

How do you start fresh when you live with the dead?

Who built this house?  
Whose money? Whose blood?

*I check out my neck but don't see anything to indicate the grip  
of two strong, meaty hands squeezing the life out of me.*

*It was only a dream. I'm fine. Unscathed.*

*But if Nan's right and dreams mean something,  
the only thing I can think is that I'm not welcome in this house.*

X

Ever since Asha and her mom moved into Great Aunt Aggie's old place, Asha's been hearing strange footsteps and waking up at night with a suffocating weight on her chest she can't explain. Her new neighbor Cole doesn't believe in ghosts. But as they grow closer, they uncover secrets that tie their families together—and histories of oppression that reverberate into the present.

And Asha can't shake the feeling that the violence in these walls is going to repeat itself.

A HOUSE UNSETTLED

DELANEY

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TRYNNE DELANEY

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# A HOUSE UNSETTLED

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TRYNNE DELANEY is a writer currently based in Tiohtià:ke (Montréal). They were born on the west coast and raised on the east coast in the place colonially known as Canada. Trynne has never seen a ghost, but they've been one.



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**To everyone who's been a ghost  
or known one**

—T.D.



PART ONE



*DUST*



## CHAPTER ONE

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*T*raci kills the ignition with a swift hand. Her aging station wagon shudders to a halt and the headlights flick off. It's evening. The old-growth trees that surround Great Aunt Aggie's property make just enough shade to give our surroundings the dark blue illusion of night.

Traci breathes out relief, breaking our silence. "We're home."

*Home.* I wouldn't have used such a strong word for this place. I understand why we had to move to Great Aunt Aggie's old house, but that doesn't make me any less homesick for the city, its foggy mornings, and our vermin-free house. This place, no matter how many times I visited growing up, remains unfamiliar to me. But Traci needed to come back; she and Aggie were each other's only close living relatives, since she lived with Aggie as a teenager and all Aggie's siblings moved out west before Traci was even born. Traci says their moving away was a betrayal of the highest order for Aggie. When the cousins came out east to visit, she'd tolerate their presence as long as they made no mention of her brothers. We're the only branch of the family left on the east coast. If Traci hadn't stepped up to take care of the house, it would've been demolished. Without Dad around, I had to come with her.



Still, as the sun set over the harbor last night, I thought maybe Traci would decide this was all part of her midlife crisis, same as her losing her job, and that she didn't actually want to move out to the middle of nowhere to an enormous and desperately neglected house where she spent her unhappiest teenage years. Up until last night, I refused to pack in hopes that would convince her to stay in the city. When that didn't work, I got mean. We're both still picking the shards of that argument out of our skin.

Each of us is hanging on to the promise of a fresh start—the only thing we agree on is wanting to get as far out of people's sightlines as possible after what happened to Dad.

As we step out of the car, the house's hulking body blocks out the setting sun, coating us in a damp cool. Traci smiles at me wide. "Isn't it just gorgeous?" she says with a sigh, her eyes glinting against the little remaining light. I squint at Aggie's house and try to imagine what it'll look like when all the repairs and cleaning are done. It's hard. My eyes move over the gaping rottenness of it all, unable to focus on anything specific.

Traci pops the trunk, and we pull our luggage from the car. One thing I share with my mother is a talent for packing lightly. Each of us only brought one suitcase. Jeff will bring the rest of the things in his truck next weekend. He said he couldn't make the three-hour commute with us on a weekday because he needs to be sharp at work if he wants to make CEO when his boss retires. It's fine with me that he couldn't make it. I'm not exactly itching for the three of us to live together—it didn't go so well last time we tried.

"You got everything?" Traci reaches up to pull down the trunk hatch. She hesitates. "You want to bring in your skateboard?"

My board leans against the dented side of the trunk, the scratched purple UFO on the back reminds me of riding through the night back in our old neighborhood with Nia. I checked my

phone the whole way here but there were no messages from her to distract me from the distance of the highway between us. She's probably heading to the skate park to practice her rock to fakie with some friends before her flight to Freetown takes off in a few days. Homesickness holds me so tight around the throat I can't breathe for a minute.

"You coming?" Traci is already navigating the path to the house. The structure blurs at the edges, crooked and imprecise. Maybe I'm carsick. "Careful not to get any ticks!"

I shudder at the overgrown grass leading to the door, but grit my teeth and follow. The path often forgets its direction in the alternating weeds and dry patches that eventually take me to the entrance. As much as I try to avoid it, my calves bear the tickling of overgrowth. I ignore the urge to swat away potential bloodsuckers until I'm at the door. I can already feel lumps beginning to swell and simmer beneath my skin.

Traci points to the third step. It's sagging on the left side. "Watch you don't step there. It's rotten." I'm careful to avoid it as I follow her onto the porch.

Even here, in the questionable security of the porch's rotten overhang, the details of the house remain blurred against my memory of it. Me and my cousins played out here in the winter, one Christmas when the adults decided to have a reunion. We raced in circles around the house, climbing the railings of the wraparound veranda. Back then, trips out here were an adventure. We were so close to nature and spent summer weekends swimming in the clear waters of a nearby ravine, jumping onto springy beds of moss . . . that vague memory version of this house is as distant as my cousins, who haven't come to visit in six years.

I wonder what it's like for Traci to be back. Maybe she only sees what it could become when it's restored. I can't tell from her face, which is upturned, searching for the hidden key in the rafters.

