



BEFORE I
DISAPPEAR

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Feiwel and Friends
New York

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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For Mom and Dad.

You taught me most of what I know about love.



"Can you hear the music, Rosie?"

It was just a question. Six little words that would change everything. Only I didn't know it then.

Midnight had come and gone. I'd just gotten home from another double shift at the restaurant. I rinsed my face in the kitchen sink and braced my weight against the countertop.

"Can you hear the music, Rosie?" Your voice threaded through the dark.

"What?" I wiped the grime from my eyes and found you in the shadows.

"The music. Can you hear it?"

All I heard was the passing of the freight train that crossed the tracks behind the trailer park. That and the laboring whirl of the space heater from the little room I shared with Mom.

The way you were looking at me, your face strained. I wanted to take that strain for you. I wanted you to tell me what had caused it, so I could fight it for you. But how can you fight something you can't even hear?

"Where's it coming from?" If I could find this music, maybe I could make it stop. Maybe I could pull you a little closer to where I was instead of where it was you were always drifting to.

"From the dark," you answered without hesitation. "It's always there, but now it's getting louder. It shouldn't be this loud."

My gaze wandered out the window, across the darkened lot. Empty except for the metal carcasses of a few rusted-out cars.

When I looked back, your shoulders were bending under some invisible weight. My heart gave a tug in my chest. The way it always did when

I felt like I was failing you. Which was a lot of the time. “There’s nothing out there, Charlie.”

“Not there.” You got up and walked across the room, wearing one of my old T-shirts. It hit you at the knees. You reached for the map tacked up over the fold-out table. It was wrinkled and water stained, scattered with red dots from North Carolina all the way to this middle-of-nowhere town in Nevada. Gently, you smoothed the paper and stared not at it but through it, at something only you could see. Your finger raced across the tangled knots of border lines and interstates until it stopped.

“Here.”

I leaned over your shoulder. “Fort Glory, Oregon?”

Your violet eyes cleared as you raised them to mine. You nodded.

My pulse jumped at the look on your face. You spent most of your time halfway suspended between here and somewhere else. But there was nothing dreamy or distant about your expression now. You were looking right at me like the entire world was no bigger than that beat-up map between us.

“We’ll have to hand in our notice. Sign you out of school. Maybe in a few weeks we can—”

You shook your head. “Now, Rosie.”

You’d never asked to move. Not once in all the countless times we’d done it. Not even when things got hard. And now you wanted to cut and run?

I took a breath and forced the words past the lump in my throat. “What happened? Whatever it is, you can tell me, Charlie.”

“Nothing happened. Not . . . yet.” Your forehead scrunched the way it sometimes did when you were looking for words. Like the ones you needed didn’t come in any language I could speak. Half the time, whatever you really meant to say got lost in translation. “It’s important. This is important, Rosie.”

You looked at me with Mom's eyes. The kind of eyes that made me want to move heaven and earth just to make them light up. I'd known it from the first moment I saw you lying in a bassinet at the foot of our parents' bed. From the first time I'd held you in my arms. There was something inside of you. A light I could feel without seeing. It made me want to do whatever you asked. Only you never asked for anything.

Not until that night. Not until that question.

The clock struck one over my shoulder. My next shift started in a few hours. My back ached, and my head was starting to pound, but I just nodded like whatever you'd said made sense to me. One thing was perfectly obvious.

We couldn't stay here.

Mom was getting antsy, and too many people were starting to notice us. Last week, you'd come home with scraped knees and a cut under your eye. The day before that, I'd caught a bunch of kids following you home. They scattered when they saw me, but sooner or later they were going to come around when I wasn't here.

These things never got better. They only ever got worse.

It was time to leave. I looked down at the map.

Fort Glory, Oregon.

It was as good a place as any.

My eyes caught on the name again. A glimmer of recognition flashed through me. A feeling almost like déjà vu. I'd read that name somewhere. I stood up a little straighter when it came to me.

I waited for you to go back to bed, and then I slipped into the room I shared with Mom. Quietly, I lifted the edge of one of my maps and unpinned the small folder hidden behind it. It held a few pages I'd printed out at the public library when we lived in Colorado, two moves ago. The only secret I'd ever kept from either of you. Something that belonged only to me.

I stared down at the papers. A complete list of all the Hands for

Hearths affiliates nationwide. I scanned the list, and there it was on the second page.

Fort Glory/Maple, Oregon.

You said we had to go there. That it was important. Maybe you were right. This was a sign as much as any green billboard hanging over a highway.

Mom didn't say anything when I told her we'd be leaving in the morning. We'd gotten our paychecks earlier that day so there was no reason to drag things out. If I'm being honest, I would've given anything for her to fight me on this. On anything. But Mom didn't fight. She just nodded and rolled over. The decision fell to me. Like everything always did.

"Can you hear the music, Rosie?" you'd asked.

I closed my eyes and joined Mom on the bed. I could still picture the Hands for Hearths brochure in my head. The smiling faces of those people as they stood in front of their brand-new homes. Homes they built with their own two hands.

No, I didn't hear the music, Charlie. I didn't hear anything but the sound of Mom's breathing and the thudding of my own heart. But I could feel it, stirring inside of me. An ache in that part of me I tried hard to ignore.

I couldn't hear the music, but maybe I could see it. A line of notes stretching far into the distance. A road that led toward something I'd been chasing down for as long as I could remember.

Secret dream hidden behind the walls of my heart.

Secret wish you somehow heard and gave to me.



ONE



The woman is one of them.

Her clothes are my first clue. The predawn crowd at the Dusty Rose diner is made up of fishermen and loggers—men who like their coffee black and their boots broken-in. The woman’s sweater and slacks have that department-store sheen. But it’s more than what she’s wearing. It’s the way every eye in the room cuts to her and then away. A sudden lull in conversation that screams a warning in my ear.

Stranger.

I wipe down the counter and keep tabs on the woman hovering by the entrance. When we first moved into town, most people assumed Mom, Charlie, and I were part of the small group of invaders that has descended on Fort Glory over the past month. An army of tabloid journalists carrying notepads and handheld recorders. UFO chasers, criminologists, and environmentalists. Even a few government types. They’ve been flocking here these past few weeks, drawn by the strange reports. It wouldn’t be a problem if their general nosing around wasn’t also keeping the tourists away. Let’s just say, the locals aren’t too thrilled.

By now, most of the residents have accepted that my family has nothing to do with these “invaders.” All the same, they haven’t rolled out any red carpets. In a way, I’m grateful. As long as the

people here are preoccupied with the outsiders and the rumors that brought them here, they're too busy to wonder about us.

The woman makes a beeline for the corkboard wall. It's littered with announcements in colorful scraps of paper. She rips down a bright pink pamphlet and studies it with narrowed eyes.

After a quick glance at the clock, I duck under the counter to gather my things. My first shift started at four thirty this morning, and the next one isn't till tonight. Charlie and I start school today, but that isn't what has my stomach tied up in knots. I can't stop thinking about the Hands for Hearths application hidden in my backpack. Twelve pieces of paper that could change our lives forever.

And Mom has no idea.

When I stand, the woman is waiting for me on the other side of the counter. She's got sharp features and an even sharper gaze. *Cop.*

I push the unsettling thought away. Her clothes are too nice, and she doesn't have that world-weary look that comes with the job. Must be another reporter. Like the other strangers flocking to Fort Glory, she's here for something that has nothing to do with me.

"Coffee," she orders, taking a seat by the big window overlooking the Oregon woods. Despite offering the best view in the house, that section of the diner is mostly deserted. There's a reason for that. He is sitting at table nine.

The young man glances up from his breakfast when the reporter slides into the booth two rows up. He studies the woman, and I study him while I dig in my bag for my keys. He's older than I am. Around nineteen. A faded Mariners cap is pulled down low over his forehead, emphasizing a strong nose and jaw. Even

with a dusting of scars and light stubble, he has the kind of face most seventeen-year-old girls would cut out of a magazine and plaster on their bedroom walls. I'd be lying if I said I didn't notice. Still, it isn't the way he looks that interests me.

