

8-2014

To Soar Above the Apple Grove: Stories

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To Soar Above the Apple Grove: Stories

By

Emily V Doseck

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

2014

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis: To Soar Above the Apple Grove: Stories

This thesis by Emily V Doseck is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

TO SOAR ABOVE THE APPLE GROVE: STORIES

By

Emily V Doseck

The stories written for this thesis revolve around the idea of lesbian characters finding, and in some cases losing, love in the young adult genre. Each piece differs in time period and setting, but all take the typical ‘tragic’ stereotype of queer fiction and prove that everyone deserves a chance at love. All three pieces also contain elements of magic, ranging from the black magic associated with the witches of Salem to the whimsical magic of fairy tales. First love is a time of discovery and new joy for so many, and queer literature could use more of these positive stories to show teens and young adults that life does get better.

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DEDICATION

To Beth, my queen and my happily ever after.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Professor Jon Billman, and my thesis reader, Professor Jen Howard, for all the hard work they put in to helping me get my thesis ready and especially for always being there to listen when I started panicking about one thing or another. They're both rockstars. Thank you to Professor Laura Soldner and Dr. Ray Ventre for all of their time and support while I was a TA. Thank you to Professor John Smolens for helping me grow as a writer; two of the pieces included in this thesis came from classes I have taken with him. I would also like to thank my officemates, Michael, Emily, and Andrea, as well as my friends Alyssa and Hayley, who were always game to listen to me ramble about my thesis and fairy tales in general.

Finally, thank you to my parents, John and Holly Doseck, for their endless support. Why you never screened your phone calls, even when you knew it was me calling at 1am with my latest story idea, I'll never know...

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

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INTRODUCTION

This was not the thesis I intended to write. When I started thinking about what sort of writing project I wanted to work on (because I knew, even though I was dual-concentrating in Literature and Writing, it'd be a creative project), I wanted to do something with rewriting fairy tales for the queer young adult niche of books. It's a small category but it's making a pretty big impact on the internet and to have my voice be a part of that, to think that someday a queer teen could read one of my stories and think to themselves that there isn't actually anything wrong with them like people sometimes say, would be a dream come true. Any story with queer characters would have been fine, but I feel a stronger connection to fairy tales than any other kind. They're the stories everyone grows up on, even if they're told a little bit differently or come to us from Disney instead of the Brothers Grimm.

But of course, life had other plans...

I've suffered from severe migraines since I was in the seventh grade. Every woman on my mom's paternal side of the family has had them. Most people don't understand what happens when someone gets a migraine; I've heard non-sufferers say that migraines aren't real or we just exaggerate about the pain, and that it's all in our heads. It's a little different for everyone, but for me, I've always had light, sound, and smell sensitivity along with pain ranging from icepick-precise daggers behind or in my

eye to hammer blows against the back of my skull. Most of the time, I have to be in complete darkness; even the light of my laptop or cell phone can make the pain and nausea worse to the point of crying. I've had migraines that lasted only a few hours, and I've had migraines that have lasted for a week. I've never been hospitalized for one, but I have been to the emergency room and urgent care centers multiple times to get stronger dosages of medication. My life comes to a stop when I get a migraine. It, in a word, sucks.

There is an upside to the special brand of hell caused by migraines. Nearly all of the medicines I've been prescribed or given to combat migraines cause me to sleep for several hours after taking them, the idea being that sleep is the next-best medicine. While sleeping or in the late-night sleepless hours that tend to follow after a migraine, I find I'm at my creative peak. I dream about my characters and stories, seeing the scenes play out in my mind like a movie, often including dialogue and action that I hadn't yet thought of but is usually exactly what I need to move the story along. I find my mind works faster in the post-migraine hangover that keeps me awake when everyone else has fallen asleep, I write quicker and without thinking, without letting my inner editor and critic tell me to stop or that something isn't good enough.

Along with migraines, I've also had to deal with severe depression, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety. Writing started out as my way to deal with the feelings I didn't know how to express in high school. Writing allowed me to put into words what I couldn't say out loud and tell a teacher, someone who helped me get professional help. It sounds corny and like such a cliché, but it's true; without writing, I don't think I'd be alive. As I've gotten older and worked at finding my own voice as a writer, and not just

that of an angsty, emo teenager, I've discovered that I don't have to write about depression or suicide to help with those feelings inside of me. Any story I put down on paper makes me feel better; it's the act of knowing that I created something that no one else did, that my words are my own and no one can say the same things I'm saying like I say them. I have a unique voice and even if my friends and some strangers on the internet are the only ones to ever read my stories, the world will still be a better place for it.

My migraines reached an all-time peak while working on my thesis. I would go days with an endless pounding in my head or an icepick through my eye, only leaving my apartment to teach my EN 211 class and conduct office hours. In my apartment, I kept the blinds drawn as tightly closed as possible to keep out the sunlight and spent most of my spare time sleeping; luckily, my bedroom was also the darkest place in my apartment. Working on anything that required more than a few minutes of concentration on a screen was enough to leave me gritting my teeth in agony. Thesis work was out of the question aside from scrawling notes across sheets of paper in the dark.

When I would finally manage to wake up pain free or get rid of a migraine somehow, my depression would hit me in full force. I've learned how to smile and act normal even though I feel dead inside, so carrying on with life is a lot easier with depression than it is with migraines. But it absolutely killed my creativity.

I found myself completely drained of any desire to write, the opposite of how my depression first affected me in high school. Everything I wrote felt forced. If I did manage to write something that at first seemed like it was useable, I quickly found fault with it or found the train of thought behind the scene brought to an abrupt halt. I tried

anything I could think of to get my creativity rocking again; prompts, idea generators, music, scanning books until a word or phrase stuck out and writing about it, starting the same story again from a new place or different part of the action. Nothing would work. I even abandoned my original rewrite of Little Red Riding Hood and tried out different fairy tales, thinking that maybe Red and I just weren't destined to tackle the art world of Detroit quite yet. But even mermaids and beastly outcast teens didn't stoke my creative fire.

It's a scary feeling when the one thing that has brought you nothing but joy and a sense of meaning, a way to make sense of your feelings and thoughts for the past eight years of your life, abandons you so completely. I truly felt like I was lost. I wanted to write like I needed to breathe but I just couldn't. No matter how hard I stared at my notebook or laptop screen, nothing came out. For once, my head was a silent place, but it wasn't in the way I wished for. I needed my characters to tell me their stories and their fears and their desires and their secrets to keep away my own fears, to keep away the depression and growing panic I felt whenever I had the niggling pain of an oncoming migraine (maybe something is wrong, maybe it isn't just migraines, people get brain tumors and say they start with headaches, maybe I'm dying and just don't know it, I still don't know).

But then a door finally opened in the form of a new plan: instead of tackling a brand new project so late in the, by now, summer, why not compile the stories I had written during my time in the program as my thesis? I'd revised them even after completing the various workshops they were written for, so they were in good shape; I was proud of the stories I'd told and the writer I'd become during the last two years. The

fairy tale influence was still evident, but I would be able to take away the stress of crafting new fiction with depression and migraines breathing down my neck and holding me back from putting words to paper.

So these are the stories I wrote during my time here at Northern Michigan University. “The Garden” is my pride and joy; I’ve never been happier with a piece I’ve written. The fairy tale elements are clear, but don’t come from just one tale. I borrowed from several and it was fun listening to readers decide which ones during workshop. It’s my homage to the literary genre that I love. “To Soar Above the Apple Grove” turned out much different than I had planned. Circuses have always fascinated me, so I think it was inevitable that I write a story about one. “So Darkness I Became” was my first taste of historical fiction. Based on the Salem Witch Trials, a period of history that I long have wished to be able to visit, I invented three characters and placed them in the midst of the chaos of the trials among real people that lived at the time. It was important to me that since the stories all focus around lesbian characters and relationships, they not be solely about the relationship or the sexuality of the character. Too many stories like that have already been told, both good and not-so-good; stories are needed about everyday life (or the historical aspect of life, in the case of “So Darkness I Became”).

