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Opening Extract from...

The Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls

Written by Anton DiSclafani

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CHAPTER ONE

I was fifteen years old when my parents sent me away to the Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls. The camp was located in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, concealed in the Blue Ridge Mountains. You could drive by the entrance and never see it, not unless you were looking, and carefully; my father missed it four times before I finally signaled that we had arrived.

My father drove me from Florida to North Carolina: my parents did not trust me enough to let me ride the train alone.

The last day we ascended into the upper reaches of the mountains, at which point our journey slowed considerably. The road looked half-made, narrow and overgrown; it twisted and turned at sharp angles.

My father spoke little when he drove; he believed one should always concentrate on the road ahead. He'd bought his first car, a Chrysler Roadster, five years earlier, in 1925, so an automobile was not a habit for him but an innovation. We stopped in Atlanta on the first night, and after we checked into our hotel, my father told me to dress nicely. I wore my lavender silk dress with the dropped waist and rosette detailing. I carried my mother's mink stole, which I had taken despite Mother's instruction not to do so. When I was a child I was allowed to wear the stole on special occasions – Christmas dinner, Easter brunch – and I had come to

think of the fur as mine. But now that I wore it on my own, it felt like a burden, an accessory too elegant for me. I felt young for the dress, though it was not the dress but my body that made me feel this way. My breasts were tender and new, I still carried myself in the furtive way of an immature girl. My father, in his gray pinstripe suit, didn't look much different than usual, except that he had tucked a lime green handkerchief in his coat pocket. Not the lime green of today, fluorescent and harsh. We didn't have colors like that then. No, I mean the true color of a lime, palely bright.

At the entrance to the restaurant, I took my father's arm like my mother usually did, and he looked at me, startled. I smiled and tried not to cry. I still clung to the hope that perhaps my father would not leave me in North Carolina, that he had another plan for us. My eyes were swollen from two weeks of weeping, and I knew it pained my father to see anyone cry.

The country was in the midst of the Great Depression, but my family had not suffered. My father was a physician, and people would always pay for their health. And there was family money besides, which my parents would come to depend on. But only after my father's patients were so poor they couldn't even offer him a token from the garden in exchange for his services. I saw all this after I came back from Yonahlossee. The Depression had meant something different to me when I left.

I rarely ventured outside my home. We lived in a tiny town in central Florida, named after a dead Indian chief. It was unbearably hot in the summers – this in the days before air-conditioning – and crisp and lovely in the winters. The winters were perfect, they made up for the summers. We rarely saw our neighbors, but I had all I needed right there: we had a thousand acres to ourselves, and sometimes I would leave with a packed lunch in the morning on Sasi, my pony, and return only as the sun was setting, in time

for dinner, without having seen a single person while riding.

And then I thought of my twin, Sam. I had him most of all.

My father and I ate filet mignon and roasted beets at the hotel's restaurant. Plate-glass windows almost as tall as the restaurant were the central decoration. When I tried to look outside to the quiet street, I saw a blurred reflection of myself, lavender and awkward. We were the only people there, and my father complimented my dress twice.

'You look lovely, Thea.'

My full name was Theodora, a family name. The story goes Sam shortened it to Thea when we were two. The beets tasted flat and dirty against my tongue; I tried not to think about what my brother was doing while I ate.

My father told me again that at the camp I would ride every day except Sunday. I thanked him. I was leaving Sasi behind in Florida, but it was just as well because I had outgrown him. I kicked his elbows when I posted. The thought of my pretty paint pony pained me terribly now. His coat, Mother always said, was distinctively beautiful, divided evenly between black and white patches. I thought of his eyes, one blue, one brown, which wasn't so unusual in horses: if white hair surrounded the eye, it was blue; black hair, brown.

Our meal, our last meal together for a year, was mostly silent. I had never before eaten alone with my father. My mother, yes, several times, and with Sam, of course. I didn't know what to say to my father. With all the trouble at home, I was afraid to say anything at all.

'You'll come home soon,' my father said, over coffee and crème brûlée, 'after all this mess is settled,' and it was my turn to be startled by my father's behavior. I sipped my coffee quickly and singed my lips. I was only allowed a taste of Mother's at home. My father rarely spoke of unpleasantness, any kind,

personal or remote. Perhaps that's why I knew as little about the Depression as I did.

He smiled at me, his small, kind smile, and I felt my eyes warm. When my mother smiled you saw all her teeth; her face revealed itself. But my father's smile was something you had to look closely for. In this moment, his smile meant he still loved me, after all I had done. I wanted him to tell me that things would be fine. But my father was not a liar. Things would not be fine; they couldn't ever be that way again.

I have never loved a place again like I loved my first home, where I was born, where I lived until the mess commenced. One could dismiss my love of place by explaining that I was attached to the people who lived there, my mother, father, and brother. That is true, I did love these people, but I cannot remember my family without remembering the gardens where they walked, the sun porches where they read, the bedrooms where they retired. I loved the house separately from my family. I knew the house, it knew me, we found solace in each other. Absurd, but there was magic in that place.

