Cottonmouth
R.M. Kinder Award Winner for Realistic Fiction

I am ready to skin the cat. Gloves, goggles, a plastic apron protecting my clothes. A former theatre major and high school Florida Thespian Society member, I am used to costumes, have lived in them my entire life. But this isn’t a disguise so much as a uniform, a dress rehearsal for what’s to come. At the start of the semester, I went to my advisor’s office and told her I was changing my major, that I’d discovered my long-lost calling: I was going to be a veterinarian.

The scalpel shakes in my hand (which will one day pull tumors from beloved dogs and foals from their mothers’ uteri). I look around at my anatomy classmates, all of them comfortable with their knives, cutting into their cats like someone slicing a pizza. Dr. Patel gives me a sharp glance, taps her wristwatch. Her eyes remind me of what I’ve been trying to forget: if I don’t make an A on this dissection, our final exam of the semester, I will fail the class.

We have two hours to disembowel our cats. Snow spirals in the window; outside, one of the many campus a capella groups sings Christmas carols. Shutting my eyes, I tell myself to be confident, or to at least feign confidence until it becomes real. I’m an expert at pretending—it’s absurd, almost cliched, that I was initially drawn to a field that let me adopt new identities, practice the fine art of self-delusion. But there’s no time for self-delusion now. I’m supposed to be a vet. I’ve always wanted to be a vet. I reminded my parents of this when I called them back in August to deliver the big news.

“I’m changing my major,” I announced. “I’m going to study biology. I’m going to be a veterinarian.”

I’d asked my parents to put me on speaker phone, and neither of them said anything until my mom broke the silence: “But it’s your senior year!”

My dad had other concerns. “Veterinarians have a high suicide rate. Right up there with dentists and cops. There was a whole article in The Baltimore Sun the other day.” After I moved to Baltimore for college, paternal anxiety compelled him to subscribe to the city’s newspaper, whose articles he often details for me over the phone.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said.

“Euthanizing dogs every day makes them depressed.”

“But they save lives, too.”

“They start to feel guilt, despair. Every day at work they’re committing murder.”

“Dad!”

“These are just the facts,” he said simply.

“It’s too late, anyway. I already switched my major and signed up for new classes.”

“What happened to Yale?” my mom asked. “What about that man from the festival in Connecticut who said he’d put in a good word for you?”

I shrugged. “Maybe they have a vet school, too.”
“But you always wanted to be an actress.”

“No, I didn’t. I wanted to be a veterinarian. Ever since I was four. Don’t you remember my preschool career day?”

Of course they did. I came dressed in a white doctor’s coat, toting a beanie baby zebra and my mother’s sewing kit, prepared to demonstrate abdominal surgery. With a pair of safety scissors, I slashed open the zebra’s belly. Stuffing spilled onto the table, cotton guts and viscera, but before I could stitch her back together, a boy in the front row began shrieking in terror, cutting my presentation short.

“That was preschool,” my mom protested. “You’re a born actress. Remember that time in the Tallahassee mall when you went right in the middle of the food court and started singing? And that kindergarten play when you were the cutest little head of cauliflower—”

“Mom, please. Besides, I wasn’t always like that. I used to be shy. Back when I was in preschool.”

“What is this obsession with preschool?”

“I don’t have an obsession with preschool. I’m just making a point.”

My mom sighed. “You look so pretty on stage, though. You’re always the prettiest one up there.”

There was something hostile about this compliment, something threatening. I was tired of being reduced to just my body—that, and I was not going to let her maternal biases sway me into a profession in which I didn’t belong.

“I’m going,” I began, enunciating each word slowly, “to be a fucking veterinarian.” But this was disingenuous, for let it be known: I am not going to be a fucking veterinarian. I have plans to be a veterinarian who specifically does not fuck. Human men are a species on which I’ve given up completely.

“No need to be hostile,” my dad said.

“We just want to understand why you’re doing this,” my mom added.

This was not a question I could answer, not yet, maybe not ever. I had already told them their little artist, the only creative kid amongst their brood of acne-riddled mathematicians, wanted to trade her scripts for a stethoscope. I did not want to break their hearts twice.

“It’s what I want,” I said.

It was at this moment that my mother decided to drop her infamous non-sequitur, a question with which she’d been harassing my three siblings and me for years: “So, Shelby, are you dating anyone?”

In the anatomy classroom, I slit that cat’s throat.

