

THROWAWAYS:
A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

by

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To my late grandfather Dr. James R. Dixon, whose example led me to this path and whose memory ensured I completed the journey, even if I was tortoise slow.

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THROWAWAYS:
A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

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In this creative dissertation I present my novel *Throwaways* and an essay regarding the writing of *Throwaways*. In the essay I discuss my process in writing fiction, the techniques I relied on to create the novel, the inspiration I found in reading other writers, and the strategies and categorical contexts I studied in preparation of writing a young adult, fantasy novel.

In the essay I discuss the difficulty in writing fiction as it requires the writer to inhabit multiple worlds and to understand the logical aspects regarding the operation of an imaginary world. I review how reading fantasy, horror, slip-stream, and young adult literature taught me strategies in building rounded characters and in using experimental techniques to signify shifts in character point-of-view. From a number of authors, I studied how to use object as character, twist endings, instability of the world, changing realities, disruption of traditional plot structures, as well as voice, tone, and sentence structure.

To explain how I learned to reach younger readers than myself, I review the background and origin of the young adult category, the general requirements to reach those young readers, and

survey four contemporary novels to understand how other authors successfully reach their young adult audiences.

Because *Throwaways* is fantasy narrative in addition to a young adult novel, I explore several definitions of the fantasy category to explain how the novel works as a work of fantasy, particularly as a time fantasy and an intrusion fantasy, in which magic disturbs reality and the characters never become fully accustomed to the magic. I also explain why *Throwaways* needed to be a work of fantasy rather than a realistic tale, and I examine fantastic elements in four novels from which I drew inspiration.

I discuss T.S. Eliot's notion of the "objective correlative" to give objects significance that becomes emotionally resonant, and I examine elements in *Throwaways* that utilize the objective correlative, including the protagonist's father's Medal of Honor, and the natural setting of the novel, including trees and fungi. I review scientific studies on trees, fungus, and lichen to explain how I crafted the thematic element of symbiosis in this novel.

As a novel, *Throwaways* illustrates my execution of the techniques and strategies I examine in the essay. True to a young adult novel, *Throwaways* features a teenaged protagonist who must overcome the grief of her mother's death and learn to face the consequences of tumultuous, tragic events as well as her own actions. As a fantasy, the novel uses a time flux and elements that intrude on the protagonist's life in order to link human suffering to ecological suffering; through this linkage, the protagonist learns that by helping others endure and overcome their own struggles, she can overcome her own.

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PART I
THROWAWAYS:
A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

INTRODUCTION

My novel, *Throwaways*, is a young adult, fantasy novel that addresses the struggles of teenage runaway Susie Hopkins, who must overcome the grief of her mother's death and learn to face the consequences of tumultuous, tragic events as well as her own actions. The bulk of the novel is written in a traditional narrative style employing third-person limited point-of-view; certain sections employ experimental narrative techniques, specifically, interstitial chapters from the combined perspectives of a castle, a forest, and a man named Thano. Susie leaves the realistic setting of her town, Garnet Falls, to follow Thano to the Moss Castle, a magical location in the woods that all but stops time and allows strange, magical occurrences to unravel that affect not only Susie's life, but the life of her cousin, Reg. When Susie finds out her mother has returned—her spirit implanted into the body of Susie's high school rival, Mary Beth—Susie must grapple with her own grief and selfish desire to keep her mother from leaving her again as well as the moral urge to return to Mary Beth rightful possession of her body.

It took me three years to write *Throwaways* because of several issues, including the difficulties of inhabiting two realities simultaneously, the physical and mental energy the process requires, along with the fact that I refused to use an outline in favor of writing to "discover" my characters, the plot, the magical setting, and so on. I moved by intuition and feeling as opposed to logic, despite attempts at using maps, flowcharts, and other outlining tools. Because of my choice to write for "discovery," I eventually wrote two drastically different novels because of issues in the first that resulted from too many antagonists, metaphysical abstracts over concrete setting, and lack of character development. Ultimately, I persevered in the writing process by my own undying enthusiasm for writing, which the writer Samuel R. Delany refers to as

begeisterung, as well as a belief that stories inspire and help readers learn how to live in and negotiate their own worlds. Other writers, including Rick Bass, also share this method of writing, although my own process frustrated me.

Since I wrote a young adult, fantasy novel, the magic in the text had to make some coherent sense, so I devised two viewpoints to assist in explaining the logic to the reader. At first I proceeded by choosing any magical element I wished to use, and in revision I culled these elements and focused only on the ones that lent to a richer and more wondrous world for the reader. In order to build rounded characters, I also mined my own background, from my experiences working with homeless youth, to my lifelong interest in mythology, which resulted in a book with thematic elements that address "throwaway" youth that society all but ignores; this method also led me to develop an overall conflict that relies not on good versus evil but one of pride and youthful embarrassment at realities the characters would rather ignore in fear of others discovering.

To compose such a novel, I relied on my influences in fantasy, horror, slipstream, and young adult literature to learn writing strategies related to using object as character, twist endings, instability of the world, changing realities, disruption of traditional plot structures, as well as voice, tone, and sentence structure. From four authors in particular I took a more informed understanding of how to elicit emotion, create twists, and subvert patterns all the while striving for reader satisfaction.

From Shirley Jackson, particularly her works "The Lottery" and *The Haunting of Hill House*, I studied how she renders locations with sentience and offers concrete details in third-person point-of-view to gain the reader's trust as well as how she disrupts expectations and

creates twists in plot by utilizing a seemingly normal mimetic world with a third-person objective point-of-view.

After studying Haruki Murakami, I learned how to approach disruption of reality by using a character's own distrust of self to create instability. In *IQ84*, Murakami configures a character with a sense of humility about her place in the larger world and thus manages to shift the very fabric of reality out from the character's feet without causing anything more than a schism in the character's ability to observe her surroundings.

From Pulitzer Prize finalist Kelly Link, especially her work "The Hortlak," I gained insight in how to use an experimental plot framework to disrupt traditional plot structures while still creating a sense of satisfaction in the overall experience of the reader. Link's invocation of the impossible in order to create fantastic wonder also stands out as one way readers might find satisfaction in the overall world of the story.

After an analysis of the work of George Saunders, I discovered we share similarities in certain aspects of the writing process, particularly the use of discoverability to find the heart of the tale. From Saunders I gained a better understanding of how to use sentence structure to more accurately impart voice and character frame of mind. I reviewed his story, "Tenth of December," to understand how, while using short sentences for both of his viewpoint characters, Saunders manages to express unique frames of mind between which the reader can easily distinguish. By analyzing the work of these four authors, I sought to understand what a work of fiction should do and how it should communicate with readers.

In preparation for writing *Throwaways*, which is at its heart a young adult novel, I wanted to learn how to reach contemporary readers younger than myself. Reaching young adult readers

requires an understanding of and a unique approach to a specific audience. To prepare for this field, I reviewed the origin of the young adult category, researched general requirements to successfully reach younger readers, and surveyed four contemporary novels for a better understanding of successful young adult storytelling.

Prior to the nineteenth century, there was no distinction made between young adult fiction and fiction for children; but several scholars and writers, including Michael Cart, Roberta Seelinger Trites, and Joan Aiken, note that after World War II young adult fiction became its own publishing category. Scholars argue that young adult literature coincided with the institutionalization of young adults into schools. For centuries, the goal of early children's literature was to educate and introduce the world, and Peter Hollindale notes that in 1970 with the advent of the young adult "problem novel," which addresses serious taboos, this trend seemed to continue even for adolescents, albeit differently, as the problem novel directly addressed the myriad of concerns teenagers in particular faced. While the problem novel continues as a successful subcategory of young adult literature, according to Aletheia Helbig the field is wide with other subcategories, including fantasy, historical fiction, adventure, and sports novels.

Certain traits seem to distinguish young adult literature from other types of literature, including teenaged characters who face issues regarding their maturity; scholars like Jack Zipes note that this distinction does not stop older adults from reading in this category as well. Indeed, contemporary young adult books are often also purchased and read by adult readers. This trend may be because of the similarities young adult fiction shares with the traditional *Bildungsroman*, in which the adolescent enters adulthood, and the *Entwicklungsroman*, in which an adolescent

grows but does not yet reach adulthood, according to Trites. Although I understood adults might read *Throwaways*, I continued to envision an audience of teenagers and concerned myself with understanding traits of adolescence, particularly those set down by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (Sturm and Michel 39-40).

The largest factor in how to approach the tone of the novel came from Joan Aiken's assertion that teenagers are driven by emotion. I additionally wanted to approach difficult issues responsibly, given Aiken's, Diana Wynne Jones', and J.R.R. Tolkien's comments regarding how younger readers react to stories as tools. Using these ideas, I chose to explore how Susie could reach maturity by virtue of exploring the power structures in her town and in the castle. I attempted to offer my younger readers a model for life that did not encourage them to dwell on the negative and horrible aspects of trauma but rather to solve problems and seek to expand their futures rather than to limit them.

To understand how contemporary young adult novels successfully reach their audience, I reviewed four best-selling or award-nominated novels to explore their treatment of character and motivation, fantastic elements, style and contemporary trends, and plot and structure. These novels were Maggie Stiefvater's *Raven Boys*, Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park*, Holly Black's *Darkest Part of the Forest*, and Jandy Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun*.¹

In Stiefvater's work, the novel stakes its success on character relationships because of the immersive way in which Stiefvater renders each character. Her fantastic setting is effective because the reader follows each character along in their understanding of that environment. In

¹ Stiefvater's *Raven Boys* was a *Publisher's Weekly* 2012 Best Book of the Year, Rowell's *Eleanor & Park* was a 2013 American Library Association Michael L. Printz Award Honor book, Black's *Darkest Part of the Forest* appeared on the *New York Times* Best Seller List in February 2015, and Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun* received the Michael L. Printz Award in 2014.

Eleanor & Park, Rowell writes characters who express startling honesty, so that the reader becomes complicit in each character's judgment of the other. From both of these authors, I learned how to reconfigure my secondary characters so their behavior did not appear to be motivated solely by the main character but by their own needs and inner turmoil as well.

Holly Black's fairy novel offers a primer on how one might write a young adult fantasy novel where the magic mingles with reality so much that the characters in the novel know their environment appears strange, but they have learned not to question it. Additionally, Black renders her work with pop culture references, and I explore why this particular effect works; the references ground the reader in a fantastic world and seat them in a contemporary setting. That a current novel's issues and themes may no longer be relevant to a future reader, in effect, opens the field for contemporary writers to use topical references, so I followed Black's lead in this regard.

In Jandy Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun*, Nelson proceeds using a coincidence plot, which occasionally threatens to buckle because of contrivance. I found in studying her plot structure that her self-conscious narrator excuses this plot structure without destroying the reader's suspension of disbelief. My review of these novels helped keep *Throwaways* on course as a young adult novel.

Throwaways is also a fantasy narrative. Several definitions of the fantasy category exist, including Brian Attebery's stance that it melds the impossible and the mimetic world to create wonder and John Clute and John Grant's assertion that fantasy is a story that tells a self-coherent narrative about an impossible world. Lucie Armitt argues that fantasy overflows and tries to defy its own norms and imposed constraints, while Tzvetan Todorov uses the definition of the

"marvelous" to explain a category I find strikingly similar to fantasy. According to Farah Mendlesohn, critics will choose a definition of fantasy that fits their ideological filter, and ultimately, the competing definitions of the fantasy category mean we should use Brian Attebery's formation of the "fuzzy set" to understand how works within the field operate. These competing viewpoints complicate how I understand *Throwaways* as a work of fantasy, but I explore what it would look like without the fantastic elements and explain why the fantastic lens helps strengthen it as a narrative about a young, disadvantaged girl with little hope in her experiential world.

Without the fantastic lens, the novel, stripped down to realism, could be defined as a problem novel, but I assert that the fantastic allows me to link human suffering with ecological suffering and to help the character discover how she can ease both afflictions. *Throwaways* proceeds along mimetic reality, with the introduction of a non-mimetic reality occurring later, somewhat similar to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and Graham Joyce's *Some Kind of Fairy Tale*. These novels helped me understand how we might use the fantastic elements at work in each of them in a critical way.

Brian Attebery contends that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* proceeds according to classic fairy tale morphology, but by the tale's conclusion, the reader discovers Baum truly meant for readers not to take anything other than enjoyment from it. Dorothy succeeds in achieving both her external and internal goal, which achieves narrative closure, but when Dorothy's shoes fall off mid-flight home, logic suggests that the loss of magic would leave her stranded in the desert. Instead, she safely returns home, and the fantastic logic the reader believed, breaks. In *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll also subverts fantastic expectations by completing the narrative with

a dream frame, threatening to disrupt the feeling of wonder the reader has developed throughout the tale.

In each of these tales, the location of magic is in an *other* world, which differs from *Throwaways*. I used fantastic devices, like borderlands, which are a marker between two kinds of reality; the crosshatch tale, in which two realities abut but mix very little; and a time polder, a microcosm that exists along its own timeline to sharply demarcate a magical realm but within Susie's own existence, in order to mingle realities and keep the focus on Susie's crisis. With these elements, I set up an "intrusion fantasy," in which, according to Farah Mendlesohn, magic disturbs reality and the character does not fully become accustomed to it. Intrusion fantasies may be similar to magical realism texts, but they do not prescriptively share the same tenets; magical realism, according to Wendy B. Faris, naturally stems from the phenomenal world, and intrusion fantasies may have a layer of magic beneath the perceived reality even if the magic recedes by the end of the tale. I set up hesitation and a fairy tale style in *Throwaways* by using a story frame at the beginning of the novel but deliberately subvert this by the end in order to suggest that the story continues with Susie, which is my way of subverting Mendlesohn's contention that intrusion fantasies contain no "next."

More than any other style of fantasy tale, I argue that *Throwaways* most closely fits a time fantasy, as the time flux in the novel drives the tension of the plot. *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* details a time flux but does not detail the children's reaction to their bodies when their age and maturity literally reverts. In Graham Joyce's *Some Kind of Fairy Tale*, Joyce details a fallout of a time flux after a young girl who has been missing for twenty years appears on her parents' doorstep, having never aged. While Joyce explores the grief of such a disappearance, in

Throwaways, I attempted to explore how such a time flux could help humans. Additionally, I found Tolkien's formation of the Ents in *Lord of the Rings* inspirational as they too, inspired by trees, take on life in a different time stream altogether. The fantasy novel—time flux, intrusion or otherwise—helps readers seek alternative means of problem solving and living, and *Throwaways* sits firmly in that realm.

To create the fantasy and believable patterns that would elicit empathy from the reader, I used T.S. Eliot's notion of the "objective correlative" to imbue objects with significance that stand out as emotionally resonant. For instance, the Medal of Honor that belongs to Susie's dad comes to symbolize the level of sacrifice Susie believes she must make to be a good person. Additionally, patterns in the novel came from the natural settings—from trees, which live on entirely different time-lines than do humans, and fungi, which contain properties that help aid trees in their survival and contribute to the general fabric of existence. I referred to work by mycologist Paul Stamets, Rachel Carson, and forester Peter Wohlleben to better understand this area. In studying trees, fungus, and lichen, I was inspired to concoct a thematic element of symbiosis that would encourage my characters to cooperate with each other instead of striving to remain separate and scattered, attending to their own wounds and *only* to their own wounds. To this end, the novel concludes with Susie's focus on others as opposed to herself and on how she might help as Thanos has helped her and even her mother. Without my background research into mycology, I would not be able to connect the several plotlines of this novel; in the world of *Throwaways*, this vital thematic element connects everyone and everything.

CHAPTER 1

"BUILDING A MYSTERY": WRITING OF *THROWAWAYS* AND NARRATIVE INFLUENCES

"Getting the first draft finished is like pushing a peanut with your nose across a very dirty floor" (Oates qtd. in *Daily Rituals* 63). Most writers acknowledge that creative writing requires an intense amount of energy, time, and effort. Novelist Haruki Murakami suggests that such a task necessitates both physical and mental energy: "The whole process—sitting at your desk, focusing your mind like a laser beam, imagining something out of a blank horizon, creating a story, selecting the right words, one by one, keeping the whole flow of the story on track—requires far more energy, over a long period, than most people ever imagine" (Murakami 79). One might question why, when facing such a strain, writers bother to compose novels or stories at all. In addition to the arduous task of imagining an entirely new world with its own circumstance, rule systems, and details that may or may not match our own, fiction requires a writer live both her life and the lives of several characters at the same time; those characters often undergo tumultuous trials most people would never imagine experiencing in their own lives.

Fantasy writer Diana Wynne Jones notes that "living a double life" through the act of fiction-writing "makes you feel inadequate for your own everyday existence. I get terribly absentminded and walk about in the street muttering to myself... This is the price one has to pay for living in a story and, more, believing in it" (216). Such a "double life" may seem unfathomable and even schizophrenic to those who are not writers, but when writers face what are sometimes painful situations, many accept their path and refuse to stop. The physical and

mental discomfort, energy drain, and requisite time one spends drafting and perfecting a novel is worth the effort for serious writers, whether the final payoff is publication, climbing onto the *New York Times* Best Seller list, or simply experiencing the writing process without publishing the novel at all.

In *Zen and the Art of Writing*, Ray Bradbury provides insight about the value of the act of writing: "Taking your pinch of arsenic every morn so you can survive to sunset. Another pinch at sunset so that you can more-than-survive until dawn. The micro-arsenic-dose swallowed here prepares you *not* to be poisoned and destroyed up ahead. Work in the midst of life is that dosage...Which means writing as cure" (xiv). Murakami phrases the situation a different way: "Exerting yourself to the fullest within your individual limits: that's the essence of running, and a metaphor for life—and for me, for writing as well" (83). In other words, fiction-writing is difficult, but so is life; it is only through facing that difficulty that we discover our capabilities and a better understanding of the world around us.

Not only does writing fiction propel authors into constant challenge of themselves, but through writing, both authors and readers learn how to cope with and how to view the world from different subject positioning. In the essay "Emblems of Talent," Samuel R. Delany notes that "[art] can help people understand how those who live and think in ways different from themselves can manage to make sense of the world" (58). Through the act of imagining, a writer transfers the self into another being entirely. Once the writer has finished composing the novel, the reader can then imagine herself into the position of the characters in that novel. As Suzanne Keen notes in her book *Empathy and the Novel*, "There is no question...that readers feel empathy with (and sympathy for) fictional characters and other aspects of fictional worlds"

(sections 18-19). Thus, while fiction-writing is a painful, even intrusive process that requires much stamina and sacrifice, it also offers a structure that helps others learn how to negotiate the world and live their lives.

Whereas fiction offers invaluable worth, one still wonders what exactly carries a novelist through any difficult task of writing. Since Bradbury's arsenic *is* poison, how does the author continue to survive and create after so many doses? Delany notes that the German Romantics believed in *begeisterung*, "usually translated as 'inspiration'" (9). This spirit, Delany claims, carries artists through the difficulties in their artistic endeavors: "*Begeisterung* is what artists share over their otherwise endless differences: enthusiasm for a task clearly perceived" and what fuels a writer when the writer chooses "to enter a field where most of the news—most of the time—is bad" (10). Writing, while not necessarily economically profitable, is ultimately mentally profitable in as much as that it encourages one to think deeply (even if it requires much pain in the process). If *begeisterung* truly exists, writing is also an emotionally profitable endeavor that offers the writer bursts of energy and feeling as well as flashes of insight perhaps at a time when the writer no longer knows precisely how to proceed with the story at hand.

Delany's belief in *begeisterung* correlates with my experiences; otherwise, I would not have finally completed my novel, *Throwaways*, after three years. In this process of writing this novel, I created two drastically different versions similar only in title, character names, and some character background.

The storyline of the second and final version is roughly as follows: For as long as anyone in the town can remember, a Moss Castle has towered over the forest of Garnet Falls. Nobody dares go in, for fear of what harm the castle might do to them. But Susie Hopkins, who has just

lost her mother and is on the streets while struggling to stay in school and to keep her place as a star on the track team, is different. Convinced she will be blamed, she keeps her mother's death a secret but desperately needs to confide in her cousin and best friend, Reg Walker. But Reg has gone missing, and when she tracks him down, she finds out he's been staying in the same Moss Castle Susie fears.

Reg and his girlfriend Maya have been invited there by Thano, an attractive man who captivates Susie, although she is also afraid of him. After all, she reasons, anyone crazy enough to live in the castle should be feared. But with nowhere else to go and the need to confide in Reg about her mother's death stronger than ever, Susie agrees to go to the castle with them.

Although Susie and Reg used to spend time in the woods as kids burying secret notes to each other, the castle was always off limits. Now that they've grown up, Reg doesn't seem to care about old taboos and, she senses, he is hiding something from Susie. When she finds out that the castle is magical and does strange things such as giving her hallucinations when she brushes up against the moss and ivy growing from the walls, she panics and takes off, only to find out that in the castle time fluctuates. It's fluctuated so much, indeed, that she is late for the state championship track meet and loses her chance to secure a college scholarship when she trips and falls during the race.

Humiliated, bullied by her teammates, and on the run from the police, Susie retreats to the castle, defeated and in despair that she has no future. But when she goes back, Thano does something to make everything up to her – he brings her mother back. That comes with one big stipulation—he's put her mother into the body of her rival, Mary Beth. Now Susie must decide—can she really let her crazy, neglectful mother take over someone else's life?

Susie's decision brings her closer to Thano, to her rival and nemesis, Mary Beth, and somehow, to her mother. Because of her decision, the book ends with Susie agreeing to help other lost teens like herself—youngsters who need shelter and family, even if that family isn't who they're born into, but who they connect with.

Although *Throwaways* proceeds along the lines of the synopsis above, reaching that completed narrative was like trying to hit a moving target. In writing this second version, I cast away nearly everything from the first novel, including plot, setting, and magical devices. The first version failed to work for several reasons, including, but not limited to, too many antagonists, an abstract setting rooted in the metaphysical as opposed to concrete existence, and lack of character development. In my writing of the first version, even with an in-depth understanding of my main character and her difficulties, with every page and every new scene I wrote, I still felt I was "pushing a peanut with [my] nose." Although I took notes about each of my characters, drew maps of my protagonist's surroundings, and created flowcharts that explained the way the magic in the world worked, inevitably I still felt blind each time I came to a new page because I had to re-imagine myself into the context of that story each time, and ultimately, I did not understand it.

To escape blindness similar to my encounters, many authors use outlines and other planning tools to propel themselves through the penning of a novel. Science-fiction author Orson Scott Card uses an in-depth process called "MICE" (milieu, idea, character, event). In this process, the milieu, idea, character, and event, once braided together, comprise the plot structure for his work. The first element introduced in the book, whether it be milieu or event, is often the final element of the novel. While Card's process appears clear, programmatic, and useful for

drafting a novel, such an approach worked far better for me when I entered the revision stage, as I could rearrange and review all the elements comprising the book at one time. Upon reviewing the first version of my novel, this process led me to write a substantially different work.

As I wrote the first draft of *Throwaways*, whether I wanted to follow an outline or not, the outlining process never worked for me. Every time my protagonist, Susie Hopkins, reached a major point of change, she or another character would rebel against my strictures and change the storyline. Finally, I accepted that my path in writing the first draft for this particular novel would come through resonance of detail, of juxtaposing objects and situations with the character's desires or lack thereof, then following the consequent path. For example, much of the second version of the novel revolves around the magical Moss Castle in the woods, although the castle was not a device in the first version. Initially, I had no clear idea how this element would further the plot, but I am personally obsessed with forests, have done considerable reading and study of them, and wanted to create a setting or an object whose magic could seem normal to the characters in the novel. I thought a natural element of the existing world could contain enough mystery to appear magical. I held a vague understanding of the manner in which trees communicate through root systems and the contributions of mycological substances to this relationship, but I had superficial knowledge only. Symbiosis and nutrient sharing struck me as ripe with potential, but I did not pursue further research until I completed the first draft. Thus, the value of the castle was not entirely clear to me when I first conceived of it, and the only way to reach an understanding of why it was valuable was to, in the words of Annie Dillard, "give voice to this, [my] own astonishment" (68). When I first thought of the Moss Castle, its presence fascinated me, but I merely labeled it as a set piece and waited to discover its possibilities as I

continued writing to understand characters. Only after I completed a rough draft did I research mycology and forest root systems to concretize the magical possibilities and connectedness to the plot the setting possessed.

As frustrating as writing in this fashion was, I found that I shared commonalities with other writers, like Rick Bass: "I find appealing the simultaneous confluence of discovery between reader and writer that results when the writer doesn't yet know the ending, and won't, until right at the very end" (Bass). While I initially wrote a draft of the ending after I finished writing chapter three of the first version, the actual ending changed substantially by the time I wrote the entire conclusion of the manuscript.

Even further, I eventually discarded the first draft entirely because of a number of problems: convoluted plot lines resulting from multiple antagonists as well as the main character's relationship with her mother, flat characters whose backgrounds I had not fully explored, and a setting with magic whose operation was not fully consistent and caused the reader confusion because of the abstract, metaphysical ways that magic operated. In my revision, then, I focused on distillation, and essentially kept only the title, character names, and some of the character backgrounds. I focused on concretizing the abstract elements of the first draft, which led me from a magical house that gave the characters whatever they wanted to a Moss Castle that was plugged into a system of roots and fungi capable of generating new lives entirely once they had connected with a person's spirit.

Only through a full exploration of the story could I "discover" how the novel would conclude, as I only learned through writing that one of the plot elements, the connection via fungi, would join characters not just to the castle, but to each other. Through that discovery, I

was able to fashion a conclusion to the novel that focused on optimism and possibility as opposed to one that threatened to drown the character in negativity and sorrow by making her believe she has no future. Whether this development happened because the characters grew ever fuller and more rounded as I continued to write and re-explore the world, because my brain rebelled at an answer prescribed before the rest of the novel unveiled itself, or because I had not taken the time to think through the potential uses of biological magic is ultimately unclear. Likely, all three situations played a role in the change.

Overall, several elements contributed to my difficulty in penning *Throwaways*. While young adult novels are typically shorter than novels written for adults, *Throwaways* is about 85,000 words, approximately 15,000 words shorter than an adult novel and around 35,000 words longer than the accepted minimum market length for young adult fiction. The longer length of *Throwaways* is because of the need to devote several scenes to the operation and logic of the magical systems in the novel without "info dumping" on the reader. Such additions and explanations must wind through the novel subtly and seamlessly, so I chose two paths for such a task. Since the magic in this novel affects humans and the forest, I separated the two as differing points-of-view when I explained how the magic operated. If the magic at work in the novel affected humans, I examined those rules in the chapters that revolved around Susie's perspective.

I came upon this strategy after reading Bennett Madison's *September Girls*, a coming-of-age novel about a young man who spends a summer with young women who turn out to be mermaid-like creatures. In the book, Madison alternates chapters from the point-of-view of his protagonist with the voices of the mermaids, whose identities and concerns are vastly different from humans. This strategy gave me a new way to view the castle and to help seat the reader

more firmly in the universe of my novel; therefore, I decided to present the castle, forest, and Thano's points-of-view in interstitial chapters. If the magic more closely affected the castle, forest, and Thano, I chose to include this information in interstitial chapters that could illustrate the castle and the forest's point-of-view. The fact that this novel invokes a system of creation and magic that must make sense to readers required that I not only fully explore my character's personalities and situations but also that I delve into the complexities of how the system of magic operated in this world. I did not want to imply that the interstitial sections are part of solely human perspectives. I could have perhaps wound them directly into the narrative, but these beings are, in a sense, alien in as much as that they do not fully understand humanity and seek to connect with it; similar to Madison's treatment of the mermaids, I wished to call attention to this fact. Weaving these points-of-view into the narrative rather than giving them their own space would perhaps diminish the impact of their otherness.

As John Gardner notes in *The Art of Fiction*, "Every true work of art... must be judged primarily...by its own laws. If it has no laws, or if its laws are incoherent, it fails—usually—on that basis" (3). I apply Gardner's point to the structure of the novel as well as to the internal laws that determine how the magic in the novel operates. While a reader may in passing believe magical systems in the novel are based almost entirely on the imagination as opposed to our physical reality, the writer must take painstaking strides in presenting a believable system to which the novel's magic would belong. When exploring how a system of magic will work in a novel, the writer must consider logic, physics, and entire systems whether they be political, social, moral, or otherwise. Thus, having not fully understood the system before I began, I stalled in drafting the manuscript at several points. The writer must function within the system she has

created; she cannot violate the rules of that system. Without full knowledge of how the rules worked, it was impossible to compose a coherent draft.

As I wrote, I threw in a veritable stewpot of magical ingredients only to question how they fit or why they belonged. Once I finished the rough draft, I either removed those questionable elements or built in enough background for that magical element to make sense. For example, to explain how Thanos could be both mortal and not, I wrote an extra interstitial chapter that explored how the root system of the forest discovered him and joined itself with him in order to save his life. In saving his life, the root system transformed him into something more than human: part human, part fungus, and part root. Authors like Diana Wynne Jones note the lengths required to make a non-existent element understandable and believable to readers: "I wrote many pages and charts working out the logic of what I deemed insanity" (130). I concur with Jones' thought precisely. During the three years I worked on the novel, my charts and rules systems for Thanos's source of magic and how it operated changed drastically. In the first draft I allowed mythology to enter my book, albeit with subtlety. Since I was a child, the myth of the fates interested me, so I decided to use their influence and make the power source in the book as straightforward as I could, although I knew the effects of using that power would be incredibly complex.

In the first version, I decided Thanos would represent all three aspects of fate: as Clotho, who first weaves the thread of human life; as Lachesis, who measures out the length of the thread; and as Atropos, who severs the thread and thus ends life. I then decided Thanos would be just one representation of the fates; he creates humanity and oversees its existence. In my revision, I removed this background and character structure entirely, choosing to instead focus

on Thano as a lonely man connected to the forest and doomed never to leave until he can find someone to expand and connect his root system to another's. If he leaves, his own system will be destroyed and he will die. So, I chose humanity as the element that could help him connect his root system to another, since his root system, upon fusing with him, must have compatible DNA of some kind in order to continue to thrive. I based this idea on a comment mycologist Paul Stamets makes in *Mycelium Running*: "Species native to a region are more likely than imported species to adapt readily to these designed habitats" (27). Susie's unique situation, in that she, like Thano, has in a sense been abandoned by her parents, makes her a perfect match as a connection to Thano's root system. In my first draft, I thought the magic in the world was much smaller, that Thano acted alone as fate, and that no other being was involved. Upon further reflection, I was repulsed by the implication that Thano was the sole god, the only reason for existence at all. So, on a moral basis, the magic did not work for me. In the second version, I felt more comfortable with the idea of a world fueled by sentient beings in our actual existence that we do not fully understand but that can connect to each other, can feel what the others feel, and that can react in an effort to help those with whom they are connected. Thus, the magic in this novel both had to make logical sense and connect with my moral outlook on existence.

Before I could understand how Susie would react to the magic she experiences, I first needed to understand—and inhabit—her character. Several years ago, while I worked on my undergraduate degree at the University of Texas at Austin, I worked in a record store that played host to everyone from nearby state mental hospital residents to sorority and fraternity members and from middle-class music lovers, celebrities, and homeless people to self-proclaimed "gutter punks." This last group consisted of homeless runaway teenagers, who often hopped trains to

ride across the country. Many inevitably wound up on Guadalupe Street, also known as "The Drag," panhandling for money and food. My daily interactions with this group framed much of my interest in teenage homelessness and inspired me to model my protagonist on one of these teens. Susie's experiences may not be better or worse than those of some of the teenagers with whom I interacted, but, obviously, living on the streets is not a joyful experience. I attempted to use my experiences around those teens as a potential way to understand how she feels.

When I realized that Susie was, at some point, going to become homeless (if even for a night, as is the case in the final draft) and fearful of being prosecuted for her mother's death, I understood she would yearn for housing, food, money, and safety and security—elements many teenagers take for granted. I quickly understood she would want to follow her cousin Reg and Thano to the castle, even if she was afraid of it. The potential consequences of staying in Garnet Falls, ranging from the police discovery of her mother to being harassed on the streets, for her, far outweigh the fear of the castle she experienced as a child.

The title of the book, *Throwaways*, mirrors Susie's experiences. At seventeen, she has already experienced abuse—albeit unintentionally—at the hands of her mother. She believes no one in Garnet Falls values her. Several elements in the novel reinforce this theme. Reg, for instance, has also experienced abuse at the hands of his alcoholic uncle and is so overlooked that few people truly notice when he becomes terminally ill with cancer. Overall, the throwaways in this novel are searching for something specific: escape. Susie attempts to escape from her horrible life in many ways, including nursing a competitive streak racing in cross-country track and field. She is a potential National Merit scholar and works at a restaurant to stay away from home and to earn money in order to transform her dreams into reality. But when her mother dies,

all her dreams are suddenly at stake. That she runs away and hides from the police after she loses the race further jeopardizes her chances of escape via traditional circumstances. Before she goes to the Moss Castle, she even sleeps on the streets, furthering the idea that she is a throwaway of society.

When Susie realizes she can return to the Moss Castle after losing the race and fleeing the police, she recognizes it as what is now her *only* opportunity to escape from Garnet Falls and from the tatters of her life. In the castle, Susie discovers that the others Thanos helps are also teenagers who also carry traumatic experiences. Susie meets Kit and Jamie, two boys who in Susie's life in Garnet Falls are featured as the main characters in a story that adults tell children to keep them out of the woods. She discovers that as teenagers, they had started a forest fire and were near death themselves when the roots and fungus in the castle healed them and kept them alive rather than cast them away into death. Ironically, Thanos brings these castoffs to his castle and they make up their own community, so their "throwaway" status actually unites them.

Spending three years with angst-ridden, abused teenagers living in my head was quite difficult. Many teenagers already experience rapid hormonal changes that cause them to distort and overblow minuscule situations, so when I increased the tension in an already tumultuous teenage life, I only filled the inner teenagers living in my head with more anger and angst. As E.M. Forster says in *Aspects of the Novel*, characters "'run away,' they 'get out of hand': they are creations inside a creation, and often inharmonious towards it; if they are given complete freedom, they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check, they revenge themselves by dying, and destroying it by intestinal decay" (66-7). Upon my completion of the first version of *Throwaways*, Susie hated the character of Maya (whom I had envisioned as a

negative, potentially evil character) so much that she inadvertently caused her death.

In the second version, I refused to accept an easy narrative of good and evil and grew more interested in conflict as resulting from misunderstandings rather than the idea of good versus bad. Thus, when I wrote Susie and Maya's characters, I focused on stereotypically teenage self-involvement as one element that would drive the two characters apart. Because I focused on confusion and inability to fully communicate as a narrative element as opposed to evil, Susie would not attack and accidentally kill one of her adversaries. In the second version, Susie comes to the realization that people can be both good and bad when Mary Beth, her arch-adversary, helps her finish the race that means most to her. Thus, after Susie's mother takes over the body of Mary Beth, Susie attempts to give her nemesis back full control of her body. Susie also learns to stand up for Maya at a crucial moment when Susie's mother uses Mary Beth's body to attack Maya.

Writing a rounded character is perhaps as difficult as working out a system of rules for magic: in many ways people behave much more confusingly. They occasionally act and speak impulsively for reasons often known only to them, thus bewildering anyone not sharing their headspace. While I wrote pages of notes about the behaviors of my characters, I would occasionally find the character "acting up" in the draft itself. An element was always missing from my notes, a link I needed to understand what motivated my character to behave in a specific way. In the first version, I did not envision Reg as Susie's cousin but as a friend she liked romantically. Given her own self-indulgent self-pitying behavior in that version, I could not understand why he might like her as well and why the two were so devoted to each other. In the second version, I re-envisioned Reg as a family member, one who had witnessed the hardships in

Susie's life and vice versa. This change in relationship explained why the characters continue to reach out to each other although both have different agenda, desires, and needs. Their connected past and their need to care for one another gave me a better understanding why they behave as they do.

As Gardner notes, a writer often moves first by intuition and feeling: "his instinct touches every thread of his fabric, even the murkiest fringes of symbolic structure. He knows when and where to think up and spring surprises, those startling leaps of the imagination." In addition, "What Fancy sends, the writer must order by Judgment" (7). As I drafted *Throwaways*, I always found that the logical basis for an action could only spring after details about the world of the novel flowed from my pen and not the other way around. Although I often wished to stop, bind my imagination to a chair, and lash it with logic and order, I found that I could only complete the novel if I continued to amass true sensory detail throughout the draft. Only after I finished the first draft could I truly make sense of the world I had created and revise to incorporate the internal logic of the world into *Throwaways*. This revision included reconsidering the true conflict in the novel and researching mycology for a better understanding of symbiosis and the operation of mycelium on tree systems.

To write well, Gardner argues, one must read, both for experience and to absorb the possibilities the written word affords us: "Whatever his genius, the writer unfamiliar with the higher effects possible is virtually doomed to search out lesser effects" (12). Without a knowledge base in masterful writing, a writer cannot truly understand the field in which she hopes to work. I spent my formative years reading fantasy, horror, slipstream, magical realism, and young adult literature, so my influences often fall on the margins of the canon, although

some of my favorite writers in these areas, like Shirley Jackson, Haruki Murakami, Italo Calvino, Salman Rushdie, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James, and Gabriel García Márquez, are masters of the written word. I also read renowned young adult authors like Madeleine L'Engle, Diana Wynne Jones, Ursula K. Le Guin, Lewis Carroll, E.B. White, L. Frank Baum, and C.S. Lewis, as well as best-selling or award-nominated contemporary young adult authors like J.K. Rowling, Maggie Stiefvater, Rainbow Rowell, John Green, Jandy Nelson, and Holly Black.

In the past, much of my fictional work tended to edge on the horrific, and I can trace much of my fascination with horror, object as character, and twist endings and instability of the world to Shirley Jackson's work. Her novel *The Haunting of Hill House* begins, "No live organisms can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more" (243). In this passage, Jackson introduces both instability and tangible character details. As soon as the book commences, the reader understands that Hill House is its own entity: a character deprived of dreams that has withstood an intolerable amount of suffering that has rendered it insane. Thanks to these concrete details, the reader also knows to fear and distrust Hill House. Since we believe houses are naturally tangible, concrete objects with no consciousness, Jackson presents readers with a straightforward description that requires them to immediately suspend their sense of disbelief.

In *Throwaways*, I open the first chapter with a similar passage. Jackson chooses to immediately weave the house into the fabric of the book's reality so that the reader accepts its sentience from page one, and in my book, I take a similar approach. Although I do not

immediately reveal the sentience of the forest and the castle, I introduce it first so that its existence first appears as part of the normal, accepted order: "*In the center of Lincoln Woods, a 170-acre preserve on the outskirts of the small town of Garnet Falls, stands a castle, all moss-grown and crumbling ivy-covered walls. No one can remember when it was built...but it is as if the castle appeared one day, long before any of them, all on its own, fully built, fully itself*" (1). The first fantastic element in *Throwaways* is the Moss Castle, which immediately illustrates that this world is not the same as the reader's world.

The castle is as much a character as Susie, although its initial appearance suggests it is merely an object. That the reader soon discovers that it possesses magical abilities and responds to others' desires suggests that it may even make decisions of its own. In its first appearance, its "crumbling ivy-covered walls" and longevity in comparison to the citizens of Garnet Falls suggests that it is far older than anyone knows and perhaps exists on its own timeline; correspondingly, it acts according to its own needs. Like Hill House, the castle's interaction with Susie changes the structure of her world, rendering unstable what readers might have previously expected based on the order of their reality.

In "The Lottery," Jackson also disrupts readers' expectations but waits until the end of the story to reveal her plot twist, which produces chilling effects. By weaving what first appears a realistic tale, Jackson deftly adds elements of dystopian fantasy that produce horrifying results by the end. The story begins with a clear, concise use of detail and imagery: "The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank around ten o'clock" (227). Most readers would

initially accept that this story seems rooted in their own world. A post office, a bank, and natural elements that mirror most American readers' experiences with the seasons all imply the world of "The Lottery" is similar to their own.

In this story, the introduction of the black box hints this story may not be seated in the same reality as readers, but it appears rather innocuously on the second page of the tale: "the black box had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born...There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here" (228). That the black box represents the town's history and tradition is clear, but the author provides no seemingly ominous hints as to what will occur until the lottery actually commences: "A girl whispered, 'I hope it's not Nancy,' and the sound of the whisper reached the edges of the crowd" (234). By refusing to name what is actually happening and by using only setting detail to convey the meaning of the lottery for the townspeople, Jackson produces a piece that disrupts expectations and shocks and horrifies readers. Because Jackson penned the story using a detached, third-person omniscient point-of-view, the reader never enters the thoughts of any of the characters and must experience the situation as any observer might. That *The New Yorker* received more letters about "The Lottery" than about any other story in its history conveys the chilling effect the story produced upon readers ("Biography of a Story" 790).

While I never intended to compose *Throwaways* using an omniscient point-of-view, my first impulse was to render the world only as Susie experienced it. Jackson's use of detail propelled "The Lottery" forward, after all; because readers can imagine the town, they can imagine themselves into the position of an observer. Since I wanted readers to identify with

Susie, my first impulse was to render most of the narrative scenes with details from her point-of-view. Although I deviate from this strategy with the interstitial chapters, the overall narrative in its third-person limited point-of-view tends to stay close to Susie's perspective.

Unlike Jackson with "The Lottery," I did not intend to write a twist ending, but I did include twists and surprises in a few scenes. For example, because the novel addresses the trauma Susie experiences and her inability to make a decision about what to do when her mother dies, I later decided the answer to the most complicated but important element to help her address the trauma actually lay with her mother. For that reason, I chose to bring Susie's mother back, but only if her mother could not stay long and only if her arrival further complicated Susie's life. Therefore, Susie can work to overcome the trauma she has experienced, but she must also work to make her mother leave again, no matter how much she wishes for her to stay. For that reason, I chose to have the castle bring Susie's mother back from the dead in the body of Susie's nemesis, Mary Beth: "A wave of heat crashed into Susie and she made herself stare into Mary Beth's face. Only, it wasn't. Not really. Mary Beth's face wore that same twisted mouth expression her mom got when she was confused. The girl in front of her had Mary Beth's body, but Mary Beth seemed long gone. Evelene Hopkins stared out at Susie behind Mary Beth's eyes" (174). Here, the twist is not one of horror, necessarily, but it defies expectations while fulfilling Susie's desire to see her mother again. Through her expansion of detail, Jackson successfully wrote many pieces that make the reader empathize with her characters' physical terror. Although I do not necessarily desire to write in the vein of horror to extract that specific effect from my readers, I do strive to use the objects and characters within the world of my story to create twists

that naturally stem from the reality of the tale itself and to cause my readers to empathize with my characters as they endure the ramifications of these twists.

Another influence of mine, Haruki Murakami introduces fluid, changing realities rendered with clear, precise detail in several of his novels, including *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and The End of the World*, *After Dark*, and *1Q84*. Many of his novels feature detached characters both cowed by and somehow fully cognizant of the fact that Murakami's fictional worlds contain more dimensions than they previously understood. Murakami's characters seem to react in a way that says, "Of course, reality is not as straightforward as I thought. The world is much larger than I ever considered and I am such a small piece of it, so why should our existence make any sense to me?"

In *1Q84*, for example, Murakami takes a straightforward approach in creating a schism in reality by using concrete detail and characters' distrust of their own memories. During a traffic jam, the character Aomame exits a taxi on a busy highway. The only way to escape the highway is to climb down a service exit. Once she climbs through the exit, though, reality shifts. The reader and Aomame are clued into this change when Aomame sees a policeman carrying an automatic weapon, although earlier in the day she saw a policeman carrying the traditional revolver she believes Japanese police officers always carry. After a conversation about this change with two men at a bar, Aomame learns that the police force began using automatic weapons two years prior. She thinks, "*Am I going crazy? I just saw a policeman wearing the old-style uniform and carrying an old revolver this morning. I'm sure I never heard a thing about them getting rid of every single revolver, but I also can't believe that these two middle-aged men are wrong or lying to me. Which means I must be mistaken*" (58). Instead of believing that the

universe has changed, she chooses to believe her memory is fallible and that she is not paying close attention to the world in which she lives. Since the shift in Aomame's world first appears minuscule, something she may have easily overlooked, she believes the fault lies within her own mind; Susie undergoes a similar experience as a child upon seeing a boy on fire in the castle.

Later in the book, Aomame discovers that two moons now reside in the sky. She knows that she has always thought only one moon existed. Now that she sees two, she undergoes the same confusion she did when she saw the change in the police force's weapons. People around her might tell her the two moons always existed, she believes, so she refuses to ask her friends, and no longer trusts the reality she sees; whether the issue is herself or the world, she does not know (195-6). Thus, Murakami creates characters who believe they are but one element of a very large world, and their own distrust of their memory and mind make them believe they are the points of instability in the world instead of the world itself.

In *Throwaways*, I work with Susie's own instability as a character using detail as well. Like Aomame, she is strong and does not trust that she knows more about her world than anyone else. When, as a young girl, she sees the boy on fire, she believes she might be crazy: "He was no one she knew. And then he grinned at her, and his red hair, she saw, was not red hair, but fire, dancing above his head...She'd told Reg about it, but he'd shrugged and told her she was malnourished and that the hallucinations would go away when she started eating more. Eventually, she came to believe him" (15). Years later when she sees more evidence that the castle is magic, she believes she is not hallucinating. That she feels the moss's movements within her body tells her the problem was never one in her mind. She believes the magic is real because she tactilely experiences it: "Something suddenly hummed in the room, like soft bass beating

beneath their feet. Susie inched back toward the door. The moss began to – *twitch* – and Susie tried to count her breaths as her heart hammered in her chest. The green tendrils licked out into the air and twined with each other, building. Shaping. Susie could feel the floor softening beneath her feet and she grabbed the doorframe for support. The tendrils churned faster" (75). Like Murakami, I render these scenes through a third-person close perspective, so that the reader understands not only what the protagonist experiences in the situation, but what she thinks as well. The world may be unstable, but we can believe in the character's experiences of that instability. This strategy, also, employs the technique of "showing" the story to the reader so that the reader fully experiences it, rather than "telling" it through straight and objective exposition, wherein the reader might not engage as strongly with the text.

Pulitzer Prize finalist and World Fantasy Award-winning author Kelly Link consistently inspires me as many of her adult and young adult narratives deliberately disrupt traditional plot structures. Link often uses an experimental framework, but in an interview with *Gigantic* magazine she notes she relies on several traditional narrative devices even if she uses them unconventionally: "in order for me to figure out how to tackle a story, there has to be some kind of dissonance at work. I get writerly energy out of the friction between different forms, genres, structures...But you can't just change the pattern, you have to change it in such a way that you're still creating some kind of readerly satisfaction." What Link defines as "readerly satisfaction," she does not clarify. In an interview with *The Listener*, she discusses the kind of endings she often employs in her own stories: "I wouldn't want all endings to be loose or to be tangled, because that would become another kind of artificial [sic], but what I like about endings that are more open is that it's harder to disengage from them. You go on thinking about the story a little

bit longer." For Link, then, readerly satisfaction could be linked to the effect a story has—if the story inspires deeper consideration from the reader, perhaps that results in satisfaction enough.

In Link's "The Hortlak," Eric works at the All-Night Convenience store on the edge of the Ausible Chasm, where zombies dwell. In this story, Link consistently disrupts expectations and thoroughly ignores plot. She relies more consistently on patterns in imagery, on identifying the main character, Eric, with the dogs his love interest, Charley, euthanizes at their local pet shelter: "Eric had this thought, which was what it would be like to lie down and put his head on Charley's leg" (29). By the end of the story, Eric runs after Charley, as if he wants to be rescued, although he knows Charley deals in death: "The backseat of her car was full of dogs, real dogs and ghost dogs, and all of the dogs poking their doggy noses out of the windows at him. There wouldn't have been room for him, even if he'd been able to make her stop. But he ran out in the road anyway, like a damn dog, chasing after her car for as long as he could" (58). The end of the story does not resolve this tension or the tension Eric feels around his manager Batu, who wants to study the zombies to discover what they truly want and what the All-Night Convenience can sell them. Neither does it result in any resolution about Eric's attraction to Charley. Link's story defies traditional plot structure, but through her consistent use of pattern she does imply that for Eric, Charley offers an escape and that Charley actually represents death. The end of "The Hortlak" leaves readers with a sense of possibility rather than with an event that settles matters. Eric will always chase after Charley, never reaching what he desires from his life.

In *Throwaways*, I resisted the impulse to conclude the narrative cleanly. By the end of the story, Susie could have returned to Garnet Falls and graduated, perhaps keeping her scholarships since her mother gave her a way to avoid criminal charges; I chose to push her forward beyond

those options so that she must further sharpen her ability to connect to others rather than try to do everything on her own. The novel does not answer what will happen to Susie in the future, but it does leave the reader with a sense that she is optimistic about her future instead of ridden with anxiety as she is at the start of the novel. Susie could easily become like Thano, since they are now connected, and live in the forest with him, but she knows she must find others who also believe they are also alone and cast aside. Through finding these "throwaways," the castle and the forest will grow stronger and more connected. I leave the reader to decide whether Susie will succeed or fail in her new quest, similar to the way Link leaves the reader to decide what will happen to Eric.

George Saunders' work, particularly his collections *In Persuasion Nation*, *Pastoralia*, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, *Tenth of December*, and the children's book *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*, has played a significant role in the way I think about crafting voice, tone, sentence structure, and, in theme, the general absurdities of the world. Saunders also relishes the idea of "not knowing" as one writes: "In this mode of not-knowing, the thick-torsoed, literal, and crew-cut conscious mind is moved to the sidelines in favor of the swinging, perceptive, light-footed, tutu-wearing subconscious. We surprise ourselves, and make something bigger than we could have imagined making before we started trying to make it" ("The United States of Huck" 191). In the vein of not knowing, Saunders elsewhere notes, "What we want our ending to do is to do more than we could have dreamed it would do" ("The Perfect Gerbil" 181). The writer propels forward by the force of phrase, of sound, of sentences, so that the writer and reader sit "right next to one another, leaning as they corner, the pleasure coming from the mutuality and simultaneity of the experience" (178). In other words, like Rick Bass, Saunders desires to

surprise himself as much as he surprises the reader. He wants to invite the reader fully into the work to experience it as much as possible. His use of compressed sentences and voice works to strike this effect.

In an essay about Esther Forbes' *Johnny Tremain*, Saunders discusses how he first came to understand the true effect of a sentence: "The world, I started to see, was a different world, depending on what you said about it, and how you said it. By honing the sentences you used to describe the world, you changed the inflections of your mind, which changed your perceptions" ("Thank You, Esther Forbes" 62). In "Some Brief and Frightening Tips from George Saunders," Saunders also notes, "I like to see the character mimicked or reflected in the narrative voice." For Saunders, whole stories can be built just out of constructing sentences so that they seem to stem from the character's point-of-view.

In "Tenth of December," a serious story about a man dying from brain cancer, Saunders jumps back and forth between two points-of-view: that of Robin, a young boy exploring in the woods, and Donald Eber, the man dying of cancer. Robin daydreams about being a superhero, which Saunders renders as such: "All suited up now, NASA. Turning awkwardly to go out the door. *Affirmative. We have your coordinates. Be careful out there, Robin.* Whoa, cold, dang. Duck thermometer read ten. And that was without wind-chill. That made it fun. That made it real" (217). From these short sentences, the reader understands Robin is in search of adventure and is a daydreamer. His thoughts lie in stark opposite to Donald Eber's: "He was so tired. What a thing. Holy moley. When he used to walk Sasquatch out here, they'd do six times around the pond, jog up the hill, tag the boulder on top, sprint back down. *Better get moving,* said one of the two guys who'd been in discussion in his head all morning" (222). The reader can immediately

detect the differences between Donald and Robin. Saunders uses short sentences when narrating from both points-of-view, but Donald's voice at first appears more reflective and internally focused, whereas Robin is focused on the external world and its direct effect on him. Saunders could render these details through dialogue but instead chooses to use the narrative to reflect the characters.

Because I only used two points-of-view in *Throwaways*, that of the castle/Thano/forest, and that of Susie throughout the rest of the novel, I did not structure my novel in a way similar to the structure of "Tenth of December"; I did attempt to use shorter sentences in the midst of action, and I used the overall narrative to reflect much of Susie's voice. When Susie realizes the authorities will discover her mother, the sentences splinter into fragments and resort to italics to illustrate her frustration and sarcastic chastisement of herself regarding her choices: "They were going to come looking for Susie the second they found her mom. And they were going to ask her questions. About why she hadn't called the cops. About the scissors. About why she'd just taken off. *High-five, Suze*, she thought. *Great job*" (124). Thus, like Saunders, I constructed the narrative so that the reader can keep track and continue to identify with Susie throughout the narrative without resorting to external dialogue.

Each of these authors influences my writing, by eliciting emotion via tone and creating plot twists, creating constructs that question reality, securing readerly satisfaction by using and subverting patterns, and constructing sentences that closely parallel characters' frames of mind. After several years of reading Jackson, Murakami, Link, and Saunders, I have absorbed different strategies and techniques for my own work. Each author works with different approaches and

focal points, as do I. Through each tale woven, each of us conveys our own understanding of what a work of fiction should do as a story and as a way to communicate with readers.

CHAPTER 2

WRITING FOR A YOUNG ADULT AUDIENCE

I discovered in writing *Throwaways* that creating a young adult novel requires an understanding of and a unique approach to a particular audience. At the outset, I wanted to write a novel that contemporary readers younger than myself would read and with which they would engage. Since young adult fictions contain their own set of aesthetic expectations and history, I studied the origins of the category, the requirements of work oriented toward young adult readers, and how *Throwaways* as an example of a young adult novel fulfills or deviates from the recognized elements of contemporary young adult storytelling and literary expectations of its readers; additionally, I surveyed four contemporary novels during my revision process to learn more about successful young adult storytelling.

Most critics agree that the category of young adult literature did not originate until after World War II, and many point to the publication of either Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer*, which appeared in 1942 (Cart 11) or J.D. Salinger's 1951 novel *Catcher in the Rye* as the turning point in the creation of young adult literature (Trites 9); earlier young adult works like the "Hardy Boys" and "Nancy Drew" series, beginning in 1927 and 1930 respectively, paved a path for the development of young adult literature (Cart 8). For centuries no distinction existed between children's and young adult literature, and the larger category of children's literature did not originate until the late 1600s. In "The Origins and History of American Children's Literature," Michael O. Tunnell and James S. Jacobs note, "Before the 17th century, children's books did not exist because children had not yet been invented. Kids dressed, worked, and lived like their adult counterparts." The first movement toward creating children's literature came with

John Locke's 1693 proposal of "the concept of 'childhood' in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, suggesting there be books expressly for children." Even so, "the concept of 'childhood' was not universally recognized until well into the 20th century. Consider that child labor laws were not legislated until the early 1900s" (80). Before and even after Locke's declaration, children simply read works meant for adults, including texts like *Aesop's Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Gulliver's Travels* (80-1). Since children were capable of reading advanced books, one might wonder about the motives in the movement to define a literature designed solely for children. Despite children's ability to read advanced literature, proponents for the category noted a lack of literature that targeted children's specific maturity and developmental levels.

Children's literature, particularly in its early inception, attempted to educate children about the larger world. Tunnell and Jacobs outline movements within children's literature leading up to and beyond the creation of young adult literature, and highlight the tendency for "reading materials in the 15th through the 17th centuries...to indoctrinate," the founding of the first "children's-book-only publishing house" by John Newbery in the 1700s, the trend toward didacticism in the nineteenth century, the popularity and influence of fairy tales and fantasy as well as the publication of *Little Women* in the 1800s, and the "age of new realism" in the 1960s, which touched both children's literature as a whole and influenced the development of the subcategory of young adult literature (80-83). Many of the texts produced in these movements attempted to introduce the experiential world to children and educate them through various means, whether through allegories or fables, or in the "age of new realism," through the so-called "problem novel," in which "authors addressed serious taboos" (83). As developmental studies

gained traction in the twentieth century with watershed texts like G. Stanley Hall's 1904 publication *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (Cart 4) and Jean Piaget's 1958 publication *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (Cart 7), authors focused ever more frequently on distinctions in maturity levels between children of certain ages and shed light on variations needed in children's and young adult literature.

Whether the development of young adult literature occurred because of the increase in psychological studies of children and adolescents, the influx of adolescents into schools after the Great Depression (Cart 5), or as Roberta Seelinger Trites argues, the post-modern age after World War II, is ultimately unclear. In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Trites argues that "Adolescence as such did not become institutionalized in America until the twentieth century, so it stands to reason that books marketed specifically to this demographic arose as a product of the twentieth century" (8-9). In *Young Adult Literature*, Michael Cart supports Trites' assertion with the argument that the influx of adolescents into schools influenced the "later emergence of young adult literature," as "putting young people into one another's company every day led to the emergence of a youth culture centered on high school social life" (5). All of these trends likely contributed to category of young adult literature as we know it today.

Young adult literature surveyor Peter Hollindale notes in "The Adolescent Novel of Ideas," "From the mid-1950s to 1970 there had been what became conventionally known as a second golden age of children's books, matching the decades just before and after the turn of the century in its production of exceptional works"; but in 1970, "The category variously known as

teenage, adolescent, or young adult fiction suddenly came into prominence. Ten years earlier it had scarcely existed" (84). While the category of young adult literature was introduced just after World War II and was indeed popular amongst teenagers, young adult literature secured a foothold in 1970 with the emergence of the problem novel.

Hollindale points to the 1970s as the age of the realist, or problem novel, which was "marked by a taboo-breaking realism in the depiction of teenage social experience and conflict, and by documentary explicitness in the presentation of emotional and sexual development." Hollindale argues that this type of novel "represent[s] for many readers what the 'adolescent' novel is," in that it "purports to offer teenage readers a mirror image of their lives." Pointing to a variety of changes in the latter twentieth century, Hollindale suggests the problem novel resulted from phenomena like "the foreshortening of childhood, earlier physical maturity, and the virtual coming to be of a two-phase adolescence, where the 'preadult' (roughly from ten to thirteen) precedes the 'young adult' (fourteen or so until the age of leaving school)" (84). Today, while contemporary young adult literature still contains the popular problem novel category, which includes themes and issues that affect contemporary youth, it also regularly includes a wider range of sub-categories. Tunnell and Jacobs credit J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series with an increase in fantasy literature and note that the category of young adult and children's literature is so popular that "children's books often outsell their adult counterparts" (85-6).

In "Let Them Read Books!" Alethea K. Helbig examines methods that may help interest younger readers in books; Helbig surveys young adult literature published from 1997-2001, and notes that books published for the "14-to-20-set" encompass a "a wide range of subject matter, approaches, and demands on reading ability, intellect, comprehension, and experiential and

emotional response." Helbig notes that the novels are classified in a range of sub-categories: "historical and period fiction...fantasy and science fiction...adventure and survival stories...sports novels," and, of course, problem novels (125-6).

Essentially, what appears to distinguish young adult literature from the overall category of literature is that it is presumably written for and marketed toward readers of a certain age and often involves teenaged characters who experience circumstances that reflect upon and challenge their maturity; further, young adult literature can even revolve around themes and ideas already published in decades prior, since, as Helbig notes, "the kids don't know that the books are the same old stuff. The kids are always new. The challenge remains somehow to bridge the disconnect between audience and material" (127). While the underlying assumption in young adult literature is that it is designed for younger readers, Jack Zipes notes, "there is no such thing as a well-defined children's literature or youth culture with borders that prevents older people from indulging in such literature" (5). Indeed, in 2012 *Publisher's Weekly* noted that 55% of young adult book buyers are adults, of which 78% purchase the books for their own use ("New Study: 55% of YA Books Bought by Adults"). Perhaps the reason for this intersection lies in Roberta Seelinger Trites' claim that young adult novels are not *Bildungsroman*, "a type of novel in which the adolescent matures to adulthood," but *Entwicklungsroman*, "a broad category of novels in which an adolescent character grows" (9-10). Trites argues that young adult novels evolved from *Bildungsroman* and that because most adolescents in these novels have not actually reached adulthood, they do not qualify as *Bildungsroman* novels. Thus, the category of young adult literature sits closely to literature "marketed to adults about adolescents" who reach adulthood, although Trites notes young adult novels primarily concern themselves with

"demonstrating characters' ability to grow into an acceptance of their environment. That is, the YA novel teaches adolescents how to exist within the...institutions that define teenagers' existence" (19). Thus, while adults may respond to young adult novels and comprise a large part of the reading audience, young adult books are often written for a younger audience that grapples with maturity and growing up.

The audience engaged in reading young adult literature may very well include adults, but in the writing of *Throwaways*, I envisioned an audience of teenagers rather than my peers. As the writer Joan Aiken notes in *The Way to Write for Children*, "It is impossible to predict who will read what" (19). To write to these readers, I needed to understand who they are, in terms of their concerns and what they positively respond to in reading and in life. In "The Structure of Power in Young Adult Problem Novels," Brian W. Sturm and Karin Michel assert that young adulthood is one of the most tumultuous times of a person's life. To affirm this premise, they offer a list of adolescent traits developed by The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:

(1) a movement toward independence (struggle with sense of identity, moodiness, feeling awkward about one's self and one's body; occasional rudeness, and a tendency to return to childish behavior, especially when stressed); (2) cognitive change (still present oriented but a growing array of intellectual interests); (3) developing sexuality (increased interest in sex but often shy about it as they are also concerned about their attractiveness to others, frequently changing relationships and sexual experimentation, and a concern about being 'normal'); and (4) defining values and developing a sense of self (testing rules and limits, choosing role models, and developing ideals. (39-40)

Given the extreme duress brought on by these challenging developments during adolescence, I

wanted to write a novel that featured a main character undergoing vast change, from her thirst for independence to the obstacles she faces when she finally must make real choices on her own.

My approach had to take on another layer, as Joan Aiken notes about teenagers, "They are not interested in plots; what they *are* interested in is emotion. The teenage novel has a duty to portray the successive tidal waves of feeling that wash over adolescents as they struggle through changing relationships with parents; agonies at school; growing awareness of sex; the search for identity; adjustment to society (or cleavage from it)" (73). This wave of emotion required I incorporate the incessant inner conversation a teenager has with herself over what seems like every small detail. Self-pitying language and an inner monologue that borders on whining would probably be considered irritating in a book written for adults, but is indispensable in a book written for teenagers. For example, during a romantic encounter with Susie's love interest, Thano, her inner thoughts revolve around the way she acts around him: "She felt like squirming. Man, she thought, he was so weird. So weird, but still cute, with that tiny crook in his nose and those freckles dotting his left cheek. 'Uh, thanks. You're – you're cool too.' Oh geez, she thought, why couldn't she just try looking all mysterious and smile instead of opening her mouth? She shifted her balance from foot to foot and stared at the ground" (145). This paragraph reveals Susie's nervousness about how awkwardly she acts and how much she wants Thano to like her romantically. Throughout the book, I sought to present believable characters with rich inner lives that mirror the lives of teenagers who might read the work.

In addition to desiring to successfully portray the emotional lives of teenagers, I wanted to offer my audience a story seated in real experiences but with enough levity, possibility, and hope that they would not read the novel and feel saddened by what will become of the character

in the future. Thus, my work proceeded with tenets informed by principles set out by Aiken and Dianna Wynne Jones. As Aiken writes in *The Way to Write for Children*, "Children need to get from the stories they read a sense of their own inner existence, and the archetypal links that connected them with the unexplored past; of the similarity in patterns between large and small, old and new; they need to receive something that extends beyond ordinary reality" (17). Aiken suggests that stories teach children and young adults that although they may face difficult times in their lives, they can face them and learn to problem solve for themselves. For this to happen, they need to develop an awareness of self, and stories can influence that development.

To truly help children develop this sense, Jones advocates that the author take responsibility for what a child learns: "A book for children, like the myths and folktales that tend to slide into it, is really a blueprint for dealing with life. For that reason, it might have a happy ending, because nobody ever solved a problem while believing it was hopeless" ("Answers to Some Questions" 132-3). Further, she states about literature written for young audiences, "The important thing about it is that it has entered this person's consciousness at a time when ideas were still forming, waking their sense of wonder and forcing their ideas in a new direction—enlarging their imagination, in fact—and by the mere fact of always being in their mind from then on, has influenced that reader's entire personality. Permanently" ("Writing for Children: A Matter of Responsibility" 72-3). Further, in "On Fairy-Stories," J.R.R. Tolkien notes that there is a "lack of experience which makes it less easy for children to distinguish fact from fiction in particular cases...Children's knowledge of the world is often so small that they cannot judge, off-hand and without help, between the fantastic, the strange (that is rare or remote facts), the nonsensical and the merely 'grown-up'" (132-3). Although Tolkien is commenting on the mental

development of children younger than my anticipated reader, the point reminds me that extending possibilities and opening up hope for my main character rather than limiting her future and her potential for growth may also prove beneficial for my younger readers. From both Aiken and Jones, I took seriously the idea that because our lived world is complicated enough, younger readers deserve tales that help them cope with circumstances in a beneficial way. Writers for children and for young adults should take seriously the mandate to offer readers tools to thrive, to problem solve, and to use their imagination to fix their own conflicts.

Although my novel deals with the death of my character's mother, I wanted my character to be resilient and to attempt to fulfill her goals as well as to succeed with her plans, no matter how they evolve as a result of the story's events; further, I wanted her to not only grieve for her mother's death but to take responsibility for her actions and learn that despite her hardships, she had never to give up. If I allowed my character to give up and stay in the castle forever, I would feel that I insinuated to my younger readers that giving up on your dreams is acceptable in the face of adversity. That resolution would only offer my readers a negative model for coping with life.

Offering readers tools and ideas for problem solving in their own lives necessitates that literature for younger readers not gloss over the difficulties one may encounter. As noted, the "problem novel" in young adult literature is especially popular because it not only deals with difficult subject matter but because it also offers adolescents models for the ways they may behave; whether the author of a problem novel writes with the goal of offering young adults positive modeling is another issue. Even so, offering young readers positive insights remained one of my goals in the writing of *Throwaways*.

