Opening extract from

The Alex Crow

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PROLOGUE: HERE IS A PINWHEEL

"Here, kitty-kitty."

The cat had a name—Alex—but General Parviz always called him in the same generic manner.

General Parviz, all gilded epaulets and clinking medals, a breathing propaganda poster, repeated, cooing, "Here, kitty-kitty."

The Alex cat, a six-toed Manx, an official gift from the Hemingway estate and the people of the United States of America, swept its head from side to side, walking slow like a drowsy lion. The cat paused at the general's slippered feet as though considering whether or not it actually *wanted* to jump up into General Parviz's lap.

The general patted his thigh softly, beckoning.

"Kitty-kitty."

The cat leapt soundlessly.

Then cat, general, palace, bodyguards, and approximately one-third the territory of the capital city blew up.

Here, kitty-kitty.

Here is a handful of dirt.

As far as its use as a medium for sustaining life—nourishing roots—it is perhaps the least capable dirt that can be found anywhere on the planet. To call it sand would be to give it some unwarranted windswept and oceanic dignity.

It is simply dead dirt, and it fills my hand.

I will tell you everything, Max, and we will carry these stories on our small shoulders.

On my fourteenth birthday, Marden and I played outside the village in one of Mr. Antonio's fields with Sahar, Marden's sister. We would have been in trouble if we had been discovered. There was a funeral that day for Mr. Antonio's cousin who had been killed fighting against the rebels, so it was expected that everyone attend.

At school that morning, we performed a play. I had the role of Pierrot, Sahar my Columbine. One of the boys in our class played a joke on me: At the end of the day when we went to change out of our costumes to prepare for the funeral, somebody had taken all my clothes—everything—so I had to stay dressed as the mute white clown. I didn't mind so much; the costume was loose and soft and made me feel disconnected, like a ghost drifting above the dead fields we played in.

"This is Mr. Barbar's ram," Marden said.

Mr. Barbar's ram had been missing for more than a week.

Sahar and I grabbed small handfuls of dirt. We poured our dirt into the eye sockets on the rotting skull. What else would kids do? Playing with dirt and horned carcasses was a good way to have fun.

The thing looked like a caricature of the devil himself.

When the FDJA came to the village that day—it was just after the mourners arrived back from the funeral—four of them took all the boys and made us go up to the third floor of the school building. I was still dressed as Pierrot; nobody would confess as to who the thief of Ariel's clothing was.

Of course, we all knew what was going to happen next, once the rebels got us into the upstairs classroom. We could already hear gunfire and cries coming from outside the school.

The rebels bribed us with cigarettes and guns.

What boy doesn't want cigarettes and a gun?

One of the men, his face hidden behind a red scarf, said to me, "What are you supposed to be?"

"Pierrot," I answered.

He shook his head, confused.

"You look like a boy-whore."

Ivan, a ten-year-old, puffed on his first cigarette and glared at me. I wanted to slap him. One of the FDJA men patted the boy's head. We were all goners at this point.

Everyone knew. It had been this way all our lives. Here, the deliberate cruelty of violence was a matter of fact; controlling, constraining, and understandable. Not so much in some of my other stories, Max.

The rebels targeted the older boys, many of whom were approaching conscription age for the Republican Army. They taunted the boys with insults about patriotism and loyalty to capitalist puppet masters. One boy, Jean-Pierre, pissed himself when the man whose face was covered with the red snot-stiffened rag prodded his belly with a gun barrel. Naturally, this was very funny to the FDJA men. Who wouldn't laugh at a sixteen-year-old boy who pissed his pants as he was about to be kidnapped by thugs with guns?

I felt bad for Jean-Pierre, who, like the other chosen boys in the schoolroom, recited a robotic pledge of allegiance to the FDJA. He would have done the same thing on his eighteenth birthday to the Republican Army, anyway. So, who cared?

We were all going to go with the FDJA now, or we would never leave this third-floor schoolroom. They promised us that we were old enough to make our way as men, even though some of the youngest boys were barely ten years old.

