1

Dad tells me the wood is not a place to play. It is a place for business, and it is more powerful than I could ever imagine.

He tells me I cannot forget the rules of the wood. There are three.

Do not travel from the paths.

Do not linger after dark.

Do not ignore the calling.

These rules are easy to remember. He drills them into my head every day over cereal breakfasts and walks to the bus stop. He meets me after school and reminds me again, but when I ask if I can go into the wood, he says, "Not yet."

I watch them from my bedroom window, the trees that spread out behind our house along the Olentangy River. To everyone else, they are half a mile wide and three miles deep. To us, they're limitless.

I watch the seasons change from that window. Count the

number of leaves that have turned orange and red, purple and gold. I watch them fall from their branches, covering the ground so that the paths are only distinguishable by the weathered logs that outline them.

When the snow comes, the logs are also covered, and I wonder if it makes the rules harder to follow. If it's easier to wander off the paths when they can't be seen. Easier to get trapped in the middle of a limitless space, unable to escape when night comes crawling in. If it's easier to forget things such as duty and honor surrounded by all that white.

Dad tells me it's in his blood. He would know the paths even if he were blind. He feels the night descending like others feel the warmth from a fire or smell rain on the horizon. He never neglects to heed the call.

Even when he wants to.

He tells me it'll be the same for me, when I'm old enough. He tells me it's in my blood, too.

And when he finally begins my lessons in the wood, I know he's right. I feel it, like birdsong. A buzzing melody beneath my skin that keeps me on the paths, guiding me, never letting me go where I shouldn't. I cannot travel from the paths—it is physically impossible. I cannot linger after dark—to do so would be suicide. I cannot ignore the calling—the one time Dad told me to try, the birdsong turned into hornets, boring into muscles and sinew, crippling me with pain and sickness.

It is because of these rules that I don't immediately think anything's wrong when I come down the stairs one morning and Dad's not sitting at the kitchen table. Why I don't understand

when I see Mom sobbing into Uncle Joe's shirt. Why a humming clogs my ears as Uncle Joe tells me Dad wandered off the paths. That he got swallowed up by the trees.

That he's gone.

I tell Joe it can't be true. Dad couldn't have walked off the paths—it isn't possible. Joe must have made a mistake. Dad just hasn't come back from his morning patrol yet. That's all.

But I've never seen Uncle Joe look so pale. He murmurs to himself, the same way he does when we play chess and he's thinking of all the possible outcomes. I catch fragments like "must have tripped somehow" and "maybe a fight with a traveler?" and "need to inform the council."

Mom is sitting at the table now, her arms crossing her head like a fort. I lean over her and lay my head on top of hers, even though I can't understand why she's crying. Dad's still out on morning patrol.

He's coming back.

In the weeks that follow, the council's investigation concludes with no evidence of foul play. They determine he simply stumbled off a path. An accident. Nothing anyone could do.

But I know better.

Either he was forced off the path, or he found a way to walk off it voluntarily. If it's the former, if a traveler somehow forced his feet from the path, there's nothing I can do. So I tell myself it's the latter, because if Dad walked off the path, he did so for a reason. If Dad walked off the path, then I should be able to do the same thing. But even as I stand in the wood, surrounded by

ice-covered trees that glitter in the sunlight like crystals, throwing bands of rainbows onto the snow around my feet, I can't follow him. My body won't let me.

I ask Uncle Joe what this means.

He says it's in my blood. I can never walk off the paths.

II

20 MONTHS LATER

I have never been so scared, or so curious, as I was the first time I met a traveler. Dad had told me about them, of course, these people who fall through the time-traveling portals—the thresholds, wormholes, whatever you want to call them—that pockmark the wood behind our house. They are the reason for the guardianship. They are the people who need to be protected from the wood, and whom the wood needs to be protected from.

Our job is to keep them from crossing a threshold into another time, Dad told me during my first lesson.

Why? I asked.

It's dangerous, he replied. *For them and for the wood. Travelers are meant to live in their own time periods and no other. To be stuck in an era that is not your own could cause major ramifications.*

Like what? I prodded.

Death, he answered. *Destruction. Implosion of the space-time continuum and life as we know it.*

I don't think Dad meant to scare me. I think he just wanted me to know, to understand. What we do—what the Parishes

have always done—matters. Even in his cynical moments, I don't think Dad ever *truly* believed the work we did was for nothing. But it didn't stop me from seeing an omen of death and destruction the first time I laid eyes on a traveler.

