

# EMPTY HEAVEN

FREDDIE  
KÖLSCH





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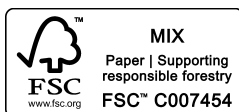
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**For the girl who died on Christmas Day–  
I love you more than words can say.**



## A note from the author

Things in this book may be difficult to read. Among the toughest topics discussed in *Empty Heaven* are child sexual abuse and suicide. There are a slew of other unpleasant items typically present in horror novels, such as gore and violence . . . but I feel that those bits of nastiness are common enough for the genre that you probably know what you're getting into when cracking open a book like this one.

So: back to the heaviest stuff. An instance of a character completing suicide takes place within the novel. The sexual abuse is fleeting, off-page, and non-specific, but its effects still permeate the life of both the protagonist and those around her.

There was a time in my life where I definitely would have bailed on this story once I realized what was going on, no matter how obliquely mentioned. If you are like the me of the past, please take care of yourself.

But if you think you're game . . . come to Kesuquosh. Absolutely everything is perfect here, and nothing is ever wrong. I swear to Good Arcturus.

**PART ONE**

# **THE BANQUET OF THE NEEDLE**



# **CHAPTER ONE**

**Sunday, August 27—Saturday,  
October 28, 2000**

If you picture it like a diorama, or one of those scale-model villages, we were just two girls in the center of a tiny town surrounded by sunflower fields. The road where we met was Good Earth Way, the main artery of the little Massachusetts village where I spent my summers. Beyond the village and the sunflower fields were the woods, and—if you zoomed far out enough on the diorama—one particularly large body of water. The sky was dotted with high-up clouds like falling feathers.

The school year (senior, finally) beckoned from the beginning of September. I'd already been given my traditional end-of-vacation send-off by my three best friends the night before, because Senovak was a hideously early riser, but KJ had asked me to stop by K-Family Pizza when we drove out.

It was too early for her by a long mile, but she had been waiting outside her family's pizza place to say goodbye to me one more time under the pretext of giving me a mix CD. She could've given it to me the previous evening when we'd all stayed up late out in the orchards that surrounded Jasper's

house, but she had held off until it was just the two of us.

I remember this part with the clarity that memories take on before a huge disaster: KJ seeing me. Stubbing out her cigarette with the economy of motion that always made her seem graceful and a little showy when she actually *did* something. Standing in the early sunlight with the little wispy clouds way up above her. When I reached her, she'd taken my left hand like she was going to hold it, and that was an unusual enough move on her part that my heart had started pounding. But instead of putting her hand in mine, she pressed on my fingers until they opened. With her other hand, she pulled out the promised CD, ensconced in a clear plastic case, from one of the cargo pockets on her stupid khaki skirt.

"This one is incredible, I promise," KJ said, her tone imbued with her usual airy bravado. "Possibly the greatest CD ever mixed by human hands. You're totally going to love it."

Her hands shook slightly when she placed the CD into mine. Her sunglasses were hiding her eyes, making her expression unreadable as usual, and after she handed off my gift she leaned against one of the flower boxes like she was the chilliest person who ever lived. But I could see that she was nervous.

"I doubt I'm going to love it," I said, falling back on my habit of giving her shit even as I wrapped my fingers around the CD case. My pulse was ticking along quickly, and my face was hot, but I thought I seemed relaxed. Normal. We made



each other mix CDs regularly, and when I got home I always listened to the songs she picked for me on endless repeat, looking for hidden meanings. “Not if it has Alice in Chains on it again.”

“God. You put *one* song about Vietnam on a mix for a girl and she never lets you forget it.” KJ was smiling, but her tone told me things her words didn’t. There was a thread of uncertainty in it.

The case was light in my hand, light for something that felt so important to me. On the CD itself, in green Sharpie, she’d written *for the loneliest girl in new york city*, all lowercase in her messy cursive. There was a smudge mark on the end of *city*. Underneath that, she’d drawn the tiniest little heart.

“I really doubt you’re actually the loneliest person in New York,” KJ said, and did the thing she sometimes does when she’s nervous or embarrassed where she scrubs at the back of her neck with one hand. “I was trying to be funny, because of how you have this, like, Heideggerian parlance going on, where you say we’re all going to *ultimately die alone*, which seems like a bold assertion for someone who’s never died or seen another person die, but then it felt stupid and I tried to wipe it off. But it was too late—”

“It’s really more of a broad pessimism, like Schopenhauer or something,” I said, which pulled an actual laugh out of KJ. I imagined she was rolling her eyes behind her sunglasses.

