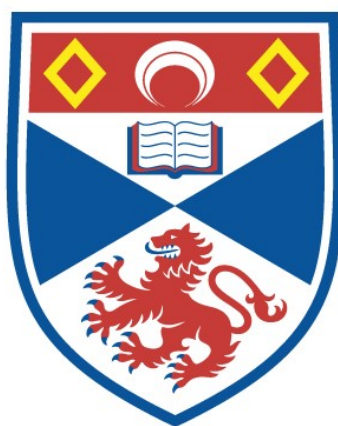


BLANK : A GHOSTLY STORY

Danielle Woodworth

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MFA
at the
University of St Andrews



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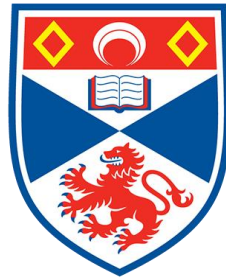
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Blank: A Ghostly Story

Danielle Woodworth



University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts (MFA)
at the University of St Andrews

August 2022

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Abstract

This work is the first seven chapters of a middle grade or young adult novel in the urban fantasy genre. These chapters introduce the two main characters and some supporting characters.

Foremost among these supporting characters are an aunt, a grandfather, and a ghost. The grandfather and the ghost have peripheral roles in the contained chapters, but become more involved in the plot as the novel continues. The events in the chapters first provide necessary interactions between the main characters. Starting in the first chapter, their interactions cause these characters to bond and begin a friendship. The friendship will be the driving force of the main plot. These chapters also contain incidents and information that will become relevant later on.

Chapter One

Carol

Skating Through Disaster

It was already the longest, hottest, and most insanely boring summer of Carol's life. Since school had ended in May, the only things she could do were chores, read books, climb trees, watch TV, or play video games. Her cat wasn't typically playful. The small town she lived in, Biscuit Flat, Idaho, didn't have shopping malls, theme parks, or any of the other interesting things that Carol could see on TV. Fun outdoors activities required a car and money, and Carol was too young to drive or to make her own money. The public pool was on the other side of town, and it was always full. So, when Carol was given the option for her thirteenth birthday party to be held at the town's new(ish) "state-of-the-art" roller rink and arcade, she was actually excited.

The problem was that there were weeks between choosing the roller-skating party and actually having the party. Or, Carol considered later, it might have been that the party didn't go well, for her. And it didn't succeed at making her friends, like her parents had clearly hoped. "Maybe back when you were young," Carol explained to Mom on the car ride home, both of them already irritable, "having a big party would make the other kids like the birthday girl. But nowadays, it's just desperate."

"Desperate?" Mom said, "It's a party, Carol. What's 'desperate' about having a birthday party?"

"It makes me look like an idiot to have this huge birthday party and invite the entire town!"

Mom laughed, "It's just a few kids."

“You invited my entire class.” Carol adjusted the cold pack that she had to hold on her face.

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Maybe - and I’m just thinking out loud here - I didn’t want all of those people there.”

“Stop that!” Mom snapped, referring to Carol’s big gestures. Carol had almost smacked Mom’s arm with her last flail. “And *why* wouldn’t you want everyone there?”

“Because they’re,” Carol spluttered, trying to find the right words, “They’re so... *rude*.”

“You were the one being rude today, Carol.”

Carol rolled her eyes. “How?”

“Really? You don’t know?”

“I really don’t know, Mom.”

“You can’t even guess?” Mom really liked it when Carol or her older sister Di, on the rare occasion that Di was actually in trouble, correctly guessed what they had done wrong.

“No,” she said. There was a stop sign ahead and Carol wasn’t sure Mom was going to slow down for it. She gripped the armrest and braced. The car continued barreling forward. “If you care so much about it,” Carol said, “Why don’t you tell me what your problem is?”

“My problem?”

“Yeah.”

Carol imagined her mom might say “You’re my problem” or “Stop talking back to me.” What Mom said instead was “The only problem here is your attitude.”

Should have expected that, Carol thought. She asked, “How? How is my ‘attitude’ a problem?”

Mom didn't hit the brakes; they flew through the intersection. Carol didn't see any other cars there, though. She released the armrest. "Do you see yourself right now?" Mom asked, making Carol think that she might not have even noticed the stop.

"Nope." And then she thought of a good line. "There isn't much reflection in this window," she said.

That pushed Mom over the edge, and she started yelling. Carol didn't listen to most of her lecture.

That morning Carol had been woken up early by the cacophony of birdsong outside. Waking up in such circumstances could be slow and pleasant, if there were about three hundred fewer birds around the property, if birds respected human circadian rhythms and chose to begin their chorus at a reasonable eight o'clock instead of four thirty, and if there were clouds masking the early sunrise. It still took a while for Carol to wake up since she was a heavy sleeper, but once awake she couldn't relax again. Unable to ignore the noise and the bright light and that she was awake anymore, Carol threw one of her pillows at the window. It fell a few feet short, onto a small pile of dirty laundry. Carol hadn't thought it would do anything, but it felt a little satisfying for the moment.

Blank, the ghost, was sitting on the end of Carol's bed, wrapped in an old baby blanket of hers - he was hard to see otherwise - and playing with an old Hot Wheels car. "Hey," Carol said to him, and she rubbed at her eyes.

He waved the car at her.

"How did you even find that thing?" she asked, but got no response. Blank never talked.

She rolled out of bed and the floor creaked under her feet. It was too bright in her too-big, too-rectangular room. The baby blue curtains her mom had picked out when she'd redecorated Carol's room last year didn't do much to keep light out and the blinds behind them weren't any better. Carol picked her way through her piles of stuff to the window, opened the curtains and lifted the blinds to see if the window was open. Hot air blew against her face and when she squinted, eyes still adjusting to being awake, Carol could see one of the neighbor's cats dart between two flower beds. She slid the window shut and then shut the curtains.

Sleep being a lost cause, Carol got her shower in early, so she wouldn't need to wait through Di's morning routine, and wandered downstairs to the family room. On the way, Carol got the newspaper off the stoop and stopped in the kitchen for a cup of orange juice. When her parents got up they were going to make French toast; Mom had discovered a recipe to make it healthier and was excited to try it out. Carol just hoped that someone had caved in on her request for good syrup so she wouldn't have to have any of the sugar free or the bitter pure maple syrup. In the family room she sat down to play Zelda.

Eventually the smell of coffee started to waft through the house and the coffee maker beeped, followed immediately by the shuffling, zombie sounds of Carol's parents getting up and the insistent meowing of Millie the cat. Carol kept playing her game, waiting for someone to call her into the kitchen, and for there to be a better spot in the game to stop and save her progress. Someone entered the kitchen and fed Millie. "There you go, there you go, stop crying." It was Mom. Carol heard more shuffling and clinking and a loud yawn, and then Mom must have noticed that the TV was on and came to investigate. "Oh. You're up?"

"Yep," Carol said.

There was a long pause. Carol didn't look but she guessed Mom was sipping her coffee, preparing to deal with her. "We're going to start breakfast soon," she said, finally.

"Uh huh."

"It's your birthday breakfast."

"Yeah."

Another pause. Normally, whoever was having their birthday didn't help out with cooking or other chores for the day, but Mom also didn't like it when Carol played video games in the morning. Or any time. "Okay then, I guess I'll start breakfast." And Mom left her alone.

A minute later Dad shuffled into the kitchen and Di stomped down the stairs. They both had to leave for work after the birthday pizza lunch, but would be spending the morning with Carol and Mom. Carol kept playing for a few minutes, until Mom called her in for French toast.

The house had been remodeled a few times since it was built. The first couple of times were for new updates like plumbing and electricity. The most recent bit of work was what Mom called a "touch-up" of the kitchen and bathrooms. So there were big drawers and quartz counter tops and an island in the middle. Carol joined the rest of the family at the island while Mom finished cooking the last couple pieces of French toast.

"Happy birthday," Mom said when she flipped the last pieces onto a plate that already had sides of bacon, eggs, and hash browns on it and sat it in front of Carol.

"Thanks," Carol said.

Dad started to say something, but yawned so hard his jaw cracked. This startled Di, who was still half asleep on Carol's other side. Dad was bedraggled and bleary-eyed. It took at least an hour for him to learn to talk again each morning. His effort to also wish Carol a happy birthday defeated, Dad gave her a side hug instead. He picked up the newspaper and looked at it silently.

Di said “Happy birthday,” and started to load her own plate with food.

While eating, Dad laid out the newspaper on the counter. “Do you have to do that? It’s in the way,” Mom said.

“Yes,” Dad said, “I have to.”

Carol looked at the newspaper. One of the article headlines caught her eye, “Secret Subway Signs Point to Hoax.” She leaned over to read the article and her arm hit the open bottle of maple syrup. It spilled right onto the paper.

“Oh, come on,” Dad said, grabbing at the paper and trying to lift it out of the syrup. Most it was soaked.

“Could you just be more careful?” Mom asked Carol. She got a cloth to wipe up the spill.

“Sorry,” Carol said. “I didn’t mean to.”

Di used one hand as a dam, to stop the spill from going over the edge of the counter between her plate and Carol’s. She used her other hand to keep eating little pieces of French toast. When Mom had gotten most of the spill, and Di had her hand back, she licked the syrup off.

Dad threw the newspaper in the trash. “I guess nobody cares about it anyway,” he grumbled. “Only the local news.”

“Yeah. Cow tipping teenagers and Jack Johnson drunk driving again aren’t really news,” Mom said.

“Well sometimes there’s articles about the town budget or -” Dad started to say, but Mom cut him off.

“I guess it’s time for the birthday girl to open her present,” she said.

Carol pushed her mostly empty plate away from her and straightened up. “Oh, is there a present?” she asked casually. On years that Carol or Di had birthday parties, they only got one present from their parents, and they would open it at breakfast.

“Is there?” Di replied, and tapped her chin. “Do we give people presents on their birthdays?”

“We do.”

Mom fetched the present from her regular hiding place in the laundry room. It was small, rectangular, and wrapped in the same multi-colored balloon-patterned paper that everyone else’s birthday gifts had been wrapped in for the last two years. “Do you want us to sing to you?”

“No, I’m good, thanks,” Carol said. She unwrapped her present carefully, savoring the few moments of suspense. It was a smartphone. One of those clunky, brick-like phones. It was out of the original box, no instruction manual came with it, no earphones. And it already had a decorative case that was black and covered in ghosts. The Halloween kind that were just white sheets with holes for the eyes. Carol frowned over it.

“Is something wrong?” Mom asked.

Carol shook her head quickly and looked up at her family. “No, no it’s... cool,” and she smiled.

“I picked out the case!” Di butted in. “We searched online and there were *so* many options,” Di gestured widely to emphasize the enormity of selection, “And none of them seemed to fit and then I remembered that ghost thing. How you used to believe there was a ghost in the house and you have all those horror books in your room, but most of the cases when I searched for ones with ghosts and stuff were really kind of creepy and then I found this one and it was just so cute!”

“Uh huh,” Carol said, nodding along. She looked down at the phone. The case really wasn’t all that bad. It could be worse. “Thanks,” she said to Di.

“And?” Mom asked.

“Oh,” Carol turned to her parents, “Thank you, too.” She really tried to look enthusiastic. She got up to hug Mom, who was sitting on Dad’s other side. It was awkward, because Mom was still sitting on her stool.

“It’s a refurbished android!” Dad said when Carol sat back down, phone in hand.

Carol didn’t know what to say to that, so she said “Okay.”

“Got it so much cheaper than a new one,” Dad continued, staring off into the distance, daydreaming about cheap electronics, striped socks, comic book collections, and whatever else it was that Dad loved. One of the things he loved was to get things cheap. For Di’s birthday in March, Dad had gotten her a “lightly” used car and spent weeks getting it fixed up for her. Recently he’d booked a cruise for him and Mom to take over Thanksgiving and spent the next four days bragging about how great the deal they got was. While their parents were gone, Di and Carol would stay with Pops and Nana, who lived near Arco.

Dad trailed off and Mom picked up the thread, “We talked about it and you’re a pretty good kid. You don’t get into a lot of trouble and...” she trailed off. Carol studied the cobwebs above the door to the back porch. It took a minute for Mom to catch the thread of what she was supposed to be saying, and then she picked back up, “And we think you should be responsible enough for this.” Dad and Di excused themselves from the table while Mom gave a short lecture on the data limits and cell phone safety. Then she, too, left Carol, grabbing her around the shoulders and forcing a kiss to the top of Carol’s head while Carol struggled. “You need to

change. You don't want to go to your party dressed like that." Mom said as she headed back upstairs.

"Why not?" Carol called after her. She was wearing normal summer clothes.

Di sighed, "Well you could try something a little more..."

In style? Carol wondered.

"...In style," Di said. "It's fine, I'll help you. You could probably borrow stuff from me. Just a different shirt and you should put on white crew socks."

"I guess."

"And then you could put your hair up."

Carol sighed and followed Di back upstairs. Blank was still in her room, playing with another toy he'd found. Even if he hadn't been wrapped in the blanket, Carol always knew if he was there or not. It was a sense, a knowledge in the back of her mind. And in the last few years it had become awkward to change clothes while he was around, on principle. So she had to find her clothes and change in the bathroom. Carol dug the recommended socks out of her dresser and Di barged into her room, waving neon-colored shirts in her hand. At the same time, the toy Blank had been playing with clattered to the floor and Carol whipped around to look at the space where he was, startled.

"Here we go," Di said, oblivious to the ghost on the floor. "Oh that's a chilly spot," she said and she wove through the piles to hand Carol the shirts. She was speaking quickly, barely pausing for breath. "How is your floor so cold in this weather? Pick one of these. Every time I've been to a place like this, people wear either neon or white. It's for when they turn the black lights on."

Carol looked at the shirts and made a noncommittal sound. The options were neon pink with a back that was split down the middle, a neon orange crop top, or a neon blue shirt that had a partly mesh back, but was still a whole shirt. Carol picked the blue and handed the other shirts back to Di.

“I should have guessed,” Di said and she walked back out towards her room. Carol went and changed in the bathroom and did her best to get her hair up into a ponytail. When Mom saw it a few minutes later, she dragged Carol to the master bathroom and redid it, making the ponytail high and tight, and tying it up with a blue scrunchy Carol wouldn’t have guessed Mom would have. Then Mom had Carol hold still while she put mascara on her eyelashes. “Nothing else, though. You’re so lucky with your skin. No acne yet. Though one wouldn’t think it from the state of your hair. Or all that bacon,” she said.

They went to the roller rink in three cars. It was a big building, especially for Biscuit Flat, and everything was nearly spotless. Though it was hard to judge because it was dim inside and the carpet in front was the fleck-pattern kind that was meant to hide stains. One employee was waiting to greet the family at the front desk. There was a bench to sit on, luckily, so kids could wait for their parents while they were at the desk. Mom signed the last of the paperwork quickly. “Skates or blades?” Carol was asked; she chose blades. She’d never worn proper roller skates before, better to stick with the familiar. When Carol examined them - they were mostly black, nothing special, and had clearly been worn by now - she caught a whiff of *smell* coming from inside the boots. She gagged.

“Something wrong, Honey?” Dad asked.

“Smell these,” Carol said and handed the roller blades to him.

Dad took a good sniff and coughed. “Yeah, uh, can we get a different pair?” he asked, turning back towards the desk. “These don’t smell great.”

The employee looked annoyed but found them another pair in the same size.

“Do these get cleaned at all?” Dad asked, in a quieter voice.

“Uh, I don’t know. Not really my responsibility,” the employee said.

Dad nodded and brought the second pair to Carol. She took them, but didn’t inspect them.

A minute later Mom’s sister, Aunt Jamie marched in with her son, Cody, trailing behind. Jamie’s car had been idling in the lot when Carol’s family had pulled in. Mom and Dad were back at the counter, with staff. Cody, who was fifteen and the youngest of Jamie’s kids, marched over to Carol with a small, sparkly gift bag in hand. “Hi,” he said.

“Hey.”

“Happy birthday,” Cody said and handed her the gift bag and went to sulk in the corner. When they were little, Cody would usually play with Carol. But lately, he didn’t want anything to do with his girl cousins. So, his saying happy birthday was surprisingly nice. Carol missed having a cousin to talk to or play with.

They waited around for a few minutes. The rink didn’t technically open until eleven, but because of the party their family had been allowed to come early. Carol couldn’t decide at first if she should just put on the blades or wait until people showed up and started to skate. Mom and Aunt Jamie had started talking, Dad, Di, and Cody were on their phones. There wasn’t anything else to do, so Carol put on the roller blades and deposited her shoes in one of the cubbies provided for patrons. When she slid, a little wobbly, onto the rink another employee turned on music. “Is there anything you’d like me to play, specifically?” he asked Carol.

“I don’t know.” Carol didn’t want to make people listen to stuff they wouldn’t want to hear. “Just play whatever you want.”

The employee gave her a thumbs up and picked music Carol could only identify as being old. If TV was anything to go by, old music went hand in hand with roller skating. It took a few laps to adjust, but Carol got the hang of skating again. It was like riding a bike, as the saying goes. While she had the rink to herself, Carol could skate freely. In the years that she’d had skates, the only places to use them had been the driveway at home, which wasn’t very big, or the skateboarding area at Hidden Park, a few miles away. So she hadn’t had many opportunities to skate on such a large area. Carol knew she wouldn’t be able to do any real tricks on skates, but she was able to execute a little spin. The second time she tried it, though, she almost fell, but caught herself just in time. Someone, either Di or Cody, laughed. Carol ignored them and tried again.

People started trickling into the building during the third song. There were a few classmates she recognized, but had never spent time with outside of school like Javier and Shelley, who she’d sat in a pod with through the whole afternoon the year before. Wren Salas, who’d been in a few classes with Carol in the past, but never really spoken to her, came with a small gift bag and said hello. Most of the guests who were arriving didn’t bring gifts. Carol was relieved, since it meant that when she opened presents at the end of the party it wouldn’t go on for long.

A few of the guests traded their shoes for skates and joined Carol on the rink, but not all of them. As more people joined, Carol moved into the inner line of fast skaters, following close on Cody’s heels. Carol called up to him, “Hey, Cody, wanna race?” But he didn’t hear. So Carol took off anyway, skating as fast as she could past him.

Carol heard Cody shout “Hey!” over the din and then he whooshed past her and flipped around to skate backwards and blow a raspberry before he turned again and almost barreled into a middle-aged man Carol didn’t know. Carol took the opportunity to speed past them. She and Cody continue racing until the music was stopped abruptly and everyone came to a chaotic halt to hear the announcement that it was time for pizza.

There was a place reserved at the tables for Carol, and Dad made her wear a party hat. It was sadistic in Carol’s opinion, but if she refused, she’d be making a scene. The pizza was okay. It was from the best pizza place in town, but there weren’t any really great pizza places in town, so “okay” was the best Carol could have hoped for. She had a slice and a few sips of root beer and was grabbed by Mom before she could get any breadsticks, which were way better than the pizza. “Look who’s here!” Mom said.

Melanie Johansson stepped up by Mom and smiled widely. “Hey,” she said, and waved. Melanie was the only daughter of Mom’s best friend Lisa. The winter before last, their family had moved to Nampa, which was five hours away.

“Uh, hi,” Carol said back. She was starting to itch. It was a reaction she often had when forced to spend time with Melanie. She had to resist the urge to scratch at her stomach and the back of her head. She’d scratched her head once when she was feeling itchy at Melanie’s house and almost gotten her head shaved because Melanie had told Auntie Lisa that she thought Carol must have lice. Carol had told Mom that it was an allergy to Melanie. Mom hadn’t thought it was funny.

“It’s been a while,” Melanie said and she flipped her long, shiny hair off her shoulder. Her hair was now dyed blonde. When she’d moved, she’d just had blonde highlights.

“Yeah, it has. You moved.”

Mom stepped into the conversation, saving Carol for a moment. “How has your new school been?”

“Oh it’s been great!”

Carol tried to step or skate awkwardly away and leave them to it, but Mom grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

Melanie continued talking, not noticing anything Carol did. “It was such a great year. I loved it so much.”

“What did you major in?” Mom asked. “Is it a major? Or what did you focus on?”

“Oh well most classes at Pendleton are required, but my elective was dance. The high school, the one that’s adjacent, they do ‘majors’ but in the lower school we just get to do a couple electives.”

“That’s great, isn’t that great Sweetie?” Mom asked Carol, pointedly.

“Mhmm, great,” Carol said. She really couldn’t have cared less about how Melanie’s year had been. Melanie had always been annoying, when she wasn’t being mean. Their moms never seemed to notice that Carol and Melanie couldn’t stand each other. Or at least, Carol couldn’t stand Melanie and Melanie hated her. She was always looking down her nose at Carol, comparing whatever they did, talking about how great her grades were and how many friends she’d made in her dance classes and music lessons, showing Carol presents her friends had given her. When that wasn’t enough, she’d make things up to get Carol into trouble. The lice incident was one example.

Melanie agreed again that her year of going to a special performing arts school instead of being stuck at Biscuit Flat Middle, or a regular school in Nampa, had been great. “One of my

teachers, Ms. Benway, told me that I have a real shot at making it into a dance school. Like, one in New York, in a few years,” Melanie reported.

Mom was ecstatic at this news, “Oh I hadn’t heard.” Usually Auntie Lisa told Mom a lot of things, but they hadn’t had as much time to talk on the phone lately. “I really can’t believe Lisa didn’t tell me this already!” Mom finished.

Melanie shrugged.

“That’s... cool,” Carol said, after Mom squeezed her arm so hard she thought it might bruise.

There weren’t any other topics Carol to talk to Melanie about. Carol didn’t like dance or theater, and she only did choir at school because participation in a music class had been required for sixth and seventh grade.

“How was your year?” Melanie asked. Her tone implied that an “I guess” would have been on the end, if Carol’s mom wasn’t still there.

“Fine,” Carol said.

And then there was a loud squeal in Carol’s ear, “MEL!” It was Alicia, Melanie’s best friend. She side checked Carol to leap at Melanie. The two of them hugged and hugged, yelling “I missed you, I missed you!”

Mom gave up on making Carol stand there with Melanie and went off somewhere else. Some people were already finished with their pizza and root beer and back on the rink. The cake wouldn’t be brought out until the end of the party. One of the younger kids was crying about it nearby.

