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Daughters of Basheera

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Abstract

This collection of fictional writing is intended for young adults. Both works feature female protagonists encountering supernatural element and could be categorized as magical realism, in that they incorporate fantastic or mythical elements in otherwise realistic fiction. “Teeth” is a short story that covers an issue that is prevalent amongst young adults and has been heavily discussed in the media. A reimagining of the Greek mythological tale of Medusa, the protagonist undergoes a transformation after a brutal rape that leaves her physically changed and what some would consider a monster. *Daughters of Basheera* is the beginning of a coming-of-age novel featuring a teenage girl who slowly uncovers secrets of her lineage after a tragedy. Inspired by the story of Tituba, a slave who was tried for introducing witchcraft to European settlers’ daughters during the Salem Witch Trails, *Daughters of Basheera* explores the idea of the descendants of the original practitioners of witchcraft. Both “Teeth” and *Daughters of Basheera* attempt to explore themes of isolation and punishment.

Teeth

The first tooth fell out exactly one day after The Party, when Sabina was brushing her teeth. There she was, scrubbing away, careful to go up and down and not in circles, when something smooth and small landed on the tip of her tongue. She tasted the familiar metallic tingle of blood. When she spat, there it was – a plain white tooth surrounded by little flecks of toothpaste.

“I lost my tooth,” she told her older sister, Elena. The toothbrush was still in her hand and the water was still running as panic crept in her chest. She’d called as soon as she picked up the tooth and realized it was not something left over from dinner. “It just fell out in the sink and I don’t know...”

“Wait, wait...what?” Elena said. But not in surprise. Her baby was talking in the background and it sounded close to the phone. She probably couldn’t hear. “What did you say? Who’s sick?”

“Nobody’s sick,” Sabina said, and she took a deep breath before starting over. Maybe she shouldn’t have called Elena so late. It was after nine and she had a house full of kids to put to bed. “It’s no big deal. I just – one of my teeth fell out. It scared me for a second.”

Elena asked, “Is it in the front?” She sounded a lot calmer than Sabina felt.

“It’s a canine.” She stared in the mirror at herself, and then lifted her upper lip a little to peek at the dark empty space. “I look like I just left a bar fight.”

“I’m sure it’s not so bad,” Elena said and baby James giggled.

Sabina asked, "Do we have a history of bad teeth? You know, are they supposed to just fall out sporadically for no reason at all?"

"I don't know," Elena said, muffled and somewhat impatient. "I can try to come by after work tomorrow and check it out. Just try to get some sleep."

And then she was gone and Sabina was alone again. She hung up the phone and turned off the water before picking up the tooth. It fit perfectly between her thumb and forefinger, and for a moment Sabina considered keeping it in a box, like her mother had done for Elena and Sabina. After the funeral last year, they'd gone back to the house to sort through their mother's belongings. Their dad had already lost himself in the bottom of a bottle and was pretty much useless, passed out on the couch, so Elena and Sabina each grabbed one side of the outside dumpster and dragged it inside to their parents' bedroom. In the back of their mother's closet, they'd found two small boxes marked with both of their names. Elena and Sabina. Inside was every single tooth they'd ever lost, perfectly preserved, some even had a little blood still on the tip. It was weird seeing something that had once been inside you so long ago in a box like that.

"Well, I guess now we know the Tooth Fairy wasn't real," Elena said with a snort. Then she tossed her box in the garbage and picked up the broom.

But Sabina had been torn. Part of her wondered what she'd do with a box of baby teeth. Let it sit on her nightstand like some sort of macabre centerpiece? Another part of her felt as though tossing the box in the trash after so many years would be a betrayal to her mother. She'd been the one who kept food on the table and clothes on their backs while their dad drank his check away. She'd

been the one at every single parent teacher conference and soccer game even after working a double.

And then one day, right in the middle of Sabina's freshman year of high school, she died. The doctor said it was an aneurysm – quick, painless. As if death could be wrapped up that easily.

In the end, Sabina decided to keep her box, even after Elena tried to wrestle it out of her hands and yelled that she needed to let go, figuratively not literally. And she put the box in the exact same place in her own room as her mother had – the back of the closet. This new tooth, however, Sabina did not keep. She examined it for a moment longer and then, with a plunk, let it fall into the toilet. After two flushes it was gone.

* * *

Three days after The Party, Sabina told her dad that she was missing a tooth and needed to go the dentist instead of school, but he drove her to the bus stop anyway. Elena had been a no call, no show, and Sabina didn't know who else to turn to.

So she waited on the sidewalk, arms crossed, angry as hell, watching her breath billow out in a cloud in front of her face. A light rain created a cold mist that seeped through the thin fabric of her hoodie. The bus was late, as usual, and just when Sabina decided to walk, it pulled up to the curb. Sabina chose a seat in the front, right behind the driver and kept her eyes straight ahead.

But she could still hear the whispers start behind her. Most of the seats were still empty, but enough were filled for there to be talk. Someone

mentioned The Party and Sabina's ears perked despite herself. In the massive rearview mirror, she caught a glimpse of a petite brunette passing around a cell phone. She dug her headphones out of her backpack, and as she struggled to untangle the chord from the spiral spine of a purple notebook, someone slid into the weathered leather seat next to her.

"You bailed on Friday." It was Jenna, but Sabina would have known that even without looking up. Jenna was her only friend. "What happened? I waited for you at the car."

Sabina wanted to answer, but there was something about Jenna's tone that made her wary. A catch, barely noticeable. Jenna waited patiently, gripping the seat in front of her a bit too eagerly. A hush came over the bus, and it seemed as though everyone, even the driver, waited for Sabina's answer.

She knows, Sabina realized. So she muttered, "Sorry," even though she really wasn't. "Something came up."

She didn't wait for Jenna to pry further. Instead, she pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and turned towards the window. The rain had segued to fat white snowflakes that dissolved as soon as they hit the heated bus windows, and Sabina watched the roads blacken with a wet slickness as she violently wiggled her front left canine back and forth with her tongue.

* * *

A week before The Party Jenna told Sabina that Pete was going.

"My dad would freak," Sabina said, but a little current of electricity shot through her gut at the mention of Pete's name. They had chemistry together –

the class, not the connection. She'd watch him sometimes from her seat in the back as he goofed off with his friends instead of taking notes, but she didn't care that he did just enough to pass so he could stay on the football team. "Sounds fun, though."

Jenna didn't give up. "Then don't tell him." She flipped the book Sabina was reading closed to make sure she had her attention. "Don't you watch TV? Say you're spending the night at your sister's. Or better yet with me. Then there's nobody to double check with. We can get ready at my house and my mom won't care if I take the car if I tell her we're going to the movies."

Sabina thumbed the spine of the book and willed herself not to get too excited. It sounded too easy. Sneak out, get caught, get grounded. She'd never been invited to any off campus parties – she wasn't *that* girl. But Jenna knew people and Jenna was her friend. And Jenna knew about Sabina's crush.

But then again, who didn't? There probably wasn't a girl at school who didn't like Pete. He was tall and athletic and popular. Sabina had studied him long enough to know his face even if he wasn't right in front of her. She could close her eyes and perfectly picture his lean muscles and evenly tanned skin. His eyes were heavily lashed and honey-colored, and even though he was a senior, his face still possessed a youthfulness that made him look endearing and innocent.

But the best part was his lips. They were full without being too feminine and just the right shade of pink.

Perfect for kissing.

At the thought, Sabina's face flushed and she had to tear her eyes away from Jenna's.

"Okay," she said, re-opening the book and pretending to focus on a page she'd already read. "What time will you pick me up?"

* * *

It wasn't until five days after The Party that Jenna stopped pretending. For a while she still tried to sit with Sabina on the bus, chat her up at lunch. But the whispers got worse, and Jenna's voice only got weirder and eventually she joined the girls who whispered behind their hands and stared as Sabina walked to class.

She considered getting angry, furiously lashing out at Jenna and the others, calling them names she was certain they were calling her. She also considered seeing the counselor, Mrs. Pafrath, just to talk. But Sabina sounded stupid when she cursed, and Mrs. Pafrath's office was all the way on the other side of campus, so Sabina did nothing. Besides, even though Sabina thought she should care, she didn't. In fact, all she felt was empty.

It was also on the fifth day she saw one of The Boys. It was between classes, and Sabina was walking by herself, careful to stay as close to the lockers as possible, as if that would help everyone forget. She'd just come from the restroom where another tooth had been left in the waste bin. He was coming from the opposite direction, talking with his friends, loud and boisterous. Sabina held her breath, hidden behind a bank of lockers, and waited for him to pass. When he did, Sabina caught a whiff of Axe body spray, the same scent he was

wearing the night of The Party, the scent she couldn't get out of her clothes or hair no matter how many times she showered.

He hadn't noticed her, or if he had he pretended not to. For some reason that made Sabina angry. Her heart beat heavily against her chest, and this time when she pressed her tongue into the empty socket her missing teeth had left, something sharp pierced the skin and she tasted blood.

* * *

They were still some things that were hazy about The Party. That night Sabina and Jenna started drinking early. Jenna had snuck a bottle of Grey Goose from her parent's liquor cabinet and she passed it back and forth to Sabina with one hand while the other hand gripped the steering wheel. Jenna told her to take big gulps, so she wouldn't taste it, but the vodka still burned the back of Sabina's tongue and the back of her throat. But with each swig, she felt more relaxed and cared a little less that Jenna was driving too fast and turning too sharply on the icy streets.

By the time they pulled up to the tiny split-level on some non-descript street, Sabina was buzzed. More than buzzed. Her head swum and felt as if it were packed with Styrofoam peanuts. Sabina struggled to make her way to the front steps. Music thumped from inside, and Sabina could feel it vibrating through her body even though she couldn't yet make out words or sounds. She lost her footing in the heels she'd only worn once before to her mother's funeral, and Jenna steadied her. Sabina giggled and Jenna told her to take another drink.

Inside, the house was humid from too many bodies in too little space, which made the alcohol pumping through Sabina's system work overtime. She found a seat on a filthy couch next to a kissing couple and lost Jenna, and maybe even passed out or slept for a while. But when she came to she remembered Pete sitting next to her, concern etched on her face, asking her if she was all right.

Sabina tried to say yes, but her tongue was dry and her lips hadn't seemed to be working right, so Pete gave her a sip of something that was in his red Solo cup and Sabina was glad to find it was plain Mountain Dew.

There were other things Sabina could remember, as well. She remembered talking to Pete, how cute his dimple looked when he smiled. She remembered staying close by his side and leaning sloppily into his chest while he talked to his Friends, and how she loved the weight and warmth of his arm around her shoulders.

And then there were other things that Sabina could remember that she didn't necessarily want to, things that made a knot in her memory that she couldn't undo. Pete leading her back to one of the bedrooms. Pete kissing her on the mouth – too hard – as he led her to the unmade bed in the dark room. It smelled bad, like unwashed hair and spoiled food, and whoever's house it was hadn't bothered to vacuum in months. A bare light bulb attached to a base flickered weakly on the floor, revealing snatches of the bedroom, like some sort of demented View Master. *Flick*. A curtain-less window that faced the street.

Flick. A pile of dirty clothes. *Flick.* A closet with the door ajar and hanging off its hinges.

Pete pushed her onto the bed and her shoulders hit something hard under the covers. Pain shot down Sabina's back, and in a second Pete was on top of her, one hand snaking under her top, his mouth sealed to hers. Sabina's head spun from the alcohol and the pain, and nausea overtook her. She told Pete to stop, but he didn't hear her or didn't want to. She struggled to flip onto her stomach, in case she threw up, thinking how embarrassing it would be to die from choking on her own vomit.

Pete's body was heavy, and even with her face pressed against the dirty sheets she was overpowered by the smell of his cologne and the stink of his sweat. She started to say, "Don't, Pete," but he placed a chapped hand over her mouth and nose.

"Shh..." And then the other hand was snaking up her thigh, under the ill-fitting skirt Jenna'd let her borrow. She squeezed her eyes shut as the most unsexy pair of underwear she owned were pushed to the side. "Be a good girl, okay?" he said, in such a casual way, as if he were asking a question in chemistry class. And that's when Sabina truly began to panic. She struggled to breathe against Pete's hand and her heart slammed against her rib cage.

And then he was done. Just like that. She could hear him zipping his jeans, re-buckling his belt, and after a moment he paused and stared at her, faced down on that filthy bed, for a bit. Then he opened the door and was gone.

Sabina, in pain, tried to think, but nothing pushed through the fog that seemed to have settled over her brain. She tried to move, to sit up or do anything, but her body wouldn't cooperate. So she lay there on the bed, waiting for someone to find her. When the door to the bedroom creaked open again, she was halfway hopeful.

It was one of The Boys, one of Pete's Friend's from downstairs, and Sabina wondered if he'd heard what happened, if he'd come to help. The last thing she remembered were his shoulders rising and falling rhythmically over her body.

There were other Boys, Sabina wasn't sure how many. And she wasn't sure how long she waited in that bedroom with that demented, flickering light. It could have been hours or seconds, but after some time there came a timid knock from the other side, and Sabina, finally able to move, gathered herself, almost like an automaton, and exited, too.

* * *

When the fangs came they didn't hurt. Fangs. What a strange word to describe the sharp buds that pushed through the spaces left where Sabina's teeth used to be. She liked to run her tongue over the tips, pierce her tongue. It was oddly comforting.

She kept her mouth closed to keep anyone from asking questions. Not that they would, anyway. The Party had been exactly one week ago, and the whispers had died down. Sabina was old news and it felt good to be ignored.

On Friday Sabina decided to wait for Pete. She'd been thinking about him for a while. Watched him in the hallways. Some might call it stalking.

It surprised her that he didn't seem to notice.

Pete had a late practice. Sabina lurked in the shadows, away from the rest of the spectators, and watched the entire time – the warm-up, the drill, the laps around the track for punishment. When Coach dismissed the rest of the players, he asked Pete to stay behind. They talked privately for a moment, conspiratorially, and it was obvious Pete was his favorite. Pete was going places. Pete was special.

As the bleachers cleared, Sabina stayed out of view, catching snatches of conversation from the excited groups that passed her by. There was going to be another Party.

Sabina followed the path to the outdoor boys' locker room next to the track. Minutes passed and boys began to exit, one by one, heading for waiting cars. It was cold but Sabina stuck to the shadows. She was freezing and the tip of her nose was wet and numb, but she stayed still.