I didn’t say *I actually have seen someone die*, because it felt

like that would derail our conversation. And also because nobody knew that. The few people who were aware of my Bad Day back in 1996 all thought I'd found that person dead to begin with.

"Great. Another philosopher to learn about. I didn't even know who the fuck Heidegger was until Jasper told me," KJ said, putting her hand on top of my hand, still holding the CD case. I didn't even laugh. Didn't smile. All of my thoughts were concentrated on her fingers brushing the back of mine.

"Uh. So. I'm going to miss you, Darian," KJ said, calling me by my full name instead of D, which was a departure for her. It made what she said sound serious.

Then she pushed her sunglasses up on her head (another departure for her), revealing the entirety of her face. Dark eyes and dilated pupils. The eye contact was so surprising that I almost forgot about the hand thing.

"Yeah. I hate leaving," I said. "I mean all of you. But you the most."

I seemed flat, so flat. If it sounds like I'm not a person who gives a lot away, well, I'm really not. I had kept myself safe from these feelings for so long that I felt more like an alien than a normal person with a crush.

This was me *trying*, desperately—with the person I cared about more than anything—to push past my awkwardness and make it sound as real as it felt. But I sucked at it, honestly. I think a less confident person or

less perceptive person would have been discouraged. But KJ, nervous as she was, had this bottomless, confident wellspring of *her-ness* that she could always tap into. She kept going.

“It gets harder every year. I was thinking next summer we could . . . do something,” KJ said.

“Like what?”

“See a movie?” KJ asked, as if we hadn’t seen a hundred movies together. But I knew what she meant, the essential difference of what she meant.

I nodded. “Yeah. *Yes*. Do I sound weird? I’d really like that, that . . . sounds good. Fun.”

“You always sound weird,” KJ said. But her smile widened, reached up to her dark eyes with the heavy lashes, crinkling them up. “But I know what you feel. I see you.”

“Oh,” I said, faintly. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears. “Good.”

For a second it seemed like KJ was leaning toward me, and I couldn’t look away from her.

Then Senovak rolled down the window on the Lincoln and said something like *We can leave any day now, Darian*, and whatever KJ had been about to do next was lost. He’d probably seen that we were about to kiss—his eagle eyes missed nothing—and interrupted at that exact moment on purpose.

I was so quiet on the drive back to the city that Senovak got worried about me, and stopped off to get us milkshakes

at a place in Connecticut called The Wagon Wheel. But I wasn't just quiet because I was sad about leaving. I didn't even think to be mad at him for messing up my moment with KJ. All I could think of as I turned in the car—as I waved goodbye and she waved back and I watched her long, lean silhouette getting smaller and smaller in the back window, and for all the hours after as we drove home—was that I wanted to go back. I was finally ready to try and do this.

I was desperate to know what would have happened next, if I was different. More inviting. Less reserved. What would have happened next if we'd had a minute more. At home in Manhattan, I listened to her CD. Touched the green inscription, complete with one smudge on the second y from where she'd put her fingers on it before it dried.

*to the loneliest girl in new york city*



I thought about KJ while the ghost of Dexter watched me from outside my bedroom doorway, in shadow except for the glint of his teeth and the shine on his glasses. I thought about her when I woke up from nightmares of Christmastime in New York. I thought about how long I'd felt this way. Basically the entirety of my adolescence. Our years of looks, our exchanges of music, our long conversations at night when Alex and even Jasper had crapped out for the evening.

Always waiting to see her again. Talking close. Sitting out on the town common while the sky got lighter and the ancient stars vanished into the dawn. The gestures that never quite translated to touching.

It was that final exchange—the forward sway of her body, the things she didn't fully say—that drove me to plan my surprise visit. And so, two months later, after begging my dad and taking time off from school and getting Senovak to ferry me all the way back up to Massachusetts, I returned to my summer home, unannounced (not even a whisper of warning over AIM), to spend my very first Harvest Hallow there. I had never visited Kesuquosh during the school year before. When we rolled into the little town center the sky was white-gray with cloud cover and the leaves on the trees were brilliant sunset colors, and I saw KJ standing in almost the exact same spot where I'd left her back at the end of August.

Perfect. Like kismet or a nice turn of the karmic wheel, both things I didn't believe in. But I believed in KJ, as stupid as that sounds. I did. And when I got out of the car, I thought we would be a couple by the end of the weekend. I thought my life was going to be more than just hanging on to normalcy by my fingernails. Something romantic. Something *good*.

