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Wicket's Folly

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Wicket's Folly

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Isabella Simcha Hecht

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Thesis Committee

Prof. Nalo Hopkinson, Chairperson

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Prof. Susan Straight

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The Thesis of Isabella Simcha Hecht is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

To my parents,

Marie and Stan Hecht,

who worry that every time I write about negligent or abusive parents,

I'm secretly talking about them. I would like them to understand,

once and for all, that in the world of literature, attentive, loving,

and responsible parents are just plain boring.

To two of the most wonderfully boring parents a girl could ask for,

with love and respect.

## Chapter One

*I dreamed of spider webs, and of clawing hands with fingers made of light.*

*A circle of standing stones gleamed dully through the night like crooked, mossy teeth. Though the moon skulked in a far corner of the sky, all the long shadows fell equally inside the circle, and the overlapping layers formed a central point of complete smoky blackness. And in that point of absolute darkness, something terrible hid.*

*Frozen on the outer edge of the circle, I wanted to run into the shelter of the trees surrounding the clearing, but my legs would not respond. I looked down, and my head moved in slow motion, as though I was underwater. There were roots twisting up from the shadowy ground; I could see them wriggling like blind earthworms as they wound themselves slowly around my feet.*

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It was Dad who had suggested that I spend the beginning of the summer in Wicket's Folly. He was trying to decide what to do with me after I was 'asked to leave' school.

I sat quietly through the whole meeting in Mr. Seaver's office, studying my hands crossed in my lap, trying to look as innocent as possible. I had dressed so carefully that morning, in ballet flats and a pink blouse with puffed sleeves. I had even braided my hair into two pigtails and worn my glasses, but neither Dad nor Mr. Seaver even glanced my way; they were too busy talking about me as though I wasn't there.

At first, I thought Dad was standing up for me. "You can't expel her for something that she didn't do," he said angrily. "Did *she* steal the test? No."

Mr. Seaver spoke over him in that annoying high voice of his. "It's not this one isolated incident, and I for one certainly don't believe that she is blameless. She *talked* that boy into stealing the test for her."

"Is *talkin*g illegal now?" Dad yelled. "Why aren't you expelling the boy who actually *stole* the test?"

Mr. Seaver's nostrils flared. "This – this *girl* – is consistently at the edge of everything that goes wrong in this school. The incident with the water fountains – that disgusting prank in the men's locker room – not to mention that poor freshman boy –"

I forgot about looking quiet and demure. "I had nothing to do with that one!"

"So you admit to the others," Mr. Seaver said triumphantly.

I shut my mouth with a snap.

"Megan was never involved with any of those things," Dad said, but he didn't sound so sure.

Mr. Seaver huffed. "You have no idea how many times I questioned the perpetrators to find that the idea was not theirs, that *someone* –" he glared at me "– talked them into it."

Dad glanced my way. I carefully examined the ceiling. Blue paint in the principal's office. Perhaps they meant it to be calming. If so, it wasn't working.

"But still," Dad said weakly. "You have no proof. She never actually did anything wrong. Please think about this. If she's expelled, it could ruin her entire future."

Mr. Seaver's lips twitched. He liked that idea all right. "Megan Breelie will come to a bad end," he said. "She's either a budding sociopath or a con artist, though for the life of me, I can't tell which. But whatever she is, someone like that has no place at this school."

He gave me a choice. I could leave the school of my own free will, or I would be expelled, and it would go on my permanent record. Not really much of a choice.

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*Voices swirled around me, tumbling over each other, fading in and out, and then disappearing entirely.*

*– she isn't the one – the time draws near – I must destroy her –*

*– she's only a child – please, please don't hurt her – she's too dangerous –*

*– Megan? – please answer me – did her hand just move? – Can you hear me? –*

*– Megan? – wake up – please –*

\*\*\*

"He totally has it out for me," I told Dad on the way to the car, lugging the contents of my recently cleared locker. "Whatever happens around here, he just blames me."

"You," Dad said forcefully, "do not talk right now."

I had never seen him so angry. It was dumb of me to push my luck on the way home, and tell him that I'd rather just get my GED than repeat eleventh grade.

He slammed his fist on the steering wheel. "So help me God, you are going to finish high school."



Since the school year was almost over, I could not start somewhere new until September, so I would have an extra-long summer vacation. That idea at least was attractive, until Dad said that, honestly, right now, he didn't want to even look at me. After he confiscated my phone and my laptop, I told him that I didn't want to look at him either. So that night he called Uncle Bennet and found out that Aunt Alicia had broken her arm. What a perfect excuse. Someone needed to help look after all those poor children.

He bought me a plane ticket that same night. I would be leaving in one week's time, on Sunday night. I told him that if I was traveling, he would have to give me my phone back. He responded that he was aware of that, and "by the way, you're grounded."

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*The stones began to warp and bend impossibly inward. They moved so slowly that I saw double, the glowing edges of residual images burned into my eyes. The stones were being pulled toward the central darkness, curling around to be sucked down into the long maw of a black hole that was somehow alive and pulsing with malice.*

*As the proud heads of stone bowed down and were swallowed, the trees around me began to bend their trunks as well. A dirty smear of silver in the night sky was all that remained of the moon. The edges of the black hole spread the more it consumed, oozing outward like rolling, ink-dyed fog, and after what could have been moments or hours, I felt the pressure, inescapable and undeniable, tugging at my body.*

*I dragged desperately at my feet, but the air was too thick, my movements too sluggish. It was going to swallow me, mind and body, and when it did, there would be nothing left.*

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On Thursday night, I made dinner, a pot pie that came out beautifully. It was meant to be kind of a peace offering before I left. When my father complimented it, I held up my hand, wiggling the fingers, and said, "I know – magic, right?" and we all laughed. It was our family joke, that everything I touched turned out perfectly, and no matter how many times we said it, it was always funny. I was relieved. Maybe the air of inquisition was finally dying down.

After dinner, I went to my room to pack for my trip. I wasn't leaving until Sunday, but I was looking forward to being elsewhere. It wasn't just that my name was mud around there. After a week at home, I was becoming hyperaware of the presence of my father and older sister. I considered myself a people person, but the three people I had the most trouble with were, unfortunately, my mother – not that *she* was around anymore – my father, and my older sister. Normally, I was out of the house a lot, but now that I was grounded, I kept noticing my family's presence. They were always *around*, my father shuffling back and forth in worn slippers, mumbling to himself, and Gwen being her usual peculiar self.

I had finally narrowed it down to five colors to bring from my box full of nail polishes – Glitter Goddess, Luscious Pink, Crimson Queen, Purple Dazzle, and Golden

Glint – and was trying to decide how many pairs of shoes I could get away with bringing for a one-month trip, when Gwen poked her head into the room.

“What?” I said, without looking up from the jumble of shoes on the floor of my closet. Flip-flops and sandals were mandatory, but should I take hiking boots as well? Clogs? Pumps? Would there be anyone there who cared? Mules? Sneakers? Was the East Coast still cold in May? *Someday I'll be rich and then I'll be able to afford designer clothes and shoes, not this Ross and Target crap.*

“Mom’s on the phone for you.”

“*What?*” I turned to stare at her. “Is it my birthday?”

“No.”

“It’s not some kind of holiday?”

“Megan –”

“Then why is she calling?”

Gwen sighed. “I don’t know. She just did. She said she wants to talk to you.”

I turned away. “Well, I don’t want to talk to her.”

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*I leaned away from the darkness creeping towards my toes, holding up my hands uselessly. My heart thumped slow and heavy as lead in my chest. I squeezed my eyes shut and turning my face away as I was dragged down.*

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It was astonishing how the mere mention of my mother's name could ruin a perfectly good mood. I hated being angry. All those negative emotions would make my skin break out.

Gwen pressed the cordless phone into her boring button-down blouse as though she was afraid that Margot might hear. "You should be happy," she said. "We haven't heard from her in months, and she wants to talk to you. Talk to her." She held out the phone, smiling.

I hesitated, studying Gwen's face. My sister smiled all the time, no matter how she was feeling – a nervous, hopeful, friendly smile. I knew her very well, but I still could not always read the real emotion under that fixed smile. This time was not difficult. Gwen's mouth might be stretched in a smile, but her eyes were miserable. I took the phone.

"Hi, Mom." I tossed myself down on the bed, hoping that she would hear the loud creak.

"Megan, I need to talk to you."

The voice was the same, breathy and rushed. Hearing it always brought on a mix of conflicting guilt, anger, and longing, that was impossible to control. I settled for keeping any outright hostility from my voice. "*We are* talking."

"In person. We need to talk in person. I need to give you the *story*. We can't talk over the phone."

I rolled my eyes at the ceiling. "I'm sure it's fine, Ma. The government only taps phones in the movies."

“Not true. How do you think they got the idea to *put* it in the movies?”

“Whatever. What do you want?”

“I need to *see* you,” she said. “Megan, please. The *story*. You'll need it.”

I squirmed. “Okay, okay. When?”

“As soon as possible. Tomorrow. You'll know where.”

“What? No I don't –” I started to say, but Margot had already hung up. I tossed the phone to the end of my bed.

“What'd she want?” Gwen leaned against the doorframe, smiling unconvincingly.

“She wants to see me tomorrow,” I told the ceiling.

“Oh,” she said softly.

“Wouldn't even tell me when or where, as usual. I don't know what she thinks she's...” I pushed myself up on my elbows and let my voice trail off. Gwen was fiddling with one earring, smiling resolutely, but there were tears in her eyes. “Hey, I'm sure she wants to see you, too,” I began uncertainly.

“No,” Gwen said briskly, brushing at the skin below her eye as though it was itchy. “Forget about it. I'm sure she'll call me another time.” She backed into the hall and disappeared.

I flopped over on my side and hugged a Hello Kitty throw pillow to my chest. I hated feeling like this, and somehow, it just made me angrier. Great. Gwen was mad at me. Probably. And now I had to go see Margot. *If* I could find out where she wanted to meet me. I glared at my pale yellow ceiling, which I had chosen because it was supposed to be a cheerful color. Wouldn't *that* be a fun visit. Anything to do with my mother made

me feel angry, resentful, guilty, and desperate for love and approval all at the same time. She *left you*, I reminded myself. Her *issues, not yours. It had nothing to do with you. You were just a kid. She didn't leave because of something you did; she abandoned you because she's crazy and refuses to get help. Who cares if she never calls again?*

I dug my fingers deep into Hello Kitty's face. *I do.*

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*An eternity passed, and I cracked open one eye.*

*Nothing. Pitch-black, darker-than-night, can't-even-see-your-own-hand nothing. I was nothing but an invisible body, floating in emptiness.*

Am I dead? Is this hell?

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I kicked my legs over the side of my bed and sat up. No matter how I felt about it, I had agreed to see my mother. I slouched down the hall, wishing there were a few doors I could slam along the way. Instead, I took a deep, steadying breath, knocked softly on the door of my father's study, and stuck my head inside. "Good time, Dad?"

He looked up from the map on his desk, a pushpin poised in one hand. "What? Yes, yes, of course."

Phew. No more shouting, then. Perhaps we were almost back to normal. My bad mood vanished as I noticed with affection that what was left of his graying hair was standing on end. He always ran his fingers through it absentmindedly when he was excited. It surely hadn't helped his hair loss. "How are they doing?" I asked.

“The Saxons may conquer Northumbria if the weather holds.” My father was an accountant by day, and a closet anglophile by night. He was obsessed with anything that had to do with Great Britain, especially the medieval period. He even went to work each day carrying an umbrella – in California. All of his free time he spent researching ancient and medieval English history, reenacting battles on his laminated maps, and following the decisions of old bygone kings as though they could affect modern-day politics.

“Actually,” he said, pushing his reading glasses up onto the top of his head and rubbing his eyes, “there was something I wanted to talk to you about too.”

“Oh, okay, you go first,” I said politely, hoping he was not going to bring up the situation at school again.

“No, you.”

“If it’s about your girlfriend, we already know.”

He knocked a pen onto the floor and quickly bent to retrieve it. “You do?”

“It’s kind of obvious – the late nights, the recent care in dressing...”

“Oh.” He could not seem to think of anything else to say, so he said it again. “Oh. Now I know how King Canute felt after he married Emma of Normandy in 1017.” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “It wasn’t much of a secret that he had left a wife back in Denmark.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” I said. “So when were you going to tell us?”

“About...? Before you left, naturally. I wouldn’t bother you, I never bothered you about any of the others, but she’s really – it was getting –”

“Wait; *others*?”

He was flustered. “I thought it might upset you, what with the indisputable fact that your mother and I never officially divorced...”

“Dad,” I interrupted. “Mom left us years ago, and there’s no reason you have to become a hermit because you can’t pin her down long enough to get her to sign divorce papers.”

“That’s not exactly – I still care for your mother a great deal. God knows she has her own difficulties – she needs help.... Pass me those troops over there.”

“Dad!” I could feel my irritation bubbling up again, and it wasn’t because of the obscure history obsession. *Why* did he always do this? He forgot everything important and then when he finally did start telling me, he bungled it and ended up talking about something else.

“Sorry. Let’s just say I’m glad you approve.”

“I didn’t say that. I haven’t met your...girlfriend. All I’m saying is I’m fine with the idea of you dating.”

“Thank you for making that distinction.”

I gave an exaggerated shudder. “Though it is kind of gross, at your age.”

He glanced at his posters of Stonehenge, Westminster Abbey, and the Tower of London, as though they could give him strength.

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*A thousand voices whispered around me, speaking words that touched my ears, but were not absorbed. I could not understand what they were saying. It might have been*



*threats, it might have been moans of despair, or it might have been a single non-sibilant word, repeated over and over like extras did in the movies.*

*There was something behind me. A great looming presence waiting to envelop me. It hung, huge and heavy, pressing down on me, laughing at my attempts to get away.*

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“Now what was it you wanted?”

“Actually, it’s about Mom.”

“Oh?”

“She called today. She said she wants to see me. In person. Tomorrow.”

“Did she now? How odd.” He leaned back, brows drawn together in thought.

“Do you think I should take advantage of that? Ask her to sign those papers once and for all?”

Dad shifted in his chair, his expression almost guilty. “No, there’s no need – I mean, the situation is much more complicated than – no, don’t bother.”

I raised an eyebrow, but decided not to comment. “Well, anyway, she didn’t tell me when or where she wanted to meet.”

“In the past,” my father said, clearly relieved that I was not going to push the topic of divorce, “when she wanted to see you girls, she pushed a letter under the door. I expect that when you go down to breakfast tomorrow morning, there will be a letter on the doormat.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks, Daddy.” I stepped backward into the hall.

“Oh, and Meggie – can you send Gwen along?”

“You going to spring your *surprise* on her? She already knows.”

“Yes, but I should tell her myself, so she won’t –”

“Hear about ‘the others’ from someone else? Good plan, Dad. Good night.”

On the way back to my bedroom, I leaned around Gwen’s door. “Dad’s a player. Go yell at him,” I announced, before heading into my own room and leaning against the closed door.

My head felt too full, and I shook it frantically, as though I could knock loose all the unwanted thoughts and images. I could hardly wrap my head around the fact that my father had a girlfriend. My *father*. My balding, gray-haired, paunchy, *middle-aged* father. The man who could recite every significant date in European history, but could not remember his own daughters’ birthdays. And how dare he get so mad at me when *he* was more or less committing adultery? That was one of the freaking ten commandments!

Shouldn’t that trump what I had done?

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*I could see something glowing in the darkness now. It was a great expanse of spider web, shining silver in a light that did not come from any source. There were webs all around me, stretching into the distance, resonating gently from the whispering voices. Or was it the web itself that was producing the whispers? With one finger, I reached out and twanged a dully gleaming strand of web, and it let out a low, mournful chime.*

*With that small noise, everything shattered. I fell, and the interconnected strands of web vibrated like guitar strings as they twined themselves around my wrists and ankles.*

*I was trapped.*

*Hands reached for me. The fingers were tipped with glowing white claws.*

## Chapter Two

Forcing open eyelids heavy as tar, I saw a strand of web right in front of my face. I reached out a weak hand to push it away, but as I moved, the web moved too. My eyes churned along its dizzy downward twists; it ended in a sharp point that was taped down and embedded in the back of my hand. I recoiled involuntarily, which set the web shaking again – but it was not a web, I realized, now that the dream was fading away. It was a long thin plastic tube.

Holding as still as possible so the world would hold still too, I looked around. My contact lenses were gone, and I could see only a six-foot circle around myself, the rest blurring into unsettling patches of blotchy color. A plastic rail barred off my bed. I squinted upward to see a white ceiling. It did not matter that the white panels were randomly patterned with tiny holes of varying sizes, the same white ceiling found in thousands of hospitals all over the country. It only mattered that it was white, and definitely not yellow, which was the color I had personally painted my room after a long argument with my father about what color walls should and should not be. White walls plus railed bed; I must be in a hospital.

I sniffed experimentally and wrinkled my nose. Yup. There was that slightly burning smell of industrial-strength disinfectant.

My head felt funny. Not painful, or stuffy, or heavy, just funny, as if the fluid in my ears had gone off-kilter and I felt movement where there was none. I shook my head

gently, blinking to clear my eyes. It didn't help. The fuzzy objects in the room shone in harsh afternoon sunlight that made them appear even more unreal.

“You’re awake!” said a male voice, its tone relieved. I turned my head, but saw only a blur of color. I tried to ask who was there, but my voice seemed to have gone, and nothing came out but a faint croak. A humanoid shape detached itself from the larger blur that was the opposite wall, and as it came within my perimeter of sight, resolved into a young man.

I had hardly registered his blond hair and handsome face, and was starting to wonder who he was, when he bent over and kissed me.

"Gr-r-awk!" I said. I shoved him away and sat up. Blood rushed to my cheeks, accompanied by a swift roaring in my ears that sounded like the ocean. I held up one hand to fend him off, and clutched my forehead with the other.

"Are you okay?"

The blood was draining away from my face, and it was taking with it the cotton wool that had been packing my brain. I looked up carefully. Everything seemed to be holding still.

The young man was watching me, looked concerned and puzzled, and a little hurt. I squinted at him guardedly, wondering whether he was an orderly. He wasn't wearing the uniform, but he might be a plain-clothes orderly, if they had such things. His presence wasn't helping me to think, and I had a lot to figure out. “You just randomly kiss people when you’re glad they’re alright?” I demanded. My voice felt rusty, but it was getting

stronger. “Are you an orderly? Where’s my dad?” My mouth tasted awful, like I hadn’t brushed my teeth in days. Gross. How could he even stand to kiss me?

“What? Megan, it’s me.” He was beginning to sound scared, and that worried me as well.

“I don’t know who you are,” I told him.

He took a step backwards as though I had physically struck him, his blue eyes pained. “Maybe – maybe you have amnesia.”

“Who asked you?” I said, but he was already in the hallway, yelling for help.

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“Ookay, my dear, just say your name for me.” The doctor bent over me, shining a flashlight in my eyes. Two crisply uniformed nurses hovered nearby. Frightening as the situation was, I kept having to fight off the strangest urge to laugh. As the doctor leaned over me, I was staring straight up his nose, which was sprouting an impressive amount of thick dark hair, much like the underside of a mushroom.

“Can you say your name?” he repeated patiently. His white coat was lightly stained, as though he hadn’t taken it off to eat lunch. It looked like he had been having egg salad.

As I opened my mouth, I could not help a tiny giggle escaping. “Megan Breelie.”

“What a pretty name,” said the doctor, in a tone that told me that he was sure I was on the verge of hysteria and was trying to keep me calm. He probably would have said exactly the same thing if I had announced that my name was Hepzibah.

“I got it from my mother,” I said, wondering if he got his hairy nose from *his* mother. This forced me to suppress another burst of laughter, and I wondered what on earth was wrong with me. I was in a hospital, there was a *tube* in my wrist, and they were saying I had amnesia, but I couldn’t seem to feel the appropriate emotions.

"And you are how old?"

"Seventeen."

The doctor finally took his nose away and stood, stroking his chin as though he was attempting to look wise. “Okay, Megan – do you know where you are?”

“I’m in a hospital,” I said, choking back another giggle that was trying so desperately to escape. Well, *of course* it was a hospital.

“Correct,” said the doctor kindly. His calm demeanor was only making it worse. Beneath the thin pink waffle-weave blanket, I grabbed my thigh with my free hand and dug in my nails, focusing on the five tiny half-moons of pain to keep my face straight. “You are in a hospital. The Edward F. Jameson Memorial Clinic. In Wicket’s Folly. New York,” he added helpfully.

The smile that I had been failing to control slid off my face. New York? I had gone to sleep last night in my own bed in Los Angeles. What the hell was I doing in New York? Then something registered. “Wicket’s Folly? I have an uncle who lives there – I mean, here.”

“Yes, your uncle stopped by to see you earlier, before you woke up. He told us you have been staying with him.”

“No, I was going to visit him later this summer. My aunt broke her arm, and I was going to go help out.” I wasn't about to tell this egg-stained doctor that I had been 'asked to leave' school.

“And when were you supposed to be going?”

“Um...next week. The 6th. Well, I was *leaving* on the 5th.”

The doctor frowned. “And what day is it today?”

“Well yesterday was Thursday. That was the 2nd, so today must be the 3rd. May 3rd.”

“So the last thing you remember is going to sleep on the 2nd of May?”

“Yes,” I said apprehensively.

The doctor took off his glasses and looked me in the eye. “Honey,” he said.

“Today is May 18th. Saturday.”

“What?” I was starting to feel truly afraid now. “That’s not – how is that possible? Have I been in a coma?”

“No, no, you’ve only been here since about two a.m. this morning.”

“Then what happened to all that time since yester – May 2nd?”

“It’s possible that it’s an effect of the accident.” He began polishing his glasses with careful attention.

“Accident?”

“You were found by the side of the road, next to a pair of truly impressive skid marks. You were hit by a car.”

I surveyed myself. “But I’m – all in one piece. I feel fine.”



He sniffed, and the nose hair rustled, but I was finding it less funny now. "Yes," he said dismissively. "By the length of the skid marks, it is likely that the car was able to slow down a good deal, and merely bumped you. You sustained only a few bruises, and a bit of a cut on your palm, but otherwise, no major injuries. You must have hit your head when you fell over, and as a result, lost the last few weeks."

"Oh," I said, slightly awed. "Is that usual?"

"Yes, patients are often unable to remember the accident."

"But the –" I did some quick mental calculations "– two – weeks *before* the accident?"

"Well, it's not common, but it does happen, especially if there's been a recent change in routine." He was staring out the window now, as though he would rather be doing anything other than looking at me. "And I'd say, apart from the memory loss, that you're a very lucky little lady. Even so, we'd like to keep you here tonight, for observation. Just in case." He turned to leave. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got other patients to see."

*Don't you call me 'little lady.' And don't just walk away.* "Sir," I said quickly. "Will I get my memories back?" I widened my eyes a little, so that I would look younger, more vulnerable.

It worked. A little. He paused briefly to smile at me. "It is always a possibility, yes. But I doubt it. I would advise you not to worry about it. It's best to just carry on with your life as usual." With that, he filed from the room, leading the nurses like a one-man procession.

“Great,” I muttered to myself. “Thanks for the good news, Doctor Nose-hair.”

“Uh...”

I looked up. The handsome young man was standing hesitantly by the door.

“I guess I do know you after all,” I said slowly.

He pulled a chair up close enough that I could see him clearly, sat down, and crossed his arms over a T-shirt which read Wicket’s Folly Community College. I studied him, now that he was holding still without making any sudden movements suggestive of kissing. His handsome face was almost *too* perfect, and it made him less interesting. Still, he had possibilities – the T-shirt said that he was a college student, which was good, but it also said that he was a *community* college student, which was less good, though he was old enough that he might have a car.

His blue eyes stared at me worriedly. They had an odd sort of glow about them – of sincerity, maybe – as if they were letting people know that everything was all right, they were safe, they could trust him. For some reason, those eyes gave me an uneasy prickle at the nape of my neck.

“Do you go to WFCC?” I asked, when he didn’t say anything.

“Yeah, just finished my first year.” He smiled suddenly, an easy, open smile, that seemed to touch his eyes just a little too late. “This is weird. I remember you asking me that just a few weeks ago.” He shook his head. “You really don’t remember me?”

“No.” His accent was unfamiliar. Perhaps Midwestern – though I didn’t have much to compare it to.

“Not the picnic in the park? Not even that time we took the paddle-boats out to the lake?” When I didn’t answer, he let out a sigh of regret. “Right. Okay, then, let’s do this. Um... my name is Michael, but my friends call me Mick. I’m nineteen, I go to WFCC – majoring in theatre arts – and I’m from Cleveland. What else do you want to know?”

I wondered briefly what he was doing coming to the middle of nowhere to attend a community college, but instead asked the question that was most on my mind. It was difficult to get the words out. “So we were, like... I mean – you kissed me.” My cheeks and ears were hot – they must be bright red. *What is wrong with me? I can't even talk to boys now?*

“Well, yeah, we were, sort of,” said Mick, shifting a little in his chair and staring at his denim knees. “But obviously, as you don’t remember....” He trailed off, leaving a rather uncomfortable silence. The guy gave me a strange feeling of unease, but on the other hand, he was pretty handsome, in a generic kind of way. And I had recently split with that idiot Luke. Maybe he was my rebound. Still, a relationship in two weeks was fast, even for me.

I was extremely glad when at that moment, my Aunt Alicia clattered in and swooped down on me. She flung her huge leather purse on the chair as Mick jumped out of the way, and tried to hug me. So exuberant and uncoordinated was she that, while she succeeded in hugging me tightly, she also smacked me on the chin with the cast on her left arm.

“Megan! They told me you had woken up. How are you feeling? What a horrible thing to happen! And after you've been such a godsend, too, helping me with the boys! You really can't remember them? How dreadful – I can't even *imagine* what you're going through. Michael, what are you doing here? Your break must be over by now.”

Mick had started backing away the second she walked in. “I was just on my way out, Mrs. Breelie,” he said and hurried out, nearly colliding with a nurse, who was on her way in.

I watched him go, rubbing my chin and fighting the urge to smirk. It was nice, seeing other people react to my relatives in the ways I was too polite to.

“Oh, Mrs. Breelie,” the nurse said. “We wanted to get your approval – we'd like your niece to stay the night, just so we can keep an eye on her.”

“Aunt Alicia,” I said hurriedly, sensing an opening for escape. “I'm fine.”

“Yes, of course,” said Aunt Alicia, talking over me. “Whatever you think is necessary.”

As the nurse went out, Aunt Alicia turned back to me. “I can't stay, dear,” she said as she settled herself into the visitor's chair. “I had to leave Archie in charge, and you know what those kids will get into on their own.”

I opened my mouth to point out that no, I had never met them, but I didn't get a chance.

“Oh, *look* at you, you poor thing! I don't know what you were thinking, out at such a late hour and in the middle of the road.” Aunt Alicia was leaning forward in a cheerful, conspiratorial manner that meant some serious gossiping was about to occur.

“We were all sitting around at breakfast when we heard – and we were in such a good mood because it seemed like the power had fixed itself up for good – no more of those peculiar blackouts, isn’t it wonderful – oh, of course, you don’t remember – but anyway, we had just got around to wondering why you weren’t coming up for breakfast, because it was getting a bit late and the boys had to go to class, when we got a call from the *hospital*, would you believe it! They were so horribly serious, saying you had been hit by a car and could someone come down and see you and fill out the forms and whatever else you have to do – so, of course, Bennet went running off, and then he called me fifteen minutes later to say it was *true*. I nearly had a heart attack, I can tell you – I didn’t know *what* we were going to tell your father – but Bennet said –”

“Did you tell him?” I interjected quickly.

“What? – oh, of course, we told him not to worry, they said you’d be fine. Really, he was ready to get the next flight out, but I told him that it wasn’t anything serious, just a minor accident. The *doctor* said so, so it must be true!” She gave a little laugh. “I really have to go now, but Megan, *please*, you have to remember it’s dark around here, sweetie. This is the *country*. We don’t have too many streetlamps, and you can’t rely on people to see that bright hair of yours at night. If that nice young couple hadn’t found you wandering in the road, I don’t know *what* would have happened.”

She sniffed loudly and began fishing around in her huge purse. I seized the opportunity. “Nice young couple?” But the doctor told me....” I frowned. He had told me something different. What had he said?

“Oh yes,” Aunt Alicia said. “Such *nice* people. I do hope they stay – I'm sure I've got the perfect little house for them! See, I brought you your glasses. I know, I know, you usually wear contacts, but there were just so many little bottles and cases I didn't know what to bring, so I just thought this would be easier.” She handed over the case. There was something fuzzy stuck to it.

“But what –?”

“I'm sorry I can't stay, dear – you know I would if I could. I'll call your father right when I get home, all right? You get some rest, and I'll see you tomorrow.” She swooped down, kissed me once more, and swept out.

I was left alone. *Holy hell, what a day*, I thought wearily, as I slid my glasses onto my bedside table. There was just too much to process, too much to take in. I knew I ought to feel grateful I was alive, and worried about what had happened to me, but really, I just felt tired. All the worries and confusion would still be there tomorrow.

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I was awoken some time during the night by an incessant faint beeping noise. It was not loud, but it was shrill enough that I could hear it clearly, and it was slow and steadily paced, so that every time I tried to sink back into warm dreams, I was jolted back into wakefulness.

I lost track of the times I turned over, muttering to myself, but finally it became clear that the damn Chinese beeping torture was not going to let me go back to sleep.

So I got up.

The IV was gone, and I wondered vaguely when it had disappeared. There was still a bandage around my palm, luminous in the darkness. The contrast reminded me of something briefly, but I couldn't think what.

The tiled floor was icy against my feet, and I shivered, the tiny hairs on my arms standing on end. I put on my glasses, bringing the room into focus, and set off, hugging my arms around the skimpy hospital gown and robe.

I opened the door, and the faint beeping got louder. My bare feet made a tiny sticky sucking noise each time they were pulled away from the cold floor of the hall.

It was unusually dark and quiet for a hospital. The hallways were almost entirely shadowed, except for the few flickering fluorescent lights that made everything an eerie blue color. *Aren't hospitals supposed to run around the clock? Maybe small town clinics are different.*

All the doors lining the hallway were closed as I ghosted by, but as I progressed, I saw that the one on the end was open. The slow beeping, now fairly loud, was coming from inside. I crept up to the doorway and peered around the corner.

The room was dark, but the curtains were open, and moonlight streamed in, creating alternating patches of bright silvery light and long grey shadows. A shadowy shape lay in the bed, zigzagged with jagged shadows from the many machines to which it was attached. One of the machines was beeping slowly and steadily. Perhaps it was measuring the figure's heartbeat.

A woman sat in a chair pulled up close to the bed, slumped over, with her head on the blanket beside the patient's leg. Her face was in shadow. A blanket was wrapped

around her shoulders, but it hung loosely, as if someone else had placed it there without the woman's noticing.

If not for the beeping, it would have seemed like a still photograph – a moment frozen in time. A woman keeping vigil by the bedside of a loved one, praying for them to wake. But the moment moved on, and the world with it, but the woman didn't notice, because she was still frozen, waiting. She probably did not even know that the world had moved on without her. Or maybe she did, but didn't care.

The woman shifted slightly in her sleep, and the back of her head moved into a patch of moonlight streaming in from the window. The light struck her hair and made it gleam silvery blonde, the same color as my mother's.

Unsettled, I turned around and crept silently back to my bed. The holes in the ceiling looked like burns caused by someone flicking matches in the air, and I counted them until I fell asleep.



*Her eyelids flutter gently as she sleeps. She looks younger like this – the gaudy earrings and whorish clothing gone, the vain paints wiped from her face. Her skin is paler now, by the light of the moon, the freckles of childhood still visible across her cheeks. The bright hair, tangled as she never allows it to be by daylight, dresses the pillow in a tide of red-gold. One hand, wrapped in white, rests by her cheek, the slender fingers curled lightly inward. She looks so fragile, so helpless, so young.*

*I long to sink my fingers into her throat. To squeeze the breath from her body.*

*My hands reach out, almost of their own accord, the tense fingers flexing. But no – not tonight. I draw them back. No matter how I long to do it, I have given my word. Her father begged me not to harm her. He made threats, wearying and impotent, until I agreed to take only her memory.*

*She will finish out her stay, and she will leave, he promised. Ignorant of all she has learned, she will no longer be a threat to you.*

*Very well, I told him. But be warned. I will have mercy only this once. If she should cross me in the future, I will kill her.*

*He bowed his head. So be it.*

*I did not know why I felt such a strong desire to snuff out her life. By taking her memory, the threat she posed was neutralized, but I was unprepared for the desire. The longing. There among the standing stones, I longed to destroy her with the full power of my own hands. I might have done it too, if she had not run. It went beyond anger that the ritual – all those long years of planning – had failed. I ached to tear into her flesh until*

*my fingers stifled the beating of her fragile human heart. How amusing, to match her crimson painted nails with my own, daubed red in her blood.*

*Standing over her sleeping form, I feel that urge again.*

*I turn away from her, leaving the temptation – for now, yes, at least for now – and wend my way through the silent hospital. Machines buzz at me; I can feel the constant pain of them on the surface of my skin. I will be able to think more clearly once I am outside.*

*The Doctor has done his part. He told her all that I wrote into his sleeping mind. According to the Charmer, my golden boy, she believed it. In truth, he told me, she remembers nothing. I should have no reason to fear.*

*Still, as long as she lives, there is risk. Watch her, I told the Charmer, get close to her. Do what you do best. See that she remains ignorant until the day she leaves my domain. If not, I will claim her life.*

*The machine doors will not open for me, and I am forced to let myself fade in order to pass through them. It makes me ache. Everything in this world makes me ache, even in this haven that I have created.*

*But not much longer. I have waited so long, and soon I will have what I want.*

*I turn my face to the sky, letting the cool air calm the burn left by a house meant for healing. The solstice is coming. A little more than one month. It will work this time, no matter the cost. It must.*

*My strategies have failed one by one, and it leaves me a single, desperate option. Long ago, my heart might have quailed at the thought of causing such devastation, but no*

*longer. I am through with waiting. The lives of the people of this place will be the price,  
and my desire will be mine.*

*Soon, I tell the stars. Soon.*

*If I must become a monster, then so be it.*

### Chapter Three

Samuel Wicket knew that he was going to die. It was not in the same way that people are generally aware of their mortality, but a knowing - a certainty, a feeling in his bones - that the end of his life was near.

He was not a particularly old man, nor was he particularly unhealthy. In fact, he was extremely wealthy, having made a fortune in the stock market, and he was accustomed to living well. And yet, he still found himself certain, in March of 1935, that he was going to die. Refusing to speak to anyone, Samuel Wicket sold all his shares, packed his bags, and relocated to his summer home overlooking Oneida Lake, the "thumb" of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York.

I had thought that the hospital would want to do loads of tests on me after a head injury, but they left me alone all morning. Truthfully, I was slightly disappointed. I had never been in a hospital before, apart from doctors' appointments, and that one trip to the ER after I had ripped open my knee falling off my sister's bike. It might have been nice to bask in all that concerned attention for once, as long as they were making me stay overnight.

But instead of an army of nurses and doctors tending to my every ache, I was lying forgotten in my bed, idly tapping my fingers against the plastic breakfast tray no one had come back to collect. The sounds of the hospital leaked in through my closed door as I waited for someone to come and get me. There was no urgency or excitement in the air, no sounds of doctors rushing to save lives. Of course, this was a rustic town clinic, so their most exciting cases probably involved three people getting the flu a year, but did it have to be so *boring*? There wasn't even a little TV monitor in the corner.

*God, I must look awful.* I had no makeup, my ugly old glasses, and my hair was a mess. *And these hospital gowns are not flattering.* I sighed, and tried to at least comb

through my hair with my fingers. It was full of knots, and I found more than one dead leaf.

I wanted to get in touch with my friends, tell them what was happening, and see what they thought about all this. *Aha*, I thought. *There will probably be a ton of old texts on my phone.* They would create a little timeline to tell me what I had been up to for the past few weeks. Genius.

My thumbs twitched reflexively, longing for the keys beneath my fingers, but my phone must be wherever the hospital had taken my clothes and possessions. The absence of the little pings from my phone made the hush more severe – it reminded me of how isolated I was.

I wondered if Melissa had finally gotten her license – she had already failed the test twice. May 19th...So school wasn't over yet – Shannon and Angela would have so much to tell me. How had Seandra's date with that guy from the football team gone? I had been noticing the guy myself – I would look adorable walking around in that oversized letterman jacket – but he was a little too grabby for my tastes. And besides, Seandra had staked her claim, and I would never betray a friend like that.

*I need to talk to Jackie.* My BFF, my best friend in the world since kindergarten – we swore we wouldn't lose touch after I got expelled, even if I never saw any of the rest of our group again. She would help me work through whatever had happened to me. *I'll call her as soon as I get my hands on my phone.*

Around ten, I decided to go for a little walk around the hospital. I didn't want anyone to see me in my ugly glasses, but I was too bored to stay put. I brought my tray

along with the vague notion of returning it, using the flat side to tap a hollow, plasticky beat on my thigh. The hallways were nowhere near as deserted as last night, though the place still couldn't be called busy. There was an air of calm purposefulness about the way people moved around. The door at the end of the hallway was closed, hiding the room where I had seen the woman keeping vigil. Or at least, I thought I had. The eerie silence and darkness of last night seemed impossible in the light and noise of day. Was it only a dream?

I found the cafeteria easily, since it took up most of the second floor. I slid my tray onto a stack by door. *Well, that takes care of that. Now what?*

There was a little girl – maybe eight years old – sitting at a table next to a snoozing old lady, looking mournful. I guessed that they were here visiting someone, and whoever it was that was sick, the kid was upset about it. Grandma certainly wasn't helping, snoring away there. I wiggled my eyebrows at the girl until a reluctant smile broke out on her face. Crossing my eyes, I flapped my elbows like a chicken, and she began to laugh.

"What in heaven's name do you think you're doing?" I turned to see a nurse giving me that stern, nursesey look, eyebrows drawn and hands on hips.

"I just escaped from the mental ward," I told her. "I have to build a fort out of lunch trays for Alvo the Wonder Slug."

She didn't even crack a smile, though behind her, the little girl had doubled over giggling. "Why don't we go back to our room, dear?" she said, her overly sweet tone making it clear that this was *not* a suggestion.

I let the nurse lead me out of the room. Marching as though I was a soldier captured by the enemy, I waved over my shoulder at the little girl, who waved back.

At the door of my room, the nurse suggested strongly that I *stay put* until someone came to get me. I threw my hand up in a smart salute as she walked away.

Kicking my heels on the edge of the bed, I surveyed the surrounding area through my window. Boy, was it boring. There was a garden with a few patients hobbling or wheeling around with their visitors, and beyond that, the edge of an unpaved road and a whole lot of trees. It was very different from what I was used to. For one thing, if I had been looking out a window of Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles, I would have been about fifteen stories higher in the air. Down below me I would have seen a mass of asphalt and concrete, and then again above me as it was reflected off the shining windows of the surrounding office buildings. There would be only a few trees, highly managed, poking through their neat designated holes in the sidewalk, like the rods of ice fishermen. There were so many trees here, sprawling and messy and uncontained. They lined the hillside as far as I could see.

There was also something wrong with this scene, though I could not put my finger on it. Something about the way the trees grew? Something about the way they crested the hill, their many pointed tops blurring into a solid line? Maybe it was something that was *not* there. Something that was missing? I spent fifteen minutes staring at the garden and the trees, trying to figure it out, before I gave up.

To pass the time, I tried to focus on what I could remember. There were no fragmented images of a car's hood lunging at me, or even of my time in Wicket's Folly. It

was as though I had simply jumped forward in time, going to sleep one night, and waking up two weeks later. I carefully reviewed the last things I could remember.

I had nearly one whole relaxing week at home before I had to leave, but even after the inquisition calmed down a bit, my sister and my father kept getting on my nerves. All the calls I received had to come through the house phone, and I had no privacy at *all*. I was in a more irritable mood than usual because Luke, my boyfriend of almost two months, had called the day after I was expelled to tell me that he thought we should take a break over the summer. I could tell he was upset about that whole test thing, even though I *told* him that that boy didn't mean anything to me.

"Why did you even do it?" he demanded. "I mean, you're pretty good at math."

"I don't know," I said. "Because I could?"

Trying to hold onto his pride, he told me that he and a few friends were going on a long 'college tour' around the country, and that trying to maintain a long-distance relationship would just leech everything good out of what we had. It would be better to call it quits for the summer, and then, if we both still felt the same way at the beginning of the school year, we could start dating again.

"So let me get this straight," I said. "You want to break up because it's not worth the effort of maintaining a long-distance relationship."

"Only temporarily," he said quickly.

"Fine," I snapped. "Then you're not worth the effort of dating."

What irked me most about the whole thing was that I had been going to break up with him anyway, before he had beaten me to it. I never dated a boy for more than two



months. Two months seemed to be the average amount of time that I could enjoy the perks – cars, prestige, lecture notes – that any particular boy had to offer, before they started expecting something more than kissing in return. When that happened, I simply moved on to someone else. I never had to worry about word getting around. Wonderful things, teenage boys and their pride – they lied through their brace-encrusted teeth. Of course, I had a bit of a reputation, but that didn't bother me. It only made them want me more.

After a week at home, I had to admit that I did miss Luke. It wasn't *him* I missed. *He* was an idiot. I missed having a boyfriend who would spend time and money on me. But Luke had had a full set of AP biology notes. And a pool.

Still, I would try to make the best of things, I told Jackie over the phone, my dad sitting in the corner, arms crossed and foot tapping. Jackie would be going to Hawaii with her family for the summer. Oh, that was nothing, I told her sarcastically. Wicket's Folly might be impossible to find on a map, but *I* would be spending my vacation as a glorified babysitter. Although, perhaps I could find some new dumb guy to exploit shamelessly.

Well, *that* had gone well. And here I was in a hospital, missing a chunk of memory. I picked idly at the bandage on my hand. Everything should have been completely ordinary, as far as getting expelled and sent away could be, except for one thing.

My mother's phone call.

It hadn't seemed more than strange at the time, but now that I was on the other side of the country, lying in a hospital after an accident I couldn't remember, it seemed to take on a new significance.

Margot had left us when I was four and Gwen was nine. She gave us no warning and took nothing with her. She must have made enough from her essays to support herself wherever she went, although I found it ironic that a woman who made her living as an essayist did not bother leaving a note when she walked out on her family. She called from a pay phone that night, when we were all desperate with worry, and told us it was too dangerous for her to be with us, that "they" would find her. It was safer for her to keep moving, she said, and that she would call when she could. And she did, but not very often. Sometimes she even arranged brief meetings in a park or a shopping mall, and though she seemed happy to see us, she was always distracted and nervous.

For years, I was sure that my mother had left because of something I had done wrong. It took a long time to get over the guilt I felt every time I looked at my sister's desperately smiling face, every time I thought of my mother. Instead, I adopted anger as a less painful way of dealing with my mother's abandonment. *It was her problem, not yours*, I told myself repeatedly.

That night, the last night I could remember, all I had wanted to do was stop thinking about everything. I wanted to go to sleep, to forget about school, my father's girlfriend, and my sister's pained grin, and most of all, that tomorrow I had to go see the woman who had abandoned me. I didn't even put on my pajamas before crawling into

bed, didn't even take out my contact lenses, though I knew my eyes would hurt in the morning.

I had the strangest, most vivid dream of my life, a dream of spider webs, and of clawed hands tipped with light.

## Chapter Four

I wanted to be huffy with Uncle Bennet when he finally picked me up. I had been left alone all morning until Dr. Nose-hair showed up to stare out the window while he admitted that he had made no medical breakthroughs, had no revelations, or even personal epiphanies over the extra night that he had made me stay in the hospital. Then the nurses returned my possessions, and my cell phone was not among them. I all but accused them of stealing it, but they steadfastly denied that I had had one when I was admitted, which was impossible, because it went everywhere with me, and then we all glared at each other for a while. I was so happy to see Uncle Bennet, with his graying mustache and receding hairline, that I instantly forgot my bad mood.

“Welcome back to the Folly,” Uncle Bennet said as he looked over his shoulder to back his minivan out of its parking space. In the rearview mirror, I could see that the back seat was a mess of cracker crumbs and stains which might or might not have been apple juice. “You really don’t remember any of this?”

I shook my head. *I wish everyone would stop asking me that.*

As we pulled out of the lot, I bade a loud good riddance to Edward F. Jameson and Dr. Nose-hair. Uncle Bennet gave me a puzzled glance in the mirror.

“They stole my phone,” I explained.

“Oh, I’m sure they didn’t do that.”

“Then where is it?”

“You must have left it at the house. No one has cell phones around here.”

I shook my head incredulously. No cell phones? What sort of hick town had I wandered into? Or...did Dad know that when he sent me here?

We drove in silence for a little while, and I watched the unfamiliar surroundings fly by. Wicket's Folly was no Los Angeles, and I doubted that I would have much trouble learning my way around, especially as I had already done it once before.

The road seemed to cut through an endless forest with trees thick on both sides. It was as I was looking out the window that I finally realized what had been bothering me about the scenery the day before. I was used to watching the swoop and rise of telephone wires lining highways through the windows on long drives. These roads were unaccompanied by poles or wires. I hadn't seen any from the window of my hospital room, though I clearly remembered phones ringing outside my room.

"Weird," I murmured. Maybe New York had torn down the telephone poles in favor of a more modern arrangement that had not yet been introduced in California. Or maybe, far worse, they had no connection to the outside world at all.

"What's weird?"

"Huh? Oh, I just kind of feel like you should be asking me all the 'family update' questions."

Uncle Bennet smiled. "Oh, I did," he said.

We stopped at a red light. "Um, do you mind," I said, "Just running over what went on last time?"

Uncle Bennet looked at me quickly in the space before the light turned green. "Of course not, Megan," he said. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Now, let's see...."

"It was last Monday. The sixth, I think. I drove to Syracuse specially to pick you up, and I was worried that I wouldn't make it back in time to open the store. I didn't expect your flight to get in late."

"I always do," I told him. "Fact of Life Number 5,742: Airplanes and Buses Are Always Late. Subdivision of Anything You're Waiting for Won't Happen." I thought for a minute. "Trains are usually on time, though."

"Well, regardless of *why* it was late, I was starting to worry that I wouldn't make opening time, or that I would have to call Alicia to go do it. My assistant doesn't have the keys, you know, so I was –"

"Um, Uncle Bennet," I interrupted. "I meant more like, you know, *generally* what happened. Anything important I should know, that kind of thing."

"Oh." His shoulders sagged slightly. "Yes, of course, pardon me. I picked you up at the airport, and we drove back to Wicket. On the way, we talked about how your family was doing. I believe you told me you were asked to leave school."

"No need to get into *that* again," I said quickly.

Uncle Bennet smiled. "Then there's really nothing else to tell. You've just been taking care of the kids."

"That's all?" I asked, disappointed.

“Hmmm...” said Uncle Bennet. "There is one more thing." He shifted a little in his seat, and cleared his throat. "It clearly didn't sink in the first time, or you wouldn't be in this situation, but perhaps it bears repeating. On your first day here, I warned you that it was not really a good idea to go wandering around after dark."

I would have thought he was joking if his tone was not so deadly serious. "Why?" I asked, when he didn't elaborate.

He shrugged, as if he wasn't really sure what he meant. "Sometimes, things just... happen...here." He sounded almost confused. "Sometimes people just.... Well, better not to put yourself in the way of anything...." His words trailed off, but I could have sworn that he wanted to finish them with 'dangerous.'

We drove along winding roads that made my stomach twist. No lanes, no painted demarcations. There was barely any room, so when we met cars coming in the opposite direction, all parties had to hug the sides to get by. I put my hand over my mouth, just in case that nasty hospital Jell-o decided to reemerge. "I miss freeways. These roads are awful."

"I like it," said Bennet. "No airport. No bus station. No noise, no smog. Now you see why I don't visit more often."

"Because it's so hard to get out of here?"

"Yes, yes, very funny. But it's really a lovely place. I'm sure you'll like it."

"I'm sure I will."

"Oh!" He snapped his fingers. "I just remembered something."

"What?"

"On our drive back from Syracuse, I asked about your mother."

My stomach twisted even farther, and it wasn't because of the road.

"You said that she called you up out of the blue, wanting to see you before you left. You sounded pretty upset about it."

"Um...so I didn't tell you what happened when I went to see my mother? Or, if I really did, even?"

"No, but I wish you had," Uncle Bennet admitted. "I was terribly interested."

"Yeah, me too..."

"You mean you don't remember?"

"That's about the size of it."

"But that happened before you came to Wicket's Folly. Alicia said the doctor fellow said that you had only lost things that went with the change in routine."

I nodded. "I lost half a week of the time *before* I got here too. Including that visit to my mother."

"I wonder if it was important?"

"I doubt it," I said, and turned my head to watch the grass whipping by on the side of the road.

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"You don't remember the house?" Uncle Bennet asked.

I peered through the windshield at the small, neat wooden building at the end of Mallard Lane. It did not even evoke the slightest sense of *déjà vu*. As I got out of the car, I turned slowly to take in the dirt roads and widely spaced houses half swallowed by



greenery. In the distance, I could see the top of the hospital over the heads of the trees.

“It’s right over there?” I wondered aloud. “But we spent like half an hour in the car.”

“The roads around here are exactly as long as you need them to be,” Uncle Bennet said cryptically, and headed towards the house.

Aunt Alicia was waiting for us on the lawn by the gate. She was wearing a slightly wrinkled charcoal gray pantsuit that did not quite fit her broad shoulders, the jacket buttoned around the bulky cast on her arm. Her hair was swept up in what should have been a neat bun, but brown strands were already beginning to escape, even though it only early afternoon. I got yet another hug and a slightly awkward kiss on the cheek.

“Welcome home, sweetheart,” Aunt Alicia said. “I really must run. I just waited until you got back – I didn’t want to leave the boys on their own again! – I’m so glad you’re alright! Bennet will show you around – again, I suppose. I’ve got to go – I’m going to be late for my meeting. I’ll see you tonight, sweetheart!” She gave Uncle Bennet a quick kiss, hurried over to the car, and sped off.

“How can she drive with her arm like that?” I asked.

“Very carefully,” said Uncle Bennet. “Shall we go in?”

I followed him up the winding brick walkway to a house surrounded by shrubbery and flowers in varying stages of water deprivation. He held the gate open for me – very gentlemanly.

A jumble of toys was strewn around the walled yard, including a red wagon whose paint was chipped, and a few faded basketballs lying half-hidden under bushes.

Three little boys were sitting on the steps before the front door, watching me warily.

“Do you remember any of the boys, Megan?” asked Uncle Bennet, stopping beside me.

I shook my head. I knew the oldest one had to be Archie, but I had last seen him when he was around three years old, and he had to be at least nine by now. Uncle Bennet had brought him to L.A. for a cousin’s wedding, and I had met him there. I had never seen either of the other boys.

The boy who must be Archie had large protruding ears, curly dark hair, and a freckled face. In fact, all the boys had dark hair and freckles. *Perfect. I’m never going to be able to tell them apart.*

“You met Archie once before,” Uncle Bennet said, gesturing at his oldest son. “This one is Eric –” he pointed out a boy with very blue eyes – “And Freddie –” the youngest boy, who was clutching a stuffed bear – “And that’s Freddie’s teddy bear, or as we call it, the Freddie Bear. Well, now you know everybody – again.”

“Hey,” I said, giving an easy wave that would encompass them all.

“Let’s go inside,” Uncle Bennet said. The boys rose from where they were sitting on the steps, and parted to let me through. As I went into the house, pushing open the door that had been left slightly ajar, I heard Uncle Bennet say, “Now boys, remember what we discussed.”

“Megan hit her head and doesn’t remember being here before,” said one young voice smartly.

“And we shouldn’t say anything to her, because it might upset her,” said another.

“Be helpful and polite.”

“Or?” prompted Uncle Bennet.

“Or you’ll sell us to the orphanage.”

“Right,” Uncle Bennet said cheerfully, and they followed me into the house.

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Uncle Bennet explained that he was staying home from work that day to look after the boys so I could rest. Mick was perfectly capable of looking after the hardware store on his own for one day, he told me, but he would pop over occasionally to see how things were going.

"Mick works for you?" I asked, surprised.

"You remember him?"

"No, he was at the hospital when I woke up."

Uncle Bennet frowned. "Now what was he doing there?"

So was I dating Mick or not? I was never secretive about my relationships, but I couldn't think of a good reason why I would not have told my uncle. Unless he was under strict orders from my father to keep me away from boys. "Why don't you give me a tour?" I said, before he could start making assumptions.

Uncle Bennet was only too happy to show me around the house where I had apparently been staying for the last two weeks. It was very small, only one storey, though it had a large backyard; not the fenced- off squares of Los Angeles, but an open hillside

sloping away into a thicket of trees. I looked at the trees warily; they looked like they would contain *wildlife*.

When the tour reached the living room, we found the boys. They had decided that I was no longer of interest, and were all grouped around an ancient computer. On the screen of the huge, boxy monitor, I was surprised to see nothing but scrolling white letters. They were playing one of those old text-based games.

“You know they make ‘em with pictures now, right?”

All three boys turned to look at me. “Why would they do that?” asked the oldest one. Archie, I reminded myself.

“Um.” I had never really wondered that before. “So you can visualize it better, I guess.”

“I can viz’lise it just fine,” said the middle one. Eric.

“You have to use your imagination this way,” said Archie.

“Isn’t that hard?” I asked.

“No.”

“I mean,” I turned to the smallest one – Freddie – “Can you read?”

He shook his head cheerfully.

“Then how...” but all of them were looking at me as though I was crazy now, so I let the question trail off.

“Let’s continue our tour,” said Uncle Bennet. His lips were curling slightly, as though he was suppressing a smile.

There were just two bedrooms in the house, the master bedroom and one with bunk beds where all three boys slept. *Two bunkbeds equals four beds. Three little boys plus one extra bed.* Did that mean I was sharing a room with the boys?

"No, no," Uncle Bennet assured me. "You were sleeping in the basement. Don't worry," he added, seeing the expression on my face. "It's furnished. *And* you get your own bathroom. No sharing with the slob."

The largest room by far was the kitchen, where everything was made of wood or colorful ceramic, rather than the stainless steel that I was used to. Despite the lack of phone lines, there was a wall phone made of yellow plastic next to a large rectangular whiteboard with "Shopping List" written on it. I dialed my father's number on the wall phone. As it rang, I twirled the cord around my finger. It felt so old-fashioned I could have laughed. "Daddy?"

"Hi, Meggie, how are you?" It was strange hearing my father's voice buzzing over the phone, when I was so sure that I had said good night to him in person just the night before last. And yet, the static distorting his words was real, as was his concerned tone. I shuddered to think what it must have been like for him, getting the phone call that his daughter had been hit by a car. *Although...it must have erased all thoughts of my expulsion from his mind....*

"I'm all in one piece," I said. "Just a little disoriented."

"Yes, Bennet told me. And you really don't remember anything?"

"No. I feel like I just jumped forward in time."

“I’m sure you’ll be able to handle it. You’re a very capable young woman.” Dad didn’t really know how to be reassuring, but I knew he cared.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Have you heard of anything like this before?”

“Well, no...but I’m not a doctor.”

“Yeah...”

“Oh yes, what’s-his-name called.” My father made a point of never remembering the names of any of my boyfriends, since he claimed they changed so frequently. I thought that this was a bit hypocritical of him, given what I had recently learned about his own romantic history. “He said he heard you were in an accident and wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“Huh. I’m surprised he even went to all that trouble.” Still, I was pleased. It was nice to know that one more boy would not be getting over me so easily.

There was a bit of an awkward silence. I read a few headlines on the copy of the Wicket’s Folly Gazette on the kitchen table, which confirmed that it was indeed the 19<sup>th</sup> of May. Dad had never been very good at talking on the phone. “Well...if you’re sure you’re alright...” he said finally.

“Dad –” I said, before he could start saying goodbye, “Did you – have you told Mom?”

There was a long pause. “No...” he said slowly. “Even if I could reach her, I thought it would be... unwise. But if you want me to –”

“No, no,” I cut in. “I just wanted to know – it doesn’t matter, though.” I hesitated, then plunged ahead. “She called before I left, didn’t she? I remember that much, at least.”

