

Chapter 1

Jojo

I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight. When Pop tell me he need my help and I see that black knife slid into the belt of his pants, I follow Pop out the house, try to keep my back straight, my shoulders even as a hanger; that's how Pop walks. I try to look like this is normal and boring so Pop will think I've earned these thirteen years, so Pop will know I'm ready to pull what needs to be

pulled, separate innards from muscle, organs from cavities. I want Pop to know I can get bloody. Today's my birthday.

I grab the door so it don't slam, ease it into the jamb. I don't want Mam or Kayla to wake up with none of us in the house. Better for them to sleep. Better for my little sister, Kayla, to sleep, because on nights when Leonie's out working, she wake up every hour, sit straight up in the bed, and scream. Better for Grandma Mam to sleep, because the chemo done dried her up and hollowed her out the way the sun and the air do water oaks. Pop weaves in and out of the trees, straight and slim and brown as a young pine tree. He spits in the dry red dirt, and the wind makes the trees wave. It's cold. This spring is stubborn; most days, it won't make way for warmth. The chill stays like water in a bad-draining tub. I left

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my hoodie on the floor in Leonie's room, where I sleep, and my T-shirt is thin, but I don't rub my arms. If I let the cold goad me, I know when I see the goat, I'll flinch or frown when Pop cuts the throat. And Pop, being Pop, will see.

"Better to leave the baby asleep," Pop says.

Pop built our house himself, narrow in the front and long, close to the road so he could leave the rest of the property wooded. He put his pigpen and his goat yard and the chicken coop in small clearings in the trees. We have to walk past the pigpen to get to the goats. The dirt is black and muddy with shit, and ever since Pop whipped me when I was six for running around the pen with no shoes on, I've never been barefoot out here again. *You could get worms*, Pop had said. Later that night, he told me stories about him and his sisters and brothers when

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they were young, playing barefoot because all they had was one pair of shoes each and them for church. They all got worms, and when they used the outhouse, they pulled worms out of their butts. I don't tell Pop, but that was more effective than the whipping.

Pop picks the unlucky goat, ties a rope around its head like a noose, leads it out the pen. The others bleat and rush him, butting his legs, licking his pants.

“Get! Get!” Pop says, and kicks them away. I think the goats understand each other; I can see it in the aggressive butts of their heads, in the way they bite Pop's pants and yank. I think they know what that loose rope tied around the goat's neck means. The white goat with black splashes on his fur dances from side to side, resisting, like he catches a whiff of what he is walking toward. Pop pulls him past the

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pigs, who rush the fence and grunt at Pop, wanting food, and down the trail toward the shed, which is closer to the house. Leaves slap my shoulders, and they scratch me dry, leaving thin white lines scrawled on my arms.

“Why you ain’t got more of this cleared out, Pop?”

“Ain’t enough space,” Pop says. “And don’t nobody need to see what I got back here.”

“You can hear the animals up front. From the road.”

“And if anybody come back here trying to mess with my animals, I can hear them coming through these trees.”

“You think any of the animals would let themselves get took?”

“No. Goats is mean and pigs is smarter than you think. And they vicious, too. One of them pigs’ll take a bite out of anybody they ain’t used to eating from.”

Pop and I enter the shed. Pop ties the goat to a post he's driven into the floor, and it barks at him.

“Who you know got all they animals out in the open?” Pop says. And Pop is right. Nobody in Bois has their animals out in the open in fields, or in the front of their property.

The goat shakes its head from side to side, pulls back. Tries to shrug the rope. Pop straddles it, puts his arm under the jaw.

“The big Joseph,” I say. I want to look out the shed when I say it, over my shoulder at the cold, bright green day, but I make myself stare at Pop, at the goat with its neck being raised to die. Pop snorts. I hadn't wanted to say his name. Big Joseph is my White grandpa, Pop my Black one. I've lived with Pop since I was born; I've seen my White grandpa twice. Big Joseph is round and tall and looks noth-

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ing like Pop. He don't even look like Michael, my father, who is lean and smudged with tattoos. He picked them up like souvenirs from wannabe artists in Bois and out on the water when he worked offshore and in prison.

“Well, there you go,” Pop says.

Pop wrestles the goat like it's a man, and the goat's knees buckle. It falls face forward in the dirt, turns its head to the side so it's looking up at me with its cheek rubbing the dusty earth and bloody floor of the shed. It shows me its soft eye, but I don't look away, don't blink. Pop slits. The goat makes a sound of surprise, a bleat swallowed by a gurgle, and then there's blood and mud everywhere. The goat's legs go rubbery and loose, and Pop isn't struggling anymore. All at once, he stands up and ties a rope around the goat's ankles, lifting the body to a hook hanging from the rafters.

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That eye: still wet. Looking at me like I was the one who cut its neck, like I was the one bleeding it out, turning its whole face red with blood.

“You ready?” Pop asks. He glances at me then, quickly. I nod. I’m frowning, my face drawn tight. I try to relax as Pop cuts the goat along the legs, giving the goat pant seams, shirt seams, lines all over.