Hope held me upright, hope made my throat tight, hope wrapped around my neck like a windblown scarf. The only worries in my mind were about how I would navigate this new thing between us.

I had never understood what was wrong with Kesuquosh, you see. The place had a way of making you look past all of that, making you incurious about the strangeness. I didn't know what was hidden in the sunflower fields and in the hearts of the people around me. I didn't know to be afraid of what was coming.

By midnight the KJ I loved would be gone. Obliterated by a monster in service of a false utopia. I had eight hours left with her on that October afternoon. Eight hours before she vanished into a swirl of darkness, and of redness, and was reborn as something . . . new.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

**Saturday, October 28, 2000**

On the day of my surprise return, when I saw KJ outside K-Family Pizza, she was alone. I was excited to see Jasper and Alex, too, but I was glad they weren't there at that exact second. It made it feel as if all the time that had passed since our goodbye had just been a quick pause of reality. KJ was cleaning off the tables outside the restaurant with her headphones and sunglasses on and her mouth in the half smile it always seemed to settle into when she wasn't talking. I was so excited to see her that I asked Senovak to stop the car and let me out right there.

"Will you go to the cottage without me? I'll walk over later," I said.

"Okay. You have your cell phone with you?" Senovak asked. Dan Senovak (my dad's driver, but also like . . . a nanny, a personal assistant, my other parent) tended toward being overprotective. And nosy. His voice had the tone of parental concern that I had heard from him since I was a little kid, but then again he was paid to care.

"Obviously," I said, and threw myself out of the dark green

Lincoln Town Car (my father's signature car, because Edward Arden was the kind of guy who had a signature car) in my excitement. Then I ran up behind KJ as stealthily as I could, and tapped her on the shoulder.

She rounded on me, and I was struck, like I usually was, by her lanky grace, her modellesque collection of attributes. By how attracted I was to all of the component things that made up this one person. KJ and her twin brother, Alex, favored their Japanese dad in terms of features—Ken Kobayashi was fairly modellesque himself—but they both had the same dark messy hair as their mom, Rita, who told me she was Greek. Alex always wore his hair long, and KJ was in the process of growing hers out. Her longest waves almost reached her upturned lips, and when she turned toward me I saw that she'd tucked her hair back behind her ears, probably to allow for the headphones she was wearing.

KJ usually had her sunglasses on, and so over the course of multiple summers I'd learned to watch her mouth. When she turned around at my touch, she looked a little annoyed, like she thought it was one of her siblings bugging her as she did her chores—and then she realized it was me, and she was shocked. I saw the shock jerk up the corners of her lip.

She knocked her sunglasses up onto her head, revealing her lovely dark-gray eyes, perpetually dilated pupils . . . and an expression that turned from surprise to horror.

Horror. *Horror.*



KJ looked at me like I'd walked into a funeral and set the coffin on fire. She pulled off her headphones with unsteady movements. I nearly recoiled from the awful look on her face. But she leaned over me. Put her hands on my upper arms—and KJ usually wasn't physical with me at all, which is why even the prospect of hand-holding eight weeks earlier had been enough to get my heart pounding. Mostly she acted as if I had a force field around me, like her hands would glance off me if she even tried to touch. "D-Darian? D, what are you . . . why . . . you're here? Why are you here right now?" KJ asked, and her hands kind of reflexively gripped my arms. I almost felt like she was going to shake me or something.

"Um," I said, "I came for the Harvest Hallow? I wanted to—" *Surprise you*, I was going to say. *I wanted to surprise you*.

But now I felt insane. I felt like I'd gravely misconstrued everything that came before. Maybe I'd misconstrued it so badly that even the friendship was in doubt. Why would a friend look at you like that when you surprised them? Like . . . like it made them sick? Like they were ill at the very idea of you being there?

"You came for the Harvest Hallow?" KJ repeated. Her hands clenched around my upper arms even harder.

"Yeah, I thought it would be fun," I said, wincing. I felt panicked, reflecting the inexplicable fear that KJ was directing at me. "KJ, you're hurting me."

"Oh," KJ said, and then I think what I'd said finally

sunk in, because she dropped her hold on me as if she had been burned. She looked . . . like she'd just watched a bomb detonate. Stunned.

"Sorry," she said, taking a few steps back, until she bumped up against one of the flower boxes behind her.

"Um," I said, "what the hell is wrong?"

It wasn't just that she'd exploded all my fantasies about a romantic reunion. She actually seemed so *afraid*.

