



THE

*Piper was raised in a cult.
She just doesn't know it.*

LIAR'S

DAUGHTER

MEGAN COOLEY PETERSON

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*For my daughter,
the map of my heart,
and for anyone who has ever felt lost
and needed to be found*

1. AFTER

A bed.

A window seat.

A chipped desk with daisy stickers on the drawers.

These things belong to me, I'm told.

The woman takes me from the room and down a hallway, the walls so close they almost crush me. She wears all beige and not a stitch of makeup. My bladder strains, and I can't remember the last time I peed. Her shoes squeak against the floor; her skirt rustles. My ears ring from the roar of it all.

The woman nudges open a door. The white walls and floor blind me, and I blink until my eyes adjust. It smells faintly of bleach. "There are clean towels in the cabinet and soap in the shower. Use whatever you like. This is your bathroom now. You're safe here."

She looks at me expectantly. I say nothing.

Finally, the door closes, and the click echoes around the room. The urine bleeds through my pants before I can get to the toilet.

I jut out my chin in defiance, make sure whoever's watching can see it.

Father and Mother told me this might happen. "The world can be an evil place," Mother warned. "I'm the only one you can trust. Me and your father. Never forget that."

Cold water surges from the faucet, pummeling the bottom of the tub. I twist the knob to the left, to the right, but there's just cold, no warm. My reflection in the metal is distorted, inhuman.

They fixed it so I have to bathe in ice-cold water. They think I'm weak. They think I'll break.

My pants cling to my legs as I pull them off. I unhook my mother's necklace with the green stone and set it on the counter—but then the stone catches the light, and I put it back on, listening for sounds outside the door.

When I face the mirror, I barely recognize the girl looking back. My collarbones stick out, shadowed underneath. My breasts are smaller, my stomach shrunken in. My hair falls out when I pull on it.

They told me I'm safe here. They told me this is my family now. But I don't know these people. And this is not my home.

Voices come from behind me, warped, like a recording played backward. When I turn toward the door, they snap off.

"The world can be an evil place."

I conjure Mother's voice. It comforts me. We'll find each other again, like she promised.

The water scalds my foot, so cold it circled around to being hot.

The tiles on the floor are tiny hexagons slithering underneath the bathtub, flat and cracked. Bottles line the sides of the tub with promises of better hair, softer skin. My mother's fancy soaps smelled of lavender and lemon.

I drag a rag across my body, over and over until my skin turns pink.

I'm the only color in the room.

2. BEFORE

The kitchen reeks of bleach.

I hold my finger up to my lips and smile at Beverly Jean, who sits on a stool next to the kitchen sink. The Aunties have a towel wrapped around her small shoulders, secured in the front with a clothespin. Auntie Barb combs through her hair while Auntie Joan mixes up a bottle of hair bleach.

Beverly Jean's eyes swing like a pendulum as she watches Auntie Joan jolt the bottle back and forth.

"Can I hold her hand?" I ask. As the oldest daughter, it falls on me to help take care of the younger children. Auntie Barb and Auntie Joan aren't exactly maternal, and they expect me to make up for that.

Auntie Joan plunks the bottle down on the table and sighs. Her long, graying hair is gathered in a tight bun that pulls her crepe-paper skin back sharply.

"Do what you like," she says. "But keep her quiet. You know how your father hates it when you children cry."

I rush to Beverly Jean and squeeze her hand with mine. "It'll be over before you know it," I whisper. "Just close your eyes and hold my hand, and it'll be okay."

Beverly Jean does as I instruct, and Auntie Joan squirts the dye onto her scalp. Almost immediately, it turns the skin red. I've asked

for less-harsh dyes to be used, but the Aunties say this is all that's available.

Beverly Jean whimpers. I hold her hand even tighter and hum "Hush, Little Baby," the same lullaby I sang to her when she was little.

When Auntie Joan finishes, Auntie Barb snaps a plastic shower cap over Beverly Jean's burning head and sets a timer. Auntie Barb wears a long denim dress and compression socks. Every day, the same. "Fifteen minutes," she says. "Not a second less."

The Aunties disappear down the hallway, and Beverly Jean opens her eyes. "After your wash, I'll rub ice cubes on your scalp, okay?" I promise. "That always helps."

