



REVERIE

RYAN LA SALA



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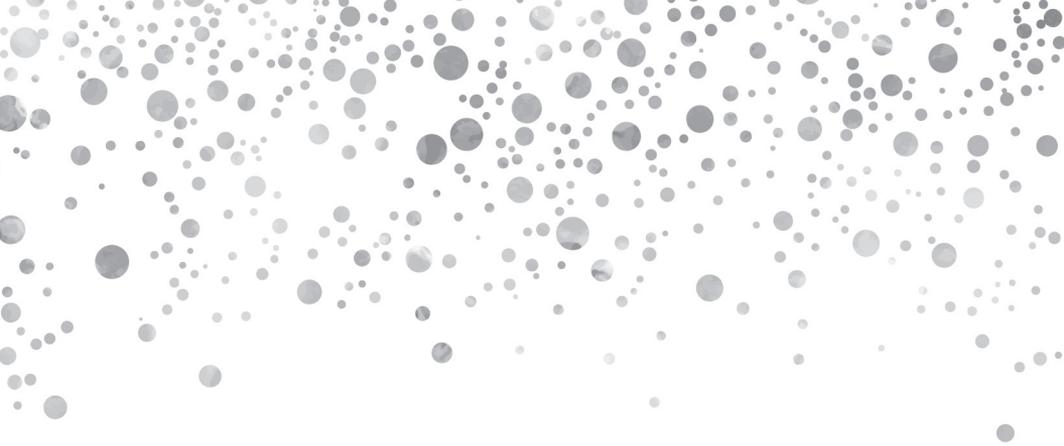
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*For my sister, Julia, who saw what the world could be
and fought to make it so.*



A dream you dream alone is only a dream.
A dream you dream together is reality.

• YOKO ONO •



• ONE •

SMITHEREENS

THIS IS WHERE IT HAPPENED. THIS IS WHERE THEY found Kane's body.

It was on the verge of September, and the Housatonic River was swollen with late summer's weeping. Kane stood among the bishop's-weed frothing at the bank, trying to imagine what it'd been like the night of the accident. In his mind, being pulled from the river would have been violent. Moonlight sliced to confetti on the black, broken water as paramedics wrenched him up. But this river, during the day, seemed incapable of violence. It was too slow. Just gold water marbled with pollen, kissing his bare legs, and a fleet of silvery fish slowly wreathing his ankles.

Kane wondered if the fish remembered that night. He had the urge to ask them. He remembered none of the accident himself.

All that he knew, he'd learned in the five days since waking up in the hospital.

Something struck his head. A pinecone. It bobbed into the water and the silvery fish vanished.

“Stop daydreaming and help me.”

Kane blinked, turning to Sophia. She stood on the bank where the weeds pressed up through crumbling pavement. He considered ignoring her, but she had several more pinecones and was a good shot. Actually, Sophia was a good *everything*. Just one of those people. Kane normally resented people like that, but she *was* his younger sister. He adored her. And he was intimidated by her, just a little. Most people were. That's why he'd brought her along today.

“I wasn't daydreaming,” Kane said. “I was thinking.”

Sophia whipped another pinecone at him, and he batted it away. “I know that look. You were thinking sad and poetic thoughts about yourself.”

Kane suppressed a smile. “I was not.”

“You were. Remember anything?”

He shrugged. “Not really.”

“Well, I hate to distract you from your moping, but you're in full sight of the bridge. Anyone driving by could see you.” She was right. The bridge, huge and elegant, hung in the shimmering summer air like a spider's web. “And we have to meet mom and dad at the police station in like...” She checked her phone. “Forty-eight minutes. *And* we're trespassing. *And* you're actually trespassing *again* if you count—”

“I know.” Kane let irritation color his voice. “You didn’t have to come. You know that, right?”

“Well excuse me for trying to help my brother in his time of crisis.”

“I’m not in crisis. I’m just...”

“Confused?”

Kane winced. *Confused*. When he first woke up in the hospital after the accident, when he first realized he was in trouble, it seemed like a good idea to hide behind that word until he could figure out what was going on. The police were asking questions, and the few memories he had from the accident barely made sense. He *was* confused. But now the word felt like a friend he couldn’t un-make, always popping up to embarrass him. Discredit him.

“I’m not confused,” Kane said. “I’m just trying to clear my name.”

Sophia rubbed a smudge of sap on her palm. “Well, you’re doing a shitty job.”

She was right. He had been acting pretty terrible since the accident. Avoidant. Gloomy. Brittle. But these were things Kane had always been. It was just that now people were looking to him for explanations. They wanted answers, or at least to see a brave survivor of something terrible. Instead they saw Kane: avoidant, gloomy, brittle. No one liked it.

“I heard mom say that Detective Thistler is doing a psych evaluation with you today,” said Sophia. “They’re going to ask you a lot of questions, Kane.”

“They’ve already asked me a lot of questions, *Sophia*.”

“You might consider attempting a few answers this time. For instance: why?”

“Why what?”

Sophia glared at him. “*Why* did you drive a *car* into a *historical site*?”

Staring across the lot at the charred remains of the old mill, Kane’s mind went blank. He’d spent every minute since waking up wondering the same thing.

Sophia went on. “Mom said the police won’t press charges while you’re being evaluated, but I heard that the county might prosecute.”

The whole county? Everyone, all at once? Kane imagined the entire population of East Amity, Connecticut, piled into a jury box. It made him smile.

Another pinecone struck his shoulder. He trudged back to the bank, letting his feet dry on the baking pavement as Sophia took pictures of the bridge. Then his feet were dry, and he couldn’t stall any longer.

“All right, let’s make this quick,” he said as pulled on his boots. “I just need to poke around the crash site. Keep taking pictures, okay?”

“Are you sure it’s safe to go in there?”

They stared at the mill.

Kane shrugged. It definitely wasn’t safe.

Half imploded, the mill sat quarantined behind a web of caution tape. Behind it, rising through the young birch forest, stood the rest of the old industrial complex: a maze of abandoned factories

and warehouses that represented the height of East Amity's manufacturing era. They went on for miles, proud and forever, slowly decaying beneath neglect as the forest grew up under them. This place was called the Cobalt Complex. This building before them—the old mill that looked onto the river—was the crash site. The crime scene. The cherished bit of Connecticut history Kane had rammed a Volvo into, which then exploded, one week ago.

He didn't even think cars really exploded on impact. That was movie stuff. Yet the mill, and everything within fifty feet of it, was scorched.