"Sorry," KJ said again. "Sorry, D. You just . . . surprised me. Are you okay? I didn't mean to—to *hurt* you, oh fuck—"

"I'm fine. Should I not have come?" I asked, in a brisk tone that I hoped covered up my real feelings. What I actually wanted to say was *Why aren't you happy to see me?* in the most pathetic way possible. And then maybe curl up into a ball and cry.

KJ looked at me for a second, eyes tracking up and down my face like there were answers to be had. Then she seemed to physically compose herself, put together all the nonchalant pieces that made her KJ, like she was building a wall. Her shoulders relaxed. Her easy smile came back.

"Nah. It will be fine," KJ said, and the residual discomfort around her vanished. She was chill-to-the-bone again. Positively refrigerated. "Should be fine. You just surprised me, is all."

"No way," I said. "That wasn't only surprise, KJ—"

"Darian!" someone called, from a little way off. "Oh man, what are you doing here?"

Alex's voice. I looked away from KJ for a second and saw her twin brother coming around the side of the pizza place, followed by Jasper.

Actually, I saw Jasper's purple mohawk first. Then his plaid pants—the chains on them caught the cloudy light like a prism—and then Alex, resplendent in a hideous all-tie-dyed outfit. Alex was eating a slice of pepperoni off a gray recycled-material plate, and Jasper was eating . . . a can of Sprite, which was basically the only vegan option at K-Family Pizza besides plain chopped iceberg lettuce and French fries. Alex looked absolutely delighted to see me, in the unfeigned, sincere way that he always had about him. His narrow face split into a grin, and he jogged over to me with his long hair flying behind him.

And Jasper looked . . . almost as freaked-out as KJ. He recovered fast—but not so quickly that I didn't see him flinch. He definitely flinched. Then he kind of shook his head, and set his Sprite can down on the edge of a planter filled with red chrysanthemums.

"Darian, where the fuck did *you* manifest from?" he asked.

His tone was belligerent, but that actually didn't raise any more alarms for me. Jasper's tone was always belligerent.

"Ed let me take a long weekend off from school. I begged him. I said that the Harvest Hallow festival was culturally relevant to me, since my mom's family was from here," I said, feeling decidedly insecure and awkward and uncomfortable and like my visit was the shittiest idea in a

lifetime of shitty ideas. But I tried to sound normal.

“The *Great Harvest* Hallow,” Jasper corrected automatically. “You . . . *wanted* to come to this?”

“Yes,” I said. My voice sounded very small. “I . . . thought it would be cool?”

“Oh, man. This is awesome. I’m so glad to see you,” Alex said, and held his arms out to be hugged.

“Thanks,” I said, giving him a squeeze. Behind him, I saw Jasper and KJ exchange some kind of loaded look before KJ put her sunglasses back on.

“You like my tie-dye?” Alex asked, utterly unaware of how awkward everything was.

“Yeah. Wow. Tie-dyed sweatshirt *and* tie-dyed sweatpants?” I said. “Rock on, earth child.”

“So dope, right? I did them myself,” Alex said, looking down at his modified Phish sweatshirt with some pride. “I’m not as good as Aunt Judy yet, but like . . . she knows all the advanced folding techniques.”

KJ, who basically had the exact fashion sense of Fred Durst (if Fred Durst were into floor-length khaki cargo *skirts* instead of *almost* floor-length khaki cargo *shorts*, colorblind, and had a trademark bucket hat), had the audacity to snort. She seemed to have recovered from her earlier shock. She touched me on the shoulder.

“Darian. Don’t encourage the tie-dye shit. He’s soooooo pleased with himself for a person who looks like—

like a walking Grateful Dead concert,” KJ said.

“You do look like you smell bad, Al,” Jasper said. He sounded normal, too.

“Hey!” Alex said. “I smell excellent!”

“That’s subject to debate,” Jasper said.

“You do *not*,” KJ said, and made a gagging face at her brother. “You smell like patchouli mixed with armpits.”

“My hygiene is actually really good,” Alex said. “It’s definitely better than yours.” Alex was bad at teasing. He was bad at being anything other than painfully sincere, which made him slightly at odds with basically every other teenager alive.

I, as a qualified person who put tasteful dabs of Ralph Lauren Romance on my pulse points every morning, stepped in to defend him. I still felt a little bit like this whole conversation was happening underwater, but I spoke casually enough. “You smell nice, Al. Like the woods.”

“Oh shit, I didn’t know you’d gone tragically noseblind,” Jasper said, raising one eyebrow at me like the world’s shortest, punkest Mr. Spock.

