



ASSAM AND DARJEELING

T.M. CAMP

ASSAM &
DARJEELING

A NOVEL
BY

T.M. CAMP

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This book is a work of fiction. All situations, events, and characters are products of the author's imagination. It's quite possible that the Underworld and its inhabitants, however, are not. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental — especially if any of them want to sue me.

The poem "Kore" on page 130 was written by Keeley Geary
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Violators will incite the fury of the seas to rise up against the nations of the earth,
wiping away innocent and villain alike. Don't say we didn't warn you.

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Pass it on.

DEDICATION

To Sam and Julia:
I couldn't have done it without you.

And also to Keeley:
For taking a chance on an old man.

BOOK ONE

EXILES

CHAPTER ONE

It was a terrible morning.

"Hurryupwe' rerunninglate..." Their mother snapped on the lights, roaring through their rooms like a whirlwind. She was all rushing words and short temper whenever her son and daughter groaned or paused for a moment to knuckle the grit from their eyes.

Sitting on the floor of his room, trying to pull his jeans on over his shoes, the boy felt a wave of frustration throb through the house. He closed his eyes, head cocked to one side, listening...

An argument.

He didn't give it a second thought, didn't think it strange that he could hear his parents even though they were all the way over on the other side of the house, even though they weren't actually saying anything out loud.

He was used to listening in, eavesdropping on people. He had a gift for it, picking up on little scraps of thought and feeling like he was doing now. His parents' frustration with the morning and each other threw off little sparks that smoldered throughout the house. He sighed and went back to struggling with his jeans.

In her room across the hall, his little sister was already dressed even though the last thing she wanted to do was go to school. Standing at her window, she looked out at the dark sky filled with falling snow. It had been winter for weeks. There was snow on Halloween and by the end of the night everyone ended up miserable — going home early in their soggy costumes with their bags only half full. And with two feet of snow on the ground at Thanksgiving, it was too cold outside to play. A whole holiday, wasted. And now, not even Christmas yet, the snow was coming down every day, sweeping across their house on icy, bitter winds.

Downstairs, the front door slammed — their father heading out to dig out the cars and shovel the driveway. He was angry. Up in his room, the boy could feel it, could feel his dad out there: A bright blur of frustration glowing red in the bitter cold.

The boy sighed again and went to go brush his teeth.

A minor scuffle in the bathroom, he and his sister quarreling over who got to use the toothpaste first. "You didn't brush long enough," he said to her.

She wiped her chin on his towel. "You have toothpaste on your nose."

"I do not."

She shoved past him. Her feet sounded on the stairs, irritation trailing after her like the train of a gown. After she was gone, he checked his nose in the mirror before following her down the stairs.

In the kitchen, they discovered that the cereal boxes were nearly empty. There was only enough left to fill one bowl with the sugary kind and one bowl with the boring bran flakes that their parents sometimes ate.

The girl stared at the two bowls. "We should mix them together, that way we both can have some of each."

"Uh huh." Her brother poured milk into each of the bowls and took them over to the table. He set the sugary one down at his chair. The other went in front of hers.

"Hey!"

"Not today guys, okay?" Their mother sighed as she came into the kitchen. She glanced at the clock, put the kettle on, and set a chewable vitamin on the table next to each of them: Purple for the boy, pink for the girl.

"I want the purple one," the girl said as her brother reached for his.

"They taste the same."

"Guys..." their mother said, sharper this time. She gave up on the kettle. The water was taking too long to boil. She would have to wait until she got to work before she had her tea. She was not happy about this.

"They do not taste the same," the girl whispered.

"Yes they do." He was right. The vitamins, regardless of color, all tasted terrible, like sour chalk. But that wasn't the point. "Besides, I can't have the pink one. I'm not a girl." And with that, he picked up his vitamin and made a show of popping it in his mouth, chewing slowly.

His sister threw hers, bouncing it off his forehead.

"Mom!"

"Enough." Their mother slapped her hand on the counter, hard.

The kitchen was quiet for a few moments. No one looked at anyone.

The front door opened and closed. They heard their father stamping the snow from his shoes. "Cold out there." He picked up his briefcase from the counter. "Alright, I'll see you guys later tonight."

Their mother was at the sink, running tapwater over a teabag in a cup, willing it warm. "Don't forget that you're picking up the kids this evening," she said over her shoulder.

The boy heard his father grind his teeth. "I have a meeting."

"Well, so do I." She turned back to the sink and dumped the cup out. She did not turn around.

"Fine." He stopped his breath, as though he had more to say. He touched each one of his children lightly on the crown of their head.

A moment later the front door closed.

At the counter, their mother shook her head. "Come on." She turned around. "We're going to be late."

The kids stood up and carried their dishes to the sink. The boy began rinsing them out but his mother stopped him. "Don't worry about that now," she told him. "Coats and jackets."

In the front hall, the boy and girl gathered up their backpacks and struggled into their thick winter coats.

"Help your sister," their mother called from the kitchen.

The boy jerked his little sister's sleeves up a little too hard, wrenching her arm. "Ow..."

Their mother came into the hallway putting on her coat and scarf. "Please. Just stop." She did not shout at them. She did not need to.

Before they could say anything or apologize, they heard a stomping on the front steps. Their father came back in. There was snow in his hair.

"What's wrong?" Their mother's voice still held a faint echo of irritation.

He set his briefcase down on the floor and slid his arms around her. "I'm sorry," he said as he closed his eyes, resting his cheek on her shoulder.

Hands full of briefcase and lunch boxes, she squeezed him back as best she could.

The boy went over and wrapped his arms around them, one arm for each waist.

His sister crowded in as well and the family all stood there for a moment, clinging to each other.

Their father raised his head and kissed his wife. "I love you."

"Your nose is cold," she said to him. "I love you, too."

He smiled.

"I love you, too." The girl clutched his leg, looking up at him.

Her brother squeezed them all as tightly as he could, as though he could squeeze closed the jagged fissures that the morning had opened up between the four of them. Their father tousled the boy's hair, gave his wife one more kiss, and left for work.

Locking the door behind them, their mother hustled them along the icy front walk to the car. Seatbelts and straps, everyone safely in place.

The car was cold and the kids watched their breath plume in the dark while their mother waited for things to warm up.

Then, skidding slightly, she backed out of the driveway and headed out of their neighborhood towards school.

"Hey." In the back seat, the boy held out his fist.

His sister put out her hand and he placed something small into her palm. It was a purple vitamin. She slipped it into her pocket.

Together they rode on, watching the snow slip by the darkened window.

CHAPTER TWO

Their mother listened to the news on the radio as they slowly made their way through the icy streets. She had to be careful. Other cars slid and tapped each other at stoplights — so gentle, the drivers didn't even bother to get out and exchange information. They just waved sheepishly at each other before moving on.

Stopped at a light, the boy watched a work crew try to tame a downed power line. The pole it hung from was bent over a car that looked like something bred from a tank and a limousine. A woman stood on the sidewalk, her immaculate hair turning into a mop under the heavy snowfall. She was speaking with a police officer and talking into her cell phone at the same time, ignoring the deadly, spitting dragon that she had carelessly set free nearby. She buzzed in the boy's mind, the impatience shooting out of her in bright blue arcs. The men were all pale caution and orange coveralls. The policeman pulsed red and angry, ready to burst.

The light changed and they drove on. Their mother groaned as their pulled up to yet another intersection clogged with cars. "Wonderful," she muttered. "Just wonderful."

From the backseat, her daughter cheerfully echoed: "Wonderful, just wonderful."

"Please don't," her mother said. The car lurched forward. Red lights flashed up ahead, the strobing pulse of brakes as the other cars moved slowly forward and then stopped again. Forward, stop . . . again. The stoplight wasn't working. It dangled low in the center of the intersection, flashing red over the long row of cars inching along beneath, desperate to get through. Their mother turned the radio up.

The boy looked out his window. In the seat next to him, his sister stared forward, watching the snow gather heavily on the windshield. The wipers groaned as they swept it away.

Their mother hunched over the wheel, peering through the falling snow. She reached forward and turned a knob on the dashboard. The heater whined louder than before. She turned the radio up again.

"That's our school," the girl said.

"What honey?" Her mother tilted her chin back towards the rear of the car, keeping her eyes on the road.

"They just said the name of our school on the radio," the girl told her.

Her brother turned to look at her and then back to his mother. The voice on the radio was reciting names, school closings due to the weather. The man reading the list reached the end and started through it again.

"Are you sure?" Their mother squinted, focusing on the methodical drone of the list. There. They said it again. Their school was on the list. Their mother blew air heavily out of her mouth.

They came around a bend in the road and headed towards a low rise ahead. Their mother sped up slightly. The boy spoke up from the back seat, "Is our school closed?"

"I guess it is, sweetie."

"Are we going to your work, mom?" the girl asked, hopeful. It was much better than school. Their mother worked in an office. Sometimes, on weekends, they would go in with her and play on the computers.

Her mother didn't answer. She was holding the wheel very tightly, tapping the brakes as they drove down the hill. "Are your seatbelts on?" Her voice, tight and sharp.

Brother and sister looked down at their laps and then back to her. "Yes."

Their mother pumped the brakes harder, a dull sound beneath her foot. The car did not slow. If anything, it began to pick up speed. The boy leaned forward into the gap between the seats to look out the front. There was a stoplight at the bottom of the hill. He saw it change from green to amber.

"Sit back right now," his mother told him.

"What's wrong?"

"Just sit back," she said again. "You too, honey."

The car continued to slide, the thumping of the brakes grew louder as they picked up speed. The boy risked another quick look between the seats. They were halfway down the hill. The light was red now. Cars were starting to cross the intersection ahead of them.

"Oh god..." their mother whispered, pumping the brakes frantically, her body bucking in the seat. The car gently spun, drifting to one side as it began to slide at an angle.

"Are we going to crash?" the girl asked.

"Just hold on." Their mother was crying now, the boy could hear it in her voice. Her fear and panic filled the car and seeped into his mind. He grabbed his sister's hand.

"Why can't we stop?" the girl asked. Her mother didn't answer. The wheel turned under her hands, but the car wouldn't obey. "Mom?"

"Be quiet," her brother said. He was staring forward and his face was very pale. They were sliding completely sideways now, the back end of the car edging around ahead of the front.

We're spinning, the girl thought as the snow swept by the window, *like slow motion.*

Their mother's hands moved on the wheel, useless. She turned her head to look out the side window, towards the intersection they were sliding into. She pressed the horn and it whined a feeble pulse under her palm.

The girl was crying, clutching her brother's hands in hers.

As they spun towards the cars inching through the intersection, their mother gave a strangled cry and thrust one hand back between the seats, reaching for her children.

And then it was all cars and headlights around them, the blare of horns and screeching tires and the awful, inevitable shriek of metal against metal. The car filled with light, the blaring howl of another horn. They lurched and shuddered and bounced, like a stone across a frozen pond. And then they were rolling, over and over — the inside of the car a jumble of bookbags and briefcases, papers scattering everywhere, the air around them full of snow laced with glittering jewels of glass.

Finally, they slammed to a stop.

The boy heard a babble of voices nearby. Car doors slammed, feet running towards them . . . and then nothing but darkness, darkness and the gentle sound of falling snow.

CHAPTER THREE

The girl woke with something over her face, thick and dry and warm. She couldn't open her eyes. She tried to brush it away, but her hands could not move. It was as if she had been bundled up in layer after layer of heavy blankets. She tried to move, tried to sit up, but the blankets — if that's what they were — settled heavier than before, pressing her down. She turned her head, felt the heaviness wrap around her face like a warm afternoon nap. She moaned, the heaviness seeping in to fill her mouth and wrap around her tongue.

That was what did it, the thick feeling sliding down her throat, the horror of it. She tore at it with her teeth, like biting a wool sweater, tasteless. She fought back against the weight on her, shoving her hands up to try and throw it to one side. Insistent, it pressed her back down.

She kept pushing, tearing at the thick weight of it with her hands, throwing it off in ropy strands. Once her hands were free, she tore at her face, peeling off band after band of pale shadow and scraping it out of her mouth. She freed her shoulders, then her waist, and sat up.

Heavy braids of pale gauze lay over her legs, binding them together. She pushed against the coils, feeling them tighten. She kicked at the ropy shadows and stood up, shaking them off. They writhed on the ground all around her, withering away into nothing.

She took a breath, finally free, and looked around. She was standing by the side of a road. The world was cast in a flat, gray light. Everything looked strange and pale, leached of color and of life. She heard a groan and turned to see a long bundle of those snakish, shadowy bands writhing on the ground nearby. She stepped back out of their reach before realizing that they were already busy smothering

someone else in their draping coils. From the outside she watched, fascinated. It was like something on a nature show.

Then the bundle groaned once more. The voice familiar, she realized who was trapped inside. The girl ran and tore at the bands, clawing them away from her brother's face and throat. His eyes were closed and he wasn't breathing. A thin trickle of the shadowy stuff dangled from the corner of his mouth. She pried his jaws apart. His mouth was filled with a wad of shadows, all coiled up inside like a snake. She dug into it with her fingers and pulled, drawing it up and out of him with a shudder. He gagged and choked as she tugged it free. It was the consistency of raw bread dough. Disgusted, she balled it up and tossed it as far away as she could.

She knelt down and touched her brother's face lightly with her fingertips. His eyelids fluttered but he didn't move. She peeled back more of the shadows until he was free to his waist and unzipped his coat. She dug her fingers into his side, clutching at a fold of skin and twisting as hard as she could. It was a common enough torment, one of her specialties as a younger sister, and he had suffered from it often.

He sat up with a gasp. "That hurts," he said, rubbing his side.

"Get over it." She helped him strip off the rest of the pale shadows wrapped around his hips and legs.

Once he was free, he stood up. "Where are we?"

Everything around them, everything they could see – the skeletal winter trees, the snow banks piled along the street, the flat pale sky overhead – it was all cast in sharp contrast, leached of color like an old movie. Everything was still. Nothing moved. There was no sound but their own breathing.

"Look..." The boy pointed to the opposite side of the road where a blunt, twisted chunk of metal roughly the size and shape of their mother's car sat like something that had been chewed on and then spat out. Next to it, the girl saw a familiar mass of shadowy bands writhing and contracting around something.

"Mom!" She started to run across but her brother grabbed her arm, holding her back.

"Watch out." He pointed to the roadway in front of them.

"What?" She pulled her arms free. The street was empty.

He pointed again, swept his fingertip across her line of vision. "Can't you see them?"

"See what?"

He raised his hand again, tracing a path in the air from the top of the hill down and past where they were standing.

"Whatever." The girl tried to run across again.

"Wait," he said, hand in mid-air. "Keep your eye on my finger." He moved his hand to trace a line down the hill, pointing at something that wasn't there.

She started to argue and then she saw it: A blur of light, red and blue like a bruise in the air. It passed by and swept on toward the bend, vanishing around the corner.

He pointed back to the top of the hill and waved his hand down, again and again.

She could see them now – blurry movement, trailing streams of light along in their wake as they passed. "What are they?"

"I'm not sure. I think they're cars." More swept past in a clump of color and light.

"What's wrong with them?"

"I don't think there's anything wrong with them," he said, shaking his head. "I think it's us."

"How do we get across? We have to help her."

"Who?"

"Mom." The girl pointed to the writhing mass on the other side of the road. "She needs us."

Her brother stared at her blankly and she gave up. Grabbing his hand, she cried "Now!" and ran. Halfway across, she looked up and saw something bearing down on them, all light and color. She froze and for a moment she thought that it would crush them, smear them across the air. But her brother dragged her out of the way and they tumbled down at the other side of the road. She heard the blare of a horn, dim and far off.

She got up quickly and ran to the huddled mass of shadows. Her brother knelt down next to her and watched as she tore at the thick bands, pulling and clawing at them. "Help me," she said to him. "Help her."

He looked at her confused. He didn't understand, hadn't seen what she had seen. He watched his sister tear at the shadows, pulling strips away and throwing them aside.

"Hurry, hurry..." she said.

He dug in with his hands, unsure of what they were trying to do. Following her example, he grasped and pulled something loose. He gasped at the sight of his mother's face there in front of him. Her eyes were closed and, as he watched, a thick ribbon of shadow slithered across her cheek and covered her once more. They both tore at the shadows now, calling to her. And then, the bundle collapsed like a balloon with all the air let out. They scraped and tore, but the shadowy bands fluttered and melted under their hands. There was nothing left beneath.

The boy sat back, watching the shadows flicker and fade as they crawled away. His sister grasped at them, as though she could force them back into shape. But they melted away under her hands. She beat at the ground with her fists, sobbing with frustration and failure.

Her brother reached out for her hands and held them. She pushed him away. He put his forehead against hers and said her name. "She's gone."

He held her while she wept, while the blur of traffic drifted by in a stream of muted light and color past the twisted lump of dead metal that had once been their mother's car.

CHAPTER FOUR

By the side of the road, the girl looked up at her brother. "What's happening to us?"

He held out his hands, palms up. The snow was falling again, a white blur of static filling the air around them. He showed her his hands. They were empty.

She held her hand up, like he had done. The snow fell, passing through her palm like she wasn't even there.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

She wasn't, not at all. But she should have been, just like she should have been able to fill her hand with snow. She rose and walked over to the twisted hunk of metal that had been their mother's car. One black tire still had some air in it. She kicked at it. The toe of her snowboot passed through without any contact.

"Look..." Her brother pointed to the ground at their feet. The thick snow around them was untouched, smooth and white.

She pressed the sole of her boot down experimentally and then lifted it, leaving nothing behind. Not

even a footprint. She looked at her brother and he shrugged. "Are we dead?" she asked him. "Are we ghosts?"

He looked at the car, or what was left of it. You didn't just walk away from a twisted, ruined hunk of metal like that. "I don't know," he said. "I don't think so." He stood for a moment with his eyes closed, his head cocked to one side. His hands drifted out from his sides, his fingertips tracing little patterns in the air.

His sister stared at him. "What are you doing?"

He shook his head and did not open his eyes. He could feel it there, somewhere far off . . . he could feel his body. It shone in the darkness, a warm beacon gently pulling at him, drawing him back. "No," he said at last. "We're not dead and we're not ghosts. Not yet." He opened his eyes and looked at her. "Can you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"Your body, can you feel it out there? Can you feel yourself?"

She shook her head.

"Close your eyes," he told her. "Try."

She rolled her eyes before she closed them. "This is stupid. Okay, so now what do I..?" Her voice trailed off, her brow wrinkled. She opened her eyes. "I can feel it. Somewhere else, in a . . . in a bed, I think. Somewhere."

Her brother nodded. "Come on."

Hand in hand, they started up the road. They spoke very little. The boy concentrated on where they were going. He could feel himself, his body, warm and bright out there, ringing like a bell.

In the summertime, he and his sister would sit on the front porch with a dollar bill to split between them, waiting for the ice cream truck.

"Is that it?" she'd ask her brother, staring up the empty street. In the still, thick afternoon air, every sound was muffled and absorbed.

"Wind chimes," he'd say or "Nope, just birds," and they'd go back to waiting again, straining their ears.

Finally, the song would rise and the squat white truck would turn the corner, wandering slowly up their street as it wheezed out a never-ending "Pop Goes the Weasel."

Walking through the snow along the side of the road, a line from something drifted through his head, a poem he'd read at school: *And I ran the slope of my high hill to follow a thread of song.* He was grasping at a thread, like that ice cream truck tune — only more elusive, humming faintly on the outskirts of his mind. However hard it was to follow, it gave him some comfort — that little scrap of song, the faint echo of their lives. It meant they were still alive.

His own song was strongest, easiest to hear. And he could catch snatches of his sister as well. But their mother, her song faded and faltered. He put the thought out of his mind. If he started crying, he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop. The sadness would overtake him and drown out everything else. And he had his sister to take care of.

Walking next to him, she let herself be led. She couldn't hear what he could hear, but she knew better than to pester him. She'd known him long enough — her whole life, actually — and she knew that sometimes he could pick up on things other people couldn't. He was good at finding lost things.

She turned her attention to the washed out world around them. There were still little smears of color here and there, but they flickered and faded like photographs left out in the rain. She could see the blur of cars moving on the road. And sometimes there were smaller blurs they passed (or that passed them) with odd smears of pink and brown trailing along behind. She took these to be other people — children

coming home from school, people walking their dogs, men and women jogging along the side of the road. Nothing touched them, no one noticed them.

The girl turned to her brother. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know."

"Shouldn't we..?" She faltered. "Are we going home?"

He considered a moment, closing his eyes to get his bearings. "No."

"Then where are we going?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what about Dad?"

He opened his eyes. "He's there. He's waiting for us."

She let him take her hand and, together, they started walking once more.

INTERLUDE

He'd been in a meeting, sipping coffee around a table with a group of people when the call came.

The receptionist came into the room. "I'm sorry. You have a phone call."

He asked who it was.

"It's the police," she said.

He laughed . . . then stopped when he saw her strained, serious face. "Really?" The coffee cup froze halfway to his lips.

She nodded.

The cup rattled against the tabletop as he set it down.

Back at his desk, he punched a flashing red light on his phone.

Moments later, he was walking briskly through the maze of cubicles, his car keys clutched very tightly in his hand. He stopped at the front desk, spoke a few words to the receptionist.

She reached out and squeezed his hand.

He nodded and left.

Back in the conference room, the meeting went on without him. His notepad and pen lay on the table in front of his vacant seat, next to where his coffee was slowly going cold and sour.

CHAPTER FIVE

The girl stood in front of the sign, trying to sound out the letters. After a moment or two, she gave up. "What's it say? Where are we?"

An ambulance raced by, wailing the answer to her question. She looked at her brother. "Okay . . . so where do we go now?"

Looking genuinely frightened for the first time that day, he said "We go in."

Inside, the hospital was a maze of hallways and rooms swarming with activity, the people no more than streaks and blurs in the air around them. The boy moved among them, unseen, with his little sister following close behind. He walked with his head cocked, eyes half-closed, listening. Eventually they found their way to a small room and went in. The girl looked around critically at the uncomfortable looking chairs, the stacks of old magazines, the television muttering to itself in the corner. "Now what?"

Her brother shushed her, finger to his lips. They weren't alone in the room. A tall, pale figure wandered slowly around the floor, little more than a blur.

"What is that?"

Her brother watched it intently for a few moments, then he closed his eyes. "Listen."

"I can't hear anything."

"That's because you're not listening," he told her. "Can't you see him?"

"Who?"

He opened his eyes. There were tears there. "It's Dad."

She stared hard at the blurry shape pacing the floor, looking for something, anything familiar that she could recognize — his father's eyes, his dark hair speckled with silver and gray, his smile...

Nothing. Just another blur in the air.

The television let out a squawk of horrible electronic music, shifting to a new program, all applause and laughter.

The blurry figure groaned at the sound.

She knew him then. Faint as the voice was, it was her father's. He slumped into one of the chairs. A low sound filled the air in the room. This was her father, her daddy, sitting with his face in his hands. She couldn't see him clearly, but she knew him. He threw his head back and stared at the ceiling, his mouth moving soundlessly. She went to her brother and pulled at his hand. He was crying. "What's he saying?"

"He's praying," he told her. "He's praying for mom and for us."

"Daddy?" She sat down next to him, tried to lay her hand on his arm. The figure did not move, did not react.

"Can he see us?"

"I don't think so."

She leaned in close. "Daddy? We're right here. We're okay."

The blurry form of their father gave no sign that he had heard.

"Why can't he hear me?"

Her brother sat down next to her. "I don't know."

Together, they watched the pale form of their father pray and weep over them. After a long while, their father rose as someone else came in to the room: Another blurred figure, wrapped in a wide band of soft white. The girl guessed that it was a doctor, the white coat.

"It's the doctor," her brother whispered to her.

She nodded, impatient. The two figures stood — one murmuring quietly, the other hanging his head. "What's he saying?"

"There was an accident, a bad one..." He trailed off.

"Okay, I know that part already."

The boy shook his head, listening. "I don't know. I can't tell for sure what he's saying."

The girl gasped. "Was that my name?" She clutched at her brother's arm. "Did the doctor just say my name?"

"Yes, yes he did. Now be quiet and let me listen." He cocked his head to one side, staring at the wall above the television, trying to make some sense out of the murmuring pale sounds from the doctor. "He says you're a fighter."

She nodded. She knew this already. Letters about it came home from school every few weeks.

Their father blurted out a stream of mumbled nonsense.

"What'd he say?" she asked. "What are they talking about?"

"They're talking about..." Her brother waited, listening. "They're talking about mom."

After a while, the room fell silent. The doctor stood, waiting and worthless while their father hung his head.

"Is he..?" The girl stopped and swallowed. "Is he crying?"

Her brother nodded.

"Why?"

He closed his eyes and dropped his head — an unconscious imitation, a reflection of his father's grief. "It's mom." His voice was low. She could barely hear him. "She's in a coma."

"What's that mean?"

"She's . . . asleep. She's been hurt very bad and . . . and now she won't wake up, she can't wake up."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," he said. "They don't know. They have to wait."

"For what?"

"To see if she can wake up on her own."

His sister did not say how stupid she thought that was — at least, she did not say it out loud. "What's he saying now?"

"He's saying it's . . . it's too soon to tell."

"What does that mean?"

He looked at her. "It means exactly what you think it means."

Their father raised his head, his voice strong — or, at least, stronger than before.

"He wants to see us," her brother translated.

"I know," the girl said. "I heard him that time."

The doctor led their father out of the waiting room.

His son and daughter followed.

CHAPTER SIX

It was the machines, her brother told her, the machines were keeping their mother alive.

There were tubes and wires, computers on silver carts, screens swimming with numbers and charts in green and red and blue. It would have been beautiful, if it hadn't been so horrible to see their mother there, laying on a long white bed in the center of it all. The tubes connected her to the machines, the wires connected the machines to the computers. The doctors and nurses watched the computers. No

one looked at their mother, no one but her children. Even when the nurses touched her, their fingers around her wrist, they only looked at their watches, never her face.

The boy and his sister could look at nothing else. Her pale and sad face, covered with small cuts and gashes. Some of them, the larger ones, were sewn up with dark, coarse thread. There was a large scrape across her cheek and an ugly purple-black bruise bloomed on her forehead like a flower. Her eyes were closed and her mouth hung open, a small tube snaking out. The boy could see that three of her teeth were broken.

He could see her face, he realized. Unblurred and distinct. She was so far gone that he could see her face. He tried not to panic at the thought, at what it meant.

His father stood next to the bed, reaching out to touch that battered face. And then he wept. After a moment or two, the doctor laid his hand on their father's shoulder and, murmuring, led him out of the room.

The girl turned to follow them, but her brother held her back. "Wait." He went over to the bedside and placed his hand on the blanket, over the place where his mother's heart still beat weakly within. He touched her forehead and closed his eyes, listening.

After a long moment, he stepped back and looked at his sister crying next to him. "She's alive," he told her.

"How do you know?"

"Apart from the machines, you mean?"

She didn't smile.

"I can feel her," he said, earnestly. He touched his forehead with the tips of his fingers. "Here. I can feel her here."

"Where is she?"

He closed his eyes, as though trying to remember something long forgotten. "Far away, she's moving further away . . . but I can still hear her."

"What's she saying?"

He shook his head. "Not like that, but she's there."

"Where?" The girl looked at their mother. The black stitches looked like centipedes crawling over her face. She resisted the urge to brush them away. "Where is she?"

"I don't know."

The girl ran her hand lightly along the coarse hospital blanket. "Is she coming back?"

Her brother didn't answer right away. "I don't think so,"

The girl bent down and kissed her mother's cheek, the skin dry and slightly hot.

"Come on," she said to him as she went to the door.

"Where are you going?"

She looked back at him. "I'm going to go bring her back."

"But we don't know where she is."

"We'll find her."

"How?"

She came back and stood in front of him, reaching up to tap his forehead with the tip of her finger.

He blinked.

"Are you coming?"

He thought for a moment, closed his eyes and listened. He nodded. "There's something we ought to do first," he said, opening his eyes.

There were two beds in the next room, two matching sets of tubes and wires and computers. Their bodies lay arranged and displayed like science experiments. One of the girl's eyes was covered with a patch of gauze seeping pink. An iron crown circled her brow, held in place with metal rods. There was a tube sticking out of her throat and it wheezed slightly. The boy's face, like his mother's, was crisscrossed with cuts and scrapes. One leg hung in a brace, suspended on wires.

Their father sat on a chair between the beds with his face in his hands.

The girl took a step towards the bed where her body lay, but her brother drew her back.

"Don't," he said. "You might not be able to get back out again."

"Back out of what?"

"Your body," he said.

"Why are you whispering?"

Their father raised his head and, for a moment, she thought that he had heard her. He had never looked so sad, the girl thought. He sat for a long moment, looking back and forth between the faces of his two broken children. He reached out to his daughter and took her limp, lifeless hand in his. On the other side of the room, the girl felt a tingle in her fingers and stepped forward.

"It's okay," she said to her brother. She went to the bed where her body lay, barely believing that this twisted, broken thing was herself. She put out her hand, lightly touching her shoulder with her fingertips. It was like dipping her hand into warm water, welcoming and inviting. "You'll have to pull me back out," she said over her shoulder, "if I get stuck."

Her brother nodded.

She slid her hand in deeper, into the arm, following the paths of bone and muscle down to her hand. She slid her fingers into her own — a perfect fit, a comfortable glove. She could feel her father's hand, his warmth and love. She squeezed, briefly wrapping her fingers around his.

He stood up, knocking the chair over, shouting at the open door. He clung to her hand and, caught inside herself, she could not pull away. The room was a blur of nurses and doctors, moving rapidly from the computer screens to her body. Her father held onto her hand, tugging at her arm as if to draw her out of the dark water she slumbered in.

Her brother said her name, loud, cutting through the noise in the room. She looked back at him, then back down to her own face. Reluctantly, she let go of her father, let go of herself, drawing her hand back out. The girl watched her pale hand go limp in her father's, watched the hope in his face crumble away as he felt her go.

For his part, the boy was in torment. He could hear his broken and battered body calling out, begging him to come back, to come home — like his father, standing on the porch at dinner time, his voice ringing out to find his son playing in a neighbor's yard, drawing him back home again where he belonged. In the murmuring noise of the room, the call of his own body and that of his father's sorrow was almost irresistible. Almost.

At his side, his sister — ever the fighter — clutched his hand. "What are you doing?"

He looked at his father, standing out of the way of the blur of doctors and nurses, letting them do their work. The boy moved forward, one arm still tethered to his sister.

"He needs us," he told her. "He wants us back."

She pulled at him, hard. "She needs us."

After a long moment, her brother stepped back. "I know. But he's so alone. He's so sad."

"I can't find her by myself," she said to him. "I need your help."
Together, hand in hand, they went to the open door. The boy looked back.
"I love you Daddy," he whispered. He hadn't called his father "daddy" in years.
Gently, his sister led him out into the hall.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They stood together in the hallway for a moment, trying to come to terms with everything they had seen.

"What now?" the girl asked her brother.

He shrugged. "I don't know. But let's get out of here."

They walked unseen through the halls.

"So where are we going?" the girl asked.

"I don't know. To find mom."

"Where is she?"

"I have no idea."

"You said you knew where she was."

He shook his head. "No, I said I could hear her. Not the same thing. Right now I'm just trying to get out of here."

He felt overwhelmed by the noise around them. The hospital was a riot of sound and activity. People strode quickly from room to room, leaving streaks and blurs in the air. Phones rang and computers chirped. Nearly every room they passed had a television set tuned to either a gameshow, soap opera, or the news. He could hear people talking in low voices, people coughing and moaning. Many were crying.

His sister pointed out a series of signs that showed the best way to escape in case of an emergency. But neither of them could make heads or tails of the arrows and diagrams that marked the path to safety. "We could set off the fire alarm," she suggested. "Then we could just follow everyone out."

Her brother inspected a small red box on a nearby wall. There was a lever behind a pane of glass, a small metal hammer hanging from a tiny chain.

"It says 'In Case of Emergency, Break Glass'," he told her.

"Go for it." She had always wanted to set off a fire alarm, just to see what would happen.

"But this isn't really an emergency, is it?"

"Not really, I guess."

"Yeah, well, we'd better not. We might get into trouble."

"You mean more trouble than this? Who's going to catch us?"

She had a point. He took up the little hammer next to the red box and tapped it experimentally against the glass.

His sister looked around, just in case. "Wait."

He stopped.

She nodded to a boy standing in a doorway nearby, watching them. The boy was about her age, maybe a little younger, and he wore blue pajamas with green frogs on them. He was very skinny and the skin on his face was stretched and pale. His eyes were sunken in slightly and ringed with dark circles. His face was clear, unblurred. They could, they realized, see him.

And he could see them. He smiled at them shyly, running his hand nervously over his shaved head.

"Hi," the girl said.

"Hi," the little boy replied.

"You can see us."

The boy nodded.

"What your name?" her brother asked.

The boy started to answer but stopped, glancing back into the room behind him. The girl peeked over his shoulder. Inside, she saw the silhouette of a man and a woman holding each other. She could hear them crying.

"James." The boy had a far away look in his eyes, his voice dreamy and soft. He held something in his hands, turning it over and over with his fingers.

"What do you have?"

The little boy held up his hand. There was a coin, about the size of a silver dollar, resting in his palm. It was dull gold and it shone like the sun behind the clouds.

"Where did you get that?" Her brother collected coins and had a couple of books full of them at home.

The boy stared down at the coin and whispered "Can you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

He didn't answer. His eyes were clouding over, his face grew dreamy.

The girl looked at her brother and raised her eyebrows. He shrugged.

The boy didn't notice. He was whispering again, passing the coin from hand to hand. His eyelids fluttered and he frowned. "I was asleep . . . I was sleeping and I could hear something . . . a sound, a rushing noise, like waves, like water . . . from far away . . . rain or thunder . . . louder and louder . . . coming closer . . . and I sat up in bed . . . my parents were there, talking to me but they couldn't see me . . . and when I looked back, I was still there, still in bed . . . and they were crying, I looked so small, so sick . . . but then I heard it again, louder now, and I came out here to see what it was . . . can you hear it, it's so loud?"

The girl shook her head. "I don't hear anything."

"Where'd you get that?" Her brother pointed to the coin.

"I don't know."

"Can I see it?" He put out his hand.

The little boy pulled away suddenly, frightened and wary. "It's mine. I need it."

"What for?" the girl asked.

Her brother put his hand on her shoulder as though to hold her back. "It's all right, James," he said. "Don't worry about it. Tell us some more about what you heard."

The boy got that drift, faraway look in his eyes again. "It's close, so close, can't you hear it? Like rain, like water rushing?"

"No," the girl said. "I can't." She looked up at her brother and rolled her eyes. "Come on."

He shook his head. "We can't hear it," he told the boy. "Will you show us where it's coming from?"

The boy nodded. He turned and walked away down the hall without so much as a glance back to where his parents wept in the room behind him.

The two children, brother and sister, followed.

"Why," she asked quietly, "are we following this space cadet?"

"He's not a space cadet. He's a ghost."

She looked at him skeptically. "He is not."

He nodded.

"How do you know he's not just some mental case wandering around?"

The boy looked at her pointedly. "Well, first of all, he can see us."

She considered this. "Fine. And?"

"Second . . . we can see him. He's not some random smudge of clothes and face."

"You think he knows where he's going?"

"I have a feeling he does, yeah. But I'm not sure if he knows where we're going."

"Where *are* we going?"

He shrugged. "I'll let you know when we get there."

They went on in silence, following the whispering boy through the maze of hallways. Along the way, others joined them. For the most part, they wore hospital gowns and pajamas. One or two were naked but, somehow, this was not embarrassing or strange. Most of them were adults, but there were quite a few children as well. All of them had gold coins like the one James had shown them. And they all muttered like the gentle whisper of waves lapping against the shore.

One woman passed by them holding a tiny baby close to her, a long twisted braid of dark rope hung from the baby's belly and trailed behind them. Tiny hands clutched a golden coin to its small, toothless mouth.

"Are they all dead?" the girl whispered to her brother.

"I think so."

Eventually, they made their way into a stairwell, following the ghosts as they wandered down in the dim light. At each level, there was a door with a large number painted on it. The girl counted down as they passed the floors one by one. After the number 2, the next door was marked G. The one after that was B. After that, there were no more doors. The ghosts went on downward, their whispers echoing off the concrete walls.

"Are we still in the hospital?" the girl asked her brother. It certainly didn't look like the hospital anymore. Hospitals were clean, with tile floors and white walls — not graffiti painted and rusty water dripping from the ceiling tiles.

"I don't think so," her brother said. "I really don't think so."

She nodded and they went on, following the whispers down the stairs. "Excuse me," the girl tapped the shoulder of one of the ghosts in front of her. "Where are you all going?"

"To the river, down to the river." He was a young man with a pleasant, dreamy face and he kept glancing at his wrist to check a watch that was no longer there.

She looked back up the stairwell. "Then shouldn't we go outside?"

The man merely smiled again, glanced at his wrist, and kept moving.

Her brother looked at her. "Don't bother them."

"I'm not bothering anybody," she said. "I'm just asking."

"Well don't. They've got enough on their minds."

At the bottom, they came to a long narrow hallway. At the end of the hallway was a dark wooden

door though which the ghosts passed, one by one. It banged shut, leaving the boy and his sister alone. They approached the door slowly. A scrap of cardboard hung from a rusty nail. Someone had written on the cardboard with green marker, but the cardboard had swelled from the dripping water, blurring the letters. The girl tried to read it but gave up, looking to her brother. "What's it say?"

He squinted at the sign, tracing one finger over each of the washed out ink: "Terminus."

"What's that mean?"

"I don't know."

She looked at him for a moment and then pulled open the narrow door, with a low bow. Her brother went forward and she followed him through.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They stood in the mud at the top of a steep hill. Below them, the ghosts gathered at the edge of a wide river, whispering. The muddy, sluggish water was barely moving at all.

The girl looked back to the door as it closed behind them. It stood alone, propped up against the air with nothing else around it. No wall. No building. Stretching away beyond the door was a vast expanse of featureless mud. The hospital was gone.

The sky overhead was cast in a dull yellow light and there was no sun. Trash lay strewn all around them and scattered down the face of the hill: Rotting cardboard boxes, broken bottles, and plastic bags. The skeletal, prehistoric remains of a rusting shopping cart poked out of the dark mud near the bottom of the hill, old newspapers fluttering between its teeth. The girl nudged an old radio with the toe of her boot, tipping it up and tumbling down the bank to the river where, with a muffled splash, it sank beneath the muddy waters.

"Knock it off," her brother said.

"Where are we?"

He ignored her, staring down to the river. "Listen."

It was quiet, but for the sound of the waters. The ghosts gathered in a group near an old pier of rotting, splintered wood. Silent, they watched the river. They did not even whisper anymore.

"What is it?" She didn't hear anything. Then a low sound, rang out in the silence: A bell, a chime, like the tolling of a grandfather clock. It fell away again, the echo fading. Then, the bell — the clock, whatever it was — tolled again. Below them the ghosts at the river's edge began to murmur once more.

"We should go," the boy said, turning to her and taking her arm. "We're not supposed to be here. Come on." He turned back to the door and stopped. There was no knob on this side.

His sister pulled her arm away. "Can't go back, I guess."

He put his fingers into the crack and pulled between the edge of the door and the wooden frame. The door didn't budge.

The bell tolled again.

The boy walked around the door and tried to push it open from the other side. His sister followed, watching him puff and grunt as his feet slid in the damp mud. She said his name once, quietly.

The bell tolled again.

"We're not going back," she told him. "We have to find Mom. We have to bring her back. She needs us."

He put his head against the rough wood of the door. "Dad needs us."

She did not kick him, though she wanted to. "He needs all of us, not just you and me." She was not crying, but only just. "We need to bring Mommy back."

He would not look at her. "She's so far away now, I can barely feel her anymore. I don't know if I can find her."

The bell tolled.

"We can find her," his sister said. "We have to."

The boy nodded, giving up on the door. They went back around to the other side. Down below, the ghosts milled about and murmured at the water's edge.

"Look," the girl raised her hand and pointed out over the river.

A boat was coming — not a boat, really . . . more of a canoe. Long and thin it came, cutting across the river towards the old pier. At the back of the boat stood a man dipping into the dark water with a long pole, pushing the boat forward.

"Come on," her brother said.

They slowly picked their way down the slippery mud to the bottom of the bank, where they stood and waited with all the ghosts. The boat rapped hollowly against the rotting wood of the dock as the boatman guided his craft in. He looped a length of rope over one of the posts and stepped out onto the rough wood planking. He was very tall and pale. He held a clipboard with a stack of papers pinned to it. Reaching into the pocket of his suit, he set a thin pair of wire spectacles on his nose.

He flipped a few of the pages on his clipboard, looked out at the crowd of passengers. He consulted his pages again, pushing his glasses back up on his nose with one finger. He gazed out over the crowd, blinking behind his smudged lenses, and nodded.

One by one, the line of ghosts moved forward. They each handed the boatman their golden coin, which he dropped into a small canvas sack. He made a notation on his clipboard for each ghost. The ghosts waited patiently for their turn as the boatman bobbed his head from passenger to clipboard to coin, snatching up and dropping the coins into his bag with a quick, birdlike movement. As each one paid, he politely stepped aside to allow the ghost to walk up the pier and take a seat on the boat.

The line inched forward, the boy and the girl lingering at the back. The girl was impatient, her brother could feel it. She sighed once, loudly, when the boatman paused to double check his clipboard. The boy put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed a warning. She sighed again, louder.

The boy watched the proceedings, his worry growing by the minute. A few years back his father had given him a book of stories from mythology, tales of heroes and gods and battles. He'd read the book over and over again for months, practically every night before bedtime — and sometimes after, when he was supposed to be asleep. There were stories of heroes who had undertaken epic quests. Sometimes they went to the Underworld. Watching the boatman take his fares, the boy began to understand what he was seeing and it made him worried.

They were near the front now, just one last ghost ahead of them. The last ghost paid and the boatman turned to let him pass. He turned back, his beaky nose just inches away from his clipboard.

"Excuse me?" The girl tugged on the edge of his sleeve.

The boatman looked up from his notes, did a double take. He glanced to the ghosts sitting patiently in the long boat, then back to the children, and then down to the clipboard. He riffled through the sheaf of papers, muttering to himself. He looked back up at the children and, without taking his eyes off of

them, took a large portable phone about the size of a brick from his coat pocket. He dialed a number and held the phone up to his ear. "Would you please connect me with Dispatch?"

The boy opened his mouth to say something, but the man raised one finger in the air to silence him. "Yes, who's this? Minnie, it's Charles. Yes, I'm collecting the six-seventeen right now but it looks like there's been a mixup . . . an overage . . . yes, again . . . I don't know, but the manifest says twenty-one but I've got extras." He listened for a moment, keeping his eyes on the children. "Only two, actually . . . well, I have the seats but . . . well, but that's not the point." He listened again, longer this time. "Fair enough," he said. "But you're the one who'll need to handle the paperwork. Can you shoot someone in Receiving a quick note and let them know what's going on? I'll file the revision before I punch out. Thank you kindly." He hung up the phone and stuffed it back into his pocket, muttering "You'd think they'd have gotten the hang of this by now." He turned back to the children and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

They stared back at him. "What?" the girl asked.

The man sighed. "Names?"

"Henry Beauregard," the boy said quickly — it was, of course, not his real name.

His sister turned to stare at him while the boatman scribbled something on his clipboard. He looked up at the girl, pen and eyebrows raised.

"Oh, uh . . . Henrietta Beauregard."

The boy groaned inwardly, watching with relief as the boatman scribbled another note without giving any sign that he'd noticed.

The boatman put his pen away and tucked the clipboard under his arm. He raised his eyebrows even higher.

"What?" the girl asked again.

The man raised his hand, palm up.

"What?" The girl wondered if she should give him a high-five.

He shook the canvas sack in his other hand, a dull clink of coins inside.

"Oh..." the girl said. "Uh . . . I lost mine. We both did." She looked at her brother for validation. "Didn't we, Henry?"

"That's right," he said. "We, uh, slipped in the mud up there and they..."

But the boatman already had his phone out again, dialing. "Dispatch, please." He stared at the children with considerable irritation. "Minnie? Charles again. Cancel the overage, we won't need the vouchers . . . yes, well, sorry about that. I'll straighten it out with them once I get back . . . no, I'll be leaving in a moment . . . yes, with the original twenty-one . . . no, no additions." This last bit was directed at the boy and his sister.

The boy interrupted. "But you have to let us come, we're..."

The man snapped his fingers, silencing the boy. "Minnie, hang on for a second." He took the phone away from his ear. "Do you, do either of you, have the obolus for the passage?"

"The what for the what?" the girl asked.

"Payment." The boatman clenched his teeth. "For the trip."

She shook her head. Her brother did the same.

The boatman pursed his lips. "You don't belong here, children," he told them, not unkindly.

"But we're looking for..." The boy choked on the words.

"We're looking for our mom," his sister finished for him.

The boatman closed his eyes, pushed his spectacles up on his forehead, and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "While I appreciate that," he said wearily, "the fact still

remains that you have no payment for your passage, and so I am forced to assume that you are not, in fact, dead."

"I'm dead," the girl said quickly. "I'm really dead, see?" She pinched her arm. "Can't even feel it."

"I have," the boatman said after a long moment, "been engaged in my current activity for over nine thousand years. I'm exceedingly good at it." He leaned forward until he was nearly nose to nose with her. "Do you really think you can fool me, missy?"

The girl backed up, shaking her head. She didn't much like being called "missy" but he had a point.

Her brother spoke up, defiant. "That doesn't matter. Sometimes it happens, sometimes people can go even when they're not dead."

The boatman straightened up, all eyebrows and irritation. "Indeed?"

The boy would not back down. "Yes. I've read the stories. I know how it works."

"Do you, now?" The boatman seemed irritated and amused at the same time. "And what stories would these be?"

"Orpheus."

"Yeah," his sister chimed in. "What about Orifice?"

Her brother elbowed her in the shoulder. She elbowed him back.

The boatman almost smiled. Almost. But he had been doing this far too long to be amused by the audacity of the living. "Yes, Master Beauregard," he said. "You are correct that others have passed this way, most notably young Orpheus. But he had some godblood in him, which helped things along more than a little bit. And he was respectful enough to pay for his passage, as you might recall."

"He sang a song," the boy answered. "He sang a song and made the boatman cry."

"Well," the man said archly. "Don't believe everything you read. But, yes, he did sing." He looked at the children, waiting. "Do either of you sing?"

The boy shook his head slowly. His sister piped up in his defense. "He's learning how to play 'Pop Goes the Weasel' on the piano."

The boatman seemed less than impressed. "Not exactly a tune to make the furies weep, now is it?"

"He's good," she countered. "He's been taking lessons."

The man leaned down. "And do you or your brother possibly have a piano concealed somewhere about your person so that I can bear witness to his virtuosity?"

While she didn't exactly understand all of the words he said, the girl got the gist of them well enough. She shook her head.

"Well then," the boatman straightened up. "This has been very nearly entertaining, but I can't help you. So run along."

The girl kicked him in the shins. Hard.

The man's face twisted and he grabbed his leg, rubbing it. He rose to his full height — which was very tall, indeed — casting a long shadow across her.

She stared back up at him, defiant.

After a long moment, he raised the phone and said "Minnie, are you still there?" He nodded. "Sorry about that, I'll be on my way shortly. Oh, and let someone in Marketing know that I'd like to have a word or two with them. Thank you." He hung up and put his phone away. "No," he said to the boy. "You cannot pass this way. Toddle off back to your body and take her with you." He smiled coldly at them both. "Grow up, children. Grow fat and grow old and die . . . but don't come back this way any time soon, if you can help it. But if you must," he said, "don't forget the proper payment."

He turned away from them before the girl had a chance to kick again, and strode up the long pier

to his boat. He untied the rope and stepped into the prow. He took up the long pole and leaned on it, addressing the passengers. "Ladies and gentlemen," he intoned. "I apologize for the delay and I thank you for your patience. We will be underway shortly. Please keep your hands and arms inside the boat at all times. We realize you have a choice of passage, and we thank you for choosing our pantheon."

He dipped the long pole into the water, pushing off from the dock. "Our journey will take approximately forty days and forty nights, with stops in Gehinnom and the Vale of Tears before we reach our final destination in Night City with further connections at points westward, for those of you who qualify."

He leaned on his pole, pushing the boat out into the current. He repeated the speech in Spanish which the boy recognized from school, followed by two other languages which he did not. As the children watched, the boatman guided his craft out into the center of the river and was soon out of sight.

CHAPTER NINE

The girl sighed. There was an old brown bottle half-buried in the mud at the water's edge. She dug it out with the toe of her boot and tumbled it into the river where it sank from view.

Her brother picked up a sheet of newspaper and began folding it.

"What are you doing?"

He didn't answer, creasing the paper into an oddly shaped triangle. He turned it over in his hands, examining his work carefully before handing it to her.

She held it between two fingers. "And?"

He took the folded paper back from her and pulled at the corners. It opened up into a broad, triangular shape like a tent.

His sister was not impressed. "Is that it? We make paper hats and go home?"

Shaking his head, her brother set the folded paper cone on the water. The newspaper boat — for that's what it was, of course — drifted away from the shore, picking up speed as the current caught it. Soon, like the boatman, it was out of sight.

His sister remained unimpressed. "Terrific. Do you want to ride in the front or the back?"

Ignoring her, her brother turned and started walking along the bank. His sister followed after him.

He stopped to inspect an old cardboard refrigerator box, but its sides were bowed and soft to the touch from the damp mud. Nearby, however, he found what he was looking for — a wooden crate, half-buried in the mud. He tugged at one corner, pulling it out with a dull sucking sound. It was a wooden shipping crate of some kind, with solid sides and bottom, about the size of a bathtub. He went back and scraped at the mud with his foot. The toe of his snowboot hit something. Another crate. With effort, he dug it out of the mud and dragged it up next to its twin.

"What are they?" his sister asked.

"Boats."

She wrinkled her nose. "You think they'll float."

"They're wood."

She tapped one of them critically. "Uh huh."

He picked up one of the crates and dragged it down to the water's edge, pushing it out onto the river. The crate bobbed for a moment and then started to drift away from the shore. He reached out and quickly pulled it back before the current could steal it away, dragging it back onto the mud.

His sister squatted down and inspected the box. It was made of wooden planks, fitted together. The sides were caked with river mud. She scraped at it with a fingernail, revealing the bare boards beneath. She banged on it with her fist, flakes of half-dried mud scattering everywhere. Beneath the mud, she found the shape of a crown printed in ink so black it looked like it might have been burned into the wood. Below the crown, there was a word printed in delicate scrollwork. She sounded it out silently, like they'd taught her at school. "What's 'Harrods' mean?"

Her brother shrugged. "I think he was a king in the Bible or something."

"Huh." She scraped more of the mud away, uncovering more lettering. She looked to her brother for translation.

"It says '5,000 Bags'," he told her.

"Bags of what?" She scraped more mud away, revealing a new word in larger letters: *Assam*.

She looked to her brother once more.

He shrugged again. "No idea." He went over and pulled the other crate down next to the first.

His sister scraped the mud off of the new one, revealing the same crown and caption. Below, however, she found a different word printed into the pale wood: *Darjeeling*.

"No," her brother said before she could ask. "I don't know what that means either."

They stood for a moment, staring at the crates, both of them wondering if they would really float and for how long.

"Are you ready?" the boy asked.

She nodded.

"Me neither." He gave her a smile. "But we might as well give it a shot." Picking up the crate marked *Darjeeling*, he waddled out into the water. His sister waded out after him and he steadied it for her while she climbed in. She sat in the crate, looking over the edge at him. He let go of the sides.

She was floating. The crate began to drift off in the direction of the current.

"Hold on." He headed back to the shore.

"Hold on to what?" she asked, utterly helpless.

"Wait up." He dug in the mud for a moment, revealing a rusty wire coat hanger.

"Um..." His sister drifted further from the shore. "Are you coming?"

"Yup." He grabbed the other crate and shoved it out into the water. He waded out and caught up with her, grabbing the side of her crate and pulling her back. He untwisted the wire hanger and wrapped one end around a rusty nail protruding from the crate stamped *Assam*. The other end of the coat hanger went through a small knothole in the back of her crate, fastening the two of them together as best he could. He stepped back. "That might work."

He threw one leg over the side of his crate and, with some difficulty, climbed in. Once his boat had steadied itself, he grinned at his sister. They were floating in the shallows by the rotting pier.

"So . . . how do we steer?" she asked.

"The river should do all the work for us."

She stared back at him, doubtful.

Gently, the current caught at the crates and drew them out into the flow of the river. In the lead, the girl watched the broad muddy band of water stretching out ahead of them. She looked back. The wire joining their two crates together was pulled tight, but it looked like it would hold.

Her brother raised his hand and waved to her. Behind him, she could see the trash-littered bank. A

low mist hung over the muddy slope of the hill. The door stood at the top suspended against the pale sky, solitary, like a tombstone.

She inspected the inside of her crate, relieved to see that there weren't any cracks or leaks. Yet. She found some printing on the inside of the planks. Slowly, she sounded it out: "'How to . . . make . . . make a . . . perfect . . . cup . . . of . . . of tea.'"

"What?" Her brother's voice sounded further away than he really was.

She called back to him. "Is there anything printed on the inside of your box?"

She heard him fumble around for a moment. "I don't think so. Why?"

The girl shook her head and settled back against the side of the crate. "Forget it." She closed her eyes, listening to the waves lapping against the sides of her makeshift boat. She thought of her father and she wondered what he was doing right now.

The river moved along slowly, carrying them forward. Sometimes the current spun them around so that they were floating side by side. Sometimes they found themselves turned around, traveling backwards down the river. From time to time they bumped against each other with a hollow sound.

Pale tendrils of mist drifted over the face of the water. On each side of the river, the banks were littered with trash. It was not the most fascinating scenery she had ever seen, and the girl soon grew tired of it. She scrunched down in her crate. It smelled of mud and, faintly, of something else. A richer, more pungent smell. Like dry autumn leaves. "Darjeeling," she said quietly to herself.

"What?" Her brother's voice drifted down the length of wire between them, making it hum with vibration. "Are you okay?"

She nodded.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." She snuggled down, letting the mingled smell of mud and tea slide over her like a warm blanket.

The two crates drifted down the river, Darjeeling in the lead with Assam following close behind.

CHAPTER TEN

In the darkness, the girl woke to the sound of water. She felt the sway of the river, the lapping of the waves against the wood. Her brother's voice called out, close to her. She sat up. "I'm here."

"Were you asleep?"

"Not really," she lied. "Maybe a little."

They floated on in silence, bumping together from time to time in the darkness. The boy began to doubt that they were moving at all. He was just about to dip his fingers into the water to make sure there was still a river there, when his sister said his name. "What?"

"What do you think dad's doing right now?"

"He's probably sitting in the hospital room with us or with mom." He thought for a moment. "He might be reading or talking to us, to wake us up."

"How come I can't hear him?"

Her brother had to admit that he didn't know the answer to that.

After a while, she said his name again. He sighed. "What?"

"What . . . what do you think mom is doing right now?"

The boy closed his eyes, looking out past the blackness and the water, searching for his mother. She was still out there, somewhere. But he couldn't quite feel where or how far away she was. They were heading in the right direction, he was certain of that. After all, the river only flowed one way. "I don't know what mom's doing," he told his sister.

They settled back into their crates, trying to get comfortable in the cramped spaces. The long night wore on, the two of them staring out blindly into the darkness. They talked a bit and they dozed a bit, lulled by the sound of the water and the gentle motion of the river. And, when they slept, they dreamed – odd fragments and scraps from their lives, little echoes of what had come before.

Eventually, the sky grew lighter. But there was no sun, no clouds overhead. Just a broad canopy of pale gauze that stretched from horizon to horizon, brightening as time passed. They could see the trash littering the banks on either side of the river once again. It all looked the same as before, as if they had never even moved.

"Do you think it really takes forty days to get there?" his sister asked.

"To get where?"

She shrugged. "Wherever we're going."

"I don't know."

She sat up. "You don't know how long it will take or you don't know where we're going?"

"I don't know," he sighed, settling back again to watch the banks slide by. Other than the trash, there was no sign of life. No houses, no people, nothing. He wondered how long it would take to paddle to shore by hand.

Up ahead, his sister called out "Hello Charles!"

He looked up to see a familiar boat sweeping past them, heading back up the river. The tall thin man stood in the prow, turning his head to watch them as he passed. The boy turned around in time to watch the boatman reach into his coat pocket and raise that blocky cell phone to his ear. His voice, dry as dust, rippled back in his wake. The boy strained to hear over the sound of the water – he thought he heard the boatman say the word "juicer" or, possibly, "Jupiter" – but he couldn't be sure and he certainly had no idea what that might mean, in either case. And then the boat and boatman were gone, swallowed up by the mist and the river. The boy looked to his sister. "I think maybe we should stop for a while."

"Why?"

He shook his head. He had a bad feeling about that phone call. He got up on his knees and started paddling for shore, pulling his sister's crate along behind him. She would have helped, but her arms were too short. Her fingertips could barely reach the water. He got as close as possible to the bank before hopping out to wade the rest of the way to shore, towing the crates behind him. He dragged them up onto the mud as far as he could. The boy walked further up the shore where the sand was dry and sat down to watch as his sister carefully climbed out of her crate, trying not to get her feet wet. She trudged up the shore and sat down next to him, vainly brushing the clumps of wet sand off of her boots. "Now what?"

"I don't know." He looked back over his shoulder to the top of the bank. "But after I hide the crates, we'll go that way."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Because."

She waited a moment for him to say more. When he didn't, she got up and went back down to the river's edge. There was a green plastic cup lying half-buried in the sand. She picked it up and rinsed it out in the river as best she could. Once it looked reasonably clean, she dunked it into the water and lifted the full cup to her lips.

Her brother was beside her in an instant, slapping the cup from her hand. "What do you think you're doing?"

She looked at him, furious. "I'm thirsty."

He pulled her back from the water's edge. "You can't drink that."

"Why not?" She rubbed her hand, sullen.

"It takes away your memory."

"What?"

"The river, the water..." He spoke as calmly as he could, so she wouldn't throw one of her classic tantrums. "If you drink from it, you forget everything."

"What are you talking about?"

"There are a bunch of rivers down here, one of them makes you forget. It washes away your memories."

She looked at him skeptically. "How do you know?"

"I read about it," he said, not a little defensively, "in a book."

"What book?"

"There's all sorts of stories about people who..."

"...if it makes you forget, then who wrote the book?"

He sighed. "No, listen..."

"...if you step in it, will your feet forget how to walk?"

"What? No . . . I don't know. But there's lots of stories about how dangerous this place is. Like you can't drink or eat anything down here either."

"You can't?"

"Not a bite, not a sip. And you can't accept presents. Or favors. And you're not supposed to tell anyone down here your name or..."

"...what do you mean 'down here'?" She looked around. "Where are we?"

He had to admit that he didn't actually know for sure. "I've read about it. A lot of it's the same — like the boatman, he's in most of the stories but some of this is, well, pretty different from what the books say."

"Different how?"

He got up. He'd seen an old checkered blanket lying nearby in the sand. He wondered, briefly, who would come down here for a picnic. He decided that he might not want to know. He pulled the blanket out of the sand and shook it off. "Well, for starters, there's no cell phones, not in the stories." He dragged the crates together and draped the blanket over them.

"Are you building a fort?" Despite the sarcasm, his sister came over to watch.

"No." He tossed a few handfuls of sand up on top of the boxes. "Give me a hand."

"With what?"

"Just . . . help me cover this up."

She knelt down on the other side and started throwing sand up and over the blanket.

"Um," he said from his side. "Try to get more on the boxes and less in my eyes."

"Sorry."

They scooped sand for a few minutes.

"So . . . why are we doing this again?" his sister asked.

"To hide them."

"From who?"

"To keep people from seeing them."

"What people?"

He stood up and stepped back. "How's it look?"

She rose, brushing off her hands and eyeing their work critically. "It looks like a couple of boxes shoved together under a sandy blanket."

He sighed. "Yeah."

"Maybe," she said, "the reason no one wrote about the cell phones was because they hadn't been invented yet."

He stopped, looked at her.

"What?" she asked.

"I think," he said slowly, "you're probably exactly right about that." He took her hand and together they picked their way up the sandy slope of the riverbank. At the top, they saw nothing but a vast, barren plain of dark sand as far as the eye could see.

The girl gave her brother a look that said *Okay, now what?*

He stood for a moment, then knelt down. There was something sticking up through the sand at their feet. He brushed it away, clearing off a large wooden sign that had fallen over. The boy could just make out the faded letters: *Moontown*.

His sister knelt next to him. "What's it say?"

"Come on." He stood up and looked back down the bank to make sure their crates were safely stowed and hidden. It irritated him tremendously that his sister was right. Even with all the junk on the shoreline, the two wooden boxes stood out like a sore thumb — or, rather, two sore thumbs.

"Where are we going?" she asked him.

He scanned the horizon and then pointed, away from the river, across the sand to a cluster of low buildings huddled together under the pale sky, hardly more than a jumbled smudge in the distance. "There."

"What's that?"

"I'm guessing," he said, "that's Moontown."

"I'm guessing you're right," his sister answered.

"Why thank you."

"I guess you're welcome."

Together, they started walking.

"What else did the books say?" the girl asked. "The stories about the rivers and stuff?"

The boy thought for a moment, trying to remember. "Well . . . you shouldn't eat any pomegranates."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "But it's in the stories."

"Oh," the girl said. After a minute, she asked "What's a pomegranate?"

"I don't know," her brother said. "Something that's . . . it's a piece of fruit, something with a lot of seeds inside."

She thought about this for a moment or two. "So I can't eat anything?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because if you do, you'll have to stay always."

They walked on in silence.

"But what if I'm really hungry?" his sister asked.

"Then, I guess, you'll just have to be really hungry."

She didn't care for his matter-of-fact, superior tone. "What else?"

"Well . . . you should always be polite. That's a big thing in a lot of the stories. And you should never tell anyone your name."

"Even if they ask me?"

"Especially if they ask you," he told her. "Especially then."

"Why not?"

"Because..." He trailed off, thinking. "Because names have power."

She squinted up at him. "What kind of power?"

Her brother shook his head. "I don't really know. But it's in all the stories, practically."

"Then what should I tell someone if they ask?" the girl asked. "Should I lie?"

The boy shrugged. "I guess."

"But doesn't that go against the polite thing?"

"I have no idea. I think it's better to be impolite and safe."

"So what should I tell them?"

"I don't know. Just make something up."

"What about what was on the boxes?" the girl asked.

"What boxes?"

She gestured back towards the river behind them. "The boxes, the little boats."

"Oh, um . . . it said 'Darjeeling' on yours and 'Assam' on mine."

"I know what they said..."

"...and they were crates, not boxes."

"Whatever," the girl said. "What do they mean?"

"I don't know."

They fell silent again, walking together towards the little cluster of buildings. As they approached, they could hear the faint sound of voices, children laughing and playing.

"No food, no favors . . . and don't tell them your name," the boy reminded his sister when they had reached the outskirts.

"Yeah. I got it."

Together, they entered the town.

INTERLUDE

Somewhere else, there's a man in a room. He sits at a low table, a glass jar in front of him. The jar rattles as he carefully sorts through things, emptying his pockets. And as he works, he hums.

It's a pleasant little tune. If you were there, you'd recognize it.

The man takes up a pen, dips the nib into an inkwell, and writes careful letters across a strip of paper the color of old bone. He blows on the paper, the deep red ink going dull as it dries. When it is, he pastes the label onto the jar and sets it aside.

If you were there, you would notice that he doesn't look at things properly, not quite. There's a dreamy, off-center look in his eyes.

An old black telephone rests to one side of the table, waiting at his elbow like a cracked beetle. Soon, very soon, it will ring and Juniper — for that's what the man is called, though it's not his name — he will pick it up and listen quietly for a moment.

And then he'll smile, hanging up the phone and humming under his breath: "A penny for a spool of thread, a penny for a needle..."

His voice is low, he barely realizes he's singing.

If you were there, you'd probably recognize the tune.

If you were there, you'd get to hear his song from start to finish, but you wouldn't get a chance to hear the rest of this story.

If you were there, Juniper would need another jar . . . one with your name on it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The boy had never heard of Moontown. It wasn't in any of the old stories. If he had — if he had known about the children, the laughter and games and screams, and what waited in the dark — it's likely that he would have stayed on the river a while longer to find a safer harbor.

But he didn't know, so they made their way through the jumbled cluster of old houses, wandering through a maze of streets and alleys. They'd been painted once, the houses, long ago — bright colors to distract and amuse the children. But the colors had long since faded, scoured away by the whirling sand and by the pale rains that sometimes came.

The boy stopped in front of one of them. It might have been painted sky blue once upon a time, when Moontown was young. Now it was more gray than anything else. Beneath the paint, the boy could see the walls were a patchwork of old cardboard boxes and cartons, flattened tin cans, folded labels and faded wrappers peeking through here and there. None of the windows had glass in them. Ragged scraps of plastic beckoned out from the dark holes like pale hands.

The boy and girl arrived as the sky overhead was just beginning to lighten. It might have been dawn, but for the lack of sun. The streets and alleys were just starting to wake up. They saw other children wandering into the city alone, gathering together as they foraged in huddled groups of four or five.

Their haunted eyes were rimmed with red, smudged beneath with shadow — but from sleeplessness or crying, it was hard to tell.

The girl and her brother walked among them, accepted or perhaps just ignored. When they tried to speak with any of the other children, they received unintelligible whispers in reply.

The morning — such as it was — wore on and the boy and girl searched through the town, watching as the groups of children formed into packs and gangs. Minor battles were fought for control of the alleys and houses in a particularly cruel and violent version of Capture the Flag. Alliances were formed, broken, betrayed, and reformed again in a matter of minutes. The children played their elaborate game, screaming and running in a frenzy all morning long.

Neither the boy nor his sister could tell for certain if it was only a game. The other children were so ruthless, so serious. There were no grownups in Moontown, just the children swarming everywhere, chasing and screaming through the streets.

Except for our boy and girl. They didn't join in the games. They simply walked and watched the petty treaties of childhood form, crumble, and be negotiated anew. And as they walked, the boy listened. A little thought kept nagging at him in the back of his mind, a tiny itch in his head that he couldn't quite reach. He had a suspicion that things were not what they seemed. There was a secret here in Moontown, he knew it. That was just how this kind of story worked. He could feel it, he could hear it whispering beneath the games and laughter. He knew that if he listened hard enough, if he was patient, he'd be able to find out what it was. Carefully he let his feelings unroll inside, tapping between the cardboard houses like a blind man tapping his way through a maze.

His sister followed close, watching over him while he walked and listened. She knew her brother was caught in his thoughts, so she kept the other children away from him with her fierce looks and, when they strayed too close, her fists and her feet. She was a fighter and her father had always told her to take care of her boy. And she always would, even here.

After a while, even she noticed that something wasn't right. She didn't have a lot of room leftover inside for listening, with all of her fierceness. But as the day wore on, she couldn't help but feel the terrible wrongness of this place, hear it screaming out from every open doorway and shadowed alley that they passed. The other children, they played but there was a quiet desperation in their games. It was hollow somehow, frantic — as though they were all trying very, very hard to have fun. And she knew better than anyone that the harder you have to try to have fun, the less fun you're really having. The children might be playing and laughing, but it sounded like they were one laugh, one scream away from a nightmare.

On they walked together, one listening and the other standing guard. And all the while, the children ran and screamed and played around them. In time, the sky began to fade and a light wind sprang up, sending scraps of paper fluttering along the alleys. It grew colder, but still the children kept running through the streets and houses.

"The kids..." the girl whispered, clutching tightly to her brother's sleeve.

"Yeah," he murmured.

"Where'd they go?" Their numbers were dwindling, the other children. Running now in groups, no more laughter or games — just running through the streets, wheeling one way and then another, like a flock of frightened birds at twilight. And with every pass, there were fewer of them.

"What's going on?" the girl whispered.

Her brother watched the shadows. There was something there, in the darkness, so quick he almost missed it: A pale hand reaching out, snatching at the children as they ran by. One moment a child was there . . . the next, they were gone. And, one by one, they all disappeared into the shadows that lapped

at their heels, pulling them away in bites, like a hungry tide pulling down a sand castle with wave after wave. Until, finally, only one child remained, running between the tattered houses, his eyes wide, wheezing with fear.

The girl gasped as he ran past. She recognized him by his pajamas, the cartoon frogs just barely visible beneath the mud and grime. "It's James," she told her brother, "the boy from the hospital."

Hand pressed to his side, James passed in a half-limping, half-stumbling run. He shrieked, twisting away from a darkened doorway and sprinted off with a long, thin scratch on his cheek. Whatever had made it withdrew back into the shadows.

The girl started to call after him, but her brother slapped his hand over her mouth. She twisted and struggled against him, but he turned her eyes to his and willed her quiet.

After a long moment, she blinked at him.

He blinked back.

Then, a stumbling crash and they heard the boy shout, crying and running a few streets over from where they were, fading away as he moved farther off.

The girl reached up to pull her brother's hand away. She froze in mid-gesture, a sound spilled out from the darkened doorway nearby: A low, contented sigh, shuffling footsteps heading off in the direction of the fleeing boy.

Her brother waited another moment or two, watching the shadows. Finally, he took his hand away and wiped it on the leg of his pants. "Sorry."

"What was that?" she whispered.

He shrugged. He didn't know, but he was planning to find out. He started walking and then turned back to see her standing there looking at him. "What?"

"We could have helped him."

"Listen." He pointed out between the houses. Out in the darkness, she could hear the boy crying. She moved to go after him.

"Come on," she said to her brother. And then, "Let me go."

He shook her, gently. "Listen," he said again.

The boy was crying, faintly and far off . . . and then he wasn't crying anymore.

Silence.

No more running, no more muffled sobs, no more of anything. The evening was all around them now, night fast approaching. Moontown was asleep.

They stood there in the middle of the darkened street. The boy waited, holding his sister in front of him with his arms crossed over her chest. If something came for them as it had for the other children, it would have to take them together. He knew his sister would fight, that was her gift. But he also knew that this was something too terrible to be fought. He could feel it out there, still circling in the darkness. He was waiting to see if it could feel him too . . . and if it could, what it would do. When it came for them — if it came for them — he wouldn't be scared. He was ready.

But nothing came.

He could still feel it out there, moving away from them, towards the outskirts of the town. He realized that whatever was stalking this town didn't know that he and his sister were still there. It couldn't feel him at all, didn't even realize they were there. No, it had what it wanted and it was done for the night. Which also meant that he had an advantage. He relaxed his grip on his sister. "It's gone."

"Are you sure?" She blinked up at his face, pale in the growing darkness.

He nodded. They were alone.

"What was that thing?"

"I don't know," he said. "But we're going to find out." He led her through the darkened streets, empty and still. He kept one ear cocked to listen to the echoes in his head. He wasn't afraid, but he knew that what they were following was dangerous. And he was planning ahead.

CHAPTER TWELVE

They smelled the fire before they saw it, woodsmoke and rot on the chill air. They made their way to the edge of the town, following the smoke and the boy's uneasy feeling. With the last row of houses behind them, they stood and looked out into the darkness. There was a faint flicker of light out there — a campfire, maybe?

They walked quietly across the dusty, barren earth toward the light. Now that they were out of the town and in the open, a chilly breeze whipped at them. The fire looked warm and inviting in that desolate, lonely place.

There was something between them and the fire — a dark mass silhouetted against the flickering flames, too small to be trees, too tall for corn.

They drew closer. A sickly sweet smell hung in the air, mixing unpleasantly with the sharp wood smoke.

The thin stalks, whatever they were, grew tall with dark, jagged leaves. They crowded close together, uncultivated, without any order or rows. Carefully the children threaded their way through the plants, the boy leading his sister towards the light. Through the stalks, they could see the outline of a small shack next to the fire. The girl cried out in surprise when one of the dark leaves brushed against her face, tracing a burning line of pain across her cheek.

Her brother turned and clapped a hand over her mouth. He squatted down and she could just barely make out the glint of his eyes, the pale smudge of his face. "Nettles," he whispered. "Stay quiet or she'll hear you."

She didn't know what nettles were, but her cheek ached as though someone had scraped a rock across it. She pulled his hand off her mouth, whispered "Who?"

He put his finger to her lips. He had figured out most of it but there was no time to catch her up. As he drew away, she saw that his hands and arms were sprinkled with small welts.

There was a low sound. A door opened and closed nearby, footsteps shuffled across the earth.

Together they peered through the stalks, watching a dark figure come out of the shack and squat by the fire.

Holding his sister's hand, the boy led her carefully through the haphazard maze of weeds. He skirted around the far side of the house, moving as quietly as he could, to come out on the opposite side. He'd read enough stories to know that fire was always a friend. He wanted to keep it between them and the dark figure.

The girl did her best to keep quiet following behind him. The nettles stung her cheeks and hands, but she clamped down and forced herself not to cry out again. From time to time, her brother would squeeze her hand tightly and let out a little hiss between his teeth. She realized that he was getting stung too, probably worse than her because he was bigger and in front. As they made their way through

the stalks, keeping their distance from the edge of the clearing, the girl watched through the leaves, studying the figure by the fire.

It was a woman, her profile like knives — the sharp nose and chin protruding through a mane of long, stringy hair. From time to time she would haul up an impossibly long, bony arm to stir something simmering in a large kettle hanging over the fire. The shadow, the woman, hissed, stirring the pot with a long crooked forefinger. A finger, the girl noted, that tapered to a point impossibly long. The woman sucked thoughtfully at the tip of her fingernail and sat back.

Having put the fire between themselves and the witch — that's what she was, of course — the children stood among the nettles half-choking in the sickly sweet smell that drifted down from the tops of the stalks. The sick, greasy odor hung in the air around them, heavier than smoke. It was too dark to see what horrible buds bloomed at the tops, but they smelled hideous and the girl could hear the low sound of flies buzzing among them.

The witch called out into the darkness: "I can hear you breathing out there, I can."

The boy smiled, laying his hand on his sister's arm to calm her down. He'd read the stories, enough of them at least to expect this sort of thing.

The dark figure stirred the pot again and ran a long black tongue over her finger. "Come to Annie, then." Her voice was like sandpaper. "There's plenty of food, plenty for all of us and I don't mind sharing." Cackling, she settled back on her haunches. The girl could see the glint of her eyes behind the stringy hair.

The boy waited for a moment. Then he stepped to one side and pushed his sister forward, sending her out into the clearing ahead of him, blinking in the firelight.

The witch didn't move, but the boy heard the slow sigh of satisfaction she let out at the sight of the girl. He felt a pulse of energy from her, raw and hungry. He waited a moment, letting it build, before stepping out of the weeds next to his sister. The witch had already begun to rise, but settled back down at the sight of him.

He spoke up, doing his best to sound helpless and forlorn. "Please ma'am, we're lost and it's so cold..." He wavered out the last word to maximum pitiful effect.

His sister picked up on the act, adding "And we're so hungry."

The witch sniffed. She'd been around long enough to be suspicious of such easy prey. She'd heard the stories of what had happened to her sisters. And it made her careful.

But her pot was full, the stew nearly ready, and she was too hungry to wait any longer. She could save room if need be, if there was a more delicate morsel to be had at the end of her meal. And it had been a while since she'd had any live, fresh meat in her bowl.

She stirred the stew again. The boy heard a dull rattle within the pot, like stones rolling against the cast iron sides. "Come closer babies, close for Annie. These dull old lights aren't what they used to be."

"They look pretty bright to me," the boy replied.

The witch chuckled. "You're a smooth one, aren't you boy? Come closer now and sit. Lost, did you say? Traveling are you? From where to where?"

The boy held his ground. "I don't know, actually. We were looking for our mother and we got lost." Lies, he knew, work best when they're wrapped around a truth.

"Well, you can't travel on an empty stomach. Come and sit awhile, try Annie's stew. It's almost ready and she gets so few visitors."

"No thank you. We're not hungry," the boy said.

The old woman sighed. "Well, it's a lonely life, being old and alone. The other wee'uns hereabouts run away from old Annie."

Yeah, I just bet they do, the girl thought to herself.

The witch sighed again. "A sad, lonely life for Annie." She dabbed at the corner of her eye.

The two children moved to sit closer to the fire, still keeping their distance. The witch smiled and nodded. "Ah, well, that's kind of you. That's right nice now, that is." She stirred the pot. "Stew'll be ready soon enough. And then, if you're very good and eat all your supper, maybe you'll get a special treat."

"Like what?" the girl asked.

Old eyes peered at her. "How does homemade black licorice strike you, girly?"

The boy looked at his sister. She hated black licorice almost as much as she hated being called things like "girly." But she smiled shyly and nodded at the old witch as though it were her favorite.

"Lovely girl," the witch said. "It's nice for old Annie to have some proper company, now and again. And especially such nice, polite, quiet children such as yourselves. Annie gets so tired of those little brats in town." She sighed and reached forward to stir the pot. "They nibbled away her sweet house so many long years ago and it's all Annie can do these days to keep them out of the garden." She peered up at the children. "Did you see Annie's garden, babies? Did you smell her sweet flowers?"

The children nodded.

The witch stared out into the night, thoughtful. "Some days, Annie can barely stand to hear them play and scream. It's all they do. Morning, noon, and evening. That's a lonely sound for someone old, children's voices. Brings back better times, when old Annie was young herself." The old woman stared into the fire, tapping one long fingernail against her teeth. "Such games we played, my sisters and me." She shook her head and cackled. "Don't pay any attention to this old woman's tanglehead rambles." She turned back to look at them, eyes bright. "What's your names then, when you're at home?"

"I'm Jee and this is my brother Assam."

The witch's eyes narrowed like scissors. "Strange pair of names. Jee, is it?"

The girl nodded. "It's short for Darjeeling."

Her brother nearly rolled his eyes but caught himself.

"Pretty name."

The girl, now called Jee, smiled and cocked her head. "Thank you." She looked up at her brother and squeezed his hand. His palm was slick and his arm was shaking slightly.

The old woman stood up, unfolding her legs and arms like a spider. She was suddenly very tall. She could have stepped over the fire, if it weren't for her ragged skirts. She could have reached around on either side to tickle their ribs with those jagged nails. She looked down at them for a long moment. Then she smiled. "Well, whatever you're called, you're both welcome to try old Annie's stew. You wait right here while she fetches some bowls."

"Thank you," Jee said cheerfully as the old woman went into the ramshackle cottage.

After she was gone, the boy said "Are you crazy?" under his breath.

"No."

He said her name, exasperated.

"Call me Jee," she said sternly.

"You're going to get us both killed," he said.

"Whisper dummy. And it was your idea to come out here."

She had a point. "Whatever. Just don't eat anything."

His sister rolled her eyes. "No? Really? Why not?" she asked. "You're not the only one who reads books, stupid."

"Don't call me stupid, Jee."

"Oh, okay Assam." She emphasized the first syllable perfectly.

They glared at one another.

The witch came back with a stack of bowls in her hands, heading for the pot. An iron ladle hung from the side and she dipped it into the stew, stirring. The boy swallowed thickly at the dull rattling sound within.

"It smells delicious," Jee said brightly.

The woman smiled, her teeth glinting like iron in the firelight. "Oh aye, it does at that. But it's not quite ready yet, we need a few more minutes over the fire." She settled back on her haunches and stared over at the boy. "Time enough for a little natter. Where did you say you were headed, boy?"

Assam took a breath. "Well, we're on our way to find..."

"...now mind you don't go lying to old Annie, boy," the witch interrupted. "She may be old and ugly, but she's got a powerful good nose on her and she can smell out a lie like it was dogshit in Sunday School." She waved her finger in the air, mock scolding. "Now, where is it you're aimed and why are you headed there?"

"We're traveling," the boy said. "But we honestly don't know where we're going."

The witch sniffed and smacked her lips, dissatisfied. "Call that an honest answer, do you?" She sniffed again. "Well, honest enough I suppose, for now. Just barely." She picked up one of the bowls and filled it from the pot, handing it over to the boy.

He took it from her carefully, her long fingernails clattering against the sides of the bowl as they pulled away. He handed the bowl to his sister, accepting the next one for himself. There was something strange about the bowl. He hefted it in his hands, his fingertips tracing the slightly bumpy, uneven surface. He could feel a strange line running across the underside.

"Ahh..." The old woman dipped a long, thin fingernail into her bowl and tasted it. "Not too hot now," she said. "And not too cold neither." Then, raising the bowl to her mouth, she wrapped her thin lips around the rim and drank.

With her head thrown back, the boy saw the ridge on the bottom of her bowl, the familiar seam of bone. He felt sick.

"Iron teeth and claws," the witch said, chewing. "That's good stew." She dragged her sleeve across her mouth, eyes glinting in the firelight. "What's the matter, babies? Aren't you hungry anymore? Eat up, while it's good and hot. Annie's stew will put the sweet flesh back on your bones, it will." She chuckled and slurped some more from her bowl.

Assam nodded. There was a sour taste in the back of his throat. He forced it back down and looked away, up to the dark sky. *No stars*, he thought. *No moon in Moontown*. "It's so quiet," he said.

