



JOSHILYN

*New York Times* Bestselling Author of *gods in Alabama*

JACKSON

*A novel*

*a*  
grown-up  
kind of  
pretty

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## PROLOGUE

# Big

**M**y daughter, Liza, put her heart in a silver box and buried it under the willow tree in our backyard. Or as close to under that tree as she could anyway. The thick web of roots shunted her off to the side, to the place where the willow's long fingers trailed down. They swept back and forth across the troubled earth, helping Liza smooth away the dig marks.

It was foolish. There's no way to hide things underground in Mississippi. Our rich, wet soil turns every winter burial into a spring planting. Over the years Liza's heart, small and cold and broken as it was, grew into a host of secrets that could ruin us all and cost us Mosey, Liza's own little girl. I can't blame Liza, though. She was young and hurt, and she did the best she could.

And after all, I'm the damn fool who went and dug it up.

I should have known better; I was turning forty-five, and that meant it was a trouble year. Every fifteen years God flicks at us with one careless finger and we spin helplessly off into the darkness. I'd known that Old Testament-style plagues of Egypt would be stalking my family the second that December ticked over into January.

Now, I try not to be overly superstitious; I like black cats about as much as I like any other color cat, and I'll go straight under any number of ladders if you put the right kind of pie on the other side. But the hold the number fifteen has on my family, there's no natural explanation.

I was fifteen when I gave birth to Liza. Then, fifteen years later, Liza had her own girl. Not a hard pattern to catch on to. Liza and I had been prepping, in our separate ways, for this year ever since Mosey was four and kept holding hands with the same chubby blond boy at the park. I'd spent double for organic milk because I'd heard that the hormones in the regular stuff could make little girls bud early and jump-start their periods. Liza worked nights and I worked days, so one of us was always around to keep tabs on where Mosey was and who she was there with. Liza was vigilant for any hint that Mosey was walking in a bad direction, and Liza would know; when it came to mapping all the bad ways adolescent girls could go, Liza had been Magellan. And she was so strong-willed, I never could pull her back to some more reasonable path....

I remember taking Liza down to the beach when she was two, young enough to have forgotten she'd seen waves the summer before. She came to the ocean like it was a mystery. She sat by my towel on her fat bottom, made fatter by her damp Huggies, and she patty-caked the sand and stared at the blue-green water, mesmerized. I'd never seen Liza

sit so still, so long. After a couple hours, I packed up and told her it was time to go home. Her whole face went mulish. She stood up and braced her little legs against me, readying for a battle.

“Wannit,” she said.

“What do you want, Little?” I asked, and she pointed her baby finger right at the waves.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. She responded by digging her toes into the sand, and I could read savage kickings and the wailings of the damned in her face. I didn’t have anything inside me to match it.

I tried to misdirect, saying in cheery tones, “Aren’t you ready for snack time, Liza-Little? I’ve got pizza-flavored Goldfish crackers at home.”

She ignored the bribe and repeated “Wannit!”—demanding I pack up the water and the sand and the deep blue sky above with half a hundred seagulls and pelicans wheeling around and bring it home and put it in her room. I looked at the rigid set of her spine, her set jaw, and I was already so tired of the fight we were about to have. She was willing to die on this hill, on any old hill, and I wasn’t.

I told her she could have it. I gave the child the Gulf of Mexico, just like that, and then I picked her up and we stood looking at her ocean. After a minute I turned my back, and she shifted in my arms so she could still see. She rested her cheek against my shoulder, and I swayed back and forth to the rhythm of the surf. I stood that way for at least a half an hour, until she fell asleep. All the while the waves crept closer, as if the very tide were trying to appease her by coming in and packing itself up into my beach bag.

I know that some folks think Liza was so wild and willful because she didn’t have a daddy to speak of and her mother was a teenage dumb-ass. Maybe so. I admit she bent me like a weed to her wind, but I was a woman grown now, and no one could say I hadn’t done a good job raising Mosey. Mosey was a peach, right up until the trouble year came.

I was caught off guard, even though from the first minute of January all the way to June I had my eyes on the horizon, trying to see whatever might be coming for us. It never occurred to me I might be looking in all the wrong directions. I never thought to look under, never suspected we’d been living on a fault line for years.

Then summer came, and Liza had her stroke. I thought that was it. Surely losing most of my own daughter was enough to feed and silence even God. How could that not be all the trouble we were due, and more?

So I went digging, and what I unearthed would pull Liza down into the black of her own past, would lead Mosey so astray I wasn’t sure that I would ever find her, and would finally land me here: standing outside the glass wall of a fishbowl conference room full of lawyers and their legal books. Not a one of them was on my side. All I had was me, the truth, and an empty Dixie cup. I don’t think the lawyers cared a fig about the truth, so it was pretty much me and the cup.

I’d never before thought of “custody” as an ugly word. To me it meant that the police had the bad guys, so the streets were peaceful and the dark corners of the garden were safe. But today that good word had turned on me, gone purely ugly. Today it meant this cold-eyed crew was coming after Mosey.