I don’t mention depression in any of these stories. There are a few reasons for this. The biggest one is that writing isn’t my only outlet for my depression anymore. My girlfriend and friends help me deal with my feelings in healthier ways than I did in high school, which means that my writing can focus on other issues and topics. I also want to stay away from the cliché that every lesbian romance is doomed to end in tragedy or with

someone in a depressed state. So many of the young adult books with lesbian characters I read when I first came out featured protagonists that ended up depressed because they were lesbian or forced to live a lie (usually due to their families), and more books need to show that everyone deserves a happy ending.

Even the weird girl who loves fairy tales a bit too much and gets way too many migraines.

The Garden

There was a house at the end of the road with a garden that never stopped blooming. Winters were especially brutal this far north, with trees and bushes looming like spiders against the snow. Roses and carnations, peonies and daffodils, lilacs and Queen Anne's lace, all bloomed year-round, scenting the air around the garden with a springtime perfume no matter the season. Amelia was amazed by it, ever since she was first allowed to ride her bike down to the end of the block and back. Back then, it had just been the Big House with Pretty Flowers, something to look at on her way to and from the street signs. She never stopped to pick flowers since her mommy said it wasn't nice to do things like that without asking first. But something about the house drew her eyes whenever she rode past it, little legs pumping the bike pedals as hard as possible.

All of her friends at school said the house was haunted just because it was old and run down, but she knew that couldn't be true. A house full of ghosts obviously couldn't take care of such a beautiful garden.

"I bet you my pudding cup that you can't even make it to the gate before you go running home to your mommy!" Jason taunted.

Eight-year-old Amelia rolled her eyes. "I could do it more times than you."

"Do it then! Or are you too chicken?" He started dancing around the sidewalk, flapping his arms and clucking. Their friends laughed.

Taking a deep breath, Amelia checked both ways before running across the street, blonde pigtails slapping her shoulders with each step. She stopped on the sidewalk, looking back to see all her friends, eyes wide in shock. She smiled; that'll show them, she thought.

Two more steps brought her to the wrought iron fence that wound around the garden. The fence was enormous and towered over her. Each post was topped with a sharp point, like the knife her dad used to carve the Thanksgiving turkey. It was like a dark force-field, keeping the world out of the garden and away from the house. Even with the sun shining bright, the tall posts appeared to cast bigger shadows than was physically possible. A trick of the light or maybe the way the trees stood behind the iron fence. No matter what, just seeing the fence up close, right in front of her, was enough reason to pause. She wasn't afraid, not really, but nervous. What if something jumped out at her from the garden? That had happened when Tommy, one of her friends, had run up to the tree in Old Man Jenkins' yard. There was a mean dog hiding behind the tree that had almost bitten him. Shaking her head, she reached out, grabbing onto the gate and giving it a rattle that her friends were sure to hear, even all the way on the other side of the street.

Right before she turned away, Amelia thought she saw something move between two of the apple trees. Holding her breath, she didn't dare move. There it was again! A flash of red. This time, she didn't hesitate in darting back across the street.

Her friends surrounded her with shouts of "What did you see?" and "Are there ghosts?" She just shook her head before glancing back over her shoulder at the garden.

"There wasn't anything there, just an empty garden." A few deep breaths to calm her racing heart. "You owe me a pudding cup, Jason Killian!"

*

At seventeen, Amelia knew better; ghosts weren't real. Someone must live in the house, or at least come in every so often to keep it groomed. It never spilled over the gates with blossoms or littered the ground with rotten fruit. If leaves fell in autumn, they seemed to disappear overnight, leaving the grass green until snow covered everything with a blanket. Even then, the paths were cleared so sparkling stones picked up the light from the sun. The flowers within reach of the paths exploded against the snow in an array of colors unseen anywhere else in town. It was like the brightness of the flowers melted the snow that lay against their petals, allowing them to push through the downy cover and open for the sun, soaking up what meager light the winter sky provided.

Sometimes, Amelia still thought about the red flash that she saw nine years ago. She had never actually seen anyone coming and going from the house or the garden, and there was never a car parked on the street. After school, she would sit across the street on the curb and sketch the house and the garden, each time imagining who could possibly live there.

Maybe it was an elderly man, all of his family deceased or gone, leaving just him and the lonely house.

Or perhaps it was a daughter, visiting twice a month to tend to the garden that her mother, now confined to bed rest, had spent so much time nurturing.

By the end of her junior year, Amelia had a whole notebook full of sketches. Art electives filled up all her free periods at school. Her passion for the old house and beautiful garden was reflected in her work. Paintings of the seasonal changes in the flora, what the house might have looked like or would look like with some love and care, the

occasional fantasy piece of the house as a grand castle with knights and ladies-in-waiting. Her teachers praised her for her vision and dedication, but Amelia still wasn't satisfied; she still had no answers as to who lived in the house.

“I bet that some crazy old man lives there. And he buries dead bodies in the garden. That's why the flowers are always so lush!” Karen said.

Amelia rolled her eyes at her friend's dramatic idea. “I somehow doubt that. If people were getting killed around here, wouldn't the papers be reporting it? Or missing persons posters be going up?”

Karen pouted, kicking at the weeds that sprouted in the cracks in the sidewalk. “What about you, Jess? What do you think?”

“I think... that it's magic. No one really lives there, not anymore, but the owner loved the garden so much, it just keeps blooming.” Karen and Jess laughed as they picked up their bags. “C'mon, I wanna get to the pool before summer school lets out and all the stupid freshmen take over.”

Amelia continued to look at the garden. “I think it's just someone who likes beautiful flowers,” she whispered before jogging after her friends.

Amelia was walking home after the first day of her senior year, dragging her hand against the iron posts that lined the garden. Each one she touched was warm despite the sunless day. They left her fingers tingling, like a static charge going off with every one she brushed. That's when she first heard the voice. Stopping, she held her breath, listening. The song was soft, but just loud enough to be heard through the thick summer

foliage. She took a few steps back, carefully setting her books down on the sidewalk and peering between two rails where the leaves weren't so thick. Kneeling down, hands deep in the dirt, a young woman sang to herself as she worked the soil. The words were unfamiliar but Amelia felt as if she already knew the song. She was working with something that looked like daisies, but were the brightest shade of red Amelia had ever seen.

Trying to get as close to the rails as possible to see what the woman looked like, she stepped on a broken bottle, the glass crunching beneath her shoes. Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach and the whole world seemed to freeze as the woman stopped singing. She looked up, right to where Amelia was standing, blue eyes locked on her. Grabbing her books, Amelia sprinted down the street, not stopping until the heavy wooden door of her house was firmly closed behind her.

She sat at her desk, math book and notes spread out in front of her. Tossing the pen down, Amelia curled up in her window seat, sketchpad and pencil in hand.

The fading light of evening seemed to fit the house and garden she sketched. The woman kneeling before the bright red flowers was centered in the picture, her features blurred as though she was surrounded by a hazy mist. Shadows lurked in the windows of the house, casting a dark presence over the scene. The house itself loomed over the woman, surrounding her and the garden in a sinister embrace. As Amelia's pencil drifted across the page, a tense look overcame the woman's features. Instead of carefully tending to her flowers, she was almost hurriedly working, like she was burying or trying to hide something.

Setting the drawing on the seat, Amelia went back to her homework, the tune she heard earlier that day winding through her mind, filling every nook and cranny with the voice of the stranger.

Weeks passed before Amelia dared to walk on the same side of the street as the garden. When she finally did, something pulled her back to the same iron railings, back to the same patch of loosely gathered leaves. The woman was closer to the fence, this time working with what Amelia knew were mums. They were soft pink, the shade that all mothers dressed their baby daughters in for the first few years.

