

THE
Queen
OF
Junk
Island



ALEXANDRA MAE JONES

THE
Queen
OF
Junk
Island

ALEXANDRA MAE JONES

 annick
press
toronto • berkeley

© 2022 Alexandra Mae Jones (text)

Cover and interior art by Nikki Ernst

Interior designed by Paul Covello

Edited by Claire Caldwell

Line edit by Adrineh Der-Boghossian

Copy edit by Mary Ann Blair

Proofread by Doeun Rivendell

We thank Elijah Forbes for his contributions to this work.

Annick Press Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, and the participation of the Government of Canada/la participation du gouvernement du Canada for our publishing activities.



Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The queen of Junk Island / Alexandra Mae Jones.

Names: Jones, Alexandra Mae, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20210328843 | Canadiana (ebook) 20210328908 | ISBN 9781773216355 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781773216348 (softcover) | ISBN 9781773216379 (PDF) | ISBN 9781773216362 (HTML)

Classification: LCC PS8619.O5245 Q84 2022 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Published in the U.S.A. by Annick Press (U.S.) Ltd.
Distributed in Canada by University of Toronto Press
Distributed in the U.S.A. by Publishers Group West

Printed in Canada

annickpress.com
alexandramaejones.com

Also available as an e-book. Please visit annickpress.com/ebooks for more details.

for all the girls who grew up feeling too
many things, in too many directions

A note:

This novel is set in the mid 2000s and contains
terminology and attitudes from the time which may be
outdated. Take care while reading.

Part One | The Cottage and Christopher

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	26
Chapter 3	49

Part Two | The Island and Ivy

Chapter 4	65
Chapter 5	102
Chapter 6	120
Chapter 7	147
Chapter 8	168
Chapter 9	194

Part Three | The Apparition and Anne

Chapter 10	209
Chapter 11	224
Chapter 12	235
Chapter 13	250
Chapter 14	269
Chapter 15	283
Chapter 16	314
Chapter 17	342
Chapter 18	357
Chapter 19	380
Chapter 20	391
Author's Note	409
Acknowledgments	413
Author biography	415

Part One



THE COTTAGE and CHRISTOPHER

Chapter 1

We drove out to the cottage with all of our things in June, a week after the phone call came and two weeks after Christopher Smith ruined my life. Mom didn't say it like this, but it was clearly a "two birds, one stone" kind of deal. I could read the plan in her jittery eyes like she was screaming it out loud: get this girl far away from this school, this mess, this city. Bury her in the earth, under work and distractions, so I don't have to look at her.

Mom and I have lived in the city for most of my life: first in a cramped apartment with two sad-eyed ladies and a baby who wouldn't stop crying; second in a building with crooked stairs where there was a man with a crinkled face always smoking outside who I was Not To Talk To Ever; and third in the apartment we've got now, where I have my own room. For the most part, I like the city—the rush and the cluster and the way the sky never truly goes black at night—but I've always known that it's not where I started out.

When I was a toddler, "the cottage" was home. I've only ever heard it called that, but it's really just the house where my mother grew up and where my grandparents lived until they died. I haven't been back since I was really little, not until this summer.

For the past five years, Mom's been renting it out to the same guy, but now he's gone, obviously.

Maybe this all happened because Mom didn't have you around for advice anymore. But it's too soon for that. I didn't know you existed at the beginning of the summer. And if you want to hear about this summer and how I got stranded out here, at the end of everything, this is where it starts.

*

I was in the bathroom, ostensibly taking a shower, when the phone call came. There's no landline at the cottage, so when the government needed to call someone about the mess, they rang our apartment. Over the running water, I heard my mother answering, then her voice ticking up like a skier going off a sudden and unexpected jump. "I'm sorry?"

Sometime later, I became aware of a pounding on the bathroom door.

I must not have responded fast enough because it felt like I'd only just registered the sound when I was pulled out of a deep, sunken daydream by the shower curtain being ripped open.

"What are you doing?" my mother said, staring down at where I was sat in the far end of the tub.