When Pete went in, the parking lot had emptied until only one car was left – a dinged up Ford – and Sabina pulled open the heavy door to the locker room and stepped inside. There was too much steam to make out much of anything, but Sabina followed the sound of running water. She took careful steps, her clothes clinging to her body with an uncomfortable wetness.

There was a pause – not in the water, but in Pete's movements. He must have sensed she was there because he called out, "Hello?"

There was something delicious about the catch in his voice. His fear was palpable. Sabina could almost taste it. Her heartbeat quickened and she

imagined the blood racing through his veins. She felt powerful, not exactly human. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

"Is somebody in here?" Pete asked. He poked his head out of the shower. Sabina wondered how much of her he could see.

She took a step forward to reveal herself more fully. She wanted to give Pete's eyes a chance to adjust. She wanted Pete to know exactly who she was.

And then he did. When Sabina parted her lips she could finally feel the air on her sharp, new teeth. She could only imagine how terrifying she looked. A too-skinny fifteen-year-old girl, hair slightly frizzed by the warm steam, dressed in a grey hoodie, teeth sharpened to deadly points. She ran her tongue over her teeth. It felt good to reveal herself.

She took a step forward and Pete's face morphed into an expression of horror. "What are *you* doing here?"

She didn't answer, and she didn't slow until her body was only inches from his, unbothered by the spray from the shower. Pete put up an arm to fend her off, but it was too late. She opened her mouth and bit and bit and bit until the flesh covering Pete's face was no longer distinguishable from the pink muscle underneath. When she was done, she stood over Pete's unmoving body, staring down at the mess she'd made. This new face would never draw in another unwary victim.

Finally satisfied, Sabina left Pete slumped on that filthy floor. She wondered how long it would be before someone noticed he was missing. She

wondered whether or not he'd still be breathing. Then she decided she didn't care.

It scared her how guiltless she felt.

Night had fallen. No one noticed the wild eyed girl in a too thin hoodie making her way home – using the back roads, of course – in the dark. Sabina was just another nameless face, a victim or a victor depending on who was asking.

She stuck to the shadows until she reached her house, and as she slid her key into the door she could hear Sports News blaring from the television and smell the opened beer her father was still holding in his sleep.

She crept quietly to her bedroom, even though he was sure to be out until the morning, and slipped out of the jeans, hoodie, and underwear that were damp with steam and blood that wasn't hers. She turned on the creaky old showerhead and ran the water until it was steaming hot. And then she scrubbed her skin until the water that puddled at her feet ran clear.

Afterwards, Sabina stared at her own reflection in the mirror, the tips of her fangs pressed against the soft pink flesh of her lips. They were getting longer and it was getting harder to close her mouth.

Daughters of Basheera

1

They say that when a person dies, those who are left behind go through five stages of grief. Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression.

And, finally, acceptance.

But what they don't tell you is that's a lie. A fairy tale constructed to help you when your life is falling to pieces, to tuck all those messy feelings into one neat little package. When a person dies, someone you really care about, there's only one stage that matters. Numbness.

That's what I felt when the doctor told me my mom had died from an aneurysm – quick, painless. As if he had any clue what she was feeling in those last few moments. That's what I felt a week later, at her funeral, when everyone kept saying how sorry they were, like they'd caused the vessels in her brain to burst.

Nothing.

After Mom died, nothing pushed past the thick fog that seemed to have settled over my brain.

Maybe that's why when the call came three months later I wasn't exactly shocked. I was in bio lab during summer school with all the other losers.

Before Mom died I was barely maintaining a D average in any of my classes. Afterwards my grades tanked. Mr. Braxton, my biology teacher, knew what happened, but that didn't stop him from putting zeroes in the grade book,

unlike the rest of my teachers. For some strange reason that made me like him more.

Anyway, there I was, back in Mr. Braxton's class, one eye pressed against the eyepiece of a microscope, pretending to count the number of cells on a slide of a potato culture but really daydreaming and listening to music at max volume on my iPod, when Mr. Braxton was suddenly beside me, tapping my shoulder. When I looked up, I realized everyone was watching. Waiting.

"Harper," he said. "You're needed in the main office."

A student office worker stood in the doorway. We were in the same grade but I didn't know her name. Tori or something like that. I'd seen her in the halls during the school year, laughing with her group of friends. They wore matching t-shirts that said *I was too pretty to be a cheerleader so I tried out for field hockey*. She waited patiently as I slid away from my workstation.

The hallway was empty but for the two of us. Tori walked slightly ahead, but she kept glancing over her shoulder like she thought I'd disappear. I kept my eyes trained on the back of her neck. Her white blonde hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail and her skin was so pale I could make out the blue veins snaking behind her ears. By the time we made it to the office Tori was teeming with a nervous energy. She placed a hand on the doorknob, tilted her head to one side and paused.

"Hey, Harper." Her voice raised slightly at the end, like she was asking a question. I was surprised she knew my name.

Tori fiddled with the knob a bit and her eyes kept skittering away from mine. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. About your mom, I mean. I heard what happened.”

Then I remembered. I had become *Harper – the girl whose mom died*. My gaze was steady on hers but I didn’t say anything.

“It must be so horrible,” Tori continued, and I actually started to feel bad for her. “To lose your mom like that. I just can’t imagine.” She must have read the question on my face because she quickly added, “The day it happened and you weren’t at school the guidance counselor was talking about it in the office. I overheard.”

That was funny, because I’d been back at school for months and the guidance counselor hadn’t said a word to me.

“Anyway. If you want to talk about it, I’m here.”

Part of me would have liked to. I had kept so much bottled up. But there was something about Tori that made me hesitate. The way she waited. A hitch in her breath, barely noticeable. She gripped the doorknob so tight her knuckles turned even whiter.

Then she added, almost as an afterthought, “What happened to her anyway?”

And I heard myself say, “It was murder.”

Tori’s eyes widened and I kept going.

“Two shots to the chest, one to the head. *Bang.*” I pulled an imaginary trigger on a gun I’d made with my hand and jerked my head violently to the side.

“The police said it was a hit. Whoever did it was probably after her boyfriend. Tomas.” I pulled that name out of the air, the lies flowing easily from my lips. A thrill coursed through me, and I glanced furtively to the left, then the right, before leaning in closer to Tori. I lowered my voice to a whisper.

“Tomas was in deep with the Mexican drug cartel. But the night the assassins came for him, only me and my mom were home. Thank God I slept through it all or they would’ve gotten me, too.” I choked out a sob and turned my head, pressing a fist against my mouth. “And to think that bastard Tomas got away. He’s probably halfway to Tijuana by now.”

Tori stood frozen, so I slipped past her into the school’s main office. Ms. Wilson, the secretary, was waiting for me. She pushed the hold button on her phone and handed over the receiver.

“You have a call, dear,” Ms. Wilson said. She was in her sixties and sweet looking, like she was the type of grandma who would bake cookies for you and give you money when your parents wouldn’t. Not that I knew much about grandmas.

“Someone’s been trying to reach you all morning. It sounds important.”

I doubted it, but I took the phone and cradled it between my ear and shoulder. “Hello?”

“Harper?” A woman’s voice I didn’t recognize. She sounded harried and far away. “Is this Harper Batailler?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly, and then wondered if maybe I shouldn’t have.

“I’m glad I finally got you on the line.” She sounded a bit relieved, like someone had just cut her out of a pair of Spanx and she could finally breathe.

I was beginning to feel itchy and impatient myself. “Who is this?”

“Your mother’s sister,” the woman said. “Matilda.”

The air was sucked from the room. It felt as if a garrote was slowly tightening around my neck and I struggled to swallow. It occurred to me that Ms. Wilson was watching and I turned away.

“Harper? Are you there?”

“Yes.” That came out a bit more forcefully than I intended so I took a small breath and added, “I’m still here.”

“Where are you?” Matilda asked.

“I’m at school.” My head was swimming and my tongue felt like a heavy rock inside my mouth. “That’s where you called. Isn’t it, Matilda?”

I couldn’t bring myself to call her aunt.

“I meant after school. Where are you staying? Was Helene married?”

I shifted my gaze to the door, and thought of the made up drug cartel boyfriend. A peppery sensation itched my eyes. No, Mom wasn’t married. I couldn’t even remember her going on a single date. For my entire life it had just been the two of us. But I didn’t think Matilda deserved to know that.

“I’m in foster care,” I said finally. “At a group home called New Beginnings.”

And finally I did start to feel something. Just a flash. Anger.

Anger that I'd spent months sleeping in a cramped bedroom the size of a closet with three other girls. And that I'd learned the hard way to hide my valuables in my socks or they'd get stolen. The only person in the world who ever cared about me was rotting in the ground because of some freak accident even though she'd been the healthiest person I'd ever known in my entire life.

I gripped the phone and struggled to swallow my rage. I decided numbness was better than anger.

"I'm sorry, Harper." She said it so softly I almost didn't hear her. "About everything. We hadn't spoken in years, but I'm sure Helene was a good mother."

"She was," I said tersely, closing my eyes against the prickling sensation that burned there. I wanted to ask her if that was all she wanted, to apologize for something she had no control over, like everybody else, and then go back to her own life. But I bit my tongue.

"I bought you a bus ticket."

"A bus ticket?" I echoed. "To where?"

"Greenville," Matilda said, and that familiar name sparked even more memories of Mom. Her stories about escaping from a town so small there wasn't even a Walmart. "It's in--"

"Louisiana," I finished for her. "I know."

It was true, I did know. But I hadn't thought about Mom's family in so long that the memories were only now coming back, like the answers to a test you crammed for the night before.

“It’s thirteen hours away, and I understand that’s really far from home. I live with my younger sister, Esme. We own a shop and live in the apartment space above. It’s small, only two bedrooms, but we have a pullout couch and the high school isn’t far.”

Her words were controlled, as if she’d been reading from a script. I could picture her standing in her kitchen, leaning against the counter. I wondered if she looked like Mom, dark haired and petite.

“It will be an adjustment. For all of us, but--”

“Yes,” I interrupted. Before she could change her mind. “I’ll come.”

When Matilda started up again about paperwork and legal arrangements I couldn’t keep up. I pretended to listen, but my mind was racing. The rest of the conversation was a blur, and I can’t really remember how the rest of that day went after I hung up.

But that night I stuffed my duffel bag full of clothes, left my toiletries for my roommates, and boarded a Greyhound to Louisiana, as if I were stealing away in the night.

And, in a way, I guess I was. The bus didn’t leave St. Louis until the next morning, stopping in Tennessee for an hour at a sketchy gas station for a snack break along the way. I tried to keep my eyes open, but after my iPod died, I stopped fighting.

By the time I opened them again the sun had almost set. The sky was streaked with pink and red and I peered out the window into the approaching night. *Welcome to Greenville, a sign read. Population 913.*

I pressed my head against the cool glass and tried to think of all the things I'd miss most about Missouri. Bacon pizza from Imo's and bike rides through Forest Park. Shopping with Mom along the Delmar Loop and chugging orange soda floats from Fitz's.

I closed my eyes and could practically see our old apartment in Dogtown, the overgrown honeysuckle bush that smelled like heaven in the spring. It was where Mom and I lived for six months before she died, the longest we'd ever lived anywhere.

I tried to force myself to feel sad and nostalgic, but it didn't work. Maybe because St. Louis never really felt like home.

The sky rumbled and a light rain descended to greet us as the bus continued down the deserted road. The driver flipped on the wipers. I watched the pavement blacken with a wet slickness. If I'd been the superstitious type, I would've taken that as a bad omen.

But after all that had happened, how could things have gotten any worse?

I always knew I had aunts. It wasn't exactly a secret. But for as long as I can remember, it was just Mom and me. I never met my dad, so on holidays like Christmas we holed up in whatever apartment we were living in at the time, sipping eggnog and opening presents and watching all three *Home Alones* on DVD, even the bad one. And one year in elementary school, Mom showed up for "Donut's With Dad" and nobody made a big deal because I wasn't the only one who came from a nontraditional family. Peter Cavanaugh had two dads, and Colleen Olsen had a double set of parents – two moms and two dads, who, it now occurs to me, might have been swingers.

But we never stayed in one place too long. A month in Colorado, six months in Kansas. Mom was a website designer and said she was just going where the work was, but as I grew older I got the feeling we were running away from something.

By the time I was seven we'd lived in fifteen different states, and one night Mom woke me up, her face so close to mine our noses touched.

"Wake up, baby," she said, stroking my hair. "We're going to California."

I stumbled out of bed, excited. Mom promised that as soon as we got to the west coast we'd visit the San Diego Zoo and Sea World, and maybe even stop in L.A. on the way and take pictures with celebrities. Her movements were manic and she talked so fast her words ran together, but it didn't bother me because I was too busy imagining my new life.

Back then I had this fantasy that whenever we moved I'd transform into someone new. Someone funny and beautiful who everybody wanted to be friends with. That was before I understood what being the new kid meant.

The living room was stacked with these huge boxes Mom got for free from Goodwill, and she told me it was my job to pack our clothes. It was like a game for me and I ran to her room to grab a pile of shirts. When I did, a glossy Polaroid fluttered delicately to the carpet.

It pictured three girls sitting on the pillared porch of a large white house. I could tell the oldest one was Mom. She was maybe fifteen, holding a much younger girl on her lap, arms wrapped protectively around her little body. A third girl stood alongside them, and even though the photograph was old and creased, I could see that one of her hands was clutching the folds of Mom's shirt, her grip so tight it wrinkled the fabric. Although they were all smiling, they didn't look happy. Now that I was older, I recognized their emotion as fear.

I remember the feeling of jealousy vibrating through my body. She had a life before me, without me. I could hear her walking down the hall, calling my name. When she found me, I stood, waving the picture in the air like a peace flag.

"Mommy, who's this?"

She squinted to get a better look, the smile that had just begun to brighten her face faded away. "Where'd you find that?"

I looked from the photograph back to her face. In real life her hair was longer, but for the most part she didn't look much different. It occurred to my seven-year-old brain that the picture wasn't taken that long ago.

“In your drawer,” I said. “Who are the girls, Mommy? They look like you.”

She sat on the edge of her bed and took the picture from me, studying it closely, as if she were seeing it for the first time as well. Something inside her seemed to have deflated. “My little sisters.”