I could have put an ad up on the Craigslist and tried to get one of my own: “Desperately seeking lawyer. Must like long walks on the beach, not getting paid, and losing.” I hear there’s a whole mess of lawyers just like that; they keep an office between Mermaid Cove and the Unicorn Forest.

I wished for Lawrence beside me. He’d been on the job, as cops say, for twenty-some years now; he ought to be able to stare down a few lawyers. He could make it their silence to break instead of mine. If Lawrence was with me, if he even knew I was here, he’d have my hand in his. I knew what he would tell me. That I should trade anything, surrender anything, sacrifice anything, but not let go of Mosey.

I knew better than any person breathing how much he’d given up for his own little boys; I was one of the things he’d given up.

I imagined his low-set rumble of a whisper in my ear, tried to hear him telling me that I could fight for Mosey, now, because he knew how hard I’d fought for Liza. But I knew better. He hadn’t been around when I fetched up pregnant. I never said boo. I was so scared I didn’t even tell my folks I was knocked up until I was almost through my fourth month. One night my mother gave me the fish eye after dinner and told me to skip dessert. She said I’d been eating like a trucker recently and I had a new thick-ness round my middle that she found unbecoming in a girl. That’s when my secret came blurting out.

The very next day, they carted me to a strange doctor a town away. They picked one with a Jewish name, thinking he would be pro-choice. After he examined me, with Momma in the room, Daddy joined us. They started asking him about “discreet options,” and all four of us knew what that meant. I sat there, naked under my cotton gown, my arms wrapped tight around Liza inside me. I looked at my own bare feet, and I let them ask. I didn’t say a word.

Lordy, but they had picked the wrong doctor. He asked them, in a deep, judgmental voice, if they had any idea just how far along I was. He showed them a picture of a five-month fetus, its kicky little feet, eyes squinched tight against the watery black around it. He added, in dark tones like a sorrowing Christ, “We’re way past routing out a blastula here, you know. If she really wants to terminate, you’ll have to take her to Louisiana. They do that sort of thing in New Orleans.” His tone made it clear he thought New Orleans was a den of godless, baby-killing vipers. My folks must have felt spanked up one side of their thin Baptist skins and down the other.

So they took me back home, and I never had to fight. If I’d been in my first trimester, I’d have had the abortion with no idea whether I wanted it or not. But I was halfway through, and I’d fallen in love with her.

Liza had quickened, which was the perfect word for what she felt like, popping back and forth inside me like a sea monkey. That’s how I pictured her, too. Not like the actual ones. I ordered the actual ones once, and they were only white, specky-size brine shrimp. One of mine got huge, like head-of-a-pin size. Then he ate all his brothers and swam around so swollen up and hateful that I finally flushed that fat old cannibal down the toilet. I pictured Liza more like the sea monkeys they showed in the ads, little smiley merpeople with crowns and friendly, waving hands. If I’d known her better then, I’d have pictured a sea monkey wielding a flaming sword.

But today my Liza wasn't in any physical shape to take on anyone. She was still trying like hell to fight her way back to using language and crossing the room without a walker. I was on my own.

The cool-eyed woman sitting in the center looked up and saw me through the glass wall. She was dressed in white and had a man on either side of her, both in sleek, dark suits. The three of them looked to me like an evil ice-cream sandwich, corpse-cold, waiting for me to walk in and begin. There was a cut-crystal pitcher of water on their side of the table and three matching tumblers sweating from the ice, each one set neat on a coaster to protect the dark cherry gloss on the table. My own cup was waxed paper, and it was sitting in my purse, bone-dry.

The woman's jacket was spotless. I can never wear white. I drip coffee down my boobs, first thing. She was older than me, but she looked my age, maybe younger. It wasn't like I was going gently into that good night either. I hid my strands of gray in highlights, moisturized like it was my religion, and I could still fit into my favorite Levi's. But she'd had a little work done, as they say. Good work. Not the obvious things like those actresses whose lips look like inflamed cat intestines, just her jawline was crepe-free and her eyes had that wide, lifted look. She had a couple of smile lines, but they were almost too shallow to mention; that may have been from a lifetime's underuse. The men on either side of her had set their foreheads into stern rumples, but hers looked like an egg. Nobody past fifty has a brow that smooth without Botox, especially not while saddling up to rough-ride and rule the law as if it were her own nasty-tempered pony.

I'd come here today to beg, to plead for them not to take Mosey. Fifteen was a hard year, and they'd be sending her to a place where no one knew she still woke up scared in thunderstorms. That she worried at her lower lip with her fingers when she was lying. That you couldn't make her talk by asking questions, but if you left her be and got real busy in the kitchen, she'd come boost herself up onto the counter and swing her feet and spill her guts. That her old one-eyed boo-bunny was hidden under her pillow and she slept with one hand stuffed under, clutching him.

If they took her from me, I didn't even know where she'd be going. I'd seen the worst-case scenario, though, and it was an apple gone wholly bad. There was no place to put your teeth where you wouldn't get a mouthful of a foul, grainy mash with worms in it. Pure poison. I wanted to ask them to leave Mosey be for her own sake, not mine, but I looked into those six cold eyes, now all staring me down through the glass wall, and I knew that it was fruitless. She was a pawn, here, not a person.

