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ORDINARY MADNESS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Ordinary Madness: A Memoir is an exploration of the chaotic trials and tribulations of growing up, of the sensitive, overly-imaginative child I was, trying to navigate her way through a world full of people who didn't seem to understand her, including unsympathetic adults, merciless playmates, and confused relatives. Set in the tiny farming town of Palatka, Florida, and spanning from early childhood memories to adolescence, the memoir delves into the realm of tragicomic youthful experiences with dead pets, bathroom graffiti, mock crucifixions, and other strange mishaps. The prose of *Ordinary Madness* is inspired by the small-town innocence of Haven Kimmel, with a splash of Mary Karr's savvy wit and witticism. This memoir attempts to capture the essence, both humorous and horrific, of what it feels like to be an outsider in your own life.

This book is dedicated to Mom, Dad, and Julie, with love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	1
PART ONE: DROPLET	2
CHAPTER 1	3
CHAPTER 2	21
CHAPTER 3	30
CHAPTER 4	42
CHAPTER 5	55
CHAPTER 6	63
PART TWO: PUDDLE	76
CHAPTER 7	77
CHAPTER 8	82
CHAPTER 9	89
CHAPTER 10	94
PART THREE: LAKE	97
CHAPTER 11	98
CHAPTER 12	109
CHAPTER 13	114
CHAPTER 14	130
CHAPTER 15	138
PART FOUR: OCEAN	149
CHAPTER 16	150
CHAPTER 17	157
CHAPTER 18	170
CHAPTER 19	179
CHAPTER 20	191
CHAPTER 21	201
CHAPTER 22	209
CHAPTER 23	226
CHAPTER 24	232
REFERENCES	241

The words inside these pages are, to the best of my knowledge, as close to the truth as possible. In a few places I've changed the chronology, or combined two people into one, for clarity and pacing purposes. Several names have been changed out of respect for the privacy of the people involved. Memory is a trickster, and perception is relative, but I've done my best to make this story as truthful as I can without sacrificing the story. My pledge for this memoir is to tell it how I lived it.

“But never let it be doubted that depression, in its extreme form, is madness.”

—William Styron, *Darkness Visible*

“I only appeared to belong to my mother,
to live among blocks and cotton undershirts
with snaps; among red tin lunch boxes
and report cards in ugly brown slipcasses.
I was already yours -- the anti-urge,
the mutilator of souls.”

—Jane Kenyon, from “Having it Out with Melanchol

PROLOGUE

I was fifteen when I took my father's shotgun out of his closet and pointed it at myself. The gun's barrel was cold against my hands. The barrel was long and thin and reminded me of a giraffe's neck. It was a rusty old gun, with a wooden handle, probably meant for hunting rabbits and deer. I could still remember when my uncle gave it to my father, about ten years earlier. My mother had protested, worried about having a gun in the house with small children, but my father convinced her it would be all right. It was supposed to make us feel safer.

I put the muzzle against my forehead, then in my mouth, trying to decide which way I preferred. I sat on my parents' bed, alone in our house. I'd never touched a gun before. I didn't know if it was loaded, and if it wasn't I had no idea how to load it. I did know—from my obsession with television crime documentaries—that in order to shoot myself with this kind of gun I'd have to pull the trigger with my big toe. I also knew the bullet would exit through the back of my head, blowing portions of my skull and brain all over my parents' bedroom; either that, or it would take my whole head off, tearing my face apart. My green eyes, my bad skin, my constantly frowning lips...all of them gone, until there would be nothing recognizable left.

I didn't think I was going to shoot myself. All I wanted was to know what it felt like to taste the smooth metal against my tongue, to realize that I had control of all of this. I could kill myself or not kill myself. Everything else was out of my hands, but this...this was my decision alone. And I needed it. I needed to know that at any moment, if things got to be too much for me to handle, I could make it all go away, permanently. This thought kept me going. Being so close to death was the only way I could bear to be alive

PART ONE: DROPLET

CHAPTER 1

The first time I thought about death, I was five. Lemon sun bleached my skin and bits of blond sand crunched in my hands, toes, and on my tongue. I was at the beach with my family, erecting and demolishing towers of mud and sand people with seaweed hair, shell eyes and smiles.

It was time for a swim and I didn't want to wear my water wings; those inflatable orange creamsicles were for babies, and I left them sitting on a towel as I ran down to the water. Mom was behind me, watching, her sunglasses making her face look alien. I splashed near the shore, stomping my feet, seeing how high I could spray salt water into the air. I wanted to be like the killer whales I saw at Marineland on our preschool field trip, leaping into the air and flopping on their sides, drenching crowds of squealing people. My feet sank in the sand, the floor beneath the waves. The water tugged at me and ran away, so I followed it.

The surf was up to my waist now, it was so cold. The blue-black water had its hands on my hips; it was dancing with me. I twirled around, I leaped, I flopped, I splashed an imaginary audience. Come dance with me, the water said. And then it had my hand, it was leading me out to the dance floor. My feet could no longer touch the ground.

A wave had me, dragging me into danger. The ocean was not my friend anymore. Where was my mom? She wasn't there, I couldn't see her. I kicked my feet like a frog, slapped the surface with my arms. Dad always said I was like a little frog, the way I curled up and kicked the blankets off in my sleep. Still I sank.

"Mommy?" Water flooded my mouth when I tried to talk, making the word come out as a gurgle.

I couldn't open my eyes, they stung too much. Noises were muffled, just bubbles and voices and pounding. The water beat the shore like it had been bad. There was water in my nose. I didn't understand what was happening.

It was getting dark. The sun had vanished, eaten up by the waves. Everything slowed down. I drifted until my feet touched bottom, sand squishing between my toes. I was in the quiet belly of the ocean. All I heard was the swooshing sound of water dancing all around me, waves crashing high above my head. But I was safe down here. It felt like being in a church at night, when everyone was so quiet you could almost hear God whispering. The water was rocking me to sleep, my body cradled in the dark wet current. I took a breath, letting it inside me.

Then I felt something grab at me, dragging me up, up out of the dark until there was light burning through my eyelids and wind striking my face. I sucked in a breath, spit out water. Someone had me by the arms, hands were pulling on me so hard it hurt. It was a lady, I could tell by the long fingernails that dug into my skin, but it wasn't Mom; this body was too squishy, the skin too rough.

I still couldn't open my eyes, it stung too much. Then the strange lady holding me, the woman who was not my mother, screamed. She'd been stung by a jellyfish, she was screaming it right in my ear and it still sounded so far away, like we were on opposite ends of a tunnel. She flailed, squeezing me into the crook of her elbow. I squirmed, wanting her to let me go. It was too loud and bright up here. I missed the quiet. I missed the dark.

Before I could slip away, another set of hands came and pried me away from the screaming woman. A towel wrapped me in itself, suffocating me. I coughed and shook. Mom's arms were around me, pinning me to her. I felt her body engulfing me, her skin, her smell. She wiped my face with a corner of the towel, the rough fabric grinding against my eyes. I opened

them. I saw aunts and uncles, their faces dangling from the clouds, Mom's head bobbing over mine, her hair hanging down like rope. They all talked at once, voices bouncing around me, and everything still sounded muffled like I was hearing it from miles away. Mom was yelling at me like she did when I wandered away from her in a store, like she did when I broke her glass table, but she kept hugging me tighter.

I like to think that this is where it started, the darkness, the obsession with death. Being pulled into that vast dark ocean, my short life close to ending, changed me. I touched the fear and the calm it held there, under the surface. I looked into the abyss, and it looked back into me, like the saying goes. And what's worse, I swallowed some of it, inhaled some of it. I could still feel it sloshing around inside me hours later. I swallowed a drop of the darkness, brought it back with me when I was pulled out, but it got stuck there, somewhere in my guts. Long after we got home from the beach and ate supper, long after I'd been tucked into bed with my Care Bear under my arm and my Mickey Mouse night light standing guard, that drop of ocean stayed there, waiting. And growing. Or at least that's the way I imagine it.

What I remember from my early childhood clanks through the corridors of my mind like baubles, shiny trinkets I pick up and play with for a moment before moving on to more important things. The memories are sometimes clouded and hazy, like I'm trying to view them through a snow globe that's been shaken to the point of a full on blizzard. It's fitting then that my first clear memory is of snow. I'm sure lots of people near where I'm from have similar memories of this same afternoon, because you're more likely to get struck by lightning or eaten by a shark in Florida—it happens often enough for it not to seem unusual—than you are to see snow falling there. But there I am, I can see it clear as day, me with my hands pressed flat against the sliding

glass door that led to our backyard. My face was so close to the glass it kept fogging up with my breath. I was four years old, and I'd only ever seen snow on TV, so the tiny flurries mesmerized me even though it probably wasn't enough flakes to fill up a decent-sized mop bucket. The bits of snow fell like confetti, fluttering around in the wind, and it was so mysterious that I stood there for what seemed like hours, as if God himself was going to spell out my future in those flakes and I couldn't afford to miss it. Then Mom yelled that there was a draft by that door and I needed to get away from it before I caught a cold, and I was snatched into the warmth of our living room with the brown paneled walls and the mud colored carpet, to poke my sister until she squealed, and to sit on Dad's lap and watch reruns until I fell asleep.

Palatka, a small town surrounded by farmland in northern Florida, is where I was born and raised. The town's name is derived from the Seminole words Pilo-taikita, meaning "boat crossing," and the town itself is cut into eastern and western sides by the St. Johns River, one of only three rivers in the U.S. that flow north instead of south (although they probably should have called it "burns down" since the city was devastated three times by raging fires in the 1800s).

I didn't know any of this when I lived there. Palatka was just another name for home back then. The St. Johns was just a body of brackish water that flowed parallel to River Street, where my grandma lived. It looked pretty from a distance, but when I perched on the side of Granny's dock and looked down into the river water, it was the color of tar, and full of algae muck and garbage.

Palatka was little, with a courthouse and a row of Mom and Pop stores that we liked to call "downtown," and a few chains of grocery stores and gas stations near the center of town. Shady oaks, majestic pines, and stereotypical Florida palms rose up to show off their green

gowns from nearly every lawn. If you drove to one end of town, you'd be hit by the sulfur smell of the paper mill pumping slate gray smoke into the cerulean sky. If you drove to the other end, it would be the shit smell of farmlands—wandering livestock, clusters of citrus groves, fields full of potatoes and cabbage, bushes ripe with raspberries and blackberries.

One thing we had plenty of was churches: Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Pentecostal, and even one Catholic church near the river. You couldn't drive more than two miles in any direction without passing at least one church. We were in the southernmost areas of the Bible belt, and I was brought up Baptist—and taught never to question my faith—like most of the other kids I knew. The people of Palatka were mostly God-fearing good ol' boys who worked blue collar jobs, drove mud-coated pickup trucks with giant tires, drank beer every night, and went hunting on the weekends.

I've both loved and hated my hometown for its claustrophobic smallness, its isolation from metropolitan areas, and its backwoods cultural mindset. But no matter how I feel about the town, it will always be a part of me, and me a part of it. Palatka will always mean home.

My mother is five different people in my memory. At different times in my life, I've called her by different names, and each of these names hold for me a different image of who she was. When I was little she was Mommy, and I couldn't imagine a time when she'd ever be anything else. At some point, without any type of transition, she suddenly became Mama. She was Mama for a while, before she became Mom. This name change marked a new stage of our relationship. I was a teenager, practically a grown up in my mind, and I certainly couldn't refer to her by childish terms. Then came a period when I would only call her Mother, in a stuffy, affectionless way that made her cringe and shoot daggers at me with her eyes. Now she is Mom

again, has been for some time, but this Mom label is different from the one that came before it; she is more open to admit to her flaws, more my equal than my rival. The story of our relationship is drastically different depending on which version of herself she was at the time. Or maybe it's more accurate to say we both went through stages, together, seeing each other as different versions of the person we thought we'd known.

My most nightmarish memories play out in my head like plays in a theater, and my mother hovers close by, offstage. Every now and then, she reaches in, tinkering or smashing, making things worse. When I scream at her, I scream at an empty stage. She never saves me, because she doesn't know how, but she is always around the corner, waiting outside the frame.

Here is one of my fuzzy, knick-knack recollections, plucked off a shelf full of early childhood memories, from a time when I still called her Mommy: I must have been about six. I felt hot, my throat was scratchy and achy, and I was too tired to get off the couch. I just wanted to lie around watching *Sesame Street* and chewing handfuls of dry Fruit Loops. Mom placed a cool hand to my head and her brow furrowed with worry. The coldness of her palm made me shiver and I pushed it away, groaning in irritation. She made a few phone calls and then dragged me off the couch and into the car.

I knew where we were going, and I didn't want to go there. I whined the whole way. I didn't want to be poked with a needle and gagged with a popsicle stick. Not even a cherry lollipop was worth that.

"Mommy, I want to go home," I said.

"We will, just as soon as we're done at the doctor's," she said as we pulled into the parking lot.

By this time I was having trouble standing up straight, much less walking, so Mom lugged me into the doctor's office, my head on her shoulder, my arms draping at my sides. She plunked me on the examination table and had to hold me up; I kept leaning to one side or the other, falling over. I was hot and cold at the same time, and so tired, I just wanted them to leave me alone and let me sleep.

I stuck a defiant thumb in my mouth and sucked, loudly, daring my mother to yell at me to stop. She'd been trying to break me of the habit by putting some disgusting tasting jelly on my thumb that burned like fire when I forgot and jammed it between my teeth. But she didn't have her jelly now. All she could do was call me a baby. We eyed each other, the battle lines drawn, but because I was sick, and because at least with my mouth occupied I couldn't complain or protest, she held her peace.

The doctor—a big hairy man with a booming voice and a funny accent—came in and he and Mom spoke in grown-up codes I couldn't understand, my eyes shifting back and forth between the two of them, wondering what tortures they were plotting for me. But the doctor barely touched me except to place his giant hands behind my ears, rubbing with his fingers, as the dark hair curling up off his knuckles tickled my face. Moments later, Mom was carrying me back to the car, my head lolling like a rag doll's.

We drove down the road to the big white square building with the scary bright red letters that spelled out HOSPITAL. I knew that word; it was in one of the stories we had to read at school. I remembered sounding it out one letter at a time, the teacher nodding encouragingly. In the story a boy had been cut up, stitched back together, and given ice cream for his troubles. It didn't seem worth it.

Now I was crying. I'd never been here before. All I knew was that on the TV shows Daddy watched people died in hospitals. I couldn't lift my arm anymore, couldn't get my thumb to the safety of my lips, and this was the final straw. I put up as much of a fight as I could, willing my sagging limbs to thrust and flail, but I was no match for my mother's long arms, her strong hands. I was floating now, under the neon red sign, into the jaws of this building. Then its teeth were sliding open and we were swallowed.

I was laid on a table that rolled, wheeled into a white room. There were hands on me, a thermometer slid under my tongue, lights in my eyes and ears, arms reaching and grabbing and poking at me from all directions. Now they were taking my clothes off, wiping me with wet washcloths, scolding and pinning me down as I flailed and fought. I wanted my mother to make them go away, but she just stood off to the side, watching, looking as helpless as I felt.

The thermometer was taken out and it was announced that I had a fever of about a zillion degrees, and big words like "bacterial infection," "strep throat," and "dehydration" were probably murmured, but it all sounded like gobbledygook to me. Orders were barked and a bag hanging from a metal pole was wheeled in. One of the nurses picked up my left arm and poked at it with a needle attached to a tube. It stung. She poked again, and I squealed. She tapped the crook of my arm and then poked harder and I was crying again. She jammed the needle at me, my arm was bleeding, she kept jamming, more blood. My mother had a hand clapped over her own mouth.

"I can't find a vein," the nurse complained to no one in particular. She called for another nurse who took over while the first one watched. More poking, more blood, more crying—no vein. She moved to the other side of the bed, picked up my right arm, and tried again. I turned

my head and closed my eyes; I couldn't watch anymore, it made it hurt worse. With my eyes closed it felt like a giant fanged leech, stabbing and stabbing me.

“Well, this isn't working,” the second nurse told the first. I opened one eye halfway and saw red stains on my right arm. I closed it again. The nurses both left and came back moments later with a third woman who looked at my arms then grazed my body with her determined gaze and said, “The head.”

They smoothed my hair back away from my forehead and came at me with the needle again. Now I was screaming. They let Mom come kneel beside the bed and hug me, but she was really just there to hold me down. The nurses bent over me and jabbed, jabbed, a sharp pinch. “Success,” the third nurse said.

Backing up, the nurses admired their handiwork. I can only imagine how I must have looked: my little body propped up on pillows, a piece of metal jutting from a blue stream that branched across the top of my forehead, a tube stretching up to a bag full of clear liquid that flowed down, feeding me things they never asked me if I wanted.

“Watch her and make sure she doesn't pull the I.V. out,” they told my mother as they left, after mummifying the fang marks on my gnawed up arms. “Otherwise we'll have to restrain her.”

Now I was nodding off, letting the sandman take me, praying a silent prayer: *if I should die before I wake...* This was the second time I thought about dying, and as scary as death seemed, I didn't think it could be much worse than my swollen arms, my swimming head, my throbbing throat. I welcomed the darkness of sleep that was overtaking me.

“My brave little girl,” Mom whispered from somewhere far away, taking my limp hand. “I'm so proud of you.”

My last thought before losing consciousness was there better be a whole bag of lollipops waiting for me when I woke up...if I woke up...

There is only one version of my father in my head. The shift from Daddy to Dad wasn't a big deal, and I never called him Father, though my sister sometimes did as a joke. He is still Dad, and what comes to mind when I think of him is an expanse of green field, bright lights shining in my eyes, and hard concrete bleachers making my butt go numb. I spent many Friday nights in a stadium, watching high school boys run around in the grass, tackling each other and chasing after a football.

I didn't understand the rules of the game. I asked Mom annoying questions about everything that went on until she shushed me. The night air was always either heavy with humidity and clouded with mosquitoes, or chilly with the promise of the coming winter. It wasn't much fun for a kid who didn't give a flip about sports, but that wasn't why I went. I went to watch my dad.

He stood on the sidelines, with headphones on, watching the game with an intense concentration that made him seem like more of statue than a human. Then he'd get mad at the ref and start yelling and cussing, throwing a tantrum better than I ever could. I always crossed my fingers and used up some of my wishes (I was convinced people got a limited amount of things to wish for in their lives) on helping his team win. I didn't care much about who won or lost, other than knowing it made Daddy happy when the Palatka Panthers—that was the team name—were victorious.

The best part of those games was when they were over, and we could walk out on the field. Football players, coaches, his friends, and even his students would swarm around Dad, like

he was celebrity. I'd wait for the crowd to move, and stand next to him until he noticed me and said, "Hey, Sweetie." That was my cue to jump at him for a hug.

There are other memories: sitting in his lap, curled up on his shoulder, watching *Conan the Barbarian* or episodes of *The A Team*; groaning at his corny jokes (we could never watch an action movie where someone got decapitated without Dad saying "Jill, he's lost his head"), shaking my head at his goofy Bill Cosby style dances, or covering my ears when he sang "I'm Henry VIII, I am" or "There's a Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road" in his squawky singing voice that could never find the right key. But for the most part, father to me is synonymous with coach and teacher: with being told to suck it up and be tough when I scraped myself on the monkeybars, being called a knucklehead—the same thing he called his football players when he was aggravated—whenever I did something dumb or thoughtless, like forgetting to put the jelly back in the fridge when I made myself a sandwich, or getting paint on the kitchen floor during one of my art projects; with asking questions about historical events that resulted in hour-long lectures, the same kind he gave his American Government students.

Early on, I inherited his thundering voice, his statuesque intensity. We had the same taste in TV, movies, sometimes music. But we didn't really talk beyond chit chat. I felt, as many girls must, strangely close to my father, because I was his little girl, and yet strangely distanced from him, because my girlness was an obstacle, and because the quiet way he dammed up things he didn't feel like talking about (that I also inherited from him) created a barrier too high for either of us to climb over.

My sister, Julie, was a ray of light in our house. She had long blonde hair that fell in waves down her back, a sweet smile that could melt the heart of any gullible adult in viewing

range, and blue-green eyes that were bright as the rhinestones glued to some of the leotards I used for playing dress up. Nearly six years older than me, she played softball, took piano lessons, and brought home report cards with straight 'A's. She spoke with just the right amount of quiet in her voice, chewed with her mouth closed, said "please" and "thank you" and "yes ma'am" and "no sir." She had a shiny bike, and a little TV in her room that had been handed down to her when Mom and Dad bought a new one for themselves.

Julie's piano teacher loved her. Her softball coach loved her. All her teachers in school loved her. As the firstborn grandchild on both sides of the family, she was doted on, and all of my relatives loved her, especially my parents. She was—as she often declared herself while I rolled my eyes—the perfect child. And from where I stood, she seemed to have everything.

I, on the other hand, was labeled "a handful." I was not polite; I thought manners were stupid. I talked so loud Mom often shushed me, reminding me that she was right there and she didn't have a hearing problem. I believed in speaking my mind at all times, repeatedly arguing with my elders. Why should I go out of my way to be nice to people I didn't even know, or to be nice just because someone was older than me? I practiced this philosophy on every teacher I encountered. I was even more difficult to teach because I already thought I knew everything there was to know. If they tried to tell me all sins were equal in God's eyes, I'd tell them there was no way God thought me calling my sister names was as bad as that crazy Marybeth lady in New York killing all nine of her babies. Any adult who couldn't see that was an idiot, and I wasn't afraid to say so. My preschool teacher, Mrs. Lee, gave me the lowest grade possible—an 'N' for "needs improvement," which was about as mean a grade as you could give teaching preschool at a private Baptist academy—under the categories of Courtesy, Conduct, and Work Habits on my report card, no doubt a result of my aggressive and proud displays of rebellion.

It seemed like every time I brought home a bad note for sassing some uppity adult, or pushed my vegetables around my plate instead of eating them, or wailed when my parents shut the book they were reading out loud to me and declared it was time for bed, my mother would mutter something about why couldn't I be more like my sister. As if that weren't bad enough, she'd given me a 'J' name; even though they're two completely different names, and I was too much of a midget for anyone to mix us up by looking at us, I still got called Julie my whole life. Relatives, family friends, and somehow—it must have been some karmic curse—even people who'd never met my sister, didn't even know I had a sibling by that name, wound up calling me Julie.

The worst thing about it all was that she had everyone fooled. She was the picture of innocence when adults were around, but when it was just us, she was meaner than any snake I'd ever met. She called me a stupid baby, laughed at the macaroni pictures of sailboats and kittens I brought home, shot evil eyes at me behind our parents' backs. She kicked me in the face once when we were play fighting, her toenail scratching a bloody gash into the tip of my nose that scabbed up, then called me Rudolph until it healed. She ran into me with her bike, leaving tire tracks snaking up from my shin to my knee.

I'll never forget the night we all went to the Putnam County fair, and Mom gave her what must have been a million dollars to play those booth games where the people call out "Step right up, step right up" as you walk by. I stood a few feet back and watched her pitch baseballs at a target where, every time you got a ball in, a little metal cutout of a race horse with a jockey on it inched forward a bit. She played that game a long time, trying to get her horse over the finish line faster than everybody else who was playing. Between games I snuck up beside her and pointed at a stuffed purple dog that I'd been eying. I just knew it needed me to take it and give it

a good home or something bad would happen to it. I couldn't bear the thought of mistreatment towards a stuffed animal, especially one as cute and fluffy as that one.

"Win that for me, please," I said sweetly, giving her my fake I'm-a-good-little-sister smile.

"We'll see," she said, and that was enough for me. I went back to my post and cheered for her until she finally won. Sure enough, she picked out that purple dog as her prize, and turned around. I smiled and opened my arms wide to welcome my new stuffed animal, and my sister in turn pulled the dog into a bear hug and shook her head, smiling smugly. She was keeping it for herself. At the denial of what I felt clearly should be mine, I cried and sulked until Mom, too weary from a night of walking all over the fairgrounds to deal with one of my tantrums, promised to take me to Wal-mart later and buy me any stuffed animal I wanted if I'd quiet down. I shut up, but I was still swollen with the sting of sisterly betrayal.

I don't know if I was mean to Julie because she was mean to me, or if it was the other way around. But my meanness, to me at least, was less about being mean and more about taking what I felt I was owed. When she was at softball or piano, I went in her room and rummaged around, pilfered t-shirts, tapes, toys. Once, when I was particularly mad at her for something I can't even remember anymore, I decided to move that TV of hers into my room. That would teach her to mess with me.

It was a 12 inch black-and-white television, and it got three channels only because of the rabbit ears that slid alien-like out of the back of it, but it was the Holy Grail to me. Having a TV in your room was the ultimate dream of kids back then, one that she didn't deserve to have come true because she was such a crummy sister. I was barely able to wrap my arms all the way around that little TV, cradling it as I eased it off her dresser. For a brief moment I held it in my

shaky grip, but as I took my first step towards the door, it slipped from my grasp. I made a desperate attempt to grab it, my hands clutching the bottom of it, which only managed to flip it over as it fell. The TV thudded against the carpet upside down, the antenna cracking from the blow.

I stood hugging the air for a moment, staring at the TV I'd killed with guilt tugging at me like a sinking stone. It wasn't my fault; I hadn't meant to do it. The only thing I could think to do was put it back and hope that by some miracle Julie wouldn't notice. I somehow managed to lug it back up and on to the dresser with a heave of strength I didn't know I had, fueled by fear of my sister beating the crap out of me. I went back to my room as if it'd never happened, but sure enough, as soon as she got home, I heard her scream my name like bloody murder.

I tried to play innocent, but she and my parents ganged up and brow beat me into confession. I was sent to my room to sit and stare at the wall while Mom consoled Julie and Dad used duct tape to try and fix the antenna. Even after its fall, that tough little TV still got those same 3 channels, though they were considerably fuzzier than they'd been before. Julie didn't forgive me for what seemed like ages. A few years later, when Mom and Dad got yet another TV, through the hand-me-down process the little black-and-white became mine, and I loved it just as much as if it had never been broken.

My memory of the third time I thought about death comes from somewhere in the basement of my brain, hidden under an old sheet, dusted with spiderwebs: I was eight years old, sitting at the kitchen table across from Mom who forked meat and vegetables into her mouth steadily, as if it were her duty, and somehow managed to talk nonstop about every irritation she'd suffered that day, usually involving the sixth grade reading classes full of mongrels that

she taught. Julie was to my right, trying to ignore me. At thirteen, just a year away from high school, she felt herself far too superior to be cavorting with the likes of her goofy elementary school baby sister.

Dad was to my left, his designated spot, because it was the best angle from which to see the television in the living room. He smacked his chicken, horse-like—due to his upbringing in a family who didn't know much in the way of manners, according to my mother, though she swore she'd tried hard to retrain him—as his eyes ate up pictures of oil-soaked ducks and otters that were plastered on the screen and his ears strained to hear what Dan Rather had to say about that stupid Exxon boat. He enjoyed his teaching job much more than Mom did. He tuned out her incessant drone, but mumbled an occasional automated “Oh really?” or “Huh” just to keep her at bay. My sister and I would eventually learn this trick and use it to our advantage.

This was a normal dinner for us. The only thing that changed much was the menu. Lasagna one night. Pot roast another. Occasionally there was Sheppard's Pie, or pizza, or hamburgers. That night we were having chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes. And in what would become my nature, I took a normal, ordinary thing and ruined it.

I was trying to aggravate my sister. I kept opening my mouth and trying to get her to look at the half-eaten globs of food displayed on my tongue. She gave me sideways glances, shaking her head in disgust while I laughed.

“Mo-om, make her stop. She's being gross,” Julie said.

Mom paused mid-rant, and said, “Jill, stop bugging your sister and eat your food.” Then she picked up her one-sided conversation where she'd left off. I behaved just long enough for her to stop paying attention before I was at it again. I scooped up a spoonful of mashed potatoes and rolled it into my mouth, squished it around a bit, then turned my head towards Julie so she could

view my creation. She shot me a hateful glare and I threw my head back in a fit of malicious giggles. Until I suddenly couldn't laugh anymore.

In my memory, everything after that happened in slow motion. I tried to laugh but I couldn't. I tried to breathe but I couldn't. Nothing but creaking noises came from my throat. Mom had stopped mid-sentence, Dad had peeled his eyes from the TV, Julie was staring at me with her mouth hanging open. They were waiting to see if I was faking it, playing a joke on them. It only took a second for them to realize I wasn't. Dad jumped out of his chair and ran across the room to grab the phone; I heard the three whiny beeps it made as his big fingers pressed the buttons for 9-1-1. Julie just kept staring at me, her eyes shiny like the surface of a lake. Mom jumped up and came around to my side of the table, pulled me out of my chair, wrapped her arms around me, balled her hands into fists and then pulled them into my stomach.

I don't remember how it felt, if it hurt, if I was scared. I don't remember how it felt not to be able to breathe. Because it wasn't really happening to me. It was happening to someone else, some girl I didn't even know, and I was watching it all from somewhere far away, floating above everyone, in a quiet place all my own. This was the first time I felt a preternatural schism within myself, as if my consciousness was pulling away from my physical body, but it would happen again years later, the first time a man tried to put his hands on me, and I would realize how the mind can jump ship, freeing itself from the body as a means of defense.

The whole scene probably unfolded in a little over a minute, but from where I was it felt like ages. Finally, after several attempts, my mother pulled hard enough to force the food out of my throat and I was ripped from my quiet place back into my body. I spit up mashed potatoes; they dribbled down my face and shirt, a few potato puddles dropped on to the floor. Dad told the operators on the other line that everything was okay now, and hung up the phone. Julie closed

her mouth. We were all shaking, staring at each other. I started crying. Then Mom was crying. Then she was yelling.

“How many times have I told you not to talk with your mouth full?”

I wanted to tell her I wasn't talking, I was laughing, but I couldn't find the words.

“Do you see what happens? Now do you know why I tell you these things? Now are you going to listen?” With each word her voice got louder and angrier, and she cried harder. She had her hands on my shoulders, shaking me a little every time she spoke. She sputtered for a moment, her lips moving, but only guttural croaks came out. She let go of me.

“Go to your room,” she said finally, as she turned and cried into my Dad's shirt. Julie sat at the table staring into her food, unable and unwilling to eat another bite. I ran down the hallway, threw myself on my bed and cried into my pillow, beating my fists against the mattress, feeling like I did when I dropped Julie's TV, like I'd broken something I couldn't fix. Looking back years later, I would realize my mistake: I'd brought death out of the dark ocean and invited it to dinner for my family to witness up close. They were much more uncomfortable seeing into the darkness than I was.

Once these moments were over, we never spoke of them. My parents got mad at me all over again when I tried to mention them, so I pretended they never happened. The memories of my brushes with death got swept under the rug with the rest of the dust. I would learn to hide my secrets, and so much of myself, under there too.

CHAPTER 2

I was not what my parents had expected when my mother got pregnant for the second time. She was twenty-five years old, my father thirty-two. They had been talking about having another child when all of a sudden I happened, and there was no more time to talk. This rudeness of showing up without being asked started a pattern that would continue throughout my childhood. Unlike my pseudo-angelic sister, I was not the perfect child by any stretch of the imagination.

Even when I tried to be good I would somehow go awry. I drew my parents a picture for their anniversary to show them how much I loved them. It was a masterpiece in my mind, a little girl (me) holding an umbrella, smiling. I worked diligently as my parents were busying themselves with making dinner. I drew in sweeping strokes of green crayon—green was my favorite color—and when I was finished, I stepped back and nodded. This must have been how Monet felt when he finished his “Girl with Umbrella” painting, but in mine you could make out the girl’s expression, her wide toothed grin, and she wasn’t wearing some stupid frilly dress, she had on cutoff shorts. It was the perfect accent to their bedroom. And no need for a frame, because I’d drawn it right on the bedroom wall, about two feet above where the wall met the floor since I couldn’t reach much higher than that from a sitting position.

I cried as my mother tried to scrub my gift from the paint, feeling betrayed. She explained that I was supposed to draw on paper, not on walls, but I didn’t understand the difference. How could something I did out of love be seen as bad, something she had to destroy?

It didn’t matter. Mom’s scrubbing was fruitless. The drawing never came off. My picture stayed up for a few years, until the walls had to be repainted.

My behavior problems weren't just hard on my parents, but also on everyone I encountered at school. Mom saved the bad notes that were sent home with me throughout my scholastic career, sticking them in a manila folder as evidence of what I'd put her through. There are scads of them, documenting my subversive, insubordinate behavior: "Could not sit still." "Wouldn't stop talking." "Talking loudly." "Disrupting the class."

Of all the things I got in trouble for, there is one incident that always sticks out in my mind. I was five, and still attending Peniel Baptist Academy, a private Christian school where I was taught Bible verses right along with numbers and the ABCs. Peniel is supposed to mean "face of God," and it was the place where Jacob wrestled with an angel in the Old Testament. There weren't any angels near that school from what I could see. Peniel was an elongated, white brick building with a big playground out back. There was a one room wooden church across from the school, where we had to go once a week for prayer meetings. Behind the church, surrounded by a fence short enough to step over, was a big graveyard where all the dead people slept. It was full of oval-shaped stones, concrete and marble statues of angels and lambs, plastic flowers and crosses. At school we were told those people were all in heaven, but I didn't understand how that could be since their bodies were still buried in the ground. I tiptoed and whispered whenever I had to walk past those graves, so I wouldn't accidentally wake one of them up. I wondered if, had I drowned in the ocean like I almost did, I would have been put behind the fence with these other people, nothing but a stone on top of me to let people know who I was.

On this particular day, I sat at my assigned table in the kindergarten classroom like I always did. It was usually hard for me to sit still, but on this day it was especially hard given the circumstances. I fidgeted, bounced my knees, and swung my head to let my eyes wander all

around the room. None of my fellow kindergarten classmates noticed the squeaking coming from inside the bulging pockets of my overalls. Mrs. Burton, our teacher, was at the blackboard scribbling Bible verses across the smooth surface with a chunky stick of white chalk. She was an older lady with gunmetal hair that curled in strange looping layers all around her head and shoulders, and a short, stumpy body so that, when she mimed “I’m a little teapot,” the words she sang couldn’t have been truer. She wore glasses that had a silver chain and frames with pointy edges, like the kind I assumed all librarians wore, and they made her eyes look huge and monstrous behind the thick sheets of glass that could magnify even the tiniest sin into heresy and eternal damnation—perfect for a kindergarten teacher in a Baptist school. She never liked me, not since day one, because I wasn’t prim and proper like the other girls. She really wasn’t going to like me today.

The little army of rain frogs I’d gathered during recess out of the tall grasses surrounding the school suddenly staged a mutiny. Some leapt to the floor and made a run for it. One hopped on to my knee and sat there, staring at the blackboard, as if he wanted to learn the gospel. But it was the ones that jumped on to the tables that got us caught.

Mandy—the pretty girl with long black hair, who sometimes said I was her best friend and sometimes told me I was yucky and couldn’t play with her—was squealing. A few of the frogs had hopped in her direction and she recoiled as if they might give her warts. Then Michael, the boy I secretly thought was cute, and had punched right in the eye for calling me ugly, was whooping with glee and trying to catch one of the frogs that was perched on the edge of the table, but it escaped the cage of his sweaty boy-hands just in time.

Mrs. Burton turned and saw what, judging from the cave her mouth made and the way her buggy eyes seemed to open even wider, must have looked like the second plague of the

pharaoh to her. Now the frogs were everywhere, their little green bodies speckling the floor, the tables, the chairs, the walls.

She ran for the little red button on the wall—the one that paged the front office when you tapped it—and mashed it with desperation as if it were a panic button that could save her from the wrath of God unfolding in her classroom. As we waited for the dean—a tall skinny man with dark hair and a Hitleresque moustache—to come and evacuate us into the cafeteria, Mrs. Burton’s bug eyes narrowed, gleaming behind the librarian glasses, as she scanned her students for sin.

“Who did this?”

I raised my hand, grinning from ear to ear. The grin on my face must have looked like a checkerboard of white teeth and empty black spaces—booty that had been offered up to the tooth fairy in exchange for the jingling in my porcelain piggy bank. I thought the whole thing was funny; I knew once I explained how I just wanted to take the frogs home as pets to live in our flower garden, and didn’t know they wouldn’t stay in my pockets, that everyone would laugh and pat me on the head and say, “Oh, you clever girl, you.” But Mrs. Burton did not laugh, not one little bit.

I knew Ms. Davis, the principal of our school, very well. I was sent to her office at least once a week. She was a bulbous, turnip-shaped woman, whose tan skin, flabby neck, and elongated face always made me think of Jabba the Hutt. As I trudged up to her desk, Mrs. Burton narrated the events that had unfolded in her classroom over the past fifteen minutes, her and Ms. Davis’ eyebrows raising and slanting in unison as if choreographed.

I could already tell by their expressions that this was going to be worse than when I got caught peeking into the boys’ bathroom last month. I’d heard rumors of strange toilets that you

didn't even have to sit down on to use, and I wanted to check it out. Unfortunately, I got busted by a teacher just as soon as my feet were inside the doorway, before I'd had enough time to explore. Years later, when I used the men's bathroom to get a laugh out of my friends, I would think back to this first flirtation with how the other half pees.

When Mrs. Burton pursed her lips, her sign that she was finally done talking, Ms. Davis raised one meaty arm and pointed to one of the corners in her office—I thought of it as *my* corner; it was practically my second home, I'd stood there so many times—and used the other to pick up the phone and call my mother. I could have sworn I saw Mrs. Burton curl her wrinkly face into a smile as I marched to my corner.

Mom arrived an hour later to pick me up. She always seemed to loom over me, her auburn curls billowing out like a halo around her pale face when she stared down at me in disappointment, hands on hips, green eyes flashing like metal in the sun. That look destroyed me, my sharp wit and sharper tongue dulling to the point of uselessness. She was the hand I clung to, the lap I curled up on, the voice that read me stories, and the kiss that tucked me in at night. Except when she was giving me that look; then she was my assassin.

After a few apologies to Ms. Davis, and a lot of head shaking and forced smiles, I followed Mom out to the parking lot and climbed in the car, my head down. She sat behind the wheel, her hands gripping it until her knuckles were white, staring straight ahead at the giant marble statue of Jesus standing in the middle of the graveyard, trying to find the patience not to scream at me.

Finally she asked, “What were you thinking?”

“I don't know.” I shrugged, not looking at her. I'd tried to explain it to her all the other times I'd gotten in trouble: I didn't mean to be bad, but whenever I came up with an idea like

putting frogs in my pockets, I felt something shoving me from inside, like an invisible force urging me to go for it. Once that force started pushing, it seemed to block out the part of my brain that normally would have thought about consequences. She said it wasn't that hard, I just needed to learn to control myself. She couldn't understand that I didn't know how to say no to that force, so I stopped trying to make her understand. It was easier to pretend there was no reason for my acting out.

"I just don't know what to do with you. Wait until your father gets home," she said, and started the car. Those words, like her glare of disappointment, sent chills through me. She was supposed to love me, she was supposed to be on my side; but in moments like this, she was on the other side of the world, and I wasn't really her daughter.

When we got home, I was sent to my room. I threw my blue plastic *Lady and the Tramp* lunchbox down, along with my activity notebook, the blank sheets of lined paper that I was supposed to use to practice my handwriting, and a plastic bag containing an assortment of pencils and crayons. I opened the double doors to my closet and crawled inside, shutting the doors behind me. I shared the closet floor with shoes and toys, the buckle on a sandal digging into my calf, the raised circles of Legos cutting indentations into my feet. I suspected a monster lived in this closet, too, but he only came out at night, so I was safe for now. Besides, I'd take my chances with the monster any day in lieu of the spanking I was in for.

The doors of the closet were wood, with little slats covering them like blinds, so I could still see out a little, and from in here I had an obscured view of my room. I saw pieces of shapes that were my school supplies strewn across the floor. It looked as if I was supposed to be sitting there with them, but had instead melted into a pool and soaked into the carpet. Good. I hoped Dad would be fooled.

I heard the back door open as he came in from work, heard his footsteps on the kitchen's yellow checkered linoleum as he walked in to set down his thermos and his bag, where he kept his lesson plans and all of his students' papers. Then there was the muffled sound of my Mom's voice, telling him what had happened (I could almost hear her saying, "Guess what *your* daughter did at school today?"), followed by a deep murmur—"mmm-hmmm"—his way of acknowledging my behavior and his obligation.

Then his big, heavy feet were heading down the hallway towards me. I braced myself. He came in the room, and I held my breath. He examined the pile of stuff on the floor matter-of-factly, as if the manner in which they were discarded was a clue to my whereabouts, and not the haphazard thoughtlessness of a scared little girl. In my head, I willed him to leave. *I melted away, I'm gone, I'm gone, don't look in the closet, whatever you do just don't look in...*

Through the slats in the closet door, all I saw was a hulking shadow, a dark form in the shape of a dad. As he slid the doors open, he towered over me, much bigger than my mother, glaring down. Not angry, but calm, stolid. Maybe he thought all of this was inevitable: my hiding; his seeking me out and finding me; my having to own up to what I'd done and pay the piper.

"Come on out from there," he said.

I stood slowly and made my way out of my hiding place, moving past him, head down, eyes on my shoes. I knew the drill. I went into my parents' bedroom and bent over, my hands on the bed to hold myself up. Dad went into his own closet and came out with a long, black leather belt. He doubled it up in a loop, holding each end in his fist, and pulled his arm back. *Ssss* is the sound the leather made as it whipped through the air, like the hiss of a snake, like Indiana Jones'

whip. There is no onomatopoeic word that can properly describe the sound the belt made when it made contact with the seat of my jeans. *Thwack* just doesn't quite cut it.