“Aha!” she says with glee. She tries to reach for it, but she’s too short. “Honey, I need your height.”

On tiptoes, I reach up into the cobwebbed rafters. The key is tired brass hardware store stock mangled by years of over-twisting in sticky locks. I’m startled by its warmth in my hand, like someone else was recently holding it. I drop it and it skitters to a stop just before it slips through the wide cracks of the soft porch wood. Holding it gingerly between my fingers, I drop it into Traci’s palm.

“Thanks Asha.” Traci kisses my cheek. I almost pull away out of habit, but I want to love her just as bad, and my arms find their way around her. She holds on too long. It’s as if she’s sucking the love out of me. When I was younger, I used to curl up beside her in bed when I had nightmares and melt into the safety of her. Now something about our skin touching is artificial.

Traci unlocks the door and steps inside. The smell of air that’s been still too long curls out of the house like smoke. Its undertones are familiar and alive: aging wood, silver polish, yeast, and pine . . . but the result is as strange as looking at someone you knew well in an open casket; all that compressed dust pretending life.

When I glance back at the car, all that falls outside the house’s shadow is cut with the lowering sunlight, sharp as shards of glass.



In the vestibule, Traci swipes her hand over the wall until she finds the switch and dim yellow light flickers into the space.

“Mice probably chewed up all the wiring in here,” she mutters as she unties her shoes and leaves them neatly next to an intimidating pile of Aggie’s old ones: a rubber boot, a sneaker, a kitten heel she must not have worn since at least the early 2000s, and enormous steel-toed boots that look even older. From my

quick glance over the pile, I can't even find matches for all of them. They're just collected there, junk removed of all function. Looking at them makes me intensely lonely.

I hold up one of the steel-toed boots. "These weren't Aggie's, were they?"

"Put those down." When I don't drop the shoe fast enough, Traci pulls it from my hand and throws it back on the pile.

"I could've put it back myself." Traci's wiping her hands off vigorously on her pants. In between wipes, she gives me a warning glance to correct my tone. Maybe she saw something on the boot I couldn't see. "Was there a spider on it or something?"

"You don't know where those shoes have been."

"Looks like they've mostly been sitting in that pile."

"They meant something to Aggie." Traci takes a deep breath, then purses her lips. I get the feeling she could say more about the boots but she doesn't want to get into it right now. Maybe the boots mean something to Traci too.

I kick off my own muddy sneakers and leave them next to hers. She bristles at my carelessness, so I follow her lead and place them neatly on the mat.

"Aunt Aggie liked her shoes. And she never threw any of them out. She was certain there'd be a use for them someday. Typical of anyone who lived through the second world war." Traci picks up one of the kitten heels and blows the dust off, rubs a corner clean with her sleeve. The patent leather takes on a dull shine. "They look like your size, actually. Perfect condition, too. Why don't you try them on?"

I take the shoe like it's a wild snake. Part of me wants to point out the hypocrisy in her offering me one of the shoes right after snatching one from my hand, but I remind myself of the fresh start we both want and can my criticism. Maybe this kitten heel is a peace offering. When I went to prom with Steven Kennedy last spring, I hated every moment I was chained to my shoes,

but they were Traci's treat; our first big purchase together after I had to move back in with her when Dad was arrested. She was so excited to share the secrets of femininity I'd been deprived of while living with my father, but wearing them made me feel like a pretender. Was this who I was supposed to be? In all the pictures on Traci's newsfeed, I look so happy.

Traci holds the other shoe out for me. I slip the heels onto my socked feet.

"Walk around in them a bit. You need to do that to make sure they fit right."

"I know." I take a deep breath, paste on a smile for her.

I take a couple awkward steps. Even having walked in heels higher than these at prom, my ankles wobble in their sockets. I pass over the threshold of the vestibule into the dimness of Aunt Aggie's house.

"They look amazing on you! You should keep them. I think she'd want you to have them." I doubt that, but I smile at Traci. Aunt Aggie and I barely interacted over the years. By the end of her life, I don't think she even remembered who I was. She was always kind of scary to me. She had this severe frown line that ran down the center of her forehead and made her look perpetually judgmental. It was years since I'd last seen her, so I don't know what she would have wanted. I didn't even know what she wanted when she was alive.

*Positivity*, I remind myself. *This move will make everything easier.*

I glance back at the pile of shoes. Was her shoe collection the only company she had in this big house? A crack snags the rough edge of the heel and I trip. The whole heel breaks off. I don't realize I fell until I'm standing back up and watching the can of beans I shoplifted from the Jiffy-Mart roll from my hoodie pocket into a darkened corner.

"Oh honey, are you ok?" Traci squeezes my arm. Her brow is furrowed. If this fall looked bad, she should see the bruises on my legs from last week's skate.

“Only thing I hurt was my pride,” I say. The words feel stolen from Dad’s mouth. Traci doesn’t laugh. It reminds her of him too. Neither of us, me or Dad, could ever stand to be embarrassed. Even the smallest mistakes we brush off or try to cover up. I don’t know why we’re like this, but I think it’s why moving out here feels a little like a relief despite the homesickness. I don’t have to face the embarrassment of everyone I know knowing about the charges against Dad. Instead, I swallow it all down.

“Glad you’re ok,” Traci says finally. “Guess you’re not keeping these, hey?” She throws the shoes back on the pile. “Go take your suitcase upstairs.” Traci leaves her own suitcase at the bottom of the stairs and flips the light switches for all the rooms all the way down the hall to the kitchen. The whole place is exposed for its dusty, neglected self, when in the dark, it might’ve pretended grandness for just a few moments longer.