“Can I meet them?” I asked.

“No,” she answered, firmly.

Usually I was the bratty type who kept insisting until I got my way, but there was something about her tone that stopped me cold. I crawled in her lap like the little girl in the picture, wanting to be close.

“They’re older now,” she said, more to herself than to me. “Matilda’s sixteen and Esmerelda should be in middle school. Besides, I don’t talk to them anymore.”

As I stepped off the Greyhound in Greenville and carefully surveyed the platform, I thought about that photograph as I searched for a familiar face. The rain came down hard, and the other passengers rushed past me to the shelter of waiting cars. A fluttering tickled my heart, the frantic beat of a butterfly’s wings. I was used to starting over, but in my rush to get away from New Beginnings I hadn’t stopped to consider that I might be headed somewhere worse.

The bus cleared out fast, and for the first time I noticed a small station on the other side of the street. It looked like a house, but a handmade sign that said *Greyhound Station* sat in the window.

I grabbed my bag and crossed the street, dodging puddles and honking cars. By the time I walked inside rain soaked through to the roots of my hair,

and water dripped from the tips. A blast of cool air from an oscillating fan hit my face and goose bumps dotted my skin. A woman in her sixties sat behind a makeshift counter, and even though she wasn't wearing an official Greyhound uniform, like the workers in St. Louis, a nametag was attached to her shirt.

Darlene.

When she finally noticed me, she screwed the top back on a bottle of OPI polish she'd been using on her nails, careful not to mess up her work. "Hey darlin', what can I do for ya?"

"I'm supposed to meet someone here, but I think I've been stood up." I dropped my bag and rubbed my shoulder. "Do you have a phone I could use?" It occurred to me then that I didn't know Matilda's number. We talked twice – once when she called the school, and then again when she called New Beginnings to tell me the train ticket confirmation number. Panic gripped my chest.

Darlene must have noticed because she said, "Don't fret. Are you by any chance Harper Batailler?" When I nodded she continued. "Thought so. Your mama called about an hour ago, said you'd need a ride home so we set ya up."

I stared at her stupidly until I realized she meant Matilda.

Darlene leaned across the counter and pointed with her blood red nails. "See that old Ford parked up the street? That's, Billy, my old man. He gonna take you home, no charge."

I glanced out the window, skeptical. The first thing you learn as soon as you're able to walk is never get in a car with a stranger. But Darlene was the first friendly face I'd seen in a while. And she did know my name.

Darlene laughed. "He don't bite, girl. Go on, tell 'im who you are. I think your folks live over on Main Street, no?"

I nodded, even though I didn't have a clue, and thanked Darlene for her help. When I reached the Ford I peeked inside.

"Are you my uber?" I joked, but Billy didn't get it.

"What now?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. I'm Harper. Your wife said you'd give me a ride home." It felt funny using that word to describe a place I'd never seen.

Billy reached over to unlock the door and then jumped out to grab my bag. He was older than his wife and limped a little when he walked, but when I tried to haul my bag into the truck myself, he insisted. He even closed the squeaky passenger door for me.

"Strap on your safety belt, young lady," Billy told me, and I obeyed. "We in for a long ride."

But we weren't even in the truck for a full ten minutes before Billy pulled a right onto Main Street. Shops lined both sides of the street, but it wasn't like any Main Street I'd seen before. The buildings were old and needed work, like they hadn't been updated in at least fifty years. I pressed my face against the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of a Burger King or Old Navy or something. No such luck.

I did spot a gas station/grocery store rolled in one, and an ice cream shop called Just Desserts. A group of girls burst out the door, laughing and making a

run for an idling car to avoid the rain. As we continued driving I thought of Mom's stories about Greenville and how badly she wanted to escape.

A few years back we'd gotten into a rare argument, and when I threatened to run away Mom challenged me with a half laugh.

"And go where?"

Not wanting to be defeated, I'd thought back to that photograph I'd found as a kid. "I'll go to Greenville," I said. "And live with my aunts. I'm pretty sure they'll be much cooler than you."

Mom was the type who never really got mad, even when she had to wait in a long line at Costco or deal with crappy service at a restaurant. But when I said that a cloud darkened her face.

"You better hope that never happens."

Billy slowed down in an area populated with two-story shops where the bottom half was a shop and the top half was an apartment. Some had *For Rent* signs in the windows, and I wondered who would actually stay in Greenville if they weren't forced to. When he finally hit the brakes and put the truck in park, we'd stopped in front of a two-story home. Vines of ivy snaked up the bricks like veins.

It stood off a little from the other shops on Main Street, like an outcast. From the street, I could see that someone had decorated the upper level with string lights to brighten the night. But the same care hadn't been taken for the lower level, which was dark and shuttered.

Thick gold curtains hung in the plate glass window of the first floor. The words *Tea Leaves* were stenciled into the glass in spidery gold paint with the business hours listed below. It looked a bit ominous, but something about it pulled on me.

“This the place?” Billy asked. He leaned over the seat, looking at me, and I was sorry he spoke. It was like he’d broken a spell.

“I guess,” I said.

And then I saw her, standing in the doorway, holding an umbrella so large it could cover at least two more people. I rolled down the passenger window and shouted over the drum of rain. “Matilda?”

But there was no need to ask, I already knew it was her. It was like looking at my mother through funhouse glass. Where Mom was soft curves, Matilda was all angles.

She nodded, barely, and I told Billy, “That’s my aunt.”

He helped me out of the truck and drove away, leaving me alone with her.

Matilda extended a hand toward me, but not to pull me in for a hug.

“Come out of the rain.”

I lugged my bag up the short sidewalk, but Matilda didn’t move. As I got closer I got a better look at her. Tall and thin, her hair pulled back in a low bun. Her look was precise, deliberate.

We stepped into the wood paneled hallway and Matilda shut the door. A steep staircase led to a second door at the top of the landing. When we got to the

top she hesitated, as if she wasn't sure whether she should let me in. But the moment passed and she pushed open the door.

I was greeted by a smell from my childhood that I couldn't quite place. The apartment was small but neat, the only furniture a couch, a coffee table and a large wooden bookshelf with a twin set of black and white antique daguerreotype photos sitting on one of the shelves.

"As I mentioned on the phone, we only have two bedrooms, but you'll have the couch." Matilda eyed my bag, then walked over to the hall closet and opened the door. "You can store your things in here. Why don't you unpack while I finish dinner? If you need it, the bathroom is at the end of the hall." Then she disappeared into the kitchen just off the living room.

I walked over to the couch and set my bag on the floor and then plopped down beside it. My body was achy after the almost day long bus ride and I sat for a moment, taking in my surroundings. My eyes were drawn to the balcony overlooking the small backyard. I heaved myself up from the couch and peered through the glass. Every available surface was covered with plants. Some were large and potted while others hung from hooks drilled into the porch ceiling. I recognized the fat pointed stalks of the aloe vera and the broad, flat leaves of the hyacinths, but others were foreign to me. And I knew plants. Even though we moved a lot, Mom always filled every apartment we lived in with the most beautiful potted plants. She had an incredible green thumb and I had inherited her skills. I was always sad to leave those plants behind when we moved, but

heavy pots don't relocate well. And we always bought a new set wherever we settled.

I looked toward the kitchen. I didn't think Matilda would mind if I took a closer look. The French doors that led to the balcony were swollen and tricky to open. But it was worth the effort. I breathed in the night air scented by the mingled odor of the flowering plants. The night was cooler than the day had been and the air left me feeling refreshed after the stuffy bus ride. I squatted down to read the label on one of the plants when I heard the sound of whispered voices carrying up from the street below.

I couldn't make out the words so I crept closer to the wooden slats at the end of the balcony and peered below into the darkness. As my eyes adjusted to the dark night, two figures huddled under a large magnolia tree emerged, one hooded and the other holding an umbrella. As the susurrations of the wind slowly subsided, their voices floated up to the balcony.

"He's been coming home late most evenings." The hooded woman was speaking. "I need to know what he's doing. I can't go on this way much longer." Her voice sounded distraught and the other woman, a shorter figure holding the umbrella, put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I'll do what I can, but I can't make any promises," she whispered. "You know what I'll need to make this happen for you, right?"

The hooded woman hesitated, and when she spoke her voice shook. "Yes, I know. And I wouldn't ask you to do this if I had any other choice. But I've run out of options."

The smaller woman sighed. "Okay. I'll do it. I'll need an item of his, something personal. And if you can, a drop of his blood. You must be discreet, or else..."

I took a step forward, curious, but the shift in my weight caused the balcony to groan and both women looked up.

"You should go," the smaller woman said, abruptly. "I'll be in touch."

One woman left through the side gate and the other walked inside. I scrambled to my feet and rushed through the balcony doors, careful not to upset any of the plants. By the time I pulled the lock back into place, the door to the apartment opened.

The woman from the backyard burst into the living room, and when her eyes fell on me she paused. Her lips parted slightly, and I stood stiffly, afraid that she knew that I'd been spying. But in the next second, the corners tilted into a smile and she said, "Harper?"

I nodded and smiled back, even though my heart was beating so fast it felt like I'd just run a marathon. I struggled to control my voice. "Esmerelda?"

She shook her head slightly and drops of water escaped from her curls. The ends were dyed hot pink. "Nobody calls me Esmerelda. It's Esme."

And in the next second she crossed the room and wrapped me in a hug. I hugged her back, awkwardly, and when she pulled away she said, "I'm sorry about your mom. You look a lot like her, I think. Or at least like the photos I've seen of her. I was really little when she left."

I shifted my eyes away and took a small step back. The plaid button up I was wearing over a black tank top was soaked, so I peeled it off and tied it around my waist. “Thanks.”

Matilda cleared her throat. We both looked up to see her standing in the entrance to the kitchen.

“We should eat before the food gets cold,” she suggested.

I felt disappointed, maybe because I was hoping Esme would talk more about Mom. But as if on cue, my stomach rumbled, and I realized that I was hungry. The last thing I had to eat was a bag of Sun chips for breakfast.

The kitchen was smaller than the living room, and that was saying a lot. Three bowls of gumbo sat at the tiny folding table, and I took a seat in the middle chair. I could feel Matilda watching me over her glass of wine.

“We’re dying to know about you, Harper. Tell us everything.” Esme nodded at an unsmiling Matilda. “We want to hear all about your friends back home. I bet you broke a million hearts when you left.”

I laughed. “Try again. We moved around way too much for that to happen.” I took a bite of gumbo. It was the best thing I’d tasted in months. What they served us at New Beginnings was worse than cafeteria food. “I lived in St. Louis for a year, and that’s only because I was stuck in foster care for six months and couldn’t leave.”

I didn’t say that to feel sorry for myself, because, honestly, I didn’t. But Esme looked downcast anyway.

“Yeah, I get it. We didn’t really have a conventional childhood, either. You could call it eccentric at best, psychotic at worst.” She picked up her spoon but didn’t eat. “Maybe that’s why Helene left.”

I looked up from my bowl. “What happened anyway?”

Esme glanced at Matilda as if she wanted to know the answer, as well.

After a while Matilda cleared her throat.

“Our father died when we were very young. It was sudden, a heart attack. But Maman was left a widow with three children, and I don’t think she knew how to handle it. She was difficult to live with. Since Helene was the oldest Maman had certain...” she paused searching for the right word, “expectations of her. And if those expectations weren’t met...”

She let her words trail off. We ate in silence for a moment, but Matilda’s vague answer was unsatisfying. It was as if she thought I should know exactly what she meant, but the pieces weren’t adding up. Mom had mentioned her Papa and Maman before, a hidden accent that I’d never noticed creeping into the perfect French pronunciations, but only to say that they had died long ago. Nothing more. I waited for Matilda to continue.

“Anyway, they fought. A lot. They’d have screaming matches that would scare Esme and me. But after a while we got used to it.” Matilda’s voice was low. I could tell she chose her words carefully. “And then, one day we woke up and Helene was gone. Just like that. No note, no goodbye. At first we didn’t think much of it. Every thing in her bedroom was exactly as she left it. Clothes, books, CDs. Helene would do that sometimes, get mad and crash at a friend’s place until

she cooled off. But when weeks turned to months, we knew. Helene didn't want to be found."

Esme glanced at Matilda, as if waiting for permission to jump in. "I remember Maman sealed off her bedroom and no one was allowed to go inside. And then one day we came home from school and all Helene's stuff was gone. It was horrible. We weren't even allowed to say Helene's name in the house anymore. It was like Maman wanted to pretend that Helene had never existed. We never heard from her again. We didn't know whether she was living or dead." She reached across the table and gave the fingers on my right hand a squeeze. Her grip was warm and comforting. "And then we found out about you."

"You found out about me?" I repeated Esme's strange words. "When?"

"The morning I called." Matilda's lips lifted in a humorless smile. "It all adds up now, the reason she left. Helene was thirty-four when she died, eighteen when she ran away." Matilda tilted her head to the side, as if she was waiting for me to add it all up, but I was clueless. When I didn't, she did it for me. "Helene ran away because she was pregnant with you."

I imagined Mom as a runaway, a little bit older than I was, pregnant and homeless. I stared down at my empty bowl. A moment earlier I was so hungry I could have finished the entire pot of gumbo by myself, but my appetite was suddenly gone. I wanted to ask where my father was during all of this, why he didn't come to her rescue. But maybe I didn't want to know.

I pushed away from the table and placed my dirty dishes in the sink. I stood there for a second, staring down at my face reflected in the dark soapy water.

When I'd collected myself I went back to the table.

"What is this place, anyway?" I asked cheerfully. "Tea Leaves, I mean. Is it a coffee shop?"

"More or less." Matilda's said. "We do sell coffee and tea."

She paused before adding, "Among other things."

"Other things?" I repeated. "Like what?"

"How about I show you tomorrow?" Esme seemed happy for the change of subject. Her bowl was empty, but she poured herself a glass of wine. "First thing tomorrow morning. It'll be fun. I'll run you through the ropes, show you what we do to keep the lights on. Maybe afterwards we can go check out the high school." She hopped up and patted my knee. "I'll make up the couch so you can get some sleep, okay?"

After Esme left, Matilda stared at me for a second, as if she couldn't believe I was here. Or maybe it was that she didn't quite know what to do with me. After a while she cleared her throat. "Speaking of school, I talked to your guidance counselor. Apparently you were failing quite a few classes."

