

## **Crotalus**

Then.

We were twelve years old, and my sister and I almost stepped on a rattlesnake.

We were hiking with our parents, not too far from our house, and we had run on ahead. Mom called after us, told us not to go too far, but we were almost teenagers, drunk on the idea of independence. Delia, my twin, knew about a shortcut to the creek that we were trying to get to, one that went straight through a wild raspberry thicket. At that time of summer, the berries would be ripe, perfect for gathering handfuls and eating them while the taste of earth was still present.

We ran off of the trail, into the thick maze of bushes and tall grass, weaving around trees in sparkling August air, until the rush of the creek could be heard just beyond a particularly thick cluster of foliage. I could spy raspberries sitting fat and red on their branches, swollen with juice and seeds.

Our parents might have been shouting at us from the trail, but their voices were faint, and we were having too much fun. It was the kind of giddy, exhausted exhilaration that comes from summer, skinned knees, and the air being so humid you can almost taste it. We pushed our way through the bushes, unable to see the ground in front of us until it was almost too late.

Delia was ahead of me, but she suddenly stopped. Surprised, and more than slightly impatient, I forced my way to her side.

“What’s wrong?”

Her eyebrows were knit and her head was tilted, like a bent blade of grass. “Do you hear that?”

I listened, the gurgle of the creek bubbling through my ears, and then, riding on the coattails of the water, a sharper, more urgent sound, one that warned *danger*.

I knew what it was going to be before I looked down. A huge rattlesnake lay coiled in the grass under a raspberry bush, about three feet away, its tail buzzing. The sinewy muscles in its body were tense, and it eyed us, unblinking, still unsure whether we were a threat.

Delia had seen the snake. “Go back,” she whispered in my ear, already stepping away as slowly as she could, keeping her eyes fixed on the rattler. “Jeremy, go back.”

I didn’t move, rooted to the ground like one of the raspberry bushes I was surrounded by. I was staring directly at this snake that couldn’t decide if it was going to strike or not, my legs scratched from forging through sharp grass and spiny branches. I knew what its rattle meant, knew about the danger, but still I remained, caught between the scaly coil and my own desperation to flee.

“Jeremy!” Delia’s voice was further away now, and she was shouting for our parents through a shaky voice that held the catch at the beginning of a sob.

I managed to regain control of my feet and took a step backward, and then another. Five more. I cracked a twig in half.

The snake had risen up to watch me, and the crack of the stick made it bunch itself up again, tongue tasting the air. Its tail screamed.

I made myself keep going, and as I got further and further away, I could see the snake relax. Its tail stopped, it uncoiled itself, and slithered away through the tall grass, abandoning its post among the raspberries.

Delia was crying. I emerged from the bushes and my mother grabbed me, searching up and down for any sign of harm. My dad had his arm around my sister’s shoulders.

“Why didn’t you come back when I said?” Delia whimpered.

I thought of the snake, poised in the knowledge that it could defend itself should the need arise. I thought of my legs, bare and tinged with bright scratches and fading bruises, socks bunched in my tennis shoes, my ankles left vulnerable. It would have been so easy, a perfect target.

I didn’t have an answer.

Now.

I’m walking down the hall, and there’s a thighbone in my hand.

It’s plastic. Mr. Guthrie, my anatomy teacher, uses this imitation as a hall pass. There are scuff marks at the point where cartilage would connect if the bone was real. A chip is taken from the middle, and the Sharpie block letters reading *HALL PASS* have faded over the years. I could go over them again; there’s a Sharpie in my pocket, right on top of seventy-five dollars.

I flip the bone around, almost dropping it as my hand, having coated itself in moisture, slips against the hard plastic. I fumble it into my left hand, and scrub the other on the side of my jeans. I hate that my palms sweat. There’s nothing here to be afraid of; with the thighbone, I’m essentially invisible. Or invincible. Both are comforting ways to be.

