

**WHAT
THE
WOODS
KEEP**

KATYA DE BECERRA

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK
NEW YORK



A part of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

WHAT THE WOODS KEEP. Copyright © 2018 by Katya de B Herrera. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-250-12425-8 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-17063-7 (ebook)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.
Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at
(800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Book design by Heather Palisi and Natalie C. Sousa

Imprint logo designed by Amanda Spielman

First edition, 2018

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

fiercereads.com

To you who steals this book, beware—
Bad luck will trail you everywhere,
You'll be plagued by gruesome forces and far worse,
For unleashing this book's Nibelungen curse.

1

MY INHERITANCE

Eyes glued shut with sleep, I scramble around for my techno-pop-blasting cell phone.

WITHHELD NUMBER.

After a short deliberation, I decide to risk it and accept the call.

“Happy birthday, Hayden!” Doreen Arimoff’s sweet-and-sour voice is like a bucket of ice, exorcising sleep from my head.

(Doreen is *ancient*. She’s been in my family’s employ since before Mom went missing. And back then Doreen already looked like an unwrapped mummy, though impeccably made-up, elegantly fake-tanned, and manicured to perfection.)

This is the first time Doreen has called me directly instead of communicating with me via my father. “Now that you’ve turned eighteen,” she says, “I have a stipulation from your mother’s will to execute. Come by my office today, and we’ll go over the paperwork. No need to make an appointment.”

Doreen's straight-to-the-point manner fails to hide her voice's tremble at "paperwork." And Doreen's voice never trembles.

"Paperwork?" I rub my forehead. A spike of headache brings back the half-forgotten dream I had last night. The dream featured me (wearing full-body armor, origin unknown) riding a huge black horse-beast and leading an army through fog-layered swamps and burnt fields and ravaged cities. White birds—ravens?—rained down on me and my army while my warriors' battle cries permeated the night. *We'll rise again!*

I blink my vision clear. *I need coffee. Now.*

"Just come by my office, Hayden," Doreen says. "I'll explain everything. Oh, and, Hayden? It'd be best if your father didn't know about our conversation. At least not until I sign your mother's things over to you."

Doreen hangs up, leaving me with many questions.

A burst of impatient footsteps outside my door reminds me that Del Chauvet—aspiring fashion star, French-Senegalese Brooklynite, and my long-suffering roommate—is waiting for me to wake up. I know she's got questions about what exactly happened yesterday: as in, how I managed to scare off a guy *this time*. Del is the mastermind behind my fiasco of a blind date, who left me stood up and battling the storm of the century in Central Park last night. (If that was Del's idea of a "perfect prebirthday present," I fear what her actual birthday present might be.) Del's impatience is tangible through the door, but she'll have to wait.

I strip off and shuffle into the shower, icy floor tiles unfriendly under my feet. As I stand below the hot stream with

my eyes closed, flashbacks, dreams, and memories spin in my head.

Dark trees. Whispers in a foreign tongue, its sound harsh. And then there's Mom, watching me from behind a tree, a sad smile on her lips. Always sad. As if Mom knew what was coming—her disappearance in the woods surrounding my childhood home. Today, my memories of Mom are like photographs rescued from a burning house, the edges darkened, middles smudged with soot. Tainted. Vague. Incomplete.

Do not be angry with the dead, my therapist, Dr. Erich, told me again and again over the years of treatment. *They're long gone, and we remain, tasked with figuring out our lives, which go on.* My response to him? *Technically, my mother is missing, not dead.* (Eventually she was declared dead *in absentia*, but that came much later.) Dr. Erich would shake his head slowly, his disappointment palpable. But it wasn't denial that motivated me. It was a compulsion to call things by their true names.

After finishing the shower and blow-drying my hair, I dance into my skinny jeans and put on a tailored cardigan over one of my Hendrix tees. I grab my old, age-ravaged messenger bag and head for my bedroom door.

I can't help the electricity running over my skin. It's like the last ten years didn't happen, and all the progress I made in Dr. Erich's office means nothing, because the simple mention of my missing-presumed-dead mother shrinks my heart into a peanut-size chunk of muscle and blood while my eyes fog up, threatened by unwanted tears.

A long time ago now, in the name of self-preservation, I chose to put Mom's memory behind me, but Doreen's

mysterious phone call promises a change, a revelation, ten years after Mom's unfortunate walk in the woods.

I forget all about Del and my failed date, and even about Del's plans concerning my birthday, as I leave my bedroom and head for the exit, determined to face head-on what Doreen has in store for me.

2

MEET THE FAMILY: DAD, MOM, AND THE NIBELUNGS

Everything and everyone on Earth is governed by invisible forces lurking just out of reach. For instance, consider the reasons why we don't drift off into the oxygen-deprived space to our deaths but keep our feet firmly on the ground. Thank you, gravity!

My life's no exception. If anything, the number of forces I'm governed by is somewhat higher than normal.