“Grab this here,” Pop says. He points at a line on the goat’s stomach, so I dig my fingers in and grab. It’s still warm, and it’s wet. *Don’t slip*, I say to myself. *Don’t slip*.

“Pull,” Pop says.

I pull. The goat is inside out. Slime and smell everywhere, something musty and sharp, like a man who ain’t took a bath in some days. The skin peels off like a banana. It surprises me every time, how easy it comes away once you pull. Pop yanking hard on the other side, and

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then he's cutting and snapping the hide off at the feet. I pull the skin down the animal's leg to the foot, but I can't get it off like Pop, so he cuts and snaps.

"Other side," Pop says. I grab the seam near the heart. The goat's even warmer here, and I wonder if his panicked heart beat so fast it made his chest hotter, but then I look at Pop, who's already snapping the skin off the end of the goat's foot, and I know my wondering's made me slow. I don't want him to read my slowness as fear, as weakness, as me not being old enough to look at death like a man should, so I grip and yank. Pop snaps the skin off at the animal's foot, and then the animal sways from the ceiling, all pink and muscle, catching what little light there is, glistening in the dark. All that's left of the goat is the hairy face, and somehow this

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is even worse than the moment before Pop cut its throat.


“Get the bucket,” Pop says, so I get the metal tub from one of the shelves at the back of the shed, and I pull it under the animal. I pick up the skin, which is already turning stiff, and I dump it into the tub. Four sheets of it.

Pop slices down the center of the stomach, and the innards slide out and into the tub. He’s slicing and the smell overwhelms like a faceful of pig shit. It smells like foragers, dead and rotting out in the thick woods, when the only sign of them is the stink and the buzzards rising and settling and circling. It stinks like possums or armadillos smashed half flat on the road, rotting in asphalt and heat. But worse. This smell is worse; it’s the smell of death, the rot coming from something just alive, something hot with blood and life. I

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grimace, wanting to make Kayla's stink face, the face she makes when she's angry or impatient; to everyone else, it looks like she's smelled something nasty: her green eyes squinting, her nose a mushroom, her twelve tiny toddler teeth showing through her open mouth. I want to make that face because something about scrunching up my nose and squeezing the smell away might lessen it, might cut off that stink of death. I know it's the stomach and intestines, but all I can see is Kayla's stink face and the soft eye of the goat and then I can't hold myself still and watch no more, then I'm out the door of the shed and I'm throwing up in the grass outside. My face is so hot, but my arms are cold.

* * *



Pop steps out of the shed, and he got a slab of ribs in his fist. I wipe

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my mouth and look at him, but he's not looking at me, he's looking at the house, nodding toward it.

"Thought I heard the baby cry. You should go check on them."

I put my hands in my pockets.

"You don't need my help?"

Pop shakes his head.

"I got it," he says, but then he looks at me for the first time and his eyes ain't hard no more. "You go ahead." And then he turns and goes back to the shed.

Pop must have misheard, because Kayla ain't awake. She's lying on the floor in her drawers and her yellow T-shirt, her head to the side, her arms out like she's trying to hug the air, her legs wide. A fly is on her knee, and I brush it away, hoping it hasn't been on her the whole time I've been out in the shed with Pop. They feed on rot. Back when I was younger, back when I still called Leonie *Mama*, she told me

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flies eat shit. That was when there was more good than bad, when she'd push me on the swing Pop hung from one of the pecan trees in the front yard, or when she'd sit next to me on the sofa and watch TV with me, rubbing my head. Before she was more gone than here. Before she started snorting crushed pills. Before all the little mean things she told me gathered and gathered and lodged like grit in a skinned knee. Back then I still called Michael *Pop*. That was when he lived with us before he moved back in with Big Joseph. Before the police took him away three years ago, before Kayla was born.

Each time Leonie told me something mean, Mam would tell her to leave me alone. *I was just playing with him*, Leonie would say, and each time she smiled wide, brushed her hand across her forehead to smooth her short, streaked hair. *I*

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pick colors that make my skin pop,
she told Mam. *Make this dark shine.*
And then: *Michael love it.*

I pull the blanket up over Kayla's stomach and lie next to her on the floor. Her little foot is warm in my hand. Still asleep, she kicks off the cover and grabs at my arm, pulling it up to her stomach, so I hold her before settling again. Her mouth opens and I wave at the circling fly, and Kayla lets off a little snore.

* * *

When I walk back out to the shed, Pop's already cleaned up the mess. He's buried the foul-smelling intestines in the woods, and wrapped the meat we'll eat months later in plastic and put it in the small deep-freezer wedged in a corner. He shuts the door to the shed, and when we walk past the pens I can't help avoiding the goats, who rush the wooden fence and bleat. I know

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they are asking after their friend, the one I helped kill. The one who Pop carries pieces of now: the tender liver for Mam, which he will sear barely so the blood won't run down her mouth when he sends me in to feed it to her; the haunches for me, which he will boil for hours and then smoke and barbecue to celebrate my birthday. A few of the goats wander off to lick at the grass. Two of the males skitter into each other, and then one head-butts the other, and they are fighting. When one of the males limps off and the winner, a dirty white color, begins bullying a small gray female, trying to mount her, I pull my arms into my sleeves. The female kicks at the male and bleats. Pop stops next to me and waves the fresh meat in the air to keep flies from it. The male bites at the female's ear, and the female makes a sound like a growl and snaps back.

