

The background is a rich, textured illustration of a natural scene. At the top, there are tall, thin trees with sparse foliage against a light sky. Below them, a dense forest of evergreen trees covers a steep, rocky slope. A waterfall cascades down the center of the slope. In the foreground, a dark, rocky stream flows. In the bottom right corner, a deer stands on a patch of grass, looking towards the left.

Jess Taylor

REAR

*a novel*

PL

Jess Taylor



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*This novel contains fictional depictions of suicide, childhood trauma, abuse, and suicidal ideation that may cause emotional responses in some readers.*

*To the past,  
goodbye!*

The only secrets Adrian likes are the ones we have together. He's cutting sticks from trees, and I'm here to do whatever he needs. My hands are hidden in gloves so that he doesn't know my knuckles are torn up again. A secret.

"Okay, I'm going to hold the sticks steady and you're going to wrap them." I nod. The sticks are taller than either of us. I'm already almost as tall as Adrian, who has always been skinny and small for his age. I'm nine. He's twelve. We're at the edge of the age where the differences start to disappear and age doesn't seem to matter anymore. Although I've always been the one he wants to play with and be around. His thin bones and gaunt face make him look taller than he is, like he's a thin stick that's been cut from a tree himself. Neither of us can ever eat enough, always hungry, even back then, but I go through stages where I grow a little pot-belly: my arms, tanned and freckled by the summer sun, gain a layer of baby fat chub.

Adrian gathers the top of the sticks together, splays their other ends out to make a cone structure that we could fit in. I wrap the twine we took from Uncle Jim's garage around the top. "You've got to make like an infinity sign or they'll all fall apart," Adrian says. We switch: I hold the sticks, and he holds the twine and shows me how to wrap it, up and down and around.

The sun's hot on my black T-shirt, Mickey Mouse printed on the front, wagging his finger. The shirt used to be Adrian's. Most of my clothes were Adrian's, and my parents don't notice that I've faded into Adrian's family as if that's where I belong. Later, I'll think that maybe they just didn't understand what goes into making kids, raising them. I live as proof of their love, but proof doesn't feel.

"Go get some rocks, Paul."

I kick around at the ground, covered in long, dried grass. Every spring it looks like Adrian's backyard might go green—shoots appear through the dead grass of last year, but it always dies off again before summer even comes. I gather two, three rocks and bring them to Adrian. He lines them against the bases of the sticks. "This will keep them from collapsing inward."

"Are we going to cover it with leaves?" I ask. "To make walls like a real house?"

"That's a good idea!" And we're off, collecting leaves. We need a way to attach them, so I run up to the house, where Aunt Dot is making us peanut butter sandwiches.

"We need glue!" I announce.

She's cutting the crust off of Adrian's PB & J. I can tell she remembered no jam in mine. "And what for, Paul?"

"We're making a city!"

"A city?"

"Yes, a real city, and Adrian says we'll make it so it glows and lights up just like in the game."

"The game?"

"The Lighted City!"

We've been playing The Lighted City for years. Out of all our games, it's had the most staying power—the image of glowing sky-



scrapers and houses and a village for us to call our own. Some games just do that, reveal things about who you are and who you want to be.

The game has existed as long as we've played together, but it's twisted and evolved over time. Out there is a city that is waiting for us—both Adrian and me—and we know the place is perfect.

Adrian imagines a place with no parents.

I imagine a place where we are in charge and worshipped.

Adrian imagines a place where we can be together.

I imagine a place so beautiful it hurts when you look at it.

The game always starts the same—we are walking in the forest and we hear something call to us: the leaves hissing in the wind are carrying a message. First, they speak to me. Adrian does the voice: “Paul, we need you. Paul, we don't know what to do. Our people are dying. They are cold and hungry, Paul. Only you can save us.”

Adrian is with me because he is always with me when I play. When I'm alone, at home, I draw, I sort my stuffed animals, and I think about the next time I'll play with Adrian. Any ideas I have, I save up for him. That's the way he likes it.

“Do you hear that?” I ask Adrian, who is no longer the voices of the people of The Lighted City. He is himself again.

“What is it?”

“People,” I say. “I think they're in trouble. This way!” We cut through the forest. Adrian follows close behind me as we go deeper and deeper.

“Wait,” he says. “I think I hear it too.”

Now I become the voices. “Adrian, it's you and Paul we need. You were always destined to rule us. We need you to bring the light back to The Lighted City. Please, save us.”

Adrian and I look at each other, ourselves again, and we start to run through the forest. As we run, the trees beside us burst into

flames at the tips of their branches, lighting our way. The path ahead gets darker and colder, but our very beings bring the warmth and light.

We come to a clearing, lit by a circle of trees that hold flames. The fire doesn't burn the trees though. It doesn't work that way. "Look," Adrian says, and he touches the tip of a branch and the fire doesn't burn him; it cannot because he is its creator.