It hurt. Every fall of the belt on my five-year-old bottom stung like a nest full of yellow jackets. But what was so much worse was the burning in my face, the tears blurring my eyes, the feeling that I was a bad little girl.

The belt rose and fell ten times, and then it was over. I ran to my room, threw myself on the bed, buried my face in my pillow, sobbing. I didn't understand what I'd done that was so wrong, how frogs in my pockets could have led to my parents loving me a little less. Mom came and sat down on the bed next to me, rubbing my back, her idea of a peace offering.

"We aren't mad at you, we're mad at what you did," she said. "This doesn't mean we don't love you." I'd heard these same lines from her many times before. I'd never believed them. On TV, people hit each other when they were angry. My throbbing butt was not a sign of love.

"It's just that I...I don't...don't know..." I tried to tell her how I felt. How I was humiliated by having to bend over and have my butt spanked. How I was angry that no one ever explained to me why what I did was wrong, or how I could have done things in a different way. But even if I'd possessed the vocabulary to adequately express myself, I was crying so hard my words were completely incoherent, squeaking out in between hiccups, gasps, and shuddering sobs.

"What? Calm down," she said. I couldn't calm down. It was too hard, I was too upset. She finally gave up trying to soothe me and said, "Go wash your face and come set the table for supper." That was the end of it for her. I would lie awake at night, reliving it, dreading the knowledge that it would happen again. I would never be able to resist the thing inside me that pulled me towards doing bad things, and my parents would never be able to love a bad daughter.

That was how the ritual of punishment in my family operated: I got into trouble. Mom was alerted, either by a phone call, a letter sent home, or both. My mother, the arbitrator, told my father what I'd done and what he must do about it. Dad doled out the designated physical punishment, usually with one of his belts, sometimes with his hand. Mom consoled me. She seemed to think this would make Dad the mean one and her the good guy in all of this, but he was just the one doing her dirty work. I knew what her role was: the puppeteer behind the strings, the dictator's order behind the army's actions. Her attempts to placate me in the aftermath of my being disciplined only made me distrust her even more.

The day finally came when Dad was away for a teaching conference, and Mom had to punish me herself. I'd gotten another bad note sent home for biting a classmate. I assumed the position, and she took one of Dad's belts and spanked me with it. She didn't hit as hard he did, but she'd never hit me with a belt before. Spanking was supposed to be Dad's job; that was the way it worked, the way it had always been, and this disruption of tradition upset me. Knowing my mother was not only willing to give the order, but was also able to pick up the belt and hit me with it herself made it worse, especially when she came to sit next to me on my bed afterwards. She wanted me to ignore what she'd just done, to smile and help her make dinner as if the spanking hadn't even happened. It was like insulting the injured, like a thief playing patty cake with the axe man who just chopped his right hand off.

CHAPTER 3

In light of my sister's talents, my parents tried to unearth hidden skills in me that didn't involve the defacing of their walls. They enrolled me in piano lessons with my sister's teacher. I would sit at our old piano banging out "Camptown Races," bobbing my head to the "doo-dah"s. I lasted a month before my teacher gave up on me. I refused to learn to read music because, in my opinion, it was dumb. I never even made it to "Chopsticks." I tried joining the swim team, but I couldn't dive, or swim in a straight line, or open my eyes underwater, or jump in the pool without holding my nose. After five days, I was done. I moved on to dancing, taking a class called "jazz," where we curled and arched our leotard-clad bodies—in ways that seemed inappropriate for girls our age—between moves like the Running Man and the Roger Rabbit. I thought I was good, but I saw some of the other girls smirk at me. I stopped going. Dancing was too girly anyway. I resigned myself to being talentless, always outshined.

I was aware I had girl parts, because my mother had once made me take a bath with her friend's son, the two of them supervising as we each washed on either end of the tub, eyeing each other suspiciously. I'd seen why he was called a boy and I was called a girl. My mother blushed in horror as I pointed and said, "Look, you have a wiener," as if maybe he didn't already know. She quickly shushed me, an embarrassed giggle escaping from her lips.

Anatomy aside, I didn't acknowledge the gender God had assigned me. My blonde hair was always either tethered back in a messy ponytail or clumped in a heap of tangles around my head. It was a common occurrence for a teacher, relative, or classmate to look at me sternly, hands on hips, and ask, "Girl, don't you know how to use a comb?" When my mother tried to pin barrettes into it or tie it into braids, they would fall out, and my hairstyle would revert back to its

natural tangled state. She also liked to put me in cute matching outfits, and I'd retaliate by wearing them as I hauled my shovel and sand bucket into the backyard to play in the dirt. Sometimes I'd tear at the stifling collar of a blouse, as if it were a python slowly suffocating me. When my church dresses got too tight, I'd struggle to get out of them, feeling trapped, sometimes squealing and ripping the seams in a panic to be free of the dreaded garments.

Despite my lack of girly-ness, I wasn't a boy, either. I was terrible at sports, completely uncoordinated and clumsy. I fell off jungle gyms, ran into walls, tripped over my own feet. My only real boy-like quality was violence.

My violent outbursts occurred on a daily basis at Peniel. On one such occasion, I was sitting in the cafeteria, listening to it buzz with the electricity of a room full of five-year-olds. With my fork, I picked at the ball of string covered in red goo sitting on my tray, half expecting it to sprout legs and walk away. The lunch lady had labeled this dish "spaghetti," but I begged to differ. Jason, my classmate, sat to the left of me, spooning noodles into his mouth, letting most of them trail down his chin, staining the bottom half of his face a dull sauce color that almost passed for red. He turned to me and opened his mouth, pushing forward the slightly chewed noodles with his tongue until they were almost falling out.

"Look. Worms!" His words came through as mumbles, but I understood him perfectly, using the psychic abilities only kindergarteners can possess.

Sometimes I thought Jason was cute, with his frizzy blonde curls and his eyes the color of bluebirds. Other times I thought he was ugly, or at least I told him I did. Whenever a boy was mean to me, or wouldn't do something I asked him to, he wasn't allowed to be cute anymore. Those were the rules.

On some days Jason was included in what I thought of as my circle of friends, and on other days he was lumped into the group of people who I considered my mortal enemies. The transition from one category to another could be swift and merciless, and often happened before Jason or I realized it.

“Did you see that episode of *ThunderCats* yesterday?” I asked him, picking bits of my bread off and eating them. This means of ingestion had earned me the label of one who “eats like a bird” from every member of my family, but it was the only way I could manage to swallow anything that wasn’t covered in frosting.

He shook his head, his mouth too full of wormy noodles for him to talk, but I still asked, “Why not? Did you have to do chores or something?”

When he finished swallowing, he said, “That show is stupid. I was watching *He-Man* instead.”

I was aghast. I felt obligated to defend to the death the best show in the world. “*He-Man* is stupid. *ThunderCats* is way better. If they got in a fight, Lion-O could kill He-Man whenever he wanted and He-Man couldn’t do anything to stop it.”

“Lion-O is dumb. He’s just a big ugly cat and He-Man would beat him up easy.”

Now he’d done it. He’d insulted the man/cat I was destined to marry, and this sin was unforgivable.

“You’re stupid!” This was the best comeback I had.

“Am not. You’re stupid. And you’re dumb. And you’re ugly.”

He probably could have continued to come up with “And you’re”s, but when I rammed my fist into his face, his words trailed off into indistinguishable sobs. His hands flew to the devastated area. I hadn’t really been aiming, I’d just sort of thrown my knuckles in his general

direction, but I'd managed to hit him right in the mouth, and little droplets of blood were rising where I'd smashed his lips into his teeth. As his whimpers got louder, heads began to turn, eyes glared at me accusingly, as if I had been the one who slandered Jason's true love. One of the teachers monitoring the cafeteria sprinted over and demanded explanation. Through his hysterical heaving, Jason squeaked out his version of what happened, painting me as the villain of course, as if I could ever be like Mumm-Ra.

I opened my mouth and stuttered out a protest. "But he called me stupid—"

"That's enough out of you." The teacher grabbed my arm and yanked me off the bench, marching me towards the office. Back to Jabba's lair.

I was playing in the sandbox with Mandy, who had decided she was my best friend again, at least for today, since I'd traded her my Fruit Rollup for her green Jell-O at lunch. We had buckets and shovels, and were digging ourselves a palace, full of towers and drawbridges. I sunk my hands in the sand and dug out a trail surrounding the whole structure; a moat, to protect our King and Queen from invaders. Mandy was about to start poking holes for windows, and I was going to carve parapets into the towers, when we were suddenly ambushed from behind.

I felt arms around me, not in a friendly hug, but in a tentacle-like grip, squeezing, suffocating. They were boy arms, stronger than my own, and I struggled and shouted in vain trying to break the grip. I could hear whoever it was breathing heavily in my ear, fighting to keep me pinned. He wouldn't let go. I couldn't get free, and I was starting to panic. I could hear Mandy struggling next to me with her assailant. I couldn't see anything. No one was coming to help us. I did the only thing I could think to do. I picked up a handful of sand and tossed it into

the face that was sitting on my shoulder, next to my ear, breathing so loud it was the only thing I could hear. There was an unholy squealing and then I was released.

I ran to Mandy and grabbed the boy on her back, putting my Mr. Spock death grip on his neck until he let go, then flinging him to the ground. Now we were face to face with our attackers. The boy who'd grabbed Mandy was Beau, the pretty, clean-cut boy with lashes so long he made all the girls' hearts flutter when he blinked in their direction; now he was sprawled in the sand, looking up at us in confusion. The boy who'd grabbed me was Matt, the kid from a poor family who had shaggy blonde hair and a hairlip scar that curled his mouth up into a perpetual snarl, like Elvis. Now his Elvis lips were stretched into a grimace as his hands clawed at his eyes, tears streaming down his face.

I couldn't believe it. These boys were our friends. Why would they turn on us?

Matt's wails had brought the cavalry. He and Beau were hauled off to the bathroom to clean up while Mandy and I were interrogated. What happened? Who started it? What made you think it was okay to throw sand in someone's eyes?

I already knew how this would play out. The boys would blame us, Mandy would toss her jet black ponytail and jingle her silver bracelets as she plead innocence with her big brown puppy's eyes, and me and my bad reputation would get stuck with the blame. No one asked me how it felt to have a body bigger than mine smothering me, how scary it was to feel powerless under someone else's strength.

Crystal was a spoiled little rich girl, the daughter of an insurance salesman, who loved to show off her pretty sequined outfits and her long brown curls that her daddy paid to have styled just to her liking. How she and I became friends I have no idea. Maybe it was because we liked

to play house together. I was always the mother, Crystal was always the daughter, and somehow this dynamic worked for us. Until one day when she decided to play the bad daughter and mouth off to me. Well, no good mother should have to put up with that sort of nonsense. She had to be punished. I stretched my palm out flat, pulled it back, and smacked her right on the butt. Then I laughed. It felt good to not be at the receiving end of a spanking for once.

We kept playing, and every time Crystal got out of line, I slapped her butt again, hard. A teacher who'd been watching us finally came over and grabbed my wrists.

“Why do you keep doing that? Who told you it was okay to touch her like that?” The woman pulled me to a bench and made me sit next to her. Then she beckoned to Crystal. She pulled Crystal over her knee and pulled her shorts and underwear down far enough so I could see the top half of her bottom.

“Look at how red it is. Look what you did,” the woman said to me.

It was true. Her milky skin was bright pink, like she'd been lying naked in the sun and got burned. I didn't know what to say. The teacher glared at me hatefully, like I was an abusive parent, and all I could do was shrug. We were playing house. I was just doing what parents do.

These episodes—and many more—of violence were also documented in my folder full of “Jill is bad” notes. One such note, from my pre-school teacher, Mrs. Lee, states as follows:

Dear Mrs. Criswell—

I am so sorry to have to write this letter to you, but I am at the point of not really knowing what to do. Jill has really been giving me and other classmates some trouble lately. There is rarely a day go by that she doesn't hit, kick and/or punch someone down. If she doesn't want to do what I say, she simply doesn't obey me. I honestly think sometimes she's doing these things to get attention. I hate to beat a path to the office with her. She really doesn't seem to mind going, anyway. Standing in the corner doesn't bother her. I don't know what to do...nothing works. Do you have any suggestions? Jill

really has some outstanding qualities. She's bright, pretty, fast at learning, and boy can she take charge! Maybe she'll grow up to be President?

Sincerely,
Mrs. Lee

Despite her attempts to sugarcoat her notes with a list of my positive characteristics, it was obvious this woman was fed up with me. Though I was angered by her tattletaling to my mother about me, reading over these letters years later (now a teacher myself) would fill me with pity, though not quite push me into guilt. I was a handful, but I was misunderstood.

In other notes, the specific names of my victims and the reasoning behind the violence—one boy folded his arms in front of me, and apparently that was enough to set me off—is detailed. So are my methods of abuse. I liked to punch, kick, slap, bite. I even grabbed a kid by the shoulders and shook him like a rag doll.

I picked mostly on boys, many of them bigger than me.

"These boys aren't runts," one teacher said. "Someday Jill is going to get clobbered."

Fat chance, I thought. Most of the boys were too either too polite or too afraid of me to retaliate.

Parents began forbidding their children to play with me, demanding teachers sit their kids as far away from me as possible. The only explanation the school could come up with for my fits of rage was that I seemed tired on my "bad days." It was the closest anyone could come to an answer.

Whenever someone asked me why I acted out, my response was always the same: "I don't know." Because I didn't. I couldn't understand it myself. My bad behavior always had consequences: getting yelled at, spanked, losing privileges, being put in time out. I didn't enjoy these things, though I did enjoy my reputation as the resident bad ass. Still, maintaining my

reputation wasn't why I did it. It felt almost like an impulse, something deep and dark living inside of me that came out unexpectedly, took control over me long enough to hurt someone or get me in some other kind of trouble, then disappeared back inside, leaving the innocent part of me to take the blame. Punishments felt unjust; they were punishing the wrong me, the one who was good and pure, not the part of me that was evil.

I don't know what happened to me. Was I born bad? Born different somehow? Maybe it was a full moon; maybe astrological signs were to blame. Or did something happen to me that I've blocked out and buried so far down in my subconscious that years of self-analysis and studies in psychology can't even unearth it? Whatever twist of fate caused me to be the way I was, it turned me into a strange, visceral creature that was far from normal from the very start.

Anger was something I never could understand. All a classmate, a teacher, my sister, or my mom had to do was make one little comment about me that I didn't like and I would fly into a rage, near tears I was so upset. "Why did you wear your hair that way?" "Have you finished your math problems yet?" "What's that drawing supposed to be?" Any one of these questions could incite a tantrum. I would scream at my classmates that I didn't want to play with them anymore, and go off by myself. I would mouth off to my teachers until they put me in a corner, where I would stand with my forehead against the cold cinderblocks, grumbling, snarling. I would yell at my sister and mother that they were mean, then run to my room, slamming my door.

My temper was just as fiery when I played alone. If one puzzle piece wouldn't fit in the spot where I was sure it was supposed to go, I would tear the whole thing apart, despite how much progress I'd made. If I accidentally colored outside the lines in a coloring book, I would

rip the book up, snap the crayons in half. If my Barbie wouldn't cooperate and fit into her pink Corvette, I would slam the car on the ground, throw it across the room, rip poor Barbie's blonde head off her stylishly dressed body. All the while, under my breath I would mutter words like "damn it stupid goddamn motherfucker piece of shit." I must have heard these words from television shows or movies, because the only bad words my parents ever said were "damn" and "shit," and even those were rare.

I didn't know why I got so angry. I didn't like acting like that, didn't want to say those bad words, and always felt guilty about it later, saying a little prayer to ask God's forgiveness. I felt like I was a bad little girl. I deserved to have no friends.

Sadness plagued me as well. Every day at school, I watched other kids play together, feeling like an outsider. Even when they let me play with them, I still felt unwanted, like I was on borrowed friend time, and it would be taken away from me at any minute. I was affected deeply by sad books and movies; if a pet was lost, or a friend moved away, or a loved one died, I felt a deep ache from my skin right down to my bones, as if it were happening to me. A few years later I would read *Where the Red Fern Grows* and cry for hours at the death of those two sweet dogs. I would read *Bridge to Terabithia* and curl up on my bed, crying for days over poor Leslie's tragic end.

The characters in the books were my friends; even after I read the last word and closed the cover, I knew they would always be there, waiting for me to revisit them. I imagined where their lives went from the moment when the story ended, dreaming up futures for them. It wasn't fair to know some of them had no future beyond the page on which they drew their last breaths.

Mom would sigh and pat my shoulder, saying, “It’s just a book. Don’t be so sensitive.” She couldn’t understand what those books meant to me, how I might as well have died in that creek with Leslie, or been buried on the hill with Old Dan and Little Ann.

It wasn’t just my anger and my sadness that made me feel alone. I was different from other children; adults said I was strange, kids called me a weirdo. Something was wrong with me, I knew it, I just didn’t know what or why.

I remember sitting in my preschool class one day, bored and restless, when I found a new way to pass the time. I stuck my tongue out and curled it, licking my arm from elbow to wrist, like a kitten cleaning itself. The little sprouts of hair growing out of my forearms tickled my lips. I licked the underside of my arm next, then moved on to my hands and fingers.

Mrs. Lee was standing at the blackboard, trying to teach us how to write the letter ‘D’ perfectly.

“Just like this, the stick meets the hump,” she chanted, drawing her magnificent letter on the blackboard so that it was nearly as tall as me. She threw a glance over her shoulder to make sure we were all paying attention. That was when she noticed my newfound obsession. She watched me for a moment, awestruck, as if trying to make sure I was really doing what it looked like I was doing.

“Jill? What...? What are you doing?” she asked, shaking her head so that her brown layered locks danced around her tan, freckled face. I ignored her. “Jill! Stop that right this instance!”

Why was she making such a fuss? She was acting like I was doing something wrong when I wasn’t. I was sitting there minding my own business. I had no intention of stopping; I just

looked at her, hateful sparks of defiance flaring up in my eyes that glared at her from around the arm I was still licking.

“Why are you doing that?”

“My arms taste good. My skin is salty,” I said, exhilarated, as if I’d discovered some secret treasure, and everyone would be licking their arms, too, if they only knew what they were missing.

“I don’t care. That’s not normal, that’s what animals do, and you aren’t an animal, you’re a little girl. Now stop.”

I didn’t. I was hooked, as if my sweat was laced with some addictive substance, and licking my skin gave me some special kind of high.

“That’s it. You’re going to the office.”

I was marched up to see Miss Davis for what must have been the third time that week. My mother was alerted to my strange behavior, and when she asked me why on earth I would want to lick myself, I shrugged.

“I taste good,” was all I could think of to say. Looking back on it now, I must have been trying to understand myself by connecting to my body, getting to know my own skin. I never could have said that to my mother. She would have thought that was weirder than the behavior itself.

Her eyes were big and empty, she shook her head and sighed, looking up to the heavens. “What did I do wrong?” She turned away, whispering, “I don’t know what to do with you.”

I didn’t know what to do with me either. I lay down on the couch in front of the TV, next to Dad. He was watching Jeopardy. I didn’t understand any of the questions, but I liked the glowing blue screens and the rhythmic rise and fall of Alex Trebek’s voice. I stuck my thumb in

my mouth and put my feet in my father's hair, digging my toes in. I'd been putting my feet in peoples' hair—mostly my parents', because they were the only ones who let me—for as long as I could remember. Something about it soothed me, much more than holding hands or sitting in laps or hugging; feeling the soft strands between my toes, knowing I was close but not too close to another human being.

CHAPTER 4

I was uncontrollable. I was infamous. I made teachers cry. And I wasn't even six yet. I was Hell on Hot Wheels. My parents knew I wouldn't last much longer in private school, so, to the relief of the entire staff at Peniel Baptist Academy, they yanked me out of private school and tossed me into the treacherous territory that was the Public School System. My troublemaking didn't cease, but it was never the caliber it had been before, nor did it garner the same reception. Nobody cares about rain frogs in public school. Still, my elementary school teachers had no clue what they were in for.

On the sixth day of third grade, I stabbed a boy with a pencil. Ben Rudd would become my nemesis for the next eight years—and would be the first of many boys who would go out of his way to hurt me—but at this point we'd only known each other a few days.

Ben was a chunky boy with short, spiky black hair, and a face like a chipmunk. He sought me out from the very first morning in Mrs. Blumenstock's class, pointing, laughing, and bumping into me.

"Get out of my way, fart face," he said. He continued to pick on me all week.

On the day I stabbed him, I was concentrating on writing the assigned essay about our summer vacation. I was detailing my family trip to a relative's cabin in the mountains of North Carolina, where I'd first experienced being in a house with no TV; surprisingly I'd loved being secluded with nature, and I'd passed the time reading, wading in the nearby stream with my sister, and chasing fireflies at night. I was lost in my pleasant summer memories when Ben walked by my desk, and just happened to slam his hip into my shoulder.

"Oops," he said, laughing under his breath, as he took his seat next to me. I glared at his smug smile, hating him. "What are you writing about?" he asked, trying to peer at my paper.

I wrapped my arm protectively around my words, turning my head towards the wall, away from him.

“What? I just want to see.” He reached over and pulled my arm away, snatching at my paper. Bumping into me was one thing, but messing with my writing was not something I could tolerate. I’d had enough. I clutched my pencil tight in my fist and stabbed the sharpened point into the back of his reaching hand, hard enough to break the skin, but not so hard that the lead broke.

“Owww!” he yelled, clutching at his wound. He grabbed his own pencil off his desk and stabbed me in the shoulder with it, pushing it deep enough to make worry that some of the lead had broken off and implanted itself under my skin like shrapnel.

“Ahhh!” All I could think about was all the times teachers had warned us not to stick ourselves or anyone else with a pencil because we might get lead poisoning; they all conveniently knew someone who knew someone who had a student that had to go to the hospital after being injected with someone’s pencil lead.

Great. Now I was going to become that student. I was going to die, and it was all stupid Ben Rudd’s fault. I leaned over and punched him in the arm just as Mrs. Blumenstock walked up. We both earned a one-way ticket to the Principal’s office.

Mr. Holt wasn’t anything like my old principal, Miss Davis. Aside from being a man, he was also elderly, with salt-and-pepper hair and bottleneck glasses, and he was funny, almost grandfatherish, like you half expected him to pull a quarter out from behind your ear. And, he was pretty much never in his office. Mr. Holt was always off at a meeting somewhere, or strutting around campus like a proud rooster. He left the Vice Principal, Mr. Bolden, to do all his dirty work.

Mr. Bolden could have been Miss Davis' brother. He wasn't as fat as she was, but he was getting there. He always wore a white dress shirt tucked into black dress pants, held up with a belt that I wondered how he was able to buckle, because there was no way he could see anything that went on under his Buddha belly. He also wore a tie that trailed from his neck to the middle of his stomach; it didn't hang down so much as seem to rest, sunning itself on the great hill of his gut.

He was also going bald, with long brown tufts soldiering on as best they could on each side of his head, while the hair that was in the middle just gave up and fell out. He did what he could to cover the whiteness of his crown with the hair that was left, combing them over into the center to hide their fallen brethren. Needless to say, this didn't work very well, and the top of his head still gleamed with the reflection of the neon overhead lights.

In my first two years at Moseley Elementary School, I'd gotten to know Mr. Bolden—I saw his stoic face nearly every other week—about as well as I'd known Miss Davis. I still talked out of turn, loudly, I still mouthed off to teachers, and I still ran all over the place when I was supposed to be walking. But there was one glaring difference between here and Peniel: at private school, they called your parents and asked them to pick you up and take you home to deliver your own child's beatings; in public school, they called your parents to ask permission to give the beatings themselves.

Ben and I were dropped off at the office, our parents were called, and one at a time, we were taken into Mr. Bolden's office to receive our punishment. When Ben was called, he walked on shaking legs towards his doom, turning to look at me over his shoulder. He wasn't glaring this time; instead, his eyes were full of fear, dread. So were mine. We weren't enemies in this moment, we were comrades, adversaries uniting while standing in line for the guillotine. The

door shut behind Ben, and I pulled my knees into my chest as I listened to the sound of each whack echoing through the walls, cringing.

The door opened and Ben trudged out, not looking at me.

“You can go back to class now, young man,” Mr. Bolden said. Then his eyes fell on me, and he beckoned with his big, brawny hand. It was my turn to be on the other side of that door.

He had the paddle in his hand already, a big wooden thing that looked like the end of an oar. His face held no emotion at all, no sympathy for me, no regret at what he was doing, but no pleasure either. This was all part of a day’s work for him.

I faced the wall, standing up as straight as I could, and waited, waited, waited for the smack to come. Worse than the actual hits were the moments in between, not knowing when the wood was going to collide with my butt. Worse still was knowing that my mother had authorized such a thing to be done to me. To be spanked by my parents made me feel like I was bad, and unloved, but at least they had a right to spank me since I belonged to them. To be spanked by this hulking, unfriendly stranger who didn’t know anything about me was a humiliating betrayal, like I was a sacrifice being thrown to the wolves. Or being thrown to the mercy of one wolf with a bad comb over.

Cussing was a sin, or so I’d been told by my parents, my preacher, everyone. I’d seen bad words carved into the dark blue paint in the stalls of the girls’ bathroom at school. I sounded them out silently, my mouth forming each syllable without actually saying it out loud. I knew what those words were, just like I knew the crude etchings of stick figures with long hair and giant boobs hugging the stick figures with rockets coming out between their legs had to do with S-E-X, even though I didn’t exactly know what that meant.

I'd said Hell before. I'd called people Stupid Dummy Head and every other combination of insults chained together that I could come up with. I'd let out strings of curses under my breath when I was angry and no one was around. But I'd never cussed at a person before, and the first time I did was all Trey Pope's fault.

My grandmother was a teacher at Moseley Elementary and so was Trey's mom, so we both hung around after school let out, waiting for rides home. We didn't like each other, but sometimes we played together out of boredom. Trey was a blob-like boy with a squat little body and a big head, and three hairy brown moles on the side of his face. He reminded me of a fat, squirmy, hairy caterpillar that just kept eating and eating all the leaves but never got to turn into a butterfly.

I was working on my entry for the upcoming Halloween poster contest, coloring in the witch I'd drawn with a green magic marker on a large piece of white poster board. Trey came in and leaned over my shoulder.

"That's ugly," he said.

"You're ugly." I ignored him and took a giant sip off my can of grape soda.

"Shut up." He wandered around the classroom, running his hands over the desks like he was checking them for dust. "Hey, watch this."

I looked up impatiently, wanting to get back to my drawing but curious as to what he wanted me to watch him do. He made a terrible vacuum sound with his throat, scrunching his mouth to the side and swishing his cheeks around. Then he leaned his head over the seat of the desk and spit a hunk of milky green goo on to it, saliva trails clinging to his mouth.

“Ewww. That’s disgusting. You better clean that up before my Granny gets back.” I shook my head and went back to my poster, but Trey wasn’t done yet. He moved on to the next desk and spit again.

“Stop it, I said. I’m going to tell your mom.”

“So tell her. See if I care. I’ll say you’re lying. She won’t believe you.” He looked down at me with his beady little eyes, his nose scrunched up, his arms folded across his chest. I put the cap back on my green marker and put it down on the table.

“Clean it up, now.”

Trey moved to a third desk, hawked up more gobs of green stuff and spit again, smiling a crooked smile at me with his lips still wet and filmy.

“Get out, you big fat dummy. I’m telling.” I got right in his face, yelling, flecks of my own spit spraying him. He grabbed a thick wooden ruler off my grandmother’s desk and smacked me on the back of the wrist with it, like a nun punishing a Catholic school girl for wearing her skirt too short. I shook my stinging wrist for a moment, examining the cherry stripe he’d made across my skin.

“Ughh,” I groaned, stomping on his foot as hard as I could. My foot was only about half the size of his monstrous hoof, so he just laughed and brought the ruler down on the top of my head with a thunderous *thwack* that left the ruler cracked a bit in the middle.

“I’m going to kick your stupid ass,” I said, fuming as I rubbed my head, my face turning as red as the mark on my arm. Trey froze at the sound of the forbidden word.

“Ohhh. I’m telling.” The tables had turned. With that one little word, I was now in control of the confrontation.

“Go ahead and tell, you ass. Ass ass ass. I’m going to kick your big fat ass.” I broke into a singsong voice, chanting the word at him. His eyes lit up and his jaw hung slack, like he was a bit afraid and impressed by my daring to use such language. He shuffled out of the classroom and I followed him, singing after him. “Ass, ass. I’m going to kick your ass. Ass, ass...”

I took a walk around the school’s breezeways, feeling victorious. I’d finally found a way to win a fight against a bigger, stronger opponent. That word was my new best friend.

When I got back to my grandmother’s classroom, she was there waiting for me, along with Trey and his mother.

“Jill, did you do this?” Granny asked me, pointing at the spit on the desks.

“No. Trey did it, I saw him.”

Granny’s green eyes darted over to Trey’s mom, her head shaking apologetically. She placed her slender arms on her boney hips.

“He said you did it. He also said you were saying a bad word. The A-S-S word. Is that true?” Her voice was strained, harsh, her stare was fierce, and I knew no matter what I said she wasn’t going to believe me.

“No, I never said—”

“Mrs. Jackson next door heard you saying it in the hallway outside her classroom.”

Shoot. She had caught me in one lie. There was nothing to keep her from thinking it was my spit all over her students’ desks.

“Where did you learn such an awful word?” Her face was growing as scarlet as her curly, strawberry-dyed hair.

I shrugged and looked at my shoes, kicking the ground with my foot.

“Answer me.”

“I don’t know,” I said, shrugging again. I could see Trey smiling out of the corner of my eye. I hated him more in that moment than I’d ever hated anyone in my entire life.

There were lots of boys who picked on me in school. I wasn’t sure why, I just seemed to be an easy target. What made it worse was that, with the exception of Trey, I secretly adored most of them. Dougie was one of those boys. Blatantly Italian, with dark hair, olive skin, and eyes that were almost black. I thought he was the cutest boy in the world, but God knows I wouldn’t tell anyone at school about my feelings. Secret crushes were a beacon for teasing, and I knew my classmates would never let me live it down if they found out. To make sure nobody caught on I went out of my way to tease, pick on, and contradict him every chance I got.

Standing in the hallway one morning, waiting for class to begin, he went on and on about his little league baseball team.

“We’re so good, we’re gonna smash the other team. They won’t know what hit them,” he said.

“Yeah, right. With you on the team, they’ll lose for sure.” I was playing it cool, leaning against the wall like James Dean, doing my best to knock Dougie down a few pegs.

“What do you know? You’re just a stupid girl.”

“I know a lot. I know you’re a retard, and retards ain’t no good at baseball.” Oops. That may have been a little too cool.

Dougie got in my face and tried to stare me down. At least he was paying attention to me now. “What did you call me?”

“I called you a retard,” I said loudly.

He was so close I could smell his Juicy Fruit breath. I couldn't let him walk away. I wasn't backing down.

I was so focused on the throbbing in my heart caused by his body being so close to mine that I was taken completely by surprise when he grabbed my shoulders and shoved me backwards into a corner, spun me around, and punched me repeatedly in the middle of my back, right on my spine. My vertebrae felt like they were exploding.

The classroom door snapped open, and Dougie promptly left me, slouched and sobbing in the corner.

"Go to hell!" I yelled after him, not sure if he even heard me. It didn't matter. I would fall to my knees later that night, at the foot of my bed, and weep, terrified because I might have damned a mean but beautiful Italian boy to play backgammon with the Devil for all eternity.

I caught on quickly to the big difference, other than spankings, that existed between private and public school. Here, I was the punching bag. Through some stroke of karma, I was now getting back every beating that I'd given, and then some. Walking in line to the lunchroom, bathroom, or P.E., if there was a boy behind me it was almost certain he was going to try and trip my feet out from under me the whole way; on more than one occasion, whichever menacing boy was tormenting me managed to knock me flat to the ground. I was also pushed, kicked, stomped on, punched in the stomach, and once, thrown into a thick patch of sandspurs. I spent fifteen minutes pulling tiny spikes out of my skin.

A lot of kids got bullied in elementary school—as a former bully, I knew this well—but my plight was different. I wasn't slapped open handed, no one pulled on my pigtails. The boys bullied me like they bullied other boys. I got no special treatment because of my gender. I would

often feel sorry for myself, all woe is me, wondering why they were so mean to just me. But deep down, I knew what sin I committed on a daily basis: I invaded their territory.

I was one of only two girls who shunned my own sex and tried to play exclusively with the boys each day on the playground. Cathy, the other girl, was nearly twice my size. She was tall and muscular, like her police officer father, and the boys didn't mess with her because they knew she could have beaten the living daylights out of them. I was a tough kid with a warrior spirit, but my body couldn't quite back up my attitude, or my smart mouth. Cathy and I should have been allies, but she saw me as her competition. Before I showed up she had the honor of being the only girl who could keep up with the boys, but I ruined it for her. As payback, she picked on me as much as the boys did.

I infiltrated the "boys only (plus Cathy)" circle, starting the first day of first grade during recess. At first they wanted nothing to do with me, but when they realized I could plan military attacks and organize spy games like no one else could, they let me play their reindeer games. At a price.

Recess played out in my imagination like a war movie. Bombs went off right next to my head. Someone was hurling grenades. If I didn't get my men out of there, we were all goners.

"Fall back!" I shouted to my platoon, just like I'd seen Generals do in the war movies I watched on TV with Dad. We retreated back to the monkey bars as our enemies continued to throw handfuls of sand, rocks, sticks, pine combs, and anything else they could use as an aerial weapon, at our backs.

"That's right!" Shane, the leader of the attacking army that he'd named the Cobras, called after us. "Get out of here, dummies, before you get hurt some more." He had a mean streak like a badger, and his laughter rang in my ears as we slunk away. Shane and the other Cobras all played

Little League baseball and Pop Warner football. They were strong and good looking, despite the hideous mullets and rat tails and bowl cuts their clueless mothers shaped their hair into. They were the kind of boys who would hurl a dodge ball at your face during a friendly game at recess.

Of course I had crushes on all of them. Maybe I just envied the freedom to be loud and violent—without getting into trouble—all those boys seemed to have. It was a freedom I'd never enjoyed and, longingly, I watched them flaunt it. If I could have possessed one of them, maybe I could have vicariously felt that freedom. In my mind, this attraction expressed itself as a hopeless, unrequited crush.

“What are we going to do, Sarge?” Marshall, my second in command, was at my side as always. He was a good man, even though he was scrawny, nerdy, and fragile in his thick, Grandma-style glasses, one hand constantly clutching his right pocket where he kept his asthma inhaler, just in case. This was my army, the Wolves. The outcasts, the underdogs, the mentally over-achieving but physically challenged leftovers who the other, stronger boys didn't want on their team. My ragtag regiment would follow me into battle, swords and guns drawn, charging kids twice their size at my orders. That's how loyal they were.

Most days we spent the whole recess period chasing each other, sneaking up and spying on each other, having huge shoot outs with bombs and guns exploding all around us. It was like *West Side Story* meets “G.I. Joe.” My cunning, and the fact that I'd invented the game in the first place, allowed me to move quickly up the ranks, and suddenly I was the leader of the Wolves. I had to live up to my status. My men were depending on me.

I eyed the fortress the opposing army was hiding behind. It was a tall structure, about fifteen feet high, that looked like ten rows of ladders stacked side by side and stuck into the ground, then painted slate blue, the kind of dangerous contraption that would be torn down in a

few years after being deemed too dangerous for children to play on. But for now, it made a perfect spot to stage a war. The boys hung from the rails, pulling ammunition from the deepest reaches of their jeans' pockets. They were shielded behind the structure, like being behind the safety of prison bars. It seemed their forces were impenetrable, except for the bushes that surrounded them.

"I have an idea," I whispered to my men. A plan was forming itself in my head. It was the oldest trick in the book. They had to be completely stupid to fall for it. Luckily, I had all the smart boys on my team.

Marshall led the suicide mission. He and a few others approached the fortress.

"Hey, you big stupid heads! Why are you hiding back there? Why don't you come out and fight us for real?" he shouted.

Marshall was hit square in the jaw with a flying hunk of dirt. The others were soon gunned down as well. In the meantime I'd taken the rest of the men around, into the bushes, to flank our enemies. As they concentrated on the stragglers in front of them, we ambushed them from behind.

"Oww."

"Stop it."

"Cut it out."

Their cries fell on deaf ears. We had them. They were exposed, distracted, confused, and had lost the protection of their structure. All they had on us now was height, and it wasn't enough. We pelted them, grabbing from piles of ammo they'd collected themselves and left at the base of their fortress, as they tried in vein to deflect the onslaught. Shane hopped down and took off to the basketball court. Their own leader had deserted them. They were finished. Soon,

his men followed him. They were grumbling, in bad spirits, but no one said “No fair” or “You cheated.” They knew we’d outsmarted them, and we’d earned their respect for it.

As the bell that ended recess rang, we all filed back towards our classroom, and Shane came up beside me.

“We’ll be ready for you next time,” he said, nodding.

“We’ll see.” I smiled at him, and he smiled back.

At lunch that day, he picked limp stalks of broccoli from off his lunch tray and slung them at me from the next table. They slapped against my juice box, landed on my peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and stuck to my Marineland T-shirt.

“Leave me alone. Why are you messing with me?” I couldn’t believe it. I thought we’d shared something that day on the battlefield.

“Because you’re a stupid ugly girl,” he said. Apparently I was wrong.

I quickly came to realize that during wartime, I was every boys’ equal, but once the bell that signified recess’ end rang, I went back to just being a girl. I existed in a grey area somewhere between the two genders. Since I played like one of the boys, some of them resented me, and some were just plain confused. Either way, they decided to treat me like a boy off the playground, minus the respect automatically given to everything that had a penis. They called me names and bullied me ruthlessly until we were back on the playground. I went home bruised, scratched, and close to tears every day. I held my own, though. If this was the cost of getting to play with a gang of boys, however brief, so be it.

CHAPTER 5

I knew I didn't want to play with girls. I saw how they were with each other, best friends one minute then forming grudges and spreading rumors about each other the next. Sometimes I tried to be cordial with the girls in my class. I'd sit next to them at lunch or in P.E. class when the teacher gave us free time. A few of them responded politely, yet still seemed uncomfortable around me, either because I was so boyish or because they knew talking to me could hurt their reputation. Even in elementary school, status was everything, and consorting with the less popular kids made you look bad. The rest of the girls glared at me, ignored me, or made belittling comments like, "Don't you have anyone else to sit with?" or "We weren't talking to you. Butt out."

Annie was the only girl I ever really made friends with in elementary school. She was a short, pretty red-headed girl, her face dotted with ginger colored freckles; she had a warm, open personality; she was on the softball and the track teams, and won awards at competitions; she played the violin and the piano; her Dad was a doctor, and her older brother was the cutest, most popular boy in fifth grade. For all of these things, other girls admired and gravitated towards her, including me. We were in the same class, but we'd never really talked. Our mothers had gone to school together, and we bumped into each other at their high school reunion barbeque. We hung out all day, rolling in the grass, playing hide-and-seek, munching on burgers and chips. I thought we would only be friends for that one day outside of school, so I was overjoyed when she sat down next to me in the cafeteria during lunch on Monday.

Annie tried to bring me into her circle of friends, but they never accepted me. I was a tag-along, trailing behind the gaggle of girls that followed her. Even so, we still spent the night at each other's house once in a while, watching movies, telling scary stories, or sometimes just

reading in bed next to each other. She was the only kid I knew who liked to read as much as I did. She had a huge collection of books, and she always let me borrow whichever ones I wanted.

When Mom would come the next afternoon to pick me up, or when we dropped Annie off at her house, I went into instant withdrawal. I felt empty. She made me happy, and I clung to that happiness. When she was gone, I went back to being lonely. I hid in my closet, crying, missing her. I usually felt down until Monday rolled around and I got to see her at school.

One night after Annie had gone home, I went out with my parents to Southwells, their favorite local restaurant. I liked going there because the walls were covered in ocean murals, and the waiters always gave me crayons and a placemat to color on. But this time I couldn't stop crying long enough to pick up a crayon or swallow a single bite of my chicken tenders. I wiped at my wet eyes and snotty nose with my napkin.

"Why are you crying? Did you read another one of your sad books?" Mom asked. I nodded. I was too ashamed to tell her the truth. I knew it was pathetic to cry just because my friend wasn't here, but I couldn't figure out how to feel happy again.

"Well stop it, people are going to think we beat you," Mom said, looking around the restaurant in embarrassment. I tried to stop, but I had to lay my head on the table and close my eyes to silence the sobs. When we got back in the car, I curled up in the backseat, sniffing.

"This is because Annie left isn't it?" she asked. I guess she'd caught on to how sullen I got Saturday afternoons after our sleepovers. I nodded. "If you're going to throw a fit every time she leaves, maybe we shouldn't have her come over anymore."

"No, that's not fair!" I sat up, clutching the back of her seat. How could she even suggest such a thing?

“You need to learn to calm down. You’re too old to cry like this. You’re going to see Annie at school on Monday. And I’m sure she’ll invite you to spend the night at her house again.”

“I know,” I said, my voice shaking. “It’s just...” The thoughts lined up in my head, spelled out a truth I didn’t like admitting to because it felt so stupid, and yet so scarily possible. “When she leaves, I’m afraid it’s the last time we’ll be friends. I’m afraid I’ll go to school Monday and she won’t want to be my friend anymore, that she’ll be mean to me like all the other girls.”

Mom nodded sympathetically, patting my head. “I know. It will be okay.”

I hoped she was right.