“Yes.” His voice hardened. “She wanted to see you.”

“And did I go?”

He paused, thinking. “I’m not sure. I got my hands on a new article that weekend, a real doozy on the inheritance traditions of the Anglo-Saxons, so I wasn’t really paying attention....”

Of course. I picked at the edge of the gauze bandage on my left hand.

“It was fascinating. You see, the Anglo-Saxons did not practice traditional primogeniture as one might think –”

“Ahem,” I said loudly.

“What? Oh, right. You should ask Gwen, I’m sure she’d know.”

“Yeah, I think I will. Is she there?”

“No. She must still be at school.”

“At – ? Oh, right, the time difference. When will she be back?”

“I never know. She never tells me –”

I almost pointed out that Gwen *did*, we both did, and he just wasn’t really listening, but I stopped myself.

“– so it’s probably best if you try tomorrow.”

“Okay, I will. Thanks, Daddy.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Bye.”

“Oh, and Meggie? Stay safe.”

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I learned that I had been staying in one corner of the basement that had been walled off into a guest room. It was tiny, only a third the size of my room back home, and I had to edge around the washer and dryer to get to it, but on the plus side, as Uncle Bennet had pointed out, I did not have to share a bathroom with three little boys.

“I guess I’ll leave you to it,” said Uncle Bennet. “I’ll be upstairs if you want me.”

Inside, the air was slightly dank, and the dim lighting illuminated exposed pipes in the ceiling. A tiny window near the top of the wall gave me a close-up of the plants along the side of the house. There was a camp bed against the far wall, a night table between the bed and the door, and a little desk in the opposite corner. A small stack of very thick books sat on the bedside table. They looked to be at least five hundred pages each. What nerd was living here? *Oh*, I thought, feeling foolish. *Right*.

On the table next to the books was my cell phone. I snatched it up gleefully, stroking its scuffed yellow plastic case. Freedom! The tiny little gadget that connected me to everything in the outside world. I turned it on. I could finally talk to all my friends, find out everything I had missed.... The screen fluctuated between one bar and ‘no signal,’ and the feeling of elation sank back away. I set the phone back on the table with a sigh. Oh yeah, I had accused the nurses of stealing my phone. *Should I feel guilty about that? Nah, they must be used to it.*

My suitcase sat in the only unfurnished corner. It was by far the most colorful thing in the dingy room. It had fake alligator skin handles, and was covered in leopard spots, with bright pink posies of roses splashed here and there. It had been a birthday gift



several years ago from Aunt Alicia. She obviously wasn't used to buying for girls, and she had overcompensated.

I closed the door after me, crossed the room in two steps, and lay down on the lumpy mattress that, on closer inspection, turned out to be egg crate foam rubber. I knew I must have been here before, but it all felt so new and strange to me. *Two weeks*, I thought, staring up at the pipes in the ceiling. *What the hell? Nothing. Not even a hint of déjà vu?*

How horribly disorienting it was, to have something in my mind which I was sure was the truth, but to have everyone around me proving constantly to me that what I knew could not possibly be right. Who did I trust then? My own eyes and ears, or everyone else's?

And, of course, all this made me think of my mother. I knew she had wanted to see me for some reason. I had even told Uncle Bennet so, though I hadn't said whether I actually *did* go. I knew that I wouldn't have shared such private information, but for a moment I was angry at my past self for not telling him exactly what had happened. *Had I really gone to see her? If so, had my mother told me anything important? Well, I could rule out that possibility, but still...it was very strange....*

It was frustrating. I had so many questions that needed answers, but the only person who truly knew could not answer back: myself.

## Chapter Five

I stayed in my room until after four. Part of me knew that I should be getting up and getting on with my uncomplicated babysitting life, and another part demanded that I try to think things through logically, and yet a third part wanted to just lie around and let the world pass by while I felt sorry for myself.

I took the last option.

If only I could talk to Jackie and see what she thought about all this. At home, I would have been online at this very moment, chatting with all my friends at once. But the computer upstairs did not have internet access, and even my trusty cell phone complained that there was no service. I was cut off from the rest of the world, trapped in my own body. It was suffocating.

I clomped up the stairs and used the number listed in my cell phone to call Jackie on the phone in the kitchen.

She answered on the fourth ring. "Why are you calling me during class?" she hissed.

*Huh?* My cell phone said it was 4:30. Oh, right...the time difference. It was only 1:30 in California. "Why are you *answering* during class?"

"I snuck out when I saw it was you. I barely hear from you in like, *weeks*, and then you call me out of the blue. You better have a good story, and I'm willing to miss bio for that. *Even* AP prep."

I gave her a quick rundown of what was had happened. As far as I knew.

"O-M-G," she said slowly. "O-M-F-G."

"I know, right?"

"Wow. I almost forgive you. So why didn't you call me before now?"

"How should I know? But there isn't any cell phone reception or anything. I'm calling from a phone with a *cord*."

She put on a pompous, snobbish voice. "My, my. How quaint."

I could hear a toilet flushing in the background. "Are you in the *bathroom*?"

"Relax, *I'm* not peeing while I'm on the phone. I'm way too classy for that."

"So what have I missed? How was Seandra's pool party?"

"Oh, oh!" Jackie said. "Boy-Taylor and girl-Taylor finally made out!"

"I totally called it!"

"It was weirdly creepy though. Like incest or something."

"Hey, Jackie, can you tell me what I talked about when I called you?"

Jackie was silent for a moment. "You only called me once or twice, and honestly you were being a real bitch. You told me that you had made some awesome new friends and you all had big plans, but you couldn't tell me because it was a *secret*. Totally all like, 'well I don't need *you* anymore.' *So* not cool."

"You know I'm sorry about that right? Do you forgive me?"

There was a long pause. "Maybe if you beg for a while."

I laughed. "I will when I get back. I promise."

"And don't you ever stop calling me again."

I sighed dramatically. "What are you ever going to do when I start my new school?"

"Kill myself?"

"Don't joke about that."

"Jesus, chill."

"I know, I know, it's just...that whole Eden thing."

"Yeah.... Listen, I should get back to class. I think today they're gonna tell us how babies are made."

"Ooh, wouldn't want to miss that."

"Call you later."

"You better."

The phone settled back into its cradle with a comfortable click. That was one noise that cell phones just could not replicate.

It was so nice to talk to Jackie without my father looming over my shoulder. Now if only my cell phone was working, we would be able to have real privacy. I had joked that she wouldn't know what to do without me once I moved to my new school, but the truth was that it would be me who would be having the hardest time. It had taken Jackie and me a long time to claw our way up to the positions of being two of the most popular girls in school, and now I would have to do it again, and on my own. That would take time – time that really ought to be spent studying for the SATs. *Shit, the SATs. Not looking forward to that.*

I found Uncle Bennet reading a book in the living room, and offered to make dinner.

“I was rather hoping you would,” he said, “but are you sure you’re up to it?”

“Sure I’m sure,” I said. “I’m just fine, and I really think I should start moving around and, you know, doing stuff again.”

“Well, if you insist...” I could tell he wasn’t going to fight me on this. He was perfectly happy not to have to make dinner. He took me to the kitchen, and showed me where all the pots and pans were kept, and the side of salmon in the refrigerator.

Uncle Bennet hovered around silently as I collected the ingredients that I would need to make a tasty fish stir-fry, but he began to talk when I asked him to update me on what I had been doing for the past three weeks.

“I’d like to just...pick things up where I left off, if possible,” I told him. “I’ll cook and babysit or whatever.”

“Are you sure you don’t need time?” he asked. “Because it would be fine if –”

“Where do you keep the spices? I keep telling you I’m just fine. I need to *do* things.” If I acted like an invalid, I was going to start feeling like one.

“Well, if you think it’s best, I’m not going to argue. That’s the last back-talk you’ll get from me.” He opened a cupboard and showed me several shelves of spice bottles.

I chose some ginger and garlic. “Great, thank you. So tell me what my routine entailed. Entails.”

There was a loud thumping as one of the little boys galloped into the room, bounced lightly off his father, and circled twice around me. He pulled a chair out from the table and used it to climb up to the counter. Standing on the tile in his bare feet, he opened a cupboard, took out a cup, and climbed down. He noticed me gaping at him and tried to copy my expression, widening his eyes and opening his mouth. "Glorp," he said, and skipped out of the room.

"That reminds me..." Uncle Bennet said. He left the room, and a few moments later I heard a loud chorus of complaints. Apparently, he had turned off the computer. He came back and leaned against the counter as I chopped vegetables for the stir-fry.

Since they were no longer distracted by the computer, the three boys tramped into the kitchen, sliding on the linoleum in their socks. They seemed to be acting out some sort of bizarre game. The oldest one, Archie, was chasing the middle one, snatching at him while he dodged and giggled. I wasn't sure where the smallest one was until I turned to grab the soy sauce bottle from the counter and nearly fell over him. He had crouched behind me to run a toy car over the lines in the linoleum.

"Why don't you play somewhere else, huh, buddy?"

He raised his eyebrows at me. "But the *road* is here."

"Let's see," Uncle Bennet mused, rubbing at his hair in almost exactly the same way my father did. "Alicia would know better obviously, but I think you served as an all-purpose babysitter. Mostly you took the boys to their various activities and picked them up. Archie has got some sort of young scientist program up at the college, which meets

every day except Friday from ten to two. Eric and Freddie have got swimming lessons in the morning –”

"Wait, don't they have school?"

"Their school got out at the end of April."

"Wow, I wish *I* had gone here."

"As I understand it, you don't go anywhere anymore, do you?"

I shut my mouth. *Everyone just loves to bring that up, don't they?*

"Now as I was saying, swimming lessons – "

"I think you'd better write this down," I interrupted before he could get any farther. "There's no way I'll be able to remember it otherwise."

"No fair launching from the chair!" a boy screeched behind me. Eric? Yes, he seemed like the whiny one.

"Way ahead of you," Uncle Bennet said over the sounds of the oldest boy, Archie, taunting his brother by blowing a loud raspberry. "I wrote it down for you the first time around. It's still on the calendar."

"Okay, thanks. Ah!" I gasped as the knife slipped in my hand. A slightly throbbing line of bright red appeared on the tip of my left index finger.

"What is it?" The boys crowded around me.

I stared at my finger in surprise. "I cut myself. *I never* cut myself." It must be the knife. I just wasn't familiar with the knife.

"You stepped on my car," Freddie said. I was worried that he was about to start crying, but instead, he just said, "now I'll be the car," and got down on the floor.

“Oh, don’t you worry. That doesn’t look bad at all,” said Uncle Bennet. “I’ll get you a band-aid. He stepped over Freddie and headed out of the room.

Archie threw up his arms in dramatic claws and yelled, “I vand to suck your blood!”

I held out my finger. “Well, Dracula?”

“Ew,” said Eric, wrinkling his nose.

Archie squirmed. “Um, I beleef I have left my fangs in my other jacket.”

“I would suck your blood if you were a lemon,” Freddie announced from the floor.

Uncle Bennet returned and handed me a band-aid. I peeled it free and wrapped it around my finger.

“I’m sorry about the pattern,” he said. A line of tiny Snoopy dogs paraded across the band-aid.

“No, it’s not that,” I said. “It’s just that now I look even more like some sort of disaster victim.” I indicated the white hospital gauze wrapped around my palm. “And Snoopy really doesn’t match.”

“Do you want me to finish the chopping?”

“No, I got it.” I turned back to the cutting board.

“Will dinner taste like blood?” Eric asked.

“Why don’t you monsters go set the table?” Uncle Bennet suggested.

Archie pulled Freddie up off the floor. “C’mon, weirdo.”



They wandered around, taking time off between bouts of shoving each other to set the table one plate or utensil at a time. Once I had longed for a younger brother or sister. Maybe I didn't want one after all.

I slid a mound of chopped cabbage into the frying pan, and the oil sizzled and spat. A searing droplet landed on my thumb, and I jerked my hand out of the way. *What is going on with me today?* "What were you saying about the schedule?"

"Um, right. Archie has science, Eric and Freddie have swimming lessons Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings. Eric has an art class at the museum Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Archie and Eric have soccer in the afternoon three days a week, and then they all have music lessons on Thursday afternoons."

"Pow-pow-pow," yelled Archie.

"No fair," said Eric.

"Pwop," said Freddie, and giggled.

Uncle Bennet scratched his head. "That's pretty much it. I think you were taking an art class at the museum too, since they have one for teens at the same time as Eric's."

"An art class?" I had never done anything like that before, but it did seem like there wasn't much to do for fun around here. That would certainly explain all the books on my bedside table.

"Yes," Uncle Bennet said. "I think it was a painting class. You used to talk about it at dinner. Apparently you were enjoying yourself quite a lot, working on something special."

The more I heard about the things I had been doing, the more I felt like the Megan I had been during the missing two weeks was a completely different person, one who read books, went to art classes, and looked after someone else's kids without a fuss. I shook my head, nudging vegetables around the frying pan.

There was a loud crash as a chair got knocked over. Archie picked it up and shoved Eric into a different chair, which fell over as well. Eric head-butted him in the stomach. *Thud!* went a third chair.

"Boys, boys," Uncle Bennet said vaguely. "Please don't do that to the chairs."

"He started it," said Eric quickly.

"It was Freddie," Archie said.

"What was Freddie?"

"I'm Freddie!" said Freddie. Archie and Eric clutched each other and snorted with laughter.

"So I just take them there and pick them up, huh?" I asked. How hard could that be?

"Oh, don't you worry," said Uncle Bennet. "They're all excited because you're back, so they're going a little wild. They should be back to normal tomorrow. I hope. It's really not too hard. And, some of them will need lunches, and you make those too. You were also doing the shopping and running errands – to the library – we've got a *very* good library here – or whatever else Alicia needs. Freddie doesn't have as much to do as the other boys, so he likes to accompany you on your errands. Oh, and you also do the cooking."

"Uh-huh." *Sure, pile it on. It's not like I'm on vacation or anything here.*

"We weren't going to have you do it, but you offered, and you're a very good cook."

"True," said I simply. "I am. I have magic hands. Everything I touch turns out just right." I was only partly joking. When I was younger and my father was attempting to cook after my mother left, I had loved to help him. If I had my hand in the preparation of the food, my father soon joked, it would somehow come out looking exactly like the picture in the cookbook and tasting of perfection. When I helped, even if all I did was slide the pan into the oven, the food always tasted better than when I was not involved.

"I think that's everything," he said. "Mmm, that's starting to smell good. Let's eat."

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"Ewww," Eric said.

Uncle Bennet frowned at him. "Eric, that's not polite."

"The *food* is not polite," said Archie.

"No, no, it's just...unusual."

"A fish *died* for this."

*If there's one thing worse than cooking bad food, it's when people try to pretend that they like it.* My cousins were right. The food was awful. I poked my fork into my helping of stir-fry, stabbing at a piece of blackened fish. If only it was alive so that it could feel pain. The fish that should have turned pink and tender instead disintegrated into black ragged bits stuck to the bottom of the frying pan. The vegetables were

overcooked and salty, even though I hadn't added salt. A funny, sour-cabbage smell hung over the whole thing.

I pushed my plate away. My appetite was gone. *It's supposed to be perfect. It's always perfect. This isn't even good.*

The front door opened, and Aunt Alicia came in and tossed her purse down on the counter. "One more house nearly sold!" she said. "Oh my, that does look delicious." Her voice sounded almost *too* cheerful, and I looked at her carefully. She was worried about something, and she was trying to hide it.

Eric wrinkled his nose. "It's gross."

"It's got a lovely dark, burnt flavor," Uncle Bennet insisted.

"It tastes like dog food," said Archie.

Ouch.

Aunt Alicia nodded. She wasn't really listening. "Bennet, can I talk to you for a minute," she said quietly.

"Of course." He wiped his mouth on his napkin and stood up.

Archie shoved his plate away. "Man, your food used to be good. Maybe you forgot how to cook when you hit your head."

Eric gasped, his eyes wide. "Dad told us not to talk about that."

"Do you ever wonder," Freddie said thoughtfully, "if monkeys have belly buttons?"

I tried to ignore them. My aunt and uncle were standing in the hallway, and as I strained my ears, I could just hear what they were saying.

"...The Gillmans' little boy," Aunt Alicia said.

"How long had he been gone?" Uncle Bennet asked, his voice low and serious.

"Theresa said he was playing outside, and when she went to call him in for dinner, he wasn't there. They're organizing a search party."

"I'm sure they'll find him. He probably just wandered off."

"I know, I know, it's just...he's only seven. I can't help thinking...what if it was one of ours?"

Uncle Bennet said something, but I didn't hear it because at that moment, Eric yelled, "Who took the last tater tot?" He glared around the table. "You had six and I only had three! The last one was mine!"

Freddie began humming to himself. Eric looked at him suspiciously.

"I took the last one." Aunt Alicia had come back into the kitchen. "You're getting a little pudgy-wudgy there, sweetie." She pinched his cheek.

"Mo-om...."

She sat down and helped herself to some food. "You have to give them *exactly* the same number of everything or they'll fight," she told me in a kind, it-wasn't-your-fault sort of voice. "My, this is certainly an... *interesting* flavor."

"Hey, where's Dad?" asked Archie.

"Oh, he was done eating and he has some things to do," Aunt Alicia said casually. "Now who wants watermelon for desert?"

I could tell that she was trying to redirect their attention. Uncle Bennet must have gone off to join the search party for the missing boy.

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When the boys had run off to play after dinner, Aunt Alicia did the crossword puzzle at the kitchen table as I washed the dishes. I watched my hands rubbing the sponge into the dishes, the one normal hand and the one bandaged disaster victim hand. My fingers were just as long and thin as usual, and the backs of my hands were as freckled as always, but they felt like someone else's hands. They certainly weren't behaving as mine normally did. "I don't know what's wrong with me," I said quietly. "That's never happened to me before."

"Oh don't worry if you feel a little overwhelmed," said Aunt Alicia, misunderstanding what I meant. "They take a little getting used to. But they're good boys, really." She thrust her fingers as far as she could into her cast and scratched at her arm.

I didn't bother correcting her. I had always attacked any task set me with the supreme confidence of someone who knew that it would turn out perfectly, simply because almost everything I did turned out that way. I might joke about having 'magic hands,' but all I meant was that I was talented at most manual skills. My hands weren't really magic, of course, because there was no such thing as magic. It was nothing more unusual than my father's memory for dates not of this century. I had never thought my hands could fail me. But once again that night, they did. A cup I was drying slid between my slick fingers and fell to the floor with a loud crack.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," I repeated, as Aunt Alicia got a broom and calmly swept up the pieces.

“Megan, stop apologizing,” she said. “There are three boys in this house – you think nothing ever gets broken? Our record is four plates in one week. And this is a clean break in the handle. A little glue, and it’s good as new! Oh, it rhymes!”

Listening to Aunt Alicia singing her new motto, I tried to allow myself to be reassured. Never in my life had I received an injury that was self-inflicted. I fell off my bike when I was learning to ride, got smacked by a closing gate, or bitten by the class hamster, but I had never cut myself before. When my classmates got paper cuts, it always seemed to me that they were being careless and clumsy.

I had never broken a dish before. I had never burned food. What was wrong with me? *It’s just stress*, I told myself. *You’re stressed out by the weirdness and the accident you can’t remember. Everything will be back to normal tomorrow.*

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I couldn't sleep that night. There was a nervous energy in my legs that made me want to pace for a while, maybe go jogging. It probably came from spending too much time in bed.

There was no reason for sleep to hold out on me. It was late. I had played a board game with my cousins that they kept insisting I already knew how to play, but at least I was starting to feel comfortable in their presence. Most of the game consisted of Archie saying things like, "You can only move that piece here if you roll higher than a six but lower than a ten, or else you skip your next turn and draw a card to give to someone else," and Eric agreeing that "Green cards are the best if you're going on the trading route; any baby knows that."

"Any baby didn't just have a head injury," I pointed out.

After they were forcibly put to bed, I read a chapter of one of the bedside table books that looked like it might not be that bad – something about a hidden garden. Usually when I felt the inclination to read, I would open up a volume of the beautiful encyclopedias that my father had given me for my thirteenth birthday. I would close my eyes, pick a random volume, and a random article. It was exciting because I never knew what I would be reading about, and I liked to think that someday I would know everything there was to know in the world.

I had thought that I might not be tired, due to the three hour time difference, but my body knew that it had already adjusted. I was tired; I just couldn't sleep. So I got up.

I threw on jeans and a UCLA sweatshirt that I had "borrowed" from my sister. No one to impress at this hour; it didn't matter how I looked. Uncle Bennet's warning about not going out after dark slipped briefly through my mind before disappearing again. It was just one of those things that parents say to try to keep their teenage daughters in the house so they wouldn't go out and get pregnant. To make matters even easier, the basement where I slept had its own side door, so all I had to do was open it as quietly as possible and climb the steps up into the shadowy back garden.

Man, it was dark outside. The only light came from the moon and the hundreds of stars overhead. So many stars! I stood for a while, neck craned up, staring in awe at the sheer number of tiny glowing lights overhead. Back in LA, the many streetlights meant that nighttime was never truly dark, and you could only see maybe five or six stars a night. But here, the sky was absolutely stuffed with them. They glittered overhead like



polished gemstones. Maybe this was why people liked to live out in the country. They could see the stars the the smog and lights of cities hid. *Someday, I want to find someone who will look at the stars with me like this. Not expecting anything from me, not asking for anything, just...being there.*

I smiled to myself. It was a wish I knew I'd never have, but sometimes, I still caught myself making it.

There was a crick growing in my neck, and reluctantly, I looked down. The night air was chilly, and I stuck my hands into the kangaroo pouch of my sweatshirt.

I didn't want to go too far, since getting lost was a real possibility, so I just walked in a straight line along my cousins' street. Mallard Way, wasn't it Or maybe Mallard Road? Whatever.

It was completely quiet except for the rustling of branches and the chirping of crickets. The hush managed to be both peaceful and creepy at the same time. I was so rarely out by myself. I missed the chatter and laughter of my friends. Jackie liked to loop her arm through mine as we walked, smiling at passersby, daring them to think we were lesbians. *God, I miss her. What am I going to do when I start the new school?*

There was a loud rustling in the trees, and I turned to look. I thought I caught a glimpse of something – glowing yellow orbs – eyes? – but it was quickly gone. *I take it back. This place is way more creepy than peaceful.*

I hunched my shoulders in and sped up.

Far down the road, I could see a few streetlamps glowing. There were other lights as well, flashlights and – were those *lanterns?* – being hurried about to and fro. People

out looking for the missing boy. They still hadn't found him. I was surprised that there were no flashing blue and red lights of police cars. Clearly, this was a civilian-organized search. *I hope they find him.*

A pair of flashlights were bobbing my way. Oh, shit. What if it was Uncle Bennet? He would be mad if he saw me wandering around at night the *same day* he told me not to. I slipped into the cover of the trees.

The narrow beams of the flashlights showed me two teenage boys walking slowly along the road. Neither of them looked to be in much of a hurry, and they weren't even bothering to play the beams of their flashlights over the trees. They were talking to each other in low voices, and as they got closer, I could hear what they were saying.

"...just don't see what the point is," said one. I could not distinguish either of their faces, but I could tell that he was tall and thin. "We should just go back."

"You gotta at least make the effort, yeah?"

"Oh, come on. We both know exactly where he is, and we both know he's not coming back from there." Abruptly, the speaker swung his flashlight into the trees. I dodged behind a thick trunk and crouched down, holding my breath. A branch jabbed into my shoulder.

*Wait. They're not looking at me.* I tried to follow the beam of light with my eyes, but it was lost among the trees, and a second or two later, its owner pulled it back. The crunch of gravel told me that they had resumed walking.

"You don't know that for sure," said one of the boys.

"Oh, come on," said the other one again. "We've been looking all day and we couldn't find him. Where else can he be?"

Gravel skittered into as though someone had kicked it. "I hate this."

"I know."

"Well, we've put in our time."

"Yeah, let's go back to the Dorm." The crunching gravel faded away, and their voices were swallowed into the night.

Out from the trees and back onto the road I crept, placing each of my feet down softly. I squinted into the darkness, trying to distinguish what the boy's flashlight had been pointing at. The roads were not well lit, and all I could see by the light of the moon and stars was a hill that looked like it was upholstered in black velvet. Not knowing what was out there kind of made it worse. The safety of my basement bedroom suddenly seemed very appealing.

I hurried up the road the way I had come, trying to be as quiet as possible. On the steps leading down to the basement's side door, I turned and squinted back at the line of the trees.

I saw them clearly this time, a pair of large, round eyes, reflecting yellow light as they stared right at me through the branches. Frozen in place, I stared back. A moment later, the eyes vanished, winking out as though they had never existed.

*I feel a stirring in the town below. A muttering unease that consumes the human souls. I close my eyes, reading them, waiting for the images to become clear.*

*A child. There is a child missing.*

*Not again.*

*The first time it happened, I was overjoyed because it meant that the portal worked. But it did not work for me, and since then, just as in every time that this happens, I want to shriek and scream, claw at my face and rip my hair out of my head. I want to laugh and laugh until I weep because once again, a stupid human child has managed to do what I cannot, and leave this place.*

*My hands clench themselves into clubs, nails digging into my palms, and I flail at the wall. Stupid, stupid child.*

*My fists pass through the wall, and my own momentum carries me forward until I nearly smack my face. There is no tearing of paper, no crumbling of plaster. My hands pass through, fading away and reappearing as I pull them back.*

*No! No. This cannot be happening.*

*I stare at my shaking fingers. My time is running out.*

*The buzzing comes back into my head, just as it used to in the worst times, when I was a child in London, and I could barely shield myself from the pain it brought. I would not let it take me then, and I will not let it take me now.*

*Calm, I tell myself, calm. I must not let it get the better of me. Not when I am so close.*

*I will have to take some more souls, though it is far sooner than I expected. The Girl's presence is throwing everything into confusion.*

*The Charmer makes his report. The Girl has been wandering around at night. Still snooping around in things that do not concern her. One would almost think the Girl wants me to take my vengeance.*

*He followed her, snuck after her, he tells me proudly, although he thinks she may have seen him. He did not realize that the lenses of his binoculars would reflect so much light.*

*Oh, my golden boy, my foolish Charmer. Stalking her like the prey she is will only strengthen her suspicions. Far better to draw her out in daylight, to smile and stay close. To charm.*

*He bows his head and promises that he will do better next time.*

*Yes, I say, letting the threat linger in my words. You will.*

*After he leaves me, I examine my hands carefully. I concentrate, take a breath of icy calm, and send my fist crashing into the wall.*

*The pain! The beautiful, glorious, physical pain! The ache in my bones sings out, I am still here!*

*Soon, the searchers will return home, sad and discouraged, worry and fear etched in their minds. At last they will sleep. I must enter each slumbering mind, and whisper away the worries and doubts that hide there. Just a few weeks more, and they will never have to worry again, and neither will I.*

*But first, there is work to be done. There is a long night ahead.*

## Chapter Six

He spent his time reading the books that he had never gotten around to, enjoying the meals of his cook, and going for long solitary walks in the foothills. Accompanied only by his thoughts, he listened to the crunch of pebbles under his shoes, the snap of twigs, and the calls of birds. He felt as though he were tiny, insignificant, an insect crawling over the enormous mountains.

He did not like the feeling.

The next morning, I woke up feeling relaxed. After my excursion of the previous night, I had thought I would be too wired to sleep, but I was wrong. I had drifted off listening to the creaks and groans of the house above me and slept long and deep, with no memorable dreams at all.

Everything was back to normal now, I was sure of it. I would get back into the swing of things as my normal, confident self, and everything would turn out fine, just as it always did. I stretched, rubbing the crust out of my eyes, and sat up.

There appeared to be a round grey cushion at the foot of my bed that I did not remember seeing the night before. Apprehensively, I poked it. It let out a faint squeak.

I was drawing my feet slowly away when the lump rolled over and sat up. It was a large grey cat. It stared at me, and I stared back at it.

“Hello, cat,” I said at last. I held out a cautious hand, and it rubbed its head against my fingers. “I didn’t know they had a cat,” I told it. “And you would think it’s the kind of thing they would mention, especially if there’s a possibility that you could wake up and find it sleeping on you.” The cat purred. “Okay, cat, I’m getting up.”

I chose out cutoff denim shorts and a pale pink tank top, with a light jacket in case east coast May mornings were cold.

It felt strange getting dressed with an animal staring at me. I had never had a pet before. I had never even particularly wanted one, beyond the usual childhood whining for a puppy. I turned my back as I fastened my bra, then felt silly and turned around to face the cat as I put on the rest of my clothes. I need not have bothered, because it had a leg up in the air and was licking its tail.

“Have you no shame?” I asked it. “Oh, of course not. I can see you’re a boy.” I fastened my sandals and stood up. “I’m going up for breakfast, cat. Do you come with me? Is your food upstairs?”

As if in response, the cat turned its back on me and curled up again.

“Okay, you stay here.” Pity. A cat might have been a nice distraction for the attentions of three wild little kids. “If I’m not back in ten minutes, go for help, boy.” It flicked an ear at me, but did not turn its head.

“I will never understand why people like cats so much,” I muttered. I edged out of the room, past the washer and dryer, and went upstairs.

The whole family – besides for Uncle Bennet, who must already be at work – was in the kitchen eating breakfast.

“Good morning, Megan,” said Aunt Alicia cheerfully. “Did you sleep well?”

I nodded.

“Wonderful.” She held up the cup she was drinking from, and I realized it was the one that had been in two pieces on the floor the night before. “See? Good as new.”

“Do I have time for breakfast?”

“Of course. There’s dry cereal, or you could make yourself an egg. You’ve got plenty of time; Archie’s program starts at ten. Don’t be fooled by my rush. My first meeting is in half an hour.”

“Business is good?” I asked, wandering over to the refrigerator. As I opened the door, the fridge let out a loud creak that sounded almost exactly like a person groaning. I took an involuntary step back. “What was that?”

“Oh, the refrigerator has back pains. Never mind that.”

“What?” I said, but Aunt Alicia wasn’t listening.

“You’d be surprised how many people are looking to buy a home in Wicket. This is wine country, you know. Quite a few of them are on fairly short notice too – Archie, chew with your mouth closed. They drive through, fall in love with the town, and just decide to stay!”

“Huh, I didn’t know that actually happens.” I stopped paying attention. This morning felt like an omelet kind of day. Yes, definitely omelets.

“Oh, it absolutely does! It happened to Bennet and me all those years back when we were on our honeymoon, and it almost happened to your mother –”

I suddenly focused on the words. “What? My mother was here?”

“Oh yes,” Aunt Alicia said. “You didn’t know? Eric, do not blow bubbles into your cocoa, you’re making a mess. It was – goodness, let me see – fifteen years ago? Maybe more? She was scouting for a home in the country and she just *loved* it here, but in the end she decided against it. I suppose Los Angeles was better for you girls.”



“Yeah,” I said, unsettled. I didn’t quite like the thought that I might be following in the footsteps of my mother, no matter how many years separated us.

“Time to go,” Aunt Alicia sang, not noticing my expression. “I got you a map of the town, sweetie, so you’ll be able to find your way around. I made the lunches last night just in case you wanted to sleep in. The schedule is on the calendar and the shopping list is on the white board. Would you stop at the store and pick up the groceries?”

“Of course,” I said, trying to focus.

“There’s money on the counter over there, see? Goodbye, darlings!” She got up and went around, kissing each of the boys, who squirmed away from her lips. “Have a good day!”

I hurried after her out into the hall. “Aunt Alicia,” I said quietly. “I wanted to ask you – did they find that boy who went missing yesterday?”

“Hmm?” she said, searching for her keys. “What boy?”

“You know – the missing boy. I heard you and Uncle Bennet talking about it last night.”

“Missing...boy?” Her brow furrowed for a long moment and then cleared. “I’m sorry, sweetie, you must have misheard me. There isn’t any missing boy.”

“Sure there is. What was that name – Something Gillman?”

“Oh, no, dear, the Gillmans don’t have a son.”

*What the hell?* My confusion must have showed on my face, because Aunt Alicia laughed and poked my forehead gently. “Everything’s a little scrambled up in there, huh? But I’m sure it’ll get better.”

"But – "

"I have to go, dear, I'll see you later."

I rubbed my forehead where she had touched it. *Either she's trying to shield me like her kids, or she seriously has the worst memory ever.*

Back in the kitchen, I gave my full attention to the creation of my omelet. Normally, without any thought at all, my omelets were light, fluffy, golden half-moons. This time, even with complete concentration, the egg stuck to the pan and ripped in half when I tried to flip it, so that I ended up with something more akin to scrambled eggs with sauce and cheese.

When it was finished, I tasted it apprehensively. It was edible. It was fine. But it wasn't perfect. And it should be perfect. And why did the oozing cheese, mixed with tomato sauce, make me think of blood seeping from a wound? I wolfed it down as fast as I could so I wouldn't have to think about it. What was *wrong* with me?

I thought it best to give myself plenty of time this morning, just in case I got lost, and at nine-fifteen, I was ready to go. My contacts were in, and my glasses abandoned on my nightstand. I would never wear those ugly things outside. They distorted the middle of my face and made my eyes look too small. I arranged my hair, and rubbed sun-block over any exposed skin. My father did not have any redheaded relatives that he could remember, but he was sure that they needed to wear sun-block at all times, and he had made sure to ingrain this behavior into me when I was a child.

As part of my morning ritual, I examined myself carefully in the mirror. Appearances were important. They affected how people looked at me and how they

treated me. When I looked good, it made people want to do things for me, and I liked that.

My face was just the same as always – freckles, slightly upturned nose, eyes set just a bit too far apart. My eyelashes were too light as well, though it was nothing a little mascara couldn't fix. Jackie was the one who first helped me put on my makeup, since my mother was not in a position to, and my sister never wore any. This summer should have been just like all those past ones, the two of us lying on her rug, painting each others' toenails and reading beauty tips aloud from *Vogue*. If only I hadn't gotten expelled, I never would have ended up here in the boonies.

I packed the lunches and money into a canvas tote bag, and copied down the shopping list onto a piece of scrap paper. Someone, probably one of the kids, had changed the heading on the white board to 'Shopping Lisp,' and amended all the Ss into 'th's.

I went to call the boys.

In the end, I was lucky to get out of the house by a quarter to ten. When I went to the boys' room, I found that not a single one of them was ready. Archie could not find matching socks, and Freddie had somehow lost one of his sandals. Eric had broken the strap of his goggles, and we had to staple it back together. By the time that was done, and we found the missing sandal in the garbage can, Freddie had managed to lose his *other* sandal. The instant one boy was ready and deposited by the front door, something would come up with another one and I would have to go deal with it, and by the time that issue was resolved and I got back, the first boy had wandered off.

When we finally did get out the door, I knew I should count myself lucky. We only had to run back once, this time for Eric's swimsuit. Still, we made it to Wicket's Folly Community College only five minutes late, but this was because Archie got frustrated with me trying to read the map, took charge, and led the way. He seemed surprised that we were late, and I could not help remembering Uncle Bennet's words about the road being as long as it needed to be. After I had given him his lunch and told him I would be back to get him at two, Eric led the way to the campus pool.

I waited outside the men's locker room, wondering if I looked like some kind of pervert. *Nah, only men can be perverts.* The air was heavy and warm, and I shrugged off my jacket and fanned myself with my hand. When Eric and Freddie came out, wearing matching blue bathing suits, I smeared them all over with sun-block until they seemed to shine faintly. They squirmed and complained, but they tolerated it.

"Okay," I said, rubbing the excess lotion onto my arms, "Your class starts in three minutes, so you can go over and wait by the edge of the pool. I'm going to go for a walk, and I'll be back at noon to pick you up."

They scampered off. I watched them go with a feeling oddly like pride inflating my chest. I had done it! I had managed to get them all where they were supposed to be, and more or less on time. Now I had an hour or so to kill, so I decided to familiarize myself with the town. I dug Aunt Alicia's map out of my bag, and sat down at a umbrella-shaded table outside the campus café to peruse it.

I had never been very good at reading maps. It was one thing to be able to follow a line from one place to another on a piece of paper where North was always up, and

another to do it on the street. *Well, there's an easy way to solve this problem. Why do it myself when I can get someone else to do it for me?*

There was a guy sitting at the next table over from me, writing away in a notebook. Every once in a while, he would look up and squint into space. He had a lot of acne scars, and his chin was poorly shaven. I knew his type. Girls never gave him a second look. He would be desperate. *Perfect. This shouldn't take long.*

Every time he looked up, I gave him a little smile and then quickly lowered my eyes as though I was shy. I fiddled with my hair, curling it around my finger, pretending to be reading my map whenever he looked at me. It didn't take long. He got up, collected his things, and headed in my direction. Sucker.

I was all set to simper and ask for his help reading this nasty confusing map, when he walked right on by me! The jerk! And after all that work. *Either he's blind, or he's gay*, I thought grumpily, smoothing out the map. *Fine. I'll do this myself.*

Muttering angry nonsense words under my breath, I located myself on the campus of the community college, and set off.

I had assumed that everything in such a small town would be close together and easy to get to, but this was not the case. The town was very small, but it was shaped like a crooked, meandering sunburst, with all the stores and businesses lining a few blocks at the center of town. Long rambling lanes spiraled off, lined with private buildings and widely spaced wooden houses, and none of the tangential roads connected to each other. If you wanted to get from my cousins' house to the community college, you would have to walk down to the center of town, and then up a different long winding road. It was like

taking both legs of a triangle rather than the hypotenuse. Ostensibly, I saw, one could take the hypotenuse and shorten the journey considerably, but no one did, because that would involve crashing through trees.

The tangential roads were not paved in any way at all, simply packed dirt, but at least they were not sprouting undergrowth. There were sidewalks and roads only on the streets that made up the center of town, and all were paved with cobblestones, rather than asphalt or cement. It couldn't be that dangerous though, because there was hardly any traffic, and many of the pedestrians were walking in the middle of the street. Still, I could understand Aunt Alicia's desire to have her children accompanied on all their excursions. Unless she could be worried that something might happen to them. Like that boy who she wouldn't admit was missing.

Wicket's Folly was certainly a very pretty place. I could see hills rising over the town, emerald green with the summer foliage of the trees. As a mountain range, they weren't even as impressive as the Hollywood Hills back home. Well, they might make for good hiking sometime, and perhaps I could get a view of the Finger Lakes, which my father claimed were some of the most beautiful lakes in the country.

Halfway up the hillside, there was a winding road leading to a solitary house partially hidden in the trees. My map told me that this was the Old Wicket House, presumably the home of whoever had founded the town. The place looked unfriendly and aloof, perched away on the hill.

The whole town was surrounded by the same forest of deep green trees that I had seen out the window of the hospital, with the uneven ground leading up to them

blanketed with coarse grass and purplish plants that I thought might be heather or gorse, or something like that. Once, I spotted a family of deer through the trees, and for some reason, this made me laugh. “Of course,” I said aloud. “You can’t have a quaint little town without Bambi and friends in the background.”

According to the map, there were three sprawling cemeteries just out of town, so that the place was almost entirely surrounded by graves. I shivered a little, despite the warm sun shining down on me. A tiny town would have to be pretty old to fill three cemeteries' worth of graves. Unless something really bad had happened there.

I walked all around the center of town, examining the shops and buildings. Most of them seemed arts and crafts related, and I was disappointed to see that there was no mall. How could a tiny town have its own school system, even a community college, but no mall? I kicked at a loose pebble in the street. Skewed priorities. Disgusting. They did have a little clothing store and a shoe store, and I made a mental note to examine both in greater detail in the future. Surprisingly, there were two inns, so perhaps this was a vacation destination, though I could not see why. At least I was not the only person on the street reading a map. I could see a young couple outside one of the inns, perusing the map together, cheerfully pointing out landmarks to each other.

Once, I thought I felt eyes watching me, and I shivered as I remembered those glowing eyes of the night before. *There is absolutely nothing there*, I told myself firmly. And last night, I hadn't really seen anything either. That was the kind of thing Margot saw, and I was *nothing* like her. There hadn't been anything there, and if there was, it had probably just an owl or something.

There were a few bright, open-air restaurants where people sat having unhurried brunches, a town hall, and a large public library, but no post office. And – I thought of the scene the night before – no police department. There was not even a single church or house of worship of any kind. I had grown up in a family that was so atheist that they didn't celebrate Thanksgiving, and I didn't even know what religions my parents had been raised with, but I enjoyed looking at churches because their stained-glass windows were pretty. I saw a little grocery store where I reminded myself that I had to go later, and felt a surprising wave of homesickness for a good, decent-sized supermarket. *Oh Ralphs, how I miss you. You too, Trader Joes, I could never forget you.*

I passed my uncle's hardware store, but decided not to go in. Mick was probably there, and I didn't really want to see him. I could do without the drama. At intervals, I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and checked it. Still no signal, no matter where I took it. What a backwoods place. I was completely cut off. No wonder I had turned to books.

It took me only a little over an hour to stroll around the whole main town, excluding the residential streets, and I was back at the pool in plenty of time to pick up Eric and Freddie. I watched the end of their swimming lesson, remembering my own days of learning to splash around in an unheated public pool in the park near my house. I waited while they changed, and met them by the door of the locker room. Their hair was still wet, and they smelled of chlorine.



We ate our bag lunches at the small park next to the public library. The lunches were nothing special; each paper sack contained identical plastic bags of peanut butter sandwich, carrot sticks, cookies, and juice box, but they made for a nice picnic.

"You used to make the best lunches," Eric said mournfully.

"Thank you," I said, "that's very sweet."

"It sucks you can't cook anymore. You used to be cool."

"That's less sweet."

"You also used to buy us ice cream every day," Freddie said hopefully.

"Nice try."

Eric and Freddie ate very fast, and when they were finished, ran off to play on the jungle gym. I finished my own lunch more slowly, keeping an eye on them to make sure they didn't manage to hurt themselves or any of the other small children in the park with their rambunctiousness. It gave me a strangely maternal feeling. But I did not want to be their mother; I wanted to be their cool cousin, so as soon as I finished eating, I went over to play with them.

It was surprisingly fun. I hadn't climbed on a jungle gym or built a sand castle since I was a little girl. I pushed Freddie on a swing, and helped Eric bury his feet in the sand. I tried to build a little sand castle over his toes, but it quickly crumbled. *Really? I can't even build sandcastles now?*

I had almost forgotten what it felt like to have my knees rubbed pink from kneeling on rough sand grains. It hurt, but in a good way; a way that reminded me of the days when I myself had played in the sand with my older sister, both our parents looking

on. At a quarter to two, I was just as reluctant to leave as my cousins. As we exited the park, Freddie slipped his hand into mine, and I smiled up at the sky.

We met Archie as he came out of his science class, and he led the way along a side road to the athletic field of the building that housed both the middle school and the high school. He told us happily about a scale model of the Golden Gate Bridge that his group was building out of popsicle sticks and plastic straws. Despite the long hot walk, as we approached the school, I could see the college we had just left off through the trees. What numbskull had designed this stupid town?

Freddie and I left Eric and Archie at the field for their soccer practice. Freddie looked a bit mournful as he watched his older brothers scampering off across the grass.

“You’re too little to play, huh?” I said sympathetically.

“Yeah, but I’ll be big soon,” Freddie told me. “Like a camel.”

A camel. Right. Well, maybe I could take him to the bakery and buy him a cookie to make him feel better.

Freddie perked up right away when we passed the cheerful blue and red striped awning of the little bakery. He bounced over to the glass display cases, and proceeded to examine every cookie in the place as though he was weighing the pros and cons of each.

I breathed in the smell of fresh bread and pastries, and sighed. Perhaps I should have known better than to let him choose his own treat.

“Kids, huh?” said the girl behind the counter. She sat on a high stool, slouching over the counter, a textbook open in front of her. She was a few years older than me, but she was also red-headed, which gave us an instant connection.

“Hello, fellow ginger,” I said.

“Tamara,” the girl corrected me.

“Megan.”

“And that’s your brother?”

“Cousin. Say hi, Freddie.”

Freddie looked up from where he was drawing patterns in his misted breath on the display case. “I can count to a godzillian,” he said.

Tamara suppressed a smile. “That’s very impressive.”

“You have brothers and sisters?” I asked. In LA, I had never really spent time talking to shopkeepers, but you had to keep up some kind of conversation while your cousin was trying to lick every cookie in the bakery through a thick sheet of plexiglass.

“Nah,” said Tamara. “Only child.” She leaned her stool back on two legs, looking bored.

I wondered how she didn’t fall over. “Uh, you go to school here?” I asked, wishing I had something more interesting to talk about.

“No.” She held up her textbook so that I could see the spine. “Studying for the LSAT.”

“Oh.” That meant that she must already be at least twenty. Old enough to drink, probably. She must see me as closer in age to Freddie, who was now sniffing at the display case. “So have you lived here long?”

“Well, I was born here, but my parents got divorced and I went to live with my mother in New Haven. I come up to see my dad most summers, though. It’s quiet here – good place to study.”

“I feel like it’s *too* quiet here, you know?” Finally, a topic of small talk to latch on to. “No cell phone service, no internet.”

Tamara nodded. “It’s like a dead zone.”

"A dead zone," I repeated slowly.

"It really forces you to do other things, though. Take up a hobby. Study for your exams... get a summer job and make a bit of money." She indicated the bakery around them. “Unfortunately, in the case of my father, it was fooling around with other women, but I suppose we all have to fill the time.”

“Um...” Way too much information. I hardly knew how to respond to the forthrightness of this statement. It had been difficult to get Tamara talking, and now it seemed like it would be difficult to get her to stop.

“That’s why my mom divorced him. Of course, I told her that she should have expected it. He *is* a politician – my dad’s the mayor of this place, by the way – but *she* said she wasn’t going to hang around with a smile pasted on her face like all the other first wives who know that they’re being cheated on, and that everyone else knows it too. I believe her exact words were ‘keeping up appearances, my ass.’”

“How about this one, Freddie?” I said quickly, pointing out a basic chocolate chip cookie.

“Okay,” he said, shrugging. “I was a frog for a while, so I like flies.”

“Um... that’s good?” I turned to Tamara. “We’ll take that one.”

She kept talking while she selected the cookie and placed it in a small white paper bag, telling me way more than I wanted to know. I waited for a break in the flow of words, and jumped in to say that unfortunately, we had to leave.

“Oh, okay,” Tamara said. “Come back and visit me sometime.” Her voice sounded almost wistful, and it made me feel slightly ashamed. She was probably just lonely.

“Now, *we* get to go to the store,” I told Freddie as he munched on his cookie, and he gave me a crumb-filled smile like I was offering him the greatest treat in the world. All the way to the store, he held my hand, and once we were inside, he hopped around, helping me find the items on our “shopping list” as though it was a scavenger hunt. *Who says you couldn’t buy kids’ affection?*

“It says we need ingredients for ‘thalad’,” I said. “What goes in thalad besides lettuce?”

“Acorns!” said Freddie. His wide grin revealed a missing front tooth.

We wandered around the little market, loading up our cart, joking and horsing around. The chilled air of the store was comfortable after the heat outside. We were having a great time, until we got in the checkout line. It took a while, because there was only one teller, a spotty, gangly teenage boy of indeterminate race. The thick, shaggy dark hair that nearly hid his eyes shone in a greasy way that told me that it hadn’t seen shampoo or comb anytime recently. He moved lethargically, as though he didn’t particularly care that he was making people wait, because *he* had all the time in the

world. I made the time pass quickly by playing a hand game with Freddie where I tried to catch a finger he darted into the center of my palm. Was it just my imagination, or had I once been so much better at this game?

As we drew closer to the front of the line, I could see that the teller wore just one black glove, which disappeared into the long sleeve of his shirt. His clothes were all black too. Great, a wannabe goth. Well, at least there was no guyliner around his eyes.

When it was my turn, the teller's lazy movements became agitated and jerky. He snatched each item from the conveyor belt and slammed it down so hard on the far counter that I was surprised nothing broke.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, as Freddie pressed himself against my side.

"Bagging," he snapped.

I tried out the innocent victim routine: wide eyes, sweet slightly high voice. "Are you mad at me? Did I do something to upset you? I've had an accident, so I'm sorry if I don't remember you."

He let out a laugh entirely devoid of humor. "Hah, that's a good one. It's always got to be about you, isn't it? Megan Breelie and her *magic hands*. I told you not to do it, I told you not to go there, and now look what's happened."

"What?" I said sharply. "How do you know my name? What do you mean?" An elderly woman behind me began clucking disapprovingly.

He talked over me. "I told you it was a bad idea, but no, *you* wouldn't listen to me."

*That's it. I'm done being nice.* I leaned forward to sound out the name on the tag pinned upside down to his faded black shirt. "Oc-tav-ian? Octavian!"

He stopped in midsentence, taken by surprise.

"Look, *Octavian*," I said. "I don't know what the hell kind of stupid name that is, and I don't know who the hell you are or why you hate me so much. I don't remember anything, but if I did anything to you, I apologize for it, and *get over it*."

His mouth snapped shut, and his thick eyebrows met in an angry V. He pounded each key into the cash register as though he wanted to cause it pain. "Twenty fifty-one," he said grudgingly.

I handed over the money with icy disdain, slapping it into the palm of his gloved left hand. He probably wore it so he wouldn't have to touch people. What a jerk. When he handed me the change, I collected my bags, gave the lightest one to Freddie, and stalked out of the market. At the door, I looked back to find Octavian still glaring at me.

"Get a haircut, hippie," I yelled. It sounded so *stupid* once I had said it, but it was the first thing that sprang to my lips. My cheeks glowed red with embarrassment and anger, and I left before he could retort.

I tried to keep things light on the way home, because Freddie was looking mournful. Of course, I was starting to realize that to him, this could be because the squirrels were keeping secrets or something. I could not help thinking obsessively about the incident at the market. Octavian was clearly a first-class moron, but he had said something about going somewhere I shouldn't have, or doing something dangerous. No

matter how I tried, I couldn't remember his exact words, but they did tell me something for sure.

*Something* had happened during those two weeks that I could not remember.

Maybe even something bad. And I was going to find out what.



## Chapter Seven

Mick called that night, while Uncle Bennet was making dinner. "How *are* you?" he asked, the concern audible in his voice. "I wasn't sure whether or not to call yet. I wanted to give you some time to get back into things, but I *missed* you."

Somehow, his concern grated at me. "I'm fine," I said. "Aside from a slight case of scoliosis, but nothing we can do about that, huh?"

He made a noncommittal noise. "Look, I know you don't remember it, but our relationship was really special, and it meant a lot to me. It may never be what it was, but I'm willing to try again. If it's okay with you, of course."

His presence had had a much stronger affect at the hospital. Over the phone, he was just a voice, easy to dismiss. "You know, I've just got so much to figure out right now," I said. "I've already got too much to handle as it is."

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Dinner went much more smoothly this time, mostly because Uncle Bennet had made it. I had told him that I was feeling tired after all the activity of the day, and he offered to cook right away. It wasn't entirely a lie – I *was* tired – but it was not exactly the truth either. The real reason was that I was now sure that if I cooked, the food would be terrible. Somehow, it was connected to whatever had happened during the missing weeks. And if I found out what had happened, everything would go back to normal.

The meal was much less intimidating than the previous night's dinner, because now I was comfortable in the presence of my cousins. I teased them gently, told them

silly jokes that made them laugh into their milk, and joined in a little ‘sword-fight’ with blunt table knives. When Aunt Alicia came home, she was pleasantly surprised to see that none of the boys were arguing or crying, because I had given them each *exactly* the same number of French fries.

After dinner, I called home. My cousins were playing in the other room. I could hear loud thumping footsteps and shouting. It seemed they got along just fine without television, though I wasn’t sure how the floorboards could take it.

“Dad?” I said when Dad answered the phone.

“Hi Meggie – better make it fast, I have plans tonight.”

“You mean you have a date,” I said, lowering my voice so that Uncle Bennet would not be able to hear me over the clatter of the pots and pans he was washing. I wasn’t sure my father wanted his romance to be general knowledge yet.

“Yes. Yes, I suppose I do. Fancy that. I have a date.” He chuckled to himself.

“Yes, hilarious. Does she *know* you’re married?”

“Well, um, I –”

“Because technically that means you’re having an affair.”

“Please, Megan, I would appreciate if you could just let this be.”

I could tell from his voice that he was getting annoyed. “I’m sorry, Daddy. Look, you go enjoy yourself. Can I talk to Gwen?”

“Of course. I’ll go get her.”

I tested the phone cord to see how far it would stretch. Not even past the whiteboard, whose heading now proclaimed “Stopping Last.” How did anyone manage to have a private conversation in the days before phones were cordless?

“Megan?” came my sister’s voice through the phone.

“Gwen, hi!” Surprisingly, it was much easier to speak to Gwen long-distance, when I didn’t have to see that perpetual false smile. “Did you hear about my crazy accident?”

“Yes, I did. And you’re okay?”

“I am. Hey, I need to ask you something.” I hesitated. I could hear thumps and bangs from the other room, where the boys were no doubt doing something destructive, and in the kitchen, the water was burbling noisily in the sink. That would probably be a good enough cover. It had become clear, through strategic questions at dinner, that my aunt and uncle did not know anything about what I had been up to, and if it was really as bad as I was beginning to suspect, then I did not want them involved. If I had told anyone, it would be Gwen. “Um, have we talked, these past few weeks?”

“Sure,” said Gwen. “I mean, not *that* much. We’re both busy and all. But you mostly talked about how much you were enjoying yourself, and you told me about an art class.”

“Oh.” Was it good or bad that I hadn’t told Gwen? “Well, remember a couple weeks back, when Mom called?”

There was a brief pause. “Yeah.”

“Did I go to see her?”

“You did. We found a note from Mom in the mail slot that morning, with the address of some run-down motel in Pasadena. I drove you there.”

“And did I tell you what happened during that meeting?”

“Only a little.”

At last, something to go on. “I need you to tell me *exactly* what happened.”

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According to Gwen, everything was perfectly fine with our trip to see our mother. She had driven me to lovely Pasadena and waited in the car while I went into the adorable little motel to have a deep heart-to-heart talk with our mother. I came out beaming with joy, and then we held hands and skipped back home, singing along with the radio.

She was lying.

I didn't have to remember the visit to know. "Oh come on, I know it didn't happen like that."

There was a long pause. "Fine," she said. "It went like this."

Her account still felt white-washed, so as I listened, I tried to piece together the real version of what had happened. Gwen did drive me to Pasadena, but I was sure the trip was awkward and tense. Each of us would be deeply lost in our own complicated feelings concerning our mother. At least I would have been. Gwen, I wouldn't be so sure about. Her face would be stretched into that unnatural grin that hid whatever she was feeling.

We parked in the lot of the Motel 6 that the note in the mailbox had specified, and Gwen pulled the keys out of the ignition. "I'll wait here," she said.

"Aren't you coming?" I asked.

"She asked to see you," Gwen said, holding desperately on to her smile. "You go. Have a nice talk. I'll be waiting for you."

I left her in the car, and climbed the stairs to our mother's room. Once I was out of sight, Gwen probably let the smile slide off her face at last and allowed herself to be really angry.

It wasn't fair, she would be thinking, that Mom wanted to see me and not her. I had been only four when Mom had left, but Gwen had been nine. She remembered what it had been like before Mom had left, back when Margot Breelie had been a devoted, attentive mother. And then, in the weeks before she left, she got nervous all the time, looking over her shoulder for spies who weren't there, jumping when people spoke to her, turning off the radio suddenly when she heard something she thought was addressed specifically to her. She didn't sleep, and her eyes were shadowed with ugly grayish yellow.

"You should have cut her some slack," Gwen said, and proceeded to tell me (by not quite telling me) of the things that she had witnessed that I was too young to remember. Gwen would often wake up at night to the sounds of Mom moving around the house, and she'd go downstairs to find her tracing a finger around all the cabinets, or blacking out all the letter Ms in the previous day's newspapers. Gwen wanted to go and hold her and tell her everything would be all right, just like Mom used to do when Gwen

was sick, but she didn't. Instead, she got a pen and helped her mother with the newspapers, or helped her touch everything in the house that was made of metal, and wished everything would be okay again.

She was sure that it *would* be okay again, because this was not the first time Mom had started acting strangely. She could just remember a long time ago, back before I was born, that Mom had gone on a trip, and when she came back, she was nervous all the time, looking for people who were watching her. But it passed, and everything was fine for a few years, and then it had all started again, and Mom had left.