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“Is it always like that?” I ask Pop. I’ve seen horses rearing and mounting each other, seen pigs rutting in the mud, heard wildcats at night shrieking and snarling as they make kittens.

Pop shakes his head and lifts the choice meats toward me. He half smiles, and the side of his mouth that shows teeth is knife-sharp, and then the smile is gone.

“No,” he says. “Not always. Sometimes it’s this, too.”

The female head-butts the neck of the male, screeching. The male skitters back. I believe Pop. I do. Because I see him with Mam. But I see Leonie and Michael as clearly as if they were in front of me, in the last big fight they had before Michael left us and moved back in with Big Joseph, right before he went to jail: Michael threw his jerseys and his camouflage pants and his Jordans into big black garbage bags,

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and then hauled his stuff outside. He hugged me before he left, and when he leaned in close to my face all I could see were his eyes, green as the pines, and the way his face turned red in splotches: his cheeks, his mouth, the edges of his nose, where the veins were little scarlet streams under the skin. He put his arms around my back and patted once, twice, but those pats were so light, they didn't feel like hugs, even though something in his face was pulled tight, wrong, like underneath his skin he was crisscrossed with tape. Like he would cry. Leonie was pregnant with Kayla then, and already had Kayla's name picked out and scrawled with nail polish on her car seat, which had been my car seat. Leonie was getting bigger; her stomach looked like she had a Nerf basketball shoved under her shirt. She followed Michael out on the porch

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where I stood, still feeling those two little pats on my back, soft as a weak wind, and Leonie grabbed him by the collar and pulled and slapped him on the side of the head, so hard it sounded loud and wet. He turned and grabbed her by her arms, and they were yelling and breathing hard and pushing and pulling each other across the porch. They were so close to each other, their hips and chests and faces, that they were one, scuttling, clumsy like a hermit crab over sand. And then they were leaning in close to each other, speaking, but their words sounded like moans.

“I know,” Michael said.

“You ain’t never known,” Leonie said.

“Why you push me like this?”

“You go where you want,” Leonie said, and then she was crying and they were kissing, and they only moved apart when Big Joseph

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pulled onto the dirt driveway and stopped, just so his truck was out of the street and in the yard. He didn't lay on the horn or wave or nothing, just sat there, waiting for Michael. And then Leonie walked away from him and slammed the door and disappeared back into the house, and Michael looked down at his feet. He'd forgot to put shoes on, and his toes were red. He breathed hard and grabbed his bags, and the tattoos on his white back moved: the dragon on his shoulder, the scythe down his arm. A grim reaper between his shoulder blades. My name, *Joseph*, at the root of his neck in between ink prints of my baby feet.

"I'll be back," he said, and then he jumped down off the porch, shaking his head and hauling his garbage bags over his shoulder, and walked over to the truck, where his daddy, Big Joseph, the man who

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ain't never once said my name, waited. Part of me wanted to give him the bird when he pulled out of the driveway, but more of me was scared that Michael would jump back out of the truck and whip me, so I didn't. Back then I didn't realize how Michael noticed and didn't notice, how sometimes he saw me and then, whole days and weeks, he didn't. How, in that moment, I didn't matter. Michael hadn't looked back after he jumped off the porch, hadn't even looked up after he threw his bags into the bed of the pickup truck and got into the front seat. He seemed like he was still concentrating on his red, naked feet. Pop says a man should look another man in the face, so I stood there, looking at Big Joseph putting the truck in reverse, at Michael looking down at his lap, until they pulled out of the driveway and went down the street.

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And then I spat the way Pop does, and jumped off the porch and ran around to the animals in their secret rooms in the back woods.

“Come on, son,” Pop says. When he begins walking toward the house, I follow, trying to leave the memory of Leonie and Michael fighting outside, floating like fog in the damp, chilly day. But it follows, even as I follow the trail of tender organ blood Pop has left in the dirt, a trail that signals love as clearly as the bread crumbs Hansel spread in the wood.

* * *

The smell of the liver searing in the pan is heavy in the back of my throat, even through the bacon grease Pop dribbled on it first. When Pop plates it, the liver smells, but the gravy he made to slather on it pools in a little heart around the meat, and I wonder if Pop did

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that on purpose. I carry it to Mam's doorway, but she's still asleep, so I bring the food back to the kitchen, where Pop drapes a paper towel over it to keep it warm, and then I watch him chop up the meat and seasoning, garlic and celery and bell pepper and onion, which makes my eyes sting, and set it to boil.