It's the way other people look *at* him.

It goes like this. Every day, the boy at table nine comes in just before sunrise. As soon as he sits down, there's a noticeable shift as the men in the nearby booths give him their backs. They don't say a word as they freeze him out, and for his part, the kid ignores their existence. That alone would make him interesting, but there's something else, too.

The pink pamphlet. The one the reporter grabbed from the wall.

The first time I saw it, the boy from table nine was tacking it to the board by the front door. Frankie, my boss, tore it down before I could check it out. Some variation of this scene has played out every morning since I started working here. That was five days ago—long enough to make me wonder what's on that pamphlet to make the boy at table nine so wildly unpopular.

I'm shrugging into my coat when a hairy hand drops onto my arm. "The woman at table seven," Frankie wheezes. "Find out what she wants."

"I've got to go. Gloria—"

"Has the biggest mouth in six counties." Frankie jerks his chin toward the waiting woman. "We don't need any more headlines dragging the name of this town through the mud. Take her order and send her on her way. Call it a favor."

The sun is already starting to rise over the parking lot, but I owe Frankie. He didn't have to hire us without a scrap of paperwork when we rolled into town last week. Then again,

Mom tends to have that effect on people. Or more specifically, on men.

The reporter wastes no time getting down to business when I place a steaming cup in front of her. She slides a crisp bill across the table. Ten dollars. That's a week's worth of frozen dinners. A new pair of shoes for Charlie. I need the money, but not as much as I need this job.

"Can I get you something else?" I ignore the bribe.

"Do you live in Fort Glory..." She scans my name tag. "*Rose?*"

"My family moved here a week ago." We don't have a TV and the truck radio has been busted forever, so I had no idea what kind of a media storm we were walking into when Charlie pointed to the dot on the map that marked this quaint Oregon town. By the time I figured it out, it was already too late. One look at the town nestled between a sea of Douglas firs and an ocean of waves, and I'd fallen hard.

"These are floating all over Fort Glory." The woman holds up the neon pamphlet. "Someone is going through a great deal of trouble to imply a connection between the problems in town and the work they're doing with the DARC." She puts the pamphlet on the table, and I get my first good look at it. The headline could've been ripped right off the front page of the *National Enquirer*.

**DEEP ATOMIC RESEARCH COLLIDER KNOCKING ON THE
GATES OF HELL. ANIMALS RUN FOR COVER AS DARC
UNLEASHES ANCIENT EVIL.**

I had no idea what a collider was until we moved here. Honestly, I'm still vague on the details. Something about smash-

ing atoms together. Whatever it does, the DARC is the biggest machine in the world. Or so claims the giant billboard corrupting the scenery on the way into town. That billboard is just the beginning. The DARC is incorporated into the name of every business establishment within a ten-mile radius. There's an information center dedicated to it right next to city hall, and every gift shop is stacked with T-shirts and other overpriced merchandise proudly proclaiming: *The DARC: The Ninth Wonder of the World*, or *Particle Physics: The Final Frontier!*

To say that the DARC is a big deal to these people doesn't come close to covering it. It's their one claim to fame. The attraction that brings in the big tourist dollars and the reason they *matter* to the outside world. And this reporter is here to mess with it.

"Do you know where these are coming from?" she asks, jerking me out of my thoughts.

My eyes dart to the boy staring down at his eggs. His faded jeans and ball cap don't give off the crazy vibe. Unapproachable, maybe. Rough around the edges, definitely. But not crazy. His shoulders tense while he waits for me to call him out. It's his lucky day, because that's not my style.

"No idea. Sorry."

The woman adds a ten to the bill already on the table. "You sure about that?"

Her nasal voice carries in the diner. Utensils stop clinking. Sentences trail off into nothing. Frankie runs a filthy rag over the clean counter while he pretends not to listen. Like everyone else, he wants these strangers gone.

The lingering silence makes the moment feel like a test. The boy at table nine has no fans here, and neither will I if I cover for

him. It's stupid, but a small part of me can't help admiring him for showing up here day after day in spite of everything. That takes guts, and it makes me think he's here for more than the strong coffee. He's here to prove a point.

"Someone has to know." The woman shrugs. "Small town like this, people talk."

Her words leave a sour taste in my mouth. The kind of "talk" she's referring to is one of the reasons Charlie and I have switched schools as often as other kids switch pairs of shoes. It's impossible not to notice Mom, and Charlie... Charlie is Charlie.

"That pamphlet has been there for weeks," I lie. "No idea where it came from."

The boy looks up quickly. I don't meet his eyes.

"Shame." The woman puts the money back into her purse. "I'm doing research for the *Oregon Chronicle*. In addition to the drastic spike in crime, there have been reports of other strange happenings. Disappearances. General unrest. Have you noticed anything odd? Anything out of place?"

"Other than you?" I don't mean it to be funny. Or rude. It just comes out that way.

Frankie covers a laugh with a cough. A few of the men nod their heads. I thought they'd blackball me for helping the boy at table nine, but I read the situation wrong.

The boy might be a problem, but he's *their* problem.

They'll handle him their way.

Their grudging approval is worth the glare she levels at me.

"Thank you for your time." She moves toward the group of loggers sitting at the counter. As one, they turn like a wall of flannel, shutting her down.

A small smile creeps across my face. Say what you want about small towns, but the people look after their own.

The woman's mouth hardens. It's a lost cause and she knows it. With one last scowl, she walks out of the diner.

The door has barely closed behind her when the squeaks of chairs and stools fill the air. A chorus of banging starts up as palms slap down on tables and countertops. I'm trying to figure out what's going on when an elderly logger in a trapper hat waves me over. His gnarled finger taps the table beside a five-dollar bill. That's when I realize.

It's for me. They're all for me.

My throat goes painfully tight. I spend the next few moments collecting small bills from men who, just yesterday, barely acknowledged my existence. It might seem like a small thing, but it isn't.

Not to me.

Another look at the clock brings me back down to earth. It's past seven. School starts at eight.

I'm jamming my apron into my bag, when I sense someone behind me.

It's the boy from table nine.

His eyes are startling. Silver gray with blue starbursts at the centers. He's tall, too. Over six feet with broad shoulders that suggest he works hard for a living. His hand moves toward me, and I tense. He hesitates before dropping something on the table beside me.

A crumpled twenty-dollar bill.

When he walks past me, the scent of fresh rain and motor oil lingers behind him.

I'm still staring after him when Frankie waves me over to the register. My boss fumbles a cigarette out of his sweat-stained apron and raises it to his lips. "Boy's got some nerve showing up here," he says, violating a dozen health codes with one drag.

"What's his story?"

"Served time for attempted murder. Not long enough if you ask me." Frankie shakes his head, disgusted. "Everyone round here knows he set the fire that killed his folks. Good people. Damn ugly business." His weathered face arranges itself into an expression that could almost be concern. "Do yourself a favor and steer clear of Ian Lawson. That boy is trouble nobody needs."

I nod. What I don't say is that I've spent the last three years working on making myself invisible. Ever since that night in July, I don't wear makeup, or rebel against authority, or drive above the speed limit. Staying out of trouble is pretty much at the top of my priority list.

But the thing about trouble is that it has a way of finding you. Especially when you aren't looking for it.



TWO



I pull into the campground just as the early-morning sun is cutting across the water. Even though I'm late, the view still makes me pause. Glory Point is the best seat in the house. A secluded bluff jutting over the sleepy little town and under a blue-blanket sky. In every direction green forests meet crashing Pacific waves. It reminds me of one of those coffee commercials where everyone is happy, and life is a postcard waiting to be written.

Fort Glory, Oregon. Not just another dot on the map. Not just a pit stop on the way to somewhere else.

Home.

Now I just have to convince Mom.

I'm steering toward the trailer when a figure stumbles out of the trees along the ridgeline to my left. A man wearing a nice suit and tie. As I watch, he climbs over the guardrail and walks toward the cliff, stopping just short of the ledge. A coat hangs loosely off his wasted frame. His body is twitching the way addicts sometimes do when they're coming down. He turns.