I pass by the bathroom. That’s where Mr. Guthrie thinks I’m going, because that’s what I told him when I put my hand in the air and asked to leave in the middle of a lecture about the human digestive system. At least I think that’s what he was talking about. I wasn’t paying attention.

Mr. Guthrie didn't care anyway. I'm quiet, and turn my homework in mostly on time, and don't laugh whenever the reproductive system is mentioned. And I'm not exactly a liar. I am going to the bathroom, just not the one by fifth-period anatomy.

I turn the corner at the end of the hallway and clomp down the flight of stairs that leads to the second floor of the building. With classes in session, this hall is deserted as well, with the exception of another kid sitting outside of a classroom, idly gazing at his phone, back against the lockers and knees pressed into his chest. He doesn't look particularly upset about his exile from the classroom. If it were me, my hands would be shaking, because I'm supposed to be *inside* the classroom, and if someone walked by and thought I was sitting in the hallway because I was in trouble, the rattlesnake in my stomach would be a writhing, choking coil, waiting for the slightest touch to strike.

As I pass the phone kid, the classroom door opens and the teacher beckons him back inside. Not in trouble, then. He stands and follows her, sneaking one last glance at the small screen in his hand.

There's another flight of stairs now, and it's even quieter on the first floor. Right next to the bottom of the stairs is what I'm looking for, the farthest bathroom from any of the classrooms or offices, and therefore, the furthest away from any adults.

I push on the slightly warped wood and the door sweeps open, years of hinges being over-oiled leading to little resistance. Inside, the soft tap of my sneakers against the ceramic tile resonates off of the porcelain sinks and metal, paint-chipped stalls. The door swings closed behind me and I bend over double, peering underneath the row of stalls to confirm that I'm alone. Being the farthest bathroom from any classrooms also means that it's the farthest walk, and to most people, it's not worth that.

I glance down at the watch on my wrist. There's fifteen minutes before the period ends, and three before Jared Stoker is supposed to get here. He told me to wait for him inside the second stall. I'm not sure why, because I'm fairly certain that our business could be conducted outside of the stalls, outside of the bathroom even, but Jared's always been a little odd. Maybe because he's perpetually high. Maybe because he doesn't give a crap because he thinks that aliens are coming any day now to abduct him, though that might be a side effect of being perpetually high.

Regardless of whether Jared is crazy or not, I don't want to risk not getting what I need from him by not doing what I've been told. I set the thighbone down in the sink, step inside of the second stall, and stare down the water in the toilet bowl. The floor feels slightly slick underneath the rubber sole of my sneaker, and I wonder if it would be possible to drown in a toilet. I read somewhere that toddlers can drown in less than two inches of water, which is why they shouldn't be left alone near a pool or bucket or bathtub or, for that matter, a toilet. There's definitely more than two inches of water in this toilet, and I bet that if I slipped, and fell *just right*—

I remember that I'm not supposed to think like this, and settle for looking at the graffiti scrawled on the hanging metal of the stall. There's a penciled heart with smudged initials inside, a cartoon dog, some pretentious line from a Hemingway poem, and a shaky ballpoint message scratched into the paint: *I hate this place I wish I were dead*. Below that, someone has written *Don't give up! Things will get better!* and drawn a little smiley face. I don't know about the first person, but that response does not make me feel better. The Sharpie in my pocket jabs into my thigh.

