

Bangor University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

On books that sell 192-book study of the American YA fiction market showing particularly strong audience resonance in matters of race, gender and moral identity

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STATEMENT I

This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Introduction to the Creative Portion of Thesis

On Meeting Places

In Nigeria there's a lake called Oguta.

I first learned about it from an ancient PBS video documentary that, no longer in possession of anything but a DVD player, I had to watch on my daughter's toy VCR. It was a real VCR, bought for her at the local thrift shop, but one intended not to be actually *used* but to house the smashed bananas and Cheerios one would expect from a toddler. As I write for young people and was watching the video to help in my writing for young people, the banana-crusteD VCR felt appropriate—even if my intended audience generally consists of teenagers who no longer smash bananas into their electronic equipment.

The TV on my daughter's dresser was small. The cassette tape was flimsy and the film was grainy. I turned on the subtitles because the audio quality was poor. The images displayed by the screen both unremarkable and captivating all at once.

The narrative, told in dry, sleepy prose, outlined a religious journey. Every year at Oguta lake, Yoruba Mami Wata worshipers take a raft across the white lake waters—representative of the goddess Ogbuide—to the place where the lake mixes with the red mud of a river—representative of the god Urashi. Once there, they dance for the Mami Wata. You see, one of the secrets of the Mami Wata (spoiler!) is that she's not the lake and she's not the river: she's the place that they meet.

The accompanying thesis is likewise of two places. The first the creative—like the forward-rushing and pulsing red of Urashi’s river. The second the critical—Ogbuide’s white still waters that feed the river just as much as the river feeds it. One is not primary and the other secondary. Both are equal, in their own ways. And, one hopes, the place where they meet is a place of dance.

The seemingly disparate labels—creative and critical—are both parts of any working writer’s career. In the novel, we don’t usually deal with abstract form or incoherent juxtapositions of medium. And so while we consider what we do to be... *artistic*, it is not the same as putting paint on a canvas. And even if it were, you cannot exorcize the critical from any creative endeavour. One always has to edit. Re-word, re-work, revise. And why do we make the editorial choices we do? Critical frameworks of thought certainly inform our decisions, whether or not we tend to formalize them by writing them down. And the kinds of frameworks we choose are as much influenced by our backgrounds and our idiosyncratic processes as anything else. The personal cannot be eradicated from the creative. (Or, if it can, I have not found the mechanism for accomplishing such in my own work.)

The medium in which I write—young adult fiction (YA)—is another place of meeting. The literature is not for children and it’s not for adults, but for the place where childhood meets adulthood. There are certain ‘rules’ of YA that aren’t extant in other narrative forms. The voice is different, the protagonists are different, and some of the elements of adult fiction are boiled down until all that’s left is the very core—the heart—of a story. Writing for teenagers doesn’t allow an author the same luxuries of self-indulgence adults will tolerate at greater levels, so the text of a YA novel will read somewhat differently from a text like this introduction. You can’t

force anyone to finish a book or even to turn a page, but this expedience, of making the journey worth the work, is even starker in YA.

But the YA voice of the creative portion is only a part of my own authorial voice. My own voice isn't wholly found in the fiction, in the academic prose, in the statistical jargon, or in the words of this introduction. It's in all of them. I write for an audience and when the audience changes, my words change. It's the way of the writer.

On a Market Audience and the Choices Made in This Thesis

Audience, indeed, is at the core of what it means to write. I write for *someone*. They don't sit next to me as I write. They don't whisper in one ear which prose should be reworked, but neither do they whisper praise. The act of writing is solitary. Me: sitting reclined in a chair. My laptop burning hot against the skin of my stomach. I choose where to send my work, but I can't change the fact that it is something I have to create alone.

But how do you choose where to send your work? How do you choose an audience?

The choice, though deeply personal, is not always one that can be articulated. I know that I write for young people. I know that I have personally chosen to write in the market. I know that I try to write the best that I can. But I also know that market work is not the same as literary work and that my choice to write in the market is not one that every writer makes. That greatness simply cannot be measured in the number of copies stacked at the nearest Barnes and Noble.

But writing in the market does have limitations.

Because of the market I work in—the U.S. YA fiction market—I am bound to honour the cultural backdrops which inform and shape my audience. One minute example of this is that, because I write in the U.S. market, I have submitted a piece of prose in American English, which is in contrast to the British English of the critical portion of this thesis. This is only one of many cultural choices and backdrops present in my creative work. And cultural backdrops are surely idiosyncratic, informed by geography and history.

Furthermore, I write in the *current* market, and though there may be similarities between this point in history and others, a market writer honours the period she lives in—attempting, perhaps, to move beyond the limitations of the time, but likewise understanding that the forces of emotional resonance in her audience will undoubtedly be shaped by the world they live in.

In the critical portion of the thesis, I attempt to enumerate and understand these forces of ‘resonance,’ though I will be the first to admit that a full understanding is not always possible. For example, religion as a driving plot factor was found in the critical portion to have deep emotional resonance with young audiences. One may argue that an American audience would be more prone to feel comfortable within a religious tapestry at any point in history, but certainly the current emotional resonance of the subject is intertwined with the more recent religious conflicts present. 9-11 is only one of many examples in which religion has played a role in American conflict, and while we can note that religion, itself, is a point of resonance, it may not be possible to pinpoint the foundation or cause of that resonance. But the market writer need not necessarily *pinpoint* in order to function. Indeed, the market writer, while bound to write *truth*, need not be bound to fact—

even to history—and she need not even be *right*. She simply asks the questions required by the cultural framework she works within.

But while my geography and cultural history have certainly informed my decisions about the way I function in the market, the other socio-political forces that have informed this decision aren't always entirely clear. For example, as is further discussed in the critical portion, about 70% of YA authors are female; about 80% of the audience who reads YA is female. (My use of the pronoun 'she' to refer to authors thus stems from more than feminist sentiment.) But what does it mean that females dominate the YA market? Is my gender a fundamental part of my decision to shape my career in this direction? Maybe it is. Probably it is. Does this mean that the YA market is of less value than other markets? I guess it depends on how you define 'value.'

And all writers feel the tension of how to define value for themselves. Is value being read? Is value being respected? Is value winning awards or getting tenure? There is always a chasm between the values of the market and the values of the audience. Always a different way to define worth.

But the split between market and audience is narrower in YA than in other places. YA is essentially a made-up category—a category that does not exist outside of the market. I don't put stickers on work that I send out, saying that 'only people between the ages of 12 and 20 are allowed to read this.' Ultimately, the act of getting my manuscripts into the hands of teenagers is one for which I am utterly dependent upon market mechanisms. I don't know how to say, 'I want to reach teenagers, but I don't want to do it in the market.' And so I write in the market. It's a practical decision, though one that doesn't rule out idealism.

The problem with the market is that it's often difficult to understand the mechanisms. Why is one book selling? Why is another not? Why does drive sometimes top the charts and why do good books go out of print?

What, fundamentally, makes a good book and what makes a bestseller? This is the ultimate question of the critical portion and the question that framed the environment in which the creative portion was written.

The mechanisms of the market are confusing, but creative writers trying to navigate the market must at some point figure out what to do with them. The frustrations of trying to write for the market are what personally led me, as a creative writer, to embark on the critical journey outlined in the second half of this thesis.

I remember once driving toward my office, feeling exhausted as I watched a windmill off in the distance that hadn't turned in over a year. It had begun to feel metaphoric, the death of that windmill. I'd just had to put away the third novel I'd written. I didn't know how to sell it and I didn't know how to justify being a writer who didn't sell. I imagined climbing inside the windmill—trying to figure out what had locked it down. Was it a problem of maintenance? Was it a problem with the way it was put together?

Years later, I found out that the problem with that windmill had never been the method of construction, but the method of transmission. It couldn't be powered up because the energy created had nowhere to go unless it was hooked up to the grid; the problem wasn't in the windmill, but in the place that the windmill and human infrastructure met. And so it was in lockdown. A perfectly good windmill that never turned in the wind. My own writing felt the same.

I had heard one person's opinion and another person's opinion about why it was, but I wanted to *know*. I wanted to know if I needed to change the construction

of my writing, or if there was a problem with its transmission. I wanted to know in a way that was predictable. I wanted to understand the language of the market.

This doesn't mean that I wanted to create a magic formula: follow these ten easy steps and become a bestseller! The result of such a formula, I imagine, would be less than artistic. Certainly not something I'd relish seeing my name on.

But I did want to know *why* books sell. I wanted to know if it's at all possible to hold on to artistic integrity in the market. I wanted to know if the forces of the market are completely out of a writer's grasp. I wanted to know how to be both a writer and a market-writer. And I wanted to know if it could be done well.

At the end of this study, have I learned everything I need to do this? I don't imagine so. The last time I checked my pseudonyms weren't anywhere to be found on the major bestseller lists. The novel presented here did win an award, and as gratifying as that was, it doesn't mean I've come as far in my career as I once would have imagined I could.

But *selling* a book was not necessarily the ultimate aim of this thesis. The aim was to *understand* the mechanisms behind sales—to provide myself, as an author, with the tools needed to evaluate emotional resonance within the rhetorical context of the market. The production of a book was part of the process, yes, but the goal, essentially, was not to write a book that sold, but to find a way to separate the external influences of book sales from internal characteristics of books that sell, and, hence, to use that information to write a book that was *good*—worth in this instance defined by a piece of writing's ability to connect with its intended audience.

Have I accomplished this?

That's the ultimate question all writers want an answer to, and my personal convictions aside, there is not a way to provide a determinate answer.

But I have learned what matters in the market and I have learned some things I can do as an author to better marry my market with my *audience*. And there is still a part of me that believes that this knowing the difference between market and audience will help my next book. And the book after that. And isn't that what it means to have a career in writing? To follow one book with another?

Structure and Content of Thesis

The following thesis comes, as required and as noted above, in two parts: the first, which immediately will follow this introduction, is the creative portion: a YA novel intended for the American marketplace.

In ordering the creative and critical portions this way, there does appear a question of which informed the other. Was the critical portion meant to be an exploration of the creative? Or was the creative drawn entirely from the critical? The answer to this is more complicated than one following the other, however. The novel presented was constructed utilizing the principles of 'resonance' observed in the critical exploration and, in this way, it is better understood from the starting context of the critical exploration. However, the act of creating a text informed the type of questions asked in the critical exploration. (After all, one only gets answers to the questions she thinks to ask.) The novel and critical portion were worked on during overlapping periods. Critical discoveries mandated certain revisions of the creative, while problems encountered during the construction of the novel added new questions to the critical exploration. The critical explored 'what kind' of book to write, and though the conclusions were used to construct the novel presented, the novel is a work that stands quite separate from the critical exploration of novels in general—intentionally so.

Ultimately I have placed the novel first in the two volume thesis presented, because no matter which half informed the other half more, or how much of the novel was informed by the exercise of the critical, the ultimate aim was the construction of a novel and, as such, the novel represents the core of the thesis.

A Brief Note On the Choice of a Statistical Epistemology in the Critical Portion of Thesis

The specific aim of the critical portion of the thesis—to find a way to separate external market influences on a text from the internal content of the text—will be discussed more fully in the critical portion of the thesis. But before coming to that portion, I would like to briefly explain the choice of the particular theoretical framework used.

In any academic work, the choice of theoretical framework is a pivotal one. But in choosing a framework in which to analyze the act and product of creative writing, one of the obstacles encountered is that almost all literary theory is intended to analyze *existing* literature, not literature that is in the process of being created. Indeed, many creative writing researchers have advocated the need for creative writing to establish its *own* theoretical approaches—approaches independent from literary approaches. After all, literary approaches are not fundamentally concerned with the *act* of writing, but with its *result*. One such creative writing researcher, Mike Harris, notes that such ‘new’ theory might be more process-based, or ‘evidential’ (Harris 31). That is, it would follow processes essentially *inductive* in nature—i.e. instead of theorizing what might make the creative process work, the creative process would be observed and theories would stem from the observation. This kind of thinking is intuitive: all epistemologies of thought have their initial

origins in observation—in the inductive. It is how new theoretical constructs are created in the first place.

This need for an observational and inductive theoretical approach, combined with the fundamentally important need to honour the practicality of studying a working market, is what led me to choose a statistical epistemology. Statistical epistemology is both inductive and observational by nature and as the goal is to understand the working YA market and the language of the market is fundamentally statistical, it is the most practical of all epistemologies. The fact that it is a choice that is outside traditional literary approaches does not intend to dismiss or invalidate such approaches and neither does it intend to ‘side-step’ them. Indeed, the theoretical approaches more traditional to literature will be periodically noted and integrated into the analysis. However, in a market book, the market is as much a part of the product as the book, itself. As the main aim of the critical portion of this thesis is to untangle the market from the literary, it is crucial to understand the language of the market primarily—and the language of the market is statistical. Thus, I use an observational, inductive, statistical epistemology which aims to utilize a sample and statistical algorithms to explore the difference between a book that sells because it is promoted and a book that sells because of its content—the later being termed a ‘resonant’ book and the concept of ‘resonance’ being a numerical indicator of audience-based quality.

Notes On the Creative Portion and its Connection to the Critical Portion

A full, point-by-point, discussion of the connection between the critical and creative portions of this thesis will be made at the end of the critical portion. But

because of the fact that both halves informed each other so thoroughly, a brief exploration of some of the connections is prudent.

The following novel—intended for an American YA audience—is a first person present tense narrative centred around a young female protagonist living in a setting loosely based on the American west.

The choice of tense, point of view, and the gender and age of the protagonist were all choices that were decided upon by the results of the critical inquiry into the U.S. YA marketplace. Some of these elements—like writing from the point of view of a female—would have been my natural inclinations anyway, but when it came to choice of tense, for example, I could have been swayed by the data in any direction. However, it should be emphasized that the goal of the critical exercise was *not* to create a ‘paint-by-numbers’ approach to writing, but to explore the validity of existing writing beliefs and instincts, looking for patterns within the data as it related to those instincts, and providing a new means of evaluating my own creative work. While the point of view, tense, or other small writing details may not seem to matter on their own, by evaluating the types of traits that led to increased audience resonance, observed patterns provided clues as to the emotional motivations of young readers coming to a text.

Understanding the patterns present in the data fundamentally led me to an evaluation of all my writing choices that was somewhat independent of the quantitative data. When it came to the choice of setting for the novel, for example, the critical data did not provide a simple direction. One pattern that became apparent, however, was that even though young adults enjoy texts that have varied settings and worldviews, they appear to have a deep need to see themselves within a text, no matter how unfamiliar the surroundings (this, I believe, also explains why

the first person was more effective than the third). This, combined with my own experience in writing, led me to construct a story set within a setting that I was personally very familiar with. By being able to see *myself* in a setting, it seemed more likely that I would be able to help a young audience see themselves within the same, no matter how different their personal settings may be. And I live in a mountainous part of America where religion is as much a part of breathing as the air. I teach at a religious university and my students are wont to ask that class be started with prayer and that the bible be used in discussions of rhetorical interactions of text and audience. Religion is fundamental to the ontology of my personal geography, perhaps even more so than it is to America in general. And America is deeply religious. Indeed, the critical data supported the resonance of religion as a driving plot factor. While readers seem to reject the ‘preachy,’ they respond favourably to the presence of religion and to the types of questions that religion poses.

And, thus, the data patterns of religious questions and stories that allow a teen to ‘see themselves’ in a text reaffirmed my initial instincts to ‘write what I knew.’ When looking simply at this conclusion—that I should follow the instincts I already had and ‘write what I knew’—there is a temptation to over-simplify the results of the critical approach, to wonder whether or not the data provided a productive/substantial change or contribution. However, the data did not always reaffirm my initial instincts. And though in retrospect many of the observed patterns indeed affirmed common sense, they also noted aspects that, though sensical, need more attention. In other words, the conclusions are consistent with common sense but they highlight ‘blind spots’ in the application of that sense to the YA market—blind spots such as race, gender, and assumptions about teenagers.

The critical data did not provide all of the necessary tools to create a text, of course—hence the re-emphasis of the fact that it was *not* a ‘paint-by-numbers’ exercise. There were many aspects of the novel that could have gone in any number of directions, that allowed me to make any number of creative choices.

One such choice was to rely on the reoccurring theme of the Mami Wata—an African water goddess. Within the highly religious atmosphere of the U.S, it seemed more consistent that a protagonist would not turn outside of religion in her internal struggles—it may not occur to someone who has never known another way of thinking—but to turn to a religion that is different from her own. Of the many religions in America, most—about 75% according to a recent religious identity survey (Kosmin)—are some form of Christianity. So in searching for a religion that would be fundamentally different from the worldview of most of my readers, I focused my search on non-Christian religions. This duality of Christian versus non-Christian is not meant to imply that Christianity serves as the ‘default’ religion in the world at large, but only to represent and present a counterpoint to the worldview of the majority of my potential readers.

In looking for a ‘non-Christian’ religion, I wanted to choose a religion that would truly be unfamiliar to readers so that it could represent a contrast to what they already know. Thus, rather than choosing some of the non-Christian religions that may be more common, I chose the religion of the African Yoruba. The Yoruba religion is weakly connected to what some call Voodoo—a point that is played upon in the plot of my novel—but the connection is distant enough that the religion, itself, would be unfamiliar and the associated images used in the novel would be largely free from problematic connotations, stereotypes, and preconceived notions in my audience. The choice of this particular religion was only reaffirmed when the data of

the critical portion indicated that American teens yearn to see plots where race and the differences between racial and cultural backgrounds are explored. And it was in instances like this one that the critical informed the creative even as the creative simultaneously informed the critical.

Further Notes on Research Done For the Creative Portion that is Not Explicitly Covered in the Critical Portion

The critical portion of this thesis seeks to discuss ‘what kind’ of book to write, but it doesn’t cover some of the specifics needed to construct a novel. Thus, additional research was required. Such research could, at times, be added into an ‘author’s note’ at the end of the novel, but in the case of this particular novel, I felt that the inclusion of such a discussion immediately following the novel, itself, would inappropriately brand the novel as ‘educational’ when that was clearly not the intent of the book. Because YA novels are used in a classroom setting and because there are, in fact, novels that are *intended* to be ‘educational,’ I felt it was important to avoid appearing as such when it was clearly not the initial intent. Because research in addition to the research presented in the critical portion was used, however, it is discussed here.

As discussed in a previous section, the most prominent of research not covered in the critical portion is that pertaining to the ‘Mami Wata.’ Though academics are not always the source of research I use for novels, the Mami Wata is a subject that I researched within an academic setting. I relied heavily on the work of Henry John Drewal—an African studies professor, currently at the University of Wisconsin. Additionally, I referred to the work of Barbara Frank, Charles Gore,

Joseph Nevadomsky, and Marilyn Houlberg, all experts in African culture. The poem I partially quoted in-text—Eve Sandler’s ‘Mami Wata Crossing’—was one of the few non-academic sources I used. It was included because many of the articles I read about the Mami Wata mentioned that she is widely used in African poetry and song lyrics, though she does not have as much of a presence in English poetry/lyrics.

The Mami Wata, herself, may seem quite unfamiliar, but research shows that her symbols have broad application. For example, Mami Wata is a symbol of impossible duality. She’s both male and female, both black and white. And so in the novel, her essence is found in the conflict between mother/daughter, the estrangement between male/female, the synthesis of light/dark, the clash of the past/present. She’s everywhere that two improbable opposites meet. And she’s never really one or the other: she’s always the space between.

Additionally, as Mami Wata is a female deity, the references to Eve in the text are meant to provide a connection between the highly patriarchal system of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the polytheistic traditions of the Voudoun religion.

Much of the Judeo-Christian imagery used was derived primarily from my own life-long experience living within a highly religious culture that values such imagery. There are, however, a few more sources that informed specific imagery—religious and otherwise. Beverly Campbell’s book *Eve and the Choice Made in Eden* informed some of the Eve references. Milo Regaud’s book, *Secrets of Voodoo*, informed some of the images of possession, religious dancing, and voodoo imagery. Some of the images of the Mami Wata and of Ogbuide were influenced by material found in Sabine Jell-Bahlsen’s *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake*. And, finally, many of the astronomical references were derived from what I could remember from a documentary about the origin about the moon that I’d

watched months earlier and didn't think to record for citation—though, to my knowledge, there were no direct quotes from it and all of the information used is readily available in many other scientific sources. (In my defence, fiction often seems to draw on resources authors don't realize are useful until they appear in-text.)

On the Union of Disparate Voices

This thesis contains several distinct voices. First, there is the voice of this introduction—a voice that is meant to hover in the space between formal academics, and informal introduction, providing a bridge between. Second, there's the voice of my novel. The voice is of a teenager—one which needs to convey sincerity as much as it must mirror the cadence of a real teen without caricaturizing it. Third, there is the voice of the critical portion of the thesis: a voice that is statistical, academic, almost the complete opposite of the voice of the creative text.

Which one is the real me? Am I the statistical voice of my randomized study? Am I the voice of my protagonist facing down secrets of her past? Am I the voice here, the one who (with some self-indulgence) is trying to nail down the realities of what it means to write fiction?

These questions, of course, are as rhetorical as they are unproductive. All of the voices are a part of me. All of them inform the way that I interact with the audience. Working as a writer means that I have to accept the voices of my villains as well as the voices of my heroes. The shadow speaks as much truth as the light casting it.

Ultimately, this thesis is not only full of disparate voices, it's defined by them. The critical, creative, the academic, market, the quantitative, the teenager.

The synthesis of all of the voices may, at times, seem cacophonous, but all of them represent my work as a writer. Numbers and novels, the academic and the youthful, muddy rivers and white lakes.

It's where they meet up that matters.

Secrets of the Mami Wata

A YA novel by Kerry Spencer

Presented According to the Requirements for the Creative Portion of the PhD in
Creative and Critical Writing for the University of Wales, Bangor

Adviser: Graeme Harper

October, 2010

Chapter One

I think some part of me knows it will be the last time I hear her voice.

We haven't spoken much during the last two months. Correction: my mother hasn't been letting us speak very much. When I turned sixteen, my mother suddenly forbade me from speaking with Grandma, but she wouldn't tell me why.

My phone is off for most of the day, so I don't notice that I have a message until I'm walking home. It's Tuesday. School has just started for the year and jumbled black clouds spew from the mouths of the seven canyons—the frame of our town, itself. I feel like this coming storm is what is going to shatter summer to bits, leaving only autumn in its wake. It's not a good omen.

When I hear her voice, it sends lightning right down me. “Oh, Isa, baby,” says the voicemail. “I miss you so much.”

It only takes hearing that much of Grandma's voice to make me start to cry.

“Listen, honey,” she says. Grandma's voice has always been a little like water. Sometimes like the rush of sea waves, other times like the soft pulsing of a stream. “I haven't been doing very well. I've been sick. And there's so much... There's so much that your mother won't let me tell you...”

She pauses and it seems like there's an ocean right there in the pause, it's so long.

“You know Mike isn't your biological father. That your sisters are your half sisters. You know that. But there's so much you *don't* know. About where you

came from. About... about your father... And here's the thing honey. If you *knew*... it would change you... it would change *everything*."

The message ends just as I'm passing our town's massive church. I'm directly under the shadow of the steeple. "I'm sending you a package. Unmarked, so your mother won't suspect. Look for it."

But the days pass and the only thing that comes is a phone call from the hospital: Grandma is dead.

After about a week, I realize the package might never come.



My mother isn't a yeller. Never has been, really. There's a cloudiness in her eyes and she never seems to be able to look you right in the face. Maybe my father was a yeller, but I've never known for sure. Mom never answers my questions about him with anything but silence.

The only time I remember her coming close to yelling that summer before Grandma died was a week after my sixteenth birthday; I had gone over to see Grandma, even though it had just been forbidden.

Mom had been standing in front of a dead houseplant, watering it as if she couldn't give up on it. And at first, she looked just slightly like a wounded animal. Cloudy eyes misted into a quiet pleading. "How could you disobey me?"

That she sounded so completely betrayed might have softened someone else. But I knew that if I let it soften me, I might never see my Grandmother again.

She reached out and touched a dead plant leaf with a single fingertip and then pulled back. "I forbade it. I forbade it and I expected you to obey."

When I responded, I did yell. It would have seemed strange to anyone listening—that my loudness was in response to her quiet. But sometimes softness is

even more infuriating than loud. “Mom, what is the problem?” I’d asked. “Why do you care? And why are you so mean?”

I wanted to take the plastic green watering pot she was holding and throw it. Because Grandma had been one of my best friends. And because I always thought that she loved me in a way my mother couldn’t.

Couldn’t or wouldn’t. One of those.

We stood there, not speaking for a few seconds. Mom’s hands were fidgeting as if her fingers were desperate to be playing the piano instead of being trapped in this conversation. Mom plays the piano constantly. And it’s like she goes *away* when she plays. I don’t know where she goes. All I know is that the desire to get *away* seems to be more important than me... More important than *anything*.

“You think you get it, Isa. I know you think you get it. But you *don’t*. Why can’t you trust me? Why can’t you just trust that I know what’s best for you? That I have my reasons?”

“If they were good enough reasons, don’t you think you’d at least *tell* me what they were?”

Her mouth got all twisty—like it was trying so desperately to hold back the things she wanted to say.

“So, why, Mom? Why won’t you let me see her?”

That’s when her voice rose—almost imperceptibly, but for her, it was practically screaming. “Because my mother has a darkness, Isa. Beneath her skin she’s full of pagan shadows of evil that you are too young to understand.”

“Oh, please, Mom. Now who’s being a drama queen?”

She shrugged and started moving—as if pulled by instinct—toward the piano. Her back was to me, but she kept talking as she walked. Typical Mom.

“If I ever catch you communicating with your grandmother again, I’ll take your phone away. I’ll take your car keys away. I’ll take whatever the hell away I need to. Go to your room.”

There was something final about it. Something more final in the *quietness* of it.

And so I didn’t go see Grandma.

I didn’t see her. And now she’s dead.



The funeral is a joke.

Grandma left a very specific set of instructions and Mom *technically* obeyed every single one; it was just nothing at all like Grandma would have wanted.

Grandma said that everyone who knew her should be invited. Mom put an off-handed, two-sentence, notice in the classifieds of the newspaper.

Grandma asked that she not be buried in a wood coffin. Mom bought a glaringly orange vinyl contraption. (She shrugged, in her passive way, and said it was on sale.)

Grandma asked that Mom make the funeral a spiritual occasion. Mom called the town preacher—Grandma’s preacher from thirty-five years ago, back when Grandma was still Christian—to preside over the event. The guy was old and deaf and didn’t even remember who Grandma was. But, yes, his presence and the fact that we were in the town church technically gave the occasion a spiritual element.

But the worst thing, oh-my-lanta the worst, is the music.

Grandma asked that there be live music. She said that “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” should be played as a joke. She thought it would be funny and she thought

it would be ironic. It was patriarchal grandeur in all its bombastic obviousness, when Grandma was all about female power.

But that's not how it happens at all.

There's no explanation of the song. No reference to irony or to patriarchy. There's just my mother, solemnly watching the junior high band she'd called in, as if this is something that graces every funeral.

Everyone in the audience just nods along with appropriately contrived looks of appreciation—trying to pretend it isn't insane.

It feels surreal. Their looks. The sound of the music. The whole thing.

I put my head on my lap, breathing in the smell of hymnals and wooden pews.

The first time I remember Grandma telling me about female power we were in her backyard, watching the Perseid Meteor Shower. I remember that the sky looked inky and that even though it was warm, the wind blew over my skin and gave it goose pimples.

“Female power is so much different from male power,” she told me. “It's subtle. And in its subtlety, it's so much *more* powerful than anything obvious could be.”

The meteors danced across the sky, bright and laughing. Grandma laughed at them; maybe that's why I remember that the lifeless meteors seemed *amused*.

“You'll have to remember, Isa. You'll always have to remember. Female power — whether it's good or evil — it always scares people.”

That's why “The Stars and Stripes Forever” was supposed to be so funny. It wasn't scary at all. It *couldn't* be scary.

But no one explains that. And no one is going to figure it out on their own.

At the funeral there are so many more people than I'd expected. They can't come close to filling the pews of the church, of course. (In our town of 2000, the church has seating for 2000. That's because everyfrigginbodybutus goes to church. Seriously.) But the group easily fills up the portion of the church closest to the preacher.

I scan the rows of people anxiously... looking for? What, exactly? At first I don't know. But then I do know.

My father. I'm looking for my father.

I think part of me hopes that he'll be there—that Grandma's death doesn't mean the death of my last connection to him. Part of me thinks that if I scan enough faces I'll see one that looks like mine. And I'll recognize it, even though I've never seen it. Grandma had probably seen it. Maybe that's enough.

There are only a few faces and hundreds of faces all at once. There are people from school, parents of Mom's piano students; when I think about it, everyone seems more connected to Mom than Grandma. Everyone wears their deeply hued clothes like infrequently worn uniforms. Old fashioned feathered hats and glistening jewelry. In the half-light of the chapel, you can't see into anyone's eyes.

And I never see that face. Maybe my father doesn't look like me, I argue with myself. Or maybe I should just admit that he isn't going to be there.

When the junior high band finishes struggling through the ridiculous song you can feel the reverberations of the music echoing against every pew of the church.

The heat is so thick that it feels like water and, for a moment, I'm overcome with the sensation of drowning.

The preacher gets up to read from the bible and a baby starts to cry. I turn around to look at the baby, hoping that the sight of a chubby little face will distract my chest from the sense of impending doom.

The baby stares right back at me.

So I look away. I look at the light sparkling off the twenty foot cross behind the preacher. I look at the stained glass windows with their hovering angels everywhere. I look at the preacher—his face turning red as he bellows evangelisms about the wrath of Father God. Everyone, everything that can't be... they're looking *at me*.

Everyone except my mother.

She just sits there. Her honey-colored hair is swept back and the line of her chin is strong against her neck. The black dress she wears cradles the corners of her body with something strangely akin to tenderness. And there is something funny about her eyes. They look *old*.

My mother isn't old. She isn't old at all. I'm sixteen and she's thirty two and you can do the math from there.

For just a moment, I think I hear an echo of Grandma's voice in my head. *Don't judge her too harshly, it says. Everyone mourns in their own way.*

But then I see it:

A smirk.

It's a microsecond long, but completely betrays the rot beneath Mom's fragile-seeming exterior.

And I want to scream.

We aren't talking about the song at the post-funeral feast.

We sit in the metal fold-up chairs just outside the church kitchen, eating food that people brought.

The first person who actually *says* something is my (half) sister: Eliza, the nine-year old prepubescent wonder. "Did you know that the church ladies made *seven* different kinds of cheesy potatoes?" she says. "I think the one the Allen's brought is the best."

I don't look at her when I respond. My chest feels so empty that I don't feel like I can look at *anyone* anymore. "You just say that because you think that Todd Allen is super cute."

"He *is* super cute." Eliza, since birth, practically, has been obsessed with boys. I don't even want to think about what puberty will do to her.

I say, "I can't believe you talk about this kind of stuff in front of your dad."
Or that you don't seem more upset about our Grandma.

Eliza just ignores me.

My other (half) sister, six year old Maggie, looks at her forkful of potatoes as if meditating on them. "Well, maybe these aren't the best, Liza," she says after a minute or so. "The cornflake dust on top does make you sneeze."

Mom and my stepdad, Mike, say nothing as they watch us all go back and forth about cornflake dust. Neither of them so much as smile.

I see a boy I know in the kitchen, then—Caden. His hair is the same color as that cornflake dust, and it curls around his forehead, brushing just above his eyes. He's holding a pan of something that looks like chicken.

His face seems a refuge from it all. And I need a refuge so desperately.

So I try to ignore Mom and Mike and Maggie and Eliza. And I watch as Caden attempts to hand the chicken pan to the church ladies in the kitchen. They keep beckoning him inside, but he keeps protesting—saying something about his mother telling him not to stay long.

Caden is new at my school. Apparently, he used to home school. His first day was the day after I'd found out Grandma had died. He'd wandered into our orchestra teacher, Mr. River's, office, where I'd been ditching my TA duties so that I could bawl my eyes out.

He'd knocked—all polite. "Excuse me," he said, "I'm supposed to do an audition..." He looked up, then, saw that I was crying and he stopped mid-sentence.

"Sorry," I said, wiping my eyes with my ratty tie-dyed T-shirt. "My Grandma died."

He didn't say anything, but he looked like he wanted to.

"Anyway," I'd tried to keep going—so that I wouldn't seem like a whining-mimi. "I think Mr. Rivers will be back in just a second. He said he had to pee."

Caden smiled, just slightly. "He talks to you about his pee?"

I laughed. Well, I half snorted because my nose was full of snot. "He talks to me about all kinds of inappropriate stuff. He says it's part of my job as his teacher's assistant and, assuming it never crosses the line into creepiness, must be borne with stoic acceptance."

Caden is someone Grandma would have liked, I'd thought. His hair. His eyes. The softness of his voice. She would have liked him.

"When is her funeral?" he'd asked me.

I'd looked at the carpet. "Saturday," I told him.

“At the church?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Mr. Rivers had walked in the room, then. He was eating a bag of Doritos, making too-loud smacking with his mouth when he licked his fingers. “You my bassoon audition?” He’d asked Caden.

Caden nodded and settled down to play.

He played beautifully, I thought.

We haven’t spoken again since then, so it surprises me to see him at the funeral.

There is something so hypnotic about his face—maybe the way the light of the doorway shines around him? All angelic? I don’t want to look away.

One of the old ladies manages to drag him just inside the door. He looks like he is uncomfortable—trying so hard to be polite but not wanting to disobey his mother.

I don’t think there’s really *that* much special about his face. Except that it’s gorgeous. His nose: perfectly straight. His teeth: shining into a bashful smile. His hair: cornflake blond, curling ever so slightly around his forehead.

Eliza, of course, follows the direction of my gaze. “Ooo!” She says. “That boy is *way* cuter than Todd Allen.” Eliza’s hair is thick in an abnormal-for-a-nine-year-old kind of way. Her hair matches her reaction to boys, I think.

I say nothing, turning quickly, instead, to a getting-cold-piece-of-ham on my plate. What would Grandma have thought about Eliza’s reaction to him? She’d probably agree, I think. They probably would have giggled over him. And then they’d both demand why I hadn’t tried to go out with him yet.

My eyes start to water.

Eliza says, "Do you know him? Do you know the super cute boy?"

"Yeah," I say. "I do."

"And you haven't told me about him? Isa! Why? Why haven't you told me about him?" I can almost feel Grandma sitting next to Eliza. See her face, demanding an answer to the same question.

I look away. "Because I didn't want to."

Six year old Maggie: "Did you think he was out of your league or something? 'Cause, you know, you're actually pretty hot."

My stepdad coughs on some cornflake dust, and has to re-adjust his glasses because the coughing makes them slip. I guess Dr. Professor Physics Man Mike does not like to hear his first grade daughter evaluate hotness. I wonder if he would be embarrassed if *I* was talking like that. Maggie is his "real" daughter. And what does that mean?

For just a moment, I try to brush away my melancholy by winking at Maggie. "Thanks," I say. "I think I'm pretty hot, too." Which makes her laugh. Her six year old laugh is something incredible: as innocent as a baby's and as understanding as a grownup's, all at once. Maggie's hair still has the fine softness of baby hair: blonde-white curls, resting along her face and just touching her shoulders. She has sprinkles of baby freckles across the bridge of her nose and she always wears lip gloss that smells like root beer.

Mom looks over at Caden, just as he is waving goodbye to the old ladies and walking toward the exit, and there is a shadow that comes over her face.

"What?" I ask her. "You don't approve of my taste in guys?"

She frowns as she watches him, hesitating before she turns to me. "Isa," she says, "you don't want to go out with someone that cute."

This is not what Grandma would have said.

“Cute guys are way too much trouble. Either they *know* that they’re cute and they have egos the size of, oh, I don’t know. Mountains. Or... They’re gay and you’ve mistaken good grooming for hotness.”

This makes Mike laugh. Which makes Mom laugh. Which makes Maggie and Eliza start laughing. They are a chorus of four: a complete family quartet in which I am the odd one out. And it makes me think: has it always been this way? Have I always been the interloper? A stranger allowed to pretend like I am a part of the family because I don’t have a father—not like they do?

How, oh, how, would things be different if Grandma had gotten a chance to tell me who he was?

“Just shut up,” I mutter. “All of you and your stupid laughing.” I don’t look at them as I say it, but I hear them quiet down. My funeral potatoes are starting to look like cold clumps of regurgitated vomit.

And that’s when I decide.

I am going to go over to Grandma’s house. I am going find the package that she was going to send me. I am going to find out about my biological father. And what on earth Mom had against Grandma.

And there isn’t a damn thing Mom can do about it.

As I take a drink of my fruit punch, I feel a slight pain in my stomach: apprehension, I think. A sense that maybe my mother *isn’t* just mean. Maybe she *does* have her reasons. Maybe I *should* be listening to her.

But Grandma had never been anything but wonderful to me. Grandma had never done anything but love me. Whatever Mom’s reasons were for keeping me away from her, they were probably stupid. Stupid, lame, reasons.

That's what I tell myself, at least.

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Chapter

Jeremiah's Rapture (pop. 2401) was settled about two hundred years ago.

An evangelical preacher named Jeremiah West gathered up a flock of devoted followers during the American religious revivals of the early nineteenth century. But even during that time of religious fervor, his people were too devoted to fit in. They worshiped Father God with a strictness, a sense of purpose, a regularity, and a zeal too intense for everyone else. And so Jeremiah had a revelation: God was driving them away, so they could worship unfettered.

They settled in these mountains—miles away from anywhere else, even today. And their sense of devotion never really faded. Two hundred years later, their patriarchal discipline is still their glory. The church bells ring every day to remind people to pray. No one drinks alcohol; no one goes a day without reading the bible. I've heard people joke that if a new family moved in to town, they'd have to build a new pew for them. I've never understood the joke, though. It's just *true*. It's not necessarily *funny*.

Our family is one of only a handful of families in this town who don't go to church.

Grandma did, once.

But she stopped before Mom was born.

And none of us has ever bothered to go back.



When I'd ask Grandma about God, she'd just smile at me. Then she'd change the subject. "I've always had the *sense*," was something she'd said once.

Then she looked away, out the window. “Not the *sight*.” She was sitting in her throne-like purple chaise lounge, and we were sharing a plate of cheese. “I always wished that I was someone who had visions,” she said. “But that was never my gift. I sense things, is all. I feel them deep in my marrow and I *know*. But that’s not the same thing, now is it?”

I was sitting on the ground, leaning on the arm of the chaise, while Grandma stroked my arm. “Your vibes, dear,” she said to me. “They’re so soothing.”

Mom didn’t like that I sat on the floor below Grandma. She said it was a dangerous place to sit, though she never bothered to elaborate. But I liked to sit there.

It made me feel important.



Zina—my best friend—and I, are standing outside Grandma’s door, determined to find both the package and the truth. It’s early on a Monday morning—about an hour before school. It’s the first chance I’ve had to sneak over. Zina is here for moral support.

It feels amazing—the sneaking. The doing what I’m going to do in spite of Mom’s quiet stubbornness. I wonder if Zina feels it, too—this sense of exhilaration that seems to originate from the very inside of the bones.

“We gonna do this?” She asks.

I nod, but I don’t move.

So Zina reaches out and tries the door. “Locked.”

