

PhD Thesis: *The Disappearance of Robin Melling*
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Doctor of Philosophy

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Thesis Summary

Synopsis of Novel

A small town in Maine is plagued with a rash of missing persons after a mysterious tremor, termed the Earthquake, shakes the whole world. Years later, after being severely injured in a car accident caused by the Earthquake, teenage Nathan Alexander is still adjusting- dealing with reduced mobility, overbearing parents, and a crush on Robin, a girl who works with him in an occult bookstore. Over coffee he senses a dark shadow- which pulls Robin into the dream world. Robin is kidnapped and gradually loses herself to the monster. Nathan must find a way to save her with only a dream swallow, a bookmark, and a small town cop to help him.

Summary of Essay

*The essay explores the themes of the novel, including trauma and *The Hero's Journey*. Each character experiences trauma, and how they deal with this trauma informs their actions and personalities. The framework of the story is explored and named, and an argument is formulated towards a story framework that underpins all stories, from myths to films. The religious precepts of Shamanism, mentioned in the novel, are used as an example of the ubiquity of this framework. These elements are brought together to paint a complete picture of *The Disappearance of Robin Melling*.*

Declaration and Statements

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed Andrew Eck Date 25/06/2019

Statement 1

This work is the result of my own independent study/investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed Andrew Eck Date 25/06/2019

Statement 2

I hereby give consent for my work, if relevant and accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organizations.

Signed Andrew Eck Date 25/06/2019

Contents Page

1	Title Page
2	Summary
3	Declaration and Statements
4	Contents Page
5	Acknowledgments
6-7	Prologue
8-14	Chapter 1
15-23	Chapter 2
24-31	Chapter 3
32-38	Chapter 4
39-48	The Dreaming of Robin Melling
49-57	Chapter 5
58-66	Chapter 6
67-76	Chapter 7
77-82	The Resistance of Robin Melling
83-94	Chapter 8
95-105	Chapter 9
106-116	Chapter 10
117-125	The Memories of Robin Melling
126-139	Chapter 11
140-144	The Truth of Robin Melling
145-152	Chapter 12
153-161	Chapter 13
162-171	Chapter 14
172-176	Chapter 15
177-181	Chapter 16
182-185	Robin, Nathan, and Peter
186-210	Essay: Journeys and Healing
211-215	Bibliography

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Thank you both.

The Disappearance of Robin Melling

Prologue

I'm having a strange dream.

Hovering on the border between life and death, I'd dreaming something really strange. I clearly remember getting hit by the car, the pain of it, the crunch of bone, the- But I feel fine! No need to worry about it. I have plenty to distract me from reality. Usually when someone pictures unconsciousness it's black. Pure, unending blackness. You drift noiselessly, caught on some current you can't feel. Time flexes, minutes can't be counted. Hours slip by unnoticed. Then one second might as well last a thousand years for what it feels like.

That's not my experience. My unconsciousness is pure white. So bright that I have to quickly shut my eyes after opening them. I have to do that a few times before my eyes adjust. Then I can see there are chairs every ten feet or so. Lots of doors with numbers on them. Some have little windows, and others are blank. An apartment building? No, too clean and white for that. And it'd be stupid to have windows on the front door of an apartment. An STD poster on the wall makes me wince. Okay, a hospital, then.

I can't be dead. The thought is silly. I mean, the afterlife is a hospital? A bit on the nose, don't you think? But I still can't bring myself to laugh; I can't even smile. I can't be dead. That car barely nicked me!

A pang in my heart and a sharp twinge in my side, the one that had been struck. I can feel my brow moisten, I wipe my palms on my jeans, but they stay slick. I'm about to start praying, because hey, why not- when I hear voices. Where? I get dizzy spinning around to look for the source. It's just mumbles. I close my eyes and concentrate. Behind me. I walk slowly, listening carefully. Anything's better than waiting. The mumbles grow louder as I make my way down the hallway. It doesn't feel fuzzy the way dreams usually do. It feels like I'm awake.

I come to a door and stop. Room 404. I can practically feel blood draining from my face, my knees wobble. In Japanese folklore the number four symbolizes death. What would Mom have called it? ... Inauspicious! That's it. A bad omen, to say the least. Okay, they're definitely coming from in there. It's muffled yelling. The room must have some solid soundproofing because I can only make out half a word every now and then. Should I go in? I peek in through the window.

I woke up screaming, a nurse was trying to hold me down until someone could give me something for the pain. Something had happened in that gap, when I looked through the door. I

knew it wasn't a dream. No matter how many times my therapist tried to convince me otherwise and divert me towards talking about the accident, my body, no matter how many times Dad raised a skeptical eyebrow, I knew. It had been real. But in the months and, eventually, years after the Earthquake and my accident, it didn't look like I'd ever get the answers to my questions. So I forgot about it. Or, at least I did until the day Robin Disappeared.

Chapter 1

On the morning of the day Robin Disappeared, I had another nightmare. The same one I'd been having on and off for two years. Well, almost the same- a gray street, a screech of burning tires, a weightless feeling as my body flies through the air- sensations that were all too familiar. I'd become used to those clips of memory seeping into my dreams; but the sludge on the ground? That was new. As I fell I landed inside a black puddle, not deep, but wide enough that my whole body got wet. The sludge felt sticky, like tar. I could only stare as it crawled up my broken body, and a strange sensation washed over me; similar to that time at Grandpa Shiro's funeral, staring at him in that casket, way too pale and quiet, not like him at all. I'd felt recognition and disgust with a desire to kiss his cheek goodbye, and then vomit.

I was wheezing hard, and sweating. My breath filled the otherwise silent room. The wheezing was from fear. But the sweat was just because it was hot. The height of summer and Dad still refused to turn the AC on before lunch. I'd sprawled myself out across the bed in a starfish shape, covers having been kicked to the ground again. Thrashing around was fine, at least I hadn't screamed again. Dad, ever a light sleeper, would have come in to check on me, which was pretty humiliating at sixteen. The nightmare, visceral and terrifying in the moment, had already started fading from memory. I headed to the bathroom. It was technically against the rules to walk around the house in just my boxers, but it was too damn hot for clothes. And the only person that cared (Dad) wouldn't see me if I was quick and quiet.

The bathroom tiles were gloriously cool on my sweat slicked feet. I might have curled up on the floor and pressed my head into the ground if, y'know, it hadn't been a bathroom. I stepped into the shower, noting the yellowing fiberglass. Dad must not have cleaned it. Well, it's not like I had cleaned it either. If Mom were here... I shook my head, pushing the thought away. After the shower I wrapped my towel around my waist, a purple one. Dad liked blue and Mom had been a fan of red things, so of course their child should have purple stuff. A cute idea for your toddler, but try having a bright purple backpack in high school. The bullying had been unreal.

After brushing my teeth, I traced a finger along my scars. Around the edges, the skin was sensitive, a mottled forest of marks on high alert; even the light touch of my fingertip was intense, like when something brushes your neck unexpectedly. I pretended it was bearable, as if I was just poking a bruise, but I knew the pain was deceiving. The smallest spark of discomfort could spread like a wildfire and send me to the ground, writhing in pain. It had happened more than a few times, back in the early days when I was more stubborn about what I could and couldn't do. Maybe I should have covered up after all. I hated looking at my scars. I turned my attention to my forearm. It still had a pretty nice curve, despite my lack of gym time. I flexed. A *very* nice curve. Good to know

not all my muscles had atrophied. I looked okay, as long as I had my shirt on. Not that Robin seemed to notice. Speaking of, couldn't forget to shave. The last thing I needed was Robin making some smart aleck comment about my peach fuzz.

That done, I stared into the mirror, thinking. The nightmares had been more frequent, three last week. There were some pretty serious bags under my eyes. Detective Dad would notice soon, if he hadn't already. I hooked my fingertips underneath the mirror and pulled. Behind it three neat little shelves were stacked with band-aids, mouthwashes, q-tips, and a few pill bottles. Aspirin, mostly, but also a half filled orange and white one. My sleeping pills. I hadn't used them in half a year. They made me super groggy, but... I stifled a yawn; sleep disrupting nightmares were making me groggy anyway. I shook the bottle twice, absently listening to the rattle of pills. Well, I could leave them on my desk and decide whether to take one later tonight. Pill bottle in hand and boxers slung across my shoulder, I went back to my room.

I floated the towel to the bed and set the pills on my desk. I made a mental note to tell Dad about them. His detective vision would clock them instantly the next time he went into my room and he'd be mad I hadn't told him I was taking them again. I went through my morning stretches; a sort of tai-chi meets calisthenics routine my physical therapist had prescribed me. I liked to feel the air on my skin as I stretched, even though usually I felt uncomfortable naked, I hadn't even been swimming since the accident, but with no one to see, I didn't mind as much. Just as I was finishing up, my eyes landed on my tennis racket, propped against a drawer. A bright orange, well worn, Wilson K Factor. I'd been avoiding looking at it whilst simultaneously delaying throwing it out. Gathering dust inside the drawer were my various tennis awards: ribbons and trophies from another life. It would be stupid to dwell on it. But still...

The strings were a little loose. I plucked one, laughing when it sounded like an out-of-tune banjo. A swing, slow and jerky. I'd gotten rusty. Knees bent at the familiar position, stood on the balls of my feet, I replayed the moment I'd won my first tournament - the game winning overhead hit, coming down too fast for my opponent to catch it. I raised my hand and-

Electricity crackled down my left side. A hiss as I sucked in air was followed by a clatter as the racket slipped out of my hand. It stung, a lot. But I'd known it would. Someone famous once said that the definition of insanity was trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. That's me. Eventually, the pain passed and I kicked the stupid useless piece of garbage under my bed. Whatever. I threw clothes on in a fume.

A sizzle meant Dad was frying something. Shouldn't he be at the station? I sucked air past my teeth. Whatever the reason he was still here, the frying was dicey. He was better at grilling. I padded down the stairs, legs already feeling slick under my black pants. Stupid work dress code.

Salt and something tangy. Fish? Poking my head past the doorway into the kitchen, I saw Dad beyond our small four person dining table, at the grill, way over-drizzling something with soy sauce. Though there was some thinning on top, he still had the majority of his hair. I was hopeful that implied good things for me in the future. Even though those gray streaks were getting bigger. He was wearing, as always, that horrible apron I'd bought him three Christmases ago. It was an ugly red and gold monstrosity that was way too long, draping over his shoes. It'd been a last minute panic purchase. I'd begged him to let me return it for something nicer, but he'd refused. It looked ridiculous over his uniform. Weird sense of style, my dad.

“Instead of just standing there-” I jumped, “-could you grab some plates and silverware?” He turned to me, an eyebrow raised.

“How do you do that?” I asked as I went to the cabinet.

“My finely honed senses,” he said, refocusing on the skillet. “I've trained for years to be able to pick up the slightest vibration, note the smallest detail, interpret the vaguest of sensory data. ... That is to say, I heard you coming down the stairs.”

I snorted and dutifully set the table. He poked what I saw were two salmon steaks with the spatula. They were done, golden crust starting to darken. I watched it with worry. He knew I liked the skin a little crispy, but often went to far and burned it. He transferred the steaks to a nearby serving platter without difficulty. He'd gotten pretty good at that. It'd have taken me three tries to get just one of them to the platter. Then, scoop by scoop, he filled a bowl with rice from our decade old rice cooker, not spilling a single grain. It was like sorcery.

“So, I take it you did your exercises? You're sweating a little,” he asked, sitting down across from me.

Had he heard the racket clatter? He might have just been asking, he often did. He frowned as the silence before my response dragged on too long.

“They went okay. I did a little extra today. Why aren't you at work?”

He shrugged. “Don't know. They told me to come in after lunch. Guess they didn't need me.”

Troubling. Were they planning to get rid of him? Hadn't they done enough to him? I reached for the soy sauce, but-

“Not yet.”

My hand froze. Dad closed his eyes and moved his hands into the prayer position. Open hands, fingertips touching, bowed outwards from the center. Thumbs brought in and flat, resting on the pointer finger knuckles. The shaman's blessing. It always looked so strange coming from him. I still wasn't sure if he was doing it because he believed or if it was just to honor Mom. It had been her religion not his, after all. Either way, I clasped my hands in a similar configuration. Her belief

system had been... patchwork, to say the least. Raised both Shinto and Buddhist, she'd grown up knowing different religions weren't necessarily incompatible. Shamanism was the hot new fad around the world after the Earthquake. Mom would have loved it, I could almost picture her at the table, reading the latest book on it, wearing her glasses, eyes crinkled so tight you'd almost think she was sleeping.

“What was that thing we used to say, at the start of meals?”

“Oh,” Dad said, his eyes softening. “I thought you'd forgotten about that. Er, 'Itadakimasu', if I'm not mistaken. Don't quote me on the pronunciation. It's a Japanese phrase. Do you remember what it means?”

“'Thanks for the food' or something like that?” I said.

“Yeah. Your mother used to say that it encourages thankfulness towards the fact that you have food to feed yourself, or to the animals for giving up their lives so you can eat. She... she really liked to believe in things, your mom.”

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I started eating. Dad had the barest hint of a smile, gaze far away, maybe remembering some conversation the two of them had a long time ago. He'd started smiling more lately. That was good. Having to debate religion seemed like a small price to pay if it meant his too few smiles would come back. I mean, it wasn't that I thought religion was dumb or wrong, and I liked most of the basics. 'Be kind', 'Don't murder'. Yeah, I could get on board. But I just had a hard time believing in any one particular religion. As for Shamanism... I liked the idea of giving thanks for what you receive out of genuine gratitude rather than out of fear that the gods will get mad that you didn't praise them enough. And it was a nice way to start the day.

“Nathan?”

I sighed and glanced at the clock. 11:32.

“I need to leave soon or I'll be late for work.”

“What time will you be back?”

“My shift ends at five, but I have to help close,” I said, scarfing the food.

“Help who?”

“Robin.”

“Oh,” he said, face so carefully neutral it gave away what he really thought about me and her working late together. Hadn't he been the one to teach me that a constructed calm was just as revealing as any other emotion? Smug jerk. “And you're coming straight home after?”

“I guess.”

He frowned and cocked his head, debating whether to say anything.

“Okay, okay! I'll come home as soon as I'm done, happy?”

God, he couldn't ever just let me leave the house without knowing every little detail about my schedule!

“Nathan...”

“Look, it doesn't matter.”

“We've lost a lot over the years, haven't we?”

I froze; my fork hovered in place, just in front of my mouth.

“I mean even just these last few years there's been-”

“Stop! I was there for it too, remember?” I said, taking a bite. I'd been afraid. Afraid of him and afraid for him; they'd mixed together.

“No, I know. But... can you understand how I feel about you? Can you at least try?”

How did he want me to answer that? What could I possibly say in response? He wanted me to accept his helicopter parenting without protest. And he was, subtly, using Mom's death to get me to do it. Unfair. Totally freaking unfair. I let myself miss her, just a little. The food in my stomach soured.

“I-I have to go. I'll see you later.”

“Nathan!”

But I was already placing my dish in the sink. I climbed up the stairs as fast as my damaged body would allow and tried to understand, I did. He'd wanted GPS tracking enabled on my cell phone so he could monitor where I was. I'd only finally gotten him to back down by threatening to just never bring it with me anywhere. He preferred me to have it than not.

A wave of nausea hit as I walked into my room. Food poisoning? The fish hadn't seemed under cooked. My hand found its way to the desk chair as my knees started to wobble like I was at sea. Dammit. It wasn't food poisoning. My eyesight kaleidoscoped, and when it snapped back to normal colors were saturated. The orange pill bottle shone like a light, my blue walls seemed to pulse and flex, sending radiant showers of color outwards. Something icy crawled its way up my body, covering my feet and inching upwards, stopping around my waist. The urge to sleep was overpowering. Another attack. What if I had one in front of someone!? It was the third one in a week. Dad would rush me to the hospital if he saw. No, it was just a delightful new side effect of the accident. It had to be.

With each breath, nausea faded and colors stopped moving. My legs felt stronger. Time to go. I fumbled for my jacket, hauled over the desk chair I'd been clinging to. Dad was still in the kitchen, faucet running. Must be washing the dishes. I snuck past the door frame.

“Hey!”

I froze, not wanting to talk.

“Say goodbye to your mother before you go.”

Oh... Yeah, okay. I should. Instead of heading outside through the door in front of me, I turned left. Our family room, with two chairs and a shelf, plus several bookcases. In the back corner, almost tucked away was a small wooden table. It was dark, but had been treated to almost shine under the light. On it, was a picture of my mother and me from a year or two before she'd died. How old was I in the photo? I looked idiotic, missing one front tooth from both my upper and lower jaw, but on opposite sides. Must have been around seven. She was probably sick by then, but hadn't yet been diagnosed. The picture frame itself was adorned with a black ribbon. Next to it was a bowl of rice with incense sticks speared into it. Vanilla, her favorite scent. We usually only lit them on her birthday, but sometimes I'd seen Dad light them and pray over the little shrine at seemingly random times. Next to that was an urn, which held her ashes and had a rosary draped over the lid. We had thought she'd have liked the eclectic mix of religions in her shrine-thing.

“Well... bye, Mom. See you later,” I said. No matter how many times I did it, talking to her picture was awkward. Like, was I supposed to think she could hear me? Should I be imagining a conversation? Not sure I believed that.

I turned and hobbled out the front door as fast as possible, eager to avoid Dad. The path to town led through a nearby park. It had an old school playground with one of those metal spider web dome things for climbing and a cylindrical plastic slide that would probably burn your skin if you tried to ride it when it was as hot as today. A sand pit, littered with garbage and missing half the sand, had been built underneath the dome. At the base of the metal fence that encircled it, was a flower memorial. Oh yeah, the anniversary of the Earthquake was coming up. There was a wreath big enough to hold with two hands, made out of round, pink, pom-pom flowers. What were they called? It was on the tip of my tongue! One pom-pom had come loose and lay on the ground. I picked it up. Maybe Robin would know if I showed her. I turned away, then turned back.

The Earthquake. That's where everything had gone wrong. Don't get me misunderstand, life hadn't exactly been a set of crystal stairs before that, what with Mom... you know, but boy did things down turn hard after that. Not even just for me, but for Dad and a lot of people. Thanks to it being the start of the Disappearances. Right after it, people started vanishing. It was rumors at first. Stories of parents abandoning their families in the middle of the night, Robin's father included. Affairs, people thought. Abuse, or drugs, said the unkind. But when that 8 year old Keisha Williams vanished, all hell broke loose. The police drowned in angry demands for answers. A vigil for the Disappeared turned rancorous, nearly riotous. The lead detective was kicked off the case and demoted. I knew the details better than most, since that lead detective was my dad. But kicking him off the case hadn't stopped the Disappearances.

Screw the Earthquake.

I kicked the wreath. It crumpled, some more flowers came loose, but it looked more or less the same. That hadn't made me feel any better. And, crap, I'd wasted too much time. Robin would be furious if I was late. Normally, my limp was barely noticeable. You might think I'd tweaked a muscle. Any sort of speed, though, and it really showed. Jogging would just lead to another trip to the hospital after someone found me collapsed on the ground. Even the loping half-jog I settled on was pushing it. I hurried, as best I was able, on to work.

Chapter 2

Talisman was a one stop specialty bookstore for occult reading. Witchcraft, demonology, horoscopes, Shamanism. I rested my head on the front door, panting. Cool glass, a slight relief. Sweat dripped from my nose onto the sidewalk. My side ached. A wave of nausea surged up, but passed almost as quickly. I used my sleeve to dab away the sweat. Small miracles: my black shirt wouldn't show any stains; my face didn't look too flushed in the window's reflection. Hair? A quick paw through it. Maybe she'd think it was gelled instead of wet?

The bell chime wasn't an electric one like supermarkets have, but a real bell hung so the door swing hit it. I checked my phone. On time! That was something. Where was Robin? Her thin black jacket was hung on the chair behind the register, and Talisman looked neat-ish, so she was definitely around somewhere. We fought a losing battle to find and re-sort books misplaced by careless customers. Robin was a one woman Dewey Decimal System. She knew exactly where each book's home was. Me, I was more of a customer service guy. Reading's not really my thing, but the smell of paper was nice. It reminded me of Mom's bedtime stories. She'd read me fairy tales in a slow, hesitant voice as she translated the Japanese to English and then switched back to Japanese as I drifted off and the plot became less important than the soft cadence of her voice.

Tall old metal library shelves loomed and lined corridors that were divided by subject. One of the lights at the back flickered. It always did that, no matter how many times we changed the bulb and, no matter how many time I'd told myself it was faulty wiring, it always felt ominous. Something shifted in between the flickering. Not a person. A presence. A cold shadow that sent a chill down my spine, like a vaguely unpleasant scent I couldn't place, that wafted down the hallway, up my nose, into my dreams, a seeping corruption that-

“Hey.”

I blinked. Robin!

“Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah. Fine.”

Her glasses had slipped to the edge of her thin nose, but an armful of books prevented her from adjusting them.

“You're late.”

“Uh, no I'm not,” I said digging into my pocket, ignoring the needles of pain at the movement, and showing her my phone, “On time. See?”

“You were supposed to come in early and help me with the display.”

Huh?

“Are you sure you asked me?”

“Yes,” she said, “Now, get out of my way, these are heavy.”

I tipped to the side, leaning on the front desk which held the register and ancient desktop computer. She scooted by, jostling me as she moved past. She jabbed my scars, right under the ribs. That hurt! Had she done that on purpose? She didn't apologize when she heard me hiss, so maybe. She stepped to the right, into the tiny window display alcove and went about placing the books here and there. *Psychic Earthquakes and other Supernatural/Natural Phenomena*. Right, the anniversary always drew in people looking to read up on the Earthquake. Robin was hunched over in the display window, trying to fan out a book's pages so it would stay standing. It fell over. She continued to ignore me.

“C'mon, I'm sorry, but we both know you already have a job for me to do to make it up to you, so out with it.”

“It's pricing day,” she said with a frown. I like to think she was resisting a smile. I groaned. She actually did smile at that, “You get a head start on that and I'll come help when I'm done.”

“Alright.”

Or so I said, but I wasn't moving, my brain said go, but my jelly legs said stop. The scars itched where Robin had hit them, but I fought the urge to scratch, I didn't want her noticing; just needed a moment to catch my breath, that's all. I felt flat, a two dimensional person in a 3D world. When I opened my eyes, she was staring at me, eyebrows furrowed.

“Are you-” she began, before noticing my hand. “What is that?”

“What?” I followed her gaze- the flower, I was still holding it. “Oh. How's your botany? I can't remember what this is called.”

She held her hand out, and I dropped the flower. A few of its thin petals clung to my sweaty hand. Squinting, Robin adjusted her glasses as she examined it and looked at me with pity, like I was stupid for not knowing.

“It's a chrysanthemum. It's a pretty common flower, Nathan. Where'd you get it?”

“I plead the fifth.”

She raised an eyebrow. Like I was going to tell her I stole it from a memorial I'd nearly destroyed. She made to give it back.

“Uh, no, you keep it,” I said, heart suddenly pounding, palm sweat doubling, tripling.

“Thanks,” she said, not really sounding thankful. Her brown eyes bored into me. Her stare was relentless. It's one of the things I liked about her, “Are you okay? You don't look so great.”

“Thank you,” I said breezily.

“No, I mean you have bags under your eyes. You're pale as hell and you're sweating like you just ran a marathon. You seem worn out. Have you been sleeping?”

Barely at all. I took comfort in the fact that she was noticing me, even if it was how gaunt I looked. Okay, that settled it. I was taking those sleeping pills.

“And I don't know how to put this, but... you seem brighter, like you're glowing.”

“Glowing?”

“Yeah, like a shimmer, or a cat's eye at night. I'm not explaining it very well, but it kind of reminds me of...” she trailed off.

I'd just looked in the mirror that morning and hadn't noticed any shimmer. Robin, on the other hand, always looked great. She was wearing one of those white shirts with ruffles on them with a black bow tied to the collar. Victorian chic. She'd undone two of the buttons, two more than usual. A bead of sweat dripped from her neck down the slope of the revealed skin. I love summer. She was kinda tall, a little rounded, with a pencil skirt and tights; she totally had a sexy librarian thing going on. And she even had brown eyes! All librarians should have brown eyes. She flipped some hair back.

“Well, if you say you're fine,” she said with a shrug. “Better get started on pricing before the afternoon rush comes in.”

I gave her a mock salute, appreciating the tinkling laughter that followed. I headed behind the counter, finally letting myself grimace and scratch my scars. Ooh that felt satisfying. Through the staff break room, the door to the basement creaked open with the subtlety of a horror movie. I shivered. The steps creaked; I knew it was just the sound of wood fibers snapping. At the bottom, I pulled the metal beaded cord for the light. It flickered twice, then came on. A naked bulb hung in the center of the room. There was a squeak; I whipped around, hurting my neck. Just the stairs settling. Got me every time. The first time I'd ventured down there, I'd nearly knocked Robin over in my haste to leave. She'd teased me for a week and half seriously offered to do the job herself.

Books were scattered in piles everywhere. About three hundred, I guessed, in stacks knee high. I'd never seen so many books on pricing day. We usually got around a third as many. The Earthquake was really driving foot traffic. I sighed, already feeling utterly worn out at the prospect of so much work ahead of me. Thanks to the state of the basement they were already dusty. The pages, though, had been yellowed by age, not dust. We only dealt in used rare books. I took five, careful to balance them on my non-scarred side. It still hurt. I growled. Not too long ago, I could have taken twenty at a time. Hell, my arms were still more than strong enough, but my useless core couldn't handle it. I bit my cheek, drew blood, and forced myself to stay within my limits. It wouldn't prove anything to take more. I set them on the front desk, next to the register. Underneath the register, lying on a shelf built into the desk was the pricing guide. It was thick and badly bound, clearly a custom job. I lugged it up to the desk with some difficulty. Pick up a book, assess the

condition: Like New, Very Good, Good, Fair, or Poor, find it in the pricing guide, and assign the correct price. Easy peasy. And dull.

“Shamanism's really weird.”

“What, you don't believe in it?” Robin said, suddenly at my back, making me flinch.

“Oh! Hey. I'm spiritually indecisive at the moment, but that's not my point. I don't have a problem with the general principles, I just mean, this new version of Shamanism is getting built right before our eyes! Like, how can you believe in a religion that didn't exist for the first 2,000,000 years of human history? Wouldn't it have shown up before now? Seems like one of the older religions is more likely to be the right one.”

“We've only been around for, like, 200,000 years.” Again, not the point. I heard her sigh as she flipped through the already priced books, checking my work. It wasn't worth being offended. She'd caught a lot of my mistakes. Her breath caressed the skin on my neck. Heat fizzed down my spine. Did she know how close she was?

“Well to directly answer your question, wasn't Shamanism the very first religion ever? There wasn't any organized religion, so it was all wise men and women guiding their people through interaction with the spirits. Or something like that. And anyway, isn't 'right' and 'wrong' a pretty limited view of religion? It's not like stories have no value if they aren't describing real events. Like, I'm Catholic, but I don't believe the story of Genesis literally happened.”

“I guess.” I could argue that believing in those stories had caused a lot of harm too, but maybe that was a bit of an intense topic for coworkers. Especially when I didn't have a firm opinion on it yet.

“Sooooo...” she said, still flipping through my already priced stack, “You carry books strangely.”

Another flinch. Dammit. Don't react, don't give her any clue, she'll pick up on it!

“You take, like, what? Four or five at a time, six max. I'm sure you could handle ten or twelve. It'd mean less trips to the basement.”

A nudge in the back. I turned to her wry smile. She'd done that a few times. Asked a question indirectly about my physical abilities. Maybe trying to give me an opportunity to talk about it. I felt the words bubble up and push against my throat, but... I couldn't do it. Something equally strong pushed them back down, begging me not to say anything. Fear. It shouldn't have mattered. She already knew something was up. I mean, we'd met when I'd only just recovered. I'd had a limp and she'd definitely clocked it, though she'd never asked about it directly. I'm not sure what I was so afraid of. But as I turned away I heard her sigh and felt the warm air hit my ears. I closed my eyes. Her breath smelled like peppermint toothpaste.

“You're a puzzle, Nathan Alexander.”

“Well, uh, we should schedule some time together after work one day so you can figure me out.”

That just slipped out! I hadn't meant to say it. I wasn't brave enough to look at her reaction. Was she smiling? Frowning? Was she disgusted? Or maybe blushing? Only a second had passed, but it dragged on into an eternity. I'd never heard a silence so loud.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Was I okay to take that as a good sign? Too late, I already had. It was sort of a polite non-answer but it made my heart soar, patter furiously. My skin felt heated, and a kaleidoscope of butterflies took flight in my stomach. A polite non-answer was NOT a rejection.

“Anyway, you priced these two wrong.”

“What? No, I didn't,” I said before sighing. “Okay, which two?”

A book appeared in front of my face.

“There's some damage on the spine.”

“That's hardly a scratch. I'm not bumping it from Very Good, sorry. Next?”

“Fine,” she said, leafing through a stack of books and picking up the one on water spirits colored a deep scarlet. I recognized it because I remembered thinking it was stupid to publish a book about water spirits in red. “It's, um, this one.”

“The Dunham, yeah, what about it?”

“She died last week.”

“Oh...” That was kind of depressing, actually.

“Yeah, the store got an email about it today. So what do we do in the first month after the author dies?”

“Raise the price by 20%. I know, I know. I hadn't checked the email. Don't forget who got you this job.”

She laughed and finally I felt the tension from her question and our little half date agreement break. “Yes Nathan, but I'm better than you at pricing. Admit it.”

“I'll admit it if you admit that I'm better with customers.”

“I'll never admit that.”

“Come on, you know it's true.”

“I don't know anything, pal,” she said, laughing again. Pal? Even that got my heart thumping. I didn't have many friends. Oh, who was I kidding? I didn't have ANY friends. She probably didn't know what that offhand word meant to me. Or, wait, was it a bad thing? Did it mean she was rejecting me romantically? Putting me in the dreaded friend-zone? But... well, I think I

could live with her thinking of us as friends, at least it meant she liked me a little. I smiled. Whatever, whichever. I'd take what I could get. Robin's head was cocked to the side, probably observing my fluctuating facial expressions.

"I'm going on lunch break. Are you okay on your own for a little bit?" she said as the front door chimed.

"Sure," I said. "Enjoy your rabbit food."

"It's called a salad."

As she left, a young guy walked through the door. He had long blonde hair drawn into a ponytail. An earthy scent accompanied him. He had piercing green eyes. Well, eye. That was new. He had a black patch covering his left eye, it had been embroidered in gold thread with the image of a butterfly.

"Nath, just the man I wanted to see! My supervisor's really breathing down my neck. She says I have good ideas, but they aren't well researched, can you believe that? I say a good idea is a good idea, you know? Anyway, I need some research materials to get her off my back. Think you can help me out?"

"Don't call me that. I mean- I just- Forget all that, Jesus, what happened to your eye!?" I was nearly yelling.

"Oh this?" he said, brushing the patch a little with his thumb. "It's just a sty. Nothing to worry about, but a little gross. The doctor gave me a patch to wear-

His doctor gave him that, really?

"-and then I went online and found a way better one."

There it was. Much more Teddy. He'd been coming in to Talisman for awhile. I'd hated him nearly instantly. The jerk had made Robin giggle the first time they'd spoken! Robin NEVER giggled... not to me anyway. But I had to admit, he was pretty funny. The guy was so damn chipper and nice I'd started to feel bad not liking him back. Anyway, we'd gotten sort of friendly, the three of us. Even though I liked it better when he and Robin didn't interact. But our rapport is how I knew something wasn't right. I mean, beyond just the eye thing.

"Sooooo..." He said, startling me, "do you want the titles or what?"

"Oh! Yeah, give 'em here."

He dug through his pockets one by one, finally finding a crumpled slip of paper in his back left one and waving it at me. I took it and laid it flat on the table, trying with the palm of my hand to smooth it out.

Spirit Callings, Death of the Rain Dance, and Modern Shamanism: A Guide.

"Hm." The anniversary of the Earthquake was definitely coming up. Shaman stuff always

sold like crazy when it did. Like how a Christian might buy a really nice bible around Easter. What was Teddy's thesis even supposed to be on? He bought Shamanism one week, demonology the next, an out of print medical textbook that was more fantasy than science after that.

“Something wrong? You need the authors?”

“Oh, no. It's just that we don't carry *Modern Shamanism*. It's too new for us to have a used copy. You should try a chain store, they'll probably have it.”

“That's fine,” he said, “I'll grab it on my way out of town.”

Out of town... where? The stuff he wanted was always super rare and therefore super expensive. I'd wondered a dozen times what he did for a living that meant he could afford our books. *Death of the Rain Dance* was a self published translation out of print for half a century. Hell, *Callings* was the book that was as close to a first edition Bible that modern shamans had. You'd only even know about books like these if you were really knowledgeable about modern Shamanism. I'd sort of picked it up through osmosis by working at Talisman.

“You're not secretly some sort of Shaman high priest, are you?” I joked.

His smile tightened. He took a step back, his relaxed posture tensing up. Wait, what? I'd offended him? The guy who'd called religion the opiate of the masses? Actually, now that I really looked at him beyond the eye patch, I realized why he seemed off. I mean, between his bright green eyes and shimmering golden hair he always gave off a kinda supernatural vibe, like an elf, but that wasn't it. He was thin, and pale. I could see his veins. The whites of his eyes were red and dark circles underlined his eyes. He hadn't been sleeping. And his smile. Even before I'd asked the shaman question it had felt forced. An awkward silence seemed to crawl around us.

“Um, well, I'll go find these, if you don't mind waiting?”

“Take your time,” he said, turning to a nearby shelf. It took me only a minute to find them. You don't forget where the pricey stuff is. When I came back he was leaning over the counter, fiddling with something. He turned to me, but didn't explain himself. That was weird. My wallet was still there, and Robin's jacket, so he hadn't stolen anything. What was with the guilty look? I rang up the books and winced.

“\$714.14,” I said.

“Here.”

The check he handed me was a custom design, the kind you had to pay a little extra for. A bright blue butterfly sat on the edge of a blade of grass. He'd written the exact number, down to the cent. Again. It couldn't have just been looking up the prices (not that he even could have for the incredibly rare books) because he'd wanted to buy *Modern Shamanism* on top of these two, but we hadn't carried it. Somehow, Teddy always knew exactly what the books he bought would cost.

“How do you always do that?”

“That's classified by orders of the Shaman high priest,” he said with an incredibly forced wink and grin. But whatever, that was fine, I took it to mean he wasn't mad about earlier.

I began to look over the books. Cover, spine, binding, back cover, pages. Teddy seemed interested.

“It's just to double check we gave it the right condition rating,” I said. “You've seen me do this a bunch of times.”

“I know, but it's still kind of cool!” He said, “You're like some professional appraiser, y'know?”

“Did you need anything else?”

“Can I have a bag?”

“Sure.” The small shelf underneath the register had large paper bags resting on it. I grabbed one and shook it out, and placed his two books inside. Teddy was staring at me. The smile that hardly ever left him was gone. The air around me suddenly felt colder, or, like something cold was approaching from behind. I noticed he wasn't staring at *me*, per se, more like my outline. My muscles? Not sure how to feel about that.

“Your friend,” Teddy said, making me jump. Third time in a day! “Is she here?”

“You mean Robin?” He nodded. “She's eating lunch. Uh, want me to get her?”

His face scrunched up, considering, but in the end he shook his head. “See ya!” He called behind his back as he took his books and left.

I nodded as the door chimed. Goodbye, weirdo.

With his departure I was alone. One customer buying two books in a specialty bookstore in a small town qualified as a sales rush. How was Talisman staying open? Meh- as long as I was getting paid, right? My stomach gurgled. Maybe I could afford to take my lunch break too. No sign of Robin in the break room. She wouldn't have gone into the basement to eat, there wasn't even a table. Maybe the manager's office? We weren't explicitly told not to use it, but I'd thought Robin was too much of a goody two shoes to break a rule, even if it was only implied.

I tiptoed to the door. Why was I being subtle? I flung the door open, slamming it against the opposite wall.

“Eek!”

...Insanely cute. A fork full of lettuce hovered inches from her mouth. Her face flushed.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack!” she said.

“I wanted to take my break and couldn't find you. Do you always eat in here?”

“No. And I was done anyway.”

I stared pointedly at the still uneaten third of the salad. She placed it back in its wrapping, overly slow, overtly casual like she was trying to show she'd always meant to leave it uneaten. Into her satchel it went, along with the rest of the debris. A packet of chips, a cookie with a bite taken out of it, an empty soda can. No judgment, but it seemed gross to take a bite of a cookie in-between forkfuls of salad. Then I noticed her body movements were stiff and she had red rimmed eyes. Oh. She'd been distracted.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Sure,” she replied, too fast.

My lips tightened as I debated whether to press further.

“The anniversary is in a few days.”

The Earthquake. She'd lost her dad right after. Of course she'd be upset. Stupid, I should have remembered. I wanted to say something, but what do you say to a person whose dad Disappeared? They don't exactly print greeting cards for it. If it had been my dad... No, not worth getting upset about, it didn't happen to him. It wouldn't.

She sighed. “It doesn't matter. Look, take your break. Someone needs to watch the store since I'm sure you didn't use the 'back in five minutes' sign.”

Lips quirking upward at my shrug, she slung the bag over her shoulders and slammed the door.

“Wait!” I called, finally finding my voice. “You forgot your lap... top.” Too late.

Her plain, white ceramic mug sat on the desk... and her laptop. Behind the desk, a bamboo plant that Robin sporadically watered clung to life. It was impossible to tell if the carpet was brown because it had been made that way or because it was old. Her laptop was open, still logged in and everything. It kind of reminded me of the police precinct. Cluttered and run-down, everything looking second hand under bright fluorescent lighting and laptops sitting on desks-

Okay! A little peek wouldn't hurt. 'Investigation- Victims'. A list of names, vital stats next to them, age, gender, a few had height and, gross, blood type? Grisly. It looked like the police reports Dad would bring home when he was dealing with a tough case, but less professional. Some names were vaguely familiar, others obscure. David Melling. Melling? That's Robin's last name. I scrolled down. Keisha Williams- The first child to Disappear. It was a list of people who'd Disappeared, with notes on each, including her dad. That explained the crying. How long had Robin been tracking this stuff? And at the end was a name with a question mark next to it. Nathan Alexander. Me.

Chapter 3

Our town has stray cats. Abandoned or escaped pets and their offspring wander around scrounging for food. They're emaciated, desperate. If you take a shortcut through an alley, you might see one. It doesn't know you're just walking from one place to another. To it, you're an invader. It'll hug the wall, protecting its flank. It'll preen upwards, hissing and spitting. Fur will splay outward, exaggerating its size.

That's how Robin looked when she opened the door and saw me staring at her computer. Feline and cornered, spoiling for a fight, she darted forward and stretched herself across the desk, slapping the screen down. Ouch. Couldn't have been good for the hardware.

“What did you see?” she demanded.

Like... everything? Height, weight, birthday, star sign. At least the medications box was blank; she didn't know what I was taking. But why have me there at all? A quick glance at my body told me, I was, in fact, not Disappeared at all. I was extremely... Appeared.

“I-nothing. The victim list,” I said.

“You had no right.”

“You left it on and open, it's not like I hacked into it!”

“Oh, so that gives the right to invade my privacy?”

“That's not what I'm saying, I just-”

No dice, Robin wasn't having any of it; she pulled the computer to her side, stormed out of the room and once again slammed the door behind her. Hard. I felt the wind blow some hair out of my face. When I was brave enough to leave, I could practically feel a cold draft coming off her. She stalked around the bookstore, an angry cloud hanging over her. What few customers we had bought their books and left as fast as possible. No one, least of all me, wanted to get caught up in a Robin tornado. Okay, I shouldn't have looked, but it wasn't like I'd read her diary, I'd glanced, *glanced*, at a file she'd left open and in front of me. About me!

By the time Robin was locking up the store, I'd come to a decision. A buzzing from my pocket distracted me. Dad, checking in with *'Are you on your way home?'* I could hear him in my head, stern, already a little worried. He'd live if I didn't respond right away.

“Want to get coffee?”

Robin gave me a look that made me feel lower than a worm. “No.”

“We need to talk.”

She folded her arms; I mirrored her and raised an eyebrow. Come on, mad as she was, she knew she couldn't pretend she didn't have to explain why my name was on that list. She exhaled loudly, staring up into the sky. Good enough. I pointed to one of three coffee shops on the opposite

side of the street. Robin fell into step ahead of me, not unusual, most people walked faster. Despite the earlier tension, the silence wasn't uncomfortable. She was a rare person that didn't feel compelled to fill every little silence, like me. With her, I felt like I could just enjoy moments, no commentary needed. I glanced her way. She had an angular face which felt at odds with her round glasses frames and overall figure. As tall as me in her heels, so she was maybe 5'9"? Perfect hug height. I'd only have to crane my neck a little for her to slot right in. And she had a curvy enough figure that I'd probably feel everything if she pressed up against me.

We crossed the town's original old brick road. It was uneven, easy to trip over and badly in need of repair. Mom used to be afraid to drive over it in case it blew one of her tires. And Dad told me every local election devolved into a fight over whether to spend the money to repair it. Costs and historical relevance vs safety. The lion's share of the budget was probably sunk into the ongoing police searches for the people who'd vanished. The road was just about the only thing left from when the town was first built.

I paid for Robin's drink, trying to earn a few points. She practically ripped the cup out of my hand as I gave it to her. Soon we were sitting on the patio overlooking the street. A latte for Robin and a sugar filled caramel something-or-other for me.

"If you want something sweet, just get a cake."

"Cakes don't have caffeine."

We watched cars pass by. The air was thick with the roast smell of coffee. A hot drink on a hot day. Time flowed slowly. It felt like I could identify each individual moment as it passed us by. It wasn't quite the alone time with Robin I'd hoped for, since it was a prelude to a difficult conversation, but it was kind of nice. Quiet moments had become rare with the paranoia oppressing the town. Anyone might Disappear for no reason, at any time. From your bed, from the street, your car, and so people talked, to keep themselves busy on anything other than thinking.

"Teddy came in today," I said, searching for a neutral topic to diffuse the tension.

"Oh?" She said.

"Yeah, he had an eye patch. He has a sty, apparently, but I think he had his custom made. It had an embroidered gold thread--"

She sent me a withering glare. Okay, she didn't want to lead in with small talk.

"I'm sorry," I said. She didn't turn to me, but I could tell I had her attention, her head tilted slightly to better catch my words. "I shouldn't have looked at your private notes. It was a dick move."

She huffed.

"But..." I said, "I did see them. So it's kind of hard to pretend you don't have a file with the

Disappearance victims' personal information in it. And mine.” The question hung in the air.

“I don't have to tell you anything.” she said, a cold front moving in from the north.

“Hey, for someone who's so concerned about her privacy, you sure don't seem to be losing any sleep for violating two dozen other people's.”

“I didn't do anything illegal,” she said.

It was something a nine year old would say.

“And I'm sure that'll be a good argument if you happen to end up in law school,” I said as she flipped her hair, refusing to make eye contact. I could feel a headache coming on and a cold tingling in my feet. C'mon, shake it off! I tapped my feet, trying to warm them up. It'd be the worst possible time to have an attack. “It looks like you're spending a lot of time thinking about the Disappearances, and it makes me worry about you. It's not healthy.”

“You're worried about my health? You look like you're about to drop dead.”

Did I really look that bad? She'd said I'd been glowing earlier. Was I sweating a lot or something? Just the heat of the day, the stress, that was all. A gulp of hot coffee did nothing to suppress a shiver.

“This isn't about me,” I said, trying to gain control of the conversation, “this is about you and your file.”

It came out forcefully. Good. Then, a pulse, a familiar chill, worked up from my feet to my waist, not stopping, rising and swirling around my heart and into my thoughts. Anger. Coldness. My vision blurred then darkened. The world dipped itself in florescent paint, then twisted. Robin's eyes became a swirling saturated mess, hypnotic. I was so tired. No, no. I didn't want to sleep. The iciness pulled at me. I was being pulled into sleep. A sharp pain broke through the noise. I gasped.

“Ah, ow!” I said. “What the hell are you doing?”

Everything snapped back. I was breathless. Had I not been breathing? Robin was gripping my arm, holding tight enough that I could feel my bones flexing. The bruises would probably lead to yet another father-son talk about my health. Fantastic. Thanks Robin.

“I'm sorry,” Robin's grip loosened before she pulled away entirely, “you looked just like- no, never mind. Sorry.”

Her hand trembled. So did mine.

“Is- Is that why my name's on your list? Because I remind you of your dad?”

She flinched. Her dad. That had to have been the person she was talking about. My pocket was buzzing from another attempt to reach me by my father. I'd pay for not answering later. Robin refused to meet my eyes; she fidgeted in her seat, crossing a leg over the other. Her skirt hitched up and I mostly avoided staring at the exposed skin.

“You look a little like he did, just before. Tired. And, like, kind of bright. It reminds me of him, okay? And I always miss him around the anniversary of the Earthquake. I got ahead of myself writing your name. I'm sorry.”

“So your dad was ruggedly handsome too?”

She laughed hard, almost mockingly. “Your features and personality are totally different. My dad's kind and sweet and really really smart, and, like, tall. Super tall. You've just had the same air about you as he did. It's hard to define.”

She was crushing my heart as casually as you'd throw away a piece of garbage. She made a noise between a cough and a laugh and turned red, looking away. Oh, okay. So, she realized it, but wasn't going to take it back.

“But it's the same as him right before... he left. You were pretty tan when I met you, but you're awfully pale now. He looked kind of drained too.”

Yeah, I'd lost my tan because I can barely walk without risking aggravating lingering injuries from the accident, so I no longer felt particularly outdoorsy. She started tapping her finger against her cup. A nervous habit? She stared into the street.

“I, uh, I did interviews with the families of the victims, and they confirmed their loved ones had looked the same way.”

“Wait, what do you mean, 'interviews'? Like with a camera?”