I couldn't remember my mother's fear; all I remembered was the abandonment and the odd behavior on visits, and I had reacted with anger. Gwen, however, remembered the woman, the one who was always afraid and the one who wasn't, and she missed Mom all the time. But she kept smiling, so no one would know how much she was hurting inside. She was always the one who kept loving our mother, and Mom wanted to see me, not her.

When I returned to the car, Gwen told me, I looked unusually grim, and it didn't look like I was going to start sharing.

At last, Gwen could take it no longer. She needed to know. "So," she said, "how did it go?"

Somehow, I told her, Mom had found out that I would be going to New York. "She was rambling mostly," I said. "Going on about things I didn't understand and telling me to be careful, like she thought Hicksville could be dangerous. And then she gave me

this.” I showed her a small blue notebook held closed with a piece of elastic. “She more or less *begged* me to take it with me.”

That was the worst part for Gwen. That Mom had given me a gift.

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“A small blue notebook?” I repeated. I didn’t remember seeing anything like that in my basement room.

“That’s what I said.”

“Hmm, that’s interesting. Thank you Gwen, I think that helps.”

“Sure. Is that all?”

“Yeah.” I hesitated for a moment. “Look Gwen, about Mom...I know you’re upset –”

“I’m not upset,” Gwen cut in. Her voice held that horribly artificial cheerful note.

“No, really.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I have to go. Good night, Megan.” She hung up.

I stared at the phone in my hand, impressed. I didn’t think my sister had ever hung up on anyone before, not even telemarketers. Well, good for her.

Thoughtfully, I put the phone back on the hook, and went down to my room. The grey cat was sprawled on top of my desk this time, but as I began to open drawers and rifle through them, it got up and stalked out of the room.

“Not going to help, huh?” I said to its retreating tail. “Right, then get lost.” I looked through all the desk drawers, emptied and repacked my suitcase, examined every

book on my nightstand, and even felt around under my foam rubber mattress. There was no small blue notebook anywhere.

Frustrated, I raked the hair back from my forehead. All that sisterly resentment, just for a dead end.



## Chapter Eight

What, he thought, was he in the face of all time? The mountains had been there for millennia before his birth, and would be there for millennia after his death. His life was fleeting, a brief flash of light in the darkness of all the ages. Who, when he was gone, would even remember that there had once lived a man named Samuel Wicket?

He became obsessed with leaving something behind. If he could not live forever, then he would at least create something that would, or as close to forever as possible. It would be something huge and permanent, something that would stand proud below the heavens and proclaim, *Samuel Wicket was here!*

When I woke up to bars of slanting sunlight on my face, the cat was once again curled at the foot of my bed. "You really ought to hang out somewhere else," I told it.

"It's probably rude for a guest to take over their hosts' cat."

It blinked at me.

"I mean, they are family and everything, but I'm still their guest. And I probably shouldn't really have gone searching through their stuff either."

My room was still a little disheveled from last night's ransacking. I had tried to put everything back the way it was, but everything, even the furniture, had a rumpled look about it.

I considered the mess that was my suitcase, trying to decide what to wear. I would be going to the art class today, so I didn't want to wear anything that might get ruined by paint, but I would also be meeting a bunch of kids my own age, so I wanted to look nice. In the end, I settled for my oldest pair of jeans – the ones with the ragged hems – and a scoop-neck lavender T-shirt over a sky-blue camisole. Old enough to be disposable, but not frumpy.

"Something's happening to me," I told the cat as I got dressed. "Or happened, I should say. Something happened to me, cat, and I don't know what. I'm sorry I keep

calling you 'cat,' but I forgot to ask them what your name is." I paused by the door. "Are you coming?"

The cat yawned, its mouth stretching wide to reveal the two little fangs of its canine teeth.

"Dracucat!" said I. "Fine, I'm off. Don't wait up."

Things went a lot more smoothly this morning. I knew now that I had to leave plenty of time for mishaps, and I sent the boys to get ready well before we actually had to leave. I felt like a pro as I spread jam on sandwiches and filled paper lunch sacks four in a row. When my canvas bag was packed, I oversaw the brushing of teeth, the donning of shoes, and managed to avert troubles promptly as they arose. As we stepped out of the house right on time, I felt quite proud of us all.

After we had dropped Archie off at the community college, I let Eric lead the way to the museum. I spotted Mick sweeping the flagstones outside my uncle's hardware store. He waved at me, grinning broadly, and beckoned us over. If only we didn't have to pass by him to get to the museum. I would have gladly headed in the other direction.

I pulled Freddie along a little faster, and as Mick opened his mouth to speak, I called out cheerfully, "Sorry, can't stop, we're going to be late!" He frowned as I sailed on by. *Ha, take that, sucker.*

I was a bit nervous at the prospect of reacquainting myself with an art class when I had never been to one before, but this was the day that I had juggled three little boys and come out ahead. I could certainly handle an art class.

The ‘museum,’ it turned out, was a wing of the town hall, little more than a corridor lined with historic artifacts of the town’s founding. Eric scuttled off into a large room full of hyperactive eight-year-olds, and Freddie and I entered the adjoining room, this one full of teenagers. The kids in this room had been milling around, chatting with each other before the start of the class, but as I stepped into the room, they all fell silent, then started talking at once, as though to hide their reaction. So it was true that news traveled fast in a small town.

Freddie was completely unperturbed. He headed straight to a little table in the corner where two other small children sat drawing with crayons. I grinned; obviously I was not the only one on babysitting detail. I took a deep breath. *You can do this.* Time to turn on the charm.

I quickly scanned the room and pinpointed the prettiest girl there. She was a statuesque black girl with cornrows and impossibly long legs. She was beautiful and she knew it. It was in the way she dressed, in the way she tilted her head at the world. She could either be a good friend or a terrible rival.

“Hi,” I said, smiling broadly. “It’s a bit embarrassing – I’m sure you’ve heard all about it – but can you point me to my – easel? That’s what it’s called, right?”

Instead of answering, the girl simply pointed across the room. She didn’t smile, didn’t acknowledge my attempt at camaraderie, just pointed, and then looked away.

“Um, thank you?” I walked over in the direction she had pointed, and then asked another person for help. This girl had shiny brown hair and freckles, just like Jackie’s, but

the similarity stopped there. She just as unfriendly as the first, simply pointing and saying brusquely, “There.”

“Okay,” I murmured, confused. I was good at making friends, and good at keeping them. People were easy; all they really wanted was for someone to be nice to them and at least pretend to care about what they had to say. It was surprising that I would be met twice in a row with such outright hostility. Perhaps this was not going to be such a good day after all.

I took my place quietly behind the easel and saw that there was a painting on it that made me catch my breath. I stared at the image, awed. Had I painted this? I turned it over and looked at the back, and yes, there was my name, the large, widely spaced letters the same as always.

Even though the painting was only half finished, it somehow managed to capture an incredible intensity. It was of a circle of blobby white things – stones, pillars? No, that wasn’t quite it. I could not tell what they were supposed to be. A brilliant orange sunset cast the objects into sharp relief, making them seem to spring from the canvas. Even though the shading was not fully complete, they looked powerful and lofty. They were only three inches tall, but the long shadows made them appear somehow *hungry*. There was something at the edge of my memory, niggling at me like a sore tooth. Why did this white circle look familiar? *Why?*

I was still trying to remember, when the teacher, a balding middle-age man, entered the classroom. There were splashes of paint on his faded pants, and yup – those were socks and Birkenstocks. He took role quickly, and I learned that the unfriendly girls

were called Sasha and Natalie. Natalie was the one who looked like Jackie. How could someone who looked so much like my best friend be so unfriendly? I could see them whispering and giggling with the kids around them. So it was just me they hated. Well, screw 'em.

I turned my attention to the painting. I had never really tried any real artwork before, but I had always been very good at drawing caricatures and cartoons of my teachers. Drawing was just another of the things that came naturally to me.

I mixed a pale gray color to put in the shadows on the – stones? – and dipped my paintbrush in. As my hand with the brush reached out, I suddenly experienced a strange sort of double vision. There was my hand with the paintbrush, but there was also another hand, the hand of a child, reaching out to touch – a mushroom?

I stared at the painting, no longer seeing it, my heart bumping in my head. I looked right through the canvas to another warm summer day, but now I was four years old. It was so real that I could smell the clover in the warm air, hear the bees buzzing around lazily. My family was just getting ready to leave on a trip to the zoo. My father and I went outside first, and we discovered a circle of mushrooms growing on our front lawn.

Dad knelt down at my side. “Look, Meggie,” he told me. “A fairy ring.”

I squatted down and edged my new pink strappy shoes closer. With one small chubby hand, I reached out and felt one of the mushroom caps. It was soft and supple, like leather.

“If you stand inside the fairy ring and make a wish, it’ll come true,” said Dad.

“Promise?” I said.

He stroked his chin wisely. “Well, I should think a good little girl like you would get anything she wants. Within reason, of course.”

Yes! I hopped into the circle and squatted down.

My mother came up behind us, carrying a picnic basket, nine-year-old Gwen trailing after her. “What’s going on here?”

“Look, Mommy, Daddy found a fairy ring,” I told her.

A sudden, horrible change seemed to come over my mother. She grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the circle. “They’re just mushrooms,” she said shortly. “They grow in a circle because that’s how their roots fan out. There’s no such thing as fairies.”

“Mushrooms don’t have roots, Margot,” said Dad. “And what’s the harm in letting a four-year-old make a wish.”

“They’re just mushrooms,” she whispered. “They’re just mushrooms.” I wasn’t sure who she was talking to anymore. Her eyes were darting around, as though she was trying to find who could have left the mushrooms on her lawn. “They’re always watching,” she muttered, her words too fast, tripping over each other, “with their beady little eyes – no they’re not! they’re just mushrooms – just mushrooms.”

“It’s okay, Meggie,” Dad said, frowning at her. “You go ahead and make your wish.”

“Megan,” said my mother forcefully. “You leave those nasty mushrooms alone.”

I looked from my father to my mother. This had never happened before. My parents were usually so calm. My mother’s face was pulled tight and masklike, her eyes

narrowed meaningfully at me as though she was trying to tell me something. But I was only four years old, and the mushrooms called me too, with promises of a wish. I pulled free of my mother's hand and stepped into the circle.

Two weeks later, she was gone.

The room came back into focus with a jolt, and I grabbed at my easel to keep my balance. It rocked on its three legs, and a couple of clean paintbrushes fell to the floor. No one even noticed. I could hear the buzz of everyone else around me chatting happily as they worked. It made me feel small and isolated and alone.

There was a thick, ugly streak of grey across the painting. I sighed, and began trying to work it in.

*I can't believe I forgot about those mushrooms.* For a while, I was sure that Margot had left because of the incident with the fairy ring. I played the scene over and over in my mind, sure that if I had done something differently, she would have stayed. At first I felt guilty because I had clearly wished for the wrong thing. Instead of wishing for the new doll for myself, I should have wished for my mother to stay. To be all right again. I hated myself for having made that wish. It was stupid. Wishes weren't real, and fairy rings certainly weren't real; they were, as my mother said, just mushrooms, nothing special about them. But I had been just a stupid, selfish little girl who wanted my wish, and it was too late to do anything about it anymore. It was even worse when, later that year, Dad bought me the new doll for my birthday. I never even took it out of the box; it was still in my closet somewhere, forgotten, buried deep with who knew what other undisturbed memories.

The painting was not going well. No matter what I did, no matter how much paint I added, it only made everything look worse. The white shapes lost their imposing nature, and they didn't even seem to be resting on the same plane anymore. The painting had lost the powerful feelings of guilt and pain and anger that had given it the presence that it had evoked before. Now it was nothing more than an odd configuration of shapes that made up a wobbly circle.

As I worked, I could feel tears of frustration starting in the corners of my eyes, and finally I could take it no longer. The painting had been beautiful with the rawness it had had before, and I was ruining it. My magic hands were failing me one more. I flagged down the instructor as he passed by, and he helped me carefully dab off all the paint I had added that day.

"There," he said kindly. "That's that. We all have our bad days, even one as talented as you."

"You think I'm talented?" I said, feeling a bit better, even though the compliment was coming from a man wearing socks with sandals.

"Untrained, of course, but you have a very good eye, and a steady hand."

I found myself unable to look him in the eye. "I'm just going through something right now," I said quietly. "I can't seem to do anything right lately."

"It will pass," said the instructor. He started to reach out a hand towards my shoulder, but drew it back again. "It is just one of those things that happens even to the best of us. Famous opera singers find themselves unable to vocalize a note, a neurosurgeon's hands shake for no apparent reason, and an artist cannot set the spirit into



the paint. The thing to remember now is quantity over quality. Just keep painting, even if it's no good. Keep exercising your painting muscles. If you keep working at it, eventually you will regain what you lost."

I glanced around the room, at everyone trying to watch me surreptitiously over the tops of their easels. "I can't."

"I'm sure you – "

"No." It was part of whatever was wrong with my hands. I would fix it. I would. And when I did, I would show them all. "I can't. Not yet."

He nodded. "Very well. Come back when you think you are ready."

His understanding somehow made everything worse. It couldn't be 'just one of those things.' Things like this just did not happen to Megan Breelie and her hands that were so quick and clever that they seemed magical. It had to be something else. Something that had happened to me. Something that could be blamed on somebody or something else.

I went over to the sink, my eyes on the floor. As I washed the paint off my fingers, I could feel the eyes of the whole room on my back. They whispered to each other, and I hear stifled laughter.

Ears burning, I toweled off my hands, rubbing hard at the last smudges of pain. Even though this had been my first and only attempt at painting, I couldn't help feeling as though I had suffered a great loss.

I helped Freddie collect his wonderfully uncomplicated crayon scribbles, and together we walked out of the room. I knew they were all watching me go, reveling in my defeat. "What did I ever do to them?" I murmured.

"Who?" said Freddie. "Your art friends?"

"Sasha and Natalie and all of them were my friends?"

"Uh-huh," said Freddie. "I'm bored, can we go now?"

I glanced at my watch automatically. "No, we've got to wait for Eric. We can go look at the museum if you want."

"Ok," he said reluctantly. "But only for a little while. Museums are boring. Like olives. You know," he clarified. "The ones that come in jars."

"I agree," I said. "Just for a bit."

We wandered through the hall, looking at all the junk in the glass cases. There was the town compact, signed by the founders in the year 1936. There were pictures of men clearing trees and building houses. In the largest glass case, there was a display devoted to the town's namesake, a man called Samuel Wicket. There were several sepia-toned photographs, and two of them immediately caught my eye. One was of a house halfway up the mountainside, the same one I had noticed on my tour the previous day, and the other was of a circle of upright white stones. The circle looked a lot like the painting I had just abandoned. I felt again the strange sense of *deja vu*. Weird. There was a little pamphlet by the side of the display.

"Oh, look Freddie," I said. "It has a story. 'The Founding of Wicket's Folly.' I'll read it to you while we wait."

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Once upon a time, there was a very rich man named Samuel Wicket who was afraid to die. When he passed his fiftieth birthday, he left his home in New York City and moved upstate to his summer home by Oneida Lake. Back in those days, the land was nothing but forest, and he could survey it all from his house on the hillside.

One day, Samuel Wicket began to make calls, to master builders and artisans and stonemasons. He had had a dream, he told them, he had been granted a vision from a beautiful spirit, of the way that he would live forever. Somehow, he had gotten it into his head that he would build a circle of standing stones on his land, similar to the ones that had peppered the landscape of Great Britain for thousands of years. No one ever knew the purpose of the ancient stone circles in England, and they drew thousands of visitors every year to wonder at their beauty and mystery. It would be his own monument to stand for centuries, a funeral marker to immortalize his name. He would call it 'Wicket's Circle.'

It took the workers months of hard labor, but Samuel Wicket insisted that Wicket's Circle must be finished before the winter solstice. He kept giving them peculiar specifications as well, looking over their shoulders as they worked, rambling on about a spirit, an angel, who was telling him what to do. Among themselves, the artisans began referring to the structure as 'Wicket's Folly.'

At last, the structure was complete, and the workers went to the mansion to receive their last payment. They were now convinced that the man was mad, and demanded to be paid in cash, rather than by check. Wicket agreed, but told them they would have to wait for him to get the money.

They never did. On the morning of December 21, 1936, Samuel Wicket went out walking and never returned. The common assumption was that he had had a heart attack out in the hills. His body was never found.

Despairing of payment, many of the workers left, but others stayed. They had grown to love the beauty of the land around them, and they too had seen glimpses of a spirit that took the form of a beautiful young woman, beckoning them to stay. Since they had never been fully paid for their work, they felt they had a right to the land. They sent for their wives and children and began to construct houses. Thus the town was born, a community of master artisans and craftsmen.

Even though Samuel Wicket's body could not be found to be buried in his circle as he had wished, he did gain a bit of the immortality he had so desired. His former construction workers named their new little town 'Wicket's Folly,' after the crazy old man who had hired them.

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“What a strange story,” I said when I had finished reading. “That’s not a history. It’s like a – myth, or a legend, or something.”

"I liked it," said Freddie. He had sat perfectly still the entire time, listening with his head on one side.

“The founding story?” said Eric, coming up behind us. "Isn't it creepy?"

I had to agree. “Yeah, that thing about the spirit....”

“I’ll tell you what’s even creepier,” said Eric, leaning forward conspiratorially. “People still see her sometimes.”

I could feel the hair on the nape of my neck standing up. Literally standing up. I tried to laugh. “That’s silly,” I said. “A ghost story. A local legend. People seeing what they want to see.”

I helped my cousins gather up their things, and as we left the hallway, I looked back over my shoulder at the display case.

“That’s silly,” I murmured again.

## Chapter Nine

I was actually glad to be having a quiet night inside, for once. Normally, being cooped up with Dad and Gwen back in LA made me itch to be elsewhere, and I had to spend hours on the phone with Jackie, or chatting online with everyone. I was still rattled from that fiasco of an art class. Those two bitchy girls must have upset me more than I thought, because as I walked home with Eric and Freddie, I kept feeling as though people were staring at me. Now I was used to attracting attention, but this was different. These eyes felt distinctly unfriendly. Instead of straightening my back and tossing my head a little to make my hair bounce and shine like copper wire in the sunlight, I had to fight the desire to hunch my shoulders and stare at the ground.

It reminded me of one of the times that my mother was in town, and we went out to eat at a Chinese restaurant. Everything was going just fine, until Margot broke open her fortune cookie, and let out a horrible shriek. The sound ripped at our ears while she screamed and screamed. She just wouldn't stop. It felt like everyone in the entire world was staring at us, the family who couldn't stop their crazy mother ruining everyone else's dinner. My face burned and I wanted to sink down under the table and keep going through the floor. It was probably the most horrible, embarrassing experience of my life. That was what it felt like to walk through Wicket's Folly.

Was two weeks even *enough* to turn a popular girl like me into a pariah? What could I have done to make everyone my own age hate me? Those kids in the art class, that one-gloved goth guy in the market – the minute they saw me they acted like they

hated me. Except for Mick, of course. *He* couldn't seem to leave me alone. He called once while Uncle Bennet was making dinner, and once while we were washing the dishes. Both times, I told him quickly that I was busy and hung up as quickly as possible. What was *with* all the people in this town? There was not a single one of them that behaved like a normal human being. I was starting to feel like an outcast, and I hated it.

On a beautifully warm night like this I should have been out with a large crowd of friends, and instead, I was inside, losing at cards to a five-year-old.

"Uno!" Freddie said, so excited he could barely keep his butt on the rug. Eric and Archie were having an intense game of checkers nearby. It wasn't really the best idea to play checkers on the couch – the pieces kept sliding off the board – but it didn't seem to bother them.

"I give up," I groaned, tossing my cards down. "You must be cheating."

"Nah, you're just dumb," said Eric. "*Everyone* in the whole world knows better than to play the Uno Monster."

Archie quickly moved a piece to the other end of the board while Eric wasn't looking. "Yeah, that's mean, Freddie. You're taking advantage of her brain thing."

"You mean we've done this before and you didn't tell me?" I said. "You little creeps!"

"Hey!" Eric yelled. "How did your piece get all the way over here?"

"It slid," said Archie.

Freddie smiled at me slyly. "Wanna play again?"

I flung my arms out dramatically and sighed. "Why not?"

He shuffled the cards by mashing them around in a mess on the rug, and I leaned back on my hands to watch. Half of the cards ended up facing the wrong way up, and it took him a while to sort through them. Finally, he had a misshapen deck to deal from.

My bandaged palm had some kind of nasty carpet fibers stuck to it from the rug, and I rubbed it against my shorts while he dealt. "Hey," I said. "I'm sorry to be monopolizing your cat."

"Monopoly?" Freddie said, confused. "We're playing Uno."

I laughed. "No, I mean, I'm sorry that your cat is hanging out with me all the time."

The puzzled expression did not change. "My cat?"

"Right, your cat. You know, meow, meow?"

Now Archie and Eric were looking up. "We don't have a cat," they said, almost in unison.

I rolled my eyes. "Ha, ha, very funny, now will you please stop it?"

"No, we really don't have a cat," Archie said. "Ask Dad if you don't believe us."

I hesitated. On one hand, I knew that boys liked to play practical jokes, and I didn't want to be taken in by them, but on the other hand, I was starting to feel a sense of unease stirring in my stomach. "Okay, I'll bite." I pushed myself to my feet, my knees protesting painfully at being folded under for too long.

Uncle Bennet was washing the dinner dishes in the kitchen, Aunt Alicia doing the crossword at the table. It seemed to be their normal after-dinner routine. How dull. "Do you or do you not have a cat?" I asked bluntly.



Aunt Alicia looked up. "A cat? No, we don't have any pets. Eric is allergic."

Uncle Bennet turned off the water in the sink and turned to look at me oddly. "We're all a bit off cats at the moment anyway. That's how Alicia broke her arm, you know. Tripping over some cat in the street."

She nodded. "It was like it just appeared under my feet."

"But every morning since getting back from the hospital, I've woken up to find a cat on my bed. It's even there at other times too." Why didn't someone just say *psych* and get on with it? This was a joke, right?

"We don't have a cat," Aunt Alicia repeated.

"I bet it's there now," I said. I was starting to feel desperate. "Come on, I'll show you!"

They exchanged a look. "Okay, Megan," said Uncle Bennet calmly, drying his hands on a dishtowel. "Lead the way."

As I opened the door to the basement, all three boys scampered up to join us, curiosity written as thickly as the freckles on their faces. They clattered down the stairs and squeezed around the washer and dryer. I opened the door to my room, and everyone tried to force his or her way in at once. Freddie got in first, because he was the smallest.

"I don't see any kitties," he announced.

I looked around uneasily, my shoulders jammed between Aunt Alicia's cast and the wall. The room was empty. Had I just been imagining the presence of a cat? Had my accident rattled my brain *that* much?

And then Eric began to sneeze.

Even though he was close enough that I could feel little droplets of moisture on my cheek, a flood of relief washed through me. If Eric was having an allergic reaction, then there must have been something for him to react *to*.

“Let’s discuss this upstairs,” Uncle Bennet said. “I’m being squashed.”

Everyone trooped back upstairs to the living room. Aunt Alicia sat down in an armchair. “I don’t think I like the idea of a strange animal in my house,” she said.

“It *is* friendly,” I said. “It sleeps on my bed. Hasn’t tried to kill me in my sleep or anything.” I didn’t have all that much experience with cats. Jackie had an enormously fat white cat that I had rarely seen awake, but I was fairly certain that I knew when a cat was friendly or not.

“Can we keep it, Mommy?” Freddie asked, hanging off the arm of his mother’s chair. “It could sleep on my bed, and I would take it for walks, and feed it, and call it Spot, and –”

She smoothed down his hair. “I’m sorry, sweetie. Your brother’s allergic, remember?”

“Yeah, but *I’m* not allergic.”

"Me neither," said Archie. "It would be cool to have a pet. Eric could just sleep outside."

"Hey!" said Eric.

“It’s a stray,” Aunt Alicia said firmly. “It could have diseases, or fleas, or something worse, and I don’t want it in the house.”

“It must have been getting in through the window,” I cut in quickly, because it looked like Freddie was preparing to hold his breath until he got his way. “I’m sorry. I just assumed it was your pet.”

“Don’t worry, Megan, it wasn’t your fault,” Uncle Bennet said.

I nodded, even though I knew that it really was. Dumb amnesiac Megan would be letting burglars into the house next, if they told her they belonged. “I’ll close the window tonight, and that’ll be the end of the problem.”

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Aunt Alicia came down with me when I headed to bed. Her pretext was that she wanted to do a load of laundry, but really, I knew she wanted to take another look for the mysterious cat.

"I wouldn't mind it being here if it wasn't for Eric's allergies," she told me as she peered into every corner of my room.

"Hmmm?" I yawned.

"And they do have a habit of just turning up. That one I tripped over – we were heading back from the bonfire last month – and it *was* dark out, but it was as if it just *appeared* under my feet. Cats are uncanny creatures. I really don't mind them – I'd just like to *know*..."

It seemed like she was talking more to herself than to me, so I went into my little bathroom to remove my contacts and take a shower before bed. When I returned, dressed in my favorite summer pajamas, my hair cocooned in a Carmen Miranda towel

arrangement, my aunt was gone, and the washing machine was humming loudly. The floor vibrated gently beneath my feet.

Flushed warm from the hot shower and ready to sleep, I took one step over the threshold of my room and immediately tripped over something. I staggered into the room, my towel flopping open and wet hair slapping itself down into my eyes.

"Dammit!" Pushing my hair out of the way, I snatched my glasses from the nightstand and rammed them onto my nose. "What the hell?"

I scanned the floor around my doorway and spotted a loose power plug. I had tripped over the cable. It must have been knocked free when everyone was crowding into my room earlier.

I rewrapped my hair more securely and got down on my hands and knees to follow the loose plug back to its source. I crawled as far into the corner as I could get. Ick, ick, ick, so much dust! I tried not breathe. The loose cable led back to the washing machine. Which was humming merrily, warm and alive. I looked from the cold metal plug in my hand to the washer. What – the – hell?

My body shouted for me to get as far away from this weirdness as I could. *Wait, wait*, my mind said. *You can figure this out.*

I stuck the plug into the outlet right next to the washer. It didn't want to go in, but I pushed, and it did.

Nothing happened. The machine kept on vibrating against my side.

I grasped the plug firmly, ready to pull it out again. *Oh please don't let me be electrocuted.* Bracing my knees against the concrete floor, I yanked the plug out, half expecting to see an arc of blue-white light, but there was nothing.

The washer juddered to a halt.

I stuck the plug back in, and stood up, brushing at the grime on my knees. When I pressed the start button on the washer's control panel, the machine jumped to life once more.

I shook my head. Weirder and weirder.

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I had to take a second quick rinse because of all the dust graying my hands and knees, and by the time I had finished blow-drying my hair, it was pretty late. I almost tried to turn on the hairdryer without plugging it in first, but I couldn't face any more craziness for one night.

I hated to close the window, because I liked to feel the cool night breeze when I slept, but I did it anyway. When I poked at the screen, I discovered that it was loose. That must have been how the cat was getting in. I closed the door of my room too, just for good measure, and went to sleep feeling confident that when I woke up the next morning, I would be alone.

I was wrong.

When I opened my eyes to the morning light shining in through my window, I immediately saw the cat curled at the foot of my bed. The usual morning sleep haze vanished immediately, and I sat up. Both the window and the door were still closed.

“Okay, *Spot*,” I said, “Fess up. How did you get in here?”

The cat merely rolled over and stuck all four legs in the air, as though he wanted me to rub his belly.

“I’m not touching you. I bet you have fleas.” I scrambled out of bed and opened the window. “Go on, get out.”

The cat didn’t move. I loosened the screen. “Look, cat, now it’s easier for you to get out. Why don’t you go?”

“Mew,” said the cat.

“We can do this the easy way, or the hard way.”

“Mew?”

“The hard way it is. But just remember, *Spot*, you brought this on yourself.” I went over to the bed and gingerly picked up the cat. It hung limply in my hands, its fur soft and warm, and I could feel its heart thrumming beneath my fingers.

I held the cat out far in front of me as I crossed to the window, pushed the thing through the loose screen, and quickly refastened the lock. Some fur was stuck to the gauze wrapped around my left hand, and I brushed it off and watched it float through the sunlight along with tiny dust motes. Both the door and the window had been locked from the inside. How *had* the cat gotten in?

When I went upstairs for breakfast, Aunt Alicia immediately asked, “No cat last night?”

“Nope,” I said brightly. As I went about getting breakfast, I tried to think of a plausible reason why I had lied.

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When I had gotten my cousins off to their science and swim classes, I suddenly realized that I had absolutely nothing to do. I was on my own, no string of little boys trailing after me like a row of ducklings. I had already toured the town, and the only extra errand I had to do today was to get a gallon of milk from the market. I was kind of reluctant to go back there without a buffer of cousins between me and that unpleasant boy with the weird name. I considered going back to my uncle's house, but it wasn't even worth the time it would take to walk there. *Gah! I hate having nothing to do.*

I found myself wandering through the center of town, pausing now and then to decide whether or not to go into one building or another. I stopped before the shoe store and then kept going. I had been thinking half-heartedly of looking for a new pair of flats, but didn't even feel like shopping. That might have been what they had put in the yearbook for the "world will end when..." page. The sun will explode when Megan Breelie doesn't want to go shopping.

Was it just my imagination, or were people in the street staring at me? I was sure they were. There was a prickling in my scalp that definitely meant that someone was watching me. I whipped my head around quickly and glimpsed a pale woman with light hair, but a group of chattering people passed in front of her, and when they moved, she was gone.

There were plenty of people on the street, and when I looked at them, I could tell that they were just looking away, which meant that they had been staring at me. It was

just like the art class yesterday, when all the other kids stared at me when I left. I could feel the eyes on me, hating me through my back. My skin crawled with it.

I needed to get away from them. There was at least one place I hadn't visited yet. The Folly's three cemeteries. There wouldn't be anyone *there* to stare, except for any kids who might be there to make out, but they would be too wrapped up in each other to notice me. It would be just me and the dead people. God, I was getting morbid.

As I crossed the street by the Folly's one streetlight, out of the corner of my eye, I saw – oh my god, the light was purple! I stopped still, there in the middle of the street, and whipped my head around. The light was red. But I knew what I had seen. I knew it. *Traffic lights aren't purple* I told myself. *And the unplugged washing machine last night wasn't on. It's just your imagination.* This wasn't really the kind of thing I told myself frequently, because I didn't really think I even *had* an imagination. But Margot saw things too, and she believed they were real. *Can you still be crazy if you can tell yourself that the things you're seeing aren't real?*

I defied the roundabout roads that looped around to the cemetery, and went straight through the trees. The ground was rough and littered with thin dead branches and decaying leaves that crunched underfoot. All this must have been completely buried in snow not too long ago.

Small bushes and short ferns scratched at my legs, and I wished that I had worn pants and closed shoes. Now I knew why everyone took the longer roads, instead of going through the woods.



Soon the trees thinned, and I broke through into a partially cleared cemetery. The graves were crooked and overgrown, arranged haphazardly here and there. The ground was twisted up by tree roots, and the gravesites were half buried in dead leaves, as though no one tended them, no one even visited. There weren't even any kids making out. The shadows cast by the trees kept the area fairly dark at all times. It was quiet except for the twittering of birds chatting with each other. Peaceful.

I trailed slowly through the graves, stopping to examine a stone here, to trace carved letters there. They were all pretty plain. No sculptures of angels or other religious figures. Not even any crosses. Just names and dates.

There was something incredibly solemn in the air. *Graveyards always make you feel your own mortality. Well, at least no one's glaring at me.*

It was as I was trailing my fingers over the carved numbers that I realized that I had seen this date before. Many times. December 21, 1985.

I walked back through the graves, really looking this time. A lot of people shared the same death date. At least ten of them. Some quick calculations told me that they had been all different ages, but they had died on the same day.

Now that I was really noticing the dates on the graves, I began to see more patterns. Six people had died June 21, 1991. Four had died December 21, 2009. Always on June 21st and December 21st. What could possibly keep happening on those days? June 21st was less than a month away. *Is something going to happen. Are more people going to die?*

As I neared the edge of the cemetery, I heard a murmuring of voices. I peered around a tree and saw a slice of the neighboring cemetery. A few people were grouped around a grave, speaking quietly, the pattern of their words sounding almost like chanting. I couldn't see their faces, so I crept closer.

"We remember you," they were saying. "We remember you, John Falconer. You died on December 21st, 1976, and we remember you."

As I drew nearer, a branch snapped under my foot. The group looked up. All of them were my age. One of them was Natalie, the girl who looked like Jackie. The girl who hated me.

I hitched a smile to my lips. "Hi. Watcha doing?"

Surprise registered on Natalie's face. "Spying, are you?" she said.

*Why* wouldn't these people make allowances for me? "I'm sorry, I don't remember you. Perhaps you heard about my accident. Would you mind telling me what's going on?"

"No," said a girl with a long horse-face and thick glasses. "Go away. Bitch."

I gave her me best murderously sweet smile. "I love your hairstyle. It's a shame it's not the 1920s or you'd be perfectly in style." I turned back to the others, dropping all pretences of politeness. "I want to know what you're doing."

A boy next to Natalie had a confused look on his face, and as she muttered something into his ear, it was quickly replaced by one of disgust. "You," he said.

"What's going on?" I asked again. I was too curious to be deterred. "I've been looking at the graves here, and half the people died on the same days."

"You noticed, did you?" the boy said. He had a British accent. "Not quite the usual sheep then, are you?"

'Bitch' I could handle. I would even consider it a compliment. But not 'sheep'.  
"What did you just call me?"

"Hey, bitch," said horse-face, "see over there?" She gestured over her shoulder, to two graves where the fresh dirt was heaped up. "Those are my parents. If you had never come here, they would still be alive."

"What?" I gasped. Was she being serious? She must be trying to mess with me. But she didn't look like she was joking.

"Shut up," Natalie hissed at them. On second thought, she didn't look that much like Jackie. Jackie would never be caught dead in those striped leggings. And that lipstick was completely the wrong color for her. "Just go," she told me. "You're not part of this, and trust me, you don't want to be."

I crossed my arms. "I'm not leaving until you tell me what's going on."

Natalie looked down at the ground. "We're remembering the dead," she said.  
"Because no one else will." Two of the other kids tugged at her arms, and she shut up.

"Could you *be* any more cryptic?" I said.

"People die all the time here," she said, ignoring the shushing of the others, "and no one notices. Except us."

"I noticed," I said softly. It was a dumb thing to say. A weak 'won't you let me be part of your group,' and I hated the hopefulness of my voice. Like Tamara, like all the girls that my friends and I ignored back home.

"Okay, okay," Natalie said to the other kids, and they stopped dragging at her. "Just stop noticing," she told me. "Stop noticing, and at the end of the summer, just leave. Because you can." Her voice was bitter.

They all turned and walked away, leaving me standing in an empty graveyard. Well, empty of course, if you don't count all the graves.

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My knees shook as I made my way back to town, and I stumbled several times over trees roots. What could I have done? Could it really have been bad enough to get people killed? And what was *up* with this place?

As I broke forth into the bright sunlight of Main Street, the eyes pinned me again. And this time, it was so much worse. I don't know if it was the incident in the graveyard, or if I just hadn't felt how strong it was before, but it felt like I was hit with a steamroller. I staggered where I stood.

There were people in the street – ordinary people going about their ordinary lives – just taking a little time to stare at me. Their eyes were narrow, shining like beads, glittering like sharp pins. I was standing in a hot spotlight made up of the judging eyes of everyone around me. Sweat pricked on my forehead; I could feel it under my arms, slicking down my breastbone. What had I ever done to them? Why did they hate me? *Why?*

Oh god, I was starting to sound just like my mother. *Calm down*, I told myself. *Calm down. It's just your imagination. It's not that bad.*

But it was.

I needed an ally. A friend. Someone outside my family who could remind me that not everyone in the world hated me. Across the street, I could see Uncle Bennet's store. Hadn't it been on the other side of the library before? I shook my head rapidly. *Whoa, starting to sound a little crazy there.* It didn't matter where the store was. Mick worked there. Mick liked me, didn't he? He wouldn't stop calling, so he must like me.

I smoothed my hair and tried to rub away some of the sweat-shine from my face. I took a deep breath, trying to gather the shreds of my self-confidence. This used to be second nature to me. A bit of hair-twirling, wide eyes, and flirty smiling was all it took. But just in case, I tugged the neckline of my dress down a little more. *You can do this,* I told myself, and entered the shop.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the light of the store after the brightness of the sun outside. I could immediately smell the new rubber and wood scents that pervade hardware stores. It smelled the same as the ones back home, and it comforted me somehow. I picked my way through narrow aisles packed with gardening hoses, different varieties of nails, and all sorts of gadgets. There was nobody else shopping today, and I wondered briefly how a store like this survived in such a small town.

Mick was at the front desk, bent over so he could lean his elbows on the counter. He straightened quickly once he saw me. "Megan!" he said. "How nice of you to come visit me! Can I get you something to drink?" His blue eyes seemed to ooze gallant concern. This looked like the face of a guy who was incapable of lying.

Even though the circumstances were completely different this time, I still could not help feeling that there was something about him that I just did not like. I could not for

the life of me tell what it was, but it was like I just knew was something off about him. It was like a sour smell – so nasty that I could almost taste it in my mouth.

“Megan? Are you okay?”

“What – oh, yeah.” I realized I was staring at him, nose wrinkled, and looked quickly away. I should be flirting like a pro, getting him to do whatever I wanted. I played with a display of miniature keychain measuring tapes to stall for time. Even with the distance, it was like there was something about him that was trying to draw me in – to be touched, to be held. I had never in my life felt anything like this before. My body was so *present*, so solid and motionless. Every drop of sweat announced itself to me. Disgusting. His body was so close, just the countertop between us. I could almost feel the heat radiating from it.

*Is this love?* I wondered, my heart beating fast. *Is this what it's supposed to feel like when you are really attracted to someone?* Was that why he made me feel so weird? Did I *love* this guy? Well, we *had* been dating.

A shock shot through my body. My head whirred, and the keychain display jangled loudly. The only reason I had thought I was dating him was because he had *told* me that I was dating him.

“What?” he asked, leaning toward me and trying to pin me with his eyes. “What is it?”

“N-nothing,” I stammered, my mind still reeling. “I was – um – just looking for my uncle.”

“He’s doing inventory in the back. Do you want me to get him for you?”

“No, don’t bother. I’ll talk to him later.”

As I turned to leave, he reached out a hand and grabbed my wrist over the counter. “Megan, wait! What’s wrong?” His words were so soft and concerned, and his hand on my arm was gentle, but for some reason, it terrified me. I couldn’t think clearly, and I needed to get away.

“It’s nothing, it’s nothing,” I said, trying to laugh. “Got to go.” His fingers tightened, and I pried them away from my wrist and scuttled backwards.

He started around the counter. “Let me at least walk you home.”

“No, no,” I said hurriedly. “I just need to –” I had no idea what I was going to say next; I just knew that I had to get away from him. I practically ran from the store, and when I looked back over my shoulder, I was relieved to see that he was not following.

My ears were burning red with from disgusting display. I had always prided myself on being able to handle guys – keep them at just the right distance as long as possible – getting whatever I wanted out of them without really having to commit. Even Jackie thought I was just being a slut at first, until I told her that I never actually did anything with them, and the truth about why I didn’t. She was the only person who knew, the only person among all my friends that I’d told. What would she think? Megan the man manager, running away from a guy she couldn’t handle. Pitiful.

I dialed Jackie’s number from a pay phone. *Please pick up*, I begged silently, clutching the warm, slightly sticky plastic. Nothing but empty ringing in my ear. *Dammit! It’s like nine in the morning there; she must be in class.* I slammed the phone back onto its hook, and the head cracked.

*Shit.* I looked around carefully to make sure no one was watching before easing the phone gently home and hurrying away.

Even though I still had time before I had to collect Eric and Freddie from their swimming lesson, I went back towards the college campus. I could still feel eyes on me from all directions, and there were goose bumps coming out on my arms.

I collapsed onto a bench where my cousins would be able to see me when they got out of the pool. The bumps had still not subsided on my shoulders, and I hugged my arms around myself. I suddenly felt very exposed, wearing such a flimsy sleeveless dress, even though the delicately crocheted bodice made it one of my favorites.

If only I could talk to Jackie. What would she say? *Well, it had to happen at least once,* she would console me. *There's got to be one creep that even you can't twirl around your finger.* Would she understand how frightening it was, to feel such a lack of control, to feel real fear that he could actually harm me.

Was everyone in this horrible little town out to get me? Some people hated me and some people wanted to get way too close to me. Why would Mick tell me that we were dating when I knew that I would never flirt with a guy like that more than once. I could tell that he was a player too, and he must have seen through my tricks like a snap. And yet he was still practically stalking me. Was everyone in this place crazy? And why did so many of them seem to hate me? Was it just them, or had I actually done something to deserve it?

Margot would blame the other people for sure. She had always talked about her unknown 'them,' the 'people' out to get her. She never seemed to consider that it might be



her mind playing tricks on her. *But if you can see it happening, is there still nothing you can do to stop it?* I pressed back a slightly hysterical giggle as I thought of the saying 'you're not paranoid if they really are out to get you.'

Without the responsibilities that I had towards my relatives, I would probably want to curl up in my bed down in the dingy basement and wait for this whole thing to be over. At least there was one good thing about losing two weeks. It brought the end of my 'vacation' in Wicket's Folly that much closer. I was scheduled to leave on a Wednesday, exactly two weeks from today. I could make it that far, couldn't I? Just fourteen days, thirteen-and-a-half really, and then I could get out of here. I would just have to endure the watching eyes and the hatred coming at me from every direction until then. It wouldn't matter if I never found out exactly what had happened in the time I was missing. I just couldn't stand being bombarded by so much hatred. I wanted to go home to my crazy normal family and never have to think about any of this ever again.

When Eric and Freddie joined me, cheerful and damp, I tried hard to pull myself together. It was an effort to enthuse over their recital of the new stroke they had learned and the number of rings they had managed to win in the diving game.

We walked to the park for lunch as usual. There were a couple of teens mooching around a picnic table, and when I tried to smile at them, they turned their backs on me. I ate my lunch quietly, finding it hard to swallow around the lump in my throat.

Instead of letting Eric and Freddie play after we had finished eating, I took them to the market. Just a quick stop, I told them, and then they could go home and play on the computer. All we needed was a gallon of milk. And hopefully, with the two of them

there, I wouldn't get yelled at this time. Yes, I was using children as a shield. But I was starting to be beyond caring.

To my surprise, instead of glaring at me in hatred like the rest of the damn town, Octavian hurried over to me as soon as I entered the market. He still wore all black, with just one glove. How pretentious would a guy have to be, to dress all in black on a hot day like this?

"Look, I need to talk to you," he said over the chorus of complaints from the people that he had left waiting for him to ring up their purchases. "I'm really sorry for the other day. I was upset and angry, and I shouldn't have shouted."

I was completely taken aback. When I grabbed Eric's hand to stop him from poking Freddie, the movement was automatic. I had been all set to withstand another vitriolic diatribe, and here he was, looking like a hopeful puppy pleading for forgiveness. Well, more of a hopeful stoop-shouldered stork pleading for forgiveness.

"Oh. Okay," I said unwillingly. I didn't really want to forgive him for yelling at me, but I was more than happy at the thought that he wasn't going to yell at me.

His shoulders sagged with relief, and I realized that he had not been so much stork-like as tense. "We need to talk," he said. "I'm working now, but –"

I shook my head. "Just because I forgive you for yelling at me in front of a whole bunch of people doesn't mean we're suddenly best friends."

"But –"

"Please leave me alone."

"Go to the cemetery," he blurted out.

"What?"

"The cemetery," he repeated. "You might find something interesting."

"Gee, thanks for all your help," I said sarcastically. "I'll scurry right on over there." I took hold of one hand from each of my cousins to keep them apart and led them away.

*I'm lying on the sofa when the Charmer rushes in unannounced. The buzzing in my head has not abated, and I'm starting to feel the cold eating into my bones. I begin to fear that I will not last until the solstice.*

*I clutch the blanket around my shoulders and ask the Charmer why he dares think he can just barge into my presence.*

*I'm sorry, he says, hanging his golden head in contrition.*

*Well? Do you at least have something to report?*

*No, he says. I've been trying and trying, but she just won't let me near her.*

*I sit up, and my head is filled for a moment with the fluttering wings of moths. You came all the way up here to tell me that you're trying?*

*I, he says. Please. I need your help.*

*How about this, I say. Try harder. Do not come here again without my permission. It would behoove you to have something better to tell me next time I call on you. Now get out.*

*He gives me a puzzled look and leaves. I stand slowly and cross to the window, holding the blanket around myself like a cape as I watch him wend his way down the hill.*

*Unlike all the other inhabitants of my town, the Charmer is here of his own free will. He tracked me down three years ago and offered his services, in exchange for one request: that when I leave this place, I take him with me. I assented, attracted by the notion of having a servant that I did not have to control, and more than a little charmed by his beauty. It reminded me of my own people, and of long ago. His help lets me conserve my energy, though his free thought makes him unpredictable.*

*As the Girl grows stronger, I grow weaker. She can feel me watching her. Once, I believe she saw me. I have tried to enter her dreams at night to play with her mind, but I can barely stand it. She is one of the ones that is too aware, and her mind is the most confusing and painful that I have ever been in. It was like crawling through broken glass in the dark, never knowing what might suddenly reach out to sting and slash. It was too painful, and I could not stay for long; I do not even know what affect I have had.*

*She must be neutralized before things get worse. If only I had not made that foolish promise to her father.*

*I should not antagonize the Charmer. I will need his help in dealing with her.*

## Chapter Ten

Night after night, he dreamt of a river winding through a plane dusted with a thin layer of snow. The sun sparkled on clear water and frost crystals, and a road led away to a circular ditch and bank surrounding an enormous monument of stone. A perfect circle of stones stood upright, a round of curving crosspieces on top joining them into something that resembled a ring of men clasping arms. In the center of the stone circle was a horseshoe of 5 larger sets of stones, these ones standing free, like the disembodied legs of giants. Each shape was lined with a similar configuration of smaller stones, and one stood free in the center of the arrangement. As Samuel's sleeping eyes watched, the sun began to set, moving quickly, as though time had been speeded up. The sun fell, moving along the line of the road and into the monument, touching the top of the central stone before sinking behind the giant's legs and disappearing into the earth.

Samuel dreamed the same dream every night, although it was slightly different each time. Sometimes the sun rose instead of setting, although it was still on the same line. Sometimes the building was not whole, but partially destroyed. Standing stones leaned, lintels fell and were half-buried, and lichen crept over the faces of the stones. And every morning, Samuel awoke with a feeling that he was seeing something very familiar, something that was very important, something that he knew, but whose name he could not quite seem to remember.

Octavian might have found it in his heart to apologize for his behavior, but no one else did. Over the next week, I felt the spotlight on me at all times, hating me, judging my every action. Every morning, I took my cousins to their various activities, and then found somewhere quiet and out of the way where I could skulk around without being seen. I wore dark colors and didn't linger over my makeup or my hair. It was like I didn't *want* people to notice me. Well, there was a first time for everything.

I didn't even have Jackie to talk to. AP tests were right around the corner, to be followed quickly by finals, and she was freaking out. She limited our calls to no more than five minutes each, and then cut me off so she could go back to studying.

"What is this, prison?" I said grumpily, when she interrupted me in the middle of complaining about stalker Mick.

"No," she said. "You got kicked out of prison, remember?"

I didn't go back to the art class. Mr. Socks-and-Sandals had told me to persevere, to just keep working, and my gift would return over time, but I couldn't make myself do it. It was a double whammy – people who hated me, and a painting that reminded me that my hands had lost their skill.

*You're letting them win*, the old Megan whispered, but I didn't care. I did go back and get the painting eventually, and I propped it up on a corner of my desk. Every morning it reminded me of what I had lost, but also what I was trying to get back.

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Uncle Bennet took over the cooking with no comment or complaint. I didn't mind – eating his food was better than facing the horror show that I knew I would produce. Only once did I ask my aunt and uncle about the deaths in the town. Neither of them seemed to know anything about it. Instead, they looked at me all concerned, like they thought maybe my head wasn't right after my accident. There was definitely something weird going on, and I was not willing to accept that it might be just me. Maybe there was something in the water.

There wasn't much for me to do except play with my cousins. I chased them around the house and the backyard, or led them in board games. Sometimes they asked me to tell them stories, so I told them about my friends back in Los Angeles, and the cleaned-up version of past high school hijinks. When Eric asked me why I had been expelled from school, I told them I wasn't expelled, I had simply quit. They got very jealous. Sometimes I listened in on Uncle Bennet reading them fairy tales. “Don't you think,” I asked him later, “that those stories makes it hard for them to tell what's real?”

“Who are we to say what’s real?” was all he replied.

Every night, I locked my door and window before going to sleep, and every morning, the gray cat was on the end of my bed anyway. As I shoved it through the window each morning, I could not explain to myself why I felt such a great need to keep it out. It was perfectly friendly, and seemed clean. The only answer I could come up with was that I did not like that it could enter in a manner that seemed to defy logic. It made me very uncomfortable.

And it wasn't the only thing. Once I had noticed the weirdness with the washer, I couldn't *not* notice more things. I wished I could have ignored them, but they would jab themselves into the corners of my eyes, insisting on being noticed, and then when I took a closer look, behaved completely normally. There was a lamp that worked even when the plug was knocked out, and the freezer that stayed cold after one of the boys left its door open all day.

"How is this possible?" I muttered aloud, pulling a whole, solidly-frozen chicken from the freezer. It was hard as a rock, and the frost seared my fingertips. I quickly tossed it back in and closed the door behind it.

"Freezers freeze things," Archie told me, as though I was being incredibly stupid. "That's what they do."

"Not when you leave them open all day. All the cold air escapes and things *defreeze*."

Archie and Eric pounced on this. "They do?"

"Why?"



"How does that work?"

"Um." I *had* read the article on freezers in my encyclopedias, but I didn't remember the technical stuff. "Um, I know they used to be called iceboxes. And, um... something about freon coils? Go ask your dad."

After they bounded off, I turned around, and found that the whiteboard had changed itself once again. It now read 'Flopping Fish.' *What the hell? I just looked at it. Who is doing this?*

I was getting thoroughly freaked out.

Maybe this was the reason that I was no longer sleeping well at night. I usually slept deeply and soundly, with dreams that were mundane and instantly forgettable upon waking. But now I had difficulty getting to sleep, and when I did sleep, my dreams were disturbing. There was a recurring dream of mushrooms with teeth, and then one where I was slowly being dissected alive on a stage in front of an audience of thousands of people all staring at me in silence while a woman's voice – the same one every time – told me that I should not stay where I was not wanted. My eyes itched with tiredness every time I put my contacts in. I wished I could leave them behind, but I couldn't let anyone see me in my glasses. They made me look plain. Drab. Ugly.

I started going for long walks at night. I felt a little guilty at first, but I quickly forgot Uncle Bennet's warning that I should not go out after dark. The solitude of the empty town was comforting after the ordeal of daylight, plus the more worn out I was, the easier it was to sleep when I got back. Octavian's words that I should visit the cemeteries kept running through my mind, and several times I returned there. The

moonlit cemeteries were incredibly creepy. The wind whistling through the branches sounded like moaning, as if the graves around me were full of unquiet spirits. *That's ridiculous*, I told myself over and over, but it didn't stop my heart from thumping nervously every time I was there. I didn't stay long, and I never found anything beyond what I already knew.

For the first time in my life, I didn't want to be noticed. During the day, I stayed inside as much as possible. Libraries back home were just places to get free wireless internet, but when I set foot inside the Wicket's Folly public library, I immediately felt safe. The place was quiet and dim, and the people sitting at the tables were so engrossed in their books that they didn't even notice me. Even the woman at the front desk was busy reading. It was the perfect place to hide from the eyes of the town. I found a quiet corner and settled down. Might as well read. There wasn't anything else to do.

I was surprised to find that the library had no nonfiction section, not even a set of encyclopedias, so I was forced to find the least objectionable of the fiction. Looking at the rows of books covered in pictures of elves and unicorns and mystical symbols made me long for my beautiful encyclopedias back at home. Why hadn't I even taken *one* volume? Sure they were heavy, but *anything* would be better than vampires and werewolves. I could not stand books that had anything abnormal happen in them, so I started in on the historical fiction section. There was one about the French revolution which wasn't so bad, until it turned out to have dragons in it, and I had to put it back.

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Whenever I had to go outside, I walked with my head down, not making eye contact with anybody. Even though I couldn't see them, I knew they were staring at me.

Maybe it wasn't everyone in the town that was conspiring to hate me, though, even though I felt like it was. It was just all the people who were my own age – the ones I would have been friends with otherwise. Tamara hardly counted. The girl seemed so desperate for companionship that every time someone visited her, she overcompensated and shared way too much personal information. She was clearly one of those sideliners oddballs that I had been happy to ignore back in LA. I would not stoop so low as to befriend someone like Tamara. Overly dramatic feelings of abandon kept swooping over me, and though I knew it was dumb, it also made me want to cry.

Once, I ran into Sasha and Natalie on the street, and when I tried to greet them, they both glared at me.

Why do I even keep trying, I thought. "Hey? What's your problem?" I demanded, too tired of dealing with this crap to bear it any more.

They didn't answer, just turned away.

"Oh, great!" I called after them. "So now we're onto the silent treatment, huh? Well, screw you."

I tried to keep a pretense of happiness when I was with my cousins, but I knew that my uncle and aunt could tell that there was something wrong. Fortunately, they assumed that my depression was due to simple homesickness, and their solution was to pretend that everything was normal, which was fine by me. I did not want to burden them with my troubles, so I had no one to talk to. I could not reach any of my friends, and my

phone conversations with my father and sister were short and strained. Gwen was still mad at me, but covered it up with a veneer of false cheerfulness, and my father assumed that I was angry with him because of his extra-marital relationship. Mick, on the other hand, kept calling, but I did not want to talk to him. I had never felt more alone. I counted off the days until I could get away from this place. I would go home and talk to my family face to face, and make everything right again. I knew I could, if I could just see them. Ten more days...Nine more days....

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The blackouts started on Sunday. The whole family was in the kitchen, eating dinner, when all of a sudden, the lights went out.

"Oh, no, not again!" Aunt Alicia said. There was a clatter. Some silverware must have fallen to the floor.

"This happened before?" I asked. The pitch slowly dissolved into deep gloom as my eyes adjusted.

"Ow!" yelled Eric.

Uncle Bennet tapped his fork on the table. "Archie, this is not an excuse to hit your brother."

"I'm not! He's faking."

"I'm a bat," said Freddie. "Chirp. chirp."

"Brat, more like."

I felt my way over to the window. "The houses on either side of us have power. I can see their lights. It's just us."

"Don't worry, the lights will come back on in a minute," Uncle Bennet said. As soon as he had spoken, they did.

I blinked and squinted at the sudden brightness. "You should probably have an electrician over to look at the wiring," I told him, returning to my seat. "If it didn't affect anyone else it means it's a problem with this house."

"I don't think that's going to help," Aunt Alicia murmured as she started gathering up the plates.

"Why?" I asked.

"We don't have a power company?"

"What? How is that even – ?"

"What's an electrician?" asked Eric.

"Mommy," said Freddie. "What makes the lights work?"

Aunt Alicia gave me a now-look-what-you-did look. *How is this my fault?*

"Oh, don't you worry about it," said Uncle Bennet. "The whole thing will sort itself out, just like last time."

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The whole thing did not sort itself out. It got worse. As though our house had some sort of contagious disease, the blackouts began to spread, first to the houses closest to ours, and then, as far as I could tell in the darkness, to the entire street. There was generally just one a night, and they only ever lasted for a few minutes, but still, the whole thing was very peculiar. Stranger still was that no one was trying to fix it. Even if they didn't have a representative of the power company in town, I didn't see why they couldn't

call and ask for one to be sent out. No one would give me a straight answer when I asked about it. Instead, I got all manner of cryptic answers and confused looks.

Wednesday night found me in the cemetery, sitting on the grave of someone I had never met. I had cleared away the fallen leaves and brushed off as much of the dirt as I could. Not just because I didn't want to sit somewhere dirty, but also so the grave wouldn't look so neglected.