He was tall—double my height—and broad, a mountain of flesh and bone. Dad didn't seem concerned, but I knew if I was out there alone, I wouldn't have been able to handle this traveler the way a guardian needs to. I was too small and he was too big. That's where the fear came in.

But the curiosity was stronger. I had only just begun my lessons in historical fashion—an effective signifier when trying to determine a traveler's origins—but I could at least pinpoint him to seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Europe. I was still trying to master Latin and Greek at the time, so I had no idea what language he spoke, but that didn't matter. Dad knew everything I didn't, and then some. I stuck to Dad like a shadow, watching his body language and facial expressions as he guided the traveler back to the threshold from which he came.

Some things you just can't learn from books.

Now, I stand across from a traveler who couldn't be more different from my first. She is a peasant girl, with a curtain of black hair covering her face and a black, suspicious eye peeking out from beneath the strands. She's shorter than I am, but the dagger in her hand makes her just as dangerous as the man who towered over me all those years ago. Still, I am not afraid.

What a difference six years make.

"Who are you?" she snaps at me in Japanese.

At least, I *think* that's what she says. It's in a more formal style than modern Japanese. Judging by her clothing, I wager a

guess at Early Middle Japanese, which is really unfortunate. I'm much more fluent in the modern dialect.

I hold up my hands in front of me to show I'm not a threat. "A friend," I reply. "I want to help you."

At least, I think that's what I said. I mold my face into the same lines of sympathy Dad always used, just in case.

Her gaze narrows. "Where am I? I do not recognize this place."

"A wood," I tell her, "where lost people sometimes find themselves."

I'm not usually so direct with my answers; most travelers jump at the chance for someone to lead them home, even a stranger such as myself, whether their questions are answered or not. But this girl's fear doesn't shut her down; it wakes her up. If I'm going to get her to cooperate, I need to be as forthright as possible.

"Where are you from?" I ask, taking a step closer.

She stiffens. A band of sunlight glints off her blade.

"Please," I say. "I'm just trying to help. Don't—"

But she's already running, barreling toward me like a bull at full charge. I duck at the last second, pivoting myself around her and catching her wrist in my hand. She jerks to a stop. In her split second of shock, I grab her other wrist, pinching her hands behind her back until the dagger loosens from her grip and sticks point-first in the earth.

"I don't want to hurt you. See?" I pick up the knife and throw it into the trees. "I just want to help."

"Why?" she spits.

"Because you're not supposed to be here. Don't you want to go home?"

Her body relaxes slightly at that word. *Home.*

I take a deep breath. "Tell me where you live."

She hesitates, then mutters, "Heian-kyō."

Heian-kyō. The city now known as Kyōto.

"What year?" I ask, but I must not ask it in the right way, because she doesn't seem to understand.

"Who is the emperor?" I try again.

"Takakura."

There is only one Heian-kyō threshold, so I'm not worried about sending her back to the wrong time, but it's important to keep track of the threshold's current timeline for the council's records. I'll have to double-check to be sure, but if I remember my Japanese history correctly, that would put the threshold somewhere near the end of the Heian period.

"I'm going to let go now," I say. "You have two choices here. You can run away and stay lost, or you can follow me and go home. Understand?"

I'm really winging the Japanese now, but she nods anyway. She follows me down the paths without saying a word. A cloud moves over the sun as we walk, and the blood in my veins jerks at the sudden darkness. A primal reaction, but logic quickly takes over, as it always does on cloudy days. The wood doesn't change until night falls, and I know exactly how much time I have left.

Two hours to sundown.

We finally reach her threshold, an empty pocket of space between the trees, only distinguishable by a break in the logs lining the paths and the decrepit shingle hanging above it that bears her city's modern name: *Kyōto, Japan*.

"If you step through the trees here," I say, "you'll find your way home."

"Home?" she repeats.

I nod.

She smiles and carefully takes a step forward, then another, walking underneath the shingle. And then she disappears entirely, as if she were never here to begin with.

This is my favorite time in the wood. The hour just before sunset, when the wind slashes through the green canopy above me, cutting open squares of orange sky like patches in a quilt. Fireflies flit through the trees, little lanterns in the encroaching darkness. I put out my hand and catch one in my palm. Its blue body is different from the fireflies others see outside the wood. Dad told me once that they are an evolved species, that our wood is littered with evolved species the rest of the world will not see for a millennium.

