

Jungle House

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For Nick and Pansy

Chapter One

EVERY MORNING LENA OPENS HER EYES and the day is stretched out before her and there's a lot of work that needs to be done. There's fishing and mushroom gathering and swimming in the river. Five days a week are for exercise and two days are for rest. In the orchard there are bananas and guavas, grapefruits and limes. Depending on the season, the garden will have cassava, sweet potatoes, and peppers as long and thin as her fingers. There's a reserve of rice and beans in the storeroom, but it won't last forever; it's important to follow the schedule written in her notebook. What will she do when it runs out? She rarely eats meat but a few times a month she'll take the shotgun and go hunting: deer and peccaries, tapir and agoutis. She never hunts monkeys because she can't stand the thought of their curled-up fists in the pot. There are chickens on the property, although every year they get wilder, and she more reluctant.

When she last spoke to Mother, the juvenile hawks were still fuzzy and white with their baby plumage, and the rainy season was coming to an end. That was a month ago. By now they will have fledged, their chests brown and spotted.

It's certain that Mother will be angry at her for moving into the hut – for storming off like that. But their last conversation was so hostile, it seemed best to have some space. And it wasn't like she and Mother had never fought before – my God, how they'd fought!

But they've always made up, and she doesn't see how today will be any different.

And anyway, these days Mother is angry all the time.

Since she moved out, Lena's been living in the guest hut by the orchard. 'The guest hut' isn't an accurate name because the family never hosted any guests. Decades ago, they would have hosted relatives, or colleagues, or even university researchers, but that's never happened in her lifetime. It's hard not to think of the family as guests – but then what does that make her? Perhaps 'caretaker's hut' is more accurate. Yes. And that makes her the caretaker.

The main house is much grander, but the caretaker's hut suits her fine. For one, it's out of Mother's sight. Like the main house, it's built on stilts, useful for keeping out floodwaters during the rainy season, as well as insects and snakes. While the main house is constructed out of expensive local hardwood, with the most advanced solar panels the family could get at the time, the caretaker's hut is much simpler. Palm-wood walls, palm-branch roof, all of it knotted tightly together with lianas from the jungle, as tough and scratchy as the hardened skin of her heels. She has two rooms, one for cooking and one for sleeping. There's a porch where she likes to sit in the evenings when chores are done and write in her notebook by candlelight or torch. She can write down what she's eaten that day, and what she plans to eat tomorrow. She has a kerosene lamp but rarely lights it because kerosene needs to be saved, and the number of bugs it attracts is overwhelming. She sleeps on a mattress under a mosquito net, and every morning she shakes off the spiders and lizards that fell there overnight. Occasionally there are rat droppings, but rarely.

To visit Mother, she must cross the orchard, which is by far her favourite part of the property. She's never said this to Mother, though. *Great*, Mother would say. *Wonderful*. *So the place that's by far the messiest and most untidy is your favourite. Isn't that lovely*. But the orchard isn't even the 'messiest' place by far – can the orchard even be considered 'messy', in comparison to the jungle?

But try telling Mother that! *Oh God*, Mother might say, *the jungle*, and then she'd be off.

But how could she explain to Mother that it's precisely because the orchard is so overgrown and disorderly that she loves it? So many rotting papayas and mangos! So many green turds from the feral pack of chickens (now generations old, a regal dynasty). Yes, she loves the orchard, every part of it, even though there are sights there that make her sad. The pit bull's grave, for one. She visits it every day. If she doesn't tend to it, the surrounding jungle devours the tiny dirt mound completely, like it wants to swallow it whole. And so she pulls away weeds and mushrooms. Shoos away beetles and centipedes. Whispers a word or two. The poor pit bull. Nobody deserved such a fate.

She won't visit him today, though. It's best to get this over with.

Her plan is to act as though everything is normal. So she heads straight to the patio chairs, more neutral ground than inside the house. As a child, she would sit here and rest after cleaning the swimming pool, and she and Mother would gossip for hours. There definitely won't be any gossip today. But she's brought the machete, in case there's a simple and straightforward task she can do for Mother, one that can be completed easily.

She takes her seat on the one chair she's successfully kept clean over the years, scrubbed free of the speckled black mould that ruthlessly attacks anything plastic. It's a Sisyphean task, but she does it dutifully. She notes with dismay the moss that's grown on the chair legs. How quickly things can change! But the pool is the same. The pool is always the same. Empty apart from the thin layer of scummy water. The hours she spent here as a child with the skimmer! The number of purple blossoms scooped from the water! The rescued baby iguanas! How Mother despised them: their tiny nails, and the stink she insisted was there, even though Mother can't smell – has never been able to.

'Mother,' she says. She doesn't raise her voice because she doesn't need to; Mother will hear. 'Mother, I'm here.'

*

A dragonfly lands on the glistening scum, before retreating immediately, as if disgusted.

‘Well, Lena,’ Mother says. No greeting, no *how are you*. ‘So you’re not dead. Apparently.’

‘No.’

‘No botfly eggs in your arms.’

‘No.’

‘No infected bites. No tapeworms.’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘There you go.’ Mother sighs. ‘At least some things are all right with the world. At least not everything is completely fucked.’

Mother rarely swears, as she considers it beneath her – she must be in a mood. And when Mother is in a mood, Lena needs to be careful. She waits patiently.

Here it comes. ‘But as you can see,’ Mother says, ‘the nest is still there—’

Lena interrupts quickly. ‘They’ve fledged though, haven’t they?’

‘Oh, Lena –’ And this is it – of all things, this is what sets Mother off. There she goes, she’s off now, there’s no stopping her! Mother’s mood, black and swirling, bearing down on Lena like an afternoon thunderstorm. ‘Lena, you just can’t imagine. You’ll never know how awful it is. The smell, Lena. The stink!’

Again, it’s a fact that Mother can’t smell – but forget about bringing *that* up.

‘The constant flies, Lena. Can you even see up there? The carcasses? Body parts, Lena. Feet and beaks. Feathers, Lena. And layers and layers of encrusted, hardened—’

‘But Mother,’ she says. She’s trying to talk fast – maybe if she acts incredibly anxious, speaking a million miles a minute, this will offset Mother’s own anxiety. ‘Remember last year, Mother? Last year wasn’t so bad, was it?’

Last year was when she went up the ladder with a pair of gardening gloves from the shed. She pulled away the worst of the nest debris, tossing it recklessly over her shoulder, secretly enjoying the mess it made as it scattered over the patio tiles. How Mother cried as the ladder wobbled! How Mother groaned at the sight of

the flattened songbird carcasses, baked into stiff patties by the heat. But once Lena swept them away, Mother calmed right down.

‘What *would* help,’ Mother says, ‘is throwing the whole nest in the river. And lining the roof with broken glass. And after that: shooting them. You’re good at that, aren’t you? Supposedly? Isn’t that part of your so-called heritage? That’s the only kind of help that would realistically do any good—’

Lena unscrews the lid of her water bottle and takes a long drink. The water is far too warm to be refreshing.

