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## Past the Edge of the Forest

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PAST THE EDGE OF THE FOREST

By

Emily Suess

THESIS

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This thesis by Emily Suess is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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## ABSTRACT

### PAST THE EDGE OF THE FOREST

By

Emily Suess

This fictional work traces the superstitions around No Name Forest as members of the town just beyond the forest begin to disappear. While set in present day, the piece draws on the way fairy tales use the inexplicable and strange to engage readers in questioning the human experience. The story details the disappearances of several people from the town of Little Haven. While each of these disappearances are presented in individual tales, they are linked together through the voice of a girl who has been tracking the disappearances. In search of the father who abandoned her, Gwynn Halpert is interested in discovering the truth of No Name Forest. Through various characters' interactions with the forest, the story interrogates the complicated nature of desire.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was in fourth grade, I played little red riding hood in my elementary school's production of *Into the Woods*. I was fascinated with the way Steven Sondheim's musical reimagined fairy tales I had fallen in love with through watching Disney films. *Into the Woods* questions if the wishes that are so central to fairy tales are really all they are cracked up to be. *Past the Edge of the Forest* came out of an interest in the nature of desire in fairy tales and the way the fairy tale genre allows readers to interrogate the human experience. Writer J.R.R. Tolkien reflects that the power of fairy tales is their ability to engage adults in a discussion of the human experience through their "arresting strangeness." The haunting power of fairy tales allows readers to escape the mundane ordinariness of life in order to question and imagine unsafe ideas in safe spaces. *Past the Edge of the Forest* came out of an interest to use the "arresting strangeness" of a forest where strange things happen in order to examine the power of desire.

In the introduction to *The Grimm Reader*, A.S. Byatt questions "what fairy stories are for?" She presents Freud's suggestion that fairy tales are modes of wish-fulfillment where challenges are met and overcome and the heroes live happily ever after (Grimm xi). Fairy tale literary critic Jack Zipes states, "Fairy Tales are informed by a human disposition to action—to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs, while we also try to change and make ourselves fit for the world" (Zipes 2). Transformation in fairy tales is about making the world "more suitable for living in peace and contentment" (Zipes 2). The frog turns into a prince; the sleeping beauty is reawakened; the beast turns into a man. With each of these transformations, life becomes

better for the protagonist. Their wishes are granted with these transformations, and they can be content with their lives.

Fairy tales are stories of desires in which the good's desires are fulfilled and the evil's desires are thwarted. The mistreated princess desires to go to a ball, and when she does, she finds an escape from her miserable life. An evil queen desires to be the fairest woman in the land, but even her best attempt to achieve her desire is defeated by the goodness of true love. But what if people aren't so easily classified into good and evil? What if desires cannot be so easily classified into right and wrong? What if the motivation of a desire is ambiguous? These were the questions I wanted to explore through creating original characters who would interact with fairy tale tropes and themes to explore the complicated nature of desire.

I wanted to question whether the path to "living in peace and contentment" is quite so simple. In fairy tales, wishing is easy, and when a wish is granted, the wisher is content. I wanted to explore what happens when we follow our hearts with no thought of consequences. What happens when we let desire alone take over and abandon logic or reason, when we let ourselves want to the point of destruction? And yet, is there a point where it is necessary to be honest about the desires that lie dormant within us? What would happen if we recognized them? What is the trade-off in this kind of honesty? What is at stake?

For years I have been playing with an idea of using the strange to examine questions about desire. At first, I imagined people going into a maze, like Theseus in the labyrinth, in search of their greatest desires. But in that maze, people's desires would become confused and misleading, so that no one ever came out. Over time, the maze

became a forest that does, for the most part, give people what they think they want. Although, the more I have written, the less predictable the forest has become.

I first began writing about the forest for a three-day novel competition during which I produced a novel that begins where *Past the Edge of the Forest* ends. What I found as I wrote through different places in the forest was that I wanted to spend more time with each of the characters who had somehow gotten stuck within in, led there by what they believed they wanted. Yet, in the novel, I was following one character's desire to find her lost sister, and the reader only experienced the forest through her eyes. However, as I began writing shorter pieces about other characters who were not focal points in the novel, I found that the variety of stories and characters I could write provided a much richer and more complicated interrogation of desire.

However, while much of this project was inspired by my love of fairy tales, I wanted to complicate the simplicity of fairy tale desire through these stories by developing rounder characters and challenging the notion that a granted wish is a key to a happy ending. Kate Bernheimer discusses in "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale" that characters in fairy tales are always flat. They "are silhouettes, mentioned simply because they are there" (Bernheimer 66). Thus, without a full understanding of the characters in these tales, the reader cannot make the link between the characters' psychological depth and what happens to them. Yet, in the case of fairy tales, this leaves room for the reader to respond (Bernheimer 67). It becomes the role of readers to fill in the gaps with their understanding of the world and experiences.

While I wanted to leave some of those gaps for my readers to fill in in this piece as well, I also wanted to develop some understanding of why a character had a specific

desire. This felt necessary for readers to question if the outcomes of a character's transformation truly improved that character's life. Readers are not meant to argue that Cinderella's life is not improved by the transformation that enables her to go to a ball, meet a prince, and leave her life of servitude. But all readers really know is that Cinderella is a kind, beautiful woman who wants to go to a ball. However, in *Past the Edge of the Forest*, those who are transformed in the forest often become lost in it as they seek what will make them content. But even though most find contentment, the question remains for the reader whether being content actually makes these characters better off.

As *Past the Edge of the Forest* developed, it was not fairy tale alone in its form. Each story within the work contributed to a larger story of No Name Forest, Little Haven, and a little girl's questions about her missing father. As the pieces interconnected and the characters moved away from the abstract of fairy tales, I looked to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* as a model. *Winesburg, Ohio* is a collection of interconnected short stories about the people of the small town of Winesburg. However, while each of these stories can stand alone, they also work together to create an understanding of the town and show the movement of one character, George Willard, from boy to man.

While fairy tales tell the stories of characters whom Max Luthi describes as "interchangeable" (Grimm ix), *Winesburg, Ohio* gives readers insight into the lives of many distinct characters. In the introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio*, Irving Howe explains the characters in the stories are not fully-rounded as they would be in "realistic fiction", but rather are "the shards of life, glimpsed for a moment, the debris of suffering and defeat" (Anderson 14). In *Past the Edge of the Forest*, I too wanted to capture "shards of life" through brief glimpses into characters' lives. While the moments Anderson focuses

on for each character varies, in *Past the Edge of the Forest*, the moment of focus is defined by each character's interaction with No Name Forest. The reader is given a glimpse into a character's life to see perhaps what has driven that character into the forest, but the reader is also left questioning the outcome.

While I worked to link the individual stories of *Past the Edge of the Forest*, I looked to the structure of *Winesburg, Ohio* as a model. Through each of the stories in Anderson's work, the reader sees members of Winesburg interact while focusing on one specific character. While each story has its own individual arc, the collection also has a larger arc that shows the development of George Willard. Through the stories, the reader sees George grow up in Winesburg and ultimately leave the town for good. While *Past the Edge of the Forest* uses Gwynn's point of view in between individual stories of members of Little Haven, it also incorporates the use of a larger story arc throughout several individual story arcs. Gwynn, like George Willard, is on her own journey throughout the stories. Yet, each story also focuses on a different character.

*Past the Edge of the Forest* has become a space where the small town voices of *Winesburg, Ohio* meet the strangeness of fairy tales in a form that is its own. This work branches out from Anderson's form in that it weaves together individual stories with a narrative that is completely separate from those tales. This story is not purely fairy tale, but it plays with the power of transformation and uses magic, not as a focal point, but as a device to allow readers to escape from their worlds and still question the motivations and outcomes of the things we wish for. I wanted to take a step away from the fairy tale ideal that wishing is easy. This project has become an exploration of the idea that it is not

always easy to know what you want, and it not always easy to know what to do once you have it.

## PAST THE EDGE OF THE FOREST

*Let me tell you a story,* my dad used to say. He would tuck my sister Carys and me into bed at night and tell us stories that sounded like dreams.

*Tell us about the forest,* I would beg. Dad would lean back against the rocking chair, stretch out his arms and say, *If you insist.* He would then tell us stories about the mysteries of No Name Forest that wrapped around our little town.

*Why do you like those stories so much?* Carys would ask some nights as she flipped through the pages of the latest biography she had checked out from the library, Marie Antoinette or Clara Barton. *They aren't even real.*

I wondered then if Carys had just grown out of the stories our dad told. I used to fear that I too would stop caring about them one day. But then Dad would lean over to Carys and say with a smile playing on his face, *Stories are real, Carrot Cake, even if the events in them didn't really happen.*

I lost the stories of No Name Forest the year I turned seven, when I watched my mom fade away before me from cancer, when my dad disappeared into the night, when I watched my mom be planted in the ground, when no one could explain why my dad had not come back. Marion Bianchi, the elderly widow who took us in did not know how to tell bedtime stories. She would tuck us in to bed at night and tell us what she had made

for lunch that day or read off her shopping list. Carys would tell me bedtime stories at night, but never the ones I wanted to hear. *I'm thirteen*, Carys would say when I begged her to tell her stories about the forest. *That's too old to tell foolish make-believe stories.*

When I asked Carys to tell me about the forest, Carys told me about the origin of No Name Forest. She told me that over two centuries ago Emeril P. Haddley, a wealthy businessman, had bought the land the forest was on. He already owned several businesses in Little Haven, but saw a profitable business venture in logging.

*Haddley named the forest after himself, but on the day a sign went up outside the forest labeling it Emeril P. Haddley Forest, a storm blew in and the sign was struck by lightning. After that, Carys read on from A History of Little Haven as she lay on her belly on the top of the trundle bed she shared with me, Haddley suffered several tragic events. His son drowned, his wife miscarried, and his mother died from Scarlet Fever.*

*Was he cursed?* I asked as I peered up at Carys between the yellow ears of my stuffed rabbit.

*No, but he thought so. He took his name off all the maps of the forest.* Carys flipped through the pages of the book and looked at the spidery lines crossing over the page to form a map of Little Haven and the forest that bordered it.

*And they couldn't come up with a new name? No Name is a pretty silly name for a forest.*

*People started referring to it as Lightning Strike Forest, but apparently superstition about the forest kept people from actually saying the name. Carys paused for a moment to listen for Marion Bianchi's footsteps walking down the hall and then brought her voice down to a whisper. They thought if you said the name of the forest you would be struck by lightning. People started calling it No Name out of safety and eventually that stuck.*

*But why don't you think it's cursed?* I asked as I mimicked Carys' whisper.

*Because curses aren't real.* Carys rolled over on her back and set the book on the chest of drawers beside her.

I stood on my bed and leaned over Carys' face. *Can't you tell me a story about the forest like Dad used to tell? Like the one about the girls who were turned into ravens or the boy who met a flying horse?*

*I already told you a story.* Carys turned away from me and faced the wall.

I laid back down on the lower portion of the trundle bed. *You told me a history lesson.*

*That is a story,* Carys said as she turned off the light. *Go to bed.*

I started looking for the stories a few months after dad left. I spent most afternoons at the Little Haven Public Library when I got out of school before Carys. Carys thought I was at Marion Bianchi's when I went to the library. Marion Bianchi had no idea where I was, but I don't think she had ever been the kind of mother to keep close tabs on her children, even though she had raised eight daughters. Most days I just sat upstairs in the library and looked up at the vaulted ceiling, watching beams of sunlight stretch out on the floor as light filtered through the large windows. I imagined my mom was in those beams of light, that she was trying to send me small bits of warmth when everything else felt strange and cold.

I would sit curled up in a windowsill on the second floor of the library, the glass warm against my back. For hours I would leaf through pictures of Hansel and Gretel and Snow White, all lost in some forest, all safe at the end of their tales. But as I read the stories of beautiful princesses and heroic knights, I missed the stories my dad used to tell at night, the ones about a forest I knew actually existed.

A few weeks after I had started going to the library I asked the old man at the circulation desk if he could help me find a story.

*We have lot of those here. Anything in particular?* He asked as peered at me from over the marble counter, limbs protruding at awkward angles, his long grey beard dragging across as he moved to look at me.

I stood up on my tiptoes and whispered, *I'm looking for a story about No Name Forest. But not the history. I already know that.*

The man wrinkled his nose as he walked out from behind the desk, *I'm not sure we have any of those here.* I followed him up the stairs and let my fingers trace the spines of encyclopedias and tattered history books as we walked along the shelves of books.

*We have stories about other forests, but I don't think there are any written down about our own.* He stopped at a shelf and pulled out a book labeled *Enchanted Tales* in gold writing.

I took the book with a sigh. I had read these already. I knew the stories of Rapunzel in her tower and Sleeping Beauty awaiting her prince. I had found other books of fairy tales where sons were killed by evil stepmothers and baked into pies and children were lured into a house made of sweets to become a witch's dinner. But none of these took place in No Name.

*But you want a story about No Name,* the man said as he tapped his fingers on the bookshelf. He stared out the window, but his eyes seemed unfocused, as though he was trying to look at something inside his mind rather than outside the window. *I can tell you a story, but it isn't quite like other stories. In fact, it's really only a beginning of a story.*

I sat down on the floor and looked up the man, eager for any piece of a story about the forest my dad used to talk about. The man laughed as he guided himself onto the floor, knees cracking, to sit across from me.

*A very long time ago, that's how stories go, isn't it?* the man asked and then continued once I nodded, *There was a young man whose name was Petrus Boynton.* I giggled into my hands. *I know, they named people strange things back then. Now, Petrus was in love with a beautiful young lady, but her father, the mayor of Little Haven, forbade them from getting married because Petrus was poor.*

The man told me about how Petrus searched for a way to make enough money to marry the girl he loved and finally found a medical school in Hayfield he planned to attend. However, the school was a bit of a journey from Little Haven, so he wanted to find the quickest route possible. *He planned out his route with his brother from maps found in this very library.* The librarian searched the shelves and pulled out a series of maps of Little Haven from the 1940s. With a crooked finger, he traced the Thornapple River as it wove its way through Little Haven and into No Name Forest to show me Petrus' route. I ran my fingers along the crinkled map after his.

*On the day he left he packed his bag, said goodbye to his love, and went into No Name Forest with the promise to come back and visit in a month. But a month came and went and then two and three and Petrus never returned. His love called the school and found*

*he had never started classes. His brother searched No Name Forest and Hayfield, but Petrus was nowhere to be found.*

The man looked down at the map of Little Haven he held in his lap and searched the ink lines that made up No Name Forest with his fingers. *His love's father convinced her that Petrus had run off with some other woman. The people of Little Haven assumed he had found a better life somewhere else. His love married someone else. The town forgot about him.* The librarian looked down again at the map in his lap.

We both sat in silence for a few minutes before I asked, *But you don't think that, do you?*

*No.* The man looked up from the map. *I knew how much Petrus loved that girl, and he was determined to do anything to be with her. Something happened to him in the forest.* The man sighed, *I just don't know what.*

*How do you know this story?* I asked as I sat up on my knees to look at the map of Little Haven.

*Because Petrus is my brother.*

I kept thinking about the story Mr. Boynton had told me as I walked back to Mrs. Bianchi's that day, as I sat with Mrs. Bianchi eating Chicken Chow Mein she had ordered

from The Tender Noodle for dinner, as I curled up next to Carys after I had snuck into her bed that night and tried to fall asleep.