There's a force called *Dad*.

Even with the uncomfortable distance that descended upon us after Mom's disappearance—a distance that seems to be growing bigger every day—Dad still tries to control what I do, where I go, and who I'm friends with. He does it to protect me, or so he says. To overcome this controlling-from-a-distance thing that he does, I stopped telling him what I'm really up to long ago. If ignorance is bliss, then my father's

ignorance in regard to my life post-therapy must be one big bucket of undiluted joy.

And then there's a force called *Mom*.

Long gone but not forgotten and still very much present in my life, even attempting to dominate it by haunting my dreams and, as it turns out, by conspiring with our family lawyer to reach out to me from beyond the grave.

Oh, and there's also a force called *Del*. She's forever seeking to improve me—everything from my hairstyle to my dating situation. I'm like one of her vintage dress projects. Who knows? Maybe one day she'll fix me, at long last.

But for now? I'm stuck in the middle, torn asunder by conflicting forces while trying to make sense of things on my own. And when I struggle to understand things that happen to me, I interpret them by applying physical principles, translating it all into a language I *can* comprehend.

I grew up surrounded by all things physics. My dad, Thomas Holland, is a physicist. Or he *was* a physicist before he let his unhealthy obsession with conspiracy theories and Germanic mythologies overtake his research and his life. Dad's academic career imploded after he decided his students needed to know that a legendary warrior race called the Nibelungs (immortalized by the epic poem *Nibelungenlied*, Wagner's opera *The Ring of the Nibelung*, and referenced throughout Tolkien's books) were going to spill into our world via a muon-enabled portal and conquer us all.

Yeah.

Dad lost his university tenure *and* his PhD students *and* got exiled from his beloved physics labs. Now he relies on my aunt's charity, going on with his otherworldly "science" projects

out of her spare bedroom. But despite Dad's academic downfall, I still rely on physics (the real physics, not the crackpot kind) to keep me sane.

It works. Mostly.



My attempt to leave the apartment unnoticed fails. Del intercepts me in what passes for our living room. (We have a derelict coffee table; old, balding carpet; and an antique fireplace we're not allowed to use because—according to our real estate agent—it's a fire hazard.)

In her Disney pajamas and fluffy slippers, Del is a vision of gold, silver, and pink. She has that enviable talent of rolling out of bed in the morning, already gorgeous. Her hair is a halo of tight black curls, and her hazel eyes are focused, hawklike, on me. A red velvet cupcake, its middle pierced by a tiny, burning candle, is her birthday offering to me as she breaks into an off-key, jazzy version of "Happy Birthday." Her French accent is more prominent than usual—the only sign she's still not quite fully awake.

She stops singing abruptly, noticing I'm dressed to go out. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To get us some coffee." It's only a half lie. "The good stuff." In one fluid motion, I approach her and blow out the candle.

Seeing right through me, Del sets the cupcake on the coffee table and crosses her arms over her chest. "It's Ross, isn't it? What did he say to you? Is that why you didn't wait up for me last night? *How bad was it?*" The words come out in a rapid stream, her cheeks reddening. She's visibly pissed off that the blind date she orchestrated for me crashed and burned.

“Ross never showed yesterday.” I don’t sound as ticked off as I probably should. The truth is, my pride is hurt, but I’m also kind of glad this Ross person stood me up. I don’t need Del’s help to get dates. . . . Okay, maybe I do, but I’m never going to admit it to her.

She doesn’t need to know this, but the last time I was on anything resembling a “date” was when I was just over seven and Shannon Reaser, the boy next door, was nine. This was back in Promise, Colorado. We were out in the woods, playing hide-and-seek. We always played in those woods, and it was always silly and innocent. . . . But that one time, it was different. I slipped and fell, and when Shannon helped me up, he didn’t let go of my hand. We held hands as we walked back home, and I remember that wild sensation of my heart about to jump out of my chest. . . .

When I think of Shannon now, I get this blurry image: features undefined, all except for clear, soft-gray eyes and dark, windswept hair. I wonder what he looks like now. I wonder if he remembers me.

Oblivious to the unexpected storm of memories raging in my head, Del shrugs. “Perhaps it’s better that way. . . . One of my little spies informed me this morning that Ross was asking around about you long before he even approached me to set up this date. Like he was digging into your family or something creepy like that.”

“Why would he be digging?” My shoulders get stiff, and I wonder if Del notices. “And if he’s so interested in my family, why didn’t he show up yesterday and ask me whatever he wanted to know?”

"I guess we'll never know. Whatever. Changing the topic, I thought today we'd eat ice cream for breakfast and have a movie marathon till noon-ish and then I'm taking you out for a surprise field trip. And look what I got you!" Del rushes into her bedroom and returns with a Blu-ray in hand.