"Get out," I said. I really wanted to yell it, but I was feeling all mush-mouthed and hazy in the steam, and it wouldn't come out louder than a mumble.

"Dell, you're fully dressed, and there's water all over the floor. What were you thinking?"

A hand landed on my shoulder and I jerked back violently, sending a tiny wave sloshing from one end of the tub to the other. I searched for a quip. How was I supposed to explain something I couldn't quite explain to myself? I remembered putting in the plug and stepping into the tub. I remembered the sound of the spray changing from a hiss to a roar as the water level rose. But the reasoning behind it all felt elusive.

Since I was a kid, I'd been afraid of water—not of rain but of sitting water, water in wait, water that can envelop. While I waited for the shower to warm up, trying to breathe through the panic that had clapped its arms around me the second I tried to undress, it had seemed like the only way to forget a new fear was to retreat into an old one.

“I mean, the laundry machines downstairs are still broken, right?” I said. “Thought I could multitask.”

Mom didn't laugh. She bundled me out of the bathroom and told me to get into fresh clothes. I changed as fast as I could into a tank top and sweatpants, trying not to look at either myself or the spot in my bedroom where a boy had stood the week before. Once dressed, I went out to sit in the kitchen and listened to my mother wring out my wet clothes in the bathroom, water slapping thickly into the tub.

“I can do that myself!” I yelled.

“You're not coming anywhere near this bathroom right now.”

“Stop freaking out,” I said. “God, you make a big deal about everything. I was in the shower—is that it now, you've just decided I don't get to have privacy?”

My mother's face appeared around the doorframe, white and drawn.

“You stopped answering me,” she said. “You can’t do that. You’ve made a disaster out of this bathroom, and we’ve probably leaked through to the floor below, and I’ll get yelled at by the landlord again and I can’t—”

She pressed her forehead to the wall, the line of her throat shuddering like there was something living underneath the skin. I could almost feel her disappointment like a physical force pressing me down into the floor.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“There’s been a report that someone’s been dumping garbage on our property,” my mother said.

“What?”

“At the cottage. And I have no way to contact Roger because he doesn’t have a phone. I can’t deal with this right now on top of—” She waved a hand at me. I was a thing to be dealt with now, I guess.

“What about what’s-his-face?” I asked. “Doesn’t he live in the area? Can’t you ask him to go check out the property and kick Roger’s butt?”

“If you’re referring to Joe, his son is visiting. I don’t want to bother him.”

Joe was my mother’s new boyfriend. I guess “new” implies there were other ones, which really isn’t the case. Mom hadn’t dated for years, or at least, she hadn’t told me about a boyfriend in years. She didn’t even tell me about this one at first. Sure, I knew something was up—she’d been wearing her Celine Dion perfume and biting her nails less, staying out for “evening meetings” and coming home late for a while now. She hadn’t had a boyfriend

since I was thirteen, but I knew what it looked like on her.

When she finally let slip a couple weeks ago about dating Joe, she told me he'd lived in the town by the cottage since they were kids. She'd reconnected with him in the winter when he was in the city for a business trip.

"You've met him before, but you wouldn't remember it," she'd told me. "You used to play with his daughter when you were both very little."

So I'd known there was a daughter involved. But this was the first time I'd heard of a son. Did this guy also have a wife and seven dogs squirreled away somewhere?

"You could just go to the cottage. It's not that long a drive, right?" I asked.

"I'm not leaving you here alone right now," Mom said.

She sat down across from me on the other side of the kitchen island, rubbing a hand over her jaw as if it had slipped out of place. Once after I came home bleeding from a fight with the girl next door, she went over and yelled at the girl's parents so loud that her jaw kept clicking for hours afterward. I remember getting scared that her face would never return to normal. After I apologized and apologized, I took her cheeks in my hands, feeling for the seam where the bones had gone wrong.

Right now, she didn't look like a different shape than the one I knew. She just looked tired.

I got up, put on the kettle, and found the chamomile tea in the cupboard. We both probably needed something calming.

"Is he grown up?"

"Sorry?"

“The son, if he’s visiting, does that mean he’s, like, an adult?”

Mom looked at me.

