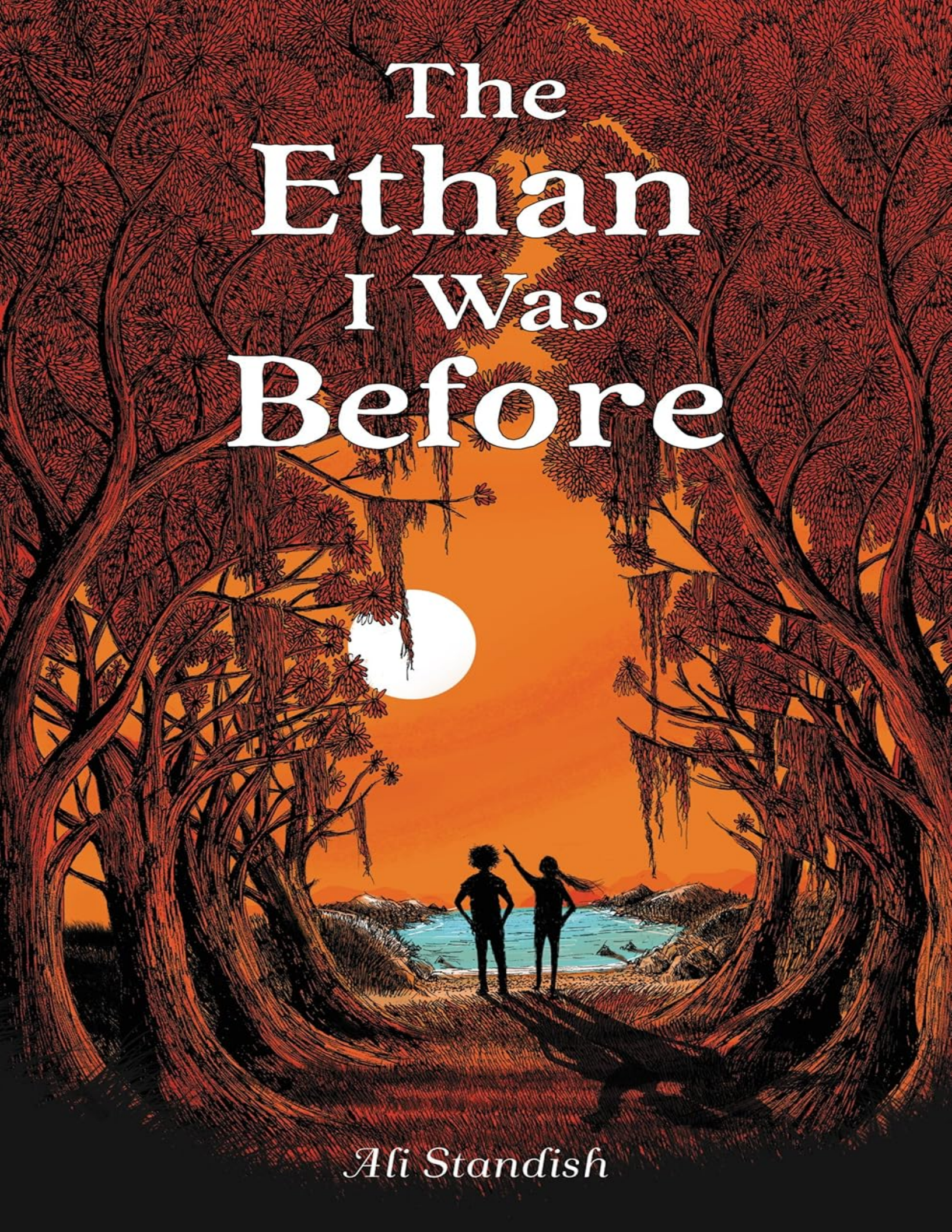


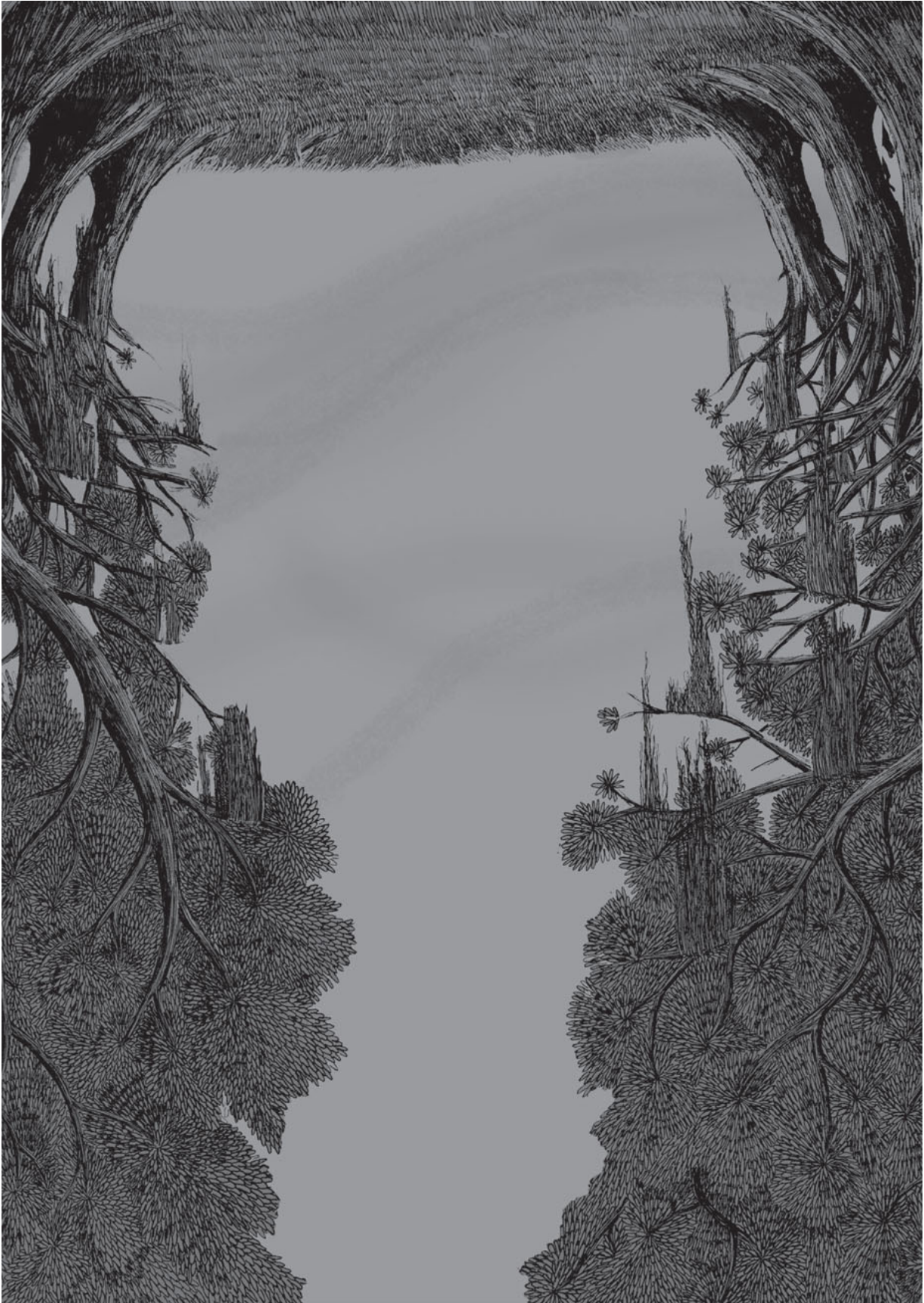
The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. It depicts a dense forest of large, gnarled trees with thick, twisting trunks and intricate, leafy canopies. The trees are rendered in a monochromatic red-orange color. In the center, a bright, circular sun or moon is visible, partially obscured by the branches. Below the sun, two silhouetted figures stand on a path, looking out over a body of water towards a distant shoreline with hills. The overall mood is contemplative and nostalgic.