She studied her, comparing what she looked like in front of her to the version that she had drawn earlier that month. The age was about right, mid-twenties, and blue eyes, but her hair was a lighter shade of brown than she had remembered. The worn dress, before a dark blue and now a pale green, was an odd choice for garden work.

The woman leaned back and looked over at Amelia, smiling. “You’re the girl that was watching me. You didn’t have to run away, you know.”

Blushing, Amelia nearly dropped her books. “Yeah, sorry, I didn’t mean to stare. I was just... um, it’s a nice garden.”

She laughed. “It’s alright. I’m glad someone enjoys the flowers.”

“Yeah. I should... I should go.” Amelia briskly walked back home, not looking back until she was down the street. The woman still stood at the iron posts. Maybe she imagined it, maybe it was wishful thinking, but there was a look of longing and melancholy about the woman’s face.

Inside her house, Amelia hummed the stranger's song as she rooted through the cupboards for a snack.

Amelia shuffled her feet, kicking a rock down the sidewalk to announce her presence. "When I saw you, the first time, like a month ago, you were singing a song. It's sort of been stuck in my head ever since and I've tried Googling it and stuff, but nothing comes up. What song is it?"

Brushing the damp soil from her hands, the woman stood up. September had brought more rain than usual to the north and the colors of the flowers were almost too bright to look at in the fall sun. Her dress was heavier today than in the past to accommodate the cooling temperatures. Amelia thought the lace collar and trim made it look too old-fashioned for someone so young.

"The song was one that my mother used to sing to me when I was just a babe. It was sung to her by her mother, and to her by hers, and so on. It's an old lullaby that no one remembers anymore. I sing it to the flowers to help them grow." The woman stood by the iron posts. She wasn't much taller than Amelia, but she kept her eyes downcast as she spoke.

"Well, it's really beautiful. I can't stop thinking about it." Amelia clenched her hands together, fighting the urge to brush back a strand of soft brown hair that had come loose from the woman's braid.

"Thank you." Looking back to the house, the woman shivered. "I should be going. But thank you for stopping by. Perhaps I will see you again?"

Amelia smiled. “Yeah, definitely. Maybe you can tell me your secret for keeping your garden so beautiful all the time.” As the woman turned to go, Amelia shouted, “Wait! Your name, I don’t know your name. I’m Amelia, I live down the street in the dark green house with the red door, like Santa’s workshop or something. Anyway, what’s your name?”

“Genevieve, my name is Genevieve.” With a tight smile that looked more like a pained grimace, the woman walked back into the house.

Out of the corner of her eye, Amelia swore she saw shadows dart past the windows of the second floor of the house. But when she looked up, nothing was there but the usual gloom of moth-eaten curtains and unlit lamps.

They formed a routine. After school, Amelia would often sit outside the iron fence and sketch the flowers or the house, and sometimes Genevieve when she wasn’t paying too much attention while gardening or gathering fruit. Some days they didn’t speak except to say goodbye, other days Amelia would tell her about school or her aspirations to be an artist. Genevieve only spoke about the flowers in her garden and whenever Amelia tried to ask about her family or how long she’d been living in the house, she would change the subject or stop talking altogether. Amelia learned it was better not to ask such personal questions.

After a month of their arrangement, Amelia tore a sketch out of her pad before leaving one day. “I want you to have this,” she said as she handed the paper through the iron posts, leaning against the rails and draping her arms over the horizontal railings. Genevieve stared at the drawing for a while and when she didn’t say anything, Amelia

continued. “I drew it after the first time I saw you. Or I guess you could say that you saw me staring. It was the same day I heard you singing. I couldn’t focus on my homework that night and I just started sketching and this came out. It wasn’t what I saw when I was watching you, but it... felt right, if that makes any sense. I just thought you’d like to have it. I mean, I want you to have it. I don’t know, it’s stupid, I guess. You can throw it out if you want—”

“No, thank you, it’s beautiful.” The catch in Genevieve’s voice made Amelia look up. There was a second’s hesitation before Genevieve leaned against the fencing and softly kissed her cheek.

The feeling of live electricity, like when she was nine and had stuck her finger in an outlet and been shocked, coursed through Amelia’s body and left her fingers and toes tingling, her ears ringing, and her lips dry. The song that had been running through her mind for months exploded in her head, like the sound had been turned up past eleven. She met Genevieve’s eyes and for a brief second, there was a feeling that she knew exactly who the woman was before she felt herself collapsing onto the hard cement.

Amelia’s parents found her as they came back from their nightly walk. They never knew what happened, what caused her to fall; she told them she must have passed out from skipping lunch to spend an extra period in the art room, and they didn’t question her excuse.

Whenever she walked home from school, Genevieve was never out in the garden and if Amelia called out, she never answered. It was hell not seeing her, not having answers to the many questions running through her mind. She replayed the few minutes

leading up to the kiss over and over again, trying to figure out what had happened, if she had maybe just imagined the whole thing and really had passed out from hunger.

Months passed and the night of the winter formal came. Walking home on the mild December night, Amelia stopped across the street from Genevieve's house. The garden glowed in the darkness, something more than just the moonlight on the snow illuminating the flowers and trees. With a clang and slow grind of metal-on-metal, the iron gates to the garden opened for the first time Amelia could ever remember.

Genevieve stepped out onto the sidewalk. She was dressed in an elegant gown, as dark as the night sky with diamonds spotted across the bodice. Her hair, normally loosely braided, was down in a soft cascade of curls. With a smile, she held out her hand to Amelia.

Amelia couldn't figure out why, but it felt oh-so-right to cross the street and take Genevieve's hand, covered to the elbow in warm gloves; kidskin, she knew without thinking. "What's going on?"

"I have been locked in this garden and house for centuries, as punishment by my jealous husband. Married to him as a child bride, I fell in love with our castle gardener, Philipa, in a way that I knew I could never love my husband. When my husband found out, he flew into a rage and locked me away in this place to tend to an ever-blooming garden, doomed to forever remember my lost love. That is why I was never able to allow you into the garden or come out of it myself. Until now."

Having led her through the gates and well into the garden, Genevieve stopped before a bush of white roses, plucking one and handing it to Amelia. When she took the

rose, the lullaby of Genevieve's childhood once again soared through her mind. "But why now? Why me?" Amelia asked.

"You are the exact image of my Philipa. Your love for my garden brought you to me. Your love for me has broken my curse."

Ahead of them, the doors to the house, once rundown and dank but now shining like the castle it truly was, opened for them. The light drifted out like smoke, swirling around their feet as they walked inside.

The doors shut behind them. In the darkness of the December night, the garden curled into itself and went to sleep.

To Soar Above the Apple Grove

There had been two weeks of rain before the circus came to town. Puddles had grown into lakes that threatened to turn Halsburg back into the marshland it had sprung from. Even Lena, who loved the smell of the rain on the asphalt as she walked through town, grew sick of the constant wet. But on the night the elephants arrived, instead of the murky clouds she had become accustomed to seeing each night, a starless sky appeared. The blueness of the sky glowed the next morning. People on the streets stopped, chattering excitedly to one another. Pieces of conversation floated around her like a rising fog.

Something is happening. I can feel the air changing, old ladies said. Good things will come. The rain is gone and now our crops can finally grow.

We can't trust these strangers. What are they bringing into our town? old men said. They should be asked to leave and if they won't go on their own, maybe they'll just have to be shown the way out of town.

At nineteen, Lena had never seen anything enrapture the town so strongly. It was like magic, she thought as she stacked clean plates under the diner's counter. Her blue apron, faded and worn at the corners of the pocket, caught drops of water as they dripped off the warm dishes. In the distance, down the long dirt road leading to the field with the apple trees, she could see the red and white striped tent crawling closer to the sky.

