

5-2019

The Blackbird Blood

Danielle Birnell

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Birnell, Danielle, "The Blackbird Blood" (2019). *Theses and Dissertations*. 407.
<https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/etd/407>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

THE BLACKBIRD BLOOD

A Thesis

by

DANIELLE BIRNELL

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2019

Major Subject: Creative Writing

THE BLACKBIRD BLOOD

A Thesis
by
DANIELLE BIRNELL

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. Christopher Carmona
Chair of Committee

Mary Ann Escamilla
Committee Member

Dr. David Bowles
Committee Member

Dr. Cathryn Merla-Watson
Committee Member

May 2019

Copyright 2019 Danielle Birnell

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

Birrell, Danielle, The Blackbird Blood. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May 2019, 114pp., references, 10 titles.

The Blackbird Blood is a novella length piece of young adult fiction. The piece not only includes themes dealing with coming of age such as love, complexities of relationships, and identity, but also touches on issues dealing with race and privilege. This coming of age novella explores these themes through the lens of teen characters navigating life on a military base in a country destroyed by war.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family for all of the love and support they have shown me, especially my children, Michael and Madelyn. May you never give up on your dreams.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am forever grateful for the support and mentoring from my thesis chair, Dr. Christopher Carmona. He encouraged me to meet my deadlines and ensured I had the support I needed to complete my thesis. I am appreciative of all the love and support of my family and friends who were there for me and encouraged me to complete my work, especially Logan Schaffner, Jiovanna Perez, Juan Flores, my mother, and my Grams.

I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Mary Ann Escamilla, Dr. David Bowles, and Dr. Cathryn Merla-Watson, for their patience and time.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER I. A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
Expanding the Definition of Bildungsroman.....	4
A Latina Bildungsroman.....	8
The Creation of a Coming of Age Story.....	13
CHAPTER II. PROLOGUE: THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED.....	17
CHAPTER III. PHOTOGRAPH.....	20
CHAPTER IV. FLIRTIN WITH DISASTER.....	26
CHAPTER V. COMFORTABLY NUMB.....	29
CHAPTER VI. MORE THAN A FEELING.....	32
CHAPTER VII. EDGE OF SEVENTEEN.....	39
CHAPTER VIII. HOLD ON LOOSELY.....	45
CHAPTER IX. ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER.....	51
CHAPTER X. SCHOOL’S OUT.....	59
CHAPTER XI. ALL RIGHT NOW.....	70
CHAPTER XII. JUST WHAT I NEEDED.....	74

CHAPTER XIII. DAYS OF THE MERLA.....	80
CHAPTER XIV. A DAY IN THE LIFE.....	81
CHAPTER XV. SWEET EMOTION.....	84
CHAPTER XVI. TINY DANCER.....	87
CHAPTER XVII. CHASING CARS.....	94
CHAPTER XVIII. ENTER SANDMAN.....	103
CHAPTER XIX. DON'T FEAR THE REAPER.....	108
CHAPTER XX. HERE COMES THE SUN.....	112
REFERENCES.....	113
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	114

CHAPTER I

A CRITICAL INTRO

DISCOVERY, GROWTH, AND LOVE IN THE BILDUNGSROMAN

Young adult fiction has always been a genre that has pulled my attention. So, when I began my journey on this project, I knew that it was the genre in which I wanted to write. What I didn't intend to do was also discover and write about myself through the characters I created. Much of what these characters deal with throughout the novel are based on experiences of mine and close friends.

My research of my family history leaked onto the pages of this work. My maternal grandmother was the first born in America. Her mother was an Italian immigrant. In my quest to track my family history, I found her maiden name was Merlo, which in Italian means blackbird. This became my protagonist's last name. Before I discovered this about my family, I had been playing with the title *The Blood of the Raven*. But finding that piece of information about my family history made the piece more personal, and *The Blackbird Blood* was born.

In the story the protagonist, Kate, is coping with the loss of her father. Losing my father as a teen left a gaping hole in my heart. In this story, like me, Kate tries to keep the memories of her father alive in her mind. She keeps a photograph by her bedside to prevent herself from forgetting what he looked like. She imagines his smile and his voice, as she fears many of her memories of him are fading.

The choice of location was also intentional. I joined the Army in my early twenties, and have been to bases all over the world. It was important for me to include this aspect in my story. I also grew up in the rural Midwest near a reserve air base, which is where my story is based off.

My love for Science Fiction also made its debut into my work. I'd be lying if I didn't mention that the hours of watching *Supernatural*, *The 100*, and *Stranger Things* had an influence on my work. Not only did those shows influence my work, but also Cassandra Clare's *Shadowhunters* novels and Elizabeth George's *Whidbey Island Saga*. These novels use the science fiction elements to write about things of importance.

In my work I incorporated all these aspects. However, I also wanted to find where my work could fit in a bigger conversation of writing discourse. This is what prompted my research of the Bildungsroman. For this critical introduction, I chose to explore the two novels, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Education of Margot Sanchez*. I chose to explore *Alice in Wonderland*, because the elements of coming of age are present, but it all happens over a short period of time, specifically through a dream. I chose *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, because it explores the elements of the bildungsroman through the lens of a Latina protagonist.

Growing up in small town, Indiana surrounded by cornfields and hog farms, didn't give way to many diverse experiences. The town is 85 percent Caucasian with only 3.8 percent of the population with a Hispanic or Latino origin. If you would have tried to explain race privilege to me then, I don't think I would have understood. When I moved to the Rio Grande Valley, it was a big culture shock, which is interesting considering I had just gotten back from deployment in the Middle East. It wasn't until I moved to *El Valle* and made new friendships that I started to understand.

“Don’t let them take me,” Jio whispered. Her clammy hand grabbed my arm. “No one is going to take you,” I reassured her. “You are legal.” Being the *Supernatural* fans that we are, we had decided to go “ghost-facing” one night. It turns out the border patrol isn’t a fan of people walking around the “haunted” La Lomita Church property (which is situated next to the US/Mexico border) at night. We had only been there for a few minutes when the five patrol cars rolled up. They took our licenses for verification and inspected my vehicle. I reassured Jio that no one would take her. Her permanent residency card was up to date. They couldn’t. Right? I questioned my own understanding of the system that says who must go and who can stay. The officers were actually very friendly and handed everyone’s ID’s back quickly, except Jio’s. Because she wasn’t a citizen, it was taking longer to process. I will never forget her panicked breath and eyes wild with fear. It was that “ahhh” moment that it all finally clicked. Everything turned out fine, and we took our “ghost observing” further from the border that night. I tell this story, because this paper is not only about Lilliana Rivera’s, *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, but also of my own education. If I had been exposed to more diverse books growing up, perhaps I would have been more educated in issue affecting minority groups.

In the novel, *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, Lilliana Rivera uses the coming of age genre to reflect on the experiences of Latina Americans. In doing so, Rivera gives new insight into coming of age themes such as dealing with love, complexities of relationships, and identity, by bringing to light issues dealing with gentrification, privilege, and race. In this paper, I explore Rivera’s use of the coming of age genre from the Latina experience. My paper is divided in four sections. The first section is the exploration of the coming of age genre and bildungsroman. I look at common themes, and I explore themes of bildungsroman and the genre of coming of age. The second section on how Rivera transforms and uses those stereotypes to reflect a more

authentic Latina experience. The third section focuses on the importance of introducing diverse novels, such as *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, in a modern-day classroom. Finally, the fourth section is how I used this research in the creation of my own story.

Expanding the Definition of Bildungsroman

Some scholars have very a specific definition of what makes up the genre of Bildungsroman. In “Defining Bildungsroman as a Genre,” Marianne Gottfried critically reviews David Miles interpretation of the genre, to which Miles writes a rebuttal. Gottfried believed “Miles's view of the Bildungsroman simply as ‘a novel that 'educates' by portraying an education’ is so broad as to be useless (122)”. Gottfried continues, “Most novels do portray some kind of education, and most educate someone-the author, the reader, or the protagonist; if the Bildungsroman is to be treated as a genre, and Miles uses the term, it must be defined according to more specific characteristics. This is especially important if, one sets out, as Miles does, to change accepted notions about the genre (122).” Gottfried believes the defining feature of the genre is the balance between both interactions of outward and introspective growth (122). Introspective growth comes before outward action. This limited definition would exclude novels that followed a mostly introspective growth. However, Miles rebutted Gottfried’s narrow view; “In short, she seems to view the Bildungsroman (as well as the picaresque and the confessional) as a static, unchanging form. Genres can shift and broaden over time. Miles believed “it is patent nonsense, in terms of real novels, to insist that the Bildungsroman ... concentrates on actions, thoughts, and reflections equally, thus portraying a total personality as well as a balance between the social and the personal, and so forth (123).” Miles believed that genres can shift and change

with time. Though there are scholars on both sides of this argument, confining a genre can prevent it from being inclusive and diverse. Part of the issue with a narrow definition is that “the protagonists of the Bildungsroman are traditionally male, highlighting the historical disadvantage of women’s social mobility in eighteenth-century Europe, as the genres of the adventure tale and the picaresque also predominantly feature men of the rising lower and middle classes” (Barnett-Woods 3). This eliminates many diverse experiences that should be considered as Bildungsroman.

For the purpose of defining bildungsroman in this paper, looking at the classic feminist bildungsroman *Alice in Wonderland* to identify themes and to set a frame to how Rivera transforms this genre using the modern-day Latina lens.

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland is a novel that narrates the development psychologically and morally of Alice, to the point she recognizes her place and role in the world. You see this growth in the way she questions identity, challenges the norms of Wonderland, and eventually displays her individualism. Although Carrol initially portrays Alice as a young girl, as the story develop Alice she shows the growth of an adolescent.

“Who am I?” This is a question many children ask themselves as they grow. Alice goes through many physiological changes and questions if she is even the same girl as she was in the morning. In many ways the it goes “beyond the unified and limited modern vision of our body and self-contained world, to reach the multilayered area of the posthuman, with its biotechnological extensions that expand human anatomy” (Richard 26). One example can be seen when Alice comes across a caterpillar on a mushroom. Alice was asked who she was by the caterpillar. Alice explained she couldn’t answer, because she wasn’t quite sure herself. She answered: “This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly,

'I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then'" (Carroll 23). Alice experiences many changes throughout the novel to a point where she becomes more self-assured.

Alice also questions her own identity after meeting the pigeon. After eating the opposite sides of the mushroom and growing and shrinking multiple times until she is the appropriate size, she becomes even more muddled about her sense of self. Alice says in response to her changes, "How puzzling all these changes are! I'm never sure what I'm going to be, from one minute to another!" (Carroll 28). As people go through many of life's changes, they often reflect on how they changed and if they are the same person at all. This questioning both outwardly and introspectively opens the door for the growth typically shown in a bildungsroman novel.

The theme of identity is not only seen through Alice, but is also seen through other characters, for instance, the duchess's baby. When Alice held the baby, she hears it grunting, and then she sees the nose of the infant start to resemble a snout. As she looks at the eyes they appear small and beady. By the end of the chapter the infant is transformed into a pig. Another example is with the jury at the trial. All of the jurors had to write their names down so that they would not forget them. These instances show that identity changes in correlation to experience and growth.

When one questions their own self, it can lead to questioning authority figures on cultural norms. By challenging those she came across, Alice wasn't the classical model child. "Never questioning their own role, model children have no hesitation about their action; they either know where they have to go or follow adult instruction" (Lucas 159-60). Alice questions the customs of the characters she comes across in her adventure. She doesn't just accept the Lory's words because she said she was older, "Indeed, she had quite a long argument with the Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say, 'I am older than you, and must know better'; and

this Alice would not allow without knowing how old it was, and, as the Lory positively refused to tell its age, there was no more to be said” (Carroll 13).

In another example, Alice disputes with the Cheshire Cat’s accusation that she is mad: “‘But I don't want to go among mad people,' Alice remarked. ‘Oh, you can't help that,' said the Cat: 'we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.' 'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice. 'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.' Alice didn't think that proved it at all; however, she went on 'And how do you know that you're mad?'” (Carroll 33). Not only did Alice not take him for his word, but she flipped the question on him. This example shows Alice using critical thinking using her own mind. This is the progression of growth typically seen in the bildungsroman novel.

Alice shows again in the tea party scene that she is not going to do something just because she was commanded to do so. When she entered the house of the March Hare, she walked in to the characters having tea. “The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it: 'No room! No room!' they cried out when they saw Alice coming. 'There's PLENTY of room!' said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table” (Carroll 35). She didn’t let herself be bullied by the other characters. Alice shows growth when she challenged what they said and sat confidently with her ability to think for herself.

Individualism served as another important theme in Carroll’s book. A defining feature of the bildungsroman is of finding oneself. This theme connects back to the idea that Alice isn’t the average demure, obedient Victorian girl. “Alice actively seeks to learn and to understand, and in doing constantly queries and doubts and proclaims her own interpretation of things (Lucas 166). Alice shows this growth and individuality when she meets the Queen of Hearts. She didn’t

follow the convention of lying face down during the procession. “Alice was rather doubtful whether she ought not to lie down on her face like the three gardeners, but she could not remember ever having heard of such a rule at processions; 'and besides, what would be the use of a procession,' thought she, 'if people had all to lie down upon their faces, so that they couldn't see it?' So she stood still where she was, and waited (Carroll 42).” Alice wasn’t afraid to go against the norms of Wonderland. This is the action that shows her growth in finding herself. This growth is seen when Alice manages to look upon herself from a distance and says to the Gryphon “it’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then” (Carroll 88).

A Latina Bildungsroman

In *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, Lilliam Rivera retells the genre of bildungsroman to include a Latina experience. In doing so, Rivera gives new insight into coming of age themes such as dealing with love, complexities of relationships, and identity, by bringing to light issues dealing with gentrification, privilege, and race. Like Alice in Wonderland, Rivera’s novel narrates the development psychologically and morally of Margot Sanchez, to the point she recognizes her place and role in the world. You see this growth in the way she questions identity, challenges the normative culture, and eventually displays her individualism.

Margot Sanchez struggled with identity, however, issues of race and gentrification compound her sense of who she is and who she thinks she should be. Margot and her Puerto Rican immigrant family lived in the Bronx. She lived in the Riverdale neighborhood which she considered "rich adjacent," and one step closer to being like her white, rich friends (Rivera 34).

In her attempt to fit in at her new prep school and to improve her social status she steals her father's credit card to buy a new wardrobe. As punishment, her father makes her work all summer in his grocery store in the Bronx instead of spending time in the Hamptons with her new friends.

Although her parents punish her, it seems as though they play a role in her inner struggle of self. Margot feels pressure from her parents as “the great brown hope” for her family (Rivera 4). Before her first day of school her father even tells her, “Don't waste your time with idiots. Always look for the kids who stand out” (Rivera 4). Her parents sent her to prep school with the hopes of her becoming a lawyer or doctor, something to move the family up. Though her tactics are childish, she isn't given a voice nor is she encouraged to find her own path. For example, Margot's father ignores her plea to help Moises, an Afro-Latino who is protesting the overdevelopment of the Bronx, when her brother becomes violent with him for handing out flyers near the grocery store. Her father's response was, “This doesn't concern you. Esto es asunto de hombres” (Rivera 32). Although he wants her to be successful, he also tells her “let us do what's best and don't worry about it” (Rivera 32). Margot is told she must be successful, move up in life, and to become friends with the people that stand out, but this message is conflicted by the message that she should keep quiet, do as she's told, and not to make a fuss.

Margot's inner struggle with identity also stems from her family dynamics dealing with race and gender. Her mother and brother are describes as being Afro-Latinos, whereas her and her father are described as light skinned Latinos. Margot and her older brother, Junior, are treated differently by their parents. Margot's father calls her Princesa, sent her to private school, and tries to mentor her at the grocery store. Her preferential treatment is obvious from the beginning of the novel, “there's some unwritten family commandment that states that I will graduate from

Somerset, attend an Ivy League school, and major in some moneymaking profession. The pressure is on to excel. They don't call me Princesa for nothing. I'm being groomed for bigger and better things" (Rivera 9). Junior, however, is referred to as a "poor investment" because he lost his wrestling scholarship (Rivera 9). Junior struggled after a knee injury wrestling in college, so his parents pulled him out. Their parents weren't concerned that he lost out on the opportunity or that he was injured. They feared what the neighbors would think. He was given the title of assistant manager at the store but was given very little responsibility and is often criticized for his work. He is allowed harass the *cashieristas* at the grocery store, whereas Margot is not allowed to talk on the phone with a boy until after high school. When Margot discusses Junior's sexual harassment with Jasmine, one of the *cashieristas*, she asks why they don't bring it to the attention of her father. Margot wants to tell her father, but Jasmine tells her not to for fear that they would be fired. Margot reflects, "I can say whatever I want but what the hell do I know? This isn't my world" (Rivera 53). Margot struggles with these incongruencies in life which affect her idea identity and confidence to stand up for what she believes is right.

The relationship between her mother and father compounds her struggle with identity. Mami is a stay at home mother. Her father is the head of the house, and all decisions must go through him. Margot's father blames her mother for Junior's loss of scholarship because he said she babied him too much. Her mother is often silenced or put down by her father, showing that he has little respect for her. Throughout Margot's life she hasn't been given a strong feminist role model. Her sense of identity is at stake as she struggles to become the family's success story, all the while the women around her are consistently silenced.