“No. Maybe 'interviews' is too formal a word. I was looking for my dad, and they'd all been through the same thing as me, so they were willing to talk to me,” she said. “I was looking for any kind of connection between the victims. Something the police had missed.”

Police like my dad. I bristled, not liking her implication. “I mean, a couple of people who kind of looked paler than normal isn't exactly a smoking gun, I know. But it felt like maybe it wasn't a coincidence.”

“Couldn't it be?” It was happening again. The heart pounding. It'd been a stressful day for the organ.

“I mean, probably.” She sighed. “But equally, maybe not. It's not like I had anything else to go on.”

My stomach felt like it was trying to crawl up my throat. I'm next. I'm going to disappear next. That's all I could think. Robin's eyebrows rose. She'd made the connection too. 'Brightness' and 'drained'. Two things I had in common with her dad. Had he had attacks like mine? I was afraid to ask.

“Nathan, would you quit freaking out?” she said. “We're talking about, like, four people who said their Disappeared relatives were 'Yeah, maybe a little pale' months and months after the fact!”

“Wha-!?! Come on, you have to lead with that!” But she was right. It wasn't the time to panic. Interviews could only take her so far, and it's not like hospitals would just give her patient information. But I knew another way.

“I can fill in the gaps in your data.”

“What? How?”

She stood up and leaned across the table. The air she breathed flowed with coffee and mint. I leaned in slightly. Her shirt still had two buttons undone.

“My dad was the detective in charge of the Disappearances when they first started. I mean, he got taken off the case but he'll still have copies of the files. Things like victim stats.”

She tapped her fingers on the table: pinkie, ring, middle, pointer, in order like that. They made a cascade of taps. She stared up and to the side, eyes squinting, puzzling something out. Afterwards she slumped back into her seat like she'd expended a lot of energy.

“Your dad wouldn't give you something like that.”

“Yeah, I'm not sure 'give' is the word I'd use.”

“Nathan-”

“It's okay. I'm offering because I need to know too. It'll be like twenty seconds of rummaging through his desk, no big deal.”

Okay, his desk in a police station, but Robin didn't need to know that. Stealing on its own was bad, sure, but the fact that it would be from Dad made me queasy. Not sure the crippled kid card would carry me very far if I stole from the police. But, still, I bit my lip, hoping against hope she'd agree. I wanted her to need my help, and I wanted to prove I didn't belong on that list.

“Look, don't do anything crazy,” she said. “Just let me handle the research. You don't need to get involved.”

“I'm not asking for your permission.” ... Wait, what? Robin looked as shocked as I felt. I'd never challenged her like that. I stumbled for something to say, to explain myself, “I'm... next, aren't I? I can't just sit on my butt and do nothing while I Disappear.”

A stinging heat pooled in my eyes. My saliva thickened, became difficult to swallow. Dad would shatter. He was already cracked, barely getting by since Mom had died. But losing me too? He'd never recover. But maybe that'd be better than having me slowly drag him down emotionally and financially. Get it over with. Would you rather get cut a thousand times with a pocket knife or speared through the gut with a javelin?

Robin passed me her napkin, “Nathan, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to- I don't know anything. That's half the problem.”

I took the napkin and laughed. At what? Who knows? At least I wasn't bawling, but the

napkin still got a little wet. Robin shifted in her seat, angling her body away from mine as I got myself under control. Her phone buzzed, giving her and me a distraction.

“I’m sorry, Nathan, I have to go, Mom and Sophie’ll be worried. Well, Mom will,” Robin said. “Just... don’t do anything yet. We can always decide to go after the police records later if we need them, but we can’t un-steal them. I’m pretty sure they’ll bust out the forensics team when they realize they’ve been robbed. We’ll talk about this later.”

I’d caught the ‘we’. Maybe I’d been accepted into the team.

“Yeah, I get you. Go on, I’m fine.”

She faltered for a moment, not really believing my flat tone, but she stood up anyway. There was a sharp tearing as she hoisted her black messenger bag over her shoulders. A strap broke and the bag went tumbling to the ground, spilling out its contents around the table’s legs. It was no wonder the bag had broken. I counted no less than three massive reference books in the mix. Hey! Those were Talisman books. One on Shamanism, another on dreams and a third whose title I couldn’t read. No way Robin could afford them, unless she was getting paid twice as much as me. She didn’t do *that* much more work. She saw me staring.

“I’m just borrowing them.”

“Uh huh. Do you think the Disappearances are supernatural?”

“I’m casting a wide net.”

We knelt and started picking things up. Robin took the books and laptop while I went for the smaller items. Pens, pencils, a pack of gum. Small bits of paper.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll see you at work tomorrow?”

I jutted my chin out. She picked up her cup and chugged the remaining liquid. Gross, it had to be cold. Then she walked off, taking care to look right, left, then right again before crossing. Her brown hair swayed back and forth with her steps. As she walked away the sunset seemed to crawl up her, like some terrible orange sludge.

I wasn’t sure where the two of us stood after that. It was the most ‘real’ conversation we’d ever had. Were we friends? Partners in crime? Friends sounded good, but I wanted... God, I didn’t know what I wanted. A slip of white paper was on the ground. No, not paper, plastic. Laminate? A bookmark. It was dark blue, but some parts had been left white in the shape of the moon and stars. The back had writing on it:

To my beautiful daughter;

So you’ll never lose your place.

Love,

Dad

The corners were peeling. Obviously careworn. There was something strange about it. It looked almost like the stars were twinkling. On the reverse side the 'Dad' was definitely moving, it bounced off the edge. The bookmark seemed to pulse, like a single heartbeat. It felt warm. A coldness seeped back into my toes, icy, stronger than before.

“Dammit, not now.”

I hesitated. It felt familiar. This iciness, mixed with warmth. Where had I felt it? It was almost there, on the edge of my mind, I- the coldness advanced, reaching it's fingers up my shins. I stuffed the bookmark into my back pocket, and loped across the street, barely dodging a car. Robin. My gait was uneven, jerky, as my right leg tried to adjust for the weakness in my left. I burst into the alley, she was there, just about to exit on the other side.

“Robin!”

She turned. Relief blossomed in my chest before an explosion of pain knocked me flat. An instinctual arm flail saved my face from kissing asphalt. I tried to stand up but the pain only increased. It was radiating from my scars through my entire body. No, don't pass out, not in front of her! Vision blurred, sounds thickened. A slap slap slap slap. A face appeared. Robin. Her hair cascaded over me, the edges of it tickling my cheeks. *Are you okay?* I saw her lips move, but couldn't hear the question. I shook my head to clear my ears. I could feel it. The iciness taking me. Calling me to sleep.

“Nathan!”

That I heard. My head lolled, couldn't keep it upright. I was stuck staring at graffiti on the nearby wall. My neck was too stiff to move. It was an ambitious design of a rainbow swallow. It was just an outline, but each foot or so it bled into another color. Crimson at the head, moving to orange, vermilion, emerald, the sky, the sea, night, and then amethyst for its head. Someone had added a dick at some point, of course. It all blended together, giving it the impression of movement. It turned to look at me.

Robin floated right above my head, an angel. Her cell phone was to her ear, but I couldn't make out the words. Could she hear it? A bubbling darkness surrounded us, slurching across the ground, ice cold wherever it went. I shook. Could she feel it? She had to be able to smell it; the scent of burnt sugar was suffocating. I tried to move my hand, tried to grab hers, but I could only reach the top of her knee.

“Robin, I don't want to go.”

Did I say that, or only think it? She took my hand in hers, lacing our fingers together, her eyes were clear, but soft, trying to keep me calm. It suited her, action in a crisis. If the roles were reversed I probably wouldn't have thought to call an ambulance yet. The darkness gathered under

us. Darting between her and me. Choosing. I heard her scream. Her hand was ripped from mine.

Robin!

I closed my eyes and followed.



Chapter 4

It's just me, the rainbow swallow, and the wall it's painted on. The night sky is bright with the sparkling trails of comets. Isn't it daytime? I could have sworn-

I'm in a dream.

This feeling... My body feels wrong. I look down at my hands and wiggle my fingers. The movement is slow, like they're being dragged through a viscous fluid. The fingers leave afterimages like a sparkler, trails of color that slowly click back into place when I keep my hands still. I know this feeling. The odd sensation of lucidity mixed with the mindless hum of a dream. That's what had happened right after the accident. I'd gone into a dream, but I was conscious. I moved across the hall... to the door... and I saw... I saw... A flash of red? No, as soon as I grasp for the memory, it's gone.

"Dammit," I say.

The swallow and I make eye contact. Well, it feels like eye contact. The artist didn't give the bird eyes, but it's staring at me all the same. Not threatening. Appraising. Intelligent, purpose guides its movements as it stretches, brushes its head against a wing. Its wings expand, spreading upwards across the wall, before folding them back into a resting position. My body feels wrong, somehow. Like I don't fit my own skin. It doesn't feel painful, but uncomfortable. Something's missing. I'm standing. The alleyway is gone, but the rainbow swallow is not.

It's waiting. For what?

"Hello?"

Robin! I feel as much as hear her echoing voice, coming from right behind my head and a hundred miles to the east and underground and in the air itself.

"Can you help me?" I ask the swallow.

It nods. Then it just sits there. My fists clench.

Something digs into my palm. My fingers unfurl. Robin's bookmark. It shimmers. On the bottom edge, a droplet begins to form, like the last drip from a shower head after you turn the water off. It's also glowing, a shining white light. Instead of splashing onto the ground, it glides down smoothly, as if it were a strand of a spider's web, leaving a shining line connecting the bookmark to the ground. The droplet twitches left, then right, before shooting between my legs, faster than I can track, the glowing line showing its path. The line disappears into the horizon. A guide? Is that where Robin is?

As if it had been waiting for that, the swallow stirs. With shuddering flaps, it attempts to extricate itself. Its beak opens in a noiseless cry. Goopy tendrils of color slough off, leaving sticky puddles. Blood? Ink? Rainbow liquid froths around my feet. Thick, sticky putty of webbing, all

colors of the rainbow, holds the swallow down. The webbing flexes as the bird's wings flap furiously, attempting to lift off from the wall. Finally, it dislodges a wing tip. The rest begins to follow. A piece of the gluey web snaps. It strains, beak open wide, much too wide. A chirp? It's really deep, more of a crow caw. Is it crying out in pain? Another snap. Then all at once- CRACK. It's not enough to hold it down, all the chains binding the bird to the wall snap at once. It's free. It flies straight into my chest. My hands grasp at my heart and I stagger and fall into warm liquid. It's sticky and hot. I scramble up, panicking as the paint-like substance sticks and almost holds me down. Whatever the stuff is made of, I'm stronger. I manage to stand and look around. The hell? It's nowhere. Did it- It couldn't have gone inside me, right? I don't want a bird messing around inside my body! No time to think about it because my feet are moving on their own, sprinting after that golden trail, too fast to see the scenery pass around me. I haven't run in two years. The feeling, it's... indescribable. It's like scratching an itch you haven't been able to reach for months, remembering the name of a song that's been in your head for ages. Like good sex after a long dry spell. Well, I'm assuming on that one. And it hits me. Why my body felt wrong, still feels wrong, is because I'm normal here. Injuries, my physical limitations, they don't exist. It's the most happiness I've felt, well, since before the accident. I finally-

We're here. My legs know where to stop. Or maybe the swallow inside me does.

It's a house. A kind of shabby one, wood painted light-blue, but with lots of flakes coming off it and the white accent beams on the porch. It's small, at least for where I live, it probably only has three bedrooms max. Is this where Robin lives? I mean, I shouldn't judge! My house is the same size, maybe smaller! I just... I dunno. I kind of always pictured her living in a mansion with a huge library and a princess style canopy bed. At least there's a big porch.

The front door creaks as I open it, but this isn't a horror movie so I'm not scared. I know it's just the rusty hinges. I'm not scared at all.

“R-Robin?” I call so quietly she might not have heard me if she was standing next to me.

The foyer is dark. There's a switch nearby and I'm pleasantly surprised when the lights turn on. It's way less frightening without all the shadows. Not that I was scared. Anyway, there's a thin rug leading from a small tiled area for guests to take their shoes off I'm standing in. I do. Seems polite. There's a stairwell to my right and a thin walkway to my left, probably leading to the kitchen. In my house the stairs are on the other side.

“Robin?” I try again, louder.

There's a series of thumps upstairs, each one sending a shiver down my spine, then, muffled- “Nathan?”

It's her! I run up the stairs, taking them three at a time, nearly tripping over myself. At the

top I turn left and sprint down the hallway. I'm sure that's where I heard her voice coming from. By the time I get there a door is opening and a beautiful, wonderful, smart girl is walking through the opening. I throw myself on her, hugging her ferociously enough that she's forced to take a few steps backwards.

“Whoa!” She says, hugging back, probably more to keep from falling than excitement, “I'm happy to see you too, but get a hold of yourself!”

I let go and step back, taking deep, calming breaths. She's okay. She's okay! I thought something terrible had happened. I'm so relieved to see I was wrong. I can't stop grinning at her. She's smirking back at me, the usual picture of poise and confidence. She flips some hair that's hanging over her shoulder to behind it.

“Last thing I remember, I was calling an ambulance for you in an alleyway in broad daylight and next thing I know, I wake up in my bed. What the heck happened?”

Whoa. I actually know something she doesn't! “I think we're in-” The door slams. The one downstairs. “Oh, sorry, I think I left the door open.”

Robin nods and I'm about to continue when I'm interrupted again.

Thump.

That wasn't the door. It sounded more like...

Thump.

Something coming up the stairs! I feel cold. A cold that starts at my toes moves upward. The thumps shudder on, getting louder and louder, Robin flinches at each one.

“Nathan, what-”

“I don't know, but I don't think we want to meet it,” I say, tiptoeing quietly to her bedroom door and closing it as noiselessly as possible. Whatever it is knows someone's here, thanks to my stupidity of leaving the light on and door open, but that doesn't mean it knows where exactly. Maybe if it searches the wrong room we can make a break for it. A particularly loud thump signals the whatever-this-thing-is' arrival on the second floor. We're both listening intently, barely breathing. I'm not breathing at all, I don't think. The knob jiggles. I step back, Robin's already standing on the far side of her bed, as defensive a position as she can manage under the circumstances. The knob turns, slowly, unbearably slowly. The door begins to open...

Jesus, maybe this is a horror movie after all. Screw that! I rush forward and throw my shoulder into the door, jamming it closed. If we're going to get found anyway, we may as well go down fighting. There's a cry from the other side. Surprise? Pain? It doesn't take long before there's pounding and pushing at the door. It's strong, stronger than me. I flex and grunt, feet slipping on the ground. If the circumstances were different, I might be happy to finally be able to use the full

strength of my body like this. I chance a look back at Robin. She's staring, wide-eyed and frightened. It looks terrible on her, the cocky self-assurance was way better.

“Little help?” I ask, trying to sound in control.

That snaps her out of it, I think I almost see her smirk before she starts forward to help, but it's way too late. With a thunderous crack, a huge amount of pressure takes me by surprise and flings me backwards coming to a stop only when I roll into the bedframe. Owowow. My head's spinning, but I know I have to face this thing, whatever it is. I have to protect her. She gasps. I manage to turn my body to face it, but I can't force myself to stand.

It's a man.

I mean, he's like the same height as me, maybe shorter. Not so scary, all things considered. A letdown, even. I'd been expecting some sort of nightmare monster. Like my mom back from the grave and trying to murder us. Or maybe something a little more classic, like a werewolf. I'm almost relieved until it steps forward and I realize the reason I can't see the man's features isn't because he's in a shadow, it's because he IS a shadow. No face, just smooth black. I can see slight protrusions of what must be a nose and ears. And hair, it's long, going past his shoulders. No mouth. At first.

He smiles. It's pure, black fangs. Glistening wet, dripping the same black shadow he's made out of. I can see my breath. It's cold in here, so cold. It's looking at Robin. It doesn't have eyes but just like with the swallow, I can feel it. The malice directed at her fills the room.

“No...” I say, weak. I struggle to stand, fail, have to lean myself over the bed. The shadow takes a step towards her. “No!”

A light shines in my hands, forcing the shadow man backwards. It holds its hands over its face, hissing in pain. What? What the heck was that? I look down. Robin's bookmark. I'd been carrying it when we'd been knocked into the dreamworld. Had I been holding it the whole time or did it just appear? Doesn't matter! It lunges towards her, but I hold the bookmark out and force it back again. I raise it high, washing all of us in a prismatic spray of light. It's warm, and gentle. It beats back the iciness of the shadow man. This is the monster I've been feeling for weeks now, clawing at my feet.

“Nathan what the hell is going on!?” Robin cries, anger covering an undercurrent of fear, panic. She's great at a lot of things, but flexibility's not one of them. No way she can adapt to a situation like this on the fly.

“Just stay away from that thing! Come here,” I say extending the hand holding the bookmark towards her. She looks from the shadow to me, nods and darts forward. I'm not paying attention; I should be paying attention! I don't see the man move, I only see Robin's eyes widen and

her attempt to shield herself with her arms. The dark man expands, turning into an ink blot, a wave of darkness and envelops her. “Robin!”

I'm running forward, grabbing her hand, even as the rest of her body is being swallowed by darkness. It's trying to, what? Posses her? Desperate, I force the bookmark into her hand and squeeze her fingers around it. There's a frustrated growl and suddenly I'm sent flying again by a black tendril striking me in the chest. At least this time I land on the bed. The shadow man is sluicing off Robin like water, driven away by the bright light of the bookmark. She crumples to the ground, landing hard on her knees. There's a distant, vacant expression in her eyes that I don't like the look of. But there's no time. The shadow man is regrouped, formed back into a person, glaring at me with that same perceptible cold malice I felt earlier. He's been staring at me for awhile, he had earlier that day in my bedroom. He wants me. I blink and he's got me by the throat.

“Wh-?” I gurgle out, hands scrabbling to loosen his fingers even as his grip tightens. Fast! I'd barely even seen him. And I'm no weakling, but I can't tear his hand away from my neck. Without the bookmark, I'm nothing to this thing. It smirks when I resort to scratching, clawing at the arm. No visible effect.

“Laaater,” he says, syllable drawn out like how you'd imagine a snake's 's' would be. “I'll have you later, little Nathan.”

It throws me, hard. I expect to hit the bedroom wall, but instead I'm launched out past the doorway, flung down the stairs, the front door opens and I'm expelled from the house, door slamming behind me. How...?

“R...Robin...”

And then I black out.

I wake to a gentle rocking. The sound of waves and the smell of salt. Different from the sticky puddles I keep encountering in dreams. Like the black one from my recurring nightmare, or the paint from the rainbow swallow's escape into my heart or whatever the hell it was doing. I prefer to think of it as paint and not blood. No, this is the gentle lapping of the water of a calm sea. I know it because Dad had taken me to the small fishing village where he'd grown up a bunch of times. I half expect to hear a seagull cry.

“You're up.”

A woman's voice. It's night; I can see the stars and smell a musty kind of smoke. Different than cigarettes. Marijuana? I turn to her voice. My vision's blurry, I can't make her out. Or maybe it's just the haze of smoke surrounding her. I look around. Nope, definitely my vision. I can just about see handrails and some sort of large pole. I'm on a boat. A big wooden one, not at all like the tiny metal speedboats Dad liked to rent.

“Where am I?”

“You're in a dream. My dream.”

I don't know what that means. I don't care. It's not important right now.

“Did you see that thing? What was it?”

The woman inhales deeply, I can hear the tiny crackle of paper being burned. She rolls her own joints. She exhales equally deeply.

“A... spirit. An elemental. A shade gone completely out of control.”

A spirit? That seems like a timid categorization of the slinking shadow man that had nearly killed me.

“Wait, what about Robin!?” I'm afraid to ask, “What'll the... spirit do to her? To my friend?”

“Well, the same as it did all the rest, in time.”

“The rest?”

“The Disappearance victims,” she says, tone exaggerated, making it clear what she thinks of my intelligence.

“The Disappearance-” I shoot up, bracing an elbow against the ground. The sudden movement coupled with blurry vision exacerbates a growing headache, but I don't care. “I knew it. That's the thing that's been making people Disappear. It was after me first.”

If it had been after me, why grab Robin too? Because we'd been close? Because I'd had the bookmark? And if we're adding questions to the pile, what the heck was that bookmark, anyway? It'd appeared out of nowhere and saved the day. Sort of.

My chest feels light, all of a sudden. I'm being lifted up. Something's moving, I can feel it on my abdomen, tickling my stomach, nipples, everywhere. I can hear a sound, at first I think- paper fluttering in the wind, and then I think the woman is rolling another joint, but I don't smell any weed, and now small wisps of a breeze caress my face and body. I strain to look down. Dozens of gigantic butterflies have appeared on my chest and are flapping their wings, trying to lift me off the ground. The bright orange and yellow of a Monarch and a Tiger Swallowtail stick out, but only because those are the only two kinds I know. A long time ago Mom had wanted to spend a summer going to parks and looking for butterflies but I'd passed. It'd sounded dumb. I wish I had Well, I'm not sure how identifying a light blue butterfly without stripes from a black one with little protruding extensions from its wings would have helped in this situation anyway.

“What the heck?” I say, raising my hand to swat them away.

“Don't hurt them!” she says. “They're helping, trust me.” She points to a brown and white one. “This one's called a Purple Emperor. Strange name, isn't it? And this pale blue one's an Amanda's Blue. Did you know that butterflies can fly even if they lose the dust on their wings? It

just weakens the wing and makes it more prone to injury.”

Her speaking has a way of calming me. I don't even panic when the butterflies start to flap their wings much faster, pulling at my shirt.

“Among the shamans, butterflies are symbols of change and rebirth. They're a little bit magic, spinning us off into new paths and stories we'd never imagined. And yet they're my spirit animal. It's a pretty mean cosmic joke. I mean, I can't change anything about my life or circumstances. I can't move or leave or do anything I really want to.”

Me too, I think. Spirits, shades, bookmarks, rainbow swallows, spirit animals. It's all getting a bit much. My eyelids feel heavy. Her voice trails from an almost breathless excitement to bitterness. I want to comfort her, but my chest lifts off the ground. That's alarming. And it only grows as my shoulders and butt join my chest in leaving the surface of the boat.

“Hey, what? No way, stop!”

“They also serve as guides down esoteric unseen paths. I wish you all the best on your journey, short or long, happy or sad.”

“I thought you meant, like, figurative guides and paths! This is a too literal for me!” I yell, already well up into the air. The fact that I'm being lifted by my shirt means I lose sight of her, I can only see the starry sky and seemingly endless ocean, but with the ocean on top and the sky on bottom because my head is lolling backwards. Oh god, I feel sick.

There's no answer.

“Wait! No, please, I have so many questions.”

“We'll meet again, if you follow the butterfly.”

“Follow what butterfly? You're not making any sense!”

“Just follow the butterfly,” she says again, distant.

“Waaaaait!” I wail. Seriously? Follow a butterfly?



The Dreaming of Robin Melling

The name slips from my lips. “Nathan!” It’s instinctive, enough of a surprise that my fingers drift over to touch them as I sit up. I’m covered in a layer of sweat. I’ll have to wash my linens today. But for now, I cling to them, soft fabric absorbing the traces of my fear. They’re fuchsia pink. I thought I’d replaced them for light blue years ago? I’d read a study that said blue is a calming color that helps you sleep. Hadn’t helped. Strange. Mom must be washing my normal ones... even though she knows I do my own laundry. My panting breaths echo in the room even as they slowly return to a natural rhythm. A thudding heart has already settled to a gentler pitter-patter. I can recall the nightmare in flashes: coffee with Nathan. Him collapsing in the alley. Teleporting to my bedroom. This bedroom. Nathan’s fear. A shadow monster attacking me and, I shiver, wrapping itself around me. I try not to think of what Sigmund Freud would have made of it. He’s been widely discredited as a psychotherapist anyway. In any case, my body knows how to handle nightmares; it’s used to having to live them out in the real world. The world where Dad vanished. A soon forgotten nightmare is nothing compared to the horror of reality. Great, now I’m sounding like Freud.

Nathan. That kid is a problem. He’s technically older than me, but he certainly doesn’t act like it. He has feelings for me, it’s painfully obvious. He’s nice enough, but kind of dumb and just... goofy! I’ve been trying to turn him down subtly, talking about us as friends. He’s not taking the hint. Maybe I should drop subtlety and lie about having a boyfriend? I hate lying but I also really don’t want to deal with his crushed puppy moping around the bookstore. He’s always got something to be sad about.

The darkness of my room has softened; outlines appear and spread across the room, first from the blanket I still cling to, then moving outward to the bed frame. I can make out the low, wide chair that’s a resting place for far too many stuffed animals, mostly snakes and frogs. I’ve always found them cuter than dogs and cats for some reason. Strictly the stuffed versions, though. One time I’d seen a garden snake slithering through Mom’s tomatoes and I’d screamed so loud a neighbor had called the police. I can see my jacket has, as usual, slipped off the doorknob and fallen to the floor. There’s an earthy scent in the air. It’s the smell of rain. It’ll happen soon, within a day; take it from the daughter of a gardener.

My hand hurts. Now that I’m calm I finally notice it. I’m gripping something, hard. It’s laminated plastic. A bookmark. The bookmark Nathan forced into my hand just before... Why am I holding this? I mean, he gave it to me in a dream and I’m not dreaming... right?

A knocking, then: “Robin?”

“Yes, Mom?” I say in a voice that’s unexpectedly wavery.

“Are you okay?”

I had a nightmare. I'm scared and sweaty. Can you sit on the side of my bed and stroke my hair until I fall asleep, like you used to? That's what I want to say, what I might have said, if the bookmark didn't flash. A low glow, like a firefly. A phosphorescent bookmark? "Yeah, um, yes! I'm okay."

There's a long pause, but no steps to indicate she's stepped away from the door.

"It sounded like you were calling out for someone."

I'm probably awake. That whole thing with Nathan was probably just a nightmare, albeit a long and oddly detailed one. Add it to the pile. I almost smile. I'd only ever go out for coffee with him if it was a dream. There's a creaking, Mom shifting her weight, waiting for an answer. I should put the bookmark down, forget about the dream. But I don't. When I try, daring my fingers to expand, to let go, something stops me. An... uneasiness. It's not rational. It's just some paper encased in plastic. It's not good for anything except keeping a page, no need to cling to it. But I clutch it tightly to my chest anyway.

"No, I'm fine. Really. Just a weird dream. What time is it?" I ask.

"Just after eight. Why don't you sleep in a little?"

Her voice sounds... I can't put my finger on it. Different. For a moment I doubt it's her before discarding the thought. Who else could it be?

"I'm up anyway. Can you put some coffee on, though?"

"Sure."

There are soft steps away from the door. She's wearing socks, not her work shoes. Her day off? I can't remember what day it is. That's unusual. I sit in darkness, legs covered in the too-pink-for-my-age blanket. It's not fading, the dark. Instead it seems to spread wherever my eye rests, a lingering corruption. It inks across my vision, reaching forward to try to caress my eyes, to cover my nose and mouth, to gently whisper lullabies in my ear. The man, the shadow man-! I turn on my bedside lamp. Nothing's there. No duh, that monster man is just a nightmare. It can't exist in reality. Those bizarre proportions and the ability to turn into some sort of liquid is obviously a biological impossibility.

"What am I doing?" I say to myself.

I step off the bed, feet finding the slippers Sophie had bought me two Christmases ago. The faux fur inside is somewhat matted. They feel real, just like I remember them. I make a note to throw them in with the linens. Some disgusting foot fungus is the last thing I need. The linoleum of the bathroom's cold, even through my slippers. The bathroom has an odd sweet smell. Perfume, maybe. Sophie, always an early riser, is obviously already up, the shower curtain she's left hanging on the wrong side of the tub drips water on the floor, a smear of toothpaste and blood from too hard

brushed gums has not quite rinsed away in the sink. She knows I hate when things are unclean, but doesn't care. I grab a hand towel and soak up the water. Then I use it to wipe the sink. Another item for the growing laundry list. I might have to do two loads. Only after the bathroom is clean do I brush my teeth. I break them down into quadrants. I brush for exactly forty seconds each, twenty on the front, twenty on the back. Then four, exactly four, swishes of mouthwash and I'm done. I make sure to leave the sink spotless.

It's all so... mundane. I'm sure it's real. It's nothing like my normal dreams, no desperate searches for my dad, always hearing his voice but never finding him, no visions of my hair and teeth falling out. This is real; I have no evidence to suggest otherwise. Except- I'm still clutching this bookmark like it's one of the protection charms I've read about in the books I'd 'borrowed' from Talisman. It had glowed a little or maybe I'm seeing things. Well, at worst it's like Pascal's Wager. The price of believing this is a dream and being wrong is very small- perhaps feeling a little silly. The price for being wrong? I'm not sure. Maybe death. Maybe worse. That... thing, that shadow man, is he lurking around here somewhere, watching? I slip the bookmark into the waistband of my pajamas and head downstairs.

When I walk into the kitchen Mom's watching a yet to boil pot of water. She's wearing a ratty robe I haven't seen her in in years. In fact, I can't remember the last time I hadn't seen her dashing around the kitchen, nearly colliding with the island, or banging her head against a copper pan hanging on a row of wooden pegs next to the oven, shouting the first two letters of a curse before catching herself, and trying to make it to work on time.

“Mom, I didn't know it was your day off.”

She laughs, doesn't reply. Have I said something funny? She's different, even her laugh. It's lighter. Like all the sadness has been sucked out of her.

Sophie's sprawled herself across the island, reading a book, no doubt trying to finish it last minute for AP English. Her hair twists under her head and cascades off the edge in a way that makes me think of a Renaissance painting, Venus of Urbino. Her top's loose, a strap hangs off her shoulder, her shorts are tight and only reach her mid-thigh. Venus, by contrast, is laying upright, with no clothes on at all. In one hand, a rose. The other is lazily covering her nudity. Sophie's meeting a boy later, I can tell. I sit down on one of the high top red chairs, coming about even with Sophie's knees.

“What are you reading?”

“*High Rise.*”

“By J.G. Ballard?”

She flips the book to the spine, “Yep,” she says, flipping it back.

“Do you like it?”

“I-” she hesitates. “It’s not terrible.”

Her reluctance makes sense, it’s an odd book to say you like, but, like Mom, she’s oddly different. Missing an edge. Typically, every interaction we have feels like the run up to a fight. But this... this feels weird. She’s not sighing and rolling her eyes every time I speak like she usually does. The water finally boils and Mom pours in the instant and walks over to me with a mug, but Sophie twists her body and plucks it out of her hands, managing not to spill a single drop. She immediately takes a small sip in a show of ownership. I hope it burns her tongue, the spoiled brat! Maybe she’s not as different as I’d thought.

“Sophie, that’s not very nice,” Mom says, but does nothing. Instead she pours another mug and passes it to me without further comment. Typical.

But now I KNOW something’s up. I have a cup of coffee, Sophie has one, but Mom has two. She’s holding one and the other sits, forlorn, on the counter. I look around. There’s no one else, not that there should be. Mom’s smiling, wide and pure. Her smile hasn’t been that unguarded since...

Then, steps from upstairs. I look at Mom and Sophie in a panic, but they don’t seem to recognize the peril. Down the stairs whatever it is comes tumbling down, too fast. It thuds and pounds its way closer. A monster is coming to breakfast. The world slows. I knew it. This is a nightmare. Wake up, wake up! I pinch myself. No effect.

“It’s for extra credit,” Sophie’s saying. “The reading list says you can take the test any time during the first month back during a free period.”

She’s talking about the book. Mom’s still smiling that stupid smile! Can’t they see the danger?

“We didn’t have extra credit when I went to school. You had to do a good job the first time,” she says in a teasing tone.

Sophie rolls her eyes, but there isn’t much teenage angst in it, she’s just playing her part. The monster is getting closer. They should be panicking. I am, thumbing the bookmark over and over. It’s glowing, a little hard to tell, under my shirt and all, but it’s there. I’m staring, transfixed, at the doorway, sure that it’s the shadow from my nightmare. Its come to life, come to finish what it started.

“Good morning, ladies!” His voice sings.

“Good morning, dear,” Mother says, handing it the remaining mug.

“G’morning, Dad,” Sophie calls.

‘Dad?’ The spell is broken. I scream. My mug tumbles to the ground, shattering violently. Shards of ceramic scatter in all directions, followed by the still hot coffee. I barely notice. I can feel my shoulders hunch and the hair on my neck flare. He’s not here, he can’t be here. This isn’t the

hazy, blurred feeling you get when you have a dream normally. But it's him! Standing right in front of me, calm, relaxed. The bookmark warms on my skin. The last time I'd seen him, his eyes had been tired, red from stress. He hadn't had a good night's sleep in a week. He'd seemed to shine, like he'd been polished. He'd had a little stubble, which went well with his ratty blue robe. This man, whoever he is, is clean shaven, with the kind brown eyes that I'd missed so much. But he's dull. He doesn't glow at all. It's not him.

His easy smile fades into a look of fatherly concern, a steaming mug in hand. This man, dressed in Dad's blazer and suit pants, ready for his job as chief administrator of the local library, is not my father. Dad died a long time ago. I've accepted that. It's the only reason he wouldn't have come back to us. I absolutely know that those years without him weren't a dream. I know it with all my heart, because I'd prayed and prayed to God for it to be a dream. This... thing, whatever it is, confirms my suspicion. I know where I am, even if I don't know what's at stake yet. I want to glare at him, hiss and tell him I know the game, but I don't. I keep calm and try to look as surprised as everyone else that my mug has hit the ground. I have to play the game.

"Robin, what the hell!?" Sophie yells, right next to my ear. I barely hear it. I'm trying to look at 'Dad' without staring at him.

"Sophie, language," he says. "Robin, what happened? are you okay?"

His voice. The feelings his voice triggers in me are intense. My memory of it had almost faded. The corners of my eyes burn. I want to cry so badly I can hardly stand it. We'd talked about school. He'd been about to send me to bed, keep me from studying too late. I'd buried that memory deep, but now I can't push it away, because every moment plays back. The green glow of the digital oven clock, the bubbling tea, the smell of cinnamon. I can't speak, I can barely see. The grief, the rage, just as raw as the day he vanished, comes crashing back.

"Poor thing, I think she didn't sleep very well," Mom says. True, but that's not it. I school my expression. I have to stay calm; I don't know what they'll do to me if I don't play along. Especially the man who is definitely not Dad. Mom has a soft, sympathetic smile on her face, and that's when I realize what's different. She looks light. Like she hasn't had to become a secretary at a crappy local PR firm to pick up the financial slack of Dad's Disappearance. She has fewer wrinkles. Her smile is wider, easier. She's not real either. Everything here is fake, fake, fake. Don't fall for it. 'Dad' takes a step forward.

"Stay back!" My fingers go to my side where I can still feel the bookmark. His eyes flick there, then back to mine, eyebrow raised. Should I take it as a good or bad sign that he backs off? I shake my head. I need to do better, act more convincing. I need space. Immediately. I hop off the chair.

“Robin, the glass!”

“I'm wearing slippers, I'm okay. Just, I need a minute, okay?” I try for a reassuring smile, but I don't think I pull it off very well. Lying is not a core part of my skill set. Usually I've a vested interest in the truth. Before anyone can stop me, I walk off.

“Wait, Robin!”

I ignore Mom's calls. I can't think about them right now. I need ten seconds to breathe. A warm sensation on my shoulder tingles, stings, then needles. What is that? It hurts. The bathroom first, then, it has a mirror. I take off my shirt and twist to survey it. There's an angry red splotch on my shoulder, and brown liquid running down my back. My shirt has a definite brown stain. The coffee must have splashed up. Yet more laundry to do. It hurts a lot, just a touch and I wince. I need to hide this. I think I can pass it off as a sunburn, but only if it doesn't blister. I pull the bookmark out, ready to examine it when Sophie interrupts.

“That looks pretty bad.”

She's standing in the doorway, hands in pockets, thumbs purposely caught on the lining. Her posture is one of mock indifference, but the tapping of her big toe on the ground sells her out. The oh-so-perfect Sophie is nervous. That's unusual.

I try to match her mock indifference and force myself to slowly look through the medicine cabinet for the Aloe. The key question I need answered about Mom and Sophie is- How dangerous are they? They could simply be products of this dreamscape, threads of my subconscious. Or they could be constructs of that shadow monster. Calling it a shadow 'man' seems inaccurate; it definitely isn't human from what I can tell. I need to break things down logically. Devise an experiment to test out my hypothesis. Which is... what, exactly? If I have to name one, I'd suppose that Mom and Sophie are not under the direct control of the monster. They don't give me the same uncomfortable feeling as Dad. It's not exactly scientific data, but I have a feeling I'm going to have to be flexible here. Sophie's still watching me.

“Do you need something?”

“Mom wanted to come check on you. I convinced her to let me instead. She's cleaning up your mess.”

I gulp, turning my head away from her, “And... Dad?”

She raises an eyebrow. “He had to go to work.”

Good. Can't deal with him yet. Need to figure him out, need to make a list. “Don't tell her about this.”

“Hm,” she says noncommittally, passing a hand through her chestnut hair. She looks as I remember her. Her hair's getting long. Almost as long as mine. I don't want people to confuse us. If

I leave fashion magazines open to pages with pixie cuts, could that psychologically influence her to get a haircut? Actually, this is the perfect opportunity to test my hypothesis. If she's part of the monster, she'll react to the bookmark, in theory. I don't know all the rules yet, but the bookmark had a definite repelling effect on the monster. She's still talking. I turn to face her. "Remember when we were little and we watched that National Geographic special on wolves? There was a scene at night where they killed a deer-"

"It was a caribou," I correct her.

"Whatever. They were snarling and biting and eating the thing and it scared me so badly I had nightmares for a week. Do you remember?"

"What's your point?" I know what her point is going to be. I shuffle closer to her, making little adjustments in my posture that slowly glide me towards her.

"That's what you looked like. Like a blood crazed wolf."

'Blood crazed', indeed. I'm almost sure that's an exaggeration.

"I don't know what to say to that." And I really don't. I almost always have some retort or comment ready, but not this time. I'm too busy trying to thrust my hip in her direction without making it look obvious.

"Are you on drugs?"

"No." I'm trapped in a dream and I can't trust you, or Mom, or especially Dad. Maybe myself too. How can I determine what's real and what's not? "Why?"

"Because you're, like, dancing towards me in slow-mo. It's creepy, Robs."

I'm not sure if she's teasing or being serious. Either way it doesn't merit a response. She doesn't seem to be reacting to the bookmark. Nathan had been further away when he'd used the bookmark to keep the monster at bay. Okay, there! Hypothesis tested and proved, in a manner of speaking. Sophie is not the shadow monster. Though she might still be working for it, or under its control somehow. I finally find some aloe vera and spread it over the burn. The cool helps instantly.

"Can I ask you something?" I say, then without waiting for her to answer- "Did Dad ever- no, never mind." Can't trust her response anyway.

This... is lasting awhile. I feel fully lucid, although it's difficult to gauge your own lucidity, and time seems to be passing normally. Maybe it's not a dream. Maybe it's a parallel timeline where Dad never Disappeared. Wait, the Disappearances! I can check my laptop, see if my research is still there. If the research is still there, then that would be a strong indicator against a parallel timeline.

"Hey." Sophie's still standing there. "What's up with you? I'm seriously worried."

I almost believe her. This is the version of her that would have existed if Dad hadn't Disappeared. She doesn't remember the first month, when we prayed for Dad to come back safely.

Fervently at dinner and when going to bed and when waking up and at most times in between. She doesn't remember the spark slowly going out of Mom as she was forced to take up more and more of Dad's responsibilities, a kind of forced acknowledgment of his absence. She doesn't remember her depression and self-medication, approaching us in tears because things had gone out of control, and she couldn't stop. And that's how I know she's not really my sister. I squeeze past even as she makes a weak attempt to physically block the door.

“Come on, talk to me Robin. I know something's going on.”

Yeah, a blind owl could figure that out. I haven't exactly been acting normal. She follows me to the bedroom, pestering me with questions, but I wave her off. She gives up when I close the door in her face. With 'Dad' gone to work, I have a window with which to investigate and not worry about what he might do to interfere. My laptop's in my bag, which lay nearly forgotten at the foot of my bed. I grab the computer and lean back against my headboard. The wake screen's background is still the same periodic table of elements drawn on a chalkboard that I remember. I click to Recent Documents. It's there. My research. The pointer hovers over the 'Victims' file. I'm a little nervous, I admit; I almost don't want to know the answers to my questions.

Still. Hadn't Dad always taught me to value the truth? Dad had never let me believe in Santa Claus. He hadn't gone out of his way to tear down the illusion, but every time I asked a question, he would give a truthful answer. It didn't take me long to figure out that he was fictional. I heard my classmates discussing their Christmas lists, getting excited about visits to mall Santas, and baking cookies to leave out for him. It sounded like fun and I got jealous.

“Why did you tell me Santa was a lie?” I'd asked. “Everyone else gets to do exciting things, but I know it's all fake.”

He kneeled down and placed a hand on my shoulder. His hands seemed so big back then, his fingertips reached far down my back.

“Robin, sweetie,” he'd said, “You won't understand this yet, but the truth is so important. So much of the world is lies. Some are bad lies, some are good lies. But you can only decide which are which if you see them for what they are.”

I didn't understand it then, but I understand it now. Whoever said ignorance is bliss was a fool. I want the truth. I open the file.

Weird. It had been corrupted. I'm not a tech person at all. I've often worried about it because computers are so enmeshed with science, and my skills are limited. But even I can see this glitch is pretty strange. It's only affecting, like, two thirds of the file. Some things I remember about the list are clear as day. I remember Keisha Williams' stats by heart. How could I not? The poor girl had been so young. And they there all were, typed up into neat little columns. But an older woman,

Marjory. I'd been lucky with her. Her daughter had given me everything. Marjory's height, weight, blood type, medications- her daughter had even told me what she was wearing on the day! And it looks like that information is filled in, but blurred. Like there's a filter over the screen, but only over some parts. I can't remember what exactly the daughter had said, but she'd definitely given me all the details I'd asked for. I know it's in the file, but I can't see it. The whole document is like that. If I can remember exactly what I wrote for a person, it's there, no blur filter. If I can't, then it's obscured by some kind of fog. Doesn't seem like a computer error. Is it me? I look around the room. Nope, all clear. It's not my eyes.

David Melling. Dad. He's there. His height, his prescriptions, Disappearance date, all of it. This is cold water on the alternate universe theory. Surely physical evidence of the original world would have been erased if I'd somehow changed timelines. So... my computer notes can only reflect what I already remember? That seems to jive with the dream theory, after all dreams were based on your subconscious. So the question becomes- what do I do now? I've got a working hypothesis about where I am (i.e. a dream). The preliminary data appears to support this. Hm. Well, surely I have to wake up at some point. A bit of an assumption. This is an unusually long, coherent, and detailed dream, after all. Clearly something's changed, perhaps because of the influence of that shadow. But even still, perhaps I can simply wait it out? It's both low risk and low effort. Anything else would probably require exploring the house and interacting with my 'family'. Avoiding that seems prudent. So, I find a comfortable position on my bed, hunker down, and wait.

I wait.

And toss.

And turn.

My alarm clock has to be malfunctioning. It's been hours. I haven't woken up, I've not even slept. Indignant, I turn and try yet another sleeping position. I know it won't work, but why won't it? I've figured it out, more or less. I'm dreaming. If this were a narrative, I would have woken up the when I realized I was dreaming. Or something would have changed, at least. Of course, life doesn't follow a clean narrative structure, so I shouldn't be surprised that didn't happen. But even physically, I have to wake up eventually. This is without a doubt the longest dream I've ever had. Maybe it means something external is keeping me unconscious in the real world. Could I be in a coma?

No, I'm thinking like a movie plot again. I have to reason this out rationally. If there's something physically preventing me from waking up, there really isn't much I can do to change my circumstances. And... if it's a dream, nothing can really hurt me, right? That's the obvious conclusion, but... I don't agree with my own reasoning. Or I at least don't trust it. If Nathan were

here, he'd be bouncing off the walls, investigating every corner, mangling Holmes' catchphrase into 'Elementary, my dear Robin', putting on a terrible English accent and not realizing that he's the Watson in our relationship. I know because he'd done it while we looked for a valuable book on demonology a customer had misplaced at Talisman. It had been kind of... fun, actually. I hadn't laughed that much in awhile.

Oh brother, I've been infected by his nonsense. The clock says it's been several hours, but that's dream time, so who knows. It's possible that only a few minutes have passed in the real world. My hip hurts. I twist around, trying to get comfortable. Something sharp digs into my skin.

“Ow! What the-? Oh...”

It's the bookmark. That's another important piece of this puzzle, I can't believe I haven't looked at it more closely! I sigh, cutting myself some slack. I probably hadn't wanted to HAVE to look at it. It seems to be the same one I have in the real world. I've had it for ages. Dad's inscription is the same, as is his drawing. I'm mature enough to admit it's a little comforting to see it here, like a security blanket. It bends as you'd expect laminated paper to. It feels smooth and plastic, nothing out of ordinary. It isn't glowing anymore. Because the shadow monster isn't near? Perhaps it's recharging. It's a reminder of how much Dad loves- loved me. A totem, the books on Shamanism I've been reading would say. I always carry it with me, even if I'm not reading anything.

I groan in frustration. This is stupid. If I'm supposed to be looking for something in particular, I need a hint. Nathan probably would have found a hint by now. That or he would have confronted the shadow and gotten himself killed. I should probably try to find a middle ground.

“Nathan, you have to help me-”

The bookmark shines bright. I drop it, and it flutters to the ground.

Chapter 5

The man sat in front of me scribbling into his notepad. “Mr. Alexander?”

“Huh?”

“Are you listening?”

His phone was on stopwatch and made a constant ticking sound- more than one per second. It made me anxious, like I was being rushed. Was he keeping track of time, or recording me? The table was shabby and worn. A piece of plywood slapped on top of four legs. Graffiti- 'To get rich quick, just suck d-' the rest had been carved out. Cute. A dark window. Two way mirror. Police station? Was I under arrest? No handcuffs. A good sign, but not conclusive. That woman was nowhere to be seen. Robin either.