I'm about to scoff at her ice cream-eating idea (I'm not going through a breakup, nor have I just lost a loyal canine friend) when I notice the title of the movie she bought me. "You found it!" I take the Blu-ray from her hands and adore the cover image in all its bloody, gory glory: a white-eyed man, his mouth twisted in a silent scream because his head's about to explode. The cinematic masterpiece that is Cronenberg's *Scanners*.

"Have I told you what an awesome friend you are?" I smile at Del.

She grins back. "Not lately. And nowhere near enough."

"I'm totally going to have to rectify that." My smile turns sheepish as I put the Blu-ray on the table, next to my untouched birthday cupcake. "Rain check?"

Del's grin falters. "I have the whole day planned out for us."

"And I'm looking forward to spending my birthday with you. I just have a little chore to do first."

"And that chore is *not* getting us some good coffee, I suspect."

"I'll get our caffeine fix on my way back. Doubleshot for you. My treat." I'm not sure exactly why I'm being secretive with her. It's kind of cruel, really. Del has zero tolerance for any kind of mystery; she reads a book's last chapter first to know what's coming. But the memory of that unsettling tremble in Doreen's voice makes me keep my mouth shut.

Eventually, Del lets me go. But not before she tricks me into a birthday video chat with her parents. Del's good-looking older brother is also there, waving at me from the screen and wishing me a *very* happy birthday.

Ironically, I have more contact with Del's family than I do with my own father. And speaking of Dad, he's keeping his distance this morning, which wouldn't be the first time he's been low-key about my birthday. But with this being the first birthday I'm celebrating while living on my own, I'd expect at least *some* interest on his part. Of course, there's a pretty strong chance he forgot about it altogether. I dig into the dark matter of my brain in an attempt to establish how I feel about it and conclude that it hurts. But I can't allow myself to care about this distance between me and my father, the same way I can't let myself go dark with grief for Mom all over again. Because if I do, the next moment, I'll be neck-deep in self-pity and won't be able to see straight.

So I do what I always do when it hurts. I ignore it and busy myself with the here and now, hoping that I can trick myself into being normal. That is, if *normal* is even a word that can be used to describe anything to do with my family.



PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

December 17

Dr. Thomas Holland
Professor of Applied Physics
Faculty of Physics and Natural Sciences
Ian Trainor University

Dear Dr. Holland,

It is my solemn duty to inform you that, following due process, the investigation panel has ruled to revoke your tenure, effective immediately.

The revocation is on the grounds of numerous counts of academic misconduct, including several attempts to publish falsified data and inclusion of unauthorized material in your graduate lectures. You are, as such, to cease citing your affiliation with Ian Trainor University in all your future endeavors, specifically in relation to your misguided interests in Germanic mythologies and their alleged links to the field of multidimensional physics and string theory.

The panel has instructed the MacEvans Fund to freeze any remaining funds they have allocated for your research in the field of string theory. We are awaiting a legal decision to be made in regard to the portion of the funds that have already been misappropriated by you in pursuit of your pseudoscientific ideas. Your laboratories are to be repurposed and staff reassigned as seen fit by the dean of the Faculty of Physics and Natural Sciences.

Your graduate students (Ms. Arista Kazan, Ms. Du Yi, Ms. An Bo, and Mr. Oliver Pritchett) will be assigned new research supervisors, who will, in turn, endeavor to review and revise your former students' dissertation topics.

Ms. Arista Kazan, who, in addition to being your student, was also in your employ as a research assistant, will face an independent investigation into her own two counts of academic misconduct, which occurred while under your supervision.

Your access to your office and physics laboratories has been revoked. Your personal belongings will be shipped to your current residential address in due course. Please do not attempt to enter the university premises following the receipt of this letter.

On behalf of the Ian Trainor University administration, I wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

ERT

Hon. Edmund Rogers-Tanner
Distinguished Professor and Tenure Panel Chair
CC: Professor Alberta Mennard
Provost of Ian Trainor University
Professor Ignacio Gulate
Dean of the Faculty of Physics and Natural Sciences

3

UPON THREE CONDITIONS: PART 1

The building where Doreen keeps her practice is nestled between a Jewish deli and an old-fashioned barbershop. As I enter the reception area, Marcia, Doreen's secretary, sets her dark eyes on me with interest. Her forbidding mouth forms a reluctant smile.

"She's expecting you. Go right in."

Despite her instructions, I knock twice before opening the door.

I haven't been inside Doreen's musty office since that *bad* day. My last day at Stonebrook Academy. The day I smashed Jen Rickman's head against a mirror. (At least, that's what everyone believes happened.) Back then, Doreen negotiated a deal with Jen's parents. This deal landed me in homeschooling purgatory and Dr. Erich's care for years to come. I was eight years old when I first met Dr. Erich and almost seventeen when I said my farewells to him at last. The years of my life

in between were one big lump of suffocating, medicated fog. Thinking now of Jen and her bloodied hands hovering protectively over her face—and the long oblivion that followed—I wait for the shivers of meds withdrawal to rattle me, but to my surprise I'm as calm as a Cirque de Soleil acrobat in the middle of a death-defying act. No queasiness in the pit of my stomach. No dark stars clouding my vision. Maybe I'm moving on at last. Maybe I'm putting my past behind me, where it belongs, just as Dr. Erich promised I one day would. Is today that day?