“Interesting. In that vein, I didn’t know you’d tragically become a fucking bitch,” I said.

Then we smirked at each other, and held the expression for point-five seconds before we both laughed. Jasper didn’t do hugging, but we bumped fists . . . and just like that, things were okay again. I almost could have convinced myself that I was imagining the earlier weirdness. Except that I could still

feel the place on my upper arms where KJ had grabbed me.

“So what have you guys been doing since the last time I was here?” I asked, and Alex started telling me about songs that Army of Dolly (the band the three of them had formed, named after Dolly the cloned sheep) had been working on while I’d been gone.

I wondered, then, if all their anxiousness and awkwardness had something to do with the Harvest Hallow.

Not Halloween, even though it culminated on the same day. The Harvest Hallow was something totally different. Because Kesuquosh was . . . unusual.

The annual Harvest Hallow, which was a legendary bit of New England weirdness—and Good Arcturus, the scarecrow deity and symbol of plenty that Kesuquoshians celebrated during the Hallow—was a thing I would have been fascinated by even if I had never stepped foot in Kesuquosh. Good Arcturus was as firmly lodged into the folklore of the towns around the massive Quabbin Reservoir as the legends of the specter that granted wishes in Stepwood Cemetery, or the Weary Travelers, or Sad Sam, the Quabbin’s own Bigfoot. More, even, because he was kept alive and relevant by the inhabitants of this one specific town.

Like, their town hall literally had a big art piece in the main entranceway, done in classic North American folk art style, of Junie Apostle-Root and Good Arcturus marching through a blocky, dollhouse-looking version of

Kesuquosh in the 1700s. The prophet and the god of the religion, respectively. Basically it was a gigantic ugly oil painting, with the perspective all screwy in classic folk art tradition, of a woman walking in front of a scarecrow. But it was antique, framed in gold, and treated like absolutely factual historical documentation by everyone in town. Alex had shown it to me once like I was going to be really reverent. I was very nice about it, even though it was weird. But the strangeness of a whole town taking the scarecrow story seriously enough to commission a painting for the *town hall* in the late 1800s and then keep it on the wall for more than a century was so insane, I loved it.

That extremely odd belief system (and the town that believed it) typically got a full chapter in any book on New England folklore. The whole situation was considered charming, cool, spooky . . . and ultimately benign.

I loved the weirdness and I *did* think it was benign. My mom's family was from Kesuquosh, even though she had died when I was too little to really remember her. Per family tradition, I'd been spending summers at my family's cottage in town since I was born.

But it wasn't until the vacation between eighth and ninth grade that I actually made friends with my trio of townie kids.

After the first summer I spent hanging out with Jasper and KJ and Alex, I realized that for the first time since everything happened, I hadn't seen Dexter *anywhere*.

Not in the back of a crowd. Not seated in the corner of a restaurant. And not by the foot of my bed at night, with nothing but his glasses glinting in the dark, like the eyes of a nocturnal animal.

And I think that I was pretty self-aware, for an almost fourteen year old. I understood that the psychological implications of not seeing Dexter when I spent my first summer with the three Kesuquoshian kids were *good* implications.

In Jasper and Alex and KJ, I had found the best friends I didn't know I was lonely for. I traced the edges of their flaws eagerly, after years of trying and failing to measure up to the rich and beautiful geniuses who populated my exclusive Manhattan private-school world.

And it was good. It was the only time I really felt like myself. Felt okay.

Every August I would go home to New York, Pelham Academy, and what I thought of (unhappily) as the *real world*, where Dexter watched me from every crowd and every night-lit window of every skyscraper. My friendships in Kesuquosh survived the school year on a diet of AIM conversations, the demented contents of care packages constructed by demented minds, and long-distance phone calls. But I knew when their big holiday took place, although I'd never attended it myself.

At some point Alex had stopped talking, and KJ had started. I tuned back in as she was describing her latest (dubious) triumph of entrepreneurship.



“—so then I buy pot from this woman in Rabbitville, right? And then I pad it out a little with oregano from the restaurant. It’s total skunk weed, so the stink when it burns covers up the smell of the herb. Of the *kitchen* herb. And then I mark it up and sell it to the rich kids at Cold Falls.”

KJ had spent the last year making extra money by getting irresponsible (or just plain gullible) adults to buy her cartons of cigarettes at the Citgo on Route 202 and then driving down to Rabbitville or up to Cold Falls Prep or North Dana to sell smokes to other high schoolers at extreme markups. Now, evidently—in the, like, eight weeks since I’d last been in Kesuquosh—she’d graduated to selling weed.

