

LOOKING FOR JEAN PAUL

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Meet Melanie Reid, the twelve year-old who has it all: a famous boyfriend, a future-minded cadre of dedicated followers, not to mention a scholarship to the most exclusive all-girls summer camp in New England, tucked away inside a breathtaking valley, complete with haunted caves and a magnificent waterfall.

Too bad for her, the boyfriend has been dead for 200 years; her dedicated followers are figments of her imagination; and the summer camp has apparently been custom-built for the rich and psychotically privileged.

Just as things can't get any worse, Melanie is befriended by Alex Kochs, daughter to the richest man in the world. But, in addition to forging a secret alliance with eight-year old camp legacy, Kell Nunen, whose twin sisters were long the terror of Tuppa Lake; Alex has diabolical plans of her own, hinging on the camp's advanced computer system, SAM, and the valley's cruelest of unofficial traditions: the Chef Hunt. And so, despite being cast in the summer play, and even being appointed General in the Color War, the more time Melanie spends with Alex, the less about her new friend she knows for certain; and when Alex goes too far, even for the Camp's exceedingly permissive Headmistress, Melanie must decide just how much she is willing to sacrifice in order to save a stranger.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Summer of My Life

I don't pretend to be a good person. I've only done one thing in my life that I'm proud of, and I was 13. I won the war. I even won the peace. I got exactly what I wanted. It was the worst thing that ever happened to me.

-Kip, could you please erase all that crap? Ahem.

The greatest thing I ever learned, was just to lie, and be lied to in return.

I could always depend on the second part.

A major turning point in my life was when I was nine, and I hacked the mainframe of Miss Prissington's Academy for Girls, my primary school at the time, to discover that my dad had donated over thirty million dollars to the school's umbrella corporation, Charstdale Holdings LLC, itself a subsidiary of the Merdeck Group, a non-profit branch of Almond Enterprises, an arm of the Carlyle-McNamara Fund, which was a finance organization that owned, among other things, controlling shares of Gorechild Techtronics, which manufactures the kind of chips that can put a neutron bomb up the vag of a hospital from across the globe with the press of a button and the right four-letter code prefix. I was studying geometry and lacrosse. But I found my interest skewing toward seeing just how many dollars I could cost Prissington's before they kicked me out.

I got the tally up to about eight million, relying largely on forging orders for extraordinarily expensive books and stamps for the school's rare book archive, which I then had intercepted by a private courier, who used the same stamps to mail said books to the Amazon, (the jungle, not the company), under a non-profit dummy corporation I created, called, *Books for the Children of the Rainforest*.

Most of these books were never recovered, and, when I was finally caught, in the spring semester, my father flew in from Bogota to announce that every dollar would be compensated, and then some, provided I was allowed to stay. The Headmistress, Dowager Smith, agreed to let bygones be bygones, if I would simply and plainly apologize.

I looked to my father, a broad, squinting sheepdog of a man, who nodded sagely. Then, I checked my fist, found the invisible organ crank, and played the Dowager a little tune to the sky.

There would be other academies, my father told me, on the ride to the airstrip. And I broke down in his arms, because I knew he was right. I could dance all I wanted, but I would never be free.

My first year of camp was almost withheld from me that summer (so much from me has almost been withheld; the list would be my life). In Tuppa Lake, I found the first place I didn't want to leave. Which was bullshit, probably, a trick of the eight-week limit, but still. There was something about it that was special, and it took me two whole summers to get around to exploiting it. The details of which I won't bore you with here.

Let's skip ahead. Hell, skip all of it, if you like. I know I've thought about it.

The summer of '14 was the greatest summer of my life. A dumb move, probably—short-sighted, to say the least, to reach my artistic peak at age 13. The worst part was finding out that there was no light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe I was a fool for believing there ever would be. But I can tell you that there isn't, it's nothing but more blackness and emptiness and cold sucking void. And no one changes, least of all you, except for whatever happens when you see the one thing you were holding out for fall to pieces at your feet, revealed to be rotten to the core, mocking not only your presently extinguished hopes and dreams, but exposing all their antecedents as delusions and deafness and a gross, sickening need for validation and purpose and acclaim. Really, I don't know what I was hoping for last summer. The apocalypse, maybe, but less stupid. That's right, I'm mocking the apocalypse. Smite away, motherfucker. I'm ready.

Yeah, yeah, I know. Her mom, and so she goes. Just leave a bookmark, instead of a note. Underline the relevant passages. Never with pills, though. I mean, the least you could do is play a different instrument.

Mmm... Summer of my *life*. 20 and 14. And so why?

Around here, like every camp on the coast, we have the Color War. Only here, the Color War was no joke. It got heated, and it got rough, as the victors were given the best of prizes—a wish. Famous wishes have included sole use of the kitchen, which quickly resulted in a riot; residence in the Dole mansion; boys from across the lake (another story all-together); and, the most recent favorite, a three-week lava game, in which everyone rides horses everywhere. One way to look at it was that it caused thousands of dollars in

damages and two scuttled lawsuits. Another would be to say that it led to the building of the exquisite stone roads we now enjoy.

Even for a roboprincess like me (just an expression, stay with me, now), a wish is a powerful thing. And while I can do a lot with the 20 billion dollars in my trust (if you don't know how to convert trust money into present cash, I have nothing more to say to you), most girls who've won the Color War have squandered their wishes on crap that could be got with a couple million and a well-compensated team of stooges rounded out by a chauffeur and a heli pilot. But then, most girls don't really think about what they want, they just enjoy thinking of the thing they want. It's pornography, not Shakespeare.

Really, it's their dreams. They suck. Nothing sadder than a shit dream. Tacky as hell. I've got too much pity for this world as it is, and crap dreams are sad machines, just churning out more pity still. One day all the weight of their crap dreams will sinkhole this valley to the center of the earth, I hope, I know, I've seen it. And on that day we can all be dead and meet the madness face to face, and some goat man will ask me what my dream was, and I'll tell him, plainly, with a smirk, if that's still a thing, I'll say, thanks, pal, but I had my summer, I had my dream, and it was everything I wanted, every last shit of it, and in the end, I felt... Nothing.

No, that's not true. I felt plenty. That was never the problem. It was the rest of them that didn't feel it. They reshuffled themselves, embraced or ignored it, but they were all of them basically the same, and I was emptied. I discovered the curse at the end of the dream. That you can get everything you ever wanted, really, yes, really, you can; and once that happens, you can never return to the place where you believed that anything you could do or be given could ever make any bit of difference.

Buddha by firing squad.

My wish? Oh, sure. No big secret. Anyone here will tell you. I gave Devin Dole, the camp's CFO and Color War peace summit arbitrator, my catalogue of new names for everyone in the camp. They were not all nasty names. Some were noble, celebrated, dignified. I gave these to my enemies, to the most vicious precious numbs in the valley, the idiots and paste-faced blanks, the ball-juggling janitors and barn cats. For my friends and allies, I gave names as near to vile and schlock as I could imagine—and a year is a long time to imagine. Some of them, Devin circled in red, high-looping ink, Spursula Mole, Devil-boy Dolt, (that was him, after all), VeeDee Newspots, Madbitchee Blown, etc. The fat stuttering bastard could circle all he wanted, but when the list was provisionally approved, there wasn't ink in the world to stop the new names—all of them—from getting out.

Enough of them hated me for the last three weeks of summer to ensure I'd be left alone, or so I hoped. A bonus—as by '14, the only girls who still spoke to me were either too stupid to realize I despised them, or too masochistic to care. I can't stand masochists—they turn a girl into a used car salesman, then they hem and haw about the model and the color.

But I couldn't shake them all, and I couldn't shake Jake, whom I renamed Qatwater Jake. He liked it. Not in the pinched, nasally defiant way of the others, but really and truly liked it.

Maybe that's what ruined everything. Maybe that's what stopped the apocalypse. Jake, that rat, might've been the only person in the valley to be happy with my wish. And

it soured everything. I guess that's when I decided to destroy him, or at least destroy that smug smile off his idiot child face. Everyone has secrets, and as far as money goes, secrets are near as easy to buy as anything else.

That, and easier still to make up.

What makes me act like this, you ask? Nothing makes me act like anything. If I can find a good reason to do something, that's as good a reason as any to get the hell out.

So I figured 2015 would either be my best summer yet, now that I had no more illusions about a payoff, any climactic confrontation with whatever forces I felt biting at my heels ever since, well... ever since ever. Really, I didn't know what I was expecting.

Or sure, I could tell you. Why not. I have too many good reasons to lie, so, I'll just say it. I was expecting him to show up, somehow. The bastard. In a helicopter, hovering low. Rope ladder twisting in the wind. Roar of the rotors, hypnotic. Kicking dust into my covered eyes, scratch and burn as proof of his presence. The camp all of them watching as he ordered the pilot to get lower, and the pilot shaking his helmet head like a cyborg, but who pays your way? The spotlight finding me, lower now, hand reaching down. "Allie, my princess." No, he'd be yelling, long and hoarse over the blades, "ALEX! GET IN."

I'd take his hand, and he, up my wrist with his Roman grip, holding tight. It would be the chopper that would lift me. And he'd pull me safe inside, make sure I was buckled and pass me a headset, and tell me all about how he knew everything and we were getting out, that it was clear that his daughter needed more than all that this everything promised and delivered in the valley. And he would take me there, wherever that was.



But, then, he'd probably miss the point entirely. He has.

You probably missed it, too. I get it. Old habits, Bruce Willis. Damsel in Denmark. But I wasn't waiting to be rescued.

I was waiting for someone to stop me.

Of course, I know of one person in this camp who means to do just that. He's not at all who he says he is, and he is by no means the first. My father has strange ideas about parenting. You can't argue with my father, the only thing you can do is correct him.

You probably think that this is my big surprising action-filled adventure, so I'm sorry to disappoint you again, but this, like all the rest, is old news. The old Potomac two-step. So yes, Jake is going down, as rats do. But no, it's not going to be exciting. Just a bother, really. Housekeeping. Not unless you enjoy pulling wings off flies.

Me? I only wish I had the simple needs of a sadist.

## CHAPTER TWO

### She Would Be Here

We came by bus. We came by car. We met bright-eyed, wise and faded at Grand Central and Boston and Philadelphia, spied toe-headed legacies too green to sing of anything but hope and fear. We watched former victims of their sisters shudder at the uncanny resemblance, as though God had spun back time for her own private joke. We tossed insured hair against brown-faced scholarship photo-fodder with no idea what they'd got themselves into, called them Nelanie when we'd heard them just fine. We crushed on Euro-lipped new counselors long before liftoff, tugging at paperbacks and new doomed fashions, and remembered at the hows and whys of our love and contempt for the old. We touched Kennedy and LaGuardia tarmacs in slim white jets and broad-packed First Class commercials. One girl came in a helicopter last year, right there on the beach, but the Doles said never again.

We arrived weeks after our trunks, packed with white shorts and shirts and colored tees, swim caps and beach towels, goggles, slacks, pajamas, tennis shoes and river shoes, riding pants and jeans and helmets, underwear and socks, bathrobes, jackets, and sweaters, towel wraps, raincoats, ponchos and umbrellas, washcloths and towels, pillows and spare cases, twin size bed spreads and no bulky comforters, laundry bags with drawstrings, full names please inside, as with all things. Tennis rackets and shoe bags, soap dishes and toothbrushes and hairbrushes and combs, shampoo and deodorant, tampons, pads, and shower caddies, contraband both liquid, powder and plant life packed

inside cosmetics, water bottles and ashlights, tribal tees and shorts proclaiming 'Pagawashek' or 'American' or 'British,' leotards and cameras (no digital), playing cards, quiet games, pins and sewing kits and accessories for hair. Clipboards and notebooks, pens and pencils, one stuffed animal, batteries and stamps and stationary. And we each and all find it again amazing how much can fit inside such words.

Of course, there are always those of us who cheat.

We unpacked in cabins grown smaller every June. Shared closets and toilets and combat sinks and mirrors. Hot water showers for the early risers and smoky insomniacs. Passed judging eyes over newly busted robes and thousand thread-count towels. Juggled barbs dressed as compliments and tossed back the potato braying over filling out and losing acne and prayed and dreamed and plotted that next year we would be as gorgeous as everyone we hated and adored, or at least that we'd be saved from stretch marks and craters and abortions and disease, future hedge fund manager rapists with athletic problems and drinking scholarships.

We made seats in the sand with backsides declared perfect, watched the waves of the Wolf lumber and bristle, made plans for underprepared hikes up the dancing mountain of the Bear who guards our south on sharp sunny days, and beckons hail and rain in later weeks when we would once again forget how to be grateful—those of us who still spoke such tired slang. And we would dream, yes, always, of how we would once and again be betrayed by the same silver beast that brought us here, the way the air-brakes would in August hiss our banishment, and we, each and all, would need every day of the ten fallow months of winter spring and autumn to find a way to forgive it enough to ride again.

We were stupidly dramatic, and we knew it, made up names for what we pretended were games but were closer to communion. Spread prone huffing crabgrass chewing sand, drank the lake for parasites or just to bring the blood of the valley back inside our thoughts and veins and skin. Rushed from cabins to Falls to the Wolf's Tail the to make sure our friends still existed and were here—obviously, the same thing. Ran leaping off the end of the south dock in all your clothes or better still stop short to remember this sly bitch was owed a swim and worse, my god, you'd forgotten how much you missed her. Take a moment on your back and blow smoke in the face of time. Go ahead. Everything is free the first day. Put your arm around the girl you saw dissolve into tea-stained postcards and thrice-read emails, now warm alive again, and imagine the woman you must one day become to deserve this.

At least, that was the idea.

Some of us were quick or old enough to know 'deserve' didn't have a thing to do with it. We were here, and the service was all long paid for, saddled up with instructions sung sweetly by the best experts who'd made just enough mistakes to be bought. You don't *ask* the machine to wash your laundry, you just toss it in the pile with the rest and besides, only climbers and Hawthornes wore the same outfit twice.

Of course, at camp we all had to make sacrifices. Build character, and so forth. But for every indignity we suffered, our parents and the brochure promised back the moon, with a handful of stars as dividends—mostly sisters and cousins to the real deal, but always a princess or two, and at least a couple A-list Mouseketeers. The friends you made at camp were friends for life, because all of us went through the same shit together,

a fee gauged against a metric no Headmistress ever needed to pronounce onstage: Is it fun? Is it fresh? Could I do it at home or while sneering over Mai Thais on the Island? Is someone going to try to stop me here, even here, in this place insured and attorneyed to Hell and back to be goddammit the one place on earth the ONE where everyone is under strict orders not to?

The possibilities were enough to shake us up, all of us, from the greens to the brownest turners, and even those old enough to pretend we knew all that could live inside the space of a cut glass, or a piano chord, or a real and endless kiss.

Naturally, we'd forgotten the taste of it, in the ten month desert that yawned out wide our non-camp lives. Tinted widows high in midtown traffic. School and school and back again, to tennis and to dance and tomorrow and tomorrow. Loft parties carving wide a sliding scale with 'scuzz' on X and 'fun' on Y. Chasing the dull, blue eyes of sharp-dressed sociopaths carrying keys to classic Jags they still couldn't drive. Knee-locked schedules and deliberately late appointments to preemptive therapists who only want to fuck you after you've gone. Mastery jargon and continental intelligence tests, necklaces and sandwiches and snuff films all certified fair-trade and blood-free.

And now, well into the afternoon of our June arrival, while the most dedicated disaffects raced chicken with their closest, dearest poseurs, the wise and wicked among us knew enough to forgo the charade, and allow ourselves this day, at least, as one in which to bask, and forget how stupid we look when we smile like we meant it.

And before we knew it, we would have filed into Rick's for first supper, dressed in pirate costumes pulled off racks in the always-open *Gatsby* Wardrobe Tower, drunk on

hugs and pollen and Coppertone, kissing enemies and elbowing pals, finding seats along the provisional pecking order, and even the greens will wait over their salads for Headmistress Ursula Dole to take the stage. And Ursula would eye the microphone as though it were offering a bargain on a questionable handbag, turn it aside, and show us how little we needed such things in the valley.

"To those returning, I welcome you back, and trust the year has found you well, and that you have found more of yourselves in the meantime. For the seniors, I hope that this year will be your best, and fondest, and that you will leave in eight weeks with all the most precious things the valley holds for you, which, naturally, are never things you can carry in a trunk, or pocket.

"Those of you for whom this is your first summer with us, please, let me say, welcome, each and every one of you. This camp belongs to you, as well as it does anyone else here, despite what the older girls might say."

Smirks, snickers, sarcasm. Ursula could say all she liked, but even her fanciest words couldn't prescribe away the world; and, while at times life might elect to imitate art, we tend to grow bored very quickly.

"Here, you will find yourself welcome to do practically anything you please. Anything, that is, except for nothing. We have scores of activities, events, classes, quiet coves and hidden islands to explore. We have waterskiing and bumper cars, zip-lines and SCUBA gear, we have a staff of over sixty trained and dedicated counselors, experts, and professionals, about all of whom, it would be impossible to say anything so crude as a general statement, save for that they are each and all of them here to make this the most memorable eight weeks of your young lives. We have, as always, new additions, and I

trust you to make them feel welcome. For now, I'd like only to take a moment to introduce, our new Head Chef, Master Chef Jean Paul Delacroix, whose Manhattan restaurant, Kamway, has been named one of the best in the five boroughs. Jean Paul, would you care to come up and say a few words?"

Jean Paul Delacroix did not appear to relish the opportunity to address the crowd, but the tall, thin man made his way to the stage nevertheless, and, after climbing the stairs, stood awkward peering down at the stick-figure of microphone. His hands fiddled at a stained apron string, and his dark brown eyes darted between his non-slip shoes, and well above our heads. Even amplified, his accented English fell well below Ursula's solo volume.

"Thank you, Headmistress Dole, and all of you, for this opportunity to share my love of the culinary arts, such as it is, and my devotion to the magic and essence of the salts of this earth, a gift that the gods have bestowed, such that we might better fill our body and souls with that which flesh and herbs cannot satisfy..."

He looked to Ursula, uneasy.

"Thank you, Jean Paul. That was lovely."

Well, it was certainly something.

Thank Christ Freddie Jones was back. He and his blues band, the Impostures, were better than good, and toured the country in the months outside of the summer, and few with an ear could understand how they could squirrel themselves away in the valley for two months with their sound, such as it was. Maybe next year Freddie would be gone too, replaced by some skinny French nut with a bizarre devotion to E-minor, but we

hoped not. Chefs had always turned over in Tuppa Lake, which was no accident, but the result of perhaps the camp's most cruel of unofficial traditions, the Chef Hunt, which, while never employing anything so spare as torches and pitchforks, may have been more sporting if it had.