"Hayden, darling, take a seat," Doreen says, bringing me back to Earth.

In her thronelike chair towering over a scratched-up redwood desk, Doreen sits tall, the proud ruler of her kingdom-turning-wasteland. (She's going broke; her once-moderately successful practice's now barely scraping up enough income to pay rent, since most of Doreen's clients are no longer among the living and she's too proud or too cheap to advertise and attract new ones.)

I perch on the edge of the chair facing Doreen, the desk between us.

"Does Tom . . . Does your father know you're here?" she asks.

A subtle tremble of her lips appears and vanishes in a blink. Maybe the reason she's all rattled is *me*—I'm what's making good old Doreen nervous, and she'd rather not have me in her office but has no choice. I feel sorry for her, just like I felt sorry for Dr. Erich every time my presence in his office made him uncomfortable and edgy. I have that effect on people—sometimes even on my own father. Del's the only exception, apparently immune to my uncanny "charm." Well, Shannon

was immune, too, but he never got to know the grown-up me.

“Nope,” I say. “I haven’t talked to him today. Not yet.”

Doreen purses her lips, a maze of wrinkles forming around her well-lipsticked mouth. Small talk’s not her forte. She studies me, and when I start to grow itchy under her stare, she says, “Tom isn’t going to like this. Not one bit. He went out of his way to keep Ella’s legacy away from you . . . but I’m legally obligated to execute your mother’s will, you see. Did you know your mother made special arrangements with me only weeks before her . . . demise, so I’d approach you on the day of your eighteenth birthday and ensure you come into possession of . . . certain items?”

“No, I wasn’t aware of that.”

The sound of my mother’s name, twisted by Doreen’s lips into something brittle and sweet, rings in my ears long after it’s spoken. I don’t think of Mom as *Ella*. *Ella* is for missing-person reports and obituaries, not for my ears or my private thoughts. Her name doesn’t belong among the living.

Doreen clears her throat. “Very well.”

She stands up, an effort on her part. I follow Doreen’s sagging form as it moves about the room, stopping before a vault, poorly concealed behind a tacky painting of a meadow. That painting was here when I was being kicked out of Stonebrook. Some things never change. I focus on Doreen’s back as a combination is entered and the vault door creaks open. Doreen shuffles back to the desk, her gnarled hands gripping two yellowed A4 envelopes. Dust and mothball-scented air tickles my nose, making me want to sneeze.

Without an explanation, Doreen hands me one of the envelopes. I stare at it dumbly. The paper is frail against my fin-

gertips. The envelope is marked with my name, written in a flowing cursive. (Mom's handwriting? I wouldn't remember.) I inspect my emotions: nothing but a twinge of curiosity. There are times I worry that my therapy years have rendered me so cautious that, to an unsuspecting observer, I might come off as a robot. It still takes me a few breaths to figure out an appropriate reaction sometimes, but I'm getting better at it.

Doreen nods at the envelope in my hands. "For your eyes only."

She produces a letter opener from a drawer and rips open the second envelope's belly with a single flick of a wrist. Like gutting a rabbit. The delicate sheet of paper she extracts from the envelope quivers in her hands, and her ancient mouth squeezes out the reality-bending words:

"This is a codicil to the last will and testament of Ella Townsend-Holland. It reads: 'To my only child, my daughter, Hayden Bellatrix Holland, on her eighteenth birthday, I bequeath my family estate, known as the Holland Manor, situated in Promise, Colorado . . .'"

**Codicil to the Last Will and Testament of
Ella Townsend-Holland**

I, Ella Townsend-Holland, of 33 Glastonberry Grove Lane, Promise, Colorado, declare that this is a codicil to my Last Will and Testament.

To my only child, my daughter, Hayden Bellatrix Holland, on her eighteenth birthday, I bequeath my family estate, known as the Holland Manor, situated in Promise, Colorado, upon three conditions.

My first condition is that Hayden goes to the Manor and looks for the gifts I left her. They'll call to her. She needs to listen with her blood.

My second condition is that Hayden uses my gifts to destroy my darkest secret—my hidden treasure, my heaviest burden.

My third and final condition is that Hayden trusts no one where my treasure is concerned, especially the ravens.



Ella Townsend-Holland

Ella Townsend-Holland

Witnessed by Doreen Arimoff and Marcia Strauss

4

UPON THREE CONDITIONS: PART 2

The cold grip of an invisible hand squeezes my heart and doesn't let go. The whitewashed walls of Doreen's office waltz around me in a drunken, merry circle while my brain processes what I've just heard.