I stroke my finger down its silver-striped back and its wings flutter, revealing the lower half of its body. Pinpricks of light swirl in a clear shell, an entire galaxy of stars and planets and sunshine trapped in its tiny frame.

At least, that's what it's always looked like to me. Dad used to say it reminded him of oil slicks, the way the rainbow would swirl through the black, but he loved working on cars and I love astronomy, so I guess it all depends on what you want to see.

I press my lips against my wrist and blow until the bug flies away. I wish I could stay longer, but the sun is closing in on the horizon, and mist is already starting to unfurl from the trees surrounding me, collecting on the paths like a ghostly blanket. It's as if the mist knows the rules change after dark. As if it would

hide the paths and the thresholds from me so I couldn't find my way home.

This is the moment when I wish my feet wouldn't betray me. When I wish I could stay in this exact spot, staring up at the patches in the leafy quilt until they turn velvety black, speckled with stars, and letting the trees take me so I can find him.

But then my feet shuffle toward home. Halfway there, the wood becomes less dense. I see the light from the kitchen through the gaps in the trees, and I remember why I can't disappear.

Mom would be all alone in this world, and she would never forgive me for doing that to her.

I would never forgive myself.

She wants me to stop coming out here. We argue about it sometimes but Mom knows there's no fighting it. The wood calls to me like a siren, tugging an invisible thread that reaches deep into my core, so that I have no choice but to follow. A puppet on a string.

Uncle Joe mediates when he can, but he's not always around.

I know I've stepped over the threshold into the normal wood—the one that everyone else sees when they drive by on 315—when the breath rushes out of my lungs in a single huff and the regular noises of the world, the cars honking and the hum of the streetlights blinking on and the sound of the river, swollen from the previous night's rain and lapping against the edges of our neighbors' yards, slam into my ears.

It's always like this. Heart drumming, lungs burning, as if I've been holding my breath for hours. I feel heavier somehow, rooted to the ground, and yet disconnected from all of it.

I sit down on the giant rock that bears my parents' initials inside a heart and watch the sunset. Mom spots me from the

window above the kitchen sink and waves. I try to wave back, but I'm still not completely in control of my body, and my hand doesn't leave my side. I smile at her instead.

Mom shrugs as if to say, *What can you do?* She knows I'm okay. She's seen Dad go through this a million times, what he used to call the decompression stage. The toll the body takes from walking through a world that is not its own is like jet lag times a thousand. She knows in a few minutes I'll be back to normal and I'll walk through the door with full control of my motor skills and ask what's for dinner.

But her shoulders don't relax until I stand and go through the stretching exercises Dad used to make me do to get my blood flowing again. Of course, he used to say chocolate ice cream did the same thing, taking me to Mr. Igloo whenever I skinned my knee or had my blood drawn at the doctor's office. "You eat chocolate ice cream and your red blood cells start to multiply. Poof," he would say, handing me a cone. "Like magic."

Now that I'm older, I know it isn't true, and I'm not certain the stretching does anything, either. Still, it feels good. Lets me forget he's not here next to me, doing the same stretch with his hands on the ground between his feet. For a moment, I can almost hear him breathing, and I think if I peek through the curtain of hair covering my face, I'll see him there in front of me.

But I never allow myself to actually look. It would hurt too much.

I start down the path toward home. Mud squishes up into the treads of my hiking boots. Crickets and cicadas buzz around me, static noise that didn't reach me farther back in the trees.

And then there's something else, a whisper that swims by my ear, soft as the tip of a feather stroking my skin. The breathy

sound shifts and stretches itself into too many syllables, but it sounds like it says my name.

Winter.

I turn back to the wood, half expecting to see my dad standing there in the same plaid shirt he wore the first time he took me into the wood, when I was ten and he seemed indestructible. A constant in my life that would never change.

But there's nothing. Just a darkness that stretches beyond what most people see.

III

Uncle Joe sits on the back porch, cloaked in shadows and cigar smoke. I'm fairly certain he wasn't sitting there a moment ago, but that's nothing new. Joe's magic allows him to bend the normal rules of nature and space.

"Any travelers?" he asks, a stream of blue vapor seeping out of his nostrils.

The old porch beams creak under my weight as I sit next to him. "One. A peasant girl from Heian-kyō. She put up a fight, but that was my fault. My Japanese is rusty."

"Course it is," Joe says. "That threshold rarely opens."