Margot deals with this struggle but lying to those around her to fit the situation. She lied to her prep school friends to try and impress them. She lied to Moises to make him believe that

she was working for a higher purpose, she lied to her parents to help keep up with the lies she has told everyone else. When she learns about her dad's affair, how her mother knows about her father's mistress, and her brother's drug problem, she has to dig deep to figure out the kind of person she wants to be. By the end of the novel, Margot goes through much introspection and decides to make a change. She starts by deciding to be honest with those around her, and with herself. She finally finds her voice and becomes the girl she wanted Moises to see. In doing so, she finds her voice. She gives her mother the courage to leave her father, and she speaks up to her parents about Junior's drug problem so that he can get help. In finding her voice, she finds even more acceptance from those around her, she grows in confidence to stand up for what is right, and she embraces herself.

The work of Lilliam Rivera and other diverse authors, allow not only helps Lantinx students identify but also serves as a window to student who may have not had many experiences with the culture. The use of diverse texts in the classroom, such as *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, help students to feel more connected to the story and more motivated to learn. In the classroom "students will be motivated when their teachers provide them with challenging tasks, ensure real-life significance in their learning activities, stimulate their curiosity, grant them autonomy, recognize their effort, and give them useful feedback for improvement" (Lam 158). By providing students diverse texts, it can stimulate that curiosity and help students see the real-life significance. Trying to motivate students is important, because it "plays a prominent role in writing development and performance" (Troia 18). Teachers have a big impact in making students feel welcome in the learning environment which increases motivation. A good interpersonal rapport between teachers and students can increase a sense of belonging and motivation in the classroom. A strong relationship can be fostered by providing feedback,

holding all students to high expectations, and providing student support (Gentry 632). Another important aspect is to increase recognition of talent within the groups. This allows teachers to provide students with opportunities for advancement and growth. Teachers can also foster a sense of belonging by incorporating the culture into the schoolroom (Gentry 632). This is where diverse and minority literature can have a vast impact. By integrating literature from the different cultures, it can create a better understanding of the people and the individual. This type of integration gives the opportunity to foster the peer relationship and understanding. A good peer relationship also bolsters student motivation.

So, how do you incorporate the literature into the classroom? First of all, be cognizant of the stereotypes that exist. You want to be careful not to project any poor portrayals, but you also want to be able to identify stereotypes that may exist among students. By being aware, the conversation can be steered in a more positive and productive way. Secondly, have your lessons reflect specific cultures. This helps to avoid generalizations and stereotyping. Not all Latino cultures are the same and many have different customs. Lastly, encourage questions from the students. The focus should be on a greater understanding of the culture, not just a simple acceptance.

According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, CCBC, out of the 3,500 children's books published in 2017 only 205 of those were labeled as Latino and of those only 108 were written by a Latino. This is problematic when trying to help students be successful. By incorporating more works like *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, students will be able to find their place in the classroom.

The Creation of a Coming of Age Story

In the pursuit of creating my first long work in this genre, I wanted to have what I have researched be reflected in my piece. My piece deals with coming of age themes such as with love, complexities of relationships, and identity. I also found it important to touch on themes of privilege and race, especially with today's political climate. These themes are primarily shown through the characters of Kate and Tina. Like *Alice in Wonderland* and in Rivera's novel, we see the development psychologically and morally of Tina and Kate, although they are still trying to find their places and roles in the world.

The theme of love is evident throughout my work. There is the relationship between Kate and Justus, Kate and Carlos, and Tina and Marco. Kate and Justus serve as that love you just can't let go of. Is it perfect for you or always right? That is left yet to be discovered. The relationship between Carlos and Kate is the relationship that makes you grow. It forces you to face your fears and your problems and serves to help you discover who you are. The love relationship between Marco and Kate steers away from the typical drama you see in young adult relationships. This is partially due to Marco's character. While Kate, Tina, Justus and Carlos are still developing their sense of their roles in the world, Marco serves as the realized and developed young adult. I wanted to portray a love that is simple, pure, and mature, which shies away from the problematic stereotyped relationship often portrayed in relationships involving Latina women.

Navigating the complexities of relationships is another prevalent theme in my work. Tina and Kate are best friends, but have vast differences. These differences complicate the relationship. At the beginning of the story, we see Kate's closed off nature and her tendency to

be tightly wound. She has a habit of holding things in until it comes exploding out of her, where Tina is the type to just say what is on her mind. Tina knows Kate's tendency, which leads her to keeping the relationship between her and Marco a secret. This creates a cognitive dissonance in Tina as she believes honesty is the most important virtue. For Tina she wants to expose all the hard, messy parts of life, whereas Kate pushes it deep below the surface. By the end of the piece, we see Kate's growth in this area as she learns to release some of her pent-up emotions and learns to face some of the complications in her life, instead of running. We also see Tina's growth in respect to her relationship with Kate by having the courage to be true to herself and be honest about her relationship with Marco.

This theme is also seen in the relationship between Kate and her mother. When the story begins, Kate questions her mother's secrecy pertaining to the letter from her father. There is also much unsaid between the character's relating to her father's death and life. The relationship is also complicated with Kate's mother's tendency to push Kate and challenge her, where Kate tends to dig in her heels. By the end of the story Kate has more patience and grace with her mother and learns some of the reasons for her mother's secrecy. However, there is still much unsaid and complications between the characters in the end.

We see the theme of identity through characters Kate and Tina. Kate longs for the father that left her family early in her life. Throughout the piece Kate is searching for this link to him, specifically through the blackbird blood. She also compares herself to her brother. She sees him as confident, smart, cool headed, and relaxed. She sees him as a role model. She also is wrangling with choosing a career path at the base. She's unsure where she fits. By the end of the story Kate learns about her identity which will inform her future decisions.

Tina also wrestles with the theme of identity which has much to do with race. With there being very few people of color, Tina often feels like she's different than everyone else. Tina is untrusting of most people, which relates to her childhood trauma of her father being deported and her mother not being admitted on to the base. We see Tina start to peel the layers with Marco. Tina also wrangles with choosing a career path. We also see Tina's struggle holding on to her Mexican heritage. Without the regular use of Spanish, she started feel her roots slipping away from her. Tina does find a family in Kate, Marco, and their mother, but she's still missing a connection to her Mexican roots.

Privilege is another theme acknowledged in this work. We see the privileges Lyla is afforded because her father is the base commander. Lyla basically gets what she wants, and this is shown through her conversations with Justus. She was able to talk her parent's into bringing Justus's mom back. She had the engagement expedited, and she was able to get out of the class project, because her mother pulled her out of class. Privilege is also seen through Kate, Justus, and Marco. They have their parents to help them with the challenges they face, which is especially important when Kate is bitten. Being the love interest of Justus, and his father being the medical director, gave them the privilege of secrecy and care, when others probably wouldn't have received it. They have their parents to guide, help, and mentor them. Tina, however, wasn't afforded that privilege. She had guardians, but their role in her life was minimal. Because Tina's mother was undocumented, she was not admitted to the base after the outbreak. Tina was torn from her mother's arms as a child, and was placed with her guardians.

Though all of the characters are important to the story, Tina was the character I felt most dedicated to creating. I will be beginning my first year of teaching high school English Language Arts, where I will have many Latinx students. I wanted a strong Latina character that my future

students and others could relate to. In my quest to fulfill this, I based my character off of real Latina women in my life. Without having the Latinx experience myself, I let *The Education of Margot Sanchez* and the real people in my life guide me, as to not create writing that is problematic. By using these themes and writing what I know, my intention is to create a thesis that is enjoyable, relatable, but also speaks to modern day issues.

CHAPTER II

PROLOGUE: THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED

“Some mood music?” Kate’s father asked.

Kate saw him steal a glance at her and her brother, Marco, through the rearview mirror. Kate grinned and nodded her head. Her dad thumbed through the playlist on his phone.

“You text, you drive, you pay.” Marco said.

“But I’m not texting... but you know what, Marco, you are right. I shouldn’t be messing with my phone while I drive.”

Her father always looked for those little teaching moments. Kate huffed and rolled her eyes. Her brother was Mr. goody goody. The perfect son. Her dad placed his phone in its holder on the dash and pressed on a song. Kate couldn’t quite make out the text on the screen, but she knew the song as soon as she heard it.

“I love Chopin!” Kate said. “Prelude Op...28... number four?”

“You got it kiddo!”

Kate smirked with satisfaction.

“You’re so weird, Katie Kat,” Marco said as he made a fist with his hand and rubbed his knuckles against the top of her head messing up her bun. “What ten-year-old listens to classical music?” he said.

Kate hit his hand away, “Only the smart ones, jerk.”

She spread her fingers like a comb and smoothed her hair back. Her dad chuckled. However, her mother would have scolded them for fighting. She was usually the one that took her to practice, but she was working late at the base. It wasn't often her dad got to watch her at practice, so she wanted to work extra hard to show him what she could do. As they walked into the studio, her father whispered in her ear, "how great you'll be my Katie Marie."

The instructor started the music. Kate felt the melody of Chopin's Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2. course throughout her body. She didn't quite know how to explain the feeling it gave her when she listened. It was as if the music made its way inside of her body. It was in her. She felt every beat of the music under her skin like the pounding of her own heart, and she felt it radiate out of her with each dance step. She turned her toes out, heels touching. Her right hand rested on the barre.

"En avant and open. Demi plie and straighten," her dance teacher said in rhythm with the music.

Simultaneously she lifted her left arm to the front and then to the side. Muscle memory took over for Kate as she bent her knees and moved her arms. Dancer's high. The music and movement made her feel free. Anything that was bothering her disappeared when she danced.

"Bottoms tucked under. Tummies in," her teacher said. "Very nice Kate."

Kate held her body tall, she imagined herself a straight line from floor to ceiling. She tried to think of herself as a puppet with a string pulling her head up. She knew she wasn't the best technical dancer, but her teacher often praised her on her performance and musicality. She would tell Kate, "You can't teach that kind of love." Kate imagined shooting out the music's energy with every movement.

"Shoulders down. Relax your face."

The command wasn't directed at Kate, but she felt her body respond to the guiding voice.

“Spit your gum out, Dani.”

The girl in front of her walked toward the trashcan in the corner. She must have been new because Kate didn't recognize her. She stopped halfway across the room. She just stood still. Her eyes widened, almost as if something had given her a fright. Her jaw dropped, and her gum fell to the floor. She fell to her knees, her haunted eyes stared into the mirror at the front of the room. She began to heave. Red liquid projected out of her mouth, painting the gray dance floor red. Kate felt frozen in place. She heard screaming, saw people running, but Kate's legs felt like heavy weights anchored to the floor. The girl lay motionless. Then Kate felt her father's scruff rub against her cheek. The aroma of his old spice cut the metallic smell that penetrated the room. Her father swooped her up in his arms and took her and Marco to the car before going back in to help. That was the first time Kate saw someone die, but it wouldn't be the last.

CHAPTER III

PHOTOGRAPH

Kate had dreamed of hearing from her father since the day he died, the day her world changed forever. She set the letter down gently on her notebook, careful not to damage its delicate creases. In her dreams she heard his gritty but soothing voice, saw his exaggerated facial expressions and the way he would talk out of the side of his mouth. Although she couldn't see his face, his written words brought some comfort to the void she had felt for a long time. From the time she found the letters last night to now sitting in her last class of the day, Kate's emotions came in a series of highs and lows, from anger to sorrow to joy and back around again. She felt like she found something she'd been missing for quite some time. But mostly, Kate just felt drained and confused. Why would her mother keep such a thing from her?

"KATIE!" Professor Blanch's voice had a shrill register that made the hairs on the back of Kate's arm stand up.

"I'm sorry, professor. Headache."

Blanch stood beside Kate's desk, twirling a blonde lock with her finger. She couldn't tell if Blanch's face was that of pity or disappointment. She felt her classmates prying eyes fixed on them, and then he walked in. Justus. She still remembered the first time she saw his face. Her mother, her brother, and she had barely made the cutoff before Grissom Airforce Base closed the gates on the rest of the world. All they had was a few changes of clothes, a couple of keepsakes,

and her favorite family photograph she now kept tucked under her pillow. Justus had brought her a Pop-Tart after noticing her staring at his meal.

“Mr. Lewis, how can I help you today?” Blanch said with a sweet smirk.

“I’m here to get Ms. Merlo. It’s time for her medical exam.”

“Very well,” she said tight lipped.

Kate grabbed her backpack and hurried toward the door. She felt the seething burn of Professor Blanch’s stare and that of her daughter, Lyla, who also happened to be Justus’s girlfriend.

Once they were out of the classroom, she turned to him. His blonde hair was starting to curl at the ends from a lack of haircut. She reached up and shook her fingers through his hair.

“Getting a little shaggy there aren’t we?”

He poked her in the armpit. “Careful there, short stuff.”

Kate brought her arms down to her side and laughed. “I’m not short. You are just ridiculously tall.”

She’d known the first day that she met him and he brought her the icing covered pastry that they’d be friends. What she didn’t know was how their friendship would turn into something more, well, at least for her. But when she’d finally realized how she felt about Justus, he’d started seeing Lyla.

“Thank you for getting me out of there, Jus. I was about to poke my eyeballs out with my pencil, even if it does mean I’m due for a checkup,” she said.

“You actually don’t have a check-up, but I think you’ll be even more thankful for this.”

Justus winked, put a hand on Kate’s back, and lead her down the concrete hallway.

“What do you mean?” Kate put Justus’s arm around her shoulder and put her head on what she called her nook. The area where his shoulder met his chest. Her place of warmth and comfort. She justified this move by telling herself that friends did this kind of thing all the time.

He looked down at her and smiled. “Just a little bit further.”

Kate couldn’t help but smile when he smiled. When they got to the T at the end of the hallway, Justus stopped and spun Kate around to face him.

“Close your eyes.”

Kate gave him the doe-iest eyes she could concoct.

“You trust me don’t you.”

Kate nodded.

“Then close your eyes silly goose.”

Kate’s eyelids fluttered closed and a bony hand from behind her touched her shoulder. She opened her eyes and spun around.

“Tina! You’re back!”

Kate wrapped her arms around Tina’s thin body harder than she intended. Kate was very particular with who she could show physical affection to, but Tina broke down that barrier long ago.

“They couldn’t keep me away from you that long,” Tina said.

It’s not often that you meet someone that you wish you could be with forever, not in a romantic way, but in the way that they make your life so much better, living without them is unimaginable. For Kate, Tina was one of those rare people. She was the cool chick that didn’t care about being cool. Like the time in sixth grade when Lyla, Blanch’s daughter, invited Tina to her ‘super-secret exclusive girl squad,’ and Tina couldn’t have cared less. She was tall with legs

for days. Her brown curly hair and earthy eyes had a wildness befitting of her blatant disregard of the rules. She had an unruliness about her that didn't quite fit into life on the base.

"How was expulsion?" Kate asked.

"You mean solitary confinement?" Tina's smile faded.

"That bad?"

"People aren't meant to be caged."

Although Tina's words were true, the base command saw the rules as black and white, especially toward juveniles. The commander would say without rules people are no better than animals. His idea of protecting the youth was to enact absurd punishments to prevent them from making the same choices as adults.

"Almost makes me wish they had just tossed me out when they had the chance," Tina said.

"Don't say that, Tina."

"I said almost. I mean, I couldn't leave without you. But then I'd have to watch you be eaten alive by killer mosquitos, and that would suck."

"Except you don't get eaten alive, you vomit your insides out," said Kate.

Tina shrugged her shoulders, "potato, potahto."

The truth was, if Tina had done what she did as an adult, that scenario wouldn't be far off. She'd be sent to one of the oil fields. Sure, they had protective gear, but most wear second hand and good luck getting a replacement if you ruined yours. That line of work typically had a higher mortality rate of any other, but without fuel, there would be no transportation.

"Maybe next time you get caught walking around past curfew, you don't run, and then subsequently bite the guy trying to take you in."

Tina guffawed. "Nobody grabs me like that. What can I say? My fight reflex took over."

“Well at least you didn’t have to deal with Professor Blanch Bitch,” Kate said trying to offer some consolation.

“She’s not that bad,” Justus chimed in.

“Ah, you’re still here,” Tina remarked.

“Be nice,” Kate said to Tina.

“You do know me, right?” Tina’s remark was more of a rhetorical statement than a question.

“Of course, you would say that about your future mother-in-law,” Tina said.

His downturned eyes lost their usual spark. “I should probably get back to the clinic.”

“I’ll see you later, right Justus?” Kate asked.

Justus and Kate’s eyes connected. Justus nodded his head. Kate felt that hollow knot of yearning she often felt when she gazed into his intense blue eyes. She wanted to take a photograph of them. The gold ring around his iris was like a sun that faded into a sea of blue. She saw in him everything she could imagine she would want with someone. But she told herself she needed to figure out how to shut it off. He was with Lyla, not her. She reminded herself that every day, but when she looked in eyes, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was home.

“Thank you,” Kate mouthed.

Tina put her arm around Kate, diverting her attention and led her down the corridor to the right. “We have some catching up to do,” Tina said. She looked back at Justus with uninviting eyes in case he had the urge to follow them.

They made their way toward Kate’s barracks room.

“You know you don’t have to be that mean to him,” Kate said. “I can have two best friends, you know.”

Tina rolled her eyes. “Yeah, he’s not going to lead my best friend on when he’s clearly not available. Plus, it’s fun making boys uncomfortable.”

“It’s not like that. We’re-”

“Just friends?” Tina interjected

“I can handle this.”

“Uh huh.”