If Mam and Pop were there on the day of Leonie and Michael's fight, they would have stopped it. *The boy don't need to see that*, Pop would say. Or *You don't want your child to think that's how you treat another person*, Mam might've said. But they weren't there. It's not often I can say that. They weren't there because they'd found out that Mam was sick with cancer, and so Pop was taking her back and forth to the doctor. It was the first time I could remember they were depending on Leonie to look after

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me. After Michael left with Big Joseph, it felt weird to sit across the table from Leonie and make a fried potato sandwich while she stared off into space and crossed her legs and kicked her feet, let cigarette smoke seep out of her lips and wreath her head like a veil, even though Mam and Pop hated when she smoked in the house. To be alone with her. She ashed her cigarettes and put them out in an empty Coke she had been drinking, and when I bit into the sandwich, she said:

“That looks disgusting.”

She'd wiped her tears from her fight with Michael, but I could still see tracks across her face, dried glossy, from where they'd fallen.

“Pop eat them like this.”

“You got to do everything Pop do?”

I shook my head because it seemed like what she expected



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from me. But I liked most of the things Pop did, liked the way he stood when he spoke, like the way he combed his hair back straight from his face and slicked it down so he looked like an Indian in the books we read in school on the Choctaw and Creek, liked the way he let me sit in his lap and drive his tractor around the back, liked the way he ate, even, fast and neat, liked the stories he told me before I went to sleep. When I was nine, Pop was good at everything.

“You sure act like it.”

Instead of answering, I swallowed hard. The potatoes were salty and thick, the mayonnaise and ketchup spread too thin, so the potatoes stuck in my throat a little bit.

“Even that sounds gross,” Leonie said. She dropped her cigarette into the can and pushed it across the



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table to me where I stood eating.
“Throw that away.”

She walked out the kitchen into the living room and picked up one of Michael’s baseball caps that he’d left on the sofa, before pulling it low over her face.

“I’ll be back,” she said.

Sandwich in hand, I trotted after her. The door slammed and I pushed through it. *You going to leave me here by myself?* I wanted to ask her, but the sandwich was a ball in my throat, lodged on the panic bubbling up from my stomach; I’d never been home alone.

“Mama and Pop be home soon,” she said as she slammed her car door. She drove a low maroon Chevy Malibu that Pop and Mam had bought her when she’d graduated from high school. Leonie pulled out the driveway, one hand out the window to catch the air or



wave, I couldn't tell which, and she was gone.

Something about being alone in the too-quiet house scared me, so I sat on the porch for a minute, but then I heard a man singing, singing in a high voice that sounded all wrong, singing the same words over and over. "Oh Stag-o-lee, why can't you be true?" It was Stag, Pop's oldest brother, with a long walking stick in hand. His clothes looked hard and oily, and he swung that stick like an axe. Whenever I saw him, I couldn't never make out any sense to anything he said; it was like he was speaking a foreign language, even though I knew he was speaking English: he walked all over Bois Sauvage every day, singing, swinging a stick. Walked upright like Pop, proud like Pop. Had the same nose Pop had. But everything else about him was nothing like Pop, was like Pop had been



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wrung out like a wet rag and then dried up in the wrong shape. That was Stag. I'd asked Mam once what was wrong with him, why he always smelled like armadillo, and she had frowned and said: *He sick in the head, Jojo.* And then: *Don't ask Pop about this.*

I didn't want him to see me, so I jumped off and ran around the back to the woods. There was comfort in that, in hearing the pigs snuffle and the goats tear and eat, in seeing the chickens peck and scratch. I didn't feel so small or alone. I squatted in the grass, watching them, thinking I could almost hear them talk to me, that I could hear them communicate. Sometimes when I looked at the fat pig with splashed black spots on his side, he'd grunt and flap his ears, and I'd think he meant to say: *Scratch here, boy.* When the goats licked my hand and head-butted



me while nibbling at my fingers and bleated, I heard: *The salt is so sharp and good—more salt.* When the horse Pop keeps bowed his head and shimmied and bucked so that his sides gleamed like wet red Mississippi mud, I understood: *I could leap over your head, boy, and oh I would run and run and you would never see anything more than that. I could make you shake.* But it scared me to understand them, to hear them. Because Stag did that, too; Stag stood in the middle of the street sometimes and had whole conversations with Casper, the shaggy black neighborhood dog.

But it was impossible to not hear the animals, because I looked at them and understood, instantly, and it was like looking at a sentence and understanding the words, all of it coming to me at once. So after Leonie left, I sat in the backyard for a while and listened to the pigs and



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the horses and old Stag's singing sinking to silence like a whipping and dropping wind. I moved from pen to pen, watching the sun and estimating how long Leonie'd been gone, how long Mam and Pop were gone, how soon I could expect them to come back so I could go inside the house. I was walking with my head tilted up, listening for the growl of tires, so I didn't see the jagged lid of the can rising from the earth, didn't see it when I put my foot on it, stepped down in the instinct of walking. It sank deep. I screamed and dropped, holding my leg, and I knew the animals understood me then, too: *Let me go, great tooth! Spare me!*

Instead, it burned and bled, and I sat on the ground in the horse's clearing and cried and tasted ketchup and acid at the back of my throat and grabbed my ankle. I was too scared to pull the lid out, then



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I heard a car door slam shut and nothing else until Pop's voice called and I answered and he found me sitting on the ground, sniffing with my breath hitching and not caring my face was wet. Pop came to my side and touched me on the leg like he does our horse when he's checking the shoe. In a quick second, he pulled it out, and I hollered. It was the first time I thought Pop didn't do something good.