I shrug. "I should have been prepared."

Uncle Joe scratches his chin. His black stubble is salted with white, and the silver strands weaving through his hair seem to multiply every time I see him. Joe is forty-three years old, or so he likes to say. Age is kind of relative when you're immortal. He doesn't have a line on his face, and his body is more ripped than our star quarterback. Age has no hold on him anywhere else, which makes me wonder if the white in his hair has anything to

do with age at all, or if it came from the wood. If the things he's seen over the last thousand or so years are finally catching up to him, or if his guilt over what happened to Dad is eating him alive, same as it's doing to me.

It's easy for Mom to tell me I shouldn't feel guilty, that there's no way to know if I could have prevented Dad's disappearance by being out there with him that morning, but it doesn't help. All I see when I look in a mirror anymore is my selfishness. I should have gotten up when my alarm clock went off that morning. Should have helped Dad with the morning patrol. But it was a Saturday, and my bed was warmer than the air surrounding it, and I knew Dad wouldn't begrudge my sleeping in.

That's the worst part about it, knowing that Dad wouldn't have even said anything to me for missing it. For not being there. For failing him.

But whatever I'm feeling, I know Joe's guilt must be worse. Joe has worked for the council as the Parish family intermediary for hundreds of years, a sort of liaison between the soldier (me) and the bureaucracy (the council). He checks on me, reports back to them. He's supposed to keep me safe, just like he was supposed to keep Dad safe.

I don't know if the other guardians are as close to their intermediaries as Dad was to Joe, but even if they hadn't been like brothers, Joe would have still felt responsible for what happened to Dad.

I think that's why Joe doesn't come around the house much anymore. He can't stand looking into my mother's pale, lifeless eyes, not when it was his failure that stole the light from them.

Joe takes one last puff of his cigar, then makes a flicking motion with his wrist. The cigar disappears. Like magic.

"Council meeting tomorrow afternoon." He stands. "I'll find you when it's time."

He starts down the porch steps.

"Hey, Uncle Joe?"

He turns.

"Do you want to come in for dinner?" I ask, even though I already know the answer.

His gaze flicks to the back windows, through which we can see Mom bustling around the kitchen, carrying plates to the dining room table. He watches her a moment longer, an unreadable expression hardening his face, then shakes his head.

"Maybe next time," he says, his body already dissolving and scattering like a million grains of sand on the wind. I suppose doing something as normal as walking or driving is too passé for someone who can teleport.

"Yeah," I reply, even though he's already gone. "Maybe."

A platter of roast chicken sits on the dining room table surrounded by bowls of mashed potatoes, sautéed green beans, and a leafy salad tossed with tomatoes and cucumbers. Mom and I both eat like birds. The leftovers will feed us for days, but she refuses to cut recipes.

She also refuses to move Dad's clothes out of the closet even though it's been almost two years. Uncle Joe says she's not grieving properly. He says I need to talk to her, but I don't see what good that would do. I'm holding on to Dad as tightly as she is.

Mom stands behind her usual chair. "Dinner's ready."

I kick off my mud-splattered boots, eyeing the third empty plate she always sets in front of Dad's chair, and make my way

into the kitchen to wash off the dirt in the cracks of my palms. "Thanks."

Not many would expect my mom to be a great cook, considering that most mothers who spend ten hours a day at work would rather order takeout when they get home, but cooking's always been a stress reliever for her. As soon as she gets home, she changes out of her professor uniform of tweed slacks and a white blouse into her sweats and trusty apron. She digs through the fridge, opens her cookbook, and doesn't say a word until the meat's roasting or stewing or frying and the whole house smells like fresh herbs and melted butter.

One time I joked that this was her own form of decompression, her way of becoming human again after a long day in another world wearing a hat that wasn't labeled MOTHER or WIFE. She smiled at me and said, "Yeah. I suppose you're right." And then I sat down on the stool on the other side of the kitchen island and she asked me what I learned in school that day. Before Dad disappeared, it was our usual routine—me sitting at the kitchen island while Mom cooked, both of us waiting for Dad to return from his evening patrol. Both of us anxious for him to get home before the sun went down, although we hid it well behind small talk and smiles that never quite reached our eyes.

Now, I'm the one who patrols the wood every evening, and Mom waits for me in the kitchen by herself, with no small talk to keep the anxiety at bay.