I just nod again. Then I say, “There’s a key in the back, follow me.”

The house that was Grandma's before she died is just one of many in our town's first new stucco housing development. It looks no different from the houses that flank it. It just stands there: utterly unimposing. There is a certain lull that comes over you when you're encountered with sameness. Identical houses, you think, identical people. You know somewhere in your gut that the sameness is a mask of deceit—that it obscures reality from you. But you don't *know* know it. Not really.

We find the key, buried underneath the rosebushes, and we go into the house. The quiet inside is overwhelming.

"This is a nice house," Zina says. And it's a nice house, though Zina has never been allowed to see it before. She's Nigerian, and Grandma had always been an old-school racist. It had always made me uncomfortable. It still makes me uncomfortable, even though Grandma is dead.

"What are we looking for?" Zina's head is tilted back, looking up at the crystal chandelier that tinkles in the air conditioning. Her hair is braided with strips of turquoise fabric and pulled back into a clip in such a way that it almost has the effect of a crown. It makes her look regal.

"We're looking for a package. Something addressed to me, maybe. Unless she never got around to addressing it. I don't think it will be terribly big, but who knows."

We move slowly at first. The plush white carpet seems almost to moan against our footsteps. It's as if we are approaching a tomb haunted by the remains of a fallen monarch.

Every sound we make seems to echo against the walls, and my attention keeps getting pulled back to the mountains that dominate the view from the front window.

God drove his people into these mountains, I think, for maybe the thousandth time. His people. Of which I am an outsider. Just like I am an outsider in my own family.

I'm still walking as I look out the window, eyes tracing the lines of the earth against the horizon. They fuzz with trees and then sharpen with rocks. Gaps marking the seven canyons.

I've gotten used to the gaps between me and the church people. But Grandma had always filled the space between me and my family. Now that she is gone, it feels like only God can fill the space. But as long as I can remember, I've felt like God lived only in the mountains. He can loom in our windows and hover over our summer picnics. His shadows can cradle us to sleep at night curled around our houses.

But God can never be just a Sunday thing here. Only a way of breathing.

"Okay, so, I'm a little creeped out," Zina says.

"Why?"

"Oh, gosh, Isa. For a lot of reasons, probably."

"Because we're going through a dead woman's house?"

"Yeah, that."

"And because this particular dead woman—who didn't even really believe in the Bible—thought my best friend was cursed by the mark of Cain?"

Zina laughs. “Maybe that, too.” We are in the kitchen now, and our tennis shoes are thudding against the marble floor. “But it’s more than that. It’s something about this *place*. What is it that’s creeping me out here?”

I shrug. “It could be a lot of things.”

“Like?”

“Well, I don’t know if you noticed, but Grandma set this house up numerologically.”

“Huh?”

“Count the pictures. Count the pieces of furniture. Count the vases stacked above the TV and number of plants in a room.”

Zina starts looking around. “I’m getting a lot of sevens. Are you saying she did that on purpose?”

“Of course she did. Grandma was like that.”

“And what, pray tell, is the numerological significance of seven?”

I find a stack of papers on a countertop, and I start thumbing through them. Mostly junk mail, unfortunately. I’m starting to be afraid that whatever Grandma had known about my father, she’d taken it to the grave. “Seven is the most spiritual of the numbers. If you fill your house with sevens, you draw a direct psychic conduit to heaven.”

“Dude.” Pause. “Do you believe in that kind of stuff, too?”

“Sometimes,” I say. “Maybe. I don’t know.” I put the stack of papers down. “Let’s go and look in her office. Maybe we’ll find something there.”

We pass the purple chaise lounge on our way and I shiver. Once, on the way home from seeing Grandma, Mom had told me, “You just sit there. Like nothing. But one day, Isa, one day you’re going to realize that evil was sitting right next to

you, stroking your arm.” She looked at me, hands gripping onto the steering wheel of the car. Then she looked away. “And you *liked* it.”

I think I told her to stop driving me to Grandma’s if she cared so much. She just said, “No. As long as you’re with Grandma, I’m not going far away. There are a lot of really good things you can learn from her—things I really *want* you to learn. But I’m not ever going to be far away. Remember that.”

Like the rest of the house, Grandma’s office is extremely tidy. It’s as if it had never been lived in at all. I go to the filing cabinets and I start thumbing through them. Zina does the same.

I don’t know how long we’ve been looking. It hasn’t been very long. Minutes, maybe. Maybe even less than that. And then Zina says: “Come here, Isa. This may be something.”

She hands it to me slowly. My hands may be shaking, but Zina’s aren’t. Zina doesn’t cry and Zina’s hands do not shake.

“What is it? It looks like a deed.”

“I think it *is* a deed, Isa.”

“But it’s in Grandma’s name,” I say. “And I don’t think that Grandma had another house besides this one.”

“It’s a parcel of land. More than fifty acres in the mountains. Are you sure she never mentioned it?”

I shake my head. “But why wouldn’t she have mentioned it? It says she’s owned it for twenty years.”

Zina’s face seems blank.

I feel like I’ve swallowed a rock. “What the frap does that *mean*?” (One thing living in this über-religious town does is endow you with a propensity toward

using fake swear words. Even though I do swear sometimes. When I really, really mean it.)

“I don’t know.”

“What should we do? Should we go there?”

Zina doesn’t say anything for awhile. Then, “I think we have to.”

I feel numb.

I have a premonition: I should put the deed down. I should walk away and stop this ridiculous inquiry into Grandma’s secret life. Who knows what she knew about my father, anyway. Maybe she didn’t know very much at all. Maybe she was just desperate to talk with me. Maybe if I could just find that package...

I hold onto the deed—staring at the longitude and latitude numbers that take up the space on the form where the address is supposed to go.

Grandma always liked numbers. We had that in common.

It would be smart to leave it alone. It would be smart to walk away and to try and be happy with my odd-man-out status in the Weatherford family. My stepdad has always *tried* to act like he was my real father. The inequalities are in the subtext. And maybe you can ignore subtext if you try hard enough.

I start adding up the digits of the longitude and latitude in my head.

Seven.

They add up to seven.

And I know I can’t be smart, not about this. Not if it might have anything to do with my father. Anything at all.

“C’mon,” says Zina. “We’ve got to get to school.”

I take the deed, put it into my backpack, and follow Zina out the door.

Chapter

First Period is when I work for Mr. John Rivers (or as I not-so-secretly call him, “Johnnie”), as his Teacher’s Assistant. He’s a ringer, Johnnie is. And by that I mean that the school district brought him in from outside Jeremiah’s Rapture because our town is too friggin small to be able to supply the school with all the teachers it needs. Consequently, he is almost universally seen as a crazy liberal heretic. But that’s OK with me. In fact, Mr. Rivers always says that he and I have a special kinship because not only am I one of the very few apostate non-churchgoers like he is, but we both play the English horn. Thus, of all the people in the orchestra, we are the ones most likely to go to hell for sounding like dying cows.

My TA duties usually consist of sitting in the back of Mr. River’s office and filing music while he teaches the freshman band outside. It’s menial labor, but I get a free A for it, so it makes me happy.

Mr. Rivers looks mischievous today. Whenever he pops into his office he gives me a funny look. “I’ve got something planned for you,” he says once. Then he starts whistling the theme song to “The Love Boat.”

I pretend to ignore him; I don’t want to reward this kind of behavior with attention.

When orchestra, itself, starts, things start to make a little more sense.

“I have an announcement!” He proclaims through his megaphone. He always uses a megaphone. *So I don’t have to abuse my throat with shouting*, he says.

He stands up on the podium, his silver hair coming down to his shoulders. He wears Birkenstocks and a Mexican tunic, embroidered with flowers. He always dresses like that. I've told him—more than once—that he is a little old to be reliving his Hippie days. He usually just laughs. "It's not *re*-living if you never stopped in the first place," he says.

Whatever.

He gives me another slightly wicked grin. Maybe after class I'll tell him that he is finally succumbing to his ever-threatening senility. *Shoulda done less LSD, Johnnie Rivers*, I plan to tell him. But he'll deny that he ever participated in anything so irresponsible as drug use. He always does.

Again. Whatever.

"As you know," he says, "the State Chamber Music Festival is coming to our very own town. And, as you know, our performance at the Festival the past few years has been *dismal*. No more, no more, young friends. This year, I'm determined that at least *one* group will do Jeremiah proud by getting a Command Performance Award. Thus, I thought long and hard about musical compatibility before making this list of groups."

He pulls out a piece of paper, showing it to us all.

"Isa..." He isn't looking directly at me, but I swear there is a tiny curve to his smile like he is trying not to wink. "I think a double reed duet would be lovely, don't you? You and Caden will be in practice room one."

Ah. That explains it. Johnnie Rivers is secretly trying to play matchmaker. He must have seen me gazing longingly over at Caden lately. Or overheard me talking to Zina about him. Or something.

I stand, pick up my English Horn and walk over to get my music. “Always happy to help you with your master plan, Johnnie,” I say.

Mr. Rivers thumbs through a few pieces. “Now, what was it I was going to have you play? Oh, yes. That’s right. ‘El Hambre Grande’ by Carlos Cortez.” He lowers his voice so that only me and one of the flute players can hear. “That means ‘The Deep Hunger,’ if you get my meaning.”

The flute player laughs uncomfortably.

When Caden is done gathering up his bassoon, he and I walk over to practice room one. I blow the room a kiss as we go inside, and then I shut the door.



The room we’re standing in is quite possibly the smallest practice room and it’s stuffed full with broken tubas. Caden and I can hardly move a few inches without touching each other—something I believe Mr. Rivers fully understood when he put us here as pawns of his romantic scheming.

We sit down, arranging our instruments and putting the music on the stand.

Because the room is so small, there is no escaping Caden’s smell. And Holy Hepstheba (note the reoccurrence of fake swear words?), his smell. It has a hint of cinnamon mixed with the warm of cologne. The pheromones in the room are absolutely *killing* me.

Caden is looking at the music. “To be played plaintively, freely, and expressively,” he reads.

“Always better than demurely, restrictedly, and inexpressively.” I swear. The kid *has* to notice that I’m blushing. My heart is increasing its tempo and I can feel sweat starting to drip from my armpits.

Stupid Mr. Rivers and his stupid old-person-boredom that led him to this wicked schemes.

If Caden suspects Mr. River's alternative motives, he doesn't let on. "You want to give this a try?" His breath smells like cinnamon, too.

I nod, like a mute dork.

We both pick our instruments up, and start to play.

And . . .

Our first time through sounds awful. Like, really, truly, awful.

Halfway through the first page I abruptly put my horn down. "Oh my gosh," I say. "Caden. This is bad!"

He laughs. And he is so pretty when he's laughing. "It's okay. It's supposed to sound all defecatory the first time."

"Defecatory? Uh... You mean it sounds like shi..."

"Okay!" He interrupts me, clearing his throat with a theatrical volume.

And so *I* laugh. A stupid, nervous giggle at first, though after a minute I relax into a genuine laugh. "I had no idea you were *that* goody-goody!" I say.

He raises his eyebrows and lowers his voice trying to be all dramatic, but mostly just sounding geeky. It's adorable. "I am a man of many secrets and layers, Isa."

My knees start to shake against his. "So, Mystery Man, what's our plan for not humiliating ourselves?"

"Practice."

"That's our whole plan?"

Pause. "A *lot* of practice."

When we decide to meet later in the week at his house, I feel like I might possibly faint. Right all over the tubas.

☪

Chapter

I went to Sunday school once when I was a little girl. A girl from my kindergarten class invited me, and I wanted to go. The massive church, sitting as it was right in the center of town, surrounded by cobble stones and copper statues of Jesus with laughing children, would have drawn anyone toward it.

When we got there, we were ushered up a spiral staircase, to a small corner room where we met our teacher. She was tall and thin, her dyed-red hair curled into a pristine helmet around her super-glued smile. She hugged us all as we got there and right away I thought I liked her.

“Today we’re talking about prayer,” she said.

The class nodded, like it was something they’d heard a thousand times. My face must have looked more attentive than the rest because she immediately turned to me. “Do you pray with your family, Isa honey?”

I think I shrugged. “Sometimes,” I said. “But mostly with my Grandmother. We pray to the Goddess.” I honestly didn’t expect much of a reaction to this statement—a sign of just how young I was.

There was a collective gasp and all the blood went out of the teacher’s skin. Her face looked like it might well turn in on itself. “Oh, you poor baby,” she said. Then she came over and kneeled in front of me, hands on my knees.

She said, “Isa, honey, we don’t pray to a Heavenly *Mother*.”

I remember wanting to back away from her because she was looking so intensely at me, but I couldn’t because I was in a chair. “But why?”

“Because there is *one* God. *One* truth. Anything else is blasphemy. Practically witchcraft. And, anyway, Father God is all the mother you’ll ever need.” She stood then and her panty hose rustled as she walked toward the front of the room.

“But he’s the *father*. Why can’t we have a mother, too?”

She just turned her back and started writing on the chalkboard, ignoring me.

I looked down at the carpet. It was a shaggy brown that looked worn by years of bored feet, shuffling against it during class.

Praying with Grandma was one of the most wonderful things I got to do, I thought. It was how I would have defined joy if you made me.

I think that was when the gap between me and the church people started to grow.

C

This afternoon Zina and I plan to make our way to Grandma’s secret property. I have half a mountain’s worth of math homework and a whole book I’m supposed to read for English, but those things will just have to wait. Mom doesn’t ask me about my homework when I ask to go to Zina’s. It’s never actually hard to convince my mom to let me hang out with Zina because Zina is infinitely more responsible than I am and Mom thinks she’s a good influence.

Convincing Mom to let me take my stepdad’s *car*, on the other hand... that is going to be difficult.

“He’s not going to need it,” I say. He’s working at home today and when he works at home, the man *concentrates*. I’ve always been curious about how intense he is at the university (where he works; it’s in the next town over; approx. 45(!)

miles away), considering that when he's working in his slippers and bathrobe his mental state is intractable.

Mom is kneeling on the floor, trying to pull Maggie's toys out from under the couch before her piano students come over. "Why can't you take the mini-van, Isa?"

I can't very well tell her that it's because the mini-van doesn't have a GPS and I have no idea how to deal with longitudes and latitudes without a GPS. "Mom, that car is disgusting," I say. Which is true. Maggie and Eliza are always spilling bits of their Happy Meals and there are patches of rotten chocolate milk and oodles of stale French fries scattered throughout the mess.

"You could always clean it up." She is a bit breathless from the effort of picking toys up.

"Please, Mom? I'll be so careful. I'll drive under the speed limit and I won't stop at Dairy Queen and I'll take off my shoes when I get in if I need to."

In spite of her cleaning exertion, Mom's hair still looks perfect. It's baffling.

"And I *will* clean the van up if you let me take Mike's car. I'll wash it and vacuum it. Anything. It's just... Zina's brother makes fun of the mini-van. And I just..." Really, really, really need that GPS.

"You don't have to call him 'Mike,' you know. He legally adopted you when you were five. You can call him 'Dad.' He'd like it if you called him that."

This, I ignore.

Mike is a great stepdad. He is kind and he treats me well and he tries pretty hard. But he isn't my dad and he never will be.

Mom sighs. "You don't have to take your shoes off," she says. "But be careful!"

I hug her. "Thank you, Mom," I say. "Thank you."

She stiffens in surprise as I hug her. But I can tell she likes it.

What she won't like is what I'm about to go do.

Which is why I am never going to tell her.

•

If I'm honest with myself, I secretly hope that my father will be waiting for me at Grandma's property. Maybe Grandma had that secret property because *he* needed a place to stay. Maybe she knew Mom was never going to let me see him and she wanted to make sure that someday I'd be able to reconnect. Maybe...

Mike's car smells like leather and the smell is so nice contrasted with the rotten chocolate milk smell that would have been in the mini-van. Zina is working the GPS while I drive. It only takes a few minutes to leave the safety of the town and to wind our way into the shadows of the mountaintops. As the highway rounds, it's like crossing into another season. It's still hot and late summer feeling in town. But just a few miles away, up higher in the mountains, autumn is well established. Leaves are streaked with red and yellow and the air seems foggy and dark.

"We're going to need to find a side-road to the right pretty soon here," Zina says.

I check my rear view mirror as I change lanes. My eyes don't look anything like my mother's. I always thought that maybe I got them from my father. Maybe a lot of things about me would make sense if I knew my father. Maybe I would feel like I actually *belong* somewhere.

The only person that's ever really made me feel that way was my grandmother.

Thinking this makes my stomach hurt.

•

We weave our way through various side streets—backtracking an awful lot—for about thirty minutes. Zina keeps frowning harder and harder at the GPS. Math isn't her thing the way it is for me, so I appreciate what she is doing.

Finally Zina says, "Stop the car, I think."

"Like, just pull over? There's nothing here but a bunch of trees." I do what she says, anyway.

Zina is looking back and forth between the GPS and the deed map. "I don't think we can get there by road," she says. "Look."

She hands me the map and I examine the GPS and the aerial sketch of the property attached to the deed. "I think you're right," I say.

We park the car and get out. It seems unnaturally quiet and it's chilly. My arms start prickling and I think with some chagrin that Mom keeps sweaters for everyone in the back of the mini-van. All Mike keeps in his trunk are jumper cables.

"Where do we go?" I ask.

Zina looks around. "Um... east?"

"Which way is east?"

"Aren't the Seven Canyons always in the east?"

"Not when you're *in* one of the seven canyons." I rub my hands up and down the cold skin of my arms. "We should have brought a compass, probably."

"No, I remember from the GPS, I think. It's this way," Zina says. "And there's a trail. Want to follow it? The property line is only about a half a mile away."

A bird squawks overhead. I watch it fly with grace and then stumble all clumsily as it tries to land on a tree branch; I can relate. "That's why we're here, right?"

The walking is helping with the chill, though I still have to pull my arms into my t-shirt.

We've been walking this way for twenty minutes, maybe. And we're walking pretty fast, so we've probably gone more than a mile. I keep looking for a building or a sign or a well or any sense that my father is living out here in the woods. I keep trying to play in my mind what the scene will look like. Will I recognize him? Will he have my eyes? Will he be as happy to see me as I'll be happy to see him?

There is a shuffling sound.

"Stop," Zina whispers when she hears it. She holds onto my arm.

I think it's either my father and he has found us or it's an awfully big animal. Both of these options set my pulse kthumping.

The shuffling is getting louder and just as I'm about to start running, I see a flash of white dart behind a tree.

"Hello?" Zina says.

"Are bears white?" I ask. "Or mountain lions?"

"I don't think bears or mountain lions hide behind trees," Zina says.

I try to remember how fast the shuffling had been, try to calculate the wavelength of the sound frequency to calm myself down.

Zina turns toward where the shuffling sound had come from and calls out, "I know that it's a person hiding behind that tree. We're going to walk toward you now and so you might as well come out because we're going to find you anyway."

We move toward the tree, my heart still crazy, and I wait for the mountain lion to jump out and prove Zina wrong.

But there is no lion.

There is a girl: dressed in a long, white robe. Her hair is roughly severed just below her ears and her eyes seem to take up half her face.

“Hi,” I say, stupidly.

A bird that looked exactly like the awkward bird I’d seen earlier (could it have followed us here?) jumps from its tree perch; it flies in graceful arcs above our heads like it’s writing a message in the heavens.

It doesn’t seem possible that the girl’s face could get whiter, but as she looks at me, it did. “Holy Mother God,” she says. “It’s *you*.”

I look back up at the bird, just to check that it really *hasn’t* written anything in the sky. The air is empty.

The girl is still talking. “They all said it couldn’t happen. ‘There’s only a little more than a month left!’ they’d say. ‘Time is running out!’”

Unbidden, I feel an internal clock start ticking. A little more than a month. And then?

The girl says, “But now you’re here. You’re here and you’ve come to save us.”

G

I’m running.

When that girl in white looks at me with her eyes like saucers, the only thing I feel is panic.

Because what could she possibly have to do with my father? And how could something so bizarre have anything to do with my Grandma?

It doesn’t occur to me that she might have answers or that I might be able to ask her questions. That if I talk to her I might save myself from so much...

Why do I run?

That's what Zina says, when she catches up with me at the car. "What did you *do* that for?" She asks. She is breathless from trying to catch up with me, though the running doesn't mess up her hair: a fact that I envy. My whitish spiral curls are always frizzing all over the place.

I shrug.

"It's not like she was a lion going to bite you, Isa. She looked like she weighed 80 pounds. What on earth could she have done to hurt you?"

She could have told me the truth. The thought comes without my meaning it to. I let it sit there in my mind, though I don't say it out loud. Theoretically, I *want* to know the truth. I want to have a father, like other people. I want to feel like I matter, like I belong. But *this* truth? I don't want it.

I shrug again.

"Cripes, Isa. We come all this way and you just *bolt*?"

I open the car door, feeling comfort in the smell of leather and peppermint gum.

Zina stands still, looking at me for longer than I want to be looked at. She says, "It's going to be OK, you know that, right?"

I don't know it. And so I shrug for a third time and get in the car.

When I start to drive it's silent. The shadows of the mountains cling to the car and it seems much later in the day than it really is.

Why would my grandmother have a plot of land in the middle of the mountains?

And why would there be a girl there? Dressed in white robes?

Why would she think that I could *save* her?

And what the hell is supposed to happen in a little over a month?!

As if in response to my last thoughts, Zina—her voice quiet this time—says, “I think we’re going to have to go back again. We’re going to have to help that girl.”

I think of the bird, making those arcs in the sky. If he really were writing a message, what would it have said?

“I know,” I say. “Just not today.”

•

Chapter

Today is the day I'm supposed to meet at Caden's house, and I tell Mom that I'm going to practice my orchestra duet, starting right after school. The practicing bit is completely true. But the time is a lie. If Mom wasn't so busy with piano lessons, maybe she'd figure out that I'm lying. But she is busy, and she doesn't figure it out, and so I find myself with a good thirty minutes to fill before I have to be anywhere.

Maybe I should use the time to study or something, but I'm too preoccupied. So I go to Grandma's. Her house is only a few houses away from Caden's house, it turns out—both houses a completely walkable distance from my own. But Grandma's house feels like it's in another universe.

I sit on the marble floor of her entryway. The stone is cold and it's so polished that I can see my reflection in it. I feel a little like Narcissus as I sit there. As if I might fall through an unseen pool beneath the tiles and find myself in another world. I'm not thinking rationally, otherwise I'd be using the time there to look for that package. To try and figure out what that girl in white *meant*. But rationality didn't have much to do with *anything* about my Grandma, and I'm not ready to find out any more. Not yet.

Grandma's house is gorgeous—decorated with pristine curtains and gilded picture frames like the house belongs in a Home and Garden magazine. There is a French Blue kitchen with ornate cabinets for her crystal. The dining room is filled with pink china plates. And even though her carpet is a plush, bright, white, there isn't a single stain on it, anywhere.

When I close my eyes, all I can smell is roses. That was Grandma's smell. Roses. She always smelled like roses.

When I was a very little girl—nine years old, maybe; close to Eliza's age—Grandma and I were standing in her backyard, surrounded by her rosebushes.

“There,” she said, pointing at the moon. “There is what they call the ‘lesser’ light.”

There was nothing that looked “less” about the moon that night. It was full, yellow, and huge on the horizon. All the stars danced around it. Maybe Grandma knew that the sight would leave me breathless. It would leave anyone breathless.

She continued, “The men who wrote the Bible pretend that it was God who deemed the moon ‘lesser.’ And then when people called the moon a woman, it seemed only natural that woman was ‘lesser,’ too. But do you want to know the truth? The moon there, she's the savior of humankind.”

My kitten, an ugly runt of a cat with mottled fur and yellow eyes, purred up against my feet. I was barefoot in the dirt and the mix of sensations—the cat's rough tongue against the top of my feet and the cool of damp earth beneath it—seemed almost as vivid to me as the moon.

Grandma said something about end days, about science and truth. Then she said how they'd recently discovered that the moon was originally a planet nearly the same size as the earth. But it was on a collision course. Earth and what would be the moon collided and both planets literally melted. Parts of both planets fused into one and the debris left orbiting eventually fused into the moon. The impact tipped Earth on its axis and the moon left orbiting stabilized Earth's tilted rotation.

Grandma looked beautiful standing there in her roses. The yellow light of the moon bounced off of the curves of her face and onto her shoulders. She looked peaceful and powerful all at the same time.

“The tip of the axis is what makes the seasons. And without the seasons and the moon to stabilize them, the weather would be too extreme. Too chaotic. Too hot. Too cold. Storms too unpredictable and intense. Not conducive to life. Without the moon to hold together the Earth’s orbit, humankind would never have been.”

She paused for a moment, probably to let me think about what it would be like to not exist. I didn’t say anything. I always tried to stay as quiet as possible around Grandma. I knew that if I listened hard, I would learn more from her than if I asked questions.

“In fact, Isa...” She looked at me and just her look made me feel important. “Eve—the mother of all living. She’s called a ‘help meet’ in the Bible. But that’s a terrible translation of the Hebrew. It makes you think that Eve was a servant. The Hebrew words were *ezer* and *k’negdo*. *Ezer* means ‘a strong and majestic savior.’ *K’negdo* means ‘equal to.’ A better translation than ‘help meet’ would have been ‘a saving goddess to walk beside you.’ Just like the moon walks beside the earth.”

The wind started blowing and it seemed to pull words from me, even though I didn’t usually like to talk. I said, “The fall from the Garden of Eden, then...”

She nodded her head, as if I should continue.

“It wasn’t about fruit.”

She broke into a smile so radiant that I felt its warmth almost from my *own* insides. “I didn’t think you’d catch on so quickly, Isa.” Then she looked back at the moon. “The fall wasn’t a fall at all. It was a collision, maybe. Just a little shove

from God. One that separated winter from summer. Birth from death. Without the fall, none of us would exist.”

She put her arm around me and I remember feeling so comfortable as I nestled against her.

“Tell me...” she said, “What’s ‘lesser’ about any of that?”

G

A sound in Grandma’s house that shakes me out of this memory. It sounds like a rustling, maybe. Or maybe a thudding. It’s hard to know, exactly.

“Grandma?” I say. It’s an instinctual thing, calling for Grandma. It’s hard to believe she’s dead. Hard to believe that even if she is dead, that she isn’t hovering next to me as a ghost. I feel like she can’t be dead. Not with her smell all around the way it is. She wouldn’t abandon me like that. Would she?

But there is no response. Maybe it’s something in the air conditioning vent. Maybe it’s a neighbor, doing some yard work.

Because even if she were a ghost, would I be able to see her?

I look down at my reflection in the floor again. Grandma always told me not to stare at my reflection for too long. She said that if I did, I might not be able to control who would start to stare back at me.

My eyes start to blur with tears and I miss Grandma so much that my chest hurts.

Maybe I should think that the noise is something other than a ghost. Maybe jumping to the paranormal first doesn’t make sense—not as much sense as, say, someone breaking into the house. But I miss Grandma so much that logic doesn’t

come into play. And so, I don't realize that the sound could be something other than her ghost.

I stand up, and I turn away from the floor and try to forget about my reflection. But I feel it behind me still. I feel like part of me is trapped in Grandma's floor and I feel like it might never escape.

It's a sensation that doesn't disappear until I walk up to Caden's door.

C

Caden's door is a ten-foot-tall wooden monstrosity, covered with some scrolling ironwork. It gives the house the effect of a fortress. I knock, and the immense door seems to swallow the sound.

The door opens more quickly than I expect a door so massive to be *able* to open. As I see the difference in velocity between the door moving at the site of the hinges and the door moving near the doorknob, I unconsciously start to calculate the angular momentum—based on my guesses for mass, velocity, etc. This kind of thing is something I've always done when I've feel nervous. There's nothing that settles down emotions faster than numbers and equations. I love numbers for that.

The woman who opens the door looks youngish; and yet, her hair seems streaked prematurely with grey. There are two long frown lines that descend from her white lips. She looks angry. More than that: she looks like she has never been anything *but* angry—for years, maybe.

I stutter as I try to talk. "My name is Isa Weatherford," I say. "I'm here to practice a duet with Caden. For the Chamber Music Festival. We were assigned to be partners and we sound really bad and..." Flip. I'm rambling. I hold up my English horn case as evidence of the validity of my duet claim.

She doesn't move. The frown lines on her face seem to deepen, even though I can't detect any motion from her face itself. It's as if she thinks I'm the devil, incarnate, and she is trying to decide what you should do when the devil shows up on your front porch.

I take a breath, trying to calm down my pulse.

But then, like a knight galloping to the rescue, Caden appears. "Oh, yay for stereotypes!" I say.

The woman says, "Excuse me?"

And now I freak because, did I say that out loud?

"Mom," Caden says. "Isa and I are going to practice our duet."

She doesn't look happy about it. "Fine," she says. "But you'll practice in the living room where I can keep an eye on you. No going into your bedroom. No shutting doors of any kind. You remain vertical at all times. Both feet on the floor at all times. If she needs to go to the restroom, you come and tell me so that I can make sure you're not sneaking off together."

Geez.

I expect Caden to mouth off or something, but he doesn't. He just nods. "Of course, Mom. We'll be right in the front room. You can come and watch us if you want to."

Seriously? She's going to come and watch us? Oh my gosh, that sounds awful.

"I have things to do, Caden. You just behave yourself, like you know you should."

"Absolutely." He beckons me into the house, and I follow. Obviously I do this with some apprehension.

What I don't expect is for it all to get even weirder. But it does. The house is immaculate, even by Grandma's standards. There are pictures of Jesus everywhere. There are more pictures of Jesus than at any church I have ever seen. Mixed in with the Jesus pictures, are tons of these creepy cross-stitched sayings. Like, "God is watching," and "A Woman's Place is in the Home," and "Obedience or Damnation." That sort of thing.

I get the distinct impression that this is what patriarchy looks like when it's totally out of control.

I follow Caden into the living room, and start putting together my English horn. Caden's Mom goes to the kitchen, and as I watch her go, I give Caden this look, like, *is she for real?* Caden just shakes his head as if warning me not to say anything outrageous out loud. For just a second I think I see a twinge of desperation on his face.

As my reed is soaking, I try to make small talk. I pick up a picture on the end table. "Is this your family?" I ask. The house smells like antiseptic, and it's hard to concentrate on the photo.

"Yeah," Caden says. "You've met my mom, obviously. And that," he pointed, "is my little brother, Jonas."

Jonas looks like a smaller, much geekier, version of Caden. His skin is pale and his freckles dark and his ears stick out from underneath his also-sticking-out hair. "He's a cutie," I say.

There is no father in the picture (literally), I note. Maybe that explains why his mom seems so angry?

Maybe fatherlessness explains a lot of anger.

Caden glances over his shoulder and then whispers. “She’s usually still at work at this time. I’m sorry; I didn’t know she’d be here.”

Without thinking, I reach over and touch his arm, mouthing, “It’s okay.”

He looks down at my fingers, touching his skin. I wonder if a girl has ever touched his skin before. I think about pulling away, but just as I’m about to, he reaches with a single finger, brushing the tips of mine before I pull them back.

I shiver.

Caden raises his voice back up to normal levels. “Okay, then.”

Poor, poor repressed beautiful boy, I think.

He puts the music onto the music stand. “Why don’t we just start from the beginning and then see if we can figure out which parts are the worst?” He adjusts his seat strap (that holds up the bassoon), and I can’t help but notice that his fingers turn white as they grip against the instrument.

We start to play.

And once again, we are pretty bad.

I keep glancing over at the kitchen, trying to see if Caden’s Mom is going to peer in on us. I feel exposed and distracted: not a recipe for musical success.

After awhile Caden just starts laughing. “Isa,” he says. “You’re good at the English horn and I’m good at the bassoon. Why do we sound so bad?”

From the kitchen I hear Caden’s Mom yell, “That is a very, very good question, Caden!”

With that simple exclamation I feel the entire mood of repression shatter.

Caden and I both start laughing so hard I think I might pee on the couch.

“Ah, heck,” Caden says. “I have to go and make dinner soon, so we’re gonna have to wrap up.”

“You cook?”

Caden begins pulling apart his Bassoon, swabbing it clean and putting the pieces into his case. “Yeah. I love to cook. It’s creative. And then you get to *eat*.”

My heart starts beating all stupid again. “You really love it?”

“Yeah.”

I grab my English horn Case and mirror Caden’s instrument-cleaning motions. “Because I *hate* to cook. It completely freaks me out. In fact, every woman in my family for four generations now has hated to cook so much that the very *idea* of cooking gives us a panic attack. My stepdad does all the cooking. And let me tell you, the guy is an *infinitely* better physics professor than cook.”

Caden slides his bassoon case under the couch, where it disappears into the freakishly clean room. “What do you do if he goes out of town?”

I finish taking apart my instrument and pull my closed English horn case against my chest. “He doesn’t go out of town.”

“Hypothetically, then.”

“Well,” I say. “I’m not entirely sure. Probably my mom and sisters and I would stand around a can of soup, silently begging the others to just go and *open* the thing. But none of us *would* open it. We would just all pretend we weren’t hungry. We’d eat a piece of bread, maybe. *Maybe* we’d put peanut butter on it. But we couldn’t cook.”

Am I talking too much? I can’t tell.

Caden stands up from his chair and slides next to me on the couch. We aren’t quite touching, but we are so close to each other that I can feel the heat coming off of his body. I try to send him a look that says, *your mom might see us, Caden!* But he ignores me.

He says, "You should have dinner with me. I'm going to make something nice and autumnal tonight."

I pull my English horn case even closer to my chest. "Autumnal?"

"Yeah. Like beef pot pie or soup or something."

"Sounds divine."

"Oh, you have no idea about divine until you try my cooking. I am *good*."

"And humble."

"Obviously."

The fact that I can banter with Caden this way is so surprising to me. I don't usually *talk* very well with boys. But we can *talk*. I always seem to know what to say. No matter how stupid my chest/stomach/head felt, I know what to *say*. The thought makes me dizzy.

I relax my grip against my English horn case, weighing in my mind whether or not the discomfort of eating with Caden's mom outweighs the excitement I feel about staying with him just a bit longer. "Isn't it still technically summer, though? Do you really want to make something Autumnal when you could be doing some sort of a 'last bash of summer' kind of thing?"

He shakes his head. "That's the thing. Today is the first day of autumn. September 22."

I feel something inside of me freeze. "The Equinox," I say.

Caden seems to have picked up on my mood shift because he pauses funny.

"Yeah," he says. "The Equinox."

It's the first equinox since Grandma died.

Why had I forgotten? *How* could I have forgotten?

I try to shake off the freeze. Try to pretend like there isn't an inside part of me all wilted and achy, now—to get that flirty awesome vibe back. I just can't quite manage.

He looks at me, as if he knows something has just gone wrong and he is trying to figure out if he should ask more. He doesn't ask anything, though.

So I look over at Jesus—all 52 pictures of him. “Do you really believe in him?” I ask. “Or in church? Or whatever?”

Caden pauses and I can't tell why. “Yeah,” he says. “I mean,” and he lowers his voice, “I'd rather not cover my walls with cross-stitches like that, but I do *believe*.”

The cross stitches *are* totally out of control.

I say, “I believe *something*. I'm just not sure what yet.”

To his credit, Caden doesn't start preaching at me. He is quiet. Quiet in a way that makes the whole question of faith seem important instead of the opposite.

I raise my voice up to the I-know-your-mother-is-trying-to-eavesdrop-on-us level. “I'd love to eat dinner with you, Caden. Especially if I don't have to cook. Can I take a rain-check, though? I have something tonight.”

I don't know what, but *something* happens. An understanding, maybe? I understand that he is the repressed son of a strict (yet *capable* of being human) mother. He understands that I hurt. On a level I can't talk about. And we are both aware that we understand *each other*. And that this is something amazing.

We stare at each other for about five seconds. And then I stand up.

“Next time, then,” he says. “I'll make you cookies.”

Chapter

Solstice and equinox.

Holidays recognized for eons, probably. And whether or not we realize it, a lot of our holidays coincide. Christmas: Winter Solstice. Easter: Spring Equinox. Halloween: midpoint between the Autumnal Equinox and Winter Solstice. Even Independence Day. I wonder if that was one of the things going through Thomas Jefferson's head as he wrote the Declaration of Independence—that the Summer Solstice had just passed?

Grandma and I always celebrated the solstice and equinox with a sacrifice to the goddess—for whom the tilt of the earth was the ultimate sign of power.

It sounds intimidating. Goddesses. Sacrifices. Ultimate power. Just saying those words would probably freak out all of Jeremiah West's descendant followers. Start them into a frenzy of witch-hunting-fury.

But the goddess was at the center of everything Grandma believed, and it never felt intimidating to stand next to Grandma on the solstice.

We would stand at the lake—me barefoot in the dirt—and she would tell me things. (Nothing seems intimidating when all you can smell is dirt and roses.)

I call Zina as soon as I get back from Caden's.

“We have to make a what?” Zina's voice on the other end of the phone is both amused and slightly horrified.

I'm sitting on my unmade bed, my eyes darting all around the chaos of my room. “An equinox sacrifice.”

“Like a goat?”

Thinking about my grandma on the equinox hurts so much that I’m about to burst into tears; so I attempt to make a joke: “Your dog will do.”

She is silent and it seems like any residual amusement has promptly morphed into *complete* horror.

I find a hot-pink slipper between my polka-dotted sheets and I toss it directly at a spider web that I notice is forming between my Victorian dresser and my yellow walls. “I’m kidding, Zina! We don’t have to kill any animals.”

She stays silent for a full two seconds before she bursts out laughing. “Isa you are a big, fat, dork! I totally believed you were going to try and kill my dog!”

“I don’t blame you,” I say. “I hate dogs.” As I say this, I notice that the painting that hangs above my brass bed frame has a black puppy in it. It feels ironic.

She is laughing even harder now.

“I’m not fat, though” I say. “I’m just a dork.”

When she can finally take a breath, she asks, “So if we’re not sacrificing dogs... or babies, I hope... what are we supposed to sacrifice?”

“Chocolate.”

“Chocolate?”

“Chocolate.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s a sacrifice to the goddess. What else would she want?”

And Zina is laughing again.

I lie down and stare now at my water-stained popcorn ceiling. “Every solstice and equinox Grandma and I would drive up into one of the canyons, find a lake, and throw a big fat bar of Swiss Chocolate in it.” I pause, looking out of my

bedroom window and watching a red-haired man in a Subaru wave at a lady mowing her lawn. “And today’s the equinox. I’d like to just forget about the old ritual, but I can’t. I don’t know why I can’t.” My voice is pathetic—pleading, really.

Zina doesn’t flinch. “I do voodoo rituals to appease Mami Wata with my Nnenne at our heretically-non-Jeremiahn-church. I’ll probably still do them after she’s dead. Ritual is part of faith, I think. Part of being human. Just because your grandma is gone doesn’t mean that everything you loved about her has to die.”

The trees that I can see outside my window look so still. I have this weird sensation for just a second that if I were to *think* hard enough, I could get the wind to blow and the barely-starting-to-turn-colors leaves would fall all around the cars that drive by.

I clear my throat, changing the topic because I want Zina to talk. “I don’t know much about Mami Wata.”