“What, I can’t ask questions about them?”

“He’s not an adult,” Mom said stiffly. “He was the product of a relationship that Joe had years ago. It’s his business, Dell, and not something I’m really comfortable getting into right now. I haven’t been focused on Joe these past few days, given recent events with you.”

She went very still after that, or maybe I did. There was a soft pop, and when I looked down, tea leaves were stuck to my palm—I’d squeezed the tea bag so hard that it had burst. I hadn’t felt it happen. The kettle broke the silence with a thin little scream.

“Then why didn’t you tell me about him earlier?” I asked in a singsong voice.

“It is not the same thing and you know it,” Mom snapped.

Sixteen-year-olds don’t get to have secrets like adults do.

I switched the kettle off. The idea of pulling out another tea bag seemed like a lot of effort all of a sudden. I imagined what would happen if I took the kettle and poured the water out over my hand instead. The skin would flush as red as my mother’s face; she would scream and lunge for the first aid kit. It was a weirdly satisfying image.

I got another tea bag out, filling the mug in silence. I set it down in front of her, and she thanked me softly.

“We could go to the cottage together,” I said. “Then I wouldn’t be alone, would I? I’m on summer vacation, so it’s not like I need to get up early tomorrow.”

I expected a no. It had been “no” my whole life, after all, when-

ever I asked about her childhood or about our family. It had been “Later, Dell,” or “That’s too long of a story for right now,” or, back when they were alive, “Ask your grandparents.”

“Okay,” my mother said. “Get your coat.”



When people think of the word “cottage,” they probably picture those summer homes my richer classmates visit periodically when they want to feel rustic for a weekend. The house on the lake wasn’t a cottage in that sense. It was where my grandparents had lived all year round, and it was in the boonies of rural Ontario, where nobody cared to vacation.

I don’t remember actually living there with my mother and grandparents because I had been too little then. The first time I realized that the apartment Mom and I had shared with the two ladies and the screaming baby wasn’t the first place I’d lived was when I was seven years old, and Grampa had given me the photos.

It’s my first clear memory of my grandparents. They had come for Thanksgiving to the building with the crooked stairs. Grampa had been tasked with amusing me while Gram and Mom made the food (this was before we got a VCR and the adults could keep me happy with old episodes of *Pokémon* during holidays). Grampa told me that our family had lived on the same property for generations, and brought out a set of seven photographs to prove that I was included in that.

“There’s the lake out the back of the house,” he said, finger

tracing the strip of dishwater blue on one picture. He flipped to the next one—me as a toddler, holding hands with another little girl. “And here’s you by the lake! With your little water wings. That was when we tried to teach you to swim. You hated it.”

“I don’t like water,” I told him. “It’s scary.”

“Even more reason for you to learn how to swim. Water doesn’t care how afraid you are when it’s angry.”

“What are you two talking about?” Mom called sharply from the kitchen side of our one-room apartment.

“Just showing Adele some of the pictures we have of her when she was little,” Grampa said.

Mom looked all pinched for a moment, but Gram touched her arm and Mom turned away. I don’t remember a lot of conversations with Gram—she never bent down when she spoke to me, so my predominant memory of her was of the stressed elbows of her sweaters, always jutting out from her sides like little chicken wings.

“Why don’t I live with you now?” I asked Grampa.

“Well, sweetheart, you and your mom only lived with us until she could get a job,” Grampa said. “And then she got one here, so you were able to move out. It’s normal for you and your mom to live somewhere else.” He made a grumbling sound like a radiator kicking on, and when he spoke again his voice was louder than before. “Though usually, when one’s daughter moves out with a grandbaby, there’s a father in the picture—”

“Dell,” Mom said. “Why don’t you come help your gram make this salad?”

That was the end of that conversation.

But I got to keep the photos, all seven of them. I kept them pinned in the center of the corkboard in my room, these days in among pictures of my best friend, Paul, and drawings my mother made. Imagining life at the cottage was the quiet obsession of my childhood. I was sure I would have fit in better there, with the trees and the hush and the stained earth. Space to run. Mom didn't let me go out by myself very often, worried about things in the city that could hurt a girl, suspicious of friends whose parents she hadn't met, strict about wasted time and potential.