# The Ethan I Was Before

*Ali Standish*

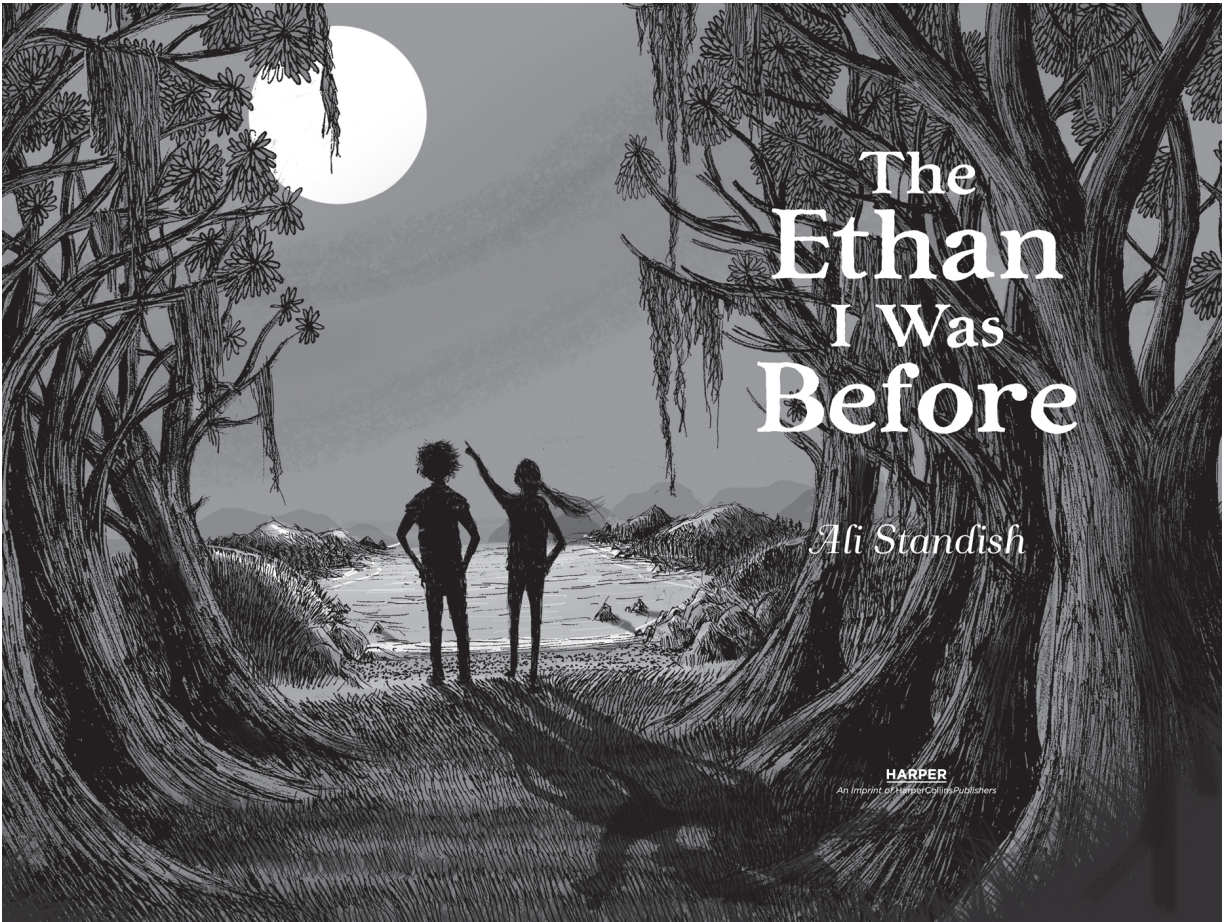












# The Ethan I Was Before

*Ali Standish*

**HARPER**  
An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

## ***Dedication***

*For Arun, who dared me to be more*



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## Prologue

**KACEY'S WINDOW HAS BEEN** dark for fifty-nine days.

It's been dark for so long that someone else might easily forget she ever even lived there. Or that she ever existed at all.

I haven't forgotten.

