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The Hero's Mother

Rosalyn Joy Ribeira

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Hero's Mother

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Sixteen-year-old Drea Grimm's mother walked out of their family home at midnight seven years ago. All she left behind were notebooks full of made-up stories and a family that Drea, being the oldest, was now in charge of. One day, Drea finds a mysterious letter with her name on it written in her mother's handwriting and everything she thought was true is destroyed. With the help of her partner on a school project, Ian, Drea uses her mom's stories and clues from her last moments to heal her family and maybe bring her mother home. But there is someone who wants Drea, and they will do anything to draw her closer to the truth, and in turn, closer to supernatural danger.

Keywords: young adult literature, fantasy, urban fantasy

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Introduction: The Very True Evolution of *The Hero's Mother*

This novel is more than a fictional story. It is a manifestation of my journey as a writer over the course of six years. It has been said that a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. I might add that a writer is someone for whom writing is like the ebb and flow of ocean waves. Or that a writer is someone continuously haunted. Or that a writer is someone for whom writing is sometimes torturous. Believe it or not, my journey for this thesis started when I was seventeen. I knew I wanted to be a writer even though I rarely wrote anything besides stray ideas and school essays. In fact, I was impatient for it. I read craft books, blog posts, author websites, searching for some secret key that would get me writing and make me into the kind of person who wrote the books I loved. I didn't want to be an author when I was old, I wanted to it to happen right then. Meanwhile, I read almost every novel in the teen section of my local library, sometimes reading seven or eight books a week.

The idea for this novel first came as a "what if?" question out of my love for fairy tales and fairy tale retellings. What if the stories the brothers Grimm told were real in some other fantasy land that they had discovered? And what if, since they found this land, their descendants were cursed with the responsibility of keeping the gate between the two worlds? And so Drea Grimm was born in a completely different skin and situation than she ended. In the five years after Drea first appeared in my imagination, I graduated high school, went to college, told everyone I knew that I wanted to be a writer, and drowned in my overactive imagination. I wrote the first twenty pages of Drea's story. Then I wrote them again. Then again, changing them slightly each time. I took classes, workshopped the plot, and looked through even more books trying to figure out what I was doing wrong.

Why was it so hard to tell her story?

Skip ahead to me post-mission, post-flip flopping, post-doubting my dreams. I was diagnosed with severe depression and put on medication. I stopped reading. I stopped writing. For two years I barely did anything. I was haunted. It was after this two-year episode and forced hiatus that Drea's story came back to me.

Drea and her family had always been central to the story. They were a constant. Even their names barely changed through the multiple evolutions of this novel, though there was once an additional little brother named Freddie. *The Hero's Mother* is a character-based novel. Even more than that, it is a character-driven novel. When I was trying to make myself fall back in love with writing again, Drea drove the plot forward and took the reins when I couldn't. It seems odd to speak of characters as if they made their own decisions and choices, but that is what it felt like. Their story was carrying me.

In many ways, the lore central to this novel (the stories of the Ten Heroes) changed everything. Through building this lore, I was able to see how the legends of a foreign land effected Drea's reality. Additionally, the stories acted as a solid reference point that I could use throughout the novel to weave in fantasy essential to the conclusion. I flipped a switch, and my book was no longer about a teen who fought fairy tales but a girl who'd lost her mother to fantasy stories. I held on as tightly as I could as the novel evolved yet again, this time making it past twenty pages. It was a miracle, I thought. A revelation. The things I love have been a struggle for much of my adult life. Each word I write is a victory. Each book I finish, an accomplishment of epic proportions. I am that writer for whom writing is more difficult, and that might not change. And so, I have my heroes. Those mentors in my past (and my present) who remind me that the good things are more often difficult than not.

The evolution is not finished. The story of the story starts and ends with Drea Grimm. I decided last year that the story would be told by Drea, not by me. She carried it when I couldn't. She cared for her family and told me about them when I couldn't come up with it myself. I wanted the narration to come from a place of knowing, of love, and from at least a year down the road when Drea was more carefree and when she felt safe. If nothing else, it made me feel better about putting her in dangerous or grief-ridden situations. She was much better at telling her own story than I was. And so, letting go became my next evolutionary step. I loosened my tight grip on my words. I would sometimes close my eyes when I was writing so I didn't constantly read what I just wrote and immediately distress over every word that wasn't quite right.

This book is about heroes because it had to be, because there is a hero in every tale, legend, or story book. Because when we're young we often make a choice between believing in stories and knowing them to be false or fantasies. I always wanted to believe in stories. I would pretend that I believed in magic or dragons because the world looked better that way. I was at war with what I wanted to believe and what my reality was telling me. This led me to making the battle between fantasy and reality a central conflict in Drea's story. She has spent years dismissing her mother as mentally unstable because she treated fantasy as reality. And though Drea once wished she could believe in her mother's fantasies, she gives way to practicality when her mother goes missing. It is only through embracing fantasy that Drea can heal her family like she wants to.

The word hero plays a large part in Drea's narrative. Diana Wynne Jones once defined heroes in this way: "heroes are brave, physically strong, never mean or vicious, and possess a code of honor that requires them to come to the aid of the weak or incompetent and the

oppressed when nobody else will” (81). This description is what she refers to as the “heroic ideal” which reflects goodness and victory (81). Defining heroes, or heroines, in this manner is reflective of epic heroes from mythology that often shape perceptions of modern-day protagonists. Such definitions shape Drea’s perspective as well. By the end of the novel, Drea suggests a different view of heroes, one in which the hero is not victorious. One in which the hero is scared, unprepared, ill equipped, and lost. And still she is a hero. Why? Because she says she is. It is vital to this novel that Drea eventually recognizes her heroism despite the lack of what might be considered classic heroic behavior. Because she was raised on stories of heroes who save innocents, Drea does not realize she is herself a hero until the end when she is able to recognize her direct involvement in the outcome of the immediate and dangerous situation. The readers can see that Drea has been somewhat heroic the entire novel; keeping her family together, going after the truth despite the dangers surrounding it, and caring for others when it might be easier to only care for herself. The complicated reality of heroism becomes the focus of this somewhat ordinary theme.

Joseph Campbell, in his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, outlines what one could call a heroic pattern. Through studying folklore, ancient tales, and modern novels/stories, he identified strong similarities between the ages of what a hero is and what he/she does or how they act in their stories. The conclusion made is that heroes and other character archetypes are fundamental to human nature and human stories. This might seem odd when faced with stories such as Drea’s where her life is changed hugely by magic and curses. However, it is through the supernatural struggles that characters such as her truly discover who they are and what their power can accomplish. It is when they are able to embrace their knowledge and belief in their own powers that they stand up against the enemy.

Drea's world is shaped heavily by her voice and unique point of view. She describes people minimally but lingers on certain words quite heavily. She is highly self-aware and yet is mainly concerned with people who are important in her life. She wishes to believe her mother is still alive, and yet is afraid of what that might mean for her future. These warring traits are best shown through her very direct narrative style which allows her to be both frame teller and objective informant. The example of Scheherazade from the tale collection *Arabian Nights* comes to mind, though the genre is entirely different. Scheherazade is presented as both subject of a tale and teller of tales. She is the frame by which other stories are told as part of a larger, personal narrative. It is similar with Drea, though she is not telling this story to save her life. She presents herself as narrator in the first few sentences, and we see this narrative voice come in periodically when she suggests that she might not be telling the story right or that she didn't know something at the time but could now correctly express what was going on during her story.

As it is for me, storytelling is hard for Drea, though she is no writer. Having her struggle with her frame narration helped me to be able to make mistakes or to write without self-editing too much. After all, it was Drea telling the story, not me. And the things I couldn't say quite right morphed into her voice and narration. Perhaps it was a cop out, a way for me to excuse incompetence; however, I believe (now that evolution is slowing) that natural inclinations in writing should be cultivated rather than stifled. For example, in another story I might keep myself from saying something like "that isn't the right word" or "I'm not quite sure how to say this" or "I would like to remind you that..." In *The Hero's Mother* I let go of almost every voice that was telling me to pull back the reins and instead let Drea speak. And so, it was her story and not mine.

While this style is not necessarily common in YA novels, it is not entirely unfounded either. Books such as the *Percy Jackson* series, *My Lady Jane*, and *The Book Thief* all have narrative elements where the audience is directly addressed and invited to participate in some way through direct humor or commentary. For example, in *My Lady Jane* by Cynthia Hand, Brodi Ashton, and Jodi Meadows, we are introduced to the narration in this way: “you may think you know the story...we have a different tale to tell. Pay attention. We’ve tweaked minor details. We’ve completely rearranged major details” (ix). By using the pronouns “we” and “you,” there is immediately an added personality and intimacy to the story. Someone is telling us this story and we are listening as if across a fire or in the corner of a library. Young adult novels are better equipped for such narration because of the tendency of young people to be drawn to intimacy rather than put off by it. Being addressed by Death in *The Book Thief* is not creepy or unnecessary but comforting. The narrators in *My Lady Jane* are not intrusive but helpful and often humorous.

It was Diana Wynne Jones who said that “your story can be violent, serious, and funny, all at once—indeed I think it should be” (4). Limiting genres can greatly limit characters and even plot. It is when writers follow so closely the heroic ideal that stories become one-dimensional and repetitive. Jones’s book *Howl’s Moving Castle* exhibits this concept of diverse genre and subversive heroism through the main character Sophie. She is the oldest of three sisters and expected to not do much of anything. Within the first few pages she is cursed to be an old woman, reiterating that she won’t be much of a hero in this story. However, by the end she is the hero through her caring and inquisitive nature. Like Sophie, Drea does not realize her magic talent until the very end of the novel. This was a conscious choice to first introduce Drea by other means. This is also seen in Nnedi Okorafor’s novel *Akata Witch*. We are first introduced to

the main character, Sunny, in this way: “My name is Sunny Nwazue and I confuse people” (Okorafor 1). She explains her dual citizenship (Nigerian and American), and her albinism which makes her seem white, though she is full blooded Nigerian. As the story continues, we learn about her magical powers. However, it isn’t until the end of the novel that Sunny uses these powers in what might be considered a heroic manner: “She stood up. Her body felt light. She felt strong. She realized that, above all things, she didn’t want to die huddling away, afraid, helpless. She was going to go out there and face Ekwensu, damn the consequences” (325-326).

Blending fantasy and reality is a way that these novels bring real, human issues into their fantastical worlds. In *Akata Witch*, Sunny deals directly with balancing her two lives as she struggles to keep her secret magic life from her non-power parents. This blend is sometimes called grounded fantasy or urban fantasy, though the genre lines aren’t perfect. One of the greatest struggles in this genre is the essential question “is it real?” asked by both the audience and the main characters. I introduce this question and theme to the readers as they are immersed into a world that is both magical and real— “Magic half heard and half out of sight,” as Jones says (72). The world that I explore in this novel is the ordinary world with the promise and suggestion of magic under the surface and around the corner. The nature of this world invites readers to ask if it is real or fantasy with the heroine. Many YA novels do similar things. Young adult literature is a great medium for grounded fantasy because of the duality that many young people experience in their lives. Teens are at an in-between age; in between adulthood and childhood, between respect, between the future and the past. Additionally, writing for young adults is often also writing for adults. These real-life struggles of transition are personified in grounded fantasy through dual world-building.

The fantasy that I choose to include in *The Hero's Mother* is more folkloric than high fantasy with creatures and wars for a kingdom. Italo Calvino, an author and collector of fairy tales, wrote “now that the book is finished, I know that this was not a hallucination...but the confirmation of something I already suspected—folktales are real” (qtd. in Warner:73). Did he mean that fairies, magic old women by the road, and strange talking creatures are real? More likely “he means that they speak of poverty, scarcity, hunger, anxiety, lust, greed, envy, cruelty, and all the grinding consequences of the domestic scene” (Warner 74). All these themes change a tale from something told simply for the sake of a good story into something which holds a greater purpose. This is the critical concept behind the tales of the ten Heroes: The Changer, The Chanter, The Mother, The Child, The King, The Champion, The Master, The Keeper, The Weaver, and The Devourer. Their tales are seeded throughout the novel and some are not even included. These tales work as reflections of Drea's own life and as a means for her and her family to connect with (and eventually find) their mother.

Though the ten hero stories are reminiscent of fairy tales, I did not set out with the intention of creating “new” fairy tales or copying old ones. While at one point in this novel's evolution it might have looked like a fairy tale adaptation, I believe it no longer fits that distinction. However, I do borrow from Calvino's idea that folk tales are real because they deal with real issues. Looking at them this way, fairy tales have always been far more grounded than one might first think. Again, this novel is not necessarily an adaptation of a single tale, but it is an adaptation of the telling of tales. It is Drea's mother who tells the tales and writes them down. She is the one who relates these stories to the family's life, and it is through these tales that relationships are formed and tested.

The Hazel Wood by Melissa Albert does similar things to the above. In this novel, Alice is haunted by stories written long ago by her grandmother. Stories she's never read herself. When the hauntings become physical, and increasingly dangerous, Alice sets out to find the root of these tales, the Hazel Wood. Where Alice's stories are dark and brutal, Drea's are sparse and utilitarian. Again, Drea's stories were never supposed to be imitations of fairy tales but instead presented as dream-like manifestations of a real past. Her mother retold these stories from visions or memories that were given to her as the hero Mother. Just as Scheherazade tells stories to her younger sister in order to save her life, Drea learns that it is through listening and telling that her family can be strengthened and saved.

Survival of the fittest is the essence of evolution. When something doesn't work, a new, better, stronger creature rises to take its place. Often that new thing is simply the grandson or granddaughter of what came before. Evolution is about bettering, not destroying. Why didn't I give up? Why didn't I abandon Drea's story when it became too hard or when it began to change in fundamental ways? Why I don't give up has a lot to do with the moon. When I was going through the worst parts of my depression, I would become claustrophobic in my shared apartment. Luckily, we had a small balcony that was facing away from any major streets. It was the perfect in-between place where I could sit against the outside wall with my knees up against my chest and look up without fear of things becoming too big for me. I often talked to the sky out loud. And though I knew who I was talking to, to the casual observer it would look like I was talking to the moon and the stars. *I want to be like you*, I said, *Celestial. Eternal. Bright enough to last for thousands of years.*

And though existential grief is what tore me away from my stories in the first place, it was the same thing which brought me back. It was living in-between which brought me enough balance to sit down in the scariest place I could think of (my own mind) and finally write the things which were haunting me. I was once at a conference where the presenter asked us where we would be without writing; without our stories. Where once I might have struggled to answer that question, I knew right away what I would say: I would be haunted; hearing whispers in the wind and seeing visions at night. This novel is far more than it seems. It is the balance between a girl torn by unseeable darkness and a woman who has become whole through time.

And though I just spoke of haunting and whispers, the fact remains that I could give up if I wanted to. I could put it away tomorrow and never look at it again. And though it is sometimes tempting, I know I never will. Drea can tell us why: “It [my story] is not heroic, though there are plenty of heroes. And the moments that we wait for, when things are the hardest, those moments that will help us feel brave or competent, they often don’t come. Because as much as life sometimes feels monotonous, meaningless, mono thematic, no story is completely predictable.” I will add to her words and say that I have learned to love the struggle some days. The things that make my life difficult have become a means for me to continually ask myself, will I give up now? Will today be the day that I decide I’m not good enough, not attractive enough, not form-fitting or trend-setting enough? And every time I answer “no,” even a feeble one, it is a celebration.

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Chapter 1

Motherlessness is a state so boring and genuinely cliché that I almost didn't mention it. There are so many more interesting things to be than motherless. For example, a chambermaid, a woman pirate disguised as a man, or someone who sells knitted animals online. And yet, I did mention it. I'm mentioning it right now. Because the truth is, I am a motherless girl. For seven years it's been this way and, sure, it was hard, but I think I've finally come to a place where I can be unapologetically honest with myself: I am motherless, I will always be motherless, I have been motherless, and I will be and am yet to be motherless.

Of course, that is an easy thing to say when you're holding your mother's newly printed death certificate in your hands. Or maybe it's harder while holding the certificate. Isn't it odd to call it a certificate? Like our family has achieved something by failing to find our missing mother to the point that she is no longer missing but presumed dead? And you wouldn't believe the paperwork involved just so we could stop shrugging and telling people she's cryptically gone. She's dead.

I held that piece of paper in front of the mailbox after school and ran my hand over the gilded lettering on the linen government paper. I wondered where I would put it and if I should maybe frame it. It was beautiful, after all, and better than the empty spaces on the wall where our family pictures used to be before my dad took them down. And more than that, that paper was proof that she was gone instead of just around any corner or in disguise in a foreign country. Of course, we still had our dad. He is a large man who works at a lumber yard—a genuine cliché of the Pacific northwest. He was intimidating on the outside, but gentle with Mom and playful with us kids. But when Mom went missing, he changed. He locked himself in his basement office and only came out for meals or when I told him we needed groceries.

And he was home from work when I approached the front door with proof his wife was dead. I looked over at Matt, my fourteen-year-old tender-hearted brother, and my heart contracted in my chest.

“What is that?” he said as he walked his bike down our long driveway. I whipped the paper slightly behind me but our younger sister, Willow, grabbed it out of my hands. She read it quickly and handed it to Matt. He frowned deeply and handed it back to me.

“Are you going to show it to Dad?” he asked.

“Hell no,” I said. And I meant it.

“Doesn’t he know it’s coming?”

“Either way, he doesn’t want to see it,” I said. Jacob Grimm, our dad named for fairy tale irony, was truly a tragic character. His grief was tangible; it was like living in a house with a corporeal ghost. And this ghost had some unfinished business. I’m not sure what convinced him to file for Mom’s official death, though I can guess the officers on her case had something to do with it, or a lawyer. Dad would never do it on his own because he’s obsessed with finding his lost wife. Everything is a clue, and every inch of his basement lair is covered in maps that he printed out and marked like some serial killer. He gave me hope in the early days that she hadn’t really left us or that she wasn’t dead. As the years went by and it became clear to us that he wasn’t going to let her go, we closed the basement door and left him to his own devices. He stopped eating dinner with us and asking about our day. He saw what his hope was doing to the family and instead of joining us in reality, he chose to stay away.

Dad’s silence was hardest on Matt. He looked up to Dad when he was younger and told everyone he wanted to be just like his him when he grew up. He would steal Dad’s shirts out of his closet and wear them around the house, eating everything Dad ate and trying to mimic the

way he sat, the way he walked, the way he talked. Dad would laugh and fluff Matt's hair and look at his son with barely contained joy. He hardly looked at any of us anymore.

I heard him down in the basement when we walked in. I called out to alert him that we were home but there was no response. Willow went to the backyard to check on her latest project (a bug terrarium) and Matt went upstairs to his room to do homework. I sat on the living room couch and stared at the death certificate in my hands. If there was some way I could have protected Dad from this, I would figure it out. I wanted to protect them all; so, I slid the paper into my backpack between two textbooks. My phone pinged a message, and I didn't look at it. I knew that it was Ian, a boy from my school. I also knew I didn't want to talk to him. Even though he'd lived in Ashwell for five years, he was still branded as the new kid. I'd never really noticed him, and he never really noticed me until halfway through last year. He glommed onto me, which according to the dictionary means to steal, catch, or grab.

It came and went in waves and always made me feel uncomfortable. Not because he was a bad guy, but because I'd much rather spend my free time studying death certificates, apparently. I looked at the message: *Did we have homework for history?* It said. *How did you get this number,* I replied, and set it aside.

I've lived my whole life embraced by the Ash forest. It's what I call a big small town, and the main thing that happened here in the last ten years is that a woman with three children went missing. Walked out of her house one night right at midnight and never came back, they say. Which is true. There's one school, one mini mart, one gas station, and one highway running through the forest town. I grew up in damp darkness and learned that it is possible to look straight up for hours and never see blue sky. I used to hold my book in front of my face and imagine her stories were the sky instead.

I'm getting ahead of myself. You don't know whose stories I'm talking about.

Let me show you instead.

Tucking the government paper into my bag brought my attention to a much more important artifact: my mom's book of stories. It is a composition book taped in many places; the cardboard covers strained to keep the bulging papers in their place. Mom's stories were never just stories. They weren't relegated to bedtime or saved for special occasions. She would tell bits and pieces, anecdotes, really, about people she felt she knew. Her characters were a common part of conversation as Mom went about her day. When she was doing laundry, she would tell us about how The Weaver made her clean clothes dance around the house and fold themselves into drawers. When Matt came downstairs for school wearing his clothes backwards (which he did for six months when he was five) Mom would say that the weaver was going to spin his clothes around on his body. Mom's voice drips from each page. Her voice had a tone of permanent astonishment; everything fascinated her, and she was easily excitable like a child.

I opened the book to a random page and read: *There is a land with ten heroes. They live all together in one kingdom, each holding responsibility over different regions depending on their heroic strengths. The King is at the center of it all and holds his righteous council of ten every year. They gather, each traveling their own way (the Weaver weaves a magical carpet, the Champion rides the biggest, fastest carriage) and discover that one of their ranks is missing: The Child. She isn't actually a child, Mom said, (although she would always add, "maybe she was"). The Hero's strengths were that of a child; she could imagine anything.*

At some point I stopped listening and tuned out her stories. When she asked me if I wanted to hear one, I'd walk out of the room with barely a word. I tried to forget the characters she chatted about as if they were her neighbors or childhood friends: The Weaver, The King, The

Master, The Champion, The Keeper, The Changer, The Devourer, The Child, The Chanter, The Mother. The ten heroes, she said. The ten heroes of a divided land.

One of the first things Willow learned to ask her was this, “are they real?”

And though I was eight and I thought I was too old for Mom’s fantasies, I listened for the answer. Was the Changer—the hero of legend who turned himself into any animal or person—real? Was there really a place that Mom saw where these people lived and ran kingdoms? Mom never answered her. She laughed, a honey-coated sound, and her eyes twinkled. Then she continued telling the story or tucking her youngest daughter into bed.

A year later she was gone.

Chapter 2

The next morning, I rode my bike alongside Matt and Willow to school like I did every day. The dark green firs flashed an unearthly glow on my pale arms like a strobe light, and the newly paved road seemed to slide out from under my wheels. The growing fall air reached down the front of my shirt and grabbed my lungs and I thought I was drinking the pines and the evergreens. I still had Mom's death certificate in my backpack: the official notice of Evelyn Grimm, now deceased. Of course, I wouldn't tell anyone at school, but I worried they would somehow tell that I was basically a harbinger of death—which according to Merriam Webster means someone who goes ahead to prepare lodgings.

The thickness of the Ash forest gave way with the first gas station that marked the beginning of town. I had fallen behind and caught up to Willow and Matt as she was taking everything out of her backpack in order to find her colored pencils. They didn't say anything when I pulled up, breathing heavily. Willow got back on her bike and we followed Matt around the corner Burger King, through the Good Mart parking lot, and down freefall hill by the grey office buildings. It's called that because it feels like a free fall, of course. I don't have to explain that one. We made it to the front of Ashwell school just as the first bell was ringing.

I re-braided Willow's hair before she pulled away from me to catch up with her friend and I turned to say something to Matt, but he was also gone; disappeared through the heavy, blueish doors of the main hallway. I sighed, straightened my bag on my shoulders, pulled up my pants with a quick wiggle and played it off like no big deal as I followed alone.

Ashwell High School is basic. Not minimalistic, Swedish-style, classic basic. Boring basic. And maybe every teenager who is forced to attend public school will say their school is boring, but Ashwell makes boredom an Olympic sport. For one, the colored ink went out of the

school printer five years ago and they have never replaced it. Consequently, every flier, every memo, every motivational poster of kids smiling in groups is the same faded grey, black, and white. It's especially sad when the tape used to stick them up starts getting old and the posters folded in on themselves in a dark depression.

Ashwell felt like an extension of me that morning. I breathed deep in the front hallway, took in the stale air, and let it float in my lungs for a while. The greyness infected me—struck me like a curse of boredom. It didn't matter if my mother was ever the center of town drama. It didn't matter that she was now officially dead. In here, we are all the same, colorless, mundane people we've always been.

There was nothing special about me. Nothing at all.

In third period photography class we were working on developing our photos from film. In black and white, of course. In our classroom we had two additional rooms: the dark room and the dark dark room; a pitch-black closet-sized space where we would take out film and put it into a canister so it can be washed and prepared for printing. I stepped into the dark dark room, thinking I was the last one to remove my film. I tripped on the door jam and reached for the counter I knew was in there.

“Hey. Who's that?” I heard someone say.

“Who wants to know?” I said.

“Someone who is holding scissors in a very dangerous position,” they said.

“Why are you pointing scissors at me?”

“I'm not trying to stab you or anything, I thought I was the last one and I was going to defend myself in case you were a demon.”

“If I were a demon your soul would be long gone,” I said.

“And here I thought Drea Grimm was a nice, quiet girl.”

“Well I thought Ian Hansen was brave,” I said.

“You think I’m brave?” He said.

“I was kidding,” I said, “I have to transfer my film. Why are you taking so long?”

“I got lost,” he said.

“Ha. Ha. Seriously, though.”

“I can’t load the freakin’ thing,” he said.

“You have to catch it right,” I said.

“I know that. I thought I was doing it right, but I think I’ve been in here for like twenty minutes now. I’ve seen so many come and go in my lifetime. I’m so tired. So very tired, Drea.”