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It was summer, several weeks before fall semester started, when everything became clear to me—my past, my future, the spent and threadbare years in between. My three roommates were out of town, meaning I had the rowhouse we shared entirely to myself. Supposedly haunted, it had once belonged to a botany professor at our university who’d died in his sleep. We’d drawn straws to determine who would move into the room in which he’d died, and I lost. However, this arrangement pleased me; not only did I have the master bedroom, but I relished the drama of bunking with a ghost. I imagined Banquo, Julius Caesar, Hamlet’s father, and cast myself as the heroine of some lost folio. Life felt wild and magical then. I went to a prestigious school, nabbed almost every lead role for which I auditioned. But
something gnawed at me—emptiness, an inexplicable longing—and I fell asleep each night straining my ears for the ghost’s plaintive footsteps.

Normally I spent my summers in Florida, but I’d been cast in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure as the chaste Isabella, a nun who must decide whether to give up her virtue to save her brother from execution. After our final show, several strangers commended my performance, but one of them lingered longer than the rest. He was dark-skinned with olive eyes, tiny lanterns that glowed in the darkened theatre.

“You were exquisite,” he said. That was really the word he used—exquisite. He said other things: that his name was Adrien; that he was a former high school theatre geek and frequently attended our school’s free productions; that he was a third-year medical student aspiring to be a pediatrician; that I was terrifying onstage, but he hoped I didn’t object to men in real life.

In fact, I did. I’d just turned twenty-one and had never made it past a second date or a first kiss. I couldn’t have told you then what made me flee; something about the closeness, a man’s breath on my ear, reminded me of when I was a kid, how sometimes, when the light slanted through my lace curtains a certain way, I’d start to feel sick. Faint, dizzy, my lungs shrunken to autumn leaves. I could not explain this sensation; I could only grab my purse and say sorry, it’s getting late, I’d better run.

But Adrien awakened an untapped determination in me, a desire to push past that inexplicable sickness and see what was waiting on the other side. Together, we were two displaced southerners, him from Chattanooga, me from the Florida Panhandle. He possessed an unwavering smile, a laugh that made people in restaurants turn and look. Never in an annoyed way, but in amusement, curiosity—they wanted a face to match the voice. He was the kind of person who wished everyone, from waiters to Uber drivers to grocery store clerks, to have a good day. It was this instinctual kindness that drew me in, that cultivated my trust. But I wanted to take my time. I wanted to get this one right.

“I don’t put out on the first date,” I told him with a sly grin, trying to pass off my fear as a flirty game. I had seen enough student-written one-act plays to know this was something you could do.

After the third date, I finally let him kiss me. We were sitting on my porch swing, watching a satellite cut across the black sky. Lights winked on and off in upstairs windows. Someone across the street was practicing arpeggios on the piano. Adrien gave me a look I’d seen before from other boys, a lazy smile, his face filling my vision until I closed my eyes and let it happen. It was a tentative kiss, slow and secretive, withholding something from the both of us. The word that came to mind was exquisite, yet when his hands slid toward my waist, I pulled away.

“Something wrong?” he asked in genuine concern.

“I think it’s the fajitas,” I lied. I’d learned to eat heavy foods on dates, meats drenched in oils and spices that could double as scapegoats.

He kissed my forehead and told me to feel better soon, and over the next few weeks, he explored by body in increments, a settler taking his time to learn the territory (for that is the only way I can think of men, no matter how exquisite—as colonizers on stolen land). In the movie theatre, his hand grazed my thigh; in his car, his fingers ran through my hair. We moved slowly until at last Adrien and I were alone in my bedroom.

A hurricane had just made landfall in Virginia, and even in Baltimore we felt its tremendous power. Rain lacerated the windows. The old house creaked and groaned. An occasional streak of lightning set
my room ablaze, making me feel momentarily exposed, ashamed. He was on top of me, his face buried in my neck, and I was trying to determine how I felt about it. I talked myself through it, reminded myself that I liked Adrien, that I was in college and sex was something college girls were supposed to enjoy. His hands found the hem of my dress and worked the material up my body.

"Is this okay?" he asked, a question he'd been murmuring every few minutes.

"Yes," I breathed.

"Are you sure?"

In answer, I unfastened the top button of his shirt, and seconds later we were both half-naked, my dress and his clothes tangled together on the floor, my bra looped around the bedpost. A rattle of thunder shook the house, and that's when I remembered the ghost. A man had died here, in this spot. Suddenly I was terrified, certain his spirit was hovering above us, his presence casting a sickly chill over the room, settling on us like snowfall. But when Adrien's hand ventured beneath the elastic band of my underwear, I knew what I felt wasn't a ghost at all.