When the timer rings, I put my hand in the sink water and touch it to Beverly Jean's arm. "Does this feel too hot?" I heated up a pot of water on the woodstove an hour ago, and I hope it hasn't cooled too much in the sink. We don't have running water, but the pipes still work for drainage.

"No, it feels good. Thanks, Pip." When Beverly Jean was little, she couldn't say my whole name. So she said Pip instead, and it stuck. It's all she calls me.

She leans back, and I peel off the cap and wash the bleach from her hair. Her once-dark roots have turned as bright as the goldfinches that feed on Mother's sunflowers. I massage toner into her hair, and soon she is a perfect blonde again. Just like Mother.

After I towel dry her hair, I grab an ice cube from the icebox and rub it along the angry patches on her scalp. "You deserve an ice pop," I say. "What flavor?"

"Grape!"

I pry one out of its mold. “Father and Mother will be here in a few hours,” I tell Beverly Jean. “They’ll be so happy to see you looking your best.”

She scrunches up her nose. “How come you and Henry don’t have to get your hair dyed? It doesn’t seem fair.”

I touch my long ponytail. “Because our hair is already blond. Mother just wants us to look like a family. She doesn’t want anyone to feel left out, or unloved, or different.”

“But what about Caspian and Thomas?”

“Father took them in, but they’re not our brothers. It’s all right if they’re not blond. Does that make sense?”

“I guess so.” Beverly Jean bites into her ice pop.

I kiss her cheek. “Good. Now finish up your ice pop. I’ve got to help with Samuel’s hair next.”



After we finish the bleachings, I go outside looking for Caspian.

The lake laps against the shore, and pieces of seaweed bob along its surface. A few of the younger children are trying to catch a frog in a bucket. Their laughter washes away the stench of bleach trapped in my nostrils, and I smile.

The old roller coaster rises above the trees. Our property includes a derelict amusement park that’s been abandoned for forty or fifty years. Father’s torn most of the rides down, but a few remain. He said this was the perfect location for his children, far from cities and towns.

We live in the old caretaker’s house. It has two stories with lots of windows and hardwood floors. The roof over the boys’ bedroom needs to be repaired, so for now it’s covered with a big piece

of blue tarp. Father prefers to keep us “off the grid,” so we don’t have electricity or running water. But we have a pump, generators, candlelight. We have all we need.

The Aunties are nowhere to be found. They must be resting before lunch; they’re always telling us how vexing we are.

I stop in front of the old oak tree. Nailed to its trunk is the sign Father carved from a piece of balsam wood.

The Community is truth.

The Community is loyalty.

The Community will keep you safe.

It’s our creed, everything the Community stands for and believes in. Every time I’m feeling sad or frustrated, I read the sign. It fills me with light and hope.

When I reach out to touch it, a spark of magic pricks my finger.

I find Cas working in a row of corn, hacking at weeds with a hoe. Our garden is large, at least twenty feet long, with corn bordering the far end. We grow many different crops: artichokes, lettuce, tomatoes, cauliflower. My favorites are the root vegetables, the carrots and beets and radishes that hide themselves away until they’re ready.

Cas wears a white T-shirt, and his wide shoulders press at the seams as he works. I grab the handle right out of his hands.

“Hey!” he says, trying to snatch it back. “I’m using that.”

I jump away, keeping it just out of his reach. “You’ve worked long enough today. I need you to time me.”

Father put a buoy a hundred feet from shore, and I’ve been practicing swimming out to it and back. When war comes, I have

to be as strong as possible. All those extra push-ups I did this week must've made me at least a second faster.

Cas's eyes meet mine, blue like the sea he was named for. I've never seen an ocean in real life, only in a book, but the photograph stuck with me, and someday I'll swim in one. Cas's eyelashes are so dark and thick it looks like he's wearing mascara. He's the only one of us with dark hair; his brother Thomas has brown hair, but Cas has black hair like he says his father had. "I think you've just about perfected your swimming by now," he says.

"Come on," I wheedle. "It's been two weeks since anyone timed me. I'm sure I've gotten faster since then. I want to show Father when he gets here. Prove that I'm ready to be initiated."