So the question was, would I let these corpse-cold bastards come after my granddaughter without a fight, without every bit of fight I ever had? I didn't see a way to win, so what did it matter if I kicked and flailed? You want the ocean? Have the ocean. You want my Mosey, this girl I helped Liza raise? Hell, I'd done most of the raising, truth be told and Liza being Liza. I'd taught Mosey the ABC song, tied her shoes a million times, been her Brownie troop leader. Last year I'd gotten up an hour early every day to try and figure out algebra with her. It was the worst grade she ever got, but we were both so proud of that C-plus we'd held hands and danced around the kitchen hooting and cheering when her report card came.

Standing outside that glass wall, I believed I had come to the awful end of everything. My family has long been familiar with that territory. Liza came across it at the Calvary High End-of-School Luau. Mosey, the day I hired Tyler Baines to take down the willow tree in our backyard.

But for me? It was standing at that window. I tried to preload my mouth with some fruitless begging, and the words stuck in my throat. I had this vision of Mosey in her best dress, the one with a thousand little flowers making up the print, standing on our front porch with all her things packed up in Liza's battered duffel. I saw it as she turned to me, felt it as she wrapped her skinny monkey arms around me, heard it as she whispered, "Bye, Big."

That's when I understood that what I did today was a message. Even if I lost, if Mosey was being driven away from the only home she remembered in a sleek official car, it would absolutely matter. She'd be alone, afraid, and with good reason; she had to know, know down to the bone, that I had fought like hell. That I would always stand with her and fight like hell. That the second after the sleek car pulled away, I'd be in my Malibu, seeing where she landed, sitting outside. Law or no law, she was mine.

I took a deep breath in, as painful and surprising as a baby's first. I straightened my spine and swallowed, though my mouth was paper-dry. I got the Dixie cup out of my bag, and I shoved my way through that door. I banged it down directly in front of them, like a flimsy barrier dividing the table. It made a scuffing noise against the wood, too soft to count as my first gunshot, but it was all I had.

I set it down between me and them, and I went to war.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Mosey

I never would have known about the other Mosey Slocumb if Tyler Baines hadn't brought his mullet head and a chain saw over to murder my mom's willow tree. I wouldn't have bet someone else's dollar that Tyler Baines, of all people, would be the one to discover her. Tyler Baines was not the discovery type. He was more the patchy-chin-pubes, tats, dirty-white-truck type. He was totally hooked on Red Man, too, so he spewed brown juice like a cricket everywhere he went. Last year my mom nicknamed him the Mighty Un-Butt Crack, because she said he was a single flash of ass plumage away from being the walking definition of redneck.

"It's like he wears mom jeans," she'd said, and I'd reached for a pencil. I'd been supposed to write down three examples of irony for freshman English, and Liza was barefoot in low-rise thrift-store Calvins that showed her silver belly ring, talking about Tyler Baines's mom jeans while he mowed our lawn. But I'd given it up before I dug out paper; I'd been exiled to Baptist school for more than half a year by then, long enough to know that Mrs. Rickett wouldn't like any irony example that involved thong underpants.

Tyler Baines was the last person on the planet my mom would have wanted laying hairy hands on her sacred willow. Before my mom had her brain event, I never even saw him have a conversation with her face. He talked lower, like he thought her boobs had microphones in them and if he aimed right he could order up a chili-dog combo.

For a couple of weeks after the brain event, my mom didn't talk at all. Now if she said one of her slurry words made mostly out of vowels when Tyler was around, he'd goggle at a spot past her good shoulder with his egg-size eyes, whites showing all the way around, and ask me or Big, "Liza says what, now?"

The morning he came to murder the willow seemed like any stupid Tuesday, with me at the breakfast table trying to eat civics facts and toast at the same time and Big scrambling eggs and stirring them into grits for my mom. Liza sat at our old butcher-block table staring at the faded pomegranates on the kitchen wallpaper like her mind was far, far away. So far that she couldn't quite get to it.

These days I liked to sit in Big's old chair, beside the half of Liza that looked like her, even though she sat too still. I felt guilty for picking to sit by the good half, like a magic monkey paw had read my wish for a more mommishy mom and it had broken Liza and left me this. Still, it was better than sitting by her right side, where her bottom lip hung a little slack and sometimes drooled and she kept her bad arm cuddled against her side like a hurt bird tucks his wing.

Big set the bowl of eggs and grits on the table, then picked up a spoon and wrapped my mom's good hand around it.

"Liza. Liza-Little? You see your breakfast?" Big said, and waited until Liza blinked and looked down, making her "yes" noise.

Big had fixed herself a plate, too, and she sat down still wearing Big-style flannel pj's that practically billowed around her teeny body. The clock said she ought to cram a slice of toast in her mouth and run to shimmy into her tweed skirt and bank blouse, which was the color of old mustard and had this vile, floppy bow at the neck.

I said, "You're not going in to work?"

"I took a half day off," Big said, not meeting my eyes, and I felt a nervous little serpent uncurling in my belly.