I confess that I was as sad to leave my home as to leave my family. I had never been away from it for more than a few nights, and I knew in my bones that it would be changed when I returned.

I would be changed as well. When my parents met me again at the train station in Orlando, all that time later, they might as well have been meeting an entirely new person.

I left my home, my lovely home, and was taken to the Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls, an enclave for wealthy young women, staffed by graduates of the camp awaiting marriage.

I came of age, as they say, at the Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls.

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But then, I knew nothing about the place except that it was where my parents were sending me so they wouldn't have to see me. It was dusk when we arrived, a melancholy hour I've always hated. Under the cover of enormous oak trees we drove up the long gravel road that seemed to go on forever; it occurred to me that it might be weeks before I traveled this road again.

My father clutched the wheel and squinted, completing very carefully the task at hand, which was how he had always done things. We pulled up to a square – it was indeed called the Square, I would later learn – of birch-shingled cabins and my father began to turn the automobile off; I looked around for another girl, but there was no one. I opened my own door – 'Thea,' my father called, but I ignored him. I set my feet on the loamy soil, so different from the ground in Florida now, which was parched from the summer. The air smelled wet here, but not like the ocean. The ocean was always close to you in Florida, even when you lived hours away, like we did; here you were boxed in, on all sides, by mountains.

I peered up at the building in front of me while my father fiddled with the car – he would not leave it until he was sure everything was turned off properly. Even now. And this building was something like I had never seen before, half built into the mountain. The stilts that supported it reminded me of horses' legs, tall and wobbly, not meant to sustain such weight. I always had the feeling that the building should fall, would fall. Later, so much later, our headmaster told me that this was, in fact, the safest way to build in the mountains. I never believed him.

Since it was a Sunday, the camp had already eaten dinner, but I didn't know that then and I was overcome by a terrible sensation of dread and longing. This was not my home, my family was elsewhere.

A man approached, appearing as if out of thin air, and held out

his hand when he was still much too far away, ten, twelve feet, for my father to possibly accept it. I thought for an instant that he resembled my brother.

'I'm Henry Holmes,' he called out, 'the headmaster.'

The first thing I thought about Henry Holmes was that his title was odd: I didn't know summer camps had headmasters. Then he reached us and first my father shook his hand; next Mr Holmes held the tips of my fingers and bowed slightly. I inclined my head.

'Thea,' my father said. 'Theodora, but call her Thea.'

I nodded and blushed. I was not used to strangers, and Mr Holmes was handsome, with dark, glossy brown hair that looked in need of a trim. His shirtsleeves were neatly rolled up, and now that he was close I could see that he did not, in fact, resemble Sam. Sam had a happy, open face, with round hazel eyes – Mother's eyes; Sam always looked kind, calm. Mr Holmes's face was a tiny bit tense, his lips drawn together in consideration. And he was a man, with a shadow of a beard. My brother was a boy.

At that moment I would have seen Sam's face in anyone's. I had taken one of his monogrammed handkerchiefs, which was what the adults I read about in books did, gave their loved ones a memento. But of course Sam had not given me anything; I had taken it. The handkerchief lay flat against my torso, beneath my dress; no one in the world knew it was there but me. I pressed my hand to my stomach and looked Mr Holmes in the eye, as my mother had taught me to do with strangers. I couldn't ever remember meeting a man who I was not related to, though surely I must have.

'We're pleased you've decided to join us,' he said, and his voice seemed softer when he spoke to me, as if he were trying to show sympathy not with his words but with the way they sounded when they reached my ears. I told him that I was pleased to be

here as well. He must have guessed that some unpleasantness had sent me to the camp so late in the season. I was enrolling in the middle of the summer; I wondered what excuse my father had made.

Mr Holmes led us up the tall staircase to the Castle, and though I would only learn later that this was what everyone called this edifice, I thought even then that it looked like a fortress, imposing and elegant. The staircase was uncovered and it must have just rained, because the wood was slick. I stepped carefully. Two gas lamps flanked the door at the top of the stairs. The twin flames burned steadily, orange and red within their glass houses. Mr Holmes opened a thick oak door, painted navy blue with yellow trim, the camp's colors, and led us through the front room, which served as the dining hall and worship site.

Mr Holmes paused by the front bay window.

'So unlike Florida,' my father said. He smiled at me, and I could see that he was pained. He had started to gray around the temples in the past year, and I saw, suddenly, that my father would become old.

Mr Holmes waved us into his office, where I sat on a brown velvet settee while my father and Mr Holmes took care of the necessary matters. I could feel Mr Holmes watching me, but I did not look up.

I coughed, and my father turned his head.

'Wait outside, Thea?' Though it was not a question. I left and wandered down the hall outside the office. From where I stood I could see the tables that were already set for the next meal, tables that tomorrow morning would surely be filled with girls. Hundreds of them. I wanted so badly to be elsewhere.