I hear Zina’s CD player turn on. Christmas music. Zina listens to Christmas music all year. She says it’s the only Christian holiday besides the Assumption of Mary (which, coincidentally, is on her birthday) that even pretends there might be something divine about women. Thus, it’s the only Christian holiday whose music is worth acknowledging. She and Grandma may not have had much in common, but thinking that women were just as divine as men was one thing they agreed on. She says, “Well, she’s probably pretty similar to most goddesses—a psycho who’s your best friend and enemy all at once. She can bring you life, prosperity, joy, love. Or... She can turn you insane and laugh at you as you spiral toward death.”

I can hear the song in Zina’s background say something about “how blessed is the Mother of God,” and I try to push my tears back down my throat.

“At church we leave her offerings to stay on her good side, and we have music, dances, and rituals that help us harness her power into our life. That’s worshipping the Mami Wata in a nut shell, I guess. We do similar stuff for all the gods and goddesses we believe in. It’s all about bringing the many forces of the divine into our lives for good.”

“Don’t you think it’s weird that your church has goddesses? I mean, everyone always thought my grandma was *beyond* weird because she believed in them.”

Zina laughs. And I love the sound of Zina’s laugh: it’s deep and happy. “Now, I know you grew up in a town with only one church so you might not know this... but it turns out there are a lot of *different* churches.”

Zina’s church is actually the first church in Jeremiah’s Rapture besides Jeremiah’s. The town only let them build it because they were hurricane refugees, after all, and it didn’t seem quite Christian to forbid them their *church*—no matter how horrible everyone thought their *beliefs* were.

Zina says, “And, you know, it’s an African church. They have goddesses in Africa. It would be weird if it *didn’t* have goddesses.”

“I’ve heard some people say your church is a cult. That you kill chickens and pour the blood on voodoo dolls.”

Zina laughs. “Just ‘some?!’ Isa, *everyone* in this town thinks that except for you!”

Maybe an exaggeration, but probably not a big one.

She says, “Here’s how I think of it, though: you can make *any* church seem insane if you want to. Back in Louisiana there were these strange people called *Catholics*. You’ve probably never known a Catholic, have you?”

Even my pervasive melancholy isn't enough to keep me from laughing because, honestly, I probably never *have* known a Catholic. "I do watch TV."

"All right. So, these *Catholics* do the most insane thing. They have a statue of a mangled human carcass and they *pray* in front of it. And then they do this ritual where they *drink his blood*. They call it *transubstantiation*. I'm not even kidding."

I always worry about peeing my pants when I'm with Zina. She makes me laugh so dang hard. "Good point." I say.

"My favorite thing to do with churches is to look at the way they connect. Some of them believe this, some of them believe that. You can put the pieces together like a puzzle."

"How on earth do you know how to make the connections?"

"It's easy. If you're *looking*, that is."

I look over at the spider web I've knocked down. How long is it going to take the spider to rebuild it? And are spiders conscious enough to get pissed about the extra work?

"Man," says Zina. "I want to eat some chocolate now."

"My mom always used to say to me that if I knew *everything* about the goddess, I would understand why she hated Grandma. I never did get that, though. What's so bad about the goddess?"

Zina is silent. For a long time.

"What," I say. "What is it?"

"Isa, honey," she says. "Here's the thing." She pauses. I think I hear the Christmas music switch off. "I don't think you *do* understand everything about goddesses."

"What do you mean?"

“Well, I think that because of your grandma, you think that they’re always good. But they’re not. They have a dark side.”

I say, “I know they have a dark side. I get that.”

“I don’t think you do. Because it’s *dark*. It’s *really* dark. You’ve gotta know that.”

I don’t say anything.

“But no worries,” Zina says. She sounds like she is trying to backtrack because she knows I don’t want to hear about goddesses being bad in the midst of my grief. “Chocolate isn’t evil. I guess it can be dark. But whatever it is, it’s divine. Manna was probably chocolate.”

I watch through my window as another car speeds past. It’s a green Honda this time. But even the rushing air of the passing car doesn’t make the leaves of the trees so much as tremble. It makes me feel like my thoughts—all the aspects of my presence as a *human*—are powerless.

Zina says, “Maybe we need to change the equinox ritual somehow... Instead of your grandma’s goddess, why don’t you borrow my Mami Wata for awhile? Sometimes the best way to figure out what you believe is to frame it with what someone else believes.”

“And you say the Mami is two faced?”

“Yeah. Like Kali. The goddess of creation and destruction, all at once.”

“Even Eve,” I say, thinking of the talk Grandma and I had in the rose bushes so long ago. “Saving humanity by talking to the devil.”

Zina doesn’t ask me to explain.



When Grandma took me to make solstice and equinox sacrifices she must have driven me herself. But I can't picture it anymore. I simply can't imagine that she was the kind of woman who sat behind a steering wheel and did anything as monotonous as push down the gas pedal or use a blinker.

I do remember that on the floor next to the front seat of her car she kept a box full of twenty or thirty candy bars. But we only ever threw two in the lake.

We'd stand right on the edge of the shore—so close that the water crawled up to our toes.

Grandma would raise her arms and chant:

Lakshmi, Shakti, Saraswati,

Asherah, Isis, Quan Yin, Parvati

If I had realized then that this was a list of ancient goddesses from other—non-white!—cultures, the irony of my racist grandmother being the one to chant the list might have struck me as odd. But I never really realized it.

All I knew was that when Grandma threw in her chocolate, I would watch in awe at the way she looked like a dancer as she threw, and at the way the chocolate ascended in a perfect arc. I'd try to match her grace when it was my turn to throw the bar. And even though I never seemed to be able to, I always felt so *powerful* as the chocolate moved through the air.

We never ate the other bars—the ones she had in her car. But it never occurred to me to wonder why she had a whole box.



After having snuck out of my house and taking the mini-van, Zina and I are trying to find a lake to re-create it all. And it seems like it's taking us forever.

I'm consciously avoiding lakes anywhere near Grandma's property. (Who knew what we would find there on the equinox?!)

But I've never had to drive to a lake myself. And, in so many ways, I don't know what I'm doing.

Zina is snacking on the granola bars I brought (we'll probably miss dinner) and singing along with the radio. Occasionally she asks: "You do know where we're going, right?"

"Um," is my typical response, "sort of."

Which is apparently good enough for Zina because she always just starts singing again. "I love... la la la... your shorts... la la la." Her voice is monotone and, like always, she is making up her own words.

When we finally find a lake, we stumble out of the car and make our way to its edge.

But it's wrong.

Something is wrong.

"The lake is frozen over," I say. For some reason, this is making me panic.

Zina just looks at me. "Of course it's frozen. It's been twenty degrees up here every night."

The lake is smallish and it's cradled by huge evergreen trees. Just above the trees I can see wisps of smoke from somebody's campfire.

"But it's SEPTEMBER. It's not supposed to be frozen in September." The air around us feels infuriatingly wet, not frozen, and I can smell the rot of lake plants on the shore.

Zina says, "Things are different this high in the mountains. The altitude. You should know that. You're freakishly good at chemistry."

I *am* freakishly good at chemistry, but that is beside the point.

“Grandma must have taken me to a different lake. One down lower,” I say. “It was never frozen. I don’t even know what to do with a frozen lake.” I feel strikingly aware of the rigid chocolate bars in my hand. “What does that do to the whole idea of sacrificing it to the Mami Wata?”

Zina’s hair is still braided with strips of turquoise fabric, but instead of making her look regal today, the zigzagging of the parts between the braids makes her look fierce. She says, “the Mami needs chocolate. I don’t think she’ll care if it doesn’t sink into the water. Wouldn’t that be a really great name for a girl band, though? ‘Mami needs chocolate?’ I love it.”

I just look around, feeling like the air, itself, has just become terribly important.

Zina touches my arm. “Ice is just another kind of water, Isa. It’s okay for a goddess to have more than one face. It’s what makes her a goddess.”

She leads me to a spot on the farthest edge of a peninsula. There is no dirt shore here, only soccer-ball sized rocks. It’s hard to balance on the rocks and as squawking birds fly by, I feel like they are squawking on purpose—just to mock me. When I feel steady enough, I hand Zina a bar of chocolate.

“Look at all that frozen water,” she says. “Holy heck, I miss the ocean.”

I ask, “Why do you think you never went back to New Orleans after the hurricane? I mean, I love you and stuff, but absolutely no one out here is like you. We’re just a bunch of crazy white people.” (Jeremiah’s Rapture is about 92% white, actually; which makes two things odd. One: neither my best friend nor the first boy I kissed are white. Two: where did Grandma’s racism come from? I mean, who has a chance to be racist when there aren’t any other races?!)

“You got that right,” she says, smiling. “Everyone here is all uptight. Won’t go to the store on Sunday. Won’t shout ‘Jesus.’ Thinking that holding hands with a guy is the biggest flizzing deal in the world and might actually make you engaged! I thought Southern Baptists were devout but my lolly these mountain people and their God are intense.” Zina thinks that fake swear words are particularly hilarious and she often tries to use as many as possible.

“I totally concede your argument, Zina,” I say, though I can’t bring myself to laugh. A man and a woman are walking along the dock nearby. They happen to be holding hands and I wonder whether or not they *are* engaged. If they aren’t, I wonder if they feel self-conscious—like Lord Father God is hiding somewhere around the corner, ready to pounce.

Zina shrugs. “Nnenne thinks that power of the Mami Wata was too strong by the ocean. That’s why we didn’t go back. She says it’s safer to worship the Mother Water grounded in the middle of the mountains.”

“And around dorky religion-obsessed white people.”

“Those, too.”

She closes her eyes for a second and then says. “You want to do this, or what?”

“Yup.”

“Okay. I’m going to make a speech.” She walks on tip toes to the absolute last rock poking up out of the frozen water on the edge of the peninsula. She takes her naked chocolate bar and waves it out at the lake. “Mami,” she says, “Here’s the deal: I don’t trust you. You can be a two faced bee-yotch, actually. Please don’t screw up my life.”

When she throws the chocolate, it ascends in an arc, just like Grandma's always did. I feel a surge of power go through me as I watch it curve through the air. Like the very power of the goddess will be released the moment it shatters against the ice.

It makes me shiver.

When it's my turn, I don't feel very verbose. Every word that comes is a struggle and comes out much too slowly. "This is for my Grandma," I say. "I miss her. I miss her a lot."

I try to hurl my chocolate with as much force as Zina did.

But it doesn't work. It gets caught on a rock that is a mere six inches from me. We watch as the rock rips the chocolate into pieces and sends them skimming on the ice with a none-too-impressive speed. A few of the pieces even boomerang back. It's like the lake is rejecting the chocolate. Sending it right back to my feet.

My head starts to throb.

Zina looks dumbfounded. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"I don't know," I say. "I think something."

We stare at the chocolate that has bounced back at us, inches from my tennis shoes.

In my stomach I feel that grit of apprehension again. That sense that I shouldn't ignore my mother's warnings. That maybe the goddess's dark side really is *that* dark. It's not too late to just bury Grandma, I think. It's not too late.

Zina reaches her arm out, and gives me a side-squeeze hug. "Be careful, Isa," she says. "*Mami Wata snatch you up, if you not careful.*"

"Huh?"

"A line from a poem."

“Oh.”

“But I’m serious, though. Be careful.”

“I will, Zina. I promise.” I say it even though I’m not really paying attention to my words. I’m too busy feeling sick inside.

Zina gives me a worried look.

Then we get into my borrowed white mini-van and drive away.

•

Chapter

Even though it's dark now and feels like possibly the longest day ever, when we get back into town, I don't feel ready to go home.

I think about Caden. I think about Grandma. I think about what it would be like to have a father. I think about the lake rejecting my sacrifice. I think so many thoughts that I stop being able to figure out what I'm thinking at all.

And so after I drop off Zina, I drive to Caden's house.

He is sitting on the porch. Up and down the street there are kids playing, cars driving by, moms yelling through windows, telling their kids to come to bed. And then there is Caden. He is wrapped in a blanket and is typing away into his laptop computer, looking like he is trying to concentrate but can't.

I see him squinting at me as I pull up, and note the precise moment that he recognizes me. His eyes go from squinting to smiling. He doesn't smile with his mouth, though. That stays put.

"Hey, there," I say as I get to his porch. "Look at you being all responsible and doing homework and stuff."

"That's me," he says. "Mr. Responsibility."

"Not me lately." I peek over at his laptop screen. I half expect to find him chatting or playing a game, but he actually does seem to be writing an English paper. Shoot, I have to do that sometime.

"I didn't think I'd see you again. You rushed off as soon as we were done practicing."

“I know. I’m sorry. I had to do something.”

He looks, for a second, as if he might ask me *what* I was doing. So before he can open his mouth I asked him, “What are you doing out on the porch?”

He shrugs. “Mom had to go back to work and Jonas wanted to play outside.” He points over to the outline of a little boy—leading a group of little boys to a hiding spot away from their moms. “I promised to watch him. Thus . . . here I sit.”

Part of me relaxes. Thank goodness his mother is gone.

He snaps shut his computer.

I sit down next to him and he opens up half of his blanket, wrapping it around my shoulders. I can feel the heat of his body still in the blanket and I can’t stop thinking about the way our shoulders are touching. His porch swing is rickety and the wood almost rotted through. My mind fills with visions of it breaking in two and the two of us falling all over each other in a mess of splinters. The image is half painful, half thrilling.

He bends over and pulls a plate of cookies from beneath the swing.

“Caden!” I say. “You’ve just fulfilled my afternoon fantasies!” I say it as if it was a joke, but I actually *had* fantasized about the cookies.

“I told you I’d make you cookies.”

“You did?”

“Yup.”

“Caden,” I say, pretending to swoon, “you have truly won my heart.”

I take a cookie and stuff about three quarters of it into my mouth at once. (I was hungry.) The cookie is mostly a fudgey sort of chocolate with chunks of peanut butter and walnuts. I want to scream out, it tastes so good. My mouth, however, is

extremely full and it would be *very* unattractive to risk him seeing the gooey mass melting therein.

“Do you like them?” he asks.

I chew as fast as I can and when I’ve swallowed enough to speak I say, “I think we need to get married. Want to go to Vegas?”

He grins. A big, beautiful, Greek God (with freckles) kind of grin. “You can’t tell anyone about my secret cooking fascination. I’ve got a reputation I need to build. I’d prefer to be known for my good looks and prowess on the rugby field.”

“You play rugby?” I ask.

“No,” he says. “I’d just like to start the rumor because it makes me look cooler.”

Laughing, I lean back against the rotted wood swing and it moans against my weight. “OK.”

He puts the plate of cookies back down on the ground and then puts his hands on his knees.

I notice then that one of his hands is shaking—ever so slightly. It’s as if he wants to reach out. And I want him to. Desperately.

Will he, though? Some of the teachers at school claim that they didn’t even *kiss* their husbands until they were married. Most of the students agree that this is the best course of action. The minority thought that maybe kissing would be okay if you were engaged. Hand holding only permissible after a minimum of six dates. And *never* when you’re alone.

Still looking at his hands, I move my hands so that they are on my knees—just inches away from his.

As if in response, he moves his hand closer.

My throat starts to swell and my cheeks are getting hot. Caden doesn't seem like the kind who would go around hand-holding without those six dates, but the momentum between us feels so hard to fight.

And so I move mine closer. So close that the edges of our fingers are touching.

They stay that way for about fifteen seconds. Both of us are looking down at our touching fingertips like we are gazing at a looming precipice, trying to decide whether or not to jump.

And he's moving. He's moving his hand so that it covers mine and now he's taking my hand and pulling it closer to him.

It seems like it might be even colder outside now, but his hand is so warm that I can't feel *anything* but warm. And I laugh inside, because now I'll have to tell Zina that I'm practically engaged and then she will mock mountain people some more.

We're sitting this way, throats caught up in the feel of skin against skin, silently watching the neighbor kids running away from their come-to-bed-yelling mothers.

"How do you think they can see?" I nod towards the kids who are screeching and laughing as they duck behind different shaggy bushes.

Caden just shakes his head.

The fact that it's so dark just reminds me that I *should* be going home. I should have already eaten dinner and have moved on to homework and getting ready for bed. I should be trying to keep from being in complete and utter trouble with my mom for once.

But I don't want to leave.

I look over at Caden and see that as I've been sitting here, he's been looking at *me*. I don't know for how long. We are illuminated by a porch light above our heads and it has a haloing type effect. I'm looking at Caden, and I can't see anything except for him.

There is a look on Caden's face—like he wants to *say* something. That he's never met anyone like me? That I look beautiful? That I should go home and change my relationship status on Facebook, like, immediately? That I must be some kind of ho-bag because I'm holding his hand without going on a real date with him? Ah, crap. *Am* I a big trampy ho-bag?

"I have to go," I say, wishing that I were saying almost anything else.

He nods. "Yeah. OK." He pauses. "But I'll see you tomorrow at school." He pauses again. "And you'll come back and see me."

I smile and stand up, holding his hand as long as possible before I have to finally let go. And as I walk away I feel more and more like the moon—pulled to him by some mysterious force of gravity.

C

I drive toward my house, fully intending to go there. Mom has called a few times already—the flashing message sign on my phone lights up with every call, though I can never bring myself to answer. And as I see the shadows of my family in the window, I realize that I can't go in there. Not yet. So I drive in circles.

I'm spinning. Mental image is pouncing on top of mental image in random flashes—all coming back to a single obsession on a seemingly meaningless phrase.

Does Jesus know?

It was something Grandma said when Maggie was born.

That day, Grandmother glided grandly into the hospital. She always seemed to enter in a way that took over the entire room. I remember my mother looking tired and when Grandma came in, she just lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. Mike, who was holding three year old Eliza, stroked Mom's hair. It seemed gross—the stroking—because Mom's hair was wet with sweat.

Grandma just took baby Magdalen out of her little plastic bassinet and touched every part of her face, as if she were giving her a blessing.

Mom's forehead was creased in what seemed like pain. I thought that maybe the pain had something to do with childbirth, but I wasn't quite sure.

“Oh, Magdalen,” I remember Grandma saying. “Does Jesus know the source of his power?”

I remember that it didn't make sense to me.

Now, I'm driving around in circles, and it still doesn't really make sense to me. But those are the words spinning around in my head. *Does Jesus know?* I keep repeating. *Does Jesus know?*

I pull into a gas station and stare out the window. Two policemen are putting handcuffs on a group of ratty looking teenage boys. I'm on the best side of town.

Does Jesus know?

I have fleeting thoughts about going into the convenience store for an ice-cream cone, but instead I find myself staring at one of the handcuffed boys who are sitting on the curb. His hair is a dirty blue color—like he tried to dye it himself and couldn't quite pull it off. He is frowning and spitting near his feet. He accidentally hits his fancy-looking sneakers with a lob of spittle, I hear him say, “Jesus!” And then he trails off in another round of obscenities, mostly aimed at the cops who looked not much older than he does.

Jesus, Jesus. My mind repeats. Does. Jesus. Know?

The cops yank up the blue-haired boy; I realize that I have to see Caden again. And like every other stupid part of my life lately, I don't know why.

C

It's so late now that it has stopped being "today" and has moved into "tomorrow." 12:02AM, to be precise. So I don't knock on his front door. I walk around to the back of the house and knock on what I calculated to be his bedroom window.

When his face appears through the glass and I try to figure out whether or not he's been sleeping, it occurs to me that I should feel embarrassed to be acting like a stalker. But he doesn't seem surprised to see me again. He makes a motion for me to wait.

Caden's backyard is edged with giant bushy evergreens that sprawled out and it smells like a combination of moss and wet concrete. In the shadows, the trees almost look like giants—holding back the wind with massive arms. There is a light on in what seemed like must be his kitchen. I see someone's shadow—probably his mom's—moving around behind the blinds. It adds an entirely new element of danger.

When he gets to me, his hands are in his pockets. It's the position your hands would be in if you were staring at the ground in embarrassment. But Caden isn't looking at the ground. He is looking at me. Right at me. His face is at once so steady and so conflicted. Like a scrambled egg, maybe—scrambled underneath an unbroken shell. The same look I couldn't identify earlier on the porch.

For a full minute, at least, we don't say anything.

In our mutual staring, it seems like there is an intensity of emotion that I don't fully understand. There is compassion... shared sadness?... confliction over a relationship moving too fast? That and something else, maybe... something more like fire than emotion.

The backyard is dark and I can barely see anything except for Caden. There is no moon. And just as I'm starting to think that the moment can't get any more intense, it starts to rain.

The cynical part of me wants to burst out laughing at what has turned into a very Hollywood moment. But the other part of me—the part of me standing in the dark rain—wonders if Hollywood can describe a moment like this. Can it capture the *mythic* feeling of it? The way that I can almost *feel* the earth moving through the stars? The way that I can tell that if God was watching from heaven he'd know that there isn't anything as important as looking at Caden?

Somehow, in the dark, I have become Eve.

And I am standing naked, the first time I know I'm naked, in front of Adam.

Trying to convince him to eat the fruit.

There is thunder and probably lighting, though I don't see any flashes. The rain is cold and I can feel the skin on my face stiffen with the chill of the wet running across it.

Caden moves closer to me.

I reach out and touch his face.

His skin is cold, wet.

He reaches out, cupping the side of my face with his hand.

And he is kissing me.

Kissing as if kissing was gasping.

As if he would die without the oxygen I'm giving him.

I kiss him back, my hands gripping his dripping cold face.

I know—*know*—that the way I'm throwing myself into this kiss... I will never be fully *Isa* again.

Part of me will always be Eve.

Saving mankind in the dark.



They are waiting for me to come home. I can see them through the front window before I even pull into the garage. Mom is sitting with her back toward the window, playing the piano. Mike is sitting, unsmiling on the couch next to her, drinking something out of a mug, and looking pissed.

As I walk into the house, Mike makes a motion for me to stay standing where I am. I feel like a soon-to-be prisoner who is in court—awaiting my sentence and feeling stupid for being the only one in the room standing up.

The room isn't very well lit, but there is a hazy globe of light around my mother from her piano lamp. She is still playing her songs as I stand there. Mom writes crazy Baroque stuff—all polyphonic and jumbled. And yet, there is always something so contemplative about her counterpoint. The woman could give Bach a run for his money.

When Mom finishes playing, she turns to me. I brace myself for all kinds of crazy, in spite of the fact that I know she will never yell.

“You didn't tell us when you'd be home.” Her voice is even, of course, devoid of intonation or emotion. It's unnerving.

“I'm sorry,” I say. I expect her to ask me where I've been, but she doesn't.

Mike puts his mug on the end table and leans forward, hands clasped together. “Isa, you’re old enough to understand about courtesy. You’re old enough to respect your mother more than that. It is *very* late. What if we’d been really worried?”

“You weren’t worried?” This confuses me.

Mom lets out a half chuckle. “Of course not, Isa. I knew exactly where you were. That’s not the point.”

“You knew exactly where I was?” I’m re-creating Caden’s backyard in my mind, trying frantically to think of just *how* my mother can have seen me there. Oh, land. Did she see me making out?

She stands up, shutting the piano lid behind her. “Of course, Isa. It’s the equinox. I know what you do on the equinox. Hell, I used to do it myself.”

“Oh.” Yay. There is no making out that needs to be explained.

Mike stands up, next to Mom. “It shouldn’t matter that we knew where you were, Isa. You should have called. You should have asked *permission*. You’re not away at college yet, and until you are, you need to respect the rules of this house.”

“Of course,” I say, channeling Caden’s obedient agreement with his Mother. “I’m sorry. I really am.”

Mike looks surprised.

But I can’t quite leave it like that. I’m not Caden, after all. “But, Mom. Would you have let me go? Even if you knew that I was driving up to a lake? Even if you knew I was still doing the things Grandma and I did together? Evil things?”

There is a blankness on Mom’s face that might be surprise. It’s hard to tell with Mom, sometimes. She keeps a tight rein on emotion. “I seriously doubt you were doing anything evil, honey.”

Mike starts talking, then. “Your Grandma taught you wonderful things, Isa. Only the best. We always made sure of that.”

“But, Mom, you always said she was evil.”

Mom starts walking toward her room—fleeing from the mention of Grandma, it seems like. She is talking with her back to me the way she does. “The side you saw of her, Isa? It doesn’t get any more *good* than that. Don’t sneak off again, you understand?”

I nod. Not like she can see me nod with her back to me. But she doesn’t turn around to check.

Mike stands there for a minute. His hair is a lot darker than my hair, even though it’s still a blondish color. He wears bright red glasses that make him seem like a rebel. But there’s not much rebellious about Mike. Physics professor by day. Mild-mannered reader by night. “Isa,” he says. “You should know something about your grandma.”

“Okay,” I say. I’m not about to even hint that I was currently thoroughly engaged in finding all out I can on my own. He doesn’t need to know that.

“She had truth. A lot of it. Beautiful truth.”

I nod. My legs are starting to prickle from standing too long. It almost feels like there are spiders crawling across them and the thought makes me sweat.

“But when someone has just a *part* of the truth and they take it too far...”

He frowns, as if he doesn’t know whether or not I’m old enough to understand what he is trying to say. It bugs me.

“When you have a bit of truth and you take it too far, well, bad stuff can happen. Really bad. Does that make sense, honey?”

It doesn't. Not now. Not when I don't even have the slightest idea about what the hell I believe myself. But I'm not going to tell Mike that. "Of course it does. I get it. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't call."

He pats my shoulder, awkward, but sincere. "I know you are, Isa. And I know you'll call next time."

He takes his mug off the end table, and moves like he is going to walk down the hall to his bedroom.

"Mike," I say, "Wait."

He does.

But I don't know how to say it. How do you ask the guy who pretends to be your Dad why he's not your Dad? How do you even begin to parse it?

"What is it, Isa?"

"We never talk about my father," I say. "I mean, my biological father. We don't talk about him at all and I've never met him and I don't know anything about him."

Mike sighs. "I know, honey. I know we don't talk about him."

"But, why, Mike? Why can't I meet him? Why haven't I met him?"

He doesn't say anything. For too long, I think. And then, "Sometimes, Isa, honey, we keep secrets for a reason. Some things shouldn't be talked about."

"Mike. That's lame. And condescending. You know that I can handle stuff."

He shakes his head. "You might be able to. But your mother's not ready. It's just too..." He takes a breath. Shakes his head, letting his voice trail off into nothing.

"Mike?"

“Don’t ask your mother about it, Isa. Will you promise to do that for me?”

After hesitating for a minute, I nod. He pats my arm. “Good girl,” he says.

And then he walked down the hall to his bedroom.

I stand alone in the globe of the piano light, feeling utterly empty inside.

•

Chapter

It starts like any other school day.

Mike is standing in the kitchen, assembling together lunches since the rest of us are incapable of stuff like that. He takes two pieces of Wonder Bread for each of us and then carefully spreads a tiny layer of mayonnaise on one of the pieces of bread and a tiny layer of mustard on the other side. Then he adds a single piece of lunchmeat and carefully pats the two sides of the sandwich together and stuffs them into a plastic sack. The funny thing about Mike's cooking is that we're always so grateful that someone has cooked for us at all that we don't even realize how lame the stuff he makes is. Well, we do realize it. We're just really, really grateful and that overrides the realization.

Mom drives off in our fusty white mini-van before any of us leaves for the day. Mike says she's going shopping for a new piano. For the last few months, she's been searching for the perfect new instrument. Today she's going to Ogdenville and will probably be gone all day. And then Mike leaves, and Eliza and Maggie's bus comes and I'm alone in the house.

If I were responsible, I would just walk to the high school, and do my TAing for Mr. Rivers.

But I'm not and I don't.

I know Mr. Rivers doesn't care whether or not I come—to TA or to orchestra. Sure, I'll miss seeing Caden during orchestra, but we aren't splitting into groups today, so I won't get to see him much anyway. And besides, I'm only going to skip orchestra. I'll see him in English and he is supposed to come to my house

after school to practice. And in two whole hours? There is a heckuva lot I can do at Grandma's.



I know something is wrong from the moment I turn the corner into Grandma's backyard. The bark around the rosebushes has been kicked and scattered all along the back porch. The key is out of its hiding place and dangling from the door. The door is standing open and dirt is tracked in boot prints across Grandma's perfectly white carpet.

I stop, still as I can be, and I listen to sounds within the house. But there isn't anything. Some papers blowing in the wind, I think, but nothing else. I can feel my face start to sweat, but I slowly move forward, creeping into the house. "Hello?" I try to sound much braver than I actually feel. "Mr. Robber Man? Or woman, I suppose. Look at me being sexist. But you *are* a man, aren't you?" Pause. "Not going to answer?" Pause. "That *is* just like a man. So, I'm coming in and I really don't want to die, so if you could leave really fast while I close my eyes and count to thirty, that'd be great!"

Counting to thirty is starting to seem excessive as my eyes are closed, but I don't want to go back on what I've said in case there really is an intruder there. But I don't hear anyone leaving. I don't hear much of anything, really. Maybe the dude had left hours ago.

I take a couple of deep breaths after I get to thirty, and open my eyes. My whole shirt is all sweaty now. Probably going to stink. *Just* what I need when Caden comes over to practice this afternoon. Maybe I can plead girl problems and leave school early to shower?

I try to think of various ways to get out of last period, vaguely looking for the broom and dustpan as I go.

Then I see the thing that pretty much makes me poop my pants.

A note. Scrawled in crappy handwriting and red-brown ink.

“Isa?” It reads. “Do I have your attention?”

⊕

Grandma.

When I try to think of who has written that note, she is the first person that comes to my mind. Never mind the fact that the handwriting looks nothing like hers. Never mind that Grandma would *never* leave muddy footprints on her beautiful white carpet. Never mind that she is *dead*.

I pick up the piece of paper, shivering and pretending for myself that it’s the September chill making me shiver. “Yes,” I say out loud. “You have my attention.”

I follow the muddy footprints into Grandma’s study.

And there is another note. “You have a destiny,” it reads.

No duh. I think. Of course I have a destiny. Don’t we all have destinies? At some point, sometime, *something* is going to happen to you. Unless you die. But even *that’s* a destiny.

Maybe the note-writer expects me to respond sarcastically like that (and isn’t it kinda creepy that he *knows* me well enough to expect me to respond like that?) because right underneath the destiny note is another note. “A special destiny. For you are the heiress.”

And there, lying in a neat row, are things my grandma had written. They look like they were pieces of letters to someone—someone called “Apollo,” as much as I can tell. And there are highlighted sentences.

- *It's all set to happen after her sixteenth birthday.*
- *There's the problem of her mother; she rejected us sixteen and a half years ago, and now she won't let Isa take her rightful place.*
- *But I believe in my heart that this position is meant for Isa.*
- *She'll take my place. She'll reign.*

She made it sound as if she was secretly the queen of some foreign country. Which, come to think of it, would be pretty cool. All *Princess Diary*-like. But, no. Something in the tone of the letters made it seem like Grandma wasn't talking about a foreign country.

Suspicions confirmed by the last passage:

It was the violence of it that drove her mother away. That's why we must keep it from her mother, Apollo. She'll never forgive us, I think, no matter if it's different this time. Better just to have it done. Pray she sees the purpose behind it. Pray that Isa's ready to embrace the duality of light and dark.

What the flock?

I'm still holding onto the paper when I hear a slamming in the other part of the house.

I jump.

But suddenly I get brave. Weirdly brave. Still holding onto that paper with Grandma's writing on it, I move toward where I had heard the sound.

At the end of the hallway, I stop. There is another note, scribbled in the same awful handwriting as the notes not written by Grandma, and it's posted on the door of the linen closet.

The answers are behind this door, Isa.

Don't let your Grandmother's plans die with her.

The answers are in the linen closet? Seriously?

For about a half a second, I'm thinking about just opening the door. What am I going to find? Towels?

But then I think better of it.

I grab the note off the door, adding it to the stack of notes that I'm now holding, and start to back away.

And there is another noise. Coming from inside the closet?!

I don't wait to find out because I don't *want* to find out.

So I start running.

Running.

Running.

Out of that house.

Running.

Door slamming.

Out to the front yard, where there are neighbors to see me. To watch so that I won't get killed.

I slam the gate to the backyard and I run out to the front, rushing down the street.

And then I see, with *amazing* relief, that Caden's mom is standing in her driveway, putting her briefcase into her car.

"Oh, thank goodness!" I say. And I mean it. Which is weird, considering that it's Caden's mom. AKA: Super Strict Ice Queen. "Someone broke into my Grandma's house! They left all these freakish notes!" I hold up the papers.

She is looking at me with horror. With more than horror. Disgust *and* horror. And she is staring down at the notes.

So I look at them and am horrified, myself.

What I didn't notice inside the house was that they had been written in blood.

⊕

“Oh my gross!” I say. “We seriously need to call the police. Or I need to keep running. Or *something*.” I’m panicky—talking fast, breathless, confused.

But Caden’s mom just stands there.

“Don’t you think we should call the police?” I repeat. I’m starting to feel like I have imagined the whole thing. I mean, a random intruder left me, Isa, notes on the linen closet door? It sounds *insane*.

But the blood on the notes is real. Disconcerting. But definitely real.

Caden’s mom still just stands there. Her eyes seem to narrow a bit. I remember that it has started to feel very cold outside. The wind is blowing my sweat dry and my skin is prickling against the evaporation.

Finally, she says something. “You just came out of *that* house?”

Um...“Yeah. And there might be someone in there and we should really call the police.”

“Why were you in *that* house?”

I stammer, confused. “It was my grandmother’s house.”

She looks like she is about to vomit. Or like she thinks *I’m* vomit. “Stay away from my son.”

Huh?

“I’m serious. Don’t you ever come near my son again. Don’t speak to him. Don’t come to my house again. Stay *away* from us!” Her voice began rising into hysteria.

She doesn’t wait for me to respond. She just gets into her car, slams the door, and peels out of the driveway.

I watch her go. For a second, I just stand there all numb. But then I realize that I’m still holding the bloody notes, the dude is probably still in the house, and the police haven’t been called.

I don’t know what else to do, so I just start running again. I run my fool head off. And I don’t stop until I’m back in my house. I lock the doors and windows, call the police, and then lock myself in the shower and cry.

C*

Chapter

The funny thing about the shower is that while you're in there, you think that the water will be able to wash away the dirt on the *inside* of you. You feel like all of that anxiety and angst and confusion will be somehow dissolve and wash down the drain.

But then the hot water starts to run out and you look at your hands and feet and see shriveled raisin fingers and toes. And you realize that even though there isn't any trace of the guy's blood... even though you're *cleaner*... you don't *feel* clean.

The police had been next to useless.

From the moment that I refused to give them my name (what if my mom somehow found out that I was sneaking to Grandma's house!), they didn't trust me at all.

They asked, "Did you actually *see* anyone in the house?"

"Well," I'd had to say. "No."

"And you say that there were notes for you?"

"Yes. Creepy bloody notes. Do you want me to bring them to you?"

The woman on the phone sounded practically bored. "There's no real way to know that you didn't just write them yourself, honey. So unless we actually have a suspect, they're not much use."

"Will you call me if you have a suspect?"

“Of course we will. After all, you kindly gave us your pay-as-you-go cell number, in spite of the fact that you refused to give us your name.” Her tone was not nice, whatever those words look like written down.

“How will you find him?”

“We’ll send a trooper out there to investigate. We’ll be in contact.”

But when they called back they just said they didn’t find anything abnormal. No sign of forced entry. Nothing appeared to be missing. There were even a few untouched hundred dollars on her dresser. They’d patrol the area a few extra times. Told me to call again if I actually *saw* the intruder.

They made me feel like an idiot.

When I finally toweled off after the shower, I did it slowly.

If I don’t go to school, Mom might find out about today. The school might call or she might catch me at home. *Something*.

It *wasn’t* some random intruder who broke into Grandma’s house, I know that. He knows my name. He knows that Grandma had a plan for me. He wants to carry the plan out, even though Grandma is dead.

Maybe it isn’t a scary plan, I tell myself. I mean, it was *Grandma* who made it. My Grandma who loved me and who stood in the dark rosebushes with me.

Maybe I don’t need the police because maybe I’m not really in danger.

I shiver as I get dressed, but I don’t want to waste any more time alone in the house. So I leave with no make-up, wet hair, and a deep fear wringing my stomach.

•

The school parking lot is eerily quiet when I get there. Without the chaos of cars and arrivals that comes with the morning, the place feels more than liminal: it feels creepy.

Sometimes when I get to school early enough, I sit in the parking lot and I watch kids get dropped off by their parents. It's usually moms who do it. Most of them are haggard-looking, hair sticking out. Sometimes they're dressed for work. Not often. Women in this town tend to think that it's sinful to work outside the home.

Every six cars or so, it's the dad that does the dropping off.

Sometimes I wonder if my biological father would have been the kind of guy who would drop me off.

Obviously, he hasn't cared enough to show his face for the last sixteen years.

But there could be reasons for that.

Maybe Mom threatened him. It would have been a quiet threat, sure, but those can be even scarier. I know this.

Maybe Mom never told him about me. She's like that. Full of secrets and annoying the crap out of me.

When I sit and watch the cars with the parents dropping kids off, this is where I always end up: anger.

Because how could your very own mother *keep* something like that from you? Fifty percent of my DNA a complete mystery to me. My very *identity* a mystery.

What kind of a mother keeps secret her child's *identity*?

Today I move through the parking lot as quickly as I can. My rage is even more palpable in the quiet of the lot; it's a monster that has to be outrun.

There are too many monsters, really.

Ⓒ

As soon as I get to the orchestra door, the bell rings and everyone starts to move out of the classroom.

Zina grabs onto my arm as she sees me and pulls me over to a neglected stack of lockers.

“Oh my gosh, Isa,” she says. “You’ll never guess what happened.”

Really? After what had just happened to me? Uh, yeah. I was going to be all incredulous about stuff. “Seriously,” I say. “I think I could believe *anything*.”

“Okay, we’ll get to you next. Here’s what happened. We were right in the middle of playing the Chorale from Jupiter. Mr. Rivers was all into it—eyes closed and waving his arms around. He was wearing tie-dye shorts, by the way. I got the impression that he did it to bug you and he was annoyed that you weren’t there.”

“Mr. Rivers likes to mess with me. What happened next?”

She glances at her watch. The passing period is going to be over any minute. So she starts talking fast. “Caden’s *mom* busted in the classroom, all drama-rama. She marched straight over to him and picked up his bag and pulled him out of the class. She wouldn’t even let him put his bassoon away. He just had to run along after her, bassoon in tow. Everyone was staring. Caden looked *so* embarrassed.”

I close my eyes. “Oh my fetch!”

Zina is staring at me, face squunched into a thinking face. “Okay, so there’s more going on here than I know.”

“You have no idea.”

“And you’re not going to be able to tell me because passing period is almost over. Well, that settles it.”

“What?”

Zina looks around, and then taking my hand, pulls me out of the passageway. “We’re ditching school today,” she says.



The parking lot monitors dissipate shortly after the morning rush of students arriving and they don’t appear again until school’s over. So once we manage to sneak past the hall monitors, we’re basically golden.

The air is just slightly crisp, and walking through it next to Zina makes me feel infinitesimally lighter. A feeling, I feel the need to note, I should realize will only be temporary.

We are just getting to Zina’s car when I see her: the girl from the mountains.

She is standing at the edge of the school parking lot, leaning against a signpost. She is still wearing the white robe, though against the concrete of the school parking lot, it looks ratty instead of mysterious.

I walk over to her.

“He didn’t mean to scare you,” is what she says.