They continued their walk in silence trying to avoid areas that were typically congregated, such as the dining facility. They passed a few people on their way, but most were busy working and didn’t pay much attention to them. As the supply sergeant, her mom would still be at work, giving them time to catch up. Kate felt like she should say something, but couldn’t find the words. It wasn’t that she was mad at Tina. She just mostly thought about the letters folded up in her backpack, one for her and one for her brother, Marco, and the hollowness in her chest.

CHAPTER IV

FLIRTIN WITH DISASTER

Justus walked alone with his thoughts, and those thoughts were consumed with Kate. Justus and Kate had become fast friends. Justus would always tease Kate about being a year older so he could tell her what to do, but there wasn't really a point because she wouldn't listen anyway. They'd always been close, but something changed over the last year. He had become very aware of her transition into womanhood. Where her uniform once hung loose, she now filled it out with soft, delicate curves. He noticed the way her hair smelled like honey. She was still stubborn as hell, something he found both infuriating and intriguing. He had always loved her, but things were different now. His love for her had become somehow gentler and more intimate. He often found himself fighting the urge to kiss her when looked into her hazel eyes.

But he knew he needed to be more careful. His feelings were starting to become noticeable. "You're flirtin with disaster," his dad would say. He pretended not to know what his father was talking about. But now, it seemed as if Tina could see it too.

He told himself he could keep in check. He needed to keep in check. He was with Lyla. Lyla, whose father was the base commander and the key to getting his family back together. Besides, he didn't know if Kate even felt the same way he did.

As he entered the clinic, he saw Lyla sitting behind his father's desk. Her legs were propped up on the desk and she put her hands behind her head as she stretched back.

"Hey, hott stuff," she said, winking

Her playfulness made him laugh.

“What are you doing here and where is my dad?”

“Oh, official medical director stuff.”

“AKA he got bored without any patients, went to take a nap, and asked you to watch over things.”

“Something like that,” Lyla smirked. She stood up and walked toward him gracefully. She stared at him as if she wanted to devour him, the same look that initially made him fall for her. She had always been beautiful.

“Well aren’t you going to hug me?” She looked up at Justus.

He wrapped his arms around her. He felt a pang of guilt wishing it was Kate nestled against his chest. He had loved Lyla. He was fifteen when they started dating, and by dating he meant going to the chow hall together and watching movies in the rec room. But now, holding her in his arms, he felt nothing more than friendship.

“So, I have something super exciting to tell you!” Lyla said.

Justus raised an eyebrow.

“Tonight at the ceremony daddy and mother are announcing the engagement!” Lyla squealed, bouncing up and down.

“Tonight?” Justus tried to conceal the panic on his face.

“What’s wrong with that?” Lyla asked taking a step back.

“Oh, nothing, I just thought we were going to wait to announce it until you were eighteen.”

“You aren’t backing out on me, are you?”

“No, of course not. You’re not backing out, are you?” He said it in a playful tone, but part of him wished she would.

“You know better than that.” She smiled. “One day I’m going to run this place, and you will take over for you father. The greatest power couple ever,” she said putting her fists on her hips, what she called her power stance. “I’ll be eighteen in a couple of months anyway, what’s the difference?”

The difference was that he hadn’t told Kate. Sure, people talked, especially on a small base where there is nothing else to do, but that was just gossip. This was going to be real.

“I have another surprise.”

“Another?” He realized after he said it how apathetic he sounded, so he pulled her close. She, however, didn’t seem to notice.

“I have a feeling you are going to be a very happy man.”

Justus stood quietly trying to mask any type of negative expression.

“I talked to my daddy last night, and he agreed to put in a transfer request to get your mother back here.”

“My mom is coming back?” His voice trembled as he said it.

Two years ago, Justus’ mother was put on orders to travel to the other bases to teach hydroponic farming methods. What was initially supposed to be short term orders kept getting extended. He loved that she was great at her job and was highly requested, but he wanted his family back together. He would do anything to get his family back together, even if that meant marrying Lyla, and now his mother was finally coming home.

CHAPTER V

COMFORTABLY NUMB

Inside the barrack's room Tina decided she would have to be the one to break the silence. Kate could get lost in her own head for hours.

“Okay, so are we going to talk about what else is going on with you or you just gonna stand there all quiet and shit?”

Kate rolled her eyes. Tina had a way of getting into the dark, hidden crevices of Kate's heart that was otherwise sealed tighter than the gate that kept them locked inside the base walls.

“I found something last night. Well, two things.”

Tina looked to Kate with what Kate called the Tina look. She couldn't think of any other way to describe it. It was sweet and caring mixed with concern, mixed with an eyebrow raise that said you better tell me what's going on, mixed with sincerity.

“I found a letter from my father.”

Saying it out loud released some of the tension Kate carried on her shoulders.

“What kind of letter?”

Kate sat on the couch and handed Tina the folded-up paper. Tina sat next to her as she slowly opened the letter.

My little Katie Marie,

I look at you, a big ponytail on top of your head, leaping and twirling in your fluffy pink tutu, and I fear the worst. Your spirit is too good for this world. There are people that will try and tear you apart like a pack of wolves devours its prey. I pray that I am with you long enough to teach you what you need to know, especially how to take the fish off your own hook, but for now, I enjoy you. I want to always remember the way your small, but strong hand grabs mine when you want me to play hide and seek or read the next Goosebumps book. I want to always remember the way you would poke my eyes to wake me up when you were little. And how you would fold your arms in disapproval and glower at me when I told you to go back to bed. Although I'm tired and I'm not getting much sleep these days, I get up anyway. It's not just because you are so unrelenting, it's because the consequential smile on your face is bliss. I want you to always remember how strong you are. We share the same blood, the Blackbird Blood. I hope that someday you understand how much I love you and why I had to do what I had to do if I am no longer with you. Make sure to always listen to your mother! I will love you forever, rug rat. Daddy

Tina remained expressionless as she read the letter, but as she looked up her round eyes were brown saucers that glistened as she held her tears back.

“How are you doing?”

A tear slipped down Kate's cheek. “I miss him.”

Tina let a tear fall. "I understand." Tina placed a hand on Kate's.

If anyone could understand loss it would be Tina. Her father was deported to Mexico when she was only eight years old. Although they were some of the first in line on the day they closed the gates, her mother was denied access because she was undocumented. Tina was only allowed entry because Captain Longfellow and her husband vowed to take care of her.

"Tina, how do you do it? I lost my father, but you lost them both."

"I'm comfortably numb."

Tina put up a tough exterior, but Kate knew the permanent scars Tina carried from having her family ripped away from her. Tina looked away.

"So, what exactly is the blackbird blood?" Tina asked

"I have no flipping clue."

"And what exactly did he have to do?"

Kate shrugged. "Always with all the questions, Tina."

"Well, don't you want to know?"

"Of course, I do, but I just can't ask my mom willy-nilly. I wasn't exactly supposed to be going through her things, and we haven't spoken about him in ages. I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Going through your mother's things," Tina scolded teasingly. "Always with all the nosiness, Kate."

Kate grabbed the pillow behind her back and threw it at her.

"So, we need a plan." Tina smirked.

Kate grabbed her canteen from her backpack that sat at her feet and took a gulp. "What do you have in mind?"

CHAPTER VI

MORE THAN A FEELING

Tina had a way of pulling out the important questions from a text. She didn't know if it was from the hours of reading Stephen King or Edgar Allen Poe or something she inherited from her parents. She would never know. She took a deep breath and read over the letter once more as Kate stared into space. Tina often caught Kate daydreaming, but she knew it was just how her brain worked. Like everything she learned was a piece of a giant puzzle and she was trying to figure out where that piece fit, making connections where few would find any. Together we could conquer the world, Tina thought.

"Let's make a list," Tina said as she grabbed a notepad and pen from her bag. "First we need to figure out what blackbird blood means."

"And what he had to do," Kate chimed in.

"And why he wasn't sleeping," Tina added.

"Does that matter?"

"Was he sick? Stressed at work?"

Kate's jaw tightened and she nodded her head.

"It just seems important," Tina said.

"Cancer," Kate said. Kate remembered all the times he'd come home after having treatments. He could barely keep his eyes open, but his sleep never lasted long, and when he did sleep, he'd thrash and sweat. She remembered the sheets tattered with rips and holes from the

wear and wash. She remembered going to Target with her mother and her loading the cart with sheet set after sheet set and her mother's sobs the time they were out of only sheets that provided some comfort to her father.

"I didn't know. I assumed...why didn't you tell me?"

Kate shrugged. "I'm not even sure I want to remember."

Kate had that far off look that told Tina she had reverted to being inside her own head. It was if Kate completely detached from the things happening around her. Tina wasn't sure what to say. Part of her felt betrayed that Kate had kept this from her, but she understood why her friend didn't want to talk. They sat in silence, Tina's hand on Kate's. Tina stared at the round black and white clock that hung on the wall of Kate's room. It was the same base-issued clock that hung in every barracks room. Every room had the same with three "bedrooms," which were barely big enough to hold a set of bunk beds and an armoire, attached to a common area. Everything the same. The same cement walls in every hall. The same boring thing day after day. Kate pulled her hand from Tina's.

"Mom will be home soon. Let's talk more later. We need to get ready for the ceremony tonight anyway," Kate said.

Tina had almost forgotten the ceremony was tonight. Had she become so numb that she'd forgotten the eighth anniversary of the day she'd been ripped from her mother's arms?

"What was the second thing?" Tina asked, vaguely remembering Kate had mentioned two things to tell her about.

"Second thing?"

"You said you found two things."

"Oh yeah. Well, there was another letter from my father."

“Way to bury the lede there, Kate. What did it say?”

“I didn’t open it. It’s addressed to Marco.”

Tina flushed with the sound of his name. Marco had always been sweet and a little bit nerdy, which made Tina like him all the more, but he was Kate’s brother. Off limits. So, when she ended up kissing him a couple of weeks ago, she wasn’t entirely sure what to do. She supposed they could have just forgotten about it, only there had been another the next night, and the night after that, and the night after that. For Tina, the worst part was that she didn’t even feel bad about it. She should at least feel guilty about betraying her best friend, but nada.

“You know you have to tell him,” Tina said more forcefully than intended.

“Yo, chill. I haven’t really had the chance.”

“I know. I’m just saying.”

Kate rolled her eyes. Tina hated when Kate made that face because that meant Kate was thinking something she would never say aloud. Tina always wanted to hear the truth, even if it hurt.

“I want to figure all this out with you, but I need a little time to process all this, you know?” Kate said looking off into distance.

Tina didn’t argue with her. She knew any effort to work through the questions now would be fruitless. Kate was boulder that couldn’t be budged, but when she made up her mind she came at you full force.

“What do you think I should wear? A blue button up with navy blue pants, or a blue button up with navy blue pants?” Kate asked, walking Tina to the door.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to be wearing a blue button up with navy blue pants,” Tina said with a smirk.

“Okay, I’ll see you at the ceremony. I’ll be the one with the blue button up shirt and navy blue pants.”

“I’m sure I’ll find you. There will only be like two hundred people dressed the same.”

Tina and Kate hugged. Tina walked down the hallway and thought of how nice it was to feel the security of their friendship. And as much as she wanted to always feel that, a small part of her wondered if she could trust it.

As she made her way through the sea of people preparing for the ceremony, she couldn’t help but feel alone. She always felt like the different one. They looked at her like the poor immigrant girl, only she wasn’t an immigrant girl. She was an American. When she turned the corner, she saw his playful grin as he stood by her door. She blushed.

“Marco, what are you doing here?”

“Came to see my favorite girl.”

“You shouldn’t be here. Someone could see.”

“See me talking to you in the hallway? Besides, it’s been three days.”

“You’ll be seen with the trouble-maker brown girl,” Tina said raising an eyebrow.

“So what?”

Her guardians wouldn’t be coming back until after the ceremony, so she unlocked the door and gestured him inside. When she closed the door, he placed his hands on her waist and pulled her close to him. Warmth radiated from his body reminding Tina of what it felt like to lay under the hot summer sun.

“You’re my sunshine,” he said.

“You’re only sunshine?”

“My only sunshine.”

Tina ran her hands through Marco's thick brown hair.

"Marco, don't take this the wrong way, but you stink."

The smells of chemicals and sweat penetrated Tina's nose.

He laughed. "I've been working on something for the hydro-farm. I got to go outside today."

"I'm so jealous." Tina threw her head back.

"Come out with me tomorrow. I think you are going to like what you see."

"They are never going to let me go with you."

"You forget, I'm in charge of the hydro-farm until Sgt Lewis gets back. I'll just put in a request for you to shadow me. You haven't selected a job cluster yet, which you need to do soon, so you're still eligible."

"Sgt Lewis is coming back? Does Justus know? Does Kate know?"

"They told us this morning when we were working, and why would Kate care?"

"No reason. Just wondered if you had talked to her." Tina hated lying, but how could she really explain something that hadn't technically happened? Not to mention, Marco was Kate's brother. He would probably be even less forgiving than her if he thought Justus was leading Kate on.

"What do you say? You'd look really cute suited up. Did I mention it's supposed to snow tomorrow?"

"Am I going to come back smelling like you?"

"It gets hot in those suits when you are working, young lady. And well, you can't skip the spray down after being outside. Don't want any flying dealers flying around in here."

"But it's winter."

“Precautions, my dear. You remember how bad it was.”

She didn't need to be reminded. She remembered it all. She remembered the quarantine, and the when that didn't work, the quarantine of the healthy. She remembered the drive to the base. Her mother had worked for the Longfellow's for three years, so when the time came Mrs. Longfellow swooped Tina up and Mr. Longfellow led her mother to the car. The Longfellow's prepped her mother with what to say at the gate while Tina stared outside as chaos the ensued. People were packing up their cars, while the sick vomited on the side of the street.

She felt Marco's fingertips graze down her spine.

“What do you say? Come with me.”

Tina desperately missed the snow, not necessarily the cold part, but she'd be sealed from head to toe. She fantasized about making snow angels and drinking hot chocolate with ground chile like her mother made.

“Don't get my hopes up, Marco.”

“I won't ever let you down. I promise.”

“What about hot chocolate? Can you get that too?” Tina raised her eyebrows in excitement.

“I'll do everything within my power to make you happy.” Marco pushed her curls out of her face.

She wanted to believe in him, and she mostly did, but she felt a nagging feeling lurking deep beneath the surface.

“One more thing. We need to tell Kate. I hate lying to her,” Tina said.

“You aren't lying, just not informing her.”

“Same thing!”

“Do you feel guilty for being with me?”

“Not one bit, actually. But I know not telling Kate isn’t right. Just because I am dead inside doesn’t mean I don’t know wrong from right.”

“You aren’t dead inside.” Marco held Tina’s face in his hands. “You just need to learn how to open that part of yourself back again. Thaw the ice.”

“And what? You are the knight on the white horse?”

“You’ve made it very clear you don’t need rescuing, and I love that about you. It has to come from inside you, Cristina Elena Sepulveda.”

Her heart fluttered when he said her full name. She felt seen and known and cared for.

“But seriously, we need tell her soon,” Tina said turning away from him.

“As you wish.”

CHAPTER VII

EDGE OF SEVENTEEN

Kate heard the main door of the barrack's suite open from her room.

"Katie, you here?" her mother called.

"Nope. I'm out gallivanting all over town." Katie affixed the last pin in her hair. She took a deep breath. She hadn't spoke to her mother since the she found the letters, and she wasn't quite sure what she was going to say.

"Very funny, Katie," her mom said breathlessly.

Kate heard a crash and her mother cry out.

"Mom!" Kate yelled as she ran out of her room. She took the in the image of the disaster she had come upon. The small round table had been flipped on its side, its skinny metal legs pointing toward Kate, the chair had slid to the opposite side of the suite, and her mother stood with her stark white shirt sopping with a light brown liquid. Her eyes closed, her mother massaged her temples with her fingertips.

"Mom, what in the hell happened?" Kate held in a smirk.

"It's just, well, how do I explain?" Kate's mom began to reenact the incident that had just taken place. She pointed to the box on the counter top. "I was carrying this box like this, and then I tripped on the chair, which made me run into the table, and it flipped over. Oh, and then the tea Marco made for me today spilled all over me."

"The perfect child," Kate quipped.

Her mother sighed. “Good news, though, I’m still upright.”

Kate let a giggle escape her lips and shook her head.

“What am I going to do with you, mom?”

Kate’s mom shrugged and began to pick up the table. Kate ran over and grabbed the other end of the wooden-top table and flipped it upright.

“Your father always did tease that I was a mess.”

Kate let go of the table and stepped back. She hadn’t heard her mother speak about him for years. Kate swallowed. Had her mother noticed the letters were gone? Is that why she was mentioning him now?

“I see you are all ready to go,” Kate’s mom said inching closer to her.

Her mother put a hand on her shoulder. Kate relaxed. Perhaps she hadn’t seen then letters, and they didn’t have to have the conversation right now.

“He’d be proud of you, you know.” A mist clouded her mother’s jade eyes. “Even in that dreadful outfit.”

They laughed.

“You’ve better get going, the ceremony will be starting soon.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

“Sorry, Katie. I’ve got to back to work. They have me not only in charge of supply now, but also procurement.”

Kate sighed. At least she’d get to see Justus tonight, and Tina was back from her three-day hiatus. They, too, were her family.

“You’d best be going. Rules are rules.”