I turned back to Mr Holmes's office, and was confronted by a wall of photographs, which I had somehow missed before. Horses, and astride them, their girls. I went closer and read the

tiny script engraved beneath each photo, touched the brass and felt the words. On each plaque there was the name of a horse, and beneath that the name of a girl, and then, finally, *First Place, Spring Show*, and the year. There were photos from the 1800s. The horses hadn't changed much, but the earliest girls rode sidesaddle, their legs hobbled together, hanging uselessly. You could see the march of time, both through the quality of the photographs and the girls' names and clothes and hairstyles; the last two had grown shorter as time progressed. So many people had passed through this place. The most recent photograph featured a tall girl with white-blond hair and patrician features, astride a giant horse; they dwarfed the man who stood next to them, presenting the award. *Leona Keller*, it read, *King's Dominion, First Place, Spring Show, 1930.*

I noticed a small, marble-topped table by Mr Holmes's office door, two neat stacks of brochures on top of it. *Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls*, the first one said, *A Summer Equestrian Respite for Young Ladies since 1876*. Beneath the cursive script was a row of smiling girls, in white blouses and white skirts, each holding a horse. The horses' ears were all flipped forward, their attention earned by something behind the camera.

At first I thought the brochures in the next stack were simply older versions. Their covers featured a photograph of what must have been the entire student body, a mass of girls straightened into rows for a picture, each one of them staring solemnly into the camera. *Yonahlossee Riding School for Girls*, the same cursive script read, *Educating Young Ladies since 1902*.

I heard a voice behind Mr Holmes's door, and slipped away and went to the window. I held a hand to the glass, my thumb blocked half of a mountain range. The view was stunning, I had never seen anything like it. Florida was flat and hot; for as far as I could see from this window there were mountain peaks, slate-

gray, snaked with trees, puncturing the clouds that hung so low they must not have been ordinary clouds. The clouds I was used to floated high in the sky.

I was not so angry with my situation that I could not discern beauty.

I was assigned to Augusta House. All of the cabins were named after the founders' relatives – we had Mary House, Spivey House, Minerva House. Mr Holmes led me and my father through the Square, but I trailed a foot or two behind so I didn't have to speak. Mr Holmes's stride was enormous; he was tall and lanky and towered over my father, who had always been on the small side. Sam, who had shot up like a weed over the past few months, was taller than him now. Sam might be eating now, or maybe dinner was done. Perhaps he was still wearing his day clothes: shorts and a button-down linen shirt, an outfit chosen to make the sun bearable. We never wore sleeves in the summer, but in Atlanta every man I'd seen had worn a full suit, despite the heat. Mr Holmes wore a suit now, had emerged with Father from his office wearing a jacket.

My father walked quickly to keep up and wanted to keep his hands in his pockets, but kept removing them, instinctively, for balance.

I wondered if I would recognize the back of Father's head in a crowd. Surely I would recognize Sam's, his coarse, thick hair that Mother coaxed to lie flat every time she passed by, drawing a hand over his head by habit.

Mr Holmes opened the door to Augusta House and walked through first, but before he did he turned and gave me a little smile; I could hear him tell the girls they had a visitor, and when my father and I walked in a moment later, five girls stood by their bunk beds, hands behind their backs, motionless. It was almost

dark now, and the light from a wall sconce was the only source of illumination in the room. I thought it odd that Mr Holmes, a grown man, had entered a cabin full of girls without knocking. But they had known he was coming. I wondered what else they knew.

'This is Theodora Atwell, she has come to us from Florida.'

The girls nodded in tandem, and a panic seized me. Did they do everything in tandem? How would I know?

'And this,' Mr Holmes said, starting with the girl on the left, 'is Elisabeth Gilliam, Gates Weeks, Mary Abbott McClellan, Victoria Harpen, and Eva Louise Crayton.'

'Pleased to meet you,' I said, and all of the girls inclined their heads slightly. Elisabeth, the first girl, broke her stance and broke the order, and I was so grateful. These were just girls, like me. She tucked a piece of ash brown hair behind her ear and smiled; her smile was crooked. She seemed kindhearted. I liked her blue eyes; they were wide set, like a horse's. She would be my Sissy.

I wondered, in that dimly lit cabin that smelled so strongly of wood, what had brought each girl there. Or who had brought them. We each had half of a bunk bed, a tiny closet, a washstand, a desk, a vanity. Our house mistresses roomed with each other in another cabin; we girls were to be left completely alone. I took my father's hand, which hung by his side, and hoped the other girls would not think me childish. His grip surprised me, and then I knew it was true, he meant to leave me here. I tugged my hand free of his and stepped forward.

'I'm pleased to be here.'

My father kissed my cheek and pressed me to him in a sort of clumsy half-hug; now I was embarrassed instead of sad, all these girls watching. Mr Holmes turned his head politely. Then they left, and I stood there alone in this room full of girls and felt

terrified. I was accustomed to the feeling of fear – it threaded itself through my brain each time I tried a higher jump – but that fear was accompanied by a certain exhilaration.

Now I watched the unreadable faces of all these girls and they watched me and I felt frightened in a way I had never felt frightened before. There was no place to go but here, no one to take comfort in except myself. I started to cross my arms in front of my chest but then an instinct told me to stop: I didn't want any of these girls to know I was scared.