I know without thinking that she means the guy from Grandma’s house.

Zina is holding the door to her car open, looking over at us both with utter confusion.

“How did you find me?” I ask. “Have you guys been *following* me?”

She shakes her head. “It’s not like that. You’re getting the wrong idea. Really.”

Yeah, right, I thought. “Blood, Mountain Girl. He wrote me notes in blood.”

Zina had walked up and was slightly breathless. “Who the hell is ‘he?’”

“I was going to tell you as soon as we got in the car.”

“Apollo,” says the Mountain Girl, looking at Zina instead of me. “He wrote Isa some notes.”

Apollo.

“He wrote them in *blood*,” I say.

The girl looks exasperated. “He writes everything in blood. He always has. But he didn’t mean to scare you. He just wants to help you. He just wants you to help us.”

“How could I possibly help you?”

“By taking over for your Grandma.” She looks a little like she might cry, now. Grief. For the first time, I think that maybe we might have at least one thing in common.

I start to walk back over to Zina’s car and Zina follows my lead.

Mountain Girl starts talking more quickly. “Please,” she says. “Just give him a chance. He’s lived in the wilderness so long he doesn’t remember how to talk to normal people. But he means well. No one is more devoted than he is.”

Devotion.

Should it creep me out?

I don’t know, but it does. I get into the passenger seat and slam the door shut. “Let’s get out of here,” I say.

Zina reluctantly follows my lead. “But that girl... We still need to help her somehow.”

“Just get us away! We’ll figure it out later!”

“You’re going to have to face it all someday, Isa. Whether or not your father has anything to do with this, you can’t keep avoiding it.” Zina’s tone is

reprimanding, but she is backing the car out of its parking space, which is all I care about.

The girl in white robes is staring at us as we leave, face stricken. “Time is running out,” I think I hear her say.

And I know it is.



Because she’s Zina and I love her, the very first place she decides we should head is Shirley’s Bakery.

Shirley’s Bakery is, frankly, my idea of paradise. It smells like bread. There are free orange roll samples. And it’s run by a delightful 90 year old lady who is thrilled to make you drink whole milk with the brownies that you *didn’t* have to cook yourself.

And oh my heck the brownies. They’re like a melting piece of heaven on your tongue. You can eat about six of them before you start to feel sick.

It takes me about three brownies (and two glasses of whole milk) to explain to Zina what had happened.

Zina sits wide-eyed, chewing slowly on her cinnamon muffins. The gingham curtains frame the sides of her head like a funky red hat.

When I’m done telling, Zina says nothing. She just keeps taking bites out of her muffin, jaw clicking in a methodic rhythm.

I lean against the rickety round table, staring at the linoleum floor. “So?” I ask. “What should I do? Anything? Who should I tell? Anyone?”

“Dude,” she says. “I’m still totally weirded out by what happened with Caden’s Mom. She’s *connected* somehow. She’s obviously connected.”

“Really? ‘Cause I think the woman is just a nut job. You should have seen how weird she was when I tried to practice with Caden.”

“Maybe.”

“But, Zina. What should we *do*?”

“I’ll tell you what we should do, cheesecake.” Sometimes Zina thinks it’s funny to give me bizarre pet names. “We should go and get my Nnenne. And then we should go and see her friend Amaka.”

“Amaka? Isn’t she the fortune teller lady?”

“Yeah.”

“How is a fortune teller supposed to help me figure out why someone is chasing me?”

“Remember what I said about connections, Isa-love? About how religions are like puzzle pieces?”

“Um. Yeah.”

“Look for the connection, Isa. Just look for it.”

C

As we are walking into Zina’s house, Zina nods in the direction of her grandmother, who is sitting demurely in her corner. I think she is knitting something. Zina says, “Nnenne, say hello to Isa. She’s having a sucky day.”

Zina’s grandmother, Nnenne Dozie, and I have known each other as long as Zina and I have. But Nnenne Dozie is always so quiet as she sits in a room—occasionally glancing up above whatever she’s working on to give me a gentle smile—that sometimes I forget she speaks English. Kind of ridiculous, since not only do I *know* that she speaks English, I also know she’s been in America since she

was at least twelve. Of course she speaks English. But it still always startles me to hear her deep voice.

The room is a lot darker than outside and it smells like sandalwood and cloves. The walls have pictures of Africa and the shelves are full of wood-carved goddesses. When Nnenne starts to speak, the sound reminds me of the timpani drum and the way the deep sound hits you in the chest. She says, “The secrets of the Mami Wata are hard to unravel. You can’t do it alone, baby.”

“How do you know I have trouble with the Mami Wata?” Actually, I had trouble with my dead grandmother. But close enough.

She smiles. “Zina told me. And she said we should help you. Said you needed to borrow someone’s faith until you could find your own.”

Zina shrugs—apologetically, I think.

I can’t tell her, maybe because I don’t know how, that I desperately *want* help. I can’t even begin to grasp the hugeness of what I’m trying to figure out. Good. Evil. Apollo. Female Power. It all goes so much deeper than, “Isa’s grandma had a few secrets,” that I can’t even begin to articulate the depth. All I can do is hope for a rescuer.

Zina says, “Nnenne, I think we should go see Amaka.” Zina winks at me. “She’s a fortune teller.”

Nnenne Dozie makes a “tsk” sound at Zina. “Introducing her that way is like saying, ‘Here is my granddaughter Zina. She plays the viola. Badly.’ A person is more than one thing they happen to do!”

I try not to laugh.

“Nnenne” is Igbo for “Grandmother” and Nnenne Dozie is from the Igbo people of Nigeria. Her ancestors were never slaves in America. Zina’s father’s were, but not her mother’s or grandmother’s. It was probably why Nnenne’s Voudoun was more like the traditional African religion than the New Orleans Hoodoo everyone always thinks of when you say “voodoo.” Nnenne’s religion was never stolen from her ancestors. Not the way Zina’s father’s was.

I don’t remember when I learned this. But I’ve always loved Zina’s Grandmother almost as much as I loved my own.

And Nnenne Dozie and her religion may be the single reason that Zina and I became best friends.

It all happened when we were assigned to do a group project in elementary school. It was soon after Zina had moved in, fleeing from the hurricane into a different kind of hurricane—Jeremiah’s Christians being “charitable.” I remember that for the few weeks after she moved, she wore the same two sets of clothes. And then—I guess when they decided to move in permanently and all the grownups in her family found work—she started wearing different stuff. And her family moved out of the preacher’s house and into a house of their own.

One afternoon, Zina, another girl, and I were supposed to do a report on Pompeii. The other girl was also new—fresh from the Bible belt, having fled that same hurricane. She had red braids and a forced smile. We were working in Zina’s new living room, and the red-braids girl kept getting more and more uncomfortable looking.

“So,” Zina was saying, “do you think we should wear costumes for our presentation, or do you think that we should wear a business suit or something?”

The girl, Rachel was her name I think, she didn't answer Zina's question. She was looking at a painting on the wall. I remember thinking that, as a red-head, she should have freckles. But she didn't have a single freckle. "This is an *oum'phor*, isn't it." Her tone was accusatory.

"Huh?" I said. The painting was a building of some kind. It looked like a primitive church or maybe a temple. It certainly didn't look like something to get all freaked out about.

Then Rachel picked up a piece of pottery that was on a bookshelf. "And this is a *govi*." She pointed across the room. "And those are *rada* drums."

Zina was trying not to look up from what she was writing down. But I could see her eyes looking sideways and not at the paper. She was trying to pretend like nothing was happening. She said, "Yeah? So?"

Rachel's face was red looking. It made her frecklelessness seem even weirder. "My pastor in Louisiana warned me about this. He said this could happen to me. That's why he passed out those pamphlets. So I could recognize those drums and pottery. They look just like their pictures did."

I was utterly confused.

"When we had that meeting I didn't think I'd ever find voodoo outside Louisiana. Who would think that you'd find it outside of New Orleans? That it would be here... in this crappy little mountain town?" Rachel's voice got loud and her arms started moving in bigger and bigger gestures. "I won't be corrupted by your voodoo spirits!" She was pointing at Zina. "I won't!"

Zina said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Rachel said, "Liar! Thou shalt be thrust! . . . THRUST!" She grabbed at her notebook and papers, stuffing them into her bag. "We never should have fled here.

We should have taken our chances with that hurricane. We never should have moved out of Louisiana. We never should have left our congregation. Oh, Christ. Death is better than damnation!”

She slung her bag over her shoulder and rushed out of the house with an F-5 like force. She didn't look at us in the face and she didn't say anything else.

Zina looked stunned to see her leave. Almost like she was going to cry. And Zina doesn't cry.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“My Nnenne,” she said. “It's just some of her religious stuff.”

“Why'd Rachel get so psycho?”

Zina shrugged. “I don't know. I guess people don't think they'll find a voodoo priestess next door.”

Zina and I were looking at each other. And there was something deep happening in that look. It was like I realized for the first time exactly who Zina was.

I said, “You know, my grandma used to be one of Jeremiah's Christians. But she's not anymore.”

I could see Zina's chin quivering ever so slightly.

People don't expect voodoo next door. And they don't expect people like my grandma, either. But they're there. People who believe all kinds of things are everywhere.

I don't remember how long we looked at each other. Or how long we stayed silent. It felt like a long, long, time.

And then I finally broke the silence. I kept my eyes locked with Zina's and said, “I think we should wear costumes for our presentation.”

Zina started laughing and then she started to cry.

To this day, that is the only time I've seen Zina cry.

That was the moment that we both knew that we were going to be best friends for life. We knew it almost as surely as if God, himself, had come into the room and given us a prophecy.

I bent over our books and we resumed talking about our presentation. But I remember feeling self-conscious about the mountains. I felt them looking at me—staring at me—through Zina's living room window. God staring at me. And he was trying to tell me something.

I never saw Rachel again. She must have gone back to Louisiana. Or maybe she started homeschooling. I don't know what happened. But I've never stopped being grateful to her.

•

Zina's car is a mangled-looking, powder-blue, El Dorado. It's a total tin bucket, but it's *hers* and infinitely cooler than the mini-van with its rotten chocolate milk and stale French fries. Nnenna Dozie looks absolutely at home in the front seat, despite the stark contrast between Zina's glittering disco ball hood ornament and Dozie's pink crocheted shawl and slipper booties.

Zina is such a crazy driver that none of us say anything during the trip over. I'm too busy gripping the plush seat hairs out of fear. Nnenna Dozie seems to be muttering some kind of chanting prayer over and over under her breath. The only thing I manage to yelp out the entire trip is, "Watch out for that cat!" which is punctuated by the screeching of tires and a swerve, then a rapid acceleration forward.

Amaka's house looks just like any other house you'd see. It's stucco. Brown. Out in her front yard is one of those freaky little garden gnomes.

As soon as she opens the door, though, everything changes.

The door sweeps in a grand motion that rushes the air over us so fast it feels like the whooshing of the wind. Amaka is dressed exactly like you'd expect a Nigerian fortune teller to be dressed: with massive loops of fabric that wrap around her head and an expansive, colorful tunic-dress. Her expression is stark—chin up, eyes downcast. I want to run in the opposite direction.

And then she speaks.

“Oh Dozie,” she says, her posture suddenly relaxing into a slumpy sigh. “I’m so glad it’s you. If I had to help one more lazy good for nothing who thinks that Hoodoo is the answer to all his mojo problems I was going to scream. Land sakes alive! There’s no secret to getting your wife to sleep with you! Do the dishes! Buy the woman a flower! Land!”

I want to laugh. Really loud.

Dozie leans over the doorway and kisses her on the cheek.

“Why do you even do all the hoodoo nonsense if you think that?” Zina asks, grinning.

“Oh, honey! Do you think those Kotex are going to buy themselves?”

She pulls us inside and has us sit down at what I guess is her kitchen table. It’s hard to tell because it’s all surrounded by black velvet curtains and twinkly white Christmas lights. In the middle of the table is a bowl full of dried out chicken bones and a crystal ball.

“Tyson Chicken,” she says, seeing that I’m staring at the bones. “The best kind in the world.”

I sit down and dip my fingers into the wax of a candle burning in front of the crystal ball. “The brand matters?”

Amaka continues, “No. It’s the believing that matters. Faith can turn even Tyson Chicken bones into power.”

“See,” says Nnenna Dozie, “You’re not as cynical as all of that.”

She laughs. “Course not. How else do you think I could sit in front of this table all day and take myself even the remotest bit seriously?” She sits back and folds her arms against her chest, watching the way I dip my fingers into the wax and then pull them out to watch the wax harden. She asks, “What did you bring me here, Dozie?”

I can feel everyone looking at me, though I don’t want to acknowledge that I feel it. I pretend to be wholly engrossed in the wax.

“Sorrow of the Mami Wata,” Nnenna Dozie says.

“Ah.” Amaka nods, her head-wrapping so much a part of her nodding that I can’t help but wonder how on earth she ties the thing up so securely. “Give me your hands, honey.”

I obey.

Amaka doesn’t look at my hands, though. She just holds them and looks in my eyes.

I feel weird over my whole body. It isn’t that I think Amaka is doing anything *magical*, really. It’s just that her hands are cool and dry. And touching another person’s hands . . . well, it’s *intimate* somehow. And she takes them without even a flinch. As she looks at me, I can’t help but wonder how deeply she *can* see into my soul.

“Now, honey, why is the Mami Wata after you?”

“My grandmother,” I manage. I can’t say much else, even though I want to. I just hope she could see the depth of my silent pleading without my having to tell her to.

“What did she do?”

“She died.”

“Uh-huh. She did more than that, honey. Else you wouldn’t be here.”

I pause, not really sure what to answer. Then I say the first thing that comes. “Okay. Here’s the thing. I think my Grandma *is* the Mami Wata. She was always this beautiful goddess to me. And I *loved her*.” Without meaning to, I start to cry. I’m afraid that Amaka is going to think I’m a blithering idiot, but she doesn’t seem to care. “But lately... Lately it seems like maybe I didn’t even know her. She knew something about my father. And she had all these secrets. She had secret plans for me. Violent ones, I guess. But it doesn’t make any sense! She never had a dark side! Never! And if she loved me, why would she be planning to hurt me? Why couldn’t she have just *told* me about my father?” I stop talking before the pitch of my voice goes from merely high to completely pathetic. It’s pretty close, though, and I know everyone around me knows it.

Amaka doesn’t let go of my hands. And she doesn’t blink. She just stares right into my face. Frowning.

The air of the room feels heavy on my chest.

Finally, she says, “Honey, the goddess *always* has a dark side.”

“I know, but...”

Amaka stops me with a whip of her head. “No, honey. You don’t know. Or you wouldn’t be here. The goddess is about *life*. And death is a part of life. Decay is a part of life. Smothering *terror* is part of life. Life doesn’t go on without those

things. And so they're part of the goddess. We don't like them. And we shouldn't. But they're there. In a perfectly balanced wheel. A cycle of dichotomies. Birth/death. Up/down. Light/dark."

"Good/evil?" I asked.

Amaka lets go of my hands and then gently tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. "Good and evil is a little more complicated, baby."

From beneath the table, she pulls a vial of oil. "Close your eyes, Isa," she says.

She starts to sing—low, almost a chant. Or a prayer. I can't tell.

All I know was that inside I start to feel calm. I start to feel the way that I felt when I was with my grandmother: powerful.

Then she touches my forehead with the oil, then my right collar bone, then my left.

When I open my eyes, it's quiet.

Amaka takes my hands again. "There's a place in Nigeria—Oguta Lake. It's clear and big and beautiful. But the most powerful place in the lake is where it meets the red river. The god of the river is Urashi and he's red—like the river that pulses with mud. The goddess of the lake is Ogbuide. She's white. And the place that the two meet . . . *that's* the Mami Wata."

A flow of air from somewhere is making her tunic quake: she looks fierce and kind, all at the same time. "It's the secret—the Mami's Secret. People think she's just a scary-ass mermaid who might eat your soul. But that's not who she *really* is."

I feel like if I look to my left, I might be able to see my grandmother next to me. But I don't want to look and see nothing, so I keep my gaze fixed on Amaka.

“Some people think God is a man. Some people think the Mami could only be a woman.” She pauses, squeezing onto my hands. “But the truth is... The male and the female together, *they* make the One God.”

Silence.

No one says anything. And I don't say anything because I don't understand what the flock she meant.

Nnenna Dozie senses my confusion. “Honey, you'll never be able to take on Mami Wata by yourself. What you have to do is find that place—the place where the muddy river meets the clear lake. That's the place you'll find your peace.”

In my mind I see the moon, circling the earth. We need her, the moon. But we also need the sun. Trying to make a hierarchy would be ridiculous. Because we need them both the same. Is that what she is trying to say?

Because it makes a lot of sense, really. I have a mother. What I need now is to find my *father*.

But isn't that what I've trying to do all along?

Amaka let go of my hands and held onto the sides of my face. “Oh, baby,” she says. “You're going to need to watch yourself. Things go dark really fast when you don't understand the Mami. But I'll be here. *We'll* be here. You know that?”

I nod.

•

My house feels so warm and so much like *home* when I get there that I just stand in the entryway for a minute, soaking in the feeling of security. And for a very brief moment, I feel like I actually *deserve* it.

It startles me when the front door slams open.

I think at first that it might be Mom home early from piano-shopping, and that I might be in trouble because the school had called her cell phone about my absence.

But it isn't. It's Maggie and Eliza, coming home from school. I make a note to myself to keep the home phone by me and to check the answering machine for messages from the school.

Eliza mutters a vague, "Hello," and then says, "You deal with Maggie. The kid is upset."

I try to get her to say something else, but she just ignores me and she disappears into her bedroom. I want to ask her if Eliza-the-prepubescent-wonder had begun her pubescence and was PMSing, but her door is shut before I can.

Magdalen's hair, on the other hand, looks more like a mane. I can feel her sense of anger almost as if it was coming off her in a humidity and enveloping me in it.

"Maggie," I say, "hey there."

She moves quickly toward her room, not even looking at me.

I follow. "You angry?" I ask. "Was Eliza mean to you? Did something happen at school?"

She lays down on her bed, gripping her pink bedspread against her. She opens her mouth, but it takes her awhile to say, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?"

"Because..." She interrupted herself with a little sob and a good deal of chin-quivering. "Because if I start to talk I'm going to cry."

I laugh, just a little, and as gently as possible. "Too late baby," I say.

She throws her head into the flowery blanket and sobs like a crazy person.

It isn't like Magdalen to cry like this, so I sit down on the bed behind her and wait.

Magdalen's room is white and pink, decorated with oodles of daisies everywhere. The view out her window is into the backyard. I stare out at the grass and at the wooden fort Mike built when Mom was pregnant with Maggie. Maybe he was hoping for a boy. The fort is faded. The once bright red paint is now more of a brown.

After a minute or two, Magdalen sits up and sniffs. "It's the kids at school," she says. "They were making fun of my name."

With a name like 'Isa,' this is a problem with which I'm familiar.

She continues, "They said that Magdalen is a prostitute's name. Just like in the Bible."

"Six year olds know what a prostitute is?" I feel like an old person lamenting the decline of civilization, but my shock is real.

She ignores me.

I look back out at that play fort and say, "The Bible doesn't say that Magdalen was a prostitute . . ." I'm about to go on about how it was some Catholic Pope, but she interrupts me.

"I KNOW!" She says, sobbing more. "She was just a woman who loved Christ."

I'm trying to think of something profound to say. Or at least something comforting.

It's Magdalen, herself, who comes up with the best response. "Honest to GOD!" she yells. "WHAT is so scary about a woman who loves Christ?!"

I stroke her hair. "Oh, Maggie, baby."

She sniffs—snot making a snorting sound.

“Powerful women are always scary. That’s what Grandma always said.”

What does it mean if *I’m* scared, I wonder. Because I’ve been more scared lately than I have been in my entire life.

She sits up. Gives me a dirty look. “That’s about the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

I laugh. “Oh, Maggie! I think you may be right about that.”

And I realize: I am going to have to stop being scared if I’m going to get anywhere. I am going to have to stop running.

Honestly, sometimes I think that if *anyone* in our family were to have the “sight” it would be Maggie.

And it makes me feel about two years old.

•

Chapter

Grandma comes to me that night in a dream.

An honest to goodness dream. One of those things that you'd expect to hear about at church, but you're not sure you'd believe in until you've had one yourself.

There's a feeling of relief when I see her walking toward me in that dream. "Grandma!" I say. I'm wearing a red dress and it's itchy. "I've been waiting! I've been wanting you to come!"

She takes my hands, and we sit down in a grove of some kind, I think. We're sitting on a rock. "I know, Isa-baby," she says. "I know you have."

"Why didn't you come right away then?" I ask. "If you knew I wanted you to?"

She shakes her head. A mist rises up around us then. "Things don't work like that," she says.

I want to ask her how they work. How I could call to her again. How I could get her to come to my dreams. To be *with* me again. *Anything*.

Grandma is looking at the mist. She reaches out her hand and points to a space. I don't see anything at first, but then the mist starts parting. "There," she says. "Do you see it?"

I do. It's the entrance to a cave. Dark. Black. Impossible to tell how deep. It looks very deep, though. It seems to stretch right into the heart of the earth.

Grandma looks worried. "In order to understand—about me, about your father, even about your mother," she says, "you're going to have to descend."

“Descend?”

“Yes.”

“There?” I point to the hole in the earth.

“Yes.”

“But what if it’s hell down there?”

“It will be.”

“What if it kills me?”

“It might.”

I’m confused, looking back and forth between the gaping chasm in the earth and my grandmother.

“Will you, Isa? Will you descend?”

The question seems to repeat itself, though Grandma’s lips—death white—never move again.

I wake up covered in sweat, my heart *thumping* in the darkness.

It feels like I should try to ignore the dream. It feels like things would be better for *everyone* if I ignore the dream.

But I can’t ignore it.

Because I know that I *will* descend.

I know that for Grandma and for my father, I would do *anything*.

•

Caden hasn’t come to school again this week.

I wait for him at my house after school, but he doesn’t come.

And in orchestra, I sit, staring at the stupid doorway, trying to see if he’s come back to school.

Zina watches me do this every day, never really saying anything until I start making her.

“What happened?” I ask her. “I mean... we had this *night*. He held my hand and then we kissed! But now he disappears without saying anything? Wouldn't he at least *try* to call me? *Something?*”

Zina keeps shrugging. “You mountain people,” she says. “Just because you kissed!” She shakes her head, her voice light but her eyes full of compassion. “I don't think we can really know anything, Isa. Not until he tells us, himself.”

Well, today is no different. Having just finished an hour of grunt-work (mostly music filing, like always) in Mr. Rivers's office, I find myself hovering close to the doorway as everyone else in orchestra files in for second period. I try to make it look like I have stuff to do. Like, oh, my! I just saw that there's some trash to pick up right there! And, well, there appears to be something dirty on my reed, so I need to stand over by the sink and wash it over and over and over and over!

When Zina comes in, she gives me an eyeball-rolling look and grabs me by the elbow, guiding me back to my chair. “If he's gonna come, Isa,” she says, “I promise you that your standing next to the door isn't going to make it happen any faster.”

I start off into what has become my daily round of questions. “But why wouldn't he call me? Why would he just evaporate like that? I mean, I thought that he *liked* me. He really seemed like he *liked* me. And, oh my crap.” When I sit down in my chair I do it loudly, throwing my arms out. “I really, really like him.”

“Uh, you think?” The voice, much to my horror, is not Zina. It's Mr. Rivers. I feel my face get all hot. Probably red, too, but I don't know for sure.

Mr. Rivers gives me his stupid hippie grin. “I’m glad to see my master plan is working, Isa.”

I just shake my head. “Johnnie, it turns out your master plan had some serious flaws.”

“Like?”

“Like, the guy that I fall insanely for just *disappears*. Like that. So, I’m all screwed up, we don’t get to practice our duet—oh, and did I ever tell you that we’re *terrible*? We’re awful. Two people could not possibly play worse together. It’s a joke. Not that it matters when he’s *gone*. It’ll just be me on the stage. Dying cow squeaking away. Alone. Embittered. And did I mention *alone*?”

Mr. Rivers doesn’t say anything back. And I *expect* him to, so it’s annoying. He just gives me an unidentifiable look, and then steps up on the podium. Zina shuffles away to her seat, pulling her viola out as fast as she can. Mr. Rivers nonchalantly plucks his megaphone up from a table behind him and speaks:

“Hello, Mr. Caden Lancaster,” he says. “It’s very nice to see you again. I know your duet partner will be glad to see you because she informs me that your progress on the duet has been less than stellar.”

I jump. Turn around. And there he is. He is walking through the doorway—late—blushing and heading toward his seat. I feel my insides scramble.

He’s *here*. He has his backpack and his bassoon case and he doesn’t look like he is just there to wrap up some business before getting sucked back into homeschooling. He looks like he’s here to stay.

Smiling all stupid, I try to wave to him.

But it doesn’t work. Not really. I see him glance over at me, and then turn his gaze to the floor, concentrating.

I look over at Zina, confused. She is frowning too, like, what the heck?

I guess this is the moment I realize my fantasy of Caden and I being destined for each other isn't going to come about. Not easily, at least.

G

Grandma talked a lot about destiny.

Destiny and real estate. The two go together in my mind, incongruous as they seem. Every Saturday, Grandma and I would go real estate shopping. I'd dress up in something business-like, and spend an hour curling my hair beforehand. Mom would sometimes send a few glares my way, but mostly she just looked amused that I *liked* going on real estate adventures.

Grandma would have done some research about which neighborhoods were hot, and we would walk the streets of them, looking for "For Sale" signs, or model homes.

When we found houses for sale, Grandma used to add up the digits of the house numbers. If the numerology was good, she'd make an appointment for us to go on a tour.

The first thing we'd do when we got inside any place was stand in the entryway.

Grandma would close her eyes. "When you close your eyes, Isa, you open yourself up to your inner sense. Every place has its own connection to this sense. You want to try and connect yourself with it immediately, so that you don't miss out on anything the spirits are trying to tell you."

Then we'd move through the house slowly. We'd note the feel of the carpet, the way the colors complemented each other, the way that corners and roofs were slanted or placed. Every time I bumped my hip or tripped, we'd make a mental note.

Bumps and scrapes were put down as evidence of bad design; in good design, corners and counters are placed to avoid painful encounters. Grandma never tripped, though. She wore long, flowing skirts made of throbbing purple silk that accentuated her ballerina-lithe figure. She seemed to glide through even the houses with the worst designs.

After making our way through houses, we'd always interrogate the real estate agent, or person at the sales office.

"How much of a down payment?" Grandma would ask. "Do you offer financing yourself? How much are upgrades? Is there a decreased APR for your upgrade loan program? What's the annual property tax? How much can I expect this property to appreciate?"

I always listened intently. I liked the numbers.

Finally, Grandma would tell the real estate agents that we wanted to be alone and we'd go out to the yard and Grandma would take pictures of me. She said it was so she could keep track of which houses had which outside features, but I always felt, as she was looking through that camera, that what she was really doing was seeing deep into my heart and finding a way to bring out the beauty.

On one foggy day, she stopped after taking a picture and looked at me for a long time. I remember that a newly planted tree next to me seemed to strain in the wind and that the fresh bark was wet and smelled like it.

"Isa," she said. "There is a power deep inside of you. Your destiny is incredible; you're one of the chosen."

When Grandma talked, I felt like I *had* to listen. Maybe it was something about the way she looked straight at me without flinching, or the way her low voice seemed so smooth and confident. But it always seemed deeper than that. It always

felt like she had some sort of metaphysical power—like the energy of her mind literally reached out and held me.

“All women are powerful. They’re the most powerful creatures on the planet—no matter what those men tell you about hierarchy and order. But you... you’re more powerful than most women. If you knew the scope of your purpose on this earth it would astound you.”

My mother had always tried to raise me to be skeptical about the motives of flattery. But I always believed Grandma. I believed her because I knew what she said was true.

Maybe that sounds vain.

Maybe it is.

But I’ve always known I have a purpose. And a power. And I’ve always known that both would be great.



When the room is quiet, Mr. Rivers announces that even though he had fully planned on practicing as a group today, he takes the sight of Mr. Lancaster as a sign from Jeremiah that we should spend the day split into our chamber groups.

He makes a motion with his hands to dismiss us all to our assigned practice areas, and I glance over at Caden, who is looking down at his bassoon, pretend-fiddling with some of the keys.

I feel dizzy as I stand up. Like I can’t breathe, or think, or speak, or pray.

And even if I could pray, what the hell would I say?

Caden slowly stands up, too, moving behind me as I move toward the tuba closet. I can’t see him, but I can *feel* him moving behind me. It seems like I can feel the heat of his body, hovering behind.

When we get into the room, I shut the door and I put my instrument down on my chair.

Caden does the same.

His eyes seem wet, or red, or dry, or *something*. He isn't crying, really, but I can't be sure that he *hasn't* been crying. It's sweet.

There is a pressure in my chest that pushes against my stomach, my throat, my entire body. I shake my head. There doesn't feel like there are words to actually *say* anything.

Caden, still not looking at me, puts one end of his bassoon on the ground and leans against it, like a walking stick. "So, uh, I guess we should practice?"

"Just like that?"

He reaches up and puts a hand in his hair, like he has a headache.

My own head is starting to hurt almost as bad as my stomach. "Where were you? Your mom yelled at me. Did she tell you? Why did she yell at me, Caden? It's not like I'm some demonic siren trying to steal your virginity and then kill you."

Caden laughs for a second. "You sure about that?" he says.

I don't find it that funny.

Caden starts fumbling. "I didn't know who you were. I mean... I didn't understand... I didn't..."

"You didn't *what*?"

Caden looks at me. The first time today he has actually looked in my eyes. As he does it, I realize just how insanely close to each other we are. The stupid tubas everywhere making sure that his skin and my skin are merely inches apart.

Caden's voice seems to waver a bit as he speaks in what is kind of a gravelly whisper and kind of a low voice above a whisper all at once. "Hell, Isa. It's just so damn complicated."

I'm taken aback. "You swore," I say. "You don't swear. You said so."

He laughs again. "No, what I said was that I was a man of many secrets and layers."

I feel like I might cry. I am so friggin tired of secrets. I close my eyes, pushing my back against the door, trying to increase the number of inches between my skin and his skin so I won't feel like I'm going out of my mind.

Finally he says, "It's your Grandma, Isa. She was the reason Dad left us."

I know, of all of the things I can have been expecting, I wasn't expecting *that*. "Really?"

He nods.

"So I guess I'm not the only one distraught over my grandma's connection to fatherlessness."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Please. How on earth could my Grandma be the reason your dad left?"

He shrugs, leaning his bassoon against this random filing cabinet and sitting down. For a second, as he sits there, I think that his hand is going to reach out and touch me. But it doesn't. "I don't totally understand, either. I mean, it happened eight years ago."

It looks like it hurts him to talk about it. But I can't let him *not* talk about it. His words are stuttered and slow, but I will just wait for him to say more. Wait for him to explain things on his own.

“I think I remember Mom saying that he’d found a new religion. Some other woman. I thought she meant he was cheating on her—like he had a girlfriend or something. But, no, it wasn’t that. He’d found your Grandma and joined her church.”

“But Grandma didn’t really have a *church*,” I say.

He shakes his head. “It was secret, I think. A secret church. Mom called it a cult.”

A secret church?

The voice in my head was saying Grandma couldn’t possibly have a church that I don’t know about. But the feeling in my gut was telling me that it’s not only possible, but that it would explain a *lot*.

“But, anyway, I wasn’t that old. All I knew was that Dad was *gone*. He was gone and Mom was devastated.”

His face looks physically pained, and it hurts my chest to see him hurt. But the truth seems more important right now, so I let him keep talking.

“Mom didn’t used to be... the way she is. She used to be sweet and she’d sing to us. She wore baby Jonas on her hip like a fashion accessory and she’d dance as she cleaned up the house. But when Dad left... we started going to church *constantly*. Not just on Sunday. We started reading the Bible at five in the morning and she started doing those cross-stitches. She didn’t sing anymore. And she didn’t laugh like she used to.” He shrugs, and looks at me.

I walk the one step over to the chairs and sit next to him. The whole sides of our legs are touching; our body heat only accentuated by the tiny room.

He reaches over to me, and he takes my hand. His hand is dry and warm and I can feel the places where the arid weather is chapping his skin.

“We’re just at the beginning of something here, Isa. And... It could have been wonderful. More than wonderful... I’ve never felt this way about *anyone* before...”

But.

He sighs. “I don’t think we can be together, Isa. Not really. And it’s better to end it now. Before we... Before we take it any further.”

Part of me is fighting what he is saying. But the other part knows that his mind is made up. “Why not, Caden?” I ask. “Just because of your Mom?”

He shakes his head. “It took a *lot* for me to convince her that I didn’t need to homeschool again. Disobeying her... It would be *wrong* somehow. I know that it would. And I couldn’t lie to my Mom. I’m not like that. Not yet, at least.”

I know he isn’t.

And for the first time, it occurs to me. Maybe it’s just men who care about right and wrong. Everything seems simple to them. Good. Bad. Right. Wrong. Yes. No. Endless polarities that can be summed up in a simple: this is the right thing, and this is the wrong thing.

Women... Women are different, somehow. Everything they do has something to do with *someone*. Calling someone to you. Sending them away.

Right and wrong don’t seem to matter so much when you want someone and they’re sending you away.

I try. “Caden, don’t you think it would be more wrong for us to split up just because of your Mom?”

But here he goes and says it. “It’s not just that, Isa. You... I mean, *your family*, is why my family is broken. I don’t know if I could be with you if part of me was always thinking that you were the reason he was gone.”

“But you said it... it wasn't *me*.”

“My head knows that.”

But not his heart.

That's what he isn't saying. He doesn't need to say it because I get it.

It just *sucks*. It sucks bricks.

I say, “So what, then? What do we do? Try and avoid each other? Tell Mr. Rivers that we can't be duet partners?” I hold up my English horn: evidence of what we are supposed to be doing in the tuba closet.

“No, we can't do that. We're going to have to go through with the duet.” He hesitates before he says that. He hesitates and I feel the tiniest flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, this conversation doesn't *have* to be the end of Caden and Isa.

“But if we do that, we're going to need to practice,” I say. “I'm not much into public humiliation. And I'm honestly kind of used to people thinking I'm *good* at the English horn.”

He laughs. “Yeah,” he says. “I know what you mean.”

“So,” I say. “Practice?”

“Mom will kill me if she finds out,” he says. “But, yeah. Obviously we can't practice at my house. But Mom doesn't know where you live. I'll tell her I have Rugby Practice.”

“Just seconds ago you said that you couldn't lie to your mom.”

“I know. I was attempting to make an ironic joke.”

“If I didn't know it was a joke, does it still count as a joke?”

He picks up his bassoon. “I guess not.”

“Here's what you can do, Caden. I teach a kid's music class every Wednesday at two. Tell your mom that your orchestra director's assistant invited

Jonas to a class. It's cheap. \$2/hour. She doesn't need to know that *I'm* the assistant. No lying required. We'll just practice afterwards."

"I think I could handle that," he says.

I let go of his hand. "Alright. Let's start playing this awful thing."

I try to sound cheerful. But inside, something in me feels cracked.

•

Chapter

Mike is home early after school. He and mom are lying on the couch—Mom’s head on one end, Mike’s head on the other, feet all tangled and lovey dovey. Each of them has a laptop where I can see a Scrabble game open. They’re each concentrating really hard and then look at the other and laugh.

“Abampere?” Mom says to Mike, outraged. “Is that seriously a word?!”

He is all smug in his black socks. “Look it up in the TWL, peaches.”

“Now you’re calling me *peaches*?!”

“Only because I’m winning, peaches.”

Mom throws a pillow at him, and they both laugh.

Maybe it should have make me feel happy. Happy to see that *they* are happy. Happy to see that even after eleven years and three daughters, they can still *be* happy. Love is real and all that crap.

But it doesn’t make me happy.

I go to my room, trying to make loud teenage noises of pissed offedness.

It doesn’t seem fair. They get to have each other. And I get? Blown off.

Rejected because of something *Grandma* did? If she even did it, that is. My money is actually on Caden’s Mom being insane, if you’re making me bet.

And then I see my stack of notes. All the cryptic passages. Plans. Reigning. Taking places. Someone named Apollo. And then there is Grandma’s property. And what that girl said: “only a month.” Only a month and then? What?

Less than three weeks, now, actually.

I guess I won't have to wait very long to find out.

I take the papers and throw them on the floor, stomping on them, and then chastise myself for the drama of such stomping.

It isn't fair that Mom gets to be laughing in the living room while I get to be miserable next to my bed. It just *isn't*.

The rage starts wrapping around me, blanket-like. Comforting in its sense of purpose. At first I just stand here. Then I start pacing.

And then I decide I'm going to get some answers.



On the morning of my fourth birthday, Grandma took me to the tops of the mountains at sunrise. That was before Mom married Mike, when Mom and I still lived with Grandma. I remember that Mom stayed in the car, sleeping on the backseat, while Grandma and I sat on top of a rock, waiting for the sun to rise.

I was wrapped in my Mom's sweater—too big for me, but soft, and smelling like my mother. Grandma had given me a thermos with hot chocolate, and she was beating on a drum, singing something in another language.

"If I stop singing," I remember her telling me, "The sun might not rise!"

I saw a little bunny rabbit peeking from behind an aspen tree, and it made me laugh.

When the sun finally poked up above the horizon, Grandma stopped drumming, and put an arm around me.

"Four is going to be the best year of your life, Isa, baby," she said.

"What about five?" I asked. "Or six, or seven?"

She kissed the top of my head. I remember that my nose was cold but I felt warm.

“Those will be the best years, too.”

•

I stomp into the room with such an aura of rage that it makes Mom sit immediately up from her Scrabble game.

She doesn't say anything. She looks like a frightened doe, really. Her vulnerability has always been her shield—the way she keeps from having to tell me the truth. I'm not going to let it get to me today.

“What's going on, Isa?” Mike says.

It is hard to talk because I'm choking on my anger. Words are something that has to be spit out. Like prune pits. Or accidentally swallowed bugs.

“Who is my father?” I don't look at Mike as I say it.

Mike pushes his computer aside. “Isa,” he says. “You promised.”

“I know I promised! It was a stupid promise, though, Mike. And it was stupid of you to make me promise it. I mean, how could you keep something like this from me?”

Mike doesn't say anything.

“So, who is he, Mom? Why haven't I met him?”

Mom just stares at me.

Mike touches her hand.

“Don't try to evade by looking pathetic, Mom. Tell me!”

She opens her mouth—nothing coming out.

I deepen the dirty look on my face.

“I don't know who your father is,” she finally says. She pulls the couch blanket down around her shoulders. “And so I tried to protect you from it, Isa. I

didn't know what else to do. And I thought it was *right* to protect you. Babies shouldn't *know* things like this."

I lose some of my fire then. I'm not entirely sure why. Maybe there is something in the way she is pulling the blanket around herself. I drop my voice. "You don't know who my father is?"

She shakes her head. "I don't," she says. "It could have been a lot of people."

I'm quiet for about five seconds. And then, "Shit, Mom." I'm almost whispering. "How many men did you sleep with?"

She looks like I've slapped her. She is motionless.

Mike is on his feet in seconds, pushing me away. "To your room, Isa. You're not to come out until morning. That is *no* way to speak to your mother. And you have no idea what the hell you're talking about."