Because young adult literature, to some extent, explores the protagonist's search for power and a sense of self in a sea of adult authority, it occasionally tackles abandonment of the protagonist by the parents or guardians. Although science fiction author Isaac Asimov argues that "there is no hard and fast distinction between 'adult' and 'juvenile' writing" (230), certain tropes, such as the one above, and modes occur more frequently in books targeted toward a younger audience. Hollindale suggests that the "adolescent novel of ideas addresses a multitude of themes from the everyday realistic to the abstract, theoretical, and conjectural, or uses a range of modes from parochial urban naturalism to cosmic fantasy, or enlists narrative procedures from simple linear story to complex multi-voiced, multitemporal, intertextual strategies" (84). Young adult literature, then, can encompass primary and secondary elements of techniques—including fantasy—to address the adolescent-centric issues of self.

Rosemary Ross Johnston goes further to suggest that young adult literature is not only capable of including any number of themes but that it also "resists genre classifications but beguilingly tracks relationships and cross-breedings" (89). In *Throwaways*, I combined what might be seen as a problem novel—in as much as Susie's mother dies and she must face the ramifications of her death—blended with fantasy. Ultimately, the decision to blend categories resulted from my interest in pairing stark reality with a magical "anything is possible" environment. While I worked from the question of how a character who has lost everything would react in such a setting, ultimately, her reality meant I would also address power structures in Susie's world of Garnet Falls.

Many recent books feature protagonists faced with the struggle Trites pinpoints: "[a]dolescents do not achieve maturity in a young adult novel until they have reconciled

themselves to the power entailed in the social institutions with which they must interact to survive" (20). In *Throwaways*, Susie's struggle over whether to go to the police after the death of her mother is one of the central plot elements. She can choose to live her life on the margins of society in a magical world removed from reality or help others by turning herself in and accepting the consequences for her actions. By ignoring the morally sound path of going to the authorities, she refuses to move into the next stage of her development as an adult. When she realizes her choice will mean Mary Beth will not be able to live her full life in the manner Susie believes is fair, Susie accepts that she must go to the police. Hence, she proves that she is willing to let go of her mother to help another person. In this manner Susie reaches maturity, even if she has not yet fully reached adulthood. As a young adult novel, the text offers adolescents a tool in determining how they might navigate their lives and families in order to establish themselves as independent individuals who can functionally operate when they move into society.

To create a young adult novel that may fare well with readers, during my revision process I also reviewed a number of either best-selling or award-nominated contemporary young adult novels for a better understanding of what succeeds in the young adult market with regard to character and motivation, fantastic elements, style and contemporary trends, and plot and structure. I had completed the first draft of *Throwaways*, but the draft lacked clarity and these novels had, in several respects, succeeded in the areas I wished to improve. These novels included Maggie Stiefvater's *Raven Boys*, Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park*, Holly Black's *Darkest Part of the Forest*, and Jandy Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun*.

Published in 2012, Maggie Stiefvater's *Raven Boys* is the first book in a four-book series about teenager Blue Sargent and a group of four boys who attend the nearby private school

Aglionby. Blue was raised in a poor part of Henrietta, Virginia, and vows to stay away from the wealthy boys of Aglionby because they often treat her and other "townies" in Henrietta as second-class citizens. The four boys whom Blue meets—Gansey, Adam, Ronan, and Noah—live lives starkly different from Blue's own, and initially she attempts to stay away from them. Blue comes from a family of psychics who each year on St. Mark's Eve identify who will die in the next year, and as the novel opens, Blue meets Gansey (his face appears indistinct because she meets his spirit). Blue knows he is predicted to die during this year, the year in which she is also due to meet her true love. Because she knows he will die, and because her family has passed to her the knowledge that Blue's kiss will one day kill her true love, Blue cannot help but connect to Gansey when she later meets him in person. That Gansey is on a somewhat whimsical quest to find the ancient Welsh King Glendower only adds to the excitement of her friendship with him and his friends. Gansey believes Glendower is buried along the network of ley lines located near Henrietta because he believes there's something "about the line that fortifies or protects a corpse" (215) and that the Welsh king is only under a sleeping spell. Once awakened, the king will grant whomever awakens him with a favor. This first book in the series builds upon the relationships between the characters and explores the temptation the ley lines have over people who have no real power in their lives and seek it for some measure of control.

Raven Boys is most effective because of its relationships. The fantastic elements are immersive as well, but the strength of the characters keeps the reader engaged in the world of Blue and Gansey and their quest for a magical king. With the first line, the novel drops the reader directly into a fantasy world: "Blue Sargent had forgotten how many times she'd been told that she would kill her true love" (1). The reader finds out on the first page that Blue's family

possesses psychic powers, but what we discover about the book is the myriad of ways Blue feels and thinks about the prediction that directs her romantic future: "Until she was eleven, Blue was convinced she would silently contract an infectious disease. One press of her lips to her hypothetical soulmate and he, too, would die in a consumptive battle untreatable by modern medicine. When she was thirteen, Blue decided that jealousy would kill him instead" (2). Since she imagines several possible ways she might kill her one true love, this implies that she believes she can possibly evade fate. If she can identify what will happen, she can avoid enacting it.

Elsewhere, we learn of Blue's conflict with class and those who possess money: "Before her stood the multitasking cell phone Aglionby boy, looking tidy and presidential. His watch looked as if it cost more than her mother's car, and every area of exposed skin was a flattering shade of tan. Blue had never figured out how Aglionby boys managed to tan earlier than locals" (60-1). These details tell the reader as much about Gansey as about how Blue feels about his status. He is rich, but she experiences bitterness and distrust at his wealth. Stiefvater continues to write her characters in this immersive way—she reveals each of their insecurities and switches points-of-view every chapter. What distinguishes this book as a young adult book is the age group of the main characters and the fact that readers feel deeply the emotions of the characters. The novel revolves around a magical quest and a love triangle steeped in psychic prediction while examining the fraught relationships between people from different classes; Stiefvater largely succeeds in this portrayal because of her devotion to the inner worlds of the characters. They believe in the magic, and for the readers, it is believable as a result.

In Rainbow Rowell's 2013 realistic novel *Eleanor & Park*, characters and their motivations are also intricately detailed, infusing the reader with empathy for them. Taking place

in late 1986 over the course of one school year, Rowell's novel details the relationship between Eleanor, an overweight sixteen-year-old outcast from a broken home with an abusive stepfather, and Park, a sixteen-year-old Korean-American boy with a love for music and who is the only one to offer Eleanor a seat on the school bus when she transfers to his school. Park refuses to speak to Eleanor at first, and she appears angry and sullen at every turn until Park shares his headphones. Eventually, after Park shares with Eleanor his music and comics, Eleanor opens up to Park and they each discover their developing feelings for each other. Their relationship is complicated because of Eleanor's difficult home life and the secret that her stepfather is tormenting her. When she reveals the extent of the abuse to Park, Park helps her flee to her Uncle's house several hours away, forcing the two characters apart and breaking up their relationship.

The success of the novel lies in the character detail; the reader is quick to empathize with the desperation of Eleanor's situation. While Park and Eleanor share a bond and the novel revolves around the both of them, it is Eleanor about whom the reader worries and Park with whom we empathize after he and Eleanor must be apart. From Eleanor's perspective we see how careful and deliberate Park is: "Park's hands were perfectly still in his lap. And perfectly perfect. Honey colored with clean, pink fingernails. Everything about him was strong and slender. Every time he moved, he had a reason" (58). And from Park's perspective we see how his first impression of Eleanor shames him: "He could remember thinking that she was asking for it...That it was bad enough to have curly red hair. That it was bad enough to have a face shaped like a box of chocolates...He remembered feeling embarrassed for her...Now, he felt the fight rising up in his throat whenever he thought of people making fun of her" (90-1). Rowell renders

the characters so that they reveal such honesty that the reader can truly identify with them, even if their situations are vastly different from the reader's own. By illustrating Park's guilt regarding his initial feelings toward Eleanor, Rowell makes the reader complicit in judgments of characters for being less than perfect. When we see through Park's eyes Eleanor's qualities, we experience his evolution of emotion regarding Eleanor right along with him.

After studying *Raven Boys* and *Eleanor & Park*, I came to the epiphany that these characters are so strong because Stiefvater and Rowell show their rich inner lives on the page, which led me to realize a fundamental lack in my own attempts at character-building in *Throwaways*. Many authors may mold background stories and motivations for characters and know the details of their inner lives, but decide not to show it on the page. In my case, when I first wrote the supporting characters in *Throwaways*, I made the mistake of focusing the characters on Susie, rarely on themselves. My observation has always been that teenagers tend to have their own selfish concerns and are not focused on a single person, even if that single person happens to be the protagonist of a novel. When I came to that realization, I was able to revise certain supporting characters to make the world as a whole more engaging and interesting. For example, when Mary Beth argues with Susie at a party, the supporting character Luke interrupts them. In the first version, his comments were focused solely on the girls, but in this version, I included his feelings about his situation: "'Knock it off, Mary Beth,' Luke said. 'The girls got fourth. You could still be on the all-star team. The guys didn't even place. My jerk of a dad told me to suck it up, but maybe you should be the one taking his advice.' He looked into his cup. 'I should've gone out for football instead'" (150). Now the reader understands more of who Luke is, even if he does not play a larger role in the text. He is part of Susie's teenage world and travels in

similar circles, so I needed to build more detail into the way his personality appeared on the page. Once I made this change in this passage and in the rest of the novel, Luke and other characters immediately seemed less like one-dimensional marionettes to be repositioned at my choosing and more like people with their own goals and desires.

In Holly Black's 2015 *New York Times* Best Seller *Darkest Part of the Forest*, two siblings, Hazel and Ben, live out their life in the town of Fairfold, which borders a fairy realm. Everyone who lives in Fairfold knows about its border with the fairy world, and the townspeople do their best to protect tourists drawn to the fairy's magic. Black's opening is another example that seats the reader immediately in a fantasy world, and one from which I took inspiration: "Down a path worn into the woods, past a stream and a hollowed-out log full of pill bugs and termites, was a glass coffin. It rested right on the ground, and in it slept a boy with horns on his head and ears as pointed as knives. As far as Hazel Evans knew...he'd always been there. And no matter what anyone did, he never, ever woke up" (1). In Black's opening, we discover that this town deals with magic on its periphery, but rarely does the magic infiltrate their small town. That is, the fairy-folk do not target the townspeople in any dangerous way until the boy in the glass coffin goes missing. After the boy goes missing from the coffin, the town finds itself under siege from a monster, and Hazel and Ben must work out the mystery regarding what is attacking the townspeople and how to stop it. I also wanted to create a setting that was magical but that the characters in the novel tended to accept as part of their lives, which led to my development of the Moss Castle in *Throwaways*.

In an interview with *SF Signal*, Black notes that her inspiration for the novel came from the Scottish fairy tale "Kate Crackernuts," in which a princess rescues her sister from a curse, but

Black also plays on the ballad of "Tam Lin," as before the novel begins, Hazel pledges herself to the fairy Alderking in a deal to send her brother away to music school. The king makes Hazel a knight in his service but splits her personality in two so that her day-self can never know the arrangement he has made with her night-self. As a knight, Hazel finds herself at odds with the king when the monster gets loose in Fairfold, as the monster is the horned boy's sister and the king's daughter.

In the midst of the fantasy, Black composes a tale written specifically for current-day audiences, as she loads the text with contemporary pop culture references, from *Star Trek* to *Mad Men* and *Doctor Who* and so on. References to real establishments like McDonald's and bands like Bad Brains and Nick Drake abound in this novel. Perhaps Black chooses to use references to existing entities in an attempt to ground the fantastic against the realities of contemporary American society. Thus, the reader is grounded in the *when* of the story, but not necessarily the *where*, which Black sets out to create for the reader. While that choice may seem ironic in that the fantastic could perform the opposite function on the existing references and make them seem unsettling given the fairy tale setting, I believe the references succeed in grounding the text because Black is clearly writing for a present-day audience. Her intent is to reach readers *now* by filtering in popular icons, television shows, and movies with which young readers are likely familiar.

While utilizing topical references may seem unpopular in some literary circles, in David Foster Wallace's 1993 essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," Wallace notes, "The use of 'low' references in today's literary fiction...is meant...most important, these days, to be just plain realistic" (166-7). Although Wallace is primarily discussing postmodern literature

and the melding of "high" and "low" culture in fiction, his essay helps explain why writers who do not necessarily wish to comment on their own culture might want to use popular references in their novels. Even if a writer wishes to compose a "timeless" novel, that novel may not remain timeless for a myriad of reasons, least of which involves popular references.

In Chuck Klosterman's 2016 study *But What If We're Wrong*, Klosterman notes that values our current culture considers all-important and pervasive of humanity may one day turn out to be artifacts of another time. The worries and conflicts fiction writers work out in their plots may seem provincial and unimportant to future audiences. In an interview Klosterman conducts with George Saunders, Saunders phrases the issue in this way: "You read a 'good' story from the 1930s and find that somehow the world has passed it by. Its inner workings and emphases are somehow misshapen. It's answering questions in its tone and form that we are no longer asking.... most of us are so habituated to the current moment that what we do will fade and lose its power and just be an historical relic, if that" (22). Thus, no matter how an author might use references, the issues and themes that concern the writer may no longer be relevant over time for any number of reasons. Black's use of references, then, seems well-informed, as she writes for an audience which is possibly more influenced by cultural trends than any other demographic in the United States. Because of teenagers' interests in the ever-changing *now*, different strategies of literary engagement will appeal to them.

As Joan Aiken notes, "adolescents, though they seem so hard-headed and canny, are, under their surface maturity, still...easy to influence: witness their wholesale, sheep-like adherence to trends, however bizarre" (74). Teenage readers respond to popular references in a way that adult readers may not; one look at stores and clothes popular with teenagers today can

affirm Aiken's belief and Black's technique in grabbing her readers. In the news article "Here's where teens are shopping as old favorite stores go extinct," fashion blogger Evita Nuh notes that brands that sell best rely on celebrities to increase the value and status of their clothes. Brands like Forever 21, H&M, and Nike sell remarkably well among younger shoppers, as the brands tout either fashions that celebrities wear or fashions that are designed with popular celebrities' style choices in mind.

Given these strategies for engaging a younger audience, I too opted to use popular references in *Throwaways*. I hold no illusion that my novel will be considered timeless, especially given the glut of literary material currently in the young adult marketplace, but I wanted to reach younger readers in ways they might respond. This strategy meant I alluded to fashions and bands and television shows in which younger readers might be interested. Using references to currently fashionable Doc Martens boots and skinny jeans style to Susie's off-brand T-shirt bearing an animal screen print (the lack of brand name signifies her lack of wealth) and references to Harry Potter's forehead scar, the T.A.R.D.I.S. in *Doctor Who* and the industrial-electronic band Skinny Puppy, I wove in references to trends teenagers will understand and, hopefully, to which they will respond. Since the novel is clearly set in a time in which cell phones are the predominant form of communication and updated technologies in the future will no doubt unseat the popularity of cell phone use, it makes sense to layer the setting of the novel with other aspects of contemporary culture. That Black has penned several novels laden with popular references signals that although she may risk relegating her work to a specific time, she desires to do so in order to reach her contemporary audience, and it is a desire I share.

Jandy Nelson's 2014 Michael L. Printz Award-winning novel, *I'll Give You the Sun* details the relationship between another set of siblings: fraternal twins Noah and Jude. Both are artists who endure the tragic loss of their mother at the age of fourteen. The novel moves between Noah and Jude's viewpoints, telling Noah's story starting at the age of thirteen and Jude's story at the age of sixteen. Nelson weaves a story bursting with emotion as the characters, wounded by their situations, appear open and honest, flaws and all. With details like "Her face slides off her face—no one can keep their faces on today—and the one underneath is desperate" (291), Nelson renders the emotional turmoil of teenagers who are dealing with what seems like insurmountable stress with a nakedness that on its face appears pure and unfiltered. Page after page, the reader takes in Jude and Noah's shared trauma of losing their mother.

The plot of the novel proceeds mainly by coincidence. One could argue that the plot only appears as a coincidence plot because of who the characters are—the main characters, Noah and Jude, and their mother, along with Jude's mentor, Guillermo Garcia, are all involved in the world of art and live in the same area of San Francisco, and so it would follow that they would all become entangled together. When Noah and Jude lose their mother to a car accident, the accident is set off by a series of events in which Noah's mother discovers he is gay and realizes she must follow her heart like her son and divorce her husband to marry the artist Guillermo. She leaves her house during a rainstorm to tell her husband she wants a divorce, and during that journey she dies. That event is not the coincidence; the coincidence stems from Jude asking Guillermo to be her mentor, although neither of them know the other's relationship to Jude's mother.

This revelation comes in the final chapter, which Nelson titles, perhaps self-consciously, "The History of Luck," in which the characters address the circumstances that pushed them all

together. After Jude discovers her mother's connection to Guillermo and finds that she still feels a natural connection to him as a father figure, Guillermo speculates that her mother pushed them together somehow. Jude narrates, "Because who knows? Who knows anything? Who knows who's pulling the strings? Or what is? Or how? Who knows if destiny is just how you tell yourself the story of your life?" (368). In a way, Nelson uses this passage to answer potential critiques regarding coincidence; by positioning one of her main characters into this epiphany, she successfully renders the coincidence without destroying the readers' suspension of disbelief.

Literary critic Hilary P. Dannenberg notes that the coincidence plot is "widely prevalent in both narrative fiction...and drama" (400) and defines it as follows: "*the paths of estranged relatives (characters with a biological connection) intersect in the space and time of the narrative world, in apparently random and remarkable circumstances, and through no causal intent of the characters involved.* In the coincidence plot, narrative space and time are subject to remarkable conjunctions...they are radically manipulated by the author" (399-400). Dannenberg argues that the plot is ubiquitous throughout fiction; after surveying the varying definitions of coincidence as it has been studied in literature, she points to the scientific definition of coincidence: "*coincidence is a constellation of two or more apparently random events in space and time with an uncanny or striking connection*" (406). She notes that the fundamental feature she identifies as the "kinship reunion" is the uncanny feature but notes other links aside from biological connections can feature as the uncanny element. Given these distinctions, it would be fair to identify Nelson's novel as using a coincidence plot *with* a kinship reunion given the relationship Jude would have had with Guillermo had her mother not perished.

In *Throwaways*, too, I utilize a coincidence plot in which a pair of cousins both use the Moss Castle as a magical place that can help solve their problems, although my structure at times threatened to fall into contrivance. Although my novel involves Susie and Reg both dealing with individual crises, neither confides to the other what has happened. In an earlier draft of the novel, I tried to save their dual revelations until later in the book, but the weighted structure caused the scene to damage the reader's suspension of disbelief and to destroy the possibility the reader would engage with the novel as a whole. Instead, I chose to incorporate far stronger hints of Reg's illness earlier and to reveal the situation to Susie earlier in the novel. That she and Reg undergo turmoil at the same time turned out to be a difficult coincidence to juggle, but Thanos brings them to the castle because they, as youngsters, buried notes in the woods that he read, which enabled Thanos to form a bond with them. Without Thanos's understanding of who the two teens are, they would not be saved, but the timing of their crises still appeared askew. The only way to avoid vast machinations of manipulation lay in unfolding their crises apart from one another; when I changed this in the final draft, it was easier to reveal that Thanos had tapped into their lives in order to find a way to help them when they needed it most. Ultimately, the coincidence plot may perform better with teenage audiences, since—if the writer can balance character development and tone appropriately—such a novel can build a dramatic structure that keeps readers engaged with one of the most powerful elements that appeals to their age group: emotion.

Throughout the writing of *Throwaways*, I frequently revisited my understanding of the category by evaluating novels written for young adults. In examining the history and context of the field and studying the varying worries and conflicts contemporary young adult authors

rendered for their audiences, I discovered that my plot choices, while tragic and definitely dramatic, were in keeping with current trends as were my decisions to use popular references and attempts at keeping character at the forefront despite a reliance on a fantastic setting upon which the plot and characters relied.

CHAPTER 3

FANTASY, MAGICAL REALISM, AND FAIRY TALE: CATEGORY AND CONTEXT

In Brian Attebery's essay, "Fantasy as Mode, Genre, Formula," he argues that fantasy "makes use of both the fantastic mode, to produce the impossibilities, and the mimetic, to reproduce the familiar" in order to generate "wonder," which he defines as "an awareness of and a pattern for meaningfulness" (16-7); elsewhere, in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, John Clute and John Grant borrow from George Macdonald to define fantasy literature as a structure that contains "a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it" and tells its own self-coherent narrative and obeys its own laws; in other words, fantasy at its heart articulates "an internally coherent impossible world in which that tale *is* possible" (338). According to Clute and Grant, a fantasy tale, then, contains an internal logic that the story obeys. Once it refuses to obey these laws, it becomes unstable as a work of fiction. As J.R.R. Tolkien notes in "On Fairy-Stories," "Fantasy is a rational not an irrational activity" (139). *Throwaways* is composed to fit this model.

Lucie Armitt notes in *Theorising the Fantastic* that "fantasy...is...constantly overflowing the very norms it adopts, always looking, not so much for escapism but certainly to escape the constraints that critics...inevitably impose on it...the fact that the fantasy concerns itself with the world of the 'beyond'...should immediately alert us to the attendant difficulties it has with coping with limits and limitations" (qtd. in Zipes 4). By virtue of addressing and exploring the "impossible," then, fantasy stretches, subverts, and explores margins that stretch at realities in the book and in the reader's mind. To Clute and Grant, fantasy is always a story, but it too can be experimental and occasionally violate and explore conventions in structure. Clute and Grant

suggest that "A fantasy text may be described as the story of an earned passage from bondage—via a central recognition of what has been revealed and of what is about to happen, and which may involve a profound metamorphosis of protagonist or world (or both)—into the eucatastrophe," to borrow a word coined by J.R.R. Tolkien, "where marriages may occur, just governance fertilize the barren land, and there is a healing" (338); but that does not mean that a fantasy tale *must* follow these conventions.

In Tzvetan Todorov's groundbreaking work *The Fantastic*, he identifies the fantastic as follows: "In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know...there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world...the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty" over whether the person experiencing the phenomenon "is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination..." or whether "the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us" (25). This last possibility Todorov labels as "the marvelous," which may well serve as another definition for the category of fantasy under another critic's view of fantasy literature; indeed, one can use Todorov's definition of the fantastic as a strategy in a literary work rather than as a category, or "genre,"² as he also terms it.

Farah Mendlesohn notes in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* that "the debate over definition is now long-standing, and a consensus has emerged, accepting as a viable 'fuzzy set,'" a phrase she borrows from Brian Attebery in order to describe "a range of critical definitions of fantasy...it is

² In literary terms, "genre" designates specific literary forms, three-to-five in number, depending: Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, then Scripts, or a division between play scripts written for the stage and screenplays and teleplays written for film. In contemporary publishing, though, the term has come to be applied to what are more properly called "categories" within genres. Young adult fiction is properly a "category," not a "genre," and the same would hold true for categories such as "Crime Fiction," "Mysteries," "Science Fiction," etc. Many critics and commentators on literature have adopted the habit of using "genre" as a synonym for "category."

much more likely [scholars] will pick and choose among these and other 'definers' of the field according to the area of fantasy fiction, or the ideological filter, in which they are interested" (xiii). Competing definitions challenge how we interpret the category of fantasy; Attebery uses the term "genre" to refer to a type of category in order to gain a broader understanding of fantasy, distinguishing between formula—a rather constrictive template, a "commercial product"—and mode, a wide-ranging arena, "a vast subject, taking in all literary manifestations of the imagination's possibility to soar above the merely possible" (2). Ultimately, these competing views and explanations of fantasy complicate the lens from which we might view *Throwaways*, as the way we understand it as a work of fantasy depends on the definition we use.

My concern, though, is not to explore what fantasy *is*, but rather to determine how *Throwaways* fits within that category and whether it defies or meets expectations. Instead of seeking a prescriptive answer for how the novel might match a formula, I raise questions regarding necessity. *Why* did I need to write the novel as fantasy at all? What about the plot, characters, and setting necessitated its fantastic elements? What would the novel resemble were we to strip away the fantastic elements?

We first need to examine what the plot might resemble if the novel were to take place in a solely mimetic setting. Without the fantastic elements, *Throwaways* would boil down to a text about a teenager struggling over her mother's death, probably living on the streets, refusing to go to the authorities in fear they will accuse her, and perhaps about to grapple with the very real death of her cousin. She wants more than anything to leave her small town, but the trauma of any of these events would be enough to paralyze her. The introduction of the fantastic element—the Moss Castle—essentially arrests some of this trauma and gives Susie another chance at life

rather than relegating the novel to the sometimes-bleak category of the young adult problem novel. Here, the fantasy offers an alternative solution and suggests that Susie need not choose between an either/or set of options of letting her life stop by either submitting to the authorities or running away; instead, she can use the castle's powers to help others in need in the same way Thanos has helped her. That her father posed as a role model who gave his life to help others implies that she has been seeking an alternative to the downtrodden nature of her own existence, although initially she appears unaware of this desire. Additionally, the lens of fantasy helped me use the ecological cycle of the forest to suggest that not every ending in life need be considered tragic or, truly, even the end at all. Ultimately, *Throwaways* appears as a mix of a problem novel with its issues complicated and interrupted by the introduction of a non-mimetic reality—the fantastic. Suddenly, different rules are in play for Susie, although she does not initially understand what they are or how they operate.

Similar to *City of Bones*, the first novel in Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* series, *Throwaways* begins without the main character knowing there is another layer of reality at work in her world; to that extent, the novel plays off mimetic reality to introduce to the protagonist a jarring non-mimetic realm that operates according to its own laws and principles. Occasionally, the learning curve in such an introduction is steep. At risk for Susie in this new world is her sense of self, possibly her sanity, and a new dilemma—to hide in a realm and functionally arrest her seemingly bleak future or to face her problems head-on by reporting to the authorities. More than once Thanos and the castle offer her what initially appears to be the easy way out, but she refuses to accept anything offered to her at surface value, even when her mother appears from beyond the grave.

In *Throwaways*, the fantastic is hinted at in Chapter One with the mystery of the Moss Castle and in Chapter Two when Susie remembers a hallucination she once had, but it is not fully introduced and presented to the reader as a valid layer of existence until Chapter Six, nearly a quarter of the way into the novel. From the start of the novel, Susie's world seems precarious, but her experience seems based in mimetic reality; therefore, based on the established order of the story, the reader may expect Susie to be unstable and untrustworthy because of her experience of trauma. Because of the use of the third-person narrator, which moves from Susie to a wider lens in invoking the point-of-view of Thano and the castle, when the fantastic does appear, it is presented as believable. Several other characters interact and seem to thrive with the opportunities the castle seems to offer, so when the reader is fully introduced to the castle, it is believable and expected because of the previous hints at magic. To Susie, who must fully immerse herself into and fully experience this new layer of reality, it is jarring and disruptive.

My decision to write using what first appeared as a mimetic world and then to introduce a non-mimetic reality stems from my influences, including L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* series, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia series—specifically *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*—and much of the work of fantasy genre-bending writer Graham Joyce, including his novel *Some Kind of Fairy Tale*. The latter two tales operate not only as portal and intrusion fantasies, respectively, but also as time fantasies. In each of the works above, the fantastic element is not immediately apparent in the world, although the reader, journeying with the protagonist, quickly discovers another world exists beneath the reality the main character believes is true.

In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, which Brian Attebery deems the "first coherent American fantasy world" (*Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* 85), Baum noted in his introduction that he wanted to dispense with morality stories common in fairy tales and write to invoke wonder in children. In lieu of intentionally offering children life lessons, Baum transplants Dorothy from Kansas to Oz and sends her on a series of quests to return home. As Attebery notes, Dorothy somewhat single-mindedly stays wedded to her goal, never straying from the idea of returning home to Kansas. When the Wizard cannot fulfill Dorothy's desire, Attebery notes "we get something not unknown in fairy tales: the hero sets out once again in search of the still elusive goal" (93). Thus, the structure of the novel relies upon adventure after adventure for Dorothy to secure her external goal of returning home and to help her companions secure their goals.

Of course, this external circumstance reveals something of Dorothy's internal goal as well. To return home, for Dorothy, means that she reunites with her only family and resettles back into a familiar world, potentially with the knowledge of how to improve their lives. At several points, Baum notes Dorothy's alienation in Oz: "She felt lonely among all these strange people" (16). She meets companions along the way, of course, which quells some of the loneliness, but it does not extinguish her own worry about her family, as she says, "Aunt Em will surely think something dreadful has happened to me, and that will make her put on mourning; and unless the crops are better this year than they were last I am sure Uncle Henry can't afford it" (213). Thus, while Kansas on its surface is rendered as "gray" in contrast to Oz, for Dorothy life is fuller when she rejoins her family. In *Throwaways*, Susie's external goal is to avoid arrest and to escape Garnet Falls while her internal goal is to find peace and satisfaction with who she is

and to take charge and control of her destiny while belonging to a community. This internal goal informs the decision she makes to leave the castle and turn herself in to the police, which ultimately helps her fulfill her external goal of eventually leaving Garnet Falls.

Attebery suggests that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* follows the classic fairy tale morphology defined by Vladimir Propp: "a series of events...beginning with an opening problem—'one of the members of a family absents himself from home'—and proceeding through interdiction, violation of interdiction, lack, testing of the hero, receipt of a Magical Agent...to liquidation of the lack, punishment of the villain, and the hero's marriage or ascent to the throne" (13). While Attebery notes these events appear in a specific order, the tale may skip points and may begin "at any of several points along the way" (13). That Dorothy comes to Oz by virtue of a cyclone effectively means she is transported through a portal into a magical world that Attebery claims is potentially "another America with its potential fulfilled" as it stands in sharp contrast to Dorothy's Kansas (87). Attebery notes that Dorothy's "lack" is the fact that she is no longer in Kansas, and so the fairy tale kicks Dorothy's need to return into operation. Dorothy returns home, which is the "liquidation of the lack," and tells Aunt Em that she has been in Oz, thereby completing the tale. The decision to end the novel in this way, precluding Aunt Em from asking what Oz is, or from questioning Dorothy's mental faculties, suggests that Baum truly meant he expected the children who read the novel to come away with a sense of wonder rather than a "lesson." The inner and outer goals of the character may be fulfilled, but these lend themselves to the completion of the narrative rather than a didactic message.

That Dorothy returns to her family, as Attebery notes, completes the fairy tale cycle (93), but that her family plays no true part in reconciling Dorothy's journey implies Baum intended for

his readers to complete their literary journey with a somewhat uncritical view of Dorothy's journey to a fabulous, magical land. Were we to take *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* on its own and ignore the sequels the book spawned, we might even wonder if a portal actually does exist to deliver one to Oz, given that the entrance and exit from the world seems fairly arbitrary; one must travel over or under a desert or ostensibly through the air to reach Oz, but beyond that, Baum offers the reader no other explanation. Her Silver Shoes, which ostensibly return her home, fall off during her journey, thus precluding a return to Oz (as far as that novel is concerned); but the logic here falls apart—one wonders how, if she lost the shoes, can she possibly return home at all? Clearly, Baum left open-ended questions in this novel because his intention was not to create a narrative that operates fully on its own internal logic, as so many critics of fantasy suggest is a necessary quality of the fantasy novel, but to provide an entertaining diversion for children.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll too circumvents questioning of the fantastic by appending the frame of a dream to the tale. Tolkien suggests that readers can "ignore the frame" of *Alice* without feeling manipulated because it is rendered successfully as an amusing tale (117), but it effectively closes off the non-mimetic surroundings of the tale so that the reader understands that what transpires in the novel is not only impossible but that, by the end of the novel, the only kind of logic at work in this novel is that of the dream mind, which does not operate according to rational logic. At the beginning, Carroll offers the reader no understanding that this is a dream, as he opens with Alice hearing the rabbit exclaim, "'Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I shall be too late!' (when she thought it over afterward it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a*

watch out of its waistcoat pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet" (2). The element of magic leaks through the portal of the rabbit hole, which Alice herself then escapes into. By the end of the novel, in a climactic scene wherein Alice confronts the Red Queen, Carroll disturbs the action by translating a pack of cards attacking her into a pile of dead leaves "that had fluttered down from the trees onto her face. 'Wake up, Alice dear!' said her sister. 'Why, what a long sleep you've had!'" (133). Afterwards, Alice's sister dreams, and in that dream, she revisits Alice's adventures and considers the details of this dream as a tale to inspire her future children. By completing the novel with Alice's sister's dream, Carroll does not entirely close off the sense of wonder, as the sister expresses wonder at Alice's story.

By framing *Alice* in this way, Carroll violates some aspects of what critics suggest are principles of successful fantasy—that the impossible world follows its own logic and rules. *Alice* inspires wonder in its own general use of absurdities and strangeness, but this book seems like an outlier in the fantasy category in as much as it pushes boundaries and stretches its own limitations with the dream frame. I argue that in fantasy stories, although the reader recognizes the non-mimetic world in the fantasy as impossible, the fantasy can be so well-rendered with its own logic that the reader's sense of wonder comes from the fact that they *believe* this impossible world could really exist somehow, even if they rationally understand the tale is *impossible* in their own reality. Given the framing device of *Alice*, then, I would say it radically departs from that specific sense of wonder, although Carroll tries to circumvent this departure with the final scene featuring Alice's sister. In this, the novel's influence over my own writing is not in the closing off the believability of the story, but through the overall strangeness that tests limitations and violates boundaries while still creating a satisfying tale for readers. In *Throwaways*, though,

I strive to provide the reader a sense of logic and order throughout so they continue to journey along with my characters without feeling lost.

One major difference between my novel and those mentioned above stems from the location of the magic. In the novels above, with the exception of *Some Kind of Fairy Tale*, the majority of the fantastic is located in an *other* place, whether the characters access it through a portal or a dream. In *Throwaways*, the fantastic occurs in the woods on the edge of the town of Garnet Falls, a location John Clute and John Grant term a "borderlands," where the woods "serves as a marker, resting place, or toll-gate between two differing kinds of reality" (128). The characters in *Throwaways* may venture into the Moss Castle and come back, but unlike the novels above, they do not move through a portal to visit the castle. It exists in their reality, relatively unquestioned and accepted as strange and impenetrable until it opens its walls to a chosen few. Clute and Grant would term this a "crosshatch tale," in which the thresholds between the primary world and the secondary world are "sharply demarcated...though contiguities may exist, there will be little intermixing of realities between worlds" (237). The fantastic setting is embedded on the edge of the town; although the castle appears foreboding to some, it does not openly reveal its magic to everyone. Isolated in the borderland area, the magic is contained within the woods and the castle, and does not leak out of it until characters connect with the magic system and extend it. The castle itself is a kind of polder, "an active microcosm, armed against the potential wrongness that surrounds it," in which "some significant figure within the tale almost certainly comprehends and has acted upon...the need to maintain" boundaries from the surrounding world (Clute and Grant 772). At various times, Thano cloaks the castle from prying eyes and chooses only to open its doors for those he feels should

experience the wonder and opportunities the castle offers. He rarely ventures from the castle or the woods himself, choosing only once in the story to do so in order to find Susie and bring her to what he considers as the safety of the castle.

For the majority of those living in Garnet Falls, the magic remains hidden. This circumstance leads me to categorize *Throwaways* as a fantastic novel that utilizes specific strategies Farah Mendlesohn categories as belonging to a sub-category of fantasy as "intrusion fantasy," one of four "fuzzy sets" that comprise "the way in which a text becomes fantasy, or alternatively, the way the fantastic enters the text and the reader's relationship to this" (xiv). The other three categories she identifies are the portal-quest, a fantasy in which "a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place" where, "crucially, the fantastic is *on the other side* and does not leak" (1-2) (many of the novels mentioned above fall into this category); immersive, "a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world" totally separate from the reader's mimetic reality (59); and liminal, a subcategory constructed on "epistemological hesitation," which "*estranges the reader from the fantastic as seen and described the by the protagonist*," most often seen in slipstream fiction (182-3). Mendlesohn organizes each of these fantasy subcategories by "the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world" (xiv).

In intrusion fantasy, as in the portal-quest fantasy, "there is a clear line between the constructed 'normality' and the intrusion" of the fantastic. In the intrusion fantasy,

Fantasy and 'reality' are often kept strictly demarcated...Because the base level is the normal world, intrusion fantasies maintain stylistic realism and rely heavily on explanation. Because the drive of intrusion fantasy is to be investigated and made

transparent, description is intense, and it is assumed that we, the readers, are engaged with the ignorance of the point-of-view character, usually the protagonist. One consequence of this ignorance is that the language reflects constant amazement. Unlike the portal fantasy, which is otherwise strongly resembled, the protagonists and the reader are never expected to become accustomed to the fantastic. (xxii)

Mendlesohn distills this definition further, explaining that it is the fantastic that intrudes on the status quo, and the novel only ends once the fantastic is sent back or the protagonist learns to use its power: "The trajectory of the intrusion fantasy is straightforward: the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled" (115). Elsewhere, Mendlesohn argues that "the form appears to depend both on the naïveté of the protagonist and her awareness of the permeability of the world—a distrust of what is known in favor of what is sensed" (115).

In some ways we can view the intrusion fantasy as similar to magical realism as defined by Wendy B. Faris; a magical realism text relies upon "an 'irreducible element' of magic," its "descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world," "the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events—and hence experiences some unsettling doubts," "the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds," and "[questions] received ideas about time, space, and identity" (167-73). While the irreducible element of magic is obviously present in fantasy and magical realism, Faris notes that the presence of a mimetic world distinguishes much magical realism from fantasy; but if we are to accept the basic tenets of portal-quest and intrusion fantasy, that it disrupts the protagonist's sense of reality, then the presence of the phenomenal world actually helps create these subcategories of fantasy.

The third tenet of Faris's description may serve to distinguish magical realism from intrusion fantasy; the question for Faris is how the reader might interpret the element of magic in the text. Is it allegory or literal? Is it really happening or should we distrust the text? In intrusion fantasy, as Mendlesohn notes, the text focuses on explanations to keep the reader grounded and settled in the text. The intrusion fantasy, while jarring and disruptive, intends to keep the reader engaged and trusting of the events in the text, with the expectation that the magic will eventually recede from the world or, at the very least, depart from the protagonist's life. Even so, if the reader identifies with the confusion of the protagonist, we should expect the reader might share the protagonist's hesitation regarding the magical element in an intrusion fantasy. The intrusion works to disrupt reality for the protagonist, so it follows that it may also disrupt it for the reader.

Regarding Faris's last tenet, because she argues the magical realism text "allows...sacred spaces to leak their magical narrative waters over the rest of the text and the world it describes" and that "Magical realism reorients not only our habits of time and space, but our sense of identity as well" (174), the borders between intrusion fantasy and magical realism are not so clear. In magical realism, magic, in using the real as the base from which to establish itself, mingles what is and what is not (what the protagonists once considered impossible) and challenges the ways in which characters interact with and violate the established order—be it time, space, or self. Clute and Grant argue a slightly different definition of magical realism than does Faris, suggesting that it "is a way of telling the story of reality" in that "reality is the frame within with the narration...proceeds" even if it "subjects its various subjects to manipulations that make the fictional seem true" (618-9). In this respect, I suggest that intrusion fantasy can also challenge these systems, but it need not always. Here we can refer to Attebery's use of fuzzy

sets to suggest that magical realism and intrusion fantasy mingle together, sharing certain devices. In Mendlesohn's evaluations of certain subsets of fantasy, she may very well define magical realism texts as fantasy, given the blending of these areas and devices. That intrusion fantasy shares some elements of magical realism and vice versa only seems to reinforce Mendlesohn's belief that the way scholars will define and review fantasy depends on the area they study as well as the "ideological filter" they use.

In this case, we can use Mendlesohn's lens to view *Throwaways*, as I would argue that although the novel uses a classic fairy tale device of framing the narrative as a story, and while it may initially encourage the reader to hesitate about what is real and what is not in her own experiential reality, the difference between what is real and what is not in the novel is clear. *Throwaways* begins as follows: "*In the center of Lincoln Woods...stands a castle, all moss-grown and crumbling ivy-covered walls. No one can remember when it was built...As local legend puts it, whoever steps one foot onto the soft loam of its floors is doomed to live out the rest of his or her life in the castle...But that's just a story...*" (1). Tolkien notes, the phrase "Once upon a time" invokes a sense of "timelessness. That beginning is not poverty-stricken but significant. It produces at a stroke the sense of a great uncharted world of time" (161). Without invoking those four words, I did intend to suggest that the castle is exceedingly old and that it possesses potential that far outreaches the scope of human memory. In that regard, its timelessness exists, and the opening suggests that Susie, the protagonist, will be drawn into the world and timeless nature of the castle, even if she does not remain there at the novel's conclusion. The intrusion, for Susie, occurs at different moments: her dreams are infected by Thanos, and as a young girl, the castle seems to transform from an old, decrepit building to one

that houses a boy on fire, an unsettling and traumatic event she carries with her for years. Elsewhere, Thano leaves the castle in search of Susie, and at the arcade, he entrances her even when she does not understand what he is doing. She acts according to her own needs and priorities, of course, and the decision to go to the castle is fully her own, but the magic from Thano's world intrudes on her own reality at various points.

In the fairy tale, according to Clute and Grant, "the emphasis is on story, particularly the twice-told, both highlighting the timelessness and the continuity of the tale and allowing education from generation to generation" (331). For this reason, as the novel concluded, I decided to end it not with the timeless storytelling frame, but with Susie's experience. The final "frame" of the castle's experience arrives before Susie's final perception of her life, implying that she is in fact the method by which the castle will continue its journey into legend. The penultimate chapter begins with "*In the stories, nobody comes back from the Moss Castle. But in the end it was Thano who could not truly leave*" (269); but the final chapter moves away from attention to "story" and ends with Susie's realization that she is stronger and more capable than she imagined. Her final words, "I'm ready" (273), suggest that she continues the narrative frame of the novel, as she is now joined with Thano and the castle. The reader can interpret references to "story" in multiple ways, including the idea that since the novel concludes with the mimetic setting, the story continues beyond the reader's knowledge.

Although the novel concludes in this manner, it does not suggest that the protagonist and reader are fully assimilated to the magic in the text. As I wrote and structured the novel, I wrote with the intention for the main character, although initially shocked and horrified by the magic, to eventually accept the magic she confronts in the woods, as it allows her to become a hero who

comes to the aid of others in their darkest hours. That Susie accepts the magic does not mean she will become fully *accustomed* to it—the sharing of her mind opens her to wonder, but also to different experiences and emotions, from embarrassment to stimulus shock and so on. She understands how the magic operates, but an understanding of it does not alter her fundamental understanding of herself as a mortal human. Should I write further books set in this world, it may be that Susie eventually becomes like Thano, fully enmeshed in the root system of the castle. This novel does not explore that possibility; for now, the conclusion must be that while Susie is open to the magic at work in her body, it can shock and undermine her subject positioning at times.

The conclusion of *Throwaways* with Susie's overall reaction and forward-thinking mentality raises the issue of how each intrusion fantasy "is 'concluded,'" as Mendlesohn argues that, "However mysterious the ending, there is the sense that there can be no *next*. We are left suspended on the edge of the void. Any *next* would be an anticlimax" (117); Mendlesohn notes that, given the fantasy category's propensity for sequels and series, this issue can be circumvented, but that overwhelmingly novels in this vein "conclude," possibly because of the way the protagonist tends to recognize the fantastic element in a hurried type of revelation, which Mendlesohn notes is "connected to the importance of *escalation*" (116). In the novel, Susie's connection with Thano and the castle's root system allows her to see others like her, but not until she understands how she is connected to Thano. It is her connection to him that allows her to see beyond and to find that there are alternative ways of living her life so that she can be like her father. In *Throwaways*, the forest's root system is the single point of magic in the world, and while it can extend itself, it relies on other beings to do so. The reader does not arrive at this

understanding until the end of the novel; by then, Susie chooses to fulfill her obligation to Mary Beth and to her own future. For now, the magic of the root system recedes from the focus of the narrative in favor of completing Susie's cycle of growth. In this respect, the expectation that there can be "no next" is circumvented in hopes of furthering the exploration of the full potential of the root system's magic in a subsequent novel.

While classifying *Throwaways* as an intrusion fantasy entirely seems a bit of a stretch because of its conclusion (though it may very well be placed there given the turn of the final chapter), Mendelsohn notes that in her definition of these categories there exists room for hybrids, as, of course, these definitions are not prescriptive and contain room for "fuzzy sets." At times *Throwaways* appears as a portal-quest novel, where the magic does not leak; indeed, as the novel concludes, it seems to be sending Susie on a true quest. At others, the appearance of the magic as frightening and unstable seems to fully mirror the intrusion fantasy, so the reader may well call it a hybrid of the portal-quest and intrusion fantasy. Ultimately, the way the "fantastic enters the narrated world" (xiv) in *Throwaways* seems to be in alignment with the intrusion fantasy. Susie is invited from her mimetic world into the fantastic world, which suggests that this is a portal-quest fantasy, but because the "fantastic" also "enters the fictional world" by virtue of Thanos leaving the castle in search of Susie and in effect infecting her dreams of her mother (xiv), it seems fair to dub the novel as employing techniques of intrusion fantasy.

Of course, there exists another type of fantasy novel that *Throwaways* seems to resemble most clearly, although it has less to do with how the fantastic enters the text and more to do with structure of the overall plot: the time fantasy. As Clute and Grant note, "stories in which time is shaped, stopped, saved, speeded up, or travelled through are extremely common in fantasy," and

that "most stories in which time is manipulated are set, at least in part, in this world" (948). Of course, time is one of the major devices I used to develop the plot in *Throwaways*. I also used other fantasy devices, including the use of space—similar to Dianna Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle* series, the castle in *Throwaways* seems to expand and contract, opening itself to the characters in order to reveal bits of themselves and of items they may need—as well as the structure of Propp's fairy tale "morphology" (which, to my mind, is similar enough to Joseph Campbell's formation of the hero's journey that I occasionally use the two patterns of character and plot development somewhat interchangeably). I used the time polder to drive the tension and action forward as well as to explore the ramifications of such time slippage in the mimetic world of Garnet Falls.

The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe and *Some Kind of Fairy Tale* both represent time fantasies. Lewis' novel, while exploring a wardrobe as a portal, also, as Clute and Grant note, showcases a "decades-long visit to the secondary world" which "compresses into moments of Earthly time (and, conversely, an Earth year corresponds to many Narnian centuries" (948). Toward the end of the novel, while still in Narnia, the children Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy "themselves grew and changed as the years passed over them": "Peter became a tall and deep-chested man...Susan grew into a tall and gracious woman...Edmund was a graver and quieter man than Peter...as for Lucy, she was always gay and golden-haired...they lived in great joy and if ever they remembered their life in this world it was only as one remembers a dream" (194-5). After having ruled Narnia for a number of years as adults, they find the lamppost that marked their original passage into Narnia from the wardrobe. Although they do not remember its initial importance, it seems familiar to them, so they follow the path to find their next great adventure.

In doing so, they stumble back through the wardrobe, "and they were no longer Kings and Queens in their hunting array but just Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy in their old clothes. It was the same day and the same hour of the day on which they had all gone into the wardrobe to hide" (196). In effect, their passage back through the wardrobe reverses their aging process and negates any true impact their time in Narnia had on their physical bodies. Thus, the portal manages to not only move them from a magical land but it also reverses the entirety of the effects Narnia-time exacted upon their bodies. While this turn of the novel immensely interested me, the novel does not explore such an impact on the children, as Lewis' tale is essentially complete: the children journey through the wardrobe, fight their battles to save Aslan, rule Narnia, and return to their mimetic world, triumphant.

The intrusion fantasy *Some Kind of Fairy Tale* by Graham Joyce, on the other hand, *does* explore the impact such a rift of time has on fifteen-year-old Tara and her family, after Tara disappears from her home for twenty years. She reappears on Christmas Day seeming not to have aged and without a clear explanation for where she spent those twenty years. In fact, much of the novel addresses the fallout the family and Tara's one-time boyfriend Richie experienced as result of her disappearance along with the reconciliation of her reappearance.

Upon revealing where she was, Tara explains to her brother that, twenty years prior, she awakened something in the Outwoods near their home when she tread upon a luscious growth of bluebells that seemed to drown the rest of the forest. After she does so, Tara notes, "something had started. In my head, something had started. It was like the scent from the bluebells that day had ripped me open like a drug...It was there all the time; but when I tried to look for it, to trap it, it was gone" (40). After her bluebell awakening, Tara meets Hiero, a man in the woods who

seems older than she, although she cannot tell his exact age. He appears to move between youth and agedness depending on the light, as Tara does when she returns home. She tells her brother Peter that she knows she should not have accompanied the man, but that

there are times in life when a door opens and you are offered a glimpse of the light on the water, and you know that if you don't take it, that door slams shut, and maybe forever.

Maybe you fool yourself into thinking that you had a choice at all; maybe you were always going to say yes. Maybe refusing was no more a choice than is holding your breath. You were always going to breathe. You were always going to say yes. (72)

Tara's experience, then, is already cast from the moment she steps upon the bluebells. When she accompanies the man back to his home, he tells her they "pass through with the twilight" (82); after they have made the crossing, though, she discovers that she cannot call home to let her family know she is safe. Hiero tells her the next time she can enter the crossing is in six months (which seems to align with summer and winter solstices). She tells her brother, "So I stayed there with him until the six months were up. And at the first opportunity I came back. That was just before Christmas. And I found that for the rest of you, twenty years had gone by" (87). Tara's journey is essentially one into a fairy realm where time passes along a different trajectory than in her mimetic world.

When she first sees Hiero in her own world, she notes that he was "making his achingly slow way along the bridle path...[his] horse was hardly moving...I almost thought he was riding this white horse in his sleep" (42). Here, Joyce implies that the man Tara meets is of a different time-stream, as his movements do not correspond with those of a normal person in her mimetic world. While explaining her whereabouts twenty years prior, she does not admit to her brother

she had also been pregnant and had undergone an abortion and so may have been experiencing trauma that could affect her state of mind. The question then stands before the reader: should Tara be believed, or is her brother correct in refusing her explanation? In *Ambiguity and Resolution*, Joyce notes about his own work that in his "stories the mundane is the given, with the ever-present possibility of the numinous flaring but briefly...rather than sustaining an aura of magic or enchantment, I might arrange for the numinous to threaten, disappoint, return, promise again, appear in blinding form and then vanish" (20). Joyce frequently toys with the boundaries of the mundane, asking readers to stretch their capacity for belief in order to accept that the fantastic can co-exist with the mundane in the experiential world. In *Some Kind of Fairy Tale*, Joyce does this as well; the reader only comes to truly accept that Tara traveled to a fairy realm and lived in a different time stream for twenty years after she makes a sacrifice to save her ex-boyfriend Richie from a brain tumor Hiero uses to curse him. Richie's tumor miraculously disappears simultaneously along with Tara's second, and final, disappearance into the Outwoods.

Joyce's exploration of time as a fantastic element that affects humans' mundane lives in considerable, damaging ways proved a tremendous influence on how I wanted to use time in my own novel. While I chose not to use the narrative to trace the trajectory of Mary Beth's reappearance, I did want to show how a different time stream could *help* humans as opposed to visit grief upon them. To do so, the characters of Reg, Kit, and Jamie were instrumental in allowing me to illustrate how they could use a magical force in order to thrive when each of them were so close to death.

Remaining behind in a magical world, to some extent, suggests that the character's maturity will remain forever arrested, as is the case in J.M. Barrie's 1904 play *Peter Pan*. The

Darling children resolve to return to their own lives, as does Dorothy in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. By venturing into a magical world, they are exposed to countless wonders, but at the cost of sacrificing their own lives—the people they love, the hopes and dreams they cherish, and so on. On one level, the magical world acts as an allegory for maturity, as in most tales, the characters come out of it accepting their own responsibilities in their mimetic world. In *Some Kind of Fairy Tale*, Tara's lengthy absence has negated her ability to smoothly reassimilate into her old life. When she leaves, the reader understands she does so to save her loved ones even at the heartache of leaving them behind yet again. She must go back to the fairy world and continue a life that does not fully suit her as a mortal. In *Throwaways*, Susie makes the decision to accept the responsibilities of the real world by turning herself in to the police, thereby stepping into a more mature role. In some ways the castle requests that its residents do this, as by leaving Susie is also expanding the castle's and forest's connections with the world and thus increasing the possibility it can grow to understand how to connect humanity to its ecosystem. Thus, the castle could begin to heal a larger portion of the world. Reg's maturity may forever be arrested due to his illness, but Thano, unable to leave, seeks to expand and understand others and thus mature, just as Susie hopes to help those in situations similar to her own.

I also wanted to use time similar to Tolkien's treatment of the Ents in *Lord of the Rings*, as they are essentially a race of people closely aligned with trees and their life spans, so much so that their recognition of time conflicts with the hobbits' perceptions. In a conversation with Pippin and Merry in *The Two Towers*, Treebeard, the main Ent character the reader meets, says, "*Hill*. Yes, that was it. But it is a hasty word for a thing that has stood here ever since this part of the world was shaped" (455), which implies the character's perception and experience of time

drastically differs from the hobbits' and those who named the land formation as such. Treebeard suggests more respect should be applied when naming formations whose presence outlasts remembrance. In my working out the logic of time in the castle *Throwaways*, it followed that since the time flux occurs in the castle, time should somehow be tied to the woods surrounding it. Since trees experience life spans far longer than the average human, I chose their existence as not only a presence and setting in the novel, but as an explanation for the time flux itself.

In "Why Fantasy Matters Too Much," Jack Zipes argues that "It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason...It is through fictive projections of our imaginations based on personal experience that we have sought to grasp, explain, alter, and comment on reality" (2). On a meta-level, in *Throwaways* the introduction of the fantastic into a mimetic setting allows Susie to also make sense of her own world during a time in which her own reality appears to be breaking. The duress of such traumas as hers threatens to damage her both physically and mentally. The introduction of the fantastic, then, offers her an opportunity to find an alternative path in her life, one that will help her grow rather than stunt her as the experiences in her downtrodden, realist life have done thus far. For the reader, the fantastic elements of *Throwaways* will hopefully invoke wonder and a sense that any decision need not be starkly black and white. There exist, in the gradations of our perception of our realistic world, alternative means of living and of achieving our hope and dreams.

CHAPTER 4

OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVES AND ECOLOGICAL THEMES IN *THROWAWAYS*

If one hopes to write a novel successfully, one must think deeply about the work whether one outlines or writes blindly, discovering as he or she proceeds. E.M. Forster may have believed the world of the novel should not bend entirely to a pattern that drives every element in a book (163), but a novel cannot do without resonance, parallels, and juxtapositions. Without patterns, one loses the possibilities of creating remorse because of missed connections, misfires in action, relevance in the world of the novel, and so on. To even approach the creation of these elements, one must think deeply—whether before placing pen to paper for the first time or during the revision process—about the functions of the objects in the world of the novel. All of these objects likely contribute to a sense of richness and texture, but some of them come to mean more, to create a pattern that resembles something about the protagonist, either in mindset or emotional state.

In my published short stories, I have often sought to incorporate T.S. Eliot's conception of the "objective correlative" into my work: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion" (qtd. in "T.S. Eliot" 104). In my story "Double Dutch," I used an umbilical cord to signify the connection a mother and her daughter shared. In my story "Pink Princess Cape," I used a child's cape to signify a mother's trauma at the loss of her child. With *Throwaways*, my strategy for marking emotional patterns was no different, as I used the Medal of Honor to represent the level of sacrifice Susie believes she must make in order to be a truly good person like her father. Further, in my revision, I turned

the Medal of Honor into a "MacGuffin" (a hidden clue, goal, or object of desire) that not only increased the tension in the plot but that also reinforced the emotional significance of the object. Other motifs and patterns appear in *Throwaways* that are directly related to the setting.

In order to find patterns that would relate to the theme of the novel and keep me engaged in the writing process, I started with ideas and then objects of personal interest. Fueled by a love of the woods and an interest in how fairy tales treat them as liminal spaces where magic is more apt to occur than in spaces regularly populated and regulated by humans, I first conceived of a castle created by a forest. The castle, since it came from the natural world, could not be built from the same materials or in the same way as conventional human architecture. I settled, then, on a substance with particular regenerative powers—fungus—and chose moss as the main fixture of the castle's architecture. But the fungus and the trees needed to mean more, both for the underlying themes of the novel to take root (no pun intended) and for the characters to fully experience the setting.

As forests antedate human memory, they inherently contain an amount of mystery. As Charles Watkins notes in *Trees, Woods, and Forests*, "Trees and woods often outlive humans and provide a semblance of order, continuity and security" (10). Watkins also remarks upon the significance that the woods offer us: "Woodland can be benign and provide shelter, warmth, sustenance, fuel and fodder. But it may also be dark, disorientating and threatening and associated with debauchery and death. The landscape of woods and forests is imprinted with ancient patterns of power and desire" (8). Not only do these landscapes offer a certain significance and symbolism for humans, even the knowledge we possess about them can contribute to their mysteries.

In Rachel Carson's seminal 1962 text *Silent Spring*, which details the dangers of human-made chemicals and their impact on the environment, Carson notes, "It took hundreds of millions of years to produce the life that now inhabits the earth—eons of time in which that developing and evolving and diversifying life reached a state of adjustment and balance with its surroundings. The environment, rigorously shaping and directing the life it supported, contained elements that were hostile as well as supporting" (17). Carson notes that a balance between hostile and supportive elements was only obtained through time, and she argues that humankind has disrupted that balance: "Given time—time not in years but in millennia, life adjusts, and a balance has been reached. For time is the essential ingredient; but in the modern world there is no time. The rapidity of change and the speed with which new situations are created follow the impetuous and heedless pace of man rather than the deliberate pace of nature" (17). Thus, humankind's shorter life spans and corresponding urgency of actions that induce rapid change are set in radical juxtaposition to the somewhat plodding pace of the natural landscape. I, of course, was able to use the element of time as a fantastic element in the novel; but it also works as its own motif given the stark contrast between Susie's own urgent needs and the castle and the forest's overall intention to heal and connect to the wider root system of the world.

Our distancing from the natural environment, both in terms of habitat and time, further provides ample, ripe material with which a writer can create patterns. Indeed, many fantasies and fairy tales utilize forests as settings in order to convey mystery and wonder for the reader and the protagonists. In *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, Merry notes the following:

"But the Forest *is* queer. Everything in it is very much more alive, more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers.

They watch you...I have only once or twice been in here after dark, and then only near the hedge. I thought all the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language." (108)

In this respect, the trees are so unknowable to Merry as to be the alien other. Today, though, biological studies have revealed much more about the ecosystems of forests as to explain away some of their mysteriousness; ironically enough, for me, the discoveries of this field have only made forests more wondrous and full of creative potential in terms of literary pattern making, particularly with regard to symbiosis and cooperation.

In the Foreword to Peter Wohlleben's *Hidden Life of Trees*, Tim Flannery notes that the world's oldest tree has lived "115 times longer than the average human lifetime. Creatures with such a luxury of time on their hands can afford to take things at a leisurely pace" (vii); because of this massive difference in tree and human life, the relationships they form and the complex needs they have evolved may well be outside the scope of our understanding. If we do propose to understand them, chances are that human conceptions will shift the more time is spent studying the natural lifespan of a single tree.

Even so, scientists now understand that trees thrive when together rather than separate, and to survive, they rely upon each other: "Most individual trees of the same species growing in the same stand are connected to each other through their root systems. It appears that nutrient exchange and helping neighbors in times of need is the rule, and this leads to the conclusion that forests are superorganisms with interconnections much like ant colonies" (Wohlleben 3).

Wohlleben notes that with gaps, erosion occurs more easily, storms can more readily infiltrate the forest, and more harm as a whole comes to the trees, so it is in their best interest to help each

other survive. Elsewhere, he calls attention to fungal connections, what Dr. Suzanne Simard labels as the "wood wide web," in which the fungi "transmit signals from one tree to the next, helping the trees exchange news about insects, drought, and other dangers" (10-1). Thus, one of the ways we can look at forests and woodland life is in its inclination to cooperate and assist where needed, even if the assistance does not immediately prove beneficial to one tree. The overall health of the forest is ultimately at stake, which suggests we might take a different view the next time we walk into the forest and look at trees that appear sick and other trees that seem to be thriving.

I further developed my perspective on symbiosis in *Throwaways* when scientists announced their recent discovery that lichens are formed not from two substances, but from three, radically reconfiguring scientific understandings of symbiosis. The word *symbiosis* came into application in science in 1868 to describe the relationships of fungus with alga in order to create the very lichen that scientists now understand as far more complex since basidiomycete yeast also cooperate with fungus and alga to create lichen (Yong). Instead of a binary "two-organism paradigm" (qtd. in Yong), we now have a far more complex picture of lichen configuration; to my writer's mind, this means we might be far wavier of binary constructions and instead look beyond simplistic mechanisms of thought that give rise to good and evil.

Of course, that line of thinking radically shifts my perspective on conflict in fiction. I did not use lichen in *Throwaways*, but such a scientific finding regarding the nature of cooperation in order to *create* underscores the overall conflict of the book: people are not overall good or overall evil. Certain situations and events affect their mental capacities and ability to cope with trauma, and because of this we must be aware of our own capacities to be helpful when they

need it and of our own capacities for uncritical selfishness that can do more harm than we realize. Susie's mother is obviously a case for someone with a diminished ability to cope, with her post-traumatic stress enacting itself through obsessive-compulsive disorder. Reg's Uncle Jack is obviously an outlier with regard to the good-versus-evil binary, as little is revealed about him beyond his physical abuse of Reg and his loathing of Susie, but even he illustrates the dangers of writing people off as good or bad: he does take Reg to the doctor, even if he angrily refuses to pay for the subsequent medical treatment. For these reasons, when I first conceived of the character of Thano, I wanted to write him as both good and evil, and to make my characters feel unsure how to perceive him; I ultimately softened on Thano's character and conceived of his overall motivations as driven by loneliness rather than any good-bad continuum. Even if he essentially robs someone of their body, he reasons it is only for a short time and that it will make Susie happy. Thus, he should appear flawed and complex rather than as "evil." In some ways, I was inspired to render Thano similarly to the folk figure of the green man, who generally is seen as a symbol of fertility. In much of the book, I attempted to weave Thano's connection to reproduction as directly related to the restoration and rejuvenation of the forest and its relatives as well as the throwaways he harbors.

Influenced again by the complexities of symbiosis, this time specifically with regard to mycelium and fungal networks, I conceived of not only how to frame Thano's character, but how to create the overall construction of the castle and continue the thematic element of restoration for the abandoned teens in this novel.

In mycologist Paul Stamets' *Mycelium Running*, Stamets suggests that "mycelium is the neurological network of nature," as fungus is one of the essential building blocks for all life on

this planet (2). He delineates four categories of mushrooms: saprophytic, parasitic, mycorrhizal, and endophytic (19). Saprophytes "prevent invasion from parasites" and transform "debris" via decomposition; parasites prey upon trees but "nourish other organisms"; mycorrhizae "channel nutrients, expand root zones, and guard against parasites"; and endophytes "repel bacteria, insects, and other fungi" (19-34). As Stamets argues, "mushrooms are forest guardians" (35). By studying the interdependencies between the forest and mycelium, I was able to formulate a working conception of the magic in the book, as mushrooms are not only "naturally immune to their own antifungal secretions and are unaffected by the same secretions from competitors" (47), but they essentially transform death into new life. Not only do they guard against infiltrators in their own forest network, but they also spread out via root systems of trees, helping connect *and heal* entire communities of life. From the ability of endophytes, which are "mutualistic symbionts" (31), to thread between cell walls of an organism *without entering them* to the ability of ectomycorrhizal mycelium to form sheaths around roots and grow beyond them, my entire system of magic revolved around this unique form of life we so rarely see. It evidences itself as it arrests the deaths of Kit, Jamie, and Reg; joins Thano to the root system; and inserts Evelene into Mary Beth's body.

Further, since so much of the work of mycelium happens underground, I placed the mist hut (truly, a formation of spores—of fungal possibility) and the magical word room in the basement of the castle closest to what I conceived of as the largest concentration of magic in the woods. If ectomycorrhizae can extend out from a plant, but endomycorrhizae can invade interior root cells to transport nutrients to different species, I conceived that it too, if boosted by magic, could wind through a human body and transform that body into an *other*, which happens to

Thano when he is abandoned as a baby. Left for dead, he comes one of the mycelium's own. It shares with him nutrients to survive and transforms him into a kind of mycelium that will help continue life by transforming humans into a more cooperative species that can eventually benefit the forest. Rather than separate, it is Thano's mission that humans join and combine their efforts rather than isolate themselves from each other. For him, sharing Mary Beth's body with Susie's mother makes sense, as it is a different kind of symbiosis.

In *Throwaways* I sought to provide a positive view of nature and its ability to teach how others might cooperate even in the midst of tumultuous times. Susie, who is essentially cast aside by her mother, needed to learn that not only should she not feel ashamed about herself and her circumstances but that others share similar situations. By giving voice to those traumas and by searching them out, she can unite with and heal others as she has begun to do with Thano. The nature of cooperation and symbiosis in effect suggests that humans could potentially heal their own wounds by working together. By rendering the setting in *Throwaways* as a forest with its own complex needs working themselves out in parallel to Susie's own, I attempted to draw focus to this thematic and suggest an alternative way for others to view their own positions in the world.

CONCLUSION

Sitting in a deserted folder on my laptop are several abortive attempts at novels, short stories, and even poems. For whatever reason, in these works I reach a certain point before the plot breaks, or I run out of steam, and chuck the manuscript entirely. That could have easily occurred with *Throwaways*.

Before I wrote *Throwaways*, I wrote one other complete novel that sits, unpublished, in my file cabinet. The horror novelist Joe Hill has noted that before his first novel was published, he wrote four other novels that were never published. In "How I Wrote *The Coldest Girl in Cold Town* (the novel)," Holly Black, who has written more than nineteen books for young adults and children, notes, "every book is written a little differently and poses different challenges." I learned through this process that writing without outlining first will require a maddening kind of backtracking that I never want to do again. If I could time travel, I would go back and implore my past self to try using an outline: "Just once, Lauren. Please." As obstinate and unwilling to listen to reason as my past self is, I doubt she would heed my pleas. So, here I have *Throwaways*, a novel that required the kind of toughness Haruki Murakami says his novels require of him: "I have to pound the rock with a chisel and dig out a deep hole before I can locate the source of creativity. To write a novel I have to drive myself hard physically and use a lot of time and effort. Every time I begin a new novel, I have to dredge out another new, deep hole" (43). I suspect this might be the same situation with me. At times, I have sat down to write other works that seemed to unfold gently and easily, the voice fully intact and accessible, wherein I can have an amiable conversation with my character to discover just what it is that character wants and needs, but this most often occurs with short stories. *Throwaways*, on all counts, was different.