'Theodora?' the pretty girl with a full figure asked, and I remembered her name. Eva.

'Thea,' I mumbled. But I wasn't from a family that mumbled. I cleared my throat. 'Thea. A nickname.'

'Well that's better,' Eva said, and grinned. 'Theodora's a mouthful.'

I hesitated – was she making fun of my name? But then she patted the bunk beside her. 'This is you. You're my bottom.'

Sissy laughed. The sound startled, then comforted me. 'Have you ever slept on a bunk bed?' she asked. 'I have the bottom, too. It's the worst, but you're here so late.'

I pointed at my trunk, which rested at the foot of my bottom bunk; pointing was bad manners, now the girls would think I had none, but poor manners were better than explaining why I had come so late.

'My trunk's already here,' I said.

'One of the men brought it,' Mary Abbott chimed in. Her voice was fragile-sounding.

'But not the handsome one!' Eva said, and Sissy laughed.

Gates turned from her desk, where she had been writing something – a letter? I wondered to whom – and I could see she did not approve.

'Oh Gates,' Eva said. 'Don't be so serious. It's just chatter.' Eva

turned to me, languidly; she moved about like she didn't have a care in the world. 'There are two men here who do chores. One is very handsome. And the other . . . you'll see.' I felt my face go hot, and quickly walked to my bunk so the other girls wouldn't see. I blushed at the drop of a hat. I busied myself with my trunk, and after a moment I noticed that everyone was changing into their nightclothes. I changed out of my clothes quickly – no other girl had ever seen me naked. Only Mother, and she was not a girl. I was careful to hide the handkerchief as I disrobed – the other girls would think me childish if they saw I'd hidden a piece of fabric from my brother beneath my clothes. Or worse than childish: odd.

Our nightgowns were all the same – mine had been laid upon the bed – soft cotton shifts with V-necklines, a mid-calf hemline, YRC embroidered over our left breasts. Over our hearts. The nightgown I had brought with me was high collared, ankle length, ruffled at the wrists. It would have given me away immediately. Mother had told me that I'd be wearing a uniform, so I didn't need to pack much; the idea had made me furious back home. I was going to be treated like everyone else! But now I was glad. I had not known my nightgown was all wrong.

The girls left in pairs – Eva and Sissy, Gates and Victoria – until only Mary Abbott and I remained. I had no choice but to follow. I didn't want to ask where we were going, but I did.

'The privies. I know what you're thinking, how can we not have a toilet in our cabins?' she asked. She dropped her voice conspiratorially: 'They think it's good for us.' Her accent was very Southern. Mr Holmes had an accent, but I couldn't place it – he spoke in clipped tones, the opposite of how everyone in Augusta House spoke. I didn't have an accent, not compared to these girls. 'But at least there's indoor plumbing. And running water for our baths.'

I nodded at Mary Abbott, unsure of how to respond. I'd always had indoor plumbing, and running water.

Eva and Sissy passed us on their way back to the cabin, along with pairs of other girls from other cabins. We looked like ghosts in our nightgowns, and I hated this place, hated these girls, my first clear, unconfused sentiment since I'd arrived. I wrapped my shawl tighter around my shoulders and hated my mother.

The privies were spotless – I was grateful for that. I didn't wait for Mary Abbott, rushed back to the cabin without once meeting anyone's eye. When we'd passed Eva and Sissy, I knew by how they smiled that Mary Abbott was not someone I wanted to align myself with. I was already in bed when Mary Abbott came in; she looked at me for a long second, wistfully, I thought, but that was unreasonable, she'd known me for an hour – and then someone entered the cabin, too old to be a woman, too young to be a girl. She barely looked at any of us. When she saw me, she nodded – 'Theodora Atwell. Glad to see you've settled in.' And then she turned off our lights.

'Good night, girls,' she called as she left the room.

'Good night, Henny,' everyone called back, in unison.

The girls said good night to each other then, in sleepy whispers; I thought they were done when Eva spoke.

'Good night, Thea,' she whispered, and all the other girls followed suit, my name whispered five times, and it seemed astonishing that I knew which voice belonged to whom; it seemed astonishing that already these girls laid claim to me.

The last girl I had known was Milly, a neighbor, and she had moved away years ago. She carried a doll with her, always. I thought she was boring, which in my family was least what you wanted to be. Other people were boring; the Atwells were interesting.

Sam liked Milly, though. She would watch him tend to his

terrariums, help him carve branches of trees into a more manageable size, listen with interest as Sam explained how his huge cane toad transmitted poison from the glands behind his eyes. Only Sam was able to pick the toad up; when I tried, it puffed to twice its normal size. Sam had a carefulness about him that animals trusted. People, too.

I did not like Milly there with Sam when I returned from a ride. And so I stole Milly's doll and buried it behind the barn. She never came back.

Sam knew what I had done. I had been cruel, and Sam hated cruelty. I think he did not understand it, the impulse to harm another living creature. It's why he couldn't ride. The thought of pressing a spur into a horse's tender side, or lifting a whip against a dumb animal – well, Sam could not imagine it.

He was ashamed of me, and I was almost ashamed of myself, but Milly was quickly forgotten, ground into the dust of a child's memory.