If this was Matilda's attempt at being welcoming, it wasn't working.

I sat back and pretended to study my nails. "Yeah, well, that can happen when your life is flipped upside down."

Matilda pursed her lips. Her tone was robotic. "True. But Greenville High School has many opportunities for credit recovery. I spoke with the principal yesterday and--"

"I'm getting my GED," I interrupted, when I said it aloud I realized it was true. The thought of starting school felt oppressive, and I couldn't imagine beginning again in a new town as a junior.

Matilda didn't look too happy about that. "I see. And after that?"

I circled my index finger around the rim of Esme's wine glass and tilted my head to the side. "I haven't really thought about it. Maybe college. Or maybe I'll stick around Greenville a while."

I snuck a peek at Matilda from the corner of my eye. I just wanted to mess with her a little bit, make her feel uncomfortable. Everything she said and did seemed so controlled, like she was deathly afraid to make a single mistake. But if she was rattled by the idea of me sleeping on her couch until I was thirty she didn't show it.

"Well, we do have rules."

"Oh, really?" I asked innocently. "Like what?"

Matilda faltered, just for a second, and I almost didn't notice. But before the situation blossomed into something she couldn't control, a kettle screamed from the stove. I jumped. I hadn't even realized it was on.

Matilda smiled, tight lipped and closed mouth. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

But she didn't wait for my answer. Instead, she rose from her chair. I turned my head slightly and caught a glimpse of her fiddling with the cupboards above the sink. Her body blocked the movement of her hands. When she returned she was holding a thin white cup and saucer. I took the cup, not the saucer. I felt like I'd just accepted a poisoned apple. But I was incredibly thirsty.

Matilda watched me intently so I took a small sip. It was good, not too sweet and a bit citrusy. I couldn't place the flavor, though. Even though it was hot, I took another drink. "Thanks."

Esme poked her head in the kitchen to tell me my bed was ready. I stood only to stumble. I gripped the table with one hand to keep from falling.

Esme grabbed my elbow. "Long day, huh?"

She glanced at Matilda, and I laughed a little to keep from feeling embarrassed. "Definitely."

Esme led me through the unfamiliar apartment and I collapsed onto the couch. The last thing I remembered before drifting off to sleep was Esme and Matilda, hovering over me, just out of reach.

Like buzzards.

I was falling. Falling through an endless cold black, waiting for the moment of impact when it would all end. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound escaped as fear gripped my body. I thought that I would fall forever, but that couldn't be possible, right? Nothing lasted forever.

And then I was jolted awake, except for a moment I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Reality was almost more terrifying than my dream.

Sunlight poured through the slats of a venetian blind. A sharp pain radiated up my back and my leg twisted around a scratchy fleece blanket. My head pounded in sync with my heartbeat.

A noise punctuated the silence, silvery and light. Whispers. I sat up, pushed myself erect on my elbows. My tank top clung to my body with sweat even though the room was cold, and my throat was scratchy and dry.

For a second, as I looked around, everything seemed simultaneously fuzzy and too clear, as if I was looking through a fishbowl. The room zoomed in and out of focus, making my head spin. It took me a moment to remember where I was. And then it hit me. I was on the couch in Matilda and Esme's apartment.

The last twenty-four hours came flooding back, making my headache worse. I glanced at my iPod charging on the coffee table. It blinked 8:54.

I rolled over, practically falling off the narrow couch. The floor was freezing but I was way too groggy to search for my shoes, so I padded barefoot to the kitchen. Dishes from the night before had been washed and stacked in a

drainer. The hallway to the left was dark and silent, every single door shut. And then I heard it again.

Whispers, coming from the closest room. I crept forward and held my breath, waiting.

"...I didn't come in here to argue, Esme." Matilda. She sounded even more agitated than usual. I felt like I was being pulled forward against my will and when I stopped I pressed my ear against the door.

Matilda continued, her voice low, and I struggled to listen.

"All I'm asking is that you be careful."

A scoff. Esme. *"Careful? She's our niece, Tilda, not a pitbull."*

They were talking about me. I held my breath, almost afraid exhale.

"Keep your voice down," Matilda snapped, but Esme didn't listen.

"I just don't think it's fair for you to come in here and vilify me for being friendly when you were the one who gave her primrose tea as soon as she got here."

My fingers flew to my lips. A sweet taste still lingered faintly on my tongue. What had I drunk?

"Don't you realize that's different?" Somehow, Matilda managed to make her whisper sound fierce. *"I had to give it to her. We don't know anything about her. If we can even trust her."*

"But it didn't work, Matilda," Esme said emphatically. *"Your spell didn't even work on her. So now what?"*

There was no answer, and a cold wave washed over me. Before I could stop myself I placed a hand on the doorknob.

“*Shh*,” someone whispered, followed by something inaudible. And I came to my senses.

I stepped backward, two giant leaps. When Matilda threw open the door, she locked eyes with me as I emerged from the dark kitchen. I yawned and stretched dramatically for effect.

“Oh. Good morning, Matilda.” I tried to look startled to see her standing there, fully clothed in a skirt that almost touched the floor. “Is Esme up? We were supposed to check out the shop today but I overslept.”

Esme walked out behind Matilda. She was dressed, as well, or at least I thought she was. The outfit she’s wearing could probably pass for lingerie.

“Hey, girlie.” Her voice was light, but the dark makeup surrounding her eyes was smudged. I wondered if it was intentional. “You looked so peaceful out there on the couch I didn’t want to wake you. Why don’t you freshen up and meet us downstairs?” Her eyes flitted to Matilda’s face before she slipped into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind her. “We were just finishing up in there.”

The bathroom was further down the hall, and a fresh set of towels sat on a ledge above the toilet. I turned on the hot water and let the steam fill the shower and then the bathroom, but I didn’t get undressed. Instead, I leaned against the wall and waited, listening carefully.

When the front door clicked closed, I popped my head into the hallway. Somewhere deep in the apartment a clock ticked, but other than that it was

quiet. There were two rooms across from the bathroom, both doors closed. I tiptoed to the one Matilda and Esme just exited and turned the knob.

I ended up standing in an ordinary bedroom. On second thought, ordinary might be a stretch. It didn't look like anybody had ever actually slept there because everything was bathed in spotless white. The duvet and decorative pillows covering the neatly made bed, the sheer curtains letting in warm light. Even the base of a table lamp that sat on a completely bare nightstand was made of a pearly white ceramic, and I was too afraid of leaving fingerprints to turn it on. Instead, I tiptoed over to the bureau angled in one corner and pulled open the top drawer.

Clothes were folded neatly inside. Careful not to disturb anything, I pushed it back in and continued down the line until I'd opened all eight drawers. Unsatisfied, I stood up.

I'm not exactly sure what I was looking for, but that didn't stop me from heading to the closet on the other side of room. It was shallow and unlit, but I could tell who's room it was from the familiar floral scent that lingered on the clothes like a kiss. Matilda.

I shut the closet door and looked around, so frustrated I could cry. I was searching for a clue, something that would explain why Matilda told Esme not to trust me. But there was nothing. And then I saw it. It was odd that I hadn't noticed before.

The duvet was hitched up, as if someone shoved something underneath the bed and didn't have time to smooth it back. I kneeled on my hands and knees

and placed my cheek against the floor. The space below Matilda's bed was just as neat as everything else, but a book bound in black leather rested against one of the legs. I slid it across the floor with the palm of my hand.

It was so thick that at first I thought it was a photo album, but when I pulled back the cover I stared at an empty page. It was so weathered and yellowed that I was afraid it might fall apart in my hands, but I still flipped to the next page, slowly at first and then much faster. Every single page of Matilda's book was completely blank.

Confused, I flipped it over and started from the opposite end, hoping I'd missed something. A lump dislodged from the thick spine and fell to the floor with a heavy clunk.

It was a skeleton key. The inside was hollow, the outside rubbed to a shiny brass. It fit perfectly in my hand and the beautifully decorated bow rested against the base of my pinky. The details were so fine it must have taken hours to make.

I stared at the key a moment longer before deciding that maybe I should give Matilda a reason not to trust me. I slid her useless book back in its hiding place and stood up, brushing dust that didn't exist off my clothes. And then I slipped the key in my back pocket.

It had to unlock something.

It was funny how fast everything could change. A year ago Mom and I had just arrived in St. Louis, and I kept my fingers crossed that it would be our final move. Less than forty-eight hours ago I was hanging out in the TV room at New Beginnings, listening to two girls fight over who got to control the remote. And now I was sitting behind the counter at Tea Leaves, watching a stranger who shared my blood. I'd showered and changed clothes, then hid the key in the bottom of my duffel bag before shoving it all behind the bookshelf in the living room. But, still. I was on edge. When Matilda stopped wiping the cash register and spoke to me, I jumped and bumped my knee under the table.

“What?”

She looked at me, an unreadable expression on her face. She would make a killing at poker. “I said Main Street usually gets the most traffic, but business is a bit slow today. If things don't pick up we can close early.”

I turned my head toward the window. The sun was out today and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. For such a small town, plenty of people were on the street, but not one stopped inside Tea Leaves. At one point a girl with bright red hair cupped her hands and peered in the darkened window, but she kept going.

The lobby was tiny and cluttered. Black display shelves filled up practically every available inch of floor space, and I wondered how anyone could possibly make it from one end of the shop to the other. The walls were painted a dizzying orange, and the wall behind the cash register was stacked to the ceiling with glass bottles of every shape and color imaginable. Besides a chandelier that

looked like it belonged in a haunted house, the only source of light came from candles so gigantic they could stand on their own, dripping wax onto the floor. I was tempted to tell Matilda that she would have less trouble bringing in customers if they did something about the atmosphere, but I wasn't sure how she'd take it. Most people don't like the feeling of claustrophobia.

At the opposite end of the shop was a wooden shelf lined with bags of loose tea. Below that was a wider ledge, this one filled with fragrant candles, crystals, and necklaces the color of the rainbow. There were other, unfamiliar, items as well, and I picked up what looked like a tiny bowl and spoon. A tag attached said *mortar and pestle set \$55*. I ran my fingers along the inside and when I pulled away the tips were covered in dust. A cough bubbled up in my throat and when I turned around Matilda was directly behind me, watching. I put it back, heat creeping up my neck.

"Where's Esme?" I asked, scooting around her. "I thought you guys worked the shop together."

Before she could answer a telephone rang from somewhere deep in the shop, muted and muffled. We both looked up. Matilda excused herself, leaving me alone. The shelves no longer interested me, but there was a door to the left of the front counter. I opened it, expecting to find an employee restroom but a short hallway led to a second set of doors. I stepped forward, and even though I didn't really expect an answer I called, "Hello?"

I was met with silence, but an invisible tether pulled me forward. I could just barely make out voices on the other side of the door, rising and falling.

I turned the knob, slowly, and peeked inside the dark room. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, but when they did I saw Esme. Her back was to me, but I recognize her pink hair. She was sitting at a table near a flickering candle that bounced light off something white in her hands.

Seated across from Esme was another woman. She must have sensed a shift in the air because she looked up. Her eyes were a pale gray, as if someone had let the color that was once there bleed out. Dark hair spilled over her shoulders like velvet, and when she realized that she and Esme were no longer alone her lips parted but no sound came out.

In the next second Matilda was beside me, pulling the door closed. I jumped back, startled. She grabbed my arm and led me back to the front, her mouth set in a line. When she finally let go, I glanced behind us.

“What was that?”

Matilda didn't answer. Instead she shoved a twenty dollar bill in my hand. “We're out of ice. There's a gas station two blocks up. We don't have a car, but would you mind running to get some?”

It was obvious she was trying to get rid of me, but I took the money. Outside, the sun was too bright after the dim lighting in Tea Leaves, and it was so hot I felt like I was under a blanket, suffocating. Sweat dripped down my back by the time I made it to the gas station.

A bell rang when I stepped inside, but the guy behind the counter was too busy flirting with a red head to greet me. The smell of gasoline and motor oil

overwhelmed me as I made my way towards a big blue sign blinking ICE. When I got back to the register, the girl was still there.

They were both about my age. He wore a dingy trucker cap and a blue jean button up with Gas n' Go printed on the pocket. The girl seemed familiar, but I couldn't place her. She leaned over the counter on her elbows, her whole torso pressed flat against the counter top. I heard her say, "Yeah, that's totally hot."

I had no idea what she was talking about until I noticed the guy had lifted up his short sleeve to show her a tattoo of a bleeding skull. It was obvious she didn't really mean it, but he didn't seem to notice. When she flipped her long red hair over her shoulder his eyes bulged a little, like that cartoon coyote.

I watched, fascinated, as her hand hovered over a rack of candy bars. It was like he didn't even notice when she grabbed two Snickers and shoved them in the book bag hanging off her shoulder. She turned her head slightly, catching my eye. When she winked I looked away.

But what really amazed me is what she did next. There was an old pickle jar next to the register, and someone had scratched off the Vlastic label and written *TIPS* with a black Sharpie. A couple of crumpled dollars and what looked like a button lay at the bottom. Just as I wondered what kind of jerk would set up a tip jar at a gas station, she reached a hand inside, grabbing everything. I watched her stuff it all in the back pocket of her jeans and then suddenly stand up.

“That’s awesome.” She ran a hand over her black shirt, brushing invisible crumbs off the fabric. “Hey, it was nice talking to you, um...”

“Justin.”

“Justin,” she said, like she knew all along. “But I’ve gotta run. I’ll see you around, okay?”

We both watched as she made her way to the exit, switching her hips a little as she walked. Justin was so focused I doubted he realized there was another customer in line, and I knew I was right when he kept watching even after the little bell above the door dinged.

I slung the bag on the counter, making more noise than necessary. But at least whatever spell he’d been under was broken and he finally looked up.

“Where’d you come from?”

I rolled my eyes and tilted my head towards the entrance. “A friend of yours?”

I was sorry I asked, because he turned his attention back to the door. The girl was gone but the way he licked his lips you’d have thought she was standing on the other side of the glass, topless. “Not yet.”

“Can you just ring me up, please? My ice is melting.” I slid the twenty towards him, and for the first time he really looked at me.

“I’ve never seen you in here before.” His eyes were heavy and half-lidded, the tell-tale sign of a stoner, and he kept sweeping his too long hair out of his face. When he passed me my change, he let his hand linger too long in mine. “Do you go to GHS?”

