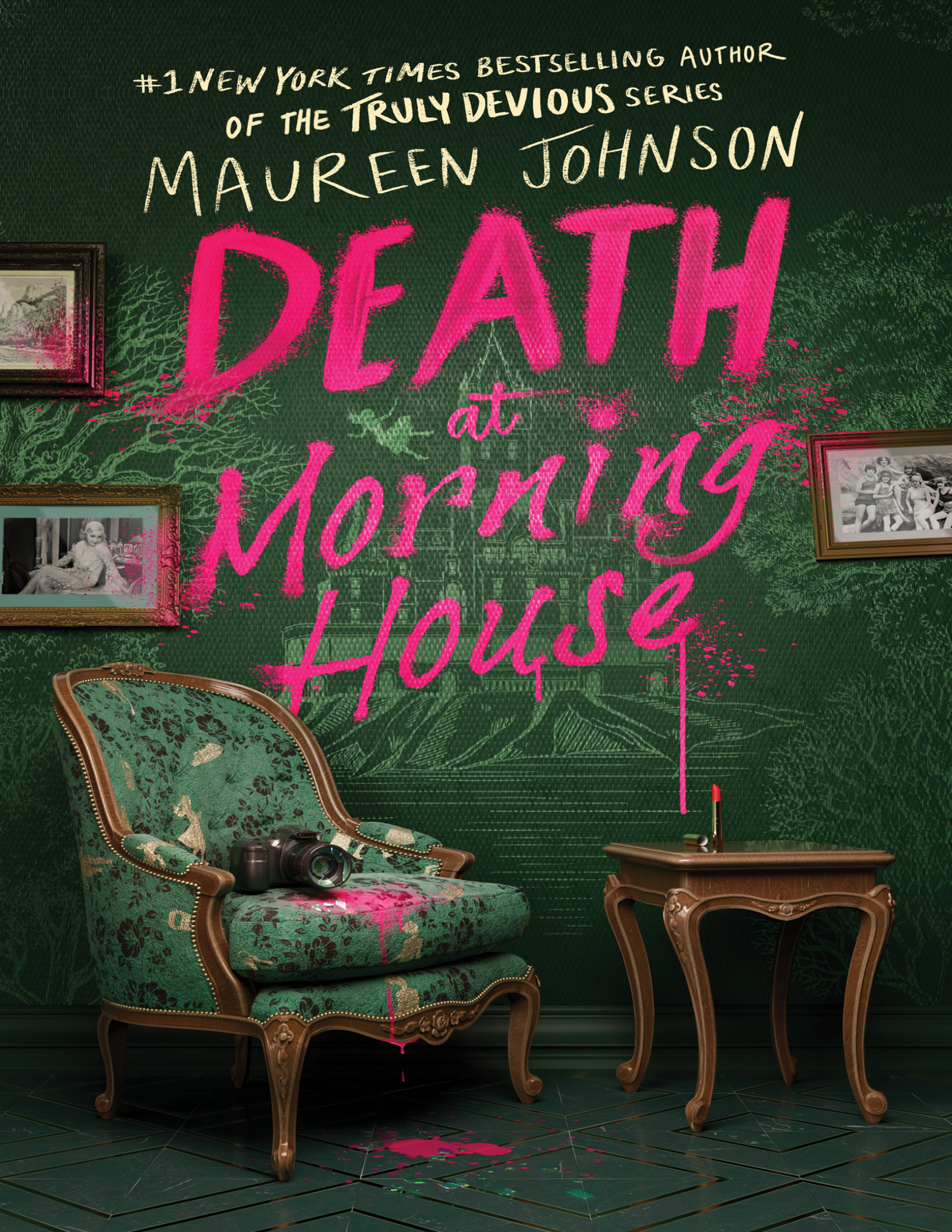
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF THE TRULY DEVIOUS SERIES
MAUREEN JOHNSON
DEATH
at
Morning
House

DEATH at Morning House

MAUREEN JOHNSON

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Dedication

To all the librarians, media specialists, and teachers fighting book banners.
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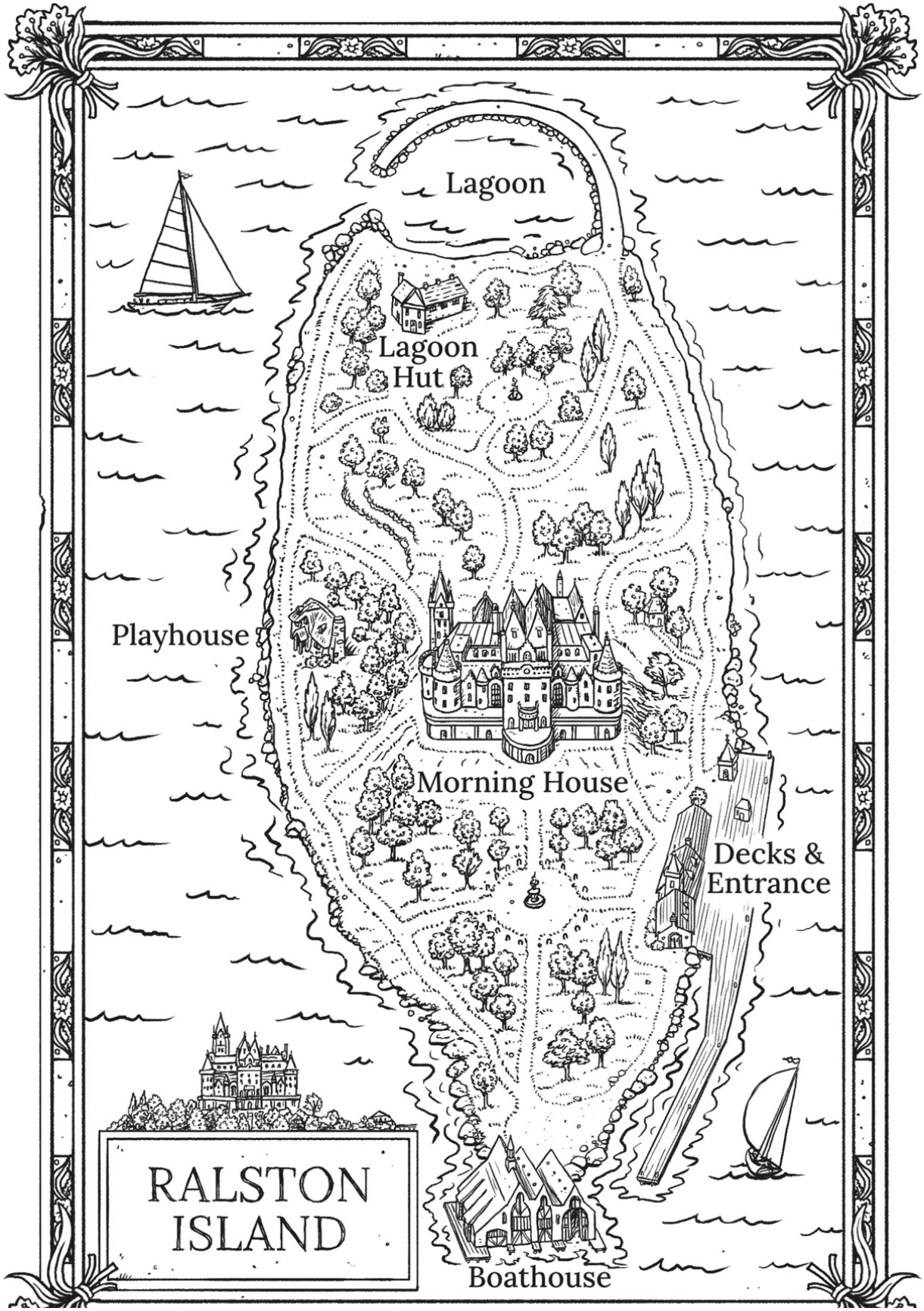
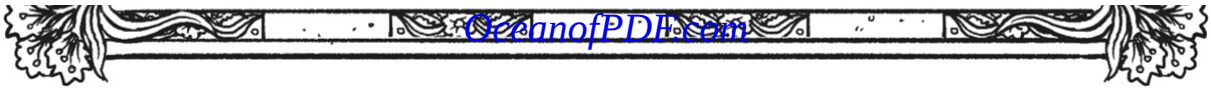
Map


Lagoon
Lagoon Hut
Playhouse
Morning House
Decks & Entrance
RALSTON ISLAND
Boathouse



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THE ALL-AMERICAN RALSTON FAMILY AND THEIR IDEAL SUMMER HOME
Photo essay in *Life* magazine, July 1932

Dr. Phillip Ralston of New York City and his wife, theater star Faye Ralston, have certainly mastered the art of good living. And they have quite a lot of lives in their care!

The doctor adopted six of his children in 1915 while working in England during the war. They welcomed their seventh child, Max, four years ago. The doctor and his wife spend most of the year in New York City and the older children board at school. In the summer, they come together in their private paradise in the Thousand Islands region. It is called Ralston Island now, though it was formerly known as Cutter Island. Their magnificent home is called Morning House. Built at a cost of $4 million, Morning House is designed to foster good health and creativity.

“Whenever my children show a gift in a particular direction,” Dr. Ralston says, “I make sure to nurture it.”

For this purpose, Dr. Ralston called in architect P. Anderson Little of Los Angeles to build a two-story playhouse that would not be out of place in a story by the Brothers Grimm. It is a cheerful place, built of stone, with windows of varying sizes and a turret on the side. Most people would imagine a playhouse to be a small affair —this one is the size of a large family home. The first floor boasts a large library, an art studio, and a room for study. The second floor is high-ceilinged and features a large open space with mirrored walls and a ballet barre, as well as a piano and other musical instruments.

The family follows a precise schedule. They breakfast together at seven thirty each morning. Dr. Ralston and his family follow the natural diet prescribed by institutions such as the Battle Creek Sanitarium. There is no meat, no sugar, no coffee or tea. Instead, the family enjoys large helpings of yogurt, cooked fruits, nut cutlets, stewed peas, and custard. By eight, they are out on the lawn, practicing calisthenics in matching uniforms. The boys and the girls exercise together. After this, the group either swim laps in a walled-

off lagoon that serves as an outdoor swimming pool or compete to see who can swim around the island the fastest.

"My daughter Clara is the strongest swimmer in the bunch," Dr. Ralston adds proudly. "No one can beat her time to the shore and back. We're working to get her into the next Olympics, though she would rather concentrate on her dancing."

By nine thirty, exercises are complete for the morning. The children have two hours of instruction led by Dr. Ralston. Topics include medicine, chemistry, heredity, history, politics, and geography. Lunch is served at noon—another round of nourishing natural foods. The children then have the afternoon to pursue their individual interests. There's another round of swimming at four. If the weather is inclement, they practice diving in the twelve-foot-deep pool in the lower level of the house. At dinner, the family reviews their day. They relax in the evening, sometimes with games, or perhaps with a motion picture.

It's hard to imagine a more wholesome and idyllic summer than one spent with the Ralstons at Morning House.

TWO CHILDREN DEAD IN MORNING HOUSE TRAGEDY
The New York Times, July 28, 1932

Tragedy has befallen the family of doctor and philanthropist Dr. Phillip Ralston. His youngest child, Max Ralston, aged four, was found drowned in the waters of the St. Lawrence River yesterday afternoon. It is thought the child left his room while his nurse was asleep and attempted to swim on his own. Hours later, overcome by grief, his oldest sister, Clara, aged 16, jumped four stories from the roof of the house. . . .

1

Petrichor. That's how this all started—from a single smell. Do you know this word? I learned it from Akilah Jones.

Akilah, Akilah, Akilah . . .

I first set eyes on her in freshman-year French. She was conjugating the absolute hell out of her first irregular verb and wearing a soft yellow sweater when I realized I was in love with her. I always knew I liked girls, but when I saw Akilah, I *knew* knew. I genuinely don't understand how you could see Akilah and *not* fall in love with her. The lift of her chin. Her ever-changing hair—braided, straight, natural, sometimes shot through with purple stripes. She played piano in our school's jazz band. She also played guitar. She smiled like she knew the joke you were about to tell and was already laughing. And her laugh? Like the bells of a cathedral.

I'd had four classes with her in total—freshman French I; biology and first-semester American history in sophomore year; and English III this last year. I usually didn't get to sit close to her, because my last name is Wexler and a lot of teachers go alphabetically, but our English teacher let us pick our own seats at six tables around the room. Unfortunately, I was late on the first day and her table was full, but I snagged a pretty good seat nearby and basked in the warmth of her magnificence. I always tried to look my best before I got there, but I'm not working with what Akilah is working with.

I'm fine. I'm Marlowe Wexler and I'm fine.

My name makes it sound like I spend my time lurking around the shadowy alleyways of some big city. One of those alleyways full of old boxes, metal trash cans, and cats that knock things over and make that *yowllllll* sound. Like there's a bartender who knows my name somewhere. Like I have three ex-wives and I don't talk to two of them but there's something smoldering between me and the third one. We never got over each other. My name is more exciting than I am. Akilah was exceptional, and I was fine, and that was the problem.

I never got to spend any real time with her until that summer when we both got jobs at Guffy's, our local ice cream place. Guffy's has thirty-two homemade flavors and locally famous hot caramel sauce. Say you want your cone "hot bottom" and you'll get some of the caramel pooled into the bottom of your cone and everyone will laugh except us, because you can only hear this so many times before you think about putting your hand inside the waffle iron just to feel something again.

I had no idea Akilah would be working there too until I showed up for my second shift in a cat hair–covered T-shirt (which I could get away with by wearing the Guffy's apron) and my most awkward shorts (because people only saw me from the waist up). She was behind the counter in a baby-blue romper and a Guffy's apron, scooping out some black raspberry ripple and smiling with the wattage of a power plant. I genuinely staggered in the doorway on seeing her and realizing that we would be working together. It was the most amazing thing that had happened to me up until that point. We were coworkers; just she and I would be behind the little counter two nights a week and one full day on weekends. (At least until I manipulated the schedule so that we had all our shifts together. I made this my mission.)

This is when I got to know Akilah properly. She was easy to talk to. If she said she liked a show, I went home and streamed that show until my eyeballs dried up. If there was a song she liked, that became my soundtrack. Sometimes my brain opens a chamber and says "fill me up." I'm not saying I know what I'm doing—I'm saying I can fill up my brain like a bucket and carry the information from place to place and it generally doesn't leak. I have no idea whether this makes me smart. But it definitely helped when I wanted to have things to talk to Akilah about.

"Do you know what my favorite smell is?" she said one day when we were in a lull and waiting for a customer to come by for a hot bottom.

“Petrichor.”

I was about to open my mouth and say *the smell of a flying dinosaur?* But something told me to shut it and nod knowingly. (That’s a *pterosaur*, which you have to admit is pretty close.)

“That smell of soil after it’s been struck by rain. That’s what it’s called. That ozone-y, earthy smell. It’s my favorite smell in the world.”

That night I spent somewhere in the vicinity of six hours reading scented candle reviews until I found the internet’s favorite petrichor-scented candle. It was thirty bucks. For thirty bucks, you expect a quality product, right? I ordered the candle, paid eight dollars for expedited shipping, and made my plan.

See, I had another job. I helped take care of our family friends Juan and Carlita’s lakeside cottage on Lake Oneida, about ten minutes from our house. Juan and Carlita teach at New York University, but they used to be professors at Syracuse, where my dad works. They still came up some weekends and in the summers. I took care of the place for them when they were away. I mowed their tiny lawn if it needed it. I watered the flowers if they were dry. I gave everything a light dusting and vacuuming, flushed the toilets to keep sewer gas from building up, took in the mail, and generally kept the place alive. It was an easy job. It only took me a few hours a week, and I was allowed to sit around there if I liked and study or whatever.

Or whatever.

We’d never had a specific conversation about how to use the cottage, but I never did anything weird with it. No one ever said, “You can’t take a date there, Marlowe.” I felt that as long as I used the place responsibly and left it better than when I arrived, everything was fine. And it was fine. Until that night with the petrichor.

My parents won a gift card to the Cheesecake Factory in a raffle, which they let me have. I’d kept it in my wallet for eight months like it was my entire inheritance, too precious to be spent right away. This was the occasion I didn’t know I had been waiting for. One night, as I was emptying out the soft serve machine, I turned to Akilah.

“I have this gift certificate to the Cheesecake Factory,” I said, shrugging. “I need to use it. Do you want to . . .”

I gulped down some air.

“. . . go?”

She looked over her shoulder at me from where she was refilling the toppings bar.

“Sure,” she replied. “Can’t let a good gift card go to waste.”

I had already studied the schedule and knew that we both had Thursday night off. I wandered over to it and read it like it was all new information.

“We have . . . oh, we both have Thursday off. Are you . . .”

“Not doing anything,” she said. “Let’s go. Sounds fun.”