When Leonie came home that night, she didn't say nothing. I don't think she noticed my foot until Pop shouted at her, over and over again, *Goddamnit, Leonie!* I drowsed with pain medicine, itchy with antibiotics, my foot all wrapped in white, bound tight, and watched Pop slap the wall to punctuate: *Leonie!* She flinched, stepped away from him, and then said in a small voice: *You was shucking oysters down at the docks when you was*



his age, Mam changing diapers. And then: He old enough. She said: You all right, huh, Jojo? And I looked at her and said: No, Leonie. It was a new thing, to look at her rubbing hands and her crooked teeth in her chattering mouth and not hear Mama in my head, but her name: Leonie. When I said it, she laughed, the sound erupting from her insides like a hard shovel cleaved it from her. Pop looked like he wanted to slap her face, but then he changed, and he snorted like he does when his crop don't take or when one of his sows bears a half-dead litter: disappointed. He sat with me on one of the two sofas in the living room. That was the first night he let Mam sleep in the bed by herself. I slept on the love seat, and he slept on the sofa, where, after Mam got sicker and sicker, he stayed.



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The goat smells like beef when it boils. It even looks like it, too, dark and stringy in the pot. Pop pokes it with a spoon, testing the tenderness, and cocks the lid crooked so that steam billows in the air.

“Pop, you going to tell me about you and Stag again?” I ask.

“About what?” Pop asks.

“Parchman,” I say. Pop folds his arms. Leans over to smell the goat.

“Ain’t I told it to you before?” he asks.

I shrug. Sometimes I think I look like Stag around my nose and mouth. Stag and Pop. I want to hear about the ways they are different. The ways we are all different. “Yeah, but I want to hear it anyway,” I say.

This is what Pop does when we are alone, sitting up late at night in the living room or out in the yard or woods. He tells me stories. Stories about eating cattails



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after his daddy been out gathering them from the marsh. Stories about how his mama and her people used to collect Spanish moss to stuff their mattresses. Sometimes he'll tell me the same story three, even four times. Hearing him tell them makes me feel like his voice is a hand he's reached out to me, like he's rubbing my back and I can duck whatever makes me feel like I'll never be able to stand as tall as Pop, never be as sure. It makes me sweat and stick to the chair in the kitchen, which has gotten so hot from the boiling goat on the stove that the windows have fogged up, and the whole world is shrunk to this room with me and Pop.

“Please,” I say. Pop beats the meat he still has left to add to the boil, making it soft and tender, and clears his throat. I put my elbows on the table and listen:



Me and Stag, we got the same papa. My other brothers and sisters got different daddies because my papa died young. Think he was in his early forties. I don't know how old he was because he ain't know how old he was. Said his maman and daddy avoided them census takers, never answered their questions right, changed the number of kids they had, never registered none of they births. Said them people came around sniffing out that information to control them, to cage them like livestock. So they never did any of that official stuff, held to the old ways. Papa taught us some of that before he died: some hunting and tracking, some animal work, some things about balance, things about life. I listened. I always listened. But Stag ain't never listen. Even when we was little, Stag was too busy running with the dogs or going to the swimming hole to sit and listen. And when



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he got older, he was off to the juke joint. Papa said he was too handsome, said he'd been born pretty as a woman, and that's why he got into so much trouble. Because people like pretty things, and things came to him too easy. Maman say hush when Papa say that, say Stag just feel things too much, is all. Say that make it hard for him to sit and think. I ain't tell them this, but I thought both of them was wrong. I think Stag felt dead inside, and that's why he couldn't sit still and listen, why he had to climb the highest cliff when we went swimming at the river and jump off headfirst into the water. That's why Stag went to the juke joint damn near every weekend when he got eighteen, nineteen, drinking, why he walked with a knife in each shoe and one up each sleeve, why he cut and came home cut so often—he needed that to feel more alive. And he could have kept it up if



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that navy man ain't came up in there, one in a group of White men from up north stationed out on Ship Island. Wanted to have a good time with the coloreds, I guess, but bumped into Stag at the bar, and they had words, and then the man broke a bottle over Stag's head, and then Stag cut him, not enough to kill him, but enough to hurt him, to make him slow so Stag could run, but his friends beat up Stag before he could get a clean break. I was at the house alone when Stag got here, Maman up the road taking care of her sister and Papa out in the fields. When all them White men came to get Stag, they tied both of us and took us up the road. You boys is going to learn what it means to work, they said. To do right by the law of God and man, they said. You boys is going to Parchman.



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I was fifteen. But I wasn't the youngest noway, Pop says. That was Richie.

Kayla wakes up all at once, rolling over and pushing up and smiling. Her hair is everywhere, tangled as the sticker vines that hang from pine trees. Her eyes are green as Michael's, her hair caught somewhere between Leonie's and Michael's with a hint of hay color to it.