"Is this about the pool again?" Big'd had a pool guy out to the house last week, but he said that to fit a pool inside the backyard fence we had to take out Liza's willow. That should have ended it right there; the willow was sacred. All my mom's yearly pins from Narcotics Anonymous were pressed deep into its bark. She hung that tree with twinkle lights every year when she got a new one. Those pins were like a love carving that read "Liza + Sobriety" inside a puffy heart. Big should have been laughing at the very idea of taking it out, but instead her lips pursed up and she shushed at me, fast and quiet, darting a glance at Liza.

"Big, you can't—"

"Toast!" Big interrupted. "Put it in your gobhole, please."

Big took Mom's spoon and helped her eat another bite of grits and eggs, then wheeled her away into the den. That was wrong, too. Big always made Liza get in the walker after breakfast. I heard the TV go on, and then Big came back to get Liza's morning meds.

She talked soft while she opened each bottle and dropped the pills into a coffee cup. "Your mom didn't get any better until they started working with her in the water. That's when she started saying 'yes' and 'no,' and now she's got at least eight words I can make out. She hasn't added a word except for 'Mosey-baby' since she got home."

Math's my weakest subject, but even I could figure that Big plus a pool and WebMD didn't equal the team of physical therapists who worked with Liza while she was still in that aftercare place.

"It's almost fall. She'll hardly get to use it, even."

Big was heading into the den, but she paused long enough to grab Liza's juice cup and say, "We get a discount if we do it now. No one else is thinking about pools, and we'll get a good couple of weeks in before it's too cold. Don't fret. I got her NA pins out, and I put them in my jewelry box." Then she turned her back and left. Before the swinging doors had swooshed closed behind her, I'd whipped my cell phone out of my back pocket and was texting Roger.

911! Pool v/s willow. Big 4 pool.

I could hear the TV fellow with the poofy girl hair talking about weather, every word clear as the day he was promising. Big had the TV on twice as loud as normal. Almost immediately my phone vibrated in my hands.

Roger's text said, Tell Big tree = Jesus. I thought about that for a second. It was crap, but it

was crap that might work. Big was way serious about respecting other people's religions, even Baptists'. Mostly because it gave her the right to not have one.

I put the cell phone under the table and tucked it between my leg and the chair. I waited there until Big came back in to put the coffee cup in the sink. Before she could say a word, I said, "You can't take out that tree. It's her *religion*, Big."

Big cocked her head like a robin to fix me with one bright black eye. She said, "A tree isn't a religion. It's an object."

"She's a druid," I said.

Big made a scoff noise, but it sounded like she had to force it. "Liza the Lorax, she speaks for the trees. Spare me. She's only a druid because it gives her an excuse to be mystical and wear a lot of white." Big was so flustered she said it like Liza was still my whole mom, the one who knew that white made her black eyes shine and her pale skin glow gold. It made me flinch, because that mom was gone, and Big swallowed hard, like her throat hurt her. She blinked it away and said, "You sure are suddenly pro-druid this convenient morning, Mosey."

I flushed, busted. When I was little, watching Liza prance off into the woods wrapped in a sheet with a bedroll and a foster dog, I'd always wanted to go, too. She never let me, and I was dumb enough to believe she was out there being deep and spiritual, sacrificing heaps of apples and grapes to the pine trees. I'd followed her one time, wanting to know how to be deep and spiritual, too. I'd learned hella more about druidism than Big needed to know. I never told anyone, not even Roger, what I saw that day. I wasn't about to start now, when I was trying to use it to save the willow.

I said, "Yeah, it's retarded. But you wouldn't let some godless heathen slap ham and mustard on some Catholic guy's Communion bread." Big cocked her eyebrow at "godless heathen," but she was the one who let my mom exile me to Calvary to save me from my own predestined high-school sluthood. Too bad on her if she didn't like me picking up the lingo.

All she said was, "Don't say 'retarded' like that. It's not nice."

"Big, you know that tree helped make her well before!" That was too true for Big to smack down. Liza had been a clean and sober druid since I was a toddler. Before druidism Liza was a speed-freak atheist who bundled me up and ran away with me when I was only a couple of weeks old. She'd hitchhiked across the country, reading palms and washing dishes for cash, all with me strapped to her back like a papoose. Before *that* she'd been a high-school free-love pothead who got knocked up at fourteen.

I knew because she told me. I couldn't stop her from telling me, because she thought I should learn from her and Big's mistakes. She was a wreck on *my* fourteenth birthday. While I blew out my candles, Liza sat, arms crossed, looking at me from head to toe. "You've outgrown that T-shirt. It's too tight. You don't need to look a grown-up kind of pretty."

I snorted. Maybe the shirt was old, but all it showed was that some merciful fellow flatty in the Sears lingerie department had sold me a trainer with a little padding.

Liza leaned across the table, pushing her face closer to mine. "Just so you know, sex at

fourteen feels about as pleasant as a hard case of constipation. Don't you let a boy so much as round first base this year."