It was different than the stories Dad used to tell. Mr. Boynton had no idea what had happened in No Name Forest. But Petrus Boynton was a real person. Dad had told stories of nameless people who wandered into the forest that he had been told by his dad, but Mr. Boynton had actually known someone who had gone in. I thought that night as I listened to Carys' steady breathing that, perhaps, Mr. Boynton was not the only person who had a story about someone who had gone into the forest and never come out.

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## I. Gone Fishing

Petrus Boynton had followed Thornapple River into the forest and had split away from the river to follow Molasses Creek, or what he thought was Molasses Creek. Each map he had looked at had placed the creek in a different place, if it had placed it at all. But at least two of the maps had shown Molasses Creek heading east towards Hayfield, where he was headed to attend the Hayfield School of Medicine. In truth, this creek had come several miles before he expected it, but there hadn't been any creeks before Molasses on any of the maps, so he thought the distance was just an error.

As the sun slid behind pointed tops of the pine trees, Petrus stopped by the creek to catch a few brook trout for dinner and camp for the night. He threw down his small pack

between the roots of a large oak tree before taking out his fishing pole and casting it into the water.

As Petrus watched the line twist and curl on the glassy surface, he thought about the journey he had ahead of him. He'd already been walking for almost a whole day through the forest, which had taken a toll on his leg that had taken a bullet at Bastogne only a year ago.

Petrus had proposed to Eleanor the minute he had returned from the war, but her father had made it quite clear that Eleanor could only marry a man of means, someone with an education.

*We could run away together*, Eleanor had suggested as she lay with her head on Petrus' chest in Lonely Meadow after Petrus had returned from France.

But Petrus had refused. He couldn't blame Mayor Fisher for wanting a better life for his daughter than Petrus could give her. And Eleanor deserved more than a life running away from a family that had only ever loved her.

The line tensed and pulled at the pole in Petrus' hands. He reeled it in, fighting against the brook trout flailing at the end. He reached inside the trout's mouth to unhook it as he struggled against his firm grasp. The sun reflected off something in the trout's mouth. At first, Petrus thought it must be the hook, but when he searched the fish' mouth, his

fingers traced a flat, smooth, circle. When he took his hand from the trout's mouth, he held a gold coin between his calloused fingers.

The trout wriggled out of his hands and flopped back into the stream as he examined the coin he held in the palm of his hand. He rinsed the coin in the creek and bit it to see if it was real. The creek gurgled in the background as Petrus traced the indents in the gold where his teeth had pressed against it. Petrus thought about going back to Eleanor with a beautiful diamond ring he could buy with this coin when he returned to her from Hayfield. But what if he could do more than buy her a diamond ring? What if there was more gold in the river? He could buy a car to travel back and forth between Hayfield and Little Haven. He could pay for a honeymoon.

Petrus slid the coin into his trouser pocket and picked up his pole to cast it once again into the stream. He waited in near silence until he felt something pull at the other end of his line and reeled it in. Once again, he removed a gold coin from the trout's mouth and placed it in his pocket. He tossed the trout back into the creek. It did not feel right to eat a fish that had offered up something so valuable.

Petrus' pockets grew heavy as he forgot about making dinner and cast his line over and over again, catching fish, emptying their mouths of their treasure, and throwing them back to the stream. He did not sleep at all that night as he slowly collected a pile of gold coins. When his pockets grew heavy, stuffed with coins, he began to throw the coins in a pile on the grass beyond the riverbed.

As he cast, waited, and reeled in he thought about the life he could give Eleanor with the gold he was collecting. If he caught enough, he wouldn't even have to go to medical school. He would have a fortune that could buy her the life she wanted. He could be back with even sooner than he had planned. At first, his plan had been to gather just enough coins to get started. He'd take enough to start a small business, maybe a bookstore or a diner, put a down payment on the blue Colonial house on Peach Street that Eleanor loved, maybe buy a Corvette. After all, he could always come back to fish for more gold when he ran out.

He spent a week fishing, gathering gold coins, murmuring to himself, *Just one more, just one more* as he tossed his line into the creek once again to collect another coin. Petrus worried that if he left he would never be able to find the stream again when he needed more gold. Or worse, what if he came back and someone else had discovered the fish's secret? He couldn't leave until he had enough gold to last him and his bride to be for their entire lives. But the more he fished the more he thought about how he could provide not only for his wife, but their children, their grandchildren. There was seemingly endless gold in the stream, he just had to get enough.

Petrus was too lost in the dreams of the life he would have with Eleanor to notice the way his beard began to grow, long and scraggly, brown turned gray and faded to white. He assumed his joints ached only because he gave himself so little sleep. He did not notice the worn knuckles of his wrinkled hands, the slump of his back, the shallowness in his

breath. He dreamed of the girl he had left behind, without knowing that it had been seventy years since he told her he'd be back.

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The women at the weekly Wine and Writers book club rarely talked about books and often drank more gin than wine, but the Weekly Whine About Your Husbands and Gossip About Your Neighbors While Drinking Lots of Booze Club didn't sound very classy. Marion Bianchi and Juliette, one of her eight daughters, hosted the club, which meant they were in charge of offering up the juiciest gossip. However, this was fairly easy because most of the gossip tended to involve one of the Bianchi sisters. However, nothing was so interesting as Liam Halpert abandoning his dying wife and two daughters, even months after Mira Halpert had passed away.

*I can't believe he would just leave his two daughters to fend for themselves,*

*You're such a saint, Marion, for taking the girls in.*

*I had the room now that all the girls are married, and Beatrice, well, Beatrice isn't around either,* Marion said as she passed around cocktail shrimp and cheese cubes.

*Oh, mother,* said Juliette Bianchi (now Herman) as she swirled an olive around her martini glass, *don't go dredging up the past.*

Marion ignored her daughter and kept moving around the room with the platter of cheese cubes. *And the house can get a little lonely, going from eight girls and Harold to me.*

*Even so, such a saint.*

Juliette skewered a cube of cheddar as the plate was passed around. *I wonder if Ginny Dunning is pregnant. She's getting kind of fat,* she said as the ladies in the group continued to fawn over her mother's saintliness.

*Why would you say that? Ginny is so sweet.*

*I didn't say she wasn't sweet.* Juliette stuck the cheddar cube in her mouth and continued to talk as she chewed. *I said she was fat. She'd have beautiful children. Her husband's a fox.*

*Didn't you make out with him when you were in high school?*

*No, that was my sister, Olivia,* Juliette said before draining her martini and biting the olive from its toothpick.

*Did you hear the town council is trying to use part of the land No Name Forest is on to build a mall?* Marion cut back in once she had settled back in her chair with a vodka martini in her hand.

*It's such a waste of space.*

*Creepy as hell.*

*I hope they build a Bloomingdales.*

---

## II. Queen of Hearts

The zipper was stuck. Beatrice pulled and pulled but it wouldn't move. She twisted and turned in the mirror in order to get a better view of it. She tried to pull the dress off without unzipping it, but it was too tight around her waist to go over her hips or shoulders. Beatrice had picked up her sister Juliette's wedding dress from the seamstress on her way home from her shift at the Gas 'n Grub gas station, and after casting off her nacho-cheese-stained vest she had pulled the white taffeta over her frazzled red hair just to see what it would look like. No, she hadn't tried it on just to see what it would look like. She found some small satisfaction in knowing that she had worn Juliette's wedding dress before her.

Beatrice had seven sisters who turned everything from memorizing Cyndi Lauper lyrics to getting asked to homecoming into a competition. Each time a new sister was engaged she had to outdo the previous one. Veronica had beat the other sisters down the aisle, but

Genevieve had been proposed to in a hot air balloon, which was only topped when Clarissa was proposed to on the top of the Eiffel tower. Olivia had a dress made to resemble Princess Diana's. Elena had a seven-layer cake lined with real pearls. And Alexis' diamond ring was the size of a macadamia nut. Juliette, it appeared from her plans, was attempting to outdo them with the honeymoon of the century, although the wedding would be no small ordeal either.

Beatrice, most people thought, could never compete with her sisters. She was not the prettiest sister or the smartest or the funniest. She would not marry the richest or handsomest man. Truth be told, her sisters would be impressed if she married anyone at all. She could probably stuff the most marshmallows in her mouth at once or win the most rounds of whack-a-mole at the small arcade in the gas station, but these were not competitions her sisters would engage in. Her best hope at impressing them would be bringing a marginally attractive date to Juliette's wedding. She had been attempting to flirt with Danny the mechanic for the past few weeks by giving him free slushies.

Laughter came down the hall as Beatrice tried once more to unzip the dress. She had not realized anyone was home, and Juliette would not be impressed to find Beatrice in her dress. She would probably be worried Beatrice would stretch it out. As Beatrice pressed her ear against the door and listened she could identify Juliette's high-pitched giggle as well as someone's deeper, solid laugh.

She peeked out the door as she opened it a crack and moved down the hall toward Juliette's room where the door had been left open, allowing Beatrice to see Juliette tangled in bed with Danny the mechanic.

*What the hell are you doing in my dress?* Juliette asked when she spotted Beatrice in the doorway.

Beatrice thought this should be the least of Juliette's concerns, but she did not say so.

*What are you doing?* Beatrice said as she stood in the doorway. *Was one man not enough for you?*

*Get out of here,* Juliette yelled as she picked up a red stiletto from the floor and threw it at Beatrice. *And take off that dress.*

Beatrice would get out of there. But she would not take off the dress, even if she could. She hauled the long train into her arms and ran down the hall and out the back door. She ran down the street, through their neighborhood of identical houses in different shades of brown and gray. She got to the end of the street and knew she did not want to return home, so she kept running, past the public library and city hall, past the Gas 'n Grub sign *Let us help you get your fill*, past the picture of a smiling pig holding a knife and fork on the Friendly Diner.

A group of teenagers in tattered jeans and trucker hats came out of the diner and stared at her as she stood barefoot in the middle of the street in her sister's wedding dress and she knew she could not just stand there in the middle of town. She ran away from Main Street, through the muddy grass of Lonely Meadow Park, through the shallow water of Thornapple River, the water cool on her bare feet, pulling the gown across the surface.

She stopped at the edge of No Name Forest. Beatrice had never gone past the edge of the trees. As a child, her sisters had haunted her with stories of Emeril P. Haddley's ghost wandering around the forest. Parents told their children stories about vicious black bears and dangerous stranglers to keep them out of trouble, but even the adults found reasons not to cross the invisible line between Little Haven and No Name Forest.

Beatrice looked into the dense red pines surrounded by mist hovering near roots crawling like gnarled fingers along the ground. There was nothing to lose in going into the forest. Perhaps she could walk through No Name Forest to the other side and end up in a different town where she could be a new person, one without any sisters. Perhaps they would miss her once she was gone.

Beatrice stepped between the pines. Each step pressed fallen needles into the damp earth as she made her own path as she squeezed through the pines. In the silence of the trees she could hear the subtle sound of needles cracking beneath her feet. The silence of the forest would have felt odd even if she hadn't grown up in a house with seven sisters who

were anything but quiet. But lack of chirping and buzzing made Beatrice uneasy as her heart pounded with each step as though trying to make up for the lack of noise.

Beatrice matched her steps to the sound of her heartbeat thundering in her ears until she was nearly running through the forest. Her head was pulled back as Juliette's lace veil caught on an outstretched branch. As Beatrice fumbled with the lace tangled in the wiry limbs of the pine the silence was interrupted with a steady, quiet laughter. In the silence the laughter hadn't startled her the way Juliette's chipmunk laugh or Olivia's snorty giggle would have, but rather it sifted into her head the way the melody of *Don't You* by Simple Minds would pop in to her head as she shelved Corn Nuts and Nutter Butters.

Leaving the veil tangled in the branches above her, Beatrice followed the quiet, steady hum of laughter, intrigued by the mysterious source. She wove her way through the pines and into a cluster of birch trees. Their white bark looked regal in the setting sun, their branches reaching high toward the golden light. As wind blew through the leaves the laughter grew louder, although it still sounded like it came from a distance. Beatrice moved through white limbs adorned with yellow leaves, pushed forward by them toward the laughter.

Beatrice worked her way through the maze of birch trees to a small waterfall, and heard the laughter echoing through the water, garbled and yet melodic. She stretched out a foot from beneath the mud-stained taffeta and placed her pale toes beneath the rushing water. Yet, even as she watched the water rush over them, she only felt a cool breeze rush over

her foot. When she withdrew her foot, it was as dry and muddy as it had been before she had placed it under the fall.

As she passed through the water she did not get wet, but rather felt only cool air push past her. On the other side of the fall, however, her feet were now clean of dirt, her chipped red toenails were evenly manicured and freshly polished. The dress was no longer frayed or dirty, but pristine, glowing.

Beatrice stood near the waterfall, and looked at a large circular table in the center of a ring of tall birch trees. Around the table sat several women, beautiful women, clothed in white lace and silk, long veils flowing over their hair, tiaras placed on top of their heads, chatting across large jars of lollipops, gumdrops, and jelly beans. Fountains of white and dark chocolate stood at either end, surrounded by plates of ripe strawberries. Blocks of fudge and peanut brittle were stacked high on platters. In the center of the table were several jars on pedestals, filled with the candy hearts like the ones that filled the Gas 'n Grub around Valentine's Day.

The only man present sat at the head of the table, with one of the brides draped over his shoulders, whispering in his ear. Beatrice couldn't help but notice the man's strong jawline, his muscular arms, his daring green eyes. The bride's fingers moved playfully across the man's chest, her lips brushed against his cheek, moving closer and closer to his lips.

In one swift movement, as the man moved his face closer to hers, she pushed her fingers into his chest, grabbing for his heart, drawing it from his body. She drew her fist out slowly, as though pulling out a knife from his flesh. When the woman's hand was completely freed from the man's chest, his body disappeared, seeming to shrink down and flow into the woman's fist in an instant. Uncurling her dainty fingers, the woman revealed a pale yellow candy heart in the middle of her palm, pink letters forming the word *liar* emblazoned on it. The woman stuck the yellow heart between the harsh lines of her white teeth, let the candy rest against her tongue for a moment, and bit it in two.

As the surrounding brides laughed, the woman turned to Beatrice, *It's rude to lurk in corners, dear*, she said as she moved toward Beatrice with slow, graceful steps. The woman was magnificent, not in the way Beatrice's sisters were, not in the way women in magazines and television ads were. Even with those women Beatrice could pick out flaws, a too-long nose, a small gap in the teeth. Beatrice could not pick out any flaw in this woman. To Beatrice, she was perfect.

*What did you do to him?* Beatrice asked still looking at the jars of candy hearts on their pedestals, wondering if each of them had once been a man.

*I won his heart.*

*By turning him into candy?*

*What good is he as a man?*

The women around the table laughed as the first bride extended her hand toward Beatrice. With small steps Beatrice moved toward an empty seat at the table. She was not scared of these women, even after watching the bride shrink a man into an edible sweet, she was merely mystified by them. Around the table the women were just as stunning as the first bride. Yet, they did not argue between themselves. They did not fight over the ripest strawberry or the lemon gumdrops the way her sisters would have.

*How are you so beautiful?*

They brides laughed, *Do you think you are not just as beautiful?*

Beatrice frowned as she looked at her face in a spoon she took from the table. Even in the distorted shape of the spoon, she could see now that she had Genevieve's soft, wavy hair, Elena's deep, mysterious eyes, Victoria's straight white teeth, Olivia's tiny waist.