For the time being, Annie was still my friend, but the other girls were not. In some ways their abuses were worse than the boys. A boy will come right out and hit you, but if you learn to suck it up, you’ll be all right; a girl will go straight for the jugular, trying to get you in trouble with the teacher, or turning your best friend against you. Like a champion prizefighter, you’ll never know which directions she’s swinging from next.

I knew how girls could be, so I should have known better when one of the popular girls invited me to her pool party. Mom dropped me off at Misty’s house early one afternoon.

“I’ll be back in a few hours. Have fun,” she said, waving as she pulled out of the driveway. I made my way into the backyard where my classmates were swimming, eating hot dogs, and playing badminton. Annie was out of town visiting her grandparents, so I wouldn’t have an ally to cling to. I tried to keep my legs from shaking. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe they’d be nice to me for once.

I looked down at my one piece Rainbow Brite bathing suit, hanging loosely from my pale, scrawny body. I looked like the fourth grader I was. My female classmates, on the other hand, looked like they were middle school veterans. Their hair was perfectly combed and styled, skin tanned and glistening in the hot summer sun, small breasts budding out beneath their striped and polka-dotted bikinis. I didn't know anything about style or fashion, I just wore what was comfortable. Mom was no help in that department either; she would have dressed me in babyish matching outfits every day if I'd let her. I didn't understand important girl things like fashion, so I knew I would never fit into their world.

I hopped into the pool and began splashing around. We played Marco-Polo. We played badminton. We ate chips and dip and cake and hunks of meat striped with grill marks until we nearly burst and were warned about not swimming for twenty minutes lest we get a cramp and drown. By "we" I mean cliques of girls and boys hanging on to each other, chattering and giggling, and then me, the outsider, tagging along.

"Why did you invite her?" Katy said to Misty. Katy had chestnut brown hair styled into a boyish pixie cut. She was one of the many popular girls who stuck her nose up every time I tried to talk to her. When I told my mom about how she acted, Mom said she thought Katy was so skinny she looked Ethiopian, and that I was much prettier. It should have made me feel better, but it didn't; if I was pretty enough to fit in with them, why wouldn't they talk to me?

"My mom made me invite her," Misty said. "She told me it wasn't polite to exclude people. I never thought she'd show up, though." The two of them snickered. Misty's family was rich. She had an inch long scar along her jaw line from when she'd fallen off her four-wheeler and landed on her face on a tree root. I thought it was ugly, but I never heard her get teased about

it, not once. She also had long dark hair that fell to her shoulders and shook when she laughed. It was shaking all over at that particular moment.

“She’s so weird. Look at that bathing suit. She looks like a baby.” More girls were joining the conversation, their eyes darting over to where I sat dangling my legs in the pool, kicking my feet along the surface to cause little waves to break the calm waters. I wished I hadn’t come. I wished a meteor would fall out of the sky and land on top of all those girls, crushing their pretty little faces.

“No way I’m inviting her to my slumber party next week,” one of them said. I wasn’t sure which one. I had squeezed my eyes shut and was focusing on the sound of my splashes. I wanted to go home. I willed my mom to come any minute now. I clicked my heels on top of the water and chanted in my head *There’s no place like home there’s no place like home there’s no place like—*

I opened my eyes. It hadn’t worked. The wizard lied.

When she finally did show up, Mom asked me if I’d had fun.

“No. Those girls don’t like me.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course they like you. Why would they have wanted you at the party if they didn’t like you?”

I looked at her smiling face. I couldn’t see her eyes behind her sunglasses, so I couldn’t tell if she had talked to Misty’s mom or not, if she’d known all along that my invitation was one of charity. She always encouraged me to play with other girls more often, so I wouldn’t have put it past her to set me up like this.

“They were mean to me. They made fun of me and wouldn’t play with me the whole time.”

“You probably just misunderstood them. I bet they like you just fine. Maybe if you smiled more, they’d be nicer to you.”

It was clear she had no idea what she was talking about. I remained tight-lipped and brooding the rest of the way home, bounding into the house as soon as we arrived.

“Did you have fun?” Dad asked.

“No!” I yelled, heading for my room to play with my toys, the only friends who were always there for me, even if I wore a Rainbow Brite bathing suit and never smiled.

Despite the consistent cruelty of the girls my age, there were times when the boys could be just as devious, if not more so.

I was watching *Perfect Strangers* one night when the phone began to ring. My dad answered it and then looked over at me, his forehead wrinkling like it always did when he was worried or confused about something.

“It’s for you. It’s a boy.”

He wasn’t sure what to make of my getting calls from a boy on a Friday night, but he handed me the phone anyway, and I took it to my room. I wasn’t sure what to make of it either.

“Hello?” I had no idea who was on the other line.

“Hello, Jill?”

“Yes?”

“This is Dustin, from school.”

“Oh.” Dustin was a dumpy, pear-shaped boy, with stringy hair the color of mud, who got to hang out with popular kids even though he wasn’t as pretty as they were, because one of the popular boys was his cousin; he was popular by proxy. I was jealous of him for it.

“I was just wondering if maybe you’d like to go out with me?”

My heart froze. Go out? He wanted to be my boyfriend! None of the boys at school ever looked at me in that way. Other girls got cat calls and compliments, I got spitballs in my face and lukewarm vegetables thrown in my hair. Dustin wasn’t cute, in fact he was rather obnoxious, but he was still a boy. A boy who liked me. I wanted so badly to have a boyfriend like all the popular girls at school did. Maybe if I had a boyfriend the other kids would be nice to me.

“Okay. Sure,” I said.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I heard an explosion of laughter in the background over the phone. Then I remembered. Dustin was having a slumber party that weekend. A bunch of the cute, popular boys in our class were staying over at his house. As the laughter got louder, I hung up the phone.

They had tricked me. For laughs, they decided to call up the ugly girl and ask her out. I would think of this moment years later when I saw the movie *Heathers*; I would feel a painful kinship with poor Martha Dumptruck, running out of the cafeteria, the jocks’ laughter following her. Popular is a label—it can’t exist without its polar opposite, unpopular; kids like Dustin couldn’t have been popular without stepping on kids like me to prove there was a difference.

The phone rang again. I answered, furious.

“Hey, why’d you hang up?”

“Quit making fun of me. I can hear you all, laughing. You’re such jerks. Just leave me alone.” In the background there was more laughter. I could picture them slapping their knees, rolling around on the floor, wiping tears from their eyes. I pushed the button to end the call and threw the phone on the floor. It bounced once, then was still, silent. It didn’t ring again that night.

My own tears crept up, but I wasn't laughing. I put the phone back, crying as I told my parents what happened. I was embarrassed and I didn't want to tell them, but I needed to tell someone. I needed my pain to be acknowledged. I hugged my dad's waist, burying my face in his shirt front.

"That's it, I'm calling that boy's parents," he said.

"No." I shook my head so hard my hair slapped me in the face. "Please just let it go. I'm embarrassed enough already."

Monday at school I didn't look anyone in the eye. No one mentioned the phone call, the fake proposal. But I never forgot it. I spent the rest of the school year trying to hold my head up high, telling myself I didn't care what they did to me or what they thought of me, knowing I was a big liar.

CHAPTER 6

I wanted to be liked by the boys, but nothing I did seemed to work. I wanted to be liked by the girls, but not enough to bend to their rules. I was ostracized by both genders, but it didn't matter. I didn't need them. I'd discovered something they couldn't touch, something more powerful than taunts and bullying: the power of my own imagination.

Every day I made it a point to shrug off school, homework, teachers, bullies, sisters, parents, every spider web that clung to me, holding me back from my true self. I shrugged off my skin and dove into the worlds I'd created inside my own head.

I straddled a little stool shaped like a turtle I'd stolen from my sister's room, pretending it was a gallant white horse. I tied one of my mother's scarves around my head and declared myself a queen. I rode my stallion through lush fields alive with flora blossoming in swirling shades of periwinkle and mother-of-pearl, trotting through enchanted woods so thick with vines and trees I had to lower my head to keep from knocking into them, galloping over mountains that glowed a bluish-gray when the sun hit them full force, as it always did, because there was no such thing as night in the lands I lorded over.

I dragged a heavy old quilt—its diamond patterned design yellowed with age and speckled with spots of dirt, smudges of bug carcasses, and even smears of blood from where one of our cats had given birth to a litter of mewling kittens on it—out into the woods behind our house, tied a rope between two trees, and slung the quilt over the rope, pegging the edges down by holding a sharp stick over each corner of the quilt and hammering it into the dirt with a large rock. I used an old sheet to make the floor, which doubled as a bed. I gathered sticks for a fire, put up more rope to hang the wash on and to use to hold a bucket over the fire so I could cook soup in it. I took a box cutter and whittled makeshift spears out of branches, stripping off all the

bark, sharpening the end into a point that could pierce the skin of rabbits, deer, any potential food I happened upon. I was a frontierswoman, living off the land, surviving in the harshest of realms.

I rode my bike up and down the street, circling the cul-de-sac with my eyes closed, seeing how long I could ride until I got scared and opened them; I usually only made it a few feet, but it felt like a mile. I took my hands off the bars, took my feet off the pedals, balancing on the seat, waving all of my limbs wildly in the air. I slung my legs over the handlebars, letting my feet dangle down to almost touch the spinning tire, lifted my hands above my head. I pedaled like a madwoman to gain speed, placed my feet underneath my butt on the seat, slowly eased up until I was crouching. I stood up straight on the pedals of my bike and let go of the handlebars, my hands dancing out into the wind. In these moments I was fearless.

I laid an old barrel we used to keep firewood in on its side and rolled it out behind the house, near the woods. Its metallic skin was flaking off, and had faded to burnt shades of brown and orange. Grabbing on to branches hanging around me, careful not to jab myself on the pine needles, I stepped on to it and worked my feet so the barrel moved beneath me, spinning under my worn out purple Reeboks like a log on a river. I practiced every day for weeks until I didn't need the branches to help me anymore, and I could ride that barrel near and far, do somersaults off of it. I was an acrobat at the circus, all eyes on me as I wowed the crowd with my dazzling feats of talent and bravery. If I'd had a pet lion, I would have stuck my head in its mouth. If I could have figured out how to build a canon, I would have tucked myself in and shot myself out, lickety-split, riding the clouds to some exotic new destination, leaving the old life I'd lived in my dust.

I could entertain myself for hours, just being by myself, thanks to my vivid creativity, my ability to not just sculpt entire worlds in my head, but to see them, to draw back the curtains of

reality and see what lay beyond, waiting for me. Where this ability came from I'm not exactly sure, though I suspect I owe much of it to my insatiable appetite for books.

From the time I learned how to read, I always had my nose stuck in one book or another. I often got in trouble at school for reading while the teacher was doing a lesson.

"I'm happy you enjoy reading so much," Mom said after I got in trouble for the third time in a week for reading when I wasn't supposed to be. "But you've got to keep it under control or I'm going to have to take your books away." I didn't believe she'd commit such an atrocity; my books were the best friends I had, and she knew it, so I called her bluff. For years, I continued to get in trouble for my reading habit, and despite her constant threats, she never took a single book from me. She did, however, make comments on my choice of books. I started reading adult books by Stephen King and Michael Crichton when I was eleven; Mom wasn't happy that I was reading about violence and sex and gore, and if I hadn't hidden those particular books between the mattresses or at the bottom of my underwear drawer, she would have thrown them in the garbage.

I liked the adult books because they were my secret passage into a world I wasn't supposed to know anything about, but my favorite books were always tinged with fantasy and sci-fi, like *Mazemaker*, *The Seer*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*. The fantasy worlds I read about bled into my waking life, as I prowled about the woods that surrounded our house, searching for mythical creatures to befriend and secret portals that would transport me to some place more magical than my own boring existence. I had a pet dragon that followed me everywhere and loved to eat the flowers and weeds I pulled up and threw over my shoulder, a pet unicorn I would ride as she flew above my house, higher and higher until nothing existed but me and a blue so pure I wanted to melt into it, be invisible, my blood and body and bones fading into translucence,

liquefying into tears, shattering into droplets, raining down on the world below, pieces of me scattered across vast oceans and unknown continents.

Eventually my mother would catch me. Her reaction was always the same.

“Do you know how stupid and dangerous it is to go walking around in the woods, and in those tall weeds? There are rattlesnakes everywhere.” Mom was convinced the entire world was swarming with bad things that wanted to hurt children, mostly snakes and child molesters.

“I just want a place to go that’s my own,” I said. I developed this longing after reading *Mandy*, a book about a girl who stumbles across an abandoned cottage in the woods and makes it her own special place. I was always on the lookout for such a place, where I could be alone, without nagging parents or cruel classmates.

“You have a room and a backyard. That’s all you need.” She was convinced that was all anyone needed. She couldn’t fathom how restless I was; I wanted adventure, I wanted to see new worlds. Even years later, when I made plans to travel to Europe, Africa, and Asia, she would try and talk me out of it.

“Why do you need to go so far away? It’s dangerous in those places. What’s wrong with being here?” She was happy being stationary; if it was good enough for her, it should have been good enough for me. She never understood that I needed more than the world she’d built for me had to offer.

My imagination wasn’t just my means of entertainment, it was also how I discovered my niche. I started writing poems, stories, and plays. I showed one of the musicals I wrote—a parody of *The Wizard of Oz* that I’d called *The Wizard of Math* and given a more school-

appropriate theme—to my teacher, who gave me permission to do a performance of it. She also let me cast and direct it myself, and set aside class time for us to practice.

I'd cast all the popular kids in my play hoping it would make them like me more, which it did, if only temporarily. I helped them all design and create their costumes: instead of a scarecrow made of straw, a tin man, and a lion, the main characters (other than Belinda, who was my version of Dorothy, and the witch) were a scarecrow made of newspaper, an aluminum man, and a tiger. I stuffed newspaper under the scarecrow's sleeves, taped Pepsi cans to the aluminum man's vest, and made ears and a tail out of cardboard and fabric for the tiger. I gave them acting lessons based on what I'd learned from watching TV and movies; I showed them how to pretend to be shy, or scared, or brave. I taught them how to sing the songs I'd written; which key to start off in, how long to hold the notes, and when to harmonize. I was starring in the musical as well. I played the Wicked Witch, of course, always the villain instead of the beautiful starlet, even in my own plays.

On opening day, I stood scrutinizing my costume in the girls' bathroom mirror, smoothing out my long black robe and straightening my black pointy hat so it stood erect on top of my head.

"You need warts," Annie said. I'd cast her as Belinda, the star of the play.

"No, I'll look ugly with warts." I almost said "uglier," but stopped myself. I didn't want to sound like I was looking for sympathy or fishing for a compliment.

"You're a witch, you're supposed to look ugly." Annie took a black marker and drew little bumps on my face with dark hairs sprouting from them. "There, that's better. Now you look scary. What about me?"

Her shiny red hair was combed into perfect pigtails, not the lopsided ones I always had when I tried to pull off that hair style. Her dress was buoyant, the blue and white checkered skirt billowing in waves around her small frame.

“Lovely,” I said, and I meant it.

We walked back to our classroom, where a room full of parents holding video cameras was waiting for us to take the stage. My hard work was rewarded with claps, smiles, and compliments. It was the first time I’d gotten so much positive attention from people in as long as I could remember. It was only for one day, but it was enough to keep me happy for a long time.

The one consistent compliment my teachers always gave about me was that my creativity was boundless. They loved to read my stories, poems, and essays. I won first place in a writing contest in first grade for a story about two hunting dogs, one of whom got shot and died in the end—even as a child I understood the power of tragedy. In sixth grade I won the English Student of the Year award; the best thing I wrote in that class was a story about a girl who went insane and killed a priest by stabbing him in the heart with a crucifix. My writing grew darker the older I got. Rather than being admirable, my talent for storytelling began to make people think I was weird. Teachers, and even my family, recognized my ability and praised me for it, but still looked at me strangely, as if there had to be something wrong with a young girl who wrote with the pathos of an old soul.

“You’re a freak,” my sister said after reading a story I’d written about a murderous, demon-possessed cat.

“Where did you come up with this?” Mom asked after reading the same story. “I don’t know, it just came to me,” I said, shrugging innocently. I didn’t want to admit I’d gotten

the idea from Bram Stoker's "The Squaw," one of many stories in a horror collection I'd stolen from Julie. If I confessed, I'd get in trouble for taking the book without asking, and Mom would assume my brain was being poisoned and take away any books she felt were unsuitable for me to read. She'd done it a few years earlier when I started having nightmares after a heavy dose of R.L. Stine.

"Why do all of your stories have to be so dark and depressing? Why can't you write happier stuff like you used to?" she often asked. Eventually I stopped letting her read my writing.

Besides being influenced by other authors, I really didn't know where the ideas came from, I just knew they were always there, entertaining me: at night, when I had trouble going to sleep, I would pretend I was a beautiful adventurer hanging out with Indiana Jones, traveling the world, getting into mischief. Other times I'd fantasize about using some untapped physical ability to beat the hell out of any kid who messed with me. The line between what the reality of my life was versus who I was in my fantasy was one I often lost track of. My daydreams were so vivid, I would sometimes open my eyes and be surprised I wasn't in Casablanca, or Calcutta, or victoriously straddling the bruised body of a bully.

This wasn't always such a bad thing, but sometimes the thoughts that came into my head were much worse; I didn't just beat up the mean kids, I stabbed them with knives or shot them with guns. Other times I used the knife or the gun on myself, and I imagined my funeral: my parents sobbing, all the teachers and kids at school feeling bad. I didn't want to have these fantasies, but I couldn't always control them; they seemed to come from a dark place, a place inside me I hadn't even known existed.

What sprung from the dark places in my imagination were fear and paranoia. I spent many hot summer nights with my Little Bo Peep comforter pulled over my head, and this night was no different. Every stuffed animal I owned was stationed around me like an army defending their eight-year-old queen from intruders. Ted E. Bear, a scraggly brown lump of stuffing with black pupils and glowing orange irises, was their commander, because he was my favorite. My bed was a fairy-tale fortress, a stuffed stronghold. And yet it was not enough. I could still feel *them* out there, watching me.

I stayed as still as I could, scarcely breathing, letting itches go unscratched. Maybe if I didn't move, they wouldn't see me. My eyes were squeezed shut. In my head, over and over again, I sang songs I learned in Sunday school: "Jesus Loves Me," "Jesus Loves the Little Children," "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Like a record on repeat, I replayed these songs to myself, because I thought maybe this way I could keep the evil at bay.

I wasn't sure what I was afraid of, but in my head I imagined Jabberwocky-type creatures: shiny black scales, long tentacle arms, bulging eyes the color of blood, gaping jaws, teeth long and sharp like icicles jutting from their slimy gums. There was an army of these things waiting in the shadows, waiting for the right moment, when I was exposed and vulnerable. As long as I stayed hidden under the covers, perfectly still, they would get bored and move on to some other child's house. I would be safe.

And then it happened. I had to pee. I'd held it as long as I could, and I didn't want to wet the bed. Maybe if I moved fast enough, they wouldn't catch me. In a flurry, I threw the comforter aside and hurled myself off my bed, jumping as far as I could—so no monsters hiding underneath could grab my ankles and pull me under—and ran to the bathroom.

Once there, I had to check behind the shower curtain for gremlins. After my bladder was totally empty, I flushed the toilet, which let out a menacing groan as the water swished down its throat. I hated that noise. It was going to wake up every wicked thing that might have been sleeping. What I hated even more was opening the bathroom door and staring down the long hallway, all the way through the kitchen to the back door at the other end of the house. It was a dark corridor and I knew there had to be something there on the other side looking back at me, something I couldn't see, a tall alien with big black emotionless eyes and long skinny fingers that reached for me, beckoned me to come closer.

I ran from this thought, ran back to my bed where I'd at least be a little safer than I was now standing in the hall, exposed. I ran for the entrance to my bedroom but hit the doorjamb instead, bouncing off and landing flat on my back, holding my aching knee and shin.

I wanted to call out to my parents, but they never took me seriously. They rose from sleep, groggy and grumpy, tucked me in with the assurance that it was ridiculous for such a big girl to be being afraid of monsters, and went back to bed. Even my sister, who was just barely old enough to not be tormented by child-eating monsters anymore, had tired of letting me sleep on the floor in her room when I got scared. And every child knew that evil creatures would just hide until parents and siblings were gone, then come right back out. I was on my own in this.

I lay there wallowing in my woe, the pain edging out my fear momentarily; but as it subsided I remembered I was on treacherous territory. I couldn't stay there any longer, it was too dangerous. I hauled myself up and made a running jump on to the bed; no albino alligators or mutant trolls made of dust bunnies were going to get me and pull me into a world where children were eaten alive for being innocent. Not *this* little girl.

I was bruised and my heart was racing, but I was back in my shelter. I burrowed myself beneath the covers again. I said the prayer I always said at night when I was afraid: *God, please protect me. If there is such a thing as demons, ghosts, aliens, or monsters, please keep me safe from them. Please don't ever let me see one, because I don't think I could handle it. And when I die, please take me quickly. Don't let me have time to be scared.* My eyes were squeezed tight, my hands clasped firmly together, no darkness could unglue them. But I still felt alone. I felt like I was talking to the emptiest cloud, the deepest ocean. I was throwing prayers into the mouth of a cave.

I don't remember what happened next, I must have eventually drifted off, but the next morning my parents told me they woke in the middle of the night because they heard me screaming. When they came in my room, they found me sitting up in bed, my eyes open, pointing straight in front of me at the mirror that hung above my dresser.

"You're scared of things in the dark, but really the thing you should be afraid of is you," Mom joked.

I laughed too, but it wasn't long before I realized how right she was.

There were times when I transcended my imagination, and my senses seemed to be in tune with nature. The clouds drifting above me smelled like fresh linen, the patch of dirt and clovers I sat in was pleasantly musky, like salad mixed with wet soil. I dug my fingers in. The clovers were soft and smooth like thin bits of plastic, and as I stroked one between my thumb and forefinger it made a squeaky noise like a door hinge in need of lubricant. The dirt curled under my fingernails, squished inside my fists, escaped from between my fingers.

In moments like these, I felt connected to everything. When I closed my eyes and listened, I heard the world talk: the whisper of each blade of grass bending in the wind, brushing against other blades; the tinkling of every pine needle that broke free from the trees and sailed to the ground; the wind itself like an invisible river lapping against whatever it touched. I felt the expanse of sky, every inch of it, stretching from where I sat all the way out to the cosmos. A faint buzz, like electricity running through a refrigerator, surrounded me on all sides. The noise was tangible. It reminded me of when I sat right in front of the TV in the living room, touching its glass front, feeling the crackling layer of static between my hands and the images on the screen; the static felt fuzzy against my skin, and I marveled at being able to touch what I couldn't even see.

Sitting in my clovers, I could reach out and touch the life that radiated off of the grass, the sky, and every living thing in between them. My nerves tingled with the static of people all over the world, their bodies humming. I was dizzy, my pulse quickened with the excitement of it all. I felt every drop of blood circling through my veins, heard my body humming with its own life, harmonizing with the song the rest of the world was singing. In moments like these I felt truly alive, and though I knew I might be the only person who could feel these living vibrations, knowing they existed made me feel less alone.

But with this hyperawareness of life came sensitivity to suffering. The living vibrations didn't always hum—sometimes they screamed. I would see pictures on the news of skeletal brown girls starving in India, or muscular black boys being beaten and gunned down in Somalia. I watched the footage of the Space Shuttle Challenger as it rose into the air on a cushion of fire, only to erupt from within, swallowed by flames, until nothing was left but fingers of smoke and a glowing, falling pyre. I heard the wail of ambulances racing to a house just up the road from us,

where the little brother of a boy I went to school with was hit by a car, pinned between its bumper and a mailbox; he died before they could pull his body free from the wreckage. I knew the world was full of people in pain, and people about to die. I felt a crushing weight on my chest, a total loss of control. I couldn't help them. I didn't know how.

When I asked Mom what I could do to help people who were hurting, she said I should pray, so I did. I asked God to stop letting people die, but He didn't listen; the next night there were more murders talked about on the news, and I was pretty sure that all the starving children in foreign countries still hadn't been fed. I went back to Mom and said that praying wasn't working, we needed to do more. She said she gave a few dollars to charity now and then, and that we were meant to take care of our families and leave everyone else in God's hands. I told her it seemed like God was busy doing other things, like maybe playing Solitaire or something, and she said she didn't want to talk about it anymore. It was the first notion I had that things weren't going to change; no one was going to jump in and magically save the world. We were all stuck in this mess, but some people had it a lot worse than others. All I could do was cover my ears to block out the screaming, and hope for silence. Sometimes I found silence in unexpected places.

The first time I seriously considered suicide, I was ten. My parents, sister, and I had taken a family summer vacation to Helen, Georgia, a breezy little mountain town. One afternoon, after swimming in the condo's pool and watching reruns of *Knight Rider*, I opened the sliding glass door to the balcony. We were on the sixth floor. My parents were napping in the master bedroom and my sister was reading a book in the smaller bedroom. I inched myself up on to the railing and slung my legs over, dangling towards doom. I don't know where it came from, but

something in me pulled me to that ledge. Maybe it was the darkness in me: the little piece of the ocean I'd swallowed, the little drop of death I'd brought back with me.

Whatever it was, it made me want to push off and go sailing into that bright oblivion, landing as a pile of crushed bones, a mere shadow of my former self. I imagined my body breaking, my joints splitting with a snap, crackle, pop. I imagined people crying at my funeral; my mother sobbing about how she shouldn't have yelled at me so much, my friends agonizing over how they should have asked me to play more often, the boy I had a crush on weeping for never telling me I was pretty, never asking to hold my hand. As I stared down at the ground below, the noise in my head subsided, and I plotted my own demise with a calm clarity. One small push, a brief fall, and then it would all be over. I felt peaceful, poised on the cusp between life and death. But every time I told myself *this is it, I'm going to jump now*, something else inside me fought to make me stop, like an invisible hand holding me back. I didn't know whose hand it was, or how I long I would have until it decided to let me go.

PART TWO: PUDDLE

CHAPTER 7

It all started with blood. My obsession with the darker side of life crept in on me slowly. Tendencies I didn't understand came unearthed from somewhere deep within my subconscious with a natural ease, a primal instinct taking over. What started as a droplet was growing, a puddle was forming. Whenever I had a thought that scared me—monsters, demons, death—I could feel the puddle rippling inside me, like it was nudging me towards something. I was scared of so many things, but I was also fascinated by them; it was the rippling that drew me towards landscapes of the grotesque, convinced me to reach for the monsters.

Blood was so beautiful, the way it glittered on TV in action movies with car crashes and sword fights and war reenactments. I was mesmerized by the way it looked, slowly dripping out of me when I got a paper cut or tripped on the sidewalk and skinned my knee. Such a luminescent red hue, blending shades of blue, purple, yellow, and brown, like something mixed up on a painter's easel. And it changed with the passing of time: ruby deepened to mahogany deepened to chocolate.

Blood was supposed to be the essence of life. And it was right there, sitting underneath the skin, just a cut away, like buried treasure.

The first time I tasted blood was an accident. I was sitting outside on the porch reading a Beverly Cleary book, eating Chef Boyardee ravioli straight from the can. When I'd dug out as much as my spoon could dig, I dipped my tongue in and licked the slimy leftovers of my meal from the aluminum. But I forgot about the sharp inner rim, the part the can opener peels the top from. I sliced the sides of my tongue on it, deep cuts that bled and bled. The pain was clear and crisp, cutting through my immersion in *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*. The blood flowed out, already in my mouth, sneaking down my throat. It wasn't gooey or sticky, not like syrup as I had always

imagined. The consistency wasn't that different from Gatorade, hot chocolate, or anything else I liked to drink.

Despite its lovely appearance, I always thought blood would taste foul, but it didn't. It wasn't sour like old milk, or pungent like vinegar. It had a smooth taste, warm and strange but not unpleasant; and there was a subtle undertone of metal, from the iron, I'd later discover. It reminded me of when I sucked on nickels—secretly so my mother wouldn't catch me and tell me to spit the dirty thing out—as I would turn the coin over and over on my tongue, my taste buds delighting in the foreign, almost forbidden flavor. That's how it felt, tasting my own blood. Like swimming in uncharted waters. Like plucking a fig from a branch in Eden.

The wounds on my tongue pulsed, and I knew I couldn't walk around all day with blood in my mouth. I used my shirt to try and clot the cuts, lifting the collar above my neck and putting it in my mouth, wrapping it around my tongue and biting down to hold it in place. Eventually it stopped bleeding. I had Rorschach blots of blood around the neckline of my shirt. When my mother asked about the stains, I would lie and tell her it was spaghetti sauce. This answer satisfied her. My secret was safe.

It wasn't the last time I put my tongue against the sharpness of a can. I would do it several more times, knowing the risk. I would cut myself again. I had awakened myself to a new taste—not simply the blood, but also the means by which the blood was drawn. I had opened the door to a craving that would only grow stronger.

When show-and-tell came around every year at my elementary school, I always took the same thing to class with me: the cartilage from my father's knees. By his early twenties, he'd damaged them beyond repair after years of playing football. A doctor surgically removed the

cartilage, put each bundle of tissue in a jar full of formaldehyde—one for the right knee, one for the left—and signed a note to medically excuse him from being sent to Vietnam. My father’s life, and my own, may be owed to this doctor’s undecipherable John Hancock.

I found the jars in a drawer in the garage one day, and my father explained to me what they were. In one jar, the cartilage looked like raw, albino-colored bacon: solid white, long and flimsy and wavy, sloshing around in yellowish liquid preservative. The seal on the other jar had been compromised, letting air in so all the formaldehyde evaporated. The cartilage had dried up, and looked like overcooked bacon: a swirling of deep red and orange, thin and stiff, clinking as it hit the curve of the glass when I shook it.

I was fascinated by the fact that these funny looking little bits of tissue had come out of a human body—my Dad’s, no less—and that I had something similar inside my own body. I was filled with oceans of blood, coils of veins and arteries, squishy organs, and bones just like those of plastic Halloween skeletons. It made me shiver to think about.

“Ewww, what is that?” the kids at school asked as I held up the jars.

“My Daddy’ cartilage. From his knee. You have these things in your knees, too.”

“No way.”

“Gross!”

My classmates squealed. I sat the jars on my desk all day, and they walked in a wide arc around me to avoid my display. They complained at lunch that they couldn’t eat because they were so grossed out by the cartilage. My teachers rolled their eyes and grumbled, asked me politely to take the jars home and not bring them back again. I’d put them back in the drawer in the garage, until next year’s show-and-tell; but sometimes I’d sneak into the drawer, take them out and stare, rubbing the palm of my hands over my kneecaps.

My cat, Bubblegum, laid a bird he'd killed on our doorstep. The head was chewed clean off so all that was left was a stiff corpse covered in gray feathers, orange feet twisted in agony, and wings that, when lifted, revealed cat claw marks; the bird's wounds were caked with dried blood, and its veins and tendons were exposed. I picked it up and put it in a Tupperware bowl, hiding it in the garage near my Dad's cartilage. I wanted to study it as it rotted, watching it until all the feathers fell off and the skin dried up to reveal its bones. I wanted to see what death looked like.

I went back a few days later to look at it, opened the lid and nearly fell over, retching from the smell. The body was turning greenish-black with decay, and maggots had somehow gotten into the bowl. I took the whole thing and flung it into the woods, watching it disappear between the trees.

There were other birds, some headless, some wingless, some completely intact. I'd pose them, surrounding them with pebbles that I shaped into a heart. Then I'd use my little plastic camera to take pictures from different angles, like a photographer ogling a professional model. They were gross, but there was a bizarre beauty to them too, knowing that not long ago they were singing and flitting through the treetops with all the other birds, and now they were nothing but a hunk of rotting meat covered in feathers. In a way I envied those birds because they knew something I didn't know; they knew what it felt like to die, so they didn't have to be curious or scared of it anymore. Taking pictures of them didn't feel strange to me. It felt natural to document nature's small tragedies.

I documented my own small tragedies as well. When I was twelve, I started shaving my legs. I wasn't very good at it, and I often cut myself, taking small chunks out of my calves,

ankles, and knees. I felt the need to have a record of my injuries, a way to look at my blood whenever I felt like it. The pictures show crimson trails running all the way down my legs, past my ankles, pooling in the gulley between where my foot ended and my toes began.

There are also pictures from when I took a dive over the handlebars of my bike, landing on the asphalt. There's a picture for each hand, revealing folds of torn skin, gashed palms, wounds embedded with pieces of the road, blood rising to create a crust. When it happened, I sat staring at my beat up hands, mesmerized by the way my skin frayed like cloth, the way my blood surfaced like water from a spring. I had to capture that moment so I would never forget it.

I would take these pictures out periodically and study them, the way I'd studied the dead birds. The pictures proved to me that I was real, made of flesh, bone, and blood. They proved to me that I was alive.

CHAPTER 8

I was playing in the front yard one day when I came across a little black snake sunning itself in the driveway. A few years before, a five foot water moccasin had crawled up out of the drainage ditch and sunned itself in that exact same spot. Dad had told us girls to stay inside while he ran it over with his truck and then chopped its head off with a hoe. That was what you had to do with poisonous snakes or they'd rear up and bite you to death. We thought he was a hero for killing it before it hurt anybody.

I stood a few feet from the snake I'd found so I could examine it, I saw my chance to be a hero. The snake was about a foot long, skinny as a reed, shiny black like a seal. My snake expertise, gained through watching lots of Discovery channel documentaries, told me it had to be a water moccasin. I headed to the garage and grabbed the same trusty snake-killing hoe my Dad had used, and held it over the tiny snake's head. I brought it down quick, and with one swift move the snake was decapitated. I felt proud. I'd made my backyard safe again.

Jasper, my new neighbor's stepson who let me ride with him on his Go Kart once, because his stepdad made him, was watching me from across the street. He came running over to see what all the fuss was about.

"I killed a water moccasin," I said.

"That ain't no water moccasin." He nudged the dead snake's body with his shoe.

"Yes huh it is. I know. I've seen all sorts of stuff about them." I leaned tall and proud against the hoe like it was a walking stick.

"Moccasins are bigger and fatter than this thing."

"So this one was just a baby, going to grow up and be a big fat moccasin."

“No, I seen adults and baby moccasins out camping with my dad. What you killed is just a little harmless black snake.” He looked at me reproachfully, tsk-tsking, like I was a murderer. I suddenly felt like one. I’d hurt one of God’s innocent creatures. For no good reason, I’d chopped its head off while it was just lying around, minding its own business, trying to get warm.

“Nuh uh.” He had to be lying. He had to.

“Did it rear up or hiss at you when you got close.”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then that wasn’t no moccasin. You killed a poor little rat-eating snake. Good job, kid.”

I stared down at the corpse. I liked snakes. I wasn’t like most girls who squealed and ran from them. I played with the pretty green grass snakes, even kept my cats from hurting them as best I could. I liked to sneak up on them to touch their smooth skin, and it was fun to watch them slither around. We learned in science class that snakes kept the rodent population under control. Except for the rattlesnakes and moccasins, the snakes around where I lived were nice animals. They’d never hurt me. I had taken something’s life, with my own little girl hands. It wasn’t fair that I had that much power over another living being. It wasn’t fair that I felt so bad about it when it was an accident.

Jasper went back to his house. He moved in with his real Dad shortly after that. We never spoke again. I buried the snake in the empty lot nearby. I didn’t tell anyone about what I’d done.

A week after killing the snake, I noticed something was wrong with my cat. I went to find my dad.

“Bubblegum is sick,” I said, tugging on his pant leg, my lower lip pouting. “Come see.”

Dad followed me out to the garage and kneeled next to where Bubblegum lay sprawled out on the cool concrete, his ice blue eyes glassy under droopy half-closed lids, his delicate pink tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth, a clear liquid running steadily from his black button nose. His side rose and fell slowly, laboriously, his breathing loud and raspy. Dad frowned, wrinkles springing up across his forehead and between his eyebrows. I knew that look. The prognosis could not be good.

“What? What’s wrong with him?” I thought of all sorts of terrible things that had happened to my friends’ pets: worms burrowing into their hearts, kidneys that up and stopped working, tumors that ate their insides out like sucking the meat from an oyster shell.

“I don’t know, honey, but I don’t think Bubblegum is going to make it.” Dad laid his hand on my shoulder as tears spurted and flowed down over my freckled cheeks.

“Why? I don’t understand.” I shook my head, wailing. This had to be payback for the snake. God was punishing me.

I’d lost pets before. My first cats, Tally and Panther, ran away. I always blamed myself, because I did like picking them up by their tails while they mewed and flailed about. They got the funniest looks on their faces, their eyes bugging out and their mouths open wide while they hollered out high-pitched meows, and the kids at school who’d told me to do it swore it didn’t hurt them. Maybe they lied, because those two kitties disappeared one night and never came back.

When my next cat, Tuna, went missing, I went outside several times a day and called for her until my parents finally told me she’d been hit by a car and they’d buried her in the backyard. I was inconsolable until Dad helped me nail two pieces of wood together to make a cross. I wrote Tuna’s name across it and pushed it into the soft mound that had become her final resting place.

But this was different. Bubblegum was my favorite cat ever. He came from a litter of mutt calicos, but somehow came out looking just like a Siamese, with a fat white body, black ears and nose, and two crystal blue ponds for eyes. He was like a chubby version of the “We are Siamese if you please” cats from *Lady and the Tramp*. He loved for me to pick him up and carry him around, cradling him like a baby. He was only two years old, barely a teenager in cat years, barely younger than my sister. He wasn’t supposed to die. This was all my fault. I’d cursed him.

“I don’t know why. Sometimes these things just happen,” Dad said, squeezing my shoulder before standing up.

He got a square container made of puke green plastic and a pair of stained gardening gloves from a shelf in the garage. With gloved hands he lifted my kitty and placed him in the plastic tub, then picked the tub up.

“Where are you taking him?” He wasn’t dead yet. Maybe there was still hope.

“Animals like to die alone, in peace. I’m taking him into the woods so he can die with dignity,” Dad said.

I watched him carry the green container out to the woods and sit it down under a cluster of trees where I usually played. He left Bubblegum there and came back to the garage, pulling the gloves off.

“Can’t I stay with him one last time?” I couldn’t believe I was just supposed to go on about my life while my cat was dying.

“No. Leave him be.” That was the end of it, in his mind. He would go inside, wash his hands, sit down to dinner and a football game, forgetting about Bubblegum until it was time to bury him.

“Won’t he be lonely?” I whispered, but Dad had already shut the door behind him.

I sat in the grass at the edge of the driveway, about ten feet from my cat's makeshift death bed, listening to him wheeze, watching his ribcage expand and contract arrhythmically. The sun dipped lower in the sky, fingers of pink and purple shooting up along the horizon. Mosquitoes slowly emerged from wherever they hid during the day, munching on my ankles, snacking on my bare feet. My butt was hurting, my legs kept falling asleep. Still I stayed. I didn't care what Dad said. I wasn't leaving Bubblegum to die alone. If I were dying I would have wanted someone with me. I would want someone to care.

I heard the back door open.

"Jill, it's getting dark out. Time to come inside," Dad said, his voice reverberating off the walls of the garage.

"In a minute," I hollered back.

"Now, young lady." He emphasized each syllable, a sign that he was losing his patience.

"Don't worry, Bubblegum. I'll be back," I said, stretching my legs as I stood.

I went inside and ate a few bites of dinner, got a shower, and then headed for the back door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Dad asked from his spot in front of the TV.

"To check on Bubblegum."

"No you're not. Leave that cat alone. Besides, you're all clean now, you'll get dirty."

"No I won't, I'll be extra careful." I was whining now. In my head I was plotting ways to sneak outside if the need came: climb out my bedroom window, climb out the bathroom window, wait until my parents fell asleep and creep out from the back porch.

"Let her check on her cat," Mom said, as I flashed her a grateful, gap-toothed smile. "Just put your shoes on first, and come right back."

Dad rolled his eyes at her as I pulled my shoes on, not bothering to tie them, running outside before he could change her mind. I approached the woods slowly with my little flashlight.

“Bubblegum? I’m here. I told you I’d come back.”

I shined the light into the plastic tub. Bubblegum’s eyes were still half-open but they were vacant and glazed over. He wasn’t wheezing anymore. His ribs were still. His whole body was silent and stiff. I reached a hand out and petted him. He felt hard, like petting a mechanical toy with fur layered over its metal skeleton. I knew he was gone, and I should have cried right then, but I didn’t. I just felt numb.

I left him there, alone.

The next day, we buried Bubblegum next to Tuna. Dad dug a hole and lowered his fat little white body into it. He took a shovelful of dirt and tossed it in the grave. It made a hollow thudding sound as it hit Bubblegum’s side. Another shovelful blanketed his head, making more hollow sounds, and I couldn’t watch anymore. That sound broke the spell I’d been under since I’d touched his dead body the night before. It was the sound that meant Bubblegum was about to be under a foot of dirt, and I would never be able to see or smell or touch my cat again.

I went back to the house and cried while Mom hugged me, telling me it was okay, Bubblegum was in a better place.

“Do you really think so? They told us in church that animals don’t get to go to heaven. Is that true?” I rubbed my eyes, sniffing.

“I think God can do whatever he wants. Don’t you?”

I nodded. My mother had a knack for knowing exactly how to make me feel better without every having to give a definite answer to my tricky questions. I imagined Bubblegum

running around in the clouds, surrounded by kitty treats, stuffed mice, jingle balls. I imagined him waiting for me to die so I could rub his belly until he fell asleep, a rolling purr rising from him like the slow motor of an old lawn mower turning over and over.