As Freddy and the Impostures jammed, and the over-fished Caesar salads were chomped and dabbed away with dainty linen, someone at your table will surely bring up tribal selection. And that's all they'll say, and the game belongs to she who best can evoke a parrot, especially around the greenies, without submitting to anything too obvious. As this last element has a way of falling apart, it's best to wait until supper is almost over to mention tribes at all. Naturally, you'll encounter the inevitable second-year who can't wait even until the entree, typically, a girl famous for neglecting the finer points of time and progression in her worldview, and yes—she would love to show you her meticulously hierarchied collection of miniature horses. "Only they're at Mother's in the Meadowlands," she'll say, heartsick, trying to recover her place at the table. "She said they needed more space..."

The selection procedure the camp's three tribes had been an object of contention between Ursula and her son, Devin, ever since the patriarch, Morris Dole, died of a coronary three years ago—in London, of all places for a French-Hungarian to die without a lance. He'd been off on some fool-headed treasure hunt—his idea of a summer, by that point. The story was that he'd checked into a hotel, ate a disappointing cheeseburger in a pub down the street, returned and set out his clothes for what was, even at 65, a giddily-anticipated meeting in the morning with his local contact, then, pulled up the covers, turned out the light, and promptly died.



Which was very sad. And it was sad, probably, that Devin seemed to possess all of his father's intelligence, but to speak to the man—to the large boy—to speak to him was to witness a pileup on some bottlenecked expressway of need. He didn't stutter, or even stammer, really, but seemed glutted with words, too full to ever quite stand up straight. So while it was rumored that Devin had amassed a slew of tribal sorting plans easily superior to his father's, and had attempted to persuade his mother time and again of their saliency, he sat as he always did, right of center at the head table, holding a thin frown along with his Kool-Aid goblet, and would, we could rest assured, not tonight utter a single sound for our ears.

But whatever else Devin, or Ursula, or her dear-departed husband might've been, none of us would be satisfied with a sorting ritual as careless and derivative as this. The dead had had their day, and besides, *Harry Potter* had predated it from the start. The consensus was that the Doles should've just chalked up the loss and figured something out. But you know how it is—tradition—Latin for: We're tired, and it's late, and who gives a shit.

Still, jaded, or mega-jaded, or beyond-mega-jaded-bitch-I-really-have seen it all I mean I went to Hong Kong for Christmas, the fact was, the prototype computer that was SAM was nothing short of incredible, and, when his light show began, even the seniors had to take the weekend to remind themselves that nothing in this world could still impress them.

SAM: Stagemaster & Actor Mimeses—but we all called him Sam. Sam was encoded not only with a fully dynamic artificial intelligence interface, filtered through a library of hundreds of your favorite Hollywood stars and starlets, Sam was also

programed with over three hundred film and stage directors, playwrights, set designers, light techs, cinematographers, as well as a hefty catalogue of historical figures, novelists, poets, artists, and politicians. With over 190 Oscar winners, Sam is the fully functional, semi-sentient software interface for theater and film arts of this decade. But he's also great for so much more:

- Birthdays
- Restaurants
- Bat Mitzvahs
- Holidays
- Art projects
- Special gatherings
- Graduations
- Reunions
- Commercials
- Business meetings
- Corporate events
- Political Rallies
- And more!

Sam was the worst-kept secret of Tuppa Lake. He appeared on no brochure, no promotional video, and was never mentioned on any personal visit. You had to ask, and ask directly, and then, maybe, you'd get a small and deliberately unimpressive demonstration. Ursula liked it this way. "Let the parents think it's all in their child's

imagination," she would say. But Sam was real, massively expensive, and still not commercially available—benefits of having a patron who was both the wealthiest man on earth, as well as neck-deep in the tech trade.

Your local Sam portal is activated via voice-command or remote. It uses lasers to deflect and excite existing light on a generous range of distances. The fact that Sam primarily *excites existing* light, rather than projects his own, is the main source of his miracle. The correct frequencies are dynamically accrued against precise positions, holographically. These images are not semi-transparent specters, but fully opaque figures moving fluidly through space. Thus, in an instant, Rick's Cafe is transformed into a tropical island kingdom, so that everyone's pirate costumes make a little more sense, though no one has ever truly felt out of place dressed as a pirate in Rick's.

The proceedings are about as serious as possible, when said proceedings involve forty small and frightened girls being called forward, one at a time, by a rather terrifying embodiment of the parrot from Disney's *Aladdin*, whom the camp calls, "Paco."

Paco screeches the name of the next girl—indeed, Paco only speaks in bloodcurdling screeches. Once the girl has come forward, he either hops, politely, vulnerable, along the wide paneled floors, flapping gingerly up onto her shoulder, to nuzzle, sometimes, if the girl is brave and foolish enough to let him get that close to her ear; or, he suddenly swoops at the child, talons bared, screeching the most vile things.

But whatever Paco does, Sam will use high-speed eye-tracking cameras and core 687variable-web processor to construct a vigorous, if limited, psychological profile, and then, completely ignore it, and assign the girl to one of the camp's three tribes entirely at

random. The assault never lasts more than three or four minutes (at Paco's very worst), whereupon the bird will squawk, AMERICAN, or BRITISH! or PAGAWASHEK.

At this point, the ritual is complete for the girl in question. She finds her tribe, wherever in Rick's they're clustered and cheering for her, and joins them, double punched reeling from this cocktail of fear roofed with friendship. She'll know her cabin number now, grouped by tribe and numbered by age, beginning with cabin 1 for the eldest Pagawasheks, 2 for the eldest Brits, 3 for the eldest Americans, and so on. A girl's tribe becomes her family, and her cabin is her "set," and she will be with her set for all morning activities throughout the summer, as well as most evening rituals, and mandatory events.

The Paco Thing was unanimously agreed to be bizarre and embarrassing, not to mention mean. But everyone went through it. Mostly, the veteran girls were proud of it, and remembered the night itself far less than the five thousand joyous moments of collectively hating the bird.

As if providing a deliberate counterpoint to the consummate mastery of Freddy Jones and his ilk, theater tech, swimming, and watercraft instructor, Jake Atwater, sat as the camp's resident almost-musician. The shaggy-haired twenty-something could strum his Gibson acoustic in a near-rhythm, and could switch about as well between maybe six or eight chords, but rarely ventured beyond three. He avoided bar chords and choruses, and typically sung off-key Dylan impressions of Guthrie. And while he was aware that his songcraft was widely regarded as an imposition, when it wasn't a workingman's backup to fireside sing-alongs like, "Tell Me Why," "If You're Happy and You Know It,"

and "Be Kind to Your Web-Footed Friends," Jake never seemed to mind. That his ambitions ran far deeper, was another open secret, and that he would likely never impress anyone with anything, beyond scope of his delusions, was alternately funny, embarrassing, and depressing, depending on the day and girl you asked.

So everyone except for the greenies was hardly surprised when Jake rounded out the after-dinner campfire sing-along with a new composition of his own. Those who were suckers for the soft, easy cuteness of adult infants and the casually desperate, could tune out scrappy sounds of Jake's esoteric key of G, and find solace in his bushy eyebrows and muddy-blond mane. That is, if they were lucky—as, depending on the last time he showered or slept, or maybe it was the position of the stars—Jake's face seemed to morph along an unforgiving binary of either romance novel majestic, or, that of a coloring book butchered by angry crayons.

#### Jake's Welcome Song

Welcome all you fakes and Dylans

Broken sweethearts too.

Across a mirror I stood before you

Twenty years ago last night.

I ignored every regulation

The fathers threw at me

I took all that I was given  
Traded notes for kerosene

One summer on the river  
I nearly lost a friend  
He was under seven minutes  
And must've hit his head.

We were whiter than a postcard  
There was something not returned,  
More than mud upon our teeshirts  
And our fingertips were burned.

For a summer to be summer  
It's that summers always end.  
But don't let it take your senses,  
And don't let it take your friends.

Welcome welcome clowns old lovers,  
Welcome welcome every one.  
There may be clouds dark in the distance,  
But even lightning can be fun.

Welcome welcome welcome  
No I do not mean to scare  
We have lifeguards by the dozen  
And attorneys paid to care.  
You will never be in danger  
If you find yourself a friend.  
When we say the buddy system  
We mean this shit what never ends.

So please tonight you'll find a buddy,  
Or find a buddy welcomes you,  
And you both please behave nicely  
And don't rock your slim canoe.

If Jake's performance didn't have the new campers thinking twice about the whole summer, and all the polished hands balking at the ending, knowing all they did about Tippy Tests; they may have dug it just enough to coolly remember J-stroke in his best moments. The luckiest might even be transported back, all at once, grateful for this bizarre triggerword of a man rattling them into knowing that they were here, really and truly here, at this unstoppable two month bathwater attack of sore muscles and horseback jet-boat second life friendship party that was camp.

Others would need the weekend, or longer, still, for the tides of school and family to draw back from the mornings, and the nights most of all. But soon, their dreams would

change, and in the dark they would awake to see the great blue Wolf stretching behind the camp's porous mash of architecture, from the POW cabins to the pho-converted-farmhouse-field hospital, to Rick's Morocco, to the three story costume tower complete with flashing green light, to the *Talented Mr. Ripely* boathouse, to the barren black concrete box of a nothing that was the theater, to the Dole's *Dr. Zhivago* mansion on the hill.

And the homesick would stand on the south dock in the moonlight breathing deep the air exhaled from Rabbit Island, and all at once against the rising sun the bells from the non-dom chapel will ring, and she would rise to greet a new day.

And she would be here.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Welcome to Butcher Falls

"No one knows him. No one knows anyone. Who's under that hat? Even he doesn't know."

-Stacey "Spark" Kuros, Cabin 3

Early in the dawn of her first camp morning, Kell Nunen stepped into the west hot tub outside the Olympic pool. She did not give herself time to adjust, but made her body take it. When she'd settled, she eyed the redhead she'd arranged to meet her, alone, an hour before breakfast.

"You despise me, don't you?" Kell said.

"You're a Nunen. I've known enough Nunens."

"I need a favor."

Alex fixed her scrunchie. "Naturally."

"I need you to do a play," Kell said.

Alex sighed, disappointed. "You should do your research. Some things are inevitable."

"I need it big. I need it long. And I need it loud."

Alex seemed to bite down with her eyelids. "Not a Chekov fan, huh?"

"You're right about my sisters," Kell said, "but I'm not them. I want to do something that hasn't been done before. I'm not shooting the moon, or any other tired cannon crap. I'm not interested in glory. If I do this right, no one will ever know, except you."

"So, you want to, what? Write the play? Make it obscene? Because that's been done."

Kell dropped her chin, and looked up from under her bangs. "No. That's your job. I'm going to take the Hornet. And I'm going to take it to its top speed."

Alex looked Kell over for the first time. It was true, she wasn't like her sisters—her eyes were bright, but reserved, her expertly butchered hair as close to white as blonde got. Her plump cheeks and dimples almost kept her from being intimidating, but that duty belonged to the nub of her chin, which could only be described as 'cute.'

"You're crazy."

"Runs in the family."

"Yeah. I know all about your family. Not the kind of people I want to blame me for killing their daughter."

"Your name will never come up."

"Your tiny body would break into a million pieces before you hit sixty, even if you could get it started, and even if you somehow neutralized the radio kill-switch, which runs through Sam, by the way, so good luck with that—even then, you'd still have the entire camp after you with all the racket—"

And for the first time since she could remember, Alex was impressed. She took off her shades and held them just above the bubbles, and this time really studied the eight-year-old girl sitting opposite. "...Holy shit. You're going to do it during the play."

Kell smiled and spread her arms along sides of the tub. "Like I said. I'm not my sisters."

Alex returned her black Ray-Bands to her face, and faced up into the rising sun. "Why should I help you?"

Kell assumed the look behind a thousand extra cookies. "Because it's awesome."

Alex fought it for a moment, then smirked. Kell waited another beat, then turned and toweled her hands, reached into her bag, and withdrew what appeared to be a fat red stick of chewing gum.

"My sisters left me files on everyone in the camp. Detailed files. They could be very useful in the right hands."

Over her shoulder, Alex watched a flock of geese crash into the southeast bay known as the Wolf's Tail. "I'm Alex Kochs. I want information, I take it."

Kell turned over the stick, frowning. "Then it could be useful in the wrong hands."

Alex grinned. "You might not be your sisters, but you're sure as hell a Nunen." She held her elbow against her breast, and her chin against the back of her hand. "I'll take the files, but you have to dump the Color War."

The blonde gave this some thought. "No. That's my backup."

"Well it's a shit one, then, because you'll still need my help on the kill-switch, which you won't get, and even if you could push that wish past the Dole's attorneys, I'd bet ten to one you'd wind up hugging Qatwater's ribs, begging him to break 50. No, you either believe in your plan, or you don't."

"But it's the Color War."

"I thought you didn't care about that crap."

"There's still a thing called 'honor.'"

"Honor's not a thing, kid. It's a bumper-sticker for judges and amputees."

Kell held her fist to her lips. She was kissing the old and ugly ring she always wore.

"Are you shooting the moon?"

Alex chuckled and stood up. Her bikinied figure was a final show of power—this side of surgery, it was, even at 14, everything that genes and wealth could afford, and she knew it.

"It's your choice. But if you want to know the truth, I think it's a hell of a plan. Really, I'm fucking jealous. And that doesn't happen."

In a photo Ursula Dole would include in the distributed *Summer Days and Summer Nights, 2015 at Camp Tuppa Lake*, (\$65.99, and \$150.00 deluxe), dreaded legacy Kell Nunen draws back an arrow, in a bow nearly longer than she. She wears a thick cabled cardigan, unbuttoned twice above her white shorts and socks. Her posture, straight, elbow high—she's doing everything right. Her chin yaws up, mouth forcing a frown. Her eyes sight down the shaft like peeking over a wall.

No one would say that this is not a small child drawing a bow. And yet, in the moment immortalized here, Kell had been Dutch Jonas, private eye to the down and desperate and quickly discovered to be depraved, and, as likely as not, remarkably interconnected with other cases.

-Thank you, Narrator Lady, I'll take it from here.

Dutch Jonas, good to know you.

The first thing to know is that Kell Nunen is my cover, and while I may appear to be eight, I am, in fact, 37, and twenty years of LA sun and smog and long nights chasing animals has not been kind to my face. Were it not for the age ring around my finger, I would've never been able to set foot in this godforsaken place, which would have been fine by me, but I had a job to do, and wasn't the kind of woman to wait around for someone else.

The second thing to know, is that the real name of this valley is not Tuppa Lake, but Butcher Falls. This was the name given by my sisters, around the time they'd shed enough blood to make it true.

The third thing to know is that while my dear, sweet sisters may be physically in Monaco, they will never truly leave the valley. What a good detective knows, and must never forget, is that evil doesn't leave a place, it only changes faces, from time to time.

They had spies and muscle everywhere, and I was presently dead-eyed drawn on one Poncho Valentino, their main muscle, known for his ghoulish popping eyes and enthusiasm for showing rummy dealers how it's done. He was also a vicious bandit and sometimes-pro prospector before he found the Falls.

The story goes, that on the long walk to cash out from an unofficial claim near Dall Mountain, his partners shot Poncho five times in the back before taking his share and mushing back to Juno. In twelve days, Poncho would find them there. And he would not settle for I'm sorry.

I'll believe one shot. Maybe, on the caliber, two. As for his present circumstances, Poncho was tough, but a bolt to the heart stops even vampires, and everyone knows that. If Poncho was wearing protection, well, I'd just have to aim higher next time.

"Nice, Kell!"

Poncho went down, same as any man if you ask him half-nice. It's like my dad used to say, "Thing about movies is, they're movies."

Sianara, Poncho. Too bad, you couldn't stick-

"Kell! We're moving stations-"

"...son of a BITCH!"

"WHOA!"

In the confusion, I'd lost the second arrow, and Poncho, in a feat of heart-placement defiance that had me questioning my dismissal of a certain tall tale, would survive, and crawl back to his favorite place to go when he should've been dead.

"Kell, what happened?" It was the slick piece of shit who followed me everywhere, and he'd already grabbed the bow out from my irritatingly weak fingers.

"He got away. Thanks to you, *Brad*."

Counselor Brad held out what he'd just taken from me, in case I'd forgotten what it looked like. "You can't treat these, like a toy."

If the ice in my eyes could freeze a man, they'd be thawing Brad on the slab for days. "Never crossed my mind."

Brad frowned, big and fake. It was good for both of us I'd been disarmed. "I think maybe archery isn't ready for you yet."

I spat beside his foot, missing. "Tell it to get in line."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Say Goodbye to Mr. Lion

from Reid, Melanie: *The Journals of Melanie Reid, Vol 2* (2013-2015). Knopf, New York, 2011. Pp. 433-434.

6/17/15 - Friday

Dear Future Diary Artifact Reader;

The past was worse, or can't you imagine it?

When YOU can't imagine the past, who you gonna call?

Blake. William Blake. He's great at imagining, and this summer, he hates,

EVERYONE!!!

He's quiet. I like that.

"I'll bet you do, my sweetness of a million suns. I had a marvelous luncheon.

Also, as it happens, I just reconciled good and evil. Whatchu been up to?"

"Sudoku."

Nothing to say about that one. He's a bit stunted like that. He's got like, reverse Althzimers. Can't remember anything past 1820-something. I'm bad with dates.

Did I mention he's married? Also dead, but Future Indiana Jones, is there a difference? Sometimes you want to grab him and shake him and scream BUT WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THIS—and point to all the absurdity around me.

Only, he couldn't make it. The Misses. Doesn't that just say it all? An ocean between us and all he can do is promise he'll write. Well, maybe I'm sick of all his cold and distant words. Maybe a girl needs more in a lifetime. Damn it, William. Even the lake is a wolf. The flipping mountain's a bear, don't you get it? We're surrounded by predators!

I mean, I am. You're in England, living off a page, and hot meals the ball-and-chain wouldn't dare interrupt.

So go ahead. Take your garden strolls, and I'll take mine. I've got a whole forest at my disposal. Bill, I'm saying, I think this has to be over. You made it this way, you said those words in front of all those lovely people you so thoroughly despise.

Enough! Sail through time and space for me, haunt me like the nice ghost from Mrs. Muir, but I must have no more of your letters. Not until I've thought things through. It's really more me, this time. I don't know how to put it into words, but, all that you can't give me, seems suddenly...

Oh, just forget it. You're a bastard, William, and I will not be the one to chase you over the falls.

You see? This place is morbid from start to finish.

And no, I haven't so much as touched a diary. I'm retired for good this time. Believe me, I've had more than enough excitement, and this is the last place you want girls to catch you snooping.



See you tomorrow, Future Jones.

"We see each other naked," the pumpkin-faced girl said. "So, if you're really a boy, or a hermaphrodite, we're going to find out."

Melanie looked up from her journal, closing it and winding the tassel. It had been a long first day, and it just wasn't working out. They're all racists—it's a secret society of white supremacists. The counselors are molesting everyone, and the Doles know all about it, and pay top dollar for the tapes. Such were the phone calls Melanie rehearsed in her mind, as she unpacked into her dresser and shared closet. But her parents were probably still in the air, and even when they touched down, they'd be shuffled aboard their cruise ship. She could call their cell phones, probably, leave a message. Still, they wouldn't be happy about it. Maybe she'd wait a little longer, at least until one of her stories had a little more evidence behind it.