"You know Curtis is proud of you no matter what, Piper. You're his favorite."

"That is totally untrue."

Cas nudges me with his shoulder. "Oh, please. You were so afraid he'd love me more than you when I first got here that you told me I could eat as many strawberries from the patch as I wanted. I got in a lot of trouble for that."

Father took Caspian and Thomas in a few years ago when they had no place else to go. He was forced to expel their parents from the Community when they brought drugs into the compound, but of course he allowed the boys to stay—it would have been too cruel to let the Outside have them. Thomas has been at the main compound with Father and Mother these past several months, ever since he was initiated into the Community, and I'm itching to hear all about his new life there.

"I never told you to eat those strawberries, and you know it! If you're going to lie, at least come up with something interesting."

He gives me a playful shove, and I shove him back. My stomach flutters, but I ignore it.

Then he goes for my weak spot—the soft skin of my inner arm. He tries tickling it, and I squeal and run toward the lake, kicking off my sandals. The smaller children laugh and chase after us, and soon we're all splashing water at one another. The sun warms my shoulders, and the cool water is a salve, taking away the sting of Beverly Jean's burned scalp, the sting of missing Father and Mother.

“Get out of that filthy lake water this instant!”

Auntie Joan stands on the shore, hands on hips. We immediately fall into line, youngest to oldest, and march toward the house.

We're good at following orders.

“You're lucky I don't take a switch to each and every one of you,” she says. “You need to get cleaned up and dressed.”

When she's not looking, I reach back and smack Cas on the arm. He catches my hand and holds it, just for a moment, before letting go.

3. BEFORE

The last time Father and Mother came to stay, Millie hadn't started walking yet.

It was an easier time.

She wiggles out of my grasp now, naked, and takes off down the hallway holding her favorite stuffed animal, a giraffe missing an ear. "Millie, get back here!" I chase after her, freshly washed diaper in my hand, and find her at the large hall window overlooking the lake. She always waits there for our parents, who're due to arrive any minute.

"Millie," I coax. "Don't you want to look pretty for Mommy and Daddy?"

She pops a thumb into her mouth. "Where's Mommy?"

"She and Daddy are on their way. Let's get you dressed, and then they'll be here."

I lead Millie back to the girls' bedroom. Beverly Jean is already dressed, immaculate in her burgundy dress with the white sash. She sits on her bed, dressing one of her paper dolls in a purple ball gown.

Carla slumps over the desk, drawing in her sketchbook. She's got her dress on, but not her sash. She's a few years younger than me and recently decided dresses are evil.

“Carla, where’d your sash go?” I try peering over her shoulder, and she blocks her drawing with her arms.

“Beats me.”

“Look through the closet. You don’t want the Aunties to see you without it.”

Carla grunts, closes her sketchbook, and yanks open the closet doors. She kicks aside a basket of dirty clothes. “Not here.”

Millie lies on her back, and I lift her bum and slide the diaper under it. Once it’s secured with safety pins, I slip one foot into her tights, and then the other. Her tights stretch against her meaty thighs, and I’m afraid they’ll tear. Whoever invented tights for babies should be locked up. “You barely looked. Please, Carla, just do as I say.”

“You’re not Mother, you know,” she reminds me, but then she immediately locates her sash on the shelf and ties it around her waist.

“Was that so hard?” I ask. Carla ignores me.

“You look so pretty,” Beverly Jean tells her.

“I look ugly.” Carla sags onto on her bed, which is across from mine. “I’m all broken out.”

“You both look lovely,” I remind them. Once I’ve changed Millie into her dress, I hand her off to Carla. “Try to keep her from getting naked again,” I say, slipping out of my bell-bottoms and crocheted peasant top and into my dress. Auntie Barb made us matching burgundy dresses a few months ago, and mine is already a little looser. All that swimming has made my body leaner, more streamlined. But I don’t complain. Mother loves it when we’re all dressed up. Father doesn’t care for vanity, but he indulges her.

Auntie Barb sticks her head in our room. “Hurry up, now. Let’s get lined up outside.”

Once she’s gone, I take Millie back. “I hope you read your pages,” I tell Carla. She rolls her eyes as she lifts Father’s book from her desk and shakes it at me. All of Father’s teachings are hand-typed and bound in leather. He’ll know if we’ve fallen behind in our reading.