I once asked her why we didn't simply move into the family home when both of my grandparents were gone, especially since I knew how much she struggled to afford our shitty apartments.

"You wouldn't have really wanted to live there," she'd said, laughing off the suggestion. "In a town with no Booster Juice? Don't you like it here? I swear we'll get a better place soon. Before you go off to university, how's that? You'll get a huge room. Seventeen corkboards so your pictures aren't crowded!"



We made that first hour-long drive mostly in silence. I watched the boxy lines of the city crumple down like Tetris levels into a flat, open plain of grass and darkness. My hair was still wet at the ends, but as we sped down the road, I could feel all of it—the shower, the fight, everything—falling behind the wheels.

Eventually, the grass turned into huge black rows of trees crowded up against the road. It started to pour, the kind of rain that turned the windshield into a rippled gloss in between wiper

swipes. I hollered when I spotted a driveway, and the car skidded into it, my mother clutching the steering wheel for dear life. We idled next to a red mailbox overflowing with wet newspapers. My mother wrenched open her car door to grab the stack.

“I guess Roger doesn’t read the mail,” I said as she slid the pile into my hands. The letters and flyers were so soaked that they felt soft, like feathers instead of paper.

The driveway was incredibly long. As our car pitched through a tunnel of trees, I tried to pick out animals or demons or mountains of garbage through the flat blackness. A tingling feeling rose up my arms, my body recognizing the setting even though my mind had lost those toddler memories. The moon cut through an open patch in the trees above, a burst of light as sudden and blinding as a camera flash—I squeezed my eyes shut, and when I opened them again the car was curving around one last twist in the driveway and the house was there.

It was a dark, blocky shape, stationary among the blowing trees. No lights on. Two main stories and what looked like a tiny attic were visible in the moonlight, a triangular peak rising above its narrow window. Mom’s chest sucked in at the sight, like her rib cage was trying to retreat further inside her. The car rolled to a stop, the headlights cutting two round spots through the dark, outlining a peeling wooden porch with several posts on the railing snapped clean in half.

We sat in silence for a moment. I felt like I might vibrate out of my skin.

Mom blew out a sharp breath and laughed. “What do you say we go to the town, get some gas, and go home?”

“We can’t go back now!”

“I didn’t think this through,” she said. She sounded kind of scared, which was weird because my mother got tense all the time, but she didn’t get scared. “I was just so worried—I don’t know why I drove you all the way out here. This really can be dealt with tomorrow. And I called Joe to tell him about this before we left, so I could still ask him to have a look. I’m sure it wouldn’t be that much of a bother.”

I hadn’t seen the cottage in over a decade and now she wanted to take back my first chance to actually go in? I popped open the glove box and grabbed one of my mother’s emergency flashlights.

“If you want to stay in the car, I understand,” I said. “I got it.”

I darted out of the car, sprinting away from my mother’s furious shriek toward the porch, the flashlight beam wavering crazily on the ground in front of me. Something heavy in my coat pocket bounced against my hip. The rain was colder than the shower had been, but it felt cleaner.

The headlights shut off as I reached the bottom step, and I almost face-planted into the sudden darkness. By the time I scrambled up onto the porch and out of the rain, my mother had reached me, the wet mail bundled up in her arms. She had another flashlight in her hands.

“When we get back, you’re grounded.”

“I thought I was already grounded for—you know. Is this kind of rain typical around here?”

“No,” my mother said. “There’s supposed to be a drought on right now.”

“Farmers are happy, I bet.”

When I knocked on the front door, it creaked open by itself; it hadn't been locked. We shared a nervous look before ducking inside. Mom slammed the door shut behind us, and the pound of rain was cut down to a muted buzz. I stood frozen in the darkness by the door.

“What if Roger's dead?” I whispered excitedly. “And we stumble on his body?”

“Adele, don't say things like that!” Her flashlight beam wobbled a bit as it cut along the floor and swept over the walls.