The Manor? Promise? Mom's darkest secret? Her burden?

"Any questions?" Doreen asks when she finishes reading what must be the most bizarre section of a last will and testament ever created (and I include in this list Houdini's request that his wife conduct a yearly séance to communicate with his spirit).

"Where do I start?"

But Doreen's eyes tell me she's as befuddled as I am. So I push back my questions with a shrug. Doreen deflates, her eyes moving to the second envelope I clutch with both hands. When she leans forward, her interest thick and tangible in the stale air between us, I lean back. Irrationally, I expect her to jump me, to wrestle the envelope and its secrets from my

hands. My fingers whiten as they grip the envelope tighter.

Relaxing back into her chair, Doreen produces a plastic folder from a file cabinet to her left. "Well then, here's the deed to Holland Manor. In your name." I gingerly accept the folder. "I presume you'd like me to identify some good real estate agents in Denver? I have some connections there. I could negotiate a nice deal for you."

"A deal?" I ask.

"You'd like to sell the house, yes? Legally, Ella's conditions are nonenforceable, you know, so no one can make you go there and look for her 'deadliest secret' or whatever. Besides, considering how old the estate is, it's best not to wait much longer before getting an expert opinion on the property's value. . . ."

"I don't think I want to . . . sell it." My words take me by surprise. Why wouldn't I want to sell an old manor? I have no interest in moving out of my cozy Fort Greene lair and into the shivery sticks somewhere in the middle of nowhere, right? *Right?* Besides, despite his distance and all, Dad would not be happy to hear that I'm even considering . . . But what is it, exactly, I'm considering?

"Don't be silly, Hayden." Doreen's patronizing tone immediately makes me want to say something biting in response. Instead, I grab the paperwork, stuff it into my messenger bag, and leave Doreen's office in a flurry of dust.

Drunk on the oddness of it all, I hurry home, though not before getting two to-go coffees and some bagels with cream cheese from the deli next to Doreen's office. With the deed to Holland Manor and my mother's mysterious, unopened letter burning holes in my bag, I fly through the streets all the way back to my brownstone haven.

Appendix to Patient Admittance Form

PATIENT'S NAME: Hayden B. Holland

AGE: eight years, eleven months

HAIR: dark blond

HEIGHT: four feet, three inches

WEIGHT: eighty-two pounds

DATE: February 26

EYE COLOR: left eye is green; right eye is light brown

TREATING THERAPIST: Dr. Thorfinn Erich (BS, MD, DO, PhD)

APPENDIX A: TREATING THERAPIST'S NOTES:

Slight dark shadows underneath her eyes; lips badly bitten.
According to her father, Hayden's lack of appetite has been an
ongoing problem.

Only child of Thomas Holland and late Ella Townsend-Holland.
Father: tenured physics professor; currently under investigation
("persecution," in own words) because of unorthodox ideas.

The child was referred to my practice following a court mandate
issued as a result of a settlement between the administration of
her former school and the parents of another student (one Jennifer
Rickman), who suffered injuries as a result of a confrontation with
Hayden.

No prior violent episodes on Hayden's record.

Earlier this year: The child experienced a traumatic event (mother
went missing in the woods) that led to family's relocation from
Colorado to NYC. Police suspected foul play; but the investigation
came to a halt due to a lack of credible leads.

For someone who had recently lost a spouse under mysterious circumstances, father appears calm and distant. My research into the Holland family only brought up a small piece of news circulated briefly about a Colorado local going missing. I was intrigued by Hayden and her family even before I met the child in person.

First impression: The child is calm, serious, soft-spoken. Minutes into our meeting, she made a joke about Einstein's theory of relativity. First time in my long practice that an eight-year-old explained Einstein to me, sounding like she knows what she's talking about and not simply repeating what she heard in the house.

Counterbalancing moments of clarity, the child tends to retreat into her own world, sometimes while in the middle of a conversation. Subsequently, she stays quiet for long periods of time, staring off into space. I would generally interpret these moments as a defensive response to a recent trauma, but with this patient, I'm not so sure. I'm not fully convinced that she's really "out of it" during those pauses. Could this be a ploy on her part to evade my questioning when the prodding gets too intense?

When asked why she attacked her classmate, the child kept altering her story. The reasons changed from being bullied to it all being an "accident." In response to my challenge of her shifting narrative, the child proceeded to have one of her quiet episodes.

When discussing my evaluation with her father, I sense an overall unease in him, but he would not elaborate as to the source of his obvious tension. At one point he remarked how, even though it was his child under psychiatric observation, it felt like he was the one under the microscope. I had to let it go.

Suggested treatment plan: Recommendation for regular counseling sessions and cognitive behavior therapy, followed by a review after six months. If no improvement is shown, consider medication.