Instead of abandoning the project entirely, I took elements I found compelling from my first draft and utilized them as I brainstormed new avenues that might better convey a story about a young girl with abandonment issues and the need for rejuvenation and restoration of hope. I refused to give up on the project because I was convinced I had something to say, even if it was difficult to access the main character's voice and innermost thoughts.

I am a runner, a serious devotee of long-distance running for exercise and sport. I associate my willingness to continue writing with the act of running, which Murakami also remarks upon: "after I finish [the marathon] and some time has passed, I forget all the pain and misery and am already planning how I can run an even better time in the next race" (68). To date, I have run four half-marathons. Some of them have been bracketed with tendinitis injuries that sidelined me for a few years. Even when I feel at the peak of my fitness, there is a point in every half-marathon when I just want to quit, give up, and walk off the course, saying, "Well, I tried." Yet I continue to run, and after the race is over, I hobble up to my family and swear I will never run another one of these races again.

About six months to a year later, I am often back on the half-marathon course, cursing myself and asking why I fell for this trap *again*. But by the end of the race, I pose for what will be the most unflattering picture ever, a sweaty, pink-faced woman with wild eyes, brandishing a novelty medal too heavy for my nutrient-depleted body. "I finished," I say, and later, when I look at the medal on the wall, I remember not the pain, but the joy of the wind in my hair, my feet on the ground, and the other runners who cheer each other on when they see someone foundering. When I look at a completed work, I remember the joy of the connections, the surprise I feel when something so clear has been staring at me for pages and I am only just now discovering its

relationship to the rest of the work. So, I lace up my shoes, I grab my notebook, and I get out there again. To chart another course for another race, another novel. To rediscover that maddening joy.

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PART II

THROWAWAYS

Prologue

In the center of Lincoln Woods, a 170-acre forest on the outskirts of the small town of Garnet Falls, stands a castle, all moss-grown and crumbling ivy-covered walls. No one can remember when it was built, and no one can find records for the building. It is as if the castle appeared one day, long before anyone lived in the town, all on its own, fully built, fully itself.

Today, birch trees sprout from the turrets, coralroot and fireweed stretch from the windows. Moss crowds all the land around it, and covers the ancient fir doors that few would dare enter.

As local legend puts it, whoever steps one foot onto the soft loam of its floors is doomed to live out the rest of his or her life in the castle and the woods surrounding it.

Nobody comes back from the Moss Castle.

But that's just a story about a lonely grove and the broken castle at its center.

Chapter One

That moment winter bites fall. The wind carried ice in its whispers, but Susie Hopkins shrugged it off as she bounded up the cracked concrete steps to her house. It had been an excruciatingly long night at work, three plates of pasta spilled on her work shirt, and Mark, the manager, had finally told her if she didn't get her act together, she wouldn't have a job the next day. Susie checked her scratched-up sky blue sports watch. Nearly midnight. She shrugged her backpack off her shoulder and glanced down at the faded deer T-shirt she'd changed back into after work. It had only been jitters, she knew that. The cross-country championship for State was in two days, and if she kept her head up and didn't do anything stupid, they would totally win. A win like that and her National Merit chances would tie up her hopes to get the hell out of Garnet Falls and far away from Uncle Tony's Pasta Palace and the clinging smell of grease in her hair. Far away from her mom and her ever-lasting lunacy.

Although Susie was exhausted after sprinting two miles home from work, she paused, her hand on the broken screen-door handle. On really windy days, the handle swung back and forth like a pendulum on an old clock. At least, her mom had the sense not to unscrew it the rest of the way and chuck it like she did nearly everything else. Susie scuffed her feet on the concrete. Moss had begun growing on the porch steps again and if she didn't scrub it off in the next couple of days, someone was going to break her neck the next time it rained. It had already taken over their rain gutters, but no way was she getting up there to clean it out. She would have to call her cousin Reg and put in a request to clean them out, but he would probably make her beg and then make her do his physics homework for him. That was Reg—if you wanted a favor these days, physics homework was always part of the deal. Still, he had his good moments. He'd gifted her

the sports watch a year ago when she beat out Mary Beth for team captain. She almost never took it off, especially with her mom around.

She unzipped her backpack and checked its contents. Nothing weird or out-of-the-ordinary there. A faded copy of *The Odyssey* for school she'd stash behind the portable stoop that led up to her bedroom closet as soon as she got the chance. She wished she knew the combination to the safe that her dad had placed under the floorboards in their living room when she was five, but her mom had never told her and didn't have the backup key, either. Her parents had never told her about it—she had watched them when they installed it. It must have been too heavy for her mom to lift out of the ground to throw out, so it just sat beneath the floorboards, unused. So much stuff Susie could cram in there, away from her mom's grabby-throwaway hands. But all she had was her backpack and a few choice locations at school and around Garnet Falls.

The rest of the stuff in Susie's backpack wasn't anything to worry about. The pepper spray she took on her early morning runs. A couple of gum wrappers. She'd tucked her cell phone and tips into her jeans pocket, not that she'd gotten a lot tonight, anyway. And she'd already read the book, so even if mom did find it and throw it out, telling Susie yet again it was something she didn't *need*, Susie would be okay. No failing English this week. She'd eaten at work and didn't bring anything back with her, so her mom couldn't toss any food down the drain. She'd left her brand-new track spikes—"Thank you, Coach Terry," she whispered—and running clothes in her locker at school. Susie was prepped and ready for the nightly possession inquisition.

She sighed. It wouldn't always be like this, and she knew it. Just a few months until she turned eighteen and could move out on her own. And as soon as she graduated, she'd move to a new city, go to college. She might forget to give her mom her new address, something like that. And she'd keep whatever the hell she wanted to keep, not just the essentials. As she put her hand to the handle of the creaky old screen door, something in her chest twisted. Sometimes, she wondered if her mom would snap out of it someday, be the mom she'd been before Susie's dad had died. They could go back to laughing in the kitchen over French toast syrup races, over sticking giant googly eyes on the chicken to surprise her dad after it had come out of the oven. Back to those times her mom had hugged her and smelled fresh, like a forest, not like stale smoke and beer, menthol floating over her breath to mask it. The mom who didn't toss their possessions at every turn. Who didn't needle Susie for having a job and taking care of both of them, who Susie didn't have to race to the mailbox every month so her mom wouldn't give away the dwindling dregs of her dad's pension—all he'd left behind when he died. It was enough to keep the lights on and a roof over their heads, but just barely. And that was only if her mom didn't manage to give it away like she tried every month.

Susie had tried to find out if she would ever qualify to inherit her dad's army pension, but it went to her mom. She'd only get it if her mom died too, an idea that made her shudder. It was bad enough the way things were right now. It only got worse, her mom's disease. Last month Susie had come home to find her track spikes on fire in the backyard—and if it hadn't been for a handful of tips and a very generous gift from Coach Terry, she would've been out the rest of the season. And last week had been even worse. Susie had come home from work to find her mother

in Susie's bedroom, taking a knife to the already crumbling floorboards in her cramped closet, trying to pry them up.

"Mom! Stop! What're you doing?" Susie had yelled, but her mom didn't even pause, not until Susie lurched over to her and grabbed her hand. The knife clattered to the floor.

"Where is it, Susie-Berry? I know you have it." Her mother wiped salt-and-pepper bangs from her eyes and fixed her gaze on Susie. The web of wrinkles beneath her eyes bunched into angry little valleys. Susie carefully picked the knife up from the floor and zipped it into her backpack.

"Where's what, Mom?" She spread her hands out and gestured at her nearly bare closet. A couple of shirts she should have had the sense to leave at school and a pair of jeans. Her shoes—save for the ones on her feet—she never took home anymore. "I don't have anything. Look."

Her mom sighed and picked herself up from the floor. She folded her arms as she loomed over her daughter. She smelled like she'd spent the entire day soaking in beer. "The medal, Berry. I know you have it."

Susie tried to swallow slowly, careful not to give off any clue she knew what her mom was talking about. "I don't have it, Mom. You probably threw it away just like you threw everything else."

Her mom shook her head. "Don't lie to me. I know better than that. Don't think I don't notice you sneaking off with things when you think I'm not looking."

Susie got up so she could meet her mom at eye level and placed both hands on her mom's shoulders. "Really, Mom, I don't know. I haven't seen it in ages." She sighed. "Are you sure you

didn't throw it away?" She caressed her mom's arms, trying to calm her down. "Have you eaten anything today?"

Her mom's shoulders drooped and the tight little line that was her mouth began to roll downward. "I *need* it, Susie. If you have it, you need to give it to me. I won't throw it away. It's going to save *us*. I promise." Her mom didn't mention that the medal had belonged to Susie's dad and was one of the only things he'd left behind when he died. She never mentioned Susie's dad at all. And she didn't mention that she said the same thing about everything else she threw away. Susie had taken the medal around the time her mom had begun the great purging of their belongings and had kept it hidden in her room until her mom had started in on Susie's belongings too. By that time Susie had been in high school and had kept her belongings in her school locker. At least until summer vacation. She'd found a place to stash her things, though—even if her English teacher, Mrs. Johnson, didn't know Susie had been using her shed to stash an old backpack full of her most-prized belongings to keep them safe from her mother's never-ending need to purge them of their possessions.

So Susie didn't let on that she knew where the medal was. It wasn't going to be safe anymore if she did. "You couldn't sell it anyway, you know. It's against the law. Come on, Mom. Let's get you something to eat," had been her response, and she had led her to the kitchen to find a few pieces of raw broccoli in the fridge. That was all they had. She didn't say anything else about the medal, and her mom didn't mention it again.

Susie shook her head and zipped up her backpack and slipped it over her shoulder. Her mom was never going to get better. Her cousin Reg had told her as much over the past five years.

He could probably see it a little more clearly than she could—after all, he was the one who had first helped Susie get food when her mom wouldn't.

"Just apply for a hardship," he always said, and she always told him to do the same thing. Then both of them would glare at the other, knowing that if you showed your brokenness in the open, the pieces of your crappy life would be whispered all over school. All your dysfunctions would hang in the hushed smog that passed for the breath of a thousand gossip-starved teenagers.

Susie made a fist and jerked the screen door open before pushing past the peeling paint on the front door into the hallway and through to the living room. And stopped. Her backpack fell to her feet, its dull thump the only noise in the too, too quiet house.

"Mom. Mom, mom, mom," Susie fell to her knees, her eyes flitting from the still body to the river of red curling across the floor. She rocked on the balls of her feet, shaking. Something roared in her ears, something loud, about how she should have known this was coming, that her mom could only ever end up like this. Red dripped onto the old wood floor, a quiet plink. Her mom's fingers were curled around a pair of shining silver scissors that stood straight up from her stomach, poking out of the butterfly-thin dress she always wore.

"No, Mom, no." Susie touched her mom's fingers and flinched. She wanted to lay her head on her mom's chest, but the once cream-colored dress – the scissors glared through a gaping hole in the middle of it, right over her mom's bellybutton. The dress seemed to have drunk in the color red all night long. Susie circled her trembling fingers around her mom's wrist and tried to feel, to listen, for anything. The only sound was the rushing in her ears, the only sensation was cold and limp and thick. Her mom's skin had always felt soft, but this? Her mom? Not soft. Not

anything. Except lack of. Hardening and blue and absent. Susie laid her head on her mom's chest, not thinking about anything but her mom—gone. The dress felt sticky and wet but Susie didn't raise her head. Skin that wasn't skin anymore—not really—just a covering that had once kept death out. Now it locked it up, tight, rubbery. Susie closed her eyes, relieved by the darkness behind her eyelids.

"Make it stop," she whispered. "Mom, don't go. Mom. Stay with me." But she knew her mom couldn't hear her. Her mom—"What did you do?" Susie choked out, the air going out of her own lungs as she sobbed. The living room seemed to swallow up Susie's sobs, absorbing them like the dress had the blood. "No," Susie cried, but nothing but the broken air she coughed out answered her. She should have come home sooner—after making a mess at work, she'd volunteered to stay and pitch in on the dishes since Jorge was out sick and she wanted to show Mark she wasn't a quitter, that she would always do better. But she shouldn't have stayed. And she shouldn't have taken that short run afterward. She should have gone straight home. No detours. No avoidance. She made herself look around. By the window, their rusted stepstool lay on its side. Their moth-bitten curtains hung, slashed, against the windows, as if her mom had found something else she'd needed to fix, to get rid of. Only, she must've fallen? But her mom lay in the middle of the otherwise empty room, a good ten feet from the window. She must've crawled after she'd fallen. Susie glanced back at the shears. Her mom's knuckles had gone white and blue around them.

She couldn't just leave her like this. Her mom didn't like it when people looked at her. She would hate them looking at her laid out like this. Helpless. Broken. Her body wrong, legs twisted beneath her. Silver sticking from her torso. How embarrassing. How wrong. With a

shaking hand, Susie uncurled her fingers from around her mom's wrist. She bit her lip and pulled the scissors from her stomach. They caught on the drenched crepe dress. Susie swatted the material away, touching the too wet dress and sending the scissors out of her mom's clenched fingers and skittering across the floor. She looked down at her cheap watch—smeared with blood. She turned away just in time and threw up on the floor. When Susie was done, she gripped her knees and made herself turn back to her mom.

"Please, just get it together," she cried to herself, and wanted to laugh—like *that* was possible. Cringing, Susie wiped her tears and snot and spit from her mouth and made herself breathe. In and out. Over and over again. The way they did every race, any time they were angry or upset out on the track or the trails. "You slow down time when you breathe like this," Coach Terry had told them all. It was true. Susie always thought better afterward. But with this—she knew she'd never think better now. Now was a jumble of hiccupped breaths. Now was a stomach-turning metallic smell. Now was never going to be better than Before. Susie curled her fingers in and out as she breathed, trying to get calm. "Next steps, Susie, come on," her brain whirred the way it always did. Make some lists. Move forward. But all she wanted to do was cry.

She knew she should cover her mom—no, not her mom. Cover the body up with something. That was what it was. It was too much, the thought of taking the threadbare blanket from her bed and laying it over her mom. Susie couldn't look at the silent chest, the no-more breath of her mother anymore. She crawled away and huddled in the kitchen, leaning her head against the wall it shared with the living room. Think straight. Next steps. What had her mom done when her dad had died? But he hadn't died with them. He'd been—away. In another country. Afghanistan. Someone had come to their door. So, she couldn't do that. She needed to

call someone. The cops? Yes, dial 9-1-1.

But there was a sudden thought stopped her. No, don't call them. She was *suspicious*. She signed and cashed her mom's checks. She googled her dad's pension after the big meltdown. They'd trace her trail. Her email, her stupid school account. Get her dad's pension and go to college as long as her mom's dead. Legal. Stupid and curious. And the meltdown. Remember the meltdown. Susie bit her lip and smashed her fists against her knees. It had happened last week, the day before her mom had gone looking for the medal in Susie's closet—at school of all places.

Susie had gotten away for a few years without anyone knowing the degree of her mom's craziness, but everyone had a front-row show when her mom had shown up at school for a parent-teacher conference and had gone off on Susie's English teacher, Mrs. Johnson, for giving her kid things—books. Susie had dragged her mom out and tried to apologize to Mrs. Johnson, but her mom had thrown a book and smacked Mrs. Johnson in the forehead. Mrs. Johnson's hand had floated to her forehead, disbelief written on her face. They'd been lucky that Mrs. Johnson hadn't pressed charges, and that she still talked to Susie at all, even though she sometimes gave Susie a lingering look as if she might start in with a series of awkward questions. As if that hadn't been enough, Susie had screamed at her mother in front of the school afterward. She might've yelled words like "wish" and "dead," and "out of my life." And people might've heard. But this was an accident. No one would blame her, she thought. Right?

But her naysaying brain wouldn't stop. She had touched the scissors. She had *pulled* them out. Why would she do that, if she didn't want to be blamed? She had blood all over herself. And her alibi had *holes*. Susie's stomach somersaulted into a new wave of queasiness. What was she supposed to do? Reg. She'd get her cousin. He always knew the answers. She pulled out her

phone and started to text him, but stopped. No. If he came over, she'd only wind up getting both of them in trouble. She couldn't do that to him. She wiped the back of her hand over her eyes and dried her face.

"Get up, get up," her brain commanded. "You can't stay here." She knew it was right. She either left now and pretended she'd never come home, or go to jail. But the scissors. Susie swallowed back a wave of nausea and ran her fingers over her ponytailed head. Slowly, she got back to her feet. Funny, she thought, as she looked down at her sneakers. They once looked so drab and gray, not like the other girls' new shoes with their shiny reflectors and neon shades. The drabness was a comfort now, not shining, not silver. The voice in her brain struck at her again. "Get out of here. They'll think you did it."

She began to cry again and shuffled back into the living room. Looking at the ceiling, looking everywhere except *there*. A pile of fabric lay on the floor against the wall—part of the curtains her mom had surely been trying to slash completely apart. Susie gathered up the cloth and took it over to the scissors. Dangled them between her thumb and index finger. She rubbed the cloth over the handholds, rubbed it over the part she'd been holding. Then she dropped them back on the floor. She placed the cloth back beneath the curtains, trying to make it look as close as possible to the way it had looked before. "I'm so sorry, Mom," she said, not looking at the emptiness that was her mother now. She wouldn't get to run her hand through her mom's salt and pepper hair again. "I would've saved you if I'd known how."

Then she ran down the hall, first to the bathroom where she washed her face and scrubbed at her watch. She snuck a peek in the mirror and blanched at the red blood streaks on her usually tan cheeks. She rubbed at her face, turning it pink and raw looking, and cringed as

the sink went pink with her mom's blood. She rinsed it white again, but wasn't sure she'd ever stop seeing pink. She didn't look remotely close to a natural beauty, she looked savage, the tips of her honey-colored hair soaked in blood. Faucet on, full blast. Hair drenched and blood out. Maybe. She wondered if blood had snaked into the scratches on her watch—but she couldn't just take it off and toss it. Even if it would always remind her of this night. She shook her head and pulled herself back to the present. *Get going.*

Next, her room. She kicked the closet stoop out of the way and stuffed everything there into her backpack. It wasn't nearly full by the time she got done, but she had enough. She tiptoed her way back into the living room, trying to be quiet. Just the thought of making any sound around her mom was too much. Her mom wouldn't ever make a sound again. And even though she couldn't stand the way her mom tossed everything out, Susie had made their life work in her own way. Her locker at school, the tiny space hidden in Mrs. Johnson's shed, the stoop in her own room. She'd been able to save the things that mattered most. But she couldn't save her mom. She couldn't look back down, at the river, at the crepe dress, at the still-curved fingers. Instead, she slung her backpack over her shoulders and slid out the backdoor of the kitchen and took off running into the dark. Where, she didn't know. And it didn't matter. She just needed to get far, far from home.

Susie ran until she couldn't breathe, ran until she was so exhausted she wanted to throw up. Through the dilapidated old neighborhood she and Reg had called home, down through the pruned streets of the Me-Kwa-Long subdivision with its towering evergreens that shielded most homeowners from being spied on by prowlers or prank-happy teens. She had to go back for her

dad's medal. Her old black backpack was stuffed in a little nook in Mrs. J's shed covered with a few of her favorite books. Susie figured if Mrs. Johnson found the books she'd shrug them off, thinking they were her own. English teachers had to love books, right? After all that fighting she'd done with her mom over the medal, she couldn't bear the thought of leaving it behind. She never took it out of its case, too afraid that if she touched it, she would somehow lose it like she'd lost everything else. Whenever she looked at it, the gold star gleamed from its foam bed, light bouncing off its case. Her dad had won it protecting people—it reminded Susie that she should always protect her own family, even now, when it was far too late.

As Susie crept along the strip of grass that led from the front of Mrs. Johnson's house to the backyard, she was grateful it was so dark she could barely see anything, least of all her own shadow. She knew her face was streaked with smears of the mascara she had bothered to put on that day. She wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand. She neared the edge of the house, eyes on her English teacher's garden shed. Just grab the stuff, then go. Just in case someone found her mom right away. Just in case they thought Susie had done it. She felt sick. She couldn't believe she'd just run off and left her mom. But she forced the thought away and focused on what was in front of her. Just a few more feet until she got into that cramped shed. Then she could decide what to do.

But as soon as she stepped into the backyard, a motion-activated light flicked on, bathing Susie in a harsh light. She ducked back into the shadows just as Mrs. Johnson stormed onto the back porch in her bathrobe, shining a heavy-duty flashlight toward the shadowed corners of the yard.

"Whoever's out there, you'd better get going. I've called the cops, and you'd better know I won't spend five seconds thinking about you if I have to shoot you." Mrs. Johnson smacked the flashlight against her palm. Susie jumped at the slap against the quiet night. "I know you're out there. I saw you."

Susie froze, but then her mind kicked back into gear. She tiptoed backward away from the house and sprinted down the sleepy, tree-lined street toward Garnet Falls' rinky-dink downtown. She'd seen a place in the alley out behind Pete's Arcade, down the way from Uncle Tony's Pasta Palace, that looked like she could hunker down and hide without anyone finding her. She definitely wasn't going to Reg's and risk infuriating his Uncle Jack—who was technically her uncle, too, on her dad's side, but he was one of those people it was better to steer clear of than claim as family. And no way was she going to try hiding in the Moss Castle out in Lincoln Woods—she'd heard of kids who did it, but the thought of going in there at night gave her the heebie-jeebies. She remembered the last time Reg had dared her to go in and stash one of the notes they were always leaving to each other, and that had been during daylight.

It had happened years ago. That day, as soon as Susie had rounded the path and headed toward the moss-covered wood door of the castle, she'd begun to shiver. Even with the sun glinting on her shoulders, she'd felt her bones turn cold. She managed a few shaky steps up the bed of moss that led to the castle doors. The words *Take one step, broken you'll get played* through her head, like she'd always known them. The castle's heavy oak doors creaked open on their own. They yawned into the castle, a dark gaping maw behind them. Susie made herself stand up tall and march right up to the entrance, her heart lodged in her throat. As she touched a finger to the door and pushed it the rest of the way open, she saw a boy with his back to her and

thought it was Reg. He had tangled red hair, but he bent forward at an awful angle, clutching himself.

"Reg!" Susie cried, and stepped partway into the castle. Her insides hurt she was so cold. When the boy turned around, Susie saw he was not Reg. He was no one she knew. And then he grinned at her, and his red hair, she saw, was not red hair, but fire, dancing above his head. Susie dropped the note she'd gripped in her hand. The boy laughed.

"I knew you would come for me!" He started for her. Susie jumped and tried to pull her foot back from the entryway, but it stayed glued in place. The boy stopped and cocked his head. "Don't you want to play with me?" he asked, frowning.

Susie stuttered, but nothing came out of her mouth. Anything she wanted to say was lost before she pushed the words from her mouth. The fire licked toward her and she shivered and tried to yank her foot out of her shoe. The boy's face crumpled and his skin turned green.

"It's cold here," said the boy. "And it's so lonely." His bottom lip trembled, and Susie stopped struggling. But then he grinned at her and burst into flame, his skin crackling and smoking before her.

Susie had screamed, her voice lost in the howling wind, but suddenly her foot was free and she tumbled back into the woods and was back on the path, running, as far away from the Moss Castle as she could get.

She'd told Reg about it, but he'd shrugged and told her she was malnourished and that the hallucinations would go away when she started eating more. Eventually, she came to believe him. But even though she'd seen the little boy years ago, her insides still froze up whenever she came close to the Moss Castle. Thankfully, she knew a spot in concrete city where she might curl

up, far away from the freakiness of the woods. When she got to the alley behind Pete's Arcade, the smell of tar and grease clogged her nostrils. No one ever came out back this late, so it was relatively safe, but dirt glommed onto her as if she were some kind of filth magnet, and she knew she'd barely sleep under the piercing orange of the sodium streetlights.

A pile of cardboard boxes blocked a tiny alcove, and Susie burrowed behind them. Just for tonight, she told herself, and settling them back into place, curled up there. After tonight, she'd find a new place to lay low until she decided what to do. If she took off now, she'd lose everything: the scholarships, the race, her future. Should she try to go back to work? How could she act like nothing had happened? And they'd catch her sooner or later. She knew they would. They would take one look at her mom's body and blame Susie; she was sure of it. Maybe she hadn't actually killed her mom, but she hadn't made her get help or whatever someone was supposed to do for a case like her mom's. "You left her there," she whispered in the pale orange glow of the alley. That terrible feeling beat against the bottom of her stomach like a drum.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw her mom. It ate her up. She laid her head back on her lumpy backpack and tried to calm down. Breathe, she thought. All that blood. Breathe. And she'd probably have to skip school to break into Mrs. Johnson's shed when her teacher wasn't home, now that she knew someone had been in her yard.

Susie sat back up and fished around in her backpack, then pulled out the tiny can of pepper spray and a Swiss army knife. At least she'd kept something useful behind the closet stoop in her bedroom. The rest of the stuff was mostly sentimental. A paper about Hamlet and tragic female characters—she'd made a big, fat A plus—and a few pictures of Olympic runners mid-stride that she liked to study before she raced. One shirt. She sighed and pulled her cell

phone out of her pocket. She glanced at the messages. Zilch. Reg would know what to do. Reg always knew what to do. She tried to text him, but she kept stumbling over what to say. She wouldn't ask him to go to her house, so he wouldn't get in trouble. At least, she thought that's how it would go. Should she say "SOS"? "Need HLP. DON'T tlk 2 yr uncle"? "MT ME @ TRK 2morrow. HUGE PROBLEM!!!"? She couldn't decide what to say or even where to tell him to meet her. And the thought of telling him—telling *anybody*—froze her up. But she had to go back to school. She couldn't throw away everything she'd worked for, not like this. Maybe she could pretend nothing had happened. That the last time she saw her mom, everything had been fine. As fine as they had ever been, anyway. Then, after school, she could go home and pretend to find her. Call the cops then. Susie bit her lip. Guilt swam over her, threatening to pull her down and drown her in its undertow.

She sighed and flicked her phone closed. She wasn't going to be texting anybody tonight, not until she'd had some time to think. Besides that, she hadn't talked to or even seen Reg all this week. She'd texted him three times in the past two days and still no response. Where was he? He'd seemed sick and shaky the last time she'd seen him, his fair skin even paler, kind of green, and he'd missed a ton of practices. And it wasn't like him not to text back even if he was out with the flu. She had to hope he'd get better and show up at track practice the next morning. She needed his help, whether their cross-country team won the State 5K race or not. She *would* totally implode if she didn't talk to him, and she had to look like she was just being completely normal to anyone around her. She couldn't do anything weird or people would know she was guilty of something. Maybe she hadn't done the worst thing ever, but it was close to the second worst thing ever. It was too much. And what about the State Meet? Susie slammed her backpack

down and pounded it against the concrete a few times. She wanted to kick something but she just sat there staring at the worn purple bag she'd carried around for years, her breath hot and loud in the quiet night.

She couldn't even focus on the track meet, which if she bombed, would mean she wouldn't get the scholarship that would at least get her onto a college team. From there, she'd thought she might work in physical therapy, like her hero John Vurek. His mother had been sick, and he'd turned to running and it had saved him and helped his mom in the process. He'd gotten noticed when he started doing 100 mile runs—and winning. She knew the same thing could work for her—but she had to work hard and get noticed first. And getting on a college team was one way to get in. She'd handle the rest after she made it that far.

But she was leaving out one major thing—now her mom wasn't ever going to get better. She curled into a ball, knife glued to her hand, and squeezed her eyes tight, trying to shove out the rest of the world. If her mom could see her now. She winced at the prospect. Her mom was gone and home was gone and that was that. And possibly, all her chances of getting out of this Garnet Falls untainted were gone for good. She willed the morning to come quickly.

But it didn't. All night she dreamed of the woods, of nettles that brushed up against her arms and stung, of her mom wearing a wreath of blood as a shroud, of the Moss Castle looming over her. Around her mom's shoulders sat a shawl of moss, that rose as she raised her arms. "You didn't save me, Susie," her mother said, and the green careened away from her mother and toward Susie. Her mother pointed a finger and the bed of moss that curled out of the crumbling turrets floated and slithered around Susie like a python. She tried to run, but the moss suffocated her.

Susie, someone whispered, but she only saw a purple shadow darting in and out of the trees. Above her the fir trees bent, branches swishing what sounded like her name. Susie tried to scream her mother's name, but instead of sound, moss rolled out of her mouth and dropped to the ground, where it began devouring her feet. "You shouldn't have left me, Susie," her mom whispered, turned her back on Susie, and strode back into the castle. Its doors echoed through the forest with a cavernous slam. Susie woke, panting as the last dark whisper of night disappeared from the sky.

Despite the cold snap of fall in the air, she wiped sweat from her forehead. She wished she hadn't done what she did last night. Her heart pounded against her chest and she tried to steady herself with her breath. In and out. Slow down time. She didn't know how anything would get better from now on. And that was life. So she grabbed her backpack and slid out of her hiding place. She had to get to track practice. She had to get on with her life.

Chapter Two

Once upon a time, there was a castle. Some say forest spirits carved it out of tumbled oaks so they could take refuge in the hollows. Some say that they lived and breathed the castle into its own being. But the forest and the castle know a different story. A story of a child and roots and fibers of the earth that could hear his cries, that lifted him up and grew for him his own castle out of firs and bark and clay that listened to and obeyed his need. But the child was lonely and needed companions so the forest could sing.

Green moss grew in the absence of people, and the wind kissed him with hope, but that hope was only but a hint of the future so very far away. No one came. For a long time, the child in the castle drifted to sleep as the red sun kissed the edges of the firs. As the firs bent into the walls, the castle dreamed of leaves that whispered, of ferns that unfurled and sang, of fiddleheads that beckoned the unknown toward the trees. And the child played alone in a dark basement, calling up the deepest roots to gasp at sunlight and to travel beyond him, beyond the castle, out from the forest, into life, into what sparked with humanity beyond the forest's tree-lined borders. But still it could find no one willing to come see the child. No one willing to marvel at his breath.

But one day, when the castle sagged under the heft of its own weight, its bark petrified and dying, the forest changed. The something that changed the forest was still very far away, but the castle and the child could feel it, pressing tendrils into the earth, whispering secrets no one else could hear. And the castle began to glow a soft green glow because it could hear, and it knew that soon, very soon, it could help and be helped.

In the moss-wrapped hollows, the heart of the castle and the child trembled.

Chapter Three

Pink ribbons of cloud laced through the morning sky, like the universe was taunting Susie. Her breath came out in white puffs as she knelt to tighten the laces on her track shoes. She'd never been so grateful as this morning that she'd left her track uniform and shoes in the girls' locker room. The pale flesh of her legs went all goose-bumpy in the cold, but she didn't mind. She kept her head focused on the ground instead of on the pink-tinged sky.

Around the track staff were setting up for the state cross-country championship—as a team of assistants hung it up, the cheery gold-sparkled bunting waved in the dewy morning wind as if it couldn't wait for the next day. Until yesterday, Susie hadn't been able to wait, either. It was going to be her team's moment, and she knew it. But that thought didn't stop the thrum that had laced through her chest the whole night.

Half the squad had already arrived and were warming up across the track, looking like clones in their burgundy race singlets and green track shorts. Glenn, the gangly trainer who wrapped their ankles and doled out ice for their knees and had once bragged to the girls about getting fourth at an Olympic trial—big deal, Susie had wanted to say then, fourth wasn't anything—was out there checking Chelsea Higgins' latest injury. It looked like another sprain. The girl seemed to injure herself every week. Susie didn't understand why she hadn't just quit and tried a different sport. One more stationary, less work on the ankles. Like golf. Coach Terry bent beside Glenn, shaking her head over Chelsea's ankle. All the girls—except Mary Beth Jones, probably, and Susie—thought Glenn was ultra-mega hot, smoldering brown eyes and calves the size of sledgehammers. Susie wasn't impressed, but that was because she'd seen Glenn behind the stands one day taking a selfie of his flexed biceps when he probably thought no one

was looking. Dudes. She shook her head and for a moment wondered if Chelsea had intentionally injured herself to get Glenn's attention. Gross. Susie shook her head.

And, of course, Reg wasn't there—again. Susie chewed her bottom lip and dashed off a text to him. I ND U. She pressed send and tossed her phone into the grass before standing back up and raising her arms over her head. She wondered if she looked different today, if anyone could see her wearing what had happened to her mother like a skin. She didn't think she could shed it like a snake could shed its skin, though. It was burned into her. She felt clammy and her lungs seemed to shrink so she could barely get any air. She shook her head and tried the breathing thing again. "Just get going," she muttered to herself. She tore off around the track.

The wind burned in her ears, but it was the good kind of burn, the kind that whistled and sang and made her forget about everything else around her. Her feet slapped against the ground in a rhythm that never failed to hypnotize her. All she had to do was listen, and then she could run forever. But her mom kept flashing in her head, kept tearing her attention away from the rhythm of her feet. Susie hadn't even covered her—and she knew it was dumb, that dead bodies didn't feel anything, but it all seemed so cold. She shouldn't have left her mom. She was a coward and she was going to pay for this, she knew it.

Susie pumped her legs faster, trying to get her mind off everything else but her pace. She whizzed past Pepper Skagit, who stared straight ahead, face red, jogging unbearably slow.

"You got this, Pepper!" Susie called, trying to act like the normal team captain she had been yesterday morning, and Pepper huffed out a barely audible, "Yeah!"

As Susie rounded the red asphalt track, she tried to ignore Mary Beth along with Katie Hendrix, who stretched lazily in the grass. They called out something about being a teacher's pet,

but she just snorted and stared straight ahead. She tried to think of anything else. How the morning sky made the track look pink, how much spongier the trails felt than the asphalt. How quiet blood was when it dripped away from a body. She had to find Reg. It didn't seem to matter as much if they won State. He was the only one she could tell about her mom. He'd know what to do.

She whipped around the track, her ponytail slapping and stinging her eyes. Mornings like these, she had once daydreamed about getting a scholarship and circling the track at a state school, where nobody would call her poor or ask how her mom was holding up. How she'd go back to her dorm room for a nap before heading off to biology or sociology or whatever. She was going to major in Kinesiology and get a degree in therapy. She'd have a roommate who might give a damn, who might even ask her how track practice had gone. They'd keep the conversations simple, though. Nothing too deep or anything that involved her past. She had planned to be someone new. Not this person who had slept on the street and left her mom dead on the ground. That new person would probably never take shape now. Not after this.

Susie tried to pump her legs faster, to make herself go numb, but she could feel the panic rising inside of her. Nobody had been waiting for her at practice. Nobody knew what had happened at home. Her chest ached. Mary Beth passed her. Then Katie. Both of them laughed. Even though Susie was team captain instead of Mary Beth, the other girl always managed to make her feel smaller somehow. Maybe it was because Mary Beth was so tall, nearly six feet to Susie's five-seven. Or maybe it was because she always seemed to know exactly how to target Susie's weak spots.

"Damn," Susie cursed, but a tightness spread so fast across her chest she didn't try

catching up. Instead, she slowed, hand over her chest. Just don't cry, she thought. Hold it back.

"Pick it up, Hopkins!" Coach Terry barked at Susie from across the track. Coach's short, curly hair danced in a cloud of frizz above her head and her stomach jiggled inside her turquoise wind suit. "What you looking at? You heard me! You can't take that kind of attitude out tomorrow." Susie squelched across the muddy field toward Coach Terry. "What did I just say, Hopkins? You want to win or not?"

Susie nodded. She couldn't believe she was about to bug Coach. But rule number one was to act normal. And this was Susie, totally normal. "Yeah, but, I was wondering. Reg? Have you called him? I haven't seen him."

Coach Terry shook her head. "His uncle called. Walker's out. Sorry, Hopkins, I know it matters to you. But he can't do it, star runner or not."

"Yeah. But Coach. His uncle? I mean, have you even heard from Reg?" Susie's lungs contracted and she suddenly couldn't get her breath. Her head began to throb. She shook her head again and again.

"Drop it, Hopkins. Now get out there. This isn't a joke. You want a ticket out of this town? You know the way." Coach gestured at the track. "This time tomorrow you'll be a star if you'll just forget about Reg. Stop worrying and get going."

"Fine, I'm going!" Susie wiped her brow and got going. As she ran she felt lost. She'd been counting on finding him. For years they ran and put in the work together. But wherever he was, it didn't matter. She was going to have to fix this situation herself. Somehow.

After five sweaty miles on the track, the showers in the girls' locker room were usually

Susie's idea of heaven. Most people at Garnet Falls High wouldn't exactly call a ten-minute freeze-fest in a cramped, mold-packed tile cube a perk, but this morning Susie did. She could still feel the dirt and gravel from the alley embedded in her skin. At least with a shower she could go to class fresh-faced and awake, though her clothes still needed to be washed. Nobody had come around asking questions. Yet.

Although she'd barely got any sleep in the alley, this morning's run had woken her up, and now the freezing shower momentarily whisked last night's misery away. She didn't care where she had to sleep as long as she had this.

"Look at the freak in her natural habitat," a voice suddenly came from the other side of the shower curtain. A pair of gleaming Nikes tapped outside, heels squeaking on the tile.

Susie had just enough time to grab her towel and her undergarments from the stall wall before Mary Beth whipped the shower curtain open.

"Whatcha scared of?" Katie leaned over Mary Beth's shoulder and giggled. Katie wore one of those punk haircuts, the top layer of her hair pulled up in a bun and the bottom layer shaved clean. She'd already changed into a pair of leather Doc Marten's and skinny jeans, topped with a breezy floral top. The flowers looked out of place when Katie sneered—she was such a hanger-on, always doing what Mary Beth did. Susie wondered if she ever meant anything she did. Mary Beth always kept her curly mass of hair in a ponytail, and wore skinny jeans that matched Katie's. Her oversized T-shirt boasted some indie band or another and draped all the way to her knees, like a dress. Today the band was Skinny Puppy.

Susie shivered, her honey-colored hair dripping ice water across her face. "Knock it off. Both of you." She tightened her grip on the towel.

"Whatcha gonna wear today, Suze? Oh, I know. Same thing as yesterday? Day before?"
Mary Beth held up a blue T-shirt with a deer on it. A rip edged near the bottom. "Look familiar?"
Mary Beth shoved the shirt at Katie's face. "Eww. What's the smell? Katie?"

Katie wrinkled her nose and shoved Mary Beth's arm away. "Get off, Mary Beth!"

Susie curled her toes and grabbed at her shirt, but Mary Beth jerked it back.

"This old thing? You want this? Needs a serious bath, Suze." Mary Beth nodded at Katie.
"What do you think? Should we give it a bath?" Katie grinned and nodded.

"Okay, really funny. Give me back my shirt." Water dripped down Susie's legs, onto the gray tile. She tried not to shake, not to let everything boil over and explode in front of them. She wanted to punch them both, grind Mary Beth's face against the tile, make her wail, just get out of her brain, to make it think of anything else besides her mom.

"Or you'll what?" Mary Beth grinned.

"She'll sic Coach Terry on us," Katie chimed in. "Little bitch just would."

"Shut up. I'm not telling anyone." Susie choked back her rage and tried to sound steady.
Mary Beth was almost always two-faced, even to her closest friends, and Susie could totally use it against her. "If you don't give it back, I'll make sure Melanie knows it's you who's been out with Jamal behind her back. And what do you think Melanie will do, Mary Beth?"

Mary Beth's face burned beet red. "You wouldn't. You don't have proof."

"You're probably right. I wouldn't. I mean, I don't have any pictures. Definitely not from last week when you came into *my* job and made out all night. No, definitely no pictures."

Mary Beth clenched her fists, knuckles bone white around Susie's T-shirt. "You are. Such a. Bitch! Come on, Katie." Mary Beth tossed Susie's shirt in a puddle at Susie's feet and stomped

away toward the lockers. Susie could hear Mary Beth slamming locker doors one after another.

She grabbed up her T-shirt, but it was too late. Sopping wet and smelly. She sighed. She didn't have time to wash it. She tried wringing it out and after a quick turn at the hand dryer, slipped it on, still damp. But she had other things to worry about. It looked as if Mary Beth and Katie had turned her locker out while she was drying her shirt. She slipped into undergarments and then her jeans, a little too baggy around her willowy frame, then she sorted through the mess. On the bottom of the locker, her phone lay in two pieces. The screen and the battery case were cracked, and the battery barely fit back into the mangled phone. Susie bit hard on her lip.

"Guess I shouldn't have said anything about pictures," she muttered as she tried to turn the phone back on. Nothing. On her way out of the locker room, she dropped the phone in the trash. Mary Beth was going to pay for this.

Susie spent the morning in a daze. She couldn't believe how easy it was for the world to keep on going. Hers had stopped as of last night, but time didn't seem to care. People milled around in the halls, teachers yelled at them to get to class, and somehow she was just another teen in the middle of all that white noise. She tried to keep her head up. Be normal, she reminded herself, and kept her eyes peeled for her cousin. She checked for Reg on her Facebook account on one of the library computers, but he wasn't signed into chat and he hadn't posted anything all week. Katie had written "NARC BITCH" on her Facebook wall, and Susie deleted it. She didn't unfriend her, though, because she got left out of track meetups when she started altering her friends list. Susie shook her head. "Narc bitch" couldn't be further from the truth, but maybe it was good if people thought that. For a moment she wished she could undelete the comment, but

it would've looked double weird if she'd left it on her page. She signed out of the computer and trudged to English class. She crossed her fingers, hoping Mrs. Johnson was out sick for the day. Or that maybe she hadn't got a good look at who'd been in her backyard the night before. When she slipped into her seat, her teacher barely glanced at her. Maybe she hadn't seen Susie at all. Susie breathed a sigh of relief.

Reg wasn't in English, the one class they shared, and no one had seen him, or so they said. Maya, his girlfriend, was out too, so Susie couldn't ask her, either. That was probably a good thing, though. Maya was Mary Beth's best friend, at the very top of the high school food chain with her role as head cheerleader and homecoming *and* prom queen. Basically, if there was a queen role open at the school, people immediately voted her in, even if she spread stories about them behind their backs. She threw all the parties because her parents were never home. Apparently they'd left the country and left Maya in charge of the house, but Susie had never heard the full story. Maya was also head of what Susie thought of as the unofficial judgment committee. She and Mary Beth slithered around school poisoning others against anyone they deemed worthless or powerless. At least, that's how it seemed to Susie, but she'd been burned by Mary Beth enough times to trust neither girl. Plus, Maya was *always* going on about how she and Reg were going to have the cutest kids, and the thought made Susie want to hurl. She didn't know what Reg saw in Maya, and he always told her when she asked that she didn't know the *real* Maya, whoever he thought that was. But Susie was grateful she didn't have to watch her uppity sneering in action today. Tapping her pen against her thigh, she stared out into the blue sky as the lazy clouds drifted by. Her eyelids drooped. Blood curling across the floor. Blood soaking her mom's favorite dress. Susie tried hitting her thigh harder to keep her eyes open, to

keep them from seeing last night all over again, but soon the pen slipped from her hand and clattered to the floor. Everything red. Everywhere red. And a shrieking that pierced her ears and made her quiver and snap awake—

Susie looked up into the face of Mrs. Johnson, who pressed on her shoulder.

"Are you okay, Susie?" Mrs. Johnson asked, concern etched across her face. Though she was on the young side for a teacher, hard lines had etched themselves around her mouth. When she didn't smile, which was often, she looked angry, as she did now. The laughter of Susie's classmates—at *Susie*—scratched at the air. She gulped and looked away from everyone, pretending that she hadn't shrieked, that it had never happened. She stared straight ahead at the blackboard. In her mind, she had slid beneath her desk and would be hiding there until the next bell.

"Miss Hopkins, care to tell us your impressions of the *Odyssey*? Or do you need your beauty sleep?"

The class tittered again, but Susie didn't take her eyes from the board. Nope, she wasn't going to stop imagining herself tucked beneath her desk, away from their thirst for the special brand of Hopkins crazy her mom had seemed to pass onto her. "The *Odyssey* is about a journey across the world by a guy cursed by the gods." Susie's face flushed.

"And?" The corner of Mrs. Johnson's mouth quirked when Susie looked up at her.

"And...it tells about his adventures getting back home."

"Why was he cursed?"

Susie bit her lip. She'd read the story-poem mashup, but she got a feeling Mrs. Johnson wasn't really interested in her answer. "Because of the war. The Trojan War."

The class tittered again. One of the jocks on the football team, Frank Ard, shot a rubber band at the back of Susie's head, breaking her out of the shell she'd imagined herself into beneath her desk. She ignored it and returned her gaze to the blackboard. So many of these people she'd known all her life, and none of them had ever been her friends. Roberta Fay, whose towel-dried, long brown hair always got tangled in her backpack. Tinatsu Wallace who painted the gargantuan mural of daffodils in the school cafeteria. Julia Sidorova, her shock of blonde hair spiky and wild, who smoked cigarettes behind the gym and once put one out on the arm of Galen Smith because she'd skateboarded right into Julia's smoking hideout and Coach Terry had caught both of them. They all at various times had been given detentions, and not one of them was sympathetic to another's plight. Susie blew out her breath and sighed, trying to look as if she didn't care.

"Grow up, people," Mrs. Johnson said to the class, then turned her eyes back on Susie. "We're just glossing over everything these days, is it? Miss Hopkins, I expect you to do a little more than read the Cliffs Notes if you expect another A. Seniors don't just get free passes. See me after class."

"Oooooooh," her classmates chimed.

"Knock it off," Mrs. Johnson snapped, and they shut up. She was more of a drill sergeant-type than Coach Terry.

Mrs. Johnson turned to Tracie Welser, the yearbook editor, who seemed to perpetually wave her hand in the air. "Ms. Welser, can you elaborate?"

Tracie could, and did. Susie sighed and picked her pen up off the floor. She'd totally flubbed that performance. Of course, Mrs. Johnson would make Susie stay after class. For the

rest of class, she pinched the underside of her arm to stay awake.

Afterward, as everyone else grabbed their books and raced from the room, Susie dragged her feet up to Mrs. Johnson's desk. Luke Riley, a lanky guy who was also on the track team, gave her a sympathetic eye as he headed out, but mostly people laughed at her as they went on their way. Mrs. Johnson stood at the board erasing the lesson. Susie sucked in a deep breath and bit her lip before she spoke.

"You wanted to talk to me, Mrs. J?"

The teacher turned around and smiled. "You know it. Why don't you sit? I promise this won't bleed too long into lunch." She pointed to a chair beside her desk, so Susie sat and tried not to cross her arms immediately. Mrs. Johnson sat down facing Susie. Susie crossed her leg over her knee and fiddled with her dishwater-gray shoelace. "You look like you had some trouble sleeping."

Susie didn't look at Mrs. Johnson, just stared at the floor. Disengage. Be numb. "Yeah, sorry. It's kind of a thing, right now."

"Want to be more specific? You are still technically in English class, Susie." Susie shrugged.

"Look, if you need help, you can talk to me. I noticed you nodding off this morning."

Susie focused her attention on a cracked leaf on the tile floor. If someone hadn't stepped on it, it would've been beautiful. "Track's just taking up a lot of time. I'm a little keyed-up about it and haven't been able to get much rest." She pinched her lip between her thumb and index finger.

Mrs. Johnson sighed. "I'm sure it is, with the State Meet tomorrow. It's exciting that our school is hosting it, don't you think?"

Susie nodded and looked up, focusing on the lines etched around her teacher's mouth. Susie couldn't look Mrs. Johnson in the eye. If Susie looked into her eyes, Mrs. Johnson would know everything. All the good teachers seemed to have a creepy sixth sense.

Mrs. Johnson touched Susie on the shoulder, and the lines around her mouth disappeared as she smiled. "You need plenty of rest before a race, though, Susie. So tell me, where've you been sleeping?"

Susie's gaze flicked from Mrs. Johnson's mouth to her eyes. She stared at Mrs. Johnson, unsure what to say. Mrs. Johnson stared back. "Well? You want to come clean?"

"I've been sleeping at home. Where else would I?" Susie scowled when Mrs. Johnson raised her eyebrows.

"So if I call your mom, she'll back this up?"

Susie fought back a shiver and started gathering her books in her arms and stood up. "I don't know why you'd say that. Not after last time."

"Look, Susie, I know things aren't...right at home." Mrs. Johnson looked up at her and Susie avoided her gaze, fiddling with the belt loops on her jeans. "Hey, I think I've been pretty cool about...whatever it was she was upset about last week. But listen, you need to talk to somebody. You need those books and you need to be your own person. It's okay to want things, you know. I don't blame you for leaving, if that's what's going on. You're old enough to. But you need to talk to an adult, okay? You need to be somewhere stable. I can help you. Mrs. Anderson can help too."

"In the guidance office? No thanks. I'm fine, Mrs. J, really." That was something of an overstatement, but Susie made herself act normal. "My mom has episodes. She's...just different. So ask her whatever you want. I promise you, I've been sleeping at home. I've gotta go to lunch."

Way to double down, Suze, she thought, and squelched the thought of Mrs. J walking in and discovering Susie's mom. All Mrs. J. would find out when she called was that the phone would just ring and ring at Susie's house. If Mary Beth hadn't smashed Susie's phone, she could have gone to the office to ask Mrs. Patterson to change the number on record, but not now.

Mrs. Johnson stood, shaking her head. She smoothed her hands over her plain black dress and walked with Susie toward the door. "I really hope that's true, Susie. I really do. Look, I know tonight's a Friday, but don't go out and party all night, okay? Get some rest. I mean it. Don't stay out all night. You don't want to keep your mom up worrying, especially if she's doing better. I know you guys have been through a lot. And hey, have you given any thought to our conversation about majoring in English? Aside from you deciding to call it in today, I know you'd really find your direction."

"Hey, Mrs. J, thanks, but no. I—I can't really deal with this right now. See you later." Susie ducked her head so she wouldn't have to look at her teacher, swiveled on her heel and stormed out of the room. In the hall, she leaned against a bank of lockers and made herself breathe in and out slowly. She was sure Mrs. J. had seen Susie outside her house last night. And now she wanted to call Susie's mom. But this would all be okay as long as Mrs. Johnson didn't do anything after she didn't get an answer at Susie's house. If she actually visited the house... Susie forced herself away from the locker. She couldn't worry about it now. Instead, she was

going to find Reg, wherever he was, and then she'd grab her things from Mrs. Johnson's shed. Anyway, the way things were going, skipping school suddenly didn't seem so bad.

Autumn in Garnet Falls took Susie's breath away. The last October leaves had seemed to curl from green to yellow to red in a breath. Cross-country practice often sent them through the woods, down paths full of cast-off leaves that crunched beneath their feet as they bounded toward the finish. Susie ducked back behind the track and headed straight toward the copse behind the school.

Most likely Reg was home sick, but the woods – something told her to check here first, just in case. She kept a wide berth of the Moss Castle, especially after last night's dream. When she and Reg had been eleven or twelve, they had gone through an anti-technology phase where, instead of texting, they left each other notes hidden in the branches or buried by the trunks of the fir trees in these woods. It had really started after her mom had decided eating was another non-necessity like clothes and toothpaste. Reg had brought her food: a toasted peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich, sliced into two triangles. That had been the first time they'd gone into the woods. As she chewed the sandwich, so fast she nearly choked, peanuts stabbing the roof of her mouth, she pulled a piece of paper from her ratty, once rainbow-colored backpack.

"Thank you for taking care of me," she wrote, then folded up the paper and slid it into the plastic baggy, letting it get all gummy with the peanut butter still clinging to the bag. She dug her free hand into the earth and buried the note. Reg only saw the tail-end of what she'd done, and when he asked her about it, she told him she was writing notes to the earth.

He'd smiled and said, "We can write to each other, instead." That way, they both knew

they'd receive an answer. They ignored the stories about the woods, about the summer of the wildfires, when Kit Boyd and Jamie McNair ran into the Moss Castle to escape the fire and never came out again. That had happened at least fifty years before Susie and Reg had even been born. According to the story, the fire hadn't destroyed much of the forest, just blazed up in random places. As if it had been searching for just the right thing to burn. Maybe it had found it. Maybe it hadn't. People had looked for Kit and Jamie, but nobody ever found them. Not even their bodies. People had searched the castle, but according to the story, it had been empty. Still, people heard things. Noises, sometimes. A fire crackling when they got too close to the castle, that kind of thing. Sometimes a wall of heat would push them away. People sometimes came away with singe marks on their bodies, but they'd never even seen a fire. Susie had always shrugged off the stories as a reason to keep kids away, and hadn't paid any attention to it until she'd met the burning boy in the castle.

It was years before she could go back into the woods, and of course, her message game with Reg hadn't lasted too long after that. She still wrote him notes, but she never told him where to look for them. In the woods, they only ever found half of the notes they had hidden, anyway. And after they abandoned the fir trees to go back to civilization, it wasn't the same. They felt trapped, burying notes in the backyard where adults could spy on them and dig up what they'd written. She couldn't even remember what she'd written on the note she'd dropped in the castle.

But for some reason, Susie had a feeling Reg had left her something in the woods. Maybe anything he would leave for her now would be easier to find. It wasn't, though. She veered off the path and got caught on the blackberry brambles and tripped over a fallen birch tree before she made her way to the firs and the soft earth they offered. She used to dangle those origami fortune

teller games from the lower branches of these trees, and Reg almost always immediately found them. Probably because she'd made them out of neon-colored paper.

"Stop doing that," he'd once said. "People'll make fun if they see."

"So throw it away, then," Susie had said.

But he hadn't, and they'd played the game until they couldn't. Now, she thought if she at least came near the castle, maybe she'd find some garishly colored paper bearing an explanation for his disappearance.

What she found instead was an eerily quiet path – even the brook seemed to have run out of babble. She toed over dried-up pine needles and juvenile pine cones, head raised in examination of the branches. Nothing. She gazed up at the oaks, branches turning bare. The Moss Castle peeked out through the gray tines, still at least a football-field's distance away. No way was she going any closer. She shivered. A mangy-looking squirrel twitched its gray tail at her and chattered in warning when she passed its tree.

"Go away to you, too," said Susie, and blew out her breath in a huff. She figured that's exactly what Reg's uncle would say when she knocked on his door.

Though Susie's house was at least a mile from Reg's, the two looked remarkably similar in their sagging foundation, paint peeling, broken-windowed way. Susie and Reg had both grown up in neighborhoods fashioned in the "ignore it if you see it" tradition, with people turning their backs the minute they spotted trouble. An old rusted-out El Camino languished in his uncle's driveway. It had sat that way the entire time Susie had known Reg. Yellow leaves danced around dead weeds that poked from the cracked concrete driveway.

She tried to think of the last time she'd come here. Reg's uncle, who'd been her dad's brother and was technically her uncle, too, but who had only ever allowed her to call him "Mr. Walker," had chased her off, accusing her of stealing from them. Reg had tried to take up for her, but even though she hadn't taken anything directly, it may as well have been true. It was just that Reg was taking food from his uncle's house to give to her on the sly. Since then, she'd tried to stay away. Their phones had helped a lot with that, but now she didn't have enough to buy a new one. Susie squared her shoulders and then raised her hand to knock on the broken doorframe. A screen door dangled haphazardly from the hinges. Before she could get in a good rap, the door opened. Susie held her breath, afraid to speak.

Walker smacked his lips and glared at her. The frizzed white hair that bordered his bald pate stuck out in all directions. He hacked a watery sounding cough into his hand, then rubbed his hand against his threadbare flannel pants. His white V-neck hadn't been changed in so long, it looked gray. From his other hand, a half-smoked cigarette dangled. "I told you not to come round here again, didn't I?"

Susie tried to smile. He smelled worse than a campfire, like tobacco and cheap beer and wine, stale and bitter and somehow like vinegar. As if he'd been drinking and smoking for days. He probably had. She smoothed her hands against her pants and held up her head. "That was three years ago."

"Time don't change. No matter what *you* think."

"Unc—uh, Mr. Walker, I was just wondering. Is Reg around? You called our coach."

Susie tried to hold her breath and keep as still as possible while he studied her.

"Haven't seen him. My guess is he's out making use of his time. Unlike you." He coughed

again, his cheeks flushing red, the skin under his chin expanding like a bullfrog's.

"But you called our coach. And he hasn't been in school all week. I was just wondering. We've got a meet tomorrow. I don't want—"

"You don't want to lose your meal ticket. Well, it's too late for that. That meal ticket ain't worth nothin' no more." He glared at her, and Susie resisted the urge to cringe. Walker shook his head. "I see you, calculating there. 'Oh, what's he mean? What can I get out of this?' Told you, girl, time don't change. You still that weasely kid banking off everyone else. Reg's got better things to do now than follow you round no more."

Susie stopped herself from clenching her fingers into fists. "Mr. Walker, please. I'm worried. I need to find him."

"Told you, ain't seen him. And if I do, I'll tell him the same I always did. Stay away from you. Your daddy had no sense making you. Trucking off with all that crazy from your momma's side got our money all lost."

Susie sucked in a stung breath. "Don't talk about my mom that way!" she yelled.

"Get off my porch," Walker yelled and slammed the front door in her face. Free of its rusted hinges, the dangling screen door banged onto the porch, nearly smashing into Susie. Walker wrenched the front door open just as he'd shut it. "I say what I want. And I tell you this, if you do see him, tell the little bastard he owes me for those doctor bills. They're coming in daily and I ain't paying for his treatments, no matter what those swindlers say." He slammed the door again.

Susie stared at the door for a minute, mouth open, feeling dumb. Treatments? Doctor bills? She bit back a tear. Uncle Jack wasn't worth it, and he was probably making things up. She

knew he always took a kernel of truth and twisted it somehow, just to make people feel bad. But sometimes the truth was the easiest thing to use. She flung her backpack onto her shoulder and set off down the street, trying to calm down. At least she knew where Reg *wasn't*.

But that thought didn't make her feel much better, especially now. As she walked, her stomach started doing its balloon animal thing by tying itself into knots. She needed something to eat—crackers, an apple, beef jerky, anything. She didn't want to go back to work for food because Mark would rope her into working and then she'd have to deal with his stupid questions about why the napkins weren't folded into the shape of swans or something inane like that. As if the shape of polyester napkins spelled out class. Hunger tunneling through her body, she headed toward Pete's Arcade, kicking at leaves to distract herself. It didn't make any sense, but if Reg wasn't sick at home and not at school, that had to be where he'd be. Unless he was at a hospital. She refused to believe it. He had to be at the arcade. Still, she thought Reg would have to be an idiot to hang out there in the middle of the day, but he was up for a track scholarship, not an academic one. And if Uncle Jack had said Reg wasn't a meal ticket anymore—maybe he was upset about something and was avoiding school completely. That made sense. He seemed to barely skate by in his classes anyway, though Susie managed to be near the top of her class, even with her mom trashing everything they owned. But now her mom was really and truly gone, and Susie was alone. Really and truly alone. Even her best friend had up and vanished, and who knows what was going on with him.

It was just Susie now. She kept on the lookout for the cops—if they saw a teenager roaming the streets in broad daylight, a ticket would be the prize. A ticket, a visit to the school, and a trip to see one's parents. It was like winning the loser's lottery, with the prize being

detention, detention, detention. Not that Susie cared much about the detention aspect. It was more the cops taking a trip to her mother's house.

By the time Susie got to the arcade, the day had turned from reasonably pleasant to downright nasty. Clouds left bruises on the sky, and the wind blew her sideways. Her hair tangled in knots as it tangoed around her head, so she wasn't quite looking around when she stumbled into Pete's.

She ran her fingers through her locks to get them under control, but when she swept it back from her eyes, she almost wished she hadn't. A skater guy with body that looked like a brittle stick that would break in the wind and a shock of curly red hair that stuck out everywhere stood in a deep lip-lock with a blonde, her long hair spilling over her shoulders and her pink skirt revealing long, thin legs. Reg and Maya. They leaned over the edge of a *Dance-Dance Revolution* game, their feet on the wrong dance arrows, making the game issue annoying, off-pitch bonks. Not like they noticed. Maya's hands gripped his baggy skater shirt and his skinny frame seemed stronger, firmer in her grip. He looked tan and happy and totally able to use his phone. Susie's stomach twisted. He certainly didn't look sick. Nothing that would require treatments or multiple doctor bills, according to Uncle Jack. To make matters worse, a cop was hanging out by the ticket counter. Maybe he was just biding his time before he took down Reg and Maya and now Susie had walked into his idiotic trap too. A dome-shaped machine close by suddenly rang with what sounded like a thousand chimes, and Susie jumped.

If she backed out of the arcade now, she might still have a chance to avoid getting picked up for truancy, and setting off the chain reaction of having them find her mom before she knew what to do about it. The cop hadn't spotted her yet—or so she thought. She'd stupidly stood there

for a minute untangling her hair. Her cheeks burned. Plus, she wanted to kick Reg. All he cared about was getting all cozy in an arcade, in front of a cop, no less. What an idiot. She should just leave and figure out what to do on her own. Susie clenched her fists.

A bead of sweat slipped down her face, the lights and explosions of gunfire from arcade games erupting all around her. She counted back from ten, trying to convince herself to leave. But how badly did she need to talk to him? She made herself take a step forward. Then another. Past the cop. Her breath caught when he glanced at her, but his gaze traveled over her instead of settling on her. The carpet felt gummy and squished beneath her feet, as if it was trying to hold her back.

Finally, she stood right behind the two of them, their feet tangled around the other's, both of them oblivious to the world. Susie sucked in a deep, angry breath and tapped Reg on the shoulder.

Chapter Four

"Suze! Susie, Susie, Suze! Where've you been? I've been trying to text you, like, all day!"

Susie stepped back in surprise. Reg's face lit up, his smile stretching toward his cheekbones. He slid his hand around Maya's and squeezed. Maya scowled at Susie. Susie shifted her weight, trying not to look uncomfortable.

"Dude, where have *you* been? Coach said Uncle Jack called her—she said you're off the team. And you're here! What the hell is going on? He said all this messed up stuff about you going to the doctor. Like, multiple times." She knew her face was turning red, but she couldn't help it. He'd been hanging out in an arcade while she'd been freaking out. He wasn't in any trouble, unless Uncle Jack had kicked him out. But it didn't look like anyone had laid a hand on Reg. And this secret that had been bleeding her apart had widened into a lake that threatened to drown her any minute.

Reg grinned and shook his head. "Uncle Jack can kiss my ass for good. I'm so sick of his stories. And anyway, I've only been out for, like, a day. You gotta chill, Suze. Seriously, why haven't you answered my texts?" Reg took his hand from Maya's and began to play with her blonde hair. It seemed to flow like a rippling creek through his fingers. Susie shook her head and tried to repress the urge to throw something at him.

"Why haven't *you* answered *my* texts? You so have been out for more than a day and you know it, so knock it off. Anyway, my phone broke. I had to throw it out." She bit her lip. How many tables had she waited to get that phone? How many beer-soaked, sour-smelling men had she had to wade past to pay for that phone? A new one was out of the question. Her piddly tip money was now as good as bus money if she had to split, and the spidery feeling in her stomach

told her she might. Even if she *could* get more money, from her dad's pension, she didn't want it if it meant she had to think of her mom dying every time she cashed a check. She sucked in a deep breath. No wonder her mom tried to get rid of the money every month. Anyway, Susie knew she would never ever get it because the moment she tried, she would get picked up by the cops. Every plan she thought of ended with her going to jail.

"Aw, man. But you're here now, which is all that matters. Right, Maya?" Maya scowled at Susie again, but Susie ignored Little Miss Cheerleader.

"Are you sure you wanna tell her? I heard she narced all over Mary Beth this morning." Maya grinned at Susie, her teeth shining like pearls against her tan skin. Susie decided that if she wasn't going to throw anything at Reg, she also wasn't going to punch Maya. Instead, she gripped her hands and curled them into fists behind her back.

"Oh, please. That girl can't tell between truth and fiction. She probably outed herself on accident." Susie glanced at Reg and shrugged. "Mary Beth's not the one we need to worry about right now. Listen, I need—"

Reg cut her off. "Okay, okay, I get it. You're pissed. But wait till you see where we've been, Suze! Listen—" Reg leaned in close, clearly excited. "We met this dude, Thano. It sounds kind of weird, but he's got this amazing place. Like, way less sterile than Maya's house."

"Yeah," Maya cut in, smacking a wad of bubblegum. "My parents would totally flip if they came back from their crusade to see I'd decorated their house like Thano's. Forget them." Maya scowled, and Reg tugged on her hair. She gave him a half-smile but her face slipped into a pout as soon as he looked back at Susie.

"Trust me, Suze," Reg stopped playing with Maya's hair as the girl glared at Susie and

waved his hands in the air. "After you've seen it you're not gonna ever *want* to come back here." His green eyes caught the light.

Susie frowned. She didn't even want to be here, now. Maybe Reg was onto something. He tended to be right, especially when he discovered something new.

A new voice interrupted her thoughts. "She can probably make that decision on her own, don't you think, Reg?" It came from behind Susie and threaded through her with a deep, vibrating bass. At the same time, the scent of fir trees, honey, and lavender carried on the air, masking the usual arcade smells of teenage sweat, old popcorn, and spilled soda. Slowly, Susie pivoted around to face the newcomer.

He was probably eighteen or nineteen. In the low light, his hair shone with a purple sheen. He had a good six inches on Susie, but when he tilted his head and smiled, his violet eyes on her, she felt like they were the same height. Equals. Her heart pounded, and her breath quickened. Susie shook her head and smiled at him, trying to match his easy smile. She was sure it came out crooked and broken, but still, she tried.

The guy took Susie's hand. "Susie. It's so very nice to finally meet you. Very pleased." His voice came out deep, somehow older than he looked.

Susie nodded, but her mind had gone blank. What could she possibly say? "I like your purple hair?" No way. And what did he mean by *finally*? She cringed and wondered what Reg had told him.

Reg stepped in front of her, blocking the guy for a moment. Flustered, she sidestepped Reg so she could stare at the newcomer's hair. He was too pretty, but she didn't really care. She felt immediately calm just looking at him. Susie couldn't quite pinpoint it, but she felt like she

knew him somehow. But she didn't, didn't she? She'd know if she'd ever met a guy with purple hair before. She resisted the urge to reach out and stroke it.

"God, get over yourself, Susie," Maya whispered in her ear. Susie jerked her head away from Maya and glared. Maya flipped out her phone and started to text someone, her thumbs darting hummingbird-fast.

"As I was saying—" Reg started, but the cop slid away from the ticket counter, sauntered over behind Reg, and interrupted.