“Mr. Alexander! Could you pay attention, please?” He hit the desk slightly. Did I have a headache before his yelling or because of it? The guy was a ginger. A 'redhead'. Even though his hair was more of a red-orange. The English language's really dumb. We were sitting down, but he was taller than me; about as tall as Dad, maybe? That'd be 6'3". He was unusually clean shaven for a police officer. Most of Dad's friends at least had some stubble and usually a mustache. It made the officer in front of me look young, early twenties. He looked familiar. Really, I knew I knew him from somewhere. Maybe when I'd visited Dad at work? He was wearing a dark blue dress shirt. Hang on. A nameplate. 'Daniels'. And he had muscles. Chest and arms, vanity muscles. Clearly a gym goer, not an athlete like me. Well, like I'd been. I slumped a little and looked at his lower half under the table. Couldn't tell if he had chicken leg syndrome from skipping those leg days, but the arms and chest were definitely conceited areas to work on. I felt faintly superior to him. I could outrun him any day of the week, I'd stake money on it. Okay, these days I struggled to outrun a determined sloth. Still, he looked like a more muscled, red headed version of Dad. Cops tended to be fat or all muscle. There weren't many elfin, willowy types in my dad's small town force. Give Officer Daniels a coffee and a doughnut and he'd win a generic cop contest – except, again, he was in extremely good shape instead of being fat. He ran a hand through his hair bringing my attention to it again. That. That was the familiar part. The hair. And maybe the sparkling blue eyes?

“Have...” My voice came out scratchy. I cleared my throat and try again. “Have we met?”

The already impatient cop leaned back in his chair, looked up, and rolled his eyes. Rude!

“This is the third time you've asked me that.”

“Oh...” Really? He had no reason to lie, but the last thing I remembered before the him telling me to pay attention was the lady on the boat. Technically he hadn't answered my question. “So, what did you say the last two times?”

“No!” he yelled, exasperated. Okay, okay, message received, no need to be a jerk about it.

“Sorry. I have a head... thing.” What was the word? “Migraine.”

“Let's just go over the details one more time, and then you can go.” His blue eyes flicked down to his notes. “So, you went for coffee with Ms. Melling. And then-?”

How long had we been talking? Had we somehow had a conversation while I was dreaming? I remembered the dream clearly enough, even if none of it made any sense. He hadn't been there. And he wasn't someone I knew from the station. I hadn't made as many trips to the precinct since Dad's demotion, but I knew the 'lifers' as Dad fondly called the people who'd been there for five years or more. Maybe he'd been the one to pick me up in the alley? Maybe I'd regained consciousness in his arms. I imagined being carried by him. He looked like he could lift three of me, no problem. He was superficially handsome, I could grudgingly give him that. And just, like, really familiar! It was like recognizing a celebrity but stumbling with the name.

I pinched my temples. “I ran after her.”

“Why?”

Because I felt it coming, the frost shadow. The ice spirit.

“She forgot something.”

“What?”

“A bookmark.”

“And did you give it back to her?”

It didn't matter, it was a pointless detail. Unless my story changed. Dad told me. They have to make sure a witness' story stays consistent. Which meant they thought I'd witnessed something. Now if only I could remember the story I'd originally told him.

“Yes. No- I don't know. Maybe. I blacked out.”

“I ask because we didn't recover a bookmark at the scene.”

No? I HAD given her the bookmark. Or, well, given it to her in a dream. It had protected me from the spirit; I'd have to hope it did the same for her. But it was obvious why the police were interviewing me. Robin had Disappeared and I'd been the last one to see her. I should have let it take me instead. It'd been hunting me at first. And- I shifted in my chair and felt something in my back pocket. Something flat, bendy. I reached behind me, subtly and felt it. Ow, sharp edges! Plastic, it had to be the bookmark, right? Okay, so did I have it, or did Robin? Did it stop protecting her and pop into my pocket when I woke up?

Officer Exasperated saw the flurry of emotions pass through me and raised an eyebrow. Whatever. He could suffer not knowing, for all I cared. He didn't know what real suffering was. My Dad, staring out the window, not drinking the tea I'd made him, looking lost and defeated during his sudden post demotion 'vacation time'- that was suffering.

“And why did you black out?”

“My Dad took some time off a few years ago.”

He nodded once; he knew that much at least.

“I can't- I'm not supposed to run. Walking's okay, if I take my time. But I... overestimated myself.”

He picked up his pen and chewed the cap. Disgusting.

“So why'd you run?”

“Huh? Oh, it was important.”

“Was it?” He was after something.

“To her. It was a gift from her dad. He Disappeared.”

He jotted a note down.

“And that's it? You just wanted to return her bookmark? It couldn't wait until tomorrow?” He kept digging, for what, I wasn't sure. It's not like he would believe me if I told the truth. *'Ya got me. The spirit that's been causing the Disappearances was starting to make ME Disappear too, so I ran for help!*. I barely believed it myself.

“It didn't seem like it could wait at the time.”

It sounded curt, but what did this guy expect? My temples were throbbing and my heart was banging a drum inside my head. And it felt like he was dancing in circles around what he really wanted to ask. Dad would have been more direct. I wondered if the two had ever worked together.

“Are you and Ms. Melling close?” He asked.

“No.” Not as much as I'd like to be. “I mean, yeah, we're friendly, but we don't hang out or anything.”

“So how do you know?”

“Know what?”

“That her father... Disappeared?”

A tapping sound. The detective's foot. The tap tap tap bounced in time with the beating drum in my head. The air felt stale. A ventilation shaft was there in the ceiling, but no air. I was sweating. He was too. He ran a hand through his hair and, again, I was struck by a sense of *deja vu*. I kinda wanted to run my own hand through his hair to see if that would jog my memory.

“I-” Click click click went his stupid stop watch. I paused. I should keep her investigation to myself, I thought. “She told me today, actually. She'd been off all day and I asked her what was wrong. It's close to the anniversary of the Earthquake.”

The detective scowled. Not at me, though. At his paper as he made some notes. He ticked something off.

“So she told you today, that's a coincidence.” He tried to gauge my reaction, but all I gave him was a shrug. Coincidences happen, he couldn't prove otherwise. I'd survived the much more intense scrutiny of my dad. Officer Daniels had nothing on him. “You know it's important to tell me everything you remember exactly as you remember it, right? Even really small things. So if you're forgetting to mention something because you forgot earlier or because you think it's not important, now's a good time to say.”

Dude, if you want to call me a liar then just get it out in the open!

“Well...” I said, thinking, “Robin screamed.”

“We know. Her voice got cut off when she was calling for help for you.”

So the scream had happened while we were both awake. But by that point that I'd seen the swallow moving, staring at me, colors flowing in and out of each other like a kaleidoscope and the black ink of the spirit, which Robin hadn't seemed able to see, had started surrounding us, chilling me deep into my core. If that hadn't been part of the dream how could it have happened in real life? Had the dream somehow bled over into the real world? I'd normally say that was impossible, but with the day I'd had... Maybe it was better to keep most of the weird stuff to myself and leave the detective in the dark.

“Is your migraine really that bad?” Officer Daniels asked. For the first time he looked concerned. For a moment he saw me as a person, not just a witness. I unclenched the scowl I hadn't known was making my jaw ache. Tension on my brow melted away.

“It's alright. Comes and goes.”

He tilted his head, his eyes and hair were still bright.

“If you're sure. You're free to go. Your Dad has my number if you remember anything. You remember how to get to the lobby?”

“Sure,” I said, standing. I felt a little giddy with relief; my legs were a little shaky, though that could just be the after effects of fainting and being attacked by a demon. And that butterfly lady? What should I make of her? I mean- a swarm of butterflies?

“Don't forget your bag.”

A messenger bag sat on the floor. Strap broken. Hers.

“Uh, right. My bag.”

Officer Daniels frowned and took out a pen light. He came over and stuck a hand under my chin, shining a light in my eyes. His fingers were warm.

“What are you doing?”

“You seem a little off, so I'm giving you a concussion test. Follow my finger without moving your neck.” He moved his finger smoothly, professionally. I followed it, too surprised to resist. His

hand was on my shoulder, warm. He patted it twice when he finished. Must have passed.

“Do all cops have first aid training?”

“Just me, far as I know.”

Was he not going to elaborate? We stared each other down. Guess not. He put away the light and handed me Robin's messenger bag. The bag was heavy; I'd forgotten how many books were in there. Not to mention her laptop. My hand was on the doorknob, just about to escape, when-

“You seem okay, but if you feel nauseous, you should probably see a doctor, alright?” I nodded.

“Oh, last question before I forget,” the redhead said airily, lying through his teeth. Another interrogation technique Dad had taught me about. Surprise 'em with a sudden final question. Get them off balance and maybe they'll make a mistake. This was the real question. He'd been saving it since the moment we'd met, “How long have you had it?”

“Had what?” The bookmark? Robin's bag? Don't panic. That's what he wanted.

“That aura. That feeling in the pit of your stomach when you just know something's about to happen. Like when you've seen a lightning bolt and you're just waiting for the thunder. That telltale brightness, hovering over you like the sword of Damocles.”

Brightness? Sword of-? I felt the blood drain from my face. I could feel my body engage fight or flight mode. My muscles quivered ready for... something. Pain flared across the damaged skin covering my ribs as I took deeper breaths. Robin had described it as a 'glow' and 'bright'. But here, this guy who didn't even know me had put it more eloquently, like he had firsthand experience. His hair. His eyes. Even his pale white skin, now that I thought about it. They're glowing. I'd thought he was just super ginger!

“I-I don't know what you're talking about.”

“No?” He raised an eyebrow, a favorite expression of his. Crap. He'd got me. No clue how he knew, but he did. Maybe he knew more about Robin's Disappearance than I did. He wanted something. But in the moment, I slunk out of the room hastily and he let me. Once outside, I leaned against a wall, shell-shocked. It was solid, but I was not. My whole body felt like it was burning, but most of all my scars. Every square inch of damaged skin, the small patch that started just below my nipple, which expanded outward into a huge field covering most of my left set of ribs before narrowing again just in time to stop at my hip, radiated pain. Bad reaction to the salt, my doctor told me. Yet another reason to never run, as if I needed another. I took a deep breath. What now? Robin had been taken by that thing, and I had no clue where to start on getting her back. Her bag, her laptop. She'd been researching the supernatural. 'Casting a wide net' she'd said. She'd been dead right. Dead. Dead, dead, dead. The word echoed in my head. The spirit hadn't taken more than a

dozen people and then just kindly returned them when it was done with whatever the hell it was doing to them. Those people had probably been... killed. The word sent a shiver down my spine. Did they die immediately or was it a process? Maybe Robin was already- Focus. I was probably the only person in the entire world who had seen that thing and not been Disappeared like Robin had. Maybe excluding the butterfly woman? Or Officer Daniels. Neither were reliable.

Okay. So I was essentially on my own. I'd assume Robin was alive and keep going based on that. What other option did I have? Robin had warned me against stealing from Dad, but I had no idea what the right thing to do was because I had no idea what was going on. More information was crucial. The waiting room was... down the hall, to the left. Dad would be there, probably ready to put a LoJack on me. I went right.

The bullpen was shabby and white. It had dumb motivational posters hung everywhere on the walls. Stuff like a kitten, paw clinging to a clothesline, with the caption 'Keep Hanging On!' written under it. The chairs were a calming blue, made of frayed fabric. Budget cuts. Dad complained about them every tax season. When my dad had been on active duty, it'd looked so slick and cool. Now? It looked like badly maintained classroom. An empty classroom. Where the hell was everyone? I'd never seen it that empty. Normally you can't go three steps without crashing into someone. Which reminded me that I hadn't really thought through how I was actually going to steal something from my dad's desk when there were usually five armed officers milling about. But no one was there... strange.

“Nathan? Nathan Alexander, is that you?”

In a back corner sat an older man. Definitely towards the fat end of the muscular/fat cop spectrum. I recognized him, an old friend of Dad's. They went way back. We'd met a dozen times, but it must have been two years since I'd seen him. Since the accident.

“Oh, hey...” I struggled for name. He'd made me call him by his first name. What was it? “Bill!”

He laughed good naturedly, “See, it's been too long since you visited! You should come by more often.”

“Uh, yeah, maybe.” Not a chance. “Where is everyone? I've never seen the bullpen this empty.”

“You should know,” Bill said. Should I? “Another Disappearance means they need all available hands. The higher ups like to get everyone patrolling at least, make people feel safe.”

I'd never thought of patrolling as PR for the police department, though I guess it kind of made sense. I didn't ask why he wasn't with them. It was obvious. If they needed all hands and Bill wasn't with them then it could only be because he'd suffered the same fate as Dad. No

Disappearance related work of any kind. They'd been close at the time the public had turned on Dad. Bill must have gotten caught in the blast radius. There was an awkward silence.

“Anyway,” Bill said, “what are you doing here? I know it's been awhile, but you should at least remember the way back to the lobby.”

“Oh, Dad said he left his wallet here. I offered to get it, wanted to clear my head.”

“Greg left his wallet? That's rare for him, I'll have to tease him about it later.”

I laughed nervously. Please don't. Why had I made up such a lame lie? “Well, while everyone else is out there looking busy, I'm going to make some photocopies. You gonna be okay on your own?”

He stood up.

“Sure. It was nice running into you,” I said, fake smile plastered over my face. He didn't know me well enough to spot it, right? He left through a different door than the one I'd used. It led upstairs to the printers, if I was remembering the layout right.

I'd need to be fast. I'd already burned too much time. Where was Dad's desk!? That was the easy part and I couldn't even manage it. Dad was essentially an administrator now and I knew they had their own set of desks in another room, but surely Bill would have mentioned it if his desk wasn't still in the bullpen. It probably hadn't been worth the hassle to move him. The room was covered in a sea of waist high desks. On my wobbly legs, it almost looked as if they were being carried up and down on the crests of waves. Well, that was an exaggeration. I was only thinking in vaguely nautical terms because of my recent boat trip.

There! A picture of me and Mom from years ago. She looked so happy... She had been really into all this spiritualism stuff. I wonder what she would have made of everything... Never-mind that now! There was another photo of me from just after the Earthquake. God, I looked terrible. Pale, almost green. I was sat up against the bed headboard, but my head was tilted forward. Must have been taken when I was in the hospital. Why would Dad want to see me like that every day?

An ancient late 90's desktop. It had one of those glass screens that protruded outward from the plastic frame. It was tan, as was the tower under the desk. Both it and the monitor sported a thick layer of gray dust on top. Maybe they hadn't even been used since the late 90's. Dad used his laptop for work. That hulking thing would take way too long to boot up. Two drawers. No locks. Kind of lax for a police department. Pens, unused Post-it notes, and- cigarettes!?! He'd started smoking again? Oh, no, candy cigarettes. Made sense, I would have teased him mercilessly if he'd had them around the house. I'd have to be careful not to mention it and give myself away. A flash drive. I pocketed it. The second drawer was filled with folders. Case files. I was a slow reader and time was running out. Someone would come looking for me soon. Maybe Dad had arranged them in

chronological order, newest at the top? He'd been a detective for a long long time, from before I was born for sure, so the stuff on the bottom must have been really old. And he'd been demoted two years ago. I figured the Disappearance file must be near the top. I flicked through the top ten or so folders. One was thick, more than twice the size of the others. That had to be it. I ripped out a few pages and stuffed them into the messenger bag.

Time to go. I barreled through the double doors, nearly slapping-

“Dad!”

He didn't say anything. Dad was always one to choose his words carefully. In that moment, just before he spoke, I thought I saw something. A flicker of suspicion?

“You were taking a long time,” he said, somewhere between a comment and an admonishment.

“I, uh, got a little turned around.”

“Yeah, this place is a bit of a maze,” he said, but his eyes were locked firmly on the messenger bag. The one that wasn't mine. That flicker of suspicion passed through his eyes once again before it passed. Not worth interrogating me over.

I stared at the paintings that lined the wall, eager not to make eye contact. Dull watercolors of landscapes and birds. A pack of swallows resting on the branches of trees. Not colorful like the one that had led me to Robin. I had no idea where it had disappeared to. I kept a lookout for the butterfly I was supposedly meant to follow in the paintings, but there weren't any.

“Why do you have that photo of me at your desk?” I asked.

“You saw that?” He sighed. “It's a reminder. To appreciate things.”

He slung an arm around my shoulder and squeezed. It felt like he was directly squeezing my guilty conscience. I could literally feel the weight of the paper and flash drive pulling me down, as if they were creating a gravitational pull around me. He shouldn't bother sacrificing for me, toiling away at a job that doesn't appreciate him. I wasn't worth it. I was a bad, crippled, useless son. But... his hand felt good. In my childhood, he hadn't been cold or mean, but he wasn't particularly physical either. When I woke up at the hospital after the accident, the first thing I felt were his fingers closed around my hand, squeezing tight, almost painful. My mother had always been a hugger, I could remember that much. But after I was well enough, Dad started hugging me like he was afraid he'd lose me if he ever let go.

“Are you okay?” he asked, arm wrapping tighter around my shoulder.

“I- I- I'm fine.” It was all my fault and if I hadn't stuck my damn nose in and it should have been me and I was so scared and it was a monster a ghost a demon a spirit and I don't know what to do! Just hug me tighter. I was so not fine.

Even without words, he understood the essential part. His grip around me strengthened. His arm formed a protective circle. It had been awhile time since I'd let him show that much affection for me. Well, a long time since I'd reached out for it, really needed it.

'I'll find you, Robin. Just wait for me.'

Chapter 6

Dad sort of hovered around me when we got home. Maybe waiting for me to talk about my feelings. I might have, if anything I had to say would have made any sense. I gave him a polite five minutes then said I was tired and went upstairs.

I closed the door to my room more gently than I wanted to. As if that would help calm me down. I took three steps and flopped backwards onto my bed, eyes wide open. The pill bottle was on my bed. Dad. Just a note to let me know he'd seen it. That's another talk we'd have to have. I put it on the end table. I thought about buying a lock. I could already hear the fun argument that would spark.

My muscles quivered, felt drained of energy, like at the end of a tennis tournament. The adrenaline had finally worn off. My soft breathing sounded loud in the quiet. It had been... quite a day. That thing, the spirit, if it hadn't taken Robin, if I hadn't had the bookmark, then- my hands were shaking. Death. What would happen to me after I died? Would I get to see Mom again? According to her belief system, her soul, her spirit, still existed somewhere. I clenched my hands tight, staring up at the ceiling. No, I couldn't show weakness. It could have gotten me, but it didn't. I was fine. If I had an ounce of sense I'd forget the whole thing and just be glad it hadn't gotten me. But-

Nathan!

She'd been so afraid. Her voice seemed to haunt the air, hiding in the silence of my bedroom. Could the monster be hiding inside the shadows? I crouched beside my bed and looked under it. Darkness. I gulped, then stuck my hand in it, waving it back and forth, retreating the second I felt I'd covered most of the space I couldn't see. I opened my closet door, hands trembling. There were shadows, but they didn't move. My breaths were shaky, nervous. I kept looking over my shoulder, I tried to keep my blinks short, limit the amount of time I couldn't see. Maybe I should have stayed downstairs with Dad. I could have pretended everything was normal. That I was only worried about Robin because she was 'missing'.

Except I couldn't. I couldn't leave Robin in the clutches of that creature, suffering. I couldn't let more and more Disappearances happen, now that I knew what was causing them. And I wouldn't be flying blind. I had leads. Dad's flash drive and the papers I'd stolen. Robin's bag. Oh, and that cryptic butterfly woman. Easy things first. I sat down at my desk and plugged in the flash drive. Then I dug out the stolen notes from Robin's bag and the bookmark from my back pocket, flipped it over, then back, then squinted at the thin side. It was crisp and mostly undamaged. It wasn't glowing like it had in the dream. C'mon, stupid thing, take me to Robin! I waggled it back and forth, but nothing happened. I sighed. It smelled faintly sweet. Caramel? No, like crème brulee. I hesitated a

moment before giving it a quick lick. Pocket lint. Gross. Dusty gray- if gray was a taste. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was an ordinary bookmark. But I did know better, and not just because of what I'd seen it do in dreams. There was something else that was strange. I noticed Robin. What clothes she wore, music she liked, books she read. And she read a lot. I figured the thing had to be at least two years old for her Dad to have given it to her before he'd Disappeared. But I'd never seen it before that day. I'm almost positive I would have noticed it sooner.

The computer had booted up and registered the flash drive. Double click, aaaaaaand- Password protected. Jeez, Dad! Paranoid, much? I ripped the drive out and tossed it onto the bed. Useless. Fine. The police report. First page was a table of contents, blank on the back side. Then a case summary. Hmm, the Disappearances from earlier than a year ago were labeled 'inactive'. They weren't investigating them. At least, not directly. Reason cited... not enough manpower. If you didn't have enough manpower, then un-demote my dad, you brain dead morons! And last, Victim Data. Like I'd thought, it was a lot more thorough than Robin's list. It had her dad, of course. David Melling. I wondered if what had happened to Robin had happened to him. To all of them. To be honest, if there was a connection between the victims, I sure wasn't seeing it. Damn, a dead end.

A buzzing broke through the silence. A text. My phone. Robin! It had to be! No one else would bother to message me. I picked it up. An unknown number. Please, please, please...

Buy one get one free pizzas all night at Frederick's Pizza Palace! Choose pickup and get a side free!

...Stupid me. But a guy's gotta eat, right? Buy one get one free really sounded good. I hadn't eaten since Talisman. Dad wasn't a fan of pizza, but he'd probably let it slide given the day I'd had. Fainting and my friend Disappearing and the police interview. I dug my wallet out and opened it. A slip of paper fluttered out. A business card. It landed, elegantly, face side up on my thigh. *Reverie Psychoanalyst Iris: Sweet Dreams Achieved.*

Iris, like an eye? And 'Reverie' didn't that mean 'Memory'? So all put together it was 'Memory Therapist Eye'. That made no sense whatsoever, and I hadn't even started on the nonsensical subtitle. The card was emblazoned with a gothic butterfly. Loopy and extravagant, like it was drawn in cursive. A butterfly design...

Follow the butterfly.

There was an address, not far from the house, in a residential area. I thought therapists only had at-home practices on TV. I wondered if that meant something. Still, I was going, obviously. It was practically an invitation, if an over-complicated one. Why couldn't the woman have told me the address when we'd met? As for who placed the card in my wallet, I had a good idea. There was only one time during the day it could have been done, but why had he done it? I suppose I'd only get

answers once I got there.

I grabbed my phone, wallet, and the card and stuffed them into the back pockets of my jeans. I looked out the window. A summer evening, a tinge of red lingered at the edge of the horizon, feeding that last little bit of light to the sky. But it wouldn't last long; soon night would be out in force. A knot of fear clenched in my stomach. Let's also take Robin's bookmark, shall we? I should be taking it wherever I go in case of evil spirit attacks, which is apparently a thing that happens in the real world now. I took a detour to the kitchen and grabbed an apple, a bagel and filled a bag to the brim with wasabi peas. Dad was in the living room, sizing me up over a newspaper. He'd put his glasses on, thin square frames, kept immaculately clean both from the general care he provided all his things and a stubborn desire to wear them as little as possible. Dad had said they made him look like an old man. I'd replied that it was the gray sideburns that did that and he'd sent me to my room for an hour.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"For a walk."

He stared at me.

"Am I allowed to take a walk unsupervised, or do I need a chaperone?"

"Watch it. We've both had a rough day, I'm just worried about you," he said, then resumed to cut off my incoming protest. "So, a *short* walk. I call, you answer. I text, you respond. Don't make me ground you for the rest of the summer, okay?"

I grinned. "Okay."

"Love you," his eyes softened just that little bit, enough to know he meant it, he wasn't saying the words out of habit. When I was a kid, he showed his love via actions rather than words. Even the accident hadn't changed that. It was after. When he saw me on the ground, staring at- I didn't want to think about it. I hadn't done it, and I'd moved past feeling that way. But it'd shocked him enough that he felt the need to say the words as well as show the feeling from then on.

I lingered. He didn't need to make that much effort. Hadn't I caused him enough grief?

"You too," I said.

Outside, the sun had only just set. The sky had been orangey when Robin and I had coffee, when it had seemed to crawl up her body, an omen of what was to come. The streetlamps helped push back the darkness, but I still kept my hand firmly wrapped around the bookmark. I kept imagining the darkness pushing out, following me. I was trying to stay calm, eating my snacks and looking up at the bright half moon, the first hint of stars, lamps, porch lights, any point of light at all, but nothing worked. I was sweating. It could have been the balmy night air or my brisk pace. But I knew it wasn't.

The more I thought about it, the more I couldn't help but think that this was a really stupid idea. Like, what was I even expecting to find? A magic spell to save Robin? It's only ever that easy in children's stories. More, it felt like a trap. A witch luring children into her gingerbread house with false promises and a sinister smile. The risk to reward ratio seemed really bad. So why was I still walking towards the address on the business card? Maybe because I had few other options. If the police department, Dad included, and Robin couldn't figure it out, then what chance did I have with around one percent of the resources and brain power? I knew that good or bad, that woman had answers. She'd known things about the monster. A spirit, she'd called it. If she knew a way to save Robin, it was worth the risk. I'd make it worth it.

I came up to a large house and checked the business card. This was it. Nice place. Dark blue-gray, the door right in the middle, with big bay windows on either side, and a straight path leading from the door to the sidewalk. A dream catcher hung from a hook drilled into a wooden support beam. It was homemade, curved sticks had been bound together with floss, and the spiral, web-like center patterns had been created from floss as well. Jade colored beads were sewn in, seemingly at random, throughout the pattern. But it wasn't random; the beads were hung in specific places to ward against corresponding threats. You picked up that kind of thing working at Talisman. A skilled shaman had made this dream catcher. I breathed a little easier, calmed down a bit. No need to ward against evil if you yourself are evil, right? As I knocked on the door, I smelled something. Earthy. Woven in the strands of the dreamcatcher were herbs. Thyme, basil, others I didn't recognize. Nothing floral, though. More protection against the sweet-smelling spirit?

The front door opened. Teddy, grinning. It wasn't a surprise. Sorry, I meant it was absolutely a surprise. Why in the world would he have left that business card in my wallet!? He was just some guy I was a little friendly with! He shouldn't be involved with this. But on the other hand, I'd figured it was him. I'd caught him leaning over the front desk at Talisman, after all. That's probably when he'd placed the business card. Maybe that's why he wanted the rare books in the first place, to force me to look for them as a distraction.

"Nathan, what are you doing here? Could it be our destinies have been linked?" He was still smiling, playing some stupid game. It wasn't a game to me.

"Stop messing around! What do you have to do with the butterfly woman?"

His smirk fell.

"Sorry. I got carried away. I'm her assistant," he said. "Slash nurse," he added, after hesitating a moment.

"Okay." I'd follow up on that later. "And you left the business card?"

"Yeah. Come on in, I'm sure you have a lot of questions," He held the door open. If it was a

trap, then this would be the last chance I had to dodge it. It boiled down to one question. Did I trust Teddy? No. That's wrong. The question should be- Was the risk of trusting Teddy worth the risk to save Robin?

'Robin, what would you do?' I sent her a message, a prayer. Tell me what to do, because I'm flying blind. My heart sank when she didn't respond. But it didn't really matter. I'd sacrifice myself to help her. Hell, the decision wasn't even hard. Robin or me? Easiest choice of my life.

I walked through that threshold, holding my breath.

It was... normal? There's something about entering another person's home that makes you super polite. Letting someone into the space where you sleep, eat, have sex is... intimate. Like, I didn't even want to bring friends over to my place, let alone a girlfriend or whatever. Given Teddy's taste in literature and the dream catcher, I'd expected the house to be a shrine to the occult. Strong incense stick odors clashing with the light garden scents of homegrown herbs. Maybe a few pentagrams lying around? Blood smears from sacrifices? But, no, it was neat, and though there were flower vases peppered on end tables down the foyer, they didn't seem to stink quite like incense candles did. Sunflowers, weird choice.

"Hey, gimme your coat," he said as he grabbed it. Jesus, wait one second. The house was warm. Air from a vent brushed past my face. Hot. A broken AC, maybe. But that'd be no reason to have the heat on instead. But it was pleasant, if I'm honest. It felt like a blanket of warmth covering your body. It made me sleepy, thinking about all those winter mornings after I'd woken up, but before I had to leave the heat of my blankets to get ready for school. Even the accident couldn't ruin that simple pleasure.

Teddy ushered me into a side room before disappearing to ditch my coat and make his 'world famous' herbal tea. When had I asked for tea? I'd rather skip it and get to the point. Every second I wasted was a second not used finding a way to bring Robin back. As he left, I noticed how thin he was. All bone and height. Or maybe it was his thinness that made him look tall. With his pale blond hair, thin frame, and pale skin, you might think he was a ghost. Maybe it was the ornate eye patch that gave him a supernatural vibe. Not my type, at all. He compared unfavorably to Robin's soft femininity or even Officer Daniels' musculature.

And then I was alone. The room he'd stuffed me into, an old fashioned library, complete with a grandfather clock, was lined with bookshelves which extended all the way to the ceiling. Books were stuffed into perfect rows, none so much as slanted. They were mostly used books. I picked one up. A Talisman book. *Creatures of the Night?* That wasn't either of the one's I'd sold him before. There was another- *On Demons*. And a third- *Elementals of Asia*. It went on and on like that; a shelf dedicated to non-fiction texts on ghosts, demons, spirits, vampires, and most of it was from

Talisman. I hadn't sold them. Or I didn't remember doing so. Damn, did he read anything else? Like, Teddy must have bought half our catalog. I'd definitely come to the right place. The woman from my dream had called the black shadow a spirit. He and the butterfly woman must have been doing research on the Disappearances like Robin had. But unlike her, they seemed focused exclusively on the supernatural. I wandered over to the couch and let myself drop. I could hear steps on the floor above me. Where the hell was Teddy putting my jacket, Narnia?

Bzz bzz

My phone.

Nathan, where are you?

Dad. I texted that I was at a friend's. It'd make him suspicious, seeing as I didn't really have any, but it'd slow down his inevitable request for me to come home. Teddy padded into the room holding a tray, one porcelain teacup with a saucer and a plate with three shortbread cookies balanced on it, in his other hand, he held a teapot. Just one cup? It was way more of a domestic image than I'd have thought Teddy was capable of producing. He always struck me as a carefree, careless kind of guy.

"It's sage. You'll love it. But don't drink it yet," he said.

Sage? Strange, but I guess I knew next to nothing about tea.

"Okay..." My stomach growled. I'd gone through all my snacks on the walk over, but I was still hungry.

Teddy laughed, loud and forced. He had this way of laughing that made you feel like he'd infused his response with a little too much energy. Like he was trying to make you feel good about yourself by laughing extra hard at your jokes. "You can have a cookie if you're hungry."

I helped myself to all three. I remembered to hold the plate under my mouth as I ate.

"Sage promotes good dreams," he said. "You've been having some not so good dreams, yeah?"

Well, since he brought it up. "What do you know about Robin?"

"Hm. Be a little more specific." He sat down in one of the ancient leathery armchairs. Spider web cracks had appeared where bits of the leather had flaked off. Taking the teapot, he carefully poured the brown-gold liquid into the cup and handed it to me. After I took it, he sank back into his chair; the massive back made him look tiny, even more so as he began to sink, slowly disappearing into red cushions. I set the cup down, not interested.

Specifics, huh? Then start with the most important question. "Is Robin still alive?"
Everything else was secondary.

He tapped his lips with his finger a few times. Again, it felt off. Like he was forcing casual

affectations for me. "I believe she is, yes."

"You're sure?"

"Well, after it kills her, I'm pretty sure its next target will be you. So as long as you're not getting attacked by it, you're golden, dude. Your crush is still alive and kicking. Probably, anyway." I couldn't decide on a reaction between relief and terror.

"What should I do?" I was genuinely asking. I would have taken advice from anyone at that point. I had no clue what I was doing.

"I think you should meet with my boss. She can give you more information, maybe a path to follow," he said. The woman from my dream. Sure. Made sense.

"Okay, and how do I meet her? Is she, like, waiting in another room or something?"

"Weeeeell," he meandered, scratching his head, "sort of. You need drink that tea."

I looked at the cup with suspicion. Like, what, as some sort of hazing ritual? Maybe it actually tasted really bad. I lifted the cup and sniffed. Smelled fine.

"It's only possible if you drink the tea." He was getting serious. Not playing around anymore. It didn't seem plastic, like the rest of his happy sing-song comments. But really, did his shift in attitude matter? Robin had to be my only concern. The steam hung in front of my eyes, giving everything a smoky look. Like a gentleman's club from the 1800's. The library had old fashioned enough décor for it.

"Why?"

"There's more kick to it than just sage," he explained. "Iris is... a one of a kind existence. You can't meet her when you're awake. She can only meet you in dreams. The tea will put you in the right frame of mind to get the answers you're looking for."

I probably should have been freaking out, sputtering that no way was I going to drink his sage and sleeping pill tea. But all I was really thinking was that that explained the stupid business card. *Reverie Psychoanalyst Iris*. Her NAME was Iris.

"Why can't I meet her when I'm awake?"

Teddy looked backwards and up over his chair. At another room in the house? Is that where Iris was? He turned back to me, guilt all over his face, cheeks red. If that's what he looked like every time he was uncomfortable, I could rest easy about his motives. I would have been able to tell he was lying instantly if his face had suddenly turned into a tomato.

"Look, you'll have to ask Iris for the why but what I can tell you is that what's in the tea is safe. I AM a nurse after all. Literally! I have a certificate and everything."

That sounded... dubious. "What if I don't want to drink it?"

"Um, well, I can't predict the future, but most likely Robin will die and then you'd probably

be next.” He said it like it our lives were nothing. Being cheerful had a dark side, I was learning.

“Robin...”

The wheels in my head whirred to life. Here I was considering drugging myself, falling unconscious in a near stranger's house, on the slim shred of a chance that it would help Robin. I guess if he'd wanted to drug me, he could have given me the tea without saying anything. Seriously, it smelled fine. But was it really the right thing to do? I sighed. I was acting like I was actually considering this. I wasn't 'considering' anything. I'd already decided to do it.

“I just have to text my dad,” I said.

“Well... fine, but don't tell him where you are. If he comes over I could debate the ethics and justify the morality of the situation no problem, but he'd probably still arrest me.”

'Arrest' not 'have me arrested'. I'd never told Teddy that Dad was a police officer. He shrugged, like it was natural he'd know that about me. I guess it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was... Robin. That's all that was on my mind. Even if the mystery of who Teddy is hadn't been remotely solved.

Dad,

I need to work through some things about Robin

I'm safe, but I'm putting my phone away now

love you

I grimaced. It looked like a formal letter. Not like me at all. And I mean no matter what I sent it would alarm him, but didn't that message sound a little... last words-y? He wouldn't think... Would he? No way. Eyes clenched shut, I hit send. I held the teacup, staring into the amber liquid as if glaring at it would tell me what Teddy had put in it. God. Bottoms up, I guess. It went down in one gulp. Actually didn't taste bad. Very earthy.

Teddy clapped. “Oh bravo! Very brave, I wish my ex had been decisive like you. I'll take care of you while you're asleep. You should feeeeeeelllll theeee eeeefeccctsssss aaaaaalmooost iiiinnsssttttaaaanntttlllyyy.”

I blinked once, twice. Surely he hadn't been that blurry a minute ago. My legs shook. I could hear my own heart beating. Slow. Much too slow.

Thump.

The ticking hand of the grandfather clock sounded, slow and deep, like a gong.

My head slumped. I could only see the bottom of the empty teacup, a butterfly painted into the china. Not a gothic version like the one on the business card. Nah, it was a more realistic image of a monarch. The red-orange coloring with black patterns were unmistakable. My eyes closed.

Follow the butterfl-



Chapter 7

It's the creaking that wakes me; a flexing of wood before it releases with a flat squeak. The floor is rocking like a cradle, water splashes all around. A boat. For years Dad's had been promising (more like threatening) to teach me to sail. Before swimming became impossible for me. Dad, is he here? It's dark; I can barely tell the difference between eyes open or closed. Need to get my bearings. I stumble to my feet. Clear, cool air pours into my lungs. I wonder if this is the harbor town Dad grew up in? I'd only visited once; the fried crab legs and creamy fudge sundaes had been beyond description. Half the taste was in the atmosphere. Like, how could crab legs and sundaes not taste great in the bright sunlight with your legs dangling over the side of a pier? I'd vomited riding the carousel afterwards. A few weeks after that the whole pier collapsed during a hurricane. A homeless man who'd been living there had been killed. Dad hadn't gone back since, he'd waved me off when I mentioned it'd been awhile since we'd visited. He wouldn't say why, but I knew it was the feeling of not wanting a broken version of the present reminding you of a lost past. Happens to me every time I look in a mirror.

It's probably not Dad's harbor, since the scent of salt is missing. There's only the gentle refreshing smell of water. So, a lake? I take each step carefully, hands outstretched. The last thing I want is to tip over a handrail and drown. But, I feel... good. So good it's weird. I twist from my hips back and forth. Nothing. No pain! Lifting my shirt confirms it- no scars. I'm in a dream for sure. The hair at the back of my neck stands on end and I'm failing to fight off a grin. Robin, I know, Robin! But I really just want to run up and down the boat, with my hands outstretched, feel the wind blow through my hair and past my body, until I'm exhausted, collapsed on the floor panting, feeling my lungs burn with the satisfaction of a good workout; I want to imagine I can still play tennis and Dad can take me sailing in his hometown without worrying because I can swim and Mom's alive and she's laughing and beautiful and we're happy. Hey. It's just a dream, Nathan, not a miracle. Focus on the task in front of you.

Alright, so where exactly am I? I didn't think I'd have to go looking for Iris. Last time she'd just kinda showed up. But at least I can make stuff out now. I'm definitely on a boat. A big, old, sailing vessel, really old, like from the age of discovery. No sails, though, not even a mast, as far as I can tell. Metal lanterns are arranged in two neat rows at the starboard and port sides. Hey, look at me knowing what the sides of a boat are called. Dad must have said it enough times for it to sink in. In each of the lanterns is a candle, there's maybe ten on each side. Just enough to cast the boat in dim light. It seems like a dangerous lighting system for a wood boat, but whatever. The wood has been carved into, haphazardly, like a toddler took a chisel to it.

I say toddler because most of the drawings are childish. There's one of a flower with six

petals, a house that's basically a square with a triangle roof on top of it. One is just the word 'BORED' in big block capitals. Every wood surface is littered with designs. It must have taken forever to carve the whole ship. Hey wait, here's a drawing of a butterfly, near the center of the deck. A whole flock of them actually. They've been given a bit more care. The artist has attempted shading and more delicate swirls and patterns. Whelp, butterflies mean I'm definitely in the right place. The boat's moving. Maybe it's heading to where Iris is? Well, as long as I'm waiting, might as well take the opportunity to take my undamaged body for a spin!

I sprint from one end of the boat to the other. Faster and faster, the gentle breeze feeling like a fierce gale. It feels so good! I collapse into a pile of exhausted limbs onto the deck, the night air drifts across my body.

“Ha haa!” I yell into the sky. “I never want to wake up!”

“You should be careful what you wish for.”

“Jesus!”

A woman is sitting next to me, staring into the sky.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack!” I say. “How long have you been here?”

She can't have been there the whole time. I would have seen her. She has absurdly long hair, drawn into a ponytail, which loops around her on the ground, tapering off in front of her bare feet, nails painted red. Her dress is like a short sleeved kimono, also red, patterned in butterflies and flowers. A sash is pulled tight around her waist, like a corset. Her legs are drawn together, knees bent. Skin pale enough that she wouldn't look out of place in an old Japanese painting. A pipe dangles loosely from her hand. It's hand carved, no glossy lacquer covering it- homemade. She takes a deep drag and blows it out, over the water. It drifts outwards, dissipating slowly. I sniff. That's... definitely not tobacco. I remember that smell. It's Iris. She's ethereal. She looks kinda exactly like you'd expect a woman who lives in dreams to look like. It's almost cliché. And butterflies again. Seriously what is it with this woman and butterflies? They aren't all that great. Dragonflies are way cooler.

I turn to face her more directly. The sweat cooling on my body makes me shiver a little. She hands me a blanket with a scowl that sort of negates the kind gesture. Have I done something to offend her? That'd be a new record for me. I wrap it around my shoulders. She takes another drag from her pipe, offers it to me, and shrugs when I wave her off. We seem stuck, she's unwilling to start the conversation and I don't know which of the seven million questions bouncing around my head I should ask. I have so many important things I need to know, which is why I nearly slap myself in the face when the first thing I ask is:

“So what's with all the woodwork?”

Of all the stupid-! That is NOT the question I should lead with, I should be asking about Robin!

“I was bored,” she says.

Yeah, I got that sense from the gigantic 'BORED' you'd carved into the deck.

“How long did it take?”

“A year, year and a half.”

“But-”

She takes a drag from her pipe and passes it to me. This time I accept. Dreams don't have continuity, do they? Has she been dreaming continuously for a year and a half? I didn't know that was possible. I suck in, but I don't know how to smoke properly, hot vapor rushes into the back of my throat, burning it. It sets off a coughing fit. She has enough grace to ignore it.

“I know your nurse, Teddy,” I say when I get control of my lungs. “Kind of a weird coincidence, huh?”

She scowls when I say his name. “Yes. How strange.” It's almost refreshing how nakedly hostile she's being. Like, the amount of venom in those three worlds could probably poison me, Teddy, and pretty much the whole world. So I have no idea how, but it seems like I've blown my chance at a good first impression.

“Here.”

She hands me a teacup. Like the blanket, it's appeared seemingly out of thin air. Right, it's a dream. Stuff like this happens all the time. Like when the bookmark traveled with me and Robin into dreams. Inside the cup is another strange liquid, this one dark brown and sweet-smelling. The last drink I'd taken from someone had literally knocked me unconscious. What if this did something worse?

“Quit being so negative,” she says, annoyed. “It's a dream, Nathan. It can't harm you if you don't let it. It's hot chocolate to help keep you warm. Change it to soda, if you like.”

I'm getting whiplash. Is she kind or mean? Hot chocolate's fine. I take a sip. It's amazing. She's added a shot of vanilla and cinnamon. I feel guilty enjoying it while Robin's out there alone, and probably terrified. But alive. Like Teddy said- until it, the spirit, came after me, I knew she was alive. Probably.

“That thing. You called it a spirit. And, like, an elemental. What does that mean? Do you know how to stop it?”

“Hm. Well, those terms seemed like the closest analogues to that monster. According to mine and Teddy's research, anyway,” she says. So I'd been right that the books I'd seen at her house were for research. “As for how to fight it... we have... a plan,” her confidence wanes, “of sorts.”

There's a rumble of thunder in the distance, towards the stern of the ship. The night's clear. She snaps towards the sound, frowning. Iris departs from the railing and takes a few steps towards the sound. She squints, trying to see... I don't know what. Should I be worried? Bad weather doesn't interest me. Saving Robin does. There's a plan. An actual plan!

“Okay. Okay! How can I help?”

We lock eyes for a long moment. There's something difficult to read there. Guilt? She turns away, saying nothing. She's saying something without saying it, but I'm too dumb to read between the lines. That makes me frustrated. That frustration turns to anger.

“You- You're supposed to help me! My friend could be dying because of me and you aren't doing anything!”

She ignores me and looks up into the sky, smiling faintly. She's mumbling something under her breath, I only just catch it, “I'm sorry, Teddy. I can't do it.”

Before I can ask what she means she turns and roars right back at me. “I AM helping you! Your self-pity makes me sick- his too! You've had some bad luck, a rough life? Suck it up! You think you're so important-”

“No I don't-” I say, interrupting, but she literally waves a hand in front of my face to cut me off.

“Shut up, I'm not done. Your self-importance is so strong you take on all the suffering you come across and somehow make it about you. Your friend Robin, your dad, whenever they're sad or upset, you take the blame. When they aren't, you imagine they are, with yourself as the cause. And I bet you never take credit for their joy, the times you make them laugh or smile, and when they're nice to you, showing their love, you reject it, saying it's pity or obligation or that the happiness you give them isn't worth the suffering you cause. As if they have no choice in how they feel, only you. You think your scars run deep? Pain from that car slamming into you? Imagine how Robin will feel when she learns that you died trying to save her. She'll feel that anything that happened to you while you were 'saving' her is her responsibility! That'll leave a scar. Just imagine the reverse, how much pain that would cause you, how deeply you'd be scarred by her dying for you.”

Her voice is so bitter, angry. She's not really yelling at me. Well, not only me. It's like she's yelling at the world. Scars, huh? ...I thumb my side, even though I know they aren't there in the dream. She knows about my scars. How? She's kind of making sense; it's true I'd be devastated if Robin harmed herself trying to help me. But that's only because she's got so much more to live for than me! And I do feel guilty for causing my dad financial worries, emotional pain, for not being the son he signed up for, and maybe I do tend to interpret Robin's bad moods as my fault, and- holy hell, is Iris right about everything? Am I the selfish jerk she described? If that's true... No. I can't get

distracted by that now. Maybe she's right, maybe she isn't. It doesn't change what has to be done, because Robin will die if I don't help her, no one else even knows what's happened! I can't take it on faith that Iris and Teddy's extremely vague plan will work. Having her alive and 'scarred', or whatever, is better than not having her at all.

“Iris, you might be right. About me, about everything. But I'm not gonna let her die just because she might resent me for it later. That'd be idiotic. So how do I help her?” On this point, I'm sure. Everything else? Not so much.

Iris sighs and smiles a little. It's tight, pained. Her eyes don't crinkle with genuine happiness. “You're a good kid, aren't you?” She doesn't know me very well. “Fine. I'll tell you a little. You have the physical copy of the bookmark and Robin has the dream version. They're connected... you should be able to contact her with it.”