Kate waited for Tina outside the gym doors. Although the buildings were now enclosed and connected, the old ID swipe machine was still connected to the brick wall. Everyone was dressed the same, but Kate could always find Tina among the crowd. She was all brown curls, and bronze skin among a sea of bland. She felt a tinge of panic rise up in her chest when she saw Marco walking with her. She still wasn't sure how she was going to tell him about the letter or what she would say. Justus was walking behind them. Seeing his face eased Kate's anxiety about her brother, but brought on another kind of nervousness, the kind of nervousness that left her feeling dizzy and sent her pulse racing. Upon seeing Kate's face, Tina looked behind her. Tina looked back to Kate and gave her the death stare. Kate wondered if she was really that easy to read.

"Your eyes give you away," Tina said once she reached Kate.

"What are you talking about?"

"Hey Katie Kat," Marco said hugging his sister. "Why does it seem like I haven't seen you in days."

"Don't call me that. And it's because you are too busy on the farm, and the fact you moved into the male barracks. See, all your fault."

"My apologies little sis, but a man can't live with his mom forever."

"Yes, because moving to a different barracks room is all the difference," Kate said as she rolled her eyes. "But I do need to talk to you later. It's important." She felt the knots in her stomach tighten.

"Kate, I need to talk to you. Can we walk?" Justus interrupted.

His face tightened and his jaw was clenched. The last time Kate saw him look this distressed was the day his mother's orders had been extended. Kate could sense something was wrong.

“Why don’t you sit with us. They are about to start.” Marco suggested.

Tina glared unblinkingly at Marco. Marco cleared his throat.

“There’s my lover boy!” Lyla wrapped her arms around Justus. “You look so handsome in your button up.”

“Wow, Lyla, do I look handsome too?” Tina asked, making a fake one-sided smile.

Lyla returned her smile with a fake laugh.

“We must be getting inside, dear. It will be starting soon.” Lyla grabbed Justus’ hand and pulled him close to her. Watching this interaction between Lyla and Justus made Kate want to scream. She dug her nails into the palm of her hands.

“Yeah, you should be going,” Kate said avoiding eye contact with Justus. She turned her back to him and continued inside with Tina and Marco. She felt like was going to hurl.

The gym, which usually was where people would go to play basketball, was filled with rows of folding chairs. Kate sat between Tina and Marco. Unfortunately, the seat had a great view of the back of Justus’ and Lyla’s heads only a few rows ahead of them. Once being a joint Army and Air Force base, the gym was filled with posters about the army core values, and the air force motto, “Aim High, Fly-Fight-Win.”

“On your feet!” one of the soldiers commanded.

Three hundred chairs creaked in unison as everyone stood, and the base commander entered near the stage at one end of the gym. He made his way to the podium, peacock chested.

“We get it. You’re the commander,” Tina whispered under her breath, causing Kate to chuckle.

“Take seat,” the same soldier bellowed.

Everyone sat. These ceremonies vaguely reminded Kate of when her family went to St. Joan of Arc Church on Sunday's before everything changed. Sit. Stand. Sit. Stand. The difference was mass made her feel better, where these ceremonies just bored her to tears.

Colonel Blanch started his annual speech about how it all began and how far we've come. The speech was the same every year. Russia and North Korea in collusion against the United States created genetically modified mosquitos to spread a deadly super virus. The mosquitos were released on military bases throughout the US, however, they were supposed to die after coming in contact with human blood. What they didn't account for was the rapid breeding that spread the disease quicker than a snap of Thanos' fingers. And that's when the nuclear weapon pacts went out the window, and the UN eventually dissolved.

Tina peacocked her chest and whispered in a deep voice, "They sent their diseases, then we sent all of our bombs to go boom on them."

Kate covered her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. Colonel Blanch was all about eloquent words and political correctness, but Tina's version was pretty spot on. Where Colonel Blanch would say "biological warfare via vector-borne disease transmitted through mosquitoes," Tina would say "make-you-puke-your-guts-out bloodsuckers." And on and on.

Tina and Kate had spaced out toward the end of the commander's speech, but Marco cleared his throat to get their attention and nodded toward the podium.

"So on this day, it brings me great pride to be able share some important news with you. Mr. Merlo, can you please stand up."

Kate looked up at her brother. He'd always just seemed like a huge nerd to her, but seeing him standing proudly with a gregarious smile reminded her of their father.

“Don’t be fooled by this young man’s age. He has done tremendous work on our hydroponic farm. I am happy to share that a whole new segment to the farm will be opening soon due to this young man’s diligence and leadership. Thank you, Mr. Merlo for your hard work and dedication to our community’s nutritional needs.”

Everyone began clapping. Kate stared wide eyed at her brother. She remembered him always having his nose stuck in his farming and engineering books, and not really having much of a social life. But now, he looked almost debonair.

“For our next announcement, I want to bring up my wife, Peggy.”

“Peggy Blanch,” Tina said in a mocking voice.

Professor Blanch stood at the podium, a fake smile plastered on her face. As many of you know, my daughter Lyla is at the edge of seventeen. When she turns eighteen in just a short couple of months, she has decided to swear in and officially become her father’s precept.

“Nobody cares,” Kate whispered to Tina.

“But we are all going to smile and clap anyway, because she’s the commander’s daughter.” Tina whispered back.

“Lyla, Justus, please stand,” professor Blanch said.

“Why does Justus need to stand?” Kate asked Tina.

Tina shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s with a happy heart that I announce the engagement of my daughter Lyla May Blanch to Justus Nicholas Lewis.”

CHAPTER VIII

HOLD ON LOOSELY

Everything started to get fuzzy for Kate. She felt her heart pounding in her eardrums. She stood with the crowd but she didn't clap. Her intestines felt like they were twisting like pretzels and her breath became rapid. Everything inside her wanted to run, but her legs felt like they belonged to a colt. Kate felt Tina's long, cold fingers clasp hers. Tina's fingers were always cold, but somehow it comforted her at this moment.

Tina whispered in her ear, "Just follow me, okay?"

Kate nodded her head and tried to focus on walking. Left then right, left the right, she thought. She held on to Tina's hand, trusting her friend to get her outside with minimal disturbance.

"Breathe." Tina said once they were outside the gym.

Kate began to pace.

"I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm breathing but I feel like I'm not getting air, my insides feel like they are doing jumping jacks."

"Sit down against the wall, put your head between your knees and breathe through your nose."

"What's going on out here?" Marco inquired, shutting the doors behind him.

"We need to get her back to the room," Tina said. Out of instinct she put a hand on Marco's chest. She pulled it away quickly before Kate could see.

“Are you sick?” Marco asked.

“Kate never gets sick. We are just having a bad day, okay.” Tina replied.

“Let me see what I can scrounge up for chow and I’ll meet you guys at Mom’s.”

The knots in Kate’s stomach started to subside during their walk back to her room. She sat on the vinyl couch while Tina grabbed her a canteen. Her throat felt like she’d swallowed cotton. When she took a drink, she felt the wetness flow from her mouth, down her esophagus, and into her stomach. It felt like the times she had dance performances and gave it her all on stage. She would be left totally breathless and her throat dry as a desert. But that came with a high, this just felt like falling on your ass.

“He’s going to marry her.” Kate mumbled.

“You want a hug?” Tina looked at Kate with her round, doll eyes.

“Nah, that’s okay. I just...I didn’t think they would actually for real get married. I guess part of me thought-”

“It would be you?”

Kate stared at the clock as it ticked. The rhythmic sound soothed her. “But why her? I mean she’s only pretty and popular and perfect and her parents run the base.”

“Kate, you know you’re hot as hell, right?”

“You have to say that, but I appreciate it.”

“But you are more than pretty. You are smart, strong, kind, and you give a shit about people. You want the best for people, not to own them or control them.”

Kate broke focus from the clock and looked at Tina. “You think that is what she is doing? Controlling Justus?”

Tina sat next to Kate and put her hand on her lap.

“Everyone makes their own decisions. I’m not a big fan of him, but I don’t think he would marry her if he didn’t have a good reason.”

“Like being in love.” Kate let out a sigh. “I just feel so stupid.” Kate felt the wet, hot tears fall down her cheeks.

Tina shrugged. “But hey, marriages fail all the time. At least you can still be friends and have the chance to be in each other’s lives for longer.”

“You don’t think they’ll last?” Kate raised an eyebrow. She felt guilty about being excited by the idea.

“It doesn’t matter. You don’t need him anyway. You and I can just age together like two old cat ladies without the cats, because cats suck and boys suck, too.”

“I actually heard on one of the bases they have a pet cat.”

“Doubtful. I can’t imagine them letting in animals when so many humans were turned away.”

They heard a kick at the door.

“A little help, please,” Marco groaned.

Tina ran on her tip toes to the door and opened it. He had two trays, one on the bottom and one turned upside down to protect the food, with two cups of hot liquid balancing on top.

“Hands full?” Tina asked staring at Marco.

“Very funny. Help, please.” He grinned and raised an eyebrow.

“Just because you said please.” She grabbed the two cups from the top.

He sat the tray down on the nearby table. “Soy burgers, carrots, and potatoes. All grown on site.”

“Soy again, yay,” Kate said as she scrunched up her face.

“Just try it. We’ve been working very closely with our chefs to figure out the best combinations of seasonings and spices to create the best flavor. Besides, you need the protein.”

“And these?” Tina pointed to the cups sitting on the table.

“That’s for the bad day.”

Marco pulled out two brown packets from his pocket that read cocoa beverage powder.

“You got hot chocolate from the MRE’s!”

Tina’s lips widened across her face in a smile.

“Is that a genuine smile I see on your face Cristina Elena Sepulveda? I told you.”

“Told her what?” Kate asked. She stared at the two of them and walked to the table to grab a cup.

“He thinks he’s suave.” Tina said.

“Bro, either there is something wrong with the water, or there is something else in these cups. Why are they a weird brown color?”

“That’s for the bad day. Let’s just keep it between us. Not exactly legal, yet.” He winked.

Tina and Kate looked to each other and then back at Marco. The concoction smelled sweet and woody with hints of vanilla.

“Just mix the cocoa in with it before it gets cold.”

They grabbed some silverware from the tray and mixed the powder into the cups. They held their cups up in a cheers motion and took a sip. Kate let out a little cough from the tingling sensation that went down her throat.

“What do you think?”

“Strong,” Tina replied.

“Just wait, it gets smoother.”

Tina shrugged her shoulders and they sat down on the couch, Tina situated in the middle.

“Okay, one more drink, then you tell me what’s going on,” Marco said.

They both took sips from their cups.

“See, Kate was a little upset about the fact that-”

“I found some letters.”

Tina shot her a look.

Kate wasn’t exactly sure what she was going to say to her brother, but she was sure she didn’t want to talk about Justus, at least not right now.

“From a secret admirer?” Marco teased.

“No. Real letters, Marco. From dad.”

Kate’s eyes connected with Marco’s soft chestnut eyes. He scrunched his brows and sat up straight from his relaxed position.

“What? Where are they? What did they say?”

Kate tried to remain calm in opposition to Marco’s intensity. She took a deep breath.

“I only read the one addressed to me. There is one for you too, Marco.”

Kate walked to her bedroom. She reached under her pillow and pulled out the family portrait she slept next to every night and the letters she had tucked behind it.

She looked intently at the photo. She was just a little girl with little black pigtails. Her mother’s hair was a more vibrant brown and her face looked wrinkleless. Her father wore what he was always most comfortable in, a flannel, jeans, and a baseball cap. Judging by the amount of scruff on his face it looked like he hadn’t shaved in a week. His smile looked like it came off the tail end of a laugh. What she wouldn’t give to hear his infectious chuckle again. She could almost smell his old spice. Marco was standing right next to him. Her dad’s hand was on his

shoulder. Marco's grin enveloped his face. His hair was grown out to where the tips started to curl. That was the last family vacation they had before the outbreak. The San Juan islands in Washington was her dad's happy place. He loved camping, fishing, and kayaking. He would say he loved the way the trees humbled all who walked among them.

Kate wiped her eyes, placed the picture underneath her pillow, and made her way back to the common area. Tina's arm was around Marco. When he noticed her, he sat up and made the same throat clearing noise he always did when he was nervous. Kate handed Marco the letter addressed to him.

"I haven't told mom, and I found it going through her stuff, so please don't tell her yet." He held it in his hands and stared at his name printed on the envelope as if it were going to jump up and grab him.

"Well, open it. Don't you want to know what it says?" Kate said.

He stared at the plain, cement wall across the room.

"I love you, but I need some time to process this," Marco said softly. He stood and began walking toward the door.

"Here," Tina said, handing him her cup. "You need this more than I do."

Kate thought she saw a tear fall down his cheek as he closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER IX

ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER

Mornings meant breakfast. As much as Kate wished she could leave the confines of the base sometimes, she did enjoy how everyone came together in the mornings for a meal. Although, she did miss bacon. Well, at least she knew she liked it before everything turned to shit. She couldn't even remember how it tasted. The gathering reminded her of when everyone would get together for coffee and donuts in the church basement after mass at St. Joan of Arc church. She wondered what that place looked like now. She imagined the stain glass windows covered in cobwebs or worse, broken. All the windows depicted the stations of the cross. She'd sat many of times looking into a teary-eyed Jesus kneeling down with a cross on his back. When she was little it had just been the stations of the cross, but now that she'd grown up, at least as grown up as one could be at seventeen, she wondered how a world that did this to themselves deserved redemption.

"Let's see what your brother had them cook up for us today," her mother said in a lively voice.

Her mother broke the trance she had been in. She grabbed Kate's arm and led her out the door. Kate found her mother's early morning chipperness annoying. Sure, she liked the actual eating of breakfast, but she didn't particularly like early morning chit chat. They made their way down the cement corridor. Kate noticed an increase in the amount of people heading to chow at

the same time. There were usually some who had early or late-night shifts that would eat earlier or later, but it seemed almost everyone was going the same direction.

“Do you remember when we first got here, how this all looked,” her mother asked looking around with a smile on her face.

“You mean non-existent.”

Kate shot a suspicious look at her mother.

“Oh, don’t give me that look. Isn’t it amazing how far we’ve come?”

“Sure, mom. I mean, it is nice that people can actually clean themselves in water. It got pretty smelly.”

When they first arrived at the base, they had been in-processed which included giving blood and urine, and being fingerprinted. They were corralled into one central building. They slept on mats and ate MRE’s. No one showered, because the water was being conserved for drinking and they were unsure how much longer we would have flushing toilets. Once the virus spread, the water treatment facility went down. But being at a military base, they were able to get the water bladders and generators out and running before things got too dire. Thankfully the windmills and solar panels that most of the bases in the country installed as part of a ‘Zombie Apocalypse Plan,’ had been implemented just before shit hit the fan. Kate wondered if maybe the ‘powers that be’ knew what was coming and the ZAP was just a decoy. Brick by brick the connecting corridors to the other buildings were constructed by men and women wearing critter proof suits that prevented them from being bitten. The base eventually became like its own little functioning town with water treatment, barracks rooms for everyone, and eventually a connection to the gym. Kate didn’t much care for the gym, but she’d not minded watching Justus work out. Justus. The deep sleep she had fallen into the night before had allowed her to

temporarily block out everything that went down. The flash back to reality gave her that dizzying feeling all over again.

“Kate, you ok there?”

“Yeah, mom. I was just wondering how they do the whole water system here and you know where it goes when its... used.”

Kate decided that it wasn't really a lie, because she really did wonder how it worked, and she was not going to visit the topic of Justus with her mother.

“Why? Are you choosing that as your workforce path? I have to say I'm surprised. I always saw you doing something more artsy. Nothing against that job. Lord knows we owe them more than we can give for what they do. I just thought maybe you'd teach or –

“Mom, chill. I'm not sure what I am going to do yet.”

“Well you need to decide soon, Kate. The deadline is approaching. If you don't pick something-

“I know, I know. They'll pick for me.”

The truth was that Kate had no idea what she'd do. She'd imagine if the world never went to hell, she might have become a dancer or dance teacher.

“Does it really matter, though? Aren't they close to figuring out an antivirus so we can all go back to our normal lives?” Kate asked.

“This is our life now, Kate. We are safe here.”

“But we have to be closer right? Maybe Justus's dad would know more.”

“Kate. Just be grateful for what we have. And please don't go snooping around while our visitors are here.”

“What visitors?”

“The announcement last night, Katie.”

Kate looked sideways at her mother.

“That Justus is marrying her?”

It came out more bitter than she wanted it to in front of her mother.

“I wondered how you would take that. I mean I know...”

Kate held a hand up to her mother.

“Fine, we won’t talk about it now. But you have to be happy for him that his mother is arriving today.”

“Wait, Judith is coming back?”

“Yes! Didn’t you pay attention last night? She is arriving today, and she’s coming with one of the top dogs and a few other people. He not only is a commander, but also one of the top medical directors.”

“Why are they coming here?”

“I don’t know, Kate. I learned long ago to just do your job and don’t ask any questions. You can’t unlearn something, you know.”

Kate wondered what it was that her mother wished she’d never known.

The echo of curious voices filled the chow hall. Everyone wondered what the visitors would be like and how the Lewis’s managed to get their matriarch back. Kate and her mother got their trays and sat at the end of a table away from where everyone congregated. Her mother being supply sergeant meant that if they were to sit near the masses, they would have their meal interrupted more times than she’d prefer. Tina joined them a few minutes later. Kate noticed the

dark circles under her eyes. She wondered how awful she must have looked from all the tears and drama from the night before.

“Well, hey, Tina.” Kate’s mom said. “Katie and I were just discussing choosing a workforce path. Have you decided what you want to do yet?”

Kate shot a look at her mother.