Jared is a minute late. The rattlesnake that is constantly coiled in my chest has begun to steadily unravel itself, anxiety slithering around my spine as my watch ticks, and I try to think of things other than being expelled from school for skipping class. I don't know if it's possible to be expelled from school for skipping class, but I don't want to find out. If I get expelled, it would go on my permanent record. I'd either have to drop out of school and work in a gas station selling slushies for the rest of my life, or finish high school online or at another place where no one has ever heard of me. And then whenever I applied for a college, or a job, they would see that I had been expelled from school, and that would leave a bad first impression, and I wouldn't get into Stanford or Cambridge, and I would have to go to a community college in North Dakota or something, and then I probably would fall in with bad people, and spend my first year drinking and partying and skipping class and never finishing my homework and failing tests, and I would have to drop out of college too, and I would never get my degree or make a career, and I would have to work in a gas station selling slushies for the rest of my life, but by that point it would be too late, and I would be addicted to drugs and disowned by my parents, and I would lose my disgusting one-bedroom apartment because I couldn't make rent, and I'd end up on the street begging for loose change and people would walk by and say *hey, isn't that the kid who got expelled from high school for skipping class? He had such potential, what a waste* and they would shake their heads and continue walking and eventually I'd end up crazy in a gutter wrapped in newspapers and involved in gang violence and probably *dead*—

I blink. The door to the bathroom has opened. There's a set of plodding footsteps, and then a sharp tap on the bathroom stall door. I push it open, and I'm met with a head of shaggy blonde hair that's pushed back by the glasses Jared never actually wears, even though he really needs them, so he just goes around squinting at everything and looking like a deranged mole.

“You told me to meet you here,” I say stupidly.

Jared looks at me like I’m crazy. “Yeah, I know what I said, man.” He cocks his head. His lips are chapped and the beginning of a mustache is scrawled unattractively above his mouth. “You okay? You look like you’re tripping on some bad kush or something.”

“Not yet,” I mumble. My palms sweat. “Do you have it?”

“Do *you* have it?” Jared mimics, holding out his hand, flexing quivering fingers in a grabbing motion. His pupils are wider than I think they should be.

I dig around in my front pocket, pulling out the brand-new Sharpie that I’ve been keeping in there. I hand it to him. “You’re sure that this is all it’s going to cost me?”

“What?” Jared says, taking the felt-tip from me and cracking off the cap. He examines the point and nods in satisfaction, then squints up at me. “Who are you again?”

The snake lets out a rattle of warning, and slips into my stomach. “Jeremy. I found you after school the other day, remember? You said you could get me... you know.” I don’t want to say it out loud.

Jared snaps his fingers. “Right! You’re the kid who wanted the...” He digs around in one of the pockets on his too-big cargo pants, pulling out wads of paper, a lighter, four pens, a pack of gum, and finally, a tiny plastic bag full of something that looks like old broccoli.

I take it from him, cautiously. “And you’re sure a Sharpie is all you want for it?”

Jared starts, like he forgot about that part. “Right. No. Also a hundred bucks.” I must be looking at him like he’s insane, because he crosses his arms and glares me down. “Do you think I’m stupid? I can’t just *give* you pot. For one thing, Etch-a-Sketch doesn’t give this stuff away for free. It takes *cash* to get this. And secondly, I’ve put my life and limb at risk here! Do you

know how many times the security guard at the side doors has frisked me? Like five. This week. Or month. What day is it again?"

I have so many questions, but the only one that escapes is, "Etch-a-Sketch?"

Jared nods. "That man can work magic. Never met another dealer like him. I don't know how he does it." He holds out a hand, now covered in Sharpie ink because he forgot to put the cap back on. "I require payment. And hurry up, the crop circles aren't going to make themselves."

I ignore that last part, and pull out the fold of bills from my back pocket. "I only have seventy-five on me." I had expected that Jared would want money—I'm not that oblivious—but I wasn't expecting more than my stash from mowing lawns during the summer would cover.

Jared plucks the wad of cash from my fingers. "Done." His tongue runs over the flakes of skin crusting on his mouth as he flips through the money. He's not looking at me when he says, "Why do you need drugs anyway? Aren't you, like, on the honor roll or something?"

My throat clenches. I have no idea what to say to that. I can't tell Jared things I haven't told anyone else. The rattlesnake is growing, filling the pit in my gut, and its tail vibrates too fast for me to even hear it, but I can feel it. It's there, waiting for me to step down, right on it, and I'm frozen, suspended in that moment where any wrong move could spell disaster, instantly.