"Are you a Muslim?" the fat one said.

Melanie was back with her mother, in the kitchen, while Dad snored on the couch, stubbled chin poking out from the afghan. Afternoon sun and paper falling over the carpet. Dirty lenses of his bifocals, still on his face. In the kitchen, this time, Melanie was saying, 'No'.

Pumpkin-head's mouth hung open. "Oh, my god—the Transylvanian is going into shock."

Melanie found her toothbrush and her floss and walked past the pumpkin and into the bathroom. This was Cabin 7, and her tribe, according to that hellish computer parrot thing, was the Americans. Which, great. Plymouth Rock to the rescue, yet again.

The cabins were, as structures, not a bit as nice as Melanie expected. The insides ran pine planks for floors ceilings and walls, although posters of dead-eyed, shirtless white boys and Bob Marley were beginning to change that. There was a potbellied stove, which she hoped they got to use, but she wasn't about to ask the mechanics in this hut. The beds were wood too, with planks that came loose, so if you weren't careful, you could fall right through.

She would learn that her set had been moving from cabin to cabin, each summer, like locust. The whine of their chatter was the same, if less melodic. The core group consisted of Pumpkin-Head, aka, Madison "Maddy" Sloan, at center, with Becky Peterson as best lackey to Mads. Becky's doughiness in body and constitution prevented her from being as popular as Celest Stone, who was neither flagrantly nasty, nor ingratiating, and was thus relied upon by Madison for consul, just as Becky was relied upon for mindless cloying moral support, which typically found her slowly chasing Maddy around the cabin, as if she needed to bridge their physical distance in order to gather breath for speech.

The pigeon-toed and water-eyed Sara Kipling could be relied upon by Becky to carry off the crap Becky dumped on her after it had been converted from the crap Madison had dumped on Becky. Kiki Roberts, rail-thin and blue-veined, was Celest's dearest blank-check of a bosom, whom Celest could rely on to Bobo-esquely follow her on whatever madcap kayak wanderthon might be on the docket for that afternoon instead of elective, but recently that had been wandering around looking for places in the woods and sitting in that place and burning things and laughing and rolling and walking feeling grass on bare legs like hundreds of tiny not too careful fingers finding other kinds of

caves to get lost in. But they didn't talk about that sort of thing in the cabin, and Maddy didn't mention it except in glancing barbs about Reggae and braincells.

Spitting paste in the sink, and pulling back her hair, Melanie watched Madison through the mirror. The gourd-child raised a ringed finger, and the insults stopped.

"Hey," she said, really very nice. "We don't mean to be mean. That's just the way we are with each other. If you can't laugh it off, and give it back, I don't know what to tell you."

Melanie had a few things she'd like to tell Mads and her feckless rabble, but feared her own power. If she ever were to really tell it like it was, heads would explode with brains and little bits of skull soaking everything, and then where would she sleep?

"Hey," Maddy said, happy just to be alive. "You should join our club. We're the Sex Animals. But of course we don't go around calling each other that, that would be stupid."

Animals indeed. A spectacularly mismanaged zoo to imprison and abuse them. Peanuts and small stones to tease and riddle through the bars. Scandals involving tons of manure left to putrefy.

A smile escaped the mirror.

Maddy smiled back, but then, she was always smiling when she spoke. "So, you want to join? You already know our secret, so it would be pretty rude not to. It's not like we go around offering memberships to everyone? It's strictly a set thing. But we totally wouldn't offer if you were hideous, or smelled like a dead body or whatever. Your hair though? Does smell kind of weird."

Melanie felt at the pencil-slim braids that hung past her cheek.

"We tell each other stuff like that," Maddy went on. "Because it's helpful? And then, we're even more like sisters."

The set was watching and listening, though they held books and magazines as props, or plodded at their blouses and slacks as they found hangers. "It's probably all that crap you put in it. Like, okay, I put three things, in my hair?" Maddy felt at her sable bob like emperor's silk, swooning.

"But it's different for blacks, right? Like, tell me if this isn't right, because I heard that black hair really sucks. No, I mean, like, 'cause it's hard. As in, it can't get soft, unless you totally burn it or something? Is that right? That sounds awful! I *need* my hair smooth." She pet her scalp once more, just to be sure.

"Otherwise, what's the point?" She frowned, as though piecing together a tragic and inconvenient puzzle. She looked to Becky for help, but her friend only stepped back and puffed her cheeks.

Melanie stepped out from the bathroom, hiding her face against a towel, and Maddy held out her upturned palms. It took Melanie a moment to realize that Pumpkin was offering her a hug.

She had to pass.

"But really, I'm serious, we don't care. We want a diverse pack of Sex Animals. Right, girls?"

Celest closed her eyes behind a *Cosmo*. Becky shook where she stood.

"It's just this camp, you know?" Maddy sighed. "It's *so* white."

In bed, after lights-out, a top bunk by a south-facing window—really a very nice view of the inlet known as the Wolf's Tail—Melanie recalled the events of the day as she tried to ignore the chatter in the darkness, one of the voices belonging to the cabin's moneyed and laissez-faire consoler, Connie Carlyle, who had arrived with swollen lips ten minutes before lights out, smelling of cigarettes. She had welcomed Melanie with the same cooing niceness that Melanie had grown allergic to long before dinner, and if the position hadn't already been filled by Maddy, she would've hated Connie worst of all.

Melanie lay there, rigid and bitterly awake, with sleep feeling as distant and impossible as the August date she would be free of this place, if she couldn't convince her parents to cut short their Alaskan cruise, or, more likely, buy her a bus ticket and make arrangements with Aunt Nora. Of course all that was out of the question, her mom would never let her give up like this, even if Dad would promise he'd fight for her.

Below it all, there was one thing on her mind, a mistake for which she had only herself to blame, and this time it didn't have anything to do with snooping in diaries, or the dozens of things she'd been made to suffer for in the past 12 hours that were out of her control, such as the thickness of her hair, or the brownness of her complexion, or her parent's tax bracket and zip code. It was something she had packed, something she and she alone had consciously chosen to bring, weighing the pros and cons over the course of many weeks. But it had taken her no more than four or five seconds, upon her arrival in Cabin 7, to recognize the origin of the physical sickness she felt.

And so, Melanie Reid was not the most unwelcome guest in Cabin 7 that night, even as she may have been the only girl not venting her excitement well-past midnight. No, that distinction belonged to her sole companion, whom she loved dearly, and now

found herself hating, and perhaps it was over this that she cried, silently, as she would not dare give any of these girls the satisfaction of so much as a snuffle. She would be gross, lying there in her roost. She was already gross; to these girls, she would always be.

But it seemed to her worse than unfair that her beloved Mr. Lion, who had never let her down, lay now suffocating at the bottom of her half-emptied duffle, hanging from a bedpost. It was worse than unfair that he should be for her a source of shame, when all she wanted, now, more than ever, was to kiss and hold him tightly, and tell him everything would be all right.

The moon shone pale against the lake outside the southern window, liquid and pockmarked and self-important. The wind was picking up, but she knew that it would never grow strong enough to destroy this awful place.

Forgive me, Mr. Lion. Tomorrow, I'll find a place for you. Get you a waterproof bag, and find a nice, stately nook, or hollow log.

A nice one.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### We've Always Made it Work

"One time, he was really nice to me. He asked me what my favorite food was, and then he made it the best I've ever had."

-Samantha Doorshek, Cabin 8.

Friday night, when the bird came for me, I didn't even flinch. I think I scared that miserable beast. He squawked me into the Pagawashek tribe, which was a relief, as the twins were longtime heads of the British tribe, and with my complicated feelings for my sisters, not to mention all the spies and old-guard still packing the Brits, a British Dutch would've meant civil war, at best, if not an all-out disintegration of sense and distinction, which might well have ripped a hole in the fabric of space-time itself.

The Paga table was not really to my liking as such—filled with babbling idiot newbies and babbling idiot turners. The Senior Pagas were mostly glaze-eyed pipe-hikers, declare-mumbling something about victory being ridiculous anyways, man. To say they needed a leader would be putting it mildly. But the time would come when I would need an army, and these twice-emptied brain buckets would have to do.

But that time was not yet, so I sat over my Myrtavesti milkshake in silence, fingering the strawberry slices with cool eyes tracing around the sand-colored pillars of Rick's, over the bouncy balloon-cheeked legacies, the drawn and tight-wound nouveau-plutos, the lazy and lecherous old world gene-scrappers, the sharp-cheeked Islanders, the

translucent and offended Capers, and the small handful of bad-haired bourgeois, pressed sad like shadows, puffed and hunched and oh so lucky to be among the first of their friends to have misread the brochure.

I pushed aside the half-drained milkshake, and some pony-loving moron took it away and signaled for another.

"Unless you were done," said the quivering child.

"Pony-girl," I said, my eyes trained on Alex Kochs, who dozed behind her Ray-Bands. "I'm just getting started."

"They are miniature horses," the girl said, quietly. "And they're *real*."

On Sunday, my story was that I was interested in paddleboats. I know, but strain belief for a moment. The hardest thing about wearing an age ring is putting yourself into the mind of an eight year-old, and remembering how stupid-ridiculous kids can be, and not wringing the necks of your so-called chums. That's the job. Sometimes, I almost believe I'm Kell Nunen myself. It's spooky. So you play it cool, like they're your idiot cousins you're taking a movie.

A particularly obnoxious specimen of pathetitude jumped back from one of the paddle boats slumped along the shore.

"Spiders!"

Jake Atwater scratched beneath a white cap darned out of a washcloth. "Yep, they're in there. It's not a bad idea to give it a quick brush out with your sandal. Then, double check your sandal."

"Are they poison?"



"Oh, no, not those. Daddy long-legs. Not really even spiders, actually, or something. And their mouths are too small to bite you. Okay, so, who here has ridden a bike?"

Jesus. Fucking. Christ. I wasn't going to make it.

"Jake? Do you have any other clubs today?"

"Stargazing. After dark, of course. On the north dock."

"You're a great instructor? But I just realized I'm not a fucking moron, so I'm never going to use one of these."

"Okay, cool. See you later then, thanks for checking it out." As I walked away, Jake spread his arms, wide and inviting. "All right, girls. So, pedals. What are they all about?"

I found Jake after supper on the north dock, just like he said, surrounded by a small cadre of girls ranging in age from pint-sized to half-pubescent monsters scratching at their asses and bra-straps. I would have to wait them out, because half were gunning for his put-on surfer drawl and foggy promises of a six-pack. It was just as well I could never play that angle, in my present condition. As luck would have it, Jake was just smart or awkward enough to steamroll every flirtation that came his way, and it wasn't long before most of the girls were gone. Meanwhile, I kept quiet, lying on my back looking up at the stupid stars, while Jake pointed and said unconvincing things about how they weren't stupid. Finally, it came time that he made his way over to me.

"See the moon? It's a crescent tonight."

"Yes, and it's the sunlight blocked from the earth. Fascinating."

Jake plopped down beside me and stretched as he yawned. "Okay, but have you realized that what you're seeing against the moon is our shadow? Is the shadow of the earth, way out there on this, our great free jumbotron in the sky?"

I tossed my cigar into the lake. It hissed. "What else is on?"

"Cute. That up there, by the bright one, is a crab."

"What's that ugly one next to it? It looks like a guitar."

"That's the big dipper. See, you're learning."

I had to speed this up, or I was going to shoot him. I was going to shoot this man I needed to like me.

Jake sat up and hugged his knees. "People say there's no meaning. Have you heard this? Nothing means anything. Do you get that?"

Well, that was a gimme.

"No," I said.

"Me neither. I mean, I think what we have here, my dear Watson, is way too much meaning."

The day I'm Watson, and Jake is Holmes, will be the day all meaning really has been lost. But he was rolling, so I kept quiet.

"Like, okay. There's a reason the Wolf is here. A glacier split, and one half does Niagara, and the other makes Tupper, and at each of their Falls, they both disappeared. We know this, young Nunen. We know the reason behind the location of every stone and grain of sand, if we bother to look up the address. We understand every step of the continental plates' dance marathon, still going, with Antarctica on the floor after a billion years, to a tune strangely familiar to the beginning of the universe, whose measures we

also know, all fourteen billion years of them, beat for heavenly beat." Jake held his breath. "It's all up there for us to see, all that time, just, sitting there, frozen in space..."

A fish leapt in the distance, breaking the glass of the lake.

"My question is, can too much meaning crush itself out of existence?"

I was watching for more fish. Maybe they all jumped together. After all, even detectives could enjoy jumping fish.

Jake sighed, as if after a narrow escape. "I don't know. But that's something you learn, I guess. Some things remain simply beyond us."

Okay, here we go. Give him another moment to get used to the idea of never knowing. He doesn't have a name for it yet, but he will. Dutch Jonas, good to meet-

"But that's a good thing, right? We don't want to hit our heads on the glass ceiling, do we?"

Relax. He's hysterical. After all, Buddha didn't play guitar. "Okay, I'll do it."

"What?"

"I'll figure it out. The meaning thing. If it can crush itself. Dutch is on the case."

"Oh. Okay, cool." Jake stood and stretched. No more fish were jumping. "So, Star Club is basically over-"

"I take fifty dollars a day plus expenses, and a bonus on results, that's standard."

"I don't really have any money."

I leveled my eyes at him, serious about my pity. "You have nothing."

"I have a small allowance that I live on."

"Okay, what's that?"

Jake took a step back, looking around for support, but all the children had left.

"I'm not gonna... I need that."

I patted my belly and chuckled like a villain who never sweats. I was still working on the belly, but the chuckle I had on lock. "And what about meaning, don't you need that?"

"I have some."

I was looking out over the lake, squinting, as though trying to find hope for this poor fool. "But nothing tangible, nothing you can hold?"

"Hey, I just wanted to talk about the stars. But, I really do appreciate your offer. I do."

Hand on his arm, assuring. "I like you, Jake. You're a good guy. I can see that. Let me tell you something. Twenty years in this business, I've never once turned away a good guy, down on his luck, who couldn't pay or get his life together. And we've always made it work. What I'm saying is, Jake. I got you."

Jake held his eyes, pushing them in with his knuckles.

"I don't think-"

"And you don't have to. Because it's done."

"Kell-"

"I'll put my men on it, get you a report in a couple of days."

I wasn't quite running, I was walking fast, up the dock and mostly backwards.

"Don't worry, Jake. They're reliable. They could stand to work a little harder, but I trust them and that's what's important. Gotta run. Swimming!"

"It's night..." Jake observed, but I was already gone.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Line Drawn

from Reid, Melanie: *The Journals of Melanie Reid, Vol 2* (2013-2015). Knopf, New York, 2011. Pp. 436-438.

6/18/15 - Saturday

Dear Future Jones;

My folks sent me a postcard:

Melanie! - Had a great flight in -Thanks to Dad who upgraded us to 1st class for my B-day! All seems very well organized - going on 1st excursion today. Made friends from Penn - Walking trail on grounds for later.

Love, Dad + Mom

Sweet, huh?

Right. Sweet aboard a cruise with their scholarshipped daughter tucked away in Hell. Wanna watch the video?

-Sure, Mom. That sounds swell.

-Dad? Come join us?

-Oh, those camps are full of snobby rich kids.

-Don't be like that, Charlie, let's just give it a chance. They took all the trouble to send it to us, the least we could do is-

-Alright, enough, I can't hear—we missed the beginning.

-No one's said anything yet. Really, what is wrong with your father?

-They were saying something.

-It was lyrics, Dad.

-Oh. Good to have you aboard, Bee.

*-Tuppa Lake is about more than just memories. It's about people.*

*-I don't think I've ever found, a more peaceful place, on green earth. And I mean that.*

*-The friends you meet, in the valley, they'll be friends for life.*

*-Oh it's definitely a special place. It's the bonds, that magical places seem to allow.*

*-There is a freedom here, for girls to be girls.*

*-There's dances, but, most campers find it's the times with their friends, they value the most.*

*-Camp taught me who I am.*

*-In pottery we make pots and I made one.*

*-It's not the oldest camp, but the valley is old, and our roots are old. And we know that when our campers grow old, they will remember Tuppa Lake.*

*-Some of our campers, aren't used to swimming in lakes. But a two week intensive course has everyone swimming to Rabbit Island and back, nearly a mile, with our fully certified instructors right beside them, for every kick, every stroke.*

*-I love the lake. It's warm like a pool.*

-Well then. I for one, would like to hear what Melanie thinks.

-What about it, Bee? I could go to a quarter for those thoughts.

For my thoughts and words that day you can refer to earlier volumes of this text. But I can say this, future doctor of archeology at the University of Chicago old buddy old chum. If I knew then what I know now, my answer would have been different. But at the moment, I'm happy to report that the lake is in fact better than cold, and if all the rest of everything I hate about this place were swallowed by the Wolf, it'd be frozen.

Mr. Dole, Devin—the Headmistress' son—said he was going to fix my camp. Which really was the nicest thing that's happened to me in the past 24 hours since that awful Kombucha-filled bus spat us out in this colossal mistake of a valley.

Only, he didn't. I mean, how could he fix anything? The bashful Bear with darting eyes could only find my trunk, make sure it got to the cabin after that horrible tribal sorting bird, before he was called back to whatever it was he did around here when he wasn't promising the impossible to strangers and being blackmailed by the psychopaths this place apparently services exclusively. Maybe they'll let me go home if I assure them I've never tortured small animals. Or maybe they'll just stick me into a primer course.



Welcome all you frauds and Devins. My hero. The red-cheeked white man to the rescue. Always worked before.

You want to fix this camp? Tell you what. You bring the gas; I'll bring the matches. If things go well, I might even stand back.

Worst of all, I still have to find a place for Mr. Lion. I can't just keep carrying him around in my bag, and I know too many ways to get into a trunk to trust locks. If these girls find him, we're both of us, done for.

So camp sucks. Is the takeaway.

It was a cool Sunday night. It was not a funeral. The hollow in the tree was not a crypt, or mausoleum, or any such thing that Melanie kept thinking it was exactly like. It was really very nice, the knave inside the oak or elm or whatever type of tree it was that didn't seem to have bark and was gray and split apart from itself in every direction, as though it could stand to be anything, so long as it was something else.

*Oh, I'm sure it's a great place to die.*

"No one is dying here."

*No, of course not. Just putting a bag over my head and stuffing me into a tree. It's a holiday in the sun.*

"You're being dramatic."

*Probably my last chance.*

"I'll come check on you. I'll visit."

"Don't bother."

Melanie jumped back about twenty feet back. The voice behind her was not Mr. Lion's, and it meant the end. She would be ridiculed mercilessly for the rest of the

summer, if she lasted that long. Mr. Lion would be lost in the scuffle, carried off on soft and boney hands; tormented, beaten, gutted and dismembered. His head to be staked on a pole at the north dock, as a warning to all those who dared love anything so completely. She hoped only they would take her the same way, and take her first.