When we used to visit Aggie, I’d sleep in Traci’s childhood room. That’s where I head automatically. Upstairs, I find myself at the head of a hall on a long threadbare imported carpet. The carpet used to be a rich red, Traci told me, but I’ve always known it to be a faded pink and gray-beige from the wear and tear of feet. The carpet holds Aunt Aggie’s shuffling footsteps. A pattern on the original obscuring it. I try to walk on the places where it looks like she didn’t. Something about stepping on her path feels like bad luck or disrespect.

The oak doors to each room are shut, but their crystal doorknobs still glint in the light that rises up the stairwell. Great Aunt Aggie kept all the doors closed except when family would come to stay. Traci says that with the doors closed, Aggie was able to shrink the house in her mind so it didn’t feel so lonely. When she was growing up, Traci wasn’t allowed in any of the other rooms under any circumstance except holiday visits, not



even Aunt Aggie's. She said it was really the only rule in the house. So, of course, she broke it. When Aggie went out to the market on Saturday mornings, Traci looked inside the rooms. She didn't find anything interesting, though. Just a bunch of dust and antique furniture. She supposed, for Aggie, looking into those rooms must have brought up memories. For Traci, the rooms felt empty.

I head toward Traci's childhood bedroom. It's the only room in the house that doesn't look perfectly preserved from the Victorian era. It's another kind of time capsule, though. The walls are pasted with posters of The Cranberries, Prince, Nirvana, and a bunch of local bands long since forgotten. A weird mix of the transition from the '80s to '90s that Traci grew up in. Big hair clips and heavy earrings line the drawers. Hairspray aerosol cans in the closet. When I was younger, I imagined the room smelled a little like Traci's teenage self: all chemical, just like the '80s and '90s before people realized how truly fucked the climate is. Her old books are in there too, mostly ones from school like *The Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I can't believe I'm still reading the same bullshit books in class after thirty years.

At least, as I turn the icy doorknob to enter, that's what I expect to see: a time capsule of Traci's youth. Instead, the walls are blank, faded around where the posters used to be. Everything is blank. No combs or big barrettes on the dresser. The mirror reflects the emptiness of the room. The bed's made with fresh white linens. It smells like dryer lint. Clean but dusty. When I pass over the threshold, will I become as colorless and empty as this room? I throw my bag on the bed to wrinkle the sheets a bit and put my jacket on the floor. There. Now, at least it looks like *somebody* lives in this old house. If I'd known the room would be so empty, I'd have brought stuff to decorate. Maybe this is better, though. A blank slate. Just what I wanted, right?

As I leave the room to head back downstairs, I think I see a flash of light on the wall across from the mirror. I swear I could

feel some heat off it too. I glance toward the mirror, then out the window that opens onto the woods diagonal to it. I can't see any light from here, not even streetlights. I close the door behind me and walk downstairs to the kitchen.

I find the can of beans in the dusty corner beside the staircase. I cradle them and wipe the cobwebs off the label, then bring the can to Traci in the kitchen. She's staring out the window over the kitchen sink, in a kind of trance. I have to tap her on the shoulder to get her attention.

She's so deep in her head that she jumps at my touch and grabs my wrist hard as she turns to face me. Her eyes hold an old well of fear I haven't seen on her before. When she sees it's me, she laughs. "You startled me! You're a regular Casper. All those old stories must've gotten to me." I don't laugh with her. My heart is racing too, now, but I hold back my fear and shake the can of beans.

"Got this at the Jiffy-Mart." I place it next to the small bag of groceries we brought from home. When Traci sees the can, her eyes well up.

"Oh, Asha. I can't believe you bought these. You remember when we used to eat these together, right?"

I nod. We used to eat beans every Saturday when I was a kid and Dad was out working at the sports center all day. Traci always said it was a treat because they're so sweet they might as well be dessert. Until I pulled the can off the shelf and stowed it away, I'd forgotten about that. Those sweet moments we used to share are buried under all the fights we've had since. Ugly things we've said that sit just behind the corners of our eyes. And even though I didn't buy them and I know I shouldn't be shoplifting, especially after Dad's arrest, it touches me to see my peace offering is understood. Besides, how can it be immoral to take one can of beans from a gas station owned by a company that's destroyed the land of this province again and again until half its people are living in poverty?

Traci wrenches the can open and pours the beans into a small pot. The smell of baked beans and molasses fills my head, clears away the strangeness of being here. Sweet comfort food. Traci hums as she stirs.

“Let’s eat.” She pours the beans into two cracked cream-colored hexagonal bowls. We sit at the kitchen table in the bad flickering fluorescence. It washes us out, makes us both look sick and gaunt. But for now at least, that’s a false image. For now, we’re both happy and full and warm. I imagine living here for the next year and it doesn’t seem so bad.

Inside me, the beans grumble. Something skitters across the floor, into the shadows.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

When the scent of coffee finds its way upstairs, I rise from a dead sleep. Voices, low and serious, follow the coffee scent into my room. My hand locates my phone squished between the headboard and the wall, and I check the time. Eight thirty. It's too early. Who's making house calls at this hour? I pull a pillow over my head to try to block the noise out as their somber voices morph into raucous laughter. I thought one of the benefits of leaving the city would be that Traci wouldn't make so much noise in the morning. No more coffee dates, no more running buddies, no more dishes to clean up before people judge us for our mess at seven in the morning. But she's still found a way to interrupt my sleep. I'm a teenager, I'm growing, I need to sleep. Period.