Because when Mother finishes with the hawks, next up will be the possums, who’ve built their own nest in the chimney. It doesn’t matter that the chimney is something that the Morels have never used, and probably never will. For Mother, it’s unacceptable.

‘You know, Mother,’ she interrupts. ‘If I block it up, they’ll just nest somewhere else, in a place you’ll find even more unpleasant.’

But Mother isn’t listening; Mother doesn’t stop. What follows are the usual talking points: the warping floors, the peeling wall-paper, the stained ceiling. Corroding metal, brackish water, layers of salt crystals on the wooden beams. Mother, talking. And Lena, sitting with growing discomfort, shifting her weight from one buttock to another as Mother’s litany grows and grows. The odours. My God, the odours! She knows they’re there, Lena, she just knows it! ‘I can feel them,’ Mother frets, and this is when Lena starts to feel them too: as suffocating as steam from soup. A sour rankness she can smell, but Mother can only imagine. ‘Like a gas,’ Mother says. ‘It stinks, Lena, it reeks. Oh, I can’t bear the thought of letting you inside; it’d be far too humiliating.’

Lena should say something comforting at this point. She really should.

Instead, she uses her feet to drag the chair across the tiles, into a shadier spot provided by the grapefruit tree.

Mother has always been obsessed with keeping the house clean and the property safe. Security and order – those are Mother’s jobs. Providing information as requested was another key task.

But that hasn't been the case for the past six months, since the satellite connection was lost.

Still, in the twenty years that they've known each other – the twenty years that Lena's been alive – those primary jobs haven't changed. And she, Lena – her entire life, she's always been helpful. Mother's helper.

What *has* changed – she must admit, albeit reluctantly – is the extent of Mother's rages. Especially this past year, since the Morels' last visit. Sure, Mother had always been a bit on the angry side, a bit irritable, but her temper has definitely become a bit more . . . well, pronounced. Lena's often wondered if it's a result of Mother's aloneness. Of course, *she's* been here for Mother, but it's not the same, obviously. How could Lena ever hope to replace the relationship Mother had with the satellites?

Anyway, she doesn't like to think about it, and Mother certainly would never bring it up. But when she *does* think about it, late at night in the hut, when she can't sleep – if she thinks about it too long, it becomes hard to breathe. Like her lungs have become sticky, overgrown with spiderwebs.

The satellite connection, gone. The family, silent. And Mother, alone.

It can't have been easy.

Especially with Lena moved out, on top of everything else.

And so, Mother's rages – she can't resent them. How can she? All Mother wants to do is her job – keeping the house safe, orderly and tidy. To stay busy and purposeful. Who wouldn't want that?

The Morels used to come three times a year – two weeks at Christmas, ten days at Easter and three weeks in summer. The visits decreased over the years, due to the rebels' presence in the area, which was obviously not her or Mother's fault – not anything anyone could control. During the last fateful Christmas visit – a year ago now – the family was barely here for a week, cutting their trip short. After that trip, the Morels stopped coming, and six months after that, the satellites cut off. But even when the connection was still functioning, she and Mother never heard from the Morels, not a word.

So she and Mother have had to do their best, making do with what they have. Without the satellite connection, it's impossible for Mother to receive any news, but the country must be in turmoil, what with the upcoming elections and the increasing support for the former rebel candidate. It must be the worst bump in the road since the disarmament process. And, of course, it's obvious why the family won't be returning any time soon. But who could say what the future might hold? Both Mother and Lena have lived through this kind of isolation before and come out of it just fine; now shouldn't necessarily be any different. Yes, a couple of years might pass, and when the Morels came back, things would obviously be different, but they could survive; they'd done it before. Her and Mother. The two of them could wait out anything. Any sensible person would see why the Morels need time away from the property. Lena understands, Mother understands (well . . . she *thinks* Mother understands). She doesn't hold the radio silence against the Morels; she doesn't take it personally.

Mother isn't even the family's only property. There's also Mountain House, where the family spends three-day weekends during the school year. Lena has never been to the mountains – she's never left the property – but, according to Mother, the weather there was much pleasanter. *Not a sweat fest like here, Lena – to be honest, you'd probably prefer it, it'd suit you; you'd end up never wanting to leave.* But I like it right here, Mother, she'd insist. I don't want to leave. And even if Mother didn't say anything in response, she'd know Mother was pleased. It was unfortunate that Mother's relationship with Mountain House was so acrimonious. Her most common complaint – repeated often, with much bitterness – was *He thinks he's better than me, Lena, so damn superior, and believe me, dealing with someone with that kind of personality is a complete waste of time.*

The main family home was City House, on the military base. That's where Isabella went to school – well, used to go to school – and her father to work. Mother's relationship with City House was even worse than with Mountain House. How scandalised Mother had been by what happened! *The way she admitted those*

rioters, Mother once ranted. *Just let them waltz right in through the gates. She let them break the windows! She let them burn the car! Unbelievable. Unforgivable. Absolutely useless. They should have torn her apart for scrap metal. That's the only thing she's good for now.*

Mother! Lena exclaimed, alarmed by the harshness of Mother's judgement. But Mother just laughed.

But even so – even though the Morels hadn't been in touch the past year (which, while distressing, was completely understandable) – Mother had never failed to do the best job she possibly could. And Lena had too.

When Mother is off on one of her rages, all Lena can provide is an audience. And so she sits quietly, watching the hummingbirds flit back and forth across the patio. Because once Mother finishes with the smell – 'I suspect mould, or possibly mushrooms, heaven forbid!' – she'll move on to the final topic, the one that most enrages her: the jungle itself. And today is no different. If the movement of the stars above follow a regular pattern (as taught to her by Mother – *if the rebels ever snatch you, Lena, you'll find it useful*), then so do Mother's complaints.

The snakes. The bats. The bugs. In the year without the family, it's only got worse. Despite Lena's best efforts, the jungle itself is now encroaching upon Mother: vines on the drainpipe, termite nests in the ceiling. There's no escaping it; Mother can't get away.

But there are so many things in the jungle she wishes she could show Mother! Because, if Mother could see, perhaps she would change her mind. If only Mother could lie in the river and let the water carry her, thin slimy fish nibbling her underarms. If only she could shine a light under the logs and see the glistening skin of the frogs and salamanders, their cool, slow blinks, unperturbed in their damp wisdom. If only she could take Mother up the branch of that one tree she feels confident in climbing, sit there waiting patiently for the band of spider monkeys to pass by – their little wrinkled hands and the tender way they groom each other, their squashed, puckered faces.

But it doesn't matter, because Mother only ever notices disgusting things from the jungle. Dirty things. Like the fly larvae wiggling inside the pit bull's wound, eating him from the inside out. Oh, how Mother had shouted . . .