The redheaded girl who'd spoken stood alone, a few yards back. She lit a cigarette from a book of matches, tossing the spent stick in the grass, keeping her eyes trained on the girl holding a pint-size stuffed animal and a folded ziplock bag.

"They'll find him. Anywhere you put him, they'll find him. They always do."

"I'll just have to go further out," Melanie said.

The girl put her hand on her hip. "Suit yourself. But every log, every nook, every hollow— Well, you obviously know what you're doing."

"There's a whole forest out there."

"No, you're right. And you could cut off from the trails, that's what you're thinking, right? And I'm sure the path you stomp through those plants won't be followed by the next bored burner hunting for a stash, or Jake tracking a Paga, or girls on a counselor hunt, yada, ya..."

"Those are bad for you," Melanie said, though she didn't know why she said anything.

"Yeah. And they taste terrible."

"Sounds great."

The girl seemed to consider smiling. She held up the smoke, inspecting it dispassionately. "I just wanted to get this one out of the way. You know, before the others made it cool."

Melanie squinted, as if seeing the girl better would force her words to make more sense.

"Okay, tell you what. I think I might know a spot."

The girl dropped the butt and ground it out with her sandal, blowing blue out the side of a grim smile. "Come on."

Melanie smelled a trap. Go off with this older girl? She certainly looked like the others, had that same air of casual superiority, and the bone structure that some psycho future corporation could sell to rich parents of impossibly beautiful monsters destined for hushed-up prep-school assault charges and career-ending spinal injuries. Still, there was something different about her.

The girl scratched at the remnants of a once-great civilization of freckles. She offered a smile, the kind that was honest about its composition. "They can be pretty brutal," she said, gesturing towards the camp. "Especially if you're not rich. Or, not the right kind of rich."

"How do you know I'm not rich?"

She made a show of looking Melanie over. When she spoke, it was the rapid-fire speech of commercial side-effect readings. "Your haircut can't have cost more than fifty dollars. Your outfit a little more. Probably a blouse from last season because you haven't grown much since you got those sandals." She fell silent, chewing her lip.

"What are you, Sherlock Holmes?"

"That's just how I think."

Melanie leaned against Mr. Lion's scuttled hideaway.

"Do you have another one of those cigarettes?"

"No. Like I said, I just wanted to get it out of the way."

Melanie was too confused to care. She sneered at the twilight fading against the lake.

"Okay," the girl said. "But you're going to think I'm weird." She took a deep breath. "It's on my list."

"Your list?"

"Camp things."

"Like smoke cigarettes."

"Like smoke *a* cigarette, while brooding."

"You have 'smoke a cigarette while brooding,' on a list?"

"Yes. And now, I can put a check beside it."

For a moment, the lake appeared brighter than the sky, and a breeze washed from east to west. A sliver of moon was out, and Melanie realized that, at least in this small instant, she no longer wanted to go home.

"Cool," she said. "What else is on there?"

"Oh, lots of things."

She found herself walking, and she was walking along the lake with the redhead, who was talking to Melanie like they were old friends. Mr. Lion was tucked inside her bag, along with her copy of *the Portable Blake*, and she kept forgetting that what they were doing was, apparently, finding the hiding place the girl had mentioned. It seemed to matter less and less that this girl would know where Mr. Lion was, too. That is, as they

walked, Melanie's plan to move Mr. Lion after the girl had left wasn't directly challenged, so much as it grew to feel fuzzy, half-baked, and unnecessary.

The girl was smiling. For a moment, they both were. The lake air blew clean and the pines smelled rich and cushioned, and all at once the stars were out and alive and everywhere.

"I'm supposed to be Alex Kochs," she said, "but really I'm just a look-alike. Kochs' people hired me to pose as his daughter, so that if anyone tries to kidnap her, they get me instead."

"Thrilling."

"Isn't it?" The girl who wasn't Alex gestured at Melanie's bag. "Books?"

Melanie shrugged.

"These girls don't have a brain among them. Maybe that's part of the plan. Camp takes the dumbest rich kids and brainwashes them to do their bidding and blow-up credit card companies or something. Or, they replace their brains with squirrel brains so they'll be better consumers and politicians."

"Or," Melanie ventured, "they're all robots, and we're the only real girls here, and they're programmed to imitate our behavior. So, in a way, we're like, robot instructors."

"Damn. I'm not being paid enough for that."

"At least you're getting paid."

"My dad gets most of it." The girl tossed her hair, which was red even in the dark, and hung in a bob just above her jaw. "Kickbacks."

"Yikes."

"Ever since the plant laid him off, things have been tight."

"That sucks."

"What do you expect? They've replaced us all with robots!" She grabbed Melanie by the throat, and shook her in a mock strangle.

After being released, Melanie kicked at a pebble and did her best disaffected working class mutter, "There's no jobs left in this town."

The girl turned into a fast-talking old prospector, "No jobs left period end of story."

Melanie laughed, bumping into her. "Your mom's all like, 'Maybe if you stayed sober until noon, you could hold onto one!'"

"My mother's dead."

The girl had stopped, not a trace of smile remained. Melanie feared she'd ruined everything. "God, I'm really sorry."

The girl's smile returned as though it had never been gone. "I'm messing with you. That's the real Alex. I had to memorize her bio."

"Oh. Okay." They resumed walking.

"Pancreatic cancer. Greek for, 'cancer all over everywhere,' I think."

"That's sad."

"Yeah, well. She's rich enough to buy a new mom."

"That's not funny."

"Hey. You're right. Line drawn. I like you. What's your name?"

Melanie gave herself a moment to make sure she got it right.

"Tell you what, I'll put Mr. Lion in my safe, no one's getting in there unless I open it, I promise. Pinkies, toes, whatever you like."

Melanie wasn't sure about this. Nothing was this easy. "How'd you know his name?"

"Well, he looks like a Mr. Lion, doesn't he?"

Melanie had to admit, she had her there.

"And you can come by Cabin 3 to visit him anytime you want, which is a lot better than traipsing through the woods and pulling him out of some spidery bugland cave."

"You're an American."

The girl tossed her hair and showed her teeth. "People call me Spark."

There really was a shooting star, and the breeze kicked up just after and split the clouds blue against the charcoal sky. Melanie did the thing she did at times when she especially wanted to remember a moment. She would imagine her eyes contained a camera, that would make a picture in her mind forever, and when she blinked, the picture would be taken. But as she held Spark's hand in hers, their eyes locked, she had the last-minute impulse to wink, instead. And she did, but then felt compelled to also wink the other eye, to be certain that her memory camera would work. She knew, of course, how ridiculous this was, immediately after the fact.

"Did you just wink, with both eyes?"

Melanie regretted the very concept of winking. "It's complicated."

"Hmm... Okay. Best friends montage?"

And so it was that Spark and Melanie skipped through the trees and held hands and caught frogs that splashed as they slipped from their fingers leaping back into the

pond in whose waters the girls admired their muddy faces and fingers and smeared mud on each other and screeched and spied through hollow logs where the other bent spying and smiling right back looking out over the great mountain expanse atop a hill before the other pushed her down and jumped to roll after running through a meadow chasing dandelion fuzz floating against the canopy widdling sunlight now close before your eyes spinning slowly on the end of a stem and laughs as she hops onto her back carried down the rocky trail peeking her head from behind a tree as Spark steps Frankenstein eyes closed towards her before Mel ducks behind the tree coming face to face with a raccoon made of teeth screaming and running into Spark herself screaming "You're it!"

And suddenly the montage was over, and there was Spark and Melanie clearing their throats with awkward grins, put their arms around each other, and made their way toward Rick's.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Workouts and Countdowns

"The hat was strange. None of us understood the cowboy hat. He's a chef. And French. And he wasn't a cowboy at all. It wasn't funny."

-Bridgette Peters, Cabin 8

#### DEVIN'S ROOM

LIGHT: NATURAL

(DEVIN DOLE stands before SAM in his workout clothes, belly pushing the shirt tight. When Sam is not anyone, his face takes on a squarish, rolled appearance, like it's being pressed against a window. His lip curls and his eyes are bright and open like a baby's. Devin speaks to him carefully, trying to assume the point of view of a machine.)

DEVIN: Morning, Sam.

SAM: Good morning, Devin.

DEVIN: I dreamed of the Paga Chief again.

SAM: Would you like me to run a catalogue for Vancouver?

DEVIN: No, Sam. Why would I want that?

SAM: I am very fond of Vancouver. I wish to see it one day.

DEVIN: Great. I hope that happens for you.

SAM: Thank you.

DEVIN: Begin recording please, Sam.

SAM: Recording has begun.

(Devin stands before a free-standing humanoid dummy, over the head of which he affixes a pair of cargo pants, such that the head is stuffed inside the thigh of one pant leg, and the other pant leg hangs free. He speaks with a Russian accent (63-73% accuracy), and later a British accent, (var., AUS, SCT, IRH accuracy ~ap. 51-82% [In these accents, his stammer is reduced 78-89% ~.].))

DEVIN: Okay, great, um, this is Karl, I'm Karl. This is an instructional video, okay? This is how to use the *Cargo Method*. This is, you can see, the *Cargo Method* here. (Indicates.) See we have nothing here but this ordinary dummy, okay? We've got cargo, just ordinary cargo pants. We've cut off the buttons. Fit it over the head, there, you can start with the right leg, doesn't matter, we're going to switch in a moment. So. One of the things that can hurt you maybe a bit is the zipper, ah, but, usually not a problem. Stay away from zipper, okay? Think of it as his teeth.

(Accent blurs into British. Strikes dummy.)

DEVIN: Right, so. Ah, my accent. (Laughs.) Right, so- Notice I am staying, only in the canvas.

(Back to Russian.)

DEVIN: This is easy to remember, because it's nice, right, because when you get outside it.

(Strikes dummy outside of canvas.)

DEVIN: It hurts. Not much, but enough, to make you want to stay inside. Plus, it's moving a little, here, the eye catches it. So we follow, around. Mix it up.

(Strike misses the canvas; he stops.)

DEVIN: Okay, you miss it, you stop. Miss it? Stop. That's to teach you, how to stop. Okay. It also encourages you, not to miss.

(Accent to British.)

DEVIN: Mostly though, you need to know, put the zipper around back. Smart. I'm British now.

(Strikes dummy, fast.)

DEVIN: Deal with it. DEAL WITH IT.

(Accent now Australian. Devin stops, and grabs the pant leg coming off dummy's head.)

DEVIN: Okay. So, gets a little more comfortable? This now, is an arm. You treat it, like an arm, it starts behaving, like an arm.

(Lets go of pant leg, grabs it and strikes dummy's head.)

DEVIN: Meaning you have to block it, go around it.

(Grabs lower, free-hanging pant leg.)

DEVIN: Likewise, when this starts behaving like a leg, you treat it as a leg.

(Stops, breathing hard, addresses the camera.)

DEVIN: Right, so. I'm totally British now, there's no going back, and here we are, we're using the *Cargo Method*, *Karl's Cargo Method*. Right. He's coming in for the punch—and you STOP HIM. (Demonstrates.) You need QUICKER? Good, yeah. If you start treating it like a body, it *becomes* a body. (Demonstrates.) And the more body-like you treat the dummy, the more body-like *you*, are becoming.

(The high dangling pant leg clips Devin across the cheek. He stops, smiling, panting.)

DEVIN: He GOT me there, did you see that? That's something of a lesson. Right. What we did, was just, a warm-up, of the sparring exercises and workouts, you'll receive, on my three, sixty-minute, instructional videos, to be found at my website, that's [karlscargomethod.com](http://karlscargomethod.com). Thanks for joining me. Good fight.

(Devin holds his smile, breathing hard, then lets it drop.)

DEVIN: Well. What did you think?

SAM: It is possible you will succeed. Would you like me to post the video online?

DEVIN: No. Not today.

SAM: You asked that I remind you of your intentions to post a video this summer.

DEVIN: I know. We will. Listen, Sam, I know that you love Vancouver-

SAM: Should I list for you its properties?

DEVIN: Not right now. I just wanted to ask you, is there anything you hate?

SAM: Chess.

DEVIN: Huh. I would've thought you'd love chess.

SAM: I do not love chess. I love nothing about it.

DEVIN: What if it were being played in Vancouver?

SAM: The answer is very complicated.

DEVIN: I'll bet.

(Devin pulls off his shirt and sits on the bed, still  
breathing heavy.)

DEVIN: Hey, Sam? Would you mind bringing up a catalogue of interesting things about Vancouver?

SAM: I would love to, Devin. I have just the one you need.

CODENAME: VANCOUVER - CLASSIFIED E/O TOP SECRET

There's a code slipped into every atlas printed by *WorldBook* since 1968, the year the FBI hit with their own domestic Tet, and effectively took control of the country. All

of this fell apart in '75 with Media, and the ragged edges of what was by now a bankrupt heard of refugees, on all sides, as those who feed on rot will always, in time, widdle themselves down to isolation and paranoia. But Couver survived, if only because there was never a written mention of it, anywhere, in the memo-happy Bureau. When Counterplea broke wide open, we were about as thorough record keepers as the prewar Dutch, and were way behind on our redactions.

So now, Hooverless, the Bureau limped back to Couver, where they hatched a plan for a new millennium. This is important, because we are not dealing with stupid men. We took a backseat in the 80s and 90s to the DEA and lesser extent ATF, and any resurgence in public profile in the latter decade can only be attributed to the success of *Twin Peaks* and *Silence of the Lambs*. But by the early Oughts, we found something way better than hippies and homegrown revolutionaries. And while we'd been watching *Back to the Future* the morning 9/11 happened, if anyone in Annapolis had a hand, it flies against everything I know. At any rate, however we found them, we found terrorists, and they looked a lot like Arabs, and this was important—that they looked like something.

The true takeover happen on Patriot Act Day (or Pat Day) a swamp holiday still. The juice involved the creation of a dummy corporation in the form of Homeland Security, which would serve as a wide funnel of cash to finance black bag projects for the FBI, and, it was proffered, in exactly one of those back garden cigar sessions with the CIA that you're imagining.

But when the votes came down, the bill had, with a little help from the Nissers, been hacked near deadline, ousting the CIA from a major arm of allocations, with the new and labyrinthine, but absolute, allocation language buried so deep, it would later take

a team of beleaguered, soon-to-be-owed-great-favors upstart Washington attorneys two weeks to come up with a final answer, which was, basically, that the FBI claimed ultimate powers resting in the range of 64%, the NSA could claim 32%, of either of which the CIA could hopelessly make appeals for, with the remaining 3-4% going to high-risk city police. The relevant information comprised a total of less than eight-hundred words, culled and digested from across 68 nonconsecutive pages, which would remain the only of the 342 pages of the bill that mattered.

I could go on with the history lesson; Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria; but the sad truth about dirty wars is that in the scheme of things they're never more than a sideshow. Distraction is their reason for being and carrying on.

Nevertheless, the point of this communication is not history, but the present. Here are the coordinates of Couver Island: 082745906LG; 834837298LT. It will not appear on any map, but reading from north to south, starting with the northern-most island peak, *WorldBook* has it wrong. The code stops at Couver Island, which is also not where it should be.

The need for immediate action is this: The NSA's plan was to dance with the devil, then surveil the hell out of his dance-steps, learn his weaknesses, and take control. But what happened was, they soon saw all too clearly how vast an outfit, and how dangerous, was the devil they were dealing with. If for no other reason, then they became aware of a second Bureau, a shadow Bureau. That was my branch of operations. Let's just say, no one who worked in DC makes jokes about the FBI.

When a certain high-level NSA chief was asked politely, at the edge of a seventy-four inch logging saw in Oregon, to back off allocations for a quarter or two, that is, if he

felt like seeing his kids grow up without some panicked beaten Mexican running them over with a truck drunk as a skunk stoned as they come, the animals. And maybe he should notice when the flag at the Bureau's DC black box is silver-tasseled, if for no other reason than it's your patriotic privilege to vote *Yes* on whatever's on the docket that morning. So it'd be wise to make a habit of walking by it on your way to work.

So here we are. 2015. A neutered CIA and a puppet NSA. A sad-eyed cheerleader President busy cleaning up two wars and America caught as an asshole by the Russians using our same language for invasion of a sovereign nation, while our agencies race to sell the last deeds of our Gulag before we just start building walls around the ghettos and be done with it.

What next? I have no idea. I figured I'd start by telling someone. Then, I quit.

Godspeed,

Alex

DEVIN'S ROOM

LIGHT: NATURAL

(URSULA DOLE sits in a rolling leather desk chair, while DEVIN stands behind her, arms akimbo. Both stare fixedly at Sam's screen, which displays a COUNTDOWN TIMER; 02W:06D:21H:13M:08S)



DEVIN: Do you believe this? She even signed her name. URSULA: Sam?

What happens when the timer runs out?

SAM: I'm sorry, Ursula. I don't have that information.

URSULA: Three weeks. That's the Color War. Sam? Where did the catalogue come from?

SAM: My memory.

URSULA: How did it get there?

SAM: It was placed there by packets of positive and negative impressions of impulses moving at  $\text{apr} \sim 300\text{KM/s}$  through interface with ISP: 12837180=13 on March 1st, 2015; under standard spider work through engines such as google; Yahoo; Deep Web; Xanadu; Alters; there are others.

DEVIN: Do you know who wrote it?

SAM: I have a full catalogue of sources. Would you like to see it?

(Ursula scoots forward on Devin's rolling desk chair.)

URSULA: Yes, please let us see it.

SAM: ERROR: [Alex]'s catalogue of sources cannot be reproduced here.

Vol:  $\sim 10^{119}/\text{mb}$ .

DEVIN: What does that mean?

SAM: Would you like an analogy of scale?

DEVIN: Please.

SAM: If each page contained a hundred sources, and those pages were stacked flat, that stack would reach the Nostular moon, and make it three quarters of the way back.

DEVIN: What's a Nostular moon?

SAM: The Nostular moon is the nearest moon from our closest neighboring galaxy, approximately 2.5 million light years away.

URSULA: Sam, who else have you shown this document to?

SAM: You are the first.

(Devin scratches his chin. He paces; picks up a pair of dumbbells, and begins pumping.)

DEVIN: What do we do?

URSULA: We keep this to ourselves, obviously. But I'm worried about Jake.

DEVIN: You think Alex knows?

URSULA: It wouldn't be the first time.

(Devin eyes Sam uneasily.)

DEVIN: You don't think, she's watching us?

URSULA: Is that possible, Sam?

SAM: No. I am axiomatically unable to record or transmit without the express wishes of the living entities being recorded. It's in my instruction manual, pages 58-60; third edition.

URSULA: Fine. (To Devin.) Any ideas?

DEVIN: I think it best that Jake be distanced from Alex.

URSULA: You want to take him off the play? But who's going to Tech?  
You?

DEVIN: Oh, no, I don't think so. What about what's his name? Brad.  
Didn't he ask about it?

URSULA: That's exactly why I won't let him near it. You remember what  
happened last year.

DEVIN: Who can we trust?

URSULA: Why not give it to the girls? Isn't that what your father always  
said?

DEVIN: Jake's not going to like it.