For once, the boys beat us outside. They stand on the front lawn in a perfect row. Caspian adjusts his burgundy tie and straightens his hair. A lock falls over his forehead, and I want to brush it away, to touch him, but the Aunties are watching. They don’t seem to approve of our closeness anymore. Next to Cas is Samuel, eleven, and then Henry, eight. Their matching corduroy suits and ties are darling, and I waste no time telling them so.

Samuel sticks his tongue out at me.

“I saw that,” Auntie Joan warns.

The girls line up next to the boys as the Aunties inspect us. Auntie Barb passes a lint roller over Samuel’s jacket, then moves on to Caspian’s. Auntie Joan orders Henry to take off his cowboy hat.

“Me hungry,” Millie whines before chewing on her giraffe’s arm.

“We’ll eat soon. Now quiet, please,” I say.

Tires crunch on gravel, and then a sleek black limousine rolls up the drive, stopping right in front of us. The driver steps out, races around to the back, and whisks open the door.

Mother puts one foot out; she’s wearing silver high heels, and I can’t wait to try them on later. Blue gauzy fabric tumbles over her leg as she takes the driver’s hand and emerges into the sunshine.

She wears a straw hat and large sunglasses. Her wavy blond hair flows down her back.

Mother is the most glamorous woman I've ever seen. She puts the Hollywood movie stars to shame. We've watched a few films together, films like *Casablanca* and *Meet Me in St. Louis* with beautiful actresses. She outshines them all.

She stops when she sees us and throws up her arms. "My darlings!"

Samuel and Henry tear off toward her, Millie toddling close behind. Beverly Jean looks at me, as if she's not quite sure it's "cool" to show affection now that she's seven.

"Go on," I whisper, and she skips ahead.

Mother crouches in her dress as the children tumble into her open arms. She plants kisses on their faces, and her laughter flows over everything like honey.

It is always better when she's here. I swear, even the sky is bluer.

Caspian, Carla, and I hang back by the Aunties. We'll get our time with Mother. Right now, the little ones need her most.

Mother glides toward us with Millie on her hip, the others trailing behind her like ducklings. "Oh my goodness, how I've missed you all." She takes off her sunglasses and kisses us on the cheeks. Her perfume is new. I'll ask her later what it is. Maybe she'll let me wear a little.

"I've brought presents," Mother coos, and Henry and Samuel jump up and down with giddy excitement.

"Did you bring me a gun?" Henry asks. Blond curls frame his soft face, and his eyes are as big and brown as a fawn's.

Mother drops to one knee. "A gun? Whatever do you need a gun for?"

“I need it to shoot the bad guys.”

She smiles. “When you’re older.” She turns to Samuel. Freckles spatter his wide nose, and he’s missing his two front teeth. “What about you, Sam? What are you hoping for?”

“New cartridges! *Pac-Man!* Or *Super Mario Brothers!*” His voice breaks, and Carla rolls her eyes.

“Kindness, Carla,” Mother reproaches.

Auntie Joan steps in next to Mother. “We’ve got coffee and tea ready in the living room if you’d like to go inside.”

“Give me a moment with my children.” She takes both of my hands in hers and pulls me close. “I think I’ve missed you most of all,” she whispers in my ear.

My eyes well up, and she wipes away my tears. “I’m so happy you’re here, Mother.”

“Me too, my darling. I’ve brought a bag of new yarn for your crocheting. Remind me to give it to you later—I found the most gorgeous yellows and greens.”

She gives Carla a hug, then Caspian. It feels selfish to show her how much I miss her. Mother helps Father with the Community—she runs companies and does so much charity work. She’s busy from morning until night and hardly ever sleeps. We know she wants to be here more, but she’s far too important.

Still, I won’t waste a single moment of this visit being sad.

Once Mother has hugged all of us, she steps into line as well. She nods at the driver, who scurries to the other side of the limo. He opens the door, and Father’s head rises above the shiny black roof.

Light streams through the trees, illuminating Father’s shaggy brown hair. He seems to float around the back of the car, wearing

linen pants and a matching shirt, and—as usual—no shoes. His gait is languid and serene, and I envy how self-assured he is. I wish I had half his poise.

