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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA at ASHEVILLE

HIDDEN PINES

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN CANDIDACY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF LIBERAL ARTS

BY

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The Final Project

HIDDEN PINES

by

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is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Liberal Arts degree at
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Signature

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ARTIST STATEMENT

A child does not have to be poor to be in need. Many think wealth and prosperity can bring stability to a home— that children will be cared for and want for nothing. However, sometimes, the very thing that a child needs is out of reach. Can a family be fixed if it falls apart? Does affluence make it easier to deal with family problems?

Hidden Pines is a fictional, coming of age novel that is a work in progress. The events in the novel are based on my experiences in both the education and the mental health fields. I am giving a voice to the girls who have been unheard and tell this story from their perspectives. I call this work fiction because I have a responsibility to protect the integrity and privacy of the girls I worked with. My goal is to generate a dialogue that focuses on the nature of the traditional family— what does it look like in the 21st century? I want to talk about manipulation and family secrets, pain, self-harm, what life is like as a teenage girl coming of age in a treatment center, and how social class and propriety play a role in the expectations of the upper class. I want the reader to become vested through the protagonist's experience.

The work suggests relevant topics about teenage life in a therapeutic boarding school and ethical gray area concerning clinical treatment and professionalism. I would like to note that I am neither an expert nor a clinician but I am simply drawing my material from observations in the field, research, and my own experiences. Characters struggle with terminal illness, abuse, loss, self-harm, low self-esteem, and personality disorders. I want other teens to know that the struggles of growing up transcend socioeconomic class, culture, race, and social status.

In many cases, families strive to fit the ideal and go to great lengths to achieve the façade of the flawless family. Sometimes parents take another adult's word to be truth over their own child's. What I have witnessed are girls who have been chosen by their parents as the nominated root of the problem within their family dynamic. Most of these girls are hidden and tucked away because they throw a wrench in the model image of the upper class family. Many suffer from the kind of abuse that is not visible on the skin. In a residential treatment center, skeletons, problems, illnesses, and traumatic experiences arise to the surface that were meant to be buried, and the gravity of which are only exacerbated in a therapeutic setting that acts as a pressure cooker.

My creative process was one of careful consideration as my goal was not to exploit the experiences of the students I base my characters on, but to explain their sides of the story. The preliminary process of my writing began by recalling events and conversations that took place at schools and institutions I have worked at: what students said to me and to each other, and conversations with staff members, teachers, therapists, and nurses. I read novels like Susanna Kaysen's *Girl Interrupted* where I learned that avoidance and silence are survival techniques. Kaysen's story closely relates to the stories of the girls I worked with. I read novels about young people in boarding schools like *Looking for Alaska* by John Green and the canon, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. Other works I read for style inspiration like Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and *Bossy Pants* by Tina Fey. Teenagers can have an uncanny sense of humor when it comes to dealing with complicated and often painful situations. Not only did this research help me to develop new ideas, but also it verified the importance of this project. As I was beginning my first draft I felt that I was only scratching the surface. Characters seemed flat and the story line appeared

sensationalized. It read like a play-by-play or a checklist. It had no heart, no soul, and didn't involve the reader. I wanted readers to feel the characters' experience and writing in third person was not doing my purpose for this project any justice. I needed the angst, the confusion, the humor, and the softness of growing into one's own to be at the forefront of the story. I was not conveying the drive behind this project— to give a voice to teenage girls in similar circumstances whether they are rich or poor, sick or healthy, struggling with self-identity or just starting to realize it, and whether their families are intact, broken, a work in progress, or patched.

I was diagnosed with bipolar II- hypomania recently but have been showing symptoms my whole life. My father is bipolar and my mother noticed the signs when I was a child. As uncomfortable as it was, I began to record memories from my childhood and times when I felt the spikes of mania and the irritability of my anger. In the project, I call this feeling The Fire. The more I thought about my experience as a child and teenager with bipolar disorder, the more I connected with the characters in this project. I realized that I was not much different from the girls I worked with. I am sure that if my parents had the wealth, I would have been sent to a school much like Hidden Pines. I decided to write from first person point of view and create the protagonist's character based on my own experiences. I married my memories with the experiences of the students I worked with.

I feel that I have tapped into a world that many do not know about. The sphere of therapeutic boarding schools is a niche that most have not experienced. But in the end, demographic and social status is irrelevant. Every teenage girl struggles.

“But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get.”

— Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

Day 1

Leaving Wilderness today. Excited, sad, nervous. Pissed that I'm not going home.

The white van approached and I didn't turn to watch it pull up. I kept my back facing the gravel drive and looked at the cement building we all called Base. I wasn't a fan of change. I felt grounded in the presence of predictability. Instead of turning to confront my future, I hid in the present and focused on the faces in front of me—the tired, wet, and dirty smiles of court-ordered and involuntary campers, my therapist, and staff members who I wouldn't see again. I wanted to brand their faces into my memory.

The sky was tin that morning—my favorite time when it was just before dawn and the woods were quiet like they held a secret only I knew. It was the only time of day when I felt I could be still. Once the light filtered through the veil of treetops and the morning made people move a little faster, so did my thoughts. They raced constantly. I went down the line, making false promises to keep in touch. I gave Mr. John a high five. My fingers barely covered the palm of his hand. He flashed a Delta sign with his thumbs and forefingers. Delta was the name of our camp group—like we were some sorority for the misbehaving and misunderstood. Ms. Julia and another counselor hugged me and wished me luck. They smelled like patchouli and sweat. Titian was at the end of the line.

“See you later, crazy bitch,” she whispered into my hair.

“Take care of yourself, psycho.” I was half-joking.

I had met Titian on my first day at New Beginnings Wilderness Camp. It was October and everything was a shade of brown or red, including Titian's hair. It was tricolored from too many dye jobs and tangled.

“Why are *you* here? Are you a runner?” she asked me on my first day.

Why are you here? should be written on the welcome sign to Base: *Welcome to New Beginnings: Why are you here?* It was guaranteed to be the first thing that someone asked as soon as you got out of the van. Like when you meet your cellmate for the first time in jail and she says, “what are you in for?” When I met Titian, or Tish— I called her for short— I didn’t know that the second question she asked me was part of the first.

“Well, I ran a 5K last month,” I said.

“Oh,” Tish chuckled— amused. “I ran from rehab.”

Tish and I started hiking together, which made the long days of endlessly traipsing through the woods in the Smoky Mountains more bearable. Not that the scenery wasn’t beautiful, it just sucked because we couldn’t take showers on a regular basis and everything had some sort of therapeutic significance. When I said I was tired, the counselor asked me if I was really tired or if I was projecting my fear of failure. When I said that I felt sick, the counselor told me to drink more water and self reflect to figure out if I was really sick or if I was victimizing for attention. And we were dirty. Not the kind of dirty when you get some mud on your KEEN hiking boots. But the kind of dirty that makes you question if you have become the host for a new kind of bacteria. We were always soaked from rain or sweat, or both. Chiggers got into places we only got to wash every four days.

Tish helped me set up my tent on the first night. I didn’t have a clue what spokes and stakes were, much less where they went. She showed me how to make frosting out of powdered hot chocolate and a capful of water. She whisked the mixture with her plastic fork and if I closed my eyes, it was like eating the icing off of a cupcake. Heaven compared to an endless diet of beans and lentils.

Tish was my best friend in Wilderness and she was a good one to have on my side. Everyone was scared of her and thought she belonged in a mental hospital. Sometimes she bragged about escaping from one before she went to Wilderness. But she never said anything else about it. Whenever I asked her about it, she shrugged and said, “Crazy, I guess.” Then changed the subject.

I took a deep breath and turned towards the parked van. Two girls in pink uniform t-shirts and jeans stepped out with matching smiles like they were the product of a cult brainwashing. A pretty woman in fashionable boots and a red scarf came around from the driver’s side. They shined against the backdrop of the dirty blue tarps and evergreens. Clean and fresh out of an L.L Bean catalogue. My fingernails were packed with dirt and my mouth felt dry. My lips were sore and cracked. I hadn’t taken a shower in four days and I knew I smelled repulsive. In an effort to get myself together, I licked my thumb to smudge away the ring of dirt just below the rim of my sleeve and wiped the excess mud from my sagging cargo pants. Suddenly I felt nervous and out of place.

I walked towards the van and smiled at the two girls who opened the door for me. One of the girls slid the door on its track so hard that when the door shut, the van shook. From the back window, I watched campers and counselors hold their hands high in a row of Delta signs. Everyone made the Delta sign except for Tish who was smiling and sticking up both of her middle fingers.