I roll over and bury my face in my pillow, but the pillowcase is dusty as hell. And the pillow itself smells like a wet basement. I try to stifle it but an enormous sneeze bursts through my face and I'm fully awake whether I want to be or not.

It would've been hard to sleep much longer anyway. The morning sun falls through the east-facing window, diffused through the ancient elm growing a few metres away from the house. Something about this house keeps cool, even in summer.

Traci told me it's because people were a lot more thoughtful about how they designed houses in the 1800s, since they didn't have central cooling.

As the sun inches onto my bed, it feels warm, peaceful, so I stretch, throw my legs off the bed and move closer to the wonky panes. Mist rises over the trees, tinted gold against the rapidly bluing sky and thick green of the woods bordering the property. For a minute, everything arranges itself into paradise. Then my eyes wander to the muddy truck parked crookedly behind our station wagon and the elaborate gardens Great Aunt Aggie once so carefully tended, now overgrown with poison ivy. It's strange. All the decay I expected from my first glance at this old place looks more like growth from up here.

I look for the spots I remember having fun in as a kid; there used to be a tire swing hanging from a tall oak that Aggie got some neighbor to put up so me and my cousins wouldn't stay inside denting mahogany and chipping china. Where is that swing now? My eyes comb the blurry edge of the treeline where new growth is emerging: little saplings, wildflowers, weeds . . . nothing to indicate the existence of that big old truck tire hanging from a frayed length of rope.

But then I strain my eyes to gaze farther back, past the saplings to the more developed trees, and I see a pair of legs swinging lazily, without any clear direction, sticking out of the brush. They're so pale, awkwardly crossed, and bruised up so badly, that at first my heart races, thinking I've clocked a dead body. Maybe it's just what I've come to expect of this old house—Aggie's death and the signs of decay tricking me into seeing such morbid traces on the landscape. Or I'm on edge from everything that's happened recently. Just a year ago, I don't think I would've assumed the worst. A year ago, I was a different person.

It's probably some local kid. Traci's always talking about how people let their kids roam free here.

I scan the brush again, and the legs are gone. Maybe whoever was swinging went back into the woods.

It's nice out today. I think I'll try skating to Main Street.

I pull on my ragged jeans, a hoodie, one of Dad's old basketball jerseys, and head downstairs.

In the kitchen, Traci is sitting across the table from a lady who looks like she spends most of her time outdoors. I get the feeling she looks older than her age. Her stiff posture doesn't match her babyface and soft blue eyes. A few streaks of gray salt her auburn hair, pulled tight into a ponytail.

When she sees me, her face opens into a warm grin. "You don't recognize me?"

I didn't expect her to speak to me. I shake my head no. Do I know her?

Traci rolls her eyes as if I should remember this stranger. "Mrs. Levesque-Gerges from next door. You and her daughter, Nicole, used to play together as babies the first few times I brought you and your father to visit Aggie out here. She's been taking care of the house." I find that hard to believe with the amount of dust that's layered up on everything.

"It's a shame you didn't come visit more, Trace." Mrs. Levesque-Gerges reaches out and places a hand over Traci's. It's pointed and overly sympathetic, the kind of gesture I know Traci considers an overreaction. I wonder if Mrs. Levesque-Gerges knows about Dad. Or maybe her sympathy is with Traci's loss of Aggie. Most people consider Traci and Dad's divorce a good call on Traci's part now that Dad's behind bars.

"Well, not until after the divorce. Asha's father didn't like it out here. Maybe you remember, Kel, Asha's great-grandparents were settled out here before they moved to the city."

"How could I forget?" Neither of them moves for a minute. They're frozen in their own thoughts, each waiting for the other to say something. Did something happen with my



great-grandparents? Mrs. Levesque-Gerges is the first to break the silence. “It’s such a grand old house. Shame Aggie neglected the place. Always made me feel like a princess walking through these halls when we were teenagers.”

The grin she shoots my way feels like an overcompensation for the awkward silence. Not wanting to endure another, I follow up: “You were friends?” Mrs. Levesque-Gerges in her John Deere camo fleece across from my mother in her cream Hudson’s Bay merino sweater that Jeff bought her. It seems impossible to imagine Traci in this woman’s world, let alone as friends.

Mrs. Levesque-Gerges turns to face me, grinning ear to ear. “We weren’t just friends. Tied at the hip, we were!” she exclaims. “At least until you got married. But of course, it was silly to stay apart all those years.”

“Well, you can’t choose your partner’s family.” Traci’s mouth is tight. It gets that way when she’s trying to protect other people’s comfort at the sake of her own. I wonder what happened between them. I always thought Traci and Dad’s family got along.

Traci clears her throat. “Asha, Kelly cleaned my old room out for you.”

“Oh, thanks. Do you know what happened to the Prince poster that was in there?” I ask. Mrs. Levesque-Gerges stares at me blankly. I take that to mean it’s in the trash. I really wanted that poster, but maybe it’s better this way. A true fresh start. Not a trace of Traci’s past in the house either. Just us and Aggie’s junk.