Tonight, like all the other nights, I wait until everyone is asleep. Then I tiptoe downstairs, slip into my coat, and creep out the front door. I climb onto the roof of our Subaru and sit there, staring.

I have stared at Kacey's window for so many nights that I no longer see the four black panes held together by the skeleton of the frame.

All I see is a dark hollow where there used to be light.

But tonight, when I step out onto the porch, something is different.

Tonight, there is a car in Kacey's driveway.

Kacey's window has been dark for fifty-nine days.

But now a light flashes on, and a yellow glow seeps into the night.

I pull my breath in so fast that the frigid air burns the back of my throat.

I hold it there.

Before I can stop myself, my feet slam against the pavement, and I'm running across the street and into the Reids' yard. My gloveless fingers fumble on the ground until I find a suitably large pebble. I position myself underneath Kacey's window and swing the stone up into the air, hitting the top left pane.

For a second, nothing happens.

Then a shadow slides up the wall, and a face appears in the window.

I feel Kacey's name rise up from the place where it stays, deep in my chest.

But then I get a better look at the face above, and her name lodges in my throat.

The drawn complexion and mussed hair belong to Mrs. Reid, Kacey's mother.

I duck down into the shadow of the Reids' hedge, next to their front stoop, hoping that she didn't have time to spot me. I crouch with my face resting against the scratching branches until I feel sure she isn't looking anymore.

My eyes flicker to the stoop, where a crisp, white square of paper rests against the bricks.

Before I have time to think about it, I snatch the letter up.

Then I sprint back to my own driveway and drop onto the porch stairs. I look at what's in my hands.

Not a letter. A bill.

I glance at the return address. I know what the words mean, but they don't make any sense.

The earth begins to seesaw.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Throwing rocks at her window like I expected her to be up there. But of course she isn't.

I know where she is now.

I'm still trying to catch my breath from my dash across the Reids' yard. But I am suddenly filled with the urge to run until I am sure I will never see this place or that window ever again. Like swimming so far out to sea you know you won't have the energy to make it back to shore.

Once my feet start moving, I can't seem to make them stop.

I have to get to Kacey.



## *What I Know about Myself*

- 1. My name is Ethan Truitt.*
- 2. I am twelve years and four months old.*
- 3. I have been in the car for fifteen hours, four minutes, and thirty-two seconds.*
- 4. Which is probably why my left butt cheek has gone numb.*
- 5. My older brother, Roddie, who is snoring next to me, hates me.*
- 6. Sometimes I hate me too. Because I know I am responsible for everything that happened in Boston.*
- 7. That's why the Ethan I was before is gone.*

## Palm Knot

ACCORDING TO THE CITY limits sign we see when we drive into town, Palm Knot, Georgia, is the “Hidden Jewel of the South.” Mom says that it *used* to be the “Hidden Jewel of the South” before the wind and ocean air swept away the paint from the *u*.

When I think of jewels (not often), I think of bright, sharp, polished things. But driving through Palm Knot, everything I see is kind of drooping and faded and flat. More like an ocean pebble that’s been washed smooth over a lot of years.

As we turn onto Main Street, my butt cheek starts to cramp up again.

I’ve been leaning against the car door for the past few hours, trying to keep as much distance as I can between me and Roddie.

But now I shift my weight and accidentally bump my knee into his.

The rattle of his breath suddenly stops; his eyes flash open and he jerks his leg away from mine as if he’s afraid I might be carrying some highly contagious disease. He looks at me in disgust. He doesn’t say anything, but I can read the words flashing through his eyes. *Watch it, freak.*

I don’t flinch. I’m used to this now. Roddie hasn’t spoken to me since the day I tried to run away. For the third time.

That first night, when I found the bill that Mrs. Reid must have dropped on her way into the house, I only made it to South Station before a police officer stopped me. Apparently, a twelve-year-old hanging around the bus station alone in the middle of the night is suspicious.

But the second time I ran, I was smarter about it. I looked up the bus times in advance, I made it to the station for a midafternoon bus, and I got

on behind a middle-aged woman who could have been mistaken for my mother. And it worked.

That time, I almost got to Kacey.

Almost.