*Here, every man will want you. If you walk back through the waterfall, you will be only what you were before. But if you stay, you can play a game you can win.*

As Beatrice examined her face once again in the spoon, a man stepped through the waterfall. Beatrice looked up to see him running his hands through his black hair, astonished that it was still dry after coming through the waterfall, but not at all surprised

that he now found himself surrounded by several women in wedding gowns. Beatrice wondered where he had come from as she watched the brides around her lean towards him, all coy eyes and knowing smirks. She wondered if he had been drawn here too by laughter.

*If you want to join us, the first bride said, This one is yours.*

Beatrice looked between the man and the jars of candy hearts, surveying the faces of the beautiful women lounging around the table before she stood and walked slowly toward the man. She did not have to say anything for the man's eyes to be transfixed, mesmerized by her. She walked within a few inches of him before she turned to walk back towards the table. She felt his hand reach out and grab hers and she turned around to see him pleading with her to stay. As she turned back to him she wrapped one arm around his neck and pressed the other against his chest. She knew what she was supposed to do next, but she was not sure she could. She stood horrified and anxious, but curious as well about the possibility of taking this man's heart.

As she paused and looked into his face she thought he looked like the groomsman who had escorted her down the aisle at Olivia's wedding, the one who she had overheard telling the other groomsmen walking with her other sisters that he's gotten the short end of the stick, the one who was supposed to ask her to dance if only to be polite but spent the night behind the gazebo with a cousin of the groom. Beatrice looked back towards the brides who looked happy and free and she wanted to be like them.

Beatrice felt her fingers slip through his shirt, his flesh, like pushing through warm water. Her fingers curved around his heart, twisted it out of his chest. As she pulled the heart from his chest she felt it grow smaller, harder. She thought of holding Danny's heart in her hands and forced her hand out of the man's chest, watching him disappear. Beatrice unwrapped her hand to reveal pink letters forming the word *unfaithful* on a violet heart.

The women's laughter rang out like applause. Beatrice looked toward the first bride for a signal about what to do next. *He's yours, if you want him, but you are not obligated*, she said as she motioned toward the jars on the table.

Beatrice looked down at the heart in her hand. She closed her eyes and the pink *unfaithful* filled the dark space behind her eyelids. He would hurt people if he were out in the world. Violet heart slipped between red lips and settled on her tongue. She curled the heart in her tongue before forcing it between her molars and crushing it to dust. Warmth flooded through her chest and wended its way through her veins with the knowledge that she had broken his heart before he could break anyone else's. The women around the table looked satisfied, as though they too could feel what she felt.

Beatrice found as other men wandered through the waterfall and other women moved forward to take their hearts that it was not a battle they were fighting against one another. They were fighting against the men. They felt the same satisfaction when they watched another bride withdraw a heart from a chest. They smiled as the jars filled with pink

words, *user, cruel, domineering, manipulative, possessive*. They laughed each time a bride slipped another heart between her lips.

Beatrice lost track of the hearts she had won. She no longer noticed the men's faces when they came to her from behind the waterfall. They whispered about how beautiful she was. They loved her, adored her, wanted to make love to her. *I can't let you go*, they would say. *You are the only one I want*. She would smile and lean in teasingly close to their lips, never saying the words she thought, *You won't be able to let me go. You will never be able to turn your sweet words into lies*.

*Who are you?* a man asked her one day as she stood with her body pressed against his, her hand resting on his chest. She thought he might mean *What are you?* but he added with a laugh, *What's your name?*

Beatrice took a step back and slid her fingers from their poised position on his chest to his face, resting them against his cheek. No one had cared about her name before. For years she has been called the eighth sister, the youngest Bianchi, the plain one, the ugly duckling. No one had wanted to know what she wanted to be called.

*Beatrice*, she said as she stepped back from the man to look at him in a way she never looked at the men who came through the waterfall. She noticed the freckles on his face with her eyes, fleck's of green in his eyes, the dimple in his left cheek. She realized she'd

forgotten what it was to look at someone. She realized as he looked back at her that she had never known what it was to be truly looked at.

*Peter*, he said as he held his hand out to her.

She had never known the names of the men whose hearts sat in jars on the table. She had never wanted to know them. It scared her to know that this man was Peter, to be known to him as Beatrice.

Beatrice looked back at the women at the table. She watched as brides pulled hearts from chests. She felt their satisfaction flow through her. Images of the hearts she had taken filled her mind, *liars* and *cheaters*, *manipulators* and *controllers*. She took a step closer to Peter and placed her hand on his chest, felt the heat beating beneath it.

Her pinky pushed through skin and grazed his heart and she could not think straight for the desire to hold his heart in her hands. She knew she would be happy if she took his heart. She did not know what would happen if she didn't. Fingers pushed through flesh and Peter melted away. When Beatrice unwrapped her fingers, she held a pale green heart in the middle of her palm. *Kind*.

For the first time, Beatrice did not feel satisfaction at holding a heart in her hand. She had expected satisfaction and now felt a desire for something more. She thought it was enough to hold a heart in her hand, but now she wanted to know it, to know Peter.

Around the grove the other brides toyed with men of their own or lounged at the table, licking chocolate off the tips of their fingers.

Beatrice moved back toward the waterfall and stood at the edge of it where she dug a small hole in the ground and placed the green heart in it. She cupped her hands under the waterfall, and though they felt dry as she held them under the water and watched them fill. She poured the water over the place where she had buried the heart before reaching into the earth and pulling Peter out by his hand.

When he regained his footing, he looked back at her and quickly moved his hands to his chest. Beatrice reached her hand out to him. She wanted to calm him, to tell him he did not have to fear her, but his eyes widened as she reached out toward him and then he ran through the waterfall and out of sight.

At the edge of the waterfall Beatrice watched the blurred outline of Peter's body move farther and farther away on the other side of the forest. She forgot for a moment about the rest of the brides, the table full of sweets, until ones of the brides said, *You look sad, dear*, and Beatrice turned back toward the table. The brides held out a white heart in her palm to Beatrice, beckoning her back to the women.

With a last look through the waterfall Beatrice searched for the form of Peter, but she knew he would not be there. She took the white heart from the bride and studied it. *Empty* the pink letters read. Beatrice thought her heart would look just the same. *Maybe he is*

*better off this way*, she thought before she slid the heart onto the tip of her tongue and swallowed.

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I had learned to sit close next to Mrs. Croop on Sundays at Little Haven Presbyterian if I wanted to stay of to date on town gossip. Over the verses of *When the Roll is Called Up Yonder* I learned about how Olivia Bianchi (now Merwin) had thrown her husband's golf clubs out of the second story of their house during a fight. Through *Onward Christian Soldiers* I listened to Mrs. Croop's carrying whisper about how Veronica Bianchi (now Castor) had gotten a nose job. However, throughout countless services I never heard a word about the youngest Bianchi sister, Beatrice, who disappeared more than twenty years ago.

After Mr. Boynton told me about the disappearance of his brother, I started asking around about other disappearances in Little Haven. I thought that because the Bianchi sisters circulated through the news circuit so often that it would be easy to gather information. And it was easy to gather information; I just couldn't ever get the same information. During conversations had when one of the sisters joined their mother and Carys and me for dinner I learned that each sister had her own story about the youngest sister had disappeared twenty years ago.

*Maybe she ran off with a man.*

*We are talking about Beatrice, remember.*

*Maybe he was so ugly she had to take him away rather than bring him back to town.*

*Or she could have joined the circus. She was always good at doing odd things.*

The town took the sisters' speculations and wove them into sensational stories about Beatrice running off with masked robbers who held up the Gas 'n Grub.

Only Juliette Bianchi (now Herman) was silent on the subject, until I spoke with her after she had returned from her weekly Wine and Writers book club. I had convinced Carys to let me help her to babysit Juliette's twins because I was considerably better at entertaining young children than she was. But I had heard, in the middle of Reverend Archibald's sermon on the parable of the talents that Juliette tended to say just about anything that came to her mind when she drank. And she drank a lot.

*She ran off because she hated me. She was jealous of everything I had, Juliette told me as she scrounged for money in her purse to pay Carys.*

*She stole my damn wedding dress too and ran off into the damn forest with it. I ran across half the town trying to track her down. Juliette handed Carys a wrinkled twenty-dollar bill and poured herself a glass of merlot. Who the hell does that?*

I didn't know who the hell did that, but until that point, Beatrice's disappearance had only ever been a source of speculation around town. But Juliette had seen her go into the forest.

There wasn't much else to go on about Beatrice, but I began to search the archives of old articles from the *Little Haven Tip* to find information about other people who had disappeared. A year after Dad went missing, I found a news article about the fire that burned down Little Haven Presbyterian fifty years ago. Most of the black and white print was dedicated to information on the electrical issues that had caused the fire and the horrible irony that church had been functioning as an orphanage at the time of the fire, which led to the deaths of four children.

I already knew that part of the story. I had passed the memorial statue in the rebuilt sanctuary countless Sundays on the way to the pew I shared with Carys, a marble Jesus with a smiling girl on his lap. *Let the little children come to me* engraved on a plaque beneath it. This use of Jesus' reprimand of his apostles always bothered me as I thought about the four little tombstones in the Little Haven Cemetery that I had passed each time I visited my mother's grave. I'm not sure that's how Jesus wanted the little children to come to him.

But it wasn't children I was concerned about as I read through the old articles. Their fates, however tragic, were certain. The fate of Reverend Leonard Grey, however, was much less clear.

No one, it seemed from the newspaper clippings I searched through in the library, believed Reverend Leonard Grey had anything to do with fire. No one, it seemed as well, had any idea where he had gone. He had gone missing the day after the church burned down. *It's unfortunate*, a comment in the *Little Haven Tip* read, *but we have bigger issues to think about now than a missing man of the cloth*. I found as I scanned the newspaper that people were either too concerned with rebuilding the church and burying the orphans or too angry at being deserted by their shepherd that no one had really looked for him. They were sure he'd run away. They were also sure they didn't care.

As I read, I recorded notes in a little red notebook my dad had bought for me one afternoon while we wandered through The Lucky Penny Drug Store across from Haddley Middle School as we waited for Carys to get out of school. Once I'd gleaned all I could from the library, I took my little red notebook and talked to Mrs. Croop, sure that if anyone had any information, it would be her.

*I thought I saw him walking that day, walking toward the forest. I never expected he was leaving us for good*, Mrs. Croop told me when I asked her if she remembered anything about the Reverend's disappearance.

*I hope he was eaten by something foul*, Mr. Croop said without looking away from an infomercial where a woman with red hair and turquoise eye shadow demonstrated the benefits of the Pogo Whisk.

*Mr. Croop is very bothered that a man of God would abandon his flock in their time of need, Mrs. Croop whispered over the applause track coming from the television.*

When I asked her what else she could tell me about the Reverend she refused to say anything more. *It's not good for Mr. Croop to get riled up, she said as she got up and moved to her olive green fridge and shuffled contents around inside it. Do you want some grape jello?*

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### III. Seek and You Shall Find

Reverend Leonard Grey walked through the forest, trying to rid his mind of the images of flames licking the cross at the top of the steeple. He wanted to banish the memory of orange fingers shining through smoke, wrapping around the steeple, reaching inside windows, unaware of the children inside.

He liked the solitude of the woods, the quiet shudder of leaves like whispers of prayer. He took off his shoes and let his feet feel the vibrant green moss beneath him as he walked. He paused for a moment and closed his eyes as he leaned his head against a red maple, his head pressed against the jagged bark.

Behind his eyelids slid pictures of charred corpses, weeping onlookers, people calling for him to help, asking him what to do. He saw himself run frantically toward the church and be pushed back by a fireman. He heard himself stumble through words at the hospital as the town gathered, looking for words of hope and comfort. He had looked at the crowd huddled together, Styrofoam cups of watery coffee in their hands, eyes red, brows furrowed. He'd been unable to say the words he wanted to tell them. *Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. God is our refuge and strength.* Instead, he had looked at the crowd, unable to say words that would not bring the dead to life, that would not reverse what had been done. *How do you pray for the dead?*

Leonard opened his eyes and kept walking, clutching his worn Bible close against his stomach. It had been simple in seminary to look at the commands and know what to do. *Love one another. Care for the orphans and the widows.* He had believed in caring about people, but caring had led to the deaths of four children. He had done what the Lord had said. He had opened his heart to the Lord's people. And the Lord had let this happen.

He moved deeper into the forest, mist swirled around his feet. Fingers of mist wrapped around his ankles and pulled him further in. The maple trees bent their branches lower, a cage to enclose him. The trees around him shuffled their leaves, just now beginning to turn, red seeping out of the green edges like blood spilling out of them. Leonard looked up at the sprawling branches stretched out over him and heard the rustle of leaves call out to him, *You killed them. You killed them.* The whispers grew louder; the mist grew thicker. *You killed them. You killed them.*

*I didn't know this would happen*, Leonard said quietly at first. His voice grew louder as he repeated the words, as he tried to drown out the whispers around him. *I didn't know this would happen. I didn't know this would happen. I didn't know this would happen.* He looked through the canopy of leaves toward the bits of grey sky breaking through. *How could you let this happen?*

Leonard crumpled to the muddy ground, his Bible clutched against his chest as his knees sunk into the mud. He flipped through the tissue-thin pages in a search for answers that weren't there. With a jerk he raised the black leather book in the air and slammed it against the damp earth. He raised it and slammed it back to the ground again and again, splattering mud onto his face, mixing dirt and tears. The Bible felt useless. What words could reverse time? What prayers could unburn the church, bring the children back to life? He had spent his life studying the Bible, but what good was it now? He dug his fingers into the mud, reached into the earth to try to find some answer to the questions about the God who seemed to have turned on him.

Leonard pulled the Bible out of the mud and twisted it in his hands. He wanted to twist it so hard the book would rip in two. But even as he thought about ripping the Bible apart, he knew he could not tear apart the words that had dictated his life. After all, it had not been the words that had abandoned him, only the God behind them,

The mist grew denser and pushed against Leonard. It forced him to stand up and walk forward without knowing where he was headed. When the mist lifted, the trees bent their

branches back, and in the distance Leonard could see a small stone wall surrounding a courtyard filled with stone benches.

Settling himself on a bench, Leonard peeled off his muddy socks, leaned back, and closed his eyes. He wanted to sink into the bench, to disappear into nothingness. Leonard had not spent much time sitting. There had always been too much to do, too many people to help. Leonard had prided himself on the way Little Haven Pres cared for the community. They had willingly taken in the orphans when the orphanage needed to be repaired. He had told them stories about Noah and Jonah with flannel graph images of an ark and a whale. He had tied shoes and poured milk for the children because he was supposed to care for them. Caring about people was supposed to make his faith stronger, not complicate it.

Leonard opened the muddy Bible, *Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.* As he read, he focused on the words and their interpretations. He tried to block out what it meant to believe in them, to follow them. The more he sat in silence, absorbed in the letters of the text, the calmer he became. It felt merely peaceful at first, sitting in the silence of the forest. But the more time passed, the less Leonard felt at all.

Leonard began rereading the Bible from the beginning. Genesis looked different now that he was only concerned with studying the words he had once sought to live by. It was

necessary for someone to study them, to know what they said. It would be for others to act upon them.

With every day Leonard spent within the garden he felt his joints stiffen, his skin lose color, his heart harden in his chest. The longer he spent away from the world, the less he thought about the friends he left behind. He stopped hearing the calls of his congregation asking for his help. He no longer saw the children crying out in the flames. He did not think about the lost souls yet to be saved, the sick and the hungry, the dying and the broken.

The maple leaves above him continued to turn as the air grew colder, the canopy above overcome with red. While Leonard had once marveled at the simple beauty of leaves changing color, he now had no concern for anything other than the tiny black words on the pages in front of him.

