

**ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO
SUMMER, 1983**

Too many freckles.

They sweep out from the sides of her nose like great wings, covering her cheeks, threatening to encroach onto her forehead. Claire Rollins used to count them and record the number on her Hello Kitty tablet, but finally gave up and buried the results in a drawer. Don't only redheads get freckles? She doesn't want to end up another Sara Melick, whose face looks like it's been shot with a thousand BBs.

At least she doesn't need braces. Her brother, Bryce, had a mouthful of metal for his first two years of high school; her best friend Meredith Paulson smiles without showing teeth and refers to her orthodontist as a mad scientist. Claire is about to start ninth grade and this freckle face is what she has to show for it.

She puts on her yellow sundress, pulls her freshly washed dark hair into a ponytail. She thinks about spritzing the perfume her grandma gave her for Christmas, but things like perfume and jewelry will be too obvious downstairs. The nails of her right hand are painted purple; Meredith paints only the left, so together they make a complete person.

Photos of Claire and Meredith – horseback riding; in various Halloween costumes; faces splattered with mud – stick along the sides of her wall mirror. Tucked right in the middle of them is Dakota Vanzant's wallet-sized high school senior portrait: a rope of blond hair over one shoulder, a crooked front tooth in the middle of a perfect smile. The girl Claire hopes she might someday become.

The fan spins back and forth lazily, making her red curtain flutter and drop, flutter and drop. On the turntable, The Police send an S.O.S.

Claire rolls her tank top and cutoff shorts into a tight ball, drops it out the open window where it lands behind the lavender-blossomed rhododendron bush. Dozens of eyes watch this from inside the crowded glass doll case, a hand-me-down from her mother. They sit and stand in rows like a class photo: baby dolls and drowsy-eyed Barbies and Japanese geishas whose alabaster skin pops against their colorful kimonos.

From this vantage point, she can see right down into Dakota's window at the Vanzants' house next door. The window dark all the time since Claire's old babysitter went off to college two years ago.

Claire takes the needle off the record and the room goes quiet, save for the low, metallic *whirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr* of the fan.

Across the hall, Bryce's door is closed as usual. Claire and Meredith once spied through his window from up in the tree, convinced he was playing with himself (though neither of them knew exactly what that meant). They watched for an hour but all he did was sit at his desk with earphones on, bopping his head and drawing. Later, when Claire

confirmed what playing with oneself actually does mean, she was glad the spy mission had failed.

Bryce leaves for church camp tomorrow, so that door will stay closed for a while. The handwritten sign on the front: *DO NOT KNOCK. DO NOT ENTER*. Below it, faded stickers: the Fantastic Four, the Silver Surfer, Doctor Strange. In another year he'll be gone to college; maybe their dad will scrape those off then.

Claire goes downstairs two at a time. She hates walking through the den, with the photos of her awkward self looking back at her from the cherry wood walls, and the display of so-called pottery – an empty vase, a wrinkled ashtray – from elementary school.

In the flowered wallpaper kitchen, Barbara Rollins, her mom, loads the dishwasher. She has dark hair, like Claire's, but with a patch of gray, kinky wires over her left ear. Claire used to help pluck these witch hairs; now she doesn't even like looking at them. Her mom's rings are a tiny treasure pile atop a towel, while she scrubs the lasagna dish. After this, she'll take her seat in the den for *Dallas* or *Dynasty* or whatever's on tonight.

The light above the sink casts a ghostly, tired image in the window. In photos from when Claire's mom was young, before this life, she looked like Elizabeth Taylor. "Where are you off to?" she asks, rinsing crust down the drain.

"I told you," Claire replies. "Some of us are gonna set off leftover fireworks at the arroyo."

"Back by eleven."

"Mom, it's *summer*." The same argument every time. Claire will come home at 11:30 and everything will be fine. Midnight would be pushing it, and Claire has an instinct about how far she can push. She bends down and gives her mom a quick kiss on the cheek to seal the unspoken deal; the moment arrived earlier that year when Claire was officially the taller of the two.

Her dad, Wayne, stands on the front porch, smoking, staring off down the cul-de-sac. The porch light makes his tanned arms a crayon-like orange, contrasting with the white belly that peeks out from beneath his undershirt. At his feet, a Folger's coffee can $\frac{3}{4}$ full of cigarette butts. Puff and stare. Puff and stare. Claire and Meredith secretly call him The Sentinel and say things like, "The Sentinel sees aaaaaaall."