I pushed him off me and sat up, drawing my knees to my chest.

"What's wrong?" he asked, alarmed. Hastily he grabbed my dress from the floor and handed it to me. "I'm so, so sorry. Please don't cry. I thought it was okay, that you were—"

"It's not you. " I pulled my dress over my head as lightning flared in the window.

"No, it's okay. I take full responsibility. I should have gone slower. I should've—"

"I said it's not you. " The vehemence in my voice caused him to jerk away.

It really wasn't him. It was summer sunlight filtering into my childhood bedroom, the wallpaper pale pink and dotted with roses. Victorian dolls inherited from my grandmother stood in a prim row on my top bookshelf. Dad's lawn mower buzzed in the yard. Mom napped with my newborn baby sister, the house quiet and still. I was five, ensnared by my twelve-year-old brother, Grayson, in a succession of lost afternoons until my mom intervened, thinking she was stopping something before it began.

I don't know how much time had passed before she caught him. A few days? A month? My memories are only vignettes: a closed door, my brother's grin, the sun crashing through the window.

Inching cautiously toward me, Adrien asked, "Do you want to talk about it?" He was sitting on the edge of the bed, his feet on the floor.

I shook my head. "I can't."

"I hope it isn't out of line for me to ask this, but did something... " he paused, unsure how to proceed.

I told him to go, that I was sorry.

Around two in the morning, the power went out. I stayed up until it came on several hours later, birds twittering outside, and went downstairs. All the clocks were wrong. I did not know what time it was, and I felt uncertain about the year, my age, how it was that my brain had edited itself like a movie: pausing my emotions, cutting scenes indecent for viewers under a certain age. But I was twenty-one, old enough to reckon with what my five-year-old self could not. I was a college senior. I was an actress just beginning to understand the role in which I'd been cast.
In another timeline, I already know how to cut flesh. I've dissected sharks, frogs, cadavers that look like people I've seen before somewhere. The grocery store, or the library on campus. I've interned with the local vet and spend every summer walking orphaned dogs at the local Humane Society. One year, the shy boy nursing battered kittens back to health says I look pretty and takes me out to dinner. His name is soft and feminine, something like Jules or Sasha, the kind of name that dooms him to a stutter and an affinity for painting. A nice boy, innocent as a puppy. I kiss him first; that's the kind of person I am. Maybe we have a summer fling, a poolside romance. Maybe we fall in love.

In this alternate dimension, my mother didn't sign me up for summer theatre camp in a hurried attempt to get me out of the house and away from my brother. I didn't return every July as Mary Poppins, Tinker Bell, and Cinderella, enchanted by the magic of the stage, my veterinary ambitions forgotten. This is a universe in which I did not beg my mother to take me to see Wicked for my twelfth birthday, where I do not know all the lyrics to the Cell Block Tango. Here, I am not the kind of person who survives by trading her identity for others.

In the real world, the here and now, I'm trying to become that girl, to feel comfortable in my own skin. But first, I have to peel off the skin of this cat.

"Get moving," Dr. Patel says, pausing after this command in a way that lets slip that she can't remember my name.

Truth is, nobody in the department knows who I am. Think of me as a ghost, someone who knocks over Erlenmeyer flasks and smudges slides, a poltergeist who haunts not because she wants to be noticed, but because she's trying so hard to blend in. In the biology department, I practice being shy. No more boisterous Shelby, dancing on theatre party tabletops and stealing the show at improv night. Walking the halls of the biology building is preschool Shelby, head down, feet clumsy. I never linger after class to chat with my lab partners, never attend department functions or post-lecture coffee runs. When people ask if they saw me in a play, I tell them they must have me confused with someone else.

I hold my breath and dig my knife into the cat's neck wound, then begin to cut. When I peel back the skin, what I find is cryptic, a map I can't read: veins like abandoned roads, broken infrastructure, a ghost town at sunset. Faded pink, dry and dead. Our assignment requires us to identify the organs, to demonstrate an understanding of the complex machinery that once brought this cat to life, but I have no idea what I'm looking at.

A lifelong deception artist, I decide to act the part of diligent student. I remove the fat and fascia, stack it in a lopsided pile on my desk. I open my lab packet and begin writing. This is the heart, this is the pancreas. If I pretend to understand, perhaps I eventually will.

Printed in slurred handwriting at the top of my lab workbook is my name, Shelby Swann, and for a moment I worry that even this is incorrect.