Kane laced up his brown leather boots. The old mill was a symbol of East Amity, appearing in the watercolor postcards sold all around town. Kane imagined the watercolor version of his crash. The dotted glass on the pavement. The inferno rendered in pale, tasteful shades of apricot. Greasy smoke eddying upward in violent, lovely twists against the restrained lavender of sunrise. Very pretty. Very New England.

"Come on, Kane, focus," said Sophia as she dragged him under the tape.

No new memories came to him in the chilled shade of the mill. Instead came an itch, the sort that simmers through your veins. An instinct. It had been crawling beneath Kane's skin since they got here. It said: *You should not have come back.*

Kane stood his ground. He needed answers, and he needed them now.

"Remember anything?"

"No."

Sophia sighed. She prodded a blackened beam.

“Try harder,” she suggested. “Use your imagination.”

Kane willed himself calm. He tested his weight on the sloping staircase. The fifth step let out a groan, but it held. “I think that using my imagination is the opposite of what I should be doing.”

“You make stuff up all the time.”

“Yeah, but in this case it might be illegal.”

Sophia drifted farther into the inky interior while Kane climbed to the second floor. From below she called, “You never know. Maybe you’re suppressing your memories subconsciously.”

Kane thought this was a very clever way of making him feel guilty for not being able to produce an explanation. Sophia continued: “Maybe it’ll only manifest through, like, art or something. You should try drawing, or painting, or—” There was a small crash that awoke a brood of bats somewhere in the rafters. Sophia appeared at the top of the steps. The bats settled. “Maybe you should decoupage something. You used to decoupage a lot of things.”

“You think delivering my testimony as a kitschy craft project is going to convince a judge that I’m not insane?”

“Maybe.”

“Sophia, that is the gayest thing I have ever heard.”

Like a sudden spark, the familiar joke flared between them. In unison, the siblings repeated their favorite refrain: “*Just gay enough to work!*”

They laughed, and for a second, Kane wasn’t full of dread.

Sophia hopped over a mess of broken bottles to join Kane on a crumbling sill that overlooked the river. They sat in silence

in the mill's stagnant air until Sophia hugged his shoulder. This surprised him; she hated hugs.

"Hey," Sophia murmured. "We're all just glad that you're okay. That's what matters most. We should be grateful for just that."

A stitch of guilt pulled tighter in Kane's chest. He agreed that being okay was what mattered most. He just didn't agree that okay was what he was.

"Plus," Sophie said, "your scars are gonna look awesome."

Kane smiled. His fingers itched to feel the tidy network of burns that wrapped like a crown around the back of his head, from temple to temple. They perplexed the doctors. They were shallow and would heal quickly, but sometimes at night they prickled with heat, turning his dreams to smoke and ash.

A gust dragged across the river, hit the shore, and floundered against the hemlocks and birch.

"Have you talked to anyone from school?" Sophia asked.

"Homeroom sent a card. The librarians sent flowers."

"What about friends?"

"Lucia sent a note."

"Lucia is a lunch lady, Kane."

Kane chewed the soft flesh of his cheek. "I know that."

"I know you know that. But what about people in your grade?"

"Umm..." Kane felt her consideration as a physical thing. "Homeroom sent a card."

Sophia let this go, and he was thankful for it. In the past, Sophia had taken it upon herself to conjure him a social life, which she assured him would do wonders for his self-esteem. *Wonders!*

always said with jazz hands. It was a well-intentioned hobby of Sophia's but had always deeply embarrassed Kane, who did not think he had low self-esteem to begin with. He just wasn't like Sophia, who needed to befriend everyone and everything. No, Kane liked to think of himself as *Discerning!* with jazz hands.

And besides, if he truly wanted to, Kane could talk to people. But why risk it? It felt unnatural. It was better to resign himself to safer companions: dogs, plants, books, and Lucia the lunch lady, who gave him extra fries on Pizza Tuesdays.

Something poked Kane's cheek. He swatted Sophia away. "What?"

"I said that I overheard Dad on the phone with the police today. They said that your accident...wasn't looking like an accident. That the whole thing seemed deliberate and thought out, and they wondered if maybe you were trying to..."

The cicadas simmered through the silence, an invisible crowd gossiping around them. Kane had to be careful with his words now. Sophia had asked a question without asking it.

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," he said.

"How can you know that if you say you can't remember that night, or the months leading up to it?"

Kane could feel each jagged edge of denial in his throat. He tried to force it up but it cut and clawed. He just *knew*.

"Kane, two days is a long time to go without calling. And stealing Dad's car? That's larceny. And I know you don't want to talk about it, but if you don't clear your psych evaluation, Mom says that you might have to go live—"

“Stop it,” Kane said, harsh now. “Look, I’m sorry. I wish I could tell you more. I wish I knew where I was, or what I was doing.”

In a small voice Sophia said, “Or who you were with.”

“What?”

“Well, someone must have pulled you out of this burning building and then helped you to the river. They should have checked your body for fingerprints.”

Of everything, this unsettled Kane the most, as though he could feel the grip of ghosts upon his flesh. He felt the way the mill looked: history, in smithereens, haunted with the sort of shadows that squirm.

“Not that you can leave prints on a body,” Sophia said. “I checked.”

A familiar sense bristled over Kane. Sophia had always thought of him as a bit of project. Had she made investigating the accident her latest focus? Did she know more about this than she was letting on?

“What else do you know?”

Kane might have noticed Sophia look away too quick if he wasn’t watching a shadow behind her break away from the wall and scamper, huge and spider-like, across a doorway.

“Something’s in here,” he whispered.

“What?”

He pulled her beneath the sill and along the wall, his eyes never leaving the doorway. “Something’s in here,” he whispered. “I saw something move.”

“Kane relax, it’s probably a bat.”

Just then they both heard a creak on the stairs—the cry of the

fifth step. Whoever it was must have known they'd given up their position. The mill shook as something large and fast thundered up the stairs and burst onto the second floor.

Kane and Sophia dashed into the closest room—one with a vaulted ceiling blackened by soot, a floor rotted through, and a heavy metal door. Kane swung it shut and slammed down the latch a moment before something rammed into the other side. The hinges screamed, but the latch held. Again and again something tried to muscle through, the ceiling releasing clots of dust each impact. Then came the awful sound of metal scraping metal. A key, maybe? Or claws?