Carol got back on the rink to get away from Melanie and was joined by dad. “Need to get away for a few minutes,” He said.

“Well I’m here to skate, aren’t I?” Carol asked.

Dad laughed, “I meant me. I need to get away for a few minutes. From them,” he jerked his head towards the tables that were populated by moms. There were still some boys at the tables as well and a small line of people getting their faces painted with white paint. The pizza had disappeared fast. And Carol had never gotten a breadstick. She and Dad skated side by side for a few minutes. Dad bopped along to the music, which sounded like something he would have picked out. The music was loud and it seemed to Carol that every minute the volume got turned up just a teeny bit more.

“Are you going to get your face painted?” Dad asked Carol, noticing that she was looking back at the tables.

Carol shook her head. “Who’s doing that anyway?”

“I don’t know. One of the moms, I think.”

“Why?”

“It’s supposed to look cool in the black light.”

“Yeah I guess,” Carol agreed. But she didn’t want paint on her face. The thought of a little brush and the cool, wet paint made her shudder.

Dad didn’t push the subject and instead gave in to his urge to dance instead, a little. He bopped his head and sang along to the music, adding an “Oh yeah” here and an “Oh yeah,” there.

Carol’s feet were really starting to sweat in the boots and her scratchy tall socks. But she was also getting back into the hang of skating. When there was room, it felt a little like flying. “Don’t you have to go to work soon?” She asked Dad.

“Not for a few minutes. I can skate with you until my alarm goes off,” He said, indicating the shirt pocket where he kept his phone.

“Okay. You really want to skate with me?” she asked. “This music doesn’t make you want to dance?”

Dad laughed, “A little bit yeah. But only if you dance with me.”

“Oh, no. No.”

Dad tried to get Carol to go to the middle of the rink and have a father-daughter dance for her birthday but she ran the time out and Dad had to leave.

The party and the skating went on. After a while the novelty of skating wore off, and Carol found herself just moving with a herd of people around and around along the oval of the rink. The beat from the music was starting to hurt her ears.

It had been an eternity since Carol had last stepped off the rink and she was curious about the arcade games on the opposite edge of the room. So Carol checked to her right and skated out past the faster skaters and into the middle of the floor, where a few people were trying out tricks or dancing. A kid dashed in front of her and Carol almost hit him, but stopped just in time. The exit on the other side was blocked by the ever-moving swarm, but there was a gap coming up, Carol headed towards it. And she must have done something wrong, she felt her skate hit and hook on something and Carol fell.

Her face hit the polished wood of the rink first. Then her forearms. Elbows. Knees. And the rest of her body. It happened in a second, but Carol felt each successive impact. Her head was turned to the side so she saw that Melanie had been just to Carol’s side and Melanie’s skate caught on Carol’s. She fell over Carol’s legs. And, because she and Alicia had been holding hands for whatever move they were trying, Alicia was pulled down into the pile-up. Carol’s first thought was *Ow*. And then, *OW*.

The music still blared and someone skated right past Carol's fingers on the floor. Pain grew in Carol's face and somewhere near her elbow Melanie snarled "Nice going. Don't you know how to skate?"

Carol tried to roll her eyes, but her face hurt too much.

There was some shouting and Carol could feel the space around her open up a little; people making way for the pile-up.

Another pair of skates stopped dangerously close to Carol's fingers. "Are you okay? That looked like it hurt."

Carol forced herself up on her elbows and peered up to see Wren Salas looking down at her, frowning. Her head was haloed in the black light, which made her face almost invisible, except for the glowing stars that had been painted on her face. And Carol was a little surprised to see that Wren wasn't laughing at her.

"Ow," was all Carol could think to say.

Wren tilted her head. "You should probably stay down there until first aid arrives. In case you hurt your spine."

"I think..." Carol said, forcing herself up onto her knees. Her hands smarted and her knees hurt, but her cheek hurt more. "I think," she started again, "that my spine is the one part that didn't hit the floor."

Wren smiled, "I guess. And maybe it's worse to stay down there. You might get a disease from the floor."

"Or a weird fungus."

"Yeah. You definitely have to wash your hands now."

Carol reached into her pocket and found her hand sanitizer was still there. She slathered some sanitizer onto her hands and silently offered some to Wren, who accepted a few drops.

“That is... so weird,” Melanie’s voice said from over Carol’s shoulder. She sounded like she was looking at moldy leftovers.

Carol flinched. Her knees hurt too much for her to keep kneeling there. She stumbled and slid to her feet, only making it up because Wren offered her a hand. Finally she heard Mom shouting. “Honey, girls, are you okay? Are you all okay?” And then there were concerned hands dragging Carol away from the rink, Melanie and Alicia ahead of her. It was easy for Mom to drag Carol due to Carol being on wheels. They were all sat down at a table that was still covered in pizza boxes and spilled root beer. Mom prodded Carol all over. Checking her for injuries, though Mom quickly started caring for Alicia instead because she’d started crying.

“Oh, sweetie it’s going to be alright.”

A paramedic arrived. Carol thought that it was overkill to call in professionals and said so. All she got for an answer was “company policy,” and a bright light shined in her eyes. The paramedic poked, prodded, and asked dumb questions, then he handed her a cold pack and he moved on. “She’ll be fine, maybe give her some Tylenol if the bruises hurt, but nothing’s broken, and she’s not concussed.”

“Hooray,” Carol said. Nobody listened. The paramedic left.

The roller blades thunked on the floor when Carol took them off, and a bad smell wafted up from them. Carol kicked them away. She had been left to sit in congealing soda, waiting for the party to end. From the bench she could see Mom rehashing her fall for Aunt Jamie, Melanie and Alicia playing arcade games, and most other guests were still skating. With nothing else to do, Carol thought about the events of the day. Spilling the syrup, being forced into uncomfortable

socks and a weird shirt, the smelly skates, Melanie being there, and falling on her face. *Oh*, Carol thought, remembering the spilled syrup, *Does the newspaper post its columns online?* She got her phone out and searched for the paper.

The Biscuit Flat Journal did post its articles online, though the site was clogged with ads. The secret subway article was hidden past more important news. There was a man accused of feeding bears, someone else had been caught poaching, and businesses were gearing up for the fall tourists. Fall was the big season in Biscuit Flat, what with the mega corn maze and fall festival, the old town haunting tours, and the anniversary of the Clarence Massacre.

It turned out that there wasn't much to the secret subway article. *It would be nice, to just get on a train and go somewhere else*, Carol thought. But what had really happened was that a few jokey signs had been put up around town, announcing the new subway line. Then, pamphlets about the line had shown up at the town tourism desk. Unfortunately, not only did the line not exist, but the towns it supposedly connected to also didn't exist. With exceptions like Missoula and Pocatello, but those cities didn't have subway lines. Then someone had found a sign, supposed to be signaling the entrance to the subway station, in between two of the rocks in Biscuit Buttes State Park, past the edge of town. Obviously, no such station existed. Finally, the journalist had interviewed a couple residents of a trailer park who swore they were feeling tremors multiple times a day. "When I asked Professor Claire Andreas, who teaches geology at the College of Central Idaho here in Biscuit Flat, about these tremors, she was concerned. But not about a secret subway system. 'It's not earthquakes,' she said, 'But it could be a sign of geologic activity of another kind.' For example, a sinkhole could be forming under the trailer park."

Disappointed, Carol stayed on her phone, searching phrases like “quietest places on earth” or “best stargazing spots.” Scouring the internet was a distraction, and there was nowhere else to go, or no way to get anywhere else interesting. Seeing as the secret subway wasn’t real. Things to do in Biscuit Flat were limited to visits to the library, the parks, the athletic center, and now the roller rink. Anything else required horses or expensive toys. Or biking on hot, dusty trails in the sun. There were rattlesnakes out on those trails, sometimes. And at other times people died out there. There was an uncle or great uncle who had died from lightning strike on a mountain before Carol was born. Although her family went camping and hiking every year, they never pushed it beyond recreational day hiking.

Carol’s face was starting to throb, even with the cold pack. It seemed to be working more on her hand than on her face. “Are you okay?” Wren asked, startling Carol. “Sorry,” she said when Carol jumped.

“Yeah. It’s fine.” Carol said. She noticed that Wren had changed back to shoes. “You’re leaving?”

“Soon-ish. My dad will be here to pick me up, but we won’t leave till after cake. When are we having cake?”

“So you’re just here for cake?”

Wren shrugged lightly, “Isn’t that what you’re here for?”

“Kind of. I did want to skate a little.” Carol checked the time again on her phone. “I think we should be getting cake soon.”

“What kind of cake is it?” Wren asked, and she sat down on the bench opposite.

“Chocolate ice cream cake.”

“Yes,” Wren said and fist-pumped.

Carol didn't know what else to say, since Wren's question had clearly been answered. And for a few minutes, it seemed like Wren was satisfied to wait in silence. Relatively speaking, of course, as the mix of oldies pop was still going over the talking and laughing and skating.

"So," Wren said, breaking the silence between them, "Have you had a good birthday?"

"I mean, I guess. It's not the worst."

"That's enthusiastic."

"There's a lot of people here. I didn't want to invite the whole class and then fifty other people I don't know. And then I fell on my face." It took a second for Carol to catch the meaning of her own words. *'I didn't want to invite everyone.' I hope she doesn't take it personally.*

Wren didn't look hurt, but since most people hid when they were upset, Carol couldn't be sure. "I guess that makes sense," Wren said. "You don't hang out with a lot of people."

Ouch. "No. I really don't." And before she could stop herself, Carol added, "Especially not Melanie and her friends."

Wren almost smiled, but Carol knew that Wren had more sense of politeness than she did. "Yeah. Melanie can be a bit..."

"Bratty."

"I was thinking more 'insensitive'. Every time we talk or had a group project together she'd ask me something like 'What are you?'"

"Ah."

Wren went on, "There's no way she doesn't know that I'm mixed. And she has to have seen me dance at events sometimes. And every year we have some project where I have to tell everyone again that my mom is Shoshone and my dad is 'New-Mexican,' but Melanie just keeps pretending to be confused. Her friends too. It doesn't make sense to..." Wren got lost in her rant

for a few seconds. She was breathing hard from the sudden burst of rage; something Carol had never witnessed from her before. Of course, not everyone was a nuclear reactor like Carol was, but most kids had fights and meltdowns at school at some point. “No it’s not about sense it’s about... respect. And courtesy. And all that. She just gets on my nerves.”

“She doesn’t give me crap like that but yeah. Though, now that her family moved away, my Mom doesn’t have her best friend to hang out with all the time. She’s not happy about it.”

“Oh. Your moms are friends?”

Carol just nodded tiredly.

They had cake and presents a few minutes later. The cake was big, but not quite big enough for everyone. So there was a cooler of ice cream bars and a thing of cupcakes as well. Carol endured the birthday song and getting her picture taken blowing out candles. She opened the small pile of gifts at the table while most people milled around, waiting for treats or eating and talking. A few parents arrived to pick their kids and get a piece of cake for themselves. The gifts weren’t spectacular, which Carol couldn’t have expected them to be. Makeup, bubble bath, skincare stuff, a teen romance book - *Well that’s a change*, she thought - a few assorted items. The best gift was from Shelley: a bookstore gift card.

Carol said thank you to the people sitting around the table. Most of her body hurt by that point, and it was time to go home. And to herself, Carol could admit that she didn’t really care about most of the gifts, and she was sure the people who had given them didn’t care either, so it didn’t matter. But it mattered to Mom, who was terse with Carol and the rink employees when they left at the very end. *The birthday girl should be able to go home early if she’s not having fun*, Carol thought as she climbed into the car afterward.

Chapter Two

Wren

Abuelo's Arrival

There was dirt in Wren's mouth. She was panting from the exertion of working in the garden and had swung the hoe hard coming down and nearly as hard pulling it back up, flinging a clod of dirt straight into her mouth. Wren gagged loudly and spat while Aaron, her little brother, who was working closest to her, laughed. Wren wanted to throw her hoe across the garden, wishing it would hit one of the grosser vegetables, like the cucumbers. And she wanted to throw some dirt in Aaron's wide-open mouth and see how he liked it. But of course she didn't. Throwing her hoe would only make trouble. And Aaron was only ten. Wren understood that boys were dumb at that age. Instead, she dropped the hoe, careful not to hit any of the corn stalks, and walked calmly to where she'd set her water bottle at the edge of the grass. She swished and spat the first couple of mouthfuls of water and when Wren was satisfied the dirt was gone she guzzled almost half of the bottle, letting herself rest for a few seconds.

"Slacker!" her older brother Dax shouted from his row, under the bean trellises.

Wren rolled her eyes, "Says the guy who just had to spend thirty minutes in the bathroom while we were out here weeding after breakfast," she retorted.

"Yeah," Tessa said, stopping to push her thick-framed purple glasses back up her nose. She was crouched by the tomatoes, where Wren had started working. Tessa had been tasked with digging up the weeds that were too close to the plants to be hoed. At eight, she was still too little to use a hoe herself, and someone had to do it. Mom had decided that, while she and Dad were gone, the kids would do the weeding and Aunt Meg and Uncle Benny - Mom's brother and sister

who both lived with the family for the time being, would take care of other tasks. (“The time being” referred to had been six years for aunt Meg and three for uncle Benny, so far.) Their work, which had been negotiated with Mom and Dad, included looking after the animals. Wren could see Aunt Meg walking the perimeter of the pasture where they were keeping the nanny and kid goats, checking for signs of wear and tear, or signs of coyotes.

Meanwhile, Dax had put his wireless earbuds back in, or maybe he’d never taken them out, Wren hadn’t been watching. He ignored everything his sisters said and instead bounced his shoulders to whatever music he was listening to while he continued to work his section. Dax may have joined them half an hour late, as he had a job moving pipe, but he was almost done. And he’d been given the biggest section to work every weeding day. Wren was barely past halfway on her part.

Wren sighed, put her water down, and went back to her hoe. It was just going to keep getting hotter, so it was always best to get the outside work done right away. And the shade was already disappearing. Even between the stalks of corn that were now taller than her, it was getting hot. The long leaves draped down and scratched at Wren’s arms as she moved up one row and down the next.

They all worked in silence for a few more minutes. Swing, scrape, smooth. Swing, scrape, smooth. A few years ago, Meg had argued with Mom about the garden and the livestock not being good for the environment, that they should be doing everything differently. Wren would certainly prefer not having to go out and hoe every few days. But Mom had refused because as far as she was concerned, their garden was producing better stuff than they could get at the store and saving money. “Do you really want to go back to eating pesticides?” Mom had asked at the end of the argument. So Meg had established a little plot to experiment with permaculture and

growing plants like artichokes and beets. She also grew heirloom varieties of squash, beans, and tomatoes. At other times Mom and Meg would bicker about the livestock because a goat kept escaping or there was an article about milk being bad for people. Half of their family was lactose intolerant. The side that each sister would take in such an argument changed almost every time. But Meg liked making her own yogurt and the kids got to keep whatever money they made from selling eggs. So they kept the animals they had, and tried not to get any more.

Not satisfied with just listening to music and dancing, Dax started singing along. When that started, Aaron took his own prolonged break to go back inside and refill his water. “You can’t even sing,” he yelled over his shoulder at Dax as he headed toward the house. Dax didn’t hear him.

“Hey, Aaron, don’t eat the pancakes,” Wren called after him.

Aaron waved her off.

The morning was wearing on and Wren neared the end of her section. She had to stop after every strike at the ground to wipe sweat off her forehead and away from her eyes. “When are Mom and Dad getting home?” Tessa asked her. Then she took off her glasses and wiped them on her shirt.

“You’re not supposed to do that, Tessa,” Wren told her.

Tessa ignored her and asked again, “When are Mom and Dad getting home?”

Wren smoothed out the last bit of dirt in her row. Mom and Dad were supposed to come home with Abuelo, Dad’s dad, sometime that day. Abuelo had been living alone in his house in New Mexico for the four years since Abuela died from a heart attack. Every time Dad had called, Abuelo had said he’d been fine. Then, in April, Abuelo’s next-door neighbor, followed a few minutes later by Dad’s older brother Roy, had called to tell Dad that Abuelo had shot himself in

the leg while cleaning one of his guns that morning. And that Abuelo had been getting into conflicts with the neighbors over everything. That week in particular the problem had something to do with trash bins and teenagers speeding. The neighbor also said that Abuelo's house was so full of junk that when the neighbor had run over to investigate after hearing a gunshot and Abuelo's yelling for help, he had had to keep moving boxes and piles of stuff out of his way. A few days later, they'd found out that Abuelo had a problem with his heart. And had gotten in trouble with his local police for threatening to shoot the across-the-street neighbor's dog for barking all the time. It was then that Dad and his siblings decided that Abuelo couldn't live alone anymore. It had taken weeks to convince Abuelo of that fact. Then, Mom and Dad had driven the thousand miles to Abuelo's house to help him pack, sell the house, and move. They'd been gone for almost a month.

Wren didn't know the answer to Tessa's question, just that their parents were supposed to arrive that day. It was Aaron who answered, "They'll get here at one o'clock."

"How do you figure that?" Dax asked, earbuds now missing from his ears, as he went to put his hoe back in the garden shed, finished with his section. "Mom said they'd be here by eleven at the latest."

Wren could practically hear Aaron roll his eyes, "Duh," he said, "They're always late on trips." Nobody could deny that was true.

"Okay," Wren interjected, "So Tessa, Mom and Dad will probably get home around lunchtime."

"Yeah, so like, when y'all are done with your weeding" Dax said.

"We're almost done!" Tessa said, and tossed another handful of weeds into the big black trash bag she'd been dragging behind her, as if to prove her point.

Dax snorted, “‘Almost’ is not the same as ‘done,’” he said, making air quotes around the “almost” and the “done.”

Tessa stood up. She put her hands on her hips and took a big breath, preparing to yell with all her tiny might, but Wren stepped between them. If Wren let Dax go on, he and Tessa would keep arguing until Tessa cried and it would take hours for her to calm down then. And over something as trivial as Dax’s teasing. He teased people all the time, but he didn’t mean anything by it.

“Dax, could you just go inside?” Wren asked.

Dax shrugged and went on his merry way with a “Whatever.” Wren knew he was going to shower and use up whatever hot water there was, but it would keep him and Tessa from fighting.

The remaining siblings finished with the garden a little while later. It was nearly ten by then. The sun was high in the sky and the breeze rustling through the nearby fields was warm. Wren heard the barking of dogs carried on the wind and the tsch-tsch-tsch-tscuh sound of the sprinklers watering a nearby field. Aaron and Tessa raced back into the house for lemonade and to fight over control of the TV. Wren didn’t want to bother with that fight either that day. Every day it was the same. Wren wanted to watch TV or play one of her games, Aaron wanted to watch a superhero show or play a different video game, and Tessa wanted to watch the little kids’ shows or play Mario Kart. Benny and Meg had banned Mario Kart two weeks earlier because of Tessa’s last tantrum over losing. Dax had permission to use the internet unsupervised, so half the time he didn’t bother fighting since he could rub in his superiority. So, hoping that Aaron and Tessa would work things out and watch PBS, Wren went over to the bunny hutches.

The family had a few bunnies. All of them were sheltered in a group of hutches under the trees, between the house and the garden. Rabbits weren’t very fun to have, Wren thought. They didn’t play like the dogs or cats but they were cute and soft. After checking to see that the

hutches were secure and that the animals all had food and water, Wren took the bunnies that had been lying stretched out near their doors to the bunny garden.

The bunny garden was a relatively small, secure pen. Dad and Grandpa had built it like the chicken coop, with concrete below and around it, to keep foxes out. The wire mesh around the edges was layered, strong, and close. There was a roofed shelter at one end of the enclosure and a few years ago, after a bunny had been snatched by a hawk, Dad had added mesh over top of the entire thing. They'd done the same thing with the chicken coop, just in case. Wren hadn't seen the bunny snatched out of the pen, but Mom had described it over dinner, in detail.

Wren sat down on a big rock in the garden and watched the bunnies as they darted around the place. One of them, with big, brown lop ears disappeared straight into a burrow. Another one chewed on a wicker ball. The others nibbled on plants and stretched out to nap. Watching the bunnies was sort of like watching animals at the zoo, but they were smaller and less deadly, and so Wren eventually zoned out.

Originally, Wren's plan for the day, until Mom and Dad got home, had been to work on a letter to the editor of *The Biscuit Flat Journal*. The *Journal* had run an article recently about library budget cuts, and Wren wanted to respond to it. But she was tired, so she daydreamed instead. She'd been returning to the same kind of daydream for months. She imagined she was Genevieve Turner - if Genevieve were younger and smaller and Native - and that she was finally solving the Babbit mystery. The fifth and final book in the Genevieve Turner mystery series was going to be released in December and Wren could not wait. She changed her mind about exactly how she wanted the final book to go almost every week and there were four previous books of material to go off of to invent the final adventure for herself.

Wren figured that there were a few things that had to be true about the ending: Genevieve had to finish school. Roland, Genevieve's annoying English boyfriend had to be dumped so Genevieve could date the much more fun, and Australian, Irving. Who had actually been helping Genevieve to solve the mystery. And last, but not least, the criminal had to be revealed and that person had to have been in the story from the first book. Unfortunately, there was a large cast and most of the characters had some backstory or alibi that became suspicious by book three. Almost every character except Genevieve Turner could have killed the Babbit family and kidnapped little Lila - the sole survivor of the murders - at the end of the first book. At that point, Wren was pretty sure that Mrs. Katterly was the killer. Wren ran over the evidence in her mind again, *I wonder if I should get my notebook?* She thought. Recently, Wren had started noting down her thoughts and writing little fake scenes in one of her notebooks. Wren was up to, once again, reviewing the motoring accident of book two in her head when a voice startled her.

"What are you thinking about?" Aunt Meg asked. She had come up behind Wren, on the other side of the fence.

Wren almost fell off the rock, but caught herself in time. She twisted around to look at Meg, "Same as usual," she said in answer to Meg's question.

Meg smiled, "Those books."

Wren shrugged, "What else is there to do?"