“Okay, you win the Oscar. Give it to me.” I held out my hand to the darkness. I was afraid to move out of my spot in case he hadn’t put away his scissors yet. I heard him shuffling, inching toward my voice. He overshot it and practically punched me in the shoulder with his cannister.

“Ow. That’s not my hand,” I said.

“Sorry.” He came closer and found my hand with his free one. I couldn’t see anything, but I felt his strangely warm skin on my fingers. I knew he was only a few inches away from me and yet I couldn’t make out his face. Of course, I’d seen Ian Hansen almost every day for the past five years since he moved to Ashwell and took a genuinely weird interest in me. We were computer partners in class since the beginning of the year, and yet for some reason I didn’t remember what his face looked like. Our hands were in a tangle as he tried to pass his cannister off to me and find his film so I could load it in for him.

“You got it?” he said.

“I’m not going to do it for you,” I said.

“What? Why not?”

“If I do it for you, you’ll never learn.”

“Said like a true mom,” he said.

“Well I pretty much raised my younger sister,” I said. I heard him sigh and felt a faint breeze from his breath.

“Here,” I said. I took his fingers and placed them on the cannister, “see, here’s the opening and then you have to slide the film in but make sure it goes in right.” We were both silent as he struggled with the film.

“No. You have to do it right,” I said again.

“What do you mean? I thought I was doing it right. I’m going to be stuck in here forever, aren’t I?” Ian sounded frustrated and flustered.

“Right: in accordance with what is good, proper, or just. That’s what I mean,” I said.

“I don’t think that definition really applies here,” he said. I felt my face grow red and I was immensely thankful that the dark dark room was so dark. The phrase “harbinger of death” crossed my mind again and I wondered if maybe I really was a cursed herald.

“What I meant to say is the end of the film can’t be floppy. It won’t go in straight otherwise.” I heard Ian grumbling softly, his faith in my assistance clearly waning. Then there was the distinctive click as he cranked the first notch of the cannister which pulled the film inside and safe. Ian screamed in pure delight and I realized again just how close we were in that room. While he was celebrating, I quickly loaded my own film. Ian’s wild victory dance bumped my hip into the counter.

“Okay, I get it, you can dance in the dark. We should probably get back,” I said. I led the way out of the room. We had to squeeze ourselves first in an even smaller coffin-like entry, close one side against the dark, before opening the other side into the dim light. I saw Ian’s face then, almost level with mine. The first thing you always see when you look at Ian is his gigantic smile. It stretched across his face from freckle to freckle. He really does have two dark freckles at the points of his mouth and if you think too hard, he starts to look like a homemade rag doll. His constantly wind-swept hair adds to the overall vibe.

“Let’s go partner,” Ian beamed at me.

“I don’t think this is a group assignment,” I said. Maybe I was being dumb on purpose. Either way, Ian laughed, his head thrown back in a cartoonish manner. In the yellow light of the back of the classroom, it was hard to remember the worry or frustration I heard in his voice just seconds before. I started thinking maybe I was mistaken. Maybe he was just Ian, this Ian, the entire time.

“You helped me so now we’re partners,” he said.

“Well, we do have to share the same computer,” I said.

The second half of the class was what Mr. Fred called “study time” but was just an opportunity for him to fall asleep with his head in his hand under the assumption that his students wouldn’t notice. People took out their homework, phones, and books, not even bothering to hide them under their desks. Ian started Googling random things like “where does hair come from,” and “who sings that one song that goes la loo doo doo.” He found an answer to that one, surprisingly enough.

Chapter 3

I stole them on a Tuesday. The books. For most of the last seven years, my dad kept Mom's journals and notebooks under his desk in their own drawer. And though I imagine he used them for some sort of cross reference for finding her, they were kept hidden from us. A few years ago, Willow insisted I find them so she could remember what Mom used to tell us. I told her that it wasn't important, but she continued on about it for weeks. I told her I'd ask Dad though I knew he would never let me see them. While he held onto false hopes like a boa constrictor, he wanted to protect us kids from such a fate and if we read the stories again, we'd become just like him. Probably.

So, I stole them. Though is it technically stealing if it's in your own house and it belonged to someone who is now dead? I only grabbed two (there were at least five in that drawer) and Willow and I fell asleep reading them. There were many she had never heard before because she was too young. For me it was like seeing someone I hated in elementary school in the hallway years later. They were different and yet still left me feeling like I'd lost something all over again. Or maybe I never really found it and that's what was sad about it.

I held one of those stolen books in my hands in the Ashwell high school photography class. The one I carried with me everywhere about the ten heroes. I wasn't obsessed, and I will assert this point until the day I die. I wasn't looking for clues or hoping that she was still alive. It's important that you remember that I never thought she was still alive, and I wasn't thinking we needed to bring her back from the dead. They were stories and nothing else.

I read the one about The Weaver over and over until I felt sure the words would disappear under my relentless gaze. The bell rang and I jumped a little in my seat.

“You okay?” Ian asked. Though his smile was constant, his eyes showed concern. I wondered why he’d noticed me at all.

“I’m fine,” I said. Fine [adverb]: very small.

It was Matt, of all people, who brought up Mom’s death certificate to Dad at dinner that night. It’s kind of a pain when the people who you are trying to protect go and blow themselves up. We were already shocked that he joined us for our nightly pasta and we showed it by taking a vow of silence for the duration of the meal.

“Something came in the mail for you yesterday,” Matt said, well into his second bowl of spaghetti. Even in the throes of what might be madness, Dad looked put together and stoic. His worn plaid button-up was tucked into his jeans, like any good dad, and his hair was cleanly cut though it looked like he’s recently tugged on it, which he did when he was nervous. He had dark hair, like me, and an oval face which rarely showed any other emotion besides distress. I quickly interjected, “It was just some bills. I put them on the counter there,” I said.

“That’s a lie,” Willow said. She realized what she’d said and stared down onto her plate away from my accusing eyes. When none of us continued Dad cleared his throat.

“What was it?” he said. His voice was low and gravelly like he hadn’t talked in a while. Matt and Willow looked at me and I sighed. I’d lost the already losing battle.

“Mom’s death certificate,” I tried to keep my voice light and casual. Like it was no big deal. Just a formality. Which, to Dad, it was just a formality.

“Can I see it?” he asked. I went through every possible excuse in my head, trying to figure if he’d believe them or not. It fell in a puddle? It hadn’t rained for a week. I accidentally

ripped it beyond repair? Too cruel. They took it back because they found her and she's still alive? That's the only acceptable answer for him.

"I accidentally left it in my locker at school in one of my textbooks," I said. I didn't meet his eyes because the truth is, I'm a terrible liar and I always have been. He nodded and got up from the table even though he still had half a plate of food left. He placed it in the sink and walked out of the room, the kitchen door swinging behind him. He left a void where he sat and all three of us stared at it like it might conjure up a real ghost dad.

"I think that went well," Willow chirped.

"As well as it can go when your brother STABS YOU IN THE BACK," I said, looking at Matt. He raised his hands up as if to say, "don't shoot."

"I said we weren't going to tell Dad," I continued.

"You said *you* weren't going to tell him," Matt said. I already felt him retreating from the conflict.

"When I say that I mean none of us can tell him," I said.

"Well that wasn't clear. Isn't it better if he knows?" said Matt.

"Groundhog Dad went back into his hole. So that means there's another week of summer, right?" Willow said, still picking at her dinner. I shushed her.

"I'm trying to keep this family together and you're not helping," I said. I tried to even out my frustrated tone so that Matt didn't run away.

"We are together," he said. I gave him my best "really? You think so?" look. "well as together as we're going to be," he finished. I sighed again.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe this is the best we can do." Matt and Willow nodded in response and I suddenly felt bone tired.

Chapter 4

I've never been good at telling stories; I can't find the right words, there are too many fantastic ones. Like fantastic. Which now means something really cool when what it actually means is odd, bizarre, fanciful.

I want to be honest, open, vulnerable (which is the trendier of the three words, though they all basically mean the same thing: capable of or susceptible to being wounded or hurt). My story is messy. It is not perfect, and I often wonder if I need to tell it at all. How do I know if my story is worth telling? If it's exciting enough? If it has an adventure or some life-threatening danger?

Mom used to say that stories are almost never false or made up. She said there's truth in everything that is told honestly and openly. She also said that every good story has to have a princess in it, and she would smile at me and I'd smile back. None of her stories had princesses, so I guess they weren't good. But maybe that wasn't the point of her telling them. And now I'm here, telling this story, and I can't help wondering what the point is. If I never believed Mom's stories, what makes me think anyone would believe mine?

How can I call myself a storyteller at all?

Maybe someone can tell me the answer at the end of it all.

School the next day was as uneventful as buttered toast. I shuffled through the halls, looked at my feet and felt the weight of my backpack on my back. Not because I was particularly melancholy but because I was sorting out my thoughts from the night before. I wondered if I should apologize to Dad, or to Matt, or to someone. I wondered if there was such thing as a confessional at public school where I could go into a bathroom stall and tell a stranger things I

did and they wouldn't necessarily forgive me, but maybe they would say "uh huh, yeah" like you do to someone you aren't entirely listening to on the phone.

I guess that's what friends do. Listen to you talk about bad things and telling you it's okay, they will still hang out with you even if you did throw up on a stranger, or something like that. I wasn't entirely friendless at Ashwell high. I had what I call lunch friends: girls I sat with during lunch hour and we mostly talked about classes and teachers. Sometimes they'd say hi to me in the hallways, sometimes they wouldn't. I never saw them outside of school and they never saw me, but we had an understanding that we would always be there for each other at lunch if nothing more than to exist together. And then there was Ian, of course, though I never knew what he was rather than someone who seemed to like talking to me and sometimes asked me about my life.

They knew about my mom. Everyone did. It was in the papers for months when the police were leading an active investigation on her disappearance. They eventually stopped reporting it, but the search went on, though it was thin and spread out. After lunch was photography again. As I shuffled my way to class, I felt something in my gut that might have been anticipation and I wondered if Ian would be in class today. I don't know why I wondered that; he was always there. He never missed. Despite that, my brain went through everything I know about him: Ian Hansen, sixteen, taller than me by only a little, always smiled, lives with Gina Pierce a few blocks from the school, was placed here five years ago and there was talk that Gina was trying to make him officially her son. He was the first of Gina's foster children to stay in Ashwell longer than a year and he was her oldest.

I walked into class and came up behind Ian where he was already seated at our shared computer. He was typing something into a search bar, and I tried to decipher what he was writing:

“How to tell a friend that reading over someone’s shoulder is rude” it said.

“How did you know it was me?” I asked. I pulled the metal chair out from next to him, adding to the scratching and scritchng that was filling the dim room. He didn’t turn his head, he just kept typing things.

“How did you know that I was talking about you?” He said.

“How did you know I was referring to your search?” I countered.

“How did you know...” He paused, trying to find the right words as he stared at his screen with his freckled mouth slightly open.

“How did you know you were so bad at comebacks?” I said. He turned to me, finally, his eyes big and wide, like always, and a smile playing across his face.

“Come on, give me a break. I never grew up with siblings. I was raised by Canadian pirates. The youngest one was fifty and only had three toes.”

“Save it for your blog” I said. I pulled the keyboard away from him and tapped the enter key with my middle finger. Ian was too busy laughing. It was easy to distract him because almost everything made him laugh and when he did, he closed his eyes to let out a ridiculous sound. Before Ian calmed down and give me a retort, Mr. Fred got up from his desk and faced the class.

“Okay everyone,” he said in a bored, slow voice, “for class today we are starting our first big project which will be a photo essay. You and your partner will take pictures of people or things wherever and then create captions to connect them. So, go take some pictures.” He sat back down, and we all looked at each other, unsure what to do but no one was willing to ask him

to expand his instructions. Students immediately started pairing off, grabbing their friends by the arm as if they would disappear if they didn't claim each other right away. I always waited until the initial choosing was over and then I would say my signature line "I guess we're partners."

"Okay partner, what should we take pictures of?" Ian said. I turned to him.

"You talking to me?" I said. He laughed again.

"Yeah, remember? We're partners."

"Don't you usually partner with Gil Tennison?"

"Gil's an idiot. He'll get over it," Ian said. I wanted to laugh because I saw Gil coming over to Ian while he was talking but then he abruptly turned with a hurt look at his face when Ian said he was an idiot; I didn't want to give Ian the satisfaction.

Chapter 5

That weekend, I was contented. Satisfied. At ease with myself and my surroundings. With that one very important piece of mail, the certificate, I thought it was over. I thought now I could do all the things I was waiting to do in case Mom ever came back. Naturally, I was going to go to the library and check out old books.

“Dad, can I borrow the truck?” I called down to him on my way out the door. I’d just gotten my license a couple months earlier and while there weren’t many opportunities for me to actually drive, it served me well in those rare occasions when my desire and Dad’s days off coincided. I heard a faint humph come from the basement through the open door which I recognized as his “sure, why not” humph.

“Kay thanks,” I said. I turned and Willow was standing in front of me in the entryway. I jumped a little, my hand to my chest.

“Where are you going?” She said, her eyes wide. Willow’s long dark hair was in a wispy braid that she’d done herself last night and never took out. She was still wearing her pajamas which were a pair of cotton-jersey shorts and one of my old t-shirts that had a rip in the armpit.

“The library. Why, you want to come?” I said. I grabbed the keys from their regular place in a bowl on a side table by the door.

“I’m not interested in dying, thank you very much,” She said. I rolled my eyes.

“Did you finish your homework?” I asked. She didn’t say anything as I was rummaging in my bag looking for my wallet.

“How long will you be gone?” Willow asked. I turned again, looking her in the eye. Her eyes are too big for her eleven-year-old frame. And though she grows taller every day, she’s still smaller than most of the kids in her class; a fact which has never seemed to bother her and which

obviously didn't bother her in that moment as she stood tall in front of me with her neck long. Her eyes stared right into my soul.

"I don't know. Not too long. Why? What are you planning?" I squinted my eyes, trying to mimic her soul-searching gaze and unwrap her secrets.

"I have an art project I want to do." She shrugged.

"No. Last time you did an 'art project' we had to have the furniture professionally cleaned."

"In the kitchen," she said.

"No."

"What if it's for homework?" she said. Her concentration was unwavering and unnerving.

"No. Dad's home today so don't create more stress in this house than there already is." I was halfway out the door, trying to give Willow my best 'You better not cross me' face which was foolproof when she was six but hadn't been super effective for the past year or so.

"I'll make sure she doesn't destroy anything," Matt said. He was standing at the top of the stairs looking down at us.

"Okay fine," I finally said, "bye, see you in a bit," and I closed the door behind me. I trotted down the porch stairs and climbed into Dad's work truck. The cab smelled like him; like dirt on the undersides of boots, mint gum, and a bit of sawdust. I rolled down the windows as the sun was shining and there was only a slight nip in the air to herald the beginning of fall. As I drove, I kept one hand out the open window and let it weave in the air like it was flowing on the waves. I kept my hand poked outside and I felt the light wash over my forearm.

The Ashwell library is small, intimate, and like a time machine. The orange carpet, the low ceilings, and the dim lighting all create an effect that you've stepped back in time to the

1970s when this library was built and apparently it hasn't moved on since then. Despite the mildew smell, I liked the library and I felt my shoulders relax just a little every time I went inside. Every sound, every slam of a book and roll of a cart was muffled and echoed back to the person who made it. If you were to scream in the library, I'm sure you'd be screaming at yourself.

I made my way to the reference section, but I was stopped halfway there by someone stepping in my way. I jumped back to avoid collision. Ian smiled back at me. Glom [noun] a look or glimpse; catch, snag, arrest.

"Hey" he said.

"Hey," I said, because I didn't want to be rude. Because what I really wanted to do was to ask him why he was following me because that's what it felt like.

"Good to know I'm not the only one who spends their weekends at the library," said Ian. He shuffled his feet with his hands in his pocket.

"Yep. You're in good company. I too like to time travel to a world without technology," I said. He chuckled.

"Okay," I said, "see you at school." I brushed past him and he turned with me.

"Oh," he called to my back, "I think you dropped this."

He was holding a thick, cream envelope.

"I don't think so," I said.

"But it has your name on it." I inspected it closely and it really did have my name printed on the front in scribbly letters:

Drea Grimm

"It's not mine," I said again. I frowned at the letter.

“Well maybe someone left it here for you?” Ian asked.

“On the floor?” I said.

“I’m just telling you I found this envelope with your name on it on the floor. I don’t know where it came from,” he said. He was trying to sound assured, but he still looked like he was on the verge of laughing. I gave him a suspicious side eye. I grabbed the envelope from him and held it between my fingers. It was thick, like there was something inside. I wasn’t going to open it because I’d never seen it in my life. But it was for me. And when I touched the outside, a shiver ran up my arm that made all my hairs stand up. I shook my head as if trying to dispel the creeping under my skin. I opened it with Ian watching me as I slid out the paper from the envelope and grabbed the corner to unfold it, my interest level somewhere between dread and anticipation.

It felt like the paper had pricked me. A thin circle of blood spidered across the paper under where my thumb was gripping the letter. When I raised my thumb to see what was under it, there was nothing but smooth, now-bloodied, paper. I thought that I must have cut it while I was opening the letter. Ian’s eyes went wide, and my pulse skittered in my chest. As I read it, I found that it wasn’t a letter in the traditional sense. It was more of a nonsensical poem:

Beautiful wares for sale, for sale,

And she cries for her hatred is a weed,

Until she has no peace. Will you save her

White as snow, red as blood, black as ebony wood.

Look I’ll cut the apple in two. You eat the

Red half, and I shall eat the white half.

Now you are finished

White as snow, red as blood, black as ebony wood.

Are you afraid of poison?

Will you take fright, turn yellow and

green with envy? Are you now

white as snow, red as blood, black as ebony wood?

The blood of the Mother shall come

For the Child: ten, five, three, one.

When you wake, come find me

White as snow, red as blood, black as ebony wood.

No signature, no “best” or “cordially”. Just a weird poem that rang in my brain and echoed off the walls inside me. My heart seized in my chest, though I didn’t know why; I was afraid. Maybe “afraid” is a little too mild for what I felt. I was terrified. No, I was scared. Neither of those sounds right. After reading that note I felt like my lungs and my stomach had swapped places and I was breathing out of my belly button.

I was disquieted: uneasy, apprehensive. Sick to my air-breathing stomach.

I shoved the letter in my shoulder bag and raced out of the library without another word to Ian. He might have said “wait” or asked me what was wrong, I don’t remember. But I knew I had to get out of there. I drove all the way home as if someone were chasing me.

Chapter 6

That night I sat on the couch with the letter clutched in my fist. I left the library looking over my shoulder like it was a death threat or something. I knew it was probably nothing. At least, I thought it was nothing, but I felt something pushing me out the door and back home like a fishing line hooked into my chest and dragging me. I couldn't put my finger on what made me uneasy and I sat there in the growing darkness trying to think of the right word. I didn't find it. I read the letter again, I turned it over (it was blank), and lined up my thumb with the rust-colored bloody print I left behind. And how was Ian involved in the non-threat threat? Maybe he really did just pick it off the ground, but I wasn't sure if I totally trusted someone who smiled as much as he did.

Someone sat down on the couch next to me and the cushions sighed in resignation.

"What's that?" It was Matt and he was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees to match my position. I sat up in response. I stared at the back of his head for a moment and wondered how time moved by so fast. When I was eleven, Willow's age, I never thought I'd be a teenager. I was sure I'd be eleven forever. When I was Matt's age, I was so tired. I don't remember from what, but I was tired. Maybe of helping Will with her math. Maybe of ignoring Dad and his looming, silent, presence. That's when I started pulling out Mom's notebook and reading it after everyone went to bed.

I was tired again. Matt's question was so sincere and simple. What was I holding? Could I tell him about it? Would it even matter?

"Just some notes from school," I said. He leaned back and I noticed his shoulder was nearly even with mine. "What's up, buddy?" I said. Matt looked at me and scrunched his nose.

He hated it when I gave him condescending nicknames, but he never objected. He was quiet a moment before responding.

“I just found out I got onto the soccer team,” he said.

“That’s great.” I didn’t sound excited enough. Matt shrugged as if he could tell but it didn’t really matter to him.

“You want to tell Dad?” I asked. Matt didn’t say anything again. Mind-reading discussions were a staple of mine and his relationship. He’d tell me something and sit in silence while I figured out what he really wanted.

“You want to tell Dad because you think he’ll be excited but you’re afraid he won’t care,” I added. Matt kind of cocked his head in what might be a nod but could be confused with a neck twitch. I knew I’d hit part of the problem and I finally stuffed the letter into my pocket. When I remembered I didn’t have any pockets I stuffed it in between some couch cushions and told myself to not forget it was there. I wasn’t in the mood to tell Matt that he should be brave, that he should just tell Dad because it mattered to him.

“Don’t tell him,” I said. Matt looked at me with one eyebrow raised, “when did you learn how to do that?” I asked.

“I’ve always been able to do this,” he raised his eyebrow again.

“That’s not true. Anyway, you’re probably right. He probably won’t care very much so don’t tell him.”

“Aren’t you supposed to tell me to face my fears?” he said.

“Why?” I brought my legs up onto the couch and tucked my knees under my chin. My back was rounded, and I stretched my forearms trying to keep all of me together.

“You used to say things like that,” he said.

“I don’t remember that. I just think it’s time to be realistic about Dad. He’s never going to be the same, Matt, and we shouldn’t keep expecting him to be normal or to even be around. You’ll just keep getting disappointed.” My little brother slouched down a little and brought his arms across his chest.

“Look, Matt. Are you excited? About getting on the soccer team?”

“I mean. Yeah.”

“Then nothing else matters. Who cares if he knows or doesn’t know or cares or doesn’t? We’ve been taking care of ourselves for years now. All that matters is if it’s important to you and it is, so be excited.” I tasted the bitterness in my mouth and I wanted to wash it out. It wasn’t a foreign taste to me, but it was unsettling. I never lied to my brother. Everything I said to him I believed completely. That’s why Matt was so scared of Dad. Not really because he was intimidated or afraid of disappointing him. Because he was afraid that if he talks to him too much, if he messes with the status quo, that we’ll wake up to a missing dad and seven years later he too will be presumed dead.

I got up from the couch, grabbing onto Matt’s shoulder to use as a hoist. I made my way to the kitchen so I could wash out my mouth with whatever soda we had in the refrigerator. Matt called me back from where he was sulking.

“It’s you,” he said.

“What?”

“We haven’t taken care of ourselves. You’ve been taking care of us.”

I snorted, mostly to cover the wobbliness in my throat.

“Nice job I’m doing,” I said.

I pushed open the swinging door and walked into the kitchen. Matt got up from the couch and walked up the creaky stairs to his room.

I finished my homework late. Late enough that I had to sneak around the bedroom I shared with Willow in the dark. I'd collected the letter from the couch and tucked it under my pillow. I didn't know why I was carrying it around with me like a talisman. But when I laid my head down, I knew that it was under there and that somehow made me feel odd. Like something different was going to happen. Odd: fantastic or bizarre. Like when you look up at clouds moving fast and it feels as if they're dragging you along with them. I closed my eyes to keep from getting dizzy imagining oddness.

"Drea," a hoarse whisper cut through the nauseating darkness, "Drey." A little louder.

"What?" I mumbled back, half of my face smushed into my bed.

"Tell me a story." My heart rose up in my chest in response.

"You've got to be kidding me, Will. It's late. Go to sleep."

"Tell me one of Mom's stories." I opened my eyes to stare in her direction. I saw her big eyes peering over a comforter pulled up to her nose. I've dreaded that request for years now. Since I told her I found Mom's book and reminded her that Mom would ever tell us stories in the first place. She'd never said anything. Never requested to hear another one, until that night.

"Why?" I asked. Will wiggled in her bed either nervous or settling in for a big discussion.

"I don't remember," was all she said.

"You don't need to remember," I said. I rolled over so I was staring at the wall.

"Why do you get to read them, but I don't?" she said to my back. I didn't respond. I'm not entirely proud of my grumpy behavior, but I believed at the time that I was protecting her.

From what, I wasn't sure. But I knew somewhere inside me that I shouldn't tell her the stories she didn't remember. Because maybe she'd ask me the same question, "are they real?"

And I'd have to tell her.

It was a lot harder to negotiate with Willow than it was with Matt. Where Matt was soft, Willow was sharp. Where Matt was bending, Willow had the rigidity of an ironing board. I heard her huffing and squirming under her covers, kicking at the bottom of her bed. I wouldn't call Willow's frustrations tantrums exactly, more like elegant outbursts.

"Will, I'm tired," I said, turning back to her.

"So?" she said. Willow won most arguments we had by being surprising. I'd try to be reasonable, but she'd find a way to loosen one knot with the simplest words. It didn't matter if I was tired. Telling stories doesn't rely on physical energy, after all. I reached out into my bag that was leaning against the side of my bed and shuffled through papers to find the notebook. I laid my palm flat on the cover and practically melted into my mattress. The book felt warm like it was sitting in the sun or recently ironed.

"Fine. I'll tell you the first story she ever told me," I finally said.

"How old were you?"

"I don't know. I think it was when you were one maybe? So I was, 6? Or 5 maybe?"

"Did she tell you before you went to bed. Like this?"

"I don't remember. She was sitting next to me, I remember that, and she had her hand resting in the middle of my back."

