

GREEN SKIN AND GRASS FOR HAIR

THE HOUSE AT the end of the street is full of bad air.

That's what the señoras always told us. They stuck their fingers in our faces and warned us not to get too close. They said it wasn't right that the shutters on the windows remained closed, even after rainstorms when the air was so thick it would rest on your skin and stick in the back of your throat. They said that the house had been cursed by the woman who once lived there. She hadn't always been bad, the señoras said, but her husband's constant neglect had left her hollow and wicked.

According to the old ladies, no one had ever trusted that man: he was white and a scientist. He was never in church. He walked the streets in the rain. He'd leave Old San Juan for weeks at a time and go out to the forests around Rincón, where he'd tear the legs off frogs, dissect live snakes to see their hearts beat out, or do whatever else it was that scientists did.

While he was gone, his wife was confined to the house.

She spent her days behind the three-foot-thick plaster walls tending to the plants in the courtyard and caring for the scientist's prized macaw. Everyone in town hated that bird. It never shut up. Every morning, it would jump onto one particular limb of a banyan tree and let out its ungodly screeches while its green and red feathers flickered like a pinwheel in the sun. Whenever someone walked by, the bird would slowly cock its head to an absurd angle, stare silently for a second or two, and then begin clucking blasphemous phrases, reciting lines from Borges stories, and singing songs nobody had ever heard before.

When I asked the señoras which lines from which Borges stories the gringo scientist taught his bird, they said they didn't know. It wasn't important. They curled their lips and asked why I would care about such a thing.

What *was* important, the señoras stressed with wags of their wrinkled fingers, was that the scientist was a very, very bad man. Somehow, somewhere, he'd lost all the beauty in his life, and that—that *loss*—was what caused him to rob his wife of all the beauty in hers. Everyone knew a Puerto Rican woman needed sun and wind and ocean water. But the scientist didn't care. He treated his wife like a creature under glass. He treated her like . . . the señoras always paused here for a moment . . . un espécimen.

That's how life was for the woman who lived in the house at the end of Calle Sol until one summer, during which five hurricanes ravaged the island, battering the coastlines and

tossing around telephone poles, a summer during which the scientist had again disappeared to the forests near Rincón to do whatever it was a scientist did. That was the summer things began to break apart.

The cracks in the exterior plaster walls came first, thick and meandering like the veins in an old woman's legs. Then the concrete of the sidewalk in front of the courtyard split, causing a mighty fissure a foot and a half wide. Aphids took over the garden. The macaw, perched up on its banyan tree, would spend hours plucking out his red and green feathers, letting them fall into the street one by one.

The woman's spirit was crumbling. And, as if out of sympathy, the house and the garden and the bird began to crumble along with her.

Around this same time, the people of Old San Juan all started having the same nightmare about a green-skinned little girl who would stand in front of them and throw stones at their faces. After waking from fitful sleeps, they suffered further by having to listen to that *tonto* bird curse and croak out songs all day long. For months, they never had any peace. Then, one night in early December, the little green-skinned girl stopped haunting everyone's dreams. The following morning the scientist came home from Rincón to find his wife and his bird gone. The woman had taken nothing and left a curse. The bird's green and red feathers were scattered across the house. Only the plants in the courtyard remained.

That was the day the man closed all the shutters and

never opened them again, and that was the day all the birds in Old San Juan stopped flying over the house. They knew better than to get their wings tangled up in curses.

Over the years, my friends and I came up with our own stories about the house at the end of Calle Sol. Rico said the scientist's wife died after giving birth. She'd been in labor for five days, and after her husband held her green-skinned baby girl up to her face, she mumbled some prayers up to the saints. Then she kicked the bucket.

Ruben had a better version. He claimed the woman had been so upset by the fact that her husband was never around that she'd thrown herself off the highest of the stone walls of the massive old fort known as El Morro. It happened in the middle of the day, as dozens of people were out steering their kites through the wide blue sky. The last thing anyone saw was the woman's long black hair and the thin white fabric of her dress as she took a running leap. When the kite-flyers rushed over, expecting to see her broken body on the ledge many feet below, all they saw was a hibiscus bush with a single flower the color of fruit punch.

Carlos said he didn't know what happened to that *pinche* woman. All he knew was that every single one of the street cats knew better than to walk in front of that *pinche* house. Once, however, a tiny kitten, its eyes barely open, got separated from its mother and found itself alone on the sidewalk in front of the courtyard. The kitten mewed and mewed all night. The next morning someone found it curled up into a

ball, dead from chewing on a leaf that had fallen from the one of the tall bushes.

“Everybody knows,” Carlos claimed, “that the plants in that courtyard are full of poison. If you touch them, they’ll make your nightmares come true. Then you’ll burn with fever. Then you’ll die.”

I thought the kitten story was bullshit. There are thousands of cats prowling around Old San Juan, and they could die for any number of reasons. The kitten could’ve been born sick and cast away by its mother. It could’ve had rabies. It could’ve eaten some of the chicken scraps Señor Guzmán mixes with glass and leaves out on the street in small piles to try to kill the ferals.

The summer I turned eleven, while we were sitting on a pier watching the cruise ships go by in the twilight, was when Rico claimed the scientist who’d lived in the house at the end of the street had a daughter and that she still lived there. He’d seen her. She was a little girl with green skin and grass for hair. He said he’d even talked to her. She’d told him she was a witch who could grant wishes.

We ran from the pier to my room at the hotel as fast as we could to scribble our wishes on the stationery the housekeepers kept stocked on my nightstand. It took Ruben the longest to figure out what his wish would be, but I knew mine right away. I wanted to lift the curse from the house, so that birds would fly over it again and the woman with the long dark hair would come home and throw open her shutters.

Once Ruben finally decided that his wish would be for his dead dog Pepé to come back to life, we folded our wishes in half, sprinted down to the end of Calle Sol, and tossed those wishes over the courtyard wall. The paper fluttered into the bad air and disappeared.

While my friends raced each other back to the pier, I stayed. I waited in front of the house to see if a bird would fly over and to listen for the sound of a woman crying. Nothing happened. And, as far as I know, none of our wishes ever came true.

One summer soon after, the stories stopped. Of course, the house at the end of Calle Sol was still there, still crumbling. The broken sidewalk had never been fixed. The blue paint was still chipped and faded, and the tops of plants still waved over the courtyard walls, trying to tempt me, but my friends and I had gotten too old to care about wishes, curses, and green-skinned little girls.