"See ya later, Daddy," Claire says, not slowing down lest he attempt to start a conversation, which is bound to be awkward and short-lived as always (since he stopped being a cool dad and became a boring one). He mumbles something in return; she pretends it's "Have fun, sweetie" instead of one of his endless annoying nicknames for her. Their cat, Baloo, watches with glowing eyes from under the tan station wagon.

At the end of the driveway, Claire slows her pace until her dad calls the cat inside and shuts the door. Then she doubles back, crouches behind the rhododendron and

changes clothes, sucking in her tummy to squeeze into the short shorts. The neatly folded sundress gets stashed behind the bush and Claire's on her way, for real this time.

The previous night was the annual Fourth of July cul-de-sac party. All the neighbors had been there, along with coolers and lawn chairs and card tables covered with food. Her dad wore an apron and barbecued hot dogs and burgers. Bushy-bearded Mr. Vanzant from next door brought his tub of brandy slush, which he ladled out for anyone and everyone. Claire had a sip once, at his insistence; serious brain freeze and a spinning head followed.

She tried to avoid Mr. Batson, so he wouldn't look at her that way he did, so she wouldn't have to acknowledge his compliments about her hair or the color of her nails.

Meredith had been dragged to some symphony concert by her parents, so Claire sat on the curb and watched the Swanson twins run around the tables like an obstacle course. Bryce and his friend Cameron piled paper plates with towers of food and amused each other by pretending to be old men (one of their high school inside jokes).

Each family had their own box of fireworks, full of screaming spinners and snapdragons and birthday hats that erupted in fountains of sparks. The kids twirled sparklers, conducting an invisible orchestra, writing with light in the summer evening. Smoke hung like London fog.

The real show got going as night fell, pops echoing like the sounds of a far-off battle. Above, blue splatters of paint, silver sparkles raining down like tears.

Now Claire hopscotches down the sidewalk in her cutoffs and tank top, staying at an angle where she can't be seen from her house. Limp American flags jut on poles from every front porch. The TV flickers through an open window at the Cohens' place. Mrs. Cohen got sick last year and no one sees her anymore; Mr. Cohen only surfaces to get the mail or the newspaper, often in his bathrobe – otherwise he stays hidden like a witch in a gingerbread house.

The drone of unseen cicadas is so thick as to be almost silence.

Claire will get lipstick from Meredith at the arroyo. There are supposedly going to be cool high school guys coming tonight, not like her brother, but Claire only cares if Justin Vance is there. Since school ended, she's stared at his picture in the yearbook and haunted the places he hangs out, like Uncle Cliff's amusement park and the arcade at the mall, but has never "run into" him. Her image of Justin is frozen from the last day of eighth grade – spiky hair, dimples, blue, blue eyes – so she's eager to see if he's gotten hotter in the past month. Correction, *how much* hotter.

Today's Cancer horoscope in the newspaper: *You intend to have more love in your life, and that intention is ringing across the universe right now. You will soon be answered.*

From the direction of the arroyo a bottle rocket screams upward, a red slash across the deep blue watercolor sky.

Claire walks faster.

“Knock-knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Cheese.”

“Cheese who?”

“Cheese a foxy lady!”

Bryce Rollins laughs too loudly at this stupid joke, but can’t help himself. Not when the punchline is delivered by Liz Martin. Bryce and his eight fellow counselors encircle their campfire, waiting to see if anyone can answer Liz’s challenge of stumping her at knock-knock jokes. Each of them wears their official Camp Open Hands counselor T-shirt, has an official whistle around their neck, and a pocketful of official Scripture Bucks to be handed out to any young campers who demonstrate virtue.

The air is heavy with the smell of bug spray and burnt marshmallows.

After five summers up in the mountains at church camp, Bryce is finally seventeen: old enough to be a counselor. The first thing he noticed upon reporting for duty this morning was that most of the campers are taller than him, which was ok before but now weird. As the first born, Bryce inherited an unfortunate mixing of his parents’ genes: his mother’s height (or lack thereof) coupled with his father’s stockiness and cowlick-prone hair.

He’d been all set for a smooth summer here. Then he met Liz at morning assembly, seven hours ago. “Let’s bow our heads,” round Pastor Bill said to the newly-arrived as they sat in the cafeteria waiting for their cabin assignments. “Lord, we thank you for bringing us all together at this time...”

Amen to that.

Bryce’s cabin mate, Marty, with his mop of black curls, is the next to challenge Liz’s supremacy by the fire.