The witch cackled again, digging between her teeth with a fingernail the size of an icepick. "Oh, aye it is at that," she agreed. "The days are so hellish noisy, what with all the little bratlings screaming in the town. But once they're gone, the night, the night is quiet and peaceful like."

"Where do all the children go?" Jee asked.

The old witch smiled at her. "Where do they go? Heh . . . not to worry, they're safe and sound in Annie's wee pot." She leaned forward and patted the side of the kettle. "Safe and sound."

The boy looked down into his bowl, into the hollowed out skull he held in his hands. Pinks strings of meat swam in the reddish-brown broth. A long curl of ivory bone lay half-submerged. *Probably a rib*, he thought to himself.

The girl set her bowl down and stood up.

The witch settled back — suddenly, horribly comfortable. She pulled her long, ragged sleeves up, exposing arms so thin they looked like bone sheathed in twisted wire. She wiggled her fingers. The children listened to her long nails click.

The boy froze, not frightened but very alert. He didn't trust her when she was at ease but he could practically hear her dark and nasty thoughts like they were a radio going full blast in the next room. He wasn't worried. His books and stories had prepared him for monsters like her.

The witch smiled at him.

He smiled back.

"The little ones, they go into the pot each night." The words crawled out of the witch's mouth like spiders. "And Annie eats her fill, dumping out the leftover flesh and bones to mulch my pretty garden when the feast is done. You saw my flowers, boy?"

Assam nodded. He'd seen them. They were terrible, twisted things.

"Come morning," the witch went on, "the children rise up from the dirt and yawn, heading back into Moontown to play their little games, not a bone out of place." She picked at a scrap dangling from the rim of her bowl and flicked it into the fire where it hissed. "Day after day they play . . . and I fill my pot. That's the way of things here, that's the shape of this place."

Not for long, the boy thought.

"Assam, was it?" the witch asked. "Not a proper name, no. Not a thing to call so skinny a boy." She shifted herself. "Come here, son. Annie wants to feel your finger and see how fat it is."

Two things happened then, very quickly. The witch sprang forward, wrapping her arms around the boy from behind, laying her long thin nails across his throat. And, at the same moment, Jee ran around to the other side of the fire. Unlike her brother, she didn't have a way to listen for things. But she was quick and she could move when she needed to.

The witch stared at her through the flames, wiggling her fingers against the boy's neck, tapping one long nail against his cheek. "Come back, girly," she said. "The game is over and Annie, she wants what's hers."

The girl shook her head, her eyes on the boy. Assam stared calmly back at her over the rim of the iron pot hanging above the flames.

"Come to me, girl," the witch said.

"Let him go first," Jee answered.

The witch tightened her fingers on his throat, her eyes fixed on the girl. "Come to me, come to Annie."

Jee put her hand on the pot. It was warm, but not too hot to touch. She bumped it with the flat of her hand, setting it swinging. "Let him go," she said again. "Or I'll dump it all." She shoved the pot once more, harder this time. A little of the stew sloshed over the side to land, sizzling, in the flames.

The witch drew her thin lips back over her teeth, hissing. "Stop your foolin', girl."

Jee pushed the pot again, spilling more of the foul contents. "I'm not joking," she told the witch.

The old woman snorted, tightening her grasp on the boy. "You think I care if you dump out Annie's dinner, girl? Old Annie's gone hungry many times before tonight . . . but not since I came here. No, now my pot is full every night and I eat my fill." She grinned broadly. "Do your worst, girl. I'll still have my snack and scatter your bones when I'm done. In the morning the two of you can get up, shake the dirt from your hair, and join the others in town. And then, we'll do it all over again tomorrow night."

Through this, Jee kept her eyes on her brother. His face was very pale, but his eyes were calm. He

smiled at her, despite the five thin fingers wrapped under his chin. He made an up-down motion with his eyes, looking from the pot to the ground and back again.

Jee looked back up to the witch. "Suit yourself," she said. She shoved the pot with both hands, sending it spilling towards the woman crouched on the other side of the fire.

The witch gave a little cry and hopped backwards like a bird, dragging the boy along with those nasty claws.

Assam stared with horror at the soupy mixture seeping out of the overturned pot. His legs and feet were swamped with it, all the way up to the knees of his jeans. It felt horrible and warm. The witch too had been splashed and she shrieked down at the sight of her ragged dress soaked all around the hem. She tightened her fingers around the boy's throat, lifting him up to shake him at the little girl standing defiantly on the other side of the fire. "I'll kill you for this, girl. I'll eat your lights last, so you can watch me suck the fat off your ribs," the witch screamed, whipping the boy back and forth to punctuate her rage. "See if I don't."

But the girl wasn't looking at the witch. No, she was staring down with horror into the wide pool of stew spilling from the mouth of the kettle. She could see the bones, the bones of Moontown, flailing and twisting in the murky mess like fish flopping on the shore.

The witch saw what the girl saw and shrieked — although, with rage or fear, Jee would never know.

The bones were coming together there in the dust, rejoining into fingers and hands and arms. Skulls and jawbones rolled and clacked into place, hollow sockets staring up at the witch accusingly. Hands scuttled across fluttering ribs like spiders, scrabbling towards the hem of the witch's long ragged dress. The witch stepped back, clutching at her rags, but it was too late. A bare, half-finished arm shot out of the muck and tore at her. And then another grabbed for her and then another — bony fingers ripping and clawing to get at her. The witch screamed, throwing the boy to one side and beating at the clattering, bony hands with her own. But it was no use. They took hold of her ankles, her arms, her throat, dragging her forward, shrieking, towards the flames. In an instant, she was ablaze, the dry rags she wore going up in a great plume of flame. She spun and flailed wildly, breaking free of the bony hands to stumble madly through the clearing, setting that horrible garden ablaze around her.

Jee watched all of this from her brother's side. There were four livid stripes across his throat but he was still breathing, just barely. Unconscious, he was too heavy to move. And so his sister was content to watch the witch flail and shriek and set her world ablaze in agony and torment.

The witch ran towards her house, trailing flame and greasy, black smoke. From inside, Jee could hear her howls as the house went up like kindling. And then, to her amazement, the house rose up from the ground on two long bony legs, clawing at the dirt like chicken feet. While the witch howled inside, the house stumbled around in the dark as the flames consumed it from within. And still the witch shrieked even as it collapsed into a heap, sending up ashes and embers into the pale sky.

At that point, surrounded by fire, Jee decided it was time to move. She leaned down and called into her brother's ear: "Wake up."

He stirred and moaned. With a little coaxing, she was able to get him on his shaky feet and lead him, swaying, through the burning nettles and into the cooler night air beyond. When they were a good way out from the fire, she stopped and looked back. The blaze was enormous, throwing off yellow stripes of flickering light in all directions. She helped her brother lay down and, sitting next to him, she rested her head on his chest and watched the fiery bloom slowly contract and wither back into itself. She was long asleep by the time it had burned itself out.

The boy awoke with a burning in the back of his throat. He coughed, his mouth bitter and pasty. He sat up groaning, his body a mass of aches from sleeping on the cold, packed earth. He looked over the blackened remains of the witch's house and garden still smoldering in the early morning light, deciding that there were worse ways and places to spend the night.

It all smelled vaguely of fried chicken.

His sister lay curled up nearby. Her face was streaked with soot and there was faint gray ash in her hair. He wiped a hand across his own face. His skin felt gritty and rough under his fingertips.

He looked around. Here and there a bare blackened stalk still stood. Tiny wisps of smoke rose from the ruined house beams and rafters jutting out like bones against the pale sky. And below, in the ashes, something moved. A hasty, furtive movement across the blackened earth.

Bones, he thought to himself. Again, a scuttling movement among the broken stalks — multiplied ten times, and then more.

He leaned over to wake his sister but her eyes were already open. She lay on her side with her head resting in the crook of her arm. She shifted her eyes to look up at her brother, then back again to watch the bones.

The blackened field came alive with skeletons, springing up like spindly weeds in a stop-motion nature film. They were coming together again, reassembling among the ashes of the burned out garden.

Here was a set of legs connected by a blackened hipbone, striding through the stubble. There, a rib cage and shoulder blades dragging itself along with half-finished arms, stopping for a moment to reattach a hand before sifting through the ashes once more.

"Look!" The girl sat up.

A skeleton walked past them. As they watched, flesh ran up and down the spindly legs, wrapping around the blackened ribs. Tattered fluttered up and twined around the figure, the scorched fabric fading to blue and green once more. The figure stopped a few feet away from them.

"Hi James," the girl said quietly.

"Thank you." The boy in the frog pajamas smiled shyly. Then he turned and ran back into town.

The girl looked up at her brother. "You ready?"

He rose slowly, stretching his head from side to side. His neck and jaw were sore, tender to the touch.

His sister stared the marks on his throat. "Does it hurt?"

He shook his head. "Not as bad as it might have been." He winced.

"Thanks to me."

He nodded. "Thanks to you."

They made their way back to Moontown. The children there stopped their games as Assam and Jee passed through. A hundred voices murmuring thanks, a hundred grateful hands touching theirs. They could have been king and queen of that place, if they'd wanted it. But there was their mother to think of. Together, they walked back down to the shore under the pale, greasy light of a sunless sky.

The crates were where they had left them. The girl got into hers and her brother waded out after her, pushing them off from the shore before climbing into his own. And, with the laughter of Moontown's children fading in their ears, he paddled off and away from the shore. The waters carried them on, gliding along the gentle current out into in the center of the river.

"I'm still hungry," Jee called back to her brother.

"I know." Assam kept his eyes on the river. He was watching for a sign of another boat, just in case. He had a feeling that what they were doing was definitely against the rules. And he was pretty sure that how they spent their evening was sure to attract someone's attention.

He was right.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jee was hungry. For the past couple of hours, she'd been telling her brother all about it. She began simply, complaining every few minutes. Just a warm-up. Then, after an hour or so, she started to get much more specific, identifying exactly what she was hungry for and describing in detail how things tasted and smelt and the sound they made in your head when you bit into them. Then, after she gave her brother a while to rest up and hope that she was finished, she began describing for him in quite a lot of detail what her stomach felt like. The sharp pain of it, the bubbling deep inside. And then, after another long silence, she went through it all again for him just in case he had missed something the first time.

"Shut up, please," he said politely.

"I'm hungry."

"You're annoying."

"Aren't you hungry?"

He didn't answer.

"I am," she said. "I'm very hungry. Very, very, very..."

The boy started paddling his crate towards shore, dragging her along behind him.

"Where are you going?"

He didn't answer. Once they were close enough to shore, he jumped out of his crate and waded through the shallow water to the trash strewn, soggy bank.

"Where are you going?" she yelled, standing up in her crate. It wobbled on the water and, for a moment, she thought she was going to tip over. She sat down quickly and peered over the edge. "Hey!"

Her brother was already halfway up the bank. He did not turn around.

The girl knelt down and, as best she could, she tried to paddle a bit closer to shore. Her arms were too short and she could only swipe ineffectively at the surface of the water with her fingertips. She leaned over as far as she could and the crate tipped, dumping her into the warm, pungent river.

She stood up immediately and screamed. Except for her head, she was mostly, completely soaked and furious. One of her arms was coated from the river bottom and she flicked it distastefully, watching the dark mud plop back down into the shallow water. Still shrieking with rage, she stumbled to shore.

Her brother was nearly to the top of the bank. He turned, watching now and grinning.

She stomped her foot, immediately regretting it as a geyser of water and mud shot up and splattered down the right side of her snowsuit. She walked the few remaining feet to shore. Once there, she made an attempt to scrape off as much of the mud as she could. She picked up a few sheets of old newspaper and wiped at her legs, but gave up. Smearing the mud around more didn't necessarily make her look any cleaner.

Her brother was still watching and, of course, he was still grinning.

She shrugged, picked a damp leaf off her sleeve, and sighed. She started up the bank after him. Halfway there, she looked up. *If he's still got that stupid grin on his face when I get up there, she told herself, I'm going to punch it off.*

But he was gone.

She hurried up to the top and found him standing a ways off, staring at a sign. It was larger than the one they'd found at Moontown, and nicer. For one thing, it was still standing and it had little lights that ran along the outside edge, flashing. A lot of them were broken, she noticed, but still. The letters on the sign looped around each other like glass snakes, glowing red and gold. She tried to read them on her own, but she couldn't figure out where one letter ended and another began. Hating cursive more than ever before, she looked to her brother. "What's it say?"

"You've got mud on your chin." He wasn't grinning anymore, fortunately for him.

She rubbed the heel of her hand across her face. "Gone?"

It wasn't, but he nodded anyway and tried very hard not to smile.

"I fell in," she said.

"I saw."

"Thanks to you."

He shrugged.

"Are you going to tell me what it says or aren't you?"

He looked back up to the sign and considered her question. He looked back to her. "No," he said. "I'm not."

He started walking. After a long moment, she followed.

They walked a very long way from the river, for a very long time — so long, in fact, that Jee gave up on complaining about it. She was too tired and too hungry, she decided, to think about anything except how tired and hungry she was. She even gave up annoying and punishing her brother for it all, which was saying something.

After a time and a distance, her brother stopped and pointed across the flat, broad expanse toward something that glittered faintly on the horizon.

"She squinted," his sister said, squinting. "She looked out and asked 'What is it?'"

He turned to look at her.

She smiled. "I've decided to narrate our adventure."

"Good for you."

"'You could do some too,' she said. 'It's fun.'" she told him.

"'I'm not sure that trying to rescue our mom before she dies is what I would call fun.' he said, ignoring his idiot sister and walking on without her,'" he said to her.

"'Spoilsport,' she said," she said.

"Her brother didn't reply," her brother replied.

"They walked on for a long moment in silence," the girl said after a while. "She didn't know where they were going and she was pretty sure that he didn't either."

Her brother didn't respond.

After a moment, she said "Her brother didn't answer. He was too stuck up and pigheaded to admit that they were lost, hungry, and almost for sure to end up even worse."

"I've decided to narrate for you as well," she told him. "Since you won't play along."

"Thank you," he said.

"In fact, the girl thought to herself, it was kind of ironic that her brother's code name..."

"...code name..?"

"...his code name 'Assam' contained her own secret name for him," she said.

"Nice."

"She ignored him and kept walking," she said, not really ignoring him at all.

A long while later she said "As they approached, they could see that the shimmering on the horizon was a building, metal and flat."

Her brother said nothing.

Soon after that, she said "The building, they saw as they grew closer, was shaped like a long silver tube with windows along one side. The girl thought it looked a little bit like a train and said so."

She turned to him. "It looks a little bit like a train."

"It's a diner," her brother told her.

"They made their way through the cars, rusty and old," the girl said. "Stopping for a moment to get the lay of the land."

There were a handful of cars parked out in front. And a large neon sign on top of the building did its best to compete with the pale, sunless sky.

"Jee studied the sign intently," the girl said. "She hated cursive with all of her heart and would rather eat broken glass than ask for her brother's help, but she turned to him and asked 'What's it say?'"

He slowly turned and looked at her.

"Okay, okay, I'm done now," she said. "What's it say?"

"It's a restaurant. A diner."

Jee's mouth began to water. She would have run for the door if her brother hadn't stopped her.

"Wait."

"What?"

"It's just that, in the stories..." His stomach interrupted him, rumbling like distant thunder.

"What about them?"

He didn't answer.

"Come on, then."

Her brother followed her through the haphazard maze of old cars. Four concrete steps led up to the door at the front of the diner. A man sat at the bottom, strumming a guitar. He looked up at them as they approached. He had a long face, a pair of round spectacles resting on the bridge of his pointed nose, and a kind smile.

"Hello children." He laid his palm flat across the guitar strings to silence them.

"Hello," the boy said.

"Hi," his sister added.

His eyes sparkled over the rims of his glasses. "You're a long way from home." His hands moved gently on the strings and he hummed for a moment, his voice rich and sweet.

They looked at him, then at each other.

"If you say so," the girl replied.

He stopped playing and raised his eyebrows. "A very long way, by the sound of it, living girl."

"What's that song?" She watched his fingertips dancing on the strings. The tune sounded familiar, somehow.

The man played a bit more. "Do you like it?"

"Uh huh," she said. "What's it called?"

The man shrugged, sticking his bottom lip out. "I don't know."

"Did you just make it up?"

"Do you like music?" the man asked her.

The girl nodded. "I'm learning the piano at school."

He smiled. "That's grand, love. Grand old piano."

It wasn't much of a joke, but the boy snickered. His sister looked up at him, annoyed. She didn't get it. He shrugged and she turned back to the musician.

"Will you sing it for me," she asked him, "your song?"

He shook his head. "Can't be done, love."

"Why not?"

"Well, for starters, it's got no words. And it's not finished yet."

"Didn't you write any?" she asked.

"I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I was waiting."

"For inspiration?" the boy asked.

"Of a sort." The man smiled, a little sad. "I was waiting for my sons. I've been saving the song for them, for when they get here – one to finish the tune and the other to write the words to go along with it."

Jee stared frankly into his kind eyes. "How long have you been waiting?"

He shook his head. "Years and years, love. Years and years . . . but I don't mind so much."

"Why not?"

"The longer I have to wait, the longer their life is. And I don't want either of them showing up before it's time or before the song is ready for them." His mouth set firmly in a thin line for a moment. He stopped playing, studying the ground beneath his feet. After a moment, he looked up at her. "You're here too soon, little sister. What would your mum say if she could see you now?"

The girl swallowed against the sudden lump in her throat. "I . . . I don't know." She looked to her brother. "I don't know what she'd say."

The thin man started playing again. "She wouldn't be happy to see you, not here," he told her. "Not at all."

Behind them, a car pulled into the lot and came to a halt with a rattling lurch. An old man got out and walked slowly towards them. "Excuse me," he said as he squeezed by them, his feet sounding hollow on the steps.

The boy blinked. The musician followed his gaze. "Don't worry, brother. That's not who you think it is."

The boy watched the old man go into the diner. "He had hooves."

The musician smiled wryly. "You don't miss a thing, do you brother? What do you call yourself?"

"His name is..." the girl began, but the man quickly laid his long, lean finger across his lips.

"Ut!" he told her sternly. "You weren't about to tell some stranger your names, now were you?"

The girl nodded and he took his finger away.

"Best not to trust people quite so easily. Not with anything. Let alone your precious names. Don't you know the stories?" He looked up at the boy. "You know the stories, don't you brother?"

The boy nodded.

The man leaned back, letting his fingers play across the strings. "So then, what are you called?"

"Uh . . . Assam."

The musician smiled and looked to the girl. "And you, sister? Would that make you . . . Oolong maybe? Or Little Miss Pekoe, perhaps?"

"Darjeeling," she told him. "You can call me Jee."

The musician laughed, natural and warm. "And so I shall. I certainly shall."

"Thank you for playing your song for us." The girl surprised herself, leaning forward to kiss his cheek. "Come on," she said to her brother. "I'm hungry."

The boy nodded to the musician. "Goodbye."

"So long, brother." The musician nodded as they walked past him and up the steps.

Once they had gone, he laid his fingertips on his cheek where Jee had kissed him. He started playing again, an old song this time. One he'd written years before, a simple tune for his grandmother, back when he was still alive: "Half of what I say is meaningless..." he half-sang in a soft whisper. A tear rolled down the side of his long nose, yet he couldn't help but smile.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Inside, they waited to be seated next to a small sign that politely asked them to do so. The diner was crowded. Nearly every booth and table was occupied. The air was filled with the sound of plates and conversation and, underneath it all, music playing softly. The boy nudged his sister and nodded to a couple of open stools along the long counter. "What about there?"

"I want to sit in a booth."

"Table for two?" The woman who approached was wearing a long dark dress — it might have been black, it might have been blue, it might even have been red. But it was very dark and she wore a small plastic nametag pinned to it: *Yama*. The lower part of her face was hidden beneath a veil, but her eyes above were friendly. "Smoking or non?" She picked up two plastic laminated menus.

"Non," the boy and girl said together.

The woman's eyes crinkled above her veil. They were, Jee noticed, very dark and flecked with gold. "Did I hear you say you wanted a booth?"

The girl nodded and the woman turned and led them through the diner to a red vinyl booth near the back. The kids scooted in opposite each other and the hostess set menus down in front of them. "Sarah'll be over in a minute to take your order."

"Thanks," Jee said as the woman turned to go. The girl opened her menu and studied it. "It says that they serve breakfast all day. Do you think that includes the nighttime, too?"

Her brother didn't answer.

She looked up at him. "What's wrong?"

He nodded to one of the tables nearby. She followed his gaze. Her eyes widened. There were two lizards sitting at the table next to them, very large and very red. They sat opposite each other, resting on their haunches with their long tails intertwined beneath the table, stretching their necks forward to lap from two steaming bowls in front of them. Their long black tongues forked at the tip. Their skin glittered, like they had rolled in jagged shards of mirror. Folded neatly along each side of the spiny ridges running down their backs were what appeared to be wings. They chuckled and hissed at each other across the table. Jee couldn't quite tell if they were fighting or friends. She thought they looked a little bit like iguanas, although slightly larger.

One of them glanced over at her and she looked away, pretending to study her menu. "Cool," she said under her breath. "What are you going to get?"

"Nothing." Her brother folded his hands over the menu in front of him.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Uh, yeah, just a little bit."

The sarcasm wasn't lost on her. "What's your problem?"

"Remember what I told you?"

"What you told me?"

"About eating?"

"What did you tell me?"

"There are rules. That's one of them. No eating."

She sighed, loud enough that one of the lizards looked over. "That's just a story."

He shook his head. "No, it's in a lot of them. They all say the same thing: If you eat anything here, you'll be trapped forever."

She snorted. "What are you going to do? Not eat the whole time we're here?"

He nodded, determined as he could be.

"Oh, that's a good idea." She rolled her eyes. "That way when you starve to death, you won't have very far to walk."

"Who going to starve to death?" a voice asked.

They looked up. A young woman stood at the edge of their table. She was very pretty, Jee noted, the sort of person who looked perfectly at ease in old jeans and a t-shirt. She had a white apron wrapped around her hips and shoulder length hair so red and dark that it was almost brown. Almost. She also had antlers, a tall rack sprouting from her hair like two trees at the end of winter. There was a plastic nametag clipped to her apron, Jee noticed: *Hi, My Name is Sarah.*

"You have horns." Jee didn't mean to be rude, it just slipped out.

The waitress nodded. "Uh huh, I do. Do you like them?"

Jee nodded, deciding on the spot that they were terrific.

"So," Sarah said, "you're starving to death?"

Jee pointed across the table to her brother. "He is."

The waitress cocked her head and looked at him. "Well then, we'd better get you something to eat." She pulled a little pad and pen from her apron pocket and winked. "What sounds good to you?"

Assam looked at his sister. "Nothing for me, thank you."

"I thought you were starving." The waitress raised her eyebrows.

"He isn't really starving yet," Jee said. "He's just afraid to eat anything."

"Afraid?" Sarah looked back and forth between them, half amused and half concerned.

"He read a story about somebody who ate some pumpkin seeds or something and was trapped here so she couldn't go home afterwards."

"Oh..." The waitress crouched down and rested her arms on the tabletop, settling her chin on top of them. "Listen sweetie," she said to Assam, "I know exactly what you're talking about. But that was a long time ago, a *long* time ago. And you shouldn't believe everything you read." She tipped her head to wink at Jee. "They were pomegranate seeds, for your information, not pumpkin. And she didn't get trapped. She *wanted* to stay."

"Really?"

"Uh huh." The waitress nodded. "She really did."

"Why?"

The waitress sighed with exaggerated romance. "She fell in love."

Jee made a face. Her brother, despite himself, did the same.

The waitress sat back in horror. "You don't believe in love?"

"I believe in it," the boy said. "I just don't like it."

The waitress fixed her eyes on him. "Really?"

Her eyes were brown, he noticed, and they shimmered a bit. Suddenly, he felt very warm.

"I don't like it either," Jee said. "Not one bit. There's this boy in my class who always says he loves this one girl, but he's a freak."

"He might be a freak now," the waitress said. "But give him a few years. It sounds like he's onto something. So..." Sarah stood up. "What do you like?"

"I like waffles," Jee pointed to a picture on the inside of the menu. "The big square ones with strawberries and whipped cream, please."

"Good choice." Sarah made a note on her pad, bobbing her head. "Belgian waffles with strawberries . . . and to drink?"

"She might be lying," Assam said quietly across the table. "How do you know you can trust her?"

Sarah stopped, pen in the air. "Pardon me?"

His sister rolled her eyes and then again, because the first time wasn't enough to express how stupid she thought he was. "Look at her. She has horns. Of course we can trust her."

"They're antlers."

"Exactly." Jee sat back and folded her arms.

Assam looked down at the menu folded in front of him. He looked back up to Sarah.

She stood, pen poised over the pad. She raised her eyebrows.

A large man walked by. He was so hairy, it stuck out all over. He wore jeans and a t-shirt with a killer whale on the front and carried a tray loaded down with steaming plates. The boy followed it with his eyes. He was very hungry. "Do you have hamburgers?"

She nodded, making a note on her pad. "We do. What do you like on them?"

"Uh..." The boy glanced down at the menu.

Sarah smiled and leaned in close. "My favorite is the Southwestern: Cheddar cheese and barbecue sauce," she said. "With bacon and onion rings. It's the barbeque sauce that makes it Art."

He nodded. "That sounds great."

She made another note on her pad. "Do you want fries?"

He thought for a moment. "Yes, please."

"Excellent choice . . . and to drink?"

The children stared at each other.

Sarah stood with her pen poised over her pad, waiting.

"Go ahead," Assam said to his sister.

"No, I'm still trying to decide."

At home, they always had milk with their meals. Each of them was waiting to see if the other was going to order something different.

"Annie makes very good shakes and malts," Sarah offered after a long moment.

"What's a malt?" Jee asked.

Sarah tipped her head back and forth, her antlers waving in the air. "It's kind of like a milkshake only a little different."

"Do they come in strawberry?"

Sarah nodded. "Chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, and pomegranate – just kidding." She gave Assam a wink.

He knew he was blushing. He could feel it but there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. Fortunately, his sister was too busy thinking about malts to notice.

"I'd like one of those," she said. "A strawberry one, please. To go with the waffles."

Sarah nodded, making a note on her pad. "You like strawberries, huh?"

Jee smiled. "I love them."

"I bet. Okay..." She turned back to Assam. "And for you?"

"Chocolate, please. A malt."

"Gotcha." Sarah made another note and smiled. "I'll go put these in, kids."

They watched her head off, threading her way through the tables, her antlers bobbing like trees in the wind.

"I like her," Jee said. "She's nice."

Her brother stared at her.

"What?"

He sighed. "Forget it."

"No. What now?"

He frowned at her. "Nothing."

"Fine."

They sat, staring at each other. Finally he said "It's just..."

"...just what?"

He fixed his mouth in a hard line, not unlike their mother's. "You should be more careful."

"Of what? Waffles?"

"Julia..." he said, exasperated.

She pointed at him, triumphant. "Now who's not being careful?"

He closed his eyes. "Sorry."

"Yeah."

"Okay, sorry, okay? Just . . . try not to be so friendly." It sounded lame, even as he said it. But before his sister could call him on it, a low voice growled next to them: "Who had the chocolate?"

Assam opened his mouth to reply and then froze, staring upwards. There was large black dog standing at their table – lean and lithe, with short dark fur and ears so sharp they stood upright. The dog stood stiffly on it's hind legs, wearing a white apron and balancing a broad tray on it's slender forepaws. It set the tray down carefully on the table. There were two tall glasses on it – one pale pink and the other pale brown. Next to each glass was a silver column frosted with condensation running down the side and each glass was topped with whipped cream and a single cherry on top, glowing chemical red.

"Right," the dog growled down it's long muzzle at them. "Two malts. Who's got chocolate coming to them?"

After a long moment, the boy meekly raised his hand.

The dark dog chuffed impatiently to itself, lifting the glass gingerly between its two paws and setting it down on the table in front of Assam. The silver cylinder followed afterwards, a paper-wrapped straw stuck to the condensation on its side.

"Thank you very much," Jee said as she got hers.

"De nada." The dog walked away with stiff, unbalanced steps through the crowded diner.

The girl picked the cherry off of her malt and held it out by the stem, offering it to her brother. "You want this?"

He shook his head.

"I hate them." She set the cherry down on the table and watching it stain the paper napkin a bright, unnatural red. "They taste like chemicals." She peeled the paper off her straw. "Stop staring. It's just a dog." She sipped her malt, testing the taste of it.

"It's not a dog," her brother told her. "It's a jackal."

"Whatever." She sipped her malt. "I like malt. What is it?"

Assam had no idea. "It's a chemical, I think. A mineral."

She took another sip, sucking in her cheeks like a fish. "It doesn't taste like chemicals. It tastes like..." She trailed off.

"Like what?"

"I don't know." She thought for a moment. "It tastes like . . . autumn leading into winter, it tastes like what the air smells like when the leaves have all fallen."

He wasn't used to her talking like this. "It tastes like leaves?"

"Shut up. Drink your malt and tell me what a jackal is. You know you're dying to."

He was. "It's a kind of dog."

She rolled her eyes. "No? Really?"

"It's like . . . like a skinny coyote." He took a sip of his malt. "You're right, this is good. They live in the desert." He wiped his lips with a paper napkin. "Jackals."

"Not all of them," she said. "Some of them work in diners making milkshakes."

Now it was his turn to roll his eyes. "Drink your chemicals."

"Malt. Yum."

They sat for a while, sipping and thinking. The jukebox started a new song, a man with a very deep voice sang about a river or an old man or a river that was an old man — Jee couldn't quite tell for certain what it was about exactly.

They watched as the two lizards paid their bill and walked out, hissing and clicking at each other as they moved through the tables on all fours, slapping their feet against the linoleum, dragging their long tails behind them. A large black man cleared the table after they'd gone. He wore a white top hat and tuxedo jacket with tails, shirtless beneath with a pair of patched blue jeans. There was a bright white skull painted on his right cheek. His nametag read, simply, *Saturday*. He moved around the table gathering up plates and scraps, clucking his tongue over the mess the dragons left behind.

Jee watched him over the rim of her glass.

He looked up from his work, caught her peeking and grinned at her, broad and friendly. He had a twin row of jagged teeth like a shark. Jee glanced away, half-embarrassed and half-frightened. She stole another peek. The man called Saturday finished up by wiping down the tabletop with a very dirty looking rag. Jee wondered if the rag was making the table dirtier or if the table might be making the rag cleaner. The waiter hefted a large tray of dirty dishes. As he carried it off, he tossed her a quick wink. She flushed, looked at her brother. "Why aren't you drinking your shake?"

"It's a malt." He chewed his thumbnail.

"Whatever. What's wrong now?" She was a little sick of all his worrying and fretting. It was like going to a very cool movie with someone who kept looking at their watch.

He looked at her, the perpetual worry lines on his forehead a little deeper than usual. "Listen, do you have any..?" but before he could finish, the waitress returned.

"Here we are, strawberry waffles for you, Princess."

Sarah set down a tray on the edge of the table. "And a cheeseburger for your friend, Mister Happy Fun Guy."

"He's not my friend," the girl told her. "He's my brother. And he's hardly any fun at all."

"Well..." Sarah reflected for a moment. "I don't know what to tell you. It sounds like you're stuck with him, then." She glanced around the table. "You guys have everything you need for now?"

"Thank you," Jee said around a mouthful of waffle and whipped cream.

"I'll check back in a bit." Sarah headed off to her other tables.

Jee grinned at her brother. "These are really good," she told him. "Do you want to try a bite?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Oh, okay *Dad*."

"Listen..."

"...your food's getting cold."

He pushed his plate to one side. "I'm not eating it."

"Too scared?"

"No. But..."

"...can I have one of your fries?" She reached across and snatched one without waiting for his answer.

He sighed. "Sure. Help yourself."

"Thanks." She took another one and dipped it into her malt. "Mmm, strawberry malt fries."

"Do you have any money?" he asked her bluntly.

"Why?"

He looked at her, then down to the full plate in front of her.

She stopped chewing. "Oh." Jee looked down at the plate of half-eaten food in front of her. "What do we do?"

He took a sip of his malt and shrugged. "I have no idea."

She opened her mouth to answer but a sharp whip-like crack from one of the nearby tables caught her attention. She turned to see that Saturday had returned, joined by two other waiters — a young woman with short coppery hair and a tall thin man with big gold hair. They snapped a white linen tablecloth between the three of them and then swarmed around the table where the lizards had been sitting, transforming it with silverware and china and crystal, and topping it all off with a candelabra in the center.

Saturday stepped back. His eyes darted over the table, checking every detail. He nodded. The woman lit the candlesticks one by one, a little green flame dancing on the tip of her forefinger.

Saturday nodded again and made a couple of miniscule adjustments to the single place setting. Satisfied, he brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his lapel and pulled a small folded card out of his breast pocket, setting it carefully in the center of the bone white china plate.

"What's it say?" Jee asked her brother.

He craned his neck to look across at the table. "Reserved."

She took a sip of her malt and said, half to herself, "I wonder who for?"

Giving in at last, Assam took a bite of his hamburger instead of answering. He figured it wouldn't be long before they found out.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The lights dimmed overhead and the whole diner took on a more formal, reserved tone. Voices were hushed, the waiters moved with a new grace and sensibility, and even the jukebox had gotten into the act, switching over to classical music.

“What’s going on?” Jee whispered to her brother.

He shrugged.

She decided that he was, more or less, useless. Jee watched as Saturday came towards them through the tables, the painted skull on his cheek glowing in the semi-dark. He moved with a formal, serious grace and she was disappointed that he did not wink again as he passed by. Following behind him was a boy in ragged, cast-off clothes. He followed Saturday to the elegant table that had been prepared, and waited for the man to pull out the chair for him. The boy sat down, nodding his thanks as the waiter handed him a menu bound in red leather. Saturday stepped back and was joined by two others.

On his right was a short, stocky man with dark skin the color of old blood. He had a long, wide jaw and rolling cow-like eyes. There was a thick gold ring in his broad, flat nose and a pair of long tapered horns spanned outward from his wide skull. He worked his jaws rhythmically, compulsively chewing.

On Saturday’s left was a thin, middle-aged woman who looked perfectly normal in every way except for the collection of small leather bags she wore on a string around her neck. Each bag was about the size of a fist and they pulsed rhythmically, like hearts – which was, Jee realized with a sick lurch in her stomach, exactly what they were.

The three of them waited patiently while the boy scanned the menu. The bull headed man’s jaws worked and a small pink sphere appeared from between his lips and then disappeared with a dull plop. Saturday glared at him and the bull headed man rolled his eyes in apology, swallowed his gum, and stared at the floor.

The boy murmured something and Saturday sent the bull headed man galloping off. He returned a few moments later carrying a small wooden box about the sized of a loaf of bread, putting it gently into Saturday’s outstretched hand. Saturday held the box out for the boy to inspect. There was a large black stamp on one side.

Jee craned her neck for a better look, wondering if it was tea.

Satisfied, the boy nodded his approval and Saturday set the box down. He ran his thumbnail along the sides, splitting the seal. He laid the box down and pried off the lid, the petulant squeal of old nails filling the restaurant. Saturday drew out a few fistfuls of straw from inside before, finally, revealing a bottle so green and dark that it was almost black. He held the bottle out for the boy, who gave him the same bored nod as before.

Saturday passed the bottle to the woman who drew out the cork with an expert stab from the nails on her right thumb and forefinger. She offered the skewered cork to the boy, but he waved it away.

Jee wondered why they tried to give him the cork. Her parents drank wine sometimes and she knew that the cork smelled wonderfully sour but she didn’t know it was edible. She would have to ask her brother about it later.

Saturday took the bottle gently and poured a small amount into one of the goblets on the table. He stepped back and the boy lifted the glass to his nose, first to sniff and then to sip the wine within. Setting the glass back down on the table, he nodded one last time.

The waiter filled the glass and, followed by his two assistants, moved off.

Jee watched, fascinated by the formality of it all and — although she would never have admitted this — a little envious of all of the attention the boy was getting. He wasn't much to look at, truth be told. He was young, of an age just between her brother and herself — maybe ten years old or slightly younger, even. His young face was rough, pockmarked with scars like the distant and cratered surface of the moon. He had dark hair that stood up from his head in tall, tangled spikes like winter trees stripped bare against the sky. His eyes, like his hair, were dark and dramatic and, somehow, spiky.

And he was looking at her, she realized. He flashed her a crazed, boyish grin. There were dark gaps in his smile where teeth had gone missing and he looked very young compared to the elegant table that was set for him. She dropped her eyes to the half-eaten waffles and strawberries slowly sinking into a sea of melted whipped cream on the plate in front of her. She had felt very old and grown up ordering for herself, but not anymore.

It only got worse when the boy's meal arrived a few minutes later on silver, dome-covered platters. She watched as he dug into his plate of rare, dripping meat. He ate like an animal, mouth opening and closing loudly, tearing at things with his teeth, smacking his lips and licking his fingers over every morsel. From time to time he would look up from his food and stare boldly in her direction, grinning that gap-toothed smile.

"Knock it off," her brother said suddenly. He had finished eating and was holding a crumpled napkin in his fist.

"What?"

"Come on," he said, inclining his head in the direction of the boy's table.

She had no idea what he was talking about and told him so.

Before he could reply, their antlered waitress reappeared. "Can I get you guys anything else?"

The boy shook his head. His sister did likewise.

"Okie dokes." Gathering up their plates, the waitress caught Jee's eye and said "Sweetheart, you're way too young for boys like Edgar. You'd best steer clear of him altogether."

"Told you," her brother muttered.

"Is that his name? Edgar?"

Worry flashed across the waitress' face. "What's your name, honey?"

The girl opened her mouth to answer and stopped. Across the table, her brother raised his eyebrows. She swallowed. "You can call me Jee."

"Smart girl," Sarah nodded. "Edgar's been around. He might run a little too wild for girls like you, if you get my meaning?"

Jee didn't but she nodded all the same.

"Good girl," Sarah said again as she laid down a slip of paper on the tabletop. "I can pick that up whenever you're ready." She moved off to another table.

Neither the boy nor the girl moved. They both sat, perfectly still, staring at the check.

"Now what?" Jee asked him.

"I have," Assam told her, "no idea."

"How much it is for?"

"I do not know and I do not want to know."

Jee thought for a moment and then she waved to their waitress.

"What are you doing?" her brother whispered.

"Buying us some time."

Sarah came over. "What's up?"

Jee put on her best face, the one she used for when she was in trouble at school. It was a good face, so good that it even worked on her mother, sometimes. "May I have another malt, please?"

Across the table from her, Assam's eyes widened.

The waitress nodded. She looked a little distracted and she looked a little worried. Then she put on a face of her own, one so bright and cheerful that it was immediately, obviously false. "Sure thing, sweetheart."

"Thank you," Jee replied.

Sarah's smile faltered for a moment and she glanced down at a folded piece of paper in her hand. She set it down on the table in front of the girl.

"What's that?"

Sarah snatched the paper back as Jee reached for it.

The girl looked up at her, confused.

Sarah knelt down and rested her elbows on the table. "You know, I don't think you want another malt, do you?"

Jee shook her head.

"I didn't think so." Sarah turned the folded piece of paper over in her fingertips. "I think you really want to get up, pay your bill, and get out of here as soon as possible, don't you?"

Jee glanced uncertainly to her brother. She nodded again.

"Then you probably don't want to read this," Sarah put the folded paper back down on the table. "You probably don't want to read this at all." She moved off.

Jee waited a moment, then picked up the paper from the table and unfolded it.

"What are you doing?" her brother asked.

"Shh." Jee looked over the paper intently.

"What's it say?"

She refolded the note and set it down on the table as before. "I have no idea."

He leaned forward and took the paper, unfolded and read it. He glanced quickly to one of the other tables and then back to her again.

"What?" she asked. "What's it say?"

"She's right," he said, refolding the paper. "We should go now."

"What's it say?" Jee held her hand out for the note but he drew it back out of her reach.

"Come on, let's see if they'll let us wash dishes or something." He started to get up but then stopped when he saw the look on her face.

"It doesn't say anything," he told her. "It's blank. Honestly."

She just looked at him.

He sighed and unfolded the note, reading aloud. "'Dear Julia, thank your for coming to visit. You're very cute. I hope you come back soon. Love, Susan.'"

She didn't blink. "Well (A), she doesn't know my real name. (B) Her name is Sarah, not Susan. And (C), you're a lousy liar."

He closed his eyes. "Listen..."

"...I am," she interrupted, "not going anywhere until you tell me what it says."

With a sigh, he unfolded the paper and read again: "'I would be delighted if you would join me.'"

He refolded the note and slid it back across the table.

She picked it up. "Huh . . . who's it from?" she asked and then stopped as realization dawned. Someone was waving to her from one of the other tables. She looked over.

It was the pockmarked boy, Edgar. And he was smiling.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

There was something there behind Edgar's dark eyes, in the way he snapped his fingers at the waiter to have a chair brought for Jee. There was something cruel inside of him, something old and damaged hiding behind that gap toothed smile. He was missing more than just the front two, she noticed as she sat down. He looked like a jack o' lantern that had been left out too long after Halloween, starting to cave in and blacken with rot.

Edgar gestured to the chair and Jee sat down, more than a little intimidated by the elegance of the table and fiercely determined not to show it to the odd boy sitting across from her. He lifted a crystal goblet and, eyeing her over the rim, took a sip. "You can call me Edgar," he said.

His voice was raspy, almost hoarse. Jee wondered if he had a cold. "Edgar what?"

He smiled. "And what's your name?"

She shrugged. "I don't remember."

"You don't remember?"

She shrugged again.

He smiled wider, showing her more than she wanted to see of his rotten teeth. "So?"

"So what?"

"What's your name?"

She shrugged again. "I can't remember."

He blinked, leaned forward in his seat slightly. "I said, I'm Edgar."

"I heard you. I already know your name."

His eyes narrowed. "How?"

"She told me."

"Who?" He took another sip of his wine.

"Sarah. The waitress."

"And did she tell you that I'm not someone you want to make angry?"

"No, why?" Jee picked at a scrap of strawberry stuck between her teeth, examined her thumbnail. "Do you get angry a lot?"

He froze, the glass halfway to his lips. His mouth twisted suddenly, as though the wine had been very sour. For a moment she thought that he might throw it in her face . . . then, abruptly, he laughed. It was a wild, animal sound and it gave her the shivers. It was a laugh she would hear for years afterwards, waking up from nightmares.

"Sometimes I do," he said, setting down his glass. "But not as often as you'd think. Would you like some wine?"

"No thank you," she said, even though she would have liked very much to try it, to join him in his little pretend grownup game.

"Suit yourself. Can I offer you anything else?" He gestured to the plates on the table.

"No." Her stomach turned over at the sight of the remnants of mashed potatoes and scraps of meat soggy with blood. "No thank you. I had waffles."

He smiled and instantly she realized that she would have to be careful what she said to him. Anything, any detail he got his teeth into, he would tear at it like a dog with a bone.

"I've never been fond of waffles," he told her. "They're too sweet for me and I don't understand them."

"Well, sure, they're pretty complicated."

"They're candy, pretending to be food. It's what parents give to little children at fancy breakfasts when they want to keep them quiet while the grownups have their coffee and talk . . . but you like them, you said?"

She shrugged. "They're all right. They're not my favorite, or anything."

"You have a favorite?"

"Not really."

"Well, you're young." He picked at his plate and popped a scrap of bloody gristle into his mouth, licking his fingertips like a cat. "I'm more of a steak and eggs man, myself."

She did her best not to roll her eyes.

"Hard to come by, where I come from," he said to her. "Eggs might put in an appearance once in a while but we never saw any meat — at least, not anything you'd call food. And steak wasn't even a dream back then." He took another sip of wine.

Jee ignored the obvious opening to ask a question. Even though she had opened the door to this conversation, she was going to do her best to keep from walking through it herself.

"So now," he said, "I order it whenever I can."

"Not tonight."

He smiled. "Tonight I felt more like roast beef."

Tonight you look like roast beef, she thought to herself.

They sat for a moment, looking at each other. Edgar took up his fork and stabbed at the stray bits of fat and gristle on his plate, filling his mouth. "You're pretty."

She was getting tired of shrugging, but it was probably safer than kicking him in the face.

He speared a chunk of potato. "But you're not as pretty up close as I thought you'd be."

"Neither are you." It was out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

His knuckles went white around the fork in his fist.

She held his gaze, ready to fight or ready to run.

He laughed, spraying bits of half-chewed food and forced good humor across the table. Then, just as abruptly, he stopped, slamming his hand down on the tabletop, rattling the dishes and crystal.

Everyone in the restaurant went silent.

Jee glanced over to her brother, half-risen in his seat. She stared at him, willing him to sit back down. When he had, she turned her attention back to Edgar. The boy had regained his composure, somewhat. But it was still there, the rage, underneath the surface. She could see it, waiting. He might snap at any minute.

"I can help you, you know." He stared at her, idly tracing his fingertip through the gravy and blood on his plate.

"Can you?"

"If you ask nicely." He grinned. "I can solve all of your problems in a snap."

Edgar licked the tip of his fingers and snapped them. Almost immediately, a waiter appeared and cleared the plate away. Edgar snapped his fingers again, never taking his eyes off of hers as another waiter swept in and removed the candles.

Snap. The silverware was gone.

Snap. The dishes clattered away in a rush.

Snap. Snap. Snap.

Again. Again. Again.

He leaned back, still staring into her eyes. *Snap.*

In a flurry, the table was as before: Paper placemats, paper napkins in their silver container, salt and pepper shakers to one side, ketchup bottle and sugar packets on the other. The jukebox wheezed to life with a groan, muttering as it picked up speed halfway through "Me and My Shadow." Somewhere, someone turned the lights back up again and conversation resumed around them.

Snap. A new waiter appeared, a grotesquely tall woman with stringy hair and rotten teeth. *Hela*, that was what her nametag said. "Get y' sumptin'?" she asked, pad and pencil in hand. Her nails, Jee noticed, were encrusted with dirt.

Edgar shook his head. "No thank you." He looked to Jee. "Anything for you? My treat? Maybe some more waffles?"

She shook her head, desperately wanting to punch him.

"Suit yourself." He stood up as the waitress moved off. "See you around."

She looked up at him and then slowly stood up. She was taller than he was, by at least a foot, but it didn't seem to bother him as much as she wanted it to.

"I could help you," he told her again. "And it wouldn't cost you hardly anything."

"How much?" She thought of the look on her brother's face when Sarah had put the check down on the table.

"Nothing at all," he said. "At least, nothing expensive."

She narrowed her eyes. "What then?"

He smiled like a picket fence. "Nothing important, nothing you need, nothing you'd miss." He turned to go and then looked back to her. "Trust me. I can help. Ask around. Everybody knows me." He smiled and gestured to the tables around them.

She glanced at the table. No one would meet her gaze.

"See you around." *Snap.*

She turned at the sound.

Edgar was gone.

Jee went back over to the table and sat down across from her brother. There was a fresh malt sitting at her place. She took a sip. It was a little runny from sitting too long.

"Who was that? What did you talk about?" Assam sounded a lot like their father.

"I have," she said, answering both of his questions at once, "no idea. No idea at all."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Back at the table, Jee drank her second malt as slowly as she could. The waitress came by every few minutes to check on them. Jee could tell that she was starting to get suspicious. But Jee was full. She gave up trying to actually drink the malt. Now she just pretended to suck on her straw. The sickly sweet smell made her stomach churn.

"Do you want anything else?" her brother asked her.

She groaned. "Ugh. I really don't."

They had no money to pay the bill. The faster she was done with her malt, the sooner they would have to deal with that problem. But the longer they waited, the more suspicious things looked.

"Any ideas?" Her brother looked at a loss. They had all the time in the world – or, rather, all the time in the underworld – to put together a plan and, it seemed to her, she was the only one working on the problem.

Jee considered their options. "Maybe we could . . . I know," she said brightly, "I'll go to the bathroom and crawl out the window. And then you go to the bathroom..."

"...what if there's no window?"

"Um..." She thought for a moment. "What about..?"

He shook his head, watching the pale giantess taking orders a few tables away. He had the feeling that, as friendly as everyone seemed, it was not a good idea to try and cheat these people.

"Okay," Jee said. "What if we're suddenly sick..?"

"...or," whispered a conspiratorial voice next to them. "What if you're two little kids who are lost, broke, and too scared to sneak out but too scared to stay and ask for help?"

Assam and Jee both jumped.

Sarah slid into the booth with them, putting her arm around Assam. She gave the boy a squeeze. "How was that burger, buddy? Was I right about the barbecue sauce or was I right about the barbecue sauce?"

"You were right," he said weakly.

"Usually am." Sarah sighed and leaned back in the seat. "So . . . what are we going to do about it?"

The two children stared at the table.

Sarah laughed softly, not unkindly. "Eyes up, guys. It's not as bad as it looks." She smiled. "I think we can work something out."

"Like what?" Assam asked.

She gave the boy another squeeze. She could tell he needed it. "Yeah, let's go talk to Gerry." She slid out of the booth and stood up. "Don't worry, it'll be fine."

She led them off through the maze of tables and booths to gap in the counter at the back of the diner. An old woman sat on a stool behind the counter. As they approached, she looked up from the folded newspaper in her hand and whispered "Hey Sarah."

"Hey Laima," Sarah said.

"What's a four letter word for 'copy'?" the old woman asked, still whispering.

Sarah scrunched up her face in thought. "Uh . . . you mean besides 'copy'?"

The woman consulted her newspaper. "The clue says 'Self portrait.'"

Sarah shrugged. "Maybe it's 'draw'?"

The woman shook her head. "It has to start with an 'T'."

"You got me," Sarah said.

Laima made a face and studied her paper. "Seth picking you up?"

Sarah nodded. "But I'm not off for another hour."

"Um," the boy said quietly. "I think it's 'twin'."

Sarah crouched down next him. "What'd you say, big guy?"

He nodded at the paper. "It's 'twin' I think, like identical twins."

Sarah looked at him for a moment and then at Laima. "So, there y'go."

"Thank you," Laima whispered, writing it down. "What are you called, boy?"

He hesitated for a moment and then he told her, finally accepting the name for himself: "Assam."

"That's a good name," the old woman told him. "Make sure you hold onto it."

"Yes ma'am."

Sarah stood up. "I'll be back in a minute."

"See you," Laima whispered, studying the crossword once more.

The children followed Sarah down a short hallway. To one side they could hear the clatter and sizzle of the kitchen. The smell of frying oil drifted past them, clinging to their clothes. "Gross, huh?" Sarah looked back and wrinkled her nose. "Sometimes on my day off, I can still smell it in my hair."

At the end of the hallway was a metal door with a round window set into it, like a porthole. Sarah held it open for them. Jee went first through the door. Just inside, she stopped. Her brother bumped into her from behind. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to decide if this is the strangest thing we've seen so far," she said quietly.

He looked past her into the room beyond. After a moment, he said "Yes, yes it is."

His sister nodded. "That's what I thought." She stepped in and he followed, the door swinging quietly closed behind them.

They were standing in a little room at the back of the diner. The room was divided in two. On one side was a counter jumbled high with dirty dishes. On the other, another counter neatly stacked with clean dishes. Between the two was a sink piled high with soapsuds. There was a lizard at the sink, moving dishes from one side to the other, washing them clean — well, it wasn't a lizard, not actually. It was too big, far too big.

No, it was a dragon. A three headed dragon. His skin was mottled and green. He had his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows and he wore a stained apron. He was washing dishes, hard at work.

One of the dragon's heads bobbed and nodded, singing along with a battered transistor radio that buzzed on a shelf above the sink.

"Hey Gerry," Sarah said. "How's it hanging?"

One of the other heads swiveled around on a long neck, a cigarette dangling from his lips. He glanced sidelong at them and rolled his eyes.

The third head, the one in the center, continued to work at the dishes, inspecting the plates intently, sudsing them and scraping them clean. From time to time, a long forked tongue poked out to lick away some stray scrap of food before setting the clean dish to one side with the others.

The first head, the one on the left, swiveled around to look at them again, squinting one eye through the nimbus of cigarette smoke circling his head. "Let me guess," he said, the cigarette bobbing in his lips. "No money?"

The children nodded.

"Well, you might as well get started," the dragon said. "Sooner you do, sooner you'll be done."

Sarah smiled. "Thanks a bunch, Gerry. I owe you one."

"You do," the dragon's left head said. "And so do they."

"Well, they're good kids. They've got a good heart."

The dragon's right head reared back in mock surprise. "Only one?" he asked. "What do you do, share it out every other weekend and Tuesdays?"

"Ignore him," Sarah told the kids. "He's just a big softy."

The dragon on the left glowered. "I am not. I am an infernal god of the underworld and the father of lies."

"Hardly," Sarah said. "You're barely either of those anymore." She knelt down and beeped Jee's nose with her fingertip. "I'll come back and check in on you before I punch out for the night, okay sweetie?"

Jee nodded.

"Stay out of trouble," Sarah said to Assam with a wink. And then she was gone, the metal door swinging closed behind her.

The two children stood a moment, staring after her. Then they looked back to the dragon.

Gerry, Jee told herself. *His name is Gerry.* Somehow it made him less frightening. Although, he was still a dragon.

"Jesus Christ, Superstar," sang the dragon's head on the right softly. "Who do you think you really are?"

Jee thought he had a fairly nice singing voice, for a dragon.

The head on the left rolled his eyes. "Ignore him. He's got delusions of grandeur."

"I do not," said the right head mildly. "I could have gone on the stage. My mother always said I was a great musical talent waiting to be discovered."

The left head tapped out his cigarette into a dirty coffee cup. "Yeah, well, keep looking, bro. You might discover it eventually."

"Aprons," said the third head, the one in the middle. "On the wall over there. Get 'em on. There's a lot of dishes to get through yet."

Assam and Darjeeling went over to the wall and the boy took down two aprons — one patterned blue and white with a teacup on it, the other had a cartoon devil wearing a chef's hat with the slogan "Kiss the Cook" printed underneath.

He handed the one with the teacup to his sister and she stared at him. "Um, kinda girly."

"Well . . . yeah. You're a girl."

She took the one with the devil on it and slipped it over her head. "Help me tie it," she said as she turned around.

He sighed, loudly.

Once she was all set, he put on his own.

The left head glared at them. "You fashion plates ready yet?"

"Sorry," Assam said.

The dragon hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Dirty dishes on the right, clean ones on the left." He puffed his cigarette, the blue smoke hanging around his head like a halo. "Don't get 'em mixed up, you pay for anything you break, and we don't accept 'sorry' here."

"Did you mean to die like that?" the middle head sang.

"Seriously, you're killing me," the left head said to his brother, rolling his eyes. "You," he said, stretching his neck out, suddenly very long and snakish, bobbing nose-to-nose with Jee. "You're on the right, so keep the dirty dishes coming. I don't like to wait."

"Okay."

"And you," the head swung around to her brother. "Grab a towel and get 'em dry."

With a quick glance to each other, the kids moved to either side. Between them, the dragon smoked, sulked, and sang.

INTERLUDE

Juniper held the stick out, inspecting it. He'd stripped it from one of the few nettles that remained standing, blackened and scorched, in Annie's garden. He poked at the slimy muck at the base of the overturned kettle.

There: Something gleaming dully in the morning light. He knelt and, gingerly, pulled them out of the muck one by one, hefting the heavy iron lumps in his hand. Juniper nodded to himself. He hadn't expected it to be this much fun. He turned to the boy standing next to him. "And from here they went to Seth's?"

The boy nodded, working the tip of his shoe under a stray bit of bone in the greasy ashes. He kicked it up and over the skeletal remains of the cottage. "Waffles and milkshakes."

"What?"

"That's what they ordered. And a cheeseburger."

"Rot your teeth," Juniper muttered. "Too sweet." He thought for a moment, the lumps still warm against his palm. He slid his hand into his coat pocket and let them fall. "All right," he told the boy. "Don't stray too far."

"All you have to do is call," the boy said. Then he was gone.

Juniper stood in the still smoking rubble on the outskirts of Moontown. He smiled at the far off sound of children laughing and playing among the brightly colored buildings. It had been a long time since he'd heard so pure a sound. Humming his little tune, he turned and walked through the smoldering stalks, leaving the town behind him.

The witch's teeth hung heavy in his pocket, tapping against his leg as he walked.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jee was having a perfectly lovely time.

"Just so long as you don't spray me," the dragon told her, handing her a pair of yellow rubber gloves and the spray nozzle. Although they went clear up past her elbows, Jee enjoyed the pleasant feeling of the gloves squeaking between her fingers.

Despite his fearsome appearance, Gerry was actually very sweet — at least, most of his heads were. Together, she and the dragon sang along with the radio and scrubbed the dishes clean. "Lots of choc'lit for me to eat..." he sang.

"...lots of coal makin' lots of heat..." she answered.

"...warm hands..."

"...warm face..."

"...warm feet..."

"Oh, wouldn't it be lovely!" they harmonized.

"Lovely..." the dragon sang.

"...lovely..." she followed.

"Gods of flame and mischief," muttered Gerry's leftmost head to Assam — who was not, incidentally, having quite so much fun as his sister. "Is she always this . . . *this*?"

"Perky?" The boy nodded glumly. "Yeah. She is."

"How do you stand it?"

Assam shrugged. Long ago he'd developed a limited immunity to his sister's charms. She no longer delighted or annoyed him — at least, in small doses.

The dragon ground out his cigarette in a coffee cup sitting next to the radio. "Some days," he confided to Assam, "some days, I'm half-tempted to 'accidentally' knock that damn thing into the sink."

"What, the radio?"

"Yeah."

"Why don't you just change the station?"

The dragon shook his head. "Wouldn't matter. It's on every station, it's all they play."

"What is?"

The dragon fished a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his apron pocket. "Showtunes," he said miserably, offering the pack to the boy. "And nothing but."

Assam shook his head. "I don't smoke."

"No? Suit yourself." Gerry tugged a fresh cigarette out of the pack with his lips and lit it with a jet of blue flame from one of his nostrils.

Assam was impressed. "They only play showtunes?"

"Yeah," the dragon blew a pale plume of smoke out of his other nostril. "Why? Where you think you are, anyways?"

Assam shrugged. He had a point. The radio squeaked its way through a commercial for a car wash and then the disk jockey rolled into a new song. Assam tried to wrap his head around the notion that somewhere out there in the Underworld was a disk jockey playing songs, let alone a car wash.

The middle head of the dragon sang softly: "As the days go by, I keep thinking, When does it end?"

"Hopefully soon," the left head muttered to Assam. Behind them, the door banged open and Sarah came in, ducking her head to get her antlers under the top of the doorframe.

"Hey guys," she said. "How's it going?"

"Sarah!" Jee and the dragon's middle and right heads called out.

The left head nodded to her. "You punched out?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I just wanted to say hi before I left. Everybody doing okay?"

Jee and the dragons nodded. "We've been singing," the girl told her.

Sarah smiled. "I bet. How about you, big guy?" She knelt down next to Assam. "Gerry being mean to you?"

"Very," the left head told her. "I'm being very mean and I've bitten him twice, once for every time he smiled."

"He's fine," the boy told her.

Sarah smiled. "Can I borrow him for a few minutes?"

Gerry nodded. "They're just about done, anyways."

"Awww," Jee frowned. "Can't we stay for a while longer?"

Sarah stood up, cocked her head, and put her hands on her hips. "You are," she told the girl, "absolutely one of the strangest, most wonderful little girls I have met. Ever." And then she kissed her, once on each cheek.

Jee beamed.

"You stay here with Gerry." Sarah put her hand on Assam's shoulder. "I want to talk to your brother for a minute. When he comes back, you guys can call it a night, okay?"

The girl nodded.

"Come on, buddy." She nudged him with her hip. "Walk me out, okay?"

Assam, trying very hard not to blush, said "Be right back."

The dragon and his sister nodded at him, bobbing their heads in time to the radio.

"No one cares if you grow or if you shrink," his sister sang to him.

Assam didn't take it personally. He hung up his apron and followed Sarah out.

"I'm not going to ask you a lot of questions, but I need to know a few things. You kids are very sweet and I'd hate it if something bad happened to you because I was afraid of being nosy and didn't help."

They were standing outside on a low concrete slab at the back of the diner. To one side was a big green dumpster with a few garbage cans gathered around it. On the other side, a set of concrete steps led down to what looked like a driveway. Assam was surprised to see that it was nighttime. "I didn't think we'd been in there that long," he said to Sarah.

"Time works a little differently here than what you're used to," she told him. "Which is one of the things I wanted to talk with you about." She shot a glance out into the darkness. "My boyfriend'll be here soon, so I don't have a lot of time." She sat down on the edge of the loading dock and dangled her legs over, letting them swing. She patted the concrete next to her. Assam sat down.

"Your sister's very strong," she said. "And very sweet. But she's not careful enough. Not by half. So you're going to have to be careful enough for both of you. You understand what I'm saying?"

The boy nodded. His parents had been telling him practically the same thing for years.

Sarah looked up at the sky. She seemed to be debating something in her mind. Finally, she said "How did you get Charlie to take you, without paying the obolus?"

"The what?"

"The coin. What did you give Charlie for your passage?"

Assam shifted, confused. "Who's Charlie?"

"The man with the boat, on the river. He pushes it along with a staff, a long stick?"

The boy shook his head. "No, we couldn't . . . he wouldn't let us on. So we had to..."

She held up a finger to his lips. "Don't. It's better if I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

She sighed. "I can't lie."

Assam looked at her puzzled. "Okay."

"If someone asks me, I mean." She tipped her head towards him and whispered. "If someone asks, I'll have to tell them what I know."

"Who?" The way she said someone caught his attention. It wasn't a someone that meant anyone — the way she said it made him think that someone meant someone specific and that it was not a good someone either.

She sat back. "Trust me, it's better if you don't know."

"It's better if I don't know or it's better if you don't say?"

She sighed. "Both, probably. But you don't need to worry about that."

"What do I need to worry about?"

Sarah looked up at the sky. "Nothing."

Together, they stared up at the dark, starless sky for a while.

"You're a good kid, Sam," she told him.

"Thanks, I..." He froze, suddenly very scared.

She looked at him pointedly. "It wasn't hard to figure out. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone." She looked back up at the sky. "There's really only one of two reasons why people come here," she said. "And only one of those is on purpose, really."

He didn't know what to say.

"You're going to have to be very careful. And she's going to have to be very strong." Sarah gave him a wry smile. "This sort of thing isn't nearly as easy as it sounds in the stories."

"It's never easy in the stories," Assam said.

She winked. "So, this will be harder then."

He laughed.

There was a clatter from one of the garbage cans and he looked over, startled, just in time to see something pale slink off into the shadows.

"Foxes," Sarah said. "Listen, you're not the first kid to try this sort of thing."

"I'm not?"

"It's happened before."

"Does it happen a lot?"

"More than you would think."

He sat there for a long moment, thinking. He was afraid to ask his next question, but Sarah beat him to it.

"Sometimes," she said, quietly. "Sometimes they do, yes."

"But not always?" He didn't dare look at her.

"But not always." She put her hand on the crown of his head and gave him a wry, lopsided smile. "I'm sorry buddy."

Looking back down at his shoes, Assam said "It's alright. At least it's not hopeless."

She laughed and squeezed his hand. "You guys, you always say that."

"Who?"

"You. People." She laughed again. "You're all so funny."

Assam opened his mouth and then closed it again.

She cocked her head to one side. "What?"

"Nothing." Assam wasn't quite sure that he wanted to know how much more to Sarah there was than just a cute girl who happened to have antlers.

"Tell me."

"What..?" He stopped, uncertain. "What are you?"

She sat back and looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Before he could answer, a car came around the side of the diner and pulled up alongside of them, engine rumbling like thunder. The car was long and painted dark red with little sparkles in it. There was a coiled snake painted in gold on the hood. As it pulled up, the top of the car opened up and folded back to crumple upon itself and disappear behind the back seat. Rap music poured out.

"That's my ride," Sarah said. "That's my baby." She stood up, brushing off the seat of her jeans. "Walk me over, I want you to meet Seth."

They hopped down and Assam followed her to the car. There was a man sitting behind the wheel. He was bald and tan, with a face so smooth it might have been glass. He had a gold ring in one ear and

wore a sand colored shirt open to his waist. He might have been a thousand years old, he might have been ninety. "Hey baby," he called to her. "Who's your friend?"

"Hi sweetie." Sarah leaned in and kissed him on the lips. "This is Assam. He's been helping Gerry out tonight."

"Hi," the boy said.

Seth had yellow eyes, with a long thin pupil at the center like a cat or a snake. "Assam," the man nodded. "That is an excellent name." He had a bit of a lisp, Assam noted, and his lips were cracked around the edges and wrinkled like a mummy's.

"Thanks."

Sarah wrinkled her nose at Seth, looking very cute and very young. "Sweetie, I gotta finish up one last thing here real quick, then we can go. You don't mind waiting do you?"

Seth shook his head. "No problem," he smiled at Assam. "Don't go stealing my girl now, boy."

"He just might," Sarah said before Assam could answer. She draped her arm over his shoulder. "He's quite a charmer and I've got a thing for younger men."

"Don't I know it." Seth winked at the boy.

Assam felt the blush on his cheeks and couldn't do anything about it.

"Come on handsome." She laughed, walking him back up the stairs to the diner. "Listen..." She knelt down and put her hands on his shoulders, "I wish we had more time to talk," she said. "Damn. I wish I could help you more."

"Why?" The question was out of his mouth before he could stop it. He didn't understand why she was taking so much of an interest in him and his sister.

She cocked her head to one side, antlers tilting. "Because. Because I like you. You have a good heart. And your sister, she has a lot of spirit."

She leaned in and put her forehead against his, closing her eyes. "You're going to be okay," she said.

Assam didn't move. He could smell her skin, warm and soft. He couldn't breathe. He wondered if she was telling him that to make him feel better or if she needed to say it so she would feel better.

She leaned back and looked at him. Suddenly, thrillingly, she kissed his cheek. "You came here for a reason," she said. "You'll make it."

Assam nodded, his brain having shut down the moment her lips had touched his cheek. He could taste cinnamon or cloves. He still wasn't sure which.

She smiled again. "You know, I really do have a thing for younger men and you're very cute."

"Really?" Assam couldn't help but glance over her shoulder to where Seth was waiting.

"Don't let looks deceive you." She leaned in, whispered against his ear. "I'm almost three thousand years older than he is."

Assam didn't know what to say.

She smiled, nose to nose with him.

Cinnamon, he decided.

Sarah locked eyes with him and said, quietly, as though someone might be eavesdropping. "Go to the Winter Palace and tell her your story. I think she'll help you."

"Who will? Where's the palace?"

"Not so loud," Sarah shushed him. "Follow the river. You'll know it when you find it."

Before Assam could ask more questions, Sarah stood up. "Time to go. My man and I are going to the movies. Take care of her." She squeezed his hands between hers.

"Thank you." It didn't seem like enough, but he said it anyway.

She smiled down at him. "You get a little older, you're going to be a heartbreaker." Sarah turned and walked back to the car while his blush mercifully, slowly faded. As she opened the door, she called "See you. Remember what I said."

"I will."

She got in and closed the door. Assam realized that a convertible was a very practical thing to have, if your girlfriend had antlers. He wondered what they did when it rained. Then he wondered if it even rained at all.

Sarah gave him a quick wave and Seth nodded to him.

Assam raised his hand and he did not remember to put it down until long after their taillights had faded into the darkness. He stood in the pool of light cast by the single bare bulb over the door. A few moths darted around, their shadows huge in the yellow sodium light. He wondered if they were real moths or, maybe, just the ghosts of moths who had long since gone into the light. Or perhaps, like Sarah, they were something else entirely.

He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders, ready to face the ordeal of persuading his little sister to stop washing dishes with a three-headed, showtunes singing dragon. He had his work cut out for him, he knew.

There was a clatter over by the garbage bins and he turned with a surprised yelp. From the shadows, something answered with a little bark of its own. Assam froze. He thought to run for the door. He was afraid that if he did, whatever was out there would give chase. He wouldn't make it.

He stared into the shadows. Something that might have been two green eyes stared back. After a long moment, he saw them blink and disappear. He relaxed.

Foxes, Sarah said in the back of his head.

He turned back toward the diner. His hand was on the knob when a soft voice spoke from behind him.

"Pardon?"

Assam turned. There was a fox, there in the shadows, sitting on top of one of the trashcans. It stared at him intently. Assam turned away, reaching for the door again. There was a polite little cough behind him. He turned back. The fox was still staring at him.

"Uh . . . hello?" Assam said.

The fox blinked and lowered its head, chewing thoughtfully on one of its forepaws. Assam felt suddenly, intensely stupid. He sighed and turned the knob, pulling open the door.

The fox raised its head and said "Pardon m'sieu, but I could not help overhearing that you were perhaps looking for someone?"

Assam stared at the fox.

"Perhaps," the fox said, "I am one who could help, no?"

Assam didn't know what to say. He let the doorknob slip out of his hand, listening to it click shut once more.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

This isn't a fairy tale, Assam told himself. This isn't Narnia or something. Animals just don't walk up to you and start talking. He'd put up with a lot so far, but this was starting to strain his innate sense of logic.

The fox sat back on its haunches. "You need to find a place and a person, no?"

"Well, no . . . I mean, yes. I do." Assam took a breath, swearing that if he ever got out of this place that nothing would ever surprise him ever again. Real life was going to be very boring from now on, when they made it back. *If they made it back.*

"I thought that this was so," the fox inclined her head sharply. "I did not mean to be, as you say, dropping at the eaves..."

Eavesdropping, Assam thought to himself...

"...but I suppose it is so. I am very nosy and always have been since I was just a kit," the fox finished sadly.

Assam realized that it was a girl, a female fox, and she was very young. "Uh, that's okay. Don't worry about it."

The fox looked up, fluttering her eyelashes at him. "But you are not angry?"

"No. I'm not angry."

The fox gave a little squeak of delight and puffed her chest out. "Oh m'sieu, I am so glad I have not offended you."

"Well . . . that's okay. I really should be getting back now. Nice meeting you."

"Oh, but please." The fox hopped down and padded towards him. "I can help you."

"How?"

She sat down a few feet away and looked up at him breathlessly. "You are looking for the palace of the winter, no?"

The Winter Palace. "Can you tell me how to get there?"

The fox wrinkled her forehead. "No m'sieu." She shook her head sadly. "That is too difficult a path to describe. I do not have all of your words to do so."

"Okay, thanks anyways." He turned back to the door.

"Wait!" The fox hopped up. "I cannot but tell you, but I can show you. And yet, we must hurry." She looked back over her shoulder behind the diner. "Before the darkness comes."

Assam resisted the urge to pat her head, not certain if she would appreciate it. "That's great," he said. "Let me go get Jee and then we can..." He trailed off.

The fox stopped her little dance and stared at him.

"What is it?"

The fox chuffed. "Jee? But who is this? She is a woman?"

"Um, well . . . yes. Well, she's a girl."

The fox pursed her lips. "A friend perhaps? A girlfriend? One of your many lovers? Like the spiky one who kissed you?"

Assam blushed violently. "God, no. She's my sister."

"You say so?" The fox seemed unconvinced.

Assam nodded. "Yes, honestly, don't worry about her."

The fox tossed her head, sullen. "And why should I not worry? What is it to me?" she asked stiffly. "Unless you are saying to me that I am jealous?" She looked at him accusingly. "Is that what you are saying to me now?"

Assam had absolutely no idea what to say.

"Because I am," the fox went on. "I am jeune petit reynard un petit jealous, oui . . . but that does not mean you should play so cruelly with me, no." She nuzzled his hand open and slid her head under it, forcing him to pet her. "No, be kind to me, m'sieu. Be kind to me, merci?"

Assam patted her head, more embarrassed than he had ever been in his life. The fox leaned against his leg for a moment. "You are a very sweet boy. I am glad we should be making such friends."

"Okay."

She pulled away suddenly and trotted off.

"Where are you going?"

The fox stopped just at the edge of the circle of light and looked back at him. "But I was only showing you the way to the palace, yes? Are we not going now?"

Assam scratched his head and glanced back to the diner. "Oh, yeah, right."

"Unless," the fox sniffed, "you need to ask permission from your girlfriend?"

The boy sighed, wondering briefly if his whole life was going to be like this, ruled by women. "I told you. She's my sister."

The fox smiled up at him, suddenly very dog-like with her small yellow teeth. "Then she is sure to wait for you to come back."

Again, he had no answer.

"Come," she said with a toss of her head. "The palace of the winters is waiting." The fox trotted off into the shadows. After a moment, Assam followed.

They walked on into the darkness, the fox a little ways ahead of the boy. Her paws made soft sounds in the pale sand and she called back to Assam, leading him on with her voice. The boy looked back over his shoulder at the lights of the diner receding behind them. He was starting to worry, to think about turning back. And then he was falling, sprawling face first into the sand.

The fox had stopped dead in her tracks and he'd tripped over her. She let out a yelp and scrambled out from under him, crouching low to the ground and staring up into the darkness ahead of them.

"Sorry." Assam got up, brushing himself off.

The fox whined and lay flat against the ground, eyes to the sky.

"What is it?"

She didn't answer. She shivered, her ears twitching back and forth. After a long moment, the fox slunk over to stand next to him. She did not take her eyes off of the darkness, not even for a second. He could feel her shuddering next to his leg. "What is it?" he asked again.

Eyes forward, the fox answered in a low voice. "Please do not speak so loud."

"What's wrong?"

Quietly, she said "I am so frightened of the darkness." She looked up at him briefly and he saw genuine terror in her eyes, quite different from the wily and flirtatious animal she had been a few minutes earlier.

"But . . . how can you be afraid of the dark? That's like a bird being allergic to trees."

The fox looked back to the darkness. "I do not know this word 'allergic.' Does it mean 'frightened of' perhaps?"

"I just mean that . . . you're a fox. You're nocturnal. How can you be afraid of the dark?"

"I am not afraid of the dark," the fox said scornfully.

"But you said..."

"...I said that I am afraid of the darkness. Oui, yes, I am a fox and I love the night. The dark is my

home and I am never scared in it. But that," she nodded to the blackness ahead of them, "that frightens me so very much."

The boy followed her gaze, utterly confused. "But there's nothing..." He trailed off. No, there was something there. He couldn't quite make it out, but it was there. He tried to focus on the dark form out there. Shifting like smoke, like ink.

"You see now?" the fox asked.

She was right. Something was there and it was coming closer, drifting towards them across the sand, rising up to blot out the sky. "What do we do?"

"There is nothing we can do."

"But..."

"...no, we wait as it passes and we try very, very hard, we try not to be afraid. You must try to be like me."

Assam thought that the fox sounded very, very afraid already, but he was too scared himself to argue. The darkness drifted closer. They stood together, the fox crouching lower and lower as it approached. Assam stared into the blackness until his eyes ached, looking for some edge or detail, some shape or sign that showed where the darkness stopped and the rest of the night began. He was looking for a spot where, maybe, if they moved quickly, they could stand and let it pass safely by. But the harder he stared, the more it grew — spreading outward to the horizon and rising up into the sky — as though by looking, he was feeding it, causing it to grow. He closed his eyes for a moment, for as long as he could stand it. When he opened them again he saw that the darkness, if anything, it had grown even more. Taller now, wider . . . coming on very fast, like a wave of shadow blotting out the sky. He looked down at the fox. If they didn't move they would be drowned in it.

"Please, I am very afraid." The fox crowded in close, circling her body around his legs, shivering.

He knelt down next to her. She put her head under his arm. They sat there together in the path of the gathering darkness. Assam could feel it all around them now, brushing against his face and hands. The fox gave out little yelps, twitching her skin reflexively and he knew she could feel it too.

"What is that?" He could hear something there in the darkness, a faint screeching sound — familiar and yet somehow he could not place it — rising and falling in volume, over and over. His mouth tasted sour, his stomach lurched. He thought he might vomit.

For her part, the fox did not hear the sound. Or, more accurately, she heard something else very different: An intermittent popping, almost an echo, like far off fireworks or gunshots. There was another sound below it, the muttered baying of hounds. She wanted, desperately, to run.

And still the darkness came on, drifting past them and over them. Assam began to wonder if it would ever stop. He realized that he'd been holding his breath and let it out slowly.

"Please, I am so very scared now." The fox's nose, cold against his ear. She crowded in close to him, practically pushing him over and sitting in his lap. "You will protect me, yes?"

Assam looked up at the long, thick tendrils of shadow drifting over them. Each one was as broad as a skyscraper. Whatever it wanted of them — if it wanted anything at all — the darkness could do take it from them. They were helpless beneath, within it.

The fox nuzzled his ear again, warm breath on his neck.

"Don't worry," he said. "If it was going to hurt us, I think it would have done it by now." It was true, he could feel it. He closed his eyes, reaching out, reaching up, like standing on tiptoes to touch the ceiling . . . it was conscious, moving with purpose. It was traveling somewhere and, for good or ill, it couldn't be bothered with a little boy and a fox. And as much as the thought disturbed him — this

massive, living darkness with a mind and purpose of its own – it made him feel safe to know that its purpose did not seem to include them. The darkness knew they were there inside, but it didn't care.

"But you are not scared?" the fox wondered.

Assam shook his head.

"You must be very brave," she said. "But I am not so much." The fox cuddled in closer to him, wriggling in further under his arms. "Please..." Her voice was soft, plaintive.

"What?" He could feel her heart beating under his hand. "What is it?"

She shivered again. "How is it that you are so brave but I am not?" she asked him. "Is it because you are a boy?"

Assam shrugged, uncomfortable. The fox put her nose against his neck, just below his ear. He wasn't certain he liked how it felt.

"You are a very brave boy," she sighed. "Thank you, thank you for being so brave for me."

"Uh . . . no problem."

"I'm so afraid," the fox sighed, not sounding very afraid at all. She licked his cheek with her rough tongue, her breath a little doggy, a little rank. She called him by name in the darkness. "Thank you."

Assam nodded and swallowed thickly, half-hoping that the darkness would pass soon and half-hoping that it would go on a little while longer. He didn't think at the time to ask himself how she knew his name.

Jee yawned.

"I know someone who's getting sleepy," said the dragon's right head in a singsong voice.

"M'not sleepy," Jee said, yawning again.

The middle head snickered. The left head snaked in. "Listen Pee Wee, I think you've just about worked off that tuna platter and milkshake."

"My name's not Pee Wee," she said grumpily. "And I had waffles. Strawberry ones."

"Whatever." The dragon lit another cigarette and squinted at her through the smoke. "But you've paid your debt to society and you're done for the night."

"I have to wait for my brother."

Gerry shrugged, his three heads bobbing in a wave. "Fair enough, but you're going to have to wait for him somewhere's else."

"Why?"

"It's quittin' time," the left head said.

The middle head chimed in. "And we've got a date."

"She's a very nice girl," the right head said.

"What's her name? Is she pretty?" Jee was more interested in matters of romance than she liked to admit.

"That," the left head said, "won't matter quite so much if I'm late to pick her up."

"Is she a dragon too?"

"Okay, you know what?" Gerry slipped his apron off. "You're welcome to stay if you want. But we're going"

"The diner's open all night," the right head said kindly.

"And there's plenty of dishes to do," said the left head.

The middle head looked concerned. "What about Harry?" it asked the other two.

"What about him?" the left head said nastily.

"Who's Harry?" Jee asked.

"He works the next shift." The right head had a worried expression on his face.

"Is he, is Harry . . . nice?"

The dragon tossed his apron at the wall. It landed perfectly, hanging on one of the hooks. "That's not the word I'd use to describe him, no," the middle head said to her.

"Is he a dragon like you?"

The left head stared at her. "What, you think we've got a union? The Association of Dragon Dishwashers? You think that's all we're good for?"

"Sorry," Jee took off her apron and handed it over to be hung up.

"Yeah, well anyways..." The dragon took a denim jacket off one of the hooks and slid his arms into it, flipping up the collar.

"What's he like, then?"

"Who?"

"Harry."

The dragon shrugged. "See for yourself, he'll be punching in soon." He cocked his left head to one side. "I think I hear him coming up the hallway now. Why don't you go and say hello?"

"Don't be a jackass," the middle head said.

Jee went to the door and pushed it open a crack, peeking out. Outside, the hallway seemed longer than she remembered, and darker. "I don't see anyone."

Gerry stuck his middle head alongside hers. "That's Harry coming now. You can't miss him."

"I don't see anyone..." And then she took a breath. It was either that or scream. Darkness pooled at the end of the hallway, shadows drifting along the floor and walls like tentacles, like plants under the sea. As she watched, the darkness moved forward, coming closer. "What is that?" she asked.

"That," the right head said, "is Harry."

"What is he?"

The left head chuckled. "He's an old one, Harry is."

The middle head nodded. "Older than most of us."

The shadow was deeper now, more solid, spreading outward up the hallway like ink on a mirror.

"You met his son," the middle head whispered, "if you came here by boat."

"What boat?" Jee was confused for a moment, then she remembered. "You mean the tall guy with the stick?"

Gerry nodded, his heads bobbing out of sync.

"That'd be Charlie," the left head told her.

"Harry's son," the right head chimed in.

"He was a jerk," Jee said, glancing back up the hallway to see if she'd been heard.

"That's not so much Charlie's fault," the middle head said with a shrug.