The ride was long and awkward. The girl in front of me with the sandy hair was singing parts to a song she was listening to— hitting the high notes as if she was the next Beyoncé. She raised her hands in the air like she was performing on stage. She was awful. The other girl reading *Harry Potter* reminded me of a porcelain doll— her skin was white and

her blue eyes small and like glass. I rested my head on the window. The woman driving glanced at me periodically through the rearview mirror to make sure I wasn't going to jump out of the window or try to kill myself with a seatbelt. I contemplated making a scene just for fun but figured it wouldn't turn out well for me. I saw the state line for Tennessee. I had never been anywhere west of North Carolina. Back in Florida, we barely went on trips because it took five hours just to get to the Florida-Georgia line. It wasn't worth the brooding tension between my mom and her partner, Danielle, who continuously picked each other apart.

I admit that I kind of preferred the mountains to the beach. The air didn't smell like fish and salt, and I found that the mountains made it easier for me to breathe. The change of seasons helped me keep track of time. My little brother, on the other hand, was a total beach bum. I kept a picture of him taped inside the back cover of my journal. Michael was seven when I took the photo—a year before I was gooned from my house and driven to Wilderness. “We're just going for a drive,” the stranger said to me at 3:00am.” I never got the chance to say goodbye to Michael— or anyone. In the picture he squinted at the setting sun and laughed at me for playing photographer with my phone. He had begged my mom and Danielle to rent a beach house for the weekend as a birthday present. He was still young enough that his cuteness alone could sway my parents into anything.

“I want to sleep on the sand in the night time,” he said to my mom.

Michael and I dug a hole in the sand big enough to cradle the both of us. We took pillows, blankets, and a flashlight from the house and made a cocoon as my mom and Danielle watched us from the porch. When the sun went down and it was dark enough to see

the stars, I made an honest attempt to be a big sister. I pointed out all of the constellations I knew. I made the rest of them up.

The silence in the van was damp and heavy from the rain. The only noise was the sound of the malfunctioning windshield wipers. My case file sat like a brick on the middle console bursting at the seams. Some papers spilled onto the front passenger seat and I was dying to know what my file said about me. I could feel the stares from the girls sitting in front of me.

“Are you doing okay?” the woman who was driving said as she broke the silence.

“Fine,” I said.

“I’m Ms. Lisa.” She watched me through the rearview mirror.

“I’m Nadia!” The girl who was singing darted her hand toward me before I could even reply to Ms. Lisa. I could hear the music blasting from her ear-buds.

“Emily,” I said.

I shook Nadia’s hand and was nearly blinded by her shiny white teeth. She nodded and nudged the girl sitting next to her.

“I’m Penny,” the other said shyly. She barely looked up from her book.

Hidden Pines School for Girls looked like a drug rehab center for rich people who were into the outdoors. A cabin on steroids stood towering over a pristine lake and was surrounded by pine trees that loomed overhead, closing us off from the rest of the world. A large dock stretched almost to the center of the lake like it was trying to get away. Rocking chairs painted green and blue lined the porch that wrapped around the entire building. Large windows were open and without bars; even a welcome mat at the front door. Homey.

My wet hair clung to my face and I was soaked to the bone. The van got stuck in the mud at the bottom of the hill and I had to lug my stuff on my back and in both hands while Ms. Lisa and the Olson twins walked ahead of me with umbrellas. I stood at the gigantic glass front door with 30 pounds of my life – most of it camping gear. For a second, I wished I were back at Wilderness peeing behind a tarp in 10-degree weather, eating shitty freeze dried food, and begrudgingly participating in mandatory Kumbaya sessions where we talked about our feelings around nightly campfires. Never mind. Wilderness therapy was meant to break me down and then build me back up. After four months in the woods, I learned two things: I was more aware of what I freak I was, and Thoreau had no idea what he was talking about in *Walden*. I don't think he even spent enough time out of his cabin to know what the woods were really like. As we waited at the front door for someone to let us in, I saw another van pull in from the opposite direction. A man in a green puffer vest stepped out of the driver's seat and opened the passenger door. I saw a girl inside with her arms crossed refusing to get out.

“There must be a mistake. I was supposed to go to Milan!” she yelled at the man in a Caribbean or French accent. “This is the woods, you idiot! I'm in the middle of nowhere! Take me back to the airport now!”

The man didn't move as the girl started kicking and screaming –banging her fists on the passenger seat and dashboard.

“Stop staring,” Nadia with the bright teeth whispered to me. “It isn't polite.”

“Sorry,” I whispered. I had no idea I was standing next to Miss Congeniality.

Ms. Lisa buzzed again and knocked on the door. A round woman in leggings and a long cardigan answered. I dragged my stuff over the threshold dripping like a stray dog coming out of the rain. A gas fireplace built out of river rocks anchored the thirty-foot ceiling. Three leather couches surrounded a wooden coffee table in front of the fireplace. The floors were covered with large area rugs decorated with cabins, bears and caribou. An enormous iron chandelier hung from the ceiling in the center of the room— antlers thrusting out from the bottom. It was ugly. If this was supposed to be a school for girls, then why did it look like a man cave? A pair of shoes tied at the laces hung from an antler. Ms. Lisa told me to have a seat on the couch and wait for the resident nurse.

I heard the front door buzz and turned around. The man in the vest was holding the distraught girl by her arm. She looked as miserable as I felt. Next to her were three large Louis Vuitton luggage trunks. From behind me, a gigantic man with penetrating blue eyes and thinning hair walked towards the front door. I don't think he even noticed me.

“Are you my butler?” the girl asked through her tears and pointed to her luggage.

The man laughed and said, “Oh no, there are no butlers here. I'm Mr. Campoke, the head therapist of this school.”

“Therapy? Are you kidding me? I don't belong here!” she cried.

I wondered how many times Mr. Campoke heard the “I don't belong here” speech. She tried to open the front door while Mr. green vest was still holding on to her arm. Mascara ran down her face.

“Let her calm down in my office,” Mr. Campoke said. “Have her call her mother when she stops crying.”

If I had started crying, would I have been given a chance to call my mom? Spoiled bitch.

Admission to any treatment center blows. I was strip-searched by a woman I wasn't even on a first name basis with. She pulled a fat tick off of my ankle. The RC (resident counselor) staff went through all my stuff while I answered incriminating questions about myself to the resident nurse.

INITIAL INTERVIEW WITH NEW ADMIT

<u>QUESTION</u>	<u>ADMIT ANSWER</u>	<u>COMMENTS</u>
Have you ever been addicted to or experimented with any drugs?	No	Admit hesitated before answering
Have you been sexually active within the last year?	No	Admit is not sexually active.
Do you know why you are here?	Yes	Admit says that her parents don't know what else to do with her and that she is aware that she has a mental illness.
Have you ever contemplated suicide?	No	Admit seems to be telling the truth. Recommendation: safety watch until meeting with therapist.
Have you ever thought of or acted on impulses to self-harm?	No	Admit says she doesn't intentionally self-harm. Recommendation: Use therapeutic hold if behavior escalates.
Are you hungry?	Always	Admit was given a banana with peanut butter.
Are you pregnant?	No	Admit says she has never engaged in sexual activity
When was your last period?	I am on my period	Student requested feminine products
Do you feel safe?	Yes	
Any medications you are currently taking, over the counter or prescription?	Yes	Admit is taking St. John's Wort. Admit says she refuses to take "crazy" meds.

Staff searched through my clothes and toiletries. They checked my body for signs of self-harm and my journals for hidden contraband and things I could cut myself with. Everyone starts out at the bottom here. No razors, no magazines, constant staff supervision, and no phone calls or visits until your first session with a therapist. My legs looked like the Sasquatch by the time I met my therapist, Ms. Amber.

ADMISSION EXAMINATION

<u>Date: 21, Feb. 2013</u>			institution:	previous institution:
Last name	first name	middle initial	Hidden Pines Academy for Girls	New Beginnings Wilderness Camp for Girls
Landset	Emily	D		
birth Date:	age:		mother's name	father's name
21, March 1999	14		Lauren and Danielle Hathay	Rick Landset
Current prescription medication:			signs of self harm:	Restricted access to unsupervised areas:
none			none	none

I waited on the couch after my strip search as my paperwork was processed. On a scale of strip searches, 1-10— 10 being the worst, it was one of the less humiliating and uncomfortable experiences I have had. I gave it a 3. It was indoors, for starters, and the nurse gave me a red sucker. I flipped through one of the pamphlets that were spread out on the coffee table.