“GHS?” I asked.

“Greenville High School,” Justin said. “But since you don’t know what that is, my guess is no. You’re not from around here, are you?”

“Nope,” I said to irritate him, but he leaned against the counter, wanting more. “Just moved in with my aunts.”

“Aunts?” He pronounced it the southern way, without the u.

“They own the shop up the street. Tea Leaves.”

Justin whistled, low, under his breath and raised his eyebrows. “Good luck with that.”

His tone pissed me off. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Tilda and Esme, right?” he said. “Everybody knows the Bataillers. And let’s just say it’s common knowledge that that Esme is one hot piece of ass.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Classy,” I pocketed my change and grabbed the ice, ready for Justin to back off. “Do me a favor. Don’t mention my aunt’s ass again. Now or ever.”

Justin laughed and held up his hands. “Don’t get mad, I’m just messing around.”

“Whatever,” I shrugged and headed to the door. I had a hand on the door handle, ready to give it a push, when Justin muttered, “Anyway, your family’s way too freaky for me to take it past looking.”

I stopped. We were the only two in the store but a filthy gray Chevy pulled up to one of the pumps outside. I couldn’t have heard him right. “Excuse me?”

I guess he didn't really care that I'd heard him, or maybe he wanted me to, because when I took a step towards the counter he leaned in. "Aren't you worried about the Batailler Curse?"

"Batailler Curse?" I tried to sound unconvinced, but a hint of uncertainty crept into my voice. "You sound like a Disney movie."

"Maybe." I could tell he was enjoying this a little too much. "But how else do you explain the horrible way Dr. Batailler died?"

My pulse quickened and the ice left a puddle on my arm. I set it down.

Dr. Batailler? Justin had to mean my grandfather. Esme hadn't mentioned that he was a doctor. Against my better judgment, I probed Justin for more.

"You mean my grandfather? But he had a heart attack."

"Yeah, sure. Okay. Heart attack." He made air quotes with his fingers when he said the last two words and then smirked at me. "And everybody knows some weird shit goes on in the back of that store."

I picked up my ice then, ready to head back to Tea Leaves before it melted completely. And I knew I should have let it go, but I couldn't help myself. When I made it to the door I turned around.

"Maybe in the future if you mind your own business as well as you mind other people's, you'll be able to hang on to your tips."

I could tell Justin was trying to think up some cute response by the grin on his face. But it slowly faded when he realized what I said.

“Wait, what?” He glanced at the empty tip jar and then back at me. I held up my hand and shook my head.

“Where’d my money go?” Justin yelled.

But I was already gone.

* * *

For dinner, Esme cooked etouffe, something so full of shrimp and rice and spices that my mouth was on fire. It was even better than the gumbo from the night before, but after the first bite I barely tasted it. The conversation with Justin kept swirling around in my head.

Matilda excused herself early and left Esme and me with the dishes. At first I was relieved. When Matilda around it was like I had to walk on eggshells. I wondered if she’d been to her room since the morning, before I snooped. I held my breath, waiting for her to storm into the kitchen, demanding to know where her key was.

But when a minute passed and nothing happened I relaxed. Esme was already at the counter filling the sink with soapy water and I joined her. She hummed something soft and pretty, the melody lilting up and down like a lullaby. It reminded me of Mom.

When she was done I said, “That was nice.”

Esme looked up, startled. She gave me a quick, embarrassed smile and color flooded her cheeks. “Thanks. Clair de Lune. Our mother used to hum it to us when we were little. She said this French guy fell in love with her and wrote it as a tribute. She was so beautiful we believed her for a while, but when I got

older I found out Clair just means light in French.” She laughed. “And that it was written over a century ago.”

“That was her name, right?” I asked. “Claire Batailler.”

Mom didn’t talk about my grandmother much, but she did tell me that, at least. I’d thought the name sounded so fancy, like a movie star or fashion model.

As if to confirm my thoughts, Esme said, “Talk about fancy. This was a lady who never left the house without looking like a million bucks. We’re talking mani pedi, pearls, fur coats.”

I laughed along with Esme. And when we fell quiet, I asked about something that had been bothering me, “Did Matilda tell you I was looking for you earlier?”

Esme shook her head. “What for?”

“Nothing, really.” I picked up a glass covered in suds and ran it under cold water. When it was clear, I turned to face Esme. “I hope you’re not mad, but I think I found you.”

Esme looked at me and smiled. “Why would I be mad?”

“Because you were with someone.” I paused before adding, “In one of the back rooms.”

Esme frowned a little but she kept smiling. “Oh, you mean Ana. She’s one of my regulars. I was reading her tea leaves.”

I smiled back even though I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Reading her tea leaves?”

“It’s called tasseography,” Esme explained. “You’ve heard of palm reading, right?”

I nodded.

“Well, in a way, it’s the same. But instead of reading the lines in your hands,” she grabbed mine and traced a finger along my palm, tickling me. “I can read your future using the left over leaves in your cup.”

“How is that possible?” I didn’t say it to be mean and Esme didn’t take it that way.

“You dump out the tea and look for patterns, symbols, numbers. Anything that takes shape, really.” She pulled the plug in the sink and looked at me. “For example, a long stalk could mean a man is coming into your life, a short stalk a woman. Or if there’s excess tea left in the cup it might mean something sad is going to happen that will cause you to shed tears. Make sense?”

I nodded, even though I still wasn’t buying it. “Do you ever read your own leaves?”

“If I could I would’ve won the lottery by now. Twice.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“So besides Ana?” I asked. “There are others?”

“Definitely.” She nodded emphatically. “Some are just thrill seekers, people who are just curious to see what it’s all about. But then there are those like Ana who come often. Ana stops in twice a week, and let me tell you, she’s loaded. She drops a buck fifty like it’s nothing. So, you know, it works for me.”

“What happened during Ana’s reading?”

“Every reading is private. But Ana’s are a bit different, anyway. She likes to write down three questions and then I search for the answers in the leaves. In that case, my view is limited. There are guides who lead me in the right direction, show me what to look for.”

A shiver shot down my spine. “Guides?”

“The spirits of our ancestor.” She said it like it was no big deal, like this was something everyone should know. “It’s a gift that runs in our family, Harper. I’m surprised Helene never mentioned it to you.”

I thought about all the stuff Mom never mentioned to me. This was just one more thing to add to the list. Esme watched me for a second, her hazel eyes darting back and forth as she tossed an idea around in her mind. She cocks her head slightly to the left, toward the hall, where we could hear Matilda start the shower. Finally, she grabbed my arm and led me to the table.

“Sit, sit.”

Esme walked to the sink and poured hot water into one of the clean mugs. When she dropped into the opposite chair, she held a steaming cup of tea, one hand wrapped around the handle and the other underneath the base for support. “Here, drink this, but save a little at the bottom. There’s no sugar in it, so it might taste bitter.”

I took the cup, like I was told. But when I hesitated, Esme nodded as if to say it was okay.

“Harper, you can trust me.”

I tilted the cup to my lips and drained the liquid in two gulps. Esme folded a clean paper towel into fourths and placed it in the center of the table.

“You need to swirl the rest of the tea around the cup. Three times. Fast. You want to make sure some of the leaves stick to the sides.” She pantomimed what she wanted me to do, and it reminded me of what I’d seen people do with wine glasses at a tasting.

I swirled the cup, once, twice, three times, and then placed it between us. Esme leaned forward to get a better look. And when she did, something passed over her face.

No, not just her face. Her whole body. It was a shiver, almost imperceptible. If I hadn’t been watching so closely I would have missed it.

And then she took the cup and flipped it upside down, dumping the leaves out. The remainder of the tea slowly soaked the paper towel, turning it a murky brown.

“Hey!” I said, but Esme pushed away from the table and walked over to the sink. I stared at her back. “Why’d you do that?”

Esme laughed, or attempted to. It sounded too high pitched, forced, and she still didn’t turn around. “I’m such an idiot. I just realized I gave you black tea, and those leaves are too hard to read.”

She was lying. Esme saw something that unnerved her. I could see her hands shaking slightly when she placed a bowl in the drain rack.

“What did you see?”

Esme's paused, one hand suspended over the sink. She dragged in a shaky breath. After a moment she finally turned around. "It was nothing, Harper. Really."

I still didn't believe her, and she must have seen it on my face because she smiled. But it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"How about we try again tomorrow? I'll be sure to brew the right tea next time."

"Yeah. Sure." I stood up and when I did the table lurched to the side and my cup tilted over. I watched as it rolled away from me. Esme leapt forward and caught it with one hand. Just in time.

She breathed a sigh of relief, holding the cup at the base. When she was sure it was secure she looked at me. "It's bad luck to break a glass."

My eyes fell to the cup in Esme's hand. And then I saw it. A fissure so fine it could be a hair. It snaked its way up the glass as if it was alive. I watched, almost in awe, as the cup split in two halves before each side tumbled through the air in slow motion.

The shards crashed against the hard tile, breaking the silence. We both watched as they shattered into what seemed like millions of pieces, into dust.

For a while, neither of us spoke. And then, finally, I heard myself mumble, "Yeah, well. It's a good thing I don't believe in luck."

Greenville Public Library smelled like a mixture of pine sol and stale books.

I was the first one outside the next morning, waiting for the doors to open. I let Matilda and Esme think I was going to the library to sign up for GED prep. But what I was really going to do was search for answers. When I stepped inside, I realized finding them was going to be a lot harder than I thought.

There were no computers. That was usually the first thing you saw when you walked into any library. But this one only had shelves of books, and not even that many. I made my way over to the front desk, where the librarian who unlocked the doors was placing stamp cards inside a stack of books.

“Excuse me,” I placed both hands on the counter and glanced at her nametag, “Ms. Dottie. I need to use a computer.”

She looked up. Her expression told me I was in over my head. “Well you won’t find any here. The high school’s got them all and they’re closed up for the summer. Something I can help you with?”

Before I could get discouraged I opened my mouth and the words poured out. “I have to do a summer project for my history teacher, Mr. Smith. He wants us to research a local family, trace them back through the years, see what we can find.” I opened my bag and tore off the end of an old receipt. When I held it up, I squinted like there was something printed on it besides the price of a box of Tampax. “I got the... Bataillers. We picked from a hat.”

She stared at me for a moment, and I thought she was going to call my bluff. My heart pounded and I wanted to kick myself for calling my “teacher” by

name. She seemed like the type who would know everybody in town by name. But after what seemed like forever, she shook her head slightly.

“That seems like the kind of thing he’d assign,” she said disapprovingly.

“Come with me. I’ll get you started.”

Ms. Dottie led me to the small room behind the desk. Plastic containers filled with old magazines lined the walls and a file cabinet with a microwave sitting on top was pushed into the corner. She pulled a key attached to a lanyard out of her shirt and unlocked the top drawer.

“This is our archive room,” she explained. “We’ve kept every single issue of the Greenville Gazette since 1952, and you’re in luck.”

She lifted a stack of yellowed newspapers and dropped them on the picnic table in the center of the room. Dust flew into the air and burned my eyes.

“The Bataillers have made the news a lot.” Ms. Dottie trusted me enough to pull the door closed behind her. When I was alone I took a seat and started from the bottom.

At first there were just small paragraphs. An obituary for what I guessed was a great-grandparent, a wedding announcement for a couple I didn’t know who shared my last name. But when I got to a paper printed on July 7, 1983, the headline was “Dr. Marcel Batailler Opens Greenville’s First Cardiology Clinic.”

Underneath was a picture of handsome dark-haired man holding a pair of large scissors. He was poised, waiting to cut a yellow ribbon stretched across the entrance of the brick building. It was my grandfather, forever suspended in time.

I kept reading.

Dr. Marcel Batailler, 39, a Greenville native and Baylor School of Medicine graduate, and wife Claire, a former Miss Louisiana, opened the Batailler Institute of Cardiology and Research over the holiday weekend. The happy couple, who wed earlier this year, are excited to build within the Greenville community.

I skimmed the rest of the article before moving on. Birth announcements followed, one for Helene Olivia Batailler the same year as the opening, and then Matilda Emilia Batailler at the end of the eighties, and, finally, Esmeralda Marie Batailler five years later.

The sections featuring the Bataillers had been paper clipped, and I wondered who else could have been interested in researching my family. There was nothing particularly exciting about the stories, mainly pictures with the governor or small mentions in the business section. But when I turned the page of an issue near the bottom of the stack, Mom stared back at me.

My eyes watered as I skimmed the caption beneath her picture.

Sixteen-year-old Helene Batailler, daughter of the late Dr. and Mrs. Marcel Batailler, attends her first cotillion.

She looked beautiful in a white sweetheart cut gown with a full skirt. She smiled shyly for the camera, one hand adjusting the large bun that sat at the back

of her neck. A sparkling tiara was clipped into her dark hair, and I wondered if the diamonds were fake.

Abruptly, I pushed the article to the side and flipped frantically through the rest of the stacks, searching for something I wasn't quite sure I'd find. And then, suddenly, I stopped. The photo of the charred remains of a large house filled the entire front page of a paper printed almost ten years ago. I recognized the once white pillars that had been blackened by smoke.

Fire at the Batailler Plantation

My hands shook, and the old paper rattled a bit. I wanted to flip the page, but I was too afraid of what I might find. It was the same house from the photograph of Mom and her sisters.

Before I could think about it, I shoved the entire newspaper in my bag. And then, at the last minute, I tore around the edges of the picture of Mom, careful to keep the lines straight.

Ms. Dottie poked her head in the door just as I finished.

"How's it going?" she asked, smiling. And then her eyes fell on the ripped newspaper.

"I was just finishing." I grabbed my book bag and brushed past her as she stepped into the office.

"Young lady," I heard her call, but I ignored her and rounded the corner, holding on tightly to the strap of my bag.

I walked fast, but even though the library was small, I'd somehow turned myself around. Instead of the front door I faced a flight of stairs. I could hear Ms. Dottie calling me from the other direction, so I raced down the steps. At the bottom was a restroom with a Closed for Renovation sign taped to the door. I could hear Ms. Dottie's footsteps upstairs as she searched for me. I figured I had a better chance of hiding out here instead of making a run for it, and I pushed my shoulder against the door.

It budged slightly but didn't open. My heart slammed against my chest and I pushed again, harder this time, and something on the other side gave. I tumbled into the bathroom and fell against the tile floor.