“Hmm,” I said. “That doesn’t sound like it would . . . work.”

“It works,” KJ said, putting a hand to her heart like I had wounded her. Now that she was discussing one of her grifts, she seemed so in her element that it was even easier for me to tell myself she hadn’t been afraid a few minutes earlier. I ignored the phantom feeling of her fingers on my arms. “I’ve never had a single complaint about my product. The lack of faith in you, D. When you of all people should know that rich kids”—here she looked me up and down pointedly—“have no idea what good marijuana looks like.”

“That may be true out here,” I countered. “But in the city they definitely know. This con only works on hicks.”

“Yeah, you’re a dumbass who sells to dumbasses, KJ,”

Jasper said. He dug a pack of cloves (Djarum Black, as always) out of the ultra-tight back pocket of his plaid pants and lit one with a flourish. “An ouroboros of idiot capitalism.”

“*Ouroboros*,” Alex said through a mouthful of pizza. “I love that word.”

“I made four hundred dollars profit this month!” KJ said.

“Incredible. Who’s the rich kid now?” I asked.

Did KJ need extra money? No. Like everyone else in Kesuquosh, her folks were financially comfortable. I kind of thought that KJ gifted for the sheer *love* of it.

She did not take after anybody else in her family. I knew them all, and KJ was like some changeling, the daughter of an amoral used-car salesman who had been dumped on the Kobayashi-Jenetopolous household. She liked to, um, embellish. I guessed that at least the part about the oregano was a lie, if not the whole operation.

I know these are legitimate behavioral issues that I am describing, so it might seem strange when I say that all of the grifting and lying was part of why I liked her so much. I . . . it was . . . she was complex. Interesting. Even more interesting than she was beautiful, and she was *really* beautiful.

“You made that money, sure,” Alex said. “But, like . . . you’re not factoring in the cost of gas. Don’t you have to fill up the PDA every third time you do that drive?” PDA was not, in this case, short for *Public Display of Affection*. Instead it meant *Pizza Delivery Automobile*, which was what the Kobayashi

twins called their family's Chevy Tahoe. It had a little light-up car topper with a pizza slice on it and everything.

"My own flesh betraying me, too? So uncool how nobody appreciates my motivation," KJ said.

"Because you're a dumbass, like I said," Jasper told her, and then turned to me. "*You* need to listen to our new set. I want constructive feedback."

Jasper actually wrote zero of the music for Army of Dolly, but, like every lead singer everywhere, he thought he was in charge.

"Lead on, maestro," I said, and he crushed his Sprite can and stuffed it into the recycling bin before heading down the road. Alex ditched his pizza remnants, KJ put her cleaning stuff back inside, and we all followed Jasper, who always walked like he had a really urgent appointment. I caught the sweet smell of his clove cigarette as it streamed past me in the crisp air. It was a perfect fall smell.

Alex managed to catch up with him, and I watched the two of them as they walked. They were opposites, visually. Jasper was short and "teen heartthrob" looking and had an angelic face . . . qualities that his DIY punk look and surly expression couldn't totally hide. Whenever he and the twins went anywhere together (which was all the time), they kind of looked like two unmuscular bodyguards working for a very alternative teen idol. Or two wiry mooks following around a diminutive crime boss.

As we marched down Good Earth Way toward the Kobayashis' "art studio," which was really an embellished shed behind their house where the family members pursued their various hobbies, I looked sideways at KJ, studying her for further signs of unease. I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary in the way that she was acting now.

"We're really going to blow you away with the new stuff," KJ said, inclining her head sideways at me and then grinning her wide grin. "I promise."

"I'll believe that when I hear it," I said, smiling in return. No way to read her eyes. I felt like we were miles away from finishing our *going to a movie together* conversation now, and I tried to push back my sadness about that.

"Pfft. You're a snob, such a huge snob," KJ said.

"Or I just know more about music than you."

"Yeahhh . . .," KJ allowed. "But I know how much I don't know. Which is the foundation of wisdom. So who really knows the most here?"

"Still me, obviously," I said, laughing when KJ huffed and threw her hands up dramatically.

I once had—before everything that happened with Dexter—a bright future in music.

I was a skilled piano player, and I'm not trying to brag. It was the one thing I was actually *really* honestly good at. I'd composed my own songs from like age eight onward. I'd been the kind of kid adults paid attention to, a kid with a decent

shot at going to Juilliard or Berklee College of Music. I had written compositions to express my feelings the way other kids wrote angsty poetry.