The bright *klings!* of mallets securing tent poles into the ground echoed through Main Street and drifted into the diner on the spring breeze each time a new customer came inside. The unusual racket was like a siren's song to Lena. She had never seen a

circus before, only read about them in books. The bright colors of the tents glowed even during the day. She ate lunch by the front window, staring as more and more tents stretched and reached for the sky. Purples and blues and oranges and greens, all shining in the noon sun. If she closed her eyes, she swore she could hear the grunts of the men lifting and moving heavy boxes, the restrained growls of animals pacing their cages, the tinkling music of a phonograph. What she wouldn't give for a chance to see the circus up close.

She didn't see the girl walk past the front window, gold papers clutched under her arm and a roll of tape sliding around her wrist, enter the diner. The squeaky stool, two down from the pie case and right in front of the soda handles, protested being used. This drew Lena away from the circus built in her mind; everybody in town knew to avoid that particular seat before the racket it made each time someone shifted on it.

Standing, Lena turned to take her dishes to the kitchen window but stopped when she saw the words written across the girl's shirt.

**FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY!
ANIMALS, CLOWNS, FEATS OF BRAVERY!
COME SEE THE ONE AND ONLY
MR. FARLANE'S FANTASTIC CIRCUS SHOW!**

Elephants, tigers, horses with feathers woven into their manes, and bears danced around the words while clowns rode unicycles, men breathed fire and tossed knives, and a woman balanced delicately on the tightrope strung above the words.

"Have you bought a ticket for our show?"

Lena's eyes darted up at the words, cheeks tinting pink. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare. You're the first person I've... you're part of the circus?"

"Alice the Amazing, at your service," the girl answered with a small bow.

Her eyes sparkled like the tents, Lena thought. With her dark hair and lithe body, Alice resembled the ballerinas Lena had seen in the big city once. Up on the stage, they had been beautiful, twirling around and jumping as though it was the only thing their bodies were created to do. She could picture Alice on a stage, moving with an unearthly grace.

"What's it like being in the circus?"

Alice shrugged, spinning the roll of tape on the speckled countertop. "It's fun, but there's always work to do. Some days I wish I could just sit and watch everyone else perform. But if I'm not practicing, then I'm helping with one of the other acts."

"What do you do?" Lena asked.

"I walk on the tightrope."

Jim, the cook behind the kitchen counter, rang the bell and placed a paper bag of food in the window. Handing money to the waitress that brought her the bag, Alice took her food and stood. "You should come to the big tent tonight. I'm practicing."

Before Lena could answer, Alice was gone, the scent of daisies still in the air.

Fairy lights twinkled above Lena's head as she stood outside the line of booths surrounding the red and white striped tent. The smells of frying dough, spinning sugar, and roasting peanuts carried in the air, leaving her starving for a taste of everything. Music drifted from every tent and corner of the compound. People shouted and laughed as they went through their routines or took a break. Animals called out to each other and

to the sky. Despite the bustle of everyone and everything, the circus grounds felt peaceful, inviting.

They felt like home, Lena realized.

A barking dog wearing a tutu dashed past her and into the big tent. She followed, gently peeling aside a panel of slippery red and white canvas. The first glimpse of the inside of the tent left her breathless. Lights roamed through the stands, searching for the audience yet to step inside. A man's voice boomed through a bullhorn in the middle of the ring as he called out directions to women performing tricks on the backs of horses. Two clowns tried to pull a third from a barrel, their exaggerated grunts and screams their only speech. The dog in the tutu sat at the foot of a burly man cranking a phonograph and cueing the small band of musicians behind him.

But the best part was Alice. High above the ground, she stood on pointe at the midway platform between two ropes. The platform was barely large enough to place both of her feet on, but Alice looked like she was right where she belonged, balanced perfectly, arms stretched out to either side. As a violin paused, Alice raised her left foot and stepped onto the rope in time with the next note. Beginning a slow journey over the rope, she turned and glided across from one side to the next.

The music stopped as Alice dropped from her toes to her heels before grabbing hold of the rope ladder next to her. "The music is too slow, Francisco. I need it half a beat faster." Lena could tell when Alice spotted her standing between two sets of stands by the smile that broke the mask of concentration.

Walking closer to the ring, Lena waited until Alice had reached the ground. "You looked good up there."

Stretching her arms above her head, Alice waved over to the man fiddling with the phonograph. "I'm taking a break, Francisco. I need to walk around, feel the ground under me for a little while."

For most of Alice's break, Lena asked questions about life in the circus, sitting on an oak chest as Alice spun her tales. Joining the circus at sixteen, when her parents could no longer support her and her six younger siblings, sending her to the ringmaster who was a friend of the family. Learning to walk on tightropes when she thought no one was watching, becoming more and more skilled until she was drawing larger crowds than the acrobats. Travelling from town to town, living on diner food and canned beans cooked over a fire. When they finally returned to the big tent, bright lights blazed through the descending darkness of night. Alice climbed back up the ladder, taking her position on the far right platform as the music started.

Lena couldn't take her eyes off of her. It was like Alice didn't even know she wasn't on the ground. She nearly danced on the rope, her body twisting and turning as her feet clung to the only thing keeping her from falling. The music was sad, mournful in a way that Lena didn't remember from before. It seduced her into a trance and between that and Alice's movements, Lena never wanted to move from her seat.

After what seemed like hours, Alice finally stood down and descended from the tightrope. "Well?" she asked as she crossed over to the stands.

"That was... amazing," Lena whispered.

Alice beamed. "Thanks. It felt like one of my best routines yet. Maybe you're my lucky charm," she said as they walked out of the tent and back to the dirt road leading into town.

Lena blushed at Alice's words and the way their fingers kept knocking together as they walked beside each other.

Walking down the road that led out onto the main road, Lena didn't hear the huffs of four men under a silhouetted apple tree.

Lena dreamed of the big tent and Alice floating around it like a bird. She was stuck on the ground, but when Alice soared and dove, Lena felt as though she soared and dove with her. Then she was with Alice. They were flying together, side by side, around the tent and through the circus compound and finally up, up, up into the brilliant blue sky.

Something was changing, she thought as she dressed for the diner. She looked in the mirror as she pulled back her hair, sandy-colored strands falling out over her forehead. Her thoughts still on the circus and her dream, she failed to notice the whispering townspeople clustered around their newspapers.

THREE BODIES FOUND IN APPLE GROVE, MURDER!!!

How could this happen in a town like ours, old ladies said. It's so quiet and peaceful here.

I knew something like this would happen, old men said. Those damn strangers came in and now this.

Lena picked up bits and pieces of the story as she worked, taking orders and delivering warm plates and refilling the same cups of coffee over and over. The bodies were just sitting under the tree... like they were resting after a long walk... open eyes and peaceful smiles... nothing mussed or out of place... just deader 'an a doornail.

By the end of lunch, Lena's stomach turned every time someone mentioned the murders. Taking her apron off and hanging it on the hook behind the counter, she was ready to go home and try to forget about the news.

Instead, Lena ended up back at the circus. The afternoon sun glared off of the tent flaps, giving everything a hazy look. The heat was more noticeable here. The tents just trapped and exhaled it out into the concourse. She found Alice stretching at a cobbled-together barre across from the red and white tent, soft pink ballet slippers looking delicate against the bright green grass. A warm smile lit up Alice's face when she saw Lena walking over.

"I was going to come looking for you later. You should stay for the show tonight. Opening night is always my best night and I'm sure it'll be even better if my lucky charm is there."

Shielding her eyes from the sun, Lena smiled back. "Ok." She gently leaned against the end of the barre, watching as Alice continued to go through her routine. The play of muscles, soft on the ground but so very strong in the air, rippled underneath Alice's skin. Lena longed to see them moving just for her, allowing her to study the movements and learn the secrets of what gave Alice such power on the rope. The heat and repetition of stretches lulled her into a daze, almost like what she imagined being drunk felt like. She was floating in Alice's wake, along for the ride but not really caring where they were going as long as Alice was the one leading her.