A girl muttered something nonsensical, talking in her sleep.

'Shh,' Gates said, 'shh,' and the muttering stopped.

In Atlanta, my father and I had slept in separate rooms. We'd never traveled alone before, so I didn't know how to interpret this, but in my great big room I'd cried, and then slapped myself for being so silly and desperate: this was nothing, I told myself, take hold of yourself. I'd fallen asleep to the noise of cars underneath my window, wondering if my father heard the same in the room across the hall, wondering if he was even awake to hear it or dead to the world.

The cars outside my window had made me feel less lonely, though that was silly – the men and women in those cars were no friends of mine.

I wondered if Sam was still awake now, listening to the Emathla crickets. I wondered what else he had heard, today, what

else he had done. Mother would still be awake, reading, listening to the radio; Father would still be driving if I had to guess, twisting carefully through the mountains.

I thought of my cousin, Georgie, and wanted to weep, but I would not let myself. I had wept enough for a lifetime. Two lifetimes. Three.

The next morning a bell woke me. I sat up quickly and banged my head on Eva's bunk. Her face appeared next to mine, from her top bunk.

'You look like a bat,' I said, and she looked at me dreamily, and I admired her pretty skin, her plump cheeks.

I massaged my scalp and waited for the other girls to rise. But no one moved for a few minutes; instead they lay in their beds and yawned and stretched. I had never been alone with so many girls for so long. Mother had sent me and Sam to the Emathla school for two weeks before deciding it wasn't good enough for us; but the differences between me and those children, the sons and daughters of country people, had been so clear. Here I did not know where I stood.

All the girls looked dazed, lying in their beds. Eva was the tallest among us; Mary Abbott the shortest. Victoria was the thinnest girl, but she was too thin, with a collarbone so sharp she looked starved. My hair was neither dark nor light; I was neither short nor tall. At home I almost never saw other children. Father taught us our lessons, and when Sam and I did see another boy or girl, in town, we were always looked at closely, because we were twins and resembled each other uncannily: we both had Father's strong nose, and high, broad cheekbones. Our faces were sculpted, Mother said. And we both had Mother's hair, a rich auburn color and coarsely wavy. It felt the same, when you touched it. Our resemblance made people notice us. Here, without Sam, I was

just like everyone else except a little darker, because of the Florida sun.

Someone else entered, clearly a maid – I could tell by her uniform.

'Good morning, Docey,' Eva called, and Docey smiled quickly in her direction, then poured water into each of our wash-stands. Then everyone rose and went to them – they were plain, simple walnut, but their bowls were painted prettily with delicate flowers. The rim of mine was chipped. Docey was smaller than any of us. If I had to guess, I'd say she was no more than five feet, but stronger, with mousy-brown hair pinned into a tight bun and a lazy eye. She spoke with an accent that was rough and quick, Southern, messier than everyone else's. Later I would learn her accent signaled she was from the poorest part of Appalachia.

After we washed and dressed, we walked through the Square to the same building I'd come to last night, with Father. I'd slept with Sam's handkerchief under my pillow. I'd wanted to put it underneath my clothes again, but the risk that Eva or Sissy – I wanted to impress them most – would see was too great.

When I stepped outside, I was shocked by the sheer mass of all the girls. There were so many of them, all dressed in white skirts and blouses with Peter Pan collars, 'YRC' again embroidered over our hearts in navy. My father had told me that there would be almost two hundred girls, I suppose to prepare me, but I wasn't prepared, not for this army. The only thing that immediately distinguished them from each other was their hair – a girl with tight curls glanced at me and whispered something to her friend, and I realized I was gawking. I stepped into the crowd and tried to keep up, tried to pace my gait with theirs. I looked at all the girls' legs and realized no one wore stockings; from the waist down, we looked like a crowd of children.

Sissy caught up with me. Her brown hair was cut in a fashionable bob. I touched my own hair, which fell well over my shoulders. I'd wanted a bob, but Mother hadn't wanted me to cut it.

'You're a quick walker,' she said.

I slowed my pace. 'Yes.'

'It's hot in Florida.' Her voice was husky; it contrasted sharply with her delicate features.

'Where are you from?' I asked.

'Monroeville.'

She acted as if I must know where that was. I pretended that I did.

'What does your father do?' she asked.

'He's a doctor. And he owns orange groves.' The last part wasn't technically true – the citrus was in my mother's family – but I assumed owning land gave you currency here.

'I love oranges!' she said, smiling her crooked smile, and I smiled back at her enthusiasm. Oranges weren't a treat to me. They were a given.

'What does your father do?' I asked.

'He manages my grandfather's affairs. And rides horses. That's why he sent me here, to learn how to ride. But I'm afraid I haven't taken to it.'

'No?'

'It's too dirty,' she said. Then added quickly, 'But don't think I'm like that,' and glanced at me sideways. 'I just like other things better.'

I was surprised by the sound of my laughter. I hadn't laughed in weeks.

The other girls swarmed around us as we entered the dining hall. Clustered at tables draped with toile cloths, they spoke among themselves, and I could see they liked it here, felt at home.