The way he speaks to me stuns me. Mike isn't forceful. Mike doesn't swear. Mike assembles together sandwiches and plays Scrabble. He doesn't push me into my room or raise his voice that way.

But he does.

And the fact the subject of my father matters so much?

It scares me.

G

Even a few hours later, after I've eaten dinner in my room, I can still hear Mom playing the piano. She'll probably play late into the night, I think. After the way her face looked when I said the thing... And the way Mike pulled me away... There is no way she *won't* play the piano for hours. It's what she *does*. Maybe she is incapable of real emotion in real life. Maybe she only feels *anything* in music.

So when the knock comes at my door, I expect that it will be Mike—come to see how repentant I am, or at least whether or not I’m going to apologize to my mother.

And I will apologize, really. I’m not sure if I’ll mean it, but I’ll do it.

“Come in!” I say, trying to keep my tone even.

In my ongoing attempt to fail all of my classes, instead of doing homework I’m sitting on my bed, burning CDs of melancholy classical music with my laptop. Whenever I’m moody I like to listen to the stuff and pretend I’m the heroine of some old movie. Sometimes I close my door and dance dramatically around the room. If I’m really feeling messed up, I do this while weeping. Hysterically.

After the debacle with Mom and Mike, I’m feeling only semi-messed up, so I’m not dancing. But I’m surrounded by a pile of naked CDs and the whole room smells like permanent marker as I write down each CD’s content on its front. My bed is rumpled and my sheets stained with the chocolate I fell asleep eating last week. In the corner is a laundry basket full of clean clothes I was supposed to put away days ago and the top of my dresser is still covered with those almost-empty bottles of lotion. In short: it’s a disaster. The precise state you do *not* want anyone you’re remotely interested in to see.

Which, I suppose, is exactly why the person who is knocking on my door isn’t Mike at all. It’s Caden. *Caden* at my bedroom door.

The hallway is shadowy as he opens the door and the way the lack of light plays on his face and down to his fingers—which are gripping the handle of his bassoon case—makes him look utterly and completely pathetic.

Because I’m a living cliché, this makes me want him more than ever.

“Hey,” he says. “I hear you’re in trouble over here, but I explained to your dad the way our duet sounds more like dying sheep than music. When I told him there were only two weeks left before the festival, he showed me where your room was.” He is half shrugging. Almost plaintively.

I want to hug him. Or rock him, or feed him, or take care of him, or something else nice and Oedipally disturbing.

“He’s my stepdad,” I say, “not my dad.”

Caden whispers, “Mom and Jonas went to karate practice together. They’ll be gone for three hours. I thought I’d sneak over.”

He is acting almost excited to see me. Does he not remember that just a few hours ago he pronounced that we can’t be together?

“Um,” I say. And then I immediately look at my carpet. My carpet is green. Mom said she put green carpet in my room because I remind her of a fairy and fairies, apparently, need green carpet. “Yeah. Sure.”

I frantically start stuffing things away, furiously glancing around the room to see if I have done anything humiliating like leave underwear—or worse: a box of tampons!—around the room. I kick a bunch of stuff under the bed, but it’s pretty obvious that the whole endeavor is hopeless.

“Mom!” I call out of my doorway. “Can I come out of my room? Just to practice my duet for an hour?”

In typical fashion, Mike speaks for Mom. And, really, I don’t expect anything else because I can still hear the piano. “Okay, Isa! But only for an hour!”

I grab my English horn case with one hand and Caden’s hand with the other hand in a single motion. “We’ve gotta get out of this room,” I say. “It’s a total disaster.”

He doesn't seem to flinch when I touch the skin of his hand. His polo shirt is wrinkled and I can see on the front a tiny mustard stain. Through the blue stripes of his shirt, I can almost feel his body heat emanating. I smell his cologne and I want to forget that any of what is happening is happening.

But things are different now; Caden has pronounced it.

So as soon as we leave my room, I let go of his hand.

•

The hallway smells like roses.

Roses and Grandma.

Laughing at dawn.

Drumming and singing.

And I am angry.

For the lying.

For the secrets.

And for making me think that sixteen would be the best year of my life.

•

We walk into the TV room and I fumble as I put together the music stand next to the couch. I watch the half-quiver of Caden's mouth as he looks like he is trying to decide whether or not to reach out and touch me again. I can plainly see the conflict on his face: Follow your heart, sure. But what if your heart is telling you two different things?

Your dad is gone. My grandma is dead. So just touch me already, I am thinking. Get over yourself.

But he doesn't say anything. And he doesn't touch me.

“So,” I say, “measure 12 on was kind of a disaster last time. Want to mess with the tempo or something?”

“OK.” The pitch of his voice has become low and almost tired.

As we start to play, the entire space between us seems to pulse with discomfort. Everything is awkward. Everything just a little off key.

Except for one thing, I realize.

The music.

For the first time since we started rehearsing this duet, the music is not only perfect, it’s heart-wrenching. The room fills with it. As if the music has become the only safe place to feel pain.

Just a few measures in I hear the piano in the other room stop, and then I hear the tip toe of my mother, coming up to where I can just barely tell she is there. She stands over in her almost-invisible corner and listens. She doesn’t move. I don’t hear her feet tapping or see her head nodding. She is shrouded in shadow. And she is completely still.

Strange as it sounds, in this very moment I understand my mother better than I’ve ever understood her. Because now I feel like we know the same language.

Accidentally, and for the first time in my life, I’m calling out to her in it.

And she hears.

•

Chapter

When our hour is up, Mike tells me that I'm allowed to walk Caden outside, but that I'll have to go back to my room as soon as he is gone.

Caden—as talented as he is when it comes to parental obedience—nods at Mike, and says, “Thank you, sir.”

Mike likes being called, “sir.” I can tell. But he pats Caden on the shoulder and says, “Oh, no, please call me Mr. Weatherford.”

“Mr. Weatherford, then. Thank you.”

Mike shuffles away, back to his Scrabble game or something.

Hearing his name—Mr. Weatherford—only reminds me that the name that I use—Isa Weatherford—is one that has nothing to do with biology.

What would my name be if we knew who my father was? Would it be something ridiculous? Romantic? Something more exciting than the Scrabble-playing-book-reading-badly-cooking monotony of the Weatherford existence?

As the front door closes behind us, Caden and I sort of just stand there. But it doesn't really feel awkward anymore.

Just sad.

There is some wind blowing. The wind makes, as Maggie would have said when she was a toddler, the trees whisper to each other. The rustling noise mixed with the speckles of autumnal color on the leaves send a kind of shiver through me. Fall used to be my favorite season.

Caden readjusts the straps of his backpack, and re-grips the handle of his bassoon case. From the white outlines of strain on his fingers, I can tell the case is heavy, but he doesn't give any sign that he is struggling with it. "I'm so glad I got to come over to your house, Isa. It was so... I don't know. *Different* than what I thought it would be like."

"Different? Really? What did you expect it to be like?"

He shrugs. "Oh, I don't know. Crazy or something. Whenever Mom talked about your grandma, it was always psycho sounding. Goddess worship. Pagan naked dancing. Knives and blood and stuff."

I laugh. "So you thought maybe you'd find a dead cat pinned to the wall at my house?"

Thankfully, he laughs, too. "Something like that. But you guys are so *normal*. More normal than my family, that's for sure." He looks at his feet, quiet.

I can't—not honestly, and Caden deserves honesty—tell him that his Mom and house are *normal*. So I don't. I let him be quiet for a minute, and then I ask, "Do you miss him? Your dad?"

He looks up from the ground, but not at me. I'm not sure what he is looking at or if he is even looking at anything at all. "I do," he says. "But, in some ways, he hasn't really been my dad, you know? I see him, from time to time. But he's different now. And somehow, that hurts more than if he was just *gone*." He fidgets, looking around at a few more trees or cars or other things that aren't me. "Sometimes I wish he had died instead of leaving us, you know? It would be easier."

There is a pause in the wind. A sudden stillness of air.

I will never even know my father well enough to know that he'd changed, I think. He is more than dead: he has never existed for me at all.

"My grandma..." I say. I don't really know how to talk about Grandma to Caden. It all still hurts so much. "The stuff I've been finding out about her... And now she's dead. And the fact that I didn't ever really know her? The *real* her? It makes it hard to miss her. And it makes me miss her more."

Caden nods. "I know what you mean," he says.

"Part of me wonders whether or not it would help to learn about her, you know? The *real* her. And then another part of me is terrified. Because I might not like what I find out."

Caden shifts the bassoon case from one hand to the other—his first outward act indicating that it is, in fact, quite heavy. "But you have to know the truth, Isa. You can't love someone based on a lie."

"Why not, do you think? Don't you think some lies could be truer than truth?"

He looks at my face. For the first time this entire conversation. "I guess I don't really know," he says. "But you'd have to know both the lie and the truth to be able to figure it out."

He doesn't smile at me as he leaves.

The trees are still whispering to each other as Caden drives away. I think that their secrets sound tragic.

⊕

I go back to my bedroom, without even trying to con my parents into letting me out of my punishment.

The part of me that had felt cracked before feels broken now.

I pace my carpet—kicking aside newly labeled CDs and mess. I don't want to sit down. But I don't want to stand up. I don't want to *anything*, really. Except scream, maybe. Or rip apart fabric of some kind. Or throw things at the wall.

It's my math book that saves my room from the utter destruction of my wrath.

I sit down on the bed, and I flip to the chapter on derivatives. I write right in the margins of the book, scribbling down derivative after derivative. The numbers will always add together—so soothing. There is a *right* answer. *Always*. Again. And again.

It's nothing like my identity: fluid and possibly always to be fluid. A whole half of me always to be a mystery just because my mom slept with too many people.

Maybe that's the most appealing part of Jeremiah's patriarchal church, I realize as I write faster and faster. Always a right answer.

When Maggie appears in the doorway, it startles me. "Maggie!" I snap. "What? Do you want something?"

I only look up at her for a second because I'm so frantic to get the numbers down. She is wearing Strawberry Shortcake pajamas and her whitish hair is dripping into curls around her shoulders. She hasn't bothered to take off her plastic earrings yet.

She gives me a weak smile, looking at me like she is trying to figure me out. "You wrote in your math book." she says.

Flipping a page in the book, I keep writing in it. "Yeah."

I think that maybe she'll reprimand me, but she doesn't. "Okay, well, it's eight and I'm going to bed."

"Okay. Goodnight."

Something about the tone of her voice reminds me of Grandma.

You can try to hide from it, Isa baby, Grandma had said to me once.

I shut my math book as I remember. I can almost smell her again, standing next to me, and I don't want the smell of math book to mix with the memory.

You can try to hide from what, Grandma?

Your spirit! But you can't hide from your spirit; it finds you.

I turn to the doorway, about to apologize to Maggie for snapping at her.

But she is already gone.

•

It's hard to fall asleep tonight. I sit in my bedroom, in the dark, listening to Beethoven. Maybe it's geeky that I listen to Beethoven, but I can't help myself. The guy has a passion in his music. When I listen to it... my life feels *important* somehow.

But as I sit here listening to the music, I notice that the rhythm is starting to seem off. I stand up and shut down my CD player, but the noises keep going and I realize what is causing the odd synchronization: our rosebushes are scratching at my window.

They do this a lot. In the wind. When the cat walks through them. Sometimes for no reason at all. You'd expect the sound of thorns scraping against glass to be unnerving. But it isn't, really. It sounds mournful. It kind of reminds me of that ache you get in your stomach when you think you're in love.

Right then, though, there is something weird about the scratching. There is too much, too fast. Like someone is *there*.

My pulse increases, as do the frequency of thoughts about all of the nasty possibilities: bloody people named Apollo, rapists, robbers, cat-sacrificers. You know. Your normal psychos.

And then there is a knocking.

I move toward the window warily, pushing aside the curtain just enough to see a human face staring through the glass. Which, of course, freaks me totally out and I start screaming.

But then, even as I'm mid-shriek, I recognize him: Caden.

My freaking out immediately turns to a weird mixture of twitterpation and annoyance—first at myself for being scared, and then at him for scaring me.

I listen to see if anyone upstairs has heard my shrieking. They didn't seem to.

So I slide open the window, and I say, "Dude. You almost gave me an aneurysm."

He doesn't smile. "I brought you something," he says. He holds up a paper grocery bag that is oozing out a liquid from the bottom. It smells divine.

"Get in here." I motion to him, taking the paper bag in one hand and pulling on his arm with the other. (There has long been no screen on my window since it's the easiest place to climb in the house when you forget your keys.)

His skin is cold and cheeks bright. The cold has deepened the shade of his freckles and now they are even darker than the sandy curl-wisps of hair that cling to his forehead.

The smell from the paper bag is intoxicating and I find my head buried inside the bag almost instantly. "What is this?" I ask.

“Thai chicken curry with rice. It was my turn to make dinner tonight. And then, well, I thought you might be hungry.”

“You *made* this?”

His voice is even, tired sounding. “Yeah.”

Involuntarily, I start to cry. “You brought me your cooking,” I say.

He nods.

“But you don’t even *like* me anymore. Why would you bring me your cooking?”

He looks confused. “Isa,” he says. “Us not being able to be together is a completely separate issue from whether or not I *like* you.”

This pisses me off.

“Why do you do this, Caden? We just, this morning, decided we aren’t going to be a couple, and you show up at my house unexpectedly not once, but twice. And yet, you still say we can’t be together?! What the hell are you trying to do, then?”

He has no answer for me.

I grab a box of tissues to stave off the runny nose my tear-welling at the cooking has caused. “And couldn’t you get in big trouble? I mean, you’re sneaking around at *night*. It’s *late*. And you came to my *window*.”

He gives a half smile, then. “Of course I came to your window,” he says. “It’s our thing.”

The lights are still off in my room, but there is enough light coming through the window that I can see his eyes. He isn’t blinking very much. But he is looking right at me—frown etched into his face.

Thinking about the night that I came to *his* window just makes my throat burn and my nose start running again.

Part of me still feels like Eve. And part of me still feels like I need to save Caden.

I don't know if he wants me to say anything about when I came to his window that night. So I don't. "What if your mom finds out?" I ask. "You'd be so busted."

He nods. "I'm hoping she won't find out. She thinks I'm out running. Sometimes I go running late at night. Helps me sleep."

He walks over to my bed and sits down, pointing to his running shoes to prove that he is, in fact, going to be running.

I hold the package of curry like it was a baby, and sit down in a chair next to my bed. "So."

"So."

"Did you just come to bring me this?" I think I want him to say *No, I came here because I was wrong about us not being together and we need to make out a lot now.*

He doesn't say that, though. "I had an idea," he says. "I had an idea about how you can find out more about your grandmother."

"Really?" I say. "'Cause I'm actually not so sure I *want* to know anything more." What I want to know about is my father, but that is seeming more and more unlikely.

"I know you don't. You said that before. But I think you need to find out the truth. And I think I know how we can find some more out."

"Okay, then," I say. "How?"

He pauses, like it's hard to say. "My dad," he says. "He knew her. He knew her really well. I'll take you to see him."

“Caden...”

He looks like he’s in pain.

“It’s okay, Isa. I want to help you. And I think it *will* help. I mean... I really think it will help.”

I remember the dream of Grandma. I remember the way that her voice sounded in my dream when she asked me to descend. For a moment, I feel like if I was to close my eyes and reach out, I’ll be able to touch her again.

Grandma knew *something* about my father. And Caden’s father knew my Grandma. There was a chance—a small one, maybe—that his father knew something, too.

I stand up from my chair, turning in a few anxious circles before I can stop myself.

Caden is looking at me, face darkened by mountain shadows in moonlight. And there is something so plaintive about him... I know I can’t say no to Caden. Not with how sad he looks.

And I know—with every part of me—that if there is more I can learn about Grandma’s connection to my father... I am going to have to do whatever it takes to find it out.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll meet him.”

C

Chapter

The plan is to leave to go see Caden's dad right after I teach the kid's music class (instead of practicing).

I teach the class every Wednesday because school gets out early that day for everyone so that all the teachers in the district can have their staff meetings. I get out of class around one o'clock. Kids start showing up at my front door a few minutes before two.

So, I have an hour. One hour to get ready to go and see Caden's dad.

And clothes seem very, very important.

I stand in front of my closet, thinking up different possible combinations. Black, red, white, or stripes? Angora or cotton? Layers or just one sweater?

When the first knock comes at the front door, I'm wearing jeans and a white Angora sweater. Sitting down on my bed and pulling on tennis shoes, I wait for someone else to answer the door and call to me. And then when they do call me, I start stumbling around the room, looking for something else to distract me.

When Mom comes right to my bedroom door, though, I know the time for distraction is up.

"Isa?" she says. She is wearing a blue blouse with a thick cotton skirt. The skirt comes to just below her knees and she is wearing flesh-colored sandals.

I pretend to be fixing the curls around my head, snapping and then unsnapping different combinations of sparkly barrettes into the serpentine spirals.

"Didn't you hear me call you, Isa? Caden is here."

I think of Grandma's funeral. About the way I had seen Caden in the kitchen and about the way he wouldn't come in and about how Mom said that I didn't want to date someone so cute. Did she remember that? Did she realize that Caden was the boy she was talking about?

"Okay," I say.

"C'mon, kiddo." She makes a motion with her head and I follow her out of the room.

C

Caden is sitting next to the piano in the front room.

I smile when I see him—I can't help myself.

When Mom and I approach, he stands up. Such a friggin gentleman.

"Hello Mrs. Weatherford." He nods at my mom.

Then there is an awkward period of silence. Inside the silence, I notice that there is a lot of noise coming from the kitchen. Maggie and Jonas are sitting at the kitchen table. Maggie has dragged in a huge box of Barbies and seems to be forcing Jonas to play with them. He doesn't seem to mind, though. He combs a doll's hair and then starts looking into a box for clothes. He picks army gear, which is hilarious. Both he and Maggie are chatting and laughing like they've known each other for years.

Mom is watching them play, too. "Are you watching Jonas today?" she asks.

Caden nods. "I usually watch him until Mom gets home from work. Unless he's got choir practice or karate."

She looks at the two of us—me in my obviously carefully chosen outfit (though probably not carefully chosen for the reasons *she* thought), and Caden standing nervously in our living room.

She seems like she has something else she is going to say, but the doorbell rings and kids start to flood in.

G

Music class is chaos. I usually have somewhere between ten and fifteen little guys—I think the cheap tuition helps with numbers—and mostly we sit in a circle and play games. Sometimes we march or drum or dance around like crazy people.

My nine-year-old sister, Eliza the pre-pubescent wonder, is my assistant.

Eliza isn't much like me. Not only is her thick blonde hair straight instead of curly, but she inherited all of her dad's predictability and none of Mom's musical spirit. Eliza never seemed to care about our Grandma—not the way I did, at least. Eliza doesn't seem to do much deep thinking, actually. And she won't stand for chaos or funny business. She takes the \$7.50/hour I pay her as permission to keep me in my place. The moment things get the least bit out of control, Eliza is sending me glares and passing me decks of flashcards with eighth notes and G Clefs. The kids get nearly as excited with the flash cards as they do when we dance around. But for some reason, the flashcard game is infinitely more acceptable to Eliza.

With the exception of the fact that Caden is here and making me feel utterly self-conscious today, this Wednesday is very much like any of the other Wednesdays. I'm standing at one end of my living room. About fifteen kids are pawing at my feet. Eliza is pursing her lips at me as she sits in a green wingback chair, obviously sending me the repeated telepathic message: *Get it under control,*

Isa. Maggie is sitting next to Jonas, being oddly flirty for a six year old. Mom is hovering in the shadows, silently witnessing the madness.

I hold up a flashcard and all fifteen kids scramble to name what is on it first.

“An F Clef!”

“Middle C!”

“The Circle of Fifths!”

“The Circle of Fifths? What the heck are you talking about?”

“It’s a real thing! Stop being such a lame butt!”

“You stop!”

There’s a rush of adrenaline that soars through me when I’m standing in front of a crowd teaching. I can look around at the room full of little people and for one hour not a single one of them can think about anything except what I’m saying.

It’s a talent I inherited from my grandmother.

And it’s comforting to know that I inherited it from her because there are a thousand things about yourself that you can’t explain through inheritance when you don’t know half your inheritance.

Grandma had a flair for the dramatic. She would whisper and people listened. She gave impassioned speeches at city hall and they actually did what she said. She told stories to me and Maggie, and we’d lose track of time. She could charm workmen, talk her way out of parking tickets. Sometimes I suspected that if she wanted to, she could convince people to give up their souls for her.

That suspicion always made me feel a little funny, though. Because if I have the same talent... What does that *mean*?

I toss the kid who correctly named the flashcard (it was a crescendo sign) a piece of candy. Those are the rules of the flashcard game. Candy for correct

answers. More candy for getting the most correct answers. It can get pretty insane. Once there was even biting.

The doorbell rings just as I'm pulling out the next flashcard and Eliza stands up from her judgmental throne to answer it.

I use her momentary absence as my opportunity to turn on Bach's "Toccatina and Fugue in D minor," and I say, "Okay kids! Time for DANCING!"

When Eliza returns just a few seconds later, she is escorting another little boy to the mad group of dancing kids. He nods and begins to dance next to Jonas, who is looking very stiff and dignified.

Caden looks tired as he sits down in the pink wingback chair—the one right next to Eliza's green one. Pink and green may be strange colors for chairs, but they complement the carpet perfectly. It's green with pink flowers on it. As well as being the only family full of heathen non-churchgoers in town, we are the only family I know with flowered carpet.

Caden is watching me—without blinking again. It takes everything I can muster not to dwell on the images of kissing him in the rain that keep popping back into my head and making me sweat. Why won't he stop looking at me like this?

Eliza rolls her eyes at me and stands up to hand me a box of plastic recorders.

I shut off the Bach music and the dancing reluctantly ebbs. A few of the kids whine out an "Aww . . . come on!"

"Sit down." I raise my eyebrows and they immediately start to obey. Again, I feel the rush of adrenaline at the power I know I have over them. And again, I feel the rush of guilt that always follows my enjoyment of it. "We're going to work on learning the recorder again today."

Eliza passes out the instruments one at a time, trying to maintain a sense of calm. But even she can't stop the kids from immediately blowing into the instruments. Jonas's eyes get wide at the high-pitched racket.

"Remember what we learned last time? Remember how to finger a C?" I hold up my own recorder to demonstrate. "Now, try the fingering and then blow as softly as you can."

Through the ear-splitting screeches that followed, I spot Jonas holding the recorder so awkwardly that I squat next to him and put his fingers in the right place.

From my squatting position, I hold up my own recorder to the group and say, "Okay, here's how you do the G!"

This goes all the way through an extremely messy version of "Twinkle, Twinkle," until it's finally time to ease the pack of kids into the kitchen to call their parents. And, like always, until their parents come to get them, I make sure that they are fed even more sugar.

Eliza is reluctantly in charge of supervising the sugar-eating fest. I watch her dole the candy out grudgingly—one tiny piece at a time—as I collapse into an exhausted heap on our yellow, velvet couch.

Caden tries to guide Jonas into the sugar fest, but I overhear Jonas saying, "Thanks, but I really don't require your assistance anymore."

Caden isn't smiling when he comes to sit next to me. Is he ever going to smile again? "That was quite a class."

"Ah, yes." I put my arms behind my head. "My masterful teaching is truly a gift that will shape the ages." My tone is mocking as I say it, but I'm awkwardly aware of the fact that I half believe what I'm saying. And suddenly I become even

more awkwardly aware of how close I am to Caden, so I push myself away from him.

Just then Jonas emerges from the kitchen holding a sucker. A small stain of red dye lining his lips. “Thank you for class, Miss Isa,” he says. “Next time will there be more singing?”

“If you want there to be more singing, Jonas, then we’ll have more singing.”

The doorbell rings. The first of the parents. I call out, “Remember, you had a terrible time and going to music class is boring!”

The kids walking to greet their parents laugh and then put a mock droop into their shoulders.

“How was class?” I hear one of the parents ask.

“Very educational, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Another kid pretends to yawn and then says, “I can just feel my brain expanding.”

Eliza is smiling at the parents with approval.



When the last of the kids has left, my stomach starts twisting.

Caden is standing up, next to Mom. “Would you mind if Jonas and I borrowed Isa for the rest of the afternoon?”

I feel exhausted, but it’s only three o’clock. There is a lot of afternoon left.

Maggie lets out a pathetic sort of “don’t let Jonas leave,” cry and Mom squints at me and Caden before she ask, “Why don’t I watch Jonas today? You guys go get some frozen yogurt or something.” She smiles. “Have fun.”

Oh, heavens. I *wish* this was just going to be a yogurt date. I *wish* that Caden and I were still all sweet on each other the way Mom seems to think we are.

My stomach twisting turns into full on stomach hurting and so I move quickly to Caden—taking him by the elbow out the front door. “Thanks, Mom,” I say, waving goodbye and trying not to let on that what we are about to do is so *not* a date.

I see her smiling at us as the door closes—misty eyed because we are such cute little flirtatious kids.

I think it’s what’s making me ache inside.

•

“Tell me something about your Dad, Caden,” I say. “Something nice.”

He is driving. His car: a black Volvo station wagon—old, but clean—that smells just like him.

Like always, it has only taken us minutes to leave the safety of the town and enter into one of the canyons. The shadows of the mountains feel alive.

It takes Caden awhile to answer. I start to wonder if maybe he isn’t going to answer me. But he does, eventually. “He gave really great shoulder massages,” he says.

“Really?”

Caden laughs without smiling. “Yeah. Weird, huh? But I remember this one time when I was, oh, I don’t know. Maybe eight years old? I was sick. Raging fever. Body aches. That sort of thing. Dad had me sit in front of him, and he rubbed my shoulders until they didn’t hurt anymore. I fell asleep on his lap.”

He pauses and the shadows seem to tap against the car, trying to find a way inside.

“It was the last time I remember feeling *safe*, you know?”

I don’t know, I realize. Maybe I can’t know. Whatever you can say about Mike as a stepdad, he makes all of us feel safe. And actually, until the last few weeks, I have been *used* to feeling safe.

Caden stares out the front window, hands gripping tight against the steering wheel. I want so badly to reach out and to touch him. To tell him that everything is going to be alright. That *I* will keep him safe.

But then I remember that he doesn’t want to be with me. That I *have* offered myself to him—in a way—and he has turned me down.

We don’t talk anymore after that. Just drive. Into the shadows.

•

I think I’m hoping that wherever Caden is driving, it will be somewhere other than Grandma’s property. But it isn’t.

When Caden stops the car, I recognize the path where Zina and I had gone. Everything looks familiar. And yet... I feel like maybe we are on another world.

There isn’t any sign of *anything* anywhere. Just trees, dirt, and darkness. It’s only about 3:30. It seems like it shouldn’t be as dark as it is. It isn’t night dark, but it isn’t day bright, either; it’s a nether-place, somewhere in between the two. The air is cold and I pull my hands inside the sleeves of my sweater, starting to wonder if I should have brought a hat or a coat or a scarf.

Caden is shivering, too, and his voice seems deeper than usual. Does he lower it to distract me from his shaking? So I won’t think him less of a man or something ridiculous?

“We’ll have to walk in,” he says. “There aren’t any roads.”

I nod, as if I have never been here before, and fall in line behind him as we descend into the forest.



Grandma didn't talk to me about death very much. Not that she didn't try. I just didn't want to hear. When I was a little girl, my cat, Buttons, was hit by a car. Grandma wanted me to bury the cat. To have a funeral. But I wouldn't.

"Isa, baby," I remember her saying. "Death is a part of life. It's all a cycle... It's..."

But I wouldn't let her finish. "Don't!" I said. "Don't tell me that death is a part of life!"

She looked confused. "What do you want me to tell you, baby?"

I remember that it was hard to talk through my tears. All I could think about was the silky feel of Buttons' orange fur under my hands. About the way he used to lick my bare toes when I was sad.

"Tell me you can bring him back. Or if you can't, tell me about how he's in heaven. Tell me *nice* things, Grandma. Not other stuff."

She hugged me, then. I cried into her chest as she stroked my hair. But I remember that she didn't say anything else.

She didn't say anything at all.



I don't know how long we've been walking. It seems like it's been hours, but the sky is still light and the sun hasn't really moved very much. It has probably only been thirty minutes or so.

The walking is making me warmer, though my fingers stay pretty cold. When I walk next to Caden, I accidentally bump into him, and he moves ahead of

me as if there is something repulsive about my touch. Eventually I just walk behind him.

I'm about to ask if Caden has thought to bring any water (he is wearing a backpack), when we see it.

A camp.

Or, a bunch of camps.

Or, a compound of some kind.

There is a center building, a ratty looking trailer, and then there are a lot of tents. People move slowly around, not seeming to notice us. The women—and there are many, many more women than men, carry water and talk in whispers. The men poke at cooking pots or add wood to fires. *All* of the people are wearing white robes. And *all* of them have blonde hair. A few of the women have flowers woven into their hair. But even those are white.

The entire sight makes me feel disconnected from my body. I look down at my white sweater and think, stupidly, that at least I chose the right color.

Caden looks at me, worried, I think. “Dad’s this way,” he says.

As we move through the camp, people start to notice us.

At first, they just stare at us—at our blue jeans? Our tennis shoes?

After a minute, though, they seem to see something *familiar* about me.

And I see the girl.

The same girl who’d come to the parking lot of my school, dressed in the same ratty white garment. She smiles when she sees me, looking relieved. And then she darts away, starting to whisper things to the people around me.

I think I feel my intestines twist with guilt. She thinks I’m here to help her.

And I’m just here to see if I can find out about my father.

A few minutes later, a few of them start to touch me. Gentle touches first. On my arm, against the edge of my jeans.

It's all I can manage not to scream at them all, "I'm not here for you! Just give up that stupid idea already!"

But even this thought makes my intestines twist in guilt even harder.

Caden is walking ahead of me, so I don't know if he sees what is happening. He leads me to a battered-looking trailer that is parked at the edge of the camp. I wonder why his Dad lives in a trailer while everyone else is in tents. But I don't have time to wonder very long because as soon as we get to the trailer, the door opens.

The man that opens the door is tall and seems much too old.

But Caden recognizes him, immediately. "Hello, Dad," he says.

C

The trailer smells like incense.

I always thought that the only reason people burned incense was to cover up the smell of pot. (Not that I know what pot smells like.)(No, really; I don't.) But Caden's dad doesn't seem like he is high. He doesn't seem like he's ever been high in his life.

And yet... He looks so much like Caden.

"You look just like your grandmother," he says. His hair—blonde, of course—came to just above his shoulders and fell in the same kind of cornflake curls that brushed Caden's forehead.

"You look just like Caden," I say. Only he looks older, of course.

Next to me I can feel Caden stiffen. I'm not sure what he is feeling. Is he embarrassed? Is he angry? Does he resent the fact that I look like Grandma? Think I'm going to steal him away the way Grandma had stolen his father? I can't tell. And when Caden speaks, there is a politeness in the way he forms his words. He seems distant. "Isa's Grandmother is dead," he says.

Caden's dad looks at Caden as if he can't have said something more obvious. "I know she's dead. We all do. We've been reeling without her."

He makes a motion for us to sit at a cardboard table set up near a tiny—foggy—window out of his trailer. There are raindrops clinging to the outside of the window and through the glass, I can see a ghost-like mist rushing across the rocks of the mountain peaks. The strange thing about the mountains is that they don't even look like mountains. They are so close to us that they seem more like giant creatures: predatory, powerful. The leaves up here have all changed to yellows and reds—though they've only just begun to change in the valleys—and the sky is about forty different shades of gray.

Caden pulls out my chair for me. His jaw is clenched shut and he doesn't look at either of us in the eyes. Was coming here a mistake?

"So, Isa," says Caden's dad.

"How do you know my name?"

He looks baffled. "Your grandmother."

My stomach starts doing its knotting thing again—like it knows that it was wrong to come. Like it knows that we will be better off if we just leave. Now.

But Caden starts talking. He looks at the table, not at his Dad. And his words seem hard to form, like maybe they are sticking to the sides of his throat.

His dad reaches over to touch his hand and there is a real tenderness in his touch. One that softens Caden's posture just slightly and gets his words to come out. "Isa's grandmother wasn't who she thought she was. And I thought... I thought you might be able to help her understand."

His dad nods. "No one was closer to her than I was." He looks over at me. "Except maybe you. But that was different. There are..." He touches an amulet that hangs around his neck. It's a piece of crystal. No, it's a vial of some kind. It's made of crystal and the edges are shaped and stained with something brown. I notice then that there is something funny about his chest. It's scarred. Scar after scar. One on top of the other. Long lines—like he has been cut with a knife. Over and over and over again. "There are different kinds of love."

"How long have you all been out here?" I ask. "Following Grandma? It doesn't seem to make sense."

He doesn't say anything. I can see through the other trailer window that the people of the camp are still moving around, performing various duties. Some of them seem to hover around the entrance to the trailer—as if they are waiting for me to come back out.

Caden pulls his hands down onto his lap—his knuckles are white as they clench one another—and looks up at his dad.

"We were called to be here," he says. "Called to follow the higher law. The truer law. Chosen."

I swallow. The smell of incense in the trailer seems overwhelming and I start to feel sick.

He says, "What good is truth if you won't live it? Won't commit to it? Forsake mother, father, child?"

Caden fidgets in his seat.

“Grandma said she could tell me things,” I say. “About my father. About who he was. About where I came from. Do you know any of it? Do you know how I could find out?”

Caden looks over at me, surprised. I realize that I have never mentioned to him that I don’t actually know who my father is. The knowledge seems to soften something in his face.

“I know a lot of things.” Caden’s dad stands up from the table and went over to a shelf where there is a box. My throat squeezes in on itself. Can this be the package Grandma was talking about?

“Isa,” he says. “Your grandmother had a destiny for you. A purpose.”

“I don’t care about my destiny. I care about the truth.” Though, I’m not sure that is entirely true. I want a father, but the *truth* scares me. The truth is that my grandmother had a compound in the woods and people who lived there wearing white robes. The truth is insane.

“The truth *is* your destiny, Isa. The question is, are you ready for it? Will you do what it takes to get it?”

My stomach knots again, telling me to run. To get *out* of here. “What do you mean? What do you want me to do?”

He opens the box.

I don’t know what I expect will be inside. Papers? Photos? A letter from my Grandmother?

Not a knife.

A fourteen inch long blade so sharp that the edge of the knife seems almost to twinkle.

Caden's dad picks the knife up, grimacing in pain as he pricks the end of his finger.

He holds his finger up to me. "Blood," he says. "It runs through your veins in a jumbled mass of cells and DNA. The markings of kings and bloodlines. Mother to daughter. Mother to son. Daughter to granddaughter. It's the dark pulsing force underneath life, itself. There is nothing more important to us than the bloodline. Than keeping it pure."

I'm breathing faster than I was before.

"I hated when Grandma went off on the bloodline," I say. It didn't happen very often—her rants. Normally, it would only come up if she thought I was playing too long with Zina. Or when I was dating Edmundo... But I don't want to think about him right now. In front of Caden, thinking of an ex-boyfriend seems like a betrayal of sorts.

"The truth is frightening."

"I wasn't scared," I say. The certainty in my voice startles me because I *am* scared right now. "When she went off about the bloodline, I was *bored*. Her racism was so strange that it wasn't even offensive, really. It was *boring*. Completely beneath her."

He doesn't know what to say to this. He looks hurt, maybe. Like he is trying very hard to be understood, but is too unused to dealing with normal people to know how.

"So," I say. "What do you need me to do? What do I have to do to get you to tell me who my father was?"

He stands up, holding the knife between us. "I need your blood."

"Like to do a DNA test or something?"

“Something.”

“What do you mean, ‘something?’”

He stammers. “You don’t know how much we need you, Isa. We need you to be initiated into our fold. Without a woman to lead us...”

My eyes start to water. “I’m not my grandmother. I’m sorry.”

And I am sorry. Because if I was more like my grandmother, maybe I would feel more like I know who I am.

He grabs onto my wrist, pleading. “Please, Isa. Please do this for me. For us. For your grandmother.”

I try to pull my hand away, but his grip is strong, in spite of how scrawny and aged he looks.

Caden jumps out of his chair, putting himself between his dad and me. “Let go of her!” he says. “She doesn’t want you to touch her, so you can’t.”

Caden’s dad slowly lets go of my wrist, looking even more hurt than he had before.

I stand up then, too, backing myself closer to Caden.

His dad says, “Please, Caden. You have to understand. She must *reign*. She is the *heiress*.”

Reign.

Heiress.

Blood.

“Oh, crap.” I say. I can’t believe I’d been so stupid not to realize it. Not to realize *who* I’m talking to. “You’re Apollo.”

“Of course I am.”

“Apollo?” Caden says. “Dad? What kind of a stupid ass name is *that*? Your name is *Fred*.”

Suddenly I’m hit with the same panic that hit me when the girl in white asked me if I was going to save her.

Apollo is hardly the imposing criminal I’d imagined when I found his notes at Grandma’s house. But he seems to know a truth that terrifies me.

And so I run.

(Ugh. I know. I run. Again. I’m a chicken and I hate myself, okay?)

I rush out of the trailer door, jumping down onto the ground and running as fast as I can. Caden is beside me within seconds, running.

Apollo is behind us, yelling. “Stop! We need you, Isa! We need you to reign!” I think he might be crying.

And there are *dozens* of people chasing us. Their white robes flap against their legs as they move. They are yelling. When I look over my shoulder, I see that Apollo is standing defeated looking against his trailer, still holding that knife. But he is just watching the people chase us. I think he hopes that they will catch us. I can’t be sure. The smell of rotting Box Elder leaves is all around us and the ground is slippery.

We aren’t going to be able to outrun them, I think. There are too many. Too fast. Every atom of my body says to give up. Submit. Die. It’s too late. The truth is going to catch me no matter how fast I run.

Maybe Caden sees me giving up or slowing my pace. Because he grabs onto my hand. He grabs onto it and he pulls until I’m running again.

“This way,” he says. “I think I know how to lose them.”

We run down a steep hill.

Descending.

Descending.

The shadows around us deepen as we go deeper into the canyon.

Descending.



As we run, I can't stop thinking about Apollo's chest.

Scar on top of scar.

Hundreds of them.

My mom has a scar. It's a circle on her left breastbone—as if someone tried to cut a piece of flesh from her heart.

When I was a little girl and still sitting on her lap, I would trace the scar with my finger, humming all the while. I told her once that it looked like an eye. She laughed and said, "Honey, if I had a third eye, it would be right here . . ." She pointed to her forehead and then started to tickle me, as if to change the direction of the conversation.

Scars come from wounds. That's not something you can change.

And perfectly circular scars come from deliberate ones.

And you can't change that, either.



We are running so fast that I never stop to notice which direction we are going or how long it's taking. Caden looks around constantly, and I guess that he isn't quite sure how to get back to the car. It's hard to breathe, but the adrenaline helps.

When I trip I think it's over and I'm half glad because I'm not sure how long I could have kept going. It's a tree root that I trip on, I think. We've just careened down another hill and are about to careen up the other side, when my foot catches against something in the ground, and I fall forward, flat on my face.

I think I scream as I fall, because Caden turns around immediately and is down on the ground next to me. "Are you OK?" he asks. "Are you hurt?" He is breathing so hard that the words are aspirated instead of voiced.