As he wrapped his mind around the words in front of him, he let go of any emotion his heart had ever felt. He was not angry or distraught. He could not think of what it was like to be passionate or elated. As his heart became numb to the world, so did his senses. He was no longer able to feel the coolness of the stone beneath his hands as the air froze and snow began to fall. He did not long for food, but he never felt hunger or thirst. He was not startled to see his fingers turning the same gray of the bench beneath him as the snow melted, nor did he panic when the color spread through his arms, turning them hard and

heavy. Inch by inch his flesh, his blood became stone, a cool casing around his petrified heart. Nothing would break it. Nothing could move it.

In the stone garden sat a statue of a man reading on a bench. He could see and move and think. His days were spent musing over how there could be light on the first day of creation, but no sun or moon until the fourth. He considered the implications of different Hebrew translations in understanding whether the text meant the world was actually created in seven literal days. These were the things it was safe to care about. He would study the Lord. He might even believe in the Lord. But he would not care about the Lord. He would not care about the Lord's people. Without people to care for, the words would only ever be words.

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After my mom died, Carys and I spent most afternoons with Beau Borden at Lonely Meadow Park. It would have been hard enough to live in a stranger's house after Mom had died and Dad had gone missing if Marion Bianchi hadn't liked to relive her glory days as Miss Little Haven. She was not the type of guardian who insisted we finish our homework or fed us orange slices and celery sticks after we got home from school. Most nights she ordered Kung Pow chicken from The Tender Noodle and showed us old tapes of her beauty pageant competitions. After Marion spent a whole afternoon parading around the living room in her old dresses, Carys found ways to avoid going to the house until dinner.

Some days we would sit by Thornapple River at the edge of the park and eat peanut butter sandwiches while we dipped our toes in the water. Others, Carys would lie in the patchy grass and read while Beau tried to flirt with her, which mostly consisted of staring at his pudgy hands as he tried to think of something interesting to say. I would watch them as I sat in the grass making daisy chains and imagined a world Carys would fall in love with the round-faced boy who had been the one person to really be there for her after Mom and Dad were gone, where they would get married at Little Haven Pres and have beautiful children and be happy. I imagined a world where the happily ever afters of the fairy tales I read would come true. I wanted this to be that world.

After I'd started researching disappearances I asked Beau on one of our afternoons at the park, *Do you think your dad knows anything else about what happened to my dad?* Beau was silent for a minute as he pushed me on the swings.

Carys looked up as she laid on her stomach on the grass reading a biography on Margaret Thatcher. *Gwynn, don't ask stuff like that.*

I dug my heels in the dirt below the swing and slowed to a stop. *But do you?*

*He doesn't really talk about it,* Beau said as he sat on the swing next to me. I watched his eyes dart to Carys who glared at him over the top of her book. *No, I don't think he does. I don't think there's anything else to know.*

I got up from the swing and climbed up the steps to the plastic yellow slide. A large giraffe had been spray-painted on the slide in red next to the words *Sadie shows her boobs for a dollar*. From the top of the tower I could see the old wooden forest sign, where the words *Emeril P. Haddley* had been ripped away and only part of the word *Forest* was left.

I looked down at Beau who stood by the swings with his hands in his pockets while he kicked at tufts of grass. *Beau, do you know any good stories?*

*Do you want to hear about zombies?*

*Not really.*

*Then no.*

I slid down the slide and walked back over to the swing. *Beau, have you ever been in the forest?*

*No*, Beau said as twisted in the swing, looking at Carys who pretended not to listen to us as she read.

*Why not?*

Beau shrugged. *My dad says not to go in.*

*Why?* I climbed onto the seat of the swing to stand on it and began to rock myself back and forth.

*I don't know, he just says not to.*

*And that's a good enough reason?*

*Well no, but that's what parents do, isn't it.*

I slid down to sit on the swing without looking at Beau. *I wouldn't know.*

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#### IV. Tall Tales

Corbin Lewis spent every Saturday morning telling the patrons of the Friendly Diner about the horrors of No Name Forest while he ate pancakes covered in maple syrup and drank a chocolate milkshake. He usually drizzled a little maple syrup on the whipped cream topping his milkshake for good measure.

*There's winged creatures in there. I saw one once, flying out the tops of the trees. Body of a lion or a tiger maybe, but with wings like an eagle.*

The waitress nodded and offered Corbin coffee. He poured maple syrup in that too.

*Did I ever tell you about the time I heard my mother's voice coming from the forest when I walked past it?*

The waitress nodded and wiped down the counter even though it was already clean.

She'd heard the one about his mother's voice and the winged creatures. She heard about the ghost children with horns and the hundreds of rats that fled from the forest.

*It doesn't sound very exciting when I tell you like that, but she was dead, you see. Been dead for years.*

The waitress grabbed the coffee pot and walked from behind the counter to search for someone who might need a refill.

*Is that really true, Mr. Lewis?* asked Gwynn Halpert as she ran her fingers through her mass of blonde ringlets. She sat eating breakfast with her sister Carys who shot her a sharp look as Corbin walked over.

*Would I tell a lie, little miss?*

Gwynn giggled and her sister said, *You have maple syrup in your beard.*

*What's your name, little miss?*

The girl smiled, exposing two missing front teeth. *Gwynn Halpert*. The girl shook her head at her sister. *That's Carys*.

Corbin rolled his eyes back in his head as he tried to place the name before he looked back at the girls with the pitying face everyone seemed to wear around them since their mother had died and their father had abandoned them.

*Do you think I could hear my mother's voice too?* Gwynn asked after taking a bite of waffle.

Carys set her fork on her plate, *Gwynn, it isn't true. You can't hear anything in the forest*.

Corbin leaned down with one knee on the floor and rested his elbows on the edge of the table so he was eye level with Gwynn. *I bet you anything your daddy heard your mum's voice and that's why he disappeared*.

Carys glared at Corbin and said, *Our dad left before our mother died. He left because she was sick and he didn't want to deal with us. If he had wanted to hear her voice he would have just stayed home*. Gwynn looked down at her waffle and cut the already small pieces into smaller pieces.

*Everything alright over here?* Officer Dunning walked up to the table after grabbing a coffee to go. Gwynn and Carys remembered talking to Officer Dunning after their father had disappeared. That's the word they had used then, disappeared. Later people stopped saying disappeared and started saying abandoned.

*Mr. Lewis was just telling us stories about No Name Forest,* Gwynn said as she looked up from her waffle.

*That right? Corbin, have you ever actually been in the forest?*

Mr. Croop, who had been pretending to read *The Little Haven Tip* as he eavesdropped at a nearby table, peered over the top of the paper and said, *You've been telling these stories for years, Corbin. There's nothing to them.*

*We've all walked by the forest before,* the waitress added as she refilled Mr. Croop's coffee. *Sure it seems dark and creepy, but you are probably just hearing voices, not dead people talking to you.*

*He's probably been putting more than maple syrup in his milkshake,* Mr. Croop said with a snicker.

Corbin stood up. *Well have any of you gone into the forest?*

*Search teams have gone in when people have gone missing and they've all come out. And none of them have mentioned ghosts of herds of rats.* Officer Dunning said. *Come on, Corbin, just leave the girls alone.*

Officer Dunning stood by the table until Corbin stood up. He walked back to the bar where he had been sitting and peeled a pink piece of bubble gum off the side of his plate he had stuck on it earlier to save for later. After placing the gum back in his mouth and tossing a few dollars on the counter, he walked out the door.

*Come back when you have a picture of a flying tiger,* Mr. Croop called after him.

Corbin could hear Officer Dunning say, *Shut up, Harry,* as the door swung shut.

Corbin went home and packed a rucksack before he headed into No Name Forest. He wasn't sure what he needed so he roamed through his house searching for whatever might be useful: a flashlight, batteries, his camp stove, a canteen, sleeping bag, pruning shears, rope, several kitchen knives, freeze-dried spaghetti, matches, camera, three packs of bubble gum. He took the fire poker for good measure.

As Corbin walked across Haddley Bridge to cross Thornapple River towards the forest, he pictured himself walking back into the Friendly Diner with pictures of flying rats of fire-breathing opossums. He pulled his American flag baseball cap down over his wiry

gray hair, tugged at his beard, took a deep breath, and walked past the lightning-struck Emeril P. Haddley sign into the forest.

With his camera around his neck and the fire poker held stiffly by his side, Corbin took small, hesitant steps over the rocky terrain. He shifted his feet over large roots reaching like fingers out of the soil, past sugar maples with large knots twisted into eyes and faces. Corbin waited for the eyes to blink at him, for the branches to reach down toward him, but they merely swayed stiffly in the wind.

Birds, sparrows maybe, hopped along the dark limbs, whistling to one another. Corbin wondered if they were signaling to each other, preparing for an attack or calling to some other unknown beast in the forest. Perhaps they could spit fire or lull him into sleep with their shrill notes. Stuffing his fingers in his ears, Corbin ran further into the forest with the poker held in his armpit.

Corbin wandered the forest for one day and then another, pausing to peer around the wrinkled tree trunks with his camera poised to capture a winged horse or lion with a human head. He grabbed the fire poker or pruning sheers every time a twig snapped or a bush rustled. He managed to take a blurry picture of the backside of a rabbit that scampered from behind a tree stump.

Corbin spent a week and a half in the forest before his freeze-dried spaghetti supply ran out. He spent a day trying to capture small animals, but realized a pruning sheers and a

fire poker was not going to get him very far. Even as he admitted defeat he contemplated just staying in the forest and starving to death. He'd been gone long enough now that people would have noticed and probably guessed where he'd gone. He'd missed his Saturday pancakes and milkshake.

He could not stand the idea of going back and facing Harry Croop's questions about where he'd been. They would laugh and mock. Worse than that, he could never tell another story in the diner again. What was the good of pancakes if he couldn't tell a good tale while he ate them? No, he could not go back to Little Haven. But thinking about pancakes had made him realize that starving to death would be a long, miserable road.

But perhaps staying in the forest and waiting for death was not the only option. He'd walked around the immense forest in the last days and seen that only a piece of it was on the outskirts of Little Haven. If he left by another road he would end up in some other town. He could disappear from Little Haven for good and everyone would think something horrible had happened to him in the forest. He would leave them with the mystery of why he had disappeared.

Corbin shouldered his pack and followed a path out of No Name Forest to a new town where no one knew him where he could tell stories about a forest that he was sure was just like every other forest.

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Gwynn slid onto the plastic red barstool at the Friendly Diner next to Officer Dunning as he drank his coffee. *What do you think happened to Mr. Lewis?*

Officer Dunning looked uncertainly at Gwynn. *We're not exactly sure.*

The waitress brought Gwynn a cup of hot water and she began to pour sugar packets into it. *But he's missing. He's missed four Saturdays. Aren't you looking for him?*

No one had technically filed a missing persons report, but the town had noticed he was gone. He had left without telling anyone. His house had been abandoned. It didn't look like much was missing, so while it was clear he had left, it also suggested that he had intended to come back.

*It's not really something for an eight-year-old should be worrying about.*

*I'm nine.* Gwynn stirred the sugar in her water and took a sip. *You aren't very good at finding people, are you?*

*What makes you say that?*

*You never found my dad. And I've been doing some research. There are a lot of unsolved missing persons cases in Little Haven.*

It was true they hadn't found her dad and it had been almost a year now, but Officer Dunning was fairly certain that was because he didn't want to be found. But that was not something you told any child, let alone Gwynn who was all sweetness and curiosity.

*We'll work on that*, he said as he reached for another packet of sugar and found the bowl empty.

*Do you think he went into the forest?*

Officer Dunning leaned one elbow on the counter and rested his head in his palm. Gwynn watched him for a moment before mirroring the gesture. This thought had already crossed his mind, of course. Corbin had always talked about No Name Forest. Dunning recounted questioning the legitimacy of Corbin's stories about No Name on the last day Corbin had been seen. It had been understandable to disbelieve him, Dunning still did not think there were herds of fire-breathing rats scurrying around the forest.

But the thought had also crossed the officer's mind that just maybe something had happened to Corbin in the forest. He wasn't sure enough of anything to start telling stories about the forest, but he had gone to Sheriff Borden with an idea of giving safety talks to the schools about staying out of the forest. *Kids could wander in, you know. And it's just so big. We might not find them again.* The sheriff had thought that was a good idea.

*We're looking for him, Gwynn.* Officer Dunning paid for his coffee and tipped the waitress extra for serving Gwynn. He had seen her do it several times before and she always refused Gwynn's fifty cents for the cup of hot water.

*Officer Dunning, Gwynn said as he was almost to the door, I think something happened to him, in the forest I mean. I think there's something in there.*

Officer Dunning thought so too.

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I never told Carys that I went to the cemetery to visit Mom's grave without her, almost every week, actually. We went on Mom's birthday together and Carys would bring sunflowers, Mom's favorite. It always felt like a weird ceremony though. We laid the flowers out on her grave and bowed our heads as if in prayer, thinking silently all the things we wanted to say to her. Then we would leave the cemetery and have ice cream sundaes at the Friendly Diner while Carys tried to pretend that our lives were perfectly normal.

I started going back to visit Mom's grave when I was nine, while Carys was working after school at the diner and Marion Bianchi was taking her afternoon nap or playing bunko. I liked just sitting by her grave, the one Carys remembers her picking out with Dad, and telling her about my life. I think she'd want to know.

I told her about the teeth I lost or the girls at school who whispered about my missing father, my deceased mother. I told her about the time Cory Warkentein had tried to kiss me by the math corridor lockers. Cory had panicked when Mr. Grupp the geometry teacher walked into the hall and ran off which left me to mumble a question about measuring circumference to Mr. Grupp.

I told her about how Marion Bianchi had cried the whole time Carys and I packed when we moved out of her house when Carys turned eighteen. I had felt bad as Marion had recounted for us how everyone in her life had left her, but Carys had been more of a parent to me in the past five years than Marion ever had. I wanted her to know I was okay. I wanted her to know the things I couldn't tell anyone else.

*Do you remember when you told us that Dad would be back?* I asked as I sat cross-legged on the grass in front of my mom's tombstone. I leaned back and looked across the cemetery to the tall pines of No Name Forest that reached into a grey sky. *It's been four years, but you said he'd be back.*

Mom never answered, but somehow it was nice just to tell her about the things that bothered me, especially about Dad. Carys hated to talk about him, refused to talk about it most of the time. But that's how she dealt with his absence. People in town were willing to listen, but no one understood. They patted me on the head and smiled condolences while thinking they were glad to not be in my place. *It's been seven years, but you said he'd be back.*

I knew just because Mom had said it didn't mean it was true. She couldn't have known what was going to happen. But she knew Dad better than Carys and I, and I trusted that. I hoped in that.

As I walked across Haddley Bridge to leave the cemetery, I passed Lydia Branson who moved passed me with a curt nod. I had seen Mrs. Branson wander through the cemetery several times while I'd visited Mom, although Mrs. Branson was not there to visit a grave. Her son had gone missing nine years ago, from what I'd gathered from old *Little Haven Tip* clippings and the missing signs still posted around town.

I never felt right asking Mrs. Branson about her son, though. Unlike Beatrice Bianchi, most people did not have much hope that Timothy Branson had run off to live a new life somewhere else. His mother was left to live with the probability that her son was dead while holding on to the suffocating hope that he still might be alive in the world somewhere.