That's because there were other girls—*real* girls—whose bodies we could press against the walls of buildings in alleyways late at night. Up close, their skin smelled like warm, wet sand, and their mouths tasted like coconut water. They wore the thinnest cotton dresses with the tiniest straps we could slip off their shoulders, and their long dark hair was always curled from all the moisture in the air.

I was kissing one of those girls when the witch who grants wishes first threw stones at my face.

PART ONE

THE
DISAPPEARED
GIRLS



ONE

I MET MARISOL on a Sunday night, two days before her body washed up on Condado Beach. We were sitting across from one another in a field near El Morro drinking rum from a bottle I'd lifted from the hotel. She was one of Ruben's cousins, and he was there, too, along with Rico, Carlos, and some girls they all knew from school.

This is how things typically went: A girl would come over and run her fingertips across the back of my hand or the top of my knee. She'd look at me, her eyelids heavy, and say something about how her older brother or her uncle would kill me if they knew that she was hanging out with me. She'd mention my blond hair, my dad, and how she and the other locals didn't know whether or not he was saving their island or ruining it. She'd give me some version of some lesson she learned from her cousin in New York or Chicago or wherever about how white guys really know what it meant to treat a girl the way she deserves to be treated.

Eventually, I'd take her by the hand and lead her either into one of the narrow alleys between the Spanish-style buildings or down to the footpaths outside of El Morro near the ancient mangrove trees that reminded me of the gray ghosts of giants. In the attempt to convince her that I was cultured and interesting, I'd tell this girl about all the places I'd traveled and sights I'd seen. I'd tuck the stray hairs that fell in her face behind her ear. I'd be gentle, my touch featherlight. I'd look her in the eye and ask permission to kiss her.

She'd always say yes.

Marisol was different, though. She didn't mention anything about my blond hair or developer dad. She did come and sit by me, but after telling me her name, she said she remembered me from last summer, when she and Ruth—a giggling girl who was currently pawing at Rico—saw me at a party. She asked if I remembered her. I told her I did even though I didn't. Which was a shame. I should've. Marisol had a generous, loud laugh, a distinctive heart-shaped face, and straight, waist-length coffee-colored hair, the shade of which almost exactly matched her eyes.

She shifted onto her knees and nervously plucked at a blade of grass.

"I was hoping you'd come back," she said.

My head was already swirling from the rum, and I was only half listening. The way Marisol was sitting caused her butter-yellow dress to ride up high on her thighs. I wanted to reach out and touch the place where hem met skin.

“Let’s take a walk,” I suggested.

We snuck away and stumbled down a steep path that would lead us closer to the water. We faced a murky expanse of sea. Behind us was a section of the original walls of the city, built hundreds of years ago to protect San Juan from invaders. Forty feet up and on the other side of that wall was the dark and silent courtyard belonging to the house at the end of Calle Sol.

This spot was a favorite of mine, quiet and isolated. I could stand there for hours and wonder if I had the nerve to jump into that inky water and start swimming. When my arms got tired, I’d float. I sometimes couldn’t imagine anything better than being alone in the ocean, carried along by the currents, with my arms out wide and the light from the moon and the sun bathing my face.

I never told any of the girls about my dreams of floating in the ocean. I also never mentioned how I always wondered if the wish on a scrap of paper I’d tossed into that nearby courtyard five summers ago was still up there, waiting to be granted.

“I grew up in Ponce.”

Marisol’s voice startled me, and I turned. She was leaning against the stone wall. Her fingers were lifted to her throat, where she was twirling a gold charm. It glinted twice in the moonlight. The rest of her was in shadow.

“My mom moved me and my little sister out here last May. I don’t know if Ruben told you that or not.” She shrugged. “I like it here, I guess.”

Marisol dropped her charm as I approached her. I put my hand on her waist and felt the soft flesh under her dress give into my slight pressure. With my free hand, I brushed a strand of her hair away from her face and then ran my fingertips over one of the straps of her dress.

“So,” I whispered, “you’ve been waiting for me?”

Marisol didn’t even let the last word leave my lips before she grabbed the sides of my face and pulled my mouth to hers. Our rum-soaked lips collided and slid against each other’s. Her hands were frantic and everywhere: in my hair, on my stomach, up the front of my T-shirt. I gasped as she raked her nails across the skin of my chest. When I threw my hands to the wall behind her to brace myself, she pressed her hips into mine and ran her teeth along the edge of my jaw.

I reeled back, needing a second to catch my breath.

Marisol’s dark eyes were shimmering from the liquor and the moonlight, but I only caught a glimpse of them before she came crashing down on me again.

It was only seconds later, as I was grasping for the hem of Marisol’s dress, when I felt something small and sharp run across my cheek. I thought it was one of Marisol’s nails, until I realized her fingers were tugging at my belt loops. Something else pelted me on the shoulder, another on the top of my head.

I made the mistake of glancing up and was struck twice in quick succession, once in the center of my forehead and

then again in the tender spot between my eyebrow and eye. Marisol shrieked and dodged away. I ducked and covered my head just as several tiny pellets showered down on me.

And then, everything was quiet. I knelt down, picked up a couple of the projectiles from around my feet, and rolled them around in my palm. They were stones, rough-edged and the size of small marbles.

I hurled them back up to their source and shouted. “Hey!” The stones came up short and rattled back down the wall. “Who’s up there?”

I craned my head and was just able to make out the dark shapes of leaves swaying against a dark sky. Behind those leaves was something else, shadowed and stationary. There was a rustling noise, but that could’ve been from anything: the wind, a bird, a cat chasing a bird.

“That house is cursed,” Marisol said, her voice slurred.

I lowered my gaze and gaped at her. She was still leaning against the stones. A strap of her dress had slipped down and was hanging loosely around her upper arm. Much of her dark hair had fallen like a curtain in front her face, and neither of us made an effort to sweep it back.

“That house is *cursed*,” she said louder, as if I didn’t hear her the first time. “That’s what everyone says. Didn’t you know that?” She swayed to the side and let out a short burst of laughter.

Again, I peered up to the top of the wall. It was the same

as before, as it always had been, dark objects against a dark sky, leaves and branches bending in the breeze. I shivered as an unexpected rash of goose bumps rippled up my arms.

“Come on.” I extended my hand to Marisol. “Let’s go.”

“You’re bleeding,” Marisol replied, pointing at my forehead. “Like, a lot.”

I swiped at my eyebrow, and sure enough, my trembling fingers came away slick. I wiped them off on my jeans and snatched Marisol’s hand.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Cuts like these always look worse than they actually are.” There was a wobble in my voice; I hoped she didn’t notice.