That's why I knew I had to try one more time. I waited for my chance, for the first opportunity when Mom and Dad would leave me home with just Roddie. And then I ran again.

I only got halfway down the block before someone jerked my shoulder back, making me trip over my own feet and fall to the pavement.

Roddie was right about everything he said that day. I know that now.

But I don't have to tell him that.

"You boys awake back there?" Mom calls from the front seat.

Roddie grunts and pulls his Boston College hat down lower over his eyes.

"Doing okay, Ethan?"

Mom has started saying my name the way she placed the teetering stacks of her best china into boxes back in Boston. Carefully. Slowly. Like she's afraid of breaking something fragile and precious.

I nod.

"We're almost home," she says.

Roddie glares out the window. "This place isn't home. It's a dump."

He has a point. The porches of the houses all sag like giant hammocks. Trees grow crooked and clawlike out of the sandy soil. The narrow roads are rough and lumpy, and even the ocean water looks clouded and gray, like the bay is filled with lead.

"Your grandpa Ike needs us here, Roddie," Mom says, turning around to face us. "We need you to stay positive, please. This is a fresh start for all of us."

Roddie's eyes narrow into little pools of ice, and he aims a kick at the console between the two front seats. "Stop lying! We don't even know Grandpa Ike. He's your own father and you barely even *talk* about him."

"Roddie!" Dad barks. "Don't start again. That's enough. Just—enough. It's been a long drive."

But Roddie's right about this, too.

Mom and Dad announced we were moving here the day after my third attempt at running away. They said we all needed a change of scenery. I guess it shouldn't have come as such a surprise. This is the only place they *could* move us to get me away from Boston, since Grandpa Scott lives just a few streets down from our old house and it's not like Mom and Dad could afford to just buy a new place somewhere.

They've been telling anyone who will listen that we're moving to Palm Knot so we can "help" Grandpa Ike, who's "getting up there in years." I pretend to believe them, but I know they're lying.

We didn't move so we could help Grandpa Ike.

We moved because of what I did to Kacey.



## Grandpa Ike

**FIVE MINUTES LATER, DAD** swerves onto a gravel road, and we pass a few houses in varied states of dilapidation before pulling up in front of a boxy, wood-sided house at the end of the street. It's not the most run-down place on the street, but it's not the nicest one, either. There's a rusty truck parked out front, and the garden beds are overflowing with brown tufts of withering weeds.

Mom gasps and covers her mouth with her palm. "Look at the place," she says. "He's let it go to ruin."

"Then it's a good thing we came!" Dad says, forcing cheer into his voice. "Everybody out."

I unhook my seat belt and thrust the door open, desperate to stretch my muscles and feel fresh air.

But as soon as I'm out of the car, the humidity wraps around me like a wet fleece blanket, so thick I can barely breathe. An insect drone swells up from the gnarled wall of marsh trees that surrounds us.

Mom stands in the gloomy shade of the house, squinting up at it and shaking her head. Maybe it's just the effect of the shadows, but her eyes look gray and stormy.

I hear a croaking noise and look toward the wooden porch to see a door open and the silhouette of a man emerging. Grandpa Ike. He doesn't come down to greet us. He just stands there, hands in his pockets, staring.

"Hello, Ike," Mom says. She greets him with all the enthusiasm of someone who's just opened their door to find a greasy salesman waiting on the stoop.

Grandpa Ike says nothing.

“Great,” Roddie mutters. “So he’s a lurker.”

Mom hisses something back at him.

Dad watches closely as Roddie and I each grab two suitcases from the trunk. Mom and Dad have been careful to keep an eye out whenever Roddie and I are together, ever since they found us in the street that day, Roddie pinning me against a parked car while blood dripped onto the pavement from my scraped knees.

Reluctantly, I shuffle up to the porch, where most of the white paint has chipped away to reveal the bare skin of the wood. Then I’m standing face-to-face with Grandpa Ike.

He’s tall—over six feet—and solid, like someone built him from a stack of bricks. His eyes and beard are the same silvery-gray color, and he has a smear of mustard in the corner of his mouth.