That's what it's like, and nobody knows.

Even if I did tell Jared, I doubt he would care, or even remember. Right now, he's staring in fascination at the wall of the stall, nose almost pressed up against it.

"What are you going to do with the Sharpie?" I ask him instead.

He jumps like he's forgotten I'm even there, which I think is sort of ridiculous because at this point we're practically on top of one another. Public school bathroom stalls are not exactly



spacious. “This?” He holds up the marker, and his grin looks a little manic. “I’m gonna draw dicks on stuff.”

I decide not to pursue that topic any further. I look down at my watch, and the snake senses the danger and lunges. There’s only four minutes until the bell, and if I’m not back by then, learning all about how our stomach acid dissolves food, there are probably going to be questions that I don’t want to answer.

I push past Jared, who is muttering to himself and running his hand through his hair, his glasses falling and bouncing off the toilet seat and onto the floor. I make it out the door, and walk a little too fast down the hall. Up one flight of stairs, through second floor, up again, and then I’m slowing in the third floor hallway, just before Mr. Guthrie’s classroom, taking deep breaths so I don’t look like I’ve been in a hurry.

The class is still learning about the digestive system, but as I slip in through the door, I hear the first backpack unzip, and suddenly the room is a blossoming flurry of notebooks and pencils and zippers and kids’ voices slowly getting louder. I’m sure Mr. Guthrie would say something about my prolonged absence, if he wasn’t so busy trying to corral the class back into concentrating on the small intestine for another two minutes.

I slide back into my seat and exhale. The plastic bag and mess of leaves that cost me seventy-five dollars and a brand-new Sharpie is in my fist, slightly damp with the sweat from my palm. I scrunch my nose, and pocket the bag, unnoticed under my desk. It feels heavier than I expected it to be, a soft lump against my thigh.

Mr. Guthrie has given up, and resigned himself to flipping his PowerPoint lecture back to the beginning for his next class. Everyone else is on their phones or talking about what they’re going to do this weekend. I hear snatches of a conversation about a party, the kind of party that

I've never been invited to, one with red plastic cups and a distinct lack of adult supervision of any kind. My parents would never let me or my sister go to that kind of party, but I know for a fact that Delia has been to at least three. She's a lot cooler than I am, apparently.

The bell rings, and everyone pounds toward the door in a herd. I stand up, grab my bag, and prepare to follow.

"Jeremy, would you mind staying a moment?"

I manage to plaster a fake smile on before I turn to face Mr. Guthrie. "Yeah?"

He perches on the edge of his desk, his arms folded. Mr. Guthrie isn't particularly old, a little younger than my dad I think, and right now he doesn't look like a teacher, just like an adult.

"You took a while there. Anything wrong?"

I choke on a laugh. "Oh. Sorry. I guess I got distracted."

"You know, Jeremy, I don't mind if you're not all there in class all of the time. You've got a lot on your plate during senior year, and I know that it's probably pretty stressful, huh?"

His eyes crinkle, like we're sharing an inside joke.

"I guess." I wish my hands would stop sweating.

"I've noticed that you've been more distant lately. Staring off into space, barely participating in group projects. Your homework and test scores are still fine, but you used to be so engaged in class." He leans forward slightly, balancing against his legs, hands folded like he's begging me to reveal some secret that he knows I have. "Are you doing okay?"

I could say something, right now.

The snake's tail rattles. A warning.

"Yeah," I say, "I'm fine."

I turn my back on him before he can say anything else, before I can see his inevitable disappointment, joining the flow of students in the hall.

I really am *fine*. It's not anything that anyone needs to worry about. I can handle it. The rattlesnake curls itself up, quietly agreeing.

I'm halfway to sixth period before I remember.

I left the thighbone in the bathroom.