I could feel the blood from the cut trailing down the middle of my face and dripping from the tip of my nose, and going up the steep steps while drunk was giving me the spins. Once Marisol and I got back to the field, I could just make out Rico in the near distance, acting the carefree clown as usual, trying to dance to nonexistent music and continuously toppling over. Everyone was laughing, except for Carlos, who was sprawled out on the grass, snoring with his mouth wide open.

When we got close enough for Ruben to see my face, he sneered and asked what I’d done to make Marisol sock me. I rolled my eyes and Marisol erupted into a fit of giggles. Neither of us mentioned the rain of stones.

I drank more rum as the night went on. I acted as if Rico’s antics were the most hilarious thing I’d ever seen and that

Marisol's attention was all I'd ever need. I acted this way because I didn't want to let on how I couldn't stop thinking about that one dark shape I'd seen on top of that courtyard wall, the one I didn't mention to Marisol, the one that didn't sway like the leaves but that seemed focused solely on me and was poised in a motionless crouch, ready for a reason to jump.

TWO

“ROUGH NIGHT?”

My dad was talking at me from behind the pages of the morning’s *El Nuevo Día*. It wasn’t even seven o’clock, but he was already up and dressed for what my mom used to refer to as the “island life.” His outfit consisted of a white linen suit, a light blue dress shirt, and tan boat shoes. His graying hair was slicked back with pomade. His wide-brimmed hat was balanced on his knee. He thought he looked debonair. I thought the only thing missing from the picture was a cigar and a mountain of cocaine on the table in front of him. Behind his back, my friends would snicker and refer to him as *el patrón* or, when they were feeling particularly brutal, *el conquistador*.

Aside from the tourists who came in on cruise ships, no man in Puerto Rico ever dressed for the “island life” like my dad did. Some of the older men wore *guayaberas*, those cotton, button-down shirts with the pocket patches running

down the front, and most had wide-brimmed hats, though theirs probably didn't cost close to a thousand dollars. I just wore jeans or cargo shorts, white V-neck T-shirts, and flip-flops or Converse. My friends wore more or less the same. Unlike my dad, I didn't dress to impress; I dressed to avoid being drenched in sweat immediately upon stepping out the hotel doors.

Not that I'd be stepping out the hotel doors anytime soon. I wouldn't have even dragged my ass out of bed this bright morning had it not been for mine and my dad's "standing breakfast."

The rum from the night before had become a painful fog in my head. I remembered that Jorge, the night doorman, had dragged me by my armpits up to my second-floor room, where I'd passed out and dreamed of a little girl with green skin standing in front of me, throwing stones at my face. The stones kept hitting louder and louder. Eventually I realized there were no stones. It was morning, and someone from the front desk was pounding on the door because I hadn't answered my wake-up call. I finally peeled my eyes open enough to see that I was face down on the floor in front of my bed, fully clothed, having managed to remove only one of my shoes before passing out. The phone was ringing in such a loud, high pitch I was tempted to yank it out of the wall and hurl it across the room. But before I could do that, I'd run to the bathroom and puked.

So yeah, it had been a rough night.

The waiter came by and sat a plate of watery scrambled eggs in front of me, and I nearly puked again right there. I had to look up, away from my food, to the tops of the palm trees rustling over the open-air courtyard. Their motion against the blue sky was soothing.

“Juan,” I heard my dad say to the waiter, “how long ago did you brew this coffee?”

“Just before you came in, señor,” Juan replied. “As we usually do.”

“It doesn’t taste very fresh. Please brew another pot.”

The waiter shuffled away mumbling a half-hearted apology. My dad abandoned the first question he asked me—because the answer was obvious—and shot me another.

“Have you thought any more about where you want to do your college visits?”

I hadn’t. He knew I hadn’t. We both had a common understanding that so long as I didn’t prove myself totally incompetent, upon graduation from wherever I went, where I would get whatever GPA, I’d be handed a position at my dad’s firm in Houston, quickly rise through the ranks, and be able to spend my summers out here in the Antilles. I wanted a shack on some remote beach where I could spend my days alone. Very infrequently, I would leave my shack, drive around the island with my assistant, and say things like, “Build a resort there. Make sure the decor is chic and modern. Make sure it’s eco-conscious. People love that kind of thing these days.”

Ignoring my dad, I looked back to my plate, picked up a slice of cantaloupe, nibbled the flesh, and then tossed it back down.

“Lucas.”

My dad had placed his folded paper across his empty plate. This meant it was time for him to impart some of his precious wisdom upon me.

“What happened to your face?”

My face. Right. I reached up, felt around gingerly with the pads of my fingers, and winced at a sore spot just above my eye. I remembered more of last night: the stones, the shape perched at the top of the wall. I took a sip of water; it had a metallic tang.

“I fell near El Morro,” I replied, poorly covering up a gag.

My dad sighed. “I’m all for you having a good time with your friends, Lucas, but let’s try to bring it down a notch.” A fly buzzed around his head, probably attracted by the sweet smell of his pomade. “Jorge told me about you coming home at three-thirty in the morning, tripping over your own feet and ranting about some girl who cursed you.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “I don’t know what it is you do all night long, aside from hang out with local kids and get drunk on *my* rum, but I’m warning you about getting into personal relationships with island girls, if you understand what I’m saying.”

Oh, I understood what he was saying. And if I’d had a clearer head, what I said next might never have left my lips.

“Mom was an ‘island girl.’ You got into a ‘personal relationship’ with her.”

My dad responded in slow motion. First, he set his porcelain coffee cup back on its saucer. Then he placed the saucer on the glass top of the table. Leaning back in his seat, he fingered the brim of his hat as he decided what to say. He could tell me to watch my smart mouth. He could laugh and say *touché*. He could brush it off, blaming my hangover. Or he could change the subject to one less off limits.

“I’m looking out for you.” He grimaced as he pinched a minuscule piece of lint from his hat. “I only wish that someone would’ve cared enough to give me that same bit of advice before it was too late.”

While my dad took his hat off his knee and rose to standing, I tried to not interpret his remark as him regretting my very existence. He pulled his mirrored Ray-Ban aviators from his jacket pocket and slid them on before checking his reflection in the glass of the table and giving himself a satisfied smirk.

El patrón.

“I’m going to Rincón tomorrow,” he said. “I’ll be gone for the night and most of the next day. I’ll leave the address with the front desk before I go if you decide you want to take a car and meet me. I know you’ve always liked it out there, though I still can’t understand why.”