“There!” Sophia pulled Kane toward a window leading onto a roof so badly damaged it looked ready to cave in. Together they picked across sagging beams and shimmied under them. Inside the building, the shadows boiled—unreal, massive shapes that scuttled through the darkness below, tracking them.

“Kane!”

He caught Sophia's wrist just as her leg plunged through a rotted portion of the roof, but their weight was too much. In a plume of dust and decay, the roof tilted beneath them, throwing them down so hard Kane's teeth snapped together.

They were...outside? They'd tumbled over the mill's back edge. Around them shivered desiccated ferns bathed in thick yellow light. Behind them the structure continued to shake ominously. Kane's hand found Sophia and they ran, crashing through the forest of scorched saplings as a portion of the mill collapsed completely. Splinters showered their backs.

Kane threw a glance over his shoulder and saw a towering shadow printed upon the rolling cloud of dust and ash, so tall it could have been a tree. But then it turned and, finding them, lunged after.

Kane focused only on keeping up with Sophia as they shot into the Cobalt Complex's sprawling maze of ancient buildings, pitted roads, and equipment overgrown with ivy, to the edges where rotten fences held back the forest. They'd hidden Sophia's car in the neighborhood that backed up against the mill, behind a wall of mountain laurel.

"Well shit," Sophia said as she flung herself into the driver's side. She gulped breaths. "That was—"

The sound of sirens cut into Kane with the finality of a guillotine as a police cruiser rolled out of the shade, stopping before their idling car. Sophia let lose an elaborate string of bad words.

"Mr. Montgomery, we thought it might be you," said one. Kane couldn't even look her in the eye. "Step out of the car, please."

Together, they scooted from the car. Sophia shook off her shock first. "You don't understand. We were just walking along the path when this *thing* came out of nowhere and chased us. This massive animal..."

Sophia's voice fizzled out, leaving Kane to wonder if she'd seen the shadow that chased them. One officer said something into their radio. The other turned to Kane. "The Cobalt Complex is a crime scene, Mr. Montgomery."

Kane's mouth was dry. He nodded.

"And private property."

Nod.

“That you’ve trespassed on once already.”

The world went wobbly beneath him. He grabbed the car’s hood to keep from falling. What the hell were those things? There was no way to describe them and no point in doing so. The police wouldn’t believe any of it. They would think Kane had caused the damage to the mill himself. Again.

Holy shit.

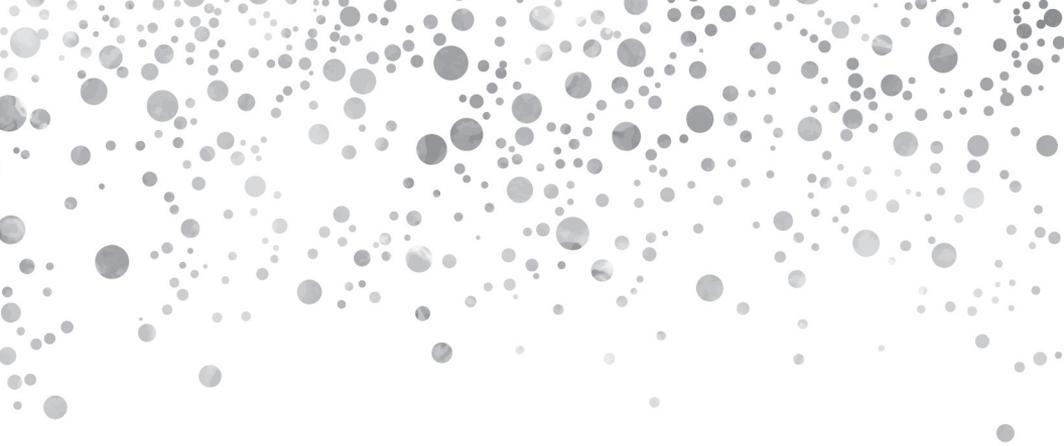
“It was my idea,” Sophia blurted. “It was, I swear. I asked to come here. I wanted to see...to see it all for myself. The mill. Kane didn’t even want to come. I made him come back. Please don’t get him in more trouble.”

The officers eyed Sophia incredulously. Her hair, the color of cocoa powder, had come unbraided and floated around her jaw, a few strands caught in glistening spit at the edge of her frown. She had on her Pemberton uniform—the all-girls private school in town, which was an honorable and mysterious institution that gave all the locals a superstitious pause—but it was a mess from their run. Still, the cops paused.

One nodded toward Kane. “Detective Thistler let us know you’ve got an appointment with him and your parents this afternoon.”

“Yeah,” Kane said. “We were on our way. We’ll head over right now, I promise.”

Everyone waited to see if a consequence would happen, and it did. The same officer rounded the cruiser and popped open the backdoor. “Miss, you head home. Kane, grab your stuff. You’re coming with us.”



• TWO •

THE WITCHES

THE EAST AMITY POLICE STATION HAD THREE INTERVIEW rooms. Two of them were simple boxes of concrete, containing only steel tables and steel chairs. Interrogation chic. The third, Kane was told as he was led through the halls of the station, was called the Soft Room. It had couches, a basket of plastic geraniums flanked by tissue boxes, and a lamp.

Kane clung to these details. No one was going to torture him in a room with upholstered couches, right? The blood would soak into the fibers. It'd take a small pond of seltzer to scrub out.

No one had told Kane what was going to happen to him. They weren't allowed to talk until his parents arrived, which made him want to throw up. He wondered what would happen as he pulled himself into a knot of shivering limbs on the couch. He wondered if a person could shiver apart. If they could, would it

happen slowly, or all at once, like a Jenga tower flying apart after one, singular piece is oh-so-carefully removed?

Kane became sick of wondering. He held himself tighter and clutched a book—*The Witches* by Roald Dahl, a favorite he'd stashed in his backpack. He'd grabbed it from Sophia's car before he was dragged off in the police cruiser. He turned the pages every few minutes, but only pretended to read in case he was being watched.

Were the police meeting with his parents separately? Should he text Sophia? His phone had been lost in the crash, but he had her old one on loan.

Kane turned another page, though it wasn't words he saw but the shadow from the Cobalt Complex. His mind drifted over it, tentative, like approaching the memory of a dream you know will break apart if it sees you coming. Even at the edges he knew there was something messed up about what he'd seen. Something unreal and unbelievable.

He shook off the notion. He couldn't afford *unbelievable* right now. He needed to figure out a way to explain all of this. A *real* explanation for what *really* happened. And he needed to figure it out before Detective Thistler did.