I couldn't really see the name of the grave's owner, but I traced it over and over with my fingers until I got the idea. "Eden?" I said aloud. A shiver crawled down my spine, and I swatted at my back, just in case there was a spider in my jacket.

"Really? 'Eden'? But are you a boy or a girl? Oh, I'm sorry. *Were* you? I knew an Eden. He was a boy. But he's still alive. Not for lack of trying though."

I leaned forward, hugging my arms around my knees. Thank goodness for the darkness. The whole Eden thing was still eating at me. He was the reason (among other things, admittedly) why I was expelled.

Eden was a freshman at my school when I was a sophomore, one of those little genius kids who was allergic to peanuts, dairy, gluten, and who knew what else. He had skipped a few grades and ended up in high school at the age of eleven. He was absolutely tiny, and not just because he was still young. With his small stature and his weird name, he might as well have had a target on his back. And he was in love with me.

I never meant anything bad to happen. He was tiny and cute, and I thought it was harmless. So I let him carry my books for me, save me seats at assemblies, and get me food from the cafeteria. I teased him gently about his name, in an easy, flirtatious way. I

didn't stop him from doing things for me, though, because I was pretty and popular, and I was entitled. It was just an infatuation that would pass in time, but why not take advantage of it while it lasted? But then, he asked me to the prom, and that was just too far. I mean, I had a *boyfriend* at the time. Kyle, I think it was. Or maybe Christian.

It had *nothing* to do with me, when he tried to kill himself. I told Mr. Seaver as much when he called me into his office to accuse me. First of all, Eden was bullied a lot – his size meant he was trashed on pretty much a daily basis. And secondly, there was no way to prove that he hadn't eaten those peanuts by accident. Maybe it was Mr. Seaver blaming me, but I couldn't quite shake the feeling of guilt. When I got some kid to steal a test for me, that was just the pretext. Eden was the real reason that I was expelled.

What a crazy coincidence that I would find a tombstone with that exact name. But this was Wicket's Folly. Nothing should surprise me about this place.

"So, Eden, how did you die?" I asked. "Under mysterious circumstances, I bet. *Everything* around here seems like mysterious circumstances. Take me, for instance. Here I am, in the middle of a cemetery at night because everyone hates me and I can't go out during the day. I've got a ton of friends I can barely reach, and I can't stand being alone, so here I am, going out every night so I can talk to dead people. No offense, Eden.

"You know, normally, this should creep me out. A dark, spooky cemetery. Is that logical, Eden? That I can still be afraid of being here? Why are people afraid of the dark? We hear something we can't see and we allow our imagination to tell us that it's ghosts, when just a little investigation will tell us that it's really just wolves. Not that wolves would be any better."

"Why are you talking to a dead guy?"

I nearly careened out of my skin. Octavian the wannabe goth kid stood just behind me. His all-black clothing made him nearly impossible to see in the darkness. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

"I didn't." He sat down on the stone slab beside me, his bony form hunched over. "You were getting pretty into it with the dead guy."

"Or girl. Eden," I jabbed a finger at the stone, "could be a guy's name or a girl's name."

"Sounds like a girl's name to me."

"It can be a guy's name too. Trust me."

"Who cares?"

I smoothed my skirt over my thighs. He wasn't worth flirting with, but I didn't want anyone to see me looking bad. "So what are *you* doing here, then?"

"Nothing," he said evasively. "Went for a walk. Thought I might have a talk with someone who wouldn't listen."

"Just shut up about that already."

He yawned, not bothering to cover his mouth. "So did you figure out my hint? About the cemetery?"

"Of course," I said loftily. "I figured that out myself. *Before* you even told me to go here."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. "I guess you're not as dumb as I thought."

"And you're way dumber than I thought."



"So what *are* you doing here?"

"I like it here. It's quiet."

An owl hooted somewhere nearby, a long, low, mournful note, and I couldn't help shivering slightly.

"Uh-huh." Octavian sounded like he didn't believe me at all. "You shouldn't be out alone after dark."

"God, why does everyone keep telling me that? *You're* out after dark. I can take care of myself. What's so dangerous around here anyway?"

He lowered his voice. "Only your worst nightmares."

I could tell he was enjoying himself. "Does your worst nightmare involve being beaten up by a girl, 'cause I think that one's likely to come true."

"Okay, okay. It's just that sometimes people go missing. A lot of these graves –" he gestured at the cemetery around us – "a lot of them are empty."

"That boy who went missing was taken during the day."

He nodded somberly. "And he won't be the last."

"Do you *enjoy* spouting cryptic nonsense?"

"Well, yes." His mouth twisted into a half-grin. "Sometimes people just drop dead for no apparent reason. When *that* happens, it's usually at night."

Though he wouldn't be able to see in the darkness, I rolled my eyes. "You think there's some sort of monster that comes out at night to kill them?" The owl hooted again. Damn bird. It was as though it waited for the moments in our conversation when its call would have the greatest creepiness level.

"No..." he said slowly. "Not...exactly. People say they're taken by the spirit of the Folly. That she takes them to a better place. And then they forget really fast." He shrugged. "But I don't know about that. I think, in the darkness, peoples' imaginations run away with them, and sometimes, they can't find their way back."

I sighed. "See, there you go again. What does that even *mean*?"

He waved a hand in the air, but it was the one gloved in black, so it was hard to see. "Sorry. Just being morbid."

"What, you?" I said sarcastically. "No!"

"Still. Do you want me to walk you home?"

"I'm no damsel in distress." I got up, brushing bits of leaf and dust from the back of my skirt.

He rose too. His knees clicked. "I'll walk with you part way."

"I told you I don't need your help."

"Jesus, would you get over yourself already? I'm gonna go home too."

"Oh. Okay."

Though I hated to admit it, his talk of strange deaths and disappearances had unnerved me. I was secretly glad to have company.

When we reached the lights of the town, he gave me a silent, ironic salute, and headed off along one of the side roads. What a strange guy. I watched him until he was out of sight, and then turned onto Mallard Lane.

I walked quickly, hugging my arms around my light denim jacket. There was a rustling noise in the trees lining the road, and I stopped to take a look around me. I

couldn't see anything. No glowing yellow eyes or monstrous things that could frighten people to death. Stupid Octavian and his scary stories. And why hadn't I accepted his offer to walk me home? *Just because a girl isn't a damsel in distress doesn't mean she can't take help when it's offered.*

More rustling, and I turned to peer behind me. My thumping heart sounded just like footsteps following me. *Why, oh why aren't there any streetlamps?* The only light came from the moon, and it barely let me see the dirt and gravel road under my feet and the menacing silhouettes of trees.

A twig snapped somewhere behind me, and my heart jumped. Menacing silhouettes? What was I thinking? They were just trees. I was allowing my fear to control me. I made myself slow down to a quick stroll to prove that I was not scared. Still, I was happy to see the lights of houses coming closer.

I bent to work a small sharp stone out of my sandal, and as I straightened up, I heard swift footsteps behind me. Before I could turn around, a hand grabbed my arm, and something solid and round jabbed into my back.

“Scream and I’ll shoot,” said a low, gruff voice.

I froze, my knees locked into stone. Inexplicably, I felt a moment of pure, crazy relief that this was a solid human man, not some nightmare creature of myth.

The feeling didn't last.

My heart began to drum impossibly fast in my fingertips. A sick feeling clawed its way into my stomach. *That's it. I'm dead.*

The man released my arm momentarily, and a canvas bag was pulled over my head. I could see from the handles that it was a reusable shopping bag, and for a moment, this gave me the insane urge to laugh.

The iron grip on my arm returned. “Walk,” the voice said shortly, and I complied. Was the voice familiar? He had spoken only a few words, and it was so hard to tell through the panic.

I could see under the edges of the bag that we were leaving the road and re-entering the woods. Twigs and bracken crunched beneath our feet and scraped my bare legs. Once, my captor nearly bumped into me as I stumbled over a dead log, and I saw below the edge of the bag that he was wearing blue jeans and generic dun-colored hiking boots. He jerked me upright wordlessly.

Stumbling through the woods, a gun pressed to my back, I tried to control my panic. *Oh God. This is really happening.* Why hadn't I listen to Uncle Bennet? Why hadn't I listened to Octavian? Why did I keep going out, even after that boy disappeared? Why did I always have to know better than everyone else?

I should have seen it coming. These sleepy little towns were never as safe as they seemed. They always had a crazy serial killer, or cannibal, or pedophile, and people from the town who went missing never be seen or heard from again. It happened all the time on TV. I suppressed a sob. I at least would not give him the satisfaction of knowing how scared I was.

I could see cobbled streets now, beneath the edge of the shopping bag, but we quickly reached a door, which the man pushed open. He shoved me through and into a

dark open space, and I could smell clean rubber and floor wax, which was somehow familiar. There was a wrench of metal as another heavy door opened, and a shove on my back sent me sprawling. The door slammed shut. I heard a key turn in the lock.

## Chapter Eleven

Shaking, I sat up and pulled the bag off my head. The room was dark, but thin slivers of moonlight came through sealed windows up near the ceiling. I examined my body and found that I was all in one piece. The shallow scratches on my arms and legs had stopped bleeding. I pressed myself into a corner and hugged my arms around my knees, shivering. It was not very cold, but I found myself bizarrely wishing that I had worn pants today, rather than a skimpy skirt. Or armor. Girls who were kidnapped in the movies always seemed to have a sixth sense that when they got dressed that morning, they should wear pants and comfortable shoes. Those were the proper clothes for a daring escape. But here I was, in a short skirt, light jean jacket, and sandals. Just like the clothes of the movie girls who got murdered and whose bodies were never found.

I had heard stories about men kidnapping teenage girls and keeping them locked in the basement for years as their 'brides.' Was that what was going to happen to me? Or would this one just kill me? Would he torture me first? Would he rape me? I was starting to hyperventilate, and I made myself take several deep breaths.

*Relax Megan,* I told myself. *You're a smart girl. You can get yourself out of this.* I stayed pressed into the corner until I managed to calm down a little. The man had left me here, and I could hear no signs of his return, which meant that I could take stock of my situation.

I pushed myself to my feet and walked shakily around the room. It was tiny, lined with laden shelves – it must be a storage closet. There was still a scent of new rubber and

varnish in the air, and I bent close to the nearest shelf to examine its contents. I found a nest of hosepipe behind a tower of paint cans. Was this someone's tool shed? No, everything in here was too new, too uniform. A hardware store? Was I in my *uncle's* hardware store?

Someone would surely find me in the morning, I thought with a flash of relief, until it occurred to me that the man might only be keeping me here temporarily, intending to move me somewhere else before the night was done.

I found myself starting to panic again, and I squatted down and put my head between my knees. They always showed this in the movies. The poor helpless girl trapped in a room, and you watch her and feel sorry for her and at the same time you want to strangle her for not noticing that she could get herself out of there if she just stopped having a panic attack.

*Paint cans*, I thought suddenly. I stood abruptly and went over to the neat stack. I hefted one in my hand. The thin metal handle pressed into my palm with a reassuring weight that meant it was full. If I could climb up the metal shelves, maybe I could break one of the narrow windows with a paint can, and escape that way.

It was difficult to climb while holding a heavy paint can, but I found that if I transferred the can to a higher shelf and cleared my foot and handholds before climbing up to meet it, I had very little trouble. The shelves wobbled beneath my hands. Well, if the shelf collapsed on me, at least it would probably kill me before the maniac could.

*Hmm*, I thought, with a strange sort of clarity. *The word 'man' only needs three more letters to be 'maniac.'*

I was nearly at the top of the shelves when a loud tapping almost made me lose my grip. Clenching my fists on the metal bars to steady myself, I looked up to see the dim face of Mick.

For once, I was pleased to see him. "Mick!" I said, barely feeling the metal mesh of the shelf pressing into my knees.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice muffled by the glass.

"I'm locked in," I said. "Can you help me?"

"Sure. You just wait right there." His face disappeared from the window.

Carefully, I climbed back down the shelf, my knees weak with relief. I wondered how it was that Mick could have found me so quickly, but decided that it was best not to question my good fortune.

Soon I heard the sound of a key in the lock. The door swung open, and Mick stood in the doorway, smiling. "I'm here to rescue you," he said.

I didn't care how corny it was. Despite all the unease and dislike he had previously affected in me, I felt like I could have kissed him. I had never before felt such gratitude towards anyone. I hugged him tightly, and he hugged me back enthusiastically.

I pulled away at last. "C'mon, let's get out of here before he gets back."

"Right." Mick took my hand, and began leading me through the darkness of what was, I realized, definitely my uncle's hardware store. A brief, laughable suspicion crossed my mind. I looked down. He was wearing dun-colored hiking boots.



We left through the back door of the store, which took us right to the edge of the woods, and then curved around to get back to the dimly lit streets of the town square. We paused briefly in front of the library, and I whispered, "Take me home."

Thoughts were flying wildly through my mind like buzzing, swarming bees. The boots – the swift rescue – how had he known I was there unless he was the one who had kidnapped me? A finger jammed in the back can easily be mistaken for a gun, and who else could have gotten the keys for my uncle's store but someone who worked there? It had to be. But *why*? Was he that desperate to get into my good graces that he had staged a phony kidnapping so that he could heroically rescue me? *How despicable*, I thought with a flash of disgust.

I had actually opened my mouth to start berating him when a thought occurred to me. If he would go so far as to kidnap me, would he not be willing to go farther? If rebuffed again, who knew what he would do the next time. There was something about him that definitely scared me, and there was no telling what he was capable of beneath that shallow façade of a handsome, kind young man. Much better to play along.

We were nearly to my cousins' house now. It was coming up fast as we walked, and I was relieved to see that, despite the late hour, the lights in my aunt and uncle's room were still on. Good. That would give me an excuse to get away.

I turned back to Mick. His eyes gleamed in the light of the moon as though they were trying to devour me. His body was calling to mine, pulling me in. But I was wise to his game. And if he was playing the role of the predator, I could certainly fool him into believing I was playing the role of the prey.

“I can’t believe you saved me,” I said softly, trying to fill my voice with admiration. “That was the bravest thing I’ve ever seen. What if he’d gotten you too?”

“It was nothing,” Mick said modestly.

Too right. “Of course it wasn’t nothing,” I said. “You risked your life to save me. You’re my hero.” And since we were now on my front porch, I murmured, “How can I ever thank you,” and kissed him.

It wasn’t as bad as I had expected. From the aversion he usually caused in me, I had thought that kissing him would be nauseating, that his lips would taste somehow bad, like rotten fruit. But I needed him to think that his little game had been successful, and it turned out to be no worse than kissing someone I was not attracted to in a school play.

I broke away from him before he could get too into it, and said regretfully, “My aunt and uncle are home. I’m sorry I can’t ask you in to thank you properly, if you know what I mean.”

He stroked a finger down my cheek. “That’s all right. Some other time maybe?” He pulled me in for another kiss.

I wanted to squirm away from his lips, but I forced myself to kiss him back. “I’ll be looking forward to it,” I murmured, hoping I wasn’t overdoing it. I reached behind me and turned the doorknob as I broke away from him. “Good night.”

I slipped inside and closed the door behind me. I leaned against the solid wood and took a deep, steadying breath.

## Chapter Twelve

He was pacing through the house in frustration one rainy day, wishing he could be outside as usual, trying to remember what it was that he had forgotten. He stormed into the kitchen to demand something to eat, and stopped dead as he saw a child, a little boy no more than six years old, sitting on the kitchen floor and building a structure out of wooden blocks. He had stood some of them upright, and laid crosspieces on top of them to form a circle. He was in the midst of erecting a horseshoe of trilithons in the center.

"What is that?" Samuel demanded, his voice too loud. "Who taught you to build that?"

"One of the housemaids," the child whispered. "She -"  
But Samuel was already striding away.

"Get up, get up, get up!" Freddie sang.

"Wha - ?" I croaked.

"We have to go soon."

"It can't be morning. My alarm didn't go off."

"There was a blackout last night," said Eric's voice. "All the clocks went blinky."

I allowed my eyes to slit open a tiny bit. They felt bloated, and the light tore at them. "What, you're here too?"

"And me," said Archie. "Mom said we should wake you up."

I gave a mock roar of rage. "Get out of my room!"

There was a confusion of giggling and thumping footsteps.

Silence returned, and I rubbed wearily at my eyes. My late walk-turned-graveyard-visit-turned-fake-kidnapping adventure had left me so tired that I fell asleep as soon as I got into bed. Unfortunately, my body needed far more sleep than I had given it. My head throbbed with a sleep-deprivation headache.

I sat up, and saw that Freddie was still in my room. He was crouching down at the foot of my bed, staring into the eyes of the grey cat. "Hi, kitty," he said.

"Mrow," said the cat.

Freddie beamed at me. "He says his name is Spot."

I yawned. "Well, isn't that a coincidence? Just exactly the name you said you'd give a cat last week."

"I know!"

The floor felt unsteady as I stumbled over to my suitcase. What to wear today? Maybe I should wear jeans and tennis shoes, just in case someone was planning on kidnapping me again. Ah, what were the chances of *that* happening twice?

In the end, I decided on jean shorts and vest-and-tank combination. Still stylish, but far sturdier than a miniskirt. And I would need to retouch my nail polish where it had gotten scratched the night before.

I turned around, clutching the bundle of clothes in my hands, to find Freddie still gazing at the cat, his eyelids drooping sleepily. "He wants me to follow him," he murmured.

"Mm-hmm, that's great, buddy. Look, why don't you go on upstairs so I can get dressed? You can follow the cat some other time."

"Okay." He stood up, shaking his head a little bit, and stretched. His little baby-fat potbelly peeked out at me from under his shirt.

"I give you to the count of three," I said, putting on the sneering voice of a villain. "And then...I will *tickle* you."

He shrieked and ran from the room, laughing. "See?" I told the cat. "Kids are easy."

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I felt like I was sleepwalking the entire day. Strangely, it made me impervious to the staring eyes, mostly because I was tired to notice them. But tiredness brought with it its own depression.

By the time I took my cousins to their music lesson, I was feeling so down that I thought I'd just sit around and wait for them, rather than finding something to do on my own. If I didn't go outside, no one would glare at me, no one would hiss at me.

When Mrs. Wilkes the music teacher led the boys into her living room and told me I could pick them up after five, I asked if I could wait inside. Mrs. Wilkes looked surprised, since this would be a wait of over two hours, but eventually she brought me into the kitchen and told me I could wait there.

I flopped down into a chair. Two hours. Time was going to drag on and on in that awful way it did when you were just waiting around with nothing to do.

Mechanically precise scales began drifting in from the other room. I rummaged through my bag, looking for something to occupy my mind. Sunblock. Juice boxes. Tissues. Some dried fruit. My useless cell phone. Crap – nothing at all. Well, at least I was not outside.

I looked up at the sound of shuffling footsteps. An old man stood in the kitchen doorway, staring at me in surprise. "Virginia?" he said. His voice was slightly strained and hoarse, as though he had lost it once after a wild party in his youth and it had never come back.

"No. I'm Megan."

The old man nodded sagely. “Oh, that’s right. Virginia’s daughter.”

“No – Megan. Megan Breelie.”

“You can’t be Virginia’s *granddaughter*?”

“Look,” I said slowly, “I am no relation to Virginia at all.”

“Whew,” said the old man. “Thought I was getting old.” He went over to the cupboard. “Have some coffee, Wilkes. Oh, don’t mind if I do.” I watched him puttering around the kitchen. Wilkes, he had called himself. He couldn’t be the music teacher’s husband. Mrs. Wilkes hardly looked more than forty. But it wasn’t impossible. I asked him if he was, and he nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I’m her father-in-law.”

“Oh,” said I, confused and relieved.

Wilkes sat down with a groan in the chair opposite me. He stirred his coffee, examining me unashamedly. “Now,” he said. “We’ve established who I am. Who are you?”

“Megan,” I said again. “Megan Breelie.”

“Breelie...Breelie...I knew a Breelie once. In the War. Scottish bastard. You Scottish?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think so.” Dad *loved* genealogy. He was probably trying to prove that his ancestors were Celts, or related to William the Conqueror or something. I never paid attention when he talked about it.

“Pity. Fine fellow. What was your name again?”

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. I was not used to old people. My mother's parents were both dead by the time she was in college, and my father's parents retired to Florida years ago. For all I knew, this guy was senile. I told him my name again.

“Ah, yes,” he said. “You would be the girl they found on the side of the road two weeks ago.”

“Yes,” I said, surprised that he would remember.

“So what happened to you?”

“They told me I was hit by a car.”

Wilkes tasted his coffee and made a face. “Yecch. Won't do.” He began adding sugar to his cup. “That's far too mundane.”

“The coffee?”

“Virginia won't let me have too much sugar, you know. Worries too much, that girl. But what she doesn't know won't hurt her.” He tasted his coffee again and smacked his lips. “The story's too mundane.”

I could not help feeling that talking to this old man was like taking part in a pentathlon when no one had told you what the sports were. “What story?”

“Girl goes to new town and loses memory. Turns out girl was hit by car.” He shook his head, his lower lip protruding like a petulant child's. “Nah, nah. I don't like it. It's far too simple. Too mundane. Not to worry though. We can improve it.” His eyes narrowed in concentration, nearly disappearing into his wrinkles. “How's this? Girl witnessed something terrible and lost her memory so she wouldn't have to face it. Or

alternatively, girl witnessed something she was not supposed to see and had the memory extracted from her by force.”

“But that’s not what happened,” I said. “You can’t change what happened. I was hit by a car. That’s it.”

“I thought you said you lost your memory,” said the old man shrewdly. “How would *you* know what happened to you?”

“I know what *didn’t* happen,” I shot back. “And besides,” I dredged up memories I didn’t know I had kept from Dad-lectures when I had barely been paying attention, “isn’t the simplest answer the right one? Somebody’s razor, or something like that?”

“Ah, the right one, but not necessarily the one that’s most interesting. And in my opinion, life could stand to be a little more interesting.”

“I think it’s fine the way it is.”

Wilkes regarded me silently for a few moments. “I am truly sorry to hear that,” he said at last, his face fully serious. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “Perhaps Wicket’s Folly and Opal can help you.”

I wanted to demand what he meant by this statement, but the words got trapped in my mouth as I remembered my father’s direction to always respect my elders, so I simply asked who Opal was.

“Ah, lovely Opal.” The old man leaned back in his chair. “She’s a spirit, an angel, call her what you will. She watches over Wicket’s Folly. Makes this place what it is. I used to see her sometimes, especially when I was a lad. I grew up here, you know. I don’t



know her name really, but her hair is white, so I thought 'Opal' would do just fine.

Maybe, if you let the Folly work on you a while – maybe you'll see her too."

I suppressed a shudder. "I don't think I want to." I didn't like all this talk of spirits and angels. It was the kind of thing my mother had always denied just a little too emphatically. Then something occurred to me. "You grew up here? Can you tell me something? What's with all those cemeteries around the town?"

"Cemeteries?" he said slowly, scratching a gnarled finger deep into one of his ears. "I'm not sure I –"

"There are three cemeteries surrounding this town," I said impatiently.

He looked confused, as though this was coming to him from somewhere very far away. "People get old, don't they?"

"They weren't all old."

"You know..." his bushy eyebrows drew together in concentration. "I think there was a fire. A long time ago. People died."

"It wasn't just once. People kept dying, year after year, some recently, always around June and December 21st."

"The solstices?"

Aha! Those dates *were* significant. The summer and winter solstices. But what did it *mean*? "Yes?" I said eagerly.

But the look of concentration and awareness was fading, and he was once more a cheerful, slightly crazy old man. "Give it time, Margaret," he said, nodding sagely. "I'm sure everything will be just fine in the end. It always is. Let Opal open your eyes to the

world around you. You may like what you see. Come to the park this Friday evening," he said, abruptly changing track. "Every other week we build a bonfire, we eat, we tell stories. Sometimes," he lowered his voice, "magical things happen."

"Well – I –"

"At the very least, there will be free food." He smiled at me winningly. Wrinkles bunched on his cheeks so that his eyes nearly disappeared. "Ah, would you listen to that?" He closed his eyes at the methodical music plunking forth from the piano in the other room. "Do you remember, Marguerite? That dance in Paris?" He rose shakily to his feet and held out a large, wrinkled hand. "Shall we dance once more?"

If I had been eating, I probably would have choked. Was he senile or not? Was he just teasing me?

He took my hand and drew me out of my chair. "Hey, humor me. I'm old."

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"I think I kinda had a date with an old man today," I told Jackie on the phone that night.

She laughed. "Oh, shit! You are such a slut!"

"*What?* It was totally his fault."

"How old is he? Is he rich? I'm thinking – gold digging!"

"Listen, I've got some more to tell you about Mick."

"Ooh, creepy stalker guy, do tell. Shutting up now!"

I glanced around quickly. There was no one in the kitchen. The dishes were washed and dried, and all the food was put away. I could hear my aunt and uncle in the other room, playing a loud game with my cousins. Perfect.

My voice low, I related the story of the previous night's kidnapping. It took me a good fifteen minutes to recap everything – why I was out at night, how I had nearly managed to escape by myself, how I told him what he wanted to hear so he would leave me alone. Jackie said nothing, but she was just being a good audience and not interrupting. "I don't know what I'm going to do when I see him again," I finished. "I don't know how long I can keep leading him on."

Jackie said nothing.

"Well?"

Still nothing.

"You better not be online while I'm talking to you....Jackie?....Hello?"

At that moment, all the lights went out. There was a chorus of complaints from the other room.

I sighed. The phone must've died too. *I may just have spent the last fifteen minutes talking to myself.*

This time, it took two hours before the lights came back on.

*The town lies like a sea of pitch below me. There is not a single light to be seen. It's growing, spreading, getting worse each and every time. My control is slipping.*

*I clench my fists in my hair and drag until the buzzing turns into a physical pain in my scalp. Real pain I can handle. The blankness, the emptiness, the buzzing that eats at my mind – made tenfold worse by the Girl's presence – that is much harder to withstand.*

*So close! I am so close and her very presence will ruin everything!*

*I will have to take more souls, or it will all fly away like dust on the wind. Already, I feel as though I am trying to capture water in my cupped hands. Nothing I do will keep it from slipping away.*

*There is nothing more to be done. I need more souls or I will no longer even be able to keep myself from fading away. I must make it to the solstice, and for that, others must die. She must die.*

*I feel a smile pulling at my lips. Yes, she must die. I have reached the bounds of my agreement with her father. No matter what trouble he makes for me, it cannot be worse than she is already causing, with her constant questions, and her doubts that seep into peoples' minds, so that I cannot dispel them no matter what I do.*

*I search out the mind of the Charmer in the darkness below. Before I can even speak, he starts chattering like a cocky squirrel, telling me proudly of how his plan gained him the Girl's trust. The tiresome boy wants my praise.*

*There has been a change of plans, I tell him. She is getting too dangerous. It is no longer enough to mislead her. She must be dealt with.*

*All that work, his disgruntled mind whispers. Aloud he says, you don't expect me to do it, do you?*

*Of course not. I will take care of it.*

*All that work for nothing, he thinks. I know he is upset. His whispering mind betrays him. Why should I listen to you, he wonders.*

*Stay away from her, I tell him bluntly.*

*Fine, he says. His mind mutters mutinously.*

*I need his help, but I do not have time to wheedle and coax. He is loyal, and he will remain so. I have other matters to attend to.*

*Soon she will be dead. I feel better already.*

## Chapter Thirteen

Though he usually did not take any notice of the comings and goings of his servants, he looked through every room in the house until he found a maid dusting the curtains in the parlor. "You," he said curtly. "You know about the circle made of stone?"

She turned slowly, lowering her duster. "I do," she said. Her voice was low and soft, her tone almost languorous. At first he thought she was an old woman, but he quickly realized that only her voice was old; she could not be more than eighteen. He had been fooled by her pale blond hair and eyes light enough to seem colorless.

"What is it?" Samuel said impatiently.

A slight smile seemed to twitch at the corner of her mouth. "It is Stonehenge," she said.

"Stonehenge," he breathed. No wonder it had looked so familiar. Why did he dream of Stonehenge? What did it mean?

'Do you want me to tell you about Stonehenge?' Her words sounded almost lazy.

He hesitated, then went over to sit in a comfortable chair. "Tell me," he said.

On Friday morning, my uncle drove me to the clinic to have the stitches in my hand removed. My stomach squirmed when the grubby bandage was gone and I saw the black twists like spider legs in my skin, but when the stitches were out, it looked much better. All that remained of the accident was a thin, neat line of red across my palm.

"Will it scar?" I asked.

"Just think of it as a souvenir from Wicket's Folly," said Dr. Nose-hair.

This was not very reassuring, but at least I no longer looked like some sort of invalid.

I didn't want to go to the bonfire thing that night, but apparently, it had been a summer ritual for as long as my cousins could remember. What's more, they told me, I myself had enjoyed the one I had been to before my accident. That didn't sound like me at all because storytelling wasn't really my style, but I shrugged, and went along with it.

We set off just as dusk was falling. I walked with the boys, and Aunt Alicia and Uncle Bennet strolled behind, arm in arm. Uncle Bennet carried a picnic basket full of

corn bread that he had whipped up rather hurriedly and hoped would be edible. It really ought to have been me who made the cornbread, but I was now afraid to make anything more complicated than peanut butter sandwiches.

As we reached the center of town, we began to see people trailing in from all corners of the square. Many of them carried baskets and covered platters. They nodded at each other, waving and smiling. They all knew each other. They were all friends. It made me ache inside. No one was going to greet me with anything more than sullen stares and cold glares. My only options seemed to be between outright hostility and indifference.

There was already a small crowd of people in the park. They had set up a centrally located picnic table as the buffet, and people were helping themselves to mounds of potluck food before they went over to join friends and family at other tables. Some ate standing up, balancing their plates near their faces. Others sat cheerfully on the ground, or swiveled gently back and forth on the swing sets. There was a buzz of happy conversation mingling with the chirping of crickets and the whirring of cicadas. As I watched them, I felt a strange mixture of awe and jealousy. Everyone seemed to know and like everyone else, no matter their race, ethnicity, or age. Were all small towns like this, or was this one just weird?

I waited quietly while my family greeted their friends. There were a lot of them. I noticed a couple of the unfriendly art class girls over by the food, and I looked down at the ground so I wouldn't have to make eye contact with any of them. Unfortunately, this was the point at which my family went over to fill their plates, and I had no choice but to go with them.

There was an instant scuffle as all the boys tried to grab for the food they wanted most. Eric and Archie started an arm wrestling competition to decide who would get first pick, and Freddie got shoved under the table, where he remained, watching the proceedings placidly.

I tried very hard to pretend that I could not see Sasha and Natalie as they helped themselves to potato salad alongside me, but apparently they were done with giving me the silent treatment.

“What are *you* doing here?” Sasha hissed. “You should just go.”

“Trust me,” I mumbled. “I’m getting out of here as soon as I can. I’m going home on Wednesday, and then I’ll be out of your life for good, so just leave me be ‘til then.”

Sasha’s eyebrows bunched together, and her mouth opened as though I had just insulted her terribly, and she was not about to take it lying down. Natalie looked around nervously and tugged at her friend’s arm. Sasha glared at me briefly, and then allowed herself to be drawn away.

I sighed, and watched Uncle Bennet and Aunt Alicia trying to persuade Freddie to get out from under the table.

“They don’t like me either,” said a voice by my side, and I turned to see Tamara standing next to me. “I don’t know why. I didn’t do anything to them.”

“Neither did I,” I said morosely. “I think.”

“Maybe they don’t like redheads.”

I shrugged. It made sense that they didn’t like Tamara and her desperate-to-please attitude, but I was popular. Had been popular.



“Well, I guess I better get back to my dad,” Tamara said. Her voice sounded hopeful, as though she wanted me to ask her to stay.

“Yeah, see you,” I said in the falsely sincere voice that I had been cultivating for years to deal with people like her. “I’d better get back to my people too.”

"Oh Megan, there you are," Aunt Alicia called to me as I walked by. "I want you to meet Steve and Jeffrey." She indicated two young men who were standing by her side. "They're the ones who found you after your accident. They got you to the hospital."

So this must Aunt Alicia's "young couple." Both were well dressed, in neat, stylish, well-fitting clothing. Add to that the baby that Steve was balancing on his hip, and I was ninety-nine percent sure they were gay. No one around us seemed to think it was strange at all that two men walking around with a baby. Back in LA, the only openly gay kid at school was despised and ridiculed. Maybe there were some good things about Wicket's Folly, too.

"Glad to see you're doing all right." Jeffrey held out his hand to shake. It was warm and solid.

"This is Marcie," Steve said, and the baby gurgled at me.

"You were in such a state when we picked you up on the road." Jeffrey looked at Steve, and they smiled at each other. "We thought you must've escaped from a mental institution!"

They expected me to laugh along with them, but I did not find it funny. "Why?" I said. "What did I do?"

Steve cleared his throat and started playing with the baby's hand.

"Oh, no reason," Jeffrey said lightly. "You weren't really coherent – just rambling on about stones, and ghosts, and something about your mother."

As he spoke, I felt a strange bubbling in my head, as though something invisible was trying to rise to the surface of a mental lake. I remembered images, sensations, distinct and unconnected – running – staggering – root jabbing into my ankle, pain – the world twisting and turning around me – running – from what? no idea – blood on my hand – head thick and swimming with popping lights – a car – waving it down, world tilting – a baby chuckling at me from a carseat – rental car smell – new leather against my cheek – and then nothing more.

I must have had a funny expression on my face, because Steve said that they had better go get some food before it was all gone. They were so glad I was all right, they told me, and hurried away.

My family had a picnic table to themselves, and I forced a cheerful expression onto my face as I joined them. My head ached faintly as I tried to follow along with the multiple conversations of my cousins. This time, it was just too difficult. Instead, I let my head clear of all thoughts, and watched the efforts of three men who were building a bonfire on a platform of bricks nearby. I focused on the small things, like the way they were layering the wood so that it would have room to breathe.

The tiny glows of the fireflies flitted around in the purpling sky. It was really pretty, for something that was actually nothing more than the glowing asses of bugs. The sky was growing quickly darker, and it made me feel anonymous and invisible. Darkness meant safety, and I lifted my chin a little.

When the bonfire was going strong, one of the men straightened up, brushing a forearm over his sweaty forehead, and called out that the storytelling would commence in ten minutes, once the sky was fully dark.

“That’s our mayor,” Aunt Alicia told me. “Mayor Strahan. But he also goes by Robert. Or Bob.”

So this must be Tamara’s father. His face looked young in the firelight that made the rims of his glasses glint gold. He probably wasn’t even fifty, though his curly hair was completely gray.

“Why do we have to wait until it’s dark?” I asked.

Aunt Alicia tried to force her fingers under the plaster of her cast to scratch her arm. “God, this is driving me crazy! To give people time to finish eating, I guess.”

Uncle Bennet leaned over her. “Nighttime is the best time for telling stories. Less to see. More to imagine.”

All around us, people were getting up, cleaning up their tables, and making their way to the fire. They sat down around it in a circle that filled out as more people joined them. I wondered how many people there were. Thirty? Maybe more? Most sat on the ground, with only the older people and one or two pregnant women occupying chairs. My cousins went over too, leaving their parents to clean up. It was incredible that the prospect of a story could keep them and all the other hyperactive children quiet and well-behaved. The air of the gathering had changed from a cheerful dinner to quiet, excited, and expectant. I sat down cross-legged next to my cousins, the short stiff grass tickling at my shins. The warm smell of burning wood spicing the air.

When everyone had joined the circle, Mayor Strahan stood up again. “Welcome again to another summer bonfire,” he said. “Before we begin, I would just like to remind everyone that there is a booksale at the library on Monday, so we should all take advantage of that. Um, let me see....All-you-can-eat brunch at The Mill and Forge on Sunday. The Solstice Festival is coming up in just three weeks, and this one promises to be *spectacular* – talk to Debbie Glass if you want to host a booth or just help out.

“Last week we heard a wonderful yarn from Jay Wilkes about one of his World War II adventures in Prague. I’m sure we will all remember that particular story for years to come.” There were a few titters from the crowd, and someone wolf-whistled. I could see old Mr. Wilkes, leaning back in his chair and looking pleased with himself. “We hand our storyteller’s hat this week to a younger head, Miss Nina Liu.” A young woman next to him stood up and acknowledged the crowd with a genial wave of her hand. There was some brief applause. “Let us hope,” the mayor went on with a wry smile, “that this story will be more suitable for children.” More laughter, calls of *no way*. “And now,” he lowered his voice dramatically, “Let the storytelling begin.” He took Nina Liu’s vacated place on the ground, and she sat down in his empty folding chair.

I probably would have been at least a little nervous if I were about to speak to upwards of thirty people, but Nina's face was calm and serious. She swept her short, shiny black hair behind her ear, and leaned forward, the firelight flickering on her face.

“Tonight I am going to tell you a story that has been passed down in my family for many generations.” She spoke slowly, her voice hushed, and though there was no microphone, I could hear every word. The circle was absolutely silent. Even the babies

seemed to be listening. Children as young as Marcie in her fathers' arms held still, their eyes not even drooping.

“This story is not the only thing that women in my family pass down to their daughters.” Nina bent down, slipped her foot free from her sandal, and extended it out towards the fire. Everyone leaned in to see. The firelight turned her skin golden and outlined the six toes on her foot. Her foot did not look misshapen in any way. All six of her toes were perfectly formed and proportioned. I could not have said which of them was the extra.

“Yes,” said Nina, slipping her foot back into its sandal. “Every woman in my family along the direct maternal line has six toes on her right foot. The daughters of my uncles do not have it, the daughters of my brothers will not have it, but the daughters of my aunts have it, and some day, my daughters will have it as well. My mother told me this story when I was a child, and when my daughters ask, I will tell them this story as well.”

Maybe this would not be so bad. Medical thrillers were always good, especially if there were hot young doctors involved. Perhaps this could be interesting after all.

“This story takes place many, many years ago. When my mother told it to me, she had no idea how many years ago it was. She didn’t even know the name of our ancestress, or how many generations had passed since she lived. She just used the term ‘Wai Po,’ meaning simply ‘grandmother,’ which was how her mother had told it to her, and on and on.

“Long ago in China, my many-times great-grandmother was a young woman. Her family was recently fallen from grace, but she was able to make a good marriage, to a man who was above her station. However, the downside was that the man already had two wives, and she now found herself in the position of being the third wife in an already established household. Because she was new, she was more interesting to her husband, but more hated by the other wives. The other wives had never much liked each other, but they put aside their differences to heap abuse and scorn on the new object of their husband’s affection.

“Any other woman might have become meek and subdued, catering to the every demand of the first two wives to try to curry favor, but my grandmother was not this kind of person. She was just as jealous and petty as the other wives, and she chafed at her low position in the household. She strutted around proudly, refusing to take any abuse, telling the other wives through her every action – look, our husband prefers my company to yours.

“And yet, time passed, and the husband lost interest in his new wife. He was a man born to wealth and privilege, and he could only amuse himself with a new person or toy for so long before his attention was caught by a bright new object. When he began pursuing a beautiful village girl, my grandmother was enraged. Here she was, newly pregnant with his child, and he had the gall to go chasing after some lowly, big-footed peasant girl!

“The other wives were so very smug. *Look at that*, they said to each other. *Couldn’t keep him interested for long, could she?*

“My grandmother could forgive her husband’s philandering because he was only a man, foolish and spoiled. But she could not forgive the vicious hissing of the other wives. *You will see*, she told them. *I will win back his attention, and I will have all of it. There will be nothing left for all of you.*

“At first, it was an empty threat, because she did not know what she would do. All her efforts to gain her husband’s attention went unnoticed, and the other wives sneered more than ever. Finally, in desperation, she sought out the advice of an old wise woman who lived on the edge of a nearby lake. The old woman was blind, but she had seen and heard much in her youth, and she had learned from it all. She listened patiently to my grandmother’s story and then asked what consistently held her husband’s attention.

“*Him?* said my grandmother disdainfully. *He flits from skirt to skirt like a hungry moth. The only thing that keeps his attention for long are the village cats!*

“The old woman nodded slowly. *Long ago, when I was as young and headstrong as you, I too tried to win a man's affection through magic and trickery*, she said. *I learned from a wise woman how to make a special tea, and today, I will make it once more for you. When you get home, brew your tea with these leaves and drink it – only yourself – no one else. This is how you will keep the attention of such a man. To end the spell, drink the remains of the tea when it is cold.*

“My grandmother thanked her and turned to leave, but the old woman called her back. *Aren't you going to ask me if the magic worked for me?* she asked, *if I got what I wanted?*

"My grandmother did not really care, and said so. The old woman scowled and shook her head. *Be careful*, she said. *By getting what we want, sometimes we lose something irreplaceable.* My grandmother was not much interested in cryptic warnings, so she took her packet of tea leaves and went back home.

"That afternoon, she boiled water and made tea, drinking it in her own room and hiding the half-empty cup behind her bed where no one would be able to find it. The tea made her very dizzy, and she fell to the floor on her hands and knees. After a moment, the dizziness passed, and she looked around her. Everything seemed much larger than usual. Her neck could now turn more easily, and she examined herself to find that her body was covered in fur. She had become a small white cat with dark paws and tail – a Siamese."

I looked around. The people in the circle were all fixed on Nina's words with rapt attention. No one seemed disturbed that the main character of the story they were listening to had just turned into a cat. In fact, if not for the firelight flickering on their faces, they would have seemed frozen, completely motionless. They seemed not to notice, as I did, the grass prickling their legs, or the ground pressing into their ankles and backsides. No one had changed positions since the story began. They certainly didn't seem to care that the story that had started out as a perfectly respectable soap opera medical drama had just turned into an impossible tale of magic.

The only one not fixated on Nina's words was Mick. I could see him staring at me, making no attempt to hide it, the bonfire drawing a dancing bead of gold in his reflecting eyes. It made him appear eerie, wolfish.



“My grandmother now understood the intent of the wise woman’s spell. Her husband’s attention could be kept only by cats, and she was now a cat, a beautiful Siamese queen. She went into her husband’s room. He was indeed taken with the new cat. He exclaimed over her milky white fur, the beautiful ash gray tint of her face, her soft paws, her silky tail, and her eyes as beautiful and blue as a lake on a sunny day. He delighted in carrying her around with him, stroking her fur, scratching her chin, and tickling her belly.”

All the people in the circle were staring into the fire as though hypnotized. My elbow nudged Freddie’s arm, but he did not move. It was as though they had all chosen the focal point of the fire so they could let the words surround them, disembodied – as though they were living the story, not listening to it. I had never been able to enter a story in that way. My English class reading projects had always been a pain, but at least they weren’t fantastical. They tended to stay more in the realm of ‘classics’ by dead English men. I *had* had to read the *Odyssey* in ninth grade, but all that nonsense was easily ascribed to the superstition of the time. I stared into the fire too, wondering what it would be like, just once, to experience a story with utter abandon.

“And so it went on like this for weeks. My grandmother would brew her tea in secret, hide the remainder and turn into a cat, and then spend all her time with her husband. Indeed, she spent more time with him as a cat than she even had when she was a woman. She became smug and contented once more, happily immune to the taunting of the other wives, who could not understand what was happening, or where she kept

disappearing to. Soon she would have a child, which would give her the most favored status of mother of her husband's son. It seemed she had everything she wanted.”

I stared into the fire like everyone else, focusing on it as I listened to Nina's words. The dancing flames burned themselves into my eyes, bending and twisting impossibly, taking a shape that was not natural to fires. Against the bright, orangey gold tongues of flame, I could see something darker, more like amber, in the fire's heart. The amber flames took the shape of a man in some kind of flowing, flaming robes, sitting on the ground as a small cat made of fire frisked around him. The flame-man reached out a hand and the cat nuzzled its head against him.

I shook my head rapidly, blinking and rubbing my eyes, and when I looked back, the images were gone. There were only the snapping and crackling logs at the heart of a normal, dancing fire. Despite the heat, I shivered involuntarily.

“One day, when she sat, as a cat, purring in her husband's arms, a sudden pain struck her. Terrified, she jumped down and ran back to her own room. Another pain struck, and she realized that her baby was trying to be born, even though she was only three months pregnant. Too late, she realized that the gestation period of a cat is much shorter than that of a human being. Her unborn baby transformed into an unborn kitten when she transformed into a cat, and now it thought that this was the proper time to be born – which it was – for a cat.”

I glanced around incredulously. People were actually buying this crap? It was one thing for the children to believe it, but there were a bunch of adults and old people in the circle, and they were drinking in every word. There had been a few kids like that at my

school, kids who sat around reading during every class break. Jackie and I teased them mercilessly, though when they were reading, they never seemed to hear us.

“My grandmother hurried back to her room, but found to her dismay that the tea was gone! One of the other wives must have come snooping into her room and removed it. If she wanted to turn back into a human, she would have to brew another cup of tea, something that is incredibly difficult to do without opposable thumbs at the best of times, and much more so when you are in labor. Wracked with pain, she tried to drag herself to the chest where she kept the tea, but collapsed to the floor.

“Soon she gave birth to a single female kitten, perfectly formed except that it had six toes on one of its feet. My grandmother rested until she felt better, then went about making another cup of tea. It was very difficult, but by using her claws and mouth, she was able to do it. She drank the tea and turned back into a woman, but her daughter was still a kitten. Desperately, she dripped some of the cold tea into the tiny mouth, but nothing happened. Her daughter had been born a kitten, and it seemed that she would be staying that way. Far too late, my grandmother understood the wise woman’s warning.”

I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't listen to this ridiculous story, couldn't watch these people drinking it in and believing it. And the thing with the fire – that hadn't happened either. “Need to go to the bathroom,” I muttered, but no one seemed to hear me. I stood abruptly and left the circle and the warmth of the firelight behind.

## Chapter Fourteen

The picnic benches were empty now, and I sat down at one that was too far to hear the rest of Nina's story. This also took me away from the warmth of the fire, and the air felt very cold without it. I scrubbed my hands over my bare upper arms to try and warm up. What *was* it about Nina's story that was so upsetting? It wasn't just the story itself, ridiculous as it was. That was just like the *Odyssey* – an old myth from back in the times that people were less enlightened about the ways the world really worked. Or in this case, a family story to explain a their genetic predisposition for polydactyly. I could forgive it for that, even as I preferred not to listen to it. No, what bothered me most was the way that Nina told the fantastical story as though it were fact, and all the other people, including the adults who should know better, seemed perfectly willing to accept the story as fact.

I watched the people in the circle, feeling superior to them because I did not share their gullibility, but also slightly jealous of them, because once again, I was being left out. True, I had left *them*, but it still hurt a little.

A shape detached itself from the circle and came towards me. Golden firelight glinted on golden hair. Ugh. Mick.

He shrugged off his light jacket and offered it to me. "Cold?"

I shook my head. "No thanks." I *was* cold, but I did not want to accept any help from him. He sat down beside me, and I watched him warily. "You didn't like the story?" he asked, all kindness and caring.

“Mm, not really my thing.”

“You’ve just got to give it a chance. This place is special – different. It’s like – here, the things that don’t matter, just don’t matter, you know?”

“Huh?”

“Well.” He thought. “It’s like there’s someone or something else watching over us – taking responsibility. You can do whatever you want – *whatever* you want, because she worries about the other stuff for you.”

The way he said it made me think he was including murder and violence in the things that he 'didn't have to take responsibility' for. “She?”

“The Folly. The spirit. She knows what’s best; if you listen, maybe she’ll talk to you. She takes care of the little things, so if you want to kick back sometime, you can. She makes sure it's okay.”

He must be talking about the same spirit that Wilkes had described to me the other day, but Mick’s idea of it seemed a little more sinister. “But I thought –” I began.

“Shh,” Mick whispered. He reached out and placed his hand on top of mine, and a wave of revulsion shot through me. *Don't you touch me, you creep.* I wanted to jerk away, but at the same time I was unable to move, a small rabbit crouching, heart racing, before a calm, watchful predator – the wolf that knows that all it has to do is swipe out a paw lightning fast, and the rabbit will be lying, neck broken, before it. It had to be the combination of the isolation, the darkness, and the firelight that made his weird magnetism so much stronger.

He leaned towards me, his breath warm on my ear. “It’s okay, Megan. This is the place. The Folly is watching over you. You can just relax. Let go sometime. Live on impulse for a change. Give in to what you want. I promise you, it’s the best feeling in the world.” He let go of my hand at last, stared into my eyes for what seemed like a full minute, then strode away from me, away from the bonfire, and out of the park.

I watched him go shakily. What on earth had just happened?

It was like he became a different person at night – one who had that strange dangerous allure of a predator. It was like – and I could have laughed at myself for thinking it – it was like he was some kind of werewolf, given the wolfish qualities of the hunter by the light of the moon.

The chill of the night breeze hit me, and I shivered. Maybe I should go back to the fire. Even if the story was still going on.

I got up, crossing my arms tightly across my stomach and gripping my goose-pimplly elbows. As I neared the circle, I could hear the murmur of Nina's words over the crackle of the flames, and see that all the people were just as frozen as when I had left. The fire still burned high, and – was it bigger?

*Oh my god.*

The fire was growing, getting bigger and bigger, spreading slowly across the bricks, even though there was nothing to burn. *That's not possible!* Frozen, I shook my head sharply back and forth, unable to believe what I was seeing.

The brightness of the flames was incredible; it tried to consume the entire sky. The fire swelled out over the bricks, spreading and growing as it went, getting brighter

and hotter as it crept towards the people. And the people – the people didn't move! They sat as still as statues, staring blankly ahead of them as the fire crept closer and closer.

Thoughts charged through my head at super speed. *Call 911 – no cell phone – pay phone? – no money – no fire department – no time!*

I hurried towards the people and stopped as I was hit with an almost unbearable wave of white heat. It dried the backs of my eyeballs. The ends of my hair crackled and tried to stand up. "Move!" I screamed. "*Move!*"

Not one of them so much as twitched. Sweat beaded on faces and slid down skin, but their eyes were glazed over and empty.

I grabbed my aunt's shoulder and shook her, praying to a god I had never spoken to in my life. Her head wobbled limply back and forth like those ridiculous dolls. Archie slumped a little against her side.

"Wake up," I screamed in her ear. She didn't move. No one did. The fire was nearly upon them; it licked at the shoes of the closest one, a fat, middle-aged man, but he didn't even react.

What should I do? What should I do? *Oh god, oh god, I don't know what I'm supposed to do.* Thirty people – my aunt, my uncle, my *cousins* – were all going to be burnt to a crisp because they were hypnotized by that awful story.

The story! I gasped, and the air was hot and sawing in my lungs. Nina was still telling the story!

Every instant stretched into an eternity. I vaulted through people, heat tight and aching on my skin, sweat streaming down my neck. I nearly tripped over someone's

motionless outstretched leg, righted myself on someone else's shoulder. I teetered to a halt in front of Nina and slapped her, hard, in the face.

She stopped talking. Blinked. Slowly, she raised a hand to her flushed cheek.

There was a scream. Not Nina. Not me. People were coming back to themselves to find that an enormous fire was roaring nearly upon them. All around they were jumping to their feet, scrambling backwards, tripping over one another away from the flames. The heat quickly dried out my throat as I laughed a half-crazed laugh. It was beautiful.

I pushed with them, gasping hard like I had just lifted a boulder. There was a mass of people everywhere, so much noise, so much screaming. Mothers calling for their children, people calling for their friends, others demanding to know what had happened, and what they should do.

But everyone was out of range. Everyone was safe. And the fire was not getting any larger.

"We should put it out," someone called.

"Somebody get some water!" yelled someone else.

"No one brought water, but there's cranberry juice!"

"There's water in the bathroom, dumbass."

"Where's Bob?"

"Have you seen the mayor?"

"I think he went home, yeah?"



I joined the people running back and forth to the public bathrooms, grabbing half-empty plastic serving bowls off the table and filling them with water to throw on the flames. It seemed useless, futile in the face of such a huge fire, but there was nothing else we could do.

"Why don't you people have a fire department," I complained as I was bumped along. No one heard me. It didn't matter though. Despite the sawing in my lungs, I was buoyant. I had saved them all! If I wanted to, I could put out this fire by myself!

The flames went down surprisingly quickly. Because it didn't succeed in killing anyone, I thought before I could stop myself. It had no more reason to burn.

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"We missed the end of the story," Uncle Bennet said grumpily.

"*What?*" I croaked. I couldn't believe my ears. We were walking home, Freddie clutching my hand tightly as we walked. We were all covered in ash. It had stuck to the drying sweat on my body and still-damp clothes, and I could feel it grating around in my lungs. It still fell from the sky like warm, dirty snow. "We're all nearly killed by a huge crazy fire, and you're mad that you missed the end of the *story?*"

The boys giggled.

"No, Megan, I'm not mad at you," Uncle Bennet said.

"But the *fire*," I more or less squealed.

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," he said. "It wasn't that bad."

I opened my mouth to remind him that yes, it had been that bad, that they all would have been burned to death if it hadn't been for me, that I had saved them all, but

instead, I started coughing. My throat scraped with every breath. There were surely cinders stuck to my eyelashes; I could feel them, gritty in the corners of my eyes.

"Bye, Ben," someone called.

"See ya, Craig," Uncle Bennet called to a group of shadowy people heading past us. "So sorry Beth couldn't make it. Say hi to her for us."

I shook my head incredulously. These people had almost *died*. If not for me, they would *be* dead – just another group of tombstones in their already crowded cemeteries – but they were acting as though nothing had happened at all.

"We only missed the very end, anyway," said Aunt Alicia. "You missed much more when you left."

"Hmph," I said.

"Don't you want to know how it ended?"

I gave up and sighed a ragged sigh. *What's the point?* "I can guess. She was able to turn her daughter back into a human."

"How did you know?" yelped Freddie.

"Nu-uh," said Eric. "She couldn't turn *back* into a human if she wasn't a human to begin with."

"Thank you, Mr. Semantics," I said.

Aunt Alicia smiled. "She had to go back to the wise woman to beg for help. The wise woman didn't want to help her. She said that the woman had paid the price for her desire, and this was her lesson. But the woman begged and begged, crying because her daughter was a cat, and at last the wise woman relented. She set her three tasks, and if she

could complete them, she would prove that she was worthy of getting her wish. She was just about to complete the third task when you stopped Nina telling it. We were worried she wouldn't be able to do that last one, because it involved an act of complete selflessness, and she was so vain. It was very exciting. I wish we could have found out what happened."

"Well, of course she did it," I said. "That's always how those things end."

She brushed absentmindedly at the soot on her cast, and then looked at her hand as though she couldn't understand why it was grey. "That's hardly the point. It's about the *story*. Not getting to hear the end of it."

"Yes, it was a lovely story. All the women in her family have six toes because of their female ancestor who was born a cat." Uncle Bennet spoke simply, with no trace of irony in his voice. I wanted to ask him whether he actually believe that, but I bit back the question. I did not think I would have liked the answer.

My cousins discussed the events of Nina Liu's story. No one even mentioned the fire at all. I said nothing.

Back in the basement, I took a long, long shower that washed off enough soot to turn the white tiles dark gray. I coughed out a lot of ash too, enough to finally feel like my lungs, though scraped raw, were at least clear.

"What a night," I murmured to the cat curled up on my bed. My voice was hoarse. "I know, I know. Just another ordinary night in Wicket's Folly." It yawned, stretching out its front paws. Five tiny claws extended and retracted into the fur. I thought of the cat from Nina's story. "Well, at least *you're* just a normal cat."

Or *was* it?

"Well that's it. I'm going crazy." I was amazed at how calmly I said it.