Rincón was less than a hundred miles from San Juan, but seemingly another world. To me, it was beautiful just

as it was, all trees and big, big waves. My dad thought differently, though. To him, Rincón was some indigent fishing village where mainland hippies went to surf and get high. He couldn't wait to build a hotel out there and help give the town a "touch of class," as he liked to say. It didn't hurt that he'd make a fortune in the process.

My dad and I, like the scientist at the end of Calle Sol, are gringos. And just like no one ever trusted the scientist, no one trusted us. Every summer since I was ten, the two of us would come to San Juan from Houston and stay at this luxury hotel that his company had converted from an old convent. Every morning of every summer, after reading his newspaper, drinking his coffee, and eating his pan dulce and melon, my dad would get into the backseat of a big black car and be gone until sundown—out looking for other old buildings to convert to hotels or the perfect place on the beach on which to build from scratch. I'd spend my time roaming around the hotel by myself and playing out in the streets with the three Old San Juan kids who would give me the time of day. It was from those kids' abuelas, mamás, and tías that I learned all of my stories about the island. They told me their stories, but they never trusted me. They smiled but never really meant it. Their whispers and suspicious stares always broke my heart.

My dad was making his way to the other side of the courtyard just as Juan brought a fresh urn of coffee. Leave it to Michael Knight to complain, make a demand, and forget he did either.

“Sorry about that,” I muttered with a pained smile. “But I’ll take some, please. And hey, Juan?” He cocked his eyebrow but didn’t look at me as he continued pouring the coffee. “Do you know if someone recently moved into the old house at the very end of Calle Sol?”

Juan did a strange thing: he laughed. It started as a chuckle but quickly shifted into a full-on, open-mouthed, head-tipped-to-the-sky guffaw. Then he turned and walked away, shaking his head and wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes.

I downed my cup of black coffee as quickly as I could and left the table without touching any more of my breakfast. Up in my room, I managed to get both of my shoes off before collapsing on top of the covers. If I dreamed of anything, I couldn’t remember what it was.

That night, Marisol’s head was in my lap while my fingers explored the cool strands of her long hair. We were in Ruben’s bedroom with the group from the night before, half watching some American reality dating show because it was the only thing coming in on the antenna.

Ruben was downing can after lukewarm can of Medalla and shouting insults at the television. On a tattered loveseat on the other side of the room, Rico was feeling up Marisol’s friend Ruth.

“I’m sorry about what happened last night,” Marisol said

before taking a sip from a straw that was plunged deep into a glass Coke bottle. “I had *way* too much to drink. I hope I didn’t say anything too embarrassing. If I did, just pretend it didn’t happen.”

I smiled. She really was pretty; I hadn’t really noticed the night before. Her eyes weren’t purely coffee-brown after all. They were flecked with green and hazel, which gave them a wild quality.

A gold charm in the shape of the letter *M* rested between her collarbones, where her skin was slick with sweat. It was hot in Ruben’s house even though the sun had set and even with the creaky ceiling fan whipping above our heads at full speed.

“Mari!” Ruben cried out, pointing at the television. “You can be honest with me since we’re family and all. Tell me. What is it with this guy? He looks like he and Lucas could be brothers. What is it about skinny blond white guys that make all the girls line up, huh?”

“Don’t answer that, Marisol,” I said.

“I don’t see a line of girls here for Lucas,” Marisol replied before taking another sip of Coke.

Ruben grunted and took a pull from his beer can. “You haven’t been around for long enough then. They line up.”

“We should take a walk,” I suggested to Marisol. “You want to take a walk?”

She narrowed her eyes at me and then craned her head

to shoot a worried glance at the hot tangle of limbs that was Ruth and Rico.

“They’ll be fine,” I said. “We won’t be gone long.”

The old town was mostly deserted. Once outside of Ruben’s house, I steered Marisol into a nearby alley off San José Street, gripped a fistful of the fabric of her floral-print sundress, and pulled her close. Again, and without the rum swimming in our heads, we kissed. When my lips left her mouth and traveled down her throat to land between her collarbones, where the little gold *M* settled against her skin, I felt her tremble. She whispered in my ear how much she was hoping to see me again and then plunged her hands into my hair.

It was later, as we walked together through the empty streets, that Marisol told me about her dream of moving to America once she finished high school. She was even considering dropping out. Her goal was either to open a café or play French horn for a symphony somewhere. She’d never played French horn before, she said, but she was convinced she could learn. It had been her favorite instrument ever since she found out it was the Wolf in *Peter and the Wolf*.

She asked me what Texas was like and if I’d been to any of the big cities like Los Angeles and New York. I told her I had, but when I said I thought they were too big, too noisy, and too full of people, she seemed disappointed.

“Ruben was right, you know,” she said, hooking her pinky

finger with mine. “I haven’t been around San Juan very long. My mom and I and my sister Celia moved up from Ponce just over a year ago.” She’d said that last night, almost word-for-word, but I didn’t remind her of it. “I like it here better. There’s more to do. The rest of my family’s here, and my mom has a better job.”

We turned onto Calle Sol. In the middle of a large circle of light cast by a street lamp, an orange cat was grooming himself on the sidewalk.

Marisol saw it and smiled a close-mouthed smile.

“Celia wants to take home every cat she sees. Even though they all hiss when she runs up to them, she calls them her babies. Are you taking me back to the same place you took me last night? By the water?” She paused, but not long enough for me to get a word in. “It’s not that it matters. I just can’t be out as late as I was last night. My mom’ll kill me. She’s been worried ever since that American girl went missing over in Condado . . . Sara Something.”

“Fikes,” I replied.

According to the news, sixteen-year-old Sara Fikes went out a couple of nights ago to take pictures of the sunset and never made it back to the beachfront hotel room where she was staying with her parents. When the police began searching for her the next morning, they found her flip-flops and her Nikon placed neatly on the sand half a mile down the coast, as if she’d set them there before going out for a quick swim.

“Where’s *your* mom?” Marisol asked. “All I ever hear

anyone talk about is your dad. Did you know they call him el patrón?”

Yes, I knew that.

“Does el patrón have una patrona?” she urged.

“My mom’s not around.” I paused. “I haven’t seen her in years.”

“En serio?” Marisol clasped my hand and forced me to stop. “I’m sorry, Lucas. If I had known that, I wouldn’t have asked. No one told me.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I forced the side of my mouth up into a half-smile. “It is what it is, I guess. She’s been gone for so long, I barely remember her.”

That wasn’t quite true, but I wished it were. My mood tended to sour when I talked about my mom, which isn’t what I wanted to happen while I was with Marisol. She was different than I was: full of optimism and hope and brightness.