My friend Marden was sixteen.

When one of the men tried wrapping the red scarf of the FDJA around Marden's neck, my friend swatted his hand away. Marden was always defiant like that—impulsive—and everyone knew it was a mistake. But what could we do?

To make an example of him to the other boys, two of the FDJA men picked up Marden by his feet and threw him headfirst out the window as he kicked and scratched at them. But Marden didn't scream or cry. I heard the impact of his body against the paving stones that lined the street below.

I desperately wished I had my proper school clothes. I felt so isolated and noticeable in my thin white clown suit.

Two of my schoolmates ran for the doorway that led to the stairs. The man with the hidden face fired at them and they tumbled down in a heap across the threshold.

"Let's go!" he said.

I could only see his eyes peering out from a slit on the covering. He waved his gun to goad the remaining boys—there were five of us—over our friends' bodies and out the door.

One of the men videoed the slaughter in the schoolroom with his cell phone, sweeping it around and around until he focused directly on my face. Most of the white makeup I'd worn earlier had been wiped away, but I was still pale and painted. And I was crying. The video would be uploaded with the usual descriptions blaming all this on the Republican Army. People naturally believe things they see. Nobody argues with the irrefutable postings on YouTube.

I was told that in America, many people believed FDJA stood for *Freedom Democracy Jesus Army*.

They sent money.

I stood by the open window, thinking about Marden and how we'd been playing in Mr. Antonio's field just moments before. What could I do? I was frozen at the edge of the floor, with the fingers of one of my hands resting on the windowsill where my friend had left the room that smelled of sweat and gunpowder.

The man with the red mask, his eyes wild and white, turned toward me. The other boys made their way out into the hallway,

tramping through blood. He raised his rifle. The barrel was so slender and short. I was as familiar with these guns as anything in the world—how they smelled, the sound of their report. When he pointed the thing at the center of my chest, I thought it would be a better end than to be thrown after Marden—but when the man pulled the trigger, the thing jammed—dead—and the two remaining FDJA men stared at me as though I were dead, as though the gun had functioned properly and I was done for—I believe they could not accept anything other than this—the wide white staring eyes of them, whiter than the soft clown suit that seemed to flutter around my body.

Then they left and I heard their footsteps clattering downstairs as the others ahead of them yelled at the boys and told them to form a line and get out onto the street.

Happy birthday to me.

Later, I thought, this was the first miracle I had seen. Perhaps my survival was nothing more than an accident. Accident, miracle—I suppose the storyteller retains the right to determine such things.

Picture this, Max: I waited in the classroom for a while, wondering if maybe I really was dead—that this is what being dead is, just a dream that continues on and on—and now I truly was the ghost I'd imagined myself to be when Sahar and Marden and I played that afternoon.

When I was certain the men and their new conscripts had gone, I went downstairs into the school's kitchen and hid inside a walk-in refrigerator.

Here is nothing but ice.

It is more than ice, more than anyone on the steamer had ever seen. It is the blue-white fist of God, curling calloused fingers to

grasp the protesting wooden hull. It is an infinity field of jaws with countless rows of teeth; absolute control and the concurrent absence of control. The hungry ice creaks and moans, stretching forever to become horizon, ceiling, and cemetery; and the ship, frozen and moving, trapped in this relentless vise, is slowly dragged along, endlessly northwest into more and more ice.

Tuesday, February 10, 1880 – *Alex Crow*

Today is our fifth month in the ice. The ship is held fast. The readings calculated by Mr. Piedmont, ship's navigator, measure the distance the ice has taken us at more than one hundred miles!

It is the cruel reversal of our intent. The men of the *Alex Crow* expedition set off with the expectation that it would be us—the first voyagers here to absolute north—who might inflict our will upon the planet; instead we face the grim truth that nature's will is uncontestable.

I keep such daily accounts as no measure of optimistic entertainment. My overwhelming sense is that the end of our story will not be written by my hand.