"Well," Meg said, "You could always help me make lunch." Her tone sounded like Grandpa's did whenever the family came out to see him and Grandma on their ranch, where there was always lots of work to do.

Wren shook her head, "We have leftovers."

"You could help me heat them up!" Meg took off her ball cap and slapped it against her leg.

Wren just shook her head again. On leftover days everyone just picked whatever food they could get, first come first serve, and heated it up for themselves. If it even needed to be heated. There was half of a leftover pizza in the fridge and pizza didn't need to be reheated. At least, not in Wren's opinion. She hoped that Dax's diet guidelines from the swim team coach would deter him from eating all of the greasy food. There was a fifty/ fifty chance that Dax had already eaten the pizza last night or while Wren had been outside and he'd been inside. Or maybe Aaron and Tessa had gotten to it. Or uncle Benny. *There are just too many people here*, Wren thought. And at any minute, there would be one more resident.

"You could also help me with my crafting," Meg continued. "I'd love to teach you how to bead."

Because aunt Meg was primarily a lecturer at the nearest community college, she didn't make much money. So when she was in her early twenties, her great-aunt Roberta - Wren's great-great-aunt - had taught her to do traditional Shoshone bead work. Since then Meg had made crafts like necklaces and moccasins that she'd sell at roadside booths during peak season at Yellowstone and Grand Teton, when tourists were more likely to stop and buy souvenirs in droves. She also sold items at powwows and online. These were usually the more expensive and precious items. If Meg sold something at a barely authorized highway-side market the item would have little significance, and was generally cheap, but at powwows she could sell bigger items. On rare occasions, Meg took commissions for special projects. She'd worked on regalia for a few people over the years and the high prices reflected the quality of material and the time Meg had put into them.

As much as Wren liked to admire Meg's work, she didn't like beading. Or any crafting really. There were so many little things so many thousands of details to pay attention to and

craning over the work table made Wren's neck hurt. On top of that, it took so much time to make something that Wren couldn't use. "Sorry but no thank you," Wren said and she held back a grimace at the expression of disappointment that Meg hid quickly.

"Well," Meg said, recovering, "Are you coming in for lunch? The bunnies should be fine out here alone, for a while. Since they're in their garden."

"Fine." Wren stood up and followed Meg back across the yard and inside. It was cool in the house. They'd finally gotten air conditioning installed the spring before last. For Wren, it was a still a novelty to have a cold house in the summer.

The back door went straight into the dining room that also had a desk and computer for the kids in a corner. Uncle Benny was sitting at the head of the dining table. He was stuffing pizza into his mouth. "Benny, I hope you've saved some food for us," Meg said.

Benny made a face that might have been a smile, but his mouth was too full to for Wren to tell.

Meg made a sound of disgust.

"The rest of the food is on the counter," Tessa informed Wren and Meg as she got up to put her plate in the sink.

Please let there be pizza, Wren thought, but when she entered the kitchen, she saw that the pizza was gone. But all of the wilting and soggy salad from two nights before, and a pork and rice casserole that was a couple days older was still there.

Meg came up behind Wren, patted her on the back, and said "The casserole's not bad," before going to get plates and utensils for them. They joined everyone else at the table and Wren ate her plate of casserole slowly.

"I talked to Doug Louis today," Benny said when he finished his food.

“Oh?” Meg asked.

“He’s been seeing bears around his farm.”

“Great. Now we have that to worry about.”

They didn’t finish the discussion. Wren took another reluctant bite of the casserole and heard the screech of a truck braking nearby, then the rumble of Dad’s car’s engine. “They’re here!” Aaron cheered and raced towards the front door, leaving his dirty plate behind. Tessa was also shouting, though she was clearly far enough into the yard that Wren couldn’t make out any words.

Wren cleared the table quickly. Aaron had left a chunk of grilled chicken on his plate and she ate it, instead of letting it go to waste. Wren hesitated when she got to the sink. Abuelo’s things would need to be unloaded from the car and moved into his room, and Abuelo couldn’t do the work himself. Wren had heard snippets of Mom talking with Meg and Benny over the phone the other night, and she’d been talking about how full of things the U-Haul trailer was. The dishes could be done later, but there was a chance that Mom would freak out about a mess being left in the sink. It would be a few minutes before everybody was inside. Wren made a decision and opened the dishwasher.

She was still scraping the dishes off and loading them into the dishwasher when Mom entered the kitchen. “There’s my busy bee,” she said, coming up to put her arm around Wren, and give her a squeeze from the side. “Don’t want to get all wet,” Mom said.

“Hi mom,” Wren said, and she leaned on Mom for a second before Mom let her go. Wren loaded the last couple of dishes and dried her hands. “How was the drive up?” She asked, turning back around to get a full hug.

Mom groaned and leaned on the edge of the red linoleum counter top. “Long. I drove the truck.”

“Yeah, she did,” Dad said, walking in from the living room. “Hey Pumpkin, give me a hug!” he said, throwing his arms out for Wren to walk into. His hugs were even tighter than Mom’s.

“Where’s Abuelo?” Wren asked him when he let her breathe again.

“He’s giving Dax a lecture about why he should play soccer instead of rugby this year.”

“But Dax *is* going to play soccer,” Wren said.

Dad nodded, “We know that.”

The last time Wren had seen Abuelo was at Abuela’s funeral. It had taken three days to make the drive down to Truth or Consequences. Wren’s family and Uncle Roy’s family had stayed at the house with Abuelo. Aunt Cathy and Aunt Vanessa had stayed at a motel with their families. Wren hadn’t spent any time with Abuelo then. He’d been out of the house a lot that week and when he was home, he was sitting in his chair in the living room, surrounded by the rest of the grown-ups. There was a flood of visitors. Like Abuela’s brother and his large family, and her friends from her church. The cousins, who all lived in different states, had spent the week playing while the adults talked and cried together.

Wren remembered Abuela and Abuelo’s house as being cramped with furniture and people. The adults had made breakfasts for everyone and made the few teenage cousins help while Wren and the other younger kids were allowed to sleep in but got up to watch cartoons instead. There had been pictures all over the walls and the house smelled like potpourri, earth, and spices. There were a lot of dried foods, like chilies, from the garden in the cellar. Abuelo and Abuela had a lot of food stored down there. Much of it was canned but some was dried, braided, and hanging

from hooks. Dax had found black widow spiders down there. And on one morning, there had been a scorpion in Aaron's shoe. Which is how Mom and Aaron missed half of the funeral. Mom had had to take Aaron to the hospital, to make sure he'd be okay after the scorpion stung him.

Wren could remember all that. The house, all the games and small fights between cousins, the funeral and how Abuela had looked in her casket - peaceful, but sad too. But Wren didn't remember speaking to Abuelo once. He stood in front of her in the present. In her living room instead of his.

Abuelo was tall and skinny. His hair was mostly gray but still speckled with brown. And he was frowning down at Wren.

"Dad," Dad said to Abuelo, he held Wren tight with one arm around her shoulders, "You remember Wren."

Wren smiled hesitantly, "Hi, Abuelo," she said.

Abuelo grunted and said, "I thought I told you all to just call me Grandpa." And then he sat down on the couch, facing the TV.

"Well, we didn't want to get the kids confused," Dad said back.

Wren heard Abuelo taking a big breath, ready to argue when Mom jumped into the conversation, coming up behind Dad and Wren from the kitchen, "I think we have a truck to unload, guys."

Abuelo didn't say anything then, just patted around the couch until he found the remote, clicked the TV on, and started channel surfing.

Dad kept his arm around Wren until they got to the door, then let her go. Everyone else was already gathered around the trailer. Benny was standing on the edge, handing a box down to

Aaron. Dax already had two boxes and was carefully stepping over the railroad tie that was between the gravel and the grass, and onto the lawn.

Wren got in line behind Tessa while Dad stopped Dax to see where he was taking the boxes. “Look,” he told the group, “There’s no way to fit all of this in Abuelo’s room so most of it is going to the barn.”

Wren groaned and Aaron whined, “But that’s so far.”

Dad just shook his head, “Anyway, if you’d wait a minute, I’ll get the dolly and that will make this easier.”

“Why didn’t you just park the trailer by the barn?” Meg asked.

“I wasn’t thinking about that when we pulled up,” Mom answered.

A short conversation about logistics followed. There was still a lot of stuff that was going in the house, and the trailer contents had not been organized. Tessa was sent to get the dolly - which she did enthusiastically. She ran back from the workshop that was situated at the back of the garage at full speed, and tripped on a root as she neared the expanse of boxes. The dolly fell beside her. Surprisingly, instead of crying and making a big deal of it, Tessa popped right back up, put her glasses back on, picked up the dolly, and walked it the rest of the way.

The boxes, bags, and assorted junk had to be set on the lawn while Mom and Dad decided where each thing could go. They were only a couple minutes into moving things out of the truck and Wren was getting bored. Usually Wren didn’t mind work so much, she played soccer on a league during the summer and for school in fall and spring, and she did chores at home. But she had done nothing all day except work or sitting in silence, and Wren was getting tired of having nothing to occupy her mind with except for daydreams.

As if they were on the same wavelength, Dax put his earbuds in.

Mom scolded him immediately, “Take those off!”

Dax rolled his eyes, but took them out.

“We need you to hear.”

Wren’s trashed her short-lived plan to get her MP3 player from her room.

“It’s not the worst idea, though,” Dad said. And he got his retro boom box from the garage, setting it to play his dad music. It was better than nothing.

So, Wren was able to settle into a flow, following Mom’s occasional directions, helping to organize Abuelo’s truck-full of belongings. After everything was unloaded and spread on the front lawn, the adults were ready to start by bringing Abuelo’s bed inside.

The frame was heavy, and it took two people to carry each of the main pieces. Wren carried a tall lamp in and set it in the hallway while the bed was being put together. The bedroom had been Meg’s until last week. They’d cleared it, repainted, and cleaned the carpets and small bathroom attached to it. Meg had been moved into Aaron’s old and smaller room, and Aaron had been moved into the basement to share a room with Dax and across the hall from Benny. Meg’s room had been chosen because it was on the ground floor, and it had its own bathroom. When Wren was still in the hallway, something dropped on Benny’s foot and he swore loudly. Abuelo started yelling about language from his spot on the couch. Wren left the lamp and skirted around the edge of the living room, behind Abuelo, and back out the door.

Outside, Mom was letting Tessa take boxes to the barn on the dolly. The music changed to a Beach Boys song that Wren recognized.

“What are you putting in the barn?” Wren asked Mom.

“Oh a lot of stuff,” Mom said. “Abuelo tried to take everything. He would’ve packed the house if he could have.”

Wren didn't say that Mom had said the same thing when she'd called that week, every time she'd called. "I guess it would be hard to leave home," Wren said instead.

Mom smiled, "I'm sure it is, but it's worse to be alone."

A couple days later, Wren was working on a new puzzle that Mom and Dad had bought while they were moving Abuelo when the doorbell rang. She jumped in her chair and got up to answer the door but Tessa got to it first. For whatever reason, maybe because it was summer and there wasn't enough excitement in a small town, Tessa loved answering the door. Wren followed just behind her sister, who threw the door open and said "Hello! Who are you?"

On the other side of the door was a man. He was tall and lanky, with mussed, wavy blond hair that was just a bit shaggy. In the doorway, with the light behind him, that hair made it look like there was a halo behind the man's head. "Hey," he said. His voice was friendly, cool and calm. It reminded Wren of the way a counselor or a pastor might talk. His teeth were impeccably straight and white. *That must have cost a lot*, Wren thought. He licked his lips, nervously. "Is Meg here? Meg Smith? The professor?" His jeans looked nice and his shirt had the logo for an eighties band on it. Wren knew it because of Dax's record collection.

It was Tessa who answered, "Yeah, I'll go get her." And she skipped off, calling for Meg.

Wren was left alone, standing in the man's cold shadow. They both stared into the distance, waiting for Meg. Wren listened to the news report that was playing on the TV.

Meg arrived a minute later, dragged by Tessa. When she saw the man in the doorway, Meg stopped dead in her tracks and stared. Then she asked, voice tense, "What are you doing here?"

“I just wanted to ask about that final again, and you didn’t respond to my emails and calls...”

The man reached up and ruffled his hair with his fingers. He looked embarrassed. “It’s not really important, I guess.”

Wren clenched her fists and took slow, measured breaths. *One, two, three, four in. One, two, three, four out. One hold. One, two...* She glanced back to see that Meg’s face had turned stony. Meg walked forward and the man stepped back onto the porch, letting her pass. Meg shut the front door behind them and while Tessa pressed her ear to the door and the boys came running into the room, changing the channel on the TV, Wren still felt frozen in place. The hairs on her arms and neck stood on end. It took two more calming breaths for her to un-stick and by then, judging from the sound of the discussion outside, things might be okay.

There was no screaming and the guy *had* looked nervous, embarrassed by his own behavior. He was probably one of the students who had flunked a final. Then there was the slamming of a car door and Meg came back inside, almost knocking Tessa over. She didn’t say anything to the kids, just stalked back to the home office.

Chapter Three

Carol

Burning Up at Pioneer Park

Carol left the house on Tuesday morning because she was so bored, she thought she might puke. It would be something to do. She walked out the door, out of the silent and still house only after checking that Millie the cat had a full water dish. Blank was hanging out in the

kitchen that morning. Everyone else was gone. There wasn't much the ghost could do. Since he'd never made a mess of the shelves where Mom put delicate things, Carol had to assume he couldn't reach up there. And if he did get up there, at least it wasn't Carol's fault. By being out of the house, she couldn't be blamed.

So, Carol double checked that the doors were locked and left through the garage. She took a drawstring bag, the one her grandma Alder had bought for her when she and grandpa had taken Carol and Di to Sun Valley for a weekend just after Christmas last year. She'd packed the bag with a hat, a water bottle, and her library books. Carol took her bike from its stand and, once out on the driveway, checked over her shoulder to make sure the door really had closed before she took off.

Carol regretted leaving almost as soon as she exited the neighborhood, turning towards Pioneer park. The park was about as old as the town itself, but was now surrounded by new developments. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and with it being the beginning of August in Biscuit Flat, the temperature had passed ninety degrees already.

The heat aside, Carol had already left the house with the plan to bike to the park to read, and she would go through with it. At the entrance to her neighborhood, she waited for several minutes for there to be a break between cars and crossed the street. She turned carefully into the bike lane so she'd be on the correct side of the road. There used to be acres of potatoes on that side of the road. But there was a new development in place of the potatoes. Carol cycled past its rows of stinky geraniums and shriveling pansies that were on the other side of the canal. Tiny trees had been planted too far apart to be of any use for thirty years. By this neighborhood entrance, there was a little business complex. It contained a dentist's office, a daycare center, and a gym. If Carol kept biking past Pioneer Park for ten minutes she'd end up at a turn-off for a

brand new Albertsons across from a new Wal-Mart with competing fast food restaurants and coffee shops at the near end of each parking lot. Starbucks on the right, Dutch Bros on the left. For the last several months every time Carol had gone somewhere in that direction with Mom they'd stopped at the Starbucks. And every time she went that way with Di they'd gone to Dutch Bros.

There were more and more people moving to the area every day. Or it seemed that way. And more people meant more cars and cars made biking hard. The new residents, or Carol assumed most of these drivers were new to the area, drove like maniacs. Not one of them drove close to the speed limit and instead treated it like a faint suggestion, and that the real limit must be at least twenty miles per hour higher. They whooshed by Carol, hardly a break between cars. She stayed as close to the shoulder as she could, but with the lane being narrow it didn't make her feel any safer. And sometimes the drivers would honk or yell at her. She could never make out the words or if the passengers were actually yelling at her, or just yelling. Fortunately, nobody yelled at her on the way to Pioneer Park. Carol kept on course, all the way imagining what could happen if she lost her balance and fell from the narrow bike lane. On the one hand she'd fall down onto loose gravel and sticker weeds. On the other hand was rough, hot asphalt and speeding cars. They'd pop her head open like a grape under a shoe.

It was as hot as Satan's armpit by the time Carol turned into the drive leading to the park's parking lot, which was full of cars. The sun reflecting a blinding glare off of them. The playground for the little kids was full of - mostly happily - screaming kids and parents shouting at their kids, or at each other, trying to be heard by their friends. There were youth sports teams practicing in the fields out back. Half of them were fenced in and the other half weren't. There was an open basketball court and a tennis court. Open to be reserved by the public that is, and

Carol had no interest in trying to play basketball even though she had been asked to try out last fall, after she'd had her first growth spurt. The basketball court was full of boys and there were adults in the tennis court.

The water features Carol had secretly hoped to run through were also full of kids and teens. "I should have gone to the pool," Carol said to herself, glumly. Unfortunately, the pool was in the other direction, and bound to be just as full and loud. Di would be there, lifeguarding. But it wasn't like she would talk to Carol since she was at work. And if any of Di's friends were there they would make fun of Carol. So Carol shook off the thought and chained her bike to the rack by the parking lot and headed towards the end of the wider expanse of park, away from the noise of the playground.

There were still plenty of people spread around the grass. Carol hadn't been able to see for sure from the flattened area of the parking lot, because the view of that area was blocked by a couple of small hills. Many of the old trees had been knocked down in a wind storm, and new trees had been planted on and around the hills. Like the trees by the development, they were all too small to provide shade for a single person, but every sliver of shade by every tree had people relaxing in them. There was a spot, though, that Carol guessed not many people would bother to take over. Her bag was growing heavier, and Carol's back was starting to ache. Sweat tickled as it dripped down her neck and back. Carol kept pausing to swat at her neck or legs, unsure if she was just feeling sweat or mosquitoes.

"Weirdo!" She heard someone say, loudly, the fourth time she had to do this. Carol ignored it and kept going, not daring to look and see if she knew who'd said it or if they were really talking about her.

As Carol neared the edge of the park that she was heading toward, climbing over and down the side of a hill, she spotted a group of girls playing volleyball. They'd tied their net up between two of the baby maple trees that were barely taller than Carol. There were still mature poplar and pine trees at the far end of the park, near the soccer field. Most of the people, so far, were avoiding those trees because they sometimes dropped sap, and because there were cows on the other side of the fence that formed the perimeter. And cows stink. Carol didn't mind much, though. Cows were better than people.

Carol sat down in the bit of shade she could get under one of the pine trees, the direction of the sun made that hard. It was prickly, but not so bad as long as she didn't move much. She took off her backpack, put it next to her, on the side by the fence and pulled out a book. Carol was almost done with it, and the book was due to the library that day. Once she finished it, Carol would have to bike to the library to return it. Or she could wait until Dad or Di got home and ask them to drive her there to drop it off, but then it would be closed and Carol wouldn't be able to go inside and pick out a new book or two. She still hadn't finished the Series of Unfortunate Events. She could look for the next one of those. Mom wouldn't be back until late because it was a "girl's night" after work. Carol didn't mind, of course, but Dad usually wanted to hang out and watch movies and Di was always doing a project or hanging out with friends, or doing some activity to boost her college applications. Whenever Carol wanted to do something she couldn't do it, because there was no one to take her or she didn't have the money, or she was too young. One day, though, Carol would be older and she'd have a good job and money and she could go wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Except, of course, for fictional places.

Instead of reading, though she had an open book in her lap, Carol thought for a few minutes about going somewhere else. In some books a kid discovered magic in the real world. A

secret or group that everyone else was kept out of or unable to see. And in others, they, the characters found their way to another world altogether. Those were Carol's favorite books, like in Narnia or His Dark Materials. Sometimes, although she was still way too old for it, Carol would peer into bushes or the space between trees or in closets. And looked for cracks where reality would shift, or she would catch a glimpse of somewhere else, wondering if she could maybe find a portal, a door, to another world. *After all, Why would anyone write about a thing if it weren't a little bit true?* She thought. *But that's crazy talk.*

Carol was stopped from thinking more when a volleyball collided with her head.

"Oops, so sorry about that!"

Carol looked over towards the group playing volleyball and saw Isla waving at her, surrounded by all her volleyball-playing friends. Carol rolled her eyes automatically. She was sure, Isla was *so* sorry.

"Throw it back!" One of the other girls requested.

Carol harrumphed and put her book down, found the volleyball where it had rolled into the weeds at the edge of the fence, and threw it back in the direction of the players. It landed several feet short of their erstwhile perimeter and one of the girls over there got it so they could resume their game. Carol went back to her book, trying to focus this time.

The wind shifted, and brought the smell of cows. Carol was able to read undisturbed for a while, she was close to the end of her book and the shade was moving. After an hour, Carol found herself in the sun. She got up and moved around to where there was spotty shade. This made Carol face the rest of the park, but only if she wasn't looking at her book. Once as comfortable as she was going to get, Carol was sucked into the rest of the book. She had just couple chapters left and was in the middle of reading through a long-awaited confrontation

between the hero and the villain. Just as she was nearing the end, Carol was hit by a ball again. This time it was a soccer ball and it bumped into Carol's shoulder. She lost her grip on the book and it fell on the bed of pine needles next to her, face down. Carol held still for a second, thinking about how the real world was not simply less interesting than those in fantasy books, but altogether awful.

"Sorry," a familiar voice said, close by, "Sorry about that Carol."

Wren was wearing a soccer uniform. She must have been on the field earlier, practicing or playing. Carol could see other kids in soccer uniforms nearby. A couple of them were practicing bouncing balls around on their knees and kicking them. No thought taken for the other people around them, who just wanted to enjoy some fresh air. *Why do other kids always have to be like this?* Carol wondered.

Carol narrowed her eyes into a glare. "Why did you have to hit me?" She blurted. Wren had been nice when they saw each other at school and at Carol's birthday party but now, one dumb question, her tone aggravated, and Wren narrowed her eyes back. Straightening up, Wren tucked the ball under an arm. It struck Carol as a very typical soccer player pose, and it was annoying.

"We weren't *trying* to hit you. Accidents happen."

Carol ignored that. She reached out and picked her book up. She'd lost her place. The bookmark that Carol had been using, lying it across the book, holding under the line she was on so she couldn't skip ahead, had landed a few inches away. "Sure," she said while she stuffed everything back into her bag. "But I don't get why you all have to play out here." Part of Carol wished she would calm down. It wasn't a big deal and she was sinking any chance at friendship.