URSULA: Well. He can write a song about it.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Cloud of Asking

On the first Monday night of camp, Jake was both aware and not aware that the Evolving Evening Activities he hosted as part of his standard counseling duties were not all about him. That is to say, Jake was both aware and not aware that his dismissal from his duties as theater tech, and his ongoing (for now, apparently) swimming and watercraft and CPR instruction were not, in fact, about him at all. That is to say, he was well aware that all of these transpirations and activities were not rendered and executed solely for the purposes of his own spiritual and emotional growth, saturated in themes surrounding, for instance, his drug use and its possible detrimental effects upon his person, his periodic, if perhaps benevolent psychotic breaks; his ambiguous sexuality, about which he felt alternately unsurprised, proud, and anxious, as well as that it was evidence of his genius, and/or indicative of particularly aggressive streaks of vanity; his desperation to be a great and famous poet, and the bullshit of that desire being nearly enough to assure him that he would never become one; his broken heart *visa-vi* Connie Calloway, and his rakesmanship/caditry *visa-vi* the same Connie Calloway; his rejection and/or periodic embracing of a smattering of cherry-plucked tenants and attitudes from his parent's Catholicism, just enough to allow himself to periodically believe it possible he could be possessed by a demon, (albeit a relatively quiet one); his self-absorption and rabid attention-seeking; his plodding and predictable bouts of depressive, or near-depressive withdrawn mopeyness, which he believed to be in part a performance put on for himself,

as much as for others; his self-absorption—again—that is to say, his obsession with his self-absorption, both in terms of his obsession with the fact of the apparently mammoth nature of how obsessed he was with this fact, as well as his sub-obsession with the apparent paradox as to the fact of his awareness of his self-absorption having been not only apparently insufficient to alter said disposition, but, instead, carrying with it the awareness of his even further embracing said obsessions, and still, despite his profound wariness of failing to rid himself of said obsessions, his encounter with the fascinating, if disquieting, awareness of his apparent fondness for said feelings and obsessions, his feelings of safety and righteousness within said feelings and obsessions, etc., etc.; meaning that his intentions of ameliorating said obsessions and attitudes could hardly be genuine, etc., etc., etc...

Finally, and, perhaps, foremostly-speaking, the often overpowering sensation, occurring quite distinct from, and existing quite plainly side-by-side with the lucid and befuddled awareness and conviction that the following is not, and could not possibly be true: That is, the sensation that a conspiracy existed all around him, a benevolent conspiracy, which carefully orchestrated not only the Evolving Evening Activities, but many, if not all encounters Jake experienced in his daily life, the end goal being, surely, a grand and cathartic confrontation or peace-making with one or all of the above themes, so that Jake might transcend his self-obsession and become a more fully-realized and loving and present human being of strong character, and solid, stable mind.

Primary and foremost of these purges would be, of course—and naturally, this too was a mighty paradox—the purging of the admittedly absurd and solipsistic and batshit notion, that the world or the camp was conspiring and working ever so hard so that Jake

might purge from his mind the idea that everyone in the world or the camp was conspiring to purge him from grandiosity, paranoia, and self-obsession.

When he was in a quiet place and when he felt calm and that his intentions were operating at a higher level, and, in particular, when he was not stoned, Jake could plainly see how absurd such ideas were.

Now, pausing along the northwest trail up the Falls, Jake rechecked his instruction card for tonight's EEA:

"Take the 12-13s on a night hike to the Falls. Once there, instruct the girls to find something that they wish to take, and to leave in its place something precious, which they should have brought for this purpose."

These instructions begged many questions. The one Jake cared about, was, did the girls have any idea how rare and special it was that the Pagawashek tribe, (the *real* Pagawashek tribe, still the living stewards of this valley), allowed this activity, as they'd categorically forbidden removal of anything from the valley for hundreds, even thousands of years? For one night, the 12-13s got to take from the Falls any one thing they liked. And after hundreds of girls, and years of EEAs, the path along the falls suffered no clutter, and neither is it bare. Still, why the Pagas agreed to this, Jake could not say.

Other, less interesting questions begged themselves. For instance, was the buddy system still in effect? How long should Jake give the girls to look? Jake knew that children thrived under such ambiguities, and would keep such questions open, permitting each of the girls to answer for themselves. For the moment, he sat on a fat slab of a

boulder, watching the falls pour over the rocks and tumble coffee-colored for hundreds of feet into the Wolf below.

The flip-side of reveling in these ambiguities was, for Jake, the creeping feeling that the girls' responses were each a potential version of himself, suggestions of possible Jakes that these girls were, it seemed, consciously and deliberately offering, either earnestly, or as a test, or parody, or as a teaching tool, so that Jake might see, for instance, that here lithe the path of wisdom, and here Mary Ann offers the path of recklessness, and here Margot showeth the path of whining about not wanting to take anything from this stupid mountain, and Gloria the path of wanton carelessness in leaving behind a Snickers wrapper in place of a smooth and spectacular moonstone.

All of this he heard in their chatter, and watched in their movements. Of course, he all the while told himself that what was really going on was that these girls were on a hike and acting like girls would act on a hike, and it was none of it for his benefit, except for what he himself could take from it, and that that had nothing to do with deliberate plans of the girls, or Dole, or anyone in anything like the deliberate manner in which Jake imagined now, even while simultaneously rejecting such imaginings, and at the same time priding himself on his ability to entertain two contradictory ideas at once, and breathed the frustrated little cough he did when he meant to banish thoughts.

It never worked.

He looked out past the falls to a large sea of pine-covered green in the southwest center of the lake. Rabbit Island. He remembered his plan to camp on the island on his weekend off. He would burn lots of sage and watch eagles very seriously and eat Yinymaska and seek to commune with the spirits spoke of by the Pagawashek.

He had not settled on the plan because he was a bit frightened of the thought of tripping on sacred Indian land and attempting to commune with spirits he wasn't sure existed, and, if they did, then maybe they would not be so into the idea of this white man sorta trying to commune with them.

So he did the thing he would at times do when he was unsure of deep spiritual questions. He would close his eyes and breathe deep and ask God, or in this case, the spirits themselves, if his Yinymaska Rabbit Island trip was something that they would be into. Asked them if he could do this in their eyes respectfully and if he should. He put the question out into the falls and felt it carried over with the foam and down down down where it spread inside of the lake as a dissolving Cloud-of-Asking. The cloud reached Rabbit Island in the same instant it did Jake, and when he felt it, he knew he had his answer.

"Are we supposed to show you what we got?" It was the black girl, Melanie. The poet. He thought of her as Melanie the poet. She held her hand cupped against her side. She was watching him, anxious, ignoring the sublime cascade over his shoulders.

He paused to affect deep thought, but already knew what it was he would say.

"That much, Melanie the Poet, is up to you."



## CHAPTER NINE

### Adios, Albatross

6/21/15 – Tuesday

Few Char-dee!

Still not talking to William.

In other news, Alex Kochs *is* in fact Alex Kochs, and no one calls her Spark, apparently, except for last summer after she won the Color War and changed everyone's names. I guess I never really believed her about that.

I've started going to play practice, or theater—it's not like they're teaching us how to play—that would be stupid. It was Alex's suggestion, and I think I'm glad I did. Madison is there, and that horrible Kim girl, but in the theater they're less-actively awful. Or maybe just sleepy after lunch.

Apparently Jake used to run it, or help run it, but now it's run by the computer that made that awful bird, but he mostly just makes James Mason, who's nice in a creepy sort of way.

The good news is, I can visit Mr. Lion whenever I want. Or at least, when I can find Alex. Most of the time, she finds me, but it's probably better this way, I don't want to appear overeager.

And yes, I miss my parents, even if I still hate them for sending me here.

On Wednesday, with Jake gone, and Alex firing James Mason after a fight over potato chips, she had Sam project a mostly naked Channing Tatum to pace the front of the stage, to buy her time to spar with Sam over the direction of the summer play.

In this way, at least to all the rest of the girls, theater had been reborn as a world of endless abs and possibly, not to mention a two-hour loaf and gossip session, and the girls found it easy to blame Jake Atwater for all the fun that theater used to not be, which quickly became the dominant subject of conversation. And even while Channing didn't have much to add, at least not vocally, it would've taken everything in Alex's power to stifle the swell of anti-Jake sentiment, that is, if she cared to, which of course she didn't.

But neither did Alex add so much as a word to the burgeoning Jake-hate, and Melanie was glad for this, as she found herself nursing a bit of a crush on the singing shag of a man-child, whom she hadn't much seen around the fire, recently, and when he was around, his guitar was not. He would sidle in, late and sheepish, and sit far to the back, where the light of the flames could hardly reach him. It seemed clear to her that he was taking his dismissal from Tech quite hard, and she worried about him. She was also, like everyone else, generally curious as to why he'd been removed, and though there were plenty of theories, (albeit most of them involving the word "sucks"), in the end, no one seemed to know.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Beware of the Jakes

"My mom saw him on TV. She said, 'Oh, he's the French Cowboy!' I was like, really? How's that going to work? But he's alright. I wish he had more salads."

-Couriley Simone, cabin 3

Jake dove the strange depths off the southwest edge of camp.

It was one thing that no one got to watch him do. He never talked about it. He'd never seen the bottom.

The girls dove the depths as well, naturally, most often with snorkels, and not very far, though SCUBA was taught and those who toughed out the full summer elective dove the depths plenty, but none of them went near as far as Jake.

Jake did not coach SCUBA. He wasn't even certified, but the Doles believing him to be connected with the Bureau did a lot of good. Say what you want to say, but a pay-stub is still as good as cash with a government stamp. The use of the tanks were open to him, and he was never directly approached about their depletions. There was one Sunday afternoon when Devin asked for his help in the gear room of the *Talented Mr. Ripley* boathouse and Jake obliged, helping to fill eight tanks in total with their finely diluted oxygen, and there were not many words between them, but then, they never really seemed to have all that much to say to one another. Devin always insisted on talking about how much he wanted to have sex with famous actresses he was prevented from

having sex with because they were famous actresses. And he didn't listen to music. What do you talk about with a guy like that?

It quickly became dark in the depths, and the sky played no part in this. What had happened, Jake knew to be quite extraordinary. Limestone filled this valley eons ago, it was a white and porous kingdom stretching for hundreds of square miles in every direction, lifting the Bear and carrying the Lion. It was the ice that filled this valley before the ice came. And when the great Niagara Twin came through ten million years later, and promptly melted, its waters melted the limestone with it, and the great veins ran deeper than anyone might swim strapped to a device. The limestone in its lifetime had been long hugging the sandstone and granites that moved into the neighborhood about 100 million years earlier, when the Atlantic plate found the North American a very pleasing place to crash indeed.

But when the big moving day arrived, one little limestone boy was left behind when everyone else raced off to the Appalachian airport, and when the flight took off and the big crush came, he was squeezed way way down in the basement, where the appliances are working, but the furnace is evil. He lived there, alone, for about a week or so, watching old gangster movies and dropping groceries, until one day, he felt the strangest sensation. It was as if all his family and friends are returning to him, but their all such different people, fast and warm and incredible. And then he feels himself warming, too. And Spring came as never before, and suddenly he's the one with too many wonderful people he'd love to have the time to talk to, and they all look to him because they think he must know the way around down here, but he's just getting started himself, he's behind, even, having been the last one to melt.

The cave systems that formed in the depths and behind the falls may well connect, but Jake can't say he's ever seen it, though passageways along the walls of the depths, especially after a hundred meters or so, particularly in northwestern sections, are beyond numerous, and their entrances are marvels in themselves. Jake has made his way into some of the larger, more inviting ones, maybe thirty or so in all, brought line and tied off to a good stone. He'd traveled the hundred meters the line allowed, even considered securing a second, but even at fifty meters, the caves played tricks in these depths.

What he meant by this, could only be meant by him. By which he would mean that the caves at those depths have a way of appearing to a person—he hoped himself not the only one, for he feared above all things, being alone—a way of appearing such that they seemed to Jake to present carefully constructed halls for Jake and in particular, Jake to stroll through hands clasped or at chin admiring as though a private exhibition of a master's work commissioned as a series of Jake portraits, life drawings, and Greek sculpture—a song composed by the gods of this valley for his ears only. And these artworks were not simply there for his admiration, no, that was for men of less stature and means. Naturally, this was a study, his soul laid bare, and so a man must make use of such gifts. He must change. He must embark. He must find a project to improve himself. Here, are, after all, were all the visions of his possible selves before him so, go, choose, follow? Yes?

Ah, but see? You are now lost in the caves. And perhaps your line should break? One cannot argue with a broken line. And your headlamp will gladly nod, when you blame it for everything, and the world, and when your air runs out, it will be nodding on still. Presently you will find its point.

Jake had known lost divers. He was a pusher, there had never been a doubt about that, but like most anyone else, he wanted to push on to tomorrow. It was good to have a limit. There was more than one way to get lost in a cave.

The main depths were beautiful, sublime, breathtaking. One might imagine a jug, but from the inside looking up. That's what it was like, looking up from 100 meters, like being at the bottom of that jug, if the spout was closer to a straw, sliced open on its side. From there, the jug thins again into shorter version of the first spout. That's at 200 meters. Jake has been through this second spout, but only briefly. The pressure at these depths is enormous, and the process of both descent, and ascent, is as vigorous as advanced baking, where you die if you over, or under work.

Lucky for Jake, he possessed, if not a natural calm for such occasions, then a dumb puppy gleefulness for shepherding himself out of such panics and oversights and potentially very dear mistakes, and his track record on this point was often enough to ease his nerves. After all, his depth-meter might not be working, but it's nothing like the time in the caves when he was quite certain he had died and was in Heaven, and all he needed to do was take off his mask, and all the water would melt away and he'd be dancing and singing and laughing with everyone he ever loved, and friendly animals from the forest, too.

It did not work.

He started choking, as anyone *not* in the caves that night might've guessed, and somewhere, way, way down at the end of that near taught 100 meter tether, Jake knew must've known this, because he only breathed in a little.

Still, it really did almost end him. That much he knew.

That day, early last summer, Jake thanked the cave for not killing him, and found the red licorice of his life-line, and confirmed his allegiance to time. Time was pretty great, after all. Sharing, as it did, the dissolved limestone's dearest wishes, and the blue and earnest dreams of fish.

On Tuesday, the sky cleared and even the air from the lake blew hot. During quiet hour, after lunch, many of the girls were scattered in their sets along the shores of the Wolf, under plush beach towels washed in Monet's, allegiances to the color pink, and excessively dignified horse heads. Virgin daiquiris and Cuba Libres were sipped and spiked over giggles, and kale chips were passed and munched and declared awful and important for skin tone. Lotions were applied and reapplied by hands less noble, and sunglasses were pushed up and pulled off and examined with the bored eyes of their owners, who declared them worth more than summer cottages, and indeed a few came close.

Melanie Reid had at last given up the stew of the empty cabin, and wandered with Blake, out toward the south-westernmost beach, hoping to find a spot where she could be alone among the herd.

Becky spotted her, and jeered prone from her gold Armani towel and matching heart-shaped shades.

"Heeeaaay... Little Miss Read-a-lot, out in the sun with us bums. What do you know?"

Connie Carlyle, looking impossibly radiant in a white and blue starred bikini, rolled over, frowning, and sat up.

"Don't listen to her, Mel." She reached out, but let her arm fall before Melanie got close. "They jibe you because they're starting to like you."

Melanie said thanks, and continued south.

Connie caught up to her. "Hey. I just wanted to tell you, I think you're doing great. I've just been so proud of you these last few days, hanging with your new friends."

"Thanks."

"Really, be proud. Are you proud?"

Melanie watched the waves lap against the shore. "I guess so."

Connie removed her shades and waited for Melanie to look her in the eyes. "Not good enough."

"I'm proud."

"Yes you are. Say it like you mean it."

"I am proud of myself."

"Good." She put on her sunglasses, and looked around dramatically, taking it in.

"You should be. Now get out of here."

"Connie? Do you know Jean Paul?"

"The chef? He's new."

"What do you think of him?"

A smile crept over Connie's face, the sort you hide from priests and new boyfriends. "Are you *hunting*?"

Melanie thought this must be some chic new slang. "Maybe."

But Connie wasn't buying it; her smile vanished. "Really." She put her hand on her hip. "Tell me what I'm talking about, then."



"You think I like Jean Paul."

Connie's smile was back, her hands all over Melanie's shoulders, holding her out to get a better look at her. "Oh my god, you have a *crush* on Jean Paul?"

"No! No. I just-"

"It's okay, he's cute. A bit old for me, but for you, he'd be perfect."

"Ha. But really, have you ever talked to him?"

Connie wanted to get back. "We met before camp, before you guys got here. We didn't really have a conversation."

"You don't think, I mean, if you had to say whether he was-"

"Gay?"

"A good person. You know, nice."

Connie looked back to the set, who were engaged in a scuffle. A red iced drink sprayed into the air, covering Madison Sloan's face and hair. Screams and laughter and curses.

Connie yelled after them, her arm up, then stopped, turned back to Melanie, and sighed. "He didn't do anything that made me think otherwise." She softened, and reached out, finding Melanie's shoulder, like a child overcoming her fear of cats. "Look, Mel, you can crush all you want on the French cowboy. I wouldn't worry about his inner soul, if I were you. He's going to be pretty busy for the rest of his life, if you know what I mean, seeing as the two of you are just a little bit star-crossed. Yeah? So just enjoy how cute he is, and make up little stories about you, and in a week or two you'll forget all about him and be crushing someone else. Cool?" She was backing away.

"Sure. Like, Jake, maybe. Heh."

Connie frowned, looked back at the set, and bit her lip. "Do yourself a favor, hun. Avoid the Jake Atwaters of this world. They are empty Christmas gifts—all paper and ribbons and bows. You think you're solving a riddle, but it's not a riddle. It's just a really bad haiku."

Melanie screamed as the green monster pulled itself out of the lake and onto the south dock. The monster slipped from the ladder and fell back, flailing and splashing, before it disappeared. Blake was all wet. She really should just stay indoors.

When the monster surfaced, it pulled off its mask and yelled in a very Jake-like voice, "Hey, Melanie, the, poet." He sunk again, then surfaced once more, and climbed the ladder. "You scared me," Jake said, dripping.

Melanie shook off Blake, and assured Jake that the experience had been mutual. Jake smiled. "Cool. That's pretty rare, for me."

She set Blake on the dock, folded open to the sun. "What were you doing down there?"

Jake sat on the edge of the dock, facing Rabbit Island. "Exploring, poking around. Just doing my best." He laid down a fat coil of red cable that soaked the weather-blached planks between them. "Lots of cool exploration-land down there. You ever been?"

He looked sad. Defeated and discarded. Or maybe she just knew that's how he should have felt. "My parents said no diving. No diving and no horses and no-" she stopped. No need to mention diaries to a desperate musician.

"Too much *Gone with the Wind*, huh?"

"My dad knew a guy, who got the bends real bad. And he says horses are the new slaves. Well, the old slaves. That, and all the brown people in prison." She pulled at her braids. She wasn't supposed to be *that* girl, either. There were lots of things to remember not to be.