“There,” she said, her flashlight illuminating the light switches. I reached out and flicked the nearest one on.

The room flooded with light. We were standing in what looked like the kitchen, except there was no table or chairs, just scrape marks on the floor. It wasn't completely bare—a counter and upper cupboards were built into the far wall. One of the cupboard doors dangled from a broken hinge, revealing the emptiness inside. Hanging from the center of the ceiling was one of those old, fancy light fixtures, with three tulip-shaped glass heads and a wooden ceiling fan with flowers painted on it. One of the rotors was missing, and it was revolving slowly, as if someone had just tapped it to get it going.

I flicked the second switch and the ceiling fan picked up speed. I flicked it off and watched it slow again.

“Maybe Roger's been a ghost this whole time,” I said. For all I knew, he could've been, frankly. I'd never met him. My only reminder of his existence was when I would pick up the mail and there was a letter from him with the rent.

When I'd asked Mom why she'd chosen him to rent the place after Gram died, she'd just said, "He knew your father," which gave Roger one over me.

"He's not dead; he's just done a runner," Mom said, walking briskly to the counter. "Probably moved out the second someone reported what he was up to. You'd think after five years he'd at least let us know he was leaving."

"Maybe he's being chased by the Russian mob," I offered. "Are these the same cupboards and stuff from when you were growing up here?"

She slapped the stack of mail down on the counter. "Yes."

"I thought it would've been a bit dirtier," I muttered. "I mean, a hoarder level of dirty. Something to justify being called 'an illegal dumping site.'"

It was hard not to flood her with questions, but I didn't want to spook her. I'd gotten us in the house. That was a step forward. "There's acres of land on this property," Mom said. "He wouldn't have needed the house for it—the forest would've been a good spot. But we're not going out there tonight. I just wanted to speak to him and clear this up, but apparently that's not an option. I'll have to come back in a couple days to figure out what to do."

"Can I come next time, too?"

My mother didn't respond—she was staring at the broken cupboard, her mouth twisted down. I felt vaguely like I wasn't supposed to be looking, and I turned away.

There were two doorways to my left. The bigger one opened into a wider room, while the other led into a narrow hallway heading toward the back of the house. I moved through the first

doorway, down a couple steps into what had probably been a living room, which was revealed to be just as empty as the kitchen when I flicked the light on. Slowly, I walked to the center of the room. The floor had small indents in the wood, too, pale streaks skidding away from each dent, like speed lines. The afterimages of furniture, of life.

I tried to imagine myself standing in this room when I was younger. I'd expected to have a rush of nostalgia or excitement when I got inside—something like what I'd felt while we were driving up. But a huge feeling of loss welled up in me. Everything was gone.

My mother slammed a cupboard in the kitchen. In the wake of the noise, it was suddenly clear how quiet it was.

"I think it's stopped raining," I said.

"Sorry?" Mom said.

"It's not raining anymore!" I yelled.

I waited, but she didn't say anything else. I caught sight of a staircase, the last steps just visible through a doorway in the far corner of the room. I crossed over to it then paused, gazing up.

"That was what, a fifteen-minute shower?" I said. "If there's been a drought on, that won't have helped much."

I waited again. The air was still and silent. I missed, for what seemed like the thousandth time this week, the easy way my mother and I used to talk to each other.

"Mom, I'm going upstairs," I called.

There was a small flurry of noise from the kitchen, then silence.

"Be careful," she said. "I don't know what Roger's done to the house. Call for me if you see anything out of the ordinary. And

keep an eye on the ground; there could be nails. Or you could get a splinter.”

“Through my shoes?”

“Maybe you should just wait until I’m done here, and I can come with you.”

“It’s a house, Mom,” I said. I tested the first step. “Not a death trap.”

“Adele—”

“I’ll call if I need you!”

The top of the stairs looked like a mouth above me. When I aimed my flashlight up, the menacing throat of it disappeared, flattening out into nothing more than old steps and a cracked wall at the top.

I could say that my mother wasn’t always this overprotective, but it simply wouldn’t be true. Overprotectiveness was a weapon she wielded well. The whole Christopher thing had just made it sharper.