But the part of Carol that was in control felt she might as well go down with the ship. She was tired of having to sit at the edge of the park only to be hit anyway.

“It’s a park,” Wren said slowly, “What do you think parks are for?”

Carol’s hands started to shake as she pulled the bag’s straps over her shoulders. She looked down at her feet, “Parks are for more than just... sports kids,” She finished lamely. And then she hurried away. *All I wanted to do was finish that stupid book. It wasn’t fair*, she thought.

She heard someone else, probably one of Wren’s teammates repeat “Sports kids” with a snort. Carol remembered then that “jock” was a better word, but it would be worse to try and amend that now. She almost got hit by another ball and a frisbee on the way back to the bike rack.

Carol looked enviously at the kids hopping around the fountains as she passed by. But with her luck, either the book in her bag would get wet, or her bag would be stolen the second she sat it down. So Carol kept walking to her bike. She grabbed the chain and lock without thinking and had to drop it with a small scream. She hadn’t thought about how few bikes there were chained to the rack when she’d arrived. The rack was sitting in full sunlight and everything - the rack, chain, lock, and most of the bike was metal and now that it had been hours, it was all too hot to touch. *Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry*, Carol thought. She couldn’t take her bike and she couldn’t stay either. So she started to walk.

Carol clenched her hands into fists. She’d have to go home, even though she didn’t feel like being there. It was so boring, being there day after day with only a ghost and a cat for company. If she said anything to Mom and Dad though, all they’d say is “Well you should have thought of that before you quit sewing and softball.” At least, that’s what Mom would say,

because that's what she'd said in June. Dad would probably offer to help Carol look for activities. But Carol didn't want to do activities.

Activities, be they music, sport, theater, or games always went the same way, and they all had the same problem: other kids.

If Carol were to join chess club, for one example, suggested by Grandma once. "Firstly," Carol had explained, "most of the other kids will be boys. And the first thing they'll do when I walk into the room will be is stare, because what is a girl doing in their club? Then they'll spend the whole hour bothering me because clearly I only want to play because of whatever movie that was about a woman being good at chess. And I don't even want to play chess. They'd never leave me alone, and I'll have to kick their snobby butts. And the butt of every boy at every competition for years for them to leave me alone."

"You shouldn't get into fights," Grandma had said.

And if Carol were to do something that mostly girls did, it would be just as bad as an all-boy thing, just with different kinds of teasing. Carol had never been good at anything except having an "imagination" which was teacher-code for "too weird, but I have to be nice."

The only activities that didn't require being on a team were music lessons, which meant Carol would have to go be judged and corrected by her teacher once a week, and practice every day, and then there'd be a recital every few months. Carol did not want to do that again. So she was left to be bored. She was starting to get good at doing chores. Last week, Mom had commented that the bathrooms looked the cleanest they ever had.

Once clear of the park, Carol crossed the gravel ditch to stand under a young tree by the new sidewalk, in front of a strip mall. She took off her bag and stretched before fishing in it for her water bottle. The water was hot. She took a couple sips and put the bottle back in the bag.

She rested for another minute, then started back toward home, staying on the short stretch of sidewalk. It went in a pointlessly winding path for a couple of blocks. But she only made it one before a white car pulled onto the side of the road and stopped just ahead of her. Carol froze, expecting, based on movies, TV shows, and school assemblies on safety, that a group of men might jump out and grab her. Instead, the tinted passenger window rolled down and Wren poked her face out.

“Hi,” she said.

Carol couldn’t un-stick her tongue from the roof of her mouth. She waved instead.

“Um, do you want a ride? Or need one?”

Carol swallowed and said, “Uh, maybe?” She’d been prepared to walk back. Even if she was tired and melting. But now that a car was in front of her Carol noticed how much her feet were hurting, her mouth was dry, and her skin was tingling like it did when it finally started to burn. But she had also just yelled at Wren. Who had hit her with a soccer ball. Not in that order.

“Come on and get in,” an adult woman’s voice called from the car, “We’ll just drop you off at home.”

Because Wren was watching, and there was another car coming down the road, Carol went for it. “Hi,” she said when she was buckled up.

The driver turned in her seat to offer Carol an awkward handshake. “I’m Wren’s aunt, Meg.” Meg was pretty. And she looked younger than Carol’s mom. She had nice eyes and her black hair was styled into waves.

“I’m Carol,” Carol said. Then a loud honk startled Carol as another car came up behind them, swerved, and shot around them.

“Jerk!” Meg shouted in that general direction. She shook her head and picked her phone up out of the cup holder.

“Could you give me your address, Carol? And the phone number for your parents? Someone should let them know you’re getting a ride.”

Carol gave her address to Meg, “But I can tell my parents I’m getting a ride home. They gave me a phone a few weeks ago for that kind of thing.”

Meg said okay to that and searched the address. “I guess you could just give directions,” she said after the navigation started talking.

Carol looked up from her drafted text to Dad, who would be home first. She hadn’t realized earlier that she should have told someone she was leaving the house, and was also realizing that she’d have to explain not only that she’d left but that she was getting a ride home with a stranger. The aunt of someone she knew from school, but still. Carol had a not-good gut feeling about that.

Meg pulled back onto the road and drove for another minute. Carol was worked on her text to Dad: “Hi. I went to the park today. My bike was too hot when I was leaving so I left it chained up there. I’m getting a ride home with Wren, my friend from school and her aunt who’s driving.”

Then Wren said, “I’m hungry.”

Carol glanced at the time on her phone, it was mid-afternoon.

“Well, let’s get Carol dropped off and then get some food. I’m sure her parents will want to see her home safe.”

“They won’t see me,” Carol mumbled.

“What’s that?”

Carol cleared her throat. "I mean, nobody's home. Everyone else is at work."

"So we can get food now!" Wren cheered.

Meg sighed and then shrugged, accepting the addition with grace. "Okay, where to?"

Chapter Four

Wren

The Agreement

"Please can we get gyros?" Wren asked. A gyro drive-through had opened near the park a little while back. It was inexpensive, and most importantly served large gyros full of salty meat and veggies with tzatziki sauce. Wren had been craving gyros for a week and she always got food after soccer practice. Because she always ended up convincing her chauffeur, usually Meg, to get food for her after any sports practice or dance practice.

"Does that sound okay to you, Carol?" Meg asked.

"Sure, I guess" Carol mumbled. Carol struck Wren as a picky eater. She remembered from elementary school that Carol was one of those kids who never ate the crusts on bread and she always had a packed lunch. Though, to be fair, the cafeteria food was gross. And there was hardly any of it. The schools took initiatives to slim kids down, and save money, seriously. Wren and her siblings usually had packed lunches too. Her mom sent them with packed leftovers but usually let Wren decide, within reason, what would go in it. Her rule was that the lunch had to include a fruit and a vegetable.

Meg told Carol, “Just be sure to let your parents know where we’re going, okay? They’ll be okay with it right?”

“Uh, yeah. They’ll be busy until after five anyway. So they’ll probably appreciate it. I... kind of forgot to eat lunch.”

“You forgot lunch?” Wren said. She never forgot a meal.

“You must be hungry!” Meg said.

“Kind of, but I had a late breakfast. I would’ve eaten a bunch of junk food when I got home. I wasn’t going to stay at the park so long. I was just trying to finish this book.”

“Oh, what book?” Meg said.

“Oh yeah, the book you were reading earlier,” Wren said. But she started talking at the same time as Meg, and the result was unintelligible.

Meg asked again, “So, what book?”

Carol stammered, “Oh, um, it’s just some book.”

“It has to be a good book if you forgot about lunch. Come on, I love a book rec.”

“It’s called The Sea of Spells.”

“Oh, that sounds cool.”

“It’s the latest book. The series is The Bellain Cycle and the first book is The Enchanted Eyrie.”

“I think I’ve heard of that,” Meg said. “Wren’s a pretty big reader.” She glanced at Wren for a second, as if to prompt her, “Have you ever heard of these books?”

“Oh yeah,” Wren said. “I just haven’t gotten to reading them yet.” After a beat of silence she asked Carol, “Should I?” She could sense Carol’s prickles going down.

“Yes!” Carol shouted and Wren jerked in surprise, the seatbelt held her in place. Carol paused and then she said, quieter, “I mean, they’re not like super popular, but they’re about this girl who...” And then Carol didn’t stop talking about the books all the way to the gyro shack.

“Okay!” Meg interrupted Carol’s attempt at a spoiler-free analysis of the antagonist’s arc in the fourth book. “What do you guys want?”

“The supreme!” Wren said.

“I, um, I’ve never had gyros before...” Carol said.

“Picky eater?” Meg asked.

“I guess.”

So Meg ordered a basic for Carol along with Wren’s supreme and a large iced tea. They waited while another couple of cars pulled up behind them. Wren’s stomach clenched and growled loudly; she started bouncing her leg. Wren caught herself, or was notified of her leg bouncing often. Meg tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and she turned the radio on, switching from the college radio station to the first pop mix station she came to. Meg sang along under her breath and Wren tried to stop bouncing her leg, it could drive other people crazy, though Meg rarely got after her about it. Wren had to really focus on sitting still. If she didn’t pay attention, the seat she was in, or the car, would start rattling. Sports helped, but waiting didn’t.

After an interminable length of time - probably seven minutes - but Wren hadn’t thought to check the clock, the guy at the window handed the food over and Meg pulled the car into a miraculously shady spot in the parking lot. She turned the car off. Wren heard Carol stifle a sigh, and she groaned a little. She’d just started to cool off. But Wren forgot about that when she took the first bite of her gyro. It was big, full of delicious, salty meat and veggies and drenched in

sauce. Wren savored the mix of dill, salt, and spice. She ate half of the gyro before she remembered to say thank you.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Meg scolded. But her scolding was lighthearted and Wren didn’t care.

Meg asked Carol if she liked her gyro.

“Yes,” she said. “I kind of thought it would be gross but this is pretty good.”

Then Meg turned to Wren, who was almost done with her gyro already, “Have you spoiled your dinner to your satisfaction?”

Wren shook her head, swallowing, then said “Nobody’s going to care if I eat a little less at dinner. Dax and Aaron will be more than happy to make up my portion.” Then she took her last couple bites, savoring them as much as she could.

“Boys.”

“Growing boys,” Wren replied. For some reason, boys were allowed to be hungry and to eat as much as they wanted because they were growing, but Wren wasn’t supposed to do that.

“Do you have any brothers, Carol?” Meg asked.

There was a rustle of food packaging, Meg reached back and took Carol’s garbage. “No, I just have a sister,” Carol said.

“Oh yeah, I remember her. Kind of,” Wren said.

“Most people do.”

“Older sisters are like that. Inexplicably popular,” Meg said. “But in the end, I think younger sisters are the cool ones.”

“Well excuse me,” Wren said.

Meg patted Wren on the shoulder, “You have qualities that make up for it.” Then she started the car again and Wren adjusted the air flaps, waiting for the A/C to start working. “So where to now? It’s still early.”

“Uh, how far are we from the library?” Carol asked.

“Oh the library, that’s a good idea,” Wren said, “I want to see the new releases.”

Meg turned the volume on the radio up for the drive to the library. It was a squarish, old, stone building on the town square, with a little parking lot behind it. Meg parked the car and they walked into the library as a group. Carol put her book in the return slot and then Meg had them all agree to meet back at the front desk by four-thirty.

Wren headed straight for the display of new releases. Carol wandered off somewhere else. One second she was there, next to Wren, the next she wasn’t. For someone so tall, or tall compared to most of the girls their age, Carol was good at disappearing. Wren looked over the new releases and librarian recommendation displays. There was a new book by a prize-winning author from Boise, more James Patterson books, a lot of stuff Wren really didn’t care to read. Or that her parents might get concerned over. Usually Wren borrowed from the teen section of the library, or checked out classics - which were usually presumed to be clear of the unmentionable topics. Wren tended to get bored reading classics and not finish the books. Sometimes she found good-sounding books in the regular, adult section. Mysteries and thrillers mostly. And then sometimes those books would get weird and she’d stop reading.

Whenever Wren brought books home from the library her mom would take a look at them, flip through, and search reviews online. She’d explained that it wasn’t that she didn’t trust Wren, but because she wanted to know if there was something in the book they might need to talk about. Mom would leave sticky notes on the books with warnings about content or that she

wanted to have a discussion about the book when Wren was finished reading it. So it happened that every few weeks Wren had to have a drawn out chat with Mom about what certain words or terms meant, or what was going on in a romantic scene. It had taken about six months of this, when Mom started letting Wren wander the stacks on her own, with her own library card, for Wren to get used to it.

There were other kids who Wren knew from school and soccer whose parents only let them read books that were labeled as being their “reading level,” or who were banned from reading certain genres or lists of specific books. A few kids and their parents had protested the school last year about some books on their reading lists being inappropriate and immoral. *If there was a book about me, most kids I know wouldn't read it*, Wren thought while she looked at the new releases. Maybe because she was Shoshone, or because she was not religious, or that she was a girl, *But that might also be because I don't do anything interesting*. So she shook those thoughts away and kept looking.

The teen section of the library was only a few shelves arranged in a square, with a couple funky benches in the middle. Wren's main complaint was that “Young Adult” was the primary genre, so the books were all mixed up. It took some serious perusal to find books she'd be excited to read. For example, there was a new fantasy book by a Maori author that she'd seen in a catalog and a sci-fi book that looked fun. Still, no new-to-Wren mysteries. Wren could go to one of the computers and look on the library's online catalog, but she preferred finding books through serendipity.

Wren left the YA section and crossed to the next row of shelves. She found Carol there, reading the blurb of a pink paperback. Carol was frowning.

“Hey,” Wren said “Does that look good?”

Carol glanced up, then shook her head. “No, it’s about a girl who finally gets out of oh-so-boring Montana to pursue an acting career in L.A. Those books are so annoying.”

“Books about actresses or about hating the country?”

“Oh both. Sagebrush and yellow grass are beautiful too.”

“I don’t know. Movies about a city kid becoming a cowboy are kind of annoying too. But I get it. What you mean.”

Carol frowned again, and looked at her feet. She seemed to spend a lot of her life frowning and looking at her feet.

Wren nodded, “It’s so hard to find stories about liking it out here that aren’t making fun. Or some kind of propaganda.” She let the word slip without thinking, not knowing what Carol’s stance on that might be.

Carol was turning back to search the shelf again. “Propaganda?” She asked.

What is said is said. “Oh, like most of those movies and books are romances or westerns. And you know westerns feature a lot of people like me getting killed.” Wren ran her fingers along the section of book spines in front of her, “And they all sell an idea about ‘hashtag’ freedom and independence and this way of life that isn’t realistic, or historically accurate, or anything...” Wren stopped and considered, then said, “I probably shouldn’t just repeat things my brother says.” Wren glanced at Carol, who was looking back at her with her brow furrowed. Wren decided to risk another statement, “To a white girl.”

Carol snorted and shrugged that off. “I don’t really know, but I have seen a few cowboy movies and they also, you know, suck. About as much as mindlessly hating the entire west for not being southern California.”

Wren was relieved, “Have you seen any mysteries or thrillers around here? I like to borrow at least one whenever I come to the library.”

“Hmmm,” Carol glanced around at the shelves, “I don’t know. I don’t like mysteries much but I get tons of those and ghost stories for birthdays and Christmas. Everyone seems to think I like them.”

“And you don’t even dress like a goth.”

Carol looked down at her rumpled tee shirt and shorts, both blue, “No, I don’t think I do.”

Wren snickered, then asked, “Why does everyone think you like that stuff?”

“You don’t know?” Carol looked genuinely confused.

“No.”

Carol shuffled her feet and sort of shrugged, shook her head slightly, squared her shoulders. Clearly, she was having a difficult conversation with herself. She said, “Okay, so, when I was little I might have thought I was being haunted.” Every word was hesitant and stressed. “There was this, well, I thought... there was this invisible person. A ghost, who really liked my baby blanket. The one I liked best and kept even when I got too old for it.” Wren wondered what age that would be; she herself hadn’t given up her favorite blanket until she was ten. “I thought it hid under there. It like, had shape like a ghost under a sheet in every movie and comic. I told some of the other kids about it in Kindergarten and they thought it was cool, but when it came up again later, they wouldn’t leave me alone about how I believed in ghosts. It got around a bit.”

Wren nodded, she didn’t think Carol was finished.

“I talked about it to my family all the time. They just thought it was me being silly. Sometimes they’d see a shape - me - wandering around the house or backyard in my blanket. I don’t remember doing that, but a lot of this was when I was really young. So they told all my

grandparents and aunts and uncles. And they just kind of thought that I liked ghosts and so I should like spooky stories. So they just keep giving me stuff like that.”

“Huh,” was what Wren said. She didn’t remember any of that from elementary school. She and Carol had usually been in different classes, though. Then she asked, “So do you believe in ghosts still? You don’t have to like spooky stories to believe in them. Like, lots of people believe in spirits.”

Carol shook her head, “Nope. I don’t believe in ghosts, goblins, ghouls or any of that stuff.” She turned back to the shelf and pulled out another book. Wren couldn’t tell if Carol was giving her the cold shoulder or if she was embarrassed. She might as well find out.

“Hey, Carol.”

Carol looked at her, “What?”

“Do you want to be friends with me?”

“Do *you* want to be friends with *me*?” Carol put on a veneer of bravado, but Wren could tell she was just acting. She’d jumped into sharing something that really embarrassed her and that made her want to look tough.

“Yes.”

Carol’s eyebrows jumped, “Really? I mean yeah. Let’s be friends.” She thrust her hand out as if to offer it for a handshake, stopped, and started to withdraw it when Wren caught it. She gripped Carol’s hand firmly, like Dad said to always do when shaking hands.

Wren smiled and Carol shuffled her feet again, sticking her hands in her pockets. “I don’t really know what to do now. Like, what do you do with friends?” Carol asked. She sounded genuinely confused, which made Wren a little sad.

So Wren said, “Right now, I think we can look for more books.”

They turned back to the shelves and continued looking. Every few minutes, one of them would call to the other or hurry over to where she was in the small maze of shelves to show her a book that looked funny, or interesting, or bad. Wren was in the middle of dramatically, and a little loudly, reading the blurb for a book that sounded hilariously annoying when she saw Meg pass by the other end of the aisle.

Meg was on her phone. Wren caught her saying, tersely, “Maybe. If Constance would -” But she was cut off by whoever she was talking to. “-But that’s... no. No, I don’t want to.” She was nervously playing with her hair. Running her fingers through it and scratching her scalp. “It’s not... simple. I don’t know what to do.” Because Wren had stopped talking so abruptly, Meg noticed her and Carol staring at her. “I’ll call you back,” she said to whoever it was and put her phone in the pocket of her shorts.

“Are you guys ready to go? It’s almost dinnertime,” she then said to the girls.

Both Wren and Carol had a small stack of books by then. They stopped to check them out while Meg walked on to the exit. She was waiting for them in the car when they came outside. Meg asked Carol for directions to her house when they got in. She seemed almost normal again. Though when she asked for the directions her voice was just a tad too far on the side of bright. Like she was making up for acting weird.

None of them talked on the way to Carol’s house. As they approached, entering the neighborhood, they got behind a dusty, gray car, which pulled into the driveway of Carol’s house just as Meg parked on the street in front of it. A man got out of the car and saw Wren, Meg, and Carol climbing out of Meg’s car. His eyes followed Carol and he looked first bewildered, then upset. “Hi, Dad!” she called from the bottom of the lawn.

Carol's dad was of average height, not quite six feet tall. Carol's head reached his shoulder when she ran up and hugged him. He hugged her back, ruffling her hair. "Hey Miss Marvelous, where have you been?"

Meg sucked her breath in through her teeth and Wren winced. Clearly, Carol had forgotten to text.

"Should we go say hi? I was supposed to borrow some books," Wren asked Meg. She and Carol had decided on that at the library.

"I guess we should. It will look worse if we don't say something now." Meg moved cautiously, raising a hand in greeting. Wren jogged up to stand beside Carol.

"So what were those books you were going to show me?" She asked before turning to Carol's dad. "Hi, I'm Wren. Carol and I are friends. From school," she said.

Carol's dad squinted at her for a minute before recognition swept across his face. "Oh, yeah, I remember you. Great to see you again." He clapped his hand on Carol's shoulder, "We are supposed to have dinner soon, but you could hang out for a few minutes. I guess."

"I'll be in and out. Carol was just going to lend me a couple books. It's so great to see you again. And this is my aunt, Meg. She was chauffeuring me today and we picked Carol up on the way back from Pioneer park so she wouldn't have to walk all the way. Made stops for snacks and the library. I'll be right back out."

Carol's dad just tilted his head a bit, taking in all of that information.

When they went inside and up to her room, Carol didn't really look back at Wren. It was a nice house. Bigger than Wren's. Or at least, it felt bigger. There was so much space for the few people living there. The walls were a soft white, decorated with pictures - family photos and art prints - here and there. The banisters of the stairs were a polished light wood and Carol's room

was a big rectangle in one corner. The room was a mess, it looked like Carol never put anything away. Wren stopped in the doorway and Carol picked her way over to a low and long wooden bookshelf at the far end of the room.

Carol still didn't say anything and Wren wasn't sure if she should either. Sometimes people forget things, and Carol's dad had seemed nice enough at the party last month. But sometimes people overreacted. Once, Wren's dad was helping Aaron's school friend find his parents at the school fair and cops came over and accused Dad of "pushing drugs" because he was a "Mexican" talking to a white kid.

So it was in silence that Carol picked three books, all in brand new condition from the shelf. She then walked them over to where Wren was in the doorway, handing them over in silence. Wren didn't look up to check Carol's face, but Carol's shoulders were hunched and her grip on the books was loose. "I'm sorry," she said as Wren said a quiet "goodbye."

Wren paused, "For what?"

"I forgot to text my dad like I said I would. I'm the one in trouble for it, obviously, but you seemed upset. And I'm sorry for yelling at you earlier today."

Wren nodded, "Apology accepted. Do you want to hang out again sometime?"

"Yeah, of course." Carol straightened up a little and looked up from her feet. "And I'll need my books back eventually. You can text me any time."

"I don't have a phone."

"Oh. Any phone?"