"Shut the door!"

The voice made me jump. I looked up and the red head from Gas 'n Go stood at the sink wearing a bra and the same ripped black jeans from the day before. The water was running full blast.

I kicked the door closed with my foot and stood up. My bag lay on the ground, and the strap looked broken. But I didn't worry about that for too long because my elbow was scrapped and throbbing. I bent my arm to take a look and wiped away a smear of blood. "You scared me."

She watched as I grabbed a bunch of paper towels and wet them under the faucet she'd left running.

"I scared you?" She stared back at me in the rectangular mirror. "You're the one who just forced your way in here. Don't you know how to knock?"

She said it like I'd just broken into her home, and I glanced back at the door. A chair, turned on its side, rested against the wall.

"Sorry." I rolled my eyes. "I didn't know you had to ask permission to use public restrooms around here."

She watched me. I felt like I should've left, but I didn't want to risk running into the librarian so I just stood there. Finally, she said, "You're not gonna rat me out. Are you?"

"Rat you out?" I echoed. "About what?"

She didn't answer but her eyes fell on the countertop. For the first time I noticed what was lying there. An opened bar of soap, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a deodorant stick almost rubbed to the bottom. The book bag she'd used to hide the candy she stole from the gas station was unzipped at her feet, and I could see at least one change of clothes stuffed inside.

She was homeless. I'd seen enough back home to know the signs. She looked a bit cleaner than the ones who slept on park benches when it was warm out or begged for a couple of bucks to grab a coffee, but why else would she have her whole life stuffed in a purse? Which explained the petty theft, as well.

"I'm almost done, anyway." She turned off the water and pulled the sweatshirt tied around her waist over her head. Her tone was nonchalant, but it made me wonder whether or not she actually bought her jeans that distressed.

"It's not like I live in here or anything."

For some reason I didn't believe her, but I kept my voice even and dabbed at my elbow. "It's cool. I was on my way out, too. I just needed to use the bathroom first."

We both knew that was a lie since I hadn't even attempted to make a move for the stalls. Her eyes fell to newspaper hanging halfway out of my unzipped book bag. *Property of Greenville Public Library* was stamped at the top.

"You know, the nice thing about a library is they give you these things called cards. You can find as much stuff as you want and borrow it. For free."

I gasped and widened my eyes. "I get it. Kind of like you borrowed that money from the tip jar at the gas station."

"Wait." She looked confused. "You saw that?"

"A blind man would've seen that," I told her. "The only reason you didn't get caught was because the guy behind the counter was too busy checking out your ass to notice anything else. And, yeah. He was a perv and probably deserved it. But in the future you might want to work on being a little more discreet."

I ran out of air then, and we stood there in awkward silence. But after a second I felt bad, like maybe I was a bit too harsh, so I threw the bloody paper towels in the trash and picked up my bag. Yep, the strap had definitely had it.

"Sorry. I've just had a really bad morning. I'm not from around here so I don't have a library card yet, but that's still no excuse for destroying public property." When she didn't respond, I added, "I guess we have dirt on each other now."

She seemed to snap out of whatever trance she was in. Up close I could tell her bright red hair was natural. She was one of those one in a million types who had porcelain skin and green eyes to match, the corners tilted up like a cat's. "No, it's cool. I wasn't going to tell on you, anyway. Most of those books are so old I'm surprised the pages haven't just fallen out."

I stood up and she studied my face. After a while she said, "I'm Emory, by the way. I'm not from Greenville, either. After I graduated it was either find some dead end job and crash in my parent's basement or go travel the world. I chose travel the world."

"And you started with Greenville." I nodded, like that made all the sense in the world. "The Mecca of enlightenment and entertainment."

"It's not so bad," Emory said, but she didn't sound too convinced herself. "Where are you from?"

"Nowhere. Everywhere." I knew I was being cryptic but Emory didn't ask me to explain so I didn't. I felt like I'd given my life story for the millionth time. But for some reason I felt comfortable enough with Emory to keep going. "I'm Harper. I actually just got here two days ago. Have you seen that shop up the street? Tea Leaves? I live upstairs with my aunts. My mom died a few months ago so it's not like I really had a choice."

"That sucks," Emory said softly, and it sounded like she meant it. I was just glad she didn't say sorry.

"Hey, are you hungry?" I asked Emory. I thought back to the change she stole from the tip jar. It couldn't have bought her much. Besides, I wanted to

change the subject, lighten the mood a little. "If you want we can go grab something to eat. My treat."

Emory didn't say anything, but she slowly placed the cap on her deodorant and wrapped her bar of soap in a paper towel. After she carefully placed them in her bag she turned to me. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. Besides, it wasn't like I wanted to eat alone, and I wasn't quite ready to face Matilda and Esme yet. There was a back door in the basement of the library that warned if opened an alarm would sound. But it didn't, and that was how Emory and I ended up walking for over an hour, trying to find something to eat.

The cool shops Esme insisted lined Main Street didn't exist. But there actually was a Burger King so we ordered two Whopper meals. When our food was ready we found a booth hidden in the corner, away from the rest of the customers.

The way Emory ate was strange. She started with the fries and dragged each one through a pool of mayonnaise she made on the paper cover lining her tray. Her bites were small but quick, and when she was done she licked the salt off each finger before moving on to her burger. This, she peeled apart and ate separately – first the pickles, then little nibbles at the lettuce, next the top bun. She saved the patty for last and tore off small pieces until it was gone. When she finally looked up and caught me watching, we both looked away, embarrassed.

"So what were you doing in the library, anyway?" she asked, wiping her greasy hands on a napkin. She picked up the drink she ordered, a vanilla

milkshake, and took a long sip. “And don’t tell me you were checking out books because the selection is pretty pathetic. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody come in that place besides the librarians, and that’s probably only because they have to.”

I wondered if Emory was actually sleeping in the library, but I didn’t know her well enough to ask. Instead I said, “I was trying to research my family’s history. Not that it did any good.”

Emory used her pinky to point to my bag. It sat beside me in the booth, in its own seat. “From what I saw it looked like it wasn’t a total bust. What’d you find out?”

I glanced down at my own tray of cold food and hesitated, not sure if I should continue. But, then again, what could it hurt? “Apparently my family used to be rich. I’m talking cotillions, tea parties, governor’s balls. My mom ran away from Greenville when she was eighteen, but I found an article where she was dressed up in this beautiful gown, smiling and dancing like some kind of socialite.” I shook my head, releasing the memory. “You’d have thought she was royalty.”

“Wow,” Emory said, setting her cup on the table. “What happened?”

I looked up. “What do you mean?”

Emory shrugged. “You said your family was loaded, right? But what happened to all the money? No offense but I’ve been by Tea Leaves. It’s not exactly the type of setup you’d expect the one percent to run. And didn’t you say all three of you live in the apartment space above?”

I didn't have an answer, and I actually hadn't really stopped to think about it, either.

"Who knows?" My head swam, but something occurred to me. "Hey, you said you've been to Tea Leaves before?"

"A few times." She looked away when she said it. "Mainly on rainy mornings when it's kind of overcast and chilly. There's no Starbucks in Greenville, you know."

I leaned forward until my chest touched the table. "Did you ever see them serve something called primrose tea?"

A strange expression flit across Emory's face but she shook her head. "I don't think so. But I've heard of it."

"You have?" I asked. "What is it?"

"It's just a flavor. You can grow primrose yourself or buy it at a store."

I frowned, thinking of the garden full of herbs and plants hanging over the balcony upstairs. "What's so special about that?"

"Nothing, really." She licked her lips and stared at me. "Primrose isn't as popular as mint or chamomile because it's not that strong. But some people use it for other stuff."

"Like what?" I asked.

Emory looked uncomfortable, but after a moment she responded.

"Spells."

A chill raced down my spine, and it wasn't because I was sitting under one of the air conditioning ducts. My head felt foggy, and I struggled to come up with the right questions to ask. But I didn't even know where to begin.

"I used to be into that stuff when I was younger," Emory explained, fiddling with the frayed edges of her jeans. Her words poured out fast, running into each other. "I went to boarding school for a while, and all the popular girls were wannabe goths. Can you believe I even dyed my hair black and got a fake nose ring? But it's lame. Definitely not real. I don't even know why I remember something so stupid, but it's always the stuff you don't need, right? Too bad I couldn't remember what a coordinate clause was when I took the SAT."

"Wait a minute. Rewind." I held up my hands to shut Emory up. She looked embarrassed, like she was afraid I might be judging her. "Spells?"

Emory blinked. "Yeah, like witchcraft and stuff. A lot of people think you have to sacrifice a chicken or drink goat's blood to make a spell work. But that's only on T.V. Most spells can be completed with every day herbs. I knew a girl who used primrose tea to find out if her boyfriend was cheating."

I frowned. "How could that tell her anything?"

"Drinking primrose makes you develop symptoms similar to those caused by sodium pentothal." When I didn't say anything, Emory added, "You know, truth serum."

So that was it. Matilda gave me primrose to make sure I didn't lie to her. Maybe I should've felt relieved to find out she wasn't trying to poison me, but for

some reason I was even more disturbed. What could she possibly be trying to find out? I threw my napkin on my half eaten food and stood up.

“You’re not leaving, are you?” Emory scooted across the booth and grabbed her bag. “Did I say something wrong?”

She walked behind me, so close she accidentally stepped on my Nike slides. I shook my head. “It’s fine. I just remembered I promised my aunts I’d head back after lunch. Sometimes they like to close early.”

“Oh.” Emory sounded disappointed, like she didn’t quite believe me. “I’ll walk with you. I have to head back that way, too.”

When we stepped outside it was even hotter than before. I tilted my head to the sky, hoping to spot a rain cloud like the night I arrived in Greenville. But it was so clear and blue it looked artificial.

Emory tried again. “I really hope you’re not mad at me, Harper. That’s the last thing I want, especially after you bought me lunch and everything.”

“I’m not mad at you, Emory,” I told her. “It’s just that...” I paused, not sure what to say next. It was just that I thought I’d been drugged and I had no idea why? Or that I was possibly sleeping under the same roof as murderers?

Finally, I told her, “I think I might have made a mistake by coming here.”

We walked in silence for a while, neither of us sure what to say next. I was so lost in my own thoughts that I didn’t even notice we’d made it back onto Main Street until Emory began to slow down. I matched her speed and she broke the silence.

“I don’t mean to sound like a bad line from a movie, but everything happens for a reason. I don’t believe in mistakes. You’re in Greenville right now for a reason. Remember what you said? That you didn’t really have a choice?”

I thought about New Beginnings. I could’ve gone back there. But which was the lesser of two evils?

“Maybe,” I said. “Anyway, thanks. For listening.”

“Anytime.” It seemed like Emory wanted to add something else, but she stopped abruptly and pointed straight ahead. “Didn’t you say you live above Tea Leaves?”

I followed her finger. At the end of the block, two cop cars were parked at the curb, one in front of the other. One was angled towards the road slightly, as if daring passing cars to hit it. I remembered the last time I came home to cops outside my house, how my entire world fell apart. My pulse quickened.

“Oh my God...”

I took off down the sidewalk, nearly bumping head first into a man holding an ice cream cone. He yelled at me to slow down and a couple stopped to watch, but I didn’t care.

It wasn’t until I reached Tea Leaves that I remembered that I’d abandoned Emory. But by the time I turned around she’d already disappeared into the crowd.

I took the steps to the landing two at a time, and when I made it to the top an officer in full uniform opened the door to the apartment. Her eyes were cold and unfriendly, and she blocked the doorway with her body.

“Harper Batailler?”

I scooted past her into the living room. Matilda was standing in the corner next to the bookshelf, one hand cupping her slender throat, her eyes trained on Esme who was sitting cross-legged on the couch across from another officer. When Esme saw me she jumped up.

“Please have a seat, Miss Batailler.” The female officer eased the door shut. The click was deafening. She held a black ink pen and used it to point to the empty spot next to Esme. “You, too.”

Someone had dragged two chairs from the kitchen into the living room, and I could feel four pairs of eyes watching me as I clambered over Esme to take a seat. She patted my thigh and gave me a weak smile.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Matilda took a small step forward. “Harper, this is Officer Dallas and her partner, Officer Simpkins.”

Both officers reached across the table to shake my hand, but it was just a formality. They were not being friendly. I asked, “Is something wrong?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out.” Officer Dallas lifted slightly from her seat and pulled a notepad out of the back pocket of her slacks. She flipped it to a

blank page and looked at me. "Can you tell us where you were yesterday? And please be as detailed as possible."

I looked at Esme, whose attention was focused on her lap. From the corner of my eye I made out Matilda, standing perfectly still, but she didn't intervene again. I turned back to the officers. "I was at Tea Leaves. I think I left to get some ice close to noon. But other than that I didn't leave this shop."

"Are you positive?" Officer Dallas scribbled something on her pad. She didn't sound like she believed me.

Esme looked up and said, "She had nothing to do with any of this. I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

Officer Simpkins held up a hand. "You're more than welcome to have your lawyer present, but we do need to ask Harper a few questions. If she can't answer us now, then she can answer us down at the station."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"But Harper's only sixteen!" Esme interrupted. "It can't be legal to question a minor this way."

Matilda took a step forward and sat on the arm of the couch.

"There's no need for that, officers." Her voice was even. "Harper will answer your questions."

"Good." Officer Dallas stated. "Now let's continue. You said you were at your aunt's shop the entire day yesterday, right? So you saw Ana Ivy?"

"Who?"

Officer Simpkins pushed a slip of paper across the coffee table. A picture of a woman holding a large margarita glass was paper clipped to the right corner. She smiled for the camera and was sitting on someone's lap, but the photograph had been cropped to focus only on her. It looked like it could have been printed from a Facebook profile. Her pale gray eyes stared back at me, and she was made up just as beautifully as the day I first saw her. I looked up into the waiting eyes of Officer Simpkins, who tapped the photograph with his index finger.

"Yes," I said softly.

"Mmm-hmm," Officer Dallas murmured. I didn't know if I liked the sound of that. Then she looked down at her notepad. "You said you only left for a few minutes, and eye witnesses place Ms. Ivy's vehicle at Tea Leaves for over two hours. What exactly was Ms. Ivy business here?"

"I don't know," I said. "Why don't you ask Ana?"

"We would. If Ana Ivy weren't missing."