I wondered as I stepped off the bridge and veered away from Thornapple River towards Main Street if Mrs. Branson went to the cemetery to try to convince herself that Timothy was really gone or to remind herself that there was still hope because his name was not among the graves. I wondered this question about myself as well and thought that, maybe, it was a little of both.

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## V. Playtime

Timothy hadn't realized it was possible to have a time out from a time out until his mother found him slashing at the ceiling fan with a plastic sword his grandfather had given him for Christmas. His mother didn't believe him when he said he hadn't meant to chip off pieces of the stucco ceiling, raining down cottage cheese over his bed. She hadn't believed him either earlier that day when she had caught him dropping his pocket knife on the trampoline that he hadn't actually intended to cut holes in it; he had just wanted to experiment to see what would happen.

Or perhaps, he thought as he sat timidly on the edge of his bed, staring at his mother's crossed arms and pursed lips, she did believe him; she just didn't care. Ceilings were very important to his mother. The only thing more important to her were the carpets, which was why his treasure chest had been moved to hide the evidence of his last adventure involving over-ripe strawberries and a fan.

He might have been able to bear his second time out if his mother had not insisted on sending him to stay with Mrs. Croop next door while she went to the grocery store. When he had asked why he couldn't stay at home if he promised to be good she had said, *You are not responsible enough. You've already shown you have no regard for the rules of this house.* She had not appreciated when he pointed out that fighting with the ceiling had

never been a rule per say. And if his parents hadn't wanted him to use a pocketknife, they shouldn't have given him one.

*Can't I come with you to the store?* Timothy had asked his mother. *That would be punishment enough.* But she had said no. She was the parent and he was the child.

Children did not make the rules. They did not choose the punishments. They were not in charge.

It was not the thick smell of mildew and kitty litter or the large collection of dolls, including a tissue box that deposited tissues from the top of a doll's head that made Mrs. Croop's house so miserable, but her habit of making Timothy do her Tae Bo workout video with her. The only thing worse than watching an overenthusiastic, over-muscular man in a spandex suit instructing them to jab left, jab right was watching Mrs. Croop squeeze her rolls of fat into a spandex suit and jab left, jab right.

When Mrs. Croop went to the kitchen for a glass of water ten minutes into the video, already working up a sweat, Timothy took advantage of her absence and snuck out the back door. He had only intended to wait for his mother calmly by the back door except that when he returned to his house, he saw that his mother had already returned from the store and was sitting on the couch reading a magazine, clearly unconcerned that he was being tortured next door.

It was then that Timothy decided that if he was going to be punished, he wanted to be punished for something he knew was a punishable offense, for a clear breach of rules laid out by his mother. He ran through a list of rules he was supposed to follow: he wasn't supposed to eat chocolate before dinner, watch more than an hour of TV a day, chew gum after he had brushed his teeth. But these were minor infractions that he had no desire to do at the moment. Timothy sat on the curb and looked down the street, as he tried to think of the things he had always wanted to do but hadn't for fear of breaking rules.

As he looked down the street, past Sheriff Borden watering his hydrangea and the McKenzie twins playing in a plastic swimming pool on their front lawn he could see the tips of pine trees peeking over the houses. Timothy was not supposed to go into No Name Forest, which backed up against the other side of the cul-de-sac. His mother had been clear on that, although she had never told him why. She had warned him if she ever caught him even walking toward it he would lose TV privileges for a month. Thinking about it now, there had to be something truly worthwhile in the forest for there to be such a punishment attached to entering it.

As soon as the forest entered Timothy's mind he could not help but move toward it, driven forward by his curiosity. After taking a few steps through the red pines at the outer edge of the forest, Timothy found large rocks to climb up on and jump off onto the pine-strewn ground. He picked up a broken branch and hit drooping branches as he jumped over moss-covered rocks.

As he ran further in, he climbed over roots of large beech trees that rose out of the soil. The bark of the large trunks around him reminded him of his grandma's wrinkled skin. He ducked under branches or wrapped his hands around them and let his body swing underneath as he dangled from the limbs.

When he stopped under a beech tree something fell from it beside him, breaking on the hard earth and spraying red liquid over his tennis shoes and shorts. Shards of glass lay at Timothy's feet, a torn label on one of the pieces read *Aunt Tammie's Tomato Sauce*. As Timothy moved closer to examine the broken pieces of the jar, another fell a few feet behind him. He jumped away from the second jar as globs of *Honest Abe's Applesauce* flew into the air.

Looking up he saw a small girl in a white dress, wrapped around a branch in the tree above him, giggling as she stared down at him. *You should move if you don't want to be hit*. Timothy stared up at bare feet covered in mud that dangled from the branch above him. A third jar fell beside him, adding to the mass of glass chips and oozing liquid on the rocks and moosewood beneath the trees.

The girl slid down from the tree, bare feet landing in the dirt. *I need more ammo*, she said as she walked past him a few steps before stopping and turning back to him, waiting expectantly. He followed her as she hopped across rocks and over tree roots, occasionally grabbing an overhead branch to swing herself over them.

Jars filled with nacho cheese, raspberry jam, and chocolate syrup rained down around them as girls and boys dropped them from the trees above. Alfredo sauce splattered in the air as the glass hit the ground, spattering those standing nearest. Some of the children danced underneath the falling jars, dodging them as they dropped, calling out to those in the trees above them, *You can't hit me.*

Timothy imagined the horrified look on his mother's face if she had been here. She would have been more disgusted than she had been when she'd caught him hacking at the wooden porch beams with his dad's camping hatchet.

*Do you do this all the time?* Timothy asked the girl as she grabbed onto a low branch and swung her body back and forth.

*When we want to play Splat. Sometimes we play other games like Capture or War,* she dropped to the ground. *C'mon, we are going to play Hide.*

Timothy ran to catch up to the girl who was already several yards ahead of him as she moved an open clearing in between the beech trees. Other children jumped out of surrounding trees as they walked into the clearing.

*Are there rules?* he asked the girl as he gathered with the others in the middle of the clearing. *Yes. You can't have a game without rules. But we make them, so we want to follow them. Once you stay with us, you can make new rules.*

When the game started, Timothy was with the hiders, the girl told him. *Don't be the first one found.* Timothy was very good at finding hiding places, although he did not know the forest like the other children did. He tucked himself in between the large root of two trees that had grown together and stayed hidden until a voice called out through the woods, *We found one.* From between trees, climbing down from branches, crawling from under rocks and leaves boys and girls emerged and ran back toward the clearing. Grabbing Timothy's hand, the girl pulled him with her as they ran.

They stopped in an opening between the trees where the children were gathering. A group of boys and a girl led another boy into the center of the clearing. As they backed away from him the children around Timothy began gathering small jagged rocks from the ground, each holding one firmly in their hands. The boy in the center looked nervous, scared, although he tried to hide it. His shoulders were tense and his eyes darted between the children, as he looked at the rocks they clutched in their hands.

The girl handed Timothy a smooth, round stone saying, *Not above the neck.* Someone asked the boy if he was ready, he nodded, someone whistled. Stones rained through the air. They pelted the boy as he tried to jump and dodge even though there was no way to avoid all of the stones. Some slashed against bare skin. Small drops of blood slid down the boy's shin. The girl next to Timothy threw her stone, glancing the boy's right elbow. She turned and looked at Timothy, blue eyes fixed on him to see what he would do.

He knew this was not something he would be allowed to do. But he wasn't allowed to experiment with what happened when he threw ripe strawberries into whirring fan blades or jump on his bed with a plastic sword either. He was not allowed to be in the forest at all, and what so far had been truly bad about any of those things? He had done those things because he had wanted to do them, but he had felt guilty because he knew he was not supposed to. What would it be like to do the things he wanted without guilt, without fear of punishment? How was it bad to do what he wanted if everyone had agreed to it?

He threw the rock and watched it spin through the air and connect with the boy's left arm. The girl next to him smiled and said *You'll play another round?* Timothy looked back at the red welt on the boy's arm that the rock had left behind. It scared him a little to know it felt good.

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Everywhere I looked for information on Timothy Branson was a dead end. He'd gone missing ten years ago and there had never been any new leads on the case. It was still recent enough though that people didn't like talking about it. Even Mrs. Croop who would gossip about just about anything refused to say a word.

A month after we'd moved into our apartment on the west side of Main Street by Lonely Meadow Park I went with Carys to Hal's Hardware to get tools to fix the kitchen sink that had backed up once again.

As I looked at the paint samples while I waited for Carys, the bell on the door of Hal's clanged and four men walked in, jostling one another as they talked about the torque on the one named Griffin's new Chevy. They were a few years older than Carys, had all played on the Haddley High baseball team, and now worked jobs at Niberino's Pizzeria or Croop's Auto Shop after finishing high school.

*Alex, Griffin said to the man behind the counter, you coming out with us tonight?*

*No, man, I told my mom I'd watch my brothers tonight so she can go to her book club.*

*Dad's not up to much of anything right now.*

I looked at them between the racks of paint samples as I tried to decide the difference between *Fuzzy Duckling* and *Buttermellow* to see the men tease Alex and punch him in the shoulder. *Dude*, Alex said as he flipped his Red Sox hat around on his head, *did you come in here to get anything or just to hassle me? Because I seriously need to start charging for hassling.*

*You sure you're not just ditching us to see Sadie?*

I moved from the yellows to blues, keeping an eye on Carys as she moved through the store while the men continued to harass Alex. I was thinking about how *Bluebird's Wing* would look in our living room when Griffin's voice caught my attention, *Why do you still*

*have this picture up?* he asked as he tapped at the picture of Timothy Branson taped on the counter.

*Dad likes to keep the missing posters up until they're found,* Alex shrugged.

*He was a weird kid, liked to do his own thing at recess,* Griffin said as he scratched at the tape on the corner of the poster. *Like he'd just run around karate chopping the monkey bars while we played basketball.*

*He was invited to my ninth birthday as kind of on accident,* another man said as he looked at the black and white photo. *Jordan's parents were watching him for the weekend and Jordan was supposed to go so they asked if Timothy could go too.*

Carys brought her basket of tools up to the counter. She pushed a few of the men out of the way so she could pay. I pretended to examine *Restful Sea* as I continued to listen to the conversation about Timothy.

*Yeah,* Griffin said as Alex rung up Carys' wrench on the register, *and we said we'd sneak out and go to the forest and he said he wasn't allowed. He'd get in trouble.*

Alex took the cash Carys held out to him. *Wonder whatever happened to him.*

*Maybe he finally got the guts to go into No Name and was eaten by a raccoon,* Griffin said.

Alex laughed with the others as he handed Carys her change. She picked up the bags from the counter and headed towards the door, *Come on, Gwynn, we're leaving.*

When I got home that night, I revisited the notes in my red notebook about Timothy Branson. Between the handwritten notes and newspaper clippings I'd taped in the notebook I still had very little information. Yes, he was among the missing residents of Little Haven, but there was nothing to say he'd gone into the forest. I took down a few notes about the conversation tonight. It wasn't much, nothing to say Timothy had definitively gone into the forest, but as with most of the stories I'd been tracking, I traced the truth a little at a time.

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## VI. Page Turner

The Haddley High Library was closed for standardized testing. Anna Frazier had gone into No Name Forest when she ditched lunch and realized she didn't know where ditchers went when they ditched school. She also wasn't sure if it was technically ditching if she was ditching lunch and intended to be back for Calculus. She had only wanted to avoid the cafeteria, to find somewhere quiet to read until her next class.

Anna usually spent lunches reading in the library. Ms. Greech the librarian let her eat behind the circulation desk since, strictly speaking, food was not allowed in the library. Sometime Ms. Greech gave Anna the little chocolate bars she used to fill the plastic jack-o-lantern she set on the circulation desk at Halloween. Ms. Greech understood that Don Quixote and Clarissa Dalloway were far better company than any of the students who sat in class passing notes across the room and carving lewd figures on their desks.

Anna read a book about the history of salt, settled between the roots of a large tree she had classified as a blue ash. Two summers ago Anna's mother had insisted she spend two weeks at Sunshine Woods Camp where people in tie dye shirts who insisted on being called things like Honeybee and Butterscotch tried to make her play games that involved shooting whipped cream into a stranger's mouth. Instead, Anna had read any material she could find, most of which were trail guides identifying the flora and fauna surrounding the camp and pamphlets instructing campers not to feed bears.

When Anna was on the last page of her book, she checked her watch and noted that she still had thirteen minutes before fifth period. She had another book in her backpack about the water conflict in California, but she was not sure she wanted to start it just yet if she only had thirteen minutes to read.

Stuffing the book back in her backpack between her Economics and American History textbooks, she quizzed herself to see what other plants she could identify. She could not

distinguish if the birch trees were white or grey, but she felt fairly certain of her identification of the northern red oak trees growing to the left of her.

Anna moved deeper into the forest, stopping every few paces to examine the leaves of a tree, rubbing them between her fingers as though she could recall the names she had once learned by touching them. She moved in between a series of ash trees that grew so close together it seemed impossible they could survive. Slender paths stretched between them, winding through the forest. Anna would follow one only to find it blocked by a large tree in the middle of the path, causing her to backtrack and choose another path to follow. As she moved in further she forgot about checking her watch, no longer caring about Calculus. There was too much to be discovered here.

She wondered now as she made her way between the trees why she had never come into the forest before. How had she trusted people when they said there was nothing to see here? She should have known people in town would not recognize the mysteries to be unlocked in the forest. No one thought about things the way she did. People in town were content to think about which grocery store had 2% milk on sale and whether to ban town members from keeping standing basketball hoops in their front yards. When everyone at school was thinking about prom dates and football games, Anna thought about nuclear fission and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

After following several trails that seemed to lead nowhere in particular, Anna followed a spindly track that opened up to a large circle of ash trees whose trunks were as wide as

she was tall, covered in books from their roots to their branches. At the tree nearest her, Anna climbed up a wooden ladder attached to the tree and examined the books tucked into the trunk.

She scanned the titles and found one marked *The Life of J. Edgar Hoover*. As she flipped through the first pages she saw they only captured the first few years of his life, documenting his actions, the first time he rolled over or crawled or walked. It captured the words people said to him, the songs his mother sang to him. When she thought she had reached the final page of the book, another appeared behind it to move into the next years of Hoover's life.

She slid the book back into its place on the shelf next to *The Life of Jeremy Hoover*. Anna did not know who Jeremy Hoover was, which bothered her because she could normally recall significant people in history. But when she flipped through the pages of Jeremy Hoover's life she saw that he was a thirty-one-year-old man who lived in Loveland, Ohio and owned a dog grooming salon called The Paw Spa. His life was not documented in history books in the same way J. Edgar Hoover's was, but in this library the story of his life, his conversations and actions were just as significant, recorded in ink as J. Edgar Hoover's had been.

As she stood on the ladder, Anna looked over the strings of lanterns that reached between the trees, illuminating the grove with pale yellow light to see that beyond the ring stood hundreds of trees, all filled with books. Below her, the clearing floor was strewn with

ornate rugs and mismatched chairs and pillows. Scattered throughout the chairs were men and women reading, their faces sagging with wrinkles, many with glasses perched at the tips of their noses, or wiry grey beards cascading across their knees.

As Anna walked around the circle of trees, she passed a man who paced while he recited the periodic table. At the other end of the circle a woman sat on the ground, furiously taking notes as she flipped through pages of several books at once. No one seemed to care she was there; no one even seemed to notice.