A chill washes over me when his eyes lock with mine. Before I can figure out why, the man scrambles back over the guardrail. One second, he's there. The next, he's disappearing into the woods. It's bizarre. Is he some wealthy local with a closet drug

problem? Another journalist like the woman in the diner? Either way, it's none of my business.

Life is complicated enough without adding other people's problems to my growing list of things to stress about.

On the short, bumpy trip to the trailer, my hands beat restlessly against the wheel. It's not just the weirdo on the ridge. Whenever I think about my appointment at the Hands for Hearths office this afternoon, I can't sit still. If Mom knew what I was planning, she'd have the trailer hitched to the truck before I had time to explain. It's been like this forever. We keep pushing west, never staying in one place long enough for the dust to settle. At first, we moved because Mom was restless. Then that night in July happened, and we did it because we had to. But standing here now with the sun on my skin and the taste of evergreen and sea salt in my mouth, I know that things will be different here.

They'll be better.

The dirt path in front of me opens up to a small clearing surrounded by giant trees. The forest is so thick, you can barely hear the roar of the ocean behind it. The park is mostly deserted. These grounds won't get crowded again until spring, and with any luck, we'll be settled into our new place by then.

I'm locking up the truck when a voice calls out. "You see him?"

I turn to find Rowena Mae camped out on a rickety lawn chair in front of the neighboring trailer. Her skin is a playground for freckles, and her hair is a shade of blond not known to occur in nature. I've only spoken to her twice, but there's something about her that feels comforting in the way strange things sometimes do.

“See who?”

“The man on the bluff,” she says. “Fancy clothes. Passed through here a few minutes ago?”

“Yeah, I saw him.” I yank the zipper of my jacket up to my chin. “Do you know what he’s doing up there?”

“Settin’ his mind about the business of dying, I reckon.”

“You think he’s going to *jump*?”

“Would make the fourth one this week.” Rowena scowls. “I told the sheriff she might as well string a net across the water. Save the city a fortune in cleanup.”

“Shouldn’t we call the police?” Normally, I wouldn’t call the cops to save my own life, but nothing about this is normal.

“Already done,” Rowena says, letting me off the hook. “Not that it’ll make a lick of difference. They’ve got their hands full down at the station, or haven’t you heard?” She thrusts something at me.

My gaze drops from the bright paper in my hand to the box under Rowena’s lawn chair. It’s full of pink pamphlets.

“You made these?” My thoughts fly to the young man in the diner. Ian. He must be a friend of Rowena’s if he’s distributing her pamphlets. Rowena doesn’t seem like the type of woman to forgive a pesky little thing like attempted murder. There must be more to Ian’s story than Frankie let on. I resist the urge to ask. I’m not generally big on personal questions. Mostly because they tend to cut both ways.

Rowena nods and thrusts out her chin. “I knew we were in for it when the birds stopped singing. Happened about three weeks ago. Same day the DARC went back online.”

“You mean the collider?” I picture the research facility I pass every day. A few squat warehouses and a handful of tall,

randomly scattered cinder-block buildings that are the only eyesores in this fairy tale of a town. “I don’t get what the big deal is.”

Rowena snorts. “Where you been, girl? You’re standing on top of the most advanced machine ever built by man. Twenty years to plan. Fifteen billion of our tax dollars to build.”

“Fifteen billion dollars?” My brain hurts just trying to imagine how many TV dinners or tanks of gas that money could buy. Instead, our government blows it on some glorified science project. “For what, exactly?”

Rowena leans forward in her chair. The rusted slats squeak in protest. “There’s more to the DARC than meets the eye. Three hundred feet under this here ground runs a tunnel track twenty miles round. It makes a loop around town and off into the parkland, as far up as the road into Maple. They spent all that money to build their fancy machine, looking for something. But the Europeans had a fancy machine of their own, and they found it first.” Her nostrils flare. “The DARC closed down. Stayed that way for three years. Then three weeks ago it goes back online with no warning. Now folks are acting like they’ve got the devil inside of them.”

Gooseflesh breaks out across my arms. I tell myself it has nothing to do with Rowena’s ravings. Whatever she says, the DARC is just a machine. It isn’t to blame for the way people are acting.

Human beings have never needed excuses to do shitty things to one another.

“And you think the DARC is responsible?” I play along even though I’m more convinced than ever that Rowena is out of her mind. As bizarre as this conversation is, it’s still a lot easier to deal with than the one waiting for me inside. For my plan to work,

I'm going to have to lie right to Mom's face. Something I've been dreading even more than our first day at a new school.

"You can't tell me one thing's got nothing to do with the other. People been asking me for proof." She scowls. "I tell 'em to get off their phones. Turn off the damn TV. Sometimes the truth is screaming in your ears. All you got to do is listen."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say, reluctantly turning back to the trailer.

"Wait," Rowena calls out. "Your mother. Helen, is it?"

I turn around, my stomach sinking at the mention of Mom's name. "Yeah." I hold my breath and wait to see where this goes.

"She's got you both working up at the Dusty Rose?"

I nod, and the old woman looks strangely satisfied. "Frankie's a mean ol' bastard, but he pays a fair wage. He looks after his people if they earn it."

"We don't need looking after." My words are sharp. I smile to blunt the edges. "We aren't afraid of hard work."

Rowena's lips twitch. "I bet you aren't." Pale green eyes settle on me with uncomfortable intensity. The old woman tilts her head to the side. "You favor her. Your mother."

I frown. If I look like Mom, it's the way the passing scenery looks through a tinted window. Kind of hazy with the colors on mute. My little brother, Charlie, on the other hand, is my mother with the resolution turned all the way up. "Your brother too." Rowena echoes my thoughts. "What's his name?"

"Charlie. And I'm Rose."

"Father?"

I have to hand it to her. She's not one to throw out lines to fish for information. She's the sort to toss a bomb in the water and see what rises to the surface. "He disappeared."

“Men have a nasty habit of doing that.” Rowena snags her coffee mug from the grass beside her and studies me over the rim. “Read the pamphlet. Like I said, folks are acting strange. Best be on your guard.”

“Thanks. I will.” I offer her a small smile. I can’t help it. Most people wouldn’t bother with the dire warnings. Especially not for newcomers like us. Rowena may be a little nuts, but she means well. As neighbors go, we’ve had far worse.

Inside the trailer, I tap Charlie’s foot on the way to the bedroom I share with Mom. I grab some jeans and a cable-knit sweater that’s as old as I am. Most of my clothes once belonged to my mother. After a hundred washes, they still smell like her. Sunshine and honey.

“Morning, Rose.” Mom greets me wearing the diner uniform: a simple pink dress and white apron that makes her eyes glow violet. My mother’s eyes are the kind of blue people write songs about.

“What time does your shift start tonight?” she asks.

“Five.” I’ll be working doubles for the rest of my life, but it’ll be worth it if Hands for Hearths accepts our application for a home. At this point, it’s a matter of basic necessity. Like our truck, the trailer is on its last leg. It was a relic when Dad bought it. That was nine years ago. Living in it was never the plan. It was a short-term solution while my parents made other arrangements—arrangements that went up in smoke when my dad left one night to buy a lottery ticket and never returned. I’ve been doing what I can to keep the place livable with his old tools, but there are only so many times you can tape up a leaking pipe before it comes apart in your hands. Most days, I feel like my collection of maps

are holding up the walls instead of the other way around. Which leads me to the real reason we have to make it in Fort Glory.

We have no other choice.

“Rose?”

“Yes?” I look at my mother.

“Can you check on Charlie after school? Make sure he’s... adjusting?”

We both know what she’s really asking. I nod to ease her mind and wish this was one of those towns where the high school and elementary school were right next to each other.

Mom refuses to admit that Charlie is different. I’m not angry with her about it. She means well and she loves us, but I’m tired. *Tired*. And as much as I love her back, I could use a break from all this pretending.

“Why don’t you guys swing by the diner after school?” She reaches for me but pulls back at the last minute. “You can tell me how your first day was over a piece of pie.”