"Oh, my God, I'm not having sex," I said. I wished that my outgrown T-shirt had those words on the front. I'd wear it every day, so Big and my teachers and our neighbors and the kids at school would stop waiting for me to swell and pop into the shape of a porn star, new huge boobs ripping my top open, bleached-blond hair pouring off my skull in waves, slutting out like some whorey version of the Hulk.

Big picked up the knife and started slicing the cake, saying, "Hush it, Liza. It's her birthday dinner."

Liza passed me the first slice and said, "Yeah, and I lost my virginity less than a month after my fourteenth-birthday dinner, out on the track field at Pearl River High. I lay down in the long-jump trench with that asshole Carter Mac. He had a lubricated condom, which I cannot recommend putting on while kneeling in a sandpit, Mosey. That sand stuck to the—"

"Who wants ice cream?" Big interrupted, at about volume nine. I went ahead and started eating, because there was no stopping Liza when it was Story-with-a-Moral time. She'd even named me to keep my legs together: Mosey Slocumb, so I'd mosey real slow toward all the stuff you can't take back. Though sometimes I wondered if the real moral to her stories was that she was hella cooler than I'd ever be.

Liza said, "I went around for the next month thinking penises must be made out of emery board, and she needs to hear this, Big, if you want the girl to do any better than us. You had me when you were fifteen, too, so it's not like you spent your fourteenth year doing needlepoint and thinking about Jesus."

"Oh, my God, I'm not having any sex!" I hollered around a huge bite of cake.

Liza said, "Keep it that way," and Big said, "Time to open presents!"

It wasn't exactly a Very Brady Birthday, but it sucked a lot less than my fifteenth. That was almost three months ago, right after Liza came home from the stroke-rehab center. She slumped in her wheelchair at the kitchen table while Big sang the birthday song alone and off-key. Liza gummed at her cake like she didn't have teeth. Brown, suck-covered crumbs fell out of her mouth and stuck to her pajama top, until I wished I'd asked for anything but chocolate.

If Big really believed that a pool would get my mom back whole, she'd kill more than a tree to make it happen. She stepped toward me now, leaning down and talking low. "Medicaid is not going to pay for any more physical therapy, Mosey."

"Ask them again," I said. Under my thigh I felt my phone buzz as a text landed in it.

"I've spent two weeks' worth of lunch hours on hold, waiting so I can ask again and be told no again. I've filled out every form they've got. They won't pay." My mom was a bartender down at The Crow before her brain event, and bartenders don't get health insurance. Big'd taken a loan out on our house already, to pay some of the hospital bills and for Mrs. Lynch to come sit with Liza during the weekdays now that I was back in school.

The only good part of us being so broke was, Big couldn't pay my tuition at Calvary. I'd started my sophomore year taking the bus to Pearl River High, back with all the kids I'd gone to middle school with. I still had to leave the house in a knee-length skirt every day and change into jeans in the girls' room. Big worried there was enough of my mom left to

catch wise. At Calvary they called Pearl River a “hive of vice,” and that was the only thing a Baptist ever said that both Big and Liza believed wholeheartedly. Liza thought if I went to Pearl River High, I’d be stoned by the end of homeroom and pregnant before third period. Like she was. Homeschooling was out, because Big worked all day and Liza said all she could teach me was how to make a perfect dirty martini. The second that Big grudgingly admitted Calvary gave me a better shot at college, my mom had pulled a total coup and prepaid a year of tuition.

Under my leg my phone buzzed again. Roger, the only good thing I got out of that year at Cal, was texting up a storm.

“Maybe we can borrow a pool? Just please don’t take out the willow,” I said.

Big drew herself up as high as she could, which was only about five foot three, but I could see how her narrow shoulder bones braced. “Tyler’s coming to do it this morning. A willow tree can’t give me your mom back whole, not even if she prays to it.”

I thought it was more likely my mom would get so het up that a chunk of her brain would burst again and we’d lose the rest of her. But I didn’t say so. It was pointless to fuss when Big’s shoulders got all squared up like that.

“You’re gonna do what you’re gonna do,” I said, “but killing the willow is wrong. And it sucks. And it’s wrong.” Big didn’t unbend even an inch, so I pushed my breakfast away, and then I palmed my phone and stomped off to my room for my backpack. As soon as my door closed behind me, I flipped the phone open. Roger’s first text said, Willow > Pool? And the second said, R U DED?

I texted back, Sorry, Big fite. I am full of lose. Pool > Willow.

Meet me in ur tree house.

I texted, School, fool.

He sent back one word: Skip.

I looked at that word. I was tempted, but skipping was a Liza thing. I didn’t do Liza things. If I got caught, Big and probably half my teachers would go ahead and assume I was already failing out, smoking diet pills, and meeting senior boys in squads of ten behind the trailers. I thumbed in, Hellz 2 the no.

His reply came back so fast he must have had it pretyped in: I won’t let u get caught.