In the center of the clearing stood a large tree whose branches stretched out over the entire clearing. Anna reached up into the tree to examine a book sprouting from a limb, the spine still green, pages still wordless. On a lower branch was a book just beginning to turn color, red spreading out from the stem. Anna traced the indentations of letters on the spine spelling: *The Wine Industry in Mendocino, CA: 2013* before she flipped open the first pages to see words printed in shiny ink. As she flipped through the thick pages, the ink on become fainter un each successive page until is disappeared completely.

*That one isn't ready to be picked,* said a man as he shuffled around the tree. He pulled a pair of glasses out of the coat pocket of his purple jacket and perched them on the end of his crooked nose. From a low hanging branch he examined a book, plucked it from the branch, and handed it to Anna. *This one is ready to read.* The man moved away without saying a word to look at other books sprouting from the tree.

Anna took the book the man had handed her, a novel that had just been published based on the cover page, and settled between the roots of a tree to read in the afternoon light. As the sun faded behind the trees, the strings of lights above her glowed brighter to illuminate the pages she read.

When she finished the novel she searched the trunks for new books. Stacks of books, fiction and fact, published works and ideas never before put into print grew around Anna as she found new books she wanted to read. At first she feared that she would never have time to finish them all, but with each new book her concept of time and life outside of the forest drifted away.

With every new page Anna unlocked mysteries lost to the past because she could put all of the pieces together. She discovered the truth behind the JFK assassination and what had happened to Amelia Earhart. The voices of monks in Siem Reap, crewmembers aboard the Titanic, women and men in small cubicles working monotonous jobs rose from the pages. In these pages, every life had a story that grew as each day of life passed. The more she read the more she understood about the books within the forest library. The books could not say what was not already known, what had not already happened, but any moment in history was recorded.

Anna forgot about fifth period Calculus. She forgot about the kids at school and Ms. Greech's miniature chocolate bars. She did not need to go out in the world, because in this library the world had come to her. One day, when she had learned enough, she would

go back and share all the things she knew. She could change the world. She could save lives. She could help people see truth.

And she did not have to be cut off from her life entirely; she could read about any person any time. She followed the lives of her parents through reading the headlines of their lives. At first everything was focused on finding her. They went to the police and filed reports. They searched surrounding towns, phoned relatives, posted flyers. They held candlelight vigils. When she read these pieces of her parents' lives she told herself she would read just one more book and then return to them. But one book turned into another, and she forgot for days on end that her parents even existed.

Over the years her parents fell into life without Anna. Her parents replaced the tile in their kitchen. Her dad got laid off. Her mom got a haircut. They fought about her dad's inability to find a new job. Her mom sat in Anna's room on nights when she couldn't sleep. Her dad boxed up Anna's books and academic trophies. Her mom started smoking. Her dad was working multiple jobs, a truck driver, a grocery store clerk. Her mom took Anna's books and trophies down from the attic where her dad had hid them. They adopted a stray cat. They argued about what to name the stray cat. Her parents went out on a date for the first time in years. Her mom quit smoking. Her dad joined a bowling league. Her mom volunteered for a neighborhood watch program. Her dad started a book, read twelve pages and stopped. Her parents bought a new kitchen table. Her dad searched truck stops for Anna's face. Her mom started smoking again. Her dad started

building a shed. Her mom quit smoking a second time. Her dad fractured his wrist. Her mom planted new rosebushes. Her parents pruned them together.

Anna knew all about the live of her parents. She knew what they did each day and what they thought. She read about their lives while she read about so many other things. She thought that was the same as knowing them.

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When I thought I had traced all the disappearances I could, a girl from Haddley High went missing. Anna Frazier's face looked out from black and white posters plastered on shop windows and telephone poles. Whispers filtered through church pew and store aisles as people speculated what might have happened to her. People said she wasn't the type of girl to run off with a boy, to leave home without telling anyone.

The *Little Haven Tip* didn't give many details about her disappearance, but I collected what I could. She had last been seen in fourth period AP Economics. Sheriff Borden had concluded she must have disappeared during lunch because she never showed up to fifth period Calculus. I looked at the map pasted in my notebook where I had marked each of the places the missing had last been seen. It hadn't escaped my notice that Haddley High backed up to where No Name Forest wrapped around the north side of town. This fact had not escaped the notice of Sheriff Borden either.

Instead of going to third period algebra, I, along with the rest of the student body, were directed into the gym for a public safety assembly. When I was in elementary school my classmates and I had occasionally been herded into the cafeteria where the air weighed with the smell of old milk and canned corn to listen to a police officer talk about town safety procedures. However, the assemblies had become less frequent over the years as the town had fallen back into the belief that Little Haven was a place where nothing ever happened.

I sat between a girl blowing bubbles in her gum into her boyfriend's face and two girls giggling as they paged through a magazine rating Hollywood's hottest celebrities. Sheriff Borden stood at a podium, his rotund waist peeking out from either side, giving a speech on the importance of curfew, telling people where you were going, and staying out of the forest. Beau, now training to be a policeman, handed out pamphlets to the students about safety procedures.

At the bottom row of the bleachers sat Officer Dunning, slumped against the bleacher behind him with another stack of pamphlets in his hands. I knew that a few months ago Mrs. Dunning had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer, and by the looks of Officer Dunning, she wasn't getting better.

Mrs. Dunning had been my fifth grade teacher. She'd taught us about photosynthesis by helping us plant a class garden and would let us watch cartoons in her classroom during lunch when we had rainy day schedule. Officer Dunning had always gone out of his way

to talk to Carys and me. He'd brought us donuts when we sat in the police station after my mom had died and Sheriff Borden tried to figure out what would happen to us. It seemed unfair that sadness should come to such good people, but I don't think I'd ever really thought that life was ever fair.

I watched as Officer Dunning glared at a boy who had stolen his cheerleader girlfriend's pompoms and was shaking them in his friend's face as the three of them laughed before I looked down at the pamphlet that had been passed to me. On the front was a photo of the lightening struck forest sign surrounded and crossed over by a bright red circle.

*Now we know it's common for kids to dare each other to go into the forest, Sheriff Borden lectured through the microphone, This is foolish.*

I thought it was foolish to make a big deal about the forest without saying exactly why people shouldn't go in it and then tell a bunch of teenagers to stay out. I had hoped, perhaps, they might tell us why No Name was supposed to be dangerous. Had they uncovered information to prove that at least one of the missings had gone into No Name? Had they found some proof of a creature or a murderer lurking in the forest? Or, as it seemed, were they just operating off the town superstition. Perhaps feeding the fear of the forest was merely a way to make the police look like they were doing something about the unsolved missing persons cases.

The bell rang as Sheriff Borden ended his speech with a nod as he said, *Stay safe*, but no one was listening. I tucked the pamphlet into my red notebook and moved with the herd of students out of the gym.

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## VII. Strings

Sadie worked at the Comfy Sleeps Inn, checking in the few people who came through Little Haven. They never stayed long, and they always seemed to be on their way to somewhere far more interesting than the little town they stopped in for the night to break up the drive. Sadie would spend the long hours devoid of new guests stealing the complimentary mints and searching the internet for places people said they were going. New Orleans. The Grand Canyon. New York City. Disneyland.

She liked to think about going to those places, about leaving town and starting a life somewhere new, but she knew she wouldn't. Alex was here. And he had very good reasons for not leaving. He had taken over his dad's hardware store. His mom needed him here now that his dad was sick. He was close to his younger brothers. His best friends, the ones he'd played baseball with from elementary school through high school with, were all here.

Sadie had heard his plans for their lives as they laid in the bed of his truck at night tracing Orion's belt in the sky. They would get married. He would build them a house out on the piece of land by Thornapple River he was saving up to buy. A big house with a large

porch and a garden out back because that was what Sadie liked. They would have kids and raise them here. They would grow old in the house with the large porch. It was a good life, Sadie thought some times as she looked at the open field where she might one day have a yellow house, four kids, and a golden retriever. But to Alex, she knew, this was the best life.

Sadie was instructed by her perpetually sweaty, round-headed boss to warn guests checking in to stay out of No Name Forest. *Too many disappearances already*, he told her. *Can't afford to lose guests in there, especially if they haven't paid their bills.* He laughed too hard at himself, breathing the remnants of an onion bagel into Sadie's face. She wished he would steal the complimentary mints too.

But Sadie did warn people about the forest. *There is a rowdy pack of wolves in there*, she would say sometimes. And when asked why the town didn't just dispose of them she would frown and say, *They are endangered.* She had no idea if wolves were endangered or not. Other times she would tell people that a few years ago a serial killer had taken his victims into the woods. Or else that the entire forest floor was covered in poison oak, no chance to avoid it.

She felt it was her duty to give people reasons to stay out of the forest they would actually believe. It seemed enough to most of the town that the police department was passing out pamphlets instructing residents to stay out of No Name, but Sadie did not think that superstition would be enough to keep visitors from traipsing through the forest.

People had gone missing, although no one could be sure if they'd even entered the forest at all.

Sadie liked the idea of a haunted forest, even if she wasn't sure she believed it. It made the Little Haven at least somewhat interesting. She'd pretended she didn't really believe the stories when she asked Alex if he wanted to go camping in the forest. She did not tell him that she wanted the stories to be true, that she wanted to discover there was more to the town than they knew. Maybe then she wouldn't mind spending the rest of her life here.

The forest did not seem particularly dangerous to Sadie as they walked through large beech trees, their gnarled branches stretching out like large arms around them. She pulled away from Alex's hand and climbed onto a low branch. She walked along it and sat down in a large curve, swung her legs over the side and let her shoes fall beneath her onto the mossy earth below.

Alex stepped toward her, wrapped his hands around her waist, and pulled her from the branch.

*What are you doing?* she asked.

*It's just this is the perfect spot.*

*Perfect spot for what?*

He smiled and leaned in to kiss her, pressing her body into the mossy folds of the trunk. She wrapped her arms around the back of his neck, felt his calloused fingers trace her bare skin underneath her shirt.

*Don't you want to explore a little first?* Sadie asked as she pulled away and looked at the green canopy overhead. Alex shook his head and leaned in to kiss her again, but she stood up straight and walked around the tree. *Let's just walk a little, find a place to set up camp.*

Sadie walked further into the trees, dragging her fingers along the rough bark as she walked. Alex followed a few steps behind Sadie. His steps echoed through the forest as he snapped twigs and crunched dead leaves under his heavy boots. Sadie tried to make out sounds of birds or other creatures over Alex's walking, but apart from the crunch of his boots against the earth, the forest was oddly quiet.

Further in the forest Thornapple River wove its way through the trees, a jagged line carved through the rocks and ground cover. At the edge of the creek, Sadie peeled off her striped socks and black sneakers to dip her toes in the cool water. When she looked back at Alex she saw him pull out his pocket knife and carve A+S in a nearby red pine. Sadie leaned back on the grassy bank by the river and shut her eyes. With her eyes closed,

Sadie tried to listen to the water slip over the algae covered rocks, but all she heard was Alex's knife scraping against bark.

*What do you think might be in here?* Sadie asked as she opened her eyes to look at the branches weaving overhead.

*I'll protect you.*

*That wasn't what I meant,* she thought, but she said nothing.

Alex walked to the bank and offered her a calloused hand. Sadie looked at Alex from the ground, wanting him to sit with her by the river, but when he continued holding his hand to her she let him pull her up. As they walked, she wished she could be back at the side of the water staring up at the beams of sunlight that filtered between the leaves.

They walked through the woods together, winding through the twisted trunks, accompanied by the sound of leaves clapping against one another in the wind. As they walked Alex seemed intent on finding the right place to camp for the night. When Sadie wanted to stop and explore, he reminded her that they needed to set up camp before it got dark.

*Do you ever think about leaving?* Sadie asked as they rolled out sleeping bags on the hard ground over brittle pine needles. Alex had found an open grove between a circle of pines that he deemed fit for their camping purposes.

Alex looked up from coaxing the fire he had built. *Why would we leave?*

*I just mean, do you ever think that there might be life outside Little Haven?*

*Everything I want is here. I thought what you wanted was here too.*

Sadie nodded, but said nothing. She wanted Alex to ask why she wanted to leave. She wanted him to ask where she wanted to go, but he stood up and collected brush to feed the fire, unaware there was more to be said. Sadie thought about telling Alex about the places she had searched on the internet, about the dreams she had of seeing new things, but she knew telling him these things would make him uneasy, which in turn would make him angry and distant. And she did not want to lose Alex. In the end, was the Grand Canyon really worth giving up a man who wanted her, who would love her and take care of her?

That night Sadie laid tucked in between Alex's large arms, eyes fixed on the fading embers of the fire. *We could be like this forever,* Alex said as he leaned in to kiss her on the top of her head.

As Sadie lay with Alex's arms wrapped around her, trying to fall asleep she thought, *He is what I want. I want him to be happy. I want to make him happy.* She said these words to herself over and over again until she faded into sleep.

When Sadie woke up the next morning she found strings extending from her wrists and ankles, rising out of her skin. She pushed her hair out of her face and found another string pulling out of the top of her head. She traced the lengths of strings to a wooden cross bar held lighting in Alex's hand. She reached toward the sleeping Alex and began to lift the cross bar from his hand to examine it. As she began to lift the cross bar from Alex's hands, he jerked awake and pulled at the cross bar which pulled at the strings extending from her body, tugging her forward so she fell on her face.

Alex dropped the cross bar to the ground, staring at Sadie splayed out in the dust beneath him. He helped her up before retrieving the cross bar, but when he stood her on her feet she collapsed to the ground again. Moving back to the cross bar he lifted it slightly from the ground. As he lifted it she too began to rise from the ground. Shifting the bar slightly made Sadie raise her left arm, shifting the bar again raised her right arm. Her legs twitched and danced as Alex manipulated the strings.

Neither of them questioned the strings. They moved around the forest that day with Alex moving Sadie along, manipulating her through the strings. When they had walked for

several hours without finding the way back to Little Haven, Sadie asked Alex if they were lost.

*I'll find the way back*, Alex said as he continued to move Sadie along beside him between the pines.

*That's right*, Sadie thought as her legs moved involuntarily over a large root creeping out of the earth, *Alex will find the way back*. Sadie felt as she was moved through the forest that she was forgetting something, but even as she began to feel anxious about whatever she might be forgetting, she looked at Alex and felt sure that it didn't matter as long as Alex was there.

When they could not find the way out by the time the sun fell behind the trees, Alex found another place to camp for the night. He was not worried, though, so neither was Sadie. As Sadie fell asleep that night she felt more peaceful than she had in months. She could not remember why she had felt so restless.

But as they walked through the forest the next day, Sadie began to say things she didn't mean to say. She began to think things she was not sure she wanted to think.

*Do you want to get married when we finally get out of here?* Alex asked her as they traced a small creek they hadn't remembered seeing before.

Yes, she said without thinking. She heard the word in her head and let it slip out through her lips.

*And have kids together?*

Again the yes slipped out, even though there were questions she wanted to ask. *How many kids? And when would she be having said kids? What about traveling, seeing the world before then? What about those things that she wanted?* These questions could not force themselves out of her mouth. Her mind could barely focus on them as images filtered through her mind: stockings above a fireplace, a little boy circling the driveway on a tricycle, Alex's arms around her as she fell asleep. And for that moment, as she lay curled into Alex she thought that image was nice. She could want that, did want that. She could not remember entirely why she had wanted anything else.

At night, when he loosened his grip on the cross bar and it sunk to the ground beneath them, Sadie's own thoughts began to fight through. She thought about how when Alex held the strings attached to her, it was his voice she heard in her head and not her own. She also thought about how the days since she had woken up with the strings she and Alex had been blissfully at peace with one another, she had been blissfully at peace with herself. Alex seemed to be more in love with her now than he had ever been.