Thunder sounds again. Closer, more threatening.

Iris snaps her fingers. There's a mechanical churning as the boat shakes. Thank god I'm sitting because a particularly violent shake pitches me forward onto the deck. I cringe, waiting for stinging knives of pain, like thin pieces of metal forming deep in the muscles of my hips up through my chest then thrusting outwards, trying to break the surface of my skin, to emanate from the scars. No knives come. It's a dream, stupid! That's a relief. I unclench my hands. Wood panels open up towards the rear of the ship and out pops a wheel. Even amidst the chaos, Iris has gone to stand away from the railings. I follow her lead. We're standing on the butterfly designs, the ones drawn more intricately than the rest. She stamps her foot three times, each stamp an echoing boom, cutting through the wind which is now whipping about unpredictably. Giant poles, unadorned with sails, rise from the ground, like fast growing plants. They're tall. Thirty feet? Fifty feet? At last all the shaking stops. I struggle to keep my feet. She pulls out a whistle from her sash. Oh great.

PHWEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEET!

Ow. No time to cover my ears. There's a gentle gust of wind. I look up to see an army of monstrous, gigantic butterflies. Twenty or more, Monarchs, Swallowtails, the one Iris had called a Purple Emperor- only giant sized, as big as cars, in all colors, periwinkle, green, black, flying high above the sails. They start dive bombing towards us.

Now, I feel similarly to butterflies as I do to flowers. They're pretty and all, but they're more or less non-factors in my life. Still, giant sized, the insects are absolutely terrifying. It makes all their creepy features way easier to see! Their giant, furry torsos with way too many legs attached, the huge curled sucker thing they drink nectar with, and of course the hideous compound eyes as big as a house's windows.

I can't hit the deck fast enough. I knock my chin on the ground and bite my tongue, drawing

blood. I'm waiting for them to lift me into the air, like they did last time. But instead they simply land on the sail-less poles. There's a slight tapping as the insects adjust their footing, but otherwise, it's just the wind howling. I liked it better when they were flying. Less creepy. Iris raises a hand. The tapping stops.

“Do you like them?” she asks, a little bashful.

“Your legion of super butterflies? No, of course I don't! Why do you have them?”

“They're more fun than sails.”

This woman is unhinged. Pick a personality and stick with it, okay?

“That's it?”

She hesitates, unsure. It's a strange look on her. “I... met them about a year and a half ago. When I fought the spirit.”

Wait, what!?! I should probably be asking follow up questions, but I'm kinda stuck with my mouth hanging open, doing a manual reset of my brain. Had she tried to save someone too? And self evidently failed, since the spirit's still out there. Rain is coming down in fierce lashings, it almost feels like ocean waves, cresting and breaking over us.

“Goddammit!” Iris yells over the storm. “Fine, I'll tell him. You'll have met something too.”

“I- I haven't met any butterflies lately.”

“It doesn't have to be a butterfly,” she says, gesturing upwards. “It can be anything. Just, something that helped you, and maybe seemed smarter than it should be?”

“No, I-” The swallow, the rainbow swallow. When I asked it for help it flew into me and I could run faster than I thought possible, and I ended up right where Robin was. “Iris, what's happening to me? Is someone doing something to me!?”

Ah, pity. I can read this look. Is she crying or is it just the rain?

“I'm sorry, there's no time to explain.”

Flash in the distance. Thunder growls three seconds later. Louder. Iris snaps her fingers. The butterflies shift, there's a pitter patter of thin legs tapping on wood. Then, with a great heave, in sync, they flap their wings. Again, and again in rhythm. The boat jerks, nearly sending me to the ground. Awake, with my injuries, I'd have been sent sprawling. I know we're going through a dire situation, but I still allow myself a tiny smile. For so long I've been trapped in my own body. I've had the musculature of an athlete mixed with the capabilities of an invalid. Knowing I can access so much power, speed, agility, but that my body will flat out shut down in protest if I do has been torture. But in a dream... The boat sails over a wave crest horizontally, then pitches downwards to meet its trough. A spray of water kicks up and splashes me and Iris. I splutter, but Iris' grim expression is unchanged.

Where are we going? I'm so confused. My mind's racing. It's too much to process all at once with a storm bearing down on us too. I want to talk to Robin! She's the smart one; she'd know what the heck's going on. The wind cuts in, blowing so strongly I have to hold my hands over my eyes. They tear up anyway. We push against the gusting wind, and the butterflies struggle to keep us on course, cutting through the waves. In this weather, Dad would've recommended pulling the sails down so the wind can't bat us around as easily. Iris keeps us steady. Clouds on the horizon roll towards us, lightning zigzags through them, getting ever closer. She whistles, the butterflies change course. I can see teeth as she bites her lip. We're being chased. By what? We're in a dream, so maybe a nightmare. Iris' nightmare. It sure is scaring her.

“What else can you tell me? What should I do next?” I strain to be heard over the roar.

“Now's not a good time, Nathan!” She yells over the wind, eyes trained on the butterflies and the approaching clouds.

“Now might be the only time!”

She clenches her teeth; I can almost hear her growling with annoyance.

“Fine! You've been seeing the world differently haven't you? Colors and brightness and outlines shifting, things like that. Those are things connected to dreams. Pay attention to them! And then stay the hell away! This isn't your fight.”

Yeah, colors have saturated and spun. And people kept telling me I was shining. And I'd noticed it in others. Robin and the cop. And Teddy. And Iris. Not Dad though. Which is a good thing. I don't want him dragged into this mess. Plus I'd seen the graffiti swallow move while me and Robin were still awake. So had her bookmark. I don't answer Iris. But we both know I'm not going to listen to her warnings. How can I?

“Iris, how do you know so much?” Not just about the this spirit, but also about me. She knows about me from my real life, and I'm one hundred percent positive we've never met before.

She doesn't answer. There's something else going on here. Something more than a spirit that kidnaps people to feed off them in dreams. Iris has answers and she's refusing to share. The water that drips down my arm is brackish black.

“C'mon Iris, together we-”

She shakes her head. “No! Just... walk away. You can still walk away! Don't end up like me.” Her voice is weak. I can barely hear her through the wind and rain, which is picking up in intensity.

“What do you mean, 'end up like you'?” I don't want to do this alone. Iris knows more about this, I know she does! She's the only person who's ever fought the spirit, even if she lost. I'm completely oblivious, I need her. I don't understand why she can't just come with me. She walks

over to the railing and leans over. Didn't she hear me? Further she leans and further still. Whoa, Iris, too far! What- she slips off the side of the boat. In a flash, she's lost to the darkness. I- I don't hear a splash.

“Iris?” I shout. “Iris!”

“Yes?” she says, coolly, standing beside me, completely dry.

“You- But-” I say, before realizing. “You can't leave the boat.”

The carvings, her bitterness. For a year and a half, she's been trapped on the boat. Ever since she went after the spirit? Suddenly her warnings and threats have a little more impact. That could be me. It's different when the danger is vague, compared to seeing it in front of me.

“Welcome to my home.” she says, her bitterness clear. A strong wind is sending the rain horizontally into our faces. There's another bolt of lightning followed in half a second by thunder. I've not seen a squall like this in... ever. Definitely not been outside during one.

“What about your house and Teddy?”

“That's where my body lives. Teddy is... my nurse.” Is that all? That hesitation is suspicious. Just how much does he know? She's clutching her chest, looking away, vulnerable. She's taller than me, I notice suddenly. “My consciousness is stuck here. Price I paid for losing against the elemental. Something's wrong with me, with my soul. It's disconnected from my body.”

The butterflies skitter, make short nervous chitters, similar to cicadas. Their wings flap double time, they sound like bed sheets being flapped out quickly again and again. I stumble as the boat lurches forward.

“We're out of time. You need to leave.”

A sickly sweet smell begins to fill the air. I remember it well. Cotton candy. Robin, almost killed, the bookmark protecting her, getting flung out of her dream house. THAT'S what's been after us?

“But, wait, Teddy said it would only come after me if Robin was dead!”

“Well, Teddy's an idiot! Robin's being protected by the bookmark. It's the first time that's happened. Who knows how the spirit is reacting? Alright, no more answers. You have to wake up before you're killed!”

Okay, but how? A lightning bolt strikes the mast, a deafening boom and shockwave sends several gigantic butterflies plummeting to the ground. There's a splintering crack as the wood gives way and crumbles. The top third of the mast is falling down! Charred butterfly bodies slam into the ship, but they're so light, they only make a wet slap sound as their broken, oozing fluid bodies hit the deck. The mast plunges into the water on our starboard side, sending up a huge geyser of water, which soaks the deck. Wake up, wake up, wake up! C'mon stupid body, wake me up before I die!

Thunder crashes all around us. Iris' mouth is wide open, she's screaming, rain pouring down her face. Or are they tears? I can smell the blackened flesh and see the smoldering of flash fried bits of butterfly sizzling on the deck. Some of the insects survived the bolt, but not enough of them are left to move the boat. We come to a stop. Iris is hunched, shuddering and kneeling on the deck, holding a broken piece of wing, half burned black, to her chest. The others flutter down from the mast, forming a protective circle around her. They're chittering. They're afraid. So am I. Iris looks up and stands, placing both of her hands on my shoulders. She's gripping them hard, I can feel her nails digging into my skin even through my shirt.

“The bird, Nathan. You have to call for it.”

She knows about the rainbow swallow, too? How the hell does she know so much about me?

“How?”

“Just call it! Now, go. Be safe.”

Iris places a hand on my chest and shoves me off the side of the boat, up into the air and overboard. 'That's gonna bruise' is my last coherent thought before I plummet into the water. I take a quick panicked breath before I slam into the rough surf, then I'm sinking into blackness. Pressure builds up in my lungs, they feel like they're expanding, trying to burst out of my chest. I try to find the surface but I don't know which way to go. It's all dark, churning water. My arms flail and legs kick in a crude breast stroke, but I might be swimming down for all I know! I can feel bubbles forming around my nostrils as my last scraps of air escape.

Please, spirit bird, help me!

A warm sensation burns my chest, from the inside of my heart. At first I think lack of oxygen has triggered a heart attack, but instead a glowing circle appears on my chest, shooting out beams of rainbow light. Out pops the rainbow swallow. It starts small, but quickly grows large, larger than should be possible. I can feel wind whipping at my face, tossing my hair everywhere. Wait, wind? I'm falling! So instead of drowning, I'm going to crash into the ground. Is this supposed to be an improvement!? I can see clouds, I've lost track of the swallow and- forget that, I can breathe again! I land in something soft, the wind getting knocked out of me. I take rapid gasping breaths, coughing as the speed of my fall is suddenly reduced to zero. The swallow is below me, the size of a pickup, flapping its wings gently. It's beautiful. Colors shifting with each change of the light. So dazzling I almost can't look.

Thank you.

I say it without sound. I feel that the swallow hears and somehow understands. A feeling that gets confirmed when its wings pop up in what I can only describe as a bird shrug. Its way of saying 'No problem, man'.

Can you help me get home? Can you help me save Robin?

It glances at me. It's a reassuring look. It'll do what it can. Our pace doubles. Is Iris going to be okay? I'd just left her there with... whatever that thing is. Iris is right, 'elemental' feels like a pretty good description, considering the massive storm it had just caused. But she knows it and what it's capable of. She'll hide or fight it off or the butterflies would protect her. I have to hope so, anyway. It's Robin who needs my help the most. I have the bookmark, that's a start. And tons of resources at Talisman. If her and Teddy can come up with a plan, then I'm sure I can too. I'll pull everything we have, all the rare stuff that never sells because it's too expensive. Figure out exactly what I'm dealing with. After that, I'm not sure. Banish a spirit, hopefully.

The swallow knows how to get me home, it looks like. It's flying pretty confidently in a straight line. I leave the piloting to it. I'll do the usual shotgun seat duties of keeping the conversation going and picking the music. That's just car ride etiquette. Dad and I have a system for long car rides. I get to pick the radio station provided I help keep him awake.

Do you have a name?

It doesn't respond, which I interpret as a 'no'. It's going to be awkward referring to it as just 'the bird' all the time. It needs a name. A good one that doesn't provoke eye rolls. I hate it when people name their pets something stupid. I can't see the ground below us. I wonder if I would have just kept falling forever? We're flying through an endless sky, an ocean of clouds stretches out before us. An ocean of clouds...

How do you feel about Amelia?

I don't know, put ocean and clouds and flying together and my mind goes to Amelia Earhart. She crash landed on an island, or maybe was captured by a Japanese warship, or faked her own death, or was abducted by aliens. I'd gone through a phase, read a couple of books, looked through a few conspiracy theory websites. Mysteries are meant to be solved. I let that spark of hope that everything would turn out alright, that Robin will be okay, that I won't mess this up, glow. I have no idea how close I am to finding you, Robin. But I'm closer than I was.

Amelia chirps, agreeing to the name as we approach a bright light in the distance.



The Resistance of Robin Melling

Look, clearly I'm attempting to detach myself from a frightening situation by affecting the demeanor of a cold, distant scientist. But that doesn't mean I'm not smart. I'm certainly not paralyzed with fear. I'm a woman of action. A sort of methodical, step-by-step kind of action, but action nonetheless. I can't stand waiting around for problems to fix themselves. It's my preference to attack them head on. So I can't bear to just wait around hoping this dream will end anymore. I need to figure out how to end it myself. ASAP. I slowly open my bedroom door, cringing at the creaking, because determined as I am, I want to minimize run-ins with my fake family members. The versions of them that exist in this dream don't seem quite right. Too happy. Too whole. I can't relate.

No one's there and it's still daylight, the sunshine streams through the windows in the hallway. It's been bright as midday the whole time I've been here. Surely it should be night by now, unless this dream version of my house has been transported to Alaska or Norway in the summer, where there's barely a night at all. My small town home in Maine isn't exactly southern hemisphere, but the sun should be setting soon. Should have already.

I only just remember to skip that third step from the bottom. Loose, always squeaks. Okay, I've reached the bottom of the stairs, now what? Explore the house? But there'd be no point. It'd look just like it does in my memories. I'd be playing one of those idiotic 'spot the difference' games. No, I need to leave, find someplace different. So, the front door. It's time to see what's going on outside these walls.

I open the door, and-

“Sweetie?”

Who!?! I whirl. It's Mom. Stay calm. It's just a dream.

“Are you alright? I was just looking for you.”

“Why?” She has a dazed expression, like she's not really focusing on the conversation. She's staring outside, through the open door. She steps forward and grips the doorknob but doesn't close it or open it further. It's strange. What's she thinking? If she's created by my memories, then surely I should be able to guess what she's thinking. I can't.

“I was listening to the radio and apparently there's a summer squall coming. It's supposed to touch down soon.”

Just as I'm about to leave she gives me a reason to stay. 'Sudden squall'. Convenient. Though, looking outside, clouds do seem to be rolling in. That's almost a relief! I'd worried that I'd been trapped in a perpetual sunny day. Poison for a night owl like me.

“Are you going to try to stop me from leaving?”

She turns to me, frowning. Something in her shifts and she's back. It's 'Mom' again. “Honey,

you're in your pajamas.”

Oops, I'd been so focused on the mystery of the world that I'd never changed. Not that it matters what I'm wearing in a dream. She sees I'm holding my ground and sighs.

“Do you remember the time we gardened together? I gave you a plot and some seeds and you made a big mess, flinging dirt everywhere and planting the seeds in pairs because you 'didn't want them to be lonely'. You were always concerned about things like that. You hated to leave things on their own. Always sorting things together, you were. You'd sort stuffed animals by color, then type, then size,” she stared at me, “Do you remember? The gardening, I mean.”

I don't remember my planting eccentricities, but I remember gardening. “Yes,” I say, “we did that lots of times in my childhood.”

Mom held her hand to her cheek and crossed her other arm under her elbow, thinking. “That's true. Those days have all blended into one bright collage of sunshine and flowers. I think my memory took the best parts of everything and mixed it all together. It's one of my fondest memories, even if it's not technically 'true'. You and your father, the two of you have always been driven to pursue the truth.”

And her and Sophie are a lot more flexible with things like that. They both loved keeping up the illusion of Santa Claus.

“What are you getting at?” I ask, impatient.

“I guess I want to know if you really think the most important thing is having all the answers? It doesn't have to be. You could make your happiness more important.”

Is she telling me I can stay here, if I want? That it'd be better to give up and accept the fantasy? I know having answers doesn't necessarily make you happy. It's probably not healthy to *never* lie. But not knowing what happened to Dad had been the single worst part of his Disappearance. Assuming he's dead isn't the same as knowing. Your heart isn't logical. It'll hold onto hope forever, if you let it. It'll wait. My family, the real one, is still stuck waiting. For Dad, yes, but now for me as well. I can't let their hearts keep holding on just because the dream I'm having is a nice one. Mom and Sophie would never recover. It might actually kill Sophie, in a manner of speaking. I clench my jaw, defiant. Mom sees and sighs, like she's disappointed, but does nothing as I step backwards out the door, watching for any sign she might change her mind. Aside from an eyebrow raised in confusion, she does nothing other than to shift to hold the door open for me. I turn around, but I can feel her watching me. Motherly concern has never felt so menacing. There's a rumble of thunder. Of course. Nothing's easy. Droplets start to fall. Wait. Wait just a second. Rain doesn't smell like pink bubblegum. It's supposed to be more earthy, like dirt or a leaf. I turn towards town, and Talisman. The rain is dark, almost black. A drop hits my hand. Ah, ow! It burns a little.

Heavier now. Each drop stings. The stuff is nasty, it isn't rain. Rain can't smell this sweet; it can't burn your skin. Acid rain is a misnomer, it's not actual acid. What the heck is this rain made of? There's no reasonable way for rain to burn your skin, not like this! But the pain overtakes my curiosity fast; my neck is on fire, then my scalp. Any skin the rain touches feels like it's being stuck with the end of a cigarette.

Turn back to Mom? Okay, wait, don't panic. This is a dream. I have control. I don't need her. "Umbrella!" I say, holding my hand out. Nothing happens. "Umbrella?"

Okay, so it's not the kind of dream where you can make stuff happen with your mind. I probably should have tried that out before now. With no other options, I run back through the door, slamming it closed and sliding down the frame to the floor. This is bad. Really, really bad. I can't think of a more scientific way to say that at the moment. I can practically feel my nerve endings sparking. It's the sort of thing that normally wakes you up from a dream. If I can feel pain here, then I can suffer, too. Get tortured. Like I said- bad. Really, really bad.

Now I've been driven inside. With my 'family'. Something IS trying to keep me here! It's stopping me from leaving. Okay so I'm- I don't know! Where the hell am I!? This has gone beyond a lucid dream. Clearly, I'm caught up in something... more. My butt feels cold. I haven't changed out of my pajamas yet, and apparently I can't just magic myself into some new clothes. This dream sucks. Someone taps my shoulder. It's Mom, she's holding a towel. I take it gingerly and begin to dry myself off. The stinging lessens as more of the strange rain is absorbed into the towel, which doesn't seem to be affected by the water. Mom holds out her hand when I'm done, but I shake my head. I should keep it, observe if there are any delayed effects of the rain on the towel. Mom sighs again and extends a hand to help me up. I take it, reluctantly. She's surprisingly strong, I'm nearly lifted off the ground. Or maybe I'm just surprisingly light. Ha! As if, I'm no twig-thin supermodel, thanks to pasta. Mom's expression is thoughtful. A perfect replication of my mother, every detail just as I remember it. Every laugh line and forehead ridge frown line, the way she wears her hair in a bun, the way she stands fully upright, a keen observer of good posture. It's her. It should be comforting, but instead it makes me shiver. Because it's not her. Something's missing in the eyes- the sadness. I know that's not very scientific. The same air of tragedy doesn't surround this woman like a cloud, as it does my mother. My real mother is probably worrying herself sick, about ready to keel over from distress. If only she were really here. If only I could let her know that I'm alright. Trapped, but okay. This version of her raises both arms towards my face. I flinch, but don't back away. She makes me uncomfortable, but I'm not afraid of her. She rests her hands on my cheeks, like she always used to when I was a child. Gentle.

"That's my girl. You find your way back home and don't let anyone lead you in the wrong

direction, okay?”

“Mom?”

Her eyes are shimmering. Or maybe that's just because mine are watery. At least... this proves she's like Sophie, not affected by the bookmark, which is still in my waistband.

“I love you, Robin. Good luck.”

She's wearing a white sundress, the hem coming in below her ankles, thick white straps over her shoulders. It's the most revealing thing I've ever seen her wear. She'll usually wear a sweater and jeans to the beach. It's strange, because isn't this is my dream? Shouldn't she only wear clothes I've seen her in? Maybe once... a long time ago, I saw her in something like this. She opens the door and walks right outside, not bothering to close the door behind her. Her feet are bare. They get wet and her dress turns see-through where the water touches it. Wait. Oh God, the rain!

“Wait, Mom, come back. Please. Come back inside.” It's not my real mother, but that doesn't mean I want to see a copy of her dissolved in acid rain! She's not reacting. Should I care? 'Should' doesn't matter, because I do care. My heart is burning and don't know how to put out the fire. I'm frozen, too scared to venture into the pouring rain and grab her, squirrel her away safely inside. Mom walks across the street and I lose track of her in the thick downpour. I let her go and something in my heart chips, another piece breaks off and dissolves. It feels like I don't have much of a heart left, like it can't withstand much more pain. “Dammit!”

I run out into the rain. It's coming down heavy, my whole body is on fire, but I can't just let my mom walk off into an acid downpour. I chase after her, she's only made it to the end of the sidewalk. I grab at her wrist, but it's slippery with water and I lose my grip. She doesn't exactly fight me off, but she basically ignores my attempt to stop her. I try again and this time manage to hold on to her wrist. She stops, but doesn't turn around.

“Sweetie, stop.”

“What?”

“You have to let me go. It's not safe for you out here.” She's fighting back tears. That's easily recognizable, I've seen her try, and usually fail, to hold back tears a hundred times over the last few years. But what she's saying doesn't make any sense. She turns. She *is* crying, and shaking her head. She pulls me into a hug. She's soaked in that burning rain, so the hug is physically painful. Which makes it doubly surprising that I hug back, despite the pain. Her lips are close to my ear, but I still miss the first word “-isn't your dream. It may be built from your memories right now, but it isn't yours. It could change it at any moment.”

“It? You mean Dad?” I say, pulling away. There's a crackle of lightning. She glances at the sky, afraid, but something in her steels and she grips my shoulders tight. It hurts.

“Sorry, Robin. Be strong. Don't be fooled. Keep the charm close.”

She brings me in towards her and then shoves me with all her might. Her strength is supernatural and I go flying through the air, impossibly fast and far. Lightning arcs across the sky. She holds her arms out, like Jesus on the cross, her eyes are defiant, open, staring into mine. I fly through door as she's struck by a bolt of jagged electricity. It's wide and thick, more like the cartoon version sent from Zeus than the ones you see in nature.

I land on the floor just in front of the door and tumble. I have no idea where I end up, I'm in too much pain. It's... too... much...

I drift.

Awash in an empty blackness. True black cannot be perceived by the human eye. It's why we can't 'see' black holes, only their effects. But we interpret it as 'black', the absence of color. Of light. I drift through that ambiance. It lasts... as long as it lasts, I guess. I have no way to gauge. But my eyes must have closed at some point, because I open them.

A shimmering light disturbs me, and a growing warmth on my hip. Not wholly unpleasant, just uneven, as if I'm being hit by sunlight in one specific location. I think I'm in my bedroom and that I must have left the curtains open. Eyes mostly closed, I stumble to my curtains, but they're closed. Then what? The warmth is still there. Oh, the bookmark! Immediately, I pull it out. It's different now. Dad's drawing is gone. In its place is a bird. A swallow, if I'm not mistaken. Its rainbow plumage is shining. Hm, I've seen this somewhere before, but I can't place it. Another dream, perhaps? I flip it over. Dad's inscription is gone too. Instead there's a message:

Robin, it's Nathan. Where are you?

Nathan's awful handwriting! I never thought I'd be glad to see it. Oh please let Nathan get me out of here, get me home. I want to see my real mom and sister, the sad, but familiar ones. My mother must be so worried. If Nathan doesn't know where I am, then she definitely doesn't either. Oh! Oh my God! That's where I've seen the bird. It was from the alleyway. Okay, this is definitely Nathan. Only he would adopt a symbol from a piece of graffiti that I distinctly recall had also featured a set of male genitalia. Maybe he'd done it so I'd know it was him.

“Did you deliver this message from Nathan?” I ask the bird. It doesn't answer, of course. Even if it had been a parrot, I wouldn't expect an explanation. But, and I'm probably just tired and stressed out, but is the bird moving? I swear I can see it flapping its wings. I fall back against my bed and leave aside the psychedelic dream swallow for the moment. So, maybe this bookmark can carry messages between me and Nathan. Given that the bookmark appears to be anathema to the monster, it seems unlikely it would be able to exert any direct influence over the bookmark, let alone use it to send an innocuous message like this. I should stay ready for anything, but in all

likelihood, this is indeed a message from Nathan. Which raises the question of how in the world he's sent it. Again, I'm not really a scientist, but he's awake, right? I'm pretty sure it's impossible to send a written message to a sleeping person. Maybe it's just how my coma-ridden brain is interpreting something? But if that were the case he'd probably know where I am. It'd be obvious, because I would be lying there in front of him, muscles slowly atrophying. It's not clear what I should tell him. I wish I knew where I was, but I don't.

“What should I tell him?”

I'm asking the empty air. I might be going crazy, I think. I know it's unkind, but I wish the two of us were switched. I think he'd get a kick out of all this craziness. I'm not saying he'd *enjoy* it exactly. But he'd probably appreciate it in a different way than I'm able to. All dopey and cheerful and, well, let's face it, a little stupid, but nice. I bet if that's bird's his symbol or something, he's already named it. Something inane, probably. Like... Captain Magellan or something. He loves history, after all. I lean in and whisper a message. The shimmer dies down and the bookmark's ink shifts. Nathan's message vanishes and so does Captain Magellan. As I watch, the bookmark's original text and images come back. Okay good. That's progress right there. I try sending more, but nothing changes in the bookmark that might indicate what I'm saying is getting passed on to Nathan. Maybe it's like call waiting. The line's still in use transferring my original message. Hopefully that first message gets to him and Nathan can figure something out. Because I as much as I hate to admit it, I need help. Even Nathan's help is better than nothing.

Next thing to tick off the damn checklist is to figure out what exactly happened with Mom earlier. I had no rational explanation to explain... any of it. To be honest, the image, still burned into my retinas, of my mom getting struck by lightning, eyes wide open and staring at me, had been deeply disturbing. Who cares if it wasn't really her? It looked and sounded like her. I'm not a robot, I can't help but feel uncomfortable about it. My eyelids are drooping, my body swaying. Wait, what? I thought I couldn't fall asleep! Well, if the dream suddenly wants me to sleep, then I don't want to! But like a drug, the scent of cotton candy fills every nook and cranny of my bedroom, every breath adds more weight to my body, encouraging me to sleep. I'm cold, all of sudden. So cold I can see my breath. No, fight it! Fight! Nathan, help!

Chapter 8

I woke gently, slowly floating up to awareness. A tiny slit of light cut through the drawn curtains. Someone had laid a blanket on me. Morning, with birds squawking loud and aggressive, not at all chirpy and sweet like Amelia. Amelia? Iris! I shot up. An involuntary hiss as my side lit up in pain. Great. The scars were back. Of course they'd be back.

“Sleep well?” Teddy appeared in the doorway, holding my coat and grinning.

I rubbed my eyes, wiping the crust out of the corners. Every blink woke me up a little, but I felt pretty sluggish. I'd slept on my arm. It was totally numb. I picked it up and let it drop. No feeling, just tingles as blood started to find its way back into the limb. Ugh, I think my mind was still a little numb from whatever drug cocktail Teddy had given me.

“So,” Teddy drawled, “how did it go with Iris?”

“It didn't.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I mean she told me some stuff, but she said she'd only called me out to tell me I shouldn't help. Why call me out at all!?”

Teddy's cheeks were burning red; I've never seen him clench his fists, close his eyes, and shake while taking deep breaths in and out before. It was terrifying. Like watching your sweet, kindly grandma threaten to murder someone.

“Here.” He said eventually, shoving a thermos at me. “It's coffee. You-” He cut himself off, mouth still open, like he had something to say. “You should go. Don't worry about returning the bottle I have, like, thirty. Not to rush you, but your phone rang almost non-stop while you were asleep. I think your Dad's panicking.”

“Right.”

He didn't ask any more questions, which was helpful, because I don't think I'd have had any more answers. Okay, I needed to get to Talisman pronto. It would be the best place for research. If Robin could be saved, that's where I'd find out how. And Iris said I could use the bookmark to contact Robin... somehow. Needed to try that too. But first, I needed to stop Dad from getting the entire police department looking for me. No point in checking the messages. My hasty 'I need to work things out' text would not have cut it for Dad. Hm. Maybe I should write down what I wanted written on my tombstone.

The second I walked through the front door:

“You're grounded, and that's just for starters,” Dad said, visibly struggling not to yell. We were not a yelling household. Aah, he didn't seem very sympathetic to my 'working things out'. Not that I'd expected him to be. The punishment didn't technically matter, I was going to go to Talisman

whether I was grounded or not, but I didn't like disobeying. "Where were you?"

"At a friend's house, like I said."

"Who's?"

"... Teddy's?" That was only partially a lie. I mean, Teddy's a friend, sort of. Kinda. Come on, let it go so I can duck out and go to Talisman as soon as you leave.

His eyes were narrowed in suspicion, like he thought it was unlikely I'd been at a friend's house. I felt weirdly defensive that he hadn't believed my lie. I could have been at a friend's house! To my surprise, though, he did let it go. Dad closed his bloodshot eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose- oh, yikes, he only did that when he was seriously trying to keep his cool. "We are not done talking about this. But I have to go to work and you have an appointment to keep."

"Appointment?"

"With the interviewer from yesterday, Officer Daniels. He'd like to ask you a few more questions."

"Oh. Is that normal?" I asked.

"Not if the witness is cooperative the first time." Dad was really not happy. Everything about him, from his tense posture, to his slightly crooked tie, to the way his hand was shaking (a sure sign he'd gotten little sleep and was drinking too much coffee to make up for it) said he was on the verge of blowing his stack. I'd only seen him truly angry once, when he'd found a cigarette in my room when I was nine. A friend had given it to me, but I'd been too scared to smoke it. Dad had turned red and yelled so loud that the picture frames on the end tables had rattled.

"Okay. What time?"

"I told him you'd text him as soon as you woke up. I sent you his number. This does not happen again. If it does there will be serious, long term consequences. Are we clear?"

"We're clear," I said, looking down. "Sorry."

Strange, that threat would have scared me a week ago. I'd have been afraid to leave a dirty dish in the sink, in fear of causing Dad to lose it. Not anymore. I'd seen real horror. Robin and myself nearly killed, just to start. Rainbow swallows and butterflies and bursts of rainbow light. I'd been attacked, almost drowned, and struck by lightning. I wasn't afraid of being sent to my room without dinner or losing my TV privileges.

"Okay," Dad said, his voice softening a little, "Then I'm going to work. Call Officer Daniels. You can spend any spare time you have thinking of ways to make it up to your mom. She probably worried about you the whole night, up in heaven."

Dad did that sometimes. Hid his concern inside Mom's.

He tried to sidle past me through the open door, so I stepped aside and held it open. "Be

good.” A grounding and a police interview. Of the two, the second was more worrying. Iris had told me people who seemed more colorful or brighter were connected to dreams. Officer Daniels had looked like that. Not just that, he'd noticed my 'shine' as well. Did he know something about Robin? Or the spirit? I could try to feel him out for information. Iris had begged me to avoid people with that glow. But I couldn't, could I? Not knowing what I did. Alright, shower first, then message the good officer. After toweling off I found Officer Daniels' number, and sent him a quick message.

My phone buzzed immediately. It was him. That was fast. He suggested Graham's and that suited me fine, it was close to Talisman. I planned to head to the bookshop straight afterwards.

“Banana papaya with a shot of ginger, please.” My exact order. Officer Daniels had stolen it. I couldn't help the frown. I'd been looking forward to that. I'd barely eaten since... since lunch yesterday. Only snacks since then. I'd really wanted my order, but didn't want the officer to think I was copying him.

“And for you, hon?”

“Uh, cherry and peach, with vanilla,” I said, adding a delayed, “Please.”

“I'll have those right out for you.”

She walked away with what had to be an affected bounce. No one could be that naturally chipper waitressing at a smoothie bar. Especially not in garish lime green polyester t-shirts and booty shorts. The walls were pink and the tables a bright yellow plastic, like something a clown might vomit. The clientele were mostly high school girls and moms. A high school boy and an adult man too young to be his father? Everyone was staring. I could feel their eyes, judging. I got enough of that just walking down the street. People turning to gawp at the boy with a limp. A girl at a nearby table stared. I smiled, and she smiled back. Good. Smiles were better than frowns. Frowns invited questions. Seriously, no one ever asks a person why they're smiling. Everyone wants to know why you're frowning. I'd learned that, post-accident.

The officer hadn't said a word beyond his order yet. Not even a 'hello' as I'd sat down, slinging my backpack over the chair and tapping my back pocket, making sure the bookmark was still there. He'd been staring at his phone with a furrowed brow, but stuffed it into his coat pocket as I'd approached. He wasn't in uniform. Instead he had on blue jeans, color faded from use, fraying at the ends. He wore a plaid shirt, the classic red and black. I'd have thought it would clash with his bright orange hair, but it didn't. There were bags under his eyes. That I could relate to. I often rolled onto my scars in the night and got jolted awake. He cut a much less intimidating figure without the uniform, but he still retained that brightness I remembered from our first encounter. His orange hair burned brightest in the sunlight, his pale skin, too. Made me squint. He was handsome, I could admit, if you were into the square jawed all-American type. Young, more like a college student than

a real adult. But that could have been the hipster lumberjack getup. And I still got the weirdest feeling we'd met before. It was driving me crazy!

There were straws in a cup on the side of the table, next to the napkins. He'd grabbed one and pulled off the paper covering. He ripped the paper, tiny pieces at a time, making a pile of confetti. Even when I'd ordered, he'd just continued ripping paper and grimacing. Was he okay?

Robin. It hadn't even been a full day since I'd sat down across from her at a coffee shop, just this same distance apart. It already felt like a lifetime ago. I mean, this was my second police interview since then. I'd drank tea drugged with... something. And that was just stuff that had happened in reality. There'd probably be a vigil soon. They'd started after Keisha had Disappeared. Some remembrance group organized them a few days after every Disappearance. At some point, after the hope had died that anyone was coming back, they'd become informal funeral services. As lead detective, Dad had brought me to a few. I hated it. I felt like I was intruding, trying to force myself to grieve for people I'd never met while their family members cried and gave shuddering speeches, sending out prayers for their loved one's safe return. Should I go to Robin's? Lay down some flowers? Maybe after... I failed, *if* I failed. Iris was wrong about one thing; it really was my fault Robin got taken by the spirit. It had been after me, I wasn't making that up out of some imagined guilt. If she'd never met me, Robin wouldn't have been taken. I shook my head lightly. Don't think about things you can't change. Remember the plan. As soon as I was done being questioned, I'd read every single scrap of paper that existed on demons, spirits, spiritualism, elementals, Shamanism, anything that looked remotely relevant. It was my only hope of saving Robin. How long did I have? I'd felt the coldness of the spirit creeping up on me for weeks before it had taken Robin. How many victims had there been? Too many. Dozens. I did some quick math, trying to figure out the timeline. Under normal circumstances, she'd probably already be dead, but I had to hope that the bookmark would protect her until I could figure something out.

The redhead officer had a snowstorm's worth of torn white dots piled up on his side of the table. He seemed dazed. Not the easily annoyed and focused questioner from yesterday. Some sort of new interview strategy? I wasn't familiar with it.

“Have you ever had a dream and everything's normal in the dream, and then when you wake up, you realize the dream was actually a nightmare?” He finally spoke.

That... was an odd question to start with. I thought for a moment. Maybe it's not in the way he meant, but every time I had a dream where my body is healed, where I can run and play there comes a point where I wake up. The joy from those moments sours when I lie in bed and slowly realize that I'm still crippled. Even when I have a happy dream, a rarity, it's still torture. “Yes.”

His eyes were glazed over. “I had a dream about an old friend.” Had he even heard me?

He didn't seem to care that I hadn't asked. Was this even the same guy? He was all over the place, like he was still dreaming. He drummed his fingers on the table and finally looked at me.

"Thanks for coming."

"Sure." Not that I had a choice.

"First, here," he said, reaching into his jacket pocket. Not the one I'd seen him stuff something into earlier. He handed me a folded-up piece of paper. "These started going up around town today. I thought you might want to see it."

I raised an eyebrow and unfolded the paper.

MISSING

Can you help find me?

Robin's picture was underneath the title. She looked immaculate, not a hair out of place. Skin airbrushed totally clear. Her glasses were perfectly balanced on her nose, not falling crooked like they often did at work. She wore her smile awkwardly, not used to showing it off. It was her most recent school picture. Next to it was her age, last known whereabouts, and distinguishing characteristics. She looked so happy... I wanted to memorize the picture, every detail, so I could hold it in my mind. Hold onto her a little. I felt the corners of my eyes sting.

"Did you think of anything I might need to know?"

"Huh?" Officer Daniels was staring at me. Gauging my reaction. Was that really all he'd brought me here to ask? "No."

"No?"

I shrugged. The waitress came over with our smoothies. The pleasant fruit aroma was mixed with the smell of additives and Styrofoam cups. Daniels looked at his straw and seemed surprised at how much scrap paper he'd created. He blew on the flakes, sending time onto my side. He stared at me. His eyebrow rose ever so slightly. Was he challenging me? I bit the end of my straw, flattening the plastic. I wasn't going to rise to his bait.

"We can't find Ms. Melling's laptop." Robin's laptop, the one in my bag back home. There'd been a mix-up at the police station. Officer Daniels had given me her bag, thinking it was mine. I hadn't corrected him. I hadn't even looked at it yet- I'd been too caught up in chasing butterflies and blunting Dad's anger. Stupid. It should've been the first thing I checked. I'd have to go back home and get it before continuing to Talisman. "Her mother swears she left the house with it. We checked the alleyway, the bookstore, and, just to be sure, her room, but no luck."

"Weird. You must have missed it."

"I didn't. Any idea where it might have ended up?"

He obviously had a hunch I had it. Thanks to Dad, I knew all about interrogation techniques,

the things he said and did to get people to tell the truth. He'd used them on me. So I wasn't about to get rolled by some amateur pretending to be my friend. This wasn't about the laptop, not really. During our interview, he'd seemed to know something about dreams, about me.

“Look officer-”

“Call me Peter.”

Yup, right on schedule. In movies, cops browbeat suspects into submission, employing a little classic good cop, bad cop. That's not a thing in the real world. In the real world, cops do everything they can to make it seem like they're your friend. They might interview you in pairs, but more often it's one on one. And they usually take you to a more comfortable location, maybe to get a coffee (or, y'know, a smoothie) and coax you to talk. No yelling. No slamming a perp's head into a desk.

“Well, Peter, maybe you should get to the point? Since we're such good friends now.”

“Alright, I'll drop the act. I know you have the laptop. I'm the one that gave it to you. Do you really think I didn't check the contents of the bag before I gave it to you? It was obviously Ms. Melling's,” he said, gesturing at me with his cup. He's been using 'I', not 'we', when he's referring to police stuff. Usually detectives try to present a united front and use the royal 'we'.

“You gave me Robin's bag on purpose? Why would you do that?”

Officer Daniels- Peter, rather, smirked, his foggy persona dissipated, and stared at me, waiting for me to do some- Wait, dammit! I'd fallen for the oldest trick in the book. Dad would be disappointed in me, and Robin would have smacked me in the back of the head.

“Now, you're a good kid, or, well, your dad thinks you are. He's always talking about you at work.” Really? Dad's... bragging about me to his colleagues? I wasn't anything worth being proud of. The cop was probably lying to get me to let my guard down. “I don't think you'd withhold evidence that could get your friend found unless you had a really good reason. Like, for example, if you knew how and why she Disappeared and that the police wouldn't take you seriously if you told them. So, Nathan, let's talk about the dreams you've been having.”

Smug jerk. He took a sip of his smoothie which reminded me I'd barely touched mine. He'd mentioned my aura. Robin had called it a brightness. Peter had somewhat melodramatically called it the sword of Damocles. Maybe that was just what people targeted by the spirit looked like. Which was interesting. Because Pete had that glow-y look as well. His hair and skin were so bright I wanted to put on sunglasses. Iris had said to avoid things with that glow, maybe because the spirit was attracted to them.

“Okay. Let's talk.”

He nodded, almost thankful.

“Great. In the spirit of cooperation, I'd like to tell you about a dream I had last night. It was about a... friend I hadn't seen in a long time. I was told something very interesting. About a girl who didn't die when she was attacked by the shadow. And about the boy who saved her with a bookmark. Temporarily.”

Friend? He had to be talking about Iris. If I was looking for someone related to dreams who knew what was going on, then she fit the bill.

“I'm sorry, what?”

“Can you show it to me?”

I jerked my hand, ready to pull out the bookmark from my back pocket, but stopped. Could I trust him? I really shouldn't, I knew that. But Iris had refused to help me and Officer Peter Daniels knew things. I could tell he was holding something back. Reluctantly, I laid the bookmark out on the table. He stared, wide eyed. What? It was just a bookmark-

“Hey. Is it supposed to say that?”

'Nathan. Help me.'

Black ink, in her florid cursive. A message in a bottle washing ashore. Maybe I could almost hear Robin call my name, her voice somewhere between a memory and an echo. No way. Where was the original inscription? I flipped it over. Instead of the moon and stars, there was an eye. Drawn just, way too vividly. I could see the veins and everything. It was really freaking creepy. How...? My heart raced. I flipped it over again. Iris had said that there were two bookmarks, and that they could communicate. Maybe Robin was trying to tell me something.

“Robin...”

The paper vibrated. I dropped it and it fluttered to the ground and landed on the side with the eye. It blinked. The heck-!?! Almost as disturbing as the shadow man. It's not possible for a drawing to move! Yet I was looking at it- blinking, looking around, pupil dilating as it focused on me. Should I... do something? I stood up in my seat, spilling my full smoothie all over the bookmark as I did. No! If the bookmark was some sort of lifeline to Robin and I ruined it, then I might lose her for good. The contents sludged out of the cup and covered the bookmark. Such an idiot! I lunged for it, but Peter got there first. He fished the thing out and shook it. He ran his hand up and down the surface, checking for damage. Was it okay? Please let it be okay. I'd never forgive myself if-

Peter wasn't saying anything, just frowning. Bad sign. “I ruined it, didn't I? God, that's just-”

“No, it's fine,” he cut me off. “It's just...”

Okay, before, when I said I felt like everyone was watching and judging us? That was paranoia. Because now they were staring like we were aliens. He gestured for me to sit back down. A uselessly defiant part of me balked, not wanting to follow orders, but the stares of judgment from

the other patrons were too strong. I sat.

He leaned in close. "It's different," he said, and showed it to me.

Blank. Both sides were completely empty, just white. No inscription from Robin's dad, no creepy-as-all-get-out eye. Nothing. I didn't get it. No matter what I did, more and more questions got thrown at me. First Iris tells me like one tenth of the story, then the bookmark is in two places at once and transforming and is this cop a friend or a foe and-! It's too much; it's all just way too much.

I held my head in my hand, elbows on the table, palms over my eyes and fingers grasping and scratching through my hair, like I just had to touch the right part of my head and suddenly everything would make sense. I just wanted Robin back. Why was that so complicated? "Spirits and dreams and magic bookmarks, none of this makes any goddamn sense. I feel dizzy."

"Hey, you're actually really pale. Here, give me your arm." Too tired to fight him, I complied. He placed two fingers on my wrist. It was quiet for a moment. Still. It's like his touch was grounding me, keeping my thoughts from spiraling off in a thousand different directions. I focused on his face, etched with concern. "Your pulse is a little thready. When was the last time you ate?"

"Does the half of smoothie I didn't spill count?"

"No."

"Then I had a few cookies like twelve hours ago."

I'd been too stressed to feel hungry. I'd lost a lot of weight right after the accident, too. Stress. That and the lack of working out meant I lost a lot of muscle mass.

"You should eat something." Was that professional medical advice? Gee, thanks. "Spirit, huh? Is that what you're calling it?"

I hadn't wanted to share that with him. He'd think I was crazy. On the other hand, what did I have to lose? It was basically doing exactly what Iris warned me NOT to do, but I didn't feel like I had a choice. I was in over my head.

"Yeah. The thing that took Robin. It's been causing the Disappearances."

"I know. The shadow? I've... seen it." I could sense a lot of missing detail in that pause. His face fell, maybe remembering something- a regret. We might have been more similar than I was willing to admit. I had regrets too. Saving Robin would prevent me from having yet another.

His grip on my wrist loosened, then slackened entirely. The bookmark, though, was still held by Peter. It'd protected me from the spirit, and it had been able to deliver Robin's message, so it might be able to find Robin somehow. I snatched at it. Peter jerked his hand back. I'd only managed to graze his skin.

"I need that bookmark." I said. I'd figured it out. That bookmark was the key to everything.

It could hurt the spirit because... well, I was still working on the 'why', but the 'what' mattered more. It fought off the shadow. Maybe the bookmark had absorbed a part of her dad or something. The bookmark was a symbol of Robin's father's love for her and that's why it was toxic to the shadow. Right? The power of love? That kind of made sense. I didn't have a better idea.

“So do I, it's my first real clue.”

His first clue? Again, I noted his repeated use of the word 'I'. Whatever he thought the bookmark was a clue for, he was investigating it outside his work at the police department. Well, duh. It's not like the police department was going to start investigating dreams. I couldn't just let the bookmark go, and he needed the truth about what I'd witnessed happen to Robin. We were both connected to dreams. I couldn't just part ways with him, especially if he was going to keep the bookmark.