Father stops a few feet from us. We straighten our shoulders, a synchronization perfected over years. He drinks in our faces, checking for something I've never been quite able to put my finger on.

“Children,” he says after a while. No one responds, and even Millie manages to stay quiet. “I expect you’ve all been well in my absence, and listening to Joan and Barb. When I speak with them later, I don’t want to hear anything but a glowing review. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Sir,” we say in unison.

He relaxes his face a touch. “Good. I’m exhausted from the trip.” Father steps toward me. “How are you, Piper? Been practicing your swimming?”

“Every day. And I crocheted a new blanket to donate.” Father does a lot of philanthropic work, including donating the Community’s handcrafted blankets and scarves to shelters. I try to make at least one or two a month. It makes me sad that people on the Outside don’t take care of each other, that they need shelters at all.

He kisses the top of my head. “I’m glad to hear it. While I’m here, we’ll go for a walk, just the two of us, and you can tell me what you’ve been up to.”

Then Father moves toward the house like a king returned to his castle.

After a moment, Mother comes out of the stupor Father sometimes puts people into. “Come along, then, Mommy needs a drink!”

As everyone follows Mother up to the house, Thomas emerges from the limousine. Cas and I hang back, eager to see him. He wears all black, and there are dark circles under his eyes. His brown hair has grown out a little. He is handsome like Caspian, but sharper, somehow.

“We missed you,” Caspian says, giving his brother a hug. “Glad you’re back. It’s not the same around here without you.”

“So? How is the compound?” I’m practically jumping up and down. “Tell us everything about it! Leave nothing out! We’re so proud of you!”

Thomas’s usual smile is gone. “It’s fine,” he says, his voice flat. “We better get inside.”

I tug on his sleeve. “Come on, Thomas. You’ve got to tell me more than that!”

“I will later. I’m pretty exhausted right now.”

I glance at Caspian, confused, and he grabs hold of my hand. He always does this when he’s nervous, kind of like how I chew my nails. A habit, nothing more. But when he brushes his thumb across mine, it feels like it *could* mean something more. My skin tingles, and I don’t know if I should hold on tighter or let go.

I let go.

It’s what Father would want.

Thomas yawns. “I got something for you, Piper.” I must have a surprised look on my face, because he finally smiles. “I’ll bring it to your room after lights-out, okay?”

I throw my arms around him, and he gives me a huge hug back. “Thank you, Thomas. I’m so glad you’re home.”

“What about me? Did you forget *my* gift?” Cas juts out his bottom lip and pretends to be sad. Thomas rolls his eyes.

We slip into the living room, where the Aunties have coffee, tea, and pastries waiting. Auntie Joan brings Mother a martini with three olives, her favorite.

Mother sinks into a plush armchair and takes off her hat. “This is exactly what I needed. Thank you.” She holds the glass up to her nose, closes her eyes, and takes a huge whiff. Then she hands the glass back to Auntie Joan, who takes it outside and dumps it into the grass. Mother used to drink before she joined the Community, and Father allows her this indulgence once in a while, to test her resolve. Drinking alcohol is forbidden. Father says alcohol dulls our senses, makes us weak, and opens up our bodies to disease.

The Aunties motion for us to sit, and we move onto the sofas. Millie tries to climb into Mother’s lap, but Father picks her up. “Your mother needs a break,” he says sternly, but Millie kicks and cries anyway, and her sash comes undone. Father puts his hand on her forehead and closes his eyes, trying to calm her, but it doesn’t work. Mother lifts Millie onto her lap and reties her sash.

“So,” she says as Millie burrows against her, “what have you all been up to since we’ve been away? Spare no details.”

Father’s jaws clench as he folds himself into the chair next to her. He rolls his head on his neck and shifts, as if he can’t get comfortable. I try not to watch him, but I’m alert to his every mood. Cas and Thomas watch him, too, but the little ones are oblivious.

Henry and Samuel tell her about the frog they caught on the beach and are now keeping in a terrarium in their room. “We named it Captain John Wayne!” Henry tells her. Beverly Jean says she learned to make an apple pie from scratch, and that we’ll have it for dessert after supper. She also made a macramé plant holder. Carla has hand-beaded some necklaces.