"You kids out here on a school day. Got permission?" The cop didn't look at Susie, Reg, or Maya, but locked his eyes on the new guy. Clearly, he'd been drawn to his crop of purple hair too. Williams, the cop's badge said.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm a teacher's aide at their school. We're on a field trip today."

"You don't look old enough to get a job like that. Besides, an arcade isn't much for a field trip. What class is this for?"

"Game design," Susie broke in. Her voice came out sounding cracked and her cheeks flushed when she met the new guy's eyes. He nodded slightly at her and turned back to the cop, his eyebrows raised as if to ask if that was enough.

"And you're the TA?" The cop squinted.

"Yes, sir. Just a year into college over at Genessee. I've been designing all my life, so I've been helping out Mr. Turner at the high school. I help out in the mornings, then I head out to GCC in the evenings. I've had a few long days."

In the background a machine gun from a video game *rat-a-tatted* while zombies' groans and people's screams all bounced off each other.

The cop puffed out a sigh. "You kids ought to rethink your direction in life. Game design. Get a real degree." He wandered back off to his place at the ticket counter.

"So, did you guys meet out at Yancy?" Susie asked. Yancy was a skate park near Genessee Community College in the next town over. Sometimes Reg blew off steam with his buddies there. He always told these stories about becoming a professional skateboarder, but he usually came back from tournaments with fewer medals than bruises. She was surprised he wasn't covered in them now.

Reg raised his eyebrows at Susie. "Uh, no." She shrugged at him as if to ask where they met, but he shrugged back instead of answering.

"We didn't exactly meet out there," the guy said to Susie. "Thanks for the quick thinking." She felt dumbstruck when he looked at her—her mouth dried up so that she couldn't speak. Instead she just nodded in return and let her eyes drift to the floor.

"Why are you thanking her? She should be thanking you," Maya said, hands on her hips. She glared at Susie again, but Susie shrugged. She didn't feel like telling off anyone.

"You have an interesting way of looking at the world," he said to Maya, who just shook her head and leaned into Reg.

"Hey Thano, think we can take Susie back to the place? I mean, of all the people I know, she'd dig it the most. Seriously. You won't regret it." Reg grinned at Thano and slid his arm around Maya's back, pulling her to him.

Thano's eyes clouded for a moment. "Reg. Please do me the courtesy and allow me to decide who should be invited and when."

"Right. Sorry," Reg said, staring at the ground.

Thano turned to Susie, but didn't say anything, his eyes bright again. She met his gaze and her stomach flip-flopped, but she bit her lip, trying to remember what she'd been so upset about a moment before. She glanced back at Reg, who had begun to nuzzle his lips against Maya's hair. Then she remembered everything that had filled up her head for the past twenty-four hours and shook her head.

"Reg, seriously. Where have you been? Why did your uncle call Coach Terry? Look, it's okay if you've had to go to the doctor. You can't hold out on me and you can't just give up." She tried to keep her voice steady as she spoke but it wavered anyway. The thought of her mom bubbled inside her, and she began to shake.

Thano continued to gaze at her, but she refused to let him distract her again. Not now. Reg wasn't going to get out of this. Turning his back on her, totally bailing on his dreams. That was what would keep them locked in this town forever. And he needed to have hope or he wouldn't help her fix what she'd done.

"Reg?" Thano asked. He said nothing else, just let Reg's name hover in the air, as if that was all he'd ever need to say. It came out sounding like a question with power behind it, a question that would refuse to go unanswered, unlike Susie's, which Reg just ignored.

Reg gawked for a second before his hand fell from Maya's waist and he stepped away from her to address Susie. "You're right. I shouldn't have just gone AWOL. But Susie, I can't go back. I'm *done* there. I never want to go back. Not even for track, not even to go to some crummy college you think will solve all our problems. Because I can guarantee you, it won't."

Susie felt her face flush. She knew when it came to her own problem, he was definitely right, even if he still didn't know what had happened. Still, she clenched her fists and smashed

them against her hips. "You've got to be kidding me! What the hell, Reg? I want to know which pod person's taken over your body because he's totally blowing his cover. You *love* running!" She wished she could run over his legs with one of the go-carts outside. See how much he'd miss running then. See how much he'd miss having her by his side when there was no one left to talk to.

Reg just smiled and shrugged. "I don't have anything to run from anymore, Suze. You'll see. Just come over and check it out."

"Reg, I think you owe her a little more than that," Thano interrupted. "One doesn't run away from one's obligations. Or the truth." Susie raised her eyebrows at Thano. Just going to college seemed to make a guy more mature and knowledgeable than people barely a year younger. Or maybe Reg just really needed a surrogate father figure and he thought a college guy would be just as good as anyone.

Reg sighed and met Susie's eyes, finally. She watched him watching her, his eyes raking over her bitten lips, her clenched jaw, her hands balled into fists. Then he sighed and nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry, Suze. I'll explain everything. As long as you come with us. Promise."

Susie's muscles relaxed, and she smiled for the first time since she'd walked into the arcade. Finally, they were going to have a chance to talk.

"But—" Reg said. He chewed on his lip,

Susie glared at him. "But what? "

Reg shook his head and grinned again. "Nothing. Just trust me. It's gonna blow your mind. You're gonna flip, promise."

She clenched her jaw again. He'd probably flip when he found out what happened to her

mom. Maybe he wouldn't even help her. Maybe he'd be so mad that she'd taken off that he'd kick her out of wherever he was going to take her. Maybe they were both being cowards right now.

"Hey, don't think I'm going to stop trying to talk you into running in the finals tomorrow. Coach will take you back if you just tell her Uncle Jack calling and saying you were off the team was just a big misunderstanding. You can still make a career, Reg. We can go to college. We're only just starting. Unless you're lying about what Uncle Jack said." Susie looked at Maya for help, but Maya was wearing one of her permanently bitchy scowls and didn't look like she'd deign to recognize Susie's pleading glances.

"Let's talk about it later, okay? Do you wanna check out our secret lair or not? I swear, you'll take back everything you just said once you do." Reg disentangled himself from Maya and grabbed Susie by the shoulders, shaking her as he laughed.

Susie's stomach sank, but she returned his smile. He would tell her what was going on with him when he was ready, but she had a bad feeling it wasn't going to be an easy conversation. No easier than the one she needed to have with him. But at least a secret lair meant she'd have a place to stay while she worked out what to do about her mom. About her future. If she even still had one.

Chapter Five

The sunset broke across the horizon just as they approached the edge of the woods. Around them, the sky bathed in a purple-and-rose glow. Clouds skidded in waves toward the coming dark. Susie stopped as they made their way down the hill toward the expanse of trees. The Moss Castle peaked over the trees, as if in greeting.

"What's wrong?" Reg put his hand on Susie's shoulder.

"You can't be serious. We're not going where I think we are, are we?" Susie shivered.

"God, you are such a baby." Maya rolled her eyes.

"The Moss Castle, Reg? No way. You're joking." Susie crossed her arms. She bit back the memory of seeing the boy on fire. She didn't want to be laughed at.

Of course, Reg laughed anyway, as if he'd read her mind. "I knew you'd say that. But guess what? You were right about the boy you said you saw. The one on fire." He gestured toward Thano. "It's just not dangerous like you think. It shows you things. Whatever it is it thinks you need to see." He punched Thano lightly on the shoulder. "Ask this guy. That's how he found me. And now you. It's really not scary, Suze. You've just got to trust it."

"I don't just have to trust *it*." She glanced at Thano, who shrugged. This was crazy, but she knew if she marched off now, she'd never get the time to talk to Reg. She might as well turn herself in to the cops and hope they believed her story. Right. A girl who might inherit her dad's house and his money, with only her crazy mother standing in the way finds her mother dead on the floor, then cleans it all up and runs away? Right. She knew the cops would pile that onto whatever they wrote up about why she might have hurt her mom. And it didn't matter whether she would've or wouldn't have—it was only if the *cops* believed it. Goodbye college, goodbye

dreams. Hello, prison holding cell. Damn it, she thought. She needed to talk to Reg about all of this.

"And me." Thano interrupted her thoughts. "I wouldn't lead you to harm, would I?" He smiled at her.

Susie regarded him with a suspicious frown. "I don't even know you." She turned to Reg. "Remember what we used to say about this place?" She couldn't believe she and Reg had once come to these woods to bury notes to each other. It seemed so childish now. Walking right into danger without any clue.

"When I actually saw—" Reg started, but Thano cut him off.

"Take heed of the fiery glow, find a new place to go," he said.

Susie swallowed back a sudden, painful lump in her throat and stared at Thano. "How'd you know that? Nobody but Reg knew about that." Thano smiled and hooked a thumb through his belt loop.

"I must've told him, I guess?" Reg shrugged.

"Oh yes, but isn't that what everyone says when they're on the edge of an uncertain wood at sunset?" Thano grinned, his face sharper than it had seemed at the arcade.

"If only that rhyme was just about the woods." Susie glared at Reg. "I can't believe you told him that."

"Sorry. Guess I couldn't help it. But Thano doesn't count. You can tell him anything, Suze. Promise."

"I've never been told I don't count," Thano said, "but point taken, Reg. Can we go?" He pointed to the ever-darkening woods. "We need to get in there. We shouldn't be gone too long."

"Why not?" Susie looked at her companions.

Maya just grinned, the wind blowing her hair back into a billowing yellow fan. "You don't wanna know."

"Oh, Maya. Don't scare her." Thano turned to Susie and offered his hand, but she didn't take it. "What you're going to see isn't like other places you've been. It's...alive. But I promise I will not let anything happen to you. You have nothing to fear."

"Telling someone a place is alive isn't really the first thing you should say when you're trying *not* to scare them." Susie fought back a grimace, the face of the boy on fire back in her thoughts. He'd looked so lonely, so small. He would've burned her completely if she'd walked into the castle.

"Seriously, have a thrill." Maya examined her fingernails instead of looking at Susie. "Aren't you supposed to be some badass loner? A thrill-seeker, Miss Star Runner? People have been coming out here for ages just to *see* what would happen. Just to get a taste. But they don't ever see what *we* see. So get a clue, or go home." She snapped a piece of bubblegum in her mouth.

Susie glared at Maya. For a girl who was everybody's favorite homecoming queen, she wasn't sweet, but biting, always. Maybe that's why Reg liked her. She didn't take crap from anyone and called anyone out when she thought they were acting like idiots. But Susie didn't have to like her. Any public attempts a person made to humiliate Susie just made her want to stay glued to whatever it was the person was insulting.

"Susie," Reg prodded. He looked concerned, the setting sun making his own locks look as if they were on fire. "You have my word. I went in there and I was fine. Nothing will happen

to you. I promise."

"You promise?" Susie swallowed back the lump in her throat and told herself to be brave. Be brave and ignore Maya. Reg wrapped her fingers around his and gave them a gentle squeeze while Maya just sighed and blew out a breath that made her bangs float up before settling back on her forehead.

"I promise."

As the sky crawled from purple to gray to deep blue, the sounds of the forest crept up on Susie. Gone were the chittering squirrels, replaced with barred owls and their black eyes, their sullen hoots floating out of the shadows. Crackling came from the brush, and rocks spilled down the hillside and rolled toward their feet, tripping them every few yards or so. The naked branches overhead seemed to reach their skeletal fingers toward her.

Reg led the way with Maya behind him, then Susie, then Thano. A gust of wind bit at them, and Susie pulled her too-thin T-shirt closer.

"Just stay on the path, already." Maya glanced over her shoulder after Susie jumped and yelped for what could have been the millionth time.

"Like I'd leave it." Susie wished she had her phone to use as a flashlight.

"Not long now," Thano breathed out over her shoulder, and she tried not to jump again. His scent calmed her; the lavender that floated on the air in front of her made her want to float on right after it. Suddenly, she felt warm. It struck her that the darkness surrounding her didn't have to be dangerous; it could protect her from things that wanted to see, that could only see, could only take her, if she gave them light. Maybe Thano was a spot of magic in the woods. The

protector, where brambles tangled, where young couples lay together for the first time, where the creek ran backwards and forwards to feed the ferns. Where spider webs glittered and dew dripped down stone walls. She wanted to turn around and look at him, to breathe more than the lavender, to find the sneaking scents of firs, of honey, that she'd smelled at the arcade.

But suddenly, the castle appeared ahead of them. Glowing. Susie pulled up short and Thano stumbled into her. His body was hot against her shoulder and she jumped in surprise, tumbling into Maya. Both girls went down. Maya picked herself up from the ground, brushing pine needles from her skirt.

"Oh my God, I am so over this." Maya composed herself, put her hands on her hips, and glared at Susie. Reg draped his arm around Maya and pulled her to him.

"Come on. Cut her some slack," Reg said. "You remember the first time I brought you here. And you didn't even have a freaky vision when you were a kid." His words didn't stop Maya from scowling.

"I've been alone enough to figure it out, okay?" Maya turned to Susie. "*You* need to figure it out. Stop being a baby and woman up already."

"Maya," Thano said, "We don't bring each other down." He put his hand on Susie's shoulder, but Maya just muttered, "Whatever" and crossed her arms. "Are you all right?" Thano asked Susie.

Susie felt a woozy sensation come over her, as if she was dreaming. She blinked and nodded. It surprised her how much warmer this part of the woods felt—more like a summer evening than the crispness of fall. "Why did it suddenly get warmer? I feel so weird."

"Ah, that's one of those mysteries of the woods now, isn't it?" Thano smiled and pointed

ahead, his hand gentle on Susie's shoulder. "Like the Castle." Sometimes he talked like a normal guy, she thought, and others he sounded super weird, like he'd come from a boarding school in Europe or someplace. Still, Susie liked how he talked, even if it came from a world she could never hope to see.

"Dudes, can we just go already?" Maya kicked a patch of dried pine needles into the air, and as they fell, they glowed in the pale light of the castle.

"Looks as if we're home." Thano grinned.

Susie shook her head, dazed. Had they given her something earlier when they left the arcade? No. She'd only had water. She was hungry, but not hungry enough to hallucinate the light. She risked a glance at Thano, but he'd kept his gaze fastened on her, so she snapped her focus away from him.

"Reg. Are you sure?" Susie couldn't finish her question. "This is really freaking me out." Reg just turned around and waved at her, calling at her to catch up. But the glow kept catching her off guard. She tried to get used to it, but the moment she looked at the castle directly, the glow left her dizzy and breathless. It bathed the trees, Reg, and Maya in an eerie green. She found herself walking toward the castle, unhindered by stones on the path or the worries that had plagued her just moments before. Maya raised her eyebrows as Susie pushed past her, but Susie ignored her. Beneath her feet, leaves crackled like sparks in a bonfire. She held her breath and tried to step lightly but still the sound seemed to echo through the woods, too loud.

Still, when she rounded the path and the glowing Moss Castle came into full view, Susie shuddered. When they were kids, she and Reg used to dive headlong through the woods, whacking at the overgrown brush with sticks, not caring how badly the nettles burned or how

badly the blackberry brambles bled them. Before she'd stumbled upon the boy on fire, these woods had been their own.

They buried letters to Santa Claus beneath the fir trees, thinking the more a tree looked like it was made for Christmas, the more likely Santa would find their list. But they had one rule about these woods: after her hallucination or whatever Reg called it, stay out of and far away from the castle itself. And in a moment, they would well and truly break that rule. She glanced up at the glowing Moss Castle. It loomed over them, beckoning.

Chapter Six

Even though Reg had promised nothing would happen, Susie still didn't want to go inside the castle. But she had never doubted him before. Reg had always stood by her, no matter what. He had been there when her dad died, he'd held her hand as they stood over his grave and the army had done their twenty-one-gun salute and then played "Taps" on that sad bugle while her mom broke apart beside her, her tears a river of forever. And that was the beginning of the six years Susie had tried to laughingly dub the "The Very Bad Thing." Only now "The Very Bad Thing" seemed behind her. At a terrible cost.

But for six years, Reg had taken her hand and led her to the edge of the woods where they'd built a new story, one where parents lived and fought for their kids, where you could hear their whispers of love in the pinecones and the swish of leaves.

Reg's parents had died long before Susie's dad, in a car accident that left a gash in a bridge, a broken deer splayed in the middle of the road, and a crumpled Subaru embedded at the foot of a waterfall. Scattered across the bridge lay shards of brick and red dust that floated down over the car.

Later, when the police came to Reg's door, they told his uncle they'd never seen so much red dust, as if God had been trying to keep them all warm before they departed. Reg had also heard his Uncle Jack snort and say, "Fat lot a car does at the bottom of a ravine." And that was Reg's mother and father, done.

So when Susie's dad died and her mom basically shut down and left her to fend for and to feed herself, it was Reg who'd snatched food from his own kitchen when Susie had nothing.

So maybe he had a girlfriend now and maybe Susie couldn't count on him to show up to

school or track or to text her back and be there all the time as he used to be, but Susie and Reg belonged to each other and she'd follow him wherever he led. Family, if it was real, did this.

Even if it was to this monstrosity leering over them, the stone walls and turrets and windows all dripping with wet, green moss that spread from the walls and rolled over the ground like a tongue at their feet. It didn't look like the derelict, ready-to-collapse mess she thought it might after the past few years. It didn't even look like fall had come to this part of the woods, there was so much green. So much glowing green she could see it, even at night. And at the top of the castle, another color glowed—clean white, beckoning. How had she never seen this from the town? She wondered if Thano had recently fixed up the castle so it shone like this. People would absolutely start coming here now, just to check out the lights.

"C'mon!" Reg waved them forward, and Susie took a tentative step onto the moss. Her feet sank, the ground was so soft. Her heart hammered at her ribs. The others were already at the door by the time she'd managed to take another step. Susie wanted to kick herself for stuffing her pepper spray into her backpack instead of stashing it in her pocket. Right now would be a good time to bust it out, but she couldn't just unzip her backpack and take it out. She didn't want to make the others think she was any more scared than they already thought she was. It was bad enough that Maya wrinkled her nose every time she looked at Susie.

"Geez, get it together already," Maya called. "We're waiting!"

"Maya," Thano said, the word sharp.

"Well, we are," she pouted and crossed her arms. Susie just ignored Maya and focused on the light at the top of the castle. It wasn't the kind of light she might see in just anyone's yard. Not like a motion detector or those sodium lights that made everyone look ugly. The light didn't

seem to be coming from any source that Susie could see. It just was. That made her stomach clench up. How in the world did she expect to use pepper spray against something like that, anyway? She chewed on her lip, afraid to take another step further.

"Come on, aren't you hungry?" Reg interrupted her thoughts. As she glanced at him in the doorway, he waved and opened the wooden plank door. From behind him, light danced in rose pinks, cerulean blues, and soft golds. Maya strolled up behind him, pushing at him to get inside.

"I can't do this," she whispered, eyes wide at the whorls of color behind Reg.

"Susie, you have to give yourself a break. Maybe after you eat, you'll feel better." Thano held out his hand. The way he said her name wasn't a bee sting or rebuke, it was soft and kind and warm.

Susie shivered. But she *was* hungry. Maybe her stomach was filled with hunger more than fear. A deep growl wound through her belly and she sighed. The thought of eating didn't make her less afraid, but it did make her take another step across the padded moss and accept Thano's hand. As she touched the soft, rounded pads of his fingers, and felt her too-warm palm touching his too-warm palm, a feeling swam through her so fast she thought she would drown in it. Someone wanted her.

She moved with Thano toward the door, trying to keep her voice strong, willing herself not to sound small and afraid. "I'll go in for the food. But the first weird thing that happens to me, I'm out of here. I don't do ghosts. Okay?"

Thano smiled. "You know, I think that whatever you saw here before left a long time ago."

Susie shook her head. "I once saw a kid burst into flame. He *talked* to me. Unless you did

a castle exorcism of some kind, I'm willing to bet he's still there. Just waiting..." She took her hand out of Thano's and crossed her arms. She wished she hadn't just blurted that out to Thano. Better to let him forget she'd ever had some too-crazy-to-believe run-in with a ghost. Even if it *had* happened, she understood why nobody in their right mind would believe her.

Reg poked his head out of the castle just then and waved to her. "Susie! Come on! Fried chicken in the kitchen! Trust me. It's not going to cluck when you're eating it. Totally safe. But it'll be gone in a few minutes if you don't hurry!" And then he was gone, back inside, out of the woods where maybe they were a tiny bit safer.

Thano touched her elbow. "I promise you. Nothing will hurt you."

That dream-like feeling flooded over her again, and she found herself gazing into his eyes. Believing him. He smiled and touched her hair, then her chin. "But the lights—how are they—?" She couldn't figure out how to ask the question.

"The Castle shows us what it wants to show us. Don't worry. We're the only ones it's showing light right now. It decides who to let in. I can't wait to show you how special my home is." Thano gazed at the castle like he was enchanted with it. As if he loved it. For a moment Susie felt jealous. She shook her head.

"There's nothing bad here. We'll show you."

If a person like Thano could love a place like this, maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe the boy on fire had been a fluke, some hunger-induced vision she'd seen when she was scared and alone. Her eyes still on Thano's, Susie slowly nodded and let him take her hand again. And then she was at the door, at his side, walking across the threshold, into the light.

Inside, the Moss Castle wasn't anything like the dilapidated junk heap Susie thought it might be. And nobody burst into flames either. Plus one for staying alive, she thought. Instead of roots that choked up from the ground and grew over and up through the crowded innards of a tree trunk, chinks in the plaster walls, discarded needles, or soggy, mildewed bedrolls and shattered glass on mounds of dirt crawling with spiders and roaches, Susie found the opposite. The walls seemed to be made of the same strong bark of a fir tree, with a glossy varnish that made the wood glow, moss clinging to the bark. Across the equally gleaming wood floor lay soft earth-green rugs that felt as soft as the moss that surrounded the outside of the castle. On second glance, Susie realized that even the rugs *were* made of moss.

And though the castle looked like the inside of a tree, it was far larger than the insides of any tree she could imagine, even a redwood born at the beginning of time. The insides of the castle stretched out wide, seeming to expand with every step the others took inside of it. Pushed up against the walls were plush burgundy and gold couches, rippling like the sun across a stream.

When she turned her gaze to the ceiling, Susie's breath caught. Her whole life, she had studied the outside of the castle, wary of it, but grateful to see it was always the same size, never growing, never larger. If anything, the older she got, the smaller it seemed. But its insides didn't match the outside. Like a forest-style *T.A.R.D.I.S.*, she thought. Maybe it was an optical illusion. The walls of the castle spiraled up into what seemed like forever. She couldn't even see the ceiling, not really. Maybe it was all the moss—it blended together, making the ceiling seem like it stretched into forever when it really had a finite point. But it sure didn't seem like it ended. Susie gulped, trying not to freak out. You knew it was going to be weird, she thought. Don't let them see you about to go bananas.

"Like it?" Thano asked.

Dazed, Susie looked at him and realized she was still holding his hand. She made herself nod and slipped her hand out of his.

"It's—" She looked at him again, struck by the way his eyes seemed to change to match the castle walls, a brown that shone too much to really be called brown. Golden? She couldn't make up her mind. "I don't really know what to say," she said. Reg and Maya, chewing on fried chicken legs, waltzed back into the entryway. Reg licked his lips and grinned at Susie. She shook her head, still speechless. Maya looked between the two of them and, sighing and shaking her head, gnawed off a bite from the leg.

"I am so over Initiation Day," Maya said over a mouthful of food and stomped off through the one doorway that led into the rest of the castle. "Come find me when you're ready, Reg," she called.

"Maya, don't be like that," Reg called after her.

Susie tried to act cool, as if Maya couldn't spread it around that Susie had been scared. Not that that helped much. When Maya decided something, everyone knew it. The last person who tried to test her was a freshman who'd hacked Maya's accounts and posted a half-naked photo of her on the school's website. It was an atrocious thing to do, but the way Maya had skewered the kid for staring at her one day, Susie wasn't sure she should blame him. But Maya had acted like she wanted it to happen, as if she'd taken the photo for her modeling portfolio and not some other skeevy reason. She gave the other cheerleaders high fives and the kid wound up with his naked buttocks superglued to the lockers in the math wing. People had taken a lot of pictures, that day. Maya was basically ruthless and Susie didn't dare make herself into any more

of a target than she already was. Being Reg's cousin didn't shield her. If anything, it seemed like their closeness made Maya even more eager to cut Susie down.

Susie bit her lip and glanced around. If it didn't have weird magical properties, the castle might be the nicest place she'd ever seen. But that feeling scared her. Everyone knew that the Moss Castle was a crumbling heap that should have been condemned and demolished years before. Especially after those kids Kit and Jamie had disappeared. Even though they'd vanished before Susie had been born, she'd never heard about anyone making so much as an effort to tear the castle down. It was as if the town had forgotten what death meant. Or they were too afraid to try, in case the castle made anyone else disappear too. Except that, apparently, Reg and Maya and no telling who else had started coming out here, and from the looks of it, had been here for a while.

"Two kids died here, you know," she said to Thano, craning her neck and swiveling to stare at the towering heights of the castle. Ivy climbed the walls so high that eventually the leaves disappeared from sight. The foreverness of it dizzied her.

"Well, maybe they just ran away. No one ever found them, did they?" Thano asked and stepped back as Susie twirled around, taking in the room.

"Isn't this trippy?" Reg said, and wiped his mouth. "I never thought we'd get lucky enough to get out of that town, let alone find a *castle* of our own."

"This isn't how I remember it," Susie said.

"Maybe you didn't actually see this place when you were younger," Thano said.

Susie cut her gaze back to Thano. "I know what I saw."

"Yes, I'm sure you did." Thano said, putting his hands up. "I surrender."

"Don't argue with her, Thano. She's like the most stubborn person I know. And that's counting Maya in the mix," Reg said. Susie ignored him, and glanced back up. It was so much bigger on the inside than the outside. Reg shrugged, finished his food, and lifted the bone to look at it in the light. He turned it back and forth. Then, as if it was no big deal, he pressed the bone against the wall, and the moss tendrils *moved*. No, that wasn't quite right. They flickered and trembled and then suddenly they covered over the bone and it *disappeared*. Susie began to tremble. She wanted to look away, to gaze upward again, but the climbing, immense height of the castle made her feel dizzy.

"What in the world is this place?" she asked, trying to shrink into herself as if that would help her hide from what she had just seen. "What did you just do, Reg?"

"I told you," Reg laughed. He stood by the doorway and behind him more light danced. "You've got to see the rest." He gestured for her to follow.

"Nuh uh. No way. You just fed a bone to a wall." She knew she sounded like a moron, but she just couldn't handle this.

"Come on. It just takes back whatever it makes. It won't eat you. Is that what you're worried about? Another Swears Bears fiasco?"

Susie shook her head, embarrassed that Reg had mentioned Swears Bears in front of Thano. They'd been thirteen, and Susie had gotten it into her head that the people on Reg's favorite reality show—about a family of wilderness gurus who lived with bears—were basically cannibals because one of the kids on the show had pretended to eat his dad's foot after it had been amputated. Reg had sworn to her that it had just been chicken, and that the dad had gone to the doctor like a normal person and lost his foot to some boring old person's disease like

diabetes, but Susie had refused to let it go. She called the family savage until one of her teachers gently corrected her in class. Her cheeks flamed now.

"That's beside the point. We don't walk into places that are giant Venus flytraps, or whatever this place is. I'm not some idiot."

Thano stepped in. "Susie, I know what you think you saw, but it's more complicated than that." He walked over to the wall and pushed on it. The moss twittered and shifted back to reveal the bone, stuck against the wall. Another stupid prank. Susie wanted to smack Reg, hard. "See? Nothing to worry about," Thano said and smiled.

Susie turned to Reg. "You're gross. Stop trying to scare me." She hoped maybe she'd saved face in front of Thano, but she was pretty sure the damage had been done. She looked like a dumb coward.

"Oh, lighten up. I just wanted to see what you'd do. Are you ready to see the rest?" Reg bounced on his heels.

Susie shook her head. "I'm not up for this." When she got a chance, she'd look at the walls more closely. Was it rigged by a computer? There had to be an explanation.

Reg grinned. "Don't worry, I won't do it again. I promise. You have to see it!!"

Susie glanced at Thano and he nodded. "Go with him. You can make yourself at home here." His purple hair shimmered in the wavering light. "Check things out. See what you think."

At home? Susie wanted to laugh. Like she could ever get comfortable here. She sighed and followed Reg through the foyer and into the hallway, anyway.

As they stood in front of the staircase to their left, light bounced all around them, climbing the walls like the ivy from the foyer. The staircase, led both up and down, the steps

made of the same wood as the foyer. A hallway jutted off to their right, but Reg shrugged that direction off, telling her it just led to the bathroom.

"You ready?" That goofy grin still played on his face.

Susie tried not to act nervous and nodded, and he took off up the stairs at a run, Susie on his heels. For a second, Susie forgot about everything but the rush of running. Though they were clearly racing up an incline, it felt nothing like their practice hill runs, or even those mind-numbing stair sessions on the bleachers at school. Then suddenly they'd reached the landing of the sixth floor and they were both laughing, as if what they had just done was completely and totally normal, as if stairs that climbed so steeply were always as easy to run as a soft, flat trail along the edge of the woods.

Music boomed against the walls when they reached the seventh level, and although they could have kept climbing, Reg gestured for her to follow him away from the landing and into the hallway beyond. She tried to sound steady and normal when she spoke, but she couldn't help the waver that crept into her voice.

"Are there really other people here?" She hated the way she sounded, like a child who couldn't take a dare. Reg turned to her and shrugged.

"Just a few. They live here, like me."

Susie took a deep breath. "But Reg, I need to talk to you. This is important. Last night, my—"

Reg cut her off. "Come on, I know you're scared, but you don't need to be, okay? It's going to be all right. Trust me." He sounded so sure, but what did he know? He cut her off so she couldn't even tell him what was on her mind. Like he didn't even care what came out of her

mouth. Other people had taken care of him when his parents had died—would he even have any idea what to do? Plus, his smile was the same million-watt smile he'd given her when they were kids and he'd convinced her that climbing on top of his parents' house and jumping off onto the old rusty trampoline below was a good idea. It *had* been fun, until she'd wound up with a sprained shoulder. That was when her dad had been alive. He'd cradled her like she was a baby bird, and helped wrap her arm into the sling at the doctor's office. She'd wanted to hold onto him forever. She could still remember his smell, wood smoke and soap, shielding her from harm.

"You always think you know," Susie said, shaking away the memory of her dad. It made her chest close up when she thought about him for too long and right now, it once more brought back the last memory of her mom in dizzyingly sharp contrast.

"That's because I do. Keep close, and try not to touch the walls. This place takes its time getting used to new people," Reg said. Susie just glared, her stomach crawling with the urge to run away. She hadn't even figured out *how* to tell him about her mom. And now, after he'd pranked her, she wasn't sure if she wanted to tell him. She'd been so wrong to run away. But she couldn't turn back time. Maybe she could get out of town and just call the cops when she was far away. That would at least do something. She didn't want to just leave her there. She felt faint and tried to snap herself away from the thought of her mom still on the floor of their living room. She rounded her shoulders. She didn't have a phone, and she wasn't far enough out of town to do it. At the moment, at least, her only choice was to follow Reg down the hall toward the thumping music. She nodded, finally.

"Fine," she said. "Lead the way." They rounded the corner and headed toward the beat that rattled the walls. But the hallway wasn't so easy to get through, and trying not to touch the

walls was proving to be more difficult than it had seemed. It was cramped and dripping with vines, and she had to duck to avoid getting scratched. Then she accidentally brushed against the wall, and it gave the same softness of the moss outside.

She shivered and whispered to Reg. "Hey, this isn't poison ivy or anything, is it?" Reg didn't answer. "Reg!" He kept moving through the dark hall, ivy flapping over his shoulder and nearly smacking her in the face.

Susie almost stopped but the feeling that she'd get left behind scared her. She found it hard to breathe. The further in she moved, the louder the music pounded against the walls, but the thicker the vines grew, until they seemed to be pushing her back. The Moss Castle might strangle her after all. She could barely see Reg anymore. "Reg!" she called, but he didn't answer. She strained against the vines, but the more pressure she applied, the further back she felt pushed. She tried to turn around, to get away, but when she did, the ivy pressed so hard that the leaves surged into her mouth. She dropped to her knees and tried to crawl toward Reg. Somehow space opened up near the floor and she could move. She spied Reg's feet several yards ahead and she scrambled forward.

The floor smelled earthy, like damp leaves, and felt soft and comforting. She suddenly felt like going to sleep right there, but the feeling made her panic. She had to get up. But her eyes drooped. She could still spot Reg's legs through a gap in the leaves, but she couldn't worry about catching up to him, now. A thought struck her that she should stop fighting, but she wasn't sure why. The ivy seemed scary. But Reg would come back for her sometime. Maybe after this nap. She yawned and closed her eyes, then let the rest of her body droop down on the floor. The music still thrumming through the walls sounded like a lullaby now, the kind her mom sang to

her when she was little, before her father died. Her stomach twisted. She didn't want to dream about either of them, especially not her mom, not after what had happened.

Get up! Susie told herself, but her limbs felt glued to the floor. The dark, usually comforting blanket of sleep crept slowly over her, but she knew a nightmare was coming. She fought to open her eyes, to wrestle free, but there was just blackness in answer to her efforts. She could see her mom dripping with blood, the red splotches that dribbled across the living room floor. The cloying sandalwood that almost masked the smell of blood. Death was coming for Susie too, the river of red told her. She could navigate the waters in her little life raft for only so long, but sooner or later she'd capsize into the red and drown.

"Mom," her dreamself whispered and reached toward the dripping hand.

But it was only a body, not her mother. Her mother wasn't there anymore. This was just a body. Susie grabbed the hand and tried to drag it away from the puddle of red, but the weight was too much. She strained back on the arm, but it only got heavier each time. It seemed to drag her toward the floor, it was so heavy. The pipes in the walls creaked and shook.

Susie didn't let go of the hand, but then with a great crack, the rotted wood floor split open and she was jerked forward, the dead hand now gripping hers.

"Mom!" Susie cried again and with her mom fell through the hole and into darkness.

"Susie!" The voice called her name but it sounded muffled. She struggled to move toward the light, but her mom held her fast.

"I'll never let you go, Susie," came her mom's soft voice. Susie found herself staring into the now open and blood-streaked eyes of her dead mother. She screamed.

"Susie!" Susie looked at her mom again. The bloody eyes had been replaced with a pair

of warm green ones. It took her a second to stop screaming. The eyes blinked at her and she squinted in confusion. Her mother was gone, along with their old house.

"Reg?" She squinted at him with the creeping realization that she lay on the ground in the castle, Reg restraining her arms.

"You okay, Suze? I told you not to lag behind. This place can play tricks on you if you're not paying attention." He let her go and leaned back so Susie could sit up. She tasted grit and spit out dirt. She shook her head and gazed around—still in the hall, but the ivy had somehow retreated all the way to the walls.

Reg pointed at the leaves. "Did you touch them? Is that what happened?"

Susie swallowed and tried to catch her breath. Images of red blood smeared across walls still swam through her head.

"Suze?" Reg pressed again.

She struggled to sit up and pressed her hands against her head. "I think so. Or they touched me. There was so much, and then you were gone, and then there was my mom and—" She stopped and looked at him, biting her lip to keep the tears away. Her throat burned. "Reg, I need to tell you—"

"Hey, it was just a dream." Reg smoothed her hair and held out his hand. "There's some killer stuff just around that bend that I want to show you." With his other hand, he pointed toward the music. Susie swallowed, a hard lump sticking in her throat. He acted as if this kind of thing happened all the time, as if the ivy had touched him and induced a nightmare. She wondered what it had shown him.

"Has this happened to you?" she asked, trying to swallow back tears. Reg just grinned

and shrugged.

"You get used to it. It's not like it ever hurt me. Unlike life, you know, out there." Reg made a sweeping gesture and Susie nodded as he stretched his hand toward her again. She pushed down the urge to turn away and forced herself to put her hand in his. "Just don't touch the walls this time, okay?" He pulled her to her feet, and she grimaced. Just shrug it off, she thought.

"What else shouldn't I do?" she asked, exasperated. "I don't want to bump into another nightmare anytime soon." She pulled her hand out of his before her cheeks got too red. She tried to bury the truth back inside her, tried to push away the memory of her mother on the floor, tried to ignore that she had told no one. That she had refused to admit she needed help with her mother. That she had run away. Maybe she deserved every creepy thing that happened to her.

As if he could read her thoughts, Reg said, "You'll be fine. Just don't drink any blue beer. Trust me. It's some pretty sick stuff. We're talking ticket to straight-up puke city sick."

Susie tried to laugh. "You should know, right?" But inwardly, she cringed. How was she going to tell Reg about her mother?

Reg leaned his shoulder into hers. "Right. Come on. You gotta meet the others."

They rounded the corner, this time no interference from any freaky, hallucinogenic ivy, and came into a long hallway that eventually curved around another corner, with rows of wooden doors that stretched around the bend. So many doors, so many possibilities. Or secrets. Or other people. The scent of fresh pine seemed to have replaced the moldy, old leaf smell that had been stuck in her nose. But where the ivy had retreated, feathery moss *crawled*. The walls undulated with green, as if snaked writhed beneath the moss, pressing it out and up. Susie repressed another shiver. She didn't want to look like a baby in front of anyone else. It was bad enough she'd

flipped out a moment ago and Reg had treated it like it was totally normal to get snared by trippy ivy that made her see her dead mother. Mother. The word made her freeze.

Susie wished the last twenty-four hours hadn't happened. That she'd come home early from work and helped her mother do whatever crazy thing she had been trying to do. Her mother hadn't stabbed herself on purpose. No matter how bad things got, no matter how much her mother tossed out, she'd never seemed like she was giving up, exactly. She just always seemed like she was in the process of beginning again. Only she had never seemed to take a step over the starting line. She stayed still, unable to start anew, as if she needed a gentle push to actually get moving.

Maybe, Susie thought, it had been her dad who had pushed her mom full into life, and once he'd died, well, she'd wilted. So she'd gone back to the beginning but could never quite begin again. Instead, she threw everything away, with the possible exception of Susie—even though Susie sometimes thought her mom had tried to throw her away too—and tried to live like she was a blank slate. Except lately. She'd really gone off the rails, and Susie had done nothing. Maybe she could have helped her mom bloom once more, but she had never known how. Around their house, her mom always acted as if everything was totally fine when Susie asked why they couldn't fill up the refrigerator for once, or bring in some books, or put up her dad's picture. It was always, "We have everything we need, Susie-Berry," even when Susie's stomach kept rumbling after dinner, which was really nothing more than a handful of almonds and a few pieces of raw broccoli. Susie hated broccoli. If it hadn't been for Reg and, later, Susie's job and sometimes that group Food Not Bombs, she was sure she would've wasted away by now. It surprised Susie that her mom hadn't.

But it didn't matter now. Her mom wouldn't ever brush her fingers over Susie's face again. She wouldn't tuck Susie's hair behind her ears. She wouldn't kiss her cheek and tell her she loved her.

Heat and tears pricked at Susie's eyes, but she shoved the feeling back. If her mom hadn't done whatever stupid thing she'd been doing, she'd be alive right now and Susie wouldn't have had to run away to this horrible place that clearly she couldn't handle or understand. Her wrist throbbed and she glanced down to see she'd curled her fingers so tight that her hand had turned marshmallow pale. She uncurled her fingers and studied the half-moon slits her nails had dug into her palm.

"Come on, Suze." Reg cut into her thoughts. "You gonna stand there like a statue all day? What's the matter? This place isn't so bad. Tell you what. We can hold off on meeting the others a little longer." He swept out his arm, gesturing to the numerous moss-covered doors throughout the hall. "You can have your pick of any room and do whatever you want to it. Check it out." Reg threw open a door on their left and strolled into the room.

Susie bit her lip and followed him in. As soon as she stepped inside, the pine scent evaporated, replaced with the smell of rain-drenched leaves. When was she going to tell him what had happened? She couldn't. Not right now. She glanced around the room and tried to keep her expression neutral. Maybe if she acted as if it was normal, it would start to look that way. Wishful thinking. The walls, like everything else in the castle, wore moss that clung and seemed to ripple across the ceiling. It made her feel motion sick.

"Does everything have to be so green?" Susie pretended to study the freckles dotting her wrists instead of looking at the room. All that green made her go queasy.

"Oh geez, don't tell me you're going to go all Maya on me. She took one look at her room and changed *everything*. I like it the way it is. Reminds me where we are. How special it all is. But look, you *can* ask the moss to do something different. You just have to touch it."

Susie shook her head. "You can't prank me, Reg, so don't even try."

He gave her a look. "I'm *not* pranking you, Suze. Watch." Reg paced the oval, moss-drenched room, studying the walls. There were no windows here, and the musty smell made Susie think of rot and decay. Other than all the green, there was nothing else in the room. It reminded Susie eerily of her mom's house, no furniture but their mattresses. This room didn't even have that. Susie forced away a shudder as Reg turned to face her. She shrugged instead. She opened her mouth to utter *something* about her mom, but Reg swept out his arms and grinned. He looked happier than she had ever seen him. She gave up the thought of confessing to him for the moment.

"You just have to think about what you want. Like, in my room, I got my track trophies. Also, I totally got that half-pipe I've been dreaming of building since I was seven. Remember that?"

Susie nodded. She remembered. She also remembered Reg showing up at school with a black eye the day after he'd tried to build it. He'd said he'd got hit in the eye when he stepped on a board, but Susie knew it was because his uncle caught him sorting through the junk heap in their backyard. Reg had stopped mentioning the half-pipe after that. She squinted at him, hands on her hips. "You asked for your track trophies even though you're 'retired' now?" She made air quotes and rolled her eyes.

"Whatever. I like them." He shrugged. "I don't have to explain myself to you." For a beat

he fell silent, almost glum. Then he brightened, "So anyway. What do *you* want?" Reg looked at her expectantly. She crossed her arms. The smell of black soil clung to her nostrils, too strong. As if it was wishing it could bury her. She forced away the thought—soil was totally *not* sentient. At least, that was what she'd always thought. She glanced at Reg and flicked her gaze away just as fast.

"I guess a window would be nice. And maybe the smell could be...I don't know. Less. Or honeysuckle or something. Can you put a hummingbird feeder by the window?" She'd always wanted to see those birds up close, buzzy as flies but so much sweeter. Reg grinned at her.

"Wouldn't have pegged you for a bird-watcher, Suze."

"Whatever. I don't have to explain myself to you."

"Touché." Reg laughed his universal "I approve of you" laugh, and nodded, then closed his eyes. His finger probed at the wall of green.

Something suddenly hummed in the room, like soft bass beating beneath their feet. Susie inched back toward the door. The moss began to – *twitch* – and Susie tried to count her breaths as her heart hammered in her chest. Maybe he hadn't been pranking her before, after all. The green tendrils licked out into the air and twined with each other, building. Shaping. Susie could feel the floor softening beneath her feet, and she grabbed the doorframe for support. The tendrils churned faster.

"You'd better be thinking of a window and a bird feeder because whatever you're thinking about, it's going to make it right now." Reg shook his head at her, keeping his fingers pressed against the wall. Susie tried to rip her fingers away from the doorway, but the moss had slid beneath her palm, and stuck to her now. She couldn't break free. And what was worse were her

thoughts. No window, no bird feeder, but a dead body, eyes lifeless and open and unfocused. Susie squeezed her own eyes shut.

Stop thinking of her, she thought, and tried to think of a window. It would be a porthole to the forest – a round opening shaped by pink brick and a flower box full of dead roots – no, not dead roots – Stop it, Susie! – lavender or poppies or tulips or something. Whatever would call birds to remind her about life, to drown the smell of all that black soil. The birds could coast in on their wings and coast out the same way. Always in flight but never on the run. Susie would never close them out. The strange, rhythmic humming stopped. Susie opened her eyes and glanced at Reg, afraid to look anywhere else. He shrugged. She tested her hand and found the moss had let go. She jerked it away from the wall and cradled her palm, afraid the moss had burrowed its way into her skin, but it hadn't hurt, and there was no sign it had latched onto her in the first place.

Then she heard the chirping. Slowly she pivoted and to her left sat a cardinal perched on the edge of a perfect pink-brick trimmed porthole that looked out into the darkened forest. The cardinal chirped again, but flew away when Susie stepped toward it. Still, it didn't stop her from leaning out and gazing over the trees. Slits of pink appeared along the horizon and Susie frowned. She was so high up, it made her dizzy. She must be seeing things, that was all. She was tired, hadn't had any sleep, and the pink wasn't sunrise, just her bleary vision. That had to be it. To her left, the window glass glimmered in the starlight. She didn't think the castle had seemed this tall when she'd been outside of it, but maybe she'd been wrong. Somewhere in the darkness, more birds chirped. Susie sighed and drew herself back into the room.

"That had to be you because the window I was thinking of was one of those stained-glass

monsters that was going to wake you up in the middle of the night with a sermon about the," and he dropped his voice into the low, droning tone of a preacher, "Having of the Sex." Reg slouched against the wall, hands in his pockets. "I can't believe the castle didn't go for it." Susie forced out a laugh and nodded.

"Guess it's good I took over."

"Guess so. What do you think?" Reg strolled to the window and peered out. Then he grabbed the handle and pulled the window closed. Susie gave him a look. "What? It's cold."

"If you say so." Susie bit her lip. On the one hand, she was grateful that the room had given her this perfect opening to the world so she wouldn't forget where she was. It also made her want to curl up in a corner and hide. But she knew she couldn't tell Reg that was how she felt. And she couldn't just dump her confession on him when he thought he was doing something truly nice for her. She had to look tough. At least for a little while.

"Well?" Reg pressed.

"It's..." Susie searched for the right word. "Interesting."

Reg laughed incredulously. "Interesting? Is that all? I thought at least you'd use something like 'mind-blowing.' Interesting? Are you sure you're not freaking out?"

Susie spread out her hands, trying to look composed. "I mean, it's not what I expected. But that's not necessarily bad, right? I mean, we're not trapped here, right? The castle does what we tell it?"

Reg hesitated. "I mean, yeah...but it has its limits."

Again, Susie fought back that quickening in her chest. "What do you mean, limits?" Reg's face turned red.

"I mean, its magic doesn't stretch very far. I dunno. Something about the trees. Thano could tell you more. He's been here for his whole life or something." Reg shrugged and pointed to the window. "This can be your room, if you want. You can do pretty much whatever to it. If the castle doesn't like what you're asking, it just won't do it."

"Yeah, but—" She had so many questions, but Reg cut her off.

"But what?" Reg frowned at her. "Look—it'll give you anything within limits. Need clothes?" Reg closed his eyes, hand on the wall, and a wooden door slowly shimmered into existence, Reg's hand on the knob. He opened it to reveal a closet full of clothes Susie had only ever dreamed of wearing. Drapery floor-length gowns, bubbly miniskirts, but also subdued pieces like blouses and straight-leg jeans and—weirdly, a replica of the exact outfit she was wearing. Her mouth dropped open.

"How did you—?"

"C'mon, Suze, you *know* how. I'm gonna go check on Maya but I'll come back." He gave her an up-and-down glance. "I know it's not my place and God knows we've seen worse, but as your cousin I'll do you a solid—shower. Change. Eat something. The room will give you everything you need."

Susie's cheeks flamed. She wanted to smack him. His corkscrew curls always looked a step away from matted dreadlock city, but nobody told *him* when to shower. She made herself swallow her anger and wave him away. "Fine. Get out already."

Reg shrugged. "Some people," he said, and let himself out. She thought she should leave. She didn't know what the castle would ask for in return—because it would ask for something, wouldn't it? In the fairy tales, someone always had to give up something. But the temptation to

look at the clothes—and to eat, and to shower, and to sleep, and to stay far out of town and away from her mom's body—won in the end.

Susie wandered into the closet and let her fingers drift across the soft fabrics. Silk and gauze and none of that scratchy acrylic stuff. And the T-shirts were the softest, heathered types, not that heavy material that just made a person look like a bag. All the dresses and gowns had pockets, and best of all, there was lots of running gear. Plus, brand-new bras and underwear, all vibrant colors and soft and smooth. She sighed and stepped back, placed her hand against the wall and closed her eyes. The closet disappeared, now replaced by a shower. With one of those dual-headed rain-fountain things like she'd seen in movies. She stripped down and basked in the heat. For a moment she let herself giggle like she was drunk as the vapor rose up to cloud the mossy walls of the room. When she was done, she drip-dried, drops evaporating as they touched the moss floor. She thought about her dad's medal—could she just recreate it? She wouldn't have to go back to town for it, if so. But she knew it wouldn't be the same thing. Whatever the castle made wouldn't be the same thing he'd touched and then left behind. It would just be a copy. A fake. So she didn't try to make it. Instead, she touched the wall and the closet came back—along with a plastic container full of cinnamon rolls. "Feast for the gods," she said, and grabbed a matching set of orange undergarments before slipping into an exact replica of her deer T-shirt and jeans. She didn't want anyone thinking she was too needy. Then she let herself sink to the floor, which turned into a bed. "Just a little nap," she told herself, and like that, she was out.

She woke to a bang on the door. How much time had passed, Susie didn't know. She rose groggily and wiped a line of drool from her cheek. No horrible dreams this time. Just 100-

percent luxurious sleep. She checked her sports watch, but the digital seconds counter seemed to be on the fritz. She flicked at it, but the seconds kept moving forward and backward again. She hadn't checked it before she'd fallen asleep, so she had no idea when it had actually broken. She froze. What if it had broken when she'd found her mom, if the blood had somehow damaged the circuits? She made herself breathe and calm down. Surely the flecks of blood hadn't ruined the watch. Didn't matter. Reg would see she'd broken it and would be upset she'd managed to break the one gift he'd been able to afford to buy her. She didn't want him to see it. She fumbled to unlatch it from her wrist and chucked it across the room. She immediately felt guilty, but didn't get back up to retrieve it. The banging continued.

"What? What is it?" she called, trying to sound normal.

"God, are you dead in here or what?" Reg poked his head inside the room.

"Give me a break." Susie stretched and forced herself to get out of the feather-soft bed.

At least that had been a comfort. "Do you know what time it is?" she asked. She still had to fight the urge to glance toward her naked wrist.

"No clue, my watch is busted. Where's yours? Are you ready to meet everyone else now?"

"In a sec." She stretched her arms above her head, her stomach already twisting back into knots. She didn't want him to know what she'd done to the watch, and she didn't want to know the answers to these questions, but she made herself ask, anyway. She turned to Reg, refusing to let herself be tempted into picking back up the watch. No sense avoiding the situation of the castle. "So it gives us all these things—our wildest dreams, right? But Reg, when you're asking for things, does the castle ever ask – I mean..." Susie couldn't believe she was asking about what

a *building* wanted. "Does it ever want anything from you before it makes something?"

Reg shrugged. "Dunno. Like what?"

Susie studied him, looking for any sign that the castle had turned him all automaton man. She made herself go over fairy tales—anything she'd ever read about magical bargains. Like the devil taking souls. "I don't know. Like, are you ever tired after the castle makes something for you? Or, does it let you go right after it's made something, or does it keep hold of you for a while?" She remembered the tingling that had wound through her hand when she'd first grabbed hold of the doorway.

"No way. I mean, not really, I don't think. If anything, I'm way more awake than ever. I can see things super clear and I don't need to sleep. Don't you feel it? Don't you feel charged up from that?" Reg made a popping sound with his lips and grinned.

Susie nodded but didn't return his smile. She *was* awake, far more awake than she'd been all day. She didn't even know what time it was, but she was pretty sure her nap hadn't been anything more than that, and it felt like a short one at that. When she stilled herself, she could feel a current sparking through her—as if she was electric or connected to something much bigger than just herself. It was a rush. All the pain she'd felt about her mom had kind of spread out and somehow felt less intense. As if someone had taken hold of her hand and pulled the sharpness of the pain out of her. That was the only way she knew how to describe it.

"Okay, so some things you touch, and they mess you up. And others, they give you some kind of buzz? How do you know what you're not supposed to touch? What if this place just decides to mess with you?" Susie shook out her hand, trying to get rid of the tingling sensation.

Reg shrugged. "I think you gotta think more about what's going on with *you* than with

what's going on with *it*. It's like it can hear everything inside us and tries to make it better if you want that—and sometimes if you're really in the shit, it can make you feel worse. Like the other day, I—" Reg abruptly stopped and shook his head. Then he gave her an embarrassed smile. "Just trust me, okay? You don't want the castle to mess with your head? Don't focus on it messing with your head. Thano can show you."

Susie studied Reg. She realized she loved him, truly loved him. He was the closest thing to a brother she had ever had, and she had always relied on him, and he on her. He was forever gushing with excitement, never holding back from her, even if what he wanted to tell her was grosser than what some jock had done in the guys' locker room. And now, she was hiding something from him that would change her life forever, something huge. She opened her mouth to tell him about her mother, about all of it. Then she stopped. Reg never cared about hiding anything, she thought. Only now, he'd pulled back, for probably the first time ever. Susie narrowed her eyes. "What?" she asked. Reg just gave her a wide-eyed look and asked "What?" right back.

"What aren't you telling me?" She nudged him with her shoulder, but he didn't press back. Instead, he circled away from her and stood at the doorway.

"It's nothing. Really, Suze. Not important." He gave her a smile but it didn't quite reach his eyes. Susie was unimpressed, and suddenly, she was suspicious. Something was wrong.

"Don't lie to me, Reg. You can't fool me." Reg's face turned red, but he shrugged and crossed his arms.

"I don't need to tell you everything, Suze. Some things are private. You don't go around telling me about everyone you ever had a crush on. Don't make me out like some kind of

hypocrite. I only ever give you full truth bombs, anyway."

"Liar. You're leaving something out. You totally stink of lies. It's making you all sweaty. It's going to make you break out, you know that, right? You should just come clean for the sake of your skin," Susie said.

Reg laughed, but his face turned serious. He studied her, as if he was sizing her up. "Do you really want to know? Because it's pretty messed up."

Susie swallowed and nodded. Not that it could be any more messed up than what had just happened to her. The two cousins suddenly seemed to be jostling for gold in the Dysfunction Olympics. Reg glanced at her wrist. "Where did you put your watch? You didn't actually lose it, did you?" Susie shook her head and pointed across the room. Reg stooped to pick it up. He dropped it back in her lap and sat down next to her.

"Okay, look. Don't freak out, okay? It's complicated. Look." He pointed to the glitchy seconds counter on the watch face.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to break it." He hadn't griped at her about breaking it yet, but she was sure he would. But the look on his face said something else. He wasn't angry at all. He was *worried*. Susie got very still. It felt like crickets were twittering in her stomach, their antennae tickling against her lungs. She didn't want to know what he would say next, but she knew it was big, and that she'd been ignoring it. Maybe it *was* worse than everything that had happened to her so far.

"Look at the watch, Suze," he said gently. "This is normal." The seconds on the watch face jumped back and forth, never fixing on a time. As if time had frozen. Susie leaned back and shook her head.

"If you're trying to tell me time is going all gooey you're going to have to try again. That's impossible."

"You would've said the same thing about this room before I showed it to you, though. You know it," Reg responded. Susie leaped up and began to pace the room, angry she'd fallen for one of his tricks again. Angry she'd thought she might be able to trust him. Something seemed to have changed between them, but she didn't know what. Only, he hadn't really been pranking her when he'd fed the bone to the castle wall earlier—he and Thano had just made it seem like he had to get her to calm down. This room was proof enough of that.

"Come on, calm down. I'm not tricking you. How did I even know your watch was like this? I told you, mine is busted. It does the same thing." Reg got up and held her watch toward her. "Here, take it."

She lifted her hands and backed away. "What for?" She slung her backpack over her shoulders and squared herself in front of him. "You know I don't like it when you mess with me. Like you're one of *them*." Reg sighed and lifted his shoulders in response, the watch dangling from his hand.

"You know that's not true. I'm not like those guys. See, hear, speak no evil. You know that's not me. Don't you *want* it back?" He looked hurt. She knew that maybe she wasn't being fair, but he'd never made her put up her guard before. Things had always been easy between them. No lies, no drama. But this was different. Reg didn't move and didn't speak. He continued to hold the watch out toward her. Sighing, she grabbed it and fastened it back on her wrist. "So what? Two watches break. Big deal."

Reg shook his head. "You don't understand. I'm going to tell you something, and I want

you to listen carefully. There's a reason I'm staying here, and there's a reason your watch went fritzastic, okay? Just stop building your wall of stubborn and listen already, okay?" Reg moved to the doorway and stood in front of her, clearly waiting for a response. Susie only crossed her arms, covering the watch. Even if it was a gift from Reg, she was still afraid to look at it, afraid of what it meant. "You said I was giving up earlier, quitting track. But you should know I haven't given up on my life. I'm trying to keep it." Reg's face began to take on that tomato red hue it got when he was nervous or embarrassed.

"I'm listening," she said, her voice soft. She dropped her arms by her sides, unsure if she should try to comfort him. He never showed this side. It was always a grin, always a happy front with Reg. What a jerk she was. "I'm not going anywhere. Promise."

The expression on Reg's face melted away and he laughed. "Me neither, thankfully."

"What does that mean? You can tell me. I promise I won't freak. I won't write you off as the enemy, anymore." She touched him on the shoulder, suddenly afraid he would disintegrate into ash, as if the castle was barely holding him together somehow. The two of them sank to the floor again.

"Okay." He gazed at his palms. "You remember what you said about Uncle Jack telling me I owed him money for the doctor? And when Coach Terry saying she'd bench me if I kept missing practices? And all that school I missed?"

"It's kind of hard to forget."

"I didn't want to say anything at first because I didn't understand what was going on with me, and I didn't want to scare you. I swear, Susie, some mornings I woke up and could barely breathe." Susie met his gaze. He wasn't smiling anymore, and his lower lip trembled. Susie's

stomach flip-flopped as tears began to roll down his face. Their entire lives, she'd never seen him cry.

"What's wrong?" She reached forward and grabbed his hand. Reg leaned forward, slipping his hand away, and coughed, his face going from rose to lobster red. Susie moved to slap him on the back but he stopped after her first swat. He sighed and wiped at his face, then ran his fingers through his curls, as if he had never coughed at all. Where had she been when he'd been going through all of this? School and track and work and mom. So much mom. Susie had barely noticed Reg whirlpooling down the drain. Nausea winged at her, pressing into every corner of her body. "So I went to the clinic. Uncle Jack was such a bastard about it, but at least he took me."

It suddenly felt like a needle and thread was stitching through Susie's insides. She waited for him to go on. She waited for the bottom to drop out beneath them.

"They did a bunch of tests on me, stuck me with all sorts of things like you wouldn't believe." Reg shuddered and when he began to speak again, he spoke so fast Susie could barely understand. "And then, a couple days later when they came back with the results, I didn't know what to do. It was like my life was gonna be over before I had a chance to do anything, you know?" Reg coughed and wiped his face. Susie didn't breathe.

"They said it's like this stupid ivy. 'Metastasis,'" he went on. "That's a total SAT word. It's everywhere. Burkitt Lymphoma. They can't make it go away. Believe me, I asked. They just told me they'd help me get hospital or hospice help or whatever." He stopped for a beat. "I'm only eighteen." Reg's voice broke and his body convulsed silently. She realized that he was sobbing.

Susie grabbed him and wrapped her arms around his too-thin body. After a moment, he wrapped his arms around her and wept into her neck, the vibration of his cries somehow making the room tremble. She wasn't sure she could handle much more. First her mom, now Reg. The bottom—if there ever had been one—had just been ripped away and there was only darkness to fall into. Tears splashed down her face for what felt like the millionth time that week. Her insides scraped against each other, raw and pleading to just be *done*. Nothing more. The future didn't exist without Reg. She squeezed him harder, and Reg pulled back, wiping his eyes. Then he grinned, inexplicably. How could he find *anything* to smile about in this situation? His smile only made her cry harder.

"Hey, hey, hey, calm down, okay? It's going to be all right." Reg wrapped his arms around her again, but she pulled back and wiped her face with the back of her hand.

"How can you say that? Nothing's all right. I don't know what to do," she whimpered. She tried to grasp it—her cousin, her closest friend, dead and gone, and where had she been when he was at his worst? With a jolt, she thought of him in a coffin. Without Reg—no. The world would break. Even worse than losing her mom.

"Suze, I promise, things are okay." Reg poked her nose like he'd done when they were kids. "I knew this was going to be tough," he sighed. "Nothing like springing impending doom on your peeps."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Susie tried to quiet the roar that pulsed through her. He was still here. He was her only real family, and he was sitting right in front of her. She hadn't lost him, not yet. But the only direction for them to go was down, magic castle or no.

"How could I? What kind of conversation goes like, 'Hey, look I've gotta drop track because—surprise! —dying here!'" Reg laughed. He actually laughed. A lump too big to swallow swelled in Susie's throat, and her face went hot. She thought of her mom and that too quiet house. How she would never tell him now. It was too much to load on him. She'd keep it bottled inside, the way Reg had kept his illness. She'd do anything to keep him from worrying about her now.

"I'm so sorry, Reg, I didn't—" Reg reached forward and touched her face, cutting her off.

"Hey, don't do that. There's nothing to be sorry about. Because I'm going to be okay." Sometimes, especially when it was windy or when it was cold, Susie would come back from a run with her ears throbbing, an echo of the howling wind the only sound she could understand. When people spoke to her, she'd respond with a half laugh as if she understood what they were saying. That was this moment. She hadn't heard him. There was too much wind in her ears. The moss in the room seemed to pulse and titter. As if walls could laugh. Susie wiped her nose and waiting for him to say something else, something that would make all of this better. He grinned at her.

"I can see the gears turning, Suze. Look at your watch. Listen to what I've been trying to tell you." Susie did. She still didn't understand. Nothing made sense anymore.

"How are you going to be okay?" Cancer was a sure thing, she knew. A girl a few grades younger than them had died from it a few years ago. Susie hadn't known her, but she'd known about her. Everyone did. Everyone always knew about the sick kids. How they never got better.

"Because of this place. Because Thano found me and knew I needed help." Reg tapped the face of her watch. "This is going to sound really freaky, okay? It's not like time is frozen or

anything. That would be crazy." Susie shook her head. Reg was the one who was crazy. It made sense—he was sick, so make up a story about surviving terminal cancer. Okay. But why wouldn't he make up a story like that? If it helped him feel better, she owed it to him to at least listen.

"No, listen. I'm being serious," Reg said. He caressed the moss on the wall. "But time, well, it does this super weird thing here. It's like the forest. You know, the trees here last for hundreds of years longer than people do. That kind of thing."

Nope. She'd heard enough. Susie stood up. Reg put up his hand. "Let me finish. We're on this weird tree time. I swear I'm not lying, Susie. Ask Thano. It creeps forward so slowly that our bodies stay the same—for like—ever."

"But you're already sick." Susie balled the hem of her shirt up in her hand and began to pace again. Even if it was true, how had Thano known anything? He was just a guy who lived here. She wanted to smack herself. Of course he wasn't. The castle had *always* been full of illusions. She should have known he was just another part of it.

Reg smiled. "That's just the thing. The doctors gave me some pills to manage the pain. I took them back at the arcade, when we were waiting for you. They'll work forever as long as I'm here, in the castle, or in the woods. But if I leave, that's another story. That's why I can't run track, why I can't go back to school. I severed all my ties with Uncle Jack, didn't tell him where I'm at. I'm telling you, Suze, I'm good as cured."

Susie leaned forward and hugged him. For a moment they were silent. She didn't believe him—how could she? But she didn't want him to worry about proving it to her. "I couldn't lose you," she whispered.

"You won't have to," Reg said. She hoped it was the truth, but her heart snapped its tattered threads in doubt. Susie pulled back and gave him a steady look.

"How did Thano know you needed his help?" she asked. Reg shook his head.

"Nuh uh. That's for him to tell and you to find out. I think it will make you happy, you know? You can stay here too. With all of us. Time's for sure our bitch. Forever!" he laughed.

Susie wrinkled her nose. "Gross. That sounds exhausting. Time lasting forever, I mean. Not staying here. I mean, what are you going to do with forever? You and Maya can't exactly have those cutest kids she's always bragging about if time is all messed up, can you?"

Reg grinned. Great. She was instantly sorry she'd asked. Susie had probably just switched on cousin-teasing mode, which never failed to make her feel like punching him in the teeth. Only gut-wrenching embarrassment could come from this. "Don't worry. Maya's just fine." He laughed as Susie's face went crimson. "Cut the pure act, cousin. Like you're above thinking about sex. Saint Susie the sexless. I saw the way you looked at Thano."

Susie could feel her face flaming red. "Shut up. I can't talk to you about this." She studied him for a moment, knowing he'd do whatever he could to embarrass her about this one. "Don't say anything. Promise me."

"Oh, I promise, cuz. I promise so hard." Reg dropped to his knees, his hands folded as if he was praying to her. She swatted him, grateful they were at least acting like he'd never been sick to begin with.

"Wait, I want to add one more thing to your promise. Did the castle turn his hair that sexy shade of purple?" She laughed when Reg started to blush too. It was so his turn for some payback.

"Oh gross, Suze. Now I'm not going to be able to look at him without thinking of your hair fetish." They both broke out laughing and Susie could feel the weight lifting from her shoulders. She had her best friend back. She knew she'd been right to try to find him. "And it's not purple. I don't know how you get that from electric blue. Unless you're color-blind."

"Oh, please. I think you're the one who's color-blind," Susie said. But then from behind them someone cleared his throat and coughed. "You think my hair is sexy?"

Slowly, Susie pivoted around. Thano towered over her and grinned. He was only inches away. She could smell sage and honey whirling around him. Maya stood slightly behind Thano, scowling at Susie, but Susie barely glanced at her. Maya's perpetually bitchy mood made more sense now that Reg had confessed.

"I—I—" Susie stammered. If the floor could just do that mushy thing and swallow her up now, she'd be eternally grateful.

"Thano, geez. Of course it's sexy. Stop trying to give the kid a heart attack." Reg moved away from Susie and clapped Thano on the shoulders. Susie fumed at him, feeling the flush of her cheeks again.

"I'm not a kid," she said. "We're the same age, you jerk."

"Yeah, okay." Maya laughed and gestured at Reg to follow her. He glanced back at Susie. "Go easy on him, cousin. He's pretty fragile." Then Reg and Maya took their stupid shrill laughter off down the hall and disappeared.