"Ha. I'm not that poor. No, I don't have a cell; we have a house phone, so I could call. And I have an email, technically. But I don't get to use the computer that often."

"Oh."

Wren had to prompt Carol to pull out her phone and make sure Carol put her number into her contacts. She wasn't sure Carol would call, but she didn't have paper to take Carol's number. Carol followed her back downstairs.

In the driveway Carol's dad was talking to Meg. Something about work, their jobs. Adult talk, small talk. "My co-worker, Jeffrey, he's got this huge house. Don't know how he affords it... Oh, you're done." Carol's dad swung around, looking between Meg and the girls as they approached. "Well it was nice to meet you, Megan and to see you again, Wren. Thanks so much for getting Carol home safely. I don't like the thought of her being stuck on the side of a road, especially on a day as hot as this." He grabbed Carol's arm, as if for emphasis, and his shirt had noticeable damp patches.

Wren and Meg said their goodbyes and hurried back to the car while Carol's dad guided her into the house.

Chapter Five

Carol

Disaster Enchiladas

When they went inside, Dad didn't say anything. Carol stood in the entryway while he kept walking back to the kitchen. She felt a little queasy. She'd just, forgotten. After she couldn't think of the right way to phrase her text. But it felt like she'd damaged something. Dad's trust, maybe. Carol hadn't even thought to let anyone know she'd left the house at all. And then, when she was supposed to have sent a text to Dad, she'd leaped into talking about Bellain instead. Out of the corner of her eye, Carol saw movement in the living room. Blank, in his blanket. He was

flipping through one of Dad's comic books. He didn't seem to be hurting it, so there was nothing Carol could do there. Not when she'd already messed up with the texting situation and would surely be getting a lecture in a moment. Besides, taking the book away might trigger a tantrum. The last time Carol had tried taking a magazine away from Blank he'd held onto it and the magazine had ripped apart. When Carol had fallen back, she'd hit a table, knocking over a lamp and a glass of juice that had been left there.

"Carol, could you come here please?" Dad called from the kitchen. Carol took her time walking there. She went to the edge of the kitchen and planted her feet there, facing Dad.

He was at the other end of the room, leaning over a recipe book, but he was looking at Carol. "So," Dad started, "Carol, what is going on?"

Carol licked her lips, which she found were cracked and chapped from the day out. "I went to the park to read and got a ride home with a friend."

"Which park? When was this again?" Dad narrowed his eyes more and frowned. "It's a problem that you got in anyone's car, whether we know them or not, without checking with me first."

"So you would have preferred that I kept walking on a busy road?"

"This isn't an argument, Carol. I am all for you getting more social and independent, but you have to let either me or Mom, or both of us, know if you want to go out somewhere and we will discuss how that will happen."

Carol guessed the "we" didn't include herself.

Dad pointed at Carol, "I expect you to start taking your safety into account before you take off again."

Carol wanted to say something else. She was mostly fine, and Biscuit Flat was a safe place to live. She probably wouldn't get kidnapped or attacked or run over. But Dad interrupted her thoughts. "Now, I'm going to change and watch the news. Can you help out and make dinner?"

"Dinner?" Carol asked. She had expected to be grounded. And she'd never made a whole dinner before, just helped Mom or Dad. "You know I can't cook," she said.

"Not can't. No can'ts in this house."

"But -"

"- I need you to do something while I'm not watching, and grounding you won't be any use."

"- But -"

"You're old enough to cook a dinner. It's an easy recipe."

"The egg incident," Carol said, trying to remind him of the ban that was still in place.

"There's no eggs in this."

"But..."

Dad left the kitchen saying "I need to think about today," and then there was just the sound of his feet thumping up the stairs. And Carol was left alone in the kitchen with the cookbook open, and the recipe marked with a bright yellow sticky note. There were notes about the order of tasks and an arrow pointing at the recipe on it. The recipe was for beef enchiladas. Carol glared at it, she hated beef enchiladas. So this was her real punishment, she would have to make and then eat beef enchiladas. There was another sticky note to the right of the recipe book, "When enchiladas are in the oven wash, peel, slice and fry the zucchini and squash in the fridge. In that order."

"Oh I'll fry them in the fridge. Okay," Carol said to the empty kitchen. If she waited any longer to start she'd be in real trouble. Hungry parents weren't fun to deal with. So Carol got the

old, stained apron from its hook in the pantry and got the ingredients out. Every couple of minutes there was the faint rustle of paper, from Blank turning pages of the comic book in the living room. The whining sound of the water running started when Carol was gathering supplies and stopped when she dumped hamburger into the pan. When she did there was a loud hissing noise. Carol wrinkled her nose and held the empty, bloody tube away from her, carrying it quickly to the trash. Some blood dripped on the floor anyway. Then, Carol washed her hands, darted back to look at the recipe, and there was the sound of voices overhead. Dad must have chosen to watch the news in the bedroom.

Carol took the vegetables out of the fridge and the tortillas out of the freezer. She put those in the microwave to thaw. Then she caught a whiff of smoke and ran back to the stove. Sticking a spatula down into the pan, Carol desperately tried to shove the meat around, but it was stuck to the bottom of the pan. She wanted to swear. Smoke was curling towards her face, *What do I do?* Carol didn't want to eat the dinner, but she didn't want to ruin it either. She couldn't budge the meat and the burning smell was getting stronger. There was nothing for it. Carol dropped the spatula, grabbed the pan handle and rushed it over to the sink. She held the pan in one shaky hand so she could turn on the cold water with the the other, and when it hit the smoking meat, steam billowed up in Carol's face.

"Jesus!" Di yelled, entering into the kitchen. "What are you doing?"

"It was burning," Carol yelled back. Her face stung from the steam but she couldn't get away from it, so she closed her eyes tight. Water reached the top of the pot and overflowed, taking bits of raw hamburger with it. She couldn't hold the pan and turn off the water, but the water needed to be turned off. Her arms started to shake.

Di walked up behind Carol and turned off the water for her. “Put that down, you’ve already ruined whatever it was. And,” she said, walking back to the stove, “you left the stove on. Don’t do that again. You could burn the house down.”

Carol let the pan down to the bottom of the sink as gently as she could, trying not to smash the dishes that were still there from breakfast. “Fine.”

“Why are you cooking?” Di asked. Her hair was damp and she smelled strongly of chlorine. She must have swum laps after her shift ended. But the chlorine smell was mixed with the coconut scent of tanning lotion. Their whole family was already on the tanned side and both Carol and Di would end each summer with deep tans, new freckles, and hair a lighter shade of brown. Except for last year, when Carol had spent more time inside since she’d been allowed to quit going to swimming lessons, and had gotten two video games for Christmas that she only started playing after school ended. Partly because at the start of summer, Mom had brought boxes up to Carol’s room and made her give away almost all of her old toys. Twelve was too old to keep playing with Barbies and collecting bugs, she’d said.

“I’m being punished,” Carol said crisply.

Di raised an eyebrow.

“I rode my bike to the park and got picked up by a friend from school on the way home. And I forgot to tell Dad.”

Di blinked. “Whoa,” she said. “You went out? You hung out with a friend? And I thought you hated everyone from school.”

“Well not everyone.”

“Apparently,” Di said. “So you’re cooking dinner because Dad’s mad at you for going out?”

“Yeah.”

“Does Dad know you’ve never made dinner before?”

Carol just shrugged. Maybe he did know and didn’t care about the quality of his food. Dad ate weird stuff sometimes. Beef enchiladas being the case in point. Carol hadn’t thought about it in the last few minutes.

“Hmmm, what was this supposed to be?”

“Beef enchiladas.”

“Gross. Is there any other meat thawed out?”

“No.”

Di went to the sink and looked in, “We could save some of this meat, maybe. I don’t know about the burnt stuff.”

“Aren’t you going to call Dad down here?”

“Why? He’s the one who loves that stuff. We’re going to have to make something else.” Di grabbed the recipe book and flipped a couple pages. The microwave beeped, the tortillas were done defrosting, hopefully.

Carol checked it and was met with more steam and a toxic smell when she opened the microwave door. When the steam escaped, and she could open her eyes, Carol saw that the plastic packaging had melted onto the tortillas and the microwave plate.

“We’ll make hamburger soup,” Di was saying, “that uses what’s left of the meat and these vegetables. No, never mind. We could make quesadillas.”

“We can’t”

“Why not? Oh-my-god!” Di stopped talking, finally smelling the microwave disaster. Then she burst out laughing.

Carol crumpled. She hated enchiladas, but there was no reason for things to go that badly. Di thumped her hand on the counter, laughing, shrieking like a hyena at the zoo and Carol tried not to cry.

Di's laughing had reached up stairs because Dad came back down to the kitchen to see, and smell, what was going on. "What's going on?" He asked.

"Look," Di gasped.

Dad looked around Carol, now leaning over the counter, her head in her hands. "What!" was all he could say.

"The sink too," Di started to cool off, but broke out into giggles again every time Carol thought she was done.

Dad looked at the mess in the sink. "Was that the hamburger?"

"Yes," Carol answered miserably.

"How?" Dad sounded so sad and confused, Carol almost started laughing, then crying. She reigned it in.

"Can we just order pizza?" Di asked. "I was going to make quesadillas instead, but now there's no tortillas.

"Fine, okay. But," He indicated the vegetables on the counter, "we still have to eat these." Dad pulled out his phone to call a pizza place but paused, "Carol, can you try to scrape the mess into the trash before it cools too much?"

Carol nodded, and dragged her face out of her hands. Di brought her a butter knife and helped her dump the mess in and scrape melted plastic into the kitchen trash.

"Pizza will be here in twenty minutes."

Carol picked the chunks of hamburger out of the sink because the garbage disposal didn't work. And she was left alone with Dad again.

"What happened?" Dad asked. Carol couldn't tell if he was angry, amused, or "hangry."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"You don't have to cry."

"I'm not crying." But Carol's voice was becoming choked and her eyes stung anyway.

"I thought this would be easy. You've done all this stuff before. Haven't you?"

"Some of it." Carol swallowed.

"Oh."

"I think I need a different punishment."

"Honey," Dad reached out his hand to pat Carol's shoulder or hug her, but Carol stepped back and retreated to the living room.

Blank was still looking through the comic book. Completely un-bothered by the drama in the kitchen. It wouldn't bother him. He didn't eat, and as far as Carol could tell, he couldn't smell either. And Carol couldn't blame him for the mistakes she made or when she was clumsy sometimes.

"Hi," Carol whispered to him.

Blank patted Carol's ankle. She felt the cold, small, hand shape, and a little pressure.

Carol sat down and picked up the fuzzy blanket that was on the couch, behind the ghost. She leaned over and looked at the comic book issue he was looking at. It was a newer one.

Spiderman. In the other room, Dad turned the news on. Carol heard snippets of it. Place names, disasters, protests, controversies, a feel-good story about some kid in Ohio and food donations. Carol couldn't really remember where Ohio even was, exactly. So she looked at the Spiderman

comic instead. She wondered if Spiderman, no Peter Parker, would mess up dinner like she had. Maybe, but it would be funny. Or not funny. Carol didn't want to laugh at someone else messing things up right then.

She let Blank flip the pages. He wasn't properly reading, Carol didn't know if Blank could read. If he did, he wasn't interested in her books. Or anyone else's. Blank mostly gravitated towards toys, games, and pictures. He'd take what he was interested in and then either leave it lying around, or place it in Carol's room.

When Dad came back from picking up the pizza, Carol was still looking at the Spiderman comic with Blank. Di ran downstairs when she heard the whirring sound of the garage door opening. Carol didn't budge. There was an empty minute, Millie ran into the living room and bumped Carol's hand with her head, signaling that she was ready for her dinner.

"Carol, Honey, you can stop sulking and come eat your pizza - get that cat off my book!"

Carol grabbed Millie, who yowled and writhed in protest. Dad loved his comic books like children. Last time one of them had been destroyed, when Dad spilled a drink on it, he'd cried like a baby. "She's ready for her dinner."

"Then feed her. And eat your own dinner, come on."

He put a hand on Carol's shoulder when she got close and guided her. Carol fed Millie; cat food didn't have to be cooked, at least. There was pepperoni and a meat lover's pizza. Carol took a piece of meat-lovers.

"That's my girl," Dad said through a mouthful of pizza.

Di made a face, she hated sausage.

They ate their pizza quietly, too hungry to take it slow. After the first slice Carol started to feel better. When she was in the middle of stuffing her third slice into her mouth, Dad suggested

they make root beer floats and watch a show as most of a family. Di washed her hands and offered to get the ice cream out, Dad got the glasses.

Carol wondered what Dad would come up with as her replacement punishment for kind of, sort of, running away for a few hours. Dad and Di argued over what to watch as they set up in the family room. They didn't let up once the streaming service opened either. Dad wanted to watch a superhero show, Di wanted to watch a cop show (because the lead actor was one of her crushes). "Carol, please, you're the tie-breaker," Di said, turning to her. "Before the ice cream melts."

So Carol picked Spacetime.

Dad and Di stared blankly at her for a few seconds, then Dad shrugged and found Carol's request. She hadn't wanted to spend the day lying around, watching TV, like she could've done. But she had been wanting to watch Spacetime again.

It was funny, and Carol could never get over how smooth and confident the main character, Andrew, was. She wished she could be like that. Cool, calm under pressure, quick-thinking, always able to come up with an answer, scheme, or crazy plan at the drop of a hat. And have it work. Unfortunately, Carol wasn't quick or calm under pressure. She wasn't a leader, and she never had a quick, snappy comeback. And she wasn't having time-travel adventures or anything like that, so how could she know that she couldn't pull off schemes like Andrew?

But beyond just Andrew, Carol wished she could be good at something, and not just sitting at home and imagining herself out of her house, out of Biscuit Flat, into adventure. To a big city or through a crack between rocks into a magical world.

It was while she was sitting there, sipping her root beer float down, that Carol decided, *I'm not going to be like this forever. I have to pick something to be good at. Somewhere to go. And*

then chase it until I'm there. For the moment, she didn't wonder how she might keep such a chase up.

They were on the third episode of Spacetime when Mom came home.

"Alright-y, where is my enchilada? What's with the pizza?" Mom's steps were loud and her voice was louder.

"Carol destroyed the enchiladas," Di called to her.

"It wasn't on purpose!" Carol protested.

Mom swayed more than walked to the family room from the kitchen. Di loudly drew in a breath, shocked. Carol frowned. Dad glared.

"How was your evening? Did you ladies all go to the Olive Garden or that fish grill?" Dad asked.

"Steakhouse. They had onion rings and loaded potatoes."

"Why would you want an enchilada then?" Carol asked.

"I ate hours ago, Honey Pie." Mom reached the chair Carol was on and hooked one lean arm around Carol, pulling her in for a hug. Mom smelled like sweat and booze, but Carol didn't say anything, just accepted the hug.

Mom released Carol and sat in the other armchair. She started talking about how crazy work had been. Dad paused the show and they all stared at Mom. Sometimes she went out with coworkers after work, usually when something big had been going on, but she never came home stumbling. That ended the evening. Both Carol and Di went to bed, even though it was still light out. Carol could hear Mom and Dad arguing downstairs, and they took it outside for a while, and then upstairs to their room. After some time sitting in bed, starting a new book, Blank slid under the door, with his blanket, to sit in the room with her. The crack between the door and the floor

was abnormally large, so it wasn't hard for the ghost to get the blanket in and out of Carol's room. Carol laid awake until the sound from Mom and Dad's room finally ceased.

Over the next couple weeks, it really sunk in that school was going to start again soon. The weather wouldn't cool off until September, but when Carol was taken on family shopping trips she saw the displays of school supplies. Di was deep into preparing for her senior year and college applications. Mom started making jokes about the family following Di wherever she went. She had been talking about Di going to school out of state, on one of the coasts for years. Di had too, but not as much. Sometimes, when a person said something, Mom would hold onto it forever and that would be who that person was to her. She still called their neighbor, Mr. Fergusons's son "That Delinquent" because when he was a teenager he'd gotten high on Halloween and smashed all the jack-o-lanterns in the neighborhood. He'd been caught and made to do community service.

For Carol's part, she was just waiting for the day Mom would decide to take her back to school shopping. Carol got some new clothes, a backpack - if the old one was ruined, and supplies before each new school year. It had been less fun since Carol had started middle school. There were no art supplies and the books they'd had to buy were boring. Carol had gotten into some Honors classes for seventh and now eighth grade, so she had to buy a list of books and read one before school started. This summer the book was *Animal Farm* and Carol had finished it before her birthday in July.

But as the days drew ever closer to the date circled in red with "First Day of School" written on it. As people started sending out invitations for Labor Day barbecues, Mom still didn't mention back to school shopping. Instead, she was working more and more. She talked about

taking on new projects over dinner and she was going to the gym every morning. So Dad came home earlier and left later than he used to, to make sure Carol wasn't running off anywhere. Di drove herself to and from her work, volunteering, and whatever other activities she wanted to do.

It was the Wednesday before Labor Day, Mom had left at six-thirty and Di had gone to the pool at eight. So it was just Dad and Carol. "So," Dad said, "Are you excited for the new school year?"

Carol briefly looked over at him, "Nope." She turned back to the TV and her cereal.

"Oh, I thought you liked school."

"That's Di."

"Well what do you like? Could you talk about that?"

Carol thought then that the Wheaties tasted more like soggy, shredded cardboard in her mouth than cereal. And no amount of raspberries and bananas could hide it. She gave a small shrug in reply. Carol could feel Dad looking at her worriedly, through the back of her head. There wasn't much she could do about that. She could have lied, but that would require some work, to pretend to like something she didn't or a whole list of things. She'd have to talk about whatever things she chose.

"Maybe we should go see Dr. Applebee again," Dad wondered aloud.

"No," Carol said.

"She might be able to help you."

"She doesn't help. Don't waste your money."

"Maybe if you'd answer her questions..."

Carol scoffed and got up, marching past Dad to put her bowl and spoon in the dishwasher.

"Carol."

“Dad.”

“It’s not normal to not have interests.”

“I have interests.”

“Like what? Can you tell me about them? Do not say ‘I’m interested in ending this conversation.’”

Carol shut her mouth, and the dishwasher.

“Could we at least look at activities you can try this school year?”

Carol shrugged again and crossed her arms.

“I have the day off.”

Obviously.

“Let’s look at the school site and some community things…”

“Mom hasn’t taken me school shopping yet. And I don’t know my schedule.”

As long as Dad was going to take over the day, Carol could get some new clothes out of it. Her shoes were pinching because her feet had grown more since spring break, when Mom had begrudgingly bought her a new pair.

“Okay,” Dad said. He’d been thrown off his track, the determination that overtook him and Mom every few months, the one where they’d see Carol and decide to fix her. And at this point Carol thought it was clear that Mom would not be taking her back-to-school shopping.

Dad got up to put his own dishes in the dishwasher. “Okay, I’ll take you. Just tell me where to go. I’m buying.”

“I’ll get dressed.”

Dad called her back before she could get to the stairs, “Hey Carol.”

“Yeah?”

“Mom didn’t say anything about taking you?”

“I think she forgot.”

“What about registration? Did she take you?”

“No.”

Dad groaned, “I think I need to make some calls before we leave.”

A few minutes later, Dad was grumbling when they got into the car. Carol was able to make out “...gotten into her?” and “paperwork” spat out viciously before Dad turned on the radio and pulled out of the garage.

Carol tried to be calm about it when Mom or Dad up and decided it was time to make her normal. But there was always a fight over it. Yeah, she’d been bored over the summer and she didn’t like school or the other kids at school, for the most part. Often they’d pretend to be nice, for a couple weeks and then they’d do something. Every time something started to go well, someone would find a way to ruin it. But in the moment, like Dr. Applebee had suggested in one of the only sessions where she’d said something helpful, Carol tried to keep an open mind and find things to be grateful for. *Maybe I’ll find something I’m really good at? Probably not a sport, but I haven’t tried martial arts yet.* Mom didn’t want Carol or Di to get hit or injured. Or maybe it had something to do with fungus, since Carol’s cousin Cody had gotten a fungus from wrestling.

Dad drove in the direction of Ridley’s. “We can go get clothes later, but we need your school supplies and some groceries. Do you have a list?”

“You’re going to leave groceries in the car while we shop for clothes?”

“Great, fine.” Dad turned at the next light and in the direction of the strip mall instead.

They parked and Dad followed Carol inside. “Don’t spend too much money,” He told her. “And Mom should’ve texted you a list,” he said before wandering away. He’d probably end up at the sporting goods store next door.

The clothes store wasn’t huge, but it was filled with clothes and maze-like. Carol could get lost in there. She was too tall for kids’ clothes now, and putting on some weight, too. Which Mom was very upset about. She wanted Carol to come on her morning runs and workouts. Carol was usually able to get out of going by being too slow getting ready or running so slowly that Mom eventually gave up and let her go back home. She followed Mom’s texted instructions, grabbed a cart and plunged into the juniors’ section.

Everything in Juniors was annoying. The shorts were extra short, the shirts were cropped, thin, and often sparkly. And everything was tight, except for camo cargo pants, in Pepto Bismol pink and harem pants, that were sheer, and ugly. So Carol kept walking all the way to the women’s section, where there were more plain options. Carol had just lifted a magenta t-shirt up, to see if it might fit her when someone said “Juniors is that way.”

It was a bored-looking, gum-chewing employee. She looked like she was Di’s age and had a line of earrings on one ear and bright blue hair. Her name tag said “Clarissa.”

“I don’t like it there.”

The girl shrugged and tossed her hair. “It is pretty crap.” Then she tilted her head the other way, leaving all her weight on her back leg. “High school hip,” is what the drama teacher had called that pose, when Carol had taken drama in sixth grade. “Why are you here alone? If you try to shoplift I’m not allowed to stop you, but your face will be on the security footage and you’ll be in trouble if any employee knows you or if you come back and you’re recognized.”

“My dad is taking me back to school shopping. He wandered off a while ago.”

“Well, to be safe, and so I won’t have to do anything else, I should help you shop. To make sure you don’t steal anything and cost me my job.”

“...Okay I guess.”

“Great, and that color is all wrong for you. You should get stuff in light blues and yellow. Or maybe pastels. More importantly, the cut and fabric of that shirt is all wrong. It’ll shrink in the wash.”