From that point until Thursday, I itched and twitched my way minute by minute. I dumped every item of clothing I owned onto my bed and tried to figure out what to wear. I got a peachy-colored dotted blouse for my birthday (and if you squint you realize the dots on it are tiny horses). I considered it my lucky shirt even though it had never brought me any luck up until this point. Sometimes, you just have to believe in your shirt. I did a bunch of stuff with my hair that went nowhere. I have brownish-reddish hair the consistency of which I think is best described as uncertain. Is it wavy? Is it straight? Will it stay if I try to put it up? It does not know. Stop asking it. It will zig when I need it to zag. I left it down and allowed it to do what it felt like it needed to do.

I picked her up. I drive a Smart Car, which is the smallest car in the entire world. It is red, so it looks like I’m cruising along in a cartoon apple. I inherited it from my grandparents, who bought it for driving around Key West, where they live, before they decided that it was ruining their image. It was given to me because it was considered a sensible way for me to get back and forth from school and could never be used for anything even remotely dangerous. What was I going to say on my crazed Smart Car spree? *Get in, nobody, because we’re going to do a sweet twenty-one miles an hour, and definitely not on the highway.*

But it was a car and therefore I loved it. It tried its best even though it was very small.

Akilah was wearing white shorts and a red top that I think was new. She’d twisted her box braids into an elegant bun, partially wrapped in a red scarf. Akilah always had good makeup, but I could see that she had made a special effort, using a combination of white liner toward her nose and a darker one winging back off her eye, with layers of yellow and orange on her lids. The overall effect was that of two sunrises blossoming on her face.

“You look nice,” she said. “I like your shirt.”

I tried not to crumple up in my seat. Was that a good thing? Or did I normally look terrible and she was just happy that I tried?

It is often embarrassing to be me, but that night, walking into the Cheesecake Factory with Akilah Jones by my side, I felt like I was stepping into human society for the first time in a full and complete way. I was the best version of myself, bursting with a confidence I had never had previously. I wasn't expecting everyone to stand up and applaud, but if they had, I would have accepted it. It would have made sense.

"My favorite things are always in the appetizers," she said as we looked at the menu. "Do you want to get a few of those and share them?"

Sharing meant that this was going well. This wasn't my food over here and hers over there. These would be *our* apps that we'd enjoy together. We filled the table with sliders, crab puffs, pot stickers, and buffalo cauliflower.

"I feel kind of stupid," she said, "but I got you something. We were talking about makeup the other day . . ."

Well, Akilah had been talking about makeup. I had been saying that I was bad at it, that I misused color palettes, that I never understood why half the colors were there, and generally bemoaning my ineptitude.

". . . and I realized there is a perfect color lipstick for you. Here . . ."

She reached into her big red purse and pulled out a gold tube. She removed the cap and indicated I should give her my hand. My hands were cold from gripping a glass and I didn't want to give her a partially wet, cold hand, but I also wanted to give her my hand in all ways. I extended one to her, and she took it. She held it, my palm touching hers (so warm, so soft) and she delicately drew a line of lipstick down the back of mine. It was a cheerful bright pink, not something I would have picked for myself, but pleasing to look at.

"Midnight Rose," she said. "I thought it would be a good color for you. Do you like it? Because you were saying you thought your lips looked thin —I don't think so, but—I think this would suit you."

My head was swimming. Akilah Jones had been looking at my mouth. She bought me a lipstick.

We were going to *kiss*.

Akilah Jones was going to kiss me and then I would ascend into the sky and keep going up and up, high-fiving the International Space Station as I made my way out into the farthest reaches of the cosmos. Nothing was real, and yet all the stories were true. This was what people meant by being

struck by love. I felt the bolt go in through the top of my head and it exited, somewhat weirdly, through my right hip. I jumped a little in my booth seat.

"Is it okay?" she said. "You don't have to keep it."

"No! No. No. I love it. I . . ."

"Try it on."

Some fumbling with my phone, looking at my own ridiculous face on the screen as I applied it. She put a napkin over her finger and gently cleaned the edges of my work with her nail.

"It's a good color on you," she said. "You look amazing. I mean, even without, but . . ."

My actual, biological heart was going to actually explode. It was going to crack my ribs and flood my chest with blood. I forced myself to speak and prayed I didn't spontaneously barf from the force of emotion.

"I like it. Love it. I mean, I love the color."

She laughed, that bright noise of joy, and I was able to steady myself and make my move.

"I take care of this place on the lake," I said. "A cabin. That I can use. Do you want to maybe see it or something . . . ?"

I lived and died in the pause before her answer, but she smiled and said, "Sure. Yeah."

Check. Gift card. *Poot poot poot* to the lake in the Smart Car.

It had started to rain. The Smart Car does not love the rain because it is tiny like a spider and thinks it will be washed away. I don't know how I drove because my hands were shaking and I gripped the wheel so hard I'm amazed it didn't snap. I'd made sure the house was clean and that the floor cushions in the little living room were arranged *just so*. I made sure my phone was connected to the speakers correctly, because they had a tendency to crap out. I planned the playlist based on everything she had ever mentioned about music she liked. I placed the petrichor candle on a table by the window where the scent would blow onto us. As Akilah looked around the cozy living room, I lit the candle with a wobbly hand.

"I got this," I said as casually as I could, "because you mentioned you like the smell of petrichor . . ."

Akilah spun around to see what I was talking about. She fixed her gaze on the little flicker of light. It coughed a bit as it took a big gulp of oxygen from the slightly open window and then took a bigger bite of wick. The scent began to bloom.

“Oh my god,” she said. “Marlowe, that’s . . .”

Oh no. Oh no. What. *What?*

“. . . amazing. This is the best first date I’ve ever been on.”

Date.

I had to sit down because my legs could no longer hold me up. She plopped down on the cushion next to me. There was rain and thunder—a sign!—and there was this cloud of petrichor in the room.

“I’m really glad you asked me out,” Akilah said. “Because I was trying to work up the nerve to ask you myself.”

Kissing is weird. If you think about the concept, it seems gross. Absolutely should not work. There should be something more elegant than smacking down on someone else’s food and talking holes (I am a poet; let me know if you want me to write your Valentine’s card). But once I felt that little puff of air from her nostrils as she came close, breathed in the scent of her shampoo, brushed the cool softness of her cheek, and felt her lips press to mine . . . my entire body seemed to liquify. I began my trip to the ISS. The astronauts were about to see Marlowe Wexler drift past the window. I lost all sense of time as we tangled our arms around each other and fell back against the floor cushions. The joy of looking at her was topped only by the glory of pressing closer to her, and her to me. She rolled me slightly onto my back, and Akilah was over me. Everything was bright—even through my closed lids there was a luminescent glow, like we were creating light together. And warmth. And tiny crackling noises. Some kind of big orange thing that I was distantly aware had come into the room. I welcomed it, in my state of bliss. *Sure, new bright orange thing, hang out with us. Everything is perfect, everyone, and yes, you too, orange thing. The world is warm and wonderful and . . .*

Suddenly, Akilah pulled away and screamed.

The big orange friend—this visitor—was a wall of fire that had spread itself around the little table the candle had been on and eaten the billowing curtains on its way to the ceiling.

I want to be able to tell you that I was gallant and in control, that I pushed her behind me to keep her from the flames, that I ran to the kitchen for a fire extinguisher, because Juan and Carlita are the kind of responsible people who would have a fire extinguisher and of course it would be in the kitchen, and that I ran back in and extinguished the curtains and whisked Akilah out the door, and that she cried out “Marlowe, you saved my life *and*

the house!” before we kissed under the moonlight by the lake and that we would laugh about it with our grandchildren.

Not so much.

I remember running around and saying “We gotta put it out, we gotta put it out” as Akilah was pushing me out the door and calling 911.

I remember trying to fill a flower planter from a birdbath, forgetting that flower planters have holes at the bottom and that birdbaths do not contain enough water to put out house fires.

I remember I considered driving to Canada at twenty-one miles an hour in my tiny car to start a new life.

I remember standing on the little patch of grass and snot-sobbing and heaving while Akilah waved the fire truck in and shouted warnings to the neighbors, who had all come out to see the fire whipping up the side of the cottage.

This was where the date portion of the evening ended.

2

I don’t like to lie. No one would have believed me, anyway. That’s the thing about lies—they are a temporary measure at best. The truth is always there at the bottom. The fire didn’t sneak in. I brought it in the form of a candle.

There was some confusion at first as to what we two were doing in the house, as we were not Professors Juan and Carlita Manzano-Solis of NYU and were instead two weeping teenagers with Guffy’s Ice Cream napkins pressed to our noses. I explained, through increasingly winded sobs, that I took care of the place for them and had taken Akilah there on a date and gotten her this special candle and I was really, really, really sorry. They got us both blankets while they called Juan and Carlita. My parents came. Her parents came. Everyone came—fire and rescue, police, EMTs, neighbors, complete strangers who just wanted to film a house burn down and post the video. It was the event of the summer. You should have been there.

The fire investigators confirmed, based on our information and what they found, that the candle exploded. This, I know from the thousand Google searches I’ve done since, is something candles do sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. This was why I wanted you to know that I spent thirty dollars. I expected a good product with a nice smell. And to be fair, it had a great smell until it blew up.

The fire gutted one side of the house. What was still standing had smoke and water damage. If it hadn’t been raining, they said the whole thing would probably be gone. Juan and Carlita came up from New York City to

survey the charred remains of their happiness. I've known them most of my life—my dad met them when I was three or four. They're sort of like an aunt and uncle to me, so they were shockingly nice about it. It was an accident, they said. We're just glad you're okay, they said. Houses can be replaced but people can't, they said.

But it wasn't that they were saying, "Great job, Marlowe! You did it! You really *burned that house down*!" Juan and Carlita were clearly sad that their house was gone. Their tone was flat. They had come to make sure I was generally all right and to let us know that the fire department said this was an accident. I assumed that meant they blamed me, but they'd had so much therapy that they ascribed all bad tidings to the whims of the universe. (Is that how therapy works?) They didn't stay long, and I didn't have the courage to lift my head and fully look at them, because we all knew that while I was *technically* allowed to be in the house, I should not have been there. It wasn't okay, what I had done. I had taken advantage of the situation, and now their house was gone.

After two days off, I turned up for my shift at Guffy's with Akilah. I wore one of my dad's old hoodies, which gave off Unabomber vibes, but at least I could hide my face. I put in earbuds and went into the back and did the jobs we always avoided, like taking inventory of the toppings bar supplies. I ran through this quickly, so I started making up new jobs for myself. I organized containers by size, wiped the shelves and walls down with bleach solution, and went berserk with the label maker. I was relatively safe in the closet of bleach, labels, and pain, coming out only when we had a line and lurking in my hoodie like a ghoul.

Akilah handled the public. I couldn't speak to her. The few times I came out from the back to help, someone would notice me and say something to the person they were with in a low voice. It was all looks and whispers, the frantic sounds of tapping on phones. Messages spread around town that the firebug was back at Guffy's. How the story had spread that soon, I have no real idea, but stories always do, don't they? At least everyone knew it was my fault, not Akilah's. I had the keys. I brought the candle.

The requests for hot bottoms were endless, usually punctuated by a muffled fart of a laugh. When I checked my phone, I noticed that random people started leaving fire emojis in the comments of my posts, or GIFs from *Firestarter*, or that one of the creepily smiling little girl with the house burning down around her.

I took my socials to private.

At the end of the shift, we silently dished up our free employee scoops (we were entitled to one medium cup per shift, arguably the best perk that exists). Akilah had mint chocolate chip with malt powder and I had rocky road as a symbolic gesture, even though my favorite flavor is Moose Tracks.

"So, um . . ." she began as we closed and locked the door. "Are you . . ."

I pulled on the hoodie strings and vanished into my cave a bit.

"Okay? Okay, um . . . I . . . the other night when we were at the Cheesecake Factory I noticed that they were hiring. I applied, and they called this morning. I'm going in for an interview. The tips . . . they're more than here. And I'm saving up to buy a new keyboard. . . ."

The world seemed to be spinning into the empty depths of my cup. I understood. We'd had one date and I'd burned a house down. Why would she—the most beautiful girl I had ever seen—want to tie herself to a quasi-arsonist girlfriend?

"That's great," I said. "Good luck."

Then I got into my tiny car and drove home at twenty-one miles an hour and I stayed there.

I called in sick to work the next day, and the day after that. I went into my room, shut the door, and ghosted the world. Somewhere in there Guffy's fired me for not showing up. Guilt piled on guilt. Guilt about taking advantage of Juan and Carlita. Guilt about the fire, no matter how accidental. Guilt about not responding to messages. Guilt about not going in to Guffy's. Guilt about being a loser daughter. Guilt for having guilt. It got heavier and heavier, and yet, I seemed to summon more. I was like that guy in the witch trials who they accused of being a witch and pressed under heavy rocks to force him to confess, and the only thing that guy ever said was "More weight." Like that, but for pathetic people. I was a guilt collector.

My lifeline came from an unexpected place. Several days into my self-imposed exile, my mom extracted me from my room. We had a visitor in the form of my history teacher, Mx. Gibson. They were sitting at the kitchen table, drinking apple tea. I was friendly with Mx. Gibson—they lived a few doors down from us and let me choose some side reading for extra credit. I liked Mx. Gibson, but I had no idea why they were in our kitchen.

(I want to note here that I have friends aside from *my history teacher*. But I came here to tell you what happened at Morning House and my friends don't really factor into it. Suffice it to say they exist; they had been listening to me talk about Akilah for three entire years and now I was ghosting them too. This is the hard part about telling stories—you can't tell everything. You have to select what's relevant and shape the story around the facts, or at least around the facts as you want them to be. Now back to my history teacher, at the table with the tea.)

There was a round of "how are you doing?" which I answered in mumbles. Then they got right down to it.

"Listen," they said, "what if you could get out of here for a bit?"

Getting out of here for a bit sounded like a good start, especially if they meant sending me on an exploratory mission to Mars with a single potato and a note of farewell.

"A friend of mine is a professor of history at Syracuse and lives upstate in Clement Bay. She's working on a history of a place called Morning House. Have you heard of it?"

It sounded only vaguely familiar, so I shook my head.

"It's a mansion built on one of the Thousand Islands, a place called Ralston Island. There was a tragedy in the family that owned it, so they abandoned it back in the 1930s and it's been empty ever since. It's just been sold to some company, but Belinda managed to get them to agree to let the public in for one summer. There's a group of local teenagers that live and work there as guides. She's down one person and needed someone who can learn things quickly. I thought of you. And I thought you might like to . . ."

"Leave town?" I said.

"Spend the rest of the summer on a beautiful island giving tours of a mansion. There's a swimming lagoon; the meals are included. The pay is . . . okay. Probably what you were making at Guffy's. But it's a good opportunity, and it would be helping out a friend of mine. If you're up for it, she can use you immediately. You'd have to read and learn the materials kind of quickly, but I think you might really enjoy it."

This conflicted heavily with my new plans for the summer, which were: one, hiding in my house; two, evaporating.

But what else was I going to do? I'd lost the girl of my dreams. I had no job. Who was going to hire me now? My parents were going to let me wallow for three more days, max, before they demanded that I get out and

do something. Something far away was about the best offer I was going to get.

"Sure," I said, forcing a smile. "Sounds great."

July 8, 1932

Clara Ralston peeled her eyelids apart and groaned. She considered throwing up, made a few attempts at a burp, and found that her stomach was sound. This was a mid-level hangover at best. It was 7:26, according to her bedside clock. She ejected herself from bed, splashed water on her face and under her arms, then tugged on a pair of long white shorts and a white short-sleeved collared shirt with a large gold *R* embroidered on the front.

Clara was a dancer—one with a quick step and exceptional balance. She ran down the stairs at speed, taking three at a time, sliding across the slick herringbone of the great hall floor and into the breakfast room, where her family sat in front of their yogurts. She threw herself into her chair just as the clock ticked over to 7:31.

“You’re late,” her father said with a smile. He was firm in his routines, but this was part of the routine. Clara was always the last one to arrive. Usually she made it right before the minute hand moved. Her arrival was the sign that breakfast could begin.

Waiting for her at her place always was a dish of fresh yogurt with some kind of fruit—in this case, cooked black raspberries. The yogurt was a nonnegotiable item, served at every meal. People in the natural food movement were obsessed with digestion, and yogurt was considered necessary for life. When she was small, Clara thought she would actually die if she didn’t eat it every day. She had been shocked when she went to boarding school for the first time and looked around at her classmates’ plates, filled with bacon and sausage and pancakes covered in syrup. Not a yogurt in sight, except for the ones in front of her, Victory, and Unity. She realized for the first time that her family was a bit odd in its habits, and that this would not endear her to the other children. After one week, Clara switched to pancakes and sausage—tasting meat and sugar for the first time. She became a devotee of all things sweet and meaty.

Clara managed to get the yogurt down without signs of violence from her body. In fact, it seemed to have an improving effect. She was slightly more alert than she had been upon arrival. She stared at the lace curtains billowing softly in the breakfast room windows. Her head began to throb in time. She watched Faye going through her mail. She had been a singer before marrying their father, and she got correspondence every day from her friends in the city, filling her in on all the Broadway gossip. Clara always felt a pang of jealousy. She didn't get a pile of letters from actors and dancers every day and she never would if she didn't get back to the city and study dance properly. Every day she wasn't in New York was another day wasted, another opportunity gone.