“There’s a cheap mechanic in Maple. I thought I’d check it out before work.” I never lie to my mother, and I don’t like the way it feels.

“You’re a good girl, Rose.” She kisses my forehead—something she used to do all the time when I was little. Since I never kissed her back, she must have assumed I didn’t like it.

I liked it.

Charlie walks out of the bathroom, his hair curling from the shower. It needs a trim. He’s paler than usual, which highlights the dark circles under his eyes. He’s also dropping weight when he has none to lose. He isn’t eating enough. Isn’t sleeping. Whenever I get off late or wake up early, he’s just lying on the

pullout, staring at the water-stained ceiling. Every so often his lips turn down in a grimace. Almost like he's in pain. He's never done that before, and it makes me worry about him. Even more than usual.

"You ready?" I ask.

Seconds tick by, but I'm used to that. My brother answers every question as if the fate of the world hinges on his response.

"Sure," he says, throwing on his favorite green hoodie. It's way too big and threadbare in places. I've wanted to get rid of it so many times, but Charlie won't let me. It's one of the few things he has left that belonged to our father.

We head for the truck—an '85 Chevy with an extended cab, lovingly named Rusty for reasons that need no clarification. Rowena waves at us from her lawn chair. Movement at the trailer next to hers catches my eye. There's a figure wedged under the hood of one of those muscle cars that always sit on cinder blocks outside of trailers the way white picket fences frame perfect lawns in the suburbs. Only this boy looks like he has plans of driving away. It isn't just the sweat stains on his shirt or the grease under his fingernails. It's the way he's bent over the engine—like he could breathe life into it with his desire to be somewhere, anywhere else.

He turns, and I freeze. It's him. The boy from table nine. Ian. And he doesn't look remotely surprised to see me.

Ian wipes his face with the hem of his T-shirt and starts putting up his tools in a beautiful toolbox that makes Dad's ancient rollaway seem shabby by comparison. My fingers itch to explore the perfectly designed cubbies. I tear my gaze away before he catches me coveting his tools.

Hinges creak behind me as Mom slips into the passenger

seat. Charlie throws his backpack through the back window and prepares to climb in after it. The door has been jammed forever, which makes getting in and out somewhat of a production. I can't decide which is worse: dropping Charlie off a few hundred yards from Roosevelt Elementary, or letting him climb out like that for everyone to see.

Shadows dot the sky as a flock of geese passes overhead. Charlie watches them intently. "They're going the wrong way."

"Maybe they got turned around." My gaze cuts to the woods, and a shiver runs up my spine. The quiet that was peaceful a moment ago suddenly feels oppressive. It takes me a minute to figure out why. It's the birds. They've gone dead silent.

"No," my brother says. "They hear it too."

"Hear what, Charlie?"

For a second, I think he's going to answer, then he just shakes his head. "Do you feel that?" he asks instead. When I don't answer, he elaborates. "The sky. It's too heavy."

Mom frowns. The silence stretches. Another winged army passes over our heads.

I take one look at Charlie's worried face before I jog back to the trailer. "Just in case." I toss our umbrella on the dash and turn the key in the ignition. There's an awful sound, like chicken bones down a garbage disposal. Panic shoots through me. My appointment with the Hands for Hearths representative is scheduled for four this afternoon. Their office is in the neighboring town of Maple. Fifteen miles away.

I wrench the key in the ignition again only to get the same sound as before. My knuckles gleam white against the wheel. Tears of frustration burn my eyes, but I refuse to cry. Just like I refuse to miss that appointment. I'll walk to Maple if I have to.

When the engine catches on the third try, every muscle in my body goes liquid with relief.

Rowena flags me down as I'm backing out of the park. She chews her lip thoughtfully while she stares at Mom. "I cut hair when I'm not acting as a watchdog for the people. I got some color that might do those roots of yours a world of good, Helen. Come on by, and I'll treat you for free."

"That's kind of you." Mom is practically collapsing into the upholstery in an attempt to make herself invisible.

It wasn't always like this. My mother used to wear lipstick, and sing along to the radio, and look strangers in the eye.

She used to do a lot of things.

Rowena frowns at me. "That truck is an accident waiting to happen. I'll send Ian over later. That boy can fix anything."

"Thanks, but we're all set." Rowena is trying to be nice. I get that. Still, it feels a little like pity and that burns even though I know it shouldn't.

My feelings must show because Rowena snorts. "The weather will turn soon. The road into town is dangerous. Let him take a look, and the boy will tell you what needs doing." I open my mouth to refuse again, but she cuts me off. "Don't let your pride make you foolish, girl. Too many damn fools around here already."

"All right." It's clear she won't be taking no for an answer. "I'll let him look, but I'll pay him for his trouble."

Rowena gives me a nod of grudging respect. "Don't let Ian's manner put you off. He's rough around the edges, but so's gold before it's polished. There's more to a thing than the look of it." She levels Mom with a knowing glance.

"Thank you." I say it again, only this time I really mean it.

Rowena may be pushy, but at least you always know where she stands. In my book, that more than makes up for the crazy.

“You can thank me by spreading the word.” Rowena hands me a stack of pink pamphlets. “Knowledge is a weapon, and we’ve got to arm ourselves. Those big brains at the DARC are knocking on doors best left closed. Sooner or later, they’ll get an answer.”

I smile politely. Mom is too busy staring at her lap, so I glance in the rearview to share a look with Charlie only to find him nodding solemnly in the backseat.

After dropping Mom off at the diner, I park next to some reddening bushes behind Roosevelt Elementary. A sense of dread fills me at the sight of that rectangular brick building. For a moment, I’m tempted to lock the doors and drive away, but Charlie has to walk through that door, and I have to let him. I just wish it wasn’t so hard.

New places aren’t easy on Charlie. It usually takes people a few weeks to get used to him. The thing with Charlie is hard to explain. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with him. It’s more like part of him is always off somewhere the rest of us can’t follow, which means I sometimes miss him even when he’s sitting right beside me.

The wind howls. The maple tree above us releases a handful of autumn confetti. Charlie watches a neon leaf dance to rest on our windshield wiper, and for the thousandth time, I wish I knew what he was thinking. Mom used to say that if heaven is a song, Charlie is the only one who can hear it playing. I’m not sure I believe in heaven, but I do know there’s a glow about my brother. The yoke of another world he never fully shed. It lights the space

around him, and it makes him different in a way others can't help but notice.

More than anything, it scares the hell out of me.

"Go get 'em." I slap him on the back in an attempt at cheerfulness that is fooling no one. "Keep your head down," I add, though it's pointless. Charlie doesn't go looking for trouble. Trouble hunts him down.

I'm still watching him climb through the window when Charlie freezes with his upper body hanging halfway out of the truck. I follow his gaze to three boys huddled together nearby. One of them moves, and I see it. A bird's nest lying on the sidewalk.

Charlie starts to get out. I twist in the seat and grab his belt. "Don't. It isn't any of our business."

He looks right at me. "Then whose business is it, Rosie?"

My chest tightens. We're officially late and Rusty may not start again, but my brother just asked me to do something, and I can count on one hand the number of times that has happened. I kill the engine.

"Hey!" I jump out of the truck. "Leave that nest alone."

"The mother won't come back if you touch them," Charlie says, as if that settles it. One look at these three tells me this is far from settled. "Please."

"Please," mimics a boy with brown hair gelled into spikes. The others take their cue from him. They close in around us, and I am instantly aware of the chain link at my back.

The bell echoes through the schoolyard.

The ringleader glares at us, an unnerving darkness glittering in his blue eyes. His glare twists into a smirk as he holds out the nest.

I know what's coming even before Charlie moves forward,

his hands outstretched. He's a few feet away when the boy lets it drop.

Eggs shatter.

Charlie gets down on the cement. I wait for the boys to run off and then I kneel with him. Because life can be hard and is usually unfair, but because some things are good, and my brother is one of them.

His shoulders hunch as he picks up a broken shell. "Why?"