"Not with so dark a father," the right head agreed.

The darkness filled half the hallway now, moving slowly, closer towards them. "But what is he?" the girl asked.

"Who?" The three heads looked at each other, then to her. "You mean Harry?"

Jee nodded.

The dragon pulled a long, thoughtful face — well, he pulled three long, thoughtful faces. "He's the dark, Harry is," whispered the middle head.

"He's the night," agreed the right one.

The middle head nodded. "He's the shadows seeping in at the edges of a lonely road."

"He's the quiet that comes to empty houses." The right head shuddered as it spoke. "He's the fear in the forest when the fire fails."

"He's the shadows in-between the stars," the left head finished, tapping the ash off of his cigarette. "The shadow that waited before. The shadow nothing casts."

The girl didn't know what to say.

"So," the right hand head said to her, suddenly cheerful. "I expect he might not mind having such a bright little girl like you around to lend a hand."

Jee looked out into the hallway, watching as the darkness slowly blotted out the light bulbs overhead, watching as they dimmed one by one. "If it's all the same to you," she said at last. "I think I'll be done for the night."

The dragon followed her gaze up the hallway.

"Yeah," the right head said quietly. "I expect that'd probably be for the best." Gerry took her hand and led her out of the dishroom and up the hallway, away from the drifting darkness.

INTERLUDE

Juniper sits at the table. He does not pick up the menu. When the waitress comes, he does not even bother to look up.

He orders coffee, black.

She brings a cup back to him a few moments later with a "Let me know if there's anything else you need, hon?"

He nods.

After she is gone, he places his hands on each side of the cup — feeling the heat radiate through his palms, seeing how long he can stand it.

He doesn't particularly care for restaurants. The idea of sharing so much space with complete strangers makes him irritable. It's too much noise in his head. And the tables are always sticky. He hates that.

He grips the cup tighter, smiling at the heat and the pain it brings.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Laima was still working on her crossword puzzle when Jee came back to the counter and asked "Have you seen my brother?"

"Just a second," the old woman whispered in irritation, filling in her squares. After a moment she looked up. "You all done back there?"

Jee nodded. "Do you know where my brother is?"

"Can't say I do," the woman whispered, pursing her lips at the newspaper. "Sorry."

"What about Sarah? Where is she?"

Laima shook her head. "Out with her feller, I expect. Said she had a date tonight."

Jee waited for a moment. She was used to grownups helping, not saying "Sorry" and then going back to what they were doing. She waited a moment, hoping that the old woman would look up again. But she didn't.

Jee turned and looked out into the restaurant. It was quieter than before and the crowd had thinned out a bit. She didn't see her brother anywhere. She sighed and turned back, giving Laima one last chance to ask "You okay hon?" or "Why don't we go look for him together?"

When the old woman didn't, Jee sighed again and walked through the tables towards the front door. As she was passing by one of the tables, a man spoke to her. He was dark haired and pale. Three of the fingertips on his upraised hand were stained a rusty brown. He gave her a vague, absentminded look. "Can I get another cup of coffee, miss?"

"I'm not a waitress," Jee told him. "I don't work here."

He raised his eyebrows, his gaze drifting away. "My mistake."

"Sorry," she said.

As she left, Juniper smiled to himself. This was going to be easier than he had expected. He lifted his cup and took a sip. The coffee had gone cold and bitter while he'd waited but he didn't mind.

Outside, Jee looked out over the parking lot at the few cars staggered here and there. She hadn't expect to find her brother, but she was half-hoping that the man with the guitar would still be out there. But there was no sign of him. She supposed he'd gone home for the night. She wondered if he even had a home. She tried to imagine what his house would look like. Or Sarah's. The thought made her happy.

Then she remembered Edgar and the idea of what his house might look like made her intensely uncomfortable, so she tried to think about something else.

She wondered where her brother was. It wasn't like him to just vanish. He wouldn't just run off and leave her. Back home, she was the one who wandered off when their parents weren't looking. It wasn't deliberate, she just ended up someplace else, someplace unexpected. Her mother used to say that she needed a leash. Her father said he'd just settle for heavier shoes to slow her down. It was her brother who usually found her. He was good at finding things. Suddenly, terribly sad. Jee closed her eyes, trying to find a place to put those thoughts. When she opened them again, there was a man standing in front of her.

He was tall, with black hair and skin so pale it was almost white, like paper. His eyes were closed and he had his head cocked to one side — almost as if he were listening, almost like he was...

He opened his eyes, staring directly into her own.

She took a step back. "What?"

His face was calm, expressionless. A word from school wandered through the back of Jee's head: *Placid*.

"What do you want?"

The man didn't answer, did not move. He looked familiar. He'd been in the restaurant. He'd asked her for coffee. Jee took a step back, wondering if she could get around him and back into the diner . . . wondering if he would chase her when she ran.

The pale man tilted his head to the other side. "Do you still have all your baby teeth?" His voice was flat, almost pleasant. He sounded so calm and reasonable that, for a moment or two, Jee actually thought that his question made sense.

"What?"

The man's eyes had a still, dull sheen to them, like old glass marbles. He wasn't looking at her, not quite. His eyes drifted past her as he spoke, setting on a point just above her left eye.

You are, Jee told herself, *looking at all kinds of crazy*. Before she could answer him, a car horn honked out in the parking lot. She practically jumped out of her skin. The pale man barely moved, his eyes flickering at the broad blare of the horn.

An old rusting hulk of a car came roaring up, skidding to a halt at the bottom of the concrete steps. The car engine revved, the horn sounded again.

Jee glanced back to the pale man. He'd moved between her and the door, between her and the safety of the diner. He smiled again, warmly, not scary at all – which, of course, made him all the more creepy.

"Hey!" Jee turned back to the car. The passenger's door swung open and she was surprised and relieved to see a friendly face grinning up at her – well, not friendly . . . but at least familiar. It was Edgar.

The pale man moved nearer to her when she wasn't looking, like some dreadful game of Simon Says. He was smiling wider but there was something decidedly unfriendly about it now. He stared absently at her shoulder. His hands hung loosely at his sides, almost as if he'd forgotten about them. Jee didn't think that they stay forgotten for very long.

The horn blared again. "Hurry up," Edgar called.

Jee had never heard the phrase "Better the devil you know, than the one you don't..." before, but she knew that she trusted the boy's strange, lopsided grin a lot more than the creepy, quiet smile of the man edging towards her. She jumped down the stairs and tumbled into the waiting car, slamming the door closed in triumph.

Edgar let out a whoop and they roared off into the night.

Juniper watched the red of the taillights fade dimly into the distance.

Too easy, he thought to himself.

He didn't like putting on an act like that, but it got the job done. Now all it would take was time. And he had plenty of that.

Still smiling, he went back in to the diner to finish his coffee.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jee sat back in the seat with relief. She reached for her seatbelt, surprised to find that there wasn't one. "Where's the..?" She stared at Edgar. "You're driving?"

He glanced over to her in mock alarm. "Oh my god, you're right!"

He was sitting on a stack of books, she noticed. And he had blocks of wood tied to his feet so he could reach the pedals. "How old are you?"

"Older than you," he answered.

She squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. She was sitting on something. She pulled out a handful of books.

"Just toss those in back," Edgar said.

Jee turned and saw that the back seat of the car was filled with books. She recognized a few of them, things she'd seen in the library at school. They were children's books, stacked on the seat, the floor and tumbled in piles. "Why do you have all these?"

"All what?"

"All these books?"

Edgar looked over at her. "What books?"

"In the backseat."

"There are books back there?" He grinned. "I just like stories."

Jee didn't reply. She was a little embarrassed about not really being able to read yet. There had been meetings about it at school. And visits to the doctor to check her eyes and what her parents called her "development." Nothing came of all the tests. But the other kids made fun of her sometimes, so there were fights on the playground and one memorable one actually in the classroom, even. All of which led to even more meetings between her parents and the principal.

Edgar leaned forward and turned the radio down. "So, where to?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "I'm trying to find my brother."

"Where'd he go?"

She gave him a look.

"Point taken. Where was he, last time you saw him?"

"We were washing dishes back at the restaurant."

"Tapped out, eh?" Edgar snorted. "I told you that you needed my help." Then, almost hurt, he added "But you wouldn't let me."

"Anyways..." Jee wasn't going to apologize just because he acted like a complete jerkstore. "He went out to talk to Sarah and never came back. And then Gerry had to go and this big dark shadow thing came up the hallway..."

"...Harry's working tonight?" Edgar slammed on the brakes and spun the car around, heading back the way they had come.

Jee held on to the door handle, trying not to fall over into his lap. "What are you doing?"

"Going back for him."

"You think he's still back there?"

"I expect he is." He looked at her. "But he's not with Sarah, I'm pretty sure of that."

"How do you know?"

"Well, while the word on the street is she does go for younger men, I hear she's already got a beau." He winked. "Got in before me, snaky bastard."

Jee hoped that, in the darkened car, he couldn't see her roll her eyes. Right now he was the only one who could help. "So where are we going?"

Edgar grinned at her. In the orange glow of the dashboard, his ruined face and missing teeth made him look even more like a rotting jack o' lantern than ever. "We're going to go back and ask the Darkness what he knows."

"I think it's gone," Assam said. The wall of shadow that had overtaken them was receding into the night. It occurred to him that it was headed towards the diner, where his sister was still waiting. He didn't know how long he'd been gone, but he knew it was long enough for her to worry and start looking for him. He stood up and brushed the pale sand from his jeans. "I'm sorry," he told the fox. "It's gone now. You're safe."

The fox stayed where she was, crouched low to the ground. She raised her eyes to his. "But why do you say you are sorry?"

"I need to go back," he said. "I appreciate your help but Jul..." He checked himself "...my sister, she'll be worried about me." She wasn't yet, actually. He could feel her back there behind him, a little jangle of a happy tune playing in the back of his mind. But she would be soon enough.

"But we are not at the palace? You said you needed to be there," the fox pouted. "How will you find it without me?"

"I don't know," he looked back at the diner, barely visible beyond the darkness. "But listen, thanks for everything. I appreciate your help and, uh, it was nice meeting you."

The fox stood up, facing him. "No," and then she called him by name.

Assam stared at her. In the back of his head, an alarm was going off. "What did you say?"

The fox padded gently around him, her eyes locked on his. She circled him once clockwise and then reversed, going counterclockwise. She stopped in front of him once more. "Come."

"What? No, look, I told you . . . I have to go back."

"Walk." The fox turned and started off.

"Listen, thanks and all but..." inexplicably, Assam began to follow after her. His feet were moving on their own, he couldn't get them to stop. He wanted to turn away, to turn back, but he couldn't. It was as if there was some kind of magnetic field between him and the fox, dragging him along behind her.

She knew his name.

"Please let me go," he begged, suddenly very afraid.

"No, I do not think so."

"But you said you would help me." He was almost crying now.

"Yes, but I was lying." Then, almost as an afterthought, she added "And you were very foolish."

The fox kept walking. Assam had no choice but to follow.

Behind him, he could feel his sister like a candle in the darkness, fading and then flickering out.

"Don't worry about Harry," Edgar told Jee just before he opened the door to the dishroom. "He's all right once you get used to him."

She nodded. She remembered that way it – Harry – had looked, that inky darkness drifting slowly up the hallway. She shuddered.

"Let me do the talking," Edgar said with his hand on the door handle. "And don't pay too much attention to what he says."

"Why?" Jee failed to hide the fear in her voice.

"He's just a little . . . simple." He gestured, making a circle around his ear with his index finger. "You know, he's been down here too long and he's gotten a bit . . . spread out over time. His thoughts have are a little..." He paused.

"A little what?"

"A little thin, I guess. You know?"

She nodded even though she didn't.

He opened the door. "Don't worry, I'll be here to protect you."

Despite her fear, she still managed to roll her eyes. Edgar was shaping up to be the eye-rollingest person she'd ever met. She followed him inside.

Assam tried everything he could think of to break the hold the fox had over him. It wasn't like she cast a spell or anything. She just knew his name, that was all. And she'd walked around in circles for a bit. That didn't seem very powerful to him, not like real magic. It was such a simple thing, he thought. Just his name. There had to be a simple way out of it.

Names have power, he reminded himself. He remembered that in the stories, the simplest spells were also the strongest.

The fox padded silently in front, more or less ignoring him.

He had tried at first to reason with her, to find some small spark of sympathy or mercy in her, but there was none. The flirting, that girlish demeanor was all gone. Now he was dealing with a more mature, disturbingly matter-of-fact animal that had no more regard for him than she might show for an insect . . . or her prey.

Finally, he asked the question that he'd been avoiding, the question that he already knew the answer to. "What do you want with me? Why are you doing this?" He tried to keep the pleading out of his voice and failed. "I'm just a kid."

"I have children of my own," the fox answered without turning. "And they are hungry."

She trotted along in the dark and despite his growling, desperate horror, Assam had no choice but to keep up.

When she was younger, Jee and her family spent a month one summer in a rented cottage by the sea. On the first day, standing up to her waist in the foam, a large wave swept in and knocked her down. She tumbled below the water, feeling the sudden, slow grip of the tide on her. She knew then the sea could do anything with her and there would be nothing she could do about it. Then her mother was there, hauling her up out of the water, laughing.

It had only been a few seconds and she had never really been in danger. But for the rest of the vacation, while everyone else in her family swam and splashed and played, Jee sat watching on the sand. They coaxed her as best they could but she refused, the taste of old salt still bitter in the back of her throat. And at night, when she lay in bed back at the cottage, she could hear the waves crashing on the shore. And in her dreams she tumbled in the cold hands of the sea.

Stepping into the darkness was very much like that.

Edgar disappeared almost at once, enveloped by shifting bands of shadow as he passed through the door. Around her, she heard the rattle and clink of dishes being washed. She could feel the darkness moving over her in gentle waves, swallowing her up. She thought of those strange pale shadows that had coiled around her by the side of the road after the accident. Immediately she wished she hadn't. She tried very hard not to scream.

Edgar was speaking near her in the darkness – a polite, almost respectful tone quite different from his usual obnoxious one.

After a moment came the response, a breathy sigh that rose and fell from the darkness around them.

"That was a long time ago," she heard Edgar say. Around her, the darkness answered, soft and low like the sleepy murmur of someone just waking up.

"I haven't seen her in ages." Edgar said. "Listen, I was hoping that..."

The darkness sighed again, longer this time. For a moment it parted, and Jee saw a glimpse of Edgar, looking very small and far away. He glanced over at her and nodded as a wave of shadow swept back in, closing the gap.

"Obviously." The customary sneer was beginning to creep back into Edgar's voice once more.

The darkness rumbled, far off thunder.

"Not at all, not in the slightest." She heard him make a conscious effort to adjust his tone. "As a matter of fact, I came here to ask a favor."

The darkness hissed. The sound set Jee's teeth on edge.

"Of course not," Edgar answered. "It's for her, for my friend." Suddenly, he was at her side, whispering. "Say hello."

"Uh . . . hi."

A gentle breath, a sigh from the darkness.

"He wants to know what you're called," Edgar whispered.

"You can call me Jee," she said. "It's short for Darjeeling."

The darkness fluttered around for a moment, brushing lightly over her face and arms. There was another sigh, low and gentle.

"Well, you know what they say," Edgar answered.

"What?" Jee asked him. "What'd he say?"

"Don't worry about it." He nudged her. "Now ask him . . . nicely."

Jee felt the darkness turn its attention to her, intent and waiting. She choked back the taste of seawater and said "Please . . . I'm looking for my brother and I can't find him."

Edgar spoke up. "I think he might have been outside, out back, a while ago. Maybe you saw him?"

The darkness heaved around them, silent and deep. After a long moment there came a murmur, a whisper.

"He might know something," Edgar translated. "What's your brother like?"

"Uh . . . he has brown hair, kind of like mine but a little darker. And green eyes, like mine only a little lighter. And he's about this much taller than me." She held her hand up over her hand to show how much.

Edgar grabbed it, squeezing painfully. "No, you idiot," he hissed at her. "Not what he looks like. What's he like?"

Jee pulled her hand away, rubbing her sore fingers. "What?"

"He can't see. He doesn't care what your brother looks like," Edgar growled. "You have to tell him what he's like."

Jee considered this for a moment. "Well . . . he's four years older than me. And he's kind of bossy sometimes and sort of a know-it-all, but he's usually pretty nice for a boy. Nicer than most, anyways." This last bit was directed at Edgar. She massaged her sore knuckles and thought about Assam and what made him special. "He knows how to snap his fingers with both hands and he can whistle" – two things she envied most in the world – "Uh, he reads a lot of books and . . . he's really good at finding things that are lost and he likes animals and, uh..."

It was hard, she realized, describing someone without describing them.

Fortunately, Edgar butted in. "Okay, okay," he said. "I think he's got the picture."

A long silence passed. Finally, the darkness shifted around them and she heard a faint hiss from the darkness around them. It was a greedy sound and she didn't like it.

"What'd he say?"

"He knows something," Edgar said quietly. "But..."

"...but what?"

"He wants to know what you have to offer in return."

"I don't know. What does he want?"

"It's better not to ask," Edgar told her in a low voice. "Just offer him something."

"Like what?" Jee had no idea what a blind, disembodied shadow would want, but she was pretty sure she didn't have it.

Edgar sighed. It was a sound Jee knew well, although her brother was usually the one making it.

"Like what?" she asked again. The darkness shifted around her and Edgar faded away as a thick sheet of shadow drifted between them.

It was close to her now.

She heard a low, impatient sound near her ear.

"He's waiting," Edgar cleared his throat. He sounded nervous. "And make it good."

"It is," she told him. "I will."

"You'd better."

"Shut up." Jee raised her head to address the blackness around her. She wondered briefly if it had ears and if so, what direction were they in. "If you tell me what you know . . . I will sing you a song."

Silence.

Then came a rumbling from the shadow and the slow exhalation of breath from Edgar.

"He's agreed," Edgar told her. "The gods only know why, but he has."

The darkness muttered impatiently and Edgar said "Only, he says: 'Song first, then I'll tell you what I know.'"

Jee nodded.

The darkness gathered in around her, expectant and almost childlike.

She took a breath and began to sing: "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine..."

They'd been walking for a while now, long enough at least for Assam to run out of ideas and lapse into a sulky silence. It was strange to be under the command of someone else's will instead of his own. He was a passenger in his own body, watching the scenery go by. He could see low hills ahead, rising up darkly against the darker, starless sky. Slowly, the hills took on a jagged, rocky outline the closer

they came. Thin forms stuck out here and there. He took them for trees, stripped bare by whatever passed for winter in this place.

He watched the fox, the little white-tipped brush of her tail bobbing along in from of him like the swing of a hypnotist's pocketwatch.

A dry breeze of rank air swept past them from the direction of the hills. He gagged but he kept walking. Back at home, one of his chores had been to walk the garbage cans down to the curb each week. It was fairly easy to do but during the summer there was a reeking cloud that clung to the cans. He learned to dread that sweet, repulsive smell – old fruit, garbage, leftovers, spoiled meat left to rot and ferment in the sun all week long, the gritty swarm of the fruit flies above it all. That was what the breeze smelled like – only heavier, sicklier. He tried breathing through his mouth, but it made things a thousand times worse when he could actually taste the air.

As they drew closer to the hills, the jagged outline became more pronounced. It was obvious now that he was looking at a trash dump. The smell poured off the haphazard jumble of rubbish, surrounding him. Choking back his cheeseburger, Assam kept walking and hoping that, somehow, his sister would know how to find him. He didn't have a lot of hope.

The fox went on towards the hills. He followed.

Jee leaned against the wall in the hallway outside the dishroom, waiting for Edgar. She tried very hard not to tremble anymore. She had done pretty well. She hadn't been scared at all – or, at least, not so scared that she couldn't keep singing, even when the darkness started singing along with her.

She put her hands flat against the wall and willed them to stop shaking.

The door to the dishroom opened and Edgar stepped out, calling back over his shoulder "Yeah, I'll be sure to tell her. Thanks again for everything, Harry." The door closed behind him and he flashed his broken, lopsided grin at her. "You ready?"

She pulled herself off of the wall. "Tell me what?"

He smirked, walking backwards up the hallway, gesturing for her to follow. "He said to tell you thanks and that you have a lovely singing voice."

"Oh."

"It's a compliment."

"Yeah, I got that."

Edgar looked a little annoyed. "I mean, I don't think he gives them out to just anyone."

"Uh huh. That's great."

He turned in mid-stride, showing her his back.

"Now where?"

He reached the end and opened the door, walking through ahead of her. "We," he told her, "are going to find your brother."

"You know where he is?"

"I do not," Edgar said. "But I think I know where he will be."

"What do you mean?" They were walking through the diner now, it was nearly empty. The big, bull headed waiter was leaning against the counter, nodding off. Laima, Jee noticed, was on her stool, still whispering her way through the crossword.

Edgar held the front door open for her and followed her outside. His car was parked where he had left it by the curb, engine still running. They got in, driving off into the night.

Finally, Jee asked "What did you mean, you know where he's going to be?"

Edgar fiddled with the radio for a moment, scanning the stations. "Well," he said, "I think I know who he's with. So I think I know where he's going to be."

"Where?" Jee asked, impatient.

"Tell me something," he asked her as he turned up the radio, "what do you know about foxes?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

For his part, Assam learned quite a lot about foxes that night . . . and none of it good. Along with the early lessons in flirting, artifice, and cruelty, the advanced courses covered habitat and hygiene as well.

He followed the fox into the hills of garbage. The stench was overpowering as she led him deeper through the maze of rubbish. He put his hand to his mouth to keep from gagging, stumbling and sliding his way through the jumble of trash. The fox had an easier time of it. At her size, she could move over and under things more easily than he.

They were not alone, Assam soon realized. He could hear rustlings around them. The sound of scuttling creatures fleeing from their approach. Larger, bolder animals watched as they passed, eyes glinting in the gloom. The fox went on, ignoring everything on her winding path through the hills.

Here and there, small fires burned. Low ragged forms gathered around, huddling together for warmth. Assam thought to call out for help but he wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not.

They passed close to one of these. Assam saw two forms sitting side by side, staring into the flames. A small pot hung over the campfire, stirred by the larger of the two figures. The smaller one stretched out its hand and immediately received a stinging blow to the side of the head. Assam heard the smack of the blow, the whining cry from the smaller one as it held its head in its hands. It lashed out at the larger figure, kicking it in the side. The larger shape drew back and rose up. The smaller one growled and snarled, reaching again for the pot. The larger shape picked up an oblong piece of rubbish and swung it once, twice, three times into the smaller form. There were a series of shrieks and then the small figure crumpled into itself and lay still.

The larger figure stood there for a moment, heaving with exertion. It pulled a dark, curved shadow from its pocket — Assam saw the dull gleam of metal in the firelight — and crouched down next to the prone figure. Slowly, it began peeling strips off of the smaller form with its knife and feeding them, one by one, into the bubbling pot.

Assam decided to take his chances with the fox.

The inside of Edgar's car smelled like an old thermos Jee had left in her locker at school one time. She'd taken it home and her mother threw up in the kitchen sink when she opened it. No matter how much they washed it, it never let go of that smell. They ended up having to throw it out. She was pretty sure that someone forgot to throw out Edgar's car a few months back.

"You know what would be nice?" Edgar asked.

"What?"

"It'd be nice if you'd read to me while I drove." He looked over at her. "How about it? Why don't you grab one of the books from the back?"

"I can't read in the car." She shook her head. "I get carsick." This wasn't true at all but she had heard her mother say it once.

He did not look at her. "You can't read, can you?"

"Sure I can, I just get carsick."

"Uh huh."

They drove on in silence for a moment.

"Did you know that words have smells and colors, just like everything else?"

She looked at him, not sure if he was making a joke or just being a jerk.

"It's true. Think about it. When we talk, when we tell stories or jokes or sing, we're using our breath, drawing these things up from where they sleep inside us, breathing them out. That's why your school smells so old and dusty, because all of your teachers are breathing out those old words and ideas that have been gathering dust and going stale inside. And that's why angry people and mean people smell so sour, spitting out all that old pickled hate they keep bottled up. And that's why your mother's bedtime stores smell so sweet, because she keeps them in her heart, in the place where she keeps her love for you."

Jee thought about this for a moment. "Okay."

"Do you know what else smells?"

Your car? Jee did not ask. "What?"

"Lies," he said. "You know what they smell like?"

"No."

"You," he said. "They smell just like you."

Jee didn't say anything.

"You can't read, can you?"

She shook her head.

"You shouldn't lie to people."

"Sorry."

Edgar shrugged. "Don't worry about it. I've lied to you plenty of times already and I expect I'll lie some more before we're through." He looked at her, suddenly serious. "But don't lie to me. Ever again."

She nodded.

They drove on in silence.

Jee wondered to herself what kinds of words smelled like sour milk.

After a while, the fox shifted direction and led Assam along a narrow path to the top of a high hill. It was a difficult climb and he stumbled often. His hands were scratched and his clothes torn by the broken glass and the bits of rusted metal and wire. Near the top, he stepped on a patch of soft, rotting trash and fell. When he put his hand out to catch himself, an old twisted coat hanger snagged on his palm, cutting him. He couldn't help but cry out in pain and surprise and frustration. The cut wasn't particularly deep – no more than a scratch, really. He rose and continued on to the crest of the hill where the fox was waiting for him.

She sniffed his hand, then licked the cut. He tried very hard not to scream. There was a small smear of red on her nose. She licked it off with a casual flick of her tongue and turned, heading down the other side of the hill. Below, Assam could see a thin stream following a winding path between the junk strewn hills.

He, of course, followed after. He kept his eyes on the ground, watching for solid footing — not that he was in control of where his feet fell. A little ways down the hill, he glanced up. The fox had vanished.

He blinked and would have stopped in his tracks, but his feet kept moving. He scanned the hillside for some sign of the fox. There was a small hole cunningly hidden between a television with a shattered screen and a largish crate filled with what looked like old, rotting stuffed animals.

Television? Assam thought to himself. *They have television here?*

And then he was in the dark, crawling on his hands and knees, gagging on the staleness of the air in the fox's lair. The tunnel was a tight fit and soft dirt sprinkled in from the top and sides, making passage difficult and slow. Assam closed his eyes to keep the loose soil from getting in them. Then, reconsidering, he opened them again. It was dark — he was underground, after all — but there was just enough light trickling in from behind to see clearly . . . not that there was much to see. He was very aware that somewhere, up ahead, the fox was waiting for him.

Eventually, the trash got too deep and the car could go no further. Edgar turned off the engine and they got out.

After the sour reek of Edgar's car, Jee had been happy to be out in the open air again — that is, until she got a whiff of the mounds of garbage outside. "Where are we going?" She cupped a hand over her nose.

"I've smelled worse, believe me." He surveyed the hills around them. "This is nothing compared to what my village smelled like at the end."

"At the end of what?"

"Little thing they called the Black Plague," he said.

Maybe that's why the stink in the car doesn't bother him, Jee thought to herself. *He's used to it. He doesn't even smell it anymore.*

Edgar stood, scanning the area. He turned one direction and then another. "Come on," he told her, starting up one of the hills.

"How do you know which way to go?"

"Just following my nose." Edgar grinned. "Come on, let's go hunt some foxes."

The tunnel went on longer than Assam expected, sloping downward into the heart of the hill. The air was dry but smelled foul, the reek of dirt and animals. He tried to slow his progress by arching his back, pressing it against the roof of the tunnel. It didn't help much, apart from sending a shower of loose earth down the back of his pants. His arms and legs kept moving him forward, carrying him deeper into the hill. Dust fell into his eyes and mouth. He spat mud.

Suddenly he stopped, as though someone had thrown a switch somewhere. In the dim light he could make out a small opening off to his right, a little chamber connected to the main tunnel. There, in the shadows, the glint of eyes staring back at him. He blinked, letting his eyes adjust in the dark. He could

see the fox in there, a handful of smaller shapes gathering around her yapping softly. They were babies, little fluffy versions of their mother and very cute.

Yeah, cute and hungry, he reminded himself. *Look who's here for dinner, kids.*

The fox looked at him and flipped her nose to one side, sending him crawling down the tunnel again. Beyond the chamber it was harder going. The tunnel got narrower and sloped awkwardly to one side, throwing him off balance as his hands struggled to find purchase on the floor. As he went along, he felt little, prickling stabs of pain in his palms and knees. Something on the floor, splintering under his weight. Bones. He was crawling over bones — cast offs from previous meals, remnants of former prey, other unfortunate animals brought home by the fox.

Like me, he thought to himself. He tried very hard not to cry.

The tunnel opened up into a much larger chamber. The air inside was rank and stale, like an old refrigerator — a horrible sweetness, rotten and foul and old. In the dim light he saw pale bones larger than those in the tunnel. He recognized them from school: Human.

He turned his head away . . . then he saw the girl.

She must have been a little bit older than him. Her hair, what was left of it, might have once been blonde. Now it was clumped together and dusty with cobwebs. She might have been pretty once as well. It was hard to tell, with her face eaten half away and one empty eye socket glaring back at him, the rotting teeth and jawbone showing through the ragged scraps of her cheek. Her hands were gone, and one leg was stripped down to the bone almost all the way to the hip. She wore a faded rubber rain coat that looked like it might have once been yellow and bright. One remaining eye stared back at him, dull and lifeless.

Then, she blinked — that eye, filmed with dust and misery, slowly closing and opening again like a rusty hinge.

She was still alive, Assam realized, held in silent thrall to the fox who, day by day, was picking her clean. Fresh meat, kept alive so it wouldn't spoil. He opened his mouth but, like the girl, he couldn't scream without permission from that horrible, animal will that ruled them both.

The girl looked back at him, that ruined face scoured with suffering and fear. He wanted to reach out to her, to touch her hand, to wipe away the pain and fear shining out from that lonely eye. But he couldn't, he couldn't do a thing but stare back at her. He wondered what her name had been and how the fox had found it out.

And so, sad and frightened, they waited together. The fox would come for them soon.

Standing at the top of the hill, Jee looked down to the banks of the dirty stream trickling below. She wrinkled her nose. Edgar was scanning the ground around them, pacing back and forth, kicking bits and pieces of rubbish and clearing an open patch. "Well," she asked, "where do we go now?"

"Down." He grinned at her, pointing at the ground between his feet. "We go down." He gestured to her to come over. "Before we do this," he said, "you owe me one, right?"

Jee nodded.

"You have to say it."

"Okay."

He shook his head. "No. You have to say it."

"I owe you one."

"Say it again."

She sighed. "I owe you one."

"You do?"

"Yes," she said, irritated.

"Say it again."

Jee rolled her eyes. Why were all boys like this?

"I. Owe. You. One," she said, as though she were speaking to a baby. "Happy now?"

"Very." He grinned at her, all gap toothed and goofy. "Now, I need one more thing."

"What?"

"Something of your brother's, something that belongs to him."

"Like what?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't care. Something he touched or carried."

"Like what?" Jee asked again.

"Like anything. It doesn't matter."

"If it doesn't matter then why do you need it?"

Edgar looked at her. "Keep in mind, we should probably hurry."

"I don't have anything."

"And you couldn't have just said that when I asked? Check your pockets, make sure."

"I'm sure."

"*Make* sure."

She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans. "Nothing."

"What about your coat?" He snapped his fingers. "Come on."

She stared at him. "Well, don't ever do that again."

"What?"

"That." She snapped her fingers back at him.

He sighed. "Fine. Will you check now?"

She dug into her left pocket, pulling out all of the little trinkets and toys she kept there — hair clips and an old marble, a couple of interesting rocks she picked up on the way home from school, a sugar packet from the diner. She looked up at him. Nothing.

"Try the other one." He didn't snap his fingers this time, but she could tell he wanted to. Her other pocket had more of the same — then, near the bottom . . . she held out something in her open palm, picked a stray bit of lint off it, showing it to Edgar. "What about this?"

He looked at it warily, suspicious. "What is it? A tooth?"

"What? No, it's a vitamin."

"What's that?"

"It's a . . . what?" She looked at him like he was an idiot. "Really?"

He held his hand up. "I don't care. It's his?"

She nodded. "He gave it to me."

"That'll work."

"Okay." She held it out to him, but he stepped back.

"Don't give it me," he said, putting his hands behind his back. "I don't want it, whatever it is. And if you give it to me then it won't work."

"What won't?"

"Don't worry about it. Stand over here." He pulled her into the center of the space he'd cleared. "Don't move."

As she watched, he walked backwards around her, dragging his heel in the ground to make a lopsided ring in the dirt.

"What are you doing?"

He stepped into the ring and grinned at her. "Widdershins."

"Widda-whats?"

"You ever get tired of asking questions?"

Before she could answer, he went on. "Now just close your..." He trailed off thoughtfully.

"What?" Jee asked.

"We should probably sit down."

"Why?"

He gave her a knowing, superior look that she was really starting to dislike. "I'm guessing that there's not going to be a lot of headroom where we're going."

He sat down, crossed his legs. After a moment, she did the same. They faced each other. He reached forward and took her wrist. "Close your eyes."

She closed her eyes.

Quietly, he said "Now, can you feel the . . . can you feel it in your hand?"

She nodded. The vitamin was starting to crumble a bit. She wondered if that would be a problem.

"Good. Hold on to it, hold it tight and think on your brother. Do you remember him, can you see him there in your mind, can you hear his voice in your head, can you feel him there below us, alone and afraid?"

"Yes." She wasn't just going along with him. Somehow, she truly could.

"Is it still in your hand, that thing he gave you?" He squeezed her wrist. "Is it still there?"

She nodded.

"Is he still there, is he close?"

"Yes."

She heard him take a deep breath and hold it.

He let it out. "Right . . . open your eyes."

She did.

Assam sat with his back against the wall, thankful that he couldn't turn his head, thankful that he couldn't see the half-eaten girl next to him. But he could hear the breath whistling in and out of that horrible, ruined cheek. That was worse, somehow, than having to look at her.

He wondered how long she'd been down here in the dark. He wondered what she was thinking. He wondered if she was wondering about him, if she was happy for the company, if she was relieved to know that the fox had fresh meat? Or maybe those raw, red blooms on her face and body were all she could think of.

There was a rustling in the tunnel and the fox padded into the chamber, head low, eyes hooded. She came across the floor, passing Assam without even a glance. Inside, his mind was screaming in panic. But he could not move, he could not do anything but wait to feel her hot rank breath on his neck, those jagged yellow teeth tearing into his cheek.

He heard a low snuffling next to him and wondered if the fox would finish with the girl before starting on him. He hoped so . . . and then he recoiled in horror at the thought. Bad enough to wish

for it, but even worse to know that he would have to sit through the whole thing, listening as the fox finished her grisly meal.

The fox reappeared, her muzzle inches from his face. A few dark beads hung from her whiskers like jewels. She looked him in the eye for a long moment. He could feel her will wrapping tight around him, forged in the fire of her animal heart.

The fox licked her lips and blinked, dipping her head towards his. He could not move. He could not fight. He could not even scream.

There was a sudden sound in the chamber below the earth, quick and harsh, like a piece of cloth being torn.

The fox's head whipped up, staring into the dimness. She barked, a quick and angry sound. From up the passage, Assam heard the answering yelp of her kits. The fox snarled low, growling at two figures sitting together in the darkness.

"Um..." his sister's voice said. "Where are we?"

Assam wanted to shout, to tell her that he was here, but the fox's will held him fast.

"Let me handle this." Assam didn't recognize the other voice, but he understood that she had brought help.

The fox barked again, territorial and fierce. But Assam could hear the fear in her voice, as well.

"Is that a dog?" His sister sounded confused but not frightened at all. He wanted to shout, to warn her.

"It's a fox." The other voice, the boy, sounded very sure of himself. "This is her lair."

"Where's my brother?" He saw her shadow move and the other reach out to stop her. "Let me go."

"Shut up."

The fox was crouched beside Assam, watching all of this. He could feel her twitch, getting ready to spring. But before she could leap, there was a snap in the darkness and the sudden flare of a flame revealing his sister's face lit with amber. The pockmarked boy from the diner was next to her, holding the match. In the faint flicker of the light, the fox crouched between her prey and the intruders. Her ears were flat against her skull and her teeth were bared. She narrowed her eyes.

The boy — Edmund? Edward? — was speaking to the fox. "Nobody wants to hurt you, girl. Just give us the boy and we'll leave you in peace."

The fox snarled. "He gave himself to me, knowingly and willingly."

"Did he now?" The boy cocked an eye. "From where I'm sitting, he doesn't look so much of neither." He lowered his voice, being reasonable. "You know who I am, fox. You know who I am." He lit another match off of the first. "Now, give me the boy and you and your mangy kits will live to see another day and you'll live to see them live it."

The fox snarled again, shifting back and forth on her paws, preparing to charge. "My prey, my den," she said. "I do not fear your puny magic here, boy."

Edgar — that was his name, Assam remembered — opened his mouth to reply, when suddenly the chamber was filled with a piercing shriek of raw horror.

It was Jee. She had seen the girl — that poor bundle of half-eaten scraps propped up in the corner, still just alive enough to see and understand what was happening to her, what would happen to her. And, worst of all, understand there was no rescue coming for her. Jee saw all this and so she screamed. It was a horrible, piercing sound and it went on for as long as she had breath to feed it.

The fox barked and flattened her ears back, making as if she were about to leap at the girl. Edgar slid between them, holding up his little flames. "Easy there, bitch," he said.

Assam watched as Edgar brought his palms together around the match and then drew them apart.

Suddenly, two flames sprang to life — one floating from each of his upturned palms. Assam realized the boy had not been holding a match at all.

The fox took a few steps backwards, still growling.

Edgar brought his palms together again and pulled them apart once more, doubling the flames right in front of the fox's nose. The animal whined.

The boy's eyes glittered in the firelight. He gestured again, stretching out a whole chain of fire between his palms. He smiled, closemouthed and grim. He pointed to Assam with a sharp jerk of his chin. "Let him go," he said. He pushed his hands towards the fox, driving her back. "Let him go and live to hunt another day."

The fox scuttled back against the wall and whined, but her teeth were still bared and the fire in her eyes burned brighter than the reflected flicker of Edgar's little flames.

Jee stared, silent. Assam watched her eyes flick back and forth between the poor girl and him. She was strong, he knew. But she was still just a little girl and this was more than she should ever have to see.

The fox snarled back at Edgar, talking in barks and growls — as angry as any human tongue on earth or below it. Edgar laughed and barked back at her. Assam couldn't tell if the boy was actually speaking to the animal or just mocking her.

"Burn her," Jee said, voice low. "Burn her up." Assam had never heard his sister speak that way before, her voice so strong.

The fox shifted, edging closer to the exit tunnel, closer to freedom. Assam wanted to shout, to warn Edgar and his sister. But the other boy already understood. He slapped his hands together and drew them apart once more, spreading a fan of flames open between them.

The air in the chamber grew hot. The fox was panting. She huffed once, a brief chuckle, and said "I do not think you want so much to burn me as you say." She edged a step closer towards the tunnel. "If you burn me, I will run and I am swift and I will be gone and your boy will be lost to you forever. His will may never return. I will take it with me when I die, a long time from now and far from this place."

Edgar's eyes wavered. Assam saw it and he knew the fox saw it too. She wouldn't leave her children to fend for themselves. Assam knew it, but Edgar and Jee didn't and he couldn't tell them.

For a moment the fox had the upper hand, her triumph brighter than any flame Edgar could conjure. And then, just as quickly, it was gone, blown away by Jee's words, quiet and powerful in the darkness: "You can't run, fox. You are old and withered. Your joints creak and ache. Your eyes are milk and your fur is thin."

The fox whined, shivering as though Jee's words were running over her like knives.

Assam felt something loosen inside, ever so slightly, as the fox lowered her head.

Jee crouched forward on her hands and knees until she was practically nose to nose with the animal. "Listen to me," she said. "Your fur is thin, your eyes are clouds, your nose gone dry and cold, fox. Can you feel it?"

The fox shuddered and, to Assam's amazement, she suddenly looked shriveled and worn. Her pelt began to fade and grow patchy, the ribs underneath showing through. She crouched low, moaning. Her mouth hung open and she was panting. Her tongue lolled out, dry and cracking as if some sudden drought had taken hold of her.

"So old, fox, so tired..." Jee battered at the animal with her voice. "Too tired to ever bother us again, not me or my brother or anyone else. Right?"

The fox nodded, rolling her suddenly pale and milky eyes.

Jee shoved her face forward. "Right?"

The fox whimpered weakly. "Yes."

Jee sat back. "That's right. You won't. You can't. Because you're dead."

Then, with a final shudder, the fox lay her head to one side. A low whine welled up from deep inside before trailing off into silence. Assam felt the bonds of will slip away from him, dissipate, and dissolve with that last remaining breath that rattled once inside the fox's chest before going quiet forever.

Jee's eyes found his and she smiled, looking older and more grown up than she ever had before. "Hi," she said. "Sorry I was late."

But before Assam could reply, the chamber filled with screams.

With the fox gone, all of her spells had gone with her. If he was free, the fox's other victim was free as well. If he could move again, so could the girl. If he could scream, so could she — and she had so much more to scream about.

In a flash, Jee crawled across the chamber and sat next to the girl, stroking her remaining, unblemished cheek to calm her down. "Shhh," she said. "I know it hurts, it's okay . . . it's okay.."

The poor ruined girl made vague sounds of choking horror in her throat. She turned her eyes to the younger girl and, with a horrible creak of her splintered jawbone, she gasped "Please..."

Jee put her hand over the girl's eyes. "You can go now, too. I'm so sorry we didn't get here sooner. I'm so sorry." She took her hand away and, with a grateful sigh, the light went out of the poor girl's eyes.

Jee dipped her head.

After a long, silent moment, she raised it again to look at Edgar. "Can we go now?"

Edgar shrugged and waved his hands, extinguishing the flames.

He didn't realize it then but, looking back, Assam would understand that somehow, he'd seen his sister grow up in those few moments. Just a bit.

They made their way up the tunnel, back to the world above. Edgar led, with Jee second, and Assam struggling along behind as best he could. His arms and legs ached, like some illness had settled in them. He tried hard to keep up, but it was slow going. He was concentrating so hard on moving along that he ran right into his sister, stopped mid-way through the tunnel. She was peering in at the fox's litter of kits.

Edgar held one thin flame at the ready on the tip of his forefinger. Tiny eyes glittered back at him in the flickering darkness, frightened and wary.

Jee shoved in past Edgar and cooed over the tiny bundles of auburn fluff.

"Leave 'em be," Edgar said. "I'll take care of 'em."

Jee looked at him in horror. "But they're just babies."

Edgar shrugged. "Foxes is what they are. And sooner or later they'll be big foxes, all tails and tricksy like their mom. Can't have that."

"But we can't just leave them here."

Edgar raised three fingers, flames trembling on the tips. "Oh, I won't be leaving them."

"No!" Jee blew out his fingers like candles on a birthday cake.

"Suit yourself." Edgar said in the darkness. Assam could hear the growl in his voice. The boy crawled on through the tunnel, leaving the others behind.

"I think we should take them with us," Jee said over her shoulder to her brother. "Maybe we could raise them to be nice."

"Maybe." Assam was not entirely sure he disagreed with Edgar.

"I'm not leaving those poor things to starve." She wriggled out of her coat and laid it open on the tunnel floor, reaching into the den.

"Careful," her brother said. "They might bite."

"Oh, they're perfectly – ow!" She drew her hand out quickly.

"You okay?"

She sighed. "No, I'm bleeding to death."

From inside the hole, one of the foxes yelped at her, defiant. Assam tried not to smile, even in the darkness.

"Do you still have your mittens?" his sister asked.

"What?"

"Your gloves. Give them to me."

"Why?"

"To protect my hands, dummy."

"Don't call me dummy."

"I need your gloves."

"Use your own." His gloves were new and he didn't necessarily want them getting shredded by little foxy teeth.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't have them anymore."

Assam sighed. She was constantly, notoriously losing her mittens.

From up the tunnel they could hear Edgar calling to them.

Jee held out her hand. "Come on..."

Assam hesitated and then reached into the pocket of his coat. As he handed them over, he said "It's like there's always going to be someone bossing me around."

"Yeah, that's gotta be tough for you," she said, taking the gloves. "Now shut up, you're frightening them." There were three foxes in all – each no larger than a newborn kitten. She gathered them all up in her jacket, carrying them up through the tunnel with her brother following behind.

"How did you do what you did back there?" Assam asked her. "With your voice?"

"I have no idea," she said. "But you're welcome."

Edgar was waiting for them at the crown of the hill when they finally crawled out. It was still night, although the sky had a slight edge to one side, going gently from gray to black. Assam wondered briefly how there could be dawn when there was no sun.

"Look!" Jee said, displaying her makeshift bag of foxes for Edgar. "Aren't they cute?"

The boy curled his lip. "Not in the slightest."

She pouted, looking down at the little bundle in her arms. One of the foxes stared back up at her and, unexpectedly, licked her face.

"Ugh..." Assam shuddered, remembering the smear of his blood on the fox's nose.

"Exactly," Edgar nodded to him. "You saw what foxes can do. You forget that poor girl down there?"

"That wasn't their fault," Jee stuck her chin out. "They don't know any better. They won't hurt us."

She bounced the foxes in her arms and they yelped with excitement and, possibly, nausea. "Will you, babies?"

"They will," Edgar said grimly. "They always do. And the only way to be sure that they don't is fire. I said I would help you, but this is where I draw the line." He drew his finger across the air and at its tip a flame flickered to life, trailing a bright line in front of her face.

Jee didn't move. "They're mine. I saved them. You can't hurt them."

Edgar cocked his head to one side and grinned at her. "Oh, can't I?" His voice was quiet, amused, and more than a bit nasty.

Assam stood up. "Just let her have them. It's not that big a deal."

Edgar barely looked at him. "For someone who forgot to thank me for saving his life, you certainly are talking a lot."

Assam took a step towards the boy, reasonable. "Listen..."

"...touch me and you'll regret it." Edgar didn't take his eyes off the foxes. "Now, put them down and let's be done with it."

"No," Jee said. "I won't."

"I wager you would," Edgar said quietly, "if they were on fire." He held his hand up, one finger still burning. "I'm going to count to ten."

Jee stared back at him.

"Come on, guys." Assam looked back and forth between the two of them.

"One." Edgar stared to count aloud, holding up a new finger — a bright flame dancing at its tip — for every number.

"Two..." Another flame appeared.

"Jee." Assam could tell that she wasn't scared but that didn't mean she shouldn't be.

"Three," Edgar said, his eyes dancing with fire.

"I'm not going to." Jee held the foxes closer.

"Four."

"I won't let you burn them."

Edgar grinned. "Don't worry, I'll stomp out the flames for you. Five." His right hand danced with fire.

"Shut up." The foxes stared up at him, blinking in fear.

Another finger, another flame. "Six."

Assam stepped between them, facing the younger boy. "Stop counting."

"I will. Eventually. Seven."

"Seriously. I don't want any trouble."

"Then get out of my way. Eight. Nine." Edgar's face glowed with the light from his outstretched hands.

In a flash, Assam took it all in: The smaller boy in front of him, taking a breath, ready to strike . . . his sister, cuddling the defenseless little bundles of fluff in her arms, defiant but very small before the face of danger. So he did what any big brother should do. He punched the boy in the stomach as hard as he could.

Edgar crumpled and fell, the flames trailing from his fingertips like streamers, fizzling out as he put his hands down to break his fall. He sat down heavily and gasped, retching in the sand. He wiped his chin and looked up at Assam.

Assam stood over the boy, trying very hard not to shake — or, at least, to not let Edgar see that he was shaking.

"You're going to be wishing you hadn't done that, boy." Edgar seemed fairly confident on this point and Assam had no doubt that he was right.

Before he could reply — not that he had any idea what to say — his sister stepped forward and said "You know what I wish?"

Edgar looked up at her, taut as a wire. "No."

Jee looked down at the fox kits still cradled in her arms and then raised them to stare back at him. "I wish you would stop for a second," she said quietly. "Stop and take a breath." She smiled. "Take a breath and hold it."

Edgar gasped, his face twisting with rage.

"Hold it," Jee said again "Hold it for as long as you can."

Edgar's face swelled for a moment, he clawed with one hand at the ground.

Assam turned just in to see Edgar's hand flash upward towards his face. He put his hands up, but it was too late. He was blind, his eyes full of sand thrown by the younger boy. He fell to his knees, eyes stinging. His sister screamed in rage.

There was a loud sound once again, like fabric tearing.

He called for his sister, he felt her hand grasp his tightly. "I'm here," she said. "It's okay."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. One second he was there and then he wasn't." She wiped sand from his cheeks.

He jerked his head back from her touch. "Be careful."

"Sorry." She sat back. "Are your eyes okay?"

He shook his head. "I just have sand in them."

She stood up. "Hang on for a minute."

"Where are you going?"

"Just wait. Don't open your eyes. I'll get you something to rinse them."

He felt her thrust something large and bumpy into his hands. "Here, hold this for a minute."

"What is it?" he asked, even as he felt the little foxes wriggling in his arms. "Oh."

He heard her move off. One of the foxes barked as though calling her to come back.

His eyes burned, the world around him a mass of blurred shape and color. He looked down at the squirming bundle in his arms, barely able to recognize what he was holding. He resisted the urge to rub his eyes, afraid he would only make it worse.

"Hold still, put your head back." His sister had returned, breathless.

"What is it?" His vision was starting to clear somewhat. He felt something cold and wet against his cheek and flinched away.

"It's just water, put your head back."

He did as he was told, letting her gently wipe his eyes with her fingertips. The water was cold but not unpleasantly so. It was soothing compared to the stinging sand. Gently, she rinsed his eyes.

"I've got it, thanks." He raised his hand to wipe at his eyes. Assam looked up at the pale sky and blinked several times. His eyes felt numb. He blinked again, watching through his wet lashes as the sky slowly dimmed. He sat for a long moment, staring around him and blinking.

"How do they feel?"

"They feel fine." But there was a worried, creased look to his face.

"What's wrong? Do they still hurt?"

He sat for a long moment, holding his hands up against the sky. Then he said "No, they don't hurt anymore."

"Then what's wrong?"

He turned to look at her and heard the breath catch in her throat. His eyes were milky white, clouded over like the sky above. "I can't see anything," he said.

They walked along the sandy bank, following the slow drag of the river.

Jee tried very hard not to cry, holding tight to her brother's hand as she led him carefully over the uneven ground. In her other hand, she held her empty jacket. She couldn't stop apologizing. "I'm so sorry."

Her brother didn't say anything, just squeezed her hand and stumbled blindly along behind her. He wasn't angry, he didn't blame her. It wasn't her fault, really. She was only trying to help. How could she have known? Of course, all of that aside, he was still blind.

Finally, he said "I'm sorry too." When it came down to it, it was his fault in the first place. He was the one who went off alone, the one who broke the rules. The fox had found out his name somehow, he'd stepped right into her trap. He put everything at risk, he was the one paying for it now.

This time it was his sister's turn to squeeze his hand.

"I hope they'll be okay," he said, speaking of the foxes. It had been a terrible few minutes, when he'd realized what had happened, understanding that he'd gone blind and why. He couldn't speak, couldn't answer her frantic questions. He had wept and screamed himself hoarse, his sister wringing her hands and crying and apologizing over and over again.

Neither of them saw the foxes scamper off. After he had calmed down and she thought to look for them, the foxes were gone. She found them wandering along the river, muddled and confused. When Jee called to them, the kits ran away to hide. No amount of calling would bring them back. She was nearly beside herself, cuddling her empty jacket for comfort.

"I don't understand why they won't come back," Jee said to her brother, forgetting for the moment that he had some fairly significant complaints of his own. "It's like they didn't recognize me."

Assam sat with his head in his hands. "They didn't," he told her. "They don't. They don't remember you at all."

"Why not?"

He did not look up. "They drank from the river. They forgot everything. Just like my eyes forgot how to see. I told you this before, remember?"

She said nothing.

He stood up, a little off balance. "We should keep moving. We'll follow the river."

"Where?"

"To find mom." He held out his hand. "You'll have to help me now."

She took her brother's arm. He flinched at her touch, startled.

"Sorry. How will we find her?"

He didn't answer for a long moment. "I can still feel her. I can still hear her. I can find her."

Jee led the way, with her brother close behind. They followed the river. As they walked, Jee kept one eye out for the foxes . . . but she never saw them again.

INTERLUDE

Edgar sat cross-legged on the ground, his hands cupped together. From time to time, he shook them, producing a faint rattle from within.

A long shadow fell across him. "What have you got there?"

Edgar held his hands out, what looked like a few pale stones lay there. "That's fox, that is. Two, maybe three years old."

"Is that all?"

Edgar did not look up. "For now. But there's more coming. I promise."

The man held out his hand. Edgar dropped the teeth into his palm. The man — who was, of course, called Juniper — inspected the teeth, poking them with his forefinger. "Is that all you have for me?" He crouched down and forced the boy's chin up with his forefinger. "Yellow teeth and old promises?"

Edgar didn't answer.

"You told me you could do better." Juniper was all smiles, everything but his mouth. "You promised me you would."

Edgar nodded.

"I'm sorry?" The man thrust his finger up, digging into the soft space under the boy's chin.

Swallowing thickly, Edgar croaked "Yes. Yes, I promised you."

"And what did you promise me, boy?"

Edgar jerked his head back over his shoulder. "One boy. One girl."

"That's right," Juniper held his gaze for a long moment before lowering his hand, releasing him. "And when do you anticipate that you will make good on your promise?"

Edgar didn't answer.

Juniper sighed. "Well, we shall see."

"I saved them from the fox," Edgar said, sullen. "If it wasn't for me they wouldn't have gotten away and you'd have nothing."

Juniper smiled thinly. "And you would still owe me."

Edgar looked away. "I suppose."

"Saved them from a fox, did you?"

Edgar nodded.

Juniper pursed his lips. "Must have been quite a challenge for you," he said. "Besting an old fox and stealing her prey."

Edgar shook his head. "Wasn't old. It was young and fleet and crafty."

Juniper cocked his eyebrow. "Oh? Then what fox did these old yellow snaggles come from?"

Edgar didn't have an answer.

"Well," Juniper said at last, "I suppose you have your secrets, too." He pocketed the teeth. "By the by," he asked, "where are they now, the boy and the girl?"

"They headed down river."

Juniper stood for a long moment, thoughtful. "I wonder where they're going," he said to himself. "Well, we'll find out soon enough. Won't we?"

Edgar didn't answer. He'd already gone.

Juniper made his way down the hill, away from the river, back into the junkyard. He was very interested to see where they were headed. It bothered him that he didn't already know. It bothered him a lot.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

They followed the river. There was nothing else they could do. At the beginning, Jee was full of questions about Assam's blindness, offering ideas for cures. But in time she gave up and he lapsed into a silence as flat and smooth as the river flowing beside them. The landscape did little to keep her boredom at bay. Five minutes of pale sand, scrubby weeds, and bits of abandoned junk and she was ready for something interesting to happen. But nothing did.

Jee watched the low mist coming off the river, trying to find shapes in the warm tendrils drifting around them. It wasn't particularly fascinating, but it was better than nothing. Mostly, they just looked like snakes or long thin fingers reaching for them, like those pale things that had bound them up by the side of the road after the accident. Jee shuddered, putting the thought from her mind. And then, something caught her eye . . . gliding over the smooth face of the waters, parting the mist like light across a mirror. Swans. Six of them, sleek and almost blindingly white.

The large elegant birds swept by, arching their long necks like question marks to stare silently at the children as they passed. There was a momentary shimmer and suddenly the swans flickered, shifting from dazzling white to deepest black in the twinkling of an eye.

"What is it?" Assam asked.

Jee opened her mouth to answer him when the birds shimmered again, changing direction and color effortlessly, gliding one way and then the next, their plumage rippling from black to white and then back again.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Why have you stopped?"

"I'm fine, it's just some birds," she said.

"What kind of birds?"

Jee didn't answer, wanting to keep the moment for herself, somehow selfish of it as hers and hers alone. For the first time she felt that this world was hers, something she belonged in and owned — or, at least, it was a world she wanted for her own.

The swans swept between the thin bands of mist that stretched across the river. They flickered between white and black once more before they vanished downstream. "Sorry," she told her brother. "They're gone now."

"What kind of birds were they?"

She took his arm and started walking again. "I don't know," she said with a sigh. "Just birds."

"Which way were they flying?"

"They weren't flying."

"What?"

She wasn't in the mood for one of his interrogations. "They weren't flying. They were swimming."

"In the water?"

"On it. Like ducks."

"They were ducks?"

"No. They were swimming like ducks."

"What did they look like?"

"Ducks."

"What color were they?" he asked.

She opened her mouth to answer and then closed it again. She looked back at him. His eyes were closed and his chin was raised slightly, as though he were looking for the birds overhead. His eyes opened, reflecting only the pale sky above. Jee looked away, suddenly very sad and sick with guilt.

INTERLUDE

Pen and ink, paste and jar. There.

Fox, the label read. *Vulpes vulpes*. And underneath, *ab Edgar*.

Juniper laid his pen down on the table and sat back, too dissatisfied to whistle. He didn't like not knowing things and there were presently any number of things he did not know.

He stared down at his pen lying there on the tabletop, a single bead of dark ink swelling at the tip of its nib.

He knew many, many things and he took great comfort in that over the years. He knew, for instance, that foxes have forty-two teeth and that they are surprisingly fond of grapes.

But he didn't know where the children were going. And he should. The thought nagged at him

He stared down at his pen, the bead of ink swelled further.

Perhaps he should make a list, what he knew and what he did not.

His pen lay on the table, the tip pregnant with ink. He waited for it to burst. When it finally did, he was unimpressed. One moment it was a swollen glossy globe full of potential, the next it was just a rivulet trickling slowly across the table top like a thin, dark river.

He didn't need to make a list, Juniper decided. It wouldn't be difficult to track the children, not now. Not now that they were on the river. After all, there was only one way to go.

Humming softly, he took up his pen once more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jee saw the swans twice more. They drifted down the river, flickering between black and white as they vanished into the mist. The mist grew thicker, spreading out from the water, eventually blotting out everything around them. The children walked through a gray world bleached of color and memory. Jee plodded along, almost as blind as her brother and supremely bored.

For his part, Assam found the tedious silence maddening. At first he tried to get his sister to describe what she saw, but she soon grew tired of answering his questions over and over again: "Mist, water, sky, sand – all gray..." was all she would say and eventually he grew tired of hearing it as well. And so the silence, like the mist, closed in around them. Gradually, the air grew colder as they walked. The

chill mist reddened their cheeks and their breath swept out in plumes. The ground turned gray with frost, a glaze of ice forming at the water's edge. The faint grass and scrubby weeds turned brittle. Soon patches of snow crept across the slope of the riverbank, making their progress slippery and tricky.

Jee zipped up her coat, wishing she still had her gloves. She squeezed her brother's hand for warmth as much as comfort.

"Why is it so cold all of a sudden?" His teeth chattered.

"I don't know," she told him, "but it's winter again."

"What do you mean? What's happening?"

"It just started snowing." The air was filling up with huge flakes, the ground disappearing beneath a layer of white. Jee glanced back over her shoulder, watching their tracks fill and fade behind them.

"There's snow everywhere," she told him. "I can't see where we're going anymore."

"Can you still see the river?"

She nodded.

"Can you?" he asked again.

She realized he couldn't see her, didn't see her nod. "Yes."

"Follow the river," he told her. "We're going where the river's going."

She didn't ask how he knew this. She was too bored and too cold to argue.

They kept walking, but it was slow going. The snow fell heavier by the minute and she had to wipe it from her eyes every few steps. She kept her head down, partially to keep the snow out of her eyes and partially to keep her eye on the water's edge. One misstep and they could plunge into the icy water or stray off in the other direction, losing their path in the snow.

There was a sudden burst of wind over their heads, a powerful rush of wingbeats as a small flock of swans — presumably the same ones she'd seen earlier — swept down to land by the river bank ahead of them. Jee gasped and let go of her brother's hand.

"What is it?" he asked frantically. "What's happening? What's wrong?"

Jee hushed him and turned back to watch the swans scramble awkwardly towards a dark figure standing at the river's edge.

It was a woman, wrapped in a long dark coat. She held a large silver bowl in her hands and was tossing out handfuls of something to the swans scrambling through the snow around her feet. The woman laughed at the greedy, comic frenzy of the birds — a bright and happy sound in this cold place. She stopped and looked up, seeing the children standing a few yards away.

"Hello!" She waved to them, tossing out another handful for the swans.

Jee took her brother's hand, approaching cautiously.

The woman was young, perhaps a few years younger than their mother. She had a kind face framed with hair that a bit too light to be black and a bit too long to be a bob. She wasn't particularly tall but she wore a long dark coat, richly embroidered at the neck and down the front with brilliantly colored thread that shimmered in the gloomy air. The woman tossed a few more handfuls from her bowl and smiled again to the children. "They're so greedy," she said. "It's hard for them to fend for themselves in winter." She reached into her bowl and tossed out another handful.

Jee stopped in her tracks, staring in horror. The color red, like fresh blood, streaked and clotted the snow all around the young woman. Her hands, Jee saw, were stained and dripping with it. At her feet, the swans gobbled greedily at the gruesome feast.

The woman followed Jee's gaze, cocking her head to one side in confusion. Then she laughed. "Oh dear," she said brightly. "I expect this must look pretty awful, huh?"

Jee shook her head.

Behind her Assam was whispering "Who is it? What's going on?"

She squeezed his hand to silence him, keeping her eyes on the woman. "We're sorry to bother you, ma'am."

The woman smiled. "It's no bother at all. You're lucky you found me out here. I just came down to feed the swans." She gestured to Jee. "Come and say hello. They won't bite."

Jee looked at the very large birds rooting through the red-streaked snow. She thought that biting was exactly what they would do.

The woman held out the bowl to Jee. "Would you like to feed them?"

Despite herself, Jee looked in the bowl. It was about half-full of little iridescent scarlet beads that sparkled like jewels. "It's not blood?" It was more of a statement than a question. Long ago, she'd watched a few minutes of a vampire movie on television before her father came in and told her to change the channel. But it had left her with certain impressions about people who wore long dark coats.

"Blood? Oh no..." The woman, who was becoming less and less vampirish every second, laughed again. "I don't think that, as bad as the winter might get, that they would ever turn carnivorous. Besides," she added. "That would be yucky and I wouldn't look forward to feeding them quite so much."

"What are you feeding them?"

"Pomegranate seeds," the woman replied.

Behind her, Jee felt Assam stiffen.

The woman looked up at the sky. "I expect it's going to get a bit worse before it gets better. I was just thinking of heading back up to the house for a cup of tea. Would the two of you like to join me?" She smiled kindly. "It's going to be hard going for a while, what with the storm, and I'd welcome the company."

Jee nodded. "We'd like that," she said, despite her brother frantically squeezing her hand.

"Excellent." The woman smiled and turned. Jee saw that on the hill above the river sat a large house – a mansion, really. Squat and stone and massive, surrounded by trees stripped bare by winter. It might have even been a palace.

Following the woman up the hill, Assam leaned forward and whispered "Where are we going?"

Jee didn't hesitate. "To the Winter Palace for tea."

Back down at the river's edge, the swans searched through the snow. After a while, they gave up and flew off, still flickering between black and white against the slate gray sky.

BOOK TWO

THE WINTER PALACE

CHAPTER ONE

"Please call me Winterly," the Queen told them. "That way we can be friends."

Jee was happy to agree. Since meeting the woman, there was nothing she wanted more than to be the Queen's – Winterly's – friend.

Her brother on the other hand was less impressed. With only her voice to go on, his imagination had to supply the rest. For all he knew, the more charming the Queen, the more evil she was likely to turn out to be.

It's not like this had never happened before. He'd read the stories. He knew how things worked. He knew what to look for. But as it was, he only had his hearing to guide him. He paid close attention to the Queen's words, looking for anything that even remotely hint at a hidden meaning or purpose. The wind didn't help, whipping past his head and making it difficult to hear anything.

And it was cold. They were halfway up the hill and his ears were starting to ache. He was tired and cold. And he was blind. He felt like a ghost – or, perhaps, the opposite of one. He was alive, a living, breathing soul, lost and wandering among the dead. He was subject to the rules and cautions of a world to which he did not belong, a world he could not escape. He was trapped within the boundaries of a place that he could neither see, escape, nor understand.

His sister, however, was having a lovely time. She helped him through the snow as best she could, paying more attention to the Queen's friendly chatter than her brother's shambling, sliding steps. The low rise of the hill was blanketed in snow inches deep. In spring, it might have been a beautiful, lush garden once. But there was nothing now save for the chill reminders of death all around. Here and there, Jee saw small shrubs and trees half-buried in snow, stripped bare by the teeth of winter. These skeletal remains were all that had been left behind after the long, cold feast. Nothing stirred, nothing moved but the three of them and the spinning, windblown snow.

Then, Jee saw someone out there among the trees. It was a man, standing below one of the trees with his arm outstretched as though straining to pick a piece of fruit. But the branch above was bare. He wore what appeared to be overalls and a straw hat. The man was motionless. Jee wondered if he had frozen to death. Then she realized: It wasn't a man at all. It was a statue.

"Almost there." The Queen led them on up the slope of the hill. The palace stood dark against the pale sky, looming over them like a shadow. Here and there, a light burned. But even if every window had been lit up, the gray squat majesty of the place would have swallowed it all like a sullen child at a birthday party, refusing to be taken in by all the joy.

It reminded Jee of something, a vague memory that took a moment to locate, then she remembered. A few years back, her grandmother had passed away and at the funeral Jee had seen little stone houses scattered throughout the graveyard. She'd been younger then and she asked her brother why dead people needed playhouses. He, of course, laughed at her before he set her straight and explained. Walking through the snow towards the palace, she tried to bring to mind what he had called them. "Mausoleums," she said, finding the word in her memory at last.

The Queen stopped and looked at her. There was a old hurt in her eyes and Jee knew that she was the one who had awakened it.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

The Queen nodded, more to herself than the girl. And then she turned and led them up a series of

stone steps toward the palace. At the top, they passed across a flagstone patio under the bored and remote gaze of the dark windows. There were two massive doors of dark wood flanked on either side by stone flower pots. Inside them, dried twigs poked up through the snow. As they approached, the doors opened and they followed the Queen inside to a massive entry hall hung from floor to ceiling with tapestries and paintings.

Jee stared up at the distant, vaulted roof above and allowed one small, awestruck "Wow" to escape. And yet, for all its beauty, she couldn't help but shiver. Unlike the bitter winter cold and snow outside, the chill of the palace was unnatural, overwhelming. Outside, it had been bitterly cold — but it was just nature. Even during the worst winter, there is a always promise that spring will one day return.

The palace was beautiful, to be sure, but as heartless and dead as a mausoleum. Nothing could press back against the emotional chill seeping from every corner of the place.

Not that someone hadn't tried. There were flowers everywhere: Vases exploding in color, bowls of water swimming with lilies and roses, potted plants in every corner. But all of the flowers in nature couldn't change the truth: This was a sad place, a dead and lifeless house. The flowers were merely leftovers from the funeral.

With the great doors closed behind them, both children reflexively stamped their feet to knock the snow off of their boots. Jee glanced to the Queen to see if she minded. The woman simply smiled, unbuttoning her long shimmering coat. Underneath she wore a dark, elegant skirt and sweater the color of fresh coffee. Jee felt warmer just looking at her.

There was a statue standing to one side of the door — a perfectly ordinary looking man in a perfectly ordinary looking suit, looking perfectly bored. As statues go, the likeness was excellent. If Jee hadn't already seen the statue in the snow outside, she might have taken him for a real person. Also, he was stone gray from top to bottom, which she thought was a dead giveaway.

Then the statue raised its arm and took the Queen's coat in a movement so fluid and natural that Jee almost missed it. The statue froze in place once more.

The Queen, apparently not noticing Jee's astonishment, turned to the children. "Now, do you want to hold on to your coats or shall we hang them up?"

"Yes please." Jee couldn't stop staring at the statue.

The Queen smiled. "'Yes please' you want to hold on to them? Or 'Yes please' you want to be rescued from their puffy, down-filled clutches?"

Assam squeezed Jee's arm before she could answer. "I'd like to hold on to mine, thank you, your majesty," he said. "And you probably should as well," he told his sister. "You know how you forget things."

"I do not," she said, despite the fact that since the beginning of the school year she'd already gone through two scarves, one pair of boots, and countless sets of gloves and mittens. She took off her coat and held it out, watching with amazement as the statue moved and shifted. She tugged at her brother's sleeve. "Come on, it's too hot for all that junk." She wanted to see the statue in action again.

"I'm fine," he said, blinking.

"You're not," she told him. "You're practically sweating to death in it."

"I am not." Assam wiped his forehead.

"Suit yourself." Jee shrugged. She considered taking off her snowpants and boots but couldn't think of a dignified way to go about it.

The Queen smiled. "Well, then . . . how does a nice warm cup of tea sound?"

Tea, they both admitted, sounded wonderful.

"Excellent!" The Queen led them off through the palace. As they went along, Jee counted the statues.

They were scattered everywhere. Their dull flat eyes stared back at her from every corner. Their pale faces almost lifelike enough to pass for real, with a patient, waiting expression. In one of the rooms, Jee saw a statue of a woman posed over a table with a rag in her hand. As they passed by, she could see that one side of the table was dull and the other gleamed, as though the statue had been frozen halfway through the job of polishing it. Jee wondered over these gray, ghost-like figures. She thought of asking her brother about them, but decided against it.

He could have told her a lot from the old stories about statues, had she asked. And very little of it would have been good. Not that Jee would have listened to him.

When they had first met the Queen, she'd been wearing that long beautiful coat with the dark skirt and sweater underneath. And she'd been wearing boots, Jee noted, black ones that went up to her knee. Jee had been considerably impressed by those boots, so she was surprised to see that, somehow along the way, they had vanished — well, they hadn't *vanished*. The Queen wasn't barefoot. The boots had somehow been replaced by patent leather Mary Janes. And the coffee-colored sweater and skirt had, inexplicably, changed as well. Now the Queen was wearing a pair of gray pants and a stiff white shirt, like a school uniform. Jee had no idea how the Queen had managed to change clothes, but she thought that the new outfit looked adorable. Even though Jee was a tomboy at heart, she had a soft spot for patent leather.

They passed on through a large drawing room where a statue posed by the mantle, feather duster in hand. On the other side of the room, the Queen held the door open for them and the children passed through. As the Queen followed, Jee looked back and did a double take. The Queen's gray pants and white shirt had, suddenly and magically, transformed into a black velvet dress with a white sash at the waist. The Queen didn't appear to notice that her wardrobe had changed. As the Queen walked past, the dress shimmered — much like the swans on the river — changing into a black knit top and a pair of very leather pants. Jee tried very hard not to stare.

"Excuse me," Assam said. He'd been quiet for some time, but the tone in his voice told Jee that he was getting a little sick of following her like a puppy.

"Yes?" The Queen stopped and looked back at him.

"Where are you taking us?" There was a faint echo of distrust in his voice, however polite he pretended to be.

His sister squeezed his hand to shut him up.

"Ow," he said. "I mean, could you please tell us where we're going?"

"I thought that we might have our tea in the Solarium," the Queen said. "The rest of the palace is so cold and stuffy."

"Is it very much farther?" His question drifted close to the border between polite and rude, but the Queen didn't seem to notice.

"Not very far," she told him with a little smile. She reached out her hand and opened a nearby door, stepping back to let them pass through.

When the Queen had first mentioned having tea, Jee imagined her mother sitting with a cup of coffee and a newspaper in the little nook off of the kitchen back home. The word "solarium" had meant nothing to her. Stepping through the doorway, she realized that whatever it meant, it probably had nothing to do with newspapers and old, chipped mugs.

Inside the solarium, the warm air shimmered with heat and color. Butterflies flitted here and there,

their color lost among the dazzle of the flowers. Gangs of songbirds twittered and scolded among the trees and shrubbery. Above them, the sun beat down through a faceted ceiling of glass panels. Jee looked up into the golden light, wondering how the weather outside could have changed so quickly. It was like being in a garden, an exceptionally beautiful and large garden, that someone had somehow set inside a diamond and then set that diamond inside the sun.

The Queen closed the door behind them. "And here we are," she said as she passed in a completely new outfit – a light summer dress of a yellow so pale that it almost looked white. She led them along a stone path to a small bridge that crossed over a narrow brook. Iridescent fish swam through the water below, sleepy and content.

Over the bridge was a little clearing in which a small white wrought iron table waited. They had obviously been expected. There were three chairs and the table was laid with white china and linen napkins. To one side, another statue stood patiently next to a small cart holding a silver tea service. As they approached, the statue moved to pull out a chair for the Queen. Murmuring her thanks, she sat down.

Jee followed suit, pulling out the heavy metal chair for herself. She looked across the table at the Queen, who inclined her head towards Assam still standing nearby, uncertain and blind.

"Sorry," Jee said. She hopped up and guided him to his seat. She sat down again and unfolded her napkin. The cup and saucer in front of her were bone white, a thin silver band around the rim shining brightly in the sun. There was a loaf of bread on a silver tray, flanked by two tall glass bottles with silver spouts. One bottle was filled with a bright green fluid. The other with a liquid so dark it was almost black.

Jee looked up to see that the Queen was watching her, an amused smile playing at the corners of her mouth. The Queen nodded to the statue. "I think we're ready now, Robert. Please get us started and then you can leave us to fend for ourselves."

The statue shifted to life immediately, transferring the tea service to the table with a quick, almost mechanical efficiency. With a slight bow to the Queen, the statue wheeled the cart away over the bridge and out of sight. Once he had gone, the Queen lifted the teapot and, glancing from one child to the other, asked "Well, should I be mother?"

"Um..." Jee wasn't quite certain what to say, a sudden memory of their mom looking back between the car seats flickering in her mind.

"Yes please, your majesty," her brother answered for both of them.

"Please," the Queen told them. "Call me Winterly. That way we can be friends."

Winterly. The name was like gentle laughter, like the sound of tea as she poured it into the bone white china cups. It was perfect. She was perfect.

Jee had lost track of how many times her clothes had shimmered and shifted, how many wonderful things she had said, how many kind looks she had given them, how many times she had laughed. If Winterly was a witch, Jee decided, then they were already doomed.

Assam would not be so easily won. His blindness made him immune to the dazzle of the Queen's shifting wardrobe and her friendly smiles. But despite her name, her voice was warm and kind.

He found himself wondering about her. What did she look like? Was she pretty? Was she old or young? And how young, exactly?

As she was pouring the tea, the Queen said "Now then: Who are you and what are you called?"

Jee glanced to her brother and then back to Winterly.

The Queen set the teapot down. "Don't worry. There is no harm here in this house, not for you. I only want to know where you are going and how I can help. Now," she said, lifting a small silver tray, "milk or lemon?"

With no idea which was better, Jee said "I would like milk please. And my name is..." but her brother coughed, interrupting her. She glared at him. "You can call me Jee. And I'm not stupid or anything, honestly." This last part was said under her breath for her brother's benefit.

The Queen poured a small amount of milk into the girl's cup, a little storm cloud drifting at the bottom of the tea. "I bet you're clever," Winterly said. "And I can't tell you how glad I am to meet you. I know people say you should put it in first, but I always forget."

"Put what in first?"

"The milk, Jee. So it doesn't get scalded." Winterly turned to the boy. "And for you?"

Assam said nothing for a long moment. Then, he opened his eyes. "You can call me Assam" He sounded not unlike a child forced to share his toys on Christmas morning.

Winterly nodded. If she noticed anything unusual about his milky eyes, she didn't show it. "And so I shall."

Slowly, he closed his eyes again.

"Milk or lemon?" the Queen asked brightly.

"Neither, thank you." Assam's hands drifted towards the tabletop, pale fingertips exploring first the edge of the saucer before coming to rest lightly on the rim of the cup.

Winterly lifted a silver bowl. "Sugar?"

"Yes, please."

She obliged and he took a sip. The tea was faintly sweet and he imagined it was the color of rain against the summer sky. He knew it wasn't, or course. He'd seen tea before, but this tasted different somehow. He could taste the color of it. The Queen's voice was the same color as the tea, in his mind.

In addition to the tea, there were sandwiches — some kind of taupe paste smeared between slices of soft bread with the crusts cut off. Both of the children politely accepted one — although neither of them felt compelled to finish it, despite the fact that they hadn't eaten anything since the diner. And no one said anything about not eating, not anymore. They'd gone too far to worry about that sort of thing.

Jee thought the stuff between the bread smelled like cat food, but she drank several cups of tea. She was utterly enchanted with the simple elegance of the cups and the little pitcher of milk. She'd never seen sugar cubes before either, and she adored the little tongs shaped like bird's claws that the Queen used to pick them up.

Her brother was enjoying himself somewhat less. The tea was hot and difficult to drink, given his condition. He had to guide the cup carefully to his lips with both hands. It felt childish and undignified, so he gave up on the tea after the first few sips. He sat back and lifted his face to the warmth beaming down from above. He wondered where it was coming from. He could see nothing, no faint glow of any kind. It was not like having his eyes closed. You could still see light and dark through your eyelids. No, this was like someone had simply painted over his eyes. And yet, he felt safe — at least, this was the safest he'd felt since the accident.

He took up his cup again, raising it carefully to his lips. He could feel their eyes on him, his sister and the Queen. He could feel them thinking about him. Assam wondered if all blind people felt this way and, if they did, how they could stand to be around people at all. He'd rather be alone than endure the constant feeling of exposure, of being watched, that razor thin edge of self-consciousness cutting through everything he did.

His sister tapped his foot under the table and, startled, he set his teacup down with a nervous rattle. The Queen had asked him something while he'd been lost in his thoughts. "I'm sorry," he said, worrying that he spilled his tea. "What did you say?"

The Queen said "Will you tell me what happened to your eyes?"

"Why?"

"I should like to know"

"Why?" he asked again. She felt kind to him. But he didn't know how far that feeling, or she, could be trusted. To tell her one thing, he knew, meant telling her everything.

"I should like to help," she answered. "If I can."

"Maybe they've always been like this," Assam replied. "Maybe I was born this way. Some people are, you know." He could feel his sister's foot tapping out a silent scolding on his own under the table. He shifted away, ignoring the wave of frustration pouring off of her.

"Some are," the Queen admitted. "But you weren't. You lost your sight or it was taken from you. Recently, as far as I can tell. I'd like to know how it happened. And I'd like to help."

Assam nearly asked her why again, but he didn't. His wariness sounded sullen and rude, even to his ears. He'd been raised to be more respectful than that. And his suspicion was getting tipped off-balance by the possibility that she might actually be able to help him. "What would you like to know?"

"Well, I already know what to call both of you so perhaps you could tell me just a bit more."

"Like what?" Jee chimed in.

"Only what you need to," the Queen said. She laid her hand on Assam's and he flinched away from her touch. Gently, she laid her hand over his again. "I know you're being careful and I understand. Believe me, If you had anything to fear from me . . . well, you would know it by now."

Assam nodded. "May I have some more tea, please?"

"Of course." While the Queen was pouring, he had time to think. She seemed kind and he wanted to trust her. He had to admit that she had a point. Of course, the fox had said something very similar.

He decided to trust her. But he would be careful. He took a breath, like someone getting ready to jump into water without know how cold or how deep it was.

"We're looking for our mom," his sister said, running all over his careful plans.

"Julia..." Assam groaned. He would have glared at her, but for his blindness. "I was trying to be careful."

"Way to go telling her my name, then."

He laid his head down on the table. He simply couldn't stand the weight of it any longer. And he wept. All the worries and fear and sadness and longing for his mother came pouring out of him in great, gasping sobs.

The Queen got up and knelt next to his chair. She didn't speak or try to calm him down. She just laid her head on his shoulder and ran her fingertips back and forth lightly across his back. It was exactly the right thing to do.

Eventually his sobs tapered off and he lifted his head again. He made an effort to clean himself up without spoiling the handkerchief that the Queen pressed into his hands. Once he had gotten himself under control, the Queen patted his arm and went back to her chair.

As she sat down, she glanced to Jee and a small understanding passed between them. *This is a good boy and he needs us right now,* the Queen's look seemed to tell her, silently. *So we'll do anything we can for him, won't we?*

Jee nodded and looked at her brother. He was staring down blindly at his hands, fingers wound through the wrought iron curlicues of table.

"So," the Queen said quietly, "you're not meant to be there, then."

Assam shook his head, a faint shadow of worry crossing his face. They were trespassers in this place. Maybe, with all of the danger, they were in trouble too.

The Queen nodded to herself. "I thought as much but you can never tell for sure. It's always better to ask."

Neither of the children said anything.

"Tell me what happened to your eyes," the Queen asked again, pouring herself another cup of tea.

Milk, Jee noted to herself, *no sugar*.

Assam took a breath. He was going to have to answer her questions now. He couldn't very well ask for more tea. "How much," he asked quietly, "how much do you know about foxes?"

"A bit," the Queen admitted. "Not much."

"Well this," Assam passed his hand in front of his eyes, "this happened because of a fox. And because I was stupid."

"I was stupid too." Jee did not want to be left out.

The Queen leaned back in her chair and sipped her tea. A shimmering wave passed over her as her clothes changed into a deep burgundy coat with a fur collar. "Start at the beginning," she said. "Don't leave anything out."