“Oh.”

“So you don’t want that.”

“No.” Carol put the shirt back. Clarissa grabbed it and refolded it. Then she pushed Carol back further into the section and over to a couple displays.

Carol had never been shopping on her own before and now, just ten minutes in, wasn’t anymore. Clarissa had very clear ideas about how everyone should dress. It wasn’t all bad, Clarissa knew what was stocked, so she could grab and find clothes that Carol wouldn’t have seen and they found a surprising amount of okay items on clearance. Or, okay in Clarissa’s opinion. Carol still didn’t have much of an opinion on fashion except that almost everything was ugly. The Juniors’ section being the case in point.

They quickly checked off Mom’s list: “four tee shirts, plain. NO graphic tees.” There were several on sale and clearance in various colors.

“ONE button-up blouse for formal events, white.” They found a button-up and Clarissa threw in a blouse with blue birds on it. Carol didn’t know when she might wear that, but she also appreciated not having to pick things out. The blouse was pretty. The button-up was going to be required for whatever arts thing she’d been signed up for this year. Carol would find out if she

was stuck in theater or choir on the first day of school, since they were the options that didn't require music lessons.

"TWO pairs of jeans." This was where Carol put her foot down against skinny jeans, which were too tight. Clarissa refused to let Carol put boot-cut jeans in the cart. So they compromised on straight-leg. "Although," Clarissa said thoughtfully, "You could probably wear bell-bottoms. But then we'd have to change all the tops out and get you jewelry. And a new haircut."

"What's wrong with my hair?"

"The layering is wrong if you wanted a seventies look."

"I don't want a seventies look."

"And you'd have to part it in the middle," Clarissa continued as if she hadn't heard.

The list continued, "TWO pairs of lounge pants, not baggy." Carol picked sweats. They were a little baggy.

"TWO pairs of gym shorts." Because the school required it, the stores stocked shorts in almost-knee-length. Carol was thankful for school dress codes just then, otherwise she was sure she'd be stuck with running shorts.

"Up to TWO pairs of leggings, must have tunics to pair with them." This suggestion was skipped.

Following the list down, they got to outerwear. "One jacket, one windbreaker, two sweaters or cardigans. Diana will hand down an old coat."

This was when another employee came over to check on things. "Hey Clarissa, is this your sister?" This employee was short and blonde, with a round face. Her name tag said "Lilli." She gave Carol a bright smile, but the kind adults usually gave to little kids and this girl couldn't be much older than Di.

“Nope. Unaccompanied minor. I’m making sure she doesn’t commit too many fashion sins,” Clarissa said.

“Or shoplift,” Carol added.

“Uh, huh,” Lilli nodded sympathetically. “But you need to go help at checkout now.”

Clarissa groaned but left. “See you around,” she said to Carol and disappeared into the racks.

“Are you going to be okay, Hon, or do you want me to stick with you?” Lilli asked.

“I’m okay. I’m almost done,” Carol held up her phone, Mom’s texts on display.

Lilli just shrugged in response and left.

The only thing left by then was shoes. When Dad texted, “Are you about ready to check out? Where are you?”

“Shoes,” she texted back.

Carol had to try on shoes for half an hour, because Dad made her walk and walk in each pair before he agreed to get the two required pairs.

After clothes shopping, Dad looked a little gray. “Was it a lot?” Carol asked.

Dad shook his head, “A whole year of clothes for a growing girl. I don’t think I can pay for your college”

They were faster at Ridley’s. There was a short list of school supplies. Really it was just notebooks, folders, a binder, refills on lead for mechanical pencils, hair ties, highlighters, and a new water bottle. They also had to pick up kleenex and dry erasers for donations to the classrooms. The reading list would require a trip to the bookstore.

In the home goods section, as she was admiring a lava lamp and Dad was finding replacement light bulbs, Carol saw Wren.

Wren saw Carol at almost at the same time. She smiled brightly and waved. Carol checked to see that Dad was still occupied with his list and then walked over to the clearance table Wren was standing by and said “Hi.”

There were a couple boys with Wren. An older boy and a younger one. All of them were similarly brown with the same face shape, noses, and shiny black hair. *They must be her brothers*, Carol thought. The boys both looked up when Carol approached, then went back to browsing.

Wren surprised Carol with a hug. “Hi, I’ve been waiting for you to call.”

“Oh!” Carol stammered. “Sorry about that.”

Wren gave her a look, “Well you said sorry, and you’ll call me soon, I’m sure.”

“Yep.”

There was a brief silence, which was interrupted when the younger boy exclaimed “Oh cool!” over something on the table.

“Are you back to school shopping?” Carol asked.

“No, we did that a couple weeks ago. We’re picking up stuff for the Labor Day barbecue.”

“Oh. That’s next week.”

“Yep.”

Carol tried to think of what else to say, but her brain felt fogged. She had intended to call Wren. But calling people was so weird. It was hard enough to talk sometimes, even when she could see the other person’s face and body language. For every other phone call in her life that Carol could remember, she’d had someone around to coach her.

Wren talked for her, “What are you doing for the weekend?”

“Oh, I think we’re going camping.”

“You think?” Wren.

“Well, we usually do. Every year we go somewhere. Usually to a park and campsite. But my parents haven’t said anything about it so, I’m still not sure.

“That’s weird that they haven’t mentioned it. Doesn’t your family have meetings to talk about plans?”

Carol stared. “What?”

“Yeah, like a meeting? To talk about the upcoming week and what everyone has going on? To coordinate and stuff?”

“Uh, no.” Carol stepped over to look at the display of rugs on the other side of the aisle. She was surprised by how heavy they were when she shoved one aside to look at the next rug on the thing they were hanging off of. She ran her hand along each one in turn, examining the textures and patterns. “My parents have been kind of busy and, well, things have been a bit weird. But they all don’t really tell me things anyway so, I could just ask my dad about it. I guess.”

“Okay,” Wren sounded concerned and when Carol glanced back at her, she could see that Wren’s eyebrows had crinkled. “If you aren’t going camping, maybe you can come to my family’s barbecue. It’s not too big a thing.” She stopped to reconsider, “Well I mean, there’s a lot of people there, usually, but it’s not a formal event. My grandparents come down from their ranch and my uncle’s family comes from Boise and a few neighbors will come over. I know Mom invited our new neighbors.”

“Not old neighbors?”

“They don’t have to be invited specially. They’ll just show up of their own accord, if they don’t have something else going on.”

“So,” Carol tried not to sound pushy, “Have you ready anything good lately?”

Wren's eyes popped with surprise, "Oh! Did you want your books back? I finished one, but not the others."

"No! I just want to hear if you like them."

"I'll be honest, I'm not a super fast reader so I can only say that I liked Eyes in the Trees. It had such a great twist!"

"Oh. I don't think I read that one."

"You didn't?" Wren asked loudly, catching the attention of nearby shoppers, and Dad. Carol turned so she could see him more clearly while still technically facing Wren. He gave her a little wave, Carol waved back.

"Sorry, do you want me to spoil it for you? I remember you're not really into the genre."

"Oh go ahead, I'd love to hear it. I just don't really want to read it."

Wren grinned. "Okay. So. It starts..." And from there, Carol was entertained while Dad finished the shopping.

A little while later, when the conversation had moved on to comparing TV show preferences, Dad came back to get Carol with a full shopping cart. "Honey, it's time to go!" he said. "Hello again. Wren, right?" He held out his hand for Wren to shake, blocking half of the aisle with the cart. An elderly couple went around their pile-up, glaring.

"Hi Mr. Maite." Carol wondered at how easily sociability came to Wren. "I was just inviting Carol to come to my family's Labor Day barbecue."

"Really? That's very nice!" Dad's smile was wide, but hard to read. Carol felt a "but" coming. "But," there it was, "we are supposed to be up in the Tetons for the weekend, and may not get back until later on Monday."

"Well if you can come -"

“I’ll put it on the calendar, if your parents are alright with four extra bodies. We’ll see if we can make it.”

Wren smiled, again, “We’re usually okay to invite people. My Mom’s just over there, picking pants for my brothers. Mom!” She called.

Wren’s mom was older than Carol’s parents, Carol assumed, since her parents were a little younger than most of her classmates’ parents. She had a few visible gray hairs, contrasting with the black. Her kids looked a lot like her, though Wren’s older brother was taller. Wren’s mom looked a lot like Meg. Carol assumed that she and Meg must be sisters because their faces were so alike. Meg’s was just younger. Wren’s mom smiled politely at Carol and Dad, “Hello.”

“Hi,” they said.

“Mom, this is my friend Carol, and her dad.”

Wren’s mom straightened slightly, “Oh, Carol, I’ve heard about you.” Carol noticed the omission of the usual “so much.” It would have been hard to miss.

Carol said hello again. “It’s nice to meet you, uh -”

“Liv.”

“Liv.”

Dad stepped forward then, “Hi, I’m Corey, Carol’s dad.”

Liv’s smile was warm now and then she said, “So, Wren, did you call me over just to introduce me to your friend?” Before Wren could reply, Liv leaned over and called the boys, telling them to get back over to where the rest of them were. Carol flushed with second-hand embarrassment for them. They didn’t seem to care. The older brother called back “In a minute, Mom!”

“I was going to ask if I can invite them to our Labor Day bash.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” Liv waved at the aura of worry coming off of Carol and her dad. “There will be plenty of people already, it’s not trouble.”

“Okay,” Dad said. “We’ll be in the Tetons for the weekend but if we get back early enough, we’ll come by. Is there anything you’d like us to bring?”

“Your own meat if you’re not comfortable with fish or bison. My brothers fish and my parents are ranchers. They switched to bison a few years ago, so we mostly serve what’s on hand at gatherings like this. Aside from that, we always welcome whatever dishes you - or any guests - would like to share. But no pressure.”

“Alright. Well, thank you for the invitation. We’ve gotta go, check out. Put some things in the freezer.”

Liv nodded empathetically, everything she did seemed empathetic to Carol. “Yep, of course. Well we’d love to see your group on Monday then. Bye now!”

Carol and Wren said quick goodbyes as the parents pushed their kids in different directions.

“Well, that was nice,” Dad said on the way out.

“Uh huh,” Carol agreed. “Do you think we’ll be able to go?”

“I don’t know. We might not be back until late.”

“But if we’re camping we’ll have to be out by like, eleven. And it’s only a couple hours to Jackson Hole. And if it starts at six-thirty...”

“But,” Dad repeated, “We might stop on the way out, when we get back we have to unload, unpack, and clean up. So it could take a while. It’s best not to make any promises since we already have such a big thing. And we’re not camping, by the way. I reserved a cabin.”

“A cabin!” Carol looked up at him, surprised. They stopped at the car and Dad unloaded the groceries while Carol stared. “But we always camp.”

“Help me with these things,” Dad said curtly. Carol grabbed a bag and dropped it into the trunk. “It was a compromise,” he explained, then paused, waiting for Carol to unload the last two bags. She did.

Carol had to wait while Dad returned the cart and put three other carts back in their pen. When they got in the car, Dad sat still, looking down at his knees. “Your mom would rather not camp this year. It’s our tradition but,” he shrugged, “Traditions can change.”

They sat still for a couple minutes. Carol couldn’t figure out what this all meant. *But Mom loves camping*, Carol thought. Dad started the car and drove them home in silence.

Chapter Six

Wren

Girls at Ranch

On Friday Wren had another soccer practice. The team was gearing up for the first fall meet. It wasn’t for a couple weeks, but half of the players for the school team were rusty after the summer off. Because Wren kept playing over the summer, she wasn’t out of practice.

When she got home, Wren found herself stuck choosing between driving up to Grandma and Grandpa’s for an overnight stay or sweating at home with nothing much to do. The air conditioning was broken. “It’ll be a few days before the repair guys will come,” Benny explained to Wren when she got home. Mom had picked her up from practice and Benny had already called the repair guys. Wren grabbed her stuff, splashed lukewarm water on her face and neck, and got into the car.

Mom, Dad, Benny, and the boys had to stay behind so it was just Meg, Wren, and Tessa going up to the ranch.

Grandma and Grandpa's ranch was northeast of Biscuit Flat, up in the mountains. Surrounded by a sheep ranch on one side and government-owned forest and scrubland on all other sides.

It was about halfway around one mountain they called "the spike," because it looked like one from a distance and nobody cared to remember if it had an official name, when Meg almost crashed into the ravine below. She had been driving pretty slowly before it happened. The back road they'd taken due to an accident on the highway, had turned to gravel a few miles down and sometimes storms or landslides would carry larger rubble or even boulders down onto it. There was a slope upwards on the right and a steep hill down to the river on the left. Aspens and some thin pines grew as they could on the slopes and there were many gaps between them filled with sagebrush, wildflowers, and piles of big, black rocks. The rocks were mostly basalt, Wren knew, and slate in some areas. Wren was watching the rocks and trees out her window as they passed by, searching for bright flowers, caves, and wildlife. There were many large animals in the region - they were entering grizzly country, and the wolf packs were starting to expand and break off, with a few animals wandering south, hunting elk. But if they were going to see any animals, it would probably be deer or coyotes. And right there, above and to the right was a hawk. Wren leaned forward to get a better look and she was slammed back into her seat by the force of Meg hitting the gas. Tessa screamed and Wren cursed.

"Don't swear in front of your sister," Meg snapped.

"What are you doing?" Wren snapped back.

Meg swerved wide around the next bend. Wren expected to hear tires squealing, but they were on dirt. So instead the crunching of gravel and whine of the engine were louder. Wren braced herself on the armrest and poked her head out to look out the back window. All she could see was a cloud of dust. “I don’t see anything.”

“There’s some - some big - SUV - back there. Came speeding up,” Meg was probably trying very hard not to start swearing herself. They careened around another bend and still, all Wren could see outside was dust. Meg turned her head to check behind them as well.

“Look out!” Tessa yelled.

Meg slammed on the brakes just in time. The car stopped just before the edge of the road. Wren could see the dark blue and white of the water below. There were rocks sticking out of it. Meg put the car in park and they all waited, breathing heavily, while the dust settled. There was no one behind them. Meg’s face fell into her hands, and she started to cry. Wren put a hand on her aunt’s shoulder, trying to offer comfort. She looked around again, and saw something rustle the sagebrush and pine boughs uphill. *A deer?* Wren wondered. But it didn’t leave the brush.

Finally, they reached the long, gravel drive up to the house. When they were nearly to the ranch there was an old bridge they had to drive across. Wren was always afraid the car would cause the bridge to collapse, and then they’d go tumbling into the ravine below. She held her breath as the car rolled over it. And in a few minutes they entered the valley the ranch was situated in. It was a small valley, nearly to an alpine elevation, and surprisingly green. Or it was green compared to the desert on the other side of the mountains.

Meg led the girls into the house. “Mom!” she called. There was no answer. It was dark inside, but the air was cool.

“Who wants to play Scrabble?” Tessa asked as soon as they put their bags down.

“We’ll all play later, but I need to find Grandma first,” Meg said.

Wren sighed. She really didn’t like playing anything with Tessa, who took everything hard.

“Can I shower first?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“I’ll get the game set up,” Tessa said and she darted downstairs.

Wren hoped that Tessa would get distracted down there. “Go on,” Meg told her, pushing her lightly towards the stairs. So Wren went up to the guest room and dropped her bag at the end of the bed she’d be sharing with Tessa. Taking a minute to stretch her legs, Wren tried to identify the smell that defined the house. A mix of cleaning chemicals, laundry detergent, and fur. Grandma and Grandpa had a lot of big working dogs. None of them had been at the house to greet the girls when they arrived.

When she came back downstairs, the living room was empty. She heard a thump downstairs in the basement, and ignored it. Wren checked the kitchen, which was also empty. *They must be in the workshop*, she decided. So she went out the back door onto the big back porch. The grapes growing on one end, on a trellis, were spread all over the exposed beams above. They created dense shade and would drip sap and bugs and bits of plant on everyone come fall. There were already hundreds of tight, green clumps hanging down.

There were voices coming from the workshop across the backyard, confirming Wren’s guess about Meg and Grandma’s location. And the ever-present scent of manure wafting from the fields. There were still a few cows over there. Selling raw milk was surprisingly profitable, according to Wren’s mom. There was other livestock as well. Mostly birds and pigs. Pigs smelled horrible but were so mean, nobody minded having to eat them over each winter.

Wren knocked on the workshop door before entering. There was Grandma and Meg. “Wren, Baby!” Grandma shouted upon seeing Wren. She rushed over and crushed Wren into one of her patented bone-crushing hugs. Grandma had pinned Wren’s arms to her sides so Wren couldn’t hug back, but she did get out a “Hi Grandma. Missed you too.” Grandma rocked her back and forth, side to side for a full minute. Wren loved Grandma and her hugs, obviously, but eventually it got hard to breathe. Luckily, Grandma let Wren go so she could look at Wren’s face, sandwiched between her hands. “You’re getting bigger! Such a lovely young woman you’re turning out to be.”

Wren smiled. Meg, on the other hand, coolly said “And what a nice Yoda you’re turning out to be.”

“Excuse you. I’m not that old, and I am not turning green.”

“You don’t have pointy, furry ears either,” Wren added.

“Good girl. I failed with my daughters, but at least my granddaughters are turning out polite.”

“Oh please, Mom.”

“What are you guys doing, anyway?” Wren interrupted.

“Mom was showing me one of her new projects.”

“Yes, yes, I have a hundred of them. This one is really something though,” Grandma said, leading Wren over to the table where Meg was still standing. Meg did bead work. Grandma’s passions lay in woodworking, soap making, and painting. Most of it sold to further supplement the ranch’s income, and so the house wouldn’t get filled up with projects. The latest project was a new collection of painted shells. Emu eggs, mostly. But there were also duck eggs, goose eggs, peacock eggs, and more. Wren couldn’t do it herself, but Grandma would collect some unfertilized eggs, blow their insides out, and then paint them, leaving them whole except for the

pinpricks on the ends. When she was little, Wren had tried painting eggs she'd collected from the yard herself, but they'd been thrown out when they started to stink. She hadn't known that there was a way to get the insides out without cracking the eggs open. Her painting also wasn't very good. She hadn't inherited steady hands and precision.

These eggs had been delicately, meticulously painted to look like bead work, using many of the same colors and patterns that Meg used in real bead work. Wren leaned close to the nearest emu egg and poked at it. The paint's texture didn't just look like beads, it also felt a lot like beads.

"I have to stop and do hand stretches every hour," Grandma said, clearly appreciating Wren's admiration. "Can't have carpal tunnel surgery again."

Meg hummed in agreement.

They stood around for a few more minutes. Meg and Grandma chatting, Wren admiring Grandma's projects. She'd painted so many eggs and they would have taken a long time to collect. There were other projects around the workroom. Grandma was whittling a lot of bison figurines because it was a bison ranch. Wren knew her grandparents sold a lot of bison merchandise. But there were a few other things. Along the wall, Grandma had set her paintings. The foremost one was a close-up of some wildflowers.

The whole workshop was the definition of clutter. It was the opposite of Grandpa's office, which was down near the paddocks in the original ranch house. He kept everything put away and organized. When Wren was little her grandparents had had the new house and the workshop built up the hill, away from the animals. Both grandparents spent most of their time out of the house and in their own workspace. Wren didn't know if that was normal. Not that she cared much, but

Mom and Benny and Meg sometimes talked about how their parents ought to retire, or not, and what might happen if one of them were injured or sick.

Wren was distracted from poking around when Tessa rushed in, almost bowling Grandma over when she did. “Okay, how about we play Uno, then have dinner, then play Scrabble? Grandma!” Her voice turned to a squeal when she looked up from her shoes - she often looked at her feet when she walked - and realized it was Grandma she’d almost knocked over. “Did they tell you?” Tessa asked Grandma, “We almost died?”

“Oh, what are we having for dinner?” Wren asked. Tessa glared at her.

“You know what? I haven’t even thought about it,” Grandma said.

Meg took charge, “It’s late enough now, we could make dinner together and then play games. Mom, did you have any meals planned?”

“Nope.” Grandma looked at Meg out the corner of her eye, “But I’d like to hear about almost dying. I’m not really hungry.”

Meg huffed. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

Grandma nodded.

“Okay girls, let’s go figure something out.” Meg herded Wren and Tessa back to the house and to the pantry, and sent Wren to the fridge. The dinner they made was simple. Wren cooked the pork she’d found in the fridge, which really only required to her to keep an eye on it and flip it a couple times. Meg prepared a sauce and a pot of minute rice, and roasted some garden vegetables. Tessa peeled the vegetables and complained about the prospect of having to eat them. Wren had felt the same way when she was little, but recently they’d started to taste okay to her. Coincidentally, in the last year Dad had gotten a cookbook for vegetables and the adults had started experimenting with its suggestions. But Tessa still had to be coaxed, forced, or bribed to

eat her veggies. That night the bribe was that everyone would play games with her if she ate all the vegetables that would be put on her plate.

Grandpa got back from his office just as they were setting the table. He was a head taller than Grandma, but the “runt of the litter” compared to his siblings, or so he told Wren. She hadn’t seen much of Grandpa’s siblings since most of them had passed on or moved away before she was born. His hair had gone white in the last few years, but he could still give Tessa and the little cousins piggy back rides or lead a hike. He was a bit muddy, even after removing his jacket, chaps, and boots on the porch.

The first thing Grandpa did when he came inside was kiss Grandma, then he greeted Meg and the girls with hugs and bristly kisses on the cheek. “How’s my little soccer star?” he asked Wren. Tessa was still hanging onto Grandpa around the waist, giggling.

“Oh, fine I guess,” Wren said.

“Still the fastest kid out there?”

“Not exactly.”

“I see. Well, I guess most girls your age quit sports. At least, your mom quit when she was twelve.”

Wren didn’t know what to say to that. Her teammates were all going through growth spurts, and Wren hadn’t grown since the fifth grade. And she hadn’t been the tallest person then. Having the shortest legs made it impossible to keep up.

Everyone sat down to dinner. The conversation at first was mostly between Grandma and Grandpa, talking about their days. And then Grandma got down to business. “So,” she said, turning to Meg, “you almost died on the way up?”

“No!” Meg said. But Tessa nodded. Wren shoved a spear of asparagus in her mouth.