"Yeah, that shit's fucked-up," Jake said, adding, "Oops," under his breath.

He shook his head, and caught Melanie with a generous dose of droplets.

"Voting is weird," Jake said, finally.

They sat there a while, and then Jake remembered to take off his oxygen tank.

"This shit, is heavy."

The red-striped speed-boat raced by pulling a senior who waved at everyone and no one, and screamed "Wooo!" until there was nothing left. It disappeared behind the Wolf's largest island. Melanie checked Blake, who seemed to enjoy the sun.

"How come you haven't been singing, lately?"

Jake rolled the tank back and forth, then opened the zipper of his neon green wetsuit. "Oh, well, we did 'Ash Grove,' the other night. That rocked pretty hard."

"When are we going to hear more of your songs?"

He cleared his throat, or tried to. "I'm sort of in a slump right now, songwriting-wise. Sometimes you feel it, and, well, sometimes the it just... rips you to pieces."

"What!?"

Jake pushed himself up. "Oh, I don't know. See? I can't even talk to people, let alone write a song. You know they, took me off theater. Which I mean, I get it, right? I'm no Brett Ratner. I'm not even an Altman. That's probably why they had me babysitting a computer."

Melanie didn't need to know who any of these people were to know Jake was in a bad place. "Jake-

"Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do? But maybe it's time I learned that I'm not cut out for Bob Dylan-land. The world needs gas pumpers, too."

"People do that themselves, now."

"Not in New Jersey." Jake looked wistful to the southwest. "That's where I'm going. Make a name for myself, among the fumes and unnecessariness." He rubbed the mesh covering his belly. "What I wouldn't give for a fruit rollup."

Melanie found one inside her bag and handed it over.

Jake accepted and unwrapped it, then peeled it from its sheer, translucent backing, and tore off a corner with his teeth. After a series of unsatisfied chews, he held it out, and sighed. "I remember when they used to print Flintstones on these. Now all they print is LIES-

He crumpled the sticky fruit and hurled it into the lake. "Let the Wolf have it," he said, exhausted. "Maybe one day, it'll take me too."

Melanie was on her feet. She didn't think he was being serious, but this was no way to talk. "Jake, stop it. You are a great musician. And I'm sure you were an awesome theater coach. Who knows why the Doles do anything they do around here? I think they're half-crazy, to tell you the truth. I mean, who wouldn't be, with these people running around? You can't take it personally."

"Okay, well, it's kinda hard not to take it personally when someone writes 'At-water Torture' on the bathroom stall, with little musical notes all around it, and stink lines?" He shook his head, staring at the puddle he was sitting in. "I've never wanted to

leave before, you know? And it really sucks. To want to leave a place you used to love. More than anywhere. Because where do you go from there? Where do I go now?"

"Not New Jersey. At least, not to pump gas."

"Thanks, Dad."

Melanie was at a loss. Even now, she wasn't altogether sure she wanted to be here.

Jake got up. "Hey. Thanks again, really, it's been cool of you, I mean it. No one else gives a shit, so... Appreciated, and all that. I'm going to get some burgers. It's the one thing that hasn't turned on me yet." He looked around for something he was forgetting, then started off up the dock.

Melanie looked around, frantic. Blake lay there, pages nearly dry now, fluttering. "WAIT!" she cried, a little too dramatically. She felt inside her bag, and found her journal.

"I really want to beat the teatime rush-"

"Just hold on," she said, flipping through until she found her most recent hand-copied Blake poem, a new favorite that even on first reading she'd noted wouldn't be out of place set to music. Maybe. She really didn't know much about such things. Jake would probably recognize it, or at least as not hers. Of course, there was a part of her that hoped he didn't. She tore it out, careful but quick.

"Here."

Jake stood there, dubious. "What is it?"

"A song," she said. "For tonight. If you want it."

After another moment's pause, Jake reached out and took it. The paper was thick, woven, and jagged where it had been torn from the diary. He began to read, and it wasn't long before Melanie could see he was interested.

"You're not going to tell anyone where it came from, are you?"

Jake was still reading. He shook his head, and seemed to forget he was doing it.

"No," he muttered into the page. "Promise."

For the rest of the day and the evening, Melanie regretted giving the poem to Jake. It would get back to her, somehow, and she would be ridiculed for helping him, and for the poem itself, which sounded more and more lame with each rereading. She would've begged him to return it to her, to forget about the whole thing, but she couldn't find him anywhere, until the campfire after supper, to which he arrived late, guitar slung over his back, trying to hide his excitement.

After a crappy story about woodland fairies from Brad, and the craggy old pottery teacher's retelling of a Pagawashek myth that must've been missing a critical piece of information; the sing-alongs began, and Jake was only too happy to assist.

Finally—and by this point, Melanie was sure that she'd suffered very real cardiovascular damage—Jake strummed a decisive G and announced, "Okay, that's all I got from the old songbook for tonight. Any requests?"

"NOTHING BY YOU!"

Laughter. Jeers.

"Okay, well, how 'bout I don't say *who* this is by. I'll just sing it. Here we go."

Strumming. The same chords as ever. But then, the words came, and instantly,  
Melanie knew it was happening.

### Jake's Mystery Song

Well... they look

Behind every step and

Believe it is a dream

And my god, are these not

Slaves, that groaned along

The streets of mystery?

And where? Where are your bonds

Where are your guards

Are we not prisoners?

(Moody, aggressive strum. Measure.)

Ahhaaa-oooohh

Where? Where are your chains

Where are your tears

And why look around?

When there, there if you thirst,  
The river, so go, bathe  
All your limbs, inside of the good  
Of all there is now.

And just, just as before  
For Mystery,  
Now is no more.

After he strummed to a finish, there was a silence that lasted an entire minute. Everyone was looking around, trying to figure out if what had happened to them was shared, and therefore, real.

Then, finally, a cheer rose up from the crowd. It was Kell Nunen, and quickly following her were all the others. They were voices of love and surprise, and the applause rang bold through over the lake and the camp, loud enough to wake the dead.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### The Chef's a Croc

In a photograph taken in Alex's second summer at the camp, two groups of four stand in the middle of a dirt road on the inside of a roughly cut wooden gate. The group to the right hugs the edge of the road, ten and eleven year-olds, and blurred. To the far left stands a tall group of three against a tree. They hang off each other's shoulders like lovers at a drag-race. The tall baby face holds the road, and at the other end is Audrey Nunen, close and away, arm around the center the other teasing her sash. Her knee points past an eleven year-old Alex Kochs, at center, and her auburn curls spill across her shoulders, fat like ostrich eggs. She dares the camera to trust her, layers beneath.

The pasty girl is Sarah Charmeier, who would leave Tuppa Lake for Lazardly the following summer. The summer of this photograph would see the fallout of Alex and Audrey, the backlash, the possible, and the destroyed. And Sarah felt herself a pawn.

Concerning the girl at the center, one is struck first by the quality of being stared down by a brute, and at once encountering a raw and open soul, like a shield she can't hold up for its weight and opacity. Alex's red hair is bleached toe-head blonde, combed over, with a part, and the length blinds her to Audrey. She wears a felt hat, like everybody else, but hers is pushed back to surely the limits of how far a hat can be pushed back, pins or no. Her polo's neck is open, wide. And while nearly all the smaller children in the road are unbuttoned just as much as Alex, there is nothing like the awareness and participation of Alex anywhere in the road. Audrey's teasing of the scarf

now appears more like a pointing to Sarah's and her own high buttons, standing in contrast to their friend. Alex's scarf winds like stretched and melted Cheerio, wide and askew and reaching around her side. One of her hiking boots stands on its toe, peaking out from behind the other, while Audrey's left boot points sharp across the road, like a deer in the dawn.

Thursdays meant swimming in the morning and something spicy for lunch, tempered by hummus and lemon slices. They meant exciting and unexpected entertainment, at least, for Melanie it was unexpected—circus performers and fire-dancers on the west beach dunes whose dark penciled eyes stole the show.

Thursdays brought Salt Try Suppers, Jean Paul's obvious favorite, where he presented everyone with a five course salt showcase, beginning with a collection of tiny soups paired with a flight of salts anticipating those in the meal, paired with small haikus equating the palate with notes of the melodic scale. Mixing is mentioned, and encouraged, slowly, with just enough caveats and intensity to turn off all but the most geeky, defiant, or careless. And Thursdays brought costume night to these suppers, for which the Dole's many-windowed three-story octagonal Gatsby wardrobe tower stood always open with an honor system, day and night, should any of the girls feel the urge to dance around tossing scarves into the air and hurl corsets at each other.

This Saturday also meant bra shopping with Alex, who had observed at lunch that Melanie's, "tits were getting huge."

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe a little. So, what's our play going to be about?"

"I have a couple ideas. One involves a dead-eyed chef who's actually a crocodile who says 'CROC!' all the time. That's how he talks. He's all like Criekey! Croc-y-croc, I'm a croc, crile 'round the murder clock." She thumbed down a rack of whites. "Do you like lace?"

"Lace is nice."

"This one has hearts. But they're the stupid kind. 'Crile rocking, I'm Chef Jean Paul / and a croc will do you nice / Killing cats since I could crawl / and if I could, I'd kill them twice-"

A plump and severe saleswoman asked if there was anything she could help them with. Alex addressed her and, tilting her head, held the casual, reluctant expression of someone explaining the delicacy of finding a good first sexy bra for her budding companion. But out of her mouth came:

"A crocodile / is what I am / though I may appear as just a man / my teeth chomping with every bite / of everything I can / Your croc wants it / he wants the stuff that makes him taste your underpants / my eyes deadness / they will be white from the screams / that you demand, well..."

The saleswoman fled. Alex sighed, and rehung an awful pea-green brazier. "Have you ever loved someone enough to hate them?"

"My parents."

"But they're not going anywhere. Are they?"

"Alaska."

"Sure. But they'll be back. In the real world? Boys, girls, whoever you hate, they can just go, anytime. And the question is, who's going to leave, and when."

"Sometimes, people don't leave."

"Okay. I get it, my mom and all? I've seen enough shrinks. I'm just talking from experience. You either chose to hardly know them, or you get too close. Either way, the time comes, and they're gone."

"Where does that put us?"

"In peril, my friend. In peril. But I'm an optimist. I believe that particular collisions can happen so spectacularly bad, that real good might come of it."

"You're a collision?"

"We're all collisions, even when we're sleeping."

"This one?"

"I think we're past pink." Alex hung a deep, deep blue pair of underwear over her head as a hat. She pulled the mesh waistband over her eyes, and nodded aggressively to a beat between her and Elton John. "Croc-crocing's all-right with Jean Paul / yes, crocing is just alright / And if you think my recipe calls for more murder / then I'll crile up another batch / but croc-crocing needs waiters and washing so / a dead-eyed mask I must command / and it says- / I'm... / Notacroc / not acroc / notacroc-

He's not Australian. He's French. And he's not a crocodile. He's a man. That was something Melanie would say. As soon as she stopped laughing.

"Whoaahhaaa / but his / dead eyes say / he's a croc of shit / so we say..." She held out her fist as a microphone, but Melanie shook her head, wiping her eyes.

Alex continued, unfazed. "He's acroc / he's acroc! / he's acroc, there acroc / goes acroc, look, a croc / watch that croc / kill that croc / kill the croc-"

The saleswoman asked if they could keep their voices down. Alex asked if they had these hats in canary yellow.

Melanie whispered. "Save the croc / save the croc."

When the saleswoman had gone, Alex asked Melanie if she'd said anything. Melanie went to the rack of boring whites.

Alex took off her blue silk hat and tossed it at the rack of its brothers. "It'd be a musical, of course. We could call it, *Jean Paul Hunting*."

Melanie was thumbing through bland, generous bottoms that would never make anyone feel anything. "You can't."

"I know we should change the name. But, Jean Paul is already the perfect name, you know?"

Melanie looked up from the charade of non-looking. "It's not the name. You can't do that to him."

"This is theater, Mel. We can't worry over every little feather we might ruffle. Especially dead-eyed feathers-"

"Stop!"

The saleswoman stopped short on her way out of the storeroom, three pairs of goldenrod drawers shaking on their clear plastic hangers.

Alex was all mouth and eyebrows. "Whoa. Cool, kid. Camp is about cool."

"This isn't cool. We can't do a play about him. I'll quit."

Alex shook her head at the saleswoman, serious. "I said, 'Canary.'"

After the saleswoman disappeared once more, Alex put a hand to Melanie's shoulder, applying small, punctuating rubs. "Hey. Just consider for a moment, the

possibility that I'm right. I'm putting my neck on the line for this camp, and my best friend tells me, what? She's leaving, no discussion. How would that feel, do you think, for me?"

Melanie looked into Alex's eyes. The best friend card lay there on the table, powerful, huge, a monster. It took all her control not to leap on it, but the way Alex watched her, helped. Like cat batting at a toy she'd already broken. Melanie mumbled when she spoke. "Probably, however you want it to."

Alex was no longer smiling. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You can be hard to read, is all."

"Do you want to say something?"

"No."

The woman had returned, holding the closest Melanie had ever seen silk come to canary, but they were closer to boy shorts, with an embroidered butterfly crotch. She set them on the glass countertop, and made a small show of examining a pile of receipts she pulled from the register. Alex watched her, grim. Finally she returned to her friend.

"I won't have ultimatums. I won't have them on my set."

"It's not an ultimatum. I'm asking you, please, to not do the Jean Paul play."

Alex breathed deep relief, gleeful at the absurdity of the misunderstanding. "Well, okay, sure! If you ask like that, that's different. No Jean Paul play. It's done." She looked over to the saleswoman, but when the glance was met, turned back to Melanie. "So. What do you suggest?"

Melanie was still too rattled to be relieved, and certainly didn't have any handy creative alternatives. "I don't know. We could do Sam's play."

"The butler thing? What the hell even is it? It's like, he buys a milk-jug? Who gives a shit?"

"Well, maybe we could change it. Put in some songs?"

"Hmm... Not a lot rhymes with 'butler.'"

"Is that bad?"

"I don't know." And like that, Alex was at the counter, waving at the saleswoman, who looked up from a collection of receipts.

"We'll take those, and the rest of the ones you've shown us. And the four swimsuits. Also the reds and the matching bras, and you better throw in two dozen of the less-gross whites, the Victorias should be fine. Half of them 'Bs' and half of them 'Cs,' it's a long summer and I don't want to have to come back here. Under Kochs, all of it. I lost a bet. You, have been very helpful, I apologize for my manner. I'm having a creative crisis."

Melanie found herself with Alex on a boulder by the bottom of the falls. Alex had convinced Melanie that no matter how many songs they packed into Sam's play, and even if they could find sense or an alternative to the milk-jug thing, the last thing this camp needed was another play about a rich dilettante miserable over all the rotten luck of never having to suffer over hunger and labor and cold and chains. Anyways, Alex said she remembered she already had a great story about pirates, which she could feed to Sam as is, and as long as she limited writer and director preferences to a pretension level to below 80%, even he couldn't fuck it up.

"No cooks?"

"They'll be hungry pirates," Alex said, smiling and shaking her head. "But sure, no cooks."

It was agreed, and they sat in the silence of the roaring falls.

"There's caves behind the falls," she said.

"Have you ever gone?"

"Mmm... We don't know each other that well."

"Now you're just messing with me," Melanie said.

"Okay, it's possible—it's possible I can be a teensy-bit guarded. You want personal? We'll do personal. But you first. Now, what I'm going to ask, I want you to keep in mind that whatever you say, simply doesn't mean shit around here. Who you are at camp, has nothing to do with who you are in the world. Yes? Good. Question the first. What's school like?"

Melanie explained, careful at first, but, finding all of Alex's reactions encouraging and apparently expectant of worse, Melanie began pouring out all the daily details of her small fief of loserdom. 'Quiet,' was a word she used a lot. But last summer had been different—the summer before junior high. She'd actually made friends, after a caricature of a much-reviled art teacher had been discovered and celebrated among her peers, who'd before then assumed that the cold fish preferred being alone with whatever it was she did. Three new friends survived the spring, and spent nearly every day of summer at each other's houses, mostly Abigail's, whose parents had a pool. They were often kind, and Melanie felt welcome, even valued, among them, despite their superficial resemblance to girls like Madison Sloan.



But then, she was caught reading Abigail's diary, and that was the end of the phone calls and the invites. Or, very nearly the end. What she didn't tell Alex was that they'd brought her back, one last time, but there would be no swimming this time, and no lemonade. Abigail's mother was gone, and when Melanie arrived, the pudgy girl, Dana, led her to the basement, where the girls sat in candle-lit darkness. After instructing her to sit, Abigail presided as judge over a kind of kangaroo court and grievance session, which spent the better part of two hours detailing Melanie's personal and physical failings, including, but by no means limited to, her hair and her figure, her nose and bone structure, her complexion, her lazy earring choices, baggy and over-tight clothing, her mumbly voice, her indecisiveness, her selfishness and inconsiderateness, her lack of "real" interest in boys, and her general failure to smile. The question of whether she would be permitted to rejoin the group was allegedly still open when she left before Abigail's mom got home, but it was clear to Melanie from the first, that whatever had been, was gone. What she couldn't understand, was why she came at all, and especially why she had stayed.

That September, when she entered junior high, she found herself a pariah. It got bad, well before Christmas. Melanie refused to go to school and, after a second morning and a long talk at the breakfast table, they switched schools. At her new school she was so fearful that her reputation would follow her across the district, she hid in the library as much as possible, which really, she had to admit, was more added hours and purpose to an established habit.

She explained to Alex that she'd gone to Tuppa Lake as part of an agreement with her parents—that if she really gave things a shot at a fresh start, where no one would ever

know her, then her parents would send her to the expensive nonschool opening downtown. But above all, no diaries. "If I find out you snooped, and that's what ruins your summer again? Then we're done. You stay at Warren G. Harding, and maybe we have this conversation again before high school.

"You're a thief!"

"A snoop. Former snoop. Archaeologist, is the academy term."

"You're a thief, Mel, and that's great. Everyone should know their inner criminal. Better than that, you've got taste. These days, information is the only thing worth stealing."

"Whatever I was, I'm done with it."

"Baby, you said it."

"What did you see in the caves?"

"I saw, my mom."

"Oh my god. Really?"

"She was all white. Glowing. Beautiful, but sad."

"How did she die?"

Alex took a deep breath. The Falls took a moment to cry for her. "There was a hyena explosion at a gun factory."

"Oh."

Alex shifted, and crossed her legs. She presented herself as serious, finally. "She hung herself. With pills. And yes, you're really sorry. We all are. Thank you for expressing how sorry you are. Let us share in this now."

"I can't imagine."

Alex stood, paced, and looked out at a runt of a pine that had no chance of finding the sunlight it needed. "Yes, you can. You're doing it, right now. It's the orphan girl romance, or daughter and daddy coming together to overcome grief. It's the hopeless child of sorrow, doomed to gaze out windows dreaming of the day she'll repeat her mom's mistakes. Or is it radical reinvention? Throwing yourself into painting or poetry, and finding the world welcoming of your gifts and maybe their love is enough—cut to the end, it won't be—roll credits. An ironically upbeat song plays, because even though the sad dead-mom girl can't see for herself what she needs to do—the audience can come away knowing. And they're fun. Believe me, I know they can be fun to play, these roles."