They spoke in turns, managing as best they could to remember what had happened. The Queen listened quietly, sharing her attention between them and smiling patiently when they quibbled over details. They told her about the accident, about awakening by the side of the road and the long walk to the hospital. Jee tried to describe their mother lying there, but couldn't get the words out.

Assam picked up the story for her and told of the bell and the stairs, of their trip down the river to Moontown, and of the witch and her garden. Jee took over from there, telling her of time in the diner, of Edgar's offer and Sarah's advice.

"I know the place you mean," Winterly said. "But I don't think I've met this girl."

"She knew you," Jee said. "She told me you were in love."

Winterly cocked her head to one side, eyes twinkling. "Really? She said that? I've never even met her."

"No . . . she said you fell in love with someone. Someone else. Not her."

"Ah," the Queen closed her eyes for a moment.

Assam wrinkled his brow. There was a faint peal of sadness that rang from the Queen.

When Winterly opened her eyes again, the twinkle that had been there was gone. "That's true," she admitted. "I did."

"Anyways," Assam said. "Sarah has a boyfriend. His name is Seth."

"How do you know?" Jee asked.

Assam shrugged. "I met him."

"You met her boyfriend?" Jee didn't bother to keep the jealousy out of her voice.

He nodded.

"What did he look like?" she asked. "Was he cute?"

Assam shrugged. "Do you like snakes?"

"Eew..." Jee recoiled.

The Queen leaned in. "Okay, you know what? I think you should tell me more about this Edgar character."

Jee did her best to fill in what she knew about the boy, his odd quirks and the offer to help them.

The Queen nodded. "And what else?"

Jee thought for a moment. "He drives. He has a car with a lot of books in the back."

"Books?" Assam asked. He hadn't heard this part before.

"Kids books, like from when I was in kindergarten."

"And he can do magic," Assam told the Queen.

She raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yeah," he said. "Real magic. He can light his fingers on fire and teleport, stuff like that."

"And he drinks wine and he's not that much older than me." Jee felt this was an important point.

The Queen was quiet for a moment. "I don't know this boy," she said, "but that's no surprise. It's a big place. I know the type, though."

"Do you know a tall man?" Jee asked, remembering suddenly the encounter outside the diner. "He has really scary eyes?"

The Queen shook her head. "You just described half the people here. Tell me more about him."

Jee thought back, remembering as best she could. He'd been very tall, taller than their father and perfectly ordinary looking. "Almost boring" was how she put it. "But there was something wrong with him," she told Winterly. "Something . . . strange. And scary."

The Queen smiled. "Strange and scary just about sums up everybody else in this place, in one way or another." She winked. "Even me."

"But do you know him?" Assam asked.

"Nope," Winterly said. "There's so many exiles out there, there's no way to keep track of them all. No idea who he is or why he was interested in you. But it sounds like you were right to steer clear of him."

"What's 'exile' mean?" Jee asked.

The Queen frowned. "It means, an exile is . . . oh, I don't know . . . it means someone who has been sent away from where they belong."

"By who?" Assam asked. "From where?"

"It depends." The Queen reached for the teapot and refilled their cups. She took a sip of hers, made a face. "It's gone cold, I'm sorry." She set her cup down and took a breath.

Assam realized that she was giving herself time to think, just like he had done earlier.

"Sometimes," the Queen said, "sometimes you can exile yourself. If you find you don't belong, if there's no place for you anymore, you can end up just . . . wandering."

"Is Edgar an exile?" Jee asked.

The Queen shrugged again, sending a ripple down her clothes. "I don't know if he is or not," she said, inspecting the sudden appearance of her denim overalls and white t-shirt. "He certainly sounds like one."

"And what about the other one, the tall man?" Jee asked. "What does he want?" She knew about safety and strangers from school and talks with her parents. There were men in cars who wanted to kidnap you, she knew, and wanted to do bad things, to touch you. But she was a little unclear on the whys of it all.

"I don't know," Winterly said again. "I don't know who he is or what he wants. I'm not sure I want us to find out, either."

Assam liked that, the way she said "us." He liked it very much. "So what do we do now?"

“Now,” Winterly said, brightening her tone and their mood. “Now we should go and see what we can do about your eyes.”

Assam nodded. He had no choice now but to trust her.

INTERLUDE

Juniper doesn't particularly care for the river. It's one of the few things that makes him honestly uncomfortable. And he doesn't like being uncomfortable, not at all.

But, regardless, there he is: Walking along the bank as though he were out for a little stroll.

Of course, he's got more important things to do than walk.

He has no idea where he's going. This makes him a bit uncomfortable as well.

No worries. Once he gets there, he'll get it all sorted out again. And for good.

CHAPTER TWO

Assam lay on his back, a cool damp cloth folded over his eyes. He tried to relax but it was difficult. Although they did not speak or move or make any sound, someone was in the room with him. He could feel them there and it made him uncomfortable. He felt exposed, unprotected. Blind.

But the Queen had made him a promise and, in spite of himself, he trusted her.

Before he'd left the solarium, she'd laid her hand on his — like her voice, it was very warm. “I cannot promise that we'll be able to restore what you've lost, but I can promise that you'll be safe here while we try our best.”

Her hand squeezed his and then withdrew. A smaller hand, his sister's, grasped his as well. She didn't say anything but he heard her all the same, every word. He nodded and squeezed her hand.

At the Queen's instruction, cold hands took his arm and led him away out of the garden. Walking through the palace, he felt the lonely chill creeping through every hallway and room they passed through. He missed the garden, the warm light on his face, the kindness of the Queen.

They walked on in silence. At times Assam would have thought himself alone but for the cold, unseen hand that led him on. “Where are you taking me?”

His question went unanswered.

After a few minutes he asked “What's your name?”

Nothing in response.

The boy gave an experimental — and, he hoped, what would seem to be accidental — tug on the

hand holding his. He wasn't looking for trouble. He just pulled at it a bit, testing their grip. It might as well have been carved from stone. Wherever they were headed, he realized, he had little or no choice in the matter.

After a while, they came to a stop. Assam heard a metallic rattle and a click, followed by the low groan of hinges unaccustomed to use.

A tug on his arm, leading him forward. He heard the door close behind him. His guide led him a step or two and then stopped. The unseen hand took his and pressed it against a low flat surface, just about at waist level. The hand patted his, like someone praising a dog.

Assam waited a moment. He lifted his hand and, immediately, it was replaced. "What do you want?"

Hands gripped his arms and shoulders, pushing him forward and forcing him to lie back on the flat surface in front of him. He struggled and protested, but he was outnumbered and outmatched. Once he was lying down, the hands withdrew and the room fell silent. He lay there for a long moment, wondering if he was alone. Apart from the pounding of his own heart, the air in the room was dead and silent.

Experimentally, he raised his head. Nothing happened.

After a long moment, he sat up.

Again, nothing.

He swung his legs over the side. He sighed inwardly with relief and stood up, holding his hands out in front of him. He took a step in the direction he thought the door was in.

Assam screamed. Someone grabbed his hands, someone else grabbed his shoulders, his arms, the back of his neck. He was half-led, half-forced back to lay down once more. The hands withdrew. Tentatively, he raised his head. "Hello?"

No answer.

"I'm sorry." The silence did not feel forgiving, exactly. Assam put his head back down and took a deep breath. He willed himself calm, trying to relax. He held onto the Queen's promise, repeating it like a protective spell.

A noise nearby interrupted his thoughts: The sound of a door opening and closing. He wasn't alone any longer. Someone was there in the room. He could hear them moving about, the soft sound of their footsteps shuffling along the floor. He heard the scrape of wood against wood, vague sounds that he couldn't place — paper rustling, something metal, the sound of glass against glass. He wondered if they were going to operate. He wondered if it was going to hurt.

There was a sudden noise nearby, staccato and harsh, like stones being poured into a metal bucket. He sat up with a start. "What's going on?"

A hand on his chest — different from the others, kinder somehow. Comforting. It patted his shoulder and laid him gently back down. The hand moved to his forehead, as though checking for a fever. Then, gently, it passed over his eyes, covering them for a moment. Then it withdrew.

There was the sound of water nearby, vaguely metallic and strange.

He whimpered in surprise as something cold and wet was laid across his eyes. He reached up to take it away, but a hand gently grasped his and held them for a moment before letting go. Assam reached for his eyes once more, slower this time, touching them lightly with his fingertips, feeling the texture of the damp cloth his unseen caretaker had placed there. A drop of water ran down his cheek and was lost in the maze of his ear.

There was a breath nearby, a sharp inhalation as though his unseen companion was about to speak. Assam froze.

Then . . . a low sigh, the escape of breath.

Assam lowered his hands.

Footsteps, the scrape of wood, the creak of a chair as someone sat down.

Assam relaxed. There was a scent in the air, sharp and strange – and yet oddly familiar. It reminded him a little of what summer smells like, when everyone in the neighborhood is mowing their lawn and the air is full of that rich, warm smell of cut grass with the faint ghost of gasoline lurking beneath.

He heard another sigh followed by a papery rustle that he knew very well: The pages of a book being turned. An image flashed into his mind with such sudden clarity that he thought for a moment that his sight had returned. This is what he saw, lying there: A grandfatherly old man sitting in a chair. Someone unimportant, insignificant. A low level employee in the palace who had been assigned to look after Assam and was passing the time by reading a paperback book until their shift was over.

He was, of course, entirely wrong about all of it – except for the grandfatherly bit, that was pretty close.

He heard a page turn.

He took a breath and held it, waiting.

CHAPTER THREE

Without her brother there, Jee felt oddly shy. Maybe it was being in the presence of a real Queen, but mostly she was just intensely afraid of embarrassing herself in front of such a kind and stylish woman.

They sat together for a while in silence. Jee fanned her hand in front of her face – partially to cool off and partially to discourage a particular bumblebee that kept approaching her as if to say “You know, your face is very familiar. Is it possible we’ve met before?”

Desperate to break the silence, Jee finally said “Your garden is very pretty.” In truth, Jee wasn’t one of those little girls who needed everything she owned to be decorated with flowers and kittens and rainbows. They were fine, as far as those sorts of things go, but it was all a bit too girly for her tastes. But the garden was pretty, she had to admit.

“Thank you,” the Queen said, setting down her teacup. “Would you like to see more of it?” She was sitting in a very un-Queenlike fashion with her legs up on the table. She was still wearing the overalls and t-shirt. At one point, there had been sneakers, orange ones, but she’d taken them off in order to wiggle her toes. “Or,” she said, sliding her legs off the table and leaning forward. “I don’t suppose you’d want to see more of the palace.”

Jee practically leapt out of her chair and said “Oh, yes.” Then she said “No thank you.” Finally, she settled on “No to the gardens and yes to the palace, um, your majesty.”

“Winterly,” the Queen corrected her with a smile and reached for her sneakers. Lacing them up, she said “I can remember when I first came here. I spent so much time exploring. It seemed so big to me then, so beautiful and elegant.” She double knotted her laces. “Although, these days I find myself spending most of my time here.”

“Why?”

Winterly shrugged – another very un-Queenlike gesture but Jee thought it was quite charming.

"Because it reminds me of my mother and I miss her." She sighed. "Come on, let's take a tour." As she rose, her outfit suddenly rippled, shimmered, and resolved into a full length gown of red velvet. A twin strand of pearls ran down the front like rainwater. White silk gloves sprouted from her fingertips and grew up her arms, stopping just past her elbows. Winterly lifted the hem of the dress and poked one foot out, inspecting the white beaded slipper she was now wearing. She made a face. "Might have done that before I spent all that time tying my shoes."

Jee stood up, feeling very underdressed. If she had known when she got up that morning that she'd be having tea with the Queen of the Underworld, she might have chosen something more appropriate than blue jeans and an old sweater. Unlike most girls her age, Jee dressed for herself. She had an interesting approach to fashion which involved combining as many different kinds of clothes, styles, and colors as she could reasonably find in her closet and drawers.

In the winter, the puffy inflated look of snowpants and jackets always annoyed her. They were so boring. And, compared with the Queen, she looked downright frumpy. Her snow boots were especially embarrassing to her. They were hand-me-downs from her brother, which made them already two years away from brand new when she got them. Also they were slightly too large and, since she was small for her age, she would probably be stuck with them for another year at least.

"All set?" Winterly asked.

"Yes, your majesty."

Winterly wrinkled her nose. "I'm going to start wearing a nametag if you keep calling me that."

"I'm sorry."

The Queen — *Winterly*, Jee reminded herself — took her hand. "Come on," she said to the girl. "Let's go and have a look around, see if there's anything interesting going on." She sighed in mock boredom. "Which I highly doubt, but it never hurts to check."

They went back across the little bridge, Jee's oversized boots clumping horribly despite her best efforts to walk gently. The fish below scattered as she passed, darting away to hide in the maze of reeds.

Through the garden they went, following a small path to an archway festooned with ivy and flanked by two statues, each of them holding a large pair of shears. The statues were frozen in place, caught in the act of snipping away at the overgrown arch. The Queen nodded to the statues and they in turn bowed low with a grating, stony creak.

Winterly and Jee passed through the arch. Walking up the long hallway beyond, Jee heard a sound behind her — a metallic snipping noise. She looked back over her shoulder.

The statues were still standing there, motionless . . . although in different positions than before.

Jee looked away. The snipping started up again. She turned back and it stopped, as did the statues. She thought she might have caught a glimpse of movement. She looked away, but there was no sound this time. She counted to twenty before she looked back, just to test her patience. When she did, she saw that the statues were standing with their heads together as though they were whispering. She couldn't tell for certain, but one of them appeared to be staring right at her. Then, just as she looked away, the statue winked. Jee turned around quickly and glanced up to see Winterly smiling.

"They're hard to catch in the act," the Queen whispered. "Believe me, I've tried." They came to a doorway and Winterly held it open for her.

Jee walked through without looking back.

CHAPTER FOUR

Assam let his breath out. He'd no idea how long he'd been laying there. His only way to tell time was by counting how many times the damp cloth over his eyes had been removed, refreshed, and replaced. Four, so far. Each time, it was the same.

First, a sigh from his unseen caretaker. Then the scrape of a chair against the floor.

Footsteps approaching, heavy and measured.

The cloth is removed. There is the sound of water.

The cloth is replaced, damp and cool once more.

There is a faint scent on the cloth, like the sharpness of his mother's breath kissing him goodnight when she's had a glass of wine with dinner. Then it fades, like the footsteps heading away.

The creak of the chair. The sigh. And the silence, followed by a thin papery sound of pages turning, his unseen companion going back to his book once more.

Not that his caretaker wasn't vigilant. If Assam so much as shifted, raised his hand to touch lightly at the cloth, he would feel their gaze on him immediately — like a lighthouse beam passing by and then snapping back suddenly to fix him in its sights.

Then, a voice spoke. A man's voice, almost a whisper, gentle and old. "The cloth is steeped in an infusion of eyebright and emerald. It may help your condition and it may not. But there should be no more discomfort than what you'd experience after a good cry."

And then, silence but for the gentle rustle of the pages.

A hundred questions rattled through Assam's mind. But he was afraid to ask any of them. He had the strong impression that if he tried to get the unseen man to answer his questions, he'd retreat into his book and leave the boy alone in the silence and the darkness. Being blind, Assam decided, was lonely enough. He didn't need the silent treatment too. Maybe just one question wouldn't hurt: "What is eyebright?" It wasn't the first one on his list, but it was the one that seemed most likely to get his caretaker talking.

"Well..." The voice fell thoughtfully silent.

Assam waited, willing himself not to speak.

Finally, the man went on. "Eyebright is a plant, an herb with certain properties or qualities, qualities that make it useful in the treatment of certain . . . maladies, conditions related to the eye."

Assam considered this for a moment. The information raised far more questions than it answered, but he had a sense that his unseen nurse wasn't finished. As it turned out, he was right.

"Eyebright," the voice continued quietly, "is fairly reliable in these situations." There was a small cough on the final word and Assam understood in a flash of insight that there was more than age in that whisper. Silence had settled into that voice like the pale frost of winter on the windows back home.

"But," the man went on, "in cases like yours . . . well, I suppose, the potential benefits outweigh whatever minor risks might arise from treatment."

"Minor risks?"

"You needn't worry excessively." The voice was calm and measured. Assam would have sworn that there was a faint smile lingering somewhere beneath it all. "The side effects that eyebright sometimes brings are sometimes dramatic, but not necessarily considered to be detrimental."

Considered by who? Assam wondered.

"Eyebright," the unseen old man said, "it's a tricky thing. You use your eyes from the very beginning of your life, even before that, when there's nothing to see but the warm dark wine of your mother surrounding you. And then, when you finally figure out that there's more to life and you scoot your way out into the light, the first thing you do is close your eyes."

The voice, Assam noticed, was stronger. Someone had forgotten to be shy.

"More than anything you do in your life," the man went on, "more than listening or the words that you manage to speak or going to the toilet or even breathing . . . more than anything, you *see*. It's what you're good at. It's what you were made for."

A creak. Assam felt a tap on the sole of his shoe. In his mind's eye, he saw the man leaning forward, tapping his finger.

"In fact, and this is one of those big secrets of your world, it's how you were made. And it's how you know each other and yourself. Sight . . . sight is the key to the doorway of existence and it's how the rest of existence enters you."

Assam felt certain that this was the longest speech that had been uttered by that voice in many years. He would not have been able to tell you how he knew this. But it was true. The man speaking to him had not carried on a conversation in hundreds, if not thousands, of years. "And eyebright?" Now that the dam had broken, Assam did not fear neither flood nor drought.

Another sigh filled the room as though life's strains and disappointments had squeezed every whole breath out of this man, and all he had left were sighs. "It was the only way," the voice answered. "The only way I could see to awaken your eyes, to help them remember what they're for."

Assam's questions didn't seem to lead to answers, just more questions. "You said that this eyebright thing was dangerous for someone like me."

"It can be, yes." The man went on, answering the question that Assam wouldn't ask. "You already see, hear so much. I don't know what eyebright will do, if anything, to a boy like you."

"Uh huh." Assam chewed his lip. He'd known instinctively from the earliest days of his life that you don't tell people that you can see things, that you sometimes hear their thoughts. You don't give that information out. Not even to your family. When you're different, you can't let anyone know. And Assam had told no one. Ever. Only his sister had the slightest inkling of what he could do. Only his sister . . . and now this man.

"But it's not dangerous, really." Assam couldn't tell if the old man was honestly reassuring him or just trying to make him feel better. "But it's wise and advisable to be somewhat careful with this sort of thing."

Assam relaxed, just a little. This sounded a bit more like someone who knew what they were talking about. And he had no choice but to trust him, after all.

"And when you cannot be careful," the man continued, reassuring in every way except the one that counted. "Then you might as well know what you're getting into."

And what am I getting into? Assam wondered.

As though he were answering that unspoken thought, the man sighed and said "Some people would say that this was all just like something from a storybook. But some people live their whole lives in storybooks, where they can be safe, holding the rest of their life at arm's length, so to speak."

Assam liked this old man, even if he didn't understand half of what he was saying. And he liked the idea, in spite of himself, that someone, somewhere was writing all of this down. Writing this story, his story, and that they cared about what happened to him. Or someone who was reading it, living through everything with him, side by side, turning every page to read what happens next.

A flash of his mother, a memory: She lay curled up on the sofa with a blanket and a cup of tea and a

junk novel she'd picked from the rack in the checkout line of the grocery store. At the thought of her, he felt his mind stretch out to look for her, lost somewhere out there in the darkness.

And then, she was there, more than just a memory: Her face rose suddenly before his eyes. So real, staring blankly past him, one hand clawing through her hair as she murmured "I let you drown, I let you die..."

"Mom!" He sat up abruptly and the vision flickered and faded away. The cloth over his eyes fell into his lap and he picked it up.

"What is it?" the voice asked quietly.

Assam shook his head and lay back down, putting the cloth back. "I thought I saw . . . I don't know." He knew this wasn't a story. He wasn't a character in a book that other people could read and root for. No, he was who he was – just a boy, blind and lost in a terrible place. Odds were that things would not turn out all right at the end.

If it ever ends, he reminded himself. Maybe things would just go on and on, story after story, until it was only the searching that made him who he was . . . just boy with a name borrowed from a cup of tea.

"And that's how gods are made, son." The quiet whisper broke Assam out of his thoughts. "That's their nine months in the womb and their first breath."

Another sigh. "And myth, mythology is the afterbirth."

Assam had no idea what the man was talking about.

The unseen hand took the rag away and wrung it out again, placing it back over the boy's eyes. "Rest now . . . don't worry yourself. There'll be time enough for that, when we're done here."

Assam nodded, relaxing as best he could, so that the eyebright and emeralds could do their work.

CHAPTER FIVE

The statues were everywhere.

Wherever Jee and Winterly went in the palace, it seemed that there was one waiting around every corner – frozen in mid-pose, stuck in time as they crouched on the floor with a broom and dustpan, or polished a doorknob, or adjusted a picture frame. They were the hardest working statues Jee had ever seen. It was very strange. All these people hard at work and yet not getting anything done. It was also a little bit creepy, Jee thought, and she said so.

"I suppose it is," the Queen said in a whisper. They were walking through a long hall lined on either side with little alcoves from which marble busts stared out at them as they passed, unblinking and cold. It was hard not to feel like someone was eavesdropping. "I used to think so as well when I first came here."

"But you don't anymore?"

Winterly shrugged. "I guess I'm just used to them by now."

"Are all of them statues?" Jee asked, stopping to inspect one of the alcoves.

"All of who?"

"All of your servants." Jee tapped on the base of the bust before her.

"Oh, they're not my servants," Winterly shook her head. "They're my husband's."

"But you're the Queen."

Winterly dipped her head. "Yes . . . I am the wife of the King, yes." The velvet gown she'd been wearing flickered and shuffled as she sighed, becoming a pair of dark brown corduroy pants and a black sweater. "But this is his kingdom, not mine. That goes for his servants as well."

Jee didn't know what to say to this. The Queen smiled wryly and squeezed the girl's shoulder. They started walking up the hallway once more, heading towards a long bank of windows. Jee glanced at the bust of an old man with a short, trim beard sat in an alcove to one side.

The bust stuck out its tongue at her.

Jee gulped and hurried after the Queen who was standing at one of the windows, gazing out. Beyond, there was a small group of trees, stunted and shriveled looking things, stripped bare by winter.

"I planted those when I first came here," she told the girl. "Peaches and apricots."

"How long ago was that?"

"Since the wedding. A long, long time ago." Winterly touched her fingertip to the window, tracing the delicate, lacework pattern of the frost on the outside.

"Where are you from, where did you live before?"

Looking very young and very sad, the Queen said "I am from above. From beyond the river, from your world." She tapped the window with her fingernail. "And I miss it very much."

"Then why don't you go back?"

"Oh . . . lots of reasons." Winterly was quiet for a moment, then she glanced down to the girl at her side and smiled. "Would you like to see the ballroom?"

"Oh, yes please."

"Come on, then." They continued further up the hallway towards a large set of double doors. After a few steps the Queen knelt down and took Jee's hands in hers. "You need to understand, I love my husband very much and there is a great deal about this place – his kingdom, his world – a great deal that fascinates me..." She looked down at her hands and trailed off. Jee wondered if she was going to cry.

Finally Winterly looked up and showed the saddest smile Jee had ever seen in her life. "I guess," she told the girl "I guess all I'm saying is that I miss my home and my family very much."

"Can't you go back for a visit?"

Winterly squeezed Jee's hands again and stood up, her clothes flickering through three or four different outfits before settling on a simple white cotton shirt and a skirt of ragged, multicolored wool. "Oh, I can visit from time to time if I like, but..." She trailed off.

"But what?" Jee found it hard to be patient with people who stopped talking just when they were starting to say something interesting.

Winterly shrugged. "But when I do go back, I find that I miss it here, too." She cocked her head and squinted at Jee. "Does that make any sense?"

"Not much," Jee said honestly.

"It doesn't, I know." Winterly nodded, as much to herself as to Jee. "But it's the best explanation I've got for you. Come on."

They started walking again. After a moment, it was Jee's turn to stop and grab the Queen's hand. "Why don't you have them come visit you here?" she asked. "That way everyone would be happy."

"Almost everyone," Winterly said with a wry smile. "I expect that they could visit, if they wanted to."

"Don't they want to see you?"

"They do." Winterly looked away, back towards the windows and the trees beyond. "Of course they

do. It's just that most people aren't in a particularly big hurry to come here, not even for a visit." She looked back down at Jee and winked. "It's hard enough to get them here after they've died, let alone before."

Winterly stopped smiling. "What is it?" she asked.

Jee opened her mouth and then closed it again. She wasn't afraid to ask the question. She was afraid of the answer.

"Come on," the Queen said after a moment. "Let's go and take a look at the ballroom."

Halfway up the hallway, Jee slipped her hand into Winterly's.

CHAPTER SIX

The thing about silence, Assam thought to himself, is that it isn't really an on-or-off sort of thing. There's much more to it than whether or not you can hear anything. After all, there's always something to hear, even if only silence. Silence has layers and variety, just as much as noise does. Assam had discovered this by degrees.

He lay there on his back in the Underworld with a damp rag folded over his eyes, going through about all the different silences he could think of...

That angry silence, filling every room in the house like smoke when his parents were having an argument. And then there was the silence when he awoke in his room in the middle of the night, the whole house awake around him. A patient, watchful silence that made him long for the days when he was younger and allowed to crawl into his parents' bed in the middle of the night.

And yet that middle night silence was the very opposite of the comfortable, early morning silence when he would awake in the very same bed in the same room in the same house, without fear or concern, and lie on his side watching the dark windows of his room turn pale with early, gray light.

And there was one silence that he knew better, trusted more than any other: The silence within himself. A silence so familiar that it was almost a physical place, a location, a little room he could step into when he needed to. A place where he could think and the answers would come to him. A place where he could listen and, in time, secrets would be unraveled and even lost things could be found once more. He'd known this silence his whole life. Since early on, he'd known that it wasn't something he could explain to anyone, let alone tell them about.

Once, when he'd been very young, he'd asked his babysitter a question. Assam had heard something, something inside her thoughts. Something about a boy. And so he'd asked her about it. She stared at him a little oddly at first, as though he were making a joke. Then she asked him what he knew.

He told her what he had heard but she stopped him before he could finish, sending him into the other room to watch a video. Even over the cartoon noise of the television, he heard her crying in the kitchen. He was afraid to go and talk to her again. After that, his parents had to find a new babysitter. She suddenly had become very busy.

His mother and father thought him clever, perceptive. Words like *gifted* and *intuitive* showed up often on his report cards. His friends didn't seem to notice that he was much different from them. And, perhaps, he wasn't really. They each had their own gifts, when it came right down to it. His sister on the other hand, she seemed not only to know about the silence within him and what it needed, she also

understood what he could do with it. Although, of course, she'd never spoken to him about it. It was one of the few subjects upon which she was uncharacteristically silent.

There was a silence in the room he was in now — a broad, restless thing that reminded him of lying in the doctor's office on that fussy, paper covered table, waiting. It was the silence, the unique silence, created by a grown up and a child in the same room — one of them waiting for something to happen, hoping the other would do something and that it would be soon. And, in that silence, something changed. His mind started to come alive. It was as if his thoughts were cleaner, crisper somehow. As if someone had thrown open the windows in that silent place inside him, letting the air and the light in.

He'd always been able to listen. Now he could see as well.

He heard the old man sigh and, in his mind, Assam saw him there, as clear as anything. He saw everything...

...the wooden chair, the hands folding down the dog-eared corner of a page . . . the rag, white with a faded pattern that might have once been leaves or ivy . . . the water in the silver bowl, specks of something that looked like dried grass floating on the surface, dark green stones at the bottom . . . wring the rag out, place it back over the boy's eyes once more before getting back to the book...

...he saw it all. But only in flashes, as though the room was lit by lightning. He saw it all.

Assam took a deep breath and held it, turning around slowly in the new place he'd just discovered inside himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jee said nothing. She'd been saying it for a very long time now. As they approached the doors to the ballroom, she finally spoke up. "So, I'm dead?" It was halfway between a question and a statement, she was looking for a little help to nudge it one way or another.

Winterly knelt down and put her hand under the girl's chin. "You are," she said, "most certainly not. Believe me, I would know."

Jee nodded unconvincingly and unconvinced.

"It's okay to believe me. I know what I'm talking about." Winterly squeezed the girl's chin playfully between her thumb and forefinger. "Now, can we please go look at this ballroom finally?"

Jee nodded.

The Queen stood up and threw open the doors, walking through and into the darkness within. The girl followed. Inside, she could feel the vastness of the open room around her but it was too dark inside to see how big it was. Faint flickers of light shone above, like stars. In the dim light, her reflection glided across the surface of the polished floor. Jee thought briefly of the swans on the river.

She followed Winterly, listening to their footsteps echo back and forth across the ballroom. When she caught up to the Queen, she saw that Winterly was now wearing jeans so faded that they were almost white. Her knees showed through ragged holes thick with strings like pale anemones. She wore a pale pink tank top with "Princess" spelled out in magenta sequins.

"I have that exact same shirt at home," Jee told her.

The Queen did not seem to hear her. Winterly looked around the massive chamber, peering into the darkness as though she were trying to find someone in a crowd. She had one hand stuffed into the back pocket of her jeans and the other picked at a lock of hair, twisting it between her fingers. "I always forget..." she said quietly before trailing off.

"Forget what?"

Winterly shrugged. "I always forget how big it is."

Jee followed her gaze out into the darkness. She could see an oblong of light shining through the doors behind them. It seemed very far off. She could not see across to the other side of the room. She looked back to Winterly. "How big is it?"

As if in answer, the Queen said something very softly under her breath. To Jee's ears it sounded like "Luck's free yacht."

Then, the lights above blazed to life. Jee absolutely had to gasp, it was the only appropriate response. Above them, a score of chandeliers blazed with candles and crystal, filling every inch of the ballroom below with golden light. And there was quite a lot of ballroom to fill. The room Jee was standing in was bigger than her whole house, times ten at least. It stretched out in every direction. She felt like she was trespassing in all that splendor, with her snowpants and clumpy boots. She wondered what it was like when it was filled with men in evening clothes and women with long gowns trailing after them. She longed to twirl and dance, washing away ten years of her carefully cultivated tomboy image down the drain. "It must be very beautiful," she said, hoping the hint was well disguised, "at the parties, with everyone all dressed up and dancing."

"I guess it must be," Winterly admitted. "But I wouldn't know."

"Why not?"

The Queen shrugged. "We've never had a party here."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We've never used this room," Winterly shook her head. "Can you believe it?"

"Why not?"

"We've never needed to."

"Really?"

"We never have parties or dances or dinners."

"Never?"

"Not once."

"Why not?" Jee was shocked. *If I lived here, she thought to herself, I'd throw a party every night.*

"It's . . . hard to explain." Winterly took a few steps, circling the center of the room. "Let's just say that my husband – the King – well, he's a little shy."

"He's shy?"

Winterly nodded.

"How shy?"

The Queen took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "You have no idea."

Jee looked around the room – the paneled walls polished like dark mirrors, the gleaming floor, the riot of gold and light overhead. She looked back at Winterly.

The Queen nodded, agreeing with the unspoken thought in the girl's mind. "You're right," she said, "it certainly is."

"What?"

"It's a waste," Winterly said bitterly. "It's a damned waste."

Jee did her best to keep a straight face. Outside of the movies, she'd never heard a grown up cuss before and it impressed her immensely.

"Come on," the Queen said after a long moment. "Let's go see if there's anything interesting going on somewhere else in this dump."

"Okay." Jee knew she ought to be worrying about her brother, trying to keep the search for their mother on track, but all she really wanted to do was walk around the palace with this sad and funny girl queen. They walked across the center of the ballroom towards another set of doors on the opposite side.

"Do you have any kids?" Jee asked.

Winterly stopped dead in her tracks. Her clothes shifted uncertainly for a moment before transforming into a tarnished suit of armor. "Um..." the Queen lifted the visor of the helmet. "No. Why do you ask?"

Jee's heart sank. She'd gone too far. "I'm sorry. I was just wondering."

"Ah." Winterly looked away. "Um . . . well . . . no. No, we don't."

"Why not?"

The Queen didn't answer immediately. She tapped a mail-clad fingertip against her plated thigh. "As I said," she said at last "My husband is somewhat shy. Which makes having children . . . problematic."

"Why?"

Winterly studied the girl's earnest face for a moment. "I had forgotten," she said quietly.

"Forgot what?"

"I had forgotten . . . what it was like to be so young." The armor shifted and rattled away, resolving back into the jeans and t-shirt she'd worn before. Winterly laid the back of her fingers on the girl's cheek. "You should do what you can to hold on to that."

"Okay." Jee had no idea what Winterly was talking about, but she didn't want to disappoint her.

"Good." Winterly opened the doors and they went out into the hall beyond, closing up the ballroom behind them. Outside the doors, the Queen stopped and turned to a statue standing to one side. He was a pleasant looking man, shortish, with a thick beard. "I'm afraid I left the lights burning again, John. Would you put them out for me, please?"

The statue bowed low and went back into the ballroom.

"Thanks!" Winterly called after him. "Come on," she said to the girl. "Are you hungry?"

"Sure." Jee shrugged. "I guess."

"Gods," Winterly said, "I'm always hungry. Eventually, he's not even going to recognize me."

"Who?"

"Ignore me," Winterly shook her head. "I'm just talking."

Jee didn't think it was possible to ignore this woman.

They walked on through the palace, talking of this and that — Jee's family and her school, her friends (not many, really), and her likes and dislikes (Johnny Cash and cheese, respectively). As they walked along, Jee noticed more and more of the statues frozen in place. "Why don't they move?"

"I'm sorry?" Winterly raised her eyebrows. "Why don't what move?"

Jee gestured to a pale form of a woman frozen in the act of dusting a small figurine on a side table. "They're not really statues, right?"

"I suppose not, no."

"So then why don't they move? Why are they pretending to be statues when we all know it isn't true? Why don't they just keep sweeping the floor?" She turned back to the statue of the woman, addressing it directly. "Why don't you just ignore us and keep doing your work?"

The statue didn't answer. Jee turned back to Queen. "So, that's what I'm wondering. It just doesn't make sense to have all of these people here and put them to work but not let them..." Jee trailed off, scrunching up her face as the penny dropped. "He must be very shy," she said.

The Queen nodded. "Yes, I suppose he must be."

They walked on.

"But why statues, though? Are they being punished?"

The Queen looked at her sharply. "How do you mean 'punished'?"

"Well, if this is supposed to be the place where bad people go when they die, then..."

"...who told you that?" Winterly stopped walking.

Jee swallowed. "Told me what?"

"Who told you..?" The Queen put her hands on her hips. It was a warning sign that Jee immediately recognized. "Who told you that bad people..."

"...no one told me," Jee said. "I mean, I've seen movies and things."

Winterly studied the girl's face for a long moment, more thoughtful than angry. "Do you think that your mother is a bad person?"

Jee tried very hard not to cry. "No."

Winterly knelt down in front of her. "Listen to me sweetheart: This is not a place of judgment or punishment."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Then what is it for?"

"That's a very good question." Winterly sat back on her legs, thoughtful. "I suppose the answer is that it's a place just like any other . . . because, well, people need to have somewhere to be, somewhere to go." She shrugged. "For some, it's a destination. For others, a prison. For many, it's almost a paradise."

"Really?"

Winterly nodded. "If it seems strange and scary and frightening . . . well, keep in mind that the world above is pretty strange and frightening sometimes, too."

Jee saw her point.

"In fact, there are some who would say that your world is the real Hell." The Queen cocked her head to one side. "Does any of that make sense?"

Jee blinked, shook her head.

Winterly reached out and brushed the hair off of the girl's forehead, smoothing out the worry lines with her fingertips. "I won't lie to you. We have our share of demons here. You've probably met one or two of them already. But we have our angels too."

"Is that what you are?"

Winterly laughed, then frowned, then laughed again. "Hardly," she said. "I don't have the brains to be the one and I'm not patient enough to be the other."

Jee looked at the statues. "So what are they?"

Winterly shrugged. "Just people, really . . . just people looking to make a living."

Jee considered the statue closest to her — a young woman, not unattractive, with bobbed hair and a friendly twist to her mouth. "It seems like a hard way to live. Always starting and stopping."

"I guess," the Queen said brightly. "But it could be worse."

"How?"

"Some statues never get to move at all."

Once again, Jee had to admit that the Queen had a point.

"Come on," Winterly said. "I need a snack."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Assam slowly exhaled, emptying his lungs, filling them with silence. He held that emptiness, feeling his chest ache, comforted to know that he was still alive. For some time now, there'd been a faint sound in the room. A whispery rasp, barely audible at all. But it was there. He could hear it.

Once, at home, he heard a similar sound in his bedroom. He called for his father and the two of them stood there in the middle of the floor, every inch of their bodies an ear, straining to hear. Then, it was there again . . . and then the next moment it was gone. They looked at each other and nodded. After a few minutes of this, Assam's father knelt down next to the wall and put his ear against the baseboard. "It's just a mouse," he whispered, "lost between the walls. She'll find her way out sooner or later, don't worry."

But Assam did worry. He lay awake all night, listening to that desperate, terrible, sound. He could see her there, in the dark. Whiskers covered in dust, blind and frantic for a way out . . . worried to death about leaving her children alone. Despite himself, eventually, he fell asleep.

In the morning, the sound was gone.

"Sounds like she made it out," his father said.

Assam wasn't so sure.

Trapped in his own dark world, he thought of that mouse as he listened to the thin, scratchy sound of . . . what? Assam realized that he'd had it wrong. He'd seen the old man sitting in his chair, fending off boredom with a book. But he wasn't reading, not at all. "What are you writing?"

The sound stopped.

Assam waited, a new kind of silence filling the room. Then . . . the familiar sigh, the creak of the chair, the shuffling footsteps. The hand and the cloth removed, refreshed, and replaced. Assam could feel the man standing over him — waiting, searching his face. It did not frighten him. Whoever it was, whoever had been given the task to care for him, they were kind. Of that, he was certain.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you for taking care of me."

A brief moment of contact, fingertips against his forehead and then his cheek. Then, the slow shuffle, the creak of the chair, and the sigh of someone settling in. There was no other sound — no rustle of pages, no rasp of pen against paper. He was waiting, Assam's unseen caretaker. Assam could hear the breath held, the word unspoken. Then, the gentle voice found itself. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel fine, I think."

"Is there any discomfort, any dizziness?"

Assam had no idea if he was dizzy. He'd been lying down. He opened his mouth to answer when the whole world poured into his head. He would have screamed, if he could have found his voice among all the noise. Someone had turned on a radio, very loud, and was spinning the dial back and forth without stopping. A sickening, lurching sound. A deafening buzz of static and voices. He felt sick, like he might vomit.

He sat up, feeling the tilt of his suddenly too-heavy head on his neck. He felt himself fall, felt two

strong hands catch him by the shoulders and gently ease him back down on the table. The noise washed over him, pounded across him like a hurricane. "Help me," he gasped, clutching his ears as though that could keep it all out.

A hand on his arm, a gentle voice speaking — just more noise in the storm.

And then, abruptly, there was a shriek of static and silence as someone, somewhere, switched off the radio.

Assam let out a shuddering breath. "What was that?" He realized it wasn't a radio, he knew that it had all been inside his head. "What's happening to me?"

"Nothing you can't handle," the old man patted his shoulder. "You might have a few more of those episodes but they'll pass in time. *Euphrasia officinalis* can sometimes be a mixed blessing for someone like you."

"Like me?"

He heard the old man shuffling back to his chair.

"What's *euphrasia* . . . whatever it's called? What is it and what did it do to me?"

"*Euphrasia officinalis*." The old man sounded amused. "That would be eyebright, as I mentioned before. It's an herb with some healing properties especially suited to the ocular systems and organs."

Assam didn't follow much of all that, but he followed enough. "But what's it doing to me?"

"It's opening your eyes," the old man said simply. A sigh, the rustle of paper.

Assam felt a low buzz in the back of his head. He wondered if that was a warning sign, another wave of noise on its way. He was afraid. If another wave came, he might drown in it. He cast around for some kind of anchor to keep him from being washed away, should it return.

The rustle of paper, the scratch of the pen. He could see it so clearly in his mind now, the tip of the pen moving across the pale page, the glossy lines of ink drying into dullness.

"I'm sorry," Assam said. "Would you please read to me?"

The room was quiet for a long moment. The old man cleared his throat. There was the rustle of paper, pages fluttering.

"How do you..?" An old, rusty throat was cleared. "How do you feel about poetry?" his unseen caretaker asked.

CHAPTER NINE

Jee and the Queen sat together in a little kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil.

"This isn't the main kitchen, of course." Winterly told her. "The main kitchen is massive. You could feed an army out of that place. In fact, I think my husband actually did that once or twice, once upon a time. But it's too big a place to make a nice cup of tea."

The Queen was sitting on a little window seat. A tabby cat hopped up beside her and stretched out on his back, offering his tummy for scratching. "Yes," Winterly said to the cat, obliging him. "Yes, it is just too big for us, isn't it?"

The cat didn't answer.

He was a stray, the Queen told Jee. There were lots of strays, apparently. She left out food for them. One day, there he was — shivering, whimpering, and half-starved. What could she do? "I couldn't just

leave you," Winterly said to the cat, "you were so cute and frozen." She winked at the girl sitting on the counter dangling her feet. "He was out in the cold," she told Jee. "He had frostbite and pneumonia and we would have lost him but for my husband's care. He stayed up all night for days, caring for him, nursing him back to health. He saved him."

She scratched the cat, rubbing her fingertips under his chin and over the back of his head. Jee could hear the cat's purr from where she was sitting.

"Well, almost. He saved most of him." Winterly rubbed the little brown nubs where the cat's ears should have been. "By the time he found us, the frostbite had gotten most of them."

It was true. The cat had no ears, just small rounded flaps that gave him an odd, bear-like appearance.

"He's my little cubby," the Queen said in a baby voice that, from anyone else, would have made Jee gag. Winterly pulled it off, though. She rubbed the cat's belly again. "But he's safe and warm now. Aren't you, Vincent? No more roaming around like those bad kitties."

On the little stove, the kettle had built up to a high, wet whistle. The cat leaped up in alarm and streaked out of the room.

"Coward. You'd think he'd never heard the kettle before." Winterly rose and went to the cupboard over the stove, taking out a light blue tin overlaid with gold curlicues. She removed the lid and raised it to her nose. "Mmmm..." She held it out for the girl. "Smell this."

Jee leaned forward and sniffed. Chocolate. She expected to see powdered cocoa inside the tin. Instead, she was surprised to see it was half-full with what looked like black, crumbled leaves. "What is it?"

"It's chocolate tea," the Queen said, spooning a few mounds into the mugs waiting on the counter. "I don't know how they make it and I don't actually like the way it tastes, but it smells wonderful and when it's all gone I'm going to keep my earrings and necklaces in the box because it's so pretty and maybe they'll end up smelling like chocolate. Which is a pretty good idea for perfume, if you stop to think about it."

Jee nodded, suddenly very far away.

Winterly tapped the lid back down on the tin. "What's the matter?"

Jee shrugged. She honestly didn't know. Her mind was a muddle of worries — her brother, her mother. She felt the tug of them in her heart. But she was starting to feel another tug on her as well, and it hurt.

"Don't worry," Winterly said. "Everything is going to be okay. My husband is going to help your brother. You're going to find your mother. You're all going to make it home, safe and sound." She grinned brightly. "And, even if you don't, you'll still be okay. I'll make sure of it. You will always be welcome here, if you have nowhere else."

That didn't sound too bad to Jee, but a thought struck her. "What about the King?"

"He may be the King," Winterly said. "But I am his wife. You'll learn one day, perhaps, what a powerful thing that can be." She leaned forward and whispered "In some ways, it's actually much better than being King."

Jee smiled and then, wonderfully, the Queen kissed her on the forehead.

Winterly took up the kettle and filled each of the mugs. The little tabby appeared in the doorway, eyeing the stove warily. He walked around the opposite side of the room and hopped back up on the window seat. "He's a good boy!" the Queen called out in her sing-song voice. She held out one of the mugs to Jee.

"Do you like it here?" the girl asked, blowing away the steam rising from the top of her cup.

Winterly fondly studied the cat, already asleep. For a moment, Jee thought that perhaps the Queen

hadn't heard her . . . then she said "I like it here." She studied the surface of the tea, tapping the side of the cup with her fingertip, making it ripple. "I like being here in this room with you and Vincent." She lifted to the cup and took an experimental sip but the tea was still too hot. "And I like feeding the bad kitties every morning and having tea in the solarium."

"And," she added, almost as an afterthought, "I like my trees. I like waiting for them to blossom."

"When will they?" But Jee thought she knew the answer already.

The Queen didn't answer. "And I love my husband. I loved him from the moment I first saw him."

"How did you meet?"

"Ah, well..." Winterly sighed, sending a ripple of colored fabric down her figure. "That is quite a story." She took her cup back over to the window seat and sat down next to the sleeping cat.

Jee could tell that Winterly wanted to tell it, her story. The girl waited, taking a sip of her tea. Winterly was right. It smelled wonderful but it was bitter and chalky. She set the mug down on the counter.

"He's much older than me. Much older," Winterly said. "I've known him all my life — or, at least, I've known *of* him. As strange as this might sound, he's my uncle."

"Your uncle?" Up until this point, Jee had been expecting a romantic story, like something from a storybook with woodland creatures singing while they made a wedding dress. But her own uncles, while very nice, were not even remotely imaginable as, well, romantic — at least, not to her.

Winterly shrugged. "I know. He's my mother's brother. Which sounds a bit creepy, I'm sure, but it really is quite tame, compared with some of the other things that go on in my family."

"Like what?"

Winterly took a breath. "Believe me, you don't want to know."

Jee noticed that the Queen wasn't drinking her tea either, although she did raise the mug from time to time in order to breathe in the sweet, dark steam.

"So . . . he's my uncle, my mother's brother, which is fine and not that odd when you remember that my father is my mother's other brother."

Jee gaped. "Your uncle is your dad?"

"And my husband is my uncle." Winterly nodded. "Just one big happy family."

"Actually, that sounds more than a bit creepy." Jee wished she hadn't said it, but it was too late. "What about your mom?"

"My mother is just my mother, fortunately." The Queen rose. "Oops, I almost forgot to feed the bad kitties." She went to a cupboard under the sink and took out a large jar filled about halfway with what looked to Jee like cat food. "Come and see," she said to the girl.

At the far end of the kitchen was a small door, cold winter light coming through the panes of glass. The Queen opened the door and a wave of cold air drifted in. Jee peeked out the doorway. There was a small porch out there, wooden steps leading down to a snow covered path flanked by shrubs stripped bare of their leaves. A stack of empty flowerpots tilted uneasily to one side of the door. Next to them, a large, pale green plate lay on the porch, dusted with snow. Here and there, Jee could see the paw prints around the plate, blurred by the new snowfall.

The Queen handed the jar to Jee and picked up the plate to dust it off. Jee noticed that the food in the jar was, more or less, identical to the cat food they had at home — shaped like tiny little brown X's. "Like kisses for kitties," her mother used to say.

Winterly put the plate back down. "Do you want to pour it out for them?"

Jee nodded, unscrewing the top and squatting down next to the plate. The jar was big and a little heavy. She tipped it over carefully and dumped out some food onto the plate. The sound was very loud, like sudden rain against the window of her room back home. "How much should I do?"

"I don't know, about twice that much," the Queen said. "There's a lot of them this year and they need their crunchies."

Jee tipped the jar again and poured until it was almost empty. "Is this enough?"

Winterly shrugged. "Might as well dump it all out there. They'll eat it."

Jee did and screwed the top back on, handing the empty jar back to the Queen. "How many are there?"

"Nine or ten, at least." Winterly gazed out into the winter landscape beyond the porch. "There's an orange one with freckled paws named Stoltz. And a gray one that I call Scott because he has a white neck and chest, so it looks like he's wearing an ascot."

"What's an ascot?"

"It's like a tie or a scarf." The Queen thought for a moment. "And there's Blackie and Carol and Autumn – I call her that because she's all speckled like a pile of dead leaves. And there's Chesterton and Luther and Alice. She's a big fluffy thing, like a big dust mop with feet." She hefted the empty jar. "There's a few others that I haven't named yet. There's also a skunk that wanders by sometimes and cuts in line to steal his share."

"A skunk?"

The Queen nodded. "Uh huh, and the rest of them hate him but they don't do anything because, you know..."

"...he'd squirt them all stinky."

Winterly nodded.

"Where are they?"

"They're hiding, probably. They won't come up until we go back inside. They're too scared..." The Queen broke off and for a moment her face crumbled into sadness.

"I sit out here sometimes," she said. "I'll see them out there, waiting. I don't mind the cold. I can wait a long time, but . . . but so can they. I suppose the fear is stronger than the hunger." She took a deep breath and looked at Jee, her smile still a little sad around the edges. "They're out there right now, probably. Watching and waiting. After we go in, they'll each come up, one by one."

"Are they real cats?" Jee asked.

"How do you mean?"

"Are they alive or are they ghosts?"

Winterly took a step back and cocked her head at the girl. "Do you know, I honestly have never thought of that before. I have no idea." She shrugged. "Either way, they're hungry and cold. I wish they would let me bring them in."

"Maybe once they get used to you," Jee said. "How long have you been feeding them?"

Winterly looked at the girl for a moment, then looked away. "Long enough for them to get used to me." She tugged on the belt of Jee's snowpants. "Come on. Let's go back in so they can eat their dinner."

Jee nodded and the Queen held the door open for her.

"Are you cold?" Winterly asked, closing the door once they were inside. "I'm going to make some more tea. Would you like some?"

"No, I'm not cold."

Winterly nodded. "Probably not in boots and snowpants, huh? Sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"It's okay," Jee said. "It's winter back, uh, back home."

"Lucky thing for you." The Queen picked up the kettle and shook it to check that there was still water inside. "Otherwise, you might have frozen to death out there by the river." She turned a knob

and the burner burst into a flame that was so blue in the dim light of the kitchen that it made Jee feel all cold and shivery.

Jee nodded. "Where do they go?" she asked. "The cats, I mean." She stood on her tiptoes and peeked out of the window. A small orange and white cat was walking halfway up the steps. It froze when it saw her, motionless and wary. Slowly it made its way up to the plate and began to eat, never once taking its eyes off of her.

"Someone's here," Jee whispered. "The orange one. He's eating."

Winterly came over quietly and peeked through the window. "That's Stoltz. Once he's done, it's usually Scott's turn."

"Where do they live?" Jee asked.

"I have no idea," Winterly said quietly. "For all I know, they have warm homes and loving families. They probably just come here for the free food."

"There are other homes?"

"A few." The Queen shrugged. "Here and there."

"Where?"

"Some are here in this world, some actually in yours – but close to one of the borders, one of the soft places between. Cats can come and go where they like, above and below. They know all the secret doors and paths. They're cats, after all."

Outside, the orange cat named Stoltz finished eating and sat for a few moments, cleaning its face and whiskers.

"Can we go back out and sit for a bit? Maybe one of them will come up while we're there?"

The Queen shook her head. "It's too cold, sweetheart. Your ears would freeze off and then you'd be just like Vincent." She directed this last bit to the dozing cat on the window seat. At the sound of his name, he raised his head and blinked slowly.

"I don't mind the cold." Jee was aware that she was starting to whine a little.

"Maybe so," Winterly said. "But that doesn't mean you don't get cold."

"I like winter."

"So do I." The Queen went to the stove and turned down the flame just before the kettle began to whistle. "I like it very much, especially taking long walks. I love how quiet and clean everything is. But it can be lonely too."

Outside, the orange cat finished up its bath and slunk off down the steps.

"Come back over here and let me make you another cup of tea."

Jee reluctantly tore herself away from the door and sat down on the window seat. The tabby – Vincent – opened his eyes briefly at the intrusion and then closed them again.

"Do you want more of the chocolate kind or something else?" Winterly was staring indecisively at the kettle.

"Um . . . something else, please?" Jee said, hoping the Queen wouldn't be offended.

Winterly nodded. She picked up their cups and dumped them out into the sink, rinsing them. "I can't help it. Every time I hope it will taste as good as it smells, but it never does." She opened the cupboard and inspected the various tins and boxes inside. Jee could see a few that she recognized from their own cupboards back home. She wondered if there was a grocery store somewhere in this place. She tried to imagine the Queen pushing a shopping cart up and down the aisles. Maybe the statues went shopping for her?

"Now," Winterly said to herself. "What kind of tea should we have?" She turned to look at Jee. "Anything you're particularly fond of? I've got lots of different kinds."

"I don't know," the girl answered. "I've never actually had tea before today."

The Queen raised her eyebrows. "Really? Well, you could have fooled me." She turned back to the cupboard and reached out for a box, stopped, and let her fingertips drift over the others on the shelf. "Um . . . I'm thinking, maybe . . . ooh, how about this?" She grabbed a lavender tin and shook it. "Sounds like there's just enough for two cups, I think."

Jee got up and came over to watch while the Queen hung little metal wire baskets off the rim of each cup and dropped a spoonful of the dark tea leaves into each. While she was pouring the water, Jee picked up the empty tin on the counter and held it up to her nose. It wasn't chocolate — a deeper, richer smell drifted inside there . . . like clean, fresh earth. There was the faint hint of flowers underneath it all. She recognized the name on the side of the tin: *Darjeeling*.

The Queen handed her one of the mugs. Together, they went back over to the table and sat down. Winterly looked fondly at the cat dozing on the windowseat. "These are good days for naps," she said. "Winter afternoons always make me want one." She took a sip from her cup. "A cup of tea, a walk, and a nap — not necessarily in that order."

Jee nodded and tried her tea. It was as good, if not better, than it smelled.

"As much as I like winter," the Queen went on "I can't help but miss the spring. All that life coming back, everything waking up. Just thinking about it..." She trailed off.

"What's wrong?"

Winterly ran her finger through the circle of condensation her cup left on the table. "I miss my mother. It's been so long since I've seen her."

"Why?"

"She wasn't exactly thrilled with my marriage. At first, she felt my father had betrayed her by promising me to his brother. It all happened behind her back." She shook her head. "She was angry with him, so angry, she turned everything upside down."

"What happened?"

Winterly looked out the window at the falling snow. "Turned out, in the end, I was the one who betrayed her."

"How?"

Winterly looked at her. "What did that girl tell you, the one in the diner? What was her name? Susan?"

"Sarah."

"Sarah." The Queen nodded. "What did she tell you?"

"She said you fell in love."

Winterly tilted her head and smiled ruefully. "Well, there you go. That's what I did."

"I don't understand." Jee was actually starting to, but she wanted to hear more of the story.

"Neither did my mother," Winterly said. "After all she'd done to save me from this terrible place, to bring me back from the horrors below..." She caught herself, stopped, and went on without the mocking tone. "My husband would have let me go, if I had asked. I had been promised to him. I was to be his single spark of warmth in this cold and lifeless place. But he would have given it up, given me up, to make things right . . . to make me happy."

"What happened?"

"The time came when I had to make a choice," Winterly squeezed her hands together. "And I chose my husband."

Jee sat back. "Was she angry?"

"You bet she was angry. But mostly, mostly I think she was hurt. She didn't understand."

Jee thought about this for a while. She wasn't so sure she understood either, not completely. On one hand, it seemed like an easy choice: A new life for an old one. On the other, she thought, whatever was chosen, whatever was gained, the choosing also took away something irreplaceable. It was a choice you made when you had to make a choice, not one that you went looking for. It was as much a choice to lose something as to gain something. Choosing to save yourself, choosing to save someone else. Either way, someone was lost.

"I bet he was happy, your husband," Jee said. "I bet he was glad that you decided to stay with him."

The Queen did not say anything for a very long time. "I expect that he was," she said at last. "But I think he would have been relieved as well, had I gone."

This made no sense to Jee. Who wouldn't want her to stay? "Why?"

"Well," the Queen said, "he'd grown accustomed to being alone. I think having me here made him more shy than ever. Those first few months were awful. We barely spoke. Every time I'd track him down in this lovely maze, he'd make some excuse and disappear as fast as he could. I went days without seeing him at all."

"Days?"

"Sometimes longer." All of the spark had drained out of Winterly's voice. Her good humor and smiles were gone — even the little sad, knowing ones she was so good at. She looked very tired. "I can't remember the last time I saw my husband," she said to Jee. "And I can't remember the last time I wanted to." Winterly turned to look out the window. "But I still love him. Isn't that horrible?"

It was, very much so. And all Jee could do was sit and watch her cry.

CHAPTER TEN

Silence filled the room, broken only by the soft sound of pages turning. In his mind's eye, Assam could see: The room, vague shapes of himself and the old man in the chair.

Strangely, there was color radiating from the old man. Red and bright, like the little spikes of fruit left around the stone of a peach when you cut it in half, the dark, knotted heart bared and exposed.

Assam knew what that meant. To be scared, to be alone, to be shy. He waited for a time, watching the colors in his mind pulse and shift.

Then, in a burst of pink, the old man spoke. "Do you like poetry?"

Assam thought of the school library, of Mrs. Jones desperately trying to steer the students toward more substantial and interesting ideas than adolescent wizard melodramas. Jane Austen for the cheerleader types, Jack London for the sports, Tolkien and Bradbury for the geeks and power dorks.

And then, for others, for students who seemed ready to abandon the mainstream completely for the uncharted backwaters of literature, she helped them find Poe and Lovecraft, Gaiman and Card and Ellison, Eliot and Parker.

Assam had rowed his canoe into those dark, complicated waters many, many times. So he answered, "Yes, I like poetry." And then he waited for a very long, very polite length of time.

He was starting to think that it had been an hypothetical question, when the voice said "They say that I was stolen away, screaming like a lost child..."

For a brief instant, Assam wondered what the old man was talking about. Then he realized that this was the poem.

He settled back to listen...

*They say that I was stolen away
screaming like a lost child
my white arms flailing about
in a most unseemly fashion
as if I were some fragile insect
plucked from an olive leaf.*

*For God's sake,
I'm not completely helpless.*

*Now
pomegranate stains my lips.*

*I've not been deceived
I can't help but assert
I've always felt it best to be
quite independent
regardless of grief.*

No one had ever read a poem to him out loud before. Assam waited for what he hoped was the correct length of time – long enough to confirm that the poem was indeed over, long enough to indicate that he was thoughtful about what he had heard, but not so long to imply that he did not like it or (even worse) he had nothing to say. This also gave him time to think of something to say.

"I liked that," he said at last. "Who's it by?" The minute the words left his mouth, he realized his mistake. Too late.

"I wrote it," the voice said matter-of-factly.

"Oh," Assam said. "Well, it's very good. I liked it."

"Did you?"

Assam heard the faint tone in the man's voice, hungry for approval. "Very much."

"Why?" It wasn't a challenge, but there was a wariness in there somewhere. In his mind, the colors shifted darker, contracting around the old man.

"What do you mean?"

"Why did you like it? What did you like about it?"

"Oh, um, well..." Assam rushed to cover the hesitation in his voice. "Because I could see it in my mind."

There was a long, satisfied silence.

"So . . . do you write a lot of poetry?" Assam asked, mainly to avoid being asked more questions.

"Only this one," the voice replied. "But I have been working on it for a very long time."

"I can tell," Assam said. "How long has it been?"

"Over one thousand years."

Assam didn't quite know what to say to that. Given all the time, he was surprised at how short the poem was. He decided that it was probably wise not to comment on that.

"Indeed." There was a creak, the shuffling footsteps, the cloth and the basin. "It is a present for my wife . . . or, possibly, it is about my wife. I'm not quite certain but, in either case, I am not very happy with it yet."

"Why not?"

A sigh. "There is so much that could be said, that should be said . . . but I'm not sure I have found the right words, if I have any words at all."

You certainly had enough time to find them, Assam didn't say out loud. "Well, I thought it was good."

A kind hand on his forehead. "Thank you, boy." Then the long shuffle back to the chair.

"Did she like it?"

"She has not seen it, has not read it nor heard it read."

"You haven't given it to her?"

"I have not."

"Why not?"

A long silence passed before the old man said "I don't know."

Assam lay there thinking for a moment or two. "Are you scared?"

"Yes."

"What of?"

"She might hate it, she might hate it so much that..." The old man trailed off.

"So much that . . . what?"

"That..." The voice cracked slightly. "That she would hate me, that she would have nothing to do with me."

"Huh."

"Why, what do you think?"

Assam shrugged. "Well, if my dad wrote something like that for my mom, I bet it's an automatic guarantee that she'd be very, very happy."

"I expect you're right." The voice drifted back into thoughtful silence.

"Listen," Assam said, "read it to me again."

Silent consent, then the rustle of paper and a flare of color in his mind.

They say that I was stolen away...

Assam smiled.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After a while, Winterly got up to wash her face. "I'm sorry," she said to Jee as she patted it dry with a dishtowel, "it's been a long time since I've had anyone to talk to."

Jee didn't know what to say, so she kept on petting the cat and scratching behind his nubby little ears. She wondered if he knew his ears were gone. He probably didn't. She wondered if the other cats made

fun of him. She got up and went to the door, peeking out through the little curtains. There weren't any cats on the porch, but there were fresh tracks in the snow all around the green plate – which was, of course, empty. "The food's all gone," she said, turning to Winterly.

The Queen leaned against the sink, an odd expression on her face.

"What?"

"Nothing," the Queen said. "I was just thinking about how much I'm going to miss you."

Again, Jee didn't know what to say. Things had gotten comfortable so quickly, she'd forgotten that she had to leave. "The cats ate all the food." She should have said more, but she didn't trust herself to speak.

"That's a good thing." Winterly nodded. "There aren't as many as there used to be. Sometimes I'm afraid that I'll go out one day and all of the food will still be there . . . and the next day, and the next."

"Should I put some more out?"

"They'll just get fat and lazy." The Queen's clothes suddenly rippled and shifted, and in a twinkling she was wearing a grass hula skirt, a necklace made of flowers, and two artfully placed coconuts. She looked down at herself, then at Jee. "If you laugh..."

"...no." Jee answered carefully, not laughing.

Winterly wrinkled her nose. "You know, sometimes . . . sometimes you just have to wonder."

"How do you do that?" Jee asked.

"Do what?"

Jee gestured to the Queen's latest outfit. "Your clothes. How do you make them change?"

"You came here on the river, yes?" Winterly did a little hula dance, shimmying slowly across the kitchen and then back the other way.

Jee nodded. "Part of the way."

The Queen waved her arms in the air at waist level. "Did you come on the boat or..?"

"...no, the guy wouldn't let us on."

"Why not?"

Jee shrugged. "I don't know, because he's a jerk."

Winterly kept hula dancing. "You didn't give him your coin?"

"We didn't have one."

"Didn't you?" Winterly frowned, arcing her hands upwards over her face, like two serpents climbing the air.

Jee shook her head.

"Well. You don't always have to pay. Sometimes you can get him to bend the rules."

"Well, he wouldn't." Jee was still a little mad about it.

"Did you ask nicely?"

Jee rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. "Kicked him in the shins."

"Ah," Winterly said, spinning in place on one foot. "That probably didn't work too well."

Jee shook her head. "Not too well, nope."

"Well, maybe I can pull some strings to get the two of you on for the trip back."

"You mean the three of us," Jee corrected her. "My brother, my mother, and me."

Winterly smiled softly and closed her eyes, letting her head fall to one side as she swayed to the unheard music. "Yes, that was what I meant to, that is what I should have said."

"Can you get us on the boat?"

"Maybe." Winterly opened her eyes, still swaying. "The river is . . . water is a powerful thing." Her body twisted through the air in a fluid, elegant motion. "We're mostly water, these bodies of ours are

full of it. It's what keeps us going, what holds us together. Without it, we're just a small pile of dust and chemicals."

Suddenly her clothes shifted again, like a field of grass waving in a sudden blast of wind, and she looked down with disappointment. "Shoot," she said, inspecting the dark red t-shirt and black jeans that suddenly appeared. "Just when I was starting to have fun." She went over to the table to collect their teacups. "Anyways, we are under water, infused with it from our heart to our eyes. And our eyes are especially sensitive to water, being mostly water themselves – *vitreous humor*, they call it – so they can't help but leak a bit from time to time."

"Uh huh." Jee didn't want to let on that she had no idea what the Queen was talking about.

Winterly set the cups in the sink and rinsed them one by one, speaking over the sound of the running tap. "And it's not just us. Have you ever seen a globe? It's all water isn't it, the world? There's a few scraps of dirt here and there, but all it really takes is one good long rain for it all to go under." She held up one of the cups and shook it, throwing drops of water around the kitchen. "Every drop within you and around you, in the air and over the earth, it's all water and it all changes and shifts and flows."

"Here," Winterly took a pale blue dishtowel from a drawer and tossed it to Jee. "Your turn to dry. I'm going to keep talking."

Jee went to the sink and got to work on the cups.

"That's the shape of the world," the Queen said, leaning against the counter. "It's all water and we're just caught in the current, pulled along by the tides around us and the ones within us, under the influence of our silver sister, once and for always. But even she is inconstant, unreliable, and uncontained – always shifting, always changing, and so we change with her." Her clothes rippled and shifted once more. "See?" she said to the girl. "I told you so. Ugh. Hopefully this one will change soon." She fingered the fringe hanging on the leather vest and pants, took off the cowboy hat and inspected it. "It's not really me, is it?"

Jee shook her head, utterly lost. "I don't understand."

"You asked about my clothes."

"Yeah?"

The Queen gestured towards the window. "That river out there. It's called Lethe and some people say that when the dead finally make their way here, they're given three sips from a silver cup full of water drawn from the river."

"What happens? Do they drink it?"

The Queen nodded sadly. "A lot of them do, yes."

"What happens?"

"They forget."

"They forget what?"

Winterly took a breath as though she were about to jump into deep water and expected to be under for quite a while. "Well . . . the first sip rinses the taste of words from their mouths, so they'll be quiet."

"Why?"

Winterly shrugged. "I suppose it's because there's a lot of them, the dead, and they'd probably make a lot of noise otherwise."

Jee frowned. "But . . . they can talk. I've heard them."

"Can they?" Winterly seemed genuinely surprised. "Maybe so, but the second sip soaks their breath and weighs it down."

Jee reminded herself to not ask questions, or else she'd never find out how things ended.

"And the third sip..." Here Winterly hesitated a moment, lost in thought.

"Your majesty?"

"I asked you not to call me that," the Queen said softly, still drifting in her own thoughts.

"What does the third sip do?"

The Queen shook herself, like someone waking from a bad dream. "What?"

"What does the third one do?"

"It drowns your heart," Winterly said quietly, looking away. "And washes away everything from your life that you ever loved or cared for."

"Why? Why would anyone want to do that?"

"So they won't be unhappy here, I suppose."

Jee thought about this for a moment. "Did you do it?"

"Do what?" Winterly asked, although Jee could tell she understood the question.

"Did you drink from the river?"

Winterly pursed her lips. "No, but there was a time..." She stopped, inspecting the palms of her hands. "There was a time when I thought I might." She laced her fingers together and flexed her knuckles, cracking them like fireworks. "But in the end, I didn't. I couldn't."

"What changed your mind?"

"I don't know that anything changed my mind. I just decided it was better to remember and be sad than forget and be happy."

Jee went and looked out the window. The snow was falling heavier than before and she couldn't see the river. She turned back to the Queen. "Do the ducks drink from the river?"

Winterly smiled. "They're swans dear and, yes, they do. They live their whole lives on the river. They swim in its waters, they eat the fish and, I suppose, they drink from it as well."

"So that's why they can't remember what color they are," she told the Queen. "Right?"

Winterly smiled but she didn't say anything.

"What color are they?" Jee asked. "I mean, what color were they when they were born?"

The Queen flicked a piece of lint off of her vest. "I couldn't say. I doubt they even know anymore."

"That's kind of sad."

"I suppose it is," Winterly said, "but it's true."

Jee nodded absently. She inspected the Queen, looking her up and down. "I still don't understand why your outfits change."

Winterly nodded. "Well, you'll just have to think about it a bit more."

Jee put her chin in her hand and thought for a moment. After a while she realized that she wasn't actually thinking anymore, just pretending to think so the Queen would see how hard she was trying and just tell her the answer. And, having realized that, she decided to start thinking for real. She sat up, put her fingertips against her left eyelid, an unconscious imitation of her father. "Your clothes," she said, "they're not alive."

"No," the Queen answered, the hint of a smile in her voice.

"So they can't drink the..." Jee opened her eyes.

The Queen's outfit had changed again. Now she was dressed exactly like the witch in Snow White, only prettier and with a kinder face.

"You can't control it, can you?"

Winterly shook her head.

Jee rubbed her left eye gently. She stopped, looked at the Queen. "You wash them, in the river," she said triumphantly. "Don't you?"

Again, Winterly shook her head . . . but she was smiling now.

Jee almost gave up. Then a thought in the back of her head raised its hand, waiting patiently for her to call on it. "No," she said. "You don't. But your servants do, don't they?"

Winterly nodded again. "Very good."

"Your clothes don't remember," Jee said with a flash of pride. "Not color or style. So they change like the ducks – the swans, I mean."

"I am so glad you came to visit," Winterly smiled warmly. "We should plan to do it again sometime, as soon as possible."

"I'd like that," Jee replied.

The Queen laid her hand on the girl's arm and gave it a gentle, friendly squeeze. "So would I."

Jee smiled. It never occurred to her to think about what that might actually mean. Had her brother been with her, he might have warned her.

INTERLUDE

For his part, Juniper could have warned Jee as well.

He knew where those sort of half-promises could lead, he knew firsthand. Not that he would have, of course. He was too far away – although, he was much closer than Jee would have been comfortable with, had she known.

Juniper was up to his knees in snow, staring upwards. He'd been standing there a long time, since the snow had only come up to his ankles. Above him, little warm lights flickered in the windows of the dark house at the top of the hill.

"Aren't you cold?" Edgar asked him.

Juniper didn't answer.

After a moment, the boy tried again. "Gods, I'm freezing. Aren't you?"

Once again, Juniper was silent.

"So . . . they're both in there, are they?"

Inwardly, Juniper sighed. "Yes. Yes, they are."

"You sure?"

Juniper did not turn to the boy next to him. He did not take him by the throat. He did not stick his thumbs under his chin and pry those jaws apart. The only reason he did not do these things was that the boy was important, necessary. Juniper had made an error, a regrettable and unfortunate enthusiasm had overtaken him outside the diner and now he needed a proxy between him and the children. Fortunately, he had planned ahead.

"Are you sure?" Edgar asked again.

Sometimes people tell you how sure they are to convince you. Sometimes they say it to convince themselves. Juniper said nothing. That's how sure he was.

"They're both there? The boy and the girl?"

"Yes." Juniper answered, although he had not expected them find them here. It irritated him considerably, being surprised by that. And, if he'd been honest enough with himself to admit it, it caused him no small degree of worry as well.

"How much longer do we have to wait here in this damn weather?"

Juniper wondered, briefly, how long it had been since he'd felt cold. He honestly had no idea. But that would change soon enough, soon enough he would feel so much more once again. It was a happy thought.

Of course, a happy thought for Juniper was, in actuality, a rather nasty thought for someone else.

Had he been alone, he would have whistled. No matter, there would be time for whistling soon enough.

"Soon enough," he said softly.

The boy next to him didn't answer.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Why doesn't your makeup change?"

"Why would it?" Winterly asked with mock-offense. "What are you saying? Don't you like my makeup?"

"No, I do," Jee said truthfully. The Queen wore very little makeup, just a bit of lipstick and a faint smoky smudge of eye shadow — and she hardly needed that. "But, I mean, do you wash your face?"

"I do."

"Then why don't..?"

"...why don't I forget? Why don't I go blind? Why don't my features fade and fail?" Winterly looked at her pointedly. "Is that what you'd like to know?"

The girl nodded.

"Well," the Queen said, almost with embarrassment. "I don't really know for sure. Perhaps the rules are different for my kind." She shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. But, as for my lipstick — well, pomegranate stains are permanent."

Winterly smiled. "Or so I've been told."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There are three beds and a chair in the room. Each of them is filled with someone Assam knows — and yet, somehow, he does not recognize any of them.

The woman lies in one of the beds, unmoving but for one solitary fingertip that traces slowly against the weave of the blanket. It might only be a reflex, only the twitch of pulse and a failing life. But it moves, Assam can see it. Two children lay tucked in tight in beds on either side of her.

One of them, a little girl, lies with her eyes closed — a faint smile on her face as though she were

having a lovely dream. She would look peaceful, if not for the stained pad of gauze across one eye, the tube snaking out of her throat.

The other child, the boy, stares wide eyed at the ceiling. His gaze is like the beam of a lighthouse. Assam knows that if he steps forward, leans over into that beam, he will be blinded by it, drawn in to safety, and rescued at last. He stays out of reach.

In the chair, a man sleeps and, sleeping, he weeps.

What sort of dream wrings these sobs from him, Assam cannot tell. But the boy reaches out a hand – perhaps to comfort the man, perhaps to wake him – and the man opens his eyes as though he felt the brush of those pale fingertips against his stubbled cheek.

Assam knows that cheek. He knows that man, the woman, those two broken children.

He stares down into his father's eyes and he opens his mouth to speak but all that comes out is a hollow gasp that leaches all of the air from his throat. Assam would have screamed, if his fugitive breath had not betrayed him so.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"How did you meet your husband?"

Neither Jee nor Winterly were paying much attention to where they were or where they were going. They were just walking.

Winterly did not answer the question right away. The silence said more than she could.

"He was very kind to me," she said finally. "People always say that he'd been a brute and a, well, a kidnapper . . . but the truth is that I chose to honor my father's promise. Partially because that is what daughters do for their fathers, but chiefly because it was my chance at having a kingdom of my own." She nodded, as much to herself as to the girl. "Yeah, not a great reason to start off on a marriage on, I know."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have any other brothers or sisters?" Winterly asked.

Jee shook her head. "Just my brother."

"Do you love him?"

"Well, yeah. He's my brother."

Winterly laughed. "Oh, that's not a given, believe me. I've got a few brothers that I wouldn't waste any time on, let alone bother trying to love them."

"Why not?"

"Well, let's just say that my father has a tendency to have sons that are a little bit too much like their dad."

"Don't you like your dad?" This was surprise to Jee, who adored her father.

"Not so much, no," Winterly said. "But I respect him for who he is, in spite of himself."

They walked on in silence for a few moments, lost together in thought.

"Anyways..." Winterly touched the girl's shoulder. "You must know how hard it is to share sometimes, even if with your brother."

Jee nodded, countless battles replaying in her mind — the right color of vitamin, the fair and equitable distribution of dessert portions, who got to sit in the front seat of the car.

“Well then, when you have a lot of brothers and sisters like I do, it gets worse instead of easier.” Winterly sighed. “You share everything and it seems like there’s less and less to go around. Nothing is your own. You end up sharing your parents, even — battling for attention, trying to make more noise than the others so that you know you’re being watched, so that you know you’re loved.”

Jee understood this perfectly.

“It isn’t easy, looking for your place.” Winterly told her. “I had no idea that escaping my father would mean losing my mother.” She didn’t cry, but the tears were there in her voice. After a moment, she continued. “I had no idea what I was setting myself up for. At first . . . at first, it was wonderful. He was so romantic, so attentive. There were fresh flowers in my room every morning.” She stared wistfully at a vase as they passed. “And we had dinner by candlelight every night. It was so wonderful, so romantic...”

Jee waited for a long moment before, finally, she said “But?”

The Queen smiled at her, acknowledging the other side of the story. “Yes. But . . . but for all of the romance, there always came a point when I would look up across the table — that long table, like a bridge between us — to see that his chair was empty. He’d escaped.” She shook her head. “It gets to a point where you start to wonder if the loneliness is actually better than the alternative. You know what I mean?”

Jee didn’t. But she shrugged, nodded.

Winterly went on. “I can never be my father’s daughter but at least I will always be my husband’s wife. Even if he doesn’t need me.”

And, to that, Jee had nothing to say.

Neither, apparently, did Winterly.

They walked on in silence together. Someone watching them from a distance might have thought they were sisters or even, perhaps, mother and daughter. Winterly took the girl’s hand. “Let’s go and see how your brother is getting on,” she said. “Would you like that?”

“Yes, please,” Jee said, although a part of her — a fairly large part of her — would have been perfectly content to keep on talking with the Queen and not give another thought as to how her brother was getting on. She was starting, in her own way, to feel a little bit guilty about that.

INTERLUDE

“So . . . we’re just going to wait here, then?”

“Yes.”

“Hope I don’t freeze to death before they finally come out.”

Juniper didn’t bother to turn and look at his reluctant companion. He could convey all of his patient scorn and disgust in a single word: “Yes.” It was a trick he had learned from his mother, once upon a time. It was all in the tone of voice, a tone that said “If you continue to irritate me, I will punish you in terrible ways.” He found it worked surprisingly well, even after all this time.

After a long moment, he sighed. Although the constant whining and questions were annoying, the

sulking was worse. It clouded his mind like static. "I'm sorry, I know this is boring." He reached into his pocket. "Come here."

"Why?" Edgar said, wary.

"I have something to help you take your mind off the waiting." Juniper's hand darted out, like a mantis striking, closing around the boy's throat, jerking him close. He forced Edgar's chin upwards with his thumb, prying open his jaws with his free hand. A twist, a quick snap of his wrist, and he released the boy. "There now," he said. "I bet you hardly notice how cold it is anymore, do you?"

Hands to his mouth, the boy nodded as blood seeped through his fingers to patter heavily against the snow.

"Good," Juniper said gently, turning back to watch the palace. "That's good." He whistled briefly, in spite of himself, putting his hand back into his pocket, feeling the reassuring click of the teeth against each other.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Assam woke with a start, dragging himself out of a dream. He sat up, staring wildly, not sure where he was or what he was doing there. He couldn't remember what it was that frightened him so. Already the dream was fading in his memory like the lingering ache of a rotten tooth that had been pulled. A wave of dizziness washed over him and his head fell backward, pulling the rest of him back down. Once the spell had cleared, he sat up slower this time and looked around.

The room was small, with dark-paneled walls close around him. One side was full of shelves and cupboards cluttered with various jars and bottles and tins. On the other, two statues stood in shallow alcoves: A man and a woman fashioned in pale marble, perfectly lifelike. The sculptor had posed them leaning around the sides of their alcoves, eyes startled and staring into the room, as though they had been interrupted in whispered conversation. Their frozen glances toward him was so lifelike, uncannily so, that he felt as though he should apologize for the interruption.

He was lying on a low table, perfectly fitted to the length of his body, like a coffin. To his left sat a large metal bowl with a damp rag hanging over the rim. The bowl was empty, save for a small clump of what looked like the crumbled leaves that gathered in the gutters of his street every fall back home.

In front of him, at the foot of his table, was a door standing half open, revealing a slice of a view out into the room beyond. Against the wall next to the door was a small wooden chair. There was a book spread face down on the seat. In a flash, Assam realized where he was and what he was looking at. He'd seen this room before . . . but now he was seeing it with his eyes for the first time.

He could see.

He swung his legs over the side of the table, careful should another wave of dizziness overtake him as it had before. He stood up slowly, unsteady. "Hello?" He spoke loud enough to be heard by anyone who might be listening for him, but not so loud as to startle anyone who didn't know he was there.

There was no answer.

He took a step towards the door, a little wobbly on his feet. His head felt oddly clean somehow, like a window that's been scrubbed, the springtime sun shining through, a faint whiff of vinegar in the air. He went to the chair, so old and worn. He knew exactly what it would sound like, if he sat down. He'd

heard it often enough, when he'd been blind. The ragged dust jacket on the book lying there showed an illustration of two men building a wall out of playing cards. The cards were massive, larger than either of the men toiling to lift them into place. He didn't recognize the title of the book or the name of the author.

He waited for a moment by the open door, looking back at the table, the basin, the shelves and cupboards. He held it there in his mind the way you might hold a snapshot in your hand and know that you were looking at a slice of time, however thin, certain that it was real. Except for the statues. He hadn't seen them before, neither in his mind nor his memory.

Carefully and quietly, he slipped out through the open door and into the next room. It was like stepping into a cathedral, a palace, an ornate tomb silent and dry as dust. It was a massive space, with high walls rising up to a vaulted ceiling overhead. The walls were lined with wooden shelves from floor to ceiling. Narrow wrought iron catwalks ran along the sides at various levels, unreachable except by two tightly wound spiral staircases set in opposite corners of the room.

It was a library, of course. There were books everywhere — lined up neatly on the shelves, stacked on tables, resting forgotten on chairs, even scattered across the floor here and there like fallen leaves in early autumn. It was exactly the sort of place that Assam would have been more than happy to spend an eternity in. He immediately, albeit wistfully, pushed the thought from his mind. He had not forgotten where he was. He had not forgotten what wishing for eternity meant here, in this place.

Across the broad lower level from where Assam was standing, a bank of five massive windows rose to the ceiling. Cold winter light poured in from outside, the sky beyond clotted with thick flurries of snow. He could not tell what time of day it was. It might be morning and it might be afternoon. He did not know if it was still the same day that they had taken tea with the Queen.