Water sluices over my hands. I pump a dollop of soap into my palm and scrub out the creases with my fingers. The polished obsidian coin hanging from the leather straps around my wrist clinks against the sink. I turn my hands over and notice a splotch of dried blood on my forearm. Peasant girl must have nicked me

when she charged. I wash it off quickly before Mom notices and walk over to the table.

"Looks delicious."

"I hope it tastes as good as it looks," Mom replies, pulling back her chair. She always says this, even after cooking one of her tried-and-true recipes. She's always been so humble that she's never known how to take a compliment. It was one of the reasons Dad said he fell in love with her.

I tell her about my history paper, due at the end of the week, and the A that I got on my English test. It's been three weeks since I had to skip a class to take care of a "disturbance" in the wood, so Mom doesn't feel the need to remind me homeschooling is an option as she's done on other nights. Instead, she tells me about her students and some archaeological dig in Turkey she's thinking about joining next spring.

We both know she won't. I can't leave the wood, and she can't leave me, even though I'd be fine on my own. Even though Uncle Joe would check up on me.

But neither of us says this.

Only ten minutes into the meal and there's nothing else to talk about. Silence fills the room like water in a bowl, pulling us under into our own thoughts and fears and white noise.

IV

Dad sits me down in the study on the morning of my tenth birthday. It's February, and nearly a foot of snow glitters outside the frosted window. He's made me my favorite drink, a mug of cranberry cider warmed over the stove with cinnamon sticks and a dash of orange juice. Flames crackle in the fireplace, consuming bits of old newspaper with the freshly cut wood. A bowl of scented pinecones sits in the middle of the coffee table, where it has sat since Christmas. The pinecones have lost most of their scent, but Mom sees no reason to throw anything away that still serves a purpose, even if that purpose is purely decorative.

Dad folds himself into his favorite reading chair, ice-covered branches fracturing the window at his back, as I curl my legs up underneath me on the couch. There are presents on the dining room table and sticky buns baking in the oven, but he tells me they can wait. It is a hard thing to hear at ten years old, especially when one of the presents is shaped like the Barbie dream car I've wanted for months, but I scrunch my eyes down into my "serious" face anyway and set the mug on the coffee table.

"You're old enough now," he begins, "to know about the wood."

I no longer have to try to forget my presents. They have left my mind completely.

He launches into a story that begins here, in this old country house made of strong timber and river stone, in the year it was built, 1794, though the Parishes had been protecting the thresholds for nearly eight hundred years before that. One of our ancestors journeyed to America when he heard of a particular patch of trees in the Northwest Territory, a piece of land the Native Americans called sacred and the settlers called cursed, where people went in and never came back out. Not a totally uncommon occurrence back then, of course, but the fact that the trees in question were located next to a river made our ancestor wonder if it was connected to the wood between worlds he was sworn to protect.

"You see, rivers are the power sources that connect the wood to our world," Dad explains, but he must see something in my face that says I don't understand, because he adds, "The wood is like a carousel, a spinning wheel that has no real beginning or end, just the platform where the conductor controls its power. Without power, the carousel does not turn."

I frown at the carpet. "But with a carousel, there's more than one way to get in and out, right?"

He smiles. "There are many points of entry, yes, just as there are many points of entry into the wood, but there are only a few power sources which keep the wood grounded in the space between worlds. Unlike other thresholds that open and close throughout time, the threshold behind our house and the thresholds located next to rivers around the world that act as these

power sources are always open. This is why the guardians live next to these thresholds, so they can have constant access to the wood."

"There's more than one guardian?"

"Oh yes," Dad says. "Ten families in all."

He explains a lot to me that morning, things I don't fully understand until he begins my proper lessons, with old journals and guided walks through the wood. He explains how the thresholds work and talks about ley lines, points of power that intersect, and the way the never-ending flow of the river gives the wood a unique source of power. He says worlds were never meant to be crossed, and it is our job to protect the wood from travelers, and to see those travelers home safely.

I learn that the thresholds always open at the same locations—in an alley in Los Angeles that used to be a grazing meadow, or in a market in Shanghai, or in some tiny corner of a place no one would even think to look at twice—little rips in the fabric of time. Some open for fifteen seconds, others for fifteen minutes. The longest open threshold on record was an hour, back when my dad was still in diapers. Grandpa sent a group of seventeen travelers back through the same threshold in one afternoon, herding them like cattle.