I don't think I can endure this imprisonment much longer; I am beginning to wonder if I'll go as insane as Murdoch.

After breakfast, a party of seven men took a team of dogs and one of the sleds out onto the pack to hunt for seal and bear. I stood at the rail and watched in amazement as the men and dogs clambered over the unyielding hummocks of ice that had once been the ocean.

Twenty-five of us remained behind on the *Alex Crow*, including the newspaperman, Mr. Warren, who had crushed his hand three days ago between the ice and forefoot of the hull and is currently under my care. Today, the majority of the men busy themselves with the drudgery of routine maintenance.

Some watch and record wildlife sightings. Wildlife!

In the afternoon we heard rifle fire but could not determine its direction due to the blinding whiteness that smothered everything.

It was then that Murdoch, who has taken to following me around, said, "Doctor, Doctor, I do believe our men have found something."

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Here we see a two-quart jar of Mason-Dixon-brand sauerkraut.

I believe sauerkraut, along with guns, is some type of national symbol in the Land of Nonsense. Everyone in Sunday, West Virginia, eats sauerkraut and also shoots things. So it isn't a casual act by which I begin a story with the examination of a jar of sauerkraut—the sauerkraut has a purpose; it shapes one of my clearest initial memories since coming to America, as though when the contents of that particular two-quart jar of Mason-Dixon-brand sauerkraut spilled, something began to fill me up after all my emptying and emptying.

I arrived here in Sunday little more than one week after my fifteenth birthday.

A year had passed since the miracle in the schoolhouse.

Happy birthday to me, once again.

Mother—my American mother, Natalie Burgess—has the most confusing habit of making everything seem insignificant and small. My brother Max calls her the Incredible Shrinking Machine.

Here is what happened: When the top jar tumbled from its eye-level placement, it caught the edge of the metal cage basket on the shopping cart and exploded in a fetid shower of cabbage and knife-shards of glass.

Mother was dressed in salmon-colored shorts and pale yellow sandals.

One of the glass shards slashed across her leg, mid-calf.

She said, "Oh."

I had only been here four days, but the way she said it sounded like an apology to me, as though it were her fault for being in that precise spot inside the Sunday Walk-In Grocery Store at the exact moment the jar slipped from the shelf.

We had dropped Max off at school earlier. I was not enrolled yet, because the officials at William E. Shuck High School insisted on testing and testing me to determine whether or not I was an idiot, or could speak English, which I could do perfectly well despite my aversion to talking.

"Oh," Mother said again.

I shifted my weight from foot to foot. I didn't have any idea what I was supposed to do. Maybe I *was* an idiot of some kind. But here I was in this grocery store, which may just as well have been some gleaming palace or gilded mosque, watching in confused silence while Mother bled all over the speckled linoleum floor.

It was a nauseating scene; so much so that I vomited, which made everything just that much more repulsive, and Mother said "Oh" again because we were making such a mess on aisle number seven.

Mother reached into her purse and gave me a handkerchief so I could wipe my face. The handkerchief smelled like perfume and mint chewing gum. Then she pressed some wadded napkins into the cut on her leg.

A clerk wearing a brown apron came running up the aisle toward us. I thought he was mad because of all the mess we'd made, but he was most concerned about the injury to Mother's leg.

"We're calling an ambulance!" he said. "Please sit down!"

And he flailed his arms as though he were swimming toward us.

But Mother said, "No. No. I'll be fine! I'm so sorry for all this."

And while the man pleaded with her, bent forward so she could press her soaked napkins against the wound, she grabbed my clammy hand in hers and led me out to the car.

"I'm sorry. This is so embarrassing, Ariel," she said as we climbed in.

We did not make it home. Mother passed out behind the wheel less than a mile from the Sunday Walk-In Grocery, due to all the blood she'd lost.

She was like that.

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Here is Joseph Stalin telling the melting man what he had to do.

Joseph Stalin's voice came from the air vents on the dashboard of the melting man's recycled U-Haul moving van. Joseph Stalin also spoke to the melting man through the radio.