“Sorry I didn’t recognize you, Mrs. Levesque-Gerges. But I’m glad my mum has a friend here.” Even if Traci and Mrs. Levesque-Gerges have some beef that’s gone unresolved all these years, and I wish I had that poster, I’m being honest: it’s good Traci has someone in this town who still knows who she is and cares enough to come by.

Mrs. Levesque-Gerges reaches out a hand and I shake it. Her grip is tight. I remember what my dad told me about how

shaking tight signals strength of character and I grip hers equally strongly back. She seems a bit surprised by this and massages her palm as she corrects me: “Call me Kelly. And I think you and my daughter Nicole would still get along.” She chuckles and takes a sip of her black coffee. “You used to play so well as babies.”

“Oh yeah?” I say. Traci is tapping the side of her mug impatiently. She must want to discuss something specific with Kelly. I hold up my skateboard. “I’m going out.”

“Now?” Traci surfaces from her coffee, scandalized that I would leave without breakfast. There’s a box of frozen waffles on the counter. She must’ve gone out to get them before I woke up. It’s a nice gesture, but I’d rather duck out until they’re finished having whatever strained conversation they were building up to before I interrupted.

“Had a granola bar upstairs. I’ll be back in a bit. See you.”

As I reach for the kitchen door, Traci says, “Remember how we used to spend so much time on our hair and clothes? See how kids go out now? I’m all for self-expression, God knows . . .” Her comment is not directed at me, but I still turn around. Traci hates when I dress to go skateboarding because she thinks I’m hiding my figure. It takes every ounce of my self-control not to talk back to her in front of Kelly.

“Nobody cares how I dress.” I try to tamp my temper down, avoid letting it seep into my tone.

Traci turns back toward Kelly. It’s unclear if she heard me. “All the bright colors and the hairspray. And now . . .”

Kelly glances at me then faces Traci, as if I’m not even part of the conversation. “Oh yeah, Nicole is just the same. Don’t understand her style one bit. It’s all Hassan’s dirty old t-shirts and baggy pants.”

They both cackle. Traci wipes tears from her eyes. “I do sometimes wish you’d show your body a little more, though, Ash. You’re so beautiful.”

I try to smile. I don't know how convincing it is. "I just don't think you'd say the same thing if you had a boy, you know?"

Traci lets out a frustrated breath. "You don't need to make me out to be the patriarchy, here, Asha. I just said you were beautiful."

"You're talking about my body, my clothes, as if I'm not even here. Acting like I'm weird for going out in—" I gesture up and down at my outfit. Heat is rising in my chest, threatening to burst out, "*—this.*"

"I just want you to look like you have someone to care for you—" Traci is usually so composed in the presence of guests, but maybe something is different with Kelly, who is now fiddling awkwardly with her coffee mug.

"Isn't that classist? What if you couldn't afford nice clothes for me?"

Kelly laughs awkwardly and jumps in to loosen the tension. "Well, your daughter certainly inherited your fire, Traci!"

"The headaches I must have caused Aggie . . ."

It's as if I'm not here again.

"I'm heading out," I say, and bolt before she can protest more. The kitchen door slams behind me. It's not on purpose, it's just heavier than I'm used to. The screen rattles in its frame. I think about looking back, about apologizing, but instead I set out for the road.



The long dirt driveway ends with a mucky puddle before the road begins. On the way in, Traci called it a moat. It's not the most welcoming entrance or graceful exit from this grand old house. It also shows how little traffic Great Aunt Aggie got in her last years. The only people coming in and out were probably the Levesque-Gergeses who did their neighborly duty of bringing her groceries and cleaning house when she couldn't do it herself.

The puddle is so wide and deep that as I slosh through it, I soak my shoes, socks, and jeans with thick brown-red water. I can't help but think it's too deep to have appeared naturally. From the stories Traci and her cousins have told, it sounds like something Aggie would have done when she was still able to do hard manual labor. Apparently, she was a notorious misanthrope. That's what Traci said.

I didn't know what "misanthrope" meant until I looked it up: *someone who dislikes other humans and society*. If Aggie did dig this moat, did she do it to keep people out? Or keep herself in? I asked Traci and she told me not to play into the town mythology surrounding Aggie and that the moat is just the gutter stream that floods in the spring and washes the driveway out.

One of my feet sticks in the muck. When I try to dislodge myself, it only sinks in deeper. I pinch my skateboard under my armpit as hard as I can to avoid either losing it to the moat or falling in myself. I tug on my left foot and the right sinks deeper. Shit. I'll never even make it to the road at this rate. I stand still for a second and just breathe. Relinquish all resistance. Other than being stuck in the moat, it's so pleasant out. The mist is burning off, and the sun warms the parts between my braids. There are chickadees in the trees doing their sweet mating calls.

Aunt Aggie taught me what they sound like when they're searching for a partner. That sweet *weee-woooo*. She also showed me how to get them to land in my hands with a few sunflower seeds and a whistle. There weren't many times we connected one-on-one, but that day she made me feel like a fairy-tale princess. Their little mouths so careful in the palm and their claws didn't even dig in. The first time I thought it would hurt. But they're so light and gentle. Their bodies are barely made of anything.

As my body melts into the stillness, I become aware of another sound beneath the slosh of my feet and chickadee calls:

sticks breaking. Something large is farther back behind the trees and moving my way.

Abruptly, I remember a time my cousins told me they saw a coyote around here. I thought they were just saying it to scare me. If that was their intention, it worked. I was scared, even though I wouldn't admit it. The night after they told me, I curled in bed next to Traci and Dad with my eyes wide open to the pitch of the country night. And late, late into the night, when everyone was passed out, I heard it. The snapping of branches and the barking laugh of a coyote beneath our window. Then the laugh became a child's scream.