"I don't know." I don't know why fathers disappear, or mothers stop wearing lipstick, or little boys with sticks always find someone smaller to poke.

A tear slides down Charlie's cheek. He doesn't cry often, and when he does it's never at what you would expect. Like at the beginning of movies and not at the end, or when one season gives way to another. Charlie doesn't cry when things die, only when they're broken in a way that can never be fixed. Like the egg in his hand.

"Look," I tell him. "There are still two left." I'm wondering how that's possible, when Charlie reaches for them.

"We can save them," he says.

"Leave them for the mother."

"It's too late. She isn't coming back. *Please, Rosie.*"

"We've got nowhere to put them," I say, though what I'm thinking is: *They're just eggs. Nobody wants them.*

Charlie places an egg in my palm like it's the most precious gift on earth, and for that brief moment when his hand touches mine, I almost believe it. "Put it in your pocket, near your body so it stays warm. I'll take one and you take the other. We can do it, Rosie. We can keep them safe." He says it with a certainty I will never understand.

“But—”

“This.” He cups my hands so that our palms form a nest of flesh and bone around the eggs. “*This* is important, Rosie.”

Charlie’s expression goes dreamy, and suddenly, I know he’s seeing something, *bearing* something I don’t. Only this time, it isn’t something that causes him pain. It’s something good.

Seconds pass. Charlie’s eyes clear. He smiles at me, and for a few seconds, the world is a lovely place full of strangers holding open doors. I’d do anything for one of those smiles, which is why I place the egg in my pocket and zip up the jacket I won’t be able to take off for the rest of the day.



THREE



In the parking lot after school, I study the hinge on the driver's-side door.

It's *clean*.

A mess of brown scrapings crunch under my feet. Apparently, I knocked a few years' worth of rust loose when I slammed the door shut this morning.

I try the engine, and my good luck gets even better. It turns over smoothly, causing a strange lightness to blossom in my chest. The feeling evaporates when Rusty backfires with a *BOOM* that echoes through the parking lot.

A crowd gathers, and I stifle a groan. It's the first bit of attention anyone at this school has paid me all day. Laughter explodes in my ears, but it dies off almost as abruptly as it starts.

When I glance up, Ian is tossing something into the bed of a pickup truck two parking spots in front of Rusty. He's wearing faded jeans and an oil-streaked tee—more blue-collar than bad boy, but one look from him is all it takes to drive off the crowd. It's eerily similar to the scene that plays out at the diner every morning. More than ever, it makes me wonder what his deal is. If he's really guilty of the crimes Frankie accused him of, why would he come back here? Why wouldn't he run far away to some other town where nobody knew his name?

I'm about to restart the engine when something collides with my door.

Startled, I look down into a small face dominated by a pair of massive glasses. The boy crouched beneath my window looks like he wishes he could disappear—something that is highly unlikely due to the thing on his back, a yellow monstrosity that bears more resemblance to a school bus than a school bag.

Brown eyes blink up at me through thick lenses. "Hey."

Before I can come up with a response, a commotion at the front of the school draws my gaze. A group of boys is gathering on the sidewalk. They look pissed.

There's a muffled oath from under my window.

"Friends of yours?" I guess.

"Business acquaintances." The boy can't be any older than thirteen, which means he must've skipped a grade or two to get here.

"What kind of business, exactly?"

"The kind where I write half the football team's term papers in exchange for their not making my life a living hell."

"You must not be doing a good job," I say as the boys scatter to flush out their prey.

"I did *too* good of a job. Now the principal is onto us, and those Neanderthals want to use my body as a punching bag."

Two of the pack break off in our direction. The area is completely open. There's no place to hide.

My hand moves to the door handle and pauses there. I have a rule. It involves not going out of my way to make enemies or friends because both are liabilities I try to avoid. But Fort Glory isn't business as usual. If we're going to be sticking around, it means getting involved, and I'd rather throw in my lot with

Rowena and the stranger hiding behind my car than those creeps at the front of the school.

I wedge the door open. “Climb in.” When the boy just stares at me, I repeat, “Get in the truck. Now.”

The boy tosses his backpack into my lap and curls up like a cat at my feet. I drum my hands on the wheel. The Hands for Hearths interview is in less than an hour. The elementary school got out ten minutes ago. How long will they keep this up?

Right on cue, the boy opens his bag and produces a book filled with so many highlights, it’s practically glowing. The title is the first thing I notice:

*THE DEEP ATOMIC RESEARCH COLLIDER (DARC):
Confirming String Theory by Unlocking the Universe’s Hidden Dimensions*
by Arthur Jackson.

The second thing I notice is the familiar neon pamphlet he’s using as a bookmark.

“Some light reading?” I ask.

The boy doesn’t look up. “If you consider a work of pure genius by one of the greatest minds since Einstein ‘light reading.’ Then, yes.”

My lip twitches at his tone. “Sounds pretty heavy.”

He snorts. “Dr. Jackson’s work with the DARC is about to change the way we look at the universe and our place in it.”

“Yeah?” I stretch my hands over my head, hoping to ease some of the tension in my shoulders. “If this Dr. Jackson is such a big deal, how come I’ve never heard of him?” School has never been high on my priority list. That being said, I’ve always had a soft spot for science. It’s something I get from my dad. He had a knack for knowing how things worked. He used to rescue stuff from the dump. Busted TVs. Old appliances. Then he’d take them

apart and put them back together again better than before. I could watch him work for hours. It was like magic. No. It was better than magic, because there were *reasons* for everything he did. Rules that never changed. Then one day, he handed me a screwdriver, and I knew that I was born to hold one.

Call me a sucker for anything practical.

The boy shrugs. “Like other visionaries, Dr. Jackson has his haters. You’re gonna want to remember his name. He’s my uncle,” the boy adds, explaining a lot.

“Your uncle works at the DARC?”

“He doesn’t just work there. He designed the modifications to the old collider.”

“What’s the deal with this collider anyway?” I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious. It’s not that Rowena’s paranoia is rubbing off on me. It’s that I can’t help wondering about the machine that is this town’s unofficial mascot. If all the hype is real, the DARC is massive. Massive enough to ring the town and a huge chunk of the nearby woods. My head hurts just thinking about how many people it would’ve taken to build something like that.

My dad would’ve loved it.

“The DARC is the most powerful particle accelerator in the world,” the boy says without skipping a beat. “It sends beams of particles flying around miles of underground tunnels and then slams them together at 99.99 percent the speed of light.”

“And people would do this *why*?”

The boy rolls his eyes, but I get the feeling my questions aren’t annoying him. If anything, his voice warms. “At that energy level, new particles are created just like they were during the Big Bang. It’s like . . .” He searches for the right words. “Figuring how the universe works by learning about its most basic parts.”

Unbelievable. Fifteen billion dollars so scientists can smash invisible bits together to try to create even more invisible bits. And according to Rowena, they aren't even the first ones to do it. "I thought they already had a giant collider in Europe," I say. "Why spend all that money to reinvent the wheel?"

"Not to take anything away from the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland, but the DARC is in another class. It's a little bigger, but a lot stronger. And thanks to Dr. Jackson it has . . . other things going for it." The boy shifts. A beam of sunlight touches his brown skin, highlighting the ugly bruise at the corner of his right eye.

The DARC is suddenly the last thing on my mind.

My hands stop drumming. "Is it normally like this around here?" I ask quietly.

The boy catches my drift right away. "No. The last month has been . . . rough." The gloomy look he shoots the school makes me want to drive straight to Charlie. "There were three suicides last week and three times as many fights. That's not counting the riot at the football game over the weekend. People are totally losing their shit." It's an eerie echo of Rowena's warning from this morning.

"You think the tabloids are right?" I ask. "That something strange is happening in Fort Glory?"

"You're asking the wrong question." The boy flips a page. "To anyone unbiased it's clear that something strange *is* going on. The more important question is *why*."

"I heard that it has to do with the DARC."

His chin jerks up. "Who said that?"

I nod at the pink pamphlet in his hand.