I whipped my head towards Matilda and Esme. Neither of them looked surprised.

Blood whooshed around in my ears, making it hard to think. "Missing?"

A kettle whistled from the kitchen and Matilda stood up. "Would anyone like a cup of tea? We've been sitting for hours. I'm sure you all must be thirsty."

Her voice was soft and sweet, very un-Matilda like. Something about her tone filled me with unease. I couldn't help think about the night I'd arrived and I knew I wouldn't be taking any tea.

“That’s what her father says.” Officer Simpkins leaned back and crossed his legs at the knee, making himself comfortable. It was obvious they weren’t leaving any time soon. “You know who Ana’s father is, right? Senator Ivy from New Orleans?”

I didn’t know how to answer, but Esme spoke up. “Harper isn’t from Greenville. She just arrived two days ago.”

I stood up and met Officer Simpkins eyes. “I don’t know anything. But is this because of the Batailler Curse?” As much as I wanted to believe Justin was exaggerating, it seemed like he was actually telling the truth.

Esme looked at me, a question on her lips.

“I found out yesterday,” I told her. “When I went to get ice from Gas ‘n Go. There was this guy there, Justin. He was spewing all this crap about some Batailler curse.”

Esme placed a comforting hand on my arm, willing me to back down, but I was too steamed to notice.

“You said you went to Gas ‘n Go for ice?” Officer Dallas asked, an idea forming behind her glasses. She glanced at her partner. “We got called there yesterday, Jack. Remember? The kid behind the counter said he got robbed out of fifty bucks.”

“That’s bull,” I said. “It was less than five.” As soon as the words left my lips, I realized how they sounded.

Esme stared at me, horrified, and Officer Dallas looked like she’d just caught a rat. I finally sat back down.

“It wasn’t me,” I added weakly. I didn’t want to tell on Emory, but I was in enough trouble as it is. “I just saw it happen.”

Officer Dallas looked at Officer Simpkins. “Now that I think of it, didn’t he say it was one of the Batailler girls?”

Officer Simpkins shrugged and widened his eyes. “Yeah, but I didn’t realize there were *three* of them now.”

He said it like it was the worst thing that could possibly happen to this town and Esme jumped up.

“Oh, come on! You don’t actually believe a word that comes out of Justin Cartrullo’s mouth, do you? This is the guy who got fired from his job as a delivery boy for selling weed with the pizzas!”

Officer Simpkins stared at Esme. “In our profession, we try not to judge any potential suspects based on their...*occupation*.”

I opened my mouth to retort, but at that moment Matilda stormed back into the room, two mugs gripped firmly in her hands. She shoved them at the officers. Steaming hot liquid sloshed over the edge, leaving an angry red welt on her skin.

“Drink!” she commanded. I looked startled into Matilda’s eyes. The look she wore scared me more than a little.

Officers Dallas started to stand, irritation etched on her face. “I don’t want...”

“Now!” Matilda said.

Immediately, both officers put the mugs to their lips. I watched in horrified fascination as they drank fast and greedily. A mix of saliva and tea spilled from the side of Officer Simpkins' mouth and stained the front of his uniform. As if rehearsed, both Dallas and Simpkins tilted their heads back to swallow the last drops, much as a child would do, and then placed their mugs on the coffee table with a clunk.

The room was silent. Eerily so. I couldn't even hear the noises from the street anymore. It was as if time had stopped. My eyes darted back and forth between Dallas and Simpkins as they watched Matilda with unblinking eyes. Matilda leaned in so close that from the outside it might've looked like she was telling them a secret. But when she spoke her voice was loud and clear.

"You will leave this place, understand? This family had nothing to do with Ana Ivy's disappearance. She was a loose woman with many lovers."

"Tilda," Esme started in a small voice, but Matilda turned on her.

"Shut up!"

Her anger was palpable, and Esme obeyed. I shrank into the couch. When Matilda turned back around she paused a moment, as though she was collecting her thoughts. The officers watched and waited and did nothing.

When she finally spoke she said, "Ana's boyfriend was jealous. Violent. Question him. But you will not come back to this house. You are not welcome here."

I don't know what she was waiting for, but there was a long pause while Matilda stared into each officer's face. When she finally found whatever she was looking for she said, "Go."

Officer Dallas stood up and slipped her notepad into her back pocket. Simpkins covered his balding head with his police hat and reached down to retrieve the keys to the patrol car lying beside the empty mugs. Without saying a word or looking at any of us, they walked to the door one behind the other. I heard their heavy steps on the stairs, the second door creaked open then slammed, and, finally, two car engines roared to life on the street. I ran to the window and split the blinds with my pointer and middle finger. They were gone.

"What did you do?" I said in a shocked whisper.

Matilda sank into the seat Officer Dallas just vacated and closed her eyes. She placed a hand against her head, and for the first time I noticed how tired she looked. A fine line of perspiration beaded her lip, and stray curls that had escaped her bun stuck to her forehead.

"How could you be so stupid?"

My throat went dry as I scrambled for an answer to Matilda's question. But when I followed her eyes, her gaze was fixed on her sister.

Esme raised her head. "Tilda, I..."

"Don't." The muscles in Matilda's jaw jumped. "I've told you over and again how *dangerous* those readings are. Anyone can find us. You let these strangers into our homes, into our lives, and for what? A few dollars?"

“It’s more than that,” Esme said, but she struggled to get her words out. “My customers are the only thing keeping us open. No one drinks tea anymore, and even if they did everybody around here is too afraid to step a foot inside Tea Leaves.”

“We could have found a way!” Matilda slammed a fist on the coffee table and I jumped. For the first time I noticed Officer Dallas had forgotten the picture of Ana. She smiled brightly at us from the coffee table. “And was the payoff worth the cost? Ana’s missing now and I’m positive we haven’t seen the last of the cops.”

“Of course not.” Esme voice was soft and far away, all the good humor that usually budded under the surface gone. “Ana’s my friend.”

“You need to think about that in the future. Before anyone else gets hurt.” Matilda struggled to stand, her gaze still fixed on Esme. “Your readings are done. I’m tearing down the back room in the morning.”

Esme stayed crouched on the couch, her head buried in her arms, even after the door to Matilda’s room clicked shut. I stood there for what seemed like hours, but Esme didn’t move. Finally, I called her name.

She jumped and looked at me with red-rimmed eyes. I think she forgot I was in the room.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Esme’s mouth tilted into a smile and she wiped her face with the back of her hand. “I should be the one asking you that. This has been one crazy Welcome to Greenville party, hasn’t it?”

I shook my head. "I'm sure Ana's fine. You said her family has a lot of money, right? Maybe she took a trip or something and forgot to mention it."

It sounded weak even to my own ears and Esme just stared at me. After a while, she said, "I guess." But she didn't sound like she believed it.

And then she placed her feet on the floor and stood up. Her small body looked heavy and she dragged a hand through her curly hair.

It hurt me to see her like this, especially since she was one of the only people who had tried to make me feel welcome since I'd arrived. I glanced down the hall towards Matilda's room and was flooded with resentment. And fear.

I caught Esme's arm as she walked past me, my ears pricking with an odd sensation. I leaned in close and kept my voice at a whisper. "You saw what happened, right? What Matilda did? Is that one of our family's 'gifts,' too?"

Esme blinked, letting a fresh tear slip down her cheek.

"It's supposed to be, Harper," she said sadly. "But when Tilda gets angry, it almost seems like a curse."

Matilda slept in the next morning, something she hadn't done in the three days I'd known her. So Esme and I opened Tea Leaves together. After we turned on the lights and pulled back the curtains that covered the windows, Esme asked me to watch the desk while she took care of something in the back. After a while I heard heavy objects being thrown into boxes.

Business was nonexistent until the door pushed open around noon. Emory walked in still wearing the black skinny jeans from yesterday, but the hoodie had been replaced by a white tank top. She held a plastic water bottle in one hand and used the other to run her fingertips along the shelves as she made her way to the counter.

"Hey, hey," she said when she was within earshot. "Busy?"

"What?" I cupped a hand around my ear. "I'm sorry, you'll have to speak up. I can't hear you over all these customers."

Emory grinned, but it was obvious something else is on her mind. She looked past me, toward the back of the shop, before focusing her attention on me again. "Do you think we can get out of here? Just for a little while. I have something I need to show you."

"What?"

Emory pressed her lips together and shook her head slightly. "It's a surprise. Please?"

We could both hear Esme shuffling around in the back. Something fell, followed by shattering glass, and then Esme cursed. I called out to her.

“Yep?” Esme emerged from the dark hallway, wrapping a white towel around her hand. It was speckled with drops of bright red blood.

“Can I take a break and grab a bite to eat with...” When I turned to nod towards Emory, the room was empty. I caught a glimpse of her standing outside the shop, her hands stuffed in her pockets.

Esme nodded. “Of course. I can handle things around here for a while. Take your time.”

As soon as I stepped onto the sidewalk Emory started walking. The sun beat down on the tops of our heads, and the edges of my hair dampened with sweat. When we made it to the gas station, I glanced through the doors and spotted a woman behind the register instead of Justin. Emory made a sharp left, away from Main Street.

“Can you at least tell me where we’re heading?” I asked Emory as we cut through a residential neighborhood. The houses were modest, but homey, and it reminded me of the kind of street from the old black and white TV shows I used to watch with Mom. As we passed a small green and white shuttered home, an older man busy watering a line of potted plants on his front porch nodded at us and I nodded back.

“I could,” Emory said, slyly. “But then I’d have to kill you.”

She said it as a joke, but her words didn’t sit well with me. My mind flew to Ana Ivy and the police visit from yesterday. And even though I liked Emory, I didn’t really know her.

“Besides, aren’t you glad I rescued you?” Emory asked. “It’s such a pretty day. Way too pretty to be holed up inside.”

I couldn’t disagree, but as we passed through the neighborhood and began to cut through a field I couldn’t help but wonder what was so important Emory had to show me during the heat of the day. There was nothing around us. In fact, we were heading so far away from any houses or shops that I couldn’t even hear any cars passing by or distant voices. The only sounds were the occasional cries from invisible birds and the sporadic chirps from what seemed like one lonely cicada.

We’d walked for what seemed like hours in the heat before I finally spotted something ahead. A black, wrought iron gate taller than both of us stretched across a dirt road that appeared out of nowhere. The words Greenville Memorial Cemetery were intertwined in the bars, and a metal chain secured by a rusted lock wrapped around the entrance. A large No Trespassing sign hung crookedly by one nail. I started to slow down but Emory didn’t break her stride. This was what she wanted to show me?

“I think it’s locked,” I said, more to myself than to Emory because she was already slipping sideways through a space in the bars. From the other side, she looked back at me, waiting for me to do the same.

Emory followed my eyes to the No Trespassing sign and she wrapped one hand around the gate. “It’s okay. The cops don’t come out this way unless they have a reason. No one knows we’re here.”

I think she meant to sound reassuring, but she didn't. There was nothing about being alone in a cemetery that was comforting, and it occurred to me that I didn't even tell Esme where we were going. If something happened she and Matilda wouldn't have even known where to start to look for my body. But for some reason, I angled my body sideways and squeezed through the bars, too.

The cemetery was large and obviously full, and as we passed by the headstones I caught a glimpse of the range of years.

1612-1641.

1799-1867.

We walked through tall grass, past tombstones so large and ornate it was obvious whoever was buried underneath was important. A crumbling brick building marked LaCroix Mausolee Familial stood next to a spooky looking tree.

The cemetery was so old that there was probably no room for any new bodies. From the look of the tall and overgrown grass, I doubted if there was even a caretaker to keep the grounds manicured. What would be the use? Anyone who might have once visited these graves was long dead by now. I wondered if any living soul besides us had been out here in the past century. Even though the sun was shining and there wasn't a cloud in the sky, there was something unsettling about the thought of what was beneath our feet.

Emory as unfazed, though. She stepped carefully around stones and fallen logs to follow a path, and when I looked down I noticed the grass ahead of us was flatter in some parts. It was obvious she'd been here before, more than once.

We headed away from the tall headstones and mausoleums, and after a while we reached another clearing. I was so busy taking in the surroundings that I didn't notice when Emory stopped and I slammed into her back.

She pointed toward my feet and my eyes followed her finger. "Look."

"At what?" I asked, confused.

But I ended up answering my own question. I was standing on a piece of stone rubbed so smooth that only a portion of it was visible, and I instinctively took a step back. My eyes scanned the dirt and I realized that there were hundreds of little stones lining the ground, some overgrown, some a bit more visible, but for the most part the placement was sporadic. There were large gaps between some, while others were practically on top of each other. But they were all in bad shape, either cracked or dirty or almost concealed by the overgrown grass. I didn't know what I'd been expecting to see, but the sight of the stones sent a chill down my spine.

"What is this?"

"One of the oldest sections of Greenville Memorial," Emory said. She watched me closely, waiting for a reaction, I guess. When my expression didn't change she added, "It's the place where they buried the undesirables."

"Undesirables?"

Emory nodded. "Criminals, heretics, the poor. That's why there aren't any headstones, just chips of rock, none of them labeled. Sometimes they wouldn't even bother with that. Some of the graves were marked with broken

bottles or logs, but those washed away over the years. There's really no way to really know how many bodies are buried out here."

Emory took a step forward, her eyes focused on the stones, searching. Even though I didn't really want to, I followed. It was better than being alone.

"Can we head back now?" I said. "These mosquitos are eating me alive."

Emory didn't listen. "We're almost there," she said, and a moment later she stopped in front of a stone that sat apart from the rest. Someone had marked it with a splash of white spray paint.

"This is what I wanted to show you," Emory said, staring down at the stone. "Or part of it, anyway."

"Whose grave is this?" I asked.

"Her name was Basheera," Emory said.

The sun beat down on my back, making the skin on my neck prickle and itch. "What's so special about her?"

"She was the first witch to be hanged in Greenville." Emory tore her eyes away long enough to look at me. "And you're her descendant."

“You can’t be serious, right?” I slapped at a mosquito that was trying to land on my wrist and a line of sweat trickled down my back. “You really think I’m related to some sort of witch?”

“Not some sort of witch,” Emory said. “*The* witch.”

“What are you talking about?” My mouth was so dry it hurt to swallow, and my eyes fell to the water bottle Emory was holding.

“Have you ever heard of Tituba?” Emory asked, and the peculiar name did ring a bell. “The first witch in America?”