"How do you remember that but you don't remember how old you were?"

"Stories aren't supposed to be interrupted, Will. You want me to tell it or not? Because I'm two seconds away from just sleeping on the couch downstairs."

“What’s wrong with you?” she said.

“I’m trying to be nice and tell you a story, what’s wrong with you?” Willow huffed in response. She’s a night owl which makes her what I call night sassy as well. Most of our arguments happen when we’re both lying in bed and usually end with one of us sleeping downstairs or on Matt’s floor.

“Tell the story,” she commanded. I took a deep breath.

“There is a land with ten heroes. They live together in one kingdom, and they each hold responsibility over different regions depending on their heroic strengths. The King is at the center of it all and holds the council of ten every year. One day, the Ten heroes gathered, each traveling their own way (the Weaver weaves a magical carpet, the Champion rides the biggest, fastest carriage) and discovered that one of their ranks was missing: The Child. She isn’t actually a child, Mom said. the Hero’s strengths were that of a child.”

“What does that mean?” Willow asked.

“Well from other stories, it means The Child hero had the ability to imagine anything.”

“So if she imagined a pizza it’d just show up?”

“I don’t know how it works. I just know what the story says. Anyway, *The King sent out the Champion, the Changer, and the Chanter to find her because he was afraid that the Child was overtaken by her enemies without the other heroes there to help her. The Mother was one of the heroes left behind and nobody would listen when she tried to give suggestions of where the Child could be. Growing tired of the Mother’s pestering, the King threw her out of the hero’s palace and told her that if she thought she knew everything than she should find the Child on her own.*

The Mother wandered the ten regions for ten years searching for the Child. She saw strange faces by day and strange visions by night pulling her closer to her goal. One such strange day she stopped to rest against an old tree and closed her heavy eyes. She was woken up by a man with a full, black beard and a thick coat. The Mother was amazed to find that while she rested snow had fallen and piled up on her meager cloak wrapped around her. The man took her back to his home so she could get warm.

The Mother never returned to the Hero's Palace and she never found the Child. Likewise, the Champion, The Changer, and the Chanter were never seen again in the ten regions. Ten became five. Five became three. Three became one. Until finally the King sat alone in his once-great palace of heroes listening for the echoing voice of the Child who tore them all apart."

"That's a sad story," Willow said when I finished.

"Is it?" I said. I'd never considered the emotion of the story, only that it was the first one she ever told me. I tried to skim the pages open in my hands but I barely made out the words scribbled there in blotched ink.

"Yes," she said, "the heroes were lost, and the mother never found her child."

"It wasn't her child; it was *the* child."

"Well, it's still sad." The room was quiet as I stared up at the ceiling.

"It's late, Willow. If you don't go to bed right now, you'll be tired all day tomorrow."

"Thanks, Drea." She said.

"For what?" I asked. She didn't answer and I soon heard her slow breathing floating across the room.

Chapter 7

I woke the next morning to something sharp digging into my neck. I turned and groaned, the sound that only is emitted by the living dead and those woken up from the depths of sleep. It was the open pages of Mom's book that woke me. I must have fallen asleep with it on my chest and it moved with me in the night until the book was strangling me. A quick glance showed me that Willow was still asleep so I pushed the book on the ground and slid my hand under my pillow, trying to find the exact position that I was in just moments before so I could reclaim some of the sleep that was stolen from me by telling stories last night.

Something slid under my fingernail when I stuck my hand under the pillow, and I suppressed a sharp gasp. I took it out and remembered I'd stashed the strange letter there before I went to bed and now it took its revenge by giving me another paper cut. I threw it on the ground by the book and it fluttered open, the folded parts forming a perfect triangle. Something caught my eye, a word, a letter, a certain flip of an "a" or "n". I rubbed my face, my eyes, to get rid of the sleep blur, and picked up the letter. Then the book.

And though I know I should have realized earlier, it wasn't until I was holding them side by side that I understood: The Mother shall come for The Child. Those weren't people but titles. In the story The Mother leaves the palace to look for The Child.

When you wake come find me.

Not only that, it was the way the letter was written. The way the words looked on the page where the loops in the g's and y's were too big and swept up and above the other letters. Or how there were too many commas and not enough capitals. It was the same way notes on the refrigerator were written many years ago. The ones that said, "you make me proud," signed, "Mom."

I shot out of bed, tore off my covers, and put on the nearest clothes which happened to be the same ones I wore the day before. I didn't ask Dad if I could borrow the car, I just took it. The library opens at 9:00, I remembered, if I got there when it opened, I would be back before Willow and Matt even woke up. We always slept in on Sundays and the house was basically under a sleep spell until 10:30. Maybe Dad wouldn't notice. And if he did notice, maybe he wouldn't care.

I sped down the highway faster than I think I've ever gone. I had to swerve once when a car didn't quite get out of my way fast enough. After that, it was like the universe understood my anxiety and got out of my way.

I talked to myself as I went, trying to reason it out.

"It can't be her handwriting," I said, "How did she know I was going to be there seven years after she disappeared. She couldn't. And it's not like someone wouldn't notice it before yesterday. It's impossible" I said to nothing, "impossible."

I wasn't sure what I would do when I got to the library. Check around for more letters maybe? Spy on library patrons to see if any of them have the same handwriting as my dead mother? I told myself an idea would come to me when I got there. It was 9:01 when I arrived, and the doors had just opened. There was a man carrying a plastic bag full of other plastic bags, a young father nervously holding the hand of his little daughter while she held a book too big for her arms to her chest. His was the face of someone who had an overdue book and now owed money to the library.

I waited for them to go in and then I followed. I carved a path directly to the woman at the reference desk. She was middle-aged with dark hair that was completely gray at the roots and

by the sides of her face. Her wrinkles were soft like the paper of Mom's book and her smile slid slowly over her round face when she saw me approaching.

"Yes?" she said, "how can I help you?"

"I found this letter here yesterday, well technically my friend found it, and I'm wondering if you know who dropped it here." I placed the letter carefully on the counter in front of me but kept my fingers on it so she knew that she could look but I wasn't giving it to her. She pulled purple glasses as if from thin air and placed them on her face in a practiced motion.

"Drea Grimm," she said, "that's you?" She looked up at me and I felt my face go red. Her narrow eyes were looking right into my soul just the way that Willow's often did. I cleared my throat.

"Yes. That's me."

"I was sorry to hear about your mother," she said. I didn't know what to say. I operate under the assumption that everyone in Ashwell knew the story and were here for the whole thing seven years ago, but no one had brought it up directly to me for years.

"Thanks. It was a long time ago." She smiled small and nodded then looked back at the letter.

"I don't think anyone has found any letters laying around. It looks like this one was just for you," She finally said.

"But how," I heard my own voice screaming back at me and I quickly lowered my tone, "Who put it there? And when? And how could—" The reference lady was looking at me, smiling softly and sadly. She couldn't answer my questions.

"I'm sorry," I said, "thank you for your help." I moved away from the desk, but I wasn't ready to leave the library yet. She was there, my mom. But was it before she disappeared or

after? Was it a goodbye note? An admission of guilt or a notice of abandonment? I felt like crying, or maybe tearing the letter into tiny pieces, or both.

“Can’t cry over nothing,” I said to myself. Nothing had changed since yesterday, or the day before except now I had two more pieces of paper than I did before: one that told me something clear, definitive, the other presented only questions. I wandered further into the stacks looking for some sort of clue. More pieces of paper maybe, or another story. I felt minutes ticking by and the voice in the back of my head told me I had to get home; had to tell Willow and Matt to clean their rooms and then make sure neither of them fell out of a tree or twisted their ankles on loose steps or burned their fingers on a pot left on the stove.

I willed my feet to turn me back and go out the front double doors. I spun around on the packed shag carpet and nearly fell backwards. My calf hit a corner of a bookcase and I hissed inward. Ian was inches away from me, smiling at me, and waiting for me to recover from my initial shock.

“How’s it going, partner?” He said. His look was so innocent and simple that I couldn’t find it in me to lie to him.

“Not great. Why are you always sneaking up on me?” I said.

“Oh, sorry,” He scratched his head just above his ear, “I thought you’d come back here. So, I came to find you.”

“To say what?” I said, “I have to go.” I passed him and made my way to the door. Ian stopped me just a few feet away from him.

“Wait,” he said. I turned back around, this time careful in case he was standing too close again. Ian wasn’t smiling which made my heart leap in my chest, although his cheek twitched like it was trying hard not to be joyful.

“What?” I said when he didn’t continue. Ian cleared his throat which is usually an indication that someone is nervous but the word I choose to describe him in that moment is careful.

“I heard you talking to the desk lady.”

Surprisingly enough, I wasn’t embarrassed or red-faced or anything when he admitted that, although one could classify my conversation with her as a low-grade freak out. I waited.

“You seemed like you were afraid of something and I felt like I should ask you—” he rocked back on his heels and twisted his fingers together. It was so strange I could hardly pay attention to what he was saying, though it wouldn’t take a genius to figure out what he was steeling himself to say. I’d heard it one hundred times after Mom went missing: *Are you alright, how are you holding up?*

“—do you need any help?” Ian finished. I felt like he’d flicked me in the forehead and told me to wake up. Help: to save, rescue, or lend strength. I wasn’t saying anything, and Ian started smiling again. My automatic reaction kicked in but there was no strength behind it; I’d lost it somehow.

“I—I’m fine. I—” air caught in my throat in the middle of answering and I nearly choked, “I don’t need any help,” I pushed out. It obviously sounded like I needed a lot of help right then. But Ian didn’t ask any other questions. He smiled small and nodded his head.

“Okay then. I’ll see you tomorrow I guess.”

He walked away into the tall shelves until he turned a corner and I didn’t see him anymore. There was an armchair close by and I sat down heavily with a whoosh of cushions and air. I wasn’t sure why Ian’s question disarmed me. Maybe because I wanted so badly to say yes, I do need help. I pressed my palms over my eyes and tried to breathe out everything that I had

held in for days. I'd done so much on my own that it was unreasonable for me to want help from someone I only half knew about something I wasn't even sure mattered, wasn't it? And even though I wanted to call him back and tell him that I was lying, and I felt like I was falling apart, I wasn't going to. Because—well the because was kind of fuzzy and had a lot to do with the dangers of public emoting and possibly about my lunch friends and how it was the rules of lunch-only friendship that kept them with their lives and me with mine. It probably also had to do with Willow and Matt and what they would think of me if now, when I'm the oldest I've ever been, after everything I've done for them, I decide I can't do it on my own.

No. It was clearly for the best that I refused his offer.

And yet.

I knew it wasn't.

I got out of the chair, wrapped my fingers into fists, and practically marched in the direction I saw him go. I didn't give my mind any time to think about what I was doing. When I faced him again, I'd open my mouth and something would come out, I was sure of it. I turned the corner and he was crouching there with his head almost upside-down reading book spines.

"I need your help," I said. He jerked up quickly and his sweeping hair fell into his face. He pushed it away.

"Why are you yelling at me," he mimicked my stilted sentence. I cleared my throat and tried to speak more normal.

"Sorry. I need your help with something."

"That's better," he walked closer to me and seemed to be standing taller than he usually does at school because his forehead was almost an inch above mine.

“Do I have something on my face?” He asked, rubbing the spot on his forehead that I was apparently staring at.

“No. Sorry. I need your help.”

Ian laughed.

“Yeah, I know. With what?” he said. I looked around us as if I was afraid of someone walking up and spying on our conversation. I wasn’t sure what I was trying to hide, but I already felt protective of what I was about to tell him.

“Well, it has to do with that letter you found.” Ian nodded thoughtfully as if to reassure me that he was listening.

I told him about Mom’s death certificate coming almost a week ago in the mail. I told him about the poem; about the handwriting and how it matches perfectly with the stories from Mom’s book. That I was sure it was written by her, though I didn’t know when or why. Like I’ve mentioned before, I’m not the best storyteller, but Ian listened through all my backtracks and unnecessary exclamations. I felt my shoulders relax slowly as I spoke. The words flew faster and smoother out of my mouth until I was sure I was speaking a thousand words per minute, but he never interrupted me or said he didn’t understand.

Finally, I showed him the letter. Unfolded it there between the bookcases. My thumb instinctively moved to cover the dark red mark in the lower corner. Ian moved closer to me until our shoulders were pressed together. I didn’t care, or really notice. I was swept up in my story and looking at Ian’s face as he read the words himself. He moved his mouth a little while he was reading as if he wanted to read them out loud but was holding himself back. Looking that close, I noticed other freckles on his face by his hairline and how the color of his hair was slightly different right at the roots. Of course, I wondered if he dyed his hair and I wondered if I could

ask him that, or if it would be too weird. Then I started imagining Ian with red hair, or maybe blue, or platinum blond.

He finished reading the letter and moved a few inches away from me, which broke my line of thought and pulled me back into the present.

“So?” I said when he didn’t immediately react to the letter. In class and in the hallways, I felt like I could always tell what Ian Hansen was thinking. He never hid his annoyance or delight or frustration. But here, in the public library, on a weekend, his face revealed nothing but calm.

“So what?” He said, shrugging his shoulders.

“So what? I just told you I got a letter from my dead mother and you say, ‘so what?’”

Ian reached and rubbed the back of his head.

“Sorry. What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. Something like, you’re not crazy Drea, or maybe your mom isn’t actually dead, or something?”

“You think this letter means she’s not actually dead? That she’s still out there somewhere?” he asked.

“Isn’t that the only explanation?” I hadn’t quite realized how much I was thinking about it until I finally voiced it. I was trying to find some other explanation because I wanted the answer to be that she was dead. Sounds terrible, doesn’t it? But I couldn’t ignore the pleas from the poem of ‘come find me’.

“So, you’re saying she brought the letter to the library recently? That she was here?”

“No. Yes.”

“Why wouldn’t she just go home?” he said.

“I don’t know Ian, that’s why I need help.”

“She could have put the letter in there before she disappeared,” he said.

We were both silent for about a minute. He was obviously thinking through everything I told him, and I wasn't about to interrupt him.

“Okay,” He said.

“Okay what?” I said.

“Okay, I'll help you.”

Ian let his easy smile spread across his face and I thought again about how every time he smiled I was surprised by how quick it came. I shook my head a little, but I was smiling too, which only made him smile more. I stuck my hand out to him.

“Partners?” I said. Ian practically burst out of his skin.

“Partners,” he said, and he took my hand tightly in his. The hair on my arm stood on end and I felt a wave wash over me. I felt freer somehow. Stronger maybe. We didn't shake, we just stood there for a moment clasping hands.

Chapter 8

Everyone imagines life without their parents. Traditionally parents die before their children so it really is a natural thing to think about; what will I do when they're gone? How will I be? And if you have to think about these things a lot sooner than you thought, it's definitely disorienting. Mom and I weren't best friends or anything. She was my mom, so I loved her, but I was nine when she was gone and was trying to define myself outside of my parents. I would say dumb things like "I want to be alone" and stamp off to my room. I had to change overnight.

For a while it was like a very important stranger had left. Adults asked me where she could have gone, did she say anything to me, was she acting strange? I just shook my head because she'd been strange to me for a while, not just recently. Maybe the letter writer was so important because of all of this. Because while I might not have known my mother, I knew her handwriting. I knew the words she used to tell stories and the tone of voice she adopted when she said "I have a story for you" all times of day and night. Maybe that's not enough to find her when she's missing, but I thought the next day as I went to school that maybe it was enough to bring her back from the dead. I didn't know yet if she even needed to be brought back, though I thought for the sake of the Grimms that she needed to be found either way.

My brain was itching, and incessant questions were moving into my heart and filling my lungs so all I saw when I blinked my eyes were the words "when you wake, come find me." I was on my way to my regular lunch table when I felt something tug at my backpack and I nearly fell back. I twisted around to see what was holding onto me. It was Ian sitting at the end of his usual table and he was grinning at me, of course.

"What do you want?" I said, glaring at him.

"We're partners now, right?"

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we have to sit together at lunch,” I said.

“Why not?”

I didn’t have an answer for him.

“Fine, we can sit together,” I said.

“Okay, good because I have some things I want to discuss with you,”

“Like what?” I asked, sitting down in the empty space across from him. I kept my back straight and stiff, on guard of our new friendship.

“Well,” Ian said, leaning across the table. His shoulders were hunched like he was about to say something dangerous, “I think I know what we need to do next.”

“Yeah?” I picked up my cafeteria taco and tried to stuff all the loose contents back into the most likely stale shell.

“What do people say you need to do when you’ve lost something?”

“Look with your eyes not with your mouth,” I said.

“What? No,” Ian said, his eyebrows scrunching up, “retrace your steps.”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant.” I hadn’t yet taken a bite of my taco. Instead I held it suspended between my mouth and my plate.

“You’re saying we need to retrace my mom’s steps?” I said.

“Exactly. Glad we’re on the same page,” Ian said.

“She was gone in the middle of the night, Ian. How would anyone even know what her last steps were?”

“Look with your eyes, Drea.” Ian, looking frustratingly satisfied with himself, chomped down on his cafeteria cheeseburger which was both too wet and too dry at the same time.

“Okay. If we’re going to really do this, we have to do this right. Smart. Sharp.”

“You can’t do something sharp.”

“I know,” I snapped, “what I mean is we can’t just flail around like a couple of dumb kids.”

“But that’s what we are,” he said.

“No. It’s not. We’re determined. There’s a difference,” I said.

“If you say so.”

“We have to go to the police,” I said.

“Why?”

“Well they supposedly have whatever evidence they collected through the years on my mom’s disappearance. And now that she’s legally dead, those documents probably belong to the family or something like that.”

“Worth a try, I guess. If you want to be sharp about it,” Ian smirked at what he probably thought was a joke.

“If we’re going to do this you can’t make fun of my words,” I said.

“You should use your words better then.”

“My words are always correct, accurate, and proper.”

“I can see already that this is going to be a ton of fun,” he said. I rolled my eyes and made sure it was clear enough that he saw the full rotation.

I bit my stale cafeteria taco and inhaled a stray lettuce bit. I choked and sputtered and the lunch girls the next table over stopped their mundane conversations to stare at me struggling for breath. When I didn’t stop, more people looked around in their seats to witness the death of Drea Grimm. Finally, I got a hold of myself and took a drink of water, which I also choked on.

“You okay?” Ian said. I nodded to assure him I wasn’t actually dying and got up from the table in order to save face. I coughed my way out of the cafeteria and into the deserted hallway.

I leaned against a row of lockers and finally breathed in enough to move whatever it was that went down the wrong pipe. I swallowed the last bits of taco left behind and took a drink from the nearby water fountain. When I stood back up my vision blurred, and I felt a rolling nausea emanating from the pit of my stomach and spreading outward. I thought maybe the taco was a bad choice. Especially because the meat was in little square pellets. I decided I was good enough to go back into the cafeteria now that the coughing stopped so I made my way back down the hallway to the double doors. I only took a couple steps and my knees gave way underneath me. My head felt heavy and I wanted to lay down in the middle of the hallway and sleep. The nausea was stronger and pulsing to the beat of my steadily-speeding heart.

I sat on the ground though I didn’t remember ever making the decision to sit on the dirty gray tiles. I caught myself from falling completely and supported my sagging body weight with my outstretched hand anchored to the floor.

I wondered vaguely what was wrong with me though every cell in my body seemed to be telling me I needed to sleep and then throw up everything I’ve ever eaten in my entire life. Or maybe sleep second. I tried to get up to go to the bathroom, but my legs refused to work. A sharp pain shot through my elbow and my arm collapsed from under me. My head was kept from hitting dully on the floor only because my arm was pinned under me. I laid out in the Ashwell high hallway. I thought briefly that maybe I was dying, and I should call out for help. When I opened my mouth to shout something, anything, all that came out was a weak moan.

I needed to open my mouth so sound would actually come out, but my jaw wasn't working. I needed to close my eyes. If I just slept for maybe ten minutes, I was sure I'd be able to make it to the nurse's office.

I was gone. Dead maybe, I didn't know. The distant cafeteria noises drifted away, my vision blurred, and I felt relieved in a way. I breathed and the air tasted like earth and moss. I never really thought about an afterlife but maybe that was it. And it wasn't too bad. It was comforting, really. There were whispers in the inky blackness that welcomed me deeper into sleep. The closer I got to the voices, the clearer they became.

Are you afraid?

Are you afraid? They said.

I wanted to respond, to tell them I wasn't afraid. The whispers turned to clear, high laughs that seemed to come from every direction. A thin breeze swept across the back of my neck. A shiver ran through every nerve in my body and I felt myself shaking. A sudden wave of warm water hit my face and I gasped, quick and sharp.

I opened my eyes and I was looking at myself. The hair around my face was sticking to my wet cheeks and my eyes were wide and afraid. It took me a few seconds to realize I was standing in front of a mirror in the girl's bathroom. My knees felt wobbly and weak, but I was standing and supporting myself against a porcelain sink. I had no idea how I got to the bathroom which was on the opposite end of the hallway from where I last remembered falling and going unconscious. I thought I heard someone say my name and I turned quickly to look behind me. No one was there but I saw thick prints of mud leading from the bathroom door to where I was standing. I shook my head, thinking maybe it was all a hallucination of my obviously dying mind. It didn't go away.

Did I walk through mud on my way to the bathroom? Did I go outside while I was unconscious? I waited a moment and cautiously moved to the bathroom door. The hallway was still empty, so that meant lunch wasn't over yet. I breathed a sigh of relief that no one saw me dying against some lockers. And though my thoughts were slow, and my arms and legs felt like someone had punched them one hundred times, I was confident that I was no longer dying. I left the bathroom and my feet almost slid out from under me. I looked down and saw even more mud than was in the bathroom. It smeared across the tiles like someone had used it as finger paint. I read the message there and felt my heart leap into my throat.

Are you afraid of poison?

Chapter 9

It was an odd question. Of course I was afraid of poison. Still am, actually. There aren't many people in the world who can say they aren't. Poisoning is so rare in the modern world that it isn't usually a fear that many are aware of until it happens to them. Until they accidentally drink too much alcohol maybe, or if you ate some bleach. There's actually cyanide in apple seeds, but you'd have to eat pounds of them before they did anything to you. It's much easier to be poisoned if you're an animal because people can trick you into thinking that the rat poison is cheese or something like that. You can give poison to people, of course. Hide it in tea or in their clothes. Not that I've tried it but since that day I read the message in mud, you could say I have a special interest.

I didn't go to the nurse's office. Maybe I should have. But by the time I cleaned away most of the dirt and washed off my hands I stared in the mirror again and looked for evidence that I was outside or that I was the one who wrote the message in the hallway. I felt like I was interrogating myself, trying to find answers in the twitch of my cheek or the growing exhaustion in my eyes. The bell rang and I shuffled across the drying mud stains to go to my next class. It wasn't until halfway through my class that I felt my mind coming back to me. My first thought was of Ian and if he wondered where I'd gone when I left the cafeteria. If he was maybe worried about me. We were partners after all. I thought that maybe we should have exchanged numbers or emails so we could go forward with our plan. I vaguely remembered him texting me the week before. I thought back at the message in mud and wondered if maybe this was all a really bad idea. I didn't know what was going on with me or with the letter my mom left me. I recognized the question, are you afraid of poison? It was in the poem. A line I initially read as a rhetorical question but then seemed more like a threat.

I was in chemistry and we were mixing some different acids into bases and marking the changes. Poison kept flashing behind my eyes in neon, trying to get my attention. My brain was telling me I was poisoned at lunch from my cafeteria taco. It took a while for me to fully comprehend this, and when I did, it was all too easy to deny. Of course, I wasn't poisoned. Other people were eating the gross tacos and they weren't passing out in the hallway and writing messages in mud. I could have been allergic to something in the strange taco meat. My symptoms didn't quite line up with what I knew about allergic reactions, but people can react differently, right?

I relaxed a little after telling myself it was probably allergies, though I felt like I was trying and failing to be convincing. I was still thinking about the differences between poison and allergies when I left school to meet Willow and Matt to unlock our bikes. Something caught my elbow as I was leaving, and I unconsciously jerked away.

"What happened?" Ian was leaning up against the outside wall and looking concerned.

"What?" I blinked a couple times, trying to clear away my all-consuming thoughts.

"When you left at lunch. What happened? You left your bag and everything."

"Oh." I realized I'd gone to my last two classes without any supplies or books. I didn't remember how I got by or who I borrowed paper from. I even took a quiz though I don't remember having a pencil or pen.

"Um," I started. I shook my head trying to dispel the residual fog. "I had to use the bathroom. And then I thought I heard something—" My voice trailed off. I wasn't sure what I should tell him or even if there was anything to tell.

"Did you get sick?" he said.

"I'm not sure. Maybe sick. Maybe poison."

I was mumbling and barely understood myself. I couldn't find the right words or even the right thoughts. Even though I was standing and felt far stronger than a few hours ago, talking to Ian felt like I was trying to run on the beach.

"Poison? Drea what happened?"

"Nothing, I'm fine now," I said.

"We're partners," he said. He looked at me severely like he was trying to intimidate some answers out of me. And I wanted to tell him that "partners" didn't really mean anything. Especially when all he was before yesterday was just a kid in my class who sometimes talked to me. I had the words ready in my mouth, but they wouldn't come out. It was like my vocal cords were stuck on the words.

"I'll tell you later," I finally said. The fog was still there but looking at Ian's concerned expression was bringing some of my sense back.