Of course, that was the reason I’d had to keep him under wraps. The day I invited Christopher Smith into my room, during the last few weeks of school, I’d triple-checked that my mother would be staying late at work. Somehow, she seeped into the house with us anyway. While I gave him the grand tour, I ended up talking about her, about the cottage where my family used to live. He stood in front of my desk, his shoulders huge in my small room, and looked at my corkboard.

“Did you draw these?” he asked, pointing at a spray of penciled flowers I’d pinned up.

“My mom did. I’m useless at art.”

“Is she, like, an artist or something?”

“I think she wanted to be when she was younger, but then—then she had me, so.”

“Who’s this?”

He’d pulled one of my photos right off the corkboard, tearing it from the pin. It was the one of me with the other little girl beside the lake.

“Me and someone I knew when I was a kid. The daughter of a friend of my mom’s. We lived in the country when I was a toddler.”

“You look so cute,” he said. “Always knew you couldn’t be a city girl.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause you’ve got something wild about you,” he said.

I was sprawled back on my bed, propped on my elbows to look up at him. My legs dangled off the bed, and he came forward to stand between them, gazing down at me. There was light all around his face where his head blocked the window, creating a dazzling haze at the edges.

“And you make such a good model, too,” he added.

I tripped.

Suddenly, I was back in my own body, climbing that dark staircase in the cottage. I caught myself on the steps as I fell, my windbreaker crackling angrily around me. Something clunked hard on the stairs as the left side of the jacket swung forward.

The windbreaker, two sizes too big, was handed down from my mother. The last time I’d worn it was on a date (that we didn’t call a date) with Christopher in the park after school. He’d brought

his whole camera setup—the big professional-looking one with lenses that he could swap out, the little point-and-shoot, and the beat-up Polaroid he said his parents had given him as a gag gift. He stuffed the last one into my pocket at the end of the afternoon and told me it was a loan.

“Shoot me something good,” he’d said.

The camera was still there now. I could feel it, huge and bulky, impossible to ignore. I’d known it was there when I put on the jacket back at my house; I just didn’t know why I hadn’t picked another jacket until this moment.

Halfway up the steps, I took the camera out, driven by the same weird impulse that had sent me slamming out of the car into the rain. It wasn’t the one he’d used, that afternoon in my bedroom, I told myself. And it was in my hands now, not his. Two contrasting urges gripped me. Smash it on the floor, make dents of my own in the wood—or make it mine in a different way.

I raised it to my eyes and turned to look behind me, at the path I’d just blazed up the steps. The flash bleached the narrow staircase white. When a picture popped out of the top, I stuck it and the camera back in my pocket without looking at it. The choice had been so quick I couldn’t deal with it now.

But somehow, I felt stronger. I kept climbing.

When I reached the top of the stairs, the first thing I saw, to my left, was wallpaper peeling off the wall in long curls. To the right was a narrow hallway with two doors. Watery moonlight filtered in through a window at the end of the hall, outlining squares of embellishment on one of the doors in a faint blue. The other door was open, a tall rectangle of black in the wall.

I couldn't hear my mother anymore, couldn't hear anything. The hallway felt like its own bubble of space and time, completely separate from my regular life. I swept my flashlight back and forth, and mundane details stuck out like new discoveries in an alien landscape: the layer of dust sitting on a decorative ledge; the pattern of the floorboards, short and almost square, like cobblestones; the smell of the stale, wooden air.

I raised the camera for another shot, a miniature blast of lightning in the hallway. It felt easier, using it the second time, and the thought cheered me.

The fear was gone. The city and Christopher were gone. I could feel myself in the floor under my feet. The photo and camera went back in my pocket.

And then, two steps later—a sound from the open door on my right. A distinctive creak.

I froze.

“Hello?” I whispered.

Nothing.

A raccoon, I told myself. Or just the house adjusting to having people in it again.

Holding my free hand at the ready in case I needed to defend myself, I slowly crossed to the open door. I'd flunked out of karate as a kid, ironically for being “too violent.” Would that count in my favor if Roger was actually still here, just waiting for someone to come investigate so he could go all Jack the Ripper on us?