CHAPTER 9

I was brought up going to Sunday school in the First Baptist Church, a huge red brick building that sat in the middle of downtown Palatka. I liked the stories about God and Jesus and angels that I'd grown up hearing. Mom had even decorated my room with pictures of angels. For my birthday, my Granny had bought me a little ceramic guardian angel with long flowing hair—Granny said she thought the angel looked just like me—to sit on my bedside table, but I kept knocking it off at night when I reached for my water cup. Both of her wings had broken off. I wondered if she was still allowed to be an angel with broken wings.

I had a little Bible my parents had bought me that I toted around every time I went to church. It somehow made me feel more like an adult to have my own Bible, even though this one was made specifically for kids, with the Old Testament left out as if it never happened, as if God never got angry and struck people with giant bolts of lightning raining down from heaven. It also had cartoon pictures in it of the angel appearing to Mary, the shepherds coming to the stable and crowding around baby Jesus, and grown up Jesus preaching to crowds of people. There were little scribbles on the inside cover where I'd tried to draw my own pictures: a radiant Jesus, holding his hands out to anyone who opened the book. Jesus is a smiley face with a beard, all outlined in blue crayon, his outstretched hands more like the curling talons of some exotic bird.

It was Palm Sunday, a week before Easter, when that Bible got me in trouble.

“The B-I-B-L-E. Yes that's the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E!” I sang softly, as I colored my picture of Jesus and the Easter Bunny holding hands. In the background was a large wooden cross with striped and polka dotted eggs hidden in the grass around it. I continued to hum the song as I slaved over my drawing, making sure every color Crayola ever made was represented somewhere on the paper.

I'd known the song for as long as I could remember, but that was the first time I ever stopped and thought about the lyrics. It was those words that inspired me to get my little Bible, sit it on the floor, and stand on top of it. It was by chance that my mother happened to walk by my room at that moment and see me committing what she considered to be an act of blasphemy.

"What are you doing?" She stared at me, her face turning red, her eyes moving from my feet—which were planted firmly on top of Jesus' picture on the cover of my Bible—to my face—which peered at her curiously, not understanding what she was fussing about—and back again.

"I'm standing alone on the word of God," I said, as if it made more sense than anything else I could have been doing at that moment.

She kept looking at me with her head cocked like a confused puppy, and she stammered like she was searching for something to say but didn't like any of the sentences she started. Finally she said, "Get down from there, right now. And never do that again."

"But Mama, I was just—"

"Get down."

"But I don't understand why—"

"What you're doing is bad. Don't ever do that in public. And don't let me catch you doing it again."

I stepped off my Bible, taking my bare feet off Jesus' face and putting them back on the carpet, disheartened. I was just doing what the song said to do, what I thought God wanted us to do. Mom didn't get it. She shook her head and took off down the hallway to wherever she'd been going before she came in my room. She never spoke about what I'd done, and I never again put my feet on top of Jesus.

Later that week, my Granny took me to First Baptist to see the Resurrection play that was being performed there. The room where Sunday services were held was huge, like an opera theater, with a balcony and a vaulted ceiling that seemed to stretch up forever, and a stage at the front of the church where the preacher would stand behind his pulpit, and the choir would stand behind him. On this night, the church was dimly lit, and candles sat in every window. It was like walking into Dracula's haunted castle, shadows dancing in every corner, people all acting somber. I'd never seen this play before, and I was excited, bouncing with each step. Why was everyone being so still, so silent?

We took a seat in one of the middle pews and waited for the show to start. I tried to chat with Granny but she was acting like everybody else now, quiet and staring at the stage up front. It had been cleared of all furniture, and dingy brown sheets had been thrown over the cheery mauve carpet. Even the stage seemed to feel sullen, dressed the way it was.

The music started, the organ's lolling notes drifting from its throat, floating out across the church, clinging to every surface until the place was dripping with music. Then it stopped, and out came the actors. They started with the birth of Jesus, then worked their way up to the Sermon on the Mount, and the Last Supper. The men all had long hair and bushy beards; I couldn't tell if the hair was really theirs or just wigs and bits of fake hair glued around their mouths.

The man who played Jesus had a loud, deep voice, just like my Dad and my uncles, and for the first time I realized that he had been a man, too, just like the men in my family, just like the man on the stage pretending to be him. This made me feel closer to him. He wasn't just a glowing figure with a shiny halo circling his head, the way he looked in the picture in Granny's dining room. He was part human, someone I could have known had I lived when he lived, someone I could almost touch.

When the betrayal came, the guards grabbed Jesus by the arms and dragged him off the stage. He stood before Pilot as the same actors who'd listened to his sermons danced around him screaming, "Crucify him!"

He was whipped, the whip rising and falling over the head of his attacker. The crown of thorns was placed on his head, blood trailing down. Then Jesus, wearing only a cloth around him that looked like a fluffy white diaper, carried a cross on his bare back that looked much too heavy for him to carry. He was skinny and pale, his ribcage outlined through his skin every time he inhaled.

I took it all in, eyes wide, trembling a little. I knew the story, had heard it many times before, but it was just like "The Little Dutch Boy" or "The Little Match Girl": hearing it was much different than having to watch a boy stand for hours in agony with his finger stuck in a dike, or watching a little girl dressed in rags slowly freeze to death while the people around her did nothing to stop it.

The guards laid Jesus down on the cross and placed nails over his hands and feet. They lifted the hammers up high, then brought them down swiftly. It was a sound unlike anything I'd ever heard before, a sonorous boom that echoed through the entire church, reverberating off the walls and ceiling, the candles flickering in the sound's wake; the noise permeated my head, my ears ringing, my brain thumping, my whole body pulsing. I wanted to put my hands over my ears, close my eyes, shut it out until it was over, pretend I was at home lying peacefully in my bed, safe and sound, surrounded by my parents and my stuffed animals. But I couldn't. I couldn't. If Jesus had to go through all this, then I should have to go through it with him.

Tears welled up and trickled down my face as the cross was hauled up off the floor, Jesus' body hanging from it like the rib of a cow pendulating on a meat hook in the back room at

Joey's Meat Market, where I went with my mother to buy steaks and hamburgers, the smell choking me as soon as we walked in the door. Jesus died a slow death while his mother watched. His final words came out in a roar: "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do." His head relaxed, leaning down so that his chin nearly touched his chest.

He returned later in a white robe, glowing, the overhead spotlight bouncing off his fake-or-real brown curls, illuminating his wide-mouthed grin. But something had been lost. It had to have been. You don't go through all that torture and then come out clean on the other side, good as new, as if it never happened. My stomach hurt. Something about this new and improved happy Jesus wasn't sitting well with me.

And then the show was over, we were leaving, Granny was dropping me off at my house where my mother asked, "Did you enjoy the play?" and I could only nod weakly and stumble to my room. I was safe and sound, but it didn't feel that way. I curled up on my bed, pulled my legs into my chest, and sobbed into my knees. I kicked all of my stuffed animals out of bed. If Jesus didn't have any comfort for what he went through, why should I? I plastered my hands over my ears as I wept, but it didn't help; I could still hear the pounding of nails being hammered into wood, the wood giving way to the metal, a man's life being beaten out of him, the people watching acting as if it was no big deal.

CHAPTER 10

Throughout my elementary school years, I'd struggled to fit in and be liked by the kids around me. I didn't have many friends, and the few I did have would turn on me in a heartbeat. Annie called me one day from her friend Maria's house to tell me they were having a sleepover without me, because they were best friends with each other now, not with me. I hadn't done anything wrong. I knew how it went; two people form a stronger bond when they unite against a third. I often found myself playing the third wheel, or, as I used to tell my mom, not even being a wheel on the same vehicle. I was a wheel on the car behind the ones my friends were on. My only friend had abandoned me, the way I'd always feared she would. But somehow I felt relieved. I didn't have to cry over her going home anymore. The worst had happened, so I could stop expecting it and relax into my loneliness.

I tried to find a place for myself, but the only time I felt safe and accepted was when I was alone. Sometimes this made me feel so lonely that I wanted to die. I used up many of my *star light, star bright* wishes on asking for things to get better, on helping me to find friends and a boyfriend to love me, or letting me die quick and painless so it could all be over and I wouldn't have to be alone anymore.

I didn't exactly know what it meant to die, only that it would bring an end to the fear that constantly plagued me, and that all of the people who had ever been mean to me would feel guilty about it. I wished for leukemia. I wished for a car accident. I wished my mother would carry out her threats of "I brought you into this world and I can take you out." When death did not come for me willingly, I thought of using force.

I thought of swallowing marbles until I choked, locking myself in the meat freezer in our garage, walking in front of a speeding car on my way home from school, running through the

woods looking for one of those evil poisonous snakes my mother warned me about. I never would have done any of these things, not just because I was afraid death would hurt, but also because of my fear that I might go to hell and burn for all eternity. They told us in Sunday School that, other than blasphemy, suicide was the only sin you would be damned for, because if you killed yourself you couldn't ask for forgiveness—you were already dead. I realized that if I wasn't sent to the right place, death might be a dark and scary thing, even darker than the world around me.

Besides, there was still hope. Fifth grade was coming to an end, and middle school was waiting for me just on the other side of summer. Moving to a new school would be a fresh start. I could reinvent myself, be whoever I wanted. I could finally be popular, pretty, have lots of friends, maybe even a boyfriend.

For fifth grade graduation, all the fifth graders performed a show for the parents. I was chosen to sing a solo of "When You Wish upon a Star." It felt like fate.

I practiced every day for weeks before the performance, Mom coaxing me, telling me where I strained to hit high notes, where I sang too softly, where my voice broke. Julie would walk through the living room and scowl, unsupportive as always.

"I can't wait until you're done with this so I don't have to hear all that squawking anymore," she said.

"Hush," Mom told her. "Jill, don't listen to her. Keep going, you sound great, honey."

On the day of the show I eased into my rented Blue Fairy costume, pulling on the frosty blue leotard trimmed in lace and the mounds of scratchy crinoline. I placed the glittery silver tiara on top of the tight bun Mom had tethered my wild mane into, and picked up my fairy wand

with a fat gold star on the end of it. I twirled in front of the mirror, my poofy skirt spinning around me like a pinwheel. I felt like I really could grant wishes looking like this.

When the time came for me to sing my solo, I stepped out on to the stage, alone, staring at the crowds of people. The spotlight was hot, my skin spilling a layer of sweat beneath it. The music started, I clutched the microphone in one sweaty hand, raising it to my lips. My voice quivered with the first few lines, and then it soared. I was a beautiful fairy. I made dreams come true. The world was blooming at my feet, opening up to me petal by petal. I was a brand new girl, and when I got to middle school, everyone would see it.

PART THREE: LAKE

CHAPTER 11

I was ready for middle school. Over the summer Mom had taken me shopping, and I felt I'd picked out a considerably hip wardrobe: shirts that were splashed and zig-zagged with pastel and fluorescent shades, flowery vests, and crisp blue jeans. Bongo jean shorts were all the rage with the popular girls, as were body suits—which were basically leotards, but were meant to be worn outside of dance and gymnastics classes—and I'd talked my mom into buying me one of each, as well as a denim purse and matching denim jacket. I'd also convinced her I needed a bra. I didn't. But it was wishful thinking: one day I'd have boobs, and I might as well get ready for them.

The night before my first day of middle school, I stole one of my sister's razors to shave my legs and armpits, even though I didn't have much hair, and what I did have was fine and mostly blonde, barely visible. Mom would eventually find out, shaking her head as she gave a speech about how I was still too young for such grown up things. I didn't care what she thought. Shaving made me feel older, more mature, and more normal, because a lot of the girls I knew in elementary school said they'd been shaving for years.

I also rode my bike outside for hours in the sun, with no sunscreen on, pinkening my cheeks and nose so it looked like I'd spent all day lying around at the beach. I twisted my long hair into twin fat braids on either side of my head, and slept on them that night, so my hair would be full of waves in the morning. I'd even stolen some of my Mom's make-up, so I could primp the way other girls my age did, the way the high schoolers on *Beverly Hills, 90210*—which I was forbidden by my parents to watch—did.

As I drifted off to sleep, I imagined what the next day would bring. Mom had gotten a list of the other students in my classes, and I found out there was a cute popular boy named Jeff who

would be in most of them with me. I'd never met him before, I'd only heard stories from girls at Moseley who had friends at Smith, the other elementary school in town, where Jeff went to school. He'd dated the most popular girl in school the year before, but then they broke up. I would walk into class tomorrow, he would see me and fall instantly in love, telling all his friends about the sweet, beautiful girl in his class. He'd ask me on a date, we'd become a couple, go to high school together, get married, have kids. He would be the love of my life, I was sure of it. This was going to be the best year ever.

Mom and I got to school bright and early the next morning. I wasn't very excited about having to go to the same school where she worked. Moseley had been bad enough with my grandmother there, but at least she had a different last name, so only the teachers knew who I was. Here, everyone would know.

I tried not to think about it. I went to the bathroom, clutching my purse full of goodies to my chest. I went to the mirror and set up all the make-up I'd brought on the side of the sink, like it was my own personal vanity. I'd never been taught how to apply it, but I'd watched Mom a few times. It couldn't be that hard.

I curled my lashes with mascara until they were thick and spiky and black. I brushed shiny purple eye shadow all around my eyelids. I puckered my lips and smeared lavender lipstick on them, then made kissy faces at myself in the mirror. I didn't have any blush, but in old timey movies I'd seen girls slap themselves and pinch their own cheeks to redden them. Grabbing the sides of my face, I pinched my sun-pinkened cheeks to make them pinker. I spritzed hair spray in a cloud around my head, to make the waves stay in place. Turning my head one way, then the other, I admired my new look. I belonged on the cover of *Seventeen*. I was going to make all the boys drool.

I went outside and stood at the front of the school, watching kids arrive, waiting for someone I knew. Some kids from my elementary school class the year before trickled in, a few at a time, and I ran wildly up to each of them as soon as I saw them.

“Hey, how was your summer?” I smiled ear to ear, unable to hide my excitement at seeing a familiar face. Some of the nicer ones smiled and chatted back, noticing my hair, my sunburn, my make-up, my outfit. The ones who’d never looked my way while we were in school together just stared, ignored me, and went to find their own group of friends.

One girl with short brown hair pointed her cold blue eyes right at me and said, “You have lipstick on your teeth,” then sauntered off. I ran my tongue roughly against the front of each tooth, making sure they were all spotless, hoping no one else had noticed.

When the bell rang to go to first period, I followed the throngs of students flocking towards the entrance. I heard a familiar vacuum noise, a noise I’d heard before and knew couldn’t signify anything good, and then I felt something wet hit my chest. I looked down and saw the chunky greenish-brown glob sliding down my brand new shirt, between what would have been my breasts, if I’d had any. Spit. It was spit. No, not just simply saliva, this was very clearly saliva mixed with green snot. And brown bits of tobacco. He had spit on me.

The widening eyes of the boy whose spit I was wearing suddenly appeared in front of my face. He covered his mouth and started laughing.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there,” he choked out between snorts. I could tell by his shocked expression that he hadn’t done it one purpose, but he wasn’t sorry it had happened. He was older, probably in eighth grade, and wore a Wrangler t-shirt, jeans that were too tight, and a flannel striped hat pulled down over his mullet. A pack of similarly dressed boys was standing around, all of them looking at me and laughing.

I fought back tears and fought through random elbows and swinging backpacks to make it to the girls' bathroom. I wiped the spit off my shirt as best I could, took a deep breath, and told myself it was okay, this was just a minor catastrophe in what would otherwise be a great day. I splashed water on my face, combed the fake waves in my hair with my fingers, and took another deep breath. It was time for first period.

Science was my first class of the day. The teacher, Mrs. Seanor, was a friend of my mom's, and I'd been to her house before. This made me feel a little safer. I walked into the room and looked at the students milling about. I didn't know anyone. Anyone, that is, except for Ben Rudd. My nemesis.

He shot me a hateful sneer from where he sat in the back of the classroom, as I sat in a desk in the front row. I looked away, pretending I hadn't seen him. I wasn't going to let him ruin this school year for me.

Then I saw him—Jeff, the boy of my dreams. Up until that moment, I'd fantasized about him only because I'd heard other girls say he was dreamy; but as soon as I saw him, my pulse quickened. He had brown eyes and silky, stick-straight white-blonde hair that came down past his ears. Over his perfect tan he wore a blue t-shirt with a surfboard on it, and blue and white striped shorts that looked like they were made for swimming. His eyes were brown, and they grazed my face as he walked in the classroom and took a seat next to a tall, pretty blonde girl with a hook nose. I smiled to myself. He'd looked at me, for just a second. This was definitely going to be a good year.

Gym class is the stuff of nightmares. Standing outside in the heat, sweating to death while balls were flying at your head—that was bad. A bunch of smelly, sweaty girls all cramped

into the same small locker room, with a rumored-to-be-a-lesbian gym coach watching us from the big picture window that took up one wall of her office—that was worse. But nothing was more horrendous than being a scrawny, flat-chested girl, trapped in a place where showers were mandatory and changing clothes was unavoidable, surrounded by girls who'd obviously blossomed over the summer. I was one of only a handful of girls who hadn't developed yet.

I'd borrowed my sister's old gym uniform to change into, because my parents told me I had to wear it. The shorts were black with a yellow stripe on the side, and they were so short I had to be careful of the way I was sitting to not show off my pink cotton panties to the rest of the class. The shirt was red, and had the school logo on it, faded from years of washing. As I looked around, I saw that all the other kids were just wearing baggy shirts and shorts. They'd stopped requiring people to wear the school gym uniform a few years ago, and I was the only person wearing one. I saw Ben pointing and snickering at me. My face flushed to the color of my shirt.

Our first day of gym consisted of going over the class rules, then breaking into groups and playing volleyball. Our teacher, Coach Simmons, was a tall, muscular man with a receding hairline and a sad face, his cheeks constantly curling down into a frown. Despite his stature, his face made him look timid, but his voice was deafening. It startled me every time his words thundered out from his pouting mouth. When he called out the teams, I heard mine and Jeff's name echoing together, bouncing from one wall of the gym to the other.

We all moved outside and got in formation behind the net that had been set up. I'd never played volleyball before, and Coach Simmon's demonstration wasn't like the real thing. The volleyball came flying through the air at you, sometimes at full speed if it was one of the larger boys who'd hit it. I'd been whacked in the face with a softball before and had a tooth knocked loose, so I had no desire to get hit with an even bigger ball. When the volleyball came flying at

me, I instinctively moved out of the way, letting it strike the pavement, and causing the other team to score a point.

“What are you doing, you idiot?” Jeff screamed from where he was standing.

“Huh?” I couldn’t believe it. He was my Prince Charming. He wasn’t supposed to make fun of me.

“You have to hit the ball, not run from it. Don’t you know anything?”

I shrugged and looked away from him, down at my shoes, then at the sky; anywhere but at those piercing eyes. I had to do better. I had to make him like me.

When it was my turn to serve, I dropped the ball and hit it right into our team’s side of the net. Jeff stomped over to me and got right in my face.

“Are you retarded? You hit it over the net, not into it. Fucking moron.” His face was so close to mine I could feel the heat of his breath. His brown eyes blazed with hatred, and my hands started shaking. This was all wrong. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I looked for Coach Simmons, but he was off talking to one of the other coaches, not even paying attention to his class. None of my other teammates spoke up for me. They just watched.

The game continued, and I didn’t get any better. Every time I screwed something up, Jeff would go off again.

“You’re the worst player on our team. Why don’t you quit? Why don’t you go be on someone else’s team?”

I saw it all going down the drain: our first date, our marriage, our children. It was only the first day and I’d already screwed everything up. Jeff couldn’t stand me. My fairy tale was torn to shreds.

By the time our class was dismissed to go back to the locker rooms, I was about to cry for the second time that day. I couldn't handle the embarrassment of being naked at that moment, so I went to a sink and splashed water on myself instead of showering. Most of the other girls did the same. When I got back to my locker, which I didn't have a lock for yet, I found that someone had gone into my denim purse and stolen my lunch money.

If the gym is a nightmare, the cafeteria is a sleepwalk into hell. The crowds are suffocating, the noise is deafening, and for a girl with no real friends—standing frozen near the entrance, wringing her hands together and trying to keep her knees from shaking uncontrollably, looking desperately for a friendly face to sit next to—it feels like trial by fire. I finally sat down at the edge of the popular table, near some of the nicer kids, smiling as big as I could. A few of them glanced at me and nodded recognition, then looked away. Most of them ignored me altogether. I pulled my Stephen King book out of my purse and read while everyone else ate.

I tried a few times to join the conversation. Brooke, the girl Jeff used to date, was talking to another girl about the color lipstick she used. "It's by Mary Kay, and it's called Dusty Rose."

I couldn't believe it. Pulling the tube of lipstick from my purse, I smiled and said, "Look, I wear the same color." I grinned. Her eyes swung from me, to the lipstick in my hand, and back again. She flashed a quick, placating smile, then turned away, ducking her head in shame that the likes of someone like me could have the same taste in make-up as the likes of someone like her.

I heard a voice further down the table talking about how cool MTV was.

"Has anyone seen the Weezer video for 'The Sweater Song?'" I asked. My sister was trying to cure me of my nerdiness by getting me into bands like Weezer, Pearl Jam, and Nirvana; I was sure my musical knowledge would win me some points with this crowd. But they

just glanced at me blankly. A few heads shook, a few shoulders shrugged, then they continued with the conversation as if I'd never spoken.

When they were all done eating, everyone at my table got up and moved outside. Not wanting to sit there alone, I got up and followed them. They stood in the breezeway or sat on the steps between the cafeteria and the agriculture classroom. I stood a few feet away from their group, staring off at the baseball diamond across from the cafeteria, the garden the Future Farmers of America had planted, the cars sailing by on the road beyond. I wished I was in one of those cars, and this place was nothing but a blur outside the window on my way to somewhere else.

There were several boys in my class who were deemed “problem kids.” My mom knew who they were because she'd seen their files, and she told me all about them. Problem kids came from divorced, low income families, where the father was either absent or in jail. At eleven and twelve years old, some of them already had rap sheets. Most of them were what Mom referred to as “white trash.”

Jon and Oliver were two such boys. Jon's dad had died a few years earlier in a drug bust gone awry, and his older brother was already serving time for dealing cocaine. Oliver's mom had left him to be raised by his grandparents. He'd already been arrested for vandalism when he spray painted the inside of a church. In a few years, he'd be arrested for shooting his girlfriend in the face with a .44 Magnum.

On this day they were sitting in sixth period, ganging up on Alex, the only Asian kid in our class. In fact, he was one of only two Asian kids in the whole school.

“Hey, Ching Chong. What's it like living in China, dumb ass? Why don't you go back there?”

“I’m Filipino,” he said in a perfect American accent. There was only the tracest hint of a lilt at the end of his words.

“Filimapeon,” the boys chanted. “What does that mean? We don’t speak Ching Chong.”

I knew I should have said something. At that moment I wanted more than anything to stand up for all the bullied kids of the world. But I didn’t. All I did was watch, tight-lipped, and make eye contact with Jon while he was laughing. That was enough to become a target.

“What are you looking at? You want to date me? Too bad, I don’t date ugly chicks,” he said, nudging Oliver with his shoulder. “She’s too ugly for me, you want a crack at her?”

Oliver looked me up and down while I stared straight forward and tried not to blush under the scrutiny of his eyes. “She’s not bad. I’d bang her. Maybe. With your dick,” he said, slapping Jon on the back.

I was fully clothed but I suddenly felt naked. The thought of them putting their dicks anywhere near me was horrifying. Where was our teacher? Why wasn’t she stopping this? Mrs. Holloway, our math instructor, was a gangly, middle-aged woman with shoulder-length hair dyed a very unnatural shade of red. She was at the blackboard with her back turned, scribbling numbers in chalk, listening only to her own droning voice.

“Faggot,” I said under my breath, turning my head. I’d heard the word used on TV before, and had heard it shouted during fights on the playground. I remember a kid getting sent to the office for saying it in third grade. I wasn’t sure exactly what it meant, but I knew it would piss them off.

“What did you say, bitch? What did you call me?” Jon asked, getting out of his seat. I hadn’t said it to him specifically, I’d merely thrown it in his and Oliver’s general direction, but it seemed I’d struck a nerve. He wasn’t very tall, maybe just an inch taller than me, and he was

skinny as a bean pole; he probably had about ten pounds on me. But for some reason, the way he stood up and pointed his furious stare at me made me shiver.

“Nothing, I didn’t say anything.” I tried to back out of it. This made me a coward, and a target for further bullying I was sure, but at the moment I didn’t care. I just wanted him to stop looking at me like that.

“Yes you did. I heard you. I heard what you said.” He was creeping towards me, slowly, like he had eons of time to come after me and do whatever he wanted. His voice was louder now. Loud enough that our stupid teacher finally turned around.

“What is going on here? Get back in your seat,” she said, grasping for his name because she hadn’t memorized it yet. She went to the seating chart and slid her finger down it until she saw his name. “Jon. Sit down.”

But he didn’t stop. He was almost on top of me, so I leapt out of my desk and backed away.

“Jill, you get back in your seat too.” Of course she knew my name, because of my mother. I ignored her and kept moving, my arms out in front of me, like I could deflect him with my hands if he suddenly charged at me.

He finally stopped walking. He grabbed an empty desk, lifted it nearly a foot off the ground, and threw it at me. I couldn’t believe such a skinny kid could be strong enough to lift up a desk like that. If he’d been a little stronger it would have landed on top of me. As it was, his small arms could only hurl it at my feet. I skipped back a few more steps as the desk skidded across the linoleum with a horrible, scraping squeal.

“Jon, march yourself to the office right now.” Mrs. Holloway’s voice crescendoed, terse but unalarmed, as if he’d just thrown a pencil at me instead of a desk. He did as he was told, slamming the classroom door behind him. “Jill, get back in your seat.”

I couldn’t believe it. Was that all she was going to do? Just send him to the office? He’d be back in class first thing tomorrow. What was I supposed to do then?

As I took my seat, I saw Ben pointing at me, his shoulders shaking with laughter. This was not the first day I’d been dreaming of. And I felt something rising in my throat, something that felt like dread, as if this was just the beginning, and things could only get worse.

CHAPTER 12

It felt like a freight train had run into my shin.

“Do it again,” I said. Ben pulled his foot way back, then let it fly at my leg full force, crashing into the same spot it had just hit a few moments ago. I didn’t cry out. I didn’t flinch. I didn’t even blink. “Do it again. Do it harder.” I stared at Ben, feeling my eyes tear him down. I could also feel my leg bruising, the skin swelling and flushing all different shades of purple.

“You’re crazy, you know that?” Ben shook his head and I could see him getting scared, the corners of his eyes and mouth twitching.

“Just do it. Are you a wuss or something? Do it as hard as you can.”

He kicked me one last time, putting all his strength into slamming the ball of his foot into my already bruised shin. The pain was crushing. And I just kept looking right at him as if he’d barely brushed up against me.

“Jill, Benjamin, keep your eyes on your own papers.” Ms. Spitzkopf, our tiny English teacher with long blonde hair and bright, blue-grey eyes, who couldn’t have been older than 23, was scolding us from her desk.

Ben turned around in his seat to face the front of the class, but not before whispering, “You’re a freak.”

I didn’t care. I’d won. When Ben had started kicking me under the table I tried a new tactic. Tattling hadn’t worked in ages, and besides, nobody tattled in middle school, it was like social suicide. So instead I sucked it up and pretended it didn’t hurt at all. Then I acted as if I actually liked it, egging him on to kick me again. Ben hadn’t known what to make of my enthusiasm, so he played along at first, enjoying kicking me and not getting in trouble for it. Then he started to get weirded out by the whole thing. If Ms. Spitzkopf hadn’t yelled at him I

was pretty sure he would have stopped on his own. I'd observed the meaner kids picking on some of the weird kids—the ones who supposedly had a screw loose from being born crack babies or dropped on their heads early on—and saw how the bullies got freaked out and gave up when the weirdos acted as if they liked the taunting. It took away the fun of watching someone squirm and protest. Willing victims aren't very interesting.

Ben left me alone for a while, giving me several weeks to relax before he was at it again, calling out from wherever he sat in the room, "Hey Jill, shut your legs. I can smell you from all the way over here."

I tried to keep my cool, to act like it didn't bother me, but I wasn't that good of an actress. By the end of the day I couldn't take it anymore.

It was two minutes until the bell would ring, signifying the end of another gruesome school day, when Ben stood up and announced, "Hey, did you guys all know Jill's a dyke?" Mrs. Holloway was buried in her gradebook, oblivious to the world. Ben wasn't much more popular than me, because he was dorky and chubby, and I'd seen him get picked on plenty by other kids. But when he picked on me, the other kids laughed with him. He used me to get their approval.

"Shut up." Two more minutes? He couldn't have kept his mouth shut and left me alone for two more freaking minutes?

"I heard you and Cheeser screw each other all the time." He pulled his fat little chipmunk face into a toothy grin.

Cheeser was the nickname for the only girl in our class who had it worse than me. Her real name was Amber, and she was skinny and freckled and blonde, just like I was, but her face had a slope to it, like it was fighting with gravity; her eyes and mouth sagged downward a little, and though she seemed smart enough, there were rumors that her mom drank and smoked crack

while she was pregnant. Amber always smelled a little funny too, like corn chips and sweat, as if she only bathed once a week—another nasty rumor that circulated frequently among her classmates. She had brown stains on her teeth and horrible dandruff to boot. The poor girl never had a chance of making it through school in peace. Everybody called her Cheeser because she farted once in class, making the whole room erupt into giggles. As she ducked her head, dying of embarrassment, Jeff shouted, “Amber cut the cheese!” and the class was rolling in their desks all over again.

I felt bad for Amber. Bad enough that I never called her Cheeser to her face, only behind her back. But not bad enough that I didn’t take offense to insinuations that I was her lover.

“You shut your mouth, fat boy.” I had never pulled out the big guns before, never insulted Ben for his weight because it was a level of meanness I couldn’t bring myself to go to, but he’d gone too far this time. There was one girl left in the class who was seen by everyone as more pathetic and tease-worthy than I was, and he wasn’t going to push me down to her level without a fight.

For a few seconds, Ben paled to a ghostly white, before reddening with a burst of anger. He stomped across the room just as the bell rang. I got up to leave with everyone else, thinking we’d pick this up tomorrow, but he pushed me back down in my seat.

He held on to my shoulders and snarled, “You ate Cheeser’s pussy. You ate Cheeser’s pussy and you liked it so much you went back for more!” He laughed, his rosy cheeks puffing, jolly and carefree as Santa Clause. He laughed right in my face. Usually I was too scared to get into a physical fight with anyone, but Ben’s laughter clanking around in my ears was too much. The violent tendencies of my younger years reared up from somewhere in my psyche and

overruled my self-control; I pulled my hand back and slapped him, hard, right across his fat, rosy cheeks.

He stopped laughing, and for a moment his brown eyes seemed to turn black; his face was right in front of mine, eye to eye, staring back at me with charcoal irises. Then he slapped me back, his hand crashing into my face. He grabbed the headband I was wearing and yanked it off, taking a handful of my hair with him, then he ran out of the classroom and down the hall.

Still a little stunned, I tore after him, teachers yelling after us both to slow down. We didn't. We rounded the corner and Ben slipped into the boys' bathroom before I could catch him. He came out a few minutes later, smiling once again.

"I stuffed your headband in the toilet and pissed all over it. You can go in and get it back if you want," he said.

He thought he'd beaten me, but this wasn't over yet. I committed the cardinal sin and did the only thing I knew of to do. I tattled.

"She started it!" Ben whined. Mrs. Hollway sighed and glared at both of us. "She never gets in trouble because her Mom works here and she just runs to her Mom and lies about everything."

That wasn't entirely true. I had gone to my mother and told her what Ben had done, and I had downplayed my role in the fight, but I hadn't flat out lied.

Even so, Mrs. Holloway was not happy that my mother had complained to her about Ben's behavior towards me in her class, insinuating that she wasn't paying enough attention to her students. She was quick to let me know whose side she was on.

"You do run to your mother an awful lot," she grumbled. That wasn't entirely true, either. I hadn't told my mother half the things that had happened to me since school had started. I hadn't

told her about getting spit on, or getting a desk thrown at me, or the teasing and humiliation I faced on a daily basis from Jeff, Ben, Jon, Oliver, and any other student who felt like chiming in. I went home and cried a lot, telling her I was made fun of, nobody liked me, school was awful. But I didn't go into detail. There didn't seem to be much of a point. Except when it came to Ben.

“Do not,” was all I said, muttering it under my breath.

“Don't talk back to me, or I'll have my own tattling to do to your mother,” she said, shaking me a little. She was standing between Ben and me, with a hand on each of our shoulders. “Now what are we going to do about this situation?”

I stared at the floor. Ben shrugged.

“I think you two should call a truce. Stay away from each other. Don't talk to each other, don't look at each other. Understand?” We both nodded. “All right, now shake on it.”

We hesitated, and Mrs. Holloway squeezed our shoulders until we stuck out our hands. I grabbed Ben's sweaty hand in mine and shook it. We stared at the floor the whole time. He tightened his grip, trying to hurt me, so I pulled away from him, wiping his sweat and germs off on my jeans.

“That's better. I don't want anymore problems out of you two. You shook on it, and that's as good as a promise. Now, go on back to your mom's classroom, Jill. And Ben, you go wait outside for your mom to come pick you up.” Mrs. Holloway herded us out of her classroom and down the hallway into opposite directions.

A few minutes later I heard a “Pssst” sound, like someone was trying to get my attention. I turned around and saw Ben standing halfway down the hallway, holding his left hand up, the one I didn't shake. He had his fingers crossed, and he was smiling at me in a way that made my stomach churn.

CHAPTER 13

Just like in elementary school, the boys weren't the only ones I had to worry about. Middle school girls could be infinitely cruel. Kami Grimes was living proof of that. She was tall—nearly a head taller than most of the boys our age—and supermodel skinny, with long, flowing blonde hair. She had pale skin with a few chicken pock scars dotting her porcelain face. The end of her nose curved out and down like the beak of a bird, and I thought this made her unattractive. But there was one thing Kami had that few of the rest of us girls had: boobs.

At twelve years old, she was already a C cup. She wore scoop neck blouses that showed miles of cleavage. Wherever she went, a trail of boy drool followed her.

“She’s freaking hot,” I heard Joseph say one day after gym class. I’d known Joseph for years because he went to my church. He was popular, athletic, filthy rich, and gorgeous to boot: stringy golden brown hair, bright green eyes, muscles sculpted from a year on the swim team. He could have had any girl he wanted.

“Man, I’d titty fuck the shit out of her,” Joseph whispered to Jeff. It was a phrase I’d never heard before, and was too embarrassed to ask anyone what it meant. I heard several boys say it about Kami, and sometimes I’d stare off into space, my head cocked in deep thought, as I tried to imagine the physics of such a feat. I wasn’t exactly sure what physical acts fucking was comprised of, so the titty part just made me even more confused. Whatever it was, I knew I would have let Joseph do it to me if he asked, especially if it meant he’d make me his girlfriend. But my chest was still flatter than an ironing board, and Joseph barely looked at me.

Some girls acted ashamed of their blossoming female parts, and that made me and most of the other underdeveloped girls more forgiving. It wasn’t their fault the boys were paying attention. But Kami flaunted her body in ways I’d always been told—by my parents and Sunday

school teachers—were “whorish.” She wore shorts and skirts that made the rest of us blush, her long bare legs stretching out from under her desk. Her shirts and dresses were always tight, straining against the curves of her body. She squealed and huffed when she caught a boy looking up her skirt or down her shirt, trying to catch a glimpse of panties, bra, or best of all, a bit of naked flesh. But she never told on them, never ducked her head with shame, never squished her legs together or crossed her arms protectively across her chest. She liked the attention, the whispers, the way boys fell all over themselves around her. She was the most powerful girl in school. And I hated her for it.

By the end of my first month of school, I’d made friends with a girl in my classes named Rebecca. She had unruly curly hair, and she was short and pudgy. She got made fun of for her weight, but she had a quick tongue and a sharp sense of humor. Anyone who ever called her fat got slapped with a comeback like, “Not as fat as your mom,” or “I can lose weight, but you’ll still be ugly.” I started hanging out with her because she always made me laugh. Sometimes I was the butt of her jokes, but I was usually laughing with her. And often times if someone else picked on me, she’d stand up to them and say, “At least she’s not inbred like you.” We were allies in the land of bullies.

The only semi-popular girl in our class was Kami. Since she didn’t have any other friends in the class, except Jeff and a girl named Christine, she’d sometimes hang out with Rebecca and me. Unlike the other popular girls who always just ignored me or gave me looks of pity, Kami actually talked to me. Smiled. Nodded. Listened to my woes about wanting a boyfriend and hating that my mom never let me go to the movies with friends. During lunch, she didn’t sit with the ultra popular kids; she sat with Stephanie and Christine, the same averagely popular kids she’d been friends with in elementary school. She was loyal. So I trusted her.

Rebecca and I started sitting with Kami and her friends at lunch. I told her about Dougie, my beautiful Italian boy, whom I still had a crush on years after our unpleasant third grade confrontation. I told her about my disappointing infatuation with Jeff. Her long, thin fingers curled into a fist, placed under her chin as she listened, her beak nose wrinkling in amusement when I told a funny story, her lips frowning in sympathy when I told a sad one.

“Don’t worry. If he doesn’t like you, forget about him. Find someone who does,” she said, patting my hand like my grandmother did sometimes. Kami said things like that a lot. I thought she was the smartest girl I’d ever met when it came to boys—though not very bright in English or Social Studies or anything—and I was in awe of her wisdom.

This went on for a while, me telling Kami my secrets, her listening intently and delving out advice. But as the popular boys began noticing her more and more, she stopped talking to me as much. At lunch, she spent part of her time sitting with Stephanie, Christine, Rebecca, and me, and the rest of her time sitting at the popular table, the one I’d previously abandoned—though no one missed me. We didn’t mind, because she never spent as much time with them as she did with us. Until she started turning mean.

I knew something was different about her the day I walked up to our lunch table with Rebecca, trays in hand, and Kami was whispering to Christine and Stephanie, laughing so hard her eyes teared up.

“I can’t believe she wears those things every day. They don’t even look like real leather. I bet they’re plastic.” Kami’s high-pitched voice floated over the noise of the cafeteria.

I looked down at my English horse riding boots. They were real leather, with the coarse brown inside layer to prove it, and I loved them. They reminded me of the summer, a few years back, that I’d spent taking horseback riding lessons. On top of Rocky, a monstrous Appaloosa,

and Jeepers, a skittish Arabian, I'd felt freer than I'd ever felt before: wind tangling my hair, a flurry of pounding hooves and smooth muscles bending beneath me, my fingers twined in sandpapery manes. When school got to be too much, I looked down at my boots and dreamed of better times, times when I straddled chaos and led it by the reins. I couldn't have gotten that same feeling from Reebok or Nike.

I tried to explain this to people who asked why I wore riding boots, but they never seemed to understand, so I usually followed up with, "They were expensive, and I want to get my money's worth out of them." I refused to stop wearing them, so I was continuously teased about my footwear. Until this moment, however, no one I considered to be a friend had teased me about them.

I glanced at Rebecca, wanting her to defend me, but she just shrugged. When Kami saw me, she none too subtly shushed the other girls and looked up at me, sheepishly grinning.

"Love your boots, Jill. Where did you say you got them?"

I sat and took a bite of discolored vegetable mush. "At a store called The Rusty Stirrup," I said, my eyes locked with hers, refusing to show any reaction to her disguised insult.

There were more incidents like this one, when I came to the table and found myself and one of my shortcomings to be the topic of discussion. Once when I was eating my chocolate pudding, I turned my head to look at something while still holding up my jell-o filled spoon and got a spoonful of it in my hair. As I tried to rub it out with a napkin, Kami had to cover her mouth to subdue the waves of laughter spilling out.

On another occasion, I was wearing my forest green body suit that accentuated my thin frame, but also my lack of curves.

Kami came up to me before class and said, “That looks really good on you,” the corners of her mouth curling up just a little.

“Thanks. I was hoping to run into Dougie today, so you *know* why I’m wearing *this*.” I spoke arrogantly, which I rarely did. I couldn’t help myself. I felt good in my outfit, almost pretty enough for a popular boy to want to date. I smoothed my hands over the suit, trying to wipe away the bits of lint clinging to it.

“Uh, yeah.” She gave me a thumbs up before sauntering off to her desk.

Later I ran into Kami’s friend Ashley, who I’d never really gotten along with. She was a pudgy, plain-faced girl who talked with a monotonous voice that made it sound as if she were bored with everything and everyone around her. She had a habit of glaring at me like I was a fly buzzing around her picnic. Worse yet, she also had a crush on Dougie.

When I ran into her, she looked me up and down and said, “I *know* why you’re wearing *that*.” She used the same inflection I’d used earlier when I was talking to Kami. I couldn’t believe it. Kami was revealing confidential information to one of my enemies. How many other secrets of mine had she given away?

It was archery month in gym class, and I was waiting for my turn to shoot when I felt something small and hard whack the back of my head. As I turned, I collided head on with an acorn being hurdled at my face. It bounced off my forehead and plopped at my feet.

“Ouch. What the hell?” I rubbed my forehead where I could already feel a welt beginning to rise. Ben and Jeff were both staring very intently into the opposite direction from me. I kept my eyes on them until I got to the front of the line.

As I drew back my arrow, I felt an onslaught of acorns thumping against my back, and for a second I considered turning and shooting Jeff, or Ben, or both of them, straight through the heart. I imagined their gasps of surprise, my classmates' screams as the two boys sank to their knees covered in blood, then fell flat on the ground—or at least as flat as they could fall with arrows sticking out of them.

I made my shot and missed the target, the arrow slicing into the dirt a few feet shy of the bullseye. As I turned I saw Jeff, Ben, and Kami. They were all laughing, holding extra acorn ammo in their hands, ready to launch again.