“Not yet, Mrs. Merlo. I was just talking to Mar-”

“You don’t have to answer her,” Kate said putting an arm on Tina’s shoulder. “Mom, enough with the job stuff. We will figure it out.”

“Fine. But you two remember the deadline is coming up.”

“You won’t let us forget.”

“Crap. I think SGT Penske just eyed me. He’s been requesting some items and we don’t have them. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll take this to go.”

She picked up her tray and disappeared around the corner.

“You okay?” Tina asked brushing a stray hair behind Kate’s ear.

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“No, actually, I’m pissed.” Kate smashed the palms of her hands into the table. She felt her face flush. “Who does that? You just decide to get married and doesn’t mention it to one of your closest ‘friends’.” Kate put her fingers up in air quotes when she said the word friends.

“Sure we never were technically anything, but there was something there. You knew it, I knew it, even though I never admitted to it, and I’m pretty sure he knew it too.”

Kate saw Tina’s sweet doe eyes staring back at her.

“Ok, rant over,” Kate said throwing her hands up.

“So, you said was,” Tina said unblinkingly.

“Huh?” Kate furrowed her brow.

“You said WAS something there.”

Kate sat back and relaxed her face like a lightbulb went off.

“That’s right, WAS! I officially have no feelings for Justus Lewis.” She didn’t believe a word she was saying, but she figured if she said it enough times, she would start to believe it.”

Tina put hand on Kate’s leg.

“Okay, you are officially in denial. But the anger, I’ll take it.”

“I’m serious, Tina. I’m just going to focus on figuring out this letter, figuring out how to talk to mom, and figuring out what I’m going to do for the rest of my life. Boy are just a distraction. No more Justus. No more boys period.”

“ON YOUR FEET!” one of the soldiers yelled.

Everyone stood up at attention.

Kate saw what must be the commander and his entourage come around the corner. He had a full head of salt and pepper hair. He was tall, probably around six feet, and although his hair and the wrinkles around his eyes gave away his age, his body looked as if it belonged to someone much younger. He motioned everyone to sit down.

“Relax everyone. Enjoy your breakfast,” he said waving a hand.

His voice was charming and calm, but carried throughout the chow hall. He was outfitted in his dress blues and had more pins and ribbons on his uniform than Kate had ever seen. Kate caught his eye and he smiled at her and Tina. Although on paper he was good looking, charming, obviously successful, something about his eyes and smile made the hairs on Kate’s arm stand up.

“Whoa, silver fox alert,” Tina whispered.

“Does something about him kind of make you cringe?” Kate asked softly. They sat and continued picking at the dining facilities attempt at pancakes. Pancakes without all gluten and syrup didn’t appeal to Kate.

“I never trust anyone I don’t know, especially someone with a face as pretty as that,” Tina nodded toward the entourage. “But, seriously, I see brown people!” Tina pinched Kate’s arm.

The commander was followed closely by the Blanches, of course they would be up a higher-up’s ass. Behind them there was a man with bronze skin who looked to be in his forties. He was not dressed in military garb, but in a plain black pants and a plain black shirt. He had a kind face and soft brown eyes. Next to him was a boy who looked to be about the same age as Tina and Kate. His skin reminded Kate of dark honey. He walked with an air of authority for such a young person. His chocolate hair was cut short and his face looked as smooth as velvet. Kate was enamored by his broad shoulders and cut waistline, and when she glanced to Tina it was apparent, she noticed too.

“So, no more boys, you say,” Tina said raising a brow.

“Yeah, no more boys,” Kate said swallowing hard.

They were followed by two soldiers and then Justus. He was arm in arm with Judith. Kate saw a glow on his face that she hadn’t seen in a long time. His mother was beautiful. She had always been beautiful. Her blonde locks were pulled back into a bun. She looked tiny next to Justus and his father who stood on her other side. On Justus’s left side was Lyla. Kate had to admit, they all looked perfect together. So perfect she could puke.

Marco joined them at the table.

“What’s up, chicas?”

“Just checking out the newcomers,” Kate smiled.

“Do I have competition?” Marco looked to Tina.

Tina looked at Marco wide-eyed and Marco realized his slip-up.

“You think someone is gunning for your position?” Kate asked.

“Nah little sis. I’m the King in my palace.”

“With Judith back, maybe you should downgrade that crown, little prince.” Tina said playfully.

Kate found Marco’s complete lack of acknowledgement of last night’s drama odd.

“Marco, are you ok?”

“Of course, but about today, Tina. We are going to have to postpone the field lesson.”

“Womp, womp,” Tina said with a frown.

“What field lesson?” Kate probed.

“Marco was going to take me to see how they are building the expansion.”

“I didn’t know you were interested in engineering,” Kate responded.

“I’m not sure what I’m interested in Mrs. Merlo.”

“Okay, Okay. Just don’t call me by my mother’s name again,” Kate said making a sour face.

CHAPTER X

SCHOOL'S OUT

Kate and Tina walked to class like normal, but the class itself was far from usual. First off, every single high-school aged student was in class. It was standard for all high school aged student to be in class together. What wasn't typical was even those who had chosen a career path and began their observation and study of those jobs were in the regular class. Even those who had started their apprenticeships were there. Justus and Lyla sat in the far back corner. *Of course*, Kate thought. Quiet and cozy. Kate took a deep breath. She hated sitting up front, but she grabbed Tina's arm and dragged her up front. Aside from sitting right in front of the Justus and Lyla, there were only three open seats in the front. She couldn't imagine having to listen to them the entire class.

"Being studious today are we," Tina said taking the seat next to Kate.

"I'm not sitting by the lovebirds over there."

"I'm glad to see you have no more feelings toward Justus Lewis."

"Shut up. I'm over him."

"Denial, anger, denial, anger. Don't worry. It's normal to go back and forth, but you are far from acceptance sweetie."

Kate force out a sigh and a fake smile.

Peggy Blanch came strutting into class. This was normal, as she was one of the main teachers and she was a pompous sow, but following her was the man in black and the boy with the broad shoulders.

“Everyone, this is Dr. Soto. Not as in medical doctor, but as in Ph.D.”

Kate cringed inside when she heard the mocking tone come from Mrs. Blanch’s mouth when she said the latter part. Blanch wished she had a Ph.D., Kate thought.

“I have some very important matters to deal with today, some things that need my urgent attention. Mister, I mean, Dr. Soto will be teaching class for the day.”

He nodded toward Blanch with much more patience than Kate thought she would in a similar situation.

“So please be on your best behavior. Lyla, I will need you to come with me to be my assistant for the day.”

Kate turned around to see Lyla stand up, cheeks flushed and nod toward Justus. He whispered something to her, and she reluctantly walked out the door with her mother.

“Trouble in paradise?” Tina whispered to Kate.

Kate shrugged her shoulders and started to turn away, but Justus caught her eye. He was looking at her with laser focus. Their eyes connected and for a moment she let herself feel the sensation of their bond. The heart-pounding, every nerve in your body screaming, pulling, wanting, mind-blowing connection. Kate forced her eyes closed and sat forward in her chair.

This was going to be hard, she thought.

Tina whispered, “remember the anger.”

Kate made a fake fight face at her and they silently giggled.

“Hello, class. I’m Dr. Christopher Soto. You can call me Chris, just don’t tell your teacher,” he said with a wink. “This is Mr. Carlos Romero. He’s a student just like you and he will be joining your class today. Please take a seat Carlos,” he said gesturing to the empty seat next to Kate.

Tina cleared her throat loudly enough for Kate to hear.

“Just a little background on me, for undergrad I was a double major in History and Mexican American Studies with a minor in English. I went on to get an MFA in creative writing and then a Ph.D. in English. Throughout my education and experience, I’ve come to thoroughly believe that to know where we are going, we need to know where we came from.”

A boy in the class, Simon, who had long ago decided he wanted to do raised his hand.

Dr. Soto gestured to him. “Please introduce yourself.”

“I’m Simon. Just so you know, some of us know what we want to do. Some of us should be there now learning what WE are going to do, not sitting in some class learning about history that doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Gotcha. Let me ask you this. What are you planning on doing?”

“I’m going to be a chef, like cooking food, not reading and writing and stuff.”

“That’s a very important job, Simon. But let me ask you this, how do you know to cook for a well-balanced diet?”

“We have theses manuals...oh.”

“Yes, Simon, you must read.”

“How do you keep recipes? You write them, no?”

Simon nodded his head.

“And who writes the updates to manuals and creates new ones?”

“Other chefs.”

“You, Simon. Someday you will be writing manuals too. The culinary arts have a rich history, something worth studying. That being said, I have a sort of project for you all. You are going to research the history of something, anything. You will need to narrow down your topic to keep it specific, and you will write a five to six-page essay with your findings. You can even write about your own history. Where did your ancestors come from? What are your questions so far?”

Simon raised his hand again. Dr. Soto nodded for him to continue.

“How exactly are we going to do that? Our lab sucks, and they don’t like us there outside of class hours.”

“Glad you asked. You will each be given a computer to do the research. The laptops are being connected to the satellite as we speak and you will have access to government sites and archives.”

The students in the class began to chatter with the news. It’s not that they hadn’t used computers before. They had, but the use was limited to writing essays, typing practice, or pulling up archives if you were chosen as an assistant, at the one and only computer lab on base. They never got to take a laptop back to their barracks with them and be trusted with them. Only certain people with certain jobs got those.

“Okay class, I’m going to go check on our laptops. Why don’t you break into groups of four and start discussing some topic ideas.”

“Working with us new guy?” Tina said looking to Carlos.

Like he had a chance, Kate thought. Tina's doe eyes made almost impossible to tell her no. He sat up and a smile formed between his plump lips. His eyes matched his smile, soft and warm.

"If that's ok with your partner," he said.

Tina and Carlos looked to Kate. She nodded her head. She suddenly felt self-conscious. She quickly tried to extinguish any thoughts of him and tried to focus on the task at hand. Like he'd go for her anyway. He'd probably go for one of Lyla's pretty pretty friends, or someone like Tina.

Justus approached the three.

"Can we help you," Tina said through narrowed eyes.

"All the other groups are full."

Justus didn't take his gaze away from Kate, but she didn't look up. Carlos grabbed a chair.

"Here, man. Have a seat."

That self-conscious feeling Kate had earlier was now compounded by a seething burn. The kind that blistered on the surface and cut deep down.

"Kate, I need to talk to you...to explain-"

Kate held a hand up to Justus, purposely avoiding eye contact.

"Just give me a minute to-"

"No," Kate said quietly but firmly. She kept her gaze at the wall. "If I talk to you, I might, no, I know, I will blow up at you. Do not push me. I'll make a scene, and then word will get back to your precious fiancé. So, just stop."

Justus sat back in his chair. Kate noticed a slight smirk on Tina's face.

“So, Carlos, what’s your deal?” Tina asked.

“What do you mean?”

Tina slouched in her chair, put her feet sloppily on the desk and said “We don’t get too many brown people round these parts,” in her best southern accent, which happened to be awful.

“Huh?” Carlos seemed confused, but he flashed a bright smile that made Kate blush.

Kate composed herself. “She means, where you are from, how long are you going to be here, why are you here, your age, yada yada yada.”

Carlos was from Fort Lewis. He was a military brat who had a not so favorable opinion about military life. His mother and father dedicated their life to the service, but when Carlos was told he HAD to be somewhere or HAD to do something, it made him not want to do it just that much more. This was the reason he had found himself at Grissom Air Base in the middle of cornfields, Indiana. His parents talked, he heard, but he didn’t listen one too many times. It wasn’t that he didn’t comprehend what his parents were saying, but that, according to his mother, he was ‘too smart for his own good.’ His father thought a change of scenery and serving as, what Carlos called, the command’s “bitch boy” would do him some good.

“Parents, you know,” Carlos said with a scoff. “But Dr. Soto, he’s chill.”

He wouldn’t be able to return to Washington until after the commander’s tour was over, but he estimated they would be on the base for a few weeks.

At that, Dr. Soto entered the room with a few soldiers and a cart with laptops stacked on the shelves. Each one was numbered and each number was assigned to a specific student. This was the command’s way of tracing any unauthorized activity if it occurred. Dr. Soto demonstrated to the class how to access the archives, databases, and other sources for our research.

“Before you begin your research, I want to get a good idea of what everyone has planned for their project. I will be coming around to every table, to talk and meet with you. If you don’t know what to do yet, get brainstorming and talking it out with your group now.”

He approached Kate, Tina, Carlos, and Justus first. To Kate’s relief Justus went first. He said he wanted to research patient zero and how the virus that killed thousands upon thousands spread from one person to the other, not so much how the mosquitos spread it. But how it was passed from person to person. Of course, he’d pick the perfect topic, Kate thought. He would pick something that could lead to the betterment of mankind. Why did he always have to be so perfect, mister knight in shining armor. Dr. Soto and Justus were discussing his project, but Kate was stuck in her own thoughts. Ok, Kate, she told herself, remember the anger. He got engaged and didn’t tell you. And he flirted with you, knowing he was getting engaged, you should be fuming, not pining. She took a deep breath.

“And what might your name be?” Dr. Soto asked catching Kate off guard.

“Kate Merlo.” She cleared her throat.

“Ahhh. Ms. Merlo. I believe I met your brother earlier.”

Tina perked up in her chair at the thought of Marco.

“Of course, you did,” Kate said. She let out a sigh.

Dr. Soto raised a brow.

“It’s just that he always seems to be one step ahead of everyone around here,” Kate clarified.

“Smart boy from what I could tell,” Dr. Soto said.

“That’s him,” Tina chimed in. She immediately sat back in her chair.

“So, Ms. Merlo, what do you have in mind for your project?”

“I’m not really sure.” Kate hated that she had to go after Justus’s perfect pitch.

“You do too,” Tina said. She gave Kate a knowing look. “History of you, darling.”

Kate didn’t understand what she was getting at.

“Blackbirds,” Tina said.

This triggered an understanding for Kate.

“Come again,” Dr. Soto said eyeing the two girls.

“Apparently, blackbirds have something to do with my family history, or at least I think it does. It’s all a little confusing,” Kate said. She felt embarrassed by her little project compared to Justus’s, but Mr. Soto seemed to be interested in the idea.

“Like I said Ms. Merlo, it helps to know where you came from to understand where you are going. See what you can find and get back with me when you’ve fully developed your question.”

Tina said she wanted to research the effects childhood maternal separation had on people. She said it matter of factly. Kate didn’t know Tina could be so clinical about the subject, not after everything that happened.

“Interesting, interesting,” Dr. Soto said. He pinched his chin between his thumb and pointer finger. “Why that topic in particular, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Just seems interesting,” Tina said. Her face showed no emotion.

Carlos found out he wouldn’t be doing the project as he had other assignments he had to attend to. He scoffed at the news.

“I tried, man,” Dr. Soto said. He put an hand on Carlos’s shoulder as he stood. He dismissed their table.

“But we are supposed to be in class. We’ll get written up,” Kate said.

“Or worse,” Tina added.

“You are going to use your time wisely, and research, right?” Dr. Soto asked.

They nodded.

“Then go. If anyone has a problem with it, they can come see me. Carlos, the commander should be at the hydro-farm. Go check in with him to see what he needs. Let one of these guys show you where it is.”

Tina volunteered to take Carlos to the farm.

“Meet you back at your place, babe,” she looked back at Kate.

“Let me know if you need any help. I can be useful,” Carlos said. He flashed a perfect smile, and they walked the opposite direction toward the farm.

Carlos’s offer made Kate giddy, but for only a second, as she realized this meant she was walking back alone with Justus. She would need to remember to chew Tina out for this.

She took up a fast walking pace headed toward the barracks. Justus kept pace. Damn him and his long legs, Kate thought.

“So, blackbirds?”

Kate ignored Justus’s attempt at a conversation. He took Kate’s hand and slowed, forcing Kate to slow down as well. She felt the way her hand felt in his, small and safe.

“Is this how it’s going to be now? You just ignoring me forever, like we haven’t been a part of each other’s lives these last eight years.”

“You should have thought about that, before...”

Kate avoided eye contact, pulled her hand away from his, and picked her pace up once more.

Justus kept stride easily. “Before what?”

At this she stopped. She faced him. Her eyes gazed into his. “You know exactly what I mean.”

Justus’s shoulders slumped and lips turned down into a frown. “Kate,” he whispered.

She turned from him.

“Just talk to me, please.”

“I can’t.”

“This is just like you, you know.”

She spun around. “Excuse me?”

Justus raised his voice out of frustration. “This is what you do. You get upset, and then you don’t talk to the people you’re mad at. Instead, you just let it fester inside until you melt down.”

Kate took a deep breath. His words hit her like a punch to the gut, but only because she knew he was right. She whispered, “and what’s it to you?” She looked to the ground as she felt a tear form at the corner of her eye.

“Damn it. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He put his hand to her cheek and wiped the tear from her eye with the corner of his thumb. He gently lifted her gaze. “You were my best friend, Kate. I know, I know, I could never compete with Tina, but you were my absolute best friend.”

Kate smiled through tears. Justus cupped the other side of her face with his other hand. “Don’t you know how much you mean to me.” How much I love you, he thought, but couldn’t say.

Kate read it in his eyes. “But you are marrying a girl who hates me.”

Justus smiled at this. “She doesn’t hate you. She is jealous of you.”

“At what?” Kate scoffed.

“This,” he whispered.

Kate got lost in the sea of his blue of his eyes. He leaned closer to her. She felt his breath on her forehead. Her head tilted up toward his. Then, she heard the classroom door open. Justus

dropped his hands, and they began walking toward the barracks. The other students behind them were talking about their projects.