Too soon, Alice straightened and grabbed Lena's hand, tugging her along the concourse. Lena knew she was moving but all she could feel was the clammy heat of

Alice's palm against hers, soft fingers tangling with hers. There was nothing she could do but follow. They ran past men hefting barbells high into the air, women brushing out and braiding horses' manes, before sweeping into a purple tent.

Inside, lights of soft blues and pinks draped over the frame. The sunlight, filtered through the heavy purple cloth, was soft here. Flowers hung in bunches as they dried. The bright bulbs of Alice's makeup table drew Lena's eyes to the center of the tent. Compacts and tubes of all sizes and colors littered the surface. A gentle push on her shoulders jolted Lena out of her thoughts of what everything was used for. She looked up, ready to ask Alice what was going on but stopped when she saw the brush and jar held in Alice's hands.

Quietly, so low that she almost couldn't hear it over the noise of the afternoon, Alice asked "May I?"

Lena could only nod, closing her eyes when the prickly bristles of the brush whispered across her cheek. Alice's fingers softly pressed instructions into her skin, turn this way, tilt up, look right. No one had touched her like this before. Each time Alice's hand made contact, Lena felt a tug in her chest, something that made her blush underneath the makeup. She sat still as a statue, afraid to move and break the spell that had wound its way around her and Alice.

"Open your eyes" broke her out of the trance. She was lost for words when she saw herself in the mirror. Is this what Alice looked like before she performed in front of the nightly crowd, she wondered, all soft shades and delicate lines around her eyes. She reached out for Alice's hand, squeezing it tightly, lips parting to say something, anything to convey her thanks.

But a gruff voice beat her to speaking. "Twenty minutes until curtain, Miss Alice."

Something like sadness, or regret, flickered in Alice's eyes. Standing and crossing to the wardrobe, she called out "Thank you, Geoffrey" and opened the door.

Standing at the edge of the curtain that separated the performance space from backstage, Lena watched as Alice climbed the rope ladder in the dark. She wondered if Alice ever felt nervous, so high up in the air, just waiting for the ringleader to call her name and the music to begin. Lena felt nervous for her. The anticipation weighted down her stomach until she felt like she wouldn't be able to stand, like if she didn't sit down that she would collapse and sink into the field beneath her feet. Finally, the man with the bullhorn spoke as lights lowered around him in the center of the ring.

"Ladies and gents, boys and girls, I am pleased to announce the grand finale of our show! She climbs heights of over fifty feet to walk across a rope no wider than your wrist! She defies gravity to entertain audiences just like you! She is... Alice the Amazing!"

Every light in the tent swung up to the platform suspended high above the ground. As Francisco began to crank the phonograph, the small band joined in to start the music. The audience clapped and to Lena, it sounded louder than thunder. How could Alice stand up there, not looking down at the crowd gathered to see her walk, arms spread out to either side and head tilted up in a resting position? Lena felt her legs begin to shake as Alice took her first step out onto the rope.

Alice's grin was brighter than any Lena had ever seen as she stepped off of the rope ladder and onto the dirt below. She took only two steps toward the ring when she suddenly had Alice wrapped up in her arms.

"That was my best walk yet! I knew you were my lucky charm! What did you think? I wish you could have been up there with me, to see how small everyone looked and feel what I felt." Alice's excited jabbering brought a smile to Lena's face as her heart stopped pounding.

She knew Alice was well-trained and a good walker, but there was something different about watching her take each step when the crowd below was expectantly holding their breath, waiting to see if Alice would make it across with the music. She felt their excitement well up in her and she held her breath through the whole performance, afraid of what would happen if she exhaled.

The next thing she knew, Alice's warm, pink lips were pushed against her own. Everything fell away from Lena. The crowd, the cheering and clapping, the clown's honking rubber horns as they waved goodbye to the audience. Her world narrowed down to Alice, and the feel of their lips coming together and the heat of Alice's hands on her shoulders sliding down to her wrists where they held on tightly, like one of them or both of them would drown without the other grounding them to this place, to this tent with dirt on the floor and the smell of apple blossoms and tall grass in the air.

Lena walked back to Alice's tent after talking to the elderly couple that owned the diner, Mr. and Mrs. James. They had seen her standing behind their section of seating when the show started, they said, but lost her right when the show ended. Mr. James had

seen her drifting back toward the partition of the tent when he called her name and waved her over.

She had wanted to go straight back to Alice's tent, wanted to see if she was still soaring high from her performance, wanted to hold her hand as Alice told her every detail about walking high above the crowds.

But nearing the purple tent glowing pink and blue under the edges, she slowed down, feeling like she was missing something.

"No, I won't let you take her!"

It was the first time Lena had heard Alice angry, and she sounded so different. Was this a fight she had engaged in before, giving her the inflection of weary anger of someone tired of going around in circles time and time again? Not sure if she should take a short walk down to the edge of the circus compound and come back or wait until the argument was over, Lena hesitated.

"She knows too much. She walked right past the men. We can't let her find out anything more. We risk everything the longer she stays," a man said. The voice was familiar, but Lena couldn't place it.

"Let me talk to her. I'll see what she knows, if anything. Just give me some time," Alice begged.

The man's reply was muffled by movement inside the tent. From the parted tent flaps, Francisco stalked out, heading straight for the big tent without looking around him.

Lena's heart raced. The tone in Alice's voice didn't bode well, setting her on edge in a way that she couldn't explain. Once her heart slowed down, she pushed back a panel of the tent and stepped inside. Alice was sitting at her makeup bench, staring into the

mirror. In the moments since she had last seen her, Lena would have sworn that Alice had aged ten years. Sadness clung to her features, her eyes downcast and her shoulders bowed.

In the mirror, their eyes met and Alice dropped the hand that held a damp towel covered in smudges of makeup. Pasting on a fake smile, Lena kicked at the ground. She felt nervous, in a way she hadn't felt around Alice before. What had she and Francisco been talking about, but more importantly, why did she feel like it was about her?

"I snagged some left over popcorn. We can go out and look at the stars after I get changed," Alice murmured as she went back to rubbing off her makeup.

Laying back on the soft grass, Alice's hand brushing hers whenever she reached for popcorn, Lena could almost forget that she had ever overheard anything.

"Do you stargaze?" Alice whispered.

"I used to with my dad when I was little. But I haven't in a really long time," Lena said as she rolled her head to look at Alice looking at the sky.

"Before I left home, my brother and I would sneak out on clear nights and make up stories for the stars we saw. It's one of the few things I miss about home."

The quiet murmur of Alice's voice stabbed at Lena. She knew what it was like to have to give up something and the heartache that it caused. She wanted to protect Alice from that, to make sure that she would never have to feel that way again.

"You can tell me stories, if you want," she said, hoping that Alice would take it for the gesture she intended.

"Hmm. See that big star, kind of twinkling to the left of the blue one? Well, it was once home to a little boy."

As Lena walked down the lane to the main road, she made the mistake of looking back to the apple grove when she heard a thump, like something solid landing on the ground. Two men stood under a tree with a heap at their feet.

Lena ran, never looking behind her until she was home.

Alice came into the diner two days later, looking more tired than she had after the argument with Francisco. Lena didn't say anything about it, still not sure what the argument had been about or what she'd seen in the apple grove that night.

No, that wasn't right, she had figured out what she had seen in the apple grove. She knew as soon as she saw the newspaper the next morning.

ANOTHER BODY FOUND IN APPLE GROVE!!!

It couldn't be a coincidence that she saw two men there the same night a body was placed under another apple tree.

The old women were becoming more fearful about what was happening to their town while the old men became more suspicious of the circus members. Even in the diner, Lena could tell that every eye was on Alice, that the whispered conversations that started after she walked in were about the circus.

Smiling at Alice, she leaned on the countertop. "Here for lunch?"

"No. I need to talk to you," Alice said, voice devoid of any joy or happiness.

"I can meet you at the park in five minutes, if you don't mind waiting."

Alice nodded before turning and walking out the door without saying another word.