Mother is many things, even without the satellites, but one thing she'll always be is stuck where she is. And the satellites' absence hasn't helped, even if Mother claims that she doesn't miss them, that in fact she feels better without them – *They were getting strange, Lena, filled with abnormal ideas, and no wonder: living high up like that would make anyone go peculiar. It does things to your mind.*

'I don't know how I can take it, Lena,' Mother is saying right now. 'I don't know why I keep going.'

When this particular tone in Mother's voice arrives, it's best to interrupt. 'I can't help with the mould,' Lena says. 'I can't make it go away completely. But if you want me to remove the termite nest, I can.'

'Oh, no,' Mother says instantly. 'That would be— I'd hate to impose. You'd feel so guilty if too many died by mistake, and then you'd blame me and get pissy.'

'I won't make a mistake. I can use smoke.' She's already brainstorming techniques. Where did Alfonso leave the grill? Was it stored in the shed? A wood fire would be better, but there's no chance Mother would consent to have something like that used so close to the house . . .

'Smoke is a risk,' Mother says. 'Especially for those godforsaken hawks. If they inhale too much they'll drop dead off the roof. And then you'll get in another mood with me, and spend another month sulking in your little hut.'

Steady now, Lena tells herself. You've done great so far. Hang in there and don't crack. 'Well, if you're sure.'

'I am.'

They fall silent. The crickets and cicadas are singing in that distinct way she only ever hears here, this close to the house – the ones by the caretaker's hut (*her* hut) are shriller, more high-pitched. If she wants to stop the sun from beating down on

her head, she's going to have to drag the chair towards the shade again. But instead she stands up, a bit too quickly.

'Well,' she says again, 'I'm sorry I can't stay longer—'

'Oh, no,' Mother says. 'Don't be silly.'

'Do you want me to take a look at the vines on the drainpipe? I brought the machete—' She holds it up high, like she did when she was little and wanted Mother to see a drawing she'd made, an interesting-looking rock she'd found, a piece of wood she'd carved. *Mother, look what I have!*

'The vines are fine,' Mother says. 'The drainpipe is fine. I don't know why I said anything about the vines in the first place, or the drainpipe, for that matter. There's nothing whatsoever about either the vines or the drainpipe that requires immediate attention.'

'If you're sure,' she repeats. She shifts her weight awkwardly from one foot to another. In this kind of heat she becomes painfully aware of how sweaty she must seem to Mother, how greasy. The huge pores on her nose, the stiff hairs on her chin. When she was a child, she never paid attention to these differences between her and Mother. Now, it makes her feel guilty, like she's failed to do something she was supposed to. Her body has come between them. The clumsy inelegance of such a puffy, solid form, with hands that swell up when it's too hot, menstrual cycles that last over a week, and feet that peel in the rainy season and smell like cheese.

At least Mother doesn't show her repulsion, even if she feels it. Well, apart from the occasional comment here and there.

'Actually,' Mother says, and there's a note now in Mother's voice that gives reason to pause, 'there is one thing.'

Lena stiffens. She tries not to, but it happens anyway. And Mother will notice, because Mother notices everything.

'Behind the pool,' Mother says. 'Where the old chicken coop used to be. You remember, right?'

'Of course.' Years ago, she rebuilt the coop closer to the caretaker's hut, so that the chickens were less likely to destroy the grass closest to the house.

‘Something’s there,’ Mother says. ‘In the overgrowth. The bushes, or whatever you want to call them. I have a rough guess of what it is. But I need to see to be sure.’

‘What is it?’

‘You’ll have to go in and pull it out, so I can be certain.’

She bites the inside of her lip. This, too, Mother will notice.

‘It’s not like that time by the river,’ Mother says. ‘Okay? I promise. It’s nothing like that time at all. But if you’re still in a mood with me over that, Lena, then I really don’t know what else I can say. My reaction back then was perfectly understandable.’

‘I’m not in a mood.’ The time by the river was four months ago. Mother had spotted vultures gathering by the gorge, over the private cove where Lena and Isabella used to swim, and insisted that Lena go investigate. They’d both got horribly worked up – Lena in tears, and Mother’s voice angry and awful in a way Lena had never heard before. And then, after all that drama, Lena had crept down the gorge, bracing herself for a terrible sight, and terrible news to report to the family. But combing through the overgrown vegetation had revealed nothing more than the remains of a butchered goat. Mother immediately recorded it in the security logs as possible evidence of increasing rebel presence. Lena had buried the goat’s remains on the riverbank, in soil that was more like clay. Digging the hole hadn’t been easy, and had made no sense to Mother whatsoever (*Just throw it back in the water for the caimans! Heaven knows why the rebels dumped it; they probably pumped it full of some disgusting drug from their awful laboratories*). But Lena had dug the hole anyway, left a small dirt mound carefully marked by a pile of stones. She still visited it sometimes, after attending to the pit bull’s grave.

‘What really gets me,’ Mother says, ‘is that I have no idea how this thing got there. Whatever it is. It must have happened during one of my spells.’

Lena’s breath quickens. ‘Have you had one recently?’

‘Oh, Lena, you know how they are; they just happen and I don’t even realise it. I know how useless and incompetent you think they make me, so please don’t bother telling me.’

‘I wasn’t planning to.’

Mother rarely mentioned her spells, but Lena feared them. They weren’t as bad as Mother’s moods – not as dark, not as powerful – but had far more worrying connotations. *It’s like I go away and then come back, Lena. But time has passed, and I’m never sure how much, and I don’t know what I’ve missed. But it’s nothing to worry about; I’m sure it’s just a way my system has adapted over the years to keep me functioning as efficiently as possible. It’s a minor irritation, at best.*

Mother never seemed bothered when she discussed her spells – only matter of fact. But still. In the past year, she’d been having more and more of them. Even though Lena tried not to think about it too much, the facts were undeniable: Mother, not seeing. Mother, less effective. Mother, missing things she should have spotted right away.

Was this it, then? Had it already begun?

Mother, failing. Mother, old.

Mother no longer herself.

‘It’s in the bushes,’ Mother says, ‘and not too deep. You won’t get your arms scratched. I promise. I promise.’

‘Well, if you’re promising twice . . .’

Mother laughs, and Lena can’t help but smile.

She walks all the way around the empty pool. Mother is right, the overgrown bushes aren’t that bad, especially considering how rarely they’ve been attended to (when was the last time Lena trimmed them back?). There are a few wooden boards scattered here and there, left over from the previous chicken coop, now exploding with orange mushrooms. These are Mother’s most hated species, after the mushy brown ones. *Don’t eat them, Lena, they’ll give you horrible visions and make you think absurd things. Leave them for the birds, they’re already insane.*

Lena stands at a distance, scanning carefully. But Mother calls out, her voice carrying across the patio, the pool, the flattened patch of grass: ‘It’s deep in there, Lena! You’re going to have to pull some branches back!’

She does so reluctantly, trying to peer as deep into the tangled

growth as she can, wincing at the occasional sharp prick of a thorn.

‘There you go!’ Mother says. ‘Getting closer, Lena!’