“It’s nice, you know,” Justus said.

Kate didn’t know if he was talking about the almost kiss, or the fact that he knows how to turn her into goo when she really should be smacking him across the face.

He seemed to register this on her face. “That people actually seem excited about a school project,” he clarified.

Usually they would spend the day in a one-room classroom with Blanch. They would have different people from engineering come to teach math and science classes, but that was only an hour and Blanch would stay the whole time to ‘keep everyone in line.’ Then, Blanch would teach English, History, or Sociology, depending on the day. The second half of the day was spent at the computer lab to doing self-paced lesson work for each subject. To Kate it seemed like the classes were just for show, because she only ever really learned something from the courses on the computer. They might as well just get rid of Blanch and stick with the lab. The only downside to the computer programs, was that they could make you or break you when you went to choose a job. If you wanted to do something in Engineering, you better have received an excellent on your math scores. And if you didn’t, you couldn’t take any computers with you back at the end of the day to redo any of the lessons. That was until today.

“Yeah, it is,” she smiled.

“I’m going to fix this Kate. I’m going to make things up to you.”

“It’s too late, Jus. You’re getting married,” she said quietly as to not be over heard.

“I’ve got an idea. I’ll show you, Kate. I promise.”

At that he turned and took off in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XI

ALL RIGHT NOW

Tina sat next to Kate on the couch while Kate typed furiously at the keyboard. Then she shut the laptop, let out a sigh, and looked to Tina.

“No luck?” Tina asked.

Kate shrugged her shoulders. “By the way, what took you so long?”

Tina had been delayed getting back to the barracks after she dropped Carlos off at the farm. When her and Carlos arrived, the commanders were at the other end of the farm. Tina desperately wanted to see Marco, but she wasn't about to have a run in with either one of them. Carlos offered to introduce her, but she declined. She offered to meet with him for dinner chow if wanted to sit with her and Kate. Instead, he said, “don't worry about me, I'll find you ladies later. But, don't worry, not in like a creepy way.”

She had started to leave when she heard a quiet whistle. She had turned to see Marco in the backroom where they kept the supplies. He motioned her over. Once she was inside, he quietly shut and locked the door.

“Hello, my Cristina.” He brushed back a dark strand from her face. He put his arms around her waist and pulled her into a bear hug as he growled and pretended to bite her shoulder. She let out a laugh.

“Marco, you're going to get us caught.”

“I’m sorry. Is this better?” He kissed her shoulder, then he planted another kiss next to that one, slowly making his way up to the nape of her neck.

She meant to ask him about the letter, she really did, but Marco’s kisses diverted her from any rational thinking. So much so, forty-five minutes had gone by before it dawned on her that Kate would be wondering what happened to her.

“Its’s time to tell her,” Marco said as he unlocked the door.

“I know. I will.”

Marco had peered outside the door. “All clear.”

She put her lips to his for a kiss and said, “today. I’ll tell her today.”

The image of his lips turned up in a crescent moon smile was seared in her mind.

Now sitting here with Kate, she had to figure out how she was going to tell her. She didn’t think telling her she was delayed because she had her tongue down her brother’s throat would be the best way.

“I was just showing new boy around,” she told Kate.

“Oh yeah?” Kate shimmied and winked at Tina.

Tina stared Kate down. “Not like that. But for you maybe.”

That’s just what I need, Kate thought. More distractions. If Justus wasn’t already pulling her attention away wasn’t enough.

“Just so you know, your little rendezvous with the new boy left me alone with you know who.”

“Oh, damn, Kate. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” Tina rarely thought clearly when it came to Marco. “Was it bad?”

“It was interesting.” Kate let out sigh and bit her fingernail.

“Interesting how?”

Kate shrugged, but didn't say anything. Here we go, Tina thought. Kate complains about an issue, then miss stubborn, miss avoidance doesn't want to talk about it. Tina took in a breath to calm her nerves. She could tell by Kate's reaction that she was being sucked back in by that deadshit. Why Kate put up with his bull, she never understood. Justus was like a virus to Kate. Even when she was asymptomatic, he was always there just lurking beneath the surface. But maybe if she found the proper anti-viral, perhaps Carlos. Although he may only be a temporary fix, it may be enough for Kate to realize she's better off without him.

“Forget him. I invited new boy to dinner chow with us.”

“I see what you're doing,” Kate said scolding.

Tina shrugged her shoulders.

“I will figure it out on my own.”

Tina stiffened. She'd always been there for Kate, and like always Kate closed herself off. “*Terca como una mula.*” Tina threw her hands in the air. “Kate, at least be honest with yourself. Justus is bad for you and you know it.”

Kate smiled. “It's so cute when you're mad and your Spanglish comes out.”

When Tina had come to the base, she spoke perfectly good Spanish, well, as good as any nine-year-old raised with Spanish speaking parents. She had a book about Selena. One half was Spanish the other half English. She would read the book time from time to keep up with her Spanish, but it was slipping more and more as the years went by. She felt that part of her slowly fading like the autumn leaves that lose their color and drift to the ground to become just another dead leaf. But that phrase, *terco como una mula*, Tina could never forget. She heard it in her mother's voice, at times in a whisper under her breathe and sometimes in a roar at her father. Her

father refused to go the doctor when he got sick, and his refusing to pay a lawyer more to fix *los papeles* he said they messed up in the first place, eventually led to him getting deported. But he never made it back to Mexico. His stomachache turned out to be an ulcer and he died from a GI bleed. “He might have been a mule, but he was my mule,” her mother would say.

Tina and Kate heard a knock on the door.

Tina shot Kate a look. “That better not be him.”

Kate shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

Tina rose from the couch and stormed toward the door. “I swear.”

She pulled the door open, and to her surprise Carlos’s bright smile was on the other side.

“Told you I would find you.” He winked. “I’m supposed to offer my help. So, here I am offering my help.”

At the sound of his voice, Kate glided toward the door on the balls of her feet to join Tina by the door.

“I think it is an excellent idea,” Tina said looking from Kate to Carlos.

“We can’t exactly work here. No boys allowed. Camp rules. You’ll be thrown to the mosquitos, and we really wouldn’t want that.” Kate said.

Tina was pleasantly surprised by the flirtation she heard in Kate’s voice.

“So where to?” Tina asked.

“I know a place,” Carlos replied.

CHAPTER XII

JUST WHAT I NEEDED

Kate and Tina followed Carlos down to the entrance of the farm.

“So, we’re supposed to work with the stinky algae?” Kate said raising an eyebrow.

It was, after all, a quiet area. The only people that really spent time there were those that worked there, which was only a few people including Marco, and maybe some of the cooks when they were preparing the monthly menus. Not to mention it was getting close to dinner chow, so the farm was empty. Marco never missed a meal. The end of the hallway leading to the farm was covered by sheets of plastic. It seemed to Kate that the farm had been in constant construction and expansion since day one.

“Just wait here,” Carlos said with a smirk. He went through the farm’s door. A few minutes later the plastic sheet to the left of the door was pulled back and Carlos waved the girls in.

“Where did you... how did you?” Tina asked pointing to the farm door and back to Carlos.

The girls entered. The corridor was dark, and when Carlos let go of the plastic sheet and replaced the plywood board that blocked the passage, they could barely see a thing. The only visible light came from the end of the corridor.

“What are you trying to pull here, new boy?” Tina asked.

Carlos take the girls hands and put one on the back of each of his shoulders. Kate felt cuts of his strong muscles underneath his shirt. It reminded her of Justus's strong build. Carlos was shorter by a few inches, so she only had to lift her hands a couple of inches above her shoulders to reach his. He led them down the shadowy passage. Kate kept her left hand on his shoulder and the right on the cold cement wall to her right to guide her. As she approached the end of the corridor, Kate saw the source of light was coming from behind a plastic sheet that replaced the wall she had been using as a guide. She pulled it back to reveal a large room that was lit by a lantern. The room was empty except for some plastic crates and boxes. Kate realized they were on the other side of the farm.

“What is the place?”

“It's for the bees,” Tina said. “Marco was saying that-”

“When did you talk to Marco about bees?”

“Well, you know I was going to shadow him for the day, and he brought up the construction. And then we got on the topic.”

“Don't we already have enough hives for our camp?”

“You both are missing two major points,” Carlos said. “A. you have to think beyond the actual honey for this camp, and two, this here is the perfect place to get away.”

“You mean b.” Kate corrected.

“Ay Dios mio.” Carlos said. But then he flashed a smile at Kate.

“This is actually pretty great.” Tina said as she looked around. “Until they decide to come finish their work and find some teenagers doing teenager things.”

“It’s temporary, but it’s somewhere,” he said. “Besides, it will be a couple of weeks before they get all the supplies they need and the plans are finalized and signed off. And if we only come in the evenings, we should be good.”

“So, they plan on making our base a honey factory?” Kate asked.

“Of sorts.” Carlos laughed.

Kate and Tina looked at Carlos with confusion.

“They aren’t just using this area for the bees. Your brother is one of the best growers alive. He’s got all kinds of herbs and shit. Mix it together, ferment it, and you’ve got?”

“Alcohol,” Tina said.

“Specifically, mead,” Carlos said.

“How do you know all of this?” Kate asked.

“Hey, there are some perks to being the commander’s bitch boy.”

The three sat and discussed the rules of the secret hideout. Firstly, to be secret, it had to be, well, secret. They had to keep the circle small. They could invite someone, but only someone who knew how to keep their trap shut, and it had to be approved by the other members. Secondly, they had to use the space to at least get some research done. That was Kate’s rule. So far, her research had only gotten her as far as finding out about the larva that sometimes plagued the blood of blackbirds. That was far from what she was looking for. And the third and most important rule, never get caught. They could use the hideout when needed, but they had to be smart and keep the noise level down.

And that was how it went for the first couple of days. The three had kept their hideaway a secret. Carlos helped Kate and Tina with their projects. Carlos had also helped keep Kate’s mind off of Justus for the most part. Tina had gone to sneak food from the dining facility to bring back

for the three of them, and Carlos stayed behind with Kate to work on her research. He had acquired some wool blankets for them to sit on. The two were sitting side by side when Carlos placed a hand on Kate's leg and Kate didn't move it. Instead, she looked at him and smiled. She found she liked the softness of gaze. It wasn't that intense, dizzying look she got from Justus. Instead, his eyes made her feel warm and relaxed. He made her feel so relaxed that she actually talked to him about her family, their trips to Washington, how she used to do ballet, and the letter. After all, if he was going to help, he had to know what they were really dealing with. The ease in which she talked to Carlos surprised Kate. She'd spent so much time avoiding talking about her life before the lockdown. She'd been afraid that everything she kept safely filed away in the confines of the boxes she created inside her mind would come erupting out, burning her and everyone around her. But it was just a slow trickle releasing the pressurized steam. He rubbed her knee. She turned to face him.

"Your eyes," he said.

"What about my eyes?"

"There are just so many colors." He put a hand to her face, his finger touching the hair at the nape of her neck. "They are green with specs of gold and bright brown starbursts around your pupils."

She leaned closer to him, but they backed away from each other when they heard crinkling of the plastic sheet as Tina walked in.

"Figure out anything else?" Tina asked. She sat the bags of goodies down in front of them and grabbed a blanket. They had been meeting every day after classes, taking a break to have a face to face with the adults in their lives, and then going back until curfew. One thing was clear from their research; Kate's last name in Italian meant blackbird. From that discovery, they

had determined that blackbird blood meant Merlo blood. Had her father simply meant that their lineage was strong? Was it really just about family pride? But what Kate didn't expect to see was her family's entrance records on the local database. There were three files under her last name: hers, her brother's and her mother's. These files, however, needed special credentials to access, and even Carlos couldn't come up with a good plan to get to the files.

"Like it matters anyway," Kate said. "We share the Merlo blood. That's it. Nothing mystical about that."

"But what did he have to do?" Tina asked.

"And we are back at square one." Kate sighed.

They heard the rustle of the plastic sheet. They looked to each other, but they all had the same expression of fear and confusion. This is it, Kate thought. They were going to be suspended for sure.

"You kids shouldn't be back here!"

"Marco!" Kate said.

He pulled back one side of the plastic and peered at the three of them.

"What are you doing here?" Tina asked.

"I could ask the same to you."

"We are doing homework," Kate said.

"She's not lying, man," Carlos added.

Marco walked toward them. He extended a hand out to Carlos.

"How ya doin, man?" Marco said.

They slapped hands.

"So, what, you guys are like bros or something?" Tina asked.

“What are you guys doing back here?”

Kate stiffened. She hadn't talked to Marco about the letter. In all fairness, he's the one that walked away and never brought it back up. It had been days since she'd given him the letter, and he'd never even asked about hers. It was Tina who interrupted the silence.

“It's Kate's letter, Marco.”

Marco chuckled. “It's just like him to tell his stories all the way from the grave.”

“What are you talking about?” Kate looked at him wide-eyed.

He's gone completely nuts, she thought. But he nudged Tina's shoulder for her to scoot over and he sat down next to her.

“The story in his letter. He told me the same story one day when we were fishing. That guy was always telling stories.”

Kate didn't understand how Marco seemed so calm, collected, and happy. Since finding the letters she'd bitten all her nails down to the nub.

“I didn't exactly get a story, Marco.”

Kate handed the letter to Marco.

“Just read it.”

After Marco read the letter, they explained everything they had figured out.

“It makes more sense now,” he said. “The story he left for me.”

“What story, Marco?”

CHAPTER XIII

DAYS OF THE MERLA

Marco, my boy. Do you remember the time we went fishing and I told you the story of the Merla? This story has been passed down for many generations in our family and carries with it our Italian heritage. I hope someday you will pass it on to your own children.

The Merla, or blackbird hen, used to be white. That's right, all the blackbirds were in fact not black at all. January was a cold and bitter foe, but one season she remained mild. And when the month was almost over, the Merla began to sing her songs of joy, for February would be arriving. In her bitterness, January despised the bird's singing. Because of her annoyance with the bird's singing, January brought about freezing temperatures and high winds. In her spite, she even stole one day from February. To survive January's blows, the merla hid in a chimney. When the winds died down and the sun peeped out, the merla came out of hiding. She survived, but had turned black from the soot. She was altered, but showed enduring strength against her adversary. And that, son, is the story of us, of our family. We may go through troubled times, but our blood is strong. We have the blackbird blood.

CHAPTER XIV

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Tina had really meant to tell Kate about her and Marco, but things just kept getting in the way: Justus, Carlos, research, repeat. As the days went by, it got harder and harder to fess up, not to mention the new members of their club house hanging around. Carlos made friends with Simon, who brought his friends. They were sworn to secrecy, but the more people who knew, the bigger chance they had of getting caught. Tina didn't understand why it was a big deal that they had a place of their own. Actually, she did understand. Control. The officials at the base had the biggest sticks up their derrieres. However, it made things easier that Marco was in the know of the hideout, because he could give them a heads up if and when work would resume. What made things more difficult was that Marco had shared with them a batch of the mead he'd made. Marco, Kate, and Tina had been good about a small drink here or there, but Carlos seemed to enjoy more than just a sip. And when Simon and his buddies started coming, they had to be rationed.

That is what took Tina to the farm office that day. She'd went to tell Marco that she didn't think he should be providing them with his elixir.

"Let's just keep it between the three us, k?" She put her fingers through his hair.

"K," he said. "For now. But when we get the supplies we need, they are ready for us to start production. This is going to be big. Just think of all the possibilities!"

"Hun, I'm glad you are excited, but-"

“Cristina, just think about it. They want us to produce this for more than just our base. This will be all over. Colonel Smithers loved my last batch.”

“But is that a good thing?” Tina put her hand on Marco’s bicep.

“Very good, my dear. The more we fly out the more flights that come in, bringing us supplies.”

“That’s great, but how would you even fly it all out? We don’t have the fuel here for that many flights.”

“They could send us the fuel. We are talking a huge trade system here, babe.” He pulled her closer to him.

“But isn’t that dangerous? Every time someone goes outside the walls it’s a risk,” Tina said.

Their bodies were pressed close to each other.

“We have precautions, dear. They wouldn’t start doing this if it wasn’t safe.”

Tina wished she had as much faith in their leaders as he did.

Marco gently brushed Tina’s long, brown locks behind her ear. “I like this, you know. That we can talk about things, important things and still be this close to each other. I love your mind.”

He was looking intently at her. When he looked at her like this, Tina knew she was in the presence of a man who truly saw her. He saw her strengths, her flaws, her brokenness, and the love in her heart, and he only seemed to care more for her.

“I love you, Marco.”

Tina had only ever spoken those three words to her parents and Kate. She thought it would have been harder to share her feelings in this way with someone. But, with Marco, it came naturally.

He pressed his lips to her and then he whispered “I love you more.”

Tina couldn’t remember a more perfect moment in her life, if only they had remembered to lock the door. Tina’s back was to the door, but the way Marco stiffened and jolted away told her someone had seen them. She turned to see Justus. Oh great, she thought. I’d rather have Charles Manson as a life coach than explain this to him.

Without missing a beat, Marco put his hand out to shake Justus’s.

“What’s up man?”

Justus looked from Marco to Tina, back to Marco.

“I, ummm, well wanted to talk to you about the thing, but I can come back later.” He fidgeted.

“No, yeah, man. We’re all good to go.”

“Tomorrow, then?” Justus’s face relaxed. He seemed relieved. “I’ll just catch you guys, later then.” He turned to walk out the door.