Welcome to Hidden Pines.

Here, at Hidden Pines, your daughter is an irreplaceable girl with her own gifts, interests and capabilities. We are a dedicated institution with staff that will work with you and your family to support your daughter and help her reach her fullest potential in order to

bring harmony back to your family. We are trained to work with girls who are lost, uneasy, angry, and need individual attention.

Hidden Pines understands the needs of you and your family and we promise that we will work our hardest to bring peace, structure, and healthy balance back into your home.

I laughed because my mom and Danielle were just the kind of desperate basket cases to fall for a load of crap like that. I could picture the two of them in Mr. Campoke's office – my mom with her white notepad, making swirly doodles and neatly writing *it's her father's fault* in cursive over and over. Danielle probably had her hands folded neatly in her lap, nodding in agreement like the lawyer she is. I could picture Michael with his feet on the couch playing games on my mom's phone. My father was in that office too. I'm sure he sat as far away from my mom and Danielle as possible like he felt some of their homosexuality might rub off on him. All of them present except for me because I was in the woods in the middle of winter with icicles hanging from my nose hairs while *they* were in a cozy room discussing the next year of *my* life! The whole system was ass-backwards. Everyone in my family was an absolute certifiable nut job except for my little brother. Michael was normal. How was I the one chosen as the sacrificial lamb to go to intensive therapy? Therapy is complete bullshit if you ask me. Oh wait, nobody did.

A voice over a walkie-talkie told the woman processing my paperwork that a girl was on the roof again.

“Copy, I'm on my way. Let's go, Emily, you can't be by yourself down here,” the woman said as she started up the stairs. Her keys jingled like a prison warden's. I followed her across a hallway lined with overstuffed chairs.

“Jeanette Dewy, get your butt off that roof right now!” the woman said. She didn't

seem like she was scared or worried about Jeanette falling. Just annoyed that she had to climb the steps in the first place. Jeanette sat on the rungs of a ladder that led to the highest point of the roof where the chimney was. She wore a black hoodie with patches of bands names like Bikini Kill and the Ramones. Her hair looked like it was black at one time but her dirty blonde roots were reaching halfway down her head. She pushed her glasses up and wrinkled her nose.

“Well, it’s the only place I can get some peace and quiet around here.”

A crowd started to gather on the back deck. Teachers came out of their classrooms trying to get the girls back inside but it was a lost cause. They were like huntresses sniffing out drama.

“Jump!” one of the girls shouted as she clapped her hands.

Jeanette turned away from us. She readjusted herself on the ladder and went back to reading.

“Jeanette,” the woman said. She changed her tone and sounded like she was singing a lullaby. “What are you reading?” she asked.

“A book.”

“You know when I checked rooms this morning like I check rooms every morning?” the woman said.

Jeanette didn’t answer.

“Well, you know that you aren’t allowed to have anything under your bed, right?”

“You wouldn’t,” Jeanette said. Her eyes narrowed.

“Oh, but I would. I know some of those novels are banned from the school.”

I could see that Jeanette was weighing her options: get off the roof and keep her

collection of books. Or stand her ground and find satisfaction in sticking it to the man.

“Don’t be a hero, dude,” Dana called out. “Don’t nobody care about your gas station romance novels.”

Dana and some other girls giggled. Jeanette climbed off of the roof and onto the deck. She walked up to Dana and shoved the book she was reading into Dana’s chest.

“Tolstoy, bitch— read it. Or can’t your fat fingers turn the page?” Jeanette said.

Dana was searching for the perfect comeback but couldn’t find one in her repertoire of witty one-liners.

“Alright ladies, show’s over. Everyone back to class. Emily, let’s go,” the woman said.

I thought I was going to escape being noticed but as soon as the other girls heard my name, twelve heads whirled around and all eyes were on me, the new girl. Fresh meat in front of a pack of wolves.

Jeanette walked over to me, “Take it from me, Emily, the bathroom and the roof are the only places around here to get any sort of time alone.”

She deliberately bumped into my shoulder as she passed. Back downstairs, a woman sat next to me on the couch. “Do you want to unpack first or take a shower? I’m Ms. Mary by the way. I run this place,” she said and offered me her hand to shake. She looked like someone’s grandma. Her hair almost blue, large bi-focal glasses, and she wore comfortable but sensible clothing

She led me to a dorm room that was large and oddly shaped. The bathroom was separated into two small spaces. The first space held the vanity and sink. Underneath the counter was where we were to keep all of our hair products and makeup. Pictures of boy

bands cut out from *Teen* magazine were plastered around the mirror. A laminated chore list was stapled to the opposite wall and the bathroom door was removed. The second space was split from the first by a pocket door with the lock cut out. This was where the toilet and shower were. Ms. Mary pulled a chair next to the sink while I undressed behind the door. There was a mirror on the wall next to the bathtub. I hadn't seen a reflection of myself in four months.

Two things are forbidden in Wilderness: mirrors and the concept of time. We weren't allowed to look at ourselves because they wanted us to find our inner beauty. We weren't allowed to know what time it was because it was irrelevant. We had to forget about life outside the woods and focus on the now. I became an expert at guessing the time by the sun's position.

Looking at my reflection, I saw my arms dangle like broken branches that were hanging on by the bark. My skin was yellow and cracked. I took down my hair and tried to pull apart the knots. A mop of kinky brown frizz slumped on my shoulders. I leaned close to the mirror and tried to push my nose in to make it look like I had a cute button nose. When I released my finger, five generations of the same Jew nose pushed back. I was only fourteen and my breasts seemed to sag and cast a shadow on my stomach under the florescent lighting. I cupped one of my breasts and poked around my nipple like I was meeting it for the first time. My legs were covered with black hairs, bruises, and scabs from hiking in thickets and brush. Faint remnants of pink polish were still on my toes. My pubic hair was curly and coarse.

"I don't hear water running," Ms. Mary said.

I forgot she was still on the other side of the door.

“Can I shave my legs?” I asked.

“Not until you have your first meeting with your therapist,” Ms. Mary said.

“And how long is that going to take?” I rolled my eyes.

She didn’t answer.

Hot water bounced from my head and beaded down the thick strands of my hair. I let my fingers run down the center of my stomach until I felt the slippery fold of skin between my legs. I washed my hair.

Ms. Mary gave me three Hidden Pines t-shirts. “You wear these to school and laundry days for you are every Tuesday. Okay,” she said and patted me on the shoulder. “Are you ready to meet the community?” she asked.

Did I have a choice?

At lunchtime, all the girls were talking around a large dining table.

“Everyone,” Ms. Mary announced and waited until all the girls were staring at me again. “This is Emily. She just arrived today and I hope you make her feel welcome. Kelsey, can you come chat with us?”

Kelsey was short and athletic looking. She carried herself as if she didn’t care what anyone thought of her. I liked that. She had her hair in a messy bun on the top of her head and wore a wrinkled uniform shirt, baggy sweatpants, and flip-flops. When Kelsey came out of the dining room, Ms. Mary was talking to a teacher. Kelsey gave me the bitchiest look I have ever seen, like she’d been practicing it for 13 years. She looked me up and down and just as she was about to say something, Ms. Mary turned around.

“Kelsey, Emily is your roommate and I thought that you could show her around the house and make her feel welcome. I have a feeling that you ladies could be great friends.

And while you're at it, Kelsey, why don't you start in your room so you can change into something that follows Hidden Pines dress code," Ms. Mary said.

"Yes, ma'am." Kelsey flashed an obviously fake smile as she started speed walking in front of me. I caught up with her by the time she reached the steps.

"I thought our room was downstairs," I said.

"It is," Kelsey said.

"Then why are we going upstairs?"

"Do you always ask so many questions?" Kelsey said.

I tried to change the subject.

"How long have you been here?" I asked, trying not to follow her too closely but attempting to keep up. She skipped every other step.

"Long enough to know why you're here," Kelsey said.

"Excuse me?"

Kelsey stopped on the second to last step and took a sharp turn to face me. I almost ran into her.

"Listen, don't you dare give me that innocent doe-eyed bullshit," Kelsey said. She put her finger two inches away from my face and I felt my whole body tingle like I was dry kindling about to set on fire. "Ms. Mary put you with me because she thinks we are the same based on what a piece of paper says, and you and I are going to be, like, best friends or whatever because we 'understand each other's pain' or some therapeutic shit like that."

I hated when people used their fingers to make quotations. The Fire was moving up my body and I felt my face burn as my hands clenched into tight fists. I took a deep breath because I didn't want to be the girl who got into a fight on the first day. I felt like I was

standing outside of my body, watching my Fire-burning-self and shaking my head in disappointment because once The Fire took over, there was no controlling it.