Mother beams. “I am just so proud of all our children. How did we get so lucky?” She looks at Thomas. “And our Thomas, back for the first time since he was initiated. I could cry, I’m so proud.”

Father nods, walking over to Thomas and patting his back. “Thomas is a true asset to the Community. He’s here for a special project, children, which I’ll explain later.”

“Thank you, Curtis,” Thomas says, keeping his eyes on the floor.

“I hope your aunts haven’t been too hard on you in our absence,” Mother says.

Caspian and I exchange a glance. They are always too hard on us. But we can’t tell that to Mother, and especially not to Father. The moment they’re gone again, they’ll make us pay for it.

“Not at all,” I say, and smile at Auntie Barb. She looks away.

Father rubs his temples. “It’s been a long journey, children, and your mother and I need a rest. We’ll see you all for supper.” Father takes Mother’s elbow and guides her upstairs to their bedroom.

“Keep those outfits spotless,” Auntie Joan says, clearing away the pastries before any of us can take one. “Dinner’s not for a few hours.”

“But the little ones need to get outside and run off some energy,” I say. “Can’t they change into regular clothes until then?”

“You know your mother wouldn’t like that.”

“Can’t they at least go outside? I’ll make sure they’re careful and clean.”

“Fine, but if I see any stains, I’ll hold you personally responsible.”

I stand and shake her hand. “Deal.”

No one moves until the Aunties leave the room.

4. AFTER

The woman waits outside the bathroom door, speaking with someone. I'm wrapped in a towel and lying on the bath mat, wanting desperately to suck my thumb, to transport myself back to Mother and Father and my brothers and sisters.

A knock on the door, and she's inside again, taking away all the oxygen in the room. Behind her, the outline of a man vanishes.

"I don't mean to barge in," she says. "But you've been in here for over an hour."

I try to wipe my eyes without her seeing. I refuse to speak.

The woman sets a bundle next to me on the floor.

"Fresh clothes," she says, patting them. "Come on downstairs into the kitchen when you're dressed, and we'll have breakfast. I made blueberry pancakes and toast with strawberry jam."

She smiles, but I don't smile back.

Once she leaves, I get dressed. The shorts sink down my hips, and the T-shirt falls off my left shoulder. It says NO LIMITS across the chest in obnoxious pink letters.

She never bothered to check my size—to get me something that fits. Maybe these were someone else's clothes.

My hand rests on the doorknob, but I'm afraid to turn it. The smell of bleach returns, stronger than before. Shimmers and zig-zags of light slash my vision.

I can't remember how I got here.

These gaps make me feel stupid and weak. Father says knowledge is power. I have no knowledge, and no power.

I step outside. The hall is a dark tunnel, so I feel my way along, unsure of where to go. Closed doors line the walls. I turn one of the knobs, but the door is locked.

They all are.

Stumbling down the stairs, I end up in a wide-open room, with more white walls, white furniture. It reminds me of a hospital.

A red prism hangs in a picture window, tossing a colored gash on the opposite wall. This place is nothing like home, where the windows were lined with old Coke bottles holding wildflowers.

"Are you hungry?" The woman's voice comes from my left. She stands in a room separated by a wide archway, her hand resting against a refrigerator.

My stomach snarls, a feral thing, and I follow the smell of breakfast to a wooden table. A single placemat sits on its surface. Two white pills wait on a napkin next to the plate.

I push them aside.

But I always was a sucker for toast with strawberry jam. Mother makes the world's best strawberry jam. She even won a blue ribbon for it at a fair when I was little. Her smile that day was my entire universe. She held me in her arms as Father took our photograph, the envy of everyone there.

I haven't eaten in so long, spots dance in my peripheral vision. I want to ask if the blueberries are organic or if the strawberries have been poisoned with DDT.

I eat anyway.

I'm going to need my strength. They don't know it, but I'm leaving.



After breakfast, the woman orders me to come to the living room. She says there's a doctor who wants to help me.

Frames clutter the mantel above the fireplace. Locked inside are photographs of smiling little girls. In one, a girl rides a bike; in another, the same girl hugs a doll. She's missing a front tooth.

The remaining photo is yellowed and grainy. An out-of-focus girl splashes in a kiddie pool.