“Lo, Ethan,” he says. He looks me straight in the eye for a few seconds before lifting a duffel bag easily from my shoulder and leading me inside. “Your room’s upstairs.”

Grandpa Ike’s house is very different from our house back in Boston.

For one thing, it’s old.

Our house in Boston was old too, but it didn’t seem like it. It had clean showerheads that sprayed hot water, and shiny marble counters and digital appliances in the kitchen.

It only takes me a couple of hours to figure out that Grandpa Ike’s house—I mean *my* house—has none of those things. The shower spurts out lukewarm water, the kitchen counters are stained green and brown, and every few minutes the fridge makes a noise like someone with a cold clearing their throat. *Huu-hukk! Huu-hukk!*

There are also boxes everywhere, stacked behind the washing machine, wilting on the back porch, peeking out from under the beds. Most of the garage is taken up by an ancient hunk of metal on wheels that Grandpa Ike calls the Fixer-Upper.

After we unpack the car, Mom bakes a frozen pizza and hands out slices on paper plates. Grandpa Ike says he's already eaten but sits in near silence at the table with us, looking on while we wolf down our dinner.

I'm glad that he doesn't seem interested in telling me how much I've grown or forcing me to answer questions about my best subject or my favorite sports.

"Can I be excused?" I ask after ten long minutes.

"Did you eat enough?"

"I had two pieces, Mom."

"Okay, well, let me come with you and make up your bed."

"I can handle it." I throw my plate in the trash can and retreat upstairs before she can object.

My new room is actually okay. It's a lot bigger than the old one, and it even has a window seat, where I sit for a long time, staring. The window looks out on a marsh, where moonlight shimmers on the black water winding through the reeds, giving it shiny scales.

I'm just about to go to bed when I hear a rapping at the door.

"Come in."

Grandpa Ike swings the door open and stands in the hall. "Settling in okay?"

"Sure, I guess," I say, standing awkwardly by my bed.

"Well, all right, then." Grandpa Ike nods and squints around the bare room. "Planning to decorate?"

"Not really."

"What's the point, eh?" he replies. "You've got all the necessities." His eyes fall on the chest of drawers stuffed into the corner of my room. I follow his gaze and notice that a photograph has been placed on it.

Grandpa Ike clears his throat. "Well, good night. I'm next door if you need me."

Roddie's room is on one side of mine, so Grandpa Ike's must be on the other. Behind the door that's been kept shut since we got here.

“Good night,” I say, relieved that there is not going to be a pep talk, no I’m-always-here-if-you-need-anything speech that all adults feel required to give me these days.

Suddenly, I hear a scratching sound coming from the ceiling.

Grandpa Ike shrugs.

“Only mice,” he says. “Nothing to worry about. Unless it’s squirrels. Then you’ve got a big problem. Anyway, sleep well.”

Just then, Roddie’s speakers thrum to life, the bass of his music vibrating against our shared wall.

Grandpa Ike looks at me, one eyebrow raised. “Or not.”

I decide I am going to like Grandpa Ike.

## **Main Street**

**ON MY FIRST MORNING** in Palm Knot, Dad shakes me awake at eight o'clock. I squint when I open my eyes, because the sun is blazing through my window. I hear a loud humming, which I think is in my head for a minute before I realize it's just the buzz of insects down in the marsh.

"Time to get up," Dad says. "Mom made breakfast, and then we're off to the hardware store."

"Why do I have to go?" I groan.

"Because I need your help," Dad says.

Another lie.

As if going on a quest to the hardware store will somehow make me feel any better.

But I get up and get dressed, because it takes less effort than fighting with him. Mom ends up coming too, so she can make sure Dad and I get "the heavy-duty cleaning stuff" and "the humane kind of mouse traps."

Grandpa Ike's truck is already gone from the driveway by the time we leave.

As we twist back up the gravel road, Mom points to each house and tells us who lives there. My new neighbors are:

1. The Bondurants, who are now actually just the Bondurant. Mr. Bondurant lives alone in a rusty trailer next to the house he used to live in with Mrs. Bondurant, who Mom says left him for his own brother.