"All right," her father said. "I received a telephone call from the reporter and the photographer from *Life* magazine. Their boat is leaving Clayton at eight, so we'll meet them by the dock. They want to take photographs of our morning exercises. So let's finish up here a minute or two early."

Of course. The *Life* magazine thing. She had managed to block that out.

"What do they want to know about us?" Unity asked.

Unity. All aglow in the morning. She'd never had a hangover. She believed whatever Father said. She was a good girl who liked being on the island, away from everyone else. It was easier for her. It was easier for all of them. Most of them, anyway. Not William, who sat across from Clara now, glancing at her through his long blond lashes. She gave him a half smile and made a subtle heaving gesture. He rolled his eyes and stifled a laugh.

"Our routines," Father said. "Our family structure. The benefits of healthy foods and exercise, things like that. Eat up!"

He was antsy. Father was excited to be in the magazine, apparently. Faye looked less so, but she had been in magazines before. On their covers as well. Faye had given up so much, and for what? Responsibility for six kids, pulled away from the glamour of her life to sit here on this island eating yogurt and talking about breeding and digestion all day. Clara couldn't think about this for too long or she would become furious; how *dare* Faye walk away from Broadway. Clara wouldn't, that was for sure. She would claw her nails into the stage and they'd never get her off.

When the bowls were empty, Phillip gestured that they had permission to leave the table. Clara took a last, long drink of water and pushed herself

up, walking out with Edward.

“I guess we’re show ponies today,” she said to him. “They’re coming to watch us run around.”

“Because we’re exceptional,” Unity said, coming up behind them.

“Because we’re freaks,” Edward countered.

Clara smirked. Thank god someone else was thinking it.

The six older Ralston children, plus Phillip and Faye, stood by the grand receiving dock that rarely received anyone. While they had the occasional guest, they didn’t socialize like anyone else here in the islands, on Millionaires’ Row. All day long, boats came and went from their neighbors’ houses, full of people laughing, singing, playing music. You could hear orchestras playing at night on other islands. You could hear laughter.

Very few people experienced the Ralstons’ guest rooms papered in silk, their fine dining room, or sunny breakfast room. They might come for tennis or to consult with their father, but generally no one stayed the night at Morning House, not like they stayed at the other great houses of the river. Everyone aside from Phillip knew why—people hated the food. Visitors might be able to go without a cocktail, and they could privately get some coffee in their rooms at breakfast, but the family meals were intolerable. Perhaps they also disliked this house of seven children and rigid schedules and its obsession with exercise. Perhaps the Ralstons were simply too . . . exceptional, as Unity thought.

Too weird. They were too weird.

But they had all the things to impress people with, even if they didn’t use them for that purpose. Clara watched the two newcomers take in the stone boathouse, the lagoon with its black swans, the fountain, and the massive house that towered over them all.

“What a magnificent sight,” the reporter said. It was easy to tell who was the reporter and who was the photographer, as one helpfully carried two bags of equipment and had a camera around his neck. He was fully prepared to document the Ralstons.

“Yes, it’s all right, isn’t it?” Phillip Ralston turned to look at Morning House like it had snuck up behind him.

“It’s more than all right, I’d say.”

Introductions were made as the photographer took a few shots of the house from the dock, then they went to the lawn. There he got some shots

of Faye looking elegant, which meant Faye looking like Faye, then they posed in a row in their matching white exercise outfits.

“You’re all similar in height,” he said, “so I think father and mother in the middle. Girls on one side, boys on the other.”

They were photographed doing jumping jacks and short sprints. The workout was shorter than the usual hour due to the outsiders. The staff brought out cold ginger water and apple juice for the family, plus a pot of coffee for the visitors, and they all sat together on the massive veranda that aproned the house.

“So many people are moved by the story of how you got your children,” the reporter said. “Could you tell me a little about that, in your own words?”

“Well,” Phillip said, looking around at his children with affection. “My medical specialty is obstetrics. I went to England during the Great War to lend my assistance, both in terms of money and in medical services. I was able to help fund some clinics. And with so many men injured or killed in battle, and so many doctors having to help the wounded, I found my services were most useful helping deliver babies. My older children were born under conditions that were all too common—fathers off at war, possibly dead, the mothers with other children at home with no money or support. I delivered all six and adopted them with their mothers’ blessings. Clara here came first. Then William, Victory, Unity, Edward, and Benjamin brought up the rear just six months later.”

Clara forced a smile. The bile in her throat was sliding back down.

“To be a father six times over in that short space of time, with no mother for the children . . .”

“My sister Dagmar . . .”

Aunt Dagmar had appeared, as if on cue, dressed in a black sundress patterned in yellow birds, with a matching yellow belt. Aunt Dagmar had more severe features than Father—a sharper chin, tighter lips. She wore her hair elegantly finger-curled tight against her head. Despite the fact that smoking was forbidden for the rest of the family, she screwed a cigarette into her long holder and lit it with a silver lighter.

“. . . was an absolute godsend. She mothered the children until my wife, Faye, came along, and she remains a stabilizing influence.”

Dagmar Ralston took a long inhale. It was unclear what she thought of being a stabilizing influence. Faye Ralston smoothed her exercise clothes

self-consciously.

“That was very good of you,” the reporter said.

“I love the children,” Dagmar replied simply.

From inside, there was an ear-piercing scream and a patter of feet. Max Ralston came tearing out the front door riding a stick pony.

“My youngest son,” Phillip said, rising. “Spirited. Excited for visitors.”

So excited was Max that he continued right past the group, racing down the steps to the lawn, screaming the entire way. His nurse hurried behind him in a way that suggested she was trying not to run but really needed to.

“Toddlers,” the reporter said with a smile. “It must have been a lot to handle when you had six at that age . . .” He nodded to the assembled. “. . . all at once. It must have been mayhem.”

“Remarkably, no,” Phillip said. “They were all very disciplined, even then. Why, they’d line up and recite their lessons and touch their toes and swim their laps.”

“Still do, it appears.”

“They still do.” Phillip cast a quick eye in the direction of Max and his nurse. The chase had continued across the lower part of the lawn. “My daughter Clara is the strongest swimmer in the bunch. No one can beat her time. She can swim to the shore and back, through the St. Lawrence current. She’s quite exceptional. We’re working to get her into the next Olympics, though she would rather concentrate on her dancing. In fact, Clara, why don’t you put on your suit? Or maybe a dance? Which would be better?”

“The dancing, I think,” the photographer said.

“Then change for dancing. Everyone, let’s go to the playhouse and show them what you can do.”

Clara smiled stiffly, rose from her seat, and made it far enough before she vomited all over the ground, just out of sight of the reporter.

It was time to dance for the camera.

3

Unlike a lot of people in my area, I am not a river rat.

In this part of upper New York State, where we live, is the St. Lawrence River—a massive, deep river that separates the United States and Canada. It's a major shipping channel, and more than that, it is a way of life. People love the St. Lawrence because it's enormous and deep and clean, with luminescent water. Everything is the river, and the river is everything. People wear shirts that say how much they love the river. Everyone has a boat up there and fishes and swims and Jet Skis around. If you are one of the people who live the St. Lawrence lifestyle, you are a river rat. I don't know why they chose *rat* as their term, aside from the alliteration. Beach bum. River rat. I'm not sure what this makes me. A land locust? Anyway, it's a thing.

Even though it's about two hours from our house, we'd only been there once, and that was when I was little. My mom's an English teacher and my dad researches socioeconomics, so we go to places where everyone reads a lot, or to my grandparents' house in Florida, where we still read a lot, but do so with someone playing Jimmy Buffett in the background or while being watched by an unblinking iguana.

In this river, in a section where the two countries are within touching distance, there is an area called the Thousand Islands, even though everyone there will tell you that there are over 1,800 islands. Only a few of these islands are very big. Most are hilariously small. All you need to be

classified as an island there is to be above and surrounded by water and to have one tree. It counts if you *used* to have a tree. This was the only thing I remembered from our trip: little spots of land with houses like candy sitting on them, surrounded by water like green glass.

It was a straight shot up the highway to Clement Bay, the closest town to Morning House. Clement Bay is a tourist town, with one main street right along the water full of boutiques and places to eat. I was supposed to catch my boat at Uncle Jim's River Cruises, right at the far end. It was a big enough operation, with a few multistory sightseeing boats and a dinner cruise. My parents bought my sixteen-dollar ticket and helped me wheel my two suitcases into the line with all the tourists. They offered to take the ride with me, but I thought it was best for me to get on the boat and go. It looks weird to show up at your new summer job with your parents with you. I got surprisingly emotional when the line started to move, and I began dragging my suitcases away from them, across the asphalt of the parking lot and to the dock. An older couple in matching American flag T-shirts regarded my suitcases with confusion and gave each other a look, like I had offended them by bringing so much stuff, and this is just what kids are like now, with their phones and their two suitcases on a sightseeing boat.

Because Morning House was the last stop, where people could get off and explore the island and house for an hour or two, I had to ride the entire scenic cruise to get there. The Thousand Islands really are beautiful. In some places, the water takes on a tropical glow—a pure aqua that seems to emit light. The boat drifted around Pine Island, with its slanted trees that had been bent by the wind. There was Bluff Island, the one someone won in a poker game. There was a scrappy little island called Willie Nelson Island. I heard about the five thousand or so shipwrecks that littered the bottom of the river, and the gold treasure that might be buried on Maple Island. There were stories of how this part of the river was how so much illegal liquor came into the United States from Canada during Prohibition, how bootleggers outfitted their boats and dumped booze in the water in packages that would float up to the surface to be picked up and smuggled into the country, how there were trails of bottles and beer cans marking their paths to this day.

"That's Just Enough Room Island," the guide said as we passed an island with one house stubbornly built on every inch, so that if you took too long of a step out the front door you went directly into the water.

“More like Leave Me the Fuck Alone Island,” I mumbled.

The older couple in the American flag shirts looked at me disapprovingly. I rested my chin on the rail and shut up.

I imagined Akilah and me spending the summer here together as we passed the elegant parts of Wellesley Island, covered in houses owned by people who use *summer* as a verb. These were the houses I remembered seeing—big, storybook-looking ones, wildly colored in pastels and gingerbread decoration. It’s always weird when an old memory like that lines up pretty well with reality.

“Fire is the enemy on these islands,” the guide said. “This was the site of the great Frontenac Hotel, which burned down in 1911 when a member of the band playing that night dropped a lit cigarette. It remains a serious concern. In fact, we have a fireboat here called *Last Chance*, because when it shows up . . .”

I put in earbuds for the rest of the tour.

We made our way along the river, me tuning everything out, until a mini-castle structure on a tiny island appeared in front of us, connected to the main one with a small stone bridge, maybe six feet long.

“Our last stop,” the captain said. “Right in front of us here is the boathouse for Ralston Island and the famous Morning House. It’s open to the public for the very first time this summer. Built between 1920 and 1922, the house was sealed up after two of the family’s children died here on the same day in the summer of 1932. But it’s been preserved and you can see it for the first time. . . .”

I got off last, clanging my rolling suitcases along the metal floor of the boat.

“That’s a lot of stuff you’ve got there,” the guide said as I heaved my bags over the small platform between the boat and the dock, trying hard not to drop everything I had for the summer into the water.

“I’m very serious about sightseeing,” I replied.

I’d been told to go to the ticket office when I got off the boat. It was right there at the dock, along with a tiny US border control office, which was just one bored guy staring at his phone. I went over to the window in the ticket hut.

“I don’t need a ticket, I don’t think?” I said. “Dr. Henson brought me here? I’m . . . going to be working?”

I spoke in questions and was answered with one from another direction.

“Are you Marlowe Wexler?”

I turned around to see a girl with pale, densely freckled skin and thick red hair that hung long and triumphant over her shoulders. She had a delicate build that was swamped in an oversized maroon Morning House polo shirt, open slightly at the neck to reveal a white-gold chain with a fragile letter *A* dangling from it. Before I replied, she removed a walkie-talkie from her hip and raised it to her mouth.

“She’s here,” she said into it.

“She won’t make the final tour,” the voice on the walkie went on, ominously, “so take her to the playhouse. Have her meet me at five in the hall.”

“Okay!” She clipped the walkie back onto the pocket of her shorts and opened the wheelchair-accessible entrance. “I’m April. Welcome to Morning House! Here . . .”

She took the handle of the heavier of my bags and gallantly began dragging it up the weaving path. I wanted to stop her since she looked like someone who could be carried off by a bird, but she moved my bags with more ease than I could manage. She was tiny but had wiry strength.

“Marlowe is such a cool name,” she said over her shoulder.

It was a compliment, but I hadn’t done anything to deserve it, so I was my usual smooth self and tried to laugh it off. What came out was an uneasy snickering noise, which I got away with because it blended in with the sound of the suitcase wheels on the path. I shouldn’t be allowed to talk to cute girls. Whenever I see one, I should put a box over my head.

As we passed a cluster of trees, the view suddenly opened and Morning House revealed itself. I had to tilt my head back to see all of it, because it was built up on the natural high point of the island and soared above. It was made of gray stone, with a red roof that was a jumble of peaks and turrets of differing heights. Windows large and small, round and square, glinted in the sun from copper-green frames. It looked like an Ivy League school, or possibly Dracula’s castle—or some combination of the two from a movie where Dracula goes to Yale.

Over the front door, there was a massive stained-glass relief of a rising sun that seemed to glow from its very own power source.

“Wait until you get inside,” April said. “The place is full of stained glass. It’s like a cathedral in there. But the playhouse is good too.”

“Playhouse?”

She didn’t need to explain, because we had turned a corner and found ourselves in front of a smaller but still sizable building. If the big house was for a happy Dracula, this one had come from Hansel and Gretel. The stone blocks in the walls were of varying sizes, jumbled together solidly. There were tiny round windows and long ones, dotted around in a broken rhythm.

I had arrived at my summer home, and it appeared to be fictional.

4

We entered the cool, low-ceilinged entryway of the playhouse. The walls were a beige color, like old parchment, and timber beams marked the corners. The doors had odd shapes, with slanted lintels and one side longer than the other. There were transoms with more stained-glass sunrises. But what really got my attention was the circular staircase in the middle, which was made of wood and carved in the shape of a tree, with etchings of bark and wooded limbs that crawled along the ceiling, with painted green wooden leaves. It felt like Disney World—expensive fakery.

"This is where we stay," she said. "The playhouse."

"We live in here?" I asked. "With a fake tree?"

"I know, right? This room here . . ." She indicated a sunny room to the right, with windows facing the water. It had two sofas, beanbags, a TV, and a few video game consoles. ". . . is our lounge. It used to be their classroom. We use the rest for bedrooms. We had to move things around a little. This way . . ."

She tried the door to the left and it opened. It was lined with shelves—floor to ceiling—that must have once been filled with books. Now it had two beds and two distinct areas. One was tidy, spare, a reasonably made bed with a plain green blanket, everything put away but a laundry bag on the floor. There was some fishing gear in the corner, tucked up against an exposed beam. The other was lively, with a black fleece blanket with silver

bolts on the bed, purple sheets, a spill of bright clothes, and a row of Lego figurines on the windowsill.

“Tom and Van are in here,” she said. “Tom’s family is into fishing and marinas. He handles a lot of the boats. Van’s with us in the house. Up here—you can leave your stuff for a second . . .”

She ushered me out and to the tree stairs. At the top, they opened on a large, sunny space that encompassed the entire second floor. One wall was covered in mirrors, and there were floor-to-ceiling windows, with trees right outside, partially shading and obscuring the view. This room also had two beds, which were placed on opposite sides of the room. There was more symmetry here in terms of neatness, though one side had a bold red bedspread and bathing suits drying on a rack. The other side had baby-blue sheets with a white bedspread, and there were several tiny stuffed animals along the sill, with framed pictures on every surface.

“Liani and I are up here,” she said. “We weren’t sure where you would want to stay. We thought maybe up here, but maybe you’d prefer privacy. You can choose! We can move you up here, but for now . . .”

She showed me back down the tree and took me to the single room in the back. This room wasn’t quite like the others. It ran along the back of the house and had stone walls and was as wide as the single bed, but three times as long. It had three large windows that were all pushed open, filling the room with soft breezes. It was deeply shaded by the trees. There was an old dresser on the far side of the room. The room was cool, even a little cavelike. It appealed to me. It fit my mood. I could live in this fairy-tale hut, in my stone room, away from the world.

“This was the art studio,” she explained. “Originally, we were going to configure it all differently and have you upstairs with me and Liani, but we thought since you don’t know us yet, you might like privacy? But you can come up if you want! Or move. You can decide whenever. I wasn’t sure what you’d be able to bring, so I got you a throw pillow.” April indicated a fuzzy yellow pillow sitting on the otherwise bare bed. She was hovering, clearly wanting to know if the room and the pillow were okay.

“It’s great,” I said.

“Oh good,” she said, exhaling. “Let me show you where we eat—and the bathroom. The bathroom is kind of an adventure. It’s not in this building.”