* 

The Swann kids. Grayson and Laura Leigh and Hannah and me, four names frequently found in the Wewahitchka Post. In grainy monochrome, we proudly display science fair projects, deliver valedictory speeches, pose with Florida senators, accept scholarships to universities that scatter us across the country. Of all the Gulf County wildlife, the starfish and sand dollars, we are perhaps the most unusual,
gawked at like the occasional unidentifiable creature that washes up on the beach. My siblings are freaks of nature, ugly ducklings who never reached the potential suggested by their surname. Homely and buck-toothed, they are burdened with the kind of faces that drive people to mathematics and science, to the forgiving obscurity of dark laboratories and safety goggles. I do not say this to be mean, but to provide a backdrop against which you might see me more clearly. Mom says when I was born, Dr. Barnes swore I was the prettiest baby he'd ever laid eyes on. I was crowned Little Miss Conch Fritter when I was five. A Florida delicacy, an opalescent porpoise, a swan from the womb. People took notice. Grayson must have, too.

Growing up, I had no crime to hold against my brother, so we got along. He hardly had any friends at school and relied on my sisters and me for companionship. This meant reading lines with me and helping me with my algebra homework; when he went to Columbia to study neurobiology, he scoured Broadway for extra playbills to shows I loved—Pippin, Funny Girl, Thoroughly Modern Millie—and brought them back to me over Christmas vacations. Even now, finishing his Ph.D. at NYU, he buys me knockoff Broadway t-shirts from Chinatown whose absurd attempts at avoiding copyright infringement double us over with laughter: The Lion Prince, Kinky Feet, Diddler on the Roof.

I'd always read his generosity as the simple love of an older brother. I never thought to interpret it as an apology.

In the summer, we often went swimming at Wakulla Springs, its freezing water so clear you could see straight to the bottom. Live oaks draped with Spanish moss rose out of the springs, perfect for hiding behind whenever Dad called us to shore. The swimming area was roped off; you could traverse the rest of the springs in glass-bottom boats that allowed you to see manatees and cottonmouths lurking beneath your feet. Sometimes, the lifeguard would blow the whistle three times, a code that meant lives were at stake—an alligator had slipped beneath the rope, and all swimmers were to evacuate the springs immediately.

I did not like Wakulla Springs, its arctic waters and threat of reptilian mutilation, but my siblings loved it. They were adept swimmers while I was not, and they abandoned me on the shore to hang out on the diving platforms. These were dangerously close to the ropes, two square wooden platforms from which they cannonballed into the water.

The water was just another chasm between us, one I sought to cross when I was seven—it was either that or sit in the sand making mud pies with Hannah, who was then a chubby toddler. Earlier that month, I'd relented to swimming lessons at the local YMCA and was most likely awarded a Certified Guppy certificate out of pity alone. I couldn't make it across the Y's pool without my lungs catching fire, but in my long-sleeved rash guard suit and heart-shaped sunglasses, I gamely dog-paddled against the current toward the diving platforms.

"Here comes Shelby!" Laura Leigh shrieked before hurling herself into the water. Her head bobbed to the surface and she grinned at me, her teeth obscured by pink and purple braces. But then her smile fell into a frown, her eyes wide with terror. Without explanation, she turned around and furiously swam back to the platform.

"What?" I yelled, but she kept swimming. "Laura Leigh!"
She scrambled back onto the platform and screamed my name. "Get over here right now!"
"Why?" I was treading water, locked in place by the current.
“Shelby!”
“What?”

I spun around and saw what had sent Laura Leigh into a panic. Slithering down a tree no more than ten feet away was a fat black snake, its head pointed into the telltale deadly arrow we’d been taught to fear: a cottonmouth. The man who owned the Wewahitchka Winn-Dixie had been bitten by one and had a large crater in his left forearm where the flesh had rotted and flaked off like breadcrumbs. Laura Leigh hollered my name again, but I was too transfixed by the snake to pay her any attention, my eyes locked on its body until it disappeared into the water.

I thrashed my arms and legs wildly, trying to break free from the current’s tenacious grip. A hoard of dripping wet kids huddled together on the diving platform and watched me struggle. I kept waiting for their faraway bodies to loom closer, for their blurred faces to sharpen, but instead they grew dimmer, shadowy. I felt heavy and somnolent, tucked in, as if I were in bed waiting for Mom to say prayers with me—or if I were waiting in dread for somebody else.

“Shelby!” I heard Laura Leigh scream, but her voice sounded strangled, drowned.