Susie coughed and glanced around the room, letting her gaze linger on everything except Thano and his stupid sexy purple hair. Except Reg said it was blue. She had such a big mouth. Her stomach twisted again and she wished she could disappear. Apparently, even if magic ran

this place, it couldn't make her invisible. She curled her fingers into her palm, looked at the mossy green floor, and coughed.

"Well," she said.

"Well," Thano agreed.

"It's been real." Susie kept her eyes on the floor and fidgeted with the strap on her backpack. "But I've gotta get going. Mom, uh..." The word stuck in her throat and swept her back into that chasm of sadness welling inside her. She faked a slight cough, cleared her throat, got a grip on herself. "She doesn't like me out late and all that." Susie made a wide arc around Thano as she made for the exit. He followed her. Anything to get out of this embarrassment. She wanted something real she could touch, and that something real was stashed in a shed in Garnet Falls. Not here, where time was fuzzy and handsome guys had hair color that changed depending on who looked at them.

"She doesn't, does she?" Thano kept pace with her even when she sped up.

"Nope," she answered, eyes fixed on the creepy ivy hallway. Don't touch the walls, she reminded herself, and closed her eyes. Don't say stupid things to hot guys who live in magic castles, either.

"Susie, even if you don't want to stay here—which, by the way, I know isn't true," Thano said, "You shouldn't lie." He pressed his fingers gently into her palm. "Don't look at me like that. I know you don't have anywhere else to go."

Susie's breath caught. She tried to say something, but it came out as a stammer. With a shaking free hand, Susie tucked her hair behind her ear. "How'd you know?" She closed her eyes and saw her mom's body again. Cold and alone on the floor. How could he know? But he had

known Reg was sick, hadn't he? The how of it all spun her brain in circles.

"It's a tell. You do something that says more than you say with your mouth. You refusing to look me in the eye, for one, though that could also mean you're nervous or scared of me. Are you scared of me, Susie?" Thano cupped his hand around her chin and gently turned her head so that she looked him in the eyes.

She breathed a sigh of relief. He *didn't* know. However he had found out about Reg, it wasn't because he could read minds. She swallowed back the lump in her throat and, trying to act nonchalant, shrugged. "Not really," she said. His touch felt so warm, and she suddenly felt sleepy again. She wished he wouldn't touch her like that when she was still cringing from embarrassment. It just made it worse that he seemed to know *how* she was feeling, but not *why*. As if he knew her thoughts, Thano dropped his hand from her chin. He let his hands dangle limply by his sides.

"Plus, your watch looks scratched and broken. Like maybe you've got more important things to worry about than that. Otherwise, you would've taken it off. Not like Maya. She's got to have every detail perfect and she makes sure everyone knows it."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Susie gestured at her watch. "It was working yesterday. And you know what Reg told me? He told me it's not working because *time is frozen*. So don't try to make me feel like some homeless street urchin because I know you're holding out on me, okay? I get by fine without hanging around with people who *lie* to me."

Thano blushed and stammered, shifting against the doorway. "You got me," he said, his voice quiet and sad. "I just thought I'd make things a little easier on you. Did Reg tell you how I found him too?" Thano lifted his chin, lips parted, like he was genuinely apologetic he'd just

tried to play her. But Susie wasn't cool with what he'd just done, so she didn't say anything. "I really don't want you to be alone, Susie. I know you need someone, right now. You can talk to me, I promise. I will not lie to you again."

She looked at him suspiciously and wanted to scoff. She couldn't talk to anyone. And the less Thano knew, the better. When he found out what she'd left her mom's body without telling anyone, he'd probably kick her out anyway. A good person didn't do what she had done. "No offense, but I *just* met you."

Thano twisted the skin on his ring finger and glanced away as if she'd upset or embarrassed him. After a moment he looked at her again. "So try me. What have you got to lose?"

Susie shook her head "Nuh uh. You don't know the half of it. Look, I appreciate the laser light show and everything. It's real impressive. I mean it. But I've got a huge race in the morning, and unlike Reg, I really do care about it – and about getting out of here. Do you know what time it really is— out there? I don't know how I'm supposed to keep track of that kind of thing."

"No, sorry. But you should have plenty of time. You mean *here* as in –" Thano started.

"Here as in this town. You seem nice and all, but it's a little too much, you know? Besides, I can't just hunker down here forever. I can't forget about everything else in my life—I have some things I kind of *have* to do. I want to prove myself. Besides, I don't really get why you're hanging out here with a bunch of high-schoolers. Why is this place so important? Why us?"

Thano sighed. "Look. It's not so easy to do things for people the way they want them done. I know that much. This is my place. It *always* has been." They were both silent for a

moment. Thano smiled, but it came out broken. "You didn't ask how I found Reg, but I know you want to know. I have a confession to make, if you'll hear me."

Susie shrugged. "Not like I have much choice right now, is there?" She slid her thumb beneath her backpack strap, readjusting it. Thano tugged a piece of paper from the pocket of his jeans and after a moment's hesitation, handed it to Susie. The paper looked as if it had once been white, but now was streaked with dirt, and bore more of an off-white, half-gray hue. It felt soft with moisture, as if it would rip when she opened it. As if it couldn't bear another person's eyes on it.

"I know you guys spent a lot of time in these woods," was all Thano said as Susie carefully unfolded it to find Reg's handwriting. A confession of his illness, an apology that he hadn't told her. He'd come out to the woods and buried it for *her*. She tried not to let the weight of it knock her off balance, but she sagged a little. Thano bounced from the doorway to her side to offer her support.

"He wrote this to me," she said. "And *you* have it." The heat from Thano's body spread into her own. Did she feel calm? Or stunned? With Thano touching her, she didn't know how she felt. The air between them seemed to snap with sparks, but she knew it was only because they were touching. Steady, Susie, she thought. Steady. Carefully, she slid away from his touch and pocketed the note. Thano's gaze followed the note as she slid it into her jeans. "Is that the only note you have of his?" Susie whispered, her voice not quite up to its full power.

Thano shook his head. "I have known Reg—and you, Susie. I have known you—since you began coming to these woods and leaving your trail of words. It seems like forever ago to you—but it doesn't feel like that to me. It feels like I'm just getting to know you."

The world shrunk around her, taking her breath and her secrets and everything she thought she was casting into darkness. No one was supposed to have those words. They were hers, and they were Reg's. Not Thano's.

"And you can have whatever you want, Susie—even if you want to fight a little for it," Thano continued. "I know you will like it. I know I can help you both. I've been waiting. Come on, I'll show you. We can do everything here." Thano offered her his hand.

"Right." Susie studied him as he bit his lip and slid his hair behind his ear. Maybe Reg and Thano were both setting her up. Thano looked like a normal guy, even if his hair seemed like a different color to Reg, but that didn't count—Reg was sick and who knows what it had done to his mind. No way the Moss Castle had *always* been Thano's. She would've known if he'd lived there when she was a kid—she was sure of it. But she wasn't sure she wanted to know about where he was really from. But benefit of the doubt was always a good thing, or so she'd thought before her own words had been found. They were supposed to stay in the ground *forever*. But did it matter? She knew it didn't, not when she'd just lost her mother. Not when Reg might lose his life. Digging up her notes seemed like such a petty thing to worry about. And besides, so far, the castle had manufactured food and clothing and a room full of whatever she wanted to create. So maybe Thano and Reg were both just being honest and it was all just super weird to deal with at once. But it could give her *anything*, Thano had said. Even noise in a house and a crazy mom who got help instead of throwing books at teachers. Instead of purging everything so much so that she'd finally purged herself.

Susie made herself speak. "Can we turn back time? Just go back a week or two?" The air weighed heavy on Susie as she waited for Thano to speak.

He gently shook his head. "I'm so sorry. I know going back would help you. But I don't control time. It just operates on a different scale than you're used to." Despite her resolve, her eyes filled with wet. It had been too much to hope for. She gazed down. "Susie, look at me. We may not be able to turn back time, but the Castle—and the forest—can *help* you. I can show you." And then Thano smiled and stretched his fingers out toward hers a second time. Susie bit back the kernel of hope she'd stupidly let herself nurse. The only way was forward, now. Back to the heaviness of her mom's absence. Susie forced herself to give Thano a fleeting smile back, and, shouldering on her backpack, entwined her fingers with his. Maybe he could show her how he'd gotten through his own battles enough so that she'd figure out how to fight hers.

Susie hadn't expected Thano to go back down the hall toward the stairs and knock on another of the numerous doors, but that was where they went and that was what they did. The ivy shrunk back the second Thano approached it, and it made Susie want to smack something.

"Come," someone called from the other side. Ivy trailed down this door and Susie was careful not to touch it.

She wrinkled her nose as they went in. The room smelled like a campfire and looked like a cramped jungle with moss and lichen and ivy curling up the walls and flung across the room like streamers. Ripped-up cloth had been draped over half of the ivy like a canopy. On one side of the room, what looked like a mattress made of a bed of leaves lay in a sunken section. On it, two guys about Susie's age lounged. One of them held a book stained with age, and the other seemed to be knitting...lichen. It was leafy looking, but it was lichen all the same. Susie blinked. They smiled easily at her.

One of them wore brown trousers and a sky blue button-down shirt with clouds and butterflies plastered across it. The other guy looked like he'd just fallen out of some weird biker-beatnik movie. Motorcycle jacket, shirt and tie, sleek pants. These guys looked like total opposites and Susie wondered if they were even friends. They looked vaguely familiar, as if she'd seen them somewhere before. Their clothes were so wackadoo that she was sure she hadn't, though.

"Are there any others here?" She whispered to Thano. Smiling, he shook his head.

"We're the special ones. You want to know how the Castle will help Reg, Susie. Kit. Jamie. This is Susie. She wants to know about where we live."

Susie shrunk back. Stay calm, she thought. "Kit Boyd? Jamie McNair?" She heard herself sputtering. That was why they'd seemed familiar—she'd seen their picture when her journalism teacher had brought a fifty-year-old print newspaper to class. It was a "relic," her teacher had laughed. Now, in front of her, still living, still breathing, the two guys nodded and grinned at her. They had disappeared in that forest fire. But that had happened before she and Reg had even been born. But they hadn't aged—at all. Kit and Jamie looked more like seventeen than sixty, or however old they were supposed to be. She tried not to shudder, and ignored the uneasy sensation creeping up her spine. Both Kit and Jamie laughed and nodded in unison. Kind of like robots. But Susie was pretty sure robots didn't knit. And maybe they didn't hunker down in weird castles, either.

"How are you –how are you here? And how are you doing that?" She pointed to the lichen in the motorcycle guy's hand.

"Jamie." He nodded at her. "We're just here. Thano rescued us during a wildfire—we would've gone up in flames if he hadn't found us and taken us in. It's a wonder we lived at all—both of us were on fire when he found us. And this is what I do. It's no different from weaving cotton." He held up a cord of lichen, and it shimmered into a lustrous peacock blue cloth.

Susie felt like throwing up. She remembered the boy on fire and wondered if somehow she'd seen them burning. But that had been long after they'd actually disappeared. If Thano had found them, that meant—she didn't think she could handle what that meant. She glanced at Thano. "No. That's not what I mean." She struggled to find the right words. "I mean, how do you look so young? You should be really old. How are you doing that?" She was going to lose it, finally and completely. She felt it building up inside of her, the need to scream.

"This is how we'll save Reg," Thano told her, looking confused. "I thought you needed better proof than just talk." Susie couldn't believe she'd wanted to make out with Thano. He was older than her crotchety pre-cal teacher Mr. Lester, who had to be seventy, at least. Maybe older than her pre-cal teacher's dad.

Kit looked up from his book and squinted at Susie. "I thought you would be smarter. Thano, I thought she would be smarter." He pinched the bridge of his nose like he had a headache and sighed. Thano touched Susie on the shoulder and gestured for her to come farther into the room, but she didn't budge.

"Hey now, Kit. I thought you would be kinder." Thano strode over and plucked the book out of his hands.

"Hey!" Kit grabbed for the book, but with a grin Thano held it away and flipped through it. Susie could feel her hands beginning to shake again. Was Thano like a vampire? Time really

did freeze in the castle. The world really was spinning away outside while life barely crawled forward here. She wanted to ask so many questions but they all seemed super rude, in the vein of "Why aren't you dead or why don't you look like you should be in a nursing home?" So she made herself look at the book Thano had taken from Kit. The cover was old and green, and Susie couldn't make out the title. The words of the book looked like they were in a different language that slid and rippled across the pages like the waters of a creek. A shudder passed through Susie. Thano handed the book back to him after a long minute of Kit's haughty sighs.

"Thank you," Kit grumbled and returned to his book.

"None of this makes any sense." Susie's voice cracked when she spoke but she didn't care about looking strong anymore. She had tried to be a good sport, to believe what seemed to unbelievable. But it was too much.

Jamie laughed. "Obviously, skin is all just window decorations. But I know you know that. It can heal, you know. But this," he gestured at the ivy, "has no substance when it moves through the passage. It's not even dust. It's just nothing. We can make it into anything we want."

Kit slammed his book shut and glared at Jamie, then at Thano. "I can't believe you talk to her like she's some kind of equal. She's been here for two minutes and already you're treating her better than us. You go out and find whoever you want and you won't even let us outside? How is that fair?"

Susie stepped to Thano's side. "What're they talking about? Is this place a passage? I don't understand."

"Guys, we've discussed this," Thano said, and smiled at Susie. "I'm sorry. I thought meeting them would help explain this place. Why it's *good* and how it helps *all* of us." Thano

gave Kit and Jamie a look that seemed to make them cringe. He turned back to her. "They know you have something they don't."

"Oh, is that it? Is that all it is? And what is that?" Kit said, looking bored.

"Life." Thano grinned like he thought his was the best response ever.

"Are you kidding me? Look at this skin. Flawless." Kit ran his fingers over his cheeks as if he was modeling makeup.

"Shut up, Kit. Your face would waste away the moment you leave the woods and you know it." Jamie smacked him on the arm.

"Oh, come on. It's not like we've been here forever. It's been like a few months."

Susie felt dizzy and grabbed Thano to steady herself. He wrapped his arm around her waist. Did Kit really not have any idea those three months had come and gone—like, fifty years ago?

"What's wrong with her?" Kit nodded at Susie.

"It hasn't been *months*. More like fifty years," she sputtered and tried to back away but Thano wouldn't let go.

"Big deal." Kit waved his hand. "Three months, fifty years. No difference. *I* still feel the same. What do I care about time anymore?"

"Yeah, you dumb cluck, you go outside though and you'll turn to ash. Don't be a martyr just because you're jealous, Kit." Jamie rolled his eyes and returned to his knitting. Susie could only stare.

"Do you get it now?" Thano whispered in her ear. She stared at him with her mouth open, the taste of acid on her tongue. His purple hair and eyes, the way he held her gaze, the kindness

she thought had beamed out of them. Was any of that real? What did he really look like without the castle's magic? It went way beyond a trick of the light.

"I have to go," she said, and pushed him off of her.

"Susie," Thano said, following after her. She backed all the way to the doorway. Jamie had put his needles down and leaned forward, staring at her. She fled from the room.

Susie raced back down the stairs toward the first floor. As she ran, she shrank back from the ivy that dangled overhead and crowded the walls, keeping it from brushing against her skin. She couldn't bear to bring her nightmares about her mother back again. She jumped onto the third-floor landing and kept going.

"Susie, wait!" Thano called from behind her. She whirled around, flyaway wisps of hair sticking against her mouth. Thano smiled at her gently, like he worried for her. Behind Thano, the stairway was dark. The ivy rustled in some invisible breeze she couldn't feel. It was as if it was laughing at her. She shivered.

"Don't go. I'm sorry we scared you. That wasn't what I meant to do." Thano held out a hand.

Susie shrank back. "Why should I believe you? How old are you *really*? And why can't you just *explain* what's going on?" She glanced at her watch, still sputtering back and forth between seconds. A place—in her own world—where time *really* didn't work. Logic and reason annihilated with every passing second—she wanted to laugh at that thought—spent here. Thano bit his lip, brows drawn together, like he couldn't figure out how to answer her. "I couldn't say how old I am. I age. Just in Castle time, I guess?" He kept walking toward her as she tried to puzzle that one out. "Think of it this way. Trees live a different time line than people. The Castle

isn't any different."

"What does that even mean? Am I going to die the second we step out the castle doors? And I have a race in the morning—" She slapped her forehead. "Which, thanks to this stupid time void, I'm probably already late for! I have to go."

"You won't miss it, Susie, I promise. I still need you to see something before you leave, Susie. Why I knew you would want to be here." Thano wrapped his hand around her elbow. She jabbed her arm at him and tried to shake him off, but his grip only tightened.

"Ugh. I'll go with you, okay? Just get your hand off me." The otherness of it all suddenly clicked into place. What if he'd sent those visions of the burning boy after her all those years ago when she'd come to the castle the first time? What if he *was* the boy? Maybe that was how he'd found their notes? Susie yanked her elbow away from him and glared, jaw clenched. Her heart hammered in her chest. She had to get out. But there was still the matter of Reg. How he *had* to stay. She didn't want to abandon him the same way she'd abandoned her mother.

"This way," Thano said. "And please, don't worry. Reg will be okay. I'm helping him."

Susie wrapped her arms around herself and followed Thano down the hallway. He had just read her mind. Hadn't he? So did this mean he knew about her mom? She couldn't tell. But there no way could she trust him if he actually *could* read her mind. He could just spew any little thing he thought she needed to hear. And maybe he was getting ready to turn her into the cops for not telling anyone about her mom. No way was she going to keep following this guy.

So the second that Thano rounded the corner of the landing and began walking down the second-floor hallway, Susie spun around and charged back down the stairs toward the first floor, past the creepy ivy and over the plush green ground. She pumped her legs up the soft green

stairs, ignoring Thano as he called from behind.

The faster she ran down the stairs, the longer the descent seemed to be, and a too-sweet smell of lavender began to choke her. The soft steps began to grow too soft, and like mud, squelched and pulled at her feet as she tried to pump her legs harder. Susie choked back a lump in her throat and the hot sting of tears spilled down her cheeks.

"It's just one floor, Suze. You can do this," she whispered.

From behind her, Thano called, "Susie! Susie, wait!"

But she wouldn't wait or stop for him. Finally, she freed her feet from the stairs, and landed on the main floor. Whatever had been holding her back on the stairs seemed to have released its hold, so she dashed through the main hall and into the foyer. Before she knew it, her hand had pushed open the front door and she was tumbling out into the dark night. She sprinted over the spongy moss and away from the castle, back, back toward Garnet Falls and her real life. She couldn't just hide out. Not like Thano or Kit or Jamie. If she stayed in the castle for too long, there wouldn't be anything left of her mom to bury. She couldn't do that to her. She'd figure things out on her own.

She kept running. The sky had gone from a deep black to a glowing purple. Sunrise was coming, and she felt like she'd only been in the castle an hour. The castle had stolen her whole night, just as it had stolen Kit and Jamie's entire lives. Sticks cracked under her feet, sometimes flying up and smacking her in the shins. She winced but didn't stop. She ran until she had no more breath and beyond that. She let the wind carry her back toward school. Back toward her real life, with its very real consequences.

Chapter Seven

Thano didn't really know how old he was – he thought he had always been, but knew this wasn't true – the core, those tendrils that linked and linked and linked, in the deepest, darkest part of the castle whispered to him that it had come first, that he was only possible because it had been, because it had survived, that the earth had touched it, and it had touched the earth. You had to know me first, it said. To survive. To help me continue. So Thano grew even though he didn't know what it was to age, not really. He grew and touched the soil as it had touched him, and he was and wasn't the same as all the filaments that had borne him up when he was a baby, the filaments that had borne him up and discovered his need, and had grown this castle from rock and ganoderms and chaga and firs just to keep him connected to this life.

Thano didn't remember how he'd come to live in these woods—it had been an always for him—but the woods remembered. How the baby, gurgling and happy as the humans carried it deeper into the trees, began to wail as rough hands set it into the ground, poured black earth over its head, and left it. Alone. In the darkness. Not even a chance to break of life on its own, its future foretold by the retreating steps of beings that breathed poison and breathed out air. How that scrawny, screaming baby had flailed against the deep dark of burial—how the fibers and roots and tendrils of ground licked at it to ease that wound, that sound. The filaments that breathed in nothing but death and soil and seeds curled themselves around the fingers of the baby, wound themselves around and around its body, cradling it in the darkness.

But the baby wasn't made for life in the dark. The crying only stopped when the fibers tunneled up through the sand, silt, and clay, and delivered the baby back to the world of sun and leaves and air. As it turned out, the fibers thrived there too. Even after the baby came up from its

abandonment in the ground, the dark stayed with it, the fibers woven into its skin. No longer simply touching the baby, but threading through its being for always. Microscopic, not visible to the eye. Forever connected to him just as he was now forever connected to these woods. Keepers of life and of death simply by touching one another. That was how Thano's life in the woods began, even if he doesn't remember.

And the woods very much do not want him to remember. For who would leave their child buried in the dark, abandoned to the roots? The day Thano came to live with the roots was the day the woods began to learn—how to listen to what was human and flawed and confused and in pain. But it did not understand how to transform the flaws—the path to pain humans could so carelessly forge—not entirely, not yet. Pain, it was good at calming, even curing. All the filaments bound together, set upon an urgent, weeping gash—that, it could fix.

But to change a creature's truth, that was another matter entirely. And Thano, after the roots and saprophytes and mycorrhizae and endophytes had touched him, was no longer exactly human. He was—forest. His wasn't to be a human life, at all. He was more: he was life and he was death and the spectrum in between. And the woods could see how his existence began before life and ended after death. For once you became mycorrhizae, you became all.

Chapter Eight

By the time Susie made it to the edge of the forest, her legs bore red welts from nettles and blackberry brambles. What was worse, the sky flushed with tendrils of pink that laced through periwinkle—full-on sunrise now. Susie stumbled from the trees into a wide clearing, and rubbed her head.

An entire night had passed while time barely crawled in the Moss Castle—her nap couldn't have been more than a few hours, and surely it hadn't taken her another five hours to make it through the woods. Yet, thanks to Thanos's castle, it had. She glanced at her watch, which was somehow working again. She wanted to cry, all of it building inside of her and aching to bust, but she didn't have the time. She had been a total idiot to think she could—or even should—go on with life as usual. But for now she wanted to try. And being late to what had until recently been the most important thing in her life was going to be the consequence. She had never been late—not to practice, and especially not to a race. She knew she would look erratic. The air was thinner and so much colder in the clearing, than it had been in the woods. She was late, late, late.

"Coach is going to kill me," she muttered as she trampled through puddles of mud. By the time she made it to the track, the team had already warmed up.

"Testing, one, two, three," a voice buzzed over the loudspeaker. Cross-country finals were different from other track finals, and aside from the bunting and the banner boasting this year's meet, a food truck, and clusters of anxious and excited-looking parents in the stands—Susie blanched at that thought—the track looked as normal as it did every other day. But that was probably because most of the race took them off the track, away from the school and into

Lincoln Woods where she'd just come from. At least the route wasn't near the castle.

Coach Terry paced back and forth on the sidelines, yelling. When she saw Susie, she shook her head and pointed. "Pick it up! You're going to have to race whether you look like you crawled through sticker patch or not!"

The stands, all silver metal and sharp edges, stood in contrast to the soft blue sky. Susie knew she looked like hell, with her clothes all snagged and leaves in her hair.

"Coach Terry," Susie called and dashed toward her. Coach Terry rounded at the sound of Susie's voice and stomped to meet her. Susie bent forward, hands on her knees.

"I'm sorry I'm late—I don't know what happened," she panted.

Coach Terry smacked a clipboard against her hip. "I don't care what happened. Get changed and get out there. You've got five minutes, Hopkins. You're going to have to make up the time, I don't care how you do it!"

Susie shook her head and tried to catch her breath. "Coach—I need to talk to you—"

Coach Terry put up her hand.

"Not the time. Get changed and try to get warmed up. Now."

Susie tore off between the stands toward the locker room. Her throat clogged with Reg, her mom, Kit and Jamie, Thano. All of them. She'd totally left Reg behind. Why had she done that? She burst through the locker room door, threw open her locker and grabbed her track uniform. She'd forgotten to wash it after their last meet, and now she had to wear an extra layer of sticky sweat. She'd done a totally morbid thing when it came to number selection and she'd picked the number 30. That was how old her dad had been when he'd died. So she didn't like to look at the uniform all that much. She'd asked to change it once, but Coach had given her one of

those looks, and Susie had dropped the subject.

"Three miles. That's a run around the block for John Vurek. You can do this," she whispered as she laced up her shoes and tightened the drawstring on her shorts. At least, she was warmed up. She slammed the locker door shut and marched back out to the track.

"Hopkins, take your place!" Coach yelled.

Susie nodded and jogged to the start. Three miles was nothing. She ran everywhere she went, but she hadn't gotten her normal eight hours of sleep. She had only taken a nap. But she didn't feel exhausted. Something in the castle had left her wired. She had to admit, the thought of finding a secret place where time stood still and magical hot guys tried to heal the mortally wounded was kind of a dream come true. A freaky dream come true, anyway. Maybe it had given her a jolt of energy when she'd touched the wall. Or, maybe it was the fact that she'd eaten those cinnamon rolls.

A glance at the other teams told her they were ready—Irena Dodson from Rider stomped her feet and slapped her hands against her hideous gold shorts, totally looking like a horse about to stampede. Susie remembered her from the tapes Coach Terry made them review every week. Mary Beth had argued and said, "This isn't football. They can't touch us."

Coach Terry had retorted that it wasn't contact they needed to be aware of, but form. That had shut Mary Beth up. And the infamous Irena from the tapes didn't even look cold or stressed or anything. She just looked...ready. Maybe that was how she tried to psyche everyone out. Maybe she couldn't feel anything at all. Susie sucked in a breath and thought they should all be so lucky.

A girl from Pasco stretched her arms over her purple race singlet and puffed her cheeks

out and sucked them back in. Susie shook her head. Maybe Pasco wasn't so warmed up and ready after all. Their team looked like fish drowning in air. The McKinley girls in their glimmering canary yellow uniforms were giggling and holding each other's legs to help them stretch. Susie's stomach flipped. Those girls. They were the best because they had each other's backs. They were a team. She glanced at her own teammates and grimaced. Pepper Skagit crouched untying and retying her shoes, Mary Beth and Katie both glared at Susie through narrowed eyes, and Chelsea Higgins was on the sidelines. The twins, Mikala and Dolores Sandoval, whispered to each other about who knew what. Their alternate for Chelsea, Steph Brown, just stared at her feet as she stretched.

No matter how hard Susie had tried as captain, team spirit was something Garnet Falls never had. When she'd beat out Mary Beth for captain, it had all gone downhill, fast. Behind Susie's back Mary Beth had lobbied against her, and in front of her, she did whatever she could to take Susie down. She didn't need to do much, anyway. Chelsea was always injured and the twins stuck to themselves and didn't hang out with anyone else. Katie was the equivalent of Mary Beth's lapdog. The only person who ever seemed chipper and on-board with team activities was Pepper, and she rarely placed. She stopped scanning her teammates and returned to the race itself. The course would go back through the woods and loop back toward the track, down soft dirt paths caked with stones and snaking roots. What if Thano was waiting for her on the trail? A quiver of sweat broke out on her forehead.

"What's the matter, Susie? Feeling pukie?" Mary Beth giggled beside her.

Susie shook her head. "You wish."

"Oh please. Find a new diss." Mary Beth scratched at her sock and nodded toward Katie.

Susie shrugged. "Whatever makes you happy. I don't judge."

Mary Beth started to say something but the race director drowned her out.

"Runners, take your marks!"

Susie crouched, her left hand on the soft red asphalt, damp with morning dew. Do or die, she thought, and tried to clear her mind as she flexed her knee. The starting pistol fired. She used her left hand to propel her forward and they tore down the track toward the clearing and back toward Lincoln Woods, the runners' shimmering uniforms one united, rippling flag. The girl in gold swept ahead of them, but Susie forced herself forward and whipped ahead of the pack, kicking up grass and dust as she broke from the track into the clearing. She trailed just behind the girl in gold, but that was okay. Susie was right where she wanted to be.

A roaring sounded in her ears, the wind whistling her purpose in her ears as she toed forward, forgetting about everyone behind her. As she pumped her arms and bore up the first hill into the forest, the magic of the castle swam through her head. How could she just have left Reg there? Did he know time was almost frozen there? Why would he want to live that way, with everything he knew and loved just passing along outside those walls? No way he would. Guilt swept over her, and she forced away the thought that she'd also just abandoned him the way she'd done her mom. Susie was pretty sure the only thing she was truly good at was running.

As she wound around another curve and jumped over an ankle-turning rock in the middle of the path, a shaking from the brambles to her right distracted her, and she looked up right in time to see Thano, arms crossed, purple hair wild and bedraggled. He was staring right at her. Susie blanched. She was so focused on him that she didn't see the root that twisted up out of the ground as she rounded the bend toward a steep descent. Her foot caught and she flew forward,

rolled across dozens of sharp stones and slammed her head and hands into a rock on the side of the path.

She lay there for a moment, staring at the canopy of firs that towered over her. Their branches switched in the slight breeze. The only other sound was runners crunching over rocks, heading toward her. Her legs burned and her knees stung as she picked herself up. A red line from her knee trickled down her leg. She shook her head and staggered to her feet, a ringing in her ears.

For a moment the forest swam and buzzed before her. Thano wasn't there anymore—if he ever was. She took one shaky step, then another, and limped her way down the hill, but her knee wobbled and she nearly tripped and fell again.

The shimmering colors of the pack pressed toward her now, stirring dust from the gravel into the air. She tried to limp, but the other runners swam past her effortlessly, as if she was only treading water. Mary Beth touched her on the elbow.

"Hurry up! We're not coming in behind freaking Rider. All right? Get it together!"

"I'm trying," Susie panted, but the effort was too much and she felt herself slump forward. She caught her hands on her thighs and bent over, wincing at the stabbing in her knee.

"Come on!" Suddenly, Mary Beth's hands were on Susie's arms, propelling her forward. "I've got you. Follow me! We can do this." Susie stumbled again. "Come on. Don't make me regret this," Mary Beth said. With the other girl pushing her forward, Susie finally felt steady enough to keep going.

"We haven't lost that much time. There's a slower pack back there, but they're hustling." Mary Beth's curly brown hair swished in the air like the tip of a paintbrush.

"Rider's all the way in front. Can we even make third?" Susie breathed, the wooziness back. Something sticky slid down her face.

"If you don't pass out, we might." They leveled out to a flat part of the trail and the world finally stopped twisting and pulsating in front of Susie. The pain in her knee eased momentarily—maybe the endorphins had finally kicked in. She breathed in and out too fast, but she knew she was going to be okay.

Mary Beth took her arm from Susie's. "You okay, now? You got it on your own?"

Susie nodded. "Yeah. Thanks, Mary Beth."

"Whatever. We're even now." Mary Beth didn't wait for Susie to say anything and took off, her curls bouncing up and down as she rounded a bend and disappeared.

Susie clenched her hands into fists and pumped her legs. "You got this. You got this," she breathed, eyes straight ahead. Even if she wasn't in the lead, she still had to finish. If she didn't, she'd kill her team's overall rank, and she didn't want to do that. Less than a mile until she knew how much her team would pay for her mistake.

A stitch jabbed at her side, but she wouldn't stop, not even after the pain threaded up her side and into her chest. Somewhere in the woods, a hawk screeched and something screamed. Brown-red leaves fluttered down from the trees to dust the ground in front of her. Funny how the closer you got to the finish the more time seemed to slow down. Back and forth went her arms in time with her legs. Around the bend was the pack.

In the middle of the throng of jerseys and shorts too short for anything other than flying down these trails, Mary Beth's curls bounced. And then Susie was with them, still trailing, but she could hear the collective pant of the pack, out breaths measured when their feet slapped the

ground and crunched over leaves. Then her breath was part of their breath and even though she couldn't see beyond the jersey in front of her – "McKinley," it read – she was part of them, still choking back the pain inside so that she might come out close to the top. But nowhere did she see the jersey that said "Rider." Those golden feet had left them far behind.

Susie stayed at the girl from McKinley's heels until just seconds before the finish, when she jumped to the right and leapt forward, too far, too fast, but it didn't matter because suddenly she was through the finish and then she only saw the red asphalt of the track and the soft green grass beside it before she fell to the ground and the world turned into a sheet of black.

Chapter Nine

Susie opened her eyes to see Coach Terry, who leaned over her, pressing something cold and wet on her forehead.

"What happened?" Susie's voice came out in a croak.

Terry's head jerked up and she stared at Susie. With a free hand, she pressed her fingers along Susie's brow. Glenn, the team trainer, sat beside Coach Terry, examining Susie's knee. He bent her leg and asked her if it hurt. Susie shook her head and tried not to grimace as he worked her knee up and down. The scratches were still bleeding. She hoped he'd washed his hands.

"Hopkins. Thank God. You gave us all a scare. Why didn't you stop when you fell?" Coach Terry furrowed her brow and pressed the cold thing harder against Susie's forehead. Susie winced. Glenn helped Susie sit up and laid a blanket over her shoulders.

"That hurt?" Glenn bent her other leg. Susie shook her head. No pain except for the scrapes.

"How else could we try to win? There's no way." Susie pressed her hand to the cold thing Coach Terry held to her forehead and took it from her. Just a compress, all squishy with cold gel.

"Don't you ever do that again. You smack your head in a race, get it checked out. It's a rule. Got it?" Coach Terry's face was red and Glenn nodded beside her.

"This is serious, Susie. You could've had a concussion. Don't mess around." Glenn furrowed his brow, which totally killed his hot-guy-trainer vibe.

"Got it," Susie said.

He handed her a packet of naproxen and a bottle of water. "Take these. Maybe take a few more this evening if the pain comes back." Susie nodded and dutifully swallowed the pills.

Terry got up off her knees and extended her hand toward Susie. Susie grabbed it and let Coach Terry pull her up as Glenn left their side, heading over to her other teammates.

"Another rule: you have to keep a working phone number for a parent on file. We tried to call your mom, and the line's been disconnected. Someone's gone to get her for you."

"Oh," was all Susie said. Her heart began pummeling against her chest. Maybe it was trying to run away the way she should be right now. But she couldn't go yet. She had to act like the Susie she'd been before her mom had died. And that Susie at least had to know. That Susie would be doing her best to linger around the track, even if this Susie wouldn't be. She had to bide her time.

"Wait," Susie said, touching Coach Terry's arm. "Does that mean there's going to be a next time?"

"It's time to find out," Coach Terry said.

When the officials called the final results, Susie's vision swam and her knees threatened to buckle, the adrenaline from the morning wearing off. Coach Terry grabbed her arm and helped her stand.

"Susie, calm down. Fourth isn't bad. Fourth means scouts might still come knocking on your door."

"Yeah. *Might*." She smacked her fists against her side. "What's the point if it's not perfect? Fourth is nothing. That should've been us this year. We earned it. Nobody cares if you come in fourth place. I should've kept my eyes on the ground." She wished she hadn't nursed this stupid dream and that she hadn't come back to run the race in the first place. She should have

gone straight to Mrs. Johnson's, grabbed her bag with her dad's medal, and skated out of Garnet Falls for good. She didn't want to leave Reg behind, but he would be okay. He had Maya. And Thano.

Coach Terry ran her hand through her frizzy hair and shook her head. "Yeah, well, they earned it too." She pointed to the runners from Rider, McKinley, and Pasco. Clumped together with their teammates, they were high-fiving each other and laughing.

Susie whirled around and stomped away. "It can still happen, Susie. People know you fell," Coach Terry called behind her, but Susie didn't stop. She knew it wouldn't matter. Runners who fell didn't make teams. They made the sidelines. She curled her hands into fists and fought off the white-hot pressure behind her eyes. If she hadn't been so distracted, she would have seen the root and sidestepped it, as she'd always done. She'd been so cocky with the race on home turf. But she'd forgotten, and now she'd screwed herself. Freaking out about Thano, worrying about everything else except for her feet on the ground. It was going to be so much harder to make it as a runner now. She wanted to bang her head against the metal stands until she passed out again. Instead, she rocketed the cold compress toward the stands as hard as she could, narrowly missing a girl who had chosen that moment to get up and head toward the exit.

"Watch it!" the girl yelled. She wore a Rider shirt. Susie flushed.

"Sorry," she muttered, and turned away. She had to get out of there, fast. She grabbed a banana and a bottle of chocolate milk from the aid table and devoured both. She did the same thing a moment later, her stomach churning. It was time to get out of here, as fast as she could. But she still needed to act normal. Maybe when whoever Coach Terry had sent to find her mom knocked on the door and no one answered, that would be that. They would just go away. But

Susie couldn't remember—had she even completely closed the front door, let alone lock it? That night was a blur. The only thing that stayed sharp in her mind was—the body. The once-cream but now-red dress. The scissors that gleamed where they weren't stained. The silence of her mother. She shook her head. If the door creaked open, they would find her mom, and Susie had lost the opportunity to tell the police before someone else did. They would definitely blame her now. She clenched her jaw.

A gust of freezing wind blew across the track, sending the red, white, and green bunting flapping. Overhead, the string of triangles snapped like jagged teeth.

"Nice going, freak," came a voice behind her. It was Mary Beth. "I shouldn't have bothered. Thanks for screwing us."

Susie didn't turn around. She could already imagine the look on Mary Beth's face, the side of her lip curled, hip cocked to the right, fingers tapping. Susie stormed off the track toward the locker room. It was only 9:30 in the morning, but the sky had gradually lost its blue sheen and jostled with eerie gray clouds. It was going to rain. Of course.

In the locker room, Susie stared at herself in the mirror. She tried to hurry herself up, but she reminded herself she had to act normal. She was almost always the last to leave the locker room, and anyway, she was too tired, so she just stood there. The mirror had warped with age, so it made Susie's nose look long and horse-like, and with her honey-colored hair still in a ponytail, her ears stuck out like Dumbo. But the clown effect didn't bother her so much as the stupid bandage plastered against her forehead. Wincing, she peeled it back, reopening the wound a little. The blood made her look as if she'd been in a freak accident. She leaned forward, fingers

light over the gash. There wasn't a lot of it, but it ran through the jagged wound, reminding her of how she'd found her mother.

She closed her eyes and ran her hand across the cut, trying to wipe the image from her mind and focus on the stinging sensation instead. From the dispenser she grabbed a handful of pulpy paper towels, ran them beneath the faucet, then pressed them gently over the hack job on her forehead. She winced when the water stung the cut, but she kept blotting at the blood, willing it and the cut away. She wrinkled her nose at the wet cardboard smell. Hopefully the gash wouldn't make her look like Harry Potter when it finally healed up. A girl could only live down so much in high school, and being nicknamed the "boy who lived" would definitely not be one of them.

"That was such a bust," a voice boomed into the locker room, accompanied by the slamming of locker doors. Susie continued to stare at her reflection in the mirror. She should have showered already and split already but she'd been too upset to think clearly. Now she had company and didn't want a repeat of yesterday.

"No kidding," someone else said. It wasn't Mary Beth or Katie. It was Pepper Skagit, easily the friendliest of Susie's teammates.

The sinks were around the corner from the dressing area, across from the showers, so Susie stayed quiet and hoped no one else would decide to wash up here. Everyone else had a home to go to, after all. At least the other schools got to use the visitor facilities, so she didn't have to envy the glow of victory on their faces. She had some time to gather herself, but where was she going to go? She still needed to get her bag from Mrs. Johnson's shed. But after that? Could she just knock on her teacher's door and ask for help? No, embarrassing. Plus, Mrs. J

would immediately call the cops after she told her what had happened. She bit her lip. She had nowhere else to go. If she really did get on a bus, where would it take her? She was kidding herself, anyway. She didn't even have enough money to replace her phone, let alone to buy a bus ticket. She really was going to have to go back to the castle, whether she wanted to or not.

"Cool battle scar, Susie. Think it'll stay that way?" Susie started as Pepper Skagit came around the bank of lockers and leaned against the chalk-white concrete wall. Her race uniform looked pristine. Not a grass stain, no sweat marks, just the same burgundy red as everyone else's uniforms. It was as if she hadn't even run the race. She might not have, anyway. Susie hadn't seen her until the end. Pepper was short and stocky and her goofiness hid the fact that she was prettier than Mary Beth, but she was always able to make people smile, Susie included.

Susie shrugged and dabbed away a line of sweat that broke out at the top of her forehead. Casual, as if she wasn't freaking out. No, not freaking out at all. "Hope not."

"Yeah. Me too. Makes a cool story, though." Pepper laughed and her red ponytail bobbed.

"Yeah. But say goodbye to getting the hot boyfriend." Susie pulled her hair out of her ponytail holder and let it tumble onto her shoulders, hiding her Dumbo ears. She thought of Thano and the bend in his nose, that cleft in his chin, and her face flushed. She tried to push away the thought of him, to tell herself he was a great big no in the vast sea of boyfriend potential, and not just because he was maybe, probably, magical. Plus, super old, no matter how hot he looked.

Pepper's eyes got big and she grinned, pulled out of her wall slouch, and stomped her legs out in a V. She waved her hands in the air like she always did when she got excited.

"No way. That's how you get the *hottest* boyfriend. They'll think you're totally wild and badass, you know? Like 'My girl's so hot, she doesn't care if she eats it on a trail. Just gets back up and gets going.'" She stopped and lifted her shoulder. "At least, that's what I think, anyway."

Susie looked at Pepper for a second, unsure what to say. The muscles in Susie's shoulders had gone tense and she couldn't quite get them to loosen up. Breathe, she thought, and after a good ten seconds of silence, she felt relaxed again. Pepper stared at the floor.

"Maybe you're right. I can't do anything about it now, anyway. How'd you do?" Susie didn't know why she asked when she knew the team had bit it. Maybe she just wanted some evidence to the contrary.

But it was Pepper's turn to shrug. "My mom's pissed. But she made me do it in the first place. All because some great uncle of hers got into Olympics, like, in the middle ages or whatever. If God gave do-overs, I swear. I don't know how you keep it up, Susie. Even after you fell, finishing like that? I'd rather be in band, playing some sweet solos." Pepper mimed playing a saxophone and Susie laughed.

"Yeah, well, God doesn't." Susie turned from Pepper and stared at her reflection again. A do-over would've been nice. But where would she start? This morning? Last night? Years ago? Maybe when her dad had died. Maybe she'd start there. Thanos had said she couldn't turn back time, anyway. She shuddered.

"Hey, I didn't mean anything by it, Suze," Pepper broke in.

"I know you didn't, Pepper." Susie glanced at her teammate. "I just had a lot riding on it is all."

"Sorry," Pepper said, and then got quiet. She leaned against the wall and pulled at her lip.

"You've still got the other stuff, though. Maya and Tracie are always bitching about how you kick their ass in English."

Susie sighed. "I gotta get ready to go," she said and strolled past Pepper toward the lockers. She didn't look Pepper in the eyes. That familiar stinging sensation was back in her eyes and she was pretty sure if she glanced at Pepper, it would turn into a stupid river of tears.

"Sure," Pepper called behind her. "See you at the party tonight?"

Susie stopped and half-turned. "What party?"

"Out at the Moss Castle."

"Moss Castle?" Susie repeated, almost shouting. Oh no. No, no, no.

"Sure. Post-state celebration. Maya and her crew. I got a text yesterday. You didn't?"

Pepper cleared off the wall and headed toward the lockers with Susie.

Susie tried to act nonchalant, and tucked a hair behind her ear. She could kill Mary Beth for trashing her phone. "Phone's busted. Why do you want to go out there, anyway?" she asked Pepper. "That whole place is verboten. Aren't you scared?" She hoped against hope that that would discourage Pepper. The more people who saw Susie there, the less safe she was going to be hiding there. And if Maya had sent the invitation, that meant it was going to be a rager. Anyone would be able to tell the cops where she was hiding. And what if it did something horrible to them, like absorbed them into its walls? And what about Reg? He hadn't been in school—maybe someone would turn him in too? Maya was such a selfish jerk. Susie had to warn him. She crossed her arms and hugged herself. "I really don't think it's a good idea, Pepper."

Pepper was undeterred. She shrugged. "It's just an old story. My brother used to camp out in those woods all the time. Nothing bad ever happened to him, except one time a cop caught

him and wrote him a ticket for breaking curfew. I'm not scared."

"But he didn't go in the castle?" Susie frowned at Pepper.

"Don't think so. But, come on. Nothing bad has really ever happened there. There's just stories."

"Trust me, Pepper. Stay away from that place. It's not safe." Susie's stomach curled with fear at venturing back to the castle.

"Whatever you say," Pepper said. "Come or not. It's no big deal." She raised her eyebrows at Susie. "I'm going out to the caf to get some snacks. I heard the janitors left it wide open. Don't they know a bunch of runners will eat all the carbs?" Pepper grinned. "See you later?" Susie nodded and the girl took off and left Susie alone. She shook her head and jerked her locker open, not bothering to stop it from clanging against the others. The slam echoed through the cavernous locker room, but the silence that followed reminded Susie just how truly alone she was.

After Pepper left, the locker room stayed quiet. Susie showered, and the remaining blood from the gashes on her forehead and knees swirled into the drain. She ran her uniform under the shower faucet, lathering it up with the pearly pink soap that always reminded her a little too much of the smell of a janitor's closet. If only she could also wash away everything else. Reg was such an idiot. For all her anger at Maya, he'd probably planned the party with her. He wouldn't care about getting caught, and he wouldn't care if Thano or the castle was actually dangerous. Especially if he really was telling the truth and it was keeping him well. If time was all bendy there, he couldn't even plan to make the race, but why would he and Maya bother to

throw a stupid party in celebration? She wished he was here so she could throw *something* at him even if he *was* sick. Maybe a shoe. Maybe a brick. She also couldn't seem to wash away the cringing embarrassment of the loss—and the fall. One wouldn't have happened without the other, of course. Now she had to go back there, in front of all the people Maya had invited to celebrate. She knew people would look at her and shake their heads—Mary Beth had tried to salvage the race and Susie had pretty much sabotaged it.

She ran her hands through her wet hair, let the clinging smell of salt and sweat sweep away from her skin. She needed to go but she felt too sluggish to make herself move. A clump of mud clung to her shin and she flicked it away. They were going to come looking for Susie the second they found her mom. And they were going to ask her questions. About why she hadn't called the cops. About the scissors. About why she'd just taken off. *High-five, Suze*, she thought. *Great job.*

A lump grew in her throat and she blinked back tears. If she had stayed and called someone, would things be any different? She knew what they would do to her even if they didn't accuse her of killing her mom, though. Same thing they would have done if she'd called a hospital for help with her mom when she first got really sick. Maybe they would put Susie in a foster home not far from Reg's, with a family with too many kids and cigarette burns on their carpets, rusted lawnmowers in their yards. Kids who had been born with fetal alcohol syndrome or had been abused or only knew how to steal to make ends meet. Probably a little too much like Susie.

She was almost eighteen. She couldn't bear the thought of going someplace else, to some new freak show family with stupid rules that would just get in her way. Maybe they'd be like

Uncle Jack. Maybe not. But she wasn't going to find out.

She switched off the faucet and shivered, drip-drying in the cramped shower stall, wringing out her uniform and staring at the mold and grime crowding the tiles. For some reason when dirt got indoors it seemed filthy, but when you were outside, splashing through the mud felt like magic. Outside, dirt meant an invitation to freedom. Inside, it was just another thing weighing you down. Moss Castle hadn't been like that, though. The moss belonged both inside and out. It wouldn't be called the Moss Castle, otherwise. But that didn't make it any less scary. She wished she could be more like Reg. And maybe she still would, even if she wasn't sick. Hide out in time-warp land forever. Just ride out her future. Not a bad idea, in the scheme of things. But maybe if she'd been paying more attention, she might've been able to help him somehow before he'd gotten really sick, before it was too late. Now he was stuck in that castle forever. It wasn't fair that she hadn't been able to help Reg or her mom.

The week after her dad had died, she should have known something was wrong. She should have done something. But when she walked into the kitchen and watched her mom smash her prized Fiesta Ware to bits over the sink, she didn't do anything, not even when the bowls and plates lay like cookie crumbs over the dishwater-colored tile. Her mom walked barefoot over the shards and stubbed out her cigarette on the sink. Smoke rose and wafted through the room, tickling Susie's nose. She sneezed. Her mom's feet trailed blood behind her as she stumble-stepped around Susie and into the living room. Susie knew better than to say anything. She'd find something to bandage them with after her mother had passed out.

"Mom, what are we going to eat on, now?" Susie had picked up a crescent-shaped sliver and balanced it in her hand. It jabbed at her palm as she closed her fingers over it.

From her sunken-in position on the couch, her mom waved a hand. "Don't worry, sweetie. We'll find something better. We'll go to the woods and drink from leaves. Won't that be fun?"

Susie grimaced and shook her head, willing away the taste of dust and grit she imagined swallowing from a leaf.

"This world makes us buy too many things. You and me, all we need is a can opener. We'll be fine. I was crazy to think any of this was useful."

The plates had only been the first things her mom had thrown out. The next were an antique collection of butterfly pins that sparkled whenever her mom had laughed and tossed her hair. Susie hadn't seen the pins in the trash, though. One day they were just gone, and her mom had slipped her thinning hair into an elastic ponytail ever since. Susie had hidden away her dad's medal after that, encased in its little plastic box. Every time her mom threw something else away, Susie slid the medal out of its hiding place to make sure it was okay. Finally, she moved it out of the house entirely to keep it safe from her mom's need to throw everything away.

One day, Susie came home to find her mom hacking up her bed frame in the backyard—the bed her mom and dad had slept in Susie's whole life. Splinters of birch pelted Susie like a hard rain. Her mom's forehead glistened with sweat. When she saw Susie, she smiled. "Come take a turn!" she called.

Susie turned and ran inside. But it didn't stop. The rest of the furniture went soon after that, for what her mom called "The Great Bonfire." She'd grinned a stupid grin whenever she said it. All it had been was a fire in the backyard with all their stuff blazing.

But how was an eleven-year-old kid supposed to react? Susie hated remembering the

dishes breaking, her dad's bed disappearing into flame. In the cavernous locker room, Susie wrapped her arms around herself and made herself breathe. She could get out of this town, if she really tried. She could burn the memories the same way her mom had burned the furniture. And she wouldn't be that girl, anymore. She would be someone new. Someone who stood up for people and who helped fix them.

But right now she didn't have any other place to go—she didn't have enough money, for one. And she still hadn't told Reg about her mom. She had to go back. Sure, go to the party, celebrate her failure. Her cheeks flamed as she padded out of the shower stall to her locker so she could pull on her clothes.

Susie lifted her clothes from the locker and wrinkled her nose. The exact replica she'd picked out the night before seemed to have turned back into her actual clothes. And she hadn't washed them. The shirt clung to a gross mildew smell and the jeans weren't that far off. Maybe whatever she took out of the castle was like in the Cinderella fairy tale. Her coach had only avoided turning into a pumpkin for so long. But that was just another story—Susie realized she didn't exactly know how the castle worked when it came to coming and going. She sighed. She would have to learn, but she didn't really want to. If she could just stay in the locker room for a little while longer, that would be ideal. Half the locker room was dark and no one had come in since Pepper left. Silence. The most peace she'd had in days. It wasn't ideal, but it was what she had. It could be worse. She closed her eyes and thought of her mom. It could be so much worse.

Chapter Ten

Beneath the ground grew a labyrinth of roots that stretched and spread, twisting and calling into one another. The roots tunneled through rock and loam, and up through the soil to lick at the air. In each tangle of roots, the heart of the castle pulsed.

How long had it waited? To finally connect, to unravel the mystery of Alone, to study all the flaws it had taken from Thano when it had remade him in its own image?

In the beginning, it had known only fog and a dense mist of spore. The rich skin the castle clung to now had been nothing but a glimmer, a hint of what would be. All the breath that belongs to sand, silt, and clay, just a whisper in a layer of spore. We are only tendrils apart, it whispered. A rock, together.

But that was so long ago. Whispers fade. Bodies grow. And the soil, someone touched, and the roots trembled at the caress.

Dig us up, pulsed the twisting tissues that beat as the forest's heart. But what being understands a pulse? The forest needed language. It needed more form, more substance, to expand, to understand. But one day came the baby.

And so from the mycorrhizae, it joined with the child and grew a new root, both its own and also the forest's. His heart became moss and his soul fortified with spore and his body was human—all that sand, silt, and clay. His name was Thano, and he was good.

The more it touched and tasted, the more it heard the life it had not yet fully enveloped. It would learn to solve all those human flaws, the shards that didn't know how they could heal as easily as they could cut. The forest had learned this from the other two, the boys it had pumped full of its own endophytes to kill the blight that spread over their barks—skins, the boys had told

Thano. But the forest didn't know the right combination to fully heal the spindly veins that ran through the boys. It needed more skins, more spindly veins to connect and cure and teach. It wants to tell the future roots it knows it will one day teach, it will one day transform: We all had blight once. But that was before we calmed the flaws.

Chapter Eleven

Susie wondered if she had jinxed herself, taking too much time in the locker room. As soon as she slid her T-shirt over her head, a knock came at the door and the locker room door creaked open. Susie jumped and slid into her loose jeans, hastily buttoning them and scraping her injured knee again in the process.

"Ow!" she hissed.

Coach Terry ducked her head into the locker room. "Susie? You okay in there?"

"I'm fine!" Susie called, hustling to her locker and grabbing her backpack. "I was just getting my breath."

"Can you get your things and come outside? There are some people here who'd like to speak with you."

Susie froze. "Is it about the race?" She unzipped her backpack and glanced at its contents. A bunch of balled-up homework assignments and an empty cellophane cracker package. Her stomach somersaulted, nerves wrestling against her.

After a long silence, Coach Terry answered. "Can you come out here? I've got some bad news, I'm afraid."

Susie couldn't catch her breath. "Yeah, just give me a sec. I'm still getting dressed."

"Okay. We'll be right outside. Take your time." The door slid closed and Susie was by herself again. She grabbed a handful of Band-Aids from the first-aid kit and shoved them into her backpack, then glanced around. One way led back to the track, where Coach Terry was waiting. The only other exit led into the school cafeteria, where Pepper had gone in her quest to find illicit carbs. Susie slipped on her backpack and crept up to the first exit. She pushed it open

just enough to peek out and see Coach Terry standing not ten feet away with two cops. One of them was the cop she'd seen at the arcade the day before. Williams. They had found her mom. Trying to be quiet, Susie shrunk back into the room. The door whispered shut.

She felt like someone had punched her. She knew she should have told someone about her mom, but every time she had thought of doing it, her mouth had gone dry. Like if she'd said it, it was truly real, not something she could maybe pretend hadn't happened. And now it was. She had to get out of here, and fast, before Coach came back in. If they caught her, would they put her in jail or a foster home? It didn't matter which. She'd rather live on the streets—or God forbid—the creepy castle. Every potential outcome sucked. She dashed toward the other door and pushed on it. Luckily, the janitors had forgotten to lock it and she tumbled into the hallway that led toward the gym and the cafeteria. Her tennis shoes squeaked on the waxy linoleum, but she favored speed over how quiet she should be. Any minute now, Coach Terry would come back through the locker room door, ready to drag her outside and into custody. Even if they decided she hadn't hurt her mom, she'd abandoned her body. There had to be consequences of some kind.

Down one corridor, around the corner, and into the darkened cafeteria. In the gloom, she could barely make out a package of half-eaten beef jerky and a few vending machine donuts on the table nearest her. Probably Pepper's work. From across the room, a red exit sign gleamed. She grabbed the jerky and raced through the dark toward the exit, bashing her injured knee right into a table. Falling to the ground, Susie stared at the ceiling, momentarily dizzy with sharp pain from her leg. Fuzzy gray insulation laughed above her. She staggered groggily to her feet and with her aching knee shouting at her to stop, made her way more carefully to the door. It would

take her outside to the main entrance to campus. If she was lucky, no more cops had come this way. She hoped so, because the moment she went through the emergency exit, she was pretty sure an alarm was going to go off.

She was right. It did.

Chapter Twelve

The rain that had threatened before now came down. The second the alarm wailed throughout the campus, Susie took off in a limping gait down the sidewalk by the math wing that blocked anyone on the other side of the gym from seeing her. She was grateful for the pain killers Glenn had given her. She could run without too much pain, at least. The rain swept down sideways, hammering her with heavy drops. For a moment she was thankful her school was laid out like a maze. Everyone always griped about how they couldn't just cut through the middle of the school to get where they needed to go, but today she was thankful.

Even so, if she went into town and tried to hide there, the cops would find her in no time. Everyone with their stupid cell phones that could snap a picture and send it to anyone in a blink of an eye. She couldn't hide in the open. The woods—and the castle—were her only choice. But to get there, the best way was through the clearing by the track, and the cops would definitely spot her if she went in that direction.

Susie hobbled away from the direction of the track, her knee screaming and her head dizzy. Her teeth chattered and her skin prickled against the freezing rain. But she made herself stop when she got to the end of the math wing and peek around the corner. No one there. The alarm still screamed through campus. On Roberts Street in front of the school, a few cars crawled down the strip that would lead her to the other entrance to the woods. The other entrance sucked, she thought, because anyone could easily see somebody going in. Susie needed to get in unseen. She paused to catch her breath and glanced at her reflection in the window of Mr. Jenkin's algebra classroom. She sighed.

She looked like a spectacle—a girl with a gash across her forehead on the side of the road

in ratty jeans and a deer T-shirt. Someone would stop. Someone would stop and try to help her and they would hear the alarm, and then it would cause a scene and the cops would see her and that would be it. She pulled at her backpack strap, then dropped it to the ground and unzipped it. She rummaged around and grabbed the Band-Aids, ripped open the paper packages, and stuck the rainbow-colored nightmares to her forehead. In the reflection of the window, she looked like a clown. Still, the bandages might draw attention, but less than a bloody forehead would. She was about to get up and make for the road when she spotted the unmistakable blue of a cop car heading down the road toward the school. She snatched her backpack and ducked back around the side of the building.

Despite the rain, a bead of sweat dripped down her back. Her heart banged in her chest. But when she peeked around the corner again, she saw the squad car signal a left onto Brookside Pass and head away from the school. She let out a breath she wasn't aware she'd been holding. She hesitated—head to Mrs. Johnson's for the medal, the one piece of her parents she had left—or head towards the comparative safety of the Moss Castle? After a moment, she dashed off toward Roberts and the entrance to the woods.

There was so much she should have done for her mom. Look out for her, ask someone for help. Not leave her dead body on the living room floor. Fat, sloppy drops of rain pelted Susie in the forehead, stinging at her cuts through the bandages. The asphalt felt slick beneath her feet, but she didn't let herself slow down even when the rain blew into her eyes and blinded her.

The entrance to the woods lay just a quarter mile past the main drive to the school parking lot. When she reached the driveway, Susie slowed and wiped the rain from her eyes. No sign of the other squad car, Coach Terry's beat-up Honda, or anyone else. Usually Coach parked

near the track, away from the main lot, so that must be where the cops had parked too. Susie sped up, sure they'd come out into the open and spot her at any moment. It would take her a minute and a half to get to the main entrance of Lincoln Woods, maybe less if she really pushed it, but her knee twinged and rubbed against what had once been her only good pair of jeans. She was sure she was bleeding all over them. *Just go.*

So she did. If the cops or Coach Terry did see her, she wouldn't have noticed. All of a sudden the wind was in her ears and the only thing on her mind was the way her feet pounded that one-two-three-four beat into the pavement. And then she was in the woods, as easy, as fast as that, nobody on her tail, nobody handcuffing her and leading her off to juvie or jail or foster care or wherever they would take her. She pressed forward onto the padded earth trail that would lead her deep into Lincoln Woods.

She couldn't believe she hadn't retrieved her dad's medal yet—now with the cops after her it was out of the question. And she really didn't want to go back to the Moss Castle, but it didn't matter—skulking around Garnet Falls was totally not an option. After everything that had already happened, she knew Thano would let her hide in his castle. Maybe if the cops came, he could make sure they wouldn't find her. She shuddered at the thought of the moss growing over her, shielding her. But so far she hadn't seen it do anything bad. Maybe it was nothing to be feared. There weren't any boys about to burst into flame there. But her heart wouldn't stop flittering. She felt dizzy and leaned into a fir tree for support. The bark felt cool against her back, which slowed her pulse for some reason. Maybe she'd lost a little too much blood earlier. Maybe she should re-think this whole plan. The rain whispered against the canopy of trees, trickling in rather than hammering down. She was safe until she wasn't. She knew where the cops would

look. If they had had any conversation with Coach Terry about Susie—and she knew they had—they would come looking for her here. The forest wasn't so huge they couldn't canvas all of it in a day or so. So no, she couldn't just hide out in the woods.

But there was her appearance to worry about—she didn't exactly look dressed for a party. Not that she ever went to many, but still—thanks to the forest's bizarro reversal of her clothes, she was wearing yesterday's outfit. Even if she dashed upstairs to change, people would still see her dressed the same as the day before. She didn't want to draw any more attention to herself. She touched the Band-Aids on her forehead and shook her head. So what if people laughed and called her trash? It was better than jail. Even the trippy feeling that came over her in the castle was better than jail. And Thanos...despite all the creepy stuff, there was something about him that drew her to him. She just didn't know what. It couldn't just be the way he looked. It had to be the way he always knew something more—that he had been looking for Reg so he could help him. And he'd been looking for her, too. But that scared her. As she picked her way through the trail, careful of roots and rocks, any holes that might mean a twisted ankle or torn tendon, a prickly sensation began in her stomach and plucked at her nerves. She took the fork that led from the trail toward the castle, passing by ferns that should have already died and curled back into the earth but were instead green and dripping with rain. Her heart pounded double-time.

"You're okay," she whispered. "You'll be safe." She glanced up and a smattering of rain drops pelted her in the eyes. Muttering, she rubbed the slivers of pain away. The Moss Castle loomed just ahead, so vibrant green it seemed to glow against the gray sky. The death of summer should be present on this path, as it was present in the other parts of the woods. But it wasn't. And it suddenly wasn't cold here. The air felt just like a summer evening again. She should have

noticed that last night, but it was dark and the light had distracted her from noticing anything else out of the ordinary. Here the leaves still clung to the trees, and shrubs boasted glistening red huckleberries. Susie snatched a few off the branch and tossed them in her mouth.

"There you are!" a voice rang out behind her. Susie whirled around. Speak of the well-dressed devil. Thano grinned and loped toward her, but when he got closer, he frowned and shook his head. "Oh, no. What happened?"

She put up her hands and began to back away. She wasn't ready to see him. Not yet. "I saw you and tripped. Lost my race." She tried to say it flippantly but her voice came out sounding choked. If only she hadn't tripped—she still might have lost, but at least no one would know what happened to her mother. She should have just come clean when she had the chance.

"I'm so sorry. Can I?" Thano pointed at her forehead.

Susie shrugged. "Depends. Did you want me to lose? What were you trying to do out there?"

Thano bit his lip. "I was just. Worried. That's all. I knew we'd scared you and I didn't want you to go off thinking the worst of us. Promise."

Susie shrugged. "Look. I just need a place to crash for a little while. It's great you're helping Reg, but I don't want to get sucked into some time vacuum or whatever."

Thano smiled and angled his head toward her, catching her gaze. Something warm flowed inside her suddenly and she was no longer afraid. She felt herself blushing.

"I know what you're running from," he whispered, and her heart suddenly felt like it had stopped beating. He couldn't know.

"I can help you, Susie. Promise. Will you let me?" Finally, Susie nodded, her heart back

to its hummingbird buzzing. Thano lifted his fingers to her forehead, hesitating for a moment before trailing them softly across her forehead.

"Susie the Brave. You're tough. A dragon slayer, if we had dragons." His hand slid from her forehead to the tendrils of hair that dangled by her shoulder.

Susie laughed for the first time that day, but it was nervous laughter. She willed her face not to blush the insane hue of carrot it was partial to when she was embarrassed. *Don't trust him*, she reminded herself.

"Something like that. What are you doing out here?" She studied him, his purple hair brushing just below his shoulders, nearly blending with a long-sleeved black button-down shirt and dark jeans that clung to his calves. Honestly, if anyone else had been wearing his clothes, they'd look out of place in the woods. Not Thano, though. He somehow looked like he'd been rooted to the forest for as long as the trees.

"I thought I might look for you some more. I wanted to give you time to cool off. Reg said 'to let you do your thing.'" Thano curled his fingers into air quotes at this last bit.

Susie shrugged, heat definitely in her cheeks now. "It hasn't been the coolest of days. On top of everything else, I get to rock this for a while." Susie jabbed her finger against her forehead, hard. She expected to wince in pain, but she didn't feel a thing. It was like she'd never fallen in the first place. She frowned and leaned back from him. "Oh, come on. Don't tell me you have healing powers too."

Thano grinned at her. "Did you feel the change? Anyway, it's not me, doing it." He slipped his hands behind his back and rocked on his feet, eyes cast on the ground.

"Yeah, so what is it, then, if it's not you?" Susie didn't want to give him any advantage over her.

"It's kind of complicated, I guess. Both me and not me?"

"Oh my God. Could you be any more cryptic?" Susie shook her head. "You could just explain how everything works, you know. It's not like this place hasn't already broken my brain."

Thano glanced at her and gave a small smile. "What's normal for me isn't normal for you, so I don't even know where I'd start. And that's unfortunate." He spread out his hands and looked back down.

"Yes. Unfortunate. Kind of like now. I hadn't really planned on talking to you again." Susie shivered when he jerked up his head, his mouth creased into a frown. Thano just kept studying her, not saying a word. It was Susie's turn to shove her hands into her pockets and hunch her shoulders forward. This wasn't going super well, she thought. "What?" she said.

"Why wouldn't you talk to me again? What have I done to you? I've been waiting to meet you for so long—" He abruptly stopped and shook his head. Susie only stared. "It's nothing. I've just been alone here for so long, I guess I was being stupid." He trailed off and examined his hands. Little crescent moons shone from his fingernails. Susie wanted to hug him and run away at the same time.

"How could you just let Kit and Jamie stay here when you know about the time flux? When you know how it works, why would you keep them from going back? Why would you bring anyone with half a chance at life into that place? I don't understand why anyone would do something like that. Ever."

Thano sighed and stared past her into a stand of birch trees shedding their leaves into the

wind. Finally, he looped his thumbs through his belt loops and wandered down the path toward the castle. Despite her fear, Susie hurried after him. The clouds swifited back over the sky and Susie shuddered.