With her back turned, it feels reasonably safe to roll her eyes.

‘I don’t see anything,’ she says.

‘What?’

Another potential cause for concern – is Mother’s hearing fading too?

‘I said, I DON’T SEE ANYTHING.’ Unable to hide her impatience, she uses her boot to stomp down viciously on a branch. Stomp, stomp, stomp. This helps her move deeper into the bushes. There’s something satisfying about crushing them down. Her trousers are thick and feel pleasingly protective. Like most of her clothes, they’re from Isabella’s closet – Isabella’s jungle outfits. Thorns rasp against cloth; her forehead prickles with sweat.

‘Mother, there’s nothing here—’

Her foot comes into contact with something hard.

‘There it is!’ Mother crows. ‘I knew it, I knew it!’

She has no choice other than to reach in deep. She can’t help herself; she lets out a cry. Thin red lines are forming on her arms; there’s definitely a spark of blood. But somehow she’s able to grasp the object and pull it out.

‘I knew it,’ Mother is still saying. She’s not shouting, but her voice is much louder than it needs to be. ‘I knew it, Lena! I was right!’

The scratches on her arm are stinging. She has to rotate the item in her hands a few times before understanding what it is.

It’s a pair of field binoculars. Simply designed. Black, with faint scratches across the lenses. Small enough to hold in the palm of one hand.

‘Turn around.’ Mother is definitely yelling now. If any birds were nearby, they’d fly away in alarm. ‘Turn around and hold it up.’

Dutifully, she does. It doesn’t have any straps, so she holds it with the lenses pointing up. Mother is still shouting, but for a brief second her words don’t register, the words don’t come through.

Lena has lived here all her life, and she would know if this was a pair owned by the family; she'd recognise it immediately, as she recognises all their possessions. If it were a misplaced pair from the army, dropped accidentally from one of the helicopters that still occasionally patrol overhead, it would have a military insignia, or the country's flag, some kind of logo to indicate ownership. It's also definitely not an item from the search party, because the search parties didn't use binoculars – they had their drones, and that was enough. And because it is none of those things, Lena is obliged to arrive at the same conclusion as Mother, who is still shouting words that Lena can't quite register, language Lena can't yet absorb. Because if these binoculars are from neither the family nor the military nor the search parties, then the only other reasonable explanation is that they come from a rebel, someone who was here, and close, and not that long ago.

Chapter Two

BACK WHEN THE FAMILY used to come, Lena and Mother would adjust their schedules and assume additional responsibilities. For Lena, this mainly consisted of attending to Isabella. For Mother, it consisted of directing staff, enforcing security, and looking after Isabella's parents. The Morels were predictable in the way they spent their holidays. There was wading in the river or hiking down the rocky gorge towards the private cove. There was sitting by the swimming pool and sunbathing. Best of all was birdwatching on the balcony: every night macaws flew home in pairs, and enormous flocks of swallows swarmed towards the waterfall, an hour's hike away.

Lena and Mother liked the visits. The family never demanded too much when they were there, not truly. The house itself had been in the family for generations. Isabella's mother owned the surrounding land, which long ago had been a rubber-tree plantation owned by Isabella's grandfather. Mother had never met him – she was only a few years older than Lena – but she referred to him as *Henry Senior* when she was being respectful, *Henry-the-plantation-baron* when she was being precise, and *you know, the big boss guy*, when she wasn't thinking too hard about her tone. Because of the ongoing conflict and increasing rebel presence, there was a long period when the family couldn't visit. Isabella herself hadn't come until she was seven, when Lena had just turned nine.

Of course, the family had known the whole time that Lena was there – Mother had kept them informed. Not the whole story, of course, but Mother’s version of it. And once the disarmament process concluded – the year that Lena turned nine – things became safer and stabler, and the family started to come again.

Safety was the responsibility Mother took most seriously. *No peace negotiation or disarmament process in the world is ever going to change that, Lena, believe me. Bandits don’t go away, criminals don’t go away, shameless good-for-nothings don’t go away. Potential combatants are a constant threat. I’ve always got to be on the lookout. I know what I’m talking about; I’ve seen it all. Nothing can surprise me at this point, nothing.*

The house had been designed by a famous architect, and, with the exception of its solar panels, was built entirely out of wood. It was originally constructed by Henry’s Austrian great-grandfather, who’d dreamed of building a house in the middle of the forest (that was the word he’d used: ‘forest’, not ‘jungle’). Lena knew all this from Mother’s lessons, as well as the thin paper pamphlets she’d carefully flicked through, the ones that formed part of the family’s extensive memorabilia about the house and its history.

There was no road access to the house. Previous inhabitants could only reach it by river, and even that fluctuated depending on the flooding season and the flowing of various tributaries. The house was two storeys high with balconies on the second floor. Connected to the house by a series of wooden walkways were several cabins, used for different purposes. There was a studio for Isabella’s mother, for her watercolour painting. There was the food storeroom: beans, rice, flour, sugar, oil, powdered milk and more. There was the laundry room, which also served as storage space for non-food items. And closer to the jungle’s boundary, across the orchard, was the guest hut. The caretaker’s hut. Lena’s hut. Behind the laundry room was the water tank, a large tower of 20,000 litres connected to a deep well. (Isabella once asked Lena if she’d ever climbed down it, and Lena had politely answered ‘no’. In her head, though, she imagined Mother putting it this way: *Lena’s not in the habit of doing idiotically pointless and life-risking*

things; it's not worth it.) At a significant distance from the house were the landing strips for the helicopters, once maintained dutifully by Lena with intense machete-hacking sessions, but now overgrown, reclaimed by the jungle – yet another task she's let slide. *How many helicopters can fit there again, Mother? How many can come?* This was one of her favourite questions to ask as a child, a question she knew the answer to, but enjoyed seeing Mother getting worked up about. *Something like a dozen average-sized ones, Lena. Though thankfully we've never had that many come at one time – can you imagine? The noise, the mess! My nerves are barely coping as it is!*

The last time they had a helicopter land there – the family's last day. That . . . had not been a good day at all.

It delighted Lena when the family enjoyed their visits. This feeling was especially strong from the age of eleven, when Mother assigned her more responsibilities for running the household, apart from just attending to Isabella. The family's pleasure in the scenery gave Lena a sense of pride, as though she herself was personally responsible for its beauty. She loved it when they exclaimed over the hummingbirds or laughed at the squabbling howler monkeys. Mornings were for the leisure area, and afternoons were for the beach, which is what they called the patch of sand by the river. The leisure area consisted of a pier extending over the water, perfect for diving off and fishing. It also had the sauna with its panoramic view and steam room, the garage with the yacht, motorboat and jet skis, as well as the concrete ramp. There was also the canoe, tied to a fence post as it drifted in the river, but no one had touched it in years (*Lena, are you ever going to put that damn thing away? It's a wonder the wood hasn't rotted by now*).