“Jojo?” she asks. That's what she always says, even when Leonie is next to her in the bed. That's the reason I can't sleep on the love seat with Pop in the living room anymore; when Kayla was a baby, she got so used to me coming in the middle of the night with her bottle. So I sleep on the floor next to Leonie's bed, and most nights Kayla ends up on my pallet with me, since Leonie's mostly gone. There's something gummy on the side of



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Kayla's mouth. I lick the hem of my shirt and wipe her cheek, and she shakes my hand off and crawls onto my lap: she's a short three-year-old, so when she curls into me, her feet don't even hang over my lap. She smells like hay baked in the sun, warm milk, and baby powder.

"You thirsty?" I ask.

"Yeah," she whispers.

When she's done, Kayla drops her sippy cup on the floor.

"Sing," she says.

"What you want me to sing?" I ask, even though she never tells me. Like I love to hear Pop tell stories, she loves to hear me sing. "'Wheels on the Bus'?" I say. I remember that one from Head Start: sometimes the local nuns would visit the school, acoustic guitars slung over their backs like hunting rifles, and play for us. So I sing it low enough that I won't wake Mam, my voice dipping and cracking and



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grating, but Kayla swings her arms and marches around the room anyway. When Pop leaves the boiling pot and comes into the living room, I can hardly breathe and my arms are burning. I'm singing "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," another Head Start hit, and throwing Kayla up in the air, almost to the high ceiling, before catching her. If she was a squealer, I wouldn't do it, because then she would definitely wake Mam. But as the smell of onions and garlic, bell pepper, and celery cooked in butter clouds the air, Kayla rises and falls, her arms and legs flung out, her eyes shining, her mouth open in a smile so wide it looks like she could be screaming.

"More," she pants. "More," she grunts when I catch her to toss her again.

Pop shakes his head, but I keep throwing, because I know, by the way he wipes his hands on the



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dish towels and leans in the wood doorjamb he planed and nailed to make the archway, he doesn't disapprove. He built the ceilings high on purpose, twelve feet, because Mam asked him to, said that the more room in the house from floor to roof, the cooler it would be. He knows I won't hurt her.

"Pop," I huff when Kayla lands more on my chest than in my arms. "You'll tell me the rest before you take the meat out to the smoker?"

"The baby," Pop says.

I catch Kayla and spin her around. She pouts when I put her down and pull a Fisher-Price play set that used to be mine from under the sofa. I blow off the dust and push it toward her. There's a cow and two chickens in the set, and one of the red barn doors is broken, but she still sinks to the floor and lies on her chest to make the plastic animals hop.



“See, Jojo?” Kayla asks, and bounces the goat. “Baa, baa,” she says.

“She all right,” I say. “She ain’t paying no attention to us.”

Pop sits on the floor behind Kayla and flicks the remaining door.

“It’s sticky,” he says. And then he looks up at the dimpled ceiling and sighs into a sentence, and then another. He is telling the story again.

Richie, he was called. Real name was Richard, and he wasn’t nothing but twelve years old. He was in for three years for stealing food: salted meat. Lot of folks was in there for stealing food because everybody was poor and starving, and even though White people couldn’t get your work for free, they did everything they could to avoid hiring you and paying you for it. Richie was the youngest boy I ever saw up in Parchman. There was a couple thou-



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sand men separated into work farms over all them acres. Damn near fifty thousand acres. Parchman the kind of place that fool you into thinking it ain't no prison, ain't going to be so bad when you first see it, because ain't no walls. Back in the day, it was just fifteen camps, each one surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. Wasn't no brick; wasn't no stone. Us inmates was called gunmen because we worked under the trusty shooters, who was inmates theyselves, but who the warden gave guns to oversee the rest of us. The trusty shooters was the type of men that be the first one to speak when they walk into a room. The kind that draws attention to hisself, talks big about the beating and stabbing and killing they did to get up in a place like that because it makes them feel bigger to be seen. Makes them feel like real men to see fear.



When I first got to Parchman, I worked in the fields, planting and weeding and harvesting crops. Parchman was a working farm right off. You see them open fields we worked in, the way you could look right through that barbed wire, the way you could grab it and get a toe-hold here, a bloody handhold there, the way they cut them trees flat so that land is empty and open to the ends of the earth, and you think, I can get out of here if I set my mind to it. I can follow the right stars south and all the way on home. But the reason you think that is because you don't see the trusty shooters. You don't know the sergeant. You don't know the sergeant come from a long line of men bred to treat you like a plowing horse, like a hunting dog—and bred to think he can make you like it. That the sergeant come from a long line of overseers. You don't know them trusty shooters done been



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sent to Parchman for worse than getting into a fight at a juke joint. Just know the trusty shooters, the inmate guards, was sent there because they like to kill, and because they done it in all kind of nasty ways, not just to other men, but to women and—

Me and Stag was put in separate camps. Stag got convicted of assault, I got convicted of harboring a fugitive. I'd worked, but never like that. Never sunup to sundown in no cotton field. Never in that kind of heat. It's different up there. The heat. Ain't no water to catch the wind and cool you off, so the heat settles and bakes. Like a wet oven. Soon enough my hands thickened up and my feet crusted and bled and I understood that when I was on that line in them fields I had to not think about it. I ain't think about Papa or Stag or the sergeant or the trusty shooters or the dogs, barking and slobbering at the mouth at the edge of the fields, daydream-



ing of tearing into a heel, a neck. I forgot it all and bent and stood and bent and stood and only thought of my mother. Her long neck, her steady hands, the way she braided her hair forward to cover her crooked hair-line. The dream of her was the glow of a spent fire on a cold night: warm and welcoming. It was the only way I could untether my spirit from myself, let it fly high as a kite in them fields. I had to, or being in jail for them five years woulda made me drop in that dirt and die.