“What?” Grandpa asked.

“There was a big, black SUV rear-ending us!” Tessa said.

Meg put a hand on Tessa’s shoulder, “An SUV was tailgating us. Sped up behind me from out of nowhere.”

“Really?” Grandma asked.

“Did you see the car?” Wren asked Tessa.

Tessa shook her head. “No, Aunt Meg did.”

Grandma and Grandpa exchanged a look.

“It’s a dirt road,” Meg said to them.

“Did you see the SUV?” Grandma asked Wren.

Wren shook her head. “It’s a dirt road. There was so much dust.” She didn’t know what her grandparents were getting at. It wasn’t like Meg was crazy, or a liar. And she was always a safe driver.

“So this car came up behind you?” Grandpa asked.

“Sped up behind us and I had to speed to keep from getting hit.”

“And then we almost went over a cliff!” Tessa added.

Meg pinched the bridge of her nose. “I was avoiding a boulder and there was a curve in the road. I stopped in time.”

“And the SUV?”

“It was gone. Maybe they were just jerks trying to scare us? We went around a couple bends before that one.”

Grandpa looked worried then. “There are a couple hunting cabins that way,” he said. “There might have been a turn off...”

The conversation turned back to undramatic topics and, after cleaning up, all five of them played games together. Though Grandpa turned on a movie for background noise, which frustrated Meg. She had to keep reminding people that it was their turn in a game. When it was time for Tessa to go to bed Grandma took her upstairs and read a book to her. Grandpa went to bed and Wren hung out with Meg, letting a couple episodes of a comedy show Meg liked roll by.

Wren looked at the pictures around the family room. Grandma and Grandpa's wedding photos, a few travel pictures. There was also a series of family pictures starting when Grandma and Grandpa were little, through their growing up, when they were first dating, their wedding again, the years they were overseas and stationed in different countries, and Grandpa's rodeo days. The best picture of him bronc riding was blown up to a large size and sitting in a place of honor over the old fireplace. Then there were all the pictures from when they started having kids all the way up to last year's family reunion. Six kids, fifteen grandkids, and Wren smack in the middle.

"Are you ready for school?" Meg asked, pulling Wren out of her reverie.

"Sure. Are you?"

Meg hummed. Wren couldn't tell if that was supposed to be a yes or a no.

Wren imagined that there were dialogue options in her head, or more accurately, written on the air or screen in front of her.

- A) *What does "hmmm" mean?*
- B) *"Hmmm."*
- C) *"I'm going to bed."*
- D) *"Do you like teaching?"*
- E) *"Who's your favorite character in this show?"*

Before Wren could decide on an option, Meg got up from the couch. “Would you like a cup of tea? I’m thinking chamomile.”

Wren made a face, “Chamomile is gross. Can I have hot chocolate?”

“You’ll eat vegetables and peppers, you ate all of the zucchini on your plate tonight, but chamomile is gross. Okay.” Meg’s voice got fainter as she disappeared into the kitchen. Wren followed her, to make sure her hot chocolate got mixed right.

Later, Wren settled into the big guest bed, slowly, so as not to disturb Tessa. Wren laid there for a while, thinking over the dinner conversation and the car chase. She knew that there were cruel people, of course. But if Meg was right, then they had almost died because of someone’s cruel behavior. There was nothing Wren could do about it, and they were alright. She did breathing exercises and stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the guest room ceiling until she finally drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Carol

Nobody Suspects the Bobcat

Biscuit Flat was not a city. Not by a long, long shot. And Pocatello, the nearest city, could barely be called that. It was more densely populated than most places east of them, all the way to Nebraska, probably. But Carol had never been to Nebraska, and when her family traveled east, they flew. Mom had a brother in Chicago and a cousin in Virginia, and they’d been to Disney World once. Mom called trips to Disneyland a waste of time, but flying to Florida is a hassle.

Dad's sister lived in New Hampshire, but they'd only been to see her once, as far as Carol could remember. The rest of her parents' families also lived in eastern Idaho, and most of their family vacations were to Lagoon, or their annual end-of-summer camping trip.

For most of the trip to the Tetons, it was quiet in the car. Carol had spent most of the days before leaving figuring out how to put music on her phone, downloading apps, and picking a book to bring on the trip. With these things done, Carol had gotten settled into the car with her blanket and a charged phone while everyone else was packing at the last minute and catching the cat, so she could be dropped off at Aunt Jamie's.

It took forever for Mom and Di to get in the car. A little while before leaving, Dad came outside and made Carol go back to use the bathroom again. "I don't want to make any stops before we get to Jackson," he said.

"Did you remember the cooler?" Mom yelled from the garage. She was in a bad mood, but she'd been in a bad mood for months, so Carol could mostly ignore it.

"Yes."

"Carol," Mom walked to the car now, another bag in her hand, "Did you remember to pack shoes?" She was asking because years ago, Carol had forgotten shoes, getting into the car barefoot, and none of them had realized until they got to the first gas station, where there weren't even flip flops. So they'd had to pull off at the first town with a Walmart and buy flip flops there. Mom still didn't trust her to be smarter than when she was seven.

"Yes. I have shoes."

"Hiking boots?"

"I didn't have any to pack."

"A water bottle?"

“I have two.”

“Stop being rude.”

“Okay.”

“Did you pack underwear? Do you need any pads or tampons?” she asked Carol. Then she turned to Dad, “Do we have painkillers?”

“I think so,” he said.

“I’ll get that.”

It took another fifteen minutes for them to leave. Then they had to drop off the cat. Aunt Jamie would always watch Millie for them. But she wouldn’t go to their house to do it. She hated driving, so she usually only drove her kids when it was necessary, and she drove really slowly and cautiously. She biked to the store and pretty much anywhere else she needed to go.

Another hour later, they pulled onto the highway and quickly left their little valley behind. As they traveled east, near Craters of the Moon, the land got rougher and rockier. Almost pure black rock with sagebrush and brown grass clinging to it where it wasn’t falling away into steep, but short, dry crevices and ravines. Sometimes the topography changed and there’d be acres of potatoes, or a dairy farm. But the lava plains were common in the region. Nobody in their right mind would walk out there. The sun beat down on the car and the rocks. Carol saw heat waves out through the windshield, even though it was September. But inside the car Carol had to wrap her blanket around her legs and one arm to shield herself from the roaring A/C. Mom and Di liked the car to be cold and not just cool.

Carol was a couple chapters into her book when Dad decided he’d had enough of the quiet. “Enough of this quiet,” he said, “I can’t wear headphones like all of you and if I fall asleep, we’ll crash.”

“You mean you’ll crash,” Di said.

“If one of us crashes we all crash.”

“This car has been declared a communist nation.”

“Exactly Di, all families are socialist.”

“Socialism and communism are not the same thing.”

“Is that what they’re teaching you in schools these days? Whatever, close enough. You get food, shelter, and basic income. And all sorts of other perks from your parents, the government. And since I, your tsar, am driving and you are in the car with me, if I crash this car, you have also been in a crash. We are a unit and we all crash together.”

“The communists killed the tsar, Dad. That was kind of a big thing that happened.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s not the point.”

“Don’t crash the car, Dad.”

“I need someone to talk to me so I won’t fall asleep and do that.”

“Why not Mom?”

“She’s asleep.”

“And she has headphones in,” Carol interjected.

Then Di said, “You could play something over the speakers, Dad.”

“What ever happened to family interaction? People used to live together you know? When they took roadtrips they talked to each other!”

“Uh huh. And how much of that was fighting and how much time was actually spent reading, sleeping, and listening to the radio?”

“Don’t be smart.”

“But I thought you wanted me to go to college, and get a good job?”

“Oh those are okay plans, but why not marry rich?”

Di laughed.

“I’m hoping to get a whole herd of cows as your bride price.”

They went on bantering for another minute before Di got music to play over the speakers.

Carol didn’t add anything more and Mom started to snore a bit. Carol listened to the banter and then to the music, trying to figure out how they did it. *How do they just talk to other people? And like it?* Carol could never figure it out. People like her parents and Di made everything social look so easy. Or it was really easy for them. Di had never had the problems Carol had had. She could just walk up to someone, start chatting, and ten minutes later, they’d be friends.

Carol put her book back in her bag, and took out her headphones, chewing on these thoughts like a cow chewing cud. Yesterday had been long. First, Carol had picked berries early in the morning. There were so many berries that they could have them with cereal or rice and milk or desserts and still freeze gallons of them, and make jars and jars of jam. That is, if Grandma came around. Carol couldn’t use a pressure cooker and Mom had stopped making jam years ago. Some of the berries had been bagged and were in the cooler in the trunk.

While she was outside, Carol had pulled some weeds from the garden box and picked some leaves to press in her books. Then, she’d wandered around the house, phone in hand, trying to convince herself to call Wren. If she didn’t call, Wren might forget about her, or decide she didn’t like Carol after all, and Carol would start another school year with no friends. And she hadn’t had much luck with befriending classmates. While arguing with herself Carol had tripped over Blank, smacking her head on the side of a desk. She had wished that he’d disappear, like he did sometimes. She wouldn’t see signs of him for weeks, and Carol would think maybe he’d finally gone off to heaven. Or wherever it was that ghosts might go, but whenever he did

disappear, Blank always came back. It didn't matter if Carol wished him gone, though. Blank never went away when she wanted him to and never came back when she needed an invisible friend.

Eventually, Carol had called and one of Wren's brothers had answered. She'd hung up and called back a few minutes later. "Hi," she said when another man answered. "Is Wren there?"

"Nope, the A/C broke. She is at her grandparents' for the weekend."

Carol couldn't tell if this meant that Wren going away had been planned or not. It might be that Wren had left because of the air conditioning, or the two sentences might have nothing to do with each other. "Oh," she'd said.

"May I ask who's calling?"

"Carol. I'm a friend. From school."

"Alright. I'll write it down here and she can probably call back when she comes home."

"Okay."

"Bye now," the voice said, and hung up.

Later, Dad had ambushed Carol about going back to Dr. Applebee's and trying out activities. The kind with a capital "A."

"It's good to try new things, Honey!" had been his opening argument.

"But I know I won't like them. It's a waste of time," had been Carol's.

"You can't know that you won't like something unless you try it," Dad argued back, firm. He was rocking in his office chair. It squeaked with every movement. Carol had made the mistake of walking past the office. "Look, Honey, I've got a whole big list of things you can try doing."

He already made a list? That's not good. Carol folded her arms and planted her feet. "I don't want to," she said.

“Well if you’re going to spend all your free time at home, I think it’s time you started doing more chores then. Really pull your weight around here.”

Carol rolled her eyes. There really wasn’t that much to do at home.

“Hey, don’t roll your eyes at me. They’re going to get stuck up there and you’ll be staring at the ceiling for the rest of your life.”

“Sure Dad.”

“Can you come in here for a minute?” Dad patted the second office chair, and pulled it over next to his computer. “Just look.”

Carol wondered if Dad really would assign her extra chores to do. He’d get tired of it eventually. And then he’d send her to Dr. Applebee, or maybe even a new therapist. She sat down in the second chair.

On the computer screen was the activities list, and it was long. There were all sorts of things on it. Water polo, cooking classes, archery club, FFA, 4H, debate club, student council, diving certification, sailing, pottery, sewing, and on and on. “Are you going to make me do all of these?” Carol was incredulous. There was no way to do all of that. Or would Dad make this his project for forever, or until Carol was normal-ish? “Are you making me do everything?” she asked again.

“No,” Dad said. But before Carol could feel relieved, he added “as long as you cooperate.”

“Define ‘cooperate.’”

Dad waited a minute, glaring down at Carol, like she was a bug about to be taken outside, or smashed, depending on what mood he was in.

“We’re going to go through this list and you’re really going to consider your options and pick one activity to try per week until December. And there’s a couple you’ll have to do for the whole semester.

No.

“You’re going to really give new things a chance and then, in December, if you still don’t like anything, you’ll pick some different activities to try for the spring.”

Carol groaned and let her head flop back, going boneless in the chair.

“You don’t have to be a baby about this.” Dad shook Carol’s shoulder. She stayed limp, stubbornly. “I am trying to help you,” Dad said. He was growing more frustrated.

“Did you lose your job or something?”

“No.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“You need to get out of the house.”

“I was outside just this morning.”

“You know what I mean. You’ve done nothing but sit around all summer. Except for the day you ran away.”

“I didn’t run away. If I’d run away I would’ve packed better, and gone in a different direction.” Carol pulled herself back up in the chair and looked at Dad. “Besides,” she said, “I’m not dumb enough to walk into the hills in summer. Without supplies.”

Dad sighed, “Anyway. I don’t want you running off again. You are thirteen and you’ve said you aren’t interested in *anything*. You don’t want to do *anything*. You barely have any friends, and you haven’t asked to go anywhere or have anyone over.”

“Less chauffeuring for you,” Carol said brightly.

“And,” Dad continued, “you don’t want to go talk to Dr. Applebee and see if she can help you work out whatever is going on in there,” he tapped the side of his head. “So this is the best solution I have.”

So, with much prodding and complaining, Carol picked her activities for the fall. Starting with geocaching, school newspaper, and skiing lessons in the winter. On top of that, Dad had reconnected with an old college roommate who lived in Jackson Hole, and they were going to do a chili cookout with his family over Labor Day weekend.

Due to the meeting, Carol felt weird about the weekend. School started on Tuesday, and so it would be her last chance for fun and for peace before then. And it would be spent in a cabin instead of camping. Which wouldn’t be *too* horrible, Carol supposed. They’d have hot showers and beds and indoor toilets that weren’t public or pits. But it wasn’t the tradition. There wouldn’t be hours spent setting up camp. Putting poles together, sweeping the tent interior, digging a trench, finding the water, finding the toilets or outhouse. No cooking over a campfire. No s’mores. Mom made the best dutch oven dinners and desserts. Carol had heard mention of plans to eat out in Jackson Hole every night. Or they’d warm up frozen pizzas or something equally untraditional.

Carol hadn’t seen pictures or anything about the cabin. But she had her new maps of the Grand Tetons, which she’d convinced Mom to buy when they went to the bookshop to buy Carol’s reading for the year. So she pulled them out of her backpack, and started looking at trails. She was finally tall enough and old enough that they could probably do a big hike. Every year before, when they’d been somewhere with trails, Mom had said that Carol was too small to do any hard hikes. That was no longer a problem.

As they approached the highway turn-off to the cabin, Mom finally woke up. Carol guessed from the set of Mom's shoulders that she wasn't refreshed. "Where are we?" she asked groggily.

"Navigation says we're ten minutes from the turn-off," Dad told her.

"Which turn-off?"

Dad gestured towards his phone in its holder on the dashboard, "The one to the cabin."

"Lodge."

"Tomato to-mah-to."

"We should get groceries before we go there."

"I don't think there's a store nearby. I think we'd have to go on to Jackson for that Bumblebee."

Mom flopped her arms about. "Well then, let's go to Jackson and get groceries."

"But this is more direct. We drop off our luggage and then go to Jackson."

"It's a waste of time. We can unload later. And," Mom cut off Dad's next argument with a wagging finger, "This saves us on gas money."

"It's not that much money. And don't you want to check out the place? Stretch your legs?"

"We can check it out later and we can stretch our legs in Jackson."

Dad carefully adjusted his position in the seat, stretching his shoulders. "What's wrong with going straight to the cabin? I told the owners we'd arrive at three."

"They're not going to be there!"

"Still, I took this route so we could go to the cabin first."

"It's the same route," Mom sounded exasperated.

"No, it's not. And I'm the driver."

"I'm your wife."

“We should have more of an old-timey marriage. Father knows best,” Dad said.

Mom rubbed her temples, “Well we don’t, and I just think we should get groceries.”

“The turn’s just up there.”

“So we know where it is.”

There was a tense pause and Carol could feel that Dad was slowing down.

“Corey.”

Dad grunted and sped back up, passing the turn-off. He grumbled something and then said, “Fine.”

Mom patted Dad’s arm, and they continued on to Jackson Hole. “If we stop we’ll get settled and not want to go out,” She told him.

“Good point. Should’ve said that earlier.”

The highway twisted up and through craggy mountains, between tall pines. Carol saw deer crossing sign after deer crossing sign. There were more and more trucks on the road with the Wyoming cowboy on their license plates. The way into Jackson Hole flattened out and then there were newish superstores lining the road.

“Check out those gas prices!” Dad said as they passed a Walmart. “Is this where you want to stop?” He asked Mom.

Carol heard Mom make a face. “No, let’s go on to Trader Joe’s.”

“There’s a TJ’s here?”

“Don’t call it that,” Mom said.

When they got to the store Carol, Dad, and Di trailed after Mom and then they took a preliminary walk around town. They admired all the falsely rustic stores and the family ended up having dinner at one of the overpriced pizza restaurants. They had to share a small pitcher of root

beer with no refills. There were arches at the corners of the little, square park at the town center. They were made from discarded elk antlers. Mom insisted on taking a family picture under one. She grabbed another tourist mother, who was dressed all in purple, dragging her away from her family. And before the purple lady could take the picture, Mom had to fix Carol's hair, licking her fingers and swiping it around.

"Stop it. Ouch!" Carol said, dodging Mom as best she could.

"When was the last time you showered?" Mom asked, grabbing Carol's hair and tugging Carol's head down further so she could look at it. Carol was now almost as tall as Mom.

"This morning. Ow! Let go!" Carol tried to get away, but Mom basically had her in a headlock, and was much stronger.

"Hmmm. It looks greasy." Mom sniffed her hair and then asked, "And did you remember deodorant?" Then, right there, as other tourists watched, Mom lifted Carol's arm and sniffed her armpit. "You should start showering twice a day. And you need to shave," she said, and then let Carol's arm drop.

Kill me now, kill me now, kill me now. God please, let me die right here. Or give me invisibility powers... Carol looked at the arch she was standing under, *How much trouble would I be in if I knocked the arch down?* The pavement didn't swallow her up, and the arch didn't fall down. Carol didn't manifest mind powers or invisibility. Mom pinched Carol's back and told her "Sweetie, you need to smile for the camera."

Carol moved her facial muscles, grimacing into a sort of smile. The purple lady kept taking pictures until Mom was satisfied.

After that all Carol was really aware of were the swaying motions of the car on the way to the cabin as it grew dark. It took a long time to get there. Dad missed the long driveway and got

lost for a few minutes. It got so unbelievably dark out on the Wyoming highways at night. Carol wondered if it was this dark back in Biscuit Flat at night, and she just hadn't noticed. They got turned around and made it back to the cabin safely.

They carried their bags inside and emptied the cooler into the fridge. Carol claimed a room and returned to the living room, choosing a spot on the couch to sit and decompress. It was a shabby place. The carpet was old and stained; the same kind of rough, closed-loop stuff that her old piano teacher had had. The couch and chairs were upholstered in a faded pink pattern and the couch sagged in the middle. The curtains were similarly faded, heavy, and dusty. The tables were stained. At the near end of the hall to the first couple of guest rooms there was a shelf of cheap, paperback romance books and informational books about the surrounding area. On the bottom shelf, there were well-used puzzles and card games. The whole experience of the cabin was tied together with a funny smell. Carol had barely sat down when Mom told her to go shower. "And use extra shampoo. Maybe next time we go to the store we can find you a different brand, something that will get rid of the grease."

Carol went back down the hall to the main level bedrooms, and changed into her pajamas. She could shower in the morning. So Carol waited for a little bit, trying and failing to sleep. Unfortunately, she was distracted by wondering what was *wrong* with Mom? In the last couple years, since Carol hit puberty, Mom had gone out of her way to say mean things to and about Carol. Nothing Carol did was right for Mom. She gained too much weight. She was too tall. Her hair was too dark. There were mustache hairs around her mouth. She didn't shave enough, didn't wear enough makeup, didn't dress right. Carol's clothes were too kiddish and bright or too boring and old-fashioned. Now Carol wasn't showering enough and she smelled. She was sure she'd put on deodorant that morning.

After tossing and turning for a while, Carol gave up and went back to the TV. *Funny we drove out here to lie around and watch TV*, she thought. Di was there, watching something already. She was wrapped up in a fuzzy blanket and eating popcorn. Neither parent was in sight, but Carol made sure to look fully into the kitchen so she wouldn't be ambushed before going over to the open recliner. "Did Mom and Dad go to bed?" she asked.

"Yeah, did you see their room? It's way nicer than the rest of this place. There's jets in the tub. Mom said she was going to take a bath and Dad's going over his 'game plan'," Di used air quotes, "for tomorrow."

"Okay," Carol said. They didn't say anything else for a while. The first rerun episode wrapped up and, after commercials, it switched to another vintage show. The Brady Bunch, a favorite of Mom's parents. The plot was silly and the characters were too cheerful. And somewhere Carol had heard, probably from Grandma, that the actors' lives had all gone sideways afterward. The bunch was going on a trip to the Grand Canyon and having adventures along the way. Carol tuned out and opened an app on her phone. She mindlessly scrolled through pictures and stories about haunted houses and cities she planned to visit when she was an adult.

"I kind of wish that was us," Di said quietly. Finished with the popcorn, she put the bowl down. It rattled because of the leftover seeds.

"Huh," was all Carol could say. She looked up from her phone and the pictures she'd found of old college buildings in Italy.

"They're so happy. And the show makes having a big, combined family look so fun."

"I thought you and Dad were having fun today."

"I don't think anyone had fun today. And Mom's been so weird lately."

Carol *had* noticed Mom being a little different, of course. Like the night she'd come home drunk and just... acting really weird. And she was a lot angrier than usual, definitely. But she and Dad went through phases. They got really into projects or decided it was time to fix Carol and make her normal, or they obsessed about Di's grades, or they wanted to put kale in everything. Stuff like that. It kept them busy. So Carol said, "She doesn't seem all that weird to me. I mean, for Mom."

Di shook her head but chose not to say anything else for a couple minutes, chewing on her next words before spitting them out. When she spoke, it was to say, "Do you think Mom and Dad are in love?"

Carol had to look up from her phone again, and she made brief eye contact with Di. "I don't know. They aren't fighting though so... I guess they are. I mean, what does 'in love' even mean?"

Di snorted and shook her head, "Not fighting doesn't mean anything. And it could even be a bad sign."