“So, what, we team up?”

He nodded. “Tell me what happened, exactly as you remember it.”

“Alright, fine. It started a week or two ago. I had these... episodes.”

“Episodes?”

“Flashes of cold, starting in my feet, but traveling further up my body each time I had one. Colors would blend together, seem brighter. I'd get dizzy, and shaky. I'd feel a foreboding sense. Like something was wrong. Then it would pass and I'd be totally fine,” I said. “I know I should have done something, spoken to my dad or a doctor, but, it just seemed like another side effect of...” Peter nodded. “I didn't want to worry anyone! I figured it'd go away in time.”

“Makes sense,” Officer Daniels said, leaning in, putting his hands under his chin. I got the impression he only said that to make me feel better, but it did make me feel better so I didn't mind.

“Anyway, cut to yesterday. I saw that Robin had been researching the Disappearances. I think trying to make sense of them after her dad was taken. I was on the list as a potential victim. Then after work Robin and I were drinking coffee and I got a really bad feeling. As she left her bag broke and she accidentally left her bookmark, the one you have, and I used it as an excuse to chase after her.”

“She was carrying around a totally blank laminated bookmark?”

Right. He hadn't seen it originally. “No, at first it had a picture of the night sky on one side and an inscription from her dad on the other. Anyway, like I told you last time, I'm not supposed to run, or do much exercise at all, so I wasn't surprised when it aggravated my scars. The pain knocked me to the ground in the alleyway where you found me. That cold feeling came back, the world seemed to swirl and shift. I saw a shadow building up underneath us. It... it's hard to describe. I felt cold. And I felt its malice. Then I blacked out. That part was true.”

“So after that you woke up alone in the alley?”

“No,” I shook my head, “not exactly. I dreamt. A lucid dream. I saw the graffiti swallow from the alleyway. It moved, freed itself and flew into my heart.” Peter raised an eyebrow. Jerk, I knew he wouldn't believe me. “Look, I'm just telling you what happened!”

He held up his hands in apology.

“It guided me to where Robin was. She was in a dream version of her room. We tried to leave, but couldn't. The shadow I saw earlier showed up. I- I tried to help her, I really did! It wanted me, it tried to take me, but the bookmark glowed and fought it off! So it went after Robin instead. I-!”

A hand settled on my arm. Peter's face was calm, kind, his hand, gentle. He had a knack for calming me down. Maybe it was the first aid training he'd had. I took a breath and continued.

“This happened in like a dream version of her house, I think. I managed to give her the bookmark just in time, but the spirit kicked me out of the house. I woke up after that.”

“I wonder why it didn't attack you,” Daniels said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you said the bookmark was pretty much your only defense, and you gave it to her, so... why didn't it kill you, now that you were defenseless?”

Oh. Good question. I swallowed, feeling cold and dizzy. I really could have died.

“I dunno. The next thing I remember is you interviewing me.”

“Not waking up in the alley? Or the ride to the station?” He shifted his hand back over to his side of the table.

“I don't remember any of that. Look, this next part, you can't tell anyone, okay? Seriously, you have to promise you won't say anything.”

“What, because the rest of what you've said is so normal?” He asked.

“I'll just say that I never said it and then it'd be your word against mine. Do you promise?”

“Okay, fine, I promise. What'd you do?”

“I stole a flash drive and papers on the Disappearance from a case file at my dad's desk.”

“You what!” Ole Pete seemed surprised at that. I felt a little proud. It WAS pretty audacious. “Your dad isn't supposed to have files from his old cases. He's going to be in a lot of trouble when the chief finds out.”

“Well, he's not going to, right?”

“Not from me,” Peter agreed. “Still, though. I like your dad. I hope he doesn't get fired.”

“He won't,” I said, full of the brash confidence of youth. “Anyway, next I-” Next I met Iris. She'd told me to avoid people like Officer Daniels, people who had that bright look. And I

suspected she was the friend he'd mentioned earlier, the one that had visited him in a dream. What game was she playing? Maybe it was best to keep the Iris card close to my chest for now.

“What's with the hesitation? You're not holding anything back, are you?” Peter asked. Damn detectives. They never let anything slide. Like he was being completely honest with me anyway.

“It's nothing. Next I basically researched until I came to meet you. I mean, if shadow monsters that kidnap people are real, then why not one of the spells for banishing shadow monsters? Plus there's Robin's notes and the stuff I borrowed from the police station.”

I let him chew on that for a moment.

“So,” I said, brightly, “I can tell when people are connected to dreams. They look different. Brighter. Like you do. And you can tell too, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Like that was going to satisfy me. “Okay, so are you going to tell me how you're connected to dreams?”

He scratched his smooth chin, thinking. “So, we know that the Disappearances are connected to the Earthquake, right? The Disappearances started right after, so it stands to reason.” Okay, sure, that made sense. “So working backwards we can guess that the Earthquake had some effect on the dream world. Something about it triggered the Disappearances and since they're happening mostly through dreams-”

“I'm following you,” I said. “What does that have to do with why you seem connected to dreams?”

“When the Earthquake happened, I was dead.”

“What?” I must have misheard.

“I was dead.”

Nope, hadn't misheard.

“I was resuscitated,.” He continued. “But I think something happened when I was on the border between life and death that connected me to dreams. I knew something was up with the Disappearances, that they weren't natural. I could just feel it. So I started investigating. I'd hit a wall before you, though.”

He wiped his hand over his mouth. Huh. When I was kid I'd wanted to be a body language expert so I could be a super cool detective like my dad. Covering your mouth was a sign of dishonesty. Was he lying? He'd seemed sincere to me.

“Well, what now?” I asked.

“What were you going to do before we met?”

“Go back home, get Robin's laptop, then go to Talisman and read literally everything I can.

If whatever's happening to her can be stopped I think I'll find the way there.”

“Okay, I'm coming too, obviously. I'll drive.”

Chapter 9

Dad 'happened' to be in the front hallway when I came home. Officer Daniels was waiting out front.

"I'm on my lunch break," he said. "How did it go?"

An inquisitorial tone, spine ramrod straight. His 'cop' pose. Perfect for interrogating criminals and wayward sons.

"You can relax," I said. "I'm not going to jail or anything."

"Because you haven't done anything wrong or because you haven't been caught?"

A little from column A, a little from column B.

"It turns out there was a miscommunication and I accidentally held onto some evidence they need. I'm here to get it," I said, stepping towards the stairs, only to stop. "What do you think of Pe- Officer Daniels?"

"Pete? He's a good cop. Takes the job seriously. Why? Did he say something to you?"

I raised an eyebrow. What would he have said to me?

"He's- no. If you want to know anything else, you should ask him, not me."

"O-okay?"

Well, that was weird. I already knew Peter was holding something back, and I hadn't been able to force it out of him. But now it seemed like there was something else. Something my dad knew. What?

"Do you, um, have a particular reason for asking?"

A simple question. But, though his pose was casual, more slouched, his shoulders were still tensed. That 'um' was unusual. He was normally more self assured when he spoke. Never uncomfortable or hesitant when speaking to me. Officer Peter Daniels seemed like any other cop to me, but something about this conversation was getting to Dad. Sure, he might be younger and more built, but that was it. If things had been different, maybe I'd have ended up looking like him around his age. I might have looked up to him; transferred my ideal image of a man from my dad to him. After all, what kind of teenager thought their dad was cool? That hero worship had to go somewhere. Even if it became more subtle. More adult. What my dad was really asking was- no. I couldn't deal with that, I didn't have time.

"Just curious."

I brushed past him and started up the stairs, and I felt him turn and watch me trudge upwards.

"You got hurt when you were fourteen," he said. I stopped, but didn't turn around. "Right when kids start pushing boundaries. And then suddenly you were more reliant on me than ever

before. Even for simple stuff like walking or going to the bathroom. And now that you're better I'm so proud of how self-sufficient you are, I love you. You get yourself to school, you help out around the house without asking, you have a summer job. But I wouldn't mind it if you talked to me a little more. You can, you know. Talk to me, if you want.”

“I-” My throat seemed to thicken; the weight of air seemed to make speech impossible. “Thanks. I love you too.”

Jesus, why now? That was a dirty tactic. Dad didn't have to be so damn nice. I wish he would just stop spending so much effort on me! Just because I'd needed babying two years ago, didn't mean I needed it still.

Dad had hovered non-stop from the moment I'd left the hospital, even though he hadn't been able to take much time off work, what with the Disappearances starting and all. He poked his head in whenever he could: Need to go to the bathroom? Some lunch? Cup of coffee? Fluff your pillow? No, no, no, and once was plenty, thanks. But eventually, he'd left. Had to do at least a half day at work. They needed him and although he never said it aloud, I'm pretty sure we needed the money, what with my hospital bills and all.

I remembered the careless tossing of linens had pulled at my left side, stitches straining against the cuts, sutures nearly bursting; then settling, tapering off to a throb in time with my heartbeat. Anger made me ignore it. Pretend not to see an angry, swollen wound, oozing blood and pus all the way from hip to nipple. 'Healing' into lifelong mottled scars.

They didn't matter at that moment. I'd decided I was going to go to the bathroom by my goddamn self.

I'd tested the stitches the day before in preparation, playing a hardcore game of chicken with my own body. How far could I stretch before passing out or re-opening my wounds? Turned out, not very. Dad had noticed the redder than usual bandages when he'd changed them that night. But he'd let it go. I think he had a sense of just how deep my pain went and knew there was nothing he could say.

So- I'd taken a deep breath and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

My vision blurred, the pill bottle and alarm clock on the bedside table became an orange-black smear. A few blinks and the objects clipped back into place. The pill bottle's disclaimer note thing had glowed, sort of legible on the far corner of the stand. May cause: Drowsiness, headaches, blurred vision, vivid dreams, heart palpitations/heart attack, and death. Pleasant.

The wheelchair could generously be described as a second hand piece of junk, but it was the best we could afford. I decided that if I could activate the handbrake, it'd make a decent brace. Leaning over, slowly as possible, my fingers strained for the lever. The farther I pushed, the more

the stitches pulled. And- There. With the mechanism flicked halfway the chair still moved easily, but there was some resistance. Good enough. Here had been an opportunity to prove all that gym time was more than vanity. I could keep myself up with arm strength alone. Probably. Maybe. Deeeeeeep breath. Teeth clenched. Deeeeeeep breath. Muscles tensed.

The chair's handle ridges had dug into my palms.

“Ggkh!” A wet grunt had forced its way out as I stood, the cuts on my back screaming, the grip on the handles growing slick with sweat. Don't fall, don't let go. A step forward with the uninjured side. Easy. No problems, barely felt it. The left-

No, it didn't. The foot, the leg, had refused to obey. Instead it shook, rose meekly, then trembled its way back down, paralyzed in fear.

“Come on!”

I'd hopped forward with my right foot. Arms straining, pushing off against the handles. The wheelchair groaned. Blood trickled down my hip, wetting my pajamas. I closed my eyes and thought about puppies. And with that I'd sailed through the hallway, out-maneuvering the average tortoise. The cold hardwood had chilled my toes. Feeling solid ground under my feet after weeks in a bed had nearly driven me to tears. Lots of things did, back then. I'd leaned against the handles for a rest, but the chair had started to slip out from under me. A reflexive shove at the handles had done nothing for my balance. The force sent the chair flying forward where it crashed into a wall. The ground rushed to meet me.

I'd woken to Dad's shout. “*Nathan!*” Something warm and wet on my ass. I'd really hoped it was more blood.

So, yeah. Independent to my own detriment. That's what Dad was referring to. I'd never really shaken that attitude. Because he'd treated me like glass ever since, afraid the slightest pressure would shatter me. I needed to prove him wrong. Show him that I could take care of myself.

A conversation with Dad lay lurking in the near future. But the future was, well, the future! No point obsessing about it. I needed Robin's laptop. It was in her bag, along with the books she'd been reading. I grabbed it, added my own laptop. When I left, Dad was leaning against the car door, speaking to Peter. When had he-? Damn his detective curiosity! Hopefully Officer Idiot there hadn't said anything stupid.

... Peter Daniels. There it was again, that intense feeling of familiarity. I was so sure we'd met, just where? I knew I was harping on it, getting obsessed, but seriously every time I looked away from him for more than five minutes, it suddenly struck me all over again. A feeling of *deja vu*. I got the sense that I shouldn't ignore it.

“Is that hers?” Dad said, pointing at the messenger bag.

“Y-yeah.” Right, he'd stared right at it when we'd met in the police station.

“I thought it was strange. You never carry a bag if you can avoid it. But, then, I don't usually see you leave for work so I didn't mention it,” he said.

“Like I said, there was a misunderstanding.”

“Uh huh.” He stared at me, like he could will a different answer out of me.

“I was disoriented, they handed me a bag so I took it.” Stupid, don't offer more detail unless you have to. Well, it was pretty much the truth anyway. Dad kept his cards close to his chest, betraying nothing in his reaction. “Can I go now?”

He gave Peter a look, “Sure. Don't forget you're still grounded. Come home as soon as you're done. Alright?”

Did he absolutely HAVE to say that in front of his colleague? It made me look like a child!

“Will do,” I said as I clambered into the passenger seat.

“He's intimidating,” Peter said when Dad was out of earshot. “He came out and started asking me question after question. How do you get away with breaking the rules?”

“I don't. He'll figure out what we're doing eventually, not looking forward to it,” I said. “Try not to think about it. I have her things, so let's go to Talisman. Without me or Robin working, no one will be there.”

“What about the manager?”

“Never met him. Or her. They send us emails with tasks to complete. There's a handbook for figuring out how the run the store too.” Peter raised an eyebrow. I shrugged. I'd thought it was weird too, but it made my work environment pretty relaxed so it was fine with me. I figured the bookstore was a side project and the owner lived far away.

He started to drive. Cars still made me a little anxious, especially if the driver was bad, but he drove smooth, if a little over the speed limit. So cops broke those laws too, good to know. He parked the car behind Talisman. I stared out the window at one of the police's missing person posters. Robin's face seemed so still and plastic in the photo, not like her at all. A wisp of hair hung across her face. She would have hated the photo chosen. It really hit me that she was gone. Not just for me, but other people too- her family. Her mother had suffered the loss of her husband and now her child. Even if I knew where she was, what had happened, that wasn't any closure for her. It must be like an aching black hole in the pit of your stomach, to have your child Disappear. I wondered if that's how Dad had felt when I'd been in my accident.

“Hurry up. I don't want anyone we know to see us go in,” he said. I was torn between agreeing and moving slowly on purpose just to spite him for ordering me around. In the end, I hurried under the awning in front of the bookstore.

I held the door open for him then led us to the break room, the only room aside from the basement that didn't have any windows. He brushed past me to sit at the table. His arms were rock hard. It takes real intense training to get physically fit like that. It hadn't been that long since I'd had wiry muscle and the ability to outrun any small town cop. I dragged a chair next to his.

“So, I have a question,” I said as we waited for her laptop to boot up. “Why do you believe me? I told you some crazy stuff and you barely blinked.”

The real question, the question underneath my question, was- What do you know about all this?

He hesitated, then- “What do you know about the Earthquake?”

I knew about it. I knew every single last detail. It had caused my accident, distracted both me and the driver that hit me enough that neither of us were able to move out of the way in time. It was a random and inexplicable phenomenon that had completely altered the course of my life. I wanted to understand it, unlock the mysteries of what had happened to me and why. Wouldn't anyone?

“About two years ago there was an Earthquake. It struck all parts of the world simultaneously. It was small, not even enough to tip over a glass of water. But what was even stranger was that all the world's seismographs hadn't picked up the slightest trace of a tremor. Nothing. Even today, no one really knows what happened. So people just called it 'The Earthquake' and kind of moved on with their lives,” I said. Except me. I hadn't moved on.

Peter nodded, “Yeah, that's about it. Except I know why it wasn't detected by machines. It wasn't a physical earthquake; it was a spiritual one.”

“Huh?” That kind of sounded like the pseudo-religious nonsense we sell at Talisman. I mean, a spiritual earthquake seemed ridiculous. The words 'earth' and 'spirit' were near antonyms! Still, with everything that had happened, maybe I shouldn't be so skeptical.

“An earthquake in dreams that spilled out into reality. It tore the veil between dreams in the real world. Ever since, people have begun slipping through to dreams, and something else has been trying to pass through dreams to the waking world...”

“The spirit. That's where you're leading me?”

He turned to me and sort of made a sweeping gesture with both hands across the table, as if to say 'Basically'. I considered his theory, trying to keep an open mind.

“Okay, so is this like a theory or something you know for a fact?”

He licked his lips and bit the lower one, worrying it between his teeth. “Let's say it's a theory for now. But it fits, doesn't it?”

Sort of. It fit in the sense of a toddler coming up with an outlandish story of what they did

while you were gone and then saying 'Well, you can't prove it DIDN'T happen!' when you called them out on it. Okay- I was being unfairly critical. It explained why the Disappearances had started happening when they did. And how they were even possible in the first place. And it was better than anything I could come up with.

“So, the reason the Disappearances are happening here is because the epicenter of the Earthquake is here? It's where the 'veil', as you put it, was torn.” Peter nodded. I knew I was putting up a disbelieving front, but in truth, I'd already decided to believe him. “And you came to this theory... how?”

“I-” he hesitated. That. That's why I believed him. His scrunched shoulders and nervous glances at me, not quite meeting my eye line. Those small moments of vulnerability would last just moments before he'd collect himself and force an aloof, confident, loose posture, but they were enough to convince me. Like me, he'd been hurt deeply by something. If he didn't want to talk about it, I could understand that. “Look, I can't tell you.”

“Yeah?” I said and he nodded. “Well, it's fine for now. I'll believe you.” Can't tell? More like won't.

He blinked, surprised. I almost laughed. A 'bing' came from the laptop. It was loaded onto a sign in screen.

“Any idea what her password is?” he asked.

Her login screen was set to an image of a blackboard where someone had written the entire periodic table of elements in chalk. She's such a nerd. A nerd who I knew had a really poor sense of security. Using the touchpad, I glided the mouse over the white password entry bar and hit enter. It loaded us through instantly.

“You're kidding.”

“Don't get me started. I've told her a thousand times to password protect her stuff, but she never listens. She says it's a hassle.”

Peter shook his head. “Here,” he said, taking control of the laptop. “Let me look around her files.”

“Okay, sure,” I said. “Can I have the bookmark? And a pen?”

He fished the bookmark out of his packet and tipped over a cup of assorted writing utensils and handed a pen to me. I could take it and run, but not only would he probably catch me pretty fast, we were actually working well together. His calm logical thinking reminded me of Robin. Neither of them laughed very much. Not around me, at least. It was like their personalities balanced out mine. I felt like between the two of us we might actually come up with a way to save her.

“Er, Robin?” I asked the bookmark. Nothing. “Here, hand me a marker.”

Peter fished one out of a pencil cup and threw it to me. “What are you doing?”

“Putting a message in a bottle.”

I bit the pen cap off and held it in my mouth. I scribbled a quick message onto the surface of the bookmark, Robin's totem.

Robin, it's Nathan. Where are you?

The words, barely legible in my sloppy cursive, indented themselves into the laminate of the bookmark. ... Nothing. Dummy. It was stupid to think it would work. I felt silly, and childish.

“Kid.”

The officer was gesturing at the bookmark. The writing, all of it, including the inscription, was fading. Consumed by a black stain that spread, growing larger. It took the shape of an eye.

“That eye again!” Peter exclaimed.

“Do you think it's Robin's eye? Can she see us?” I tried waving and the eye tracked my hand movement, but nothing else happened. Robin's eye, if it was Robin's eye, was already fading, bringing back the blankness from before. My message was gone. I flipped it over again and again, but nothing. That settled it. The bookmark must somehow be transmitting our messages to each other. That first message had been from her, and now my reply must have been making it's way over to her somehow. The slip of paper's design had once again settled into its blank state. It seemed unlikely that this was just a bookmark that Robin's father had given her. Maybe I shouldn't trust it so readily. But at least it meant that wherever that creature had put Robin, she could still be reached. We could find her.

I took my seat next to Peter who was browsing through Robin's Word documents. There was a bunch of stuff for her classes, broken down into folders. We clicked through them all, checking every one, going alphabetically. Her 'Essay Writing' folder had like thirty sub-folders, identified by different dates.

“Huh,” I said, as he clicked on the first one. Empty. Weird. The next one was too. And the one after that. “Maybe the files got corrupted?”

“No, it's here,” Peter said, pointing to a date at the end of the list.

“How do you know?”

“There's no November 31st.”

'Victims', 'Research', and 'Notes/Conclusions'. I'd already seen the 'Victims' page. Instead of looking through any one file, Peter was browsing through the files' properties.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to see when she started this. When she created these files,” Peter said, scanning the file's creation data, then scowling.

“What? What is it?”

“She created the first document about four days after her dad disappeared.”

To know that, he'd have to know Mr. Melling's Disappearance date by heart. That surprised me. It wasn't surprising he'd know most, if not all the victims' names and the general time they'd Disappeared, but to know it so precisely off the cuff, he must have cared deeply about the investigation. We wouldn't have been working together if he didn't care, but maybe it ran deeper for him than he let on. It probably connected to his Earthquake theory.

“I guess she thought she could help find him,” I said.

“Yeah. But her dad was probably already dead by the time she started looking for him.”

“He... He could still be alive. For all we know.”

“Oh grow up,” he said, with venom. My heart skipped. People never got mad at me, like ever. My limp usually made them pretty sympathetic. So even though it might sound a little weird, even masochistic, it felt surprisingly good to hear him snap at me. Even if I hated what he was saying, everyone was usually so damn careful around me, like I'd break if they spoke above a gentle coo. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I'm sorry. It's just, it's been years. With all these people having vanished because of an evil shadow man, I don't think there's much hope.”

“Yeah, no worries, I understand.” Did it make me a masochist if I kind of liked when he got mad at me? It was a little thrilling.

But still, he might be wrong. If it was a normal kidnapper, then sure, all the victims would probably be dead, but the fact that a supernatural creature had caused the Disappearances changed the rules. Maybe some had been dragged into dreams and had escaped or fought it, only to become trapped there, like Iris.

“I want it on record that I'm a little uncomfortable invading Robin's privacy,” I said, remembering how angry she'd gotten the last time I'd snuck a look at her laptop.

“You get used to it, as a police officer. Barely notice it now.”

“That's kind of sad,” I said.

“How?”

I shrugged. Just was. Getting used to something like that seemed sad.

Peter clicked on her 'Notes' file. Robin hadn't reached any concrete conclusions. She'd grown more open to the idea of a supernatural cause as the Disappearance count kept rising while the clue count stayed at zero. But she couldn't prove anything. There wasn't even enough information for her to speculate. Instead, she had used the space to come to terms with her father's Disappearance and then later, accept his probable death. At the end of the document, on a single line by itself, she'd written:

I know that even if I find him, he's not coming back

“There's not much here,” Peter said, unable to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“You know what? Let's divide and conquer. You keep trawling through Robin's laptop and I'll look at her books,” I said.

“Books?”

“Robin borrowed a bunch of Talisman books right before we were attacked. They were in her bag when it happened. Normally, I'd discount anything you learned while reading one of our books, but they might actually be helpful in this situation. We've got a whole section on exorcisms, banishments. Maybe there's something in there that can get Robin out of this mess.”

“Don't forget yourself,” he said.

Yeah, me too. I had kinda *wanted* to forget that part, but thanks Peter. I could be next on the list after Robin if the shadow spirit had its way. I looked through her bag. It still felt weird going through her things without permission, but since it was for the greater good'n all, oh well. I pulled the three hulking books: the one on Shamanism, one on dreams, and the third, which turned out to just be a mystery novel she'd been reading.

I almost decided to read that instead because I estimated that there were about five hundred million rituals cleansing spirits in Robin's book on Shamanism. Burn sage, walk three times counterclockwise around the afflicted's home to cure heart trouble? If a spirit is causing seizures, the cure is to have your assistant beat a drum in a rhythmic, repetitive pattern until the shaman falls into a trance. Then chant a spell, tie a red ribbon to their pinkie finger to connect your souls. Find the spirit by following the ribbon. Engage in a battle with the spirit, calling upon your animals and protective spirits. That was one of the simpler ones! Although... hm. Amelia had carried me when I'd left Iris' boat. Maybe we could adapt some of this ritual so we could guide ourselves to Robin when we needed to? I made a few notes. The problem was, I didn't know what we were dealing with. If Peter was right, then the spirit was a one of a kind thing, a totally new creature created, or at least enabled, by the Earthquake. If no one had come across it, no one will have devised a ritual to counter it.

For his part, Peter had begun taking a forest's worth of notes; they'd slowly eclipsed the surface of the table. I'd eventually moved to the ratty beanbag chair Robin had found in a thrift store and brought in. To cheer the place up, she'd said. It hadn't worked. I groaned and rubbed my eyes and moved to the next section.

“You got anything?” Peter called.

To treat a physical imperfection: an injury, birth defect, or other malady:

This... It could cure me. Make me normal again. I could run and play and not have to worry

about a brisk jog sending me to the emergency room... No, not now. Robin first.

“I might have a way to find Robin once we're in dreams. But I have no idea how to free her once we're there. I can't find anything resembling our shadow man in these books. What about you?”

“Well, she hadn't discovered much of anything that the police also hadn't, but it's still impressive work. She should join the force! How old is she?”

“Uh, seventeen, I think.”

“When's her birthday?”

“Er, January. I don't remember the day.”

“Well in six months, she should look us up.”

I was pretty sure Robin was going to go to college and end up curing cancer or something, not be stuck walking the streets of a small town as a police woman, but I let Peter dream. There was a buzzing, a low rumble. A phone vibrating on the table. Neither of us moved.

“Aren't you gonna answer that?” Peter asked.

“My phone's in my pocket.”

Our eyes slid to the table. There, half-buried underneath Peter's chicken scratch notes, was the bookmark. Shaking just like it had been at the smoothie place. Peter was fast, but I was faster this time. Former tennis player reaction speed > Cop reaction speed.

Again, the shape of an eye had taken over the back. Ignoring it for a moment, I flipped it over.

“What's it say?”

I'm at my house, but it's a dream. It won't let me leave. Nathan, please, you have to help me.

Her writing was rough. As if she'd written it in a hurry, or maybe while her hand was shaking. Neither me nor Peter said anything. I quickly scribbled a reply. Hopefully it would calm her down. Let her know I was coming. She'd hold on till then. I knew she would. It was Robin, after all.

“What'd you say?” Peter asked.

My eyes snapped to his. Again. Again! An itching at the back of my mind. Screaming that we've met before.

I sighed, figuring once more couldn't hurt. “Look, I know this is getting repetitive at this point, but are you absolutely one hundred percent sure that you and I have never met?”

He blinked, before a flicker of annoyance passed through his features. Yeah, that was fair, I'd asked him like five times already. I didn't think he was lying, so why was did I insist on asking over

and over? He controlled his irritation and forced a grin.

“I don't know, maybe we met in a dream and forgot?”

A joke? A bad one, considering the circumstances, but I appreciated the effort. If we had met in... a... dream... A dream! The images came flooding back, almost too fast to make sense of.

“Nathan, what is it?” I stared at him, and took a step back. He stood up. “What?” He said again.

I remembered it all.



Chapter 10

The dream I had, the one right before I woke up in the hospital, screaming in pain. It's happening again, like I'm experiencing it all over. I'd almost forgotten. I'm walking down the hospital hallway, following the buzzing of a conversation I can't quite hear. One is frantic, speaking quickly, desperately. The other is accommodating, soft, probably trying to calm the other down. It's two men, I can tell that much. I'm back in front of Room 404. The number is as chilling as ever. A four in Japan is like a thirteen in America. But that's where the voices were coming from. Should I go in? No, assess the scene, look through window.

“-you've done this,” one voice is saying. “What were you expecting?”

That voice comes from a young man with bright eyes and flaming red hair. Peter Daniels, I recognize him now. He looks exactly the same as he does now. There's another man, the one he's arguing with, I can't see his face, but he's shorter and thinner. Pale blonde hair, almost white. It's cut short. Over Peter's shoulder is something... I'm not sure how to describe it. It's like a burn, a scorch mark, but deep, empty, endless. I can see an infinite nothing swirling behind him. Where there should be a wall, instead there's just this- nothing. Although it's clearly *something*. I just have no earthly idea what. And it's leaking. Not a lot, just a small trickle of black fluid.

“I don't know, a thank you?” The blonde one is saying, petulant. I... I know that voice. I've heard it recently! Peter doesn't like that answer. He turns and gestures at the scar.

“Oh sure, thanks a lot. I'm sure this is nothing to worry about-” He loses his train of thought as he stares at his arm. He touches his sizable bicep. Then the one on the other arm. He brings his hands to his face and sort of feels them around, touching various features. Then he brings his hands to his chest and squeezes. Weird time for vanity, but okay. “What did you do to me!?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” the blonde guy says, tilting his head. He really does sound confused. I'm waiting for a chance to knock and ask what the hell is going on, but I feel like I should wait until this argument plateaus.

Peter growls and grabs the guy by the arm, pushing him back. “Make a mirror. Now.”

The force of the push turns him a little... I knew it. Teddy. What the hell is Teddy doing here!?

“Okay, okay, no need to manhandle me,” he says. He does... something. Kind of waves one hand over the other, and a mirror appears. Like with Iris and her drinks that seemed to come from nowhere. It's a small mirror, it has a handle, which Peter grabs and stares into. His eyes harden. He combs over his body with it, not liking what he sees. What? He looks fine! Good, even. Handsome. It turns out that's the problem.

“I don't look like this.”

“What do you mean? Of course you do!”

Peter shakes his head, eyes glassy. “No. I’m not this muscular. I barely ever go to the gym and now I look like I have three protein shakes for lunch. My hair, my eyes, they weren’t this bright. And, And! Even my features are sharper. My jawline is more distinct. Even-” he glances down and flushes, then shakes his head, “Everything’s different!”

“Oh, Petey, I’m so sorry. This is all so confusing and everything’s happening at once, I know. It must be really upsetting to find out your body’s been changed.” It sounds... kinda patronizing. Teddy should know better, he sounds really superior right now. Are they friends? I still have no clue what they’re discussing. How could Teddy have altered Peter’s body? “But to me, you look the same as you always did.”

“How could you possibly think I look the same? You of all people,” Peter says, disgust creeping into his voice.

“Because, it was my power that brought you back, right? And I was just doing it from memory. This... this is always how I’ve seen you, Petey.”

What power? Teddy brings a hand up, slowly, like he’s afraid Peter will slap it away, and cups his cheek. When Peter doesn’t react he tries his luck with the second hand and lightly rests it against Peter’s hip. Oh. Teddy’s...? And Peter too! The conversation makes a little more sense now. Peter starts laughing; it’s a desperate, slightly unhinged laugh. He shakes off the gentle hands and whips the mirror at a wall, shattering it. It’s super bad luck, but I don’t think he’s worried about that. Fingers trembling, Peter slowly lifts his hands. At first Teddy relaxes, maybe thinking that Peter’s going to reciprocate his romantic gestures from a moment ago. That probably lasts right up until the moment those trembling fingers wrap around his throat, thumbs on his windpipe.

“What- What are you doing?” The voice comes out strained. I’m panicking. What do I do? I can’t just let Peter kill him!

“I haven’t decided yet,” Peter says. I’m not sure if he’s really going to. I don’t know him, his personality, what he’s feeling, nothing. I don’t even really understand what’s going on. But I see his muscles tense and I yell out an instinctive “No!”

Confused, Peter looks around to find the source of the noise, his grip loosening. Teddy takes his chance and braces his shoulder into Peter’s chest and starts forcing him backwards, towards the scorch mark behind them. Peter’s confused, then panicked. He might be stronger, but he’s surprised and off balance. If the blonde man’s goal is to get him into that darkness, he doesn’t have far to go.

“No!” Peter shouts, “You can’t do this! I don’t want this!”

The blonde man has no response that I can hear, and then they’re gone. Like one moment they’re tussling in front of the void, the next they’re through it. I’d figured I’d still be able to see

them, but no. The darkness churns, seems to swirl. I can hear a gurgling sound, even through the door. A black liquid pours out of the void. I don't know why, but I think it's blood. For some reason, I get the impression that the world is bleeding. At least, until I see the black sludge moving, slithering across the ground like a shadow, forming into... something. I don't get to see. My hip splits open and I scream in pain, finally waking back up at the hospital.



“Nathan? Hello, mission control to space cadet?” Peter was saying, “Hey, are you okay?”

His face was etched with worry. I wanted to believe in it, I needed to believe in *someone* who wasn't my dad or trapped in the world of dreams, but I'd literally just seen him seriously contemplate murder. Well, not 'seen' so much as 'remembered'. And that black thing. Even I could connect the dots easily enough.

“You were there,” I said. “When the spirit was created. You and your boyfriend were there.”

His eyes widened, “It was you! You were the one who called out that time. How long were you there?”

“Long enough to see your freak-out.” He looked away in shame. Good. At least he felt bad about it. “Tell me everything, Peter. Every detail. If I think for even a second you're holding something back, I'll walk out right now, you got it?”

I wasn't sure how effective the threat would be. It depended on whether Peter considered me a help or a hindrance. Most people thought I was the second one. Robin came to mind. But I wasn't joking about walking away. I needed to know everything about him and Teddy, from the beginning. To my surprise, Peter took me seriously.

“I understand.” His eyes were clear and bright. “I used to be a nurse. Two years ago.”

I didn't miss the catch in his voice. But, a fully trained nurse AND cop? And two years ago... that was right when the Earthquake hit. When this all started. Maybe I'd finally get some hint about how to save Robin. He sat, gearing up for what I figured was going to be a long story, then froze, looking unsure of how to continue. That was fine because I already had a question. Well, I had like a million.

“How old are you?” I asked. Because both a cop and a nurse? That meant he'd gone to college, a full four years, plus more for an internship or whatever nurses do for training. And then he must have gone to the police academy. He really didn't look a day over twenty five, so the math

wasn't working in my head.

“The answer's more complicated than you might think,” Peter started, suddenly enthralled by the pile of notes on the desk. How could it be complicated? “But I was born thirty one years ago.”

Thirty one!?! Right off the bat and his story was already impossible! No wrinkles or gray hairs, no thinning either. And his face, it just looked youthful, less weathered, maybe softer? Had Teddy also de-aged him? No way he was more than a decade older than me. No way. How did Teddy and his so-called 'power' figure into this? I was bursting with questions, but I forced myself to be patient.

“Even then, I had a young face,” he supplied, as if that explained anything. Wasn't there a limit to how far that sort of thing carried you? Dad was in pretty good shape, didn't seem old, but he still looked like he was on the wrong side of his forties.

“I hadn't gotten a decent night's sleep in weeks,” Peter said, as he started tearing at the sheet of paper in front of him. He'd done that at the juice bar too. Must have been a nervous habit. “I was in the middle of my RN residency. Kind of like an internship. It was exhausting. I kept getting put on the night shift. I'd drive after work, squinting through the sunlight, finally getting home and hang blankets over the windows, stuff cracks under doors with towels, anything to simulate night. So, one time, I'm working a day shift for once, filling in for someone. It's long. It's difficult. There's a lot more going on than at night. I can barely move when I get off. I figure I'm not safe to drive, so I decide to take a nap in one of the spare beds they have for doctors and nurses to catch some shut eye if they have to work a double.”

“Makes sense,” I said, trying to make it sound like we were having a normal conversation, instead of an explanation of how a spirit came to be able devour people. Although in his defense, this part had been pretty normal.

“So, after some tossing and turning, I finally fall asleep. But of course, I start having a nightmare. It's been years now; I kind of forget what it was about. I think some puppet had come to life, chasing me through the hospital. Eventually, it corners me and it's about to stab me or whatever, when this guy, wearing a tight, bright yellow onesie jumpsuit thing with a cape, jumps in between me and the puppet. He shouts something like, 'Foul mannequin! You'll go no further!' and then he does this stupid pose-”

Peter suddenly burst from his chair and took two steps back. He put one hand out in front of him like he was signaling 'stop' and one hand rose above and behind his head. His feet were planted wide. It looked like a bad kung-fu stance, and I couldn't help but laugh. Peter didn't join me, but the oppressive mood lightened up a little. I'd had weird dreams like that after watching that old Jackie

Chan movie: Rush Hour. Peter sat back down.

“-and the guy in the onesie literally shoots a fireball out of his hand. The puppet thing is vaporized, there's just a pile of ash left on the floor. And this guy says 'Have no fear, citizen! The Crimson Flame will keep your nightmares at bay.' and then he flies off. I'm sitting there stunned, but a weird dream is a weird dream, right? Nothing to freak out about. But what's strange is that when I wake up, I'm more rested than I've been in weeks. Completely refreshed, the best I've felt in months. I'm in a good enough mood that I agree to do a double to cover a nurse I barely know. Imagine my surprise when I see the costumed adventurer responsible for the best sleep I've had in weeks and weeks admitted as a patient at our hospital. He'd collapsed studying for a nursing exam, of all things. Exhaustion.”

I wasn't surprised, it kinda seemed like that's where the story had been going. What I didn't know was how it tied into the Earthquake or Robin. But I didn't rush him.

Peter's voice took on an uncharacteristic softness. Must have been nostalgic. “There was a strange smell in his room. Like cooked meat. I was stunned. He asked for a cup of water and I got it for him. I told him we'd like to keep him one more night for observation, but that he could leave if he wanted. He elected to stay. Odd choice. Most people hightail it out of there as soon as they can, but he called it an 'impromptu study trip', with a goofy smile on his face. He kept staring at me, and I stared back. I mean, it was the guy from my dreams.”

“Soooo, this... guy, he was your friend?” I asked, probing into his wistful tone. I also decided to keep the fact that I knew it was Teddy a secret. I wanted to keep it hidden until I figured out just what part he was playing here. Peter noticed the question buried under the question.

“Well, it got complicated, but at that point I barely knew him,” Peter said, rubbing a hand behind his head, embarrassed that half a grin had appeared on his lips. It was crazy that talking about a hospital could make him act like that. Hospital references only reminded me of pain. “I told him that he bore a striking resemblance to this new superhero, The Crimson Flame, but that must just be a coincidence because he's only a mild mannered student. He laughed. A whole body laugh, that started with grin, then spread all the way down to his toes. Literally, he started wagging his feet like a kid. He asked if I could keep a secret. Told him I could. Nurses keep secrets all the time.

He told me about how ever since he was a young boy, he'd been able to control his dreams, and his sleep. Fall into a dream whenever then manifest his will on the fabric of his dream. He launched into this incomprehensible speech about ‘lucid dreaming phenomenon’ and the ‘morphic resonance in dreams’. Real highbrow stuff, not my thing. He was a philosophy geek and it was impossible to get him to shut up about it. Should have don't that as a degree instead of nursing.”

Yup, that sounded like Teddy all right. The guy could talk your ear off about almost

anything, but philosophy was his passion. My side was starting to hurt. It didn't like supporting my weight for any extended period of time. I wish I'd sat down earlier, but now it felt like I'd be interrupting the flow of the story. I hobbled over to a wall and leaned on it, trying to look casual. I don't think it came off, but Peter continued like he hadn't noticed.

“Basically, he'd started experimenting with trying to bring dream objects into the real world. He'd been studying for a final, and instead of just ordering takeout like a normal person, he decided to dream of fried chicken and bring it back with him. In his own words: 'It wasn't exactly an overwhelming success! My soul was totally exhausted!' And that's how he'd ended up in the hospital. But he was smiling a piano key smile. 'What's up with the grin?' I remember asking. He threw his covers off and there it was. A plate of fried chicken. That had been the smell I'd noticed when walking in.”

“So, he really brought it from a dream?”

The mood in the room darkened. Ah. So that was what Teddy had done when he'd conjured the mirror. 'Manifested his will on the dream world'. Iris had as well. Did she have the same power? I bit my tongue. I had so many questions, but I had faith that Peter would answer them. He acted cool, but I could tell he was struggling to get the words out. He hadn't looked me in eye once since he'd started talking.

“That's what he said, but I didn't believe him. I figured he'd snuck it in- until he started bringing other stuff. Things from my dreams, or replicas of stuff at my apartment. And after every time, his heart rate and blood pressure would spike, or plummet, or both and he'd faint. It was hard to deny it after that. No matter how much I told him to stop, that next time he was going to have a heart attack or a stroke, he kept doing it. And getting better at it. He started bringing bigger, more complicated things with fewer side effects. Even when the girl I'd filled in for had come back, I kept stopping by. It was barely a surprise that he stopped by my dreams.

“'Why are you here?' I asked. 'Why not?' was his reply. I remember scoffing, even though I was glad to see him. He grabbed my arm and took me flying. First I was on his back, riding piggyback, then he showed me how to fly solo. We flew over mountains, the ocean, everywhere. Eventually some smart aleck comment from him got us bickering and we crash landed into a meadow, dissolving into a puddle of laughter. The way he looked at me...”

“You were falling for him,” I finished for him. Peter looked away, but I could see his ears were red. It was obvious; I hoped he realized that. I could kinda see it, though. Peter and Teddy. Peter didn't seem like the kind of guy who fell for people easy. It must have been hard for him to deal with. Peter recovered and pressed on.

“He liked tea, we'd drink it all the time in dreams. He gave a set to me, as he was finally

getting discharged. Said it was a memento of our time together. I,” Peter swallowed, “thought that was going to be it. But he stopped at the door. He scribbled something on a piece of paper and kissed me on the cheek. It was his phone number.”

Peter stopped talking. I recognized that look. He wanted to DO something. Not just walk and talk. That's the kind of restlessness I saw every time I looked in the mirror. I shifted on the wall to make some noise, snap him out of it.

“And then?” The story didn't end there. I mean, that was obvious, even to an idiot like me. He sat down at the table and put his head in his hands. What was up with him? Was it that painful to talk about?

“I died.”

“I'm sorry?” I must have misheard. No way could that happen. No way.

“I died. I fell down some stairs at work, apparently. Hit my head pretty bad. An intracranial hemorrhage. Didn't even make it to surgery.”

“But wait,” I said remembering he'd said earlier, “I thought you said your, like, heart stopped or something and were resuscitated right when the Earthquake hit!”

“Sorry, that was a lie. I died for real. For anyone else, that would have been the end, but not him. The next thing I remember, he was standing in front of me. In a dream. And you pretty much saw the rest.”

“But, but, you were dead!”

“Yes. I was. He's that powerful. He made that burn mark when he brought me back. That's what the Earthquake was. When the scar over the dream world was made. And he used the damage he'd caused, the thinness of the border between the dream world and reality, to drag me through it. And then the spirit-”

“I saw,” I said, too harshly. Peter closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

“At first, I think he was doing it so he could say goodbye. There was so much left unfinished between us, you know? Even he must have known it was a horrible idea to try to bring me back, but when he saw me, when I first saw him in that dream, his easy smile wobbled. He started crying. I told him not to cry, that it wouldn't do for The Crimson Flame to be seen crying. And then I leaned down and kissed him. I thought it was a dream. Well, it was. I mean I thought it was a normal dream. I didn't understand anything at all, until I noticed the scar and we started arguing. That kiss... I think that convinced him to bring me back. I shouldn't have done it. All of this, the Disappearances, the Earthquake, Robin, all of it's my fault.”

Peter's eyes were glassy, like the surface of a disturbed pond. They wobbled wildly, but no tears fell. He looked for something in me. Forgiveness? Like me, he'd taken on a deep burden of

responsibility. I could blame him, if I wanted to. He was giving me an opportunity to shove my guilt for all the pain I'd caused Dad because of the accident onto him. It would be so easy. I won't lie. I considered it. Not in a 'should I or shouldn't I' sort of way. It was more like the guilt I felt was a living creature, sniffing Peter, sussing him out, seeing if he might make a more suitable host.

But I couldn't do it.

I mean look at the guy! His shoulders were trembling and everything. I couldn't put the weight of my accident on him, let alone the deaths of over a dozen Disappearance victims, he'd collapse. It hadn't been his fault anyway. It really had been an accident. I smiled and shook my head.

"It wasn't your fault." Maybe... Maybe it hadn't been my fault either. Maybe I could be a little gentler on myself. Peter's relief was palpable. He accepted my answer, but I could tell he hadn't really absorbed it. He knew I didn't blame him, but I hadn't knocked out the guilt he felt. Still, the room felt brighter. "So, what was the afterlife like? I'm hoping for something like an amusement park, parade, and magical fantasy kingdom rolled into one."

The corner of Peter's mouth twitched- as close to a guffaw as I was going to get. "I don't know. I'm not- it's complicated. I'm both Peter and his doppelganger simultaneously. I was created from the very fabric of dreams, made to resemble the original Peter in every way. I have all his memories. But I don't have his soul or his body. His body is rotting in a coffin. I should know, I've visited the gravestone. I'm probably not even human anymore."

"Peter..." I didn't know where to start. That's just about the saddest thing I'd ever heard. To question your humanity. To have good reason to question it! What was I supposed to say to that? I don't think they meet greeting cards for existential crises. "Look, I'm no good at spiritual stuff. That was always my mom's area of expertise. But for what it's worth, I think you have a soul."

"Thanks."

"No, seriously, think about it. Just because you were born in an unusual way doesn't mean you weren't born. No one really has a choice about being born. You might not have the original Peter's soul, but... yeah. I think you definitely have one," I said, sounding more confident than I felt. Peter looked unsure, but that was okay. He could take his time and think about it. In the meantime, I had more questions. "We're getting sidetracked. What happened next? He brought you from dreams into the real world. You were a nurse then and now you're a cop, so there's gotta be more to the story, right?"

Peter nodded. "You're right. After he tackled me through the portal we were in the real world, in his bedroom. We stood there, his hands tight around my waist and head buried in my chest, for I don't know how long. I mean, what could either of us say? Eventually he shifted, or I

did, and we made eye contact. He leaned in, I think to kiss me.” I raised an eyebrow. Bold move, considering Peter had been nearly angry enough to strangle him not long before. “I shoved him down and ran out of the room. Haven't seen him since.”