Everyone in the house woke up. Usually, coyotes or coywolves didn't come that close, Aggie said. Maybe they heard all us kids making a ruckus and thought it had found some kin. That didn't make me feel any better. What if the coyote was disappointed when it saw me? Would it tear me up and devour me? While everybody else got up and turned the lights on, traded stories about how they woke up or what they were dreaming just before, I curled under the covers and pretended to sleep. I pretended to sleep for the rest of the night, even when the excitement wore off and everyone drifted off again, safe in their beds, confident in the security of locked doors. I never told anybody how I couldn't stop shivering, like I'd been the coyote out there in the cold of the night.

Now, the same fear overtakes me. I pull harder at my foot as the rustling comes closer. There's no one out here. I'm stuck and if a coyote didn't like the look of me, it could take me down, easy. I forget that it's not likely for them to be out at this time, not likely for them to approach a human. It's just me and the fear fluttering in my chest. I need to get out of this puddle and skate away as fast as I can to town. And then a bright orange baseball cap emerges between the leaves and I know I've embarrassed myself again.

“Hey!” the person in the cap yells my way. They’re short and wearing clumsy work boots and a brown barn jacket that engulfs them so only the ends of their shorts peek out from beneath the hem. “I said hey!” they yell again when I don’t answer.

“Hey!” I yell back, trying to sound friendly. I know I can’t pretend I don’t see or hear them. Who walks through the brush in the morning yelling at strangers? It doesn’t really make me feel much safer in my stuckness. Plus, it’s embarrassing I’m even in this situation. Maybe I should’ve just buried myself in blankets and hidden the day away.

They come out into full view, and I can see it’s a girl around my age but a head shorter than me. She has tan, freckled skin and long, dark auburn hair. Something around her eyes is familiar. It takes a minute, but I recognize Kelly in her.

I’m not surprised when she yells, “I’m Cole Levesque-Gerges. Your neighbor? You know you could’ve just taken the easy way . . .” She laughs and points to the makeshift log bridge over the gutter that I hadn’t even known to look for. Heat rises to my head, the fear of encountering a wild animal melting to shame at my lack of awareness. “Throw me your board. It’ll be easier for you to get unstuck.” Cole comes closer to the edge of the moat and I toss her my board. She catches it and I’m finally able to get my feet unstuck and wade out of the moat, panting.

She crosses the rotting log bridge and meets me in the lengthening grass that quickly turns to chunked cement and gravel. I survey the pavement. It’s pretty torn up. It’ll be a challenge for me to skate at all.

“Yeah,” Cole smiles, seeing me survey the road, “Not many skateboarders around these parts. The roads’re shit.” She says her “r’s” hard and rural the way Traci does after she has a couple glasses of wine.

Cole hands my board back to me, and I reach for it with still shaking hands. Her eyes catch on them, but she looks away quickly.



“I’m Asha. I live here now.”

“What’s it like living in a haunted house?”

I shrug. Her tone is jokey but there’s something behind the question that makes me realize just how little I know about the house’s history. I don’t want to betray my ignorance about the house, so I strike the same joking tone to reply. “Don’t know yet. It’s only been one night.”

She doesn’t laugh. Maybe she doesn’t know if I’m joking either. There’s a moment where we both stare at our feet, not sure what to say. Then she points at my board. “You know any tricks?”

“A few.”

“Kickflip?”

I laugh. “Why’s that always the one people ask first?”

“Well, can you?”

“Kinda . . . not well.” Nia was trying to teach me. Ground tricks freak me out. They take a lot of confidence, and all the momentum must come from you, rather than the sloping terrain of a park. Nia would always make fun of me for being such a chickenshit skater. *May as well be a long boarder*. I can’t be chicken now. First impressions . . .

I throw my board down and land on it with that familiar pop of solidity. I skate down the street a bit, then come back and do some ollies over potholes. Cole throws up some *whoops*. I can feel myself warming to her already.

This is what I like best about skateboarding: I can do something so little and feel so proud. Just for a moment. My favorite part of show and tell was always the showing. Why waste time talking about the *whys* and *hows* and *whats* of things when you can just ride and ride until—

“Hey, I think someone’s coming!” I turn to see if what Cole says is true so I can get off the road and—

I hit a rock.

I don't remember falling and I don't remember standing back up. My hand's on the back of my head where a lump is already rising. Better it swells out than in. I look around, but Cole's gone. It's just me and an RCMP cruiser barreling toward me, chirping its siren. I scramble off the road, my legs catching gravel sharp as shrapnel as the cruiser kicks up dust. A white man hangs out the window and yells something at me I don't understand as language. I'm still turning my head, looking for Cole, when I realize the cruiser has pulled over and switched on its lights.

Why would this cop car come speeding out of nowhere like that, entitled and reckless? Rage fills me until I can't feel my body's edges. But as the cop swings his legs out of the cruiser and slams the door, I swallow that anger down and let it simmer just above my stomach where it burns like acid reflux. I force a smile onto my face.

Cole appears beside me holding my board, burrs attached to her shirt. My board must've gone in the ditch. She looks me up and down, concern wavering behind her eyes. "You ok?" That concern is misplaced, I think, when the cop is walking toward us, slow and menacing.