I push myself up, looking down at my hands.

"You're bleeding," Caden says.

And shaking. I'm shaking so hard.

Caden looks around and we both listen.

Nothing.

We'd out-distanced the robed people long ago, and I guess that maybe we lost them within the last ten minutes.

"There," I say, pointing to a gigantic tree that had been hollowed out by a lightning strike. "Let's hide in there. If anyone comes, we'll hear them."

He nods and then he helps me to stand up. I lean against him, limping my way toward the hollow of the tree.

The space is cramped, but it's dry. There is a smallish hole that we crawl through, and we are surrounded by the tree. It makes a tube up toward the sky and I think that inside the tree, God is the only one who can see us.

It takes us both a long time to slow our breathing. And even then, mine has a raggedness to it that feels desperate.

Caden opens his backpack and pulls out a water bottle.

Ah! I think. He *does* have water in there.

“Give me your hands,” he says.

His voice has a new authority to it.

I obey him, but my hands are still shaking.

Caden holds both of my hands—palms up—in a single one of his hands.

He pours some of the water from the bottle onto my hands, carefully pushing away bits of rock and dirt from the scrapes. And from his backpack, he takes a scarf, and he wraps my hands with it.

I start to cry.

For a about a second, I’m completely embarrassed because do I do *anything* but run away and cry? Is that, like, the only thing I can come up with to do?

But the next second, Caden’s arms are around me and he is holding me. He rocks back and forth, shushing me like a baby. One of his hands is around my back and the other hand is against my hair.

And up, through the tree tunnel into the sky, I can feel God looking down on us. And I wonder what he thinks of it all.

G

We don’t stay in the tree very long, but only because we can’t. The forest shadows are deepening, and we know that we don’t have very long before it will be completely dark.

“Okay.” Caden keeps his voice quiet, but it still has that authority. “There. There is the sun. So. West.”

He looks around, frowning, seeming to mutter stuff to himself. “We ran from that way. North. And we parked the car to the west of the camp. So that means...”

My arms are still shaking and my hands throbbing, but I try to brush off the dirt and dust off of my jeans. White angora doesn't seem like the best choice, after all. "I can't tell you how happy I am that you have a sense of direction, Caden. Seriously."

He smiles, but only a little. "Don't be happy until we're actually *in* the car again."

He puts his hand on the small of my back—which sends tingles all through me—and he leads me away from the hollow tree. He doesn't talk, but neither do I. Voices carry in the forest. We both know that.



Grandma didn't always smell like roses.

The leaves in the forest are rotting around Caden and me. They are soft and mushy underneath our shoes. And feeling their slimy lack of friction makes me realize that Grandma didn't always smell like roses.

Sometimes she smelled like dirt. Dirt rich with manure. Rotting and decomposing into a black soil.

You need that kind of dirt to grow roses.

You can't have the smell of roses without the smell of that kind of dirt.

Roses and shit.

They go together.



When I see the black Volvo appear a few dozen yards away, I want to cheer, but Caden shushes me. "We don't know if they're here, waiting for us," he says.

So my heart starts doing its freak-out dance again, and I'm squinting through the tree shadows, trying to see anyone. Anything. But I don't.

We creep, almost silently thanks to the wet carpet of rotting Box Elder leaves.

But as soon as Caden unlocks the car, we're racing. We slam the doors and we jump in the car, locking the doors as fast as we can. Caden turns the car on and accelerates away.

I look behind us as we drive. Maybe, just maybe, I see the shadow of someone running toward where the car had been.

But I can't be sure.

C

Chapter

When we get home, Jonas and Maggie are in the back yard, playing in the fort. Mike is in the kitchen, mashing together some cream of mushroom soup, rice, canned peas, and fried ground beef.

“Hi, Honey.” Mike says. Then he looks at my dirty sweater. “What happened to you?”

Uh... My sweater is a total mess. Grass stains. Dirt stains. There is probably gunk in my hair, too. And I don’t even want to look at my favorite jeans. “I fell down,” I say. “Tripped on a tree stump while we were walking.” I hold up my scarf-wrapped scraped hands to show him.

“When I’m done here, we’ll get some antiseptic on those,” Mike says.

I nod, looking over at Caden.

We hadn’t discussed how we were going to act when we got home. And I don’t have any idea how to keep from clueing my parents in that we haven’t gone for a walk and eaten frozen yogurt. It’s an impossible thing—the truth—but I don’t know how to keep my face from screaming it at them.

So I think that maybe, just maybe, I can take my cue from Caden. Make my face look the way his face looks.

But he won’t look at me.

“You going to stay for dinner, Caden?”

Caden shuffles a bit and looks at the clock. “Thanks so much for the offer, Mr. Weatherford, but no. I told Mom we’d be home by six thirty, and she doesn’t accept excuses to be late.”

Mom is sitting at the table, hands folded on her blue cotton skirt. “What if I called her?”

His voice cracks a bit. Panic? “Oh, no. Thank you, though.”

Mom just keeps staring at him.

Caden keeps talking, even though he doesn’t have to. “See, with my mom there’s right and there’s wrong and there’s nothing in the middle and no excuses for being late. And I have homework, anyway.”

Mom nods. She looks like maybe she is going to say something to Caden. Maybe even something wise. Something about Mom has always seemed wise, even when she’s busy pissing me off.

But the door opens then: Maggie and Jonas come from the outside. Eliza dragging herself behind them, as if Mom has asked her to keep watch over them and she is bugged about it.

Mom turns to them and smiles—leaving us waiting for that wisdom that isn’t going to come.

•

Mom tells me to walk Caden out to the car while she gets Jonas ready to go. There is a winking smile in the way she says it—like she wants us to have time *alone* to say goodbye.

It’s pretty dark as we stand in the driveway. Not all the way dark, yet, but getting there.

“What are you going to tell your Mom about today?” I ask.

He leans against his car, hands in pockets. “Just what I already told her. Jonas had music class. He knows better than to say anything about playing with a *girl* afterward. Plus I put dinner in the crock pot this morning and we’ll be home before she is, so there shouldn’t be an issue, really.”

“Jonas seems like a good kid.”

“He is. Stiff and goofy, maybe. But a good kid.”

We both pause.

October in the mountains is a strange month. Part fall, part winter. Mountain air is thin and burns your throat when it’s cold. But in October, the air is full of wet. It’s comforting.

I pull the scarf off of my hands, examining the scrapes left behind. “Not too bad, really,” I say. “Not bad enough to make anyone ask what happened once I change my clothes and wash my hair.”

Caden reaches out and takes my hands, looking at the scrapes, touching them softly with his fingertips. “They’ll be healed in no time.”

When he doesn’t let go of my hands, my chest and throat start to hurt. What did today *mean*? I want to ask. If we aren’t going to be together, why does he hold my hands this way? Why did he hold me when I cried and why is he looking at me the way he is looking at me?

“We didn’t find out who your father is,” Caden says.

I nod. “Were you surprised? Were you surprised that I don’t know?”

“Yeah,” he says. “But it’s okay. I mean, all of us have things we don’t know.”

“Not knowing your father’s identity is a pretty huge thing to not know.”

He laughs and there it is again: his smile. “True.” He squeezes—gently—against my hands and looks right at me. “But we *will* find out. I mean... I want to help you find out. If you’ll let me.”

Because my throat feels swollen, I can’t say anything. So I just nod.

Caden looks around us. “The stars are coming out,” he says. “I don’t know any of their names, though. I took astronomy last year, but I took it winter semester so I only know the winter stars. Isn’t it weird that starlight is millions of years old? That’s how long it took to get to earth. So when you’re looking at stars, you’re looking back in time.”

“I don’t know how we’re going to be able to find anything else out,” I say. “There might be something at Grandma’s house. But your dad broke in there. And then your Mom wouldn’t do anything. What if it’s not safe? What if he waits for me in the very place he thinks I’ll go because I still want that stupid package Grandma was going to send? I just don’t think I can go there. Not alone. Not again. But time is running out! Like the girl said. It’s *coming*. I just don’t know what *it* is.”

I’m talking really fast and probably not making much sense.

Caden reaches out with one of his hands—still holding onto my hands with his other hand—and runs his fingers across my hair. He tucks a stray curl back behind one of my ears. It completely silences me.

“All we need,” he says, “is to be there long enough to get a clue. Just one clue. And you won’t have to be there alone. I’ll come with you.” He swallows, knitting his eyebrows together. I think I see a muscle in his neck twitch. “You met my dad,” he says. “You met him and you don’t look at me any differently.” He

swallows again, harder this time. “I don’t care about the other stuff anymore. I just don’t.”

Is he saying...? What *is* he saying?

I don’t get a chance to find out though. Jonas is coming out the front door, followed by Maggie and my Mom. “Come again, Jonas,” Maggie is saying, slightly breathless.

“I will,” he says. “I definitely will.” He is grinning and even in the twilight, his freckles look like dark stains on his face.

“Mom and Mike’s anniversary is this weekend,” I whisper. “They’ll be out of town and it’s our next chance.”

Caden gives me a smile.

And then he and Jonas get into the Volvo and drive away.

⊕

Chapter

But Caden hasn't talked to me much the rest of this week.

We'll be in English class and I'll feel him looking at me, but when I turn around, he looks away. I'll see him in the halls, but he'll be looking at the ground—as if he's *trying* not to meet my gaze. When Mr. Rivers sends us into the Tuba closet to practice, I think maybe he'll say something about that bizarre night in the mountain forest. Maybe he'll say something about how we are supposed to meet up this weekend. I don't want to push him in case he is embarrassed about his dad, so I don't *try* to bring it up. But he doesn't, either.

We just practice.

When I stumble out of the Tuba closet, I must be making a sour face because Mr. Rivers says, "Oh, Isa. Come here. You look like you need chocolate. I'll write you a tardy-pass."

I practically throw myself into a chair in his office. I make a really loud sigh, too. (I can be dramatic like that.) "Johnnie," I say, "I need more than chocolate."

"Diet Coke, too?"

Diet Coke and chocolate *are* good together. "Caden won't talk to me," I say. "He won't even look at me. I think he hates me."

Mr. Rivers laughs. "Oh, Isa. You just do not understand the adolescent male brain, do you."

Huh?

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you when you can’t see. The boy is smitten.”

He hands me a box of chocolates. I take three pieces.

“Maybe. He still won’t talk to me, though.”

“Any idea why not?”

I stuff all three pieces of chocolate into my mouth and chew, answering with my mouth still completely full. “It’s complicated Johnnie.”

Mr. Rivers looks pensive. Well, actually, he just looks the same as he ever did (grey hair frizzing into an Einstein-like fro, hippie clothes looking all worn out). But I know he is pensive because if he *wasn’t* pensive he would be saying something about how unattractive it is to talk with my mouth full of brown goo.

I swallow the chocolate and reach out for two more. Mr. Rivers reaches into the mini-fridge he keeps under his desk and makes good on his promise of Diet Coke.

“Thanks,” I say.

He nods.

I’m about to stuff the next bits of chocolate into my mouth, but I pause, right before. “Johnnie?” I ask. “Why do you hate organized religion?”

He pulls out another Diet Coke and plucks it open. The hissing sound of pressurized carbon dioxide releasing seems oddly cathartic. “I don’t hate organized religion. I think organized religion is fantastic,” he says.

Um... okay... “But you’re always talking about our shared apostasy.” I drink some Coke. Too fast. Then I burp out my eyes.

“Well... yeah. I don’t go to church, you’re right. Or, more specifically, I don’t go to *Jeremiah’s* church. But I’ve been to church before. I love church.”

“What do you love about it?”

“Oh, a lot of things. I love the way that hymnbooks smell like dust. I love the way that moms bring their babies cheerios and then the cheerios get mashed into the floor. I love the smell of wax and the whispers people make.” He looks at me.

“I really do want to know,” I say. “I’m not just messing around.”

“I know.” Mr. Rivers drinks his own Coke. Not as fast as I drank mine. “Mostly, I love how it’s the same story, told a thousand different ways. Moses. Muhammad. Jeremiah. Different names for the same lesson.”

What about Kali? I want to ask. Eve? Mami? But I don’t.

“Is that chocolate good?”

“It’s lovely,” I say. Though, honestly, my stomach is starting to feel a little sick.

“Faith... Well, it *matters*. But it doesn’t mean a sack of snot if you don’t use it. People who go to church... They get weekly practice with faith. A community of people around, to support them in it. You don’t get that on your own. Not the same way.”

“But churches are all f’d up.”

“Humanity is all f’d up.”

“Why don’t you go to church then?”

He reaches under his desk for his tardy-pass pad. A silent sign that our conversation is almost over. “Because I love *all* churches,” he says. “And as much as I love the extra ten grand they paid me to move to this Podunk town to teach... I couldn’t give up *all* churches just for the one. And that’s what I’d have to do.”

He shrugs, starts writing my name on the tardy slip.

I ignore my sick-feeling stomach and stuff three more chocolates in my mouth.

When I open the door to walk out of Johnnie's office, Caden is standing just outside.

Aw, crap, is my first thought. Because how much of that conversation did he just hear?

"Hi," I say. The sound is muffled with chocolate, so I'm not entirely sure that it sounds like, "Hi," though.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I was just waiting for you. Is that OK?"

"Yeah, it's okay." I stuff the yellow tardy-pass into my pocket, wondering whether or not I should turn around and ask Mr. Rivers to write one for Caden.

Caden doesn't seem to care, though. "I just..." he says. It seems like he is really struggling with the whole sentence construction thing.

So I start walking and he starts walking next to me.

He doesn't look at me as he talks. "I just wanted to make sure we were still meeting tomorrow. That you hadn't forgotten?"

"No," I say. "I haven't forgotten."

"Okay. My mom shouldn't get home from work until seven tomorrow. Can you meet me at four? At your Grandma's house?"

WTF? I want to say. But Caden looks too uncomfortable. "Yeah. I'll be there."

"I'll have to have Jonas with me."

"That's okay."

He nods. "Okay, then."

And then he walks away. Without smiling once.

And I got directly back toward Johnnie's office for more chocolate.

6

Chapter

In the mountains, there is always a day of warm before a snowstorm. The air is still and children play outside and you don't have to wear a hat because your coat is enough. It's like a tiny respite before chaos. A chance to run and laugh before the snow comes down like a monster—stealing away your ability to dance or sing.

This is the weekend of my parent's anniversary.



Mom and Mike leave early Friday afternoon and leave me in charge of Maggie. Technically, I'm in charge of Eliza, too, but she tells me that she is too old to be babysat. When I tell her that isn't exactly true, she just goes into her bedroom and slams the door.

When Maggie and I go to Grandma's house to meet Caden and Jonas, I just leave Eliza there in her room. There are only three hours before his mom gets home from work, and we probably don't want to waste time with someone who won't keep our travels a secret anyway.

Maggie hasn't been to Grandma's house since she died.

I realize this as soon as we open the front door and I see Maggie's eyes go soft and wide and hear her laughter melt into a silence. Putting an arm around her, I walk with her over the threshold. As we are surrounded by the smell of roses, I wonder what Maggie is thinking. She loved Grandma. She didn't spend quite as much time with Grandma as I did, but she loved her probably as much. It's different for us in some ways, though. Mom didn't marry Mike until I was five. Mom and I

lived with Grandma before then. Grandma was like a second mother for me. For Maggie she was only Grandma. But that was a lot, I realize as I watch her. More than I expected it to be.

Caden and Jonas follow us into the living room slowly. Things with Caden still feel awkward. Completely unresolved.

I'm trying to figure out what to tell Jonas and Maggie to *do*, but Maggie handles that for me. Letting go of her softness with a single breath, she turns to Jonas and says, "C'mon. I'll show you where the toys are."

As they run off, my thoughts start to center on the house. And Apollo.

There aren't any signs that he is here this time. There are no footprints on the carpet. (Did Apollo actually *clean up* after himself?)

"If anywhere has a clue," I say, "it'll be over here." I turn on as many lights as I can as I walk down the hall toward the linen closet. Caden doesn't ask me why I'm doing what I'm doing. Maybe it doesn't need to be explained.

The linen closet is closed and before I open it, my heart accelerates again. I shut my eyes and open the door in a fast swing. And when I open my eyes I see...

Towels.

Just sheets and blankets and towels and washcloths. They are all a bright white and folded perfectly on the shelves. Grandma was probably the last person to touch those towels.

Underneath the towels is a gun safe, where Grandma kept her rifles.

Grandma was quite the hunter, believe it or not.

I look at Caden, whose eyes are wide.

"What?" I ask. "Never seen towels next to rifles before?"

"It's not that," he says. "It's... Why did you think there'd be a clue in here?"

“There was a note. Said all the answers were behind this door.”

“If this closet is anything like the one at my house, then they probably are.”

He reaches out—as if he knows exactly what he is doing—and pushes on one of the shelves.

When the shelves start to move backward, I’m pretty sure that I’m going to puke.



When I let myself think about it honestly, I always knew there were things that Grandma didn’t tell me. I knew that there was a *reason* Mom hated her. I knew that she went places she never spoke of. I knew she had a KKK-like obsession with blonde hair and blue eyes. I knew that she had friends she didn’t tell me about. I knew that she had a life outside of me. Thoughts outside of me. It never bothered me because I never thought about it.

But why... why didn’t I ever think about it?

Maybe you don’t think about things unless you have to.

Or maybe... maybe I knew that if I thought about it, I would find out things that I didn’t want to know.



When Caden sees the secret room behind the linen closet, he seems in awe, horrified, and like he always expected something like this, all at the same time.

It’s a small room—windowless. The ceiling had been painted with swirling stars and the walls are a light blue. At the center of the room is an altar and the walls are covered with photographs.

I find a light switch that cast spotlights onto each of the photographs. It looks like an art gallery, almost.

The pictures are mostly of Grandma. Grandma with her hands up in the air. Grandma kneeling before the altar. Grandma holding a knife. Grandma praying. Grandma dancing in a circle with people wearing white robes. And the weird thing? In most of the pictures, Grandma is *naked*.

Caden walks red-faced around the room, quickly glancing at, then moving past, each of the photos—as if he doesn't want me to think that he is looking perversely long at a naked woman (even if it was supposed to be “art.”) When he gets to the altar, he picks up a sage stick and smells it.

“It’s a nice smell,” I offer. “Unless you think it’s gross. Which I maybe do.”

He doesn't smile at me, but the spotlights with their dramatic lighting make him look even more beautiful than normal.

“Apollo—uh, your dad, I guess—said that we'd find the answers in this room. So, where should we look?”

Caden's mouth looks pinched.

I stammer. And then, “Are you angry with me, Caden?”

He isn't looking at me when he answers. “What do you mean?”

“That. Are you angry? You seem angry. Should I not bring up your dad?”

He puts the sage stick back on the altar and I think I see his hands trembling just slightly.

I say, “Tell me what to do, Caden. Please. Tell me how to act around you. Because I really don't know.”

He sighs then. A long sigh and he sits down on the carpet—leaning his back against the wall.

“Have I done something wrong? You haven’t really been talking to me at school. Are we not even friends? Do you think we were wrong to think we could even be in the same room? With my grandma... and your dad... and...”

He stops me, before I can go on anymore. “I’m not angry, Isa. You haven’t done anything wrong. Really.”

I sit down right in front of him, legs crossed. It takes more daring than I’m used to, but I sit so close to him that our knees were pressed against each other.

“Tell me then, Caden. Just talk to me or something. Because I’m totally confused.”

He looks around the room, staring, for longer than he has let himself before, at one of the pictures of Grandma. “She was beautiful, you know?”

I look over at the picture he is staring at. “Grandma? Yeah. I know she was. She was *too* beautiful, I think. Goddess incarnate.”

He looks back at me. “Do you think that we’re doomed, Isa?”

Not what I’m expecting him to say.

“Doomed?”

“Apples. Trees. I am the son of my father. And he... He seems so harmless. But he’s done some bad things, Isa. Not just leaving us. And not just weird things like wearing robes and calling himself ‘Apollo’ and being obsessed with blood. He’s done *bad* things. Things I don’t even want to think about. He did them in the name of religion, sure. And I’m pretty sure that he really thought he was doing the *right* thing. But that doesn’t make it any better. It makes it worse, really.”

“What are you saying? That you think you’ll be like him just because you share half a genome?”

He shrugs. “The genome fact *is* unalterable. And sometimes I think he might be evil, Isa. An evil man. And if you *come* from evil... How can you be

good? Cake doesn't stop being cake just because you cut off a piece of it and put it in another room."

"Mmmm," I try to joke. "Cake."

This makes him laugh—soft laughter, but still a smiling laughter.

From upstairs, I hear Maggie and Jonas laughing together. Jonas's laugh isn't as high as Maggie's, but there is still just a hint of that baby kind of laugh in it. Their laughter—whatever they are laughing about—hasn't learned how to be self-conscious yet. It's a gift they don't know they have. A gift they'll lose as soon as they realize they have it.

"There is not a single freckle on your face that's the least bit evil, Caden. I don't know much else. But *that* I know."

He reaches out then. A single fingertip against my cheek. I close my eyes, heart beating stupid fast.

"You look just like her... your Grandma," he says.

It isn't quite like calling me beautiful, but it's pretty close. Caden follows it with silence. Silence and stillness. For at least a minute.

It seems like he is never going to move or speak, and I say. "Well, we'd better get going. We've got to get you back before your mom comes. And who even knows when Apollo is going to show up again and..."

His hand is in my hair and it sends so many shivers through me that I can't talk anymore.

And he's kissing me.

For the second time ever, he kisses me.

And that sensation... of being Eve... of saving humanity with darkness... is even stronger this time.

But this time...

This time it strikes me just how desperate Adam is to be saved.



This afternoon we found only one thing that seemed like it might be a clue.

It was a bunch of receipts to a store called, "Thirteen Moons."

Caden promises that he will try to find a way to meet with me tomorrow.

Zina will be my backup, though. Because I am *going* to find something out tomorrow. What, I don't know. All I know is that time is running out.

And it isn't something I can face alone.



Chapter

Zina is spending the night with me. But for some reason, I can't tell her about kissing Caden again. I don't know how to bring it up or I don't think it's real or I don't think it will last or *something*. I wrote a paper once completely trashing this song on the radio because the chiquita singing said she didn't want to tell her friends about something that had happened because then maybe it would cease to have happened. When I wrote the paper I called her a logical-fallacy-ridden-drama-queen.

But I get it now.

Whenever Zina spends the night, we sit in the kitchen until late and Zina makes oatmeal-chocolate-chip-cookies. And not the bitter-sweet chocolate chips, either. The full of sugar-diabetic-coma-inducing kind of milk chocolate chips that taste like love. (But because the cookies have oatmeal in them, we call them healthy.)

The counters are full of warm cookies tonight. Maggie has taken a plate of them to my parent's bedroom, where she is watching one of the movies Mom had left to keep her entertained while Mom and Mike are gone for the weekend being disgustingly romantic. I'm pretty sure Maggie will fall asleep during one of the movies, so Zina and I keep our voices low, just in case we'll wake her.

Zina: "Are you eating the dough, again, Isa?"

Me: "Um..."

Zina: “Do you really want me to lecture you again about the kinds of diseases you can get from eating uncooked eggs?”

Me: “No, Ma’am.”

Zina: “Give me that spoon, Butterface.”

Me: “Yes, Ma’am.”

Zina takes the spoon and the bowl of dough and moves it to another counter top. Then she leans her elbows down on the counter so that her face is right next to the fruit bowl. I keep imagining what she would look like if she was wearing a headdress made of fruit. The idea makes me want to laugh, but every mental image I can come up with actually seems to look really good on her.

“You’ll never guess who I ran into the other day,” she says.

“Edmundo?”

She stands up, taking her face away from the fruit and ending my visions.

“Uh, no. But that’s weird that he’s the very first person who came to your mind like that.”

I shrug, as if it means nothing.

“He’s the first person she ever kissed, duh.” The voice is Eliza’s and it’s startling that she appeared so suddenly.

“What are you doing here, Liza?” I ask.

“I’m hanging out with the girls.” She sounds like she is trying to appear sophisticated. “Plus, you wouldn’t want me to tell Mom that you actually kissed Edmundo before you were sixteen and allowed to *date*, now, would you?”

I’m trapped.

Eliza sighs. “Such a good story, your first kiss. So romantic. It’s no wonder that you still think about Edmundo.”

Zina just takes Eliza's being there in stride. "It really *was* a romantic story."

Eliza gets squeally. "Tell us again, Isa! Tell us again about your first kiss."

I shake my head. Eliza's prepubescent-supposedly-nonexistent-hormones are crazy.

Fortunately, she doesn't really need me to fill in the blanks. "So, you were under a frozen waterfall. Did he take you there on purpose?"

I stand up, making my way over to the trays of warm cookies. If I don't answer her, I'm going to have to hear her version of the whole night, which sounds not-so-fun. "Actually, no. I asked him to take me there. Grandma always took me into that canyon and I've always thought it was such a *powerful* place. Does that make sense? The powerfulness of it? Because it wasn't just about the huge mountains overhead or the waterfalls of the river or the trees. It's like there's a spirit there. Some sort of primal thing. A wild, untamed god living in the rocks."

Zina shrugs. "You forget you're talking to a voodoo princess, honey. I get stuff like that."

Eliza frowns. "That is just boring, Isa. Get to the good part."

From the refrigerator, I pull a jug of milk and pour it into my mug. "I didn't know the waterfall would be frozen like that, though. It was like it was suspended in time—all made of crystals in the moonlight. And behind it... it was almost *warm*. Warm and yet, you could still see the stars through the gaps in the ice and their light twinkled so cold against us."

"Silly. It was warm because you were all huddled up against Señor Hernandez, your Latin Luffer." Eliza is giggling.

"Ah," I say. "That must have been it."

Settling back into my kitchen chair, I take a bite of the cookie. “This is a great batch,” I say. “How on earth do you stay so skinny, Zina?”

“Good epigenome.” Ever since she saw the PBS Nova about the epigenome, Zina gives it credit for *everything*.

I say, “Edmundo must have had some freakishly good cologne because he smelled just like heaven, I think. Holy crap I was attracted to him. Kid had some good pheromones.”

Asks Eliza: “Why did you guys break up if he was so great?”

The cookie in my stomach turns upside down, pushing some bile up into my throat. “Grandma,” I say. “The bloodline.”

Zina makes a ‘phrsh’ sound with her lips. “That woman and her bloodline.”

“I know!” And then I laugh. “So boring! And then you’re all upset with yourself because you should be *offended* but you can’t because you’re too *bored*.”

Without meaning to, my mind flashes to Apollo. To the way his face looked when I said the same thing to him. To the way the bile was in my throat then, too. It makes me stop laughing.

Eliza’s face has lost some of its fire. Apparently, she’s never heard this part of the story. “How could *Grandma* have made you break up?”

“Simple, Liza, honey. Edmundo was at my house when Grandma stopped by. And she yelled at him. About how his blood couldn’t ever mix with mine. About all kinds of crazy. It was so embarrassing. I thought maybe that he’d be able to forget it—she’s just a dumb old racist grandma, you know? A lot of people have those. But maybe we weren’t far enough into the relationship or something. It was sour from then on.”

Zina: “I’m sorry, kid.”

I swallow the bile back down by taking another bite of cookie. It doesn't taste like love this time, though. Just like cookie. "It's okay. If one rambling old lady was enough to send him running away from me, I'm not sure we'd have worked out that well anyway."

Zina passes Eliza the cookie plate. "That doesn't mean it didn't hurt, though. Come on. I remember how hard it was for you to get over him. It took *months*."

"It still hurts." Probably because it's one more sign that I should have *known* Grandma wasn't the pure paragon of wonderfulness I always thought she was. Probably because it's more evidence that I was clueless.

Seeing that tears are possibly starting to form in the corners of my eyes, Zina makes a bizarre attempt to make me laugh: "Do you remember at your eleventh birthday party when she called me a 'nigger'?"

It shouldn't work, but it does; I'm laughing again. "Oh my gosh, that was horrible!"

"She walked in all red-faced... Right while you were opening presents! And asked you in that too-loud voice why you invited that *nigger*."

"And your face didn't change at all!"

"And you asked me if I even knew what 'nigger' meant!"

I close my eyes, still laughing. "That was so stupid of me."

"The whole thing was stupid, Isa."

I look into my mug of milk, watching the bits of cookie and chocolate that are floating there and wondering if you can read chocolate the same way you can read tea leaves. "Did it ever make you mad?" I ask. "That I loved someone so much who thought you were so worthless?"

“Nah,” she says. “Families are complicated. And old people aren’t always, um, *stable*. All I thought about was how much I liked you.”

This *does* make me start to cry.

“Oh, honey!” she says. “I didn’t mean to make you do that!”

Zina hugs me—her face coming close enough to the fruit bowl to send my mind back to the headdress visions again.

“Eliza, did you know that just a week later an avalanche destroyed that waterfall?” I ask.

Eliza shakes her head.

Zina says, “I remember, though. You kept walking around all wide eyed that week. Asking me how you could have been standing *right there* and not have sensed the danger.”

“I think I meant that even more metaphorically than I realized,” I say.

Zina kisses my hair, and moves back to the oven to tend to her cookies.

“So,” I say, “who *did* you run in to?”

Zina shrugs. “Oh, just that weird red-head, Rachel, who was so freaked out back in fifth grade by my voodoo ways.”

“*Her?* Strange!”

I notice then that Eliza is kind of staring at me. When she sees that I see, she says, “I’m sorry, Isa. I’m sorry Grandma did that to you.”

Which surprises me.

I guess I don’t know Eliza quite as well as I think I do.

⊕

The doorbell rings at the butt-crack of dawn. Nine AM, to be precise. And, okay, it’s not quite the butt-crack of dawn. But on a Saturday, it’s close enough.

I have bed-hair—a fact only emphasized by the pushed up sleeping mask on my forehead. I'm pretty sure that my mascara is smeared under my eyes, too. The only thing remotely redemptive about my appearance is the fact that my night dress comes several inches above my knees (and if you truly understood my town, you would know that this is very, very risqué, indeed) and I just shaved my legs yesterday.

I know it might be Caden, but I think there is a chance that it's a delivery guy or a kid who threw a ball in our backyard or someone other than Caden. (Because can I really be attracted to someone who was a morning person?! Seriously?!) Maybe that's why I don't look in a mirror before I open the door.

But, of course, it's Caden standing there. Caden looking showered and well-groomed and smelling all awesome.

“Ah, crap.” I say.

He just laughs. And I notice that Jonas is standing next to him, staring (in horror?) at my outfit.

“Come in,” I say. “Eat some cookies for three hours while I finish sleeping.”

It's too late, though. Zina and Maggie and Eliza all have stumbled into the living room.

Zina's hair and face look a lot better than mine, but she is wearing frumpy pj's, so I don't have to be *too* jealous. “What's going on, Isa? Why is your doorbell ringing?” Then she sees Caden. “And what is he doing here? I thought you guys were broken up. Or you weren't going to get together. Or... Fetchin'A. I don't understand mountain people.”

There is a *lot* I need to explain to her, I realize.

“We’re not broken up,” Caden answers for me. “Not getting together was the stupidest idea I ever had and so now we’re very much together.” He’s looking at my oh-so-exposed legs.

Heart. Beating. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Zina gives me a betrayed/angry look.

“I was going to tell you about it! I swear I was!”

Maggie shakes herself out of her morning stupor long enough to ask, “Want to come play Barbies, Jonas?”

The grin he gives back is so geeky it makes my chest hurt. “Sure!” he says.

And they are off, chattering like they do, down the hallway to her room.

Eliza just stares at them, shaking her head.

“Great news,” Caden says. “My mom decided at the last minute to join this creepy anti-Halloween committee at church.”

Zina says, “Anti-Halloween?”

“Yeah.” Before I know what is happening, Caden had one arm around me and the other arm reaching out to hold my hand. (In *public*!) “They’re worried about the whole celebration of Satan thing. Here’s the good part: they’re going to be in an emergency meeting *all day*. It was like a miracle from God, when the call came in this morning and she ran off so suddenly. We came right over.”

“The Grinch-who-stole-Halloween miracle,” I say.

“You could have *called* us first,” Zina says.

Caden just squeezes my hand and gazes at me all cheesy. (And, yes, I *like* it.)

So Zina pulls on my arm. “Caden: go eat cookies.” She looks down at my bare legs. “Isa and I need to go get decent.”



I tell Zina that the plan for the day had—all along—been to go to Thirteen Moons (with or without Caden), and she only yells at me for not telling her sooner for about thirty seconds.

“You could have mentioned just a hint of your whole alternate purpose in inviting me over while we were gorging ourselves on cookies and spilling our guts last night,” she says.

“I know,” is my response. “And I’m sorry. I really am. It’s just... I have a hard time talking about it sometimes. About finding out who my father is... About Grandma’s secrets...”

She holds up a hand. “Enough! I get it. Your silence is forgiven. Now for goodness sakes let me do something with your hair.”

All in all, not too bad.



Chapter

Thirteen Moons is at the edge of town, just as civilization disintegrates into the wild of nature. It looks completely unimposing from the outside. I figure it'd *have* to be unimposing. Otherwise Jeremiah's witch hunters would have shut it down years ago.

We are quite a procession entering the store. Zina: hair in elaborate braids and sunglasses the size of half her face. Caden: standing so close to me that his smell makes me dizzy. Jonas and Magdalen: following behind and chatting about various bits of seeming inanity. Eliza: looking around at it all with eyes wide and incredulous. We are loud and everyone—"everyone" being the one bearded man behind the counter and another guy sitting over in a corner, flipping through a stack of cards—stare at us as we come in.

The store is incredible. Walls of sparkling robes and glass cabinets full of wands made of jade. There are books on witches, an entire wall full of bins—and even cauldrons!—of dried herbs, and an entire other wall full of candles of every size and color. The man behind the counter is tall and looks like a pagan Santa Claus.

It's overwhelming, looking at it all. It sparkles and smells like candle wax.

I can't help thinking, *And this is somehow supposed to help? Seriously?* I want to slap myself for even thinking I could find stuff out on my own. I want to slap myself for trying. I feel ridiculous.

But then our pagan Santa Claus friend began to speak, and I'm suddenly wondering why it has taken me so long to come.

"How can I help you?" he asks, eyeing us with more curiosity than suspicion. "You here to get ready for Samhain?"

I think it's my gall bladder that's lurching. Or maybe my spleen. Hard to say, for sure. "What did you say?"

"Samhain. It's coming. Are you here to get ready?"

Samhain.

Coming.

Time running out.

My mouth tastes like copper.

I ask, "Is Samhain some kind of pagan holiday?"

Pagan Santa nods. "Sure is. How you celebrate it depends on your particular tradition, though. Do you have a tradition?"

I shake my head.

"Oh, well. You can always build one for yourself. Faith takes time, anyway. A lifelong pursuit."

Caden just huddles even closer to me—clinging to my skin as if he is afraid I might disappear. Jonas and Maggie aren't even listening anymore. They are off chatting with the guy we'd seen flipping through cards when we came in. Just then I notice that his picture is on the wall. James Julian is his name. He is a tarot card reader. I think this might make Caden nervous—he'd told me that his mom wouldn't even let them play with face cards because they were too much like the devilish tarot. But he doesn't seem to be paying attention to anything except for Mr. Pagan Santa.

Asks Caden: “What exactly *is* Samhain?”

“More importantly,” I add, “*When* is Samhain?”

Mr. Pagan Santa laughs. Bowl full of jelly, just as you’d expect. It’s unnerving.

“It’s Halloween, little girl,” he says. “Only, it was Samhain before it was Halloween. An ancient, holy sabbat that celebrates the dead and the darkness.”

There is just a hint of panic in Zina’s voice when she speaks, but even the hint freaks me out. “Isa, do you remember what that girl said about time? Halloween is, like, next *week*. The dates match.”

I give her a look. Of *course* I remember what the girl said.

Says Mr. Pagan Santa: “I know it’s next week.” And he winks at me.

“Business has been *booming*.”

I squeeze Caden’s hand because I think he may be freaked because there is so much going on that he doesn’t understand. He, however, seems to take it as a sign that he should take charge. “We found a receipt in Isa’s” he looks at me, “Grandmother’s house. We were wondering if you knew her?”

He laughs. All jelly again. “If she came here, the question isn’t whether or not I *knew* her, but whether or not she *liked* me.”

“Huh?” I ask.

He winks. Again. And, you know, it’s really disconcerting to have a Pagan Santa winking at me so much. “There are a lot of people in this town who don’t like me very much.”

Uh... you think? I think. I wonder how many “emergency” meetings they’d had about this place.

Ask Caden, “You mean, like the *church* people?”

More jelly laughing. “No! They could care less about me.”

Huh? This is not what I expect him to say.

“They don’t ever come in my store. I mean, like the *coven* people.”

We must be a sight with our blank staring and our frozen faces.

“I think covens are a bad idea. Or any kind of group. Gets too much like a cult, you know? With one leader telling you what to do all the time and telling you what to think and what to read. Some people get mad at me for that.”

Caden stammers a bit. “Are... are there a lot of covens out here?”

I understand the stammer. Surrounded by Jeremiah’s descendants, you’d think that the coven people woulda gone running long ago.

Pagan Santa nods. “Yeah, I’d say so. They don’t all call themselves covens, but they’re basically the same kinds of groups. And I just don’t like them, you know? They take all the things I think are beautiful and then, I don’t know...”

“Like, they have truth but they take it too far?” I ask.

He looks like he doesn’t understand my question well enough to answer it, so I drop it.

“What was your Grandma’s name, little girl?”

I tell him.

He nods for a minute and makes a sign for us to wait as he goes into the back room.

I listen to what Mr. Julian James — I mean Mr. James Julian — is telling Maggie and Jonas about their tarot. Apparently, they are going to have intertwined destinies for a long, long time. They both seem pleased.

When Mr. Pagan Santa appears again, he is holding a large manila envelope. My throat pounds again with the improbable, *could this be the package meant to reveal my father?! Why would it be here?!*

But, of course, it isn't the package.

It's a collection of photographs.

Says Mr. P.S.: "She'd make me copies, sometimes, of the photos she took. We never did seem to agree about that whole 'groups' issue, but she was always such a delight anyway. How's she doing?"

Zina—who hadn't taken off her sunglasses, oddly enough—says, "She's dead."

Mr. P.S. frowns. "I'm so sorry, little girl." Then he thumbs through his stack of pictures. "Here," he says. "You keep this one."

It's a picture of Grandma and Mom, when Mom was about my age. They were laughing.

My eyes well up.

"Thank you," I say. "Thanks so much for your help."

I don't want my tears to turn into the full-on sobbing that I know I am capable of, so I hand the picture of Mom and Grandma to Eliza so I can fetch Maggie. Eliza's hands look tiny against the photo. It's a glossy 8X10—black and white—a lot like the ones in the Linen Closet Room, but a bit smaller.

"Maggie," I say, "You ready?"

She is peering at the spread of tarot cards as Mr. Julian explains what all the symbols mean and how he knows it would foretell her destiny. She gives me a look that seems to say she wants to stay longer, but I give her a look back that says, no,

we need to get home, ASAP. So she says goodbye—with reluctance—to James Julian. Jonas following her as she walks with us out of the store.

Caden asks, “Are you sure you want to leave, Isa? There’s probably more we could figure out.”