“Cut it out you guys.”

“*Cut it out you guys,*” Jeff and Kami said in perfect sing-song unison. Then Kami put her lips next to Jeff's ear and murmured something to him that he found hilarious, his face turning red and his cheeks stretching from fits of laughter. He pointed at me but couldn't get any words out through his chuckling. What awful secret had she told him? That I had a crush on Dougie? That I used to have a crush on *him*?

“What? What's so funny?” Ben asked. He hovered around expectantly, but they ignored him. At least I wasn't the only one being excluded from their little duo.

I was used to this from Jeff and Ben, but not from her. Why would she turn on me like that? I couldn't understand it.

I tried to talk to Rebecca about the whole mess, but she wasn't much help. “That's how Kami is. You just have to get used to it,” was all she said.

I tried talking to my mother about it, but she said the same thing every time I told her one of my friends was being mean to me: “Then that person really isn't your friend, and you need to find someone who is to spend time with.” When she made useless comments like these it made

me wonder of she'd ever been young or if she'd somehow emerged from the womb a full-grown, well-adjusted adult. I would have to find my own way to deal with Kami.

During Health Awareness month, the girls and boys were separated during gym, and we were all weighed and measured to make sure our bodies held the proper percentages of fat, muscle, and whatever else was sloshing around inside of us. Most of the girls were deemed "of normal body type." At 5'5, weighing about 75 pounds, I was told I was "slightly underweight." The only girl in our class who weighed less than me had a growth deficiency, and was barely over four feet tall.

Coach Swain, our lesbian gym teacher, was in charge of weighing all of the girls. She'd chosen Kami to be her helper, holding the clipboard and marking down all the numbers. When it was my turn, and Kami copied down the numbers on the scale, she scoffed, like she had something caught in the back of her throat.

"Wow. You are so skinny. Maybe you should eat something." She looked down her hooked little nose at me. She didn't say it in a mean way; she sounded more jealous than anything. She was thin too, but not quite as thin as I was, and I'd heard her call herself fat several times; not seriously, but in that I'm-fishing-for-a-compliment kind of way.

I don't know why it made me so mad. I was skinny. My friends and family had been telling me that my whole life. I ate, but I was a picky eater and I never had a big appetite. I didn't purposely try to be skinny, and that's why I didn't like being called that name, even when it was meant as a compliment. But it was more than that when Kami said it; those words lodged in my chest and I couldn't get them out. I was sick of her snide comments, her haughty laugh, her giant boobs. I felt anger and resentment bubbling up inside me, the same way it had when I was

younger and got mad at one of my Barbies. I imagined cutting Kami's hair, throwing her across the room, ripping her head off and shoving it in the toilet. I knew I couldn't really do any of those things to her, but I could do other things.

Lunch was next period. Instead of heading for the cafeteria, I told Rebecca I'd catch up with her later. I headed for the eighth grade girls' bathroom, entered one of the stalls, and shut the door. I was fuming, unable to get Kami's snobby little face out of my head. I hated her. I hated that smug little bitch, and I needed to tell someone about it. Pulling a pen out of my backpack, I scribbled on the back of the stall door KAMI GRIMES IS A GAY BITCH ("Gay" and "Bitch" were two of the worst insults in my pre-teen lexicon). The blue letters were long and skinny—maybe they should eat something—and stood out in stark contrast against the white faux-marble of the door. Writing those words made me feel powerful. So I turned around and wrote them again, on one wall of the stall this time. Then I wrote it on the other wall. Then I turned and wrote it on the toilet seat. Then on the dirt-speckled, eggshell-colored tiles in front of the toilet, like a message on a welcome mat.

Every time I wrote that sentence, it made me feel a little stronger, a little better about myself. She was just a dumb bitch, what did she know? So what if she was mean to me, I was smarter and I could be just as nasty. I kept writing. I went in every stall, even the handicapped one, and wrote it ten times in different places. I wrote it on the rim of the three sinks. The ink in my pen ran out, so I threw it away and grabbed a pencil from my backpack. I wrote it over each mirror, underneath the vanity lights. I got down on my hands and knees and wrote it all over the floor. I was possessed, I couldn't stop myself, adrenaline flushing through my system, making me giddy. Someone could walk in at any moment and catch me, but I didn't care.

I wrote it in large blocked letters on the wall that was built between the door and the inside of the bathroom as a barrier, so boys couldn't peak in. As soon as anyone walked in they'd see it there, like a neon light flashing. I climbed on top of the little barrier wall to write it on the ceiling. Breathing hard, my head spinning, I finally stopped. My hand seized up from clutching my pen and pencil for so long. I shook it and splashed water on my face, taking deep breaths, trying to calm myself down. When the bell rang, I headed to English.

"Hey, where were you during lunch?" Christine asked. Kami looked up, vaguely interested in my answer.

"In the library," I said.

I got a phone call from Stephanie that night. She'd never called me before, and I hoped she this phone call was just the start of a new stage in our friendship. I hoped, but I knew better.

"Oh my God, did you hear what happened?"

Stay calm. Anything could have happened. "Uh, no. What's going on?"

"After school today Kami and I went to use the bathroom, and someone had written 'Kami Grimes is a Gay Bitch' all over. Can you believe that?"

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. This was not good. If they found out it was me, I would be ostracized from the group. I would lose the few friends I had. "That's awful." My voice was steady. I sounded convincingly surprised and sympathetic.

"Kami was really upset. She started crying."

Damn it. Guilt hit me, a coldness settling in my bones. I'd never meant for her to see what I'd written, I was just venting. I'd figured the janitors would clean it up before more than a

few people saw it. And I'd never thought she'd cry about it. She acted so tough, I didn't think she'd get upset about something like that. All I could say to Stephanie was, "Wow. That sucks."

"I know. I just don't understand it. Who would do something like that?"

I couldn't tell if she was suspicious or if I was being paranoid. "I don't know."

We got off the phone shortly after that. I faced the idea of having to go to school the next day, confronting everyone about what happened. They knew I wasn't at lunch. They'd put two and two together. I was screwed. I would have no one to hang out with at school anymore. I would have no one to sit with during lunch. Kami and the other girls might even want to fight me. By avenging myself, I'd inadvertently destroyed part of my life.

I didn't sleep that night. The next morning I deliberated telling Mom I was sick and needed to stay home from school, but I knew that would just have made me look even more guilty. So I sucked it up and went to meet whatever consequences awaited me.

I got to school and walked into class, squeezing my hands into fists, taking deep breaths, trying to keep myself calm. I could see Christine and Kami already seated in their desks. I didn't look at them, or anyone else. I kept my eyes on the ground, watching the shuffling of my feet as I trudged to my seat. Once there, I stared at the manila coloring of my desk top, tracing all the indentations on it with my fingertips: the trench dug into it that was meant to keep your pencil from rolling off, the various scuffs marring its surface, the place where someone had scratched MARK WUZ HERE '91. I wondered where Mark was at that very moment, and if we'd ever meet.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Kami and Christine looking at me, whispering. Kami's eyes were red and puffy, like she'd been crying recently. I felt bad, but hadn't she

brought it on herself? She shouldn't have turned on me. I went over all the mean things she'd ever done to hurt my feelings, trying to convince myself she deserved what she got.

"Hey Jill," Christine whispered. "Where were you yesterday during lunch?"

"I told you. I was in the library."

"Sure you were." There was an accusatory edge to her voice. "Did you hear what happened to Kami?" As Christine spoke, Kami glared at me, her mouth taut, her jaw rigid. She was waiting for me to slip up and say something incriminating, waiting for proof so she could pounce on me.

"Yeah, Stephanie called me and told me about it. That sucks Kami, I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry? Did you do it?" She almost spit the words at me.

"No. Of course not. Why would you think that?" My stomach was cartwheeling, I was sweating something fierce. They knew. They had to.

Kami shrugged and turned to face the front of the classroom as Mrs. Seanor started our science lesson.

I knew what I'd done, but I felt like as long as no one else knew it was me, what I'd done didn't matter. Kami was pretty and popular; she'd get over this and move on. The only people I'd really hurt were the janitors who had to spend time scrubbing up my work, and because I only occasionally saw them wheeling trashcans around in the breezeways, I didn't feel too bad for them either. As long as no one else knew, I hadn't really done anything wrong.

I could lie to everyone except Rebecca. Somehow, maybe because she was such a good liar herself—good enough to get away with anything when it came to her parents and teachers—she saw right through it.

Between classes she cornered me in the bathroom. "Why'd you do it?"

“What are you talking about?”

“I know you wrote all that stuff about Kami? Why would you do that?”

“I didn’t.”

“You’re lying. I know when you’re lying.”

“Oh really? How do you know?”

“I just do. So why’d you do it? I’m not going to tell on you.” She looked at me like a puppy, with big, curious eyes, almost like I was a whole new person. Then it hit me—I was a whole new person. I’d fought back. And she admired me for it.

“I don’t know. She just made me so mad. I was tired of her picking on me. She really is a bitch. I can’t stand her.” It felt good to tell someone, so I kept going. “I wish she hadn’t seen it. I wasn’t trying to hurt her, and I’m sorry for that, but I’m not sorry I did it. I’m not.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened and she nodded. She knew how I felt. She would have done the same thing if she’d had the guts.

I was glad Rebecca knew, but I didn’t want anyone else to find out. So I kept up the lies. I avoided Kami and her posse as much as I could, but at lunch I had to face them or find somewhere else to go. I sat down at the table with Kami, Christine, and Stephanie. Kami immediately got up and moved to sit at the popular table.

“You’re not welcome here,” Christine said. Stephanie looked from Kami at the other table, to me, to Christine, back to me, with her eyebrows raised. She didn’t know who to believe.

“Did you do it?” she asked, staring as if she could peel back some part of me and the answer would be there, written in the air behind my face in big, bold letters.

“No, I didn’t do it. Why don’t you guys believe me?”

“Well if you didn’t do it, who did?” Christine was smug, like my absence of a response would prove my guilt.

I’m not sure why I said what I said next. Maybe it was to divert attention away from me. Maybe it was for revenge. Maybe I was just being cruel.

“It was Rebecca.” The words jumped out of mouth. I didn’t even try to stop them.

“Rebecca?” Christine’s voice was slow and harsh, like she was trying to talk through a mouthful of sand. Stephanie gasped. They looked at each other, silently asking the other if such a thing was plausible. Then we all looked at Rebecca, still standing in line with her tray, waiting to pay for her lunch.

“Yes. I’m pretty sure it was her. She had the motive. Kami’s made fun of her a lot lately.” It was true. I’d heard Kami make snide remarks to Rebecca about her sloppy clothes, and laugh when other people called her Porky. She never got it as bad as I did, but she got it just enough to make it believable that she’d retaliate.

I watched Rebecca as I spoke, staring at my friend’s back as I talked behind it. She was near the front of the line now. It wouldn’t be long before she was headed to our table.

“Look, I don’t want to be in the middle of all of this. I’m getting out of here.”

I picked up my stuff and headed for the library. When I got there I pulled out my Social Studies book and tried to read a chapter, but I couldn’t concentrate, so I kept reading the same page over and over again. I had betrayed the only friend I had left.

I saw Rebecca heading down the hallway towards me as I made my way to class. She was crying. I’d made two people—two friends—cry in one day.

“They think I did it,” she said, sniffing. “They think I wrote all that stuff about Kami on the bathroom wall. You have to tell them. You have to tell them it was you.”

“I don’t have to say anything. They’re going to believe what they want to believe, and nothing I say will change that.”

“Did you tell them I did it? Christine said you told them it was me.” She looked hurt. My mind spun out another lie.

“Of course not. Christine asked me if it was you, and I told her I didn’t know.”

“Why would you say that? Why wouldn’t you say no?”

“Because then they’d know I’d done it. And they can’t ever find out.”

Rebecca looked at the floor and felt a sinking feeling in my gut. “You didn’t tell them it was me, did you?” I asked, my voice rising as she began to chew her lip and wring her hands together. I’d sold her out, only to have her turn around and sell me right back.

“I didn’t tell them exactly. I just said that I knew who’d done it, and it wasn’t me, and that the person who did it was really sorry she’d done it.”

I closed my eyes and covered my face with my hands. “You idiot. Of course they’re going to know it was me now. I can’t believe you said anything. You’ve totally screwed me.” I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her. But the bell was about to ring, and we had to get to class.

When I walked in, Kami and Christine both glared at me. I was toast.

The rest of the day was unbearable. Kami and Christine kept coughing into their hands, saying “Jill’s a bitch,” disguising their words between an unconvincing fit of hacking. They loudly whispered things about me: I was gay, I was mentally retarded, I smelled bad. Our classmates looked at them, listened, then laughed at me. Ben laughed the loudest. Rebecca kept her eyes forward and wouldn’t look at anyone.

At one point Christine stood behind me and asked Kami to throw her a book; she threw it right at my head, but I ducked, and Christine caught it.

“Kami, you almost hit Jill,” Christine said, pretending to scold her.

“Oops. I’m so sorry,” Kami said, snarling, as she and Christine both broke out into a fit of giggles.

When the bell to end class rang, I hurried out of the classroom as fast as I could get away. I headed outside to the steps by the cafeteria and sat down, pulling my English homework out of my notebook. A minute later I heard footsteps behind me. As I turned, I saw Jeff hovering above me, Kami standing a few feet behind. He pulled his foot back and kicked me with the toe of his shoe. Then he kicked again. My calf, my thigh, my butt, my hip. He kept kicking.

“Cut it out!” I threw an arm up, trying to shield myself, but he just kicked my arm too. When he stopped, I looked up at him, my lip quivering. For the first time he actually looked like he felt bad for hurting me.

He took a few steps back and whispered to Kami, “Are you sure it was her?” Then I knew. He felt bad because this time he wasn’t picking on me for his own pleasure, he was doing it on someone else’s behalf.

“Yes,” Kami said, her voice quiet but sharp as a knife, her eyes locked with mine. “It was her.”

Jeff turned and looked at me, shrugged, and kicked me again.

Everything changed after that. Christine, Kami, and Stephanie didn’t talk to me anymore. I had nowhere to sit during lunch, so I spent the lunch period in the library reading, or hanging out in the girls’ bathroom with Rebecca, wreaking havoc. We pissed in all the toilets and didn’t flush. We locked all the stalls from the inside, then slid underneath, so no one could use them.

We littered the ceiling with spit balls. We draped toilet paper from the sinks and stalls like Christmas garland. But we never wrote anything about anyone, never even dared to take out our pens.

CHAPTER 14

Nigger was a word I was familiar with. Being raised in Palatka meant growing up in the midst of a Confederate mentality, trying to decide whose side I was on: “theirs” or “ours.” There seemed to be no happy medium in our little town.

I’d heard almost everyone in my family say the “n” word—mostly my uncles and grandpa—on more than one occasion. I’d said it around my family too, and my sister was the only one who ever scorned me for using it. I knew they used the word to talk about black people, and that it wasn’t a nice word; I knew if a white kid said it to a black kid he was in for a beating. Beyond that, I wasn’t sure what to make of it, or why it made black kids so mad to hear it.

The Confederate flags that danced all over town from doorways and truck antennas in the hot summer winds didn’t mean anything to me when I was in middle school. They were decorations that looked like someone had tried to design the American flag but had gotten confused.

I’d watched the L.A. riots on TV, the scores of dark bodies running through the streets, screaming, breaking windows, and starting fires. Smoke billowed over the horizon like the sky was puffing on a giant cigarette.

“Why are they so mad at white people?” I’d asked my parents.

“They blame us for what’s wrong with their lives,” they said.

“Well that doesn’t seem fair.” I hadn’t done anything to mess up anyone’s life, and I didn’t see how my being white would make people of different races angry at me. I didn’t get to choose what color my skin was anymore than they did.

Slavery was taught briefly in history class when we studied the Civil War, and it never felt real to me; I couldn’t imagine being put in chains and hauled away to different lands.

Oppression was something I'd heard of, but most of my family and my friends' parents talked about it as if it was something that existed way in the past and didn't matter anymore. I'd been taught by these same people that some blacks were violent, angry, that I should be afraid of them and stay away if possible. But they didn't say how I could tell these bad ones from the rest of them, so I was wary whenever I was near a black person I didn't know.

There were lots of white people in town who didn't like black people, and lots of black people who didn't like white people. I wasn't sure where I fit in to all of it, or how it could touch me.

When I was in elementary school at Moseley, Mom dropped me off there every morning before going to work at Beasley, the middle school three blocks away that I would later attend. Each day after school let out, I walked from Moseley to Beasley so I could ride home with Mom. Most days I walked down the back roads to get from one school to the next, so I didn't have to deal with the kids from my grade who annoyed me or the older kids who might try and mess with me. But sometimes I took the main road, the road all the other kids took, because I didn't feel like walking the long way around.

I liked going that way sometimes because of Gladys, the crossing guard. She was an older lady, with skin as dark as coal that made her white and orange uniform glow even brighter, little black moles dotting her cheeks, and coke bottle glasses that made her eyes seem much too big for her face. She called me "Baby," and it made me feel special, even though I knew she called all the kids "Baby." She always asked me how I was doing, if I was making good grades, if I was minding my parents. I thought she was sweet, like my grandma. I wondered if she hated white people and was just nice to kids. I wondered if anyone had ever called her nigger.

The last day of school before Christmas vacation, I hung around at school for a while after the bell rang. Kids were always nicer around the holidays, so I stayed and chatted a bit with a few other boys and girls who let me tag along with them. We stuffed ourselves full of cookies and candy some of the teachers had given out in class, talking about what we hoped to get for Christmas—I wanted a hot pink scooter and a hula-hoop, and I was hoping Santa would oblige. Once the other kids’ parents had picked them up, I headed towards Beasley, walking down the main road since I was already running late. When I got to the intersection I ran into four older black girls, all eyeing me as our paths merged. At the sight of them I felt my body tense up, my breath sticking in my throat. The odds here were not in my favor. Gladys was nowhere to be seen; she must have left early for the day.

“What you got there?” One of the girls pointed to the small plastic bag I was carrying, candy canes and chocolates clearly visible through the translucent material. Her onyx-colored eyes sized me up. She was a head taller than me, and easily twice my weight. Her friends were a bit shorter, a bit thinner, but still much larger than I was.

“Nothing. Just some stuff from a Christmas party.”

“Give us some.” It wasn’t a request. The girl barked it at me and held her hand out, waiting.

“But I...it’s mine.” I looked around and realized I was alone on the street. If Gladys was here I bet she would have run those girls off, but she’d abandoned me.

“So? You got plenty, why can’t you share?”

“No, I don’t want to. It’s my stuff.” My voice quivered. The girls stepped closer, like a single unit, a wall of dark bodies.

“You a cracker. You a racist cracker. Now give it.” Their hands reached out and opened the bag, though I still held one of the handles squeezed tight in my palm. They shoved their fists in and grabbed all they could carry, then backed away laughing.

“Thanks cracker.” They peeled the wrappers off some Hershey’s Kisses and popped them into their mouths as they continued walking, leaving me standing there clutching my bag, which was now light enough to shudder wildly in the breeze. I looked in it and saw that they’d left me a few stray candy canes and chocolates. I realized I was shaking.

I’d heard the word cracker before, but no one had ever called me one. I wasn’t sure exactly what it meant, but the sound of it stung me. I walked to my mother’s classroom and told her what had happened.

She put her arm around me and said, “Don’t worry about it, sweetie. They’re just dumb niggers.” Her voice was soft and reassuring. For the first time the word felt heavy in my ears and made me feel a little sick.

In elementary school it had been okay for me to be friends with the black kids, and for them to be friends with me. But in middle school everyone hung with their own kind, and the few exceptions were called Oreos and Wiggers, and made fun of mercilessly. The idea of interracial couples was something that only happened on TV and in sinful places like L.A. and New York City. I was warned by my family that if I ever brought a black boy home as my date, he’d be shot. They said it without a trace of sarcasm, and though I never believed my father or uncles would hurt anyone, the message was strong enough for me to never even consider looking at a dark-skinned boy with desire. So I blushed when the cute black boys at school asked me if I had “jungle fever,” but I stayed away from them. I was nice to the black kids that were nice to

me, but I didn't try to form friendships. I found that as long as I kept my distance, they didn't mess with me. Except for Victor.

Victor was a chubby little black boy with a squeaky, high-pitched voice, who played the trumpet in the school band and still sucked his thumb, all of which made him an occasional target for bullies. He wore button up shirts with holes in them, and hand-me-down pants that were too big. Lamar, a tall, muscular, ebony-skinned boy, had pulled Victor's pants down several times in front of the whole class. Lamar was a nice guy, and he and Victor were friends, but he couldn't resist the roars of laughter that erupted when Victor's boxers were displayed for all of his classmates to see. Victor should have known better, but once he forgot to wear underwear, and when Lamar pulled his shorts down we saw his bare bottom, smooth and black, for a full second before he could pull his pants back up. I'd never seen a black boy turn so red.

Because he got picked on more than most of the other black kids, Victor had developed a mean streak towards kids he could get away with picking on. I was one of them.

Once, when we'd been arguing about when the varsity football game started that Friday night, I'd said, "Look, I know when the game starts, my dad's one of the coaches."

Victor thought this was hilarious. "My Daddy's a police officer, and he'll arrest your Daddy. No, wait, my Daddy's a fire fighter and he'll burn your house down."

I rolled my eyes at his stupid comments and tried to ignore him. Then he got some of the other kids on it.

"My Daddy's a pro football player, and he'll come beat up your Daddy and his whole football team!"

"My Daddy's the president! He'll have your Daddy executed!"

This went on until they got bored and couldn't think of any other imagined careers for their Daddy's to have.

Most of the time Victor kept his teasing simpler. He'd call me stupid bitch. Sometimes he tripped me as I was walking to my desk, or came up behind me and pushed me into the lockers as I was walking through the hallways. He didn't bully me as much as Ben, Jeff, and some of the other kids, so I didn't worry about him.

Sometimes I teased him right back, saying things I'd heard in movies like "Your mama's so fat, she causes earthquakes when she walks down the street," or "You're so ugly, your mama had to tie a steak to your head to get the dog to play with you." Maybe it was his ratty clothes, the rusty old trumpet he carried with him everywhere, or the squishing noise he made when he lay his head on his desk with his lips curled around his thumb, but for some reason he didn't make me as nervous as most of the other black kids. I wasn't scared of Victor, but I should have been.

On a warm day in April, nearly Spring Break, and I was sitting outside after school, perched on the railing that ran parallel to the wheel chair ramp leading up to the school entrance. I was daydreaming about staying up late watching the *Twilight Zone* and eating Neapolitan ice cream all during the break, when Victor rounded the corner and spotted me. He was walking with someone, a black girl I'd never seen before, one of his friends I guessed.

"Jill Criswell," he said, squinting up at me, butchering my name so it sounded like Jiw Cwiswa. From where I sat, his head barely reached my shoulder, and I felt bigger than him. "Waiting on Mommy and Daddy to come change your diaper?" He laughed at his own joke, his soprano voice tinkling out in short giggling bursts.

“At least I don’t suck my thumb like a baby,” I said, looking down at him smugly. His cheeks reddened and he glared up at me.

“What’d you say to me you dumb cracker?” I could see him watching the black girl out of the corner of his eye, trying to impress her.

“Shut up you stupid—” For a second, the word nigger hung on my tongue, so close I could taste it, but then I remembered how I’d felt when my mother said it last, how my whole body smarted when the word cracker was flung at me, and I caught the word and changed it before it left my mouth.

“—faggot.” Next to the “n” word, this was the worst one I could come up with. It worked. Victor’s face pulled back into a grimace as if I’d slapped him. The girl snickered a bit, and his grimace turned into a snarl. He reached up and grabbed my foot in one hand and my calf in the other.

“You think I’m a faggot?”

“Let me go.” I kicked my leg but his grasp was too tight. He wrapped my calf around one side of the skinny metal pole that held up the rail I was sitting on. I felt the muscles being stretched, the hot metal pushing into my skin. “Oww, stop it, that hurts.”

“You still think I’m a faggot now?” He kept twisting, forcing my foot around to the other side of the pole, like he was braiding them together. I felt a pain deep in my bones, my leg aching from the pressure.

“Victor, you’re hurting me, let me go.” My voice rose shrilly, infused with panic, but he still wasn’t done yet. He held my twisted leg taut against the pole with his right hand, then reached up with his left and grabbed a handful of my long hair, pulling me backwards so that my

neck and back were arched unnaturally. He put his face close to mine, his hot breath on my skin, his dark eyes full of fire, burning into mine.

“Say I’m not a faggot!” He pulled harder on my leg, jerked my head back as far as it would bend. I could feel the bones in my leg about to snap, the muscles about to tear. I could see him giving one final tug, my leg shattering into a million pieces, my spine breaking in half. I would never walk again. I would never sit on the railing of this wheel chair ramp again. Instead, I would be in a wheel chair rolling past it, for the rest of my life.

“Victor, you’re going to break my leg!” I wasn’t even trying to stay calm anymore. I was flailing, looking to the girl for help, but she just stood and watched curiously, waiting to see what happened.

“Say it,” he whispered, his teeth barred, his eyes fierce.

“You’re not a faggot, Victor. I’m sorry I said it.” My voice shook with the sobs that were rising in my throat. I waited, but he still held on to me. “Please let me go. Please, Victor, I’m sorry.”

Finally his hands released their grip. I stood up shakily, my neck and leg sore. I thought I would only be able to limp, but my leg held up my full weight and I was able to walk steadily, as if nothing had happened, down the ramp and across the parking lot towards the road.

“You stupid ass white bitches need to learn,” Victor called after me. I didn’t turn around. I wasn’t sure what he meant, what it was he felt I should learn, but after that day I stayed away from Victor. My heart still leapt when I got near a black person, like it always had, but it wasn’t out of nervousness, it was out of terror; painful pricks of fear that started in my foot and crept up my leg, stretching along my spine, a throbbing, constant ache.

CHAPTER 15

The day finally came when I turned thirteen. I was a teenager. I was one step closer to being a woman. Short, stiff hairs sprouted up all over my body. My armpits stank like sweat and dirty clothes when I didn't wear deodorant. My face was oily, shiny, slick to the touch. Zits tunneled up under my skin, pushing through like swelling volcanoes. As much as I wanted to grow up, I wasn't sure if it was worth the hassle.

It wasn't just me. My classmates were going through it too. The girls were growing boobs, getting their periods. The boys' voices were cracking, deepening. They got bulges in their pants that made them walk funny, and they blushed if anyone noticed the lump in their shorts and pointed it out. We'd all been shown the *What's Happening to My Body?* documentary in fifth grade, so we knew about penises and vaginas. What I didn't know yet was what they were used for.

When I was growing up, I heard whispers about what sex was. I knew the drawings on bathroom walls, in textbooks, and on papers kids at school drew on and then showed around—cartoonish depictions of women with huge circles for breasts fondling the enormous oval shapes protruding from the men's bodies—had to do with sex. But my parents had yet to have “the talk” with me, so I didn't quite have it all figured out.

My older sister, whom I believed knew all the secrets of life because she was in high school, once challenged me by saying, “You don't even know what sex is.”

“I do so,” I shouted back.

“What is it then?” she asked.

I fumbled around in my brain for a likely definition, finally explaining with mock confidence, “It's when a man and a woman sleep naked in a bed together.”

She laughed at me. “There’s a lot more to it than that.”

“Nuh-uh.” I was intrigued. What more to it could there be? Wasn’t putting your naked body near another naked body enough? I didn’t ask her to explain it to me, because I knew she wouldn’t. Asking Rebecca or anyone else at school, and admitting I didn’t already know, was too embarrassing.

Until about a year earlier, I was also confused about where babies came from. When, at six years old, I asked my mother the million-dollar question, she simply said, “You have to be willing.” Since, like all little girls, I thought babies were cute and fun and just like my dolls, I wanted a real baby for myself. So I decided to be willing. I said a little prayer, letting God know I was willing to have a baby whenever he wanted to give me one, and then I waited, believing that at any time my stomach would start to swell and I could tell my mother the good news.

It wasn’t until I was twelve that fellow classmates, amused by my naiveté, began explaining the meanings of taboo words such as “horny,” “fag,” and “fuck.” I’d liked those words a lot more when they were mysterious verbal trinkets I threw around to try and impress the other kids at school; knowing what they actually meant made me feel too shy to let them leave my lips. Still I listened intently, nodding and taking mental notes so I could go home and impress my sister with my newfound knowledge.

I never walked in on my parents having sex, but I did know they were having it. They usually slept with their door open, but on Saturday nights it would be shut until about midnight. Then it would mysteriously open. On a few of those infamous nights I actually tried the doorknob and found it locked. And sometimes when I was little and had a bad dream, I would go looking for my mother and find her wearing lingerie and sipping a glass of wine while my father massaged her shoulders.

I'd seen my father naked once, in a picture I found while I was snooping through my mother's dresser drawers. Mom walked around the house naked frequently; I didn't know this wasn't the norm until I mentioned it to some of the kids at school, and they gagged at the notion of seeing a mom with no clothes. Dad was much more modest. I'd never seen him, or any other man, without at least underwear on. The picture didn't disgust me, but it made me feel uncomfortable, like I'd heard a secret that wasn't meant for me to hear. It was a part of him I didn't want to know about. I didn't want him to be a man, to have male parts, or do things that other men did. I didn't want him to be like all the other men in the world. I just wanted him to be my dad.

My image of him was shattered the summer we went to Georgia. We were packing for the trip, and I was trying to be helpful, so I pulled my father's suitcase out of his closet and opened it up for him. Inside was a Pandora's box of porn: magazines and videos with naked women on the covers, twisting their nipples and licking their lips at me. I was horrified. Dad looked at this stuff? I quickly zipped the suitcase up and put it back in the closet. I tried to convince myself that maybe he was just holding it for someone else—a friend, or my uncle. But I wasn't that stupid. I knew. I spent the whole time in the mountains trying not to look at my father, trying to get the thought of him watching those naked girls play with themselves out of my head. My whole vacation was ruined.

I didn't consciously make the connection then between pornography and masturbation. I knew both were somehow related to sex, I just didn't know all the details. I thought knowing my father had dirty magazines and movies upset me because it made him less dad-like. It was years later when I realized why it had disturbed me so much, and what it all meant: I masturbated, as did the women in the pictures. My father masturbated, looking at the pictures of those women.

My father and I were both committing the same act. There was something mentally incestuous about knowing all of this, and it brought on waves of guilt and shame that I wasn't prepared to deal with.

I started masturbating when I was about four years old, nearly a decade before I even knew what it was I was doing. It's one of my earliest memories. And I'm not talking about a child's innocent exploration of her own body; in fact, I didn't even touch myself. I would lie on the floor and pull myself forward, then push myself back. In college I took a Sexual Behavior class and found out I wasn't a freak after all; it's called "thrusting," and about a fourth of all women use this method as their preferred form of masturbation. I don't know how I learned to do this—whether it was instinct, or something I saw somewhere, or something that happened to me as a child that I blocked out of my memory. What I do know is that I was good at it. I was having orgasms, though at the time I just knew that when I moved my body in such a way, after a while I would feel a strange pulsing sensation *down there*. Followed by horrible guilt.

I'm not sure exactly where the guilt came from. Autonomous sexual behavior wasn't directly addressed in church, nor did my parents or anyone else ever discuss it with me. I didn't even learn the name for what I was doing, or find out that I was still normal and other people did it too, until I was in fifth grade and heard the boys at school making jokes about jacking off. Regardless of where the guilt came from, it brought fear along with it. I was doing something wrong, so I had to be punished. I became convinced I was causing internal damage to myself, or that I would be struck with cancer as the price of my dirty little habit.

When I was about eight years old and had been masturbating for years, I felt so guilty about it that I tried to tell my mother what I was doing. I was lying in bed late one night, crying, and she came in and asked me what was wrong. This was it. It was time for my horrible secret to

come out. Through hysterical sobs, I tried to explain to her the bad things I did to myself when no one was looking. She looked completely confused, and I had no idea if anything I told her made any sense.

“It’s all right. Go to bed,” was all she said. I never brought it up again, and neither did she.

My conscience’s innate link between sex and shame and fear was vague at first, but it became cemented in my mind during middle school. I knew boys could be mean—tease me, hit me, spit on me—but I didn’t know what else they could do to girls.

Rocky was the first boy who scared me in a way I’d never been scared before. I’d seen him around school. He was a year older than me, and over a foot taller, with shaggy brownish hair that was already going grey, and a plump, mushroom shaped nose that made him look sweet despite the way he constantly scowled. Even though I’d never talked to him, I liked him because he had the same name as the horse I’d ridden and fallen in love with when I’d taken horseback riding lessons a few years earlier.

I was walking around campus after school one day, waiting for Mom to finish her lesson plan so we could go home. Rocky and a few of his friends were standing outside talking as I walked past. He looked at me for a second, and there was a strange spark in his eye. He smiled at me, slow and toothy. There was something creepy about his smile, and even his funny nose couldn’t stop the shiver that tickled my spine. I walked a little faster to get away from them.

“I want me a piece of that,” I heard Rocky say to his friends. As I tried to process what he could have meant by that, I heard his footsteps following me.

I ran for the double doors that would let me in to the hallway where my mother’s classroom was, but they were locked. I turned, and there were Rocky and his friends,

surrounding me. He held a pebble in his hand, and he kept tossing it up and down, rhythmically, not even looking at it. I wasn't sure what their intentions were, but my heart clanked against my ribcage when I realized they weren't just going to move aside and let me pass by.

"You looking for someone?" Rocky asked, as his eyes slid over me, from my sneakers up to the top of my head. His gaze was like an inspection, as if I were a laboratory sample under a microscope. I felt exposed. After all my years of wanting a boyfriend, now this boy wanted to touch me, and all I felt was fear. From the way he looked at me I knew he didn't want to stroke my hair or hold my hand, he wanted to stick his tongue down my throat and his fingers down my pants. This scenario wasn't sweet or romantic like I'd always dreamed, it was sleazy and unsolicited. If he touched me I thought I might throw up. This was what sex was: being trapped by what someone else wanted from you. Being afraid.

"My mom works here," I said. It wasn't a statement, it was a threat, a warning to stay away.

"Oh yeah? Who is she?"

"Mrs. Criswell." I hoped my identity as a teacher's daughter would be enough to make them leave me alone.

"Oh, she's not here. I saw her leave a little while ago. She's gone." His voice was deep and low, lulling almost, and for a second I believed him, my heart clanging faster. I looked over their shoulders, waiting for someone to come along, an adult I could call out to for help, but no one came. I felt lost. Then he and his friends laughed, breaking the spell, and I realized he was lying.

"Like hell she is," I said, my voice sounding as tough as I could make it. I dodged to the side, ducking away from the group of boys. Rocky reached out to grab my arm, but I pulled it

away and ran as fast as I could to the main entrance. When I turned back no one was there. I was shaking.

I told my mom about what happened, and she was furious. She demanded Rocky's suspension; he was suspended for three days. A few months later his parents got divorced and he transferred to a different school. It didn't make me feel any safer. The way those boys cornered me, the way Rocky had looked at me; I was haunted by it.

I didn't see Rocky again until a year later, when I went with a friend to one of First Baptist Church's youth group meetings. As the youth group leader was speaking, I looked across the room and saw him staring at me. My breath caught in my throat when I noticed him. His eyes were piercing, furious, hungry. He leaned over and whispered something to the boys sitting next to him. They looked over at me and started laughing. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, avoiding their eyes. When the meeting was dismissed, I slipped quietly from the room. I didn't go back. I wasn't sure if Rocky would ever try and touch me again, but I knew no matter where we were he would leer at me and whisper lies to anyone who would listen. I was starting to understand what kind of a world I was living in—a man's world, where you weren't even safe at church.

Rocky was the first, but not the last, of the boys who made me feel scared and humiliated about being a girl. Jeff had bullied me all year, and since the Kami incident, other popular boys had joined in. Kami and Joseph, the pretty, rich boy, were now boyfriend/girlfriend.

During an anti-drug assembly in the school auditorium, I found myself sitting next to Annie, my old best friend. She was still popular, and even though we didn't hang out any more, she was always polite to me when she saw me around school. I felt nervous around all the

popular girls, but especially around Annie; I had been such good friends with her years before, but we no longer knew much about each other. I tried to think of things to say while we waited for the assembly to start.

“Hi, how’s it going?” I asked.

“Good. How are you?”

“Fine.” There was a long, awkward stretch of silence as I searched for something else to talk about, finally saying, “How are you doing in geometry? I think it’s pretty hard.”

We went back and forth, chit-chatting. As we talked, Jeff and Joseph scooted down the aisle behind us. Jeff sat in the seat directly behind me, and Joseph sat in the seat behind Annie. They were both friends with Annie, so I thought maybe they were there to talk to her. But I could feel them looking at me, staring at the back of my head. And then they started talking.

“Hey Joe, you know that girl Jill Criswell?”

“Yeah, Jeff?”

“I heard she’s a whore, man. A real slut. She gives up her pussy to any guy willing to get near it.”

“Yeah, I know. She showed it to me the other day. It was nasty. She’s wide as a football field. So loose you can’t even feel it when you’re fucking her.”

The assembly started. I stared straight ahead and pretended to ignore them, trying to listen instead to our principal’s descriptions of how uncool it was to smoke pot and snort cocaine.

“Her cooch has the funk. It’s got green stuff coming out of it. And it’s covered in sores with, like, puss oozing out of it.” They laughed so hard they were snorting, tears streaming down their faces as they slapped each other on the back.

My cheeks were burning, and I could barely breathe. My face was on fire. I was sick to my stomach. Sitting next to me, Annie looked almost as uncomfortable as I felt. But she didn't try to defend me. She didn't tell them to stop.

“Seriously, man, Jill’s got the nastiest coochie I’ve ever seen. It’s all slimy and moldy, like she’s never washed it. It’s like putting your dick in cottage cheese. And the smell! It smells like a dumpster full of rotting fish. You’d have to be desperate to want to fuck that thing.” Joseph sniffed loudly. “Oh man, I can smell it from here.”

Jeff rapped his knuckles against the back of my head. “Shut your legs, slut, we can smell your nasty cooch from here.”

I wanted to disappear. I wanted to turn and scream at them. I wanted a gun so I could murder them both in front of the entire school.

When the assembly was over, Jeff and Joseph left. “Later hoochie coochie,” were their parting words. I bit my lip so hard it bled, not saying a word.

“I’m sorry,” Annie said, turning to me. “I didn’t know they were going to act like that.” She said it as if she thought I blamed her for associating with them. At that moment, I did.

“It’s okay,” I said quietly before getting up and making my way towards the exit.

I went to the eighth grade girls’ bathroom, the same place I’d found solace before, writing awful things about Kami. I stood in front of the mirror, looking at myself, trying to find something written on my face, a deformity of my body, some physical reason for them to treat me the way they did. I thought I was cute, almost pretty. Maybe I was wrong. Or maybe they were just assholes.

No one was in the bathroom. I took out my pen and stood in front of the barrier that faced the entrance to the bathroom. I wrote so big the entire wall was covered: JEFF CAHAN AND JOSPEH ROBERTS SUCK DICK (EACH OTHERS'). I smiled at the words. I felt a little better.

Annie came up to me later that day and said, "Did you see what was written about Jeff and Joseph in the girls' bathroom?"

I shook my head. Embarrassed, she whispered the words to me. She seemed more shocked that anyone would write such a thing than suspicious of me.

"Hmmm." I shrugged. Without a trace of sarcasm, I said, "I wonder who would write such a thing?"

The worst of my confrontations with Jeff happened before math class one afternoon towards the end of the school year. I was sitting in my desk, staring into my algebra book, when Jeff came waltzing in the classroom.

"What's up bitches?" he called out to the class as soon as he noticed our teacher hadn't arrived yet. He jumped up into the seat of an empty desk and waved his arms in the air, whooping, some of our classmates laughing and egging him on. I rolled my eyes.

"What? Are you making faces at me?" He sprinted across the room and wrapped his arm around my neck, pulling me into a headlock. Then he shoved my face into his crotch, chanting, "Suck it, baby, suck it!"

He held me there, my face and mouth pressed so hard against him I couldn't breathe, nothing but a few thin layers of cloth separating me from the small bulge of his penis. I thought of the crush I'd had on this boy, how much I'd wanted him to touch me; to put his arm around

me or brush his lips against mine. Now he was touching me, his arm was around me, but not in the way I'd wanted it. I felt ashamed for ever desiring a boy to touch me.

I heard the rest of the class laughing from far away, like a distant droning in my head. Finally Jeff let me go, and I fell back into my seat, sputtering, my face flushed, a high-pitched ringing in my ears. The salt sting of tears hit my eyes, but I shut them hard and waited for the urge to pass. I wouldn't give him, or any of them, the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

I held it in until I got home, where I buried my face in my pillow and cried for hours, my chest heaving, my eyes burning. I didn't try to stop. I let it all pour out, soaking my pillow, forcing every ounce of pain to well up and spill out of my body.

PART FOUR: OCEAN

CHAPTER 16

A bubbling blackness began uncoiling in my chest, moving around under my skin. It was barely noticeable at first, just the lake rippling, as it always did. But it was growing stronger. Instead of nudging, it was pushing. And it was on the move. It was no longer just a tightness in my chest, a knot in my stomach. It had leaked into my eyes, skewing what I saw.

I wanted to look like the other girls at school: tan legs, budding breasts, pristine skin, hair that fell effortlessly over shoulders and down backs. They made it look so easy.