He did not know how long he'd been asleep. He did not know how long he'd been blind.

He did not, he realized with a pang of fear and guilt, know where his sister was. Then, for a brief moment, the walls of his mind shuddered and expanded. He had the sense of rushing, a blur of movement through unknown hallways and chambers before coming to a gentle stop. He felt something, his mind brushing lightly against a . . . a what? A burst of warmth and recognition, a sense of relief, a bright little voice in the back of his mind.

And then the library walls slipped back into place, surrounding him once more. His mouth was dry and he felt, suddenly, very tired. But he also knew, somehow, that his sister was safe.

To one side of the library stood a large stone hearth, a fire within battling back as best it could against the cold winter light spilling in through the windows. Around the hearth was arranged a collection of overstuffed chairs, sofas, and end tables.

Not entirely sure if he should be exploring without permission, Assam took a few tentative steps into the room. There was a table in the center, a massive square slab of dark wood piled high with books and papers. He approached it cautiously, feeling more and more like he was about to be caught, reprimanded, and perhaps punished. He picked up a sheet of paper from a small stack, scanning the cramped, almost illegible handwriting. The phrase *I am not entirely helpless...* caught his eye. He frowned, something familiar ringing in his mind. He set the paper back down where he had found it.

He felt self-conscious, watched. He looked around quickly, eyes darting to the little nooks and corners of the room and glancing up to the empty catwalks overhead. He was alone. Almost.

On one wall of the library, opposite the fireplace, stood two massive doors of polished wood. Next to them, a pale figure stood motionless: A tall, broad-shouldered man with long, shoulder length hair and a fierce, disapproving gaze. He wore a thick sweater and a rumpled pair of trousers. And, from head to

foot, he was entirely white. For a moment, Assam thought it was a ghost. But it was only a statue, like the ones he'd seen back in the little room.

He relaxed . . . barely. He wasn't quite sure what he should do, but he was fairly certain that he probably shouldn't be doing what he was doing right now. He considered going back to the little room to lie down and wait for his caretaker to return. Or he could stay here, find something to read maybe and wait by the fire. Or he could, very carefully, explore a bit more and hope he didn't get caught. If he had been more like his sister, he would have started exploring immediately, looking for secrets and clues. But he wasn't like his sister. Not much.

He walked over to one of the tall windows and peered out, looking down a long slope to a river — he assumed it was the same river, but he couldn't be sure. He put his palm against the glass, cold radiating through the pane and up his arm.

"So you're up and about," a voice said from behind him. "How do you feel?"

Assam turned in surprise to see a man sitting in one of the chairs by the fire. The boy hadn't seen him as he'd walked past, but he recognized him instantly. He'd listened to the whispery rasp of that voice, he'd caught glimpses of that friendly, careworn face in his mind, back when he'd been blind.

The man rose from his chair, smiling. He had a pair of spectacles in his hand and was polishing them with a scrap of cloth. His close-cropped hair was the color of the ashes at the base of the fire — gray, tinged with the memory of a warmer color that might have once been red. He wore a faded blue workshirt and a pair of colorless trousers. He looked like a handyman and if he'd had a name stenciled over his breast pocket (he didn't) Assam would not have been surprised.

"Hello again." The old man set the glasses on his nose, blinking.

"I'm sorry," the boy said. "I didn't know where you'd gone and I woke up alone, so I came out here to find someone."

The man bobbed his head, the lenses of his glasses flashing like coins in the pale light of the windows. "And so you have." He came forward to meet the boy. "I'm very pleased to see you up and about."

"Thank you."

"How are your eyes? Any blurriness or stinging?"

Assam heard genuine concern in that voice. "No, they feel fine. Thank you."

The man took his arm and gently turned him so that he was facing the windows. He tilted the boy's head back, inspecting his eyes. "No flashes of light or odd shadows in the periphery?"

"Uh, not really."

"That's good to hear." He stepped back. "You're likely to be in for some interesting times, so be careful." The man smiled conspiratorially. "Not that I know what 'interesting' means, of course. Or if it's good or bad. We'll just have to wait and see."

"Okay."

"Would you like a cup of tea?" The old man gestured to a small tray with a brown teapot and cups laid out on a small table near the fireplace.

"No, thank you."

The man nodded. "Well, come and have a seat anyway. I'd like to hear more about you and what happened to your..." He broke off.

There was an odd, rasping sound from behind them. Assam turned and blinked, not sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing. The statue by the door was walking towards them. Each movement — its legs as it walked, the shift of its head on its neck — grated like two stones rubbing together. The sound set Assam's teeth on edge.

"What is it?" the old man asked as the statue approached. The statue inclined its head next to his ear. The old man nodded, listening. "Thank you, Gardner."

The statue stepped away, returning to its place by the door.

"I'm terribly sorry," the old man told Assam. "I would have liked to have talked with you a bit longer but, unfortunately, I need to..."

There was a sharp crack from behind them, like a tree limb breaking. Assam turned to see that the statue had bent over at the waist as though it were inspecting the floor in front of the door for something it had lost.

And then the doors opened and his sister walked in. "Hey!" She rushed over to throw her arms around him, pinning his elbows to his sides and rocking him back and forth. "How are you?" She stepped back, waving her hand in front of his face. "Can you see me? Can you see my hand?"

"Yes, I'm fine now." He swatted her hand away. "Thank you."

"I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Really?"

"No, not really," she admitted. "But it was nice of me to say so anyway, right?"

"I guess. But next time you should try to pretend for a while longer," he told her. "It's more polite. But where have you..?" He stopped. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen walked through the doors of the library. He felt his breath siphon out of his mouth in a thin trickle of something that did not even remotely resemble words.

The woman nodded to the statue bowing to her. "Gardner."

The statue straightened up with a dry crack, closed the doors, and took up its place beside them once more.

"Well, hello again," the woman said to Assam.

He stared, dumbfounded. The long dress she was wearing shimmered and shifted like water before his eyes.

She glanced briefly around the library. Assam followed her gaze. They were alone. The old man had gone. Somewhere back in the shelves, he heard a small door quietly close.

"Are you feeling better?" the woman asked him.

Before he could answer, his sister said "This is the Queen." In the world's least-quiet whisper, she added "Her name is Winterly and her clothes can change all by themselves. Try not to stare." She nudged him, whispering out of the corner of her mouth. "I'll explain later."

"Yes, I saw. Thank you."

The Queen was younger than he had expected. He saw immediately why his sister trusted her. He wondered how he could have ever thought that they wouldn't be safe in her hands. Kindness radiated from her in gentle waves.

"Thank you for everything, your majesty."

His sister kicked him.

"Ow." He rubbed his leg. "What was that for?"

"She doesn't like to be called that, remember?"

Winterly chuckled and gave him an apologetic look. "I'm afraid you won't find me all that majestic once you get to know me."

Assam didn't know what to say, so he thanked her again.

Briefly, she touched her fingertips to his cheek. "It's good to see you, but it's much better to be seen. I wasn't sure we'd be able to help."

Assam nodded, trying to will away the blush blooming on his cheek where her fingers had touched. "Yes, you did. I mean, you were." He sighed inwardly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." The queen glanced past him to the rest of the library, a faint flicker of disappointment passing over her face. She looked back to him. "He took care of you?"

"Look at this," Jee called to them. As they were speaking, she'd grown bored and wandered off to explore the library a bit more. She was standing in front of a large brass globe resting on a massive oak stand as tall as she was. She set it spinning with her hand, the unfamiliar continents etched into the globe flashing by as it picked up speed. There was a low sound in the air, a ringing hum like the resonant echo of a bell tower.

"Yeah, that's great." Assam looked back to the Queen with a shrug.

"I would like to know," she said quietly, "what the two of you talked about. I envy you that time with him."

"The librarian?"

She tipped her head to one side. "No, my husband."

"Where's Ohgeeyah?" his sister called.

Assam ignored her, turning back to the Queen. "Uh, I don't think I met..." He stopped.

Kindly, she waited for the realization to sink in.

"I'm sorry. At first I thought he was a nurse or a doctor or something, but..." He gestured around the room. "Then I just figured he was the librarian."

"Oh no," Winterly said, nodding to the statue by the doors. "John is the librarian."

"I thought he was the gardener."

"No," the woman replied. "That's his name, not his occupation."

"Look at this!" Jee called from the other end of the room. She pointed to a small glass case on a table which held what was either a poorly maintained toupee or a rather expertly groomed species of rodent – possibly it was both. "I think it used to be alive."

"Yes, it's fascinating," the Queen called. "But perhaps we should go, now that we have your brother again."

"Aww..." the girl said, suddenly sullen. "I wanted to explore more."

"Well, perhaps next time."

Assam didn't think about that until much later, that the Queen said "next time" to his sister. She turned to him as Jee made her way back over. "What did you talk about?" There was a sad, earnest quality to the question.

He took a breath, remembering. "We talked about poetry," he told her. "We talked about you."

For a moment her face crumpled into itself and he thought that she might break down. The Queen took a deep shuddering breath and held it, her eyes never leaving his. Then she let it out again. "I should very much like to hear what he said."

He nodded. "Yes, your majesty."

"Don't call her that," his sister told him as she rejoined them.

"What?"

She studied his eyes carefully. "So you can see again? Completely?"

"Yes."

She scrunched her face up between her hands. "You can see this?" she asked, although it sounded more like "You cagg scheevizh?"

"Yes."

Assam could practically see the relief pooling around her. "I'm fine now," he told her, remembering

that it had been her fault. "It's alright now. I can see." He didn't bother telling her the rest, since he wasn't quite sure about it himself. The old man — the King, he corrected himself — had been right. It was going to take some getting used to.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jee tried very hard not to cry. They walked back through the palace and with each step they were getting closer to the time when she would have to say goodbye. And with each step, her misery increased. It was time to go, she knew. There was no reason to stay, now that her brother had been cured. They had to move on, to find their mother. She knew this. But she didn't want to leave. She didn't want to say goodbye. If she had been slightly younger, she might have thrown a tantrum. She half-wanted to even now, even though she knew it was no use. The only thing that kept her from it was that she didn't want to spoil their remaining time together, time that was slipping away with every step they took.

But it was already spoiled. Even Winterly seemed to feel it, saying little as they walked through the lonely halls. The only point that she came close to smiling was when Jee reached up to take her hand. She looked down at the girl fondly. Apart from that brief moment, the faint flash of happiness in her eyes, there was very little to hold back that wave of loneliness, that terrible tide rising to fill the rooms behind them, an ocean that Winterly would sink back into once Jee and her brother were gone. And then she would drown.

Neither Winterly nor Jee said anything. It was just too sad.

Assam was silent also, overwhelmed not by sadness but sheer amazement and wonder. There was so much to see, he could feel his eyes opening up, stretching like the jaw of a snake to swallow everything he saw. It wasn't just the splendor of the palace. Beneath it all, the world had layers and layers that he had never known before — each one superimposed over something far larger and deeper than the one above.

Take the statues, for instance — frozen in time and space, unmoving and silent as the death they were forever fixed within. But within the statue, beneath that marble shell, he could see the person, alive and warm, watching him as he passed. And around them, a hazy mist twined and looped, faint lights glittering within the pale tendrils. Little flickers and glimmers of the people within, memories of what had once been their lives in the world above.

Assam knew he ought to be frightened. He was starting to get an idea of what the King had meant. It was very "interesting" indeed. And he was interested to see what would happen next. He wondered briefly if he would be able to keep this gift, to be allowed to see like this, once they returned home. He wasn't entirely sure if he wanted to.

Before he could reflect further on this, two things happened that brought him out of his thoughts. First, they passed through an open archway and into a large foyer. And his sister burst into tears.

Winterly knelt down and embraced the girl.

Assam realized that this was where they had first entered the palace. He stood there, awkward and self-conscious, while the two of them collapsed into each other and wept. It was almost too sad to endure. He could feel their sorrow intensely, crashing around them like waves, one after the other.

It was too sad. He sat down on the marble floor, his legs giving out in the face of that storm washing over them all.

Eventually, finally, mercifully . . . the storm subsided. It was still there, waiting to come crashing down on them once more, but now they could stand again. Winterly could open her eyes, stroke Jee's hair, tell the girl that it was going to be all right.

"I don't want to go," Jee said.

Winterly hugged her. "I know. But you have to, nonetheless. You have things you need to do."

"I want to stay with you." The girl could hear the petulant whine in her voice and she hated herself for it.

"Your mother needs you," Winterly said. "That's all that matters now."

"He can go, he can be the hero."

The Queen put her hand under the girl's chin and gently lifted her face. "He needs you too. Look."

Jee opened her eyes. Her brother lay slumped on the floor next to them. "What happened?" She stood up and went to him, nudging his shoulder. He groaned.

Winterly came over and knelt next to her. She stroked the boy's forehead. His eyelids fluttered and his brow wrinkled at her touch. "His sight has been restored," Winterly said, "but it was bought at a heavy price." She put her arm around the girl. "Don't worry, in time he will learn how to bear what he has been given. But until then he will need your help and your strength."

"I don't want to be strong," Jee said. "I want to die. Then I could stay forever."

"Oh..." The Queen turned the girl to face her. "Never say that, never want that."

"I do."

Winterly shook her head. "No, you don't. Believe me. It wouldn't be the same and you have too much left to do in your life. You don't want to stop before your time."

"Why can't I just stay then? I could stay here with you."

"I'm afraid not."

"Can't you ask?" Jee said. "Maybe your husband could..?"

Winterly shook her head. "After certain events you might have heard about, he tries to steer clear of doing this sort of thing for people."

"Maybe he would, though, if you asked."

The Queen smiled sadly. "Doing what I ask is what caused trouble in the past," she said with a sigh. "Trust me, it wouldn't be good for you to stay. It wouldn't be good for you at all. If you're meant to be somewhere else but end up here . . . well, it can change you."

Jee sniffed. "What do you mean?"

"Sometimes people who do that, the exiles, they become twisted, distorted images of what they should be. Like a reflection in a fun house mirror, a perversion and a horror to themselves and everyone who cares about them." She squeezed the girl's shoulders. "I wouldn't want that to happen to you."

"Maybe it won't," Jee said sulkily. "You don't know."

"That's true," Winterly admitted, "I don't. But I know that you have to go on. I know this isn't where you should be right now."

"How do you know?"

Winterly shrugged. "I just do."

Jee leaned against the Queen for a moment, knowing this was the truth, knowing that she had to accept it. "Can I come back to visit?" she asked, afraid to look up.

She felt the Queen sigh. "Oh, I don't think so, sweetheart."

"But people do," she said. "He told me. There's lots of stories about it."

"There may be, but few of them ever got what they wanted and none of them were happy here."

"I'm happy now," Jee said, crying. "My story could end here."

Winterly chuckled. "This isn't a fairy tale, love. There's no ending and very little happiness."

Jee couldn't tell if Winterly was saying this to her, or saying it to herself.

Assam groaned again and tried to sit up. "What's going on?" he asked, his voice thick and muddled as though he'd been asleep.

Winterly gave him her arm to lean on. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm not sure," the boy answered. His head, his whole body felt heavy, weighted down, as though his bones were made of lead.

"Are you going to throw up?" Jee asked him.

"No, why?"

"Because Dad says that it's better to just do it and get it all out instead of trying to hold it all in where it'll just boil up inside you and make you sicker and sicker and sicker until finally you can't hold it in anymore and then it..."

"...no," Assam said. "I am not going to throw up."

Jee looked to Winterly. "Do you have, like, a bucket or something?"

The Queen put her palm on Assam's forehead, looking into his eyes for a long moment. "You'll get used to this," she told him. "You'll learn, in time."

Assam nodded, wondering how long "in time" was to someone like her.

The three of them stood there, each waiting for one of the others to move, each of them unwilling to be the one to break the simple, comforting structure they'd built together.

Then Winterly sighed softly. At the same time, Assam nodded and Jee gave each of them a squeeze. The three of them drew apart, back to normal once again, more or less.

"Samuel," Winterly said.

"Yes?" Assam immediately realized his mistake.

The Queen eased his panic with a smile. "Not you." She gestured to a statue standing nearby, next to the door. The statue stepped forward with their coats. Jee's heart sank at the sight.

The statue was a man with close cropped hair and a deeply lined face. The piercing stone eyes were unnerving. "Um..." Assam awkwardly took the coats. "Thank you."

Almost imperceptibly, the statue nodded.

Handing his sister her coat, Assam pulled on his own. It was time to go. There was no putting it off any longer.

The Queen hugged each of them in turn. "Take good care of her," she whispered to Assam. "And be careful with yourself."

"My name is Julia," the girl whispered fiercely to Winterly as they embraced. "I wish I could stay."

Winterly held her tightly. "I know," she whispered back. "But your mother needs you." She squeezed the girl once more before letting her go.

The Queen straightened up, her clothing flickering, pale and luminous. She raised her hands, one palm over each of them, and her voice rang out to fill the room:

"The fates guide you and keep you.

The kindly ones watch over you and yours.

The unseen dread will not lay its hand upon you.

You will find your path, you will find your home.

You will be safe."

It was something like a blessing, something like a prayer. She was every bit the Queen in that moment

and both of the children felt her power for the first time. Then she lowered her hands and the moment passed. She was just Winterly once more.

“Farewell,” she said, dipping her head gently towards them. “You will always be welcome in my husband’s house. And you will always be safe in his kingdom, if I have anything to say about it.”

The children bowed low — although neither of them could have explained why, as they had never done it before in their lives. Behind them, they heard the palace doors open.

They turned to see the statue with its hand on the brass knob.

Samuel, Assam thought to himself, *his name is Samuel*. Through the open door he could see the gray sky, heavy with snow. “Thank you for everything,” he said to the Queen.

She nodded.

His sister said nothing.

Winterly answered her in kind.

To her credit, Jee did not start crying until they were well away from the palace. At the base of the hill, she looked back. The Queen still stood in the open doorway — standing in the mouth of loneliness, waiting to be swallowed whole. Winterly raised her hand in farewell . . . and Jee collapsed inside.

The icy wind froze the tears on her cheeks. But the tears did not freeze so fast that she couldn’t taste the salt of them, bitter as anything she had ever known.

Her brother took her hand, gently leading her down to the river.

INTERLUDE

Edgar spat into the snow at his feet. He was tired of waiting but he didn’t want to risk another reprimand from Juniper. *Sooner or later*, he thought to himself, *something different will happen*. It was a lesson he’d learned long ago, in darker times. It made things easier to endure, no matter how bad they got or how long they lasted, to remind himself that he had lived through worse than this, he had been hurt worse than this. Stick around long enough, you got used to it. Something else he’d learned, all those years ago, was how to take it — until it was his turn to give it, of course.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Juniper said in that flat monotone voice. “Don’t forget why you’re here.”

Edgar squinted. “Why I’m here?”

Juniper turned to him and nodded knowingly, though his eyes vague and unfocused.

Through sheer force of will, Edgar managed to hold his gaze steady. He couldn’t control the shiver, though.

“When I have what I want, you can have what you want.” Juniper sounded almost kind.

If Edgar hadn’t known better, he would have thought that the man was on the verge of tears. Juniper crying? The thought of it was horrifying to consider.

The man turned back to the palace. Edgar followed his gaze, secretly watching Juniper out of the corner of his eye — studying him, savoring the day when the tables would turn.

"If you keep that eye on me much longer," Juniper told him, "I will become quite attached to it and keep it for myself." He spoke in a quiet tone that was barely audible, without so much as a glance to Edgar.

The boy looked away immediately. He did not mind waiting. He did not mind being hurt. But he needed his eyes.

After a moment, Juniper nodded to himself. "Well, there you go." He sounded almost cheerful.

"There what goes?" Juniper in a good mood was worse than anything Edgar could imagine, even worse than Juniper crying.

Juniper turned silently to look at the boy.

Eventually Edgar looked away. The strange distance in the man's gaze made him sick to his stomach.

Juniper smiled quietly. "And now we're off."

"Where to?" Edgar asked.

"You to the river." Juniper pointed. "They're on the move again."

Edgar turned to look. "What about you?"

But Juniper was already gone.

Edgar stood for a moment, alone. He spat again and started walking toward the river. Behind him, the bright splash of red faded under the falling snow.

BOOK THREE

REMNANTS

INTERLUDE

There is a room, crowded with the clutter and castoffs of a thousand lifetimes. But there is only one life inside, patient and waiting to live again.

CHAPTER ONE

The weather turned savage after they left the palace, as though the storm was angry with them for leaving Winterly behind. The snow was deep and made it difficult to move along. The wind came in brief, cruel bursts, biting at their eyes and cheeks with stinging teeth of ice and snow. The cold crept into their bones.

Eventually though, the storm abated. The wind began to taper off, the cold to recede. The snow on the ground began to thin out, patches of bare earth and scrubby grass peeking through. And then, eventually, they left winter behind for good.

Jee cried quietly to herself when the last of the snow was gone.

Her brother barely even noticed. There was so much in his head now, so much noise. He could hardly concentrate on anything more than putting one foot in front of the other. It wasn't just that he could see and hear and feel so much more than before. It wasn't his actual eyes and ears doing more than before. It was something else, something deeper.

When he was younger, he'd once gotten a bad sunburn and his peeling, tattered skin had revealed a new layer beneath so sensitive that even the slightest breeze felt like it was scraping against him. Walking into a sunbeam could bring him to tears. He felt like that now, like his mind had been peeled and exposed. And it hurt. Eventually, his sunburn had gone away. He wondered if this would be the same.

A while later, after the snow was gone, Jee finally stopped crying. She'd run out of tears to shed.

The river wound on through a low set of hills dotted here and there with clumps of pale, brittle grass. After walking for a time and a distance, eventually the land opened up around them, the hills fell away, and the river was the only thing they could see for miles around, stretching out to the horizon.

As they walked, the river shrank into itself – the broad, steep bank leveling out as the far shore came closer until it was nothing more than a small stream, no wider than a sidewalk and maybe as deep as a bathtub. The low hills fading behind them, the tattered ribbon of water leading them on. There was nothing else but a featureless plain of packed earth, barren and dry.

"Can we stop for a bit?"

Assam started at the sound of his sister's voice. Neither of them had spoken in some time. He turned to look at her as if he had forgotten she was there.

She sat down without waiting for his answer, just sat down on the ground right where she was and watched the river drift along. She was tired, as flat and hopeless as the countryside around them.

Her brother stood nearby, his eyes vague and unfocused. Whatever he was looking at, whatever he could hear, it wasn't the water gliding quietly past them.

Jee picked at a little clump of grass in front of her, tearing out each brittle blade one by one. When she'd run out, she tossed them into the river, where the current quickly carried them away. She wondered if the grass would forget what it was. If she planted a garden and watered it from the river, would the seeds forget what they should grow into? Would apple trees sprout from potatoes? Would flowers bloom from lettuce seeds?

She dipped her hand into the water. It was warm, a little greasy on her fingertips. She held up her hand and watched the drops fall back into the river. She wiggled her fingers and wondered why they could remember to move.

She dipped her hand again and raised it, cupping the water in her palm, watching it run through her fingers. She shook her hand, scattering ripples across the face of the river, watching as the current smoothed them out.

Jee held up her hand, fingers splayed, feeling them dry in the arid air. She wondered what would happen if she took a drink. She wondered how much would it take. She wondered what it tasted like and if she would feel quite so sad after she had forgotten everything. Would it happen right away or gradually? What did the Queen say? One sip, two sips, before it was all gone?

"It wouldn't." Her brother's voice was quiet and flat, like a sleepwalker.

"What?"

He didn't answer.

Jee looked at her hands, the dust between the creases of her fingers looked like dried blood. She dipped her fingers into the water once more, rubbing them together under the surface. The dirt washed away but her hands still felt gritty. She cupped her hands together and raised them, the water pooled within.

"After you drink it," her brother said, "you'll still be here."

"I won't be sad anymore."

"You will," he told her, "but you just won't remember why. That's why they cry, that's where the river comes from: The tears of the forgetful dead."

Jee stared up at him. He didn't sound like himself.

Assam's face was blank. But inside he was reeling under the waves and waves of sadness coming off of her. He could barely stand up under the force of her sorrow.

"How do you know?"

"I don't know." He closed his eyes, closed his mind against her sadness. "I just know."

They might have stayed like that for hours, even days, maybe forever. Just two more statues in this place. One sitting down gazing into her cupped hands, the other standing quietly gazing at nothing.

But then Jee heard a faint, familiar sound. She looked up. There was a small dark figure moving toward them. She could hear the soft noises it was making, distant but unmistakable, calling out as though it were calling her name. She sat up, letting the water fall back to the river without a second glance. The little figure came closer, padding across the barren plain, stopping from time to time to investigate a stray patch of scrub grass before continuing on.

It was a cat.

INTERLUDE

If there was one thing that Edgar hated more than anything else, it was walking. Walking meant time taken, time lost, time that had been his and now was gone. He had fought hard for his time, he'd made sacrifices for it — often living ones — and he hated to see it wasted. He didn't know how much time he had left, but he knew how much more than most he'd been able to scrape together. He knew he didn't deserve all that he had, but that didn't mean it wasn't his now.

He didn't have to walk anymore. Not like the old days when the only thing anyone could do was walk, unless you were fortunate enough to own an animal you could ride or had a cart to pull. But when the roses came, the animals fell ill and the carts were all piled with the people who'd already made their escape. That is to say, piled high with the late, the dead, the ones out of time.

When his family died, Edgar walked away and left them in their beds, heading into the village where, soon enough, other families ran out of time. He walked from town to town, staying just ahead of the rats and the roses. Eventually, he came to a city — he couldn't remember the name of it now to save his life — and when the city fell, as they always do, he started walking again, on and on until, eventually, he walked right out of the world altogether.

He kept walking, holding onto as much time as he could, picking up little tricks here and there along the way. He learned how to side-step things, to open the little doors that lead someplace else. He was still walking, of course, but it was much better than the tedious step-by-step lives that everyone else made do with.

He went through every door he could find, without rhyme or reason or direction. Time curled before him, worlds crumpling under his feet like paper. And then he made his way here and realized he had the chance to find what had been lost long before. Sometime later he saw his first automobile and realized he was done with walking.

Except for now, he thought to himself as he walked along the river. He cursed the soft bank crumbling under his feet, cursed the children he was following, and cursed Juniper.

Edgar wasn't afraid of Juniper, necessarily. But he kept walking nonetheless. Despite his own dislike of the man, he'd been around long enough and walked far enough to recognize an open door when he saw one. He knew it the first time he'd seen the girl and her brother at the diner. That Juniper was involved only made it easier to get the door open. Juniper's interest in the kids almost guaranteed that Edgar would get what he wanted.

He smiled to himself. He was willing to walk a ways for that.

CHAPTER TWO

Jee sat by the river with the cat in her lap, stroking the mottled fur between his stubby, missing ears. "I think it's the same one from before," she told her brother. "I think he followed us."

Assam nodded, not because he agreed but because he was relieved her mood had lightened somewhat. It was easier to concentrate, to try and shut off the noise in his head, without all her sorrow crashing into him every few seconds.

"I think he likes me." Jee laughed as the cat stood up on its hind legs to lick her chin.

"I think you're right," her brother said with a grimace. Each time she laughed, he was blinded for a moment as though flashbulbs were going off in his mind.

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Just a bit of a headache."

The cat mewed at him and hopped off Jee's lap. It rubbed against his legs, scraping the side of its head and chin across the toe of his boot. Small radiant colors drifted upwards, friendly and warm. Assam shook his head to clear it of the colorful fog the cat had spread in there. He was going to have to learn how to shield himself better if he was ever going to manage to have a normal life again. If his sister and a cat could overwhelm him, there was no telling what a crowd of people could do to him.

The cat dropped onto the ground at his feet and rolled in the dust. Assam knelt down and scratched its stomach, gritting his teeth against the burst of delight that spread upwards from the animal. And then, just as suddenly, it was all gone. Like a radio switching off, the noise dropped away.

Assam stood up, blinking in the sudden silence. As much as it was a relief, a part of him worried, briefly, that his new ability was gone forever. He wasn't quite sure if he wanted to lose it that easily.

The cat mewed up at him, as though asking him what was wrong and why did he stop?

"Oh don't mind him." Jee leaned forward to pet the cat. "He's just a big party pooper. Yes. He is."

The cat stared up at Assam. The boy felt a brief flash of . . . something. Then the animal closed its eyes and gave in to Jee's attentions.

The trouble with cats, Assam thought to himself, is that they act like they know a lot more than they let on. But you can never be sure if they really know something or if it's just an act.

Jee was speaking to the cat now, playful little nothings in a singsong voice that bordered on baby talk. It was intensely irritating.

"Well," began Assam. "We should probably..."

"...all right. We're ready." Jee scooped up the cat in her arms and stood up.

Assam stared at her. "What are you doing?"

"What?"

He waved his hands towards the animal in her arms. "You can't just take him."

"Why not?"

"That's, that's, that's practically stealing."

"Stealing?" She looked at all the nothing around them. "From who, exactly?"

Assam wasn't about to admit she had a point. "Well, I don't know. He must live around here somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't know. In a hole?"

"He's not a gopher."

"Besides," Assam tried to be reasonable. "Who said that he wants to come with us anyways?"

At that, the cat — looking quite comfortable curled up in Jee's arms — raised its head and meowed once at Assam.

"See?" Jee said triumphantly. "He wants to come with us. He just said so." And with that, she started walking downstream.

The trouble with cats, Assam told himself as he hurried to catch up with her, is that they don't know when to keep their mouths shut.

Following the river for so long felt, after a while, like they were standing still and it was the river that was moving. Assam had to look down at his feet to assure himself that he was actually still walking.

His sister, on the other hand, was perfectly content to walk along with the cat nestled in her arms. And the cat was, apparently, perfectly content to nestle there.

"It's only a matter of time," Assam said to himself.

His sister shot him a glance over her shoulder.

He hadn't realized that he'd spoken aloud. He wondered if he'd said anything else while they'd been walking through this wasteland. He wondered if this was how crazy people felt, walking backwards into insanity, wondering why the real world was fading away step by step.

It wasn't long afterwards that it began to rain, hard. It was the kind of rain that soaked you to the skin in an instant... The kind of rain that turned friendly, sleek cats into bedraggled, sodden messes that stare out at the world with sullen eyes... The kind of rain that ran down into Assam's eyes and blinded him, turning the dark figure on the horizon into a vague shape, like something from a child's doodle...

He clutched his sister's shoulder, pointing ahead. "There's someone out there," he whispered.

"Yes, yes there is." She managed to sound both irritated and irritating at the same time.

"You can see it?" Assam asked, still not trusting his new senses completely. The King said that he might see things that weren't there.

"I can see him." Jee added a new layer of meaning to her tone which effortlessly implied what an idiot he was. "And the cats."

"Cats?" Assam wiped the water out of his eyes, peering through the sheets of rain. He could just barely make out the distant, lone figure on their side of the bank, walking toward the river. Behind the figure trailed a long dark shape, lying low to the ground like mist. It undulated and rolled along in the figure's wake as though it were alive. It didn't look like cats, not to Assam. "Whatever that is," he said, bringing his sister to a stop. "I don't want to meet it." The dark figure rang oddly in his mind, slightly off-balance, like a warped record. The sound of it rose and fell, making him sick to his stomach.

His sister stared at him like he was insane.

Assam shook himself. He had absolutely no idea what he'd been saying or what had been going on in his mind. He'd been frozen in place for a moment, transfixed by the mental image of an old gramophone with a bell like a giant flower, a warped record spinning round on a lopsided, hypnotic cycle.

"What's wrong?" Jee was half-concerned and half-annoyed. "You just went away for a minute there."

"I'm fine," Assam replied. "But we need to be careful. I think it might be a good idea to take the long way around this one. We can circle back to the river once we're past."

"No."

"What?"

Her face was firm, matter of fact. The cat glowered at him as well, wet and bedraggled, backing her up. "I said no. We're going to keep following the river, because that's what Winterly told us to do. And because Vincent is hungry."

"Who the heck is Vincent?"

The cat raised its mottled head and meowed at him, as though to say "I am, jackass."

"Yes. And besides," the girl went on, "anyone with that many cats is probably going to have enough food to go around."

Assam realized a number of things all at once. First, his sister was probably right and knew it, therefore she would be impossible to argue with. Second, he hadn't eaten since they'd had tea with the Queen — which meant that they were long past the point when cucumber sandwiches hold any lingering nutritional value. And thirdly, finally, he was tired and he wanted nothing more than to sit for a while, possibly next to a nice fire if there was one available, and let his clothes dry out. If there was any pity in this world, he might even get something to eat — or, at the very least, a warm mug of something to hold in his hands. In a perfect world, there would be a grilled cheese sandwich in there somewhere, just like the ones his mother makes. *Used to make*, he reminded himself with a pang.

Then, the rain stopped almost as suddenly as it had started. Assam wiped his face, not sure how much of it was tears and how much was just rainwater. He had a flash of her then — their mother framed in headlights from the oncoming traffic, throwing her arm back between the seats of the car as though she could save them from the accident just by touching them, her voice drowned out by the screech of brakes. He felt himself pulled into those horrified eyes, seeing what she saw: Her hand outstretched towards them, hearing the screams of her children, the blare of the horns, and everything swirling away into darkness. He let go of his sister's shoulder, fell to his hands and knees, and vomited at the edge of the river.

Jee took a step towards him to help, but stopped. There are some things that everyone has to do all on their own.

Assam felt the tears running down his cheeks and watched the current carry away those poisonous, sour images that he couldn't keep down. Eventually, he stopped retching and spent the better part of a minute spitting into the river and wishing for one clear drink to rinse his mouth. The problem was, of course, it would rinse away more than that.

Jee patted his back with one hand, cradling the cat with the other. "You okay?"

Assam shook his head, wishing it would start raining again. He cleared his throat and spat once more. From behind them, he heard someone — not his sister, not the cat — clear their throat in reply.

"It occurred to me a moment ago," a voice said, "that it might be wise to pick a spot further upstream, given the current situation with the, ahem, current."

Assam looked up, if for no other reason than he'd never heard anyone pronounce the word "ahem" before.

The cat in Jee's arms made a small noise and leaped down, padding excitedly over to rub itself against the long legs of the man standing there behind them.

He was bald, Jee noticed immediately. You couldn't miss it. His round dome of a head bordered around the sides with gray hair, like clouds wreathing the moon. He had a large, shaggy beard that flowed down his cheeks, chin, and neck to disappear beneath the collar of the full length fur coat he was wearing. Jee couldn't tell where the beard ended and the coat began. Altogether, his appearance was quite shaggy.

The shaggy man looked back and forth between the two of them, his eyes twinkling. In one hand he held a wicker picnic basket. In the other, he carried an impossibly long fishing pole. Behind him stretched a long line of cats. They sat patiently, tails flicking back and forth in the dust, staring up at him.

Assam took a breath and winced at the sour taste in the back of his throat. "Sorry."

The shaggy man smiled. "Not to worry. I know how it can be after a long night."

"M'not drunk," the boy replied thickly, sounding very drunk indeed.

The man laid his index finger along the side of his nose. "Of course you aren't." He winked.

"Are all those cats yours?" Jee'd been watching her cat roll around at the man's feet and she was a little jealous to be forgotten so easily.

"Ah..." The shaggy man looked back at his feline followers. "Well, I'm not certain that anyone can presume to claim that they own a cat. They are their own masters, after all. But if you mean to ask if I have taken it upon myself to provide food and lodging sufficient to the material needs of however many stray felines wish to avail themselves of my hospitality? Then, I suppose, it is safe to say that, yes, these are my cats — or, possibly, I am their man."

"Okay," Jee said.

"But," the shaggy man continued, "I am equally confident to assert that, no, these are not my cats. Although," he knelt down and scratched behind the stubby ears of the cat at his feet, "I must confess that I think I might recognize this fellow here as one of my regular visitors, despite the fact that he seems to vanish for weeks at a stretch."

"That's because he's staying with — ow!" Jee said, pulling her arm away from her brother, who had suddenly squeezed it very tightly. "What was that for?"

Assam gave her a warning look. He glanced at the shaggy man.

"I think what your friend there was trying to say," the man nodded good-naturedly, "was that children, strays, and travelers would do well to be careful in this land." He patted the cat on the belly and straightened up. "But it is known far and wide, or thereabouts, that Elephant House is a safe haven for them all." He gestured to the cats circling him. "Just ask anyone."

It wasn't a great joke, but Assam smiled in spite of himself. He stood up and said "Sorry" to his sister (who was still rubbing her arm, mainly to make a point). There was frustration and anger radiating out from her but he could tell that her arm didn't hurt as much as she was letting on.

She glared at him and he saw a flash in his mind of her kicking him in the shins. The image was so clear, he nearly stepped back. But he held his ground and said, quietly, "Don't even think about it." He knelt down, holding his hand out to the cat at the shaggy man's feet. The cat sniffed his fingertips cautiously.

"What can you tell me about our new friend?" Assam murmured very softly, almost not speaking at all. The cat's crisp, sulfur-yellow eyes fixed on his. A handful of images fluttered across Assam's mind, like a flock of birds taking flight..

...snowflakes, fat and crisp filling the air . . . a dull cold that wreathed his head like a crown . . . tiny, piercing echoes of pain in his hands and feet . . . a broad white expanse stretching out under a charcoal sky broken only by the shaky outline of a roof and a bright rectangle of window below . . . a face leaned in close to his, all beard and kindness . . . rough hands lifted him gently out of the snow, out of the pain . . . coming to rest in a warmer, welcoming place...

...Assam snapped back to himself, the cat still staring up at him. After a long moment, it blinked slowly and looked away. Assam nodded. If he'd had a tail, he would have flicked it. He straightened up and smiled at the shaggy man. "What should we call you?" he asked.

"As many nice things as you can think of." The man smiled, all crooked teeth and good humor.

The boy accepted this with a nod. "You can call me Assam. And this is my sister, Jee."

"Hello to you both," the shaggy man replied.

"What's The Elephant House?" Jee asked.

"It's my house," the man said. "And they call it Elephant House. The 'The' is unnecessary."

"Why do they call it that?" she asked.

"Why do they call it what?"

"Why do they call it Elephant House?"

The man frowned in mock seriousness. "Who calls it that?"

"They do."

"Who are they?"

"I don't know," Jee said in exasperation. "But that's what it's called."

The shaggy man narrowed his eyes. "Who says?"

"You did."

"Me?" he asked, shocked.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just now."

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

"But you said it."

"But who am I?"

"I don't know."

He tsk-tsked at her. "A girl your age should know better than to talk to strangers."

Jee opened her mouth to respond and then closed it again. She glared at him.

Assam coughed, hiding a smile behind his hand.

"Well then!" The shaggy man looked around with a pleased expression. "I should probably earn my keep, yes?"

The cats sat up expectantly. The man hefted his picnic basket and swung the pole back over his shoulder, heading upstream with the cats close behind. Jee stared after him.

Assam nudged her. "Come on," he said, walking after the man. After a moment, she followed.

At the river's edge, the shaggy man set down his basket and flipped open the lid with his foot. The cats gathered around, murmuring. It sounded to Assam like they were placing orders.

With deft fingers, the shaggy man had his line hooked and baited almost immediately. Instead of worms, the man had a small pot of foul smelling paste. "Limburger," he told Jee, taking a pinch and molding it around the tip of his hook. "It smells evil but the fish can't resist it."

"What kind of fish do you catch?" Assam asked.

The shaggy man flicked the tip of his pole in the air. The cats murmured appreciatively. "Well . . . forgetful fish, mostly." He grinned. "Not that I have a burning fancy for fish. But times are hard and," he gestured to the cats around him, "I do have mouths to feed."

"What are forgetful..?" Jee began, but the man held up his hand. There was a dark smear on three of his fingertips and his thumb. Jee cocked her head, trying to remember what it reminded her of.

"Quiet please," the shaggy man intoned. "I am, in fact, now going to fish."

And with that, the rod swept back through the air in a perfect, leisurely arc across the sky. Then, it flicked forward . . . the hook flying out with a faint hiss to land in, more or less, the exact center of the river. As soon as the hook hit the water, the shaggy man reeled it back in, the line clacking and rattling as he cranked. Soon, the end of the line came into view, a brilliant scaled fish struggling against that insistent lurch, the inevitable pull of the shore.

At the site of the fish, the cats gathered around the man like thunderclouds around a mountain.

Their tails flickered like lightning as he drew the fish in, dancing at the end of his rod. He pulled the picnic basket closer with the toe of his shoe and dropped the fish in.

Down went the lid, up went the pole, and out went the line again. The hook hung in the air so long that the shaggy man had time to look at each of the children and ask "Now, should I be expecting you for dinner?" before it hit the water again.

"You didn't put the bait on it," Jee said. "The . . . lindenburger."

The shaggy man nodded. "I did not, you're correct. And yet, for some reason, I feel certain that the fish will find my hook once more."

"We'd be very grateful," Assam said, "for a little dinner. As long as it's no trouble."

"It's no bother, providing — or pretending — you like fish." The shaggy man smiled at Jee. "And, it's *Limburger*. It's a kind of cheese known the world over for its evil stench. It won't be on the menu, although I do admit that the taste does seem to find a way to seep through into the fish."

"Yes, please." Assam decided that one of them should show some manners. "We'd like that very much."

"Splendid!" The shaggy man drew in the line. The cats complained with disappointment when they saw that the hook was bare. Without missing a beat, he cast again and said "A is for author, who set out a plate."

The hook hit the water and he reeled it back in, empty once more. Another cast and, while the hook was in the air, the shaggy man intoned "B was the boy who thought it was great."

His hand spun the reel, an empty hook and another cast. "C were the cats who sat on the sand."

Cast, reel . . . a fish dangling from the hook, finally. Into the basket it went. Just as quick, the hook flicked out again, trailing the next line of the poem behind it: "D was a doodle I drew with my hand."

Jee sat down among the cats.

"E was the elephant with memory reliable." The man spun the reel with a flourish. "F was the blanket, scratchy but pliable."

Together, Assam and Darjeeling watched the man cast time and time again. Every so often, the line would drag in the water, heavy with a fish. The cats watched and whined while the catch was being safely stowed, falling silent once more as the pole drew back, shimmered in the air, and sent the line whizzing out once more. After three or four casts, with more poetry to bait the hook, Assam sat down as well. There were, after all, twenty-six letters in the alphabet. They had a while to go before dinner.

CHAPTER THREE

"Well," said the shaggy man, pushing his chair back from the table with a contented sigh, "that should, I hope, satisfy us for a while." He patted his stomach affectionately. "Did the two of you get enough to eat?"

Assam nodded. "Yes, thank you very much."

"Thank not the fisherman nor the line he cast," the shaggy man told him. "Give thanks to the fish and the river that delivered the fish in time for your repast."

"Amen," Jee said.

"Don't talk with you mouth full." Assam told her.

"I'm not," she replied, swallowing.

"Now, now..." the man said mildly, crossing his knife and fork on his plate. He leaned back in his chair and smiled at the two of them. One of the cats hopped up into his lap and meowed into his face. "The trouble with cats," he said with a chuckle, "is that they have a tendency to be a little bossy."

The cat contradicted him, loudly. A few of the others sitting on the floor around his chair took up the argument as well. Soon the room was filled as more swarmed in from the other parts of the house to add their opinion to the debate.

The shaggy man sighed. "The chief appeal of spending a nice quiet evening at home," he said, loudly so as to be heard over the noise, "is the relaxing atmosphere and ambience. More wine?"

This last was directed at Assam, who shook his head and said "No thank you." The glass in front of him was more than half-full and he planned to keep it that way.

"And you?"

Jee wrinkled her nose at the offer.

Earlier in the evening, the wine had been a point of contention between the children.

"We are not allowed to have wine." Jee whispered fiercely to her brother.

"Who says?"

"Mom and Dad."

"Oh really?" Assam pitched his voice so that the shaggy man — who was humming in the kitchen as he prepared dinner — wouldn't hear. "So, Mom and Dad have told you explicitly that you cannot have wine?"

"Yes." Jee didn't know what the word "explicitly" meant and she wasn't about to ask.

"They've said 'No, no Julia. No wine for you'? They've actually used those words?"

There was a fractional hesitation before she took the plunge into outright lying. "Yes."

Assam didn't even blink. "Well, they've never said it to me."

The shaggy man poked his head in from the kitchen. "Sorry to interrupt the amateur forensics, but that's the verdict? Wine or no?"

"Yes please," the boy said at the same moment that his sister said "No thank you."

The shaggy man nodded. "Well, there'll be a bottle on the table — white, I think, since it's fish again tonight. So you're welcome to partake, if you're so inclined. Of course," this was directed at Jee, "there's no obligation to do so. And I promise that I won't let either of you get behind the wheel of any heavy machinery afterwards." He winked, scratched his beard, and ducked back inside the kitchen. They could hear him humming with renewed vigor.

"I'm telling," Jee fired point blank at her brother. "One sip and I'm telling."

Assam scratched one of the cats behind the ears. "You do that," he said without looking up. "You tell them."

"I will."

"You tell them that while we were in the underworld rescuing Mom, a crazy old man with a hundred cats invited us home for dinner."

Assam adopted a parental tone, in reply to his statement. "'And who was this man?'"

He took on a babyish voice, obviously meant to be her. "'I don't know but he was bald and he wore a fur coat and he lived in a house that he drew himself.'"

More from the parent voice: "'So, he's an architect?'"

Baby voice: “No, he drew it, in the air, with a pencil.”

“Uh huh.” Assam dropped the voices and looked up at her. “Yeah, go ahead and tell them. I’d like to hear how that conversation turns out. I’d like it very much.” He could tell she was struggling for something suitably withering.

Finally, she said “He didn’t draw it.”

“Yes he did.”

She stared him down. “He sketched it.”

He shrugged. “Fine, that’s one in a row for you. Way to go.”

“Shut up.” She flopped down on the sofa. After a long moment, she asked “How did he do that?”

Assam, still petting the cat, replied “I have no idea.” It was certainly one of the strangest things he had ever seen. And he’d seen a lot of strange lately.

“Z is the happy snore from my big full tummy.” Once the shaggy man had reeled in the last fish in the alphabet, he set down his pole and stretched his arms to the sky, arching his back until his spine cracked like fireworks. “Well then,” he said generally to the cats and the children, to the river and the sky, “I expect that’s enough for dinner.” He snapped the lid of the basket closed and slung it over his shoulder. “Would you like to join us?” he asked Assam and Jee. “There’s plenty to go around.”

Jee nodded, suddenly very hungry. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten.

Assam started to speak and stopped, letting out a sudden, involuntary gasp. He began to cough uncontrollably. It was as if his whole throat had been coated with sand.

The cats all leapt up and ran off. They sat a safe distance away watching him, wary.

Assam growled at his sister to stop slapping him on the back. Finally, the coughs subsided. He cleared his throat, setting off another ragged coughing fit.

“Are you okay?” Jee asked him, genuinely concerned.

He nodded, trying to keep the coughs under control.

“Hold on son.” The shaggy man dug into the pockets of his big brown coat. “We’ll get you sorted out.” He pulled out a small stub of pencil.

Assam stared at him, baffled and still half-choking.

“What are you doing?” Jee asked.

The shaggy man stared into the air in front of him. “I’m . . . taking us home,” he said, absently.

“Where is your home?”

“I told you.” The shaggy man licked the tip of the pencil. “Elephant House.” He raised the pencil and placed the tip of it gently on the air in front of his face.

“Is it . . . is it far?” Assam managed to choke out.

“No...” The shaggy man laid his palm flat against the air. “No, not far at all.” And then, carefully, he drew the tip of the pencil down, all the way to the ground — leaving behind a dark line scratched into the air in front of him. He stepped a few feet to the right and drew another line similar to the first, connecting the two of them at the top with a horizontal one. Working quickly with his pencil, the shaggy man soon had the space between the lines filled in with crosshatched shadow. He stepped back and admired his work, nodding to himself.

It was, of course, a door — simple and unadorned, a little bit rough in places . . . almost sketchy, even. The cats clamored around it, mewling softly and taking turns to rub against the shaggy man’s legs. Assam was so dumbfounded he nearly forgot to cough.

"Here we are," the shaggy man said, "almost home." He put his hand out towards the door and stopped with a frown. "Blast," he muttered, digging into his pocket for the pencil. He drew a hasty knob and stowed his pencil once more. He looked back at the children. "The real question, of course, is who is the one following..." He trailed off, staring at Assam.

"Easy now!" The shaggy man leapt forward, catching the boy as he fell. Assam had fainted.

"What's wrong with him?" Jee asked with alarm. "What happened?"

"I don't have the slightest idea," the shaggy man said, hefting the boy in his arms. "But we should get him back home so I can figure it out." He jerked his head towards the door in the air. "My hands seem to be full, could you give me a hand with the door, dolly?"

Jee could and did, despite being called "dolly" of all things. She reached for the oval knob that he'd drawn and hesitated a moment. It looked flat, almost make believe. She glanced up at the shaggy man and he nodded impatiently. She closed her eyes and took the knob in her hand. She turned it, feeling a little click. Behind her, a murmur of anticipation rippled through the cats.

Then, with a sound not entirely unlike paper being torn, she pushed the door open. The cats flowed through like the tide coming in.

The shaggy man edged past Jee, bearing the limp body of her brother in his arms. As he passed, she saw that Assam's face was very pale.

"Be sure to lock it please," the shaggy man called to her from inside. "I don't know who it is that's following you, but his sort is not welcome in my house."

Jee waited until the last of the cats had gone through and then she followed, closing and latching the door behind her as he'd asked.

Darkness. She could hear the shaggy man shuffling along somewhere and she felt the cats sliding around her feet. A harsh scratch, a match flared to life: A faint light flickered over the room and the intent face of the shaggy man. He went around the room, lighting candles – washing the shadows away and revealing, in bits and pieces, her brother lying on a small sofa. Soon the room was steeped in warm flickering light.

"Come in, come in," the shaggy man said in a sing-song voice. "You are safe, you are welcome, come in..." But whether he was singing to the children or the cats, Jee couldn't tell. She wondered if they were safe, if maybe he was putting a spell on them with his little song.

The shaggy man finished the candles and sang out "Hello kitties, are you hungry? Are you?"

The cats meowed in response and he sang back to them. "I thought you might be, I thought you were." He picked up a candlestick and walked through an archway, disappearing from sight. Many of the cats followed after him. Jee could hear him singing to them in the other room.

She sat down on the edge of the sofa, doing her best to not displace the cats sitting around her brother. She decided that the shaggy man wasn't putting a spell on them. He was just being friendly to a few more strays he had picked up.

"We're not strays," Assam whispered.

She turned to see that he was awake, staring at her.

"You don't need to worry, he's safe. At least, we're safe with him."

Jee started to answer and stopped. She realized that she hadn't said anything, but he still answered. Ever since she had been a little girl, her brother had been different. He knew things, he could find things that were lost. But this was something else, almost like he had read her mind.

"Almost," he agreed.

"Oh. My God."

"But it's not like reading – it's more like one of those magic pictures with all the dots and if you

stare at them long enough and hold your head in the right way, all of a sudden you see the picture behind the dots." He closed his eyes again.

Jee wondered, briefly, if she had imagined the whole thing, if she was going crazy.

"You didn't," he said, his eyes still closed. "You aren't." He sighed. "And you can stop staring at me any time you want, thanks."

There was a clatter from beyond the archway. A few cats ran back through the arch and hid under the sofa.

Jee got up and walked around the room. She had no idea what was going on, but she was pretty sure she didn't like it. She stood for a moment, staring at a set of candles burning on a small table. She ran her hand over the wood and stopped. There was something odd about the table, about how it felt. And it didn't look quite right, either. She cocked her head and bent over for a closer look.

"It's not really there," her brother said from the sofa, "I mean, I think it's not real. I can't tell exactly, but I think that all of the furniture and stuff here is..."

"...they're drawings," Jee said. "It's not real." She ran her finger across the tabletop. "Someone drew it, someone drew all of this. He drew it."

He brother didn't answer.

She looked back at him. He was staring up into the eyes of a little cat perched on the back of the sofa. "What?"

He didn't answer her.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "You're freaking me out. Stop it."

"Quiet." His voice was low, his eyes fixed on the cat. They stared at each other for a few moments longer. Then the cat turned its head away and yawned. It walked across the top of the couch, hopped down, and left the room through the archway. Assam turned his head to look at Jee. "What did you say?"

"What were you doing?"

"When?"

"Just now, with the cat?" she said, exasperated.

"I'm not really sure," he said with a shrug, "but I think I'm starting to get the hang of it."

Another loud noise came through the archway, as though someone had dropped a large metal frying pan on the floor — which was, of course, exactly what had happened. "Everything's under control," the shaggy man called. "No need to worry."

"It was harder when all of the cats were going at once." Assam sat up. "It was like sitting in a room full of radios all turned to different stations and going full blast."

"Radios?" Jee had a hard enough time believing he could read other people's minds, let alone cats' minds.

"I can't read minds," he said.

"You just did. You just read mine."

"No, I can . . . listen in on things a little bit. But it's jumbled and complicated. And the cats are . . . harder to hear. They kind of whisper."

"What are they saying?" Jee asked.

"They're saying," the shaggy man said from behind her, "that it's time for dinner." He was standing in the alcove. He held a rag in one hand, a glass of wine in the other. There was a frilly lace apron tied around his fur coat, jolly and ridiculous all at once.

The cats streamed in through the door around him, meowing loudly. Jee wondered if they were commenting on his apron. She thought he looked like someone had pasted a doily on a grizzly bear.

"Be nice," her brother murmured, holding his hand out to her for help getting up.

I don't like this new thing, she thought as she glared at him. *You should stay out of my head from now on.*

He shrugged.

"Feeling better, I see." The shaggy man nodded. "That's good. I need the space. Excuse me."

Assam and Jee stepped to one side and watched as . . . something happened. Though they saw it with their own eyes, they didn't quite believe it.

The shaggy man wadded up the rag in his fist and used it to scrub out the sofa, erasing it completely. In a few swift strokes, it was completely gone. Once he had finished, he pulled out the pencil from his pocket and deftly sketched a table and three spindly-legged chairs where the sofa had been.

Jee blinked.

The shaggy man stood back, admiring his work. "What do you think?" he asked them. "Should we forgo the candlelight or should we be formal and fancy?"

"Formal," Jee answered without hesitation.

The man nodded and quickly sketched two tall candlesticks in the center of the table. Leaning forward, he carefully drew a small scrap of flame at the tip of each one. Jee didn't know that you could draw fire and she said so.

"It's possible," the shaggy man said. "But you have to be careful not to burn the pencil."

One of the cats hopped up onto the tabletop and was just as quickly shooed off. "Down you go, Harold." The shaggy man swatted the cat's rump as it leapt off. "Meanest cat I ever knew was one who singed his whiskers on a candlestick. You don't want to end up like him, do you? Trusting nothing and no one, never able to walk through a doorway again?"

Jee stroked the cat's offense away. "Why is he named Harold?"

"Mm?" The shaggy man grinned. His teeth were like books on a shelf. "Well, I suppose it's because 'Purple Crayon' was too obvious." He rubbed his hands together. "Now then," he looked back and forth between them, "which one of you is least likely to embarrass yourself in the kitchen?"

"I know how to use the toaster," Jee volunteered.

"Ah," the man stroked his beard. "And what a help that will be in twelve hours time, when I'm ready for my breakfast." He turned to Assam. "How about you, boy? To what degree have you risen in your culinary skills?"

"Uh..." Assam thought for a moment. "I made eggs once, on Mother's Day."

"Eggs?" The shaggy man beamed. "Why that's practically the same as fish. Only, not so much." He shook his head. "Well, we do not discriminate here at Elephant House — except against you, of course." The man looked pointedly to Jee and then took the boy by the shoulder. "So, we will have to hope that the lessons your brother learned from his single experience with pre-partum poultry will suffice for Señor Pescado y sus amigos." And with that, he led Assam away to the kitchen. As they passed through the archway, the man called back to Jee. "Mind the candles, dolly."

Jee sat down heavily in one of the shaggy man's sketchy chairs, half hoping it would break. One of the cats hopped up into her lap almost immediately. It was a gingery cat with dark freckles on its nose. She stroked its arching back and ran her hand down its ridiculously long tail.

"Eggs," she said to her new companion as it settled down into her lap, "are for breakfast also. You'd think he would know that."

The cat, already dozing, didn't reply.

CHAPTER FOUR

The shaggy man raised his hand, resting the tip of a fountain pen gently on the air in front of his nose. Slowly, he moved his wrist, describing a tiny circle, no more than a single dot, suspended in front of him. He adjusted his grip, adding a larger circle around the smaller one.

As he worked, he hummed quietly while the children watched from their seats at the table.

Shifting outward once again, he swept his hand in ever-increasing circles, moving round and round in a tight spiral, expanding outward until, finally, there was something dark about the size and shape of a dinner plate floating in the air in front of his face.

The warm buttery smell of the fish was making Jee hungry. The cats gathered on the floor around the table shared her impatience.

The shaggy man finished the final loop of his spiral and stood back to inspect his work. He carefully capped the pen and placed it in the breast pocket of his coat. Deftly, he caught the disk one-handed as it fell. Turning it over in his hands, he inspected it before handing it to Assam.

"Would you," he asked, "be so kind as to start the music?"

"What do you mean?"

The shaggy man looked at the boy with an amused smile on his face. He nodded to a odd-looking contraption sitting on top of a small table nearby. It was a large box made of polished wood with brass fittings and a crank sticking out of the side. A large brass trumpet in the shape of a flower bloomed out of the top of it.

Assam turned the disk over in his hands. "I'm sorry?"

"Oh honestly..." The shaggy man took the disk from him. "This is a record. This is what people used for music, before that horrid plastic music you all listen to now. And this," he ran his hand lovingly over the polished box. "This is what we listen to music on, real warm music that doesn't come out of a computer or a silvery salad plate."

"You mean CDs?" Jee asked.

"Whatever those awful machined things are called, they have neither life nor breath in them. They're plastic. They're the opposite of music. And they're not allowed in Elephant House."

"But that thing's plastic," Jee pointed out.

"This?" He held the record up. "This is not plastic. This is vinyl. This is analog. This is real. Real music, real sound, real voices captured and preserved like flies in amber, waiting to be resurrected."

"I saw a movie about that," Jee agreed, "there were these scientists who made dinosaurs and..."

"...as I was saying," the shaggy man went on. "This is music. And this is what it sounds like." He laid the record gently on top of the wood box. He turned the crank and set a small brass arm on top of the record as it spun to life. From out of the brass flower came a hissing scratch and then, at last, music.

"What is that?" Jee asked.

"That," the shaggy man said as he sank into his chair with a contented sigh, "is the single greatest guitar player who ever lived."

Jee was unimpressed. The music her father downloaded sounded cleaner, less scratchy. And it wasn't all banjos either.

Assam, however, was amazed. He closed his eyes, letting the music drift through his mind...

...he could feel every note, the vibration of every string rang through him, he could see the man's fingers plucking them, strumming with his mustache twitching in time . . . could see those fingers tapping out a

song on a pale curved shape that was no guitar he'd ever seen before . . . could feel the fire burning in them, twitching across the strings . . . could see the face of a child staring up at him in quiet wonder . . . could do nothing but watch as a cloud covered his quiet, patient eyes like smoke . . . the music smeared the whole man's life through his mind like a child finger painting...

...and then, with a flourish, the song was over.

Assam opened his eyes. The shaggy man was watching him.

"How's that strike you?" he asked.

The boy nodded.

"I thought it would. Now," the man said as the next song began, "shall we eat?"

The cats murmured their agreement.

The fish was excellent, flaking apart under their forks like pastry. Jee finished hers in a matter of bites. Then she started in on the rice, shoveling a huge forkful into her mouth. She chewed and stopped, choking on it. It tasted good but it was dry as dust, scratching her throat when she tried to swallow. She considered spitting it out, but didn't want to offend their host. "May I have a glass of water please?" She just managed to choke the words out.

The shaggy man patted his lips with a napkin and shook his head, swallowing. "I'm afraid not, my dear. All we have is river water here and, well, I expect you know all about that by now."

She nodded. "Is there any milk?"

"Oh certainly," the shaggy man chuckled. "I'll just pop out to the barn and get a squirt or two out of old Bessie."

Jee narrowed her eyes. She had been a guest of the Queen not too long ago and had an open invitation to return. Truth be told, it'd gone to her head a bit. But even so, she'd never been overly fond of being mocked. "So there isn't any milk and there isn't any water?"

"There's wine," the shaggy man offered.

Jee looked to her brother.

Assam blithely scooped up a bite of rice and washed it down with a sip from his goblet.

She glared at him. If he had been peeking at her thoughts just then, he would have shifted his chair back a few feet to get out of the way. "I'm too young to drink *alcohol*," she said as witheringly as possible. "So, no thank you."

"Suit yourself, my dear." The shaggy man shrugged, his shoulders rolling like a galloping bear's backside.

"May I have another piece of fish, please?" Jee asked in her sweetest voice.

"Yes, you certainly may." The shaggy man set down his knife and fork and rose, taking her plate into the kitchen.

"You jackass." She glared at her brother after the man had passed through the archway and out of sight.

"Nice language," he said. "You know why the rice is so bad?"

"You made it?"

He shook his head. "No, he did. He made it. He drew it."

"He did not."

Assam raised his hand. "Swear to God. I watched him do it. He drew it, piece by piece."

Jee picked up one of the grains, crushing it between her thumb and forefinger. There was a dark smear on her fingertip, like the smudge of a pencil. "You're lying," she said.

"Lying," the shaggy man said sternly from the archway, "is absolutely forbidden in Elephant House." He set the plate down in front of Jee and took his seat. "I will permit storytelling and I've been known to tolerate the occasional fib and certain, well-intentioned factual distortions. But not lies, never, nohow." He took a sip of his wine. "So which one of you was lying, then?"

"He was," Jee said.

"Ah." The shaggy man swiveled his gaze to Assam. "Is this a common tendency for you, boy?"

"No," Assam answered.

"Why not?"

"Because lying is wrong."

"Is it?" The shaggy man scratched his beard thoughtfully with the tines of his fork. "I lie all the time. I make things that aren't true, true." He leaned in close suddenly. Assam could smell the wine on his breath. "Don't go poking 'round in my head, little brother. You won't like what you find."

Assam's fork clattered against his plate. "I'm sorry." He sat back in his chair, wide eyed.

The man patted his hand. "Not to worry, no harm done."

"I didn't know..."

"...and now you do." The shaggy man patted his hand gently. "In all honesty, though, I'm surprised. You seem smart enough to figure it out on your own. And it is pretty obvious, if you stop to think about it."

Assam nodded. He looked pale, shaky.

"What's wrong?" Jee asked, her mouth full.

The man put his hand against the boy's forehead. "Let it go, boy. Just let it fall away."

"I'm . . . I'm trying," Assam said.

"That's ninety-nine percent of your problem," the shaggy man said gently. "Trying too hard. It's a gentle gift you have."

Jee spoke up. "What's going on?"

"I really am sorry," the boy said. "I didn't mean to pry."

"What." Jee asked. "Is going. On?"

The other two looked at her.

"Oh, nothing," the shaggy man said lightly. "Your brother is just apologizing for eavesdropping on the private miseries of an old ghost named Edward."

She blinked. "You're a ghost?" She stared at him and then at the half-eaten food on her plate. "You're dead and you cooked my dinner."

"Well," he said mildly, "it's not like it's contagious." The shaggy man sat back in his chair, a sad smile on his face. "Yes. I am dead. It's official. Now finish your dinner. You asked for more and I expect you to eat it."

Assam leaned forward and rested his head on the table.

"What did you do to him?" Jee asked the man.

"Nothing much. I made him dinner. He just bit off more than he could chew." He patted the boy's shoulder.

"I'm fine," Assam said, "perfectly fine."

"Well then," the shaggy man said after a long moment, "you rest there a while and we'll" — he included Jee in his gesture — "we'll take care of the dishes."

Between the two of them, Jee and the shaggy man managed to clear most of the plates in one trip. In the kitchen, he put Jee to work scraping the plates clean and delivering them to the sink where he was already up to his elbows. The sleeves of his coat were rolled up, fluffy suds clinging to the damp cuffs.

He glanced over to her and gasped. "You're not throwing out the bones, are you?"

Poised half-frozen in the act of tipping a plate over the trash bin, Jee nodded.

He shook his head. "You need to save them, dolly girl. We need those bones if I'm going to have my supper tomorrow."

"But..." Jee looked down at the empty plate in hands and then to the clump of rice and scraps of fish and little crescents of bones all jumbled together in the bin. "They're already in there."

"Pick them out, pick them out." He shook his head and went back to the dishes in the sink. "I don't want any limpy gimpy fish in my river or on my table."

Jee stood for a moment, waiting to see if he was serious.

"Chop chop..." he told her, turning back to the sink.

She put the dish on the counter and bent over the bin, her throat constricting in disgust.

In the other room, Assam was feeling somewhat better. He kept his head down on the table just in case, but at least he didn't feel like screaming anymore. He couldn't quite forget the cold depth he'd stepped into when he'd tried to peek inside the shaggy man's mind, but he could at least let go of it now. He didn't know what was happening to him, but he wanted it to either get much worse or much better. Either way, he didn't care which.

It came and went like waves on the shore, the sound and color and voices slamming against the fragile coast of his mind. Sometimes it was so strong he could barely stand it, his teeth practically rattling in his mouth. Other times, there was hardly anything at all and he had to strain to hear even the most distant whisper of the tides. Neither state bothered him so much as the sudden shift between the two, unexpected and jarring every time.

This time, it was his own fault. He'd been politely minding his own business at dinner when it occurred to him that he might take a peek inside the shaggy man's head, just to make sure he could be trusted.

It was cold there in there, he found, and dry as dust. He nearly screamed with the shock of it. He felt as if he were covered in spider webs. He tasted smoke on his tongue, grit between his teeth, a clot of dry hair at the back of his throat. He rolled in sawdust, splinters of rotting wood clinging to him. He felt scrubbed, scratched out of thin air by a rusty pen tip. He was two dimensional, he was black and white. He was dead.

Assam slowly backed out of the shaggy man's mind, suddenly understanding who's hospitality they relied upon. He could hear something whispering to him in an old voice, dry as dust.

Once he was clear of that terrible voice, the cats came screaming through his mind. There were no words — they were cats, after all — but he stared around the room and, meeting their eyes, he realized that they knew he could hear him. Each animal was a crowd, a riot, an argument of voices, a choir screaming. That was when he put his head down on the table.

Things had quieted down somewhat since then. Assam thought he might try opening his eyes, just to see if he could keep his head from exploding.

So far so good, he thought. Now try sitting up.

He carefully pulled his head off of the table and, uneasily, straightened up in his chair. The top of his head did not cave in. Assam considered this a good sign. On the table in front of him, the candles cast flickering, scratchy shadows around the room. Next to his chair one of the cats was playing with a little scrap of what looked like black thread. As he watched, the cat danced backwards and then pounced. Putting its head down between its front paws, the cat snapped and pulled at the string with its teeth. It tugged at the thread, its head and shoulders low to the ground, pulling backwards.

There was a snap and a bump . . . and Assam found himself suddenly, inexplicably landing on the floor with a painful thump.

He sat there, stunned. His first thought was that the cat had somehow managed to tip over the chair . . . but there was no chair to be seen. It had vanished out from under him.

The cat rolled around in a tangle of dark string nearby.

Curious, Assam reached out and took the end of the string between his thumb and forefinger. It was dry, almost brittle. He easily snapped off a length of it. It was lighter than he expected, more like hair than string. Squeezed between his fingers, it went to pieces almost immediately, crumbling away into a dry, powdery smudge on his fingertips. He held his fingers to his nose and sniffed — a faint whiff of something acrid and sharp, a chemical smell that was familiar and strange at the same time.

His mind skipped between thoughts, like the record on the player. He saw the shaggy man holding the tip of his fountain pen to the air, the hand describing circle upon circle — like the crazy spiral they were stuck in, he and his sister. His thoughts skipped in his mind again, like the scratchy music the man had drawn out of the air. Like the rice he'd made in the kitchen.

Assam sniffed his fingers again: *Ink.*

The cat, bored with the tangled mess on the floor that had once been Assam's chair, padded over and curled up in the boy's lap with a sigh. Assam reached down to stroke its back. The cat raised its head and complained, but it did not get up and move away.

Assam continued to pet the cat, thinking.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jee was starting to wonder why all of the genuinely interesting conversations here only happened when there were dishes to do. As the shaggy man had instructed, she was carefully picking out the bones from the trash. She'd eaten the fish. She'd enjoyed the fish. But she was a bit revolted by the task at hand. He'd given her a small dish for the bones and, as she worked, the pile grew. "This is kind of gross."

The shaggy man did not look up. "Imagine how much worse it is for the fish."

She thought about that for a moment. "Yes, but they're dead."

"They certainly are." He shifted a stack of plates over with a clatter.

They worked in silence for a moment.

"If they're dead..?"

"...aha, there is a spark there after all." the shaggy man said under his breath.

"If they're dead.." She closed her eyes and tilted her head to one side. "Then where did they go?"

"Into our bellies, I should think."

She shook her head. "No, I mean, where do they go when they die here?"

The shaggy man considered this for a moment. "Some people would say that there is a great wheel at the center of all things and that all of us travel along it, going round and round for eternity, moving from one life to the next, taking scraps of ourselves along with us — as many as we can carry, at least — letting the others fall away without noticing what we've lost, riding the spin and the pull of the wheel and trying to hang on as best we can." He sighed and set another handful of dishes into the sink.

"So . . . *where* do the fish go?" Jee asked after a long moment.

"They do not," the shaggy man said with a sigh, "go into the trash." He leaned over and plucked out a bone she has missed, dropping it into the dish with a flourish.

"Sorry."

"Not to worry." He smiled good-naturedly, teeth big as tombstones. "I'm sure I've missed a few myself, from time to time." He rinsed off the dish in his hands and set it on a rack next to the sink. Jee noticed that it wasn't particularly clean. *He'd never get away with that if Gerry was watching, she thought.*

"Honestly," he said, "I've no idea where they go. But I know where the bones go."

"Where?"

He rinsed his hands off under the faucet. "Back in the river."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Because if they don't, I won't have any fish to catch tomorrow."

"I don't understand."

"All I know is that I throw the bones into the river each night and each morning there are fish to catch." Drying his hands off on the towel only made the towel dirtier, Jee noticed. "I don't know why. I imagine that the bones tumble along the bottom and get swept away by the current, carried back around the wheel once more."

It took Jee a moment to follow what he was saying. *What wheel?* she thought and then remembered. "So . . . the river and the wheel are connected?"

The shaggy man smiled. "I don't know that I'd say that. But something has to keep the wheel spinning, doesn't it?"

Jee scrunched her face up like a fist, thoughtful. "Is there really a wheel somewhere?"

The man shrugged. "Maybe."

"Then who built it?"

He chuckled. "You might as well as who built the river."

"Who did build the river?"

"I don't know," he said, suddenly looking very old and very tired. "It was here before I was. Long before."

"How did you get here?" Jee asked and immediately wished she hadn't. "I'm sorry. I know. You died." She stopped talking. It was the easiest way to stop feeling stupid.

The shaggy man nodded. "Well, yes, but after that I decided to . . . you met Charon?"

"Who?"

"On the boat?"

"Yes," she nodded. "He wouldn't give us a ride."

"I expect not. You shouldn't take it personally. He a little particular about the rules."

"Yeah." If he had been there, she would have kicked him again. "He wanted money."

"Really?" The shaggy man's eyebrows moved upwards.

"A golden coin from each of us." She nodded. "Like we have pockets full of them."

"You do," he told her. "Well, at least, you have a coin."

"No I don't."

He smiled kindly. "It's not a very easy thing to find, let alone give away. But it's there."

"Where?"

"As I understand it, it varied back in the day. Sometimes on the eyes, sometimes on the tongue."

"I don't have one."

The shaggy man's eyes crinkled together, happy and sad all at once. "You sure about that?"

"Pretty sure," she said. Then she stopped.

The shaggy man tipped his head to one side.

Jee clamped her jaws together and then she relaxed them. There was something very wrong about it, but she couldn't help raising her hand to her mouth. When she looked down, there was something in her hand. It was a coin, a gold coin. It felt heavy and somehow soft against her palm. "Does everyone have one?"

The shaggy man nodded. "Everyone who's still alive."

"Oh, sorry." Jee folded her fingers around the coin again.

"Not to worry," the shaggy man replied. "I'm used to it by now."

"Uh..." Jee hesitated, held up the coin. "What do I do with this?"

"You put it back, of course."

She thought for a moment and then, that was exactly what she did. It was the strangest sensation, to feel that coin slip back into place. As soon as it had, she could barely feel it there anymore. "But," she said, experimenting with the feel of the words in her mouth. "But . . . that means we could have..." She stomped her foot, thinking of all of the trouble and time they could have saved.

"Yes, that's true," he agreed. "But think of the adventures you would have missed out on."

Jee didn't answer.

"Also," he added, "it might've made things easier getting here, but it would've made it much harder to get back home — impossible, in fact."

"How come?"

The shaggy man picked a stray scrap of fish out of his beard. "That coin is not one of the things that you get to keep when you come to this place."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's too heavy, maybe it would weigh you down, maybe it..." He rubbed his hand across the bald dome of his head as though he was looking for the hair he'd misplaced years before. "I've honestly no idea. And I'm not going to think too hard about it. Be glad for what you have and hold onto it as tight as you can. You have no idea how valuable and rare that coin is in this place, nor how much some would want it for their own."

"Why do they want it so bad?"

He shook his head. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

Jee thought for a moment. "Because they're dead?"

"Some of them," he nodded. "Some are worse off than that."

"The exiles." It wasn't a question.

He stared at her in surprise. "That's quite a gift you have."

"What is?"

"Getting people to tell you things."

She shrugged. "What's it for, though?"

"What?"

"The coin, why do they want it?"

"I distinctly remembering not answering that question a moment ago. I'm not suddenly inclined to do so now."

Jee pursed her lips in disappointment, an unconscious imitation of her mother. "You're not an exile." Again, she was not asking a question.

He shook his head and turned back to the sink. He handed her a small dish towel. She wiped her hands on it and handed it back to him.

He stared at her for a moment, sighed, and set the towel down on the counter. He went to a drawer and took out a new, clean towel and handed it to her. "I thought you might dry for a bit," he said, "so we can finish up faster."

She nodded, cheeks burning. "Does it...?" she started to ask and then stopped.

"Yes?"

Jee took a breath, considering, wondering if she was about to ask a very rude question. Finally, she said "Does it hurt?"

The shaggy man scrubbed at the next round of dishes. "Does what hurt?"

"Being dead."

"Not so much as dying does." He laughed. "That hurt like Hell. I do not recommend it."

"But..." Jee trailed off.

"Yes?"

"But everyone dies."

The man arched a shaggy eyebrow at her. "Who says? There's plenty that don't. The gods, for instance."

"I know that," Jee said. "Gods can't die."

The shaggy man handed her the plate he'd been washing. "Oh no, gods can die. Some don't, of course – or, at least, they haven't yet."

"How can a god die?"

The shaggy man chuckled to himself over some private joke. "Some gods, all they do is die. It's the only thing some of them are good at."

She looked at him for a long moment, curious.

He glanced over to her and laughed. "Nope. Not me, dolly girl. I've known the odd god or two in my time, but I'm not one myself."

"How did you die?"

"Unexpectedly," he answered with a sour look, "just like everyone."

"Who were you, before?"

"I was me, of course. Who else would I have been?"

Jee rolled her eyes. "I mean, what did you do?"

"Nothing much." He shrugged. "I had a good life, a talent that made people happy, loved by more people than I was hated."

"That's good."

He nodded. "It truly is. You'd be surprised how few people can say that. Not that it matters, in the

long run. One day, you're you . . . and then the next, you're finished — or, at least in my case, my heart was finished. And here I am now, still me."

"Don't you miss it, being alive?" Jee asked. "Don't you want to go back?"

"I can't."

"But would you want to, if you could?"

"No." The shaggy man spoke without hesitation.

"Why not?"

"I would be too worried," he said. "Who would feed the cats?"

Jee knew the answer to his question, so she told him.

He stared at her. "You certainly do get around," he replied. "Tea with Persephone and everything."

"Her name is Winterly." Jee told him.

He leaned back against the edge of the sink and scratched his beard. "Actually, in older mythologies..."

"...her name," Jee said, "is Winterly."

"Of course it is," he answered without missing a beat. "My apologies."

"S'okay."

He handed her another dish. She wiped it dry. "Am I an exile?"

"I honestly don't know. You could be, you might end up that way. It's really quite up to you." He looked at her intently. "Do you feel like one?"

"I'm not sure yet." She chewed her lower lip. "Are all of them bad?"

"I don't know," he said. "I haven't had the occasion to meet them all just yet. I'm planning on holding a series of dinner parties next month to get through the list." He patted her shoulder, a little awkward. "They're not all bad. I expect most of them are just trying to get their basket of fish out of the river each day, same as the rest of us."

Thoughtful, she handed him the last dish, dried and ready for the rack.

CHAPTER SIX

Back in the living room, Assam lay on the floor asleep surrounded by cats.

"Looks like someone is tie-tie," the shaggy man said to Jee from the archway. "I'll just go toss these out," he told her quietly, hefting the bowl of fish bones in his hand. "And then we'll get your sleeping arrangements sorted out."

"Kay," Jee nodded.

The shaggy man went to the wall and drew a quick door with his pencil. He turned the knob and went out.

Picking her way through the sleeping cats, Jee went to look out the window. She was surprised to see that everything outside had changed. Gone was the barren landscape and starless sky. Instead, she found herself gazing out on a peaceful summer evening. There was a lawn bordered by trees and hedges. Fireflies danced across the air, reflecting and redoubling the stars above. The moon shone brightly, a sliver of light so thin it was little more than a split in the sky.

How long has it been, she thought, since I saw the moon?

She watched the fireflies, more thoughtful than she had been in a long, long while. There was a sound behind her and she turned in time to see the shaggy man let himself back in. He shut the door quickly and ran the flat of his hand around the door frame, smudging the pencil lines to nothing more than blurs on the wall. He stepped back and pulled a rag from his pocket to wipe his hand. "All's well in here?" he asked, a little out of breath.

"What's wrong?"

He grimaced at the mess on his handkerchief and inspected his hand: It was black, as though charred. "Met a friend of yours out there," he grunted. "Little fellow, bad hair and worse skin."

"He's not my friend," Jee said.

"I didn't think so," he replied, "but he said he was. He didn't seem like the type."

"The type to be my friend?"

"The type to *have* a friend."

"Yeah," she agreed, "he isn't."

He scrubbed his hand again. "As I said. So I declined his invitation to join us. He seemed a bit annoyed with me but I'm not interested in having that sort in my house."

"What sort?"

He made a face. "Nasty and mean, a low sort of child. Diseased, neglected by time. A rotten, spoiled piece of fruit. The sort of thing you wouldn't want to touch, even to throw it out."

Jee thought of Edgar's rotten pumpkin face and nodded. "I didn't see you out there."

The shaggy man came and looked out at the darkness and fireflies with her. One of the cats at his feet meowed and he picked it up, scratching it absently behind its ears. "No," he said at last. "You wouldn't. It's been a long time since I walked there under those stars. That's a view from long, long ago from the real Elephant House." He smiled wryly. "I guess I do miss it a little bit more than I let on. I can draw my windows to see whatever I want."

"Really?"

"More or less."

"How does it work?"

He pulled the stub of pencil from his pocket and held it up. "Well, this end here, the pointy one, is made from something called 'lead' and you can press it against things to make a line..."

"...come on," Jee said. "How does it work?"

He shrugged. "I've no idea."

Jee turned back to look out the window.

"Would you like to try?" he asked the girl. She nodded. He led her over to one of the walls where a picture hung in a frame — no, Jee corrected herself. It wasn't hung on the wall, it was drawn on the wall. Even the frame had been sketched in painstaking detail. The picture showed an odd collection of figures, gathered in some kind of strange, open house framed with drapes on either side. Inside, there was a skeleton dancing with a woman and a devil poking up through a trapdoor. Two angels floating overhead with cakes on platters. And there were, of course, cats everywhere — climbing the curtains, sleeping in the rafters.

Jee moved closer, inspecting a man in a long fur coat hiding to one side of the picture, peeking out through the folds of the drapes. "It's nice," she said, "did you draw it?"

The shaggy man nodded and, pulling his sleeve over his hand, proceeded to rub away the picture.

"What are you doing?"

"We just need some space to work with."

"But your picture..." Jee stared at the ugly smear on the wall in front of them.

"Don't worry. I can always draw it again somewhere else." He looked at her, his arm poised over the already ruined image. "All right?"

After a long moment, she nodded agreement. It didn't take him long to clear the wall. Once he was finished, he handed the pencil to her. She took it cautiously. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Draw a window," he told her.

"How?"

He sighed. "No, I already got a chance to do that joke. You know how to draw a square, right?"

She nodded.

"Well, that's all a window is."

Jee raised the pencil to the wall and then hesitated. "How big should I make it?"

He shook his head. "I've no idea. It's your damn window, not mine. What do you want to see?"

She thought for a moment. "My dad."

"Well then..." He stepped back to give her room.