I nod. I can’t explain out loud how I want to keep from crying in front of them all without actually *starting* to cry. So I just move to the car. They all follow.

•

If I had known what was about to happen, I wouldn’t have rushed so fast out of the store. I would have found a way to control my tears and I would have asked Pagan Santa more about why he didn’t like covens. I might have asked how much he knew about Grandma and her group. If what she had was a coven, or if what she had was a cult. I would have let Maggie and Jonas keep learning about the tarot and I would have let Caden keep standing next to me, touching my skin.

Because after what’s about to happen, he isn’t going to touch my skin again for a long, long, time.

•

Even though we took our fusty white mini-van (the other cars didn’t have enough seats for us all), I let Caden drive it home.

I take the photo back from Eliza and I’m staring at it.

Grandma’s eyes look so light and joyful. *Mom’s* eyes look joyful. Have I ever seen that look in her eyes?

I turn the photograph over. On the back is Grandma’s writing. Below the date are beautiful scrolling letters, notating all about the picture.

Here we are celebrating the end of summer. Doesn’t Mary look so beautiful? I made her new robes, myself, out of white silk. Most

*people don't look good in white, but when the fires are blazing,
nothing looks better on my Mary.*

It went on. Lots of details about who took the picture, who did what for the festival. What the festival was.

There doesn't seem to be much traffic as we drive. When we stop at a light, I feel like our mini-van may well be the last car on the earth. Just seconds after this feeling, though, a green pickup truck pulls up next to us.

And it hits me suddenly.

I know.

I *know* how we can find out more.

"The linen closet," I say. "It's full of pictures."

Zina looks at me funny.

I say, mostly to myself, "The answers are behind this door."

Caden says, "Should we go to your Grandma's house?"

I nod. "As quickly as possible."

⊕

To tear the photographs off of the wall seems almost a sacrilege. They look so beautiful hanging in their frames, lighted by the glow of spotlights. But it has to be done.

Maggie and Jonas are off playing with toys and Eliza is standing at the entrance to the room looking horrified. "Look at this place!" she says. "Grandma had a *secret room*?! People don't have *secret rooms*! It sounds *insane*!"

I mumble, "Maybe Grandma *was* insane, Liza honey." I yank at a picture and it comes off the wall, taking with it a big chunk of blue paint. "Don't talk so loud,

though. We don't want Maggie and Jonas to get all curious about us being in the linen closet and then want to play in here when they find out what this place is."

"Did Mom know about this room?"

"I don't know what Mom knows about except that she doesn't yet know that I've been sneaking over here trying to figure out the family secrets. And you won't tell her, right?"

She nods, mute.

It's hard to tear the frames off of the photographs, but when I do I find that my instinct was right on: the backs of each are covered with Grandma's writing.

After we get all of the pictures off the wall and the photographs out of their frames, there is quiet as we all read what the photos have to say.

I scan the writing as closely as possible, trying to figure out *how on earth* any of this will help me find my father. There is stuff about how other underground pagan groups (some of them who even went to Jeremiah's church every Sunday!) were angry with Grandma because they didn't agree with the violent kinds of things her group did. There is stuff about how Grandma's idea of the goddess was so unique. There is what they all agreed about the Goddess: that she is Matriarchy crushed by a patriarchal world. There is stuff about fires and fireworks and dancing and knives and blood-as-symbol-of-the-dark-goddess and bloodlines kept pure from mother to daughter.

And then there is...

"Holy Mother God." Zina stares at the photograph she is holding and when I try to grab it from her, she keeps clinging to it. I have to practically pry it out of her hands.

It's black and white and glossy, like the rest of them. The photo is of my mother, dancing in a white robe, laughing as a circle of men swirled around her.

I turn it over quickly, trying to see what is written on the back.

There isn't much. Unlike the other photographs with their copious explanations, this photo says merely: "Isa's parents: Samhain." And then there was a date.

"Isa's parents?!" The fact that I yell this makes Eliza take a step back toward the white towels. "There are like five different men in that picture! What the frap does it mean, 'Isa's parents?!'"

Asks Zina, eyes all wide, "What does it mean, *Samhain*? What did that girl mean? What did she need you to do?"

Caden has moved over from his side of the room and is now kneeling next to me. "Let me see the picture." he says.

I can hear footsteps and laughter coming from upstairs: Maggie and Jonas. They get along so well, and it's weird, when I think about it. There is no reason on earth the two of them should be friends. But they *are*. All because I made a vow to myself over a vat of potato casserole at a funeral.

"Isa's parents," reads Caden. "Plural. So that means..."

I finish. "That means that whoever my father is, he's in that picture. One of those five men."

I feel dizzy. Like maybe I know somehow... Maybe I know the world is about to stop spinning.

"Isa..." Caden says. His face is white and he looks like he is about to puke.

His legs are shaking. His legs shake against each other. Thigh hitting thigh.

I reach out to touch him, to tell him that whatever is wrong, it will be OK.

But he jerks back.

Zina's head cocks to the side and her eyes narrow into a confused frown.

"Isa," he says. "My dad is in this picture."

"What? No he's not," I say. "I would have noticed."

He points, the picture bending against the force of his pointing. "There," he says. "He's younger, sure. But look at his scarred chest. Look at the amulet."

Zina is peering over my shoulder. "Look at how he looks just like you, Caden."

Caden drops the picture on the floor, like it's filth.

All of us are silent.

We are silent for a long time.

And then Zina says, "So that means..."

Caden continues, "There are five men. Any one of them could be Isa's father."

Says Zina: "And one of them is *your* father."

Says Caden: "So there's a twenty percent chance..."

Says Zina: "And there's no way to know..."

My stomach starts to cramp. "I think I'm going to throw up."

Caden is moving. Not to help me. He is moving away from me. He is walking out of the room, yelling for Jonas.

"Wait," I say. "Let's figure this out!"

"We just did," he says. He is pushing Jonas toward the front door, and he doesn't look at me again.

Not even once.

Chapter

I wait, alone, in the garage for Mom to get home.

It's a strange place to wait, even considering what had just happened. I sit on a crusty old couch that we put out here because we were too lazy to take it to the dump. As I sit here, I keep imagining how many thousands of spiders must now be living in the couch skeleton. But even as my legs began to itch at the idea, I can't make myself move.

I just sit here.

Zina is staying another night until she has to go to church, but she is up with Maggie and Eliza, braiding their hair, trying to convince them that nothing is really wrong.

But everything is wrong.

It is nearly ten when the garage door opens and Mike's car pulls in. Mom and Mike are laughing as they empty out the back of the van. They don't see me sitting on the couch here until Mike walks by carrying a suitcase.

"Isa?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head, unable to keep myself from doing the blank stare thing. As long as I can remember, I have wanted to know who my father is. And now that there is a 20% chance that I do know, my legs are just sweating, prickling like fire against the imaginary spiders across flesh. "I need to talk to Mom."

He looks at me, confused. But then he looks at Mom and she nods that it was okay and he goes inside.

Even at the end of this long day she looks beautiful, I think. So young!
Where on earth would she have been if she hadn't gotten pregnant with me?

Mom stands in front of me, her eyes looking soft, like they might melt.

"Why did you stay?" I ask, finally. "With Grandma?"

The garage smells like cat urine. We have two cats, but neither one is allowed inside the house. So they live out here. And they pee out here.

I don't really give her a chance to answer. "If you *knew* she was evil... And you did know... you always seemed so *sure* of it and I always thought you were so crazy and..." I scratch, for the first time, my sweating legs with their imaginary spiders. "Why didn't you run away?"

She moves slowly to the couch, sitting down next to me and not even seeming to flinch at the idea of imaginary spiders. She puts her arms around me and I let her do it. Her skeleton against mine feels so frail.

"I did run away," she says. "After I found out I was pregnant with you, I got on a bus and I went to the city. I lived in a shelter, all the while my belly growing huge."

"What happened? What changed?"

She is rocking me, not speaking for a few minutes. And then, "I went into labor."

One of our cats creeps out from under a pile of boxes and starts to rub its head against my bare feet. The cat makes me think of fleas which remind me again of those spiders. My mom watches me as I scratch my legs and then my scalp. She isn't smiling, frowning, or speaking. It's like she was trying to decide if I really need to know more—if the secrets she has kept for so many years should stop being secrets.

She says, "Mother always taught me that darkness was part of life. Birth and death necessary points on a wheel of ever-changing duality. That's why she said she had to hurt me... It was to teach me..."

Her voice breaks, just for a second, but she clears her throat and continues.

"But it never made sense to me. When I think about it, it still doesn't really sink in. The only time it ever made sense... Was when I was in labor."

She strokes my hair and pulls my head against her shoulder.

"Giving birth... There's a primal *terror* in it. You're standing at the edge of the two worlds, ushering in this new life. And this deep, horrified, part of yourself knows that when the veil between the worlds is open... you can fall right back through it. Life becoming death in a mere exhalation of breath. What my mother tried to teach me, it made sense then. What didn't make sense was the other—the trying to pretend that you could banish fear. That if you were *good* enough, *righteous* enough, you could keep pain out of your life. You can't keep pain out of your life. And if life is sacred, it has to be sacred *within* that pain, too."

She doesn't talk for awhile. And when she does talk, I notice that there is a warm dampness mixing in with my hair: tears.

"You call out for your mother when you're in labor. It's what your body *does*. I called out for her and they called her... And she *came*. She was beside me, holding my hand, telling me it would be alright. She said that I didn't have to believe the things she did. I didn't have to *do* the things she did. I could live with her..."

She takes a breath.

“And I was terrified. I was so terrified. When you’re sixteen and you don’t know what to do... It doesn’t matter what your mother did to you. You *need* your mother.”

She kisses the top of my head and the cat jumps from the garage floor, onto the couch next to us. His purr resonates against the structure of the couch, and I can feel the vibrations of it go all through me.

I take a breath, feeling a wracking in my rib cage that seems incongruous with my inability to stop staring into space.

Mom is still talking. I don’t remember hearing her say so many words at once in my entire life. “In that moment... standing between the worlds... I thought that maybe I’d be able to forgive her. And then, later, when I couldn’t forgive her... I thought, at least, I’d be able to protect *you*. You could have the mother that I loved so deeply... And never see the monster. I believed that. I really did.”

The light in the garage clicks off, and we are surrounded by darkness.

After a few moments of stillness, I see that there is moonlight, bouncing against the floor of the garage.

“Sometimes, Isa baby, sometimes you *have* to do terrible things. Mama tried to teach me that. And I didn’t believe her. I didn’t believe her until I had to decide whether or not to *tell* you... When all my choices were just... *crappy* choices.”

Her voice trails away, and I sit quiet in the darkness.

“Come on, honey,” says Mom. “It’s late. And you need to sleep.”

I shake my head, protesting weakly.

She smiles at me. A kind smile. Kind and sad all at the same time. “Sleep heals the soul, you know,” she says. “It really does.”

And so I stand up and I follow her into the house.



If sleep heals the soul, it has a weird way of doing it.

I have the worst nightmare of my life.

I am standing—barefoot—at the frozen lake. My feet are turning black against the frost and I can hardly breathe.

It's dark, like I'm in a cave.

And then, bursting through the ice, comes a mermaid. She rises up into the sky, hair around her like light. And when she speaks, it's with Grandma's voice.

What do you want? What do you want? I keep saying.

The dream mermaid shouts without even moving her mouth.

Blood. Blood.

Blood?

Of someone you love. A sacrifice.

Sacrifice?

The mermaid shrieks—nightmarish shrieking—right in my face.

And then she crashes through the ice, back into the depths of the underworld.



I wake up in a panic, heart beating out of my ears.

It wakes up Zina, who had been sleeping next to me.

“Shush, honey,” she says. “Shush.”

But I can't shush. I tell her about the dream, talking so fast that I run out of breath.

The further into the dream I get, the higher she sits up in bed until she is sitting upright, eyes folded into a frown.

“What does it mean?” I ask. “Blood? A mermaid? Grandma?”

When Zina responds, it's carefully. "It's a Mami Wata dream," she says. "If you were in my church and you had a dream like that, they'd take you off to be initiated before the Mami could eat your soul."

"But I'm not in your church."

"I know."

"So what do we do?"

For just a second, Zina's hands are clenching the edge of the bed quilt, knuckles white against the pressure.

"What, Zina?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm freaked out. It's not like you go to my church."

"But it feels like we should *do* something."

"Yeah, it does feel like that." She lies back onto her pillow again. "The only thing I can think of is that we go and see Amaka again," she says. "First thing in the morning?"

I notice that out the window snow is falling. It spirals down from the sky, plopping onto the cement in a bitter splat. It's the first snow of the season.

Winter is coming.

•

When we get to Amaka's house, we see someone knocking on her door. I assume it must be a client of some kind, so I put the car in park and stare at the eerie garden gnome.

Grandma never liked lawn ornaments of any kind. She only ever planted flowers. Lots of them.

“Your blood is the most important thing you have,” she’d tell me as she planted. She’d plant daisies and lilies and tulips and bleeding hearts. But her favorite were the roses. Lots of roses everywhere. “Your blood is your heritage. Your connection to the divine. It is the dark force of life, unseen beneath your skin—frightening you when it comes to the surface. The goddess is inside you, Isa. Floating in your molecules. Whispering to you. Connecting you to generations of ancestral women. Their blood is in your veins, too. Even when I’m gone I’ll be part of you.”

“Zina,” I say, back in the present. “I feel like I’m going insane. Like I’ve completely gone off my rockers.”

For only about a half a second, Zina looks something akin to frightened. And Zina doesn’t ever look *anything* akin to frightened, so even the half a second is worrisome. Then she tries to lighten up, shrugging with a half laugh. “Mami Wata will turn you crazy,” she says. “I’ve seen it happen.”

Amaka’s door opens and the man comes out. She smiles when he is looking at her, but as soon as his back is turned I see her roll her eyes in disgust. Another “mojo freak,” apparently. Does she see me as a mojo freak? Or does she see *me*?

Zina jumps out of the van and walks toward her before the door has a chance to close. I follow as quickly as I can.

Amaka spots us almost right away. “Hey, honeys!” She tucks a piece of her head-scarf more tightly in place. “And hello, Zina, lovie. I wasn’t planning on going to church today, so I didn’t think I’d see you before the trip.”

Zina is supposed to go on a church retreat the day of Halloween. She had told me about it when I was trying to decide about wearing a costume or whether wearing a costume is a bad idea because we have no idea what is going to happen that day.

But Zina doesn't have time for chit chat. "She had a Mami Wata dream." The words sort of burst out, like the soda in a can that'd just been shaken too hard. And yet, there is a lightness about the words that is disconcerting.

I think that Amaka might laugh. The way that Zina said it was funny. But she doesn't. Her face doesn't move. "What did the Mami tell you?" she asks me.

I feel like I'm floating. "She told me I need to make a blood sacrifice."

"Oh, land." She takes me by the shoulder through her front door and into her living room. "That's what you're gonna have to do then, isn't it."



Blood.

Grandma *was* obsessed with it. She had books on it. She'd look at it under microscopes. Once she had a Tupperware container of it, I think. She told me it was marinade, for a steak. But we never ate the steak. I never even saw the steak. And she pushed the bowl away from me so fast when I saw it there in her refrigerator. What if it was given to her by one of her followers? What if she told them to expose the dark force of the goddess by cutting open their skin? What if one of those empty-eyed girls in white stood over the bowl with a knife and drained their blood into it? What? What then?

One summer I remember that she was sitting at her microscope, peering away at blood cells, making notes in one of her spiral-bound notebooks.

"When God took away Adam's rib, he must have bled," I remember her saying. She said it like it was a joke and I laughed at it like it was a joke, but I didn't understand how it was funny.

"And Adam's rib is important to you, Isa. To every girl."

I remember that I pulled a chair up next to her and she let me look into her microscope as she kept talking.

“People think that because Eve was made from it that she’s less than Adam somehow,” she said. As she’d talk, her ears used to jingle under the weight of her earrings. They were always gold and they always dangled almost down to her shoulders. “That’s the danger of thinking literally. You have to see through the symbol, Isa. That’s what a symbol is. It means a thousand things at once. And all of them are true.”

She never told me straight out what she was trying to say. She always talked around it. Worked me up to it. Got my emotions into an acceleration that culminated in a resonating climax.

That day I watched the way that her face moved as she talked. Watched the way her perfectly pink lips formed syllables. And I waited.

She was looking back into her microscope when she finished. “And here is what the symbol was telling you: Eve represents what Adam doesn’t have. She’s everything that was taken away from him when he was put on this earth. He’ll never be complete without her. Never be saved without her. She was taken from the casement of his very heart. His very soul.”

Now I’m shaking as Amaka pushes us through her house and into her backyard. And I can’t stop thinking about the rib. It seems like somewhere, somehow, inside that image, there is an answer.

⊙

It’s freezing as we stand at the edge of Amaka’s fish pond. The snow from the night before has mostly melted, but in the shadows there are still creeping piles of ice, already dirty.

At the edge of the pond is a Mami Wata shrine.

“I’m supposed to sacrifice the blood of someone I love,” I tell Amaka and then I laugh. “As if that’ll fix everything.”

The shrine consists mainly of a statue wearing sunglasses. The statue is surrounded by mirrors, masses of melted Hershey bars, combs, sunglasses, and Coke cans.

“The asking for a blood sacrifice is actually quite typical for a Mami Wata initiatory dream.” Zina sounds just slightly like she is reciting an encyclopedia article. “She’ll ask you for the blood of a brother or sister. Maybe mother or father. And if you don’t give it to her...”ⁱⁱ

An ugly fish pushes its head above the water. It sees us standing there, I assume, and is looking for us to throw it food. The fish seems so desperate, slopping the water this way and that way until the water seems to make a disgusting slurping noise; it reminds me of a spoiled toddler, whining and jumping around because his mother won’t buy him more candy.

“How she gonna do that, honey?” Amaka has an arm around me and an arm around Zina at the same time. “She gonna sneak up on her little sister in the middle of the night? Cut her with a knife? Bring it back in a sippy cup?”

“I can’t be like Apollo.” There is calmness in my panic. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but there is such comfort in knowing what I’m *not* going to do. “I’m not going to just join on up with him and cut myself all the time and obsess about blood and do probably terrible things.”

Amaka isn’t smiling when she looks at me. “I know this all seems weird to you. I know you think that maybe we’re over-reacting. Taking a dream so seriously.”

I do one of those nervous-laugh things. “Well, it can’t get worse than this, can it?”

Zina’s voice sounds rough when she speaks. “It can always get worse, Isa.”

Says Amaka: “She’s right, Isa. It can always get worse.” She pauses.

“Especially when you go and say that you’ll never do anything terrible. Because you will. That’s not even a question. Life demands terrible choices. There’s only one question you need to ask yourself. One question that determines good, evil, and the course of destiny.”

The gross fish keeps on slurping around. It seems completely oblivious to the fact that neither one of us has any food to give it.

“What question is that, Amaka?” I ask.

I try to keep staring at that fish instead of at her, but she won’t let me. She takes hold of my chin with her fingers and lifts my face until I am looking at her.

“You gonna act out of love? Or you gonna act in spite of it?”

A thousand images were whirling around in my head. Apollo. Knives. Grandma. Dancing. The sun rising. Kissing Caden. Matriarchy. Patriarchy. Disgusting slurping fish. Oguta Lake. Maggie and Jonas playing Barbies. My Mom’s face... so hurt when I disobeyed her.

I feel like everyone is looking at me.

“Love.” I feel like I might choke on myself. “I want to act out of love. I won’t sacrifice. Not *anyone*. Not anymore. The Mami Wata can just stay beneath the ice.”

Amaka shakes her head. “You’ll never get rid of the Mami without the sacrifice.” She pauses. “People think that the good looks completely different from the evil. But it doesn’t. The shadow and the symbol are the same. They look

exactly the same. Light versus dark and good versus evil are not synonymous dualities. You need the blood.”

Blood. Everyone wants blood. Apollo, Grandma, the Mami. What is the dumb deal about it?

Zina says, “It’s not a big thing, Isa. Just prick my finger.”

“I’m not going to prick your finger, Zina. That’s ridiculous.”

“How is it ridiculous? I’m here. You love me. No problem.” She starts digging through her purse, probably for a pin of some kind.

“Just stop it!”

Zina looks a little like I’d flicked her chin with my thumbnail: totally surprised.

I turn my back on the shrine and start moving back toward the car. “This is *stupid*, Zina. I don’t know why you made me come here. Actually making a blood sacrifice?! Are you, like, *insane*?”

I try not to feel it, but as I move away, I think I can feel the Mami statue glaring at my back.

C

When Zina and I get back to my house, we don’t speak. I think that she might just drive off, but she doesn’t. She follows me into the house and she sits down on the couch in an angry silence.

Finally I say, “I’m sorry.”

“Sure as shit you should be sorry,” she says. “You were so rude! And Amaka was only trying to help! Just because you don’t believe in the things I believe in doesn’t mean you get to be so disrespectful about it.”

“I don’t know what else to say, Zina! I’m sorry. I’m sorry I was rude. But a blood sacrifice?! Puh-lease. It’s gonna do a friggin lotta *nothing*.”

She is shaking her head, still obviously pretty pissed. “I would think that you’d be able to get it. Especially after your grandmother.”

“Get what?”

“Ritual. You don’t get it.”

I don’t say anything. I feel tired.

“When you do something in ritual form, you don’t have to do it in real life. Go read some psychobabble about it if you want to. It’s *real*.”

I reach over—like my mother—and pluck out a few keys on the piano.

“The reason that every religion on earth has ritual as part of it is that rituals are *powerful*. They change something in your spirit. Your brain, maybe, or maybe some weird quantum thing we don’t know enough about. I don’t know. All I know is that they *work*. You go and refuse to acknowledge something ritually like you did today... Stuff happens. You have to face it in *real* life.”

I’m not much into speaking back.

So Zina asks, “Why don’t you go get your English horn?”

“Now why would I do that?”

She laughs an angry sounding laugh. “Because I *could* sing for you, but that would be *terrible*.”

When I don’t move, she breaks into an extremely off-key version of “She’ll be Coming Round the Mountain.” Only, Zina’s version consists of a never-ending loop of: “Someone’s in the kitchen with Zina.”

I get the English horn.

“Here” She hands me some sheet music when I get back. “Play Bach. Something about him casts out evil spirits of all kinds. So play him right now.”

I don’t take the music. Instead, I go to the piano bench and get out a piece that Mom wrote. It was written for the piano, but I play the melody line.

The afternoon is cloudy as I play—I know that much. The sky seems to darken, almost as if I have commanded it to with the melody. And it’s haunting—the melody. A direct snapshot into my mother’s soul.

I can’t see Zina’s face as I play, but I know what the piece does to me and I know that there is nothing about the piece that can cast away demons. It just stirs them up. Or maybe this has nothing to do with the music. Maybe it’s just me.

“Isa, I’m afraid for you,” Zina says when I finish.

I put my instrument back in its case—pretending not to listen.



Chapter

The morning of Halloween comes, unannounced. Mike is toasting bread (just a little too long) in the kitchen when I stumble in. Mom is pinning something—a horn?—into Maggie’s hair. Eliza isn’t feeling well and is asleep still.

“Are you a stag, Maggie?” I ask.

“A unicorn.” She snaps as she says it, like I can’t have possibly said something more stupid.

Mike pokes at the over-toasted toast with butter that is too hard until he finally just gives up and pushes the plate toward me.

“Thanks,” I say.

He pushes his red glasses back because his sweat has made them slip.

“You’re not going to wear a costume?” he asks.

I look down at the outfit I’ve chosen without thinking. A long silk skirt and sweater. Dangling gold earrings...

Grandma.

I’ve accidentally dressed up like Grandma.

Mike doesn’t seem to notice, but Mom is staring at me.

“I’m pretty old for Halloween, don’t you think?” I try to sound playful.

Maggie’s answer is serious, though. “You don’t get *too old* for Halloween. What a horrible thing to say!” She looks like she is angry at me—did I do something to her?

She seems to answer for me. “Mom, Isa and Caden had some stupid fight. And now I can’t go trick-or-treating with Jonas!”

Mom says, “Honey, don’t you remember? I called Jonas’s mom. He can’t go trick or treating because she thinks that it’s the day of Satan, not because of Caden and Isa.” And their breakup. That’s what it seems like she’s telegraphing to me as she looks over at me. Oh, what would she do if she knew what really happened?

“Satan?! How is candy from Satan?! Go call her again, Mom. Tell her Halloween has nothing to do with Satan!”

Mom pats Maggie’s mane.

“I’m pretty late for school.” I grab the over-done-toast and head for the front door before anyone can say anything else.

C

When I get to Mr. River’s office, he is sitting at his desk, looking all pensive.

“I see you dressed as a hippie,” I say.

“Ah, yes. Thought I’d re-live my hippie days just this *one* day, seeing as it’s Halloween and all.” He is holding a messy cross-stitch in his hands. When I was first his assistant, he told me that one of his oldest and dearest students had given it to him the first year he was a teacher. “In Music There is Harmony,” it read. “In Harmony There is Peace.”

“You seem somber today,” I say.

“I am. Can’t explain it to you, though.”

“Is the reason *that* racy?”

He laughs. “No! Silly, girl.” He put the cross-stitch back onto the window sill, touching it tenderly for just a second. “I’m just not sure why.”

I put my backpack down and sit in one of the chairs facing his desk.

Normally, when I get here in the morning, this would be when he'd rattle off the various petty chores he'd be having me do. Grunt work, he feels the need to endlessly explain, is mandatory for someone who will be getting a free A just because they registered to be a teacher's assistant instead of that optional Social Studies course.

But he doesn't start rattling off chores, he just looks at me. "You're very brave, you know."

I notice then that he isn't actually dressed like a hippie that day. He's wearing jeans and an old t-shirt. No tie dye anywhere. It's ironic.

"In what way, pray tell, could I have proved myself *brave* to you, Johnnie?"

He points, half-heartedly, at my instrument case. "You play the English Horn," he says.

"You have to be brave to play this thing?"

"Yeah," he says. "You do." He looks over again at the cross-stitch in his window for a minute.

"Explain."

He nods. "The English Horn," he says, "is a persnickety little bitch of an instrument."

I wonder if he would have sworn in front of one of the Christian students.

"It's capable of more soul-wrenchingly beautiful music than almost any instrument in the orchestra. Or, as you and I both know so painfully, it can sound like a dying cow." He winks. Enough of the hint of normal Johnnie for me to not worry about him and his somberness.

"The thing is," he says, "there's nothing different about the instrument."

He stands up, reaching over to grab his megaphone so that he could go teach the class waiting outside his office. “Just in how you play it.”

He pats my shoulder as he walks by—an act of gentleness so rare that my eyes start to well. “Take the day off today, eh?” he says.

•

When he tells me to take the day off, I’m pretty sure he thinks I’ll spend the hour reading a book or doing homework or talking on my supposedly-forbidden-by-the-school cell phone. Maybe if he could read my mind he’d take it back.

But maybe Zina had a point about rituals.

Maybe she was right that I should have thought to be more careful.

Because some, deep, unconscious part of me takes over and I know that I have to do what I’m going to do. I’m moving by instinct.

And my instinct tells me to go to Grandma’s house.

•

When I open the door to Grandma’s house, the dual smell of dirt and roses blows over me in a single whooshing of air.

I cross the threshold slowly, moves deliberate.

“Grandma?” I say, as I cross over. Funny that *both* her smells are in the house today. They mingle together in the air, all around me. “I know you’re here. That you’re haunting me. I want it to end soon, OK?”

There is a sound, then. A rustling of fabric, a sudden increase in the room’s temperature.

And here he is.

Apollo.

Coming out of the hallway and standing right in front of me.

I think I knew that he was going to be here when I came. I think I knew that in order to get to the end of whatever hellish journey I'm on, I was going to have to *face* him.

If I have to name the look on his face, it would be relief, I think. And gratitude. "You came," he says. "On the morning of Samhain, you came."

It feels just slightly hard to focus my eyesight. "Mr. Apollo," I say. *Or should I say 'Daddy?'* "I came to apologize. I'm sorry that my grandmother is dead. I'm sorry that you miss her so much. But I can't take over for her. I didn't even know that you all existed. I don't even really know what you believe." *I don't even know what I believe.*

Apollo doesn't look much like me, I think. He looks like Caden. An older, more decrepit version of Caden, but still Caden.

"But I can teach you all that, Isa. If you'll just let me. Come with me tonight. Be initiated. We serve the goddess and there is nothing more beautiful than that. To understand the female divine... It would heal so much of this world. And you can help us do that, Isa."

I feel like part of me inside is tearing. I know that I love the female divine. Every wonderful memory of my grandmother has something to do with the power of women. But there are so many unknowns. Blood. Bloodlines. Secrets. Fatherhood.

I want to laugh, actually. Here, in front of me, is a man who might *be* my father. And every molecule in my body is praying that he isn't.

"Isa." His voice is so quiet. "I have loved you since you were a baby." He moves over to a chair and sat down, hunched over in it. He looks so tiny.

“What about your family? About Caden and Jonas? Didn’t you love them, too?”

“How can you even ask that?” he says. “Of course I did.”

“Why did you leave them, then?”

He swallows, straightening in his chair. “I wanted them to stay with me... I... I wanted to believe what I believed *with* them. But, they wouldn’t...”

His voice breaks and I feel just slightly sorry that I had asked him something like that.

“Your grandmother,” he says. “She taught beautiful things. All I ever wanted to do was to follow her. To *live* the things she taught.”

“But why did you have to do that in the woods? Grandma obviously had a house. Why couldn’t you?”

He shakes his head. “She was stronger than we were. The rest of us... we couldn’t live in both worlds at once. But she could. The rest of us... we needed to live with the earth to live what we believed. And now...”

“Now what?”

He clears his throat. “And now we *need* you Isa. Can’t you see that we need you?”

I can see that he needs *something*. “I’m not who you think I am.”

“Of course you are. You’re her granddaughter. I was there when you were conceived. Full moon. Samhain. Seventeen years ago today.”

I feel my stomach turn in on itself.

But now, he is standing again. And when he is standing, he doesn’t seem quite so tiny anymore.

“Your grandmother didn’t want to do to you what she did to your mother. She kept trying to talk me out of it. But that would be just *wrong*. I believe that. It was destiny that killed your grandmother, I think. Destiny that *knew* you had to take your place.”

If destiny killed my Grandmother, I’m not sure I want to believe in destiny.

“Maybe you don’t get it now,” he is saying. “Maybe you need just a little encouragement. Maybe after tonight... Maybe you’ll understand then.”

My sense of instinct starts to fail. I back away from him, trying to get to the front door. “I won’t. I’ll never understand. Why can’t you just *let it go*.”

His eyes are full of tears. “I’m so sorry, Isa,” he says. “It hurts me so much to have to hurt someone I love. But I must do the bidding of the Goddess. It is *my* destiny.”

And he is grabbing me.

It’s audible—the grabbing. The motion makes the fabric of my skirt rustle. I wonder how he has become so strong. I’m confused.

He is pushing me, toward the garage. Toward Grandma’s car.

Her car is a deep purple—almost black and almost red, the color is so deep. It’s the color of blood—the color of the dark goddess—I think as he shoves me in the backseat. And I wonder why I have never noticed.

“If you love me,” I ask as he is speeding away, “Why would you hurt me?”

He doesn’t answer me at first.

He is driving, moving down the street at crazy speed.

“Abraham,” he says. “He loved Isaac. Yet God asked something terrible of him. And he obeyed. You must always obey God. In spite of your love.”

The car smells dusty. I touch the seats, trying to remember the last time that I had ridden in this car with Grandma.

I don't know where he is trying to take me.

All I know is that my mouth tastes like blood.

And that I can't go.

Not with him.

And just like that, my instinct comes back.

As we are coming close to a stop sign, he slowed the car down.

I say, "You know what, Apollo? Maybe Abraham made the wrong friggin choice."

And I jump out of the car.

I jumped out of a moving car. Bones and skin kathumping against the pavement in a pain that made my vision momentarily go black. But inside the pain, I'm up. I'm up and running. Winter-like air burning my nose, my throat. I run straight for a fence and jump into someone's backyard. And then I'm jumping all kinds of fences.

He is behind me, at first, but then—just like the other times I've had to run from him—I lose him.

And I turn the corner.

And run into my house.

⊙

"Isa?" Mom is sitting at the kitchen table, sorting through bills. "What are you doing home? Why are you out of breath?"

I know that I should tell her now.

Maybe I should have been telling her things long ago.

But I can't.

"I need to get out of here, Mom," I say. "I need to just get away from everything, everyone." Particularly from Mr. Bloody Apollo.

I feel like I'm about to cry. I want to keep running or to pace the floors, but I keep thinking that the sound of footsteps will wake the Mami, send her crashing up from the underworld, so I stay still.

"Where do you want to go?" Mom asks.

"With Zina," I say. "She and her Nnenna are going on a church trip down south. She's leaving this morning—which is why I left school. It's a three hour drive. But maybe I can go along?"

Mom nods, sort of distracted. "If that's really what you want to do, honey, I suppose I don't see the harm in it."

"Thanks, Mom, I'll call her." I move toward the phone, clinging onto it as if it was a life-line.



Maybe I should notice as I talk to Mom that the window is open—that there is a pan of burned something on the stovetop and that the air in the kitchen is cooler than normal. Maybe I should smell how the cool air outside smells so much like *earth* and how it's mixing with the smell of burn in the kitchen.

And maybe I should notice that there is a shadow moving behind the blinds.

And a few hours later, when I'm driving with Zina, I should see the deep purple car following long behind us.

But I don't notice.

And it's a little late for what-ifs.



Chapter

After I call Zina and she agrees to take me with her, everything is a blur of panic.

But before I know it, I am in Zina's car and we are driving south.

Zina is driving and her driving is probably as terrible as ever, but I don't notice. All of my feelings are stuck in my throat, and there just isn't room for worry over whether or not we run over any squirrels.

"Thank you," I mutter once, "for letting me come. And I'm sorry. About the way I acted."

She just nods, unsmiling.

As we drive south, the landscape around us changes. The mountains change colors and sizes. The vegetation vanishes until there is nothing but sand and rock.

When Zina finally speaks, it seems like she is trying to be comforting. The tones she uses—almost musical—are low, soothing. "I've always loved the desert," she says. "There's a sort of starkness in the infertility of it all. It feels clean."

Zina's mother and grandmother are in the car ahead of us. Maybe that's why we seem to be driving more slowly than normal.

It's midday and on the floor are the remnants of our Dairy Queen lunch: paper wrappings with chocolate sauce dribbled and dried up on them, limp lettuce leaves dropped from our burgers and smeared with ketchup, and rattling cups almost empty except for a few cubes of ice.

"There's something you should know about what we're going to do," Zina says.

"What's that?"

“We’re going to be on a boat tonight.”

“Oh.”

Occasionally as she drives, she’ll look out the window at the suddenly barren landscape. She has some chocolate sauce on her cheek, but I haven’t gotten around to telling her about it yet.

“Don’t you want to know why we’re going on a boat?”

“We’re going on a boat?”

“Isa, are you listening to me? Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry. So, we’re going on a boat.”

“Yeah,” she says. And then she swallows. “We’re going to a Mami Wata festival. She’s a water goddess. A mermaid, remember? So we’re going to have to be in the middle of a lake. That’s where the priestesses will try to summon her.”

I laugh—the bitter kind of laugh. “This is *literally* my nightmare then.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier,” she says.

I just shook my head. “That bitch is messing with my life,” I say.

There is a bend in the road, and I will Zina to turn the steering wheel carefully. I don’t want any of the saucy wrappings from Dairy Queen to slide over and slime my toes because we take a corner too fast. But on the other hand, I don’t want her to hit the massive boulder that caused there to be a curve in the road in the first place.

Deciding to change the subject away from the Mami, I ask, “Any reason we have to go to a lake in the middle of the desert?”

“Besides the fact that all the lakes where we live freeze unpredictably this time of year?”

“Yeah.”

Zina kind of frowns, as if I've asked a more complicated question than I had intended. "I have a theory," she says.

"Yeah?"

"I made it up when I was reading the *Poisonwood Bible* last summer. It's not from my Nnenne or anything."

"OK."

Directly to our left beyond the boulder we'd just curved around is a mountain with dirt so red that it makes me feel hot—even though it's far from hot outside.

She says, "Well, in the Congo—Zaire now, I guess—they have a word for 'people.' What was it... *mucha?* *Mocha?* No, I remember: *muntu.*"

One of the ketchup stained papers starts to slide toward me and I get nervous.

"Here's the weird thing..." She scratched at her face and the smeared bit of chocolate sauce got even more smeared. "The word for trees is the *same*. Trees are people to them."

"Wow," I say. "That is weird."

"So my theory is that the Mami Wata worshipers like not having tons of trees watching them make their appeasements. As if the trees would be spying or something." She pauses. "But it's just a theory. Grandma speaks Igbo, not the *muntu* language. But I think they might have Mami Wata in Zaire, too. They just call her something different." The ketchup paper makes a final slide and, predictably, slimed toes. "My toes! Ugh! So disgusting!" I say.

"That's what you get for being barefoot," Zina says. Then she rolls down the window and throws the trash outside.

"You litter?" I ask.

"Today I do."

I make a tsking sound of disapproval and bend over, trying to wipe off my toes.

“There’s something else about *mntu*,” she says, her face looking more serious than I like.

“What?”

“If I remember right it means something like, ‘everyone who is here,’ and it’s the word they use to talk about Ghosts and Gods, too.”

Something about the way she said this sets me shivering.

“I guess they think that Gods and Ghosts are hovering around us all the time,” she says.

And the thing is, I know they’re right.

•

As we pull up to the marina, everything is dazzle and excitement. There are black women everywhere wearing white dresses and red hair wraps. There aren’t very many men, but the few there are carrying huge vats of Coca-cola cans onto the waiting boat.

Zina sees me staring at the Coke.

“Mami Wata loves Coca-Cola,” she says, shrugging as if it isn’t that odd.

I go to the back of the car and surveyed all of the stuff I brought because I wasn’t sure what I needed to bring: a sleeping bag, a sweater, a bag of ranch-flavored Doritos. The air smells like roasting chicken and, in addition to the vats of Coke, people are carrying Costco containers of muffins and cheese. I leave the Doritos and the sleeping bag and grab my sweater.

Zina has bounded ahead and is hugging Amaka-the-fortune-teller. Zina is so much smaller than Amaka that she ends up momentarily airborne.

When Zina is back on the ground Amaka looks at me. I half expect Amaka to either hug me the same way or to slap me since I'd been so rude before, but she just looks.

Part of me realizes that I should take this look as a sign that things aren't going to go any way that I can predict. But all I feel was a vague stirring inside—a discomfort forming—and I smile at Amaka and pretend that I don't feel anything but sorry for my behavior and excited to be here with her.

The boat docked at the edge of the lake is a huge raft-like thing. The deck is strung with festive lights that blow in the desert wind. Just beyond the deck, the western sky is rainbowed with clouds. The sun is bright orange—bright, but because it's hiding behind clouds, it isn't painful to look directly at. I can't see the moon anywhere. It almost feels like there may not be a moon anymore.

We walk onto the boat deck and it's really loud. There is drumming and chanting. People are dancing around in circles.

I know as I look at the sight of it all that it *should* make me feel happy. Everyone out on deck dancing looks so *happy*.