"Right." He scowls. "Rowena Mae's been spreading her

propaganda about the DARC since it started running again.” His lips twist into a smirk. “This is the same woman who insists the government is using the Home Shopping Network to brain-wash people.”

“Is that right?” I ask, hiding a flash of annoyance. “Because she told me the problems in town all started when the DARC went back online. Seems like a pretty big coincidence. Does your uncle have anything to say about it?”

“Just that it’s all superstition and fearmongering. The two greatest enemies of science throughout the ages. If you don’t count religion.” The answer flies off the tip of his tongue, but his voice is strained. Like he’s pushing too hard. Like, maybe, just maybe, he isn’t as convinced as he’d like to be.

I’m suddenly more eager than ever to be on my way.

I crack the door. “You’re all clear.”

Taking the hint, the boy tucks the book into his pack and scrambles out onto the asphalt. “I’m Blaine, by the way. Blaine Jackson.”

“Rose.”

“Kind of ironic.”

“How’s that?”

“You work at the Dusty Rose diner, don’t you?”

“How do you—”

“Small town.” Blaine shrugs as if this fact is the single greatest trial of his existence. “Also, I was there last Friday, and I met your mom. She seems nice.”

I flush. My mother *is* nice, but most people are too concerned with what they see on the surface to care about what’s going on underneath.

Most people walk through life missing the best parts.

A throaty rumble echoes through the parking lot. It's coming from Ian's truck. He's been sitting in the driver's seat, watching our little drama unfold in his side mirror. I can feel his eyes on me as he pulls out of the lot.

"So, Rose," Blaine says, drawing my attention back to him. "Are you as handy with all tools as you are with a power saw? Not stalking you." He holds up his hands. "I sit behind you in Advanced Woodshop."

"I like to build things," I say.

"That was fairly obvious." Blaine rocks back and forth on his sneakers. Though he's playing it cool, I get the sense he's leading up to something—that it wasn't an accident he chose to hide behind Rusty instead of one of the other cars in the lot.

"I've got a project in the works that requires someone with your specific skill set. I'd make it worth your while."

"How?" My mind flies to our empty savings jar.

"If you're interested in colliders, I'm your best resource." Blaine shrugs. "I interned at the DARC all summer as an assistant to my uncle. If that doesn't interest you I've also got some tutoring money stashed aside. We could work something out." Blaine taps the door with his knuckles and backs away. "Think it over." He glances up at the sky. Worry lines snake across his brow. "But maybe don't take too long."

I know something's wrong the moment I pull up to the school and Charlie isn't waiting for me by the curb. A few years ago, when we were living in Minnesota, Rusty's tank sprang a leak. I had to walk five miles to get gas. It was a snowy day in February.

When Mom and I finally arrived at the school, it was dark and cold, and Charlie was still there, half-frozen and waiting right where I'd told him to.

My heart gives an anxious squeeze when I spot his orange backpack abandoned near a clump of bushes. I gave him that backpack when we left Minnesota for Kansas. It looks as new now as it did then, and if you look closely, the tags are still attached to the zipper, carefully tucked away inside the front pocket.

I hop out, leaving Rusty running behind me. I cut through the bushes and come to an abrupt stop on the other side. Charlie is ten feet in front of me, backed against the chain-link fence behind the baseball diamond.

“Are you stupid?” demands the boy from this morning as he pushes Charlie back with a sharp rattle.

Charlie raises his hands. He isn't trying to hit the boy. He isn't even trying to defend himself. He's shifting his arm so it hovers protectively over the bulge in his pocket.

The boy notices. “Give it up.”

“Why?” Charlie says, but I'm the only one who knows what he's really asking. Why do people always destroy what they don't understand? Why do we use our hands to break when they should be used for building?

“You just made a big mistake, freak.”

The boy punches Charlie in the stomach. My brother goes down hard. He doesn't move his arms from their protective stance, not even to break his fall. I watch his face hit the ground, and everything inside of me clenches.

I lurch forward. Thorns snag at my shirt, trapping me in place. I yank at the fabric with both hands. A few feet away, the boy stands over Charlie.

His next kick is a hammer and my world is made of glass.

The boy raises his arm again, but this time I am there. Knuckles collide with my cheekbone, sending shockwaves through my jaw. It hurts. But I'm not thinking about that right now. I'm thinking about my brother in the dirt at my feet, the deep scratch across his forehead and the gravel embedded in his hands as they pat the side of his faded green hoodie.

I turn toward the person responsible. *"Enough."*

The boy pales. He didn't mean to hit me, and he's trying to decide how much trouble he's in. "Whatever." Something in his tone tells me I won't be the last girl he strikes in his lifetime.

"Why?" I repeat Charlie's question. "What did he do to you?"

"He's a freak." The boy's black eyes narrow to knife points. Eyes I could've sworn were blue a few hours ago. "The teacher asked him what he thought about Fort Glory. He said it looked like the inside of a snow globe."

My hands tremble. I want to lash out. I want to hurt this boy the way he hurt Charlie, but it will only make things worse. I know because we've been here before.

"Get lost," I snarl.

The boys run away, laughing. When they're gone, I turn to watch Charlie dig the egg out of his pocket. It's one more problem. One more complication in a life already full of them, but I sag with relief when I see it cradled in his palm.

We don't speak as we climb into Rusty. We both know words won't fix what just happened, just like we both know it will happen again. Rowena and Blaine and all the tabloids might be convinced that some dark force is at work in Fort Glory—a force that's turning the people here violent, but I know the truth: There are boys like that in every town. Boys that become men. One of

their kind has sent us packing from state to state, all the way here to Fort Glory.

I am done running.

My cheek stings, but I forget about the pain when I see Charlie curled in on himself, his forehead resting against the glass that's stained white by his breath. My fingers itch to stroke his face the way I used to do when he was little and Mom was working the late shift. I remember watching him sleep and thinking how beautiful he was. How I would do anything to protect him. Only how am I supposed to protect him from the entire world?

Seconds pass while I sit there, my hands on the wheel and Charlie hunched beside me. The image of him on the ground fills my mind. Suddenly, I can't get enough air.

"We can't keep doing this, Charlie. For once, just *once*, can you please try to fit in?"

"Everything has a proper place, Rosie."

"Yeah, well, we're running out of towns to try on for size," I snap, more sharply than I intended. I take a deep breath. "You don't have to win any popularity contests, but couldn't you just try to be—" *Normal*. I stop myself from saying it out loud.

The word hangs between us all the same.

On the drive back to the park, every minute of silence makes me feel worse. I should take it back. I should tell him I didn't mean it, but I bite my tongue and keep driving. I want to build a life here. For us to have a chance at that, I need Charlie to hear what I'm telling him.

It isn't until we're back at the trailer that Charlie speaks. "I'll try, Rosie." He leans into my window, his expression so earnest it tears at my heart. "I promise. I'll try." He gazes at the sky, and

a shadow flits across his face. He makes that pained expression he's been making more and more since we came here. "Can I come with you?"

Weeks pass where Charlie barely speaks. Already today he's asked me for three favors. It feels important, but my cheek throbs, and I'm late, and this is just one more thing I can't deal with right now.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

He shifts so that his body is facing the woods. "The music in the dark. It's coming faster now. The cracks are getting wider." He turns back to me, his eyes sadder than I've ever seen them. "I'll be here. Soon. The dark is coming, and I don't want to be alone."

I close my eyes and grip the wheel. "Frankie won't like it. Stay here and do your homework. I'll be back before you know it."

"You promise, Rosie?"

The question is a sucker punch. For a moment, I sit there, emotions clogging my throat. "I'll come back, Charlie. I will *always* come back."

I am not Dad.

Charlie's shoulders relax. "I know. The music in the dark is loud, but it's not as strong as the song inside of us. You'll feel it. Right here." He fists his hands over his chest. "It'll bring you halfway there. The rest you'll have to do on your own. Remember, Rosie. Promise me you'll remember."

I nod even though I have no idea what he's talking about.

Watching him back away from the truck, a small part of me caves. Just like it always does.

"Wait," I call out. "Let me clean that cut."