“Who’s there?” she says.

“Tarzan.”

“Tarzan stripes forever!” she yells.

Unfortunately, Bryce saw Liz today only at meals, whole group activities like Capture the Flag, and now, after lights-out for the campers. Her red hair comes out in such a wild explosion she’s given it a nickname: Leroy. She’s offered a dollar to anyone who can win the knock-knock challenge (out of Pastor Bill’s earshot, of course). She can also imitate a kazoo.

Asia who? Galahad who? The jokes go on and on, and Liz hangs on to her dollar.

Each day of camp, Bryce looks for her, that shock of red easily spotted against the surrounding green. He wants her to see him leading his group, showing them how to master the ropes course or avoid poison ivy. Each night back in the cabin, Bryce draws Liz in his sketchbook, once even putting her in the costume of Phoenix from the X-Men (now his second favorite redhead) while Marty reads *Heavy Metal* magazines on the top bunk.

Bryce goes through his whole sketchbook the first week, trying to get her likeness just right. The only other entertainment he's brought is Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, which doesn't do a good job of distracting him. He writes letters to his parents (the usual day-by-day breakdown), and his best friend Cameron (the Liz story).

Knock-knock. Who's there? A lovesick fool.

From his bed in the cabin, Bryce stares right above the treeline each night, the white thumbtack stars holding up the sky. Beyond those, God. Cam doesn't believe, or says he doesn't, but for Bryce it's a comforting idea. Someone looking out for you. Things happening a certain way because they're supposed to. The mess of life, his often-terrible luck, the vast universe out there, would be too terrifying otherwise.

Finally it's the last day of the two-week session, campers packing up, cabins reporting for inspection. Bryce lay awake the entire previous night, working on his note to Liz. It can't be coincidence that they're here at the same time; he can't be so lame that he lets the opportunity pass. He sealed the note in an envelope as the sky began to lighten.

No turning back.

The bumpy bus ride back down the mountain to civilization is filled with songs like "Kumbaya," "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore," and "I Don't Want No More Of Camp Life." On a backpack-strewn floor at the station, everyone says their goodbyes as parents and siblings arrive. Pastor Bill wades through the crowd, dispensing Bless You's.

Marty gives Bryce a half-handshake, half-G.I. Joe grip and says, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do, and if you do name it after me."

Bryce sees Liz across the station, encircled by her campers, all of them writing in little pads and trading sheets of paper. This is the moment. The crowd seems to part for him. He's ten steps away... seven... four. Someone's massive backpack whacks him – idiot! – and the envelope falls, face up. Liz's name, in his best block printing, might as well be in five foot tall neon letters. He scoops it up in a panic, not knowing if she even saw, and retreats into the safety of the crowd.

Then his dad and Claire are there, waving and smiling (well, his dad is).

The three of them stop at Long John Silver's for fish and chips on the way home. Bryce shovels down an order of hush puppies while his mouth tells them about his time away and the rest of him hates being such a coward.

The problem is this: on the wall menu, the hot dog looks plump and juicy, too big for a mere bun to contain. But when the wiener is cooked on the conveyor belt with the pizzas, it shrivels until it doesn't even reach the ends of the bun. All the employees know that whenever a hot dog is ready, the best move is to put it in the pickup window, call the order number, then get the hell out of there before the unlucky customer comes to claim it and looks at you like you're an asshole.

The response the cooks all want to give: *Who comes to a pizza restaurant and orders a hot dog anyway?*

Cameron Casey learned the hot dog risk on his first day as an official Chuck E. Cheese pizza maker. After nine months of a busboy's life, he would've just about killed someone for a kitchen job. He got to trade his red bowler hat and dish tub for an apron and dirty looks from hot dog lovers. He got to trade the sloppy chaos and out-of-control children for a pizza assembly line and an oven that burns like the sun.

But the best part is, he never, ever has to set foot in the main dining room again.

It's also known as the Zoo, the Barn, and Hell. Families. Birthday parties. Kids + pizza + soda + ice cream. What really puts this place over the top, though, what makes it a vision to haunt busboy nightmares forever, are the Pizza Time Players. These refrigerator-sized, animatronic animals – Pig, Dog, piano-playing Cow, the giant rat himself, and others – occupy a lit stage at the front of the room, where they sing country-western music and perform “comedy.”

This room turns busboys from bright-eyed newbies into hardened veterans. The first words Louis, the dishwasher, said on Cameron's first day: “Remember, your hands are washable.”