"I need your phone number," I said. I handed him my phone from my pocket, and he sighed but started entering his contact.

"We'll talk tomorrow," I said, and I took my phone and my bag which was sitting next to his feet. I turned away and went to where Matt and Willow were already waiting for me. They were both staring at Ian and I and I knew I was going to get a lot of questions from them on the way home.

I made pasta with a jar of pre-made alfredo sauce for dinner. I stared at the white sauce as it glopped on the stove top and tried to think about absolutely nothing but the pasta and the sauce. I remembered the first time I had to make dinner for my family. It was a couple of weeks after Mom was gone and all the food the PTA members had brought was finally eaten. I didn't know what to do and I stared into the fridge for what seemed like forever. Willow was crying in

the other room though I don't remember why. I wanted to go into the living room and cry with her. I wanted to so bad that I almost did, but the emptiness of the fridge is what stopped me. What made me realize the divide between me and my five-year-old sister. I was tall enough to reach the cupboards and she wasn't. There was stuff to make peanut butter sandwiches in the high cupboards and I had to stand on a chair, but I got it down and started making four sandwiches. As I spread the peanut butter across the white bread, I felt the tears dissipate and my sadness retreated deeper and deeper until I couldn't feel anything at all.

Now it was almost every night that I scrounged the cupboards yet again for something to feed me and my siblings. And since I'd learned to ask for groceries from Dad we didn't usually face the same fare of plain peanut butter sandwiches and I didn't have to stand on chairs to reach the high cupboards, but the slow stirring of the sauce was still a strange sort of comfort to me. When I was eleven and Willow was seven, she accidentally called me "Mom" once. And I wanted out of the responsibility almost immediately. I didn't want to be this way, taking care of everybody, making sure they had at least semi-passable food on their plates, but I was. Because I thought I had to be. If it turned out that my mom could come back and save me from this, that would be worth everything, wouldn't it?

"How was school?" I asked Will over our finished pasta. She nodded which really wasn't an answer, but her mouth was full of slick noodles.

"I have a project in math that I have to do," Matt said.

"A math project? What is that?" I said.

"We have to use formulas to map out a picture on a graph or something."

"Sounds horrible," I said.

Matt shrugged his shoulders. He was never one to complain.

“I have an art project,” Willow finally said.

“You don’t have an art class this year,” I said.

“I still have a project,” she said. I didn’t respond. I didn’t really want to know what it was because it most likely involved either a mess that I had to clean up or at the very least the strong smell of too much paint in our room for the next week.

“What is it?” Matt finally said. I gave him a look, but I don’t think he noticed.

“The forest. I’m going to find different things on the ground and in the yard and then glue them together to make a sculpture.”

“Well just don’t go out there at night,” I said, shoveling more pasta into my mouth.

“I’m not a baby, Drey,” She said.

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re a baby or not. The Ash forest isn’t safe at night. Everyone knows that,” I said.

“Well I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Fine. That’s all I’m saying is don’t.”

We ate our dinner quietly after that until we heard steps creaking up from the basement. Matt promptly dropped the rest of his meal in the sink and went upstairs.

I messaged Ian that night.

Sorry for being weird. I said.

No apology necessary he quickly replied. I breathed a sigh of relief I didn’t even know I was holding in.

So are we doing this tomorrow? He added. I had to think for a moment to remember what he was talking about.

Going to the police? I said.

Yeah.

I guess so. I'll bring whatever documents we have for my mom.

And I'll bring my charming smile

See ya weirdo.

Chapter 10

Dad left for work only twenty minutes before we went to school in the morning so I had a short window where I could run down to the basement and look through his file cabinets full of unknown papers. I didn't turn on the light because I was afraid of seeing something I didn't want to see. Like tear stains on the old brown couch or marks on the wall like Dad was counting the days of his prison sentence. Even in the dark I saw the floor was littered with plates and silverware stacked on top of books that probably fell there and were never picked up. There were things pinned up above the desk though I couldn't tell what they were.

Maybe I was hoping to see some of the family pictures he took down. Like maybe he'd saved them for himself, but if he had them down there, he wasn't displaying them. I carefully opened the single file cabinet next to his desk. I guess I didn't want to disturb anything that might be on top or loose inside. The drawer was heavy and packed with papers of varying sizes and lengths. All of them were labeled "work" so I yanked open the middle one. Here I found a small manila folder that was unlabeled. I picked it up and quickly rifled my thumb through the pages. I stopped when I saw the words "official form of report." I'd found the right stuff. I slammed the cabinet closed a little harder than I would have liked.

"Drea?"

I heard Matt from the top of the stairs. I took them two at a time and found him peering down at me from the basement door I left open.

"Let's go," I said, tucking the folder under my arm. Matt looked at me with both of his eyebrows raised.

“What were you doing in the basement?” he asked. It was a perfectly reasonable question. And I was prepared to give him a perfectly reasonable answer. But the moment I opened my mouth I forgot all about that.

“Rats,” I said.

“Rats?” he said. I nodded thoughtfully.

“Yeah. I thought I heard one and so I went down to kill it,” I said. To Matt’s credit he only seemed mildly surprised.

“Uh-huh. So you killed it?” he said. I nodded again.

“Yep. It’s totally dead. No more rats here. We should get to school.”

“How’d you kill it?” Matt continued. I was not so subtly pushing him away from the basement and toward the door. He glanced at the folder that was sticking out of my armpit.

“Um. With this.”

I whipped the papers out but made sure they were all tucked inside the yellow folder, “yeah that’s why I brought it up because it’s got rat juices on it now.”

“I don’t see—”

“It’s on the other side. Don’t worry about it,” I said. Matt was quiet but he knew I was lying to him and I gave him the satisfaction of obviously feeling very bad about it. Willow was already outside and waiting for us. We made our way to school in silence.

Ian and I made plans to meet up after school so we could go to the station together. He said he was borrowing his foster mom, Gina’s, car and he told her it was for a group photography project. Which wasn’t entirely untrue because he made me take pictures through the car window as we sped down the highway.

“Gina’s been so good to me,” he said, “honestly I don’t think I’m capable of lying to her even if I tried. I don’t think my brain would even be able to comprehend it. I’d probably explode.”

I rolled up the passenger side window and cut off the near-deafening wind that had ripped through Gina’s hatchback. There were a couple beats of awkward silence and I felt like I should bring up something or else I might start doing something embarrassing like singing along to the radio.

“What’s she like?” I said.

“What?” Ian said.

“Not what, who. Gina.”

“Oh her.” He shrugged his shoulders and seemed to struggle to find the right words to continue, “She’s like if you took all the moms in the world and taught them all Jiu jitsu.”

“She knows Jiu jitsu?” I said.

“No, I’m just saying she’s like that.”

“So she’s pretty strict?” I clearly wasn’t following what Ian thought was a brilliant image.

“No not exactly. Though yes. Gina is a flurry of blows straight to the brain and the heart.” I thought about it for a minute.

“I guess that’s kind of awesome,” I finally said.

“Yeah,” Ian smiled at the road ahead of us.

“What’s your dad like?” Ian asked. I guess I should have seen the question coming. It was a natural connection from the Gina conversation. And yet I still felt my shoulders tense up around my ears.

“He’s fine,” I said.

“I didn’t ask how he was. I asked what he’s like,” Ian said.

“He’s like crab apples that you step on in the grass. Once was useful but now he just hides in the shrubs. Harmless.”

“Oooo that’s a good one,” he said, glancing over at me. He must have noticed my grimace which I felt growing across my face.

“Drea, you’re not the only one who’s had a crab apple for a dad.”

“You had one too?”

“Dad? No. Foster dad? Sure. The system is full of every kind of apple”

“What was it like?”

“Like playing the steel drums for the first time in a solo concert.”

“Terrifying and humiliating?” I said.

“Exactly,” he said.

I had to laugh because the image of Ian playing steel drums with his lanky arms splayed out was too much for me to bear. Ian laughed too though I imagined a bit of edge in his voice. Like it’d taken him a long time to get to that laugh.

The police station was actually the county police, so we had to drive almost a full hour to the county offices which were three towns over in the slightly larger Bluff Gorge. They had a target and two grocery stores. We parked in the target lot to look over Dad’s documents before going into the station.

I pulled out the folder from my backpack and wiped my hands on my jeans.

“Nervous?” Ian said.

“I guess. My dad never let us know anything about the investigation when it was active those first few months. All I know I overheard from conversations by the front door.”

“Here.” Ian held out his hand and I quickly gave him the folder, “I’ll just hand them to you, and we’ll figure them out together.”

I nodded gratefully. Warmth spread up my arms from my fingertips and I wondered if I’d even be doing any of this if I hadn’t told Ian I needed his help just a few days ago. I probably wouldn’t be about to walk into the police station at all. Probably would be out of my mind with anxiety. Probably alone.

Ian passed me the first paper and I tried to scan it quickly though I couldn’t get my eyes to focus on just one thing. *Missing 72 hours. Circumstances of disappearance suspect. No known risk of suicide. No previous injuries, illnesses, medications.*

“I think this is the original report Dad filed. A copy I guess,” I said. I placed it face down on my lap and willed my fingers to stop trembling.

“Here’s another one. I think this is some sort of written summary or report,” Ian handed me the next. *Victim was tracked to various areas in her immediate vicinity. Left close to midnight Tuesday night. No note was found though stories or dreams she wrote was submitted by family. Reports of a woman acting delirious or drunk, evidence of possible substance abuse or overdose.*

“They think she killed herself?” I barely got the words out.

“It seems like it was an easy assumption to make,” Ian said, “here. I think this is the last which isn’t just police jargon or government documents with your dad’s signature.” My hands were definitely shaking and I braced my elbows against my knees, holding the paper so it was practically touching my nose.

It was a transcript of a report that someone called in. They'd seen Mom on Wednesday afternoon about sixteen hours after she left our house. *"I saw a woman by the river" it said, "I tried to go help her because I was afraid she was going to fall in and drown. I think she saw me but she didn't say anything. Then this wolf. Yeah a wolf. Came out of nowhere, grabbed the woman's arm with its mouth. No. She must have tried to fight back but I couldn't tell. I didn't know what to do, because wolves are endangered species right? I ran back to my house to call 911. No, she wasn't still there when I got inside. I think the wolf dragged her off somewhere. Can wolves do that? So do you guys call animal control or what?"*

There was a scrawled note under the transcript which said, "fits description of missing Grimm wife."

"How do you think your dad got all these reports? Aren't things classified?" Ian mumbled. Tears welled up behind my eyes, but I knew they would never fall. I sat back up and breathed in heavily.

"This is crazy," I said. Once I started, I was on a roll. I didn't cry but my feelings came out in a rambling rant, "This is so crazy. What are we doing here? This case is closed. There's no way they will tell us anything. We're not even legal adults! And a wolf? She was dragged away by a wolf? Did she get eaten? They never found a body because it's inside an animal? Where was she going? Or was she really overdosing?"

"Drea, calm down," Ian said in what was probably a very soothing voice to most people.

"Sixteen hours!" I was yelling now and breathing heavily in the stuffy Subaru. "Someone saw her sixteen hours after she left us. After she walked out the door with no clear intention of ever coming back. Enough time for her to what? Get some drugs so she could go die in a river the next town over? So, we would wake up to news reports of a drowned anonymous woman?"

“They never found a body,” He said.

“I know that! I know all of this. None of this is news to me, Ian. She didn’t want to be around me anymore. Around us.” I shoved all the papers off my lap and onto the floor of the car. I jerked the passenger door open and slammed it behind me. I stalked a few feet away but there weren’t many places to go to at the edge of a target parking lot. I settled on a planter box right next to the car. I felt Ian staring at me through the window. Waiting. I tucked my head between my bent knees like they say you should do when you’re in a car crash.

A few minutes passed and I heard Ian’s door shut. He shuffled over to me and sat down with a sigh. I glanced up at him but then hid my face again. The anger had slowly leaked out of me as I sat there by myself and I was ashamed that I’d yelled in Gina’s car. I wondered what was wrong with me. I used to never have outbursts, but it’d only been half a week and I’d had multiple. Maybe I was going crazy. Maybe my personality was splintering into pieces and in another week I’d be two people instead of just one.

I rested my chin on my arms folded on top of my knees. I knew I looked like a hunchbacked gremlin, but I didn’t care. I knew Ian wouldn’t speak first. It was clear he would wait hours. Maybe days. Probably not days.

“I’m too old for this shit,” I grumbled. His shoulders shook in what was probably a laugh held in.

“The boss is on my ass, Grimm. We’ve gotta solve this case by the end of the month or else we’re both gonna be thrown out on the streets with the rest of the disgraced detectives.” Ian pitched his voice lower and gave it what he probably thought was an east coast accent.

I buried my face in my arm to cover my own laugh.

“What was that?” I said. Ian was already laughing, his head thrown back, loud shouts of laughter. I couldn’t help but smile.

“We’re partners on the case,” he managed to choke out between laughs. A lady passed us pushing a cart laden with target items and she glared. Just another couple of loud-mouthed teenagers.

“I lied before,” I said, once Ian had calmed himself down and wiped all the tears from his eyes.

“What?” he said, still giggling.

“I didn’t know about the wolf thing. I said I’d heard it all before, but I didn’t know about the wolf thing.”

“Yeah, seems like something you’d remember.”

“Are there even any wolves in Oregon?” I said. Ian thought for a minute.

“I want to say no. But I have no idea.”

“So are we doing this then?” Ian asked. He pulled out his phone and glanced at the time, “if we still want to go to the station we have to go now. All the citizen-related stuff closes at 5:30.”

I steeled up my insides. Made them like hard armor. I stood up and turned to pull Ian up next to me.

“Let’s do this, partner.”

Chapter 11

Ian held the door open for me at the county police station. Phones seemed to be ringing from every office and I smelled stale coffee and wafts of cigarettes from the other people waiting by the front door. They were sitting on benches of various sizes and barely even gave us a glance as we walked in. I ordered myself to stay calm and collected. I looked down at myself and then at Ian to see how easy it would be for someone to tell that we're teenagers. I was always tall for my age and Ian was about the same height as me, which wasn't necessarily a good sign for him. Neither of us had our backpacks with us, but then I noticed that Ian was wearing an Ashwell high sweatshirt.

"Come on, man," I whispered.

"What?" Ian looked down where I was pointing accusingly at his sweater, "Oh. Sorry I forgot."

"It's fine. I guess I should do the talking."

I walked up to the woman at the front desk. She was talking to someone on the phone. Nodding at nothing and looking at the skin on her hand which was patchy and red.

"Yep. Yep. Mmkay," She was saying. I put my arms on the counter thinking that was enough to get her attention. She didn't look up.

"Excuse me," I said. She looked at me with a side glance and immediately hung up the phone without even saying goodbye to whoever was on the other end.

"Yes, sweetie? How can I help you?"

She smiled at me and there was some pink lipstick on one of her front teeth. The fact that she was already calling me sweetie did not bode well for me trying to pass as someone who was at least eighteen.

“I’m wondering if I could get some information about a missing person’s case,” I said it all in one phrase, so I didn’t mess it up. I was rehearsing how exactly I would say it in my head as we walked through the front doors. She tilted her head to the left a little and her smile got even more sweet if that’s even possible.

“Who is this regarding?”

She started tapping on the keys of her beige, ancient computer.

“Evelyn Grimm,” I cleared my throat. I almost choked on her name. I saw she was typing it in and then she looked uncomfortable. She looked from me to the computer and back to me again. I decided to save her rather than watch her struggle more.

“I know she’s dead,” I said. This too proved difficult to say and I had to cough over my shoulder. I continued in case she thought the matter was cleared up, “I am wondering if I can get any detailed records of the investigation posthumously.”

“You’d have to file an official request for those, sweetie. And it can take 3-6 months to get any sort of approval on case files,” she said.

“Even if the case is closed?” I asked. The woman typed a few things into the computer again.

“That process might be a little faster, but you’d still have to fill out the form.”

“Can I fill it out now?” I said.

“We just went digital about a month ago so you can get those online.”

She smiled like it was all so exciting.

“Okay,” I said, “thank you.”

Ian and I went back out the front door and I breathed in air that wasn’t saturated with old coffee smell.

“I guess we came here for nothing,” I said.

“Yeah. I guess we did,” he said, “Let’s go.”

I filled out the form on my phone as much as I could on the drive back. The light was fading, just barely making it through the thick forests surrounding long stretches of road.

“Have you ever wondered why they grow so close together?” Ian said. I didn’t look up from my screen, but I knew what he was talking about.

“I’ve heard redwoods in California grow together in families,” I said.

“Huh. Well what do you think about the evergreens?”

“I think they just grow where they fall. The closest place is right next to each other,” I said.

We were both quiet for a few minutes while I contemplated whether I should lie about my birthday on the request form.

“Where was that lady who called to report your mom by the river?” Ian suddenly said.

“What?” I said.

“That lady who saw the wolf, what town did she live in?”

I shuffled the papers that were now back in my bag until I pulled out the transcript of the call.

“Applegate,” I said. Ian jerked the steering wheel and sliced into the next lane and off the highway at an exit I hadn’t even seen hidden so well by the greenery around it.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re going to Applegate,” he said.

“For what?” I said, although I already knew the answer.

“We’re going to find that Lady and talk to her. This won’t be a wasted trip.”

Ian seemed excited, like he'd just thought of something brilliant and he knew it.

"We don't even know where she lives," I protested.

"We know she lives next to a river," Ian said.

"It was seven years ago. She might not even live there anymore."

"She might," he said.

It was a completely crazy idea, but it seemed it was a day full of crazy ideas. I was sick of hearing myself say how insane it all was, so I let Ian drive us into Applegate with minimal complaint.

"We should get gas," Ian mumbled. We pulled into a gas station called Pump 'n Things and waited for the attendant to slowly make his way to the car.

"I think that man is a zombie," I said. He did look like one. His skin was sallow and white. His eyes were sunk deep into his skull like they were trying to escape from the rest of him.

"Do you think people would tell us if the zombie apocalypse started or would we have to find out by getting chomped on by an old gas station man?" I said. Ian stifled a laugh as he rolled down his window. He told the man to fill it up and kept the window open to ask him the question we were really here for.

"Is there a river in Applegate?" Ian practically yelled toward the old man.

"No swimmin. Water's too high," The man said.

"We don't want to swim. We just," Ian paused, "like looking at rivers."

"You're making us sound like river perverts," I whispered at him.

"Trench river. There's a walkin path that goes along it. Not that big of a river though."

“How do we get to the path?” Ian asked. The man gave us more directions than we could ever possibly need and by the time he finished the tank had been full for five minutes.

Ian followed his directions once we made sense of all that he told us. I shot off a text to Matt saying that I would be home late from working on a project but that there were leftovers in the fridge. I’d never been away from my family for so long and I started to get antsy as the sun disappeared behind the trees. We stopped at a dirt road that the man said was the way to the river trail.

“I don’t know if this car can make it over those holes,” Ian said.

“Let’s walk then,” I said.

“We don’t know how far away it is,” he said.

“You’re the one who said we should go to Applegate to find a strange woman.” I started to get out of the car.

“That was before it got dark outside,” Ian said as he followed after me.

“So, you can come up with ideas, but you can’t finish them?”

“That’s why I said we need to be partners,” he said.

“Good point,” I said. We both gazed down the dirt road to where it disappeared into dark green shadows.

“Well,” I said, “you know what they say.”

“No. What?” Ian squinted back at me.

“The only way forward is forward.”

“Do people really say that?” he asked. I shrugged my shoulders. I wasn’t sure. I led the way, though I was skeptical that we would find anything of note at the end of the road. Ian, though lacking in follow through, continued to remind me why we were there and what we were

looking for. For clues, evidence, the stuff that truth is made out of. And I thought maybe then I could take that truth home with me and show it to Dad. And maybe then he'd talk to me again. We both heard the rushing water before we saw it. We followed that sound until we were standing shoulder to shoulder at the sharp bank of a medium sized river. Neither of us said anything. I chose a direction and we made our way along the river to look for a stranger. It didn't take long for a house to rise up in front of us. The view was blocked by trees until we were standing in what was categorized as a half-hearted attempt at front yard landscaping. Brown pavers were haphazardly placed a few feet from the front steps and a few ferns dripped from the porch.

"You think this is it?" Ian asked. I gazed up at the shadowed windows and the stone porch with the bending roof.

"Well, it seems to be the only house by the river we've seen," I said.

"Could be a murderer's house though," he said.

"Yeah I guess so."

"You're supposed to say it's not a murderer's house," he said.

"There's no way I would know that," I said. I thought maybe joking about it would make him feel better, but his subtle frown told me it didn't work.

"You don't have to come up to the door with me if you don't want to," I said. A shiver seemed to go down Ian's spine and he shook out his shoulders.

"I said I would help you, so I should help you."

He wasn't looking at me when he said this, so I figured it was some sort of line to convince himself to move his body toward the front door. I was strangely calm. Like I knew we were at the right place before we even knocked. I knew she was here on the near shore kicking

rocks into the water. I led the way and Ian followed tentatively after. An older woman with gray hair pinned up behind her head opened the door before we knocked. She kept the glass screen closed between us. It occurred to me that she must have seen us standing in her yard for five minutes before we came up to her porch. I cleared my throat, but the woman interrupted.

“It’s late,” she said.

“Yes,” I said, “sorry. We would like to ask you a few questions about a missing woman that might have come through here.” She eyed us both suspiciously and looked us up and down like she was searching for concealed weapons.

“Janice?” she practically barked at us.

“What?” Ian chimed in.

“Who?” I corrected.

“Is it Janice? That crazy old bitch was fixin’ to run off into the woods any day now. Always whittling that stupid piece of wood over and over again. I’ll jam it down her throat.” I stepped back a little from the woman’s sudden animosity for Janice.

“No. Not Janice. Um, it was a woman seven years ago who might have come across your property.”

She stared at me, waiting for the rest. It was a good sign that she hadn’t already slammed the door in our faces. I continued, “it would have been evening, maybe. She was attacked by a wolf?”

There was a spark of recognition in the old woman’s eyes at the word wolf.

“Yes,” she said, “It was the strangest thing I’ve ever seen. Wolves, in this area. Ridiculous. They’re all protected now, I think. I ran back inside before it attacked me too.” She looked ready to close the door now that she answered my question.

“The woman,” I said quickly, “what happened to the woman who was attacked?”

“Wolf dragged her off,” She said. Her face showed no emotion whatsoever, like it was a simple matter for a wolf to drag away a grown woman. She continued, “Grabbed her right here with his teeth,” the woman grabbed hold of her forearm and held on tight, “and she was hitting at it with her other hand,” she mimicked hitting herself in the head with her fist, “but it just kept dragging her down the river bank and into the trees.”

I looked at Ian and he was already looking at me, watching me for my reaction to the woman’s story. The impossible was true then. That still didn’t account for the sixteen hours before she came to the river and was dragged away by a freakish wolf. I wasn’t sure what I was feeling. In a lot of ways, it felt like I’d already used up all my emotions for the day and it was now impossible for me to feel anything more. I had to go home to my family.

“Thank you,” I said to the old woman, “Sorry again for coming to your door so late.” She nodded and closed her heavy front door in our faces.

Chapter 12

“The Changer is a hero with many faces. And though they are many, all forms bare his marked eyes with a silver glow. One marked day, he was fighting a sorcerer, and they were both shifting; changing into creatures with human faces and tearing at each other with claws, wings, saber teeth; ripping each other apart. The Changer won and left the sorcerer in the battlefield. But what the hero didn’t know was that the sorcerer’s blood was enchanted, and the field became poisonous. Whoever set foot in that place from then on was killed almost instantly. It was forever called the void. The Chanter tried to heal the place, to modify the enchantment but was not strong enough and almost fell to the void himself. One can still see the blood magic shifting and changing the land beneath it, preparing for when the heroes slip up and step onto the cursed land.”

Ian and I were eating lunch together the next day and I let him read the story out loud to me from Mom’s book. He hesitated at first, but his voice grew more confident as he read. I didn’t think we’d find anything more than what we’d already discovered but Ian was optimistic that something might have changed while we slept on the events from the day before.

“I wonder what it means,” he said to me, his eyes raking over the words again after he was done reading them. We were sitting outside on a plastic red lunch table, so I was distracted staring above the trees in the distance.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” I said, “it’s just a story.”

“You said they were from dreams she had, right?” Ian said.

“Yeah.”

“Well dreams always mean stuff. Like if you dream you turn into an animal that means that animal is important to your life or something. Or when your dreams are only in black and white that means you see the world in strict good and bad choices.”

“I’m pretty sure my mom’s dreams only meant one thing,” I said.

“What’s that?” Ian looked up from the notebook. I hesitated.

“It’s not important,” I said.

“Well you brought it up so it must be important,” Ian pushed. I grabbed the notebook from his hands.

“Let me look at it. Maybe we can figure out what it means.”

We didn’t find anything, which is maybe not surprising since we were just looking at a bunch of made up stories. I don’t know what I thought we would find. Maybe a secret message and if we read the whole thing backwards and in the mirror it would say “I’m still alive. Come find me at the nearest Target.” But the whole thing with the wolf felt like a revelation. Like I should know something more about her disappearance after yesterday. And I still felt empty handed. Or empty headed.

“Deranged: disordered. Disarrayed,” I said.

“That’s a little harsh,” said Ian.

“It’s true.”

