

LINDSEY CRITTENDEN

The Ruins

CAYLIN'S FOURTEEN NOW, runs to the phone when it rings the tone dedicated to Micheline's incoming call. They've known each other only a few months, spend evenings together on Facebook, walk so close that they might as well be holding hands. My daughter talks with something new in her voice—an emphasis on the final syllable, as though Danny and I are hard of hearing. Last week, I found hydrogen peroxide on her nightstand next to a used cotton ball, the spot of dried blood as tiny as that in a fertilized egg yolk. She showed me her navel right away, red and puffed around a gold stud. I winced, as though we were still connected there. A few days later, I found tampons under the sink. Not my brand, and not from the junior-size box I've kept on hand. Micheline started already, Caylin told me, and brought some over to our house in case she needed one. Makes sense, sounds responsible, but I can't help feeling co-opted, my place taken. Caylin's never kept secrets from me, and I want to keep it that way.

Danny reminds me of my vow not to act like my own mother. "Some things she's going to have to learn on her own. You know, I wouldn't worry about Micheline," he adds. "She's not the type boys go for."

It's not the boys I'm worried about.

I WORK ON commission, right now a portrait in glass of a wealthy client's grandchildren for an interior staircase window. The boy has white-blond hair; the girl's is darker, like honey; they both wear sailor suits.

I'm scoring a sheet of blue for the trim on their bibs when the studio door creaks open. Caylin never comes in here anymore unless she wants something, and now it's arts camp with Micheline, four weeks this summer, a five-hour drive away. Learning guitar, writing songs, throwing pots. When she was a toddler, I fenced off a corner of the studio with padded flooring and a latched gate, and she busied herself with fabric and string and scraps of glass I'd sanded smooth.

“Put on your goggles,” I say without looking up. “You know the rules.”

She sighs so that I can hear, reaches for her pair from the hook on the wall. Yesterday afternoon, I overheard her on the phone: “Most moms carry Blackberries, but *mine* wears dorky protective goggles.” And then a pause and the kind of laughter that made me feel fourteen again, too.

She stands at my elbow now, her arm brushing mine. “Dad thinks it’s a good idea. Please, Mom.”

“Careful. This thing’s sharp.” I hold the blade straight up-and-down like a calligraphy brush. Since Caylin was a baby, I’ve bought my glass from Phil, a big guy with hands like oven mitts and whiskers dark and high on cheeks that are always flushed from working around heat.

If you want perfect likeness, I advise clients, hire a photographer. Handblown glass this pure is gorgeously uneven. A sheet of Phil’s blue has streaks, tiny air bubbles. At one end, it’s indigo and thick as a finger, at the other, robin’s egg and thin as a sucked-down lozenge. When the finished window is hung, light will pour through it to dance across a polished parquet floor, a pale wool rug, a blank wall. From my first entranced hours staring at the windows in Gothic cathedrals, with their stories of Abraham and Isaac, of Mary and Joseph and the baby fleeing Herod’s threat, likeness has mattered less than the way the glass throws the light around.

“What’s a good idea?” Although I know. I’ve heard Danny’s reasons: the social and artistic exposure, the fun and community, the chance to find something she’s good at—or, at least, enjoys. “You’re always saying she needs to make more friends,” he said last night in bed. “What could be better than a structured program? Artsy kids, they’ll be sweet and nerdy.”

Druggy and messed up, more like it. Little Warhols in the making. Nascent Kurt Cobains.

“Mom!” she says now. “Would you put down that glass and look at me?”

“I can see you just fine.” I hold up the strip of blue glass and peer through at my daughter’s widened eyes and lips moving in slo-mo. I’ve been looking through handblown glass for so long, I no longer think of its effect as distortion.

“Ple-ee-ease?”

“I told you, sweetie, Dad and I are thinking about it. Bugging me isn’t going to help, okay?” My hand bumps the edge of the table, and the sheet of blue glass falls. My hand flings out, as though I’m driving and have slammed on the brakes. “Look out!” Phil’s glass breaks clean,

but you can't be too careful about splinters. "You okay?"

"Mom, you're bleeding."

I touch my face. A piece has snapped off, flown up, bitten me on the cheek.

I WAS FOURTEEN, too, the year my father's job moved us to Naples, settling us into a grand, high-ceilinged apartment with ornate door handles and no clothes closets, only huge wooden armoires smelling of vanished moth balls. Heavy shutters kept out the midday sun, and soot and exhaust had so darkened the outside of the building that when the taxi first pulled up, I felt a chill at having to live inside. And then my mother threw open the shutters and light poured in, and I saw the size of my own bedroom, like our living room back home. The next day at the *scuola*, I met Ingrid.

La Scuola Americana. Another grand building, a former palazzo behind a high wall covered with bougainvillea. Ingrid sat behind me in Latin and wore cashmere sweaters, plucked her eyebrows, and used Jean Naté body milk on her waxed legs. She envied me, she told me, my skin soft enough not to need moisturizer. I'd just started wearing a bra, which seemed ordinary next to Ingrid's Swedish cotton camisoles, bought at a shop in Rome. Ingrid had long arms and legs, and when school let out, she'd undo the top button of her uniform to show the smooth dark mole beneath her collarbone. Clavicle—the dip in the center, at the base of the throat, the best place to apply scent, she said. Joy or Fracas or Shalimar. She had thin lips, flyaway blonde hair she twisted into tortoise-shell barrettes—the only feature she seemed self-conscious about, calling it baby hair—and pale eyelashes and eyebrows she darkened with pencil. I wasn't allowed makeup. On the *corso*, just around the corner from the *scuola*, she showed me the best place for *gelato* and identified the clothing of designers in boutique windows, the names of Yves Saint Laurent and Diane von Furstenberg sounding as exotic as the flavors we ordered two doors down: *frangole*, *nocciola*, and my favorite, *stracciatella*, so much more fun to say than "chocolate chip." Our first afternoon together, she stopped in front of a shop window, pointing out a supple brown leather handbag, with a soft, rounded body and a flap trimmed in purple piping. Never having carried a purse, I agreed that it was perfect.

PHIL WON'T SHIP his glass but insists that clients make the drive. For me, three hours to the end of a dirt road where he lives with kilns and blowtorches, pipettes and unfathomably hot fires. He knows now to