Charlie shakes his head, his violet eyes anxious. “No, you should go. Right now.”

“Are you s—”

“Goodbye, Rosie.” Charlie closes my door, ending the conversation.

I use the crank to roll down the window between us, but the words I need jam in my throat.

When I was little, Mom was always offering me pennies for my thoughts. Even back then I could feel it—the wall inside of me that separates the things I feel from the things I can say. Most of the time, I’m glad it’s there, but there are moments, like this one, when I’d give anything to blast a hole right through it.

Only, I don’t know *how*.

I hit reverse. Charlie stands there, one hand raised and the other still pressed to his chest as he watches me drive away. His face grows smaller and smaller in the rearview. I wait for it to disappear completely. Only then do I allow myself to cry.

I arrive at the Hands for Hearths office with five minutes to spare. For a moment, I sit in my truck, staring at the red door.

We lived near a Hands for Hearths neighborhood in Oklahoma. I can still see the rows of neat houses, hear the hammers as they framed one out a few hundred yards from our trailer. I remember thinking how special that was. To help construct the house that would shelter you and the things that matter most. *Home*. More than a word. More than a place. More than four walls and a roof meant to keep out the rain.

On move-in day, the volunteers held a small party for the family on the front lawn. I’ll never forget the father’s expression

as he opened the door to his home for the first time. It represented everything I wanted to feel. That was five states, three years, seventy-eight paydays ago.

The application feels like a three-hundred-pound anvil sitting at the bottom of my bag.

I smooth out my diner dress and apron. Then I walk up the cement path to the building.

The foyer inside is decorated with framed blueprints. I approach a sixteen-hundred-square-foot ranch with a porch, and I catch my breath because it is so beautiful.

There's a plan just like this hidden behind one of the maps in my room. I keep it with some other things Mom doesn't know about. Things that belong to a ghost.

The worst thing about my father is that I still remember him. You can't miss someone you don't remember, and I still miss him. Every day.

It's strange. I don't recall the exact color of his eyes, or his favorite TV show, or even if he read to me. What I remember is the taste of the butterscotch candies he kept in his pocket and the calluses on his hands as they helped mine hold a hammer. In my memory he's a giant. Seven feet tall with work boots that bent the floorboards. The details of his face have gone sketchy, but when I think of him now, I imagine the lumberjack on the Brawny paper towels we can't afford.

Mom used to keep a photo of him tucked under her mattress. It was taken on their wedding day. My mother in white was a sun whisper; a spot of light so soft and bright it hurt your eyes to look at it. And even though she was lovely in a way that aches, she could never be more beautiful than he was when he was looking at her.

Mom took the picture, but I still have the plans. The ones he drew of the house he was going to build for her. Like his memory, the pencil marks have begun to fade, and the print is barely legible. It was their dream, and he's not here to give it to her.

But I am.



FOUR



Outside the Hands for Hearths office, I grin at the red application folder before I tuck it into my bag. The meeting went much better than I could've hoped, considering I spent the first ten minutes making up excuses for why Mom wasn't there.

Getting her to the main interview on Friday isn't going to be easy.

My mind is so preoccupied with the problem of my mother, it takes me a moment to notice the whistling. High-pitched and whining. I pause a few yards from Rusty and scan the empty street. That's when I notice the sky. I could've sworn it was sunny a second ago. Now the clouds are dark, low, and a sickly shade of green. They're moving fast. Racing each other across the horizon in the direction of Fort Glory like waves drawn in by the tide.

Something tickles my nose. At first, the current is barely noticeable. Like the whistling, it builds until every hair on my body is crackling.

Pop. There's a drastic shift in air pressure. The whistling cracks like glass in my ears, fracturing into a series of jarring notes that slam through my skull.

Oh God. This sound. It's like nothing I've ever heard. A

machine-gun blast in my brain. A vibration in my bones that wants to break me into pieces.

Two men in coveralls burst out of the mechanic shop across the street. Like me, they stare at the sky with their hands pressed over their ears.

I'm sure the noise is going to kill me when, finally, it breaks. There's a *CRACK* like a hundred cannons firing as a thick band of lightning splits the sky. A tremor runs through the ground, shifting the earth under my feet. Car alarms blare. Windows shatter on both sides of the street.

Glass is still raining down on the pavement when another wave of sound hits me dead-on. It rolls through my body and into my brain, burning through my synapses. The sheer force of it bowls me over, and then the pavement is there to meet me. Starbursts of pain explode behind my eyelids.

Gravel bites into my palms, my cheek. I try to lift myself up, but it feels like the entire weight of the sky is pinning me to the asphalt.

Black spots are dancing at the edges of my vision when the pressure in my head finally lets up. When it goes, the pain goes with it.

Cold, clean air fills my lungs. The first breath burns, but by the second, my head has begun to clear. I peel my face off the ground and look over the trees in the direction of Fort Glory. There's no sign of the weird lightning, and the clouds aren't racing anymore. Instead, they hang overhead like downy pillows ready to smother us.

The sky. It's too heavy.

My stomach lurches as my body fights to regain its equilibrium. A quick sweep of the street reinforces the feeling of wrong-

ness. The men from the auto-body shop are sprawled out on the ground. One of them is knocking the side of his head like he's trying get water out of his ears.

Blood drips down the side of his neck onto his stained coveralls.

A moan echoes down the street. A few yards away, a woman in a blazer is kneeling in front of a store window. She stares at her reflection in the glass, her pupils fully dilated and glittering with a darkness that makes my blood run cold. A jagged sob racks her body as she drives her fists into the sidewalk. Again and again and again.

The pavement runs red with her blood.

All around me, people pour out of stores and homes, packing the street and filling the air with their cries. Most of them are focused on the sky. Others stagger around in a daze like the one I can't seem to shake.

I'm still regaining control of my muscles when a man in a postal uniform rushes forward to help the crying woman. Gently, he pulls her away from her reflection in the window. Red nails flash as she claws at his face. The man's shriek pierces the fog around my head.

More confusion erupts in front of the auto-body shop. The two mechanics who were sprawled out a second ago are now back on their feet and trying to kill each other. A crowd gathers around them. People clap and jeer when one of them delivers a vicious jab that sends his opponent to the pavement. The man is still lying there, motionless, when his partner moves to stand over him, a tire iron clutched in his hand. He lets it drop.

That's when I throw up.

The sound of fighting grows louder. The brawl across the

street jumps to the crowd. Violence spreads like wildfire until the road is full of people fighting, running, bleeding.

I wipe my mouth on my sleeve. Smoke fills my lungs, acrid and thick. What's gotten into these people? Most of them are acting as scared and confused as I feel, but a few—the men fighting across the street and the woman with the crazy eyes by the store window—have lost their minds.

Sirens blare in the distance. A cavalcade of police cars races toward us. The relief I feel at the sight of them quickly turns to panic. I have to get out of here. Now. Before they detain me as a witness to manslaughter. And that means I have to get up.

I'm on all fours when the convoy of cruisers reaches us. They hurtle down the road through Maple, past the brawl and the dead man lying in the road and the swarms of injured people. Directly toward Fort Glory.

Mom. Charlie.

Fear is a straight shot of adrenaline, bringing me to my feet.

Glass crunches under my sneakers as I stumble for Rusty. I'm reaching for my bag when fierce barking erupts behind me. A huge golden retriever dragging a leash lunges at the postman. The man's shrill scream cuts through the air as jaws lock around his throat.

I don't watch what happens next. I break into a run. Rusty is a few feet away when something whizzes past my head. The rock smashes out the back window of a nearby sedan, startling me. One wrong step, and the side of my foot smacks into the curb.

Papers fly out of my bag as I hit the ground. Right next to the red Hands for Hearths folder.

I look down at myself. Blood drips from the fresh cuts on my legs onto the hem of my uniform. It's crazy, but suddenly, all I

can think about is how stains like that never come out. No matter how many times you run them through the wash.

Another rock zings dangerously close to my ear. I don't pause to see who threw it. Don't stop to wonder why. There are only two things that matter now, and they are fifteen miles down that road.