Sadie looked up at the stars and thought of all the wishes she had made on shooting stars and dandelions to be with Alex for forever, to be the girl he could love, the girl who

could make him happy. She felt his heartbeat against hers as they fell asleep together and she felt sure that all of those wishes had come true. But as the fire died and she drifted into sleep, her hand resting on the cross bar, she wondered if she was still who she wanted to be.

*Aren't you curious about what is in the rest of the forest?* She asked Alex the next day as he pulled on his boots while she sat on the ground with the cross bar in her hands.

Alex shook his head as he tied his laces, *I only want to get out of here.*

Sadie mused about finding a haunted cabin or searching for moose or white-tailed deer in an attempt to perk Alex's interest. Alex continued to tie his laces without giving any sign that he had heard anything Sadie had said. She wanted knew Alex to ask her why she was so interested, but she knew he was not going to. *I want to explore the rest of the forest. I want to know what else is out there,* Sadie said as she plucked the strings connecting her to the cross bar. *You don't listen to what I want.*

Alex stood up and told Sadie he thought they should start walking in a direction he thought was east to find Thornapple River and follow it out of the forest.

*I want you to be quiet.* Alex pulled up on the string coming out of Sadie's head and she felt her jaw pull upwards and her lips clench together. Alex looked both scared and

satisfied as he looked back at Sadie, her teeth clenched, her lips drawn together by the string.

*Just stay here*, Alex said as he looked down at the silent Sadie. He took the cross bar from the ground, and wedged it in the branches above her head, leaving her arms hanging limp from it as she sat on the ground beneath it. *I'll be back*, he said as he kissed her on the head and walked into the trees.

Sadie watched Alex's broad shoulders disappear into the fringe of pine branches, left alone in the silence of the forest. Body limp, she tried to move her forefinger, her pinky toe, but her limbs and joints did not follow her brain. They waited to be instructed to move by the cross bar that hung in the branches above her.

She closed her eyes and felt the sun sink through her eyelids as it had by Thornapple River when they had first entered No Name. She didn't want to just sit here. She didn't want to live life thinking someone else's thoughts. She didn't want to live with a man who didn't want to know who she was because she was afraid she would not be wanted.

*I do not want this*, she thought as she tried to make her mouth say words that were actually hers. *I do not want this. I do not want this.* The words came as a shout from her mouth as the string coming from the top of her head snapped from the branches above, letting her jaw spring open. *I do not want this*, she yelled again and again. With each

shout the strings connected to her wrists and ankles snapped, freeing her from the cross bar hanging in the tree.

Sadie pulled herself up from the ground and began walking through the forest, away from the way the direction Alex had gone into the pine trees. Sadie made her way along the creek they had been following until she walked out of the trees and into the sunlight on the edge of a town she did not know. She knew she was not at the same place she had entered, but she had no intention of going back to Little Haven. She took her first step outside the forest, uncertain of where exactly she would end up, but certain that she would never return to the town where she had become someone she had never wanted to be.

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*What do you think is in the forest?* I asked Sheriff Borden when Beau had invited Carys and me to dinner. Carys glared at me as she chased peas around her plate.

*It's not safe,* Sheriff Borden said as he brushed mashed potatoes out of his mustache.

*But why isn't it safe?*

Sheriff Borden looked confused, and I wondered if he could remember why he had been telling people for years to stay out of the forest. Did he actually believe the forest was to blame for disappearances? What stories had he been told?

*Thanks for having us over Sheriff, Carys cut in. The roast is delicious, Mrs. Borden.*

*Do you think that's where the missing people have gone?* Gwynn asked as Carys had gone back to eating her roast and potatoes.

Sheriff Borden took a large sip of water. *We think it's a possibility.*

I could feel Cary's glare without looking at her. *Well I just figured if you are going to have assemblies about staying out of the forest, there must be sufficient evidence to suspect that's where people have been going.*

*That's classified information. We can't really talk about the cases,* Beau cut in. I doubted Beau did a whole lot around the station other than fetch coffee and retrieve cats from trees, but he probably just want to be a part of the work he was excited to do, so I just nodded.

I waited until everyone had finished dinner and Carys had moved into the living room to play the Sheriff a promised game of chess before I offered to help Beau clear the table.

*It must be fascinating getting to work on these cases,* I said as I scooped leftover corn and mashed potatoes off each plate before stacking them. *You get to do something so important.*

*It's nice to be able to help,* Beau murmured.

We carried stacks of dishes and set them on the counter before returning to the dining room. *You must know a lot of things.*

Beau shrugged as he tried to hide a smile. *I got to look at the case files once.*

*I know you can't talk about the cases. It's good you take your job so seriously.* I collected silverware from around the table. *It's just, I don't really think the forest can be that dangerous. I mean, what proof is there?*

*It is dangerous. We know Sadie and Alex were planning on going camping in the forest. And the school librarian swears she saw Anna heading in the direction of the forest.*

I kept track of the notes I wanted to record in my notebook as soon as I got home. No one had yet said why the police were so interested in the forest, other than the superstition that circulated through town. Still, a lot of their leads seemed to be guesswork. *But the forest has been searched. Nobody has been found.*

Beau shrugged. *We'll keep looking.* He grabbed several bowls and carried them to the kitchen.

I followed Beau to the kitchen with a stack of plates and set them in the sink. *Have you ever been in the forest?*

*No.* Beau looked disappointed. *Officer Dunning is doing another search tomorrow. I wanted to go with him, but Dad says he needs me in the office tomorrow.*

*Maybe you'll get your chance yet.*

*Maybe, he sighed, if there's another disappearance.*

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## VIII. Search and Rescue

Bryan Dunning had been assigned to a new missing persons case. A year ago it'd been a teenage girl. This time it was a young couple. Alex Marshall's friends said they were going camping, although they weren't sure where. They weren't leaving town, though, which made No Name Forest the most natural place to look.

The frequency of stories of missing people who had never been found was making the town uneasy. But that wasn't the disconcerting part. Most towns dealt with runaway kids, wives leaving their husbands, the occasional murder. But people in this town went missing without a trace. They never showed signs of planning to leave, packed bags or

notes of farewell. Bryan and the other officers never found any tracks, any leads. They never found any bodies either.

The joke had been the missing people had been swallowed by the forest. But now it was becoming less of a joke and more of an actual fear. Bryan was not sure if he believed in the superstition, but he had volunteered to take the case and search the forest. He was not sure if he went into the forest to prove people wrong or because he wanted the rumor of the danger of No Name Forest to be true. Since his wife had died, he found himself more and more unsure of exactly what it was he wanted.

Sometimes Bryan would go up to the roof of the police station and stand at the edge, the toes of his scuffed shoes hanging off the brick ledge, trying to make himself feel something. But as he stood staring at the ground beneath him he never felt anything, secure in the fact that he was not going to fall. Maybe he actually had to jump to feel the risk of it. He was not sure if falling from the roof would make him feel fear or relief, and the uncertainty kept him from trying.

People told Bryan as they brought him casseroles of canned mushrooms and unidentifiable meats in various shades of yellow that grief impacted people in different ways. What they did not say was that there were appropriate and expected ways to handle grief. He pretended to be dealing with his grief in those ways. He kept to himself. He threw himself into work. He slept with Ginny's sweater on the pillow next to him. He

would search the forest for the missing people, as though finding them, becoming some sort of town hero, could help him move on.

The forest was eerily quiet, no rustling branches, no cracking twigs, a television with the sound on mute. A light snow dusted the forest floor and clung to the dark leafless branches of gnarled oaks and trembling aspens. The large oaks reached out to him in twisted claws, beckoning him in further. Upon entering the forest he had forced himself between the aspens crowded together to make his own path. Deeper into the forest a thin trail stretched out in front of him, starting in the middle of a dense copse of pine trees and winding in between them.

Snow began to fall and land in soft tufts on the dark needles of the pine trees above Bryan as he followed the path. He didn't care if this would lead him to the missing people or not. He didn't really care if they were in the forest at all. The truth was he hadn't gone into No Name Forest to come out of it a hero. He couldn't stand the idea of people being happy for him, proud of him, because he was not someone to be proud of. They only knew the image of him that he put out for them to see. They did not know what he felt. They would not cheer for him if they did.

The trail led to an old brick house, covered in vines with a roof that was caving in, collecting snow where it sagged. The forest had led him here he thought as he followed the walkway up to the front door and pushed it open. He walked into to an entryway lined with thin candles that illuminated a large wooden staircase in the middle of the entryway.

He did not think he would find anyone else in the house, but that wasn't why he was there. He followed the stairs up to the hallway of the second floor, feeling his way up the stairs in the dim light. The hallway seemed vastly longer than the house had appeared from the outside, a slender line stretching out into darkness with large wooden doors on either side.

Bryan stood at the end of the hallway and looked at the dark oak door on his left, unsure of what to do. He pressed his ear to the door and listened for what might be on the other side, but was met with silence. He tried to tell himself that it was his duty to search these rooms for the missing people, but he knew that if he did go into these rooms, it was because of his own curiosity, not his sense of duty. He placed his hand on the long silver door handle and opened it.

Through the door he stood in the middle of a basketball court in the Haddley High gym, replaying the memory of being dumped by his first girlfriend during a pep rally. A surge of hatred for Stella Maroney came rising out of his stomach, into his throat, through his teeth. He hated her for breaking his sixteen-year-old heart and for humiliating him in front of the entire sophomore class.

On the bleachers in the corner of the gym sat the tight-pants-wearing, guitar-playing, floppy-haired boy Stella had replaced him with. He watched Stella drape her arms around him while he played his guitar. He hated her for replacing him. He hated him for his

thrift store t-shirts and long bangs that hung in his eyes He hated him for looking like the kind of guy she would be with in ways that he never had.

Around him he could pick out the faces of Trish Stanwick, the sophomore class president and Tyler Herman, the starting point guard who had watched as Stella tore out his heart and threw it across the sweaty gymnasium. He hated all the people in the crowd around him who had witnessed his humiliation while girls with ponytails sprouting out of the tops of their heads yelled at him to find his tiger pride. He hated the stupidity of cheerleaders calling out *be aggressive* with oversized smiles to boys who needed no encouragement to do so.

Onto the court came Ronnie Boeman, the rat-faced kid from sixth grade who had mocked Bryan mercilessly when he had come to school wearing a shirt that smelled of cat piss. Bryan remembered how he hadn't realized the cat had peed in the laundry basket until he had gotten to school. He remembered how he'd had to take his shirt out of the laundry because his mother hadn't had time to do the laundry because she'd had to pick up an extra shift. Bryan hated the cat for peeing on his clothes. He hated his mom for working a job that didn't pay enough. He hated his dad for thinking a divorce meant that it was okay for him to only send money to his kid and still call himself a father.

Settled in the bleachers were a group of men and women in white coats, doctors who only knew how to say, *I'm sorry, we did all we could*. He hated them for not finding a way to save Ginny, for making him eat spongy peaches in the hospital cafeteria for months on

end. He hated them for their practiced stony faces, their white coats that gave them the authority to pronounce who would live and who would die.

As he stood in the middle of the basketball court, surrounded by those he hated, he felt, for the first time, free to hate them all, no matter how irrational it was. He could tell them now all the things he had held in because that was what decent human beings did. He ran up to Stella in the bleachers, yelling at her that she was a coward for breaking up with him in that way, that he would and had found someone better, that her teeth were too small for her mouth, that she the most irritatingly high-pitched voice. He stole the replacement boyfriend's guitar and threw it to the ground. He ran down the rows of cheering girls, stealing their pompoms and throwing them back at the girls faces as they kicked their feet in the air, mimicking their high-pitched voices as he cheered, *you're an idiot, you're a fucking idiot.*

He punched Ronnie Boeman in the face. He punted the cat into the crowd. He yelled insults at his mother, *I hate your tuna loaf so much I fed it to the cat. I hate that you always wore overlarge sweaters that made you look like an eighty-year-old woman. How could you think of sending a sixth grader to school in a paisley shirt?* He turned to his father and yelled at him for pressuring to him to play basketball and then never showing up to a single game. Bryan pelted basketballs at his father's head, *Do you want to see me play now, Dad?* He found a bin of rotten tomatoes at the end of the court and pelted the doctors with them, staining their white coats.

The crowd cheered him on as he tore apart the people from his past, as he actively hated each one of them. With each expression of hatred he felt as though he released something heavy that had settled in his stomach. He ran around the court in victory lap, raising his hands above his head, dunking a rotten tomato through one of the hoops. He bowed as the crowd continued to cheer before he walked off the court and out the door.

As Bryan stepped back into the hallway his hatred subsided. He could remember feeling more hatred than he had ever felt in his life, but in that moment, he felt calm, curious about what else he would find behind the doors along the hall.

Through the next door Bryan was thrown into darkness. He began moving quickly along a street as lights flickered on above him, illuminating a road lined with cars. Bryan found a red Maserati waiting for him in, the engine on, the door open. He sat in the driver's seat unsure of what to do for a moment. Was he supposed to go somewhere? Where would he even go?

As he began to drive down the street, a black Audi raced down the road, grazing Bryan's car and ripping off his driver-side mirror. Bryan watched as the car swung into the driveway of a large as anger collected in his stomach and spread through his veins as though it were anger, not blood that kept his heart pumping. He shoved his foot against the gas and drove toward the Audi at 90 mph. He had no thought of the damage he could do as he rammed the Maserati into the Audi. He only wanted to see the door crumple into

the cavernous interior. He backed up and drove forward again and again, each hit crumpling metal, scraping paint, shattering glass.

Bryan backed up the Maserati and sped forward through the French doors, settling in the middle of an elegant dining room. He moved from the car and grabbed a fire poker from a stand next to a brick fireplace. Swinging the poker like a baseball bat he hit decorative plates with patterns of small children holding lambs from the wall, spraying shards of porcelain across the hard wood floor. The grand piano, the china cabinet, the grandfather clock were all fractured by his forceful blows. There was not reason to it, but with each swing he felt more fueled by his rage, more full of rage.

Bryan's swings slowed, leaving him to look at the wreckage around him. He let the poker rest against the ground as he stared at the wreckage of the house. Something grabbed him from behind. He dropped the poker as the dark shape pulled him down to the ground with strong hands clasped around his neck. Bryan could not see the face of his attacker, only it's shadow as he twisted and writhed.

With a punch into the darkness he freed himself from his assailant. The shape fell back, landing on the ground, and Bryan punched the shape again and again, his moment of fear now tuned to rage. With each hit Bryan felt more pleased. He found pleasure in his knuckles connecting with flesh and bone. He felt more alive as he wiped sweat from his face with his bloodied fist.

Bryan found the fire poker beneath him and once he held it in his hand all he wanted to do was shove it into his attacker's stomach. He wanted this thing dead, to know what it would be like to kill it, to pour his rage into it. Fueled by anger he couldn't explain, anger he didn't need to explain because there was no one here to care, he pushed the poker into his attacker's stomach. As he twisted the poker, his assailant gasped and collapsed. With his foot, Bryan kicked the man over to get a closer look at his attacker. Bryan stared down at his own face, now lifeless, on the floor beneath him.

More men crawled out of the darkness, creeping along the floor, circling around him, but Bryan was ready for them. He willed them to come closer, to tempt him in a fight. Bryan grabbed a hunting rifle mounted on the wall and began shooting the figures as they moved close. He did not care who they were or what they wanted from him. He did not feel the need to rationalize his anger toward them. He felt satisfaction as he watched bullets tear open the fabric of their shape, spurting dark liquid into the air. As the bodies crumpled their faces became visible, all identical to his own. He was glad to see so many versions of himself dead. He was glad he had killed them.