He didn’t understand, because skipping was super easy for Roger. He looked younger than he was because he was so short, and he had a great big head and round eyes like a bush baby. He said “yes, ma’am” and “no, sir” and held open doors for old ladies and passed out *Are You Truly Saved?* tracts in the park during Youth Week. Plus, he was a Knotwood, and his mom ran the Calvary Booster bake sales, and his dad owned a car dealership in Pascagoula. Teachers never watched him hard enough to catch him perpetrating evil.

I flipped my phone shut without answering. I grabbed my heavy pack, slung it on my shoulders, and walked through to the living room. Liza was slumped in her chair, pointed at the super-loud TV. Big sat in the center of the ancient sofa, her slight weight pulling the saggy cushions into a smile-shaped curve. With the two big front windows right behind her like eyes, it looked as though the whole damn living room was giving me a vile, gloaty

grin, watching me tuck my tail under and creep obediently away while Big killed the willow.

Big was barefoot but dressed now in her polyester-blend bankbot uniform. I guessed she planned to go to work after Tyler took the tree out, like it was a regular day.

I tried one last time, giving her my best pleading eyeballs. "Don't."

"You are going to miss your bus and end up with a tardy if you don't scoot," Big said. She was sure that would light a fire under me. I never got tardies. Just like I never hooked her beers or snuck out to meet boys or even turned in a paper late. Never.

My eyes went all narrow. "Oh, yeah. If I got a tardy, the earth would fall into the damn sun."

"Language!" Big said, but I was already stomping out the door. I paused for a tick on the stoop to let Big say, "Don't you slam the—" before I slammed the door and cut her off.

It felt really good. The sound rang in my ears, and my feet didn't seem to want to walk me to the bus stop. Instead, before I could think it through, I ran around the side of the house, through the wooden gate, and into the backyard. I sprinted as fast as I could, my heavy pack slamming me in the spine with every step, and got behind the big oak tree in the far corner.

I clambered up the wooden rails nailed to the oak tree's backside and poked my head through the hatch. Roger was already there, grinning because he'd heard me climbing up. He'd pulled the old pool-chair cushions out of the built-in toy trunk and made himself a nest. He spent a lot of his skip days tucked away high in my backyard, reading Ayn Rand and sending me smug texts about not having to dress out for gym.

"I didn't think you would do it," he said as I scrambled all the way in and shucked my pack.

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my ears, and I thought I might puke. I tried to sound cool, though, as I said, "Rats. I was about to text you to bring chips." I yanked my Baptist-costume skirt down over my knees, prim like.

Roger rummaged in the cushions beside him and pulled out a Big Grab of Cheetos.

"Who's your daddy? Say, say, say it," he chanted, and waited till I had rolled my eyes and said in the flattest voice possible, "Roger is my chip daddy, oh, yeah, holler," before he passed them.

I opened the top, but then I couldn't eat even one. My throat felt like it had screwed itself closed.

"OMG, what am I doing?" I said.

Roger said, "The right thing. When your mom sees that tree is gone, you need to be here."

The oak was in the back left corner, so huge that Liza used to worry its roots would warp our fence and let one of her foster dogs out. The tree house had a big cutout window that gave me a good view of the willow, growing smack in the middle of our yard.

There was another window aimed back toward my house. The oak was so tall I could see a good piece of the road and a couple of our neighbors' houses. The oak's leaves were turning red and gold, but they were still on, and I didn't think anyone would see us peering out. Even so, my hands were shaking and my palms were leaking clammy sweat.

"I'm going to get caught. And then I will puke. And then I will be dead because Big will kill me," I told Roger.

"Don't think about it," he said, totally at ease. He reached for my backpack and unzipped it, pulling out my civics book. "Here, study while we wait."

I opened it and tried to concentrate. Most times I found it real soothing to put facts away in tidy bundles in my brain so I could unpack them all out onto a test and then get it back two days later with an A or at least a B on it, sometimes with a "*Good job, Mosey!*" note. I was a regular on the dean's list, but the exclamation point always looked surprised to me.

I heard a car coming, and I dropped the book and craned out the front window to see if it was the Mighty Un-Butt Crack's truck.

"Excellent studying," said Roger. "You should eat the relevant pages. Seems like you'd get more of the test material in you that way."

It was only the Wheatons' station wagon with those vile fake oak panels on the sides. If I left now and sprinted the woods track, I could catch the bus on Marlin Street, down farther on its route. Tyler might not show for hours, if he even came today. Big hired him because he worked cheap, he had his own tools, and he knew how to do all the stuff most families had husbands and dads to do. He'd snaked out our clogged toilet, built my tree house from a Home Depot kit, tarred our roof, and put a new battery in Big's old Malibu, but he came when he came.

"Chill," Roger said. "You are not going to get caught. I already made you this, in case you showed." He pulled a sheet of folded paper out of his back pocket. I opened it and read, "Sorry, Jean, *about* Mosey's tardy, but she had a doc appointment and so please write her a pass." He'd already signed it "Virginia Slocumb," in blue pen. The handwriting was super close to Big's, but the best part was how it said things exactly like the real Big would.

I blinked at him. "I sometimes wonder what the world would be like if you ever decided to use your powers for good."

Roger shrugged, like real rueful. "It's a tragedy for Earth, I tell you."