5

PUZZLE ME THIS

According to Isaac Newton's *third law of motion*, every action of a force produces an equal and opposite reaction. In other words, what goes up must come down. Or: Every force has a doppelgänger that masquerades as its double but really is its opposite. Get it?

My opposing force must be Delphine Chauvet, aka Del.

I didn't like Del very much when we first moved in together half a year ago. Our alliance was one of convenience. I was taking a year off before starting college, and I needed a place to live—a place my tiny allowance could afford. I was months out of therapy by then and deciding what to do next. The possibility of having to spend another day under my father's stifling roof was making me want to scream. (Well, technically it was my aunt's roof, but my father was the one making it stifling for me to live there.) I'd had enough of listening to him mumble about the Nibelungs nonstop, curse

his former employer, and conspire over the phone with his devoted research assistant, Arista.

As the gods of good timing had it, while I was looking for a place of my own, Del was being pushed out of her Jersey loft by her roommate, who was eager to move in with her girlfriend. The planets aligned, Del responded to my ROOMMATE WANTED ad, and the next thing I knew the two of us were screaming insults (me in English, Del mostly in French) as we forced our moving boxes up the rustic stairwell like a pair of angry but determined ants.

Our first days of living together were tough. The things I couldn't stand about Del included the following: her collection of ridiculous vintage clothing that wouldn't fit in her bedroom and required additional space in the living room; her on-and-off boyfriend, Bolin, who took an instant dislike of me; and her unceasing aspiration to give me a makeover and get my romantic life going. Her recent attempts at matchmaking (Ross, etc.) are just the tip of the iceberg.

It took me a month to warm up to Del. Her adoration of sci-fi movies (the more outlandish, the better) was what tipped the friendship scales in her favor. She confessed later that it was sisterly love at first sight for her, from the moment she first saw my freckled nose and "witchy eyes." By the fourth week in our dilapidated Fort Greene haven, our spirits high on *Buffy* and cheap tequila, we made a pact: to watch all sci-fi movies ever made; to always have each other's backs; and to grow old together, or at least side by side, in case we ever moved out of our brownstone fortress.

I know that Del's been planning my birthday activities for the past month, if not longer. So I feel doubly bad for not knocking on her bedroom door immediately after I return home from my morning detour to Doreen's office.

Still dazed after Doreen's reading of the codicil to my mother's will, I leave my deli haul on the kitchen island and sneak into my room. There, I skim through the deed to the Manor. My busy mind's already going through the logistics. I have some money in savings but nothing to get excited about and definitely not enough to finance airfare to Colorado. My very modest trust fund is off-limits. That leaves my emergency-only credit card. How long will it take Dad to notice if I dip into my line of credit?

With stiff fingers, I open the sealed envelope containing my mother's letter, intended "for my eyes only." Unlike Doreen, I own no letter openers, so my hasty work on the envelope is far removed from her skillful single cut. My impatient fingers tear the envelope into uneven bits.

Inside I find a flash-card-size piece of hard, glossy paper: a gorgeous medieval print of a girl in a long, midnight-blue gown. A dragonlike creature the size of a porcupine is curled at her bare feet. A string of runic symbols is woven around the girl's shape like a halo, covering her entire silhouette, including the spiky creature below her. The girl's widespread hands hold two objects: a bleeding heart (not a heart symbol, but a real one, like from the biology books) and a transparent cup filled with red liquid. The back of the card is covered with familiar, left-leaning writing:

My Hayden,

The greatest power comes from within you. Dig deep. Your hands can handle the heat. In the house on the edge of the woods, the rotten key lies. Yours to finish what I started. Ravens will watch your every step—hold your cards close, keep the birds of prey at a safe distance, and show them you're one of them.

A sheen of cold sweat coats my palms. Mom's presence in the room is elephant-huge. That forest-saturated scent that permeates my memories of her invades my airways now. I want to (need to) scream.

I don't scream, of course. Instead, I set the card aside.

Sitting prim and collected on the edge of my bed, I challenge my mind to produce a single clear memory of my mother. But there are none. Don't get me wrong: I have a whole mental trove of Mom memories, it's just that none of them is something I can hold on to. My mother remains elusive, in the periphery of my vision—there and not-there, dead and alive, like Schrödinger's theoretical cat, its state altering the moment I focus on it.

It's been a decade since I last heard Mom's voice, spoke to her, looked at her. Having her message addressed to me, right here in my hands *now*, it's like all those years never happened. Like Mom never left at all, just took an extended leave and is now back, terrifyingly alive, an uncanny revenant. Would she like this grown-up version of me? A girl raised on books and wishes, brought up by strangers, shaped and polished in doctors' offices? What would she think of me? Would she be proud? Would she love me?

My pondering is interrupted by the bang of a slamming door. Del's frantic footsteps remind me I have friend duties to attend to. Having no better place to hide stuff, I stick the deed to the Manor, the codicil, and Mom's cryptic message under my pillow. My disheveled thoughts and feelings recede back into the dark crevices of my mind, waiting for my next moment of weakness so they can raise their scaly heads above the surface.