“I know exactly what’s happening to you right now. You want to hit me,” she whispered. “Your blood is boiling and your face is flushed. I can tell you want to hit me.” She smiled and moved closer. My eyes welled up with tears. It wasn’t enough to weaken The Fire.

“Ms. Mary put you with me because we both have anger inside of us, an anger that comes from something we can’t explain because we were born with it. It’s tattooed on our brains!” she said as she roughly tapped her head. “That’s the part that pisses us off the most and there is no hiding anything here so quit the innocent act, you goddamn...”

I felt like I dove into a pool on the hottest day of summer. My body tingled and my legs, arms, and head buzzed. I floated. I was weightless. Then I felt two RCs pinning me down. My hearing and vision blurred and I could hear Kelsey’s muffled threats but I couldn’t see her or make out the faces of anyone around me. My body writhed in every direction until the RCs put me in a therapeutic hold and I was dragged into Ms. Mary’s room to cool down.

“Well, congratulations, Emily,” Ms. Mary said. “You are the first Hidden Pines girl to get into a fight on her first day. How does that make you feel?”

I didn’t answer and I was pretty sure that I wasn’t the first to get in a fight. These girls were nuts.

“Answer me, Emily. How does it make you feel? You are only going to make your time here more difficult and last longer if you don’t abide by the rules and cooperate with me.”

“Terrible,” I answered. “Please don’t tell my mom and Danielle. They’ll be so

pissed.”

Ms. Mary gave me an ice pack for my bleeding lip.

I remember the summer of 2011 when I was 12. I spent an unusual amount of time with my grandparents that summer. Even more unusual, they let me do practically whatever I wanted. I guess it might be normal for anyone else’s grandparents but not mine. My grandmother was a proud, sturdy house of a woman– a 5’2” walking poster of WWII propaganda. Not the candy giving, spoil rotten, stay up late eating food that gives you cavities and watching TV kind of grandma. That ship sailed when my grandma on my father’s side died four years ago. My grandfather, however, was soft spoken and kind– the type of person who made you feel safe just in his presence. He called my grandmother his *Petit Napoléon*.

“Don’t think you can fool me with your French croissants and your fancy talk, mister,” my grandmother said to my grandfather at the dinner table. I was nine at the time. “The Lord knows what you did while you were stationed in France. But here we speak good old American English, and young ladies chew with their mouths closed. Elbows off the table.” She poked me with her salad fork and then pointed it at my grandfather. “Now eat your broccoli, *monsieur*. Doctor says you need more fiber.”

But during the summer of 2011, I ate what I wanted when I wanted and always had my elbows on the table. My grandmother said nothing. Not even when I chewed my food like a cow. She only looked at me with pity.

I stayed up late one Tuesday night watching reruns of *American Idol*. I didn’t want to be a famous singer. I couldn’t even sing that well but I wanted to feel that kind of passion for anything other than when I was angry. I got high off of a good argument and hated that about

myself. I fell asleep on the couch and when I woke up from a pain in my neck, dragged my feet through the hallway towards the guest bedroom. I was about to pass my grandparents' room when I heard them whispering.

“She is going to grow up so confused, Jack. First her parents are going through a grueling divorce, as if that isn't already disgraceful. And now *our* daughter, Jack, our daughter is...is...” she sobbed. “*My* daughter is not *gay*.” She was trying to keep from raising her voice and breathed heavily. “That's how they do it, they lure you in until you don't know which way is up!”

“Who is they?” my grandfather asked.

“The gays!”

I heard my grandmother punch a pillow. I knew the sound because it was what I did when *The Fire* was too much to keep inside. Punching a pillow didn't hurt but made a sound that was satisfying enough. Whenever my mom called to check on me, my grandmother pretended like she didn't hear the phone ring. My grandfather spent a lot of time listening to my mother and my grandmother. He never took sides.

I was about to start eighth grade and Dad had moved to Toronto for some book deal. I heard from him on birthdays, holidays, and around report card time. A year after that, it was just birthdays. I hated that I inherited *The Fire* from him and I think my mom resented him for passing it down to me. I wanted to distance myself from him as far as possible. Danielle moved in and was introduced to me as Mom's special friend. What a load of shit. I knew exactly who she was. Sometimes adults don't give kids enough credit.

DAY 4

I hate oatmeal! Wilderness oatmeal, Hidden Pines oatmeal, oatmeal with raisins, flavored oatmeal, oatmeal in the woods, and oatmeal with bananas: it's all oatmeal no matter how you dress it up and it sucks! When I get out of this shithole, I am never eating oatmeal again.

I made a cloudy pond out of my sorry excuse for a breakfast, pressed the outer walls with my spoon until the water pooled in the middle. I dropped cranberries like tiny red bombs and watched them swim until my oatmeal was a muted pink. Everyone ignored me. Even the girls in my room avoided me like the plague. They left the bathroom when I went in to brush my teeth and ignored me when I asked a question. Even Jeanette the lone wolf refused to sit next to me. It's bad when the outcast considers you a pariah. The girls thought I was getting special treatment because I was allowed to sleep inside while Kelsey and Amber slept outside in the cold. They were right. Kelsey was on her third day of isolation because of the fight. Amber was on her first because of the prank she pulled last night. At Hidden Pines, serious violations of the code of conduct got you put on isolation and sleeping in a tent outside. There was no speaking except to staff and only with permission. They were allowed to eat oatmeal and come inside for meals and restroom use only. I was told that this was normal. I could see them from the dining room window, emerging from their tents and asking the overnight RC for permission to speak. They shivered when their bare feet touched the cold grass. The RCs took their shoes at night so that if they ran away, they would have to do so barefooted and in the woods. They did the same thing in Wilderness. I knew a girl in Wilderness who tried to run away. She got bit by a spider and came back to camp with a

pocket of pus on the bottom of her swollen foot. It got worse each day. She wailed in pain and screamed during most nights but we were told to ignore her. She hiked on crutches until we got back to Base so that the nurse could see her. I knew I was let off easy. I should have been out there with them.

After the fight, I had to drag my mattress into the living room and sleep on the floor. I was on safety watch and considered a violent threat to the community. I barely slept through the laughter and chatter of the overnight RCs who gossiped and complained about their boyfriends and being fat as they scrolled through Facebook on their phones. At midnight, the RCs did their rounds. They checked rooms and counted heads. They took turns smoking cigarettes outside and calling their boyfriends. Ms. Bet was the lead overnight RC assigned to watch me. She had her head in a bag of potato chips most of the time.

I was used to the noise and fell asleep easily by the third night of sleeping in the living room. In the middle of the night, Amber got a hold of my blue water bottle and filled it with her piss and water from the toilet. My mouth was dry when I woke up and I took a sip. I spit warm piss water all over my mattress and part of the leather couch. I had to clean it up and give my sheets and blanket to staff. It was Friday and I had to wait until Tuesday to wash them.

I watched Kelsey and Amber walk into the dining hall like a two-man chain gang dragging their feet. Their faces were long and pale. Dark bags hung under their eyes. The rest of the girls ignored them but I couldn't. They looked sick as they nearly gagged pouring their oatmeal packets into plastic bowls. It reminded me of the first two days of my solo trip at New Beginnings. I only knew how to boil water. Oatmeal was the only thing I could make.

Silence and oatmeal for breakfast, lunch, and dinner builds character, as any Wilderness counselor would say.

Isolation usually only lasted a few days depending on the offense. But it took at least a week to regain strength and color in your face after digesting only off-brand oats from the Discount and Bulk grocery store and sleeping in a cold wet tent outside. I stood up to throw away my trash and deliberately dropped my spoon next to Kelsey. I scanned the room before I bent down and slipped a mini Snickers bar from my sleeve into the side of her shoe. It was the only piece of candy that I managed to keep hidden when I was checked in. I hid it under the insert of my shoe. I had been saving it for later but desperate times called for prison politics. I figured it was time to start building alliances if I was ever going to make it out of there alive. We exchanged a look of understanding.

Thanks, Kelsey mouthed. I nodded. Truce.

That night was Kelsey and Amber's last night outside and I was allowed to bring my mattress back inside my dorm room. I pulled it onto the bottom bunk under Anna-Haiden from Alabama.

"Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in," Anna-Haiden said.

She let her head hang over the top bunk. Her blonde hair almost reached the tip of my mattress.

"I'm Anna-Haiden. Daddy wanted a boy so I got two names. What's yours?" she asked.