I set aside the book and folded my hands over my face. I breathed in the scent of my skin and contemplated rethinking my entire life in that small moment. It seemed too big a task, so I stuck with expressing my frustration instead.

“Why are you helping me?” I asked Ian for what felt like the hundredth time.

“I’m bored,” he laughed. I took my hands away and looked him in the face, full on. It’s hard to look someone in the eye. You have to really concentrate and it’s uncomfortable, especially when they don’t look away. And both of you want to laugh, but at the same time it’s an act so uncommon that you can’t look away even if you wanted. I locked my eyes onto Ian’s and studied the flecks of bright blue dotting his. He blinked a couple times but otherwise was stoic.

“Really,” I said, “Really, Ian. Why?”

There were people pushing each other a couple tables down but we didn’t notice. Our fellow students rustled through homework, clashed plastic trays on even more plastic tables, screamed in excitement and disgust, always talking because they didn’t know what to do with silent bodies. He never answered me. Or, I should say, he didn’t say anything. We both knew that it was weird, what we were doing. Not that it was wrong or that it was crazy, because it was. But I mean him and me. Me and him. Him and I. If I wanted to, I could notice his shoulders or jawline or lithe fingers, but that’s not what we were.

Our friendship happened so fast. You might look at us and think “there’s no way they are this close in such a short amount of time,” and you’d be right. There’s no natural way we were as close as we were at that point in this story. All it took was one risky question that erased any embarrassment, any awkwardness, any apprehension that is usually felt when meeting someone different.

Maybe that’s the point. It wasn’t natural, though I didn’t know it at the time. I wouldn’t know it for a long time after.

I left school that day feeling more defeated than I’d ever thought was possible. At sixteen I was already beaten by life. I was beaten and now I had to live my life out as peacefully as I

could until I too went missing or was dragged away by a wild animal. Everything felt too real. The old woman by the river, the police reports, everything. It was disgustingly real and the minute I opened the door to the Grimm family home I knew that it too was real, and it was utterly depressing. Heavy winter curtains covered the windows. The paint on the stairs was scuffed raw, there were finger marks on every door, clothes and books strewn out over the love seat in the family room, dark dust collecting on every surface and electronic, and unbearably bare walls.

I tore off the curtains first. Which sounds more violent than it was. I took them off without breaking anything, but I did it with purpose and force. Next, I picked up armfuls of stuff from the couch and moved it all into the laundry room off the kitchen. Matt was nervously following after me saying “hey some of those books aren’t waterproof!” I grabbed the spray cleaner and vigorously attacked every door in the house and eventually Willow yelled that she was going outside because of all the door rattling. Dad peeked his head out of the basement once to see what all the yelling was about, saw that the doorbell was only ringing because I was expertly detailing it with vinegar and baking soda, mumbled something probably about how having kids was the worst thing he’d ever done, and went back down.

When I finished it was only 5:00 and I deflated right where I was standing in the front hallway. Willow found me on the floor with my forearm covering my eyes.

“You done?” she said. I nodded.

“Good,” she said, “I need your help with something.”

I moaned in response. I felt like my shoulders were going to burn off my body. But it felt good to think about something other than my presumed dead mom for an hour and a half.

“Come on,” Willow pressed, “it’s outside. Before it gets dark.”

She grabbed my arm and pulled up. She was surprisingly weak, so I raised my heavy arm so she felt like she was actually doing something. She grunted, “Why are you so damn heavy?”

“Will!” I screeched at her and sat up nearly hitting our heads together. She jumped away from me and bit her lip to keep from giggling.

“Come on,” she practically sang. With some effort I got off the floor and followed Willow to our backyard. Almost every house in Ashville sits up against the Ash forest. And before you think that the Ash forest is made up entirely of ash trees, it’s not. One or two do pop up but majority of the growth are dark evergreens, spruce, and sometimes aspen. The wall of trees stops abruptly about twenty feet from our back door. I watched as Willow ran across the lawn into the tree line.

“Where are you going, Will?” I yelled after her.

“Come on,” she called back. I sighed, though there wasn’t anyone around to hear it. She’d probably found some wildflowers she wanted me to look at or maybe a bunny. It wasn’t the first time she’d dragged me outside to see a rabbit warren. I was only a few feet into the trees when I tripped and had to catch myself against rough bark. I felt intensely stupid when I looked down and saw that I’d rolled my ankle on a crab apple. I looked up and wondered where in the world it came from. I’d never seen a crabapple tree there in my whole life though it was definitely possible that I had no idea what a crabapple tree looked like.

“Drea!”

I heard Willow calling back to me. My heart leapt when I remembered that I’d come out into the forest with my little sister and I didn’t actually know where she was. Her voice sounded clear and I told myself she wasn’t too far away.

My stomach suddenly growled with a power so intense it could move tectonic plates. I looked down at the crabapple and my mouth started watering. I'd eaten crabapples before. They aren't great, but they are edible. I picked up one that was tucked nearby that I hadn't stepped on. I rubbed some caked dirt off with my thumb and only thought briefly about all the animals that defecate in the forest. I ate half of the apple in one bite and my face scrunched up from the intense taste.

I was breathless and I thought at first it was because of the sourness. I thought how lucky I was that I didn't choke on the apple when I found myself suddenly breathing like I'd just climbed three flights of stairs. I figured I must have cleaned far more intensely than I thought I had. I leaned up against the nearest tree (maybe that was the crabapple tree) and called out to Willow so she knew I was too tired to follow her anymore. She must not have heard me. I wasn't even sure if I'd heard me. My stomach turned and churned with an eerily familiar pulse of sickness. My eyes shot open (I didn't remember closing them) and I stood up with a jolt of adrenaline. It couldn't happen again. I wouldn't let it. I walked (or tripped, or crawled, or drunkenly loped) out of the trees but I didn't make it far. My face was buried in long, soft grass which was filling my nose. I tried to keep my breathing even, but my chest hurt like someone had squeezed me too tight.

It's easier to give in, I thought. And if this was the moment I died then that would be fine. I was tired. Too tired to care about anything that I ever cared about yesterday or today or even the next day. I remember that someone turned me onto my back right before the darkness took me under. I was looking at some wispy clouds in the sky and I thought they looked like marshmallow fluff spread on pancakes.

Chapter 13

There were two voices. One was reciting a chant, a song maybe. I saw it was a woman, though not one I knew and maybe not quite human as her voice was mixed with deep growls.

Hero brother, she said, take me home. Hero brother take me home. Hero brother take us home.

Then another voice which sounded softer and I had to strain to hear.

When will she come, it said.

Oh, she will be here very soon I think. The other growled. The soft voice said something else and the first answered harshly,

To save you? Now little mother we've talked about this.

A shattering scream echoed in my head and I wanted to cover my ears against it, but I couldn't find my arms.

An orange, florescent light beat on my eyes in time with my ticking pulse. There was a hand circling my forearm like a fleshy gauntlet. There were fingers dabbing a napkin on my chin which is what make me wake up; water running down my neck and into the crevice of my bent clavicle. I breathed in sharply through my nose while opening my eyes, like I was cut off mid-breath and was just now finishing it up. The napkin darted away when I opened my eyes and I adjusted my shoulders, sliding down the bed a few inches before catching my elbow on the metal side. I tried to straighten up but was stopped short by a fuzzy pain in my hips and leg-bones. There were so many things I wanted to say. Like, what happened? Where am I? Who is grabbing my wrist? Instead I said,

“Shitshitshitshit.”

The room came into focus as the pain dissipated and I was met with two pairs of eyes staring at me like I had just grown a third arm out of my forehead.

I probably knew it was irrational at the moment, but I wanted to yell at something.

“What?!” I barked at them. It was Matt, ever-appeasing delightful Matt, who spoke up first. He came to the end of my bed and simultaneously leaning closer and farther away somewhere out of my theoretical reach.

“You passed out, Drey, and we didn’t know what to do so I called Dad and he carried you to the car and he’s talking to the doctor. The tests aren’t done so really we don’t know—”

“You swore,” Willow interjected. Her small hand was the vice around my arm, but she released it to emphasize her shock by pulling away and a cold breeze ran up my arm. She continued, “I’ve never heard you swear before. And you just swore. Like a lot.”

I tried to bring my arm up to rub my face because it suddenly itched like I was wearing an invisible wool ski cap. I was slow and held back by hidden muscle seizure and also what felt like a plug, but reason told me was an of IV line.

I looked over at the beeping monitor and I wanted it to skip a second, to show some sort of sign that my insides existed on my outsides, but it stayed spikey and covered in otherworldly numbers. A tall, beautiful woman in slim scrubs with her hair raised on her head with the tail curled around her neck like a great snake walked through the door. She smiled thinly, though beautiful, like she was already annoyed just being in the same room as three teenagers and breathing the same air.

She patted my covered thigh and cooed at me, “Don’t worry, Honey, everything is all right,” like she was reading cue cards just beyond our view.

“The doctor will come in a minute and if you need anything, you or,” she looked around the squished room, “your friends, just let me know.”

She looked at some of the numbers on the monitor, struck her fingers on a few keys of the keyboard, and swayed out of the room again. None of us knew where to look when she left now that nothing in the room was beautiful. Willow looked down at her right pocket threading and Matt looked at my big toe, or what he figured was my big toe shooting up under the covers.

Matt said, "So what happened?"

I was surprised that Willow hadn't told him, but the question stood there now that it was spoken. I definitely didn't want to answer him, so I waited and was rewarded by Will quickly filling up the silence.

"We were outside, and I was going to show Drey something but then I realized she wasn't following me. So I went back to tell her to catch up but I found her on the ground, collapsed and gurgling, and it sounded like she was choking so I stuck my finger in her mouth because I read online that's what you should do with babies, and I know she's not a baby, but I figured I would check and nothing was there but she almost bit me which was weird and then she stopped gurgling."

Soon after her speech Matt mumbled something about finding a vending machine and Willow curled up in her chair, closed her eyes, and she was asleep almost instantly.

And I waited. Because I knew he'd be here soon.

The doctor never came in like the nurse said and it didn't take much waiting for me to hear the thumps of my dad's work boots on the linoleum hospital hallway. Willow startled in her seat at the sound of his steps and straightened like she was getting ready for an investigation. I think we sighed in tandem although that might just be how I remember it because it felt like a really dramatic moment. Like anything could happen in those two seconds between when Dad

was outside in the hallway until he opened the door and said, or didn't say, whatever he was going to say, or not say.

The door clicked open and thumped behind him as he stomped inside the room. I could tell by his eyes that he counted heads as he came in (one, two) but nothing else about his face gave him away. His forehead was lined, his hair still full but thinning at the edges. It stuck out on the sides like he had recently either worn a hat or pulled it that way with some hair gel.

Dad looked at me, right at my stomach, and I thought maybe he was going to be angry. And then I thought maybe he would laugh, smile even. I would have welcomed either one though the anger would've been most satisfying to hear, for once in my life, his voice raised to a level somewhere beyond a moderate monotone.

His jaw clenched like he was biting something; his own tongue maybe.

"Matt told you?" I said, breaking the lead-heavy silence that he always brings to a room.

"Yeah," Dad said. He scooted a couple inches away from the door. Closer to me and yet further somehow.

"I feel fine really. I mean, I don't think it was that big of a deal. I probably just haven't drunk enough water."

I didn't believe a word of what I was saying. I knew what it was, but I wasn't about to tell him I got poisoned by an apple and I was hearing voices. And anyway, poisoned apples are so cliché.

"The doctor says you had traces of hemlock in your system," Dad replied. His deep voice the same continuous river of sound. Like it would go on forever and never stop if he wanted it to. That voice used to tell me silly stories at night for a long time after mom said we had to "turn off the light and really go to bed now she really meant it this time." He searched my face like I was

going to give away my secret pastime of consuming poisoned herbs. As if hemlock were the equivalent to a delinquent teen smoking weed after school. I didn't know what else to do so I shrugged at him, which made him frown harder.

My suspicions were mounting, and I was already then forming a theory that I was planning on sharing with Ian later. The words were building in my mind what exactly I would say to him. But for Jacob Grimm, supposed patriarch of the family, I had nothing.

"Must've been the poisoned apples" I said. And because my father knows me just about the same amount as I know him, he thought I was joking.

"I'll sign the papers and meet you outside," he said, before counting heads again, 1-2, and leaving.

As soon as the door closed behind him, I changed into my clothes which were folded on a side table. Willow and I met up with Matt in the lobby area. Every step I took closer to the car I felt my energy come back into my extremities. I stretched and retracted my fingers over and over to remind myself that I had blood and it's moving through my veins.

I was more frustrated than anything. Especially when Matt told me I was still weak. That I shouldn't be making dinner. That I shouldn't get off the couch. Instead, I should let him bring me soup although I told him that all I wanted was water. Pure, untainted water. He insisted I lay on the couch with a blanket up to my chin while he watched TV. I obliged because I really didn't want to do anything else and lying down was as appealing to me as a proverbial bed of roses after the journey back home in Dad's jerking truck.

I stretched out on the couch, studying Matt's face and his sandy blond hair that stuck up in random places. Probably because he'd run his hands through it, a habit he'd developed in the past few months. Out of all of us he looked the most like Mom. Their hair is the same, their

smiles, their goodness. Matt didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve the stress of going to hospitals and having to avoid my dad, talking to him face to face which I know probably scared him most of all. Matt should be at soccer practice, dribbling or kicking. Instead he's using my ankles as an arm rest and nervously glancing at me like I was going to start spasming again.

I renewed my unspoken promise to not share what I was then calling my curse with my siblings. And really, I did think I was cursed. The doctors only confirmed what I was already thinking; that I was poisoned. That somehow someone had laced both my taco and a crab apple with essence of hemlock that made me hear voices and write threatening messages for myself in mud.

I pretended to be asleep until Matt and Willow were both in their rooms for the night. I couldn't sleep for the obvious reason that the darkness surrounding me in the living room felt suffocating to the point of distraction. I crept into the kitchen and fumbled around our junk drawer for any piece of paper and a pencil nub. I had to order my thoughts which were split between intense wonder and fear at the nothingness behind the glass sliding door leading out to the forest.

I wrote down everything I remembered from the voices: Hero brother, little mother, are you afraid of poison. I was shaking though I didn't notice until I wrote "The ten heroes" under my notes. I underlined it and dug my pencil into the counter to try and anchor my hand. And if anyone had come up to check on me then. If my dad had thought that maybe he should worry about his daughter who was mysteriously poisoned just a few hours before and came up from his office, he would have seen a white-faced girl, braided hair falling out around her face, leaning up against the plastic kitchen counter, trying not to cry over a Post It note.

Chapter 14

It was real.

There is no way it was real.

But it had to be real.

There is always another explanation.

And then because the more I said it the more I started questioning everything, I had to look it up: real [adjective] being an actual thing; having objective existence; not imaginary.

I stayed home from school the next day, though I felt completely fine. Matt and Willow wouldn't even let me get dressed out of my pajamas and they practically shoved me onto the couch before they left. I couldn't sit still, and I shuffled through Mom's book over and over again while pacing from the back sliding door to the front. I first read a story about The Champion whose hero power is combat. Then The Keeper who remembered everything she'd ever seen, heard, or read. The Master who commanded the elements and finally, the Chanter with the ability to speak power into words.

And my mother might be with one of these people. With some hero who believed she was one of them. That she had abilities, or powers, or magic. If I believed the voices in my head, they were waiting for someone to come. I knew somewhere that it had to be me. That I was going to be the one who went to them, but I shook it away.

It wasn't real.

It couldn't be.

Because that means the last thing I said to my mom before she walked out the door and into the night was completely unfounded. And already the guilt was unbearable.

I was nine. An age that I would say from experience is the brat phase. Willow was the same way, sometimes being contrary just because she wanted to. Testing her attitude out on actual people like her teachers who would sometimes send her home with notes for parents that said things like “Willow needs to learn that calling teachers pathetic during class is inappropriate.”

And though I don't remember any specific notes from my teachers, I know I was the same way. Or maybe worse.

Mom was acting odd all day. Willow was crying and she acted like she didn't hear it. Only when I shook Mom on the shoulder did she rouse herself from her waking dreams and hurry off to check on her. I watched her closely, my young self even then strangely focused and suspicious of a lot of things. I thought I was acting from a place of love, I really did. I cared about my mom and I was worried about her. So, I looked up the word “crazy” in the dictionary. Crazy, adjective, senseless; impractical; totally unsound. I wanted to make sure I was scientific about my research on Mom, so I wrote the definition down in my grade school notebook and used it as my field journal for the day. The first thing I wrote was spaciness. That she didn't seem to care about Willow's crying, and I put (senseless). Next, I asked her if Matt and I could dig a giant hole in the backyard and she said yes without even looking at me (impractical). It was when I finally wrote “totally unsound” after a long day of observing that I grew angry. I realized my mom was mentally unstable and instead of asking her about it or feeling concerned, I was mad that she would lie to me. To us. That she would continue to tell stories as if they were real when the responsible thing to do would be to admit that she made them up and that she was delusional.

I decided to confront her about my findings and tell her the definition of crazy because it didn't seem like she knew it. She was on the back patio and I threw my notebook into her lap and started telling her about everything I'd noticed that day. Everything crazy. I told her that her stories were lies and that she needed to live in reality because she was being a bad mom. She blinked slowly at the messily scrawled (and probably misspelled) notes I'd taken on her. She then looked at me and I felt like a vice had gripped around my small chest. Tears were streaming down her face and I knew that I had ones to match. I ran up to my room and I stayed there until morning.

Now at sixteen, I realized I hadn't changed at all in the seven years she's been gone. All this time I thought I was growing up, that I was maturing and finally understanding the nature of my mom's illness. When really, I was still that nine-year-old who was collecting data and trying to justify her last moments with her dead mother.

Except now she's not dead. And she's waiting for me.

A knock at the front door startled me out of my spiraling and I quickly opened it without thinking about who might be on the other side.

Of course, it was Ian. Who seemed to be there for every one of my lowest moments in the past week. I felt stripped away or peeled like an unripe banana. Before he even said hey or hi or what's up, I pulled him inside and wrapped my arms around his chest and buried my face in his shoulder. We were quiet and he tentatively returned the desperate hug though I could tell he wasn't sure what to do with his hands. I let him go and I was relieved to see that his face was bright red because I was pretty sure mine was too. He cleared his throat.

"Ummmm," he said, "What's going on?"

“Sorry, I just,” I took a deep breath to steady myself, “sorry. Do you think I’m a bad person?”

“What?”

I knew I was giving Ian conversational whiplash, but everything felt vitally important all at the same time and it was hard deciding which was the first thing I should tell him.

“Do you think I’m a bad person?” I said, not even trying to hide the emotion from my voice. I needed him to tell me that I was fine.

“No,” he said.

“How would you know?” I demanded, “you don’t even know me that well. How would you know whether I’m a good person or not?”

“Probably the same way someone knows that Hitler was a mass murderer without actually meeting him.”

“So, you’re saying because you don’t know of anything bad I’ve done that it must mean I’m a good person? Don’t be naïve, Ian.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he was matching my frustrated tone though he was confused and still reeling from the unexpected, and uncomfortable, hug, “I know you’re not a bad person.”

“But how? For all you know, I might have been a puppy kicker when I was a kid.”

“Because we still are kids, Drea. Our pasts don’t matter that much because we are still developing into full humans and it’s not like nothing you’ve ever done matters now, but also, I’ve seen you be nice. And nice people don’t usually kick puppies. And if you did then it was probably an accident and you probably feel really bad about it.”

“Okay,” I said, “But what if someone hates you enough to poison you?”

I told him about going to the hospital the day before, about the doctor finding hemlock in my system and about the voices I heard. I showed him what I wrote down and finally, my greatest fear.

“It’s all real, Ian. The stories my mom told me when I was a kid. The ones she wrote down. They’re real.”

He looked at the scrawled words on the notepad and a small wrinkle formed between his eyebrows. He opened his mouth to say something, but he closed it again. He didn’t seem surprised, merely thoughtful.

“And you think one of them is poisoning you? One of these heroes?” he finally said.

“I don’t know, yeah?”

Ian scoffed.

“They’re not very good heroes,” he said.

“I don’t think anyone was trying to kill me. Or else I’d be dead, right? It’s probably just to get my attention. To get me to listen,” I said.

“There’s better ways to get people’s attention.”

“Obviously. But we have no idea who we’re dealing with so we can’t make any judgments yet.”

“Are you telling me not to judge the person who poisoned you?” Ian said.

“The point is, I thought she was crazy, Ian. I thought we were looking for a woman who’d wandered off into the forest and got herself lost for seven years. That maybe she’d left clues because she thought she was in a story.”

He nodded.

“And then we find out that she really is in a story. She is the story,” Ian said. We were quiet then and I leaned back onto the couch we were huddled on.

“You’re missing school,” I said lazily.

“So are you,” he said.

“She wants me to come find her. To save her,” I said.

“Did she say that?”

“No. But I know she does. ‘When you wake come find me,’ the poem said. Her words. Her writing. I’m awake now. I’m not sure I was before. I think I’ve been sleeping for a while trying to dream up some other reality where either she never existed, or she was never crazy. Not crazy.”

“So, what are you going to do? How are we going to save her?”

“We?”

“Obviously.”

“You don’t think this story is too weird?”

“Of course it is,” Ian smiled, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be a part of it.”

I smiled back at him and my heart lurched in my chest. I coughed to clear the feeling.

“Well it’s not like we can go and fight whoever took her,” I mumbled.

“Speak for yourself,” Ian said. I laughed and he only looked a little offended before he laughed as well.

“What? Are we going to do some kind of training montage or something? We’re from forest suburbia. We can’t fight anyone, let alone a hero,” I said.

“Yeah, especially since we’d probably have to fight a wolf,” Ian chuckled. Something clicked in my head and I sat up straighter. Ian stopped giggling.

“A wolf,” I said, “that’s only possible if—”

I grabbed Mom’s book from the floor and flipped the pages violently until I came to one about the Changer.

“The Changer can turn into any creature,” I said, “with claws and fangs and wings.”

“Do wolves have claws?” Ian mused.

“I think it was The Changer who dragged my mom away by that river.”

We took in this new revelation and I felt like my head was going to explode. The Changer was always a mythical hero until now. A figure who lived in a strange place: timeless and unreal. I looked at Ian and his face seemed to reflect exactly what I was feeling: surprise, confusion, and resignation.

The next couple days I spent most of my time with my nose in my mom’s book, looking for clues or answers or maybe some way out of this whole mess. A secret to a time machine that would take me to right before I found the note at the library, of all places. I felt like my eyes were stuck in place reading the same stories without really understanding any of them. I turned yet another page, the last one, and read:

In the very beginning there was The Devourer. It ate everything that it could, using up the energies of the land and people here before to devour and create its own world. Motivated by selfish interest, The Devourer emptied the valleys, drank up the oceans, and razed the villages to the ground singlehanded. Alone, The Devourer found itself contemplating the future. Sitting on the peak of a single mountain surrounded by flat earth, The Devourer thought to himself, What is the point of emptiness if there is nothing to fill it back again?

The Devourer traveled away from the empty land to seek filling. They spoke with kings, priests, sorcerers, gods, mothers, fathers, collecting and devouring in equal measure. One day

while The Devourer was digging through an endless cavern in a strange place, it came upon a lone girl sitting in a high cave with only an ornate rug under her as a home.

“Greetings, priestess,” The Devourer said, because it had met with many women and girls of this type on its travels and knew the proper respect for a strange creature.

“I am not a priestess,” the girl replied.

“Excuse me,” The Devourer said, “I only intrude to ask a question.”

“Ask it,” she said. She did not move from her spot on the rug. The Devourer did not join her for it was unwelcome.

“I am the lord of an empty land with no way to fill it again. What power, what prayer, might I speak in order to create mountains, valleys, and rivers?”

“No such power exists,” She said. The Devourer was told this countless times already. They turned away, ready to finally give up the search.

“But there are many powers which will accomplish what you wish,” the girl said, “Take me to the empty land.”

The Devourer and the girl entered the land hand in hand. When the girl spoke, her words seemed to float around her like fairies. When she directed them, they sprouted daffodils in their path. Over the course, the girl spoke and people began entering the land from faraway places. Driven there by a force they did not know. The Devourer was amazed by what one so young could do.

“I am not enough,” the girl told the Devourer. She told them of other persons of power who could help them be truly filled.

All their days, The Devourer invited those who they thought might have the skills necessary to heal what it had done to the land so long ago. Meanwhile, the girl stayed and wove

chants day and night. She sang songs and composed poems that can never be written, and the world bent around her to obey.

In the beginning, heroes walked a foreign land. They asked questions, sought answers, destroyed, and built. Heroes that were fantasies, figments of my mother's imagination yesterday are now or were living beings. And yet, no matter how many times I read about The Devourer, nothing brought her back to me. To us. That's what it was all about, after all. This story is about a girl who lost her mom, remember?

Even though it was 6:00 at night I called up Ian.

"Let's retrace her steps," I said.

"Okay," he said.

Twenty minutes later he pulled up in front of the house in Gina's car. I quickly jumped in the passenger seat and glared back at Willow who was staring at us from the front window with something close to murder in her eyes.

"What's with your sister? Is she a demon or something?" Ian asked as he made his way back down our driveway to the main road. I sighed.

"No, she's just mad because I told her to do her homework."

"Makes sense," he said. I sighed again.