She reached up, drawing a smallish sort of square on the wall, not too big. "Now what?" She handed the pencil back to him.

"See for yourself." He nodded at the window.

Jee stepped forward cautiously and looked through. "Oh."

Her father was there. He was sitting in a small chair, head tilted to one side, fast asleep. The room he was in was small, with plastic chairs lining the walls. There was a stack of magazines on a low table in one corner and a potted plant in the other. It looked like a dentist office. "Where is he?"

The shaggy man peeked in over her shoulder. "Hospital," he said. "That's the classic waiting room decor, unchanged since 1967."

Her father looked like a pile of old laundry someone had dumped in the chair. He hadn't shaved, she noticed. And his hair had that wild look that he got whenever he stayed up working late into the night, running his fingers through his hair as though the lines and rhymes he was searching for were lost in that thick dark tangle.

"He looks so sad." Jee tapped the picture. Inside, beyond, her father stirred. "Did you see that?" She lifted her hand to knock, louder this time.

The shaggy man grabbed her wrist. "Don't."

"Let go." She jerked her hand away. "Why not?"

"Think on this: If he looks up and sees you staring at him from the window of a waiting room, what do you think he'll do?"

"I don't know."

"He'll think he's going crazy. Worse yet, he might just go crazy."

"No he won't. I'm his daughter."

"That's right. And if he sees you staring out at him from the wall, he'll think you're dead, a ghost back come to visit him."

She thought about this for a moment. Then she nodded. "Okay, you can erase it now."

The shaggy man raised his hand. Once the wall was clear, Jee said "Wait. I'm not done yet. I want to see my mom." She held out her hand for the pencil.

The man hesitated.

"Please."

He gave it to her. She drew a bigger frame this time, wider. At first, all she could see within was darkness. Then her mother's face slowly appeared, staring back at her. As she watched, her mother's face twisted. There was a flash of white light and she screamed, her mouth a silent chasm of horror.

"Mom!" Jee reached for the window but the shaggy man leapt forward and wiped it away with a few sweeps of his arm. He turned to find the girl huddled weeping against her brother. Assam was staring up at him with absolute hatred in his eyes. "What did you do to her?"

Jee answered, forcing the words out in the breathless spaces between her sobs. "It wasn't him, he didn't do anything. It was my fault."

"What happened?" Assam asked, his doubtful eyes still fixed on the shaggy man.

"I wanted to see mom and . . . oh, it was horrible."

"You saw mom? Where?"

She pointed to the dark smudge on the wall where the window had been. "There. I drew a window and looked through."

"What did you see?"

"I saw her in the car, I saw the crash. She reached back for us and then it was all light and screaming..." She broke down once more.

"It's okay," Assam said. "Don't worry. It's all over. It was just a memory."

"Erm..." The shaggy man cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to butt in, but I don't think that's the case."

Assam, still angry, nodded curtly at the man. "It was. I was there the first time."

"We both were." Jee added.

The shaggy man nodded without agreeing. "Well, be that as it may, I am simply pointing out that these things don't work that way."

"What things?"

"Windows, my windows." He gestured to the wall. "What were you thinking when you drew the window? Did you want to see your mother or did you want to see the past?"

Jee said "I wanted to see my mother."

He nodded. "Then that's what you saw: Your mother. Now. At this moment. Not in the past."

"Don't listen to him," Assam said to her. "I believe you."

"I believe her too, boy," the shaggy man said gently. "I'm just trying to help you make sense of what she saw."

"Fine. Thanks for all your help."

The boy's sarcasm wasn't lost on the shaggy man. He seemed about to answer and then decided against it. "Well, I suppose I should get things situated for bedtime. Excuse me..." He turned back to the wall, sketched a quick door and walked through.

"I know what I saw," Jee said quietly after the man had gone.

"I believe you, don't worry. We'll find her."

"Do you..?" She stopped.

"What?"

"Do you think..?" She started again, stopped. "What will we do, when we find her?"

"I don't know. Get back home somehow."

"How?"

"We got here," he said matter-of-factly. "We can get back."

"What if we don't find her?"

"We will. We're close. I can feel it."

She shook her head. "No, what if we don't find her in time?"

"In time for what?"

"What if we find her . . . but she's dead?"

"Don't talk like that," he told her. "That won't happen."

"But what if it does?"

"If it does," Assam replied, "if it does, we'll just have to figure something out."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, if she's..."

"...what if we're dead?"

"We're not."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know?"

"Yes."

"Well, for starters..." He glanced at the obvious all around them.

Jee held up her hand. "No. We might have died days ago. This might be all there is. There might not be anything else." She clenched her fists in frustration. "Mom might be dead. We might be dead."

"No."

She looked around the room. "This is where we're at and this is where we'll stay."

"We're not dead," Assam said. "Do you think we're dead?"

She shook her head. "I'm just wondering. If we are, this isn't so bad a place to be."

"It's dangerous."

"And the real world's not?"

He didn't have an answer to that.

"We've made a few friends, we could even..."

"...stop." He brother was very serious now. He put his hands on her shoulders, squeezing them tightly. "Do not finish that sentence. Do not give up. We are not dead. We are not dead. We're not staying here, we're not stuck here. You're not staying here, I don't care how interesting it is. I don't care how fascinated you are with that Queen of yours . . . we can't stay here, we don't belong here."

I belong here, his sister did not say.

"You don't," he said. "You really don't. You belong alive and awake and riding your bike down the middle of the street with the sun shining down on your face."

Jee didn't say anything.

There was a sound behind them and they turned to see the shaggy man poking his head through the newly made door. "Your beds are ready."

They stood up and he opened the door for them. One by one, they went through.

CHAPTER SEVEN

If you took fresh grass clippings, mixed them with a box of cracker crumbs, and then sprinkled the whole thing over a wool blanket, then you might have as much trouble sleeping as Assam was having in Elephant House. The bed was awful. The mattress, the sheets, the blanket — it had all been sketched by the shaggy man with pen and ink. Each dried line was like a freshly cut blade of grass. Each smudge was a handful of twigs. And it was impossibly uncomfortable.

Assam itched. All over. He lay there suffering for what felt like hours but was, horribly enough,

probably only twenty minutes or so. There was a rustling in the dark from the other side of the room, where his sister was sleeping. "Jee?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you asleep?"

"Not anymore."

Silence.

"Jee?"

"What?"

"Is . . . uh, is your bed all itchy?"

"A little bit," she answered.

"Really?"

"Uh huh."

More silence. Finally, he said "How can you sleep in it?"

"I'm not."

"What?"

"I'm not sleeping in it."

"You can't sleep either?"

"No, I can — at least, I was until you started talking to me."

"The bed's not too itchy?"

She didn't say anything.

"Jee?"

"Yes?"

"You're sleeping on the floor, aren't you?"

"Uh huh." She sighed, contented.

In his mind's eye, Assam saw her lying there snuggled up in her snowpants and jacket. "Isn't it too hard?"

"What?"

"Isn't the floor too hard to sleep on?"

"Not really." She sighed again. "You just snuggle up, close your eyes, and wait for your idiot brother to shut up."

Assam shut up. He tried to relax into the bed, into sleep. Every time he moved, every time he breathed, every time his heart beat, a thousand tiny pen strokes scraped his skin. This must be what a character in a book feels like. All those words crowding around like people on the subway. Assam had never been on a subway, but he'd seen movies. He shifted in the bed, trying to find a spot or a position that didn't feel like he was lying in a pile of crumbled leaves infested with fleas. He decided that there probably wasn't one. He slid out from under the covers and, wrapping a blanket around him, lay down on the floor. If anything, the itching was worse.

When he was much younger he would sometimes call out for his father late at night. A bad dream, a drink of water, a strange sound at the window, even just being bored and looking for someone else who was awake. And when he called, his father would always come. Sometimes, they'd just sit and talk for a bit until he dozed off once more.

He missed his own un-itchy bed and wished he could call for his father to come and sit with him. "Jee?"

"What's wrong?" Jee asked in the dark.

"Nothing," he said. "Just itchy."

"Sleep on the floor."

"I am, but I'm still itchy."

Jee was silent for a moment. Assam could feel her thinking. He got there a split second before she did.

"Do you still have the..?" she began but he interrupted her.

"Yes, it's the blanket, thank you. I am an idiot."

He tossed the horrid thing aside and lay back once more.

Silence.

"You're not an idiot. You're my big brother."

"Jee?"

No answer. "Are you crying?"

He heard a familiar snuffle. He got up and went to her.

They slept easier then, the two of them together — his arms supporting her, her hand over his heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They were quiet when they woke, uncertain and ill at ease. The room felt hollow somehow. Every sound slightly too loud, every movement too large.

"Come on," Assam said. "Let's go see what's for breakfast."

"Toast," Jee muttered.

The table in the front room had been replaced, redrawn, with a much smaller one and two chairs. There was a small pot of tea, a butter dish, and a plate of toast. All drawn by hand.

A vase of flowers, carefully sketched, sat in the center of the table. Against the vase, a small folded piece of paper waited patiently. Jee went and peeked into the kitchen at last night's dishes stacked on the counter. There was no sign of the shaggy man or the cats.

They sat at the table. The toast was dry, even with the butter. The tea in the pot was cold. As they ate, Assam unfolded the note.

"What's it say?"

"He says we should be careful when we leave," he told his sister. "He says we should use the other door."

Jee saw a new door drawn on one of the walls. It had not been there the night before. She hadn't noticed it. "Did he draw that for us?"

Assam nodded, chewing slowly as though that would make the toast taste better.

"Why?"

He swallowed with a grimace. "Why what?"

"Why do we have to use that door?"

"Don't worry about it."

"What else does the note say?"

"Not much. He drew a picture for us." He turned the paper around for her to see. Along the bottom

of the page there was a very nice little sketch of the three of them, sitting on the river bank with fishing poles in their hands. Behind them, the cats waited for their dinner.

"Oh, I like that. Can I have it or do you think we should leave it?"

"I don't care," Assam said, but he did not hand it to her.

She studied the drawing from across the table. "If he drew that, then how come it isn't real like everything else?"

"What do you mean?"

She squinted, cocking her head. "He draws things, right?"

"Uh, yeah. A little bit."

"Don't be a jerk. When he draws stuff, it's real. Right?"

Assam nodded.

"So how come that one doesn't coming to life as little versions of us that walk around and do stuff?"

It was a good question. Assam turned the paper around and looked at the sketch. "I don't know."

"What else did he write?"

"He says that if things don't work out, we can come back and stay with him."

"That's nice." She had no intention of taking him up on his offer.

"I think he's just being polite, actually."

"And what else?"

"Nothing."

"Read it to me."

He sighed and took another bite of what tasted like sawdust shaped toast. "I already did."

"No you didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"No, you read it to yourself and then told me what it said. That's not the same as reading it to me."

"Why don't you learn to read for yourself?" This wasn't really fair of him, but it slipped out.

"Why don't you learn to shut up?"

He held out the note to her but she crossed her arms and wouldn't take it.

"Ow!" He put his hand to his forehead. It felt like someone had just stuck a spike into his brain.

"What's wrong?" Jee asked with little or no concern in her voice.

His eyes were watering. "What did you do?"

"Read me the note."

"Tell me what you did."

"Read me the note," she said firmly, staring him down. "Or I'll do it again."

The dull ache behind his eyes subsiding, Assam held up the paper and began to read, do his best imitation of the shaggy man's voice.

My Young Guests,

I trust you slept well. I've set out some breakfast for you. I expect you're already eating it, so don't let me stop you, greedy pigs. It isn't much but it will keep you going for a while longer.

I'm out and about for the day. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. I expect that won't be long as there's

no food and very little to do. I thought of drawing a checkerboard for you, but I can never remember how many squares there are in each row.

Once I tried my hand at playing cards, but I got distracted while I was drawing the Queens and never finished. You'll understand what I mean one day.

Speaking of distractions – or, rather, writing of them – you've got one of your own sniffing around the front door for you. He was there last night and again this morning.

Apparently the little brat doesn't have anything better to do than camp out on my doorstep. I don't know why he's after you, but I'm certain you deserve everything you get. But he's much more horrid than you, so count your lucky stars that I'm on your team.

When you leave, if you leave, do not go by way of the front door. Use the other door, the new door, the one right over there that you can see if you just look up for a moment and stop reading this note. Go ahead. I'll be here when you get back.

Hello again. Did you see the door? That's the one to use. It should put you well out of the hands of that poxy little weasel.

Don't get me wrong. I love children. I myself have the heart of a five year old boy. I keep it in a jar under the sink.

Joke.

Nevertheless, heed my words – and other such dire phrases – and use the new door.

Good luck to you both. I hope you will not take this the wrong way but it is my fervent wish that I never never see either one of you again.

If I do, you are welcome to stay for as long as you like – or until I tire of you and bury you in the shallow graves around back.

Again, joke . . . or is it?

Honestly. You have better things to do and better company to keep, I assure you.

Go away. Now.

Warmly,

Dory Ragweed

"That's it," Assam said. "That's all he wrote."

"What's 'Dory Ragweed' mean?"

"I have no idea. Maybe it's his name."

"Last night, he said his name was Edward."

"He's probably half-crazy being out here all alone."

"He's not alone. He has the cats."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Isn't that what crazy people do? Live alone with too many cats?"

"I don't know any crazy people." She sat back, thinking through things. "Do you think he was joking about the jar thing?"

"Yes. But don't go look."

Jee sat back down. "Why not?"

"It's better not to know." He drummed his fingertips on the tabletop. "Now, it's your turn."

"He didn't write anything else?"

"Nope."

"Really?"

"Yes," Assam said, irritated. "Now tell me what you did and how you did it."

"What do you mean?"

He stared at her. "You did something to me a minute ago. You hurt me."

"Sorry."

He shook his head at the half-hearted apology. "I need to know how you did it."

"I don't know."

"Oh come on..." He slapped his hand down on the table, rattling the dishes.

"Honestly," she said. "I don't."

She seemed earnest but when Assam tried to look deeper, his headache opened up like a flower in bloom. "Tell me." He tried not to grit his teeth as he said it.

"I didn't do anything. I just got angry and I wanted to punch you. You were kind of being a jerk." She gazed at him reproachfully.

"And did you?"

"I think you would have noticed."

"I mean," he explained, "did you punch me inside, in your mind. In your imagination?"

"Yeah," she said. "Like I don't do that twenty-three times a day."

He nodded. Apparently his gift worked both ways. He could reach out but he was also open to anyone else reaching in. This must have been what the old man meant. His new gift, it seemed, had a price as well.

Jee picked up the note. "Why is he following us?"

"Who?"

"Who." She gave him a look. "Who? Who do you think?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I am worried," she said. "Why is he bothering us?"

"Who knows?"

"You do," she said pointedly, "or you could if you'd try it out."

"Try what out?" He asked. "It's not like I just got a new bike. I can't just magically discover..."

"...well," she said over-dramatically, like their mother, "I don't know about *magically*, but I'm guessing that he's right outside that door with his scabby little ear pressed against the wood, waiting for us."

"Maybe," Assam said. "For all we know. So what do you want me to do about it?"

"I want you," she told him, sounding more like their mother than ever before, "I want you to read his mind or something and, I don't know, change it."

"Change it?"

She made a noise like a tea kettle just before it starts to scream. "Wipe it out, make him forget about us. Erase us from his mind."

"Ah."

"Ah," she echoed. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that (A) I don't know if I even can try to erase someone's mind or (B) if I am even able to if I could figure out how, but (C) I am certain that it is not only a very bad idea but also (D) not something I should do if I (A) can.

Jee stared at him for a moment. "Okay. (A) You're an idiot. (B) Because I said so."

"There's got to be a different way."

"We should kill him. Before he kills us."

"Yeah," Assam said, "well, we won't do that."

"Why not?"

"I think it's safe to say that however sneaky and murderous we might try to be, he is probably going to be better at it than we are."

"But we outnumber him."

Assam smiled. "Finish your toast."

Jee wrinkled her nose. "It tastes like kitty litter."

"Well, I'll just have to take your word for that. Put some butter on it."

"Does the butter taste like kitty litter?"

"No. It tastes like parking lot."

Jee held up her half-eaten slice of toast. "How do you draw butter?"

"I have no idea."

Assam stood up. "You ready?"

Jee looked, suddenly, scared and vulnerable. He went over and knelt down next to her. She did not want to cry, so she didn't. "I'm scared."

He nodded. "I know you are."

"Are you scared?"

"I am," he answered. "A bit."

She coughed. "Do we have to go right now?"

"We probably should."

She glanced to the door. "What if he's out there?"

"He's not," Assam lied. He could feel the boy somewhere on the periphery of his consciousness, watchful, circling patiently. "But even if he is, he won't hurt us."

"He won't?" Jee looked up at him hopefully.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"He wants something from us."

She frowned. "What does he want?"

Assam answered slowly. "I have no idea. But I'm certain that we're safe."

"Really?"

"At least until he gets it."

"And you're sure?"

"Not really," Assam shrugged. "Come on. Let's go find out if I'm wrong."

Jee rose and followed him. They stood together in front of the two doors, trying to decide. On one side was the door they had come through the night before. A well drawn door, intricately detailed, solid and impressive. On the other was the new door. A hasty scrawl of a thing, just a rectangle scratched into the wall and obviously not meant to last.

"Okay," Jee said finally. "What's the point of having two doors side by side? You're going to end up in the same place no matter which one you go through."

"You sure about that?"

She frowned. "Well . . . yeah. I mean, you might as well go out one and I'll go out the other. We'll be right next to each other."

"I think," her brother said slowly. "I think that we probably don't want to do that."

"Then what should we do?"

"We should do what he told us to do," Assam said.

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "We can trust him."

Jee wasn't convinced. "But what if that Edgar kid is outside that door?"

Assam didn't answer right away. He laid his palm against the newly sketched door, took a breath, and held it. After a long moment, he let it out. "He's there."

"Then we should use the other one." She reached for the knob.

Her brother pulled her back. "It's okay," he told her. "We have to go this way. Even if he is there."

"Why?"

"Because that's the door that leads to her."

"Who?"

He opened his mouth, closed it again. Finally, as gently as he could, he reminded her: "Mom."

"How do you know?"

Assam shrugged. "Just do."

Jee looked away. "What if you're wrong?"

He had no answer for her.

"Fine," she said. "Whatever you think. Just wait a second." She went back to the table and picked up the note. She turned back to find her brother watching her intently, in a way that was so familiar and completely strange at the same time.

"What's that?" he asked. "The sketch?"

She nodded.

"Careful."

"Of what? Paper cuts?"

He shrugged. "Just be sure that's not your pomegranate seeds."

"It's not." She folded the note into her pocket.

Assam squared his shoulders, looking a lot more confident than he actually felt. "Let me go first," he said, reaching for the knob. "If anything happens, be ready to close the door behind me."

"What?"

He looked at her, drawing on all of his big brother authority. "Just close the door and wait for the old man to get back. He can take you to the Queen to ask for help." He raised his eyebrows. "You got it?"

Jee nodded, reluctant.

Gently, Assam turned the knob and pulled open the door. He stepped through and, after a moment, waved her on. Jee followed.

The sky outside overhead was as flat and featureless as a sheet of paper left out in the rain. They stood for a moment blinking in the harsh light. The ground around them was hard packed earth, all dust and cracks and patches of scrubby pale grass sprouting here and there.

Jee heard a little click behind them and turned. There was nothing there, not even a faint line where the door had been. "It's gone," she told her brother.

Assam nodded absentmindedly. His eyes were half closed and he was tilting his head this way and that.

"Did you hurt your neck or something?"

"Shh."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm listening," he said through clenched teeth. "Be quiet." He turned his head slightly, cocking his ear to one side.

He certainly looked like he was listening, Jee thought to herself. There was, she decided as she looked around, absolutely nothing in any direction. They could be anywhere, they could go anywhere. They were nowhere and there was no one else around.

Assam opened his eyes and looked at her. "Hi."

"Hi." She realized that he wasn't looking at her, he was looking behind her. She turned. There he was, big as life, grinning that jack o' lantern grin.

Edgar.

CHAPTER NINE

"Some people," Edgar said cheerfully, "they might get their feelings hurt by getting ditched. Some people are sensitive that way."

"Don't come any closer," Jee said quietly, ready to fight if it came to it.

"Now me," Edgar continued as if he hadn't heard her, "my feelings don't get hurt. But that's just me, just the way I am." He shook his head and looked at Jee scornfully. "Closer? Now why would I want to do that?"

"How did you find us?" Jee asked.

"It wasn't difficult." Edgar grinned, all gaps and shadows. "Anyways," he said, "I just figured you might need some help getting where you're going."

"How do you know where we're going?" Assam asked.

Edgar pointed his thumb in Jee's direction. "Who was it again you were looking for?"

Jee started to answer but Assam interrupted her. "You can help us?"

Edgar nodded. "I can help you."

"How?"

"Oh . . . I'm good at finding things and I know this place like the back of my hand." He held his left hand up, as though this proved something. "So what do you say?"

"No thanks," Jee said. "We can find her oursel..." Assam put his hand on her shoulder.

"That's right," Edgar said, snapping his fingers, "it was your mom. I remember now."

Assam groaned inwardly. "What do you want?"

"For what?"

"For helping us."

Edgar looked surprised at the suggestion. The boy thought for a moment. "I honestly don't know. Why don't we just say that we'll strike a bargain? I'll help you and you can help me when the time comes."

"No deal." Assam shook his head. "Come on, Jee." He nodded to the boy. "See you around."

"Wait a second," Edgar said before they could turn to leave. "Hold on now, let's not get too huffy about this. I'm perfectly willing to help. And since you offered to trade..."

...Assam narrowed his eyes at this, but the boy went on...

"...out of the kindness of your heart, I'm sure . . . well, I think we can figure something out."

"So," Assam said, "what do you want?"

Edgar said "I want five minutes."

"What?"

The boy's pockmarked face was inscrutable. "Five minutes, maybe ten. A thin slice of time is all I ask. Just a few ticks of the clock, nothing you'll miss."

Jee looked up at her brother. Assam squinted at the boy, so she did the same.

"That's all?" he asked. "Five minutes?"

"Ten, tops." Edgar spread his hands. "That's all."

"When?"

"When what?"

"When do you want the five minutes?"

Edgar shrugged. "I'll let you know, when the time comes. Don't worry. You'll hardly even notice it's gone."

"You're lying." It was very matter of fact, the way Assam said it. Which made it sound even worse.

"Am I?" Edgar didn't bat an eye, although they did glitter a bit.

Assam held his gaze, silent.

Gently, Edgar said "I don't remember the last time someone called me a liar to my face."

"Sure you do," Assam replied in a voice that Jee didn't quite recognize. "It was your mother. And she was crying."

Edgar snapped his teeth together and took a step forward, eyes blazing. Assam tilted his head to one side, staring down at the boy through half-closed lids. Edgar blinked, his brow furrowed.

Jee could see his jaw muscles clenching. She could have sworn that, for a moment, she saw a faint flicker of uncertainty or possibly even fear beneath the boy's anger.

"You should be careful what you say," the boy told Assam, stepping back. "Especially to me."

Assam said nothing.

Suddenly, Edgar burst out laughing. "Fair enough. I might be lying and I might not. But you need me to find who you're looking for."

"So, you'll help us," Assam said, not a question.

"I don't see why not," the other boy said with a grin. "So. We have a bargain?"

"No way." Jee didn't trust this kid and she couldn't figure out why her brother would.

"No problem," the boy replied. "You go on and wander along your merry way. I've got plenty of other things I could be doing."

"Oh, well, we'll miss you..." Jee stopped and looked up at her brother.

Assam was chewing thoughtfully on his thumbnail. "We can agree to your bargain," he said, "but you need to agree to one condition."

"Oh, now it's conditions, is it?"

"Yeah, it is. Or else we'll just wander along our merry way." Assam pointed out into the wasteland surrounding them, deliberately pointing away from the direction where he could feel his mother waiting. "And then no one will get what they want."

Edgar pursed his lips. "So, what's this condition, then?"

Assam started chewing on the nail of his index finger. He spit out a scrap of dried skin and looked at the boy. "You agree that as long as we're with you, we'll be safe. Then we have a bargain."

"I'm not your bloody babysitter." Edgar snorted, half-amused and half-angry. "I can't guarantee your safety."

"No one's asking you to. All I expect is that you won't do anything to harm me or my sister. That's all you need to agree to."

Edgar considered this for a moment and then nodded. "Fair enough." He spat into his hand and held it out. After a moment, with as much delicacy as he could muster, Assam did likewise.

"Ugh." Jee watched as the boys sealed the bargain. She didn't know what was worse, that they had done it in the first place or that both of them wiped their hands off on the seat of their pants afterwards.

The three of them stood there for a long moment. Among them stood the uneasy bargain — like a fourth person, unseen and unknown, but who was almost certainly to show up sooner or later.

Jee looked around. "Which way's the river?"

Assam turned and surveyed the landscape around them, dry as dust in all directions.

"Lucky thing for you that I came along." Edgar smiled.

CHAPTER TEN

With Edgar in the lead, the three of them marched out over the barren plain. After what seemed like hours, Jee pointed to a dark smudge on the horizon. "What is that?"

"That," Edgar told her, "is a forest. It is where we're going."

They went on. As they walked, Assam could feel a dull ache growing in the middle of his head. By the time they came within eyesight of the tree line, it felt like there was a hive of wasps loose in his mind — the long drone rising with every step they took, almost unbearable.

At the edge of the forest, Edgar looked up at the trees waving and whispering in the wind overhead. "The river is just on the other side."

"Great," Jee said, "let's go."

Edgar held his hand up. "We're not going through the forest."

"Why not?"

"Because," he told her, "we're going around it."

Jee looked to her brother. Assam didn't meet her gaze, he was too busy grinding his teeth with the effort of shutting out the noise in his head.

"What's the matter?" Jee asked then stopped, looking quickly into the trees. There were faint whispers and voices coming from the forest. "Can you hear that?" Jee asked the boys. "What are they saying?"

"Yes," Edgar said. "And I don't care."

Her brother could as well, of course. But it was far louder for him and the effort to shut it all out had almost drained him completely.

Jee closed her eyes. "There's a woman, I hear a woman."

Edgar looked at Assam pointedly but the other boy was lost in his own careful, fragile thoughts and didn't reply.

"What are they?" Jee asked.

"You really don't want to know." Edgar brushed past her, giving the bushes and stunted trees at the forest's edge a wide berth. "Come on, we need to keep moving."

Assam nodded, squinting and somewhat under control, followed close after him.

"She sounds so sad." Jee stood for a moment, still staring into the trees. She ran to catch up with the boys. "I still don't understand."

"Do you have to understand for your feet to work?"

Jee sulked for a moment. "How close is the river again?"

"Maybe a mile or so." Edgar gestured towards the trees on their left. "Maybe a little less."

"One mile." She shook her head. "And how far do we have to go around?"

"Oh . . . ten miles or thereabouts."

"Ten miles?" She stared at him. "I thought this was the short cut."

"And I thought you knew something about something."

Jee crossed her arms. "I know that ten miles is longer than one mile."

"Good for you," Edgar said. "And do you know the difference between the two?"

She snorted. "Nine miles. I'm not exactly an idiot."

Edgar closed his eyes and rubbed his thumb between his eyebrows. "Actually," he said wearily, "in this instance you are, in fact, exactly an idiot." He gestured along the ridge of trees they were following. "You see ten miles of hard walking with no shade and a shifty, unreliable leader."

He paused. "I hoped," he said after a moment, "that someone might disagree with me on that last bit."

Neither of the children said anything.

"Anyways. That's ten miles that no one in their right mind would go out of their way to walk – unless, of course, the short cut was worse."

"And is it?" Assam asked.

"Well," Edgar said, "it all depends on what you're used to." He walked over to a nearby bush and tore a small branch from it.

The bush shuddered and a voice shrieked out from within, saying "He said he loved only me, only me and no other . . . there were too many . . . I didn't want this, he said he was mine forever, we'd always be together . . . forever, I told him . . . and he did not answer . . . but there were too many, I could not take so many . . . I didn't want this, not this . . . he would be mine but I did not want this . . . my father and mother, my lover . . . there were too many . . . I did not want so many, so many . . . he would not see me, not me . . . too many . . . he had too many, too many to take . . . I did not want this, I could not take this . . . there were too many, I told him and he did not answer, he would not answer, he would not see me, there were too many and I did not want this . . . and there were too many for me and he would not see me and I could not take too many, too many before he would see me again . . . he would not see me, I did not want this . . . I took too many, too many..."

And then, after too long, it fell quiet once more.

Edgar tossed the stick away and dusted off his hands. "They all do that. Every tree and bush, every snapped twig, every leaf that falls frees their voice and their misery." He looked pointedly at them. Jee had her hands over her ears. Assam was swallowing against the bile at the back of his throat. "How many times do you think we might accidentally snap a twig or brush a branch, walking through the forest?"

"If we're very careful..." Jee began.

Edgar's sneer stopped her short. "It's hard to be careful when you're running flat out with a wolf at your heels and something worse than wolves swooping down from the branches above."

"Wolves?" Jee asked.

"They're everywhere in the wood, waiting for the day when they can feed again on low hanging fruit. I know you have some experience," he nodded at Assam. "But foxes and wolves are like flint and fire, cousins at best. But only one can truly burn you." He grinned. "Besides..."

"...there's something worse than wolves." Assam finished.

"Ten times worse. They roost in the trees, their children are raised in nests woven from twigs and screams." The boy shivered, making a show of it. "Harpies. And they like to play with their food." He reached over and plucked a small leaf. The bush whimpered briefly and then fell into a sorrowful whispering. Edgar smiled quietly and plucked another and another, until the plant was shuddering with sobs.

"Stop it." To her surprise as much as his, Jee slapped Edgar's face. It was a hard blow for such a little girl and he staggered back with his hand up. But only for a moment. He straightened and the upraised hand became a fist. His face was very pale, save for three bright streaks her fingertips had left there.

Assam stepped between them. "We have a bargain, you and I."

Edgar gave him such a look of hate that Assam thought for a moment that he was going to have to fight. But the boy lowered his fist. "Yes, we do." His eyes flickered to Jee, then back. "But she doesn't hit me again. And you better not either."

"I never have," Assam said mildly.

The pockmarked skin wrinkled up around the boy's eyes. Assam couldn't tell if he was about to laugh or cry. "Sure. Well, let's keep it that way. And you," he turned to Jee, a finger in her face. "Don't ever touch me again."

"You are," she said, her voice shaking, "the most horrible person in the world."

He gave her a short quick bark of a laugh in reply. "Hardly. But I can show you where he lives." He stared at her for a moment longer before shifting his gaze back to her brother. "So," Edgar said with false cheer, "long way 'round, then?"

Jee crossed her arms. "We should go through. We can make it. And he has to help protect us."

"I said I'd keep you safe, brat. Not commit suicide for you." Edgar looked at Assam. "It's very noisy in there." He jerked his thumb towards the trees. "How you feeling right now? You think you can handle that?" Savagely, he snapped a twig off of the bush and it screamed briefly before lapsing into a shallow moan.

Assam stared up at the trees. The wind shook the branches and he heard the faint voices within whispering, weeping. "We're taking the short cut," he said to his sister.

"Which one?" she asked.

He nodded to Edgar. "His."

"Well then," the boy said, "let's not waste any more time." He turned on his heel and headed off.

Jee looked after him. "I don't understand why you made that deal."

"Would you rather have him somewhere back there following us, never knowing when he was going to show up or what he was going to do . . . or up in front where we can keep an eye on him?"

"How do you know he won't go back his promise?"

"I don't know that he won't," her brother said. Even if Edgar kept his word, they would still need to be careful. Edgar was the sort of kid who always knew where the best hiding places were. And Assam could tell he was hiding something. "We'll just need to stay one step ahead of him," he said.

"Then we'd better catch up."

Together, they followed after the boy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They skirted the edge of the forest. Edgar turned very chatty, almost chipper, even. He made small talk and little jokes, he grinned and laughed. All of which made Assam very suspicious. And when Edgar started asking questions – questions about them and their lives, questions about their parents – Assam felt the familiar little tickle of warning in the back of his head. He did his best to avoid giving out any specifics without appearing to hide anything. But, he knew that the more questions Edgar asked, the more the boy was revealing about himself and what he wanted.

“What about your family?” Assam turned the tables on the boy.

“What about them?” Edgar’s voice fell flat. If there had been a sun shining overhead, a cloud would have covered it.

“Any brothers and sisters?” Jee asked, seemingly unaware of the change in his mood.

“Yes.”

“Which? Or both?”

“Both.”

“How many?”

“None.”

She cocked her head at him.

“They’re all dead.”

The three of them walked on in silence for a few moments.

“So . . . have you ever gone looking for them?”

Edgar stared at the girl, incredulous.

“I mean,” she said, “haven’t you ever looked for them here?”

He shook his head. “I want you to imagine something.”

“Okay.”

“I want you to imagine how many times you’ve taken a breath since the moment you were born, how many more breaths you’ll take before you die, and add up how many breaths that will be over the span of that rich, full life of yours.”

“Okay.”

“If you started on one side of this place and talked to every single person you met, even with all that breath saved up, you would only make it six steps into the first ring before you ran out.”

“Ran out?”

“Of breath.”

“What’s the first ring?”

He sighed. “The first . . . neighborhood.”

“Okay.”

“You get what I’m saying?”

“I guess.”

“It’s a big place, bigger than you can imagine. As far as you’ve gone, everything you’ve seen . . . it’s only a sliver, the smallest slice of the whole thing. You have no idea...”

“...you didn’t answer my question.”

Edgar stopped walking, glanced at her sharply. “That’s right. I didn’t.” He started walking again.

“So?” Jee asked.

Assam felt Edgar's pulse throb with annoyance.

"I never bothered," the boy told her. "I never really cared much for my brothers and sisters."

"Not at all?"

"Not much."

"What about your parents?"

"What about them?"

"Did you look for your mom or your dad?"

He shook his head. "I never knew my dad but," he pointed his chin to the line of trees on their left, "my mother's somewhere back in there."

Jee looked back at the trees in horror. "She is?"

"Yes."

"Do you ever go see her?"

He looked at her for a long moment, then away.

Jee decided it was time to stop asking questions for a while.

They walked on. It was slow going, the heat oppressive. They fanned their faces, walking as fast as they could to escape the gnats that swarmed around them. Assam and Jee had long since stripped off as much of their winter clothes as modesty would allow. They tied the sleeves of their coats around their shoulders, wrapped snowpants around their waists. But it barely helped. Jee panted along beside her brother. The cool shadows beneath the trees looked inviting, but she could still hear the little whispers and whimpers well enough. She thought of the river and how much cooler it would be there, by the shore. But when she mentioned this to the boys, Edgar shook his head.

"It won't be," he told her. "The folks in these parts, they expect it to be hot this close to Hell."

"This isn't Hell."

Edgar curled his lip at her. "And you would know."

"Winterly told me," she said. "The Queen."

"And you believed her?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "Smart. If you were the Queen of all the damned, would you tell the truth about it?"

"Shut up."

"Me shutting up doesn't make it true."

"Listen..."

"...so this is Hell?" Assam interrupted, trying to avoid another battle between the two of them.

"This? No." Edgar gestured around them. "This is a long hike on a hot day." The boy ran his hands over his ruined face, wiping the sweat up into his hair. Jee thought that he looked like a porcupine that lost an argument with the front tires of an automobile.

Edgar gestured to the trees. "Hell is what you make of it, just like this place. That sorry lot back there, they thought their lives were Hell. They were looking for a shortcut too, but they also thought they deserved Hell. And so here they are."

"So they wanted it to be this way?" Assam slapped at a bug on his neck. He inspected the dark smear on his palm, wondering how much was his blood and how much belonged to the squashed insect.

"Well, yes and no," Edgar said. "But they weren't too disappointed when they got here and found out they were right."

Assam started to ask another question but Edgar held up his hand. "It's best not to think too hard about it. We're talking about a minor scrap of real estate, a handful of souls stuck in an ill-kept, unfrequented backwater of a much larger territory. There's a lot more of those places than you'd think."

He shook his head. "People love sending themselves to Hell almost as much as they love sending other people there."

"I don't believe you," Jee said.

"Fine," Edgar started walking backwards, facing them as he went up a rising slope ahead. "You'll see." He stumbled and sat down with a tooth jarring bump. "Might as well take a rest."

"This is lot more than ten miles." Assam stopped next to the boy.

"That may well be," Edgar replied. "But I'm not a cartographer. Not drawn to scale, your mileage may vary, objects in the mirror closer than they appear."

Assam watched his sister climbing the hill after them. He was suddenly angry and he didn't know why.

"You're doing fine!" Edgar called to Jee. "It's not long now."

"How long?" Jee called back.

"Maybe fifteen, twenty miles more."

"Twenty miles?" Jee almost collapsed in despair.

"You can do it!" Edgar shouted encouragingly.

Assam walked down to her.

"We could have killed him," she said out of the corner of her mouth, taking the hand he offered.

He shook his head. "No, I don't think we could have."

"Is this still better than having him behind us?"

He shrugged and walked with her. They reached the spot where Edgar sat, passing him without a word.

"That's the spirit," the boy told them as they passed. "Never say die. Especially here."

Jee and Assam stopped when they reached the crest of the hill. The girl looked back at Edgar, still sitting halfway up the slope where they had left him. She saw him glance back at her over his shoulder. When he saw they had reached the top, he rose with a grunt and walked up to join them. Together, the three of them gazed down. The hill was much taller on this side, steeper. It sloped sharply down to the broad flat ribbon of river below. The river was wider than before and overgrown with brownish-green reeds, almost a swamp.

"Like I said," Edgar sighed, "I'm not so good with the distances."

Jee stared down at the river seeping out from the base of the hill below. "It's so big."

"It is big," Edgar said. "Yes."

"How do we get across?"

"Not to worry," he told her, "it's shallow enough to wade."

"Really?" Assam narrowed his eyes at the boy.

"Don't you trust me?" Edgar asked.

"About as much as I trust the river," Assam replied. "But at least I know which way it runs."

"Come on," Edgar said with a laugh. "We haven't got all day." Gingerly, he began picking his way down the steep slope. They followed him. The bank was muddy and their feet slipped out from under them more than once. Muddy and bedraggled, they reached the bottom without being too worse for wear. Except for Jee. She had the worst of it, sliding ten or fifteen feet on her rump, the mud coating her jeans and soaking her to the skin. She was not happy about this, not at all. Even Edgar knew better than to laugh.

They stood together at the base of the bank. The river was, just as Edgar had said, quite shallow — the thin current wandering sluggishly through the reeds and cattails. And, as Edgar had promised, the

heat was much worse. As were the flies. Unlike the tiny gnats at the edge of the forest, the flies by the river had grown to a more respectable size. And they had no mercy.

"Ow!" Jee slapped at her arm as they wound their way through the soupy riverside, tangled in weeds and reeds. "It bit me."

"They do that," Edgar said.

"I didn't know flies could bite."

"Some of them can even chew." Edgar led them through the bending stalks, turning this way and that, heading for the far shore.

Assam and Jee followed along as best they could. Jee swatted at a tilting cattail and it burst into a cloud of drifting pods. She sneezed.

"Is this even the same river?" she asked.

"The same river as what?" Edgar called back.

"As before?" Jee thought back to their gentle boat ride through the mist. It was hard to imagine that broad band of water losing so much of its strength and power, becoming this weak and feeble thing.

"There's only one river," he answered. "All waters are one."

"One what?"

He ignored the joke.

"Which one is this?" Jee asked, surveying the swampy marshland surrounding them.

"I told you, there's only one," he answered. "Now, come on."

Jee looked at Assam. He shrugged. They followed Edgar through the reeds, the warm muddy water splashing their legs. "Where are we going?"

"We have to cross the river," Edgar replied.

She wiped a few sweaty strands of hair out of her eyes for the hundredth time. "Why?"

"To get to the other side."

"What if it gets deeper?"

"I have," Edgar replied, "no bloody idea. But I feel quite certain that I will figure it all out, providing that you ask me enough inane questions."

Jee asked Assam "Does that mean what I think it means?"

Her brother nodded.

"It means 'stupid' right?"

He nodded again.

She called up to Edgar. "So how are we going to get across?"

"Never say die," he replied. "That's what I admire about you, kid."

"We could swim," she offered.

"You could," the boy answered. "I could not."

"Why not?"

"I don't."

"You don't what?"

"I don't swim."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

Edgar sighed. "I don't know how."

"You don't?" Jee was amazed. She'd been swimming for years.

"Hard to believe, but there wasn't much call for it, where I came from." He bent back a wall of reeds,

pushing his way through. "The biggest body of water in my village was a pig trough. I tried to learn, but it just wasn't the best environment for a growing, impressionable boy and soon I fell in with the wrong crowd."

"We could take a boat."

"We don't have a boat."

"We could make a boat."

Edgar looked at her.

"Out of trees or something," she said.

He looked at the broken reeds all around. "What trees? They don't grow here, can't get their roots deep enough. It's a shallow place, no depth to it."

"What about back there?" Jee pointed back up the bank the way that had come. "The forest?"

He stared at her with genuine horror on his face. "Even if you could manage to cut one down without any tools and if you managed to do it without going insane from all the screaming, you'd be hard pressed to make it across in a boat made from a tree that's got a built-in death wish."

Jee looked at him blankly.

"No," he clarified, "a boat made from wood taken from a tree in the Forest of Suicides is literally the definition of 'structurally unsound.'"

"But..."

"...besides," he interrupted, turning back to the river, "it's shallow enough, we should be able to wade across. I think. It looks like it's shallow enough."

"You could have just said so." Jee replied sullenly.

"I could have," he agreed, "but then I would have denied myself the pleasure of making you feel stupid again." He turned and began wading once more.

The sound that the clump of mud made as it connected with the back of his head echoed over the water, startling a flock of crows that rose, squawking from the far shore.

Edgar froze. He raised one hand to the mass of mud and duckweed slowly sliding down the back of his neck. He ran his fingers over it lightly, like a blind man reading a face. Gently, he peeled it away and scraped what he could out of his hair before turning around.

Jee was rinsing a broad smear of mud from her palm. "What?"

"Why did you do that?"

"Do what?" She shook her hand dry and wiped it on her pants.

"Why did you throw mud at me?"

She shrugged. "Why does anyone do anything, really?"

Edgar stared at her long and hard for a moment.

"You really don't want to do that again," he said.

"Oh, but I really do."

He turned away. With his back turned, Jee stuck her tongue out.

"You really don't, you know," Assam said to her in a low voice.

"I can take care of myself, thanks."

Assam recognized the tone. It was one he knew from home. It made him extremely tired and even a little homesick. "The last time," he said patiently, "I was the one who had to pay the price for you getting him all riled up."

"That was different. It was your fault for running off with the fox. Which, if you hadn't, he never would have gotten involved."

"But you invited him."

"Maybe, but you made a deal with him. So it's your fault now."

"Now?"

"You invited him, you acted like he was important and powerful and now he's our best buddy."

"Say," Edgar called back to them, "what are the chances the two of you might shut up for a few minutes?"

They struggled on quietly through the swampy water, following Edgar's winding path through the maze of reeds.

"Are we even headed the right way?" Jee asked Assam in a low voice. "Which way is the shore?"

Assam shrugged and pointed vaguely in the direction Edgar was heading. But whether that meant that the other boy was going the right way or that Jee should go ask him herself, she couldn't tell.

Edgar stopped suddenly, staring into the mist and reeds ahead of them. He held up his hand. Jee and Assam approached quietly.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Edgar tapped her lightly on the tip of her nose, wiggling his finger in front of her eyes for a moment before slowly pointing to something ahead of them.

Jee looked where he was pointing. "I don't..." she started to whisper, when one of the shadows ahead shifted, moved under Edgar's fingertip. Her eyes focused on the movement. "Oh," she whispered, "I see her."

It was a little girl, perhaps half as old as Jee, standing off in the reeds, looking back at them. Jee waved to her. The little girl's dark eyes widened and she waved back, tentatively.

"Don't do that," Edgar said under his breath.

"Why not?"

He ignored her, looking pointedly at Assam. "If she runs, we need to stop her. You understand?"

Assam nodded, not quite certain that he did. It must have shown on his face because Edgar rolled his eyes and whispered. "We don't want her to warn the others."

"What others?" Jee waved to the girl again.

Edgar grabbed her arm. "I thought I told you not to do that."

"You did." She pulled her arm away. "But I wanted to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Edgar looked up in time to see the little girl vanish into the reeds. He said a word under his breath. It wasn't a word that Assam or Jee had heard before, but they understood it's meaning well enough. "Come on."

He took off through the reeds, splashing muck and water everywhere.

Assam and Darjeeling followed after him, trying to keep up as best they could. As they ran, the mist would part and they'd catch a glimpse of the girl. Then the mist would close and she'd vanish once more. Jee lost first one boot and then the other to the thick river mud. She kept running. There was a splash up ahead and Jee heard Edgar shout "Gotcha!"

She and Assam ran up to find him holding the girl by her shoulder, his hand across her mouth. The girl was soaked from head to foot and she had her eyes squeezed closed. She threw herself back and forth in his grasp, but he held her fast. "Easy now, lassie. Don't you be getting ideas." He shook her roughly. "Stop dancing or I'll dunk you again."

She twisted in his grip and he pushed her to her knees, forcing her face towards the shallow water. She growled at him, low in her throat. He pushed her face forward another inch or two. "One drink. One drink and you'll forget how much you hate me. In fact, I might even get a new girlfriend out of the deal." He pushed her forward again, twisting his fingers in her hair until she whimpered.

"Stop it," Jee said. "You're scaring her."

"She's not scared," the boy answered. "Are you lassie? One sip is all it'll take. I wonder if your savior will bother with you once you've forgotten all about..."

"...stop it!" Jee shoved him backwards with all her strength.

Edgar went over, pulling the little girl down with him. A huge surge of muddy water flew into the air all around them. The boy was up in a second and, just as quick, Assam was once again standing between Edgar and his sister. Anger was pouring off of the boy like the water streaming from his soaked clothes.

"I told you," Edgar said, shaking with fury. "She can't touch me."

Jee went to the little girl and helped her up. The girl whimpered and reached for a little bundle floating nearby. Jee retrieved it for her. It was a doll, crudely made from woven reeds and stuffed with what looked like cattail fluff. She brushed it off as best she could and handed it back to the girl. The little girl took it gratefully, cradling it in her arms. She brushed her limp hair out of her eyes and shot a frightened look over to where Assam and Edgar were standing.

"Don't worry about him," Jee told her. "He's just a bully."

The girl looked unconvinced.

"What's your name?" Jee asked. "You can call me Jee."

The girl hesitated for a moment and then, quietly, she said "Amabel."

Jee smiled. "And who's this?" she asked, pretending to tickle the little doll. The girl giggled and shook her head.

"Doesn't she have a name?"

Amabel shook her head again.

"Oh, her momma must have named her something when she was born. Let me see..." She took the doll from the girl and studied it carefully. "Well, if you ask me," she said, "I think her name might be . . . Amy." She held the doll up to face her owner. "What do you think? Does she look like an Amy to you?"

Amabel nodded and accepted the doll back with a broad smile.

"Hello Amabel," Jee said. "Hello Amy. It's nice to meet both of you."

"Hello Jee," the girl replied, and then again in her doll's voice.

"This is Amy and Amabel," Jee said to the boys. "They're friends."

The boys looked at her, then back to each other.

"Which one is which?" Assam asked his sister.

"Well, Amy is the one who likes to dance, but Amabel has a better singing voice."

The little girl giggled.

"Oh honestly..." Edgar sighed. "Can we just, for the sake of Pete, get across before he catches up with us?"

"Before who..?" Assam looked back the way they had come. At the top of the bank behind them, rising above the reeds and the mist, a man stood dark against the sky. Assam could feel his eyes on them, like fingers tapping around the edges of his mind. It was not a pleasant sensation.

"That's him," Jee said, "the guy from the diner."

Edgar nodded grimly. "It is."

"What does he want?" Assam wasn't certain he wanted to know the answer. He reached out tentatively with his mind but found nothing to hold onto. The man's mind was too slippery – like mirrors, like glass – giving nothing away.

"He wants you," Edgar said.

"Us? Why?"

"I have no idea."

Assam knew Edgar was telling the truth. But he could feel that, beneath that truth, a larger lie was still hidden.

"Is he..?" Jee stopped and held her breath for a moment. "Is he the Devil?"

Edgar snorted. "Yeah, he's the Devil. And I'm the baby in the manger." At this, Amabel suddenly gave a shriek and bolted off through the reeds.

"Hey!" Jee shouted after her. "Come back. He was only kidding."

Edgar sighed. "Looks like our cover's blown. We might as well get across. Maybe we'll get lucky and miss them altogether."

"Miss who?" Jee asked.

"The Holy Children of the Lord," he said, rolling his eyes. "The chosen people. The hundred and twelve thousand saints, give or take."

"Who?"

"The happy souls tucked deep between Abraham's hairy and ample bosoms." He patted her head. "Don't you worry. If we hurry, we might just catch your little friend before she gets there."

"But..."

Edgar pointed a thumb over his shoulder. The top of the river bank was empty.

"Where'd he go?" Assam could still feel the man out there, but he couldn't quite place him.

Edgar shrugged. "You've got more important things to worry about."

"Like what?"

"Like how we're going to make it out of Heaven alive. Come on." And with that, he headed off into the reeds, Assam and Jee following close behind.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The reeds grew thicker near the far shore, it was easy to catch a foot in their tangled roots. In among the reeds, cattails grew long and fat — some of them bursting open, leaking fluff like Amabel's little doll, the seeds drifting lazily through the heavy air. They tickled Assam's nose and he had to suppress a sneeze. Truth be told, he wouldn't have particularly cared for the cattails, even if they hadn't made him sneeze. Their exploded, leaking innards seemed gruesome somehow, like a dead animal in the road. They reminded him, he realized, of those horrid unseen flowers that grew around the witch's house at the outskirts of old Moontown. It was all either poison or poisoned here — the light, the water, even the air. *Even the flowers*, he thought. *Stay here long enough and you'd either get poisoned or become poisonous.*

Jee and Edgar were already well ahead of him, moving through the reeds. He walked on in shoes saturated with river water, pants soaked to the knees. He wondered briefly if his legs might somehow forget what they were. Would he end up crippled, perhaps, with two useless, forgetful things hanging off of him? Or would they turn into something else altogether, having forgotten what they should be? He tried to imagine himself with duck feet, with wheels. Ridiculous. Mercifully, his legs and feet remained uncomfortably damp and nothing more. He was realizing that the rules of this place made no sense, like a dream where the monster chasing you suddenly has your face. Or worse.

Catching up to the others, he put the thoughts out of his mind. They were huddled together in the

reeds, deep in fierce, whispered conversation. Assam could immediately tell three things: They were arguing. Edgar was right. And Edgar was losing the argument.

"You have no idea what or who you're dealing with here." Edgar hissed. "No idea at all."

"And you do?" Jee countered.

"You'd better believe it," the boy replied. "I've got hundreds of years under my belt."

"You're not wearing a belt."

Edgar groaned in frustration. Assam knew exactly how he felt.

"I don't understand what the big deal is. I just want to give her this back." Jee held up the sodden doll.

"We don't have time to waste on charity cases," Edgar hissed. "And you have no idea who you're dealing with here. No idea at all."

"You said that already," Jee said. "And they don't scare me."

"Yeah, well, they should."

"You said they're new here and don't know anything." Jee replied.

"Relatively new," Edgar said. "And their stupidity is what makes them so dangerous. Just like you."

"Whatever," Jee said as she stalked off through the reeds.

Edgar looked after her in amazement. Assam almost felt sorry for him. "She's like that," he told the boy. "You get used to it."

"I doubt it," Edgar replied.

They hurried after her. After a few steps they broke through into a large clearing. Jee was standing directly in front of them and the three of them went down in a tangle of arms and legs and reeds. Assam stood up quickly, covered in mud and sodden cattail fluff. He reached down and helped his sister up. They were standing in a hollow place in the reeds, about the size of their front yard back home — a large round clearing, almost egg-shaped. The ground had been cleared and covered with mats of woven reeds.

And they weren't alone. Twenty or thirty people were scattered through the clearing — weaving, washing clothes, grinding, doing chores...

Assam took it all in. He could feel their fear, like a clammy mist drifting at the edges of the clearing. Then, a sudden wave of nausea shuddered through him. There was power within that place. But it was diseased, twisted somehow.

He felt her eyes on him before he saw her. The old woman sat in the center of the clearing on what looked like an old kitchen chair. As battered as it was, she had all the air of a queen on a throne. The girl, Amabel, stood next to her, her little face etched in fear.

The old woman might have been forty, she might have been a hundred. She was skinny, almost skeletal, with a bright, hungry light burning in her eyes. They were blue, so blue that Assam thought she might be blind. But then they locked onto his and he felt the familiar sizzle of connection at the back of his mind. Assam nearly vomited with the flood of images that flowed between him and the old woman, he shuddered under the strain of trying to block them all out...

...a woman, struggling on the shore of a black and stagnant sea . . . a horde of beasts, all teeth and fangs, swarming around a fallen animal . . . the scream of birth, the horrible tear as one life is ripped through into this world from the next . . . a brood of spiders, spreading out across the land while one at the center sucked on the sweet jewels that its brood brought back . . . alone and hungry, the spider shifted its hunting grounds to a new place, ripe with such fresh food...

...and then the old woman shifted her gaze and the feeling passed. She did not seem aware of what had passed between them. "Who are these lost children?" she croaked. "What demons dare tread so close to the holy gates of Heaven?" She threw her arms up into the air and thrust her chin forward. "Speak now, I command you in the name of the Lord!"

The rest of the people stared at the ground, waiting. Apart from Amabel and the old woman, no one dared look at the three newcomers.

"Um..." Jee stepped forward. "We're not demons, ma'am. I just wanted to give this back." She held out the reed doll. "I know she might be lonely for it otherwise."

The old woman lowered her arms, resting one hand on the shoulder of the little girl. The long fingers curled slowly, drawing Amabel closer. There was no love in the gesture, no sense of kindness or protection. It was a wary, greedy movement. It spoke of ownership, of slavery, of addiction.

"Where do you come from, girl?" The old woman leaned forward, the chair creaking under her like old bones.

Assam didn't like the hungry look in her eyes, didn't like the way she licked her lips at the sight of Jee. "We came from across the river," he answered, stepping forward. "We're looking for our mother."

The old woman swiveled her head to stare at him. Assam could feel her gaze scuttling like a spider over the outside of his mind, looking for a weak spot to creep through and spread its venom. There was more than madness in there, behind those pale eyes.

"Lost children," the old woman said. "You'd do best to search for the Father. He is the one who can lead you back home."

"Our dad is at home," Jee said. "Our mom's the one who's lost."

The woman's gaze flickered from Assam to his sister, then back again. "Lost child," the old woman said, "do not wander the paths of Hell nor keep company with demons any longer." She huffed for a moment, building up steam like a locomotive. "Turn away from the gifts offered by those infernal powers and reach out!" She flung out one hand to grasp the air between them. "Reach out for the holy kingdom that is just within your grasp. Reach for Heaven, girl. Reach for salvation."

Assam was at a loss for how to respond.

Unfortunately, Jee was not. "Well, for starters," she said, "I don't know what 'infernal' means but it doesn't sound like a very nice thing to call people."

"And do you call..?" the woman growled, but Jee kept talking.

"Let me finish, please. You had your turn." She took a breath. "And while he is an ass — sorry, but it's true..."

"...no problem," Edgar answered...

"...a complete ass, that's a far cry from being a demon. I've met a few of them, I think. And you know what? They all talk and act a lot like you."

The old woman stared at Jee, silent and hateful.

"And besides," Jee went on, walking forward to face the woman down. "If it's a choice between a crazy lady or a kind queen who serves hot tea and puts out food for the little stray cats on the back porch," she took a breath, "then I know which one I'll choose every time."

The old woman worked her jaw, chewing on whatever words she had in her mouth. Then, calmly, she spat in Jee's face. The girl let out a little cry of surprise and disgust, backpedaling across the sodden, matted reeds underfoot.

"Hey!" Assam ran forward and caught his sister as she fell. "You okay?"

Jee nodded, wiping her face with her sleeve.

The woman raised her hands in the air and the people in the clearing moved in, surrounding him and his sister. Strong hands tore her from him, strong arms held him fast. He heard Jee struggling next to him. Someone forced him to his knees. Cold, muddy water seeped up through the woven reeds to soak his jeans. He felt his hands being tied behind his back. His sister fell down next to him, her wrists bound with reeds. There was a splash to his left. Edgar. Even with his hands tied, the boy looked calm – almost amused, even.

The old woman made a satisfied sound, mouth working over the three of them with a mixture of pity and sheer, naked loathing. “You poor lost souls,” she murmured from her chair. “Wandering for so long, alone and apart from the love of God. Give thanks and rejoice that you have finally found your way here at last.”

“And where would ‘here’ be, exactly?” Assam asked.

The woman drew herself up stiffly against the old chair. “The shore of the Jordan river, the holy gate of the Promised Land.”

“Alleluia.” Edgar muttered under his breath.

The old woman narrowed her eyes. “How dare you show your face in this holy land, Beelzebub?” A murmur of fear rose from the crowd, but Assam could hear anticipation in it as well. “You, Father of Lies, Lord of the Flies.”

“Oh, you can just call me Edgar,” the boy said mildly.

The old woman stood up, all arms and elbows and hobbled a few steps towards them. “I’ll not be mocked, demon!” she shrieked. “God will not be mocked. These poor souls are no longer under your diabolical spell. They have been delivered...”

...*Alleluia*, the crowd murmured...

“...they have been delivered by the holy hand of the Lord...”

...*Amen, amen*, the congregation answered.

She shuffled forward, kicking up little sprays of muddy river water with each step. Once again, Assam had a flash, a mental image scuttling across his mind like a spider.

The little girl, Amabel, waited by the chair clutching the ragged reed doll that Jee had brought to her.

“God will not be mocked,” the old woman said again, voice grating against her teeth like stones rubbing together. “He will cast you out as He always has...”

...the crowd again, *Praise him*...

“...you will fall once more under the blazing sword of righteousness, back to the fiery pit, freeing Heaven from your foul wiles forever.”

Alleluia, amen! The crowd was near frenzy now.

“Wait,” Jee said. “This is Heaven?”

“It really isn’t.” Edgar replied.

“You’re a demon,” Assam told the old woman, the pieces falling into place. She turned her gaze to him, nothing but raw hate in her eyes now. “You’ve tricked them all.” He looked around at the pale faces of the congregation. “You’re all under her spell, don’t you see what she really is?”

“Deceiver!” the old woman growled, turning to her followers. “Do not listen to his lies, People of the Lord.”

“Look around you,” Assam went on. “Does this really look like Heaven to you? Is this really what your God promised?”

“The faithful have found their home with the Lord at last,” the old woman shrieked. “They live under His hand, basking in the golden light from His throne.”

"They live," Assam said, "in the mud and weeds." He turned to one of the men holding him. "Open your eyes. See for yourself."

"Think for yourself," Jee said.

There was a faint sound to Assam's left. He was not entirely surprised to see that Edgar had vanished.

"Demons!" The old woman was practically dancing in rage. "Do you not see their diabolical powers now revealed?" She gestured and the man holding Assam forced the boy's head up to face her. "Demons hiding behind the sweet innocence of a child's sacred face." She nodded, knowing and wise. "I knew you from the first," she said, "but I had to wait and let your true nature reveal itself."

She turned then to her followers and raised her arms, drawing strength from them. "Hearken unto me, you blessed and redeemed: These monsters come to tempt the children of God with their unholy lies and blandishments." The woman spun in a wide circle, eyes blazing with hunger. "Will you allow them to invade the Holy City, to invade your very hearts? Will you cast down the God you worship here?"

A murmur went up from the congregation. Assam's throat filled with a sick dread. He could feel it, their raw energy and the naked hunger within the woman, gobbling it up.

"Has not your God been faithful? Has not He offered satisfaction for your every need?" She spun again, her voice rising to a screech that set Assam's teeth on edge, and she began to sing: "All I have needed, all I have needed Thy hands have provided..."

...the crowd murmured, swaying....

"...great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness..."

...*Lord unto me*, the people intoned, picking up the tune as they turned from the old woman to the children. *Summer and winter*, they sang in their flat voices, *springtime and harvest . . . sun moon and stars in their courses above...*

The flat eyes, the shambling movements, those moaning voices — it reminded Assam of a zombie movie.

"Join with all nature . . . in manifold witness..." The old woman stalked through her followers, soaking up their praise.

He struggled, but hands held him fast...

...*to Thy great faithfulness...*

Jee was crying, calling to the little girl for help. But Amabel stood frozen, fear scrambling over her face.

"...mercy and love." The crowd parted and the old woman stepped forward. She was horrible, eyes blazing and her mouth agape. She held a long reed in her hand, thin and fresh and green. She drew it back and forth across the air in front of her. Assam saw the tiny beads of blood on her forearms, on her cheeks and he understood why it's called a blade of grass. The edge of the reed was very fine, very sharp. Every time the old woman slashed the air with it, it whisked against her face, against her hands and arms. And she loved it, Assam saw. She drank it all in.

The old woman gestured and the two men holding Jee pulled her forward. One of them pulled her hair back, exposing her throat.

"Amabel!" Jee gasped, trying to find the voice that had saved them in the fox's lair. "You found me. I named your doll, I brought her back to you. What kind of demon would..?"

"...silence!" the old woman shouted, flicking the reed across the girl's throat, leaving a faint line in which tiny beads of blood gathered.

To her credit, Jee did not scream. Her brother, however, flew into a rage. He lurched forward, pulling

against his captors. Later, he would not be able to remember how he did it. It was as if he reached out and grabbed the woman's skin, pulling it off of her like a magician tugging at a table cloth. But his hands were tied, of course. And yet, it happened all the same.

Just for a moment, he tore off the woman, stripped her away like a costume to reveal the horror that was hiding beneath. She was gone. But a spider, huge and frantic, scuttled about the clearing shaking with fury. It raised itself up on its back legs and lowered the reed it held between its claws, laying it against Jee's exposed throat.

And then Amabel began to scream.

The spider spun around at the sound, blinking its swollen goblet eyes in confusion. It swiveled back to Assam and he felt a fierce stab in his head.

The congregation, their eyes now opened, scattered. Shouts of horror and disgust echoed as they disappeared into the reeds. The spider hissed, realizing it had been unmasked. And, throwing back its head, the spider howled.

There was a sickening shift, a momentary lurch in the air, like a soap bubble collapsing in on itself, and then the old woman was back, glaring at Assam. "Demon," she growled at him. "How dare you deceive the loyal followers of the Lord with your sorcerous visions?"

Assam didn't bother answering what was obviously a hypothetical question. He strained at his bonds, twisting his hands and feeling the reeds splinter slowly against his wrists.

"When I'm done with you," the spider, the old woman, said to him, "the faithful will see the true power of the Lord once more."

Assam watched, helpless as the old woman jerked Jee up by her hair and raised the thin edge of the reed. Just as she began to draw it back, the woman collapsed suddenly into a heap.

Amabel stood behind her, holding the splintered remains of the chair in her hands. She tossed it aside and went to Jee, helping her up.

"Thanks," Jee said, getting to her feet. She gave the girl a hug.

Assam pulled his hands free of the reeds at last and rose on shaky legs to embrace his sister. They held each other for a moment, Amabel still clinging to Jee. Assam, at last, pulled away and looked down at Jee.

"I guess we should probably..." He broke off, interrupted by a sudden howl of rage that filled the air around them like thunder.

The old woman rose up in fury, flickering between her mask and the true face of the spider beneath. "Children!" she shrieked out. "Come now and aid the servant of your Lord in this holy battle against the evil forces that have turned to assail the gates of Heaven and strike down the servant of the Lord."

It howled again and the people came streaming back through the reeds, compelled by that hideous call. Gathering the congregation back to itself, the spider — and it *was* a spider, Assam saw, wearing the old woman like a costume — turned back to the children huddled together. The spider flared out its mandibles with a fierce, stinking hiss. Its followers swarmed forward, gathering around it like curdled milk down a drain, surrounding the children.

Assam pushed the little girls behind him. If this was going to be his last fight, he was going to try to do his best to give them time to run.

Just as one of the congregation reached for him — a dough faced man with eyes as flat and dull as stones — there was a strange rush in the air around them. Assam swallowed, his ears popping. The man's eyes widened in horror.

Edgar was back. The boy had a tiny flame about the length of a pencil balanced on the tip of his

forefinger. "I think," he said as he stepped forward to face the spider, "that it's time for a little purifying fire of my own."

The spider backed up slowly, the firelight dancing, refracted in its many eyes.

Edgar glanced around to the people surrounding them. "Abracadabra," he said, snapping his fingers. The flame shattered and, within moments, the clearing had become a nightmare conflagration — reeds going up like birthday candles, cattails exploding like torches, screams and panic and frenzy, blazing and blackening faces.

People ran, people caught fire. And they burned.

Assam gently put a hand over Amabel's eyes, shielding her from the horrible sight. He tried to do the same for Jee, but she shoved his arm away.

A woman ran past trailing screams and flames, her reed dress ablaze, her hair scorched down to blackened nubs.

Jee took his hand and replaced it over her eyes. She did not push it away again.

Assam watched as Edgar strolled around the clearing, nonchalantly flicking flames off of his fingertips like a bored schoolboy shooting rubber bands at flies. He paid no attention to the demon — now an old woman once more — wailing away piteously as her petty little world burst into flames around her.

Assam could not help being impressed by, and even a little envious of, the other boy. He wondered if he would ever have that power, that confidence.

Eventually, thankfully, it was over. The smoke hung thick in the air and there was a gritty, greasy tang to it.

"Is it over?" Jee asked, slowly peeling his hand away from her eyes, the palm slick with her tears.

"It is." Edgar gave her a rotten smile. "And you're very welcome. Oops," he said, pointing his finger towards Amabel, "looks like I missed one."

"Stop!" Jee stepped between him and the cowering girl.

"Just kidding." Edgar laughed, lowering his hand. "You need to lighten up, missy. When you lose your sense of humor, you might as well give up altogether." He sighed, contentedly surveying his work. "So . . . shall we go, then?"

"What about Amabel?" Jee asked.

Edgar shrugged. "She can stay to bury her dead or shave her head and spend the rest of her days weaving wickery baskets with Baby Jesus for all I care. But," he held up his hand, stopping Jee in her tracks, "she's not coming with us. I didn't sign on to babysit every stray you pick up. And," he continued before Jee could open her mouth to protest, "there's nothing you can say or do to convince me. So don't bother."

"You made a bargain," she said.

"Yes, yes I did. And I'm perfectly happy to sit here and wave the flies away from your sweet little face. And that's all I plan on doing if you press the point. But I won't take another step with that precious little tot in tow."

"What do you want?" Assam asked.

Edgar looked at him, nothing but honest fatigue on his face. "I want this to be over. Believe me, I am as sick of the two of you as you are of me. Besides," he said, reverting back to his usual cocky self, "I want my five minutes. The longer this takes, the longer I have to wait for it."

"Where's that old lady?" Jee asked suddenly.

Assam looked around. There was no sign of the woman or the spider. Only a pile of ragged clothing remained where she had fallen.

Edgar nudged the clothes with his toe.

"Wherever she went," Assam said, "I don't think we need to worry about her anymore."

"I wasn't all that worried about her to begin with." Edgar shrugged. "But if it makes you feel better to think you're safe because you can't see her anymore . . . well, okay then." He turned back to them. "Now, about your new friend..."

"...she's coming with us," Jee said firmly.

"We really can't just leave her here," Assam said, hoping the boy would see reason.

Edgar looked at him in disbelief. "Why not?"

"Because..." Assam thought for a moment. "It's not safe here."

"It's safer than it used to be."

"She's just a little girl," Jee said.

"You sure about that?" Edgar cocked an eyebrow. "You never know who's who in this place. Believe me."

Holding her ground, Jee returned to first principles. "She's coming with us."

Edgar smiled wryly. "Did it even occur to you that you might ask her if she wants to?"

Jee said nothing.

"Okay kids," Edgar turned to Amabel, squatting down in front of her, hands on his knees. "Here's the score: You can either join up with your new pals on their magical mystery tour . . . or you can stay here and play with your dolly until Judgement Day. What's it going to be?"

Amabel pulled her doll close and stared at him silently.

Edgar rolled his eyes. "You're killing me, kid."

"Amabel?" Jee asked. "Do you want to come with us?"

Slowly, the girl shook her head.

"We can take care of you. You'll be safe."

"Leading the witness, your honor." Edgar muttered.

Assam touched the girl's arm. "You want to stay here?"

Amabel nodded.

"Alone?"

"But..." The little girl laid her fingertips against Jee's cheek, silencing her. She smiled and hugged the older girl.

"Well," Edgar said brightly, "that's settled, then."

Jee pulled back and looked into Amabel's face. "You sure about this?"

The girl nodded. Jee hugged her again.

Assam put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "Be careful," he told her. "Take care of yourself."

"And Amy." Jee added.

The girl nodded again. "I will."

Maybe she watched them go, standing there in the burnt out clearing littered with blackened reeds and greasy bones. Maybe she raised her hand in farewell when Jee looked back.

And, once the children were out of sight, maybe she went to the old wooden chair and set it upright once more. Maybe she sat down, legs dangling, clutching her doll. And maybe, as she sat there, she might have noticed a little brown spider picking its way up the arm of the chair towards her hand. And maybe, just maybe, she stretched out her hand and watched it tap its way onto her open palm. Maybe she held it up to her ear, maybe she listened to its careful whispers.

And maybe, at some point, she smiled.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I'm cold," Jee said.

They'd been walking for a number of hours. No one had spoken much, not since the spider. Not even Edgar. A thick mist clung low to the ground, enveloping them and making it impossible to have any sense of how far they'd gone.

They followed the river, of course. Edgar led the way, with Jee next and then her brother following after. She kept her eyes on the ground — the sound of water on one side, silent mist on the other. Jee placed her bare feet exactly into the footprints that Edgar left behind. His steps were so regular and even that she had to glance up to make sure he was really there. But even the dim shape moving in front of her was little comfort for long. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was alone, following her own footprints in circles through the mist. Like Pooh and Piglet hunting heffalumps.

She looked back at her brother, little more than a shadow in the mist behind her. She strained for a glimpse of his face, so familiar and safe. There: A blur resolved itself into those features she'd known her whole life. She sighed, safe again.

Jee looked back down at her feet once more, watching them rise and fall in the pale mud. She'd lost her boots during the chase through the marsh and she was regretting not going back for them. "I'm cold," she said again. She'd been cold for a while now. But it was finally time, she decided, to mention it. Her feet and toes had gone numb a while back before. She knew that eventually they would fall off. She realized she wasn't walking anymore, her feet wouldn't move. They were blocks of ice too heavy to lift. Like her head...

She swayed and a shape rose up and caught her as she fell. Her brother's breath, a warm blast of summer on her cheek. "I'm cold," she said again. "Is it cold? Why is it so cold?"

"We should stop and rest." Assam helped her sit down.

"Whatever you say." Edgar sat down heavily across from them.

Assam noticed her feet. "What happened to your boots?"

She shrugged. "I lost them in the swamp, chasing that girl."

"You should have told us, we could have gone back for them."

She shook her head. "We couldn't go back with that man following us."

Edgar said nothing.

Assam scratched his head, irritated with her and with himself for not noticing sooner. He took off his coat and then his sweater. He wore a t-shirt underneath which he removed and then, carefully, tore into two sections.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"You need something on your feet," he told her, carefully wrapping them in the sections of the shirt and tying them off. He tore his sweater into strips, biting at the rough wool to get started. These he wrapped around her odd, bundled feet. "How does that feel? Better?"

Jee nodded.

He put his coat back on. "We'll see how they hold up. What do you think, Edgar?"

The boy's face was little more than a thumbprint smudge in the mist. "What's that?" He sounded young. He sounded tired. This was new to Jee. She stared at him, trying to read his face through the fog.

"Nothing." She realized that she felt a little sorry for him. "How old are you?" It was hard to tell if his eyes were open or closed, but the sigh he let out sounded very tired indeed.

"A little older than my teeth," he told her, "but not as old as my tongue."

"How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to know my way around."

She nodded. "How did you come here?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did you find this place?"

"I just started walking and..." He broke off.

"Uh huh."

"It . . . it was a long time ago."

"How long?" Assam asked.

Jee couldn't tell if Edgar was smiling or not, but something in his face and voice changed.

"I've no clue," he said. "None at all. Far too long, let's say."

"Why don't you leave, then?" Jee asked.

He stood up. "Well, sometimes it's not so easy to leave a place after you've settled in." He rubbed his hands together and blew on them. "Might as well keep moving," he told them. "It's going to get colder and walking's the only way we're going to keep ourselves warm."

Assam and Jee rose reluctantly.

"Why is it so cold here?" the boy asked.

Edgar didn't answer at first. Then, quietly, he said "This is what it feels like when love is betrayed." He started walking.

Assam looked at his sister and then they followed after him.

"What's that mean?" Jee asked.

"It means this is the point where love and loyalty lose all of their heat," Edgar said in the mist.

After that, there wasn't much else to say.

But Edgar was right. It did get much colder.

INTERLUDE

In his precise, careful handwriting, Juniper writes these words: *Most people think that time, like a river, only moves in one direction. They believe – believe because they have been told – that the shape of their life is that of a line, tracing a single path from Point A to Point B.*

Juniper sets down his pen and considers these words, watching the ink shift from shiny to dull as it dries on the page. He takes up his pen again and carefully draws a line through each word he has just written. After a moment, he starts again.

Time, he writes slowly, is not the single, unbroken thread that people believe it to be. It is not a river flowing

only one direction and dragging along whatever gets caught in its irresistible current. The shape of our lives, the shape of all our lives, is not a straight line that starts when we are born and stops when we die.

There is no old woman with scissors waiting for us at the end.

The nib of his pen hovers over the next line. He frowns at what he has written. He has a sense that he's straying from what he had meant to write, but he does not want to take the time to try and start again.

Time, he cannot help but write, is not a river. It is more free than that, more fluid. There is no bank on either side that directs it. There is no channel to follow.

He hums to himself now, still writing: *Time, like water, is everywhere. It finds every crack, every gap, and flows into it. It fills the air around us. We breathe it in, we draw time into us and it flows inside us, until we gasp it out once more.*

It is in the clouds, it falls from the sky, it crashes against the shore and sends up its spray to fill the calmer places where it pools and gathers. And there, smaller things live in a tiny pool of time while beyond the rocks a whole ocean of it seethes.

We pass it between us – hand to hand, lips to lips, body to body – we share it, we hoard it.

Our eyes are filled with it and it is time that dribbles out from them in tiny rivers when we find we cannot stand to hold it in any longer.

When there is no water – in the spare places between the worlds, in the dry, lifeless places – there is no time.

Time, Juniper writes carefully, is water.

He stops himself from writing more, letting those last words dry on the page, watching with satisfaction as the letters seep into the paper.

Juniper's ink is not black, but a deep coppery brown, almost red. It is the color of old blood, the color of the sun seen through smoke, and he makes it himself.

The first clocks measured time with water – water and sand, sea and shore...

There is a rattle from one of the shelves behind him. Juniper stops and looks up. The jars are dull, pale yellowed labels are starting to peel on a few of them. He makes a mental note to replace them later. Another rattle. He narrows his eyes.

Silence.

He turns back to the book open in front of him. But the words, the gentle flow of them that had once been so strong in his mind, it has all drifted away. He grinds his teeth in irritation before letting go of the frustration with a long sigh. Capping his pen, he reminds himself, for all of his collections and diversions, that this is only a temporary situation.

He'll be on his way home soon enough, in time.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The word "cold" Jee decided, didn't quite do justice to the bone-numbing chill that seeped into every inch of her being. It was a dry cold, harsh and insistent. It was determined. It would not be overcome,

it could not be shut out, and it was impossible to ignore. There was no place anywhere, inside or out, where she felt warm.

The ground sloped downward under their feet, hard and slippery and unforgiving. They made their way down as best they could, shoes skidding and slipping. After a while the slope flattened out again. A chill mist clung to the ground, bits of reeds and plants sticking up here and there.

"It's frozen," Assam said.

"What?" Edgar didn't turn around.

"It's frozen. It's a frozen pond."

"It's a lake," Edgar replied. "And yes, you're correct that it is, in fact, frozen. Good to see that you're learning to use those remarkably perceptive powers of yours." He kept walking. The children followed.

Jee stumbled, tripping over a rock, frozen, half-submerged in the ice. She stood up and brushed off the seat of her pants. "Sorry. I tripped over a..." She trailed off, eyes wide.

It wasn't a rock. It was a body, a corpse almost completely submerged into the frozen surface of the lake — head and shoulders poking up through the ice. The skin was windburned, laced with frost, and hanging off in shreds. The scalp had been scoured down to stubble by the chill wind. The face was blackened, the eyelids iced over, the teeth bared in an eternal grimace.

Then the eyes opened.

"What is it?" Assam rushed to her side. "What's wrong?"

Jee didn't answer. She was too busy screaming, nothing but sheer, horrified madness blasting out of her. She scrambled away from the head, watching the pale eyes follow her as she slipped and skidded across the ice. Assam knelt next to her and said her name, trying to break through. "What is it?"

She gestured to the dark shape poking up in front of them. Assam looked, locking his gaze with those staring eyes. A silent misery drifted sluggishly across the front of his mind, sinking further inside. Very cold. Taking as deep a breath as he could, Assam pushed it back out again with all of his might.

Jee's screams had turned to long gasping breaths. He held onto her and stood up slowly, lifting her up along with him.

"Oh my god..." she choked. All around them in the mist, dark shapes stuck up through the ice. They weren't bodies, Assam realized. They were people trapped in the frozen lake. They were everywhere, as far as the eye could see, frozen into the surface of the lake. Some were more exposed than the one Jee had tripped over, their waists and legs encased below the surface while they clawed at the ice above. Nearby, another had managed to work a hand free. Raw fingers clutched, waved at Assam like the fronds of a dark anemone. There, one long arm extended towards them, just out of reach, grasping sluggishly at the chill air. Others had settled deeper, only their eyes and the top of their heads visible above the pale surface. And some were moaning, some screaming, crying out in a host of languages.

Jee had awakened them with her screams. Holding onto her, Assam backed up, leading his sister slowly away. He stumbled, something clutching his foot. He looked down to see dark fingers sticking up through the ice, curling around the toe of his boot. Below the surface, he could make out a blur that might have been a face, a frozen scream. He pulled his leg away but the hand held him fast. Pale bones poked through the shredded tips of the fingers like claws. He had a momentary flash, an image in his mind of those dark fingers pulling him down through the ice, trapping him here like all the others. He kicked and stomped with his other foot. The fingers snapped, shattered like icicles and he pulled himself free. A cry of rage and pain echoed up through the ice and drove itself into his brain. He stumbled, pulling his sister down with him. They huddled together, squeezing their eyes closed to shut it all out.

Footsteps scraped across the ice. Assam looked up. "What are they?" he asked.

"Irritating, mostly." Edgar shook his head. "Come on, we've got a ways to go yet."

Assam tried to rise. Jee clung to him. "Who are they?"

Edgar offered him a hand. "Well," the boy said with a grunt, helping them up, "at one point this was where all the traitors came."

"Traitors to what?"

"Who knows?" Edgar surveyed the lake, shaking his head. "It used to be better organized than this. Used to be you knew where you were at, knew how far gone you were, by who was frozen into the lake around you. Now it's all jumbled up. Can't tell the ones who betrayed their country from the ones who betrayed their family."

Assam looked around, then back to Jee. She was shuddering, eyes staring.

"I'll let you in on a little secret," Edgar said. "All of these people aren't really traitors to anything but themselves. That's where it always starts and, once you do that, there's no turning back."

"Who put them here?" Assam asked. "Are they being punished?"

"Only by themselves." Edgar pointed to a figure nearby: A body submerged in ice up to the chest, only the head and one arm exposed. "The only one punishing him is him." He gestured to all of them scattered across the frozen waste around them. "Same for all of them."

"Why? Why would they do this to themselves?"

The grin opened across Edgar's face like a rotting wooden gate. "Because that's what they expected, it's what they think they deserve. Trust me. They would have been disappointed if there hadn't been a little bit of a spanking waiting for them when they got here."

"Spanking?" Assam stared at the boy in horror.

"This is nothing," Edgar told him. "Just be glad we don't have to go through Malebolge or Dis." He shook his head. "The people there really have some issues."

"Can we go now, please?" Jee kept her face against her brother's jacket, muffling her voice.

"You bet," Edgar said as he led them off. "This goes on for quite a while so you may want to keep your eyes closed."

"For how long?" Jee asked.

Edgar looked at Assam and shrugged. "Not too much farther. We'll tell you when it's safe to look."

They threaded their way through the dark forms, keeping their distance as best they could. There were hundreds of them, thousands. As far as the eye could see.

Probably more, Assam thought to himself. He wondered how big the lake was, how deep it went. "They're all traitors?"