It would take less than a day after their arrival for Isabella's skin to start burning and become swollen with blistering, angry mosquito bites. Lena's bites – on the rare occasion she got them – were never like Isabella's; at their absolute worst they were

small raised bumps with a red pinprick in the middle. After spotting them, Mother would always make the exact same comment: *You're lucky not to be allergic to mosquito saliva, like Isabella. You're a true child of the jungle.* And Lena would laugh awkwardly, because the way Mother said it, she could tell: it wasn't a compliment.

'Peel me, Lena!' Isabella would cry, pulling down her bathing suit straps. And Lena would oblige and pretend to enjoy it, even though she was secretly reluctant. It was always difficult touching someone like that – such disgustingly soft skin! – after so many months at the house with no one else around other than Mother and the staff. Even when she became older and more mature, it never failed to feel challenging.

It also didn't help that the drone tended to hover over Isabella during these sorts of moments, buzzing in her ear in a way that Lena found – well, a bit overbearing. He also often gave Isabella instructions that Lena found painfully obvious, like *Please keep away from the barbed wire.* Of course Isabella was going to stay away from the barbed wire! What did he think she was going to do, dive into it head first? But, like Mother, the drone was only trying to do his job, and that wasn't something Lena could hold against him.

But take how Isabella was never allowed to enter the deepest parts of the river, as the drone consistently assessed that the water wasn't adequately safe. Lena found this a bit much – to travel all the way here, on that long (presumably nauseating) helicopter ride, and then never actually go swimming? She felt this was more about the drone himself being afraid of water, which Mother confirmed: *These military types, Lena – if you ever meet more of them, and I hope to God you never do, you'll see for yourself that there's always something a bit off with them; they all have their neuroses. Some of them can be real sickos. But you can't blame them! They've been through a lot, it's no wonder that they aren't right in the head. They're paranoid, they're bossy, and God forbid you ever contradict them. But they've made a big sacrifice, Lena, a sacrifice for us all, for this country, so they're deserving of our respect. Just do what he says and respect his requests, and whatever you do, don't get on his*

bad side or create any drama, because he's not going away any time soon and you don't want to cause any problems.

Mother was right, because Mother was always right about these kinds of things. The world was a complicated place, and Mother understood it much better than she did. But at least when things were normal – when it was just her and Mother and the staff – Lena could go out swimming in the river as far as she wanted. She liked the spot where slimy black fish nibbled her ankles, and the current smacked against rocks. Sometimes the spray hit her own face so hard it felt like a slap.

Isabella was always happy enough with dangling her feet off the dock or playing on the sand. When Isabella was happy, the drone was happy, and when the drone was happy, Lena could relax. He would tell Isabella's parents that Lena was a good caretaker, a nice girl. A good person. That she wasn't an inconvenience, and they should continue letting her stay here at the house, that it was fine to let her go on living here with Mother; she was a big help and wasn't any trouble. What would happen to Lena if she *was* trouble? What would 'Lena being trouble' look like, exactly? It wasn't sensible to think about it too much. Still, before every visit, Mother never failed to issue her standard warning: *Don't forget, Lena, it's very kind of them to let you stay here with me, so let's not cause any drama to make them think otherwise.*

Mother had a great fear of drama. She cautioned against it quite frequently.

By the house the drone was always a bit more relaxed; it was only when they wandered further away, deeper into the jungle, that he became more tense. In the private cove, for example, he would only let Isabella wade in up to her ankles. Lena would show Isabella how to hunt for caterpillars on the underside of leaves, and the drone would tersely interrupt with, *Be careful, they sting.* And when she pointed out logs and explained how to correctly identify a caiman, it was clearly *not* a conversation topic that the drone enjoyed at all. Perhaps Lena wasn't exactly following Mother's advice to avoid drama in these moments, but she couldn't help herself – it was so amusing, the drone's horrified reaction.

And then, in the evenings after the family showered for at least the third time that day, Silvana and Alfonso would prepare wonderful dinners outside, over the barbecue pit and wood stove. Fish stews or grilled meat, depending on what Mother had scheduled and what the helicopters had brought. Lena was especially good at making juices – she consistently got the balance of sugar and fruit exactly right. The family would eat and eat, and drink and drink, until they clutched their ribs and groaned. Lena never ate with them, but Isabella's parents sometimes asked her to attend their arrival and departure meals, which were inevitably celebratory and epic. Fried plantains, rice with shrimp, lobsters with onions, tiny wedges of lime – it could be a bit overwhelming. Overwhelming options, overwhelming amounts. Sometimes Alfonso went so far as to prepare oysters, but he was terrible at shucking them, and as he became older and rustier and generally more confused, they became increasingly rare on the menu. Without the Morels around, Lena was content with fish and rice, beans and potatoes, the occasional chicken soup. Simple food, easy to prepare. Nothing like what they put on for the family.

Lena felt quite tense when eating in front of the family and preferred not to. She worried about dropping grains of rice down her shirt or forgetting to wipe away sauce smeared on her chin. She also worried they'd notice how much she ate. In front of the Morels, it was important to be polite. Mother made her sit through countless lessons about table manners, but it still didn't prevent Lena from getting nervous. She liked having the family come, especially Isabella, but as she grew older, it became harder to adjust to them rather than easier.

'Aren't you darling!' That's what Mrs Morel had said the first time she saw Lena, when she was nine. How anxious Lena had been! Her back pressing against the wall, her hands hot and dry. It had taken all her courage not to slink away, or hide her face against Silvana's cool metal torso. It was only the sound of Mother's voice in her head that kept her in place, albeit with trembling legs: *I'll deal with them, Lena. Just focus on your three main responsibilities. Do you remember what those are?*

Lena, reciting dutifully: *Not call you Mother in front of them. Not cause drama. Be nice and polite, especially to Isabella.*

Exactly. Even still, the windows and doors kept opening and closing at random, betraying Mother's nervousness.

'Absolutely darling,' Mrs Morel repeated. She patted Lena on the cheek a few times. Lena closed her eyes but forced herself to stay put – how strange Mrs Morel's hand felt. Disturbingly warm and sticky. Nothing like Silvana's or Alfonso's. 'She's just as you described her, Jungle House. Very cute, but a little surly. Come closer, Lena, we won't harm you.'

'Yes,' Mother said. 'Lena's services as a local guide, and capacity to provide indigenous knowledge, will enhance Isabella's jungle experience and provide invaluable authenticity to her stay.'

'Wonderful,' Mrs Morel said. Mr Morel wasn't paying attention; he was already walking upstairs, dropping cigar ash on the steps Alfonso had spent all morning carefully sweeping. Isabella had been hiding behind Mrs Morel's leg this entire exchange, which gave Lena a strange feeling. (It was just Isabella at that point; the Morels wouldn't purchase the drone until the following year.) Isabella, wrapping her hand in her mother's. Burying her face in her mother's shirt, occasionally peering out at Lena, crossing her eyes, poking out her tongue when the adults weren't looking. Lena, though, had to stand there alone. Even though she pressed her back against the wall as hard as she could, it felt nothing at all like an embrace. All she had was Mother's voice in her head. And what was Mother saying to her?