Many nights, while the rest of my family slept, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, naked, hating the girl reflected back at me. Her butt and thighs were too fat, cellulite growing on them like scales. Her arms and calves were scrawny, skeleton-like in comparison to the rest of her body. Her breasts were small and limp, the nipples wrinkled and flaccid as if they were bored with the sagging chest they were stuck to. Her hair was a mop of frizz, the sickening color of dry mustard. Her head was too large for her misshapen frame, like a Pez dispenser. Her nose was too big for her face, overshadowing her squinty eyes, her parched, thin lips. Her face was oily and dry at the same time, suffocating under a layer of grease, dotted with patchy flakes of white, and in between were intermittent blackheads, whiteheads, the occasional cyst. I didn't know what horrible thing I'd done to be cursed with these impurities. I didn't understand how that girl could be me.

I consistently stole my mother's make-up, and every day before school I'd lather it on in globs. I spread foundation all over my face, trying to cover my enlarged pores, my swelling zits, but they still stuck out on my face, giant boils about to explode. I lengthened my lashes with mascara, lined my upper and lower eyelids with a thick bar of black eyeliner, colored my eyebrows with a reddish tinted eyebrow pencil, rubbed grey and brown shades of eye shadow on

my eyelids and in the crescents below my eyes; it looked as if someone had punched me in the face. I painted my lips in dark red gloss to make them stand out; you could spot my lips from across the room, and some of the boys at school started referring to me as the girl who wore “whore lipstick.”

I stuffed my training bra with toilet paper and socks, but it only made my breasts look lopsided and deformed. I smothered my hair with conditioners and gels, blow dried it, fried it with a hot iron, brushed and hair-sprayed it down, but still it flew in wild, electrified strands around my head. I begged my mother to let me dye it, but she refused, claiming I was too young for such displays of vanity. She did let me use her self-tanning lotion on my pale legs. It dried in uneven swirls of orange, creating a canvas of cream and rust colors that caused the kids in my class to point and snicker.

I wanted to talk and laugh like other girls did, to be sweet and interesting, the kind of girl people were drawn to. I struggled to find words, my voice got caught in my throat. I never had anything intelligent to say, it all came out wrong, and people just thought I was weird. My thoughts were growing darker, my fantasies of hurting people at school who were mean to me, or killing myself to illicit their guilt, were becoming more and more frequent. I should have been a better person; I should have been feeding the homeless, caring for the sick, or at least not feeling sorry for myself. I felt ugly, selfish, and voiceless, and my critical self-analysis was sucking me down deeper, making me hate myself.

“You’re too skinny,” Mom said at least once a week, always looking me up and down critically, adding to my insecurity.

“No, I’m not. I’m fine,” I’d say. I hated it when she commented on how I looked, as if I had any control over it. I hated it when Dad called me skinny-minny, using an insult as if it were a pet name.

Sometimes she let it go. Other times she’d keep pushing me, saying things like: “You need to eat more. You’re eating enough at school aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I’d say, hoping the lie wasn’t written all over my face, usually leaving the room so I didn’t have to hear her anymore.

I’d stopped eating lunch at school. I saved the \$2 a day Mom gave me for lunch, putting it in a big box I’d decorated with pictures of Kurt Cobain, the lead singer of Nirvana, who’d killed himself a few months earlier. Since his suicide I’d become intrigued by him, reading old interviews in magazines and borrowing my sister’s copies of his CDs, looking and listening for hidden signs of what was to come (I found that he’d made many comments, in his lyrics and in life, about thinking of suicide, going so far as to write a “joke” song called “I Hate Myself and Want to Die”). Every time I fed Kurt those dollars, I felt a glimmer of hope. I didn’t know what I was saving the money for, but I knew I was a few bucks closer to a better life.

As a result of skipping lunch every day, I was usually starving by the end of school. I was sitting in Mom’s office one afternoon, waiting for her to get out of her meeting so we could go home, when I decided to sneak into the guidance counselor supply closet next to her office. I found boxes and boxes of goody bags the school gave out to the elementary school kids during presentations on puberty. They had pamphlets on hygiene, coupons for hygiene-related groceries, and pads for the girls. They also had tiny containers of crackers with a little tub of processed cheese, and a small bag with a handful of chocolate Hershey’s Kisses. I stole the crackers and Kisses from one bag and savored them. Then I ate some out of another bag. Then another.

This went on, and by the end of the year I'd eaten the snacks from almost every goody bag in the closet, though no one ever caught me or asked if I knew where the food had gone. Some days I would pull out package after package of crackers and Kisses, scarfing them down, feeding my growling stomach. I would go home and keep eating, ingesting whatever I could find in the cabinets: cereal, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, hunks of chocolate marble cake, Saltines with slices of real cheese on them. I would snack until dinner, clean my plate, then snack more. My parents were happy to see me eating, so they didn't try and stop me. I temporarily convinced myself I was too skinny, and if I could just eat enough my body would fix itself into the correct proportions.

After a few days of this, the spectrum shifted and I realized I had eaten too much: now I was fat. For days I'd starve myself, eating only one apple each day until I felt I'd lost the weight I might have gained during my binge. Then I'd binge again. Eat. Starve. Eat. Starve. Seesawing back and forth from week to week, watching my body expand and collapse like an accordion as I stood in front of that godforsaken mirror, feeling the depths of the lake undulating inside me, letting it show me how little I was worth.

"You're ugly," I told the girl in the mirror matter-of-factly one night, furious at her for trapping me in this skin. If it weren't for her, I could be normal, pretty, loved. She was the cause of my misery. She had to be punished.

I drew a hand back and let it fly in an arc through the air, colliding with my face. My cheek stung as if a hundred tiny needles were pricking me. I stared at the glowing red handprint on my cheek. My whole body felt as if it was just waking up—like when my foot fell asleep and I had to stomp it and wiggle my toes to get the feeling back in it—and a fuzzy tickling sensation danced across my nerves. I felt good. My face hurt, but in the pain there was a satisfaction. There

was vindication. I couldn't control my ugliness, my unworthiness, the way my shortcomings marred me. I couldn't control whether or not the other kids at school were nice to me. But I could control this pain, this punishment. The Catholic kids at school said "Hail Mary" to cleanse themselves of sin; when I'd done something wrong as a kid, I got spanked, but then it was over, my crime was forgiven, the slate was wiped clean. Maybe this was the same kind of thing: by hurting myself I could be absolved of whatever offense I'd committed that caused me to be so wretched. Pain would make me holy, pure, lovable. Pain would give me back some kind of control over my life.

I slapped myself again. Then again, a little harder. And again, so hard I sent my head whipping off to the side. I used both hands, slapping my cheeks until they were puffy and pink as a sunburn. I grabbed a handful of mustard hair and yanked hard, then harder, ripping out little tufts, my scalp aching. I twirled the amputated hair between my fingers, brushed it against my face, and under my nose, smelling it. It smelled like chemicals, from the gels and sprays I used to try and make it less frizzy. I threw my bits of hair in the garbage can, hiding them under wadded up paper towels and cardboard toilet paper rolls.

I took my jagged, chewed-to-the-nub fingernails and dug them into my arms, pushing in and pulling down all at once, leaving trails of claw-like scratches. I dragged my nails down my swollen face, creating bumpy red lines on top of pink skin. I pumped a glob of liquid antibacterial soap into my palm and rubbed it on my tongue, washing my mouth out with soap, as if I were a child who'd said something dirty in the presence of an adult. My parents had threatened to do this to me when I talked back to them, but they'd never actually done it. The soap tasted rancid and medicinal, like cough syrup without the fake, sugary flavors to cover up

the sour taste of active ingredients. My mouth felt grimy for hours, and I woke the next day with the taste of Dial still on my tongue.

All of it—the soap, the slapping, the scratching, the hair loss—was painful, and unpleasant, but it eased the horror I felt when I looked at myself. It calmed the sloshing in my chest, quieting the lake. Self-lambasting became a weekly ritual. It was my punishment for being so hideous. Soon after I began hurting myself, I discovered the word “penance” in one of the books I read. I’d never heard it before, so I looked it up and found stories of monks and saints beating themselves bloody as an apology to God, and a way to feel closer to Him. Pain equaled purity, that’s what penance meant, and what the lake seemed to be saying to me: if you hurt yourself, it will make you feel better. So I listened.

On another night, I went after the clusters of moles growing on me like fungus: flesh colored ones that stuck out on my neck, tiny red ones on my chest, two brown ones on my stomach and two on my thighs, a pink one on the back of my arm. They disgusted me, more evidence of how impure I was. I used tweezers to twist and yank off the ones on my neck, leaving little scabs in their place. I took a kitchen knife and sliced at the skin around one of the moles on my leg, trying to cut it off, but all I did was cut myself up. It was too deep under the skin. I took a razor and went after the little red ones on my chest, managing to slice off a few, bandaging up the nicks with hydrogen peroxide and Neosporin. I got at the one on the back of my arm with my teeth, biting pieces of it off and spitting them out. I made it smaller, but it was mutated by my teeth marks, and when it healed it looked uglier than ever.

The only thing beautiful about me was my eyes, wide and shiny and green; when I cried they almost looked blue, aquamarine pools to drown in. I stared at my eyes in the mirror for half

an hour, studying all the different colored flecks in the iris, focusing on my one redeeming quality to distract myself from everything else that was wrong with me.

Ten years later, I would look back at pictures of my fourteen-year-old self. Thin, bright-eyed, long straw-colored hair; a little plain, but still far from ugly. I would be unable to reconcile the pictures with the memories. The girl staring back at me, frozen in adolescence, preserved under a sheath of sticky plastic, was not the girl I'd seen in the mirror. She was not the girl I'd tortured.

CHAPTER 17

School was finally over for the summer. I'd survived. I spent most of my days and nights lying around in bed, sleeping, reading, and watching *The X-Files* or *Beavis and Butthead* on my little TV (through the hand-me-down process, I'd been upgraded from a tiny black-and-white to a tiny color one). I felt no reason to get up.

My parents would question, then coax, then yell at me about lifting my lazy bones up long enough to clean the bathroom or set the table or come into the living room and watch TV with the rest of the family: "Jill, why are you still in bed?" "Come on, it's time to join the land of the living." "Young lady, if you don't get up right now, so help me...I'll come in there and drag you out of that bed." I didn't care what they said; I wasn't moving. I started closing and then locking my door in an attempt to shut them out.

Up until that summer, I'd loved my family. I'd sat in Dad's lap and watched episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, feeling cozy with my back against his chest, leaning into the crook of his arm.

I'd talked to my mother about everything. "Mama, I want to be an archeologist when I grow up," I had said to her. I wanted to unearth lost civilizations and study them like my hero, Indiana Jones. But that wasn't enough for me. "And I want to write stories and poems and plays, and own a ranch full of horses, and have a husband and seven children."

"That's wonderful. I bet you can do all of those things if you set your mind to it," she always said. She encouraged my goals, no matter how far-fetched.

"The kids at school are mean to me. They hate me and make fun of me, call me ugly. Why won't they leave me alone?" I cried to her many times throughout elementary and middle school. She rubbed my back and stroked my hair.

“You are beautiful, much prettier than any of the other girls at school. Those kids are jealous because they know they’re ugly and stupid and you’re pretty and smart. They don’t have a future, but you do. You’re special, and they aren’t. You tell yourself that every time they’re mean to you.” I knew she was just saying regular Mom things, trying to make me feel better, but at least she tried.

Even my sister, who glared and snarled and teased me most of the time, held my adoration. She was older, wiser, cooler, and I let her make me her project; she showed me movies like *Pulp Fiction* and *Romeo is Bleeding* and gave me albums by Pearl Jam and Nine Inch Nails to listen to in an attempt to make me as cool as she was.

I didn’t go to Mom with my problems anymore. The few times I’d tried to talk about how ugly I felt, she said I was being ridiculous, fed me those same old lines about how I was the prettiest girl at my school. When I tried to tell her how lonely I was, she said I needed to just be patient and pray for God to send me a true friend. Her advice for every hardship I went to her with was to smile and get over it.

“You make your own happiness. Girls who go through life with a smile have happy lives. If you keep up that frown, no one will want to be your friend,” she often said.

“So you think I’m choosing to be miserable?” I would ask.

“Well, you certainly aren’t choosing to be happy.”

I couldn’t figure out her logic. Did she really think it was that easy? If I’d had a choice to just get over it, I certainly would have, but such a choice was never offered to me. The pain I felt was fused with each breath, each heartbeat, each waking moment; it sprung from somewhere deep inside, a place I couldn’t climb down to and plug up. Despite my mother’s prodding, there was no switch for me to flip on and off at will. I couldn’t just get over it. I was consumed by my

alienation; I felt like I was alone in the world, with no one to talk to about my struggle with self-loathing. This alienation stirred up fear, because I didn't know what was happening to me, and anger, because no one seemed to care about what was happening to me. They thought it was a rough phase all teens go through, a rite of passage, nothing to be taken seriously.

I'd seen commercials on TV about depression. I didn't know much about it, but I knew isolation, anger, and hopelessness were symptoms I had. I went to my sister and told her I thought I was depressed.

"You don't even know what that means," she said, laughing at me. I suddenly felt embarrassed, exposed. Why had I confided in her? Why had I thought she might understand? "You don't have any real problems, so you have nothing to be depressed about," she said. That was the end of our discussion. I didn't bring up the "D" word again. No one was going to believe me, so there was no point.

As my body and the way I viewed it changed, so did my connections with other people. My family's voices began to sound like the cackling of hyenas, and what came out of their mouths made about as much sense as animal noises: "Cheer up." "Stop moping." "If you don't pick your bottom lip up you're going to trip over it."

I grew less and less affectionate. If my parents said they loved me, I would mumble an insincere "yeah, love you too" back. If my mother hugged me, I'd let my arms hang stiffly at my sides. If my father kissed me, I'd tuck my chin and hide my face, so he could only put his lips on the crown of my scalp. If either of them tried to pat my butt—the way they'd done since I was little, the way they still did to my older sister—I'd dodge out of the way and turn on them, screaming, "Don't touch me that way."

The first time I leapt through the air to avoid my mother's hand from grazing my bottom, she was so startled she knocked a stack of bills off the counter next to her.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked, clutching at her chest.

"I'm too old for that. I don't like it."

"Why not? It's just a love tap."

"I don't care. Don't do it anymore."

She rolled her eyes and let the matter drop.

When I ran from my father's hand, a sadness crept into his eyes. I wasn't his little girl anymore, and he knew it.

"You're overreacting," was all he said.

I gradually weaned them off of butt pats, as well as other kinds of touches. It had never bothered me before, but now any touch or declaration of love, especially from my parents, made me feel sick. Touching was a form of comfort; comfort was the opposite of suffering; if suffering equaled purity, comfort must have defiled me: accepting their affection was undoing all the progress I was making through penance. I decided that I wouldn't allow myself to be touched or loved.

My parents seemed shocked at my sudden detachment. As I continuously shunned their affections, my father passively withdrew from me to the point where we barely spoke or acknowledged each other's presence. I would walk past him in the living room, sitting in his favorite chair watching *ER*, and grab food from the fridge to take back with me to my room. I never looked at him or said a word, nor did he peel his eyes from the screen or utter a syllable in my direction. We may as well have both been deaf and mute.

My mother, on the other hand, became aggressively furious. She would often stand outside my bedroom and yell at me through the thin slab of oak I'd put between us.

"Come out here, Jill, dinner's on the table."

"I'm not hungry." I was usually curled up on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

"I don't care. Your dad and I made dinner, and you're going to come out here and sit with us to eat."

I answered her with silence. The doorknob turned, but wouldn't budge.

"Why do you always lock this door? Come unlock it and let me in." Her voice was strained and I knew she was about to lose all patience with me.

"Just leave me alone, I'm tired." I pushed her, waiting for her reaction. I wasn't disappointed.

"Open this door right now!" She tried the doorknob again, then beat at the door with her fists. Her anger fueled my own, and it gave me a surge of energy. Feeling anything other than sadness was a welcomed release. A confrontation with my mother was one of the few things worth getting out of bed for.

I dragged myself up and opened the door. She took a step in, almost knocking me down. "You listen to me, young lady. You are to keep this door unlocked from now on, or by God I'll rip it off its hinges. Do you understand me?" She wagged her finger at me, her nose and mouth twitching. She might as well have had smoke billowing out of her ears.

"Yes ma'am," I said, in a kind of sing-song mocking tone.

"You'd better watch that smart mouth of yours if you don't want me to slap it. Now get out there and eat your damn dinner." Mom rarely threatened violence or cussed, and even innocent curses like "damn" were only used under dire circumstances, so I knew she meant

business. I went to the kitchen table, slumped in my chair, crossed my arms, and stared at my plate, refusing to eat. My family sat down in their own chairs, eating and talking to each other as if I wasn't there.

When they were done, my Dad wordlessly picked my plate up and wrapped it in tinfoil in case I wanted it later. Mom, tired and defeated, told me to go to my room. I shut and locked the door behind me and went back to the safety of my bed, emerging only after my parents had gone to sleep, grabbing a few bites of food off my dinner plate. Just enough so no one would be able to tell I'd eaten any.

This was the beginning of years of defiance towards my mother. I took pleasure in her anger, savoring it like vengeance. She deserved it. I hated her. I felt it boiling in my stomach, bile rising in my throat when I thought about her. I blamed Mom for everything that went wrong for me. It was her genetic flaws that had passed down bad skin and frizzy hair to bestow upon me. It was her fault I didn't have any friends because she never let me go to dances or to the movies by myself like the other kids got to do; that must have been why they thought I was such a baby. She was the one who said there wasn't enough money for me to have the nicer clothes I wanted, and my JC Penny jeans and t-shirts would never compare to the other girls' mall chic outfits from The Body Shop and Wet Seal. All of it was her fault. She didn't want me to have anyone but her. She was smothering me.

I wouldn't understand until years later exactly where the hate came from: the pain of living was becoming too much, and in my desperation I was lashing out at the one who'd brought me into this miserable world. I hated my mother for giving me life.

To keep from having to spend any time with my parents I stayed holed up in my room. Since I spent so much time in it, I decided I should make my room represent who I was and how I felt. I wanted to banish the girly pinkness of it, the color Mom had so cleverly tricked me into. When I was seven, I'd asked her if we could paint over the boring white walls of my room with a calming shade of sky blue. She thought it was a great idea, so she went to the paint store and returned home with an armload of paint buckets. I saw the color's name written across the front of each bucket: Pink Satin. Her explanation was that the experts at the paint store told her this color would look better and last longer without fading. I think she just wanted to make my room up all girly because she thought it would be cute. After painting the walls, she hung up pictures of ballerinas and angels, bought a pink speckled comforter for my bed with matching curtains, and even got me a stuffed rabbit in a lacy pink dress to sit on my bed. At seven years old, despite my tomboyishness, I liked my pink room; it was girly, but at least it wasn't boring and bland. At fourteen, it felt like being confined inside my mother's idea of what a normal girl's room should look like, and it made me want to gag.

"Mother, can't I paint my room blue, or green, or anything other than pink?" I had been asking her this same question for months.

"What's wrong with pink?" She was usually distracted when I asked her, working on her grad school thesis or some other kind of homework. This time was no different. She was focused on the papers in front of her, a pen tucked behind her ear.

"I hate pink. It's like living inside a Valentine's Day card. It's just not me."

"What is you? I bet you'd paint your room black if you could, wouldn't you?" She glared at me over the top of the thick reading glasses that had slid down her nose.

"Maybe. If it meant I could paint over that God-awful pink."

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain. The pink stays.”

I stomped back to my room and pulled out scissors and a stack of old *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* and *National Geographic* magazines my sister had given me. If I couldn’t paint over the pink, I’d cover up every inch of it.

Over the course of the summer I transformed my room into a giant collage. I didn’t ask my mother’s permission. I hung bamboo and glass wind chimes from the ceiling, strung up blinking colored Christmas lights and Christmas bulbs that looked like mini disco balls, and pasted glow-in-the-dark stars everywhere. I randomly stuck a checkerboard, scrabble pieces, and painted popsicle sticks in weird designs, on the walls. I tacked posters on the ceiling, and stuck a foot tall Christmas tree upside down just out of reach of the ceiling fan. Over a background of black construction paper, I made a 5 x 6 foot memorial to Kurt Cobain, complete with pictures and articles about him, and an inscription at the top: 1967-1994. I made a shrine to Nine Inch Nails, my new favorite band, putting up pictures of Trent Reznor, using sticky tack to fix CD jewel cases of their albums to the wall. An assortment of other bands and musicians I loved were plastered around haphazardly: Soundgarden, Stone Temple Pilots, Tool, Tori Amos, Alice in Chains, Hole, Garbage, Babes in Toyland, and White Zombie.

I made a scarecrow for my room, like the one my family made every Halloween by taking Dad’s clothes—smelly work gloves, an old flannel shirt, a stained pair of jeans, scuffed shoes—and stuffing them with newspaper. We’d sit the body in the bench on our front stoop, and put a plastic jack-o-lantern on as its head, with a baseball cap on top. For my room’s scarecrow, I used a long black wig instead of a baseball cap, and sat him in a lawn chair in the corner. I put a small sign in his lap that said “What the hell are you looking at?”

From *National Geographic* I cut out and taped up pictures of skulls and bones, anatomical drawings of the human body without skin, sinking ships shrouded in clouds of smoke, animals flaying and devouring their prey, cemeteries filled with Holocaust victims, and dried up dead bodies lying on the side of the road in African war zones. I filled the spaces in between with pictures I put together from strange advertisements and random artistic renderings: headless dolls, prison bars, surgical instruments, grenades shaped like fetuses, fires blazing out of control, slabs of raw meat, car crashes, a syringe sliding into a junkie's vein, shattered mirrors, breaking glass, and a woman with chains and barbed wire wrapped around her face.

I cut out a quote I found and taped it to the wall: "I want to die in a tragedy...I've got no intention of living out a stupid, boring, unchallenging life. I want to go down in flames." This was how I felt about my life. I was trapped inside my small hometown, my unbearable school, my annoying family, my catacomb bedroom, my layers of skin and blood and bone that housed the restless spark flickering inside me. I would have rather burned it all to the ground and spontaneously combusted than stayed in that prison one second longer than I had to. As soon as I turned eighteen, I was getting out. I covered my room with pictures of people and places and things in the outside world so I would never forget there was a world beyond my personal prison. If I could just hold on long enough, I would leave this town and everyone in it, including my family, and then I would finally be free of their judgments, free to find out who I was and who I wanted to be.

Getting out was my goal, the only thing I had to hold on to, but I knew it would take years, and I felt helpless. I was busy working on my room, mulling over my dread at having to go back to school in a few weeks, when I saw my sister's old wooden crutches. She'd gotten them when she hurt her knee playing softball years earlier, and they were still sitting in the

garage. All at once the symbolism hit me: I was immobile, I was crippled, I was lame. I needed to display my disability, to make it a physical piece of artwork instead of just internalized angst. I took four giant nails from Dad's toolbox and nailed the crutches horizontally to my bedroom wall.

Mom had put up with my ongoing art project, constantly griping about how ugly and disturbing she thought it was, but never interfering. She drew the line at hammering huge nails into the wall.

"Why would you do that?" she asked accusingly when she noticed the newest addition to my collage later that night.

"It's art," I said, putting myself between her and the crutches, trying to keep her from taking them down.

"It's not art, it's junk. It's weird. And it's putting holes in my wall." She pointed over my shoulder at where the nails pierced the pink paint.

"It's not weird." I hated it when she called something I liked weird just because she didn't get it.

"It's not normal to hang crutches up like decoration. What is wrong with you?"

I wanted to tell her about feeling crippled, trapped, and restless, but I couldn't. If Julie hadn't believed me, there was no way Mom would. I saw no reason to try and talk to her about how much I was hurting, so I focused on the fact that she was laughing at my artwork, at something I'd created to reflect who I was. I had flashbacks of when I was little and I tried to make a mobile out of sticks, string, and pictures of things I liked: horses, books, and white lilies. I couldn't reach up high enough to hang the contraption from the ceiling, so I hung it on the wall. When Mom and Julie saw it, they laughed and poked fun, and I cried. I ripped the mobile down

and threw it away, but they still brought it up whenever I tried to talk about my views on creativity, saying, “This from the girl who tapes sticks to the wall and calls it art.” So instead of trying to explain, I burst into tears.

“Why are you crying?” Mom sighed and threw her hands up, exasperated.

“You’re making fun of me,” I said, my voice wavering and my shoulders shaking. “I’m not weird.”

She sat down on the bed. “I didn’t mean to call you weird. I just don’t understand why you do these things.” Her voice was soft but demanding, waiting for me to give her an answer.

I shrugged and wiped at my face. I said nothing.

“Just take them down,” Mom said, standing up. “And no more holes in the wall, or all of this”—she gestured at my pictures, collages, posters, and objects dangling from the ceiling—“comes down. Got it?”

I nodded. She left. I lifted the crutches off the nails, and pulled the nails themselves out with the claw of one of Dad’s hammers. Sure enough, I’d left four dime-sized holes in the wall, like bullet wounds. I wanted to fill the hole with red food coloring and corn syrup, let it trickle down in long, heavy streaks, staining the carpet. A wounded, bleeding wall was even more symbolic than crutches. Instead, I plugged the holes up with sticky tack and hid them under pictures. I was getting good at hiding wounds.

My sister had a small acoustic guitar she’d gotten for Christmas one year, and in a haze of boredom, I picked it up and started messing around on it, plucking out my own tunes. Dreams of becoming a musician began to form themselves in my mind. I begged Mom for guitar lessons,

and she agreed, thinking it might be a good influence on me, something to get me out of my room for a while.

My guitar teacher had a head full of curly grey hair and a bushy gray mustache. He told me to call him Carl. I started out learning simple Beatles songs on my sister's acoustic guitar, but what I wanted was to rock out on an electric guitar. I pulled my Kurt-covered box out of the closet, opened him up, and let the piles of dollar bills spill out. Between my lunch money and the birthday and Christmas money I'd saved for the past couple of years, I had enough to buy the guitar I wanted.

I took my money to the guitar store and picked out a white Fender Stratocaster I'd been eyeing for a while. It had voluptuous curves, and the metal shined lustrously. It was the same brand and model Kurt Cobain had played. I knew it was mine the moment I saw it. I bought a small amp to go with it. Few moments have brought me as much joy as when I plugged my amp in and struck my Strat for the first time, vibrating the whammy bar as if I'd been doing it for years. The crashing waves of distorted chords careened through my ear drums, pulsed in rhythm with the pumping of my blood, and sent a tremor of ecstasy up my spine. I was in love.

I started writing lyrics, scribbling words on every scrap of paper I could find, playing with phrasing and alliteration to create songs that described what I was going through. I crafted crude guitar riffs and simplistic solos around my lyrics. I practiced quietly in my room when my family was home, and at full volume when they stepped out and I had an hour or so of solace. Anything sounded good if you played it loud enough with lots of distortion. All my songs had depressing, angry choruses that I would scream at the top of my lungs: "I like to sit and hate myself." "What right do you have to judge me?" "You're living in a fucking fantasy world."

I wasn't great, but I was still young. There was plenty of time to practice and get better. It was a glimmer of light at the end of a dark tunnel. This could be my way out. I could get famous, become a rock star. I could meet all of the people I listened to, have them as real friends. I could make star-struck guys fall in love with me. I could be admired and adored by tons of fans, and make a difference to all the other people out there who were suffering like I was. I could show all those assholes who were mean to me, and even my own family, that I was so much more than they ever gave me credit for. This dream gave me something to hold on to. It gave me a reason to live.

CHAPTER 18

When I walked towards Beasley Middle School on the first day of eighth grade I was not the same girl who'd roamed these halls just a few months earlier. My self-conscious shyness had been replaced by anger, my desire to be accepted replaced by jaded apathy. Instead of trendy Bongo jeans and form-fitting body suits, I wore torn, faded, generic brand jeans, and a revolving assortment of baggy black T-shirts with band logos splashed across the front: Nine Inch Nails, Pearl Jam, Stone Temple Pilots, Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers. I still wore my leather riding boots, though, the last fashion remnant of my previous life.

I'd grown my bangs out so they fell into my eyes, wispy blonde strings, and I used my hair as a cloak I could open and shut at will, depending on how much of the outside world I wanted to let in. Like before, I covered my face in make-up, but the make-up itself had changed: I went from a shade of bright red whore to blood maroon lipstick; instead of gobs of foundation that made my face look unnaturally tan, I smoothed Halloween face paint on, a shade of vampire pale; I traced my eyes with black eyeliner, put smoky earth tones around the lids, and rubbed in a bit of blue shadow under my eyes to give myself a sleepless, sickly hue. I looked like the walking dead.

Heads turned my way, people dropping their jaws or turning up their noses as I strutted past, my mouth set firmly in a bored grimace. Teachers raised their eyebrows as I slunk into class, hiding under my hair, drawing curlicues and stars around the Nathaniel Hawthorne quote I'd written on my notebook: "What other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart! What jailor so inexorable as one's self!" I noticed the attention, and though it wasn't my intention, I enjoyed it. The popular kids who'd been mean to me, the nerdy ones who'd been nice, and everyone in between, including the adults, seemed wary—and a little frightened—of the new me.

I was sure my mother would have had the same reaction if she'd ever seen me like this. Luckily, my parents had helped Julie buy a car, so she dropped me off in the mornings before heading over to the high school, and picked me up after school. We left the house after our parents had left for work, and got home before either of them returned. With Mom working at a different school I didn't have to worry about her spying on me. My sister approved of my look, so long as Mom didn't find out and give her hell for letting me leave the house looking like I did. We'd even started borrowing each other's shirts. On the way to school, she'd play her tapes, and we'd bob our heads to Concrete Blonde's "Jesus Forgive Me," a melodious rock song about a woman who fantasizes of hunting down the lover who wronged her, methodically murdering and burying him.

Rebecca's parents had decided to enroll her in a private Christian school, like the one I'd gone to in kindergarten, so I didn't get to hang out with her anymore. I had no interest in the company of anyone else at school. Sixth and seventh grade were designed so one class stayed together the whole day, going from teacher to teacher and room to room, but eighth grade was structured to get us ready for high school, so there were different people in each of my classes. Some of the kids I knew, most of them I didn't. I had a class with Ben and one with Jeff, and during the first week they both tested my new reputation.

"What's up, Morticia?" Ben asked as class was dismissed, squinting his eyes as he grinned, pleased with his own cleverness.

"Go fuck yourself, dough boy," I said. I'd been working on that one for months. Ben sputtered, trying to think of a come back as I sauntered off.

The next day, Jeff whispered loudly at me from across the room. "Jill worships the Devil."

I smiled. "I am the Devil." I said it with a straight face, a penetrating stare, and then I laughed high and long, a crescendoing cackle.

Jeff turned around in his seat. He never bothered me again.

During class, and in the hallways between classes, I kept my head down, ignoring everyone. During lunch I hid in the bathrooms, hung out in the library, or sat by myself at the end of a lunch table, always staring into a Stephen King novel or scribbling poetry in a notebook:

If life is but a dream,
why won't someone
wake me up?
I find myself wishing
I'd never been born
much more often
than I find myself
feeling glad to be alive.
The demon inside me,
the evil in my heart,
this soul full of madness,
are all that remains of me.
Each night,
as I drift into slumber,
I realize there is no reason to stay awake
and there is no reason to stay alive.

I spoke as little as possible, never opening my mouth in class unless called on, responding to schoolmates' comments with an indifferent stare. At home, I watched MTV with Julie, talked with her about bands, and nothing more. I was forced to be around my parents during dinner, and I muttered monosyllabic answers to the questions they asked, responded to their comments with silence.

I spent most of my time in my room, behind my locked door, sitting in the dark, usually listening to music. Sometimes it was Alice in Chains, singing, "Down in a hole, and I don't know if I can be saved. See my heart, I decorate it like a grave...I'd like to fly, but my wings have been so denied...Bury me softly me in this womb." Other times it was Nine Inch Nails,

singing, “There’s no escape from this, my new consciousness. The me that you know used to have feelings, but the blood has stopped pumping and he is left to decay. The me that you know is now made up of wires, and even when I’m right with you, I’m so far away.”

I wrote poems in the dark, so I didn’t have to see the words, I could just let them pour out of me on to the page without thinking about it. I wouldn’t look at them again for days. The handwriting was uneven, zig-zagging across the page, the words smashing into each other:

This will never be enough.
I have to hide in a dark place,
a place where no one can find me.
I want to stop caring,
and hurting,
and being afraid.
I want to stop torturing myself.
I want to tell someone about this,
but I can’t.
So instead I write poetry in the dark
where no one can see my confessions,
not even me.

Sometimes I turned my little blue lamp on, in the corner next to my bed. I took a sheet of paper, pale white like my skin, the blue lines crossing it like veins, and I would write the word “Death” over and over again, making patterns out of the word, stringing it across the page in arcs and swirls, sometimes in tiny, precise letters, other times in large, chunky letters. I drew pictures with a charcoal pencil I’d stolen from art class: one titled “Trail of Tears” showed a woman sobbing, her face buried in torn pieces of paper bearing the words “I’m So Happy.” Another drawing was called “Me,” and depicted a girl with tears running down her cheeks, and a hole drilled where her heart should be, so you could see straight through to the other side. The drawing “Depression” showed the upper torso of a girl standing in the rain, the bottom half of her concealed by a small tornado of blackness that seemed to be swallowing her. There was a

somber acceptance in her expression; she had given in to the darkness that was slowly overtaking her.

The silence was killing me. I hardly ever spoke, so when I did talk my voice came out small and squeaky like a child just learning to use her vocal chords, or low and gravelly like an aging, cancer-ridden smoker. The words built up in me, catching in my throat; I swallowed them back down, but they never went away, they just sat there in my stomach, making me nauseous.

On Friday nights, my sister would stay at her best friend's house, my father would coach his football games, and my mother would go and watch the game from the stands. I convinced them I could stay home alone on game nights. I had the whole house to myself. I would light candles around the house, turn all the lights off, and blare my albums on the living room stereo, twirling around in the flickering shadows while the singers' voices cradled me. They were my true friends, my family, the only ones I needed. They were the only ones who understood what I was going through.

These were the moments that got me through the week: knowing I could have this time to be completely alone with my music. I would drain all the tears I'd been building up and holding on to all week, letting them well up and flood down my face, letting my sinuses fill up with snot until it dripped down to my chin. I licked my lips, tasting the salt of tears and mucus, tasting my sadness. I would fall to my knees, mouthing the words along with Nine Inch Nails' singer, Trent Reznor, as he whispered, "You make this all go away, you make this all go away. I'm down to just one thing, and I'm starting to scare myself." My legs tucked underneath me, my arms pounding the floor, my face against the carpet as if I was praying, I would cry out the final line

of the chorus in unison with the voice coming through the speakers: “I just want something I can never have!”

My life, my home, even my own mind and body had begun to feel like a series of cages that kept me pinioned to the point of claustrophobia. What I wanted was to get out, to be on my own, to be around people like Trent Reznor, people who would understand me because they suffered as I did. Those Friday nights I spent alone with Trent’s voice were the closest I came to feeling free. I hurled myself around the living room, my hair and limbs flying in strange orbits, like a voodoo priestess dancing around a bonfire; my flames were the speakers, I was trying to invoke the spirit of the voice coming from the stereo. I punched and kicked and slapped at everything around me—the couch, the kitchen counter, the brick fireplace—as if I was lashing out at the bars of my cage. I banged my head against the wall, or against the floor. I once banged it so hard the whole world went black, I nearly puked from the pain, and I had to lie on my back for a long time because I was too dizzy to get up.

I ran back and forth through the empty house, screaming, my long hair flailing behind me. I screamed tentatively at first, at a low pitch; then louder, hearing my own voice echoing off the walls. Then the pitch heightened, I screamed as loud as I could. Sometimes I sounded furious, ferocious; other times I sounded abandoned, terrified.

If the screaming wasn’t enough to make me feel better, I’d put my hands in the candle flames to see how long I could stand it. Or I’d put hot, smoking matches against my skin as soon as I’d blown them out. From there I moved up to putting my fingers, palms, and knuckles against a hot light bulb that had been on for hours—always daring myself to hold my skin against the searing surface as long as I could. I liked the little red marks left behind, the slight throbbing of a scorched patch of skin.

Sometimes I would raid the medicine cabinets and take handfuls of sinus pills. I wanted to try marijuana and LSD, just for the experience, but I didn't know any drug dealers so I had no idea how to get my hands on them. After seeing a story on TV about teenagers abusing over-the-counter drugs, I thought I'd give it a whirl. I started with three pills, then four, then five, and so on, upping the dosage each time. The pills made me feel tingly all over. Sounds seemed to swish by me, back and forth, getting louder, then softer, then louder again. When I spun around to the music, trails of light whisked by. The pills even gave the blackness color; everywhere I looked, a greenish glow illuminated the darkness.

One Friday night I was filled with the urge to break something. The need filled me like hunger, growling in my head until I satisfied it. I took my mother's empty Perrier bottles from the recycling bin and slammed them against the kitchen linoleum. The sounds they made when breaking were musical, soothing. The green-tinted glass scattered all over the floor. I lay down on the shards and rolled around, savoring the tiny pinching pains as the jagged edges dug into me. When I stopped and looked down at my arms and legs, they were covered in tiny little cuts.

I began breaking bottles every Friday night. The act of breaking something, the sound of it being destroyed, followed by the act of rolling in its remains, somehow calmed the whirlwind in my head. I always cleaned up the evidence as best I could, sweeping carefully in every corner, but once my father stepped on a small piece I'd neglected. He and my mother both assumed it was my doing, and cornered me.

"I dropped one of your bottles by accident," I said, my heart pounding, convinced they could see the lie spelled out on my face.

"Well, just tell us next time," was all they said. I nodded and exhaled a giant sigh of relief as soon as their backs were turned.

I decided it was time to try breaking something different, something meaningful. I took small, fragile knick-knacks and threw them against the wall in my room. They left chips in the paint, holes in the wall itself, scars so deep that a few years later, when my parents decided to repaint my room and removed the posters I'd used as Band-Aids, the holes would have to be filled in with globs of spackle. I took my reprimands with eyes cast down, lips tight, offering no explanation of how my walls became victims to such destruction.

I threw a porcelain lamb I'd had since I was a baby, a glazed pottery bowl I'd worked on for a week in art class, a little carved donkey my grandmother bought for me in Mexico; any piece of junk that meant something to me. The lamb was decapitated, the bowl shattered, the donkey lost both its ears and part of a foot. I mixed the pieces of my past together and held them in my hands.

I destroyed my favorite stuffed animals: the dog my sister won at the fair, the one I'd coveted for ages before I finally stole it out of her room after she'd teased me into tears over my imaginary pet dragon; the rabbit Mom had bought me because its lacy pink dress matched my pink walls; even Ted E. Bear, the stuffed animal I'd slept next to and found comfort with for over a decade. With a pair of scissors, I ripped open the dog, skinned him, spilled his cotton guts all over the carpet. I tore the rabbit into pieces, dismembering and beheading it. I took a knife and cut off the bear's ears and legs while his orange eyes stared up at me, pleading for mercy.

Breaking things that I loved felt more like breaking myself; I wanted everything around me to be as broken as I felt. This was punishment. I was miserable and I didn't know why, so I must have been being punished for something I'd done, or for who I was. I would add to the punishment, get all the suffering over at once, and then maybe it would be over. Maybe I could finally be whole.

This was how I freed the words, and the pain, that got trapped inside me like air bubbles, causing the pressure to build until I couldn't stand it anymore. The screaming, the banging, the burning, the breaking: it was all just catharsis. It made me feel stable again, temporarily. But I'd become aware that I'd somehow crossed from normal teenage angst and bad behavior into strange new territory. Even though it made me feel better, the things I was doing weren't normal. I was afraid I might be going mad, but I had no idea how to stop it.

CHAPTER 19

It was another boring afternoon, and the bell that ended P.E. and ushered me to hurry to the other side of school for my Chemistry class had rung. I was walking next to Nicole—a self-conscious, scraggly, nerdy girl, with a mouth full of train track braces—who I sometimes talked to because she looked as lonely as I felt, and her attempts to fit in socially reminded me of my seventh grade self. I’d even seen her get bullied by Jeff and Ben on a few occasions, though I never stepped in to help. I was done being their target, so she would have to learn to fend for herself.

“How did you do on the algebra quiz yesterday? I got an A.” Nicole said. This was the extent of our friendship: walking together from one class to another, talking about school. I knew almost nothing about her, nor did I care to. She was just a distraction, a way to pass the time until school was over.

“I got an A-,” I said.

“Oh. That’s good.” We walked on in silence, but I heard footsteps behind us, people whispering. I turned and saw a group of girls walking a few feet behind, staring straight at me. The one in the middle was a tall, skinny girl, whose shoulder-length jet black hair had tattletale blonde roots. I’d seen her around school the past few months. We had a couple of classes together, so I knew her name was Morgan.

“How’s it going?” Morgan asked when she saw me looking at her. She broke away from her friends and walked in step right behind Nicole, who immediately clammed up and looked around nervously, like she was afraid of the dark-haired girl.

“Just peachy,” I said. I wasn’t sure why she was talking to me. I’d always thought she seemed rather odd, but I couldn’t tell if she was creepy-odd or interesting-odd.

“Nice shirt,” she said, nodding her approval of my black T-shirt with Nine Inch Nails written in white letters across the chest. On the back were the words “I’m nothing, I’m nothing, now I’m nothing, nothing now.” I wasn’t sure what it was supposed to mean, but to me it was a warning to teachers, bullies, anyone who might try and mess with me: don’t look at me, don’t talk to me, I don’t even exist.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You like their music?” What this really meant was: are you a true fan or just a poser trying to look cool?

“Their music is my life,” I said.