I didn’t like the sound of the bathroom adventure and followed nervously. She showed me back to the tree, and pointed out that along with containing the stairs, it also concealed a curved door. This opened to reveal another set of steps, these being plain stone and going down into a stone-lined tunnel, wide enough for maybe two people to walk side by side.

“There are passages that can’t be seen by the public,” she explained as she switched on the light and led me down the steps and through the tunnel. “For servants, so no one would see them walking from building to building.”

We walked about fifty paces and reached a door.

“Oh,” she said, pulling some keys from her pocket. “Your keys. You’ll need these to access the house and the bathrooms, but we keep a spare here . . .” She indicated a hook by the door. “. . . you know, in case you’re in a hurry and forget.”

The door opened into a cavernous basement with a high ceiling. It felt more like an empty warehouse, echoey and pleasantly cool. We walked around a mostly empty warren of large rooms, some with a few tools lying around—shovels, rakes, sledgehammers, racks of cleaning materials and paper towels and toilet paper.

“Over here,” she said, “our bathrooms are behind the public ones. They’re gender neutral.”

There were single bathrooms, and then two showers with just curtains for doors, and hooks outside for clothes and a towel. I was thinking of the many ways this setup could be awkward (1. Someone opens curtain, I am naked. 2. I see a spider, jump out naked. 3. I accidentally open curtain, someone is naked. 4. Curtain falls down for no reason, I am etc.) when a ghostly sound floated through the space.

“Hellooooooo . . .”

I turned around, but there was no one in sight.

“Hellllloooooooooooo, neighhboorrrrr . . .”

April turned in confusion as well.

“Van?”

“Who isss Vannnnnnn. I’m a ghoosttttttt.”

“Van, don’t freak Marlowe out. She just got here.”

“I would neeeverrrrrr . . .”

April zeroed in on the sound and found it was coming from the empty swimming pool that was at the edge of the basement. At the bottom was a

lanky guy with a wild puff of brown curly hair and the widest mouth I'd ever seen outside of a Muppet. It looked like he could flip his entire head open. He was sitting at the bottom of the small but surprisingly deep empty swimming pool that was tiled in a vibrant aqua green, puffing cheerfully on a vape.

"You foundddd meeee," he said.

"Why are you sitting in the pool?" April asked.

"Privacy," he said with a shrug. "You're the new one! It's Marlowe, right?"

I nodded.

"I'm Van, as in, get in the."

"It's kind of early for that," April said, indicating the vape.

"Tours are gone by now," he replied with a graceful wave of his hand. "Best time of the day. Marlowe! Come down. Here . . ."

He held out the vape.

"I'm fine," I said. "Thanks, though."

He nodded graciously. "You burned a house down?"

"*Van* . . . ," April said. She had a look on her face that told me they all not only knew what I had done but had talked about how they were going to talk about it, and Van had just violated the terms.

I had practiced this too.

"It was a scented candle," I said, "and it . . . exploded . . ."

I was immediately off script as well, because talking about how you caused a house fire is hard. There is nothing casual about it.

"Oh, we know," he said. "It's fine. Shit happens. We get it. You've come to the right place for that."

"Seriously, Van, Dr. Henson is around. Don't let her see you doing that in the house."

"She doesn't care," he said, waving us off. "Anyway, Marlowe, come to me anytime for a kiki or an edible or whatever. It's lovely to have you."

April shuffled me off.

"He's *really* good at tours," she said as an explanation. "Van is the best, really."

She took me to the far side of the basement and opened a door onto a sparkling stainless-steel-and-white-tile kitchen, restaurant-sized, with a long wooden prep and worktable with a dozen metal bistro chairs set around it.

“The original kitchen was down here,” she said, “but because this is going to be a retreat, they took it out and put this in. Obviously, no tours come here. We only do the upper levels. Anyway, the way it works is, everyone comes in and gets their own breakfast. There’s cereal and bread and eggs and stuff. For lunch, you can come back here and make a sandwich, or if you want something from the refreshment stand, that’s free, but just so you know, it’s awful and it takes forever. For dinner, they did a deal with a restaurant in town and they make us up trays of stuff we can stick in the oven or warm up on the stove . . .” She opened a massive industrial refrigerator, where several marked tinfoil trays were stacked. “. . . so we have this roster. It’s someone’s job to come and warm one or two of these up. It’s usually lasagna or a chicken casserole or something like that, and there are always vegan ones in there. And we have salad stuff. And we always have leftover hot dogs and hamburgers from the stand. We eat together, and we have a schedule for who cleans up and loads the dishwasher. And we have tons of ice cream from the place in town. There’s always ice cream.”

This was deeply reassuring to me, as I lead an ice cream–forward existence. I didn’t start working at Guffy’s by accident.

“What’s your favorite?” she asked. “We can ask for it. We all request flavors. I like birthday cake.”

“Moose Tracks.”

“I don’t think I’ve had that?”

“It’s peanut butter cups and fudge in vanilla ice cream. Sometimes chocolate. They make extreme versions as well, but I like the regular one.”

“I can see if they can do that,” she said. “I mean, we have a lot of fudge in town.”

April was doing all the heavy lifting here to make me feel welcome. This one hit home.

“So you’ve all been here for . . .”

“Two weeks,” she said. “But we live nearby and we’ve been on the island a few times helping get things ready.”

“So it’s weird I’m here.”

“Not weird! I was excited we were going to have someone new. We’ve all known each other forever.”

“Seems kind of strange that they brought me in from so far, but . . . I guess she did it to be nice.”

April cocked her head. “Dr. Henson isn’t . . . she’s not mean. But she’s not nice. If she brought you here, there was a reason.”

That sounded ominous, and April realized that.

“She’s fine! I don’t mean, like, she brought you here for a bad reason. It must have been a good one. We barely see her, anyway. She’s working on a book about this place and the family, so she’s in her rooms almost all the time. She comes out to have meetings with visiting students and historians, or she goes to town sometimes, but basically we run the place. Now you’ll run it with us! We’ll show you everything you need to know.”

Her walkie-talkie crackled to life.

“Bring Marlowe up to the porch,” said a voice.

“She’s ready,” April said, smiling broadly.

It was time for me to meet my new boss, the woman who had summoned me to Ralston Island.

July 8, 1932

Victory Ralston had always been embarrassed by her name. When the *Life* magazine reporter had spoken to her this afternoon, she could see him measuring her up, using *Victory* as the yardstick. It sounded like she should be riding in on a horse while carrying a flaming sword. At school, she used her middle name. Marie. A much better name. A real name, not the *concept of winning*.

She was glad that *Life* magazine thing was over. The whole thing made her self-conscious, all the photos they'd had to take out on the lawn. Now she was just trying to read her book, but everyone upstairs was being too loud.

All the Ralston children were well educated and multilingual, more or less fluent in German and French, with passable academic understanding of several other languages. To keep them on their toes, their father regularly had all the books in their library switched out. Sometimes they could read in English, but they might come down to find that only Greek was available. No one liked this except Unity. Unity was the linguist. She sat there now, with eight copies of *The Wizard of Oz* in front of her. Their father would regularly give her a new copy in a different language, setting her the challenge of trying to learn a bit of it. Along with a dictionary and a few books of grammar, she would use *The Wizard of Oz* as a baseline text, moving back and forth between various versions, comparing the languages, trying to break the code of how this new one used its symbols to communicate ideas. Today it appeared that she was trying to learn Russian.

"They're drunk again," Victory said to her sister. "Earlier than usual."

Unity nodded in reply, her eyes still on Oz.

"I don't care except I can't read," Victory went on, looking up at the ceiling.

As Unity was not having this problem and did not seem overly interested in her plight, Victory pushed herself out of her chair. She made her way to the tiny room behind the library where her brother Benjamin was at his easel in the process of copying a still life painting.

“They’re starting early tonight,” he said, delicately adding an edge of silvery blue to a flower petal. “It’s like they’re trying to get caught.”

Benjamin’s little studio had originally been a large toy closet. It had been given to him when he became serious about painting, as a storage space for his canvases and supplies. More and more, though, he hid away in here, copying Dutch masters by the light of the single window.

“It’s really good,” Victory said, standing by his shoulder to admire his work.

“It’s all right,” Benjamin said, squinting at the brushstroke he had just applied.

“I can barely tell the difference.”

“Well, don’t tell that to Jan Davidsz de Heem.”

“I’ll do my best. When did he die?”

“Around 1680,” he said.

“Oh, then no promises.”

She looked around at the various prints that Benjamin had collected. The Dutch loved to paint mundane objects back in the 1600s. Flowers. Bread. Oysters. Cheese. Rotting vegetables.

“Why do you think they were so interested in painting these sorts of things?” she asked.

“Because they could—technical mastery. But they were also statements. Ars longa, vita brevis.”

Art is long, life is short.

She envied Benjamin’s painting; that he had something he could make that took his entire concentration. He was unbothered by the noise upstairs. When he painted, he was gone, off to a place he built stroke by stroke. She could tell he wanted to get back to it, so she drifted up the circular stairs, the ones carved to look like a tree. They opened into the studio that occupied the entirety of the top floor. William was at the piano in the corner of the room, his face flush and slick with sweat. He was playing Debussy, a piece that rattled and thundered through the room, that sounded like ten pianos playing at once. Clara was wearing a deep-maroon bathing suit with a white belt. Her copper-colored hair was heavy with sweat and clinging to

her head like a shining helmet. Her bare feet pounded the floor. With every twist and bend she poured everything out of herself while wringing the music dry. It was almost frightening to watch her dance, like she had so much life in her that it was trying to get loose from her body, and she was wrestling it to keep it in.

Or she was drunk. Bit of column A, bit of column B.

Benjamin, William, and Clara all had ways of letting things out—on canvas, on keys, on the floor and in the water. Victory, Edward, and Unity had more academic interests. They had no outlet, no way to sweat it out, to pour it out. So sometimes, like Eddie did now, they poured it in. He was flopped on the floor on the far side of the room, drinking from a bottle full of brown liquid.

When William came to the end of his piece, Clara collapsed onto the floor, her face running with sweat.

“Pass it over, Eddie,” she said.

Edward peeled himself from the chair and handed the bottle to Clara, who took a long swig. Clara held the bottle out to Victory, who shook her head.

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” Clara said. “This is good. . . . What do you think this is? Whiskey?”

“Rotgut,” Eddie said. “The finest rotgut.”

Alcohol was illegal because of Prohibition—and Phillip Ralston believed the stuff was poison, so even if it became legal to drink, there would be no liquor on Ralston Island. He was naive enough to believe that his staff and family felt the same, and that they would never seek it out. What he didn’t realize was that there was no need to go anywhere—the booze came to them.

Where they were, in the middle of the Thousand Islands, was the great booze battleground. Canada was only a mile or so away from the mainland shore, and sometimes only a few yards away on another island or section of the river. Ralston Island was on the US side, but only just barely. All the islands in the St. Lawrence were a middle zone—a place between nations, and in some ways, worlds. Prohibition existed in some parts of the water, but drift another moment or two, and your cocktail was perfectly legal. This was why some islands were known basically as cocktail bars. More important, this was why bootleggers used this stretch of river as one of their

main highways to get alcohol into the United States. Half the boats that went by during the day were loaded with it; all the boats at night were.

Some bootleggers took crates of booze out into the water and dropped them overboard, weighted down with bags of salt. As the salt dissolved, the crates rose and small boats would collect them as they bobbed to the surface. Sometimes when being chased, the bootleggers simply threw the stuff overboard. There was probably more booze in the river than fish. Clara simply swam out and grabbed some free-floating bottle, or she'd linger in the water with a silver dollar hidden in her swimsuit and buy one off a passing boat.

When you obtain free-floating alcohol in often unmarked bottles, you never quite know what you're getting. Sometimes it was weak and tasted like water with old nickels in it; other times, you got something like burning honey that warmed you all the way down and helped you melt into the sound of the lapping water. It was usually the first one.

"Go on, Vic," Eddie went on. "It'll put hair on your balls."

Clara cackled at that. Victory shrugged. Eddie always said stuff like that to try to be shocking, but Victory took a practical view of the human body and was not fazed.

"If I had testes," she said, "I think it might have the opposite effect, as alcohol is a depressant. There's interesting research going on in Chicago right now on bovine testicles from the stockyards. Father was telling me about it."

"She's raised you cow balls," Clara said. "Your move, Eddie."

"I'm going to go and piss off the roof," he replied.

He clambered out the window. William took this as a sign to leave the piano and the room. Victory and Clara remained behind, Clara flat on the ground, her chest heaving as she recovered her breath and took another swig.

"You can't drink all summer," Victory said.

"Can't I?"

"Come on . . ."

Clara rolled onto her stomach and turned herself to face her sister.

"Come on, what? What else is there to do? I should be in dancing school, in New York. Instead, I'm here, dancing around the room. Doing the same thing, every goddamn day. No visitors. So yes, Victory, I am going to drink all summer, and if you had any sense, you would too."

She punctuated this with a long swig and a grimace.

“Looks tasty,” Victory said. “Seems fun.”

“So go sit with Unity and talk about the health benefits of yogurt and the importance of good breeding. She loves that stuff.”

“She’s trying. We’re all trying. It’s nice here.”

This budding argument was interrupted by a loud rustling noise from outside, following by a heavy thud.

“There goes Eddie,” Clara said. “That one sounded solid.”

At a certain point in the night, Eddie would piss off the roof, then climb down the trellis on the side of the playhouse. He usually made it, but sometimes didn’t. He hadn’t broken a bone yet, but the summer was young. As the caretaker, the one interested in medicine, Victory was generally the person who picked up the fallen.

“I’m just saying,” she said as she got up, “there’s no point in getting drunk every night. It’s not good for you.”

“And I’m saying,” Clara replied, “that something about this place has to give. We’re not here because this is good for us. We’re here to be controlled.”

In later years, the few she had, Victory Ralston would think back on these words of Clara’s. At the time, she put the remarks down to Clara’s elevated sense of drama—her big emotions, wild swims, feverish dancing. But they had not been idle remarks. They were the key to everything, and she had missed their meaning.

Victory would never forgive herself for this oversight, right up until the moment, some ten years later, when the bomb fell from the London sky and made her a part of it.

5

My first impression of Dr. Belinda Henson was that she looked like a praying mantis—green, long, and strangely arranged, with big bug eyes. She was sitting on a chair on the veranda dressed in expensive athleisure—yoga leggings and a snug top in a bright, verdant jade. Her limbs were tangled together in a complicated position that looked uncomfortable to me. She had a face shaped like an upside-down raindrop—a wide forehead tapering rapidly down to a pointed chin. Her hair was a quiff of white gray, and she wore large sunglasses to hold back the late afternoon sun. Her attention was on the viewing screen of a camera she was holding. It was a serious piece of equipment, with a long telephoto lens. April and I stood there for a long moment until she finally tipped her head up in our direction.

"Marlowe," she said. "Marlowe Wexler."

I held up my hand in a sheepish *hello* gesture.

She uncoiled herself and stood. She took me in with a dispassionate gaze, and the resulting look on her face suggested that while she wanted more from the situation, she knew better than to expect it.

"I'm Belinda Henson," she said. "And you're the one who burned down someone's house."

"Well," I replied. "Not all the way."

I am not only truthful—I am modest.

"I'm told you have a good memory."

I was probably supposed to say yes, yes I did. To nod. To show that in some way bringing me here was worthwhile. But I just stood there because I have no capacity to take a compliment. She waited for my reply for a moment, then shook her head gently. I looked to April, but she had tiptoed off into the shadows.

“Have you read the manual?” Dr. Henson asked.

I said that I had.

“Do you remember what year the house was built?”

“Between 1920 and 1922.”

“Cost?”

“Four million.”

“What kind of a diet did the family follow?”

“Natural foods,” I said. “Following the prescription of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, the family refrained from consuming meat, refined wheat, alcohol, caffeine, or sugar. A typical breakfast consisted of plain yogurt, stewed fruit, juice, boiled milk, nut cutlets, mushy peas, and prune toast.”

“Verbatim from the guide,” she said approvingly. “Good. People love those details about the mushy peas and prune toast because it’s disgusting. Ralston was obsessed with health, which is funny, because his family came from tobacco. His family was very much a part of the Gilded Age scene in New York City, not the richest of the rich, but close enough.”

She quizzed me for another few minutes, asking me about the members of the family, what kind of stone had been used for the house, who the architects were. I started to ease into the questions. I like a quiz—and it’s easier to show people I can remember things rather than just say I can.

“All right,” she said, nodding approvingly. “It seems Wren Gibson was right about your memory.”

So Mx. Gibson’s first name was Wren. It always catches me off guard when I find out that teachers have things like first names and friends. I know this logically. They’re people. But it’s always disorienting to find these things out and realize there’s so much we don’t know about the people we see every day.

Dr. Henson opened the massive front door. It looked like a door that should creak as you pushed it, and that bats should fly out, but it had a silent, well-crafted glide. My first impression of Morning House was that everything twinkled. The sun seemed to be everywhere, jumping from

mirrors, refracting from crystal doorknobs. This huge room was made of wood—wood-paneled walls, wooden floor—but it all glowed.