Tina looked to Marco and nodded toward Justus.

“What?” he mouthed.

Tina rolled her eyes. “Hold up. I’ll walk with you, Justus.”

CHAPTER XV

SWEET EMOTION

Justus and Tina walked past the herbs on their way toward the entrance to the farm. Hints of chamomile, basil, and rosemary filled the air. The lavender, however, grew bigger than the rest. Its smell wafted through the air. This relaxed Justus enough to break the ice.

“So, what’s up?”

“You’re not going to say anything are you? You know, about what you saw.”

“I didn’t see anything. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it. Just because I’m with Lyla doesn’t mean I’m going to nark to command.”

“Screw those guys, that’s not what I mean.”

Justus looked at her blankly.

“I haven’t told Kate yet, ok. I need to be the one to tell her.” She twirled one of her long locks with her fingers.

“Yeah. I don’t think that will be a problem. I’m pretty sure she’s avoiding me.” He felt the swell of guilt and hurt and love rising up from inside. He stretched his hands to the ceiling and let out a loud sigh.

Tina stood still. “What the hell is going on with you?”

Justus stopped walking, but he didn’t turn to face her. He stared ahead focusing on the algae on the other side of the room. What was going on with him was something Justus knew he would soon have to face. His mother’s return hadn’t quite been the family reunion he’d been

expecting. Engagement plans on a wedding he didn't want was moving full speed ahead. He was only eighteen for Christ's sake. And then there was Kate. She'd been his friend and confidant, his secret keeper and now the person he loved. The absence of Kate left him feeling more alone than when his mother left. He couldn't exactly talk to Lyla. So, there he stood.

Tina moved to stand in front of Justus. He was stone-faced but he felt a tear start to escape, and the look on Tina's face told him she saw it too.

He turned his face and made himself cough, trying to nonchalantly wipe the tear away. He cleared his throat and continued walking.

"Boys."

He heard Tina say this under her breath followed by sigh.

"Wait up," Tina said unenthusiastically.

He heard her quick footsteps coming up from behind him. Just hold it together. You're not a weak ass punk, he thought.

"What's going on?"

Justus took a deep breath.

"You're engaged, Justus, to someone not Kate. Just let her go."

"I can't."

Tina stiffened. She closed her eyes, took a breath, opened them and said, "She's not your damn side chick. She deserves more than that."

Justus shook his head. "Don't you think I know that."

He pushed his fingers through his hair.

"She deserves the world," he said.

Tina's posture softened.

“Well, at least we can agree on that,” she said. “Listen, I need to talk to Kate about some things, so I can show you where she is.”

Justus smiled.

“But, like I said, I need to talk to her. So only for a minute, ok?”

“Deal,” he said.

CHAPTER XVI

TINY DANCER

Kate was dancing. She'd forgotten how free he made her feel. She felt the load she'd been carrying lighten with every turn and leap.

When she'd arrived to the hideout, Carlos was already there. When she said hello, he held up a cd player.

"I just borrowed it from the rec room. I'm sure it will find its way back in due time."

Kate had shaken her head at him.

"It's for you, anyway."

"For what?"

"You said you did ballet, right? Well, here you go. Show me your moves."

Carlos pushed play and the melody of "All Right Now," by Free quietly sounded from the speakers.

"You want me to do ballet to this?" Kate giggled.

"I know it's not Chopin or Mozart or whatever, and we can't turn it up any higher, but come on, give it a try." Carlos had started doing the robot.

"Okay, okay, just stop doing whatever you are doing right now. It's hurting my eyes."
She'd laughed.

Kate listened to the music and started gliding to the beat. As she relaxed into the melody, the muscle memory took over, and she was dancing again. She saw Carlos staring at her. She stopped.

“Don’t you know it’s rude to stare?”

“Don’t stop.” He walked toward her.

“Do that jump thingy where you kick your legs out and I’ll lift you up.”

“A leap?”

“Whatever, you know what I mean.”

Kate showed him how he should walk beside her in order to lift her the right way. He placed his hands on her waist. Kates heart picked up pace. He counted out loud to three. Kate felt his pull as she jumped, but then she panicked. She put her hands on his and stiffened her legs. He lowered her gently.

“Relax,” he said, his hands still on her waist. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Okay, okay. Let’s do it again.”

Kate drew in a breath. He counted out to three, and she jumped, letting Carlos lift her higher than she’d be able to go on her own. Her legs reaching to opposites of the room, toes pointed. When she lowered, she turned around to face him. He was still holding her waist.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She heard a cough by the entrance and turned to see Tina and Justus looking at them. She pushed back from Carlos and went to shut the music off. When she looked back to Tina and Justus, she saw his pallid, expressionless face. She’d seen that face before the day his mother left.

It was Tina who broke the awkward silence.

“Kate I need to talk to you, girl to girl, if you know what I mean.” She looked to Carlos.

“I gotta go check in, anyways. But, I’ll be back later.” He picked up the radio and when exited the room, Justus didn’t move. He was like a boulder. Carlos had to maneuver around his body.

“Whatever, man,” Carlos said walking away down the corridor.

“Posturing, really?” Tina said to Justus.

Kate walked toward them.

“What’s up, T?”

“Well, I need to talk to you about something important, and it has to happen today. No boy distractions or research distractions, just you and me. But, I told peacock boy over here I’d give him a minute.” She said this last part puffing out her chest.

“That’s okay,” he said. “There’s something I need to do. After chow, k?”

He didn’t wait for an answer.

The girls grabbed some blankets from the corner of the room and sat. Tina made Kate promise she wouldn’t completely loose her lid, but that otherwise she could react however she needed to. Kate motioned Tina to hurry up and get to the point.

“It’s Marco,” she said.

“Is he ok? What’s wrong?”

Tina put a hand up to calm her.

“It’s not about what’s wrong, but what’s right? I mean, he’s in the right way with someone, if you know what I mean.”

“My brother has a girlfriend?” Kate laughed. “What’s wrong with the girl?”

“I dunno, she’s smart, beautiful, witty, lots of fun, and has the most understanding best friend on the planet.” Tina batted her eyelashes at Kate.

“Oh my God! You’re seeing my brother!”

“I know I should have said something soo-”

Kate pulled Tina into a hug and squeezed her tight. Then she put her hands on her shoulders and looked at her.

“You’re going to be my sister, someday.”

“Oh, Lort. Here we go.” Tina rolled her eyes. “So you’re not mad at me?”

“Not in the slightest.” Kate put an arm around Tina. “Now tell me everything. Okay, maybe not everything, but the important non-gross stuff.”

Tina gave Kate the highlights, and the reason she’d gotten in trouble for being out way passed curfew was because she had been with Marco.

“Which made him feel terrible,” she added.

Somewhere the conversation took a turn and it was Kate’s turn to spill.

“What’s up with you and Carlos?” Tina asked.

Kate told her how Carlos made her feel comfortable and how he had and is still helping her remember who she was before everything became so complicated. When she was with him her helped her stop thinking about Justus.

“Like a band-aid,” Tina added.

“I guess you could say that,” Kate said.

“Band-aids don’t fix bullet holes. You said he helps you stop thinking about Justus. But, in order to figure out this thing with Justus you need to talk to Justus.”

“Can I just take an icepick to the bicep?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying y’all need to be together, but it’s better to air things out, don’t you think?”

Marco appeared from the other side of the plastic sheet.

“I didn’t see y’all at chow, so I brought you something to eat.”

Tina stood, walked toward Marco and kissed him.

He looked to Kate who was scrunching her nose. “You told her?”

Tina nodded at Marco. He sat the bag of food down, wrapped his arms around Tina and lifted her off the ground. They laughed and Kate thought she’d never heard anything so pure.

The three sat and ate and talked. And for a brief moment everything was just right, but when Carlos arrived to the hideout, so did the chaos of the evening. He made the announcement that something was going down outside the chow hall.

“Your buddy, Justus, well him and his girl were going at it. Well, more like she was giving it to him. Screaming and crying, the whole nine. I got out of there, quick. That shit’s too dramatic for me.”

Tina and Kate looked to one another.

“No? he didn’t, did he?” Kate said to Tina.

Tina grimaced.

Simon and his friends Gill and Theo came in carrying canteens. They stumbled as they entered. Tina poked Marco in the arm.

“Ouch. I didn’t give it to them.” He scooted away from her. “They must have taken it last night.”

“You guys are going to get us caught and get Marco in trouble,” Tina scolded.

“Chill, princess.”

Tina started to stand, but Marco grabbed her hand. “They won’t get any more. I promise.”

“Just sit down, and please just try to keep it down,” Tina huffed.

Simon turned the flask upside down. “I’m empty anyways.”

The three of them stumbled to the ground looking up to the ceiling.

“I think I can see the stars through the ceiling,” Gill laughed.

“This is your fault,” Tina said pointing to Carlos. “You brought them here in the first place.”

“I thought the dudes were gonna be chill. How was I supposed to know?”

“Guys, they can chill here until curfew. It will be fine,” Kate said.

And if that wasn’t enough Justus arrived putting the whipped cream on the chaos sundae.

“Kate, I need to talk to you, please.”

His face was red and his eyes were strained.

Tina nodded to Kate.

“Okay, yeah, sure,” Kate said.

She walked to Justus. He glared at the three boys lying on the floor.

“Are they okay?”

“Yeah, it’s a really long story.”

Justus picked the flask up off the floor and sniffed at it.

“Gah, what is this.”

“Uh, mead. They weren’t supposed to have anymore, but…” Kate gestured to the boys on the ground.

And that's when that's when the cherry of the chaos sundae arrived. Lyla peeled the plastic sheet to the side.

“What the hell are you guys doing back here?”

She took the room in.

“Lyla, what are you doing?” Justus implored.

“I followed you, you idiot. I should have known, as soon as you break off our wedding, you'd come see this little wench.” Lyla pointed at Kate.

At this Tina stood up. And walked toward them

“Hey, bitch. What's your problem?” Tina said.

“Hey, hey, hey, princess showdown,” Simon said hitting Gill in the leg. Half asleep Gill moaned.

“What's wrong with them?” Lyla questioned. She looked at the boys lying on the ground, the looks on the other's faces and the canteen in Justus's hand. She grabbed it and sniffed. She cackled. “Just great. Just wait till I tell daddy about all of you.” She stormed off.

“Great, just great, Justus. Now I'm really gonna get thrown out to the bloodsuckers.”

“Damnit. I'll stop her. Just give me a minute.” Justus said as he ran after her.

They decided the best course of action would be for everyone to get scarce. Kate and Tina walked back to the barracks while Carlos and Marco walked the guys to the farm office to give them a little time to sober up.

CHAPTER XVII

CHASING CARS

Kate was pleasantly surprised when she woke the next day and her and the rest of the group hadn't been hauled off to receive whatever punishment the commander found fit. The day went almost perfectly. She'd had breakfast with her mother. Tina and Marco came over and they played euchre with Kate and her mother. They even told her mother about their relationship to which she exclaimed, "sweetie, I already consider you part of the family."

Despite how perfectly the day had been going, Kate had a nagging feeling that something was coming. With everything that happened the night before, there would surely be some type of fallout. She acknowledged this feeling and decided to just wait it out. She'd come to conclusion that the truth always rises to the surface, and sometimes it can't be forced, it just has to unfold when it's time.

While they were at dinner chow, Colonel Smithers had entered the dining facility. He was accompanied by the Blanches, Dr. Soto, and Carlos. Kate tried to wave at him, but he kept his head forward, looking solemn. Kate's mom looked at the group and stood.

"I've got to go, kids."

"You okay, mom?" Kate asked.

"Just a headache. I'll be fine."

She sped toward the exit.

"Is it just me, or was that weird?" Kate asked Marco and Tina.

“Mom works hard. She probably just needs time to herself,” Marco said. “Besides, it’s almost time.”

“Time for what?” Tina asked.

“You’ll see.” Marco smiled.

Marco led them to the doors that led to the building’s exit.

“Are we?” Tina asked Marco.

Marco nodded his head.

“No freaking way!” Tina jumped in Marco’s arms.

“What’s going on?” Kate asked.

“We are going out!” Tina jumped.

“Shhh,” Marco said putting a finger to Tina’s lips.

Kate pointed the doors. “Like out there, out there?”

Marco nodded.

Kate wasn’t sure how she felt about this. She knew for Marco it wasn’t a big deal. He’d been outside more times than he could count working on the farm’s expansion, but this was the first time she’d been outside in eight years. She felt like she needed more time to prepare herself, but she followed Marco and Tina to the small room that held the mosquito suits. As she entered the room, she saw a man suited up, standing in the corner. He turned around and realized it was Justus.

“What are you doing here?”

He smiled at her and she felt her cheeks flush.

“It was his idea,” Marco said.

Marco handed Tina and Kate each a coat.

“Bundle up. It will probably be cold out there.”

They put the coats on then Marco took them through the steps of donning the suit. Marco helped Tina zip her hood while Justus helped Kate. Even with all the layers on, his touch made her heart race. Kate looked up at him.

“Beautiful,” he said. His voice was playful, but his thoughtful eyes told another story. “I told you I’d do something to make it up to you.”

They double checked each other’s suits and met two guards by the door. Marco handed them the paper authorizing the expedition.

“The reason for today’s expedition?” one of the guards asked Marco.

“Apprenticeship opportunity, signed by Colonel Smithers himself.”

Tina, Justus, and Kate looked to Marco.

“What can I say. I impress with my farming skills.”

The guard looked at the paper and motioned to the other guard to open the door. He pressed the button next to the door. Kate heard the sound of the vacuum and the door clicked three times before it opened. On the other side was another an empty cement walled room. The chemical smell made it hard to breathe. As they entered Marco suggested they held their breath. The other door was then sealed behind them.

“You ready?” Marco asked them.

They nodded. He put his hand to the red button on the wall and pushed it. Kate heard the vacuum sound again and the door clicked three times before it slid open.

The sun had already set, so the sky was dark, but flood lights offered them some visibility. As they walked outside, Kate felt the crunching of snow underneath her boots. As they walked outside the room, Marco pressed another button and the doors closed behind them. Kate

took a deep breath. The cold air made her nose run. She looked to the star filled sky and marveled at the full moon. She felt something hit her left arm. She looked over to see Justus laughing with another snowball in his hand. She loved it when he laughed like that, pure, uninhibited joy. He packed the other snowball and chucked it at Marco. In response to this Tina stuck her hands in the snow, packed a ball together and said, “No one messes with my man,” and threw it at Justus. And that’s how Kate’s first snowball fight happened. They played until they couldn’t throw anymore and then they attempted to make what Kate called snow angels in suits. Justus grabbed her hand and pulled her up. He motioned for her to follow him.

“Not too far,” Marco said. “Stay within the spray zone.” He pointed to the orange poles that went around the building. He cozied up next to Tina in the snow.

Kate felt herself being pulled to Justus.

The snow crunched under her feet, and when she reached him, she could see him smiling at her from behind his hood.

They stayed close to the building as they made their way around the corner. He turned towards her and cupped his hands over her gloves.

“I’ve missed you.” Even with his hood on, Kate could see the sincerity in his eyes.

“I’ve missed you too, but I totally have frozen snot on my face.”

Justus laughed. He looked around and pointed to an old glass bus shelter covered in ice.

“Should we go over there? It looks like it might be out of the spray zone.” Kate pointed to the orange pole that stood where the bus shelter began.

“It’ll be fine,” he said.

He took Kate's hand and began running. His long legs had no trouble getting through the inches of snow, but Kate's legs kept getting stuck. If he hadn't been holding her hand, she would have fallen.

Justus wrapped his arms around Kate and pulled her into the empty bus stop. The ice surrounded the shelter, making beautifully patterned igloo just for two. He put his hands around her waist.

"I need you in my life," he said.

"What about Lyla? Justus, you were getting married."

"I need to tell you something, but I'm afraid you are going to think I'm an awful person."

"Never," said Kate.

Justus told her how his feelings for Lyla had changed long ago, but with them working to get his mother back to the base, he'd felt guilty breaking up with Lyla. Then they moved the engagement up and he'd felt like he couldn't say anything.

"I really did love her, but-"

"Your first love isn't always the one," Kate finished. "And it doesn't help living in a place that if you've so much as gotten in a little spat with your mother, the whole community knows."

Kate realized she'd been so stuck in her own head, she hadn't even asked him about having his own mother home.

"It wasn't quite the homecoming I was expecting," he replied when she asked.

He told her about how his mother and father had barely spoken to each other and how even he was having a hard time connecting to her.

“I don’t know, Kate. It’s like she doesn’t even want to be a mom. Like she was happier when she was away.” He stared at the patterns of ice surrounding them.

Kate put a hand on his arm. “I’m sure that’s not true. You know it’s probably an adjustment for her too.”

He seemed to ponder this, but when he looked back to her he said they had probably needed to get going. When Kate started to leave the shelter, he pulled her back to him.

“There is something I want to do first.”

He reached behind his neck and unzipped his hood.

“What are you doing?” Kate yelled.

“It’s fine, Kate.” He smiled. “There aren’t any bugs out here. It’s the middle of winter.”

With his hood off she could better see the blues in his eyes. He reached behind her neck and unzipped her hood. Kate pulled it off and looked up to Justus. He leaned in closer to her.

“Frozen snot, remember,” she said.

He stroked her hair.

“I don’t care. Do you even know how beautiful you are?”

He pressed his lips to hers. She felt the warmth of his lips and his hands around her waist. She wrapped her arms around him and leaned into him.