Big white fluffy clouds were racing across the sky as Lena sat down on a swing beside Alice. The air was cooler than it had been in several days and she wished she had brought a jacket to work that morning. They sat in silence, pushing themselves back and forth on the swings and scraping their shoes through the dirt. Lena couldn't bring herself to ask what Alice needed to talk about, afraid she already knew the answer.

"Mr. Farlane says that my performances haven't been up to standard since we came to town," was all Alice said at first. Time seemed to drag as Lena waited for her to continue. "He says that I need to spend more time focusing on my walking and less time making friends."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But he runs the circus, and I can't disobey him."

Lena didn't say anything, weighing her choice in words carefully before she spoke. "Does this have anything to do with the murders?"

Alice shook her head. "Please don't make this any harder than it already is. I'm sorry, but I can't see you anymore. I have something for you though." She pulled out a small strip of paper, holding it out. "I want you to come to our last show later this week. It would mean a lot to me."

The lump growing in Lena's throat kept her from speaking as she took the ticket. Looking down at the ground, she listened as Alice got up and walked away.

*

The week dragged on. Rumors about the murders spread, but no one seemed to know any facts for certain. Lena worked every day, picking up the latest, but she found she didn't care unless it had something to do with the circus. The old men who had been against the circus from the beginning said it was some sort of satanic ritual, murdering the innocent citizens of whatever town they were in.

By Thursday, Lena was disappointed that Alice hadn't come to the diner for lunch at least once. Mr. Farlane couldn't keep her from eating, could he? When she left for the day, she half-hoped Alice would be outside waiting for her, even though she knew it was unlikely.

She dressed for the circus by the light of her lamp, trying to recreate what she had felt in Alice's tent days ago. The dress in blues, pinks, and purples made her think of the tent, but the colors weren't right. The glow had gone from everything she saw, like a candle snuffed out among a group. Dusting her cheeks and eyes with the powders her mother had once used, she didn't feel half as pretty as Alice had made her feel.

When she left her room, she avoided looking at the mirror, not wanting to be reminded of how much had changed in the last three days.

Back in the big tent, Lena politely cheered and clapped for the different acts that came and went. They were all great, but they weren't what she had come to see. As the performance went on, the tightness in Lena's stomach that had been building and growing for days struggled up through her insides until it lodged itself firmly in her throat. As she tried to calm her breathing, tried to find something calm and peaceful within herself to settle the roaring in her ears, the ringmaster took his place on top of the box.

"For the last time, I am proud to present the Angel of Altitude, the Temptress of Tightropes, Alice the Amazing!"

Her eyes ripped open as the lights jumped up to the platform, shining on Alice standing on pointe. Lena felt tears pressing in against her head. As much as she wanted to look away, not have to acknowledge that this would be the last time she watched Alice perform, she sat riveted in place, wanting to soak up every detail of the moment and never let the moment go. When she was old and lying in bed at night, she wanted to be able to remember the last time she saw Alice walk across the tightrope.

The music started and with it, Alice lost her statuesque posture and became a body of grace and movement. Again, Lena's world narrowed down to the girl performing and the hum of the phonograph. Tonight Alice looked better than she ever had. Her steps were placed with purpose and not even a single moment of hesitation. It was like she knew how each step would feel before she took it, Lena thought.

And that was the moment she knew something was wrong. When Alice deftly jumped on the middle platform, pausing for just a beat too long to look at the crowd before allowing her body to straighten and arc into the next step, Lena felt as though Alice had looked right at her, sitting in the middle of the happy crowd.

The band trailed off, one by one, as they realized what was happening. Lena stood up, hands tight over her mouth to keep the fear she had been holding inside from escaping.

Alice's foot twisted off the rope, and she spread her arms like wings.

*

As Alice lay on the dirt floor, unmoving, Lena waited for something to happen. The crowd went silent. The phonograph dragged out the last few notes before stopping. The band held their instruments in position, like they were waiting for the cue to come back in. In the distance, the screams of animals and men tore through the air. The ringmaster leapt over the stage blocks, screaming words Lena had never heard before.

Above her, the tent began to dissolve. The poles and ropes and seats, the clowns and band members and dancing dog with the tutu, burst into clouds of fine dust before floating to the ground in the final rays of the setting sun.

So Darkness I Became

Salem, September 1692

The jail cell is heavy with the heat of midday. Once again, we are packed together like animals, four and five to a space not large enough for two. I am lucky to be chained to the wall. The stones, damp and cool, provide me much-welcome relief. The chains rattle from every cell at all times of day and night, like the specters we are accused of appearing as. They chain us to keep us from sending our spirits to possess and bewitch others, but from the talk I overhear through the window and from the priests and judges, it does not seem to work. I would find it humorous, would that not cast more suspicion upon me; who would be dim enough to think that mere metal would be enough to stop the work of the Devil, if he is truly the one at work.

I can hear someone praying in the next cell, murmuring “Our Father, who art in Heaven...” over and over while a woman sobs. These sounds are the only ones I hear anymore. I miss the song of wild birds in the trees outside my window, the comforting chatter of the chickens in the yard as they hunt for grub.

Will I ever see the faded paint of my homestead again? Will I ever watch the sun set over fields of tall grass and trees, knowing freedom? Will I ever cook and clean and laugh in the place I grew up? Will I ever see my son again, my Jacob, with his curly blond hair and bright blue eyes? Or Anne, beautiful Anne and her uncouth ways?

I fear I will not.

*

Baker-Doyle Farm, slightly outside Salem, late April 1692

Sunlight warmed my face as I sewed yet another button on Anne's shirt. The woman ripped loose buttons as though I existed solely to patch and mend her clothing. The pile of jackets, trousers, skirts, and shirts next to me on the floor attested well to that. I knew it was only because she was working hard farming the land or doing odd jobs for whoever would hire her, so I did not complain. I half listened to Jacob's non-stop babble, thinking of what I must go into town for the next day when the familiar clomp of boots across the porch signaled an arrival.

"AnnieAnnieAnnie!" Jacob did his best to run to the dark-haired woman. I smiled, at both his excitement and her playful nature that emerged when she was around my son. Growing up together, I recalled that her parents were strict and did not exhibit much affection toward her or her siblings, so I assume she makes up for her dearth of childhood affection when she is around Jacob.

However, my smile faded when she turned away from Jacob. Her countenance was grave, the lines around and above her eyes tight and pinched. The light in her eyes, light that comes from the feeling of 'putting in a hard day's work and earning her keep' as she says, was gone. "Those damn girls have accused more women of being witches."

"Who have they pointed to this time?" I folded and refolded the shirt on my lap, needing to do something with my hands to keep them from shaking. The witchcraft business, accusations and arrests, had been going on for months now. Several of our neighbors, including Goodwife Nurse who was a close friend of my mother's before she passed on to the Kingdom of Heaven, may she rest in peace, had already been accused and taken into town for questioning by the judges. Gossip runs rampant and even though

I rarely ventured into town those days, I still heard plenty from the men and women that passed by on their way to and from Salem.

“Abigail Hobbs, Bridget Bishop, and Mary Easty, among others. It’s hard to find anything out for certain. Everyone is running around scared that if they talk of witches, they will be the next accused, but all anyone can talk about in private is who may or may not be a witch.” Anne bent over the large iron pot warming above a small fire, taking a small taste of the rabbit stew. It was her favorite of all the rabbit dishes I made, and I was very glad I made it that day.

“This is getting out of hand. These girls are just calling out on anyone they can think of now. This is madness.” My stomach felt as though it was tied in knots. I was terrified for myself, Anne, and Jacob. Our life on the farm was far from usual and although many of our neighbors said nothing about it, getting along well with Anne and using her services often enough to keep food on our table and wood in our hearth, I knew that the feelings of some people in Salem proper were not nearly as warm. Her manner of dress, the way she partook in discussions left to the men in town, the mere fact that she went to Boston and only came back after her own parents were already buried six months, none of that had encouraged much affection in the hearts of the pious churchgoers of Salem.