"Emily, just Emily." I was exhausted and in no mood for pleasantries. I made a sloppy attempt to put clean sheets on my bed that Ms. Bet had found in storage. When I got into bed, I turned my face towards the wall.

“Well, I’ll tell ya, just Emily, you looked about as angry as a wet hen when I saw you fight’n with Kelsey and on your first day at that! What’s wrong with you, hun? Is that why you’re in here? Cuz you got a hot temper?”

“Yup, and why are you here?” I said out of habit. Like when someone asks you how you are doing and you say, “fine, and you?” hoping that the other person is just going to say “fine” because you really didn’t care in the first place.

“Daddy says I got my ways with men,” she said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means she’s a slut,” another girl said from the other end of the room. I couldn’t see her in the dark.

“Shut up, Dana,” Anna-Haiden snapped and then looked back at me. Her veins showed on her red face from her head hanging over the top bunk. “It means that I believe in love and sharing that love with the boy I’m in love with. “She reached around her bunk and climbed down the ladder to sit on the edge of my mattress. She turned on my bed lamp.

“Here’s my boyfriend,” she said and handed me a school photo ID. “Isn’t he handsome?” Anna-Haiden was smiling ear to ear.

“He’s. He’s um.”

“Black, I believe, is the word you are looking for, newbie. You a racist or somethin’?” a girl said.

My eyes had adjusted to the dark and I saw Dana had propped herself upon her elbows.

“No, my best friend is black.”

“Yeah, that’s what racists say,” Dana said.

But my best friend in Florida, Nicole, was black. My dad used to call us yin and yang. My sixth grade teacher had to tell him that it wasn't appropriate to call us that.

"You know," my dad said to my teacher. "One day people are going to be so afraid to offend someone that we will eventually just stay silent. Glenn Beck says that political correctness doesn't change us, it shuts us up!"

Another reason my parents never got along: my father was a conservative Republican who loved to argue. My mother was a liberal Democrat who turned out to be a lesbian. Who saw that coming?

In eighth grade, a girl locked me in a bathroom stall. Her two friends were in the stalls to my left and to my right. They stood on the toilets and poured bleach on me to remind me of what color I was. She called me a nigger lover. The reason why I hesitated to answer Anna-Haiden was that the picture was faded. I could barely make out the guy's face.

"He's very handsome. You love him?" I asked.

Anna-Haiden nodded.

"Don't listen to her, newbie. Anna-Haiden loves just about any guy who'd pay her the slightest bit of attention."

"And you would love any guy who offers you a free buffet dinner!" Anna-Haiden said as she stood up. "Don't sass me, Dana, I'm warning you." She turned off my bed lamp and climbed the ladder back to her bunk.

"Or what?"

"Or I'll tell Chef Don you took extra egg rolls tonight at dinner and stuffed them in your pockets." Anna-Haiden said.

Gross.

Dana was silent.

“Do you like it?” I asked Dana.

“Like what?”

“Tolstoy.” I pointed to the book. “He’s one of my favorites.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a geek too! Are you one of those bitches who has her SAT score posted on her Facebook profile?” She grabbed the book off the table and flipped through the pages at an angle to show me. “I hide my candy wrappers in here, see.” She showed me a neatly pressed Butterfinger wrapper.

“Clever,” I said. “How did you sneak those in here?”

“Oh, ancient Chinese secret,” Dana said and laughed. “I take out the Kotex pads from the wrappers and put the candy inside them.”

“Ya’ll don’t forget to say your prayers,” Anna-Haiden said as she turned off her reading light.

“Prayers won’t turn you back into a virgin,” Dana teased.

“Bless your heart,” Anna-Haiden said.

I stared at the wooden beams above my bed. I read the carved and written messages from past students— *get me out of here, fuck this place, Layla wuz here*. I tried to think of the last time I had prayed, when I felt confident that God was listening. I’d be lying to myself if I prayed now. I’d feel like an idiot talking to someone who I didn’t even know was there.

In kindergarten, my teacher told our class that we were all God’s children as we sat in a circle and held hands. I know now that she wasn’t talking about kids like me. It didn’t seem that God wanted anything to do with the girls at Hidden Pines. He must have given up. We were dropped off and forgotten until we were fixed of our problems and set free if we were

lucky. I held a grudge against God for a long time until one night back when I was in Wilderness. Delta lit a blazing fire after we set up camp. Tish sat next to me on the ground and we wrote things down to let go of on pieces of damp paper.

“I don’t know what to write,” I said.

“Just something that’s weighing you down that you need to let go of,” Tish said.

“Like anger or something.”

“I don’t have anything to let go of,” I said. “I want to keep all my anger.” I wanted to tell Tish about The Fire— that anger was a part of me like fuel. If I let it go, I wouldn’t be me. I never told her but I think she knew.

“Tish.”

“Yeah.”

“How did you get your name? Like your full name?” I asked.

Tish stared at the flames. I rubbed my hands together and held them out to the fire.

“Titian was a famous Venetian painter,” she said as she kept her eyes on the fire. “My mom had this print of one of his paintings in her bedroom called *Venus of Urbino* from like the Renaissance or something. It was a gift from my dad.” She cleared her throat. “So in the painting, the woman is looking at the viewer, dead on, like daring you to stare at her, you know?”

“And?” I said.

“And my dad said I looked at him like that when I was born. Like I was daring the whole world to look at me. My mom wanted to name me Venus but my dad said it rhymed with penis so they settled on the name of the painter.”

I giggled as Tish scribbled something on the piece of paper.

“Why do you ask?” she said.

“Just think your name is cool,” I said.

“Thanks, Em.” She smiled at me and put her hand on my knee. “Thanks.”

I saw the only genuine smile I had ever seen from her that day. In that moment, she wasn't the intimidating one whom everyone was afraid of. She wasn't sarcastic or avoidant. She was vulnerable and her eyes softened. Deep down she was sensitive and insecure like the rest of us. I decided to let go of God altogether but wasn't going to say that in front of everyone. I didn't want to offend any believers. We stood around the fire with folded papers in our hands.

“My addiction to the internet and social media,” a girl said and threw the paper into the fire.

“My hatred for my sister who gets everything she wants,” another girl said.

“My dad,” Tish said.

“Anger,” I said.

On day five, I woke up to the sound of Dana smoothing a KitKat wrapper. I hoped that it wasn't oatmeal for breakfast. We left in a silent single file line for the dining room when our room was called over the intercom. Kelsey and Amber were allowed to shower and get in line too. I smelled bacon in the hallway. Maybe there was a God.

DAY 14

Met with therapist today for the first time. She sucks. I hate her voice.

I met with Ms. Amber in her office downstairs. The therapy hall used to be where the massage and facial rooms were when the school was a spa retreat. But Hidden Pines was anything but relaxing. The halls were painted muted blue and green. Tapestries with quotes from the Buddha about mindfulness and inner peace were hung on the walls. Therapists' offices had the best lighting, best couches, comfy chairs, and candy if you decided to open up and talk about your feelings. Ms. Amber was short and stocky with spiked blonde hair. I was pretty sure she could kick my ass. But her voice was like a church mouse.

“How are you feeling today, Emily?”

I shrugged.

“Look at the chart if you need some help.”

I glanced at the feelings chart on the wall. Cartoon images of the same face with squiggly lines that made the shapes of all the mouths. The trees outside Ms. Amber's window filtered the sunlight that came into the office. It made me think of Wilderness.

“Lonely,” I said.

“Very good,” said Ms. Amber. She wrote something down on her notepad. “Now, why are you feeling lonely?”

“Seriously?”

Ms. Amber kept looking at me with her head cocked to the side like it was a perfectly reasonable question.

“For starters, I'm here,” I said.

“Go on.”

At this point, I just wanted some chocolate. I would have said anything. I sighed deeply.

“I miss my family– my mom, Danielle, my little brother.”

“Michael, right?”

Ms. Amber referred to my file. Hearing Michael’s name made my heart sink.

“I miss him the most,” I said. My throat tightened.

“And why is that, Emily?” Ms. Amber said.

I rolled my eyes, annoyed. “Because he is the only sane one in my family! He’s normal and he didn’t ask for or deserve any of us as his family.” I sputtered a nervous laugh and shifted in the overstuffed chair. I looked out the window at the lake. I was finished talking. I didn’t even want the chocolate anymore.

“Why didn’t you mention your dad when you talked about people you missed? Do you want to talk about that?” she asked.

“Nope, there’s nothing to talk about. We don’t talk.”