*I stand among the ashes that might as well be the remains of my dreams. The fire was supposed to kill the Girl, to take new souls so that I might retain my power. But not only did she survive, she saved the rest of them as well. It makes me sick to my stomach.*

*I kick at a few stray plastic forks on the ground, and my foot passes through them, barely even wrinkling the grass on which they lie. My bitter laugh sounds too loud, hollow in the night air. I should be screaming my rage for all the world to hear, but instead I feel oddly contemplative.*

*Creating that fire took almost everything I had, and then it took everything else to convince the minds of those sheep that it had not happened. I feel weak as a blind baby mouse. But not powerless. Oh no, not powerless.*

*Clean up, I tell the Mayor curtly.*

*What? He gapes at me. You broke your promise, you tried to kill them all, and now you want me to clean up?*

*I want you to do as you are told.*

*Why should I? I can't trust you to keep your word, so why should I do what you say?*

*Of all the times to grow a backbone! But he does not know how weak I am. I raise my hands, allowing the fingertips to glow as I reach slowly, menacingly towards him.*

*No! he cries, backing away. Don't!*

*I lower my hands, and he bends over and starts gathering up bits of rancid leftover food in a napkin. His mind mutters with mutiny, just like the Charmer's. I should not have to concern myself with the minds of my allies.*

*Things are spiraling out of control. I can see the threads in front of my face, but I cannot reach out to touch them. If I do, my hands will simply pass through once more.*

*Now is not the time to fight, though that time is coming all too soon. Now is the time to retreat, to watch from the shadows, to regain my strength. So let her gain some ground. Let her learn dangerous things. I will be learning dangerous things about her, too, things that I will not hesitate to use.*

*When she tries to destroy me, as she surely will, that will be the time to act. I will strike like a hidden snake, swift, silent, and deadly.*

## Chapter Fifteen

On Saturday afternoon, I took my cousins to the park. I had barely slept the night before. Perhaps I was in shock – the fire – the story – the pictures in the fire – and Mick – it was just too much. And then, when I had mentioned the fire at breakfast, no one seemed to remember it. I couldn't even feel surprised. I couldn't feel anything. But it didn't matter. Feelings were overrated.

This time, instead of joining in my cousins' games, I sat on a bench and pretended to watch them. Just yesterday this place was a mess of ash that fell everywhere like snow, blackened bricks, and trampled trash. Now there was no sign that anything at all had happened. Sure there were scorch marks in the fire pit, but nowhere beyond that. The bricks, the sand, the grass – all perfectly clean. No soot, no trash, no mess.

But it *had* happened. My throat was still sore, and my eyes were so dry that I couldn't put my contacts in this morning. Now the whole world would see me looking like a nerd. Well, what did it matter? What did any of it matter? *What's the point? I should just give up. Nothing I do matters anyway.*

I smiled and waved dutifully when my cousins looked at me, exclaimed in mock amazement when they came over to show me rocks they had found, and realized what I was doing was not all that different from the behavior of my sister. She was pasting a fake smile on her face to hide how much she was hurting from the people she loved. Could Gwen also be so terribly unhappy? I had never really considered it before. I had always just assumed she was peculiar.

The crunch of footsteps behind me made me turn my head. Octavian. He wasn't wearing his store apron or nametag, but he still wore a glove on his left hand. What was that material? Lycra? cotton?

He looked at me apprehensively. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

I sighed wearily and shrugged. Why even bother? He no longer seemed to hate me openly, and he didn't make me feel uneasy by his mere presence, so it seemed that he was about as good as I was going to get around here.

He sat, stretching long skinny legs in black jeans out in front of him. He had the look of someone who had grown a lot very recently and had yet to fill out or get used to the new length of his limbs. "Nice glasses, four-eyes."

"Who asked you, jerk-face?" There was no fire behind my words, because I was simply too tired to be angry, but he grinned, so perhaps that was the right way to talk to him.

"Yeah, *there* she is."

"Shut up."

He did not shut up. "I hear there was a bit of excitement last night."

I didn't answer.

"A great big fire, almost killed everyone. Ring any bells."

I turned to him quickly. "You were there? You remember?"

"I was not there, but I heard through the grapevine. And I do remember."

"Then why doesn't anyone else?"

He sighed, staring up at the sky. "This is Wicket's Folly."



"That's not an answer."

"Well it's easier than saying I don't know. And around here, they mean more or less the same thing."

I shook my head, a lump growing in my throat. "I just don't get any of it. I don't get how no one remember can something like that."

He shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. "You did save a lot of lives."

*As if that's supposed to help.* "Everyone in this place hates me," I told my knees. "I'm pretty sure I'm going mad. I've lost two weeks of my life, and I can't seem to cook, or draw, or any of the things I used to be able to do without even thinking about it." I didn't know why I was telling him, but perhaps I was beyond the point of even caring.

"Right, your 'magic hands,'" he said.

"How do you know about that?"

"You told me."

"We were friends?"

He shrugged. "Maybe more like friends in the way of someone you enjoy trading friendly insults with."

I managed to laugh a little. "Well, I'm sorry, but I don't even feel like insulting you, tempting as it is."

"That's okay." He hunched forward to rest his elbows on his knees. Greasy hair fell over his eyes. Gross.

We watched the boys play for a little while. Archie was trying to build a sand castle, Freddie was the attacking monster, and Eric was the knight fighting him off. Their lives made such simple sense to them. *I wonder what that's like. I think I used to know.*

Eventually, I said softly, "I can't wait to get out of here."

Octavian gave a bitter chuckle. "You and me both."

"You don't live here?"

"Not technically."

"What do you mean, 'technically'?"

"It's a long story."

"So where *are* you from?"

"Phoenix." There was a note in his voice that sounded like longing.

"Arizona? Then what are you doing here?"

"*That* is part of the very same long story."

"Which you aren't going to tell me?" God, he was infuriating.

"It's not that. I just don't think I should. And even if I wanted to, I'm not sure I could."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He simply shook his head, and we were back to sitting in silence. Eric knocked over one turret of Archie's tower and a small scuffle began. I considered going over to break it up, but decided against it. They were just playing. Once, sandcastles were the most important thing in the world to me too.

“You know what the worst part is,” I said at last. “I think I’m going crazy. I feel them staring at me, hating me, telling me things that aren’t true but I don’t remember that they aren’t, and also telling me things that are true but I still don’t remember. I can’t stand it. I just can’t. The only thing that’s keeping me going is the thought that on Wednesday I’m leaving.” I hated the sob that I couldn’t keep from my voice, and I tried to swallow it down. I was not one of those sissy girls who cried all the time. It was a sign of weakness, and I hated it.

Octavian was silent for a long time, his brow furrowed in thought. “You need to stay,” he said abruptly.

“That’s not funny.”

“No, I mean it. Change your flight.”

“Are you kidding? Did you not hear the part about how I’m desperate to get out of here?”

“Look, you need to figure out what happened to you,” he said. “If you don’t, it will hang over you for the rest of your life. And your hands will never get their power back.”

“I hardly think of it as ‘power.’ More like a talent.”

“Whatever you want to call it. You need to figure this out. It’s the only way to fix everything,” his voice was low and urgent now.

“And you can help me,” I said skeptically.

He nodded, glancing around, as though checking to see if anyone could be listening in. “I only know some of the story. But I think together we can figure it out.”

“Why should I trust you? You could be lying to me.”

“You have to trust someone,” he said simply. “And at least I’m moderately friendly.”

“Um....” Much as I hated to admit it, I knew Octavian was right. I was the girl of supreme confidence. I was the girl who always achieved perfection in everything I did, for whom anything less was unthinkable. If I left, I would be running away. Giving up on a challenge. Two things I had never done before. For the rest of my life, I would be wracked with self-doubt. Constantly looking over my shoulder to see who was following me. Like my mother.

I sighed. Normally when choosing male friends, I would want a better-looking guy, one who could be arm candy, or at least easily manipulated by charm. It grated at me that Octavian was merely willing to help me because he felt sorry for me. *Guess I have no choice.* “Fine. I’m not saying I trust you, or that I’ll stay, but I’ll hear what you have to say.”

He nodded. “Great.”

Condescending bastard. As though *he* was doing *me* a favor! I did not accept favors. I got people to do things for me. There was a huge difference. *Besides, he should be grateful that I’m allowing myself to be seen with him. Maybe I can still turn this around.*

I smiled and placed my hand gently on his arm, lowering my eyelashes coyly.

"Thank you so much," I purred. "You must be *so* smart."

He jerked his arm away. "Don't you try that on me!" His ears turned bright red, and his eyes narrowed to angry slits. "I am *not* one of your little slaves!"

"Okay, okay," I said. "I'm sorry."

"I'm helping you out of *friendship*, because I want to help, not because you *manipulated* me into it."

"I said I was sorry," I snapped. Secretly, I was impressed. Men were usually so easily taken in by a pretty face and a little attention.

"Okay, this is going to take some careful planning," he muttered. "How about... no, that wouldn't...but if we went... yeah, it can't hurt." He stood up, his body bowing backwards as he stretched. I got a glimpse of pallid stomach and a few dark hairs. No muscles at all. "We need to go to the library."

"What, you're not going to tell me now?"

He shook his head. "It has to be there."

"I can't." I gestured at my cousins. "I'm babysitting. And then I'll have to take them home."

"Fine. Meet me in front of the campus library in two hours."

"I still don't get what's so secret that you can't tell me now."

"You'll see," he said vaguely, and walked away, hands in his pockets.

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I almost decided not to go meet Octavian. He had been so cryptic that I wasn't sure anything he said could really be of any use to me. But in the end, I went. Something about having an ally, even one as strange as Octavian clearly was, bolstered my

confidence. I could work with him. No act, no show, no manipulation. Maybe it would make up a little bit, for my small part in what had happened to Eden.

Besides, it was nice to know that not everyone in the town hated me. I even thought I felt fewer eyes staring at me in the street, and the ones that still did were not as sharp. I didn't think that it was all in my mind, but I was starting to feel that it might be possible. No matter whether it had been paranoia or not, I was feeling better, more confident. Perhaps I could do this after all. It would not hurt to at least hear him out. I could make a decision about staying afterward, if I liked what he said.

Since my aunt was home that afternoon, I did not have to take my cousins with me. I left them running around the backyard, playing some kind of a freeze tag game that was fine in theory, except that none of them could hold still very long.

It was a few minutes before four when I arrived at the community college library, but Octavian was already there waiting for me. "Come on, let's go inside," he said. He kept glancing over his shoulder, as if to make sure that no one was watching. Margot used to do that too. I began to toy with the idea that he was just as nuts as she was.

I followed him into the building and up three flights of stairs. "So why 'Octavian'?" I asked. "That means you're the eighth kid in your family, right?"

"No, it means that my last name is Smith, and my parents wanted me to have a unique first name."

"Ah. Can I call you 'Tavey'?"

"No."

"Party pooper."

“Here we are.” He ushered me into a small reading room lined with books.  
“Good, it’s empty.” He flopped down into a cushioned reading chair and indicated the chair next to him.

I sat down carefully on the edge of the seat. “Why here?”

“This is the place where all the science books are kept.”

“But why –?”

“I don’t think she can go in here,” he said with all seriousness. “For some reason, it’s like she’s not allowed.”

“Skating right over what *that* means,” I said, “can you start at the beginning and explain clearly whatever it is that is going on around here? And none of that cryptic stuff.”

“Okay,” said Octavian. He settled back into his chair. “I’ve actually been thinking about how to do this since yesterday, and I think I have to start with the founding of the town.”

“You can skip that,” I said. “I read the story that went with that exhibit in the museum.”

“Oh.” He seemed surprised. “What did you think?”

“Cute that this place has got a founding myth, but also kind of creepy.”

“Creepy, right,” he repeated musingly. “Okay, so you know the town was founded by the workers who were hired by a rich loner to build a monument, but they were never paid, so they never left. Right, and you remember the spirit from the story?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she's real. And she never left either.”

“I told you to stop with the cryptic!” I said, annoyed.

“Sorry.” Octavian scratched his nose with his gloved hand. “It’s cooler that way. Anyway, the spirit from the story is a real person. Her name is Lysandra, and she was the one who actually orchestrated the whole thing. She gave Samuel Wicket a slight hope of immortality, she gave him the idea for his final funeral marker; she used him and his money to get what she wanted: a stone circle.”

“Because...?”

“She believes that she can use the stones as a portal to someplace that she's trying to get to. Another world.”

“Well that’s just silly,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s silly, or if it’s true or not, because *she* believes it.”

“Wait,” I said, trying not to laugh. “You sound like you think it could be true. Do you actually believe that you can get to another world by using a circle of stones? Do you actually believe there *is* another world?”

“Let me finish,” said Octavian, annoyed at being interrupted. “Lysandra failed before, but she believes that she can still get it to work. She believes that the way to get the gate to open for her is by bringing the two worlds closer together. ‘Thinning reality,’ she calls it. Over the years, she’s created the perfect environment for reality to be as thin as possible. She’s gathered people who have some kind of unusual talent, something just a little bit beyond the norm, and she keeps them here. She keeps the outside world out – technology and science, things that belong entirely to the real world don’t belong here.



And likewise, things belonging to the unreal world abound here – the unusual, the strange, the stuff that’s just beyond normal. They all interact and magnify each other, and somehow, impossible things happen here. I don’t know if you noticed, but there’s no cell phone reception around here, no nonfiction section in the public library. The only computers are ancient clunkers, and there’s not a single television in the whole town.

“There are a few more modern things, all designed to keep people from leaving. We have our own school system, our own hospital, even though our town is so small we’re not even on the map – and I have my own theory about that too. There’s no easy way to leave, and for the most part, people don’t. They don’t realize that she’s keeping them here. Because she has some kind of power too. Her power involves somehow controlling people and keeping them here to use them. Most of them don’t even see it. But there are those of us who do, and we try to leave but we can’t. And she doesn’t even try to keep it secret, because she has power over us and there’s nothing we can do. Sooner or later she will collect enough people with unusual talents to bring this world closer to the other one. And when she does, she believes she’ll be able to open the gate at last.” He took a deep breath. “Now what do you think?”

“That,” I said, “is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.” I had kept quiet during Octavian’s lecture, mesmerized by his words, but now I did not want to listen anymore.

“Maybe,” he said. “But it’s true.”

“Right. Magic powers and secret doorways to other worlds,” I said sarcastically.

“Are there also fairies and talking animals? Are you really a vampire?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no such thing.” I could tell that he was getting angry and trying to control it. His hands were clenched in his lap, the knuckles of the ungloved hand white. “Is it so hard to believe that there’s something more? And you’re one to talk, after going on about how your hands were magic.”

“That was just a joke!” I said. I didn’t know why I was getting so upset. “It’s just a talent.”

“Exactly!” Octavian said angrily. “You have a talent, I have a talent, everyone in this miserable town has a talent. On our own we’re nothing special. Nothing more than unusual. We can’t fly, or turn invisible, or – or read minds, or whatever. We’re just really good with animals, or at art, or cooking, or telling stories, or fixing cars. There are people like that all over the world – we just call them talented. Green thumbs – perfect pitch – it’s how we try to explain things that don’t make sense to us. But you bring us all together – a whole bunch of people a little more than normal, and suddenly you have a lot more than normal – and we’re being used!”

“I don’t even know why I’m listening to you,” I said, shaking my head. “This is absurd; it can’t be true. It just can’t.”

“Why not?” Octavian demanded. “What happened to you that makes you so unwilling to – to have an imagination?”

“Because this is the real world and things like that just don’t happen!”

“Yes they do,” he shot back. “They happen all the time. There are things all over the world we don’t understand – like, like, homing pigeons – and – geysers – and until

we understand exactly how they work, they will always be not quite part of our rational world.”

“It’s not like homing pigeons!” I said. “We’re talking about freaking *magic* here. It happens in movies and in books, but not in the real world.”

“Exactly.”

“What?”

“It’s not magic, weren’t you listening? But it could be, if it gets that far. It happens in books. Bring together a whole bunch of people who read and believe those stories, and anything can happen. Believing is seeing. Believing is creation!”

I jumped to my feet. “I am not listening to this anymore. I’m leaving.” I headed for the door.

“Wait,” Octavian said. His voice was calm now, controlled. “I can prove it.”

I turned around slowly, my hand on the doorknob. “Yeah? How?”

In answer, he held up his left hand and slowly pulled off the glove. “Watch this.”

My knees suddenly felt weak, and I let my body slide down the door until I was sitting, crouched against it. “Oh my god,” I whispered.

## Chapter Sixteen

She sat too, perched on the wide windowsill, the gray rain lashing the glass panes behind her. "Long ago," she said softly, "Long, long ago, long before the first books of history were written down, the gods of the tin island came to this world from their own. The fabric of the place where they came through became weaker than in other places because it was a cemetery, a place where spirits hover between worlds. The crossing of the gods weakened the separation between worlds even more when they came over, and the stuff of the other world began leaking through.

"On the place that is now known as Salisbury Plain, the gods built a henge, a bank of earth, to contain the power, and marked the spot with a circle of stones to warn the humans not to enter. And yet, every once in a while, a lost sheep or a child would wander into the circle, ignorant of its meaning, and were never seen again."

I sat on the hard floor as Octavian told me his story. I was aware, as if from a distance, of the floorboards pressing into my butt and ankles, and the door trying to flatten my spine, but I couldn't make myself move to go back to the comfortable chair. My body was as limp and shivery as severely overcooked noodles. All I could do was sit, gape, and listen.

Octavian had never meant to end up in Wicket's Folly, he told me. His parents had dragged him along on a wine tour they had planned for their twenty-fifth anniversary. They flew to New York, rented a car, and drove around the Hudson Valley with little or no consideration of maps, stopping whenever they passed something interesting. And when they drove by Wicket's Folly, his parents decided to stay for the night, and then for the week. He couldn't understand it. There was absolutely nothing of interest in this little town, and yet his parents were acting as though they were ready to start building the homestead.

After a week had passed, and they showed no sign of wanting to leave, Octavian began whining as only a fourteen-year-old could, reminding them that he was bored, and

he wanted to be anywhere but here. He nagged for days and finally they gave in. He felt a deep sense of relief as they drove out of the Folly, but it was short-lived. There was a deer in the road, and his father swerved to avoid it and lost control of the car. The last thing Octavian remembered was wondering vaguely why a tree was flying towards him far faster than a tree had any right to move.

He awoke three days later in the Edward F. Jameson Memorial Clinic, very groggy, with a feeling that something was desperately wrong. When he surveyed his battered body, he was horrified to discover that his left arm was now a bandage-wrapped stump that ended just above the elbow. It was badly crushed in the accident, the nurse told him, and there was nothing they could do to save it.

“Try to find the bright side,” advised a doctor with a prodigious amount of hair growing from each nostril. “At least it was your left arm.”

“I’m left-handed,” Octavian said, and turned his face away.

For a while, he was very depressed. Due to the angle of the crash, his parents had both survived the accident relatively unscathed, and they came to see him every day. They tried to cheer him up, talking about going home, and the wonderful advances in prosthetics, but he couldn’t bear to listen to them. He was already bullied at school for being a runt and having a weird name, and now he was going to be mocked for being a cripple.

Everything was made so much worse by the presence of horrible pains in his left hand. He could feel it as if it were still there, as though the hand was clenched so tight that its very bones ached. The doctor told him that he was experiencing something called

‘phantom limb syndrome,’ that it was common with amputees, and that it would either pass with time, or that he would get used to it. He also prescribed strong pain-killers.

One night, Octavian woke up woozy and thirsty from the drugs. He reached for the plastic cup of water on his bedside table and had it halfway to his mouth before he noticed that he was holding it in his left hand. The hand that wasn’t there. As soon as he realized this, the cup slipped through nonexistent fingers to the floor

The next morning, he was not sure whether or not he had dreamed the whole thing, but he had a very vivid memory of a pool of water spreading silently across the tiles, silver in the moonlight. The drugs made him confused, so he stopped taking them. And that night, when no one was around, and it was too dark for his eyes to tell him that obviously there was no hand at the end of his arm, he concentrated his entire being on reaching for that glass of water. He groped blindly, carefully, in the darkness until he felt the tiny dimples of the plastic under his phantom fingers. Pure joy swept through him as he brought the cup to his lips and drank. The cool liquid slid down his throat and told him that yes, this was real. It had really happened.

Over the next few days, he forgot that he was supposed to be depressed. He was focusing too hard on training his phantom arm. If he concentrated to keep it in place, he could reach out with his right hand and feel the skin of his left palm, the tiny hairs on his arm. And then, if he let his concentration slide away, his flesh disappeared from under his fingers.

By the time he was released from the hospital, he could maintain the solidity of his phantom arm with minimal concentration. He could use his left hand as usual, but try

as he might, the force of his will could not make the arm visible. So he took to wearing long-sleeved shirts and a glove on his left hand. When it was covered, no one had to know his left arm was not really there.

His parents were confused but happy, and soon took his phantom arm in stride. In fact, they even seemed to forget about it. They began making plans to leave, and while they were loading up the rental car, his father had a stroke. It must have been a delayed reaction to the accident, the doctor said. Sometimes internal injuries could take a while to manifest.

Now Octavian's father was the one lying in the hospital. He had been in a coma for a little over two years now. Octavian's mother rented a little apartment where they could stay, but spent all day and many of her nights at her husband's bedside. She seemed almost not to notice what her son was doing. They were living on their savings and insurance now, so Octavian took a part-time job at the grocery store to help cover the bills and to feed himself.

When school started at the end of the summer, he enrolled himself in the local high school because he felt that he probably should. His mother had forgotten all about it. Over the next year, he grew almost a foot taller. How ironic, he thought, now that he was finally as big, or bigger, than his bullies, he couldn't get back to see the looks on their faces. He desperately missed the dry heat and sun of Phoenix. When the winter started, he thought he would die of cold, but he made it through.

He became friendly with a few kids at his school – there were only twelve in all in his class – and was surprised to find that many were in the same situation as he was. They

had come through the Folly, never even intending to stop, and had ended up living there. Many of them had come without their parents, and they all lived together in a building known as the Dorm. Most were unaware why they were now living there, and didn't even seem to mind. But some told Octavian that they could tell someone was keeping them there, and when they tried to leave, that someone stopped them. They even knew who it was.

They were understandably bitter. They knew who was stopping them. They even had some idea why. But there was nothing they could do about it.

They told him what they knew about Lysandra, the woman who was keeping them there, and her dark plans. Much of it was conjecture, and all of it was strange, but a lot of it seemed like it made sense, especially with what had happened to him. They told him about their gifts – Sasha had been a track star with Olympic dreams, Evan could play piano by ear, Natalie was good with animals. They had been stopped when they came randomly through the town, and found themselves unable to leave. Octavian's story about his father merely reinforced their fears. Lysandra was willing to hurt people they cared about to get them to stay.

Octavian did not tell his new friends about his hand. For some reason, he did not want them to know about it. It was much more magical that any of their gifts, and the mere fact of its existence forced him to make some difficult conclusions about his situation; namely, that maybe Lysandra's goal of getting to another world was not as crazy as it sounded. He didn't quite trust his new friends. There was a feeling about them, a desperation that told him that they might willingly sell him out if they thought that it



could somehow get them free. When they asked what his gift was, he claimed he had a photographic memory. He told them that his arm had been scarred in the accident, and he wore a glove because he was self-conscious about it, and they accepted this story without question. He was quiet and solitary by nature, so they didn't notice when he didn't hang out with them that often, or when he didn't speak up much when they talked.

He had been in Wicket's Folly for two and a half years now, and his strange life had taken on a predictable familiarity. His father slept, his mother waited, he went to work, he went to school, he missed his home in Phoenix, and he waited for something to change.

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"I don't believe it," I muttered. "I don't believe it." I pushed myself off the floor and stood shakily. Maybe I was in shock. Suddenly my world was no longer the same, and I did not know how to deal with it. I inched over closer to Octavian, who sat in his armchair with his left sleeve rolled up, holding a book with his nonexistent hand.

I began reaching out, and then stopped. "I want to – can I touch it?"

He nodded, and the book moved closer to me.

I moved my hand blindly until my fingers met the flesh of his arm. It felt like a normal arm – warm, covered in tiny hairs. I followed it down and traced the outline of his fingers on the book that seemed to be floating in mid-air. They felt like normal fingers.

I trailed my fingers up his arm until I came to his elbow. Slowly, wondering if he would stop me, I gently lifted the sleeve of his shirt and saw the stump of his arm, the flap of skin sewn over to cover the bone. The wound was long healed, and incongruously,

I could see the ropy muscles of his upper arm were not atrophied as I had expected, because, of course, the arm still got plenty of use. I took my hand back, feeling almost as if I had intruded on his privacy, as if I had seen him naked.

His face was slightly flushed, as though he was embarrassed as well. “Watch this,” he said. He took my hand and guided it to close around his left wrist. I yelped as the wrist vanished from beneath my fingers. The book fell to the floor, and I bent to retrieve it. “If I pinched you,” I mused, “would you feel pain?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve banged a funny bone I don’t have, and it still hurts like hell.”

“And um – if you cut it, would it bleed?”

“I can’t be sure. I’ve never seen it.” He rolled his sleeve back down and replaced his glove, and suddenly everything was normal once more.

“I think,” I said slowly, “I’m going to have to believe you. There are only two options here – I’m crazy – or your arm is invisible. Of the two, I’d rather take the second option.”

“Well, that’s nice.”

“I think we need to start over. And this time, I won’t scoff.”

He shoved the book back onto its shelf. “I’m not repeating myself.”

“Fine, I’ll ask questions, you answer.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t do that.” I sat back down in the other chair. “First, why are we meeting in the library? Why couldn’t you have told me all of this yesterday in the park?”

“You remember how I told you that there aren’t many things that belong solely to the rational world here, but there are some, so people don’t leave? It gives us an advantage to exploit. In order to have a college so people don’t leave to go somewhere else, there needed to be a science library. For some reason, she has no control over the newer things in this world. She’s very old, and I think it’s because she can’t understand them. She doesn’t go here, and she doesn’t watch here, and that’s why she can’t see us now and try to stop us.”

“It can’t be to stop people leaving, though,” I said. “I’ve seen people leaving. They go in and out all the time. My uncle even comes and visits us in LA sometimes.”

“I have a theory about that,” said Octavian. “Remember how I told you that some people don’t realize that they’re being kept here? Well those people can leave, because they’ll always come back.”

“Huh.” I scratched my head, thinking. “So this ‘portal’ thing. She’s collecting people with unusual abilities to bring the worlds closer together, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So what happens when they’re close enough? The worlds, I mean. How does she do it?”

Octavian shook his head. “That, I don’t know. Evan thought she was looking for one more person, the right person, who could open the gate for her. He seemed to think it was some sort of blood ritual.”

“Is there any possibility that all this is just in her head? That she’s just some old loon?”

“I did think that for a while,” said Octavian. “And there is that possibility, of course, but I don’t think so.”

“But why?”

“Because I saw her.”

“You *saw* her!” I exclaimed. “What? When? Could you tell she was evil?”

“Slow down,” Octavian said. “It was when I was delivering groceries up to the mayor’s house – you know, the old Wicket manor on the hill. While his housekeeper was paying me, I spotted her going down the hall.”

“But how did you know it was her?”

“Because I got a paper cut on the receipt. And she came right over, took the receipt without so much as one word, licked my blood off it, stared at me for a minute, and left.”

“Eww,” I said, but I was looking down at my hand, at the new red scar across my palm. How had I gotten that cut? Was it already there before I was hit by the car? Had I even been hit by a car at all, or were people just telling me I was? I pushed the thought from my mind. It was getting too strange.

“She looked just like they people told me,” Octavian was saying. “You can’t tell how old she is until you realize she’s young – her hair and her eyes are both really light.”

“Oh,” said I quietly. “I think I’ve seen her.”

“Where?”

“In the street one day. But I tried to look closer and she was gone.”

“Yeah, people see her all the time. She’s like our town’s resident ghost story, but she’s not a ghost. Evan says she’s a witch.” He shrugged. “I don’t know. She doesn’t age though, which makes me think she has power. And maybe she knows what she’s doing, and she’ll open her gate eventually.”

“What do you think will happen when the gate opens?” I asked. “Something can come through? Or go through?”

“I don’t know.”

“And why do you think she’s trying to open it?”

Octavian shook his head. “Again, I don’t know, but I doubt her intentions are good. I’m pretty sure the old standards are power and eternal youth.”

“Doesn’t she already have those?”

“How should I know what she wants,” he said irritably, “she’s a power-crazed witch lady.”

*He’s got a short fuse.* I cleared my throat and adjusted the fall of my embroidered peasant blouse. “And your hint about the cemetery? The people who die?”

He squirmed a little. “I don’t really know. It was just the strangest thing about this place I could think of, and I wanted you to notice, ‘cause you wouldn’t talk to me.”

“But the days it happens on. The solstices.”

He glanced at his watch. “Not just the solstices. A few on other days too. Equinoxes. Halloween. And other ones. But the next one is the summer solstices. That’s in three weeks.”

“That means she’s gonna do it again, doesn’t it?”

"Not if we stop her."

"Great. Now, if we can just figure out how to kill an ancient angry spirit in three weeks or she's going to kill us all."

"Whoa." He held up a hand. "Who said anything about killing her?"

I fingered the ends of my hair. The layers were starting to get uneven. Maybe I should have it trimmed soon. "Isn't killing her implied?"

"In books, the heroes always struggle with whether or not they should kill the villain."

"Why? The villain would go right ahead and kill them if he had a chance."

He bit his lip. "I don't know. Something about not stooping to their level. Being the better person."

I snorted. "Oh come on, then they can just come back for vengeance in the sequel. If one person has to die, and another person has to get their hands dirty, it's for the greater good. It saves a lot of people in the long run."

"People have used 'the greater good' to justify a whole lot of horrible things."

"Yeah, but that was eugenics, or slavery, or genocide. This is just killing one person who is plainly and simply evil, so save an entire town."

"And the thought of actually in-cold-blood *killing* her doesn't bother you at all?"

"No. Should it?"

Octavian opened his mouth, thought for a moment, and then closed it again.

"So it's settled, then. We kill her. Assuming we can, of course."

"She's powerful, but I think we can do it," he said seriously. Now he was back on familiar territory. "Something's up. All these power outages, and then she went off schedule with that fire last night. She must be riled. I figure this could be our chance. We can do this."

"Or we'll just get killed."

"Stop being such a pessimist."

"No, I'm being a realist."

"Well whatever you're doing, stop it."

I glanced at the darkening sky outside the window, the bellies of the clouds tinged with deep lavender and orange. "So now the sixty-five thousand dollar question," I said. "What does all this have to do with me?"

"That's the thing," said Octavian. "I'm not sure this has anything at all to do with you."

"That's not possible," I said. "There's got to be something, I know it. The way everyone is staring at *me*, watching *me*. I feel like I must be important to this whole thing somehow."

"Little superiority complex you got there?"

"Shut up and talk. What did you mean that time that you yelled at me? You told me not to go, not to do something. You were pretty angry."

He nodded. "I was. I warned you that something bad might happen, but you didn't listen to me."

"Right. About what?"

“We used to chat at the market sometimes, and one day you told me that you had become friendly with a couple of girls in your art class who were very interested in you. Do you remember my friends, Sasha and Natalie?”

“Yes. But even if we were friends before, they really seem to hate me now.”

“They have good reason.”

“What!” I said, aghast. “Are you saying that I *deserve* to have everyone hating me like that?”

“No, no,” Octavian said quickly. “I’m just saying that from their perspective, you do. See, Sasha and Natalie took one look at you and your gift and saw exactly what they had been waiting for. A gift that seemed to manifest in a way that was more than just unusual – you yourself called it magic.”

“Yes, but –”

“Shut up, woman, I’m talking,” he said.

I kicked his ankle. “That sounds a lot more like *your* hand if you ask me.”

“It can’t be; she tasted my blood that time, remember? So Sasha and Natalie they told me and Evan that you were the one Lysandra was waiting for, that they were sure of it. They were absolutely convinced that the power of your hands would be enough to get her where she wanted to go, which would in turn allow us to go free. I made a few arguments about not knowing what was going to happen if she opened the gateway, etc, etc, but they weren’t interested in listening to me. They were going to convince you to go to Lysandra somehow, and then they would be free.”

“But it didn’t work out that way, did it?”



“Obviously. I have to admit that I was pretty conflicted about the whole thing. On one hand, there was a strong chance that I could get out of Wicket, and I desperately want to get out of Wicket. On the other hand, I had no idea what might happen if they took you to Lysandra, but after my own experiences, I doubted it could be good. It was really hard for me, but I couldn’t – I mean, I –” he stared very hard at his knees “– in the end I warned you not to go, that it was dangerous, and that something bad might happen, but you didn’t listen to me. You were so sure of the rules of your rational world, and you – you laughed at me.”

He had chosen my safety over his own freedom. I was touched, and a little humbled. “Octavian, I’m sorry –” I began.

“You think I care?” he shot back. “Well anyway, you went, and clearly you weren’t the one, because something bad did happen to you and we’re all still stuck. And they all hate you now because they thought you were their salvation and you weren’t. And I hated you for a while too, because I really wanted to get out of here, and I almost did, and then I chose the ‘noble’ route, and it was all for nothing.” He took a deep breath. “And then I felt bad and apologized, and that’s where we are now.”

“So why did you decide to help me like this?”

“Well, you’re not as awful as I first thought.” He looked away from me and grinned, letting his greasy hair fall over his eyes.

“What a compliment! So you don’t know what exactly went wrong with Lysandra?”

“That’s as far as I know. I wasn’t there when whatever it was happened.”

I slumped back into my chair. “Oh. So how do we find out what happened?”

“We’ll have to ask someone who was there. Sasha or Natalie or one of the others,  
but –”

“I know, I know,” I said. “They hate me.”

## Chapter Seventeen

My family ate their dinner as though nothing was wrong, and I removed the meat from my chicken bone and cut it into smaller and smaller pieces.

“You have to cut down some of the trees if you need the space to build,” said Aunt Alicia. “But the rest of them will still be there.”

“Which would you rather have to fight,” said Archie, bits of mashed potato and gravy leaking out of his mouth. “A lion, but you could have a baseball bat, or a snake, but you couldn't have anything.”

“How big a snake?” asked Eric.

“A python.” He chewed for a moment. “But, it's invisible.”

Uncle Bennet picked a bit of lettuce out of his mustache. “I just don't see why they have to cut down more trees when we could just put houses in between the ones we already have. I like the trees where they are.”

“I think the snake,” said Eric. “No! The lion.”

“I think” Freddie mused, “that potatoes are my favorite fruit.”

Aunt Alicia said, “Then it would turn into one of those cramped, crowded cities, which I for one – Eric, chew with your mouth closed – which I for one, would like to avoid.”

“I'd have to say the lion too,” said Uncle Bennet. “The snake's invisible, and at least with the lion you get a weapon.”

Aunt Alicia nodded.

Archie grinned triumphantly. “You’re *all* wrong. I never said you couldn't just run away from the snake.”

"What?" Eric said so loudly that he practically squeaked. "That's cheating! Dad, tell him that's cheating."

“Do you ever think about leaving,” I blurted out. Everyone stopped talking and turned to look at me. “I mean, do you ever think about moving away?”

“Moving away?” Uncle Bennet repeated over the laughter of the boys. “Why would we move away – we love it here.”

“It’s quiet, it’s safe, and it’s beautiful, quaint, picturesque,” Aunt Alicia recited as though she was trying to sell me a house. “What more could you ask for?”

At that moment, the lights went out, and everyone sighed.

"Working electricity, for one thing," I muttered.

Aunt Alicia went to get some candles, and we finished the meal by gloomy, flickering candlelight.

Were they being kept here too, I wondered. I stirred my mashed potatoes around my plate so that they formed a gray sticky lump in the darkness. Was there someone, or multiple someones, in this family, who had a gift that would be useful to Lysandra’s project? Uncle Bennet was good with cars, I knew, but none of the others seemed to have an obvious talent, and Freddie seemed to be a permanent resident of five-year-old la-la land. Obviously, they didn’t realize what was going on. What if I told them and they tried to leave? Would something bad happen to them, like it had happened to Octavian's father?

No. I would not allow it.

I wasn't sure that I believed Octavian's crazy story, and in fact, most of the reason that I was going along with him was that I needed to find a logical, rational explanation for what was happening. I could accept a phantom limb that was more than phantom; at least that was only a little more than normal. Many amputees still felt pain and sensation in their missing limbs, and the fact that Octavian's could go a step further to solidity only made it very unusual, but still firmly of this world. But wild stories about gateways to other worlds where magic abounded – that could not possibly be true, and I needed to prove it to myself. If there was not, there would be nothing left in my world that I could be sure of.

When I called my father after dinner, I told him that I wanted to extend my trip.

“I was under the impression that you were really looking forward to coming home.” He was surprised, and I thought he sounded a little hurt.

“It's just that I'm having such a good time here,” I said, hoping to emphasize that I liked it *here*, rather than let him think that I didn't want to be *there*. “I get along so well with the boys, and Aunt Alicia could still use my help – and my art class isn't finished yet.”

“I thought you were going to get ready to start your new school. And you still have to study for the SAT.”

“I will. I've still got time before school starts.”

He sighed. “Very well. I'll move your flight forward. Is four weeks enough? You'll leave on –” I could hear papers riffling in the background “– July 3rd.”

July 3rd. That would mean that I would be here for whatever was going to happen at the solstice. I opened my mouth to ask Dad if I could leave a little earlier, but I forced myself to stop. *Don't be cowardly and selfish*, I told myself sternly. *You're in this too deep to leave. And you can't just run away and leave them to die.*

"Are you sure Bennet and Alicia won't mind having you around?"

"Of course. They said they'd be happy to have me as long as I want to stay."

"Very well, then. I'll change your flight later tonight. Is that all, Megan? I've quite a lot of work to do."

"Actually, there is one more thing," I said, wondering how he would react, when it was clear that he already did not want to talk to me. "I kind of wanted to talk to Mom."

"You know she won't talk over the phone."

"What if you persuade her? I really need to talk to her."

"You read the letter?" he asked. "I told her not to do it, but she insisted, and you know how she gets. But I need you to know that –"

"What letter?"

"She said she sent you a letter after you visited, explaining...things. I'm sure you should have gotten it by now."

"Oh *that* letter," I said quickly. "No, I haven't read it yet, but I will."

"Do me a favor. When you read it, whatever your immediate reaction, I want you to remember that this *is* your mother we're talking about, and call me first."

"Um, okay. I'll do that."

When I had hung up, I went to tell my aunt and uncle that I had decided to stay until the beginning of July. They were thrilled, and Aunt Alicia suggested that maybe I might like to start doing the laundry too. Then I went downstairs to toss my room again, this time, to search for a letter.

I wasn't particularly surprised when I couldn't find it.

My reflection in the mirror stared back at me as I brushed my teeth. So now there was a missing letter to go along with the missing notebook. Some things were becoming clear to me now, through the haze of confusion and weirdness that covered everything else. Two things that my mother had given me had gone missing. Margot had been in Wicket's Folly before, and she must know something about what was going on. Of course she would never explain it over the phone; she had probably even thought that she was not supposed to say it out loud, in case her hotel room was being bugged. Why had she even asked to see me?

I spat out a glob of toothpaste and straightened up. Maybe Margot was right. Maybe there actually was someone watching her. The notebook wasn't in my room, and it wasn't in the suitcase. There was only one possibility remaining: someone had stolen the notebook, to keep me from finding out whatever it was that Margot had to say.

I shook my head slowly. I couldn't adjust to the possibility that my mother might not be as crazy as I had imagined. But no, her behavior was too erratic for that. But what if she was right about some things? What if she *was* being watched? And what if *I* was being watched too?

The cat was curled on the end of my bed, though of course, I had no idea how it had gotten in. I narrowed my eyes at it. What if Lysandra had animal accomplices and the cat was really a spy? *Oh my god*, I told myself. *You're going crazy*. Just in case, I shoved it out the window anyway.

That night, I dreamt of my mother's voice telling me over and over, *Think, Megan, think. You're missing something*.



## Chapter Eighteen

As soon as I had dropped off my cousins at the community college, I went to the grocery store to find Octavian. He wasn't in the front, so I combed the aisles until I found him sticking price stickers onto cans of green beans, a vacant expression on his face.

"I need to talk to you," I whispered, although there was no one around. "I think I might have something."

"Herpes?"

I punched his shoulder.

"Ow. Okay, okay, but I'm at work now."

"What time do you get off?"

"Five."

"So we'll meet back at the library."

"It closes early during the summer. Probably at five."

"What if I get a bunch of sciencey books out and we set them out around us?"

"You know, I never thought of that. You certainly have some good ideas sometimes, for a girl."

"Um, thank you?"

"You'll need a card from someone who's a student there."

"Oh no!" I knew Mick was a student at WFCC, but I most definitely did not want to talk to him. At least he had stopped calling me. "Listen, my cousins are taking summer classes at the college, but they're only kids. Can they get books out?"

“Probably. They get student ID numbers when they enroll, don’t they?”

“I’ll ask them.”

“Well, if it doesn’t work, you can use your feminine wiles.”

I gave him a dirty look. “You’re really a jerk, you know that?”

“Ah, but at least I’m joking. Now get out of here before you get me in trouble.”

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As it turned out, my cousins were allowed to take out books from the school’s library, even though their student status was only temporary. I chose out ten nice thick books from the science collection, picking ones with complicated titles and words I didn’t understand, and my cousins helped me carry them back home. As they walked, Freddie and Eric having a skipping contest, I decided that helping me carry things was as far as I wanted them involved in what was to come.

"We really shouldn't need these," I grumbled to myself. "Anything really scientifically advanced looks just like magic anyway."

I packed the books into a backpack and a canvas bag, and at four-thirty, I wrote *Going out, back later – Megan* under the heading on the whiteboard that now read “Chopping Floss,” and staggered down to the market. I was nearly bent double by the weight of the books, and so I could not really look where I was going. Though I could still feel eyes staring at me, they felt more curious than hostile. *That's right*, I thought, *I saved you from that fire. You should be grateful.*

“Need a hand with that?” someone asked. I looked up to see Mick heading towards me, the sun shining brightly on his golden curls, a wide smile on his face, and eyes that would make ice cubes look warm.

“Don’t bother,” I stammered, but he had already grabbed the canvas bag and was walking alongside me.

He peered into the bag. “Lots of big books in here. You planning to read the whole library before you go home?” He chuckled at his own joke.

“Yes,” I said shortly. “That is exactly what I’m planning to do.” The initial terror had worn off, and now I felt only a general irritation at his presence. Why would he not leave me alone?

“You’re so smart,” he said admiringly, not a hint of derision in his voice, yet it made me want to hit him.

We were outside the market now, and I said, “This is as far as I’m going,” with some relief.

He didn’t give me back my bag. “Look, I was wondering if you wanted to go out some time. Get a drink, maybe.”

“Oh, I – um –”

“Hello, Mick.” Octavian had joined us.

“Octavian.” There was a certain frigidity to Mick’s words.

I saw an opportunity and seized it. “I was just telling Mick that I couldn’t go out with him because we’ve got plans. Because we’re dating,” I added.

Octavian shot me a quick bemused look, but announced, “That’s right, we’re in love,” and threw an arm around my shoulders.

“Excuse me?” Mick said. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Megan and I have been seeing each other since she got here.”

“Yeah,” said Octavian sarcastically. His fists were clenched. “I bet.”

The prospect of having two boys fighting over me was thrilling, but I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. Well, I didn’t want Octavian to get hurt. “Stop it!” I said sharply, and they both looked at me.

“What?” said Mick.

“But he –” said Octavian.

“Look, Mick, I’m with Octavian now.” Knowing what he was capable of, I spoke gently. “Just please leave me alone.”

He stood still, a confused expression on his face, his mouth working as though for once in his life, he did not know what to say. “Bu – I –”

“You can go now,” I said helpfully. He did not move. “So if you could just give me my books back...” I linked my arm through Octavian’s.

Irritation showed momentarily in Mick’s face, but he recovered quickly. He held out the canvas bag and I took it. “Well. I’m happy for you,” he said, and headed away from us down the street.

Octavian had a curious half-smile on his face. “Wow,” he said. “You just kicked ass.”

“That was exhilarating,” I said. “And terrifying. I think I’m still shaking. He isn’t going to drop it. I can tell. He’s not going to give up that easy.”

“Just stay close to me,” he said. “I’ll protect you.”

We both laughed at how ridiculous the words sounded. I realized that my arm was still linked to Octavian’s, and I quickly let go. “Thanks for playing along,” I said.

“Although I do think you overdid it. ‘We’re in *love*’?”

He shrugged. “Think nothing of it, darling. You want to tell me what all that was?”

I sighed. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“He fake-kidnapped me so he could rescue me.”

“Holy shit! That is *messed up*.”

“But the weirdest part is that he’s so nice all the time, but he makes me feel like he’s... *wrong* somehow. Like...inside. I don’t know.”

“Our Mick is a charmer,” Octavian said. “And I’m starting to think that it’s literally. He can win over almost anyone he wants.”

“What do you think he wants with me?”

“Probably another conquest. He can get any girl he wants, and now he wants you. But you’re resisting, so that makes you interesting.”

“But to go to such *extremes*.” I shuddered. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Where did you want to go?”

“Not my uncle’s house. Let’s go to your house.”

“It’s kind of...messy.”

“I don’t care.”

“Okay, my house it is.”

"Here, hold this for a minute." I passed the backpack and the canvas bag to Octavian so I could pull my hair into a ponytail. I didn't take them back, and he didn't even notice. I smirked to myself.

Octavian led the way through the center of town and up Rambling Rose Lane. The houses were smaller here, closer together, and each had a cluster of mailboxes in front. I guessed that these houses must be divided into apartments. Back in Los Angeles, most apartment buildings were tall and imposing modern complexes.

“That’s it,” he said, waving at a house near the end. “We live in apartment 3, which was formerly apartments 3 and 4 until some walls were knocked down, and so sometimes we get mail for 4, or someone looking for 4, and we get to have the fun game of explaining that it doesn’t exist.”

“I thought there wasn’t any post office around here.”

“There isn’t. We’ve all got PO boxes in Camden.”

“Why not just build a post office?”

“Too much of an anchor to the outside world. It’s bad enough we have telephones. It’s up this way.”

I followed him up two flights of winding, creaking stairs and waited while he unlocked the front door.

“Here we are,” he said, ushering me inside. “Home sweet home.”

The apartment was small and messy, and the floor appeared to be on a slant. A woman sitting slumped on the sofa looked up and said “Tavey, you’re home!” at almost the exact moment that Octavian said, “Mom, you’re home!”

While Octavian was introducing me, I regarded the woman curiously. She looked familiar somehow, but I could not place her.

She got up to shake my hand. “You’ll have to excuse me,” She said. “I just came home to get something to eat. I’m on my way back to the hospital.”

The hospital! That was it. I had seen this woman during my brief stay in the hospital, when I went roaming around at night. I had thought she looked like my mother. I was relieved to see that from close up, Mrs. Smith did not look anything like Margot. She was at least fifty for one thing, short and square-faced, and her gray-streaked hair was brown. It must have been the moonlight that made it appear blond when she bent over an unmoving figure that I now realized had been Octavian’s father.

“You’ll be along later, won’t you?” said Mrs. Smith. “You should visit him.”

“I will,” Octavian said quietly. “Bye, Mom.”

I stood awkwardly by the couch, feeling like I was intruding as Octavian kissed his mother and she left. “So,” I said, fishing around for something to say. “You don’t look anything like your mother.”

“You mean because she’s white.”

I stammered a bit, until Octavian interrupted me. “It’s okay. I’m adopted.”

“Do you ever think about finding your birth parents?” I asked curiously. I had friends with single or divorced parents, friends who had been born via surrogate mother,

friends with same-sex parents, friends with sperm or egg donor parents. It was a bit of a novelty to find someone who was just plain adopted.

His eyebrows slammed together briefly, but then he grinned. “Not really. In all probability, my biological mother was a sixteen-year-old junkie who couldn’t remember who it was knocked her up.” He shook his head. “I don’t need to know. I’m happy with what I got. In time, I may even forgive them for my name.”

I laughed, but I didn’t think I could have been as nonchalant in his situation. To not know who my parents were would mean not knowing where I came from, or who I might become. I wouldn’t know if I was predisposed to diseases, or if my talents were inherited. “What if you wanted to marry someone, and it turned out she was really your cousin, or worse, your sister?” I asked. “What about college applications? “What will you put when it asks what race you are?”

“You’re not seeing the beauty of the thing,” he said. “I can put anything I want, and no one can contradict me. There isn’t a selection box for mixed race, so I can claim White, Asian, Hispanic, Filipino, or Native American. I’ve been taken for each in the past. I’ve even been taken for black before – some idiot asked me why my hair was straight. I’ll probably just go with Indian on my applications and get into whatever college I want. I’m sure it makes me eligible for all kinds of scholarships too.”

“That’s got to be dishonest.”

“How?” When I could not think of an answer, he said, “Exactly.”

“So how old were you when you were adopted? Do you have any memories of your birth parents at all?”



He hesitated, and his eyebrows drew back together. "No," he said shortly. "You are really nosy. I'm going to go clean up my room."

Well, that could have been much worse. Dad always told me it was rude to mention race, but Octavian seemed okay with it. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be adopted. To not even be sure what race you were. How could he be so well-adjusted? Or at least, he *acted* like he was. *I'm not sure I buy it. Although I was being nosy.*

We set up a base by surrounding the room with a perimeter of the science books from my backpack. We placed two books on each windowsill, two by the door, and spread the rest around the walls.

"That should do it," said Octavian, and sat down cross-legged in the middle of the floor.

I joined him. "It smells funny in here."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," he said. "You said you had something?"

I explained about my mother and the notebook, and the letter. I left out the specifics of my Margot's illness, simply explaining how the fact that both had gone missing had to be significant.

"Wow," said Octavian. "Your mother was in Wicket before? There might be something in that letter that could help us. Have you tried asking her about it?"

"You don't just...ask my mother about things. And even if you do, you can't believe the things she says, and you can't always even understand them. It's complicated."

“Do you think that maybe she got trapped here too, but she got away? It could be the reason for her...um, condition.”

“Oh my god,” I whispered. “What if the way she is isn’t her fault? What if it was caused by this place?”

“By Lysandra.”

“All this time, and I’ve –” I shook my head frantically. “No, we can’t jump to conclusions. We need to find that notebook.”

“Okay. You think it was taken?”

“Yes.”

“Then it will be up at the old Wicket manor. With Lysandra.”

"I thought that's where the mayor lives."

He rolled his eyes. "He's in cahoots with her, dumbbell."

“Great, both of them,” I said. “How on earth are we going to get it?”

“That’s easy. All we have to do is break in to the dragon’s den.”

“It’s ‘lion’s den’ and you could just *say* it’s impossible. We have to kill her in order to get the letter that might tell us how to kill her.”

“That’s not exactly what I had in mind. It’s going to take some planning. But I was thinking more of sneaking in and sneaking out before she knows what’s happening.”

"And she's just going to *let* us?"

"I didn't say we shouldn't take some weapons along. Just in case."

"Great," I said sarcastically. "I always carry a rocket launcher with me, how about you?"

## Chapter Nineteen

Wednesday marked the day that I would have been on my way home, had I not decided to extend my stay. I had had my window of opportunity to escape, and I had not taken it. If things turned out badly, I would have no one to blame but myself.

Octavian had eventually decided that the best way to get into the mayor's manor was to be as straightforward as possible. He would offer to take the next grocery delivery, and we could just walk in the front door. "It took you three days to come up with that plan?" I said. "We've only got a week and a half left until the 21st!"

"Oh hush," he said. "Like you could have done better."

"And what makes you think she won't just kill us as soon as we walk in the door?"

"Look, I've made deliveries there a hundred times, and I've seen her a grand total of exactly once. She's probably not home during the day. Too busy wandering around and snooping."

The next delivery was Friday morning, so we had plenty of time to kill until then. I got my cousins to their various activities like a pro and helped my aunt around the house, though I still did not touch the cooking utensils. I knew it would be useless.

I had been spending every afternoon at Octavian's apartment. We didn't do nearly so much planning and plotting, but instead talked or played games. It was a new experience for me, hanging out with a guy who didn't want anything from me, and that I wasn't trying to manipulate. It was nice, like when you stop in your busy schedule of

swimming laps and just float for a while. Octavian was teaching me how to play chess. He nearly always won, because I did not have the patience to plan moves far in advance.

“You’ll never be a criminal mastermind.” Octavian gathered up the chess pieces, shaking his head with mock regret. “Real villains are always fifteen moves ahead – building wild patterns of the moves they are going to make, planning years in advance, like spiders in their webs.”

“I’ll let you do the planning for me, and then I’ll take the credit,” I said.

“But that would make me the power behind the throne.”

“That’s okay – you need a figurehead that people will follow because they’re charismatic and beautiful, and I’m sorry, but you just don’t cut it.”

He yawned and lay back on the couch. “Well at least I won’t have to dress up.”

It was a particularly hot day, and the east coast humidity made me feel sticky and sweaty all the time. I missed the dry heat of Los Angeles, which at the very least did not make me feel like a sausage trying to burst out of my own skin. Octavian too was used to the extreme dry heat of Arizona, but he had been in Wicket’s Folly for two summers now, so he was at least partially used to it.

We were in the living room of his apartment, all the windows open and two fans going on full power. The air was warm, but at least it was moving. Octavian had rolled up his sleeves, and the glove on his hand seemed to be floating in midair at his side.

I lifted the heavy hair off my neck and let the air from the fan play over it. "Why don't you ever wear shorts?"

He gave an upside down shrug from the couch.

"I bet you have chicken legs!"

"I do not have chicken legs."

"Then why don't you wear shorts?"

No answer.

"I'm bored."

He covered his eyes with his hand. "Shh."

I rifled around in my bag until I found a pen and a crumpled receipt. I smoothed the paper out onto the kitchen table and held out the pen.

"Here, write something," I commanded.

"No."

"Aw, come on, please?"

"Stop whining," he said, but he sat up and peeled off his glove. The pen pulled itself from my hand. Its tip touched the paper, and it began moving in the familiar loose loops and sharp turns, although it appeared that no one was guiding it. Since he was left-handed, his hand should have blocked the words from view, but I could look right through it and see the words he was writing.

"Ha, ha," I said sarcastically. He had written *Look, I'm a ghost*. "Why do you keep the glove on even when you're at home?" I asked curiously. "There's no one here to see."

"It's not for you, it's for me," he said. "I can feel my arm, but I can't see it. It's hard to grab things with a hand you can't see. Besides, when it's covered, I'm less likely to suddenly remember that it can't possibly be there, and then it isn't."

“I wonder...” I said slowly. “Let’s try something.”

He wiggled his eyebrows at me. “You want to...experiment.”

I smacked his arm.

I had him lie on the floor, his right shoulder braced behind the edge of a bookcase.

“Now reach your left hand out as far as you can – really stretch.”

“I don’t know why I’m going along with this,” he said, but he complied.

I placed the pen a few inches out of reach, then pulled off his glove. “Now see if you can pick up the pen.”

“You know I can’t, you put it too far.”

“Just try to forget how long your arm is. Just pick up the pen.”

He strained for a while, and the pen did not move. I sat quietly, arms around my knees, watching. Eventually, he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and *reached* – and suddenly the pen sat comfortably in midair.

“You did it!” I exclaimed.

“Do you know what this means,” Octavian said excitedly, sitting up. “I can change it.”

I shook my head. “It can’t be possible. You must have just stretched farther this time. That’s the only explanation.”

“But this whole thing was your idea.”

“I didn’t think it would actually work!” I snapped. In fact, I had been expecting it not to.

He shook his head. “I just don’t get you sometimes, red. Why are you so sure that everything has to have a logical explanation? Can’t you just take some things on faith?”

“No, That’s superstition.”

“But it’s okay to – to have an imagination and stuff.”

I thought this over. “When I was little,” I said slowly, “my mother saw things that weren’t there. If anyone made so much as a reference to Santa Claus, or the tooth fairy, she would get really upset and tell me that they didn’t exist, they were just myths or collective folk belief. Sometimes it was like she was trying to convince *herself* that they weren’t real too, because I think she could actually see them. I decided, when I was growing up, to believe only what I could see and understand.”

“So you understand quantum mechanics and stuff like that.”

“No, I mean stuff that there's an explanation for – that I could understand if I took the time, or did the research.”

I stayed for dinner that night, which was warmed-over frozen meatballs. Octavian explained that his mother was rarely home for long, but when she remembered, she cooked a large amount of food and then froze it. If he ran out of that, he ate waffles three meals a day.

While we ate, we continued our argument about the strengths of my viewpoint versus Octavian’s. He claimed that not understanding everything in life was what made it interesting, while I stubbornly held out that I wanted my world to be as rational as possible. When people do not understand the world around them, they allow themselves

to be led by superstition and fear, which could lead to lynchings, inquisitions, and genocide.