“I know, Becca. But you have nothing to be afraid of. We have done nothing wrong here. We keep to ourselves, we celebrate Sabbath, we are honest and kind people.” Her hand reached up to stroke my cheek. It was warm and rough against my skin. My eyes slipped closed at the small comfort. “But if you truly do not feel comfortable staying

here, perhaps we should go to Boston? I still have connections there and it would be far easier to blend into the crush of people. No one would notice us there.”

I couldn't even fathom the idea of living in a city so large. I know Anne lived there and found moderate success in various ventures, but I could not imagine myself and Jacob being there. Anne's reasons for leaving Salem, for doing what so few of us had ever done, were just, but I could not bring myself to make the same decision this time. Her father was a difficult man to live with, often heavy-handed and drunk or tyrannical and overly-pious. He abhorred the way Anne grew up, more like her brothers than a young lady and frequently employed carnal punishment as means to straighten her out. As best friends, I was witness to the many bruises she bore through adolescence and tearfully hugged her goodbye the night she stole away on a small ship headed south to the harbors of Boston. Anne did not often talk about what she did during her seven years away, only that she made enough money to survive and came about it as honestly as she could. Boston is so different from Salem and although it may be safer, I feared it would not be safe enough in the right ways. No, leaving Salem would be the wrong thing to do. I shook my head.

“Then we stay. I plan on going to the trial of Goodwife Easty. I did not know her well, but she has provided us with some aid and work in the past. If I can provide any support in her favor, I shall.” Anne shook off her jacket, sheepishly holding out the garment to me with its tear along the right elbow. I took it and fold it on the pile of pieces to yet be mended.

“Just don’t get yourself into any trouble, Anne.” Standing from the wooden rocking chair, our hands brushed. I could feel color flood my face as it did when we were children and we touched in much the same way.

“I would not dream of it, Becca,” she whispered with a laugh.

The woods are dark and cold... I am moving faster than is possible... Through the air up up above the trees... Stars shine bright in the sky... Below me, homes look like children’s toys...

A bird passes... A scream strangles me as I see that its face is Bridget Bishop’s... The bird caws, cackles, and dives... I go on until the house of Reverend Parris comes into view... My heart pounds as my body swoops through the air... Down down down toward the window... Inside I can see little Betty... She is restless in her sleep... I am inside her room above her bed... Above her... Her eyes open... She screams... I scream.

I woke up in a cold sweat, tears filling my eyes as my heart raced in my chest. A dream, I thought, just a dream. Sitting up in bed, I brushed loose strands of blonde hair off my forehead. Jacob was still in his bed on the other side of the room, but beside me, I could feel Anne stir.

“What is it?” Her voice was drowsy. She was not truly awake, only enough to know that something was not right.

“Nothing. I had a fearsome dream, that’s all,” I reassured her as I tried to settle under the stifling hot blankets. I felt like I was being suffocated by something beyond my control.

“Hmmm, ok.” She was soon asleep.

I found it much harder to attain the same peace for the rest of the night.

I tried not to think about the horrid dream from the night before as I went about my morning tasks. Anne was already out feeding the chickens and taking care of the land duties while I heated porridge and cured ham for breakfast. Jacob was cranky, and refused to sit still at the table. My temper was frayed and I was about to send him back to bed without breakfast when Anne came running in.

“Reverends Parris and Hale are coming to talk to you. They say Betty Parris said you came to her last night and tried to kill her. She’s accusing you of witchcraft.”

Salem, September 1692

The meetinghouse is filled to the brim with people from all over the county coming to witness the examination. It isn’t just me that brings them here, it is the spectacle of the girls, moaning and shouting of specters sitting on the ceiling beams with their animal familiars as they are pinched and pricked nearly to death, that brings people into Salem today and every day as the examinations and trials go on. I hear stories from the other women, and now men, in the jail with me although I have never seen an examination myself. I am terrified of what I may accidentally say that will lead the judges to condemn me for crimes I have never committed. It seems as though no matter what one does, it is the wrong thing to say or do when before the judges and the townspeople.

As I am led to the front of the room, young Betty Parris, her rosy cheeks and soft curls reminding me of how I must have looked at her age, begins to shake and twist when I walk past. I keep my eyes forward, knowing from the stories going around the cells that

looking at the girls, making any sort of contact with them unless told to first by the judges, is good enough as admitting guilt. Betty's father, the Reverend Samuel Parris sits near the Judges of the cases, John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin, a notebook, pen, and inkwell tidy on his small desk, prepared to dictate notes as the examination goes on.

Anne sits in the middle of the room, lips tight and back straight, looking for all the world as if she were the one being questioned. My time away has been hard for her, I know, looking after Jacob and the farm is not an easy task for one person alone. Her visits to the jail have become less and less frequent as the harvesting season has gotten more underway and she has found herself meager work. Few people will hire her now, since Betty Parris cried out on me in late April. Just being associated with my name has sullied her reputation as well. Only our closest neighbors and friends still believe in my innocence, especially given our living situation, or perhaps in spite of it. They are the ones that take pity on Anne and find work for her to do around their farms. But I know Jacob is being well-cared for despite everything; Anne loves him every bit as much as I do. I'm thankful that he is not here to witness the examination, even though he would be far too young to understand what was taking place.

Judge Hathorne, severe in his black Sunday suit and staunchly pressed brown hair, clears his throat, calling for silence to the whispers of villagers. Only the accusers, sitting in the front row, carry on. "Goodwife Rebecca Baker, do you understand the accusations which have been leveled upon you and led to your jailing and now this trial?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"And what be those charges?"

"I am being accused of witchcraft which I have not committed."

From the first row, Betty cries out anew, “Liar, liar, against God you speak!”

Tears cause my vision to blur. I am mightily afraid that already, I have said too much.

“Betty Parris says that on the night of April the twenty-third, in the year of Our Lord 1692, you appeared to her while she was asleep and attempted to choke the very life out of her. Were it not for the prayers and vigilance of her father, the Reverend Samuel Parris, and several others standing nearby in a room discussing matters unrelated to the case at hand, they claim that she should have died in her bed that night. What say you to this claim?”

Taking a deep breath, I turn to Judge Hathorne. “It was not me, Sir. I did not choke Betty Parris, nor have I ever choked or even attacked any living person in my life. She is mistaken.”

Howls of pain rise up from the girls, arms and legs bending at angles unnatural to the human body. One begins to mutter about a man in black pacing in front of me.

“What of the marks found on her neck and shoulders following the attack?”

“I cannot remark on them, but that I do not make them.” My hands are shaking so badly that I shove them underneath me to keep them still. I can remember my dream from the night before I was accused in exact detail. I know this is what they refer to, when I was supposed to have choked the young child. But how can one cause bodily harm in a dream and the injuries appear in real life?

From the first row, Betty shoves her hands under her legs in the same violent mockery of my movements. A murmur goes through the room at her actions.

“Reverend Hale, after meeting with you at your farm the morning after the spectral attack, reported that you said you had a ‘dreadful dream in which I saw young Betty but I woke up right away’. What else happened in that dream?”

“Nothing, nothing happened. It was short, dreadful but short, Your Honor.”

“You tell us that you did not send your specter out by means of your thoughts, through the night, and into the room of Betty Parris to choke the life out of her?”

“Of course I did no such thing! I would never harm a child, would never wish harm upon any child.” My heart pounds at the thought of the horrible afflictions that ravage the girls being set on my baby Jacob. I would never be able to stand aside and just pray for God’s mercy. “I am not a witch, I have not practiced witchcraft, and I have never harmed any living being in my life.”

“And what of the other complaints lodged against you? There is one that you cursed a farmer’s cattle because he would not provide your... ‘houseguest’ with adequate wages for her work.”

“Again, I say that I did no such thing, Sir.”

“There are also accusations of ungodly behavior between yourself and your houseguest that has led many in this good and humble town to question what sort of farm you are running, Goodwife Baker. Do you have any answer for those accusations?”