I always had an ear for music. And I recognized a similar skill level in Jasper. He had a depth of talent that reminded me of my own (never-to-be-realized) potential.

Jasper couldn't even read music. But his voice. It was astonishing. He had perfect pitch. He could project like a megaphone. And his voice wasn't characterless, either, like so many people who could sing exceptionally well. It was always kind of . . . Jasper-like. A cathedral bell, but sarcastic-sounding.

Not that he wanted to use it for anything but guttural screaming. He might have sung in a church choir (if the hypothetical church didn't spontaneously burst into flames when he stepped into it), but Kesuquosh was pointedly devoid of any houses of worship, except for one crumbling church foundation from more than two hundred years ago, out at the edge of a field between the Quabbin and the sprawling acreage of Plum Farms.

So Jasper took all his musical energy and screamed it into their band. Army of Dolly was kind of a hilarious mash of influences. Jasper liked punk, Alex was into jam bands, and KJ . . . KJ liked alt rock and grunge. A lot. Her AIM screen name was xXMellonCollieGuitaristXx.

So what they had was a three-person band with a lead singer who couldn't read music but knew how to play the

bass (poorly) and used his golden voice for shouting; a hippie drummer-slash-percussion player; and a guitarist who was obsessed with the vocal stylings of Billy Corgan.

And . . . it actually worked. It was even pretty excellent. But sometimes their songs needed a little massaging, and I spent time listening to their stuff and giving them notes for improvements. For a while, back in the beginning of high school, Jasper had been bugging me about actually *joining* the band. But eventually KJ made him stop. It was like she could sense that there was more to my refusal to play music than I was giving away.

In the Kobayashi-Jenetopolous family studio, I sat on the yellow velvet love seat adjacent to the easel where the oldest Jenetopolous sibling, Isabella, did her watercolors, and directly across from the long wooden table where their mom did her crafts (Rita did everything from using the table saw to felting, making dollhouses and dolls—she was artistically multitalented), while red and orange leaves blew in through the open doors on little gusts of wind. On the makeshift stage in the far corner Jasper screamed and Alex noodled and KJ made guitar playing look about as cool as humanly possible.

Jasper had exaggerated when he said they had a whole new set—it was only four songs—but I enjoyed it anyway.

“Rank them,” Jasper commanded when they were done.

“Um, the best one was ‘Vivid Oblivion.’ You need to fix the bridge, it’s way too long, *Alex*. But the whole thing was really good,” I said.

“YES,” Alex said. “I knew it was solid. I did write that one, how could you tell?”

“Because the bridge was way too long,” I said.

“Oh, right,” Alex said, not looking too upset about it.

“And also because it’s about taking mushrooms,” I added.

“Which Alex has never done,” KJ said, putting down her guitar to light a Newport 100 with a book of Citgo matches. (She had definitely fallen into the trap of sampling her own merchandise with her cigarette-reselling scheme.)

“Never done *yet*,” Alex said mellowly. “My experience of time and space flows like a river. I wade in and wade out and draw inspiration from past and future.”

“You are the world’s *worst person*,” KJ said. “Rancid as fuck!”

“Guys?”

Our conversation was cut short by Rita Jenetopolous, Alex and KJ’s mom, coming in through the open double doors of the studio. She brought the smell of pizza with her and looked pretty as usual, always seeming slightly too young to have kids as old as she did, her curly hair tied back and a smudge of flour on her cheek.

“What’s up, Ma,” KJ said, crushing out her cigarette on the unfinished floor.

“Are you smoking in here? Oh my god. I told you not to smoke in here. The neighbors just got here, guys. It’s time to start getting ready—Darian! I didn’t know you were here!”

“Hey, Rita,” I said, getting up from the love seat.

“I already *told* you she was visiting,” KJ said.

“No you didn’t,” Alex clarified. “She’s lying, Mom. Darian surprised us. She’s coming to the Banquet tonight.”

“Kahie, why do you just make things up like that—”

“I don’t, Ma,” KJ said. (This was an insane lie, the biggest lie known to humankind.) “And don’t call me Kahie. It’s KJ.”

“You keep on lying,” Jasper said, giving KJ a double thumbs-up. “Gotta stay true to yourself. Maintain a clear head. Especially now.”

“You got it, boss,” KJ said, thumbing-up back at him.

Rita sighed, visibly gave up, and came over to hug me. “Your dad knows you’re here, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. I got permission from my school.”