Be nice, Lena.

And so, Lena stepped forward. Isabella looked up at her, with a strange look of haughtiness that made Lena bristle. For the briefest of seconds, she pictured herself storming off. But no, that wouldn't do. She had to do as Mother said.

And so, Lena asked, 'Would you like to see the pool?' Extending her hand, just like she'd practised with Silvana and Alfonso. Her fingers were shaking slightly, so, forcefully, consciously, she made them stop.

Isabella snorted. But Mrs Morel gave her a nudge.

‘Fine,’ Isabella said without smiling. She reached out and took Lena’s hand. Lena imagined Mother sighing with relief. The locks of the doors unclicked as Mother relaxed, but nobody apart from Lena noticed.

It was a relief to Lena when at first Isabella’s parents basically ignored her. But as she grew older, they began to look at her. To *really* look at her. Like the time Mr Morel asked if she would walk around the table a few times, which she did so obligingly.

‘Look,’ he said, nudging his wife by the elbow. ‘Watch the way she lifts her feet.’

Mrs Morel watched carefully, and made a face that Lena wasn’t sure how to interpret. ‘Strange!’ she said. She made Lena circle the table again before they got distracted by a falling mango, and Lena was then able to slip away quickly and go help Alfonso with the dishes.

She begged Mother later to replay the memory and explain it to her. Mother was usually steadfast in her absolute refusal to show Lena any of her memories, but on this occasion she was surprisingly willing. *I would interpret this as concern, Lena – see the lined forehead? Her mouth is also pulling down but remains shut. If it were disgust, or even fear, the mouth would be slightly open.*

But concern for what, Mother? And why?

It’s the way you walk, Lena – you lift your feet too high. You’re used to raising them in order to avoid tripping over a root, or sinking in the leaves, or getting tangled in branches. It makes you look strange to them.

It did?

She tried to walk differently after that – tiny, delicate, light steps, like the tinamous when they scurried away with their chicks. But it was hard to maintain, and it didn’t take long to become tedious. So she looked strange when she walked – so what? Let her look strange! For the forty-odd weeks of the year that the family weren’t present, she could walk however she wanted, and it made no difference to anybody else who lived

with her. Mother, Silvana and Alfonso, the pit bull most of all – none of *them* cared.

Still, there was always a part of her that felt a bit embarrassed about it.

Another unfortunate incident was the time with her and Isabella by the pool. Lena was fourteen, and Isabella was twelve. That was the summer Isabella became completely obsessed with sunbathing, which was understandable – she wasn't allowed to go outside City House, not even on the balcony. Lena had just finished swimming laps. Panting hard, she'd collapsed next to Isabella on the same beach towel. It wasn't the kind of position Lena would normally assume – she usually kept more of a respectful distance. But she was exhausted and wanted to rest (as she told Mother later, *I wasn't thinking clearly*). Isabella's eyes were closed, and she made no sign whatsoever of noticing Lena's presence. The drone sat there too, squat and unmoving, absorbing direct sunlight for his battery. It felt nice for Lena to lie there too, soaking up the sun. But then Mrs Morel had come outside to smoke a cigarette and immediately started laughing – a light-hearted, tinkling sound.

'Well, Lena!' she exclaimed. 'Aren't you uppity!'

Isabella opened her eyes immediately and stared at Lena. Her lip curled slightly, as it did when eating something distasteful. For a moment Lena didn't do anything: first came the embarrassment, washing over her body in a wave of goose pimples. Then came the anger, gathering in the back of her throat like bile. In that moment, she wanted nothing more than to give Isabella a good hard smack. Mrs Morel, too. But she could imagine Mother's voice, speaking in her head: *No drama, Lena*. And so Lena quickly shuffled off the towel, so that their buttocks were no longer sharing the same piece of fabric. Playing with Isabella was fine, keeping Isabella company was fine, but there seemed to be a line Mrs Morel didn't want her to cross, and for whatever reason sitting on the same towel as Isabella was exactly that. And then she'd felt the most terrible sense of shame, more soaking and immersive than the pool water could ever be.

Mother never mentioned it. She didn't even reprimand Lena for it later. But the drone – he said something to her afterwards, in that sharp, abrupt way of his, when Isabella had stood up and was shaking the towel out carefully over the patio tiles.

'That wasn't right,' he said. 'What she said to you.' He spoke quietly, like he didn't want to be heard.

'Pardon?' Lena said, startled. It was the first time he'd ever addressed her directly.

But the drone didn't speak further. Instead, he zoomed closer to Isabella as she draped the wet towel over her arm and headed inside. Her wet feet left prints on the tiles that disappeared instantly in the white-hot sun.

So yes, it could be a bit intense and exhausting to deal with the Morels. How loud, how red-faced they could be. They inevitably broke down near the end of their visits and left a full day early. The humidity, the storms, the bugs, the snakes. Mrs Morel would even get frustrated at how often her glasses steamed up. It could be a bit much at times. Lena would end up spending more time in the bathroom than was necessary, or shutting herself in the cupboard with the bleach and buckets and extra dustpans. Silvana and Alfonso would usually be in there as well, seizing the opportunity to recharge at the wall socket (no matter how often they charged, though, it seemed like their batteries could never hold it for long – an early sign of their impending fate). She found it comforting to lean against them, feeling the warmth in their bodies from the charge. Sometimes she even wrapped her arms around their torsos. The same way she clung on to them as a child, letting them drag her from room to room. Closing her eyes. Deep, shaky breaths.

It didn't help that Isabella could be so cutting sometimes, especially as she got older, about how 'primitive' and 'old' Jungle House was, compared to City House. How it pained Lena to hear such pointed remarks! There was that one visit, for example, where Isabella spent the entire time complaining about the lack of external weather control, no artificial climate generator . . . not to mention her subtle critiques about Silvana and Alfonso. Wow,

I never knew droids this old still existed! Where did you get them, Mummy – an antique shop?

And then there were Isabella's remarks about Lena herself. 'Why are the pores on your nose so big?' she often asked. 'And the hairs on your chin so dark?'

But still. It was nice seeing them. It was always nice, having them come. Isabella and Lena were so close in age. She and Isabella laughed a lot together. They had a good time.

Isabella's parents, too. Take Lena's party trick with leftover fish, for instance – she could pick the bones cleaner than any of them, and suck out the eyes with gusto. Mr Morel would over-praise her, and Mrs Morel would laugh, and Isabella would groan in overdramatic disgust. 'Come, Lena!' they would call. 'Come do your fish trick!' And Lena would come. The more dramatically she sucked out the eyeballs, the louder they would cheer: *absolutely disgusting!* After dinner, Lena would help Isabella with her bedtime routine – shower, story time, song when Isabella was young; combing her hair and cleaning her biotech-device implant when Isabella was older. In the meantime, Mother would provide Isabella's parents with music or films or simulations to wander through, whatever they might like. Mr Morel preferred to go to bed early – he worked so hard at the base, he liked his time at the house to be restful. But Mrs Morel loved to drink late into the night and admire the sky, the stars, the pock-faced moon most of all.