"Yeah, just a hard fall." It's a half-truth. What really set me off was the RCMP car. The full truth is that sometimes I crave the crash into the pavement. I should've stayed off the street. "But I'm fine. It was just a shock."

That's what Traci said when Dad called her collect from prison the first time. She cried too. I guess throughout the trial and his sentencing, the reality of the situation hadn't fully kicked in. Even though I know she hasn't loved Dad for a long time, she still cried. Back then, I thought she was being melodramatic. I still haven't cried about it. I thought I was stronger than her for holding back. I try to be stronger than my instincts now, suck all the salt back in. No tears.

The cop shifts from foot to foot. He's bulked up with gear and holds his hand on his hip, just above the holster of his gun. The hair left on his head is beginning to gray from a dirty blond. Even though he can't be much taller than me, he's way more solid, which gives the impression that he could intimidate anyone he wanted to.

I jump when Cole shouts, "Uncle Joe!"

The officer smiles and walks our way. He opens his arms, reaching out the way people do in that moment of surrender when you're not sure if they're going to get shot or make it away safe. Cole falls into his embrace.

"Nicole Mariam, how many times have I told you—stay off the road. It's a blind hill. You and your friend here could've been hit."

Cole pulls away. "I *know*. But I asked Asha to show me a trick."

He squints at me like he's feigning misrecognition. "I don't think we've met? You from around here?" he asks me.

"Asha," I say. "I just moved in." But I bet he says the same to all the other non-white folks in town. *You from around here?* All my history's in this town, I should've said yes.

"Oooooooh—" He draws out his surprise. "You're Traci's daughter?" How did he know that? We just arrived last night. Maybe like Kelly and Cole, we met in some distant past I can't remember. I thought no one in this town would know who I was, that I'd be able to build up an image of myself from scratch. I'm starting to realize how unrealistic that dream was.

"Yeah," I admit.

"She was a fun girl back in the day."

The way he pauses when his lips shape themselves around the word "fun" makes me think he means slutty. Not that that's anything to be ashamed of. Good for Traci. I'm glad she got hers. I don't think this officer is all about sex positivity though. I hold the officer's gaze, hoping he can see past my neutral expression

to what I really think of him calling my mother fun. There's an awkward silence between the three of us as I struggle to think of anything else I could possibly tell this balding RCMP officer who almost ran me over, who is related to Cole, who didn't ask us to get on our knees, whose gun is so close to his hands.

Then the silence breaks as he and Cole exchange pleasantries and a brief arm wrestle. I become invisible. She asks him if he's going to come by for dinner. He asks her how the last week of the school year was. Then he gets in his car, salutes us, and drives off.

I don't have the time or guts to talk about how uncomfortable this exchange made me before Cole asks, "Hey, you ever seen baby bunnies?" Her gaze lingers on my hand clenched around my board.

"I should go back home." I don't want to be out here anymore. *Home* stings in my mouth. It's not a lie, but it feels that way. Aggie's big old house is not what I think of as *home*, at least not yet. I miss our warped laminate floors and familiar cracks in the popcorn ceiling, the smooth, easy-to-skate pavement of our cul-de-sac.

Cole sees my hesitancy and grabs my arm, pulling me toward a path off the road. "It's on the way back, come on." And before I know it, I'm following Cole into the woods, my wet shoes squashing out water into the sweet-smelling moss as the new summer canopy shades us, veils us from any onlookers. I remember the bruised legs I saw this morning. Uneasiness crawls like worms in my guts.

Then, I notice Cole's legs, moving through the brush, match those bruised legs exactly. I let go of my breath.



The moss is moving. It reminds me of the thick skin that sometimes forms on top of a pot of warm milk. The whole thing

moves as one, as if bubbles want desperately to escape but can't. It looks alive. And it is.

Cole reaches one hand toward the patch of moss. All our surroundings are dappled; sunlight falls like rain through the thick, humid air right onto the patch of moss Cole overturns with two soft fingers. I lean closer. The hole is well protected, not just by the moss, but prickly raspberry brush and poison ivy that Cole warns me to avoid. At first glance into the hole, I think I see one large rabbit. Then, what I thought was a leg twists and turns, separating into little bunnies. Soon, the little slits of sleepy eyes become visible.

"Come, look," Cole whispers. "There're five of them. I've been coming to check on them every day since I found them."

I let my knees sink into the mulch of the forest floor and put my face closer to the bunnies, closer to Cole too. We're almost touching. I do my best to keep my distance, try not to breathe too loud or heavy. Don't want to disturb the scene with my morning breath. "How'd you find them?"

"By looking." She reveals her buck teeth in a smile. She's soaking up my awe. Gently, she places the moss back on top of the nest and we stand. "I like coming on the trails out here. It's quiet and no one's telling me to clean my room or take out the trash. Plus, I keep the trails fresh. My parents like that."

"Kelly?" Cole looks surprised that I know her mother's name.

"She was at my house for coffee and mentioned I'd get along with her daughter Nicole," I explain. "Assuming that's you?"

"That is me! But don't call me Nicole. I hate it. It's always Cole."

"Cole it is."

We're both silent for a moment. She looks comfortable in it, tilts her head skyward. I dig my hands deeper into my pockets and wriggle my toes in my shoes. I don't know what to say next. It's so weird I would meet someone who seems genuinely cool

and nice and who I might want to chill with in the first few hours of my first day here. Minus the RCMP uncle, of course. He can suck it. I don't want to get my hopes up, though. Friendships have never been easy for me. Traci says my expectations are too high. I don't know if that's it exactly. Dad says it's because I don't know who I am yet. That might not be it exactly either. The only person I ever felt I could be truly myself with was Nia, but that's a lot of pressure to put on one friendship, especially when she's flying across the ocean for the summer.