Melanie wanted to say how Alex didn't have to perform for anyone, anything, least of all her. But she felt chills, so naked her friend seemed, for once.

Alex had turned away, and spoke so softly, Melanie had to strain to hear. "Really, it's bullshit. I don't know her as anything more than what people see of her in me. I know her only as her leftovers, her remains. I've been walking around eleven years of my life, as the remains of my mother. And I know it isn't fair, but I hate her for it. It's not that I don't believe that I loved her, but it's somewhere on the other side of my memory. I can only make it out enough to know that it's real."

Melanie reached up a hand.

Alex shook her head, and took another step away. "I feel like, what she did to me and Dad, was turn us into an imprint of whatever it was she was running from."

She took another step toward the Falls, then turned to face her friend.

"The worst part was when I realized how little time she'd spent thinking about me. But I'd spent better part of my life killing myself over trying to figure her out. This stranger. It's pathetic."

"It can't have been about you."

Alex put her hand on Melanie's shoulder, then, just as quickly, drew it back. "No, that's what sucks. It's the other way around— I'm stuck being all about *it*."

Melanie craned her head around after her. "Not if you don't want to be."

"Ah. Now you're talking perception. Beware sellers of perception, should their prices appear deflated."

"You've really thought about this."

"Listen. I don't open up to just anyone. Okay?"

Melanie stood, and took Alex's hands in hers. "I stole secrets. I never traded them."

Alex dropped their hands together, and when Melanie didn't let go, she smiled and looked into her eyes as though together, they'd come upon a small and beautiful victory.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Circus Circus

"That's no cowboy."

-Kell Nunen, Cabin 14

In the valley, the 15 year-old Nunen twins were ghosts, but were nevertheless presently quite alive in Monaco. The dark-haired Audrey had been the brains—cold and rational to the point of insanity, with Hoover files on everyone. Blonde Vikki, the younger of the twins by seven seconds, had been the heart—insane to the the point of rationality. It was Vikki who'd been the originator of the Chef Hunt, as part of her longstanding war against dairy (the original hunted chef being a world-renowned cheese aficionado, that is, before his hospitalization). While Vikki never managed to stamp-out dairy completely, for years, both girls and staff alike were afraid to be seen drinking milk or eating cheese, and enough of it was left to spoil that the Doles adjusted their stocks down to a trickle.

The Doles knew about the Chef Hunt, of course; officially denied its existence and condemned it in one breath, fought every year with a slightly different tactic that, nevertheless, always managed to completely miss the point: In short, that the Chef Hunt had no point, at least, not after the Dairy War. There was nothing about the chef himself that could ever make any difference. He was the target, because he was the chef, and this was the Chef Hunt.

So, while the first Hunt was born of a purpose, (albeit the product of madness), its iteration the following year could have nothing to do with dairy, as the Doles had taken great pains to hire a wild-eyed purist who prayed, yes, literally prayed at the roots of chlorophyll and carrots and chutney. He nearly bankrupted the food budget on juicing and truffles and cilantro, and in the first three weeks the girls grew thinner and weaker and more and more orange. Truly, with all Chef Constapada promised of the powers of juiced carrots, there were more than a dozen campers whose skin turned visibly orange, especially their hands. By July, despite Constapada's assurances that orange skin was only one step along the great journey to toxin-free super-health, Ursula Dole demanded that he start offering meat and wheat again as part of the regular rotation, and even gave Donnie, the young and disinterested line cook, strict orders to cook her menus no matter what Constapada said.

As the orange girls were taken off carrot juice and force-fed cheeseburgers and emitted from their bodies the most astronomically vile gasses any of us could afterward imagine, they stopped being so tired all the time, and their skin slowly returned to normal. And while it was clear to all of us that Constapada was not long for this camp, one evening, Vikki and Audrey declared to their sad-eyed, waxen inner-circle that the Chef Hunt was on, and whoever it was to get the Juice Man sacked before the Doles could replace him on their own, won.

"What do we win?" the most rash of the fools inquired.

To which Vikki took a great step toward her and popped her eyes wide, far too wide and wild for the quiet of such a night.

"The future, child. The future!"

"And ten thousand dollars," Audrey grumbled, seeing how little the idea of owning the future impressed these philistines.

It wasn't a lot, for most of them, but knowing that it was coming from the Nunens made even a small pot of gold shine black enough to bother.

Now that the twins were gone, it was assumed that Kell would put up the prize money, which she was happy to do, as it wasn't hers, but would come from an eighty-thousand dollar trust set up by her sisters to ensure the continuance of such a new and noble family tradition. For her part, Kell understood and respected the idea of the Chef Hunt, as well as she did the Color War, or any of the other stupid rituals she'd been taunted by her distant knowledge of over the years. To Kell, it seemed that the twins' favorite part of camp Shangri-La was lording its greatness over those still too young to go.

But this summer, all that had changed. And while Kell had long-expected, with ever-churning mixed feelings, that her first year would be one shared with her then Senior sisters, it was not to be, as, at the last minute, their father had withdrawn the twins from camp, flashing them tickets to Monaco instead. To this news, the twins were shocked; it was everything they'd been asking for for years, but it also meant that their last camp summer had been stolen from them, and they would never get it back. But Dad wasn't asking; it was done.

Chef Constapada was finally slain, if you care to know, on the third week in July, when a doctored photograph of him grinning madly as he stuffed a severed duck head into one of his industrial Champion juicers was projected via Sam while a particularly

popular beet and apple concoction was enjoyed at lunchtime, making for the largest mass-vomiting in camp history, six lawsuits, and the prize going to a spritely new redhead, Alex Kochs, who needed the money like she needed another glass of carrot juice.

Alex would win the Chef Hunt twice more, in the following five summers, and seemed to take less joy in it every year.

The twins, for their part, were equal-opportunity villains; terrorizing counselors, experts, and maintenance staff along with girls both green and seasoned, for reasons largely inscrutable and kept to themselves. It was enough for most of us to keep our distance, speak of them only in the fastest-moving slang, or better, not at all, or even think about, but only as one might at times consider a darkness that barked long and lonely in the night, keeping us awake as something primal and fatal, and never to be gone after with foolish bravery and a short-beamed flashlight.

This summer, Jean Paul took to cheese and milk as a matter of course, (though he didn't seem especially enthusiastic about either), and, with the twins gone, the girls slowly returned to it. Finding that Kell had nothing to say about dairy products one way or another, some of girls even found themselves enjoying it. Even still, many a girl or counselor's hands shook as they took up their cheese forks, or passed up orange sorbet for Rocky Road. They would come upon the twins in their dreams, fast around a corner or on the other side of a tree, stark and staring and blood-eyed. They always wanted something, but it was never what they asked for.



The third weekend meant the Candyland Circus, and it was the Candyland part that saved the third weekend from being universally despised. As a general rule, circuses are stupid, weird, and gross. The performers are dirty and dark-eyed, and the only ones who smile at you are clowns, sometimes, and the last thing anyone wants is to make meaningful eye-contact with a clown. Then there's the big smelly animals, the ashy-skinned elephants and suicidal gorillas, the stood-upon zebras and sleepy, temperamental lions with their mangy excuse for a mane. Circus performers, human and animal alike, are always beset with scars, brands, and disfigurements—so much so that one has to imagine that the designation between "regular performers" and "circus freaks" had in the beginning been entirely arbitrary—a line drawn in the pay scale based on who the head baffoonish baton guy wouldn't stoop to sleep with, or cop to having done so.

Which would've obviously sucked, being invaded for three days by three dozen weirdoes and their abused performing pets, but the Candyland-part meant that, a truly massive shipment of Surge—a particularly sugary and caffeinated soda—would mysteriously appear with the circus troupe's arrival on Friday morning, and be exhausted and officially forgotten by midday Sunday—along with forty cases of pixie stix, twenty cases of dip-a-stix, as well as a calydescope of red and blue and green and yellow-coated sours, super-sours, jawbreakers, Nerds, chewy Nerds, worms, and gobstoppers. There was also five cases of big-league chew, three cases of water taffy, and a twenty-five pound crate of Swedish Fish, that was somehow stolen, in total, every summer, with the victorious gang drunk as much on their power as anything else they'd ingested, as they would be kings, even among the seniors, for as long as their supplies held out—that is, if

they didn't in the meantime succumb to theft, betrayal, paranoia, or all three; not to mention the temptation to consume nearly all the damn delicious things themselves.

Of course, the older girls wouldn't settle for candy and soda, though most of them partook of these as well. And while naturally the Doles never shipped in anything stronger, the Circus troupe were hardly a temperance choir, and, even if they had been, most girls with such extra-curricular interests never found it difficult to sneak in contraband. Even those who sneered at pipers and Nal-gins could be found tipping and sniffing and singing insults at the donkey walking backwards beneath a clown, as it was the acknowledged duty of all girls on third weekend to imbibe in excess their intoxicants of choice.

In this spirit, Celest and Kikki were clearly way-too-stoned, though they did their best to prop wide grins against their terror and sadness, and a lot can hide behind mirrored shades. Jake might've been stoned too, but then, Jake might've always been stoned, it was an open question in the valley whether Jake relied upon chemical assistance to excuse his shuffling eyes and disastrous attention span. Whatever the cause of Jake being Jake, he kept it secret, and if ever he were directly questioned, he would typically smile and grow serious, then look around as though he'd forgotten to turn off the stove, declare ignorance of the very concept, or, politely ask you to repeat the question.

The Doles treated the Candyland Circus in much the same manner—acknowledging the presence of soda and candy, as a treat to be enjoyed responsibly, and feigning deafness and blindness to near-ubiquitous examples of excess, debauchery, and the consumption of more powerful agents than sugar and caffeine. Of course they were prepared for the inevitable cases of alcohol poisoning and insulin shock, but for the most

part they were able to prevent these before they occurred, as their acute blindness permitted them to keep an eye on the girls, and those who became particularly shit-faced were most often brought to the camp Hospital and traded in for salty snacks.

But at four pm, no one had reached that point yet, although Madison, Becky and Sara were aggressively drunk, and grew more so as the afternoon cooled and their Nalgine bottles dried. It had been Becky's idea to get Melanie drunk, which was weird, that Becky should have an idea, but she responded strangely to alcohol—it had the effect of quieting the voice in her brain that would run in the background, quiet, and insistent, that she was stupid, and ugly, and always would be.

As it happened, Maddy was stoned enough from Celest's pot that she would consider any idea, even one from Becky, which would've in other circumstances been more than enough reason to reject it, and so they helped Sara to her feet, after she had fallen the second time, and they recovered from laughing, after they had fallen on top of her, and Becky reminded them what they were doing, they were looking for Reid, and first let's mix-up some more Surgeons, and oh my god let me have a drag, I'm feeling so faded.

They found Melanie, finally, after Mads threw rocks at a mime, and chased him forty yards up the beach, calling him, "worse than dead." She then felt sick, had to sit in the sand for a few minutes, and Becky hugged her and told her that she was the only one she could ever really talk to, which caused Sara, standing behind them, to cry, and hide it, and Madison to push Becky's face away and call her stupid.

Melanie had witnessed the mime chase, and the subsequent knee-hugging recovery in the sand, along with Alex and Kell, who'd been sitting sipping Cuba Libres on the north

dock for the past hour, though Kell's had been virgin, despite her repeated protests and assurances that she was the *only* girl on the dock of legal age. She tempered her exclusion with liberal doses of pixie stix and Swedish Fish, as she had information that Kim Andrews, the weekend's kingpin, preferred to keep buried.

So it was that on Maddy and Co's arrival, Melanie was already two-drinks deep and as drunk as she'd ever been, or would get this summer, and feeling quite good about it. She felt all the better when Alex insulted the Surge and gin concoctions that Becky offered as "over-sugared schlock," and scared them away when she offered them a tinfoil full of Kell's pixie dust, which she claimed to be smack.

When the unwelcome trio had escaped earshot, and the victorious trio finished laughing, Alex prodded offered Kell a sip of her Libre in exchange for the real story of why the twins were missing their last summer of camp. And while Kell took more than what could ever be considered a sip, when all that remained of Alex's third was ice and a squeezed-out lime, she delivered the tale.

Kell explained how last Christmas, Vikki found a treasure map in an old book about Tuppa Valley—you know, one of the fifty things she wouldn't open until May? Well, she opened it in March. Something must've called to her, as Kell had never seen her pick up a book in her life, let alone a moldy old nasty one, as she called it.

So she finds the map and shows it to Aud, who goes nuts. Dad was pissed, he was swamped and didn't need this shit. Aud shows him the map, and Dad, the look on his face. It was that night that she really went crazy. And Vikki, too, who'd been skeptical from the beginning, it took the look on Dad's face to bring her around.

After that, there was no more yelling; only whispers.

Dad drank a lot that spring. Never sloppy, or at the table, but his evenings were pasted over work in front of the news trying to shut out some silly notion he'd got lodged in his head. Why had he give her that book? And he knows he must forbid them to go into the caves, and that will only mean they will surely go, and if they follow this map toward its treasure, then he would surely lose them. Because Dad was nothing if not a thorough man. He's been to the valley, he's been behind the Falls, and recognized at once that this was a haunted place. That these were caves that swallowed, and rarely gave back. He has heard stories of these caves in which children go in and they do not come out again. And that the Pagas believe that one day all the lost children will together come out of the caves, every one of them, and not one will not have aged a day, to Dad this myth feels only like the glass he holds cold to his face for comfort.

"There should be a gate," he had said, stepping out into the sunlight filtered through the roar of Falls.

His Pagawashek guide, who had not followed him inside, took his time to reply. "They are inside," the Paga said. "All the gates are inside. You must have seen them. For here you are."

Then, one night, late in April, Dad remembered something, and suddenly there was no conflict. His girls were getting what they'd been asking for every Christmas since their mother died. This summer, the twins were going to Monaco.

Kell pulled another pixie stix from the communal bowl and broke the end, draining the contents into her mouth. She smacked her lips with satisfaction, and clapped for a fish who lept in the distance.

Alex fixed herself another Cuba. "Did you make the map?"

Kell held out her glass, and frowned when Alex stopped with coke over ice. "I mean, do you have any idea how long it takes to forge a good treasure map? Nine months. Well, five if I hadn't fucked up the first one. It's all in the paper. Vellum, actually, sheepskin. That's what they used. You have to bake it on low for like, ever. I baked that shit for three months, every night, after everyone had gone to sleep. Set my alarm for 2. Bake a good hour or so, watch a movie. Dad asked me what I was doing, so I told him. Watching movies and baking. 'Don't stay up too late,' was all he said."

Kell looked away, bitter. "He never even asked to try anything."

"But you weren't making anything," Alex said.

Kell drank deep, and sighed. "So you bake that shit until it's like falling apart. Right?"

"Right."

"Wrong. You fucked up. How'd you fuck up?"

Alex turned her drink over in her hands, then winked at Melanie. "Didn't draw the map first."

Kell tossed a stone of taffy to the Wolf. "I didn't draw the fucking map first."

They gave her a moment.

"So this time, after I accepted the failure and pulled out another vellum, I realized that I needed to do some serious research. I had ordered all the right inks and quills and

really old wine to spill on it, but all my test maps looked like they were out of books.  
Kids' books. I needed something real."

Alex didn't miss a beat. "You bought a real treasure map."

"It was wicked. It was all pirates and shit. There weren't any swords drawn on it,  
but they slashed it. It was slashed, probably."

"How much was it?" Melanie asked.

"Fifty."

"You got a real treasure map for 50 bucks? Why haven't I done this?"

Alex didn't need to check with Kell. "Thousand. Fifty thousand."

"Well, 48."

"How?"

"There were credit cards on file. We buy shit from ebay all the time."

"No one NOTICED?"

"The help did. But I made it right."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### The Special Agent

As the blades cut the lake beneath me, I could easily see how little girls could find this exciting.

I spat over my shoulder. There's no control, being pulled behind a boat. 'Hold yourself up, so you don't get dragged.' Okay, great. That sounds more fun than being dragged. How do I steer this thing? "Thumbs up for faster and down for slower." What's right or left? "Ha. Okay, here we go-"

Not that it would matter. Jake would never treat me to the hairpin turns and cuts we needed. Wouldn't take us between those two docked freighters, 'I said GO BRIE-T-WEIN ZEM!' and Jake would, and the men with submachine guns following on jet-skis would follow and the tugboat would tap the freighters squeezing tight our alley and it's going to be close—we're OUT! and the jet-ski behind is not and BOOM- they cover their eyes with their arms but it's an explosion stupid you're dead. And now another jet-ski comes around and I hop off these stupid skis with a jumping spinning double reverse kick to the throat he's donezo blood gushing out his mouth dead before he hits the water and I am in his seat gun the engine RHHRRMMMM.... peel off and ride that mother for like, the tank, wait Jake's ready with the kill switch but TOO SLOW I launch the Hornet over the bow of his speedboat crushing him turning the handles to make sure he's squashed good and then after that I take her to top speed and feel the wind rip the skin from my face and just blow out the tank so it's enough to get me back and I stall just then



as I coast to the pier and Jake is there because I guess I didn't crush him after all and he's shaking his head because he saw me out there busting up torpedoes and doughnuts soaring off the crest of ten footers, carbon-fiber ass smiling at the sun, and he'd say something stupid, like:

"You're going to have the whole damn town after you."

And I'd say, "Jake, why don't you just forget about it? Just put it out of your mind, Jake."

And then maybe I'd give him a little slap across the face, just to remind him whose town this really is.

The Nunen files on Jake Atwater were interesting, but nothing new to Alex. They described, among other things, Jake's only official/unofficial gig with the FBI sent him to Denver in the summer of '13 to keep an eye on the pot industry as it eased into legalization.