We walked on. For a while it was so quiet, I could hear Mari’s sundress swish around her legs. I had the sense she thought that by bringing up my mom she’d tread unknowingly into a minefield and was searching for a way to retrace her steps. Eventually, she stopped. Her gaze had landed on something down the dark street, and I watched as a small smile spread across her face.

“What?” I asked.

Marisol pointed to the scientist’s house. I’d brought us straight to it without even realizing it.

“The other day my grandma told me that house is cursed,” she said, again repeating herself from last night. “It was some stupid story that another old lady at the market told her—about how anyone who goes into the house never comes out and that maybe the man who lives there eats them or something.”

I laughed. “*Eats* them?”

“Yes, eats them.” Marisol nodded soberly. “He puts them in a big pot with carrots, onions, and potatoes, and lets them simmer overnight. Have you not heard that?”

“I haven’t heard *that*,” I said. “But I heard that the house was cursed, yeah.”

I told Mari the señoras’ story about the scientist who kept his wife trapped with his bird and his plants, and also about how when we were kids my friends and I would make up our own stories.

“Rico said that a witch lived there and if you wrote a wish on a piece of paper and threw it to her, she would grant it.”

“Did you throw a wish?” Marisol asked. I tried to hide the truth but the strained expression on my face apparently gave me away. “You did!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands. “I know you did. What did you wish for?”

I shook my head. “I can’t tell you. Only the witch knows.”

Marisol let out a cry of mock-outrage just as the orange tom behind us expelled a guttural screech. I turned just in time to see it zip down a nearby alley.

Marisol released her hand from mine and ran over to the

wall of the scientist's courtyard. She picked at a flake of loose plaster with her fingernail and peered up at the tips of the leaves.

"This is where the stones came down from last night, right? I remember that! *Someone* has to be there or else all these plants would die. Come on, Lucas." She reached down to slip off her sandals. "Give me a boost. We'll solve the mystery, and then we'll get to tell all the old ladies what the *true* true story is. If I don't come back, just tell them I was eaten. They'll understand."

I was impressed. As long as I'd been coming to the island neither me nor any of my friends had ever thought of actually going *into* the scientist's house. It had always been a place people judged from far away and made up stories about, not a place they would ever willingly enter.

"That wall is three feet taller than you," I said, offering up the most rational response—one that didn't involve poison or witches or curses. "Even if I gave you a boost, there's no way you'd ever get back over."

"There might be a ladder or something on the other side." She stood on the balls of her feet and stretched her arms up to the sky. As much as she was willing herself to be a giant, it wasn't happening. "A little help, por favor."

"You *just* said something about not wanting your mom to worry about you and now you want to jump into a house that's cursed." Marisol ignored me and started taking little two-footed leaps into the air. She still came up very short.

“You look ridiculous, by the way. Whatever you’re trying to do isn’t working.”

Marisol let out a burst of laughter and finally stepped away from the wall. As she put her sandals back on, one of the straps of her dress fell off her shoulder. I stepped closer and lifted it back in place.

For a moment, the tips of my fingers lingered against her warm skin. They traced the curve of her shoulder up to her throat. She leaned in, brushing her lips across my ear.

“Paper,” she whispered.

I jerked back. She was grinning. It was a devilish expression, made even more devilish by the mixed light from the moon and the orange-tinted street lamps.

“Do you? Have any? *Pay-per*?” she asked. “I want to make a wish. You can’t object to that. It’s something you’ve done yourself.”

“When I was a kid, yeah.”

She shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. Do you have paper or not?”

I dug into my pockets and pulled out a quarter, a couple of crumpled receipts, and the folded piece of hotel stationery on which my dad had scribbled the name and address of the place he’d be staying in Rincón. He’d written the information just under the embossed logo he was so proud of, a blood-red palm tree, and the name, Hotel St. Lucia.

Marisol snatched the piece of stationery from my hand and began to dig through her small, tooled leather purse. She

pulled out a pen with a squeal of triumph, placed my dad's note on her knee, and scribbled her wish on the back. She then wadded the paper up into a ball and pitched it over the wall.

“Do you want to know what I wished for?” she asked, twirling toward me.

“Yes, but don't tell me.”

“That's okay.” Marisol gripped my hand and started to lead me back down Calle Sol in the direction of Ruben's house. “Only the witch knows now.”

THREE

AFTER HAVING A tense, chat-free breakfast with my dad bright and early the next morning, I went down to a jewelry shop in the touristy section of San Juan and bought Mari a charm for her necklace: a dime-sized head of a wolf, cast in pewter, in honor of her dream of playing French horn. The plan was to give it to her when I returned from Rincón in a couple of days.

Back in my room, I was lying on my bed flipping mindlessly through the channels when I landed on the news and the familiar headshot of Sara Fikes. The press apparently had only one picture of her, and they showed it something like seven times every thirty minutes, along with the phone number they'd set up for tips. In the photo, Sara was wearing a bright red jersey and holding a volleyball in the crook of her arm. Her long, board-straight dark hair was neatly swept over one shoulder. Her smile was toothy, forced-looking, like she'd been holding it too long and her jaw was getting sore.

“Police have expanded their search to include Santurce and some of the other outlying districts,” the television buzzed. “Meanwhile, Fikes’s parents vow to not return to Florida until their daughter has returned safely.”

Puerto Rican girls went missing all the time, and their faces were rarely on the news. The señoras referred to them as desaparecidas, the disappeared girls, and their stories always made the señoras cry when they told them. The desaparecidas were just ordinary girls who vanished from their beds or when they were walking home at night. The police did little to find them, and mostly assumed them to be run-aways. Despite their families’ desperate pleas to God and the hundreds of votive candles lit in their honor, none of the girls were ever seen again—unless it was by Señora Gaona, who everyone said had gone loca after her third stroke. She sold fruit down at the Plaza de Mercado, and she swore that one night, years ago when she was going home from her daughter’s house near Condado Beach, she saw a teenage girl standing on the sidewalk, looking like she’d walked straight out of the ocean. Her hair was wet. Her feet and ankles were speckled with dried sand. Señora Gaona claimed she called out to the girl, asked her where she lived, but the girl didn’t answer. She told the girl to stay right there, that she was going for help, but by the time she’d come back with her son-in-law, the girl was gone.

I’ve heard Señora Gaona tell the story about the night she found the disappeared girl at least a dozen times. Each time,

she'd look up to the sky, her eyes sparkling with tears, and recall how the air that night smelled of cinnamon and salt water.

My dad was also convinced that the desaparecidas were runaways, but no matter what he or the police said, I believed the señoras. I never thought their stories were just stories. And while Señora Goaona seemed a little batty, she never struck me as a full-blown liar.