The woman stands behind me, her breathing and the ticking clock the only sounds in the room.

She clears her throat, then gestures to the man seated on the sofa. "Are you ready to begin, Piper?"

The man licks his lips, which are topped by a mustache. "Hello, Piper. I'm Dr. Lundhagen, but you can call me Oscar if you'd like." He wears a turtleneck and a dark gray blazer and adjusts a thick gold watch wrapped around his wrist.

Father says only fools covet wealth.

The woman takes a hesitant step toward me. "Oscar is here to talk with you, Piper. Just the two of you. About how you're feeling."

"Would that be all right with you?" he asks. A few dark nose hairs dangle into his mustache.

I shrug, but I don't move.

The man looks at the woman. She disappears from the room. A door opens and closes in the hallway.

I am alone with another stranger.

He clears his throat. “Would you like to take a seat?” He points to the opposite end of the couch. A shelf of porcelain figurines takes up most of the wall next to it.

Their eyes are dead.

I drag a high-backed chair across the room, positioning it so I am seated directly in front of him. I sit up as tall as I can. He is sunk into the couch, lower than I am. Weaker.

“Thank you for speaking with me, Piper. I know this can’t be easy for you.”

My response is to stare and remain silent, though I want to point out that I have not, in fact, spoken a single word to him. I wrap a hand around my necklace and rub my thumb over its green pendant. Mother told me the amazonite stone stands for courage. It’s cool to the touch, like always.

He clasps his hands. Black hair grows from each thick knuckle. I burp up a little of the pancakes, but swallow them down without blinking. The ingredients were probably full of preservatives, leaching all the nutrients from my cells, poisoning me.

“How are you adjusting?” His eyebrows rise up his forehead with feigned concern. “You’ve been here for a little over a week now.”

A week? Have I?

He scratches the back of his head. “Jeannie says you haven’t been eating all that much.”

Jeannie. The woman. I hate the sound of her name, a choking of consonants and vowels and lies.

“Your appetite will come around again. You’ve been through quite an ordeal, Piper. It’s normal to feel disoriented and fearful. Everything here is different, and probably quite strange. You’re shell-shocked.”

He stares, waiting for me to say something. Finally, he sighs. “I must seem strange, too. I get it. Maybe we can chat again another time, when you’re feeling better. I’d love to help you, Piper. Anything you say to me will be kept just between us.”

The floor in the hallway creaks. She is listening.

5. BEFORE

A goldfinch skitters in the weeds, sunlight dappling its yellow feathers. I lean against a bumper car and watch as it pecks the ground. When we first moved here, the cars sat on a metal platform, but Father tore it down after a lightning strike. Now they're rusting in the grass.

We all come here sometimes, using the cars as places to talk or read. Henry and Samuel pretend they're rockets and fly them to space. Beverly Jean turns them into houses for her paper dolls.

Moving away from the car, I scan the forest floor. Mother seems more tired than usual, and a bouquet of wildflowers might cheer her up. A poppy, bright as a pumpkin, cuts through the green, and I add it to my handful of baby blue eyes and buttercups. I wipe the dirt from my hands as Cas joins me.

"Picking flowers for Angela?" He's no longer wearing his jacket, and the sleeves of his white dress shirt are pushed up his hard and sinewy forearms.

I force myself to look away. "How'd you know I'd be out here?"

I can feel the smile in his voice. "Because I know you, that's how." He climbs into the lime-green car and leans back. "Can I admit something without you getting upset?"

“That depends, doesn’t it?” I slide in next to him, same as always, but leave a little extra space between us.

The air snaps with electricity, most likely from Father’s return. Anything feels possible today.

He turns toward me, his eyebrows crinkled together. “I’m not as happy as I thought I’d be now that Curtis and Angela are back.”

His eyes search mine, like he’s waiting for me to agree or argue or tell him why he’s wrong. Like everything depends on what I say.

I’ve never lied to Caspian before, and I don’t plan to start now.

“Cas,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “I know it’s hard being here without them, but Father and Mother have done so much to keep us safe and happy. Showing them gratitude is the least we can do. A grateful heart starts with good thoughts. We have to weed out the bad ones, just like your garden, or they’ll poison us.”