She smiled. “I see you sitting by yourself during lunch sometimes. You should come sit with us.” She motioned to the small cluster of girls standing behind her, all of them wearing torn jeans and flannel shirts, dark make-up, or an ensemble of black clothes.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

What I’d gathered from seeing Morgan and her clique around school was that she was the leader of the anti-popular misfit group: the goth kids, the punks, the freaks. I had never thought of being part of their crowd. These girls were hardcore. They had homemade prison-style tattoos, came from broken homes, and smoked menthol cigarettes when no teachers were around to catch them. They cursed and drank like sailors, had sex, and got high. They had no respect for parents, or teachers, or the law. They wore all black and dyed their hair unnatural colors. They drew anarchy signs and pentagrams all over their notebooks. They listened only to hard rock and heavy metal. They embraced their weirdness instead of letting it alienate them. They didn’t seem to be afraid of anything. And for some reason, they wanted me to be one of

them. When I spent my lunch period sitting with them that day, it was the first time I felt like I belonged.

“So what other bands do you like?” Morgan asked.

“I don’t know. Tool. Nirvana. You know, the usual.” I shrugged. “But my favorite is Nine Inch Nails. No one compares with Trent Reznor.”

“Uh oh,” Lisa said. She had long brown hair, huge breasts, and acne scars dotted across her face. “You better watch out for Tiffany. She’s in love with him too.”

“Yep, I plan to marry him” Tiffany said, nodding. She was half black, half Cherokee, with dark olive skin and long, kinky hair. She would have been lovely had it not been for her square bones, which gave her a bulky, overtly masculine body. “I guess you’ll just have to fight me for him.” We both laughed, but I felt a tinge of jealous territoriality. Trent belonged to me.

“What about movies?” Morgan seemed fascinated with me, sitting on the edge of her chair, her eyes glowing as if she was hypnotized.

“*The Crow* is my all-time favorite,” I said. It was a dark, romantic tale about a man who comes back from the dead to kill the men who murdered him and his fiancée. I found myself drawn to the portrayal of death, and of undying love; it made me feel empty, though, because I didn’t think anyone would ever love me as much as the slain couple in the movie seemed to love each other.

“I knew it!” Morgan clapped her hands together. “I saw you wear a shirt with *The Crow* logo on it last week. That’s my favorite movie too. Well, that and *Interview with the Vampire*. I meant to talk to you that day, but I wasn’t sure if you were cool or not. When I saw you wearing your Nine Inch Nails shirt today, I knew you had to be cool,” she said, nodding vigorously.

I was flattered that she had noticed my clothes, that she had been studying me for some time and had decided I met the qualifications to join her circle of friends. It was nice to be wanted by someone.

I was ushered into the misfit crowd slowly, but with open arms. I walked with my new friends from P.E. to Chemistry, leaving Nicole to trail behind us by herself. Part of me felt like I'd abandoned her, like a cub in the wild, but I didn't want her to cramp my style. I was somebody now, I was the new little sister of this group.

None of the girls could believe how innocent I was. I was a virgin, I'd never skipped school or snuck out of my house, and I'd certainly never smoked or drank or done any drugs, other than occasionally popping sinus pills. Compared to them, I was an innocent, naive child, and they couldn't wait to teach me the ways of their world, to corrupt my seemingly virtuous soul. I was a willing participant. I was tired of being sheltered by my parents. I wanted to shed my past reputation as the teachers' daughter. I wanted to do bad things, to taste the delicacies immorality had to offer. I wanted to be corrupted.

“Hold it like this.” Morgan plucked a Marlboro Red from the pack and held it gracefully between her first two fingers. “See?”

We were sitting in a dark parking lot, across the street from the high school football stadium. I'd convinced my Mom I really wanted to go to the game, and that she should let me sit with my friends instead of with her, giving up my Friday night alone at home so I could finally learn how to choke down a cigarette.

I mimicked the way Morgan had posed with the cigarette. She held up the lighter.

“Now put your lips on it and suck.”

She lit the end of the cigarette, and I sucked until I felt the thick fog of smoke pouring into my lungs. Then I coughed for all I was worth, that rite of passage cough that all first-time smokers must go through, pushing smoke-breaths out of my mouth like a drowned person vomits up water.

“Nice job. You suck as good as any two dollar whore,” Lisa said.

Morgan patted my back. “Ready to try it again?”

With each drag, I coughed more, feeling a bit like the world was undulating, back and forth, and I was going to be seasick.

At school the following week, my friends and I skipped sixth period and hid in the woods behind the school. There was a clearing a few yards in, and we sat in a circle, passing around the asthma inhaler that belonged to Tiffany’s little brother; she had stolen it from her mom’s medicine cabinet. When the inhaler got around to me, I did it just like the other girls had, putting it in my mouth and breathing in the cool mist. I felt a little lightheaded, nothing more. It didn’t make me nearly as dizzy as the cigarette had. I wasn’t sure what the point was, but I played along.

“See how fast my heart is racing?” Morgan put my hand over her sternum. It felt like a humming bird was bouncing around inside her.

After convincing my mom that Morgan was an upstanding young girl who could be trusted, she allowed me to spend the night with her that weekend. Morgan lived in San Mateo, a township next to Palatka that was even more rural and isolated. She got her older brother to buy us wine coolers, and we sat on her back porch, sipping Sex on the Beach and Fuzzy Navel flavors. I felt a fizzy sensation from my lips down to my legs as my first alcohol buzz tickled its way through me.

“You just popped your booze cherry,” Morgan said, giving me a high five, then passing me her cigarette. I smiled and took a deep drag. I didn’t cough once.

At lunch the next week, Tiffany showed us the safety pin she’d stabbed through her belly button.

“I pierced it myself,” she said, glowing.

We crowded around her chair, admiring her handiwork. She wasn’t the only one who had a do-it-yourself piercing; most of the girls did. Ears, noses, belly buttons, even nipples. They’d all pierced something, with just a safety pin and some ice to numb the area.

“So, what are you going to pierce?” Tiffany asked.

“What?”

“You need a piercing. What are you going to pierce?”

“I don’t know. I can’t really pierce anything. If my mother saw, she’d kill me.”

“Fuck that shit,” Morgan said. “That’s more of a reason for you to do it. Piss that bitch off.”

I’d told them all about yet another fight I’d had with my mother over the way I dressed. She told me I looked miserable. I told her I was miserable. She told me for the umpteenth time that it was my own fault, my own choice, and I could choose to be happy at any time. I went to my room, slammed the door, and made a secret wish that she would die soon.

“Yeah. Stupid bitch. Maybe I will.”

I wanted to pierce something, but it had to be in a place I could hide easily. I decided to pierce my ankle. It was original, and I could always cover it up with a sock.

I took a plastic bag full of ice and placed it on my ankle until it was good and numb. I grabbed a fold of skin and poked at it with the safety pin. I barely felt it. I put the end of the pin against my ankle and pushed a little harder. I felt the tip slide in; the pain was minimal, but the site of the pin disappearing into my foot made my stomach flip flop. I froze up. This wasn't like burning myself; this was sticking an object in one side and waiting for it to come out the other. It was too invasive. Could I really do this?

I thought of showing my friends my piercing at school, how cool they would think it was. I took a deep breath and slowly pushed the pin deeper, through the tissue. It felt like sewing folds of leather. I pushed until the pin's tip emerged on the other side of my skin, and I clasped it. It wasn't a sharp pain like I'd expected; it was more of a dull ache, almost rhythmic. It barely bled at all, which was a surprise and a disappointment. I thought sticking a foreign object through my body would bring at least a little blood to the surface for me to admire.

I couldn't sleep that night. My ankle kept throbbing. Sharp pain shot through me when I accidentally rolled over and brushed my ankle against something. I couldn't stop thinking about all of the medical problems I could have caused myself: gangrene, lockjaw, sepsis. I could feel the bacteria swimming around in my wound, feel the skin growing to the safety pin so that if I left it in any longer the only way to remove it would be to rip it out. I couldn't take it any more. I turned the light on, unclasped the pin, and carefully slid the pin out, leaving only two tiny marks half an inch apart.

"I pierced my ankle," I told my friends during lunch the next day.

"Your ankle? Really?"

"That's pretty ballsy. Let's have a look."

“Well, but see, I had to take it out. I think it was getting infected. But I’ve got a little scar there.” I pulled my sock down.

“Oh yeah, I see.”

“Huh.”

Their heads bowed over the disappointing little holes, the only thing I had to show for my attempt. I felt like I’d let them down, but it didn’t matter. I would have better luck with other forms of self mutilation.

I was still burning myself from time to time, still rolling in broken glass when I needed to feel some kind of pain. But Morgan and the other girls turned me on to new kinds of pain. Their mutilation went beyond just piercing; they also carved and burned themselves. Morgan had carved the word HATE into her calf. Every time a scab started to grow, she’d pick it off. If the wound showed any other signs of healing, she’d re-cut, digging each letter a little deeper than the last time. I thought her scar was a beautiful expression of what she was feeling. I tried to make my own, sitting down with a steak knife from the kitchen, trying to dig it into my leg, but I chickened out like I had with the safety pin. I didn’t have the guts to cut as deep as Morgan did.

Burning was more my style, and they showed me knew ways to burn that I’d never thought of. Some of them burned words into their skin by holding the end of a paper clip in flames and then pressing it into their flesh. Tiffany’s boyfriend, Clayton, showed me where he’d burned the word NOTHING into his calf. He talked about how good the pain felt, how it shut out everything else. Morgan said the same thing about carving her scar; it made her feel better. I’d finally found people who understood my need for pain. I felt almost normal. They used their pain to hide from things, just like I did; they hid from parents who beat them or abandoned them or

just flat out didn't love them, from brothers who had hanged themselves, from being taunted with labels like "faggot" or "whore." Next to them I sometimes felt I had no right to complain about my problems.

Clayton made the experience of burning sound irresistibly Zen-like. So I went home and lit a vanilla-scented candle, carefully uncoiled a paperclip, and held the tip against the burning wick, watching the silver blacken. I held my trembling hand over my leg. I pushed the clip into my skin, watching the whiteness blacken. This was the sharp pain I'd been looking for; clear and strong and overwhelming, until there was no room for any other thoughts: no insecurities about how I wasn't cool enough or pretty enough, no fear that I didn't really belong anywhere and wasn't really cared about by anyone, no worrying that my mother was right when she said my misery was my own fault. There was only pain, a merciful, comforting pain.

I burned the words KILL ME into my skin, just above the ankle I'd pierced a few weeks before. They were lyrics screamed in a Nine Inch Nails song called "Eraser." They were also my secret wish; not that I wanted to die but that I wanted to be erased, so my pain would be erased. I wanted to be free from everything that was pulling me down, as free as I felt when I branded myself with those words.

I was flipping through one of my sister's *Spin* magazines later that year when I found an article about people who practiced scarification as an art form. One of the girls in the article talked of how she loved the taste of her own blood, how she would scoop out her menstrual blood with a spoon and drink it. I was repulsed at first, but I was also mesmerized; the way the girl spoke of the intoxication of a woman feeding on the blood from her womb—the blood that gives life—absorbing her own essence, was sensual, inviting, as if it were the most natural thing

a woman could do. I'd only started menstruating six months earlier, and I was still in awe when blood started leaking out of me every month. After I got past the initial taboo, I felt compelled to try it. I wanted to taste my life, and the life that I might someday give.

So on the first day of my next period, when the blood was heavy and thick, I took my finger and ran it between my legs, the way I would swirl my finger around the inside of a mixing bowl to scrape up leftover cake batter. I brought it to my lips and licked the blood from my finger. It tasted different than the way I remembered the blood tasting when I'd cut my tongue years earlier. It was thicker, saltier, heavier in my throat. I smeared it over my lips like gloss and looked in the mirror over my dresser. I looked demented, a purple-red smile painted across my face. What was I doing? This fascination with blood, the act of drinking it, burning myself, hating myself...this couldn't be normal, could it? What was wrong with me?

I had tasted my own blood, but no one else's; not until one night when I was spending yet another weekend with Morgan, who had rapidly become my best friend, and who happened to be obsessed with vampires. Pam, one of the girls in our group, was diabetic, and she'd given us some syringes because we thought they were cool. She'd stayed the night at my house once, and I'd watched her stick the end of a needle into a bottle of clear liquid, sucking it into the syringe, then pinch an inch of skin on her thigh, sliding the needle into her flesh. Her brown hair fell in her face, and she tossed her head to the side to move it out of the way. As she pushed the plunger down, she caught me watching her.

"Sorry," she said, as if I'd objected.

"I don't mind," I said, continuing to watch as she pulled the needle out of her leg. "What would happen if I injected myself with that stuff?" I asked, nodding at her bottle of insulin.

“You’d die,” she said, without missing a beat.

She tossed the used syringe and the near-empty bottle of insulin in my trashcan. After she’d left, I fished them out and hid them in my closet. There was still a fair amount of liquid sloshing around in the bottle. I would never have injected myself with it, but I liked the feeling of holding it in my hand, knowing that I could.

Now I watched Morgan take one of Pam’s syringes out, unwrapping the plastic covering. I sat next to her on her bed, watched her stick the needle in her vein—a glowing blue thread tattooing her sickly-pale skin. Then she asked me to help.

With shaking hands, I pulled the plunger up slowly, drawing the blood from her vein into the translucent body of the syringe. I watched it fill with blood, a plastic mosquito engorging itself. Then she took the needle out and offered it to me, calling me her “blood sister” as if we’d pricked our fingers and rubbed them together on the playground.

I opened my mouth wide and she squeezed half the contents on to my waiting tongue. I held it in my mouth for a moment, reluctant to swallow. Morgan wasn’t sheltered and innocent like I was. She was worldly and street smart. Her parents let her go where she pleased, while mine kept me under lock and key. At fourteen she’d already had several lovers, whereas I had never had a boyfriend, never even been French kissed. I was thinking about all the diseases I could catch from her matured blood—hepatitis, syphilis, maybe even HIV.

I drank anyway. I drank because I didn’t want to seem impolite, like the rude guest who refuses to eat what’s offered to her. And I drank because I wanted her to be a part of me. I wanted us to be sisters in blood. I swallowed, letting the drops trickle down my throat. She was a part of me now. Her blood tasted different from mine, I couldn’t explain how. It was just different. It didn’t taste like me.

Despite Morgan's fascination with vampires, I wasn't interested in the romantic notions of drinking someone else's blood. I just wanted my own. I wanted to understand my own body. Who was I? Why was I alive? Maybe the answer was in my blood. I didn't know where else to look.

CHAPTER 20

My relationship with my mother was becoming more strained and volatile by the moment. We had shouting matches several times a week about my clothes, the way my room was decorated, the music I listened to, the people I hung out with—everything that made me who I was.

“Open this door. Damn it, how many times have I told not to lock this.” Mom’s fists weren’t big, but she could beat my door like a hammer. I sat on my bed listening, wanting to make her wait as long as possible, and she unleashed a powerful series of poundings that made my whole bedroom shake. The Nine Inch Nails porcelain logo I’d made in art class, forming it and firing it in a kiln, fell off the shelf on my wall and hit the floor, breaking into several pieces. It was one of the few things I cared about and hadn’t broken myself, and now it was destroyed.

“What? You’re breaking my stuff,” I yelled as I opened the door.

She pushed me back into the room, holding scissors in one hand, and several pairs of jeans draped over her arm. “Why did you do this?” She held up the cuffs on the pant legs, where I’d cut the seams off so they would unravel and fray stylishly. I knew she’d be pissed if she saw them. I must have forgotten and left them in the dryer. “These are brand new jeans, I just bought these for you two weeks ago.”

“I like them like that. Why does it matter?”

“Why?” Her eyes and mouth grew huge, like she was turning into the wolf from *Little Red Riding Hood*, and she threw the jeans on the floor. She lifted the scissors up high and brought them down swiftly, whacking me hard on my knuckles with the plastic handle.

“Owww.” I backed away, rubbing my hand. Other than the one spanking, she’d never hit me before.

“You’ve ruined them. I can’t let you go walking around looking like this, it’s ridiculous. What will people think of me if I let you go to school dressed like that? It makes me look bad.”

“I’m the one who’s wearing them, not you. Why do you care what people think?”

“Because everything you do reflects back on me. I have a reputation to uphold.” I’d heard this speech a million times. If I did anything she didn’t approve of everyone would think she was a terrible mother. In her mind, this justified trying to bully and force me to fit the perfect-daughter mold she’d imagined.

“That isn’t fair,” I said.

“Life isn’t fair, otherwise I would have normal children.” My perfect sister was growing distant from her too, becoming more her own person, and less of a suck up to my parents. Mom didn’t like it at all, and she seemed to be cracking under the stress of losing us both. “If I’d known you two were going to turn out the way you did, I would have thought twice about having children.”

This was one of several statements my mother would utter during the course of her lifetime and then conveniently forget about. To this day she denies ever saying these words to me, but it’s burned into my memory like an apocalyptic sunset. I stared at her for a moment, turning the phrase over and over in my mind until she spoke again.

“Why do you have to dress like you’re going to a funeral? You look like a dead person.” She went to my closet and ran her hands over my shirts, pulling some off the hangers. I thought I’d been sneaky about wearing them, but not sneaky enough apparently.

“I like my clothes. There’s nothing wrong with my clothes, you just don’t like them. I don’t like the same things you like.”

“I know you don’t. You like dressing like death and living in this pit.” She gestured at my walls, littered with photos of rock stars. “This? This is who you look up to?” She pointed at a picture of Courtney Love, stripped down to her underwear, giving the camera a distinct fuck-you look. Mom grabbed Courtney’s head and ripped her from the wall, tearing her body from her bare legs in the process. “You think these people care about you?”

“They understand me better than you ever could.”

“These people with their Devil music? They’re influencing you. Are you worshipping the Devil?”

I laughed. I wanted to say yes, to give her a nervous breakdown, but I was afraid she would have me locked away in an asylum. “No.” I shook my head.

“And those people you hang out with? Do they worship the Devil?”

“No, of course not. Why would you think that?” Truthfully, some of my friends had claimed to, but I’d never seen them do more than wear pentagram necklaces and show off copies of Anton LaVey’s *The Satanic Bible*.

“Because some of your teachers have expressed concerns. They said you aren’t eating during lunch, you seem withdrawn in your classes, and your friends all dress weird and are known for being troublemakers,” she said.

This was the curse of being a teacher’s daughter: there were spies everywhere, just waiting to meddle in my business and screw everything up for me. That must have been how she’d found out about the outfits I wore to school.

“I pass on lunch sometimes because I’m not hungry. I don’t talk in class because I’m tired. And there’s nothing wrong with my friends. Those stupid teachers are just being nosy and

they need to butt out. Why can't everybody just leave me alone?" I threw my hands up, exasperated.

Mom sighed and rubbed her temples like I was exhausting her. "Just know that if you keep this up, I might have to send you to a psychologist."

"What? Why?" This was news to me. As much as I wanted someone to listen to me and help me, a surge of fear rose in my throat at the mere mention of a therapist. I couldn't talk to one of them; if they knew what was going on inside me, I'd be sent to a nut house for sure.

"Because I don't know what's wrong with you, and I don't know how to fix it. If your grades slip, or if you get into any kind of trouble, I won't tolerate this anymore. The clothes go. The pictures go. The music goes. Everything. Understand?"

I nodded until she left. Then I shut the door and curled up on my bed. I was just a problem to her, a problem that needed fixing. I wasn't sure how to live with that.

It was my idea to vandalize the cars. I was walking from P.E. to Chemistry with Morgan and the rest of our friends. Every day we made this trek: cross the street from the gym to the front of the school, down the sidewalk, through the parking lot, then up the breezeway where we parted ways to go to our respective classes. This time, as we walked through the parking lot, I pulled out a pencil.

"Watch this," I said. I drug my pencil across the top of several of the cars. My friends watched and laughed. I'm not sure why I did it. Like with breaking the glass bottles, I just felt the urge to destroy something.

The next day I did it again, and Lisa joined in. On the third day I brought a permanent marker to school and drew lines across several of the cars, even writing FUCK YOU on the hood of a pristine white Mustang.

The next morning, a voice crackled over the intercom in our homeroom, announcing a reward for information on whoever was vandalizing the cars. My heart turned to ice in my chest. At lunch, my friends convinced me no one had seen us, no one would tell.

“Don’t worry about it. No one’s dumb enough to tell on us,” Lisa said.

“I dare them to accuse me,” Tiffany said. “I’ll tell them to go fuck themselves.” I couldn’t remember if she’d taken part in scratching the cars or not. I’d been too busy enjoying the rush that came from doing something bad.

“It’s going to be fine,” Morgan said. “You’ll see.” It was easy for her to say; she had only watched and laughed while I dug my pencil into the cars’ paint.

During sixth period, the Dean came and pulled me out of class and walked me to the front office.

Principal Palmer was a middle-aged black woman with the face and temperament of a pit bull. She took me into her office, where two cops stood waiting in the corner.

“Sit down,” Principal Palmer said. I sat. “It’s come to our attention that you and another girl are the ones behind the car vandalizations. Would you care to tell us why you did it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. It wasn’t me.” I lifted my hands up like people did on TV to show they were unarmed.

“We have witnesses,” one of the cops spoke up. “They’re willing to testify against you. Believe me, you don’t want this to go to trial.”

“It’ll be much better for you if you just cooperate and tell us the truth,” the other cop said.

“But I didn’t do anything!” I was pleading. What were they going to do to me? Sweat was creeping out of the pores in my armpits, my palms, my back. My heart fluttered wildly in my chest.

“Do you know whose cars you vandalized?” Principal Palmer’s bug eyes were straining against their sockets, as if they might pop completely out of her head. “Mine,” she said, banging on her desk with her open hand. “And the Vice Principal’s. And the Dean’s.”

Holy shit. I hadn’t even thought about who the cars might belong to. I’d screwed with the personal property of all the administrators at the school.

“Look, we’ve already called in Lisa,” Cop Number One said. “Lisa says it was all your doing. If you don’t tell us your part in it, we’ll have to assume she was right. You’ll take all the blame and your friend will get off scot-free.”

I didn’t know if he was lying or not. Would Lisa really give me up to save her own ass? I wasn’t as close to her as I was to Morgan, but she was still my friend.

Cop Number Two chimed in. “If you’re found to be the only one responsible, that’s four counts of criminal mischief, one for each car that was damaged. Four counts is a felony. But if you and Lisa were both involved, you can share responsibility. You’ll each get two counts, and it goes back to being a misdemeanor.”

A felony? I was a felon for messing with some cars? How could this be happening? It was too much to take in all at once. My mind spun out of control.

We went around in circles for twenty minutes, them telling me all the information they had on me, how I could be arrested, expelled, thrown in a juvenile detention center for a year, but only if I didn’t confess. If I owned up to what I’d done and gave them the information they

wanted, they would protect me, give me only the minimal punishment. After hearing this for the tenth time, it started to feel like my only option.

“Okay. I admit it. It was me.”

They all smiled. “You’re doing the right thing.”

“But Lisa did it too.” I paused, weighing what I was about to say carefully. “So did Tiffany.” In my mind, I couldn’t be sure if Tiffany had done anything, but it was possible, and somehow I felt like the more of us who were implicated, the smaller my own share of guilt would be. I gave them her last name, and one of the cops scribbled it on a note pad. I would see Tiffany in the hall the next day, crying, telling me what had happened, that the cops had said I’d told on her. I would deny it convincingly enough that she would never again question my loyalty.

I wrote and signed a confession. “Now what?”

“Technically you’re being arrested. The only difference is we’re not going to slap you in handcuffs and take you down to the station. We’ll contact your parents and you’ll be in their custody. The school will issue punishment as they see fit.” With that, the cops walked me out of the office and sent me on my way.

Of all the days for my sister to be busy after school, she had to pick today. She was studying for the ACT with friends, so I had to walk to Moseley and wait in my mother’s office for my dad to pick me up, because Mom had a bunch of meetings to go to. I sat in the empty office, my head on the desk, terror washing over me. The sense of impending doom was crushing; I felt the pressure in my bones, they seemed about to collapse inward as if I was being squeezed in a vice. My life was over.

Dad picked me up, and we rode all the way home in silence. I didn’t know if he knew what I’d done, if the Principal had called him or not. He didn’t seem pissed, just quiet, so I kept

my head lowered, staring at the floorboard of his truck, and stayed quiet too. When we got home I went straight to my room and didn't come out until dinner, which wasn't unusual for me.

Mom called me to dinner, and I sat there silently staring at my plate, eating slow and methodically, not making eye contact with anyone. They had to know by now, they just weren't saying anything. They were torturing me on purpose, making me sit there in agony, bracing for impact. When I finished my dinner I got up from the table, put my dishes away, and headed for my room. I made it halfway there before my mother called out my name.

"Jill, come back here and sit down." There it was. The time had come to face what was coming to me. I went back to the table and sat down. My father was next to me, my mother across from me, but I still felt like I was completely surrounded.

"I know." The words came out of me in a whisper.

"You know what?" Her voice was harsh, ready to attack.

"I know you know what I did."

"Then why don't you tell me in your own words."

I told her what I'd told the cops, once again putting a spin on it as if I was just an innocent victim pulled into the whole mess unknowingly. I blamed it all on Carissa: it was her idea, I only did it once, she was the one who used the permanent marker.

"I told you those friends of yours were going to get you in trouble."

"No, it wasn't all of them, just one." I knew what she was trying to do. She was trying to find an excuse to keep me away from Morgan. Mom remembered having Morgan in class, and she'd always thought there was something off about her, though until now she'd still allowed me to hang out with and stay overnight at Morgan's house, against her better judgment. I didn't know what I would do if we were separated.

“You know what has to happen now. I want your clothes, your CDs, your TV, and your stereo out of your room. All the pictures on your walls come off and go into the trashcan. No phone calls, no spending the night with anyone, no going anywhere but school until you prove I can trust you again.” Her composure was alarming. She was angry with me, but she was also glad I’d given her an excuse to take everything away from me in a way that made it seem like it was all my own fault. “Oh, and you can forget about getting anything for your birthday. We won’t be celebrating it this year.”

My fifteenth birthday was just around the corner. True to her word, there was no cake, no card, no gift. She kept the gifts my other relatives gave me. The day of my birth came and went like any other day.

I could live without a birthday, but it was torture to have to hand over all of my most prized possessions to my mother. She shoved all of my things into her closet. I sniffled, hatred painted all over my face.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said. “You’re lucky I don’t throw them all away.” I waited for her to bring up sending me to a psychologist, but she didn’t. I hadn’t pushed her that far just yet.

She sent me into my room with a trash bag. I peeled my pictures from the wall, disassembling the collage I’d spent so much time creating. The room was a reflection of me, a depiction of who I was. Tearing it apart felt like ripping myself into pieces, and this time the destruction wasn’t under my control.

Mom walked by several times to supervise my progress, like a warden checking on her prisoner. At one point she said, “We’ll go to the mall this weekend and pick out some new outfits for you to wear to school.” Her voice rang with a declaration of victory.

I refused to look at her. She was enjoying this way too much.

Julie came in and sat down on my bed. I sat down next to her.

“Why is she doing this to me?”

She shrugged. “You know how she is.”

“This room is my life. It’s a part of me. I feel like I’m crumpling myself up and throwing me away.” I started crying again. “Why won’t she just let me be who I am?”

Julie shook her head. “I don’t know.” Her own eyes were full of tears. Maybe I could have confided in her at the moment, told her about the burning, the broken glass, the lake of blackness sloshing inside me, pulling me under, making me hate myself. But I was too afraid she wouldn’t understand, that she’d decide I was as abnormal as Mom thought I was, and I would lose her. I couldn’t risk it, so I held my tongue. We sat in silence for a few minutes, then she patted my shoulder and went back to her room.

I finished tearing my pictures down, leaving my room naked. Mom came in and took the trash bag. I sat in the middle of my room, the pink walls caving in on me.

CHAPTER 21

Middle school ended. My time at Palatka High School began. Mom sent me to school in crisp blue jeans, shiny white sneakers, and cute t-shirts, all of which she'd picked out herself. My clothes were still being held hostage. Five months had passed, but I was still technically grounded. I'd been given a week of in-school suspension, written apology letters to the school, done community service, and visited the local prison, all in accordance with my punishments from the school and the state. I'd earned back my TV, stereo, and CDs from my parents by going for months without getting into any kind of trouble, but Mom felt like I still didn't deserve the right to be allowed to dress how I wanted or go anywhere aside from school. I was a prisoner in my own house with no release date in sight.

I tried borrowing my sister's shirts and hiding them in my backpack so I could change clothes at school, but because Dad was a teacher there, I always got caught. Under Mom's orders, he started checking my backpack each day before we left the house. I still felt ugly, especially compared to the other girls at school, and not being allowed to choose my own outfits only added a scoop of humiliation on top of my mountain of self-consciousness. I was struggling with trying to find my own identity, but I didn't know how to do it when Mom wouldn't let me express myself or make my own decisions. I had no identity. I was nobody. I felt completely lost.

High school was as bad as middle school had been, only there were twice as many people around. No one talked to me. They all seemed to be staring at me. I didn't know a single person who had the same lunch period I did, so I sat alone at a table. I saw a few people around me pointing and laughing with their friends. I pretended to be engrossed in my homework. I felt like a total loser.

There were people everywhere. Before and after school, they milled around like flies on a corpse, buzzing and fluttering to and fro. During school they packed into the hallways, and I got shoved around, pushed into lockers, knocked into other people. I felt like I was constantly being watched, laughed at, criticized. Eyes peeled away at my skin, exposing me. I might as well have walked around with a giant kick me sign on my back. Every time I heard a sharp whisper or an explosion of laughter, I knew it had to be directed at me. I was a magnet for ridicule.

Something was happening to me. When I walked through throngs of teenagers to enter the building in the morning, when I forged my way from one class to the next, when I sat by myself at lunch, I felt sickly. I sweated more than I ever had before, salty liquid soaking through my clothes. My heart sped up, beating so hard and fast it felt like a machine gun going off in my chest. My ribs seemed to tighten, and I had trouble breathing, so I had to concentrate on filling up my lungs. Sometimes I got dizzy and had to close my eyes to make the world stop spinning. Much later, I would find out these were symptoms of panic attacks—a side effect of social anxiety disorder, which often accompanies depression—but at the time I just thought maybe I was dying. I wasn't sure if I cared or not.

The only good thing about school was that I got to see Morgan. I'd developed a powerful crush on her, an attachment that was as close to falling in love as I'd ever felt. It wasn't sexual, I didn't desire her physically—though I found her mysterious and beautiful—but I wanted to be around her all the time, to be the center of her attention.

When I brought home a report card with straight 'A's, I told my mom it was time for her to trust me again. She had to let me leave the house. She had to let me stay the night with Morgan. Somehow I convinced her, but her permission came with a warning.

“If you give me any reason not to trust you, you won’t get any second chances. I’ll make sure you never see her again outside of school.”

I accepted her terms, and I called Morgan to tell her the good news.

“Hell yeah,” she said. “It’s time to get you stoned.”

That weekend Morgan and her brother, Doogie, took me to meet their friends Stan and Leslie. They lived in a cramped but cozy trailer just a few miles away from Morgan’s house. Stan was tall and thin, and had short black hair, with a well-groomed beard and mustache to match. His wife, Leslie, wore glasses and had wavy brownish-blond hair. Morgan sat down on their thrift store couch, and I followed suit. Stan and Leslie’s son crawled over to us. He grabbed my knee and pulled himself up to standing position, sucking on his fingers and squealing at me.

“Hi,” I said, frowning. I’d never really liked babies. Something about their squishy bodies, powdered-feces smell, and drooling, gurgling mouths made me uncomfortable.

“Jefferson, leave her alone,” Leslie said, picking the boy up. “I’m going to put him to bed, and then we can hit the pipe.”

What Stan pulled out of a drawer was the biggest pipe I’d ever seen. It had the thickness of the kind of cardboard roll paper towels are wrapped around, and was nearly as long. I watched them all take turns hitting it, blowing out smoke, and then it was my turn. They circled around me, excited about being part of my first high.

“Put the end of it against your mouth,” Morgan said. “Now I’m going to light it, and you just suck in like it’s a cigarette, but hold the smoke in your lungs as long as you can. Ready?”

I nodded. She lit the pipe, and I sucked, feeling the potent smoke tear through my lungs. I couldn’t help it; I exhaled with my mouth still on the pipe. The clumps of marijuana that had been packed into the pipe’s bowl went flying out in all different directions.

“Crap,” I said. “I’m sorry.” I started picking bits of pot off the couch.

“That’s okay,” Stan said with a wave of his hand. “Happens to everyone the first time.”

Stan wasn’t very attractive, but I was drawn to him, the way I was drawn to Doogie; they were both almost nine years older than me, and they seemed to know so much more about the world than I did. They drank and smoked and did drugs, they had lots of friends, they were funny and charming. I didn’t know any men, except the ones I was related to, and I didn’t have any brothers, though I’d always wanted one. Something about being in the presence of males excited me, the way it did when I had played with boys as a kid, like I was experiencing a different world. I was in awe of them.

We picked up the escaped pot and put it back in the pipe.

“All right, let’s try this again. Come on, Jill, you can do it.” Morgan gave me a thumbs up, then lit the pipe.

This time I inhaled and held the smoke in, even though it burned. I held my breath as long as I could before letting go of it in bursts of coughing. My lungs felt raw.

“You’re a smoker now,” Doogie said, clapping.

A few more hits was all it took. First the coffee table seemed to be moving back and forth, a few inches away at one moment, then five feet away the next. Then colors seemed confused. Reds and greens glowed too brightly, and started switched places; the ruby curtains flashed to lime, the house plant turned burgundy. Morgan, Doogie, Stan, and Leslie’s faces seemed to swim around me, floating in the middle of the room.

“How do you feel?” Morgan asked.

The words were thick as molasses on my tongue, and hard to push out into the air. “Everything is funny,” I said, laughing.

Morgan waved her hands around in front of my face. “You’re so gone. You’re totally fucked up.”

“I know, right?” I nodded and my head felt like a bowling ball, too heavy for my neck to move. My eyelids drooped, and lifting them was like picking up sand bags. My arms and legs were like lead.

Stan picked up one of his son’s toys, a ladybug with flashing lights in its gizzard, and waved it around in front of my face, then Morgan’s, and we stook turns swatting it away.

“Stop it man, you’re freaking us out,” Morgan said.

“Enjoy this,” Leslie said, getting so close to my face I could smell the sour tobacco on her breath. “Your first high is always you’re best. There’s nothing like it. No other high will ever be as good as this one right now.”

“Yeah?” I wasn’t sure how to respond. Despite the sudden heaviness in my extremities, I felt amazing, like I could lift off the ground and float around the room. I didn’t like someone telling me this was as good as it would get.

We sat around talking for a while. Then we watched one of the videos that Leslie had bought for her son. We laughed and pointed at the screen full of dancing puppets, bright colors, and hypnotic landscapes.

“This stuff is so not for kids. These things are made by stoners for stoners,” Doogie said.

When the video was over, Stan and Leslie decided we should play a game. “It’s called the laughing game. We lie in a circle with our heads on each other’s stomachs and try to make each other laugh.” It sounded weird to me, but Morgan and Doogie were up for it, so I joined them.

We all laid down and scootched over towards each other. I put my head on top of Doogie’s stomach, he put his head on Leslie, she put her head on Morgan, she put her head on

Stan, he put his head on me. Then we told funny stories, or dirty jokes, and felt our heads bounce around from other people's laughter, as we bounced them around with our own.

After awhile, Stan began to rub his fingers lightly over my foot. I felt a warm rush of surprise. Was he really doing that? Did he like me? Everything was happening through a fog. I saw that Leslie was running her hands through Doogie's hair, so I put my hands gingerly on Stan's head. I brushed my fingertips over his hair. His hand went up my foot and under my jeans, stroking my calf. He tilted his head up and smiled at me. It made me feel special, but also confused. His wife was right there. Was he just being friendly? I couldn't think straight. My head felt like it was full of cotton candy, sugary cobwebs making my thoughts stick to each other, saturating my brain until I lost all concentration.

When the game was over, Stan said we should all take a nap together. He pulled the sofa bed out. I excused myself to the bathroom. I held on to the counter, my head bowed over the sink. I was making too much out of this. It was going to be fine.

When I came out of the bathroom, Stan was standing there waiting for me. He grabbed my hand.

"Here, Jill. I got a place for us to lie down." I let him pull me to the sofa bed. Doogie and Leslie were wrapped up in a sleeping bag on the floor. Morgan was scrunched up in one corner of the sofa bed, already fast asleep. Stan laid down with his back to her, and pulled me down next to him. This couldn't be happening. It was just the pot. I had to be hallucinating.

Stan pulled me close to him. I closed my eyes and pretended to fall asleep. I felt his hands sliding over my shirt, then up under it, grabbing at my small breasts. Why was he doing this? His hands moved down over my butt, squeezing at my flesh, pinching it in his fists. Had I asked for this by stroking his hair? Was this some sort of punishment from God for being attracted to a

married man? I'd thought he was cute, and liked the way he looked at me, but this wasn't what I wanted. This was scary and wrong. Why was he touching me like this with his wife just a few feet away, and his son in the other room?

His hands slid in between my thighs, kneading them, then up against the crotch of my jeans, pressing hard against the material with his fingers. Oh God, he was going to rape me. As the hands moved up and clawed at the button on my jeans, undoing it, then pulling the zipper down, those words flew in an unending chant around my head: he's going to rape me he's going to rape me he's going to rape me.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to push him off of me. I wanted to cry out to Morgan and Doogie for help. But I was too scared to move or utter a single word. I shut my eyes tight against him, tears escaping through the cracks. Maybe if I just lay here as still as I could, he'd leave me alone, just like the monsters did when I was a little girl. I just had to be still and quiet and then he'd go away.

He put his lips against my ear, whispering in some gibberish language I couldn't understand. His hand found my underwear, slithered inside it, rubbed against the rough hair between my legs. I held my breath, trembling. For a moment, my whole body tensed up and I thought I was going to explode or burst into flames. Something tugged at me, I was ripping in half, I felt myself being pulled away from my body. I looked down from the ceiling, saw myself lying there, with Stan on top of me. But from where I was, I couldn't feel it, I couldn't feel anything. I felt safe and calm. Then everything went dark.

I didn't come to until a light flipped on. I had no idea how much time had passed. I opened my eyes, blinking to adjust to the brightness. Doogie was standing in front of me.

“Come on.” He took my arms and pulled me off the bed. “We’re leaving.” I stumbled out behind him and Morgan, not looking back when she turned and waved, calling out her goodbyes. When we got to Morgan’s house, we went to her room and crawled in bed, bundling up under the covers.

“So, did you have fun tonight?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, shaking a little, telling myself it was from the cold even though I know better. I rolled over and closed my eyes. Soon after I heard Morgan’s breathing slow and soften as she fell asleep again. I lay awake the rest of the night, now that my brain was sober enough to think in straight lines. I wasn’t sure what Stan had done to me after I blacked out. I wasn’t in pain, there was no throbbing; everything between my legs felt the same as it always had. He hadn’t raped me. I’d narrowly escaped.

But in a way, I hadn’t escaped at all. After that night with Stan, I was terrified of older men. Whenever a man who appeared to be over eighteen looked my way, paranoia took over, and I felt like he was devouring me with his eyes. These men seemed hungry, violent, wanting to tear into my flesh. Even my father scared me; if he looked at me for too long I would cringe and leave the room, if he tried to touch me in any way I would shudder and suppress the urge to vomit. I didn’t feel safe around men. And I still dreamed about Stan’s face, hovering above me, crushing me. In my dreams he raped me over and over again while I lay beneath him like a corpse, trying to scream, my voice getting caught in my throat every time.

CHAPTER 22

It was a warm Spring afternoon a few months later, and Morgan and I were spending it in our favorite spot: the San Mateo Cemetery, right behind her house, hanging out on top of a grave marked with the names Evans-Reddick. We'd chosen it because of our juvenile senses of humor. "I have such fond memories of Evan's red dick," one of us would often joke. We'd spent a lot of time out here lately, smoking cigarettes, chugging whiskey straight out of the bottle, and getting high. Today we'd come out to the cemetery so we could smoke a joint.

I hadn't told anyone about what had happened with Stan, not even Morgan. Stan was her friend, and I didn't want to make her feel like she had to choose between us. Morgan had dragged me back to his house twice since that night. Both times he stared at me, tried to touch me, tried to get me alone. I scooted away, refused to look at or talk to him. After the second visit, he told Morgan I was bitch, and that he and Leslie didn't want her to bring me around anymore. I felt relieved, finally putting the incident out of my mind as best I could, going on with my life as if nothing had happened.

I squinted at Morgan through my red-tinted hippie glasses as she lit up the joint. When she was done with her hit, she passed it to me. I squeezed the joint between my fingers and thumb and inhaled deeply. I wasn't a rookie anymore. I didn't choke on the smoke like I used to. I passed the joint back to Morgan's outstretched hand. "My mother would kill me if she knew what I was doing." I smiled, thinking about how much I'd gotten away with lately.

In between her puffs of smoke, Morgan said, "I'm such a bad influence."

We passed the joint back and forth until it was almost gone. I lay down on the grave and stretched out, looking up at the canopy of trees shading us from the sun. The world was a culmination of red hues: deep burgundy, rich crimson, bright scarlet. Morgan licked her fingers

and snuffed out the joint, spilling ashes on her worn Nirvana shirt as she put the roach in her pocket for later use. She lit up a cigarette and lay down on the grave next to me, lifting my glasses off my face and putting them on. It took my eyes a minute to adjust back to the normal shades of greens, grays, and blues that colored the world.

“These are really cool.” She waved her hand in front of her face. “Almost as cool as the blue screen.”