"They fought on the way here."

"Yeah." Di looked away. "I don't know. There's just something off. Mom hardly comes home anymore and she doesn't talk to me much and something's going on..."

"I haven't noticed anything different," Carol repeated. She didn't know if she was reassuring Di or not.

"Yeah but, you're a kid."

"Teenager, officially."

"Sure..." Di said, in a tone that clearly meant the opposite. "They're probably hiding whatever's wrong from us."

Carol didn't know what to do with any of this. She had enough to deal with, what with school about to start and Dad making her life into his project. "I just, I don't know. Maybe there's nothing *to* hide from us."

"Is nothing better than something?"

"Beats me."

The next morning, Carol got up before everyone else. She mixed up some of the instant coffee that was left as a courtesy by the vacation home owners. It was bad, but Carol had never tasted good coffee before. She'd thought she might need the energy boost to deal with whatever would be thrown at her that day. So Carol sipped and shuddered and added milk and sugar, and sipped and shuddered some more.

Mom was the next person up and she made a face at Carol's breakfast. "We can stop for real coffee before we start our day."

Carol shrugged and kept sipping the coffee, it was mostly milk at that point.

"Dairy is so bad for you," Mom said as she put the jug of milk back in the fridge. "Did you eat anything?"

"A banana."

Mom shook her head, "Those are full of sugar. We need to get something healthy in you."

Over their pre-breakfast meeting, Dad laid out his plan for the day. "We should leave in five and go straight to the park. Best times to see wildlife are early in the morning and again at dusk. "Then," He indicated the dashed line on the map he'd taken from the bookshelf, "We can do this hike together. Afterward, we'll have a picnic lunch. Then we can go to the hot springs for the afternoon, get dinner in town as a family, and then we'll drive up to see the night rodeo."

Everyone be at the car in three minutes. Go to the bathroom now. Don't forget your boots, sticks, water, snacks, hiking sticks -"

"You just said sticks."

"Your hiking sticks, swimsuits, hats, sunscreen, bug spray..." Dad grabbed the cooler and walked outside while all the girls were off collecting their backpacks.

They got in the car right on Dad's schedule. It was still only seven in the morning, but the sun was up and the surrounding forest was noisy with birdsong. They stopped at a café for a real breakfast on the way and they joined the start of peak season traffic on the highway up to the Grand Tetons. Fortunately, that early the traffic was still comparatively light and the cars moved along. But when they pulled off at the entrance to take a family picture with the sign, cars sped past them. "Alright, let's get in there while there's still parking space," Mom said, collapsing her selfie stick.

They got through the ticket barriers after waiting in line for only a few minutes, and headed straight for the old farm buildings. There were often wildlife down in that area. Carol crossed her fingers, hoping to see moose. Or a bear. Instead there were elk out there in the grass and four bison. On the gravel road Dad missed a pull-off and they got stuck in a traffic jam. Di rolled down the window and Dad turned off the car. "No point wasting gas on this," he said.

"Should we get out? I could get a really great picture from there," Mom pointed to a spot a few yards away, through tall grass.

"No," Dad said.

They sat there for a few more minutes with no sign of movement from head. These sorts of traffic jams happened all the time in Teton and Yellowstone. People would stop in the middle of the road to gawk at a gopher. Then Mom said, "Oh screw it, I'm getting out." She hopped out of

the car and waded into the tall grass. Dad made an annoyed noise and Di took a picture of Mom taking a picture of an elk. Mom startled some pronghorns which had been camouflaged in the brush as she walked over to get pictures closer to the big animals. The antelope darted in different directions. Most ran further into the sea of grass, but a couple ran across the road. One leaped over the hood of the family's car.

Mom finished taking her pictures, which included a close-up shot of a bison's face, and started back to the car. When she was halfway there, Carol heard a loud "Ma'am!" and then a park ranger appeared. The ranger was a man with graying hair around a shiny bald spot. He was red-faced and started gesticulating wildly before he reached Mom. He very loudly told her that approaching the wildlife is illegal and that he was supposed to issue a ticket and Mom would have to pay a fine.

Mom's whole posture changed and she adopted a confused look when the ranger got close. She answered him in what Carol thought was supposed to be French. "Is that French?" Carol asked Di in a whisper.

"I think she thinks it sounds like French," Di whispered back.

"Your mom doesn't speak anything but English," Dad whispered back to them.

"Ma'am I lived in France for two years, you can't convince me that's French," the ranger said.

Mom tried again, speaking gibberish, pretending not to understand. "Vo-ka-to, voulez-vous, Francais, mi-ami, les tra-lo, pa-ka, pla, sil vous plait, parlor ma-so-ra-mi..."

The ranger just waited with folded arms and a scowl for her to stop talking.

Carol wished Dad would or could just drive away. The ranger wrote out a ticket, told Mom again that it is illegal and dangerous to approach wildlife, and handed the ticket to her. Mom got into the car, and as soon as the ranger was out of earshot she laughed. “Oh that is so stupid.”

“Really?” Dad asked her. His ears were red.

“Oh whatever. Nothing bad happened. Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down, Aly.”

“Come on, it’s not like they’re dangerous. That ranger just has a stick up his -”

“Aly.”

“Bison are the most dangerous animals here, actually. And elk attack more people than bears,” Carol said.

Mom sighed. “And yet, they didn’t attack me. It was fine. I could’ve petted them and it still would have been fine.”

Di didn’t participate in the argument, instead she stayed hunched over her phone. Carol didn’t add anything else and Dad let the argument drop. They waited another ten minutes before the traffic started to move and several more people tried to get close-up pictures, and got yelled at by the ranger.

Almost as soon as they parked at the trail head parking lot, their family hike started to go wrong. They got a good spot, right in the shade. But as Carol was getting out, her door clipped the side of the car next to them. Carol looked around and none of the people milling around the parking lot were looking at her. Not even her family seemed to have noticed so Carol shut the car door and joined everyone else at the trunk.

They made sandwiches and packed snacks, and then Dad said “Alright, let’s sunscreen up!” And he shook the can of spray-on sunscreen. Di held her arms outstretched and Dad sprayed her down first. She dutifully put the liquid face sunscreen on, turning her skin temporarily bright white, leaving some smears behind. She smashed a ball cap onto her head, threading her ponytail through the space at the back, and grabbed her backpack.

“I’ve got to spray you for bugs too,” Dad told her as he turned to Carol, gesturing with the can of sunscreen.

“Why do we have to do this?” Carol asked pleadingly. “None of us burn.”

“Anybody can burn if they’re in the sun long enough,” Dad said.

“And anyone can get skin cancer,” Di added.

Carol sighed and shut her mouth and eyes tight. As usual, she got a faceful of spray.

“Oh sorry, sorry honey,” Dad said when he noticed what he’d done.

Carol nodded.

Dad finished spraying Carol down with sunscreen and handed her kleenex to wipe her eyes and mouth off with. Her eyes stung anyway and Carol spat as much as she could before reapplying her chapstick. Dad let her apply bug spray herself. “Be sure to get your legs real good. You don’t want to pick up any ticks.”

Di went to look at the trail information sign, and Dad went to examine it as well while Carol followed Mom to the bathrooms. Carol was in line first but Mom still met her to wash hands side by side. “Way back when your dad and I were dating, I wouldn’t have to pee so many times in one morning.” She paused, as if waiting for a response.

“Uh, okay.”

“It’s what having babies does to women. You know,” Mom couldn’t seem to work the air dryer and shook her hands vigorously instead, “Some women’s bladders take such a pounding that afterward, for the rest of their lives they pee their pants, like, all the time.” Mom was talking loudly and Carol flushed with embarrassment. The bathroom was full. She wiped her hands dry on her sides.

“Oh yeah, that’s what happened to me,” some older lady said from down the counter.

“And my sister,” said another woman. “She can’t jump anymore. We tried to do a kickboxing class together once, she didn’t make it through the warm up.”

“Okay...” Carol said again and headed for the door. “Guess I’m not having kids then. Point taken.” Mom didn’t look too happy at that comment, *But what was she hoping for?*

They met Dad and Di at the information board, and then Di decided she needed to use the restroom as well. “Are you sure you don’t need to go?” Mom asked Dad.

Dad shook his head. “I’m good. Besides if I need to go later, I’ll just step into the bushes.”

“Ew!” Carol said.

Dad laughed.

They set off a couple minutes later. It was still cool out, but the sun was already high in the clear sky and it was going to get warm.

“You ready for this?” Di asked Carol a few minutes into walking.

“Yep.”

“Well okay, just keep up. Don’t want to lose you to the bears.”

“Yeah I’m sure that’ll happen. And maybe you should be keeping up with me.”

Di laughed. Carol frowned and took off, out-pacing Dad and then Mom. Her eyes still stung from the sunscreen. She blinked diligently, still waiting for the stinging to stop. It made it a little

hard to see the trail ahead of her, which was rough with rocks sticking up out of the packed dirt and lots of small trenches made by runoff.

It wasn't hard, for the first bit. Carol had never gone past the five mile point on a trail before. Even though plenty of kids younger than her would do much longer trips. Some of the boys at school were doing three-day, fifty-mile trails at ten. And it wasn't really about the distance for Carol as it was about the distance from the road and other people. She'd never gotten to go so far into the wilderness before. Carol needed to know how far in and how high up she'd have to hike before she could forget about all the other people around, that any of them were there at all. *How far do you have to go until the world turns quiet, finally?* She wondered.

Every year before now, when they'd gone hiking, one of the parents had stayed with Carol and either taken her to do something else, like swimming, or taken her on a little hike. Or they'd had Mom's parents with them and Grandma would stay with Carol. When she was eight, Dad had taken Di and Grandpa on a big hike and Grandma had stayed in town to shop while Mom took Carol on a walk to look at and identify wildflowers and tracks by a visitor's center.

At first, on that walk, all they saw were cacti and poppies. Mom had had a booklet on the flora and fauna of the region and she'd given it to Carol. Temporarily, of course. The text was small and dense, and Carol didn't know half of the words. But the pictures were clear and after the first few feet, they started learning to see the differences in the cacti, the sagebrush and grasses. Carol would flip through the pages while Mom waited.

"P-uh, pri-uh, prick-uh-ly pear," Carol had sounded out words like that and Mom cheered. Softly, though, so they wouldn't bother other visitors. "That's my smart girl!" she'd said. And once, she pulled Carol in for a hug and said "Oh I'm so proud of you, Honey Bun."

About half a mile on, the trail started to rise, turning steep, and Carol quickly ran out of breath. Everyone else caught up to her on the first hill. “Oh Honey your face is red. Do you need one of those cooling rags?” Mom said, and she put one of her own cool, dry hands on Carol’s cheek.

“I’m fine,” Carol panted.

“Okay then.”

Carol didn’t like the tone. So she pushed herself harder. Her legs were already hurting and her lungs burned. But she did eventually get to the top. The others were walking slowly up there, waiting for Carol to catch up. *Or they’re pacing themselves*, she thought. But a bit spread out. Mom was up ahead, in the lead again. Di had hung back a bit, and Dad was in the middle.

And on and on it went. Carol started to struggle to keep in sight of the group. She knew they wouldn’t *actually* leave her behind. But it would be easy to do with her being in the back. Already out of sight, by default.

“Are we at the end yet?” Carol asked after an eternity. She was getting used to the cramping in her legs. But her feet were starting to scream. She could feel blisters growing on her pinky toes.

And everyone else laughed. Mom checked her phone. “Oh Honey, we’ve only walked a mile and a half.”

It was an eight mile hike. Carol leaned forward and gagged.

“You alright Sweetheart?” Dad asked. They’d all stopped to look at Carol.

A stabbing pain had started in her side, and she was pretty sure a bug had just flown into her mouth. But she nodded and gasped out, “I’m okay.”

So her family turned and kept going up, and up. Carol couldn't remember why she'd been so interested in hiking as a family. Or, not so much as a family, but finally going on a long hike. Characters in fantasy books always started out as fairly fit and then, a paragraph or five later, they could ride or walk long distances and sword fight. And Carol was only hiking eight miles.

There is no way any of those authors have been on a long journey before, Carol decided. *Of course, most of those characters travel on horseback.* Ahead, Mom and Dad and Di looked like they were almost skipping. "And how are they not tired?" She grumbled.

Carol was so focused on her lungs aching, her legs cramping, her side stabbing, her feet blistering, that she took almost an hour to notice that it had gotten quiet. Not fully quiet; she could hear Di's breathing from up ahead. That was satisfying. Di did still spend most of her days sitting in a lifeguard chair or at a desk, or sitting with friends. There was a wind blowing down from the peaks, cooling Carol's neck. There were a few birds chirping and something was chattering. A woodpecker? There was a sort of knocking noise in the trees.

And yet, everything felt so still. For a few seconds it was like stepping out of time and into a fairyland. And then Carol stepped in scat. She felt something squelch under her shoe when just before that everything was dry, if bumpy. Carol looked down and saw that her foot was in a pile of dung. Wet and fresh and *smelly*. A word tumbled out of her mouth and Mom heard it from up at the next bend. "Language, Carol!" She shouted.

"I stepped in poop, Mom. There's poop here."

"Ew," Di said.

Everyone wandered back to where Carol was standing, momentarily frozen in disgust. There were no hoses around, so Carol removed her foot from the scat and scraped the sides of her shoe awkwardly on the nearest ridge of rock that functioned as an obstacle in the trail.

“Ooh, that’s fresh,” Mom said.

Dad plugged his nose dramatically. “What do you think left it there?”

“Hmmm.”

“Deer?” Di suggested.

“Something gross,” Carol said.

“Everything poops,” Dad said, dropping his hand. “Could’ve been anything.”

“Does that include trees? The sky?” Carol asked.

“What do you think sap and rain are?”

“I think those are more like pee.”

“Well what about snow?”

“You’ve officially ruined weather for me, Dad,” Di said. “You too,” she pointed at Carol.

“That’s more than enough,” Mom said. “And, based on the smell and the lack of grass or berries in there, a carnivore probably left that.”

Carol gulped. “Like a bear?” The stuff was fresh.

Mom and Dad both shook their heads. “Omnivores,” Mom said. “There’s usually berries and seeds in their scat.”

“So what then? What else is out here?”

“Cougar? There’s wolves here too,” Mom said. Proud of herself and her wilderness skills.

“Probably a dog,” Dad said. “Lots of people bring their dogs on hikes.”

Mom tilted her head, “Are there any tracks around?”

“Doubt it,” Dad said, “it’s too dry.”

“Well in any case, let’s keep moving. We have things to do.”

The whole family stayed clustered together after that, glancing warily at the trees. Or, the girls were glancing warily at the trees. Mom and Dad didn't seem all that bothered.

"I read online that if you feel like something is watching you, something probably is. And it's probably a cougar," Carol said a few minutes later.

Di glared at her, "I don't feel watched. But maybe you should stay in the back. As bait."

Carol rolled her eyes. "We should've brought someone else with us. To be bait."

"We're not using anyone as bait," Mom said firmly.

"Of course not, Mom." But then Di poked Carol in the side.

Carol pushed her back. Di didn't budge.

"Girls," Dad said in a warning tone.

"We're not doing anything," Carol whined.

Di poked her again in retaliation and Carol was just going to poke her back when the lower leaves of brush ahead of them parted, and a jackrabbit jumped into the path.

Carol started. "Oh," Dad said. And the jackrabbit stilled. Its nose twitched, its gigantic ears rotated, listening intently for something. It moved its head to better look at the group of humans. *We must be a silly sight for a jackrabbit, Carol thought. Big and funny-looking with our long limbs, short ears, front-facing eyes. And all frozen by the sight of a harmless hare.*

"It's cute!" Di whispered, peering around Dad's shoulder.

The jackrabbit stomped and then took to grooming itself.

"Shouldn't it be more shy?" Mom asked.

Nobody answered, and none of them moved for a good, long minute. The jackrabbit ducked its head to wipe at its face and Carol saw a nub just before each ear. Kind of like a wart. *Huh*, she thought.

And then in a flash, the jackrabbit leaped away. Something else raced across the trail after it. Everyone screamed. Dad jumped two feet in the air and collided with Mom on the way down. She'd grabbed her chest and fallen towards his arm. Carol lost her balance. She saw a cat, bigger than a house cat but definitely not a cougar, bounding away. The breeze brought a distinct musk to her nose. Then she noticed she was falling. Her ankle twisted a little, and popped before her foot slipped. And as Carol was distracted by trying to identify the cat, and realizing that her ankle was twisting, her hiking stick flew up and hit her across the face. She struck the ground with a grunt.

Di ran back the way they'd come, shrieking.

Carol saw the bobbed tail and big back paws disappear into the brush, chasing after the jackrabbit.

There was a moment of silence, while they took in both animal sightings. Then Mom sighed with relief. "You don't see those... hardly ever."

Carol stayed down while the parents called Di back. Carol clutched at her ankle, which was still hurting like another curse she could think of.

"You okay, Carol?" Dad asked.

Carol shook her head. She hadn't been eaten. "I'm alive, uneaten. But my ankle hurts."

"Did you twist it?" Mom crouched down and forcibly removed Carol's hands so she could look at the ankle. She squeezed it and Carol started crying.

Di trotted up, "What's happened?" she asked, out of breath from her sprint.

"I think her ankle's sprained," Mom said. She pinched Carol's ankle again and Carol reflexively smacked at Mom's hand.

"Hey! Oh," Mom removed her hand from Carol's ankle. "Oops."

“We’re only halfway to the point,” Di said.

Everyone else just kind of shrugged at that.

“I didn’t think you were that anxious to go the whole way,” Dad said to her.

“I just... like to finish things.” That was true. Di never started something without finishing.

They spent a minute squabbling over the options. In one scenario, everyone would go back to the car. That way they can take turns helping Carol get back down there from the mountainside. The other option featured two of them continuing to the end, while one person helped Carol back to the car. They went with the first option and entirely ignored Di’s joke that they could leave Carol or Carol and another person there by the trail while she and the other parent finished the hike and came back down. It took just as long to get back to the car as it would have to finish the entire hike if Carol hadn’t twisted her ankle. Or so Carol assumed.

When she finally got into the car, Carol hung her uninjured foot out the door. Mom scraped the remaining poop off her shoe with the disinfecting wipes she had in the car for wiping down public equipment. Carol nearly fell asleep there. It had warmed up and Carol had never before realized how comfortable the seats in the car were. And she was worn out. But her legs, feet, ankle and face hurt too much. And she’d skinned her elbow in the fall, but hadn’t noticed it for a while.

“Are we still going swimming?” Carol asked.

“I don’t know,” Dad said.

Carol’s sighed. “I don’t think I can swim.”

“Yeah. What are you trying to get us to do?”

“I don’t know,” Carol replied. “My eye hurts too.”

“We’re going to the store now.” They buckled up and Dad got in the car out of their spot and headed to the exit. “We’ll get a wrap for your ankle.”

“My face hurts.” *What is it with this summer and hurting my face? And falling down?*

“We can get an ice pack.”

Mom pulled a pill bottle from her purse and said, “You can take some ibuprofen now.” She tossed the bottle back towards Carol, who barely caught the bottle.

“And you’ll be feeling better in time for the night rodeo.”

Normally, Carol would want to see the rodeo and go to the hot spring. But her ankle was throbbing. Her whole body hurt, so she kept on complaining. “I can’t believe you don’t have a first aid kit in the car.”

“We do,” Mom said. “We just don’t have any ankle wraps.”

“Wow, really prepared.”

“Don’t be a brat.”

Dad said, “It’s lucky we’re near a town with plenty of stores where we can buy a wrap.”

“Yeah, lucky,” Carol muttered. Dad’s relentless positivity during emergencies got on Carol’s nerves. *He should have been a doctor.*

“Do you have any blister stuff in the first aid kit?” Di asked. “I think I have one on my toe.”

Carol suspected that her own feet were now entirely blister. Two enormous blisters on the ends of her legs.

“Hmmm, we’ll check when we get to the store,” Mom answered.

After they got to the closest store, Mom found the kit in the trunk and looked in it. There wasn’t any blister stuff. In fact, it was mostly full of gauze, butterfly bandages, and salve. “Ooh, I see itch cream,” Di said, resting her chin on Mom’s shoulder.

Mom shrugged away from Di. “Don’t do that, your head is heavy,” she said.

They got the supplies. Carol chose to limp around the store to see if she could get someone to buy her a cold drink and treats. “Nope,” Mom said. “That stuff will rot your teeth.”

Di bought a baggie of cookies for them to share, and cold lemonades. Mom sighed when she saw them, but couldn’t do anything to stop them. It made the white chocolate macadamia nut cookies sweeter.

Synopsis

From here the story is meant to pick up in pace. The girls start school; there’s a difficult teacher making Wren’s life difficult and classmates bullying Carol. At home, Carol’s family has more conflict as both parents become more tense and her mother starts fighting with Di about Di’s new boyfriend and her plans for the future, which are changing. On Wren’s side, Abuelo is having difficulty adjusting and, while the whole family is struggling, Meg in particular is frustrated with the changes. Meg becomes depressed, and then she disappears.

Following that, Wren’s family starts to tear apart as family members disagree on the best course of action to take. There is little response from law enforcement and the community. Carol gets further involved in a conflict with one of her bullies. Eventually, after a racist display, both girls are involved in a fight and are suspended from school. Carol introduces Wren to Blank. Then, following clues they’ve put together from things Meg has told Wren, and Carol’s conversations with a mysterious character, the girls run away. They discover a more magical pocket of the world.

In this later section of the story the girls are looking for someone who they think Meg might have gone to or who might know Meg’s whereabouts. Their mutual goal is to find Me. There are some

genre-typical hijinks and troubles. The ghost, Blank, comes with the girls on the journey and Abuelo tracks them down. They do find Meg eventually, but she doesn't want to go home with them. And, after the difficulties earlier in the book, and experiences along the way, neither does Carol. This will be resolved, but with some difficulty. There will then be a short ending with the group returning home and facing some consequences for disappearing. Both Carol and Wren will have to either accept certain issues as beyond their control, or make what changes they can in difficult situations, such as bullying. The overall mood of the ending will be bittersweet as the main goals will have been accomplished, but not in the way that either girl had hoped and there are still some things that can't be fixed.