I drag myself to my feet and sprint for the truck.

The red folder stays with my backpack, abandoned on the sidewalk behind me.

The road to Fort Glory is a minefield of abandoned cars and panicked pedestrians. I drive with one hand on the wheel and the other pressed down on the horn.

Finally, the turnoff for the town comes into view. It is swiftly followed by a wall of red and blue lights. I hit the brakes. The umbrella tumbles off the dash and onto the floor. My heart pounds wildly—like it always does at the sight of police cruisers.

Cars are everywhere, a dozen vehicles and a semi obstructing the way into Fort Glory. Motorists huddle in small groups on the side of the road. A handful of police officers and firemen are spread throughout the crowd, administering first aid, restraining a few disorderlies, talking hurriedly into radios. That's not what worries me.

It's hard to put my finger on—something in the lay of their faces and the hesitant glances they keep shooting over their shoulders in the direction of Fort Glory.

Charlie. Mom.

I kill Rusty's engine and step out onto the road. A woman carrying a toddler rushes past me. More follow her lead. The police are pushing them back. Using force when necessary.

I fight my way through the crowd to the front of the pileup. I stumble when the asphalt under my feet gives way suddenly to grass.

That's when I realize what caused the holdup in the first place.

The road. It just . . . *stops*.

Directly ahead of me, a wall of forest stretches out in both directions, blocking the way into town. Not regular trees. Giant redwoods, swallowing everything in their path. Only, that makes no sense. Forests like this grow over hundreds of years.

They don't rise up in a matter of hours.

I'm still trying to understand what I'm seeing when I spot a familiar face. Rowena Mae. She's standing a few feet ahead of me, squared off against a fresh-faced deputy.

"Please return to your car, ma'am," he tells her.

"Not until you tell us what the hell is happening."

"Look." A touch of strain enters the young officer's voice. "I can't tell you something I don't know."

"Somebody here knows something. I suggest you scurry off and find them." Rowena pierces him with a glare before she stalks off toward the trees.

He charges after her. "Wait! You can't go in there. Please, ma'am. Return to the road."

"I'm just going behind that tree. You wouldn't stop an old woman from relieving herself, would you?"

The police officer's radio squawks. He turns it all the way down. "The woods aren't safe."

"This spot isn't going to be safe in about two minutes," Rowena snaps. "I'll come straight back. You're more than welcome to watch if you like."

In the end, the policeman's orders are no match for Rowena's stubbornness. He turns his back, and Rowena walks away, triumphant. I'm left with half a second to decide.

I follow Rowena behind some trees and out of sight. She spins, and her green eyes show no surprise as they zero in on my face. "I'm getting to the bottom of this. Go back to the road, Rose. What's left of it. There's trouble up ahead, make no mistake. I'm betting it's not the kind you need."

She has no idea how right she is. Drawing attention to myself now could undo everything I've worked so hard for. It would jeopardize our home application, or worse, it'd have the police digging into my closet of skeletons. We can't afford that. I *know* it, but I also know that where a few hours ago there was a road, now there's a forest blocking the way into town.

And my mother and brother are in it.

"I'm coming with you."

Without a word, Rowena heads north toward town. I glance over my shoulder one more time, and then I follow.

The ground is a quagmire of mud that threatens to suction my shoes off my feet. Ahead of me, Rowena huffs and puffs up a steep incline toward the rock rise overlooking Fort Glory. According to the Oregon map of trails I pored over for two weeks before coming here, it's called Devil's Tooth. There were multiple warnings in that book cautioning hikers not to climb.

Rowena stops in front of Devil's Tooth wearing a formidable expression. "Nothing's been right since the birds stopped singing. They felt the darkness coming, and by the looks of things, it's finally here."

I'll be here. Soon. The dark is coming, and I don't want to be alone.

The seed of fear inside of me blossoms into all-out dread.

“Think you can climb to that first ledge if I give you a hand up?” Rowena asks.

The rock wall leers at me. It’s about fifty feet tall, with a small lip carved out of the side fifteen feet up. High enough to offer a view over the trees and into town. A fall from that lower ledge wouldn’t kill me, but it would do some damage.

My vision blurs. Once when we were living in Georgia and the trailer felt too cramped, I took Charlie to the playground by the park. He went right for the slide. I kept my hands on him the whole way up, but still, he slipped. It was all I could do to wrap my body around his as we went down. We hit the ground on my right arm. It hurt like hell, but it wasn’t the pain I couldn’t shake. It was the helpless feeling of falling.

I’ve avoided slides ever since.

I’m about to tell Rowena no when Charlie’s voice echoes through my head for the second time.

I’ll try, Rosie. I promise. I’ll try.

I swallow the saliva in my mouth and meet Rowena’s gaze. “I’ll try.”

“Get up there and take a quick look. Focus on them DARC buildings in the center of town. Whatever disaster caused this, that’s where you’ll find it.” Rowena is surprisingly strong as she braces me. “That’s it, girl.”

Carefully, I remove my apron, the one holding Charlie’s egg, and lay it on the ground. Bits of rock bite into my palms as I pull myself up. One step. Then another. My heart bangs against my ribs. Sweat snakes into my eyes. I’m about six feet off the ground when my left hand slips. There’s a flash of pain, and then I’m ten years old again, falling through the air with Charlie enveloped in my arms.

The impact at the bottom drives the air right out of my lungs. Rowena curses under her breath as she helps me sit back up. I raise my hands in front of me. My knuckles are scraped raw, and one of my nails is cracked to the bed. It should hurt, but as strange as it sounds, I don't feel anything. Not even fear.

She whistles through her teeth. "You all right?"

"I'm fine," I lie through a mouthful of copper pennies. My finger is bleeding, but aside from that, nothing seems damaged.

"You're no such thing, girl."

I turn back toward the rise. So high. So, *so* high.

"What are you doing?" she demands.

"Can you give me another leg up?" The danger. The cops. Even the sound fades as I measure the distance to the top. Everything inside of me is screaming that I have to get there. I have to see what's happening on the other side of those trees.

Rowena crosses her arms. It takes all my resolve to keep my voice steady. "My family is in Fort Glory, Rowena." I raise my chin. "If something is happening in the town, I'm going to find out what it is. With or without your help."

"Try not to get yourself killed," Rowena grunts as she bends down to give me another boost.

I start to climb again. Adrenaline floods my veins. The ground is less than three feet below, but it might as well be thirty. The muscles in my legs are shaking. Sweat beads on my brow. Soon, I'm back to where I was when I fell. The next step feels impossible. I close my eyes and picture Charlie's face, streaked with blood and tears and focused on the egg in his hand. I reach up again.

My whole body is thrumming when I finally reach the narrow ledge tucked into the side of the rise. I get my arms over the

top before my muscles give out. For a moment, I hang there with my lower body dangling. Unable to move, I catch my breath and stare across the stone at the blue marble sky. Only then do I see the specks littering the clouds, tiny dots of gray that seem to be growing larger by the second. I think they're birds until I realize.

Birds don't move like that.

First there are three. Then three become ten. Then twenty, until the sky is full of metal.

I grip the ledge as dozens of helicopters fall from the sky like clumps of silver fruit. The air is alive with the whirl of blades, a mechanical thunder that sets the rock trembling beneath me. I press myself flat against the side of the wall, a fleck of pink on gray. The swarm passes overhead, so close I can feel the air rush over me in its wake.

"Rose! Are you all right? Rose, what do you see?"

I gaze over the ledge, across the treetops toward Fort Glory, and then I forget all about pink pamphlets and the police and the fifteen-foot drop below me, because I can't understand what I'm seeing. Because it is impossible.

I open my mouth, but there are no words. There are only people. My mother at work in a diner that should be right beyond that bend, her hair pulled back and her scent like a meadow. Charlie. His smile that makes the world a wonderful place. His hand in mine and the egg in my apron pocket.

"It's not there."

"What?" Rowena demands. "The DARC?"

"The town," I say, as if by voicing the thing in front of me, I could somehow understand it. "The town is gone."