Sara Fikes's disappearance, however, was a different story. Since she was from the mainland, the cavalry got called in, and the police were doing "everything in their power" to reunite her with her parents.

I couldn't help but think, though, that the thing with the camera was strange. She'd really just set it down and walked barefoot into the water? And the last photo she'd taken—what was it of?

I must've dozed off, because the next thing I remember is waking up with the remote in my hand and the lights, the television, and all my clothes still on. My stomach hissed. It was 2:00 p.m., time for lunch.

I swung my legs off the bed, and something on the ground caught my eye. One of the staff had slipped a piece of hotel stationery under my door while I was asleep. I crouched down to pick it up and saw three distinct sets of handwriting.

The first belonged to my dad: *Hotel de las Palomas, 24 Via San Angelica, Rincón*. When I turned the paper over,

I noticed a scrawl of blue pen that must have belonged to Marisol: *I wish*. But whatever it was she'd wished for was illegible, crossed out by a series of heavy black lines. The third set of writing was in an unfamiliar, perfect cursive:

Sorry, Lucas, it read. This is one I just can't grant.

FOUR

I STUDIED THE web of creases spread across the piece of paper. Whoever had crossed out Mari's wish had pressed down into the paper hard enough to create indentations. They hadn't just wanted to erase her wish; they'd wanted to obliterate it.

On television, the newscasters were talking about the weather.

"Better hunker down," they were saying. "Storms are coming."

I picked up the phone on my nightstand and with shaky fingers dialed Marisol's number. Her grandmother answered. "Mari no está!" she yelled into the receiver. "She's probably with Ruth. My Mari is too good to be hanging out with that girl. She never asks about my health. She has bad manners."

As I hung up, someone knocked on my door.

"Lucas! You up?"

It was Carlos, his voice muffled through wood.

I shoved the note into my back pocket and went over to open the door. In one fluid motion, Carlos plowed right past me, undid the buttons of his porter's uniform, kicked off his shiny leather shoes, and collapsed onto my unmade bed. Then he grabbed the remote from the nightstand and started to flip through the channels.

"Sorry if I woke you," he said.

I loved Carlos like a brother, but his timing couldn't have been worse. All I wanted to do was find Marisol and figure out who crossed out her wish. I couldn't shake the image from my head of a little girl with green skin and grass for hair, sitting in the courtyard of the house at the end of Calle Sol, sucking on leaves, waiting on wishes to land in her lap.

"No you're not," I replied, closing the door.

"You're right, I'm not." He spread out his limbs, creating an *X* across the mattress. "Ay, this bed!" Carlos's eyes closed in rapture. "Lucas, you have no idea how good you've got it."

Earlier in the summer, Carlos had asked me if I could get him a job at the hotel. He said he'd do anything: wash dishes, clean toilets, get down on both knees and kiss the tourists' butts. All he wanted was to save enough money to get a one-way ticket off the island so he wouldn't end up like his dad, working as a waiter out on the cruise ships for the rest of his life. A part of me hated seeing one of my best friends scurrying around the hotel in his bright white porter's uniform and

squeaky black shoes, saying *yes, sir* and *no, sir*, carrying suitcases up and down staircases and catering to every ridiculous request of every ridiculous guest, but he didn't seem to mind it. He was the only one of our group who had a regular job, and every once in a while he'd celebrate his gainful employment by buying us all salt cod fritters and soda from the street vendors down by the pier.

"You on a break or what?"

My voice had an edge to it, but Carlos either didn't notice or didn't care. He took one of my pillows and shoved it under his head.

"No. I'm done. I worked the early shift. I'm telling you, this place is loco. You would not believe the shit that goes on down here."

"You didn't run into anyone that was looking for me, did you?"

"Nah." Carlos turned onto his side so that he was facing me. He pushed his pomaded hair back into place and grinned like a little kid with a big secret. "But get this. This woman calls the desk this morning asking for towels, right? So I go down to housekeeping, get four of the whitest, fluffiest towels for this woman's white, fluffy ass, and I go knock on the door. She answers—I swear to you—naked." He paused, I assumed to allow me time to draw up a mental image. "No clothes."

Carlos rolled onto his back and put his hand over his brow

as if the memory was in the process of undoing him. “Madre de Dios!” he cried out to the ceiling, “I will remember the shape of that woman’s beautiful breasts until the day I die.”

I couldn’t help but crack a smile. “So what, she just took the towels and thanked you like it was no big deal? Did she at least give you a tip?”

“My friend, what she gave me . . .” Carlos closed his eyes and tapped his temple twice. “What she gave me is something you can’t measure in dollars and cents. But, hey.” He sat up and checked the clock on the nightstand. He seemed far too full of energy to have just come off a ten-hour shift. “It’s early enough that we can make it to the market before Señora Mendoza runs out of pan dulce and then go to the beach before the sun goes down. What do you say?”

As he leaned over to lace back up his butt-kissing shoes, I faltered.

“Are you coming or what?” Carlos asked. He jumped to standing and fiercely rubbed the palms of his hands together like a person does if he’s either standing over a fire or hatching some magnificent plan. “After what happened this morning, I’ve got a good feeling about the rest of the day. Quesitos and coffee on me.”

With so much raw hope shining from his eyes, it was impossible for me to refuse.

We shared a cab the five miles from Old San Juan to the Mercado. Once there, I followed close behind Carlos as he

shouldered his way through the large crowd. Our destination was a tiny blue pushcart with a frayed giant yellow beach umbrella that sat among dozens of other fruit and vegetable stands. From the look of sheer determination on his face, you'd think Carlos was after a long-lost love rather than an eighty year-old woman selling pastries. He was convinced that Señora Mendoza, who got up at four o'clock every morning to crank up her gas oven, whip together her cheese filling, roll out layer after layer of pastry dough, and then push her cart down the street to the market, was proof that God existed and had designed our stomachs to be filled with sweets.

We were waiting in another line for coffee, our hands and mouths dusted with powdered sugar from the quesitos, when I turned at the sound of someone calling my name. It was Ruben. He was squeezing through the crowd in our direction, holding several shopping bags with one hand. In his other hand he was grasping the palm of a little girl—obviously Celia, given her resemblance to Marisol. Her dark brown hair was pulled up into two symmetrical pigtails, and she was wearing a sepia-toned sundress. As the two approached, I could see the little girl's cinnamon eyes burning with impatience. She was a shifty one, scoping out the corners of the market as if trying to find an exit. Ruben was sweating through his white T-shirt and seemed thoroughly miserable.