“That’s part of the design,” she said, following my gaze. “The way the light comes into the house and bounces around. Phillip Ralston was a man who liked to control his environment, I think it’s fair to say. Look up.”

I tipped my head back and saw a domed ceiling made of stained glass. The center was a kind of sunburst—orange and yellow and brown and white—radiating and changing into blue and lavender. But every piece was a different shape. There were sunbeams and tendrils and waving lines, all of which ended in a ring of human faces, I think women, with golden hair. They were at the outer rim of the wild mosaic, looking down.

“It’s a masterpiece,” Dr. Henson said. “Made of over twenty thousand pieces of glass. It’s incredible that it’s lasted all these years and that it’s in such good condition. The same could be said of this whole place. I’m sure you’ve heard, this is the first and only summer this house has been open to the public. It’s been sitting disused since 1932. There was a local effort to try to buy it and preserve it, open it up for tours, but the town couldn’t raise the money. As a gesture to the community, the group that bought it is letting the town run tours here for one summer.”

Dr. Henson proceeded to give me a walk-through, not quite a tour, the names of the rooms tossed off as we walked past doors. The first floor of Morning House was composed of rooms for every time of day. There was a breakfast room with long windows; a sitting room for the afternoons with views over a garden; and a library with a massive fireplace for cool evenings.

Through a set of bottle-green double doors, there was a grand dining room. It was an impressive space, self-assured as a church, with a green marble floor cut through in geometric patterns in black and gold. The table looked like it could seat a hundred, so just the tail end had been covered in white and silver plastic tablecloths. Mahogany wainscotting hugged the room from below, while the top section of the walls was papered in a moss green, run through with fine lines of green and gold. It was too fresh and clean to have been original.

“When the family left the house, the furniture was put into storage. Some was used later or sold, but luckily for us, a lot of it remained. We got it out a few months ago, cleaned it up, and restored it to its original position, as far as we could determine. I’m not someone who usually does

this kind of thing. I'm here because I'm working on a book about the family. I'm in charge in the sense that someone has to be, and being here helps me do my work."

We walked toward the back of the house, where there was a large room full of ancient gym equipment—gymnastic horses and rings, a wooden rowing machine, an old leather punching bag.

"The exercise room," she said. "A major part of the family's life. They had strange views about health."

She opened a door at the back of the gym, revealing a white-and-green-tiled room that might have been a bathroom, or maybe a lab. It had some health-adjacent purpose. It had things like a massage table and a large shower with lots of heads. There was a steam box with a stool in it and a space where your head would come out the top. I could sort of guess what that was for. I couldn't say the same about the object at the far end of the room, a kind of elaborate casket that was filled with lightbulbs.

"What was this for?"

"Some quackery," she replied. "It's a sunbed, but it seems designed to electrocute you. Nothing in this room seems safe. They were obsessed with digestion, so maybe something to do with that. Take this, for instance."

She nodded toward a boxy wooden chair with a hole in the seat. It wasn't quite a toilet, but I could see it was in the toilet family—a truly upsetting relative with a threatening aura.

"One strange thing about this house," she continued as we walked back into the main hall and started up the grand stairs that led up to a series of other floors, all edged in balconies that opened onto the space. "In most of the places along here on the river—the big houses—the whole point was that they were set up for visitors. You came here for the summer and you brought friends. Morning House had no dedicated guest rooms. This family needed a lot of bedrooms. Can you name the members of the Ralston family?"

"Dr. Phillip Ralston," I said. "He was the dad. He was married to Faye. He adopted six kids—Clara, William, Victory, Unity, Edward, and Benjamin. He had a younger son named Max."

"Good. They all had bedrooms here on the second floor. Phillip, Faye, and Max and his nanny over on the left, and the six older children this way . . ."

She pointed toward a hall with six identical white doors with ornate brass handles but did not stop her progress. She indicated a doorway on a landing halfway up the steps to the third floor.

“It’s a half level,” she said. “In the time Morning House was built, the higher up in the house you slept, the lower your status.”

“That makes no sense,” I said. “Aren’t the views better from the top?”

“Don’t mistake wealth for logic. The servants’ rooms began on the third floor, though they also slept on the fourth and in the turret. They put in this halfway room for Dagmar, Phillip’s sister. When the house was originally built, she had Max’s room. But when Max came, they had to switch things around. Max was a baby and needed to be near his mother. It wouldn’t be proper for Dagmar to be on the same level as the servants, so they built out a little and made this room, the second-and-a-half floor. It’s a very nice room. It’s my room, in fact, so it’s not part of the tour.”

She kept going to the top floor. We were almost level with the glass dome, and I could see the eyes of the glass women up close—luminous and blue, still clear as ice after a hundred years. Here, the walls were not papered or paneled in fine wood. They were simple white plaster with the occasional pane of clear plexiglass covering up some raw wood planking. While the space was empty, the walls were not. There was writing all over them, and some carvings as well. Names. Dates. Initials. In some cases, they had carved their initials into the plaster so deeply that I could get my finger into the grooves up to the first knuckle.

“This is also part of Morning House,” Belinda said. “The people took it over long after the Ralstons left. When I was a kid, growing up here, we used to come to the island all the time. It was where we had parties and explored. Everything you can imagine, that’s what we used this abandoned mansion for. People did that for years.”

Clearly. The graffiti artists often dated their work. The dates ranged from 1944 up until around five years ago.

“You grew up near here?”

“Oh yes. I’m a local. Morning House has always been on my horizon. We all knew the stories. In fact . . .”

She scanned down the wall near the doorway until she spotted a small message in black ink.

“Here I am,” she said.

I looked and saw a message: BELINDA HENSON WUZ HERE, WITH HER BEER, JUNE 4, 1977.

“Probably not the smartest thing to sign your destruction of private property, but we all did it. The general impression was if you only defaced the fourth floor it would be okay, and it was. As long as you didn’t do it in this last room, which was Faye’s favorite.”

I followed through a set of tall French doors. This room had a vaulted ceiling and traces of silver wallpaper with trailing pink roses.

“She would sing up here,” she said. “The sound would fill the house. There are cabinets built into the walls of this room. They used to store chairs so they could hold recitals here. In theory, anyway. No one ever came to visit, so there were no recitals, and now, no chairs.”

She indicated a panel in the wall and gave it a gentle press, revealing a closet with a vacuum and some buckets, along with a yoga mat.

“I do yoga up here every morning at sunrise,” she said. “I keep my mat here. But there’s also something very important that you’ll find in this closet and in all the rooms.”

She pointed to a red box marked WINDOW FIRE LADDER. I got the message.

“I am *not* a babysitter.”

I hadn’t just asked, “Hey, Dr. Henson, are you a babysitter? Is that how you would describe yourself?” But she spoke like I had, and she was kind of mad about it.

“I care more about the family than the furnishings, but you can learn a lot about people from their homes, obviously. Morning House is Philip Ralston’s creation, and it contains some glimpses into his mind. Come this way. I won’t be breathing down your neck. As long as you all do your jobs safely, I don’t care what you get up to. But no candles. The idiots . . .”

She seemed to want to correct herself, then shrugged.

“. . . who bought this place are setting the fireplaces back up and I saw candles down there in their supplies, but do not use them. The fire ladders are in all the upstairs rooms. I’ll have April show you. Van will forget. He’s good with the presentation, less on some of the details. A child almost climbed up a chimney the other day. Do not let children climb the chimneys.”

“No children in chimneys,” I repeated.

She opened the doors that led out onto a massive balcony that was the roof of the floor below. It was trimmed in a crenellated wall, all unfurnished. From here, the water looked less glassy and green and more like a rippling muscle of steel blue. There were two islands right in front of us, one with a high cliff edge, and a smaller one with a single green house. More were in the distance, small and insignificant.

"This is the highest point on this section of the river," Dr. Henson said, walking to the edge. "You can see for miles. I take a lot of photos from here. I've gotten some amazing pictures of birds. There's a pair of bald eagles that sometimes perch on the oak on the far right. That's the best thing to see. The worst is what people get up to . . ."

She had a haunted air as she said this, and I had immediate visions of naked grandparent parties on boats with names like *I'm Knot That Drunk*. I may have been scarred by my own experiences in Key West. My grandparents' best friends are their hippie neighbors, and I accidentally got a look at someone's entire ass through the screen door as they bent over to get the remote. Sometimes, right before I fall asleep, it appears in my mind. The floating ass, wasting away in Margaritaville.

"This is the most popular thing visitors come to see on this island," she said. I immediately started scanning the view, but she shook her head.

"Look down."

I looked over the side of the balcony, to the ground four stories down. Directly below us, in between the bit of garden and the other balconies and porches, was rubble and nothing else.

"Where is it?" I asked. "What is it?"

"You're looking at it. That's the death spot. You see, the story of the Ralstons is lore around here. It's what made this place so alluring, so mysterious."

I'd read the basics of this in the manual. It was a sad story. On the twenty-seventh of July, 1932, Max Ralston—who was four years old—slipped out of the house without anyone noticing. When they did, there was a massive search. It was his oldest sister, Clara, who found his body at the bottom of the lagoon. The family was in shock. Clara went off by herself for the rest of the day. She returned to the house that evening, seemingly intoxicated and wild with sadness, and fell from what must have been this balcony.

“The witnesses said she seemed to be dancing before she threw herself off,” Dr. Henson said, adjusting her huge glasses. “She landed on the patio below, where the rubble is.

The family immediately left the island—within a few days—and they never came back. The only thing Phillip did to the house after he left was to have the patio where Clara landed smashed to pieces. People always want to see it, but they’re disappointed that it doesn’t make for a good picture. Anyway . . .”

Clara’s death spot was summarily dismissed.

“. . . you’ll be getting the details a lot over the next few days. If you’ve learned what’s in the manual, you should have no problem. I’m sure the others will help you.”

She said this in a tone that suggested that the others may or may not help me and that she didn’t care much either way.

“It’s good to have someone from outside of town to keep an eye on things. And if anything is off, you’ll come and tell me.”

“Off?”

“Not off, but . . .” She stopped herself and cocked her head slightly, as if puzzled by her own remark. “. . . if you have concerns. As I said, I’m not the babysitter, but I want to make sure everyone’s getting along.”

I had no idea what any of that was about, except that it sounded like I was supposed to narc on the others if they did something wrong. Dr. Henson looked out at the view and the other islands in a dispassionate way, signaling that she had no more to say about the subject. She had made it clear: she didn’t care about our creepy teenage problems. Not in a mean way. Just in a not-caring way. Frankly, that’s how I like my authority figures.

“You must be glad they saved it,” I said. “All this history.”

I said this as an offhand remark—something you do to punctuate a conversation. Like *nice to meet you* or *have a good day* or *this concludes my TED Talk*. I wasn’t thinking much of anything aside from that the view was nice, I missed Akilah, and I wondered how many nights in a row I could just eat hot dogs until everyone else here dismissed me as a dirtbag. So I was confused when Dr. Henson said, “No, not really.”

“No?”

“No. That’s not how history works. We don’t save every monument just because it’s big or because it’s there. Lots of things are big, lots of things

are *there*. Some things should be allowed to fall down. But this is still here, so we do the best with it that we can. Anyway, why don’t you take the opportunity to look around. You’ll start training tomorrow.”

With that, she left me alone with the view of the river and my little weird thoughts.

6

When Dr. Henson left me standing on the balcony, I made my way back alone, retracing our path to the second floor. I stared up at the dome for a long time, until my neck hurt and I got dizzy. There was something about the colors, the *faces*. Identical faces of some woman with oversized blue eyes and a tumble of gently curling brown hair, all rendered from shards of glass. Only rich people would put a ring of light-beaming faces with wide, staring eyes on their ceiling. It was like an overcaffeinated audience of clones was watching everything from the sky. But it was the sun at the center that got me the most—the hard power of it, the way it was so orange that it was brown, like it had burned itself up. The overall effect was not soothing if you really looked at it, but the light was nice.

I walked down the hallway where the Ralston kids slept—six rooms, identical in size. The rooms were large and airy, full of ornately carved furniture, painted porcelain lamps, and funny little things. One had a massive armoire with pictures of cats carved into it, another a lamp shaped like a parrot, another a strange little clock shaped like a bear. One had an ornate desk, another a massive gilt mirror that took up a third of the wall. The girls all had those dressing screens that I've never understood. Why do you need a screen to change in your own room? Plus, these had a fine, transparent lace stretched over the frame, so there was no point to them at all. There was more lace on the bedside tables and the bureaus. Lace

curtains on the windows and the glass door that led out to a balcony. Big Lace had gotten its dainty paws on this house.

I drifted around the rooms on the first floor, walking through the sunbeams that flooded in through the windows and illuminated the dust motes. There was the smell of a recent cleaning, a bit of must, and a current of summer air. There were sofas that faced sofas, arranged for a time where there was nothing else to do but face other people and talk to them. No television. No computers or phones or anything to filter out the relentless presence of other people you saw every day. There were cushions for days, all delicately embroidered in flowers and plants and patterns. More lace, of course, dripping over everything like sleeping ghosts. I'd call the style cozy castle.

I found myself in a bit of hallway where there were several cabinets that displayed photos of the Ralston family. They were a tall bunch, and very similar-looking in that way that people from the past all look alike. The girls had bobbed hair and the boys had the same cut, with a sweep across the forehead. They stood in a line wearing identical white shirts and shorts with the letter *R* over where a breast pocket would be. Only one stood out—a girl. While the others stood straight, she had a slight cock to her hip and she looked at the camera from under the fringe of her bangs. She didn't seem impressed. A man figured in several of the photos, usually in a pinstripe suit, extremely from The Past, with a pencil-thin mustache. That had to be Phillip Ralston. And the studio portrait of a woman in a tight evening dress, looking over her shoulder at the camera, her long blond hair floating down in a perfect wave—that was Faye, his actress wife. In a few photos, there was a severe-looking woman with dark hair, pulled back and tight to her head. She had an intelligent face. She looked like someone who didn't miss much. The plaque indicated that this was Dagmar.

There was one photo of a little boy with a wild tangle of curly blond hair and wearing a jacket with a massive bow around his neck, like he was a present. Max. The boy who died. I was looking at him when I realized I was covered in tiny rainbows that were coming from a doorway I hadn't noticed on the walk-through. I moved closer, following the rainbows. I could see a rack of sweatshirts inside.

The dancing rainbows were flying off the twenty or so prisms that were stuck to the large window, full of late afternoon sun. I had to shield my eyes against the onslaught, even as it appeared I was being refueled with pure,

nuclear-grade queer power. Off to the side was a large display of Thousand Island dressing. There was a person in this room, partially concealed by the tower of dressing. They had their back to me and were refolding and piling some T-shirts on a table. Their socks were dark blue with the outline of a creepy tree in black, and the words I LOVE CREEPY SHIT in yellow.

“Why are you staring at my knees?” they said, without turning around or removing their headphones.

I involuntarily backed up a step. The person had dark hair just past the shoulders, choppy, dark blue streaks that almost blended in. They wore loose black shorts and a draping, slightly faded black T-shirt over it.

“The only use for this thing,” they said, pointing at a suncatcher made of tiny mirror disks. “It catches knee creepers.”

“Not your knees,” I said. “Your socks.”

They looked down at their socks, as if it was news that they were wearing any.

“This is the gift shop?” I said.

“What tipped you off?”

I’d just been trying to make conversation, and sometimes conversations demand that you say obvious things. Part of me wanted to back slowly out of the room, but this person was regarding me with interest, and I wanted this person to maintain their interest.

“I’m Marlowe,” I said. “I’m the new . . .”

“I know who you are.”

“You don’t have a name tag,” I pointed out.

“I’m Riki. She, her. I don’t do name tags. I don’t need one. I don’t do tours. I just do this, and no one needs to know my name when they’re buying their dressing. No one works the gift shop but me. I’m an *independent contractor*. . . .

“Oh.”

“You burned a house down,” she went on. “Was it fun? It seems like it would be fun to burn a house down. Cathartic.”

I needed to change the topic. There was a book on the counter. It was open, face down to hold her page. The title was *The Daughter of Time*.

“You like fantasy?” I asked, tipping my head at it.

“Yes,” she said. “I do. But that’s not fantasy. It’s a mystery. This is the twelfth time I’ve read it.”

“It must be good.”

“No,” she said. “I’ve read it twelve times because it’s terrible.”

I got the sense that Riki wasn’t entirely against talking to me—more like she was waiting for me to say something worth listening to. On that front, I was really going to let her down, because all I could think to do was point at the tower of Thousand Island dressing bottles and ask, “Do people buy a lot of dressing?”

This, it seemed, was a topic she was prepared to engage with.

“More than you will ever know,” she said. “A depressing amount. Welcome to Morning House. Come for the excesses of capitalism, stay for the deaths. Get yourself some thick orange dressing at the gift shop. Here.”

She unstuck a flat magnet from a display next to the tablet that served as a checkout.

“The recipe for Thousand Island dressing. On a magnet. Here you go.”

It looked like she was giving it to me, though I didn’t know why, so I reached out for it.