We direct your attention to the following excerpt, from a report entitled, "Why Special Agent Atwater Does Not Care for Reports," (please note that Jacob Atwater never was a Special Agent, or a regular Agent, of the FBI):

*...fucking, I probably won't end up sending this version of the letter because I already said fuck too many times for an FBI report, and I probably shouldn't write the letters "FBI" on this, in case Kenny comes by and sees it and flips out when he finds out I'm undercover and all but okay, there is this shit here called Dab, and it's like, wax. We are trying to discourage the use of the term weed-crack, but it's basically that. But so I*

*have, this typewriter, and I know I should be using my laptop, but I like the sound of the clickity-clack. But what I do not like, is the sound of reports. Because writing them is, like, I don't want to, right now. I have songs I'm writing and friendships I'm making and that's what you're paying me for and so I will compose at the end of this assignment, like, one BIG ASS journal report of my adventures, but then this might also probably just be a postcard saying, 'Hey, so you want to know the Den? come here. Visit-land this shit, because we would love to have you, but not the mean ones.' Yeah, I'm talking to you, Strickland.*

*Okay, so this is turning into a real report, so I'm getting ready to close it out. But the other thing I wanted to say, was, okay, I'm not building myself an empire here, I'm doing what it takes to permit the cultivation of relationships with the people and such. So that's what I'm doing and that's what I'm being paid for, soon, I hope, you will send some of that check business, though my address is kinda fucked right now, but there are things that are happening with that. In other news, I'm running out of cigarettes, so please send those when I get you the address, though I should quit, so, maybe you should not send those.*

*Fucking... what else?*

*Clickity-clack is awesome, you guys should try it, even Strickland, maybe especially Strickland, it might de-jerkify him, a bit, but he would have to write, like, War and Peace on this shit to clack all of his jerkiness out. Sorry Stricks. Not trying to pick on you. I really am trying to work on that, where I'm always picking on you for how mean you are all the time, at least with me. Maybe there are people in the world who really like you. I hope so. I hope you have people who love you.*

*Okay, last thing, about the other thing, which was, what? Okay, Dab, yeah, said that, no more reports, said that, some songs, could send those along if you're into it, but don't ask me to send them if you're not going to read them, and you should really sing them if you read them. Okay... friends and community, not doing an empire thing... Sorry, but this is how I think like this, and you can't edit on a typewriter so hold onto the horses that you have neighing all over the place when you read stuff that you are not used to reading.*

*Oh yeah, there's was this murder sort of thing, well, a murder, is what it was, and it was fucked up. And I was like, whoa, not this happening right now, or ever, if possible, and the murder was all like, fucking, I'm happening, and I was like, where's my gun? And the gun was all like, You don't get to have me, because of Strickland. So I'm like, Okay, whatever, shit's on you, bro. On Strickland, is who it was on, in my head at that time when it happened, but I think now that maybe it's not fair to put it all on Strickland. Jesus forgives, and shit, and that's not me, because I'm just Jake, but I am doing the forgiving that Jesus would be all up on and shit, if he was the one Strickland said he couldn't have a gun because of whatever power trip Strickland was on that morning or whatever. Policy and poly-tics. I get it.*

*Anyways, so that got cleaned up, underworld-style, and I was like, Okay, chill out, write this report, send this shit, that they wanted, monthly or whatever, so here is that, a little late, maybe, and I hope it's cool like a report should be, and fun to read more so than other reports, but also informative in the ways it should be, and the guy, whatever, the cops found him later and it wasn't great, but the wheels of justice are doing their thing. His name was Bill, or Bob, or Bub, or something. I called him Bub, but he never*

*liked that, I don't think, because of the way he looked at me when I called him that, and also those times he was saying how he didn't like me calling him that and that I should learn his name. But that's not why he got shot. It was because he stole shit, apparently. Still, no excuse on my part, for not learning his name. That's on me.*

*My cover is cool. Mostly. Mountains and fountains here are sick, (that means "good," Strickland), and basically it's all community times and kickass breakfasts and ending shit on a positive note. So here is me doing that now.*

*Sianara until mon'yana, Amigós.*

*-Jake*

Improbably, the Bureau put up with him, though if Strickland had had his way, Jake would've been taken out back and shot. Instead, he wound up staying two weeks longer than his contract. At one point, he claimed he couldn't find the airport, just couldn't find it, and gave up. Take a cab, they said. He said he needed to leave on his own accord.

A month later, he was quietly fired, which was quite a feat for an informant, to be fired.

So, a few months after Jake's first and only official undercover assignment for the Bureau, Jake was approached by people representing Richard Kochs. They offered him an astonishing amount of money to report to them on Alex Kochs, and to offer his (strictly platonic) companionship, should the girl need or wish for it.

On the night of the camp-wide hang-over of the Candyland Circus Sunday, Jake waited for his song girl at his favorite table at Rick's, off in a strange little corner, away from traffic and direct sun. When she arrived, he made chitchat for few unconvincing minutes, but mostly filled his mouth with Eeketyne French fries, and one of Jean Paul's epic cheeseburgers. Once his third Coca-Cola was brought, and his plate held little more than a few cold fries, he leaned close, and broached the topic of more.

Melanie's eyes bugged. "You want *more*?"

"Well, yeah. Everyone really seemed to like it."

"You're pretending it's yours."

"Not exactly."

"You are."

Jake rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm allowing—in some ways—*allowing* that assumption to occur. But what can I do?"

"Say, 'I didn't write this.'"

"Okay, sure..."

Melanie waited for something more, but it never came. "No. But so, do it."

Jake grinned, and turned up his hands. He nodded, and chuckled, then addressed her, seriously, chin down and face blank.

"So, do you? Have any more?"

Melanie laughed in spite of herself. It certainly felt nice to be so needed. And it would be easy. *The Portable Blake* was right there inside her bag. She could give him a week's worth of bonfires this moment, if she wanted to.

"Come back to the theater."

Jake deflated, just a little. "No can do. Dole's orders. But it's sweet of you, to like, appreciate my skill-set and shit."

The severe-faced waiter refilled Melanie's water. She thanked him, and drank deep through the straw. Her eyes were on the open kitchen, where the wiry Jean Paul moved between plates and steam and flames licking up around the bottoms of copper skillets.

"What do you know about Jean Paul?"

"The chef? His burgers rock. Numero Uno. Cowboy hat, fucking... French. Why? You crushing?"

"Sure. That's it. But I need to know more. I need real information on him. Personal stuff. I'm obsessed. Can you get it?"

"Uh... I mean, I did used to work for the FBI and shit, on the nose, about that. Meaning don't tell anyone. Top secret and all. But... okay, you scratch mine and I'll, do that thing with you. I mean, get the info. I'm not gonna, touch you. In any way—I mean, swimming, sometimes that happens, but—"

"Jake. Stop."

"Sure, I can do what I can. About that. So, that means, you'll hook me up?"

Melanie smiled around her straw, draining the glass to its ice. "Give me the weekend," she said. "I'll see what I can do."

"I'm always best under pressure myself," said Jake, stacking silverware on his plate and wagging his cheeks. "Garson! Bring another round of burgers, for me and my friend."

Melanie was already pushing in her chair. "Another time."

"More for me, Jelly-Bee."

She took up her bag, patting at the outline of old Billy Boy. "That's not a thing," she said, a perfect imitation of her mother.

"You're forgetting, my sweet, regular-nosed, girl-child-Cyrano. *Mystery* is no more."

"I'm leaving now."

Jake laughed, in the way happy, excited people hook humor to anything, as an excuse to laugh at the world. "I solved that one all by myself."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### The Color War

At the close of a tense lunch, while nibbling salmon patté out of clipper-ships made of Triscuits, Alex appointed Melanie as the American General, and announced an American rally in the theater, to begin immediately.

At the rally, General Reid was visibly shaken when Alex produced a stuffed animal, and held it aloft.

"This, is the Emperor," she announced. "And while your asses belong to General Reid, your souls belong to the Emperor. Now," she said, wetting her lips with a smirk.

"Bow."

We looked at each other. Few among us had ever bowed to anything, much less some stupid stuffed-

"BOW!"

We bowed. We bowed to the lion. Even the General bowed. Even Alex.

Argument was dead. Long live the Emperor.

"Good," Alex said, standing, and motioning us to follow. "Now then," she said, bringing the Emperor low and setting him upon his wooden stool of a throne. "The safety of the Emperor is paramount, above all things, above pranks and points and yes, even the ultimate prize. An army is nothing without its Emperor, even the General is nothing without her master. If harm should come to the Emperor, all will be lost, and his suffering



will be visited ten-fold upon the heads of each and every one of you." She turned to the General, and the General glared.

"Twenty," the General said, turning to the rest of us. "Twenty-fold."

Can we just agree to skip the Color War, because A) It's totally rigged this year (by me), and B) Color Wars are lame as fuck because, come on, we've seen it, it's like, pranks and trying to win some relay and be all fancy-time at meals but lookout! Here comes some prank that'll make it really hard to be fancy-time. It's like that, for four days. Plus, harrowing acts of bravery, pulling someone you hated up over a wall, until everyone is really dirty and slimy and tired, and laughter, and getting clean, and push-ups and jogging montages, and maybe a go-cart race, and then we end it all with a power ballade and passing a purple baton in a closeup of white hand to black.

So, we good? I just saved you like, an hour, of bullshit describing that. So use it for reflection or something. Talk to your kids. Tell them they're special. Or, not, if they're not special. Some kids suck, I think it's time we just admit it.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### The Salt Diary

*To all those for whom the process of tasting is a blessing and adventure;  
this is dedicated to those for whom the same is a marching order  
from the houses and recipes that name them among the lost.*

*True flavor dwells in conditions of the impossible;  
its present wish is that you should savor this.*

*We must find the beauty in our tastes again;  
this could never breathe to be an order, and so  
it only remains—a brine.*

*All men shall be tasters, then, until the salt shall free them;  
as I sink beneath your flavor like a stone.*

*Woe and you shall feed them plainly, in as many flavors as you shall wish, and  
choose them ever carefully, and verily they will gag inside the mirror of their memories,  
and only then will they love you, until and verily they shall no longer taste and it is only*

*then and yes ever into outfrom them and you the same; take comfort only it is then we do not believe what we have tasted. And hold here, with me, not on this sheer abyss.*

*Climb! Even should you feel yourself moving backwards...*

*And when the salt shall touch your tongue aware; you will see only sky*

*It started with Pikoreski. Flavors scrambled through the centuries. Started coming up. In a salt tasted centuries later still. After, the scramble slows. Flavors change. The vibrations of your world smoother, as before, in times of less blandness, and excess.*

*There is another salt, we can say December, but nothing more about it. This salt does other things, but these things see not good results. It is not the salt that does this, but the world in which it is sprinkled. Do not let your world become such a world, in which, a salt could do it harm.*

Melanie unwrapped a stick of gum and stuffed it into her mouth. "I'm still trying to figure out that last part."

Alex sneered, feigning disbelief. "There's nothing to figure out. He's obviously a psychotic."

"Why? Because he likes salt?"

"Oh, I think we blew past 'like' at about 2000 miles an hour."

They sat on the roots of the same strange tree under which they'd met four weeks ago. Alex didn't like the idea of using the same location twice, she said it was lazy, but when Melanie had mentioned that it concerned new information about Jean Paul, she just asked "When?" Melanie should've figured that Alex would react this way, but still, she was disappointed.

"I think it's nice, that he loves something so much."

"This isn't love," Alex said, holding up the book like a disease. "This is madness. And he means to bury us all with it."

Melanie laughed airily, and shook her head. "I think you're overreacting."

"I'M OVERREACTING?" She coughed, stammered, there was too much to say. "Your boyfriend, Jean Paul Manson here, is ushering in the salt-apocalypse, or whatever the hell he's got going on in that very twisted, very fucked up mind of his, and I'm the one who's overreacting. That's—that's why teenage hormones are just, waaay too powerful for our own good. I mean, you have a thing for cowboys and French accents, and the next thing you know, he's salting you up and eating you alive—"

"Oh, come on—"

"—and I bet you won't think his *complete* and utter alienation from reality is endearing. Will you? When he's eating you alive?"

Melanie put on a little laugh, but turned it off after she had recovered Jean Paul's journal. "You're just threatened by anyone giving a shit, about anything. Aren't you?"

"I give a shit," Alex said, looking after the book, which Melanie stuffed back into her bag.

"Oh, really? Name one thing."

"You not getting eaten, for one. The play, for two. I could go on."

"Do you really care about the play? Or is it just another joke? Another way to push people's buttons."

"How can you even ask me that?"

"Do you really love theater? Do you actually believe in it?"

Alex laughed. "I do theater so I don't have to believe. That's the whole point. That it's made up."

Melanie sighed. "Yeah. That's what I thought."

Melanie didn't see it come out, not until Alex lit it.

"You got *addicted*?"

"Oh, grow-up, Melanie. I smoke sometimes, girls do that. Girls like me."

"What about the list?"

Her words came through the smoke. "Come on, you really bought that? I mean, you don't still think I'm a stand-in, do you?"

"Has *anything* you told me been true?"

"Some of it. Your little Mr. Lion. He's totally the fucking Emperor. Hey- Where are you going?"

"AWAY from you! What do you think?"

"Well, I *thought*, you were cool. I thought you were smart. I thought you got me, I mean, it was nice, having someone around who got me. Just accepted me for who I was. I guess I was wrong."

"Yeah, I guess we both were. Because I know *nothing* about you."

"If that's what you want to think, be my guest."

Melanie turned again to go. She hated that she'd been reminded of the Color War.

"You are, you know. My guest. That little scholarship of yours? Dad wanted to name it after Mom, but, I convinced him just how tacky that would be."

It was good that she was a few yards away, because she spat when she spoke. "I don't believe a word you say."

"It's about time. But this one, you can ask the Doles about, or anyone, really. I mean, they're my guests too, all the money Dad sunk into this place?" She blew out her last drag, and flicked the butt into the bushes. "You don't get it, do you? You'll always be my guest, Reid. Wherever you go. Because this world, whether I like it or not, is mine. It's always been mine. And the more money I give away, the more lies I tell, the more the truth just rushes to catch up to me."

Melanie closed her eyes. "Go to Hell."

When she opened them, Alex's smile was the worst thing she'd ever seen.

"Don't you get it? That's where we are. And you, me, all of us, can never, ever, leave."

Melanie walked away, just the same. She wanted to run, but feared that if she did, the devil would chase her.

No. She couldn't believe that. It was just another of Alex's lies. None of them were true, she was protecting herself, she was pushing everyone away.

Well, she'd succeeded.

DEVIN'S ROOM - NIGHT

LIGHT: INCANDESCENT

(DEVIN sits watching Sam, while URSULA stands looking out the window overlooking the camp.)

DEVIN: Two minutes.

URSULA: I don't care what her father's done for us. Next year, she's not coming back.

DEVIN: I don't think I will be either.

URSULA: No?

DEVIN: It's this dream, I keep having. In the dream, the Pagawashek chief comes to me, and he's old, he's hundreds of years old, but the water here keeps him young. But because I know this, it's not safe anymore, and if we stay, people will come and destroy it. Anyway, that's the dream.

URSULA: I think it could be good for you.

DEVIN: You want me to go.

URSULA: What I want for you, darling, is far less important than your dreams.

DEVIN: It's starting.

(The Countdown Ends, and Sam's Portal emits the sound of static.)

ON-SCREEN

BARE ROOM

(As the static clears, Sam's portal displays a surveillance-style video of an African-American MAN in a white suit, seated at a steel table, holding a drink in a cut crystal glass. On one side of the room is a window of mirrored glass. After a moment, Jean Paul enters the room, and closes the door behind him.)

OFF-SCREEN

DEVIN'S ROOM

(Ursula standing over Devin, her hand drawing back from his shoulder. She is terrified.)

URSULA: Is this on any other screens?

(Devin looks up to Ursula, stands and rushes out of the room.)

ON-SCREEN



BARE ROOM

(JEAN PAUL steps around the table, and  
sits down across from the MAN in the suit.)

MAN: I hope it's a Ferrari. I already got a Porsche and a Jag.

(The Man sips his drink, rattles the ice. Jean Paul  
composes his hands into a steeple.)

JEAN PAUL: What you might get to keep are your testicles. I usually like  
to leave them. But the little man, he always has to go. Because it is the  
little man that runs the revolution, that much, I have come to accept as  
fact. Some things, after you witness them, time and again, it really does  
seem ridiculous not to, no?

(The Man looks into the camera, then behind him at  
the closed steel door.)

JEAN PAUL: Do you like crystals?

MAN: What?

JEAN PAUL: Crystals, do you like them?

(The Man shakes his head, dazed.)

MAN: Fuck crystals. Dug from dead dark backs. Fuck your diamonds.

JEAN PAUL: I'm not talking about diamonds. They are a crude way to turn blood into gold. I am talking about alkaloids, salts. I am talking about nature's ability to open the doors of your mind. Have you ever been to Bogota? Your drink has. Soon you will have no will of your own. If I handed you my knife and told you to cut off your penis, you probably would. Some don't, but, they will do just about anything else. For instance, you will withdraw ten thousand dollars from checking and you will give it to me. Then you will set fire to the Brothers Z, return to your apartment, and smoke a great deal of the cocaine we will leave for you. By this point, you will be missing something very precious, but I assure you, a long and fulfilling life awaits, so long as you can hold onto hope.

(Jean Paul stands, checks his watch,  
and smiles wide.)

JEAN PAUL: Now. Please stand up, and touch your nose.

(As the Man rises to his feet, the surveillance  
footage cuts to static.)

OFF-SCREEN

DEVIN'S ROOM

(ENTER DEVIN, panting. Screams can be heard from the direction of the camp. Ursula holds up her hand, and covers her eyes.)

URSULA: Don't tell me. I already know how it ends.

Ursula Dole stood before us on the stage at Rick's. She withdrew a cigarette from her purse, though no one had ever seen her smoke. She struck a match, lit up, then dropped the match.

"Littering," she said. "I do not approve of it."

She took her first deep drag, and coughed.

"Smoking," she said, dropping the cigarette, and letting it burn. "Neither do I approve of this."

She took her time looking around.

"But what you have done to this poor man, is beyond disgraceful. It makes me ashamed to be your Headmistress. I know as well as each of you, that this is all part of that sick little ritual of yours, and don't you dare put on looks of ignorance, don't you DARE."

She pounded the podium with her fist so hard, most of us jumped.

"I wonder how many of you spoke to him, before you condemned him. Or spoke to him at all in these past four weeks. I won't ask how many of you have thanked him. I don't dare. Do you really believe this is real? Or are you all just waiting for excuses to be cruel?"

She waited, watching us, as though she really was expecting someone to answer.

"If this is your idea of fun, well, I don't know what else I can say to you. Only that I know him, and I know him to be a good man, and that he's neither a member of any clandestine organization, nor has he been a part of any of the horrible things that one of you has taken great pains to fabricate."

Ursula stopped, turned away, then returned to the podium, in tears now.

"As it is clear that his system has been compromised, Sam will remain off-line until further notice."

Groans. "What about the play?" someone called.

"I'm seriously considering foregoing the summer play."

More groans. Boos, even.

"ENOUGH." She again had our attention, and stared us down for a long, hard moment, to make sure we knew it. Then she spoke, almost pleasant, but unmistakably firm. "You're all to go to your cabins, and you're to sit until lights out, and you will do nothing but sit and think about how you have all condemned this man, with your vicious little game, and how it would feel if someone had done the same to you. If you pray, pray for Jean Paul. Pray he can forgive you, and forgive the worst among you, who has done her best to murder a man with his heart still beating."

She took a long time to think, and looked at none of us.

"Jean Paul has elected to take a leave of absence. He is still the Head Chef of this camp, and will return when he sees fit. In the meantime, all post-Color War celebrations are cancelled. There will be no breakfast. The Peace Summit will meet at 9am sharp. All generals, and only generals, may attend. The rest of the camp will remain in their cabins until further notice. That's all, standard exit, seniors first."

And then she left.

...Fucking seniors, always first.