The melting man tried to do anything he could to make Joseph Stalin shut up.

He removed the radio at a rest stop near Amarillo, Texas, and left it dangling wires atop the hand dryer in the men's toilet, but Joseph Stalin's voice still came through the old speakers.

At the same time Leonard Fountain—the melting man—crossed the border between Oklahoma and Arkansas, Joseph Stalin told him this: "They are coming to get you, Leonard. You know that. You must not let them catch you."

Leonard Fountain drove his recycled U-Haul truck all the way

from Mexico City, where he'd assembled the biggest bomb he'd ever seen at a rented flat on the top floor of an apartment house across the street from one of the sixteen Holiday Inns in the city.

Leonard Fountain believed he had to stop the Beaver King. The Beaver King was hiding somewhere near a shopping mall called Little America. He knew that, because Joseph Stalin told him all about the Beaver King. The Little America Mall had an animated Statue of Liberty in the center of its welcoming gates. The statue could spin its crowned head around in a full circle, and its torch-bearing arm could lower and flash colorful beams of lights at the dazzled shoppers.

No doubt, had the French been more technologically advanced, the original Statue of Liberty would perform the exact same tricks.

Leonard Fountain had a fascination with bombs. He grew up in Idaho, where kids were naturally expected to blow things up.

What else would you do?

When he was thirteen years old, although he spent the majority of his waking hours playing video games or masturbating, Leonard Fountain helped out his neighbors by blowing up beaver dams.

On his fifteenth birthday, Leonard Fountain, who hadn't started melting yet, made a remote-controlled bomb from three sticks of dynamite and lashed it to the neck of a dairy cow.

They never found the cow's head.

Leonard Fountain loved blowing things up.

"They are coming for you, Leonard," Joseph Stalin said. "There is a drone flying directly above our truck. You can see it. When you look at it, it will disappear."

Outside Arkadelphia, the melting man pulled the truck onto the shoulder of the highway. He knew what to do. He pretended to be distracted, and then looked up into the sky behind the rear gate on the U-Haul.

Leonard Fountain saw something in the sky.

What he saw was a perfect rectangular prism that hovered soundlessly, fifty feet above his head. The thing was metallic and shiny, about four feet long, and as soon as the melting man focused on it, the thing rotated diagonally and vanished—became invisible.

They were watching Leonard Fountain. Leonard Fountain knew it all along.

From time to time, when he'd get out of the van to pee or sometimes vomit alongside the road, the melting man would suddenly jerk his head around and glance up into the sky, and the little floating box—it resembled a package of tinfoil—would always be there, and then it would turn slightly and disappear.

And it was while the melting man drove through Arkansas, in the direction of Tennessee, that Joseph Stalin became particularly nasty.

"Look at you," Joseph Stalin scolded. "You're disgusting. You better get this done before you dissolve into a puddle of pus and goo. Now pay attention."

Leonard Fountain did not want to pay attention. He drove with an old Hohner Special 20 harmonica in his mouth, and he'd blow the loudest noise through it every time Joseph Stalin said anything about what he wanted the melting man to do. But the harmonica didn't work. So Leonard Fountain bought two spring-winding kitchen timers at a drugstore and he taped them over his ears with medical gauze, hoping the metallic *tick-tick-ticking* of them would stop the Communist dictator's voice.

He thought Joseph Stalin's voice must have been beamed into his head from a government satellite. What other explanation could there be?

Actually, there was another explanation, but Leonard Fountain never figured it out.

Leonard Fountain was insane and melting, and he needed to blow something up.

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Here we see the family pet—a crow we call Alex.

The bird is named after a barkentine steamer commissioned by the U.S. Navy in the late nineteenth century. The ship became icebound—trapped—during an expedition to discover a fabled open seaway to the North Pole in 1879.

Alex is a product of my American father's research.

I don't think the research turned out very well for Alex.

What my father does, I believe, is less research, and perhaps more appropriately called "aimless scientific wandering."

And he finds things you'd never know were out there.