And then I was moving toward the shore. Someone was carrying me, and then he was beating the water out of my lungs. I sputtered and coughed, blinded by the sun. At some point, my sunglasses had fallen off. I blinked sun spots out of my eyes and a face materialized before me, its features disordered and chaotic, like paint thrown on a blank canvas. Crooked mouth, wide-set eyes, a forehead spattered with pimples. Grayson.

“It’s okay, Shel, you’re all right,” he said, draping a towel over my shoulders. He wiped my cheek with the edge of the towel, letting his hand linger there. A semicircle of concerned sunbathers had formed around us, and I shocked them by kicking Grayson in the mouth.

“Get away from me!” I cried. My dad was crouched next to me, and I retreated into his arms, weeping.

“I got you, baby, I got you,” he murmured, smoothing my hair. “Don’t take it personally,” I heard him say to Grayson. His voice had the jocular quality of a wink, lighthearted and kind. “She’s just scared, that’s all.”

I suppose my dad was correct; I was scared, but even today, I cannot tell you of what. Had I mistaken my brother’s hand for the sleek tail of a cottonmouth, or had my skin remembered what my brain had chosen to forget?

After a few days, my assault on Grayson became a family joke that lasted for years. Whenever he bored us at the dinner table, pontificating about some fascinating article he’d read in National Geographic, I often threatened a reenactment of that day at Wakulla Springs.

“Better be quiet or I’ll give you another mouthful of foot,” I’d joke, but it’s possible I wasn’t joking at all.

“Time’s up,” Dr. Patel says to the class.

Her voice is nearly lost in the hiss of backpacks zipping, my classmates packing up and talking in low voices about their winter break plans. They will visit with aunts and uncles and protest with
faux-modesty when their moms brag about their accomplishments. They will awkwardly make acquaintance with their significant others’ parents while baking Christmas cookies. They will sleep soundly in their childhood bedrooms, their sheets pristine and pressed, never waking in a cold sweat, never waiting for their doorknob to turn. They are going to become pediatricians and orthodontists and cardiothoracic surgeons, and they have known this their entire lives. As they walk out the door, I realize that wherever they’re going, I won’t be following them.

I give my answers one last glance-over, not to make sure they’re correct, but to complete the scene, enhance the illusion. An actress’s trick.

While my anatomy classmates head back to their dorms, I board the college shuttle and go straight to the train station. A marquee board hanging from the ceiling offers a list of destinations: Washington, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, New Haven. I’d taken the New Haven train before, once, late last spring, and had returned to Baltimore with glossy brochures and a Yale sweatshirt that still has the tags on it.

“Whens the next train to New York?” I ask the man at the ticket counter.

“Fifteen minutes.” He arches an eyebrow at me. “What’s the matter? Smile, girl!”

With a determined frown, I pay the fare, head for the platform, and locate an empty seat in the last car. In the window’s reflection, I notice a large woman settling down next to me.

“Full train today,” she says, pulling out a paperback, “and I gotta stay on all the way to Boston. Good thing I’ve got some Nora Roberts to keep me company. Where are you headed?”

“New York City.”

“Oh, fabulous! What brings you there? Christmas shopping?”

“I’m going to see my older brother.”

“Wonderful! Any plans?”

The words come out before I can stop them. “I’m going to punch him in the face.”

I am just as surprised as my seatmate. This time, I’m not going to kick Grayson. I want to feel my knuckles against his teeth, watch his eyes flicker from shock to ashamed understanding. I want to know that he is haunted, too.

In front of us, a man twists around in his seat, his expression the unambiguous delight of a madman. “I’ll tell you how to get him real good,” he says. “Stick your key between your middle and ring finger. Get him right in the eye.” Fiddling with his nose ring, he condescendingly, he stares at me expectantly.

“Thanks,” I mutter, but despite my unconvincing tone, I am grateful, because I want to hurt Grayson. I want to get him real good.

As the train pulls away from the platform, I text him: Surprise! On the way to NYC. Meet me at Penn Station at 5:00 and we’ll grab dinner?

He texts back immediately: Sounds great! See you then :)”

The next three hours pass quickly. I spend them thinking about my newfound capacity for violence, the acts of which my hands are now capable. Maiming, dismemberment. I think about their formidable power, the terrible potential of all hands. But then I remember what mine can’t do, how they refuse to be held or to touch, and my mind drifts back to Adrien. The memory of his jolly laugh fills me with shame. I had cast him out into a hurricane, mistaking him for a colonizer, a member of an invasive species, when all this time he’d only been a man.
My fists clench, and when my seatmate scoots a few inches away from me, I don’t unclench them.