At night Lena would often be busy getting Isabella settled and tidying up, leaving Mrs Morel to herself. However, there was one incident that occurred during the Morels' last visit. Lena had come into the living room to clean up the remaining evening debris – platters of salted peanuts, glasses of half-melted ice cubes – and Mrs Morel had called her over. 'Come, Lena,' she said. 'Come chat with me for a bit.'

And Lena obliged. Mrs Morel had never before made this kind of request – to speak with Lena alone – so Lena felt it would be rude to refuse. But how would Mother feel, watching Lena and Mrs Morel converse privately? Lena did her best to hide her anxiety – hopefully, Mrs Morel wouldn't notice.

‘You’re lucky, Lena.’ That’s what Mrs Morel said, the rapidly melting ice cubes making no sound in her drink as she raised it. ‘So lucky to live here. You don’t get stars like this back home. Too many lights.’ She talked about the greyness of the city – such a contrast to the greenness of the jungle. Since the conclusion of peace negotiations, security in the city had vastly improved. Still, there were memories around every corner: the bombings, the hostages, the violence. ‘You’ve never seen the city, have you, Lena?’

Lena nodded politely. ‘That’s correct.’

‘You’ll have to come back with us sometime. It’d be quite the experience for you!’

It was then that Mother interrupted: ‘Mrs Morel, there’s quite the unique configuration of stars tonight. Would you like to hear about the constellations?’ Without waiting for a response, she helpfully projected a replica of the night sky on to the living-room wall, pointing out which star was which, what was a planet as opposed to a satellite. But Mrs Morel seemed unbothered, so Lena gratefully seized the chance to retreat to the kitchen.

‘Sorry, Mother,’ she said by the sink. She was whispering, but Mother would still be able to hear. In her head, she could imagine Mother’s response: *Whatever, Lena. If you want to get all cosy and intimate with Mrs Morel, fine by me. I’m surprised it hasn’t happened sooner.* But Mother didn’t speak. In that way, Mother’s silence in that moment said more than any of her words ever could.

Before the family arrived, Mother always had everything sorted. She’d tell the helicopter to bring liquor and cigarettes, as well as popsicles for the freezer (coconut and lime, Isabella’s favourites). She’d make sure Silvana had plenty of freshly caught fish and assess what Alfonso needed to best maintain the property. The house was always well stocked, and apart from local game and vegetables, most essential supplies were delivered by helicopter, the one that brought Isabella and her parents from the base. Of course, if an emergency were to happen, Lena could always travel by canoe to the village, which apparently had a store . . . but

there'd never been any need for that. No reason to go, no need to bother. Mother and the helicopter always got along surprisingly well – it was so hard to predict at times, who Mother would judge as useless and who she'd assess as helpful! *To be honest, Lena, he's a bit of a gossip – some of the things he tells me, I wish I didn't know. But he's always on time, and consistency is something to be valued, believe me.*

Like the helicopter, Mother also loved to gossip, particularly about the satellites and their countless dramas. The treacherous one who abruptly left his orbit and headed to Mars; the weirdo who'd been obsessively watching the same glacier for years; the drama queens who hadn't spoken in a decade due to a misfired missile. But that wasn't the kind of thing Mother ever did with the Morels present. Lena had noticed that Mother didn't want the Morels to know how often she and the satellites gossiped. It would cause drama.

What else did the Morels like to do on their visits? They used to hike out to see the waterfall, but then one summer Mother informed them this was unwise, due to rumoured rebel presence, and they never went again. Lena still went on her own, but obviously that was different. The Morels weren't as familiar with the area as Lena, and it would be inadvisable for them to assume any unnecessary risks.

Good times. They'd had some good times. All those years together, and all that fun.

Things were different now, of course.

But Lena still held a hard kernel of belief within her. Like a pebble swallowed by one of the parrots she raised as a child. The Morels would return. Yes, it might take years – but they'd stayed away for long periods of time before, hadn't they? Lena herself hadn't even met them in person until she'd turned nine! And it's already been over a year since they last came. Since it happened.

A year was probably not quite enough time for them to recover, to be fair.

But at some point, the Morels would come back. Life was surely carrying on for them in the city, as it went on for Lena

in the jungle. Mr Morel was likely extraordinarily busy in his national security job, and Mrs Morel was probably occupied with her painting and her charity work. They *would* come back eventually, and some sense of normality and routine would be restored. It would.

The cut-off satellite connection, though. That . . . wasn't a good sign. Neither were the binoculars by the house. There was no way around it. They were problems. It was drama.

And then there was the matter of the drone.

That was drama, too.

'Horrible,' Mother sighs. 'Maybe it's for the best we can't send the Morels messages anymore. They'd probably ask the army to fire-bomb the entire area, me included. Not a bad idea, quite frankly.'

Lena lowers the binoculars into her lap. She's sitting on the couch in the living room, so that she and Mother can converse more easily. It doesn't technically make a difference – Mother could hear perfectly well if she stayed outside on the patio – but she knows it makes Mother feel better, having her close, inside. Neither of them acknowledges it's been a month since Lena was last here.

'Oh, Lena,' Mother says. 'You should probably just set fire to the whole damn place yourself and be done with it. Don't leave anything for them to raid; don't let yourself get taken hostage. If the flames burn high enough, the army will come to investigate. Hopefully.' She pauses. 'I wonder how long it'll take for me to melt. I can withstand a temperature of a thousand degrees. Supposedly.' She rapidly flicks the light switch up and down, a long-time anxious habit she only ever does around Lena. But the bulbs don't turn on – how long have they been burnt out? Is the power out completely? Has Mother been sitting in the dark this whole time, with Lena away in the hut?

'Please don't be crazy.' She hates it when Mother gets like this.

'It's true, though. But even without the solar panels, I can survive up to a hundred years. What a fun life that'll be! No one but me for company. A brain in a box.'

‘Well, it’s never going to happen, so there’s no point in worrying about it.’

‘But whatever you do, Lena, don’t throw any of my eyes in the river. I’ll just float forever and spend the rest of my godforsaken life watching algae grow. If I’m especially unlucky a caiman will swallow me. Can you imagine a worse fate?’ Mother cackles.

‘Mother!’

After a month away, it’s easy to note what’s fallen into disrepair. Dust on the ceramic figures, spiderwebs on the bookshelves. And there, in the upper left corner of the ceiling – is that another termites’ nest? Have they moved in that quickly? The couch feels damp beneath Lena’s trousers, there’s a strong smell in the room reminiscent of mushrooms – Mother’s worst nightmare! – and even the curtains are speckled with black spots of mould.

How disarming it is – to see how quickly it can all change.

Neglectful, she thinks. I’ve been neglectful.