The door led to another empty room. I aimed my flashlight over a crisscross of heavy beams on the ceiling and what looked like a closet door on the right wall.

This room was darker than the hallway; the two small windows on the opposite wall weren't at the right angle to properly let in the moonlight.

I was just about to step back into the hallway when I saw it.

There, in the crack at the bottom of the closet door—a sliver of white, glowing when my flashlight caught it. Something Roger hadn't thrown out?

I crossed to the door and threw it open.

A face hung in the blackness. Two wide human eyes met mine.

Something hit my chest, driving the air out of my lungs. The room pitched viciously, and I was slammed back onto the ground, one leg twisted underneath me. My head met the floor and bounced up into a strange, sweaty palm. It pressed down over my mouth; skin stretched against my teeth, and I tasted salt. For a moment, I couldn't see anything at all, my vision gone static like a television in a storm.

“Oh,” said a voice. “You're just a kid.”

My eyes refocused. The face was there above me.

It was a girl, a teenage girl, I thought. Her hair cascaded down around us, soft on my collarbone.

I yelled something like “What the fuck!” into her hand and tried to buck her off, arms flailing ineffectively. Her face shifted, and I felt her straddle me, knees clamping my body in place.

“I'll take my hand off if you don't yell, okay?” she offered.

I nodded. She took her hand away. I screamed, and she clapped her hand back down, cutting off the sound.

“Jesus Christ,” the girl said. “I ask for one thing.”

The flashlight, still clutched in my nerveless fingers, lit up a

bright streak across her body, sweeping over a T-shirt and a red windbreaker and one bare shoulder that had slipped out of the fabric.

I pitched my head to the side violently enough to dislodge her hand. Anger had beaten out fear.

“What the fuck?” I said again.

“Who are you?” the girl asked sharply.

“Who am I?” I said incredulously. “You’re the one hiding in a closet! In the dark!”

“Because I heard a car coming up to an abandoned house and I didn’t know if it was murderers or not!” she shrieked.

“If it’s an abandoned house, what are you doing here?” I demanded.

“My stepmom owns it.”

I stared, my response caught in my throat.

“What’s going on up there?” Mom shouted from downstairs. The space between us distorted her voice, making her sound unfamiliar.

“You came with someone?” the girl asked, her profile swimming back into view. I couldn’t decide whether she looked scared or simply intense.

“No,” I said, letting a tremor come into my voice. “I have no idea who that is.”

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. Maybe I was followed.”

Teach you to call me a kid, I thought. She couldn’t be much older than me, and yet she was going all James Bond on me for opening a closet?

Mom was hurtling up the stairs now, making an awful, panicked racket. The creaking steps made it sound like a monster was approaching, not a thirtysomething woman. The girl was no longer bent over me, her head turned instead toward the door. All at once, she swung her leg over me, releasing her knee-hold on my hips.

“You should hide,” she said suddenly. “Get in the closet.”

That wasn’t what I’d been expecting. “What?”

Shoes squealed at the end of the hall. The girl swore under her breath, rising higher in her crouch to block the doorway from my eyes—she’d put herself between me and the hall. There was a sliver of movement past her shoulder, and she made an aborted movement, half lunging off the ground before she came to an abrupt halt.

“Anne?”

“Ivy?” came Mom’s voice from the doorway. She sounded winded. “What are you doing here?”

The girl shot fully to her feet, and my mother was suddenly visible, standing in the hallway with her flashlight pointing at the ground. When she spotted me on the floor, she rushed forward to pull me to my feet. I immediately noticed that the other girl was taller than me then felt stupid for caring.

“You aren’t hurt, are you?” my mother asked. “What happened?”

“I’m fine. She just jumped out of a closet and surprised me,” I replied. “Ivy?” I knew that name somehow.

“You were hiding in the closet?” Mom said, rounding on the girl.

“I was checking out the house for you,” Ivy explained. “I overheard my dad on the phone with you and, I mean, he’s all distracted with Jamie, and Jamie’s mom doesn’t want me in the house when he’s there anyway, so I thought I could come over and talk to Roger to help you out, and then it started to rain and the door was open . . .”