“Eight bucks,” she said.

“Oh. I . . .”

I didn’t want a salad dressing recipe magnet, but it seemed by reaching out for it I had entered some kind of contract. At that moment, April appeared in the doorway and looked between me and Riki, toying with her monogram necklace, sliding the *A* back and forth on the chain.

“Marlowe, are you . . .” April didn’t finish that question.

Riki retracted the magnet and slapped it back on the display.

“Hi, April,” she said.

“Hey, Riki. Um, Marlowe? Did you need help unpacking or with your stuff? Because we’re going to have dinner in the main dining room here in the house tonight, as a special thing, for you.”

“A special dinner in the house,” Riki said. “You’re getting the celebrity treatment.”

April’s freckly face flushed pink and she compressed her lips, as if physically holding in a remark. Something was going on here, some issue that I was not privy to. It was like watching two cats quietly regarding each other, paws on the ground but the claws silently sliding from under the fur.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’ll go unpack. I’m good.”

“Oh.” April nodded. I seem to have said the right thing. “Okay. Great. Dinner’s at seven.”

I got the impression I was supposed to go now, so I shuffled toward the door, where I was again splattered with rainbows. Riki smirked and returned to the pile of sweatshirts she had been folding when I interrupted.

I often think back to this first meeting with Riki. Things at Morning House, I could already tell, were going to be complicated. I was so innocent then to think that *complicated* would cover the situation I had gotten myself into. I tell myself that the dominos were already set up before I got there—they only needed that little push to set them all going on their terrible track. But there I was, the unknowing, necessary finger, flicking the first one into motion.

July 14, 1932

Clara floated under the floor.

It’s hard to keep a secret on an island. You need to find a private place, and if the island is small, this can be difficult. But Clara Ralston was good at finding solutions. They may look for you in every room or on the water or even on a roof, but no one ever looks under their feet.

She found her spot her first summer on the island. Their boathouse was large, and its slips housed their yacht and smaller boats. Clara swam under the dock, into the shadowy water. The stranger things of the river were here—the slimier sea vegetation, reaching up for her like a thousand slippery fingers, the smallest fish with the most to hide, the things that had no name that the river coughed up and spat toward the banks, the things that were probably rocks but you were never sure.

She would sometimes float here for an hour in the dark, the dock above so close at points that it almost touched her face, the crew or members of her family walking right on top of her, speaking and unaware of the person just under the floor, bobbing and smiling. She’d heard many things in her hideaway. She knew about their captain’s mistress, Velma, who worked at Eddie’s Bar in Clement Bay. The upstairs maid and the gardener would meet here when the crew took the yacht out and canoodle in one of the canoes. She always hoped to overhear something juicy either about or from Father, but he seemed to have no secrets. He was just as boring in private as he was in public.

“Clara?” a voice called.

William had come to meet her for a ride on her speedboat, *Silver Arrow*. She was not covetous of her boat and would allow her siblings to use it freely. She was, however, careful to guard her secret space, even from William, her closest sibling. She glided silently under the boards,

swimming around the boathouse to the shore, emerging through the door as if she'd come from the open water.

"Are you ready?" she asked. "I want to show you something."

Silver Arrow was a magnificent little mahogany speedboat that had come in second in the powerboat races last summer. She could go almost sixty miles an hour. Clara opened her up and cut through the water, her bobbed hair flattening against her head. Sometimes when she went out in her boat, she thought about not stopping, not turning. With a flick of the wrist she could be in Canada. She could step onto its shore and hide in its wilds. Or she could ride the length of the St. Lawrence out to sea.

Today, she steered them toward Washington Island, one of the most sizable islands, just offshore from the town of Clayton.

"Frankie told me about this," she said, slowing the boat down and turning into an inlet. "He said I had to go and have a look."

Frankie was a part-time worker on the island who had recently repaired one of their boats. He was ancient and smoked far too much, but he knew everything about the river. The St. Lawrence was famous for its shipwrecks—it had thousands. Most were deep, a hundred or hundreds of feet down. This one, however, was only about ten feet below the surface, beams clearly visible. She pulled *Silver Arrow* right on top of it and cut the engine.

"See that?" she said as they tacked gently in place. "Under us. It's the wreck of the *Elk*. Do you want to hear the story Frankie told me about this one?"

"I don't know if I believe any story Frankie tells."

"Listen. He said that the captain lived here, on Washington Island." She indicated the piece of land only a dozen or so yards away. "He was coming home, and he was drunk—so drunk he rammed into the island. He knew the ship was going to sink, but he thought he could get it in a little closer, so it would be in more shallow water in front of his house. The captain's wife came out and saw her husband outside, on his slowly sinking ship, so she got her paints and she painted it going down. That's how slow it was."

She stood up on her seat, stepped to the edge of the boat, and dove into the clear water. The ship right there—a hundred or so feet of her—the hull bizarrely intact, encrusted in vegetation. It was terrible and wonderful what the water did to the things it claimed. She reached out and tapped the rotting wood, then quickly withdrew her hand and shot to the surface.

"Touched it," she said.

“What for?”

“It’s less scary that way,” she said as she pulled herself up the back of the boat. “Shipwrecks are eerie, but I can’t look away.” She hooked her chin on the edge of the boat and looked down at the *Elk* as a large fish glided by. “This one, it’s like us, sinking slowly, right in front of everyone. And they came from *Life* magazine and took pictures of us going down. I don’t know what we look like afterward. No one’s made that picture yet. No one wants to paint the curse.”

“What the hell has gotten into you recently?” William said. “You’re drunk all the time and you talk like Edgar Allan Poe. I half expect to see you walking the parapet at midnight with a raven on your shoulder.”

“That sounds amazing. I should do that. Can we get ravens here? Can I paint a pigeon?”

“Clara.”

He said her name crisply, and she sat up in mock attention.

“William,” she replied.

“What is wrong with you? Why do you keep saying these strange things, like you think our family is cursed? We might be bored. We might be a little offbeat. But we’re not cursed. Cursed families don’t get photo essays in *Life*, no matter what you say. You don’t need to do this spooky act around me.”

“*Think* our family is cursed?” Clara dipped her fingers into the water. “I know it is. There’s nothing magical about curses. You just do a bad thing long enough, it takes root. No magic about it. You know it as well as I do.”

If William knew what Clara meant, he wasn’t prepared to admit it. He turned his focus to the wreck of the *Elk* below them, the view wobbling in the ripples on the water.

“You’re in one of your moods,” William finally replied, He put on a pair of sunglasses and turned his face to the sky. Clara continued looking at the *Elk* down below, in the strange world under the water. Only ten feet down but in another land. You could visit, but if you stayed in it too long the current would claim your lungs and the fish would eat your eyes. Your bones would settle to the bottom and turn to silt.

William was right. She was in a mood, haunted by a thought she could not express. Her soul cried for escape—just go, drive the boat and go—but she instead took the wheel and steered them back, inevitably, to Morning House.

7

It didn’t take me long to empty my two suitcases. I put things into the rickety dresser drawers. I put the sheets on my bed, arranged the single throw pillow April had provided, put out my toiletries and the smattering of samples and mistakes that I smilingly call my makeup collection. And in a place of pride, on the middle of the bureau, the Midnight Rose lipstick Akilah had given me.

Maybe it was the bouncing vibes or just the fact that being new can sometimes feel like dislike, but I slipped into a funk. I had entered the time of day when, for some reason, I always felt depressed about Akilah. It was always just as the sun was going down that my mood would free-fall. It was like I could sense the ghosts of all the summer nights we were supposed to have had together. I should have called my parents, but they would have heard my bummed-out tone and worried. I texted. I sat down on the edge of my squeaky new bed and scrolled on my phone as the shadows fell over my room. I was so lost in my murky thoughts that I didn’t notice it had passed seven. Only the little knock on the door shook me out of it.

“Dinner!” April said as she peered around the side.

I was surprised to find that, in my gloomy absence, April and Van had gone to some trouble to make the grand dining room into a proper little party for me.

I was ushered to a place at the mahogany table set with silver plastic dishes and a napkin that someone had attempted to fold into some shape. It

was kind of a spiky triangle situation.

“It’s a swan,” Van said. “Napkin art is my passion.”

“We just wanted you to have a good first night,” April said. “And— Oh, hey! Good! Everyone’s here.”

Two new people joined us. The first was a stunning girl with short hair wearing a pair of white sweatpants and a cropped hoodie. From her posture and gait, it was clear that she was an athlete. She moved well, the way I think you’re supposed to, head and hips and feet all properly aligned. I’d seen my reflection as I’d walked into the ballroom earlier and I looked like I was walking against the wind.

I straightened up.

“I’m Liani Harris,” the girl said.

The other person was a guy, maybe two inches shorter than me, but built out by several inches. Every part of him had been worked out. Even his forearms were cut. He had a confusingly even tan and professionally white teeth. He reminded me of a potato, for some reason. A nicely baked potato, ready to burst with a little squeeze.

“Tom,” the other person said, extending his hand. “Tom Keeting.”

I’m not sure I’d ever done a handshake before, largely because I don’t spend my time closing deals or greeting foreign leaders. Tom gripped my hand much more firmly than I expected, giving my hand a quick crunch and a shake. He was a polite potato.

“Marlowe,” I said. “Wexler.”

“It’s good to have you here, Marlowe,” he replied.

Was it? Liani seemed less convinced, and I agreed with her.

“Okay!” April said. “Let’s eat! So we have the chicken thing again tonight. Do you eat chicken, Marlowe? This one is good. It’s got tomatoes and onions and peppers. This mac and cheese is made with butternut squash, so it’s vegan, and here’s salad. And there’s no nuts in anything . . .”

April rambled on about the meal while the others sat and began filling their plates. I was genuinely touched by all this effort. Here I was, some random weirdo who’d been thrust on them, and they were trying to make me welcome. Maybe I’d been wrong. Maybe this would be the best summer ever. I began to feel the lift. Yes. Though I had been brought low with the fire, perhaps I could rise. I could work my way back into polite society. I could convince Akilah that I probably wouldn’t burn two houses down. It

would be a funny story someday. And it all started here, at this table, in the room with the moss-green walls.

Do you ever get like this? Think a dozen thoughts at once and go up like a balloon or sink like a balloon with a rock in it? Just ping around with no emotional middle point? If so, get in touch with me at once. We'll go have confusing times together.

"So," Liani said, "what do you think so far?"

I tried to think of something significant to say, something that would convey that I understood she was just being nice, but also that I was paying attention to what I had seen, and also that I was funny and altogether a pleasure to be around.

What I said was "It's big."

Tom passed me the mac and cheese. "Liani and I are the outdoor people. I handle boats and the dock side, and Liani is the lifeguard at the lagoon."

"I'm sort of the opposite of a lifeguard," I said.

It was meant as a joke, but Liani cocked her head at me. There is no delete button for real-life conversations, and that is most of my problem.

"What does that mean?" she said. "You can't swim?"

"I can swim," I said. "I mean, I won't sink. But I don't think I swim correctly? My strokes are . . . not right, but . . . I won't sink?"

No one wanted to hear whatever I was saying, so I stopped.

"We grew up here, so we can all swim," April said, helpfully ending this strange interlude.

"My family is in boating," Tom cut in.

"*In* boating," Van repeated. "Not into. In."

"Uncle Jim's? The boat you rode in on? My dad and my aunt own it. It's been in the family for fifty years. My grandfather started it. We do tours, fishing, boat rentals."

Tom reminded me of someone running for office. I wouldn't have been surprised if he concluded this by saying *I'm Tom Keeting, and I approve this message*.

"So," Van said. "You're from Syracuse, right? Why do you think Henson brought you here?"

He was saying what they must have all been wondering.

"My history teacher knows her. Maybe I could learn the stuff fast enough? I'm good at memorizing. And you're short a person or something?"

This had a strange effect on the assembled.

“Short,” Van repeated, toying with his fork. “I guess we are. Short a person. It’s a weird phrase, right? Short. You’re short. Short . . .”

Liani drilled her gaze into her mac and cheese. April fluttered a bit and leaned in, about to speak, when someone else entered the room. Riki, headphones around her neck, leaking sound, dropped into a chair next to me.

“Riki!” Van said. “Joining us tonight?”

“There a problem with that, Van?”

“You know I have no problems with anything. I’m utterly *frictionless*. We never see you, is all. Not for dinner.”

April’s eyes went wide. Tom began forking up a massive amount of mac and cheese and shoveling it in with fervor. He ate like he knew something you didn’t.

“So,” I said, “I’m going to be an indoor guide? I guess I’ll be going on tours for a few days. I learned a bunch of stuff from the guidebook. Dr. Henson was saying people like to see that rocky bit outside, where the girl fell? Clara?”

“People love damage,” Riki said, digging away at her mac and cheese.

“Thanks for that,” Liani said.

“It’s true, though. People like to hear about crime, about war. They like to see the scars. People come here because they want to look at a big, expensive house where some people died.”

“Not everyone is a freak,” Liani said.

Everything was vibes. Vibes in all directions, bouncing around like sunbeams. I couldn’t duck them.

“Nothing freakish about it, and nothing wrong with freaks. People love, have always loved, dark shit. And this place has a good story. Strange rich family, little boy drowns when no one is looking, older sister dances off the roof, house is left to rot, brother leaves a treasure . . .”

“Treasure?” I repeated. “That wasn’t in the guide.”

“Because it’s bullshit,” Liani said.

“Here are the facts,” Riki went on. “Benjamin, the last surviving Ralston, used to come to the island every year until he died. He last came in 2002. He insisted on coming onto the island alone. As he got off the boat, he told the others he was going to bury a treasure, and he had something with him that he didn’t have when he got back on the boat.”

“Bullshit,” Liani repeated.

“You’re both correct,” Dr. Henson said from the doorway. I hadn’t heard her approach. It was unsettling. She had changed out of the green stick insect outfit and was now wearing a loose dress in light gray linen, with a heavy statement necklace made of gold beads with an owl pendant resting on her sternum.

“Riki is correct in that Benjamin is reported to have said it,” she said. “Liani is correct in that I imagine it was a joke. You’ll get to find this out quickly, Marlowe. Water people—sailors, people who live near oceans, rivers—they love a story. And these islands do have a lot of stories. My grandfather was a bootlegger. He smuggled whiskey in from Canada. He told me stories of how they used this island and this house, both while it was being built and when the family was here. In the fall and winter they had a free-for-all, but even in the summer, with the Ralstons in the building, they kept it going. The builders built in a little hiding spot in the house that wasn’t on the plans.”

“A hidden passage?” Tom asked.

“Nothing that exciting. More like a dank closet, far from anywhere the family might go. And there’s no way that space is structurally sound, so I’m not telling you where it is. But it’s also not very interesting. It’s basically a closet. I’ve been in it. There’s no treasure. It’s full of old bottles and dead mice. Don’t worry about the secret places. Look at what’s around you, on display.”

She waved her long-fingered hand around, indicating the room we were in, but I didn’t see any potential evils. Just chicken and vegan mac and cheese.

Dr. Henson squinted at something on the other side of the room.

“Is that mirror crooked?” she asked. “I can’t tell. I had corrective eye surgery last year. Before, if I had looked at that mirror without my glasses it would have been a blob on the wall. Now I don’t know whether to trust my eyes.”

Everyone turned. I couldn’t tell if the mirror was crooked either, as the irregular gold pattern on the wallpaper made it impossible to tell which way was straight.

“Sometimes I wonder if it was worth getting my eyes fixed,” she went on. “The past looks better when it’s a little blurry. Soft focus. That’s how we like our past. That’s why we never learn.”

I got the feeling that we'd been set up for that remark, that she'd never cared about the mirror and this was her opener for everything she ever did—history lectures, general small talk, drive-through orders.

"As a historian," she continued, "a lot of times I find that people ignore the obvious. Evil, especially. People act like if a thing is in front of them—if people come out and say or do something in full view of everyone—that somehow it must be okay. Because how can they be doing anything wrong if they're doing it for everyone to see? Evil isn't always smart. Some evil deeds are done through complex maneuvers in secret, but the biggest evils, the ones people get away with most often, are the ones done right out in the open."

"Are you talking about the dickheads who bought this place?" Van asked.

"Oh. Them." Dr. Henson's phone pinged and she picked it up, glancing at it. "I think those particular dickheads, as you put it, work both in the open and privately. Hence buying a castle on an island. Public, private—the lines can be blurry."

"Well, they're continuing the Ralston curse," Riki said.

I don't believe in curses, exactly, but I'd had some bad luck this summer and it seemed like the universe was sending Marlowe Wexler a message to keep her head down and lower her expectations.

"Curse?" I said, turning to Riki.

"Nothing good happened to that family," she replied.

"What happened is this," Dr. Henson cut in, unable to risk hearing history told incorrectly. She pulled out the chair at the far end of the table, keeping a little distance from us, and sat down. "On July twenty-seventh, 1932, Max Ralston drowned in the afternoon when he was left unattended. His sister Clara fell off the roof that night, presumably jumping due to grief. Faye Ralston, Max's mother, didn't recover from the shock. A month or two later, Phillip Ralston sought the advice of his medical colleagues, and decided to take her to the first private psychiatric facility in the United States, Craig House. Craig House was a modern facility run by Dr. Clarence Slocum. It's outside New York City in the town of Beacon. It was a very fancy place—Zelda Fitzgerald was there when Faye was. Marilyn Monroe would stay there later."