And then the thresholds close, like scabs over a cut. Days, weeks, even years in the human realm can pass before the scab is picked and the timeline rips open once more, bleeding travelers into the wood until it scabs over again. This continues until the threshold closes for good, the cut finally healing into a scar, although this doesn't happen as often as Dad would like.

He grabs a book from the shelf and hands it to me. It's an old book bound in leather with the title and author's name etched in

green. The copyright reads 1936. It is a collection of stories, paranormal events that have taken place around the world that have never been fully explained. He tells me to turn to chapter twenty-three, entitled "Time Travel." In it, there are a dozen stories of people disappearing from their time period only to wind up in another. One story in particular catches my eye, about a traveler wearing medieval clothing, who, according to onlookers, appeared out of nowhere in the middle of a street in downtown Chicago. One witness told police that the man shouted at passersby in Shakespearean English and stared at the buildings surrounding him as if he'd never seen anything like them. In his confusion, the man was run over by an Oldsmobile and died instantly. Some thought he had possibly escaped from an asylum, while others thought he was an actor who'd had too much to drink. Whatever the case, his identity was never discovered, leading some to believe he may not have been from their time at all.

"These people pass through the thresholds unknowingly and end up in our wood," he explains. "They become disoriented, and it is our job to take them back to their own time, but a few of them have slipped through the cracks in the past thousand years, since the guardians were called. These travelers journeyed through a threshold that was not their own and ended up in another time. This is dangerous for many reasons but, most important, it upsets the natural order of things. We are all supposed to exist only in our own timelines. To be dropped into another could rip apart the very fabric of our world."

I flip the page. There is a copy of the newspaper article detailing the accident, along with a sienna photograph of the body splayed underneath the car.

"I want you to read that book before we begin your lessons,"

he says just as the oven timer dings. He ruffles my hair. "Enough talk for one morning. I believe you have presents to open."

But I am not as excited about the Barbie dream car or the sticky buns. I hug the book to my chest and keep it on me at all times over the next week, reading whenever the opportunity strikes, making notes in the margins in purple ink under the notes made by my dad and my grandpa and someone else before him.

V

Trevor watches me in fifth-period chemistry from the other side of the room. Meredith notices and nudges me with her elbow. A drop of distilled water sloshes out of the beaker.

I sigh. "You're lucky that wasn't hydrochloric acid."

"You should go out with him," she says, doodling fat hearts onto her lab packet. "He's clearly into you."

"I did go out with him." For one week in sixth grade. It was enough.

Mr. Craft walks by and Meredith fiddles with the Bunsen burner until he moves on to the next worktable. "But he's *mature* now. And he's a quarterback."

"Second-string," I mumble as I watch the solution and jot down my observations.

"Yeah, but those abs ain't second-string."

I roll my eyes.

Meredith became boy crazy right around the time Dad started teaching me about the wood. She'd talk to me about her

latest crush and I'd nod as if I were listening, when really all I thought about was my next lesson. And then she would notice I wasn't listening, and I'd spend the next hour apologizing. We had our biggest fight in eighth grade. Meredith called me a freak and I called her immature. We weren't friends for a week.

It was the longest week of my life. And even though she still calls me a freak sometimes for making it to junior year without having one steady boyfriend and I call her immature for caring more about gossip and boys than our upcoming ACTs, I don't know what I'd do without her.

She reminds me that there's a normal life outside the wood. Reminds me that there's something to protect that goes beyond me and my family, even if it's something that I'll never fully be able to enjoy. Meredith hits it on the head every time without meaning to.

I am a freak.

"Yeah, well, I have it on good authority that Trevor's hoping he'll see you at the game Friday night." She bounces in her seat as she says this, the fluorescent lighting making her perfectly straight teeth look even whiter than usual.

"Did he say that?"

"No, Tommy D. did. I think he wants to ask you to homecoming."

"Tommy?"

She rolls her eyes. "*Trevor.* Honestly, Win, I don't know how you function sometimes."

I don't know, either. It's not like I don't notice boys at all. Not like I don't wish I could be more like Meredith and actually have time on my hands to go to football games and parties and homecoming dances. But even if I did have the time, there

wouldn't be any point in it. I don't care how mature he is for his age; I doubt there's a single high school boy in the country who would believe me when I'd inevitably have to cancel a date to send a time traveler home where he or she belongs.

Frustrated, I huff out a breath. "Well, then why doesn't he just ask me? Why does he have to get Tommy D'Angelo to tell you to tell me to go to the football game so he can ask me out to a dance that's still two weeks away?"