Kane tensed at the thought of Thistler, who wore a suit with a badge clipped to his belt, who smelled like cigarettes and spearmint. Thistler was always smiling when he questioned Kane, like he thought they were about to share a secret adventure. Kane had a fear of people who smiled too much, and Thistler proved why. In their first meeting at the hospital, Thistler laid out Kane's circumstances in a cheerful, rushed explanation, like someone

enthusiastically describing their odd hobby. He let loose terms like “Third-Degree Arson” and “Permanent Record” with a flourish. When Kane was suitably panicked, Thistler started his strange, meandering questions about Kane’s life. Did Kane have a girlfriend? *No.* A boyfriend? *Not yet.* Did he participate in any clubs at school? *No.* How did he feel about school? *Good.* And so on.

Toward the end of their two hours, Thistler began circling in on something much larger than useless details about Kane’s life. He was targeting Kane’s stability. The questions turned pointed. Why do you find yourself lying to avoid people? *I...I...don’t.* Why would you decide to hurt yourself? *I wouldn’t. I didn’t.* You seem angry. Does talking about what you did make you angry? *Yes, but—*Why is that?—*but I didn’t do what you think.* You seem upset. Why are you upset?

Kane awoke to the insidious craft of these questions too slowly to work his way out of them. It was as though the lights had come up on a stage he didn’t know he was standing on, revealing a play he didn’t realize he was performing in. The play was a tragedy. He was the lead: a gay boy, lonely, suicidal, brimming with angst. He had played his part beautifully.

Even now, Kane’s whole body burned in humiliation. His parents had been there. They’d whispered with Thistler after, in the hall, and their whispering continued until the next day when they sat Kane down and told him about the psych evaluation. Kane’s second chance.

“You’re a Montgomery,” Dad had said. “That means something in this town, you know. Your uncle is on the force.”

“You’re lucky,” Mom had said. “They’re giving you a chance to prove you’re committed to helping yourself. Not everyone gets that, sweetie.”

“You’re screwed,” Sophia had said. “They think your nuts. You’re gonna have to figure this out for yourself. Prove them all wrong.”

And that’s how they’d ended up at the mill.

Fear splintered through Kane’s guts. If he made it through this conversation with Thistler, he promised he’d never go back to the Cobalt Complex. He’d never even wonder about it.

The door to the Soft Room opened.

Kane burst to his feet. “Detective Thistler, I can explain—”

But it wasn’t Thistler at the door, or even Kane’s parents. Framed in the cold light of the hallway was someone entirely new to Kane’s small, disastrous world.

“Mr. Montgomery? I hope you weren’t waiting long in this dim, sad place. I left as soon as I got the call.”

The person said this with humor, in a voice adorned with theatrical flourish that warmed the small room. They wore a fitted suit sashed at the waist and sleek pants trimmed in satin, all of their outfit rendered in a rich, golden fabric that revealed an elusive pattern beneath the lamplight. Even their skin glowed with a gold luster, shifting as they sat. Kane sat, too, a bit dazzled by the person’s faultless face, which would not allow him to answer the question as to whether this person was a man, a woman, both, or neither.

They slipped a pad of paper from their bag and peered at Kane through curled lashes.

“What, you’ve never seen a man in mascara?” he said, answering the question on Kane’s face.

“I’m sorry.” Kane’s cheeks burned. How often had this man caught people starrng? How many times had he been asked that question? How many more times had he answered it without being asked, just for the sake of people uncomfortable with ambiguity, who ignored what this person had to say while instead wondering viciously at his identity?

“I’m sorry,” Kane repeated. “I didn’t mean—”

The person pinched the air, snuffing out Kane’s apology. Kane sat a bit deeper in his shame. This was not a person usually found in suburban Connecticut. This was not a person Kane knew how to hide from. He found instead a need to impress them.

“You’re not Detective Thistler,” Kane said, even though it couldn’t be more obvious.

“Ah, how astute. They told me you were a clever one.” The man winked conspiratorially, making Kane grin. “Thistler is occupied with... I don’t know. Whatever occupies the pathologically heterosexual. Perhaps trying to find just one more use for his three-in-one shampoo-conditioner-body wash? Maybe he ought to use it as a mouthwash, too? It might help that dingy rainbow of a smile he keeps showing everyone.”

Kane outright laughed, surprising himself.

“Anyhow. It’ll be just you and me today, Mr. Montgomery. You may call me Dr. Poesy.”

Kane was fascinated by Dr. Poesy, especially by his conspicuous queerness. He was not naïve enough to dismiss this similarity

between himself and the doctor as a coincidence because (and as a rule) Kane didn't believe in coincidences. Life so far had shown there was something awful and determined about the way the world put itself together for people like him. A seductive sort of unluckiness that repeated in infinitely small and cruel ways. And at first Kane thought Dr. Poesy was part of that wicked design. A further unluckiness, sent to trick him one more time. But how could someone so like him be bad for him? Deep in his distrust, Kane felt something long-lost blink to life: hope. This meeting wasn't a coincidence, but perhaps it wasn't unlucky, either. Maybe Dr. Poesy was good. Maybe he was here to help Kane break free from the wicked designs of his life. Maybe, just maybe, Dr. Poesy was the brighter edge of fate.

The thought stung Kane's eyes. He bit down the emotion, telling himself this new hope was dangerous. He needed to stay on guard. Wiping his face clean of emotion, he asked, "You're the psychologist, aren't you? You're here to do my psych evaluation, right?"

"I'm one of many people here to help you," Dr. Poesy said. "And yes, I am here to evaluate, though today we're only talking. Your parents have been informed and have left the station for the evening."

"Do they know what happened?"

Dr. Poesy's smiled impishly. "Not quite. I told the officers to let me handle them, and I haven't yet decided what I'll say. I suppose I'll decide during this meeting."

Kane drew back a bit. Was that a threat? What did that mean?

"I see you've brought a book. What is it?"

“Oh.” Kane was still clutching *The Witches*. “Nothing. A kid’s book.”

Dr. Poesy gazed at it. His eyes held a color that slid between black, blue, and oblivion.

“Witches interest me,” Dr. Poesy said. “If you look at most female archetypes—the mother, the virgin, the whore—their power comes from their relation to men. But not the Witch. The Witch derives her power from nature. She calls forth her dreams with spells and incantations. With poetry. And I think that’s why we are frightened of them. What’s scarier to the world of men than a woman limited only by her imagination?”