“That’s *wonderful*,” Rita said. Her face was open and happy, her dark eyes (with dilated pupils, of course) luminous. “It’s such an important holiday for us. This year, especially. I am so glad you’re coming. The family connection—well. It will be so nice to have you here.”

I let myself be held in Rita’s comforting arms (Senovak and my dad were not big on hugging) and glanced over her floury shoulder just long enough to see Jasper look . . . concerned.

Jasper’s eyes never did the neat trick of everyone else’s in Kesuquosh—his irises contracted and expanded like normal, turning his pupils to pinpricks in bright light—and right now his baby-blue gaze darted around with distinct unhappiness.



“It’s because he can’t hear the Lord of the Field,” KJ told me once, when I commented on it. “He fell out of the trapdoor of his parents’ attic as a kid, got a concussion and probably, like, a brain injury or something. And he never could hear the voice of Good Arcturus after that.”

I believed that about as much as I believed every other obvious lie that KJ told (not one iota) and kind of dismissed the whole thing. I had never, for example, felt bold enough to ask Rita or any of the other adults in town, *Why are your eyes so strange? Is it something in the water?* and so it became a charmingly weird mystery, like so many other charmingly weird things about Kesuquosh.

There were a lot of strange things I didn’t think about too closely when it came to Kesuquosh, a village full of people who never seemed to argue, driving cars that never honked at each other in the streets. A village full of people who didn’t ever fight over politics or get impatient waiting in line.

And I didn’t notice myself *not questioning* those things, not until later.

“You don’t *have* to come to the Hallow, though,” Jasper said abruptly. “Even though your aunt . . . was from here. It will be boring.”

“I’m dying to go,” I said truthfully. I wasn’t sure why he’d mentioned my aunt Blanche, who had died when she was a child, when actually my mom’s whole side of the family had been Kesuquoshians. But I disregarded it. I wanted to

get up close and personal with the weirdness.

“Wonderful. Why don’t you go home and change, sweetheart,” Rita said. “Wear something red, if you can. You meet us back here before we start the Banquet at about quarter of nine. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, kind of baffled by my dismissal from our hangout. But I knew that Kesuquoshians were bizarre about their religion. “See you guys later.”

“Bye, D,” KJ said, and Alex waved. Jasper didn’t answer.

It was almost five. I picked my way down the street to my family’s summer cottage as the sun fell below the rim of the horizon, admiring the round lanterns and the dried bundles of sunflowers and calico corn and the red-painted scarecrows that decorated Good Earth Way: none of it precisely *Halloween* decorations, but all of it cooler and more evocative than any plastic skeletons or foam board gravestones ever could be.

A cool breeze moved the leaves on the street. The sides of the road were jammed with cars, like everyone from Kesuquosh had come home for the weekend. It was even busier than during the height of summer, when rich people used the village as a scenic getaway. The Fieldstone Inn’s parking lot was overflowing. Windows glowed with orange light against the darkening sky. The flat clouds of the day were breaking up as night crawled in, and the moon cast a thin smile down over everything.

I saw car doors flung open and the little old houses that

lined the street opening in turn, heard music and laughter coming from inside of warm homes.

I was already forgetting . . . *actively* forgetting. Reinterpreting my initial encounter with KJ. Her fear. How powerful her fear had been, before she put it away.

I decided that the frozen anxiety I thought I had seen in KJ . . . and Jasper . . . was just garden-variety surprise.

In case you can't tell, I am extremely adept at bullshitting myself.

*Everything is good* was the bullshit I was selling to my own brain in those initial hours after I surprised them. It was good for me, because I got melancholy in the fall, when the days grew shorter and darker, to be in my favorite place with my favorite people. And it was normal. There was no weirdness.

*It was a smart move to come here*, I thought. Here, with KJ and Alex and Jasper, far away from my dad's high-profile existence and the pressures of acting out a Well-Adjusted Girl With No Problems life, I felt like myself—my *truest* self—all the time.

I should have heeded the unspoken warning in the actions of the only girl I'd ever loved.

I *should* have. But I wanted to belong there, to be accepted, to be a part of it. To escape my life. I wanted it more than anything. So I ignored the little voice in the back of my mind, whispering concerns.

I carried on walking home, feeling good enough, after

a few minutes, to whistle a piece I had been working on in my mind. Not on paper. I never actually wrote down my compositions anymore. But this one was fully in my head, and so I whistled it through the chilly streets as the Banquet of the Needle drew closer.