

Mary Jane Johnson/ June-December 1949

He'd been watching her all summer.

His gaze was attention. Attention was gold. Mary Jane wanted to reach out and touch it, it was so shiny.

But it hurt, too, made her cower, ashamed. She wanted to run away from its sharp shine.

On dusky late June evenings, the day's heat dissolving into a lush sultriness, her parents, he, and his wife Betty—a newlywed couple years younger than her parents—leaned back on patio furniture, fireflies popping bright into the gloom, flicker-dotting the space over the lawn. Mary Jane played with her younger brother Bobby and a neighborhood friend or two, Margie or Diane, all of them hiding behind the black maples that grew at the back of the house, screeching when tagged. As Mary Jane ran, her arms outstretched, his gaze became her shadow, her second skin, cupping her. She might fly up and over the trees, his attention pulling her along.

But when she turned to face the house, he sat on his lawn chair, taking a sip of bourbon, or laughing at something her father said about farm wives and their big bottoms.

He watched her, his gaze confusing and awful. And wonderful. He was old, of course. But tall, with a full head of dark hair. Bigger than her small, slight father, he had strong shoulders and long legs. He walked like could buy up the very stones or floorboards or grass he strode on. His voice was deep, serious, but also filled with laughter. She could hear him now, telling a story, pulling everyone into his good mood.

Even in the growing darkness, even in the dull yellow porch light, Mary Jane felt his stare, his large black eyes trained only on her, eyes so dark, she couldn't see his pupils. Eyes like caves, wells, tunnels.