"Fancy," Van said.

“That’s where Faye was during Christmas 1932, just five months after the deaths. Phillip rented a large house in the woods nearby so the family could spend the holiday together. But on the twenty-eighth of December, Dagmar, Phillip’s sister, and Unity took a walk through the snow. They didn’t know the area, so they didn’t realize the snowy ground they were walking on was a frozen pond underneath. They fell through the ice and drowned. That’s four members of the family dead between July and December.

“So now there were four Ralston children: William, Victory, Edward, and Benjamin. Victory attended Yale University, where she graduated from medical school with honors. William studied music at Juilliard, and Benjamin studied painting at Beaux-Arts de Paris. None of them were slouches. Benjamin got out of Paris before the Nazi invasion in 1940 and encouraged Victory and William to join him in London to aid the war effort. They got a house together. Victory worked in a war hospital, William helped refugee efforts, and Benjamin worked with British intelligence. He was away on the night in 1941 when a bomb landed on their street and blew up the house. Victory and William were both killed. Phillip had a heart attack when he got the news. He survived that one, but not the next one, which happened five months later. So, in 1941 that’s three more Ralstons dead.”

This was a cheerful countdown.

“Meanwhile,” she said, “Edward had been in New York. He had a serious alcohol addiction. Technically he worked as a banker, but really he spent his time gambling and partying. He was driving drunk one night in 1944 and drove his car into a river and died. Faye never left the hospital and died there in October 1947. That left Benjamin as the very last Ralston. He was a decorated war hero and well respected in the art community. He came out as a gay man to his siblings quite early on. Benjamin was a champion for people with AIDS, long before the disease had its formal name. He poured much of his remaining fortune into housing and treatment programs for those with the disease. Moreover, he was known to help people on a personal level—going to hospitals, sitting with people who had lost partners, providing food, shelter, and comfort wherever he could. He paid bail for people who were jailed during ACT UP protests.”

“Raise one to Benjamin,” Van said, raising his can of Coke. “Here’s to a real one.”

“And the only one who made it to old age. And that is the story that the Ralston curse is based on. In reality, it was a strange family that made its own bad luck, though some members of the family tried to be beneficial to society.”

Lecture finished, Dr. Henson stood to go, focusing on her phone and not looking at us again.

“Going to dinner in town,” she said as she left the room. “Make sure to clean this up.”

Suddenly, Riki’s I Like Spooky Shit made a lot of sense. She had been following the story as it was told, hooked on every word, though she clearly knew all the details. She was into it. There was no missing it. Now that it was over, she too got up, leaving her dirty plate.

“Are you going to help clean up?” Liani asked.

“No,” Riki said. “I’m an independent contractor.”

“I can think of other things you are.”

“Happy for you, Liani. Nurture that imagination.”

As Riki walked toward the door, she stopped as she was about to pull her headphones over her ears.

“Oh, by the way,” she said to me, “did anyone mention you’re taking over for a dead guy?”

July 19, 1932

“They’re arguing,” Unity said.

She was at the window of the playhouse library, looking out from between the tangles of ivy and honeysuckle that squeezed the building.

“Who is?” Victory asked.

“Father and Faye.”

Victory joined her sister at the window and looked out. They couldn’t hear what was being said, but the gestures made it clear. Phillip was indicating the water. Faye was bundling a crying Max in a blanket and moving him back toward the house.

“Another failed swimming lesson,” Victory said.

“Not a failure,” Unity replied. “Max is a difficult student.”

“Look at Faye’s face. Look at Father’s. That’s failure.”

“That’s just Faye giving up,” Unity corrected her.

They were supposed to call Faye “Mother,” and they did in front of their elders, but when it was the six of them, she was always called Faye. Sometimes it was still so odd that she was here.

For the first ten years of her life, Victory didn’t have a mother. Like her siblings, she had been adopted almost from the very moment of her birth. She came into the world and went directly into the hands of Phillip Ralston. She would ask her friends at school what mothers did, and she got vague answers about planning meals and parties and taking care of the house and telling them to listen to their father. The Ralstons had a housekeeper to take care of the running of the house. They had a cook, and servants who made their beds and laid out their clothes. They had their aunt Dagmar to sit silent and knowing at the opposite end of the dining table and weigh in on domestic matters. There were loads of women in their houses who sounded like they did things mothers did, so Victory felt herself perhaps a little superior to people who had only one woman to do all of that. Plus, she had

her five siblings to talk to, to help her when she had problems, to support her. She needed nothing else.

Then, when they came home for the winter break from school six years ago, their father sat them all down in the living room of their Fifth Avenue house. Next to him was a woman. In Victory's memory, she was like a picture of a goddess from a story—tall, finger-curled and bobbed hair that looked like it was spun from platinum. She was wearing a stunning green velvet dress.

"This is Faye," he said. "Faye Anderson."

"You were in that film we saw," William said. "*The Silver Cuckoo*."

"You have a good memory," Faye said, smiling.

"Faye has been in many films, and many shows here in the city. Children, I am so very glad to tell you that Faye has agreed to be my wife, and your mother."

Victory took this in stride. So another woman was joining the staff. Not everyone felt the same. Clara came to her room that night, wrapped in her red dressing gown and clutching a pillow.

"She's going to be our stepmother," Clara said.

"So what?"

"So what? Our mother, Victory. Our *stepmother*. Stepmothers are always mean in stories."

This was an unusual display of distress from the normally fearless Clara—the Clara who pinched out matches with her fingertips and dove in any body of water she saw. The same Clara who saw a group of boys abusing a stray cat and punched the ringleader in the face, knocking out his two front teeth and rescuing the animal. (Father paid for the boy's dental work and privately elevated Clara to the highest rank within the household for her courage. The lucky cat went to live with their neighbor, Mrs. Elsmore, who named him Lorenzo, installed velvet cushions on every windowsill for his comfort, and fed him poached salmon twice a day.

"She's not our stepmother," Victory replied.

"Of course she will be. She's marrying Father."

"But you have to have had a mother for someone to be a stepmother, and we've never had one, so she can't be. She'll just be Mother."

Victory had no idea if what she'd just said was true, but it sounded solid. Clara calmed a bit and thought it over.

“Whatever,” Clara finally replied, letting that part go and hugging her pillow closer. “She’s still going to be mean. She won’t like us.”

But Faye Ralston was not mean. In fact, she was kind. She had presents for each child that reflected their interests. Faye loved sport as much as the Ralston family did. She was an excellent skier and swimmer. When they fell ill, she sat by their bedsides if they were sent home from school. She was nothing at all like the stepmothers in fairy tales. Victory thought Faye was entirely acceptable, and she seemed to make Father happy. This may have been heightened by the fact that they only spent school holidays and summers together, but those summers were idyllic.

Two years into the new arrangement, Faye started throwing up after breakfast, and then she got a little bump at her belly. Phillip Ralston, being a man of science, did not dance around the subject with his children. There was a child growing inside Faye—his child, their new sibling. He pulled out a medical textbook and showed them what was going on inside Faye’s body.

“Faye is working hard right now,” he went on. “She is growing organs and systems. She is providing nutrition to the new child through the food she eats.”

“The baby eats nut cutlets?” Benjamin asked.

“Not exactly. But the nutrients in the nut cutlets are transformed into the material the baby needs to grow and develop. So we must all be very good and kind to Faye and thank her for working so hard. It is not easy. That’s why she feels tired and ill sometimes. But she is perfectly healthy. You have no reason to fear.”

Unity burst into tears. Unity was like that.

“But you’ll still love us?” she asked. “Won’t you?”

“Unity! Come here.” He reached out his arms to his daughter. “Everything will be the same. It will only improve.”

Unity did not budge. Her concern began to affect the others. Clara also began to cry. William patted her shoulder and looked extremely concerned. Edward looked askance, and Benjamin appeared mildly terrified. Only Victory was unmoved, but this was mostly because she was still digesting the anatomical implications of what she’d just learned. It was fascinating stuff, growing babies.

“What’s wrong?” Phillip said, saddened by the response of his children. “What is it?”

“The baby will be different,” Unity said. “Everything will be different. If the baby comes from you and Faye, that means he will be more connected to you than we are. You said that’s how heredity works.”

“Ah.” Phillip Ralston nodded. “Yes, of course. We have discussed the concept of heredity. Of breeding. Animals have offspring, and we, as humans, are animals. We are simply the highest form of animal. And when we breed selectively, we produce the highest form of human. But our case . . .”

He indicated all the children and himself.

“Our case is quite special,” he began. “I delivered you all. I knew your mothers, and I also knew who your fathers were. All died in the war—all good, strong men. The women who gave birth to you were also strong and good. It was the war that made it impossible for them to care for you, the loss of their husbands, the struggle to feed their families. I took you all with me, one by one, because I had the resources to care for you.”

Unity sniffled and stopped crying, and the mood calmed.

“You promise we’re just as good?” she asked.

“My dear Unity, do you think that I—an established expert of eugenics, who understands the importance of biological purity—would be careless? No. I met you at your birth. I knew you all to be quite magnificent. I chose you. Isn’t that wonderful? You are all quite, quite perfect.”

Unity nestled her head into her father’s chest. Victory watched, unsure of how she felt.

“That means that some babies are not as good,” she said.

“Exactly so.”

“How can you tell?”

“Through looking at the parents. Race, of course. Their economic state . . .”

“You just said they couldn’t afford to keep us.”

“I did, and well spotted, Victory.” He nodded approvingly. “That was because of the war. Wars cause scarcity. Come now. I think you all could use some cheering up. I think a trip to the pictures is in order. And perhaps we’ll stop at FAO Schwarz and see what new toys they have.”

All was made right with that. Everyone jumped up and cheered at the thought of movies and toys. Victory did as well, but her mind always lingered on the idea that some people might not be as good as others. It didn’t make sense to her, no matter how many times her father explained

the science (which was constantly). After all, they were Americans, and they were always told how this was the land of the free and everyone was equal. She saw many people on the street in New York, and they all seemed fine to her. Father had to be right, because he was a doctor and knew about these things, and yet she was dissatisfied. She was young and knew little, but she knew her heart, and her heart said no to this idea.

Eugenics was wrong. She kept this thought locked away. It was hers, and hers alone, because it might be taken from her if she showed it to the others. She would keep it and grow it. A little seed.

Max was born in New York City in February on a freezing-cold morning during an early frost. Phillip had kept the children home from school for the last two weeks of the pregnancy so they could be there when their new sibling was born. There was a frantic happiness all around the house, then the high wail of a baby. This little thing—red, almost purple at times, eyes screwed shut and tiny fists—this was Max.

Things were not the same. It was like the Ralstons had been living on a finely balanced platform that was, ever so slightly, starting to tip. Max was Faye's baby, always in her arms. There was a connection there that was unlike any other in the house. Faye was good to all, but Max was small and needed her and her alone. He needed her milk, her warmth. He needed to be carried from room to room and held. On the piano in the music room (the one that was really for guests and show—William mostly played the one in the playhouse), there was a lace cloth and an array of framed photographs. There were two group family photos, three of Clara, Unity, and William by themselves. Two of Edward, Benjamin, and Victory. One of the three sisters and one of the three brothers. There were eight of Max.

Right now, Max was nearing the house, wrapped tight in Faye's embrace, his arms around her neck, letting out a piercing wail that sent the birds scattering. Victory and Unity stepped back from the window so they would not be seen staring out.

"He's going to be a nightmare today," Clara said, coming into the room, sweat dripping down her face. "God, listen to that. They should stick him on a lighthouse island to warn off ships."

"He didn't want to swim," Unity said.

"Clearly. He never does. And now someone's going to pay."

Victory turned away from Clara. She was right, of course, but Victory didn't like talking about it. Talking about it made it more real, more

immediate. She peeled back a bit of curtain and watched the sobbing Max go inside with Faye. Father stood alone for a moment, hands on hips, staring up at the sun. He had a look on his face that Victory had never seen there before: defeat. The wriggling, screaming four-year-old had defeated him.

"Lock your doors," Clara said as she went back toward the stairs.

8

“Well, that moves things along,” Van said, tipping his chair onto its back legs and pulling his vape out of his pocket.

I knew immediately this was no joke, because Riki’s words had the effect of someone dropping a hissing bomb with a lit fuse on the table. There was a second of paralyzed confusion, then Liani jumped up and left. Tom swore under his breath and went after her. April’s mouth twisted up into a strange little bow, like she had swallowed a bunch of bees.

“What’s happening?” I asked. I think this was a fair question. In reply, April grabbed me and got me out of the room in a kind of Secret Service hustle.

“Oh god,” she said as we made our way through the echoing main hall, under the watchful gaze of the women in the ceiling. “I’m so sorry. God. This isn’t your fault.”

I hadn’t known that anything in this would be my fault, but I allowed myself to be moved along, feeling guilty anyway. As I’ve said, I’m good at feeling guilty. It’s my natural resting state.

April couldn’t decide which way to take me, starting first for one of the reception rooms on the first floor, then taking me outside. We saw Liani and Tom moving quickly down the lawn, so April took me around the veranda, opting for an isolated section that wrapped the side of the house.

“*I* wanted to tell you,” she said in a low voice as she sat down on one of the Adirondack chairs. “I thought you should know that something

happened. I mean, someone was going to tell you. I *told* them that. I said that you would find out."

"What is going on?" I asked again.

In reply, April reached into the pocket of her hoodie and got out her phone. She flicked through some photos until she came to one that showed her and a guy with a deep tan.

"Chris," she said. Her voice was thick with suppressed emotion. "Chris Nelson."

I've never been attracted to guys, so I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be looking for when assessing them, but I think Chris was handsome. He had black hair, prominent, dark brows, deep-brown eyes, and a soft smile. He was posing with a pit bull wearing a dog jacket that read ADOPT ME. I had to assume that Chris was the dead guy Riki had referred to because I couldn't say to April *So, this is the dead one, huh?*

"It happened seven weeks ago," she went on. "The second of May. Prom. There was a party. It's a tradition. It's a different island every year so that they can't stop it. The whole thing is you stay until dawn and you come back to town for breakfast. It's kind of more important than the prom itself. Every year the school and the cops say they're going to shut it down, but no one does because they all went to it when they were in high school. It's that kind of thing."

April looked to see if I was following, and I nodded.

"There were always six of us," she said. "Me, Chris, Tom, Liani, Van, and Riki. We've known each other since we were—I don't even know. We all grew up basically on the same street. We were always like brothers and sisters when we were little, but that changed. Chris and Liani started dating in junior year. They broke up last fall, in November. That's a whole other story. Then Chris and Van got together around Valentine's Day. So when prom came, Chris went with Van, and the rest of us went single. I mean, except for Riki. She didn't go to the prom itself."

She gave me a little nod as if to say, *you know what I mean*. And the thing was, I did. I'd only been on this island for four hours and I already knew that no, Riki wasn't going to the prom.

April needed a moment to steady herself before she got to the next part of the story. She rubbed the heels of her hands on her thighs and blinked several times. I braced myself.

“That night,” she began, “we all met up at eleven thirty to ride out. Van and Chris went together on one of Chris’s family’s Jet Skis. Tom, Liani, and I went on one of Tom’s family’s small boats. I don’t know how Riki got out there. She was there when we all arrived. Here . . .” She scrolled through her phone for another moment and held up a photo. “This was us earlier in the night.”

There was Liani in a stunning long red dress with a slit up the leg. She was with Tom, who wore a dark suit. Chris and Van were next to them. Chris was in a black tuxedo. Van wore a gray one, with tails and a top hat. April was in a blue dress with a full skirt. Riki was not in the picture.

“There was so much happening that night,” she said. “We were all dancing, taking videos. Pretty much everyone was drunk. At some point, Van and Chris went off to be alone, and then Van was back, all upset, because he and Chris got into a fight. But that happened a lot. Then, as the sun came up, everyone started to get ready to go back for breakfast. Van was supposed to be riding back with Chris on Chris’s Jet Ski, but Chris was still off somewhere.

Van said that Chris could just stay on the island for all he cared and he would ride with us on the boat. So we were packing up, and I was going to go look for Chris, but then someone started screaming. Then lots of people were screaming, saying Chris was in the water . . .”

April seemed to drift away from the veranda where we sat. She was remembering, and she tucked her knees into her chest and hugged them.

“We all ran to where the screaming was coming from,” April said. “I can still see him there, in the water . . .”

She shook her head and closed her eyes, willing the image away.

“Liani tore off—she ran so fast. She got down to one of the shore points. She didn’t even take off her dress, she just pulled it up to her waist and jumped in. I can always see her, swimming in that dress. She flipped him over and pulled him to the shore and started CPR, but it was too late.”

Liani, swimming in a prom dress to pull her ex-boyfriend from the water. It was all so extreme. So intense.