Sissy pointed out my table, where Mary Abbott, Victoria, and Henny sat amid others. Mary Abbott grinned excitedly when she saw me, and I gave a small smile in return, then chose the seat farthest from her.

'Hello, Theodora,' Henny said. I started to tell her about my name, but Mary Abbott piped in.

'She goes by Thea.' Henny didn't acknowledge that Mary Abbott had spoken, went on and introduced the others at the table, a mix of younger and older girls and a teacher, Miss Metcalfe, who had very smooth skin and small, pearly teeth.

There were steaming platters of food – eggs, bacon *and* ham, raspberry muffins, grits – but I had no appetite. Mostly, everyone ignored me, and I was grateful. I thought that Sam would have loved all this food; he had started to eat like a horse the past few months. I knew exactly where he was right now: out back, tending to one of his injured animals, or feeding the insects in one of his terrariums, rearranging a branch so a lizard had a better place to sun himself. He didn't always have an injured animal to tend to, but he'd been raising a nest of baby squirrels for a few weeks. Their mother had vanished.

'Can I ask you a question?' Molly said, halfway through the meal. She had buckteeth, which made her seem younger than she was. Her thin brown hair hung loose, an inch past her waist. It needed to be cut.

'May I . . .' Henny corrected. She was chubby, with a double chin and an unfortunately placed mole on her left temple. She wasn't homely, exactly, but there was the mole. I did not like Henny but I was relieved by her presence, that there was a near-adult here along with Miss Metcalfe to keep order.

Molly continued. 'Why are you here so late?'

'Pardon?'

'Why didn't you come at the beginning like the rest of us?'

I waited for Henny to intervene, but she sat quietly, like the rest of the table, watching me. Alice Hunt Morgan, from Memphis, Tennessee, traced the rim of her glass. I'd called her Alice and she'd corrected me: Alice Hunt, she'd said, that's my full name. Now everyone waited for my answer. They were all curious, and I couldn't blame them: I was an interloper.

'It was a late birthday present,' I said, 'we were in Europe on holiday because it gets so hot in Florida during the summer.' I paused. The girls waited, heads tilted. Molly rolled a piece of her ratty hair between her fingers. 'We go every year and I didn't want to miss it, but my father wanted me to come to camp, too. So he arranged it.' I shrugged my shoulders, as if to say, it was all in the hands of generous and capable adults.

'Where in Europe?' Molly asked, but by then the other girls were tired of me, had returned to each other.

'Paris,' I said. 'I love Paris in the summer.'

Molly nodded and looked away, satisfied. I felt the back of my head for a tender spot from this morning, but there was nothing. I looked across the room and found Sissy, who smiled at me. I smiled back.

'Thea,' Henny said. So she had heard Mary Abbott; Mary Abbott was a girl one didn't have to acknowledge. 'Drink up.' She nodded at my milk. I contemplated the glass, which I had barely touched. At home we drank orange or grapefruit juice, depending on the season. Never milk. Mother had an aversion to it. We stirred milk into our tea sometimes, or Sam and I had it with dessert. For lunch at Yonahlossee, I'd soon learn, a glass pitcher of sweet iced tea, a chunk of ice floating in the amber, would rest next to Henny's plate, and she would dole it out among us carefully. This iced tea was thick and syrupy, and, I had to admit, delicious. Years later I'd crave this iced tea, its cool weight on my tongue, the bitterness of the strong tea

offset by the copious amounts of sugar; I'd learn that to miss the Yonahlossee sweet tea was something of a tradition among us.

But that would be later. For now I stared at my glass of pale milk and tried not to cry.

'Thea,' Henny said again, her voice low, but I knew I would cry if I looked up. Then I could feel her gaze lift; everyone turned their seats around in the same direction and I thought this was some strange way of leaving until I heard his voice.

'Good morning, girls,' Mr Holmes said.

'Good morning, Mr Holmes,' everyone chorused but me, and Mr Holmes seemed quietly delighted at this response, even though he must hear it every morning.

After he had delivered morning announcements and led us in worship, a woman approached me, too old to be a house mistress. She was plump and short, with a pretty face.

'I'm Mrs Holmes, the headmistress. Follow me,' she said, and gestured toward the stairwell at the edge of the room. I tried to keep the surprise from my face, but she saw anyway, looked at me for a second too long so I would know I had erred. But I also knew I could not be the first person who had been surprised that she was married to Mr Holmes. When I'd seen her this morning, I'd thought she was head housekeeper, or some other staff person; even from across the room she had a matronly, interfering way about her. She struck me as impatient. I followed her obediently, slowed down so that I would not overtake her. Her waist seemed unnaturally small, as if she were cinched in, and I realized she must be wearing a corset. Even Mother didn't wear those. But Mother was so slim she didn't need one.

Her office was on the third floor, and by the time we reached it she was out of breath. As she opened the door, I stood close enough so that I could see how tightly her brown hair was bound

into a bun; her hair was graying, which you could not see from a distance.

Her office was elegantly appointed, the settee upon which she gestured for me to sit upholstered in a modern plaid.