After the divorce, my mom was withdrawn and cried a lot. Danielle was always working and seldom came home before eight at night. She said that 2011 was a great year for divorces. The housing market was still struggling, and if Danielle taught me anything, it was that the beginning of the end of a marriage was arguing over money. My mom felt alone even though she wasn’t. She bought boxes of chardonnay because they held more wine for a cheaper price. They also took up less room in the recycling bin.

I didn’t blame Danielle for my parents’ divorce. I was relieved when my mom and dad sat me down for that talk when parents are about to split up. They said all the right things

and I wasn't one of those divorce kids who blamed myself either. My parents were toxic together and they were better off apart. My dad used to hit my mom and once poured boiling water over her when they were arguing. She ran into my room and I locked the door. She slept in my room that night and for many nights after that.

The last time my dad hit my mom I waited outside my parent's bedroom door the next morning. When my dad walked out, I jumped on his back and punched him repeatedly in the temple hoping one of those important blood vessels in his head would burst and bleed. I saw it on a crime show.

The truth is, I know why I was sent to Wilderness and I know why I was at Hidden Pines. The Fire burned more intensely with age. Although I never hit my mom, Michael, or Danielle, I fought with vicious and crippling words I can't bring myself to repeat. I saw fear in my mom's eyes when she looked at me. The same fear she felt for my father. She knew about The Fire before I did. Maybe it was teenage hormones but Mom and Danielle were afraid that I was going to take my anger out on Michael. He had already been through six years as a warden of the state.

I came home from school one day and Danielle's car was in the driveway. Maybe she was making an effort to come home earlier. I walked through the front door and no one was home. I passed the kitchen table that was covered with unopened mail. A pamphlet was about to fall from the tallest pile.

"Your dream of adopting a child is our goal and we can help you in this extremely important process. Here, at Helping Families, your questions and concerns can be answered. We will help you on your way to adopting a child that best suits your growing family."

There was a picture of a baby on the front surrounded by a multiracial family. I thought about my dad and his views on political correctness. I tossed it back onto the pile and went to the fridge. A note on the refrigerator door read,

You are old enough to be on your own for twenty minutes

Be back soon,

Mom

I grabbed an apple and slumped onto the couch to watch reruns of *American Idol*. I heard my mom's minivan pull in the driveway, and there was the strangest sound after the doors shut—laughter. My mom walked through the front door smiling. She wore pressed jeans, a crisp white shirt, and a black blazer. She was wearing makeup for the first time in months.

“Mom, you look great,” I said. “Did you get a new haircut or something?”

Mom could barely contain her excitement but didn't say a word. Danielle walked in behind her.

“Can we talk for a minute, Em?” Danielle said.

I hated it when Danielle called me Em. She didn't know me well enough to use my nickname. She sat on the ottoman and folded her hands.

I took a bite of my apple while giving her a blank stare.

“Your mother and I have come to a decision that we think is a really great idea and we hope that you do too,” Danielle said.

“Okay,” I said.

“Ever since I started my career I felt I was missing something— a family,” she said.

And now you've weaseled your way into ours, I thought. Danielle was waiting for a nod or permission to continue.

"Uh huh," I said.

"Since I met your mother, I feel more whole," Danielle said and looked at my mother who was tearing up and smiling. "I have seen a lot of families break up, and I have seen a lot of kids badly hurt because of it."

"Danielle, what are you getting at?" I asked looking up at mom.

"Well, I think it's time that we expand our family," Danielle said.

"We are adopting!" My mother practically squealed.

She clapped her hands and threw herself onto Danielle's lap, and they started kissing. I swear Danielle was trying to prove that my mother loved her, and that, no matter what, I wasn't going to stand in the way of that.

I sat silent on the couch, staring at my apple core. I couldn't believe it.

"Aren't you happy, honey? That you are going to get a baby brother?" mom asked.

"Bother? How is he going to grow up living with a bunch of women? He'll go nuts!" I said. "Mom, you have been drinking wine and crying since Dad moved out and she moved in." I pointed to Danielle. I felt The Fire in my toes as my feet tingled and it moved up through my entire body. I couldn't control what I was saying. My face got hot and the adrenaline of an argument felt too good to stop. "You think that adopting a kid is a good idea? That it's going to make this family better or happier? Mom, you can't be serious. It's childish."

"I can assure you that we have thought this through," Danielle said trying to keep everyone calm. "We didn't tell you until now because we were afraid of your reaction."

“Can’t you just be happy for us?” My mother sank to the floor crying. I felt nothing. The Fire was gone and so was the satisfaction of being right.

“Apologize to your mother, Em,” Danielle said and leaned in towards me.

“Don’t call me Em!” I yelled and my nose was near enough to touch hers when I got up. I stepped over my mother and stomped up the stairs. I slammed my bedroom door. I was mad at myself for opening my stupid mouth, and I needed something better than a pillow to punch. I caught my reflection in the window and I was disgusted at my own reflection, and for hurting my mother. I punched through the glass and felt the release of immense pressure from my body. It felt like hours waiting in the emergency room in silence. I winced when the doctor gave me stitches.

“I’m so sorry,” I said to Mom. “It’s not you I’m angry with.”

“I know. You guys just need time to get used to each other, that’s all,” Mom said.

“It’s not her,” I said. “Mom, I can’t stop it.”

She didn’t need to ask what *it* was.

“I am so sorry,” I repeated and hugged her with my free arm. I buried my face into her neck while she held me tightly.

I was expecting my mom and Danielle to bring home a baby – a cute bundle of joy for my mom and Danielle to dote on. But when they came through the door the child was walking. He walked in after my mom and peeked out at me from behind my mother’s leg. I paused *American Idol* and scooted to the edge of the couch. I wanted him to make the first move. I was never good with little kids because I hadn’t been around them. Now one was going to be living in my house. Mom had converted her office into what was going to be his bedroom and painted it blue. She’d stenciled green frogs around the border.

“Emily, this is Michael, your brother,” my mother said and tried to guide Michael toward me.

Mom couldn’t keep her eyes off of him. I waved at him and smiled and he hid behind her leg. Well I tried, I told myself, and leaned back on the couch. I pushed play and resumed watching *American Idol* reruns. I felt my mother’s eyes on me. She was hurt and disappointed that I wasn’t as excited about Michael’s arrival as she was. I couldn’t be excited about having a six-year-old live with me. Danielle called me cold for not warming up to Michael right away.

The first night with Michael in the house was exhausting. He cried, whimpered, and sobbed until I saw the hallway light turn on. A yellow glow came through the space between my door and the floor. Michael cried for eight nights straight. I heard my mother begging Michael to stop, promising him anything he wanted for just a few hours of sleep. On the ninth morning, I glared at him during breakfast and blamed him for the bags under my eyes while I rewrote my homework— a paragraph answer to the question: *What makes your mom and dad special?*

“You can’t leave your stuff laying around anymore, Em. Make sure you put your things away next time,” Danielle said. She was stirring her coffee and clinking her spoon against her mug.

“So this is my fault that my homework has blue crayon all over it?” I held it up for her to see.

“He’s six,” Danielle said. She poured some sugar into her coffee and started another series of clinking.

The Fire was starting again. Making itself known by buzzing in my head. As tired as I was, The Fire wanted more, a fight to put Danielle in her place even if she wasn't responsible. I curled my toes in hopes that The Fire would stop. Michael banged his wooden blocks against the TV. Danielle continued to unconsciously clink her spoon against the mug while she read the paper.

Bang.

Clink, clink.

Bang, clink, clink.

Clink, Bang.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.

Silence.

Clink, clink.

I left my breakfast on the table and went to my room.

Soon after, I got used to having Michael around and things weren't so bad. We avoided conversation that was sure to end in a fight. Silently walking away seemed to work in deescalating a brewing storm between the members of our family. We made attempts to do what families do like go to the park and the beach. We even made an effort to eat together at night.

DAY 30

Kelsey is crazy. Not the fun kind of crazy. Like kill you in your sleep crazy.

Before bed, the girls in my room were talking about where they were before they came to Hidden Pines. Many of them went to New Beginnings. Others went to residential treatments centers that were like prisons but with better food. Staff called it war-storying. We called it comparing notes to see who had it worse. Kind of like a competition. Kelsey and I weren't on speaking terms but we had an understanding that we could be in the same room together and not be obligated to communicate. It was her turn to talk. Kelsey had gone to Teen Conquest instead of Wilderness. We all laughed because it sounded like a walk in the park compared to primitive camping.