“When Van saw him—I remember he just started laughing like crazy. He couldn’t stop. He was actually hysterical. We had to stop him from jumping in the water too. He started saying he was going to swim to shore. I grabbed him. Tom grabbed him. We had to hold him down.”

“What happened?” I said. “Did Chris fall?”

“I think so. No one knows. Everyone was at least a little drunk. I think Chris was a lot drunk. I don’t know if he jumped in to swim and didn’t think about the rocks, or if he was close to the edge and he lost his balance. It just happened. But he hit his head and drowned.”

April put her phone into the pocket of her fleece.

“We talked about whether we should tell you. Liani made the case that we shouldn’t, and she had maybe the worst trauma, aside from Van. Van . . . you noticed he’s a little high? He’s been like that since it happened. He’s self-medicating all the time. It wasn’t his fault.”

I hadn’t suggested it was, but April was just talking at this point.

“Chris was the one who set this all up for us. Chris was big into organizing things and working for charities. Chris was the best. He used to work at an animal shelter. And he was a big part of River Rescue, which is an environmental group that protects the river. He was one of those people who went to community meetings and made speeches about stuff. When this island went up for sale, and the town got it for the summer for tourism, Chris made the pitch that the guides should come from our high school. He actually went to all these meetings about educational grants. He helped set up the whole thing where the town would hire the six of us, and Dr. Henson would have to teach us for a semester, and we would get school credit for it and then get summer jobs. That’s what he was like. He was going to go to *Princeton*. Anyway, all we want to do is be with each other, and we are, you know? We’re here. And it’s a job. And we have to do it for Chris.”

I nodded. I had one more question, but I wasn’t sure whether to ask: *Hey, what the hell is the deal with Riki?* Sometimes if you want to know something, you have to ask around the question.

“Riki lives here too?” I said. “She’s not in the playhouse.”

“She stays here, in the house,” April replied. “Riki tends to operate by a different set of rules than the rest of us.”

She slid the charm on her necklace back and forth, ticktock, ticktock.

“You saw there’s some tension,” she said.

“Hard to miss.”

“Yeah . . .” April rubbed her right hand down the side of her face. “Riki’s kind of the reason Chris and Liani broke up last fall. It was . . . bad. I’m surprised she decided to go through with it—to take the class with us and come here. But that’s Riki. She’s going to do what’s she’s going to do.”

She held up her hands, indicating that these things were out of her control.

“You know,” she said, “sometimes I think, at least it happened in May. If it had been in April, I would never be able to say my name without thinking about him. But I always think about him anyway. I should get back and check on Van. Are you okay?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You’ve been through a lot this summer, right? And this was a lot.”

She reached out her hand and put it softly on my elbow. I have to admit a light flutter—I’m not immune to the charms of a cute redheaded girl. But that wasn’t where my head was at, or my heart. This was all too grave, too much.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Oh. Good. Okay.”

She stood, lingered an uncertain moment, then nodded and left. I stayed on the veranda for a moment, watching an orange-and-black butterfly meander past on a soft current of breeze.

Chris had entered the chat. Chris, the dead guy.

9

It wasn’t lost on me that this was something interesting I could message Akilah about. At least, it seemed like an interesting idea at first glance. But what would that message look like? *Hey, guess what? I’m subbing for a dead guy. He fell off a cliff. How’s the Cheesecake Factory?*

No. I couldn’t be the one who just started a fire and now had random dead guy stories. You can have one of those, but not both. Not in a matter of under two weeks.

I returned to my room for the rest of the night, shuffling around and rearranging things, listening for noises, voices in the fairy-tale house. The walls were thick but the floorboards sang. I heard Liani and April walking up the steps. I went online and searched the name *Chris Nelson*. I got five hits from local sites.

CLEMENT BAY TEEN DIES IN ACCIDENT

A local teenager has died after falling from a rocky point on Mulligan Island last night, authorities say.

Christopher Nelson, 18, of Clement Bay, was at a party with many other students from Roosevelt High School. Somewhere around 5:00 a.m., he fell from a sixteen-foot cliff into the rocky bottom of the shallow waters below. His body was recovered by a fellow classmate, Liani Harris, who swam out to provide aid. A

rescue boat arrived soon after, but Nelson was pronounced dead at the scene. . . .

ALCOHOL AND DRUGS INVOLVED IN LOCAL TEEN'S DEATH

The autopsy of local teen Christopher Nelson revealed that he had a blood alcohol level of 0.12 and traces of marijuana in his system, which potentially led to his fall. . . .

I searched socials and found Chris's accounts were still open, though there had been no activity since the second of May. I looked at pictures of Chris at the prom with the others. There was Van, tall and dapper. Liani, simply gorgeous. April, adorable in a cobalt-blue dress, her hair swirled into a flaming red updo studded with pearl accent pins. I scrolled back through Christopher Nelson's life. I saw him posing with dogs wearing RESCUE ME! jackets. I saw him with his arm around Van, kissing him on the cheek, Van smirking goofily, eyes squinted shut. I rolled back through the year, watching him pose, seeing his impassioned posts about the river and the environment. He took several shots of wildlife, of the river itself, with long captions about how it needed to be protected and preserved.

When I look at the river, I realize how lucky I am to live here, and how important it is to do everything in my power to protect this place for my generation and for generations to come. We aren't the only ones who live here either. All the life that depends on this river needs to be protected as well.

Lots of likes on that one. April left a caption with a dozen hearts. Van wrote: *Look at my sexy wildlife warrior.* More hearts.

I went back in time through the winter and saw April, Van, and Chris flopped down in the snow. Liani appeared in the feed as I moved back into the fall. The pictures were more romantic—so many studies of Liani. Liani with longer hair in Bantu knots, puckering her mouth for the camera with shimmering copper lipstick on her lips. And there was Riki, sliding into the group shots in October, smiling, her smudgy kohl eyes staring down the camera. Riki always seemed to wear oversized black T-shirts. She went through a deep-blue lipstick phase, which I found very attractive on her. She always seemed to be in the middle of saying or doing something when the picture was taken, never posing.

I kept scrolling, watching them all grow younger. I saw them doing tricks on Jet Skis, playing for the camera. I saw Van shrink in height, Tom in muscle. Liani was gangly. April had chipmunk cheeks. Riki sometimes wore blue. I went all the way to the end, to a picture of a puppy in a laundry basket, then refreshed to go back to that final photo, the group shot at the prom. The last night Chris Nelson was alive.

Then I switched over and started scrolling through Akilah's feed. I did this most nights. Wiggle that tooth. Salt that wound. Make sure it hurts. I knew every photo on there by heart, and I studied new ones like they were the Voynich manuscript. No new ones of her, just one of her big orange tabby, Scrambles. So I did my other new painful hobby—I scrolled the Cheesecake Factory menu. I replayed our date. I imagined Akilah taking orders for avocado tacos and grilled chicken salads.

By the time I looked up, I realized it had grown dark. It was almost eleven. I'd been scrolling for over two hours, and I really needed to pee. The bathroom was so far away. This was going to be terrible.

I got up and opened my door cautiously. All was dark and quiet in the little fairy-tale house, with the thick walls and the exposed beams that crossed the ceiling with measured haphazardness. It was a hunk of concrete whimsy—a big toy.

I stepped out onto the stone front step and looked up at the wide expanse of sky, scattered with all the stars not visible from Syracuse. The sky had a blue glow, with just a bright curved needle of moon piercing through. Next to me, squatting silently, was Morning House.

I'd never gotten the creeps before. I didn't really know what the *creeps* were. That night, I got them, and I understood. It's a cold, nervous prickling—an overwhelming sense that something in the environment isn't right. That there is a danger, but the danger is pretending to be something else. There is something that you don't want to be around, and the need to go back to somewhere you understand, that's warm and secure, where you can be away from the thing you can't name.

And yet. There was something about the cold, uneasy feeling that also made me want to look at it a moment longer. Something darted through the sky above me. A bat. Looping, sweeping in circles. I read a book about bats when I was a kid and have always had a lot of affection for them since. Bats are just here to eat insects and use sonar. They don't know we made it weird for them. They've never heard about vampires. (This is sort of the same

logic I use when I can't watch animals under threat in movies or on TV. I know they're fine—they're getting a treat for doing something—but *animals don't know what acting is*. No matter what's going on, they're telling the truth.)

Now I really had to pee, which meant facing that trip through the door under the tree stairs, down the steps, and through the tunnel to the basement. I was going to have to get used to this. I stepped quietly back inside, pulled open the strange little door, and switched on the light. Just an ordinary basement passage. I decided to walk with a confident stride, like I loved walking through dark basements—the fake-it-till-you-make-it approach. The short tunnel was no problem. I got the key on the other side and opened the fire door that led to Morning House's basement.

This was different. In the passage, all was lit; the walls were reachable. I could hear the hiss of water in a pipe, the wind on old walls, the echo of thousands of tons of house above me, shifting in its sleep. Creepy shit, as Riki's socks would say.

There was another light switch that illuminated the way to the bathroom. It dumped industrial, orange-tinted light on the path I needed to take. I hustled, bare feet on cold concrete floor, not caring about what I might be stepping on. I was on a mission. Pee and get out. Maybe this would grow on me in time, but that time was not now.

Mission accomplished, I gave my hands a quick wash and rubbed them dry on my shorts as I hurried back. I was an arm's length from the switch when I heard it, the distinct shuffle of feet on concrete. There was someone else down here, moving through the bowels of the house.

"Hello?" I called.

I heard a soft scrape, then movement stopped. Maybe it was Van, sitting at the bottom of the pool?

"Van?" I said.

Nothing. I stood, arm outstretched toward the light, gulping down the bile that jumped up my throat.

"Okay," I said, "well, I'm going back to the playhouse, so . . ."

No need to murder me, creeper! Nothing to see here. Marlowe Wexler is not going to get up in your business.

I put my back against the wall and moved along, sideways-crab style, toward the door that led to the passage and the house. I heard it again. A definite movement.

I’m not proud to tell you that I didn’t bother to turn off the light. I tore that door open and ran—ran through the passage, ran up the steps, ran back through the little door under the tree, which I slammed shut. I went to my shadowy room and turned on the overhead light. There was nothing there but the bed, my stuff, and a lone moth that was twiddling around the ceiling and banging into the shade.

Every single time I had to pee I was going to have to make that trip, and I did not like that at all.

Someone had been in the basement with me, which was *fine*. So why hadn’t they answered? Unless it was a stranger on the island, someone who snuck on after closing? Or someone who took the tour and hid for the night? Maybe people did that for fun? As a goof? As a dare?

Possibly it was a rat. River rats, actual rats . . .

But it wasn’t. I knew that much. Someone had been down there.

10

The next morning, I shuffled down that same basement passage to the bathroom in my rubbery slides. A few hours had vanquished the bad vibes completely. It had returned to being a benign space, kind of pleasant on a summer day. The showers were as basic as they came—a cheap showerhead in a concrete stall with a drain on the floor and a plastic curtain. The first shock of warmish water came tinkling from the showerhead with all the urgency of a sleepy toddler. Then it suddenly became alert and power washed me, sending me flying against the vinyl curtain with a yelp.

"Showers are weird here," I heard a voice say.

I did a quick body wash while dancing against the tips of the spray. I wrapped a towel around myself and peered out to see Liani standing outside, wearing a short blue terry cloth robe.

"It takes a minute," she said, putting her caddy down on the floor of the next stall. "But the pressure is pretty strong once it builds up."

I hadn't thought to bring a robe. It had never occurred to me that the bathroom would be so far from where I slept. I only had the slightly too-short towel to cover me as I gave her an embarrassed nod and then hustled, wet-footed, through the basement, the tunnel, back up the stairs, and to my room under the magical tree.

I had been issued three maroon Morning House polo shirts and one fleece. I pulled one polo out of the plastic packaging. It hung loose. I'd been

told to bring some kind of bottoms in khaki or gray. I'd gone with gray shorts.

When I got to the breakfast table, April, Tom, and Liani were already there. (Liani was obviously quicker than I was at showering—and probably most things.) Tom was working his way through his Froot Loops with the determination of a marathon runner who'd just passed the twenty-sixth-mile mark. Riki floated into the room, dressed in black, her headphones on her head, blocking out any possible conversation. She opened the fridge, removed a bowl, and was gone.

"Morning," Liani mumbled, smirking in the direction of Riki's retreating figure.

"We'll show you around outside this morning," Tom said. "Get you familiar with the grounds."

When I stepped outside, I understood why they called it Morning House. The eerie, toothy building of the night before was transformed. In the afternoon, it was imposing. At night, disturbing. In the morning, it had a glow. Light seemed to drip down the facade. The red peaks and spikes of the roof had a cheerful tone, like jaunty little caps.

Tom showed me along the dock area, where I had come in the day before. There were sections we didn't have to think about, like the ticket booths, the refreshment stand, and the landing dock for the big tourist boats. He walked like a determined Muppet, as if there was a string coming from his sternum, pulling his chest toward an unseen hand in the sky, his legs bobbing in strides that were just a few inches longer than they should have been. It wasn't the walk of someone going places as much as it was the walk of someone who watched some videos of someone going places and was attempting to replicate it at home.

"Is it strange to be here?" he asked. "On the island for the summer?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just got here."

"But it must be really different for you. You're from near Syracuse, right?"

It was and I was, and clearly Tom wanted me to acknowledge that it was going to be maybe a little weird for me. I nodded, and he seemed satisfied.

"My family has lived around here for over a hundred years. Boating, fishing. My uncle was the mayor of Clement Bay until the last election. So, we're pretty . . ."

I waited for the rest of the sentence, but it never came. I was left to imagine what Tom and his family were “pretty” like. Pretty powerful. Pretty well-off. Pretty good at fishing. Pretty close to Canada. Or maybe they were just all very pretty.

He pointed at the concessions stand at the dock and the small booth with border control.

“They got a company to do all the tickets and food,” he said. “I guess the government sent the guy who does border control for Canadian boats.”

Border control for this little island seemed grand and silly, like three kids in a trench coat.

“This is technically America,” he went on, “so Canadians have to pass through border control, but there’s nothing to it because all they do is walk around the island and leave. The line between Canada and America is just somewhere in the water. Boats cross it all day long.”

I had noticed this on my ride out, when my phone kept telling me I was in Canada, then that I was back in America.

“Anyway, we basically have nothing to do with the things that happen on this part of the dock. We never even talk to the people who work here very much. They come in for the day, go home. They often don’t even come up to the house. I do this bit over here where the private boats come in.”

Tom walked me down a small rocky strip that formed a tip off the end of the island, to a stone arching bridge. Ahead of us was another stone building, nowhere near as large as Morning House, but easily as big as the playhouse. Probably bigger.

“This is the boathouse,” he said as we crossed over the tiny bridge. “It’s technically on a different island. The big one is Ralston Island. This one is Sunbeam Island. But it’s all one property.”

The boathouse door opened onto a large area that stretched out over the water. The walls were covered in what home renovation shows call shiplap. I guess the whole ship part of that is real. It was rustic and serious-looking, with ropes and tools and a stack of canoes on one side. There were two large docking slips, but only one was occupied, and barely at that. A single Jet Ski bobbed there sheepishly.

“This is our Jet Ski,” he said. “Life vests are in here.”

He swung open the cabinet doors and revealed a stack of wearable orange life vests, then swung it closed again just as quickly.

“And over here . . .” He indicated a small padlock box hanging from a bolt in the wall. “. . . is the box for the keys. The passcode is 1932.”

“The year everyone died here?”

“Well,” he said, “seemed easy to remember.”

He punched in the code and the box swung open, revealing a key on a long piece of red retractable cord.

“Everything you need for the ski is in this box under here.” He pulled out a plastic box from a shelf. “Everything is in here—flares, PLBs . . .”

“What’s a PLB?”

“Personal locator beacon.”

A big rule for me is this: never go anywhere where you need to bring your own beacon. Pro tip.

“Key’s on a lanyard,” he said. “Put it around your wrist when you’re on the ski. Most important thing. If you come off the ski, the key will pull out and the engine will cut off.”

He demonstrated attaching the lanyard to my wrist using a Velcro band. Tom seemed to genuinely believe I’d be coming here often for all those Jet Ski rides I loved to take.

“You ever ridden one?”

I shook my head.

“They’re basically our cars,” Tom explained. “Or our bikes.”

Well, the joke was on them because I don’t like bikes either. This Marlowe likes to move around on land in the safety of her tiny Smart Car. She likes her water shallow and not full of five million shipwrecks.

“It’s easy. I’ll show you later. We have to put out the cushions now, though. That’s the first job of the day. We store them overnight in the living room.”

I followed Tom around Morning House, to the rubble pile that had once been a patio. He stepped across this and opened the double doors, pulling out a blue tarp stacked high with cushions. We carried these around and put them on chairs, tying them in place.

“By the way,” he said, “see the big island in front of us? That rock face right there.”

He pointed at another island, with a cliff face cutting out of the water.

“That’s Mulligan Island,” he said, pointing at the closer of the two nearest islands. “That’s where it happened.”

“Where what happened?”