“And what about you?” I asked.

Peter sighed. “When I sleep my whole body goes to the dream world, I think because I'm made of dreams. I was unstable, back then. The reality of my existence was at odds with the laws of physics. I slipped from dream to reality, flickering in and out of existence. The next two months, I was lost. I barely remember them, my savings were running low, but I didn't care. I ate enough to live and watched TV. Which was how I heard of the Disappearances. It pulled at me, somehow. It sparked something in me. If I could get pulled out of dreams, out of death, could something else pull people in? I sniffed around dreams and saw some of that black liquid. The same kind from the scar. I followed it. Saw the man, the shadow man, but it got away. I'm not sure if it noticed me or was just ignoring me. To investigate the human side of things, I became a police officer.”

Silence hung like a blanket, expanding, filling up more of the room, taking up more space. It was oppressive. Deafening. Neither of us could find a way to break it. Peter coughed, lightly. Yeah, no surprise. Research in Talisman was dusty work. I used to randomly break off into coughing fits when I first started.

“Look,” I said, “we need to shake this off and get back to work. I'm not mad or upset, but that was a lot to take in, you know?” Peter nodded. “Okay, good. I'm going to take a walk. When I get back, let's strategize, okay?”

Without waiting, I turned and left. I tried to walk slowly so Peter wouldn't think I was desperate to get away, even though I kinda was. Not because of him! Well, yes because of him, but not in a bad way. It's a little bit shocking to learn that someone has supernatural powers and can use them to bring the dead back to life. I think I deserved five minutes of deep breathing.

MISSING

Robin's eyes followed me from her missing person's poster as I walked out the door. They tracked me, accusing. *Selfish*, they seemed to whisper. Shut up! I knew I should just put what Peter had said to the side for now and go back inside and keep working on a way to save her. But I couldn't. A short walk to clear my head. Surely I could allow myself that much? Robin's expression on the poster didn't change, unconvinced.

I wasn't sure where to go. There wasn't anywhere I could go. I started walking towards the coffee shop me and Robin had visited yesterday (it seemed way longer ago than that), but I didn't want to risk being seen by someone I knew. Or Dad knew. Eventually I found myself in the alleyway, the one where Robin and I had fallen into dreams and this whole mess had started. I

examined the graffiti of a swallow, the one that had become Amelia. I'd nearly forgotten about her. I wondered what she was doing. It took up the space of maybe a garage door. It was definitely wider than both my arms outstretched. I was avoiding the issue, and I probably looked stupid with my hands stretched wide, measuring rainbow street art with a white dick added by some hilarious idiot. With a sigh I turned around and sank to a sitting position, back against Amelia, and closed my eyes. I drew my knees up to my chest and rested my face on them. What should I do about Peter? He hadn't wanted any of this, he'd just been caught up in it by his dream wizard friend. Then again, I hadn't wanted any of it either. There was still hope. If Robin had been dragged into dreams because some guy had weakened the barrier between dreams and reality, then she could probably dragged back out.

I pictured Robin. Black leggings, a gray and white patterned skirt, sensible dress shirt, her pale skin and long dark hair, down to her hips. She'd dramatically flip it to punctuate comments, an unconscious gesture. Her glasses hiding bright, intelligent eyes. Her laugh, a bit quiet, a bit strained, like she didn't do it often, but bell-like and clear. How patient she'd been, when we'd first met.

It started at a tennis house party hosted by the captain of the women's team, Felicity: strong net play, but a bit weak on the backhand. It was after the accident and recovery, my limp was more pronounced back then and bouts of random pain more frequent. The scars hadn't settled into the soon to be familiar patterns. I was fifteen or nearly so. The boys were charming and predatory, and the girls, comfortable on familiar territory, were unguarded. They'd invited friends. Robin.

She sat on the arm of a couch, chatting with a small group of other outsiders. She stood out, partially because of her body type. Not fat, not at all, but with a softness that tennis girls lose in their first year of the sport, if they train hard enough. An academic beauty. For the first time since entering the house, I felt moved to, well, move. I remember her clocking me as I limped over. She had to have seen it, but didn't comment when I sat down. She was dominating the discussion, talking about her essay on Agatha Christie's 'And Then There Were None' with such a blunt passion it was almost embarrassing. Young people aren't supposed to care about things so much. A break in the conversation led to introductions after which she began questioning me.

She liked books and asked what interested me. I'd been struck by her eyes. She looked at me differently than everyone else. They all saw 'disabled kid'. She saw 'Nathan'. That's what it felt like. Like an idiot, I blurted out 'Amelia Earhart'. The group laughed. She didn't. She asked questions, intelligent ones. And when I spoke, she listened. Actually listened, y'know? When I told her that I thought maybe the Japanese had intercepted her downed plane, she nodded, like I'd said something very wise. For a brief moment, just the length of a conversation, I forgot that I was crippled. I forgot that I would never play tennis again. I forgot rehab, the hospital, seeing my dad cry. It would

happen more and more often as the memory faded and the scars etched themselves into my skin, but that night was the first time.

She mentioned she was looking for a job and I leapt at the chance. I had a summer job and they were looking for a part timer during the school year. A bookstore, right up her alley. I'd ask my manager. I had no clue if the bookstore was hiring, all I was thinking is that this is someone I want in my life. She asked for my number and I gave it. She left soon after. Guys came up to me, clapped me on the back. 'Good job getting back in the game, man!' An awkward pause. "The dating game. Sorry, man." I ignored their dumb, insensitive comments. That wasn't what it was. Robin at the bookstore, Robin drinking coffee, Robin gasping in fear as she's attacked by a spirit man right in front of me!

My head snapped up. I was leaning against the wall, just as I had been a few minutes ago. Whoa. Had I fallen asleep? The light hadn't changed, so it hadn't been hours, at least. My hand clutched against my side, it hurt, likely from the awkward leaned over position compressing my torso. I'd bet Peter was worrying. He worried a lot, I think. I'd said I needed a walk to clear my head, but it didn't feel particularly clear. I didn't know how I was supposed to feel about him, but, like it or not, we were working to save Robin together. He'd tried to get me to understand him by telling me the truth. I was grateful, even if he had been at the epicenter of the cause of my injuries. We had to be on the same page to work together. It was time to save Robin.

The Memories of Robin Melling

I'm dreaming of my mother. Well, not dreaming exactly. It's more solid than that. It's more as if I'm reliving a memory. The moment is so peaceful I just watch, an observer in my own body. We're in the back garden. I'm impressed by Mom's knowledge; my thumb is decidedly not green. There's a section for flowers, baby's breath and tulips and daisies, even some wild honeysuckle that had found their way to her plot naturally. She has an edible section, with her usual zucchini and tomatoes. This year, she's trying for watermelon too, but they aren't faring so well. The whole thing is framed by a wood lattice, ivy growing all over it. And it's the first year she's carved out a space for me. I'm planting some of her leftover daisy seeds, a perennial easy enough for a six-year-old. Dream or memory? They feel blurred into one. The sun warms my neck as Mom kneels behind me, each knee on either side of mine. The soft sweetness of honeysuckle drifts on the air; I can feel the dampness of the earth, the watery, black stickiness of it as it sticks to my hand, then dries as a brown crust over my palm. She scoops out a small divot of earth and a single seed is dropped inside. She presses it down with her thumb and scoops earth on top of it. She grabs my hands and has me mimic the same actions. Then she lets me do it myself. It's clumsy, the dirt is displaced in big chunks, but I'm at least careful not to throw it. Instead, I make a pile between my knees. My smile is wide and bright, shared by my mother's, even though her face is covered in shadow.

“That's great, Robin.”

I'm lying down on the couch in the reading room, thumbing through a worn book of Greek myths. Orpheus and Eurydice. It's probably my favorite, even though the ending's a little sad. Maybe because of that; I've always liked love stories that are a little sad. Life's a little sad too, sometimes. I've been there awhile, if the crick in my neck means anything. Mom comes into the room, holding a mug. She sets it down on the weird lamp stand that's shaped like a man's foot. Typically, Mom decorated the house, but sometimes a weird object like this catches Dad's eye and it becomes impossible to persuade him that it doesn't go with anything. Mom's saying something. What? I can't make it out. Black water pours out of her mouth. All the sounds she makes come out as gurgles. She steps back into shadow, the whole of her covered in blackness. Then even the outline disappears. Where she stood is only a silhouette of her form, an alien malevolence that slips and dances out of my perception.

“Mom, wait!”

I'm sick, home from school. The rag on my head is almost dry, I need a new one. I remember catching mononucleosis my freshman year. The whole time I'd been afraid that someone would find out I had the 'kissing disease'. Sophie was still sweet back then, and not in high school, so she wouldn't be spreading rumors, but still I was terrified. I'd never so much as kissed a boy on the

cheek. But to be honest, it was the fever held my attention most of the time. It was thick and hot, like hot cotton had been stuffed in the gaps in my head. Everything hurt, except sleeping. My eyes are closed, heavy. A hand pats me gently, running fingers through my hair, sometimes stopping to smooth this strand or that. Mom. Dad likes to ruffle my hair and mess it up. My eyes want to stay closed, but I force them open anyway, fighting against what feels like invisible lead weights on top of them. Next to my bed, an empty chair. The floor glistens, soaking wet. My breath hitches, but the gentle comfortable patting doesn't stop.

I close my eyes and when I open them, I'm awake and she's gone. Except for a warmth on my cheek. A tiny hint of dampness lingers. A kiss? Maybe from Mom coming to check up on me while I slept. There's a constant tapping against the windows. It's still raining out...side... Wait what'd happened? I'd fallen asleep? It'd felt a little stronger than that. Unconsciousness. Putting being trapped aside, it's sinister, more sinister than anything that's happened to me. It can't have been random. But awake or not, as long as I had the bookmark, the shadow man couldn't attack me. So maybe its goal had been to keep me asleep while it accomplished some other task. Perhaps it had slipped out of this dream world into another one...

I'd gotten caught up in the craziness of... 'yesterday' and had forgotten to change out of my pajamas. Not this time. If I need to flee the house or fight something, I want to be wearing better clothes for the task. I'll wear my leggings with the usual skirt. To be honest, workout clothes would probably be better, in case I do have to run, but I can't deny it's a little comforting to wear what I usually do. I feel secure in them, like they're a uniform. It's annoying when Nathan pretends not to stare, but I've been wearing stuff like this from way before I met him and, with God as my witness, I'm not going to change my clothes just to make some dumb boy stop looking at me. Speaking of God, maybe I should send Him a prayer. I hadn't felt in the praying mood, but that probably means it's the perfect time. I tell myself I'm sure it'll reach Him, but I feel doubt. This dream is a long way from heaven. Maybe I can ask Nathan to send one for me, if we find a more reliable method of communication. Anyway, I clasp my hands together.

“Please, protect me. See me through this ordeal you have placed before me. Please protect my family. And Nathan too, I guess. Thank you. Amen.”

My prayers are always an odd mix of casual and formal. I'm not sure which tone God prefers. I don't want to treat Him like a genie or a pen-pal, but I also don't want to talk like someone I'm not. That's probably item one thousand on my list of things to worry about right now. In what's quickly becoming a reassuring physical tic, I tap my side, making sure I have the bookmark on me. I'm becoming more and more certain that the only reason something terrible hasn't happened to me is because I have it. Although I'm still no closer to answering why. Maybe I don't need the why right

this second. As I finish buttoning the last button on my shirt, three sharp knocks sound from my door.

“Who's there?”

“So are you awake or what?”

'Awake' is an interesting choice of word.

“I'm up, Sophie. What do you want?”

A pause. “Caaaan you open the door, maybe?”

I can, but I certainly don't want to. It's not really her. The real her is out there somewhere, awake, probably trying and failing not to be worried about me. Even during our worst fights, we check in with each other a lot. We've done it ever since Dad... Interacting with her is painful. It reminds me too much of the real version of her at home. And what if... what if interacting with me is what got my mom- I don't finish that thought. She wasn't even real. Stop obsessing. She's a dream, I'm sure she's fine. Probably downstairs again playing the role of domestic hero.

“Knock knock!” Sophie says, punctuating her onomatopoeia with actual knocks. “C'mon, anyone home?”

I open the door.

“Wow, you look terrible,” Sophie says with her usual candidness. I'm never sure if she doesn't know her comments hurt my feelings or if she doesn't care. “Did you sleep at all last night?”

She looks perfect, as always. I don't answer, partially because I don't know if I really slept or not.

“We can't all get up two hours before dawn to put our faces on.”

“Whatever. I made a pot of coffee, but I'm guessing you don't need any if you're already acting like your usual charming self.”

It's counterproductive to keep arguing with her. She'll be in a mood all day if I do.

“Doesn't Mom usually make the coffee?”

She cocks her head. “Mom?”

“Yeah, short for 'mother', matriarch of the household, 'mater' in Latin, ever heard of it? In some cultures the mother is considered-”

She scowls and flicks my left breast.

“Ow!” I say bringing both arms to my chest. Hey! “What's your problem, your math teacher reject your advances again?”

“I never- I'm trying to wake you up! Mom died more than a decade ago. It's been the three of us for as long as I can remember. Look, coffee's getting cold and I gotta get some reading done.”

She can't be... dead. We'd spoken yesterday! Sophie was there. Bony fingers curl around my

heart and squeeze. I hear myself sputter, fail to say anything. Sophie just rolls her eyes and walks towards her room. A new wrinkle in the story. Okay, what does this mean? Well, it could be evidence of multiple timelines- no I've already discounted that. This is definitely a dream. It's just as Mom said. This world is modeled after my memories, but something else is in control. The monster. Which means it isn't a monster. Not in the traditional sense. It has intelligence, a guiding will beyond mayhem. I'm not sure if that's good or bad. It's pointless reasoning with a wolf, a monster. It feels nothing but base instincts. A being with intelligence, though, they could be persuaded, made to feel sympathy. Not really my area of expertise, but it's something. And even if it's just a shadow, that monster has a physical form. It has to *be* somewhere. And, really, there's only one place left to look.

“W-where's Dad?” I call after her.

“Dunno, asleep? Oh, and don't use the shower, it's backed up again.”

She vanishes from sight. Backed up again? Has it ever been before? No, that's not what I need to focus on! I'm looking down the hallway when I notice something seems off. The wallpaper is muted, less bright than I remember it. So in addition to erasing my mother, the monster has also done some redecorating? Unlikely. And the family photos! They're different too. My feet slap down hard on the wood floor. The pictures are there, frames hung exactly as I remember, in an asymmetric pattern. But instead of idyllic family photos, like the professional one we'd had done last year when Mom had the flu but insisted we go anyway, or the one from our camping trip where I'd caught my first fish, there's only black nothing. Like someone had carefully and deliberately covered those memories in black ink. I've seen them so many times they normally barely even register; they're part of the scenery. Covering them up, blackening them. It feels... vindictive. Like it was done specifically to get at me. This thing knows I love my family, that's why it picked this echo of my home life to... what? Lower my guard, perhaps. If so, that had been a spectacular failure. I can't imagine my guard being higher than it is right now. It's after something, but what!? WHAT!? My hand hurts. I've slammed it against the wall. Ah, actually, it really stings. Wait, stings? That's not blunt force pain, it's- my hand is wet. The wall is soaked. The rain. The rain from outside is tearing through the walls! No, I have to- I've gotta-

Okay. Okay. Calm down. I'm taking control of this situation. I can't lose my grip. I'll make a list of what I know. Lists make everything clearer. Despite my inner appeals to calm, I all but sprint to my room to grab pen and paper.

What I know

1. Mom's gone and ~~no one~~ Sophie doesn't remember her.
2. This is related to the Disappearances. It has to be. Is this what happens when someone Disappears?

3. Nathan- Where the hell is he?!

a. Options- The real world, a dream of his own, he never existed/he's a dream, he's my split personality

b. We can communicate through my bookmark.

4. I can't leave the house

5. Dad's here. He's suspicious. Mom and Sophie weren't affected by the bookmark.

6. My bookmark is protecting me. Find out how.

The last one's a bit of a leap. I haven't seen it do anything a cell phone with a flashlight function can't do since before we got here. If it had visibly repelled the monster, I'm pretty sure I would have noticed that. Dad's a problem too. The one time I saw him, I was filled with fear, paralyzed. I'm scared of what he might do to me. I might fight with Sophie but at least she doesn't make my stomach turn every time I see her. The dead can't come back to life and yet there he is- standing in front of me with that loving smile on his face, the one that makes you feel drawn in, like he's about to tell you a big secret. The smile that's gone from the world. The whole thing is making me feel nauseous. Which should be impossible because I've not eaten in what has felt like days. But, yup, it's exactly the same as when I have a big test coming up. It's coming, no way to stop it. I stumble to the bathroom, just making it to the toilet. Hot stomach acid surges and pours out of my mouth, black. The color makes me heave again. It's the same as the wall, the rain. Is that sludge... inside me? The monster did have a pretty firm hold on me before Nathan managed to send it away. I flick the sink on, eager to wash the bitter taste out of my mouth. After swishing some water, I spit it down the drain. The reflection in the mirror is haggard and pale. I don't tan well at the best of times, but I look like a vampire. Gross, individual forehead veins. My eyes are bloodshot, hair a frazzled mess. Sophie's right. I do look terrible.

“Are you alright, Robin?”

Dad. He's blocking the doorway. I can't escape. My fight or flight response pumps adrenaline into my body. But I don't try to run or attack him. Instead, I'm frozen. Because there's a sad look on his face. Regret. My heart pushes out, beating towards him, wanting to be wrapped in his arms. I've missed him so much. I'm afraid of him, yes, but I'm also afraid to feel happy to see him, knowing he's not real. That I'll have to wake up to a world without him in it.

“If you're gonna puke again, close the door! I don't want to hear it!” Sophie calls from down the stairs. We're staring at each other, waiting for the first move to be made. I break first.

“You're not my dad,” I say. “My dad is dead.”

There. It's out in the open. Will he turn into a monster and attack me? I'm tense, twitchy, like a cornered mouse. He's a snake. He doesn't react to my accusation. It's such a non-reaction that it's

suspicious. I put both hands on my waist, trying to project confidence, but what I'm really doing is making sure the bookmark is still close at hand. It is, thank God. Even in my vomit panic I'd taken it with me. His eyes flick towards the bookmark, which he shouldn't be able to see, since it's under my shirt. That's... telling. He's able to sense it in a way that Mom and Sophie can't. Neither of them paid any special attention to my hip. He scowls.

Had... Had he *intended* for me to forget the bookmark? Obviously it was nothing more than conjecture, but it's possible he sent the rain and tried to stress me out as much as possible in order to induce my anxiety reaction. It's obvious the shadow has access to my memories. It'd be easy enough to sift through them and find that weakness. I shiver as I realize how close I came to dying. He was going to kill me if I hadn't brought my bookmark. My own father would have murdered me. It's awful, I nearly puke a third time.

He sighs, disappointed, no doubt. Yeah, sorry your scheme failed. I want to say something cocky like that, but I can't. I'm too afraid, my throat's closed up. Nathan probably would say something. Again, I really, really wish we were in opposite positions.

"I hope you feel better. I'll make some lunch and put it in the fridge for you. Eat it when you feel up to it, okay?" he says with sincerity. He's a good enough facsimile that it really sounds like he cares. It's not soon enough when leaves. My arms and legs shake. Okay, things are really starting to spiral. I need a game plan, an escape or battle strategy. This situation only ends one way. Eventually I forget my bookmark or it gets damaged and I... lose. I sit down on the edge of the tub, face in hands. I'm not... I'm not going to cry. I can't be that weak. I wipe the wet beginnings of tears away from my eyes. But as long as they don't fall, it doesn't count as crying. I sniff, trying to regain control. Maybe I should stop wishing Nathan were here instead of me. This is horrible, and I don't wish it on anyone. I doubt he'd easily adapt to a monster torturing him with his worst memories. He's disabled. We met soon after he was well enough to be done with bed rest. Everyone was talking about his injuries. I didn't, and still don't, care, but I have ears. You can't help but hear. I assumed he'd fully recover. It wasn't until I started working at Talisman that I realized he wasn't going to. I'm sure the pain and terror and rage of that was immensely difficult. And very exploitable by the shadow. Maybe I should count my blessings that my traumas were confined to emotional ones.

My butt aches and my shoulders are stiff from being held hunched. A sloshing sound from behind breaks me from my thoughts. The tub's more than halfway full of black water. Sophie had said there was a clog. She'd failed to mention that the clog is producing that same black fluid I've seen everywhere, from the rain to my own vomit. It's sweet smelling, like cotton candy. Not even Sophie is oblivious enough to let black water just pour out of the faucet, so it's weird it's this full. Is

it coming up through the drain? I roll up my sleeves and start to reach my hand down towards it. It's an awkward angle. Our tub is one of those free standing ones, the kind that's vaulted off the ground by brass lion's paw legs. If I touch the water, it might burn my skin again. I'll test it out with my pinkie first. Before I can the bookmark starts glowing again. I quickly pull it out. That bird again! It's a message from Nathan.

We're coming to get you, Robin. We're trying to fight the thing that did this. You have to fight too. Stay strong. See you soon.

The words from Nathan quickly give way to the original pattern. I thumb my finger over the lamination, almost reverent. It's my charm against misfortune. Not that I believe in that stuff. Or that it's done me any good. I sniffle.

“This was a birthday present from my dad. He took me berry picking and gave it to me. It was pretty hot out, so we ended up eating more than we took home!”

I know I'm talking to the empty air, but I trust it more than anything else in the house.

I've Disappeared, its become obvious. I feel like I've compiled enough data to make that conclusion. That thing is dragging people's consciousness from the real world into a nightmare. It's doubtful anyone had someone like Nathan on the outside helping them. They were probably killed right after they first encountered the shadow. They wouldn't have had defenses like the bookmark. My little bookmark totem really is protecting me, and apparently no one else had been protected by one before this. Or maybe they'd died anyway, and it just took longer. The time between Disappearances was variable, after all. It might already be too late for me. Maybe my body has been erased. All that's left is my soul, or spirit. If I die here, destroyed by the monster, will that somehow prevent me from going to heaven? I don't know, I can't bear to contemplate the answer. I hug myself tighter, clenching my eyes shut. I don't want to die. I don't want to die like this, alone and scared and confused. Is this how Dad felt? Did he as soon as the monster pulled him into dreams or did he die seeing fake copies of Mom, Sophie, and me, praying he'd find a way back to us and failing?

A drip. An echoing droplet of water. I look at the sink. Nothing. Then- that horrible cotton candy stench, and underneath it something else. Something earthier. Jasmine. Sophie's favorite scent, coming from behind me. Right behind where I'm sitting on the tub. I want to ignore it. I'm afraid of what I'll see.

Two Christmases ago Mom and I had been shopping. We were in a mall and there was a perfume kiosk. The bottles were so pretty, clear blues and lavenders carved into elaborate flower shapes. But a dark green one caught my eye, the simple design standing out among the extravagance. It was expensive, very expensive. I looked up at Mom.

“Well, you'll have to pay me back.”

Sophie had screamed when she'd unwrapped it. It'd been her first bottle of perfume ever. Jumping up and down, she'd wrapped her hands around my stomach and thanked me again and again and had practically attacked the packaging to get it open. Spritz. Spritz. ... Spritz. Mom winced, but didn't say anything. The jasmine smell overpowered everything and the air around Sophie had a bitter, chemical taste all day. But no one said anything. How could we when she looked so happy? It was heaven. The happiest we'd been since Dad had left.

I turn around.

Sophie's sitting in the tub, naked. It's filled now, overflowing actually, my skirt gets soaked with that black sludge water. It doesn't burn like the rain did, but I stand up anyway, surprised. Why doesn't the black water burn like the rain? What's different? She's popped in from nowhere. I was sitting right on the edge, it's not like she could have slipped past me. She stares forward, knees to her chest.

"This isn't real," she says. "You know it. I know it. There's no use pretending anymore."

She'd known the whole time. After Mom's warning, I'd suspected as much, but this is confirmation. I wonder if she felt guilty pretending. She looks like she feels guilty, all hunched together like that.

"What is that liquid?"

She looks down at the black water and swishes her hand through it. It must not be burning her like it does me. That explains why our mother was able to tolerate it as well. Perhaps because they're dreams and I'm not. I should examine that theory more thoroughly when I get a chance.

"Blood," she says.

"The monster's?" I'm pretty sure no animals that have black blood, though I can't be certain. Take horseshoe crabs, they have blue blood.

She tilts her head back and forth, weighing my question. "Sort of. It's more complicated than that."

"What does it want?" I ask. It wants something. It's smart, manipulative. It has to have a goal beyond simple survival. She turns to me.

"To live, Robin," she says, "That's why it takes people. To experience the things they do. To inhabit their flesh. When the flesh corrodes, it finds a new victim." Meaning the acid, the blood, destroys a person from the inside out. I have more questions, a thousand more questions, but Sophie interrupts right before I can get another out.

"Don't forget about me, okay, Robin? Even though I'm not real, I don't want to be forgotten."

I try to say something reassuring. 'I'll never forget you', perhaps. I can feel pity for this poor girl who is not my sister. She's just a dream, a notoriously ephemeral phenomenon, but she can

think and feel. I wonder if Dad would encourage me to utilize a 'good lie' in this situation.

“It's okay, you don't have to say anything. I'd rather you didn't. It's almost time for me to go anyway. The shadow man's pretty much done with me. See, look.” She holds up her arm and the black water doesn't drip away, not completely. A large patch of her arm is purplish black, like she's gotten frostbite. She finally turns to look at me. Her irises are gone, instead there are just black spheres, starting to expand outward to her eyelids. Nausea sweeps over me. My sister, my baby sister. Everything is collapsing around me. The black water is crawling up the walls in spatters, like bloodstains. It's all over the ceiling too, each black splotch spreading outwards. I can feel a thin layer of it under my feet. My feet are getting wet, but it doesn't burn. It's gotta be the bookmark. It's glowing, a bright ward against evil. Dad... even now he's looking out for me. But I'm weak, I can't do this alone. Faced with the prospect of my false father and I alone? It's hard. Too hard.

“Sophie, I'm so scared, please don't-”

And then, before I can do anything, she's gone. Like the bottom of the tub dropped out from under her and she sank through. But that's impossible. Water still pours over the lip, but the water's calm.

“Sophie!”

I thrust my arm into the tub. It keeps going and going, well past the base of it. I lean over the side and push farther. My hand should be grazing the floor by now. It just keeps going. A familiar sting starts to build over my whole arm. The bookmark can't protect me if it's light can't shine on my arm? I don't care, I'm not losing her! I reach and reach, flailing, desperate for anything that might be my sister. But I don't feel her. All I feel is an intense burning, getting worse and worse. I'm forced to retract it. It's red all over. My skin's always been sensitive and this looks like a giant sunburn. I want to try the other arm, but I know it's no use. The only reason she didn't just disappear as soon as the monster had no more use for her is to cause me pain. It's still after something, or maybe this is just fun for it. Please, please Nathan or God or anyone- hear my prayer. Release me from this nightmare. I can't keep going through this. I'm not strong enough.

Chapter 11

Peter acknowledged me with a hard stare when I walked through the door. I tilted my head back and forth, trying to tease out tension, trying to feign some air of casualness. The message seemed to translate; the clack clack clack of Peter's lightning fast typing resumed. I'd almost gotten around to asking what we should do when my phone rang. Crap. Dad.

"Uh, hey Dad, what's up?" Easy, breezy, casual.

"You're lucky corporal punishment is out of fashion, young man," Dad tone was terrifyingly flat. "Where. Are. You?"

"Er-" Okay, so obviously I needed to lie, but what could I say that would get him to believe me? Maybe I should tell the truth, but *act* like I'm lying to throw him off the scent! No, that'd be dumb, he'd know exactly where to look when he did figure it out. And he would.

"Pete's taken the day off too..." he said. "Is he with you?"

"Ah, who was that again?" Well, I had to try. Silence. "Dad?"

"Nathan, staying out late is one thing, but all this lying... it's not like you. You know you can tell me anything, right son? Is this really about your friend?"

Incoming! Unexpected guilt trip from Dad! It's a major hit! Man, his voice even quavered a bit. Hadn't heard that since the incident with the knife, when he'd seen me at my lowest point. If my problem was in any way comprehensible, if I could have explained it in simple terms, I would have broken and told him everything right there. I almost wished it were a drug addiction. At least then I could have told him.

"Please."

His voice held a tinge of desperation. I bit down, grinding my teeth against each other. I couldn't.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He sighed; it came out in patches, like he was shaking.

"Can you put Pete on the phone?"

"Yeah, let me grab him."

No point pretending. He knew Peter was there. He'd just call his phone next if I tried to lie. Either 'Pete' would sell me out or he wouldn't. Peter caught the phone as I stared at my toes. That conversation had probably hurt Dad a lot. He worried about me all the time, my well being was almost constantly in his thoughts. Probably since Mom died, definitely since my accident. This was probably killing him.

"Sir?" Peter stood up, spine ramrod straight. "Since this morning. Well sir, I'm ashamed to admit he convinced me."

Hey! That rat really was selling me out.

“It turned out we have a lot in common. One very important thing in particular.”

What the heck could he be referencing? Exposure to supernatural monsters? Peter had just seen me avoid telling him anything about Robin, so that couldn't be it.

“Yes. Well, with all due respect, that's an incredibly offensive thing to say to me. ... Of course not, he's sixteen. Sir, if that's bothering you, I can tell you that my parents were wonderful people, and I still didn't want to talk to them about it. Uh huh. Okay, sure.”

Peter passed the phone back over to me. I could hear Dad's breathing, but he didn't say anything.

“H-Hello?”

“You never told me.”

“I'm... sorry?” I had no clue what was going on. Peter's conversation hadn't given me anything to work with. Peter's face was as red as his damn hair and had found an apparently fascinating stain on the wall, so no help from him.

“That you and Pete have a... shared interest?” There was a pause and a sigh on the other line. “In men?”

No. No, no, no. He hadn't. Peter wouldn't have. He refused to meet my frantic stare.

“Um...Yeah?” I grit out. Anyone with eyes could see I had a crush on Robin. And I'd never expressed an interest in guys, least of all to my dad. Though he'd been hinting for awhile that he thought I might. How had he known? Peter too. It pissed me off that they weren't wrong. Instead of going after Robin, saving her, I was dealing with stupid nonsense. If we were too late to save her, I'd never forgive myself.

“Look, Dad I'll try not to lie any more, but this is a big deal and I need time.”

Another pause.

“Only for as long,” he said, low and tight, like he was saying them through clenched teeth, “as I can stand it. Remember to apologize and to thank Peter for taking the day off to help you talk things through.”

“Don't worry, I was already planning on thanking him,” I said, glaring pointedly at Peter. I hung up. The dial tone droned. My heart pounded, full of conflicting emotions. Anger, at Peter, the rush of panic at coming out, and relief that it had gone well, all things considered. Peter was too cowardly to say anything. “I wasn't ready.”

“I'm sorry,” Peter said. “I couldn't think of anything else that was reasonable.”

“How did you even know?”

He turned redder. He was embarrassed at least. “I... noticed you staring a few times. I just

assumed.”

As much as I wanted to throttle him, we'd already wasted enough time.

“Whatever. We don't have time for me to be mad about it, do we? Lucky you. Let's talk strategy. What's our next move?”

“I was thinking about that while you were... out. For now, how about we grab what we can and change locations? Wouldn't want your dad to catch us.”

“He told me he'd give me some leeway, though.”

Peter laughed a single 'Ha!' and said, “Isn't that what he'd say if he wanted you to stay put so he could find you?”

Good point. Great point, actually. That sounded exactly like something Dad would do, especially if he was desperate.

“Yeah, it is. So where to?”

“My place,” Peter said with an uncertainty that made me guess he didn't entertain much. He pulled the car around while I gathered up everything we were using. Some of Peter's notes had been crumpled or folded a few times. I wasn't sure what was still useful, so I just took them all, laptop too. I did a quick search of Talisman, sweeping the super rares we keep behind the counter, and grabbed a few books that I'd missed on my first sweep. Did it count as stealing if I worked there and intended to bring everything back? Oh well, Robin had done the same thing and she's a goody two shoes, so it was probably fine.

Peter came back inside to help me carry stuff once he'd parked his car out in front. We started driving away from the central hub of the town and into the east suburbs, the rich ones. He stopped in front of a house. A nice house. How in the hell had a nurse/cop afforded it? It looked old, Victorian maybe. A light shade of yellow with lots of windows, framed with bright white wood paneling. It almost looked like a castle. A small bit of the house kind of jutted out and was cylindrical, roof pointed into a peak. It had a wraparound porch. They're called verandas. I only knew because Mom used to go on and on about them when she saw them; she'd always wanted one. I really doubted Peter could afford it.

“It's my parents',” he said. Okay, then where were they? I got the sense I shouldn't ask. With furtive glances at the neighboring houses, he ushered me in and sat me down on a white couch. “I'll be right back.”

He left me alone. He'd carried all our research stuff into the room. It was cozy in his living room, there was a small fire place and a white carpet that seemed like it'd be really hard to clean. In front of me was a small glass table with several ceramic coasters. Hung over the mantle above the fire place was a deer head, though someone had placed googly eyes over its glass ones. I laughed at

the image of a young Peter running around the house affixing the eyes everywhere with glue. Must have been pretty cute. You could see a crack where an antler had fallen off and been glued back in place. The atmosphere was homey enough, but it didn't give off an 'a child lived here' vibe. There were few family pictures. All the ones I saw had the same couple in them. A woman, pale and short with short curled hair. She wore dresses in dark colors. She had pearls around her neck. Classic New England style. His dad was also pretty short surprisingly, still taller than his wife, but definitely not up to Peter's height. He had dark hair and a tan complexion. Stark contrast to Peter's orange hair and pale skin. Maybe he'd been adopted? Okay, enough of the family history. Orange sunset poured through the bay windows. We were losing the light.

It was hard to believe it'd only been a day since Robin and I had been separated. So much had happened. I'd met Peter and Iris, and learned more than I ever thought I would about Teddy. That thing, the spirit. If we didn't stop it, no one else would. It'd just keep rampaging on. But how do you fight a dream? If it just wanted me, if Robin and I could somehow trade, then I'd do it - me for Robin, more than fair - she was never meant to get taken in the first place. But I knew the spirit wouldn't stop with just me. Peter started unpacking the materials we'd brought. He started with Robin's laptop, waking it from sleep mode. She'd gone for the basic silver color, and hadn't dressed it up with stickers or anything. But the thing was in good shape. No obvious wear or scratches. She'd left it sleek and elegant, just like the owner.

"How long do you think she has?" I wished she'd just be there. That I could just call her and then, just like that, her voice would be on the phone, probably annoyed that I was bothering her, and everything would be alright.

Peter didn't look up from the laptop, but he frowned. I noticed that the lines weren't etched very deeply into his skin. He'd gone from a full nurse to a cop. That had to have taken some time. He seemed really young. Freakishly so. Maybe after he'd been brought back, Peter had stopped aging. Forever the way his friend/boyfriend pictured him.

"I've been thinking about that, and I just don't know, I don't think we CAN know. The time between Disappearances is variable. How long does it take to find a victim, and how long from there to drag them into dreams? You said you'd been feeling strange for about a week, so it takes at least that long. But as for what happens after that... we just don't know."

It was my fault she'd been caught up in all this. If I'd been the one taken, so many people would have been better off.

"In our best case scenario, we may have months to figure this out. At our worst case--"

Robin might already be dead.

We worked through the night, researching into the early morning hours. Well, Peter did. I

catnapped here and there. I remembered resting my eyes for just a moment. I must have fallen asleep a few times, but never long enough to dream, thank goodness. I wasn't prepared for another dream adventure. Not that staying awake would have been more productive. I'd been over everything Talisman had on shamans, spirits, demons, all that junk. Peter's story had been helpful in one respect, it ruled out a lot of stuff the spirit could be. Like, it clearly wasn't a wind djinn, right? That was the good news. Because even if what I was reading wasn't a load of bull, it was still something entirely new, created by Peter and Teddy. We weren't going to find a cleansing ritual in a book, not directly, anyway. Peter had mined Robin's laptop for everything he could and, as far as I knew, gotten nowhere.

"You're awake," Peter said, sounding relieved. It was the first time I'd heard that tone of voice from someone other than Dad in years.

"Did you stay awake the whole night?" I asked.

"I don't need sleep," he said, and at first I thought he was bragging, but then he added- "Anymore."

He was sat on the ground cross legged with the laptop in front of him and a huge torrent of papers and notes sprawled as far as the fireplace. The books Robin had taken from Talisman were out and open on top of them. He'd torn paper to act as small page holders all throughout them. He was glancing at me every now and then, but mostly still busily tapping away, not even looking tired. I frowned, a powerful itch building right where the scars were thickest. I resisted.

"What's wrong?" Peter asked.

"Ah, it's nothing," I said.

Peter began to press the issue, nurse instincts likely kicking in, when there was a rumble. My butt was vibrating. Like, enough that it itched. The bookmark!

Everything's dissolving. Can't fight. Don't know how. Please, Nathan, come get me.

I turned it to the other side and, yup, the eye was there. What the heck was that thing? It's been watching us every time Robin- Ah! It finally clicked. It was *his* eye! He'd been watching us the whole time! Peter leaned over my shoulder as we watched the image fade away. Robin was running out of time. But crucially, we hadn't run out of it yet. Huge difference. Still, it was probably the last message she'd be able to send. I had to do something, anything. I stood up.

"Let's go see Iris." And Teddy, I tacked on mentally, still not sure how Peter was going to react to his involvement. Involvement? More like puppeteering of the events.

"Iris? The dream therapist woman?" I felt something brewing inside me. Like a prairie fire, it started small, but quickly grew into a determined blaze. Hope. Finally, I had some hope. Don't worry Robin. We're going to come for you. Hold on.

“No more vague riddles. I'm going to force her to tell me what she knows, and then we're going to save Robin,” I said, an awful lot more confidently than I felt. I was going to force *both* of them to talk.

“Here, this address,” I said, suddenly feeling tingly as adrenaline surged through my system. I handed Peter the card Teddy had snuck into my wallet.

Neither of us spoke as the car pulled out of the driveway. We both knew we were heading down the final stretch. Either we'd save Robin, or we wouldn't. And there were a lot of shades of gray between those two outcomes. We could die or end up like Iris. Or Peter. Or Robin. There were a lot of bad outcomes. And Iris had said that Robin might even be hurt by my actions to save her. But Robin's life meant so much to me; I thought her life was worth so much more than mine that I barely considered all that. She had so much going for her. Not like dumb idiot me. It... it might be okay if I didn't make it. I decided to call my dad. Just in case.

“Nathan?” He'd picked up halfway through the first ring. His voice sounded thin, watery. Like when I'd woken up in the hospital after the accident and he'd explained what had happened to me.

“Hey Dad,” my voice wasn't exactly strong either.

“I have no idea what's going on with you.”

“Sorry?” My voice soft because I was afraid speaking louder will give him a reason to ask what's wrong. And I might have told him if he'd asked. He took a deep, shuddering sigh.

“I got fired today.”

That was an abrupt shift in subject, “Wait, what? Why?”

“They caught you on surveillance stealing from my desk. I covered for you and said I'd asked you to grab the flash drive and notes, but one thing led to another and they found the Disappearance file. I was supposed to have turned over all the case materials, even copies, when I stopped working the case. So they fired me.”

“Dad, thank you so much for not telling on me. And I'm- I'm so sorry. I didn't, I never thought-”

“I know. That's my point. I don't think you're thinking through the consequences of your actions. The things you do ripple outward and affect those closest to you.”

Just like Iris had said about my efforts to save Robin. It wasn't only my actions in the dream world that could have downstream consequences.

“I'm sorry.”

“You're looking for Robin, right? And you convinced Pete to help you?”

“How did you know?” He'd already figured it out, so there was no point in lying.

“You left some things at the book store. Smart move to change locations. I'm guessing that was Pete's idea?” He said.

“Yeah,” I replied. Wow, close call, Peter had been right.

“I figured. The kid's got good instincts. He'll probably make detective sooner rather than later,” he said, almost wistful. “Look, I can't pretend to understand why you need to do this so badly, badly enough that you'd lie to me and steal. But I wanted to say... I don't know what I wanted to say. Just that I love you and to be careful. Come home safe.”

He loved me. I knew it. And I loved him too, of course. He was my dad. But it kind of rang a bell inside me. Made me realize I was being too cavalier, almost like I was hoping to trade my life for Robin's. And that was wrong. Yes, Robin had people that cared about her and a bright future and people that loved her. But so did I.

“I love you too. I... will. I'll come home.”

The dial tone carried an extra dose of finality. My limbs felt loose, drained. I leaned my head back against the headrest. Peter rolled up the window. He gave no indication that he'd overheard our conversation, even though he must have. It was quiet inside the car, and hot. Dad had loved that job, and had put in the work to show it. From patrolman, to detective, to sergeant. After his last promotion, we'd gone out to the nicest Italian place in town. Dad and I loved Italian but were lackluster chefs, so it was our go-to celebration place. He'd gotten a bottle of wine, I'd felt mature ordering a steak. Teased him the whole time, calling him 'Sarge'. I'd kept it up for a whole month because he would have this tiny involuntary smile every time I did. Probably all I'd done for him lately was give him deeper wrinkles and more gray hairs. He'd aged so much in the past few years, because he was always worrying about me.

“We're here.”

Peter parked in front of the house that was still clad in dream catchers. Fat lot of good they were doing. We needed to hurry, but something kept us in the car. The fear of taking that next step? Maybe. A little nervous about Peter's reaction to seeing... him?

“Are you okay?” He asked. There it was again. Concern. Just like my parents.

“Yeah. Thanks. Let's just go.”

Taking me at my word, he nodded and opened the car door and started walking towards the house, leaving me behind. Rushing in and out of cars aggravated my scars, too much squishing and bending for their liking. On the telephone pole, a single word caught my eye- MISSING. Too far away to make out the other details, but I knew they were hers. The posters were spreading like plant tendrils, blooming out from where she'd been taken. Not long now, just wait for us, I thought before turning back to the house. It looked different in the daylight. Less mystical. The homemade dream-

catchers lost their charm without a moonlit night. They looked tacky, to be honest. An arts and crafts project. Peter was already knocking on the door when I caught up, my fastest speed a half-jog and even that was pushing it. There was a thump from upstairs, a shuffling, a brief silence, then the door opened.

“You're late. Well, to be fair, that's Iris' fault, not yours.”

Teddy. He had a smirk on his lips before he'd even fully opened the door. But it was still kind of good to see him, all things considered. Peter was basically the only person I'd seen in the last day and a half. I'd almost say it felt like the longest thirty six hours of my life, but no, waking up in pain in a hospital had been a much worse day, when every slightest twitch made me wince and brought tears to my eyes. Teddy stared, eyes shiny, directly at Peter, seemingly unprepared, even though I knew he had to have been the one to engineer this 'chance' meeting. The detective had been looking away when the door had opened, playing aloof as always, but when he heard the familiar voice, he turned to look. He took a step back, like the surprise had driven him away. They recovered at the same time.

“So good to see you again.”

“What the heck are you doing here!?” They said it at the same time. I'm pretty sure Teddy said the former and Peter the latter.

“I live here,” Teddy said with a smile that even I found infuriating. What a non-answer.

“I knew it,” I said.

They blinked. Well, Teddy might have winked, I couldn't tell. He was still wearing the eye patch, so it might have been a blink. He turned to look at me. Teddy was still grinning. All according to plan, huh? But I did catch a tenseness that might mean he was uncomfortable, or nervous. Peter was so tense it'd be hard *not* to catch.

“Teddy. You were the other guy in the dream. The,” I paused, “friend.”

“So you told him about that, huh?” Teddy said, “I figured you would. You're too kind for your own good. Or his.”

Peter's eyes narrowed, as his gaze darted from me to him. He'd caught onto the fact that I'd known about Teddy for awhile now. Teddy dug into his pocket and pulled out a carton of cigarettes. Tapping one out, he also then produced a lighter and proceeded to light it and take a deep drag, blowing smoke upwards with a practiced quirk of his lips.

“Y-You're smoking.” Yeah, wasn't he supposed to be a nurse? Teddy quirked an eyebrow- a challenge. “I thought you quit.”

“Yeah, well,” Teddy said, taking another drag and breathing out, “I unquit.”

“W-” Peter cut himself off. The unasked question hung in the air. 'When?'. Yeah. Their past

intimacy almost demanded the question, but their current alienation also made the question too personal. The answer too frightening. What if it was right after they 'broke up'? What if it wasn't? Peter's eyes narrowed again as he made some internal calculation. "What happened to your eye?"

Oh, finally! A question I knew the answer to.

"It's the bookmark," I said. Teddy's eye widened. He hadn't expected me to figure it out? No one gave me any credit. It was obvious if you just stopped to connect the dots. A bookmark with power over dreams, Teddy's power, a missing eye, an extra eye appearing where it shouldn't. He sighed and undid the ridiculous eye patch he was wearing. It slid off as the tie came loose. The eye was closed, but it opened slowly when the light fell on it. And-

Peter gasped. I think I did too. It was milky white, totally clouded over. Advanced glaucoma? No clue, but there was no way he was seeing out of that.

"Earlier, you acted like the bookmark-"

"I lied." He said it casually. Like it was so easy. A person like that was dangerous. Teddy's agenda might not have been our agenda. I needed a way to communicate that to Peter secretly. Although, with the way he was staring, I probably didn't need to. Peter looked like the world had been pulled out from under him, like a little kid learning that Santa is your parents. "C'mon, I'll tell you about it inside."