“Didn't expect to see you here,” Carlos said before taking

the first bite of his second quesito and releasing a puff of white powder around his cheeks.

“Where’d you get that?” the little girl asked Carlos. “Ruben, can I . . . ?”

Ruben gripped the girl’s hand until she squealed.

“I’m stuck with Celia *all day*,” Ruben griped. “Mamá y Tía went down to Ponce. Marisol was supposed to watch her, but no one knows where she went off to.” He lifted his forearm to wipe back the short chunks of sweaty hair that were stuck to his forehead. “I was thinking she might have been with you, Luke.”

“No,” I replied. “I haven’t seen her since last night.”

“We were going to the beach,” Carlos said. “Why don’t you two come?”

Ruben shook his head. “Celia can’t swim. She’s afraid of the water.”

“Ruben, shut up!” Celia hissed.

“Es la verdad!” Ruben exclaimed. He knelt down in front of his little cousin and whispered to her in Spanish too rapid for me to understand.

“We can take turns,” I offered. “I don’t mind watching her on the beach while you guys swim. Celia and I can hunt for shells or something. We’ll dig up a present for her sister.”

Ruben swiveled his head and sized me up for a second.

“Won’t that be fun, Celia?” he asked, his enthusiasm obviously faked.

Celia didn’t respond. She’d gotten distracted by a woman

and her black-and-white cattle dog performing tricks for change in the middle of the square.

“So,” Carlos said, “what are we waiting for?”

Just like in the hotel, I hesitated. The combination of the note stuffed in my pocket and not being able to get ahold of Marisol was making me more and more anxious. But I also didn’t want to come across as some possessive creep demanding to know every single move of a girl I’d just met. Ruben didn’t seem worried, just pissed that he’d been saddled with Celia. *Mari’s fine*, I told myself. *She’s with Ruth*.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Before it gets too late.”

We made our way through the more run-down neighborhood of Santurce and passed underneath a highway before hitting Avenida Ashford, the busy, upscale street where all the luxury beachfront high-rise hotels sat. During that time, Carlos told Ruben the story about the lady with the towels, going so far as to silently act the parts that he felt would be inappropriate for a seven year-old to hear. At one point Ruben was laughing so hard he had to stop and set down his bags in order to collect himself.

Once the beach was in sight, I hoisted Celia up onto my shoulders, where she gripped my chin with her chubby fingers. I twisted my head up to see her eagle eyes focused on the shore.

“There’s something wrong!” Celia shouted. She released one of her hands and pointed in the direction of the beach. “There are ambulances near the water. I can see their lights.”

Carlos, Ruben, and I shared a glance. All three of us were thinking the same thing. Someone had gone out for a late-night or early-morning swim and had fallen victim to the currents. That happened sometimes, maybe once every couple of years, but usually when the weather was much worse, causing the sea to tumble like a furious machine.

Today the sky was clear and bright, almost a postcard-perfect shade of azure.

We skirted around the side of one of the hotels and got as close to the shore as we could. Access to the beach, however, was blocked by police tape. Small crowds of locals had formed; word of mouth had worked in its typical swift and efficient way. Beyond the crowd and closer to the water, the lights of squad cars and the ambulances silently flashed. Several television reporters stood at the ready in front of their cameramen with microphones in hand. From the balconies of their sea-facing rooms, tourists pressed against the railing. Somewhere not too far away, a dog was barking.

As we merged with the rest of the onlookers, I heard some of them murmuring, praying, speculating. I lowered Celia from my shoulders, and her feet sank into the sand.

Ruben stood up on his toe-tips and raised his chin, trying to peer over the shoulders and between the heads of the people who had gotten there before us. None of us could see much.

“We can try La Andalusia,” Carlos suggested, pointing

to the barely visible white shell of a high-rise with torn and faded red awnings several hundred meters down the beach. “We can probably get a better view from there. Less people.”

“Forget it,” I replied. “We’re not taking a little girl to a condemned hotel. We should probably get out of here anyway. This isn’t really the place for . . .”

“The girl from Florida!” A man wearing khaki shorts and a white T-shirt with underarms stained with in sweat came trotting up the beach in our direction. His face was sunburned, his eyes red and rheumy.

“Hey!” A woman in mirrored sunglasses and a police badge clipped to the waist of her gray slacks stomped in the man’s direction. Her black hair was lacquered down onto her scalp and pulled back into bun so severe that it looked more like punishment than a style; her lips were painted a bold shade of matte red.

I ducked my head, hoping the woman wouldn’t notice me. It was Mara Lopez. The last time I’d seen her was a year ago, on a night I’d rather forget. She was dressed differently then, in a beat cop uniform rather than in plainclothes.

The sunburned man glanced briefly over his shoulder at the woman and then went on. “The search dogs found her. She was almost completely buried in the sand.” He stopped to catch his breath and dab his face with a red and white bandanna that he’d pulled from his back pocket. Whispers of *po-brecita* passed through the crowd.

“Move on, señor!” Mara Lopez roared, dodging the reporter who’d just materialized to shove a microphone in her face. “This is a crime scene. Leave it to the professionals.”

“Está muerta?” someone shouted from the crowd.

“Let’s go, Celia,” Ruben commanded, picking up the bags he’d set down and grabbing his cousin by the arm.

“Sí,” the red-faced man lamented with a sad, slow nod. “She was probably in the water for a long time.”

“Move it!” Mara Lopez issued her command in English and again in Spanish. “We’re trying to do our jobs here.” Despite my efforts to hide, her eyes landed on mine. I saw myself—a doubled, distorted reflection—in the lenses of her glasses.

I looked away and noticed that Celia had crouched down and wedged herself between the legs of the people standing in front of us. All ten of her fingers were resting on the police tape, and she’d gone as still as a mountain, her eyes fixed on a cluster of people I assumed were more detectives near the edge of the water. They were examining something at their feet.

“Celia, now!” Ruben demanded.

“Let’s go.” I picked up Celia, and once in my arms, she wound her legs around my torso and clutched my shoulders. I followed Ruben and Carlos as they wedged themselves through the growing crowd. Together we made our way silently back up to the Avenida.

Eventually, Ruben broke the silence awkwardly: “I forgot eggs.”

“We’ll have to go back to the market,” he added. “Rico’s coming over to the house later. You guys can come, too.”

The last part of his sentence was nearly drowned out as a cop car hurtled around the corner and screamed past us in the direction of the beach.

“Do you have a sister, Lucas?” Celia asked, as I unwound her limbs from around my body and set her down.

“No. Why?”

Celia didn’t get the chance to answer because Ruben took her by the hand and dragged her back toward the market. She did, however, look over her shoulder and wave.