I find Del right outside my door: She's all dolled up, her hair pulled into a chic, loose bun, with a few tight curls escaping to frame her lovely heart-shaped face.

Her mouth full of bagel, she asks, "Done with your chore?"

"You're welcome." I eye the bagel in her hand. "And yeah, all done."

"Secrets are bad for the soul." A headshake of disapproval. "Sharing is easy. Let me show you how it's done. I lost my virginity at the age of seventeen to a dashing barista in the back of his Mustang."

"Doesn't sound very comfortable."

"Memorable, though. And now you know one of my dearest secrets. Your turn."

"I don't have any secrets. My life's boring and so am I." I make my way to the kitchen and start on my bagel. After taking a sip of now-cold coffee and fighting the urge to spit it out, I shove the paper cup into the microwave and count off the seconds it takes to reheat.

Del watches me, then pouts a little. "But I have abandonment issues! And you've been kind of aloof lately. More than usual, that is."

We mirror each other's movements as we sit on the floor on opposite sides of our battered coffee table. Obviously, I'm on fire to tell Del about my morning adventure at Doreen's and desperate to hear Del's opinion on Mom's weird conditions. But that means I'd have to tell her all about Promise and Mom's disappearance, and once I start talking, I won't be able to stop, and then Del will know the real extent of how messed up I am.

Del's eyes plead with me, and I break. A little. "I'm thinking about a spontaneous trip," I say.

Del's eyes grow excited. "Where to?"

"Colorado."

A puzzled look. "What's in Colorado?"

"Promise. It's a town. I used to live there, before . . ." I trail off. "Before New York."

There are times I forget what Del knows and what she doesn't. She knows my mother's been missing for years and is declared dead in absentia. What she doesn't know is that the night Mom went missing, the local woods of Promise, for lack of a better word, *erupted*, forming a new clearing in the process. More of a crater, really. As if a burning giant's foot stepped down into the woods, the trees were stomped to the ground, and the grass was burned off. If I didn't know better, I'd say that the night of Mom's disappearance, Promise became the landing site of a small meteorite. But there were no meteorite sightings recorded anywhere in Colorado that night—I checked. No bangs of explosions heard. No flashes of light seen. The local police and fire departments declared it a freak forest fire that burned itself out. Their main theory was that my mother set it and then skipped town.

"As of this morning, I own my family estate in Promise." I watch Del's lips stretch into a perfect little O. "Dad isn't going to be happy about that. He was very thorough when he cut off all connections I had to Promise after Mom disappeared. But I guess he has no control over what Mom planned for me while she was still around. She stipulated in her will that I get the house the day I turn eighteen."

“So that’s what your mystery chore was.” Del overcomes her surprise enough to speak. “What are you going to do? I mean, about the house? This is huge!”

“I-I know the logical thing would be to sell it. I don’t see myself moving to Colorado, but I want to at least have a look at the old place, maybe spend a week there before I let it go. Is that too bizarre, that I want to go back to a place where nothing good has ever happened to me?”

My question is rhetorical, and I don’t expect Del to answer. She doesn’t. Also, I’m not being completely honest with her, and, knowing how perceptive she is, it’s likely she can hear the deception in my voice. Some good things *did* happen to me in Promise. Lots of good things. Take the woods, their dark calm, their unending welcome, their unwavering acceptance of me. On days when Mom wasn’t tormented by her demons, she took me deep into the woods and we’d roam for hours, petting the wet moss, collecting strange flowers that grew in the shadowed corners, and listening to the sounds of birds and animals before returning to the Manor for the simple lunch Dad would make for us.

And then there was Shannon. The boy next door, my first friend—my only friend back then. Would he still be living in the house next to the Manor? When I left Promise as a child, I cried about losing the safe haven of my forest and Mom’s beloved Manor, but most of all I was devastated because leaving town meant leaving Shannon. We didn’t even have a chance to say good-bye. One morning I woke up to Dad telling me I had an hour to pack; the rest of our stuff would be shipped to our new home. I thought of running away, of going to the woods and staying there, eventually becoming a wild girl reared by

animals and nourishing myself with berries and roots, but Dad picked me up, packed me into his car with the luggage, and just took off. And that was it.

After we settled in New York, I wrote to Shannon regularly. At least, I did until the therapy started and I lost days, weeks, and even entire months to Dr. Erich's treatment. Since my father was in complete control of my life back then, there's a good chance that none of my letters actually got mailed. Or maybe Shannon moved away or simply moved on. Whatever the reason, I never heard back, and eventually I stopped writing.

"Can I come with you?" Del asks, sounding uncharacteristically timid.

"Don't you have your group project to work on during the break? And what about Bolin?"