Alex is a morbid being, obsessed with his own death, and gruesomely despondent. I know that's an odd set of qualities for a bird, but Alex should not have been saved to begin with. He is a member of a species that has been extinct for more than a century, and I think all Alex really wants to do is go back to where he'd been pulled from.

My father, and the company he works for, are tireless in their obsession with saving things from nonexistence, and by doing so, controlling the course of life itself. Unfortunately, sometimes paths and directions can't be so easily controlled, as the men on the ill-fated steamer *Alex Crow* found out. And sometimes things don't want to be saved or brought back from where they'd been trapped.

WE FIVE BOYS OF JUPITER

It came as no surprise that our interplanetary archery competition was canceled the day Bucky Littlejohn shot himself through the foot with a field point arrow.

What was surprising, Max—my American brother—told me, was this: No kid before Bucky Littlejohn had ever been cunning enough to devise such a foolproof plan for getting out of Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys.

"Why didn't *I* think of that?" Max said.

Probably because Max was not as self-destructive or desperate as Bucky Littlejohn, I thought.

It was also surprising that Bucky Littlejohn did not cry or scream at all as the arrow drilled through his foot all the way to the plastic yellow feathers of the shaft's fletching. It mounted Bucky Littlejohn like an insect pinned for display to a spreading board, tacking the boy to the soft ground of the lakeside field. And Bucky, transformed into a silent, human version of a draftsman's compass, spun around and around a bloody pinpoint in his sea-foam green plastic clogs, while he stamped out an impeccable circle with his free right foot.

So there was an empty bunk that night in the Jupiter cabin of Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys, where Max and I slept with a reduced-to-two additional bunk mates and Larry, our counselor.

If only the archery contest depended on our team's willingness to inflict self-injury, we would have beaten the unbloodied boys from the Neptune, Mercury, Mars, Saturn, and Pluto cabins.

There was no populated Earth cabin at Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys, and the camp's directors had decided to shut down and abandon the Venus and Uranus cabins as well. Those planets came with too much psychological baggage for teenage boys.

The night before—our first night at Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys—I felt certain that some terrible mistake had been made. Lying in my dingy bed, in a damp room that smelled of urine and sweat, I couldn't sleep at all due to the incessant rustling of bedding, and one of our roommates' depraved sobbing that never slackened in the least.

I believed that Max and I had erroneously been committed to some sort of asylum for insane children.

This was America after all, and there was no shortage of insanity as far as I could see.

It was mid-June here in the George Washington National Forest. I had completed the final months of my ninth-grade year at William E. Shuck High School. That was when our parents sent Max and me off to Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys.

They told us the experience was intended to get us to bond as loving brothers should. Max and I hadn't made much progress along those lines.

Max, after all, did not like me. He told me as much during my first week with his family.

He'd said this: "Listen, dude, just because they took you in doesn't mean I have to act like you're my brother—because you're not. You're a stranger, just like anyone else I never knew."

Yes, it was a mean thing for Max to say, but I also empathized with his feeling intruded upon.

And as usual, I didn't say anything, so Max went on. "They're nuts, anyway. She doesn't know how to react to setbacks, and Christ knows, every time she turns around she's getting kicked in the teeth. And he—he's a freak."

I shrugged.

And Max had told me, "He's an inventor, you know, and he purposely creates things that destroy people's lives. Like you, Ariel,

only you're not going to ruin my life, and neither will Mom or Dad."

So I was convinced Max hated me. He probably had good cause. What fifteen-year-old boy (we were the same age) would welcome the halving of his world with a foreigner who didn't like to talk?

I should explain that Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys was a sort of disciplinarian's boot camp—a detox center for kids who were unable to disconnect from cell phones and technology. For boys like that, being outside or sleeping in smelly huts crowded with strangers—things I had plenty of experience with—was the same as eternal condemnation to hell. And Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys was not fun at all, which is exactly why Bucky Littlejohn shot himself in the foot.

You almost couldn't blame him.