"Okay, we know she was last seen in person in Applegate. But How did she get from here, to there? And what was she doing along the way?"

Ian idled at the end of the long driveway.

"Let's go," I demanded.

"Go where? What's your plan, partner?" He said.

“We’re trying to figure out where my mom went and why she went to Applegate which will hopefully help us figure out where she is,” I said. My voice was raised by the end and I had to take a couple deep breaths to calm down, though I wasn’t sure why I was worked up in the first place. Ian put the car in park and turned toward me.

“Listen,” he started. And I knew this wasn’t going to be a conversation I enjoyed, “we know she was taken. By heroes.” He waited.

“Yeah, and?”

“This just seems like a waste of time to be going back on a road we’ve already gone down in order to find the same answer. She was taken. By the heroes in the stories. Probably a shape shifting hero. What other answers are you looking for?”

“I’m not looking for answers,” I said quickly. Ian threw up his hands.

“Then what are we doing?”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. So I sat there opening and closing my mouth trying to find something reasonable to say but it never came. It was a good question. What was I doing? Was I actually trying to find clues of Mom’s disappearance? Or was I more likely trying to delay the inevitable? Was I scared of the heroes or was I scared of reality that was stranger than fiction? All things I would rather put off until tomorrow. Or never. Never sounded pretty good to me then.

Let me say now that if you are frustrated with this story, I understand. Nothing is really happening. I’m talking to a lot of people and pacing and panicking, but not really doing anything. And here’s the thing, I know that no one likes stories like this. We want action and decision and for sureness. But when was the last time you found out that fantasy was reality and reality was fantasy? And let me remind you that everyone else in my family thought they had a

dead mom. I still wasn't entirely sure I didn't have a dead mom, though the hope was growing in me fast and burdensome like a tumor. The thing is, it would be easier if she were dead. This story would be entirely different. It would be about a girl who is recovering from grief and maybe moving on with some other relationship. The heaviness of the situation was slowly getting more and more noticeable every day I held onto the hope that she was still alive. And it only got heavier after hearing the voice say that I would save her. She was sure of it.

Let me remind you at this point that I didn't think I could save anyone. I wasn't a hero. There was nothing special about me. Nothing at all. And because I had lived such a painfully boring and nonspecial life for sixteen years, I responded to Ian's question in the following way.

"We're not doing anything," I said, my voice flat, "sorry I called you for nothing."

"No, that's not—"

"Seriously. Thank you for helping me with everything. I'm sorry you got pulled into this non-adventure adventure. You obviously have things to do and I need to get some things together. Maybe we should just call the police or something like that."

"The police think she's dead and—"

"Well maybe she is. You can't really trust a fevered mind, can you? You can't really trust me."

The air in the car was thick with my words like they were waiting to break free from the metal casing and race out into the world to tell everyone that Drea Grimm is not to be trusted. I wrenched open the door and got out of the car. I tried to smile in the most genuine way I could.

"Seriously, Ian. Thank you for being a friend. It's more than I ever expected." He looked like he wanted to stop me or to argue. His brow was furrowed; simultaneously confused, angry, but also amused by something. I closed the door in his face and walked away.

Chapter 15

My story wasn't going very well. I sat on our sagging front steps for a while looking at the sun creep down between the trees and then lower and then even lower than that. I thought about strange. How it usually meant unusual, extraordinary, or curious; odd. And how it also meant estranged, alienated, as a result of being out of one's natural environment; foreign.

It's that second definition that caused me to close the door on Ian and sit on my porch for half an hour staring at nothing and thinking about word definitions. I was at the crux of my story. The time when I was suspended between action and inaction. Between friends and enemies. Ian was so close to being indispensable. Which is probably why I pushed him away. I pressed the tips of my fingers together just to remind myself that I had a body, that I felt things and that I was real. I tried to cry. To emote. But it didn't feel appropriate. Someone else should be crying, I thought, not me.

I felt them in the house behind me. The soft thumps of bodies living behind closed doors and thin walls was both comforting and anxiety inducing. Those living bodies who relied on me for comfort, for sustenance. And after my time in the hospital they were hungry for assurance that I would never die on them. I laughed a little at myself contemplating the promise of immortality. I had no idea what was truly waiting for me behind the front door. I just thought I knew because, of course, up to this point I was holding on a foolish hope that nothing was truly strange or foreign.

Seems like a long time to hold onto an old reality. Let me tell you, changing worlds is never easy.

Eventually, I opened the front door and air whooshed out and blew back my hair like there was a giant fan in the front hallway. It smelled like a morning bedroom that was filled all

night with stale breath and dirty clothes. When I walked in, everything was heavy and quiet and it felt like someone had put some really good headphones over my ears but didn't play any music. I knew the whole family was home, though I no longer heard any evidence that they were around or conscious. I couldn't make out the sound of my shoes on the wood flooring.

The air was frozen. I called out

“Matt? Will? Anyone here?” I thought for a millisecond that I heard a faint sound. Like someone calling from far away.

I took the stairs up to my room two at a time.

Matt was sitting on Willow's bed, his face contorted in confusion, fear, panic, all of the above. My breath froze in my mouth.

“What happened?” I said on an exhale. The only air I had in me.

“Nothing? Something? I don't know. Drea, she won't wake up. I kept calling her because I had a question, but she didn't respond so I came up here and I shook her, even slapped her a bit. Just a small one. She won't respond.”

“She's not—”

“She's asleep. But she's too asleep. Is that a thing? What should we do?” he said.

I quickly went to Willow's bed and knelt by her head. She was curled up on her side. I've woken up to this same picture every morning for who knows how long. And when she was four and would pee the bed, I'd wake up to her little face wet with tears. I'd clean her up and she would clutch onto me like I was her lifeline as we both fell back to sleep together.

I listened for her breathing. It was deep and long like waves. I touched her face. Nothing. I grabbed onto one of her arms that was sticking out of the covers and jerked it around. Nothing. I sighed, grabbed onto her hand and held it for a moment.

That's when I felt it. Something distinctly paper-like. Something rough and thick.

I unfurled her hand and took out a crumple of paper. I quickly unfolded it. It was a letter. And not just any letter. There was a spider-webbed drop of blood on the bottom edge like a finger print. I read it out loud.

It shall not be your death,

The princess will only fall.

One must remain at home if

Your wish shall be fulfilled

The thorns hold firmly together

As though they had hands

Thirteen of them to the Kingdom

Your wish shall be fulfilled

If only we had a Child;

But they never received one, and so

They lived happily until they died.

Your wish shall be fulfilled.

We didn't call 911. Maybe it will sound ordinary, but I didn't want Dad to have to pay the bills for the doctors to just tell us there was nothing they could do because it's a curse and not just a regular coma. After trying everything we left her there in her bed. And by "everything" I mean we tried kissing her. Is that weird? Let me clarify, we kissed her on the cheek. I figured it

was worth a shot. It didn't work, obviously. That would be too easy. That's not how stories go, or so I'm told.

Matt and I sat at the kitchen table. Waiting. Waiting for some stroke of genius to hit us. Waiting for a magical wizard to show up and solve all our problems. Waiting for someone else to be cursed. Maybe waiting for Dad to show up. Or dreading it.

I was angry. Should I be telling you that? You want to see it instead? Well the tension in the kitchen was building to almost a boiling point. No one was saying anything, and I wanted to scream. And I never scream unless it's at the TV. He did nothing wrong, but I wanted to yell at Matt. He barely said a word after I read the note.

And everything felt suffocating, like it was trying to slowly push the life out of me. I ripped off my sweater and threw it unceremoniously on the floor. I stood up quickly and slammed my hands on the table. Matt looked at me like I was an alien.

"What's wrong with you?" I said in Matt's face. He didn't speak. He finally managed the word, "me?" before I started in again.

"I just told you your little sister is cursed, and you don't even bat an eye! Like it's all some normal off-day events. Why are you so calm?"

Matt stood up from his seat and looked me in the eye. It was such a penetrating look I wanted to look away, but I couldn't.

"I'm mad at you," he said.

"Good," I said.

"Not everyone shows everything they're feeling. You should know that better than me. And I thought you should already figure I'm mad."

"How's that?"

“You’ve kept this from me. You knew this could happen, but did you warn us? No. You don’t figure to say to your siblings, ‘Hey by the way don’t accept any weird letters because they’re going to steal your blood and curse you.’ And now Willow might not wake up ever, and who knows what will happen to the rest of us.”

“You’re saying this is my fault?” I said.

“Yeah I guess I am,” Matt said.

“Well it won’t be for long.”

I nearly stumbled out of the kitchen. I threw open the door with so much force it hit the wall. I didn’t even look in front of me, I just tried to stomp forward out of there. I say tried because in my anger I was blinded and didn’t see my father standing in the doorway, his hand already out like he was about to grab the door handle before it was ripped away from him.

He put his giant hand on my shoulder to stop me from ramming into him. I think he felt something in my blood, the way it was boiling.

“What happened?” he said. I loosely gestured because I didn’t trust my voice up the stairs in the general direction of our bedroom where Will was.

I think he knew. I don’t know how he knew. He strode up the steps before I even blinked. The bedroom door was open, and I knew he was probably doing what we all had already done. Trying to wake her up. Calling her name. He probably found the note I left on the bedside table, like some sort of plaque in a museum: the sleeping girl, created by Drea Grimm, donated by evil shape shifting hero. I crossed my arms over my chest and went through all the scenarios, all the things he would say or could say when he came down. Meanwhile, Matt came out into the hallway. He wouldn’t look at me.

Matt was pacing slowly when Dad finally came back downstairs. He kept his dialogue short, as always.

“Explain” he said, crossing his arms and resting his hands on his biceps. I didn’t say anything. Then Matt had to open his dumb mouth again.

“It’s a curse Dad,” Matt said, “Willow got some sort of letter and when she read it, it made her fall asleep and now she won’t wake up. And we didn’t call 911 because Drea knows it’s a curse because she was investigating all this stuff for weeks now and she didn’t tell us.”

It sounded like Matt was trying to get me in trouble. He was really mad.

“A curse?” Dad said. I sighed. It was my responsibility to make things right again. If Willow’s life wasn’t on the line then I would have kept about my business, not involving Dad at all, as was always my plan. Alas, one cannot have all that one wishes for.

“You remember the stories Mom used to tell?” I said, “Well I think they were true. Like she was predicting something or it got in her dreams. Either way, Mom’s in trouble, and she left me a cursed note so I would figure this all out.”

Dad didn’t say anything. In fact, he stayed completely still during my entire story. I know I’m not that great of a storyteller, but he should be moved by mentioning Mom. I wasn’t asking for his help, of course. And maybe I was trying to get a rise out of him. I stood up in front of him.

“Why did you keep looking?” I said. I didn’t yell. I didn’t scream or cry. But my voice was hard and unforgiving, even to my own ears. I didn’t know that was what I wanted to say to him until I had said it. And it was out there, stuck in the frozen air of our house. I kept going, “You knew she wasn’t dead. So why declare her dead? Why make us all go through mourning?”

Alone. Why was it so easy for you to shut us out? Why won't you answer me? Why won't you ever just look at me!"

Dad looked like he wanted to say something. Looked like he might explode with saying something, instead he turned and opened the door to the basement, except he didn't close it behind him. He clomped down the wooden stairs, turning on the light as he went.

I followed with Matt. I was staring into my dad's back, wondering what he would say if he let himself. I wanted to keep yelling. To keep saying things. Mostly about what I should do and if he secretly knew where Mom was this whole time but for some reason he wouldn't tell us. As we went further down into his man-cave basement, I wished Ian was there and he'd say we're partners and maybe then I wouldn't be so scared.

I hadn't been in the basement since before Mom was gone. I remember she used to tease Dad because of the old couch that he kept down there that looked like everything that could be spilled on it, was spilled on it. She wanted him to get rid of it, he refused because it was so "comfortable," she tried to put some covers over the upholstery, he would always take them off again or tell her they didn't fit his "vibe" he was going for. Which back then was sophisticated grunge and now seemed to be crazy person grunge. The couch was still there, tucked to one side but there was also a long desk with a computer, stacks of books falling over on the floor, papers strewn over the arm of the couch like they had fallen there, and a dead bulb in the middle of the ceiling so the only light that was shed came from the sides. It made Dad's face look even more eerie, only lighting up the sides.

The biggest thing in the room was a map compiled of roads, towns, pins, scribbled notes, and printed out shots from Google Earth. At the time I didn't have the patience or emotional

wherewithal or appreciate how dumb it was for him to have printed out pages of the Internet, but I've told him since, and I think he appreciated the feedback although he grumbled when I said it.

I couldn't keep my eyes off it, searching and trying to make out the tiny descriptions Dad wrote of different roads, where they led, if Mom had ever taken them before to get anywhere. Dad joined me in studying the map.

"I've been looking," he said, "for seven years, though I knew it was a hopeless quest. I knew it then; I know it now. That's why I didn't let you know anything."

"But maybe we could have—"

"You had enough; taking care of your siblings."

"I don't understand," I said, "I've always wondered, how did you know she isn't really dead? This whole time?"

"How do you?" he asked.

I thought about this for a minute. Normal people who believe their loved ones are dead grieve for a couple years maybe, or more, but they live their lives knowing the one they love is buried somewhere with a gravestone.

Mom doesn't have one of those, but there is a certificate which I haven't touched since that first day. I stared at the map and caught myself thinking "crazy" again. I shook that thought out of my head and looked at my dad. Really looked at him. He had dark stubble dotting his cheeks and his grey eyes were drooping and sad. I heard echoes of when he would laugh in the very depths of my memory. When he would love openly and often. It was because of him that I used to search every store I went to, every face I saw, if maybe it looked like her face even a little. For him. For everyone else. Never for me.

The stories convinced me to believe. Not because they were particularly persuasive, but because I needed to talk to her. I needed to hear her voice and hear more. If the heroes were real, what did that make her? What did that make me? I needed to see her again so I could look at her the same way I looked at Dad. So I could tell if she was real. If she was ever really real.

Dad kept talking. I think he said more than I had ever heard from him in years.

“I didn’t believe her stories for a long time. Even after she told me the dreams she had, how real they felt, how she knew they were true. But I would write them down for her when she woke up and they were still fresh. And then came the weeks leading up to her disappearance. She got nervous, her dreams became darker, someone was coming for her, she told me. I thought it was stress, maybe, her eccentricities reaching a new level.”

“Were you scared?”

This was from Matt. Dad didn’t answer his question, he kept going,

“When one morning I woke up and she was gone, I knew in the pit of my stomach that whatever it was that she was afraid of had finally caught up to her. And I hadn’t listened to her fears, I brushed them off like they were small worries. And when the police said we had to assume she was dead, I wanted to argue, but I didn’t. I knew that the reason for her disappearance was hidden in the dreams, in the stories. So I studied on my own, created this map, spent off hours driving roads she might have walked down or places she might be.”

His deep voice trailed off.

“Do you need some water after that speech?” I teased. I was in awe. Or maybe shock. Or maybe both. Our family ties were in flux in that moment, I felt it. We were creating a new normal, us and Dad, and it was all hanging by a thread.

Dad smiled. He actually smiled and it was ugly and crooked, but it was there.

“Here,” Dad said. He turned around and gathered a couple of the fallen books from the floor near his desk. He poured them into my waiting arms. They were notebooks. Just regular notebooks each with a number 1-4 on them in thin, tiny handwriting.

They were full and dated with each new entry. I picked a random page in the first and read

Once upon a time there was a beautiful little girl. She was royalty, though she didn't know it yet. She lived in a cave with her grandmother and grandfather and it was nice there. They had carpets from other lands strewn across the stone floor and gas lamps wedged into cracks in the wet walls.

Every day the girl asked her grandmother if she could play outside. She said no. Every day, the girl asked her grandfather if she could learn how to play a song like he often did after meals. He said no. And though she was an obedient child, she grew impatient for more than the cave she'd grown up in. One day, her grandmother grew very ill and could not leave her bed. Her grandfather, being old and often ill himself, pleaded with the girl to go out and find a medicine man to heal his wife. The girl agreed and ran out of the cave for the first time.

Her bare feet were surprised by the softness of the outside vegetation and her skin cried out at the intensity of direct sunlight. She ran her hand through mountain water and tasted the clear, thin air. She did not forget her grandmother, the dear woman who raised her, and so she took off down the mountain side in search of others who might help her.

She came to a small village at the foot of a mountain pass. When the villagers saw the girl coming, running through rocks as if they were fields of golden flowers, they hid in their homes. It is the girl from the cave, they said, the one from the stories. She has come down at last to destroy us all.

“I haven’t seen this one.”

I pointed at the page I was reading. Dad looked to where my finger was.

“Oh. Your Mother thought that one would be too scary for you kids.”

“It’s not that scary,” I said. I thought about the girl in the story and remembered Willow upstairs. My heart sank.

“What are we going to do?” I asked, “How are we going to save Mom and Willow?” Dad raised his hand to rest on his jaw.

“I think that’s your decision,” he said.

“What? Why? You’re the adult.” I said. And yes, it did sound childish even to my own ears.

Dad continued, “You put together in two weeks what took me seven years to find out. If you believe that your mom is leaving messages for you, I think that means only you can really find out the truth.”

“You’re going to go back to not helping me?” I said. Dad contorted his face in what I hoped was shame. He sighed deep and long.

“No, I don’t think that’s the best choice anymore. We’re all in this now. I’ll pull together what I have, all the places I know she’s not. You take care of your sister.”

He made sense. He made a lot of sense. Which made me more than a little bitter that he hadn’t said anything to me earlier. I could quickly follow that with reasonable explanations, but I much rather preferred to be bitter for a while. Our basement meeting was adjourned so Matt and I walked back upstairs, leaving Dad behind to shuffle through papers, read his map notes, and maybe print off some more Google Earth pages. The secrets my dad kept from us were maybe necessary when we were younger, but we were all involved now and there was no going back

even if we wanted to. We all felt it that night as we fell asleep. That the world would be changed the next morning.

Chapter 16

“I’m giving up,” I said to Matt in the morning. I’d spent the entire night trying to get comfortable sleeping on the couch. I could barely be in the same room as Willow’s unconscious body let alone sleep next to it. And because I didn’t really sleep, I thought about Dad’s map and it loomed larger and larger in my mind until it seemed to swallow me up. To devour me. And that next day after the initial shock of my dad’s confrontation, I was tired. He’d spent seven years trying to find my mom and even if I had some better idea of where she was, which I didn’t, I was clearly not the right person for this job.

“Giving up what?” Matt said. He looked up at me from his bed, bleary eyed. He clearly had not slept well either. I motioned for him to scoot over and I wiggled onto the bed next to him.

“I’m sorry,” I said. Matt rubbed his eyes like that would make him understand me better. I continued, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the letter I got. I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you that I thought Mom was still alive, or that she wasn’t crazy.”

“I never thought she was crazy. At least, I don’t think I did,” Matt said.

“Well, you were a better kid than I was.”

“I just don’t think I cared,” he said. “I mean, it didn’t really matter to me whether her stories were real or not. Like Santa Claus, you know? It was just fun to act like they were real with her.”

“Yeah well.”

The guilt washed over me again.

“And I know you’re not sorry. You don’t have to pretend like you are,” Matt mumbled. I was shocked, “Of course I’m sorry. I should have told you from the beginning because you’re not a kid anymore and you can handle stuff like this.”

Matt shook his head and his hair swished against his sheets.

“Yeah but you’d do it all again in a heartbeat, wouldn’t you? You keep things from us to protect us. We both know it.”

“Protect you from what?” I said softly. I wanted him to give me the answers that I couldn’t find in my own brain.

“From reality,” Matt said. He turned on his side and closed his eyes. We sat on his bed together and I felt my eyes grow heavy. I was about to fall asleep when Matt’s voice shook me out of my waking dreams.

“What are you giving up?” he said.

“I don’t want to do this anymore. I’m not even sure I ever wanted to do this. It’s too much for me, Matt. And now that Dad knows everything, I think I can just give it to him and he’ll bring Mom back to us.”

Matt scoffed loudly.

“What?” I said.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” he said.

“Explain,”

“‘Too much’ was like three things ago, Drey,” He sat up and leaned back against his headboard next to me, “It’s too late now. Everything is different. Everything’s changed.”

“That’s what I’m saying—”

“And everything is the same also. Dad was searching in the basement, but he’s still Dad. He’s still a walking grief machine who can barely think about basic care for himself let alone for his children or his missing wife. Why do you think he said you have to figure this out?”

“Because I’ve heard the voices?”

“Because he knows he can’t do it. He’s not strong like you.”

“I don’t feel strong,” I whispered, “I feel used up.”

I rested my head on Matt’s shoulder and was surprised to find it closer than it used to be.

“You’ve grown,” I said.

“Probably,” he said.

“I’ve missed so much thinking about myself.”

“That’s okay,” said Matt, “You were trying to fix us all.”

“What’s your wish, Matty?”

“Huh?”

“Will’s poem. It said, ‘your wish shall be fulfilled.’ What’s your wish?”

He thought about it for a moment.

“I just want us to be okay again.”

I heard bowls and spoons clanging in the kitchen when I walked down the stairs. As I got closer, I also distinguished low cursing and hissing, like some deranged foul-mouthed snake was using our utensils. It was just my dad. I watched him from the kitchen doorway struggling with fishing eggshells out of a bowl of raw eggs. Nearby on the counter there were pans of varying sizes, crumpled up used paper towels, and what seemed like every single cooking utensil we owned.

“Need some help?” I said. He jumped and turned to look at me. He grunted and frowned deeper.

“I can make eggs,” he grumbled. I smirked though I tried to hide it.

“You don’t have to do anything, Dad.”

I hesitated, but eventually let my hand rest on his large shoulder. It rose and fell under my touch as he signed. Which is how I found myself eating breakfast with my father for the first time in I don’t know how long. Cereal, of course. We reached for the same box, our hands colliding, and we both mumbled sorry in the same way. He pushed the box toward me. Matt didn’t look up from his face in his bowl.

After we finished, Dad brought up his files full of map pieces and notes and he plunked them all on the kitchen table. He began pulling out single pieces and handing them to me, noting what they were and how he got them with each one.

“This is from when she mentioned the mall in Grantsville, and this is that garden in Portland she loved to much, this is her least favorite place, and this is where she thought one of those hero people might be—”

“She was looking for the heroes, the real heroes?” I said.

“Well, one in particular,” he said.

“Which one?”

“I’m not sure, but I think he was a child.”

“The Child?”

“Yeah that was it.”

Mom looked for The Child. It wasn't just a story then. Well, none of them were stories, but the one she told me the most, the one where The Mother looked for the Child, that one was true. Or, at least, she thought so. And that meant—

“Dad,” I said, “did Mom mention anything about having powers?”

Both Matt and Dad looked up from the pages they were staring at to give me the crazy side-eye. The stress had gotten to me, I'd finally lost it, they were sure. I tried to elaborate, “Like magical powers. But not wand and spells thing but mind powers? What was it again—”

“Your Mom would sometimes say she saw the future,” Dad said, “but she was usually joking.”

“What about the times she wasn't?”

“When she dreamed, she would say she went somewhere else. Was transported. And sometimes it was in the future or the past.”

Matt didn't know where to look, who to accuse first. He looked like he was going to yell, puke, and pass out, but instead he rested his forehead on the table which shook with a hard thump. What Dad said about Mom's “powers,” those were the strengths of The Mother. Mom was The Mother, not just a mother, but the hero Mother. She's still looking for The Child. But why? Why did she care so much about a story that may be connected to her but is still not hers?

I needed to get out of the house. Go anywhere. Be anywhere. Matt didn't want to leave Willow. In fact, he spent most of the afternoon reading next to her bed. How he stood the sensation of his voice being bounced back to him is beyond me, but it's what gave him peace.

I left as soon as I could. And I ended up going to Ian's house.

I knocked on the front door enthusiastically at first. I thought maybe too enthusiastically, so I quickly followed it up with an apology knock that was gentler. A woman answered the door.

She was short with chestnut hair tied up in a thousand different braids that swung around her round face. Her name is Gina, everyone knew her, and she'd known my family for a long time though I never met her in person.

She'd had a handful of foster children in the past few years but none as long as she had Ian. Gina smiled at me when she saw me standing in her doorway, like she knew why I was there. For some reason my face went red and I struggled to say anything, but it didn't matter because she said it for me.

"He's in his room. Last door down that hallway," she said. Gina opened the door wide for me to make my way through.

I didn't knock or anything, which when I think about it now was probably a bad idea, I walked in his room like I knew the place. Luckily, he was clothed, though he did roll off his bed when I came in.

"What are you doing?" I said, talking to the floor, which was where he now was.

"What are *you* doing?" Ian said, his voice muffled by the carpet he was speaking into.

"I came here to talk to you," I said. Ian pushed himself up and stood, brushing off the front of his shirt like he'd gotten it dirty but he was flustered and was trying to cover it up as well as he could while wearing pajamas. And not like t-shirt and pants sort of thing, he was wearing a pajama set with a button-up and everything. He saw me staring and shot me a glare.

"Gina got them for me when I came here," he said.

"That's sweet," I said. I didn't even try to cover up my smile. He was uncomfortable and I was delighted. I looked around like I was in a museum. One wall of his room was covered in pictures, posters, and various pieces of paper like he was slowly trying to wallpaper it. There was

no desk but there was a bedside table that had a small stack of books and a laptop was on his bed with the covers half-thrown over it.