Richie ain't had near that time. It's hard enough for a man of fifteen, but for a boy? A boy of twelve? Richie got there a month and some weeks after I got there. He walked into that camp crying, but crying with no sound, no sobbing. Just tears leaking down his face, glazing it with water. He had a big head shaped like an onion, the kind of head seemed too big for his body: a body all



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bones and skin. His ears set straight away from his head like leaves coming off a branch, and his eyes was big in his face. He ain't blink. He was fast: walked fast, his feet not shuffling, not like most when they first come to camp, but high-stepping, knees in the air, like a horse. They undid his hands and led him to the shack, to his bunk, and he lay down in the dark next to me and I knew he was still crying because his little shoulders had curved in like a bird's wings when it's landed but they still fluttering, but he still ain't make no noise. Them night guards at the doors to the shack go on a break, things can happen to a boy of twelve in the dark if he a crybaby.

When he woke up in the dark morning, his face was dry. He followed me out to the latrines and to breakfast, and sat down next to me in the dirt.



“Mighty young to be in here. How old you is? Eight?” I asked him.

He looked insulted. Frowned and his mouth fell open.

“How biscuits taste nasty?” he asked, and hid his mouth behind his hand. I thought he was going to spit the bread out, but he swallowed and said: “I’m twelve.”

“Still mighty young to be in here.”

“I stole.” He shrugged. “I was good at it. I been stealing since I was eight. I got nine little brothers and sisters always crying for food. And crying sick. Say they backs hurt; say they mouths sore. Got red rashes all over they hands and they feet. So thick on they face you can’t hardly see they skin.”

I knew the sickness he was talking about. We called it “red flame.” Heard tell some doctor had claimed most that had it was poor, eating nothing but meat, meal, and molasses. I could’ve told him those was



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the lucky ones that ate that way: in the Delta, I'd heard stories of people cooking dirt patties. He was proud of himself when he told me what he'd done, even though he got caught; I could tell in the way he leaned forward, in the way he watched me after he finished talking, like he was waiting for my approval. I knew I couldn't get rid of him then, especially because he was following me around and sleeping in the bunk next to me. Because he looked at me like I could give him something nobody else could. The sun was coming up through the trees, lighting the sky like a new fire, and I was already feeling it in my shoulders, my back, my arms. I chewed something baked into the bread, something crunchy. I swallowed quick—best not to think about it.

“What's your name, boy?”

“Richard. Everybody call me Richie for short. Like it's a joke.”



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He looked at me with his eyebrows raised and a little smile on his face, so small it was only his mouth opening to show his teeth, white and crowding. I didn't get the joke, so he slumped and explained with his spoon. "'Cause I be stealing. So I'm rich?"

I looked down at my hands. Crumb-clean and still felt like I hadn't eaten.

"It's a joke," he said. So I gave Richie what he wanted. He was just a boy. I laughed.

* * *

Sometimes I think I understand everything else more than I'll ever understand Leonie. She's at the front door, paper grocery bags obscuring her, hitching the screen and kicking it open, and then edging through the door. Kayla scoots toward me when the door bangs shut; she snatches up her juice cup

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and sucks before kneading my ear. The little pinch and roll of her fingers almost hurts, but it's her habit, so I swing her up in my arms and let her knead. Mam says she does it for comfort because she never breast-fed. *Poor Kayla*, Mam sighed every time. Leonie hated when Mam and Pop began calling her Kayla like me. *She has a name*, Leonie said, *and it's her daddy's*. *She look like a Kayla*, Mam said, but Leonie never called her that.

“Hey, Michaela baby,” Leonie says.

It's not until I'm standing in the door of the kitchen and see Leonie pulling a small white box out of one of the bags that I realize this is the first year Mam won't be making me a cake for my birthday, and then I feel guilty for realizing it so late in the day. Pop would make the meal, but I should have known that Mam couldn't. She's too sick with



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the cancer that came and left and returned, steady as the rising and sinking of the marsh water in the bayou with the moon.