"Oh no, you don't understand," Kelsey said. "This was a religious treatment center. Like fire and brimstone and speaking in tongues kind of shit. We had to pray for everything: our shoes, our food, our water, our salvation."

"Well, were you?" Anna-Haiden interjected.

"Was I what?"

"Saved."

"Well, I don't know. But I saw Jesus and He spoke to me," Kelsey said with a sly smile.

I knew that Kelsey was leading Anna-Haiden on.

"Oh, Kelsey, you are blessed." Anna-Haiden was giddy with excitement. "I've been praying to be saved my whole life. I've been waiting for a sign." She cleared her throat to regain her composure. "What did He say?"

“He told me that girls like us don’t belong in heaven,” she said and shrugged. “And besides, I don’t look good in white. Ha, not even heaven wants us!” She cackled loudly and slapped her knee. “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” She gave a cruel smile to Anna-Haiden who was simply crushed. I didn’t know whether to be impressed by her literary reference or to lunge across the room and strangle her.

Kelsey snapped her fingers like she was trying to remember something.

“Now, who was it that wrote that?”

“Milton,” Jeanette said without looking up from her book.

“That’s right. *Paradise Lost*. Am I correct, Jeanette?”

Jeanette didn’t answer.

I watched Anna-Haiden look down in disappointment.

“Do you get off on this?” I said. The Fire was stuck in my throat but it was pushing its way to my mouth. I was ready for round two with Kelsey.

“I have to get off somehow,” Kelsey said.

I went over to Anna-Haiden and put my hand on her back.

“Oh I did her a favor,” Kelsey said. “And who are you all of a sudden, Mother Theresa? I didn’t say anything about God that you or she doesn’t already know.”

She was right about part of it. I knew, but Anna Haiden found comfort in her faith. Who was Kelsey to take that way?

“Come on, let’s go to bed,” I said and guided Anna-Haiden back to our bunk.

When the RC left after making her rounds for lights-out, I heard Anna-Haiden praying quietly through her tears. I folded my hands and listened.

Day 43

She's here. Maybe I will survive this place.

I had managed to stay below the radar of both the staff and the other girls. During on-bed quiet time I went into the bathroom to read and avoided talking to anyone. Jeanette noticed my new survival tactic because she did the same thing. Every night we leaned against the tub and sat in silence while we read our books. I saw girls whispering to each other at breakfast. They strained their necks to see out the dining room doors. I watched the RCs brace themselves. They put their phones away and stood guard in front of the doors. One girl nearly fell off her chair when she started laughing out of excitement. I was used to the ritual by now. Another new girl had arrived.

I had brought my book to breakfast and was reading *On the Road*, a book that Jeanette left on my bed with a note that said, "And God is Pooh Bear" with a smiley face next to it. There was no use getting worked up anyway. The new girl had to be searched, questioned by the Gestapo, and unpacked before she was even introduced to the community. I heard a tap at the dining room door. A girl was on the other side of the glass sticking her middle finger up against it.

I'm not sure exactly how we ended up on the living room floor but there we were, rolling and laughing. I lost my page. Her hair was cut short and she looked tired and frail. If it weren't for her smile I wouldn't have recognized her.

"What happened?" I asked. I was out of breath grabbing the edge of the coffee table to get up.

"Good to see you too," Tish said breathing heavily.

I begged Ms. Amber to be the one to help her unpack. I wanted to know what happened to her. She couldn't fool me with her sarcasm. Something happened to her in the time between New Beginnings and Hidden Pines. She hadn't come straight to Hidden Pines after Wilderness like I did. I knew because she was clean looking and wearing normal clothes. Whatever was eating at her must have pushed her deep into the kind of darkness that Sylvia Plath writes about.

Ms. Amber gave me the green light after Tish's strip and luggage search. The RCs were short staffed and let me show Tish to her room. We had a second alone while an RC was in the hallway printing out paperwork to add to Tish's file.

I dropped her duffle bag on the empty bunk. She had to sleep in the room closest to the RC desk on the second floor because her file said she was a high-risk runner. I unzipped her bag.

"I can't believe you're here," I said.

"Me either," she said.

Tish pulled out a framed picture of her and her mom at an apple orchard and dismantled the casing. She took out a match and a cigarette that was hidden in the back of the frame and opened the sliding glass door to blow out the smoke.

"No bars!" she said and smiled. She took another puff.

"Are you kidding me?" I snatched the cigarette from between her lips and ran to the toilet to flush it down. I sprayed a cloud of Lysol around the room and waved my hands around to get rid of the smell.

Ms. Bet came in. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

“What you got?” Tish was looking in drawers filled with the belongings of other girls.

“Oatmeal,” Ms. Bet said.

Day 50

Missing my mom today, especially after watching The Breakfast Club after school. She cries on the phone when we talk and says that she misses me. I believe her.

My mom and I used to have movie nights. We made breakfast for dinner and locked ourselves in my bedroom. We put on pajamas and ate popcorn, chocolate, and soda in bed. But it wasn't about what we did. It was about hanging out— just us. I missed having time alone with her. When Dad moved out and Danielle moved in, it seemed like those times with my mom were over. I didn't hate Danielle. I just wished there was some time before she moved in when it was just us. Our favorite movie was *Heathers*. She said that *Heathers* was an 80's cult classic like *The Breakfast Club*, but I think the movie deserved its own category because every school has a clique of mean girls just like the Heathers of Westerburg High. The only difference was that the girls at Hidden Pines School for Girls weren't all named Heather. But they were just as cruel, just as popular, and just as feared.

Kelsey was a cutter and the leader of her clique. She had a large scar on the side of her neck and wasn't ashamed of it. She wore it like a badge. Everyone knew she lost her virginity at twelve to a guy who was in high school. Some say she sucked off the whole football team before she went into treatment. I hated her but even I didn't believe she was that much of a slut. She was envied and feared by all the girls. She was pretty but not gorgeous; had an athletic stature but was no Venus Williams. There was something about her confidence that everyone respected, even the staff. She simply didn't give two shits about what anyone thought of her. She got to leave school all the time for doctor's appointments and the teachers always excused her from homework. After each appointment she came back

with a McDonald's bag and a chocolate shake. We salivated as she sauntered by us. I called Kelsey and her clique of friends the Bitch Parade because they always walked in procession—Kelsey at the front followed by her three blind mice: Jenny, the bulimic pageant queen; Nadia, who was too nice to be in the Bitch Parade but liked the popularity; and now, Tish. I tried my hardest to keep her away from Kelsey and her crew. I selfishly wanted to keep Tish to myself but I also wanted to protect her. She still hadn't told me what happened before she came to Hidden Pines. Soon after she arrived, she began to ignore me and snicker with the Bitch Parade when I walked by. I had no idea what got into her. One minute we were on the floor laughing. The next she was completely ignoring me. We made eye contact a few times between classes but she said nothing. I wondered if she told the Bitch Parade about my secrets—about The Fire and other things I shared with her while we were at Wilderness. I tried to warn Tish that Kelsey was an energy vampire; that she sucked the life out of all her friends until they were her vacant zombie followers. But Tish saw something in Kelsey that I couldn't understand. Whatever it was, they bonded over it and I lost my only friend in this place.

DAY 52

*Two Households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge, break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.*

Ms. Hannah, the English teacher, was at the peak of one of her feminist rants. This one was about how women were earning only 80 cents for every dollar a man made. Her face burned red as she preached about women's rights and education. We were reading Act I of *Romeo and Juliet* when Ms. Hannah got sidetracked and started lecturing us about roles of women in the Elizabethan era. I simultaneously admired and pitied Ms. Hannah. She was educated, independent, and a Riot-Girl feminist. She thought she could save every one of us and make us into the next Hillary Clinton or Malala Yousafzai. She had a *Yes We Can* poster of Rosie the Riveter on her classroom door. Her hands waved like she was the head of air traffic control when she was passionate about something, which was all the time. Spit flew out her mouth as she slammed her fists on our desks for dramatic effect. Each lecture always ended with, "You girls are the women of the future! Open your eyes!" Ms. Hannah was moving into her finale with her fists on Nadia's desk when Jenny interrupted her.

"I'm just going to marry rich," she said. "That way I won't have to learn about any of this shit." She glared at Ms. Hannah and flashed a debutant smile. Jenny still had her panties in a wad because Ms. Hannah gave her a C on her last paper. When Ms. Hannah asked me to hand them back I peeked at the comments on Jenny's paper: *Lacks substance*.

Ms. Hannah rested her tattered copy of *Romeo and Juliet* in her lap. The whole class fell silent. Ms. Hannah took a deep breath, smoothed her corduroy trousers, and fixed her eyes on Jenny.