The room went dark. The bodies disappeared around him and only a door could be seen through the blackness. When Bryan returned to the hallway, his rage, like his hate, had subsided, leaving him ready to enter the next door. Bryan went through door after door, experiencing emotions he had never allowed himself to feel. Here, he did not have to explain his fear or bitterness. He did not have to worry about people being concerned for him, judging him. He was free to sit in his anger, to wallow in his despair.

Maybe there was a door for happiness somewhere along the hall, but he did not want to feel it, because it would always be tinged with something that he did not have. Happiness was not the same without Ginny. It would only ever remind him of loving her and that happiness would once again turn into the ugly emotions he was supposed to move away from. So why not just let himself feel them? Why not enjoy them?

Bryan moved to the door at the end of the hall and inside Ginny stood there waiting for him, whole and healthy and alive. The room began to spin as Bryan held Ginny to him. As they stood together, memories of their life together flooded back to Bryan, not the faded, fragmented memories he had pushed away because it was too painful to only ever have pieces of her. As they spun, he fully experienced each of their best moments together.

Once again he felt the indescribable closeness as they walked together through the snow down Main Street on their first date, the thrill of their first kiss until mistletoe at Marion Bianchi's Christmas party, the warmth that flooded through him when she said *I love you* for the first time as they stood on the roof of the police station on New Year's Eve. He felt the quiet joy of waking up next to her, the intensity of making love, the passion of fights, the contentment of being near her, feeling her skin against his, hearing her laugh.

His stomach lurched as he saw her walk down the aisle toward him. He heard her sing *Moon River* in the shower, watched her make pancakes in abstract blobs because she

always said circles were too ordinary. He danced with her around the living room after moving into their first house, surrounded by boxes yet to be unpacked. As they spun through each moment he felt the fullness of each, remembered what it was like to love her.

The spinning slowed and her body slumped against his as they moved to the last moment he had with her, holding her frail body ravaged by cancer. He watched as her eyes begged him to let her go, as her body quaked and shuddered. And then it stopped. His arms wrapped around her body as his own body quaked and shuddered while his sobs rang out in the darkness. Her body, too, faded from his hands, leaving him in darkness with nothing to hold onto.

*Come back*, he called to the darkness. He looked around the room, empty except for the outline of the door at the end of the room. He crawled around the empty room in an attempt to find where Ginny had gone, but he was alone in the dark. With a jerk he ran to the door, wrenched it open and slammed it again as soon as he stood in the hallway, only to open it again and step back inside.

And there she was again, standing in the middle of the room, walking toward him. And the memories played out for him all over again. And he lost her all over again. And once again he ran to the door as soon as her body was gone.

Bryan lost track of the number of times he went through the door, but no matter how many times he entered the room, it was never enough. He came out again and fell to the floor, shuddering as tears streamed down his face. It felt like his heart was being amplified, enlarged so it filled every part of him only to be squeezed until there was nothing left.

He sat outside the door in the dimly lit hallway, unsure whether he could lose Ginny one more time. Even thinking about the image of her lifeless body made him want to tear out his heart and throw it across the room so he would not feel the emptiness anymore. But he did not think he could walk away, not when he knew that in a few seconds he could see her again alive, hold her, kiss her, feel her warm skin against his.

Bryan pulled himself up and stood facing the door. Back in that room, he would lose Ginny all over again, but he would also love her all over again. He stood with his hand on the doorknob, staring at his knuckles gripping the handle before he turned the knob and entered the room once more.

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Sherriff Borden held a press conference after Officer Dunning went missing. He looked tired and worried as he tried to keep the town calm, but no one seemed very sure what they should do.

The sheriff reported that Officer Dunning had gone missing while on duty. Reports said that he had left the station to search the forest for Alex Marshall and Sadie Cross, however, no one could verify that he had actually gone into the forest.

*What kind of police station are you running where you don't know where your people are?* Mr. Croop yelled from the audience as he spat out a mouthful of sunflower seed onto the city hall floor.

Sherriff Borden tried to tell the audience that he was not taking questions at this time, but people kept calling out, drowning out the sound of his repeated, *no comment*.

*Are you going to send out a search party to look for him? What happens if your search party goes missing to? Should Dunning really have been working at all? He hasn't been quite right since his wife died. What are you going to do about the forest? What do you think is in there?*

Sherriff Borden tried to reassure the public that they were doing all they could to find Dunning. *There is nothing abnormal about No Name Forest*, he said as he clasped and unclasped his thick fingers. *But as of now, we are requesting the public to stay away from it.*

That day the police strung yellow caution tape around the edge of the forest. No one was sure how that was supposed to make them feel any safer.

#### IV. Lost and Found

Liam Halpert had gone into No Name Forest to find a cure for his wife's lymphoma. The doctor had said she only had weeks to live. Radiation hadn't worked. There were not surgeries or clinical trials that would help. Medication could make her comfortable. Liam had laughed when the doctor said this. Who could be comfortable knowing they were going to die, leaving the family they loved behind?

He had promised Mira when they were married that he would always protect her. He had told Carys and Gwynn as they worried about their mother that everything would be all right. But there was nothing right about watching their mother lose her hair and fade away before them. There was nothing right about going with Mira to pick out a coffin, even though she told him it was for his own good. *I don't want you to have to deal with this on your own*, she had said as they looked at sample coffin interiors.

Liam did not know how to save his wife, but he did not know how to stay and watch her die either. His father had told him the same stories about the forest that he now told Carys and Gwynn. In truth, he doubted they were anything more than stories, but he was out of options and chasing even the tiniest sliver of hope was better than nothing.

Liam followed Thornapple River into No Name Forest after he dropped Carys and Gwynn off at school. Once he had lost sight of Little Haven through the trees. He

followed a slender path stretched out in front of him. The forest led him to a library of trees covered in books. Liam looked at the shelves and shelves of books, wondering if somewhere in their pages was a cure for Mira. A man with a beard that draped over his chest and hung to his knees stood inspecting a book growing from a branch on the tree at the center of the shelves.

*This one looks just about ready*, the man said as Liam approached him.

*Ready?*

*To be read.*

*Are you from*, Liam paused and looked around, *here?*

*I came from Hayfield*, said the man who introduced himself as Harris. *I was searching for answers about the forest that bordered it and I was led here.* The man continued to move around the tree, occasionally stopping to inspect a book at the end of a branch. *Strange things kept happening in town, and everyone began to associate them with the forest, although no one knew why for certain.*

Liam followed Harris around the tree. *But you wanted to know why.*

Harris nodded.

*Did you find what you were looking for?*

*Yes and no. The library records what has happened to people in the forest. I know what anyone who has entered the forest knows, which is far more than anyone who has never come into the forest does. But if you wanted me to explain any of it, I couldn't.*

Liam stepped in front of Harris and lifted the book he was inspecting out of his hands.

*I'm trying to find a cure for my wife. Do you think I can find one here?*

*If there is a cure, it would be here.*

Liam spent days pouring over books about medical cures. He read about miraculous discoveries all over the world, yet with each new page he found nothing to help Mira.

There were no secret remedies to keep his wife alive, to save his girls from the pain of losing their mother. He had gone into the forest to find something that could not be found because it did not exist.

Liam left the library, unsure of where he wanted to go next. He knew he should return home. Carys and Gwynn needed him. He could spend Mira's last days with her. But he did not want his last memory of Mira to be of her succumbing to death. He did not want to return to his girls and admit his failure.

Liam realized as he wove his way through the forest that he wasn't even sure how to get home. He had followed Thornapple River into No Name, but had followed winding paths that led him to the library. But once he walked away from the circle of ash trees he could not find any paths to lead him back to the river.

He began to walk with the thought that he would eventually reach an end to the forest, even if it wasn't where No Name bordered Little Haven. At least then he could ask for directions.

After what he thought was several miles, Liam walked into an open grove, the ground around him covered in snowdrops. Throughout the thick growth of flowers that turned the ground white lay several people, some with faces to the sun, eyes closed, others curled against the trees at the edge of the meadow. None of them appeared to be moving.

As he inched toward a pale girl surrounded by snowdrops, Liam watched her steady breath push the petals of the flowers near her face away from her with each exhale. He watched the girl for a moment and wondered if he should say anything to her since she looked so peaceful. He wanted to know, though, what everyone was doing lying in a field in the middle of the forest. But when he called to the girl and prodded her in the arm, she didn't stir. None of the sleepers woke when Liam spoke to them or tried to rouse them.

As he walked toward the edge of the meadow he saw an old stone wishing well in between the trees. A wooden bucket with a small ladle attached to it sat on the top of the

stone rim. Liam peered into the well, expecting to search the darkness for traces of water, but instead it was filled with mist that swirled at the bottom. Small wisps reached up and climbed the stone walls, fingers beckoning him in.

Liam pushed the bucket into the well and waited to hear the splash of water that never came. Yet, when he pulled the bucket back up it was not empty, but full of the swirling mist that wove its fingers around the ladle to crawl into it. He scooped the ladle into the bucket and caught the mist in it. He brought the ladle to his lips and breathed the mist in.

For a moment Liam felt drowsy. The mist swirled in front of his eyes, blending with the snowdrops on the ground. He was unsure which was the ground and which was the sky, but he dropped into one of them and let himself fall.

Liam landed on the brick walkway that led to the blue front door of the house he had lived in with Mira since they were married. Of course the well would have sent him home, he thought. He had been lost and the forest had known to send him back where he came from. But when he walked through the door, he did not see Mira, pale and weak in her bed as he expected. Instead, she stood by the kitchen sink washing dishes and laughing as she watched Gwynn and Carys danced around the living room. Carys stood on a chair in one of Mira's old nightgowns and her favorite red heels as she attempted to sing *My Heart Will Go On* while Gwynn pranced around wearing Liam's leather jacket and an old fedora that had belonged to Liam's father. When Gwynn saw Liam walk

through the door, she grinned, exposing empty spaces in her gums where two front teeth used to be.

*Play for us, Daddy*, she said as she ran to him and pulled him toward the piano in the living room. *Play for us*, Carys echoed.

Liam looked at Mira in an effort to discern if she was just having a good day. People said sometimes the sick regained some energy just before the end, but she looked like she had never been sick at all. Her skin was rosy, her face full. She smiled at him as Gwynn tugged at his arm. It was the kind of smile they used to share often, a secret passed between them, an unspoken *I love you*.

Liam settled himself at the piano and set his fingers against the keys. *Wait, wait*, Gwynn said before he could play a note. She took a plastic tiara from the old suitcase where the girls kept their dress-up clothes and placed it on his head. Carys wrapped a striped scarf around his neck. *Perfect*, Gwynn said.

Liam bowed ceremoniously to the girls and then to Mira who winked at him before he began to play an old ragtime song his mother had taught him. As Carys and Gwynn bounced around the living room, Mira settled herself next to him on the piano bench. She kissed his cheek and laid her head on his shoulder.

Liam wondered as the girls danced around him if this could actually be real, if the cure he had gone looking for had actually been found. As he breathed in the scent of Mira's hair he thought about how this was all he ever wanted in life. It did not quite seem that he could have returned to something so perfect. But as he leaned his head against Mira's, he decided he didn't care if it was real or not. This dream was the only reality he wanted.

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*Why do you bother with those stories?* Carys asks me as she finishes washing the dishes after dinner. She sent me to work on schoolwork after dinner, but I've been flipping through my red notebook, retracing each of the stories of each of the missing person's cases. Flash cards for a test on the Hapsburg Empire can wait until later.

*Hmm?* I ask as I scoot up on my belly and prop myself up on my elbows without moving my gaze from the pages below me.

*Why do you bother with all of that?*

*I think it's interesting,* I say as I glance up briefly before returning to my notes.

Carys scrapes bits of corn and potatoes from a plate into the bin under the sink and sets it into the soapy dishwater. *I find lots of things interesting that I don't spend years taking copious amounts of notes on.*

*What do you find interesting? You don't seem to have any hobbies or interests,* I pause for a minute and give Carys a small smile; I know most of her time is spent working two jobs so she can take care of me, *Unless you've suddenly taken up tennis or restoring old cars or something and have forgotten to tell me?*

*You're evading, Gwynn. And don't think I didn't notice that you just nearly called me a boring loser,* Carys says as she rinses the rest of the dishes in the sink and places them on the counter to dry.

I shift to a sitting position on the floor as I try to discern whether Carys is mad at me for poking fun at how she spends her time or just annoyed that I'm still so interested in No Name. *You'll think it's stupid,* I say as I shuffle loose clippings back into the notebook. *You've always thought the stories were stupid.*

Carys brushes her red hair out of her face the same way mom used to when she stood in the kitchen at the end of a long day telling us to get ready or bed. *They are just stories.*

*I'm not saying that there are princesses or unicorns living in the forest like Dad used to say,* I watch as Carys' face twitches at the word *Dad*. I sit up cross-legged on the floor. *But I think there might be more to it than we know. I've been doing research for years—*

*But why do you even care?*

I bite my lip, knowing Carys will not like the answer. Of course, knowing Carys, she already knew the answer, she just wants me to say it for myself. *What if Dad actually meant to come back?*

Gwynn— Carys gathers her hair back again in her hands and then lets it fall around her shoulders as she sits down at the kitchen table.

*What if he got stuck in the forest? Look, it makes sense.* Carys shakes her head as I search through the notes and spread them out on the table in front of her. *I know you are fine believing that dad abandoned us when mom was sick because he didn't want to have to take care of a dying wife and two little girls, but I don't think that's the whole story.*

*Gwynn, this has to stop.*

*But don't you want to at least know if it's true? I mean, what if Dad was looking for a way to save Mom and that's why he left?*

*Gwynn, stop. You can't just create the truth you want to believe. This is ridiculous. The forest is just a forest. Our father left us. End of story.*

I gather up my papers from the table and stuff them into my red notebook. *Just because it seems ridiculous doesn't mean it can't be true as well.* I tell Carys I'm going to the library. I hear her call after me as I shut the door, but I don't answer.

I don't want to go to the library, so I end up at the cemetery in front of Mom's grave. *You said he'd come back*, I say to her as I try to avoid the memories of the way people have whispered about my dad, of Carys' hatred of him, of the logic that points to the conclusion that he is never coming back.

I look up at the trees stretching above the rows of headstones, tall figures carved out of the sky by moonlight. I know that in part I believe No Name is not just a forest because I can not believe the father who once told me stories every night to send me off to sleep just abandoned me. But I also have a feeling that I cannot quite explain that there is something inexplicable about the forest.

The night is silent as I move away from my mom's grave toward the line of trees. I run my hands across the jagged bark of a jack pine, the same way I run my hands over the cover of a book, as though simply touching it will tell me what story lies within it.

I take a few steps into the forest and look back at the rows of headstones, the dark line of Thornapple River, the dim lights of Main Street. As I walk I think about how the reasons everyone has given for my dad's disappearance are logical and rational and ordinary. But maybe, just this once, the reason is not so ordinary. Maybe there is more to the story. I'm tired to taking notes, of trying to convince myself the way I will never convince Carys. I don't want to hear about superstitions and guesses and fears.

I stop and look back the way I came, but I can no longer see the lights of Little Haven.

Bare branches and pointed pines weave around the moonlight. More than anything, I just want to know that Dad didn't just abandon us. And maybe, just this once, I will find what I'm looking for. Maybe, just maybe, the story I dream of will be real.

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