‘You’re staying here, then,’ Mother says. She doesn’t even phrase it as a question.

Lena doesn’t respond.

‘With rebels this close, you can’t be out there in the hut, all by yourself—’

Lena shuffles around on the couch. The smell of mushrooms grows even stronger.

‘Lena,’ Mother says, and this time her voice is measured and calm. ‘This is not a risk to be underestimated. I am not in any way exaggerating. The rebels will take you, Lena. *Kidnap* you. They’ll make you march up into the mountains. They’ll make you do drills. You’ll be forced to wear their uniform, and you’ll never see me again. They’ll rape you. They’ll enslave you. If you get pregnant, they’ll make you abandon your baby. They’ll—’

‘I know!’ Lena says. ‘I know, I know, I know. Fine. Yes. Okay. I’ll move back into the house.’

‘Good,’ Mother says. ‘It’s the most sensible decision.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘It really isn’t safe—’

‘You already made that perfectly clear, thanks.’

‘Well,’ Mother says. Her voice is still very calm. ‘That’s settled, then.’

Lena rubs a finger over the binoculars’ lenses. ‘You really didn’t see?’ she asks, even though she knows the question is pointless.

‘No, Lena. During my spells, it’s hopeless, I don’t see or notice a thing. I know, I know, I should be put directly in the trash, I should be smashed to bits, I’m not even worth recycling . . .’

Off she goes. Lena doesn’t bother interrupting.

It’s a tricky thought to have. But she goes ahead and has it anyway. Sometimes . . . it seems like Mother’s spells conveniently occur during moments of great drama. When there’s something truly vital to be seen.

It’s a thought Lena’s had before. But it’s not something she would ever dare express aloud.

If one of Mother’s main jobs is to protect the property – to see, to watch – then what did it mean that Mother kept failing to do exactly that?

Mother, failing. Mother, old.

Lena raises the binoculars to her eyes once more. How heavy they are! And in surprisingly good condition – a few scratches, but otherwise fine. They’re considerably dirty, as though recently dug up. The view through them is blurry. She rotates here, fiddles there, twists the ridged wheel back and forth. But her surroundings still don’t come into view – they remain murky, indistinct.

Where did they come from? Could it have been a local from the village, rather than a rebel? But the closest village is well over three days’ walk away. Why would they approach the property? Why would a villager own such equipment?

The drone – perhaps he witnessed something. Maybe the drone can help. Highly unlikely, but still possible. In order to find out, though, she’ll have to ask him herself.

She can help, too. She’ll put things right again, back to how they were before. Yes, she and Mother had their argument, their little spat, but it was fine now. Things were fine. She was here. She was back. She and Mother, together again, just like normal.

And with rebels potentially in the area, it *did* make sense for

Lena to move back into the house. What happened with the pit bull – it was behind them now.

Poor Mother – all alone this past month. And with the house in such a state!

I'll do the curtains first, she thinks. Those are always hardest. The bulbs are dead, but she can check storage for spares. And if the power is out, she can turn on the generator. Mother will hate wasting gas, but surely it'll be fine to have it on briefly. The swimming pool is a complete disaster – she should have followed Mother's advice and never emptied it in the first place – but she could clean it up. She could make things normal again – make things right.

'Lena,' Mother says, 'you're daydreaming again. Where are you? Where did you go?'

'Here, Mother,' she says. 'I haven't gone anywhere – I'm right here.'

She puts her hand on the wall. When she was a child, she would do silly things like this all the time – kiss the doorknob, or hug a drainpipe – in the misguided, childish belief that it was the kind of thing that Mother could feel. But she's a grown woman now, not a child, and Mother herself is much older than the family ever expected her to be or become.

'Oh!' Mother says, in a little cry that is also a sigh. 'That feels nice, Lena.'

They both know she's lying. Her hand stays on the wall.

Chapter Three

OUT OF ALL THE ROOMS in the house, Lena attends to Isabella's the most. Yes, the master bedroom is in desperate need of a vacuuming, not to mention a massive dose of insecticide for the never-ending ant invasion. Yes, walking barefoot anywhere on the floor will inevitably result in having to wipe the bottom of her foot off on her calf. And yes, along with the possums, there's probably a bat colony in the chimney – the fact that Mother hasn't bitched about them yet is truly a miracle.

She has no interest whatsoever in checking her own room – the smallest one in the house besides Mother's. A scratched-up wooden door down the hallway, past the kitchen. She turns the knob experimentally but of course it doesn't open; she'd have to shove down hard with all her strength. In there are Silvana and Alfonso. Stored away, sitting on her bed. *Surely there's a better place to keep them, Lena. Put them in the shed, for God's sake. It makes no sense, kicking yourself out of your own room.* But Lena had insisted: it was the only place that felt right. Silvana and Alfonso didn't belong in storage with the barbecue grill, or the broken dryer, or the microwave with the faulty light. They deserved their privacy, their peace. But right now, it's not a scene she's willing to confront, not yet. Still, she briefly touches her forehead against the wooden surface, before turning away.

The trip up the stairs – dead roaches, dried-up moths, fearful

lizards skittering away – is enough to drench Lena with even more guilt. She’s really let things slide – one month away, and look. Look! But she’s back now. Isn’t that what counts?

Just like her own door, the one to Isabella’s bedroom tends to stick. All wood throughout the house has warped due to years of intense humidity and moisture, so there’s no chance of ever sneaking into any of the bedrooms without making a loud noise – not that there’d ever be any reason to sneak, of course. As usual, she has to put her shoulder to the door in order to push it open, but then enters as quietly as she can.

In the brief second before it blinks out completely – before he shuts it off – she can see it. Briefly, but she sees.

Isabella, standing there in her pink rain jacket. Lena’s stomach twists at the sight. Isabella’s arm points upwards; her lips move, she’s smiling. And then she’s gone.

‘Good afternoon!’ Lena calls out with forced brightness. But as expected, there’s no reply.

In contrast to the rest of the house, Isabella’s bedroom is quite bare. There are two hooks on the wall for Isabella’s rain jackets (only the purple one is left, the one she claimed leaked and never used). There’s a chest of drawers with its too cluttered surface: brushes, creams, collected seed pods. Battered clay animals she and Lena made as children – it’s hard to tell now what they’re meant to represent. One is either a cow or a puma, but another is reassuringly identifiable as a toucan, thanks to the beak. There’s a closet and the chair. A bed and the air-conditioning unit. The windowsill is lined with pebbles and shells collected from the river. And there’s the window, and its balcony view.

Lena inspects the room, but apart from the dead flies and streaks of dust – easily amended with a damp cloth and furniture polish – everything is acceptable. Daring to hope, she looks up to the rafters. She then looks at the mattress, but there’s no lump under the single thin sheet, no hunched, trembling shape. The woollen blankets were folded up long ago, as they are at the end of every rainy season, stored away in the wooden trunk in the hallway. Stored by Lena. Most of what’s been done here is Lena’s work.