“So what you’re saying is that in your perfect world, every question has an answer, every puzzle has a solution, every blank place on the map has been filled in?”

“It sounds kind of bad when you say it like that, but yes. I guess that’s true.”

Octavian shook his head. “I’m not sure I’d want to live in that world with you. Me, I like a little bit of mystery.”



## Chapter Twenty

"Where did they go?" Samuel asked. "These people who disappeared." His voice was hushed, enraptured by the words of her tale.

"To the other place," she answered. "The place where the gods had come from. Some say that it is the place of magic, the place where stories come from, and where men live forever."

"And children ended up there?"

"Perhaps. She smiled, showing small white teeth that seemed almost sharp. "If they did, they must have liked it there, because they never came back."

Octavian suggested that we take Thursday to do a little hiking in the hills, or 'reconnaissance,' as he called it. He had the afternoon off, and with my cousins at their music lesson, I was free as well.

After lunch, I changed into jeans and sneakers and a white long-sleeved layering tee. This time, I was going to be prepared for walking through the woods. Uncle Bennet had told me that in this part of the country there were ticks that could give you Lyme disease, so I wanted to keep my arms and legs fully covered. It might be hot, but at least I wouldn't need to slather more than my face with sun-block. I packed a bag with a bottle of water, extra sun-block, and some snacks in case I got hungry.

After taking the kids to their various lessons, and then back home, and *then* to the house of their music teacher, I already felt like I had walked at least three miles today. I made Octavian wait while I took my time cooling off in front of the fan.

He too was dressed for a hike. I surveyed him, holding back the hair that the fan was trying to whip into my face. "Something's different," I said. "Oh I know! You washed your hair!"

"Very funny," he said sarcastically.

"You want sun-block?"

He indicated the olive skin of his ungloved arm. "Do I *look* like I need sun-block?"

"Sheesh, I was just asking."

"Can we go now?"

As we walked back to the center of town, we had the bad luck to see Mick across the street. Octavian immediately threw an arm around my waist. To complete the picture, I reached around his waist too, and took his hand in mine. I must have taken him by surprise, because for an instant the hand vanished and I was left holding an empty glove before it solidified a moment later.

Octavian let go of me as soon as Mick was out of sight. I was glad. On the one hand, it was very awkward to have Octavian touching me like that, but on the other hand, it was also sort of nice. It made me feel things I wasn't used to feeling, things I was sure that I was never *going to feel*. It was all too confusing, and I greatly preferred it when things were simple. I made a mental note to tell Jackie later and see what she thought. Assuming the phone was still working.

Octavian led the way out of the center of town, and I looked over my shoulder to see a sign reading "Welcome to Wicket's Folly."

"Are we leaving?" I asked. "I thought you weren't allowed to leave?"

"We're not really leaving," he explained. "This is just the town. The whole surrounding area belongs to Lysandra – the woods, the manor, maybe even some of the lake. As far as I can figure out, it's everything up to where the paved road starts – the

highway. There's no sign for the Folly there, just one of those food-gas-hotel signs. I think that's how a lot of people get trapped here.”

"Carb-heavy food?"

He shook his head. "No. It's because there isn't any gas station. People come looking for it, but they don't find it, and then they're stuck."

"But people drive cars around here. They must be getting gas somewhere."

"Yeah, but not from here."

The cobbles gave way to a wide dirt track with tire grooves on either side. The road was flanked by two shallow grass-filled ditches. Was it here, I wondered, in one of these ditches, that I had lain after my accident? I tried to imagine myself lying sprawled on a mashed bed of grass, but imagination had never been my strong suit.

“What happens during the winter?” I asked. “With all that rain and snow, do the roads turn to mud, or ice? How can cars get through?”

“People try to stay home during the winter,” Octavian said, kneeling to examine a tiny lizard scurrying under a rock. “We get snow here like you wouldn’t believe. And there’s no plows or anything. People shovel their own walks, and if they have to go out, they ski.”

“They ski to work?” I said incredulously.

“Well, it’s either that or wade through snow knee-deep or higher. It doesn’t get too messy though, because the ground freezes pretty solid. You wouldn’t believe how cold it gets. Be grateful that you don’t have to stay here for the winter. You got here

pretty much right after it got warm and all the snow melted. Right, here we start climbing.”

We turned onto a narrow dirt track that led off into the trees. The trail did not appear to be maintained in any way, and the ground was covered in a thick blanket of dead leaves that crunched underfoot. In places where the foliage was thick, the usual light dappling of shadows became the full beam of a spotlight where the sun managed to break through the leaves. I wondered how these individual ragged, spiny and sometimes sparse trees could look, from a distance, like smooth sheet of green velvet covering the hillside.

There were soft crunches and snaps around us that would be frightening at night, but during the day, they were immediately recognizable as the comforting sounds of a natural setting going about its business. Birds sang and the squirrels chattered, and a family of wild turkeys scattered in fright at the sound of our footsteps. The leaves of the trees rustled in the breeze as though they were whispering to each other, and I felt for a moment as if I was intruding on a place where I did not belong. But that was a silly thought, I chided myself. No one owned the woods.

“This place is really something in the winter,” Octavian said eventually. “White snow everywhere like everything is muffled and asleep. Sometimes you feel like you should talk in whispers or you’ll wake it up. You should see it, you’d like it.”

I smiled as a rabbit darted across the path in front of us, its white tail bobbing as it scampered away. “How do we know,” I said slowly, “that I’m allowed to leave? Maybe I’m just as stuck here as you are.”

“I thought you didn’t believe all that.”

“I’m just saying. What if?”

Octavian thought for a while. “If I were her, I don’t think I would want you,” he said at last. “You’re too much of a skeptic.”

We walked in silence for a long time, each of us lost in our own thoughts, speaking only to point out an interesting tree, or an animal off in the distance. I was thinking about Margot and her need to deny the existence of the unreal things she could see. The past few weeks had proven to me that there was something more than usual in the world around me. Could it be that it was just this weird place with its resident witch, or did it mean that the world as a whole was not what I had once taken for granted? I had seen things and heard about things that could not be possible, and yet people believed them, and I had seen those things too, and I had to believe them because there was no alternative. But did it just mean that there was an explanation and I didn’t know it yet, or did it mean that when I tried to rationalize, I was behaving like my mother?

Octavian certainly believed that things were beyond normal in Wicket’s Folly. What else could he do, with an arm like his? But he also seemed to believe that there was more to life than met the eye, that there was some sort of deeper mystery in the way things worked, and he seemed completely comfortable with not understanding *why*. I definitely could not live like that, so here I was, treading a thin line between a quest for reason and utter insanity, trying to find answers when I wasn’t even sure of the questions. But I needed to know, and I reassured myself that I would, and it would all make some kind of sense eventually.

“We’re here,” said Octavian, his voice hushed.

We stepped out into a clearing in the trees, and I caught my breath. A circle of magnificent and weathered grey stones stood tall and proud, the afternoon sun casting their long shadows behind them. What had once been called Wicket's Circle. The Folly itself.

It looked just like it did in the painting that was sitting on the desk in my room, except that I had painted them with their shadows all falling to a central point, which made them eerie and foreboding. Up close, they didn't have that dangerous feel.

The stones felt powerful and eternal, even though I knew that they had not even been there for a whole century. Their surfaces were not worked smooth, and they were of slightly varied size and thickness, but despite their subtle differences, they appeared part of a perfectly matched set.

From up here, I could see the lake, its water sparkingly clear, and the town, almost hidden in the trees, the little people crawling along like insects. From this lofty position, it seemed like the stones could watch over everything happening below.

“You know what I heard?” said Octavian. “I heard that if you count them, you’ll come up with a different number every time.”

I took a long drink from my water bottle. It had been a hot climb, and I was sweaty. “Not possible.”

“Let’s try. You stand here, and I’ll go around.”

I complied, mostly because I wanted to see his theory proved wrong. While he wound around the circle, touching each stone as he counted, I placed my hand on the surface of the pillar closest to me. My fingers looked so long and thin, the skin too pink

against the gray-white stone. My gold nail polish was chipped and scratched. When was the last time I had painted them?

The surface of the stone felt rough, slightly furry with lichen, and warm from the sun. I traced a crack along its side with my finger.

“Seventeen,” announced Octavian, coming up by my side. “I’m going around again. Don’t move.” Off he went.

Below, on the lake, I could see some people in tiny, bright colored kayaks. I had never been kayaking. If only I hadn't been expelled, I could be planning summer expeditions of kayaking and swimming with my friends, not a care in the world, instead of here in Wicket’s Folly, trying to recover missing memories that would disprove the existence of magic. *If I could take it all back, go back to the beginning of the summer and tell myself not to come here, would I do it?*

“Nineteen,” said Octavian, coming up by my shoulder. “See, I told you.”

“That’s not possible.”

“I can count very well. In fact, I’m known for it.”

“Go again. Now I'm paying attention.”

He shrugged and headed off, this time counting from the inside of the circle. I watched carefully this time, counting quietly to myself as he went. Was it just my imagination, or was he getting smaller as he went? Were the stones getting bigger? No, it seemed as though he were getting farther away. But that wasn’t possible, was it? He was getting farther away, but he was still inside the circle and there was nowhere to get farther away to.

“Octavian,” I called nervously, but he didn’t turn, didn’t even seem to hear me.

Something like panic broke inside me, and I stepped into the circle, screaming his name. He turned, surprised, and saw me. “Come back!” I called.

He walked back towards me, and it was a much longer walk than it should have been. When at last he was close enough, I grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the circle.

He looked at me, confused. “What is it?”

Now that we were both outside the circle, everything seemed normal again, laughably so. I shook my head. “I thought – nothing.”

“You know something weird?” he said quietly. “That time I was up to thirty-six. But that’s way too many. Much more than the first time.”

“I’m sure you just started going around a second time,” I said. “Can we go now?”

He scratched his head, not really listening, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Yeah. Wait, what about reconnaissance?”

“Let’s not bother,” I said. “I want to go.”

Octavian shrugged, and we began the long winding descent back to the town.

I was glad when the stone circle disappeared into the trees behind us. *What the hell just happened?*

It seemed like my world was getting complicated once more.



## Chapter Twenty-One

As if we had agreed upon it, Octavian and I did not speak about what had happened at the stone circle. I was still too unsettled by it, and Octavian was deep in thought. We spoke only of our plans to retrieve the notebook and my mother's letter the following day, and parted company until then.

It felt as though I was preparing to go into battle. I did not know what was going to happen or how things were going to turn out, and that made me nervous. I liked things to be predictable. But I had to know what that letter said, even if it was nothing but nonsense.

I spent the evening playing with my cousins, to keep from thinking about things too much. They were antsy after having to sit still and behave at their music lessons, and were, if possible, even rowdier than usual. We ran around in the backyard before dinner, and then build a large, lopsided pyramid out of blocks. I sat in for the reading of their bedtime story, even though it had talking animals.

"Aren't you going to tell me that animals don't talk?" Uncle Bennet said when he had turned out the light.

"I don't know what I believe any more," I answered.

"Are you alright? You sound strange."

"It's just this place – it does things to you."

"Yes I know," he said. I could just make out his wide glazed smile, too bright in the darkness. "It's wonderful isn't it?"

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I waited for Octavian by the market's rear loading dock. Because of nerves, I had not slept well the night before, and now I kept yawning with jawbone-cracking fatigue. I had only barely managed to get Eric and Freddie to their swimming lesson on time, and then had almost forgotten to pick them up again. I had left them all at home under Archie's care, with the understanding that I would be home soon, but just in case, if I was not, their mother would be back by four.

Mick had spotted me on my way to the market, which was almost inevitable due to the problem of having hair so bright that it made me recognizable from miles away. *Maybe I should buy a wig*, I thought, while I smiled and told him truthfully that I was in a hurry. He accepted this excuse with no outward hint of irritation.

I pulled a crate into the shade and sat, rubbing my eyes, glad that I had decided to forgo the contact lenses. My glasses might be unflattering, but at least they didn't itch. I fingered the solid wooden handle of the small kitchen knife in my pocket. It was the same one that had cut my hand when I tried to cook three weeks ago.

When Octavian showed up at last, I surveyed his all-black clothes and said, "We aren't robbing the place you know."

"We kind of are."

"Not like burglars. We're just trying to get back something they took from me. You look suspicious like that."

"Shut up, I like black. It matches the color of my soul."

“Of course it does.” I myself was wearing my sturdiest jeans-and-sneakers combo, the same ones from yesterday. I really should have brought better clothes. While packing skimpy summer outfits, I hadn't planned for painting, or getting kidnapped, or for breaking into houses.

"Did you bring a weapon?"

Wordlessly, I pulled the knife from my pocket and unfolded the washcloth I had wrapped it in.

"Excellent." He showed me a boxcutter that he had brought with him from work.

I had thought that we would drive the produce truck up to the mayoral manor, but Octavian admitted, rather shamefacedly, that he could not drive, and we could not ask anyone to drive us because someone might wonder why a simple delivery was going to take so much longer than it should have.

“I can’t drive either,” I told him reassuringly. “I’ve just got a permit. I’m going to take my test soon though.”

“I would have got mine by now, but we don’t have a DMV here, and I can’t leave to go to one.”

He was pressing the issue too much. It obviously embarrassed him. “So what do we do?”

“We take the wagon.”

“Which is...?”

Octavian pointed, and I looked over to see...a child's red wagon. I could have laughed. "Don't tell me we're going to walk all the way up to the manor dragging that thing?"

"Nope. We're going to ride all the way up to the manor." He showed me how the wagon hitched up to a bicycle. "And now you see why I don't go to make deliveries by myself."

I shook my head. "You've got to be joking."

Together we loaded up the wagon with big paper sacks that Octavian stapled shut and then secured with string.

"I don't suppose there's room in there for me to ride too?" I asked doubtfully.

He shrugged. "Hop in and we'll see."

I shifted the bags over as much as possible, then crammed myself into a corner with two bags on my lap. Octavian climbed onto the bike and strained to work the pedals. We rolled forward a few yards before stopping. "Whoa," he said. "You weigh a ton. This will be murder going uphill."

"You've never had a girlfriend, have you?" I said coldly.

"There's only one way to do this. One of us will have to walk."

"Fine, I feel ridiculous sitting in this thing anyway." I climbed out of the wagon.

"I'll walk for now. We can take turns walking quickly and riding slowly."

He nodded. "Fine. And if we end up having to leave in a hurry, you can ride in the wagon. The extra weight will be positively useful if we're going downhill."

"Just shut up," I said wearily.

The system of riding and walking worked very well, if a trifle slowly. The journey was also less creepy when we kept to the road instead of going through the trees.

Octavian creaked along on the bicycle with I walking at his side, and when one of us was tired we switched places. I contrived to spend less time working the bike contraption, though I did help.

The road curved around the town, so we could watch it growing smaller below us. My uncle's house shrank steadily below us, and I was pleased to see it was still standing. I probably shouldn't have left the boys on their own, but it could not be avoided. Archie, as the oldest, would have enough sense to keep the mischief to a minimum. Hopefully, I would be back home before Aunt Alicia, but if something went wrong...I put it from my mind.

When we reached the Wicket house, I was surprised to see that the place was silent and somewhat rundown. The paint was faded and dirty, and several lathes of the shutters were missing. One of the windows was cracked and taped over. It did not look like the home of an important man like a mayor.

Octavian climbed off the bike and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He rang the doorbell. "Here goes nothing."

We waited, and the door was soon opened by a middle-aged woman that I assumed had to be the mayor's housekeeper. "You're late," she said, but she did not sound annoyed. Her voice carried no emotion whatsoever.

"Truck broke down," Octavian lied. "We had to take the bike."

She shrugged. “Too bad.” Again, her voice was expressionless. “Put the bags in the kitchen.”

Octavian and I carried the bags into the hall. As we stepped over the threshold, I felt like a sheep walking into the lion’s den, or a juicy fly voluntarily entering the spider’s web. I eyed the shadowy stairs as I followed Octavian and the housekeeper through a huge dining room with a long table that was set with dusty plates and tarnished silverware, and into a large kitchen. As we set off to get the next round of bags, Octavian gave me a significant look, jerked his head over his shoulder, and mouthed, “I’ll stall.”

I nodded, and touched the knife in my pocket for reassurance. “I think I’ll just go use the bathroom,” I announced loudly . There was no reaction from the housekeeper, so when Octavian headed out to the wagon for the next load of bags, I went upstairs. The steps were covered in thick dusty carpet, but they still creaked quietly at my step.

The second floor of the house seemed just as neglected as the first. It was very dim, considering the bright sunshine outside, and it smelled musty, as though the windows were never opened. There were splotches of mold on the carpet, and a thick coating of dust choked the corners where the walls met the floor. Ugh. What on earth was that housekeeper here to do if not to clean?

Doors lined the hallway, and most of them were open. Through one set of double doors partially ajar, I could hear voices talking quietly. I resisted the urge to listen; my primary objective was finding the notebook.

A quick tour of the half dozen doors lining the hallway showed me that they were mostly bedrooms, though the blankets of the fancy four-poster beds were dusty enough

that I could tell they were never used. I hesitated on the threshold of one, feeling daunted. Where was I supposed to start? Crap and double crap. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

Would the notebook be lying around in plain sight? What about the letter? What if they were hidden? Should I be feeling behind mattresses and looking behind paintings? How could I have been so foolish, thinking I could simply traipse up the hill, help myself to the notebook, and then skip off home? *Why* hadn't we thought things through?

I could still hear the distracting murmur of voices coming from the study. I could feel them drawing me in, the lure of secrecy and things I wasn't supposed to know, like listening to people who thought they were alone talk in the ladies' room. What was the harm in listening for a bit? They could be saying something interesting or important, and they might stop soon. I could start my search a little later. Back through the muffled hallway I crept, cursing silently as the floor creaked. I paused by the double doors and stood, completely still, listening.

I could hear a man's voice and a woman's. The woman's voice was too quiet to decipher clearly, but I could hear the words of the man almost entirely. I wondered if this was Mayor Strahan.

"I would do the same, if it were me," he was saying. His words were swift, almost pleading.

The woman murmured something, her voice hissing on the *S*'s.

"Haven't I always done what you said? You command and I obey. Can't you allow me this one?"

“Kindly do not meddle in my affairs,” the woman said, her voice rising so I could hear her words. “Child of yours or no, this cannot be allowed to continue. Not when I’m so close.”

Was she talking about Tamara? Had Tamara been up to something that was dangerous to Lysandra? The man muttered something I could not hear, and the woman said, “Threats now, is it?” Her tone was amused. “You may try if you like, but you know that I will not...allow it. Let me remind you –”

There was a low sobbing cry of despair from the man, but I had not heard the woman say or do anything. I hovered on the threshold. Should I run in and help the man? The moment passed, and I did not move. I could hear the man crying quietly now.

“Remember this, Megan Breelie,” said the woman loudly.

I froze, my heart pummeling my ribcage. The door flew open of its own accord. I could see a figure curled on the floor, shaking quietly, but there was no one else in the room. My gaze flew back and forth over the desk and endless bookshelves, but I could not see the woman who had been speaking. I gripped the knife in my pocket and drew it out.

"My, my," said the woman's voice. "Isn't this a surprise? And you've brought a gift. A kitchen knife in a washcloth? How very terrifying."

*Where is it coming from? I raked the room with my eyes. How can there be nothing? This isn't possible.*

A flash of white burned momentarily before my eyes, and the woman appeared right before me, her nose three inches from mine.



I jumped backwards with a shriek, the knife slipping from my hand so that I held nothing more than a little green washcloth.

Hair and clothes billowing around her in an invisible wind, she stared directly into my eyes. The pale face was surprisingly young, but the brittle, floating white hair and faded eyes were those of an old woman. Her small sharp teeth bared themselves in a smile that was far from friendly. "Boo."

"Ly-lysandra," I stammered.

"Oh you know my name?" Her lips pressed into a thin dark smudge on her ashy face. "And I know yours. Remember what happens to little girls who cannot mind their own business, Megan Breelie. Your voice offends my ears." Her outline seemed to shimmer. She reached out an arm that stretched towards me, glittering and insubstantial and impossibly long.

I pulled at my feet but they had rooted themselves to the spot. *Relax, focus*, I told myself, but my mind had other ideas. *I've been here before. Tree roots – stones – the moon – I can see it! Stop it – not now! Why can't I move?*

"Megan!" A thundering of footsteps announced Octavian's arrival. He was clutching his boxcutter in his gloved left hand. "Get back," he said bravely, but his voice shook.

Lysandra smiled. "And it brought a friend." She turned to me. "You really could have chosen better. Can't you see this one is swarming with insecurities. He carries them with him everywhere; they're mosquitoes, stinging and stinging at him. He isn't even sure who he is. And he wonders, doesn't he? Oh, yes, he wonders."

"Shut up!" Octavian's cheeks were a deep dark red. He raised the boxcutter, and there was a rapid clicking as he extended the blade as far as it would go.

"What, you think that puny toy can actually harm me? My dear, don't you see? I have ancient and powerful magic, and you have a little knife."

She lunged in an instant, faster than my eyes could track. Her hands flashed into pure white light and shot towards me, *through* me. Instantly, the world shuddered violently. For a long moment, my stunned eyes could see nothing but bright white.

Color swam back into the world. The walls bled purple, and then throbbed to green. I could hear my heart thundering in my ears. Shadows dripped like ink down the pulsating walls and crept up to engulf the ground. The floor beneath my feet was stretching thin, and I was sinking into a pit of ink.

"There will be no escape," Lysandra's voice whispered in my ear. "You're mine."

I couldn't breathe. I gasped and gasped, and no oxygen passed into my lungs. Pain exploded in my chest, as though my ribs were trying to fold in on themselves. My neck tried to telescope, while my head was floating away like a parade blimp. The world twisted and swirled, crawling with flashing, pixilated slime.

"No!" cried a man's voice suddenly. The mayor. Lysandra gave a cry of surprise and rage, and the world snapped back into place around me with such violence that I reeled and nearly fell. I clutched the wall to recapture my balance, gasping in air. Before the floor was fully solid again, I snatched Octavian's frozen hand and bolted.

All thought of finding the notebook fled from my mind. I didn't care that the mayor might be harmed for interfering, that he had stood up for me and might be hurt. All I cared about was getting away from that house and that evil woman.

I did not know how we made it down the stairs without falling. Octavian stumbled along behind me. His stride was much longer than mine, and he kept bumping into me, stepping on the heels of my shoes, and tripping us both up.

"Let go!" he yelled as we picked ourselves up at the bottom of the stairs. "Let go!"

His words finally got through to me, and I unlocked my fingers from around his. We hurtled out the front door, and I barely registered the robotic housekeeper standing by the door, her hand clutching a wad of cash stiffly in the air.

"Never mind," Octavian yelled over his shoulder. "We'll bill you!"

"We've got to get out of here. She's coming after us." *Where is that damn wagon?*

"What happened?" he asked urgently. "All of a sudden you looked like you'd seen a ghost, and then you just grabbed me."

"I'll tell you later," I gasped. I climbed into the empty wagon. "Go, go, go!"

He hopped onto the bike and we shot away down the road. Several times we nearly careened into a tree, but that wasn't nearly as frightening as what we had just left. I looked over my shoulder many times, but it seemed that no one was going to follow us. And why should they? Lysandra controlled this entire place. There was nowhere we could go that she could not get us.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

"Time passed," she went on, "and the gods decided to leave this earth. The days of magic were ending, and it was time for them to go. Before they went, they built a monument of stones in the center of the circle as a testament to the end of an era. They used stones larger than three men together, too heavy for any but a god to lift, so men would see it and always remember the power of their gods. Moreover, when the last stone fell, they said, the two worlds would no longer overlap, but would be forever separate, even for the gods. From that point on, mankind would have to learn to take care of himself, to live or die by his own hand."

My heart did not stop galloping until we were back in the leisurely bustle of the Wicket's Folly afternoon. In the bright sunlight and ordinary proceedings of the town, the idea of terrifying visions in a dark and spooky mansion seemed laughable. And yet, inexplicable as it was, I couldn't deny that it had happened.

The bike screeched to a halt back at the loading dock of the market, and Octavian pretended to fall dramatically to the ground. "Ah my legs," he groaned. "I'm dying."

I had to unlock my legs before I could make myself move, and as I climbed out of the wagon, I found that my knees were shaking.

"So?" Octavian sat up. "You going to tell me what happened?"

"Lysandra saw me," I said shortly.

"But you got the notebook, right?"

The notebook! The whole reason for our ill-advised trip, and I had not even looked for it. "I couldn't find it," I said, not looking at him.

"What about the letter?"

"Nope."

“What? All that planning – all the *biking* – and you didn’t find it?” Octavian said indignantly. “Then what was the point of all – what are we supposed to – what about my *legs*?”

“I’m not giving your legs any consideration at all,” I snapped. I felt guilty and foolish, and it made me want to lash out at him. “I tried to find it and I couldn’t. End of story, okay?”

He stood angrily. Clearly his stupid legs didn't hurt *too* much. “Yeah, I bet you tried *real* hard.”

“And if you ask me, I think your little plan was –” my brain flailed around for the proper word but couldn’t find it “– severely *underplanned*.”

“Oh yeah?” he snarled. “I didn't hear *you* sharing any brilliant ideas. I notice you’re perfectly happy to let me do all the hard work, but when it comes time for you to do something, you give it five minutes and give up.”

“*What?*” said I outraged. “That is so far from – I don’t – who do you think you are, Mr. High-and-Mighty? ‘*I* understand what’s going on around here. *I* know everything, and *you’re* too stupid, so leave the thinking to me.’”

“I do not sound like that!”

“Hey kid!” someone called, and we both turned to see a man in a blue apron standing on the loading dock. “You were supposed to be back half an hour ago. I’m not paying you to stand around and argue with your girlfriend.”

“She’s *not* my girlfriend,” said Octavian angrily.

“I don’t care. Get back inside and get back to work.”

“This isn’t over,” Octavian hissed at me. He followed his boss back inside.

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It seemed I had lost my only ally, but I was too angry to care. As I walked home, I kicked at pebbles, thinking of all the ugly words that I would have liked to call him if I had had the chance. *He was angry at me?* How could he have thought that stupid, *stupid* plan was a good idea? How could he just *say* those things to me? To *me!* Even boys I broke up with still wanted me. I *owned* them.

*And how did that work out for Eden?* a sneaky voice whispered in my mind. *Shut up!* I yelled. *Why am I arguing with myself?*

I saw Sasha jogging on the other side of the street, and when she glared at me, I glared right back.

I was stewing with resentment and grumpiness when I let myself into my uncle’s house. My cousins materialized as though from nowhere, dashing in to skid to a halt in front of the door. They stood in a row, like a small, three-person live barricade. I tried to dispel my dark mood. None of this was *their* fault.

“You didn’t want to come in, did you?” Archie asked.

“Well, I was thinking of just sitting on the doorstep for a few hours,” I said.

“Oh, good,” said Eric.

Archie elbowed him. “She’s being sarcastic, doofus.”

I examined their too-innocent faces. They were clearly hiding something. Great, something else I could feel guilty for. I had left my cousins alone unsupervised while I

ran off on an errand that turned out to be a waste of time, and while I did, they had gotten into trouble. I sighed. “All right, what did you do?”

“Doo-doo,” said Freddie, giggling.

“Nothing,” said Eric.

“An experiment,” said Archie.

I shoved my way through them, and as I passed, they latched on to my arms and legs. I struggled along as though I were a convict of old, complete with iconic ball and chain.

“Don’t go in there,” Eric squealed.

“Shut up, moron,” said Archie.

“I love you,” Freddie announced, hugging my knees.

“The kitchen, huh?” I said. I grabbed onto the door frame to pull myself and my retinue into the kitchen. There was an odd burning smell, and I sniffed repeatedly to try and locate its source. I turned towards the microwave. “Oh my god, what did you do?”

“An experiment,” Archie said softly. All three boys let go of me and cowered down onto the floor, as though they were trying to make themselves as small as possible.

Gingerly, I popped the microwave’s door and had a look. The back of the door was covered in green splotches, and thin wisps of smoke issued gently from inside. “A marker? A *marker*? Why on earth would you microwave a marker.”

“We didn’t do it,” Eric wailed. “Please don’t tell Mommy!”

Freddie scratched his ear placidly. “Sometimes I think there’s dirt on my arms, and then I realize it’s just my freckles.”

“It was dry and it wouldn’t color,” Archie said. “Whenever the food is dry, Mom puts it in the microwave and –”

“Only with food,” I said. “No markers in the microwave.”

“We would have asked permission, but you weren’t here,” said Archie. His tone was slightly accusatory, and I had to admit that he had a point. I should not have left them alone. Really, it was lucky that microwaving a marker was all they had done. All of them were still alive, no one was harmed, and the house was still standing.

I sighed. “Get me some paper towels and we’ll see what we can do.”

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Only Gwen was home when I called that night. That meant that Dad was probably out on a date with his mystery girlfriend. I thought I could sense that my sister did not want to talk to me, so I joked around, telling Gwen about our cousins’ latest escapades.

“Luckily, I was able to get most of it off,” I said. “The microwave is still a little bit green, but I don’t think Aunt Alicia noticed.”

“That’s nothing,” said Gwen. “When you were five, you broke Dad’s camera trying to see how the pictures got in and out.”

I laughed. “Really?”

“Yeah. And then you told him that elephants from Mars had done it, not you.”

“Well if I said it, it must have been true.” Excellent. She was relaxing. We had found something to talk about that was not a sore point for either of us.

“So why did you leave them alone anyway?” Gwen asked. “Everyone knows not to leave little kids alone if you value your furniture. Got a new boyfriend, huh?”



“What?” I thought of Octavian, that stupid know-it-all jerk. “As if. I had to go looking for something I lost.”

“What’d you lose?”

I hesitated. Did I really want to bring up Margot, when things were going so well? I bit my lip, then plunged ahead. “It was the notebook Mom gave me. I must have put it somewhere before the accident, and now I can’t find it.”

“Did you look everywhere?”

I thought of my expedition to the Wicket house. “Everywhere.”

“Have you tried all the places you might have hidden it?”

“Yes.” I could hear my sister’s footsteps through the phone. There was a rustling, and then a brief silence.

Finally Gwen spoke, and there was hostility in her voice once more. “And you didn’t, I don’t know, leave it right here in your room?” I could imagine my sister’s perpetual smile pinched tight with anger.

*What?* I had put so much time and effort into finding that notebook, risked so much, probably stirred up a hornet’s nest by disturbing Lysandra, and then it turned out that I had simply not taken the notebook to Wicket’s Folly?

I swallowed down my frustration. “What’s in it?”

There was a pause while Gwen flipped a few pages. “It looks like pretty old,” she said. “It’s the first draft of one of her essays, but I’m pretty sure she’s never published this one. Actually...I think it may be a story. Maybe she wasn’t comfortable with fiction, so she didn’t publish it.”

"You've been following all her publications?" I was surprised. Margot published her essays under several false names. Gwen must have been keeping tabs on each one.

"You're not?"

Hmm. There was just a story in the notebook? Well, my mother must have wanted me to have it for a reason. "Can I ask you a favor?" I said apprehensively. "Can you check and see if there's a letter too?"

"There isn't."

"Oh, okay. And um...can you send the notebook to me?"

That did it. Gwen exploded. "I just can't believe you sometimes! It's not just that Mom gave you that notebook, asked you to take it with you, and you didn't. But now you want me to *send* it to you?"

"Uh...yes?"

"You can't just – change you're mind about what is and isn't important – Mom asked you to take it with you. That should have been enough. You owe her that."

My temper rose. "I don't owe her anything, and neither do you. Look, will you send the notebook or not?"

"Fine," said Gwen, her tone unwilling.

"Ship it express, okay?"

"Fine."

"Good."

"Okay."

"Yeah. Oh, there's someone at the door. I gotta go."

I hung up on Gwen's sarcastic "yeah, right." How could she think so little of me?

*Sometimes I can't believe we're related.*

I sighed and opened the door to find... Mick. *And the fun just keeps on coming.*

I took an involuntary step backwards.

He held up his hands. "Wait," he said. "Truce, all right? I'm not here to try anything." There was no glow about his eyes this time, no magnetism, nothing. He just looked tired.

"What do you want?"

He glanced over his shoulder and then pulled a crumpled envelope out of his pocket. "I came to give you this."

I took the envelope. My name was written in green pen above a PO box number. Could it be my mother's letter? "Why do you have that?"

"Someone gave it to me to keep. I no longer want to keep it."

"But why are you giving it to me?"

He bit his lip. "I don't know. I got...carried away. More than I thought possible. More than I thought I would. I'm sorry – for everything." His hand reached out to touch my hair, and I stepped back out of his reach. "I saw a lot of myself in you. And the other day, when I saw you with that guy....Sometimes we can be so blind to our flaws until we see them in someone else."

What? Did he just insult me?

"You're an extraordinary woman, Megan Breelie. Good luck." He sighed and turned away.

I watched him trudge down the path, his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets. He seemed like a completely different person from the charming, commanding presence he had had before. He walked like a man going to his doom, one who was resigned to his fate.

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I couldn't bring myself to open the letter. I wanted Octavian's support when facing my mother's words, and I was pretty sure he would never be talking to me again. Back home if I lost a friend, I could easily just get myself a new one, but out here, Octavian was all I had. How pathetic.

“At least it’s Friday night,” I told the cat as I changed out of my sweaty sneakers. “At least I don’t have to go out.” I folded the letter carefully, and tucked it into the back pocket of my jeans.

I had been looking forward to spending the night inside and having a good sulk, but I had forgotten about the bonfire.

“You don’t think it’s going to rain,” I said hopefully as we were packing up to leave.

Uncle Bennet turned and regarded the gray sky through the kitchen window. “I don't know....I know that where you come from, whenever the sky’s not blue, that means it’s going to rain, but around here, it’s a little more unpredictable.”

“So can we go?” Archie asked.

“We’ve been very good,” Eric added.

I could have easily cancelled the trip by bringing up the subject of how the microwave had attained its faint green tint, but I did not want to get my cousins into trouble. *Besides*, I thought. *What if Lysandra's so angry that she tries to use the fire to kill everyone again? I should be there, just in case.*

I stuck close to them all throughout the picnic dinner, avoiding the eyes of all the people who hated me, or who I was currently fighting with. Perhaps it was just the weather, but there were fewer people at this week's bonfire, and they seemed less cheerful than they had last week. The circle was smaller this time, though it could have been because people sat closer together. I wondered if some part of them remembered the enormous fire that had almost killed them two weeks ago.

Even the story was darker tonight – this I knew for certain because I stayed for the whole thing. There were so many people I didn't want to see – Sasha, who glared at me, Tamara, who kept trying to catch my eye, Octavian, who was studiously looking anywhere but at me....At least Mick wasn't there. I tried instead to focus on the story, even when I thought I saw images in the fire again.

Mayor Strahan seemed unusually tired, but no worse for wear after the events at the Wicket house. His hands were slightly unsteady when he held them up for silence. After the usual reminders about the upcoming solstice festival, he announced that he himself would be telling tonight's story.

He told a tale of a man who was very superstitious.

This man had been unusually lucky in life – he had a good job, a lovely wife, and many children. He had never had any major tragedies in his life, and he believed that he

had gotten as far as he had with as much as he had because so far, the evil eye, the eye of the devil, had failed to notice him. He was always very careful never to brag or to boast about anything, because he knew that this is what calls the devil's attention, and the devil always takes the things that you love most. He would never even tell people how many children he had, for fear of calling the evil eye on them.

Years passed, and eventually the man lost everything he had. He was fired from his job, his income dried up, and he was left a beggar. A terrible illness struck his children and many of them died. His wife took the remaining children and moved away. The man was left, destitute and lonely, for the remainder of his short, unhappy life.

When he died and finally met the devil face to face, he asked, *how did you know where to find me? I was so careful. I did everything right, and still you took everything from me.*

The devil answered, *I did not see you for a long time until I noticed that there was a man trying so very hard not to be noticed, and then you seemed to stand out more than everyone else around you.*

*Do you mean,* said the man, *that by trying not to be noticed, I called your attention to me?*

*Yes,* said the devil.

*If I had not tried to hide,* said the despairing man, *would you still have taken everything from me?*

The devil smiled at him and said, *I guess we'll never know.*

The story ended there, leaving me feeling distinctly unsatisfied. If I was going to sit through a whole story, it should at least have a good ending. Not even necessarily a happy ending – just one that made sense.

Well, that was a waste of time. There was no monster fire this time to save people from. But perhaps I could still salvage one good thing from this night.

I sat down next to Octavian. “Hey.”

He hunched his shoulders over and put his chin on his knees. “Hey.”

Wordlessly, I pulled the letter out of my pocket and showed it to him.

His back straightened. “Is that...?”

I nodded.

“Where did you get that?”

“Mick gave it to me.”

“What? But I thought – ”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Have you read it?”

“Not yet. I want to wait until I have the notebook too. My mother said she sent me the letter to explain things. It feels like they ought to go together.”

He tossed a few blades of grass at the smoldering logs of the bonfire. They fell short. “And did Mick give you the notebook too?”

“No. Um. Turns out I left the notebook at home. I never brought it here after all.”

“*Now* you tell me?”

“Yeah, but my sister’s mailing it to me. I should get it Monday. We can read it then, okay?”

“I can't believe you're going to make me wait so long,” he complained.

I smiled to myself. Peace offering accepted.



*I am surrounded by fools and traitors.*

*I pace the hallways of my home with a nervous energy. My home! My home! This place I made my own after that fool Wicket died, and that cow has the gall to walk right in. And far worse, in my pitifully weakened condition, I could not see her coming.*

*She was right before me, open, unprotected, and I could not kill her. Intervening traitor! I will punish him sorely for this.*

*So. That Girl has found a companion, the gangly stork boy. I've listened to them planning, thinking I will not be able to hear. He knows much, but he has misinterpreted it. I allowed myself to grow complacent, thinking myself safe. And then this – this insult of an invasion.*

*No matter. The Stork-boy is clever, but he will be easy enough to break if the necessity arises. He is weak, though he hides it well. His father's life is a powerful trump card.*

*I pause at the window and survey the gathering clouds outside. My fingers touch the glass lightly, and to my joy, it is cool and solid to my touch.*

*How ironic. The Girl's ill-thought assault had results than I could hardly have hoped for. The show of cheap tricks that I put on to scare her has worked surprisingly well. She is shaken, her footing uncertain, and her power weakens because of it.*

*And as her power weakens, mine grows.*

*I can feel my strength returning to me, slowly but surely. It is only one week to the solstice, and already I can feel the mists drawing in, obscuring edges, showing me the*

*way. The doorway will open this time. I am sure of it. She will be powerless to stop me, paralyzed by her fear.*

*When I visit the Charmer, I know immediately that something is wrong. He doesn't greet me, doesn't fawn and smile. He senses my presence and wheels around from stuffing possessions and clothing into a trunk. His face shows panic for a moment before settling into a stony mask. He simply says, I gave her the letter.*

*You what? I scream. My calm is slipping away from me. The hinges of my mind groan from trying to contain my anger.*

*I'm done, he says. I looked at her and I saw myself, and it disgusted me. I just don't want to do it anymore. I'm going home.*

*Traitor! Traitor!*

*I forget everything, the buzzing in my head, the constant ache of the world. My rage bursts from me, far greater than anything I have felt before, greater even than when I first felt the urge to kill That Girl. I am nothing more than its channel. It flies from me, wild and venomous, and I can't stop it.*

*Through the boiling, seething mass of red obscuring my vision, I see the terror in the Charmer's eyes.*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

"Time passed, and outsiders came to the islands of tin. They tried to conquer the land, tried to make the people follow their customs, believe in their gods." She looked down. "Some did. And some did not. Some fought...and some left." She looked up, straight into Samuel's eyes. "Some reasoned that if they could not be allowed to live in their land and follow the old ways, they would leave. Some of them went through the Stonehedge circle, and perhaps they got where they intended, because they were never seen again. Some were unable to make it south because of the fighting. And so the priests searched for more places where reality was thin, where the worlds overlapped just a little bit. They marked the spots with circles of stone so those who wanted to follow in the future could find them, and they led their people through."

"...As for the maid who knew so much about the old days, she disappeared, though she did not leave – but that's a different story."

"That," I said, "had got to be the creepiest story ever. I mean, how would my mom even know half that stuff."

Octavian looked up from the notebook. "Does it matter?" he said hoarsely. He had decided to read the entire thing aloud, to make sure that we wouldn't miss anything.

"It matters to me."

"I thought it would tell us more," he said, disappointed. He closed the notebook and handed it to me.

My fingers slid gently down the creased and age-worn cover. Rough edges where pages had been torn out showed above the spine. My mother's notebook. It shouldn't matter to me, but somehow it did. I slid the notebook carefully back into the padded envelope Gwen had sent it in.

Octavian stretched, twisting his back, and it gave several loud pops. He had been sitting, hunched over the notebook on his bedroom floor, for nearly three quarters of an hour. "So it tells us a little bit about Lysandra's motivation, but – "

"Wait, where – ?"

"Wow, you can be really dense sometimes. Lysandra was the maid. She convinced Samuel Wicket to build her her own personal pseudo-Stonehenge, the stones on the hill, and now we know why. She wants to use it to get to the 'other place,' where the gods came from. It must be a place of great power."

I yawned. "Didn't we already know that? A lot of it sounds pretty familiar to me." I had had to get up very early that morning to go with Uncle Bennet into Camden to pick up the package. Beyond his complaining about Mick, who hadn't shown up for work and wasn't answering the phone, and the amusing conversations with people who seemed unaware that Wicket's Folly existed, the trip had been completely without incident.

"Well, not exactly...."

"How did you know?"

"My friends told me."

I drew my legs up and tapped my fingers impatiently on my knees. "So how did *they* know?"

"Um. Well, it was more, um, guess-work, I guess...." He scowled at me. "How did your mother know?"

"The letter," I said. "Dad said she sent me the letter to explain things." I pulled it from my pocket and smoothed out the envelop against the tight gray weave of the carpet.

"You read it out loud this time." He coughed into a closed fist. "I'm out of voice."

"I'm not reading anything out loud." I ripped open the envelope and unfolded the pages within. They were completely filled with my mother's small, dense handwriting

Octavian scooted closer to me. "Fine, we'll read it together."

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*To my daughter Megan.*

*This is a letter I had hoped never to have to write. Better you think that your mother abandoned you than that you should know the truth.*

*When your father told me you were going to that place, I knew I had to see you. To prepare you, to tell you the truth. But I don't think I managed it too well. I am often confused about my time there, and I think that perhaps I rambled too much. You didn't believe me.*

*I don't blame you for hating me. I left you. I couldn't be around you and your sister any longer; it wasn't safe. I saw the signs everywhere, and I knew that if I left, they would follow me and leave you be.*

"Are you sure I should be reading this?" Octavian asked.

I looked up from the letter. "It doesn't matter. I know why my mother abandoned me, and I don't mind saying it – she's nuts. We're reading it for the information about the Folly, and you need to read that too."

He checked the position of the science books surrounding his room. "I keep feeling like someone is going to burst in and attack us or something."

"She hasn't done anything yet. Maybe she isn't going to."

“She *always* does something. She’s just trying to decide what.”

“We've got less than a week before the solstice. We're running out of time.”

"Don't be such a worrywart. This'll help us. I know it."

We both bent back over the letter.

*That morning, I walked you to preschool, and then I kept walking. I disappeared.*

*Details about the time get muddled in my mind sometimes, but I am writing this letter while things are clear to me, so that when the day comes that you have a need to understand certain things, it will be there for you.*

*It happened in the year before you were born. Your father and I were happy with where we were in life. We had comfortable jobs, we had a beautiful young daughter; we had nothing more to want for. Still, there was a wonderful opportunity at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. An opening in the English department for a tenure track professor to teach expository writing. My essays were not particularly well known, but they had always been well-received in scholarly circles. It was too good to pass up. It was down to me and one other candidate, so I planned myself a little vacation and went to look at the area. I know we should not have been counting our chickens before they hatched, but we were young and confident, and we thought it was a sure thing.*

*But my visit to Cornell is not the important part, especially since, as you know, I did not get the job. I'll skip ahead. After I left Ithaca, I drove around upstate New York in my rental car. The area was so lovely that really I enjoyed myself just driving around, and I was planning out an essay about my travels.*

*Eventually, I stopped in Wicket's Folly to visit your father's brother, Bennet. I was completely charmed by the town. It was so beautiful and rustic. I imagined that once we moved to New York, we could drive up there on weekends, or stay there for the whole summer. I decided to stay a bit longer, to really get a feel for this place that felt more like home than any place I had ever been. I met people; I made friends. Everyone there was wonderfully kind. The mayor was completely accessible to the people; he walked around with his adorable little redheaded daughter riding on his shoulders and knew everyone by name. The whole town participated in picnics and barbeques, and story-telling circles. There were no religious factions arguing, no crime, no racial unease. In fact, there were a surprising number of mixed race people and interracial families, and no one gave each other any trouble at all. It was like a paradise. But I should have known that there is no such thing as a utopia, and the most beautiful of masks hides the ugliest secrets.*

*I was there for a few weeks, that much I know. And then things become very muddled in my head. I can remember only snatches of things that fade away the instant I try to focus on them. Sometimes I remember images – a circle made of stone that is really a door, a girl with white hair who is somehow very, very old and very, very powerful – and these images frighten me.*

*The next thing that I can remember clearly, I was running, soaking wet, through a forest during a rainstorm. My car was gone. My suitcase was gone. I had no idea where I was. I stumbled across a highway and followed it to a town where I was able to get help. I spent a few days in the hospital recuperating, and there I learned that I had been*

*reported missing the week before, and also that I was pregnant, which was simply and utterly not possible.*

*Any child cringes at the details of their parents' love lives, so suffice it to say that your father and I had decided that to contribute our share to the effort to reduce global population, we would take measures to ensure that we would only have one child.*

*I am so very sorry to have to tell you this, Megan, but Keith Breelie is not your biological father. I do not know who your biological father is. That is part of the whirligig nightmare of images that is all I can remember when I try to think back to most of my time in Wicket's Folly.*

*I think about it too much, I know. I obsess over it. Did I cheat on my husband, or did I have no choice in the matter? When I try to figure it out, I just see the sneering smile of that white-haired girl, and I know that it was because of her – it was all according to her plans. Somehow, she got me to commit infidelities, and then she took my memory of what had happened. But somehow, I managed to get away from her.*

*The only thing I had in my pocket when I was found was a little blue notebook, the same one I used to jot down ideas. There was a new piece in it, a complete draft of a short story, not the usual notes and bits of essays. It was in my handwriting, though I did not remember writing it.*

*It told a story that was similar to the founding tale of the town that I remembered reading, though it was in far greater detail. I did not know whether it was to be my first foray into fiction, or whether I was expanding on the story I had read. Something about it had a feeling of truth to me, though I do not know how I could have known any of the*



*things that were said and done behind closed doors, or in the minds of others. I have never before, and never since, written anything like it. If it were not in my notebook, and in my handwriting, I would not believe I had written it at all. The mystery of its origin frightened me, but I could not bring myself to throw it away.*

*When I got back home at last, I was scared for a while that the nightmare woman would come after me. I thought I saw her everywhere. But time passed, and nothing happened, so I relaxed. I gave birth to a daughter eight months later. I said nothing to Keith; I'm sure he knew that the baby was not his, but he said nothing. He has been a far better husband than I deserve.*

*And then, four years after that escape that I cannot remember, I started seeing the signs again. Unnatural things springing up, following me around. I saw them everywhere, and I knew that she was coming for me. She wanted my daughter, but I was not going to allow it. I would leave my family so they could be safe. She would follow only me, and if I kept moving and did not see the ones I loved, she would not find them.*

*I gave you that notebook so you could read the story within its pages and understand the truth behind the woman who is called the 'spirit' of Wicket's Folly. Because I realize now what she wanted with me. She is breeding people to have magic powers, to create an army so powerful that they can conquer the world for her. I see her everywhere, in everything that is unreal. I can deny it all I want, but I cannot escape the truth. She wants my daughter back, and I can guess why, but she won't get her. I've raised her so she won't believe, and she will be safe.*

*When you read this, Megan, I don't expect that you will believe it. In fact, maybe it is better if you don't. But I need you to understand one thing, and I hope that when you do, you will explain it to your sister so she will understand as well. I did what I had to, not out of fear for myself, but because I love you.*

The letter ended with no signature.

"I need to call my father," I said. I felt shaken, dizzy.

"You can use our phone." Octavian was looking at me apprehensively, as though he was afraid that I might blow up. "It's in the kitchen."

I pushed myself to my feet and stumbled slightly. Octavian's shoulder was closest, and when I grabbed it for balance, he didn't push me away.

The phone's ringing seemed to go on forever, and I chewed my nails, spitting out bits of the old glittery polish that I still hadn't redone. I hadn't bitten my nails since I realized how beautiful my hands were when I was eight.

"Megan, this isn't really a good time," my father said. "I was just about –"

"Did you know?" I cut in.

"Sorry?"

"I read the letter. Mom's letter. You asked me to call you when I did, and now I am. Did you know what it said?"

"I can guess. It says I'm not your father, doesn't it?"

"So are you?"

There was a long pause. "As any writer of your mother's caliber will tell you, the answer is both yes and no."

“Dad,” I said curtly, “My entire existence and identity is hanging on the verge here, and I would appreciate if you didn’t start waxing academic.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry. I just meant that while I am not your biological father, I am still your legal father, the one who raised you and loved you, and that means something important, Megan. It does.”

“But you knew? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know for sure,” he said slowly. “I guess the truth is that it really didn’t matter. It didn’t change how I felt about you, and I worried that it might change how you felt about me. And your mother – I didn’t want you to blame her.”

“You didn’t – how could I not? How could *you* not?”

Dad sighed deeply. “When she got back from her trip to New York, she was a nervous wreck. Scared all the time. She claimed not to be able to remember what had happened to her there. I suppose that was the trigger of her illness. She felt so guilty about her affair that she blotted it from her memory, convinced herself that it hadn’t happened or that it was somehow inflicted upon her by someone else. And when the fact of her pregnancy forced her to face that something had happened, she convinced herself that it was mine. But when the baby – when *you* were born – with that little mop of red hair....There are no redheads in my family, and it had to have come from somewhere.”

“You should have told me,” I said quietly.

“Perhaps I should have.” His voice sank too, the sound over the phone wispy, and I wondered if he was crying. “Forgive me, Megan. It was out of selfishness that I did not. I love you so much, and I wanted you to be mine.”

I found that I was suppressing tears of my own. I was about to reassure him that he had been and would always be the only father in my life, but he ruined it by launching into a discourse: “Nowadays, familial bonds are more confusing than ever. There is a woman in my office who was a surrogate for her sister and is now an aunt to a child she gave birth to. A friend of mine who donated sperm has at least three children out in the world, probably with different mothers. The lesbian couple down the block is having a baby with donor sperm, but only one will be biologically related to the child. Now, following the precedent...”

I began to laugh. Gales of shaky laughter tore out of me so that I could barely breathe.

“Hmm? What?” said my father.

In that moment, I felt closer to him than I had ever been before I knew that he was not really my father. I loved his paunch, his baldness, his forgetfulness, his lectures, his constant distraction. All the things that had once annoyed me now made him more fully mine. He was just a man who did his very best to be a father. *I wish I knew how to say it. I wish I could give him a big, tight hug.*

I cleared my throat, getting control of myself at last. “So, any idea who my sperm donor is?”

He laughed as well, though it sounded a bit raspy. “None at all. I thought for a bit that your mother's intense guilt might be caused by it being my brother —”

“Uncle Bennet?” I said, shocked.

“But we run into the same problem of impossible hair color with him too.”

“Hair color...”

“Megan?”

I didn't really hear him, didn't feel the phone pressed against my ear. I was thinking of Tamara, the redheaded girl from the bakery, the daughter of the mayor, and of Lysandra's voice through a study door, threatening the mayor's child. The mayor's child, who was not Tamara, but me. *Oh, shit.*

“Megan?” Dad said again.

I forced myself to relax. “Yes?”

“I dislike using this phrase because of the grammatical inconsistencies, but in this case I feel it's justified. Are we good?”

“We're good.”

"Excellent, now if –"

“Hey Dad, have you heard of ‘the tin island’?”

There was a pause where I was almost sure that I could hear him scratching his head, and he said, “You actually want to talk about history?”

“I do. I've been doing a lot of reading, and I'm interested.”

“You've been reading?”

“Yes, I know, impossible to believe – can you please just tell me?”

“Hmmm, ‘the tin island.’ That's a literal translation of Cassiterides – the name that the Romans called the British Isles. Tin was its main export – very useful, since it is highly malleable, and can be used to make bronze and copper.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, trying to pretend that this was interesting. “And what do we know about the people that lived there? The ones before the Romans, I mean.”

“The thing about prehistoric people,” said my father, “is that they’re prehistoric. They have no system of writing, so the only things we can say about them are conjecture, and therefore highly suspect. This is not exactly my area of expertise, but as far as I know, the earliest accounts we have of them are written by the Romans who first tried to invade – oh, I think the first time was around 50 BC. But even those are suspect, because they are the notes of an invading nation who doubtless tried to demonize the people they were trying to conquer – savages, communal wives, human sacrifice, that kind of thing.

“Earlier than the Romans, no one knows, because it isn’t written down. Besides, Great Britain was very much a country shaped by invasion after invasion, and now no one knows who, if anyone, were the original people, or if it even had an indigenous population.”

“So there aren’t any of them left, huh?”

“The thing about constant invasion is that you must adapt and intermarry, or you die off. The ones who did not accept the new rule were surely wiped out.”

“What about Stonehenge? And the stone circles? Who built them?”

“For some time it was thought that they were built by the druids, but that theory has gone out of favor. There is no evidence that there even *were* druids in Britain before the Romans arrived, and even if there were, their ceremonies didn’t involve stone. There are quite a few crazy theories as to how the stones got there and what they were for – aliens, Merlin, the devil, that sort of thing.” He laughed, as though this was his idea of a

hilarious joke. "I think the current prevailing theory is that the stone circles are monuments of some kind – war monuments, or funeral markers. I've been reading about quite a number of fascinating experiments conducted to try to determine how the stones were erected, but as of yet, nothing is definite."

"Interesting....Thanks, Daddy."

"Is there anything else you wanted to ask me? It's so nice to see you taking an interest in history."

*Maybe I should let him blather on about history more often.* "No, that's all for now." I hesitated, then plunged ahead. "Daddy, I... I just want you to know I love you."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

By the time I got back to Octavian's room, I was emotionally drained. It wasn't every day that a girl found out her father wasn't her father and then reaffirmed bonds of love. I sat down on the end of Octavian's bed and said, my voice expressionless, "My biological father is Mayor Strahan."

"Huh," he said. He was perusing the letter once more.

*Gee, thanks for caring. He probably didn't even notice how long I was gone.* "My dad seems to think my mother had her first psychotic break out of guilt from having an affair. It makes sense. I mean, a lot more sense than the breeding people thing. That's got to be crazy."

"Maybe not so much," said Octavian slowly. "Maybe –"

"Don't tell me you believe her!" I cut in.

"Shut up, I'm trying to think." He had drawn both his knees up and was clasping his head in his hands, muttering to himself. "It does make a certain kind of sense... If you mix two talented people, then logically, their child would be even more strongly talented. So it *was* you... Sasha was right. You were different from us. Special. Lysandra thought you would be the one who could open the gate because she made you to be that way. She bred you."

"Stop talking about me like I'm a dog!"



“But you failed,” Octavian continued, talking over me. “So what is Lysandra going to do? If I were her, I’d try again.” He looked up. “I’d try to breed further in, with another person with a strong talent – a second generation might be the key.”

“Are you saying she wanted to ‘breed’ me too,” I squawked.

“Maybe she already did. Maybe that’s why she won’t harm you. You were uncooperative, so she took your memory, just like she did to your mother.”

“Oh my god.” I drew my legs in and curled up on the bed. “Oh my god. Oh my god.”

“Are you pregnant?” Octavian asked.

I sat up. “How should I know!” I screamed.

“Aren’t girls supposed to, you know, keep track of these things?”

*Right, right, calm down.* I had my last period – when? – oh god, when? Two weeks ago. Relief flooded giddily through my body. I looked at Octavian and shook my head.

“So you’re not pregnant? Well there goes that theory.”