"More or less." Edgar replied. "It's hard to tell these days. Everything went sketchy for a while after they went over to computers. They never really got all the bugs sorted out. But this is where you end up when you've got more guilt than grace to share with yourself at the end of the day." He stepped over two figures intertwined together in the ice. They could have been lovers, they might have been enemies. Either way, they tore at each other in desperation. But they weren't so desperate as to not look up as the children passed.

In his mind, Assam saw a dark hand dart out and grab his leg, adding a third figure to that terrible sculpture for all eternity. He shuddered, unsure of whether that thought had come from one of them or if his imagination had just been playing tricks on him. "How did they get here?"

"I told you," Edgar said.

"No, how did they get here? How did they find this place?"

The other boy didn't answer immediately. Assam wondered if he even knew the answer to the question.

"We all find our way to where we're meant to be," Edgar said at last. "Everything finds its own level in time. Eventually."

"Even you?"

"And look at me now, eh?" Edgar chuckled. "Let's keep moving. Otherwise we'll start to melt the ice. And then we'll sink. And then we'll freeze."

"What's that?" Jee pointed to a dark smudge rising up in the distance off to their left.

"Don't worry about that," Edgar said over his shoulder. "Less talking and more walking."

Assam could see that there was something out there. It was far off but he could tell that it was huge, towering over the ice. It might be a building of some sort. He thought for a moment, watching how the dark shape shifted and changed in the distance. It reminded him of something. "Is that a..?" He stopped, watching it move. "Is that a windmill?"

"No," Edgar said.

"What is it?" Jee asked.

"You honestly don't want to know."

"Tell us," Jee said. "Is that where we're going?"

Edgar sighed. "You two tourists don't need to worry about every little local point of interest on your trip. You're not on a holiday." Something pulled at his foot. Edgar looked down to see a dark face chewing at his ankle. He kicked at the splintered teeth absentmindedly and then threw up his hands. "Fine," he said, "since you want to know so bad. It's a remnant, from hundreds of years ago. I can't believe it's even still around, let alone that you can see it. But we're not going even one step closer to it than this."

"Why not?" Assam asked.

"Because it scares the shit out of me." Edgar gave them an exasperated look. "Can we keep moving now, please?"

"What's a remanannant?" Jee asked.

"A remnant," Edgar said patiently, "is a piece of fabric left over from a larger bolt of cloth. It is a scrap, a shred of something left behind by someone who couldn't be bothered to clean up after himself. For many, many travelers," he went on, "this place accommodates their milieu by giving them raw material to shape for themselves. A template, if you will, by which they can create a metaphor to help them make sense of where they are."

"What's a millyew?" Jee asked at the exact same time that her brother asked "Who left it here?"

Edgar clapped his hands together. "Tell you what," he said, "I will answer your questions if you agree to keep your feet moving in the general direction of our destination. How does that sound?"

Assam and Jee nodded.

"Peachy." He started walking again.

They followed.

"A milieu," he said to Jee, "is a way of looking at the world. Sometimes the world looks back and, if you're lucky, it will try to get to know you better."

She nodded as though she understood.

"And your question," he said to Assam, "is just too stupid to answer. Who cares who left it here? Even if I told you his name, you still wouldn't know anything more than you do right now." He hooked his thumb at Jee. "At least she got a vocabulary lesson out of it."

They walked on in silence. After a time and a distance, the dark figures in the ice began thin out,

appearing less and less. Assam looked back at the shape still looming off in the distance behind them. It did not, he decided, look like a windmill from this angle. Not at all. The wind kicked up, sending a chill through him. He heard then, or thought he heard, a howl from on high. It might have only been the wind, but he knew better. In his mind's eye, he saw three faces howling with horrible fury, massive wings beating against the air, straining to be free. He shook his head, trying to get rid of the image.

Once for his birthday, his father had given him a toy screen that magically drew lines across its silver surface by twisting a few knobs this way and that. When you wanted to clear the picture and start over, all you had to do was shake it and it would be clear once more . . . or almost. There was always a ghost of the image left behind, lingering on the screen. Over time, the silver would be etched with old lines, old pictures long shaken out of existence. If you looked close, you could get lost in them, like a maze.

He felt his mind drifting down that path. He heard echoes of old stories, layered on top of one another, footfalls on the ice from other travelers long passed, flickers of what they saw. He shuddered, shook his head to clear the images away. When he had cleared his mind enough, he saw that he was a little behind the others. His sister had outpaced him and was up ahead, walking next to Edgar.

The boy turned his head to say something to her, but the wind kicked up and Assam heard nothing but the faint sound of Jee's voice answering. He strained to hear, but her words were carried away in the blunt teeth of the wind. He jogged up alongside her and grabbed her arm, pulling her back. "What were you talking about?" he asked, holding his palm against his ear.

"Nothing," she said. "What's wrong with your head?"

"I have an earache."

"Is it going to fall off?"

"No," he told her. "It's cold and I'm trying to warm it up."

"Is your other ear cold?"

"Yes."

"Then why aren't you warming that one up too?"

"Because I don't have an earache on that side."

"Oh. Okay," she said.

"What did he say to you?" Assam asked her under his breath.

"Just asked about mom."

He glanced up at the boy walking ahead of them. "What about her?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Just what she was like."

"What did you tell him?"

She shrugged again. He wanted to shake her. Instead, he called out to the boy in front of them. "What did you ask her?"

Edgar turned and walked back to them, hunching his shoulders over against the wind. "What?"

"What were the two of you talking about?"

"When?"

"Before," Assam said. "You asked about our mom."

Edgar gave him a look. "If you knew the answer, why'd you ask the question?"

"What did she tell you?"

Edgar shrugged.

Assam could feel himself starting to lose grip on his anger. "What did you ask her?"

"He just asked about mom," Jee said from behind him.

"Yeah, I got that." Assam grabbed Edgar's arm. "Tell me."

The boy looked at Assam's hand on his arm and then back up again. "I asked her who your mom loved more, you or your sister."

"What did she say?"

Edgar reached up and pulled his arm free. "I don't remember." He turned and kept walking.

"What did you tell him?" Assam asked his sister. She stared at him for a long moment. "Tell me." It wasn't that he cared about the answer, he just didn't like it that Edgar had asked the question. Truth be told, he liked it even less that his sister had answered it.

Jee opened her mouth to answer and then stopped. He saw her eyes widen. "Look!" She pointed past him through the mist.

He turned, still fuming. Before he could ask what was going on, she broke into a run. The ragged cloth around her feet flapping loose. She stopped long enough to gather them up before continuing on down the hill barefoot.

"Come on!" she called to him over her shoulder as she ran past Edgar.

Assam watched her go. Up ahead he could see a low dingy streak of brown running like a scar along the edge of the lake. They'd reached the shore.

Edgar waited for Assam to catch up. The two boys looked at each other, expressionless.

"Looks like we've just about made it," Assam said.

"Looks like." Edgar turned and kept walking.

Assam followed. They made it to the shore and started climbing up the high slope of the bank. Jee was up at the top calling to them. By the time Assam and Edgar got to the crest, she was already running down the opposite site. At the top, Assam could see what she was running towards and, on one level, he was starting to understand what was going on.

"You're not coming with us, are you?" He did not look at Edgar. He did not need to.

"I don't think so," the boy answered. "No."

Assam waited for a moment. "Anything you want to tell me?"

"Not really," Edgar said. "You can take care of yourself."

"I know you're lying to us," Assam told the boy.

Edgar tensed, wary.

"But I don't know why. We haven't done anything to you."

Edgar said nothing.

Down below, Jee called to them.

Edgar did not look at him. "I'm not lying to you."

"Maybe not," Assam replied, "but you're not telling the truth either, are you Edgar?"

"Never said I would."

Assam studied the boy for a moment. "Who is he?"

Edgar only shrugged.

"What do you want?" Assam asked him. "Why did you do this?"

The boy looked away, down the hill to where Jee waited impatiently.

"We could have been friends," Assam said.

"No," Edgar replied. "We couldn't have."

"What did I ever do to you?"

Edgar smiled, his teeth like old tombstones, crumbling and forgotten. He looked suddenly, immeasurably old. He shook his head, a pitying look on his face, and said nothing.

Assam waited, then he said "Be seeing you."

"I've kept my end of the bargain." Edgar reminded him.

Assam turned away. His sister was calling again. "Sure thing."

"I'll catch up with you later to collect."

"Take your time."

"I kept up my end," Edgar said again.

"Did you?" Assam continued down the hill without looking back.

Down below, Jee was rewrapping her feet. "'Bout time."

"Sorry."

She looked back up at Edgar. "Isn't he coming?"

"Nope." Assam didn't bother to turn around..

"Good." She wrinkled her nose. "He smelled bad." She shouted up to the other boy. "You smell bad!"

"Jee..." Assam said.

She shushed him and pointed to the low gate in front of them. "Do you see it?"

He nodded.

"Is this really here?"

He nodded again. "I guess so."

"That's what I thought," she said. "I thought it was, but I wanted to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

"That I wasn't hallucinating." She lifted the latch on the gate. The brass handle, familiar and worn, fitted perfectly to the palm of her hand. "Ready?" she asked, walking through before he could answer. Assam caught the gate as it closed, wincing as the rough wood raked his hand. He drew back and saw a dozen or more splinters across the span of his palm.

"Coming?" Jee asked from the other side. He nodded, picking at the splinters as he went through.

They stood together for a moment, side by side. It was their house — or, rather, it was a house just like theirs back home. Almost exactly like theirs. Someone had reproduced the house they lived in down to the very last detail. The only difference was that the house in front of them was weathered and worn — faded, like a photograph left out in the rain. The paint had cracked and yellowed. The few remaining windows were smeared with dust.

Jee patted his arm. "Don't worry, I'll take care of you."

"I'm not worried." As a place, Assam felt nothing from it. It was practically inert. His mind slid off it like a bead of moisture running down a mirror. He could get nothing from it — which was, in and of itself, a little odd considering everything that had happened so far. Jee took his hand and together they went up the walk to the steps. Assam could see the splintered groove in the rail where, a few years back, he had started to carve his name. Before his father caught him, that is.

"What are you looking at?" Jee asked.

"Remnants," he muttered, shaking his head. Whoever had done this, made this copy, they knew their stuff. They went up to the front door, their footsteps hollow on the narrow porch. Even their mother's flowerpots were there in their proper places on each side of the doormat. But whatever had once grown in them had long since withered to nothing more than a handful of dried twigs.

Jee reached for the door.

"Wait." Assam put his hand on hers. "Maybe we should knock."

"It's our house. We live here." She turned the knob and pushed the door open. "Come on." And then she went in.

Her brother glanced back up at the hill.

Edgar was gone.

After a moment, Assam wiped his feet on the mat and went inside. The sound of the door closing behind him sounded just like home.

BOOK FOUR

HOME

INTERLUDE

If you wait long enough, Juniper thought to himself, you always get what you want. Wait long enough and either what you are waiting for will come to pass, or you will have changed sufficiently enough that whatever does come to pass will end up being, ultimately, what you wanted all along.

Juniper had been waiting a very long time. And he had done very little changing — at least, of himself. He had changed, of course, made many changes to the things surrounding him, changed the people he had met. He had given the world a little nudge from time to time, like kicking a corpse to wake it up, remind it that it was alive.

But even with his hobbies and his side projects, he had grown tired of waiting. Not that this affected his work. No, if anything his boredom made him more productive than ever. But still he waited and made a change happen here and there, when he'd had the opportunity . . . and now his own time was coming, he knew it, and finally it would be time to change. He couldn't wait.

But he had to wait. So he packed it all up inside and sat, waiting, with one ear listening for the door. He fairly vibrated with anticipation. Around him the jars on the shelves echoed along the same frequency. He willed them all to be still. He willed himself calm.

And then he took a breath and held it, waiting.

CHAPTER ONE

Assam and Darjeeling waited, listening as the front door latched behind them — a gentle noise, one that they knew well. It was the sound of afternoon snacks after school, the sound of their mother coming home after a late night at work, the sound of friend come to visit, and the sound of going out to play. It was, in any number of ways, the sound of home.

"Is this our house?" Jee's voice sounded flat and hollow in the dead air, she dropped it to a whisper. "Are we home?"

Assam had no idea. They were, obviously, standing in the front hallway of their house — the house they had lived in their whole lives. To one side of the door he saw the scuffed baseboard where they threw their backpacks after school. Once a year, at the start of summer, their father would paint over the marks. By the end of the school year, they'd be back again. And here were those marks, familiar and unmistakable.

They were home. And yet, that was impossible. They couldn't be.

They moved from room to room, each empty and stripped of furniture, laid bare to the walls. A thick layer of dust lay over everything. The corners were practically furry with it. There were old nails and stained squares on the walls where pictures had once hung. The cupboard doors in the kitchen gaped open, hollowed out. The faucet in the kitchen sink let out a gasp of stale air when they turned it and, somewhere below, they heard a rattle of ancient pipes.

Upstairs was no different. They could not bear to explore the hollow shell of their parents' room, stopping only to peek in through the door before moving to their own.

Assam stood in the center of his room, listening to his sister's footsteps echo across the bare floor of her room next door. In his mind, he saw her open the closet door, searching for some scrap of her life in this hollow husk of a house.

He could feel the house itself — empty, inert and gray with neglect. There was nothing out there, not a ripple nor a flicker of what had once been. There was no joy in this house and there never had been. He could not hear even the faintest echo of old laughter. Little fingers like his had never torn paper and ribbon from a gift, or tapped out a tune on the piano. No child had ever played here. No parent had ever smiled. It wasn't just a dead place, it was stillborn. It had never drawn breath.

He was still standing there, staring at the floor, when his sister came in. "So now what..?" she started to ask, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"What?" She whispered. "What is it?"

He put a finger to his lips, slowly lowered it to point to the floor. Dusty footprints wandered here and there. He passed his finger in a wide arc, tracing the looping spiral trails. "I don't think all those are mine," he said softly, putting his foot into one of the prints. It was much larger than his. An adult's foot made that mark. He stepped into another one, then another, tracing the steps throughout the room. He followed them to the window, then to the door. He took a few tentative steps into the hallway, but the only footprints he saw out there were his sister's. He stepped backwards into the room, following the path of the prints to the window and then back to the door once more. He stood in front of the open doorway, studying the patterns at his feet, the dusty maze traced into the floor. After a moment he raised his hand and closed the door.

Back home he had a hook on the back of his door for hanging up his towel and bathrobe. Below the hook was a mirror his mother had brought home one day. "Now you can check your style," she told him with a wink.

It had never quite occurred to Assam before that he might have a style, nor would he have known where to check for it, if he had. So he'd more or less forgotten about the mirror, except when he remembered (or was reminded) to hang up his towel.

A few months after his mother had put up the mirror, one of the girls at school had smiled at him during lunch and said that she liked his hair. She was a year older than Assam and a bit taller as well. Since then, he had found himself somewhat more interested in the mirror, checking his hair in it every morning before he left for school.

But in this place, the mirror on the back of the door was broken. A thin crack ran down across the face of it, from the upper right to the lower left corner.

"When did that break?" his sister asked.

He stared into his reflection. It had been so long since he had seen his own face. He reached out his hand to touch the cool surface, the reflection of his palm splitting open, divided and doubled where it overlapped with the crack. Assam tilted his head to one side, watching his reflection skip over the crack and continue on the other side, splitting his face in two.

"So now what?" Jee was growing impatient behind him and he could tell that the emptiness of the room, the emptiness of the house all around them, made her uneasy.

"Now," he said as he laid his hand across the crack, "now we find out what's really going on around here." It sounded a lot cooler than he actually felt, but he did the best he could with it. And then, gently, he pushed against the crack. There was a grating sound as the mirror bucked under the weight of his palm and fell inward with a crash.

Assam stepped back, shaking bits of glass off his hand.

"Did you cut yourself?"

"No." He stepped forward to inspect the door. There was a hole there, where the mirror had hung. Beyond the mirror — no, *within* it — there was a hallway, leading forward into darkness. Assam stepped back and opened the door once more. Outside, he saw the door to his sister's room, his parents' room further up, the bathroom at the end of the hall, the top of the banister leading downstairs. It was not the same hallway as what he had seen inside on the other side of the door. He closed the door again and poked his head into the space where his mirror had been. The dusty, cluttered passage still waited on the other side. Broken shards of the mirror glinted dully on the floor.

He stepped back and opened the door again. The hallway outside was open and light, the floor clear of glass. He looked at his sister and experimentally stuck his hand through the open space on the back of the door. His hand did not come through the other side. The front of door remained smooth and unbroken. He stuck his arm in further, almost to the shoulder. He waved his other hand on the other side of the door. Nothing but air.

"How are you doing that?" Jee whispered.

He shook his head and pulled his arm back out. Gently he closed the door once more and turned to her. "Wait for me here and..."

She was already shaking her head. "No way..."

"...wait for me here," he said again. "If I'm not back in a couple of minutes..."

"...I'm going with you," she said, scared but defiant.

"You're not. You're going to wait here for me. If I don't come back, you're going to go back the way we came. The Queen will help you.

"Her name is Winterly."

"I know her name," he said gently. "And she knows yours. She likes you and she'll help."

Jee glanced to the window. "What about Edgar, I could..."

"...no way," he said. "No. You can't trust him."

"You did."

"I didn't. I just let him believe that I did."

"What about the deal he made with us?"

"The deal he made with me," Assam said. "Not with you. If I'm gone..."

"...I don't want you to go in there."

Assam didn't want to either, but... "I have to."

"Why?"

"Because it's what happens next." He realized as he said it that it was true, this is what had to happen. Everything so far had led them to this point and it had to be done, or it would never be over. He touched his sister's cheek, his fingertips breaking through the tears gathering there and sending them rolling down her face. She grabbed him tight and buried her face under his arm. "I don't want you to go," she said again.

He squeezed her for a moment, feeling very much like his father. "Wait for me," he told her. "But don't wait too long."

She stepped back, face streaked with dust and tears, and watched as he carefully lifted first one leg and then the other over the bottom of the hole where the mirror had once been. He was standing in the door, one leg in and one leg out.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm okay." He looked away, up the dark passage beyond the door. "Don't wait too long," he said again.

"How long is too long?"

"A couple of minutes."

"How will I know how long it's been?"

He thought for a moment. "Count to one hundred. No, better make it two hundred. No, you know what?"

"What?"

"Sing a song. When it's over, if I'm not back, then you can go."

"What song should I sing?"

"I don't know." He felt very uncomfortable, standing between two places like this, exposed in both of them. "Pick something."

"How about 'Happy Birthday'?"

"Something longer than that." He back looked up the dark passageway. "And don't sing too loud, either."

"Okay."

He pulled his leg in. He looked back at her, through the door.

"You look like a poster," she told him.

He posed awkwardly and gave her a weak smile. "Yeah, I'm a boy band."

"Your mom's a boy band." She didn't smile, not even at her own joke.

They looked at each other for a long moment. He nodded and moved up the passage, away from her. After a few steps, he turned back to wave, his palm a pale blur in the dim light.

She waved back and then he turned a corner and was gone. Jee watched the black rectangle for a few moments, half-expecting him to come back right away. When he didn't, she took a breath and, quietly, began to sing...

"'Desperado . . . why don't you come to your senses?'"

She stepped back into the room, eyes on the door, still singing.

INTERLUDE

Juniper had waited long enough. As long as it had been, as certain as he was that they were finally coming . . . he just wasn't sure. He disliked uncertainty. Intensely.

Because, he reflected, at the end of the day, if nothing happened, if no one came, he was just a man sitting in a room and staring blankly at a door that might never open.

He tilted his head to one side, listening to his spine crack. The jars on the shelves behind him rattled as if in response.

Maybe, he thought to himself, *I should go and have a look around*. And as he thought it, he hated himself — the need, the weakness, the uncertainty within. He shifted his weight back against his chair . . . but he did not rise.

The jars rattled again.

He listened for the door. But he heard nothing. He willed himself to be certain. He willed himself to know. Only then would he allow himself to rise.

CHAPTER TWO

Assam walked through the semidarkness, turning this way and that as passages opened up. It wasn't quite dark. It wasn't quite light. He could see well enough to know he was moving along some sort of hallway, but not well enough to know what was around him or what he might be approaching.

He was inside his house, walking on the other side of those familiar rooms and hallways. It never occurred to him before now that there was another place in the place where he lived, just on the other side of the wall.

On this side, the walls were rough, all exposed beams and pipes and unfinished plaster. From time to time there would be a gap between the beams and, instead of an opening, there would be a smooth surface. He'd already bumped his nose once or twice trying to turn into a hallway that wasn't there. He stopped in front of one of these and studied it, trying to make out some kind of detail in the dim light. There was nothing there, really, just vague shapes that shifted like shadows, drifting across the deeper darkness before him.

He went on walking. There was no instinct guiding him, no purpose or method behind when he turned or when he went forward. He might as well be in a maze. In a flash, he thought of his father. Once, when he was younger, they'd been reading the story of the Minotaur together. Assam had found it all a little scary. It wasn't the monster that had bothered him so much. It'd been the idea of Theseus wandering alone in that dark maze. His dad set the book aside. "Do you know how to find your way out when you're lost in a maze?"

Assam didn't.

"You don't run around blindly, trying to guess the way out. It could take forever before you got lucky. And you might never get lucky." He stood up, holding his hand out in the air, palm out. Assam watched, fascinated.

"When you're lost, put your left hand out against the wall and leave it there. Start walking and eventually you find your way through the maze."

They went back to the story and, in the end, everything worked out just fine.

Now, here in the dark, he thought of his father and, carefully, he put his hand out against the wall. *Eventually*, he reminded himself, *you find your way through*.

CHAPTER THREE

Jee sang her song. She sang it twice. Afterwards, she sat cross-legged on the floor and stared at the jagged hole on the back of her brother's door.

"This," she said aloud, "is stupid." She stood up. She had absolutely no intention of doing what her brother had told her to do. She wasn't going to wait, she wasn't going to go for help. In fact, she was surprised when he believed her so easily. Still, he was like that sometimes when he was distracted. Too trusting.

She went to the door and peered through the hole. She was not the sort of kid who was afraid of the dark. In fact, very few things scared her at all. She didn't get scared usually, she got angry instead — which made it a lot easier to deal with things, when they did get a little scary. Fear makes you run, it turns you cold. You freeze up. Anger, on the other hand, is hotter and it gives you the power to head right at whatever is scaring you so that you can kick it in the shins. Or higher, if you can reach.

Right at the moment, Jee was angry, angry enough to step through the broken mirror and go inside. Her brother was in there and she wasn't going to let anything or anyone hurt him — not exiles or witches or spider demons or robot spacemen with lasers.

She moved slowly, picking her way through the dusty passage with care and mindful of her thinly-wrapped feet. The floor was littered with all sorts of trash and clutter — fragments of glass and wood, old newspapers, and even what appeared to be dried leaves and twigs. It looked like the sewer grate at the end of their street cluttered with trash after a rain storm.

It was dark and she moved carefully. There were twists and turns everywhere, with no straight path to follow. The light was so dim that she found herself bumping into walls every so often. She took the turns as they came, not knowing if she was getting closer to her brother or further away. She wondered, briefly, if she should try to follow a pattern or a path. Maybe he had left little clues along the way so that he could find his way back. Bread crumbs. It seemed like something he would do.

She studied the ground in front of her, squinting in the dim light. Even if that jumble of dead leaves was some kind of sign from him, she decided, she had no way of knowing what it meant.

She walked on, turning a corner and coming face to face with a shadowy apparition. She gasped and immediately lashed out, punching it in the stomach as hard as she could. A shudder ran up her arm, a flat point of contact against her knuckles, and then the shadow disappeared in a shower of broken glass.

Jee stood for a moment, willing herself calm. It had been a mirror, stuck between two of the wooden beams in the wall, and she had shattered it. She'd punched out her own reflection. "Seven years," she muttered. Her knuckles were bleeding. She wiped them on a crumpled sheet of newspaper and touched one of the open spaces to her left. Smooth as glass.

She stared into the darkness. There was another faint shadowy shape in front of her. She raised her hand. The shadow did likewise. Another mirror.

She moved on, keeping a hand on the wall. A left turn here, a right turn there. She had no idea where she was going. She wanted to call out for her brother, to follow his voice and find him. But she didn't know who else (or what else) was here. Deep down she knew that if all else failed, her brother would come and find her. He was good at finding things.

Suddenly, she found herself sprawled on the ground. Her nose was sore. She rubbed it, glad to see that it wasn't bleeding. She stood up, a little dizzy, and reached out carefully. The passage in front of her

was smooth like the others but she couldn't see a reflection. It took her a second to realize that it was glass, plain glass. She'd walked right into a glass wall and it had knocked her down.

She remembered once when the carnival had come to her school. There had been a maze, glass and mirrors arranged in a simple pattern of hallways and dead ends. But that maze had been different, filled with light and laughter and music from the midway. She'd loved it. It had been like walking through a crystal clear lake. And no one got lost — at least, not forever.

This, on the other hand, was a stagnant pond choked with rubbish and exposed roots, and she was drowning in it.

Gently, she tapped the glass wall in front of her. She wondered if she was still in the house. She didn't think back home there was room for all of this between the walls. She realized then that she was, more or less, far past the outskirts of anything familiar. And her only escape was to find a way out on her own. No one was coming to rescue her.

She held her breath. She grew up a little bit in the time before she let it out again. Her brother had not come back for her, which meant he could not come back for her. Something had happened. He needed her. She was just going to have to rescue them both.

She could not do what he could do. But she could at least listen. All around her were little creaks and cracks. She cocked a careful ear, trying to hear anything different, anything unusual, anything she could follow. And then, she felt something run across her foot.

She gasped and jumped back, panting in the dark as whatever-it-was scuttled away up the passage. It must have been a mouse, she decided. She was comfortable with the idea of a mouse. A rat would have been somewhat worse. A spider was considerably more horrid to consider. So she settled on the easiest, most comfortable possibility. She listened to the mouse — or, rather, the “mouse” — as it rustled further down the passage.

It dawned on her that, while she might not have any idea where she was or how to get out, the mouse almost certainly knew where it was going. She took a few steps towards the sound. It stopped. She waited, worrying that she'd lost it. Then, she heard the stealthy movement, the scrape of little paws on the floor, rustling a bit of paper as it passed.

Jee followed as quietly as she could. This turned out to be difficult, as there was all sorts of rubbish on the floor. Every step had the potential to set off a chain reaction of noise. She cringed at the slightest sound, waiting and listening for the rustling up ahead to start moving again. And then, she took a step and accidentally kicked something large in her path. She heard it tumble and clatter through the hallway and, in the silence that followed, she heard a frantic, far off sound as the mouse took off through the maze, leaving her behind.

Jee sat down, frustrated and determined not to cry. Crying meant giving up. And that was something she didn't do. Ever.

But she sat for a while, staring into the darkness and listening. She could hear faint sounds far off in the house, but she had no way of knowing if they were just the usual creaks and cracks or something else.

Then, a dark figure crossed in front of her, about ten or fifteen feet up the hallway from where she was sitting. She froze, nothing but the sound of her own heart in her ears. Below that, faintly, she heard the sound of footsteps moving away. She couldn't be certain, but she did not think that it had been her brother. It looked bigger than him, the footsteps sounded different.

She wondered if she would be able to find that voice again, the one that had saved them in the fox's lair. If she was in a jam, would that voice come to her again? What if it didn't?

It had finally occurred to her that maybe her brother wasn't the only one with power.

She listened as the steps faded away, deciding if she should follow or head the opposite way. Once the hallway was silent again, she counted to twenty in her head and then stood up as quietly as she could. She moved carefully up the hallway toward the point where she'd seen the figure pass.

There was another hallway, intersecting the passage she was in. She considered for a moment. Should she turn left and go the way the figure had come from? Or go right and try to follow them?

Finally, she turned to the right. She knew it probably wasn't the safest way to go, but she thought it was the smartest and more likely to lead her out of the maze. She hoped.

CHAPTER FOUR

It didn't take long for Assam to realize that there was one flaw in his father's theory about mazes: To get out, you would have to follow every passage and turn, touch every wall, trace every blind alley to the end. Assam didn't have that kind of time.

He went back to the basics, using his own innate sense to find a way through. However, he felt more and more confused with each step he took, his thoughts scrambling around in his mind. He pressed on, moving forward through the darkness with dwindling confidence. He tried desperately to listen, to push past the darkness and focus in on finding a way through the maze. But he was like a bat, chasing after the echoes of his own voice. The mirrors, he realized. They were reflecting his senses back and forth, bouncing them back at him. He wasn't going to be able to count on his emeralds and eyebright. Not here.

He was, for all intents and purposes, blind once more. Assam slumped against the wall of the passage, sitting down with his back against the cold surface of a mirror. He stretched his legs out in front of him, his feet tangled up in some stray sticks and scraps of newspaper. He didn't care. He was too tired from trying to tune out all of the noise bouncing around him. He tried to calm his mind, to turn inward. He wished that he could just put his hands over his ears, shut it all out and rest for a while. But his ears weren't the problem. It was his mind, still surging with the power of the King's remedies.

His mind . . . he had a flash of insight and wondered if it would work. He slowly built up a mental image, a picture of himself. In his mind, he focused on the image of his hands cupping his ears with his palms. He filled in the image, over and over again, building it up. And, as he did, the noise began to fade. He held it there, in his mind. It might only be imaginary, but it worked. Everything got a bit quieter.

Still holding the image in place, he began adding to it in his imagination: Bundling himself in blankets and pillows, insulating himself even more, wrapping himself up like a mummy. He buried himself, deep under the earth. He was a stone, inert and unreachable.

There was a sound, footsteps approaching from up the passageway.

He took a breath, held it. It was not his sister's walk he heard. Of that much he was certain. The stride was too confident and too long. It was a grown up, someone walking with purpose and direction.

He knew who it was.

The man came upon him so fast. Assam had no time to rise, to fight or run. He sat, still entombed in his mind, as the dark shape passed over him like a wave. There was a flash of something: A vague,

familiar feeling so strong that it penetrated deep into where he was hiding himself. And then the man continued on up the passage, his steps falling away to silence once more.

Assam let out his breath. The man had missed him completely. Just a half step off one side or the other, he would have tripped over the boy's legs.

He stood up slowly, shakily. The noise hadn't let up, but he had been able to deaden it somewhat. *It's all in your mind*, he told himself. His mind was all in his mind. There was a slippery kind of madness in the thought. He could lose his footing on it, if he wasn't careful.

He tilted his head back and forth, rotating his skull around at the top of his spine to work out the stiffness that had settled in. When he felt he was steady enough to go on, he started walking after the dark figure. He had no doubts about who he was following, about who stalked this maze in darkness.

He'd never trusted Edgar completely, but he had hoped to find their mother here. He knew now that he was wrong. He felt that mind as it passed over him, not the first time that he'd had a brief glimpse at the damaged thoughts scuttling inside. He'd felt it before, when the dark man had reached out to him from the hill above the swamp. But he'd missed him this time, passed over Assam without so much as a glance.

Assam hadn't just insulated his thoughts from the noise, he'd wiped himself practically out of existence. That would be a good skill to practice, especially if he was going to try to have the element of surprise on his side.

He stopped at the next intersection, considering. To his left was the way the man had gone, leaving a faint trail of hate and madness in his wake. To the right, another passageway leading off into darkness.

Assam carefully opened his mind, focusing on the vague echoes there but...

There. He caught at something, garbled but unmistakable: His sister, she was down that passageway somewhere. He turned to the right, heading towards her. He didn't know why Jee was here, why she had followed him in. He should have guessed that she would. He had to get to her before someone else did.

Someone else. Without a doubt, Edgar had betrayed them at every step of the way, leading them here . . . but why? He could have handed them over at any time. Why did they have to come here?

He had no answers, so he put the thought out of his mind. There would be time later to puzzle over it, and to take care of Edgar.

He followed the faint trace of his sister through the warren of passages, stumbling over clutter and rubbish. He tried to stay focused on her, but the signal folded back on itself like a curtain blowing through an open window, confusing him even more. He would head one way, certain of where she was. And then he'd hear an echo coming from the other direction.

He stopped to get his bearings and sift through his tangled thoughts. Two signals, he realized, there in his mind, each one competing for his attention. And yet, both were unmistakably his sister.

The mirrors again, he thought to himself. They'd led him back across his own tracks and now he couldn't find her. He tried to pick out the closer, the stronger of the two echoes.

There. That would be the right one to follow, he was certain. He started walking again, almost jogging along, the signal getting stronger and stronger with every step. He was so close now.

And then he ran headfirst into a dead end, the back of his eyeballs exploding with white light from the impact. He came to his senses on the floor. His mouth was numb. He touched it lightly and his fingertips came away slick with blood. He could feel the split in his lip. The ache of a bruise forming on his cheekbone.

Assam rose carefully, still a little dizzy, and put his hand out to the wall in front of him. He took a

breath, focusing on his sister once more. She was close, so loud in his mind . . . he could feel her there, just on the other side of the dead end. He ran his hand over the rough wood in front of him. It was different than the other walls, paneled. He tapped on it softly. Hollow.

He reached for the doorknob that he knew must be there, letting it slip into his palm, round and smooth from either too much use or none at all.

He took a breath, turned the knob, and went inside.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jee was angry with her brother. Well, she was not actually angry yet. She was rehearsing being angry so she'd be ready once she caught up with him again. She moved through the dim passageways, turning this way and that in the hopes that she might run across him or, failing that, locate the way she had come in. She wasn't sure what she wanted most right now. If she found her brother, he could help get them out. If she found the way out, she could go ahead and do what he had told her to do. She knew that he was going to mad at her for not going for help. But she was also going to be pretty mad at him as well.

Jee didn't know what was happening with her brother. At home, he'd been nice enough — a bit of a know it all, but that's how big brothers are, isn't it? And he had a tendency to be moody and go off by himself. Which was fine since he wasn't all that much fun to be around. But she loved him. She could count on him to help her if she needed it. He'd taken the training wheels off her bike when her mother had said it was too soon. He believed in her.

And she in him, she supposed. He'd always been special, always able to pick your thoughts out of the air without even trying. And he was a wizard at finding things that were lost. So she'd been a little jealous at first, to know that the King had given him . . . superpowers. That was how she thought of it. He was like something from a comic book now. Reading minds. She couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't been chosen.

It wasn't fair. He always got to do more because he was older. He could stay up later. And watch scarier movies. He could go to the mall on his bike with his friends. He could read minds.

We shouldn't have split up, Jee thought to herself as she walked through the maze. In every movie, when you split up, the monster got you. There was strength in numbers. He should have known better.

"He was just trying to protect you," she whispered. "He wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Of course I'm okay," she answered. "I'm always okay. He's the one who needs a babysitter."

It was true. There was something different about him, vulnerable and sensitive. He didn't have many friends. But the bullies, they absolutely loved him. Jee had learned that little sisters don't get thanked when they rescue their older brothers from bullies on the playground. She knew that he would much rather get beaten up than be rescued by his little sister. But she couldn't help herself. You have to take care of each other. That's what family is all about.

Jee froze in her tracks. She'd been walking through the dim hallways for what felt like hours, running her fingers over the rough wood of the walls, tapping the mirrors as she passed. But now, her fingertips caught on something different.

The doorknob fit easily enough into her palm, warm and round. And now she had to decide what

to do about that. She considered knocking but then thought better of it. If no one answered, she might be tempted to try the knob. And if it opened, she would almost certainly go in. And if she did, she felt certain that she would find someone there, waiting for her. Or, possibly worse to consider, they might answer the door when she knocked. Either way, she wasn't so sure that she wanted to see who was waiting behind the door.

She opened the door carefully, slowly, without any sound. If something rotten was waiting, she didn't want to give it fair warning. If it was someone nice, she could always apologize for intruding.

Beyond the door was a long passageway, dim and foreboding. At the far end she could see an open doorway with a single light burning in the room beyond. She moved up the hallway, as slow and careful as she could manage. Each time one of the floorboards would creak underneath, she cringed and waited before starting again.

Inch by inch, she moved along the wall. There were no doors on either side, but the walls were covered with framed pictures. In the dim light she could not make any of them out, just the dusty, smudged faces of strangers.

Every step, she knew she was moving closer to trouble. She was just about at the point where the door was farther away than the room at the end of the hall. She stood there, halfway between the room and escape. She couldn't decide if she should go on or go back. Then, a figure walked past the open doorway in the room beyond. Jee froze at the brief flash of his profile. "Daddy!"

She ran up the passageway, bursting into the dimly lit room beyond. Her father stood to one side, inspecting a rack of shelves against the far wall. She ran to him and she flung herself into his arms just. She buried her face in his side. He patted her back as she wept.

After a long while, she looked up. "How did you find..? her voice trailed off.

It wasn't her father.

But she knew him. She'd seen him before . . . outside the diner, across the river. The man stared down at her blankly, his head cocked to one side.

"Hello Julia," he said.

She backed away, glancing around the room — the desk, the books, the shelves stacked with jars. No other way out.

He did not chase her, did not reach for her. He simply stared, vague and mild.

He was the scariest person Jee had ever seen. She could feel the hallway behind her. She took one step back. Then another.

The man raised his hand towards her, palm out. "Do you see my hand?"

She did. And, for some reason, she couldn't look away.

"Can you see the lines there, the curves and loops, the map of my paths and pains in this life? Can you see it? Can you see the shape of things, the shape of me? Can you see it all there whirling over and into itself? Can you see it all? Can you see my hand?"

It had grown impossibly huge, his hand, filling her eyes. She could see it, all of it, woven together across his palm. It was all she could see. Lines on top of lines, looping this way and that, running across his palm like...

It's just like a maze, she thought to herself, it's just a maze.

And then the darkness overtook her.

She could hear him talking, chatting away as though speaking to an old friend.

Jee opened her eyes. She was sitting in what felt like a dentist's chair. Only, she didn't remember having her arms and legs strapped down the last time she had her teeth cleaned. She was facing a brick wall lined with shelves. There were rows and rows of jars, each one tagged with a little paper label. The jars were filled with a murky amber liquid and she couldn't quite see what else was in there. She wasn't sure she wanted to try all that hard. She could not move her head. Something pressed down on her forehead, holding it in place.

Jee was not frightened, she was not scared. She had skipped that entirely and gone straight into white hot anger.

The man walked around into her field of vision, still talking.

"Where am I?" She hadn't really been listening, so she didn't feel too bad about interrupting him.

He stopped, took a breath and looked away from her. "You're here," he answered. "With me."

"Who are you?"

He smiled. "I might ask you the same thing,"

She didn't answer.

He ran his hand over a row of jars, rubbing his fingertips together, checking for dust. "Anyways, that's when I realized that, at a certain point, you're just collecting for the sake of collecting and the thing itself — the thing you once so longed for, the thing you dreamed of — is no longer important, it's the act itself, it eclipses the thing it seeks." He adjusted one of the jars on the shelf in front of him, aligning the label with the others. "You know what I mean?"

"Sure." She figured that, sooner or later, he'd say enough so that she could catch up.

"Well, you don't, of course."

"I don't?"

"No. Because you're stuck in the middle of it and there's nowhere outside to stand to get your bearings. It's all about perspective." He tapped one of the jars with his fingernail. There was a faint movement within the jar but he didn't seem to notice. "I've been there. During my eye phase," he nodded knowingly, "I just couldn't see where I was headed, I couldn't see the path. Just like where you are now."

"Yeah." Jee shrugged as best she could, strapped down and all. "That's, uh..." The man leaned in close, almost but not quite angry. She couldn't tell if it he was angry with her or about something else.

"That's where it starts," he said. "You realize it, you see it for the first time in a flash, like a lightning strike in your mind. And once you do, you can never un-see it again. It's there, burned into your brain."

"That must hurt." Jee figured that the longer she kept him talking, the more time her brother would have to find her.

"I can't explain what it's like." He leaned back, letting his anger drift away with a sigh. "You just have to experience it for yourself." He walked outside of her field of vision.

"Experience what?" Jee wasn't crazy about not being able to see him or what he was up to. She heard him puttering around back there, a long scraping sound. He came back into view, pushing a metal table on wheels across the floor. He set a little red toolbox on the table. The sheer ordinariness and familiarity of the toolbox filed her with a sudden ache of sadness and longing. Her father had one just like it back home.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I need to oil the wheels on this thing. I didn't hear what you said?"

"Um . . . what do I need to experience for myself?"

"The truth, the reality," he told her. "The undeniable fact that the story you're writing for yourself, this adventure you're on, is far more interesting than finding your mom. Yes. You know it's true."

Jee stared at him, the world shifting and rebalancing under her. She realized that he knew a lot more about her than she knew about him. It was not a good feeling.

He seemed disappointed when she didn't answer. "Eventually," he told her, "you're going to understand."

"Understand what?"

The man smiled sadly. "I genuinely pity you," he said. "You have so much to learn."

"I just want to find my mom," she told him.

"Of course you do," he said, fiddling with something just out of her line of sight. "But you're starting to enjoy the story a little too much. And you don't necessarily want it to end. Do you?"

"I want to go home."

The man glanced up at her, a little bit surprised. "No, you don't, not really." He smiled. "It's okay, I won't tell."

Jee let that one slide. "How did you know my name?"

He sighed. "The answer isn't going to give you much help with those straps."

Jee relaxed her arms. "What's your name, then?"

He tilted his head one way, then the other, his eyes drifted over her face. "By now, you should know how to ask that question without asking."

Fine. "Who are you, what are you called?"

"Very good." He clapped his hands, polite mockery. "You can call me Juniper."

"What kind of name is that?"

"It's my kind of name," he said with a smile. "And that's why I picked it."

Jee noticed that he hadn't answered her question, not really. She wondered if he even knew the answer.

"Now..." He looked thoughtful. "What was I talking about?"

The big phony, Jee thought to herself. "Uh . . . first principles?"

"Yes, thank you." He bent over the table, just out of her line of vision. "When things get too complicated or confusing," he said to her, "all you need to do is go back to the beginning, find what's most important to you, and strip everything else away."

Jee wondered if he'd rehearsed this speech. It sounded like something someone had written down and then learned by heart.

"Of course, it's not always easy to set aside the old, familiar habits." He straightened up, a pair of pliers in one hand. "Even I have trouble with it."

"Wait," Jee said.

He nodded, genuine sympathy in his voice. "I want you to understand, I don't enjoy this. I'm not a monster. And I'm truly sorry that I can't make you more comfortable, but . . . I need your pain."

"Don't hurt me." Jee did not plead, she did not whine. No, her voice was strong and clear. And there was a part of her, beneath the fear and the anger, there was a part of her that was proud of herself.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

Jee believed him. She wanted to look away, to close her eyes and shut him out completely. But that wasn't an escape. She tried to call on the power she'd felt, the strength of her voice in the fox's den. Her mind scrambled wildly for the words she could use to stop him in his tracks, wither him down to nothing . . . but nothing came to her rescue.

He bent over her.

She stared up into his placid, regretful eyes — hazel, flecked with green. A faint cloud drifted across them, like the pale swirl of cream in a coffee cup. In a flash, she saw it all then: His name, his secret

purpose, the tears in his eyes as he leaned in with the pliers. The obvious, horrible insanity of it all filled her head and it took everything she had not to scream.

But even then, it wasn't enough.

CHAPTER SIX

Assam waited with his back against the door, giving his eyes time to adjust. After so long walking through the dim passages, the light inside was almost blinding. It did not help that most everything in the room was painted an eye-twisting riot of pink. It made him think of the mint-flavored chalky medicine his father would bring him when he was ill, of nausea and unsettled nights with a sick stomach.

There was a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, the bare bulbs shaded with cones of red and pink tissue paper. A number of these makeshift shades had slipped askew and were slowly turning brown against the bulbs. A few were already black, little tendrils of smoke rising from them. Long strands of beads hung from each branch of the light at different lengths, giving it an unstable, cockeyed look. It fit in well with everything else in the room.

In one corner there was a jumble of old books, children's books. The ceiling above was stained and the books had a sodden, swollen look to them and the covers were decorated with a fine lacework of mold. Assam thought that he could see a few mushrooms growing out of them as well.

There was a threadbare sofa against one wall. It might have once been white, but now it had long faded to a dull yellow. The fabric was dotted with dark, brownish-red splotches here and there. They might have been patterns or flowers once. Or bloodstains. Atop the sofa was a massive pile of dirty laundry. Assam could smell it from where he was standing: Old perfume gone sour and bitter, the sharp ammonia tang of cat urine. He resisted the urge to gag.

On a small table next to the sofa, a plastic radio in the shape of the head of a popular Japanese cartoon cat stared back at him. It was cracked down the center, static and snatches of old showtunes spilling out of the wound. The cat stared blankly at him, like a lobotomy patient. His sister had one just like it at home.

There was a door on the far wall. He picked his way across to it. The floor was a disaster. Broken crayons and dried up bottles of glitter nail polish crunched under his feet, the once-bright colors crumbling like scabs. Here and there broken doll parts lay abandoned — severed heads staring up at him with hollow eyes, chubby little arms waving as they went under for the third time. It was as if someone had taken the typical little girl's room, sealed it off, and left it to rot.

Once he reached the other door, as he put his hand on the knob, a long shuddering moan filled the room behind him. Assam turned. The room, for all of its clutter, was empty. He waited, heart pounding.

Then, the stinking pile of laundry on the couch heaved and lurched as another moan came sliding out of it like diarrhea. He realized his mistake immediately. It wasn't laundry. It was a person, bundled up in layers and layers of old clothes. Whoever it was moaned again, rolling over with effort to face him. A pale, bloated face stared up at him. Tiny, sunken eyes narrowed for a moment. Then, they spread

wide in horror. Vague whispers came out of the toothless gash that had once been a mouth. The eyes, yellow and rimmed in red, rolled back as the thing on the couch began to scream.

It was a woman, Assam realized, horribly obese and apparently insane. He held up his hands, palms out. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

The woman screamed again, long and hard. A coughing fit overtook her in a spasm of hacking gasps. One hand clambered out, digging into the cushion beneath her. A half-filled pop bottle reappeared clutched in the chubby fist. The woman unscrewed the top with her sausage fingers and drained the bottle, the sickly red liquid running down her chin into the folded maze of her neck. The bottle fell to the floor and her hands fluttered in the vicinity of her throat like pudgy butterflies. After she had regained her composure, the woman took three deep breaths and slowly let them out. Finally, she croaked something, her fat mouth working around the words like a dog worrying at the last few scraps of meat on a bone. She stared at him, expectantly. Assam realized she was waiting for some kind of answer. "I'm sorry?"

The woman waved one hand at him, gesturing, beckoning for him to come closer.

Assam did not particularly want to go closer. There was nothing he wanted more in the world than to not go closer. But she gave him a look of such despair that his heart sank. She knew what she was — how she looked, how she smelled — she knew how disgusting he must find her. She croaked again, a handful of mangled words falling out of her mouth in a clump.

He moved cautiously, breathing through his mouth and comforting himself with the thought that in all likelihood he would be able to outrun her, if it came down to it. He knelt down next to the sofa, just out of reach.

The woman stared him full in the face, letting out a long, shuddering sigh. She burped, sending a sour cloud towards Assam. He gagged and leaned back, unable to keep the revulsion from his face.

The woman began to choke again.

It took him a moment to realize that, no, she was only crying.

She reached out for him, her thick fingertips brushing his cheek before he could pull back. He hated himself for flinching, but she smiled and cooed reassuringly, her pink fingers waving in the air. She said something, a jumble of sounds and nothing more.

It was his name, he realized, she said his name. She knew his true name.

Then she said "You came back for me."

Staring down into those suddenly familiar eyes, his sister's eyes, brimming with grateful love, Assam felt his mind split, gently, in two.

And then, at that moment, far off in the maze, he heard Jee scream.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Assam ran blindly through the turns and passages, clinging to a thin thread of pain and fear that wound its way through the maze. He could feel his sister at the end, her screams vibrating along the thread he followed like a plucked violin string. That was his sister there in front of him. Not that horrible bloated ruin behind him, dragging at him with her sorrowful wails. He wanted to forget her, to pretend that it was some horrible trick. But he knew it wasn't true. He had felt too much of her there to

deny it, down below the layers upon layers of years. Her sorrow tugged at him, her terror pulled him forward. And so he ran to Jee, ran to the sister that wasn't already beyond saving.

Turning corners, left and right, he followed the thin thread of her fear. He could not think of what he had left behind in that horrible pink room, the echo of those sobs fading in his mind like the dull ache of an old rotten tooth, familiar and hateful all at once.

There was a maze, he remembered, with a monster at its center. And the hero followed a thread the princess had woven for him.

He could hear her now, louder, her voice rising and falling in a jumble of words that he dared not stop to consider or decipher. And then she went silent.

Another corner, a door up ahead. Assam was through it before caution could slow him down. He ran through a long hallway, picture frames on the walls rattled as he passed. One of them fell and clattered against the floor. He heard glass break. He ran on through into a room, taking it all in: Shelves on the walls, rows and rows of jars, a low table littered with tools, his sister strapped down in what looked like an old barber's chair.

"Jee!" He ran to her, undoing the straps that held her head and neck. There was a trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth, tracing a path down the line of her jaw, soaking the collar of her sweater. He patted her cheek. For one terrible moment he thought that she was dead . . . but her eyelids flickered at his touch, her chest hitched and heaved with breath. She murmured, her brow creasing.

"It's okay..." he said. "Shhh, let me get you free."

Her eyes opened and then fluttered closed again. Her head fell forward and then back, setting off a chain reaction of memory in his mind: Watching her as a toddler, fighting sleep in her high chair, her head lolling forward and then snapping up again, trying to stay awake, desperate not to miss out on anything going on. It was a good memory. He almost smiled at it, in spite of everything. "It's okay," he told her. "It's all right now. I'm here." Then he saw the brass bowl on the little table, the two jagged shards at the bottom: Her teeth, bloodied at the back where they'd been torn out by the root.

Assam went blind with rage. He would have, he could have killed anyone then.

His sister opened her eyes and gasped. "No, you have to get away from here."

He tugged at the straps around her wrist. "Not without you."

"Yes, get out..."

He tried to assure her, to let her know that everything was okay. But then he felt a spider crawl across his mind, tapping experimentally at each crease and fold, looking for a weak spot. He turned. There was a man standing on the other side of the room, familiar and...

The man raised his hand just a split second before Assam raised his own as if to ward off a blow.

Jee shouted his name but he was already falling — a puppet, his strings cut.

Juniper lifted the boy, limp in his arms and carried him over to the table.

"Don't hurt him." Jee struggled against her bonds.

Juniper ignored her, studying the young face for a long moment. He did not touch that pale cheek, he did not lay his hand to smooth that tousled hair — but Jee could tell that he wanted to. Finally, he turned back to her and nodded with that same vague expression on his face. "Thank you," he said, all business. "I never would have been able to get him here without your help."

"Why are you doing this to us?" Jee fought to shape the words, forcing them through the awkward

gap in the front of her mouth, past the two seeping holes where her teeth had been. "What do you want?"

Juniper smiled sadly. "The answer to both of your questions is simple: I want to go home."

She had nothing to say to that.

He took a small jar from one of the shelves, tapping the lid against the edge of the desk. It was empty, Jee noticed.

"I don't know that you particularly care about any of this." He unscrewed the lid. "But it's important to me that you understand."

Keep him talking, Jee thought to herself. "I want to understand."

"Do you?" He set the jar on the desktop and pulled out the chair, sitting down. "I expect that the only way to do that, the only way for you to understand, is to tell you my story." He drew out a slip of paper from one of the drawers and patted his hands over the table top in front of him, as though looking for something. He ignored the boy lying senseless in front of him. "Do you like stories?"

"Is my brother dead?"

"No." His mouth twisted, sour and disappointed. "Do. You. Like. Stories?"

Jee flinched, despite herself. "Yes."

"Good." He stared at the tabletop for a moment. "I do not," he said quietly, "have any idea where I left my pen." He leaned back in his chair and opened the drawers in front of him. "This," he said, standing up to check his pockets, "is intensely irritating to me." He sat back down and thought for a moment. "Ah. Yes." He lifted Assam's limp arm and drew the pen out from under the boy. He uncapped his pen and stopped, fingers searching the desktop. "Now . . . where did that label get to?"

"It fell when you, it's on the floor."

"Yes, I have it. Thank you." He screwed the cap and pen back together and reached down to retrieve the fallen slip of paper, fingers tapping the floor to find it by feel. "But it was a hypothetical question. You know what that means?"

She shook her head.

"It means," he said, "I do not need an answer." Juniper uncapped the pen once more and bent over the paper.

"Then why did you ask?" The question was out of her mouth before she could stop it.

Juniper froze, the point of the pen almost touching the paper. "Do you," he asked without looking up, "want to hear a story or not?"

She said nothing. Her only weapon was to be irritating and, like any little sister, she knew she had to strike a careful balance or else he might explode.

He swiveled his head to stare at her, vulture-like. He appeared to be slightly walleied, Jee noticed. "I had a sister," he said quietly. "She was precisely as irritating as you."

Jee stared back at him blankly, trying not to break, not to give anything away. He'd heard her thought, she was sure of it.

"I did. She thought she was funny," he said, returning to his slip of paper. "She thought she was cute. But there are times and there are places when and where nothing is cute." He carefully wrote something out, one letter at a time. "There was an accident," he said quietly, without looking up. "And so, after a time and a distance, we ended up here." He sat back and capped his pen, stowing it away in a pocket. "Stop me if you've heard this one before."

Jee said nothing.

He lifted the paper carefully by one corner, waving it in the air. "It wasn't so bad at first. It was . . . an interesting adventure, like something out of a storybook. But then things went bad." He blew gently

on the paper for a moment. "We were so sure of ourselves," he said. "So confident that we would make it back." Juniper shook his head. "But it's easy to get distracted in this place, spend your time chasing echoes reflections. You lose track of what's important, we lost track of each other . . . lost track of ourselves." Juniper said nothing more. He was somewhere else.

Jee wondered if he knew he'd gone quiet.

"When the time came to make a choice — and make no mistake, there is always a choice to be made and when it comes right down to it there is only one choice — she made hers."

"What happened?" Jee didn't know what to believe. Anything he said could be a lie. All of it could be true. It could be just another trick to try and lure her in. But she was already in. What more could he want?

"She made her choice and then she was gone."

"Where did she go?"

He shook his head. "I don't envy her the choice, no. Believe me. If it had been me, I might have done the same." He was thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. "I would have." He rose and came near to her, leaning down to stare blankly into her face. "But as it stands . . . You. Left. Me."

He stood there for a long moment, clutching her wrists.

Jee did not move or flinch for fear it would set him off. "You're lying."

"Am I?" He let her go and stepped back. He looked tired all of a sudden, tired and very old.

"You're not my brother." She couldn't allow herself to believe what he was telling her. Her teeth lying there in the bowl. She could not believe her brother capable of that cruelty.

Juniper shrugged. "Perhaps you're mistaken. What if I were to tell you something you wanted to know, any secret that only you and he would know . . . would you believe me then?"

"No."

He nodded. "I don't expect that you would, no. But I am your brother, nonetheless."

"Then why are you a grownup?"

"I told you," he said wearily, rummaging through the desk drawers, "you left me here, left me to rot, years and years ago."

"That's..." She stopped. "I didn't leave you. I mean, I didn't leave him. I'm still here and he's right there."

"We should probably talk about time a little bit now." Juniper produced a small metal can and unscrewed the top. The lid of the can had a small brush attached on the inside and he drew it out carefully, wiping it against the rim of the can. There was a sharp smell in the air, burning at the edges of Jee's nostrils.

"You probably think," Juniper said as he ran the brush over the slip of paper on the table, "that time is all about going from point A to point B. First one thing happens and then another and then another. Like a river, it flows in one direction and we're just along for the ride." He replaced the brush in the jar and held up the paper by one corner, waving it in the air. "We get in the boat when we're born and we go along until it's time to get out, when we die. Yes?"

"I guess." Jee honestly could not care less. "Sure."

Juniper laid the slip of paper back down on the table, sticky side up. "Are you sure?" he asked, picking up the glass jar and breathing on it. "Because if you are, you're completely wrong."

Jee shrugged. Whether or not he was her brother, they both seemed to share the tendency to be more boring than school.

"Because," he said, rubbing the jar on his sleeve, "time is not a river, not at all. It's messier than that, more jumbled up." He laid the glass jar down on its side, tapping the desktop with his fingertips as he

lined up the jar up perfectly with the edge of the paper. Something about the gesture struck Jee as odd, out of whack. Slowly he rolled the jar across the paper, the glue sticking to it as it rolled across.

"Time is not a river going one way." He held up the jar. The label was perfectly straight. "It's a lot bigger than that." He set the jar down on the table and sat back, thoughtful. He laid his fingertips against his eyelids, massaging them gently. A familiar gesture. Jee pushed the thought out of her mind.

"I don't remember." Juniper said. "What grade are you in?"

"Fourth." Jee answered.

"I may not remember everything," he said, "but I'm also not an idiot. You're in second grade."

Jee said nothing. She was starting to feel a little sick from the taste of her own blood, seeping out of the two holes in the front of her mouth. She resisted the urge to spit, to swallow.

"So, second grade . . . they probably haven't told you about water and the cycle of precipitation?"

She stared at him blankly.

He sighed. "There goes my big speech. Don't worry about it. It's a middle school thing."

The little black phone on the desk sprang to life, the insistent jangle cutting through the air. Jee could hear the jars on the shelves rattling in response. Juniper let the phone ring several more times before he reached out his hand and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" he said into it, his voice flat. A long moment passed.

He covered the mouthpiece with his palm and said to her "I have to take this. Can you give me a minute?"

Before she could answer, he raised his hand and everything went out like a light.

She blinked once, twice. Everything had changed. She was no longer lying strapped to the chair. Instead, she was sitting at the desk, looking at her brother strapped down in her place. He did not appear to be awake, let alone alive.

Juniper stood nearby, thoughtful. The phone sat on the table in front of her, the receiver back in place. She tried to reach for it, to call someone for help. Her hand would not move. Juniper was holding her there, holding her down. But he wasn't even touching her. He could do things, she realized. He could hold her, could turn her off, stopping time. Long enough to finish his call, long enough to move them around the room. Long enough to do anything he wanted.

The glass jar was sitting on the table to one side. The label, she saw, began with her name followed by *Incisors (2), immature*. The handwriting, she noticed, was almost identical to her mother's. The jar was empty.

"Sorry about that." Juniper picked up the jar from the desk. "Personal call."

"I'm not immature," Jee said sullenly. She'd had to sound it out in her head.

"I beg you pardon?"

"That." She pointed her chin at the jar in his hands. "I'm not immature."

His eyebrows knitted for a moment. He stared at the jar in his hand and then laughed. "Of course you aren't."

"I'm not."

"No." He sounded very much like her father, and not in a good way. "My notations pertain to your dental rather than emotional development."

She just stared at him.

"Your teeth." He tapped the jar with his finger tip.

Jee heard a faint sound from the shelves behind her.

"They are immature. They are," he explained, "your baby teeth."

"Oh," Jee said. "Okay."

He tipped the bowl over the jar. Jee heard her teeth rattle against the glass. "In a way," he told her, "that's a good thing. They'll grow back in time and you'll be no worse for wear."

"Except for the whole Tooth Fairy thing."

"Well, yes . . . except for that."

"Then you owe me some money."

"Don't hold your breath." Juniper went to a small cabinet, opened it, and took out a plastic jug.

"Why do you want them anyway?"

Juniper didn't answer. He uncapped the jug and filled the jar with clear liquid. She would have thought it was water but for the harsh, chemical smell that filled the room. He capped the jug and screwed the lid down on the jar. "It started with eyes," he said, cupping the jar in his hands. "I regret that now. I was young and I didn't yet have a clear vision of who I had become."

Jee was surprised to see that he looked a little embarrassed.

"It was the water, really, that misled me," he said to her. "I thought of the river and the tears and *vitreous humour* and, well, it just seemed obvious: Eyes."

She just stared at him.

He sighed. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

She shook her head.

"What do you think the river is?"

"What river?"

He stared at her incredulously. "The river . . . the one that you've been following this whole time?"

"Oh, right." She knew this one. "It's water."

He shook his head. "No. It's tears."

"Tears?"

Juniper nodded. "Yes, the tears of the damned. You know what that word means?"

"Yes," Jee answered. "But that's not true."

"I assure you, it is."

"No," she said, "it isn't. She told me that it wasn't. She said no one was being punished here."

"Who?"

"Winterly."

"I'm afraid I don't know who you mean."

"She gave us tea at the palace."

Juniper's face went slack, expressionless. After a long moment, he said "I've never been there."

"Sure you have," Jee said. "That's where we went after your eyes..." She trailed off, staring at him. She realized, suddenly, that he was not looking back at her. Not quite. His gaze was directed off to one side. In a flash, her mind scrambled back through everything she'd seen — the careful movements, the methodical pace as he moved through the room, the distant dreamlike gaze he wore so often.

"You can't see," she said. "You're blind."

"Yes. And do you remember how that happened?"

"But the King," she said, "he healed you."

"The King?" he asked. "Which one?"

"I don't know his name. The Queen's, Winterly's husband."

"I do not know what you are talking about." He held up the jar and tested it, making sure the lid was tight. "I have never met those people, I have never been to that place."

Inside the jar, she saw two pale shards lying at the bottom. The sight made her very angry. "Well, we did. Me and him." She nodded at Assam still lying senseless on the table. "So I guess you aren't my brother after all. Besides, she said no one here was damned, no one was being punished."

Juniper shook the jar gently. Jee heard her own teeth rattle faintly within. A hollow chorus answered from the jars on the shelves.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked her.

She wasn't, she realized. Not at all.

Juniper placed the jar on one of the shelves. "Have you considered," he asked her, "how things might have been different here, if you'd made different choices, followed a different path?"

Jee started to answer and then stopped.

Juniper went on. "Somewhere in our shared past — and we share a past, make no mistake — there was a choice, a fork in the road, a place where you and I went one direction while I and you continued on in another."

"So there's two of you?"

He smiled. "Oh, well, I expect there may well be considerably more than that." He started ticking off on his fingers. "The accident, the river, the time in Moontown, pancakes and hamburgers . . . so many different paths, different choices, each one of us making our own way. It does start to add up after a while. Like when raindrops fall and shatter off in all directions, tracing their individual paths down the windowpane. All the same, all different, sometimes splitting in two, going in two directions at once." He lowered his hands, cupped them together. "But they all return to the same place at the end, to the source of the water . . . as do we all."

"Waffles," Jee said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I had waffles, not pancakes. At the diner."

He held out his hand. "So there you go. Just another path that you chose."

"So there's two of me?"

Juniper didn't answer.

Jee thought of him, of some twisted version of her brother growing up alone and blind in this place. It was no wonder he'd turned out the way he had. She would have almost felt sorry for him, if not for the iron taste of blood in her mouth, if not for her missing teeth.

"I would have liked to have met the King." Juniper looked very young for a moment. "What was he like?"

"He was great," Jee said. "He made us homemade ice cream and balloon animals."

Juniper looked at her — or, rather, he turned to face her. "No need to be rude," he said mildly, straightening things around the room.

Jee had the impression that she had hurt his feelings. Good. She watched, wondering how he could tell what needed to be moved. Or was he just moving things at random giving himself time to think? She kept her eyes on his hands, trying to see any hint of awkwardness or uncertainty, any sign that his blindness made him weak. She needed him to be weak.

As he worked, he kept talking. "At any rate, I soon — though not soon enough, to my shame — I soon realized that eyes were completely useless for my purposes."

"What purposes?" Jee asked, trying to force the words past her new lisp. She was going to make him

pay for those teeth, one way or another. A thought formed in her mind. If he hadn't been to the palace, then he didn't get cured. And if he didn't get cured, then maybe...

He shook his head. "You were never much of a listener, were you?"

Jee was old enough to note the past tense and it irritated her. "I heard you," she told him. "You cut out people's eyes."

"No," he replied seriously, "I *used* to cut out people's eyes. But not anymore."

"Why not?" She couldn't tell if he was joking or not, but she was sickened by the conversation and her own fear. Her brother lay motionless, lifeless in the chair. He would never become this monster, she knew it.

"I did it because..." Juniper thought for a moment. "I took them because I thought they might help me get home — or, at least, to get free of this place. And when I realized I was wrong, I stopped."

"Yay for you."

He shuffled a pile of papers aimlessly. "You have to understand, I have traveled so far since you left me. I lost so much along the way, but I learned much as well." Setting the papers down again, he said "I knew I could never get back that golden coin of mine. But I thought that, maybe, there might be another way."

Golden coin? Jee reminded herself to keep him talking. The more he said, the more time she had. "Like what?"

"The eyes were a regrettable mistake, yes, a blind stab in the dark. As were," he sighed, "the fingertips." He ran his hand lightly over one of the shelves, never quite touching the jars. They clinked and rattled in agitation as his hand passed by. "And the tongues," he said. "Although that did get me closer."

"Tongues?" Jee tried very hard to keep the disgust out of her voice and failed.

He shook his head at the interruption. "It was my thought that since the coin was gone, I might try my hand at minting a new one." He stood for a moment, rubbing his fingertips together.

Jee remembered that her brother had a coin collection at home. She tried to push the thought out of her mind.

"I needed," he went on, "a way to make a new coin to replace the one I'd lost. Not a counterfeit, mind you. It had to be real."

"Why?"

He gave her a blank look. "You're serious?"

She nodded slowly. "If you're dead, then why do you need a coin when you could just..."

Juniper snapped his teeth together and lunged forward, slapping his hands down on the tabletop. "I am not *dead*." He did not shout, but almost.

Jee flinched, barely.

Juniper relaxed and withdrew. He seemed almost embarrassed by his outburst. "Dead or not," he cleared his throat, "without a coin, I am lost. I might be able to walk along all sorts of paths . . . but I can never go so far as to recapture the boy that I once was." His voice was full of sadness and nostalgia . . . but Jee could see the raw, naked hunger on his face as well.

"Eyes," he said, "were a dead end. As were . . . other options. But it occurred to me that..." His voice trailed off and he stared off into the passageway, still rubbing his fingertips together. Finally, he said "When you touch a drop of water, a little of it comes away on your finger. Then you can touch that fingertip to the tip of each of your other fingers, spreading the drop of water among them..." He trailed off once more.

Jee thought of saying that she already knew how to wash her hands. But after his latest outburst, she didn't want to push him further.

Fortunately, he went on. "You remember it? That lovely coin the little boy in the robot pajamas had in his mouth?" He shook his head. "He was so young."

"Jimmy," she said. "His name was Jimmy and it was frogs, not robots."

Juniper smiled, then frowned. "I remember his name, but I remember robots and not frogs."

"I remember the frogs," she said. "It was longer ago for you than me."

He waved his hand in the air, waving off her assertion like an irritating fly. "Yes, fine. Frogs. But do you remember his coin?"

Jee nodded and then, wondering how he could see if she was nodding, said "Yes, I remember."

"I remember too. It was gold." There was a faraway look in Juniper's eyes. "And it shone like the sun." He touched the jars lightly with his fingertips. "As I said, I have been down many paths since you left me. For a very long time, I thought that if I collected enough teeth then I would eventually have enough gold to mint a coin for myself."

Jee poked her tongue into the space at the front of her mouth, dabbing at the iron taste of blood. She had never been so angry in her life.

"A tooth here, a tooth there . . . little by little my collection grew. But the gold that I got from each of them — when there was any gold at all, and often there wasn't — it was hardly worth the effort." He stopped to straighten a jar, making sure that the label lined up perfectly with the others.

Jee wondered how he knew it wasn't right. She watched carefully, his fingertips deftly tapping here and there to feel where things were at. They must be very sensitive, those fingers. She wondered what would happen if he lost them. She wondered if she could get close enough to him to find out. Her front teeth might be gone, but she thought she might still be able to do some damage. "So what happened?"

"Oh, I did it. I minted a new coin," he said. "But it didn't work out as I'd hoped. The coin I made was just a lump of gold lying there in the palm of my hand, dead and useless."

"Why didn't it work?"

Juniper shook his head. "Maybe because of how I made it, maybe because of the screams and pain resonating through every molecule of its surface. But more likely, it didn't work because it wasn't my coin." He smiled, but there was no humor in it. "It couldn't be just any coin. It had to be my coin, the same coin I started this miserable life with. I couldn't make a new one any more than I could make myself a new soul. Nor could I steal someone else's."

"Is that what it is?" Jee asked.

"Is that what *what* is?"

"The coin?" she asked. "Is it our soul?"

"Not quite."

"Then what is it?"

"It's the price we pay," he told her simply. "It's the sum cost of our life, collected when our turn on the wheel is over."

"But where does it come from, where did we get it?"

"Well, if I knew that..." Juniper let the comment fall into the silence between them. He tapped one of the jars. Something stirred inside, rattling faintly within.

"What was that?" Jee asked.

"That," Juniper replied as he took down the jar and ran his fingertips over the label, "that was the

sound of two canines and four molars. Numbers 13, 23, 17, and 12. I did not get his name, but I expect he was probably about thirty-eight years old. Number 23 has a temporary crown on it."

He's feeling the letters with his fingers, Jee realized in surprise. He could read them.

Juniper shook the jar and the noise grew louder. Even after he replaced it on the shelf, it continued to rattle in agitation.

"It's alive?"

Juniper shrugged. "I suppose so, after a fashion."

Jee thought she might throw up. But somewhere in the back of her mind, a voice whispered and then fell silent. She tried very hard not to think about what it said to her, just in case he could eavesdrop like her brother. "Wait a minute," she said.

Juniper raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"You said," Jee was still sorting it out as she went along, "you said that the thing with the teeth didn't work, right?"

"That's correct."

"Then why..?" Jee couldn't believe she had to ask the question. "Then why do you keep doing it, taking teeth? Why did you take my teeth?"

"Well, you know how it is," he said. "Once you get interested in something, start a collection..." He held his hands up. "What can I say? It's a hobby. Besides . . . what was I supposed to do, put them all back?" He lowered his hands. "But more importantly, I needed to get his attention, to draw him here."

Jee looked to her brother. Assam lay in the chair, lifeless as a corpse but for the faint motion of his chest rising and falling. She wondered if he was dreaming, if he could hear them.

She wondered what would happen to him, after Juniper stole his coin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jee stared at Juniper, a sick feeling growing in her stomach. Bait. She'd been used as bait. "Why?" She knew the answer but she needed to hear it.

Juniper went to the chair where her brother lay, checking the straps. "Well, he has something that I think I might be able to make use of."

"Does it hurt?" Jee asked, watching as he straightened the tools on the little table.

"Mm?" He looked up for a moment. "What does?"

"Does it hurt to lose it?"

"That all depends." His voice had a far off, dreamy quality to it. "It hurt a great deal when I lost mine," he said, his hands drifting over the tools as he prepared to work. "But I had my heart broken at the same time, so I'm not sure I could tell you definitively which hurt more."

"Who broke your heart?" Jee asked. She wanted to get him agitated again, to get him talking, to distract him from her brother.

"That," Juniper said sharply, "is a subject that I have little or no interest in exploring with you at this point." He lifted something, an instrument of metal and chrome. Jee had no idea what it was for, nor did she want to find out.

"Why are you doing this? What did we ever do to you?"

"Well," he said with annoyance, "I think I've already answered those questions but . . . you left me, alone and blind, once upon a time." He smiled, mirthlessly. "And I suppose you could say that he left me too, after a fashion."

"You're not actually him."

"I assure you," he answered, "I actually am. Which, I suppose, means that I betrayed myself. Of course, it also means that I'm not really hurting him. I'm actually helping him, in a way."

Jee made a noise of disgust.

"All I want," he said, "is to go home."

"But what about him?" Jee pleaded. "Is he going to die?"

Juniper sat quietly for a long moment. Finally he spoke: "I honestly have no idea. It's impossible to say. In the past — in one of many possible pasts, one of many possible futures for you both — he stayed and, in time, he learned to walk in darkness, taking a new name for himself and finding new companions, traveling so many different paths."

Jee thought for a moment that he might begin to cry.

"But they betrayed him, like you and all the others. So he kept walking alone and, in time, he found his way back to a time and a place where some of those things could maybe be undone." He set the instrument down and rubbed his fingertips against his eyes. "But that's just one possible future, one likely past that he and I share. It might not turn out that way at all." He lowered his hands and blinked his eyes a few times. "So, no, he won't die," he said to her, "but he won't be able to live either, not anymore."

Jee said nothing.

"But he will live, in a way." Juniper smiled. "I will live. If I can be restored then so can he. In one past, I was lost. In this one, he will be." He turned to look at her. "Think on this, if there's two of me . . . how many of you might be out there as well? In another time and place, maybe you're the one that went sour. In others, maybe we both do."

Jee said "In others, maybe we both escape and you lose."

Juniper smiled. "If that makes you feel better about it, yes. But there is no maybe to it. If we can imagine it, then it can happen. If it can happen, then it has happened."

"This isn't happening," Jee said. "It didn't happen. It won't happen."

Juniper shook his head. "It already has." He stepped back and moved the little table out of the way.

Jee realized that, as they'd been talking, he's put away all of his tools. "I thought you were going to take his coin," she said.

He pushed the little table against the wall and nodded. "No, I'm not."

"You're not?"

"I can't take it from him."

"Why not?"

He came over and knelt down next to her. "It's complicated. But . . . let's just say that I have a theory."

"A theory."

"I can't take it from him. He has to give it to me."

Jee turned to look at her brother, completely dead to the world. "I don't think that's going to happen."

Juniper nodded. "I know. That's why I want you to do it for me."

She stared at him, eyes wide. "What?"

"Your brother's coin," he said. "I want you to take it from him and give it to me."

"No way."

He nodded. "Oh yes."

Jee shook her head. "I won't do it."

"No," Juniper answered, "you will. Otherwise, I'll kill you both. And then I'll find mom and kill her too."

Jee opened her mouth but he held up his hand.

"I won't be quick about it. I'll take my time. It won't be easy like before and," Juniper nodded towards the shelves, "I've got plenty of jars to spare." After a moment, he sat back. "You ready?"

Jee stood up. "Yes."

He rose and stepped back so she could pass.

"How do I.?" She gestured to her brother.

"Oh . . . it's easier than you think. Just open his mouth. You can't miss it."

Jee turned away from him, her eyes closed. After a moment she turned back. "Okay." She went to her brother's side. His face was pale and she could barely see the rise and fall of his chest. "You're sure he'll be okay?"

"He'll be fine." Juniper said. She could hear the tension, the impatience in his voice. "He'll be much safer than if you don't."

Jee realized then how alone she was. There was no one coming to rescue them. She was going to have to decide, to choose for herself as well as for her brother and mother. She raised her hand, resting it on Assam's chest. A faint heartbeat fluttered under her palm.

"Don't worry," Juniper said from behind her, "I won't tell him it was you."

Jee would have killed him right there with a word, if she could have. If she still had that voice, if she could find it again. But it was gone. There was no one coming, no one who could help. Not Winterly, not the shaggy man...

...she put her hand to her mouth, gagging and choking.

"What is it?" Juniper asked. "What's wrong with you?"

Jee held her hands over her mouth, the gagging rising out of her throat.

"Are you sick? Are you going to be sick?"

"I don't know," she choked. "I'm..." Another fit overtook her and she covered her mouth once more. After a moment, she straightened up. "I'm okay now," she said, her voice still a little shaky, "I'm fine." She looked back at Juniper. His face was etched with concern but not, she knew, for her. Those pale eyes. She would have given anything to put them out. Anything. She turned back to her brother, laying her fingertips against his cheek. He did not stir. She hoped again that he couldn't hear anything, that he wouldn't know what was coming.

Jee put her thumb on his chin and gently opened his mouth. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

After a long moment, she turned back to Juniper. "I'm done."

Juniper cocked his head to one side. "Do you have it?"

She nodded. It was very small in her palm, and warm.

"Do you have it?" he asked again.

"Yes, sorry..." She'd forgotten that he was blind and couldn't see her nod.

"Bring it to me."

Jee shook her head, then said "No."

"Bring it to me." His voice didn't change at all. "Now."

"And you'll let us go?"

"Yes."

After a long moment, she walked back to him.

"Give it to me." Juniper held out his hand, palm up and pale eyes roaming wildly.

Jee held her hand out and, no idea what would happen next, set her coin gently into his palm.

His fingers closed around it. Juniper's face glowed, he closed his eyes and clutched the coin to his chest. "So long," he said to her, to the air around them. "Too long..."

Jee stepped back.

Juniper raised his hand to his face, his clenched fist opening like a flower. His eyes glittered with golden light and she saw their milkiness begin to drift away like clouds burning off in the sun.

She felt weak, out of breath. A pain in the core of her, somewhere deeper than her chest. Jee said his name quietly. She did not call him Juniper. She would not call him Assam.

He looked at her, his eyes seeing her for the first time in a long, long time. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry," Jee said to him.

"Don't be." His eyes, now clear, were so earnest. "Oh, don't be. Without you, I never would have found this again. I never would have..."

"...that's not his coin." Jee stared at him flatly.

Juniper's brow crumpled in a familiar, confused gesture. "What?"

"It's not his. I didn't give you his coin."

"Then whose..?" He down looked at the coin in his hand. His face went slack. "No..." He raised his eyes in time to see her reach up for the rack of shelves and tip it towards him. "No!"

The jars burst, scattering glass and rancid fluid everywhere. The air filled immediately with an acrid smell, sharp and stomach-churningly sweet. And then the voices started. From every corner of the room a horrible chorus of sighs and chatterings rose up, sweeping around Jee and crashing down like a wave onto where Juniper had fallen to his knees. The wave swept him up like a ship in a storm and then, in a frenzy, pulled him back under once more. He had time to scream, plenty of time to fill the air with his own howls, to fix his eyes on her — the hurt and betrayal, those familiar eyes Jee had known all her life — before, finally, he tumbled into the roaring whirlwind of vengeful teeth and bones and meat. And then, soon enough, it was over.

All that remained was a terrible mess.

Assam woke with a start, uncertain of where he was, groggy and confused. He did not recognize the room he was in. The smell was terrible and his eyes burned. There was a low sound from the other side of the room and he sat up to see his sister sitting on the floor, her hands in her lap, sobbing uncontrollably. There was a vivid scratch of red on her cheek, just starting to show tiny jewels of blood. All around her, the floor was covered with broken glass and water and bits of things that looked like roadkill.

"What's wrong?"

She jumped up so quickly that he thought she was going to run away. Instead, she ran to him and threw her arms around his waist. It was a very long time before he could persuade her to let go, and even longer before she finally stopped sobbing.

As they were leaving the room, Jee stopped for a moment at the door and then ran back down the hallway. Assam followed, watching from the entrance as she picked gingerly through the broken glass. "What are you looking for?"

Jee stopped, picked something up from the ground and wiped it off on her pants leg. She stared at it for a long moment.

"What's that?" Assam asked her.

She stowed whatever it was in her pocket and turned to look at him. "Nothing. Are you ready yet?"

He smiled. "Come on."

They went back up the hallway and stepped out into the maze, closing the door behind them.

CHAPTER NINE

In the dim light of the passageway outside, Assam turned to his sister. "What happened in there?" She put her hand in his. "Get us outside again."

He nodded, still a little groggy. And so, on they went through the dim maze, passing their shadowed, tarnished reflections as they navigated the dusty halls and passages. At one point, at the intersection of two hallways, Assam stopped for a moment with his head cocked to one side.

"What's wrong?" Jee asked. "What do you hear?"

But Assam only shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "Just thought I heard something."

"What did you hear?" She had visions of Juniper rushing up to them in the dark, grabbing them from behind and dragging them back through the maze to his room once more.

He squeezed her hand. "Don't worry about it."

And on they went until, eventually, they turned a corner and saw an irregular, jagged rectangle at the end of the passage in front of them, pale light showing through from beyond. A few steps later and they found themselves once again in that strange, barren copy of their house. Assam turned to her again, but Jee gave him a look, wearied and fearful. "Not yet."

They left the house quickly. It was a sad and empty place and neither of them wanted to explore it further. They felt like ghosts there. So they left it behind, walking out through the front door, across the porch and down the steps. Jee did not stop walking until the house was well behind them. She finally came to rest at the top of the little hill where Assam and Edgar had their last conversation. She sat down and waited for her brother to catch his breath.

She was different, Assam could feel it. There was something in her face, something older. Whatever had happened back there, it had stretched her a little, strained her, and more than was good for her. Better that than to have her remain forever as that horrid child he'd found back in the maze. But still...

He put the thought out of his mind. *Give her time*, he said to himself, *let her tell it in her own way. That's what she needs right now.*

And so she did, as best she could. She told him everything, leaving out one or two details at the very end, things he didn't need to know — at least, not yet. And she told him about Juniper. She had to.

After she was done, they sat together for a long time without saying anything.

Finally, he asked "Is that what we . . . is that what I am?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. He could have been lying."

"But you don't think he was." He wasn't asking a question and she didn't need to answer. He rubbed his hands over his face, suddenly exhausted. "Is that what happens to me?"

Again, she had no answers . . . but she tried anyway. "I think that it's like he said, it's one possible way you could have gone on, gone wrong. But you didn't this time. I mean, you're not. You won't now, because you know and you know things are different. You're different." It sounded lame as she said it, even to her.

He didn't buy it either. "I don't want that to happen. I don't want to become that." He was quiet for a long while before he told her. "I saw someone back there, too."