Neither Max nor I had a problem disconnecting from such things as technology and video games, and interacting with real human beings. The first time I'd even touched a cell phone happened after turning fifteen and coming to America.

The first time I'd used a cell phone was to call for help when Mother slumped unconscious from blood loss behind the wheel of her Volvo as we drove home from the sauerkraut store in Sunday.

I also found out later that Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys was free of charge to our parents. It was owned by the lab company our father works for, the Merrie-Seymour Research Group. Every six weeks, the camp alternated its focus between technological addiction and weight loss. Two summers before, during one of Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys' "fat camp" cycles, Max, who is awkwardly thin, was sent.

The summer he was thirteen, my brother Max lost fifteen pounds.

To this day, Max has nightmares that prominently feature celery.

The campers' beds in Jupiter were arranged along one wall, packed so closely together that they were nearly impossible to make (something we were required to do every morning). We learned that we had to take turns navigating around our sheet-tucking duties. And the only reasonable way to get in or out of one of the beds without risking a fight or awkward bodily contact with another boy was from the foot of each one. Bucky Littlejohn's cot sat empty along the back wall. After he left, which was on our second day—not twenty-four hours into the six-week journey to rediscover "the fun of boyhood" at Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys—none of the campers in Jupiter wanted to claim the vacated bed by the wall; Bucky peed in it the first and only night he spent in Jupiter. Maybe he only attempted the bedwetting as an initial means for getting kicked out.

Bucky Littlejohn was no quitter.

The arrow-through-the-foot tactic was unarguably brilliant.

The boys of Camp Merrie-Seymour were desperate.

My sleeping spot sandwiched me between a kid Max and I had seen around William E. Shuck High School, Cobie Petersen, a pale-skinned, freckled sixteen-year-old who lived up Dumpling Run, a creek that was only about three miles from our home in Sunday; and a thirteen-year-old boy named Robin Sexton from Hershey, Pennsylvania. Robin twitched his thumbs constantly, as though he were handling an invisible video game controller, and he kept tight wads of toilet paper jammed into his ears because he said he couldn't stand all the noise the world pushed into his head when he wasn't wearing earbuds.

Of course, there were no earbuds—no electric-powered devices of any kind—permitted for the campers at Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys. In fact, every one of the thirty-three boys assigned to the six planets of the camp was closely inspected upon arrival. Each of

us was obligated to bring perfectly matched camper kits: duffel bags, which contained precise numbers of T-shirts, shorts, toothbrushes, and changes of socks and underwear, in which, for reasons I could only speculate, we had to write our names with permanent marker.

They counted everything.

Max's bed was closest to the door.

On our first night at Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys, Max joked that he would be the lone survivor from Jupiter if our cabin burned down in the next six weeks, to which Larry, our counselor, warned, "Don't get any ideas, fuckheads."

And then Larry proceeded to strip-search all five of us. We even had to turn our socks inside out.

This may have pushed Bucky Littlejohn over the edge.

So we five boys of Jupiter, who would be four the following night, stood there in our underwear while Larry emptied the contents of our duffel bags and tore the covers and bedding from our cots, just to make certain none of us had smuggled in a cigarette lighter.

During the commotion, boys spilled out from the Saturn, Mercury, Mars, Neptune, and Pluto cabins. They taunted us from outside our screen windows. As long as the lights—kerosene lanterns, which were closely guarded by the counselors—were on in our solar system, everyone could see everything that happened in Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys.

The other planets chanted and clapped at us.

"Strip search! Strip search! Strip search!"

Larry left the place a complete mess, and we had to clean it up—in our underwear—while the planets outside observed (after all, it wasn't as though they could divert themselves with television or video games) and our counselor watched suspiciously from his bed, which sat uncrowded and isolated on the opposite side of the cabin.

"Hurry up and straighten out your shit," Larry said. "I want lights out in five minutes, and you're all getting up at sunrise tomorrow morning. You're going to *have fun*, fuckheads."