I remembered starting a book freshman year in English with the same name about the Salem Witch Trials and the women who started it, but Mom and I ended up skipping town before I could finish.

“She was tried in Salem, right?” I said. “That’s just a story, Emory. Fiction. What does that have to do with this?”

I pointed to the grave but almost immediately shoved my hand in my pocket. It felt disrespectful for some reason. From the corner of my eye, I saw Emory nod.

“You’re right about her being tried, but it wasn’t just a story. Tituba was a real person. She taught witchcraft to the settlers’ daughters, and when people found out they weren’t happy about it.” Emory tore her eyes away from the stone and looked at me. “Tituba didn’t make it out of Salem alive, but her daughter did.”

“You mean...” I stared down at Basheera’s grave, taking in the enormity of Emory’s words. My eyelids burned from the dry air and I blinked rapidly to moisten them.

“Yeah. Basheera fled as soon as she realized what was going on. She had to, otherwise she would have hung from the end of a rope just like all the other witches. She was only a teenager, but somehow she made it to Greenville and hid out. For a while, at least.”

“What happened to her?” I asked.

Emory shrugged. “No one knows. But since she’s buried here someone must have found out who she was. *What* she was.”

“How do you know all this? That I’m related to her?”

“There are records,” Emory told me. Her voice was steady, and I believed that she thought she was telling me the truth, at least. “You can find out anything if you look hard enough. But if you still don’t believe me, ask your aunts. They know.”

I shook my head, once, slowly. “Okay, let’s say you’re right. I really am related to Basheera. A lot of innocent women were killed back then for being witches, Emory. That doesn’t mean that they actually were.”

“That’s true,” Emory said. “But I can prove Basheera wasn’t one of those women.”

“How?” I asked, even though I wasn’t sure I’d like her answer.

But Emory didn't answer, not directly, anyway. She plopped down on the grass and pulled off her book bag. I took a seat next to her, careful not to sit on a grave.

"At first I thought I'd done something wrong. That day at the gas station, when we first met." She pulled out an empty mason jar and set it on Basheera's stone. "I'd performed a cloaking spell to distract Justin."

I almost started to laugh, but when I realized Emory was serious it died in my throat. "A cloaking spell?"

Emory nodded. "Remember I told you I used to dabble in witchcraft when I was younger? That's true. At first I did dumb stuff I thought witches were supposed to do, like wear all black and mess with Ouija boards. But when I realized my spells were actually working, it wasn't just for fun anymore."

Her red hair stuck to her face with sweat and she pushed it back before unzipping a small pocket on the side of her book bag. Inside were two skinny red candles, dripping with dried wax. "I learned how to cloak myself first. In a way, I guess it's kind of like what a pickpocket does times ten. I flirted with Justin to keep his eyes on me, but the spell kept him from seeing what was really happening. Does that make sense?"

For some reason, it did. Or about as much sense as it possibly could. No wonder Emory didn't bother to hide the fact that she was stealing. She actually thought she was doing some sort of magic.

"Emory, I think Justin was just stoned or something. I heard he's a dealer and I swear I could smell marijuana on him that day. I don't think..."

Emory held up a hand. "I know you think I'm crazy, Harper, but let me finish. That spell, I've known how to do it since I was thirteen. It has worked *every single time*. And it should have kept every single person in the gas station from seeing what I was doing. But you saw me."

Emory stopped what she was doing, then, and turned to face me. She was so close that I could hear her breathing. Small, frantic inhales and exhales. "Do you know why?"

I shook my head, not sure how to answer. I felt uneasy and my clothes felt like they were slowly getting tighter, strangling me. "Why?"

"Because you're a real witch," Emory whispered. "Like me."

I tried to laugh for real this time, but it sounded forced even to my own ears. "Emory, I'm not a witch."

"You really don't know, do you?" Emory studied me, as if she wasn't sure whether I was telling her the truth. "I thought you were trying to keep it a secret. You saw through my spell, Harper. Only a true witch could do that."

"Emory, there was no spell." My voice was firm, steady. But I knew it didn't really matter what I said. There was no convincing Emory that she was living in a fantasy world. "There's no such thing as witches."

"You don't have to believe me, Harper," Emory said softly, even though it was obvious she desperately wanted me to. "I know you think I'm crazy. But I have one more thing to show you. Something important. And if you still think I'm crazy afterwards, you never have to talk to me again."

I hesitated. Emory was making me uneasy, but the truth was I didn't want to find my way back on my own. "And afterwards we head straight back?"

Emory sighed in relief and grinned. "Yes, I promise. Cross my heart and everything. Now can we start?"

But she didn't wait for my answer. Instead, she reached back into her book bag and pulled out two clear plastic bags. The first one was filled with something grainy and white, the second a small yellow flower. She set them next to the candles and the mason jar, all in a neat line.

"That's salt and the flower is called broom," she explained, pointing to the bags. "When I tell you to, put them in the mason jar, okay?"

"Are you doing a spell?" I asked, even though I was sure I already knew the answer. My mind raced as I watched Emory stab the candles into the dry dirt. When they were secure enough to stand on their own she pulled a purple lighter out of her pocket. She flicked it on and a flame the color of her hair waved on the tip.

"Bad idea," I told her. "Look at all this dead grass."

"Shh." Emory cupped her hand around the first candle and tilted the flame to the wick, lighting it anyway. When the first one was done, she started on the second one. "The first rule for any spell is avoid distractions. Besides, we won't have to worry about that for long."

Before I could ask her what she meant, she reached for my hand and I let her take it. Her skin was too hot next to mine.

"Ready?"

I was sure it wouldn't matter if I said no. "As I'll ever be."

Emory picked up the water bottle and unscrewed the top. I waited for her to take a sip so I could ask for some, too, but she didn't. Instead, she closed her eyes and shifted her body back and forth. When she was finally comfortable, she spoke in a voice that didn't quite sound like her own.

"Basheera, can you hear us? We invoke your spirit." Emory's eyes flew open so suddenly I startled, and she poured the water in the mason jar.

"Basheera, hear us. We ask you to release the rains of time upon this earth."

Slowly, it became clear what Emory was trying to do, and my eyes rolled up to the clear blue sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight. I focused back on Emory, who was busy swirling the water around in the mason jar. "You can't be serious," I started to say, but Emory shushed me again.

"Release the rains of time upon this earth, Basheera. Cool this dry land and let the winds follow effortlessly, tearing through every limb of tree."

A gust of hot air picked up, stirring the dead leaves surrounding Basheera's grave. I was positive it was coincidental, but I felt strange nonetheless. I waited for Emory to say something triumphant, like "I told you!" But she was concentrating so hard on the mason jar she couldn't focus on anything else.

When she finally looked up, she said, "Grab the broom."

I picked up the yellow flower and dropped it in the mason jar. It settled gently on top of the water and Emory kept going.

“Release the rains of time, Basheera,” Emory commanded again, in a much firmer voice. She squeezed my hand, almost too tight, and rocked back and forth slightly. Her eyes were pinched shut so tightly that the corners creased into a million little lines. I tried to pull my hand away but Emory wouldn’t let me.

“Don’t let go,” she hissed, cracking one eye open to peek at me. “Seal the spell, quick!”

“Seal the spell?” I asked. For the first time I realized how hard my heart was pounding. “How?”

“The salt!” Emory said. “Pour it in, before it’s too late!”

Frantically, I reached for the bag of salt and dumped it in the water, too, and Emory finished with, “By the powers of three times three let it be!”

And then, in one swift movement, she picked up the entire mason jar and threw it all out onto the dirt. The flower lay limply on its side, surrounded by a puddle of salty water that was slowly dampening the dirt. Beside me, I heard Emory’s labored breathing as she struggled to catch her breath.

I sat completely still, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did. The cemetery was silent, the sky still a bright and cheerful blue. A feeling flooded me, and after a moment I realized what it is. Disappointment. I couldn’t believe Emory almost had me convinced.

“Now what?”

Emory smiled slowly, rubbing her palms on the top of her jeans. “We wait.”

I opened my mouth to ask for how long, but she held up a finger, silencing me. She cocked her head to the right, as if she was listening for something.

“Can’t you smell it?”

I took a deep breath, but the only thing I could smell was the smoky scent from the extinguished candles. I was convinced Emory had completely lost it.

“What?”

“Rain,” Emory said, and I realized that I was right. She actually thought she could control the weather using a spell. I didn’t know whether I should have felt worried or sad, or maybe both.

I shifted in my spot on the grass besides Emory, afraid to speak, to tell her that this was all imagined. But suddenly, without warning, something stirred in the air. An imperceptible shift. I looked behind Emory, at the field of dead grass and broken stones, and the reds seem more vivid, almost alive. It was as if I’d put on a pair of goggles that suddenly made everything clear.

And then it came. First one drop hit the earth with an audible ping, evaporating the moment it hit the dirt. Then another, and another. The sun was still shining, but the rain fell faster, playing a steady staccato on the broken stones that surrounded us.

“No way,” I whispered, finally letting go of Emory’s hand. I felt drunk, or at least the way I thought that drunk would feel. Dizzy, excited, and just a little bit scared. I stood up, slowly, careful not to fall and blinked. Once, twice. The rain was still falling.

“See?” Emory finally said, and when our eyes met she looked very tired, but she was smiling. “Now do you believe me?”

“How did you...” I started, turning around in a circle to take in the whole field. I didn’t know what I was looking for. Maybe a friend of Emory’s hiding out, controlling some sort of high tech sprinkler system or something. But there was nothing there. Just the two of us. “How did you do this?”

“We,” Emory yelled over the rain. She was still sitting and the rain was slowly beginning to soak her hair. “How did we do this. And I told you, Harper. We’re witches. That was a powerful spell, Harper. I couldn’t have done it on my own. But I knew you were what I needed to make it work.”

I stared at Emory. It was obvious she was completely convinced that she was a witch, some type of magical being who could conceal herself from ordinary people and change the weather at will. That we both were. And while I still thought that was completely crazy, I couldn’t deny that something strange had happened.

Emory stared expectantly at me, waiting for my answer, but all I could say was, “Come on, we better go. We’re getting soaked.”

Emory nodded, but she still didn’t stand up. Her red hair had fallen forward, creating a curtain over her face. I knelt beside her and noticed for the first time how pale her skin looked.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just...” Confusion clouded Emory’s face and her green eyes were blank. “This happens sometimes. With the bigger spells.”

I wrapped an arm around Emory's waist and stood us both up. Her body leaned so heavily against mine I had to make a real effort to keep from falling.

"Let's go."

We'd barely taken a step forward when the sky began to rumble, low and menacingly. It was still bright outside, but suddenly, out of nowhere, a bolt of lightning snaked its way across the clear blue sky, lighting it up with white electricity.

The boom that permeated the air when it actually touched ground was deafening. Emory stiffened and I jumped, one of us let out a yelp. Without another word I led us both away from the field, back in the direction I thought we came from. I was half carrying, half dragging Emory, who seemed just as ready to leave as I was by then, but didn't have the strength to make it happen. I felt so relieved when I finally spotted the tombs we'd passed on our way to the field that I almost dropped Emory.

"Just a little bit further, okay," I yelled over the rain. It was coming down in sheets now and the thin fabric of my t-shirt clung to my skin. "I think there's a mausoleum ahead. We can wait out the rain in there."

Emory didn't respond, not that I expected her to, and we made our way through the cemetery, dodging the same tombstones we passed on our way in. Up ahead was the twisted cypress and the LaCroix Mausolee Familial, and I pulled Emory toward it. She seemed eager to be sheltered, as well, and used the last of her strength to make a run for the crypt.

When we finally made it to the double doors, I pushed against them and they swung open without resistance. Inside, the crypt was dark and dusty, but that' was better than getting drenched so Emory and I stepped inside.

Spots materialized in front of my eyes as they adjusted to the dark. White particles of dust swirled in front of me in a vortex, and I coughed into the crook of my elbow. Emory slumped against the wall, and then slipped onto the floor in a sitting position, her cheek pressed against the stone.

"Oh my God, you look awful," I told her. And I didn't mean to sound rude, but she did. Her skin was wet and clammy, and not only from the rain. I was sure if I pressed a hand against her forehead it would've felt hot. "What happened?"

"Big spells..." Emory started between pants, her eyes pressed closed. Her chest rose and fell slowly as she struggled to catch her breath. "Make me...tired. I need to...rest."

"Okay," I told her, because it was obvious there was something wrong with her. With each breath she took, there was a wheezing behind it, high pitched and hollow. "Just take it easy. We don't have to leave just yet."

Emory nodded, once, and I thought that she was actually listening, but suddenly she opened her eyes and grabbed my arm.

"My bag...Harper...I need my bag." She struggled to stand but I pushed her back down with one hand.

"Emory, no," I told her. "You're way too worn out. We can get it later."

But Emory wouldn't take no for an answer. She tried to stand again but she was so weak she fell back to the ground.

"Look, I'll get it, okay?" I said, even though I really didn't want to. But I remembered the things I'd spotted in Emory's bag. It was all she had. "You stay here. I'll be right back."

And then I was back out in the rain, running blindly in the direction of the field, past the tombstones and trees. I could see Emory's back pack from a distance, tilted on its side and pelted with rain. I ran right to it and shoved in the candles and mason jar, and at the last minute the empty baggies. I zipped it all up and slung the book bag over my shoulder. It was lighter than I thought it would be. And just when I stood, I heard it.

A whisper. The words were inaudible, but I could make out the sounds. The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and I felt like a complete idiot for coming out here alone. I should have just waited for the rain to stop and we both could have grabbed it later.

I shouted, "Hello?" It somehow seemed better than just waiting in silence.

But there was no answer. Only the whistling of the wind as it picked up, causing rain to hit the back of my legs. I knew I should go, rush back to Emory, but I didn't feel like I could move.

Someone was watching. That was what it felt like, at least. Like I wasn't not completely alone. I wiped at my eyes, expecting to see Emory nearby, having gathered enough strength to follow me to make sure I everything. But as I scanned the field, there was nothing. Not even a place for anyone to hide.

I wrapped a hand around the strap of Emory's book bag and headed forward, telling myself that I was being foolish. But I kept my head down, trained on my sneakers that were slowly filling with water. Partly to keep the rain out of my eyes, and partly because I was afraid of what I might've seen.