But I *can't* be happy. And I don't know why.

•

“Eve has gotten such a bad rap, you know?”

I remember Grandma saying that one day after she had taken Magdalen and me to a carnival. I don't remember where Eliza was, but baby Maggie and Mom were riding the Merry-Go-Round for the fortieth time, and Grandma and I were sitting on a bench, eating ice cream. I must have been about twelve.

“There were *two* commandments in the garden of Eden. One: don't eat the fruit. That's the one we hear about over and over. Blah, blah, don't eat the fruit.

Bad, bad Eve for eating the fruit.” Grandma rolled her eyes and I laughed. There was carnival music in the background. I suppose my laugh must have mixed with it nicely.

“But there was *another* commandment.”

She paused, probably for dramatic effect. She was like that.

“Multiply and replenish the earth.”

I took a bite of my ice cream. It was the kind that had bubble gum in the center.

“That means have babies, Isa!”

I laughed again. “I know what it means, Grandma!”

“Of course you do. But tell me... If they hadn’t eaten the fruit... They’d have stayed all innocent. Baby-like themselves. They never would have had babies. They couldn’t!”

The Merry-Go-Round ended a round, but Maggie tugged on Mom’s arm and ran right back to the end of the line—waving at us as she went.

Grandma was eating a Dove chocolate ice cream bar. Ice cream of the goddess. “If there are two commandments... And you can’t *keep* one of them without *breaking* the other... Well, what are you supposed to do?”

I shrugged. I had gotten to the bubble gum part of the ice cream at that point, but the bubble gum seemed to lose its flavor pretty fast. That was always the disappointing part about that kind of ice cream.

“Adam couldn’t do anything. Poor schmuck was paralyzed by his inability to disobey. He needed a savior.”

“A helpmeet?” I asked.

Grandma grinned right back at me. “Exactly. He couldn’t descend into the fall on his own. He needed a little... shove.”

“But Eve still broke a commandment.”

“Of course she did. But she would have broken one either way.”

“Did she choose the right one, though? How can you know?”

Grandma put her arm around me. The sun must have been going down, too, because I remember shivering in the cold. “I know she chose the right one, Isa baby, because you’re *here*.”



“You OK, honey?” Amaka’s hand rests so lightly on my shoulder that if it wasn’t for its warmth, I wouldn’t know it was there.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“If you dance, sometimes it brings it all to the surface.”

Even from this far away I can smell the mix of water and salt radiating from the dancers. “I don’t think I want everything to come to the surface, Amaka.”

The drums beat and the swirls of dancers look like pinwheels, laughing in the wind.

Nnenna Dozie comes up behind me and puts her hand on my other shoulder. “You ain’t never gonna be free until you face things,” she says. “*Everything*.”

Face things.

Face *her*.

Amaka pushes against my shoulders ever so slightly. “There are a few hours before we leave dock. Go then. Face your demons, honey.”

My footsteps are slow motion next to the whirling and jumping. But I move forward and the drums seem to get louder and louder. The drumming and the

whirling seem to get faster and faster. I can smell the roasting chicken. The smell mingles with the heat of bodies.

There is a woman beside me, swilling in circles so long that she staggers. I hear someone saying that she is possessed by the Mami Wata. And the possessed woman is beside me now. She is saying, "Come, come."

Dance with the Mami, my mind adds.

I lift my arms. Slowly, starting all the way out at my fingers. Then I close my eyes and began to circle my hips to the beat of the drums.

And then I can feel it rising: *Everything*.

But it all catches in my throat.

It catches in my throat and I'm having trouble breathing.

Zina takes me by the arm, then. She takes me by the arm, and we leave the safety of the boat.

•

We sit, legs crossed, in the sand, far enough away from the boat that we can't hear the chanting. Just the drums.

"Sometimes I think Jeremiah was right with his lists," I say. I'm staring at the sand, completely disconnected from my ability to feel. "Good on one side, bad on the other side. Simple. But Mike said that when you have truth, you can take it too far. And then Amaka says that life demands terrible choices. Find the place, she says, where the river meets the lake. As if I'm supposed to know how to do that!"

"Calm down, lemon-drop." Zina is trying to sound all light, but there is a tiny tremor in her voice. That's how I know I'm worrying her by talking so much.

"Why is the Mami Wata such a *bitch*? All the goddesses. Even Eve, who's not really a goddess but was sorta like one, anyway. Tricking the man she loves into

eating a stupid apple?! Why the tricking? Why the forcing? Why not just *talk* to the guy! Tell him that there isn't another way! *Something.*"

There is a look on Zina's face that seems like it wants to say, "I have no idea what you're talking about." But that would be a lie. Because Zina does know. She knows me well enough to know. And after not saying anything for awhile, she says, "You're forgetting the secret of the Mami Wata."

"The secret?"

"Yeah, you remember it, 'cause you were just talking about it. The river. The lake."

"Oguta Lake."

Zina smiles. "See, you totally remember."

I dig my hands into the sand, feeling the cool dryness of it between my fingers. "Tell me again, anyway."

"We think of the Mami as a goddess. One scary-ass mermaid who might eat your soul. But that's not her. Not the *real* her."

The wind is blowing. It feels appropriate.

Says Zina, "She's not a goddess. She's not a god. She's not patriarchy and she's not matriarchy."

"She's both."

"Yeah. She's both. Male and female together."

"They make the one god," I finish.

For about three seconds, I feel a deep calm sinking into my chest. I feel like I don't have to panic and I don't have to be afraid.

"No one extreme has the truth, Isa. Not Jeremiah. Not your Grandma. Truth is the place where the extremes meet."

The wind blows again, and I almost believe that disaster has truly been averted.

But on the fourth second, there is a voice. “What a beautiful thought, little black girl. I’m so sorry that I have to do this.”

And there is a swinging.

A bat?

A stick?

Something hard. It hits Zina squarely across the head. There is a rag-doll quality about the way her body moves through the air. The sight tastes... metallic. And as she hits the ground, unconscious if not dead, I see blood starting to trickle from her mouth and into the sand.

Someone pushes me onto my face. The sand—cool and dry—is strangely comforting against my skin. I can’t talk against the sand. I can’t even breathe because I will suck it all in.

And my hands are being tied.

I wonder why we wandered so far from the boat. I hear the drums playing, rising above the water. Even if I can take a breath, no one will be able to hear me scream.

My eyesight starts to fill with spots. Lack of oxygen, maybe?

But I’m lifted off of the sand.

And I’m being pushed—no, that’s not the right word.

Shoved.

Someone is giving me a little shove.

Into the trunk of Grandma’s car.

Time is up.

Ⓢ

Chapter

Of all of the times when I thought I could feel Grandma's ghost, now in the trunk is the strongest.

It's *her* trunk. And so it smells like her.

I bounce as the roads change, one kind of vibration toward another. I flinch at every bounce. My shoulders feel bruised and the muscles in my back are cramping.

At first I try to get my cell phone out of my pocket, but my hands are tied.

So I try to get comfortable; but it's hard enough to breathe, let alone get comfortable. And so I lie there in the darkness.

Darkness. Pain. And the smell of Grandma.

Hush, says her ghost. *Hush*.

I close my eyes, try to fall asleep.

Hush, says her ghost. *Hush*.

I cry.

And then I sleep.

•

Hours have passed by the time the trunk opens and Apollo lifts me out. And I can still *feel* it: Grandma's ghost. She is standing next to me, having gone silent. I want to think that she is sorry. That she feels *bad* for this. But the only thing I can feel is that she is still *here*.

"After your initiation, Isa, you'll change your mind," says Apollo.

I wonder if I will.

Part of me *wants* to. Part of me thinks that if I move into the woods and worship the goddess that I will always keep my grandmother's ghost next to me.

Because I know I'm never going to stop missing her. No matter what the truth is.

"Isn't an initiation useless if I'm not willing?" I ask.

He smiles, softly. "Your mother wasn't willing, either."

Which isn't a real answer, I don't think.

He moves behind me and I see that we are standing somewhere in the woods. It's definitely not my grandmother's property, though through the peaks of some of the trees I see mountains. We could be *anywhere*.

Says Apollo: "I know that you're scared. I know that you're in pain. But it's part of the ritual. The pain. The terror. The needing a little... encouragement."

"Ritual?"

But he doesn't answer. He is walking me toward a set of fires.

For about a half a second, I wonder if he is going to sacrifice me or burn me at the stake. But, no. That won't make sense.

And that's when I notice that there are other people there.

White robed people.

They are dancing around the fires, flowers braided into their hair. They all seem so *happy*. Relief that it's finally happening. That I am finally here.

The image of the robed people swirling in the fire-lit half-light of the woods is surreal. I honestly can't tell at first whether the people I see are really people. Are they spirits? Demons? It isn't until I'm almost right up next to them that I can see

they *are* people. Just regular old people who have somehow become ensnared in the web of the Goddess. For one, tiny, moment . . . well . . . I almost feel *sorry* for them.

The girl who I'd seen in the parking lot comes over, and starts rubbing something smelly onto my skin. "You won't regret this," she says. "And I'll help you get through it."

Help.

I'm supposed to help *her*, I think. Is it too late?

Apollo walks up to the fire and throws something inside of it. Fireworks of some kind because there is a pyrotechnic explosion and everyone starts to cheer.

And all kinds of motions are set into action.

Drums start beating. The dancing gets faster. (That seems to be the theme of the day: dancing and drumming.) And chanting.

The chanting spins and grows and got louder.

Lakshmi, Shakti, Saraswati,

Asherah, Isis, Quan Yin, Parvati.

And Apollo throws something else into the fire.

The fire explodes into a blue pillar of pyrotechnic psychosis.

It spits out little sparks everywhere. I think the trees might catch fire. They certainly seem to bend away from the entire scene. As if they know what is about to happen is vile.

And then there is chaos.

I feel Grandma's ghost move closer to me. And three men appear. They are completely naked, various parts of their bodies painted with blue paint.

They have knives and they start to slash at me.

First, at my clothes.

They slash and slash until the skin starts showing. And when I'm practically naked, they slash at the skin. They slash at everything except the ties that bind my hands.

I think I can see Grandma standing next to the blue pyrotechnic creation— watching the blue pillar of fire spitting up toward the stars.

And I think the stars are trembling.

And I think I'm screaming.

There is blood on my face and on my legs. The force of the goddess caking against my skin. I can feel cuts across my stomach like oozing welts. Nothing is making sense.

Someone is putting me on a rock.

Five men stand ready, at the bottom of the rock. And their nakedness has become... Something much more sinister.

They come toward me.

In a circle that gets smaller and smaller until they are right up against the rock. And Apollo starts to ascend the rock.

Somehow, in the chaos, he has become naked, too.

There is a quiet that overtakes me.

It's like the noise all around has become so loud that it ceases to exist.

And in this moment of quiet, I know.

The knowledge...

It comes all at once.

Quickly.

Clearly.

And it explains.

It explains everything.

My father.

Five men.

Dancing.

Seventeen years ago, today.

On Samhain: celebration of the dark.

This.

This is how I was conceived.

A little shove.

A fall.

Eve and the apple.

Pain is part of the sacred.

Or profane?

Just a little shove.

Five men.

Life from darkness.

I don't know who your father is.

It could be a lot of people.

Shit, mom.

How many men did you sleep with?

You have no idea what the hell you're talking about.

Go to your room.

Just.

A.

Little.

Shove.

I scream a single, wailing cry, throwing it up above the tops of the trees toward heaven.

Mother.

I'm calling for my mother.

It's what I *have* to do. It's what I *should* have done all along.

There is blood coming from somewhere. Blood dripping down my skin and onto the rock in a little pool. The blood of my grandmother, running in my veins. The blood of my mother. And I love them both. The Mami's sacrifice can't be avoided after all. But it would have been easier in Amaka's backyard. That was true.

The chanting and the yelping just intensified. The blue smoke from what I now think of as Grandmother's fire exploded again—this time into a pillar of red flame so hot that the heat burns the water right out of my eyes.

“Now!” Apollo is screaming. “The time has come!”

I feel him grab onto my ankle.

Another one stands above me with a knife, like he is ready to make a deep cut on my chest—like the one my mother has.

And Apollo is crawling toward me. Getting closer and closer.

All I can see is that he is naked. And that it is *ugly*. I feel like the stars in heaven just retreated. My eyes blur and narrow. Everything seems to fade into tunnel vision. Like I almost don't even exist anymore.

And then, out of nowhere, there is a gunshot.

And another.

And another.

I wonder, momentarily, if my grandmother is going to kill me now. But then the dancing and the singing and the drumming turn into a frantic diving to the ground.

Everything is confused.

I spin my head to the left and the right, trying to make sense of what is going on.

And the first thing I can focus on is my mother's face.

My mother.

Here.

"Get in the car, Isa," she says, motioning with her head. She's holding Grandma's rifle with a hand so steady that she almost doesn't seem like my mother. She is something wholly different. Something infinitely more powerful.

But Apollo grabs onto my other foot.

"No!" He is screaming at her. "You ruined everything seventeen years ago and you will NOT ruin it again!"

He is coming toward me, knife raised high. His nakedness, itself, a weapon.

"Apollo!" Mom is screaming. Mom who doesn't scream. "Don't you DARE! I'm warning you!"

"Don't try to stop this, Mary! Not again."

"Do you really think I'm going to let you do this?"

He is moving, even faster toward me. "She wouldn't have been here if we hadn't done it to you!"

I writhe, move.

But there is a final shot.

Followed by quiet.

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I writhe, move.

But there is a final shot.

Followed by quiet.

The deepest kind of quiet there can be. It's the kind of quiet you'd imagine there being right after Adam took a bite of the fruit. As he dropped the apple onto the ground, and watched it roll away.

It's the kind of quiet you'd expect just as the water of the lake froze and the river that beat against it slowed into ice.

My mother.

Apollo.

The male has met the female.

And it's quiet.

And Mom whispers. "Go to hell, Fred."

There are sirens.

Police vehicles that pulled up, just minutes after my mother did, but they would have been too late.

Someone—a woman police officer, I think—is putting a blanket around me, telling me everything is going to be alright.

The robed people are scattering, even as the police are rounding them up.

Apollo's body lay lifeless just below the rock.

Grandma's ghost has gone. Fled to I don't know where.

And my mother stands, holding that gun.

And we are looking at each other.

And all I know is that I am sorry. So, so sorry.

And I wonder if it will ever be enough.

©

Chapter

I have about fifty thousand questions that it will take me a long time to ask. Because after all the fuss and being questioned by the police and having my cuts stitched up and being given IV antibiotics at the hospital and then driving home... neither of us can speak for a long time.

But when we get home, we walk in the door. And there is that *home* feeling.

The air is warm around us. And when we walk in, Mike is here. He is hugging us—crying.

Mom and I aren't crying. We can't cry. Not yet.

Maggie is sleeping on the couch—still in her unicorn costume, clutching onto her bag from trick-or-treating.

In a crock-pot, Mike has poured cans of soup and has been keeping them warm for when we got home. He pours the soup into mugs and then hands them to us and ushers us into my parent's bedroom.

I turn to my mother and start the questions.

One: "How did you know to come?"

Answer: "Zina called me."

Two: "Zina is alive?"

Answer: "Yes. In the hospital. Near where she was. She has a concussion and was unconscious for an hour. And then the first hour she was awake, she was having trouble staying coherent. But as soon as she could form words, she called

me. She told me what you've been doing at your Grandmother's. She told me about Apollo. I knew it was Samhain. I filled in the blanks from there."

Three: "How did you know where to go?"

Answer: "It was the same place—where he took you—the same place they took me. It's an hour and a half drive there from here. But I made it in an hour ten."

And then, silence for awhile.

We sip our soup, and stare at the carpet. I finger the hospital ID tag they'd given me. My name looks so surreal printed out on that wrist tag. "Isa Weatherford."

Whoever the hell *that* is.

My mom looks up at me as I think that—almost as if she hears.

"You're the true alchemy," she says.

It seems to come out of nowhere and everywhere, all at once.

Mom's hair is tied back; I notice that for the first time tonight. She looks as young and as fragile as she ever did, clinging to her mug of soup the way a child would.

"I don't think you know about alchemy," she says.

I spread my fingers wider around the warm of the soup mug. "Sure, I know about alchemy," I say. My voice is hoarse and I don't sound like myself. "We learned about it in chemistry. It was a misguided practice of the middle ages. People yearning to be rich tried to turn stuff into gold."

She nods. "Like I said. You don't know what alchemy is." She sips her soup, closing her eyes as she does it.

Mike has a hand on her knee, even though he's been so quiet it's like he is in the background. Mike always seems like he's in the background somewhere. Quietly doing whatever it takes to keep the family going.

Mom says, "Alchemy is a metaphor. It always was. Sure there were crazies who thought they might be able to make gold. There have always been crazies."

"Present company included, I suppose?"

She laughs at that. But only for a second.

"Gold from dross," she says. "That's what you are. The true alchemy."

She stands then, puts a hand on my hair, and then kisses the top of my head. She holds the kiss for several seconds and there are so many words telegraphed in the silence of it. Most of all that words can't be enough. But that she loves me anyway, in spite of it all.

She walks out of the room. Escaping the way she always has. Only I *get* it now. And I let her go.

Mike is left in the room, sitting on the edge of the bed next to me.

I use the presence of the rest of my soup to stay silent. He sips his, too. He looks like there are so many things he wants to say that he doesn't know how to say. But he *would* have said them if he could. I understand that now. Maybe for the first time.

Finally, I ask: "Does it bother you? That you're not my real dad?"

He sips his soup before he answers, but he looks at me when he does. "But I've always considered myself your real dad," he says.

"Not biologically."

"You know that biology is only a part of it, Isa."

"But it *is* a part of it," I say. "We can't pretend that it's not."

He shrugs and looks at me and then looks away. Not as if he is trying to ignore me or anything. As if he is trying to think.

“Was there a moment?” I say. “Was there some sort of grand moment that you realized you were my real dad?”

His soup cup is empty and he stares at the emptiness of it before he answers.

He says, “There doesn’t have to be a *moment*. That’s too much pressure. Imagine there never was a moment. What would you do then? Live your whole life feeling like you hadn’t earned the right to be my daughter just because you could never produce a magical moment?”

I’m starting to feel cold, so I grab a blanket from the bed. It smells like my mother.

Lavender.

I identify my mother’s smell for maybe the first time in my life.

Mike says, “Fatherhood isn’t about grand moments or profundities. It’s about every day. It’s about assembling together a lunch for your cooking-impaired female clan. It’s about going to work so your kids can just go and be kids. It’s an hour-by-hour exercise in boring stability. And you’ve always been a part of that for me. Just as much as Eliza and Magdalen.”

“But Eliza and Maggie are *yours*.”

“And you’re your mother’s and she’s mine. So you’re mine, too. Don’t ever doubt that.” He looks at me for that last bit and some of my inner sadness begins to melt.

If I had found my father—really found him—what would I have wanted from him?

Mike.

I would have wanted him to be exactly like Mike.

We hear the piano start to play.

Mike—who has maybe been my “real” dad all along—stands. “I’d better go move Maggie,” he said. “Your mom’ll probably be playing for awhile.”

And she does play for awhile.

She plays all night.

•

Chapter

When the Saturday of the Chamber Music Festival comes, it's almost a relief. After today, Caden and I won't have to sit in closet sized rooms together. We won't have to try and be civil to each other when both of us are so aware of everything that has happened.

I realize that Caden was right.

We were doomed.

And after the concert is over, I can endeavor to get over him. I'm clinging to that.

•

Most concerts are at night, but this is an all-day festival. Caden and I are scheduled to be on the Jeremiah Church Stage (the only place big enough in J.R. to host a music festival) at approximately 2:00PM.

I usually get so nervous before a performance that I can't sit still. I start talking super fast—usually to strangers. I tell them all about my preferences for food flavored with basil and math books written in a sans-serif font. I talk and talk at them without stopping until I force them to make some lame excuse to get away from me.

But today's performance is different. I have nothing to say.

My eyes feel dry and heavy. My stomach growls and I don't even want to eat anything. Every sweat pore in my arm is tingling because next to me sits the strangely beautiful boy who has a twenty percent chance of being my brother. We

are sitting just off stage, each of us cradling our instruments. We stare at the music. Never at each other.

But I'm terrifyingly aware of him.

His hair is gelled down and he is silently moving through each fingering change as we wait for them to announce it's our turn. There is a deep red curtain behind him and it moves slightly every time he does. His rubber-soled shoes make a soft squeaking sound as he rubs them against the black floor. I can smell the way his aftershave seems to glow in his heat. He must be getting nervous. Or maybe he is more like me—hot only because of repressed emotion, not nerves.

I think about the audience we are about to step out in front of. The lights of the stage always make a fog-like haze around them. As you step out, the audience looks like they are made of disembodied spirits—waiting to judge.

Caden clears his throat and then wipes a sweaty hand against his dress pants. I watch his hand move across his thigh and I can't help but think of the way his thighs trembled the last time I touched him.

And then I think of my mother, waiting outside in the audience.

She must know by now... Who Caden's father was. Someone must have told her. And if she doesn't know yet, won't she finally realize that he looks just like Apollo because he *is* Apollo's? Or is that the kind of thing you try not to notice even if you do?

A voice outside announces, "Our next performance will be an English Horn and Bassoon duet. Caden Lancaster and Isa Weatherford will perform Carlos Cortez's 'El Hambre Grande.'" His pronunciation of the Spanish is so terrible it makes me wince.

Caden plays an A, wordlessly indicating that we should tune.

I play an A back. Not an *actual* A. The English horn is in a different key than the bassoon. This seems metaphorical.

But the sound, I remind myself, is the same.

Wavelength: 220.

Caden stands up first. “Good luck, Isa,” he says, unsmiling.

“Yeah, you too.”

And the lights of the stage are all around us.

C

There’s always a magic in that moment—the moment you enter the bath of stage lights and see in front of you the rumbling ocean of audience. At first you can only make out one or two faces in the front row, but suddenly you feel this electricity go straight to your core.

I find my mom and dad quickly. Dad is smiling. Mom looks worried. Zina is sitting next to them, chewing gum, head still bandaged. She has used the whole head injury excuse to get out of playing in the concert. And, really, it’s better for *everyone* that way. Zina truly is a terrible viola player.

Zina smiles at me then. A winking kind of smile.

I listen to my black concert skirt rustling as I sit down. We had memorized the piece weeks ago, and it feels awkward to just sit here, no music to arrange on the stand. My face aches hot from the lights and all I can smell is Caden’s aftershave, surrounding me. Mocking me.

When we are both settled, Caden looks at me. He doesn’t blink and so I can’t blink. In front of all these people, we are staring at each other.

He gives a nod and we start to play.

And it’s just like it is in rehearsal.

Beautiful.

All I'm aware of is how close our bodies are. My mind insanely starts to calculate the force of the gravitational attraction between our molecules.

$$F_g = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

There is a comfort, maybe, in knowing that it isn't just an emotional tug between us. Our masses are literally pulling on each other.

We keep eye contact throughout the piece.

And the music is otherworldly.

It's so intense that I wonder how my mother does it. She lives at the piano. But her *soul* lives in the space outside her body—in the music. Outside her body... but inside her emotions? How does she watch the music flow out of her and not wig out at the idea that her entire spirit is suddenly bare in front of everyone who knows the language? How can a person live with that much emotion hovering just outside of them?

Caden sits perfectly straight, but I'm swaying slightly. (It's easier to sway slightly when you're playing the English horn because it's less bulky.)

And I wonder, does Caden know this language? He is staring right into my eyes. But can he read into the notes coming out of our instruments and know what they mean?

As we finish the last bit of the song, Caden makes the tiniest nod of head and in perfect synchronization we end the last note.

We sit perfectly still and listen as the residual sound carries forward and then bounces off the back of the theatre.

There are approximately three seconds of silence before the audience bursts into applause.

Caden reaches over and takes my hand. He squeezes it ever so slightly as he pulls me up to my feet. As I turn to bow for the audience, I break eye contact with Caden.

When we are upright again, I can see the judges staring at us—smiling—maybe in disbelief. I want to tell them they shouldn't be so surprised. We aren't just teenagers up here. We are old people. Aged and burdened by the darkness of the Mami Wata.

One by one their scores appear.

Caden and I get the Command Performance award.

Our teacher, Mr. Hippie-man Johnnie Rivers, is just off stage, ready to hug us.

When I see Johnnie—all dressed up in an almost-suit with an actual-not-tie-dyed tie—all I can think is that if he never paired us together for the stupid duet... If he never decided to spice up his boring old person life by playing matchmaker ... I wouldn't love Caden the way that I do. I wouldn't hurt the way that I do. It's all John's fault. All of it. Even though I know that it isn't; not really.

I hug John without looking at him. Facing Caden is one thing. But facing Mr. Rivers, I simply can't do.

•

Because of festival rules, we can't go join our parents in the audience until one of four pre-arranged breaks in the program.

And so after the performance, Caden and I end up in the Green Room (aka: Sunday School Room 7).

We aren't alone together, praise the Gods of the Music Festival. All kinds of people from all kinds of schools make their way in and out of the room. And there is such comfort in the chaos of it all. *I feel invisible, huddled in a corner* and holding onto my English horn.

Caden isn't sitting terribly far away and every now and then I see him look over at me. He never smiles. So I look at the floor. Anything not to see him looking at me without smiling.

But then there is a touch on my knee.

Caden.

The room is so loud, that he has to lean over and talk right in my ear so that I can hear him. He smells slightly of sweat.

"I want to talk," he says.

I laugh silently. How many girls have sat around praying for some guy to *want* to talk? And how horrified would they be by me: here, a beautiful boy wants to talk to me. And I have nothing I want to say to him.

I can't very well say that, though. So I nod.

He reaches his hand out to help me stand up and then he beckons with a jerk of his head to follow him.

C

We end up on the roof, where we can see the valley of the entire town in one direction and the mouths of the seven canyons in another.

Two hundred years ago, before the town was settled, I wonder what God's people thought as they saw this place for the first time. Were they relieved? A

promised land finally theirs? Or were they horrified? That of all the promises, *this* was the land God had chosen for them?

It's cold and I don't have a jacket. Caden-the-perfect-gentleman, of course, takes off his suit coat the second I even start to shiver. He doesn't ask if I want the jacket, he just puts it on me, and I can't say no.

Not wanting to look in Caden's eyes the way I had onstage, I stare out at the horizon. Onstage there was at least the excuse that we needed to stay in tune with each other. Up here, there is nothing.

"Your hair looks nice pulled back like that," Caden says. "You kinda look like an elf."

I don't say anything.

So he doesn't, either, for awhile.

Then, "I've been thinking, Isa." I wonder what Caden's face looks like as he says this.

I answer with my voice all light. "What have you been thinking about?" Ha! As if everything was just as normal as it ever had been and there wasn't anything to really think about!

Birds fly overhead. A huge flock of them. They swoop and dive up and then down in a beautifully chaotic synchronization. They always do this just before winter.

I think I can feel Caden looking at me, but I won't look back at him.

"They have tests these days, you know?" he says. "It costs a few hundred dollars. But I could get a job."

The birds overhead swoop up and then away, out of view. "What do you mean?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him shrug. “DNA. The whole stupid... you know. Let’s just eliminate it. I mean, there may be a *twenty* percent chance... but that means there’s an *eighty* percent chance...”

I snap my head to look at him. “You can’t be serious. After everything that’s happened!”

Something in his eyes shrinks back. “I know that you may not like me anymore. And I get that. I don’t like me half the time, either.”

“Caden.” I think my emotions have completely frozen in time. “I was on a rock. I watched your dad go all lifeless. I watched my mom... And... and you still want to be with me? Even after *that*?”

He looks away. Maybe the birds are back and he is looking at them now. I don’t see, because I’m looking at him.

He says, “Maybe you’ll never be able to forgive me. For what they did to you.”

“You know that wasn’t your fault, Caden.”

“But it was my *dad*.”

“You’re not your dad.”

Silence. Ten seconds worth. At the end of it, Caden looks at me and I look at him.

“I don’t meet people I can talk to the way I can talk to you, Isa. And you know everything about me. And you can still talk to me. And...”

“But your dad,” I say. “My mom... she...”

There is a shadow that comes from behind then. And a new voice: “We know what she did, Isa.”

Caden’s mother.

There is something about Caden's mom that is *changed*. She is calm. The rage that seemed to ooze from her very pores... It isn't there anymore.

She takes a drag of a cigarette and then grimaces at it as she coughs.

"How did you know we were here?" Caden asks.

She holds up the cigarette. "Came up to smoke. Heard your voices."

Caden says, "But you haven't smoked for..."

"For eight years," she answers. "And, you know, I thought I missed it, but this thing is disgusting." She throws the cigarette on the ground and stamps it out.

I don't know what to say. This woman is so different from the one I know as Caden's mother. Charming, almost.

She sees me staring at her and she smiles.

Caden said, "How much did you overhear?"

Her cheeks are bright in the cold. Looking at her this way, I finally realize exactly where Caden had gotten his beauty. "More than you wanted me to hear, I'm sure." She's laughing. "But I swear it was an accident."

I'm still staring at her. I have no idea what to even *do* with her like this.

She sees me staring, and it just makes her laugh again. "Look at you, all freaked out that I'm not trying to rip your face off."

Caden is staring, too.

"The truth is, your mom just did the one thing I didn't realize that I wanted to do. And now that it's done?" She shrugs. "I don't have to be angry anymore." She is shaking her head, lightly laughing. "And to think! I had no idea that I would respond like this! I always thought I wanted him *back*. Thought I was so angry that

he *left*. But now? I feel like everything is going to be okay. For the first time in eight years, I feel like everything is going to be okay.”

She comes over and sits down next to us. Next to Caden, specifically. She puts her arm around him and she kisses him on the side of his head. It makes him blush, but something inside him seems to relax. I wonder: when was the last time was that she’d kissed him like that?

“You don’t have to get a job, honey.” She says. “I’ll pay for anything you need.”

Caden seems to stammer a bit. “Thanks,” he says.

She kisses him, again. If she didn’t *seem* so sober, I’d wonder if she’s drunk.

“But here’s the thing, though. You don’t really need those tests. I can tell you right now.”

“Whether or not we’re related?” Caden asks. “How could you possibly know?”

I see little of the laughter leave her eyes then, and she looks down at her feet. “I know,” she says, “because I was there when Isa was conceived.”

⊙

The things she says next keep playing in my head the entire afternoon. As I eat the brownies at the refreshment table. As I watch my mom’s face as Caden’s mom pulls her aside to talk. As I stand next to my dad and make small talk about the awards ceremony.

“I didn’t realize that she would scream,” is what she says. “I knew there would be a violence in it... But I thought she *knew* what was going to happen. I thought they *told her*. And I thought it was... *necessary* somehow. Part of the

ritual. That's what Fred told me. That terror and pain were part of life. And so part of the ritual."

Her hands fidget as she tells me this, and she doesn't look at me in the face.

"We understand light in our Judeo-Christian, American, culture. But we don't understand darkness. We pretend that we don't need it... that it can be eradicated... But it can't. Any grown-up not kidding themselves knows that it can't. Even that it *shouldn't*. The initiation... that's what it was supposed to do. Shock a Christian-mind into an understanding of the goddess. Samhain celebrates darkness... shows us that from darkness comes *life*. You're a holy child, that way Isa. You came from the darkness... Fred always thought of you that way..."

She sighs as she talks, looking tired—tired and relieved all at the same time. Her face has such a softness as she speaks. "And up until then, everything about the group had been so *beautiful*. The way they'd look at stars? Time their lives to the changing moon? I still time my life to the moon," she says. "Accidentally. Or subconsciously, maybe. Waxing moon = increase. Waning moon = decrease. Decrease clutter on the wane and clean the house. Increase productivity at work on the waxing, working late." She'd shrugs. "There is always something so wonderful about being in tune with the way the planet moves. It feels... right. A deep kind of right."

Her hair is blonde, I'd realize, just like the rest of them. Why was Grandma so obsessed with blonde hair and blue eyes?

"But I didn't realize that she'd scream."

Caden has started to shiver and I want to give him back his coat, but I know he won't take it from me.

“I’d have nightmares about the screaming. About the things they ended up doing to *all* the girls who came to them. Year after year it was the same. Girls worn down by Jeremiah’s subjugation would find your Grandmother. She’d tell them about the darkness. Explain in detail the violence of the ritual—maybe *because* she didn’t explain it to your mother, I don’t know. The violence would still surprise them. But I guess that was the point.”

“So how do you know about Isa’s father? That he wasn’t mine?” Caden’s voice sounds unsteady as he speaks.

She looks at Caden when she answers. She can’t look at me, but I think it’s good that at least she can look at him now. “Because Fred wasn’t part of it, at first. And maybe that’s what made me OK with it. Because it was something that happened *outside* of me. *Outside* of our little family unit.” She scoffs. “As if that’s an excuse.”

But part of me understands. Because I know my Grandmother. I know how much I loved her. I know what it’s like to watch for the changing moon and rejoice in the tilt of the earth. Watch the ever-changing dualities move back and forth. Light, dark. Male, female. Winter, summer.

It’s good and evil that are more complicated, just like Amaka had said.

“But when Jonas was a baby... There was a rift of some kind. Some of the men left. Caden’s dad was elevated in the hierarchy. Fred became Apollo. And now *he* was the one hurting the girls. Their screams never got any softer. Most of them didn’t leave the way that your mom did, Isa—but then again, they all knew what was going to come and had chosen to go through with it anyway. As far as I know, it only ever was your mom that didn’t know. So, the others would learn to

pitch their tents. Learn to ignore the screaming. Submit themselves to the will of the goddess.”

And so she left him. Well, Fred left her, technically. But Caden’s mom was the one who asked him to choose Grandma or her. He chose Grandma. And that’s how she left the goddess behind and embraced Jeremiah’s Christians.

“There were only three men who raped your mother that night,” she says. “Maybe it seemed like more to her, I don’t know.”

She looks like she wants to reach out and touch me. Try and make up for what they’d done to my mother. That she’d watched it happen.

“I know your Grandma took a lot of pictures. And if you had a picture,” she says, “I could point them out. You could figure out who looked most like you, maybe. I might even be able to tell you a name.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I think I’d like that.”

G

Chapter

It's Thanksgiving Day when it finally comes.

The package from Grandma.

I'd forgotten all about it, maybe. At least, I'd stopped looking for it.

Thought that maybe it never existed.

Mom had sold Grandma's house—furniture and papers and all. She said that whatever treasures were inside the house, she couldn't bear to sort through them. And so she just let them all pass to the new owner. Grandma was such a good decorator that it actually helped the house sell faster.

Our house is crammed full of people for Thanksgiving. After we eat we plan to drive over to the next town. To go to a special mass.

Maybe it's surprising that we started going to church. (And that I know some Catholics now!)

But maybe it's more surprising that I'm the one who asked to do it. I can't bear not knowing what I believe anymore; that's what all the mess of fall has shown me.

The house is loud, but it's a happy kind of loud.

Caden's mom and my mom—who have improbably become friends—chat and laugh (loudly) as they sip spiked eggnog and watch Caden and my dad cook. Zina's family is manning the record player while Zina and Eliza make cookies and then both simultaneously scold me for eating the dough. Jonas and Maggie play out

in the backyard in the fort and every so often I see Dad staring wistfully at them—wishing for a baby boy, maybe.

When the doorbell rings, we can hardly hear it because the house is so noisy.

I move toward the door, completely baffled by who it can be because isn't everyone *here*?

It's our neighbor. And he is holding a slightly mushed box.

I wonder if he is bringing us some sort of holiday offering and if we have anything we can possibly give him in return. "Hi!" I say. "Happy Thanksgiving! Your name is Mr. Sisson, right?"

"What a memory!" he says. There is a line of beaded sweat shining against the edge of his hairline. "I'm sorry, but what's your name?"

"Isa." I smile, trying to be friendly and polite. It is a holiday, after all.

"Isa Weatherford?"

"That's right."

"Ah, well, this package is for you, then!" He holds it out and I take it from him. The package looks like it will be heavy, but it isn't heavy at all. And it's only when I get it into my hands that I realize that it's an unmarked package; and that the possibly disguised handwriting looks a little like Grandma's. "I don't know when it came. I've been out of the country for most of the semester. Taking a sabbatical. Just got in today."

"Oh, that's right," I say. "You teach at the university, just like my dad."

"Well, not *just* like him. I'm in the History department. Much, uh, *different* from the physics department. But now that I'm back, tell him we should carpool. Gas prices are terrible."

I smile again. The obviously-trying-to-be-polite smile again.

“Ah, well. Anyway, I guess they delivered it to the wrong address.”

“Thanks so much,” I say.

“Happy Thanksgiving!”

I think I say the same thing back to him, but I’m not entirely sure.

C

When I come back in the house, Caden is the only one who seems to notice that the color has gone out of my face.

He follows me into the front room, sits down next to me on the couch.

“I think it could be the package,” I say. “From my Grandma.”

“Holy crap.”

“I know!”

He puts his hand on my knee.

“I don’t know if I can open it,” I say. But I’m already opening it. I’m already moving my hands along the tape, trying to find a place loose enough to peel off.

Caden starts to help me.

At first, all I can see is tissue paper. And on top, an envelope. I open the envelope first and find myself reading Grandma’s shaking writing. *Oh, Isa baby*, it starts.

If only there was a way to justify the truth... or at least, to know that it was right—even if it was wrong.

What Eve did... It was wrong.

She had to do it or we wouldn’t exist. But it was wrong.

And it was Adam that gave her that dichotomy. That sense of right versus wrong. It was always his sense. That’s why he was so

paralyzed in the first place. That's why he needed to be saved.

Justice facing Mercy in the inevitable standoff between male and female.

But the truth.

Ah, Isa.

The truth.

The truth is that we may never know who your biological father is.

And it's my fault that we may never know. You can't blame your mother; just know that it's my fault.

There's only one thing we can know for sure.

Mothers and daughters nest inside each other's bodies, all the way back to Eve.

You always know who your mother is.

And you always know that whatever... whatever she did...

It was because she loved you.

I open the tissue wrapper, then. Beneath it are four things. The first is a Russian nesting doll. Woman inside of woman, all the way until you get to the end and find a grain of rice.

The next three are jewelry boxes. The first and second are addressed to Eliza and Maggie. The last to me.

Inside mine is a necklace: concentric circles, nested one inside of the other.

I stare at the necklace for a long time. It's silver and the circles sparkle in exactly the same way that the stars seem to sparkle.

“Caden,” I say. “There’s still one thing I need to do.”

“What?”

“There was a girl. In white robes. Zina said we needed to find a way to help her. And I think she’s right.”

Caden nods. “We’ll do it then. And I’ll stay with you the entire time.”

I feel calm, then.

Caden puts the necklace around my neck. It’s cold against my skin at first, but when it’s there, it feels like it has always been there.

We stand up.

And then I take the box and head toward the noise of the kitchen.

⊕

Endnotes:

ⁱ Sandler, Eve. “Mami Wata Crossing.” *Black Renaissance / Renaissance Noire*. Vol. 2, no. 3. (Jan. 31, 2000) p 50.

ⁱⁱ Wintrob, Ronald M., MD. “Mammy Water: Folk Beliefs and Psychotic Elaborations in Liberia.” *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal*. Vol. 15 no. 2 (1970) page 147.