Yes, Cameron has earned his way into the kitchen and is never going back, thank you very much.

Chef Cameron deals out slices of pepperoni like playing cards and slides the extra large onto the conveyor belt. Seventeen years old, he wears glasses and his zits are under control. He lifted weights at the YMCA for six whole months before accepting that he'll always be skinny. The one physical feature he's proud of is his hair, which can be counted on to feather just right every day.

The next order slip comes printing *tickatickatickaticka* out of the metal box in the kitchen. Someone wants a hot dog. Damn. Cameron times it so that he calls the number for pickup, then immediately goes on his break. His co-chef tonight, Loo from Norway (who looks like one of those guys in the underwear ads), can smooth talk the wiener owner. Meanwhile, Cameron hides out in the arcade, with its rows of video games, skee

ball, air hockey, and even a pit full of plastic balls for kids. The *boops* and *beeps* and *dingdingdings* are almost enough to drown out the songs from the dining room. Almost.

Once the restaurant is closed and cleaned, Cameron needs a destination. Bryce is off being a good little church camper. Going home means facing his mom and having her make helpful observations like:

What about getting a girlfriend? Handsome guy like you shouldn't have any trouble.

And

You spend too much time holed up in your room. You'd better not turn out to be a serial killer. Ha ha.

If only there were something fun to do in this town.

He drives the massive block of metal that is his dad's old Pontiac to Circle K. After successfully purging every other trace of the man from his life, Cameron held on to two reminders: the car and the model airplanes.

He pulls into a parking spot, ready for a deep fried burrito and a Sunkist orange soda. But before he can even cut the engine, a red Chevy Malibu, its metal pulsing along with AC/DC, appears next to him. The white light from the store illuminates the driver: whiskers, muscle shirt, mirrored aviator sunglasses. Ricky Zaplin, aka The Spawn of Satan. Zaplin and his crew of burnouts, crowded into the car, reporting to their territory like lions around a watering hole. Better yet, hyenas.

"Seriously?" Cameron says in the aquamarine glow of his dashboard. His own radio's Rush song now seems tiny in comparison.

Zaplin looks over, unfolds a predator's smile.

Shaking off a momentary paralysis, Cameron shifts his car from *P* to *R*, backs out of the space, trying not to screech his tires as he makes his getaway.

He knows from the moment he pulls into the cul-de-sac that his mom's there: there's a light burning in every room, their house lit up like a giant Jack O' Lantern.

Cameron stands at the bedroom door watching Molly Casey under her sit-down hair dryer, a *People* magazine open on her lap, glass of white wine on the table next to her. Her domain could have been lifted from a museum display titled "The 1960s," all chromes and pinks, gewgaws from antique stores and garage sales, the room like a metal bowl filled with cotton candy.

He knows to shout. "Mom!"

She looks up. "Hi, baby! How was work?"

"You're going out?" There are usually two options on a given night: going out with her hyper friends or staying in with a bottle of wine. She motions to her ear. "YOU'RE GOING OUT!" he yells.

"Me and Jillian are going to dance till we drop and ek cetera!" She says this last part way too often; he's given up on correcting her. She tilts the dryer up off her bleached blonde hair. "I think I've gained weight lately. Do I look heavier to you?"

“No.”

She pinches her stomach, studies what’s held in her grip. At her makeup table she applies a shellac of hair spray, the whole scene lit by a dozen little bulbs like a Hollywood movie set.

He says, “You’re wearing your wedding ring.”

“Yeah, I don’t feel like getting hit on tonight.” She wiggles her finger as if they both need to see the ring again. “Did you eat? TV dinner in the freezer if you’re hungry. Got you some chocolate milk at the store, too.” She grabs a pair of sparkly shoes from her tightly disorganized closet, air-kisses his cheek (don’t dare mess up the lipstick) and is gone.

Cameron sits on his bed, Hungry Man fried chicken dinner balanced on his lap, a glass of chocolate milk on his nightstand. He hasn’t liked any kind of milk since he can remember, but his mom keeps buying it and he keeps drinking it.

The *Fall Guy* theme blares from the little TV, balanced on its rickety wooden stand. All around, evidence of the life he’s built: academic certificates; model airplanes and satellites suspended from the ceiling by fishing wire; a rack full of tiny, painted role-playing game figurines. The actress Heather Thomas – the most perfect woman ever to walk the earth – grins out simultaneously from both the TV screen and the poster above his bed.

He starts with the sad square of cherry cobbler.