She waves her hand in dismissal. "Bolin and I are through. Done. Never again. And I can work on my project while you do your soul-searching or whatever."

I consider it. I've never traveled by myself before. It'd be nice to have a travel buddy. And Del tagging along to my homecoming trip means I'd have a shoulder to cry on if being bombarded by sad memories gets too tough.

"First let's see how much plane tickets cost, and—"

Del doesn't let me finish. She launches out of her spot on the floor to clasp me in a breath-ending hug. "Let me worry about that! Oh, and happy birthday, Hayden!"

Herald Point Press

News

Entertainment

Calendar

Guide

Contact Us

URBAN TERRORS

The Stonebrook Incident: Unveiling the Facts

by Ross Hidalgo

Note: Doreen Arimoff, lawyer for the Holland family, has requested we remove this investigative report under allegations of fraud, defamation, and invasion of privacy. The Urban Terrors blogmasters are reviewing her request.

An episode of horrific violence, which in local urban lore came to be known as the "Stonebrook Incident," took place ten years ago on a gloomy September day in an idyllic corner of Long Island. The ghosts of what happened that day still haunt the halls of Stonebrook Academy and the minds of all involved, including the victim and the perpetrator.

My investigation began in the living room of the Academy's former headmistress, Ms. Belinda O'Reilly. Now retired, Ms. O'Reilly fondly remembers Jennifer Rickman, a kind and popular girl, who at the age of nine suffered severe cuts to her hands, head, and face after being thrust into a bathroom mirror by classmate Hayden Holland.

Fingers wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee, Ms. O'Reilly recalls a school assembly that day. The assembly was called to calm the student body after a young pupil's gruesome discovery: Eight birds had crashed to the ground for no apparent reason, inexplicably dead. The boy who found the dead birds had smeared their blood all over his face and would not stop screaming. He had to be sedated and kept on school premises as unusually stormy weather prevented his parents from picking him up promptly. To make matters worse, the Academy's grounds had been partially flooded by the storm, and an old oak tree that served as the Academy's symbol, its image decorating the school's emblem, was struck by lightning and split in half. All these creepy events added to the foreboding background for an incident that shook the Academy to its core.

"I still get shivers when I think about it," Ms. O'Reilly says, recalling how the atmosphere in the darkening halls of the Academy was growing tense with anxiety. "Those bulging black clouds hanging over our school . . . like a curse in the making. And all those dead birds. Hayden's stone-cold face! And blood flowing from the wounds on Jen's forehead and cheeks, her nose smashed in, her lips a gory mess . . ."

Ms. O'Reilly was called to the scene—a girls' bathroom—after a student named Hayden Holland attacked Rickman. Like most students and staff that day, Ms. O'Reilly only saw the aftermath of the attack. The sole eyewitness to the event was Ms. Aileen Lancaster, a geography teacher. My attempts at locating Ms. Lancaster for an interview hit a dead end; she has no digital presence or accurate records that I can locate.

On the other hand, Rickman agreed to meet with me in a café in eastern Long Island. After undergoing extensive therapy and several plastic surgery procedures to remove the worst of the scarring, Rickman's face still bears a reminder of what Holland did to her.

"It all happened so fast," Rickman remembers. "She cornered me in the bathroom. One moment I was standing next to her and we were talking. Just talking. And the next, I was whooshing through the air, my back hitting the wall. And then I was pulled back by this unseen force, and I was flying, headed for the mirror. I didn't even have a chance to raise my hands to protect my face before the impact. It all happened so fast. . . ."

Whooshing? Flying? Unseen force?

I ask Rickman if she was fully conscious during her ordeal. Yes, she was conscious, and yes, she meant what she said: Holland sent her flying into that

"What would a 'monster' have to say in her own defense?"

mirror. When I ask how that could be possible, Rickman whispers that Holland is "not quite human."

"Take what you will from this," Rickman continues, "but this is what I know happened, and I will stand by it."

Suspended from the Academy following the incident, Holland appears to have never returned to the formal schooling system. No details of her life post-Stonebrook can be found on public record. Holland has no social media profiles and no other digital presence.

Rickman believes her attacker just walked away from the incident unscathed and unpunished. She blames Holland's family lawyer for pulling strings to save Holland from a more drastic intervention. Sometimes, Rickman says, she can't sleep at night thinking that this monster's still out there somewhere.

I keep thinking that there are two sides to every story. What would a "monster" have to say in her own defense? If not for a random connection, I might have never received any answer. But a friend of a friend from college mentioned in passing that he knew a girl whose roommate is named Hayden Holland. I asked to be introduced, and soon I was making arrangements for a "blind date" with the "Stonebrook monster" herself.

I could not believe my luck. . . . And then my luck ran out. An hour before I was supposed to meet Holland, I received a phone call from—you guessed it—the Holland family's lawyer, threatening me with legal action if I didn't drop my investigation. But this is not the end. It'll end when the truth is out.