'Theodora Atwell,' she began. 'You're at Henny's table?' Before I could answer, she continued. 'I've known Henny for a very long time. She's exceptionally capable.' This seemed like a warning. She looked down at the papers in front of her. 'From Emathla, Florida. I've always thought that to live in Florida as a gardener would be sublime. You could grow anything.'

Mother said that very same thing. But I didn't want to think about Mother. 'Everyone calls me Thea.'

'Oh, I know,' she said, and smiled at me. I wondered if Mr Holmes had already told her what to call me, if they spoke often about the girls here. They must.

'Tell me, Thea,' she said, and lowered herself into her shiny wooden chair and gazed at me from across her desk, hewn from the same wood, also polished to a sheen – 'how are you liking it so far?'

'Very much,' I said, because there was nothing else I could say.

'The founders of Yonahlossee were very progressive individuals. They started this camp in 1876, eleven years after the War Between the States. Why, Thea, was this such an important time in our nation's history?'

I knew this, at least. My own great-grandfather had fled the War Between the States. 'Because the South was poor almost beyond belief. Because it was a terrible time for this part of the country. Everything was changing, rapidly, and no one was sure what would happen to the South.'

I had impressed her. 'Yes.' She nodded. Then she told me about Louisa and Hanes Bell, who had never had children of their own but who had made it their mission to provide a summer

respite for females in this rapidly changing – she used my words – world. Places like this already existed in the North, for girls and boys, and in the South, for boys, but the Bells had seen a lack and filled it.

'And then the camp became a school, as demand for the place grew.' Before, she had sounded like she was rattling off a speech, one she had given before many times. Now she looked at me intently, but I didn't know why. 'So now Yonahlossee is a camp for certain girls and a school for others. But in both cases it is a place for young women to learn how to become ladies. Because, Thea, becoming a lady is not simply a thing which happens, like magic.' She snapped her fingers, then shook her head. 'No, quite the opposite: becoming a lady is a lesson you must learn.'

'In this world of uncertainty,' she finished, 'a lady is more important than she ever was.'

She was referring to the financial crisis, of course. It seemed sad that the Bells had never had children, especially since they'd devoted their lives to the young. Something must have been wrong with Louisa's organs. I had very little idea of what Mrs Holmes meant: she might as well have been speaking Greek. A lady was now more important than she ever was?

'And the name?' I asked, because Mrs Holmes was looking at me expectantly. 'Yonahlossee?'

'Oh,' Mrs Holmes said, and made a small, flinging gesture. 'An old Indian name. It has nothing to do with the camp, really. The name of Mrs Bell's horse.'

I waited for her to continue, to say something about equestrienne pursuits. I smiled to myself; Sasi was an old Indian name, too. Mother had named him after I couldn't think of anything. Sasi was an old Muskogee word, meaning 'is there.' As in, the flower is there. Mother had said that, exactly. I remembered her voice so clearly.

'I hope you'll like it here,' she said, and put her elbows on the table, and stared at me frankly, her small hands folded in front of her.

'I feel sure I will.' And I had liked it, a moment ago, liked hearing about Louisa Bell; Yonahlossee seemed like a kinder place now that I knew it was named after a horse. But remembering Mother, and Sasi, had turned me gray again.

'Your mother was sure you would.'

I was so confused for a second – had she read my mind?

'Your mother is a friend of mine. An old friend.'

This was impossible. My mother didn't have any old friends; we were all she needed. How many times had I heard her say that she and Father had stumbled into their private utopia out here in the Florida wilderness?

'You have her hair,' Mrs Holmes said, and then I knew it was true, she had known Mother.

'We went to finishing school together,' she continued, 'in Raleigh. Miss Petit's.'

My eyes blurred, and I thought for an instant that I was having an allergic reaction, like one of Father's patients; to a bee sting, a berry.

I bit my lip, and it was hard to breathe; then I started to cry.

'Oh, Thea, I didn't mean to upset you. Did your mother not tell you that we knew each other?'

I shook my head.

'Yes, I know all about you. She entrusted me, in a way. Another place might not have been suitable for you.

'Do we understand each other, Thea?' Mrs Holmes asked, after a moment.

I nodded.

'Please look at me.'

I did as she asked. Her eyes were almond-shaped. That I was

looking into the same eyes my mother had once looked into seemed impossible.

'And there's another thing: if you notice anything unusual, anything . . . bodily, please come and see me at once.'

'Bodily?' I repeated.

'Bodily. I'll expect you know what I mean if it happens.'

I told her I understood, even though I didn't.

As I walked alone to the stables for my evaluation, I thought she must mean my monthly cycle. But I already had that, and knew what to do myself.

I was glad no girl could see my red eyes; I was grateful that I had the walk to compose myself. My understanding had been that Yonahlossee was a place arrived at by accident, by circumstance.

The path past the privies narrowed into a lane wide enough for two people; trees rose on either side, blocking out most of the sunlight. I shivered, and was relieved when I emerged suddenly into a large circle of flat space, bordered by mountains.