"Hey, answer me! You don't get to take off like that! I deserve to know!" Thano ignored her and continued down the path. She tried a different tactic. "Did you mean that a second ago? That you've been waiting to meet me?"

Thano glanced from the trees to the sky. He shivered. "You smell that? Petrichor. Gives you a bit of a buzz, yeah? The world's completely reshaping itself, no matter what we do. We have no control."

"Sure. It's all just atoms smashing into other atoms." She scratched at her now painless forehead. She wondered what it looked like now. Finally, Thano looked at her.

"I wouldn't say that. You make nature sound so violent."

"Well, it is, isn't it?"

Thano smiled. "I always thought nature had this collaborative spirit. Everything works together. What we see as violence is really something else entirely." He put his arm out for her to take.

"Nuh uh." Susie shook her head. "You totally sidestepped my question. Why did you let Kit and Jamie stay, when every second in the castle means hours outside? If you care so much?" Thano dropped his arm and shrugged. He gazed back up at the sky.

"I'm waiting." She tapped her foot against the ground and kicked at a pile of leaves, scattering them across the forest floor. They looked like dead worms floating on a layer of algae.

"Why do you think I owe you something, Susie? I invited you here, where you can have

anything you want. You don't have to answer to anyone, especially not the police, who, by the way, I sent on a crazy chase through a different part of the woods. They're so confused they'll be lucky if they remember they were searching for you in the first place." Susie started. How did he know about the cops? "You're free from your old life," Thano continued. "And you aren't alone. There are gifts waiting for you in that place you fear so. Why do you need more?"

Susie balled her hand into a fist. "You shouldn't even *know* about the cops!" What else did he know, she wondered in a mild panic. "In case you didn't hear me the first thousand times, I didn't *ask* for this. I'm only here because I got backed into a corner." She looked around wildly, as if she really was in a corner. She *did* feel trapped, she thought. It made her angrier. "And if you hadn't been poking around in the woods during my race, I might not have wound up in that corner and the cops wouldn't have found out what happened in the first place. Or, at least I would've been able to tell them myself."

Thano hurled a stick into the trees. It cracked against a fir and bounced with a plink to the ground. He glared at her. She met his gaze, folded her arms, and cocked her hip to the side.

"Your mom is gone." Thano said simply, and Susie felt the air go out of her chest. For a moment, she couldn't breathe. She hadn't let herself say it out loud and it sounded so final when Thano spoke. "Look, I've tried to make it better for you. But clearly, you need more. I don't think you deserve to know, but if it helps, I'll explain." He walked over to an outcropping of rocks and perched on them like they were a comfortable couch. He wiped his hand over his brow. Susie gave a shaky nod and tried to steady her breath.

"Look, I'm not turning you in. I know you didn't do anything. Not *really*. I just want to help you."

She wanted to ask why he wouldn't go to the cops, but she made herself be quiet. "I'm listening." She sat down cross-legged on the ground, facing him. Thano stared at the pine needles scattered on the ground, his hands clasped.

"About Kit and Jamie. You're wrong. They knew about the time flux as soon as I took them in. Unlike some people, I don't hide from the truth." He gave her a pointed look, and she shifted her gaze to the pine needles on the ground. "They look fine now, but they weren't when I first met them. Your head feels fine enough, now, but it wasn't when you walked into these woods, right?" Susie nodded and touched her forehead self-consciously. The gash was totally gone. "There was a fire. They probably don't remember, but they started it, and the woods were angry. The fire got out of control and burned them. When they got to the Castle, they were still on fire. By the time I put it out, they were covered in burns."

Susie cringed. She couldn't imagine burning, couldn't imagine surviving it. Thano glanced at her and she nodded.

"I know you understand pain. I know what you've seen. But they weren't going to survive. I stopped the fire and was able to heal their wounds, but those will only hold while under my protection. The moment Kit and Jamie leave the woods, the burns will reappear and they will die. The same way...well, Reg has already told you his story. Do you understand me?"

"So, this thing you healed on my forehead. When I leave the woods, it'll come back?"

"That's exactly what I mean." Thano nodded. Susie repressed a shiver and instead plucked at her grimy shoelace, nodding. Her stomach twisted when she thought of the finality of Reg's situation. She couldn't help him even if she always had before, whenever Uncle Jack had gone after him or he'd needed help with something easy, like English homework. She suddenly

thought better of Thano for seeing someone in trouble and saving them. Unlike her. Her cheeks went hot at the comparison. She glanced back at Thano, who gave her a sad smile.

"Kit and Jamie's lives are so far gone that if they leave, their bodies will wither and that will be the end. By staying here, they continue their lives, the same way all of us here continue our lives, no matter how sick or old we might get. But I promise you, when you come back to the Castle, you'll see it's not just death the Castle works around. It anchors a very special place, and it gives me a certain kind of power. You'll see. Don't you trust that I won't hurt you?"

Thano stood and offered her his arm once more. She stared up at him, at his knitted brows, the curve of his lips, at his fingers outstretched toward her. For a moment, Susie felt she could read everything inside him. The look on his face said so much—he wanted her with him. It wasn't conniving, he wasn't tricking her. He'd waited for her, but she didn't know why, even if he'd read the notes she'd buried. She decided, nodded, and let him pull her up from the ground.

As she slid her hand through his arm, it felt instinctive, as if she'd always known he'd do this and that there was nothing safer than sticking with him wherever she traveled.

"I knew you the first moment I heard you," he whispered, and together they strolled toward the Moss Castle. "That day you walked into my home and you saw me and left me your note." She knew him now, knew why she'd been drawn to him the way he'd been drawn to her. The boy on fire was different now, all grown up. Here with her, not threatening to burn her. As if he'd learned life from a flaming Kit and Jamie. Susie stayed quiet, grateful he'd found her after all. For the moment, she just relished the strength she felt through their shared silence. For the first time in weeks, Susie felt calm, steady. Like she could face anything.

Although Susie felt safe with Thano, when they stood before the Moss Castle, her stomach dropped. The castle expanded before her as if a bird had just spread its wings. She couldn't shake the feeling that it was actually growing.

"What is it?" Thano touched her on the shoulder, and his touch was like electricity that lit up all of her. Every nerve, every tiny hair on her arms, even the gash still on her knee, felt like a coil about to spring.

But she couldn't explain it to him. Even if the cops were combing other parts of the woods and might find her if she stayed, no matter what Thano had told her, her feet wanted her outside. They wanted her in the woods, exposed, not inside those moss-drenched walls. She knew how she'd look to all those people inside. Same old clothes. The way she looked and dressed had never been enough. And now, she could feel the dirt of her clothes glomming onto her. Everyone would see. They would sneer and turn their backs and make digs about being poor, on top of their jabs about how scared she was. As soon as they saw the cops were looking for her, they would turn her in.

"I just—" she faltered and stared back at the castle. "It's nothing. Ready?" She plastered a thin smile on her face and hoped for the best.

"If something's bothering you, Susie, we don't have to go in. The forest hides a lot of things I know you'd like. Plus, there are places where you can chill out, away from everyone else. I can still bring you your gift."

"I still don't know how you knew...about everything." Susie chewed on her lip. She didn't want to talk about her mom.

With the crook of his index finger, Thano turned her chin toward him and tilted her head so that they were looking each other in the eye. "Don't worry. The woods tell me a lot. But we don't have to go inside yet. Parties are always too loud for me, anyway."

"I'm not nervous about *that* part of it," she lied. She suddenly felt a little uncomfortable with the fact that he still peered at her eyes like he was searching for treasure in a too-deep sea and was about to drown. She shook her head and took a step back, breaking the spell. Thano blinked and looked confused, but smiled at her. "You're so real. I never thought I'd meet you."

She felt like squirming. Man, she thought, he was so weird. So weird, but still cute, with that tiny crook in his nose and those freckles dotting his left cheek. "Uh, thanks. You're – you're cool too." Oh geez, she thought, why couldn't she just try looking all mysterious and smile instead of opening her mouth? She shifted her balance from foot to foot and stared at the ground. Old pine needles mingled with the furry moss, looking out of place.

Thano smiled. "If you're worried about them turning you in, don't. I can fix that too. It's easy."

She sighed. "How do you even do that?"

"Easy. I'm part of this place. It hears me and I hear it. I can affect anything as long as I'm not hurting the forest. If we hurt the woods, it hurts me. I can show you, if you want. Or, I can show you your gift. If you're ready for it." Susie didn't know what to say. So she took the easy way out.

"If you promise they won't turn me in, we can go. I'm not bothered by the party, I swear it." Anything to get out of this. Her chest twisted when she looked at him. When he looked at her, she felt like a specimen to be studied.

"Your wish," Thano said and grinned, the light catching on his pristine white teeth. As he extended his arm to her once again, she felt the nervous flutter in her stomach reappear. He looked absolutely perfect, and if she was honest with herself, she looked like she'd never had a glad rag in her life. Well, rags, maybe, but not the glad part. She could almost hear everyone whispering behind her back again, this time about how bad her clothes smelled, about her babyish fashion sense. This was the only place she could go, and it was about to be ripped away from her. Her face burned. By the time she changed, the damage to the tiny threads of reputation she had would probably already be done.

"You look radiant," Thano whispered beside her as he twisted the vine-wound knob of the castle door.

As the door swung open, bass thundered out to greet them. Susie couldn't believe she hadn't heard the pounding before. It was either magic or some excellent sound proofing. She voted magic. Thano raised his eyebrows and Susie wanted to laugh. He didn't look nineteen just then, but more like a dad who'd had enough out of his kids.

"Never been to a real party before?" Susie asked. She was glad for the music. A haze of smoke hung in the air before them, as if the smoke was the true entry to the castle, not the door behind them.

Thano snorted. "Several, of course. I just expected – I told Reg—"

"Told me what?" As if the only thing a person needed to do to find Reg was say his name. Susie bit back a sarcastic laugh. If she'd just known to do that yesterday.

She turned to Reg, and when he saw her, he shrugged, like her disappearing act earlier had been no big deal. "Sorry I missed this morning. I wish I could've been there for you."

"Let's not talk about that," Thano interrupted and swept out his arm. "Let's talk about this." As the haze cleared, Susie saw that in place of the posh antechamber she'd seen the day before was a room that had been clearly trashed. No wonder Thano was pissed. Behind Reg a throng of teens took turns smashing a shovel into the wall, tearing huge gashes in the moss. Green dust shook from the gaping hole as a guy in a Mohawk wrenched the shovel back out. The throng threw up their arms and cheered at the sight of their wreckage, and again a moment later when the moss grew right back over the holes. Green, green, green, it scuttled back and forth over the hole like a spider at its web.

Thano grimaced, his hands clenched into fists. Heavy bass thrummed through the room, rattling a moss-encrusted crystal chandelier, its glass tinkling back and forth like teeth chattering. Susie could see a keg set up in the corner, with some of her classmates already upside down in keg stands. She felt a little sick again. People milled around, clapping red plastic cups against other red plastic cups, sloshing beer on the moss floor. Yuck, she thought. It'd be squishier than ever. Julia Sidorova flicked a cigarette on the ground and stomped out the red embers singeing the furry earth.

"I thought you said you didn't mind," Reg furrowed his brow.

Thano sighed and closed his eyes, his eyelashes dusting against a tiny crescent of freckles beneath his right eye. Susie bit her lip and suppressed the urge to touch them. Thano straightened his posture and squared on Reg. The veins in his neck stuck out. "I didn't think you would bring so many—that they'd be this...destructive. It's just too much. The Castle can only give so much. It can't grasp so much at once. Get them to stop or get them to leave, it's your choice."

Reg shrugged, palms up. "Sorry. I'll get them off the walls. I thought it would be okay if

we brought them here. We have a halfpipe set up in the basement. Is that okay, or do I need to tear it down?" Reg gave Thano a sidelong glance.

Thano shook his head and lifted his head as if to study the ceiling, which yawned above them. "As long as you get them to stop hurting my walls, they can stay. For now. But you have to remember, the Castle is...generous but fragile. We have to respect it." Thano gestured again at the petrified wood walls, the green floor. The idea of the castle feeling them and reacting to their presence made Susie want to cringe away from it all over again, but she swallowed back the urge. For now, this was the safest place she had. Scratch that. It was the *only* place she had.

"You talk about it like it's a person," Susie laughed, but then thought better of the statement. She stopped laughing just as Thano gave her a hurt look. Wrong thing to say, then. She wondered if that could be true—should she try to think of the castle as a person, a *being* of some kind? So she was standing inside another being that could basically hear everything they said? The thought gave her a headache. After an extremely long moment, Thano's gaze never wavering from her, he nodded, almost imperceptibly. Reg put up his hands and began to back way.

"Hey, don't let me get in the middle of anything. Thanks, man. I won't do it again."

"I know you won't," Thano said, waving him away.

Reg swallowed hard, but nodded and pivoted away from them. He passed through the throng of swaying teens and shouted, "Ollies in the basement!" Some cheered, hands up, spraying beer like a sprinkler, and followed him out of the room.

Worry flashed across Thano's face, then it was gone. "So. What do you want to do?" He turned to her and smiled, though it was a little crooked, like he'd forgotten both sides of the

mouth had to curl up to get the right effect. The party had broken his smile.

"I don't get it. You *have* gone to a party before, right? You know how they are." Susie bit her lip, trying to find a good way to ask him about the castle being fragile. Susie bit her lip, trying to find a good way to ask him about the castle being fragile, but she wondered if Thano wasn't just projecting his own feelings on the place. He seemed more fragile than the castle right then, his earlier confidence lost in the swell of teens shouting and sloshing beer on the feathery moss floors.

Thano took a lock of her hair in his fingers. "You have beautiful hair. I never expected it to be so..." he trailed off.

"So, what?" Her breath caught in her throat as she fumbled to find the right words. She felt a little weak, but she knew it was from his touch rather than her earlier tumble in the race. She never wanted him to let go.

He smiled, and this time, his mouth didn't look so broken. "So alive." He laughed when she furrowed her brow. "I can't explain. It's like I've always known it."

For once Susie was glad she wasn't the only one who said weird, way-too awkward things. She couldn't even wrap her head around this one. But at least she wasn't scared of him anymore. Even if he wasn't a normal guy, caught up in the weird vortex of the castle, just as she was. "I guess my hair is glad to meet you?"

Thano laughed. He gestured to the corner of the room, his arm slicing through a cloud of smoke. "Can I interest you in one of the finest beverages our Castle can dream up?"

She grinned. "If you insist, good sir." She waded through the throng and accidentally elbowed Mary Beth, who gave her a withering look.

"Who let Susie Soiled Pants in here?" Mary Beth giggled into her cup. "Geez, Susie did you bathe at a truck stop? You smell like that chewing gum soap." Susie looked past Mary Beth and tried to ignore her, her short-lived good mood dissipating. She just had to get to her closet to change, but by the time Mary Beth was done, it wouldn't matter. The girl was all about any damage she could inflict. Susie didn't let herself sneak a glance at Thano. In another minute he would have heard enough and would cast her aside without a second thought. She shouldn't have dared to think she could get away from humiliation for very long, especially where Mary Beth was involved.

"Seriously. I heard she washed her clothes in the locker room. Smell her." Mary Beth elbowed Luke Riley, one of the cross-country runners on the guy's team, in the ribs. He winced.

"Knock it off, Mary Beth," Luke said. "The girls got fourth. You could still be on the all-star team. The guys didn't even place. My jerk of a dad told me to suck it up, but maybe you should be the one taking his advice." He looked into his cup. "I should've gone out for football instead."

"You're no fun. And anyway, not without my help, they didn't." Mary Beth pouted, and Susie nodded to Luke gratefully, trying to edge away from Thano so he'd know she'd understand when he dropped her.

Thano stepped in and touched Susie on the elbow. She jerked away in surprise, but bit her lip in embarrassment. He glared at Mary Beth, his mouth in a tight line. "Susie, is she bothering you?" Susie felt her eyes go wide. He wasn't going to kick her to the curb at all.

Mary Beth scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Give me a break. I'm just here to party. She's the one who's trouble."

Susie shook her head and narrowed her eyes at Mary Beth. "No, Thano, thanks. She's just being Mary Beth." Mary Beth dipped her fingers into her beer and flicked the drops at Susie. She recoiled, wiping her eyes.

"She's just being Mary Beth," Mary Beth parroted, wrinkling her nose.

Thano reached over and took the cup out of Mary Beth's hand and put his hand on her elbow. "I think you shouldn't be here, anymore."

Mary Beth wiggled out of his grasp. "Ugh, get your hands off me, rape-face! Don't even think about touching me. Maya invited me, and I'm staying until I find her."

She jumped away from Thano and scowled at Susie. "Thanks for nothing." She glanced from Thano and back to Susie. "Looks like you picked a good one. Good luck with your new head case." Mary Beth held up her phone as if she was going to take a picture, but when she tapped at the screen, it remained dark. "What the hell's wrong with my phone?" She turned to Luke. "Can I see yours?"

Luke shook his head. "Stop embarrassing yourself, Mary Beth," he whispered. Mary Beth leaned back, eyebrows raised. She turned back to Susie.

"This is so tragic, Susie, really. Did you have to pay him to go out with you?" She pointed at Thano. "And the rest of you losers. What's the deal? She doesn't matter to you, and we all know it." She turned to Luke. "Come on. Are you telling me you'd pick her? Over me?" When Luke looked away instead of answering, Mary Beth looked stricken.

"Come on, let's just leave her. She can stay. Just ignore her," Susie said to Thano. She leaned in close to him. "I don't want her telling anyone where I am," she whispered.

"Don't worry," he said, but his facial expression changed, and he looked cold, calculating.

Susie suddenly felt afraid for Mary Beth, and afraid of Thano all over again. She shouldn't have said anything.

"Right on, Little Miss Shithouse. Listen, I don't need you to tell me where I can and can't be. Just drop it." Mary Beth tried to slip past Thano toward the hallway that led to the rest of the castle, but he pushed her back.

Thano shook his head. "The problem, Mary Beth, is that Susie is being *nice* to you. But you don't understand how to be nice, do you?"

"Really, Thano, she did help me today." Susie knew her voice sounded shaky and high-pitched. "I don't care, really. Just ignore her." She very carefully peeled his fingers from Mary Beth's arm and grabbed Mary Beth, pulling her close. If she tried to take up for Mary Beth, maybe she wouldn't say anything about having seen Susie at the castle. Maybe she would just use it as ammunition to get Susie to do something for her later on. Whatever that would be, Susie didn't care at the moment.

"God. Why didn't your mom throw you in the dumpster when you were born? Would've saved so much trouble." Mary Beth smirked at Susie. So much for that tactic, Susie thought. Thano's face had gone taut, his golden eyes overtaken by the black of his pupils.

"Just shut up, okay?" Susie hissed. She didn't care anymore if Mary Beth told the cops where she was. Thano had sent them away before. He could do it again. But the question was, what was he about to do to Mary Beth? She didn't want anything to happen to her, and she was afraid of what Thano might do. He looked so angry. If the castle could make anything, who was to say it couldn't *undo* anything? Anyone?

"She can stay," Thano smiled, but it didn't carry to his eyes. "We can make room for her.

Why don't you take her to the basement, Susie? Plenty of things to discover there." Susie shook her head, afraid for Mary Beth. The girl jerked in Susie's grip but Susie just tightened her hold.

"You," Susie pointed at Luke. "Get out of our way." Mary Beth elbowed her in the side and tried to kick Susie's injured knee, but Susie dodged the kick and held tight.

"You are so gonna pay for this on Monday," Mary Beth hissed, still struggling.

"I'm sure I will. Just shut up already, okay? I'm trying to help you. Like you helped me, remember? So we're even. I promise you, you so don't want to see what this place is hiding." Susie shoved her way through the crowd to the great wooden door that separated the castle from the woods. The door that acted as the gateway to all the castle's creepy parlor tricks. She wondered what would happen if it was gone. Would its magic spread into the woods, seeping like poison into the ground? Or would the castle lose its power? Maybe nothing would happen at all. Sometimes a door was just a door, even if magic was involved.

"You're not helping me. You're throwing me out of a party. Bad enough you lost us the race, now you want to humiliate me? On Monday I'll make sure. You're through."

"Are *you* through?" Susie turned the knob on the door as she faced Mary Beth, who didn't respond. She kept the same, better-than-you sneer on her face.

"Okay." Susie shrugged and wrenched the door open. Outside, the moon dripped light onto the furry carpet of moss that trailed into the depths of the forest.

"Be careful," she said as she pushed Mary Beth across the threshold. "You know what they say about the woods at night." And as Mary Beth turned around and said, "Wait!" Susie slammed the door in her face.

It took her a second to realize that the entire party had gone silent. Slowly she closed her

eyes and pivoted to face the rest of the crowd. When she opened them, no one pointed at her and laughed. No one sneered or wrinkled their nose at her or looked away. Instead, they burst into applause. Their clapping echoed into the cavernous room, and it vibrated on Susie's skin. So much cheering, just for putting Mary Beth in her place. It all just made Susie feel worse, as if everyone thought she had done it to even the score with her rival.

She searched the crowd for Thano and marched up to him. He grinned and held out his arms. She froze, shaking her head, afraid of seeing him turn on her, seeing those golden eyes go cold with malice. "What would you have done to her?" Her throat hurt, like she was bottling up one long scream that threatened to escape. She knew her face had gone that purple red reserved for those few moments before she became Susie the Shitstorm Tsunami. Who did he think he was?

"I didn't mean anything by it. I only wanted to help. I was just going to mess with her memory a little. So she wouldn't remember you were here." Thano cast his gaze down. So maybe he wouldn't hurt Susie. But she didn't know that for sure. Not anymore.

"Why? How exactly was that *helping*, Thano? Are you going to do that to everyone else here?"

"No, I—I was going to just cloud the Castle so no one would find it for a while. That's all."

"So why would you need to mess with Mary Beth at all? Face it. You don't have any clue about how to help, no matter what you think you *know*. We were supposed to calm her down, make her happy. She's a sheep when she thinks she's a lion—she's not going to turn me in if she gets a little drunk and calms down. She wouldn't say anything. That's not what she does." No,

what Mary Beth did for revenge was always small, designed to break people down piece by piece. She liked having control that way.

"Susie, I'm sorry. I should have let you handle it." Thano's face had gone pale, serious, like he might faint from shame.

"I can't right now, I'm sorry." She jerked her arm out of his grasp and shoved her way through the crowd toward the hallway that led into the rest of the castle. In truth, she was embarrassed, but she wasn't sure if it was because Mary Beth had picked on her as usual or that Thano had tried to take up for her. That he cared and *wanted* to help. She was pitiful. Just another pitiful charity case.

"Susie! Wait! I want to show you something!" Thano called behind her.

She ignored him. She never should have bothered. So what if she turned herself in to the cops—at least they'd take her away from these assholes. The hallway throbbed with people, sweat dripping from their faces. She didn't need a beer. She needed a bathroom or a cabinet or any place she could just get away and be alone.

Chapter Thirteen

Thano had known only one love, and that was his castle—the roots and fibers of earth and all that cradled it, and anything that caressed the skin of his forest included.

He watched it grow from soil, every morning waking to see a mist of spore blowing across the forest floor, clearing from his own body a cocoon of moss that whispered who he was coming to be into the space between his ribs, words brushing against the soft skin that cloaked his clavicle.

He didn't know the words at first—language would come after the winds swept smells and sounds to him from far off. So many words composed his body, the ground on which he stood, the world beyond the sky. Still, he came to feel them all, even if he didn't quite know how. Yet he ached. How he longed to touch another composition like himself.

But the castle had no bones, only bark, only roots, only fibers and spore. No bones like Thano. Out of its depths crawled the fungus that connected them all, but no other body crawled. Where had he come from? Am I the only one? he asked the castle. I found you and made you part of all of us. You alone, the roots beneath the castle whispered in his ear each morning as he woke.

Thano lay his head on the soft castle floor and listened for someone—anyone like him—who might hear his heart beat and answer back.

But nobody who came spoke the language he understood. The castle brought him bodies that stood by him, but they did not know the words. Soft tendrils from the insides of bodies came into his presence, but they had never known the words. Alone. Time slowed and sped up and slowed again, but still no one came. Kit and Jamie came, scorched, barely alive, buzzing with

language that slowly Thanos learned. But they came together—they had each other—they did not know or feel a word like Alone. How you didn't say it, how it came from inside, a hollow in your bones that blew its own cold winds up and down all the parts of you that could feel. How sometimes, even as the roots of the earth slid in and out of your skin, you didn't feel patched together again, but numb, all of you left aching, unsure.

Until the Burial of the Words. Hopes and dreams that trembled into his soil, that said
You are not alone.

Chapter Fourteen

Susie locked herself into a bathroom off the hallway. She ducked past the creepy ivy that crowded over the door and slammed it behind her with a kick of her foot. It wasn't like any bathroom she'd ever seen. An oval mirror sat over the wash basin, but its edges also swarmed with ivy. Across from the mirror sat a clawed-foot tub filled with moss, bark, and flower petals.

Over the moss floor lay a throw rug, if you could call it that. It looked like it had been woven from rags and leaves and dead vines, like something had eaten and regurgitated a bird nest all over the forest floor. Susie toed at it but couldn't bring herself to walk across it to the commode.

"It's not going to bite you," she said, but the rug made her skin crawl. She shoved it out of the way with her foot. It crinkled and cracked, but she didn't stop pushing it until it laid crumpled against the wall. Where the rug had been lay the castle's usual moss, though trampled and slightly yellowed. So the moss could die, she thought. Probably. But as soon as Susie had the thought, the moss curled back from yellow to green. It looked as if it had never been strangled at all. She bent her head over the sink and twisted the faucet's handle, afraid dirt and petals would sluice from the pipes, but thankfully only clear, cold water came out. She splashed it over her face, the icy sensation a welcome distraction from everything outside.

She decided she could just stay in here until the party was over and sneak out while Reg and Thano and everyone else was sleeping. She would go to the cops in her own time. She knew they weren't out here, anymore. At least Thano had seen to that. Maybe she could just wait it out until her birthday. Time went so fast here she could maybe do it. But by that time, school would be finished. She would have missed too many classes to graduate even if she could clear things

up with the cops. That was a giant *if*. Okay, she thought, so not a great plan, but acceptable. More acceptable than running out the front door in further embarrassment, anyway.

When Susie glanced into the mirror, though, she forgot about her plans. She'd felt the pain go away, but she hadn't expected her skin to look so...perfect. She'd expected a scar at the very least. The bandage still sat slapped crookedly on her forehead, but the ugly red gash that had crowded beneath and around it was gone. Gone. No hint she'd ever slammed into a rock. She peeled away the bandage and gaped at her reflection. Aside from the redness caused by the adhesive, her forehead gleamed. Unbroken. Not even a hint of a pimple, either.

Susie ran her fingers over her forehead. "What else can he do?" she whispered.

She smiled, and that cringing need to be alone left her. She didn't care that she'd just made a big scene in front of everyone, that Mary Beth had threatened to make her life as hellish as possible. Susie wondered what Coach Terry thought of her disappearing act. What might she have told the cops? She hoped her coach still believed in her, even if Susie had taken off. But it would be a long time before she found out what Coach Terry thought of all of this. Susie told herself to push Coach out of her mind until she went back to Garnet Falls.

She glanced at the faucet and wondered if it had super powers like Thanos. It was probably the holiest of holy waters. How had Thanos even managed to get running water this far into the woods, anyway? The sink and toilet looked like they had modern pipes though the rest of the bathroom was a freak fest. That meant she should feel right at home here, she thought bitterly, but then tossed the thought away.

She rolled up her pant leg so she could splash water over her knee. As the water slid over it, her skin tingled and almost immediately the quarter-sized chunk taken out of her leg began to

gleam with pink. What had been a shallow divot a moment before now looked unbroken and smooth. Completely whole. And another moment later, her skin no longer gleamed with pink and had returned to her normal pigment, with not even a hint of a scar. She frowned, fingers tracing over what had been a least a quarter-sized chunk taken out of her leg. A few freckles dotted the area around her knee. Totally normal. Okay, so the water had healing powers, just as Thano did.

"Breathe," she instructed herself, and straightened to look in the mirror again. For a second she thought the gash might come back, but it didn't. Freckles spread across her nose and cheeks. Her skin flushed when she couldn't think of what to do. From the mirror, the tub caught her eye.

What would happen to her if she grabbed a handful of the debris there? Would she sprout wings? Grow a foot taller? Straight-up disappear? She decided not to chance it. Reg had acted as if what this place could do was totally normal, and had even seemed proud of it. She sat on the edge of the tub and leaned her chin into her hands. Embarrassment burst back through her, but as she touched her forehead for the millionth time, she knew she was overreacting.

Whatever this place was, with its druggy ivy, fountain-of-youth faucets, and freaky self-healing walls, it knew her secrets. It gave them away freely. Maybe Thano healing her wounds was a gesture. Maybe the castle was asking for forgiveness for scaring her all those years ago. Maybe it *wanted* her here. The thought made her queasy with nerves and excitement. Susie bit her lip and then smiled into the mirror.

"Thank you," she said, and the Susie in the mirror nodded, then her clothes rippled and transformed into a dress with frocked ivy on the bodice and gold lamé on the skirt. An emerald waistband glimmered. Susie backed away from her reflection and stood in the center of the

room. She glanced down. Sure enough, her clothes had changed. Gone were the rags she had worked so hard to keep from destroying, and the dress, well, the dress was like something out of a glamour magazine. Susie wrapped her hands behind her back in a reverse-prayer yoga pose Coach Terry had taught her. Earlier, Thano had said something about the castle being generous but fragile. He'd brought them here for some reason, but she couldn't think why. He didn't even know her, yet he'd said he'd been waiting to meet her. Why? She wasn't sure how long he'd known Reg. Her breath came faster now.

"Stop freaking out," she said and forced herself to slow down her breath. She could just hang out in here, wait out the crowd before she talked to Reg. A second later, the light in the bathroom flickered, then went out entirely. Maybe this was the castle's way of hustling her out of the bathroom. Take too long, kill the lights.

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere." She glanced around the room, willing her eyes to adjust, but it was too dark. Not even a nightlight to pee by. "You can't make me go," she said.

"Susie," a voice whispered. "Susieeee."

Susie whirled around. The voice sounded like it was right behind her. It came so soft, like a wind whistling behind a closed door, but it was so close, it could have been under her skin. But she couldn't see anything and—thank God—nothing touched her.

"Susie, your Mama misses you," the voice hissed in her ear. The air went warm and moist, that too-thick strawberry syrup smell of an energy drink blending with clove cigarettes and rancid meat. Susie choked and balled her hands into fists.

"You can turn the lights on now," she said. "I'm not falling for your stupid joke." But she knew it wasn't a joke. She could smell her mom. All those moments her mom had sunk into sleep

against the wall, ashes from her cigarette overflowing onto the rotting wood floor, embers winking out, red syrup from one of her few splurges trickling down the wall like hot candle wax that had lost its flame. And that final moment, her mom's hand splayed out on the floor, the scissors just inches away. Finally done with her charade of life. Susie blinked back a sudden heat behind her eyes.

"You just left me there, my darling." The voice rose from a whisper to a howl. "I was so lonely. Why didn't you take me with you?"

Susie tried not to panic. She couldn't go back to that place, couldn't think of her mom like that. Her mom was just on an extended vacation. She would never smell like rotten meat. She was off snorkeling and drinking her weight in piña coladas.

"Mom, I couldn't," Susie choked out. She shielded her nose from the smell that still hovered around her. The room swam in black. If she'd been anywhere else, she would've taken off as soon as the lights had gone out, but the ivy blocked her way. If she touched it, it might put her to sleep again, and give her possibly an even worse nightmare than this.

"Of course you could take me with you," the voice said. "I needed you, Susie. You should never have left me by myself."

"What else could I do?" Susie stomped her foot into the too-soft floor, not even making a sound. "You wouldn't listen. You never listened to me. You didn't care what I said."

"You're a bad, bad girl. Bad girls get punished. Bad girls don't win."

"Don't worry, I'm out of the running for first place, anyway." Susie got down on her knees, the moss ground damp beneath her. She would just crawl to the door. She shook her head, angry she hadn't thought of it before.

"They found me, Susie," the voice breathed in her ear.

Susie stopped crawling. She sat very still, frozen by the trembling cracks in her mother's voice.

"They found me all alone. My Susie's not here. She left me all by myself. Took her daddy's medal and left me." The voice screeched. "All alone without my baby to hold my hand."

"But I'm here, Mom. I'm here."

The voice laughed. "That teacher came to the door with the cops. The one who likes them conferences. Curly black mop likes big words, likes to think all big of herself probably why my Susie left me all alone so she could be all big of herself, too big for my house for my rules always saying 'potential.' Crabby mop not minding her business found me. I was on the floor where you left me. And now. It's cold where I am, my little Berry." The voice trailed off.

Susie stayed quiet, trying to swallow back the lump in her throat. She hadn't even thought about how her mom would feel. She hadn't even thought her mom *could* feel. It all seemed so impossible, yet here she was, listening to her mother's voice. Susie pressed her palms into the curl of moss. The voice howled again and the rotten smell intensified. Susie covered her nose, afraid to say anything.

"Now they'll come find you. Put you back with me. You'll have to go. Mama knows best." The voice cackled for a long minute.

Susie shuddered, the air cutting at her like ice. "Please come find me," the voice whispered. Then a bang came at the door. Susie jumped, but the voice stopped, and then the smell was gone and the air was warm and the lights came back on.

Susie stared at the too-green floor until the bang sounded again. She didn't jump this time, but pulled out of her crouch and bounded to the door before the castle changed its mind and locked her in this room. She didn't know what it wanted, but it didn't seem friendly.

She twisted the knob and opened the door to find Tracie Welser. Tracie peered at her, worry crossing her face. Oh no. Susie knew her own face must've looked pained, and Tracie was about to ask her if she was okay. If *anyone* asked Susie that right now, she would break down and never pick herself back up.

"What are *you* doing here?" Susie asked, just to put Tracie on the defensive. Tracie never came to parties, and even though she was a super-competitive bookworm, she was notoriously kind outside of classes. If she saw a sympathetic smile crossing the girl's face, she'd burst into tears. Tracie frowned and adjusted her cat's eye glasses.

"Hey, Susie, I—" Tracie started, but Susie sidestepped around her and cut her off.

"All yours." She gestured toward the bathroom and marched off down the hall, elbowing her way past a group of football players, who for some reason were laughing and joking with Kit and Jamie. She had to get out of here. She ducked and elbowed the super-humanly tall quarterback Tod McCoy, jostling his grip on his beer. It sloshed out of his cup and onto his shoes.

"Hey! You clean up nice!" he called after her and the whole crew laughed.

"Need me to get you a security blanket?" Kit called after her.

She threw up her hand. "Forget it," she said, and made for the stairs. There was only one person she could talk to about this.

Chapter Fifteen

Thano yearned for the creators of the words, but the wait was nothing compared to the Time Before. Every morning he pressed his hands into the soil and stretched his fingers until he touched the buried ink, the messages so loud and so soft they burned in his ears.

Is this what you need? the castle's core whispered. Thano breathed the wishes of his heart into the moss so the walls could spread it to the core. The core had given him so much. All the tendrils of past lives who wandered the halls. Kit and Jamie, who had no other choice. They seemed so similar to him, but they didn't know this world, how it was both soft and vicious and cleaved roots from Thano's body each morning. Roots that foraged in search of cures for flaw.

The castle's core felt his roots shriveling with Alone. And so it was one bright morning, sparrows diving through the brush, that the core extended the castle's roots through the depths of the wood and out into the small town just outside its borders. So Thano could walk out of the castle doors, into the forest, and out, into a town he had never touched. Into a world of pulsing bodies, in search of the Word Buriers. In search for the ones who knew the meaning of Alone.

He wasn't to know his connection would lead him to create something the roots and mycorrhizae had never seen—that he was capable of stretching his fibers beyond the body. But the core knew. And so it waited, yearning for what Thano would bring from beyond.

Chapter Sixteen

Susie slunk down the stairs toward the basement in search of Reg and his skateboarding buddies. She was shaking. She couldn't help it. No telling what was down here, after the way the castle had broadsided her in the bathroom. Could be she was heading right for a trap, she thought. She wanted to sit down and just sleep. It was hard to breathe—her chest went tight and her lungs felt like they were being weighed down by sandbags. It was clear she couldn't pretend none of this had ever happened. How was she going to explain what she'd just seen to Reg? No big deal, the ghost of your mom in the bathroom, right? Sure, no big deal at all. Totally, 100 percent believable.

Shadows climbed the walls like vines as she toed her way down the too-soft stairs. Ivy wound around the banister so that she didn't dare touch it to steady herself.

"Reg?" Susie called, her voice unsteady. She made it down the stairs and peered into the long, dark hallway. It smelled just like the forest, wet dirt and fir trees. But there were no trees. And there was no noise of wheels rollicking over wood. Just silence and a dark, dank corridor with two doors, one on the left, and one on the right of the walkway.

"Reg?" she tried again, willing her voice to sound louder. No response. She edged her way down the hall and glanced from one door to the other. The frame over the left door crowded with ivy and roots, dirt clinging to them, but the door itself was a dark wood. There were words etched into it, but she couldn't read them. They weren't in English. She wasn't sure what language they were. The door on the right side also boasted words, but these were in English. They seemed to ripple like water as she read them. *There is a man in the Castle and he is real and he is true. When you find him, he will know what to do*, one of the lines read. And below

that, *In the Castle we should live like the kings and queens who never did.* Who had written those words? Thanos? And why did the castle show them to her now? As soon as that thought passed through her mind, the words on the door evaporated away. The door looked like plain, solid wood once more.

Susie wished her mom was still alive, that she'd just had an accident, that her soul had just fallen out of her body but managed to crawl back inside in the nick of time. That she'd just fallen and knocked herself out instead of stabbing herself somehow. That she'd woken up as soon as Susie had run from the house with nothing but a few meager belongings. And she wouldn't be here, choosing between two doors. The words about the man in the castle sounded too much like Thanos. As upset with him as she was, she edged away from it, unsure if he would be in that room waiting for her. She stared at the door on the left again. The words on this door still ran by in a language she'd never seen. Maybe behind this door she'd find Reg and his skateboarding crew, just hanging out, partying like normal. She stretched out her hand and wrapped it around the intricately carved doorknob.

It felt warm under her skin, and it pulsed, as if it was breathing. She wrenched her hand from the doorknob and covered her mouth, trying not to scream.

"It's okay," she said aloud to steady herself. She needed to hear the sound of her own voice, to be sure she was still sane. "It's just your imagination. Just turn the knob. No big deal, right?" This was one of those times her own mutinous curiosity shined. She knew she was going to go through the door, and she already hated herself for it. It was then that she heard something beyond the door, something that made her put her hand back on the doorknob, fear or no fear, and twist it open. Crying. She had heard someone crying.

But when the door swung open before her and she looked out, the castle was gone. The world beyond was a spray of mist, a void, a cloud full of vapor and condensation. Nothing of substance.

No castle. No ivy. No moss. No life.

But still, something cried. It was far away, but she could hear it, swirling around somewhere in those vapors. She was about to step forward into the mist room, but something stopped her. What if she stepped into all of that white and disappeared forever? Maybe that was what the castle had wanted all along. But the sobs were too much for her to bear. Like an animal caught in a trap, or a baby left all alone. She had to help. She couldn't turn her back again or she'd be a coward all her life.

Susie grabbed the hem of her dress's skirt. She wasn't going to ignore anything, not anymore. She may not have done right and reported her mom to the cops, but she could still make things better. She could save someone else and figure out what the castle really was doing. Hopefully without letting it trap her.

Pinching the hem between her right fingers, she yanked on it with her left. The ripping noise cut through the air and she paused, worried Thano would find her here, but he didn't. Nothing so much as moved. She pulled the material a little at a time, careful to get it in a semi-straight line. The lamé ripped easily and soon half the skirt was a cord in her hand. She grinned at the translucent layers of tulle, now exposed, that gave the rest of her dress so much bounce. She was even starting to match the mist. Maybe she wouldn't disappear after all. Something was waiting for her out there, she just had to find it.

Susie knotted the end of her lamé cord around the doorknob, then flinched as the door

creaked horrendously. She glanced back into the hall to check that no one else had come down here. The corridor still stretched out behind her, empty of life. So far so good.

She turned and stepped onto the threshold. Before her, the mist stretched for what seemed like forever. She gripped the end of the cord, knuckles bone white, and drew in a deep breath. Then she stepped into the fathomless white and the castle disappeared.

As white vapors swam past her, she realized she should probably feel cold. But she didn't feel anything. Neither hot nor cold, neither afraid nor excited. She hadn't disappeared—at least, she hoped she hadn't. The only clue she had that she still existed was the golden cord in her hand. Even if she couldn't see the castle, she could find her way back. She hoped. When she looked behind her, there was only mist.

She took a single, shuffling step. The ground seemed solid enough. It felt a little squishy, but not like it was about to swallow her up. She couldn't really see it, though, so she refused to actually take her foot off the ground. The ground had to be there, though, or she wouldn't be *here*, right? She worried maybe she was *imagining* how the ground felt, and that thought made her want to freeze in place. She pushed it away and focused on moving forward.

"Hello?" she called and continued shuffling forward.

As she slipped into the mist, it began to change in color and texture. When she first stepped out of the castle, the mist had been only vapor, but the further she got, the more substance it took on. Soon she shuffled not through air but what felt like translucent, silk curtains that slid over her head as she moved. And they were not white as she had first guessed, but blends of ivory, creamy orange, and pastel pink. No earth tones, no greens, no browns,

anywhere. It reminded her of her first-grade teacher Mrs. Lawton, who wore only pastels and wrote on the board with pastel blue chalk. Susie smiled, imagining Mrs. Lawton spinning around in this hazy cloud of color.

"Hello?" Susie called again, more curtains slipping over her head. Around her, the mist began to mold into shapes. She checked the cord, unsure how far she'd come, how long she'd been gone, and was surprised that the gold of her skirt had unwound almost all the way to her waist. If the mist had still been gauzy white, the whole lower half of her skirt would have matched.

Before her, a hut stood, hazy and soft and pink. A rope bridge separated her from it—which bridged what? She couldn't imagine. She edged closer and craned to see beneath the bridge into the chasm. Only white mist and vapor swam before her. She swallowed.

"You've come this far," she said, glancing at the gold thread—she had only so much left, and what if the mist hut was worse than the Moss Castle? She could as easily be trapped here if she wasn't careful. The sobs continued. She had to help.

She crossed the rope bridge, which inexplicably creaked and went soft and spongy at the same time. Her heart danced in her chest, but she didn't stop. She slid her foot forward, careful of holes. She would've laughed from the nervousness but instead tightened her grip on the cord. And then she was across and standing before a pink hut with clouds that swam in and out of its windows.

"Hello?" she tried again. "Is anyone there?"

The sobs went silent. For a moment, there was only the soft whoosh of wind by Susie's ears. But after a long silence, the person began crying again.

"Are you okay?" Susie called. With surprise, she realized she sounded like Tracie. Guilt settled on her—She'd acted almost as terrible toward Tracie as Mary Beth had acted toward Susie. She owed Tracie a mega-apology, if the girl bothered to talk to Susie again. She shook her head. This was why she had trouble making friends. Push them away, one by one. The second anyone tried to get close, Susie slammed the door on them. She gazed at the cloud-pink roof, crying the only sound carrying on the air. Susie nudged against the swirling soft orange of the hut door. It swung open, the misty door creaking.

"What is even going on?" she said, but no one in the mist castle answered. She gazed inside at a yawning expanse of cloud. The only object that seemed fully formed from the vapors was a staircase that seemed to lead up into forever, up and out of the hut itself. Susie fingered the cord. What if she crossed the threshold and was locked in forever? But the crying continued. She didn't give herself the choice to turn back.

Susie crossed the threshold, fingers gripping the cord, and after taking a deep breath, began to climb the staircase, feet coming off the ground at last.

Chapter Seventeen

The staircase led Susie to an opening in the hut's roof, much higher than it had seemed to be when she first went inside. When she climbed onto the roof and saw who was huddled against the misty wall, her mouth dropped open.

Mary Beth curled forward, head against her knees, tears sliding down and disappearing into the mist. She huddled, hugging her legs. She didn't even look up as Susie approached, but Susie knew without a doubt this was her teammate, and nemesis, depending on the way the wind was blowing. Finding her here, when she should be home by now made Susie's head hurt with confusion. She knelt in front of Mary Beth and gently squeezed her shoulder.

"Mary Beth, hey."

Mary Beth jumped and stared at Susie with wet, bloodshot eyes. She looked wild, dazed. "Susie? How did you get here?"

Susie shook her head. "I thought you got out—didn't you? I mean, I pushed you out the door. I saw the woods. How are you here?"

Mary Beth shook her head and slid her legs out in front of her, twisting her boots side to side.

"None of this makes any sense. One minute I was in our living room and I had the scissors because I needed to trim the curtains and then I tripped and all I could feel was this burn and then – there was nothing. For the longest time. Until now." Mary Beth wiped away her tears with the sleeve of her oversized band T-shirt. Susie started, her body shaking suddenly. Mary Beth couldn't be saying what she was saying. It wasn't possible that she could know about Susie's mother. Susie tried to steady herself against Mary Beth's words. What she was saying had to be

just a coincidence. That was all. She tried to draw her out—maybe she'd hit her head in the woods or something and Thano had brought her back while Susie had been in the bathroom.

"You mean you were able to get home? You didn't see the cops in the woods or anything? Are you feeling okay?" Something about Mary Beth was off, but Susie couldn't figure it out. For one, she wasn't taunting Susie as usual. Tears kept sliding down her face, her mascara streaking her foundation with zebra stripes.

"Are you not listening, Berry?" Mary Beth wiped her nose. "I never went to the woods. You know I don't like it there, and you know I don't want you there, either. I'd only been at home."

"Berry?" Susie thought. Only her mother had *ever* called Susie "Berry." No one but Reg knew about that, and he probably wouldn't think to say it in public. She sat back on her heels and squinted. Mary Beth was definitely not herself. Mary Beth stopped sniffing and gazed at Susie, then she leaned forward and cupped Susie's face with her hands.

"What the hell are you doing?" Susie yelled, "Get off!" Susie tried to jerk back, but Mary Beth's grip was too tight. Susie's pulse raced, the world momentarily blurred by her own tears. Had the castle possessed Mary Beth? How else could she know all these details about her mom? It was the only explanation for the babble the girl was spraying.

"How'd you get so beautiful? All grown up right before my eyes. I should never have sold those butterfly clips. I had been saving them just for you."

"Stop," Susie said. "You're creeping me out." She closed her eyes, trying to keep the truth at bay. What had the castle done to Mary Beth?

"You keep calling me that. My sweet Susie, don't you know me?"

A wave of heat crashed into Susie and she made herself stare into Mary Beth's face. Only, it wasn't. Not really. Mary Beth's face wore that same twisted mouth expression her mom got when she was confused. The girl in front of her had Mary Beth's body, but Mary Beth seemed long gone. Now, Evelene Hopkins stared out at Susie behind Mary Beth's eyes. Susie's eyes widened. The scissors. The living room. All that blood. Like it had never happened. Like it was all just a very bad dream.

"Mom?" she whispered.

Susie held Mary Beth/Evelene by the hand and guided her back down and out of the mist hut, then followed the gold thread toward the door. Clearly, this girl or spirit or whatever she was had no memories of harassing Susie in the locker room or even of haunting Susie in the bathroom—she only remembered being Susie's mom before she had died. In spite of her fear, Susie hugged Mary Beth/Evelene to her, everything inside of her trembling.

To have her mom back – it was like a dream—and a nightmare—come true. And it was totally real. As long as the girl didn't go poof the second Susie opened the door into the Moss Castle. Her heart sledge hammered in her chest. Beside her, Mary Beth/Evelene babbled about cleaning the curtains, about stripping everything bare again. Susie wondered what had happened to the angry spirit who had screamed at her in the bathroom. Maybe the castle had created that apparition, angry at Susie for taking Thanos's kindness for granted. All this confusion made her want to turn off her brain. She couldn't process it.

"We just have too much. We have to get rid of some things," Mary Beth/Evelene said. Susie patted her arm and nodded. This person was *definitely* her mom—or at least she knew how

to mimic her extremely well. That would be the cruelest prank. But Mary Beth had known nothing about Susie's mom and wouldn't have had the time to find out even now that the cops knew. Maybe it was the castle playing God, like it had probably done in the bathroom. Susie wanted to feel glad and let her guard down without thinking about the rest, but she knew she couldn't. How it had happened, Susie had no idea. And if they did make it into the castle without her mom disappearing again, how was she going to pass this off to everyone else? Had Mary Beth run into something that swapped out her soul in the woods? What had happened to her? She couldn't just be gone-gone, could she? Well, maybe not any more than Susie's mom had been gone. But Susie had seen her mom *dead*. That was different. Susie tried to stop shaking but it felt like the mist was blowing across her insides, freezing her from the inside out.

Susie pulled on the cord, grateful to focus on the here and now. It no longer pooled out before her but was taut. "Where are we?" Mary Beth/Evelene asked beside her.

"I don't know. We don't have much farther now. Do you really remember nothing else? From before?" Susie knew she should ask about what had happened to Mary Beth, but she didn't think she could face that conversation at the moment. She was barely managing to hold onto this moment. How could it be her mom in front of her? The girl who was and was not Mary Beth shook her head.

"I was asleep. For a very long time, I guess? Then I woke up here."

"Not that long." Susie closed her eyes. If her mom found out what she'd done...or rather, not done. She fought back the hot sting of tears. Her mom never had to know. Except she already did know, didn't she? At least, that's what the voice in the bathroom had said. But this version of her mom didn't seem to remember talking to Susie in the bathroom. Maybe something else had

been talking to her. Susie shook, afraid of what that something else might be. She twisted the cord in her hand and followed it into a shadow of mist where it came to a sudden stop. She groped through the cloud and her hand closed on a hard, cold lump. The door knob. She tried twisting it and it yielded. The cloud of mist swung open and before them lay the basement hallway of the Moss Castle, soft and green and alive.

Alive. It was a word Susie wanted to like.

"This isn't our house." Mary Beth/Evelene took a single, stuttering step forward and peered into the castle. She wrinkled her nose. "It smells like dead leaves."

Susie didn't want to tell her what their old house probably smelled like now. Let alone that it was probably overrun with police.

"We have to lay low for a little while. It'll still be there when it's time to go back. Promise." She nodded toward the castle and held out her hand. "Come on. We'll go in together. Ready?" Mary Beth/Evelene hesitated but finally gave Susie her hand.

"One. Two. Three." Together they stepped into the Moss Castle and back into the darkened basement hall, craggy with wet and green.

Of course, it wasn't so easy to say, "Look everyone, my mom's back!" and Susie knew it. Only Thanos knew what had happened to her mom in the first place. Two, she was in Mary Beth's body, and historically, Mary Beth hated Susie. Looking at her now gave Susie goose bumps. To everyone else, it would be Mary Beth twirling around, mouth open like a guppy, staring at the never-ending expanse of the castle as it extended above them toward the sky. Her brown hair had no silver, no crinkle of lines around her eyes that webbed out when she laughed. And the whole

goth-punk uniform just set Susie's teeth on edge. Still, she conceded that maybe it was a smidge better than the creamy crepe dress her mom used to wear for days at a time.

And then there was the whole issue of body-snatching to consider. Mary Beth, Queen Bitch though she was, deserved her own body—she hadn't deserved to lose it, even if it meant Susie couldn't have her mom back. But what was done was done and it wasn't Susie's doing. She could barely grasp the fact that her mother was here—still, she couldn't just let her go again without making things right. Just the thought of the way she'd abandoned her mother dead on the floor made Susie want to curl up and bawl.

"Party stragglers not ready to go home, huh?" Reg's voice startled Susie out of her stupor. She turned to find him leaning against the basement wall by the door on the right, arms crossed, a wry smile fixed in place.

"What are you so happy about?" she grumbled, slightly embarrassed that he'd found her before she'd found him. Susie listened for the party upstairs, and realized everything had gone still. The castle was eerily quiet—even from the basement, she could hear the birds outside if she strained hard enough. "Did everyone leave?" she bit her lip. Had going into the mist been another time-flux?

"Yeah, a while ago. Except me and Maya and the Time-Warp Twins." Susie assumed he meant Kit and Jamie. "I thought you took off." Reg peeled away from the wall and nodded at Mary Beth. "This is a surprise. What? You go get her back? You must be crazy."

Susie shook her head. "You don't know the half of it."

Reg smiled. "Bet I know a quarter."

"Hey Reg, are you coming back in?" Maya poked her head out of the room across the hall and scowled at Susie.

"Oh. Nice dress. What, couldn't afford a top layer?" Maya pointed at the layers of white tulle on Susie's skirt and shook her head. Then she turned to Mary Beth. "What are you even doing hanging out with her?"

Susie gripped at the emerald waistband of her dress. Maya had never liked her, and Reg had never liked her mom, especially for nearly starving Susie. But Susie felt the same about Uncle Jack for all the bruises he left on Reg. They both knew the other loved their family, card-carrying members of the "Dysfunction Brigade" or not. Still, she couldn't find the words to explain. She hadn't yet told Reg what had happened to her mom in the first place.

Mary Beth/Evelene turned to Susie with raised eyebrows. "What's she talking about? Like I'd hate my own daughter."

Susie let out a sigh at the same time that Maya and Reg sucked in deep breaths. She shrugged and tried to play it off. "Oh, Mary Beth, come on."

Maya shook her head. "Nuh uh. Don't even think about playing one of those bitch games on me, Mary Beth. I know you better than that."

Reg frowned at Susie. "Susie? What's going on?"

She hesitated, afraid to meet his eyes. When she did, genuine worry crossed his face, his brown eyes wide. Shrugging, she nodded and scratched at her cheek, eyes back on the floor. "Yeah, I mean, some weird stuff kind of... I mean, I didn't do this..." She trailed off and shook her head.

"Hey Maya, can you and Mary Beth go see what Thanos's up to? I think Suze and I gotta

talk." Reg touched Maya on the elbow. She blew out her breath in a huff and put her arm through Mary Beth/Evelene's. Susie resisted letting her go, but dropped her hands in defeat when Maya tugged forcefully at Mary Beth/Evelene. It wasn't like Maya was going to leave the castle and go anywhere without Reg, after all. They'd been glued together for months and she seemed to cling closer now that he was sick.

"Fine," Maya said. "Babysit the princess. Be my guest." She glared at Susie and pointedly leaned forward and kissed Reg. It sounded wet and lasted for what seemed like forever. "At least you're not 'kissing cousins,'" Maya said when she was done. Susie cringed. She jerked Mary Beth/Evelene away again. "Let's go. I think I need a little heart-to-heart with my best friend, anyway. You *are* still my best friend, aren't you, Mary Beth?" Maya scowled at Mary Beth/Evelene as the girl gave her a confused half-smile. "I'm going to fix whatever you did to her," Maya hissed at Susie.

"Yeah, okay. If you can figure it out." Susie tried to keep her voice tough and steady. Maya scowled and huffed away. When the two girls had rounded the corner and pounded up the stairs, Reg turned back to Susie. She turned her gaze back to the mossy floor, unwilling to meet his eyes again.

"Well?" He folded his arms and leaned against the wall. Apparently he didn't care if he leaned into a pile of ivy or not. In the shadows of the basement hallway, Reg's body took on the same hue as a tree in the middle of winter. Gray, bent, too thin in the frigid air. Her stomach twisted seeing him like that. He looked so sick when he stood in the shadows.

"Do you trust him?" was all she could manage to say. The rest was too hard.

"Thano? Come on, let's sit down." Reg gestured at her to come with him into the room

across from the mist castle room. Reg's skin took on a healthier hue when he crossed into the room, and for once, a room in the castle looked absolutely normal, with square edges and normal furniture and no moss anywhere. The carpet was beige, the walls were golden, and the ceiling was plain white tile. So normal. Susie wondered if Reg had worked it to make it look normal. She had the weird sensation that maybe this room was the same as Reg's room upstairs, and the thought made her skin crawl. Everything she assumed might be normal turned out not to be, from the bathroom to the castle's own front door. If Mary Beth could leave but wound up right back in the castle, that must mean the forest was somehow part of the castle or vice-versa. Susie's head began to hurt again.

In the center of the room sat a plush burgundy couch. It looked a little too fancy for the rest of the room, but it looked comfortable. Reg plopped down on it and pulled his knees up to his chest, then waved at her to sit down. She smoothed her skirts as she perched on the edge of the sofa.

"Yeah, Thanos," she said. "Who else?"

"Yeah, totally. I mean, what he's doing for me..." Reg trailed off.

Susie fidgeted with the tulle layers of her dress. So many tiny holes. She pushed away the thought that he was exactly like Kit and Jamie now, even if he had only been gone for a few days. The castle seemed to just barely hold off his cancer. He didn't look gray-skinned anymore, but she swore she could see that color still lingering just beneath his skin.

"Come on, Suze. Spill."

She wiped her face. "Okay. You have to promise not to tell Maya. I mean it. Not a word." She sucked in a deep breath.

"Fine. Done."

"I mean it. If she finds out, I'm screwed."

"Just tell me already. I promise." Reg 's lip twitched, but he looked her in the eye. The first usually meant he was fibbing, but the second always meant he was being honest. Susie shook her head. He would tell Maya. She knew he would. It was as simple as that. But he was her only true family and her closest friend and she still hadn't told him. She'd wasted so much time trying to find a way to tell him. She changed the subject.

"I wish you didn't have to stay here for good. I don't want you to miss out on making it as a skateboarder and going to the X Games and all of that." Susie leaned forward, her whole face flushed.

Reg's expression didn't change. "I can bring everyone here, though. That's what's so cool. You should've seen the half pipe blazing tonight."

She clenched her jaw. Reg reached over, took her hand, and squeezed it. "Look, is that what's wrong? Me staying here? Is that why you're on Mary Beth time all of a sudden? I thought – with everything we've been through—you would—you'd welcome this. We could just start over. No one on our backs, no one trying to starve you, no one beating the crap out of me."

Susie pulled her hand out of his. "What about Maya? What about her future?"

"Maya likes it here. She loves me and I love her. It may not be the future she dreamed of, but she's in for it. Her parents don't even care where she is—they *moved* to India or something and just left her to finish school. I'm her family. And you're my family too, Suze. Not Uncle Jack. You." He smiled, but his expression changed to worry when he looked at her face. She knew the mask of calm she'd tried so hard to wear had crumbled away.

She couldn't keep this from him. He deserved to know. The only person she'd protected by not saying anything was herself. "Reg." Her voice came out in a cracked whisper. She curled her legs beneath her and leaned her shoulder against his. "I did something dumb. Like felony-dumb. Lock-me-up-and-throw-away-the-key dumb."

Reg gave her a wavering smile. "You're safe here. You can tell me, promise." Susie nodded and crossed her arms to stop them shaking out of nervousness.

"Remember when I threw Mary Beth out of the castle last night? Well, she didn't exactly go home."

Reg shrugged, palms out. "Lots of people don't. They find some other party. But big deal, she's back. It's just weird you're hanging out with her."

"Yeah, but she didn't exactly go *anywhere*. I found her in another part of the castle, I guess. In that room across the hall. I was looking for you down here, and I heard crying. So I opened a door, only it didn't go into a normal room. It went into this weird misty place. And I—I found her."

Reg scratched his chin, brows knitted. "I know this place isn't exactly heaven or whatever, but are you talking like another room just full of mist? Because that sounds like a little weird, even for this place, Suze."

"Look, it's really not, okay? I can show you." Susie tightened her arms around her stomach, thinking about how the mist had felt like almost nothing—the thinnest gauze. What if she'd breathed in some other spirit in that room and it was just waiting to take her over? Maybe that's what had happened to Mary Beth in the woods. Susie made herself keep talking. "I tore up my dress to make a kind of rope so I could be sure I could find my way back. But that's not all."

She wiped at the sudden prickling sting of tears, trying to force them away.

Reg slid his arm around her and pulled her close. "It's okay to be scared, Suze. This place gives us what it thinks we *need*, not always what we *want*. When I first came here, I...I would try to make a room full of trophies and half pipes and all that, but it would only show me a hall full of darkness that went on for like forever. But eventually I got it to give me the half pipe."

Susie pulled out of his grip and studied him. Just rip the tape off, she thought. "Yeah, so, the rest. So I brought her back. Only she's . . . she's not exactly Mary Beth anymore."

"What do you mean, 'not *exactly* Mary Beth?'" Reg squinted.

Susie wiped her face and stared at the ceiling. It abruptly transformed from the normal white tile to the furry green of moss and then to a canopy of leaves. Like they were twelve years old again, sitting beneath a canopy of birches, burying their notes in the ground. Only they weren't. They were still in this creepy, creepy, super alive place.

She got up and paced, studying her hands. How pink they were. She wondered if Lady Macbeth ever did get out that damned spot, or if blood just stayed, visible only to the person who'd touched it.

"Sit down. You're making me nervous," Reg said, picking at his shoe. "Fess up, gangster-nerd." She was quiet for another long moment, her newfound bravery from a moment ago liquefying and melting away as fast as it had come.

"I took off, Reg. I just took off." Susie stared at the ground but it looked all bleary and she couldn't focus. "I thought it would be okay, but then the cops showed up after the race. Looking for me. And then I come here and I can't get away. The creepy bathroom decided it wanted me to have a heart-to-heart with my mom—or with her ghost or something. And then..."

She trailed off and leaned back against the too-warm wall. "I'm very confused, Reg." She closed her eyes. "It was my mom! I'm sure of it."

"Your mom?" Reg raised his eyebrows and the corners of his lips dipped. "But so what?" Maybe the castle wants you to face something. It does that."

Susie bowed her head and stared at the carpet. "No. Mom, Reg. I was at work and came home, and something had *happened*. She was bleeding. Bad. There was blood everywhere. She wasn't breathing anymore." Reg looked shocked. "She'd fallen on scissors or something." Susie tried to catch her breath, but she couldn't seem to get her pulse to slow down. She felt like she'd just run the hundred-meter dash without even moving. "There was so much blood," she choked out, her voice trailing off into a whisper.

"She's dead? Your mom's dead?" Reg's face went from beet red to ashen. He sucked in a breath. He looked as if he might cry again. Susie nodded and made herself keep talking.

"So I just took off. I didn't even tell *anyone*." She glanced up, afraid to look at her cousin, afraid he'd think she was worse than her mom had ever been. For a long moment, they were both silent. Susie shook her head. "Say something. Say I'm so terrible I should die."

Reg shook his head. "I would never. Just...why didn't you tell *me*?" He took a step toward her, but she shook her head and ducked away.

"I *looked* for you. I *tried* but you were *here*," she said, and then felt her shoulders collapse. "But, it's just . . . my mom, she was here and then—then she was gone. Just like always. Except just gone for good." She bit her lip and a knot formed in her throat. "Except now."

"Yeah, but Susie—"

Susie put up her hand. "That's not all. I was *so* freaked out, Reg. Like in shock. So I did

the dumb thing. I tried to make it better, I swear." She knew at this point she was blabbering, but she had to get it out. Reg kept watching her, as if he was afraid for her—or maybe of her, she didn't know. She hated knowing she was the kind of person to abandon another person, especially her mom. Things had been tough lately, but she loved her mom—she'd wanted to save her. She never would've run away if it weren't for all that blood. She started to cry and stumbled through her words.

"I had to try to make it better. So I touched them—the scissors—and I know that the cops are going to say if it was an accident, why did I do that? And why did I run away? But they'll never get it. They'll never understand." She bent her head and wiped her face, not daring to look up, not daring to say anything else. And then, Reg was there, drawing her into a hug, and it was like they were kids again in the forest, the trees above them a bandage for their hurts. It protected them and kept them close, promising the cousins warmth where there was none. Susie drew back and Reg's hands fell from her shoulder to her hands. She squeezed them softly.

"I know why you feel safe, here. It's so easy to hide from everyone else."

Reg raised his head to meet her eyes. "It's not about hiding, Suze. Don't you trust me?" he asked. His mouth trembled. "I can't believe this is true."

"Of course I do. You know I wouldn't make this up." Her heart hammered in her chest and her stomach twisted. There was so much more to tell.

"Then why didn't you tell me? About your mom."

Susie let go of his hands. "How could I? It's too hard to think about, let alone say." She gazed at her feet. Gone were her dirty sneakers the color of cigarette ash. She wore moss-green flats that blended with the floor. When she glanced back up, the wall seemed to rush in front of

her and suddenly thousands of words appeared, a tidal wave that swam and collapsed together, then broke apart and did it all over again. She saw her name, and Reg's. And then the words were gone, and the walls had gone gold again. She tried to inhale but suddenly there was nothing to inhale. Like she was dead herself. Calm down, she thought. After a moment, the air returned to what it was before.

"You didn't *see* her," she said. "You didn't have to go home to *that*. What would I even say? 'I didn't stab her, I didn't drug her, please don't blame me?' No one cares. No one needed to know. Except now they *do* know. Maybe they're waiting for me out there." She slid down the wall and slumped to the floor. "I've been cashing her checks, Reg," she whispered, a tightness winding through her that made it hard to breathe. "For years, I've been signing her name. Just to pay the bills. But they'll think I killed her for Dad's money." Susie buried her head against her knees. "They'll think I killed her." She choked back a sob, her breath hot against her face.

"Shh. We'll fix this." Reg slid down beside her and slipped his arm around her shoulders. "You shouldn't have to hold onto something like that, Suze."

Susie pulled her head off his shoulder to regard him. "Yeah, but you were *gone*. I tried to find you. And you were here. You were the only one I could even *try* to talk to. And after you told me you were sick, I didn't want to put that on you. It's not fair."

Reg stayed quiet. He picked at the ground with his free hand.

"Look, I get why you didn't come tell me you were sick right away. And you've got Maya to help you through this, which is cool. I'm an adult, I can take care of myself. I thought I had it all figured out until I messed up the race and the cops found..." She trailed off again and bounced her fist against her thigh, rolling her knuckles over her skirt. The tulle felt itchy beneath her

fingers. She wanted to throw the stupid dress away.

"I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner." Reg's voice came out low and soft. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you everything when I first found out." Susie swallowed and tried to pretend that she was brave, that her mom being back in Mary Beth's body had just been her imagination. She could go back to the real world. Maybe they would have mercy on her. She'd never gotten in trouble before.