Carlos and I waited until they’d crossed the street and disappeared from sight before hailing a cab to take us back to the old city. During the ride, we both stared out our windows and watched the same line of gray clouds descending from the eastern sky.

“I guess we forgot to tell you. La Lopez got promoted,” Carlos eventually said. “She’s a detective now.”

Last summer, when she was just a beat cop, Mara Lopez—nicknamed La Lopez by the neighborhood kids—hailed me in for underage drinking and drunk and disorderly conduct. According to her, some viejo down on Calle Vecinto called in a tip claiming that a group of kids, included el chico rico (the rich kid: me) were down on the pier, acting all borracho, smashing beer bottles and scaring las turistas.

Most of that was true—though, to my credit, I think the bottle smashing was dramatic flair on the part of the old

man—but that doesn't make up for the fact that Rico and Ruben and everyone else on that pier who was stumbling drunk had been sent off with nothing more than a stern warning. I, however, had been hauled down to the San Juan jail by La Lopez herself, where I'd spent the rest of the night in cell with a man in a grease-stained mechanic's uniform who snored like a broken furnace and smelled like rum and bird shit. The next morning, my dad, dressed to the nines as always, came down to pay a "fine" I assumed was generous enough to wipe the charge from my record.

"You need to get a handle on your boy," then Officer Lopez had warned as we were leaving the station, "before he does something he can't buy his way out of."

"*You* need to get a handle on how to run your department," my dad had shot back. "Maybe you should try focusing on bringing in real criminals rather than kids who aren't guilty of anything aside from a momentary lapse in judgment."

But I'd been guilty of more than that, my dad had told me in the car on the way home. I'd been guilty of being the one white kid in a group of otherwise nonwhite kids. According to him, Mara Lopez was just like all the others. Puerto Rico was full of women like her, he said—women with icypick stares who hated the whites and always blamed them for ruining their island and liked to mete out punishment like it was their divine right.

I remember wishing he'd just shut up. He was ranting,

and I had a headache. The car was filled with the spice-musk scent of his Burberry cologne. He'd put on too much this morning, and I was choking on it. The car was also full of his sense of entitlement, which stunk worse than his cologne. At one point, I remember wondering which was worse: being stuck in a town car with my dad or having been stuck in a jail cell with a snoring, stinking mechanic.

What my dad didn't get was that Mara Lopez hated me not because I was white but because I was spoiled. I sometimes hated myself for the same reason.

FIVE

THE SUMMER I turned twelve, a daughter of one of the hotel maids taught me how to kiss. She was older than me, maybe fourteen, but she seemed much older by the way she dressed—in short jean shorts and cropped tank tops—and by the things she said. Nothing ever impressed her, and everything was lame.

For a reason I never figured out, she'd chosen to take me on as a project. Every day for a week she would sneak into my room during the hot hours of the afternoon and sit me down cross-legged on the floor at the foot of my bed. I'd listen carefully to her instructions. She'd point to the hollow between her collarbones and tell me to kiss her there first; she'd point to her bottom lip and tell me to kiss her there next. She'd take my hands and put them on each of her round, smooth shoulders, and she'd tell me to move my fingers up and down her throat. I did exactly as she said. She'd give me

tips: slower, less pressure, more pressure, more movement. Sometimes she'd talk about all the other boys she'd let kiss and touch her and she'd compare what I was doing to what they'd done before.

"You're not the best," she once told me. "But you're not the worst either."

She was the first girl to make me hungry and desperate to the point that I would stare up at the ceiling and fantasize about her at night. More than anything I wanted her to think that I was an enthusiastic and capable learner, ready for anything. But mostly she just seemed bored.

One day she came to my room and didn't want to start kissing right away. First, she asked if I'd heard the story of the young nun. I told her I hadn't. She asked if I knew that before this hotel was a hotel, it was a convent. I told her everybody knew that. She asked if I knew that the very room we were sitting in, the room I'd stayed in every year for as long as I could remember had, hundreds of years ago, belonged to a nun who had died.

"The story es muy triste," the girl said.

According to her, the nun was young, around fifteen, and the day before she'd entered the convent, she'd fallen in love with the local butcher's son. Once a week, after saying her morning prayers and washing the floors of the convent with a potato sack, she would sneak out and give the butcher's son letters she'd written in the margins of pages she'd torn

from her Bible. At night, after all the nuns were asleep, the butcher's son would jump the walls of the convent and slide his responses under her door.

"They were the best, most romantic love letters you could imagine," the girl said dreamily. "They were about him wanting to lie in bed next to her and run the tips of his fingers across her lips and her neck and stomach and hips. She wrote to him saying that thoughts of them being together and touching each other kept her awake at night. She told him her body was on fire. She begged him to find a way for them to run away to Mayagüez or Ponce, to some place where nobody knew them and they could be together."

"Have you seen the notes?" I remember asking.

I wanted the story to be over so I could put my hands and mouth on the girl's salty skin.

"Of course I haven't seen them." She looked at me like I was an idiot. "How could I've seen them? This happened *way* before I was even born."

According to the girl, the young nun kept the butcher's son's letters folded in the fabric of her habit, so she could pretend that the papers pressing against her bare skin were his hands, but one evening, as she walked across the courtyard on her way to vespers, several of the letters fell out and scattered across the ground. A few blew away in the wind; others landed in the fountain and turned to mush, but an older nun snatched one out of the air. She turned that letter in to the abbess, who was mortified. As punishment, the

young nun was locked in her room—*this very* room, the girl who taught me to kiss said—without any food and just a small cup of water. She was told to come out only when she'd purged herself of all desire and was convinced that she was pure of heart.

Two days passed, then five. As they walked by her door, none of the other nuns ever heard their sister calling out to them. They expected those calls; they expected that after many prayers and with knees bruised and sore, that the young nun's heart would've been stripped of all affection for the butcher's son.

After a week, the abbess, with all the other nuns stacked behind her, finally unlocked and opened the door. They found the young nun dead on her bed, her green-gray skin a stark contrast to the now black blood that had spilled from her wrists and dried into her sheets. Scattered around her were the letters from the butcher's son that hadn't blown away, along with loose pages from her Bible. The nuns gasped. Some dropped into dead faints when they realized what their sister had done with the pages of the holy book.

"That's why they put you in this room, you know," the girl told me, "to scare you into leaving. Everyone here hates you and your dad for coming in and acting all stuck up. They're waiting for the young nun to come back and shake you from your sleep and tell you to leave her room."

Then, finally, the girl let me kiss her.