“Some girls in this classroom might not choose to follow the same pattern in life that you speak of,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jenny asked. The only sound in the room was the hum of the air conditioning. Ms. Hannah just smiled. “My daddy pays your salary and I can have you fired,” said Jenny.

“Yes he does, Jennifer, and he’s paying me to do my job.” She went back to the white board at the front of the classroom. “And to teach you all Shakespeare!” She made a dramatic plié. “Now, where were we? Oh yes, Romeo was pining over Rosaline like a lost puppy.” We opened our books again. Jenny rolled her eyes. Ms. Hannah was my hero.

Someone knocked on the door.

“You may enter,” Ms. Hannah announced in her best Shakespearean voice. Kelsey and a girl I didn’t recognize walked in. She was giving a tour. First impressions were crucial at Hidden Pines and the odds were always stacked against the new girl.

“Everyone, this is Susannah,” Kelsey said in a fake-nice voice. Susannah raised her hand and gave a nervous wave. I felt sorry for her because not one girl said hello back, including me. Each girl narrowed her eyes as they sized her up. I wanted to say something to her, but it would only make my reputation as an outcast worse. Finally Ms. Hannah cleared her throat and introduced herself. She asked Susannah if she ever read *Romeo and Juliet*.

“No ma’am, I’m only in eighth grade,” Susannah said.

“Well, it’s never too early to appreciate the eloquence of a sharp tongue. Where are you from?” Ms. Hannah asked.

She was from Florida too. And she had freckles like me. Her hair was shiny, dark and thick like the girls in shampoo commercials. People would kill for volume like that. I would

kill for volume like that. Her braces were bigger than her smile and enough to fill the whole room with metal and rubber bands. She had clean clothes on, which meant that she didn't come straight from Wilderness. She looked normal. You see, the definition of normal changes when you are in a therapeutic boarding school: Oh, you stole your parents' credit cards and spent thousands of dollars? Normal. You had sex in all the bathrooms at your old school? Normal. You called your school pretending to be your parent and snuck off to Paris for the weekend? Normal. You pulled your braces off with pliers? Normal. But Susannah was normal by any and all standards. If she was moving in, I needed to make friends with her before the Bitch Parade initiated a new member.

Day 53

Cut.

Cut.

Cut

She cuts her arm.

Cut.

Cut.

Cut.

She cuts her leg.

Cut.

Cut.

Cut.

She cuts her wrist.

Gossiping was a sport for the Bitch Parade. They were grouped in the corner of the dining room, whispering and all nibbling on half of a bagel. The Bitch Parade did everything they could to stay skinny. They bribed other students with the opportunity to sit with them at lunch in exchange for their ADD meds because they heard it helped them to lose weight. They ate hot sauce on everything because someone said that it helps you to eat less. I don't know why. It wasn't like there was anyone to impress here. I waited for Susannah at the dining room door and peeked in to see what was for breakfast. At least it wasn't oatmeal. I was dying for cooked food: bacon, eggs, sausage, French toast, Benedict, maybe? Benedict would be pushing it. We were lucky to get microwaved bacon.

"Are you trying to starve us?" Dana said. I could hear her from outside of the dining room. "This isn't breakfast! Where's the fried chicken and waffles, bro? This bagel shit is for skinny white bitches."

Who knows what the Bitch Parade was plotting but I knew it was something about Susannah, I was sure. She was normal and I wanted to keep her that way. What could they

want with someone like her? I caught Susannah just outside the dining room. Her hair was brushed and pulled into a bouncy ponytail.

“Sit over here with me,” I asked as I guided Susannah over to the opposite end of the table. Tish narrowed her eyes at me. Kelsey flipped her hair and glanced at me. Then turned back to her flock. I hated the Bitch Parade for taking Tish. She was my friend first. I wanted my best friend back, the one who smiled more and didn’t care about superficial bullshit like staying skinny. The one who laughed at my stupid jokes and couldn’t care less about being popular or cool. But I had a new friend now. I was damned if I was going to see Susannah end up like the Tish.

“So, how was your first night?” I asked. “It can be tough. On my first night I cried myself to sleep.”

“Actually it wasn’t so bad. All the girls were really supportive and nice to me,” Susannah said.

“Oh, well that’s great,” I said. I was trying to hide my disappointment. I always had it harder than anyone else.

“Just be careful around here. Some of the girls don’t have the best intentions when they are nice to you.” I regretted saying it before I even finished my sentence.

“I think that everyone deserves a chance. I like to be friends with lots of different kinds of people, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said, “totally.”

She was being so fucking positive it was annoying the hell out of me. I bit the inside of my cheek. Then I smiled and stuffed half of a bagel into my mouth. I saw Tish get up and

walk to our side of the table. She didn't even acknowledge me when she sat down next to Susannah. I don't know why I was surprised.

"Hey, friend! When you're finished with morning chores, Mr. Daniel said we could go for a swim before morning classes. Do you want to come? The lake is really fun," Tish said in a high-pitched voice. So fake.

"Sure," Susannah said. "I'd like that."

I shoved the other half of my bagel in my mouth and left the dining room.

I was sweeping the entryway when Susannah and the Bitch Parade came out of the room in bathing suits. Tish wore a black string bikini. Only Kelsey could make an electric blue one-piece look slutty. Susannah wore a purple tankini. I moved to the side as they walked past in procession. Each had her nose in the air except for Susannah who smiled at me. Maybe there was still hope.

"You wanna come?" she asked.

"No thanks. I'm not finished with my chores."

She waved goodbye and I saw five large, raised scars that covered her right arm from shoulder to elbow. Six more were on her thigh.

I was allowed to talk to my brother during one of my social calls. My mom and Danielle didn't want me speaking to him until they felt that I was in a good place. Sure, I was in a great place if it meant getting ten minutes to talk to Michael. Ms. Amber handed me the house cell phone and it felt completely foreign in my hands. When I was back at home, I used to go everywhere with my phone like it was an appendage.

"Can I talk to him alone?" I asked Ms. Amber.

"You may," she said.

I took the phone outside. I sat down on one of the blue rocking chairs. My palms were sweaty as the phone rang and I pictured Mom waiting anxiously by the phone.

“Hi honey!” my mom said. She answered on the third ring.

Hearing my mom’s voice made my throat swell.

“Hi Mom, can I talk to Michael? I only have ten minutes. I love you and miss you.”

I wiped a few tears from my cheek. I wanted to apologize and tell her I was sorry for being something else she had to worry about. But this phone call was for Michael and I had to apologize to him as well. I heard shuffling as my mom handed Michael the phone.

“Hi, Sisi! I played with Derek today and he said that he has a sister too. She’s crazy too!”

I laughed. “Oh yeah? Is that what you think– that I’m crazy?” I asked.

“That’s what Danielle says. Mom said something about your homorons? Sisi, what are homorons?”

I felt a sting in my chest. I wanted to tell Michael to put Danielle on the phone so that I could tell her exactly what I thought of her saying that I was crazy.

“Michael, I think you mean hormones. Hormones are something that teenagers have to live through until everything balances out. It will happen to you too one day.”

“Nu-uh, not me. Hey, Em?” Michael asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why did you leave?”

I wasn’t prepared for that question. I certainly didn’t think it would come during our first private conversation since I left.

“That’s going to take a long time to answer, Michael. But I want to tell you that when I come home, I’m going to take you camping, show you some of the things I learned in Wilderness. Does that sound fun?”

“Can you build a fire?” Michael asked.

“Yup.”

“Can you show me the stars again?”

“Yes, even show you some new constellations,” I said.

I wiped my cheek. “Michael, I’m sorry I went away.”

“It’s okay. I miss you,” he said.

The lump in my throat swelled again. “I miss you too. Are Mom and Danielle still fighting?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you do when that happens?” I asked.

“I go into your room and get in your bed.” He paused. “Is that okay?”

I hunched over my knees. I didn’t want Michael to hear me sob. I tried to speak past the blockage in my throat.

“Of course, Michael,” I said. “You can sleep there whenever you want to. But do me a favor, will you? The next time that they fight and you go into my room, there is an iPod in the drawer of my nightstand. Listen to it so you can go to sleep faster.”

Michael said he would and told me all about school and friends who say how lucky he is to have two moms when a year ago he didn’t even have one. By the time he was finished explaining what Derek’s tree house looked like my time was up.

“Okay Michael, I have to go now. I love you and don’t forget about the iPod.”

“Okay. Here’s mom,” he said.

I hung up the phone before she could say anything.