Kane sat forward. He sensed he was supposed to respond, but how? Was this part of the evaluation? He hadn’t been careful with Thistler. He would have to be with Dr. Poesy.

“It’s just a book,” Kane said cautiously.

Dr. Poesy flipped through a file. A golden pen appeared in his hand, and it waggled haughtily as he wrote something.

“So, in your own words, Mr. Montgomery, why are we here?”

“I was in a car accident.”

“Painting in broad strokes will get you nowhere with me. Try again.”

“I...” Kane flattened his voice. Steeled himself. He knew what needed saying. “I ran away a week ago today. I stole a car from my parents, and I drove it through the Cobalt Complex after a big storm. I lost control of the car near the river and crashed into a building. The car caught on fire. So did the building. I got out and the police found me in the river. I passed out and went into a brief

coma, but I woke up in the hospital later. I'm in a lot of trouble. I don't remember any of it."

Dr. Poesy looked at Kane for a long time. "And, of course, you were back at the mill today. Did you remember anything?"

"No." It wasn't a lie, but should he tell Dr. Poesy about the thing that chased them? How could he even begin to describe what happened without sounding even guiltier?

But Dr. Poesy moved on. "Why does a runaway return home, just to steal a car?"

Kane's mind hiccupped. No one had asked him this yet. "I don't know. I don't remember doing it."

"How does a mostly-brick building catch fire in the rain?"

"The...the car must have exploded or something."

"That's cinematic, but not usually how cars work. There were, however, traces of gasoline found all over the crash site."

Kane frowned. "Cars run on gasoline. Gasoline explodes."

Dr. Poesy tapped the gold pen against his temple, "Clever." Then he wrote something down.

"What are you writing? I didn't set that building on fire on purpose."

Dr. Poesy continued to write. "I didn't say you set it on fire at all, but that's a curious thought."

Kane slumped backward, horrified. "I wouldn't...I mean, I didn't—"

Dr. Poesy held up a quieting hand once again. "I'm going to be honest with you, Mr. Montgomery, in a way that no one else will be honest with you, because I understand you, and I understand

your misfortune. Know that I want what's best for you, and so even if my honesty is harsh, it is not cruel." He waited for Kane to give a consenting nod before continuing. "First, your story of your misadventure is clearly false. None of it quite works, does it? You attempted to vanish, but very poorly. You destroyed your cell phone, yet what little you posted online you didn't bother to delete. You stole a car from your own family, but not cash or credit cards. You drove this car, miraculously, through several security perimeters in a very direct route to the river, before swerving at the last minute into a building. A crash of this sort would kill a person, normally, but the EMTs found you conscious and mostly unharmed, sitting in the river several yards away, so you couldn't have been in the car upon impact. Do you know how they described you in the police report? 'Polite and detached.' Those are the exact words. The report says they found you sitting in the shallows, humming to yourself and picking apart flowers. And, only after you were safe did you suddenly lapse into a coma. That's odd, too, I think."

Kane could feel the deep frown on his face, and he forced it away. It was too hard to look at the doctor, so he focused on his clenched fists instead.

"None of it works, does it?"

Kane shrugged. It was all he had.

Dr. Poesy sat back. "And here is where I will tell you the actual truth, Mr. Montgomery. My colleagues disagree with my decision to do so, but I feel it is important you understand the reality of the situation in which you find yourself. Or, at least, the reality so far."

The lighthearted act was gone, replaced by an inscrutable, clinical stare. When Dr. Poesy smiled, it was like he had just learned how; all in the mouth, nothing in the eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that your story takes place within a much larger story, an ongoing case bigger than the scope of your small town’s police department. You’ve managed to attract the attention of some very powerful, very bad people, Mr. Montgomery, who will go to extraordinary lengths to keep you silent about what you witnessed. As fortune would have it, I reached you first. I can protect you.”

Kane squirmed. “Am I in danger?”

Dr. Poesy dipped a manicured hand into his bag and placed a small square of paper on the table between them. Absurdly, it was one of the postcards Kane had been thinking of before. The ones that showed the mill painted in wistful watercolor.

“Let me introduce you to the work of Maxine Osman,” Dr. Poesy said. “She was born in the year nineteen forty-six and has been a fixture of East Amity for seventy-three years. She married, but her husband died eons ago. She has no children. She used to head the East Amity Craft Guild. She is known for the watercolors she completes every year for the East Amity tourism board. In fact, she’s most known for her seasonal series of the Cobalt Complex, completing twelve every year for the official East Amity calendar. Her favorite subject was the old mill, which you blew up.”

Kane stared at the postcard. There was something he knew here. Something important he couldn’t quite grasp.

“You think a painter is going to come after me because I burned down the mill?”

Dr. Poesy pinched the bridge of his nose. “She was set to paint the mill the morning of your crash. She was set to paint it at sunrise, about when the crash happened.”

Kane tried again. “I’m really sorry. I can apologize to her.”

“No,” Dr. Poesy said. “You can’t apologize to her, Mr. Montgomery, because she’s dead.”

Kane’s eyes went wide, dry and unblinking. “She’s...what?”

“Dead. Deceased. Departed.”

“I know what dead is.”

And then Kane realized what Dr. Poesy was saying, and the air went out of the room. The doctor smiled wider, now speaking with deliberate easiness. “Maxine had a small box of supplies she brought with her to her painting sites. Aluminum, with clasps and a handle. In it would have been her paints and brushes. Other artists’ tools.” Dr. Poesy’s eyes were feline in nature. Kane felt that if the lights were to switch out, the cobalt of those eyes would turn to moony disks. “That box was found among the ashes of the mill, melted shut. What’s clear is that you were present for Maxine’s final moment. What is less clear, is why.”

Kane’s eyes stung. He couldn’t resist the compulsion to run his fingers over his burns, to hide behind his white knuckles. Dr. Poesy leaned forward, intrigued by Kane’s reaction, as though he already knew Kane was guilty.

“Your parents do not know about Maxine Osman. The police do not know, either. I am not your appointed psychologist,

as Thistler believes, nor do I answer to the East Amity Police Department. I answer to forces much more powerful. Those forces have an interest in Maxine's disappearance. Those forces wish to keep this investigation a secret, and your involvement risks that secret, but I do not believe you are a risk yourself, Mr. Montgomery. I believe you are an answer."