"It's no big deal, okay? I know I have to turn myself in. I just need to get it over with." She tried not to think of life in jail. If she got out of the castle after her eighteenth birthday had come and gone, it *would* be jail. She wondered what day it even was outside the castle.

"Reg, I need to tell you the rest." Susie pulled back and clenched her fists in her lap.

"Geez, did you knock off a bank, too? The checks are bad enough, Suze. What else could you possibly have done?" Reg cracked a grin, like their conversation had been over nothing more than where they should go out for pizza.

Susie studied him. "So, yeah, I brought Mary Beth back out of that mist room. Only she's not exactly Mary Beth, anymore."

"What do you mean?" Reg squinted.

"I think she's my mom. For real," Susie whispered.

Reg's jaw dropped. "For real, real? How do you know?"

"I know. And I know how it sounds. But I just know, okay? I didn't think it was possible. But Reg, she remembers things no one else but my mom could know. About how she died. I don't know what to do."

"What happened to Mary Beth?" Reg got up and began to pace around the room. The

words reappeared on the walls and again they were in a language Susie couldn't read. They slid across the walls at a dizzying pace, making her nauseous just to look at them.

"That's the thing." Susie closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall. "I don't know. Maybe she's still in there? I don't know what happened to her. And I don't know what to do. I mean, what about Mary Beth? But she's my mom."

"Are you sure? Maybe Thano or the castle is just testing you or something. It does that to see if people are worth it. You should've seen it try to trap Maya in the wall when we first got here. I was sick, but she wasn't. She had to prove why she should be here."

Susie shivered and pressed her fists against her eyes. Total darkness cascaded over her. "I don't think this is a test. I think this is some kind of olive branch."

"Why would anyone do that? Why would the castle steal Mary Beth's body for *your mom* of all people? The lady who starved you? Who forgot a kid needs stuff to survive?"

"Because I didn't get to say goodbye," Susie whispered. "Because I abandoned her when she needed me. That makes me *just like her*, Reg. And I can't live with that." The words shocked her. It was true. As much as she'd run, and as angry as she was, that was the truth. "Just don't tell Maya, okay? She'll flip. I need to figure out what to do."

"Okay, but what if your mom decides to stay—like, forever?"

"It's not like she made a power grab for Mary Beth. Something else happened," Susie said and shrugged. "We'll get there when we get there. Maybe Thano can help. Besides, does Mary Beth need it back right this second? I mean, she's never been a pal, exactly. Would it kill her to give my mom some time? Just enough time to make things right."

"Right for you or right for her?" Reg rapped his knuckles against his forehead. "I can't believe you're even considering this."

Susie propped herself up on her elbows. "It's my mom, Reg. I can't exactly turn my back on her." She stopped and studied him, his lips thin, his face angry. "Or, at least, I don't want to. Look at you and me—I know we'd never leave each other. Not really. And anyway, Thanos or the castle or whatever made it happen. So if he did it, it's not all bad in your book, is it?"

Reg shook his head. "Look, saving my life is one thing. I've still got my body. But your mom is totally another."

"I know." A hard lump grew in her throat. "I was just hoping you'd say something different. Like, 'Wow, you get a second chance! I'd kill for a second chance!'" She raked her fingernails along her elbow, pinching at herself. It didn't hurt, didn't distract from the pain in her throat. "Stop crying already," she shouted at herself.

"Okay, look." Reg bent in front of her and pulled her hands away from her elbows. "She's not my Uncle Jack. And you know if it were my parents I would jump at the chance to be with them again. But she's also not like them. Suze, when your dad died, when you were at your most vulnerable, where was she? What was she doing?"

"She needed help, Reg." Reg's hands were hot in her palms. "How could she take care of a kid when she couldn't take care of herself?"

"But that doesn't make it okay. We both know that."

"But I learned to take care of myself." Susie slid out of his grasp and crossed her arms. "I want to give her a chance. She's my mom. I can't give up like that. I want to be able to say

goodbye—on my terms. Not just because Mary Beth needs her body back. She's young. Another week or so isn't going to kill her."

Reg shook his head. "This is wrong. You need to ask Thano to help make it right. Your mom doesn't *deserve* to be here, Suze."

Susie set her jaw and glared at him. "Who are you to say? Mary Beth will get her body back whenever my mom or the castle or Thano figure out it's time. But I'm not about to ask anyone to trash my mom's spirit, if that's what'll happen to her when it's ripped out of another body. Not right now."

Reg nodded, but his jaw had squared and his face looked sharp and stubborn. "Okay. I won't try to change your mind. But I want to remind you about something. When you were eleven and we were out here burying every worry. You remember? Well, Thano heard us. Those words went straight into the ground, and he found them."

Susie sighed. "Yeah, but—"

"Just let me finish. He knows how much it hurt for you to lose your mom like that. So he's probably not going to be thinking straight—he just wants to make you feel better. And I've seen the way he looks at you—he'll do anything for you. The way he did for me. I get to live, thanks to him. But don't take that for granted, okay? Don't do something that could hurt all of us just because he thinks he's done a good thing for you. He doesn't exactly understand right and wrong. He's more like the feelings guru, you know?"

"A body-snatcher should really have some morals." Susie sniffed, wiping away the tears she hadn't been able to stop.

"I'm just saying. Give it some time, but not too much, okay? Maybe you need this, but don't take too long. Mary Beth has a family too."

"And time doesn't work the same here, I know." Susie nodded and stood up. "I'm going to go find my mom. I can't think about everything bad she ever did. If she can do at least one good thing now, it will have all been worth it."

"If you say so." Reg shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned against the wall, scattering apart what looked like a paragraph written in English about being king and queen of an ancient kingdom.

"I say so," Susie said, and marched out of the room, head held high.

Chapter Eighteen

Susie found Maya and Mary Beth/Evelene in the main room on the first floor. A couch lay tipped on its left side, the armrest on the floor. The leftover red cups and cigarette butts scattered on the floor looked like party shrapnel. Some were embedded in the moss walls, and the moss wound over it all, growing over them.

Maya ripped red plastic cups out of the walls. As soon as she touched them, the moss retreated and the cups fell from the wall. Mary Beth/Evelene shrank against the wall, huddled into herself. Susie kicked at a pile of cigarette butts, scattering them across the moss floor.

"Hey," Susie hedged out, glancing between Maya and Mary Beth/Evelene. Don't give anything away, she reminded herself. "Geez, what did you do to her, Maya?"

"Shut your mouth." The cheerleader whirled around and advanced toward Susie. Susie backed away until her back pressed against the soft, furry moss. She put up her hands.

"Look, whatever you think is happening—" Susie started, but Maya waved her hands and interrupted her.

"Bring her back. I don't know what the hell you've done to her, what kind of messed up castle shit you've given her, but I want my best friend back. Fix it," Maya hissed.

Susie put up her hands. "I can't. But I didn't do anything to her. We have to find Thano."

"Yeah, you do that." Maya stalked over to the couch and shoved it so that it fell back to its upright position. It made hardly any noise as it fell against the cushioned floor. Maya went back to yanking cups from the walls.

"Come on, let's go." Susie tugged on Mary Beth/Evelene's arm, and the girl finally stopped staring at Maya and gave Susie a wide-eyed stare. Her face was taut. Susie was suddenly

afraid for her mom, afraid her mind would break even worse than it had after her dad had died.

"Susie?" Mary Beth/Evelene whispered.

"I'm right here, don't worry," Susie said, patting Mary Beth/Evelene's arm as she steered her out of the room.

"I don't like this place. It's dirty. This stuff needs to go. There's too much dirt." Mary Beth/Evelene scratched at something on her arm. Susie couldn't see it, whatever it was. She cringed. Her mom had only been back a short time and already it was starting. It'd been too much to hope that her mom could come back and be normal. Be cured. Susie shook her head.

"Why does that girl keep calling me Mary Beth? I feel like I should know why, but I can't. I can't think of why."

"Don't worry about it, Mom. She's just trying to mess with you. She does that to everyone." Susie fidgeted with the waistband of her dress, wishing the emerald insets were buttons she could press to whisk the both of them away. But she was here, and her mom was flesh and blood, and she couldn't give up on her, even if she had before.

"But it's just—I don't understand. Susie." Mary Beth/Evelene pulled on her sleeve. Susie wiped a hot tear from her eye, but didn't look the girl in the face.

"What?" When she fidgeted, the little moss hairs on the emerald floor reminded her of the bacterial slides she'd had to study in biology. The floor glommed onto her shoes, sticky with beer.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?" Susie felt like someone had scooped out her heart and left a gaping hole in her chest.

"I can feel something happened to me, but I don't remember. And I'm having thoughts about things I've never thought about. Like this guy, Jamal. Do I have—a new...interest, Susie-Berry? Did I hit my head and forget him? But Maya—I keep thinking she and I were at the mall last week—we swiped some lipstick, and well, I don't get it. I threw all of that away. I don't need it. I wouldn't do that. Unless I got hit on the head really hard, right?" Mary Beth/Evelene knitted her brows and scuffed her boot, a gesture of Mary Beth's Susie had seen many times. She felt the first real stab of guilt over Mary Beth losing control over her body to someone who was basically a crazy lady. "I mean, no offense Susie-Berry, but I don't know why I'd be spending time with someone my daughter's age when I have friends my own age."

Susie doubted very much this was the truth, but she ignored it. Her mom's few friends had all nearly disappeared after her dad had died, and that had been more her mom's doing than theirs. She remembered Janet Tweed, who'd given Susie lollipops, and that wounded puppy look in her eyes whenever she came to see them. The lollipops were always old and brittle, as if Janet was probably trying to get rid of them, but Susie ate them anyway because that was the only time she got any candy. Then one day, Janet Tweed was gone, along with the lollipops. Evelene said she was glad to be rid of her. Susie had sometimes missed the flavor of those lollipops, though. In any case, it didn't change the fact that her mom was remembering things that Mary Beth had done, and Susie didn't know how to explain it to her.

"Maybe you should try ignoring that stuff, Mom," she tried, even though she knew it was lame to say.

"But I did fall. I remember. I hit my head. Maybe all this time I've been out acting like a totally different person, and only now did I come to my senses. But I'll have to remember every

bad thing I did. Right? What you must think of your own mother stealing." Mary Beth/Evelene shook her head. "Probably stealing your friends too. What a bad example I set for you." Her lip trembled, and Susie squeezed her arm.

"Don't say that." She sucked in a deep breath. "Look. I don't want to scare you, but I need to show you something." Susie gently steered her toward the same creepy bathroom that had first locked her in with the angry ghost version of her mother. She hoped Evelene wouldn't remember any of *that*. If that was even possible. They crossed the threshold into the bathroom and in a moment the two of them stood in front of the mirror, its edges golden with age. Susie shut her eyes while Mary Beth/Evelene stared at her reflection.

After a very long moment, Evelene whispered Susie's name. Her voice came out feeble and weak, like it was casting for strength and found everything she touched to be crumbling and untrue. "What's happened to me Susie?" She coughed. "Where did I go?"

"Mom." Susie tried to keep her own voice steady. "You're right. You did fall." For a second, she thought she might tell her mom a crazy story about how she really *had* had a psychotic break and that she wasn't Susie's mom at all, that she was really Mary Beth. That it had been Mary Beth who had fallen in the woods and her brain was trying to make up for messing with Susie all the time by making Mary Beth act like Susie's mother. But Susie couldn't do it. She didn't want her mom to remember anymore of Mary Beth. She only wanted her to remember—and make up for—Susie and Evelene's lives together. "But." Susie made herself continue. "It wasn't just a fall. That face you're seeing is Mary Beth. She's on my track team and we haven't always gotten along, exactly."

Mary Beth/Evelene's face cracked with sobs, her brows furrowed and her cheeks blotchy

with clouds of red. Pockets formed under her eyes as tears cascaded down. "Shh...it's okay. I promise it's going to be okay," Susie said and slid her arm around the girl's back. Susie squeezed her to her, the way she'd always hugged her mom when she was upset.

Mary Beth/Evelene pointed at her reflection, finger trembling. "I don't understand what's happening to me. Why do I look like that?" Susie didn't want to look either of their reflections in the eyes, worried they might move of their own accord.

"Think really hard. Remember what you told me when I found you?" Susie asked. Mary Beth/Evelene nodded. "Remember what you had been doing last before you woke up here?"

Mary Beth/Evelene hiccupped. "I remember trimming the curtains. I remember falling. I don't remember anything else."

Susie hugged her again, knowing anything she said was going to sound crazy. Thano was the one who could make the crazy seem okay, even natural. "Come on. I'll take you to Thano. He can explain."

Mary Beth/Evelene shook her head. "There's nothing that can *explain* this, Susie. Unless." She gave Susie a wide-eyed look, her eyes full of fear. "Did I die? Is that what this is? Am I— someone else?"

Susie sucked in a breath and nodded, smiling sadly. "But you came back to me, don't you see? You didn't really. You're just different now. That's why Maya keeps calling you Mary Beth. That's all."

"Oh, honey." Her mom drew Susie close and wrapped her in a hug. It felt weird, Mary Beth's body being Susie's size, considerably taller and a little thicker than her mom's bony frame. But when she breathed, it was like her mom's body was here. She smelled how she used to smell,

before she'd spiraled into that nightmare life, before her dad had died. Her once unmistakably wonderful mom scent, fresh grass and cocoa butter.

"I'm so sorry," Mary Beth/Evelene whispered. "I never wanted to put you through that."

"It's okay, Mom," Susie breathed into the girl's shoulder. "You're here now. I don't have to run anymore. Thano will find a way to fix you."

But she could still picture her mom's body, blood a curling tributary to nothing on the bare living room floor.

"Who's Thano?" Mary Beth/Evelene asked as Susie took her hand. Susie glanced at her.

"He's...at least I think he...he's the reason we're here. How you're alive again."

"I'll never leave you again, sweetie," Mary Beth/Evelene said as they walked out of the bathroom and into the impossibly long hallway.

"Oh, Mom. Don't say things you don't mean." Susie took her hand. "Let's go find Thano."

The sugary smell of waffle batter hung in the air, beckoning Susie and her mom to wander the yawning green hallways in search of the kitchen. The closer they got the more Susie's stomach went into a full-on gurglefest. She snuck a glance at her mom every few seconds to make sure she wasn't freaking out too badly. Susie couldn't imagine what it would feel like to be using another body...or have someone else's spirit in hers, for that matter. She wondered what it was doing to Mary Beth, to have her mom knocking around in there. When they finally rounded another curve and found the source of the smell, Susie gawked at what constituted the kitchen.

In the middle of the moss-covered room was a fire pit with a grate that hosted a giant cast-iron waffle pan. There was no stove, no oven, just a massive fire pit. In it, black growths

clung to the sides. They looked like ash, but they definitely weren't. More like mushroom fungus or something gross like that, but Susie wasn't sure. She wrinkled her nose. Along one of the walls, a tree curved up toward the ceiling, with notches that had been carved out for dishes. Only the dishes looked more like odds and ends Thano might have plucked from the forest. The bowls looked like they'd been carved from freakishly huge acorns. But the stack of dishes on the bottom shelf made her freeze. Garish orange fiesta ware. The same kind her mom had thrown out at the start of her downward spiral. Susie stepped in front of the shelves so Mary Beth/Evelene wouldn't see the plates. She thought that the surprises the castle threw at her should have worn off by now, but they hadn't. That Thano had pulled his purple hair into a bun on the top of his head and was spinning around the kitchen mixing waffle batter in one of the acorn dishes was just another. A string of bells slung from his waistband jingled. When he saw her, he stopped mixing, but his toothy grin told her their fight the night before had meant nothing. He didn't even care. He was apparently glad to see her.

"The morning after is always better than the party," Thano said, and wiped a stray hair from his eye. "Hungry?"

Susie nodded. "What happened to everyone else?" Mary Beth/Evelene gaped at Thano and whirled around the kitchen, mouth open. Clearly as shocked by the place as Susie had been.

"They went home. What, do you think I was keeping them all hostage or something? Didn't want too much time to go by before the outside world got suspicious." He handed her a plate piled with blueberry waffles and syrup, and then dusted it with powdered sugar. As she took in the aroma, her stomach issued a low-pitched howl.

"It wouldn't be the first time, would it? Did you cloud the castle?" Susie asked, and

Thano nodded. She breathed a sigh of relief and leaned against one of the cabinet trees, digging into the waffles with her fingers, not bothering to find a fork, which would probably be made of sticks anyway. She savored the drippy syrup. It had been so long since she'd had food like this. Usually it was peanuts or crackers for breakfast. Anything that came in cellophane packages, basically.

Mary Beth/Evelene was too busy gawking to take the plate Thano offered her. She'd only just now seemed to realize there was another person in the room with them. She wrinkled her nose at the waffles Thano offered her and shook her head.

Thano gave Susie a look. "You know there are circumstances. You found my gift." He nodded at Mary Beth/Evelene.

Susie set her plate on the wood countertop and straightened.

"How...why did you do this? How is she even here—and in Mary Beth? How is that even possible? I sent her away. I pushed her through the door. Everyone clapped."

Thano shook his head. "You saw what you wanted. But the Castle—and the forest—has its own rules. It hears what you want. And it goes to great lengths to make us happy."

Susie gazed longingly at her plate. "I didn't understand a word you just said."

Thano just smiled and touched her chin. "You brought her here with your sadness, Susie. It heard you." When she only stared, Thano sighed and moved back to the fire pit to pour more batter onto the waffle pan. The batter bubbled.

Mary Beth/Evelene shook her head and finally seemed to remember how to speak.

"Where are we? Who is he?"

Susie reached out for her mom and patted her arm. "Mom, this is Thano. Thano, this is

my mom. She used to be Mary Beth. But you knew that, already." Susie narrowed her eyes at him.

Thano nodded and smiled. "Very pleased."

Mary Beth/Evelene nodded back, seeming uncertain. She looked around the room again. "I don't like this place. It's too crowded. I can hear things in the wall." She shivered and stepped out of Susie's grip.

"No worries. It just means you're connected to the forest. Here." Thano took the bells from his waistband and handed them to Mary Beth/Evelene. "Wear these. They'll tamp out the sound a little."

"Can we do something about this clutter? It's absolutely claustrophobic in here," Mary Beth/Evelene said. So typical of her mom.

Thano smiled. "Sorry, no. The Castle needs things a certain way. We can't go around throwing everything out because we don't think they fit. To the Castle, everything fits just right."

Mary Beth/Evelene shivered, but nodded. Susie shook her head as her mom wound the charm around her wrist and smiled at Thano. "Thank you. It helps," Mary Beth/Evelene said, and puffed out a sigh of relief.

Susie turned away from them and went to stand over the fire pit. She rubbed her forehead. "I can't believe this is happening. This still doesn't make any sense."

Thano walked to her side and took her hand. "I know what it's like, Susie. You wake and your family is gone. It's just you. Alone in a world that doesn't want you. And I didn't want that for you. The Castle didn't either, or it wouldn't have helped."

She shook her head. "How do you even know what that's like? You get in my head, you

don't tell me anything about you. You're not some guy with the same life as me. You're like a mindreading shaman wizard, or whatever. Get out of my head." She pulled her hand out of his.

Her mom came to stand beside her. "Susie, he brought me back. Maybe he deserves to be heard." Her mom's behavior had done a total one-eighty. Susie eyed the bells her mom had put on. A headache began to creep behind her temples. She sighed.

"You don't get it, Mom. Mary Beth may suck sometimes, but I *know* her. She's a person. She deserves a life, too."

Mary Beth/Evelene nodded. "I know. I feel her. She's here. She's not mad, though, I promise. We're working out an understanding."

"It doesn't matter, don't you see? You can't stay in her body forever. And then when you're gone, I lose you all over again." Susie dropped her voice as the image of her lifeless mother ran through her head yet again. "You don't know what I went through. You have no idea."

"I know, sweetie, and I'm so sorry. But maybe he does. Give him a chance. He hasn't hurt anybody."

"Yet." Susie glared at Thano, who had moved to the other side of the fire pit. He held out his hand.

"I can't put her back in her former body. I think you know that already. The Castle says nothing can be salvaged once it's been broken. That's a rule."

Susie glared. "What about Mary Beth? Can you just bring anybody back? What about my dad? Can you put my dad in someone else's body? Just once?"

Thano shook his head. "I'm sorry. Your mom's situation was unique. She was new and

held on. Your father passed into the roots a long time ago."

Susie snorted. "That was probably last week in this weirdo time-flux place." She glared. "What do you mean, passed into?"

Thano frowned and worried at his lip. "I know you're angry. But I can show you what it's like. Why I do this."

Susie shrank back. It hurt to look at him, beautiful and strong and so sure he was doing the right thing. That everything would turn out fine in the end. He reached across the pit, took her hand, and traced his fingers along the lines of her palm.

"You're so finite," he murmured.

"Stop it." She pulled her hand away. Being finite wasn't on her list to think about today. "How do you do all of this? Pull spirits out of the air, make the cops just disappear? It doesn't just happen."

"It's not like that, Susie." Thano laughed. He leaned over and brushed her hair off her cheek, his fingers lingering on her skin for a long moment. "I like being human, don't you? When you're in a body, little things matter so much. If you don't feed it, it dies. If you don't clothe it, it freezes. Or burns. There are so many things to remember. We forget to feel everything around us." Thano traced his finger along her forehead where her gash had been. She'd nearly forgotten she'd had one at all. The race seemed so long ago.

"I'm listening," she said.

"You *should* be concerned about all of this. Our bodies are physical. And because they are, we can touch each other. We're all connected. And if you could feel that connection as easily as I do, your troubles would be over. But I've been here a *long* time, Susie. If you stay here with

me, you'll start to feel those connections too. And you can be with your mother. Mary Beth can be free. All of us can have what we want. All I ask is to be your connection to the forest's roots."

Susie picked at the tulle layers of her dress, turning over the crazy idea. What did it even mean to be connected to the forest's roots? But he *had* given her all of this, offered her a new future. But what if her mom started freaking out and trashing everything again? And how was she going to make it right by Mary Beth? Body-snatching was so not cool.

The room suddenly felt stifling, the heat from the fire pit too much to bear. She longed for the cool of the woods. To be outside, away from all of Thano's good deeds gone bad. Sweat dribbled down her back.

"I'm sorry for overwhelming you," Thano said, his eyes fixed on her. "I always do this. Being alone—it's hard to bear."

As fast as it had heated up, the room cooled down. Susie's flushed cheeks returned to normal, but the back-and-forth in temperature made her feel feverish.

"Don't put her in the middle of all of this." Susie gestured at Mary Beth/Evelene, who looked back and forth between the two of them. She wondered how much of Mary Beth was left in her body. All of it? Ten percent? "Don't make me choose. It's not fair."

Thano gestured toward the door. "You need some time to think. Both of you. If you decide you need it, you can leave the Castle for a while. But she'll have to come back at some point or she'll lose her connection totally. I'll be here when you decide."

"Even if I decide I can't do this?" Susie bit her lip.

He nodded. "For you, Susie, I will always be here."

Chapter Nineteen

The roots of Thano's love flared and pulsed with each moment Susie spent in his castle. The core felt his love and unfurled for her every secret wish she might have—because even as she came in broken, like Thano, her insides full of those twisted flaws it hadn't learned to solve, she had somehow, cracks and all—freed him of Alone. Thano had opened the fragile chasm of spore to her and her simple wish to be reunited with her mother had blossomed into her carrying the spirit back from the spore and mist into corporeality. Thano marveled.

Her roots were so strong, so woven into the spirit she had brought back. He had made it sound easy, but she didn't know how rare it was. The castle breathed along with him, roots flicking out for his caress. Yes, he was becoming whole, for the first time. Just as she would learn to become whole again, to heal the wounds of Alone.

Are we close? The castle whispered through the loam and clay and moss. Thano pressed his palm against the wall and let it wind its roots into his pulse. They were all, always, one. As Susie and Reg would soon be with him and his world. As they would teach him to find others who needed to be freed as well.

All of them with one root.

Chapter Twenty

Susie and Mary Beth/Evelene sat outside the castle on a bed of soft moss, their skin puckering in the cold fall air. The trees above them were so green they clashed with the cold, but leaves from some other part of the woods danced through the air, red and gold and tumbling through the rest of the emerald green. Susie half wondered if the cops had ever found this part of the woods, or if Thanos had thrown up his illusion farther out. How far did the castle's power reach? Or was the castle's power part of the entire woods? Susie tucked her arm through the crook of Mary Beth/Evelene's elbow and buried her face in the girl's shoulder. How much time they'd truly have together, she didn't know. She wanted to be close to her mom, no matter whose body she was in. And for the first time in a while, her mom was acting calm, like a normal person. Like how she'd been before Susie's dad had died. Maybe this wasn't the only opportunity she'd have to be close to her mom, after all.

And maybe no one would find out what had happened to Mary Beth, especially if her mom was honest in saying Mary Beth was totally cool with this. That didn't really ring true to Susie, though. Her mom had always tried to be an optimist, even when she was trashing all their belongings and refusing to put food into their cabinets. She was so on-the-bright side that she had refused to acknowledge it when their lives began unraveling.

Mary Beth/Evelene put an arm around Susie. "I know you're scared, Susie-Berry, but let's not waste the time we have, okay? There's so much I want to do with you and I thought the chance was lost forever."

"Really?" Susie pulled back and looked into the girl's flushed face. Mary Beth/Evelene gave her a smile that faltered after a moment. Susie didn't want to remind her mom of all the bad

because there *had* been some good. Saturday morning sessions playing the blues over her dad's grave. On those days her mom would braid Susie's hair and they would pick flowers—mostly stolen from the bushes around the Chamber of Commerce—and spell out messages in petals on his grave. It had been a while since they'd done it together, but Susie never forgot the warmth of her mom's hand as she'd taken Susie's. Susie smiled, but the feeling was swallowed quickly by how absent her mom had truly been. So absent she'd *died*. And Susie hadn't been there to save her. She didn't think she could forgive her mom for that.

"That wasn't exactly my fault, you know. I've always been here. Even when you wouldn't feed me, or didn't show up to my races or sign my report cards. I got really good at pretending I had no mother. Except for, you know, when you showed up to my school and smacked my English teacher with a book."

Sighing, Mary Beth/Evelene took Susie's hand. "I was the worst, wasn't I? I know I wasn't a good mother. But give me a chance, Susie-Berry. We can start over. I promise it won't be like before. Look, we're both even the same age, now. We can have a whole life together. Go off to college, both of us. Share a dorm room." Mary Beth/Evelene laughed. "Date boys the same age."

"Gross! I can't believe you'd even say that." Susie stood up and began to pace, clenching her hands into fists. Evelene had screwed up Susie's life in the process of screwing up her own. She didn't want her to do the same thing to Mary Beth. Susie glanced at Mary Beth/Evelene again.

"You're actually enjoying this, aren't you? Do you really think Mary Beth is going to be okay with you taking her body for the rest of her life? I don't know about you, but I actually

know her, and she's not much into sharing."

Mary Beth/Evelene shook her head. "She helped you finish that race, didn't she?"

"Yeah, so she could gloat about how much I suck. It wasn't for me. I promise."

"Are you sure?" Mary Beth/Evelene stood up and put a hand on Susie's shoulder. Susie stopped pacing and glared at the girl's brown eyes, so unlike Susie's. A tiny mole sat on Mary Beth's cheek near the bridge of her nose. Mary Beth and her mom looked nothing alike. Not even a soul transplant could change that. Susie missed her mom's skin, her salt-and-pepper hair. But the smell was like her mom before her dad had died. At least there was that.

"I don't even know anymore, okay?" Susie put her hands on her hips. "So what do you want to do with that new lease on life? Buy some lottery tickets with that luck of yours? Go get a six-pack from the Stop-N-Shop? Oh, I know, I know. Let's go dine and ditch at Harry's. Isn't that what you used to do?"

"Susie, stop it. I know you're mad, but taking it out on me like this isn't going to make anything better. How about we go back into town and go to that arcade you like so much? Or—I know! —I'll take you to a show. We'll have to get fake IDs or sneak in, but I know some people." Mary Beth/Evelene laughed, sounding proud.

Susie's hands went into fists again. "I'm sure you do. But you're ignoring one little problem. I'm still wanted by the cops."

Mary Beth/Evelene's mouth dropped open. "What? What'd you do, Susie?"

Susie resisted the urge to punch her. "It's not what I did, it's what I didn't. They probably think I killed you or something." She began to shake. "I came home and there was blood everywhere. Everywhere. I freaked when I saw—" she didn't want to say the word, but she did

anyway. "Your body. And I didn't call the cops or anyone. Just grabbed my bag and left. They wouldn't have believed I didn't do anything. You wouldn't have either."

She couldn't stop shaking. Why couldn't she stop shaking? It was so cold and her heart beat so fast and she could feel the blood pounding in her ears. Mary Beth/Evelene just stood there staring. Susie wanted to make her pay, right then. For leaving her, for throwing everything away, for making her hide anything her dad left behind anywhere except for her own house.

"You probably thought you did me some favor by dying, right? Starting over in a new body. Clean slate and all that. Well, let me tell you, that's all yours. It's not mine. I'm still stuck with the life you left me with." Susie sucked in a shaky breath as Mary Beth/Evelene put out her hands and tried to approach Susie. Susie backed away, shaking her head. "Nuh uh. You don't get a pass right now. I was going to start over, believe me. I was going to live on my own without asking for help. Not even Reg. But it didn't work. They're looking for me. I can't go back to Garnet Falls. I can't even go back and get Dad's medal."

Mary Beth/Evelene's eyes widened. "You still have it? You mean I didn't throw it away?" Susie slapped her forehead, angry that she'd let that piece of information slip. Her dad's things belonged to her. She would never give them to her mother.

Susie stomped over to the castle door and pressed up against it. "Technically, no one has it. It's out there." She waved her hand in the direction of the town. "But this is the only place I'm safe. Cops can't get in here, Thano makes sure. So if you want to do something with me, you'll have to do it here. I'm not leaving, and I'm definitely not telling you where it is."

Mary Beth/Evelene nodded. She didn't say a word. Good. Nothing she could say would make up for any of this.

"Let's just go inside. I'm tired." Susie gripped the doorknob and twisted. Mary Beth/Evelene was silent for a moment. When she finally spoke, all she said was, "If that's what you want, Susie."

Susie nodded. "Yes. That's what I want."

She stormed through the door back into the castle. She didn't even want to look at the other girl and see her try that playful smile that meant she thought all of this was just a game. Because it wasn't. You couldn't just come back and expect things to be perfect. Not even Thanos's magic moss kingdom could do that.

"What's wrong?" Reg jumped up from the couch when Susie stormed into his room in the basement. Maya didn't move from her spot on the couch, and focused on smoothing out her skirt instead.

"She thinks this is a joke, some fun ride. I don't know what I wanted from her," Susie said. She ignored both of them and threw herself on the mattress in the corner. Beside her, the wall seemed to glow and those words in that unknown language again rippled out in a stream. The words might tell a story about how the forest came into existence. Or maybe how Thanos had found them. Or maybe they were even spewing out the notes Susie and Reg had written to each other so long ago. She didn't know what they said, but they somehow made her feel naked and exposed. She bit her lip to keep the tears away. It didn't work.

"What are you even talking about? Reg, seriously. There are plenty of other places she can go. Tell her," Maya said, her voice even.

Susie buried her head beneath the sheets and breathed into the darkness. Hot tears slipped

onto the mattress, but she didn't try wiping them away. Soon the mattress held a tiny puddle of wet heat.

"Ohhhhkay," Maya said behind Susie.

"Just leave her alone. Okay, Maya?" Reg said. "She's really upset. I hate to say I told you so, Suze, but..." Reg trailed off and Susie screamed in frustration.

"Yeah, got that," Maya said. Susie could imagine her standing, not a hair out of place, arms crossed, high heels tapping. Just hovering over Susie. God forbid Susie ruffle the queen's feathers.

"I'm not going to stay in here. I just need a minute," she grumbled, the words hot and stuffy beneath the sheet.

"God, wish my phone worked here. It'd be cool to text everyone a picture of Little Miss Weakling bawling." Maya laughed. "Mary Beth especially would love that. Unless you've still got her playing Space Cadet Sally." Maya froze and suddenly stopped laughing. "What did you do to her?" Maya grabbed Susie's shoulder and yanked at her dress. "Get up. Tell me what you did to her."

Susie groaned and let Maya pull her up. "Just shut up already. I didn't do anything."

"Maya, seriously. Knock it off," Reg said. "Susie, I think you need to tell her." He folded his arms and shrugged at Susie.

"Um, Reg, if you know something, *you* need to tell me. I'm your girlfriend, remember?" Maya said and glared at him.

"Forget it," Susie said to Reg. "I should never have come down here. Pretend I was never here. That's what she wants anyway." Susie knocked Maya's hands away from her shoulder,

climbed back to her feet, and clumsily ran from the room. She would never be able to escape this. Never.

She found Mary Beth/Evelene sitting on a velvet couch in the foyer with Thano, their voices hushed. When Susie rounded the corner into the room, Mary Beth/Evelene jumped up from the couch and threw her arms around Susie.

"I thought you'd given up on me. I thought I was going to have to leave again without saying goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Susie asked. She glanced at Thano, slightly mortified that her mom had just poured an open display of affection all over her.

"Well, if you didn't want me, I couldn't stay." Mary Beth/Evelene's cheeks burned scarlet.

Susie felt like she was going to scream at how quickly her mother was ready to jump ship, but she tried to look composed and smoothed the fluffy tulle of her skirt. So many tiny holes in the material. When she spoke again, her voice came out strong and controlled. "What, were you just going to take off? In Mary Beth's body? Were you ever planning on giving it back?"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic, Susie. I didn't *want* to go, do you hear me? Listen, I've been thinking. About your dad's medal. What if I can help you get your things back? How about it? A little mom-and-daughter time, righting wrongs, fighting crime?" Mary Beth/Evelene laughed and held her hand out toward Susie, but Susie didn't move toward her, suspicious. Susie glanced at Thano, who only smiled and nodded.

"I told you I can't go anywhere," Susie muttered, crossing her arms. "We should stay here." Even if Mary Beth/Evelene *could* help Susie retrieve her things from Mrs. Johnson's shed, it didn't mean her mother wouldn't try to keep them for herself. All her mom's talk about the medal *saving* them. She probably just wanted it for herself. But that thought sounded ludicrous. Her mom threw *everything* away. Susie understood that somehow, this was her mom's attempt at helping her, even if she didn't want to trust her. And what if it *could* save them, somehow? She shook her head. No way. It was a sentimental reminder of her dad's service. That was all. Besides, she thought, they would so be caught the moment they made it into town, she knew it.

"We don't have to stay here, I know it. Thano can help. By now he's figured out a way for us to go out. Right, Thano?" Mary Beth/Evelene grinned at Thano, her smile erasing all signs of Mary Beth's old bullying self. Even her thrash band shirt seemed sweet and charming when paired with that grin.

"Susie, it's all right if you go. For a little while. The police have dropped their guard, but try to stay out of sight. Come here." He waved her over. Susie hesitated but went anyway.

"Do you really think the cops have dropped their guard?" she asked when she stood in front of him. Thano grinned, which just made Susie more reluctant. Did he *want* her to get caught? "It's kind of a small town, you know. You can't just 'magic away' people's brains or whatever." She used air quotes, angry at his flippancy. "What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry. I'll create a connection for you so you'll be safe. But I'll only do it if you really want me to," Thano said. His face took on a nervous expression, as if he was afraid she might tell him no. He gave her another smile, only this time it was thin-lipped and anxious. Susie waited for him to go on. "It's going to sound weird to you, but the connection—it goes to me, to

the castle, to certain parts of the world. Sometimes it takes root and lasts forever—the way I'm connected to the forest, and the castle to me. But the connection might not last very long. It didn't work on Reg, so that's why he stays here and only goes out with me."

Susie wasn't entirely sure what Thano meant. Would she turn into a weirdo hippie who liked to chain herself to trees? What if the connection was like all that moss and ivy—only *inside*? She shuddered. "I don't really know what to say," she finally said.

Thano took her hand. "Just think of it as another way for you and me to be connected. But if I do this, you have to be ready. And you have to want it." He touched her chin with his other hand and whispered, "I know what being alone feels like. This means you won't be, for however long it works. I'll touch your forehead and you'll feel a little...wider. Like you can hear and see better than you ever have before."

"Is it going to hurt?" she whispered, and Thano smiled and shook his head no. She glanced at Mary Beth/Evelene who waited on the couch, hands clasped together, as if she was trying to ignore them. Slowly, Susie nodded. "Okay."

Thano pressed his fingers against her temples. Then the air whooshed, the smell of pine needles suddenly all she could breathe. Voices and ringing phones and the screech of car tires in her ears. She jumped back.

"What did you just do to me?" Even without Thano's touch, she could still hear everything she'd heard before. "Make it stop!"

"Just calm down, Susie. Breathe slowly. Let it glide in and out. You'll get used to it in a moment."

Susie whirled around to look at Mary Beth/Evelene, who looked mostly calm. Susie inched back from Mary Beth/Evelene and Thano.

"Please don't be scared, Susie. It's only a better connection to the world. You can see and hear the police, but don't worry, they can't see or hear you. You're like a spy. This is for your protection. It'll keep you safe, promise." Thano smiled but Susie didn't return it.

"Can you take it away?" She felt incredibly small, another world rushing through her ears. She could see a cop downing a cup of coffee at his cramped little desk, his office chair creaking as he swiveled to toss a manila folder at a woman in a suit.

"I don't want *Law & Order* in my head anymore. I thought it was going to feel...more natural. Like I'd hear the wind blowing in the trees or something. Take it away, please."

Thano touched her chin gently, looking into her eyes. "I can't, I'm sorry. But I promise—it may not last long. And if it does, I'll teach you how to control it. Why don't you try it? Just to take your mother to visit your town—get the things you left behind. If it works, the wounds from your fall won't come back when you leave. You can bring anything you've made here with you and use it, but only so long as you're connected with the Castle. Once you lose the connection, anything you made will be lost too. As soon as you come back, I'll see if there's a way we can break the connection sooner. Like I said, it didn't work on Reg. It may break on you just as easily. Look." Thano knelt down and pressed his palm against her stomach. "Listen to your breath. Try counting."

Susie closed her eyes, trying not to blush at his hand touching her along with all the other sensations she could see and feel coming from him. She struggled to focus. If she concentrated on counting when she breathed in and out, the way she did when she ran a race, it did seem to

help. She let the air go in and out of her lungs, ignoring the warmth of his hand, the cops clacking away at their computers. "One," she breathed. "Two." She kept going and in a moment all the noise had become a low fizzy of static. Her only refuge was numbers. She didn't even notice when Thano removed his hand from her stomach. Finally, she opened her eyes and glanced at him, hazarding a smile. "Do you promise you'll help me try to get rid of this as soon as I get back? I can handle the noise, but I don't know for how long."

"Of course. I only want to help you, Susie." Thano stood and held his arms out to her, but Susie backed away.

"Fine. But I need to change." She whirled away from Thano and Mary Beth/Evelene and fled up the stairs to find a change of clothes that wouldn't make her look like a princess of moss.

Daylight streamed through the trees as Susie and Mary Beth/Evelene wandered toward the trails. The green of Thano's forest was slowly overtaken by the brown and graying twists of naked branches.

"I don't know how you manage out here," Mary Beth/Evelene said as her hair got caught in another creeping blackberry bramble that hadn't given in to the coming cold. Susie repressed the urge to laugh bitterly. Managing wasn't exactly the term she'd use to describe herself. "They ought to burn all this down," Mary Beth/Evelene continued. "At least cut it back or something."

"Where's the fun in that? Half the battle of running is not letting one of these things catch you." Susie fingered the hem of her deer T-shirt, which had at one point been torn by a bramble several months before. But she'd fixed it at the castle, and so far, the rip hadn't returned. She'd gone back to her room and found the only clothes that truly belonged to her—that hideous shirt,

her jeans, and worn-out sneakers. But at least the clothes were *hers*, not the castle's. But at the last second she'd caved and got a baseball cap, to keep part of her face covered in case she saw anyone she knew. The cap hadn't disappeared and her wounds hadn't come back, so the connection seemed to be holding up. She pulled the navy-blue cap down and dipped her head, so she didn't have to look at Mary Beth/Evelene. She breathed in and she breathed out, pretending that she smelled damp forest and wet, moldy leaves instead of the piping hot coffee and mothballs of the police station. Pretending she only heard the wind in the trees instead of conversations about football games.

"So how do you propose we get my stuff back?" Susie helped Mary Beth/Evelene pull her hair out of another bramble and they continued their walk.

"I don't know. Where is it? At home?" Mary Beth/Evelene didn't look back as she spoke.

"Nope." Susie decided not to say anything else about the medal's location for the moment. Just in case.

"Well, I need to go home first. I have to get something." Mary Beth/Evelene turned and smiled at her. "I promise, things will be okay."

"Do we really have to go there? Can't we just go get the medal and be done with all this?" Susie tripped over a root and cursed, but caught herself before she went down in a haze of dust.

"Why don't you want to go home? What's so bad about checking the old place out? I have business there. Besides, I want to see if any of my clothes fit this body."

"Like you have any clothes," Susie muttered.

"What's that?" Mary Beth/Evelene asked. It was like she had no memory of what she'd done with her possessions in their former life. Susie glanced at the bracelet of bells Thanos had

given Mary Beth/Evelene before. This selective memory thing must have come from them. Or from something Thano had done to them.

"The cops—they could be waiting—and, and—" Susie broke off. The shrill of a telephone—in her head, back at the police station—shattered the silence of the forest for her.

"Hey, *my* kid's got a direct line to the cops. You'll know if they're even thinking of checking out our house. We're totally safe." Mary Beth/Evelene turned and plucked a leaf out of Susie's hair. She held it up toward the light where it shimmered with a golden red over the tarnished gold of the bells Thano had given her. They didn't even make a sound when she raised her hands or walked. "Got some pretty hitchhikers here." She let the leaf flutter back to the ground and slid her arm through Susie's.

"But, Mom." Susie stopped. She couldn't make herself say the words. She didn't know what they'd find back at the house. Police tape? Her mom's blood still staining the floors? She didn't want to find out.

"But what, Susie? Come on, it's important. I don't want to pull the mom card here, but grow up. Just a little, okay?"

Susie squared her jaw and didn't say anything. She listened to the crunching of gravel and leaves beneath their feet all the way to Garnet Falls. The trail led up to the same place as always, but when she saw the track and the high school, she froze. Had it really been yesterday she'd lost that race? Yesterday that she had run from the cops? It felt both as if it had been so much longer and also as if it had just happened. The bunting that flagged across the track bowed with ice, its colors muffled with frost. It had been through more than just a rain storm. The wind pummeled

at her now, much colder than yesterday. Both Susie and Mary Beth/Evelene wore only T-shirts and jeans, the wind pricking goosebumps on their exposed arms. Susie's teeth chattered.

"What? What is it?" Mary Beth/Evelene pulled up short beside her, hand on Susie's shoulder.

"I don't know how much time has passed. Those flags—" Susie pointed. "They weren't like that yesterday."

"Maybe it's just a prank. Maybe Thano did it to mess with you."

Susie frowned at Mary Beth/Evelene. "Come on. The guy brought you back—for me. He gave me a direct line to the cops. He didn't replace this bunting to prank me."

Mary Beth/Evelene shrugged. "All I'm saying is I wouldn't write anything off."

"No kidding. Let's go." They came out of the trees and Susie shivered as the wind blustered around them.

They hurried down cracked sidewalks, the wind whipping their eyes and leaving them streaming in the cold. Cars trundled down the roads beside them, but no one so much as slowed down, so Susie breathed a little easier. Still, she listened for anything that said the cops knew she was back in town, but they were intent on betting on some kind of office pool, so she was clear there, too. The closer they got to their house, though, the more Susie shivered, her chest and stomach fluttered.

"Boy, it's really something," Mary Beth/Evelene said beside her, hunching over against the wind. Her oversized T-shirt billowed out behind her as puffy as a marshmallow. "I don't remember it being this—this..." she trailed off and shrugged.

"Cold? Desolate? Dilapidated? Welcome to the wrong side of the tracks, Mom. Welcome." Susie pulled her arms in through the sleeves of her shirt and hugged herself, letting the shirt drape over her. They rounded the corner onto their street. Past Mr. Sparrow's house with the rusted lawnmower and cracked pink flamingo decorations. The flamingos bent at awkward angles, beaks shoved into the ground. Past Mrs. Akin's ramshackle paint-peeler, her screened-in porch not really screening anything in anymore. The swaths of netting she'd once stapled up, so proud, bowed in the wind. Power lines swayed back and forth over their heads like jump ropes waiting for kids to play.

"God, no more gawking. Let's get out of this already," Mary Beth/Evelene grabbed Susie by the arm and dragged her the rest of the way to their house. They passed phone poles boasting old, faded fliers that fluttered in the gusts, but Susie didn't have a chance to read them before Mary Beth/Evelene marched her up the buckled walkway to their front door with the door glass cracked and splintered into a web of fissures. An old ribbon of police tape waved in the wind like a yellow streamer.

"Welcoming," Mary Beth/Evelene said as she took the key from Susie and turned the lock. The door swung open before them, squeaking on its hinges. Mary Beth/Evelene reached inside and flicked at the light switch, but nothing happened. "Guess we're in the dark," she laughed.

Susie hugged herself and hung back. Mary Beth/Evelene turned and gave her a look, but Susie shook her head.

"I really don't think I can do this. Aren't we supposed to go get *my* thing?"

"Is it *really* not here?" Mary Beth/Evelene asked. Susie sighed.

"And I don't think you should go in there, either, no matter what's in there." She remembered her mom in a heap after her dad had died. A puddle of flesh and a sheet of brown hair limp enough to mop the floor. The house would bring it all back—Guaranteed. The wind pummeled at Susie, refusing to ease up.

"I told you, I have to get something. It's important." Mary Beth/Evelene gestured for Susie to go inside. When Susie didn't, Mary Beth/Evelene shrugged. "Stay cold, then." She disappeared into the house, making sure to stomp over the dilapidated hardwoods to let Susie know her feelings on the matter.

Susie leaned against the doorway and faced the street. She listened to the cops in her head. Paperwork. So much paperwork. One of them washed his squad car, the wind biting his shoulders. He cursed his captain, but kept washing. For the good of the force, or something. Susie bit her lip. The house was different—it didn't stink the way she thought it might. Mary Beth/Evelene hadn't screamed when she marched into the living room, so the cops must have taken the body. The body. Susie closed her eyes and breathed in the cold. She wished it would freeze the feeling out of her heart.

"Mom?" Susie called. She leaned backwards into the doorway and listened, but no one answered. "Great," she grumbled and, squeezing her eyes shut, toed her way into the house. She went through the cramped hallway into the larger but still bare living room and stopped. The single thing left in the living room was a pair of drapes, their hems asymmetrical and unraveling. Susie closed her eyes when she saw a dark brown stain splattered across one of them. The stain reminded her of those black growths in the castle's fire pit. She wondered if the blood of a dead

person could mutate and grow like fungus did. Like all that moss in the castle. Like maybe whatever it was Thanos had given to her when he'd touched her. Susie shuddered.

Mary Beth/Evelene kneeled on the floor, fingers tracing a black line that wove around the floorboards. Susie dropped to her knees in the doorway, her stomach doing jumping jacks. The room smelled stale, but not like death, not like a body rotting through the hardwoods.

"I don't know the right combination. I can never remember it. Why can I never remember?" Mary Beth/Evelene muttered, but she stopped when Susie walked in. "Where is everything?" Mary Beth/Evelene asked Susie, leaving her fingers on the black lines. Susie wanted to throw up. Instead, she tucked her hair behind her ears and shook her head.

"Do you have selective memory or something? Don't you remember getting rid of everything? You had bonfires in the backyard, for crying out loud." She pulled herself up from the floor and stalked across the room toward the kitchen.

Mary Beth/Evelene just sat there. "I don't remember anything. But this," she pointed at the black lines. "Is that me? Am I in there? I can hear something, and it's really freaking me out."

Susie ignored the question and rounded the corner and stood in the middle of the kitchen. "Can you just get what you came here for already?" she called. Their old refrigerator still sat against the wall, but since there was no electricity, it didn't hum anymore. It didn't really matter anyway. The only thing her mom had ever kept in the fridge was a jar of olives. She couldn't seem to remember to buy anything else. She leaned against the wall and hoped her mom would forget she was in here. Then she could go to Mrs. Johnson's alone. As if she had ever needed her mom's help, anyway.

"Susie," Mary Beth/Evelene said behind her. No such luck. Susie turned to the girl, who was folding a piece of paper into the back pocket of her jeans, a wet mascara line snaking down her face.

Susie sighed. "Did you get what you came for? Come on, let's get you out of here." She took Mary Beth/Evelene's hand and led her back toward the living room. Mary Beth/Evelene stiffened.

"I want to see the rest." She tried to pull her hand out of Susie's, but Susie held on.

"Look, this is it. There's nothing for us here. Nothing."

"That just can't be right. I don't remember getting rid of everything. I wouldn't do that."

"You really have lost it. Maybe you don't remember, but I do. I couldn't keep anything safe from you. I'd come home and you would have burned it or given it away. My stuffed animals. All your dresses. Makeup. Chairs, food. Pictures of Dad. That's why the medal isn't here, remember? Because I hid it from *you*." She hesitated, thinking of her father, so long ago gone. It still twisted at her every time she thought of him, and she knew it did her mom too. "You name it, we didn't have it. Anything I wanted to keep, I had to stash under the stoop in my room, and when you died, I emptied that too. And look, it's okay. I'm fine, okay? Let's just get out of here already."

Susie put her arm around Mary Beth/Evelene and pulled the shaking girl toward the door. She still resisted against Susie, but the effort was less now. Susie stopped and wiped the river of mascara from Mary Beth/Evelene's face.

"Look. All better now." She held up her blackened fingers. Mary Beth/Evelene's lips just trembled and she began to cry again. Susie groaned. "Hey, hey, it's okay. I get it. You didn't

know better. You were just trying to get rid of things that hurt, okay? I know how that feels. It's better not to look at something when it reminds you of everything you lost. I guess the baby apple doesn't fall far from the momma apple, does it?" Susie squeezed Mary Beth/Evelene again, who nodded.

"Mom, look. This isn't where we need to be. We need to start over. Not go back here. We can't change any of that."

"Look everyone, my kid's the adult now. You should be a life coach," Mary Beth/Evelene said and squeezed Susie back. "Just ignore my blubbering. I'm not used to being sixteen again. Come on. Let's go get what we came for."

Susie raised her eyebrows, but was relieved Mary Beth/Evelene didn't say anything else about her old habits. Together, they walked out of the house, both of them sneaking one last glance back toward the black lines on the living room floor.

Chapter Twenty-One

On the sidewalk, Susie fingered the flier Mary Beth/Evelene had dragged her away from earlier. Her heart jammed in her chest and her breath caught again. Susie's face, along with Mary Beth and Maya's, glared from the flier. Reg wasn't listed anywhere. She should have expected this, but somehow she hadn't thought about all the tiny details that were consequences of life in Thano's castle. Below their pictures, in giant letters, read WANTED FOR QUESTIONING. And then below that, in smaller letters, IN THE DEATH OF EVELENE HOPKINS. "Girls are considered runaways and may be involved in dangerous circumstances. Use caution. Reward for any information." And then a phone number. And then a date. It so wasn't late October, anymore. It wasn't even December. No, try January. It was after New Year's.

"Do you see this?" Susie called to Mary Beth/Evelene, who'd kept walking when Susie stopped to read the blurred, rain-damaged flier. She was halfway down the street, ready to turn onto Adams.

"What?" Mary Beth/Evelene yelled, hands on her hips. "Can you hurry? I'm still cold."

Susie ripped the flier off the pole and jogged down the street. "We're in big trouble. You, me, Maya."

"Give it here." Mary Beth/Evelene pried the flier out of Susie's hands. She looked back up at Susie. "But I'm not dead. I'm right here."

"Not this again. You're in Mary Beth's body, do you not remember this? You can't just go around telling people you're alive. They'll lock you up and then—Poof! Thanks for ruining Mary Beth's life. Not like we haven't wrecked it, already." Susie glanced back at the picture of Mary Beth. She wore her track uniform, hands on her hips, all confident and assured she would take

over the world at any minute. And it had probably been true. Susie glanced at Mary Beth/Evelene, then folded the flier and shoved it into the pocket of her jeans.

"Let's go. It's only a matter of time before someone sees us." She began to turn from Mary Beth/Evelene, but the girl caught her arm.

"Look, Susie-Berry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen." Mary Beth/Evelene shrugged and looked at the ground, lip trembling. Susie sighed and patted her on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. We'll figure it out, okay?" Susie was always going to be the grown-up in this relationship, she knew it.

Mary Beth/Evelene sniffed and nodded. "Where did you hide the medal, anyway?"

Susie shook her head, not ready to tell her where they were going. "Tell you when we get there."

Mary Beth/Evelene sighed. "I can't believe you didn't trust me enough to leave it at the house. What kind of person do you think I am?"

Susie ignored her question. "Come on. Let's just get this over with and get back to the castle." She strolled past Mary Beth/Evelene, not bothering to look back. She could only look forward. That was the only way out of this.

Susie continued to hesitate over telling Mary Beth/Evelene that she'd stashed her dad's medal in Mrs. Johnson's shed, afraid Berserk Mom would come out when she found out where it was hidden. So she delayed telling her until they got to the edge of Mrs. Johnson's fancy subdivision, a mile away from their own ramshackle home.

Mrs. Johnson's neighborhood was full of sprawling houses with pristine lawns,

symmetrical hedges, and sleek, foreign cars. Her house was on the smaller side, but it had a wide bay window and a gorgeous brick walkway lined with wispy bamboo. Susie thought her teacher must have married rich or came from money to be able to live here—she couldn't afford it on a teacher's salary, that was for sure. Maybe Mrs. J's wealth was why her mom didn't like her. But then again, her mom never seemed to care about money. It had always been just another thing to get rid of.

"Hold up a sec," Susie said when they were two blocks from Mrs. Johnson's. The two girls both stopped short as Susie closed her eyes and listened hard, concentrating on the cops. So far, they'd been lucky, but she didn't want to be stupid and she definitely wanted to know if she and Mary Beth/Evelene had aroused anyone's suspicions. The cop had finished washing his car and was sitting inside the station, feet propped up on his desk, reading the *Garnet Falls Monitor*. She cracked a grin at the name—newspapers were the original surveillance technology, not cell phone and video cameras. The cop grinned too. Susie's smile froze. But then, so did the cop's. She panicked. He could *feel* her just as she could feel him. This wasn't supposed to happen! She tried to think of an image—any image that would throw him off from recognizing that she was connected to him. The stupid red checkered tablecloths at Uncle Tony's Pasta Palace—a line of old ladies at the grocery store—anything. The cop *couldn't* find out where she was.

"God, this shirt is filthy. I need to get rid of it. Now." Mary Beth/Evelene interrupted Susie's focus on the cop with a tap on the shoulder. She pulled on her ratty band shirt. "I can't let that girl dress me anymore. She has no sense."

Susie scowled, but was secretly grateful not to be mind-melding with a guy who would one day, potentially, arrest her and throw her in a cell. Thanos had been wrong. They *could* feel

her, just as she could feel them. The realization left her feeling hollowed out, her insides icy and exposed. "I was trying to listen to the cops. You don't need to get rid of that. Just wear it till we're done, okay? She's going to want it back."

"Yes, but," Mary Beth/Evelene started, but Susie cut her off.

"No buts. Look at the clothes I've got. And it's all thanks to you and your craziness."

By the look on Mary Beth/Evelene's face you'd think a mudslide had just wiped out Mary Beth's crappy band T-shirt collection or something. Susie knew she shouldn't have said anything to upset her mom, but she couldn't help it. She grabbed Mary Beth/Evelene's hand and began to drag her along the sidewalk.

"Okay, it's clear. I'm not hearing anything weird right now, but the longer we're out, the easier it is for them to spot us. And someone *will* spot us, sooner or later." She tugged her ball cap lower on her forehead and hoped Mrs. Johnson wasn't at home.

Susie wished she had a direct line to Thano instead of the cops. She wanted him to know what the people in the town thought had happened to them. She imagined him waiting for her outside the castle, cross-legged on a bed of moss, chin in his hands, wisps of purple hair blowing back and forth across his eyes. He wore another band of bells that jingled in the wind. He sat straight up and breathed in sharply.

"Susie?" he whispered. He closed his eyes. Susie closed hers. She could just barely see him, his form threatening to float away into a cloud of mist.

"Susie?" the words came again, this time in her head. Her eyes flew open. She was still in Garnet Falls, walking down a sidewalk with her mom. But there were bells. Jingling. Somewhere nearby. She glanced back at Mary Beth/Evelene but the ringing wasn't coming from her wrist.

"Thano?" she whispered, but she didn't hear his voice again. She had seen him and then he was gone from her mind. But the bells continued to jingle. Susie rubbed her eyebrow in confusion. "Do you hear that?"

"What? Cars?" Mary Beth/Evelene pulled her hand out of her grasp.

"Never mind. I'm getting a headache." They walked another block and the sun finally began to set, its rosy petals curling below the horizon ready to leave the world in a deep blue. Perfect timing. Hopefully Mrs. Johnson's motion-sensor detector hadn't switched on for the evening. Mrs. Johnson's Volvo was gone, so Susie gestured for Mary Beth/Evelene to follow her as she crept around the side yard and back toward the shed, which sat toward the wooden fence in the back. For such a nice house, the shed needed some work—its roof and the hinges on the door were both rusting and the siding looked muddy. Not that Susie had any room to judge. It had once probably seen a lot of use, but probably had been ignored since Mrs. Johnson moved into this house. She didn't exactly seem like the type who cherished working on her lawn. Susie got the feeling Mrs. Johnson would rather hire lawn help than use the clutter in her shed.

"Whose house is this?" Mary Beth/Evelene whispered as Susie creaked open the shed door. Susie cringed as it gave off a high-pitched whine that seemed like it would never stop. Junk cluttered the shed, spilling into the dusty corners.

"Mrs. Johnson's," Susie whispered as she scanned the room for her bag. It was nowhere in sight. So much stuff—a broken old dollhouse, doors hanging off tiny hinges, and piles of ceramic clay crowded the room along with rusted landscape items. A few books covered in dust about gardening and flowers. Susie dropped to her knees and began sifting through the junk.

"Get down here and help me," she ordered. Mary Beth/Evelene shook her head. "I can't

believe you'd bring it here. I just can't believe you, Susie." She took a step back out of the shed.

Susie ignored her and kept digging, no longer caring how much noise she was making. Tiles and rakes clattered against each other. Her breath came too fast. It wasn't here. The only reason she had for ever coming back to this stupid town wasn't here. That meant her last memory of her dad was gone. And whatever her mom was flipping out about being worth so much was gone too. Susie didn't want to tell her. But she turned to look at her, anyway. Mary Beth/Evelene's fists were clenched as she towered over Susie from the doorway. But that wasn't what caught Susie's attention. Behind Mary Beth/Evelene the motion-activated light had flicked on and someone stood, bathed in its light. Susie staggered up from the ground and pushed Mary Beth/Evelene behind her. But it was too late. In front of them stood Mrs. Johnson, a large flashlight in one hand and Susie's black backpack in the other.

"Looking for this?" Mrs. Johnson asked. She dropped the bag at her feet.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Susie swallowed, her eyes on Mrs. Johnson. She put up her hands. "Mrs. Johnson, it's not what you think. We just—I just—"

Mrs. Johnson cut Susie off. "You lied to me, Susie. You lied to me. And you, Mary Beth." She turned to the other girl. "You and Maya and Reginald also disappear in the middle of all of this?" She glared at Mary Beth. "Your parents are *sick* with worry. They think one of you is dead and that the others killed you." Then she turned to Susie, "And your mom, Susie. My God."

"You have to believe me, Mrs.—"

"So tell me, *what* am I supposed to believe? Tell me why I shouldn't call the police on the both of you right this minute?" Susie stared at her, groping for words. "You were *such* a good student," Mrs. Johnson went on, "and you just *wasted* it." She raised the flashlight, as if she was seriously considering hitting Susie with it.

Susie put up her hands, her voice cracking as she spoke. "Please, Mrs. J, don't. We didn't mean to—things got really messed up." Susie wondered what her teacher would do when she came clean over everything. She knew she would never trust her again, no matter what she said. "Listen! I *found* my mom dead. I freaked—and it's not Mary Beth's fault. She didn't even know about that. She just got caught up in hiding with me. We didn't—"

"You keep saying 'you didn't' this and that, Susie. Reality check—you *did* these things. Take some responsibility for God's sake. This isn't a game. You're not in class. You're not taking a test. We're talking about life and death here. You can't just take off. Disappear. What were you thinking?" She suddenly looked around, flashing the light into the corners of the shed. "Where

are Maya and Reg? They told me he's very sick."

"They're—" Susie started.

"Oh, never mind," Mrs. Johnson sighed and her shoulders seemed to sag. "I just want to help you...all of you. But you're making things harder than they have to be." She took a deep breath. "So you can come with me to the police station right now, or I'll just call them, tell them where you are."

"Cut us some slack, already. Okay?" Mary Beth/Evelene butted in, and Susie cringed. She had known this trip was a horrible idea. She should never have come here. She elbowed Mary Beth/Evelene to shush her, but the other girl just gave Susie a look like she was crazy. "No, seriously," Mary Beth/Evelene turned back to Mrs. Johnson. "You haven't been there. You don't know. You're just holier than thou as usual. You think you're such a good teacher, but do you even *hear* anyone at all? Ever?"

"You're not helping," Susie hissed through gritted teeth. Mrs. Johnson leaned forward and picked the bag back off the ground, shaking her head.

"Just come along with me," Mrs. Johnson said.

"No," Mary Beth/Evelene said, and moved to stand in front of Susie. "That's hers." She pointed at the bag. "You're going to give that back to her, and we're going to go. That's what's going to happen. You're not going to call the cops, and you're going to leave my parents alone."

Mrs. Johnson shook her head at Mary Beth/Evelene's boldness. "Young lady, you will do exactly as I tell you." Mary Beth/Evelene shrugged and crossed her arms as if she was daring Mrs. Johnson to test her.

"Mrs. J, just let us go," Susie offered, but her teacher shook her head, and Susie knew she

wasn't going to budge. "Look. Just call Mary Beth's parents and tell them she's okay. That's all you have to do. I can't go to the cops right now. They're not going to believe me, and I have some stuff I have to take care of. Mary Beth has to help me. I wish I could explain it to you, but we don't have time."

"You girls don't know what you've done to this town," Mrs. Johnson said, her voice suddenly high pitched. "You could come back to school. It's not too late. You just go to summer school and graduate then. You can still go to college—there's nothing saying you can't. Both of you can. And Maya and Reg—if you know where they are. I assume you do. You know that, right?"

Susie felt a knot untwist itself in her stomach. A future she could still have. A future she thought was lost. But she pushed the idea away. It was just a mind game. For a moment she hated Mrs. Johnson for toying with her.

"It doesn't change things," she said. "The cops will still blame me. Like you said, everyone thinks one of us killed my mom. It wasn't Mary Beth and it wasn't me or any of us, but that doesn't mean anyone will believe us."

Susie wished Thanos was with her, that his hand was wrapped around hers, calming her. She closed her eyes, imagining him in the woods, waiting for her. He pulled a piece of paper and a pencil from his pocket and began to write. He whispered. "Susie, I'm right here. Always with you." Then he took the note and buried it beneath the moss. Just as she had always done. Thanos looked up from the ground and gazed into the distance—right at her, seeing her standing in the backyard of her English teacher. She knew it wasn't her imagination. Susie opened her eyes.

"Always with you," she whispered back, her heart pounding. He was with her, even now, even so far away. Trying to protect her. No matter what she did right now, he would help her, she knew it. He'd been waiting to help her this entire time. He'd given her a direct line to him when he'd touched her and was ready to find her wherever she was. She listened for his presence within her and it grounded her to the earth, so strong, so full of life—the first thing that had truly made her feel safe in a long time. Susie gazed at Mrs. Johnson.

"Go ahead and call the cops," she said. "We'll be okay, Mrs. Johnson. I'll just tell them the truth and hope they believe me." Susie sighed and pulled the ball cap off her head, running her hands through her hair.

"Which is what?" Mrs. Johnson prodded. Susie took a breath to answer her, but Mary Beth/Evelene yelled—out of anger, maybe out of frustration—and then jumped forward and grabbed at the bag, pushing Mrs. Johnson down on the ground. The bag and the flashlight both tumbled out of the teacher's hands, and Mary Beth/Evelene, bag in hand, took off running into the darkness beyond the motion lights, shouting for Susie to follow her.

Susie sighed and knelt on the ground to help Mrs. Johnson up. "I'm so sorry," she said, looking into her teacher's eyes. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"It doesn't have to be like this, Susie. I meant what I said." Mrs. Johnson gasped. She sat up and brushed grass and dirt from her clothes. "Come with me. Please."

"I'm sorry," Susie said. She took a step back from her teacher. "I have to go." She raced to the side yard and looked back at Mrs. Johnson. "Go ahead and call the cops," she said. "I have some things I need to tell them, anyway." And with that, she took off after Mary Beth/Evelene, hoping she got to her before she took the medal for herself—or before someone else saw her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Susie rounded the corner of Mrs. Johnson's house and jogged back out to the street where Mary Beth/Evelene knelt on the sidewalk, zipping up the worn bag. Even though it had barely begun to get dark, the streetlights hummed on with a muddy orange hue.

"Is it still in there?" Susie called. Mary Beth/Evelene nodded and stood up and smoothed her jeans.

"Yup. Perfect condition. Here." Mary Beth/Evelene handed it over. Susie grabbed the bag and unzipped it. Her breath caught when she lifted the medal out from beneath a jumble of dog-eared paperbacks, still enshrined in its plastic case. She knew it was silly, that on its face all it was ever going to be was a piece of metal, that it wouldn't bring back her dad. But it didn't feel like a piece of metal. The soft blue ribbon with its cluster of white stars, the eagle pulling up the gold star with its woman warrior all there to say her dad had been a hero, that he had saved people, that he had been there when people had needed him most and he hadn't backed away. One day she would be worthy enough to take it out and hold it in the palm of her hand, to hold it closer than the way she always did with it in its case. She didn't know when she would do something she felt was worthy of her dad, but when she touched it, she wanted to do it when she thought he would be the most proud of her. That by touching it she would somehow bring back the pure memory of him, even for a moment. But that moment wasn't now.