Someone dumped a bucket of ice water down Jee's back. She did not move, she did not look at him. "What was I..?" She stopped herself. "What was she like?"

"Not good." her brother told her. "Not good at all. She was you but she wasn't, if you know what I mean?"

She did. "Do you think she's still back there?" It wasn't a pleasant thought.

"I think," her brother told her, "that there might be a lot of you's and me's still back there.

More ice water. Jee shivered.

"But look at the bright side," he said. "It's possible that a few of them might turn out to be better than we are. For all you know, the two of us might be on the low end."

Jee laughed. It felt good to do it but she stopped when she saw her brother's face. "What's wrong?"

He looked at her intent and concerned. "What happened to your teeth?"

She would have given anything not to have told him.

CHAPTER TEN

Eventually, they left that place far behind them.

Each of them would still visit from time to time, never happy to find themselves back there — even if it was only during infrequent, fitful dreams. But it was, after all, only an old house on the edge of a frozen lake, buffeted by the chill wind that carried the low howls of the traitors across the ice. And even dreams fade in time.

Jee let Assam set their course away from the lake and the house, the frozen ground gradually giving way to barren, packed earth. Their footfalls sounded flat and dead. There were no landmarks, no features to the landscape. No trees, no rising hills. Even the river — that thin trickle of sorrow they were so accustomed to following by now — was nowhere to be seen. The horizon itself was faint, barely distinguishable from the pale sky above.

Even Jee felt a little blurry around the edges. "Are you sure we're going the right way?" she asked her brother several times. And, several times, Assam assured her that he was and they were. He could

hear their mother, whispering to them, somewhere out there on the edge of his mind. He followed the thread of her voice, leading his sister through the barren plain.

Jee kicked the ground as she walked but even the meager dust she managed to stir up was inert, settling back down almost immediately in the flat, breezeless air. It was not cold. It was not hot. It was neither dark nor light. With no sun, they had no way to measure their progress — no way to know how far they'd come, to know how long they'd been walking. It might have been forever, for eternity.

They might, Assam considered vaguely, even be wandering in circles. Their feet left no prints in the hard packed earth. It was impossible to tell if they were and doubly impossible to retrace their steps, should it come to that. But Assam trusted himself enough to follow the thread in his mind, that thin voice he recognized. He had enough faith to believe that they would find her, that they would bring her out once again.

He stopped walking.

Next to him, Jee fell over.

He helped her up. "Okay?" He was barely able to muster the strength to form more words.

She nodded, her head bobbing feebly on her neck. "Fell."

He did not even bother to agree.

"Why'd you..?" She trailed off, staring at him for a long moment. "Why'd you stop?"

He tried to remember, his brow knitting. His thoughts were moving in slow motion and he didn't know... "Music," he said, raising his head.

His sister looked at him, uncomprehending.

He touched her ears. "Listen."

Nothing. Nothing and enough of it that they might have stood there forever had not Jee gasped, saying "I hear it." And she did, the faint sound of music drifting through the air like a small rivulet trickling through a parched, drought-ridden land . . . searching, desperate for something to quench. And then, it faded away once more.

Assam raised his hand, drawing Jee's eye to a faint shimmer off on the horizon. "There."

They continued on toward the mirage, sometimes forgetting why they were even trying to reach it. But then the music would drift past once more, like the sound of wind chimes on a quiet afternoon, and they would shake themselves and remember to keep walking.

Jee didn't notice, didn't realize when they finally arrived. She might have kept walking had not her brother pulled her back. She heard him shout but she couldn't think of what it was that he was saying. It might have been her name, it might have been something else entirely. She came to herself, standing up to her knees in warm, tepid water.

Her brother dragged her back to shore. If he hadn't, she might have kept walking until she drowned. They were standing on the edge of a little pond, not much larger than a swimming pool. The ripples she'd made smoothed out immediately, the surface as flat as the surrounding earth.

Jee looked up at Assam. He was staring into the center of the pond. She followed his gaze. Under the surface, they could see the bottom of the pond sloping steeply downwards, away from the shore. The water was clear, clear enough to see the pale bones littered all along the bottom to where, down near the center, a dark, oblong shape rested in the mud.

It took Jee a moment to realize what she was looking at: An old upright piano, tilting to one side. Faintly, the sound of music drifted up through the water. Jee did not recognize the song. She wondered if it was a showtune. "What is this place?"

Her brother didn't answer.

She examined the sodden rags wrapped around her feet and kicked them off. "Let's go."

They kept walking, leaving the pond behind and continuing on into the barren plain. After a time and a distance, they saw a small dark figure on the horizon in front of them. They headed towards it.

It was a man, crouching in the sand. They approached him carefully. He was dressed in a long flowing robe, kneeling to trace something in the ground with the fingertips of his right hand. He glanced up to them with dark, friendly eyes. His mouth, buried beneath a broad scrub of beard worked soundlessly for a moment. "As-salaam Alaikum." It sounded as though the words had lain there for years, rusting in his throat.

Neither Jee nor Assam knew how to respond to this.

No matter. Without waiting for them to answer, he returned to what he was doing. He ran his fingertips over the hard packed earth again and again, his arm moving slowly back and forth. Despite his effort, he barely left any trace in the hard ground. Assam and Jee watched him for a moment.

"What is 'Etaf'?" the boy asked. "What does it mean?"

The man did not stop. "It is my mother's name. I am writing it here so I will not forget it as I have forgotten so much of everything else." He looked up at Assam, his hand still moving lightly over the earth. "It is a matter of honor and respect. If I do not know who my mother is, how can I profess to know myself? And if I do not know myself, then I am lost for certain." He smiled, looking back down at his work. "But mostly, it is my mother's name." The man stopped and stared down at the thin letters etched into the ground. "It is an honor to her and we are told 'Honor your father and mother.'"

"And your days will be long upon the earth." Assam wasn't sure why he said it but he'd heard it somewhere and it sounded right.

The man looked up at him, still tracing in the dirt. "And do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you honor them, boy? Your parents?"

"I don't know," Assam answered honestly. "I try to."

The man nodded, casting his eyes down. "That is a good thing for you," he said. "You will please God by this."

Having no gods of his own to speak of, Assam had nothing to say in reply.

"Which god are you?" Jee asked.

Without missing a beat, the man replied "There is only one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet."

"No," she said, correcting him, "there's lots more. I've met some of them."

The man did not look up. "You have met evil spirits of wind and sand and flame, posturing demons masquerading for their own amusement and your damnation." He looked up at her with genuine, kind concern. "You must resist them, child. Their tricks and torments will only bring you pain."

"Not really," she said. "The ones I've met bring waffles and milkshakes."

The man clucked his tongue. "Sweet enticements to snare you, child, nothing more."

Jee opened her mouth to argue but Assam put his hand on her shoulder. "Can you tell us anything of this place and how we might find someone who is lost here?" He heard himself imitating the man's voice, his style of speaking. It felt appropriate.

The man looked back down at the letters in the dust. He stopped tracing and lifted his fingertips, inspecting them. "What I know of this place," he said, "is what I see here before me. These four letters, this patch of ground, and my mother's name." He sighed. "I am sorry, but I am the only one here and it was always that way until you arrived."

"How long have you been here?"

"I do not know."

"Has it been a couple of days? Weeks?" Jee asked. "When did you die?"

"I do not believe that I have died," the man said softly. "I have no memory of such an event."

"What do you remember?" Jee shook off the hand her brother put on her shoulder.

"As you see." He swept his hand over the patch of earth in front of him. "I remember my mother's name, the smell of her hair, the patch of burgundy light in the iris of her left eye."

Jee started to cry. The smell of her own mother's hair came back to her in a rush. It was a wonderful thing to go into her parent's room and bury her face into her mother's pillow. She wanted very much to do that right now.

Assam put his arm around her. "We're sorry to have disturbed you," he said to the man. "We have to keep moving, Our own mother is waiting for us."

"No disturbance, boy. And I am sorry to have so grieved the young lady." He leaned forward and squeezed the tip of Jee's toe between his thumb and forefinger. "I enjoyed our talk very much. This is such a desolate place."

"What's 'desolate' mean?" Jee asked.

"Lonely," the man replied. "Abandoned, forgotten . . . exiled..."

"Thank you for speaking with us." Assam nudged his sister. "Come on."

"Farewell..." The man was already starting to trace the letters again.

Jee waited behind a moment.

The man raised his eyebrows to look at her.

"There are other gods," she said quietly. "I've met some of them. They're nice and friendly. They take care of strangers and put out food for stray cats."

The man said nothing.

"Also," she said, pointing down to the faint letters scraped into the dirt before him, "that's 'fate' spelled backwards."

The man's hand stopped. He blinked and looked down.

Jee walked off after her brother. When she looked back, the man was gone. She caught up to Assam. Together they walked further, wandering through the blasted, barren plain, passing by all manner of relics and remnants. They passed a playground, rusting away on the open earth. The metal pipes, pitted and cracked, brown with age. Jee considered the slide, but it looks like it was on the brink of total collapse.

Further on, a battered leather jacket lay crumpled up in the sand. Nearby, a business suit and briefcase lay abandoned, vomiting papers and computer disks.

They passed the remains of a burnt out campfire, the embers long cold and little more than a blackened pit in the earth. A half empty bottle of catsup lay forgotten nearby.

They saw hoof prints the size of dinner plates crossing their path. But whatever beast made them was nowhere to be seen.

And they saw people, here and there. Some were gathered in groups, staring silently up at the sky. Others sat and rocked back and forth, moaning or giggling or reciting snippets of scripture and poetry and what Assam would have sworn were the ingredients off a candy bar wrapper. And still others seemed perfectly happy to be where they were...

...there was one couple, two men in tuxedos who drifted across the bare earth, dancing in each other's arms and oblivious to everything else around them...

...four women, their faces the color and texture of carved wood, sat around a card table playing a game with brightly colored tiles...

...a dark-haired man sitting alone on a short slab of concrete, reading a comic book. Jee waved to him. He nodded and gave her a smile as they passed...

...a woman, carrying on a conversation with someone unseen. She said something, waited, then cocked her head to listen. "You know who I am Jim," she answered to the air...

...they passed five small children gathered around a game board. Jee went over and peeked to see what they were playing. The board was decorated in black and ivory, with numbers and letters on it. A crescent moon in one corner, the sun in the other. One of the children had their fingers on a small water glass, moving it around the board. "My turn, my turn..." another of the children whined. The others ignored her...

(Jee looked at her brother but he just shook his head.)

...but strangest of all were the Number People, as Jee called them. They sat or stood alone, away from anyone else, speaking carefully into the air. They rattled off a span of random numbers or words, sometimes for minutes at a time. Then they fell silent. After a long moment, they would begin again. Sometimes they spoke in other languages....

...these last ones fascinated Jee. "What are they doing?"

"I have no idea".

"What does 'Tango Charlie Mike' mean?"

He thought for a moment. "Well . . . tango is a kind of dance and Charlie is a name, it's short for Charles. And Mike is . . . another name for Michael, who was an angel, I think. So..." He trailed off, thoughtful.

Jee waited a moment. "So?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea."

They walked on, passing more and more as they went...

...they threaded their way through a topiary garden, all manner of animals and characters fashioned not out of hedges but what appeared to be discarded shopping carts...

...a woman sitting in a recliner, staring at a television and gesturing to the vacant chair next to her, browbeating her unseen husband and the empty air...

...a line of children, standing in front of an old refrigerator, holding the door closed and giggling...

...their path crossed by rusted, weed-choked railroad tracks leading off into the horizon on either side...

("Maybe we should follow them?" Jee asked, but her brother shook his head.)

...little piles of dark, pitted lumps of volcanic rock arranged in broad spiral around a small, puckish man with a scraggly beard at their center...

("I am not here," he told the children as they passed, picking up another rock and setting it in place. "I only come here to dream.")

...rows of children weeping in front of an old puppet theatre, bound to each other and to the theatre by a thick iron chain...

...a woman with a large triangular hole torn in her cheek, who would not stop following them, begging them to take her home, until Assam patted her arm and said that he would try. She shook her head and went her own way, still weeping...

...all this and more Assam and Darjeeling saw. They could have spent years wandering in that place and not seen the same thing twice.

Some time later, Assam stopped and pointed to a dark shape on the horizon. "There she is."

Jee started to run. "Come on!"

"Wait!" He caught up to her and grabbed her arm.

"What are you doing?"

He nodded to the figure. "Just being careful."

"But..."

"...remember the piano."

She stared at him for a moment and then looked back up at the small figure ahead. "Okay."

They started walking again, keeping their eyes out for traps.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Their mother sat in an old chair with her back to them, staring blankly into the distance beyond. She wore a suit, the coat and skirt faded and frayed, hanging in tatters. It was the outfit she'd been wearing the morning of the accident. The pale skin of her arms and face was mottled with scrapes and bruises. And she was whispering, silently gasping out the same horrible words over and over again: "I let you fall, I let you drown..." She did not appear to know her children, did not even notice that they were there right in front of her.

"What's wrong with her?" Jee asked.

"I don't know." Assam crouched down to stare into his mother's dull eyes. "Mom, it's me. It's Sam. We're here."

She did not answer, no flicker of recognition at all.

"Mom?" Jee said.

Assam held up his hand to quiet her. He leaned forward and, gently, touched his mother's mind with his own. He snapped back immediately and straightened up.

"What is it?" his sister asked.

He shook his head. He didn't know what it was, he didn't know what he had seen there, but something was very wrong. He'd never felt anything like it before and it frightened him.

Jee leaned in. "Is she..?"

...and then their mother began to scream. It was a horrible thing to watch. She flailed wildly in her chair, slapping her hands in the air and across her face and arms, adding livid red welts on top of the older bruises. Through it all, her children stood there clutching each other and crying. It went on for a long time, too long to bear and longer still, longer than any living person should have breath to scream. And then, finally, she let out one single wailing gasp and drifted back off into silence again, lowering her arms and staring out into the middle distance. "I let you fall," she whispered. "I let you drown."

"Is she..?" Jee began, but her brother cut her off.

"No." He let go of her and stepped closer to their mother. "She's not dead."

"Then what's wrong with her?"

Assam walked around the chair, listening without getting too close. "I think she's asleep," he said after a moment. "I think she's dreaming."

"About what?" Jee asked.

The look he gave her was very Older Brother. "I don't know," he said. "But it doesn't look like it's a very happy one."

"So what do we do?"

He considered for a moment, walking around their mother once more. "I think," he said as he came to a stop behind the chair, "we need to wake her up." He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. "Mom?" It was all he had time to say before the world turned inside out around him.

In school, Assam's science teacher had spent a couple of days telling them about magnetism. During the lesson, he handed out small black bars about the size of a stick of gum. Each student also got a small dish of coarse, dark powder. Following the teacher's instructions, Assam sprinkled the powder over the little black bar, amazed to see the grains arrange into patterns around the magnet, bending outward in visible waves like ripples across a pond.

When he touched his mother's shoulder, Assam felt something surge through him, felt himself crumble and fold inward, no more than a handful of dust shaped by her dream...

...and then he was in the back seat of their car. Outside the window, snow fell between the winter trees, dark sky beyond. In front, the radio murmured too quietly to be heard and not loud enough to drown out his mother, whispering as she drove.

"I let you fall," she whispered. "I let you drown."

He tried to answer her, he tried to speak. Nothing. She did not, could not hear him. He reached out his hand to touch her shoulder, to comfort her, to wake her up. She was too far away.

Then he heard her gasp, heard the screech of the tires and the howl of the truck as it bore down on them. His mother, reaching back through the seats for him. He stretched out his arm, straining against the seatbelt to touch her hand, as the car filled with light. He looked for his sister. The seat next him was empty. He heard his mother scream, the howl of metal.

A familiar, sickening lurch. The car began to roll.

Jee stood staring at the two of them, her mother and brother locked together and oblivious to everything around them. Assam had his hand on their mother's shoulder. From time to time he twitched. Jee had no idea what to do. She tried shouting in his ear, but he gave no sign that he'd heard. "Sorry," she told him. Then she kicked him in the shins. Even without her boots, it was a solid shot. Nothing.

She wanted to pry those fingers off of her mother's shoulder, one by one. She knew it was a bad idea. She'd seen what had happened when his hand had locked onto their mother. She didn't want to be trapped as he had been.

She thought for a moment, weighing different ideas and then rejecting them. Nodding to herself, Jee turned and walked away ten or fifteen paces, measured the distance with her eyes. She went another ten steps more. She crouched down and ran full tilt towards him and launching herself against his body, knocking him to the ground.

She rolled over and sat up. Assam lay in a heap nearby like a rag doll. She crawled over and patted his shoulder. "Hey?"

He gave no response.

She screamed, full voiced, into his face. His eyelids flickered, nothing more. Out of options, she slapped him, hard as she could.

He let out a gasp and sat up, rubbing his cheek. He stared at her sullenly, a little woozy. "Why'd you hit me?"

"I wanted to know if you were alive."

He wagged his jaw back and forth. "Well, why didn't you just ask?"

She helped him stand. He stood and watched their mother for a moment. She was still whispering.

"I wouldn't let go, huh?"

Jee nodded. "It was like you were hypnotized or something."

"Hypnotized," he corrected her, absently rubbing his cheek. "She's stuck in there."

"In where?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Inside. Somewhere inside."

"What happened to you?"

"I was there," he said, "I was with her."

"But . . . where was she?"

"Back in the car." He rubbed his eyes. "It was happening all over again."

"What was?" Jee asked with growing dread.

"The accident," he told her. "She's living it over and ..."

...and then, as if on cue, their mother began to scream, flailing about wildly in the chair. Just like before.

Jee grabbed her brother's arm. "What's happening to her? Why is she doing that?"

"She's still there," he said. "In the car . . . I think she's, I think it keeps happening over and over again. The accident."

"Why?"

He looked down at their mother. His gaze was a little cold to Jee's eyes, like a doctor studying a patient. She didn't like who it reminded her of. He nodded as if confirming his diagnosis. "I think she's punishing herself."

"Punishing herself?"

"Over and over again," he looked at Jee. "For letting us die."

"But..." She stopped as the screams subsided, their mother calmly whispering once more. "But we're not dead."

"She doesn't know that," he told her. "All she remembers is the accident."

Their mother whispered something. Jee looked up at Assam to translate.

"I let you fall." he told her. "I let you drown." That's what she's saying. She was saying it before, too. Inside the car, in the dream."

"Why?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea."

They watched their mother for a moment.

"I could try knocking her over," Jee said, "like I did with you."

"What do you mean?"

She explained how she had run at him, broken him loose from the magnetic pull of that shared nightmare. "That might work."

"I don't think so. I wasn't as deep as she is. I knew where I was, I knew who I was. I'm not sure she does anymore. She's been inside of this for too long."

"So what should we do?"

"We have to go in after her." He said it with his jaw set, grim. "We have to get her back."

Their mother started screaming again. Jee closed her eyes, covered her ears with her hands. Not enough. She could still hear her mother screaming herself hoarse. Then, their mother once again settled back into that horrid rasp, that whisper. Jee lowered her hands and opened her eyes.

"You're going to have to be stronger than that," Assam told her. "I'm going to need your help." She nodded and took his hand, suddenly very glad that he was there with her.

"I'll touch her left shoulder," he said. "You're on the right. Just like in the back seat."

"But what if we get stuck, like you did?"

He stood watching their mother for a long moment. "I don't know. But we still have to try." He squeezed her hand. "You ready?"

She nodded.

"Okay. On 'three' then..." He began to count. "One . . . two . . . three..."

Together, they each put a hand on their mother's shoulder as she began to scream once more.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was, Jee thought to herself, very much like being in a clothes dryer. At least, what she imagined being in a clothes dryer would be like. They tumbled in darkness pierced by flashes of light. A blare of noise, the thunder of a thousand things coming undone at once all around them. The air cluttered, gemlike shards of broken glass tumbling past her face. The horrible squeal of metal, their mother's screams. A lurch, a teeth-grinding jolt.

And then silence and darkness.

The sound of the radio then, murmuring to itself. Slowly, the snow began to drift past the darkened, now-unbroken, windows. The faint glow of the dashboard, illuminating their mother's profile. Her lips moving soundlessly. The sweep of headlights outside. The sound of the road. The thump of the wipers. Jee had a brief moment of unreality. She wondered if she had fallen asleep, if it had all been a dream. She did not want it to be a dream. She did not want to give up those memories so easily. She slid her hand into the pocket of her snowpants, half-relieved to find the small circle of rough metal there. She looked over to Assam, safely bucked in next to her.

He held his finger to his lips.

A moment later, there came the gasp, the sickening slide of the car, their mother reaching back to them. The sudden glare in the windshield, the blare of the horn filling the car. The tumble, the broken glass, the screaming. Lurch, stop . . . silence and darkness.

Jee heard the faint sound of the radio rising, the hum of the car on the road. They were driving once more. She looked to Assam. "What's going on?"

He was staring straight ahead, a blank, almost dreamy look on his face. "Just," he answered, very far away, "just . . . just wait for a second . . . I'm trying..." His voice drifted off.

Jee looked up between the seats at their mother. *It's all the same, she thought. Just like before.* There

was one difference, though. The radio was playing music, not the news. It was faint but Jee could make out a girl singing that, no matter what we do, please don't tell Mama. Jee smiled, in spite of herself, thinking of washing dishes with Gerry. She touched her pocket again. *Two differences*, she reminded herself.

Then, her brother let out a long shuddering gasp and clutched at her hand. "Hold on," he choked out, "it's coming around again."

"What is?" she asked.

And then it hit them...

...the sweep of light, the slide...

...their mother reaching for them, screaming...

...the tumble through darkness and broken glass...

...the sharp smell of gasoline...

...the jolt, the shudder, the stop...

...the darkness...

...the radio fading up, the car coming to life, driving once more...

...their mother's eyes framed in a strip of light from the rearview mirror, haunted and stricken. Her lips moved but she wasn't singing, Jee knew. Her mother hated showtunes.

Next to Jee, Assam scrubbed at his face and shook himself. "I'm trying to get in, to get past everything . . . but she's so deep."

Jee had no idea what he was talking about and said so.

"It's hard to explain," he replied. "She's . . . it's like she's sleeping, dreaming. I'm trying to wake her up."

"She doesn't look asleep."

"I said it was *like* she was sleeping."

Jee thought for a moment. "Why don't you just yell really loud?"

Assam rolled his eyes. "It's not like..." but then his sister filled the car with a piercing scream. Like all girls her age, Jee was an expert screamer. Hers could scrape across your skin like a sunburn. She could drive it through your ears like an icicle, freezing your brain. This was one of her best. Assam thought his head was going to explode.

And then, just as abruptly, she stopped. In the front seat, their mother gave no sign that she had even heard.

"It didn't work." Jee told her brother.

"It would be nice," he said, eyes closed, "if you didn't do that again."

"Fine. Now what?"

"I'm going to try..." but then the car filled with light and their mother's screams once more.

Tumble.

Glass.

Stop.

Silence and darkness.

The radio faded up, their mother's whispers following close behind.

Assam looked at his sister in the dim light of the dashboard. "We have to get her out of here."

Jee nodded. "But what if we can't? Will she just go on like this forever?"

"She might," he said. "I don't know."

"We can't just leave her here."

Assam looked into her eyes, then away. "You don't understand," he said, looking down at his hands in his lap, "we're here now too. If we can't get her out, we can't get ourselves out."

Jee stared at him with growing horror. "We're trapped?"

He nodded. "If we can't get out, we can't get out – with or without mom."

As if on cue, the car flooded with light and the mother reached back between the seats, screaming. Jee saw the madness in her eyes, realized her brother was right. And then the world turned over once again.

In the darkness, as things settled, Jee said "We're trapped."

"Yes." Assam sounded hoarse. The radio faded up, the dim light from the dashboard rising to meet it. He looked over at his sister. "This is her trap," he told her, "she made it for herself."

"Why?"

Assam nodded towards their mother, whispering in the front of the car. "I let you fall, I let you drown..." he recited. "This is her, punishing herself."

"But it wasn't her fault."

He closed his eyes. "Now that we're here, it's complete. She can go on forever . . . and we'll go on with her."

"So what do we do?"

He looked at the back of the headrest in front of him, trying to push through into his mother's mind. "We wake her up, we bring her back."

"And then we can stop? We can go home?"

"I don't know," Assam said, "but at least we'll have her back again." He took a breath, let it out. "Quiet now," he told her. "I'm going to try again." He let his mind edge forward, focusing on the faint pattern of the fabric of the headrest in front of him. Vertical lines of gray and blue. Corduroy. Like bars, like a prison. He closed his eyes, pushing forward through the bars. In the darkness beyond, he could see faint shadows moving back and forth, waving gently before his eyes like rippling water.

A large shape drifted past, the faint sound of laughter. He heard children playing, a splash.

White spots formed in front of his eyes, dazzling. He blinked, rubbing them away. The sun was very bright overhead. The water very blue. The sharp smell of fresh cut grass and chlorine all around. White tiles around the rim of the swimming pool gleaming like a movie star's smile. His mother lay on a plastic chair, reading a book. Next to her, a little girl in a pale green swimsuit lay on a towel, playing with a handful of brightly colored plastic toys. Assam knew those toys. He knew that girl, no more than two or three years old.

She looked up and said something to her mother. Assam watched as his mother breathed deep, did not answer. Her book tilted forward to lay almost flat against her stomach.

The girl stood up and took a few awkward steps towards the pool. She looked back at her mother.

The book dipped lower.

The girl said something, a jumble of sounds. Assam knew that voice very well. He remembered when she used to talk like that.

There were mothers and children everywhere. But the little girl, none of them were watching her. She took a few more steps towards the pool. Assam looked back to his mother, dozing. He wanted to shout, to run and shake her. But he couldn't. He couldn't do anything but watch as the book slowly slipped down her hip and, finally, fell out of her fingers and onto the ground. Her hand twitched.

He heard a splash, looked back. The girl was gone.

His mother was up in an instant, leaping into the water. Assam could only stand and watch the

water ripple and swell over the edge of the pool, a tidal wave coming towards him, tumbling over and dragging him down into chaotic darkness where he could hear his mother screaming.

Then, silence.

In the darkness, he felt a hand in his.

The radio played, the light rose.

His sister, looking at him with fear and concern. "What happened?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't reach her. I couldn't get deep enough."

"What did you see?"

"I saw her, I saw a little girl . . . a swimming pool." He shuddered. "The little girl fell in."

"What little girl?"

"You," he told her. "Obviously. She jumped in after you."

"How old was I?"

Assam shrugged. "I don't know. It was a long time ago. Her hair was short."

Jee nodded. She'd seen pictures, her mother posing for the camera with her hair in a smart little bob.

"I have to try again." He swallowed. "Before the next crash." Without waiting for her answer, he turned to face forward once more, pushing through the bars. As before, the bars began to shift and ripple. It was easier this time. He wasn't entirely certain if that was a good thing. But he kept moving forward, going deeper past the light on the water and into the darkness beyond. The shadows parted in front of his like the leaves of a tree, drifting against his face. He could almost feel them brushing against his cheeks. Then, as the shadows parted, he saw his mother's face.

He was looking down the stairs back home. His mother stood at the bottom, very far away. As he watched, she began to climb, a basket of laundry in her arms. She reached the top and, awkwardly, shifted the laundry to one arm so she could open the baby gate at the top. Assam knew that gate well. He remembered his father dragging it out of the attic to install it a few months after his sister was born. Vaguely, he remembered clinging to it himself, hooking his fingers through the white plastic grate.

His mother got the gate open, nearly dumping out the basket in the process. She muttered a word under her breath. It was not a word Assam had ever heard her say before, never even would have believed she knew it. She stepped through and turned to close the gate behind her. The laundry basket tilted again and she caught it, just in time. Annoyance flickered across her face as she swung the gate back into place with an angry jerk. She turned away.

The gate did not latch, Assam saw. But his mother did not. She continued on up the hallway and stopped outside his room. "Hi sweetie," she said through the open door. "Mommy just has to put this away and then we can go downstairs for lunch, okay?"

A voice answered, so familiar it left an ache in the center of his chest.

His mother went on with the laundry to his parents' room. Assam watched as his younger self – halfway between baby and little boy – came out of his room and wobbled down the hallway towards the top of the stairs. Assam wanted to shout for his mother. Through the open doorway at the end of the hall, he could see her passing back and forth as she put the clothes away. He could not shout, he could not move. He could only watch as the little boy he had once been toddled forward and grabbed hold of the safety gate.

Up the hallway, his mother stopped in front of the open door. She froze for a moment, seeing her son perched on the edge of disaster. To her credit that she did not scream, did not shout and startle the little boy balanced on the cusp of disaster at the top of the stairs. She took a couple of steps into the hallway.

"Honey..." Assam could hear the strain in her voice, feel the barely-controlled fear radiating out from her. "Can you come here to mommy?"

The little boy looked up and saw his mother. He laughed and banged on the gate. The latch slipped, the gate swung open under his hands. The boy hung there for a moment, the chubby fingers of one hand tangled in the plastic mesh of the gate.

His mother moved faster than Assam had ever seen her move before. She reached the top of the stairs in time to watch her son tumble down the full flight to the hardwood floor below. Her face was a gaping mask carved from pure horror. Assam could not look away, could not drown out the bubbling wail that rose out of her. And then he fell forward into that wide mouth, that howl echoing him down through the darkness until he came to a lurching stop once more.

He heard the radio, the sound of the road, the gentle thump of the wipers. His sister's face came into focus. He shook his head at her unspoken question. "It was different this time." He told her about the stairs, about the fall, about the horrible look of despair and failure in their mother's eyes.

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know. But I have to keep trying." What he would try now, he had no idea.

"What's it like?" she asked him.

"What's what like?"

She struggled with words for a moment. "What's it like when you go away, when you're..." She gestured towards the front of the car where their mother sat whispering.

"I don't know. It's like walking into a tunnel, crawling into . . . it's like another place completely. I'm still here, but I'm somewhere else too."

"Where?"

He thought for a moment. "Inside, somewhere . . . inside her head, her mind."

"Can you like see her brain and stuff?"

"No." He didn't know how to put into words so she could understand. "It's not . . . biological. It's more like..." He dug deep for some kind of metaphor. "Okay, you know how when we used to play hide and go seek?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you know how when you hide in her closet, you can see all of her clothes there?"

She nodded.

"It's like that. All of her clothes are hanging there and you can see them, but you can also see them in your memory. You can see her wearing them at different times . . . the Christmas dress from last year, the jeans she wears when she cleans house. It's all right there hanging in front of you and you can remember her at all those times, you can smell her all around you, the smell of her hair, her perfume..?"

Jee's eyes filled with tears.

"It's like that," he said. "That's what it's like in there, surrounded by all these different pieces of her. It's . . . overpowering. Like I might get stuck there with her." Assam stared, focusing on his mother, ready to dive in once more.

"Ugh," Jee groaned.

"What? What is it?"

"I hate this song," she replied. "Does anyone really even like this play?"

Assam shrugged. "I have no idea."

She nodded. After a long moment, she said "Assam?"

"Yeah?" He didn't want to sound testy, but he couldn't help it. She wasn't making it easy to concentrate.

"Are we going to get out of this?"

"You mean the car or..?"

"...I mean all of it. The whole thing." She sighed, staring out the window, the falling snow beyond.

"Are we ever going to get home?"

"I hope so," he said.

She was quiet. Then, almost timid: "With mom?"

He looked at her and nodded. "Yes." He could hear the conviction in his voice. He hoped she could as well.

"Yes, if we can make it out . . . then mom will be with us."

"If?" Jee asked.

Her brother didn't answer.

As the car began to tumble a few minutes later, Jee said "You know, I'm really starting to get sick of this."

Assam didn't answer. He was already inside.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Assam fell through the ribbons of shadow to find there was nothing waiting on the other side, just darkness. He waited. He could not tell if he was moving or standing still. His outstretched hand and touched nothing, felt nothing. This was the darkness that everyone feared — under the bed, at the top of the stairs, down in the basement, at the back of the closet . . . this was what was waiting for us all, in the end.

Then, close by, he heard his mother whisper. "I let you drown, I let you fall..."

His heart twitched and fluttered at the shock of her voice so near. "Mom?" He stretched out his arms, reaching for her.

"I let you die," she whispered.

"No," he walked forward into the dark, "I'm here."

"I let you fall."

"You didn't." He wasn't even sure if she could hear him. "I'm fine."

"I let you die."

There, off to his right. His fingertips brushed something, her shoulder. He grabbed hold, following the shoulder down the length of her arm to grasp her hand in both of his.

"I let you drown," she whispered. "Let me die."

"No," he told her. "It's time to come home."

She muttered something and then, with the squeal of metal and his mother's screams rising in his ears, Assam squeezed her hand and *pulled*. They tumbled backwards through the darkness, battered by shadows. For one terrible moment, Assam thought they might not make it all the way through to the other side. That he might not be strong enough, might lose his grip, might lose her once more. But then they came to a lurching, teeth-jarring stop.

Darkness. Her hand still in his. Then the radio began to fade up.

"Did you make it?" he heard his sister ask. "Are you back?"

Before he could answer, he heard his mother let out a gasp. "Sweetheart?" The panic rose in her voice. "Is that you? Where are you?" The pale light of the dashboard rose and Assam saw his mother twisting back in her seat, reaching out for the two of them. She cried out their names, such relief in her voice. The children grasped at her hands.

"It's okay," Assam told her. "We're here."

"We came to get you," Jee said.

"Get me?" Their mother sobbed with relief. "What do you mean?"

Assam realized she didn't know what was going on, didn't know what had happened. She didn't know where they were. "There was an accident," he told her. "But it's okay now."

Their mother passed a hand over her face. "I don't know what's happening, I thought..." She trailed off, dazed.

Assam raised his voice a notch. "Mom. You've got to stay awake. You've got to hold on."

She nodded and turned back to the wheel, peering out through the windshield. "I'm sorry, honey. I can't believe how thick it is out there." She turned up the wipers. "Why didn't they call a snow day?"

"Mom..." Jee said.

"Quiet sweetheart." Their mother's voice was dreamy, almost a yawn. "I'm trying to concentrate on the road."

Assam knew that at any moment the truck was going to come barreling into them again, knocking her back into the darkness once more. Maybe deeper this time, too deep for him to reach her again. He grabbed Jee's hand. "Hold on."

"What are you going to do?"

He didn't answer, turning to their mother once more. "Mom!" He was almost shouting, "I think I'm carsick."

"What?" His mother turned back, putting her hand on the seat next to her as she twisted around. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it, tight enough that he heard her cry out in pain. She tried to pull away, but he held on – despite the screams, despite the blare of the truck, the shards of glass scattered through the air like stars, the long tumble into darkness – he held on until the end.

In the darkness, he heard her crying softly and it broke his heart. "What's happening?" she sobbed. "What is this?"

The radio played, the light rose. Their mother sat at the wheel, driving. Confused tears streamed down her cheeks.

"It's okay, mom." Jee tried to reach up and pat her shoulder. "Everything's okay. We're just stuck in the Underwo – ow!"

Assam didn't want to hurt her, but he had to. He had a very strong feeling that their mother, in her current state, would not respond well to any information about where they were or why. He had no idea what to say. Which was fine because, of course, his mother screamed and reached back through the seats as the headlights filled the car. He held her hand very tightly until it was over once more.

As the music faded up and the dim light rose, Assam realized that he was getting tired. He wasn't sure how much longer her could stand the horrible cycle, how much longer before he slipped away into the darkness as his mother had done.

"What's happening?" his mother asked. "Why is this happening to us?" She pinched her cheek tightly between her thumb and forefinger. "This is crazy. This doesn't happen."

"Do something." Jee poked his arm.

"I don't know what to do."

"What?" She poked him again. "Wake up and get us out of here."

"Knock it off." He edged away from her. "I am awake."

"So get us..."

He cut her off. "I don't know how."

"What?"

He shrugged. All he really wanted right now was a nap. He felt his eyes drift downward. In the front seat, his mother walked into his room and told him it was time to get up for school. He groaned and sat up. He stared at the foot of his bed for a moment before flopping back down again.

Then, his sister said his name.

"What?" He swung his head up and stared at her, blinking away the brief dream.

"We. Need. To. Go."

He rubbed his eyes. "I think I was falling asleep."

She rolled her eyes. "Less naps, more saving."

"I'm so sorry," their mother said. "So sorry..." They were losing her again.

"Something. Now. Do." Jee poked each word into Assam's shoulder for punctuation.

"I don't know what to do," he told her. "I think we're stuck here."

"We can't be."

"We really are."

"We're really not." She nodded to their mother. "Better get ready to grab her again."

He reached out, just in time. Soon enough, it was over. The wave passed, taking a little more of their mother's sanity and Assam's strength with it.

"What were you saying?" He remembered that they'd been talking, but he could not remember what about.

Jee resisted the urge to punch him. "I was saying that we aren't stuck here."

"I think we are, though."

"Well, but you're an idiot. We're not stuck here because we're back there."

"Where?"

"In the other place."

He looked at her in confusion. "Which other place?"

"The desert, where we found her..?" She gave him a look. "In the chair?"

"I don't think I am, I don't think we are," he said slowly. "I think we're just here now."

"But that doesn't make sense. She was there when we found her and she was here. So we must be too, in both places. And if we are, then..."

"...right." Her brother looked at her thoughtfully, realization dawning.

"What?" she asked.

"I was just thinking that I don't give you enough credit."

"Yeah," she said. "You really don't."

He smiled.

"What?" She asked again. "You've got that look. What are you thinking?"

He opened his mouth to explain but it was too late, the car began to roll.

Hands grasping, mother and children holding on as best they could through the storm of sound and pain. Eventually, it passed.

Even before the radio began to fade up, Assam was already talking. "Do you remember when you killed the fox?"

Jee nodded.

"Do you remember how you did it?"

"I don't know. I just talked to it." It had been horrible, all that power spilling out of her, watching that poor animal waste away under the weight of her words. But it had felt good too, that much power.

He put his hand on hers. "I want you to talk to mom."

"What should I say?"

"Tell her what you told me, that we're still there, back in the desert." He squeezed her hand. "Use that voice, the fox voice, and bring her back." Any moment now, it would begin again. He could feel it. Assam locked his fingers into Jee's. "It's coming around again, talk to her."

At a loss, Jee stared down at her snow boots in the dim light. Her boots. She lost them back in the swamp when they'd chased the little girl. But now they were back.

She thought of her toes, worn and raw from walking over the ice and through the desert. She thought of the feel of the packed earth under her feet, digging her toes in and breaking up the parched fissured ground, holding onto it like a bird on a perch. Jee flexed her toes, digging in as she said, as loud as she could "Mom? Listen to me..."

Then her mother screamed, the car lurched.

Assam reached for her between the seats.

Above it all, Jee kept talking.

The ground felt like sandpaper under her feet. It must have been a lake once, long ago . . . dried away now to nothing, evaporated like all of the dreams and lives of the people who were trapped there.

Jee was there. She was back. She stood behind the old chair her mother was sitting in, one hand on her shoulder. Her brother stood next to her, but he wasn't there. She heard him then, in the back of her mind. One word delivered across the gap between them with such force that it rattled her teeth: "Pull."

"Come here." She let her voice do the hard work of dragging the two of them out of that hideous nightmare place, reaching deep to tear them out of themselves. They screamed as they came through, pulled loose, and tumbled to the ground in a heap.

But they were free.

They sat there, the three of them, clutching at each other, hanging on as though they might suddenly fly apart again. The two children surrounded their mother, weighing her down so she might not vanish once more. It was a pure time, love and relief alone. Nothing could intrude, no shadow could be cast.

Until, from behind them, Assam heard a familiar voice: "'And when the bell rang, when the moment came, it was only my mother, my dear sweet mother, who could recall my name.'"

Assam raised his head, still clutching his mother and sister. "Hi Edgar."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Edgar nodded to Assam. "Looks like you made it through and out then, eh?"

Assam stood up, brushing off the seat of his pants. "We did."

"Yeah, no thanks to you." Jee kept her arm around her mother's shoulder.

Assam faced the other boy, quiet but tense.

Edgar had his hands behind his back. "You know, you can't stop me if I want what I want."

"What do you want?"

"Five minutes," Edgar replied. "Maybe ten. Just like we agreed."

Jee stood up and moved forward. The air grew considerably thicker between them.

"We had a bargain," Edgar said to them.

Assam studied the boy for a moment. "What do you have back there?" he asked softly.

Edgar shrugged, almost as though he were embarrassed by the answer. He brought out what he'd been holding behind his back.

Jee laughed, in spite of herself. She recognized the book he held. She'd first seen it when she went to preschool. It was practically a baby book.

Edgar bristled. "Don't you laugh at me."

Assam stepped in before Jee could say anything. "What is it you want, Edgar?"

"We had a deal." Edgar looked pointedly at Assam. "You made a deal."

Neither of the children answered.

Edgar sighed and bent down to tie his shoe. "You know," he said, "that silent treatment thing doesn't work so good on me." He looked up at them. "It's a bad habit to get into, treating people like that. Breaking your word." He stuck out his left thumb and drew a line in the dust between him and the kids. "Don't get me wrong," he said as he stood up. "I don't mind silence. If anything, I prefer it. But it's a hard habit to break. You play the silent treatment once too often and you might forget how to talk at all."

Jee opened her mouth to say something but he held up his hand. "Let me finish. You might want to know about this. It could strike at any time. Like a disease, a silent plague. One minute you're being a snotty little brat, keeping mum . . . and the next, it's like your tongue gets too heavy, your throat closes up, and the next thing you know..."

Assam reached out for him, his hand stopping in mid-air. He raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Yeah," Edgar agreed, "that's all it takes: One thin line in the dirt, a few choice words from me . . . and then where are you?" He smiled, gap toothed. And then, something shifted . . . as if the line he had drawn in the dust was a hinge, folding one way and then another, flipping the world over on itself. One moment, Assam and Jee were standing between Edgar and their mother. The next, he was standing where they had been. They were on the other side of the line. They could not move past it. Their mouths were leaden, their teeth fused. They could not speak.

Edgar gave them an apologetic, embarrassed look. It seemed almost genuine.

Assam felt sorry for him, in spite of everything. There was a dull ache, a sadness somewhere at the core of that boy. He could feel it.

For her part, Jee wanted to kill him with her bare hands.

Edgar turned, clutching the book to his chest. He walked towards their mother. She looked up as he approached and asked a question. Her voice was faint but Assam knew what she had asked: "I had a son. Are you my son?"

In reply, Edgar held out the book to her. She took it from him, turning it over in her hands. She looked up at him and nodded. He held out his hand and helped her up. She led him over to the chair and sat down. She edged over on the seat, giving him some room next to her. Once Edgar had sat down, their mother put her arm around him.

Assam could feel Jee about to burst into flames next to him. He put his hand on her shoulder. She shoved it off and knelt, digging at the flat dry earth with her fingers. Assam thought at first that she

was trying to dig under the line, the barrier that Edgar has set in front of them. Soon, however, all she had to show for her efforts were a handful of bloody fingertips and a small stone she had managed to coax out of the fallow ground.

Jee stood up, hefting the stone in her palm. It was about the size of a golf ball, jagged on one side. Without judging the distance or taking aim, she let fly with the stone just as her mother was opening the book and turning to the first page. The stone rose in a gentle arc, clipping Edgar on the temple. He fell off the chair, his hand to his head. His eyes flashed at Jee and he said one word: "Sit."

She crumpled to the earth without a sound. Assam knelt next to her. She tried to stand but her knees buckled beneath her. They could only sit and watch as their mother helped Edgar up and dabbed at the small scratch on his head.

She asked him a question in her soft voice and he nodded in reply. She sat him back down on the seat once more and kissed him tenderly on the temple. Sitting down next to him, she opened the book and began reading. She turned the pages, pointing out little details in the pictures and giving him a squeeze from time to time. Edgar looked perfectly content, like any other little boy reading a story with his mom.

When the book was finished, their mother closed it gently and handed it back to him.

He sat there for a moment, staring down at it in his hands. Gently, he laid it back in her lap before standing up. He bent down, kissed her cheek.

She smiled at him as he turned away. Assam wasn't sure Edgar had seen her smile. Slowly, the boy approached where Assam and Jee were waiting. His face was streaked with tears. "Sorry," he said to Assam. "Thanks. Sorry."

Gently, Edgar laid the sole of his shoe against the line on the ground and wiped it away.

The two boys stared at each other for a moment.

Edgar turned away.

Assam touched his arm. "You could come with us."

Edgar looked back at him, then to Jee. He rolled his eyes. "Not for all the tea in China."

Assam nodded. He hadn't really expected the boy to take him up on the offer. He wasn't even sure that he wanted him to. "Uh . . . one more thing?"

"Yes?" Edgar was impatient to leave, Assam could tell, embarrassed and ashamed of his tears.

"Which way do we go? Back the way we came, or..?"

"...well, there's two schools of thought on that one," Edgar pointed back the way they had come. "Heading back's definitely the longest path, but at least you know what's ahead. Contrariwise," he pointed off into the distance the other way, "heading onward probably gets you there quicker, but there's no telling who or what you might run into."

Assam considered this lack of helpful advice. "Which way would you go, if you were us?"

The jack o' lantern grin blazed to life. "I'd go on. It might be easier or it might be harder . . . but at least it won't be boring."

"Okay," Assam said. "Thanks."

"Yeah," Jee said. "Thanks for everything."

"You're welcome," Edgar said, ignoring her tone.

And then he was gone, for good.

Assam let out his breath in a long, slow sigh.

"I still," Jee said quietly, "really, really want to kill him."

Her brother shrugged. "No harm done. Come on."

Their mother sat in her chair, staring down at the book in her lap. She looked up as they approached

— a hazy, uncertain recognition drifted across her face. “Do you . . . do you want me to read you a story, before bedtime?”

“Not right now, mom.” Assam reached for her hand. “Let’s go home first.”

She looked deep into his eyes and nodded slowly. “I don’t think I know the way, honey.”

“That’s okay,” Jee said, helping her up. “We can show you.”

They set off, heading out further into the wasteland. Edgar had pointed this way and they had no reason not to trust him. Not anymore.

After a few yards, a faint noise caught Jee’s attention and she looked back. Behind them, Edgar’s book lay forgotten on the seat of the chair, pages rustling in the wind. She thought of going back for it but decided against it. After all, given all the junk scattered around the desert, what was one more forgotten shred of someone’s life caught on the fence between this world and the other?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The question their mother asked most often was “Where are we?” closely followed by “How did we get here?” Neither of her children thought it was a particularly good idea to answer either question with complete honesty. It was good to have her back once more, but it was difficult too. They had to take care of her now. So they kept walking, each of them taking turns to keep her from wandering away. The vast plain stretched out in every direction, featureless and sterile. They did their best to head in a straight line, more or less.

After a while, a horrible thought stuck Jee: What if they heard that music again, the piano rotting away at the bottom of that stagnant pool? What if they were walking in circles? Or, worse yet, what if they found nothing at all? What if they kept walking and this horrible stale place stretched on forever, never ending? What if this was Edgar’s final joke, his revenge? “That would be just like him...” she muttered.

“What?” Her brother looked at her strangely.

“Nothing. I was just thinking out loud.”

“Oh, my poor baby...” her mother murmured kindly.

“Who were you talking about?” Assam asked.

“Not you, don’t worry.” Jee was bored and irritable and had no problem taking it out on her brother.

“Who then?”

“Him.” She gestured back the way they had come. “Crater Face.”

“What about him?”

She sighed. “Just thinking that maybe he lied and sent us this way on purpose, to trick us.”

“Why would he do something liked that?”

“To get even with us.”

Assam shook his head. “He didn’t.”

“How do you know?”

He shrugged. “Just do.”

“What, you read his mind?”

He shrugged again. Infuriating.

"Please don't fight," their mother said, sounding like her old self for the first time. She had wandered off a ways, staring out into the distance around them.

"All I'm saying is," Jee was warming up, "I think we're out here in the middle of nowhere and that freak is laughing his butt off."

"Don't say 'butt' honey," her mother said.

Assam ignored Jee's attempt to draw him into an argument. "I think she's getting better. She seems more . . . connected."

"Great," Jee said. "She can watch me die of boredom, stuck here forever."

"You can't be sure of that."

"Oh yeah? Well I bet I'm surer of this than you are that he didn't lie to us."

"He didn't lie to us."

"Um..." their mother called.

"Come on, Houdini," Jee said, "read my mind. Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong." Assam had more to say, but he stopped.

"Good comeback," his sister said.

He held up his hand. "Shut up."

"Don't tell me to..."

"...shut up." Assam scanned the horizon. He heard a faint rumble, like thunder or music, coming closer. Assam turned around, trying to see where it was coming from. His mother stood looking back at him, her arm outstretched to point at a rising plume of dust on the horizon, heading their way.

A car roared toward them. It shone against the dull earth, as red as a candy apple.

Assam laughed.

"What is it?"

"It's our ride." He heard the sound of a car horn, a snippet of music blaring out a familiar tune that began *There's a place in France...*

"Really?" Jee squinted into the distance. The car had some kind of ornate radio antenna sticking up from the top.

"Really."

Once the car got closer, she realized her mistake. It wasn't an antenna after all. They were antlers.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"I like your car!" Jee shouted from the back seat, trying to be heard over the wind. Seth winked at her from the rear view mirror. She blushed.

Sarah turned and wrinkled her nose at the three of them. "I am so glad that we ran across you guys out there."

"So are we," Assam said.

She and Seth had been on their way back from having dinner with his parents when they had caught sight of the kids and their mom. "It's one of those assisted living facility places," Sarah told them.

"Which is a little sad. But there's good activities and stuff. Besides, I think they kind of like the extra attention."

Assam didn't even bother to be surprised by this.

"So," asked Seth, "where can we drop you off?"

"We're headed back to the restaurant," Sarah told them, "if you're hungry."

"I hear you're good at washing dishes." Seth smiled.

"I'm hungry," their mother said. She was sitting in the middle of the back seat, Jee on one side and Assam on the other. She had her eyes closed and the wind blew her hair back. She looked very happy.

"Actually," Assam said, "we're sort of on our way back home."

"Okay..." Sarah exchanged a glance with Seth. "That's . . . doable."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Sarah said. "It's just that it can get kind of tricky for exiles when they decide they want to go back."

"We're not exiles," Jee said.

"Everyone is an exile," Seth replied, "until they go home."

Sarah waved any concern away. "Don't listen to him. We can put in a good word for you." She nodded at Seth. "His dad's got some clout still, and I used to go out with the boatman."

Seth pursed his lips at this. Sarah caught it out of the corner of her eye. "Come on, that was a long time ago."

"Not long enough."

She sighed in mock exasperation. "We were kids. It was a schoolboy crush. He got over it."

"Then why does he still send you e-mails?"

"We're friends. We stay in touch."

"Well, just so long as he can stay in touch without touching, then he's got no problems. Otherwise, I'm going to touch him." He smiled grimly.

Sarah leaned over and kissed his ear. "Hey," she said, "where am I? Who am I with?"

"I know, I know."

"So if you know, then shut up." She poked him in the ribs. "Besides, you're one to talk, what with all your ex-wives."

"That," he said, "was an even longer time ago. And most of those were political, arranged."

"And that's why you're still paying alimony?"

"Forget I said anything." Seth shook his head.

Sarah smirked. "'Lord of Strength' my foot."

"I said forget it."

Sarah tossed her hair. "Okay Mr. Sensitive, it's forgotten."

"Uh huh."

She looked back at the kids. "Sorry."

"You have something on your head," their mother said abruptly.

Sarah smiled and looked up. "Really?"

Their mother nodded earnestly.

Jee sank into the seat, weighed down with embarrassment.

"Wow," Sarah said. "That's pretty cool."

They drove on, listening to the radio. They heard "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" (Sarah sang to Seth on this one, snuggling next to him) and "Mack the Knife" and "Tonight" from *West Side Story*. Then

the DJ broke in to announce a that block of songs by someone named Steven Something-or-other was coming up after the break.

Seth put in a cassette.

After a while, Assam cleared his throat. "Uh . . . excuse me? Seth?" He wasn't quite sure how to address a god, even one that drove a convertible and listened to rap music.

Seth's pale eyes found his in the rear view mirror.

"A minute ago you said something about the boatman?"

Seth nodded.

"Well . . . is he, is that the same one who brings the people down the river?"

"That is the man, yes."

"What's up, sweetie?" Sarah looked back at him with concern. "What's on your mind?"

"Well, he wouldn't let us on the boat before. Because we didn't have any money."

Jee chimed in. "And neither one of us know how to play a harp."

Sarah laughed. "Yeah, he's kind of old fashioned that way."

"Kind of?" Seth raised an eyebrow.

She pushed it back down with her forefinger. "Be nice." She looked back to the kids. "He didn't want money. He wanted the coin."

"The obolus," Seth said.

Jee resisted the urge to put a hand in her pocket.

"What's that?" her brother asked.

Sarah cocked her head to one side. "It's . . . well, it's a gold coin, but it's also..."

"...it's your life, right? Your soul or something?" Jee couldn't help speaking up. "And you have to give it up when you die."

Sarah looked at her for a long moment. "Well . . . it's not your soul, but, yes. You have to pay the price in order to leave that life behind you."

"But we didn't pay, we didn't give him anything," Assam said.

Sarah nodded. "Which is why you can go home. You all still have yours."

Assam looked at her, skeptical. "Where?"

"It's in your mouth," Jee said quietly. "You don't know it, you can't feel it. But it's there."

"That is a true thing, little sister." Seth turned the radio down. "Sometimes, in the old times, the people would put coins on the eyes of the dead. Sometimes just one in the mouth."

Jee shivered, thinking of shelves and jars. Now she understood why Juniper started with eyes.

"Why on the eyes?" Assam had seen this in a movie and he always wondered about it. "Why the mouth?"

"To keep them from staring back at you," Seth answered. "To keep them quiet."

"To pay the boatman," Sarah said.

Assam turned to his sister. "How do you know about all of this?"

She hesitated, then shrugged. "Remember Jimmy? The boy in the hospital? He had a coin in his mouth."

"So we have to pay to leave?" Assam asked the two gods in the front seat. "If we give him our coins, won't we die?"

"Charlie's kind of old school about this sort of thing. He doesn't collect for the return trip," Sarah said. "But if he did . . . well, you'll just have to get used to immortality."

"It takes some time." Seth said. "Which you'll have plenty of."

"Hush, love. You're scaring them." Sarah shook her head at him. "He's just kidding. All you have to do is show your coin to Charlie. That'll prove you've got a right to go back."

"So . . . we can go back?" Assam had a worried, pinched quality to his voice.

Sarah nodded, reaching back to pat his knee. "I think you'll be just fine. Who knows?" she asked brightly. "Maybe he'll even remember you."

"Maybe."

Jee wondered how many times the boatman had been kicked in the shins over the years. She bet it wasn't often. Her hand lay on her leg. She would not put it in her pocket. She would not touch that the scarred, dull thing resting against her hip. She would not ask the question burning in her mind. She would know soon enough.

Her mother put an arm over her shoulder. Jee laid her head down in her mother's lap. In a moment, she was asleep.

Sarah looked back at them and smiled. She turned forward and laid her hand on Seth's neck, stroking the back of his head. They drove on across the plain.

Assam stared out the window. They were almost home.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The sun didn't exactly come out, but there was a lightening of the sky, a warmth that spread gently across them as the car approached the river. Their mother lifted her face, basking in the glow from the parchment sky.

"Where are we now?" Jee asked.

"We're still in the Midlands, sweetie." Sarah sounded sleepy. "But we're getting close to the river."

"The Midlands?" Assam hadn't heard of this before.

Sarah nodded. "The whole plain behind us, the desert, it's called the Midlands. It's one of the thin places on the edge of this world and yours."

"It's the place to where dreamers go," Seth added, "where sleepwalkers wander and the near-dead wait."

"What do they wait for?"

"For their time to come, time to go on . . . or time to go back. Some days, long time ago, all of this was crowded with in-between people, some wandering in and some wandering out. And some just wandering."

"Why isn't it crowded today?" Jee asked.

"It has not been crowded for a long time, not since back in the old times, the times of my people."

"Your people?" Assam asked.

"Yes."

"Egyptians?"

"Gods."

They drove on in silence for a while.

"Why isn't it crowded anymore?" Jee asked.

"Who knows? Maybe people die faster now, with their hospitals and computers to help hurry them

along. Maybe they live longer and die faster. Or maybe they have other ways now, to keep out of the path of their death, to hold sweet Sister Death off and close their ears to her weeping for them to come back to her."

"Come back to me," their mother whispered.

Jee squeezed her hand, a wave of sadness washing over her. "I'm here, mommy."

Assam looked at her sharply, suddenly. She ignored him, staring straight ahead, filling her head with the music from the radio, making her thoughts as flat and uninteresting as possible. She didn't want him eavesdropping.

Seth slowed down, turning the wheel. "So we're almost here," he said, "and you'll be on your way home soon."

Assam sat up and craned his neck to peek through the windshield at nothing but desert.

"When we get there," Sarah said, "let me go down first and sort things out. Charlie will pay more attention if it's just me."

Seth said nothing, loudly.

"What if he says no?" Assam asked.

Sarah smiled. "He won't. I'll go and talk to him and then you'll get on the boat." She leaned over and tweaked Seth's ear. "And then I'll get back in my lover's beautiful car and he'll drive me back to his place for, uh..." She stopped, hesitated.

"For what?" Jee asked.

Sarah blushed. "For a nap . . . before dinner."

"A nap sounds nice," their mom said.

"Stay awake for a while longer mother," Seth called back to her. "We are almost to the river."

The car slowed to a stop. Everyone got out. Seth put on a pair of sunglasses, his eyes like mirrors. They were parked at the ridge of a long sloping bank that led down to a river. There was no sun in the sky, but the river didn't seem to mind. It had its own light to work with and that was more than enough. The water was so clear, so bright. Dazzling, rolling and rippling like gold coins scattered over a mirror.

"There is no way that's the same river." Assam couldn't accept that the gray and dingy river they'd come down had anything in common with this one. His eyes hurt, just looking at it.

"Who are they?" Jee asked, pointing to the water's edge.

"They are passengers, hopefuls, people looking to go home." Seth nodded to her. "People like you."

It wasn't a big group, Jee thought. Maybe less than a hundred. They stood in an odd, zigzagging line that turned this way and that, folding in on itself a number of times towards where a tall, familiar figure stood on the dock. A boat waited, bobbing on the bright water.

"Okay," Sarah said, "I'm going to head down and have a word. When you see me wave, come on down after." She gave Seth a quick peck on the lips. "Be right back." And then she was off, strutting down the bank with her hands in the back pockets of her jeans.

"There's too many people," Assam said to Seth. "They won't all fit on the boat."

"You should have seen it a thousand years ago," Seth told the boy. "This is nothing."

"It was long, huh?"

Seth nodded. "It was long."

"So what happens when the boat is full?"

Seth gestured along the curve of the river. "The boat leaves, the rest wait."

They watched as Sarah made her way up to the end of the line and, without any hesitation, walked

past everyone. The tall man on the dock saw her coming and, just a little, stood up straighter. Sarah walked up. They spoke for a moment.

"And this man, he still sends her the e-mail three times a week," Seth muttered.

"What a creep," their mother agreed.

They have e-mail? Assam thought to himself.

Below, Sarah looked back up at them and pointed. They saw the man follow her gaze. He said something to Sarah and she nodded. He said something else. She shook her head firmly, crossing her arms.

The man stared at her for a moment and then glanced back up to where they were standing. He looked back to Sarah and nodded. She hopped up and down, kissed his cheek.

Seth made a noise, not pleased.

Sarah was waving to them.

"You hurry now," Seth said, "before he changes his mind."

Assam took his mother's hand. "Thank you for everything," he said to Seth. "Thanks for helping us out."

"Yeah," Jee agreed. "Thanks for the ride."

Seth's mouth turned into a tight little twist of a smile. "Thank you for giving us something to talk about tonight at supper." He held out his hand and Assam shook it. "You take care of yourself and these ladies of yours."

"I will."

"It was a pleasure to meet you," their mother said. "You have gorgeous eyes."

"Mom..." Jee said, mortified.

Seth knelt down in front of the girl. "I am happy to have met you." He touched the back of his fingers to her cheek and stopped.

"Thanks," she said. "You too."

He held her gaze for a moment. Then he nodded slowly, straightening up. "Maybe you can come visit sometime."

"I doubt it," Assam said.

"All the same," Seth replied, "once you push through one of the thin places, it gets thinner still. And you get better at it."

"Okay," Assam said. "Well, thank you."

Seth nodded and Assam turned, leading his mother down the bank towards the river. Jee hung back for a moment. She glanced up at Seth.

He looked at her and shook his head. "Might as well try."

She nodded, turning to follow after the others. She caught up to them just as Sarah reached them, heading on her way back up.

"Okay." Sarah grinned. "I think you'll be fine from here on out." She looked back over her shoulder and waved. The man on the dock did not wave back. "He sees you, don't worry. He'll take care of you."

She looked at the three of them and took a breath. "Okay. Be safe. Don't forget about us."

Jee's mother stepped forward and hugged her. "Thank you." She almost sounded like her normal self. "Thank you for everything."

Sarah gave her a squeeze. "Happy to do it. And you," she said to Assam, peeking over his mother's shoulder. "Don't be so serious all the time." She stepped back and ruffled his hair. "Take a page out of your sister's book. Learn how to have some fun every once in a while."

"I'll try." A moment later, he was crying.

Sarah hugged his shoulders. "Don't worry, you're almost home."

He nodded, wiping his eyes on the sleeve of his sweater. "I know, thank you."

She smiled warmly and gave him another quick squeeze. "Come back and see us again," she said with mock sternness. "Just not too soon, okay?"

He sniffed and nodded, allowing his mother to pull him to her side. The two of them, mother and son, continued down the bank to the dock. Assam looked back for his sister.

"I'll be right there." Jee turned to Sarah. "Thank you." The words didn't quite want to come out of her throat.

Sarah crouched down. There were tears in her eyes. She looked deep into Jee's face and stopped. "Oh sweetheart..." Sarah's face crumpled into itself for a moment. She smoothed it out with effort.

"I know, I'm sorry..." Jee told her.

Sarah sat back on her haunches, the tears breaking free to roll down her cheeks. She shook her head.

"I'm sorry," Jee said again. It was all she could say.

Sarah put a hand to the girl's cheek. "Don't worry. It'll be fine. I'm sure he'll..." She looked down to the pier and broke off.

Jee took her hand. "I'm going to miss you."

Sarah nodded. "Yeah, well, I don't want to see you for a very long time, okay?" When she'd said it to Assam, there'd been a joke in her voice. This time, she was serious. She said it with all of the authority of a death goddess who knew her business and had been at it for tens of thousands of years (when she wasn't actually waiting on tables, of course).

Jee tried to speak, stopped.

"Don't worry," Sarah said, "and don't be frightened." She kissed the girl's forehead lightly. "It'll be okay."

Jee stood for a moment with her eyes closed, her hands at her chest. "Goodbye..." With a sudden sob, she turned and ran down the hill to where her brother and mother were waiting. She buried her face in her mother's side. When she finally raised her head to look back, she saw Sarah standing at the top of the bank. Sarah raised her hand and waved. Jee waved back.

Then, Sarah turned and walked out of sight.

Jee started crying again.

"Who are all these people?" her mother asked Assam. It was a good question. Standing at the back of the line, they had a pretty good look at their fellow passengers.

Waiting directly in front of them was a large black man wearing a pair of ripped jeans and a wrinkled white shirt. His long dark hair stood out from his head like spokes from a wheel. He was barefoot and he carried a brown paper bag that was stained dark at the bottom. He held the bag away from his body so it wouldn't drip on him.

Ahead of him were two elderly women standing hand in hand. They wore hospital gowns, trying very hard to keep them closed at the back with their free hand. Every so often, they shot an accusatory glare to the man standing behind them. For his part, he gave no sign that he noticed them at all.

Further up, there was a girl about Assam's age, waiting patiently. From time to time, she rubbed at what appeared to be a small dent in the side of her head. Assam thought she was very pretty, apart from that. She glanced back at him, one eye listless and pointed to the sky. He looked away quickly.

There was a large collection of what appeared to be tourists, huddled together and consulting their guidebooks. They spoke in whispers and stared suspiciously at the people around them. Some fingered

the scorch marks that marred the edges of their lightweight summer clothes, shaking their heads. A few of the others took photographs.

The stewardess standing in front of them ignored their questions as best she could. She did not, however, seem to be able to stop from offering her patient, phony smile to everyone who happened to catch her eye.

A woman in a scarlet tracksuit, very dark and beautiful, carried a long baguette under one arm. In the other hand, she held a large aluminum travel mug from which she sipped from time to time.

Assam could see seven boys standing together near the front of the line. They shared no similarity among them, save for their approximate age, their blonde hair, and a dark patch in the center of their chests.

There was a man, standing alone. He wore a crumpled tuxedo and his hair was wet. One shoe was missing. He read a sodden, dog-eared paperback book but he was too far away for Assam to see the title.

Somewhere, elsewhere in the crowd, a baby wailed.

A woman, an old woman, iron gray in every way, right down to the polyester pantsuit she wore, frowned at the cell phone in her hand before doggedly attempting to dial again. She sighed and closed it.

And there were also the shadows that waited patiently in among the other people — smears of darkness that moved along with the rest of the crowd, shuffling forward a few steps at a time. Assam studied one of them standing close by. It was translucent, a vague blur against the air. And when he tried to concentrate on it, to listen in to what it was, all he heard was silence. He wondered where they were headed, what they were thinking. He wondered how he looked to them.

"I don't think there's enough room on that boat for all of us." A man nearby frowned for the benefit of anyone who might be paying attention to him. He wore a business suit stained dark under the armpits. Assam, unsure of whether or not the man was talking to him, said nothing in reply. He stood up on his tiptoes, craned his neck . . . but he could not see the end of the line. The man was right. There were too many people waiting and the boat was far too small. They were too far back in line, his sister and mother and himself. They were never going to get there. They were never going to get home.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There was a commotion further up in the line. Assam could hear voices rising and falling, a ripple of anger spread quickly back towards where they were waiting with their mom. His mother clutched at his arm, still so lost in this place. "What's happening?"

Before Assam could answer, the crowd parted in front of them and a tall man in a dark suit strode forward. It was the boatman, Charlie. He did not greet them, did not even nod. "You might have just come to the front, saved me some trouble."

Assam could feel everyone staring. "Sorry."

The boatman sniffed and made a show of looking at his watch. "We're late now, as well."

"Sorry," Assam said again.

"Well, be sorry on your own time." The boatman turned back the way he had come. "Let's get moving."

Assam could feel anger and confusion bubbling up from the people around them. "Come on," he muttered, pulling his mother by the arm.

"Where are we going?" She stared wildly around her, almost frantic.

One of the people in line gave them a sour look as they passed. "Looks like you're going home, lady."

"Come on, Mom." Assam kept her moving.

Jee, miraculously, stayed silent as she clung to their mother.

They pushed their way through to the front. Assam tried not to look at anyone along the way, but more than a few people had choice comments for them as they passed.

Charlie was just stepping into the boat when they got there. "Come along, boy. I can't hold the tide, not even for you."

Assam resisted the urge to apologize again. He led his mother and sister up the dock. The boatman, somehow managing to stand straight as a ramrod in the bobbing boat, held out his hand. Assam stared at him for a moment, then remembered. "Oh, yeah, right . . . sorry." He hesitated a moment, no idea what to do and then, carefully, he raised his hand to his mouth. There was something heavy there, under his tongue. He wondered why he hadn't noticed it before. He spit it out into his hand. It was a coin, golden and bright. It was heavier than he expected. He handed it to the boatman.

The boatman took it from him with distaste, inspected it and nodded before handing it back.

Assam accepted it and wondered what to do with it. He felt weird putting it back in his mouth but he didn't want to lose it. Carefully, he slipped it into his pocket, watching as the boatman inspected his mother's coin. The boatman took her arm and helped her into the boat.

"Be careful," Jee said. "She's a little wobbly."

"Ooh..." her mother said as the craft tilted and bobbed under her weight. The boatman helped her sit down on one of the narrow benches.

"Now you," he said to Assam, helping him across.

The boy sat down next to his mother. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I'm so sleepy, though."

He squeezed her hand. "Then you should rest a bit." Assam looked up and saw Jee was still standing on the dock. The boatman stood in front of her, the long pole in his hand.

"Please?" she asked.

The boatman shook his head. "I am sorry, child."

"What's going on?" Assam asked, half-rising. The boat bobbed under his weight.

"Can't I just..?" Jee began to say, but the boatman lifted the pole and dipped it into the water.

"Hey!" Assam stood up and immediately the thin craft was off-balance. Everyone wobbled in their seats.

"Young man," the boatman said as he cast off the tether that bound them to the dock, "if you do not take your seat, then I will be forced to..."

"...Jee?" The boat wobbled and Assam had to sit down again to keep his balance.

His sister took the man's sleeve in her hand. "Sarah said it was okay, she said you'd help."

The boatman pulled his arm back. "I am sorry, but she doesn't make the rules."

Jee tried to look defiant. "What rules?"

"Wait a minute!" Assam called. He stood up again.

"Do you have a coin?" the boatman asked Jee. "Do you have your coin?"

"What's going on?" Assam's mother asked. "Where's your sister?" She clutched at Assam in desperation, throwing him off balance. He stumbled against a few of the other passengers, apologizing.

"Do you?" the boatman asked again.

"Jee?" Assam said. "What's wrong?"

"Because I don't think you do." The boatman spoke grimly, like someone accustomed to giving people bad news. "But if you do, I will be happy to be wrong." He held out his hand and waited.

Jee stared at him for a moment. Slowly, she dug into her pocket and produced something, laying it in the center of the man's upturned palm. It was a coin, of course — and it was hers. Once, it might have been gold. But now it was a blackened, ruined thing. Whatever forces had destroyed Juniper had done the same for her coin.

The boatman pursed his lips. "Mm. I am sorry, my dear." He handed it back to her and raised his pole once more.

"Wait!" Assam shouted. His mother began to wail like a child. He stood up and clambered over to the side of the boat, shoving his way through the crowded rows.

"Jee..." He reached out for her as the boat drifted out from the dock. She was just a few feet away, nothing but bright water between them.

"I'm so sorry," she told him. "It was the only way I could think of to stop him. I didn't know."

"Stop who?" Assam suddenly saw it all in a rush, a jumble of images tumbling from her mind to his. He shook his head. "No, there has to be something we can do."

Five feet away, then six. The boat was moving, the current had caught it.

"Let me go back." he turned to the boatman. "I want to go back."

The tall man looked down at him reluctantly, considering.

Jee called to them, to her brother. "No, you need to stay with mom. She needs you. She can't go back alone, she can't lose..." Her voice broke on the words. "She can't lose both of us."

"Jee..." Then he heard his mother sobbing behind him. He looked at his sister — ten feet away now, maybe more — so small and alone on the dock.

"Don't worry." She tried to smile. "I'll be okay."

He wanted to throw himself in, to swim back to her, to rescue her the way she had rescued him but his mother was crying. He nodded and sat back. They were far away now. The water was so bright, he couldn't see if she was crying. He was.

His mother clutched at him in panic, her fingernails digging into his arm. He winced in pain. Around them, he could hear the other passengers murmuring.

Smaller now, he could barely see her on the dock, bright light bouncing off of the water into his eyes. There was a sharp pain in his arm. He looked down to see something sticking out of it — a patch of gauze, a tube leading off.

The voices around him, louder now. He looked back, looked for her, but all he could see was light.

"We're losing her," someone said. Commotion, footsteps hurrying.

He shouted, calling her name. He tried to sit up but gentle, firm hands laid him down again. He rolled his head to one side and saw his sister's face just a few feet away. She was looking at him, her eyes locked on his.

He had so much to say. He could not speak. Her name would not come loose from where it had stuck in his throat.

People swarmed around her, all voices and machines.

Slowly, she smiled at him. Her teeth, none of them were missing. He tried to shout, tried to reach for

her. A hand closed around his, strong and warm. A face next to his, the sound of his father's voice, the rasp of stubble against his cheek.

"Oh son," his father said. "I love you so much."

"Dad?" He tried to sit up. "Dad, we have to..." He was too weak.

"Shhh..." his father said. "It's okay, you're okay now."

"I couldn't save her, I tried to..." Assam looked back to his sister in the hospital bed next to his, but all he saw were people moving, a blur of white and aqua that washed over her and swept her away.

His father held him, pulling him close. When the wave of people finally cleared, Assam looked back.

His sister's eyes were closed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The water was too bright. It hurt her eyes.

But Jee watched the boat anyway as it passed out of sight.

Once it had gone, she took a deep breath and turned to walk slowly up the dock and back to the shore.

EPILOGUE

It had been snowing for three days.

Sam's mother refused to let him go out, wanting to keep him close. Finally, on the third day – Sunday – she collapsed into bed late in the afternoon. After Sam's father made sure she was resting peacefully, he came downstairs to sit with his son. They didn't say much. They didn't cry much either – not because they weren't sad, they were. But all the tears of the past few weeks had wrung them dry.

"School again tomorrow," his dad said.

Sam nodded.

"It'll be good to see your friends again, I bet. It was nice, everything they did." There were cards upstairs, things that kids from school had sent to the hospital – some for him and some were for his sister.

"Can I go outside?"

"Sure." his dad said after a long moment. "You want company?"

Sam shook his head.

His father nodded.

Sam got his snowpants, scarf, jacket, gloves, boots – all brand new. They'd had to cut his other

things off of him, in the ambulance. He reached for his new knit cap off of a hook on the wall. It had built in earmuffs.

He stopped, one hand on the hook. There was a pair of her sneakers on the floor under where the coats were hung. His sister has scrawled all over them with magic marker, like hieroglyphics.

He stared at them for a long moment. Then he took down his hat and slipped it on. At the door, he stopped. "I'll be back in a while."

His dad looked up from the couch and smiled at the bundle of kid in front of him. "You think you're gonna be warm enough?"

Sam smiled. It was the first joke that anyone had told in the house since the funeral. "Yeah."

"Have fun, be careful."

Sam knew his dad wanted to say more. He could feel it, he could hear it in the back of his head. Just like he could hear his mother's fitful dreams upstairs. "I will," the boy said, opening the door. "I love you."

"Love you too, son."

The door closed on the last word.

Outside, the snow had stopped. Sam walked carefully down the driveway. His ankle hurt. And his shoulder. He didn't want to slip, to make it worse. At the bottom of the driveway, he stopped and considered.

To his right, a few houses down, was his best friend and an afternoon of computer games, an afternoon of not thinking about things, an afternoon where he could just be a kid and not be sad.

To his left..?

He turned left.

It wasn't a long walk, but it took some time. The snow was deep and his hip started to ache after a few blocks. He wasn't supposed to leave his neighborhood, he knew. But he crossed the busy intersection anyway, watching the green hand turn red halfway across. He wanted to run, to get out of the way of the cars before they roared to life again and ran him down. He willed himself calm.

The cemetery was a few miles away. It took him a lot longer to get there than he thought it would.

Inside, everything was blanketed with fresh snow. He threaded his way through the gravestones, the bare trees rattling overhead in the chill wind, clutching at the iron gray sky. He stood for a moment, eyes closed, listening to the stillness of winter all around him.

He opened his eyes and tried to get his bearings. He realized that he had no idea where he was going. He hadn't been back since the day after the funeral and with the fresh snow, he had no idea how to find the grave site again. He thought for a moment and then made his way slowly, wiping the snow off of the headstones, looking for familiar names. Landmarks, hieroglyphics.

He had heard once that it was bad luck to walk across a grave — or, at the very least, it was disrespectful. Given how cramped and crammed together the headstones were, he honestly didn't know if he was walking between the graves or over them. It didn't really matter, he decided. He was the only one here and he had it on good authority that the dead don't care nearly as much as the living.

It had been cold the day of the funeral and everybody cried.

Everyone was there – kids from school, teachers, family. One of the girls in his sister's class had brought a small purple bear, leaving it beside all the flowers.

He looked around, spying the splash of color nearby. The bear was buried in snow and half-frozen. He picked it up and shook the snow loose, holding it in his hands for a moment. The bear stared up at him with dark, unsympathetic eyes. "Pretty cold today, huh?"

The bear didn't answer.

He set it down and brushed snow off of the headstone in front of him, a little bit at a time, until his sister's name was revealed. He sat down, leaning his back against the stone. "It's going to snow tonight," he said at last. "Tomorrow might be a snow day. No school."

He sniffed. His nose was running. "I'm supposed to go back to school tomorrow. It'll be my first day back, after . . . everything. I don't really want to go."

He didn't say anything for a while. A light snow started to fall, little granules that clattered against the headstones like salt.

"Everybody's sad, we miss you." He took a breath and held it for a long moment before letting it out. "Yesterday, I started wondering if it had all really happened. I thought maybe it was just a dream, something my mind made up to pass the time while I was unconscious."

He shifted a little on the ground. His legs were stiff, getting cold. "I thought about asking mom, seeing what she remembers. But I don't want to upset her any more than she already is."

He shook his head. "I don't know what she'd remember. And I don't want them to think I'm crazy and send me off to therapy . . . which I already get to do, also starting tomorrow. Thanks to you."

His backside had gone numb. He stood up and brushed his snowpants off. "I thought it might have been made up, I might have just dreamed it. But then that would mean that you weren't there, that you were all alone, and that there was no one who..." He stopped, trying to hold it together. "It wasn't a good feeling, to think that."

He watched the falling snow fill in the spaces of his sister's name.

"But then, last night at dinner, I passed mom the salt . . . before she asked for it." He smiled at the memory. "I heard her ask for it before she said anything." He tapped the side of his head with his thick gloved fingertips. "I heard her in here."

The wind picked up, getting colder. He pulled his hat down around his ears. "I didn't sleep much last night – not that I'm sleeping much as it is, with mom and dad coming in to check on me all the time like they're afraid I might vanish or something."

He reached forward and wiped the snow off of her name. "I know they're just sad. I'm sad too."

He stepped back, looking down at her headstone. "I couldn't sleep last night. I was wondering all night, did I really hear her? That's impossible, right? Things like that don't happen in the real world."

He knelt down and put his hand on the snow covered ground, leaving a print right above where his sister had been laid to rest.

"Are you there?" he said, then again inside: *Are you there?*

Nothing.

Cold earth below, bare trees above. He tried to push past it all, to force his way back through this frozen world and into that other place . . . to reach her, to hear her. She was either too far away or she was not there at all. Either way, all he had was silence.

He took the glove off of his hand and rubbed his eyes. He was tired and his brain felt frozen, slushy thoughts. He wiped the snow off of his sister's name once more, pressing his fingertips against the letters. The cold radiating into his hand and up his arm.

"Darjeeling?" he said softly. "Jee?"

Nothing.

"I'll come back." It felt stupid to say it, but he didn't just want to walk away and he didn't want to say goodbye. He watched the letters fill up again, the snow covering the brief span of his sister's life.

He could feel, on the outskirts of his mind, a small flicker of worry. At home, his father was starting to get concerned. He would have to hurry.

As he was walking back through the headstones, he stopped in his tracks, head cocked.

There was a faint glimmer in the back of his eyes, an echo of something bouncing back toward him as though from very far away. He was afraid to move, to shift position, lest he lose the signal.

Gently, he closed his eyes — trying not to force it, not to chase it. Knowing that if he did, it would slip away. He let everything else drift — the wind, the cold, the ache in his hip and knee — raising his face to catch the falling snow, huge fat flakes filling the air like smoke.

And then he saw her: *Jee*.

She was walking through the drifts, nearly waist deep, making her way to a large stone mansion at the top of a hill. The snow was deep, but the going got easier as she went along. For, where she passed, a swath of green appeared in her wake, like the train of a gown. It spread outward behind her, melting the snow and bringing the frost bound gardens and orchards to life in an explosion of warmth and color. The spread of green outpaced her, pulling back the mask of winter to reveal a riot of new life beneath. *Jee* began to run, chasing after the spread of spring all the way up to the crown of the hill.

Then, the front door of the palace opened.

Sam opened his eyes. He half expected the cemetery to be transformed, as in his vision — the green grass and trees — but everything still slept silently under the snow.

It didn't matter. Spring would come soon enough.

After he said his goodbyes, he made his way back through the cemetery, heading for home.

TERMINUS

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One day long ago, I came home to find two little kids sitting in boxes on my living room floor. "We're going down the river," my son Sam told me, while his sister Julia rowed along frantically behind him. That's where this story began.

T.M. Camp
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.M. Camp spent most of his childhood daydreaming. Despite the fact that he is an adult now with grownup responsibilities and commitments, he hasn't really stopped. If anything, he daydreams more than ever. Fortunately, he works in Advertising where people pay good money for that sort of thing.

He is the author of the novels *Assam & Darjeeling*, *Matters of Mortology*, and the forthcoming *Pantheon*. In addition, he has written over thirty plays, many of which have been produced by theaters in California, Michigan, Iowa, and Tennessee. A few of these have even won awards.

T.M. lives in Michigan with his excellent and lovely wife, as well as an indeterminate number of cats and children of variable age and intelligence.

And by the time this sees print, there will be a new baby in the house — which he hopes will explain why he used the vague term “forthcoming” above.