Kane thought he had known fear, but this new horror recalibrated all the bad he'd gone through so far. This was so much worse than he thought. It must have been a long time before Kane answered, or maybe he never answered at all, because the next thing he heard was a ringing, hammering laugh.

"Do not look so aghast, Mr. Montgomery. I do not think you murdered Maxine Osman. I'm not sure who did. That's why we're here, together."

Kane shook off his shock. He couldn't lose himself now.

"You need my help figuring out the murderer?" he asked.

"Ah, so you *are* smart! Yes, I have a proposition. A bit of homework for you." From their bag Dr. Poesy pulled a notebook and handed it to Kane. It was thin and had a supple, red leather cover so bright Kane thought the color would stain his hands. It came with its own golden pen in a leather loop, and the pages were blank except for the first, which read *My Dream Journal*.

"You want me to keep a dream journal?"

"Of course not." Dr. Poesy laughed. "I may not be your real psychologist, but you are still under my evaluation, and as long as that's the case, the police cannot touch you. Keeping this journal, along with weekly check-ins with me, should give you the time

and inspiration you need to give me the information I want about Maxine Osman and your incendiary evening together. Do this for me, and I will handle the rest.”

Kane’s voice was a pale-blue whisper. “But I told the police everything I know.”

Dr. Poesy smiled. “You and I both know there is more to your story. Perhaps you’ve lied. Perhaps you haven’t. Perhaps your dreams will reveal what your waking mind cannot bear. It does not matter, so long as it makes it onto those pages. No detail should be considered irrelevant. Withhold nothing, or I will know. You have three weeks.”

“But...”

Kane stopped himself. What was he doing, revealing how little he knew? Dr. Poesy had just said Kane was untouchable so long as he was being evaluated. If Dr. Poesy lost faith in his ability to be useful, the evaluation ended, and Kane’s freedom winked out like a light.

Dr. Poesy crossed his legs at the ankle. He draped his hands, one over the other, at the knee, and a flare of gold chain on his wrist caught the lamplight. Kane stared at it, helpless beneath the fear and panic surging through him.

“Look at me.”

Kane looked. Dr. Poesy leaned over the table, daring Kane to join him in a new, hushed closeness.

“There is a dangerous truth within you, Mr. Montgomery, that not even the most competent artifice will conceal for long. And, as with all dangerous truths, the trick to surviving it is letting it out in a way you can control.” Dr. Poesy leaned even closer. “People like

us? We must tell our stories ourselves, you know, or else they will destroy us in their own violent making. And I assure you this truth will destroy you, too, if you're not careful. It'll crack you apart from the inside out"—Kane lurched back, Dr. Poesy's fingers snapping an inch from his face—"like an egg."

Kane's throat was raw as he sucked in a deep breath. The Soft Room pulsed. He could not believe this person was accusing him of lying *and* blackmailing him into keeping a journal. A fake *dream* journal. Absurdly, he was overcome with the urge to tell Sophia she'd been right. He was being told to figure out his testimony through arts and crafts, after all.

"I understand," Kane whispered.

"Grand," Dr. Poesy said, softening. "I thought you might. Now, when we leave this room, I want the blood back in your face. A pep in your step. We've only just been getting to know each other, haven't we?"

Kane got the hint. "Of course."

Together they left the Soft Room, walking through the station and the doors that buzzed when they were unlocked. In the lobby, Kane and Dr. Poesy exchanged goodbyes, and Kane rushed to the double doors.

"Kane."

Dr. Poesy stood back in the lobby, fiddling with the cuff of his right wrist.

"Be careful. The things we cannot outrun are the things we must fight, and you are no fighter. You will need help. You will need me, and I do not provide for liars."

Kane saw the shadowy monster in the clouds of dust and light. He saw it turning, slowly, its eyeless head stopping to consider him. And of course he had run. And Dr. Poesy knew.

A pair of officers walked by. Dr. Poesy smiled vacantly, handing Kane something. The postcard. “I want you to have this. A bookmark, so you will always know your place.”

His face burned as he took it. He held it close as he shoved through the double doors of the police station, fleeing back into the embrace of summer and the singing of cicadas.



• THREE •

BEWARE OF DOG

AS SOON AS KANE WAS OUTSIDE, HIS PHONE ERUPTED in a million messages, all of them from Sophia. They were coming in too quickly to read, so he just called her as he hurried away from the station.

“Kane? Where have you *been*?”

“At the police station. I’m fine. Where are Mom and Dad?”

“They’re at the house. Didn’t you see my texts?”

Kane walked faster. He had the urge to run, but people were still out and about in the town center. The sun was still setting.

“I haven’t read them yet. What happened?”

“You tell me. I don’t get it. I got home and Mom and Dad pulled in twenty minutes later, saying the meeting was canceled and that you were meeting a counselor for your evaluation, or something. I told them I’d pick you up, but that was two hours

ago! So then I told them we were grabbing fro-yo. I think I bought us some time to talk.”

Kane was not comforted by this. He suspected his meeting with Dr. Poesy was unofficial, somehow. No paper work. Nothing to document what they’d talked about. A blank yawn in his life. Just like the accident.

“What happened, Kane? Where are you?”

Kane bit into the flesh of his cheek, trying to decide if he should lie or not. Sophia was already overinvolved in this.

“Nothing bad happened. I just met with a counselor, like they said. I had to write out some answers for a report and talk about my feelings. It was dumb.” The lie left him feeling more alone than ever.

“Where are you? I’ve just been reading at Roost. I’ll come get you.”

“I want to walk home.”

“You’re not supposed to be alone. Mom said I should—”

“Lie for me again, will you?”

Kane hung up and turned off the phone. He had the urge to throw it into the rhododendron that bordered St. Agnes, the university at the heart of East Amity. He cut through the campus, speeding toward Harrow Creek.

East Amity was an ill-conceived town, a concrete canvas thrown over the sodden greenery of the Housatonic’s flood lands. For that reason the fabric of the suburban grid was eaten through in places, sunken by ravines that filled with rain water and grew fuzzy with forests. Harrow Creek ribboned through these small

forests, hemmed to the land by a concrete runner's path. It was the least direct route home. But it was safe. No cars could drive alongside it looking for him. No little sisters out searching for their brothers.

Kane needed time and space to think, and the path had always given him both.