He nods and looks away. “You’re right. I know you’re right.”

“You know you can tell me anything, don’t you?”

He reaches for my hand out of habit, but doesn’t take it. “I know.”

Energy sparks off him. He’s like the lightning that struck the bumper-car ride. I want to touch him, to see if an arc of light might flash between us.

“Can I tell you something funny, then?” he asks, hesitantly. “I had a *huge* crush on you when Thomas and I first moved here.”

My heart pulses. “You did?”

He glances at me. “I was too afraid to talk to you. Every time I tried, I got all tongue-tied. Thomas made so much fun of me.”

“I thought you hated me!”

“Nope. And now you’re stuck with me for life.” He takes the bouquet from me. “We need more flowers. This is looking kind of sad.” He goes ahead and grabs my hand. “Come on. Let’s go for a walk.”

We head deeper into the woods. Cas leads us around trees and over moss-covered rocks and logs. He keeps his eyes trained to the ground, looking for pops of color. It’s like magic back here, and I am grateful for this world Father has given us.

“Is that a flower?” I ask, kneeling to pick a strawberry-shaped burst of red.

“Don’t touch that!” Cas warns. “It’s a red thistle. They have pricklers.”

“But it’s so red. Have you ever seen something so red?” I gently touch its stem with my finger, and it doesn’t sting me. “Mother would adore it.”

“You’ll cut up your hands. Let me pick it.” He squats next to me and pulls a couple from the dirt, adding them to the middle of the bouquet.

“They’re perfect, Cas. Thank you.”

He gives me a lopsided smile.

We continue our walk, venturing deeper into the shade of the trees. Ferns and weeds edge our path, and pine trees rise above us. Cas stops and picks a pine cone off the ground. He studies it for a moment. “I think this is a Coulter pine. See how its pine cone looks like a pineapple?”

“You know more than anyone should about trees.”

He tosses the pine cone with one hand and catches it. “Not much else to do around here but read and hoe corn.”

When he tosses it again, I try to catch it but knock it to the ground. It rolls ahead, and we scramble for it, our laughter and the

cicadas the only sounds. Cas gets to it first, and when I push back my hair, I gasp.

We're standing at the chain-link fence. It runs the perimeter of the property, topped with coiled barbed wire.

"Cas," I whisper. "We should go."

He walks toward it and grabs it with one hand, gives it a shake. "It's only a fence," he says. Mother's bouquet quivers in his other hand.

"The Outside isn't safe. I'd feel better if we went back to the house."

He turns to me. "Have you ever thought about climbing over? Just to see what's out there?"

I back away. "No, never. Please get away from there. You're scaring me."

Cas gently sets the bouquet on the ground. "I wonder if anyone's ever tried to climb it?"

"Cas, stop. The fence is there for a reason. We're wasting too much time out here; I should be back with the littles to make sure they stay clean."

"It'll be fine," he says. "I just want to see if I can." He grips the fence and hoists himself up, shoving his feet between the chain links.

"Cas, no! What are you doing? Stop!"

"It's okay! It's easy!" he says, getting dangerously close to the top. To the Outside.

My hands grow slick, and I wipe them on my dress. Something rustles in the brush beyond the fence, and suddenly the trees are closing in on us.

"Enough! Cas, I'm coming up!" I rush forward and pull myself onto the links, keeping my eyes on the fence as I climb, trying to

ignore the danger beyond. I sweat; my arms burn. When I'm close enough, I use one hand to grab for him, but my foot slips.

I plummet to the ground, and my teeth clatter when I land on my tailbone.

"Piper!" Caspian jumps down. "Are you okay?" He gives me a hand and pulls me up, worried. "I'm sorry, Piper. I was just fooling around. I swear."

I squeeze my hands together to keep them from shaking. "Please never do that again." I wipe the dirt from my dress—it's not stained, thankfully—and pick up the bouquet. One of Mother's buttercups is broken, and I ease it from the bunch. I must have fallen on it. "This one's ruined."

Cas takes the buttercup and tucks it behind my ear. "No, see? It's not ruined. It's perfect."

I touch it and smile, my heart still racing.

The Outside can't harm us here. The fence is strong.

We just have to stay on the right side.