“I got you a cake,” Leonie says, as if I’m too dumb to know what the box contains. She knows I’m not stupid. She said it herself once, when a teacher called her in to school to talk about my behavior, to tell Leonie: *He never speaks in class, but he’s still not paying attention.* The teacher said it in front of all the children, who were still sitting in their seats waiting to be dismissed for the buses. She assigned me to the frontmost desk in the classroom, the desk nearest the teacher’s, where every five minutes, she’d say, *Are you paying attention,* which inevitably interrupted whatever work I was doing and made it impossible to focus. I was ten then, and had already begun to see things that



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other kids didn't, like the way my teacher bit her fingernails raw, like the way she sometimes wore so much eye makeup to hide bruising from someone hitting her; I knew what that looked like because both Michael's and Leonie's faces sometimes looked that way after fights. It made me wonder if my teacher had her own Michael. On the day of the conference, Leonie hissed: *He ain't stupid. Jojo, let's go.* And I winced at the way she used *ain't* and the way she leaned in to the teacher without even knowing it, and the teacher blinked and stepped away from the latent violence coiled in Leonie's arm, running from her shoulder down to her elbow and to her fist.

Mam always made me red velvet birthday cake. She began when I was one. When I was four, I knew it well enough to ask for it: said *red cake* and pointed at the picture on



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the box on the shelf in the grocery store. The cake that Leonie brought is small, about the size of both of my fists together. Blue and pink pastel sprinkles litter the top of the cake, and on the side, two little blue shoes. Leonie sniffs, coughs into her bony forearm, and then pulls out a half gallon of the cheapest ice cream, the kind with a texture like cold gum.

“They didn’t have no more birthday cakes. The shoes is blue, so it fits.”

It’s not until she says it that I realize Leonie got her thirteen-year-old son a baby shower cake. I laugh but don’t feel nothing warm, no joy in me when I do it. A laugh that ain’t a laugh, and it’s so hard Kayla looks around and then at me like I’ve betrayed her. She starts crying.

* * *



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Usually, the singing is my favorite part of my birthday, because the candles make everything look gold, and they shine in Mam's and Pop's faces and make them look young as Leonie and Michael. Whenever they sing to me, they smile. I think it's Kayla's favorite part, too, because she sings stutteringly along. Kayla's making me hold her, because she cried and pushed at Leonie's collarbone and reached for me until Leonie frowned and held her out to me, said: "Here." But this year, the song is not my favorite part of my birthday because instead of being in the kitchen, we're all crowded into Mam's room, and Leonie's holding the cake like she held Kayla earlier, out and away from her chest, like she going to drop it. Mam's awake but doesn't really look awake, her eyes half open, unfocused, looking past me and Leonie and Kayla and Pop. Even



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though Mam's sweating, her skin looks pale and dry, like a muddy puddle dried to nothing after weeks of no rain in the summer. And there's a mosquito buzzing around my head, dipping into my ear, veering out, teasing to bite.

When the happy birthday song starts, it's only Leonie. She has a pretty voice, the kind of voice that sounds good singing low but sort of cracks on the high notes. Pop is not singing; he never sings. When I was younger, I didn't know because I'd have a whole family singing to me: Mam, Leonie, and Michael. But this year, when Mam can't sing because she's sick and Kayla makes up words to the melody and Michael's gone, I know Pop isn't singing because he's just moving his lips, lip-synching, and there's no noise coming out. Leonie's voice cracks on *dear Joseph*, and the light from the thirteen candles is orange. No



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one but Kayla looks young. Pop is standing too far out of the light. Mam's eyes have closed to slits in her chalky face, and Leonie's teeth look black at the seams. There's no happiness here.

"Happy birthday, Jojo," Pop says, but he's not looking at me when he says it. He's looking at Mam, at her hands loose and open at her sides. Palms up like something dead. I lean forward to blow out my candles, but the phone rings, and Leonie jumps, so the cake jumps with her. The flames waver and feel hotter under my chin. Pearls of wax drip onto the baby shoes. Leonie turns away from me with the cake, looking to the kitchen, to the phone on the counter.

"You going to let the boy blow out his candles, Leonie?" Pop asks.

"Might be Michael," Leonie says, and then there is no cake because Leonie's taken it with her to the



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kitchen, set it on the counter next to the black-corded phone. The flames are eating the wax. Kayla shrieks and throws her head back. So I follow Leonie into the kitchen, to my cake, and Kayla smiles. She's reaching for the fire. The mosquito that was in Mam's room has followed us, and he's buzzing around my head, talking about me like I'm a candle or a cake. *So warm and delicious.* I swat him away.

"Hello?" Leonie says.

I grab Kayla's arm and lean in to the flames. She struggles, transfixed.

"Yes."

I blow.

"Baby."

Half the candles gutter out.

"This week?"

The other half eating wax to the nub.

"You sure?"



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I blow again, and the cake goes dark. The mosquito lands on my head. *So scrumptious*, he says, and bites. I swat him, and my palm comes away smeared with blood. Kayla reaches.

“We’ll be there.”

Kayla has a handful of frosting, and her nose is running. Her blond afro curls high. She sticks her fingers in her mouth, and I wipe.

“Easy, baby. Easy.”

Michael is an animal on the other end of the telephone behind a fortress of concrete and bars, his voice traveling over miles of wire and listing, sun-bleached power poles. I know what he is saying, like the birds I hear honking and flying south in the winter, like any other animal. *I’m coming home.*