He looked up through the birch trees that webbed across the dimming sky. By the time he was alongside the creek, night shaded the distance and drew a curtain of shadow right up to the path's edge. Every few yards stood a glowing lamppost wreathed by moths, neon and frantic. Down a steep bank the creek slid over its bed of worn rocks, silent and unbothered and everything Kane was not. On the path two kids scraped by on scooters, followed by their parents. They stared at Kane, which is how he realized he looked as dismal as he felt.

Kane took out the postcard Dr. Poesy had given him, his hands shaking. In the corner were the initials *MO*. Maxine Osman. Smothering dread curled in Kane's throat as he forced himself to stare into the painting's pleasant colors. The image wasn't any different now that its creator was dead, yet it somehow brimmed with new life. It was all that was left of her, and so in a way it was where she existed now. Trapped, in her own watercolor world.

Kane thought of how he had stood and looked at the mill, imagining it in the dreamy brightness of watercolor. At the time it had felt like just another daydream, but now? He itched with his usual instinct to run, to hide. To stop himself from discovering anything else.

He knew now it wasn't a daydream before—it was a memory.

Waves of anxiety bubbled up from his stomach. What had he done? Who was he? He didn't want to remember, but he also didn't have a choice. The truth was his *only* choice if we wanted to survive this story, Dr. Poesy had said.

Kane breathed steadiness into his nerves, imagining their frantic energy drifting from his hands as waves of writhing static. He shook himself out, hopping in a small circle, then hopping in the reverse direction to undo the coil. These small rituals often worked for him, and the tension eased from his body. He had made it this far, hadn't he? He wasn't going to let himself crack apart now.

"I'm not an egg," Kane told the night, pulling out the journal. Into its soft leather cover, he whispered, "I'm not an egg."

By now his only company on the path were the clots of gnats around his head, and the moths, and the occasional glimmer of moonlight on the creek's edges. When he reached a bench beneath a lamp, he slumped into it and opened the journal.

Experimentally, Kane clicked the pen twice. It made a clean, expensive sound. He clicked it six more times, then drew a few squiggles.

"What your waking mind cannot bear," Kane muttered, printing the words in careful letters. He read them over and over, until they no longer looked like words, finally turning to the postcard.

Whatever had happened to Kane, it somehow connected him to Maxine Osman. This meant he needed to learn everything he could about her. Already he had some details. He wrote down her

name. Dr. Poesy had said she was born in 1946, which made her seventy-four. Kane didn't add *when she died*, because he refused to know that. Not yet. Poesy had also said she'd always lived in East Amity, but where? And she did paintings for the tourism board, a series for the town's calendar. One such calendar was hanging in Kane's kitchen right now, had hung there every year since Kane was little. In a way, he'd known Maxine Osman all his life.

Now what?

Kane thought of the frustration that boiled through him—fine and corrosive, like soda bubbles—when he stepped into the water near the mill and felt nothing. He thought of watercolors, and of what Sophia had said about how someone must have dragged him from the fire. He didn't think an old lady had rescued him, which meant someone else had to have been involved.

But who?

Hunched on the bench, Kane penned in a version of what had happened that afternoon at the mill, sanitizing it for Dr. Poesy. When he got to the part where they were running, specifically when he looked back to see what chased them, he stopped. He still didn't know what he'd seen. The more he imagined it, the more he remembered. It had not moved like a person, one leg at a time. It moved like a spider, every leg at once.

Chills spread over his body, the night turning cold on his thighs. He tapped his boots against the pavement, eight taps each side then eight taps together. He should go home. Get inside. Dr. Poesy had warned Kane about those that wanted to keep him silent. What did that mean?

And then it hit. Dr. Poesy believed Kane had been with Maxine Osman when she died but had not killed her. That meant two things: someone else had murdered Maxine Osman, and that someone knew who Kane was.

Why hadn't Dr. Poesy pointed this out? Kane's hand tightened around the pen. He was about to stand when a gleam like moonlight on a blade drew his eye across the creek. He squinted into the flat darkness.

There it was again: an edge of light floating above the creek's other bank. His heart raced as a portion of shadow shifted, and the glare vanished. Was it a wolf or maybe a bobcat? East Amity was nestled in rolling forests and sometimes the animals got curious, but something about the shadow seemed unnatural in a familiar way.

He clutched the journal as he crept to the edge of the path, his eyes never leaving the other bank. Whatever it was, he couldn't see it now, and so he listened for the sound of splashing to determine if it was coming closer. Instead, he heard a needling click, like claws on smooth stone. And it was right behind him.

Something massive scampered over the bench, knocking Kane's backpack the ground. Dimly he registered a great many legs, long and multi-jointed like a gigantic spider, all fused together in a grotesque jumble. It skittered backward, sprawled out, and then leapt straight up into the trees.

Kane's heart jammed against the back of his ribs. Too scared to even scream, he grabbed his backpack and sprinted toward the end of the path. Around him the night filled with wind and chanting cicadas, a strange sort of laughter that filled Kane with

white-hot dread. Those legs. He couldn't unsee those legs. There was no cloud of dust this time. Nothing hiding the thing that had chased him and his sister from the mill earlier that day.

It had found him, and it was going to finish him off.

Kane hit a bend in the path that sloped up toward the road. He threw a glance backward. The beast swayed from the lamppost, like a cocoon of shadow. A spindly leg separated from the main body and plucked something up. *The Witches*.

Kane tripped over himself and crashed to the ground. His hands stung, his fingernails jammed with grit. He was almost upright when he heard that clicking again, ahead of him now. He drew back a moment before another mass of legs skittered over the path to block his exit.

"Leave me alone!" Kane shouted, hurling his backpack at the thing before running toward the creek. He dove into the reeds, muck sucking him down to his knees in the creek's sulfuric stink. Unblinking, his eyes ticked between the two banks, watching for movement. He waited, clutching the red journal for security.

And waited. The night waited with him, totally silent.

Then there came a voice: "Hello? Is someone down there?"

A girl appeared on the path, peering into the reeds. Crickets chirped and water slapped. "Hello?" she called again. Kane knew he should warn her, but he couldn't breathe. Shamefully silent, he waited for the darkness to grab her with its many legs, but nothing happened.

The girl jumped down the bank. "Hello? I can see you. Are you okay?" She was much bigger than Kane, dressed in running

gear, and she held his muddy backpack. She stopped short when she saw him.

“There was something...” Kane began. Where did he begin? Should he even try to explain?

There was a beat of stillness as Kane and the girl realized they knew each other, and then so much dread settled on Kane he felt like he would sink right back into the mud.

“Kane?”

“No,” he blurted. “It’s not. I’m not.”