“Nice place you got,” I said. I rolled forward and backward from my heels to the balls of my feet. Ian sat on the edge of his bed.

“So?” He started, like he was offering an invitation. Or waiting for one.

“Why are you here, Ian?”

I sat down next to him on the bed.

“Well, this is my room,”

“No, I mean. Why are we here, together?”

“Everyone needs someone, right?”

“That was never true for me.” I stared straight ahead so I didn’t have to look at him, “Until a week and half ago. Then it was like I couldn’t do anything without you.”

I looked at him then and my eyes strained with the effort to keep my gaze locked with his.

“Can I change real quick?” he said, his eyes trained down to his bare feet.

“No,” I said, sitting on the end of his bed, “I’ve got to tell you things.”

We talked for about an hour though it felt like more. Ian listened patiently and only provided feedback when I asked for it. He didn’t ever ask me to prove anything, to explain things again, it was like he was in my head right along with me with every thought and every crazy theory. Despite Ian’s openness, I found myself wondering what he was thinking and how he stayed here and listened to me when everything I was saying was nonsense; sleeping girls, cursed letters, mothers in need of rescue.

We sat on his floor leaning back against his bed and I noticed every time he swept his hair away from his eyes and the freckles in his face corners glinted like bits of glitter. I suddenly wanted to touch them one by one, for good luck maybe.

“What was your life like before this?” I suddenly asked, gesturing to everything, the house, Gina, Harris, her husband. Ian straightened like he was taken aback by the question.

“I’m a foster kid, what do you think my life was like?”

His tone was no longer easy. I wasn’t sure if I should continue the conversation.

“I don’t think I can even imagine what sort of life you’ve lived,” I said. Ian smiled a little and I relaxed again.

“I guess that’s true.”

“After the thing, with Willow, I’ve just thought a lot about how I can be selfish sometimes. But I think I want to be your friend anyway,” I said.

“When I was ten, I had this friend. Well, I guess he was more like my brother. We clicked the moment we saw each other. We both liked race cars and this TV show about some monster fighting kids. After a few months our foster parents couldn’t watch us anymore. I was lucky to get put with another family by myself. They thought they were going to adopt me. But my brother was sent to a boy’s home. One that was known for being a little rough sometimes, when things were bad or overcrowded. I asked about him whenever I saw my social worker or a state counselor. They told me they didn’t know but they would find out what happened to him. They never did. He slipped through the cracks, as they say. Which is how they describe someone that’s lost in the system without really taking any credit for abandoning a little boy.”

I couldn’t say anything even if I tried. I thought that maybe this was the first real thing Ian had ever said to me after all of our time together and I felt lighter, but also heavier in a good

way. Like someone helped you with your backpack in preparation for a nice day hike. I thought about telling him what lost meant--having gone astray or missed the way; bewildered as to place, direction—but thought that might not be right for the moment. Ian glanced sideways at me.

“You’re not going to tell me some irrelevant definition, or that you’re sorry or anything?”

He wasn’t accusing, merely wondering.

“Irrelevant is a strong word,” I said, “and I think it’s nice.”

“Nice?”

He turned to fully look at me and he clearly thought I was fundamentally broken somehow.

“We are both looking for parts of ourselves that we’ve lost in the form of people.”

“Yes. That’s it,” he said.

Chapter 17

The last time Mom told me a story there were thick clouds in the sky. She sat in a chair in the living room and like one of those holiday witches she started talking when I passed her on my way outside. She grabbed me gently by my arm and made me stop and listen. It went like this:

Once upon a time there was a beautiful little girl. She was royalty, though she didn't know it yet. She lived in a cave with her grandmother and grandfather and it was nice there. They had carpets from other lands strewn across the stone floor and gas lamps wedged into cracks in the wet walls.

Every day the girl asked her grandmother if she could play outside. She said no. Every day, the girl asked her grandfather if she could learn how to play a song like he often did after meals. He said no. And though she was an obedient child, she grew impatient for more than the cave she'd grown up in. One day, her grandmother grew very ill and could not leave her bed. Her grandfather, being old and often ill himself, pleaded with the girl to go out and find a medicine man to heal his wife. The girl agreed and ran out of the cave for the first time.

Her bare feet were surprised by the softness of the outside vegetation and her skin cried out at the intensity of direct sunlight. She ran her hand through mountain water and tasted the clear, thin air. She did not forget her grandmother, the dear woman who raised her, and so she took off down the mountain side in search of others who might help her.

She came to a small village at the foot of a mountain pass. When the villagers saw the girl coming, running through rocks as if they were fields of golden flowers, they hid in their homes. It is the girl from the cave, they said, the one from the stories. She has come down at last to destroy us all.

The girl entered an empty village, though she was not deterred. She knocked on the closest door. Because she did not know the proper etiquette for visitors, she opened it on her own when there was no reply. She called out for someone to help her grandmother.

“Hello? Is there medicine here?” she asked. The villagers marked her voice, high and sweet like an innocent child. A woman came to greet the girl.

“There is no medicine here,” she said, “But an herbalist a few doors down.” The girl followed the kind woman’s instructions and again entered into a strange home.

“Hello?” she called again. An old woman sat at a table close to the kitchen fire.

“What do you want, Chantress?” the woman spat. The girl was surprised by the ferocity in her voice.

“My grandmother is dying,” She said, “She needs healing.” The old woman hmphed.

“What did they expect living in a cave all alone with a demon child?” she said. The girl was too young to be offended by her words. She waited for a response, but grew impatient. She could hear the wind whistling through the pass outside and she wanted to try and catch it in her small hands.

Finally, the herbalist handed the girl a piece of paper.

“Say these words over your grandmother,” the woman said, “she will be well again.”

The girl was delighted that the solution was so easy. She thanked the woman and trotted outside. She ran up the mountain with the energy only children have. The villagers watched her go and prayed to the gods above they wouldn’t have to see the child again.

Back at the cave, her grandmother was far worse than she was before. Her eyes fluttered closed and her body shook in an effort to stay alive. Her grandfather was asleep next to his wife. His wrinkled face frowning at some unknown dream. While the girl knew she should wake him,

she was impatient, and decided to say the words herself. When she did, she saw black words crawl out of her mouth and float into the air above her grandmother. They hesitated there a moment. The girl was mesmerized and delighted. She tried to catch the words but they danced out of her grasp. She was angry and screamed sharply (as she often did when throwing girlhood tantrums) and the words flew quickly back to her, resting against the palm of her tiny hand.

She giggled and allowed the words to dance across her skin. Her grandmother struggled for air on her bedroll and the girl quickly remembered her duty. She pushed the words forward from her hand, aiming for her grandmother's chest. The spell shot through the old woman, leaving a wound deep and deadly. The girl's grandfather woke up and immediately saw his wife, dead. The little girl was devastated. She ran from the cave and was never seen again.

I thought the story was never written because it wasn't in my book, until I saw Dad's yesterday. When I woke up the next morning to a house still sleeping heavily, I remembered every word. I checked on Willow to see if anything had changed (it hadn't) and went to find my dad, which was a very new thing for me. He was in the front yard by his truck and I walked toward him on bare feet getting soaked by the morning dew on the weeds. He was rummaging with some different pieces of wood and lifting boxes out of the truck bed. He didn't acknowledge me, didn't see me maybe, until I coughed loudly at him. His head whipped up and I saw something leave his eyes, like he'd had a good time until I reminded him that he was a father.

"We should talk. Just the two of us," I said. I couldn't feel my feet.

"Sure," he said. He walked to the side of the truck that I was on and leaned against it.

"Willow hasn't woken up," I said. He nodded solemnly like he knew already, "What did you mean when you said I had to find Mom?"

I wanted him to confirm what Matt had said yesterday. That he couldn't do it. That he had failed all of us. I needed to hear it out loud. Dad looked off in the distance away from me. He squinted at the rising sun like it would tell him what to say to me.

"We're too similar, me and you," he said. My arm hairs stood on end at his words and I rubbed my bare arms to get the chill out. I felt myself frown even deeper. He continued, "She shouldn't have left us alone together. And she knew it. We're skeptics, stubborn sometimes, and we have a pretty heavy fear of failure."

He paused and I wasn't sure what he wanted me to do. Assure him that yes, I am just like him. I wouldn't have done that if he offered me anything in the world.

"What does this have to do with Willow?" I said, arms crossed and shuffling my feet against the dirt.

"We can't do this without her. We never could," he said. He sounded like he hadn't even heard me.

"We've done this without her for seven years, Dad, what are you talking about?"

I couldn't keep my voice from rising at the end. He turned toward me and blinked just like he had toward the sun.

"I'm not trying to argue with you," I said, though I really did want to argue, "But we have to do something. We have to find a way to wake Will up. Mom's not here and sure, she might be alive somewhere, but Will is here right now and she needs help."

Dad strode past me and up the porch steps.

"Come on," I heard him grumble, and I trotted after him.

I followed him up the stairs and into his bedroom. I didn't remember the last time I was in that room and it was like entering into the tomb of a Pharaoh. I wouldn't have been surprised

if I found jars of old hearts and lungs lining the walls. The bed was perfect, like the display furniture you see at home goods stores piled with unnecessary pillows and perfectly straight bedding. Dad stood just inside the door and stared at the bed like it would light on fire with the intensity of his gaze. I shoved him aside a couple inches with my shoulder so I could get inside the room past his girth.

“You’re putting off some real creepy vibes, Dad,” I mumbled.

“Your sister was always like your mom; a heavy sleeper.”

I nodded and gestured toward him with one hand to encourage him to keep moving on with his point, “Evelyn would wake up in the morning and it’s like she’d gone on a long trip while she slept. Her hair was tangled in knots, her clothes stained and torn, and she was older every time. You could see her aging a little bit every day. I mentioned it to her once as a joke and she ran to the mirror and looked at her face, tried to smile, but just looked at herself, tired, instead.”

He walked over to one side of the bed and I had to dig into my ancient memories to remember that it was Mom’s side. He yanked back the covers like he was unveiling a magic trick. And maybe he was because what I saw underneath didn’t make any sense to me.

If you’ve ever taken a high school world history class in the United States, then you have probably seen war footage. Images meant to scare teens into learning from the world’s tragic past. I remember one class where we read a short story imagining the horrors of nuclear fallout on suburban America. It ended with a haunting imagined image of a boy and a girl being blasted where they played and all that was left were nuclear shadows of where they once were.

One of those was imprinted on the bed in the shape of a woman sleeping on her side with her knees slightly bent toward her partner. I approached the shadow and touched it, expecting to have ash or residue come away on my fingers. They came away clean.

“What is this?” I whispered.

“Right before she started talking about people coming to get her, she woke up heavier than usual. In fact, she woke us both up. It felt like,” he stopped, trying to find the words, “like she’d fallen from the sky back onto her bed. Though at the time I thought, of course that’s not possible. Even still, I had to shake her to wake her up and ask what happened. She said she didn’t know but she was afraid. When she stood up and saw her shadow there, she immediately ripped off the sheets and spent the day washing them over and over. It never went away. Never even faded.”

He touched her outline gently. My mind was racing. I was thinking about what felt like hundreds of different things all at once and I wasn’t sure where to focus. I brought myself back to Willow sleeping just across the hall. Sleeping heavy like Mom. The idea of going somewhere, coming back dirt stained and ripped wasn’t new to me. In fact, those split seconds between when I fell in the school hallway to the bathroom mirror kept me up almost every night. I often wondered if someone was pulling on me, trying to get me to do something, to go somewhere, but maybe it just wasn’t working well enough. I came back easily. Just like how Mom always came back or rarely ever left at all.

And what if that same someone was pulling on Willow.

I practically ran into our room and knelt down hard next to Will’s head. She looked the same as she had when we found her like this almost two days ago. Her lips were slightly pouted and her breath came out of her like ocean waves. I ran my hand over her hair to feel for tangles,

but it was smooth. I checked under the blanket for dirt stains on her knees or arms but found nothing again. I sighed and for a second my breathing fell into step with hers.

“Willow,” I said, my voice low and insistent, “Where are you?”

I wanted to see her eyes open so bad it hurt. A feeling that was lodged under my ribs and spread out around my chest and arms. “Show me where you went and I will come find you,” I said to her. I swayed a little on my knees and that feeling squeezing my middle changed to something like pulling. Slow pulling like candy makers do to taffy. I grabbed Willow’s hand like she would stabilize me and my neck was pushed forward while my hips went back. A sound like wind screeching through branches in a storm filled my ears and I closed my eyes against it, expecting for the storm to catch me up and whip me around. I felt nothing but the insistent pull and an exploding warmth that rose up my neck and made my face feel like it was on fire.

When the screeching stopped, familiar voices rose out of terrifying silence.

“We can’t keep her here,” one said, weak and thin.

“Don’t you think I know that!” the other, harsher, louder, screeched back, “This is the only way we can get to her long enough so that she can then come back. Does that make sense even to your half-functioning brain?”

I opened my eyes. I was hunched forward over my legs folded underneath me and my hands were clutching at nothing. I spread my fingers out on the ground and felt soft, springy earth and a bed of pine needles. Slowly, I began to distinguish colors and light, but only in a limited space right in front of me. My vision formed a small flashlight radius. I blinked a couple times, but the small round patch of needles was all that I saw.

I jumped when a rough, slender hand grabbed my wrist. The nails were vicious looking like the claws of different carnivorous animals all mixed together. Already, they were drawing

blood where they grabbed me. The hand jerked me upright until I was looking at a strange face haloed in darkness.

It was a woman. Or, at least, I thought it was a woman. Her face was slender and oval, and her shoulders were rounded. That's where the human resemblances stopped. Her skin was buried underneath a layer of what looked like thick, coarse fur. Her nose was a snout with a black leathery tip and her mouth just an opening underneath that curled up to reveal rows of sharp white teeth. Her eyes were silver, which I remember thinking was odd for a creature that resembled a bear.

Still clutching my wrist, the bear woman raised her other hand which was holding something I couldn't see. She pressed it onto my left forearm and my skin bubbled and smoked underneath. I knew I was screaming but I heard it as if it were far away. The pain too seemed to be somewhere else. A different time, maybe, happening to a different Drea. When she was done, the bear woman shoved me hard in the middle of my chest and I fell backwards.

I kept falling until I was back next to Willow. I was desperately clutching at my arm and screaming. Something was trying to crawl out of my skin, I was sure of it. I watched in pinpricked horror as dark red words etched into my flesh like someone writing in delicate ink.

I will go and meet The Mother where she waits with one other

Chapter 18

The next hour was a blur of hands reaching, carrying, turning faucets and the coolness of water rushing over my raw skin. I passed in and out of consciousness because of pain but was startled awake when I stumbled into a wall and hit my head on the way to the couch. The cuts on my arm were bandaged, swaddled, in gauze and tape though I knew the wounds gushed no blood. It was Dad who sat me down on the couch and got ice for my head. I cradled my arm in my lap. The words danced across my vision like they were burned behind my eyelids as well.

I will go and meet The Mother where she waits with one other

And I knew what it meant, though I hated it. It was a key. How did I know this? Maybe because it was written on my body and it just made sense. Or maybe it was the unceasing build up that had started when I found the first letter and raised my anxiety every day until I just had nothing else to give. It was all gone now, I thought. All that was left was the key that she gave me. The hero. The Changer.

It had to be her, The Changer. She was a beast woman with claws that were also talons and sharp nails. Which means the other voice, the weaker one, was Mom. My heart flipped in my chest when I wondered whether they were working together somehow. If maybe Mom had gone willingly, but I pushed that thought deep where I didn't have to look at it anymore.

So then why did they want me? It was as if The Changer wanted me to find Mom, though the object of abduction is usually for the person to never be found again. But the words were irreversible. Whatever she wanted me for, she would get it soon. I knew, even while I was curled over with pain, that I would use the key. And it scared the shit out of me. I was breathing heavily, nearly hyperventilating, when I called Ian once the pain subsided to a dull, red, ache.

“I have a key,” I said, when he picked up with a hesitant “hello?” “And I’m going to use it so if you want to stop me then you should get over here.”

Then I hung up. Some part of me probably thought Ian would run over to our house and heroically stop me just in time and tell me...what? That he valued my life? That my pain was his pain, that we had to do this together or not at all?

I hope I don’t have to remind you that my story isn’t like that.

It’s not heroic, though there are plenty of heroes. And the moments that we wait for, when things are the hardest, those moments that will help us feel brave or competent, they often don’t come. Because as much as life sometimes feels monotonous, meaningless, mono thematic, no story is completely predictable.

I was alone in the living room. Matt had gone back to his room to look for something, he said, though he was probably trying to find the pieces of his mind and put them back together. Dad was in the kitchen and I heard him aggressively turning the pages of Mom’s journals to find a match for the phrase on my arm.

I peeled off the layers of cushion on my wound as quietly as I could. I only touched the corners of my arm, the rest felt like blazing fires were licking me. I hissed inward, long and sharp. First, I studied the movement of the lettering. I didn’t recognize it, which was a small consolation; at least I knew that my own mother wasn’t the one carving things in my skin remotely.

I called up her face in my memory, heart shaped and pleasant like a small-town nurse from a romantic lifetime movie. Her medium-length hair was always down and flowing around her face in different directions. She had the habit of continually tucking her honey hair behind her ears so much that they were sometimes red at the tips. She was nothing like me. She was a

calm quietness that suggested to you that she knew something you didn't and that something made her happy. She was a horrible morning person, though. She rarely talked before 10am and we'd get ready for school in relative silence.

I don't know if I loved her. I never thought about it until a year after she left. Seems odd, that a little girl wouldn't notice she loved her own mother until she was 10, but I had other things on my mind. I'd seen movies, read books, about motherless girls who had tragic lives and grieved for years for the loss of a best friend, a caretaker, a guiding figure of pure beauty and angelic temperament.

Though Mom was beautiful, I had a hard time thinking of her as an angel. I thought maybe she wouldn't have that job if she were dead because she wouldn't be able to wake up in time. She dreamed too much. I was studying her face in our latest family photo that I was trying to nail back to the wall after Dad took them down; one of our first passive aggressive battles. I had to squeeze my eyes shut to keep the tears inside and I nearly cracked the frame glass. Looking at her made me like that, made me love her. Not for who she was, or the relationship we had, but for who she wasn't. I loved her because her absence was gaping and I was scared.

I felt that same fear calling her up then in my mind while reading the key on my arm. It felt just as small and wrenching. And though I didn't cry, I felt the sadness dripping into my stomach, feeding me. It was a complicated sadness that wasn't entirely about motherlessness. It was also about change, unknown darkness, physical pain, guilt, and the death of heroes.

And yet I knew I would say those words out loud and they would take me to her. And I wanted that most of all. More than I wanted to embrace the fear and forget. For the sleeping princess, for the troubled, unafraid, young boy, and for the grieving king.

"They'll be better with her," I whispered to nothing, "they need her."

I started reading, surprising myself with a clear, bold voice that seemed to wash everything away. With each word, I felt my muscles relaxing and my blood pumping faster, I stretched my neck and straightened my back, preparing myself for something, though I wasn't sure what. I said the last word "*word*" and it echoed through the whole house. At the same time, Dad came out into the living room and there was a loud knock at the door. Dad must have seen something that scared him because he looked at me with eyes wide and desperate.

"No!" he shouted. He started to lunge toward me. The last echoes died, and I smiled because my arm didn't hurt anymore. I also smiled because Dad was running for me, and that was totally unexpected.

I blinked and the house was gone. It wasn't a slow pull this time, but a flash of color like an abrupt scene change in a dark movie theater, and I was on my feet and my legs were strong.

I stretched out my arm. The words were gone as if they were there in the first place.

"Welcome little hero," a voice drawled from behind me, "Me and the little mother have been waiting for you for a long time."

Chapter 19

I warped into a trap with my eyes wide open. I was in a forest clearing that was bare and dim despite the hint of the sky high above us. It was empty. So empty that I thought for a moment that I had dreamed it all and there's no one here waiting. No human-bear hybrids, no witches, captured mothers, or hidden kingdoms of heroes. I looked down at myself and was a little disappointed to see that I was still wearing my pajamas and no shoes. I'm not sure why I thought the transfer would make me more equipped to bring back my mom. It was still just me. Which would have to do under the circumstances.

My head felt clearer as I looked around me, nothing but trees, and I began to think my solo plan had some major flaws. Mainly, I didn't know what I was doing or how to find Mom.

A voice, The Changer, "You look great, honey. Truly beautiful," and then a mocking cackle. It came from all around me like the PA system at school.

"Where is she? Where are you keeping her?" I spat.

"Oh how rude of me. You are our guest after all, you deserve a welcome."

A woman who looked like a curvy cheetah stalked out of the shadows. Black spots ran down her bare arms and torso overlaying tan, sleek, fur that ran up her neck to join black stripes racing up her cheeks and circling around eyes the color of dull silver.

Eyes that burned into me like hungry mosquitos. That's a bad comparison. Maybe more like her eyes burned with hunger. She looked like she wanted to chase me down and eat me with whipped cream. But I wasn't running anywhere.

"Where is she?" I said, clenching my fists to my thighs to keep from shaking.

"I'm right here."

The witch held out her arms and kept walking toward me like she was walking down a runway.

“You know who I mean.”

“You mean the blood bucket Mother of course. How disappointing.”

She stopped inches away and I stepped back. She smiled then, sharp-toothed and practically drooling. Maybe she really did want to eat me, I don't know. If I could, I would have sucker punched her right there, but I knew I didn't stand a chance fighting like that.

“What do you want with her? Why did you take her?” I said.

“Take her? I didn't take her. She came to me, alone, pretty, and oh so full to bursting with questions, just like you.”

“I don't believe you.”

“Oh of course because then what? It means she left you? That she didn't love you?”

“No.”

“Doesn't that just sting? Like something crawling in your gut right here?”

The witch pressed her clawed finger up against my stomach and dug just a little bit. I flinched back again.

“That's not true,” I said, strength coming into my failing voice, “you lured her here like you did with me. You poisoned her or cursed her or something like that.” She laughed, big and full bodied, “Those curses were rich aren't they? It was your mother who actually gave me the idea, and the means of course.”

Her eyes shone like crystal balls trying to see into my head. I wanted to gouge them out with a grapefruit spoon, although there was no way I would have something like that at this point in the story. I guess I should have been more prepared.

“And it only gets better, curses always kill dear, don’t you know that?”

I didn’t know that, but I wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction of admitting it.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She waved her speckled hand in the air, “it’s not like you can do anything about it. It’s too late for the sleeping princess. But not for us, you know.”

I steadied my breath, begged my heart not to stampede out of my chest. Willow’s image was stuck to the inside of my eyes, just like she’d be stuck there. Forever. And there’s nothing I could do.

“Us?” I whispered.

“Yes, us. You, me, and the bloody mother of yours.”

“Why?”

“We’re the Heroes of the story of course! We get the happy ending. But first we need to get there and that, my dear, is where you come in.”

She snatched her hand out and grabbed my arm. I tried to pull away from her, remembering what she did the last time she touched me like that, but her grip was like an iron cage. She stretched out my arm until my shoulder popped in protest.

“Just say a few words, like you did before, and it will all be over.”

She drew one slim finger down my forearm, circling.

“Say the words? Why? What words?”

“Just read them and you will have your answer.”

She smiled and her cheeks bunched up making her look far too human for her cat-like features. It was unsettling. It was all unsettling, really, but when she dodged my questions it was

all the more suspect. Especially after the free information she seemed delighted to give me just moments before.

“I want to see my mom first.” I said. She huffed her breath.

“She will be here soon. She has to be; She won’t be able to resist. Just read the words. Out loud, please.”

“You still haven’t given me anything to read,” I said.

“Oh, silly me. Yes.”

She reached down the front of her makeshift shirt and pulled out a hand-sized paper. The edges were rough like she’d ripped it into that shape. There were a couple sentences written at the top of the page.

“Blood calls to blood--” I started.

“Stop!”

Both me and The Changer whipped around. When she saw who spoke the witch growled deep in her throat.

It was Mom, her leg stretched out behind her like it was chained to something I didn’t see. Her hair fell into her eyes, but I saw through the tendrils and they were clear, brown, just like I remembered them. What she wore wasn’t important. I remember her lips were caked with blood like she was biting them and there were scars circling up her arms that were healed over multiple times.

She reached one of those arms out toward us now, her hand splayed like she was desperate to touch something, anything.

“Don’t speak,” Mom continued. Her voice rasped like sandpaper but it flowed over and through me like life-giving water.

“This is what we want you little worm,” the witch was practically yelling, “this is what I promised and after all I’ve done for you, you repay me by betraying me? How dare you!”

In an instant the witch was gone and I stood blinking in the space she had left.

“Drea, listen,” Mom said. Her words slurred together in her speed.

“She could be anywhere now, anything, and she isn’t going to let us go. Find the book, the book she uses.”

“What? Mom—”

“Don’t speak! I can’t help you; she’s going to pull me back soon but don’t let her cut you, and for all of our sakes, don’t say anything.”

She was gone. Faded away from the clearing

I was alone.

Chapter 20

The second I felt my feet again I tripped over to where my mom was moments before. I collapsed to the forest floor and swept my hands through the brush, looking for something, anything that would give me a clue to where she went. There was nothing but a faint smell of dried blood like iron on my tongue.

