

Treehouse

Mushrooms and dandelions and thistles grow along the base of the old oak. Sunlight filters through newly sprouted leaves, a hopeful green that reflects off the surface of the creek running right below. Gray and brown rocks crusted with minerals and moss. The bubble of fresh rainwater, metallic and tinkling as it sweeps away the pieces of grass I drop in.

I look up: my treehouse. Daddy built it for me while Mommy and I watched. We sat in rusty lawn chairs with holes in the faded blue fabric, drinking too-sweet lemonade, our hands shielding us from the afternoon sun. If I close my eyes, I can remember the way Daddy threw his head back, laughing, almost falling out of the oak tree. Mommy snorted and spit her lemonade all over the grass.

I climb the rickety rope ladder, the soft skin on my hands scratching against the frayed rope. I pull my body onto the small platform and sit down between the plywood walls, listening to the wind rustle through the spaces between the boards. I pull the stems of dandelions apart, rubbing the sticky wet parts under my nose so I can smell like the forest.

“Did you do it?” Mommy asks Daddy. “Have you taken it down?”

“No. I uh,” he scratches his head with one grease-blackened hand. His eyes look at the carpet, studying each fiber. “I haven't yet.”

“When will you?” she begs.

“I'll get to it, I promise. It's just...we built it together.”

I come here every day. When it rains, I sit in my treehouse and catch the raindrops as they fall from the roof, collecting them in my hands. When my hands are full, I dump the water out the doorway, my ear tilted and my eyes closed, listening for its *plop* against the wet ground. I pretend I'm a sailor on the high seas in a hundred-year storm, bailing water to escape from the sharks that circle my ship

below. Sometimes I lay by the creek in my blue jeans, muddy at the knees, and watch the leaves move against the bright blue sky. Wading out in ice cold water, I don't bother to roll my pants up. Crawdads tickle my bare toes and the mud seeps between them. The water is clear enough that I can see tiny minnows darting past, and if I kick my feet around, the mud billows up to the surface and my heart races, waiting for the soft flesh on the undersides of my feet to be bitten. I hold my hands up to the sky and dance in circles until my jeans are wet up to my waist. I pray for rain, like they do in those old western movies Mommy watches.

“Do you see that, Jim?” Mommy whispers, her voice shaking.

“See what?” He looks at Mommy with one eye still on his newspaper.

“There, over there,” she points towards me. “It's something over there.”

“There's nothing over there,” Daddy says without looking.

“I think it's Caddy.”

Mommy and Daddy never ask me where I'm going when I leave in the morning for my treehouse. Mommy sits in her chair next to Daddy's and knits little blankets with bouquets of dandelions and pretty pink flowers on them. She always knits my name on each blanket, but she never gives them to me. Maybe she knows another Caddy.

When Daddy gets home from work, Mommy disappears into her bedroom, the knitting abandoned on her chair, the soft crack of the latch sliding into place behind her.

Today, I have crayons and paper to draw pictures of the clouds. Yesterday, there was one that looked like a dragon, and I wished so much that I had my art box. I splash with my yellow rain boots in the creek and throw my crayons and paper up into the treehouse. I climb up and sit with my shiny green

raincoat against one wall and start to color. At first it's the dragon I saw in the clouds yesterday. But then the lines of the snout turn into the mouth of a man I've met before. I met him here, at my treehouse.

I outline his eyes in Darkest Night Black, just like they were, and color the eyes Shamrock Green. With a Coffeehouse Brown, I draw his hair, messy with a few curls near the back. I line his lips with Ruby Red. His body is tall and wearing a Smolder Gray blouse with Tired & True Blue jeans. He's got earrings on, like he's going to a ball. They look heavy, loaded with Midnight Blue diamonds and dangling chains. In his left hand, I draw a handkerchief, diamond patterned and Strawberry Red. In his right hand, I draw a rope. I can't remember what he did after he climbed up into my treehouse, the platform groaning under his big, Leather Black boots. I look into the man's Shamrock Green eyes, trying to remember. *No*, a voice tells me. I force my eyes shut and crush the drawing in my hands. Ripping and squeezing, I stand up and throw the pieces as far as I can into the woods. I reach my hands to my Chestnut Brown hair. It's his handkerchief, the one I found floating in the creek, ebbing against rain-darkened rocks. I kept it and now I wear it, sometimes tucking dandelions behind my ear, securing the wet, grassy-smelling ends into the knot at my neck. It makes me feel like I'm a girl in some long-ago tribe. She used to live here.

I sit down and fumble for a new piece of paper. I color her pale skin, cheeks red from splashing in the creek. A shiny yellow raincoat and green rain boots. Hair the color of roasted nuts. A handkerchief, Strawberry Red and diamond patterned, dandelions tucked into it. I look into her Amber eyes and the past is a map that folds into now across her cheek, blurring time trapped in Rusty tears, memories tangling like Maple Green leaves and Oak Brown branches thrashing against my treehouse. Shadows reaching. *Smack*. And *silence*. *Who's a pretty girl?* *Smack*. And *silence*. A rhythm that I run from. Fists and feet, raindrops and the trees screaming.

I hold up her drawing to the sunlight. I feel her familiar eyes looking into mine, and I reach up

to touch my hair again.

The only thing connecting me to this girl, whoever she is, are the flowers and red handkerchief I wear in my hair.