I gasped, in spite of myself; I had told myself I would try not to be surprised by everything new at Yonahlossee. But I had never seen anything like this; I hadn't even known something like this existed. There were three stone barns, all in a row, and they were massive compared to my barn at home, as if they housed an army of horses. My barn at home was barely a barn at all, I realized, compared to this. Horses hung their heads out of their stall windows, and I saw an Appaloosa with a spotted head, a breed I'd only read about, never seen.

Grooms milled about the grounds, pushing wheelbarrows or leading horses. One man caught me staring, and I turned away, blushing; he looked like Docey's male counterpart, skinny and wiry, capable.

There were five riding rings, two with jumps. Everything

looked perfect and new, the rings freshly raked, the fences newly painted. I wondered where Yonahlossee got all its money. The few towns we had driven through on the way here had looked very poor – the buildings falling down, the people dirty – but I knew we were entering Appalachia, which was poor anyway, aside from the financial crisis. Father mentioned a terrible drought. Another reference to unpleasantness, uncharacteristic, but I was quickly learning that my life was turning into a series of surprises.

'It's unexpected, isn't it?' a voice asked, and I spun around to find a tall man standing at my left. A horse, already saddled and bridled, stood at his side.

'You startled me,' I said, my hand clapped over my heart, as was my habit when surprised. I hoped my red eyes didn't give me away.

The man laughed. He had a German accent; I'd met a German man before, Mr Buch, who used to come visit my father every year or so for business about the oranges.

'You're German?'

'Yes. I'm Mr Albrecht.'

'I'm Thea Atwell, pleased to meet you.' I curtsied slightly, to compensate for my rudeness. I recognized Mr Albrecht from the photographs hanging on the wall. He was the man who presented the awards. He was extremely thin, with a flat chin, which surprised me. I thought Germans came with square jaws. But his skin was smooth, for a man, and his teeth straight. He was, if not handsome, passable. He seemed as old as my father.

'And this,' he said, 'is Luther.' He stroked the ridge of Luther's neck, and Luther lowered his head and watched me. Luther was a homely horse, dull brown with a too-large head and small ears. But he had kind eyes.

'He's the first horse everyone here rides. Your father said you were an experienced rider?'

'Yes.'

'You shouldn't have any trouble with Luther. Tap him on over the jumps, keep him steady through the doubles. He'll jump anything, but sometimes he balks if you're shy.'

Mr Albrecht gave me a leg-up, and I settled into the saddle while he adjusted my stirrups. My heart raced, from some mixture of the shock I'd just experienced at the hand of Mrs Holmes and the anticipation of riding in front of a stranger. Luther was huge, over sixteen hands, maybe even seventeen, the largest horse I'd been on. That doesn't matter, I told myself. Control is control. Mr Albrecht mapped out the course, and I followed him to the farthest ring. He gave me ten minutes to warm up, and I trotted around the ring, testing Luther. I tugged on my left rein and he tugged back; I gave him a sharp jerk. Mr Albrecht stood by the gate and watched. He had a simultaneously formal and relaxed air about him; he stood with his hands in his pockets, his head cocked, his white shirt spotless, his breeches neatly ironed and creased.

I tried to ignore the figure of Mr Albrecht watching me ride. When he told me it was time, I halted Luther from a trot and then asked him to canter from a walk; I wanted his reflexes sharp. Another man had joined Mr Albrecht by the gate; I squinted – Mr Holmes. He waved, and I bowed my head in response. I wasn't wearing a helmet, no one in those days did, and though other people wore gloves, they dulled the feeling in my hands. The jumps I was to clear were over three feet tall; we weren't afraid of anything, in those days. We didn't know there was anything to be afraid of.

I completed the course in a blur. I could never remember my courses after I'd finished them, someone would have to tell me if I'd knocked down a rail, or made a wrong turn. After I jumped the last combination, I cantered Luther around the perimeter of

the ring until the tension in both our bodies eased. I walked over to where Mr Albrecht stood; Mr Holmes was gone.

Mr Albrecht nodded, and slapped Luther's neck.

'Cool him out. You did well.'

I could still see Mr Holmes; he hadn't reached the trail yet, where the woods would swallow him. I wondered how long it would be until Sam was as tall as Mr Holmes. Right now he was still a child, or half-child, half-adult, like me.

I held on to the reins by the buckle at their end and let Luther hang his head. We walked leisurely around the ring. That Yonahlossee was not a place picked at random disturbed me, but also confirmed that my parents' plan was beyond my understanding. Mother had chosen a place a little like paradise, as far as horses were concerned; at least there was that. That my mother could have been friends with a person like Mrs Holmes was almost unbelievable; yet I had to believe it. My mother had been cruel to me in the past few weeks in a way that I knew I deserved but was nonetheless hard to bear. My parents had not sent me into the arms of strangers; instead they had sent me into the arms of a woman who knew at least part of my terrible secret. But what part had my mother told her? Surely not everything.

Mr Albrecht had disappeared into the barn. I stopped Luther and dismounted; then I did a childish thing. I wept into his hot shoulder, salty with sweat, and for the first time in weeks I felt comfort.