“I do not understand,” I choke out through dry mouth and constricted throat. Now I feel as though I am bewitched, as though someone has wrapped their hands around my neck and is preventing me from breathing.

Mary Walcott cries out, “Look at the man, the tall man in black, Goody Baker, why do you pay him no heed when he tells you the exact words to say?”

The other girls quickly join in the call, pointing at some specter of a man only they are able to see. I turn to the Judges, pleading that there is no man feeding me words, that what they see is nothing but a trick of their own minds. I am quickly quieted along with the rest of the meetinghouse.

“Is it true that you raise a bastard son with a woman known to have prostituted herself in Boston, selling sins of flesh on the street corner to any man with money enough? Is it true that this same woman dresses in a manner unbecoming to womanhood, wearing pants and boots, often revealing parts of her body that should be left covered on a woman of good virtue, and partakes in pursuits generally given to men? Is it true that you share a bed, lying together as man and woman, in mockery of the Bible, the Holy Book of Our Lord and Word of God?” With each question, Judge Hathorne’s voice becomes louder and louder, until I feel as though the meetinghouse is closing in on me. The cries of the girls have reached the point of hysteria. I see Anne stand up, her eyes wide in anger, as she yells back at Hathorne. But I hear nothing.

Nothing but a ringing in my head, before everything goes dark.

When I awake, I am back in my jail cell. Goodwife Easty is pressing a damp rag to my forehead. She smiles as my eyes flutter open. “There’s a good girl. We were afeared that you may have been frightened right to death.”

“What happened? I don’t... I was in the meetinghouse, the girls were shouting about some... tall, black man, but there was no one beside me, I swear upon it and—”

“Calm yourself, dear, before you go into a swoon once more. You fainted during your examination and the Judges had you brought back to the jailhouse. It has been

several hours since then.” Goodwife Easty sets the rag down on the floor next to our waste bucket. “I am afraid that your examination will be the cause of much tongue-wagging for many days to come.”

I slowly sit up, my hand pressed to my forehead as a slight pounding causes my eyes to close in pain. I cannot remember what happened, just that I quite suddenly felt weak all over and heard a dreadful ringing in my head. Then, blackness.

“The girls, after you fell back into your chair, claimed that the tall black man took your specter’s hand and flew out of the window with you. They could hear the call of his devil’s horn, coming from Reverend Parris’s field, where the witch’s Sabbaths are held. The Judges ordered that you be brought back to the jail until your trial.”

“There was no tall black man. They said he was whispering instructions to me, but no one was near me but the judges.”

“I know, dear. They say that the tall black man talks to all of us. He be the leader of the witches, according to the girls.” A racket from the far end of the hallway brings Goody Easty up short. We rise from the bench together, pressing against the bars of the cell as far as our chains will allow, trying to see what the commotion is about.

“You let me see her right now, George Corwin, or I swear to you!”

“Touch me again, Simmons, and you’ll be in a cell right next to that witch!”

Anne. Of course it would be my brash Anne threatening the Sheriff. I fall back down to the small bench, dropping my head into my hands. As much as I wish to see her, to talk to her and hear her words of reassurance that this mess will be resolved somehow, I know that her visit will bring nothing of the sort. I can only hope she has left Jacob in

the care of someone else; he should not see me like this, especially if this is to be the last time he may see me.

“Becca, thank God you’re awake. Are you ok?” Anne is breathless and the knuckles of the hand she pushes through the cell bars are red.

“I’m fine. What are you doing here?” I wrap my hands around hers and pull it to my chest. We are close enough that I can see the tremor in her lips, the way her eyes dart around the cell I am caged in. I squeeze her hand tightly.

“I had to see you. After you fainted during the examination, I tried to get up there to make sure you were ok, but they wouldn’t let me go to you. They insisted that you had to go back to the jail for the protection of those damn girls. They were beside themselves after that. You would have thought Judgment Day was upon them. This is the first time I have been able to get past Corwin. What he thinks I’m going to do back here with you, only he knows. I just want to make sure you are alright.”

I find myself smiling, despite the circumstances. “Well, aside from my current chambers, I’m alright. Goody Easty has been taking care of me since I was brought back.”

Anne nods at the older woman, solemnly saying “I won’t forget your kindness, ma’am.”

Goody Easty reaches through the bars and pats Anne’s shoulder. “Think nothing of it, Anne. You did well for me when you spoke up for me at my examination. I shan’t forget that either, child.” Walking the few steps back to the bench, she grants us privacy as she closes her eyes and begins to recite her nightly prayers.

Looking down the hall toward the door where Corwin still stands, talking with Reverend Hale, Anne leans in closer to me. “Tonight, after midnight, I’m coming back with Jacob. We’re leaving for Boston.”

“What? We can’t! They’ll come after us. It’s as good as confessing guilt to run away,” I whisper. What could she possibly be thinking, going off to Boston like a band of rogue fugitives. Especially with Jacob in tow.

“They are hanging everyone and I’m not about to let you be hanged for some crazy child’s game that has gotten out of hand. We can make it to Boston by morning and be lost before they can find us. We’ll be gone for good, I promise you, Becca.”

“How will you even get me out of here?” I sigh. Can I truly be harboring the notion of this crazed plan?

“I... have my ways. I’m ‘unbecoming to womanhood’ and ‘partake in the pursuits of men’ according to that ass Hathorne, remember?” Her smirk, despite my misgivings, gives me hope. It is likely best that I do not know what will take place later this evening.

“You are as crazy as those girls in the examination, do you realize that?”

“Remember, midnight.”

She’s gone before I can say another word, already yelling at Corwin for just standing around when there are witches to be caught.

I don’t sleep tonight. Every sound causes my body to twitch, wondering if it is Anne coming for me, or perhaps someone catching her in whatever devious acts she must commit to free me from my prison cell. I find myself wishing I had asked more questions, gotten more details of what to expect from her arrival other than ‘after midnight’. But I

know she would not have said much more, lest someone overhear our discussion and speak to one of the reverends or Corwin himself about our plans.

Finally, when I have about given up hope and assumed that she has either decided that a breakout is too dangerous or has been caught somewhere along the way, I hear the door creak open at the end of the hall. Between the noises of everyone already slumbering and the chains rattling as bodies shift, I don't hear Anne until she is unlocking the cell door. She is unnaturally quiet, as though she has done this before. I find myself yet again wondering what exactly it was she did during her time in Boston.

Allowing the door to swing just enough for her to slip through, she begins to work at the chains on my ankles. Goody Easty sits up and watches. I'm afraid that she will say something, but before I can beg her to remain silent, Anne speaks.

"We have room for one more, if you'd like to go to Boston, Good Easty." Looking up as she slips off the first chain, she smiles grimly. "I can't promise you much down there, but I'm sure you could find work somewhere."

Goody Easty shakes her head. "No, I am needed here. These trials and hangings cannot go on and I will work until the end to bring them to a stop, even if I must do it from this very jail cell."

Anne nods as she unlocks the chains around my wrists. They rubbed furiously and, now that they are gone, I can see the dried blood on the edges, outlining the cuffs. The skin is tender but Anne is careful as she guides me to my feet.

We step carefully through the door, slowly closing it behind us and locking it back up. The hallway is cloaked in darkness, light shining through windows every few

paces from jail cells. I follow Anne, unsure of where I am going and not wanting to take a wrong step or make any noise that may give away our escape.

At last, we are free of the hideous building. Our horse is tied to a tree and behind it, Jacob sleeps in the small wagon we would drive to town in. It contains just a few belongings, my mother's sewing basket and my father's tools, which Anne has taken on as her own, clothes and food for the trip, and blankets for the cool night ride. She bundles me up, making sure that I am warm enough, before untying the horse and climbing in.

Under the full moon, in view of the main road of Salem, Anne kisses me then whips the horse forward in the direction of Boston.