That almost made me smile. If he hadn't been with me, I would have cracked and run for the bus by now. Roger had been my only friend at Calvary. He still was, even though I was at Pearl River High now. It was like that year in Baptist exile had made me lose my place. The girl who'd been my best friend since kindergarten, Briony Hutchins, had come back from her summer in Nevada twenty pounds lighter, except in the boobs. She'd also straightened her hair and found poisonously beautiful cheekbones. She sat between Kelli Gutton and Barbie Macloud now, the two of them turned in toward her like she was the Tome of Gorgeous and they were the prettiest pair of bookends available, whispering about hair-tossing techniques and being way too good for me.

"Keep studying," he said. "I'll watch."

I shook my head. I put the book and Roger's note in my backpack and then hesitated. I felt like my lungs were slowly filling up with beach sand, so I could only get oxygen in smaller and smaller sips. My palms leaked sweat. I gave in and rummaged down to the bottom until my hand found the two-pack of dollar-store pregnancy tests tucked under my pink Trapper Keeper. I pulled them out and waved the box at him. "I need to go pee."

"Love a duck," he said. "Again? Really?"

"I need to," I said, and he rolled his eyes. He knew that the hawtest sex action I'd ever seen was when Dougie Breck and I touched tongues on a dare in sixth grade. "Whistle if you see Tyler's truck?"

"You're such a 'tard," he said, but that meant he would.

I got one of the tests out and tucked it down into my bra. Lord knows my bra didn't have much else in it to speak of, so it might as well make itself useful. I peered through the foliage, but I didn't see any of our neighbors out, and Big and Liza were likely still in the den, where the windows pointed at the street. I shimmied down the back of the oak and skimmed over the fence to the woods behind our house as fast as I could. Big took me to Girl Scouts when I was little, so I knew to watch for poison oak and ivy when I left the trail. I found a good spot behind some bushes. I got the test out and said a quick thanks heavenward that Roger had beat me to the tree house, so I hadn't changed into my jeans. The skirt made it so much easier.

I squatted down over the stick, and even before I started peeing on it, I felt more air getting down into me, like my squeezed-shut insides were untwisting, even though I already knew the test would come out negative. That was kind of the point, to hold this solid piece of plastic proof that I wasn't going to turn out like Liza and kill Big in the heart. I yanked my underpants back up and sat on a log with the stick beside me. A minute passed, two, three, and I sat watching while the pink line that told me the test was working properly formed, real bright and obvious. Beside it, the window that would get a pink line if I was pregnant stayed blank and white, the way it always did. It was perfect and clear, and the leaves and dirt and trees around me got fuzzy and out of focus, and I looked only at that pure white window.

I don't know how long I sat staring at the test stick with the morning air tasting real clean and sweet to me. I sat until I heard a quick, sharp whistle, and then my heart leaped up and started trying to jam itself into my throat, undoing every bit of good the pee had done. Roger's whistle came again, but I still took thirty seconds and dug a hole and dropped the test down it and covered it. Big didn't come out to the woods hardly ever, but if she caught me with a preggo test, she'd crap herself. Then she'd murder me before she even paused to change her pants.

I hightailed it back to the fence, popped quick as I could over it again, and scrambled up the tree.

Roger said, "There."

I turned to crane out the window. Sure enough, Tyler's filthy white truck had already pulled up and parked on the street, parallel with the back gate.

"Crap, crap, crap!" I said.

Tyler got out in his mom jeans and a green tee with the sleeves rolled up to show off his fifty million arm tats. He did his Tyler Baines slouch walk around to the truck bed and pulled out this enormous chain saw.

"Should we at least try to stop him?" I whispered.

Roger shook his head. "That guy looks like he would eat his own children."

We shut up then as Tyler passed by us on the way to the willow. He yanked at the chain saw's cord, and it roared to life.

I should have run down right then and handcuffed my arms around the willow. I should have sent Roger to set Tyler's truck on fire to distract him. But I didn't think of any of those things. I sat, dumb and unmoving, and watched while Tyler swung the saw forward. It bit into the willow's trunk with this vile, harsh grinding, and I sat there, like I couldn't quite believe it. The saw roared so loud I felt the buzz of it in my teeth. I knew I should do something, but I kept looking at the back door. Part of me thought Liza would rise up and come roaring out herself again, all smitey and alive, magically cured to save this tree. The back door stayed closed, though. The TV was on so loud that Liza might not realize for days that her willow was gone, if her brain wasn't too effed up to even notice, and I was missing my civics test.

Tyler's saw bit at it from one side, then the other, rattling my eyes in my sockets. The old Liza would have known how to make him stop, but I wasn't like her. I sat there and let it happen. Finally the tree tipped slowly and went over with a crash, and the chain saw stopped.

It was so quiet then, it felt like the whole world was holding its breath. I blinked, shaking my head in a little "no" shake, back and forth, so small it was like trembling. Tyler began hacking the willow up and carting off the chunks of it, businesslike and fast. It took a couple of hours, and we sat and watched, and Liza didn't come. Finally Tyler opened the fence gate wide and backed his truck up into the yard to winch out the stump.

