

three

Santa Maria

"Trouble," Roxy says. She arches a brow at the kids by the van through the bug-spattered windshield, the ghost of a half-smile rippling across her face.

"You would know," I shoot.

"So would you," she snaps.

Maybe we're a little on edge. We've been in the car so long the pattern on the vinyl seats is tattooed on the back of my thighs.

The kids my mother is talking about, the ones sitting on the white picket fence, look like they slithered up the hill out of the ocean, covered in seaweed, like the carnival music we heard coming from the boardwalk as we were driving into town plays in the air around them at all times. Two crows are on the posts beside them like they're standing guard, and they caw at each other loudly as we come to a stop. I love everything about this place immediately and I think, ridiculously, that I am no longer alone.

The older girl, white but tan, curvaceous, and lean, has her arms around the boy and is lovely with her smudged eye makeup and her ripped clothes. The younger one pops something made of bright colors into her mouth and watches us come up the drive. She is in a military-style jacket with a ton of buttons, her frizzy blond hair reaching in all directions, freckles slapped across her cheeks. And the boy? Thin, brown,

hungry-looking. Not hungry in his stomach. Hungry with his eyes. He has a green bandana tied across his forehead and holes in the knees of his jeans. There's an *A* in a circle drawn in marker across the front of his T-shirt.

Anarchy.

"Look!" Roxy points to the gas gauge. It's just above the *E*. "You owe me five bucks, Cookie. I told you to trust we would make it, and see what happened? You should listen to your mama every once in a while."

"Yeah, well, can I borrow the five bucks to pay you for the bet? I'm fresh out of cash at the moment."

"Very funny."

Roxy cranes out the window and wipes the sweat off her upper lip, careful not to smudge her red lipstick. She's been having real bad aches the last two days, even aside from her bruises, and her appetite's been worse than ever. The only thing she ever wants is sugar. After having been in the car for so long, you'd think we'd be falling all over each other to get out, but we're still sitting in the car. In here we're still us.

She sighs for the thousandth time and clutches at her belly. "I don't know about this, May."

California can't be that different from West Texas.

I watch TV. I know how to say *gag me with a spoon* and *grody to the max*.

I fling open the door.

Roxy gathers her cigarettes and lighter, and drops them inside her purse with a snap.

"Goddammit, Elle," she mutters to herself, eyes flickering toward the kids again. Roxy looks at me over the rims of her sunglasses before shoving them back on her nose. "Mayhem, I'm counting on you to keep your head together here. Those kids are not the usual—"

"I know! You told me they're foster kids."

"No, not that," she says, but doesn't clarify.

"Okay, I guess."

"I mean it. No more of that wild-child business."

"I will keep my head together!" I'm so tired of her saying this. I never had any friends, never a boyfriend — all I have is what Grandmother calls my nasty mouth and the hair Lyle always said was ugly and whorish. And once or twice I might've got drunk on the roof, but it's not like I ever did anything. Besides, no kid my age has ever liked me even once. I'm not the wild child in the family.

"Well, all right then." Roxy messes with her hair in the rear-view mirror, then sprays herself with a cloud of Chanel No. 5 and runs her fingers over her gold necklace. It's of a bird, not unlike the ones making a fuss by the house. She's had it as long as I can remember, and over time it's been worn smooth by her worrying fingers. It's like she uses it to calm herself when she's upset about something, and she's been upset the whole way here, practically. Usually, she'd be good and buzzed by this time of day, but since she's had to drive some, she's only nipped from the tiny bottle of wine in her purse a few times and only taken a couple pills since we left Taylor. The withdrawal has turned her into a bit of a she-demon.

I try to look through her eyes, to see what she sees. Roxy hasn't been back here since I was three years old, and in that time, her mother has died, her father has died, and like she said when she got the card with the picture enclosed that her twin sister, Elle, sent last Christmas, *Everybody got old*. After that, she spent a lot of time staring in the mirror, pinching at her neck skin. When I was younger, she passed long nights telling me about Santa Maria and the Brayburn Farm, about how it was good and evil in equal measure, about how it had desires that had to be satisfied.

Brayburns, she would say. *In my town, we were the legends.*

These were the mumbled stories of my childhood, and they made everything about this place loom large. Now that we're here, I realize I expected the house to have a gaping maw filled with spitty, frothy teeth, as much as I figured there would be fairies flitting around with wands granting wishes. I don't want to take her vision away from her, but this place looks pretty normal to me, if run-down compared to our new house in Taylor, where there's no dust anywhere, ever, and Lyle practically keeps the cans of soup in alphabetical order. Maybe what's not so normal is that this place was built by Brayburns, and here Brayburns matter. I know because the whole road is named after us and because flowers and ribbons and baskets of fruit sat at the entrance, gifts from the people in town, Roxy said. They leave offerings. She said it like it's normal to be treated like some kind of low-rent goddess.

Other than the van and the kids, there are trees here, rosebushes, an old black Mercedes, and some bikes leaning against the porch that's attached to the house. It's splashed with fresh white paint that doesn't quite cover up its wrinkles and scars. It's three stories, so it cuts the sunset when I look up, and plants drape down to touch the dirt.

The front door swings open and a woman in bare feet races past the rosebushes toward us. It is those feet and the reckless way they pound against the earth that tells me this is my aunt Elle before her face does. My stomach gallops and there are bumps all over my arms, and I am more awake than I've been since.

I thought Roxy might do a lot of things when she saw her twin sister. Like she might get super quiet or chain-smoke, or maybe even get biting like she can when she's feeling wrong about something. The last thing I would have ever imagined was them running toward each other and colliding in the driveway, Roxy wrapping her legs around Elle's waist, and them twirling like that.

This seems like something I shouldn't be seeing, something wounded and private that fills up my throat. I flip myself around in my seat and start picking through the things we brought and chide myself yet again for the miserable packing job I did. Since I was basically out of my mind trying to get out of the house, I took a whole package of toothbrushes, an armful of books, my River Phoenix poster, plus I emptied out my underwear drawer, but totally forgot to pack any shoes, so all I have are some flip-flops I bought at the truck stop outside of Las Cruces after that man came to the window, slurring, *You got nice legs. Tap, tap tap. You got such nice legs.*

My flip-flops are covered in Cheeto dust from a bag that got upended. I slip them on anyway, watching Roxy take her sunglasses off and prop them on her head.

"Son of a bitch!" my aunt says, her voice tinny as she catches sight of Roxy's eye. "Oh my God, that's really bad, Rox. You made it sound like nothing. That's not nothing."

"Ellie," Roxy says, trying to put laughter in her voice. "I'm here now. *We're here now.*"

There's a pause.

"You look the same," Elle says. "Except the hair. You went full Marilyn Monroe."

"What about you?" Roxy says, fussing at her platinum waves with her palm. "You go full granola warrior? When's the last time you ate a burger?"

"You know I don't do that. It's no good for us. Definitely no good for the poor cows."

"It's fine for me." Roxy lifts Elle's arm and puckers her nose. "What's going on with your armpits? May not eat meat but you got animals under there, looks like."

"Shaving is subjugation."

"Shaving is a mercy for all mankind."

They erupt into laughter and hug each other again.

“Well, where is she, my little baby niece?” Elle swings the car door open. “Oh, Mayhem.” She scoops me out with two strong arms. Right then I realize just how truly tired I am. She seems to know, squeezes extra hard for a second before letting me go. She smells like the sandalwood soap Roxy buys sometimes. “My baby girl,” Elle says, “you have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to see you. How much I’ve missed you.”

Roxy circles her ear with a finger where Elle can’t see her. *Crazy*, she mouths.

I almost giggle.