Was he actually upset that he was wrong? And after he made me believe, even for a moment, that I could be pregnant! “Octavian Smith, I am going to *kill* you.”

He backed out of arm’s reach. “I’m sorry, okay. I told you what I thought could be possible.”

“You jerk! You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“I said I’m sorry.”

I scrambled off the bed, grabbed the nearest science book, and threw it at him. He tried to dodge, but it hit his shoulder.

"Okay, okay," he said, rubbing the spot, "I'm sorry."

"Anyway, it's not possible," I said, talking more to myself than to him.

"Why not?"

My ears glowed with heat. "Because I'm – I'm –"

"A virgin?"

I nodded.

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Really? You?"

"This is not funny," I snarled.

"Okay, okay, being completely serious now."

"Still. It's not possible."

"Why not?" He raised his eyebrows. "Are you gay?"

"No." I said. "I thought I might be for a while, but I'm not – not anything."

"Huh?"

I sat back down and tucked my legs under me. "I'm not gay, not straight. I'm nothing. I've never been physically attracted to another person in my life. Male, or female."

"You mean like – you're asexual?"

I nodded. Looking away from him, I mumbled a few of the details that I had never told anyone but Jackie. I had my first real boyfriend in eighth grade, and at graduation, during the after party in the gym, we had slipped away to find someplace to make out.

My boyfriend had stolen the key to the science lab, and it was perfect, quiet and shadowy. We made out for a while, and then he wanted to go farther. I was fourteen, and I thought I knew everything. I thought I was an adult. Plenty of my friends had already tried things, and though I didn't really feel anything for him, I thought I was ready.

His hands began working their way under my clothes as he kissed me harder and harder. I tried to relax, tried to get into it, but I felt nothing. The more his hands moved, the more I couldn't help noticing the smells of the science room. Our very last science experiment had been soaking the shells off eggs to study the insides, and it seemed nobody had bothered cleaning up. The sour smell of vinegar insinuated itself into my lungs, soaking the back of my throat with its acidic sliminess. Nausea churned in my stomach and clawed up my esophagus. I pushed the boy away.

"Ever since then," I finished. "If I ever even *try* to go too far, I smell that smell again." I swallowed, remembering the slick greasiness coating my throat.

"Wow," Octavian said. He gave me a long appraising look, as though he was reevaluating my worth. "I really thought that you were – "

"I know." Jackie had told me that it didn't have to matter, that I didn't have to end up as some lonely old cat-lady crone. Just because I felt no attraction didn't mean that I couldn't have boyfriends. Since I would have no physical urges affecting my judgment, I could use my relationships to any advantage I could.

"Wow," he said again. "Maybe it just hasn't been with the right person. I'm available for a little experimentation if you want." He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

"Ew. Shut up!" We both laughed, though the too-hardy quality of the sound felt uncomfortable. I couldn't believe I had just shared one of my deepest, darkest secrets. And with a boy no less.

"Oh!" said Octavian suddenly. "Mick!"

"I haven't seen him since he gave me the letter." I thought. "Actually, Uncle Bennet was complaining this morning that he didn't show up for work. What about him?"

"His weird behavior. That he would go so far to try to win you over. He must be the one who's supposed to – to breed with you. But since he's still trying to, um – that means he hasn't been able to do it yet."

We looked at each other and then said, at exactly the same moment, "Eeeew."

\*\*\*

I was exhausted that night when I got back to my uncle's house. What a long day it had been. I wanted nothing more than to curl up in my basement bed and go to sleep. But I had one last thing to do.

"Gwen," I said when my sister answered the phone. "I need to tell you something."

"So shoot." Gwen sounded impatient.

"I read Mom's letter. It told me that Dad is not my biological father."

"*What?*" Aha. Now she was paying attention. "How –"

"We've talked it out and it's true, but it doesn't change anything."

"Is – is he *my* father?"

“What? Yes, of course. But the letter – it explained about Dad, and also about why she left.”

There was a long pause. “So why did she leave?” Her voice sounded casually curious.

*You're not fooling anybody.* “She wasn’t well, Gwen. She was convinced that she was being followed by people who wanted to hurt her children. So she left us, so they wouldn’t be able to find us. She thought she was protecting us. She left because she loved us. She never told us anything because she thought it was safer for us not to know. Do you see?”

Silence. Finally, “Yes,” Gwen said, her voice very quiet.

“So please stop blaming yourself. And it’s okay to be upset. You aren’t singlehandedly responsible for holding our family together. We’re going to be fine.”

More silence. Then a whispery “okay.”

I thought of the words my father had said earlier. “So we’re good?”

“Yeah, we are. Megan, you’ve really…”

“What?”

“Changed, I guess.”

I smiled. “Take that back.”

“Never. I mean it.”

*I weep for the Charmer, my beautiful golden boy. I did not mean to do it. I was wild with rage, and I struck blindly. Before I knew it, he was dead. My tears stroke my lips with their salt, a particular taste that stings of a remorse I thought I had forgotten long ago.*

*He lay at my feet, unmarred and unmoving, even more beautiful in death than he had been in life. In that moment, everything fled my mind – the solstice, the stones, the Girl – and I wept for my Charmer.*

*I weep for him still, though his death was his own fault. He betrayed me, drew forth my vengeance on himself. The blame lies with him. I will not be drawn down by it; I have too much to prepare for.*

*That Girl and her Stork-Boy will not be a threat to me. Though they have recovered the mother's notes, they still careen in the wrong direction, wasting time with wild theories. They deserve no more of my attention.*

*My power seeps back to me, not nearly as strong as it once was, but enough to make the journey through the stones. The Girl's fear has strengthened me, as has the energy released by the Charmer's body. His sacrifice will not be ignored. I will use the power he leant me when I finally destroy this town and leave this pitiful and painful world at last.*

*Just a few more days. Borders fade, and limns dissolve. The grey shadows lengthen. The solstice is nearly here.*

*A monster I may be, but a monster who will finally taste success. Taste it, and devour it.*

## Chapter Twenty-Five

The sky was very dark the next morning, the sun shrouded in heavy gray clouds. The cool, heavily humid air whispered that a storm was coming. It gave me a distinct feeling of foreboding. "Something bad is coming," I told the cat. "She's angry, and she's going to make us pay." I shook my head and laughed. "Listen to me. I don't know what I'm saying."

The dreary sky seemed to be affecting everyone's spirits. My cousins ate their breakfast quietly, not even bothering to show each other the half-chewed food in their mouths.

To my surprise, Uncle Bennet showed up while I was rinsing my cereal bowl. He always left for the hardware store early in the morning, and we generally didn't see him until the evening. His eyes were wide and agitated. "It's Mick," he told us. "He didn't show up for work again, so I went to his place, and I found –"

"Hm!" said Aunt Alicia loudly. Her lips were pressed into a thin line, and she jerked her chin towards the boys.

"Oh." Uncle Bennet's shoulders sagged. "Well, I closed the store for the day, and the um, the service is going to be this afternoon. We should go. He did work for me."

She nodded. "Megan, you'll be here to watch the boys?"

*Oh God. I can't believe he's....* "Yeah, I can be here."

"Will you take us to the festival on Friday?" Archie asked.

"Of course," I told him. *If we live that long.*

\*\*\*

I paced back and forth in front of the bakery.

I had shepherded my cousins along to their classes, clutching the hands of both Freddie and Eric. Mick was dead. The guy who we thought was working for Lysandra, and right after he had given me my mother's letter, he was dead. No one was safe. *If anything at all happens to these little boys, I will kill her. Although...we're planning to kill her anyway....Well, if she hurts them, I'll kill her really slowly. And I'll enjoy it.*

Mick had said that he saw a lot of his own character in mine. Was I really that controlling, that self-serving and manipulative? *Yes*, whispered a tiny voice in my head. Maybe Mr. Seaver was right about me all along. I thought of all the boys I had used, and of Eden, that poor little kid who thought he was in love with a girl who cared only for herself. *I'll never do it again.*

I stopped by the market briefly to tell Octavian that we would have to meet at my house.

"No problem. Hey, did you hear?" He leaned forward on the counter. "Mick's dead. They found him in his apartment, not a mark on him. But I think we both know what happened."

I bit my lip. "It was because he tried to help me."

He glanced around, making sure there was no one nearby. "Are you having second thoughts about this?"

"No, no. It's just...Is it my fault?"

Octavian looked down at his hands. "It was his decision," he said finally.



I went back to pacing.

Every time I passed by the bakery, I considered going in. Should I tell Tamara that we shared a father in common, that we were half-sisters? I walked back and forth down the street, trying to decide whether or not to do it.

After lunch, I went so far as to go into the bakery to buy a cookie for Freddie. He had just lost a tooth, and I had promised him that I would. I had plenty of time while he examined every cookie in the place again. As Tamara chattered away, I tried to figure out how to say it. *So, how 'bout them dodgers. By the way, I'm your half-sister.* It sounded horrible, even in my mind.

“Crazy weather, huh?” Tamara remarked. “I keep waiting for a major storm, but nothing happens.”

“Yeah,” I said, biting at my lip.

“Is something wrong? You seem kind of distracted.”

I opened my mouth and tried to form the words. *I'm your half-sister, which means that your father had an affair in order to create me. I'm the reason that your parents got divorced.* I couldn't do it, couldn't destroy someone else's world. “Just planning my errands,” I said lamely.

I bought Freddie the cookie that he eventually settled on, as well as a croissant for myself. I gave Tamara a five-dollar bill and told her to keep the change. She gave me a strange look in return, but it was the least I could do.

\*\*\*

I was still feeling guilty when Octavian showed up at my cousins' house later that afternoon.

“It feels like there’s a storm coming,” he said pensively, brushing past me into the hall. “But this isn’t natural. It’s like a – a portent or something. Something big is coming. But we’ve still got ‘til Friday. Maybe it’s building up to it.”

“Maybe I should just tell her,” I said.

“She’s going to punish us for what we did.”

“I should, shouldn’t I? I know I hate it when there’s something that I don’t know.”

“Wait, what?”

“But it only bothers me if I know there’s something I don’t know. If I don’t know that there’s something I don’t know, then I’m perfectly happy.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I should leave well enough alone. I won’t tell her.”

“You’re not even listening to me are you?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

“I was just thinking about maybe telling Tamara that we’re half-sisters.”

“Oh. Do you know that for sure?”

I squirmed. “No. Not for sure. But I think so.”

“So if you don’t know for sure, don’t say anything,” he said shortly.

Archie leaned around the door of the kitchen so that all we could see were his eyes. "You work at the market," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Tag!" Eric cannoned into him. Both of them tumbled into the room, landing in a scuffling heap.

Freddie wandered in after them. He regarded Octavian silently for a moment, then said, "Tadpoles grow up to be frogs."

Octavian raised an eyebrow. "Not always."

I clapped my hands to get their attention. "Why don't you boys go play on the computer for a bit."

Archie and Eric immediately jumped to their feet. "Dibs my turn first!" Archie crowed and darted off.

Eric tried to grab the back of Archie's shirt, but missed. "No calling it. I go second!" They galloped from the room.

Freddie yawned. "Can I go say hi to Spot?"

"Sure," I told him. "I'm not sure he's there, but you can go look."

"He's my friend."

"Of course he is."

Octavian watched Freddie trotting away. "Funny kid." He crossed into the living room and flung himself down on the couch. His feet in their big dirty sneakers went up on the coffee table.

I winced at the dirt he would no doubt be getting on the varnished wood. "Hey, get your feet off there."

He sighed and straightened up. "Can we get back to the topic at hand?"

I planted myself in the armchair next to him. "Which is?"

"This weather. Even you must have felt it."

"I did," I admitted. "It feels like something big is gathering power, getting stronger and stronger. Something bad is going to happen."

"Wow," said Octavian. "I thought you were going to start lecturing me about weather patterns and whatnot and how this was perfectly normal."

"I'm surprised myself. Can we not make a big deal out of it?"

"Fine – but first Mick, and then this. We're running out of time. The question is: what are we going to do?"

"Did you ever tell me what happened last time?"

"Last time?"

"You know, the last solstice or equinox or whatever?"

He looked up at the ceiling. "One time, a tree fell on a couple people. They thought it was struck by lightning, but it didn't look scorched. And then there was an outbreak of mysterious food poisoning. And then...some people on life support at the hospital flatlined. All at the same time."

He looked most serious at this last one. He must be thinking of his father, so vulnerable and unprotected in the hospital.

"So it's only ever a few people," I said.

He flared up immediately. "So it's okay if we don't succeed? It's only a few people? I can't believe you!"

"What, I never said –"

"It's going to be so much worse this time. She's all riled up; can't you feel it. It's gonna be much, much bigger this time."

"Sheesh, okay."

Freddie came back into the room. "Spot had to go," he told me. "He said he'll come back later, and then he'll take me someplace special." He climbed onto my lap and slumped back against my chest.

"Oof," I said, but I didn't mind really. He had been so quiet today. He was normally such an oddly exuberant, weird little kid, that when he got quiet, it made me worry. It was the darkness of the weather, the feeling of the storm in the air. It was getting to us all.

His body was warm and solid, and so small. I put my arms around him and rested my cheek on the soft mess of his hair. It smelled of strawberry shampoo and bubblebath. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and his eyelids began to droop. Had my mother once held me like this? My dubious origins aside, I was sure my mother loved me.

Octavian smiled at the sight of Freddie falling asleep on my lap. It softened the sharp angles of his grim, bony face, and made him look almost nice. "Should we not talk about this now...?"

"It's okay," I said quietly. Freddie was falling asleep. "So you were saying this is the big one?"

"It has to be. I know it. There's never been anything like this. I can feel something coming a mile off."

"Yes, but *what* exactly?"

"What, do you mean 'what?' A catastrophe. Something awful."

I smoothed Freddie's bangs across his forehead. "So what do we do? She trounced us last time, when we snuck into the mayor's house."

"I know. I was there," Octavian said grumpily.

"What *can* we do about it? There's only just the two of us."

"Maybe," he said slowly, "it's time to call in the reinforcements."

## Chapter Twenty-Six

"Years passed and the islands were invaded again and again. The people were pushed back farther and farther, into the corners of the island that had once been their home. But such is the way of things. New people and ideas come in, and the old must make way for the new or be destroyed or forgotten. But still, always, the people resisted the march of time. Some of them fought and some of them left. Each time, there were fewer and fewer of them left behind. As far as I know, today they are all but gone. And the stones lean, and they fall." She fell silent, and for a long time there was nothing in the room but the battering of raindrops on the window.

I barely saw Octavian the next day. He was going around town, talking to everyone he knew that was aware of Lysandra and her plans. As he told me later, they all claimed that they could feel something coming too, but it took some convincing to get them to agree to do something about it. Since no one really knew what to do, Octavian called a grand meeting for the following afternoon, June 20th, which he called a 'war counsel.' It would be in the science library at Wicket's Folly Community College, the place Octavian was sure was safest from Lysandra.

He and I arrived first.

The room was dark because almost no light came in from the grim sky outside the windows. Occasional fizzles of lightning shot through the clouds and disappeared. The storm looked like it was ready to break, but still, nothing was happening.

I switched on the light and surveyed the empty room doubtfully. "Are you sure they'll show up?"

He nodded confidently. "Of course. You may not understand just how desperate some of these guys are to get out of here. They'd do *anything*, and I really mean that."

"I still think we're cutting it close," I muttered. "The solstice is *tomorrow*, for crying out loud."

"It was the soonest I could manage, okay," he said irritably. "Stop nagging." He was rubbing at his arm – the left arm, the one that wasn't there.

"Does it bother you?" I asked.

He nodded. "It's this weather. The pressure in the air. I feel it in the bones I don't have, and it aches."

I wanted to say something cheerful or comforting, but couldn't think of anything. It was easy to snap back a retort when he was joking, but when he was being serious, I didn't know what to say. I wasn't generally in the business of comforting others.

People began arriving soon after four. All of them were young, around high school age or a little older. Maybe only the younger people were aware of Lysandra's activities, or maybe these were the only people that Octavian knew. I spotted Sasha and Natalie right away. They threw me unfriendly looks and took the chairs farthest away.

The room was a strange mix of people. There were boys who looked like they would be on the football team, and boys who looked like they belonged on the chess team. There were girls who looked like the popular cheerleaders, and girls who looked like they were the quiet wallflowers. They all crowded into the small room that housed the meager collection of science books. There were about twenty-five people in all, and there were not enough chairs to go around, so soon people were sitting on the arms of friends' chairs and on the floor.

To my surprise, Tamara showed up. She entered the room with a bemused expression on her face, looked around, and sat down unobtrusively in a corner.



“Right, I think that’s everyone,” Octavian said. He sounded nervous, but I didn’t know if it was because of what he was proposing to do, or if it was because he was speaking in front of so many people.

“Yeah?” said Sasha. “What is *she* doing here? She’s not one of us.” She jabbed her thumb at me.

I looked down at my knees and adjusted my glasses. I hadn’t taken the time to choose a nice outfit this morning. And I really should take off my nail polish if I wasn’t going to bother redoing it. Well, there were bigger things to worry about.

“She is one of us,” Octavian said. “She’s an important piece of all of this. You’ll see. Now we’re all together, and we’re going to work this through, and we’ll figure out what we can do to stop Lysandra, because she’s cooking up something big. I’m sure you can all feel it.” There were nods around the room.

People kept *saying* that. Things like ‘there’s something bad coming.’ I had even said it myself. *But when you try to ask them exactly what is coming, they just give you confused looks. Kind of like when no one could remember that huge fire.*

“First of all, there are some of us who are not on the same page as everyone else information-wise, so I think we’d better start by pooling our resources. Evan?”

A short, thick boy with one brown eye and one blue eye stood up. “Right,” he said. “Lysandra is the town’s resident ghost story, except she’s real. She’s a very old and very powerful witch who is trying to thin reality by collecting people with unusual abilities. When she has the world the way she wants it, she’s going to open a gateway to another world through the Wicket’s Folly stone circle. Who knows how long that’s going

to take, but until then, she's keeping us here." A while ago, I might have scoffed at this story, might have stormed out so I wouldn't have to hear it, but now I simply sat, listening quietly. I wasn't sure of anything anymore.

"We can't leave. Some of us get as far as the highway and are simply unable to go any farther. Some of us" he nodded at Octavian "have been punished, or have had people they cared about punished for escape attempts. She hides out up at the manor, directing the whole town, controlling all our lives from afar." He sat back down. "That's all I've got."

Octavian opened his mouth, but to my surprise, Tamara spoke up. She had been sitting quietly, listening to what must surely be the strangest story she had ever heard in her life, but she did not ask any of the questions I had thought she would. Instead, she said, "When you say 'the manor,' do you mean the mayor's house? As in, my father's house?"

Every head in the room turned to look at her. "What?" she said. People were whispering to each other in rustling voices, and I suddenly realized why Octavian had brought Tamara along.

"Your father is the mayor?" asked one of the football boys.

Tamara nodded. "I live with my mother though. I come to visit him every summer."

"Visit like *live with*?"

"Yeah."

"Whoa," said Sasha. "You're living in the lion's den. What's it like?"

“Do you, like, eat breakfast with Lysandra every morning?” asked a Hispanic-looking cheerleader.

Tamara shook her head. “I don’t know anyone by that name. What’s she look like?”

There were murmurs of surprise. “Scary,” said one of the chess-club boys. “Light hair, light eyes. She looks completely normal, yet somehow at the same time, she’s really scary.”

*That's how they knew, I thought suddenly. Octavian had never bothered asking his friends where they had gotten the information they knew about Lysandra. Because they've seen her. Even spoken to her. Who's side are they on here?*

Tamara shook her head again. “I’ve never seen anyone like that.”

“Thank you,” Octavian said over the whispers of disbelief. “That’s very interesting. I think that may be important.” I looked at him carefully. There was an air of barely controlled excitement about him. Something about what Tamara had said was exactly what he had been hoping her, but for the life of me, I couldn’t understand what.

“Let’s pick up our story again,” Octavian said. “Megan and I have been doing a lot of homework on this, and here’s what we’ve got.” Why was he was including me in this? I didn’t know anything. “I think that for some reason, Lysandra is not capable of opening the gateway for herself. For a while I thought that she was waiting for the right person to show up, but it goes a bit farther than that. This place is already right where she wants it. I think she’s trying to breed someone who will be able to open the gate for her.” There were murmurs of shock and disgust around the room. “And this is where Megan

comes in. This is where she gets important. But there's still something that I don't understand. Sasha –"

"Who, me?"

"We need you to tell us what happened on the night you took Megan to Lysandra."

Sasha squirmed.

"It's okay," said Octavian soothingly. "We understand why you did it. We aren't going to judge you. We just need to know what happened."

\*\*\*

It wasn't that Sasha wanted to get out of Wicket's Folly more than anyone else, she told us, though she implied that she felt this was certainly the case. It was just that she had the most going for her back in the outside world. She had been her high school's track star. In her two years on the team, she had broken six state records, and she trained with driven determination every single day, because she knew she was going to make it to the Olympics. If only she hadn't wandered away from the team's bus as they stopped at a gas station on the way back from a meet.

No one else in the Folly had skills as useful as hers. Natalie, her best friend there, was only good with animals, a talent that would one day make her a great vet. But Sasha would have been famous. Every day that she was stuck in Wicket was another day that she was not out in front of the cheering crowds, who had surely forgotten her by now. But if she could just get out of here – if she could just make it back – she would remind them.

So when I showed up in the Folly, Sasha thought she had found her ticket out. I joined an art class that Sasha and Natalie were taking, and right away, they could tell that I was special. My hands were magic. I made no secret of it. I told them so. I said smugly that everything I touched turned out perfectly. Even though I was only joking, they took it seriously. They could see that there was power in my hands, maybe even enough to open a certain gateway that would get rid of a certain witch.

Sasha and Natalie befriended me, letting me think that they were not interested at all in my special power. They went about it very slowly, one day hanging out with me after class, and then later telling me that there was a woman up on the hill who might want to meet me, that she would be so very impressed with my skills. I thrived on coaxing and flattering, and finally, they got their way. On a Friday night, flushed with excitement by that evening's story-telling bonfire, I agreed to sneak out at night and go with them to meet Lysandra.

On the way up the hill, Sasha was very nervous, but she hid it. This was it, she was sure of it. Finally, she would get out of here. Who cared if someone else got hurt in the process? So many other people would be freed. It was collateral damage.

Lysandra opened the door before they we knocked, as though she were expecting us. The house behind her was dark and silent.

When Sasha told her my name, Lysandra went as still as a cat on the prowl. The three of us followed her as she silently left the house and began walking through the trees. She made almost no noise as she passed through the dark woods, and the only way we could keep up was by following the hair that shone silver in the moonlight.

She glided through the trees like a wraith, and the three of us stumbled after, trying to keep up. Except for the crunching of our footsteps, the forest seemed unusually quiet, as though it was waiting for something.

Eventually we came out into a clearing in the trees, and Sasha could see by the light of the moon the circle of standing stones that seemed almost to glow in the silver light.

Lysandra instructed Sasha and Natalie to restrain me. I started to protest, but it was already too late. They grabbed my arms, holding me in place. I tried to jerk away, but Sasha held fast. She threw a look at Natalie, who had a pained expression on her face. She wished that she could remind her friend that no matter what happened, it would be worth it, if they could be free.

Lysandra drew close to them, staring into my eyes. Her teeth gleamed in a sudden, sharp smile.

I stopped fighting against my captors, and stood still, swaying slightly, as though mesmerized.

As though words were whispered in her mind, Sasha knew what she had to do. There was a glint of metal on the ground, and she picked up a small, sharp knife.

She hesitated a moment. At Lysandra's impatient hiss, Sasha grabbed my left hand, and the knife sliced across its palm in a single swift movement. I gasped in pain, seeming unable to speak. Sasha guided the bloody hand to the nearest of the standing stones and pressed it against the cold, rough surface. Somehow, she knew that this was

what she was supposed to do. She held the unresisting hand there for a moment, and then let it drop.

Lysandra turned and faced the stones. She said something then, though Sasha could not remember exactly what. Something along the lines of *If there once were words, I do not know them. Please let me pass though.* She stepped into the circle and closed her eyes. Arms akimbo, she stood, waiting.

Sasha watched, heart pounding. What was happening? Was anything happening?

Lysandra's eyes suddenly snapped open. Her face was contorted with rage. She threw her head back and let out a wordless wail of despair that sounded oddly like a wolf howling at the moon.

The sound washed over Sasha, and for a moment, she saw images of pain and despair. She was hit with a barrage of emotions all at the same time. Longing, desperation, hopelessness, loneliness, rage, and hatred all fought to take control of her body. The world spun around her and she found herself on her hands and knees. She looked over and saw that Natalie too was down, clutching the grass as though she might fall away from it if she let go. I was gone.

Lysandra screamed, *Go after her – she's getting away!*

Sasha pushed herself to her feet and ran with all the speed of her former track star glory. She could hear me crashing through the trees ahead of her, and Natalie through the trees behind.

I had a head start, but Sasha was born a runner. She raced through the forest like a deer, her toes inside her shoes gripping and releasing as though she was running barefoot.

She didn't know why she was chasing me down; the blood of my so-called magic hands had clearly not been enough to open Lysandra's gate.

She caught up with me just as I ran out into the road back to town. Sasha gave a flying leap and crashed into my back. We both went down, rolling over and over, small stones digging into our skin. Sasha pulled herself free and jumped to her feet, ready to grab, but I lay still. Perhaps I had struck my head in the fall. A horrible thought crossed Sasha's mind for an instant, but no – she could see that my chest was moving slightly up and down.

Sasha bent over and put her hands on her knees, breathing deeply.

Natalie caught up a moment later, gasping ragged breaths and pulling leaves from her hair, and suddenly Lysandra was there too, though she looked completely unruffled. She advanced on my inert body with dark, bitter purpose in her eyes, but as her pale hand reached out, something seemed to occur to her and she hesitated. She touched my forehead. Her fingers appeared to shimmer and sank into my skull. Then she stood abruptly, walked a few feet, and faded from sight just before reaching the line of the trees.

Sasha and Natalie were left, standing over a body.

Even though she knew I was not dead, Sasha still didn't want to be found there. She lifted my shoulders and dragged my limp body to the side of the road. Her task accomplished, she began walking away, back to the Dorm that seemed like it would be her home for the rest of her life. She thought longingly of her parents. Would she ever see them again? What did they think had happened to her?



She felt like crying, not because she was sad, but because she was angry. She was livid. She had been so sure that I was the one – Lysandra had seemed think so too – but I was not. All that planning, all that kissing up to such a smug bitch like me, all that hope, and it was all for nothing.

She almost wished I *had* been killed.

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"I was right!" I said. "You *have* been working with Lysandra. That's how you knew all that stuff."

"We didn't," Natalie said. "She only told us that we would be free when she went through the stones! And, um," she looked down, "that we should bring you to her."

"I could have died!"

"So what?" Sasha snapped. "You were such an evil bitch, and the rest of us would have been free!"

"Thank you, Sasha," Octavian said loudly. Sasha sat back in her chair and folded her arms defiantly, as though daring anyone to think badly of her. "That tells us a lot. It tells us that this is about blood. Lysandra herself does not have the right blood, so she's trying to create someone who does. And Megan was supposed to be that someone. Eighteen or so years ago, Megan's mother was here in Wicket's Folly, and when she left, she had lost part of her memory and she was pregnant."

One of the jocks and guffawed. "What, Lysandra got her pregnant?"

"No. She bred her with a man she chose."

"Who was...?"

Octavian glanced at me. I gave him what I hoped was an encouraging smile. “We aren’t sure. Suffice it to say that Lysandra meant Megan to be the key, and she was not. We should not blame Megan for what was obviously not her fault.”

“Okay,” said Sasha impatiently. “Fine. So now we know. But why did you call us all here? What are you planning?”

“It’s obvious that Lysandra got really upset that Megan wasn’t her key, and she’s all set to punish us for it.”

“Wait. I fail to see how all this –” she gestured at the sky outside “– is still not her fault.” Several people nodded and muttered in disapproval.

"You're welcome for saving you from that fire, by the way," I said loudly.

“I called you all here,” said Octavian, talking over us, “because I think we can find a way to get rid of her, or at least weaken her enough that we can leave. I think that’s worth it.”

There were hesitant nods. People obviously liked the idea of escape, but were unsure if it was worth the price. "I don't suppose she's the kind of witch that melts when you throw water on her," someone said hopefully.

Octavian shook his head. "Megan and I had a little run-in with her last week. I'm pretty sure she's way too powerful for us to take on directly."

Stunned silence. "All that just to say she's too strong for us!" said Natalie. "Sorry, everyone, go home?"

Octavian held up his hands. "No, no. That's not what I meant."

“So what did you have in mind?” Evan said at last.

“Well there are some interesting things about this whole situation,” Octavian said. “Lysandra lives up at the manor, but Tamara has never seen her. The way she gets other people to do her dirty work for her – she had Wicket build her stone circle, and we just heard how she had Sasha do the knife action. The way she manages to appear and disappear. I don’t think she’s solid. The way she said she wanted to get *back*. I think she really is a ghost. A witch who died a long time ago. She’s dead, and now she’s trying to get back to the – the 'other side' or something. She’s still incredibly powerful, but she can’t touch anything.”

“But she looks so – so solid,” said Natalie, unconvinced.

“Call her whatever you want. But the circle was built on an old battleground, and that sure sounds like a gateway to the spirit world to me. But it got me thinking. She can’t touch anything, and yet she’s still so powerful. She’s got to be getting it from somewhere.”

“The stones,” I said slowly. Everyone looked at me, as though surprised that I would even care about any of this, and I blushed.

“Yes, the stones,” Octavian repeated. “I think she had Wicket build it so she could use it as a portal, but also so she could harness the power of a special place. So all we have to do is –”

“Destroy the circle,” Sasha finished.

“That should break her power, and we’ll be able to leave.”

“But what if she gets to us before we can destroy it?” asked one of the wallflower girls.

“That’s a risk we’re going to have to take.”

“I don’t know....” the girl said slowly.

“Look,” said Sasha impatiently. “Do you want to get out of here or not?”

“Yes, but – she’s capable of some pretty nasty things.”

Sasha looked ready to retort angrily, so Octavian said quickly, “We’ll put it to a vote, okay? Those in favor of destroying the stones?”

More than half the kids there raised their hands, including me, much to my own surprise. I still didn’t know whether or not I believed Octavian’s theory of ghosts, but I knew I wanted to help.

Octavian nodded gravely. “So it’s decided. Those of you who don’t want to be involved, you don’t have to come. The rest of you: meet by the welcome sign after dark. Let’s say ten p.m. tonight. Bring any kinds of weapons that you can.”

The war council filed from the room until it was just Octavian and me. Sasha and Natalie hung back by the door. Natalie said, “Look, I – I’m sorry for what we did. And how we’ve been treating you.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Sasha looked like it was the hardest thing she had ever had to say.

I would have liked to see her squirm some more, but I simply nodded, and Sasha left.

"You didn't tell them everything," I said. "You didn't say anything about the solstice. And the fact that it's *tomorrow*."

"I know." He looked down at his shoes. "I just thought...why incite panic? They know something bad's coming. Why tell them that any number of people they care about could die tomorrow?"

"Maybe it would motivate them."

"Trust me, they're already motivated. You don't know what it's been like, being trapped her for so long. The kids living in the Dorm – some of them haven't seen their parents in *years*."

"Can't they just call?"

"And say what exactly? 'I can't come home because I'm trapped in some mysterious town'? Then their families come to get them, and voila, you've trapped your entire family too."

"Oh."

We left the stuffiness of the library and began walking back through town. "So how does it feel not to be hated anymore?" Octavian asked.

I inhaled deeply. I felt lighter, as though one of my heaviest burdens had been lifted. "Nice," I said simply.

"Are you sure you want to come tonight? You don't have to, you know."

"I know," I said. "But I want to. I'm going to see this through to the end."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Tell me," Samuel said at last. "Do you believe all this?"

"I believe only what I know to be true." She stood and walked from the room, disappearing before Samuel realized that she had not really answered the question. He stared out the window as if in a trance, not really seeing the rain and the glowering gray skies.

It wasn't hard to sneak out of the house that night.

The basement where I slept was also the place where my uncle kept his tools, and I selected a long-handled shovel. As I crept out the side door, I considered that I could have told my family that I was going to sleep over at a friend's house or some such other fabrication, but I thought it would be best if they were as minimally involved as possible. If things did not go as planned, they would be safest that way.

I had dressed in sturdy clothes in dark colors – dark-washed jeans, a black long-sleeved shirt, and contact lenses for the best possible vision – feeling as though I were preparing for something illegal. And in a way, I was. My friends and I were going to deface and destroy a Wicket's Folly monument that had been standing watch on the hill longer than the town had been around. A ski cap or some kind of hat would have been useful to cover my bright identifying hair, but I hadn't bothered to bring any. My hair was probably my best feature, and I didn't usually cover it. As I pulled it into a ponytail to keep it out of my way, I added *outfits for vandalism* to my mental list of clothes that I really should have packed.

I rested the shovel on my shoulder as I made my way down Mallard Lane and to the center of town. The old-fashioned streetlamps were lit, but there were hardly any

people around. The place was nearly deserted, and the lights made it look like a ghost town, all lit up and waiting for people who would never come.

A small group of people huddled by the sign that read “Welcome to Wicket’s Folly.” Like me, they had dressed in dark, muted colors. Many of them carried gardening tools as well – shovels, hoes, even one or two pickaxes. Though there was a lamp trained on the welcome sign, the people were hanging back just out of the circle of its light, as though they did not want to be seen, even by each other. They were nothing but shadowy shifting shapes in the darkness.

One long narrow shape stepped forward, and after a moment I recognized Octavian. “Did you have any trouble getting away?” he asked. His voice was low, barely more than a whisper.

“No,” I said, my voice low as well. There was something about the heavy clouded sky and thick air that discouraged noise. The whole world was hushed, as though poised expectantly, waiting for something to happen.

Octavian was looking around, counting people. “Eighteen,” he said softly. “Does anyone know if anyone else is coming?”

There was a pause in which people shook their heads and then realized that they could not be seen. “No one else, as far as I know,” someone said. Maybe Natalie. I peered around, looking at shadowy faces. All the people whose names I knew had come back, including Sasha, Natalie, and Evan. Again, Tamara was there, though I had not expected her.

“Okay then,” Octavian said. “It’s time. Let’s go.”

The group set off down the road that led out of the Folly and around to the mayor's house. We walked quietly and swiftly, not speaking to each other. The only sound was the crunch of dirt and gravel under our shoes.

I fell back and walked next to Tamara. "I didn't think you would be here," I said. "I mean, this isn't your fight. You're free to leave."

"I could say the same thing to you," she said.

"I know."

"But it's not entirely true, what you said. This kind of is my fight. Because if what all of them are saying is true, than my father is caught right in the middle of it."

*You mean our father.* "Do you believe them?" I asked curiously. "About all this ghosts and witches stuff?"

She shrugged. "Actually, I think it's kind of cool."

"You're alone there. I don't like it. Any of it."

"So why are you here?"

I didn't answer, because the real reason was that I did not know. So much had changed for me in the past few weeks. Perhaps I was living out the new course of my life, or maybe I was still clinging to the notion that I could disprove it all. Maybe it was curiosity; I needed to see where it would all end. Or maybe I was just going to help out a friend.

As the group left the road and started crunching through the trees, I sped up until I could walk with Octavian. I could not see his face, but his voice was quiet and grim when he said, "You understand that this might be dangerous."



“I do. Don’t tell me to go back.”

“I wasn’t going to.” There was no trace of the usual biting humor in his voice. I tried to look at his face, but could not see it clearly in the darkness. He had become a leader. It was cool the way he could take control and make difficult decisions, but I found myself missing the old Octavian, the one who hated his name and defensively claimed to be okay with not knowing who he really was, who teased me, and who always had to have the last word.

“I’ll be glad when all this is over,” I said, “and everything goes back to normal.”

He sighed, rubbing at his phantom arm. “I’m not sure it ever will.”

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The stones rose before us, bleak and white in the light of a moon that was just barely forcing its way through the thick curtain of clouds. The group stopped, as one person. There was no noise in the air at all. Not even the chirping of crickets broke the silence. I cleared my throat surreptitiously, just to make sure that I had not gone deaf.

“All right,” Octavian said softly. This was a place where one should speak quietly, reverently. This was a place of power. “If we dig underneath them on one side, we should be able to push them over.” Even his whisper sounded loud in this unnatural silence.

He approached the nearest stone and placed the blade of his shovel against the thicket of weeds that grew around its base. Everyone leaned forward slightly, as though they were waiting for something to happen. The blade of the shovel sank into the

reluctant earth with a scrape, and Octavian stamped on it until he was able to turn over a small mound by the base of the stone.

I realized that I had been holding my breath and let it out in a slow rush of relief. *Not that I was expecting something to happen or anything.*

The rest of the group spread out, two or three people each sharing a stone. The ones with hoes tried to break up the earth, and the ones with shovels moved it away from the bases of the stones.

I found myself working with Sasha and Tamara. Sasha had a small gardening fork, which she thrust into the earth repeatedly to loosen it. Tamara had a rake, which was not really much help, but she tried to clear away pebbles and bracken. I was left to do most of the heavy work, and I was soon sweating from the exertion, the humid air, and my heavy black clothes. *If only I could make some guy do this for me,* I thought over the ache in my arms. *But no, I'm not doing that any more.*

I wished working with Octavian, rather than Sasha and Tamara. I felt like talking to relieve some of the tension brought on by this unnerving reverent silence. All I could hear was the soft scrape and crunch of shovels biting into rocky earth. It made me focus on my aching arms, my hands blistering on the wooden handle of the shovel, and the sweat painting my face and soaking my shirt.

The other two girls said nothing. Sasha had, until recently, been vocal in her dislike of me, and Tamara still did not know that she might have a half-sister from her father's affair. It wasn't only that I was wary of their feelings towards me. I found myself

missing the days when it had just been Octavian and me, lazing around in the afternoon heat, arguing amicably about the virtues of one philosophy versus another.

“I think we’ve got it,” Evan called softly from where he and Octavian were working together.

“Come on,” said Octavian. “We need help pushing it over.”

Glad of the excuse to leave Sasha and Tamara, I dropped my shovel and hurried over to him. We were joined by one of the big beefy football boys, whose name, I thought, was Tyler. His arms and shoulders were enormous. Now this was the kind of guy who would have been perfect for talking into digging for me. If I was still doing that.

We grouped together around the stone, leaning our combined weight against it. Several of the other people put down their tools and came over to watch. I found myself squashed between Tyler and Evan, and I tried to edge away from them a little. They stank of sweaty teenage boy. Yuck.

The stone was huge and heavy, and we strained against it. Finally, I felt it give a little bit, and one of the boys exclaimed in excitement and triumph.

At that very moment, there was a high scream, shrill and furious, from away in the distance. Everyone jumped.

“She knows!” a girl said breathlessly. “She’s coming.”

“What are we going to do?” said another.

“She’ll kill us!”

They were starting to panic. Some of them were edging away as though eager to run.

“Stop!” Octavian yelled. “We have to push it over before she gets here. If we can, there’s nothing she can do. It’ll break her power.”

There was a panicked rush towards the stone, and I was suddenly crushed against it by the weight of so many people trying to help. My vision was completely obscured, and there were people pushing and shoving against *me*, instead of the stone. I could barely drag air into my lungs.

A drop of moisture hit my face. *Ew, is that sweat?* I craned my neck to see around the mass of people against me, and as another drop hit my face, I realized that it was raining. The storm had broken over us at last.

The drops fell thick and fast, heavy and cold, much more violently than anything I had ever experienced in California. The parts of me that were not covered with people were instantly soaked. The loose dirt that we had stirred up turned immediately to a sea of mud. I could barely see. The world was completely obscured by bodies and rain, and the stone we were trying to topple was slick and shining with water.

A flash of lightning turned the world white for a moment, and someone gasped, “She’s here!”

The horrible scream of rage came again, but this time it was nearby. The sound echoed in my head, sending a wash of panic and desperation over me. I pushed at the people around me, but now they were moving away of their own accord. There was terrified screaming, and a rush of bodies trying to force their way past each other. I couldn’t see what was scaring them so badly. It was too dark, and there was too much water hemorrhaging from the sky.

I was scrambling around the stone to the inside of the circle, sliding in the mud, when I caught a glimpse of wild, panic-stricken eyes. Tyler the huge football player barreled past me and knocked me back against the stone.

My head hit something hard, and for a moment I could not think. What was going on? There was shouting everywhere, and running, crashing footsteps. Something shot past my face, and I saw that, oddly, it was a glove. My head suddenly clear, I reached out and grabbed it, and Octavian fell to the ground beside me.

His eyes were wild, darting from side to side, his hands moving to fend off things that I could not see. His free hand shot out and smacked my shoulder, and I grabbed that too, trying to control his spasms.

“What’s happening to you?” I gasped, spitting out the water that was running into my mouth. “What am I supposed to do? I don’t know what to do.” What did he see? What had they all seen? Had they had all run off and left me, or were they too lying, twitching, on the muddy ground around the stones? “Talk to me!” I pleaded, but Octavian did not answer. His head jerked back and forth as though he was trying to dodge away from something.

A jagged fork of lightning stabbed down somewhere nearby and momentarily blinded me. I shook my head violently, trying to see through the darkness and the pouring rain.

As my eyes cleared, I could see something huge and glowing white pulsing in front of me. It seemed to be floating in midair, but no – that was not possible – it was on the ground. It was Lysandra, a phantom wind whipping her gauzy dress and her hair

around her. She stood in the center of the circle, completely dry despite the rain, her pale face contorted with rage. She looked impossibly big – a pale and shining malevolent angel. Thunder peeled, crashing against my eardrums, and I jumped. Mud squelched, and I could feel myself sinking a few inches.

“You,” she said, and though her low hissing voice should have been inaudible over the racket of the storm, I heard every word. “You. Always, always, in the way. But no longer.”

Her hands shot out, her arms and fingers elongating into thin lines of glowing light that twisted like the branches of stunted, otherworldly trees. I tried to dodge out of the way, but the struggling Octavian was an anchor dragging me down. The shimmering hands shot towards me too fast, and I could not move. In an instant they were upon me, they went *through* me, and then everything was gone.

I could feel heavy chains locked around my ankles, dragging me down to someplace deep and frightening. A nightmare of images spun around me. There were beasts with too many legs and glowing red eyes. There were *things* with slimy tentacles and mouths dripping with green acid. There were people who seemed normal, but who fell to bits as they lurched towards me, rotting before my eyes.

I tried to clutch my muddy hands to my face, desperate to block it all out, but the images were not in front of my eyes. They were in my mind.

“It’s not real,” I whimpered. “It’s not real.” For a moment, the oozing monsters before me *flickered*, disappearing for an instant and then reappearing, and I briefly saw

rain and mud, and huge wet stones. I was so surprised that I almost forgot to be scared, but the fear returned, stronger than before, trying to crush me down out of existence.

A caldera of lava swirled below me and turned into thick, dark blood. An enormous beast burst forth from the sickening soup and clawed other terrifying beasts to bits as bloody rain fell from the sky. A deluge of fire and ice reduced everything to a twisted mess of flesh and smoke.

My mother's voice whispered in my ear, speaking the words that she had written in the letter: *I've raised her so she won't believe, and she will be safe.* I heard also the words that Octavian had spoken, even though it seemed like ages ago: *She doesn't want you – you're too real.*

The words danced around me, echoing in my head. *I've raised her so she won't believe, and she will be safe. You're too real. I've raised her so she won't believe, and that will keep her safe.*

Something deep in my heart grew stronger. "It's not real," I whispered experimentally, and the images flickered again. "It's not real," I said, my voice bolder. "It's not real. It's not real!"

I screamed it out to the world, and suddenly the images were gone, and I was looking out into the real world. I sat in cold mud, still clutching Octavian's hands. His eyes were closed, and he had gone mostly limp, but his body twitched occasionally. Lysandra stood in front of me, but somehow, she seemed smaller, and her clothes did not float and billow around her. They were just as wet as mine.

She gave another shriek of rage and hurtled towards me, hands outstretched, this time for real. I threw up my arms and tried to lean away, but my back was against the unyielding pillar that was the stone.

Her fingers were around my neck and face, and they were solid, wet and icy. She wasn't a ghost. Octavian had been wrong. " 'It's not real', is it?" she said, hatred shaking in her voice. "I'll show you real."



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

The world was gone again. But this time, the images were not a hodgepodge of nightmares. This time, they were so much worse. They were not the stuff of bad dreams – they were a window on reality – a waking nightmare.

In one moment, I saw every war that had ever been fought over all the ages of history. I saw every battlefield that had ever been dyed red with blood and corpses. I saw murder, death, and starvation. There were plagues and pandemics, oozing pustules, and people drowning in the blood of their own lungs. I saw genocides, piles of emaciated corpses of all colors who shared in common the one fact that they had been just a little bit different and had died for it. I saw lynching, rape, torture, and it made my soul ache. I saw people crammed together like cattle for the slaughter, and then I saw them being slaughtered too. I saw bombs exploding and people disintegrated by the cold fire of radiation. I saw people dying in car wrecks, in plane wrecks, in floods, in earthquakes, killing each other and then dying themselves. I saw images of smoke and fire, of people burning alive, the skin on their faces bubbling like water in a pot cooking over a volcano. Their bones blackened and turned to ash until there was nothing left but the echoes of their screams of pain in the air, and then it all started all over again.

I tried to cover my eyes, but could not. Here, I had no eyes. My hands were invisible, and my eyes were invisible as well. I simply saw everything, experienced everything. I could not make it go away, because this was reality. And reality was too real to face.

I saw buildings crumbling, and a sky turned gray with ash. I saw children choking to death on gas. I saw a world poisoned and slowly dying, a world whose inhabitants were killing themselves, a world that cried out, but could not be heard.

“Oh god,” I whimpered. “Make it stop. Please, please, make it stop.”

A naked child with dark limbs like sticks and the distended belly of starvation turned to look at me. “Isn’t this what you wanted?” the child said softly. “This is reality. The reality of your world. Not so pretty, is it? Not worth saving.”

“There’s good too,” I choked out. “I believe there’s a balance. An equal amount of good for the bad that’s happened.”

The child raised one sarcastic eyebrow over pale eyes that didn't fit with her dusky face. “Do you really believe that?” She gestured behind her, at an entire city destroyed, still-blazing bodies littering the streets. “Do you really believe that there’s an equal amount of good for all of *this*?”

I shook my head. “No,” I whispered. “No.”

“So why do you deny me the opportunity to leave it? You don’t even want to be here yourself.”

“I – I –” I was unable to speak, didn't even know what I would say if I could.

The little girl that was Lysandra stepped closer, peering into my disembodied eyes as behind her, a group of men on horseback laid waste to a village. “The world is full of people killing each other. Horrible, selfish, murderous people,” she said, “and I rather think you're one of them.”

"I'm not like this!"

She closed her eyes. "Oh? I can see the guilt in your heart. What was the name of that boy, the one who almost died because of you?" Her eyes flew open, and she smiled. "Eden?"

*No. How could she know about that? It wasn't my fault. It wasn't!*

"You try to convince yourself, but you know it's true. He may not have died, but he'll never be the same again, thanks to you. You destroyed him – his innocence, his *goodness* – he'll be broken forever more."

*It was my fault.* I led him on for a whole year, teased him, used him, didn't protect him from his tormenters, and then discarded him when I felt like it. I taught him that you can pour your soul into love and get nothing in return but empty promises. *But I'm not that person anymore.*

I found a tiny thread of my voice left. "It's not real," I whispered.

Lysandra laughed. "Haven't you been listening? This is more real than anything in your pathetic, sheltered life that you've ever seen."

She was right, I knew, but she was also wrong. The images might have been of real people and events, but they were still only pictures, a fabrication. "It's not real," I said, more boldly, and the world flickered again. The little girl turned back for a moment into the pale woman.

I rocked back and forth, and felt the mud far away, shifting wetly beneath me. "It's not real, it's not real," I repeated, as though I were chanting a mantra, and each time I did, the real world flickered in and out of existence. I could not force things back to normal completely, but even when I stopped chanting, the world continued to shift back

and forth. Bloody battlefields became sodden grass and muddy earth before reverting again, and the figure before me switched between starving child and pale woman.

Lysandra leaned towards me, and I could see in her eyes that the time for taunting and sharing pictures was over. I was too troublesome, and her control over me was waning. She meant to kill me right then and there.

The claw-like hands reaching for my throat flickered between small and dark and long-fingered and white. Before the fingers could touch me, I lunged forward, reaching out hands I could not see, and grabbed Lysandra's flickering face.

My invisible fingers clutched, and I felt real flesh, cold and damp beneath them. With every atom of my being, all of my divided minds, the parts of me that needed things to be as clear as possible, to deny things that couldn't possibly exist, and also to study them obsessively until I understood how they worked, with every ounce of will I could muster, I screamed "You're not real!" I called upon the missing talent of my hands, and if there was anything at all magical about them, I called on that too.

Lysandra shrieked in anger and fear. If I could deny something unreal and make it disappear, perhaps I could deny something real and make that disappear too. She was secretly afraid of me, I realized, and maybe that was the reason that she hated me so much. Just as she had the power to create false images, I had the mirrored power to see through and destroy them.

Her raging voice tore at my eardrums, and I let my own voice rise to a scream that I could barely hear. "You're not real!"

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The other place, the place where men live forever...It might be nothing more than nonsense, but if it wasn't...And even so, he could build a stone circle, something tangible to leave behind, that would stand for ages after he was gone. He could even stipulate in his will that he be buried in the center of the circle, and it would be a grand funeral marker. He would call it 'Wicket's Circle.'

Goaded by his dreams of Stonehenge every night, Samuel Wicket began to make phone calls. He hired a contractor who was a master with stone and charged him with choosing a team of the best laborers that he could find. He gave the man free reign to purchase as much equipment as necessary, and told him he would foot the bill.

Everything dissolved around me. Lysandra's nightmarishly real world faded away into floating white mist, taking with it the rainy night sky and stone circle. I could not feel her face beneath my fingers anymore. I could not feel my own body. I was helpless. All I could do was watch.

There was no more confusion of nightmares, real or otherwise. The white mist cleared, and the world was calm. It didn't flicker in or out, or shift pictures with wild, raging pressure.

I was bodiless, floating above the world like a cloud. I could look around and see the entirety of the world, even the parts that should be on the other side of the globe. I could see for miles around, and at the same time, look down and see the world below me up close. Somehow, I knew where I was meant to look, knew what I was meant to see. I was powerful, all-knowing.

The outline of the country was familiar to me from geography lessons, and I could have figured out its name from the shape of its coastline, but at the same time, I *knew* that it was England, and the time was several decades before the industrial revolution.

I saw a group of pale, cloaked women standing around a circle of stones at sunset. This one was different from the one at Wicket's Folly. It was made up of several concentric circles of free-standing stones and trilithons. This one was Stonehenge, but not half-fallen as it stood today. The circle was still complete.

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The women stood, each with one hand on one of the stones, chanting in a strange and ancient language. As the sun set, touching the top of the central stone, all but one of the women began to file through the circle one by one. They walked for much longer than should have been possible, growing smaller and smaller into the distance, and then they were gone.

The remaining woman was older than the others, and she stood looking after them until the sun had fully set, an expression of longing on her worn face. Then she turned and began to walk away to the road, where there was a small cart hitched up to a hobbled donkey. The bed of the cart was filled with sweet hay, and there were several infants bundled in blankets, sleeping peacefully. The woman bent wearily to unhobble the donkey, and then began leading the cart slowly away up the road.

She would raise the children in a small cottage in the wilds of Wales. There were five of them this time, three boys and two girls. She would keep them away from prying eyes as much as possible, because they did not age as quickly as human children. The rules of this world were not quite the same for them.

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As years and decades passed, the children slowly grew older. They were allowed to run free in the hills, but they were not allowed to go near normal people. Someone might have noticed that they hardly aged, and the consequences would have been unimaginable.

The woman who was their guardian told them stories about their homeland every evening, so they would understand where they had come from, and who and what they were. She called it Olemarca, and though it was their true home, they would hear of it only in stories until they were old enough to return. She wove for them an image of a land where magic was plentiful, that was beautiful and dangerous, and where a great people called the Olemar lived forever. Time did not affect the denizens of that world, and though they could be killed, they could not have children. How would one have children if time was immaterial?

There was far too much free magic around, and it made Olemarca beautiful, but it also kept everything constant. Time passed, but did not affect anyone. The world was lovely, but it was not perfect – people died, but they could not be replaced, because they could not reproduce. No one knew how the Olemar themselves had come to be there, and there was much argument on the subject – some claimed that they had been created by the intensely concentrated magic itself, others that they had come from a different world, or that their own world had once been more mundane. This last philosophy suggested a theory.

A council of wise mages proposed that if the people traveled to a different world where magic was not so strong, they might be able to reproduce there. And so they built the first gateway, marking it with a circle of stones.

An expedition of men and women went through the gateway and found themselves in a different world. Or perhaps it was the same world, but taking up a different space in reality. Whatever it was, this world was less magical, and the people found that time there affected them, even though it moved slowly because of their origin. The women of the expedition were able to conceive, carry, and bear children, and they began to use the world as a breeding ground, the same way that a salmon must swim upstream before it may lay its eggs.

At first they had no contact with the local primitive people that inhabited the island that was named for its tin. But the natives could not help but notice the tall, beautiful people, and in time the Olemar were amused to find that the native humans thought they were gods. Though there was little ambient magic in that world, the collective belief of all the natives gave the people great powers anyway. The natives were sure that the Olemar were gods, were sure they were powerful, and so they were.

The Olemar built a stone circle around the gate in the new world too, to keep the indigenous people from crossing over accidentally. The natives became sure that terrible things would happen if they entered the circle of the gods, thus laying the groundwork for deep and varied superstition. Still, occasionally, animals and children wandered into the gateway and vanished. They were never able to find their way back, and the people called them sacrifices to the gods.



And so it went on. The Olemar went back and forth through the gate as easily as one goes through a door. They were able to bear and raise children, who grew up over several centuries in the other world before being welcomed home to their own land.

Thousands of years passed in this way. The Olemar had started out intending to find a breeding ground, and had instead become gods. But over time, things began to change. Outsiders came to their makeshift island kingdom, and there was fighting and bloodshed. Some of them wanted to interfere – were they not the gods of this island? – but the wisest of them dissented. Conquest, warfare, and change were both the natural order of this barbaric world, and it was decided that they should not interfere for their own selfish devices.

Some of the human natives were killed, some intermarried with the invaders, and some clever ones were so bold as to build gates of their own and leave their island for worlds unknown. Their beliefs thinned as did their blood. There were fewer people that believed in the old ways, and as that happened, the Olemar found that they were losing their power.

Without the beliefs and superstitions of the natives, it was as though the worlds were drawing farther apart. It became harder and harder to get through the gateway. Eventually, the wise leaders of Olemarca decided that perhaps this was the way things were intended to be as well. They were ancient and sagacious, men who had seen thousands of years go by in many a world, and they knew that they must not interfere with what was meant to be. They built a great stone monument and told the natives that

when it fell, the worlds would be completely separate, thus instilling one final superstition. And then the ‘gods’ left the island – or they appeared to.

They continued to send very small groups through the gateways. The Olemar would reproduce, and when the children were born, they would be left in the care of a single woman who willingly went into exile to raise the young, and the others would return home. This way, the woman could raise her charges in anonymity, and indeed, as belief continued to wane, they were seen just as ordinary humans. As long as they stayed inconspicuous, no one would notice how slowly the children aged.

And so it went for many years. As the centuries passed, hardly any of the humans believed in the old gods. There were new ways, and new superstitions, and there was science. As belief and trust was placed more and more in science, the caretaker of the children found that it was harder and harder for her to be in this world. They were a product of magic, in which no one in the world believed any longer. She and her charges did not belong, and the world was trying to tell them that. She could feel it's rejecting her as a physical pain, a constant whine in the back of her mind.

When the Industrial Revolution began, the country became a soot-drenched frenzy of iron machines with furnaces that whined constantly to be fed, as though they were new deities demanding tribute. The humans saw only their hungry machines, and no longer saw their one-time gods. The world became unrecognizable to the children so quickly that they scarcely saw it happening.

And then their caretaker died.