He attached the chains and revved his engines and yanked the very heart of the willow right out of the ground. The sound of those old roots ripping as it pulled loose was a tinfoil bite of a noise. It made me and Roger both clap our hands over our ears. The stump came out and got dragged, trailing its torn roots like guts as the truck lurched forward.

Tyler stopped then and got out and came back to look at the jagged hole. The willow's stump lay on the grass like a dead sea creature, wrenched out of its proper home and flopped up on the shore. He started to turn away, then paused and scratched at his head, staring down into the tangly mess of dirt and thready roots. He took two steps closer, then squatted like a caveman. From my perch up high, I could see something gleaming silver from the side wall of the hole, almost at the bottom. Tyler let himself down into the hole and dug at the earth around whatever was lodged there. He pulled and worked at it until he got it out.

It was a dirty silver box, like a miniature treasure chest. Some of the dirt fell away as he clambered out with it, and I could see that the back of the box had pink metal hinges shaped like daisies.

Roger pointed at me, eyebrows lifting, like asking if the little trunk was mine. I shook my head no. He whipped out his iPhone and texted to me, Backyard pirates?

I texted back, MayB. Weird.

We both leaned forward, peering down, hoping Tyler would open the box.

Tyler set it down on the ground, and then he squatted and pried it open. He had to work at it, like the box was latched or stuck shut. He got it, though, and then he pulled out what looked like a rotty stuffed duck, tiny and deflated, so old that the yellow of his cloth body had browned out in big patches.

Tyler gave the duck a shake, and even from all the way up in the tree I heard it chime.

The old bell sounded off-key and weirdly sad, like a noise in a movie that tells you something bad is coming.

Roger made a bored, blowing noise and whispered, "Some kid's box," but I wasn't bored. I felt all at once hyper and alert, like under my skull a pair of inside ears had pricked up.

I found myself reaching for Roger's hand and grabbing it, tight. Roger gave me a WTF look. He had this unspoken rule that I didn't stuff myself into his same beanbag chair or sling my arms around him and be all snuggly-touchy like I used to with Briony. He didn't want me that close to him. Not unless I meant it in a way I didn't feel about him.

When he saw my face, he left his hand in mine, mouthing, *What?* at me. I was like a dog on point, leaning forward, and Roger craned to look out the window, too, puzzled enough to be interested again.

Tyler set the duck aside and picked something else out of the box. Something small and strangely curved, cream-colored under the dirt. He turned it around and around like a raccoon washing something, and as he spun it, the dirt fell away. He reached down and picked up another one just like it. I couldn't make out what they were, not at all, not until he held the two pieces together. When I saw the way they fit, saw the shape and how they hooked on the ends, I gasped. Roger did, too. Then he clutched my hand back, very hard. We looked at each other, and his big eyes were as round and green as crab apples.

We looked back down, and Tyler's mouth had gaped open wide enough to let drool fall out. We knew what he was holding. It was small, too small to be a grown-up's, but I've watched about fifty million *CSI* and *Bones* reruns with Big. It was a teeny jawbone.

Roger breathed out, "Is that from a person?"

Tyler bent down again and picked out a piece of faded pink fabric, streaked with slimy brown. It hung like a rag in his hands, and I saw that it was a ruffly baby dress, and that's when Roger and I heard the sound, this horrible moaning wail. Tyler dropped the dress, and Roger and I both jumped. It sounded like someone tiny and damned had been in the darkness under Liza's tree, and Tyler had yanked its sleeping ghost into the sun. I screamed a short sound like a bark and clutched at Roger's hand so hard I felt his own bones grind.

But the noise wasn't coming from a ghost. It was coming from my house. The back door slammed open, and my mom came stumping and wailing into the yard on her walker. Big was right with her, saying urgent things no one could hear. My mom unleashed a noise that held every bit of hell she had left in her, and I squeezed Roger's hand so, so tight, so tight. My mom sucked in a desperate whoop of air, and then a new wail came. I thought it was because of the tree, but she wasn't looking at the tree.

The wail changed and became shaped, words made mostly from vowels. My mom was screaming words at Tyler. He stood there staring with that tiny, awful jawbone still in his hand. My mother said a thing over and over, a thing no one but me and Big, who'd listened to Liza for almost four months now since the stroke, could possibly understand. It was a garble, but after the third time I could make it out, what she was screaming, and it made no sense.

My mom let go of the walker, like she was trying to run at him, and her bad leg gave out, and she went down still screaming those crazy words with poor Big trying to catch her.

“What the what?” Roger asked.

“She says that it’s her baby. She says the bones are her baby.” I ground Roger’s fingers to paste, and he clamped down, grinding mine right back, because it sounded so impossible.

My mom’s good leg kicked at the ground, like she was trying to swim to Tyler and take the little curve of bone away from him. Big fell to her knees, reaching for Liza, white and shocked and weeping. Liza kicked and stretched her arm toward Tyler, straining toward the dress and the bone, demanding her baby, over and over, and it made no sense, no sense at all, because my mom had only ever had one baby, and that baby was me.

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