Peter stepped forward, then hesitated. It was more uncomfortable than Talisman when Robin was mad at me. But we needed Iris; I wasn't about to be scared away by social etiquette. Teddy quirked an eyebrow and stood aside. I looked over my shoulder and saw Teddy ash the cigarette and flick it into a bush. Real nice. We were led to the same sitting room as last time. Peter appeared distracted, deep in thought. No shock there, he was probably barely able to process his emotions, let alone the new facts he'd learned. The way Teddy had grabbed him in the dream had sure been intimate. If things had been different, would they have been a couple? Given his self loathing and guilt, I doubted Peter had dated anyone since the incident. Not sure about Teddy. If Robin started dating some other guy, I'd be pretty upset. With both men taller than me, I felt shorter than ever. I'm no shrimp! I'm 6'. Okay, 5'11". I was getting a complex. Probably because I'd been with Peter for so long, who had to be pushing 6'3" and Teddy was just a hair under that. All three of us sat in silence, waiting for someone else to start. Fine then.

"Okay, are we really not going to say the 'M' word!?" That's what I finally chose to burst out with. Childish, as usual. In my head I'm calm and mature, but that's not how it comes out when I say stuff.

Peter looked confused, "What 'M' word?"

"Magic"! Your ex-boyfriend has actual freaking magic powers! How are you not telling

everyone you meet? I'd be screaming it from the rooftops if I had superpowers.”

Teddy laughed.

“We aren't ex-boyfriends,” Peter spat.

That shut him up quick. The two of them shared a look. Teddy leaned forward, like he wanted to stand up and go over to him, but just as quickly, he leaned back. Neither of them answered the question. I wondered if they were consciously avoiding the word 'magical'. I mean, that's what Teddy's powers were, right? But I guess they probably hadn't felt all that magical since they'd ruined the world and caused the deaths of more than a dozen people. More like a curse than a blessing. Peter broke the silence next.

“So what's the deal with the bookmark?”

Teddy let out a 'hf', a half laugh. “Sure, we can start there. It's easier if I just show you. Nathan, may I borrow the bookmark, please?”

Teddy held it over his cloudy eye. Slowly, a black slit appeared on the bookmark's surface. It widened and rounded until it formed an oval with three circles inside it. One white, one gray, and the center one black. Little lines appeared in the outer circle. Veins. It was an eye! It exactly matched Teddy's other eye, except in grayscale and flat. It even started to move in sync with the real eye. Could Teddy actually see out of that bookmark?

“The eye...” Peter said, tapping me on the shoulder, “So it was yours.”

Yeah, Peter had put it together as well.

“So you were spying on us the whole time?” I asked.

“Oh no,” Teddy said, waving his hands in front of him, “It's pretty tiring for me to sync up with the bookmark. I was only checking in on you.”

That raised way more questions than it answered, but Peter got the next one in.

“You- What have you done to yourself?” Peter asked. Teddy waggled his eyebrows suggestively. Suggestive of what, exactly? Even when Teddy was just a customer at Talisman I didn't really get him. He was always playing around. No change in a situation like this, then. He flicked the bookmark back and forth, showing us his blind eye, then the one on the bookmark.

“Hmm, what? It's just another extension of my power. I am my power, after all. To answer your next question 'Why?', well, I knew we needed a weapon to beat that thing, I'd been looking for one for ages, but I only recently came to a certain conclusion. That creature only got made because of me, right? Right?” he said again, looking at me. I nodded. He was being way, way too chipper about disfiguring himself. “I figured I'd make the best weapon to fight it.”

“Then why not go fight it yourself?” Peter asked.

Teddy handed the bookmark back to me. He pointed his two pinkies at each other and play-

acted like he was trying to get them to touch, but couldn't. "Well, it's kind of the same as magnets. Spiritual magnets. Like, me and the spirit have the same polarity, you know? Both positively charged," Peter snorted, earning a glare from Teddy. "Or *negatively* charged, Mr. Smart Alec. We repel each other, strongly. My magnetism is too strong, in other words. I needed a way to tone it down. Didn't find one until recently."

"Why did it affect Robin like it did?" Peter asked, "She thought it was hers, right? But it wasn't." Wow, good point. I hadn't thought of that.

"Well, in a dream, your mind sort of... fills in the gaps. Like when you're in an unfamiliar room, but in the dream you 'know' it's your living room. Like that. Same with the bookmark. It's mostly dreams, so it has that effect on you. You have something, so you must own it, right? Her mind just took the shortest possible route to explain why she might have it."

"But not me and Nathan? It doesn't have that effect on us."

Teddy turned serious, "How could it? You, Peter, are made of dreams. You are built out of the world of sleep. I imagine it's very difficult for you to be fooled by a dream. And you, Nathan, you were there. I saw you, as me and Peter dove through the portal. At the border between life and death, you saw everything. You touched it, indirectly. And it touched you back. Well, in a philosophical sense! I don't mean literally."

The way he was talking it almost sounded... intentional. Like because I was there, that's why he chose me to be the one to team up with Peter. If that was true then it meant there was more to it.

"It sounds like you have a plan?" I said, allowing a smidgen of hopefulness to creep into my voice. Peter probably wouldn't approve but I couldn't help it.

"We do."

'We' meaning him and Iris, I assumed.

"What is it?"

"Iris will tell you more about it when you see her."

"Oh come on!" Peter said, rising to his feet. "That's the most ominous thing I've ever heard! Just explain it now! Right, Nathan?"

"Nathan, Robin's running out of time. We have to move quickly. Time flows differently in the dream world. You'll have a better chance of reaching her in time if you go into dreams as fast as possible."

I don't know what Peter expected, but his face fell. Was he surprised? Of course I was doing it! What other choice did I have? Let Robin die and then pray the spirit didn't try to kill me next? That was beyond foolish. Teddy was careless, duplicitous, sure. Playing dumb when we all knew he was anything but. But I also knew he was desperate to stop the shadow man, maybe more desperate

than anyone. Because he'd sacrificed his own eye. And Peter knew it too, he just didn't want to know it. It complicated things for him, knowing Teddy was willing to go so far. Peter sighed and looked upwards, maybe praying for strength.

“Oh, Peter's given up? Nathan, he must really like you. It always took me ages to convince him to do stuff he didn't want to,” Teddy said, his smile suddenly wide and overbearing. Fake. Maybe he was jealous. “Okay! Let's knock you guys unconscious. Is that okay?”

Yeah, I'd expected that. It sucked, but it was better than waking up mid-rescue.

“That's fine,” Peter said.

It wasn't fine. You could hear it in his defeated tone, see it in his sagging shoulders. I almost reached out, to pat his leg. Would Teddy find that strange? I chickened out, though my hand twitched, wanting to move.

“Oh, but I think I only have enough equipment to keep one of you under,” Teddy said.

“I won't need any equipment, or drugs,” Peter said, looking uncomfortable. “I've been able to sleep whenever and for as long as I want, since that day.”

Teddy closed his eyes, holding them shut for just a moment longer than a blink, like the memory had caused him pain. Even his cheerful mask couldn't conceal that. I knew how he felt. I sometimes thumbed over my scars when thinking about the accident. He shook out of it. “Well... good. You can use my bed. It's on the second floor. Let's go.”

He led us upstairs. The hallways branched, a set of double doors stood at the end of one corridor. The master bedroom?

“That's Iris' room,” Teddy said. “Mine's third door on the left. I'll meet you there once I've gathered what I need.”

So Iris' body was in there. Her soul and physical form unable to reconnect. She was very beautiful in dreams- ethereal. But I wondered how much of that was constructed. Maybe she was actually really short or her hair was blonde. A gentle hand set on my shoulder. Peter? No, it was Teddy.

“The real Iris isn't in there. The real one is in dreams. Not that. That's just a shell, waiting for her to come back.”

He'd read my thoughts? Could he do that? No, as I glanced over my shoulder and saw his faraway gaze, it was clear he'd said it to himself as much as to me. Huh. Another question for Iris. One more for the pile. Peter tapped my shoulder and gestured towards the opposite corridor. Teddy moved to the double doors, sparing Peter a glance, which he failed to return. Peter followed right behind me, deliberately using his body to prevent me from peeking into Iris' room. I really really wanted to see what she looked like, but no luck.

Teddy had said he lived there, but he hadn't seemed to have taken many liberties with the decoration, unless he really liked dull grays and whites. The curtains were hung low, blocking sunlight. A crime thriller's cover, folded to a page towards the end on a bed table, was the only splash of red. A dull landscape of a mountain hung over the bed. Everest? All jagged mountaintops with snow looked like Everest to me. The house wasn't Teddy's, but it wasn't like his coma stricken boss was around to complain about the decoration, so I'd expected something brighter. I sat on the bed. It was poofy. If it were my bed, I'd have trouble sleeping on it. Teddy would be back soon to drug me unconscious for the second time in like three days. I was placing an awful lot of faith in someone I knew for a fact was a huge liar.

“Hey, is this a bad idea?”

Peter had lain down, eyes closed. It was unusual to see him relaxed, unguarded. If he didn't need sleep, did that mean he didn't get tired? What about regular exhaustion?

“No matter what I say, you're still going to do it, right?” he said, “So there's no point in getting you all worked up and nervous about it.”

Aw, that was kind of sweet.

“But for the record this is a terrible idea and you're an idiot for going through with it.”

Never mind.

Teddy hefted in a ton of supplies. There were vials of drugs, IV bags along with the actual IV, some bandages, and needles. All that to care for Iris? He started prepping a needle, carefully drawing from one of the vials. That'd be going in me soon. It made me shiver a little. Anything for Robin, of course, but... needles weren't a favorite of mine. Peter examined each of the chemical bottles and nodded at me. Phew. They were safe. I'd almost forgotten he'd been a nurse. Still, I was nervous. I couldn't very well hold Peter's hand through it, even though I wanted to. Teddy produced a cup from somewhere and poured about two inches of a milky liquid into it.

“Drink this,” he said, handing me the cup.

“Okay,” I said, not bothering to ask what was in it. I didn't want to know. If it would knock me out long enough to save Robin, then I didn't really care. He cleaned a spot just above my elbow joint and stuck the needle in without much preamble. “Ow!” I said, more from surprise than pain. Okay. The final trip into dreams. Was I ready? We hadn't worked out a lot of the details. The last time I'd fallen asleep here, I'd woken up on Iris' boat, but she'd been attacked by the spirit after I'd left, so who knows what had happened. And we really didn't have a way to kill the spirit yet. Me and Peter would have to find a way on the way. In the end, it didn't matter if we were ready. Robin was out of time, so we were going. Teddy finished cleaning and bandaging the prick.

“Okay, when you're under, I'll set up the IV to keep you there. I'll check your heart rate

every hour or so, just to make sure nothing's going wrong.”

Already his voice was getting fuzzy. I clutched the bookmark, held it to my chest, the only weapon we had. I tried to think of how we could use it to kill the spirit, but I was already flying away...

“Peter?” It barely buzzed through.

“What?” His voice was much clearer. Well, he was lying right next to me, after all. There was a pause. For second I didn't think Teddy would answer back, then-

“I don't regret it. Even if I knew all this would happen in advance, I'd still bring you back. I'd sacrifice those people to save you. If it's for you, I'd become a monster.”

Silence.

“I guess I've made you hate me even more, huh?” Teddy laughed, but there wasn't much joy in it. “I'm just going to check on Iris, I'll be right back.”

I heard a door open and close. And then just a whisper, but still I heard it.

“Things would be a lot easier if I could hate you.”



The Truth of Robin Melling

It's awhile before I'm coherent enough to feel something. Time is probably irrelevant here. I bet the monster could make a day feel like a minute and vice versa. But I do feel a chill wafting its way down the hall, a dry, cold breeze. It's a bitter winter cold. In the house, somehow.

"I guess my Hell has frozen over." The breeze is likely part of some sort of trap. I sigh, knowing that springing the trap is probably the only way to move forward. Well, I feel in the mood for battle anyway. I'd like to get some revenge on the monster that's done this to me. I'm going to figure out a way to weaponize the bookmark. Wreak some real havoc on the monster. Surely if I shove it down its black, heartless throat, it can't survive, right? Let's go find out.

I follow the wind to my own bedroom, think. I say 'I think' because what's beyond the open door is blatantly not my bedroom. Or a bedroom at all. It's some kind of wintry meadow. There's a thick sheet of snow on the ground, maybe a foot high. I can see a clearing surrounded by trees, most without any leaves left, but a few evergreens that have retained them. There's thick green bushes with red berries. I think they might be poisonous, which Freud would probably say is symbolic of something, since this whole place is built from my memories. It's vaguely familiar. I've been here before. There, in the center of the clearing, there's a figure. Dad. It can only be him. He's the only one left. Of course, it's not really my dad, never was.

The somewhat deep snow makes it slow going. I'm not wearing the right clothes. My closet has a wide selection of winter clothes, as you'd expect for a woman who's grown up through Maine winters. Of course, my room, including the closet with my winter gear, is now this meadow, so that's a bit of a catch-22. I try to think of something to say for when I get closer to 'Dad', but nothing comes to mind. Just rage and foul language I feel guilty just thinking about.

"Are you okay, honey?"

It's said mockingly. I narrow my eyes into slits. I haven't trusted anyone since I figured out where I am, but him least of all. The last thing I want from this shadow of my father is false sympathy.

"What do you want? You can't touch me or you'd have killed me already."

He kicks at the snow, like he's annoyed I've figured that out. So sorry to disappoint you. I'm cautious, but confident. Like I said, he'd have killed me if he could.

"You humans lead such interesting lives. So much love, and hate, and good food, and pain, and-

"Get to the point," I say.

He smiles, way too wide, full of teeth, like a shark is smiling at me. "I saw something in your memory that I've never seen anywhere else before. A... stitching. A contradiction. I want to

figure out the source of it. I'm... curious.”

“You mean you're curious to know if that apparent inconsistency is why you can't hurt me,” I say, surmising why he's actually interested. His lips curl into another smile, less frightening, almost gracious. He tilts his head in my direction, perhaps impressed with my deduction. So what's the play here? The smart path is probably to just ignore him. It's more or less admitted that it's trying to figure out how to kill me. Probably shouldn't help him puzzle it out. On the other hand, I could leverage his answers for some of my own.

“A question for a question,” I propose, “Sound fair?”

It uses Dad's hands to clasp them together in a prayer formation and look skyward. His thinking about it.

“Yes, fair, if I go first. You may be able to stave off death, but I can certainly make things a lot more unpleasant for you, if I so choose. So I get first question.” That's... true. My memory is fertile ground for psychological torture. I've gotten off relatively lightly so far. I nod, agreeing to his terms. “Good. Then, my first question to you, is where are we? This is a place from your memories, so you must know it. Please be specific.”

I raise an eyebrow. If this is trawled from my memories, then surely the monster would already know where we are. But, yes, it had seemed familiar when I walked in. The winter landscape... it's not the sort of place I'd go in the winter. You could charitably describe me as 'indoorsy'. The only way I'd ever go to a forest was if it was in summer and someone else dragged me there. I try to imagine it in summer. This meadow, same clearing, but with leaves on trees besides the just pines and with dragonflies. The cries of cicadas? I almost remember, but- no, it flashes away too fast for me to grasp hold of. Bushes? Fruit bearing, filled with raspberries, blackberries and the less edible nightshade. Dad had taught me their names when I was little...

“Oh! I remember now. You brought me here for my birthday that one time. We picked berries for the whole afternoon and then you gave me my bookmark as a present. This one.”

I pull the mark from my pocket. No new communication from Nathan. But it looks darker, dirtied. Maybe the water in the tub had damaged it? But the splotches are uneven, if it was from the water, the whole thing should be waterlogged. 'Dad' winces when he sees it, but you can tell he's pleased. Why? Ah! I've given away a lot of information with that statement! I could have milked it for more questions from him. This is a game of duplicity. Normally it's not something I'd get into, but now that I am I need to be more evasive. Put that brain to use!

“Okay, my turn, monster. What are you, exactly?”

It pauses, head tilting. It doesn't know the answer? Doesn't know how? “Blood,” it says eventually in a tone I've never heard from my dad. It's vicious. I wait for him to elaborate. “Now,

how old were you when you got the bookmark?"

"Hey! You didn't answer my question!"

He wags his finger back and forth. What am I, a child? "You simply don't like the answer I gave. That's not the same as not answering it."

Yeah, little wonder the evil shadow bent on killing me is better at deception than I am. Also, there's something strange. His voice it's... echoes? That's not right, but it's the only thing I can think of.

"Fine," I spit, "ten or thirteen. Around then."

"You must be specific."

"Okay, whatever," I say, losing patience, "it must have been when I was ten. You- Dad would have taken me somewhere nicer for my 13th birthday. What's your point?"

He smiles, patronizingly. Smug that he's realized something I haven't. This is not my dad. I knew that already, but knowing something and seeing it in front of your eyes is different. Dad would never look at me like this.

"Ah, excellent question! I shall answer that, however, I need some leeway as it would interfere with my questions."

This- This has to be cheating! I don't actually want to use one of my questions for that.

"Please explain to me why your bookmark is still in perfect condition, despite the fact that you've had it for seven or eight years. It has no fraying at the edges, no pen marks or scratches, not even dust or dirt. I can rephrase this as a question if you'd like to be pedantic."

"That won't be necessary," I say as venomously as possible through clenched teeth. He's kind of got a point. Why is it in such good shape? It might be a magical (until I figure out how it works) item, but if it's based on my memories it should be in worse shape than this.

"I-I take care of it. It was a birthday gift, so-"

"Robin, when's your birthday?"

What a waste of question! I'll hold him to two of my own after I answer, I swear. I almost laugh at his random flailing query. "Janua-"

I don't feel like laughing any more. The meadow stills. Even the gentle cold breeze falls flat.

"January 11th."

Almost a whisper, but it might as well have been a shout. I can see my breath, the temperature drops. The ground freezes under my feet. My heart and lungs and kidneys and toes freeze. I hadn't felt cold at all before, now it's the only thing I can feel.

"Your father didn't bring you here in the middle of winter to pick berries, Robin."

"So what!? I confused a birthday for some other time he took me berry picking! What does

it matter?”

“No. No, Robin, your father never gave you that bookmark or any bookmark. And you know it.”

If I had been crying the tears would have frozen on my cheeks.

“I-I-”

I sputter, trying to say something, but nothing comes out. He's right.

“It's a false memory, sweetie.” The 'sweetie' sounds hollow and patronizing. It's not even making an effort to sound like him. “Someone implanted it in your head. That bookmark wasn't made by your father, someone else shaped it. I can smell them all over it. A noxious smell, like some sort of fried meat. When did you first notice you had it?”

“I-I don't know. I remember eight years worth of having it! It... feels so real.” I have clear, distinct memories of using the bookmark. Are they all fake? Communicating with Nathan, that had definitely been real. No monster influence there; I'd deduced that much and I still believe in my own rationality, even as my world is starting to fall apart around me. Although... aside from the memory of Dad giving it to me in the first place, I can't seem to recall other people interacting with it. Not Mom or Sophie. No one. No one except-

“Nathan,” I say. “He asked about it just before I woke up here. He even held it. It must have been real at that point.”

“Him again? Sounds like he's the one to blame for all of this.”

He's smiling. A horrible, awful smile. Way too wide.

“Think about it. You were feeling fine, but what about him? He looked sickly and pale, just like your father did before he Disappeared.”

In an act of cruelty, Dad's skin suddenly pales, his frame thins. Even his hair seems waxy, less real. That was how he looked... just before. I can't look.

“You even thought Nathan might be next. Instead, you Disappeared and he's fine. I wonder why you're here and he's not.”

Everything hurts. I hold my hands to my head. My skull is pulsing to get free of my skin. A migraine.

“No, no, no. It's not- shut... up...”

There are three crunches in the snow and then Dad's standing over me. His presence radiating comfort and menace all at once. I want to hug him and I want to run away as fast as I can. He's close. Has he always been able to get this close? The bookmark's protection extended farther than this when I first got it, didn't it?

“Poor, poor Robin. You've been through so much. You've fought so hard, figured a lot out.

But it's all been for nothing, hasn't it? It's all been a lie.”

He's the liar. It hasn't been for nothing. Nathan's coming. He's coming to get me. He's determined. He's not the type to quit before something's finished. Though I freely admit he might do a haphazard job.

“Isn't time to rest, to let your grip loose and let go? Just relax, Robin and all this pain can be over in a heartbeat.”

I stand, holding the bookmark between us. He grimaces, but isn't pushed back. Get out. GET OUT! I shove him backwards, screaming as loud as I can. His form ripples, like my push slapped the surface of a pond. A brilliant flash of light emanates from my- the bookmark. He screeches. It's monstrous, like a number of animal screams being layered through a voice modulator. It's changing, turning purple, shorter, growing watery strands of black hair. I don't know what to do! It's my height now, staring me in the face with familiar eyes. My eyes. It lunges at me.

“No!” I hold my hands out futilely, hoping to, I don't know, slow it down maybe. But I know it won't work. So imagine my surprise when it does. The monster screams as an even brighter bright, warm light pours out of my hands, like a super powered blast of energy. The creature's form collapses into shadow and it flees, dark spot on the ground slithering towards the door which slams behind it. I follow, sprinting, and slap the bookmark on the door. Fantasy meadow or bedroom, there's only one way in, and I'm officially locking the door. My knees give out and I sink to the ground.

Chapter 12

The gentle rocking of Iris' boat is a pleasant surprise. I'd half expected something to go horribly wrong, for Teddy to get the dosages wrong or maybe simply put me so deep to sleep that I didn't dream.

“Hey.”

Peter, he must have followed right after me. I heard him, talking to Teddy. Should I say something? Butterflies in my stomach titter. I'm not jealous, exactly. But I'm... disappointed? Peter mooning over some guy that betrayed him seems contrary to my impression of him. He's in uniform, and I gotta say- his police outfit does make him look pretty heroic. Does our subconscious control how we appear in dreams? If so, then Peter has totally divorced himself from his former life. I mean, I'd thought he'd only become a police officer out of convenience, so he could investigate the Disappearances, but here he is, rocking the whole badge and gun getup. I guess that means he's thrown his identity as a nurse away. I shouldn't read so much into it, because if I do, I'll start painting a messed up picture of myself. White polo shirt, white mesh shorts, a visor, and tennis racket. The ol' reliable Wilson K Factor. Oh yeah, I'm *totally* over the accident.

“You okay?”

“Peachy,” I say.

“You look... good?”

I think he meant to tease me but lost his nerve halfway through. Peter shouldn't joke, he's bad at it. “Thanks. You look like a workaholic. Dreams should be an escape from work, don't you think?”

He looks down and feels his clothes, like he's just noticed what he's wearing, and smiles wryly.

“Is this the right place?” Peter asks, skeptical for good reason. The boat looks like a battlefield. Huge scratch marks are torn through the deck. Most of the carvings have been so damaged, they're virtually gone. The rail has completely shattered in places, like multiple cannonballs had ripped through it. There's no sign of the butterfly sails. Had the lightning bolt killed them all? Iris had been distraught when that'd happened. The giant masts have been recalled into the deck. The boat's been... what's the word? Becalmed. I think Dad taught me that one. Or maybe it was *The Pirates of the Caribbean*. Of the torches, only a couple of them still burn. They'd probably gone out when the spirit's hurricane hit, but why hadn't Iris re-lit them? It's like a ghost ship. It- It can't be that- No. Iris isn't dead. She can't be. We'd know, Teddy would have known, there'd have been some sign. ...Right?

“It wasn't like this last time,” I say. “Iris?”

I can feel a faint edge of panic creep into my call. We NEED her. We wait, me with my tennis racket, Peter with his badge of honor, hearing only the breeze and gentle waves spraying against the prow of the boat. There's a little forward momentum, maybe from a current. A creaking of a hatch opening echoes in the wind. In front of us wood panels slide away, revealing a set of wooden stairs leading down, into darkness. A small swallowtail butterfly, bright yellow, floats up from the yawning opening and lands on a plank right next to the maw. All the tension I'd been holding in my legs suddenly releases, I nearly stumble to the ground. She's alive. Thank goodness.

"That's Iris' symbol," I say. "I guess we should go down, huh?"

"After you, Nancy Drew."

"There's a time and place, Peter," I say, without enough energy to actually sound offended.

I know he's just trying to keep my spirits up, but I need to focus on Robin. Sensing my hesitation, he decides to take the lead, descending slowly down the steps. One step at a time he disappears from sight. I stand alone on the deck, a cold breeze triggers a shiver. Yup, just the cold.

"Coming?" he asks, head popping back up.

Obviously. C'mon, deep breath. It's just a little darkness and this is for Robin. I follow Peter. When the last of the light disappears and darkness closes over my head I feel the sudden urge to grab onto his shirt. Pride won't let me, though.

"The steps end here."

He grabs my arm and guides me down. There's a faint line of light maybe ten yards in front of us. Light shining under the crack of a door? Peter starts to shuffle towards it. I can hear his hand against the wall as he uses it for balance and to feel the way forward. His breathing is soft as we creep in silence towards the dim glow. I'm holding my breath. I can hear the thrum of blood pulsing in my ears. I want to say something, make a joke, but the darkness swallows up any attempts to break it with noise. What are we going to find beyond the door? Slowly, eyes adjusting, we approach it. There's something else, increasing in volume as we get closer. A beeping? Something I recognize. Peter hesitates at the door, but I don't.

"Iris?"

The door opens to white, pure shiny white. Bright enough to hurt my eyes. There's a bed with a metal foot guard, and a metal headboard. It stinks. There's a chemical soap smell mixing badly with a faint scent of flowers. I suddenly notice a bouquet of red roses sitting on the counter, where there's a stainless steel tap and sink. I should have noticed that right when I walked in, eye drawn to the only splash of color in the room. It's like we're in a video game and the room is still loading, with objects popping in as they finish rendering. I can't think of a reason why, except that maybe your subconscious mind is better at interpreting dreams and if you're conscious in a dream it

can take a little longer for things to fill in? That'd happened when I'd first met Iris, actually. She'd appeared out of nowhere. Maybe she'd been there the whole time.

The room looks a lot like Teddy's room actually, if a bit more medical. It makes sense, if Iris had been the one to decorate them both.

"You're here," a scratchy female voice says.

Iris is lying in bed, what's left of her. Her head rests on the pillow, but it's not connected to anything. Her neck and body are gone. No, not entirely. There's a wrist, there. And a small scrap of her kimono hovering above the sheets. Her smile is weak.

"What- what happened to you?" I say, feeling the color drain out from my face.

"Got into a fight. Lost. That's all. I'm used to it."

I swallow, deeply, trying to put how disturbed I feel looking at her aside. "This is Peter."

Peter's first instinct is to shake her hand, since he's kind of formal, but he realizes that she's not able to and instead gives a weak wave. Iris tilts her head in acknowledgment.

"Have-" Peter stops, seems to reconsider the question, then carries on. "Have we met before?"

That's an odd question. It's the same one I'd asked him over and over when we'd first met. She laughs. It's a hacking awful sound. As if she's been smoking for years. "No, I've heard a lot about you, but I don't think we've formally met."

Something passes between them. Some look I can't decode. What is it? Whatever it is, we need to move along. "Peter's told me everything. I know what the spirit is."

"I see. You ignored my warning."

"I did," I say, not sure if I should be apologetic or defiant. Never hurts to be nice, I guess. "I'm sorry."

She shakes her head.

"It's okay. I didn't think it would work anyway," Iris smiles faintly. Even though she's bedridden and missing literally half her body, she seems more at ease than last time. Less abrasive. It's an abrupt change in personality that only makes me more suspicious. I know she's holding back something. I've known that basically since I met her. Iris told me herself that she'd fought the spirit and failed, but she has to be more involved than she's letting on. "I'm just sorry I couldn't protect you."

"Protect him from what?" Peter asks. I think he's actually more concerned about my safety than I am. No wonder him and Dad get along. For my point, I'm getting a little annoyed. Every adult in my life is practically throwing themselves onto grenades to protect me! 1. I'm really not worth it, and 2. I can handle myself. Kind of.

Iris raises an eyebrow at Peter, "From what you're about to do, obviously."

So she already knows why we're here.

"How do you know so much?"

I'm pretty sure of the answer already. Because... there's only one way for her to know. As far as I'm aware, there are only three people who know exactly what's going on with Robin, excluding Iris. Two of them are standing right here. Neither of us could have given her any details. I didn't know any details when we met. And Peter literally just met her. So only one person could have given her any information on the situation. Teddy. I wonder how Peter's going to react. I never told him my suspicions. I hadn't been sure, true, but also it'd hurt him to know Teddy had caused Iris' condition.

"You figured it out, guess you're not as dumb as I thought."

She sighs before flashing me a smile to show she's only teasing. "Fine. About a year and a half ago I was contacted by a man who exists between dreams and what you call reality. Back then Disappearance hysteria was raging through town. I'd had an influx of patients showing symptoms of PTSD at my psychiatry practice. And I wasn't doing too great myself... A friend of mine was among those who Disappeared. So when that man came to me, in a dream, and explained what was really causing the Disappearances and that he wanted my help in bringing them to an end, I accepted. I barely asked questions. After all, it was only a dream. What harm could it do? If it could help my friend, then I wanted to do it."

She pauses, reflecting. She'd tried to dissuade me from pursuing Robin. Because trying to save her friend is what caused her condition. She doesn't want the same thing to happen to me.

"That... man-" Peter says, putting the pieces together. He's covering his mouth with one hand, thinking. The color drains out of his face, not that he had much color to lose in the first place. He looks to me. I can't hold eye contact for long and end up staring at my shoes. I'm sorry, Peter. Forgive me.

"Yes. Teddy. He said he couldn't help directly, but he'd guide me to the spirit and I was to do battle with it. He taught me a little about lucid dreaming; he figured if I could control dreams then I could fight it somehow. He called it a battle of philosophical will. He got the details pretty wrong."

"Of course he did," Peter says with disgust.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Iris agrees. "But we both knew it was risky. I regret what happened, but not that I tried. And he's stayed close ever since. He signed on as my nurse to watch over me. To see if he could bring my soul back to my body, so I know he's not a bad person. Hating him is difficult."

Peter wants to interrupt but holds himself back. He turns pale.

“What happened after that?”

“I- We knew that the spirit wasn't just going to stop on its own. I don't think it can. So we started doing research, trying to figure out how it might be destroyed. And then...”

Her eyes lock on mine, as she waits. Huh? I don't get it. She rolls her eyes, but there's a hint of fondness in the gesture. “He recognized you, Nathan.”

Oh! He'd gone in to Talisman for research and bumped into me, recognized me from the dream! And then he, what, recruited me? “Why me?”

Iris pauses, taking time to phrase things the way she wants, “I'd found my spirit animals, the butterflies by that point, so we knew there was something to Shamanism. He thought that you were a perfect candidate. You'd been exposed to his power and you were there at the spirit's creation. Plus you'd experienced a sort of death and rebirth. That stuff's really important.”

“Important to what?” I'm still not getting it.

“Shamans, Nathan,” Peter says, placing a hand on my shoulder. “She's saying they think you're a modern day shaman. Why did it have to be him, though? Teddy told us why he couldn't do it, but why not you? Or me.”

Iris tries to sit up, but fails. Not surprising, since she's missing more than a few joints. There's a button on her bedside that adjusts the headboard, I flick it so she's sitting up. She sniffs, haughty, trying to let me know she could have done it herself. She might be nicer, but she's still prideful, I guess.

“I don't have a body. Believe it or not, you need a body to fight spirits. For starters, I can't explore or move about freely without a body tethering me to reality. I'm stuck here. Secondly... It's kind of hard to explain, but fighting a spirit with just your soul is kind of like trying to win a gunfight with just the bullets and no gun. They function together.”

“And why not me?” Peter asks.

Iris sighs like she doesn't want to divulge the information. Maybe she's trying to protect Peter too. “Your existence is uncertain. You're a muddle of many different things. Human, physical, spirit, ethereal, whatever the heck Teddy's power is, all of it mixed together. It's not that I'm sure you couldn't, but it's not clear you could, either. Plus your heart isn't clear. You don't know what you want. I'm not saying you need a pure heart- no one has that. I just mean you need clarity of purpose. Nathan has that. Do you?”

Peter doesn't answer. For me, I definitely want to save Robin. But I don't know how to react to all that. Two days ago? It would have sounded impossibly silly! I might have laughed her off. Now I feel uncomfortable, the expectations of me are really high. Since the accident I've been used to having the bar lowered for me. God, I've gotten used to everyone letting me off easy, haven't I?

All that time complaining about my situation and I'm still taking advantage of it! I'm pathetic. If Teddy and Iris have chosen me as their 'shaman' or whatever, what did that make Peter? My bodyguard? Teddy had admitted he'd drawn the two of us together. Pretty cruel of Teddy. It's obvious Peter still loves him. I can't shake the thought. It rings around my head like a bell. 'He still loves him!' echoing, mocking me.

Enough! I don't care about the specifics, if it gives me the power to save Robin, then I'll do it. Even if I don't know what 'it' is. I'd already been prepared for that. I should feel upset, but they'd basically 'manipulated' me into doing something I would have wanted to do anyway. If anything, I feel grateful for the opportunity.

“Okay,” I say.

That's the last straw for Peter. He grabs my shoulders tight and shakes me back and forth, saying, “Okay? Okay!? How is any of this okay? Nathan, they used you and now they're sending you to your death and you're acting like it's nothing! He... he...”

Peter eyes turn glassy, his arms drop to his sides. No wonder he's upset, this hits pretty close to home for him. I touch his cheek.

“I'm sorry.”

I'm sorry for what happened to you. I'm sorry for all your suffering, and mine. I'm sorry I'm going to keep going and make you worry about me. I'm sorry if it doesn't work and I get hurt. I'm trying to apologize for all of that at once. He starts crying, I want to cup his cheek a little more firmly, but Iris clears her throat. Peter takes a step back and we wait for him to compose himself.

“What do we need to do next?”

“Call for your spirit animal.”

“You mean Amelia?”

My chest glows, a white circle opening up right over my heart, brightening the room, making the harsh medical whites even harsher. I close my eyes until I feel her. I feel her flapping her wings inside me. It's strange, it's not a physical feeling. It's like an intrusive thought, an image of wings and motion. I hold my hands cupped under the circle and out pops my beautiful, iridescent, rainbow swallow.

“Hi, Amelia,” I say, a little breathless. She preens, leans into my chest as the glowing light fades away. Okay, *that* had been pretty cool. Maybe this shaman stuff isn't all evil spirits and nightmares. Even Peter looks a little impressed, though he's still squinting.

“What now?” Peter asks.

I know. I'd been reading about it all this time. “She'll guide us to Robin. If I ask her.”

“That's it? That's all you have to do?”

“He can do a dance and chant in Cherokee if it'll make you feel better, but I figure time is of the essence,” Iris just laughs at my glare. Peter's reaction is totally fair, because you'd really think there'd be more to it. But I guess they're called spirit guides for a reason. It's a snap for them.

“Um, can you guide me to Robin?” I say. “Please.”

There's an agreeable peep before a bright glowing line emerges from Amelia's back. I grab hold of it and she immediately flies backwards out the room and down the hallway without so much as a glance back. The cord attached to her seems to expand the further she flies away. Looks like she's going on ahead and we're supposed to follow the line to catch up to her. I can see jagged glowing lines where light crawls up the stairs.

“What do we do when we get there?” I ask.

Iris shrugs, looking guilty, “I don't know.”

“You don't know!?” I yell. Peter snorts. He's barely surprised.

“This isn't science, Nathan! You have the bird, you have Peter, and Robin has the bookmark, I'm sure there's something you can do. This is dangerous, are you just realizing it now?”

“No, I-”

There's no plan? No real plan. 'Send the shaman kid in!' is not a plan. Crap, I'm still going to go, aren't I? I must be the dumbest person to ever live.

“I can't change your mind?” Peter asks. I can only look at him and kind of shrug. He can't. “Then we should go quickly. We're on a clock.” He's right. Teddy can only keep us under for so long. It's probably unhealthy as it is.

“Are you-?” I say to Iris.

“I'm fine. I'll recover. Go get the girl already!” If she can crack jokes then I'll believe her.

“Um, Peter?” she calls just as he's almost out the door. He stops but doesn't turn, “I don't know if you want this, maybe you'll find it insulting, but... I forgive you. I forgave you a long time ago.”

He hesitates, then leaves. My heart hurts. I don't get why at first, but then I make the connection. That must be how Dad feels about me. It doesn't matter how much I put him through he'll always love me, always forgive me. It makes me want to forgive Dad for caring too much, for protecting me a little too well. I shake my head. Time to go.

He's nearly up the stairs by the time I catch him, gaze directed studiously downward, following the trail of light. Faced with the slightly brighter night sky and clear air, I take a breath. I hadn't realized how still and stale the air was down there. The cop's silent. He's walking over to the bow, where the thread dips down straight into the water.

“Are you okay?” I say, lobbing the tennis racket, which I'd left on the deck, into the water. It

doesn't splash, just vanishes, like it wasn't there to begin with.

"I'm fine." Is that what I sound like when I say 'I'm fine'? No wonder no one ever believes me. "We should get going."

He's really pale. As he speaks, he clammers on top of the rail and stands on it, ready to jump. He's looking outward, across the sea. The light of the stars is reflected onto the water. I hurry to follow him, making sure not to accidentally jostle him off the boat. The sea itself is pitch black.

"Ready?" I ask. And I'm scared. Really scared. Not just nervous, but terrified. Pride had stopped me before, but... I grab his wrist and just as quickly let go. Crap, now he knows I'm afraid.

"I'm a little nervous too. I'm not great with heights. And I never thought I'd be comforted by a high schooler." He's lying, I think, about the heights. He's shaking, but it isn't from a fear of falling. He's literally shaking and he's still trying to make me feel better. Peter is the greatest friend anyone could ever have, no wonder Teddy's so hung up on him.

"Me too," I say. "A little!" I add, downplaying how deeply frightened I am about the next leg of our journey.

He smiles just a bit and I'm... happy. Scared, and happy, and embarrassed at being happy to have made him happy and-

"Okay- 3, 2, 1, jump!" I yell.

We jump together into that murky abyss, sinking like stones. Our bodies don't even make a splash, not the slightest of sounds. Iris' boat disappears. Bubbles swirl around us, I can hear them churn. I'm forced to close my eyes as they envelop us. Then, air? What? We're on dry ground.

"Land?" I say, before slapping my free hand to my mouth, trying to prevent the water from rushing in. Only there's no water. We're standing on asphalt. I can't have fallen asleep outside again, right? No, that's not it. We're in front of a building. A big, familiar one. There's a red cross on the front, but no name. But it doesn't need one, because it's obviously a hospital. Peter's breath quickens. Mercy South. Peter had worked there and it's where I was treated after the accident. And it's where Teddy inflicted a bleeding wound on the world of dreams. Is this the same place as back then? Did 'places' exist in dreams? Maybe it's just been built from mine and Peter's subconscious. Or it's a trap by the shadow. The golden thread points us forward.

Chapter 13

The corridors of the old hospital twist and turn in a pattern that makes no sense. I mean, I hadn't expected them to; it's a dream after all. But it's still disconcerting to walk around a place you're familiar with and have the directions all jumbled up. I'm sure that first was the reception desk and osteopaths. I'd walked by them both dozens of times for physical therapy. But where they should be there's just a long hallway straight forward that leads to a staircase, which then leads to a hallway which doubles back the way we came! I mean, we can't get lost, I'm still holding onto the golden cord attached to Amelia, but it's unsettling. More so for Peter, who actually used to work here. It doesn't seem to be bothering him, but we haven't spoken in awhile. I try a couple of doors that line the second hallway, even though the thread doesn't lead to them. They're unlocked but uselessly inconsistent. One's an office. Another has a surgery prep room; a third has those bunk beds that hospital staff sleep in. When we reach the end of the hallway the path branches in three directions, and I am so grateful to Amelia. If we didn't have her we'd have to pick one at random! We'd never find Robin like that.

“Where the heck are we going?” I swear we're losing ground; we've looped back against ourselves more than once, but the golden line never wavers. Some parts of the hospital, the nurses' station or some patient rooms, are lit, others are completely dark. In places thick with dark, I try to hold out the glowing thread like a lantern. Doesn't really help. Peter doesn't answer. He's lost in thought, barely registering our twisting path. Not that I'm surprised. He'd been emotionally charged as it was and now we're literally walking through his past. Peter stops and stares at wall.

“I think I know where it's leading us,” Peter says, running his fingers across a black splotch. At first I think it's a shadow, but his fingers come back black and oily. I've seen black liquid like that before. The further we walk the more the walls darken, getting wetter and more damaged; they twist like the knotted whorls of tree bark. We're heading to the scar, where Peter and Teddy started this whole thing. It makes sense that that's the spirit's home base.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

“More or less. Are you?”

I shrug. Not really, but it doesn't matter. How can I be ready for this? We don't have a plan of attack, even a clue of how Robin might be saved. His expression is tight. He's in pain. I don't want Peter to suffer anymore. Peter or Robin. The thread leads us around a corner and we're there. The hallway from my dream. It's not exactly as I remember it. The lights are flickering for one. The black tendrils of corruption are the most severe yet. The posters have totally dissolved away. And the smell is totally off. It's supposed to smell like bleach, maybe lemon if you're lucky. But all I can sniff out is, like, some kind of burned sugar smell, like a bakery. A bakery that's just had a fire. But

still, I get a sense of nostalgia. It would've been a piece of cake to find the right door at this point, even if we didn't have a guide line. The 404 door is just about midnight black and dripping wet. Black droplets are falling off the knob in a hypnotic beat. *Drip*, one, two, three, *drip*, one, two, three. I go to grab the knob, but Peter puts an arm out in front of me.

“Let me do it,” he says. “We don't know if it's toxic or not, and I've already touched it.”

I'm not sure that's a good argument. If it's toxic shouldn't we spread out the exposure instead of heaping it onto one person? But he's got that 'I dare you' look in his eyes that means even if I argue I'll just lose eventually. Whatever, let him martyr himself if he wants to. He pulls his sleeve over his hand and turns the knob. It's wet, so he slips once, but after that the door is open. Sparing a glance at each other, we push through.

There's tall grass, up to my shins. I can see the tiny flashes of lightning bugs on the tips of grass and in the air. They mirror the twinkling stars in the sky. Wait, what? I look behind me. I can still see into the hospital through the door behind us. The door's just standing free in the elements, apparently unaffected by things like architectural stability and common sense. Before I can react, it slams shut. Oh, that's kind of ominous. I'm hoping it doesn't mean the spirit's on to us. The element of surprise would be handy to have. But anyway, where the heck are we?

“Where's the scar?” I ask Peter, like he'd know. He scans the horizon, shading his eyes with his hand, even though it's not sunny. He points, into the distance. It's the same direction the golden string is leading us. Where is he- Oh! There in the distance, a house. Not a house, *the* house! The one I'd found Robin in last time!

“Let's go,” Peter says.

“Hey wait!”

I stumble to catch up. Damn Peter, he's always like that, so abrupt when he wants to do something! He could give me a second to mentally prepare myself. We could have, like, a team huddle, or something, even if that's not his style. The house is totally dark- or, wait, is it? I think I can see a glimmer of something on a banister on the porch. A flashlight, maybe? A twittering followed by a gentle weight landing on my shoulder.

“Amelia! Are you alright?” I gently rub her head. She leans into it and pecks my neck. It's a light, barely there, tap, just letting me know she's fine. It makes me smile for the first time in a long while.

“Hey birdbrain, we've got a job to do,” Peter says. His tone is hard, verging on mean. Amelia takes off from my shoulder and starts flying around Peter, pestering him. She flaps in front of his face and sounds off loud chirps in his ear, making him jump. Even he has to laugh eventually, “Okay, okay!” He holds his hands out for Amelia to land in, which she does. “This is a serious

situation, you know that, right?"

Amelia does that bird shrug thing I'd seen her do back when she'd saved me from Iris' ship. Peter wants to get mad but can't. Instead he walks up onto the house's porch and sets her down on a railing. Standing in front of the door, he turns to me and says, "Coming?"

"Of course." I'm next to him in a flash. We both reach for the door handle at the same time. I can tell we're about to have another argument about who should open what door, but then there's a loud click, and the door slowly opens of its own accord. It's a terrible sign, because the spirit is in control of the house, isn't it? It's probably a trap. Peter and I hesitate at the door.

"You know in horror movies where scary stuff is starting to happen and one guy goes off alone to investigate the strange noises coming from the inexplicably unlit basement and you want to yell at him for being such an idiot and you swear if you're ever in the same situation you'll do the smart thing and just leave?" Peter puffs out a breath and I can't tell whether he's laughing or scoffing at me, but he walks right in, getting swallowed in darkness.

In my haste to follow, I tumble through the door, falling, and landing in a heap on soggy ground. Slime covers my shirt. The ground's wet, but seems solid enough. Hardwood floor. The air is stale and cold, with a sickening cotton candy scent. Peter grabs my shoulder and hoists me up like I'm a bag of feathers. Whatever, I'm not impressed. Not even a little bit.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

I brush myself off, trying to reduce the amount of slime on my clothes. If it is hazardous, I'm in trouble, but other than a slight burn, it doesn't hurt or anything. "I guess so. Thanks."

Amelia peeps in my ear. She must have followed us in. I hadn't even noticed her land on my shoulder. Neither of us have closed the door, but I'm not surprised when I glance back and it's mid-swing. It shuts with a deafening click that rings in my ears. It's less frightening than when it opened.

"Let's go," Peter says, picking a direction. It's pitch black. Amelia's giving off a little light, but it's basically only enough to see the floor. Peter seems confident, but I know him well enough to know he's faking it. He's got that nervous twitch he gets and he's paler than usual. That's his tell. He's probably putting on an act for me, so I don't get nervous too. Whelp, too late. I'm not good with the dark under the best circumstances, so having to fight a shadow man in absolute ink black is kind of a literal nightmare for me. We shuffle along, using the wall and Amelia's thin light as a guide. It's a bit damp, squishy even, but we manage. The two of us eventually come into some sort of room. That's all I can say with confidence. I run my hand against the wall, rolling my eyes because I know that even if I find the light switch it isn't- CLICK. Bright light floods the room. Oh. Well, better than darkness, I guess. We're in the kitchen. This is where Robin prepares her meals, drinks her coffee. No surprise there's an espresso machine next to the standard coffee maker. She's a

coffee fiend through and through. I'll bet the whole family is; it's probably genetic.