I was fascinated by the word. One more of those American things that made no sense to me whatsoever, I thought. If they'd allowed me to bring my notebook along to Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys, I would have written a reminder to eventually research the etymology of *fuckhead*.

Still, I had no idea what to expect from Larry's concept of "fun." It had seemed to me that in just a few hours we had been through enough torment already. At dinner, they fed us something called "Beanie Weenie." I had never heard of it before, but it was better than sauerkraut, so I ate it.

It made no sense.

Jupiter, an exact replica of Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys' other eight cabins (three of which were abandoned), was a strange and primitive design. To me, it most closely resembled an insect cage. The walls, which stood only about three feet high, were built with horizontal redwood slats. The entire upper two-thirds of them were nothing more than mesh screen all the way around, which is why the boys of the other cabins could watch us losers from Jupiter enact our dramatic failure in our underwear for their entertainment. Unless you were a counselor, who got to sleep in actual pajamas and had his own lighted-by-electricity toilet and shower facilities, there was no privacy anywhere in the camp. And we would eventually find out, too, just how miserable and damp it could be during a summer downpour.

Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys had a motto, which was carved in a sort of rustic hewn-log font on the crossbar over the entry gate. It said this:

Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys
Where Boys Rediscover The Fun of Boyhood!

It almost made me nauseous—not just the word *rediscover*, which is a ridiculous word—all the *boy, boy, boy* on that sign. You could practically smell balls just by reading it. To be honest, the camp always did smell like balls, anyway.

Someone—no doubt a Merrie-Seymour success story who'd endured the camp before Max and I arrived—had taken the time to vandalize the crossbar by etching in two additional words: OR DIE.

Apparently, the internees at Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys had been encouraged to carve. This was something that we'd never be allowed to do. After Bucky Littlejohn's archery performance, the counselors removed everything sharp from Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys.

There were all sorts of things carved into the walls around our cots. Two pieces in particular fascinated me. First, there was a kind of religious depiction of an Xbox controller that was nailed to a cross floating in the clouds, while tangles of skeleton-thin boys looked up at it from the apparent hell of Jupiter cabin. The second thing I admired was a short inscription—a mathematical equation for our cabin—that said LARRY = SATAN.

And there were plenty of names, too, and dates. The name nearest my pillow said ELI 1994. Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys had been there for decades.

It was almost like sleeping in a graveyard.

So as I lay there that first night, trapped between the twitching kid with toilet-paper earplugs from Hershey, Pennsylvania, and Cobie Petersen—and while I listened to Bucky Littlejohn's pathetic sobbing—I imagined what 1994 Eli was doing right at that moment.

Probably Facebooking, I thought.

Larry extinguished the lantern. There was no electricity in the cabins, naturally.

Our audience disbanded and journeyed back to their respective planets.

The mattresses on our cots were covered with thick plastic. It made sense, I suppose, but whenever any of the boys moved or shifted, our beds made sounds like someone was crumpling a soda can. After about five minutes, Cobie Petersen said to no one in particular, "I can't take this shit."

Larry said, "Shut up and go to sleep."

Larry had a non-plastic mattress. Apparently, Larry could be counted on to not pee his bed, or do the other things some of the campers at Camp Merrie-Seymour for Boys inevitably did.

Max rolled onto his side—*crumple crumple!*—and put his pillow over his head.

Then Cobie shot up in bed and yelled, "What the fuck! The crying kid's pissing!"

And we all heard the dribble of Bucky Littlejohn's urine as it trickled down between the cots and puddled on the floor below us.

Larry said, "Jesus Christ!"

The lantern came back on.

And Larry ordered Bucky Littlejohn, who was steaming and stained in his drooping, piss-soaked underwear, and the rest of us, the four insomniacs with dry underwear, to go to the lavatory—a dark and scary combination toilet, insect sanctuary, and shower facility for the campers—and fetch a mop and pail.

On the way there, Cobie said, "If you weren't covered in piss, kid, I'd kick the shit out of you."

I wondered if Cobie Petersen really meant that, because if he