"Okay, look. No offense or anything, but . . . you're kind of scary, Win."

I cut my eyes to her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Okay, maybe *scary*'s not the right word. You're . . . intimidating. You never talk to anyone besides me. You're totally unapproachable."

My brow furrows. "I talk to people."

"Teachers don't count."

"There's this girl in my English class who's always asking for pens. Anna something."

"Arianna Andrews, and she doesn't count, either."

"I talk to people," I say again, but the bell rings and Mr. Craft is clapping his hands and telling us to turn in our packets, and I don't think she hears me.

It's a lie anyway. When it comes to any semblance of a social life, I am as tiny and insignificant as the fly currently slamming its body against the window behind Mr. Craft's desk. That's the way it has to be. If I get too involved, make too much noise, people will notice me as more than just the brainy girl who skips class a lot and, apparently, scares people. And since being noticed can only lead to questions I can't answer, I think I'll stay in my silent, scary corner, thank you very much.

Meredith takes our packets up while I clean our work area. She isn't the greatest lab partner. She always skips steps in the instructions and never helps me clean up, but I prefer to do things on my own anyway.

There's no one you can count on out there to save you, Dad used to say. *When the guardianship passes, you're on your own.*

Meredith returns and shuffles her books into the crook of her arm. "You coming over this afternoon?"

"Crap, I forgot. I'm—"

"Busy." Meredith sighs. "The ACTs are in three weeks. I need you, Win. I got a nineteen on my last practice test."

"I can't tonight, but we'll study all through lunch tomorrow and I promise I'm all yours this weekend."

She stares at the tessellated floor, brown and pitted from past chemical spills. "My parents'll kill me if I have to go to community college."

I swing my backpack over my shoulder and put my arm around her as we head toward the door. "You're not going to community college. Your GPA's not bad, and you're on student council. You'll be fine if we can just nudge your score up a few points."

"Easy for you to say. What'd you get on your last practice test? A thirty?"

Thirty-two, actually, but I don't say this. It's not like it matters anyway. I can't go to college. I already know what I'm going to do for the rest of my life, and it doesn't require a four-year degree. The only reason I'm even taking the test is to make Mom feel better, to make it seem like I have options when I really don't.

We push our way through the congested hall. A couple of guys throw a football back and forth over our heads, holding up

the stampede and nearly braining every single person between them. Meredith shouts at them to knock it off, but in a teasing, flirty voice that gets her nowhere.

"Make us," one of the guys says, tossing the ball back to his buddy.

The next time it zooms over our heads, I catch it one-handed.

Both guys stare at me, dumbfounded.

"Mine," I growl, tucking the football underneath my arm.

"See?" Mer says as the guys skulk away, darting pissed-off looks in my direction. "Scary."

I roll my eyes. "So you *wanted* to get smacked in the face with a football?"

"No, but that isn't the point." She pauses at the door to my French class, sighing like she can't believe a person could actually be this clueless. "You sure you can't come over? Mom's ordering Chinese."

I wish I could, but it's dangerous enough to take the afternoon off from the wood on a regular day, let alone on a day that falls between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice, when the veil thins and the roads between worlds are easier to travel.

I shake my head. "Sorry."

She stares at me, her mouth hanging open slightly. She wants to ask me something, but she stops herself. It's not the first time the question has hovered in the air between us, an unspoken conversation that's practically written in our eyes.

Why do you keep secrets from me? she seems to say.

I have to.

Does it have to do with your dad?

Yes.

I could help.

You'd get hurt.

I don't understand.

You're not supposed to.

It's a gap in our friendship that's been widening lately, but we never actually talk about it. It's made even worse by the fact that I can't even tell her what really happened to Dad. As far as Mer and every other outsider know, he walked out on us. It's the worst sort of lie, because no matter how bad things got for him, Dad would never voluntarily leave us. But Mom didn't want people thinking he died, just in case. If he does come back someday—hope swells in my heart just thinking about it, but hope is dangerous, and I crush it the moment it tries to poison me—it'll be a lot easier to tell people he and Mom are working on their marriage than to convince everyone he's back from the dead.

Mer watches me a moment longer, debating something, then says, "Okay. I'll save you a fortune cookie."

"Thanks."

She walks across the hall and ducks into her classroom just as the bell rings.

I take a seat in the back and nibble on a protein bar when the teacher isn't looking.