"Adrian," I say, because what is beyond the clearing is amazing. There are skyscrapers made of glass and twisted tree limbs and branches, the dark windows slowly lighting up as our presence fills the clearing. Tiny huts, just big enough to house a person or two, lead up to where the skyscrapers are, and in front of each house, a fire lights. People begin to come out of the houses, and the sticks they hold emit light from their tips as soon as they walk toward us.

"We're saved!" they exclaim, and warm their hands at their front-yard fires.

Adrian takes a backpack off and pulls out bags of rice, lentils, chickens, vegetables, all food we've stolen from the dinner table. The townspeople come and take the food, share it out amongst themselves, and begin to cook and feast. Music starts to play in celebration.

"What is this place?" Adrian says to a boy closest to him.

"Don't you know, Your Majesty?" the boy says. "You're home. You've reached The Lighted City."

And it's true, we're the king and queen, the way it was always meant to be. Adrian takes my hand, and we kiss. At the beginning, that's how the game ends.

## Now

For a long time I didn't even let myself think the name "Adrian." Everything that happened with The Lighted City was only "what happened to me" or "the day everything happened." I hid all my bad experiences in a chest where they wouldn't be able to touch me. Any complicated feelings I felt, they went in there too. By keeping them tight away, I could continue to live. That was also something that felt hard for me. Sometimes it still feels hard.

But everything always came out in dreams, especially once I moved to Toronto. And then, in 2016, things got worse, the way they need to before they get better. That was when things started to change. When I started to really look at those things in the chest and wonder if I had any hope of becoming a person who felt at peace.

Dr. Johnson recommended I try writing everything down to see if I can make sense of it all. Selina, she prefers. To see if I can be more honest with writing than I am in our sessions together.

Not *it*. I have to stop doing that — I need to call things what they were. The Lighted City. Adrian. Everything that happened in 2016, when I was close to finally losing myself. The notebook I pick is black leather. When it arrives at the door, I peel open the cardboard and hold it in my hands. It suits the way I feel about my memories, I suppose. I open it and the spine creaks.

On the first page, I write instructions for myself.

*You will talk about 2016.*

*You will talk about The Lighted City.*

*You will be brave and truthful.*

*You will get to the bottom of what happened.*

I put a piece of masking tape on the cover and then write on it in black permanent marker: *How It Happened*. Because I realize that's what I want to figure out. Not just what happened, although that's important too. I don't always feel I can trust my memories. In some places, there are gaps, or things begin to blur and look different. And as I look at the cover, even it blurs and changes: *How Could It Have Happened?*

Sometimes it feels like I've been working so hard for the past nine years, and yet I still end up trying the next thing that promises to make me feel in control of my life. But I want to live, or at least I want to try to want to live, so that's something, I guess.

## How It Happened

### The Lighted City

In those days, we are a we: Paul and Adrian. Never lonely when we're together. For as long as I can remember, Adrian has said that we are a team, and I believe him—need to believe him. Around him is the only place I feel like I belong. We know each other inside and out. With other people that feeling is impossible, and we're each other's only friends. More than friends, cousins. Adrian tells me that cousins are like super friends because you can lose friends but a cousin is always your cousin.

I come over in the day and he smiles his eight-year-old's mischievous grin at me, his blue eyes bluer than the sky when it's freezing cold in January. He is so pale, almost see-through. The skin covering his bony arms looks pristine, but I know why he's wearing long pants even though it's so hot we had to be kicked outside by Aunt Dot. Normally, she has to find us out there before we can be called in. Sweat runs down his ankles, along his bare feet. I know what's underneath his clothes.

I wish I didn't.

Despite what we know about pain, our days that summer are made of play. We climb a pair of cherry trees that hang close to

where Adrian's field turns to forest. We dig through dirt. We swing branches like swords. We are dragons, cheetahs, koala bears.

Walking through the forest, we find a small broken rock laying against a large one. The big one is half buried in the ground. Adrian pokes at the ground with a stick, dragging it in the dirt beside the big rock, seeing if he can dig it out. I point to where the small rock is cracked in half. "Why's it like that?" He picks the halves up.

"Maybe an animal dropped it from up high?" Adrian says. He looks up at the sky and his black hair falls back off his sweaty forehead. All that's up there is the canopy of leaves and needles creating the shade we've been desperate for. "Or someone threw it." He winds up like he's going to throw the half in his right hand, just to see how far and hard it will go. But then he looks at it and holds up the left. "Look, Paul." He slots them together and they are whole again.

He gives me one piece and he carries the other.

"This is important," he says. "You can't ever lose it." I nod. "It's like . . . what do you call it? A pact. A pact to be together forever."

"Friends forever."

"Like this forever!" he says and takes my half back and presses it into his until the rock looks whole again. He gives it to me.



Everything between us is a pact. As the years come and we grow, the pacts have more details, but the core stays: Adrian and I must always be together. Or, looked at in another way: neither Adrian nor I can live without the other.