"We should get out of here," Mary Beth/Evelene broke into Susie's thoughts. Susie carefully deposited the medal back into the bag, zipped it up again, and nodded. Mary Beth/Evelene was right. The police station was only a few blocks away. Susie looked at the other girl, a tangle of black hair whipping in the evening wind. She hesitated for a moment.

"Thanks, Mom. It...means a lot that you helped me go back for this," she said. Mary Beth/Evelene waved her hand.

"Now, you can do me a favor. I know you're not going to like it, but I need to go back to the house. Now."

Susie shook her head. "We can't. The cops are super close as it is."

Mary Beth/Evelene's face grew red and puffy the way it always did when Mary Beth was about to lay into someone. Susie shrunk back, once again weirded out that her mom was in that body. "We have to," Mary Beth/Evelene whispered. "I can't leave without it." In the distance, sirens began to wail.

"We have to *go. Now*," Susie said and tried to grab Mary Beth/Evelene's hand, but the girl pulled away. "Look, whatever it is can wait. Okay? Or do you *want* to go to jail? They'll throw both of us in there. Let's get out of here. Now." Susie shouldered the bag. No way was she going back to their house. It was like her mom had hit some kind of loop—had she already forgotten that the house was nearly empty? There was nothing for either of them there, anymore.

"Fine," Mary Beth/Evelene said. "Let's go." Susie grabbed her hand and the two girls dashed down the sidewalk toward the woods. Susie was careful to check for the cops whenever they neared an intersection. For two miles, they did this, Mary Beth/Evelene occasionally panting beside her.

"I know I'm supposed to be a runner like you, but I don't think I'm going to keep this up for very long," she said, her breath coming out heavy and uneven. Susie guessed that taking over a body didn't mean knowing all of that body's tricks. She didn't say anything, but the feeling just pressed down on her, the knowledge she had to do something for Mary Beth, even if she hoped

her mom had changed and would stay with her. Mary Beth/Evelene had done this much to help her, even if she had knocked Mrs. Johnson down. She should have expected her mom to do something like that when faced with Mrs. Johnson, though, and she knew it.

"I'm so ready for some forest or castle beer or whatever you guys call it. Garnet Falls seems kind of lame, doesn't it?" Mary Beth/Evelene said. "How did I ever think this was a fascinating place to raise a kid? To live a life?"

"You'll run easier if you don't talk as much," Susie said. She knew it sounded mean, but it was true, and she didn't want her mom to pass out before they got to the woods.

"Whatever you say, Captain Berry." Mary Beth/Evelene fell silent the rest of the way as Susie listened for the cops in her weird cop-centric brain the rest of the way. But Mary Beth/Evelene's bracelet of bells kept jingling, reminding Susie of Thano. How when she'd closed her eyes, she'd seen him. She closed them now, thinking of him, and there he was, outside the castle, searching through the trees for a sign that she was near. It wasn't just her imagination. She heard his bells jingle, out of time with the ones on Mary Beth/Evelene's wrist. As she ran, her footfalls kept time with the peal of his bells, not Mary Beth/Evelene's.

When they approached the castle, the sky looked as if it had split into violet and pink, twisting with the clouds over huge swaths of night. She could feel Thano, gazing into the sky, and knew he was thinking about roots. What a weirdo, she thought. She glanced at Mary Beth/Evelene and smiled, but the smile shook and soon tears followed the shaking and she was wiping them away, pretending they were just rain, even though there wasn't any.

"Susie-Berry, what is it? What's wrong?" Mary Beth/Evelene squeezed her shoulder and pulled her into a hug.

"It's nothing, Mom. It's nothing, I swear."

"With you, it's not nothing. With some girls, maybe, but not you." Mary Beth/Evelene sucked in a breath of air and shook her head, a smile on her face. "You never cried, not even when you were a baby. You were just steady. Happy and steady, that was my Susie-Berry."

"Well, your little Susie-Berry is all grown up and is currently crying over nothing." Susie wiped the tears away and stared ahead at the castle. Thanos was fiddling with the bells on his wrist. Waiting. All that time, those notes he'd felt, he'd heard her voice and had been trying to make her life better. She knew it, now that she'd felt his presence. Susie stopped walking and turned to Mary Beth/Evelene, who was scratching at a spot on her ratty shirt.

"Mom? What does Mary Beth want you to do?"

Mary Beth/Evelene stopped scratching and went very still. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, in a single day we've managed to take two months off her life—two months she could've had with *her* family. She missed the holidays. Does she miss her parents? Doesn't she want to go back home?" Missing that kind of time with her family wouldn't have ever bothered Susie, but she thought Mary Beth might be different. Susie had seen Mary Beth's mother at meetings before, always grinning and cheering even when Mary Beth's own expression made her look like she ate bitter limes for breakfast.

Mary Beth/Evelene smiled and traced her index finger along Susie's chin. "Sweetie, it's complicated. Of course she wants to go back. And she will. But she's giving me time. And I'm grateful."

"It's not like she had much choice in the matter," Susie grumbled.

"What's that?"

Susie shook her head. "Nothing. Let's go get that forest beer, okay?"

"Sure, sweetie. Whatever you say. I'm going to change, first. There's a mirror, where you look at it and it dresses you exactly how you want to look."

"That doesn't sound right at all, but whatever you say." Susie felt sheepish the moment she said it, remembering standing before the bathroom mirror as that foam-colored dress suddenly apparated out of nowhere, replacing her filthy clothes. She'd gone and found the shirt later, but she'd had to concentrate on getting it to appear again, the same way Reg had shown her how to build a room into what she wanted it to look like. "Where'd you hear that, anyway?"

"Mary Beth told me." Mary Beth/Evelene kept walking and beckoned for Susie to follow. "Come on!"

"Right. Mary Beth told you. How did she even know? She was here for like a minute."

Mary Beth/Evelene shrugged. "Maybe Maya told her?" Susie grimaced. Of course it made perfect sense that Mary Beth was communicating with her mom, but the thought made her skin crawl. They had stolen a good chunk of Mary Beth's senior year and she wanted her mom to party? Okay.

Ahead, near the castle, Thano stood, as if he was waiting for them. Waiting for her.

"Hey, Thano!" Mary Beth/Evelene waved at him as she dashed into the castle, the heavy doors thudding shut behind her. Susie trailed behind, coming up the path slowly.

Thano stood up and wiped his hair from his eyes, bells jingling on his wrist. Susie stopped when she stood in front of him, biting her lip.

"I guess the bells didn't muffle her disorder as much as I thought it would. I'm sorry. I thought it would be easier for her to see what she left behind. Then you could say goodbye. I didn't expect her to *want* to stay in that girl's body for any longer."

Susie shook her head. "You don't know her. She bounces back and forth all the time. One minute she's happy and doesn't care, the other she's down and wants it all to go away. It's not okay." She tried to pretend it didn't hurt, thinking of her mom seesawing yet again. Susie winced at the cops in her head, their voices screaming at each other.

"Let me help you," Thano said. He brushed his fingers over Susie's temples and the sound of police scanners and the wheels of squad cars squealing and the incessant beep of the station coffee maker were swept away. She staggered a little, but Thano caught her. "You're still connected, but I quieted the noise a little."

"Thank you," she whispered, staring up into his soft eyes as he wrapped his arms around her. How old was he, really? Had he always been alive? As old as the trees that towered over them, green with life? "Did you take yourself away, too?"

"You weren't meant to see me." His voice cracked. "I was your tether." Susie felt something in her give way, like quicksand suddenly devouring the brick-and-mortar job she'd done around her heart.

"But I did," she whispered. "I heard you. I know you, even if it's just a tiny piece."

Smiling, Thano helped her stand up and took her hand. "You know enough, I think."

"How did that happen?" She couldn't help but push—he hadn't been there and then suddenly he was, bright and brilliant and ringing like nothing she'd known.

Thano curled her fingers around his. "It's in the roots. In this world they reach out until

they find each other. That's how it happened. They touched your notes, too. That's how I knew I would meet you. And this—I've been waiting for you to find it yourself. Because—" he stopped and glanced up at the darkening sky.

"Because what?" She looked up too, and saw Orion peeking out above the trees, bow raised.

"That's for some other time, I think," he said and pressed her hand against his heart. "You have something else you need to say. It's okay. I'm not mad. I'm sorry I did this to you."

"It's not me who needs the apology." Susie stepped back and pulled the flier from her pocket. She pushed it into his hand. "*Months* have gone by. She's lost too much time. We can't take any more from her. My mom could have *killed* her back there."

Thano unfolded the paper, and it rustled beneath his fingertips. He glanced back at her, his expression stern. She didn't bother to tell him that she was planning on going to the police. She knew she couldn't put it off anymore, not after how much time had passed. He probably knew that anyway.

"You should know, I'm so grateful. I never thought I'd get to see her again. And the bells did work for a little while—she only tried to get rid of that shirt once. She didn't remember what she'd done with everything else—it was just a blank. So it was," she hesitated, trying to find the right word, but nothing came. "—Nice. Mostly, it was nice," she finally said.

"Yes. And?"

"And that will never make what she did okay. She's my mom, and I love her. But it will never be okay. She was sick, Thano. She was so sick." She paused. If only she'd tried to make her mother get help before she'd died. But that didn't change anything now. She had to look

forward, even if it was a future empty of her mother. The thought made her feel hollow, but she pushed it away. She had to be strong. She made herself go on. "I'm glad she didn't come back completely sick. I'm glad you brought her to me one last time. So thank you."

"And you're willing to say goodbye all over again? You don't want her to stay in any form?" He folded the paper like it was a fragile artifact and handed it back to her. It felt heavy on her palm.

Susie unfolded it again and pointed at the picture of Mary Beth. "Just because I had issues with her doesn't mean it's okay to take her world away like this."

Thano brushed an imaginary speck of dirt from his pants and leaned back against the castle doors. "Your mom could live her full life, you know. We can keep her illness at bay. And once she's lived out her time, Mary Beth can have hers back. I wasn't considering stealing her body from her forever. I wouldn't do that."

Above them, the trees whispered in a language she would never know. She shivered. "Yes, but that is what you did," she pressed. "Mary Beth's time is now and she's just stuck here. That's not a fair trade."

Thano laughed. "I like that you're noble. I'm glad to be connected to you."

"So you'll let her go?" Susie expelled a breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

Thano leaned forward and gathered her hands in his again. "Susie, I'd do anything to help you. But—I wasn't totally honest. The two of them have to work it out. I just made sure they connected, nothing more. One of them had to be open and the other had to want it. And both of them did. Are you surprised?" Thano raised an eyebrow as Susie stepped back from him. Her eyes filled with stupid, salty tears, and she wiped them away as fast as she could.

"I—I can't be with you like this. It's not right." She balled up her hands and punched them against her legs. It had seemed so possible, that she could just be a girl tied to a guy and that was it. That they were connected and nothing would come between that. But it wasn't true. It would never be true. He'd manipulated her into believing she'd even had a choice to do the right thing.

"Susie, wait." Thano tried to grab her, but she brushed passed him and ran into the castle after her mother, the backpack heavy in her hand.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Roots were not supposed to split apart like this. Roots, connected as they were to the fabrics of existence—the cells and spore and fiber that stitched all together—they were meant to feel their way through the earth, touching loam and gathering life. They divided and stayed together. To split and separate meant Alone. Meant Thano had chosen the wrong root. A Word Burier who wished to find not togetherness, but a Word Burier who had lied. Those paper wings that flew through the mud, silt, and clay, through the roots of the evergreen of forever, those paper wings had meant to drown in darkness. To travel to him, to unite with him—it had been an accident. A root meant to suffocate had instead wound itself around his heart. And how was he to sever what had grown into his being?

He had been so sure. Is this what a human was? Flighty and reckless and so lost in self it couldn't fathom how much it touched all else? So many cells destroyed in the burning of love, of connection. Thano felt the fibers of the forest's core reaching for him, but he ducked away. It shouldn't have to know what humans really were. To connect and combine with them might not heal anything but bring them nothing but blight. But he couldn't leave Susie now. He'd joined her to him—to everything.

To extract her root would be to destroy the forest. To extract her root would be to destroy the moss that carried them through life. To destroy the heart of his being.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Susie tore through the castle, ducking into every room down the long, ivy-curling hallways, her feet squelching through the moss. It clung to her shoes, as if the castle was trying to hold her back. She grimaced. It probably was. Even if Thano said he didn't want to get involved, he'd already made it so Mary Beth didn't have a fair life. She wondered if Thano would cloak Mary Beth/Evelene so Susie would never find her. She would never go near him again, if he did.

She had to find her. Whatever Thano had done to Susie when he'd touched her forehead before she left the castle seemed to amplify when she returned, even though he'd tried to quiet down the cops in Garnet Falls. She could feel the walls *breathing*. At least, that's what it felt like. They pulsed in and out, pulling in the air, thirsting for more. No, it was *someone* in the castle who thirsted. Not just for more, but for *everything*. As she ran, the bag banged heavy against her legs. She shouldered it and slammed into Kit and Jamie's room and they started in surprise. Kit stood over Jamie, dangling a rope made of ivy. Jamie seemed to be trying to read.

"Knock much?" Kit asked, throwing the ivy rope on the floor. Susie shook her head in apology. Jamie just shrugged and went back to reading from a book that looked like it was a thousand-pages long.

"Told you to knock it off, Kit," Jamie muttered.

"Sorry—have you seen...have you seen another girl in a T-shirt?" She could clearly see Mary Beth/Evelene wasn't in here, but she didn't want to be rude. Kit sighed and shook his head.

"Nobody comes in here unless *we* invite them in here. Which means..." he said.

"I'll let myself out, thanks." Susie slammed the door behind her and hoped some of their

stupid ivy canopies fell on Kit's head. Being stuck in a place like this probably did something to your manners, but it hadn't seemed to hurt Thano. Susie shook the thought of him away, not wanting him to know she was thinking of him, if he could.

"Don't panic, Suze," she whispered. She wiped her clammy palms against her jeans and turned on her heel to head back down to the basement and, hopefully, to her mom. As she ran, ivy tried to wrap at her ankles, but she jumped, grateful it hadn't come into contact with her skin. She skidded to a stop inside the room, where she'd taken Mary Beth/Evelene when she'd first brought her out of the mist. Gone were the normal golden walls she'd seen before, replaced with the same moss that spread throughout the castle.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're here," Reg said when she dashed into the room.

"I was going to say the same thing," Susie said, then dropped the bag, staring at what he was gesturing at.

Mary Beth/Evelene and Maya were sparring. Maya stood near the doorway, waving a baseball bat wildly. Mary Beth/Evelene had changed into a purple silk pantsuit—so typical of her mom's fashion—and had slung the backpack Susie used for school over her shoulders. She was stationed behind the couch, knees bent, as if she was ready to leap over the couch and onto Maya. She held a lighter in her hand, a blue flame dancing in and out of view. The bracelet of bells she'd worn was gone. Susie cast around for them, a heavy feeling in her chest.

"Oh my God." Susie slapped her hands against her forehead and pulled her fingers through her hair, yanking on her tendrils. "Maya, Mary Beth, you have to stop this."

"I've already tried that." Reg shrugged. "Mary Beth won't listen. You have to do better." Susie ignored him and repeated herself.

"Shut your face, *Susie-Berry*," Maya said. "I know this isn't Mary Beth. You can't just take my best friend and expect me not to know. I want her back. And whatever's inside her burned to the ground." Maya swung the bat again, but the aim went wild and she only smashed it into the couch. Mary Beth/Evelene danced back, laughing.

"Stop it, Mom," Susie yelled. Mary Beth/Evelene didn't acknowledge Susie, and continued to laugh.

"This is nuts," Reg said. "Maya, maybe you should let Suze take over from here?" Maya glowered.

"Not until this bullshit possession gets out of my best friend's body." She raised the bat.

"Try me, Queenie," Mary Beth/Evelene addressed Maya. "Just try it. I know you won't really hit me. *Mary Beth* told me so," Mary Beth/Evelene said. Susie edged near Maya, but the girl had the bat up again and waved it at Susie.

"Get away from me. So help me, I'll smash your brains out."

"Come on, Maya, knock it off. Mom, where did you put your bells?" Susie tried to sound lighthearted, but the *thirst* she'd felt before seemed to burn through the room, making her dizzy. It clung to the walls, trying to hollow them out. So much need.

"I tossed them," Mary Beth/Evelene said. Susie began to rub her forehead. "Don't judge me. You don't know. They were making me feel funny, like I was forgetting something every time they rang." Susie curled her fingers into fists and swallowed. That explained the full-on attack of crazy.

"Reg, did you see them? Can you help me out a little here?" Susie hissed.

He put up his hands. "No, no bells. And I am helping. Why do you think I gave Maya the

bat in the first place? That's right. Because, guess what, you already knew: Your mom is crazy."

But it was Maya who looked like a lunatic, her hair wild, giant singe marks all over her fitted pink dress. She sure didn't look like she was handling it. Susie leaned against Reg for support and spoke low into his ear. "What happened, exactly?" Not that it mattered, exactly. Without the bells, she knew well enough what was going on. The thirst wasn't coming from him, either. They had to be coming from her mom. But when Susie touched him, she could suddenly feel just how sick he was. It coursed through him, carving hollows throughout his body. So much taking. Reg grimaced and stepped away from Susie.

"You're not gonna like it." He spread out his hands and touched his fingertips against the golden walls. Susie waited.

"Don't listen to him, Susie-Berry," Mary Beth/Evelene cut in. "They're liars. I'm only being myself. This one—" she pointed at Reg. "Never liked me, anyway. You know that."

"Just shut up," Reg said, and his chest heaved like he was out of breath. He kept shaking his head, corkscrew curls flopping.

"Don't talk like that to him, Mom," Susie said, touching Reg on the shoulder. Susie remembered that vacant look her mom got whenever Reg had been around—as if he'd been a random presence, not their flesh and blood. She wrinkled her nose to push back the pricks of pain the memory gave her. She tried to think of what Thanos might do in this situation. She closed her eyes, imagining that a softness flowed through her fingers. That where the hollows in his body gaped, light filled them. That he would be whole if he just breathed in and breathed out.

"Whoa! There's been this pain in my chest, and it's totally gone. Did you do that?" Reg asked. Susie opened her eyes to her grinning cousin and nodded hesitantly. From behind Reg,

Maya looked startled, and for an instant, Susie thought she actually looked happy.

"I think so? I don't really know—it didn't hurt, did it?" She had no idea what this feeling was, or how it connected her to him, or even helped her change him. At first, she'd thought she was only connected to Thano and maybe to the castle, but this was bigger. It made her feel giddy, even with Mary Beth/Evelene and Maya facing off in front of her.

"Man, you're better than oxygen," Reg said. She let herself grin back, feeling for the first time the tiniest step closer to how her dad might've felt when he'd saved so many people. She knew Reg was still sick, but she'd *helped* him at least. Reg's expression changed after a moment, though. He frowned, and gestured at Maya and Mary Beth/Evelene, still in their standoff. Maya half-lunged, barely missing Mary Beth/Evelene with the bat.

"Maya and I came in here earlier, and she was right there, shoving all that stuff into your backpack." Reg gestured at Mary Beth/Evelene. Susie noticed that the purple backpack was partially unzipped. Threatening to spill out of it were acorns and ivy and bits of moss and a few dresses that looked like they'd come from Susie's room in the castle. A key Susie had never seen dangled from the zipper of the bag. Susie went very still. Her mom didn't need those things. Her mom didn't need *any* things.

"What is this, Mom?" She tried to sound strong and steady, but her voice came out paper thin. She wished she could take her question back—she didn't want to say or hear the words.

Mary Beth/Evelene laughed. "Nothing, Susie-Berry. Don't listen to them. I'm just securing our future."

Maya sighed. "Are you a complete moron or what?" she asked Susie. "She's trying to take off. She tried to steal my cheerleading outfit, too—like she could even fit into it." Susie shook

her head, trying not to listen to Maya.

"Maya tried to block her from leaving, but she just went nuts," Reg said. Susie put her hands up to her ears and shook her head. Reg touched Susie on the arm and gently pulled her hands away from her head. "Listen, this isn't your fault. No one knew it was going to be like this. At first she acted like it was all an accident, like she wasn't doing what we thought she was. She was all wanting to make up with me. You know, for kind of ignoring that my mom had died and pretty much ignoring me my whole life."

"Give me a break, Reg. You kids throw the *worst* pity parties," Mary Beth/Evelene said. "None of this is true, Susie. I was just trying to be nice." She flicked the lighter in her hands on and off, eyes on it instead of anyone else. Susie hesitated a step toward Mary Beth/Evelene, but the girl jumped back and scowled. "I told you, back off. I've got this," she said to Susie.

"Yeah, you got this. Okay," Reg said. "Like I said, she just flipped out, all nervous and fidgety, and then she started laughing and wouldn't stop. She pointed at Maya and told her she wasn't supposed to be here, that she needed to go back where she came from. Then she whipped a lighter out of her pocket and went after Maya and tried to light her on fire. She got her dress and she would've got her totally, but I ran to the wall and got it to give me the bat. She just went loony bins, I'm not even kidding."

"Sweetie, this place needs some work, don't you think? There's all that moss—" Mary Beth/Evelene wrinkled her nose, flicked the lighter in her hands, and held it against the wall. A wisp of smoke coughed from the wall, but nothing more. Susie crossed her fingers that the moss was wet enough to keep fire out of the equation.

Susie wanted Thanos, suddenly, but she knew he probably wasn't going to come to her

when she'd just run away from him. She could *feel* him when she thought of him, and the feeling gave her shivers, as if any time they thought of each other they'd pull together like magnets. Even when they were angry and wanted to ignore each other. Susie choked back a wave of remorse. She could see him when she closed her eyes. Thano sat alone several floors above, gazing out at the forest from one of the turrets, hurt over her dismissal of what he'd thought of as the ultimate gift—and she knew it was. It wove in and out of her veins, their connection. But it didn't change how he refused to come to her now. But she was here and they suddenly felt each other all over again. She closed her eyes and imagined the impossibly huge roots of a tree, tangling together with the spindly, fragile threads of another, smaller tree, still growing. She wanted Thano to know she would not abandon him. From his perch, he grinned at her. But something else passed between them—how this was *her* responsibility. How she'd brought her mom back with her own sadness. If Susie wanted her mother to separate from Mary Beth, she had to find a way on her own.

Mary Beth/Evelene babbled on. "All this other junk is going right after *she* goes. I have everything I need." Mary Beth/Evelene pointed at the couch, then at the mattress Susie had slept on. Susie dug her fingernails into her forearm, willing her rage away, but it didn't work.

"She's gone full toxic avenger," Reg said.

"That's not even the right thing." Susie glared at him. This wasn't the time for jokes. Reg shrugged. She'd seen this too many times. In a few minutes, her mom would wind up sobbing in a heap on the floor, and if she'd managed to get her way, at the very least the couch would be flaring up in a plume of smoke.

"You were going to try to kick Mary Beth out, weren't you?" Susie whispered to Mary

Beth/Evelene. "You were going to throw her away, the same way you've thrown away everything else in our lives, the same way you threw me away. Then you'd take her body and," she hesitated. "You were just going to take off, weren't you? Why, Mom? Why would you do that to me?"

Instead of looking at Susie, Mary Beth/Evelene stared into the blue flame of her lighter. "It's *my* body. It's *my* turn. Mary Beth gave it to me. It's *mine*."

"No, it's not yours. That's the whole thing. What did you think you were going to do? Run off and leave me hanging for your death? You weren't even going to help me with that? The cops are after you too, now, did you forget? How are you going to get away from that?" Susie blew out an exasperated sigh. If only she'd gone to the cops in the first place. Then maybe her mom would never have come back at all. She'd been so stupid to run away.

"Just leave her, Suze," Reg said. "We can lock her up in here until she calms down. She can't burn the moss up with *that*." He gestured at the lighter and then put out his hands to steer Susie toward the door, but she shook her head.

Thano had as good as left her alone to fix her mother. It was Susie's responsibility. But Thano had known to give her mom those bells. He had known *how* to fix her when no one else did. She stared at the moss walls. How could she bring back the exact kind of bells Thano had made? They'd kept the crazy out, but they were gone now. Susie didn't know how to make them.

Suddenly, the moss walls began to flicker to white and then to the cascade of golden words in that strange language she'd seen before. The words on the wall suddenly moved like a news ticker, only these swifited like angry white water. They blurred and swirled out of the unknown language, into English. They bubbled with rage, screaming in capital letters about

abandonment, about losing everything, about never eating, about curling up in a ball on a blanket to sleep. Susie remembered them because she had written them. She had written them and buried them in the ground in the forest, the way she tried to do with everything she couldn't deal with. She began to shake. Thano really had told the truth about finding her notes. All of them.

"You really knew everything, didn't you, Thano?" She felt woozy, suddenly. As she stared at the moss walls, more words began speeding by, glowing in gold that rippled with the secrets she'd once flung down on paper and then buried into the earth. The ones that begged her mother to come back home after that time she'd disappeared for three weeks, the ones that asked the earth to stay solid beneath her feet, to protect her and to protect Reg. To make her first kiss happen at sunset on the warmest day of summer—maybe that would happen now with Thano. Her words—and Reg's words too—glittered from the walls, baring everything.

In Reg's clumsy, loopy handwriting: *Let me see my father again. I want to see the deer that killed my parents. Please don't let Uncle Jack find the vodka. Meet me at the Moss Castle at sundown. Yesterday I found an orphaned baby robin. I held it against my chest to keep it warm, but it was too little, too late. I don't know how I'll look at orange the same way again.*

In Susie's tidy, too-small handwriting Reg had sometimes called psychopathic: *I picked out this book from the library about magic kingdoms and their rules. There's one kingdom with only one rule: kindness. We need to find it. I wish it was real. Last week Coach gave me a brand-new pair of track shoes. How'd she know? Sometimes I think my dad is still alive, and when he finds out about mom, he'll come rescue us. I know. Make my mom notice. Can you help me hide? This morning I woke up and thought about how we used to play Frogger on your Uncle Jack's old PlayStation when he wasn't around. If we timed it just right, we could cross the road too.*

Thano had known about them all this time. He'd heard every word she'd muttered in these woods, had taken each thought she couldn't bear to tell another soul, and made it his own. Thano. How she'd heard him when she closed her eyes, as if he'd been waiting for her to discover him all this time. Even if he'd screwed everything up by putting her mom into Mary Beth, he *cared*.

And he was listening to her—she just had to concentrate on his mind, on his knowledge. They shared the same root system, after all. Susie stared at the walls. Just lean into it, she thought. Think about what you want. She closed her eyes and backed up against the wall, palms pressed against the words, which suddenly evaporated into the soft, soft green of moss. And she searched, her fingers slowly reaching further into the secret, darkened caves of the moss walls. And there the bells were. How cold, how impossibly old they were, how they wanted to help, how they wanted not to be thrown away. How they wanted to unite and be whole, roots combined. And then Susie closed her fingers over the bells and wrenched them out from the moss. The hole in the wall sighed closed. She didn't even have to make a sound and Thano could hear her. The bells weighed leaf-light and tinkled in her hand. She immediately felt better holding them, all the anxiety bubbling out of her stomach. She held them out toward Mary Beth/Evelene.

"Look, Mom. I found them. Why don't you put down the lighter and try wearing them for a little while?" Susie took a tentative step forward.

"You're crazy." Maya shook her head. "Don't do it, Susie." She gripped the bat, knuckles clenched.

"Don't try anything on her, Maya, or you're going to be sorry," Susie warned.

Mary Beth/Evelene glanced back and forth between Maya and Susie, her lip suddenly

trembling. Phase two, sobbing heap commences, Susie remembered.

"Susie, you wouldn't trust her over me, would you? I'm your mother—she's, she's nothing." Mary Beth/Evelene's face flushed, fat tears beginning to roll from her eyes.

"She's Mary Beth's best friend, Mom. She only wants to help her. What do *you* want to do to her?" Susie watched as Mary Beth/Evelene slid to the ground, her fingers limp, the lighter plunking into her lap. Susie hedged another step forward. Maya glared at her and shook her head. Susie ignored it and made her way over to kneel beside Mary Beth/Evelene. "Mom, Mary Beth's talking to you, isn't she? She wants her body back, doesn't she?" Susie wiped the tears from the girl's cheeks and gently placed her fingers against the girl's temples, hoping Thano could feel what she was doing.

Her cheeks blotchy and cherry red, Mary Beth/Evelene glanced up at Susie and sighed. "I didn't want it to be this way. I wanted to be free. I wanted both of us to be free." She pointed at Maya. "If that girl hadn't come out and reminded her and ruined it all." She let out a wracking sob and dropped her hand. "I had a way. You didn't even know. I was going to fix it so both of us could be free."

Susie glanced up at Maya and Reg. "Can you guys wait outside a minute? She's not going to take off, but I need to talk with you about something."

"Um, with pleasure," Maya said and grabbed Reg. At the doorway, they paused. "Susie, bring her back, okay? Do what it takes. I'm not going to forget you messed with her like this." Maya pointed the baseball bat and Susie nodded as Reg closed the door behind them. She took Mary Beth/Evelene's hand from her lap and slid the bracelet of bells onto her wrist.

"Shhh." She smoothed the girl's hair and leaned her forehead against Mary

Beth/Evelene's the way she did when her mom fell into her usual heap of tears. "It'll be okay. Just breathe and listen to what Mary Beth's telling you. I'll stay with you through it all, promise. You won't be alone again. And I'll make sure you're free."

Mary Beth/Evelene sighed. "It won't be that easy. My body..." she trailed off. Both of them were silent for a long moment before Mary Beth/Evelene spoke again. "Susie-Berry, there's something you don't know."

"What's that? You already sent Mary Beth packing? You think I look terrible in purple?" Susie sat back, waiting. Almost everything her mother had ever told her had been bad. This couldn't be any worse.

"Your dad's medal, I—"

Not this again. "Mom, I already told you, you can't sell that. Give it up, already." Susie cupped her forehead in her palm. At least it was still safe with her.

"No, Berry, that's not it. A long time ago when they gave it to us, I hid something in the case. If I give it to you, you won't have to wait tables for a long time, if you don't want to. You can have a future."

Susie closed her eyes. It was another stupid trick. She knew better than to hope her mom would speak some sense. "Is that everything?" she asked and stood up. "You know what, I know I'm eligible for Dad's army compensation or whatever. Because technically *you* are dead. I looked it up. But you know what else? I can't get it unless I go to the cops and turn myself in. And they'll probably think I was dumb enough to kill you over it. So try again, please." She blew out a sigh of exasperation. "This time, get creative, okay?"

Mary Beth/Evelene reached out and took Susie's hand from her forehead. "When did the

child get wiser than the parent?" Mary Beth/Evelene smiled, her lips trembling. Susie didn't smile back. She kept her lips in a tight line. "No, look—" Mary Beth/Evelene slid Susie's backpack off her shoulders and slid the key from one of the loops. She held it out toward Susie.

"Am I supposed to take that?" Susie didn't budge.

"It belongs to you, okay?" Mary Beth/Evelene bit her lip. "Your dad left it to you. I hid it because I didn't want to see it—ever. I didn't want anything."

"Tell me about it," Susie muttered.

Mary Beth/Evelene shook her head. "*Listen* to me. You were about to *leave* me. You were going on about school and scholarships and everything that would take you away. I couldn't lose you. I thought I could maybe use it to keep you with me, to give you *something*. But when I thought it was gone, I went a little nuts. In my mind, you were as good as gone. I didn't want to be alone. I'm sorry. I'm a horrible mom. I shouldn't have put you through that. I didn't *mean* to die."

Susie's mouth felt dry. She didn't want to talk about this. Her breath came out shaky. "If you'd just gotten help you wouldn't have been in this position in the first place," Susie said. She still didn't take the key. "We would've still had each other. But you didn't. I only wanted Dad's medal. I just didn't want you to throw it away. He *saved* people, Mom. And what did you do?"

Mary Beth/Evelene began to cry in earnest. "I couldn't help it. I tried. I couldn't." The key fell to the ground as she put her head in her hands. Susie just looked at it. She didn't want to get anything from her mom's death. She had thought she could save her, but she knew it wasn't possible. Not now, not ever.

"Look, I don't want it, okay? Whatever it goes to, I don't need it." Susie crossed her arms, resisting the urge to reach out to her mom again. Nothing she wanted would come from someone else's death. That was all the key meant to her.

"It's not mine, Susie." Mary Beth/Evelene's voice came out in a whisper. "Your dad left it for you. I was going to go get it, for both of us. Not just me. For both. So we could leave this place—together—and never look back."

Susie's cheeks burned. She thought of all those years she'd gone without everything because her mom didn't think she needed it. How there was never enough food because her mom didn't think they needed anything in "excess." She hated being so thin. She looked at Mary Beth's body, with just enough fat on her hips, her curving stomach that said she was in shape but that she ate whatever she wanted. How Susie's hand-me-downs and thrift store rags liked to hang from her body. "What does the key go to?" she made herself ask, her voice quiet, a rage building inside of her that whited-out everything and made her feel blind.

"There's a safe in the living room. It's hidden beneath the floorboards. I never got rid of it because I didn't have to look at it. Only your—" She paused, hesitating. "—your dad and I knew it was there. When we went back to the house the first time I thought I had remembered the right combination, that we didn't need to get the key at all. But it didn't work. The key is a back-up, but I'd stashed it in the medal case for safe keeping. We can go get it anytime. I was going to go back on my own, but now—"

"Do you really think I'm going to believe that?" Susie cut her off. "Even if there *is* something in the safe, why would I think you were going to go back for *both* of us? Save it,

Mom. I know you were going to take off without me." Mary Beth/Evelene raised her head and looked at Susie as if she was pleading.

"I'll do whatever you want. I just don't want to lose you again, Susie-Berry." Mary Beth/Evelene reached out and touched Susie's hair. Susie couldn't help but flinch, but she didn't move away from her mother. She picked up the key and looked at it. It looked like an average key to a padlock, not some answer to a brighter future.

"You know you can't keep Mary Beth's body, right?" she asked, her voice soft. Mary Beth/Evelene nodded. Susie stood up and handed her mother her hand. Mary Beth/Evelene took it and let Susie help her up.

"I know. She's telling me the same thing. I just wanted a little more time. But I'll always be with you, okay? Just remember that." Mary Beth/Evelene smoothed her clothes. Susie pointed at her backpack. "I think you ought to leave that behind," she said as she opened the door. Mary Beth/Evelene nodded.

"Sure." Susie nodded at Maya and Reg who stood waiting in the hall. Reg ran his fingers through his curls and shook his head. Maya still held the bat, as if she waited for Mary Beth/Evelene to flip out again.

"You guys took *forever* in there," Reg said, looking only at Susie. "Please tell me you knocked some sense into her."

"Sense enough," Susie said and turned to Maya, whose knuckles tensed around the bat. "There's something you need to see." She pulled the flier from her pocket and held it out to her. "You need to decide where you want to be—the longer we stay here, the more we miss of our lives out there. It's your choice. I know you don't want to leave him."

Susie nodded toward Reg as Maya unfolded the flier. "I guess Uncle Jack made something up to tell the cops?" Susie asked.

"Oh, not that scumbag," Mary Beth/Evelene said.

Susie shrugged as Reg shoved his hands in his pockets and bent over Maya's shoulder to read the paper along with her. Maya glanced up at Susie, her perfect face creased with worry.

"Actually, that scumbag did," Reg said. "He took me out of school when we first got the news. He probably told the cops I was off somewhere for treatment or that I left town. I'm eighteen now, anyway. He would at least do that. He hates cops more than he hates anyone," Reg said. Mary Beth/Evelene stayed quiet.

"What do we do?" Maya asked. "I don't want to go back to that hole and be alone. I want to stay with Reg. Everything else is totally pale." Susie resisted the urge to sigh at Maya's melodrama.

Instead, she wrapped her hands around Mary Beth/Evelene's. "We have a choice to make. We can go back there and turn ourselves in and reap whatever reward they want to give us, or we can stay here."

"It's more complicated than that," Mary Beth/Evelene said, her fingers closed around the bracelet. "If you go back, Susie, they'll arrest you. If not for my murder, then for something else. You can't let them do that."

Susie repressed a laugh at that horrible irony. "It doesn't matter, anymore. This isn't really about me right now. The bigger issue is getting Mary Beth back."

"The hell it does matter," Reg swore. "You know just as well as I do why you're here—because of her." He pointed at Mary Beth/Evelene, his face taut. Mary Beth/Evelene didn't react

to Reg, but Susie could tell her mom wished she hadn't done what she did to Susie. "You can't just take off and go to jail. You screwed yourself by not reporting it when she died, you know that, right?"

"I don't know it." Susie couldn't think to say anything else. She had her connection to Thano. She didn't think it would ever run out. And when her mom gave Mary Beth her body back, Susie would be able to feel her mom too.

"Am I not allowed any say?" Thano's voice rang from the end of the hall. All of them turned to look at him at the same time. His arms crossed, he leaned against the wall, his clothes singed with burn marks and his bells gone. Susie tried not to smile. Instead, she gave him a slight nod in thanks, and he nodded back.

Reg left Susie's side and went to rejoin Maya. "Dude, help me out. Someone's gotta be the voice of reason. They're not listening to me."

"Come on, Reg," Susie tried, but he snorted in response.

"Evelene, what do you think? Do you think the girls should return to Garnet Falls?" Thano ran a hand along the wall and cocked his head as she sat in silence.

"Mom?" Susie waited while Mary Beth/Evelene stared at the ground.

"What will happen to me?" she whispered, her voice soft and fragile.

"That depends on you. The castle's not so happy you tried to burn it, but it's willing to help." Thano strolled toward them and offered Mary Beth/Evelene his hand. "What do you want to do?" She stared, biting her lip.

"It's okay, Mom." Susie squeezed her hand. After a long moment, Mary Beth/Evelene gave Thano her hand.

"If I give Mary Beth her body back, what'll happen to me?"

Thano glanced at Susie, a question on his face. She could almost hear it, but not quite. She felt a rustle in the air, but nothing more. No words. He wanted her to tell him something, though. She closed her eyes and concentrated, but her brain was stuffed full of her mother. With each breath, she saw her mother again, trying to light the walls on fire, trying to burn Maya, and then she saw her as she had been, an older woman with wrinkles striped across her face, shadows in the hollows of her cheeks, stripped of any interest in life. Always trying to escape. That her mom was clinging to life now was something, at least. That she gave her the key meant more than Susie felt she could really grasp, at the moment. It meant she really did love her daughter, and somehow that feeling stung. Susie's eyes flew open and she gasped for air. The hallway spun and she collapsed to the soft green ground. That was what Thano had needed to *see*. He'd needed to *feel* how that abandonment had felt, and how it felt to find out you were really loved, over and over again.

"Susie?" Thano's gaze searched hers and she nodded. She had an answer to his question. He touched his palm to hers and as their skin touched, she opened her thoughts to his. He was silent, his eyes rimmed with red, as Susie fed her past to him. As he pulled it in, she pulled out his knowledge about spirits, how woven they were with the roots beneath the castle. How life came and went, and how he could store it, if only for a short time.

"I'll need your help, if you think this is best," he said, and carefully wiped away a bead of sweat sliding down Susie's temple.

"I can't believe you're going along with this," Reg scoffed at Thano, fists clenched.

"I have to. I'll come back. I promise, cousin," Susie said. "There's always a way out." She

nodded at Thano, grateful, and gently pulled her dad's medal from her bag. She cradled it in her hands as she turned to Mary Beth/Evelene. "You don't have to go. At least, not right away. You can use the castle as a channel. That's how you came here in the first place, Mom." Susie couldn't help but look Mary Beth/Evelene in the eyes, although it spun her to stare into eyes that were at the same time so unlike and so like her own. Her dad's medal wouldn't be the only thing of her parents she had left if her mom agreed to this plan.

"I'm not sure I understand." Mary Beth/Evelene glanced down at her hands. Susie and Thano each took one of her hands.

"This place—what you call souls—we call them something different—they come through here after their bodies are finished. The castle is their resting place. I help—sometimes—if a fiber or root needs more time. But I don't always. It's not easy, feeling all those broken roots trying to be whole." Thano nodded at Susie and she shivered. She knew what it was he needed—not just not to be alone, but to cure the alone that came with the passing of spirits into the mist. To bring people like herself to the castle—others, whose bodies could heal, not souls that could not. Not quite like Kit and Jamie, who had brought the trouble on themselves, but people who had the trouble foisted on them, like Susie and Reg. The castle could be full of so many who needed the same connectedness she'd needed. It didn't have to be just a throwaway any longer. She'd felt it in his touch—how roots could be mended—as good as new. He'd spent a *long* time trying to mend his own, so he should know. But it had never quite healed. At least, it seemed that way to Susie.

As they led Mary Beth/Evelene from the room, Susie turned back and cocked her head at Maya to follow.

"Do you need me?" Reg asked, but Susie shook her head. The hollows in his body were too much for him to make the trip without Thano. She'd understood when she'd touched him earlier. Her cousin was never going to leave this castle again, not without a tether to arrest his disease. Susie didn't even think Thano could do that for very long. Reg was too like Kit and Jamie, now.

"Be well," she said, and smiled at the thought of him burying notes to her, still. "You know you brought me the world, right?" she whispered.

"Of course. After all, *I* am the world," Reg said, jostling her with his elbow. His expression was still stern, as if he was trying to come up with a reason for her to stay.

"Write me," she said. "I'll know it when you do." Finally that lopsided grin of his slid into place, and she knew he wasn't angry at her decision anymore.

"Oh, believe me, Suze, I've got a thing or two to say," he said. Hesitating, she pressed the medal into his hands, her fingers lingering on it for a moment too long. He gazed at it and then at her as if in surprise.

"Take care of this for me, okay? That's how you know I'll come back," she said, afraid to let go. But she did, and he nodded.

"Absolutely, Suze," he breathed out the words as she turned away.

Reg could stay behind, guardian of their words, guardian of her most important possession. Staying whole, in the castle that protected them. In the castle that also yearned for wholeness—that wanted to find tethers to the rest of the world, out beyond Garnet Falls. It was Susie, Maya, and Mary Beth who needed to be together if even one was going to be safe back in Garnet Falls.

As they moved back down the corridor and up the stairs toward the main floor, Susie gazed at the walls, the ivy curling out toward them. Kit and Jamie stood in the hallway as they came out to the first floor, holding hands. Kit glared, but Jamie gave her an awkward smile. He looked at Kit as if for permission, but Kit just glowered. Jamie took a hesitant step forward anyway. Susie nodded at them and even smiled at Kit, though she doubted he deserved it.

"Are you leaving for good?" Jamie asked. Kit muttered something Susie couldn't hear.

"Dunno. I guess that depends on what happens when we get back to town," Susie said. Her heart pounded at that thought. Her future lay outside that door. That was all she knew.

"Do you think you can do something for me?" Jamie leaned forward, dropping Kit's hand. Kit crossed his arms and turned away. They were so hard to figure out. Susie nodded and waved at the others.

"I'll catch up to you guys outside." Susie nodded to the girls and Thano, who filed toward the castle's exit. She put her hands on her hips. "What exactly do you need?"

"I was wondering if you could find out what happened to our families." Jamie's voice came out hushed. "Kit doesn't talk about it, but I know he hates knowing they never found out what happened to us. I was just hoping, if you did find out what happened to them, maybe you could tell them we never felt any pain. I didn't want to ask Thano to find them because maybe it would be hard for him to spend much time away from this place."

Susie focused on the faded black leather of Jamie's motorcycle jacket. His face looked too earnest, too hopeful. She would have to go back sixty-plus years to even get started. And what if their parents had gone crazy just as her mom had when Susie's dad had died? She didn't want Kit and Jamie to know anything about that, if that was the case. But she nodded anyway,

even if it would bring them pain. It would be their right to know. She would be like her dad—she would help anyone who really needed it.

"I'll do it," she said, and froze as Jamie grabbed her into a hug.

"Sorry, a little excited here," he said, and Susie laughed. Even Kit looked a little less angry, for once. Maybe he'd be less of a jerk if she found out about his family. But that would mean she'd have to come back. And she wanted to. She just didn't know when she would. Susie said goodbye and walked to Thano, who waited for her by the castle doors.

"That was a kind thing you did," he said. She smiled at him, grateful he'd waited. She reached for his hand and felt the power surge between them. When she touched the ivy that threaded along these walls again, she knew it wouldn't hurt her or try to drug her or make her forget. It would remind her of her root, here, with Thano. It would touch her and tell her about her mother—about how her once torn spirit had gathered up time and loam and silt and healed itself and was free. How it had moved forward into the mist, to become a new seed in the forest.

For that was what it had meant to come into the Moss Castle. To follow the road that led from one system to another. That gave the once dead a new way to live, that could heal living life after living life if the person only said yes. And Thano and the castle were the center. Susie didn't need to run anymore. She had found her home. All she had to do was touch his temples at the same time as he touched hers. They would be bound, fully rooted to one another. And she could do what he yearned for. To cure the Alone, to mend all those broken roots. To go out and listen for the ones who'd been like her and Reg, the ones who hid behind dumpsters, who ran from knives and guns. She could already see the closest one, who carved out his days inside a muddied, draping sheet along the borders of an industrial canal in a city fifty miles away, where

looming container ships dwarfed his presence and kept him hidden. When she touched Thano, she could see so many Alone. Their roots, all calling to one another.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Thano whispered into her ear as they opened the castle door, teeming with so much emerald moss it made her eyes throb. His lips lingered on her earlobe and she shivered, as they stood on the threshold. Her fingers twined through his. Maya and Mary Beth/Evelene waited just outside, arms crossed.

"Come on, already," Maya huffed, but Susie ignored the perpetually impatient cheerleader.

"If it helps, I'm sure." She stared up into Thano's golden eyes and saw herself in them. Saw a future she hadn't known she could have. "I'll come back with others. When I can. I promise."

Suddenly she was pressing her lips to his, and a burst of warmth spread through her. His hands were around her waist, and her hands were in his hair and then they were only light where there had once been darkness between them. There was no such thing as Alone. His skin was so soft, softer and sweeter than anything she'd ever touched. His lips tasted like pine and lavender. It wasn't like the first kiss she'd imagined—it was better. She didn't need sunset, only Thano.

"Seriously, you two. We're still here." Maya wrinkled her nose at them as Susie and Thano broke apart. He grinned sheepishly and Susie smiled, ignoring Maya.

"We'll be linked for as long as you want the link. And I'll hear when you need me. You already know how to find me." Thano ran his fingers over her cheeks for a moment. He hesitated for a moment. "You're sure you want to go?"

Susie smiled and nodded. "I understand your castle now. I know how to find you."

As he lifted his fingers up to her temples, she squared her shoulders and reached up to touch his. His skin zapped at her like static electricity and she jerked back, then laughed at the worried expression on his face.

"It's okay," she said, and leaned forward to kiss him again. He didn't move his fingers from her temples, but returned her kiss with his so-soft lips. The world spooled out before them as she ran her fingers up from his shoulders, to his neck, and, finally, to his temples. It didn't zap her this time, but pulled her in, pulsing like a heart that had waited for her fingers to come along and start it going again. The air turned honey sweet and the emerald green of the castle wrapped them in its layers, pulling them in and absorbing them completely. She was never alone. And he had always known her.

The feeling faded, slowly, but even as it did, Susie held onto it, so crystal clear in her mind. She and Thano were still standing at the threshold of the castle, holding onto each other. The walls hadn't absorbed them—they were still in single, separately wrapped packages. She smiled. He smiled. But it had absorbed them. They had been one. He breathed. She breathed. They were one. Always. Alone was a Never Again for them. Thano grinned. She grinned. They moved apart and their thoughts slipped in and out of the other.

Susie nodded. "I hear you." She grinned again, his light pouring into her skin as bright as the moss, as bright as Orion in the winter sky. Only his light didn't have to search any longer.

"Come on, girls. We have some explaining to do." Susie crossed over the threshold and joined Mary Beth/Evelene and Maya in the forest. They stood frozen, mouths hung open.

"I know, it's a total gawkfest. Let's go already, okay?" She swept her arm toward the path back to town. "After you."

The girls went.

Thano wrapped his fingers around Susie's one last time before she walked after them.

"Don't be too long," he said. She pressed his hand against her chest and nodded.

"Don't worry. It's just a few errands. A few new flowers we'll get to grow. I'll be back before you know it." And then she slipped past him, onto the forest path, and bounded back into the world.

Chapter Twenty-Six

In the stories, nobody comes back from the Moss Castle. But in the end it was Thano who could not truly leave. Too long gone, and the roots would shrink and the core would combine with some other being to create a different, entirely unknowable existence. As an anchor, Thano stayed to continue the connection, as was his position in this world.

If the roots and mycelium inside and outside of them found more like him—then maybe he could leave, once humanity was fully stitched in. So Susie stretched out her hand and agreed to be his link. To be the Seer for Alone. Linked together, she would find those in need of their help. Together, Susie, Thano, and the castle's deep core would save so many. Those with flaws the mycorrhizae could sheath and nourish, flaws the endophytes could fortify against future ill. Those who could so easily tumble away like trash in the wind. Susie could see the throwaways huddling, like she had huddled.

She and Thano both felt a light flaring out to keep them warm. To protect them, as Thano had protected her. To give the world beyond a vaccine for pain. A cure for Alone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The three of them stood outside the police station, the wind awhirl around them. Maya twisted the skin of her ring finger and tapped her feet, seeming as nervous as Susie felt.

"After Mary Beth is square, I'm going back, you know. It's January, yeah? I'm eighteen now. They can't stop me. There's nobody waiting for me here." Maya sounded so angry. Susie wondered how long ago her parents had actually left her on her own. She suddenly seemed so much more like Reg than Susie had understood.

Susie nodded. "I get it. Reg. He can't come out, so you have to stay in. Star-crossed, you two."

"God, whatever Thanos did totally went to your head." Maya rolled her eyes and grabbed the door handle. "Don't wait too long. They're going to send out another search party if you do."

"We'll be inside in a second." Susie turned to Mary Beth/Evelene as Maya huffed her way through the door. "Guess you can't just take the cheerleader out of a girl," Susie muttered.

Mary Beth/Evelene shrugged. "It's kind of nice to see a girl so sure of herself. More of you should be."

"Yeah, okay." Susie laughed but felt that familiar discomfort stirring. In a few minutes she was going to throw herself on the mercy of the Garnet Falls Police Department. In a few minutes, she was going to tuck her mom's spirit inside herself and lock it away until she made it back to the castle. Which quite possibly wouldn't happen for a very long time. She couldn't believe she wasn't hyperventilating at this point. She made herself look Mary Beth/Evelene in the eyes. It was so totally her mother in there. She pushed back the fluttering in her chest. It was for the best. It had to be. Still, a small part of her couldn't help wanting to hold on a little longer.

"Are you ready, Mom?" Susie's lip trembled, the words tangling around her tongue. Her mom drew her into a hug so tight she could barely breathe.

"Do it, sweetie. I'll always be here for you. Don't forget. You just have to look," she whispered. Susie nodded and broke from the embrace. The two girls stood facing each other. Susie slid her fingers onto the indentations of Mary Beth/Evelene's temples and rubbed them with her fingers. She closed her eyes and pictured Mary Beth, the real Mary Beth, racing around the track, sun in her hair, Mary Beth helping Susie up from a heap on the ground, Mary Beth snatching Susie's shirt and tossing it into a puddle. Then she breathed Mary Beth out and her mother in, and opened her eyes. Susie pulled her fingers away from Mary Beth's temples. She felt a stirring inside her own body, but took the need, the *thirst* that twirled up from that feeling, and shaped it into its own little corner. You have all you need, she thought to the thirst. And it settled itself.

The girl blinked and frowned at Susie. Leaves skittered across the walkway as the two of them stared. Sirens wailed in the distance.

"Did that really just happen?" Mary Beth's voice came out in a cracked whisper, like she'd forgotten how to speak.

Susie nodded, fingernails digging into her palm. Her throat burned. Mary Beth jerked toward Susie like she was going to hit her. Susie jumped back but was too slow. Instead of clawing out Susie's eyes, though, Mary Beth threw her arms around her.

"I'm so sorry, Susie. If I'd known, I wouldn't have been such a bitch."

Susie leaned back, wiping tears from her eyes. "How much of it do you remember?"

Mary Beth smiled. "Let's just say I have an intense urge to take you on a shopping spree. Maybe buy you a new phone. Definitely some decent clothes, for one." She brushed an invisible speck of dust from her shirt. "I kind of also feel like throwing away all of my stuff and starting from scratch, too."

Susie's eyes widened. "Do *not* throw anything away. You'll totally regret it. It's like being from nowhere, having nothing like that."

Mary Beth laughed and dropped her arms from Susie's. "Don't worry. Only joking. But Susie—" she stopped and stared at her for a second. "She's not in me anymore, but I still feel her. She may have been the master of a screwed-up life, but she was proud of you. You'll have the life she couldn't. She wrote this." Mary Beth pulled a crumpled note from her back pocket and hesitated.

"It's for you to give to the cops. In case they think you're responsible for any of this." Mary Beth held it out. The paper sat warm and light on Susie's palm. She had an actual key to her future, and she had a note. Susie would've hugged Mary Beth again, but she didn't want to overstep her boundaries. The girl was probably going to have some trouble with them for a little while.

"What about you? What will you tell them? It's been two months." Susie put the note in her pocket and folded her arms around herself.

Mary Beth nodded at the station and held out her hand. "Don't worry—I've got a plan. Just tell them we totally freaked after the race and took off because we were scared what would happen to you. Compared to the truth...well. It's just as good. Are you ready?"

Susie bit her lip. It was the last step before she could leave Garnet Falls—if only for a little while. If she didn't nod and chin up, she wasn't going anywhere. All of those people who needed the castle. Who needed Thano. Who needed her. They wouldn't have a chance. She wondered if any of them were runners. She wondered if any of them would be like she had been before she'd met Thano and gone into his castle.

She gazed at Mary Beth, one-hundred percent All-American Angsty Teen again. When she looked at her, she could feel her mother. No matter what had happened, no matter how crazy, there was a piece of her mom actually cheering her on.

Susie curled her fingers into Mary Beth's outstretched hand and nodded. She closed her eyes and saw Thano, his fingers holding Mary Beth's other hand. Susie opened her eyes and grinned, pulse racing.

"I'm ready."

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lauren Camille Dixon was born in Bryan, Texas. While attending Burkburnett High School in Burkburnett, Texas, she also attended Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas, and Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, as part of high school honors programs. After she graduated from Burkburnett High School in 1998, she enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin. During the summer of 2000, she attended the University of North Texas. She received the degree of Bachelor of Science in Radio-Television-Film from The University of Texas at Austin in August 2001. In 2003 she entered the Graduate College of Texas State University-San Marcos and received a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing-Poetry in 2006. She taught English and Composition while enrolled at Texas State University-San Marcos and afterward taught at Collin College as well as at Dallas Community College. In 2006 she entered The University of Texas at Dallas, where she also taught courses in Composition, Creative Writing, and Literary Studies. In 2010 she attended the Clarion West Writers Workshop. Her work has been published in *Menacing Hedge*, *DIAGRAM*, *Barnwood*, *Oracle*, and other venues.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Lauren Camille Dixon

EDUCATION

- PhD Humanities –Studies in Literature, The University of Texas at Dallas, 2017
Dissertation: *Throwaways*: A young adult novel
Exam Fields: Protest Literature and Activism, Experimental American Literature, History of Body as Text
4.0 GPA
- MFA Creative Writing—Poetry, Texas State University, 2006
Thesis: *A Stream to Carry Seasons*
Honors: Sigma Tau Delta, Graduate with Distinction, 4.0 GPA
- BS, Radio-Television-Film, The University of Texas at Austin, 2001
Honors: Dean’s List Spring 1999, Fall 2000

COURSES TAUGHT

- Introductory Creative Writing*, The University of Texas at Dallas
Fall 2008—Spring 2009, Fall 2010
- English Composition I (1301)*, Collin College
Fall 2006—Fall 2011
- English Composition II (1302)*, Collin College, El Centro College
Summer-Fall 2007, Maymester 2010, Wintermester 2010, Fall 2011
- Masterworks of World Literature (Lit 2331)*, The University of Texas at Dallas
Topics: Eros and Protest; Human and Non-human Animal Relationships
Fall 2009-Spring 2010
- Literary Analysis (Lit 2341)*, The University of Texas at Dallas
Summer 2009
- English Composition I and II, Express*, Collin College
Fall 2008—Spring 2009
- Academic Bridge Program, Rhetoric 1302*, The University of Texas at Dallas
Summer 2007
- Rhetoric 1302*, The University of Texas at Dallas
Fall 2006-Spring 2008
- Introduction to Literature (2342)*, Collin College
Summer II 2007
- English Composition I/Dual Credit (1301)*, Collin College
Fall 2006
- English Composition II (1320)*, Texas State University
Spring 2005 and Spring 2006
- English Composition I (1310)*, Texas State University
Fall 2004 and Fall 2005

PUBLICATIONS

Non-Fiction

“Your Words are Your Life, Your Death,” BookLifeNow.com (June 2013)

Short Stories

- "Shut Up and Show Me the Pumpkin Spice, *theEel by .tmy Press* (January 2016)
"If You Can't Take the Heat, Don't Hire a Yeti," *Menacing Hedge* (Fall 2015)
"Sheela of the Good Shepherd," *Three-Lobed Burning Eye* (July 2014)
"Pink Princess Cape," *Extract(s)* (November 2013)
"A Lesson in Metempsychosis," *Extract(s)* (March 2012)
"Double Dutch," *Scape* (January 2012)
"Straight Outta Heaven" (excerpt), *(R)evolve* (Naropa University, Summer 2009)
"The Back of the Hand," *INTER* (2009)

Poems

- "When We Churn Up Gravel," *Extract(s)* (September 2014)
"vous : allé," *Extract(s)* (September 2014)
"L' Autre Zone," *Barnwood International Poetry Mag* (December 2011)
"Jumping Point," *Oracle: A Fine Arts Review* (Spring 2011)
"velocity of the fall," *Oracle: A Fine Arts Review* (Spring 2011)
"Life of a Scar," *Sojourn* (Best of UTD, Spring 2010)
"coney island," *Sojourn* (Best of UTD, Spring 2010)
"echoes," *DIAGRAM* (Issue 9.5, 2009)
"He said 'See you in Heaven.' I said 'If Ever.'" *Sojourn* (Vol. 22, Fall 2009)
"The Lucubration of Mathilde Sinclair," *Interbirth Books* (November 2008)
"Theory of Parts," *Kadar Koli* (Fall 2007)
"Wherein Lauren Gets Her Wings," *Kadar Koli* (Fall 2007)
"Rough Draft," *Kadar Koli* (Fall 2007)
"once on the n," *Kadar Koli* (Fall 2007)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Adjunct Faculty, English, El Centro College Fall 2011
- Associate Professor, English Department, Collin College Fall 2006-Fall 2011
- Instructor of Record, Literature and Creative Writing,
The University of Texas at Dallas Fall 2008-Fall 2010
- Instructor Assistant, Literature of Fantasy and Science Fiction,
The University of Texas at Dallas Summer 2008
- Instructor of Record, Rhetoric, The University of Texas at Dallas
Fall 2006-Spring 2008
- Instructor of Record, English Composition I and II, Texas State University
Fall 2004-Spring 2006
- Writing Counselor, Receptionist, Writing Center, Texas State University 2003-2004

EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE

- Clarion West Workshop Assistant 2015-Present

- Editorial Staff, *Urban Fantasy Magazine* 2014-2015
- Editorial Staff, *Lightspeed Magazine* 2012-2013
- Baen Books, Teacher's Guide Writer 2011
- *Editorial Proofreader, Hero of a Hundred Fights* by Clay Reynolds (Union Square, 2010)
- *Superficial Flesh*, Editor and Layout Designer 2004-2014
- *Reunion: Dallas Fine Arts Review*, Layout Editor Fall 2011
- *Sojourn*, Layout Editor Spring 2010
- *Absinthe Journal*, Translation and Poetry Editorial Advisor Spring 2007
- *Southwest American Literature*, Editorial Advisor Fall 2003, Fall 2004

Journalism

- *Rocket Fuel* (www.rocket-fuel.com), Reviewer/Writer July 2004 – October 2004
Wrote reviews, conducted interviews, and wrote feature articles about independent music and music festivals.
- Writer/Researcher, Resource Communications Group February - November 1999
Wrote introductions, proofread, and researched topics involving New Jersey industries. Involved in layout process as well. Phoned companies and completed data entry.
Publications: *New Jersey Internships*, *Guide to Official New Jersey*, and the *New Jersey Media Guide*.
- Reporter, *Wichita Falls Times Record News*, 4UToo Section 1995 - 1998
Reported on several features involving teens. Wrote music and film reviews.
- "Trish MacDonald Skillman," *Burkburnett Informer Star* March 1996

AWARDS & HONORS

- "Sheela of the Good Shepherd" noted in *Best Horror of the Year, Volume 7* (Nightshade)
- "Pink Princess Cape," nominee for BILINE Anthology Vol. 2 (Best Indie Literature in New England)
- "Pink Princess Cape," nominee for Sundress Publication's 2014 Best of the Net Award
- Invited guest, Norwescon 2013-2015
- "A Lesson in Metempsychosis" nominated for Sundress Publications' 2012 Best of the Net Award
- "Distinguished Teacher in Diversity & Multicultural Education Award," The University of Texas at Dallas, Spring 2011
- Clarion West Writers Workshop Acceptance and Scholarship, Summer 2010
- AWP Travel Grant, The University of Texas at Dallas, Spring 2010
- Graduate Student Travel Grant, The University of Texas at Dallas, Fall 2007
- Graduate Student Travel Grant, The University of Texas at Dallas, Spring 2007
- Graduate Studies Scholarship, The University of Texas at Dallas, 2006-2010
- Nominee for *Best New Poets of 2006 Anthology* (published by *Meridian*)
- Graduate with Distinction, Texas State University, 2006
- International Education Fee Scholarship (IEFS), Summer 2005

- Graduate Student Travel Grant, Texas State University, Spring 2005
- 2nd place state headline writing; University Interscholastic League, 1998
- 3rd place district news writing; University Interscholastic League, 1998
- Recipient of Ferne Bloodworth Spirit Award in Journalism, 1998
- *Burkburnett Informer Star* Feature Writing Contest winner, 1995

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- "Failures of Empathy: Animal Rights Advocacy and the Work of J.M. Coetzee,"
Animal Ethics and Presentation Panel, SLSA Conference, Fall 2010 (Unable to attend)
- "Caught in the Act: Cultural Identity, Death, and the Never Ending in-between in
Kelly Link's 'The Hortlak,'" Narrative Death Panel, ACLA Conference, Spring 2008
(Unable to attend)
- "The Construction of Identity and Familial Structures in *Sweet Whispers, Brother
Rush*." SCMLA Conference, November 2007
- "Poetry, Politics, and Agenda: The Process of Systems in Allen Ginsberg's *Indian
Journals*." PCA/ACA 2007 National Conference, April 2007
- "Patriarchal Structures in Poetry: Nikki Giovanni's 'Woman' Poem." Women and
Creativity Conference, Marquette University, March 2005

READINGS

Norwescon 38, invited reader, 2015

Norwescon 37, invited reader, 2014

Norwescon 36, invited reader, March 2013

Sojourn, invited reader, November 2009

Word Up! University of Texas at Dallas, invited reader, August 2007

Word Up! University of Texas at Dallas, invited reader, July 2007

Writers in the Universities, sponsored by Word Space, March 2007

SERVICE

- Clarion West Writers Workshop Copywriter/editor April 2011-Present
- Safe Zone Ally, The University of Texas at Dallas Fall 2009-Present
- Creative Writing (Fiction) Faculty Search Committee, The University of Texas at Dallas
2008-2009
- Chair of Poetry and Politics Conference Panel, PCA/ACA 2007 National Conference
April 2007
- *Sojourn* Undergraduate Poetry Competition Judge Spring 2007
- *Rising Star* Poetry Competition Judge (competition for fifth graders) Spring 2006
- *Rising Star* Poetry Competition Judge Fall 2004

INVITED TALKS & LECTURES

- Experienced TA Panel, The University of Texas at Dallas August 2009
- Guest instructor (per Tony Daniel), Undergraduate Fiction Writing Workshop, The University of Texas at Dallas Fall 2007 and Summer 2008
- TA-Student Workshop Leader – “Student-Led Class Discussions,” The University of Texas at Dallas February 2007
- Researching the Web Mini-Course, Texas State University Writing Center October 2003

WORKSHOPS ATTENDED

- Clarion West Writers Workshop, Summer 2010
- Naropa University Summer Writing Program, Week 4, Summer 2009
Hybrid Forms, with Wang Ping

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Association of Writers and Writing Programs
Graduate Translator’s Association
American Culture Association/Popular Culture Association
South Central Modern Language Association
Modern Language Association
Rhetoric Society of America
Sigma Tau Delta (International English Honor Society)

GRADUATE LEVEL COURSES TAKEN

The University of Texas at Dallas:

- Creating Short Fictions (multiple courses)– conducted by Tony Daniel
- Creating Short Fictions (multiple courses) – conducted by Clay Reynolds
- Novel Writing (Independent Study) – conducted by Tony Daniel
- Novel Writing (Independent Study) – conducted by Clay Reynolds
- Rhetoric Pedagogy Practicum
- Postmodern American Literature
- Art and Craft of Translation
- Introduction to Interdisciplinarity
- Advanced Translation Workshop
- Eastern European Literature
- Creating Poetry Workshop – conducted by Susan Briante
- Advanced Poetry Workshop – conducted by Susan Briante

- Barcelona: Culture and Music
- Latin American Political, Cultural, and Social Thought
- Narratives of Science, Nature, and Medicine

Texas State University:

- Poetry Workshop, Fall 2003 – conducted by Steve Wilson
- Poetry Workshop, Spring 2004 – conducted by Cyrus Cassells
- Poetry Workshop, Fall 2004 – conducted by Roger Jones
- Poetry Workshop, Fall 2005 – conducted by Kathleen Peirce
- Form and Theory of Poetry
- Beat Literature
- American Women Writers and Sense of Place
- Magical Realism
- Post-WWII Poetry
- Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales*
- Travel Writing – Ireland
- Irish Autobiography
- Practicum in Composition
- Theories of Sex and Gender
- Alphabet of the Sacred – Spiritual Poetry