I wanted to cry. I almost did. The tears were right there, welled up behind my eyes, but I pushed them back further and further until the pressure subsided. If I cried, then I wouldn't be able to see and then I couldn't figure out a plan. Some sort of plan. Any plan. Hell, I would have given anything for just some idea really.

And like I said before, I was alone.

Just me.

And my thoughts.

Which looked like this: *panic screaming, don't scream for real, hold it back, breathe, breathe, why can't I breathe? Okay okay okay okay let's do this. Do something. Do something! Book, have to find a book, why was there so much blood? Why am I doing this? Why is this happening?*

I eventually came back around to the book that Mom mentioned. Find the book, she said. And do what with it, I wasn't sure, but the task gave me something to focus on instead of the thinning air.

I started walking in the direction Mom was.

It felt like I was walking down a long hallway of trees stretching above me and egging me on. I'm not sure how much time passed before I found something, and I'm sure I wouldn't have found it if The Changer didn't want me to. My bare feet told me it was at least half an hour

of walking and stubbing toes on stray roots. I nearly ran into it because I was so focused on the treacherous forest floor. It looked like a hut made of shiny obsidian. I thought it must be the place where The Changer kept my mom all these years and figured she was in there now. I slammed my fist against the stone hut and called out to her. Nothing. The sound of my hand on the black rock made a pitiful slapping sound that barely traveled. I didn't see a door and I slid my hands over the smooth black surface of the outside wall, walking around the structure and looking for a break that would indicate a hidden door or opening of some sort. When I didn't find anything, I pushed my full weight into the side, hoping it would fall open under me. Instead I heard faint muffles, like low breathing or talking. I slid along the wall again, this time with my ear against the surface trying to pick out something.

“I'm so close!” It was the witch. The Changer, “I got the girl here and I finally figured out the spell,” a pause. “Before she said it the mother stepped in. Meddling like always...yes I've taken care of it. She won't be a problem anymore.”

My heart squeezed in my chest. I did what my mom told me; I didn't say the words. But I did run my hand over the paper I still clutched and mouthed them to myself. I felt a tingling in my mouth when I did, like after eating too much pineapple, the words were lapping at my teeth trying to escape. I always felt like words were alive. But I never knew they could be alive alive. Like moving and wiggling and running away. But these ones were. And maybe it was the power of suggestion, but maybe it really was magic and there was something that would happen if I said the words out loud together. There are always two options: either there's a perfectly rational explanation for what I'm feeling or seeing, or there's not.

I heard a slithering, grinding sound, like a metal snake racing across a stone floor. I jumped back when one wall of the obsidian hut moved upwards inches away from my listening

ear. I wasn't sure where to hide, the whole structure being a general octagon shape. I landed behind some tall ferns close by and hoped there was a breeze that convinced the witch the movement came from natural sources. I didn't need to be worried. The Changer strutted out of the tent like she was dominating a runway, raised her arms above her head, and disappeared.

I tried not to think too much about what I did next. I ran, only tripping once on the forest floor, and that's how I found myself gasping inside the black hut while the exit closed behind me.

Alone in the empty building I felt comfortable enough to break my promise and speak out loud to no one.

"Find the book," my voice bounced back to me as if there was a wall just inches away from me, "find the changer's book and do...something with it," I continued. At the sound of my voice the words wiggled and squirmed under my skin. I tried to ignore it, crumpling the paper in my fist as if trying to push the escaping words back.

"Find the book...in an empty room," I said. And the room really was empty. No furniture, no old rags or dirty dishes from breakfast. My feet whispered on the glassy floor and the only light was coming from dusty lights in each of the eight corners of the room.

"Find the book and save Mom," I said again. I said it like a chant: "find the book and save Mom, find the book and save Mom, find the book and save Mom," while scanning everywhere the light touched with my fingertips.

I tripped. When I fell, I slid a few feet, the slick surfaces inside the tent acting as a slide against my pajama leggings. I looked to see what I'd tripped over and found it. The book. Well, I assumed it was the book, I guess I had no way of knowing before, but a book that shows up out of nowhere must be magical.

I slid to the book and ripped open the cover, hoping to find some sort of “instructions for use” I guess. The first page was blank, the second page was blank, the third page was...blank. I crashed the tome open to the center and finally found words. Some sort of poem:

*“I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wing blows the water white and black.
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake up, and we drown”*

At the bottom of the page where I would expect a page number to be, was a dried pool of rusty blood that curled the edge.

Maybe it was dumb. Maybe I shouldn't have. I read just one more time, convinced it wouldn't hurt anything or anyone. Mom was crazy not so long ago after all.

When I read, the black words lifted off the page in a flowing wave like each figure was holding hands with the next and dancing down the line. I couldn't stop myself, despite my shock at sentient letters rising above my head. My voice drew weaker but it didn't stop. The trembling in my hands made it hard to see the words but I still understood each line. When I finished the words tumbled around each other like they were hurrying off somewhere. I only had a second to gasp as the lines darted toward me and hit me in the chest, right where my lungs are.

I couldn't breathe, I was drowning. The ocean was in my lungs, I was wreathed in seaweed, the ink on my skin shook in anger at the intrusion.

I scrambled at the obsidian hut which opened when it sensed my movements. Outside, with the old book at my feet, my vision was going black. I saw a few steps ahead of me was a

cliff face that disappeared into a nightmarish gulf. That's where I emptied my stomach. I half expected to see the little words shooting out of my mouth, but that would be ridiculous.

I barfed an ocean.

And it was an angry ocean. I tasted sea water on my lips and some of it dribbled down my chin. It wasn't like I sat there for days like a fire hydrant spewing up water. No, it unloaded in an instant and where there was once a valley of swampy ferns there was now salt water and crested waves colored black just beneath the surface. Let me clarify that it was technically a sea, being a body of water that was not freshwater but also not quite large enough to be an ocean. Like the dead sea, etc. Despite my obvious disgust and consequent stomach pains, I knew there had to be a purpose to all of this. Yet another riddle I had to sort out in order to set things right. I turned back to the book which was untouched by the seawater.

Human voices wake us and we drown I read again in my head.

My voice wakened those words on the page, and I felt like I was drowning. It was like the book was telling me something. Maybe this was the instructions page. The same page with the dried blood which if it followed the running theme, had to belong to the owner of the book: the changer. It was a book of curses then. The same book that the changer must have used to curse my family.

And then I knew what to do and I wanted to kick myself for not doing it earlier. For not doing it when I first saw the book. Mom didn't specify what to do with it. She just said to find it. But I'm smart, I have brains, right? I mean, I'm only a junior. Cut me some slack but I do know a thing or two about giant books that no one likes.

The best thing to do with them is destroy them when no one's looking.

I hefted the book up, staggering a little because it was far lighter than I anticipated, and hurled it over the cliff into the sea below. I watched it go, tumbling and fluttering its pages like it was waving goodbye. But it didn't seem mad. I think it knew its destruction was imminent. It was engulfed by roiling waves in milliseconds. I thought I'd feel something when it was gone, like balance restored. The whipping wind ripped through the trees around me and flew my escaping hairs into my eyes. That was all I felt, all I heard.

Until a scream tore through my ears. The sound brought me to my knees, my already weak stomach threatening to spasm yet again.

"What are you doing, you stupid girl?"

The Changer was screaming directly into my ear, leaning over me like a great spirit. Her glossy coat was dark and thick. A warm color that clashed with the piercing steel in her eyes. I knew she didn't want me to respond, but I did anyway.

"I honestly have no idea what I'm doing," I said.

"That's so much worse!"

The Changer shoved my head and sent me on my back like a teetering turtle.

"You're such an idiot you can't even defeat me in a fair fight because you. Know. Nothing!"

With each word she kicked me in my tender stomach which I thought was just insult to injury, or I guess injury to insult.

"You don't know what you're doing so you just run around throwing books off of cliffs for no reason?"

"What?" I said.

“And that was my favorite book! Do you understand what you’ve done?” The Changer continued.

“I’ve broken the curse” I said. My voice came out monotone and flat. I was caught in a lie. I knew that wasn’t true and the changer confirmed it.

“You wish,” she said. “All you’ve done is piss me off even more. I was going to finish it tonight but now I will never know how it ends. You obviously need a little visit from someone special.”

The Changer snapped her fingers right above my face and my arms flew in front of me now tied with thick fern roots. I sat up quickly.

“What are these for,” I said, “I’m not resisting you anymore.”

“Yes you are, I can feel it inside you. I can taste it in your blood. You’re planning on getting out of this and going home with your sweet little family.”

I was silent but it was like she read my thoughts.

“Lies! Lies you tell yourself so you won’t be scared. So you won’t cry and scream and kick like a fussy baby. Who are you?”

My vocal chords constricted and I was silent for a moment.

“Drea Grimm,”

“Lies! Who are you? Who are you to think you can save your family, break your curse, out think me, out-magic me, to think you could resist me in any way. Pathetic. All of you. Too pathetic to be heroes.”

The Changer waved her arm around like she was pinwheeling and the air shimmered next to her. A figure appeared curled up in a ball with her head draped over her knees.

It was Mom.

I lunged toward her but found that the roots around my wrists were connected to the dark earth under me. I continued tugging but with no success.

“So pathetic,” the Changer hissed. She drew her clawed hands across Mom’s shoulders and she didn’t flinch, she didn’t react, she didn’t even look up from her curled position. In my mind I begged her to look at me so I saw her eyes. So I could recognize her again as the woman who used to tell me stories and who used to believe in heroes.

“I’ve been bleeding this one here for years, did you know that?”

I saw again the circling scars on Mom’s arms healed over again and again. I saw her pale, translucence and I wanted to rip the Changer’s throat out. If only I could be a giant carnivore as well it would be a fair fight. I pulled on the roots again, this time so hard that the edges bit into my too-soft skin.

“Turns out the blood of two heroes is better than one. It follows that the blood of three would be even better. I thought maybe you would help willingly, but no, you had to be just as dumb as your dear mum. Oh well, we’ll just have to get a bigger place. And I know just where to take you once I open the gate with your hero blood. Or I guess I could still persuade you.”

The Changer extracted her claws and they flashed in the light for a moment before she dug them into Mom’s bare shoulder. It wasn’t a quick stab either, she burrowed them in slowly and deep. My eyes welled up blurring my vision. Mom didn’t react at all. Maybe she was knocked out, or maybe she was already dead.

“Please. Stop,” I whispered

“I don’t think I will. Her weak power feels quite nice actually.”

“Just. Stop. Please.”

My voice was hoarse to keep back the growing horrors.

“I know you’re not going to make me stop. I think it’s rather fun to watch you try not to throw up. And this one is so stupid that she doesn’t even feel it anymore, do you dear? Oh, you do? Even better.”

“I’ll open your stupid gate.”

My voice found purchase on my budding anger.

“I never asked you for that.” The changer slid her claws out of Mom’s skin one by one, “I was just going to squeeze it out of you later.”

“It’s better if I do it.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m the Chanter.”

Chapter 21

“Yes, that doesn’t mean anything except for your blood type dear.”

The Changer waved her bloodied hand in the air like she was talking to an annoying neighbor.

“I’m the hero,” I said. To me, The Changer wasn’t there anymore. All I heard was the beating of my own heart. All I felt was my own blood flowing through my thin veins. The little girl in the story, the one who killed her grandmother, she was The Chanter. The Chantress. Her words flowed out of her mouth and obeyed her commands, just like what happened to me a minute before. It’s why the Changer wanted me there at all. Because I’m one of them.

“I wouldn’t go as far as say that. You have to have actual power to be a hero. And you’re, well, you’re tied up and you seem quite clueless.”

“I’m the hero,” I said again more for my benefit than anyone else’s. I don’t know why I didn’t realize sooner. The Chanter wanted me; The Chanted. So she lured me here with curses and visions that gave me enough hope to lead me there with her.

I’m The Chanter. One of the ten heroes whose written words gain power when she speaks them out loud. That’s why I barfed a sea. That’s why Mom told me not to speak. The Changer looked at her claws like they were manicured nails and wiped them on the black fur that wound around her stomach. She thought she’d won. She thought I couldn’t do anything. And so she didn’t see me when I pried a mud-covered rock from the ground next to my wrist tether.

“I’ll open the gate,” I continued, “if you let my mom go. And if you break the curse on my sister.”

“Fine, whatever. It was getting tiring anyway.”

The Changer didn't even look at me. She looked down at the whirling waves below us. I didn't expect her to concede so easily, but there it was. The safety of everyone I loved, promised to me by a madwoman.

"You think I'm a monster." The Changer turned to me and licked her lips, making her look even more predatory.

"You look at me and you think 'abomination, lunatic, beast.'"

"All good words," I said.

"I'm not finished."

She twirled around on her heels and folded herself down, cross-legged only about a foot from the cliff face.

"I can be anything. I can convince you I'm not a monster with just a few changes."

I didn't take my eyes off her. Her animal skin began to peel away starting at the top of her head. The peeled skin didn't go anywhere but turned to mist and flew off with the wind. Underneath was skin tanned from sunlight and cheeks smile plump. Freckles dotted her face and honey hair fell down to her shoulders. She wore a loose-fitting dress, her bare arms showing no scars. Her bare shoulders no fresh wounds from panther claws.

It was Mom as I remember her. Before she left us. Before she became what she was then, sitting next to me on a dark forest floor, bleeding, and not giving me a second glance. She didn't know me; I was sure of it. She might have known me before, but she was gone now. Only a vessel for The Changer's torture. Even if I took her home, even if we got out of this somehow, even if I finished writing the last word in mud while the Changer was talking, she might never wake up. And she would never be The Mother. And she would never tell stories, because I know now that they're real, and everyone knows that true stories are far too boring.

The Witch smiled at me with Mom's clear eyes.

"How about we go home?" she said. Her voice was wrong. Not Mom's, though her words were familiar.

"I have so much to show you."

"Okay," I said. I was finished.

The Changer saw it a split second before I began the first word, but the moment I opened my mouth with the intention of speaking power, she couldn't stop me.

"Changer go back, leave us alone."

Not the most eloquent of speeches or chants, but I was trying to write on my skin while tied up, so I think I get a pass. I was going for direct rather than finesse. When I finished, the changer was still standing there wearing Mom's face. I guess I expected her to fly off somewhere, for the words to come off my skin and shoot through her heart, but when I looked again the mud had absorbed into me with no sign of coming out again.

"You stupid girl," The Changer said.

"You keep saying that. Think of something more original."

I nearly shouted back at her. It didn't work. My hero power was useless. I thought that was my hope, and that as long as I thought of the words, I would get us back home.

"You don't even understand what you've just done."

The Changer stood up then on her bare feet, digging her toes into the underbrush like she was bracing herself for something. Heat blazed at my back and the now-dark sky burned yellow and white in this spot near the cliffs above an ocean-gorge. I turned as much as I could and saw behind me, about a foot away, was a doorway made of light. The Changer was laughing, deep and melodic, and I wanted to slap Mom's face off her, if only I could get out of the restraints.

“Turns out it didn’t matter what you did, girl. You opened the gate either way. I guess I should thank you, but I think I get more credit for this.”

She turned her hands up to nothing and looked directly into the light. I didn’t know how she bore it.

“Hero brother, Gatekeeper, take us home.”

She closed her eyes as if reveling in the glowing gate. Nothing happened.

The Changer looked around, shifted her feet and said again, “Gatekeeper, we wish to enter your kingdom. Please admit us heroes three.”

“That just sounds weird,” I said.

“Quiet,” she hissed.

I’d managed to loosen the dirt around my root, and I knew that all I needed was a couple good yanks and I’d be free. I yanked once, hard, and I felt it give an inch. I didn’t dare look into the gate again for fear of being blinded, but the Changer seemed entranced by the sight. She continued to try and find the right words.

“I, the Changer, wish to enter the Kingdom. Please accept my request and allow me to bring two guests.”

Nothing.

Just one more and I’d be free. Once I was free the Changer would definitely do something like knock me out or even hurt Mom again so I only had one chance to really make a difference. I steeled myself, locked eyes with the Changer. She was looking past me but she sensed what was going to happen next because she smiled a little. I think she was proud of me. Which made what came next even more disturbing.

I gave the root one last yank and I followed the momentum the pull gave me and rose up on my feet. I took a couple steps toward the Changer. She was too close to the edge. I practically fell on her because my legs were asleep, and that was enough to send her diving backwards off the cliff. She grabbed my arm, maybe thinking she would pull me over with her, but I was stopped with my shoulder dangling over the edge. On one side I had the Changer wearing my mother's face over a roiling sea. On the other was my actual mom, haggard and bleeding but gripping my ankle like she was an iron chain. Her eyes were wide and full of horrors, but they were hers.

I was genuinely surprised she had the strength to hold me, but I didn't question it, mostly because the Changer was trying to climb back up my arm.

"You won't let me fall," The Changer shouted, "You don't have the stomach for it."

She looked angry, but also scared. I saw it around her eyes and her chin. She didn't want to fall. My throat burned and my arm and my stomach. Weeks of poisoning, worrying that I would die the next day or maybe the next. Worrying that I'd go to school and come home to an even more empty house. No one should have to worry about that. I just wanted my mom back and to not worry about my survival. I wanted to worry about tests and what shoes are in style, not about death certificates and little sisters who won't wake up.

I opened my hand. It didn't take long for the Changer to lose her grip and start slipping on my bare arm that was getting sprayed with mist from the water below. She fell.

And I watched her the whole way down.

Chapter 22

Without the weight of the Changer I flopped backwards away from the edge. And the strange thing was, I was calm. I wasn't panicking, crying, my thoughts weren't going too fast. Everything was clear. For the first time in... forever really. And I thought of the perfect word for the situation.

Done: completed, finished, through, exhausted, used up.

I couldn't resist it any longer. I scooted across the piney ground until I was kneeling in front of Mom, looking right into her weary eyes. I think she tried to smile, her muscles learning again how to look at me, her daughter.

"Hi, Mom," I said. And I think I was crying though it's hard to remember because of how done I was. She lifted a shaking hand to my face, her thin fingers feeling at the same time familiar, strange, and new.

"Hi," she whispered. Her voice flooded through me like slow-moving lava and I couldn't stop smiling even if I'd tried, which I didn't. I could have sat there with her for weeks. Months, maybe. But she shifted her weight, finally moving, and she flinched a little though I knew she was trying hard not to show anything. And I remembered that she was bleeding from the shoulder and chained by her ankles for who knows how long.

"You need to go to a hospital," I said, trying to reach out and touch her but unsure whether I should. Mom didn't argue, she nodded and looked beyond me like she was studying something in the distance. I had to be strong still. I couldn't fall into her arms like I wanted to or touch her hair, comb it out like she used to have it. The story wasn't over.

I stood up, momentarily startled by how small Mom looked, unable to stand up on her own. I lifted her nearly off her feet. She was so light I wondered if there was anything left of her.

Her feet were bare and her ankles unbound. The chains disappeared when the Changer did. Mom sagged against me out of necessity and I carried her back to find a trail and go home. Finally. And though I was carrying her, and we were definitely lost in the middle of nowhere, I felt lighter. Like something inside of me that had burrowed into my heart, stuck there like a barnacle, was now gone and nearly forgotten. And I knew that when we went home that Willow would be waking up.

And I really wanted pizza.

We moved slowly, both silent and enjoying being near each other and having contact of skin to skin and blood to blood. We only went a few feet into the trees in the general direction I thought civilization was when I heard a rushing of leaves and breaking branches. A pale blur sprinted out of the trees in front of us, hair sticking on end, and there was an air of pure panic around him.

It was Ian, running toward us like he was being chased. He stopped right in front of me and bent over, catching his breath.

“How the hell—”

He held up his hand to stop me.

“Are you okay?” He gasped.

“Ian! Where are we? How are you here right now? How did you get here?”

I felt Mom starting to slip and I wondered if she was passing out.

“We don’t have time for this,” he mumbled. He grabbed Mom from the other side and helped me carry her weight.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am,” Ian said as we continued in the direction he came, “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

I had no more words for him though I was forming quite a few that I would say when we got Mom safe. Ian seemed off, confused, harried in a way that I'd never seen him before. Like he was far away from his body and slowly catching up. Our arms overlapped to support Mom's upper back and my hand pressed against her bleeding wound on her shoulder to keep the blood inside.

"I don't think it's far," Ian mumbled.

"What's not far?" I said.

"I'm taking you home," he said.

"Hopefully not through some glowing gate," I said.

"What?"

Ian stopped moving and looked at me with wide eyes.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

He ignored my question, "You said a gate?"

"Yeah. The Changer wanted to open a gate and take me and my mom with her."

"Did she do it?"

"Well technically I did, though nothing happened so I don't think it really worked."

Mom passed out and her weak bones were growing heavy on my hip. The calm of my post-adrenaline rush was wearing off in favor of a new rush of blood in my ears. I locked eyes with Ian and found that he was scared. Frightened. Terrified, maybe.

"What's going on, Ian?" I tried, gently, "How are you here?"

He looked sad, then, like he knew that everything was going to be different now. Even us.

"I'm not," he said, "I never was really here."

Suddenly, the three of us were blown back onto the forest floor, the wind knocked out of our chests. I squirmed up, trying to get to my mom, fearing the worst. She was lying a few feet to my right, her eyes closed and her mouth slightly parted. I grabbed her around the shoulders and set her head in my lap, trying to elevate it because I heard somewhere once that elevation is important for injuries. I heard Ian groaning and was comforted knowing I wasn't the only one conscious.

“What the HELL?” I said into the air, “was THAT?”

It was a different, strange voice that explained.

“It was me,” it said. The voice was low and gravelly and seemed to come out of nowhere and everywhere.

“What? Who?” Ian said. I was laying my hand on Mom's chest just to make sure it was moving.

“Oh, sorry, forgot,” The voice said. A giant man appeared in front of us, a long-handled sledge hammer resting on the ground between his booted feet. His giant fingers were curled around the handle of the hammer but he didn't raise it like he wanted to smash us, which was encouraging.

“Damn,” I said, “I shouldn't have said anything.”

“Well, you did and here I am. Sorry it took me a while. So, let's go.”

He swept one hand out behind him, gesturing at nothing.

“We can't go anywhere. We just escaped from a really traumatizing situation. We need to go to a hospital!” I said. The giant man squatted down and narrowed his eyes at Mom between the two of us.

“She looks fine to me,” he said, “Though I’m probably not the best at medicine. Probably just needs some rest, so let’s go,”

“No,” I said, trying to match the steeliness of my voice with his, “we aren’t going anywhere. We’re going home,”

“Yes, you’re going home. That’s what I said, right?”

“No, you just said, ‘let’s go,’ and I think you’re trying to take us somewhere weird or dangerous or both and I’m not having it. Not again.”

“Calm down, little girl.”

The man raised his hands like he was trying to calm a wild animal, “I’m just doing my job. I get called, I come, I take people home.”

“And what if I refuse to go?” I said. The man rested his hand on his chin, thinking.

“Well that’s never happened before, but I guess I’d just take you anyway.”

“You’d force us to go with you?” I said.

“Well, force is a strong word. I’d say, drag.”

“Drag isn’t a better word,” I said. I stood up from the ground, ready to do something if he came at me and tried to drag us away.

“Well, it looks like it will be dragging then.”

The man sighed and raised his sledgehammer as if it was a ruler.

“Stand back,” he said, glancing at us. He pulled the hammer back and swung it sideways in a giant arc. It was clear to us that he was swinging at nothing and he would probably go flying from the momentum of the hammer. Instead the hammer hit something, shattering it in shards of golden light. The broken pieces fell and rained on the forest floor like icicles. The air around us

popped like microwave popcorn and something started sucking me forward like the air was pulling at me toward the hole that broke open moments before.

“Don’t panic,” the man said, his voice even and strong, “just let it take you. That’s the best method. Don’t want any broken bones or whatever.”

He yawned like this was all just everyday business for him. Mom’s unconscious body started sliding forward, taking leaves and dirt with her, pulled by the same force that was making my hair fly forward around my face and required me to brace my feet against some bare roots.

“No!”

I dove down to the ground and grabbed Mom around her shoulders. Her toes were inches away from the empty hole and it took everything in me to keep her from being sucked in. I wasn’t going to just let her disappear again.

“Drea!”

Ian was yelling my name somewhere behind me. I glanced back and saw him standing by a nearby tree, effortlessly resisting the pull. He was looking at me, his face full of fear and panic. Something that I’d never really seen on him and it made my heart skip many beats. Then I felt myself sliding forward and I understood his fear. I pulled at Mom, trying to get my feet in front of me instead of behind so I could brace both our bodies against the ground. I dug my heels into some roots but Mom’s ankles were dangling into the void now and I felt like I was nearly pulling her shoulders out of their sockets.

“Come on,” the man said, tapping his hammer on the ground, “this is taking way too long.”

His hammer rumbled the ground like a small earthquake and my heels lost purchase. I slid until only Mom’s upper body was still outside of the hole.

“This isn’t fair!” I screamed, “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be!”

“You said you want to go home; you’re going home. Hooray,” the hammer man said.

“I hate you so much right now,” I said.

I felt it, the moment when my muscles gave up and gave in. I couldn’t pull any more and my arms turned to gelatin. My elbows straightened and I was yanked forward by the pull of the hole and of Mom’s body.

“No!” I heard Ian scream right before I was engulfed, swallowed, dragged.

Dragged isn’t the right word.

Devoured.

THE END