Ursula Abernathy, another junior at Amity Regional, shifted from foot to foot. Broad and powerful, she was a star athlete on the track team. Or maybe the field hockey team? Kane just knew she did sports often, and she did them well, but that off the field she was super awkward. She’d been picked on a lot growing up. Kane knew because he’d been there for all of it. They went to the same elementary school.

It was pointless trying to lie now that she’d recognized him.

“Fine, it is me,” Kane said.

“Are you...okay?”

“Yes.”

Ursula waited, clearly ready for an explanation, but Kane had nothing to give. He was too busy with the realization that by morning it would be town-wide news that Kane Montgomery, local gay miscreant, burner of buildings and crasher of cars, was caught nocturnally frolicking in the muddy tributaries of the Housatonic River. He could already imagine Dr. Poesy making a note of this in that stupid file.

Daintily, Kane picked himself out of the muck and padded up the bank, his boots making indecent squelches. Ursula followed at a distance.

“What were you doing down there?”

Kane glanced at her. She was dressed in a ratty, long-sleeved shirt that read in hand-written letters, BEAT PAVEMENT, NOT PEOPLE. TRIATHLON TO END DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. Sweat glazed her pink shoulders, her neck. Her copper hair was pulled into a sloppy bun that looked more like a nest than a hairstyle, and her bangs were a frizzy awning above thick-lashed, worried eyes. She wore no makeup, not even Chapstick from the looks of it.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked again.

“I’m fine,” Kane lied. He scanned the night for those creatures and, not seeing anything, began scraping the mud from his boots. It was hopeless. He was caked up to his knees. His ass was soaked. His whole body prickled with heat. He wished he could just vanish.

Ursula kept trying to restart the conversation. “I was on a run and I heard something. I didn’t know people were on the path so late, so I thought maybe it was an animal, but then I found your backpack, and then I saw you fall into the river, and...”

“I didn’t fall into the river.”

“Okay, well I saw you sort of stumble into the river, and—”

“I didn’t stumble.”

A dimple of worry bore into the flesh between Ursula’s eyes. “But are you okay?”

Kane looked up at her. “Why are you asking me so many questions? Do I *look* okay to you? Can’t you read context clues?”

Another person would have pushed back, but Ursula only tugged at the hem of her shorts and stared at the ground, embarrassed. In the awkward silence there was space for Kane to feel what he always felt toward Ursula Abernathy: guilt. Ursula, like Kane, was an easy target growing up. They should have been friends, but Kane was no nicer to her than anyone else. He was perhaps even meaner, to show just how different they were, or how much more she deserved their classmates’ ridicule. A survival tactic of his that he was not proud of. In third grade he’d made a joke about how Ursula Abernathy was adopted from a dog shelter. He didn’t remember how it turned into a rumor—only that it was a mistake—but by the next day it was a school-wide legend. He still felt bad about it, especially the part where someone put a BEWARE OF DOG sign on Ursula’s desk. Whenever he saw her, he saw her as the red-faced girl facing down a room of kids woofing at her. She looked that way now.

Kane had never apologized. He wondered if she knew it was him.

“I’m sorry,” Kane said. “I’m okay, really. Do you...do you want to walk me to the street? I’d appreciate it.”

Ursula glanced around, possibly for an excuse not to, but relented. They walked along the path in silence, Kane doing his best not to show that he was still shaking. He played it off as shivering, though the night was warm.

“How’s school?” he asked.

This surprised Ursula. “School is school. We miss you.”

“We?”

“Yeah, like the teachers and everyone. People were really worried.”

“But I’m fine.”

Ursula gave him a once over that told Kane she did not think he was fine. He hated how she stared, like a child at a zoo.

“Well, you know. Your whole... The whole incident with the mill.”

“Incident?”

“Right, right. Sorry. Your *accident*. Everyone heard about it from Claire Harrington—her dad’s a cop. There were a ton of questions, and the school called for an assembly in the gym and opened up the counselor office hours for anyone who wanted to talk.”

The horror Kane felt surpassed everything from the night so far. An assembly. About him? This was his hell, manifested.

“I’m fine. And Claire Harrington makes shit up all the time.”

Ursula kept pulling at the hem of her shorts. She rolled her lips together, unsure.

“Everyone was really happy to hear you woke up, even though Mrs. Keselowski said you were still pretty confused, and Mr. Adams said it was important to give you space and privacy.”

“Why are the school counselors telling people things?” Kane snapped. “Isn’t that like, against their privacy code or something? And I’m *not* confused. And if people really cared about me, maybe they wouldn’t make shit up or pry into my business.”

Ursula hugged herself. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Wait,” Kane stopped before they reached the road. “You talked to the school counselors? Like, you went to their office hours?”

Even in the darkness, Ursula’s face glowed red. She had.

Kane felt something in him soften. He picked his words carefully. “Look. I’m sorry for...I don’t know. For whatever this is. For how I am. Thank you for stopping. I know we’re not really friends but I appreciate it.”

Ursula gave a meek smile. “Anytime.”

They were at the path’s entrance. He expected her to run off, but instead she leaned in as she handed him his backpack and whispered, “Is it true? About your memories? Tell me quickly. They’re probably watching.”

Kane pulled away. There was a hardness in Ursula’s stare now that had not been there a second ago, that had never been there. Right now, there was no meekness about her whatsoever.

“Your memories. Tell me. Please,” Ursula pressed. “I need to know.”

“I remember everything,” Kane said, defensive.

Ursula was unflinching as she assessed this for the lie that it was.

“You don’t. It’s true. The others were right.” She glanced around until her eyes tracked upon something over his shoulder, as though she saw things in the shadows he could not. The hair on the back of his neck rose up, and his burns prickled.

Beware of dog flashed in Kane’s mind.

“I remember...” Kane again felt his lost memories trying to guide him. “I remember Maxine Osman.”

Ursula's eyes went wide, and Kane knew his guess had struck something. She edged even closer so that cricket song swathed them in chatter, as though she were afraid of being overheard.

“Never say that name again.”

“But—”

“I can't help you. You have to find your way back to us on your own, Kane. Check the treasure chest.”

And then the old Ursula returned. Meek and unsure. Rounded by anxiety. “It was nice running into you,” she murmured, unable to even look him in the eye. “See you back in school.”

She jogged toward the path, messy bun bouncing. Kane watched her go, watched the dark where she vanished, and only moved when he felt the dark watching him back.