She trailed off, shrugging uncomfortably.

With the second flashlight and the moonlight from the hallway adding an ambient glow, Ivy’s features were starting to come into focus. She had long hair tucked up in a high ponytail, and a pointy chin that stuck out, her first line of defense. It was a face I had seen before, I was sure.

“She said you were her stepmom,” I said to my mother.

Ivy twitched slightly, a half step in my direction.

“You said you didn’t know who else was in the house,” she hissed at me. Then, loud enough for my mother to hear, she said, “I said that only ‘cause I didn’t know it was you downstairs, Anne. I was just trying to make my story sound more believable because I thought she was breaking in.”

“It’s fine,” Mom said, hands out like she was soothing a pair of fussy cats. “It’s all right. Ivy, this is my daughter, Adele. Adele, this is Joe’s daughter, Ivy. I’ve mentioned her, remember? I think she’s actually in one of—”

“My pictures,” I said. The ones from Grampa, the little girl holding my hand. I felt a dragging feeling, like my lungs were descending into my legs. I had a burning desire to shine my flashlight directly into Ivy’s face so I could see her properly and temporarily blind her all at once. I slid my hand into my pocket instead—the camera

didn't feel like it had been damaged in my fall.

Mom was already talking to Ivy again.

"Does Joe know you're here?"

"No."

"And you came out here by yourself? In the rain?"

"I like going running out past here. I know the area, and it's not that late. Joe's fine as long as I'm back by eleven."

Mom's face was tight with disapproval, like it had been a few days ago, when I was trying to explain what I'd let a boy do. I knew that look—she was definitely about to start yelling. I braced myself, hoping I wouldn't get dragged into it.

My mother sighed.

"Okay," she relented. "Okay."

I waited, but nothing else seemed to be coming.

"Mom?"

My mother ignored me.

"Why don't we get you two downstairs," she said.

"She broke into our house!" I exclaimed.

"The door was open," Ivy said defensively. She wasn't even looking at me, and something about that rankled me even more than my mother not listening.

"It's still trespassing!" I cried. "No matter who your stupid dad is!"

"Adele!" Mom snapped. A flush of embarrassment lit up my skull.

Mom turned back to Ivy. "We'll get this sorted out, okay?"

"Yeah," Ivy said. "All right." A pause, and then she stepped forward into Mom's outstretched arms and hugged her quickly.

“It’s good to see you,” Ivy said, her voice muffled.

My mother blinked and hugged her back, slightly stiff but looking pleased. An intense resentment suddenly threatened at the back of my throat, like acid reflux.

“Joe was always doing reckless things when he was younger, too,” Mom said softly. “Gosh, it’s dark up here. Dell, no wonder people think you’re creeping up on them if you don’t turn the lights on.”

She paused, reaching a hand out toward me. “You’re sure you didn’t hurt yourself when you fell?”

The final injustice. There was no way I could admit that my ankle hurt in front of this new girl, especially when she looked so cozy cuddled up against my mother. How could Mom not understand that there was no dignified way for me to answer her question?

“I’m not made of tissue paper!” I retorted, flapping a hand to dismiss my mother’s. Which, okay, wasn’t very gracious, but I was low on options.

“Well,” Mom said, clearly taken aback. “I apologize for asking then.”

She blew past me with her arm tucked securely around the other girl’s shoulders. Just as they passed through the doorway, Ivy looked back at me, and for the first time, as the moonlight in the hallway caught her fully, her whole face was visible.

I had stared at that face again and again while growing up—held it in a square in my hand and wished to be back there beside those dark eyes and that dark hair—but now that she was here in front of me again, time had made her unfamiliar.

This girl wasn't the friend I'd always envisioned, couldn't be, not when she was looking at me like that, a hint of a triumphant smile leaking out over Mom's arm.

They turned toward the stairs and were gone. I was alone again, but the feeling I'd grasped in the hallway before was gone completely. If there was anything of me up here, Ivy had trampled over it.