Just before five o’clock, the train arrives in New York. As I make my way to the door, the man in front of me taps me on the shoulder.

“Remember what I told you,” he says, jangling his keys.

I’ve never liked travelling to Penn Station—the sticky floors, the persistent smell of urine, the occasional pigeon strutting past the KFC—but today its dismal atmosphere satisfies me. If my life were a stage production, I would want the set to look like this: lights low, mood grim. From the crush of people, as if on cue, Grayson emerges.

Despite being almost thirty, he could still pass for seventeen. He’s the shortest person in our family, skinny and pale and only five-foot-seven. When he sees me, his eyes light up behind his glasses, and my hands start to tremble. I wiggle my fingers, a reminder that they are mine, that I am here. There are no windows, no sunlight. My right hand makes a fist.

“Shel!” Grayson calls once he’s closer.

“Hey!” I say, and all my preparation for this moment is ruined by impulse—my hand instinctively rises to wave at him.

Despite being inches apart, we don’t hug. We never do. He rocks back and forth on the heels of his shoes, a nervous habit from childhood. “How was the train ride?”

“I mean, it was a train ride. Nobody kicked my seat or brought their screaming babies with them, which is all you can really ask for.” My own nervous affectation is to vanquish any and all silences, smoother them with meaningless chatter. Anything to not let the unsaid surface. Whenever Grayson and I hang out alone, our conversations are always one-sided.

“Good,” he says. “Great, yeah.” He inexplicably removes his glasses and puts them back on, another anxious tic I thought he’d eventually outgrow. “Ready to eat?”

“Absolutely,” I say. This is it, I think, I’m going to punch him now, but he’s already turned around, heading toward the exit.

We walk outside and down a busy sidewalk, searching for a restaurant. I feel tense, sweaty, as though I’m next to a stranger. When we finally sit down across from each other in a diner booth, I’m relieved that he immediately unfolds his menu and holds it in front of his face.

I curl and uncurl my fist, preparing myself.

“Pancakes,” he mutters. “Hmmm.” Cautiously, he lowers his menu. “How have you been?”

“Me?” I ask, as if he could be referring to anyone else. “I’ve been great.”

“I heard you switched to veterinary, uh, to pre-med. That you’re going to be a vet?”

“I did. Dissected a cat today and everything.”

“Cool, nice. Yeah, that’s very cool. You would be good at it.” His voice turns contemplative, serious.

“But it seems a little... well, weren’t you supposed to graduate this spring?”

“Yeah, I was.”

He pauses. “I just hope you’re okay, is all.”

I want to tell him I’m not okay, that I’m going to spend the rest of my life slashing through sick bodies while stupidly hoping I might find my old self nestled in their goop and gunk, that he’s the cancer I’ll rip from old dogs, the fleas I’ll mash between my fingers, the rabid cats whose lives I’ll end
with the quick prick of a needle—

"I'm fine," I tell him instead.

The rest of our meal passes in stilted yet amiable conversation, like an awkward first date or airplane small talk. When our plates arrive, we take refuge in our food. My fingers are wrapped around my fork, a polite fist. Here we are, sharing a meal, when I was supposed to punch him back at the station. This way is better, I decide. Build up his trust. Catch him off guard.

He insists on paying the bill, and I allow him this unspoken form of reparation. We walk into the brisk night air. It's dark now, all streetlamps and stars. An appropriate place for crime, no dolls or pink blankets. No sun.

"So, Shel, do you want to—"

I whirl around and get him right in the mouth.

He staggers sideways, one hand cupping his face and the other holding him steady against the diner's brick facade. Blood seeps through his fingers. My own knuckles are bloody, but I don't know whose blood it is. People and headlights rush by, wanting nothing to do with us. I want nothing to do with us, either; I flee the scene, walking fast, numb with cold and regret. I've punched the wrong Grayson.

"Wait," I hear a strained voice behind me cry.

When he tries to speak again, only blood comes out of his mouth. He spits it on the concrete, then looks up at me. Guilt shines through his eyes. Whatever he was going to say, I don't need to hear it. As I leave him, I examine my hand for injury and catch a faint whiff of formaldehyde. The dissection feels far away, like it never happened. After it ended, my classmates dumped their cats in the trash and swept their gooey entrails into plastic garbage bags. Only I remained huddled over my cat, stuffing her viscera back inside her. I wanted to send her off with dignity, so I put her skin back in place and brushed her fur. If I squinted, she looked like any regular cat.