We broke into giggles thinking about how we’d gotten stoned the night before, fixated in front of the fluorescent emptiness of a glowing television, flapping our limbs in amusement against the neon turquoise background.

“Blue screen is awesome,” I said.

“Congratulations.” Morgan took my hand and shook it. “You are well on your way to becoming a stoner.”

It was strange to be here during the day. We usually only hung out here at night, sneaking from Morgan’s house, through the woods, out here to our playground. Most people seemed to think cemeteries were scary, but we found it to be a quiet sanctuary. And Morgan’s little brother was buried here, which made it feel like we had permission to be in this sacred place. The last time she saw him alive, he’d tied a belt to a tree branch above their Dad’s truck so he could jump through it; they found him hanging from the belt an hour later, his face blue. He was ten years old. Morgan almost never talked about it.

“I fucking hate this town,” she said. “Nothing here but cows and potatoes. We’ve got to get out of this place.”

“Where do you think we’ll be in ten years?” Smoking out usually made me in the mood for philosophical conversations. I picked at the day-old black nail polish already peeling from my fingernails. I’d have to scrub it all off before I went home so Mom wouldn’t see it.

“I want to be a vampire. Either that or I’ll have to kill myself. I don’t want to live past twenty-five,” Morgan said, blowing smoke rings. I watched them drift like doughnut-shaped clouds over our heads.

“I don’t want to live past twenty-nine. Something happens to people when they turn thirty. It’s like they lose touch with everything that happened earlier in their lives. The child in them dies. I don’t ever want to be like that.”

She nodded in agreement. Wind rustled the leaves hanging above our heads, sending a few withered ones sailing down to land on us. I picked one up and squeezed it, letting it crackle and fall apart between my fingers.

“How would you kill yourself if you were going to do it?” I asked.

“I’d use a gun. Like Kurt Cobain. You?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a gun. Or maybe pills, so I could just drift off to sleep and never wake up again.” I’d thought about it a lot, even written out suicide notes, but I still wasn’t sure what the best method would be.

A blue jay swooped down and landed on a headstone near us. It hopped down to the ground, chirping sweetly in between intervals of pecking the soil, searching for worms. If the bird ate worms that ate dead people, were the birds technically eating dead people too?

“I just don’t want to die of old age,” Morgan said, interrupting my train of thought. “There’s nothing worse than getting old.” She sat up and pulled her hair back in a ponytail,

handing my glasses to me. I anchored them on my nose and looked at the graveyard through a shroud of red. I felt like nothing could touch me.

“So what are we doing tonight?” I asked.

“We’re meeting some people here in the graveyard around midnight. I thought we’d get high, then drive around and try to find something to do. You in?”

Morgan’s escapades frightened me sometimes—sneaking out of her house, going to parties, driving around while intoxicated—but I had spent too many years being sheltered and locked up by my parents. I was afraid if I didn’t break away from the grip my mother had on me I would suffocate. “Yeah. Count me in.”

Night came quickly, and we found ourselves dangling from Morgan’s bedroom window, our skinny legs stretching to reach the ledge below. We crept out on to the roof. Morgan had just started dabbling in Wicca, and as she leapt from the roof’s edge, she clutched the talisman of a moon goddess that was around her neck, and whispered, “Protect me.” She landed gracefully in the weeds below and turned to look up at me.

I jumped, saying nothing, and toppled forward on to my knees when I hit the ground.

We made our way through the backyard into the cemetery. Morgan had insisted that I let her apply my make-up, fix my hair, and borrow some of her clothes. She wore dark, gothic-style make-up like I did, but somehow managed to apply it in a way that was less scary and more feminine. She curled the ends of my hair under, and dressed me in hip huggers and a tight shirt that exposed my midriff. I felt like a little girl playing dress-up, trying to look prettier and older than I actually was. As we walked, I kept trying to hide my naked stomach, afraid it might be poking out too much.

“You’re skinnier than I am,” Morgan had said when I complained about the outfit she’d picked out for me. Her stomach was thin and never poked out. Mine constantly seemed to be spilling out over the top of the jeans I’d borrowed from her.

“Why did you make me wear this? I look ridiculous,” I said, ducking under a tree limb and sidestepping a headstone.

“Shut up. You look hot,” Morgan called over her shoulder. She was wearing a short black dress with sandals, looking effortlessly elegant as usual, and she treaded daintily over thorn bushes and sandspurs as we hurried to the center of the cemetery.

We met at Evans-Reddick, like always. There was a car parked next to it, a banged up, piece-of-shit Honda. Clayton, Tiffany’s now ex-boyfriend, and some of his friends were all waiting for us. So was Lisa. The two of us hadn’t spoken much since the car vandalization incident, nearly a year ago. We’d both ratted each other out, and had decided to hate each other for it. Hating just meant avoiding each other, and talking bad behind one another’s back. Morgan had partly organized this outing to get us to be friends again.

“Hey,” I said to Lisa and Clayton as we walked up.

“How’s it going?” Clayton said. Lisa nodded in my direction; we’d made it through the avoidance stage, but she was obviously still not ready to be friendly.

Clayton and Lisa had both grown up living on the other side of the cemetery from Morgan, and they’d all been friends since they were kids. I’d seen Clayton around at school lately, and had developed a bit of a crush on him. Since breaking up with Tiffany, he claimed he was bisexual. Morgan told me she’d always thought he was gay, and he just said he was bi because it was more acceptable. His sexual confusion, and his frail physique, made me feel less nervous around him than other guys. He wasn’t like Stan. I didn’t have to be afraid of him.

Lisa and Clayton had brought two people with them I'd never seen before. One was a chunky blonde girl in low cut jeans, her generous stomach spilling out over the zipper. I felt better about my own stomach as soon as I saw her. She introduced herself as Sarah, and Morgan whispered to me later that Sarah was in love with Clayton, and had been for years. The other person with them was a neo-hippie guy, wearing khakis and a hemp necklace, his matted hair falling limply at his shoulders. His name was Jarrett, though I spent most of the night calling him Jared, or Jareth, or some other J-name variation. They were all camped out on the graves with a couple of six-packs. Clayton was pissing on a nearby headstone.

"Hey guys," Morgan said as she made the rounds, hugging everyone. Clayton offered me a beer, and I accepted, sipping slowly at the foul liquid, pretending I was enjoying it. I'd never really gotten used to its taste, preferring sweet malt liquors, or even straight shots of vodka, rum, or whiskey.

"Now what?" We looked around at each other.

"Does anybody have any weed?" No one did.

"Acid? Ecstasy? Anything?" I'd yet to walk through the gateway supposedly opened by marijuana, but I was willing to try. Unfortunately, our drug supply was bone dry. The six-packs were almost gone, the empty cans littered across the dirt, so we piled in Jareth's car. It was a tight fit. I wound up sitting in Clayton's lap, my head bent to the side so it didn't hit the ceiling. We were on a mission. It was time to find a dealer.

Our first stop was Lisa's sister, Shannon. She was a small-time drug dealer, and she usually gave Lisa a discount, but tonight she was out of everything. She told us to go find Vex.

Vex was Shannon's fiancé. He lived with his friend Buzz in a ramshackle trailer out on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. Technically they were squatting, because the place had been

condemned, and the owners didn't know he was staying there. We got to his place shortly before midnight.

The windows on the trailer had been busted out and were covered with trash bags to keep the rain and the bugs out. The outside of the trailer had been spray painted by vandals in a plethora of colors and phrases: some declared that "so-and-so wuz here" in bright silver, some scrawled out insults about people's mothers in navy blue, but most were just slurs for genitalia in lipstick red. A 'No Trespassing' sign was posted on the front door; I wasn't sure if it had been put up by the owners or the current occupants. Clayton knocked, and a burly, brutish looking man with a shaved head and a large swastika tattooed on his shoulder answered.

He invited us in, and one-by-one we climbed the three rickety steps to the door and went inside. The interior wasn't much better than the exterior. The place smelled like puke, piss, mold, and cigars. There were holes in the floor, the walls, the ceiling. Garbage was piled in corners and strewn about on the floor. The only furniture was a small stereo with a stack of CDs next to it, and a couple of lawn chairs. There was a poster on the living room wall with Hitler on it, and a caption below that read: 'Your spirit marches on.'

"Do you have a quarter sack you could sell us? Shannon's all out." Lisa explained our problem to Vex.

"Naw, all I got is coke right now. I can sell you a vile of pure." Our companions looked at each other questioningly, but Morgan and I shook our heads. Cocaine was where we drew our imaginary line between recreational and hard drugs.

"No thanks."

Sympathetic to our plight, Vex leaned back in his chair and scratched his chin. "Buzz could probably score you guys some hash. Hey Buzz?" Buzz wandered in from the other room,

topless, with one hand buried down the front of his plain white boxers. “That guy you know still trying to unload his hash?” Vex asked.

“Yep.” Buzz blinked his squinty eyes hard, still half asleep.

“Why don’t you take these guys out there to buy some?”

“Fuck, man, I just got up.”

Lisa took control of the situation, pouting her lip and edging closer to Buzz. “Please.” She put her hand on top of the hand he was scratching his crotch with. “I’ll make it worth your while.” I’d heard rumors that Lisa was kind of a slut, and I wasn’t sure if she was seriously propositioning him or just conning him into helping us.

Buzz seemed to believe her, licking his lips at her and grinning. “All right. Gimme a sec.” He vanished into the cave of his room, the door hanging off its hinges, and reappeared a few minutes later fully-clothed in black jeans and a wife-beater. “Who’s driving?”

It was quickly deduced that there wasn’t enough room for all of us to go, and since I was the only one who didn’t have any money to contribute, I was volunteered to be the one left behind.

“It’ll be okay. I know he looks scary, but he’s harmless.” Morgan was whispering as I walked with her to the door. She turned and squeezed my hand, either ignoring or not seeing the anxiety in my eyes. “We’ll be back soon.”

I was left alone with Vex the skinhead drug dealer. He put on a CD, and some random punk band came screaming through the speakers. He walked down the hallway, into the bathroom, and I sat in the living room drumming my fingers against the plastic lawn chair arm. I was examining the piles of trash—empty beer bottles, pizza boxes, and condom wrappers—

wondering when this guy was going to decide to rape and murder me and where he would hide the body, when I heard him yelling from down the hall.

“Hey! Hey, come here!”

Must be now, I thought. I didn’t want to go, but I didn’t know what else to do, so I trudged down the hall towards my doom. I stepped into the bathroom and Vex turned to look at me. There was a razorblade in his hand. My whole body shook and I thought was going to throw up all over him.

“Want to watch me cut it?”

Sitting on the sink was a box of baking soda and several vials full of powder. He dumped the contents of each into two separate piles and began mixing them together, organizing them into lines with the razor. When he had finished about ten of them, he stopped and snorted a few of the lines he’d made. He stood up, sniffing repeatedly, swabbing at his ruddy nose.

“Want some?” I shook my head. He smiled at me. “I like your outfit.” He turned back to the sink to continue his work, sniffing every once in a while, and I slowly backed out of the bathroom and slipped back down the hall.

After fifteen more minutes of drumming my fingers and waiting for Vex to attack me in a coke-frenzied rage, Morgan and the others finally returned, empty-handed.

“He’d already sold it all.”

“We’re not going to find anything tonight. Everybody’s sold out.”

With no hope of making a score, it was time to try for more alcohol. We piled back into the car and found the nearest gas station, a ragged looking 7-11 that stayed open all night. As we walked inside, an electric bells dinged incessantly as each one of us passed through the entrance. We were the only customers in the store.

Lisa and Sarah shuffled to the bathroom. Morgan and I inspected the aisles of doughnuts, beef jerky, and car wax, while Jarrett hauled two twelve-packs up to the counter. He handed the silver-haired clerk his fake I.D. and hummed nervously as the man squinted at it through his glasses, looking from the little plastic card to Jarrett, card, Jarrett, card, Jarrett, before he finally sighed and rang up the beer, accepting the cash Jarrett held out in his trembling hand. The clerk dropped some change in Jarrett's open palm and then looked at the rest of us.

"Y'all aren't going to be drinking this too are you?" With his mouth open, I saw he only had a few lonely teeth left. The question was addressed to no one in particular. We looked at each other and said nothing. "Y'all of age?" We pretended not to hear. "Just don't go drinking and driving. Couple boys out here a few weeks ago up and got themselves killed."

We left without saying a word, the clerk's haggard eyes following our exit, and the ding of the electric bell echoing goodbye to us, one by one.

Back in the car, Sarah couldn't control her snickering. "Could you believe that guy? Like he was our fucking father. Stupid hick. No wonder he's fifty years old and still working in a gas station."

"So where to now?"

After a round of shrugs, Lisa spoke up. "I know this lake we could go skinny-dipping in. It's out in the woods, no one around for miles."

Twenty minutes of driving in circles and we finally found it. Beers were tossed to all of us, and then people began to strip. I had never seen a real live penis up close before, but now there were two, dangling a few feet away from me as the boys tossed their boxers aside: Clayton's was short and thick, a pale pinkish color, and wrinkled like a bloodhound; Jarrett's was longer, with a darker pigment, and strangely curved. I felt like a pervert for looking until I

realized the other girls were looking too, and even Clayton snuck a peak at Jarrett when he wasn't paying attention. The two of them headed down to the shore. Sarah followed, peeling off her jeans and chasing after them, her cellulite jiggling as she ran. Then Lisa was naked, dipping her freckled body into the lake. Morgan looked at me, waiting.

“Are you going to do it?”

“Of course.”

She smiled and pulled her dress over her head, revealing delicate curves. I watched her dive into the dark water, knowing it was my turn. First the shoes, then socks. I hesitated. Then off came the shirt. Then the jeans. I stood there in my underwear, arms clasped around my chest. I walked towards the laughter that rose up from the lake's surface.

“Come on. What are you doing?”

They stared at me. I poked a toe in the water and mimed a shiver. “It's too cold.”

“Would you just get in already?”

I waded in as they laughed. “You've still got your clothes on.”

Carefully beneath the water, I unhooked my bra and held it up for everyone to see. I kept my underwear on the whole time, my arms locked firmly around my bare chest until we all crawled back on to the shore.

Clothed and nearly drunk, we stretched out on the grass. I sat between Morgan and Clayton, with my back against the car tire, as they chain-smoked and I pulled nervously at blades of grass.

“I can't believe we couldn't find anything tonight. I feel like I'm going to go crazy.”

Morgan's teeth were chattering, clacking against each other whenever she removed her cigarette.

“I know, man. I need some fucking reefer,” I said, pulling slang from the small drug vocabulary I’d accrued from movies and cop shows.

Clayton burst out laughing and stared at me. “Did you seriously just call it reefer? God that’s lame.” I tried to hide my embarrassment, but I could feel the flush burning on my cheeks.

“Hey, leave her alone.” Morgan was always ready to jump to my defense.

“I’m sorry. But it’s funny. Sweetie, nobody says reefer anymore.” I mentally struck the word from my drug slang list as Clayton moved closer to me, resting a hand on my leg.

It was three in the morning when we left the lake. Jarrett stumbled into the driver’s seat and started the car. I was sitting in Clayton’s lap again, but now he was holding me tighter than before, his fingers wandering. His hands sent sparks through me, my skin erupting into goosebumps beneath his touch. It felt strange to be enjoying this—I was afraid of men, and Clayton was probably gay—but I went with it because at least I wasn’t bored. Sarah sat on the other side of Morgan, pretending not to notice what was going on as she glared out the window. At first none of us saw the flashing lights following us.

“Oh shit.” Jarrett pulled the car over and turned the engine off as he rolled the window down. The police officer pulled in behind us, got out of his car, and walked over to the driver’s side, bending down to peer in the window.

“That’s a lot of people you got in that car. Y’all at least eighteen?” We nodded emphatically as his eyes scanned us.

“We’re just coming back from a party? Was I speeding?” Jarrett spoke carefully, trying not to slur his words.

“No, you were swerving a bit. Can I see your license?” The officer stretched his hand out expectantly.

“Um, I don’t have it on me.” Apparently the fake I.D. was all he had.

“Registration?”

“Yeah.” Jarrett fumbled through the glove compartment, finally producing a yellowed, balled up scrap of paper, and handed it to the cop.

“I’ll just go run this real quick.” The cop walked back to his flashing car with it.

“Holy shit. We’re going to jail. My mother’s going to kill me.” I leaned back against Clayton, covering my face with my hands.

“Calm down, everything is fine,” Lisa said. “Just don’t breathe on him, Jarrett, for God’s sake. You smell like a keg.”

In the rearview mirror we saw the cop head back toward us. He handed Jarrett his registration.

“I’m going to let you off with a warning. Next time bring your license, and try not to pack so many people into one car. You kids get home safe now, you hear?”

Jarrett drove away and we all breathed a sigh of relief in unison.

“That guy was pretty cool,” Sarah said. “Most of the cops around here are dicks.”

Morgan and Clayton nodded. I was still too shaken up to respond.

We made it back to the far side of the cemetery, where they dropped Morgan and me off. The moon was hiding behind a clump of clouds, and when the headlights of Jarrett’s car pulled away, there was almost no light left to guide our way. Morgan instinctively knew every inch of the trail, and I followed her blindly as we headed back home.

I’d been in this graveyard many times before, both during the day and at night, but rarely had I been this sober when I was in it, and I’d never walked from one end to the other in the last few hours before dawn rose and destroyed the moonlight.

As the only graveyard in San Mateo, everyone who died in or around the township was buried here, and it seemed infinite now, the rows of trees and tombstones tunneling into the darkness as if without end. The graveyard was surrounded on all sides by dense thickets and ancient trees stretching up into the sky, creating a walled fortress that let in only minuscule traces of light. I could see nothing. Morgan was a moving shadow ahead of me, her dyed black hair and all black ensemble merging with the night. The only way I knew she was really in front of me was by her pale hands dancing from beneath her flared sleeves as she walked. I followed her hands and the sound of crunching leaves her sandals made with each step.

I saw no ghosts, no spirits; nothing walked with us or rose from the graves. But I felt them. I felt the humming of bones buried in the belly of the earth around us. I felt their eyes watching us, envious of the flowing of our blood, the breath in our lungs.

“Do you hear them?” Morgan whispered, startling me, her voice sounding husky and alien as it drifted back to me as if from miles away. “They’re singing. Listen carefully. You can hear them.”

I could. From under layers of dirt I could hear a soft hymn climbing out, reaching for us, grabbing hold. It was hard to breathe, even harder to walk, bogged down in their lamentations. It was just my mind playing tricks. It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. But I felt it. I felt their song resonating in my corpus, their music leaking into fiber and marrow and synapse until my whole body was singing with it.

I began to think maybe this wasn’t Morgan. Maybe this was some spirit I’d been duped into following and my best friend was somewhere else, oblivious to the fact that I was no longer behind her. Maybe I was Eurydice following Orpheus, not away from hell but into it.

And then suddenly we broke through the trees and Morgan's house loomed above us, ghastly and foreboding in its gown of pale paint glowing against a background of velvet sky. There was nothing but cold grey silence and a few cricket squeaks to fill the space where the graveyard's music had been. I was full of empty, and all I wanted was to turn and run back over that threshold we'd crossed, back into the grip of the spirits' spell, where my body could sing once again. Instead, I followed Morgan back into the monotonous land of the living.

We went around to the garage, our usual way of sneaking in, but the door was locked this time.

"That's odd," Morgan said. "When I checked it before we left it was unlocked."

A sinking dread crept over me. Something was wrong. We walked around to the screen porch, opening the door gingerly so the spring wouldn't creak, then we slipped inside the back door.

Morgan's mother was sitting at the kitchen table clutching a cup of coffee, waiting for us. She was an obese woman, with a disproportionately large mouth and a thunderous voice. Morgan and Doogie always referred to her as "the beast" behind her back. I hardly ever saw her. She was usually at work or in her room whenever I went to Morgan's house. Tonight I saw her in all her beast-like glory as she lifted her heavy body from the chair, her foot tapping the kitchen tiles impatiently.

"I knew it," she roared. "I had a feeling you planned to sneak out tonight. Where have you been?"

"In the graveyard."

"No you weren't, I had Doogie go look for you." She waved a fat finger at us accusingly.

"We were in the graveyard, then we went out with friends, and now we're back."

"Why did you sneak out? Why didn't you just ask?" The beast woman's eyes glinted.

“Because I knew you were going to give me shit about leaving. Why do you have to be such a bitch?”

I couldn't believe how Morgan talked to her mother. If I'd ever said anything like that to my mom she would have slapped me across the face.

“Morgan, I don't want to hear your smart mouth right now. I've called Jill's mother. She's already on her way here.” She turned to me, her eyes piercing straight to my soul.

Shit. I was totally fucked. My stomach sank into my knees as I thought about facing my mother's piecing voice, her rabid stare, the way her rage almost emanated off her. She was going to tear into me for this, and then she'd lock me right back up in my cage.

“You did what?” Morgan was furious. She paced the floor, aiming her rant towards the sky. “I can't believe you. You are such a bitch. Why did you go and do a fucked up thing like that?”

“Because when she's in this house, she's my responsibility. You two brought this on yourselves. You have to learn that you can't go around doing whatever you damn well please. You need to be punished.”

Morgan scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Yeah right, Mom. Like you have the balls to punish me. You know I'd run away in a second, and you'd never find me. Even you aren't that stupid.”

Headlights flashed through the window, and I looked at Morgan, desperate. “She'll never let me see you again,” I said.

Morgan took my hand and clung to it as she walked me to the door. She hugged me and said, “Don't worry. Everything will be okay. She can't keep us apart.”

Then she let go. I opened the front door and took tiny steps down the sidewalk. I heard the door shut behind me. I was alone. The car was waiting for me at the end of the sidewalk, the shadow of my mother looming over the steering wheel.

CHAPTER 23

The psychologist's office was cold. The walls were grey, neutral tones to soothe crazy people. At least they weren't padded. There wasn't a couch like on TV. There was a desk on one side, and then three plush, blue chairs, like you'd find in someone's living room. I sat in one, the psychologist sat in the one across from me, and the third was empty, but I swear it felt like my mother was sitting there, watching, listening. I chose my words carefully.

"So, why don't you start by telling me why you're here," the psychologist said. She had shoulder length white hair and a plump face smeared with too much make-up. Her dress was blue, and so were her eyes, both a few shades lighter than the chairs we were sitting in. Her legs, trapped in a web of pantyhose, were crossed, and a notebook sat on her lap. To me, she looked like Dr. Joyce Brothers, a psychologist I'd seen on talk shows discussing sex. I can't remember her real name, so I'll go ahead and name her after this resemblance.

Dr. Joyce's face was serene, not smiling, not frowning, just thoughtful, as if nothing I was about to tell her could shake her in the very least. I wanted to tell her I was a psychopath just to see if I could crack her composure.

Instead my cheeks flushed, I reverted from fifteen to five, and I said, "My mother made me come." After being caught sneaking out, hanging out in graveyards, and joyriding around town, Mom had reached her breaking point. She'd finally decided I was too weird for her, and had bullied me into agreeing to visit a therapist.

"That's okay. A lot of people who come here say that." She nodded, as if approving of my answer. It suddenly occurred to me that I desperately wanted her approval. I wanted her to see me as a good girl whose mother was overreacting, not as the bad girl who should be led away in a straight jacket. "How would you describe your relationship with your mother?"

She doesn't like who I am. She keeps trying to push me to be the person she wants me to be, the kind of daughter she can parade around and say, "See what a good mother I am, see what I made." Sometimes when she leaves for work or goes shopping I pray that she'll die in a car wreck, that she'll never come home. And then I'll be free.

"We fight a lot," I said.

Dr. Joyce scribbled something in her notebook. "And what do you fight about?" she asked.

How much time do you have?

"Mostly about how she doesn't like my friends."

"Tell me about your friends."

They got me started on Marlboro Reds, then moved me up to Bacardi Breezers, then, when they thought I was ready, they introduced me to the mind-altering landscapes of marijuana. At night we hang out in graveyards and get high. They're desperately trying to find the perfect guy for me to lose my virginity to. I'm their protégé, their little sister, and with them I've found a place in the world.

"They wear all black. They listen to loud rock music. They do drugs."

"And do you think it's okay that they do drugs?" Dr. Joyce's voice rose a little bit, her blue eyes looked down her powdered nose at me.

What am I saying? I can't trust her. She'll judge me, just like my mother does. She is an enemy.

"No. I mean, that's okay if they want to do it, but I don't agree with it. I don't do drugs."

We went on like this, back and forth; she asked me questions, I gave her edited answers, half-truths, and sometimes full-blown lies.

“Do you ever feel suicidal?”

Every day. Every minute. Right now.

“No. I mean I’ve thought about it, but I know I could never actually kill myself.”

Dr. Joyce nodded and scribbled in her notebook again.

Why does she believe me? If she’s so good at understanding human behavior how come she can’t tell I’m lying through my teeth? Why won’t she call me on it?

At the end of the session, Dr. Joyce brought my mother in. She sat in the third chair, where she’d already been sitting as far as I was concerned.

“Well she’s not suicidal, she doesn’t want to harm herself. There are no serious issues to be worried about here.” Dr. Joyce talked to my mother as if I wasn’t even in the room. My mother had taken to doing that lately, talking about me in the third person as if she didn’t even know I was there, as if I were an inanimate object and not a real human who could think and feel. That was how she’d told Dad and Julie about my appointment. With me standing right next to her she announced, “Jill has agreed to seek help for her problems.” I might as well have been a ghost.

“Oh, that’s good,” Mom said, pretending to be surprised. I looked at her dyed white-blond waves, her face that rivaled Dr. Joyce’s in the amount of lipstick and mascara and foundation that covered it, her smile that showed too many teeth to be natural, as if she were a beauty pageant contestant and had spread Vaseline on the enamel.

“Now why don’t you tell me a little bit about what’s been going on between you and your daughter,” Dr. Joyce said.

I saw Mom gearing up to play her part; she never just talked to people, she gave prepared speeches. I guess that came from being a teacher. She knew when to gesture with her hands,

when to use inflection in her voice, when to make eye contact and when to look away. She knew exactly what to say to make sure none of my problems ever appeared to be her fault:

“Jill just has a strange sense of style. She likes dark clothes and she listens to dark music.” A pause. An innocent shrug. “I admit I was never artistic, so I don’t exactly understand it. She has all these weird pictures up in her room that I finally made her take down. I put up with it as long as I could, because she makes good grades. But when she started getting into trouble I had to draw the line.” A head shake. A raised eyebrow. “I think it’s these people she hangs out with, they’re a bad influence. They don’t even seem to like her, I don’t know why she hangs out with them.” A roll of the eyes, up towards heaven. “It’s just that she had such a hard time making friends in middle school...”

As my mother spoke, I looked from her to the psychologist, the way they were nodding, sharing knowing glances, passing secret messages I wasn’t allowed to be a part of. They were on the same side. No one was on mine.

After my second trip to the psychologist, which played out much like the first, I decided to try and open up to my mother on the car ride home.

“I don’t know what it is. It’s just that, for some reason, I sometimes feel like I deserve to be unhappy, and the unhappiness can cleanse me. Like the pain can somehow make me pure.” I wasn’t sure if the words were coming out right; it made sense in my head, but in the air everything I said turned to mush.

“Well that’s just ridiculous,” my mother said. “You have nothing to be unhappy about. We’re not poor, your father and I aren’t divorced, and we don’t beat you. You don’t know what pain is.” Mom had grown up poor. Her father had slapped her and her brothers around every now

and then. To her, there was no other kind of pain, and my life was all rainbows and gumdrops compared to her own adolescence.

She fell silent, my nonsense ideas hanging in the space between us. Why did I even bother?

“Are you getting anything out of this therapy?” she finally asked me.

“I don’t know. I guess.”

“You guess?” Her voice rose an octave on the word guess, the “ss” hissing out between her teeth. “Do you know how expensive these appointments are?”

“You said insurance was going to pay for it.”

“Eventually, but only after we meet our deductible, and that’s a lot of money to spend.”

“You wanted me to go! It was your idea!” I couldn’t believe she was trying to turn this around as if it had been my decision.

“That’s because I thought you were going to get better.”

And then it dawned on me. My mother—a youth guidance counselor herself, and, oxymoronicly, a woman who had staunchly declared more than once that she didn’t believe mental disorders really existed—had thought this was going to be a quick fix. She thought I would go in for a few sessions, the psychologist would tinker around inside my head—tighten a bolt here, adjust a nut there—and I’d be fixed, lickety-split. I’d be reprogrammed to be the daughter she’d always wanted. The psychologist would be able to do what she herself had been trying to do for the past two years—snap me out of this funk I’d been living in since I was thirteen.

At my third visit to the psychologist, my mother politely let the woman know that we wouldn’t be returning. She didn’t seem to mind.

“I wish you the best of luck,” she said.

I needed it. My mother couldn't help me. My psychologist couldn't help me. It stood to reason that there was no one on Earth who could help me. There was no hope left for me to hold on to.

CHAPTER 24

I didn't have the strength to fight anymore. The blackness inside me had started whispering in my ear, then shouting, then screaming. There was no way to block it out. The floodgates opened, and my lake became an ocean, raging inside me. I saw the world through a fog. I couldn't concentrate in school. I couldn't hear my parents talking to me. I was in a vacuum. I'd sunk below the waves again; I was back where I was when I was five and I first swallowed the dark, letting it inside me. But this time no one was here to pull me from the depths. I was going to drown. As terrified as I was, somehow I felt safer down in the quiet dark than I did above the surface, fighting to live in the light. I was too tired to fight anymore. I gave up. I gave in. I let the darkness take me.

Burning wasn't enough anymore. I needed something stronger. I stole a scalpel from my high school biology class, the same one we used to slice up frogs, to reveal the hidden mouse bones in an owl pellet, to open up a pig fetus and poke at its organs. I slid it into my pocket when no one was looking, brought it home, and poured hydrogen peroxide over the blade to sterilize it—I didn't like the thought of pig germs leaking into my wounds.

I placed the blade against my wrist and pushed down. I was going to open myself up, find bones and sinew and veins, find myself beneath a mess of anatomy. I proved not to be surgeon material. The blade was dull. I pushed harder. I ran the blade up and down my arm. Still nothing. No blood, no breaking of skin. I lacked the courage to push as hard as I needed to cause more than shallow scrapes. This would not do at all. There had to be a better way.

* * *

The first real cut—like a first drink, or the loss of virginity—is a rite of passage, another memory burned into the cloth of youth. Technically, I'd cut myself before, but this was the first professional job, clean, with a razor blade. This was the first time I could actually say I knew what I was doing.

There was a girl at my high school showing off a nasty wound on her thumb and telling people about how she'd accidentally sliced it while trying to remove the blade from her disposable razor.

“You can do that?” I asked. Why had I never thought of this before? She explained it through a smile, her hands gesturing emphatically, as if she were giving me directions to some hip new teenage hangout.

“First you have to get something sharp to pry open the plastic around the blade. A knife usually works best. Once you break the plastic off, then you just pop the blade out, and presto...razor blade city. It's as simple as that.”

Her tone was cheerful, casual, even though, by some innate psychic connection that miserable teenagers under the burden of angst seem to share, we both knew what she did with her razorblade and we both knew what I was going to do with mine. I wondered if seasoned junkies were as cheerful when they instructed new users on the intricate art of shooting up.

That night I went home, locked myself in the bathroom, selected a razor—a Bic, shrouded in blue plastic—balanced myself on the edge of the tub and went to work. I used my good-for-nothing scalpel, slid the tip of the blade in the small crack where the plastic covering on the front met the covering on the back. I pushed up on the scalpel's handle until the razor's conjoined coverings broke away from each other, making a delicious snapping noise and exposing the slate grey blade, my prize inside the cereal box.

I used the tip of the scalpel to pry the two blades from the tiny screws holding them in place. The two pieces—straight edge and serrated edge—tumbled on to the bathroom rug. I rechecked the lock on the door and then sat down on the cold tiles, folding my legs Indian style.

I studied the underside of my arm: freckled, Irish-pale, faint traces of blue lines like a mirage rising up from the whiteness of skin. It looked too pure, too innocent. I wanted my outer layers to match my inner ones. I wanted to be scarred.

I held the straight edged blade against my wrist and pushed down, then slowly pulled the blade backwards. I watched tiny drops of blood seep to the surface, creating a three inch vertical line down my wrist. The pain was exquisite—there's no other way to describe the sensation. This was what I'd been waiting for. No one else had hurt me. Not my mother with her criticism, her way of pointing out how I wasn't the kind of daughter she wanted. Not the kids at school staring at my unstylish clothes, laughing at my boyish figure. This was a pain I had complete control over.

It didn't take long for experimentation to develop into habit. High school now made everything in my life even more complicated. Morgan had shocked me by deciding to drop out of school, and my mother wouldn't let me go to her house anymore, claiming she was a bad influence; I missed her terribly. Other girls at school, even some I'd thought friends, started rumors that I was slutty, or that I was a dyke. Stan had taught me that boys weren't fairy-tale princes like I'd always imagined; I was meat, an object for a guy to try and have sex with. My parents still didn't want me going anywhere that wasn't school related, or wearing clothes they didn't approve of, or hanging out with people who didn't come from decent church-going two-

parent households. My mother never let me forget that nothing I liked or enjoyed was, by her standards at least, considered normal. I couldn't trust anyone.

I became a binge cutter, falling back on my newfound vice to ease the sting of my problems. Whenever the anger and sadness filled me to overflowing, I would cut, letting those feelings pour out of me along with the blood. Or when I felt hopelessly lost and out of control, like I was slipping off the world's axis with nothing to reel me back in, I would cut, and the pain awakened me, reminded me I was still alive.

Sometimes I would cut for hours until I was making cuts on top of cuts, because there was no white space left on my canvas, no unmarred skin left to destroy. I always cut on my wrists. I was drawn to them, maybe because I realized if I ever pressed in a few more centimeters I could slit them open. The option was always right there, staring me in the face.

I knew cutting myself wasn't normal. Part of me wanted to talk to someone, wanted to tell anyone who would listen about all this darkness welling up inside of me, but the words always got caught in my throat before I could get them out.

With Morgan gone I was hanging out mostly with a newer crowd. My new friends were still freaky, but more lighthearted than my gothic roots. I tried to tell a few of them about my cutting problem and their reactions weren't exactly helpful: a shrug, a comment about how we all have problems, and a declaration that I was weird.

I usually hid my cuts from my parents, but there were times when I tested them. I'd fix myself something to eat, my cuts in plain view as I opened the silverware drawer or rummaged through the cabinets, while my mom sat at the kitchen table, still working on her grad school thesis, and my dad sat in the living room watching sitcoms. They never noticed. My parents walked around with blinders on, only able to see what they could handle. A daughter who carved

herself up like a jack-o-lantern would have been too much for them. Just as cutting became my method of self-preservation, not seeing became theirs.

Since I couldn't talk to anyone about my cuts, I had to hide them. It wasn't hard. Most people thought I was just being fashionable, wearing long sleeves in the middle of summer. When I wasn't wearing long sleeves, I wrapped my wrists in gauze and made up an excuse about my cat scratching me.

Anyone who bothered to ask more questions could have seen the shame in my eyes, could have figured out what I was doing to myself; but people were happier to accept a lie than risk opening the floodgates and facing the ugly truth of how those cuts had really happened. Sometimes a classmate would see the scabs peeking out from underneath my sleeve, look at me with eyebrows raised, then look away. I was happier they didn't ask. Would they think that I was a spoiled brat just trying to get attention? Or maybe that I was crazy? *Was I crazy?*

I didn't want to be locked away in a padded cell. I didn't want people looking at me the way they looked at the boy in school the teachers had labeled "slow," the one who wore a helmet. It was easier to stay silent. I didn't have a voice, so I let my skin speak for me, let it make tangible all the hurt inside me I didn't know how to express.

I spent most of my time curled up in a fetal position in the foot-and-a-half space between my bed and the wall. I kept the blinds closed, so the only light in the room was what bled in from underneath the door—the outside world leaking in—as my family was going on about their daily lives. They were a galaxy away. Distant, disembodied voices that would never be close enough to be coherent. Footsteps that would pass by my door without faltering. And if they did stop? If there was a knock on the door, voices calling from the other side, "Jill, are you okay?" I would

tell them to go away. And they would. They couldn't save me now. I was at the bottom of the ocean. I was too far gone. I wasn't even human anymore. I was a thing. I was a soulless creature who lived in the dark. I was a shell of a girl, abandoned by its host. There was no reviving me. Fifteen years old and I was already the walking dead.

I never knew how long I'd laid in that spot, my arms hugging my knees, my eyes closed, my brain racing until I blacked out. Not until I looked at my alarm clock, the neon red lines that slid themselves into numbers. The clock would often tell me I'd been laying there for hours, though it felt like minutes. Other times I'd lie there for minutes and it would seem like hours. In my cocoon, time had no meaning.

Tonight my stomach roared at me, angry at its emptiness. I thought maybe I'd had an orange for breakfast the day before, but nothing since. My arms throbbed from the cuts that had collected on them, little razor blade kisses I'd given myself. These were the things I used to remind myself there was still breath in my lungs, still blood in my veins. I was walking dead, half-dead, almost dead. Almost, but not completely gone. My cuts were the smiley-faced Hallmark cards I sent myself that said, "Don't Kill Yourself. It's Not Over Yet."

I lifted myself from the corner, put on my headphones, and assaulted myself with a song by Tool. It started with the bleating of lambs, representing a congregation I supposed, but also hinting at an awaiting slaughter. Then a man, in a mock-preacher voice, evangelically proclaimed how in a dream the Angel of the Lord revealed to him that carrots were alive, that they had a consciousness.

Tomorrow is harvesting day, but to them...it is...the hol-o-caust; he enunciated each syllable slowly, drawing the word out cacophonously. *Let the rabbits wear glasses! Save our*

brothers! Can I get an Amen? Then there were several obsequious voices chiming in with a hearty *Amen!*

In the background, there was a pounding of drums, a clanging and mingling of instruments—or maybe kitchen utensils—and something that sounded like chains rattling, and I thought of a chain gang in hell, skeletons with connecting manacles beating rocks with mallets, surrounded by an inferno.

Then a raspy voice—creaking like the rusted hinge of a door—emerged, almost as an afterthought, chanting: *This. Is. Necessary.* The voice was urgent, demanding; it paused after each word, as if the word itself were a complete thought. *This. Is. Necessary. Life. Feeds on. Life. Feeds on. Life. Feeds on. Life. Feeds on. This. Is. Necessary.*

His voice got louder until he was shouting at me: *This! Is! Necessary! This! Is! Necessary! Life! Feeds on! Life! Feeds on! Life! Feeds on life!*

The lead vocals collided with harmonious background vocals, a swelling crescendo rising like a spirit from the speakers, invading my eardrums to possess me. Then the voices fell silent, but the clanging and pounding and clinking and rattling continued another minute or so.

I used this song to test myself. I stood in the center of my room, not moving, isolated under my headphones: I could hear nothing but the bleats and clangs and chants. I dared myself to keep my eyes closed through the whole song. My inability to see or hear anything around me sent my paranoia into overdrive. The darkness was a smothering shroud closing in on me. I felt it tightening, and I knew if I could just open my eyes it would stop.

Sometimes I made it through the whole song. Other times, like tonight, I couldn't. I let my lids fly open and saw flashes, red and gold and green blotches of colors bursting around me; sometimes they came in circular shapes, hanging right in front of me, staring at me like eyes. I

rushed to the other side of the room, flicked on the light switch to prove to myself they weren't real. But when the bulb drizzled its dim illumination over the muscle-pink walls, the pimped popcorn ceiling, I was not comforted. Those things I thought I saw were demons, and though I couldn't see them anymore, I could feel them here, lingering, waiting to take me home. Waiting to slap cuffs on my ankles, hand me a mallet, and make me just another skeleton in line.

I took Tool out of my tape player and put in Nine Inch Nails. I grabbed a candle, some matches, and my diary, and crawled into my closet, laying down on top of sneakers and flip flops, closing the doors behind me. I lit a candle and opened my diary. I read the pages of nothingness, useless rambling of an empty life. My life was so boring I'd made up stories, lied to my own diary—romantic trysts, enamored lovers, travels to exotic lands. I tore several pages out, crumpled them up, ripped them into smaller pieces, and burned them in the candle's fire, blowing them out before they could catch anything on fire. I watched my life burn and blacken, purified by the flames.

I turned on my headphones, letting Trent's voice take me away. "I hurt myself today, to see if I still feel. I focus on the pain, the only thing that's real." I cried as his voice cracked, feeling his pain, wishing someone could feel mine. "Try to kill it all away, but I remember everything." I rubbed my hands over my cuts. This was all I had. This was what I'd become. "Everyone I know goes away in the end." The tears came faster now, and I cover my nose and mouth so no one would hear me sobbing. "If I could start again, a million miles away, I would keep myself. I would find a way."

The song climaxed—my ears ringing from the echoing guitars, the lingering vocals—before crashing to a finish that faded into white noise. I was left with the quiet hum of the tape turning, winding, waiting to reach the end. When it came, the spindles reversed, emitting a

scratchy whir until they'd reached the beginning again; then the cassette recorder clicked off. End. Rewind. Restart. It was too simple. If I could end it all, I could rewind it, undo my life as if it had never happened. I could make it all go away. Maybe I would be born again in a distant land, to a different mother, sliding down a birth canal to enter the world as a different person. Maybe then I could be happy.

That was when I decided to put a gun in my mouth, to feel the cold metal against my lips. It was another test, to see if I could pull the trigger, rewind everything, start again. I lifted my toe up next to the trigger, held it there for a moment, then put my foot back down. I didn't have the strength to do it. I was a coward, and my punishment would be to keep on living, swallowing time, waiting for the bullet to finally come.

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