She was trampled by the iron wheels of a carriage one day as she was walking to the market. The driver never stopped, acted as though he could not even see her, and in truth, he had not. The young children were left all alone to fend for themselves. And they soon found that in this horrifyingly real world, they themselves had become unreal. It was often hard for the humans to see them. When people noticed them, it was only for an instant, as though their presence was just a trick of the light, something that could be spotted from the corner of an eye, but on closer inspection, was not really there.

The children learned quickly to dodge away from carriages and horses, to be careful around the heavy machinery that were insubstantial to them, just as they appeared insubstantial to the people around them. A machine might pass through them most of the time, but all it took was instance that it did not. After two of the other children died in sudden horrible accidents, the remaining three learned to be alert and wary at all times. They raised themselves on the streets, stealing what they needed easily from under the noses of unknowing humans. But they felt so terribly alone in this huge, frightening world, and they sustained themselves on the stories they remembered of the ones their guardian had told them about their homeland.

They aged very slowly, and it took them over a hundred years to reach the point of young adulthood, and these were miserable lonely years of constant danger. As soon as the children considered themselves old enough to return home, they traveled to Salisbury Plain, but found that the Stonehenge gateway would not open for them. They tried everything they could think of, visited every complete and partial circle of stone in Great Britain, but they could not get the magic to work. Either they were missing some words

or rituals that their guardian had not managed to impart to them before her death, or the worlds were now too far apart.

The three of them argued constantly about what they should do, and eventually had a falling out and separated. The young man wandered for a long time, and eventually found peace as a walker of the world. He thought of himself as a guardian, a caretaker, walking unseen, but seeing everything. He would carry the memories of this adopted world for all the long ages of his life.

One stormy night, one of the two girls took refuge in a school for the blind, and found that the young students could sense her presence. They could not see her, but since they could sense her, they believed that she was there, and this made her more real, gave her body substance. Eventually, she married a young blind man even though she knew she would far outlive him. His love kept her real, solid and visible, and though she was not human and could therefore not have a human man's children, she led a happy, normal life. But the last girl never found peace.

She saw only the evil of her adoptive world, and she wanted desperately to get back home to a land that seemed increasingly to her as though it must be paradise. There she would live forever, people would be able to see her always, and she would have power, such great power, from the naturally occurring magic in the atmosphere. She wanted to be there. She *needed* to be there.

She could never live in a world where she felt she did not belong. She might have been born there, and she might have grown up there, but it would never be her home. She could feel the world eating away at her. Over the years, it had caused her to fade – her

skin lost all color, and her dark hair slowly turned white. If she did not get out of this world, she would fade away entirely, and she would never allow that to happen.

Her name was Lysandra.

## Chapter Thirty

The images from the past dissolved away in twisting ribbons of mist, and I was back in the real world. The rain had stopped, and I was sitting, my back against an uncomfortably solid stone, in a puddle of chilly mud that made a nasty squelching noise as I tried to move. Octavian still lay beside me, but he now appeared to be sleeping normally. Of the rest of the group, there was no sign. They had all fled.

In the center of the stone circle, a pale young woman sat, watching me warily.

*I could end this right now.* My head whirled with dizzying power. I knew everything about her, every detail of her past. All I had to do was tell her, with all the force of my new power and conviction, that she didn't exist.

Lysandra no longer looked huge and glowing and terrifying. Now, she was just a girl, pale and thin, who appeared to be only a year or so older than myself. The diaphanous gown of before was now just an old-fashioned white nightgown that was plastered to her body and streaked with mud. She shivered from the cold, and her teeth chattered faintly.

I could destroy her so easily. She already didn't belong here, and it would be so easy to get rid of her for good. We had decided, so long ago it seemed, that she should be killed. But now she crouched there, water dripping off her pointed chin, so small and fragile.

In the moment that had lasted two hundred years, I had seen the real Lysandra, had finally gotten my wish to truly *understand*. Strangely, I was relieved that her origins

were not human. Since she was not from this Earth, that meant that the rules of *my* world were as they should be.

We sat, regarding each other silently, each waiting for the other to make the first move. My muscles were tensed, ready to spring into action at the slightest hint of an attack from her. The silence stretched long and sharp between us, and I didn't move.

Octavian groaned and sat up. "Ugh," he said, trying to wipe at the mud that was smeared over one side of his face. He looked at me first, then followed my gaze. "Who're you?" he asked.

"That," I said, "is Lysandra,"

He cocked his head, looking the pale girl over carefully. "You are," he said at last, his tone wondering. "But you're solid. And you're not – scary or – evil, or anything."

She gave a soft, ironic laugh. "Don't be so quick to judge." Her voice was low, and now that she was no longer screaming, her words were rounded out by an unfamiliar accent. She had grown up in Wales, so perhaps her accent was Welsh. However unhuman she might be, she looked so – so *ordinary*. She just wanted to get home. *Do I actually feel sorry for her?*

"Look," I said. "We're not going to get anywhere by sitting around in the mud. Let's call a truce. I say we go inside, wash up, put on some clean clothes, and then we can get back to trying to kill each other."

Octavian nodded, and Lysandra said, "That is acceptable."

We all rose slowly and stiffly. My knees were shaking slightly, and I wasn't sure if it was out of cold, or because I had been sitting in the same position against a rock for

so long. I stretched, and my bones creaked like an old woman's. The mud squelched unpleasantly beneath my shoes, and my clothes were surely ruined. *How do you get mud out of clothes? Is it even possible, or is this outfit gone for good?*

Octavian and I turned to begin our long trek back down to the town, which, due to the condition of the roads, was likely to be more of a slog than a walk.

“Wait,” Lysandra said. “You can come back with me to the manor.” When Octavian and I exchanged a skeptical look, she said, “I won’t try anything; I swear it. Truce, right?”

“Well, it is closer,” I said.

He gaped at me. “Are you actually considering –”

“I’m freezing,” I said shortly, and that decided it. We turned to follow Lysandra.

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“Would you like some tea?” Lysandra asked politely.

“Yes, please,” I said. Beside me, Octavian simply shrugged. He had a rather bemused expression on his face. I could hardly blame him. He had been terrified of this woman for two years, had decided to fight against her at all costs, and here he was in her house, being asked if he wanted tea, as if this was a social visit. Perhaps he believed he was still dreaming, still caught in whatever nightmare visions she had showed him before.

Lysandra went off to the kitchen, and Octavian and I were left alone. We huddled close to the fire, luxuriating in the warmth flooding over us. There were no showers in the house, but there were multiple bathrooms, so we had each taken a hot bath. I wore a thick



bathrobe over a white nightgown much like Lysandra's, and Octavian had a pair of flannel pajamas that probably belonged to the mayor.

The house had been eerily silent while I scrubbed the pasty mud off my body. It seemed that both the mayor and the robotic housekeeper were either deeply asleep, or not at home. Perhaps they switched the housekeeper off for the night. Tamara was not there either. She had run away from the proceedings in the stone circle. She was probably staying with someone in the town.

Octavian leaned close to the fire, looking around warily. "What's with you?" he asked. "You don't seem scared at all."

I was about to tell him what I had witnessed of Lysandra's past, when the woman herself returned. "Can someone help me with the stove?" she said apologetically.

I got to my feet immediately, and ignoring Octavian's confused look, followed her out of the room. "So, can you not see the stove?" I asked curiously.

"It's... blurry. I can tell it's here though." She extended her hand and groped around. I watched, captivated, as her fingers appeared to briefly go *through* one of the dials before she managed to touch it. "It won't work for me, though. Nothing new does."

"So when we surrounded ourselves with science books...?"

"Yes, it made you hard to see. But I could tell you were meeting secretly, and that was all it took."

"Huh." Strangely, this seemed not to matter so much anymore. All that was now marked in my mental file folder as *of the past*. I turned the knob, and a blue fire sprang up beneath the kettle. There was a moment of awkward silence, and then I said, "Is it

okay if I tell Octavian your story?” Lysandra’s back stiffened, with anger or wounded pride, I could not tell which. “He’s really smart; I think he may be able to help.”

At last, Lysandra nodded.

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There were no clocks in the Wicket house, but my watch read two-thirty a.m. when I placed my empty teacup down at last. Lysandra had sat quietly throughout the whole tale, listening as her own story was recited. Eventually, she said, “The skeptic has turned storyteller.” Her tone was amused.

“So you’re actually from the world through the gate,” Octavian said. He kept shaking his head in amazement.

I smiled. “Crazy, no?”

“That actually makes quite a bit of sense.”

“Better than your ghost theory.”

“Shut up.” He turned to Lysandra. “I have a few questions for you.”

“And I should answer them because...?”

“I think I may know how to open your gate.”

She leaned forward, a sudden hungry look in her eyes, and I reminded myself that despite the recent show of contrition, this woman was still very dangerous indeed. “Tell me how to open it.”

“First, I want to know –”

“Tell me!”

Octavian shook his head. “This isn’t how this works. You've done some pretty horrible things, and I’ll tell you how to open the gate if and when I’m satisfied with your explanations.”

“I could kill you with a single stray thought,” Lysandra said, her tone soft and menacing.

His eyes widened, but I said, “Hmm...no, I don’t think you can do that. In fact, I’m absolutely positive that you can’t.”

Lysandra shot me a look of loathing, then leaned back in her chair, a slight ironic smile twisting the corner of her mouth. “Very well.”

“Fine, now that we’ve got that settled...How could you do that to my father?” His voice rose suddenly in anger, and it sounded very loud in the silent house.

I expected her to laugh and mock him, but instead she just said, “How could I do what?”

"Are you joking?" Octavian was taken aback, but renewed his accusation. “You’ve kept him in a coma for two years to keep us from leaving here!”

“I did nothing of the sort. I do not have that kind of power.”

“But – but –” He seemed unable to form words.

“He tried to leave,” I explained, while he mouthed silently like a landed fish. “The first time, there was a car accident, and the second time, his father had a stroke or something.”

“Ah.” Lysandra nodded. “I remember now.”

“So you did –!”

“I did not.”

“Then what –?”

She leaned back, clasping her hands around her knees. She looked impossibly childish, and it did not fit with her upright posture and white hair. “I tried to stop your family from leaving, true, but you were able to convince your parents to go, and my power over you was ended. On your way out of town, you had an unfortunate accident, and once again, I say that I had nothing to do with it. I have no power at all over machines. Your father must have simply had a delayed reaction to the accident. A slow-moving blood clot, perhaps. Or perhaps he had meant to have a stroke at that moment, no matter the cause. An unfortunate coincidence, nothing more. I am sorry for your pain,” she added. She didn't look sorry at all.

“But you got what you wanted anyway,” Octavian said accusingly. “You got us to stay.”

“You were unnecessary. I had plenty of people in my town already. One or two could hardly make a difference.”

At last he nodded, and I said, “So all those people that you keep here...?”

“Most of them stay because they are happy here,” Lysandra said. “There are a few who are not, but I have carefully sewn the belief that I can stop them, and since they believe it, it is true, and I can.”

“Wait,” said Octavian slowly. “Wait. If I believe that you didn't put my father into a coma to stop us from leaving, then the thing that's keeping him from waking up is –?”

Lysandra nodded. “Yes. It is you. I simply helped enhance your belief.”

“Oh my god.” He put his head in his hands.

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to comfort him. “If you don’t believe that any longer, so he should wake up soon, right?”

“But I kept him there for *two years*,” he said, his voice muffled. “It was all my fault. What if he’s never the same? Oh my god, my mother. All this has almost killed my mother. *I could have killed her. I could have killed them both.*”

I laid my hand tentatively on his shoulder. “I can’t believe you could let this go on so long,” I said to Lysandra. “How could you let it happen? And he’s not the only one.”

She lowered her eyes and looked away. It was the first sign of uncertainty in her that I had seen. “Belief is a powerful thing,” she said quietly. “My ancestors knew that well. It has effects both good and bad. I cannot create only the good true belief without causing some negative superstitions as well.”

“And my mother too,” I said. “You drove her mad.”

Lysandra shook her head. “I – your mother’s mental state was delicate to begin with. When I took her memory, I admit that it must not have helped, but her problems were always her own.”

I nodded. I knew that this was true. Lysandra was confirming just what I had had to work so hard to convince myself after Margot left, just what I had recently managed to convince my sister.

"So why this place?" I asked. "Why here? I've seen your past, but not your present. I get what you're trying to do, and why, but I don't get the how."

"Are you sure you want to know?" She shifted uncomfortably, as that she would rather not be talking about this.

*Yeah, it doesn't portray you in the best light, does it? I never liked to talk about why I got expelled either.* I nodded firmly.

Lysandra clasped and unclasped her hands, looking at them as she spoke. "In the early 1900s, I crossed the Atlantic Ocean to America. If the stone circles in Britain were useless to me, I would start fresh. I was not going to trust to the power of chance and nature. This time, I was going to take matters into her own hands."

Octavian looked up, his eyes red. "So you began doing exactly what the old leader guys of your people decided they should never do. You were interfering with the natural order of things."

She sighed. "Yes. I traveled the country until I found a likely spot. It was a place with a heritage that gave it dark power, a battleground whose soil had drunk the blood of many soldiers. I drew upon its power, and it was enough to keep myself visible and fully solid for short periods of time. It was very difficult – sometimes the effort to keep myself real felt just like trying to hold my breath for hours.

"There was a rich man who lived nearby, and I inserted myself, unseen, into his household. Generally no one saw me but children, whose minds are not yet set firmly in the real world, so I could easily pass for a maid. I sent the rich man dreams every night–"

"Wait, how did you do that?" He had regained his composure, and now had the eager attitude of one faced with a most fascinating puzzle to solve.

"When humans are sleeping, their minds are more willing to accept the fantastic, because they are safe in the knowledge that it is just a dream."

"Okay, go on."

"I sent the rich man dreams every night, dreams that would make him obsessed with the recurring image of a stone circle. Eventually, he sought me out. I told him a slightly embroidered version of the truth. I could see in his eyes that I had ignited the spark. He would build me the stone circle that I needed.

"But it did not work for me. Wicket died in the circle and vanished, and I thought perhaps that he had made it through. It worked for him, but it did not work for me. Perhaps, I thought, the worlds were too far apart now. But I would bring them closer.

"I took possession of the rich man's house and began drawing people towards me. The first ones to come were some of the builders that the rich man had hired. They built a town for me, and I used it to draw people in, and then to keep them here. I had almost no power at first, but their belief gave me strength, just as it once had to my ancestors. I could stay visible easily now, or go unseen when I wanted to. It was easier still, when I gave up trying too hard to understand the technological things that were not real to me. I could only barely see them, and often they even passed through me as though I was not solid.

"I tried to keep technology as much as possible out of my realm. Too much of it, and the town would be anchored irretrievably in the real world. Still, I allowed what my people needed. I even considered allowing them to have houses of worship, but decided that it was best that their belief not be divided between myself and anything else.

"It took a long time, but I was patient. I slowly collected people whose blood remembered the old ways, and the space that the town inhabited started to become more fluid. It was not unusual for strange things to happen, and people took them in stride when they did. It became an in-between place, not quite real, but not quite unreal either, one of the last left in that world. The townspeople were very happy. For them, this place was like a utopia."

"Only because they didn't know about you. You keep messing with their minds," Octavian said. "How do you do that anyway?"

"I have always been able to enter dreams. With the increase of my power, I could see into a waking mind from afar, even implant suggestions. Not actions, not anything concrete, but I could encourage beliefs along, strengthen the ones that were already there. It was very difficult, very tiring, but over time, I could persuade people to think what I wanted them to think, to breed as I wished, not to leave. I convinced them that I had more powers than I actually had, and when they believed it, I gained those powers."

"Did you ever try to mess with my mind?" I asked, wrinkling my nose in distaste.

"Well, yes," Lysandra admitted. "I did take your memory. But I could not get to you from afar, not even dreams. There was something about your mind..."

"That's why you were so afraid of me!" I said, and the other two looked at me in surprise. "If I truly believed that nothing you had done was real, then it wouldn't be. I almost 'didn't believe' you out of existence."

She nodded. "I am very lucky that you struggled with what you did and did not believe."



"But it didn't work on everyone, did it? My friends and I, we've always been able to see through you. I mean, figuratively. We didn't know about – um –" he trailed off.

"Yes," she said. "A small minority of the townspeople could tell that I was here, could sense me, could keep me out of their minds. They wanted to leave, but if they were powerful enough to be aware of me, I needed them to stay. They were afraid of me, and believed that if they tried to leave, I would stop them. If they believed it, then it did not matter what I could actually do. I had no such power, but I could use their superstitions."

"But you can't deny you do kill people," I said.

"I didn't kill anyone." She swallowed and rubbed her hands against her snowy white nightgown. "I...help circumstances align so that they die. I have never directly..." Her voice trailed away as she stared at her pale hands. The fingers trembled slightly.

"After a number of years had passed, and I was sure that the worlds were close together again, I tried to open the circle. I tried and tried, but still I could not get through. It was too late to turn back. I knew I would have to take more drastic measures. I hesitated to do it the first time, but I had no choice. At the times of greatest overlap between worlds, I ensured that a few people died. Borders are always fuzzy at certain time –"

"The solstices!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. Midnight is not quite day and not quite night, a solstice is not quite one season, but not yet another. A few spirits crossing between worlds makes the borders more fluid than ever."

Octavian leaned forward. "But it still didn't work."

Lysandra smiled. "Though the fluidity of the spirits' crossing did give me a great deal of power." She seemed to remember that we were listening, and carefully rearranged her face into a serious expression. "I should not have kept on, but the power was intoxicating. It is in the indefinable nature of all crossroads and graveyards."

"And the people who disappear?" I said. "I suppose you weren't involved in that either?"

She curled her lip. "Why would I want others to succeed in the crossing where I have failed?"

"Did you mean Megan to open the portal for you?" Octavian asked.

"I did. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that I could not open the gateway because I was not human. It made perfect sense – only one stone circle had been built by my people, long ago, and they no longer belonged to this world. The other circles, including my own, had been built by humans, for the use of humans. I needed someone whose blood was strong, whose bones remembered the old ways. The stones would know their blood, and they would open.

"And so I created my key. I found that the man with the strongest blood and caused him to breed with a woman of equally strong blood who was passing through. This woman was the most promising, but she proved to be difficult to control."

I grinned. "She got away from you." But then she spent the next eighteen years living in fear for her life. My smile sputtered and died on my lips.

"And I could not follow after her. By that time, I was just as enmeshed in my schemes as the people she had brought there, like a warden guarding a jail with no doors.

Without the warden, the prisoners would all escape. I was like a spider that had become tangled in its own web."

Lysandra sighed and brushed her hand over her eyes. "This was the first point that I took a step back and really examined what I was doing. I had started out trying to find a way to get home, and I had become a monster. But it was far too late to turn back."

## Chapter Thirty-One

At last, Samuel had his circle. It was finally complete. He had left his mark on the landscape of the Earth. And as for the other thing...He walked to the monument every day, through it and around it, but nothing happened. He sent for the maid again, took her down with him to the circle. She walked through it with a strange, reverent expression on her face, but still nothing happened.

She turned with a look that was half bitterness and half resignation. "I knew it would not work," she said softly, as though to herself. "The worlds are too far apart now." She walked away.

Samuel refused to give up. He came to the circle every day with increasing desperation. He was certain that his time was almost up. He was right.

"You can't just use people like this," Octavian said. "We aren't just – belief batteries or something – to be used to your advantage."

"I didn't mean to at first," Lysandra said. "I didn't mean any of it to happen. I should have understood that I was meant to fade to the margins of the world, like my brother did, like my sister will. It was wrong to meddle, but at first I didn't see the harm, and it was just a little. But then it got to be more and more, and I couldn't stop without losing it all." She bowed her head. "I just want to go home."

*It must be so lonely for her.* I played with my empty teacup, clinking it gently against its saucer. Lysandra had been so caught up in her schemes that she had lost perspective. But it still didn't excuse the things she had done. I knew that now.

I had been hated too, even though at the time I didn't know why, and I hadn't done anything to cause it. It was the loneliest feeling in the world. Would I too have eventually lashed out? *Anything is better than being hated, except being hated with good reason.*

"It's not just that," Lysandra was saying. "It is another negative effect of the power of belief. I myself am not immune. When more and more people believed that I was evil, I became so. They believed my powers were malevolent, and so they were. I

had such trouble thinking straight sometimes. Rage and hatred took control of me, and I admit that I did not try hard enough to fight against it.”

“Is that how you show people those pictures?” Octavian asked. He shivered slightly, and I wondered if he had seen the same things I did. “How did you do that?”

“The superstition...it increased my powers ten-fold, as did the crossing souls. People saw me as they wished, and I used their fear.”

"Stop calling them that. 'The crossing souls.' As though it was their own idea. You *killed* them."

She bit her lip. "I killed them," she said softly, as though tasting the shape of the words. "I killed them."

"Here's something I've been wondering," I said. "Why did you go through so much trouble to stop me from learning the truth?"

“‘So much trouble’? All I did was take a few memories. Your father asked me to.”

“My father...?”

“Your real father.”

“Oh...”

“He asked me to let you go, so I took all memories that would lead you to me, starting with a certain conversation with your mother. You knew nothing about me, and so you were free to go.”

“Did you mean for Megan to breed with Mick, though?” Octavian asked.

She laughed. "Of course not. I told him to keep an eye on her. Our charming friend was not the most scrupulous of characters. I think he went rather overboard."

"So he was working for you." I said. "But you killed him."

She looked down at her hands again. "I...did not mean to. He betrayed me and I could not control my anger. I didn't mean to."

"Are Megan's hands really magical?" asked Octavian. Clearly he didn't feel too bad about Mick.

Lysandra was about to answer, but I cut in, "Oh, I know! I don't believe they are, so they aren't. But I was always sure they were talented, so they are."

"You're getting the hang of this," she said.

"But why did I lose that power?"

"You were unsure of what you knew to be true. You were unsure of yourself. And that uncertainty manifested itself in the loss of your skills – with your hands, and with people too, I suspect."

I smiled. "I bet I'll get it back now."

"Are you so sure of the world now?" Octavian said sarcastically.

"No. But I'm sure of myself. I bet that tea we just drank was the best tea you ever had, because I made it."

There was a slight pause while they considered and then admitted that yes, this was true. "Don't let it go to your head," Octavian said. "You're insufferable enough as it is."

“I make no promises.” I smiled, but I knew that even with my 'magic hands' back, I would never be so arrogant again.

“Are you finished with your questions?” Lysandra said abruptly. “Are you going to tell me how to open my gateway?”

“Not quite,” said Octavian. “I need to know what will happen if you open the portal. Some cosmic backlash? Some horrible monster comes through?”

She shook her head impatiently. “I am fairly certain that nothing of the kind will happen. I copied my people’s original design of the henge, which should prevent the leakage of power. As far as I know.”

“So you’ll just go through, and that will be that? End of story?”

“Yes.”

He leaned forward. “So what’s the world like? Through the gate?”

She stared off into the distance, as though looking through an unsurpassable window at paradise just on the other side. “I don’t know for certain. There were the stories of my guardian, but I was very young when she died, and my memory is not reliable.” She spoke slowly, her tone full of longing. “I know that it is a land full of magic, and people live forever because time does not affect them. I know that it is beautiful and wild, and sometimes frightening and dangerous. But all good things are, I think. I believe that there are many more worlds, all connected by that gate. I don’t even know if I will get to the right one. But I have to try. Because no matter what, it is my homeland, and it is where I belong.”

“More than one? Wow,” Octavian said softly. His voice was hushed as well, as though he too could see that beautiful image just out of reach. I looked at him curiously. “Okay,” he said at last. “I think I believe you.”

Lysandra leaned forward, her body very still, catlike. “So you’ll tell me?”

He glanced at me, and I shrugged. “Fine,” he said. “I can open it like this.” He pulled the glove off his left hand and held his phantom arm aloft.

No reaction. “How?”

Octavian looked rather disappointed. Obviously, he had been hoping for a better reaction. “My hand,” he said. “My arm.”

“I see nothing unusual about it.”

“Oh!” I said. “Your arm isn’t real, so it looks real to her.”

Finally, Octavian got the reaction he wanted. Lysandra gasped, and jumped to her feet. She hurried over and began feeling his arm. “It looks so real,” she said wonderingly. “Are you sure it’s not there?”

Octavian nodded.

She examined the arm closely for a few moments, then returned to her seat, disappointed. “Most interesting, but I don’t see how it can help me. I have tasted your blood. It’s not the right mix.”

“But I’m learning to change it,” he said. “I’ve been practicing. I can make it longer or shorter.” I saw Lysandra’s eyes widen and move to follow something I myself could not see. I watched carefully, and though Octavian did not move, a teacup on the table three feet away lifted and moved around. I was both impressed and a little annoyed.



He had been practicing, and he was getting quite good. But why hadn't he told me? Did he think I couldn't handle it?

"I bet," he went on, "That I could change the blood in my arm to fit whatever requirement the stones have. But it may not even be necessary. I think I opened the stones once before, and I almost went through, but Megan called me back."

I thought back to that day that we had hiked to the stone circle, when I had gotten so frightened as Octavian had almost disappeared. "It's true," I said. "He can open it."

Lysandra's eyes gleamed with excitement. She sat very still, but her shoulders were tensed. "So open it. Let me go through! I will never bother you again."

Octavian nodded. "I will."

She leapt to her feet. "Then let's go!"

"Wait. I have a few demands first. And a request."

"What is it?" She looked ready to begin pacing back and forth like a caged animal.

"First," said Octavian, "you stop meddling with people."

She looked confused. "But they're happy."

"Only because you take their memories of anything bad. People deserve to keep their memories whole, good *and* bad. You've done enough damage already."

She nodded and motioned for him to keep talking.

"Second, you let everyone who wants to leave, go. If my dad's okay, I'm going to finally go back to Phoenix."

She hesitated.

“You said yourself there are enough people who actually want to be here to keep the worlds close together.”

“It’s not that simple. They are kept here by their own belief. Even if I stop encouraging and enforcing that, they still believe it.”

“We can spread the word,” I suggested. “We’ll tell them we defeated you in single combat or something, and they’ll believe it and they’ll be able to go.”

She shrugged. “Very well. What else?”

“Third,” said Octavian. “You wait one year before going through the gate.”

“What?” she demanded angrily. “Why?”

“Because that’s my fourth demand. Or request, really. I want to go with you.”

“What?” Lysandra and I said together, and then continued, each trying to talk over each other.

“You do not belong in the other world,” she said.

“Why would you want to go there?” I demanded.

“You are tempted by the lure of immortality?”

“What’s wrong with this world?”

“You wish to exploit my world for its magical resources?”

“Calm down, everyone,” Octavian said loudly. “Let me explain!” He lowered his voice. “I don’t want to be an earthling expatriate, or be immortal, or exploit a whole world. It’s just that... all my life, I’ve read about other worlds in books, and I wanted to be there for real. And now I find out that there’s another world, maybe more than one, through a door not a mile away, and *I* have the key to open it.” His eyes were shining

with enthusiasm. “I could visit other worlds, explore them, have adventures....You think I’m going to pass up an opportunity like that?”

“So that’s what this is about,” I said. “The adventure.” For some reason, I felt like there was a thin knife of betrayal twisting in my gut. Had our summer adventure in the real world not been enough for him? It had even taken a turn for the magical, and he still needed more.

Lysandra was regarding Octavian silently.

“I swear,” he said. “No exploiting. I don’t even want to stay. I’ll come back here afterwards, I just want to visit.”

Finally she nodded. “Fine. You may come. But do not expect me to babysit you once we are on the other side.”

“I don’t.”

“Why do you want to wait a year?” I asked.

“Because on the off-chance I get stuck in a different world, I want to be eighteen. Legally an adult.” He thought for a moment. “I want to finish high school, too. No one’s going to call me a dropout.”

“In this Phoenix?” Lysandra asked.

“I’m certainly not staying here.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “How do I know you will return in one year’s time?”

“Because I will,” he said. “I want to go through that gate as much as you do.”

“Very well,” she said. “One year’s time. We go through the gate.”

He nodded.

"Do not forget your part of our bargain," she said softly. "If you double-cross me, you will find that my vengeance will be far greater than anything you can possibly imagine." As though this was her way of saying goodnight, Lysandra yawned and stretched. She was surprisingly graceful, despite that voluminous old-fashioned nightgown. "It seems we are done here. It is very late, and I think now I would like to sleep. It has been a long day. You may sleep here tonight if you wish, or you may see yourselves out." She rose, and turned to leave.

"Wait," I said. "One more request. I think – maybe – I might want to come too."

Both of them looked at me, stunned. "*You?*" said Octavian.

I didn't know why I had said it, didn't know that I was going to say it until I had opened my mouth and started to speak. My face burned red, and I didn't dare look at Octavian. *What on earth are you thinking*, I asked myself.

Both of the others were still staring at me, waiting patiently. "I guess," I faltered, "I've seen that there's a lot more to this world – these worlds – than I knew, and though I don't really want to know it, I can't *unknow* it, you know? I guess I – I just want to see what else there is."

I risked a glance at Octavian. He was smiling.

*I return to my bed just before dawn.*

*I hardly thought, when I was tugged from it in the middle of the night by the intense feeling that my stone circle was in danger, that I would be returning to it with such a feeling of success.*

*In fact, when the Girl finally realized her dangerous power and turned it on me, I was certain, there in the soaking wet and the cold mud, that I was going to die. So much I had lost in this mad quest, and now my life would be added to that list.*

*But instead, the Girl did not kill me. She saw my past unfurled before her, and she did not act. She saw my desire to return home, and she pitied me.*

*I cannot stand her pity. Still the hatred of her gnaws at me, strong and deep as iron ore biting at the earth. But she and the boy offered me a way to get what I want, and I was desperate enough to stoop to taking their help.*

*We talked late into the night. I told the truth – mostly – and it felt nice for a change, not to have to scheme and control. I had almost forgotten what it was, to speak freely.*

*As usual, the blankets take too long to warm to my fading body. But soon I will be home, and I will be whole once more. With a deep exhale, I release my holds on every single soul in the town. Something drains away from me, and for the first time in years I feel light, so very light, as though I could float away. I never realized how taxing it was, how heavy and tired it made me feel, trying to hold on to all that power.*

*My mind is floating gently away. Even the world does not hurt me so much anymore.*

*I do not know how I will be able to stand another year of waiting. They dangle the promise of home before my nose like an apple before a horse, and make me swear to be a good little girl, to wait. If only there was a way to hurry things up....But wait I must, and wait I will.*

*I can put up with her, with them both, for the time being, at least until I have what I want. And after that, we shall see.*

*I smile to myself as I slide softly into sleep.*

## Chapter Thirty-Two

I didn't take Lysandra up on her offer to spend the night. I remembered how dusty those beds were. The sun was just barely starting to come up as I trudged home in a stupor of exhaustion. The ground was still soft and squishy under my feet, and as I walked, I watched the sky turn pink and orange with the sunrise. The sleeping town below me was unharmed by the night's storm. *It's the solstice. We did it. We're safe.*

Despite the early hour, the lights were on in the kitchen. I peeked around the corner to behold Uncle Bennet at the kitchen table, sipping from a chipped mug and reading a book. I judged that he was probably thoroughly engrossed, and was preparing to crawl by, when he said, without looking up, "Come in, Megan."

Down on all fours, I froze, then stood guiltily and entered the kitchen.

He regarded me quietly for a moment, then held up his mug. "Tea?"

I gave an unhappy chuckle. "Just when I think I'm in trouble, people keep offering me tea."

"I'm not sure what you mean by that, but I'll take it as a no."

He looked back down at his book, and I said, "Aren't you going to ask me where I was?"

"No." He marked his place with a finger and closed the book. "I'm not even going to remind you that the last time you snuck out at night you ended up in the hospital, or that I asked you not to go out after dark. I am not your father, but I just want to remind you that I am responsible for you. I don't have the right to try to control your actions, but

please take into consideration, the next time you think of sneaking out, that if anything were to happen to you, your father would kill me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” *Well, what do you know, I actually mean it!*

“Is this a habit for you? You don’t have the best track record, you know. You sneak out, you get hit by cars, you come home with your clothes all muddy...”

I considered telling him that I had been kidnapped once too, but instead, I glanced down at my clothes. They had dried well enough, though they were stiff and uncomfortable, and the remaining mud was flaking off in brownish pieces that reminded me of fish food.

I drew up a chair and sat down wearily. I was exhausted, and I ached all over.

“This is the last time. I promise.”

He nodded, but his expression was skeptical.

“I was off having an adventure,” I told him, “but it’s over for now.”

“For now?”

“Yes. Can I come back next summer? To visit again?”

He smiled. “I guess you decided you like it here after all.”

“Well, maybe this crazy place isn’t as bad as I thought. Maybe I even like it here a little.”

Uncle Bennet nodded wisely. “It does grow on you. And you’re welcome to come back.”

“I may not stay the whole time,” I warned. “Some friends and I – we may be going on a – a road trip.”



“We’d be happy to have you as long as you want to stay.”

I yawned hugely and considered going down to bed. It seemed like a very long way to go. “How did you know I snuck out?” I asked sleepily.

“ESP.” At this point, I was willing to believe anything, but he went on, “No, I didn’t know. I couldn’t sleep because of the storm, and I couldn’t get back to sleep when it ended, so I just got up. I was rather surprised when I saw you trying to sneak by.”

“Some storm, huh?”

“We get them up here sometimes. I remember a year when there was a thunderstorm every day at exactly 3 pm. Everyone knew to be back home and to take the laundry in before it started.”

“Did it feel like a –” I tried to remember the word Octavian had used – “a portent of something bad to you?”

He laughed tiredly. “A portent of evil? The books getting to you at last, eh?”

“Yeah, maybe.” For him, last night had been nothing more than a fierce summer thunderstorm. That proved that he was in Wicket’s Folly because he wanted to be there, not because he was being kept there. He and his family did not need rescuing. And perhaps the storm really had been just a storm, blown out of proportion by people who believed that it meant something bad was coming. And in a way, it had. They had run off in terror from frightening pictures of monsters – monsters that we wouldn’t have seen if Lysandra hadn’t been able to use our fear in the place. Funny things, paradoxes. I yawned again and pushed myself to my feet. “I think I’m going to drag myself down to bed.”

“So how was it?” Uncle Bennet said. “Your adventure?”

Hmmm, how *was* it. I had never really thought about it while it was happening. Finally, I said, “Surprisingly normal, I guess. Some parts of it were scary, and some were weird, and some were confusing. I learned what was real and what wasn’t, and what was kind of in the middle. There was a lot of stuff that I was sure of that turned out to be wrong, and a lot of stuff I was wrong about, and it turned out to be okay in the end. Made some enemies; made some friends. Lost some memories I wanted; gained some more I didn’t want. Nothing too weird.”

Uncle Bennet gave a little half-smile. “And did you learn any important life lessons along the way?”

I yawned. “Nah. Don’t think so.”

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Spot the cat was not on my bed when I got downstairs. And on the first night when I wouldn't have felt compelled to shove him out the window! I still didn't know how he got in and out, but I had an idea. He was a Wicket's Folly cat; he probably walked right through the walls. *But I don't really need to know. That's what Octavian would say. Nothing wrong with a little bit of mystery.*

I peeled myself out of my muddy clothes and crawled into bed in my underwear. My head sank into the pillow and I floated away.

It felt like only minutes later that I was awoken by screaming.

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I woke up in the confusion of sound, my arms and legs thrashing in surprise. *Who's screaming? What the hell's going on?*

My eyes were still bleary, and I had to squint to see my watch. Just before eight. *Shit, not even two hours of sleep!* There was another scream from upstairs. *Oh, right.*

I threw on some clothes, slapped my glasses onto my nose, and ran upstairs.

Aunt Alicia was slumped over the kitchen table, her head in the crook of her elbow, sobbing. Uncle Bennet was pacing back and forth, muttering wildly to himself.

I looked from one to the other. "What's going on?"

"F-Freddie," Aunt Alicia choked out.

My heart sank down into a leaden lump. *Not my Freddie. Not my strange, silly little buddy.* I stumbled on numb feet to the boys' room.

Two ashen faces stared at me with wide eyes. Eric and Archie were huddled together on one of the bunkbeds, and for once they weren't hitting each other. Both were still in their pajamas. Freddie was nowhere to be seen.

"What happened?" I whispered.

Archie clutched his arms around his knees. "Freddie's gone." He seemed stunned, like he wasn't sure what was happening.

"How long has he been missing?"

Eric shook his head. "We don't know. Mommy came to wake us up and then she just started screaming."

"Have they looked for him?"

Both of them stared at me, their eyes wide.

"Have they *looked*?"

Archie shook his head.

I ran back to the kitchen. "Why aren't you looking for him?"

Uncle Bennet turned to me, his eyes wild. "They go missing," he said. "They never come back."

The words were like poisoned darts to my heart. He was remembering. Lysandra wasn't blocking their memories anymore. Just like I had asked.

"What if he just wandered off?" I said loudly. "We have to go look. Form a search party. *Something.*"

He shook his head. "It's no use," he whispered.

"He's gone!" Aunt Alicia's voice rose into a wail. They were remembering everything that had happened in the town, all the people who had died, all the children who had gone missing, and they were giving up.

"What is wrong with you?" I yelled. "He may not be gone yet!"

Uncle Bennet sat down and put his arms around Aunt Alicia.

"Fine! I'll look for him myself." I stamped down the stairs to get my shoes. My bed was a mess. The sheets were in disarray, and still cat-less.

I froze in the doorway, staring at the empty bed, as a suspicion formed in my mind. I remembered Freddie, crouched in front of the cat one morning, murmuring, *he wants me to follow him.*

*Oh no.* I slumped down onto the rumpled covers. Why hadn't I listened to him? How could I have been so stupid? Cats were uncanny at the best of times, but a Wicket's Folly cat that could walk through walls? *It was waiting for him all along. He's gone. My little boy is gone. Why didn't I listen?*

"Lysandra!" I screamed, and jumped to my feet. "Lysandra! I know you can hear me. *Lysandra!*"

*What?* Her testy voice projected itself directly into my mind. *You woke me up.*

My brain buzzed and I grabbed my ears. "Ow!"

*Now you know how I felt.*

"Freddie is gone. Did you do this?"

*I swear to you I did not.*

"Then get him back!"

*I can't. Children sometimes wander into the stones. It has nothing to do with me.*

"He's there. He's on the other side, all alone. He's only five years old!"

*I'm sorry, she said. We can find him though. When we go through. I'm certain we will. Though – she paused – we will have to go through sooner than your friend stipulated. As soon as possible, I imagine.*

Yes. Relief flooded through me. Yes, we would go through the stones, and Freddie would be there. We would find him and bring him home safely. But it would take us time to find him. I remembered, all those years ago, when my mother had disappeared. It was agony – the horrible waiting to see if she would come back, wishing you knew what to do; not knowing, until she called, if she was even alive. Every second stretched into an misery of uncertainly and self-loathing. How long would my aunt and uncle have to wait before they knew? What would it do to them?

"Take their memories," I said suddenly. "Make them forget."

*I thought you said I was not to do that anymore. Was her tone slightly mocking?*

"Just this once more. We'll bring him back. I know we will. But I don't want them to suffer until we do.

*Very well*, said Lysandra, and she was gone from my mind.

My legs trembled as I paced back and forth, thoughts flying too fast through my mind. We would have to go through the stones as soon as possible. What was I going to tell Dad and Gwen? Jackie and the rest of my friends? What about school? College applications? Getting my driver's license? I wasn't even sure I *wanted* to go through the stones. I was counting on that extra year to make up my mind. *No*, I told myself sternly. *None of that matters. The only thing that matters is finding Freddie.*

*I've got to tell Octavian. Where will he be?*

The festival. The solstice festival was today. I had all but forgotten in all the planning we had done to face Lysandra. We had been so worried about making it to the solstice. It had never seemed like there would be anything to think about afterwards.

I showered quickly to get rid of any remaining lack of sleep stupor, as well as any mud I had missed last night. After I dressed, I noticed distractedly that my shirt didn't quite match my pants. I couldn't go out like that. *Old habits die hard*, I thought, as I changed into a blue sundress. With no makeup and no jewelry, there was no need to worry about what didn't match. I buckled on my sandals and ran a comb quickly through my hair.

The stairs creaked as I ascended slowly, apprehensively. Would there still be crying and screaming?

There was nothing. Everyone was gone. The house was completely silent except for the ticking of the large grandfather clock. I wandered into the kitchen, looking around for anyone and anything at all, and spotted a note written on the whiteboard under the heading 'Whopping Fist.' The note read, *Megan, we thought we'd let you sleep in. We've all gone to the festival! Meet us there if you see this in time.*

It seemed like Lysandra had kept her promise. *That's good. Right?*

## Chapter Thirty-Three

His household began to worry when Samuel did not return home on the evening of December 21st. They searched for him for two weeks, combing the hills, the forests, even the stone circle, until they were forced to conclude that he was dead. But they never found his body.

As for the maid who knew so much about the old days, she disappeared, though she did not leave - but that's a different story.

The world outside looked like it had been reborn after the storm. I took a deep breath of sweet fresh air. Was it the end of Lysandra's influence, or did the world just seem more *right* than usual? The sun had returned, bright and warm, and I leaned my head back for a moment, closing my eyes and simply drinking it in. The ground was soft but sturdy under my feet, and the leaves and grass looked as if they had been painted in brighter greens overnight. Tiny droplets of water still clung to the leaves, making them seem as if they retained their fresh morning dew.

The day would be perfect, if Freddie was here.

The solstice festival was in full swing all over Main Street, which had been blocked off for the purpose. All the stores were closed, but people had set up stalls where they sold all kinds of things, from food to books to handmade jewelry. It was still early in the morning, but the place was packed with happy people and laughing children running around and getting in the way of everything. Many of the stalls went unmanned as their owners wandered around looking at things and talking to their friends. Nobody was worried about thieves. This wasn't that kind of a place.

There were tables piled high with different fruits and vegetables from people's gardens, and cookies and cakes from their kitchens. The air smelled of buttery pastry and chocolate. There was one table that had nothing but about seventeen different kinds of



apple. My stomach rumbled. I was in such a hurry that I had not bothered to eat before coming down. No sense going hungry.

Munching on a French crepe slathered in chocolate syrup, I looked around for Octavian. *Where are you, you jerk?*

I spotted Tamara at the bakery's stall, idly waving flies away from the piles of cookies and desserts as she leaned across the table to talk to her father. My feet tried to turn away. *Last night you almost single-handedly took on Lysandra. You can do this.* I crumpled up the crepe's empty paper wrapper.

"Hello, sir," I said, holding out a hand to my biological father. He regarded me for a moment, then took my hand. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"You as well," he said softly.

I wasn't sure what to say. How did you acknowledge a man who was your father, and you were both thinking it, but were afraid to say it out loud because you were standing in front of his legitimate daughter? "I'm sure my father would like to meet you as well," I said at last, hoping that he would understand all the things that I meant by this – that I was grateful for everything he had done for me, that I had a father already, that I was open to getting to know him even though the title of father had already been earned by someone else, and that I would not say anything to Tamara without his permission.

He held my eyes for a moment, then nodded and walked away.

"That was...odd," Tamara said.

"What?" I said, pretending to look around for something out of place.

"Never mind. Hey, about that stuff last night..."

“Yeah?”

“One minute I was digging, then the next I saw scary monsters, and I was running away as fast as I could. I stayed in the Dorm because I was too scared to go home. But on the plus side, I think I’ve made some new friends at last!”

Oh, right. In my concern over Freddie, I had almost forgotten that I was supposed to be spreading some new rumors. “Well you can go home now, there’s nothing to worry about,” I said, thinking quickly. “The witch summoned those monsters to kill us, but in the end, they turned on her and killed her.”

“Oh,” she said. “Crisis averted then. I guess everything’s okay now.”

I was surprised to see that she looked slightly disappointed.

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I tried all of the free samples, bought a bunch of cookies and a large, beautifully luscious heirloom tomato. I wanted to zoom around, grab Octavian from wherever he was hiding and charge off through the stones, but I knew that was a bad idea. If that trip to search the mayor's house had taught me anything, it was that you should never rush in without thinking things through fully and considering all possibilities. And Freddie was an extremely relaxed sort of kid, I reassured myself. He took pretty much anything in stride. I could just imagine him looking calmly into the eyes of an enormous wolf and remarking, "Your tail is pretty. Do you know how to fly?" The wolf would immediately adopt him into its family. He would be fine until we got to him. *I hope.*

Still, I couldn't help feeling guilty as I wandered, munching, from stall to stall, inspecting all the merchandise. I found that I knew a lot of the people at the stalls, and I had to stop and greet them.

Wicket's Folly was a place full of talented people, and there were so many extraordinary expressions of creativity. I bought a pair of intricately beaded earrings from my cousins' music teacher, Mrs. Wilkes, and said hello to her aged father-in-law, who was resting in a lawn chair under their booth's colorful striped awning.

"Would you look at that," he said, gesturing as Steve and Jeffrey walked by with their baby. "In my day two men would never –"

"Dad!" Mrs. Wilkes admonished him, but she was eyeing them askance as well. And she wasn't the only one, I realized, looking around. *Is this another effect of Lysandra taking away her mind control? I guess Margot was right. There is no such thing as a utopia. Well, it's better this way. People are going to have to actually find ways to deal with each other now.*

"I met your town's resident myth," I told Mr. Wilkes as I hooked my new earrings through my lobes.

He smiled happily. "I knew you would eventually. She was magical and mysterious, yes?"

Not particularly. I was about to tell him exactly what she was, but I reconsidered. Why not? "Yes, she is," I said. "Very mysterious."

The old man winked at me. "I knew it."

I gave him one of my cookies.

My family at the next booth, admiring a collection of little hand-carved figurines. Archie and Eric were tugging at their parents and asking repeatedly a variation of, “Can I have one, Mom?”

“I didn’t think you guys played with dolls,” I said.

“What?” said Eric, enraged. “*Dolls?*”

“They’re not dolls,” said Archie scathingly. “They’re wooden figurines. Models. Action figures.”

I nodded. “Very manly.”

If Freddie were here, he would have said “*I like dolls.*” I couldn't stop my mouth from twisting in a small, sad smile.

"Are you okay?" Uncle Bennet asked.

"Are you?"

His eyebrows drew together as though he was trying to remember something. He scratched his head. "I think so," he said slowly.

Guilt clawed at my heart. *It's better this way. It is.*

“I give in,” Aunt Alicia said, throwing up her hand. “You can have *one* doll – I mean model – between the three –” she stopped, her brow furrowed. “Between the two of you,” she finished slowly.

My throat felt thick, and I swallowed hard. *Everything will be okay again. I'll fix it.*

“I see you found our note,” said Uncle Bennet.

“Yeah,” I said. “I wasn't asleep though. Although I was pretty exhausted from –”

“Reading so late,” he interrupted. “You know how it is – you get so caught up in a good book and you lose track of time!”

“Hmm,” Aunt Alicia agreed, and went over to buy the action figure that had been agreed upon by a contest of shoving.

“Why did you do that?” I asked Uncle Bennet.

He shrugged. “Alicia would be horrified if she learned you were out by yourself all night. I may be able to recognize my niece’s independence, but I’m afraid she will continue seeing you as a child until you’re at least thirty. I don’t know what she’ll do when the boys grow up and leave home,” he went on pensively, “but I suppose there are always grandchildren to look forward to.”

*But not from Freddie. If we don't get him back.* I shook my head. *Don't think like that.* I tried to pull myself back together. “A mother who actually *wants* to care for her children. Weird.” At one time, I might have spoken the words maliciously, as a barb against my own mother, but not anymore.

“Oh she may seem flustered and absent-minded sometimes,” Uncle Bennet said fondly, smiling at his wife’s back, “But she loves those little monsters, and she worries about them all the time.”

*She should be worrying a lot more.* My stomach squirmed with guilt. *I've got to stop talking to him. I can't stand feeling like this.*

“Her cast comes off in a few days,” he went on, “and then you’ll see her really get to work.”

“What?” I said. “So you mean that I’m free?”

He smiled. “Now you can go have a real summer vacation. Have all the adventures you want with your friends.”

If only it were that simple. “You know,” I said. “I think I’ve had all the adventures I can stand for this summer, but as for goofing off with my friends, I think I see some of them now.”

“Ah, well, go ahead.”

“I’ll see you later.” As I went off to join Octavian, I looked over my shoulder at them. Eric and Archie were arguing over who got to hold their new action figure. I was not really related to any of them, but it didn’t matter. I would risk whatever it took to get Freddie back to them.

Octavian looked up guiltily as I came over. The reason for this soon became clear, because the booth he was standing by sold jewelry.

“You should definitely get a nose ring,” I said.

“Hmm,” he said. “I was thinking of something more in a tongue piercing, but I’ll consider it.”

“Why stop there? You can get some eyebrow rings too.”

“Are you done?” said Sasha, her voice dripping boredom. She was running the booth. I gave her a tentative smile, and she nodded back.

“Did you make all of these?” I asked, examining the display of jewelry. “They’re really pretty.”

“Nah. I’m just helping out.” She lowered her voice. “So, what’s the score with Lysandra? Should we be singing ‘ding dong the witch is dead?’”

“Oh she’s dead,” said someone, but it wasn’t Octavian. I turned to see a pale young woman, looking completely normal in a white sundress covered with tiny embroidered flowers. “Completely and utterly gone,” the girl repeated.

Sasha blinked at her. “Do I...know you?”

“Yes,” said Lysandra.

“That’s Liz,” said Octavian loudly. “You remember Liz, don’t you? She was there with us last night.”

Lysandra nodded. “Yes. I mean, yeah. I am *Liz*. That is my name. I was there, and I saw the whole thing.”

“The monsters that she called –” I cut in. “They turned on her, and killed her.” I thought we’d better keep our story consistent, just in case any of the people we told compared notes later.

“Oh,” said Sasha. “But I thought she was already dead.”

“Um,” I said.

“They were phantom monsters,” said Octavian. “So what better way to kill a ghost?”

“I suppose....” said Sasha. “So this means....”

“You’re free to go,” said Octavian.

A look of disbelief crossed her face, followed by one of complete and utter joy. “I can go? *Finally!* Natalie! Hey, Natalie!” She ran off.

"I do like a happy ending," said Lysandra, watching Sasha tugging at her best friend's sleeve. She turned to face us. Her manner changed, and she was once again ancient, otherworldly, and slightly unnerving. "Tonight is the night," she said.

"What?" said Octavian.

"My cousin's gone missing." I quickly filled him in on what had happened. "We need to go after him as soon as possible," I finished.

Octavian said nothing. He was eyeing Lysandra suspiciously. "That seems a little bit too much of a coincidence if you ask me," he said.

She raised her eyebrows. "I told you that if I knew how to send people through I would already have gone myself," she said smoothly.

"Still..."

"Can we not argue about this?" I said. "The fact is he's gone, and we need to go after him."

He hesitated, conflicting emotions crossing his face openly. Why was this taking so long? *Of course*, I thought suddenly. *He has another reason for wanting to wait a year. Adopted kids can find their birth parents when they're eighteen. Mr. Well-adjusted, my ass. He wants to know who he is.*

I understood where he was coming from, but we didn't have the time. "Octavian, it's *Freddie*. He's only five."

He tried to hide his disappointment. "Okay, okay. I don't think we'll be ready by tonight though."

"Why not?" demanded Lysandra.



"Narnia."

"Huh?" I said.

"It was eternal winter on the other side. What if it's winter in the other place too?"

"So, we'll bring jackets," I said impatiently.

"And what if it's too hot? What if there's no food? What if there's no shelter?"

What if there's wild animals? What if –"

"Okay, okay, stop, I get the picture."

Lysandra waved a hand. "Do your planning. But be warned. I will be watching you. If you try to leave without me, my vengeance will be truly terrifying."

"Enough with the threatening already," Octavian said wearily.

"Sorry," she said, and I was surprised to see that she really did look sorry. "Old habits, you know." She gave us a small, ironic smile and walked away. She slid between people with impressive grace, as though she really was a ghost walking through a crowd as insubstantial as smoke.

I watched her go. "You know," I said thoughtfully, "it's amazing how much you can be wrong about someone, and still be right."

"Are you saying I was wrong?" Octavian said. "Because I don't remember *you* making any theories that turned out to be right."

"What? I was right all along, about almost everything!"

We began strolling through the booths together, stopping here and there to watch little children getting their faces painted, or people playing ring toss games.

"If you can claim to be right, then I can claim to be right too," said Octavian.

“Oh yeah? In what universe?”

“Maybe one of the ones through the gate....”

“Shut up.”

He paused to watch a man twisting balloons into interesting shapes. “I’m just saying... I could still be right about some stuff. There’s parts of it we still don’t understand. Like how this whole thing works – bringing the worlds closer. See, it could be that Lysandra’s right, and it’s about blood. It could be that I’m right, and it’s about creativity and talents. And it could be something else, like blurred boundaries – I’ve been giving this one some thought – all the mixed race people, the things in this town that are not quite one thing, and not quite another. I think it lets this town be not quite part of the real world, but then it’s also not part of the other world. It’s kind of unclear – somewhere in the middle. That makes it nowhere, but at the same time, it’s part of both places, and that makes it the perfect bridge.”

“Blah, blah, blah, ” I said. “Maybe it doesn’t matter which reason is the real one. Maybe it’s part of all three. Another blurred boundary. You said it yourself. Maybe it doesn’t matter whether or not there’s a specific reason. Maybe it’s the mystery of the thing that allows it to be what it is. What?”

He was looking at me with an almost awed expression on his face. “You know,” he said slowly, wonderingly. “You really –”

“What?”

“Nothing. Stop fishing for compliments.” To my surprise, he blushed slightly.

“Hey, did I tell you my father’s awake?”

"He is? That's fantastic!"

"Yeah. We were making plans to go back home." He sighed. "Thwarted again."

"But at least this is on your terms."

"It wasn't *my* idea."

"Are you saying you wouldn't go after my cousin if I hadn't asked you?"

"Hey look, cotton candy."

"Answer me."

He shrugged. "Plenty of kids have gone missing before."

"I cannot believe you!" I jabbed a finger into his chest. "And you think *I'm* selfish!"

"Ow." He grabbed my hand with his gloved one and held it for a moment against his chest, right over his heart. "We'll find him," he said, his eyes looking straight into mine. "We'll find them all."

I pulled my hand away. My heart was beating a little too fast, and my cheeks felt hot. "What if we get stuck too?" I said abruptly. "What if there's hundreds of worlds. Thousands? That's like looking for a needle in a whole universe full of haystacks. How are we supposed to find the right one?"

"We will."

"Yeah? How do you know?"

He smiled. "It's like a quest. And the heroes always succeed."

"You know that doesn't really happen," I said, but I smiled too.

We walked in silence for a little while, stopping every now and then to tell the people who had accompanied us last night that Lysandra was dead. Most of them reacted like Sasha, but a few of them seemed almost disappointed.

"It does grow on you, this place," I mused.

Octavian sighed. "Yeah, I'll almost be sorry to leave it."

"I'll be sorry to leave this whole *world*."

"Here," he said. "I got you this." He felt around in his pocket and pulled out a thin black leather cord with a small green stone dangling from it. "It's a bracelet."

I smiled, and it wasn't just at the prospect of a gift. I held out my left hand, and he tied the cord around my wrist. The green stone was probably jade, I decided, holding my arm up to admire the effect. It was carved in the shape of a tiny owl. "Oh, it's beautiful. Thank you, I love it."

"Ah, it's nothing," he said gruffly, but he looked pleased.

"Are you implying that I'm wise, like an owl?"

"No. I just like owls."

I opened my mouth, and closed it again, my heart in my throat. With every other boy, I knew what to say, but not with this one. It made things confusing sometimes, and more than a little awkward, but it was kind of nice. More genuine. "I like owls too," I said finally. It sounded so stupid once I had said it, but it also felt right.

As we wandered off together through the fair, I found myself thinking that everything would be all right. Sure, we were going through a stone gateway into the complete unknown with a murderous alien girl we couldn't really trust and who might kill

us at the slightest provocation, and we had to find Freddie and a group of other children who might be spread out over myriad worlds, but somehow, I knew we could do it.

Just for today, I could let all my worries go. Children laughed and ran nearby, and the warm air smelled of cotton candy and cinnamon. I flipped the little owl charm around on its cord and smiled as it sparkled milky green in the sunlight.

Things made sense again.