But I don't want to come on too strong with Cole. So instead of asking if she wants to be best friends forever, I just ask: "How come I don't remember you from when we were younger?"

Cole looks down from the place she was observing in the trees. She doesn't quite meet my eyes. "I kind of remember you. Eating popsicles on the stoop or something. But my parents got pretty strict when I was older and I don't think I saw you again."

"Are they still strict?"

"Yeah, but I'm better at lying. And I'm old enough to drive."

We both laugh.

"Your mum seemed pretty desperate for us to be friends."

Cole rolls her eyes. "She thinks I'm lonely. Plus she doesn't like my friends."

"Why?"

"I don't want to get into it." But from the way she waves her hand, almost theatrically, it seems like she might.

"You sure? I'm the perfect person to share gossip with because I don't know who anybody is anyway. Secrets are safe with me."

"I mean . . . it's not really anything, you know? Just petty high school drama and I'm over it. I just want to get the next year over with and get out of here."

I know exactly how that is. That's part of why I'm here. "Is it, like, a boy thing?"

"No? I guess? I don't know."



“So, it is.” All the boy-thing stories start like this. I know from listening to all the people in me and Nia’s (mostly Nia’s since my dad’s arrest, if we’re being honest) extended friend group talk about their *boy-things* non-stop. I’m always giving advice or zoning out. It’s the one subject Nia doesn’t really talk to me about, which is fine. I’m not ready to talk about my feelings for anybody and she hasn’t ever pushed it. She’s a good friend for understanding, but sometimes I wish she could help me understand this part of myself, what I want. *If* I want anyone. I’d have to be able to put how I feel into words first, though.

“I mean, you’ll hear it from someone else if you don’t hear it from me, so . . .” She takes a deep breath. “It’s like . . . I made out with one girl, Maddie Leblanc, at a party and then everyone was saying I made her do it to break up her and Devon because I was jealous.”

“Devon?” She’s acting like I already know everyone in town. I don’t know if it’s because we used to play as babies and that’s a special bond in her eyes, but I appreciate it. I haven’t met many people I feel so immediately comfortable around.

“Devon Paul. We were tight, best friends since primary.”

“Not anymore?”

“Nope. Not anymore.” Cole takes in a big breath, then lets it all out in a huff. “I’m not saying I didn’t break his trust or whatever, but he told her stuff I wanted to keep private between us, like, about my sexuality, and then *she* kissed *me*.”

“Oh, shit.” I can’t believe she’s telling me this right off the bat. That’s, like, some deeply personal stuff. Not to mention extremely hot gossip for a newbie like me to be privy to. Maybe she’s as lonely as me. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s whatever.” She won’t look my way. I can tell it’s bringing up some emotions for her. “We’ll get over it. It’s just high school.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s high school, but it’s also a breach of trust on, like, many levels.” People just can’t help running their mouths. It’s better to keep to yourself.

Cole nods. I hitch my skateboard up under my arm. “Dude, look,” I say, “that sucks. If you ever want to hang and catch up more on all the stuff that’s happened since we were babies, I can give you my number? Or you can call the landline. I think your parents probably have Aggie’s old number.”

“My phone’s in the shop, but I’ve got the landline. Used to do crank calls to the old, haunted house in middle school.”

“You ever get a ghost?”

“A few times, actually, yeah.”

I laugh. It hurts, just a little, in my stomach, so I stop. I never thought before about how laughing builds muscle. Mine must be out of shape. I remember Dad told me to keep the ones who make you laugh around. “You want to come to lunch?”

“Thanks, but no thanks. Mum’s counting on me to sous-chef from now ‘til Sunday dinner. My dad just got back from out west so she’s pulling out all the stops.” *Sunday dinner* . . . I wonder if their family is traditional Christian. What do her parents think about her queerness? Do they know?

“Ok.” Maybe I went too hard, too fast. I have to play it cooler. “You know how I can get home?”

She points to a towering oak that has a lightning split in it. “Just keep walking straight at that oak and then you should be able to see the edge of the roof. From there you should be fine if you just walk in a straight line.”

“Thanks.”

“Ok, ya city slicker.” She chuckles to herself at the phrase. “See you later if you don’t get lost and die in the woods.”

“Later.”

I turn and walk toward the house, the smile on my face as warm as the dappled sun. She turns and walks toward her home. I think of all those baby bunnies so safe in their mossy nest, all curled up tight and close.

I run my hand over the back of my head. The lump’s big and tender but the blood has dried. I hope Traci doesn’t see me

before I clean up and wrap my hair. She'd freak out for sure. I feel some guilt at hiding this morning's adventures from Traci. It's just so she won't worry about me. She already has so much to worry about with the house and moving. Is lying by omission as bad as lying straight out?

Besides, it's hardly the worst information I've kept from her. If she knew what I do about Jeff, maybe everything would crumble and she'd be back on the couch, not eating, not speaking to me. I'd be totally alone.

Cole's directions back home are good. I make it to the oak, and then the edge of the woods, and then I'm back in our yard. I look up at Traci's room. Her shadow moves across the curtains. This house isn't haunted, just depressing and lonely as fuck.