He pulled back to look at her. “I can’t ever lose you, Kate.” She wrapped her hands around his neck. He picked her up by the legs and wrapped them around his body.

“You won’t,” she said.

“Kate, your nose is freezing. Let’s get you back.”

He gently let her go and started to don his hood. Kate grabbed her hood off the ground when she felt something sting the back of her neck. She swatted at it, and the realization of what just happened hit her.

“Justus!” she yelled.

He looked to her. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been bitten.”

Kate went into panic mode. “Oh God, oh God, oh God, please.”

Justus looked at her neck. He zipped her hood and grabbed her hand. “Let’s go, Kate. Now!”

They ran back to the doors. Tina and Marco were waiting for them.

“Where have you guys been,” Marco scolded.

“She got bitten.”

“Wait, what? Katie, are you ok?” Marco grabbed his sister’s shoulders.

“I don’t know, I think so.”

“Where? Was it a mosquito?”

It dawned on Kate that she could have been bitten by something else. But Justus’s words confirmed her fears.

“It looked like a mosquito bite,” Justus said with tears in his eyes. “On her neck.”

Marco looked from Justus to Kate and back to Justus. He kicked the ground. “You guys are idiots. Damn it.” Marco paced back and forth. “Genetically modified mosquitos, emphasis on modified. What the hell were you thinking.”

“I’ll take her to my dad. He’ll know what to do,” Justus said.

Tina just stared at Kate. Tears were swelling in her eyes.

“They won’t let her in if she’s been bitten. They will think she’ll infect everyone,” Tina sobbed.

“So, we won’t tell anyone. I know my dad will help us.”

They nodded their heads.

“Act natural,” Marco said as he pushed the button to open the doors.

They entered the room and Marco instructed them to hold their breath. When the door closed, the sprayers turned on covering their suits with the bug killer, then Kate heard the familiar vacuum sound and the clicking that opened the doors. After getting back into the building, Kate’s heart and mind were racing. Everything blurred together. When they had returned their suits, Justus hugged her close to him.

“It’s all my fault. I’m so sorry, Kate.”

“Stop. It’s going to be fine.” She wasn’t sure she believed it.

Marco and Tina took her to the medical office while Justus went to get his father.

Dr. Lewis took Kate to an exam room. He wore a gown, mask, gloves, and eye shield. He looked at her bite and did his assessment.

“Unfortunately, it does look like a mosquito bite,” he said.

Kate’s breathing quickened.

“Try to relax, we don’t know anything yet.”

“Relax? Are you kidding me?” she said.

“I’m going to run some blood tests, ok. Let’s just wait for the results.”

Kate started to sob. He hugged her.

“I’m going to give you a little something to help you relax and sleep, ok?”

Kate nodded through her tears. He unlocked the drawer to the med cart and handed her a white pill and a canteen of water. She took the pill and laid down. He took three vials of blood from her arm and covered the area with gauze.

“Listen, I’m not going to lecture you right now, and I’m going to keep this quiet until we find out the results.”

“And then?”

“We’ll figure it out when get there, ok?”

Kate nodded her head.

“For now, if anyone asks, you just have a stomach bug, but Marco is going to have to tell your mom what is really going on.”

“She’s just going to freak.”

“Get some rest. I’ll be staying here in the office tonight just in case you need anything.”

He opened the door to see Justus, Marco, and Tina waiting impatiently.

“Is she going to be okay?” Justus asked looking over his father’s shoulders to see Kate.

Mr. Lewis blocked the door. “We will have to see. You kids need to get going.”

“Can’t we see her?” Justus asked.

Mr. Lewis shook his head and placed an isolation paper to the door.

“Give this to her please,” Marco said. He handed Mr. Lewis a change of clothes for Kate and the photo she kept at her bedside. He put in on a chair inside the room.

“We love you, Kate,” Tina yelled.

“I’m very disappointed in you kids,” Mr. Lewis said as he shut the door. And Kate was alone.

CHAPTER XVIII

ENTER SANDMAN

Kate couldn't remember a time she had ever felt so exhausted. She sat at the edge of the bed and held the family photograph, the only picture she had of her father. She wondered if she'd still remember his face without it. She put her head down on the bed and squeezed the photograph tight against her chest. She closed her tear-brimmed eyes. She whispered through rapid breaths, "please daddy, help me. Please I need you. God, I need you." She sniveled. "GOD PLEASE!" She released the last of her control, and the tears fled from her eyes with every compulsive gasp. "God, I know it's been a long time, but need you. Help me, please!" After some time, her sobs began to quiet, and Kate entered a deep sleep.

In her dream she saw herself sitting at picnic table. It was as if she was floating somewhere outside looking in. She saw the tall trees through the dark of night. The setting looked familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. Then she saw park ranger approached her.

"Young lady, where are your parents?" the ranger asked as she shone her flashlight on Kate's mud and blood covered boots.

She saw herself pull a blanket tight around her body.

"I don't know," dream Kate whispered.

"Can you tell me how you got all the way out here to Stewart Island, honey?" the park ranger asked shifting her hips to the other side. "Are you alone? How old are you? How long have you been out here?"

Kate came to the realization she was seeing herself at the San Juan Islands, the place that held so many memories of her father. She wanted to poke herself. *Talk, Damn!* But it was as if she was screaming a tv screen. She wanted to make herself jump, move, speak, do something, but she had no control.

The ranger unclipped her radio from her hip. “Can you send medical up here? I’ve got a girl, I’d say around sixteen years of age, may be in shock, tell ‘em to bring more blankets.” She clipped the radio back onto her belt. “Did you paddle out here all alone? I saw two kayaks and a motorboat on the bank, both those yours? Where are your friends?”

“I DON’T KNOW, I DON’T KNOW, I DON’T KNOW,” dream Kate yelled.

In her dream, Kate woke up to the sun rising and the bird singing. The blues and grays of the everlasting sea lapped back and forth like a serene song. The fir trees expanded to the sky, humbling all who walked among them. She felt free.

“The guy clearly said we needed to be at Gossip Island at midnight,” Tina said.

“You are going to trust some random fedora wearing dude?” Marco said.

“He obviously knew something, Marco,” Tina replied.

“Marco, Tina is right,” Kate said.

Kate then found herself, Tina, and Marco standing on Gossip Island. She remembered its distinct characteristics. The tiny island sheltered some marine life, but its uneven terrain and small size made it uninhabitable to camp overnight. They searched the island, for what, Kate did not know. She kept walking up and down the hill forgetting each time why she was there.

She then found herself on Stewart Island in the exact same place her family had taken the photograph. Justus came from around a tree. Even in her dreams she felt her heart pulled toward him. He took her hand. His hand enveloped hers like a newborn baby being swaddled.

“I’ve set up our camp. Let’s walk.” They hiked around the island, taking in the scenery. They stopped at a small one room school and then they were at a lighthouse. But the dream kept jumping. She would be one place then all of the sudden find herself somewhere else. She went from being a floating cloud watching the scene below with the knowledge that she was dreaming to being pulled back into the dream.

Then they were at a campsite where Justus made a fire, and Marco filled up some jugs with potable water. Kate saw herself shaking cutting veggies with Tina. Marco made his signature camping dish, quinoa with veggies. While the food was cooking, Justus practiced his knife throwing. A couple of kids, a brother and sister from a couple of campsites down, begged Justus to teach them how to throw. The boy was eleven and the girl was eight. It reminded Kate of how Marco and her would play when they were little, only they had the reddest hair she had ever seen. They ate their meal surrounded by the fir and pine trees.

Then they were in their kayaks paddling out of the mouth of Stewart Island. The moon’s uninhibited glow reflected off the water as the blue of the bioluminescence glowed with each paddle. Justus and Kate paddled together, while Tina paddled with Marco.

As they neared Gossip Island, Marco called out, “if anything happens, just paddle back as fast as you can. I mean it.”

That’s when the dream shifted. The winds picked up and the kayaks were pushed to the tiny island.

They pulled the kayaks up to find some shelter on the island, but something rustled in the bushes.

“RUN!” Marco screamed frantically. They grabbed the noses of the kayaks, nudging them into the water and tried to get in without tipping.

“HURRY, GO, GO,” Justus yelled.

Kate got herself seated and saw the long thick body of a red and green striped creature slithering toward them. Its snake-like body glided down the slope. It had a strip of red hair along its back and red fins on each side.

“PADDLE HARD,” Marco yelled from his kayak.

“WHAT THE HELL!” Tina screamed as their kayak was moved sideways closer to Kate and Justus’s.

Then Kate felt their kayak lift up and drop down.

“Just keep paddling,” Justus screamed.

They heard a motorized boat heading our way. They started waving at the boat for help. As it neared, it flipped to its side. Screams of agony echoed over the water.

The screams followed them as they made their way to the closest inlet. As they approached the shore, Justus jumped out and pulled their kayaks up. The land was uneven and Kate felt the branches cutting her legs as they ran. Kate found herself surrounded in a sea of blackness. She heard a thud behind her. Tina cried out. Unable to stand on her right foot, Tina put her arm around Kate’s shoulder for support.

“I lost Marco,” she cried.

Kate tried to listen for Justus and Marco, but all she heard was her own breath and Tina’s sobs, and then there was a hissing.

“Tina, we have to move, come on, come on,” Kate begged.

That’s when Kate felt the hot stabbing of fangs grab on to her ankle. The burning worked itself up her leg, and she was thrown. She landed hard on her side. She stood, but then everything was foggy.

“Tina,” she tried to scream, but her voice failed. She stumbled and her foot slipped. She landed in a hot sticky puddle. She looked to her hands, and saw they were covered with blood. As she stood, she saw a blanket of red hair.

“No. No. No.” The two small bodies were sprawled on the ground, gutted. She tried to keep her legs moving, tried to fight the fog, but the darkness won.

Then she was back to where she sat with the park ranger.

“Hey, Carlos. I’m glad you are on duty tonight. Maybe you can get this girl talking,” the park ranger said.

Carlos was in a paramedic’s uniform, but she knew him from his bronzed skin and warm eyes. He wrapped another blanket around Kate and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Are you hurting, Kate?” he asked.

She looked to her leg, but there was nothing there.

“How is that possible? It bit me.”

He looked to her leg, and then into her eyes. “What bit you?”

“The creature.”

“Kate, don’t you know how special you are? The girl of the blackbird blood.” He flashed a smile at her.

CHAPTER XIX

DON'T FEAR THE REAPER

Kate awoke to see Tina sitting in the chair in her room.

“Tina? You’re here!”

“You’re awake! No more isolation, babe. You’re going to be fine!”

Tina walked to Kate and Kate threw her arms around her.

“I love you,” Kate said.

“I love you, too.”

Kate proceeded to tell Tina about the dream.

“Weird,” Tina said. “But it makes sense.”

“How so?”

“It basically reflects everything going on in your life with boys,” she winked when she said this. “And you survived a creature’s bite.”

Kate heard her mother’s voice outside.

“Oh, crap. My mom’s pissed, huh?”

“Your mother stayed down here all night, Kate. She was the one to come get me this morning,” Tina said.

“No, my answer is no,” she heard her mother say.

“But this is incredible! I ran the blood three times. I’ve never seen anything like it. You know the possibilities if you would just let us study it.”

“I’ve seen the possibilities and it ends up in a coffin. No.”

Tina looked to Kate and whispered, “What’s that about?”

Kate shook her head.

The handle of the door turned and when her mother saw she was awake, she ran and hugged Kate hard.

“I love you, but what were you thinking.” She pinched Kate’s bicep.

Kate rubbed her arm. “Ouch, mom.”

“Don’t you ever scare me like that again. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kate smiled at her mom.

“Tina, why don’t you come with me to get some chow, so we can bring some back for Kate.” Tina rose and followed Kate’s mom out of the room. Kate was left alone with her thoughts, and she pondered the meaning of the conversation she overheard and what it had to do with her, her blood, and a coffin. She thought of her father. In her mind, she played with the idea that maybe her and her father shared a gene that somehow made them resistant to the virus. But was that what ultimately killed him? She laughed it off.

When she heard a knock on the door, she assumed it would be Dr. Lewis. But when she told him to come in, she saw the person on the other side of the door was Colonel Smithers. Kate fidgeted and sat up straight.

“Relax, relax, Ms. Merlo.”

He stared at Kate, which made the hairs on the back of her arm stand up. He had greenish yellow eyes that reminded her of a snake.

“You are probably wondering why I’m here.”

Kate nodded

“Well, I’m Colonel Smithers. I am fr-”

“I know who you are,” Kate said.

“You see, I didn’t put two and two together when I first got here. Merlo rang a bell and your mother, well she looked familiar. Well, see, I was one of you father’s doctors in Washington.”

Kate looked at him wide eyed. “You knew my father?”

He nodded “Indeed, fine man he was. But, yes, I was one of his doctor’s. You see, there was something special about him, something you have in common with him.”

“Do I have cancer?”

“Cancer? Where did get that idea?”

“You said we carried something in common.”

“Is that what they told you, dear girl? That your father had cancer?”

Kate stared blankly at the wall in front of her. Her father didn’t have cancer? What did that mean? Why would they tell her that? Unless her theory was true, and they had some type of immunity to the virus.

“I think I might know,” Kate said.

“Ahhh. Smart girl. Just like your father.”

“Just so we are on the same page, we are somehow resistant to the virus,”

Colonel Smithers cackled. “It’s more than that, my dear.”

His laugh gave Kate goosebumps

“Your body actively attacks the virus so quickly and aggressively that it doesn’t even have a chance to replicate or cause any symptoms. And if you are anything like you father, which I believe you are, it’s like this with all viruses.”

“So, like super immunity.”

“Precisely.” Colonel Smither pointed a finger at her. “Which brings me to the reason I am here. Your blood is very, very special, and I’d like to study it. You could help save the world!”

“I don’t know.”

“I’d just need a couple of vials.”

“It’s just that I don’t know if my mom...”

Colonel Smither’s put his hands up. “We can just keep this between us. I’d actually prefer that. I would want to protect you at all cost.”

Kate looked down at her knees.

“Perhaps, I’ve asked the wrong person. You know we could really use someone to build up our farm in Washington. I might have to pull someone to come out there with us. What do you think?”

Marco, Kate thought. “I’ll do it, she said.”

Colonel Smithers pulled out two tubes from his pocket and a phlebotomy kit from the drawer. Unlike Dr. Lewis, he wasn’t gentle with his needle stick. He put the tubes in a bag and put it in his cargo pocket.

“That’s it?” Kate asked.

“For now,” he said, smiling. As he left the room, he turned to Kate and said, “our secret.”

CHAPTER XX

HERE COMES THE SUN

The next day Kate and her mother were joined at breakfast by Tina, Marco, and Justus. They ate and talked and laughed. Carlos came to the table where they were sitting and joined them.

“I thought you guys were leaving today,” Tina said.

“They are,” Carlos said. “The colonel is leaving me to, I dunno, punish me.”

“Glad to know it’s a punishment to be around us,” Kate snickered.

“You know what I mean, goof.”

Justus stiffened next to Kate. She put a hand on his leg, looked at him, and he softened his posture.

“But Dr. Soto is going to stay for a while too. So, I got someone looking out for me.”

Colonel Smithers gave his farewell speech in the dining hall. Kate watched as him and his entourage walked toward the exit. But before he went out the dining facility door, he turned around and looked to Kate. Two words went through her head. *Our secret.*

REFERENCES

- Barnett-Woods, Victoria. "Models of Morality: The Bildungsroman and Social Reform in The Female American and The Woman of Colour." *Womens Studies*, vol. 45, no. 7, Feb. 2016, pp. 613–623., doi:10.1080/00497878.2016.1225400.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* [illustrated]. Bookbyte Digital, 2011. Kindle Edition.
- Gentry, Marcia, and Matthew C. Fugate. "Gifted Native American Students: Underperforming, Under-identified, and Overlooked." *Psychology in the Schools* 49.7 (2012): 631-46. Web. 17 April 2018.
- Gottfried, Marianne Hirsch, and David H. Miles. "Defining Bildungsroman as a Genre." *PMLA*, vol. 91, no. 1, 1976, pp. 122–123. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/461404.
- Lam, SF, and YK Law. "The Roles of Instructional Practices and Motivation in Writing Performance." HKU Scholars Hub: Home, Heldref Publications. <http://Www.heldref.org/Jexpe.php>, 1 Jan. 1970, hub.hku.hk/handle/10722/57182
- Lucas, Ann Lawson. "Enquiring Mind, Rebellious Spirit: Alice and Pinocchio as Nonmodel Children." *Children's Literature in Education* 30.3 (1999): 159-66.
- "Publishing Statistics on Children's Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators." *Children's Books by and About People of Color*, ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp.
- Richard, Moniques. "Engaging "Looking-Glass" Youth in Art through the Visual Narratives of the Transforming Self in Popular Culture." *Visual Arts Research* 33.2 (2007): 26. Web.
- Rivera, Lilliam. *Education of Margot Sanchez*. Simon & Schuster Books, 2018.
- Troia, Gary A, et al. "Relationships between Writing Motivation, Writing Activity, and Writing Performance: Effects of Grade, Sex, and Ability." *Springer Science and Business Media*, 29 Apr. 2012, pp. 17–44., doi:10.1007/s11145-012-9379-2.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Danielle Birnell earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in May 2019. Additionally, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in December 2015. Danielle is a veteran of the United States Army and served overseas in Kuwait and Afghanistan. She currently resides in South Texas with her dog and two children. Permanent mailing address 2603 Live Oak St., Mission, TX.