In that bright kitchen, a girl suddenly appears. She's a few years younger than me. She's peeking inside the breadbox. She has familiar black hair and build. Robin's younger sister? The girl picks out the two crusts, even though there's perfectly good middle pieces left, pops them in the toaster, then gets out butter, sugar, and cinnamon. She hasn't noticed us, which is odd, because a tennis player, a policeman, and a glowing bird are pretty noticeable, you'd think.

"Robin?" She jumps. We jump. It's a man in the door frame, right behind Peter and me. He's got weathered skin and salt and pepper hair except for at the temples, it's whiter there. He's wearing glasses in unstylish wire frames. He has the same kind of round physique as her. Then that girl is Robin? Robin from a few years ago. We're watching her memory. Some sort of echo of her consciousness? "What are you doing?"

He's staring right through me and Peter like we aren't even there. Robin's doing the same. I'm stupid enough to try waving a hand in front of the dad's face, but Peter's there to grab my wrist and pull me out of the way before I get too far. He shakes his head and hits me lightly on the chest, admonishing me. Yeah, okay, that's fair. Do I even *want* to get their attention? Robin's father steps through the empty space I'd just vacated.

"Taking a study break. What about you?"

"I was tossing and turning so much your mother kicked me out of bed," he jokes. Actually, now that he mentions it, he doesn't look so good. Red eyes that had been obscured by the glasses and sagged shoulders, the usual signs of tiredness, conceal something deeper. A haunted look. Like something has been eating away at him. He's kind of shimmering, eye-catching. I want to look at him more than I want to look at Robin, which is saying something. He's got the glow. This must be right before he Disappeared.

The toast pops up. Robin retrieves two small plates, placing one slice on each, buttering them up, then dusting them with the sugar and cinnamon, coughing a little when a cloud of cinnamon kicks up towards her nostrils. She hands one of the plates to her dad.

"Cinnamon toast? I haven't had this since you and Sophie were little girls."

He munches on it slowly, turning something over in his head.

"You know, your mother and I are very proud of you."

"I- I know that!" She sputters. It's incredibly cute in a kid sister kind of way. "Why are you saying that?"

"It's..." he glances over at the oven clock, "11:12 and you're still up, studying. And I know you have a student council meeting tomorrow morning. What time did you set your alarm for?"

"6:00." She's lying, it's obvious. He raises an eyebrow. She stares back, holding her ground.

“And how long were you planning on staying up?”

“Awhile?”

“Robin.”

“Midnight. 12:30 at the latest.”

“Sweetheart, it's not going to kill you to get a 92 instead of a 96 on your Biology test. Lack of sleep might actually kill you. Trust me, I know. So go to bed.”

“But I-” She seems to realize the futility of arguing. “Fine. Let me make you some tea to help you fall asleep first, though.”

“Sure.”

She opens a cabinet. There's a wicker basket.

“Chamomile, or Green, or Earl Grey, wait, that one has caffeine, never mind, or Lemon, or Ginger? You like Ginger, right?”

“Sure. All tea tastes the same.”

“That's not true.”

“They're all mostly water, aren't they?”

She sighs dramatically and picks up a packet of Ginger. Mr. Melling crosses his arms over each other and lays his head down on them. Poor guy, he really does look tired. Robin's busy with the microwave, heating up water. Her dad suddenly jerks up, back ramrod straight. He stands, the motion is careful. Robin doesn't hear it over the hum of the microwave. She's putting away her dish.

“No,” I say. “No!”

I dash forward to- I don't know! Do something, grab Mr. Melling by the hand, warn Robin, anything. Peter's arm clamps around my wrist. I know I shouldn't, but I can't just let it happen in front of me again! I pry his fingers off my wrist, only for Peter's other arm to swing around and pull at my waist. I'm not gonna make it! It all happens so fast, but it feels like it takes forever. It's worse, everything is heightened, knowing what's coming. My whole body is numb. I stop fighting. I can't look away. The alertness fades and his eyes close. He falls to the floor, through it. A patch of darkness a little too dark to be just a shadow the only sign anything is amiss. Robin turns.

“Dad?”

“Robin!”

She turns and I swear she's looking at me, staring at me, even though she's just a memory. She smirks and disappears. Wait, what? Should she be able to do that? Was that the real Robin? Peter's tugging at my arm.

“Nathan, come on, we should go. She's not here,” Peter's saying. I can only hear him vaguely. I'm still staring at the spot where Robin used to be.

“Oh? Going so soon?” A watery voice echoes across the kitchen. It fills the room. I twist and turn, but can't find the source. Peter's doing the same, he even checks under the table and behind the kitchen island, even as it's still talking, but no luck. “But I had more to show you, if you're interested?”

“N-No way to go but forward, right? You can't hurt me with memories!” I shout at nothing, the stutter betraying my nervousness. It's needlessly combative; I really shouldn't be trying to piss this... thing off. It's a little reckless, but something happening is better than nothing happening, right? It means we're getting closer. Peter's scowling at me, so he probably doesn't agree, but what's done is done. “Well!? Show me what you got!”

There's a loud, mocking laughter. Huh, I almost recognize that laugh. It's not Robin's, I'd know that instantly, voice modulation be damned. It doesn't give me another opportunity, instead the kitchen dissolves, changes shape. It's- I recognize it. The same four person table, that stupid apron hung on the refrigerator handle!

I see Dad. Peter gasps. He's sitting at the table staring at me. Well, not me. Younger Nathan. I know exactly when in my memories we are. I don't want to see it. I don't want Peter to see it! It's the first time I'd seen Dad cry- the only time. It had been after dinner one night, months after the accident and I'd come home from the hospital. We'd had meatloaf, a perennial un-favorite of mine. He'd bought it from the supermarket. It was dense and the texture uneven. Chalky in some places, moist in others. But I'd tolerated it, wolfed it down, even. He'd finally made something I hated. It'd been nothing but a string of my personal favorites and comfort food for weeks. One of a million infuriating ways he was coddling me. And because he was doing it for me, I couldn't even complain! Yeah, between that and the constant, gnawing pain and knowledge that I'd never play tennis again, I was not what you'd call happy. You might have called me depressed. Severely depressed. I offered, insisted to be honest, on putting away the dishes. 'Let me have at least this', I remember thinking. Dad had smiled, then frowned, torn between happiness at my offer and concern over my injuries.

“Well, thank you, Nathan. That's certainly thoughtful of you.”

I'd turned and started washing the dishes. His eyes had burned holes in my back. I'd glanced backwards a few times, but Dad was fast and sneaky. Each time, he pretended to be engaged with his phone or adjusting his badge. But we had both known he was watching. I wanted so badly to be better. To go back to normal. I hadn't realized how different I was. Am. It happened as I was carrying the silverware to the dishwasher. My knee trembled. That was the only warning I got.

“Ah!” A shooting pain had torn up and down my side, I'd collapsed and fumbled the silverware as I did, scattering it around me.

“Nathan!” Dad’s yell had been immediate. “Are you alright, son?”

They’d been right. My dad, my doctors. I wasn’t the same. I’d felt my cheeks burning. So stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Just don’t cry, he’d never let me out of his sight again. Dad had touched my shoulder gingerly, but I’d thrown him off. I’d shut my eyes tight, feeling them line with tears. Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.

“I’m fine,” I’d ground out. I wasn’t fine. I was humiliated.

“You’re bleeding,” Dad had said. “Ah, looks nasty. You might need stitches. Here, wait a second.” He’d stood up to grab a towel. Somewhere in the chaos, I’d nicked my arm, probably with the big carving knife we’d used to cut the meatloaf. I’d clasped a hand over the wound. It had barely tickled, not that you’d guess that from all the blood. Adrenaline rush, probably. The knife lay right in front of me. I’d stared at it thinking, ‘Wow, that didn’t hurt at all. It’s so much less painful than my injuries.’ It’d be so easy. Just a quick slash across each wrist and it’d be done. No more pain, no more humiliation. I’d barely even thought it, let alone seriously considered following through.

I’d heard something. A sniffle, and the towel had dropped down in front of my face.

“Dad?”

Tears had poured down his face. He’d made no effort to stop them. He silently begged me, pleaded. Don’t. Please, don’t. He was white, ghostly. Terrified. He’d seen. He’d seen and understood and the magnitude of that horrified him. He’d felt powerless and weak. I knew it, that’s how I felt too. He’d looked away, shoulders shaking, hand over his mouth, eyes squeezed closed tight, tears still flowing, dripping onto his fingers. I didn’t make eye contact with him for weeks, afraid of what I’d see.

That’s what happened. And now Peter’s seen it too. I look away, jaw locked in fury and shame. That’s- that’s not me! That’s not who I am... anymore. I can’t meet Peter’s eyes, the overwhelming pity makes me want to cry and punch something.

I can’t- I can’t make this about me. This is about Robin. She’s in here somewhere, at the mercy of this sadistic thing, hiding somewhere out of sight!

“Robin? Robin where are you!?”

There’s that laugh, that familiar, cruel laugh again.

“Oh ho? No insults or comebacks? Seems like I’ve struck a nerve. And you think you’re so strong. But we both know you’re weak, don’t we?”

I take one-two-three giant gulping breaths in rapid succession. It’s taunting us, but I won’t be distracted. We’re close, so close, almost found her. Gotta keep her safe, I have to find her, doesn’t matter about me or Peter, nothing matters, gotta-

“Nathan. Nathan, look at me. You’re having a panic attack. Try to breathe slow and deep.”

Peter, he saw and now he knows what I am. This is all his fault but I can't, can't, can't breathe and everyone thinks I'm a failure, and I know Dad resents me and Robin's never liked me very much, and if it wasn't for the Disappearances Peter and I would have never met-

"Pete- Peter! I, ah! I can't!" I'm sucking in gasps of air, everything's so intense! It's all so bright and loud and at the same time, I'm floating above my body watching it all happen as he grabs my arm (Hot! Way too hot!) and sets me down at the kitchen table and placing his arm over my eyes. What? I thrash, but he holds firm.

"Nathan, focus on my voice. Can you do that?" Can I? It's so loud I can't hear my own thoughts, but that can't be true because I'm thinking so fast that even Robin would be impressed. I try. I try for him.

"K," I say. Even that letter is a monstrous effort.

"Good, good," he says, all gentle. He's always gentle when it counts. "What else can you hear?"

Nothing! It's all black emptiness, an endless humming that- Wait, I think that's actually the refrigerator.

"F-F-Fridge. It's hum-humming," I sputter, coming back into myself.

His grip loosens when he notices I'm not fighting and I'm less tense. "Anything else?"

There is something else. It's faraway, or maybe just quiet. You can kind of hear it all around us. How hadn't we noticed it before? It's a sloshing, a winding kind of slosh. Water. Running water. It's flowing from somewhere.

"W-Water," I say, annoyed at the stutter. We're both quiet for a moment. My breathing's slowed down. It's calm. We're okay. I'm okay. I touch Peter's arm and he lifts it. I know I should thank him, say something.

"That's never happened to me before." I think it comes out a little sheepish, like a sitcom character apologizing to their lover.

Peter shrugs. "Yes, well, you've probably never been literally forced to relive a trauma and then taunted about it before either. I've seen less cause worse."

Oh yeah, nurse training. I bet he's seen all kinds of crazy stuff. I should ask about it sometime. When we're not in the middle of a rescue attempt. I stand, he even offers me a hand up, but I shake my head. If I can do something myself, I always try to do it myself. Trying not to let what little autonomy I have left slip away.

"Still," Peter starts, thoughtful, "I'm a little worried."

"Yeah, join the club," I say, forcing a laugh that Peter, jerk, doesn't reciprocate. "What's on your mind?"

“Well, if the spirit wanted to hurt us, that would have been the perfect opportunity. You were extremely vulnerable, and I wasn't paying attention to anything else.”

That's a good point, actually. Nurse and detective, he's the full package. “I dunno. Should we really be upset that it didn't attack us? Maybe it was just enjoying watching and the chance slipped by.”

“Could... be.”

His brow is furrowed. If this were a mystery story, he'd be scratching his chin, lost in thought. I guess that makes me Watson. A sidekick in my own life, great.

“Well, as long as we're not going to be attacked we might as well press on, right? We'd do it regardless of whether we expected a fight or not.”

“That's true,” Peter concedes. “Where to next? I'd like to avoid any more unpleasant memories if we can.”

“Upstairs, I think,” I say. “That's where Robin was when I last saw her. Good as place as any to start. And, earlier, when you were telling me to listen and I heard water? I think the sound is coming from upstairs. We should check it out.”

Peter nods and points to the hallway, “Let's go.”

Chapter 14

The hallway wallpaper used to be green. You can still see uncorrupted patches here and there. But most of it's covered in black lines, like water droplets that have been smeared with ink. It's even dripped over the family photos, ones that must have contained images of Robin's smiling happy family. I wonder if they had any from after her dad Disappeared? Dad and I haven't hung one up since Mom died. Maybe we should. The stairs are even wetter than the wall. You can see a flow of liquid running down them, right down the center. It's pooling at the bottom and the pool branches off in every direction, through every doorway. Maybe... nah. It can't be that the water has been dripping *up* the walls. Can it? The shiver travels down my back involuntarily. Let's not think about that.

“Robin?” I call up the stairs. Peter shushes me. I roll my eyes. It's overcautious. “It's not like the spirit doesn't know where we are, Peter.”

There's no answer from Peter. Or Robin or the spirit, for that matter. No other option left, we head up the stairs, trying our best to avoid the still flowing river of black sludge. Peter's slyly taken the lead again. He hasn't let me go through a door first since we'd entered the hospital. I'm a little surprised he hasn't tried to leave me behind and forge on by himself. Just then Amelia makes a peep from on my shoulder. She's been unusually quiet, I'd nearly forgotten about her. Wait, she doesn't look so good! Her colors are less vivid, almost pale, and she's not giving off nearly as much light as before. Maybe she's sick. I mean, the air in here is pretty awful, it has this terrible deadness to it. The smell isn't so bad, kinda sweet, but it just feels... wrong.

“Amelia why don't you wait outside?” She peeps and nuzzles against my neck. Doesn't want to go. Aw, she's so cute. “Come on, you've done enough. Go on and rest.”

She's still for a moment, but before long she takes off, leaving a shimmering trail behind her. Peter's waiting for me at the top of the stairs. Well, not 'waiting for me' exactly, he's scouting the area. He flicks a switch and the upstairs hallway is illuminated. There's a white door in front of us. The stream of black is pretty clearly flowing out of it. I mean, there's no way Robin's in there, right? Any person in their right mind would stay as far away from this stuff as possible, not hang out around its source. But we can't discount the possibility she's in there. Maybe in trouble. She hadn't answered my call, after all. Peter's scowling. He's probably thinking along the same lines. He looks back at me and I nod. He grips the doorknob. I swallow. He thrusts it open and takes a step back, defensive, ready for anything. But there's nothing. Nothing immediately threatening, anyway. That was a lot easier than anticipated. I'd thought that at least the door would be locked. It looks like a normal bathroom. There's a small, square mirror over a sink that has a cup with two toothbrushes, bright pink and black. The black's Robin's, I'm sure. She wouldn't be caught dead with something as

flashy as fluorescent pink. The tub's old, one of those free standing one with four legs that have been designed to look like lions paws. No lion's head faucet, though. Guess that would have been a little much. Water sloshes out over the side. It's black. Yup, this is definitely the source of all that black that's all over the house.

“What the heck is this?” I ask. Weird black sludge coming from a bathtub? What are we supposed to make of that? Peter swallows thickly, biting his lip.

“I think-” he hesitates, “I think this is the scar.”

“The scar? The one from your... the dream?” I ask. “I thought that was in the hospital.”

“This *is* the hospital, did you forget?” Oh yeah. I kinda did forget. “And anyway, I don't think it matters what it looks like. It's a dream, so it's probably influenced by whatever's nearby. The spirit and Robin, in this case.”

So it's not water. It's blood. The blood of a world. Man, Teddy really shouldn't have messed with dreams like he did. I mean, I'm happy Peter's alive! But, still...

“Well, should we like, patch it up?”

Peter raises an eyebrow, “How?”

Stitches? A big band-aid? Or maybe we should just bring in a plumber, now that the scar is a bathtub. “I don't know,” I'm forced to admit.

“Well, Robin's not in here, obviously,” Peter says. “Let's deal with her before we start working on a project to fix the whole world.”

I'm feeling... petulant? Like we've seen a homeless man on the side of the road in winter and our excuse for not helping him is 'Well, he'll probably be here tomorrow'. I know it's more complicated than that, but even so. “Yeah... I guess.”

“Let's check out her room next,” Peter says. Yeah, that's a good idea. “You've been here before. Where is it?”

“Er, left at the top the stairs. So right from here,” I say. “Here, I'll show you.”

“Nathan, wait!”

Really, he's a lot like my dad. Super protective. Sometimes it's cute, but usually it's annoying. I'm not some ancient treasure that needs to be handled carefully. I can do things on my own! “Look Peter, I get where you're coming from but, come on! Give me some space to freaking breathe, okay!?”

I stalk off before he has a chance to reply. He isn't far behind, but he makes sure to keep some distance this time. Whatever, forget about him. There, the door. I jog up and grab the handle, looking forward to seeing Robin again after what feels like an eternity. The handle jiggles, but doesn't give.

“The door's locked,” I say to Peter, futilely messing with the handle to get it to open. I give up and start banging on the door instead. “Robin? Robin are you in there? If you can hear me, say something!” There's a muffle of sound. A voice! “Robin! Robin, open the door!”

“GO AWAY!”

Ow, my ears.

“What? Why? I've come to rescue you. We were talking through the bookmark, I thought you knew it was me!” I call through the door.

“But how do I know you're you?”

Huh? Oh, the spirit's been messing with her too, apparently. And for a long time. I suddenly feel a little nauseous thinking about what she must have gone through. If it was anything like what had happened to me downstairs, it would make sense that she's on edge. It's not fair on her, but I need to get in that room and she's not letting me. If I have to trick her, then so be it.

“Oh, okay, I guess I'll leave, then,” I say, stomping my feet loudly and then slowly softening my steps so it sounds like I'm walking away from the door. I wait, holding my breath. There's a pause. Is she coming to the do-

“How stupid do you think I am! You're definitely as dumb as the real Nathan.”

“Okay, ouch,” I say, “Even if I was a figment of your imagination, I'd still have feelings.”

There's a tap on my shoulder. Peter. He looks... unimpressed with my negotiating skills. “May I?” He asks with practiced neutrality. Alright, fine Mr. Hotshot, let's see you do better. He raps twice on the door. “Ms. Melling?”

“Who's that?”

“My name is Peter Daniels. I'm a police officer.”

“But- but we've never met before, have we?” she says, her voice much softer. “I thought the monster could only mimic people from my memories...” she sounds thoughtful, “No! I'm not going to be fooled. Maybe we met somewhere and I just don't remember. Or, or, maybe it can take the form of the people it made Disappear!”

Oh. She's figured out what's happening to her. That's impressive, considering she's been trapped in this house the whole time. Well, it's not all that surprising. It is Robin, after all.

Peter's nodding, “That's true. You shouldn't open the door until you feel certain you can trust us.” What! Don't say that! Robin is like the least trusting person in the world, she'll never let us in now. “Now, can I ask how you've managed to keep yourself safe from the spirit? The, ah, monster? And before you say no, may I point out that the monster would already know how you've done it? Telling me won't impact your situation negatively.”

He's speaking awfully formally all of a sudden. That's how he spoke during our interviews,

now that I think about it. Dad always went for a warmer sort of vibe. I wonder if they teach you interrogation personas at the academy. We wait a few moments for Robin's response.

“It's my bookmark, the one my dad made for me. Nathan handed it to me before we got separated. It repels the shadow, but I'm not sure why, yet.” Her voice is much closer, she's standing in front of the door now, I can tell. It's a little muffled, but we can basically speak normally. “It couldn't touch me while I had it. Eventually I just stuck it to the door and it hasn't been able to bother me since.”

Whoa, smart. That's, like, barrier magic. Teddy had said that his soul or whatever repelled the spirit like a magnet. I hadn't figured that out until he'd mentioned it and Robin had managed to do it with considerably less resources. If she hadn't, then- no, don't think about that. She's here. We can still save her. Assuming Peter gets us through that door.

“Okay, okay, good. In other words, the spirit can't mess with the bookmark, right?” Peter says. “I need you to send a message. The same way you did with Nathan.”

“Send a message? To who?”

“Me and Nathan are asleep. There's someone watching over us. He has the bookmark, the physical one, I mean. There's one for each plane of existence.” She's quiet for a long while. “Ms. Melling, you've sent a couple of messages already. Nothing about your safety or anything else will change if you send another, right? They didn't last time.”

There's a clunk. “Robin?” I say. She sighs. Oh, I recognize that one. She's exasperated. Not surprising, she hates changing her mind.

“What's the message.”

“Show me your eye. An actual eye will appear on the surface of the bookmark,” Peter says. Oh! So that's what he's up to. That's clever; I never would have thought to do that. Not that I'll say so in front of these two, they'd just tease me.

“Show me your eye!” she says, slowly, making sure to get the words right. Another silence. She gasps, then- “Ugh, that's so gross.”

“You can see it, right?” Peter's saying. “There's no way the monster could have known about our contact in the real world or that that phrase would make an eye appear. So we have to be telling the truth! It really is Nathan and a friend.”

I shiver, feel the weight of something on my back. I turn around.

“Um, Peter...?”

It's there. The shadow man. Or, a man cloaked in darkness. Because even though the hallway is bright, we've definitely turned on the lights, I can't make him out. That side of the hallway is completely black. I can only see a man-like silhouette. Peter curses.

“Ms. Melling, decisive action would be appreciated!” Peter says, banging on the door. When it doesn't open immediately, he shoves me behind him, slamming me into the door, leaning on me hard, making sure to stand between me and it. It's laughing; I can hear the cruelty in its tone. This is it. It's going to kill us!

“Robin, please!” I scream, even as both Peter and I lean harder against the door, trying to phase through the wood. It's nearly on us, about to kill us both. That's what I'm thinking, when the door clicks, every bit as joyful a sound as an angel's trumpet. It's a little less joyful when we both fall through the door and straight backwards as soon as it's open. Something soft cushions my fall, but I don't have time to wonder what. Peter's literally falling on top of me. We'd been pressed together pretty tight, putting a lot of momentum into the no longer closed door. With it gone we'd both flown through. It's like some strong force launched us into Robin. Peter's elbow cracks into my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. I think I knee Robin in the thigh. I'm coughing so much I can barely think. Luckily, even though she's also lost her balance and is tangled up with me, she hasn't been hit too hard. She still has her wits.

“The door!” she cries.

Peter's on it, up in a flash, slamming it and immediately getting blasted backwards, like the spirit's pushed him. I hadn't seen it, but it must have been there, there's no other reason for Peter to go flying like that. My vision must be messed up from the tumble, but it's unsettling. The shadow man had been right behind us, I'm sure of it, but I hadn't seen it in the instant before the door closed. I want to check on Robin, but I can't do much more than cough. There's a hand on my back, rubbing gently. I want it to be Robin, but I'm pretty sure it's Peter. The nurse can't help himself, after all. I stand. We're not where I'd expected.

We're on the edge of a clearing, on all sides of us is a forest. Thick pine trees form a ring around the clearing, with smaller bushes laden with red berries filling the gaps between the trees. There's juniper, yes, but nightshade and raspberries too. Do raspberries even grow in the winter? Better not eat anything, just in case. My stomach growls, displeased. I haven't eaten anything substantial for practically a whole day. No time. The smell of pine is thick. The clearing is probably a meadow in the spring and summer, but it's barren now. There's a sense of emotion here too, like the other memories. Joy, so much that it feels unnatural, synthetic. Kind of like the memories in the kitchen. But no little vignette is playing in front of me. Memory or not? It feels like a halfway point between memory and dream. In the center is the door we'd just collapsed through. It's standing free, just like the one from the hospital to Robin's house. And there, taped to the center is the bookmark, just like she'd said. It's glowing faintly, like Amelia when she was sick. A gentle snowfall is slowly building on what's already on the ground. Judging from how deep it is, up past my ankles, it's

probably been falling for awhile. Ah. That's what broke my fall. Robin's a couple of yards away, having backed away from the door. I trip and fall face first into the snow. It's all over my hair and face. I don't care. I get closer, I have to see her, how she is. She crosses her arms over her chest, defensive. Okay, no hug, then.

One of her glasses lenses is cracked, that's the first thing I notice. Her hair is somehow both frayed and wet. She's in her usual librarian style clothes, but they've seen better days. Huge patches are covered in mud, some parts are dissolved. She's wearing tights, or she was. They're pretty much just one big run now. Her skin is pale, no, a worse word, pallid. Peter is pale. This is sickly. Poor Robin, it must have been hell. But I can see puffs of white air coming from her mouth as she breathes. She's alive. I can barely keep the smile off my face. Has it really only been a few days? It feels like it's been weeks since I've seen her. I want to crush her into me, hold her tight and reassure myself that she's really here. That same warm feeling in my chest, the same need to impress her that makes me act like a fool against my better judgment, is still there. There's so much I want to say. I missed you. Did you miss me?

“I-”

“I'm Peter Daniels,” Peter interrupts. Oh. I'd almost forgotten he was there. He's smiling, but it's tight, professional. “It's nice to meet you after hearing so much about you.”

Robin raises an eyebrow at me and I shrug. It's not like I said anything bad. She lets out one of her classic sighs and shakes Peter's outstretched hand. He shakes her hand once, then lets go. He seems unfocused, dazed even. It's not like him. He's staring at the ground like he can't bear to meet our eyes. What's his problem? I'm so relieved to see her, I forget to be annoyed.

“Robin Melling. Okay, so what's the plan?” She asks. There's a pause. She pinches the bridge of her nose. This time it does annoy me a little. “You idiots don't have one. Of course you don't.”

“Look, I'm not expecting you to throw a party for me or anything, but I did sort of put my life at risk to save you so maybe you could stop calling me stupid to my face!”

“Well you are stupid! Instead of just me being trapped here, it's all three of us.”

Her scream echoes across the empty, frozen meadow. She starts pacing.

“I knew you liked me. I should have discouraged you, turned you down, but I didn't. I didn't hate the attention. And it would've been too much trouble to deal with your hurt puppy dog eyes. And now, because I didn't- Oh God. You're going to Disappear with me. I've killed you.”

Her shoulders shake as she turns away. She's trying to stay quiet, but it's pretty hard to hide crying in the complete silence of the meadow. I've been blaming myself for getting her into this, and now she's doing the exact same thing. But she's wrong, it's not her fault at all! It's... mine... isn't it?

Robin's being really self-absorbed and unreasonable, putting all the blame on herself when it's not even remotely her fault. Face to face with her, it's hard not to see the parallels to myself. I blame myself for the spirit taking her, sure, but I still think the accident's my fault too. Even though I'd heard the story about Teddy and Peter. And I'd blamed myself for every little bad thing that had happened to my family ever since. Even when it's pretty obvious that Dad isn't holding any grudges. He loves me. If Robin's words hurt this much, then I must be hurting the people around me twice as much as I'm hurting myself.

Iris had said that I should be careful with my attempts to save Robin. That trying to help doesn't always end positively. I mean, she's living proof of that herself. I didn't get it then, didn't care to get it. There's a burning, prickly sensation in my nose that spreads to my eyes. Who have I been kidding? I'd done everything for her, just to impress her, in the hope that she'd come to like me as much as I like her. A small couple of tears sink from my face into the snow. I'm so uncool. So lame! I've been so selfish. Who- I mean who thinks like that? It's borderline psychotic. And I'm going to die for it. I'll deserve it. I-I-

“Who says we don't have a plan?” Peter says. The meadow feels like it stops. Me and Robin turn to stare at him. What- What's that look on his face? He's- he's smiling so gently. He's always been gentle, but every time he's smiled it's been, like, a smirk, or a grin. I've never seen him like this. But even still, it's a horrible face. Absolutely terrible. Because he's got Mona Lisa eyes. Eyes that you think might burst into tears the second you look away.

“Do you really?” Robin says, suspicious but with an undercurrent of hope.

Peter nods. I'm not buying it, Peter. You're hiding something. Robin's buying it, though. She's desperate to buy it.

“But I'm worried about something.”

“What's that?” Robin asks, perking up at the thought of something she can worry about. The girl loves a good worry.

“Why we made it here in the first place. It could have attacked us at any point while we were looking for you. In the hallway, for example, it waited until Nathan saw it to attack. And it only attacked us psychologically in the kitchen. Why?”

I'm stumped, but at least I'm not alone because Robin looks puzzled too. “I'm guessing you have a theory?” Robin asks.

Peter's face scrunches, “Well, I could be wrong, but it felt like it was herding us. Driving us here, you know, like it wanted us to find Robin. I think it expects us to try to leave and take Robin with us. As a way of breaking their deadlock. It thinks the bookmark can't protect all of us. And it might be right.”

Is it? I stare at the bookmark, taped to the door. Looking at it... it's different from the one in the real world. Ours doesn't glow, obviously. But- something nags at me. Something's changed since the last time I saw it; I take a few steps towards it. Peter's watching the two of us, observing. He's holding himself tight, like he expects to have to run at any minute.

"Well, that's a little unsettling, but it doesn't really change anything, does it?" Robin's saying. "Both groups achieved their short term goals. We still need to leave and it still doesn't want us to, whether it was planned or not."

"That's true," Peter replies. I'm barely listening. I'm no good at that kind of analysis anyway. But noticing little details; I can do that. Okay, mostly about people close to me, like Dad or Robin or Peter, but still. Once I notice something I'm not the kind of person who can ignore it. Our bookmark is crisp white, shiny, though not shining. This one's dull. Kinda grey-ish. Why?

"Oh, while we're on the subject. What the heck are these bookmarks? I have a super clear memory of my dad giving it to me, but the shadow pointed out some inconsistencies that I can't figure out. I- I had kind of thought he was protecting me. Watching over me, you know?" She laughs, the tone is just a little too high pitched, "I guess that was silly."

Peter sighs, on the hook for Teddy's meddling yet again. He'd explained how the bookmarks work, but it's hard to explain. At the moment, I'm more interested in the bookmark in front of me.

"I don't think it's silly. Anyone would have thought something similar. I had some questions for you too, actually," Peter says, neatly sidestepping Robin's question about the nature of the bookmark. Yeah. Don't know how we're going to explain that one. "Isn't this supposed to be your bedroom?"

"Oh," Robin says, "the monster can change the architecture in the house how it wants. It used this clearing to try to trick me. I used to come here with my dad when I was little... Um, Nathan, what are you doing?"

I'm touching the bookmark, rubbing it between my fingers. It's wet, the ink looks stained. "Look at this. I think the bookmark's weakening."

"What!?" Robin and Peter say in unison. Robin rushes over, but Peter keeps his distance from us. He's being weird, but it's not like I have time to hassle him about it. Robin shoulder barges me to get a better view. She touches it.

"See?" I say. "Isn't it less bright than when I first gave it to you? It's definitely fading, like Amelia was earlier."

"Who's Amelia?"

"My spirit animal. She's a rainbow swallow." Robin stares at me, thinking. "What?"

"You used to go on and on about Amelia Earhart."

“That was one time! I mean, she vanished into- Never mind. The point is, I don't think we have a lot of time. I'm guessing something about this place or the spirit, is inherently corrupting. Peter, what should we do?” His hand is over his mouth and he's staring at the ground again. It's not like him. He's supposed to be assured, take situations by the horns and figure out what to do. His behavior's starting to scare me. “Peter, what's wrong?”

“Huh? Oh! Nothing, Nathan. Sorry.”

He's not very convincing.

“Given that our barrier is breaking down, we should make use of it while we can. Let's use it to make a run for it.”

“That's your plan?” Robin scoffs. I might have scoffed myself if she hadn't gotten there first. It's not a very elaborate tactic.

“Hey, just because it's simple, doesn't make it a bad plan,” Peter says. “This isn't Scooby-Doo; the ghost isn't just a guy in a costume we can capture with a trap. Call it a tactical retreat if that makes you feel better.”

“Okay but, assuming that we make it out of here alive and back to the real world, what's to stop the shadow from just coming after us again?” Robin asks. It's a good point.

“I have an idea about that, but we'll need to coordinate with Teddy.”

Why would we need to- Oh! I see. That's... an idea.

“Are you sure that'll work? The bookmarks exist in two different worlds. Is there even a physical space between them?”

“That's one thing I want to ask Teddy. He'll know best.”

“What the heck are you guys talking about!/? Who's this Teddy? And 'bookmarks'? As in plural?” Ah, right. Robin doesn't have the same information of us. She's normally so far ahead of me that it's kind of sad, but she's been basically fighting for her life this whole time. It's no wonder theoretical concepts we'd had explained to us aren't making sense to her.

“Well, I'm simplifying here, but there's a bookmark here and in the real world. Peter's saying that both bookmarks create barriers that repel the spirit. They're basically movable walls. He wants to smash the two walls together with the spirit in-between. If I have that right, Peter?”

“Yes, exactly,” Peter confirms.

Robin looks between the two of us. She's probably wildly uncomfortable with being the least knowledgeable person in the room.

“Just... trust us. Please.”

We lock eyes. I try to communicate something to her. Sincerity or maybe faith. If Peter says something's the best plan, it usually is. This is what's best for now. She finally nods, a tiny motion,

after a minute of tense silence.

“Okay, then,” Peter says, taking charge. I'm happy to let him, but Robin's clearly uncomfortable relinquishing control, “if the spirit's after Robin, I think Nathan should take the bookmark and lead, followed by Robin, then me. Keep her protected, yeah?”

Peter wants *me* to go through the door first? After he spent the whole first half of this little expedition acting like a nervous parent, checking every door before I walked through? No. This is ridiculous! He's definitely hiding something. But I don't know what it is and I can't call him out after I just told Robin to trust us. She's quirked her eyebrows, sensing my hesitancy. I grab the bookmark and rip it off the door. Neither Robin or Peter are looking at me. They're both lost in thought. I guess the both of them are thinkers at heart. They like to take their time and consider every possible angle. I'm a do-er. Well, before the accident I was. Not sure now.

“Are you guys ready?”

Peter's head snaps up and he nods.

“Oh, yeah,” Robin says, “just figuring some things out. Let's go.”

She turns the door handle slowly. There's a series of impossibly loud clicks as its mechanisms go into motion. They weren't always this loud, were they? She pushes the door.

Chapter 15

The door doesn't open too far, but it's enough to see into the hallway. There's nothing there. Well, no spirit. It's a little dark, but I can just make out the end. It's not here for the moment.

“What are you figuring out?” I ask as the three of us tread carefully through the door. It goes me, holding the bookmark out like a totem, which I guess it is, then followed closely by Robin, who would probably be holding on to my shirt or something if she had less pride, and finally Peter. He's some distance away. A couple of feet. Seems risky. We don't know how far the barrier extends. It's probably not very far at all.

“The spirit's goal. Like, why is it bothering to make people Disappear and play with their minds and all that?”

I thought for moment. That's a good question. “Well, I thought it was its nature. Like it had always messed with people but it'd gotten way more effective recently... for some reason.” Me and Peter know the reason but we haven't told Robin yet. Now's really not the time.

“I think it's a means to an end. I think it wants to come to the real world.”

“What makes you think that?” I ask.

She hums, taking a moment to arrange her thoughts. We're moving at a snail's pace. This isn't how I imagined we'd be 'making a run for it' but it's dark and creepy in this house and I don't want to run into any traps. But we've encountered very little resistance the whole time we've been here, mind games aside. It's putting me on edge.

“Some things that were said to me while it was trying to trick me; I think when it takes people it experiences life like humans do. Emotions, hunger, pain, pleasure. Things like that. But obviously the connection doesn't last long. You've seen what that black stuff does, imagine what it does to your heart or kidneys.”

Robin and I reach the staircase and start down, Peter's straggling, staring at something behind us. The spirit? No, he'd raise the alarm.

“What are you saying Robin?”

“I'm just theorizing, but maybe it doesn't want to hurt us, it wants to come with us.”

Before I can answer, a door creaks open. Robin and I turn, slowly. Peter's standing in front of the bathroom; the door is swaying slightly, opening wider. He's leaning forward, like he'd like to take a step towards it, but he's not. He's just... leaning.

“Dammit,” he says. “Dammit!”

“Officer Daniels?” Robin calls, clearly afraid to go up to him. I don't blame her. It's really, really ominous. He doesn't answer. I'm too afraid to ask anything. This is related to what he's been acting weird about. I don't think I want to know. She tries again. “What's wrong?”

His shoulders are shaking, he draws in a deep, steadying breath, and then breathes out, sounding shuddery. Robin gasps and elbows me in the shoulder, pointing to his feet. It's only noticeable because we're on the stairs and he's not, but there's ink on his shoes. A black oily looking substance that- It's moving. It's moving up his leg, fast. That can only mean one thing.

“How long have you known?” I ask.

He glances over his shoulder at me. His face is red, straining with effort. It's not that he won't turn around, it's that he can't. Or is desperately fighting not to.

“I,” he winces as the sludge touches the skin of his ankles, “figured it out pretty soon after the door sent me flying when I closed it.”

Robin adjusts her glasses. “Because the bookmark repels the monster and the monster had attached itself to you.”

“Yes. That's right, Ms. Melling. Nathan's right to credit your intelligence.”

In any other situation I'd probably blush, but I can feel the blood draining from my face.

“And then I noticed I had two shadows. And that one was darker than the other. Not hard to put it together after that. So I thought of a plan to kill it, but it noticed what I was doing when I opened the bathroom door. It won't be long until it takes me over. I can't feel my legs. I'm sorry, Nathan. I'm so sorry!”

Is- he's not crying, right? His sorries come out so watery. Peter's like the stoic, all-American hero type. He can't be crying because if he's crying, then-

“I-It's okay, it's not your fault. We just gotta figure this out. I mean we can figure it out, can't we!?” Robin puts her hand on my shoulder. Her eyes are shining. No, I don't want that! I shake her hand off. “The bookmark! If we use the bookmark we can-”

“Nathan,” Robin says, shaking her head. “The bookmark's weak. Unless I'm mistaken it'll just push Officer Daniels away from it, like when it blew him away from the door.”

“I think you're right again, Ms. Melling.”

Stop acting like you aren't scared! “Then- then-!” I don't know! This is usually the part where one of them would have an idea.

“What was your real plan? The one to destroy the monster?”

There's a silence. Robin's question hangs in the air, gathering power with every second it's not answered. All answers are like that. The longer between question and answer, the more magnitude it has. I wish he'd answer quickly. I wish he was able to answer quickly. His eventual answer is hesitant, unlike him.

“I need you, Nathan.” Something's odd about his voice. It's echoing.

“Of course. Anything! Just tell me.”

Robin winces. Can't meet my eyes anymore. What? What am I missing?

"I... need you to use the bookmark to push me, us, into the scar. Back where we both came from."

"No." The response is instant. I've never processed anything so quickly, but you don't need a lot of thinking time when the answer's so obvious. Obviously I'm not doing that.

"Nathan—"

"I said no! That could kill you!"

"Yes." He admits, saying it like it's nothing. It's not nothing to me. "But I already died, Nathan. I shouldn't be here, you know that. Both me and the spirit are like an infection. We're corrosive to the world. We're breaking both dreams and reality down."

"That's the spirit! That has nothing to do with you!"

"If that was true before, it's definitely not true now," he says, finally turning to us. It's my turn to gasp. His clothes are soaking wet, covered in the black ink of the spirit. Droplets fall from his fingertips like they can make rain. One eye is black and soulless, alien. The other is quickly darkening. And his voice is definitely echoing. His is still there but it's sounding weaker, while the deeper, darker voice gains strength. He doesn't have long.

"Please, Nathan. I don't want to die like the Disappeared did. It must be an awful way to go. Already I can't see very well. And I'm in a lot of pain and it's getting worse."

My hand shakes and my eyes burn. I hold the bookmark forward and step onto the landing, Robin right behind me. This pushes him back into the bathroom. The spirit fights every step. Its movement is jerky, Peter's steps backwards unnatural. He's close to the tub. He's smiling; the freak is smiling! How can he smile in a situation like this? I'm about to kill him! It won't take much to... to end it. If he gets possessed, he'll live for awhile, won't he? Me and Robin, Teddy, and Iris can regroup, figure this out, get back to dreams and save him, right? We don't have to kill him. He can sense me hesitating.

"Nathan! I know you want to believe there's another way, but there isn't. I should never have come back. This is the way it was always meant to go. Do it now! "

"Peter, I can't!"

He probably thinks I mean 'won't' instead of 'can't', but I really can't, my arm is shaking and my knees are locked ramrod straight. Please. Please don't make me do this!

He smiles, a genuine smile. He's grateful. That I can't kill him, like he didn't expect that to be the case. How could he think otherwise? How dare he think I'd feel any other way about him! A hand closes around my wrist. Robin. Her face is set, grimly. Determined. She looks at me, clear-eyed, steeled, like an incarnation of Artemis, the Huntress. She lends me her strength, her

determination to do what we have to. I draw something up from deep inside me. Courage, the self-preservation instinct, or love, I don't know what. But it gives me the strength to nod at her. She grips my wrist tighter. And together we thrust the bookmark forward, even as the black tries to move Peter's body towards us. We step forward, forcing him back. Robin had been right; the bookmark's light isn't strong enough to banish the spirit from his body. Peter must have realized that when I figured out the bookmark had lost strength. That's when he came up with his 'tactical retreat' plan. He was planning on throwing himself into the scar. He'd have killed himself to save the world. Maybe he did it for me and Robin. Or maybe he did it out of guilt for his role in the Disappearances. I'll never have the chance to ask.

“Peter...” I'm crying and can't say anything more. Hell, I can barely see through my tears. Robin's trembling. He nods. I think he heard what I was trying to say. I hope so.

Together, we take that final step and Peter mirrors us, legs hitting the lip of the tub, hard. He winces. His balance is off kilter. Instinctively, he tries to right himself, but he can't. The bookmark's basically a wall, like we said. There's nowhere for him to go but backwards. He falls in. It's... anti-climactic. There isn't a big splash. There's no thrashing. No tortured cries from Peter or the spirit. He just... slips away with a small sploosh. And then it's quiet, like he never existed in the first place.

We wait there for awhile, me sitting on the toilet seat and Robin standing in the doorway. She clearly wants to say something but doesn't know what. I'm not sure if we're waiting for me to get over my shock or on the slim chance that Peter comes back. But he doesn't, the tub doesn't make so much as a gurgle. Except that it's stopped overflowing. Bleeding. Like it's finally getting a chance to heal. Maybe Peter had been right after all. Forgive me if I can't be happy about it. Time breathes. Are we there for an hour or five minutes? I don't know, but eventually I feel a tugging. A brightness in my chest. My hand goes to it automatically.

“Nathan? What's wrong?” It's the first I've moved since I sat down, no wonder she's concerned. I'm not sure how to answer her, I don't really know what's going on- Ah! The tugging gets stronger and the room starts to melt away.

“I think I'm waking up.”

“You are? What about me!”

“Here,” I say, standing up and grabbing her hands and putting them around my waist, “hold tight. Hopefully we'll go together. No promises, though.”

It's all mechanical, forced. Very little emotion seeps into my voice. An hour ago, nothing would have thrilled me more than this. But it all feels empty without Peter. Her arms might as well be lead, not warm flesh and it feels like there's a thick sheet of it between her heart and mine. The tugging gets stronger and stronger and I press her into my chest. After all this, it's not like I can risk

leaving her behind. But, yeah, I'm definitely going through the motions. I'm not really feeling it. Her. She grips me tight and presses her face in close. The colors swirl together more and more, blending into a bright white light that envelops us.



Chapter 16

I woke staring at a white ceiling, arms curved, folded over themselves in an empty hug. The dull pain that my scars always sent through my body had come back. It was bright, stingingly so. The curtains were drawn. What kinds of birds were those chirping in the distance? I wasn't sure. Definitely not swallows, I would have recognized Amelia-like squawks. I threw my arms over my eyes, trying to shut out the world. I wanted to turn over and have Peter lying there next to me. I turned, then chanced opening my eyes. Nothing. A snuffle came from behind me, making me jump. It was Teddy. He was sitting in a chair, the eye that was uncovered by the patch was red and both cheeks were wet. Snot was dribbling down his nose which he was trying to stem with his sleeve.

"I felt him go," Teddy said. "I brought him back. I can always tell where he is, if I reach out for him. Always. And now he's... nowhere. He's gone, isn't he?"

I nodded stiffly. "He went through the scar with the spirit." There was an aching emptiness in my heart, sucking away at everything, making the world gray and flat. Just recently it had felt like I'd seen colors brighter and more vibrant than any rainbow, flaming red hair, glowing swallows, Teddy's eye. That was all gone. It was all... normal, I guess, but it felt like being color-blind. Maybe it was a side-effect of the scar healing. But who cares? Peter won't come back. Maybe I managed to save Robin, but- Wait! Had I even saved her? If I failed at that too-!

"Where's Robin? I was trying to bring her with me."

He looked confused, like he couldn't remember who she was for a moment. The person we'd done all this for. Well, the person I'd done it for. I was pretty sure Teddy had done it for Peter. To make up for the Disappearances? To look heroic in front of him? Then he frowned, closed his eye as if listening for something.

"Ms. Melling... isn't in dreams. I don't think so at least," Teddy said. "If I had to guess, she probably woke up where she Disappeared. Why don't you call her? I bet she's confused... yeah, you call her and I'll- I guess I'll get you something to eat. You've been asleep for more than twelve hours, after all." What was it about his commitment to domesticity that suddenly seemed so horrifying?

I got through half a ring before- "Nathan?" Thank the spirits of heaven and earth or whatever it is shamans pray to. At least she'd made it. At least her. It didn't matter if she'd never like me back. I couldn't even begin to care about that.

"Yeah, it's me. Are you okay? Where are you?"

"I'm fine. Famished, though. I'm in the alleyway, the one with the graffiti. I think I startled a cat."

"You what?"

“When I woke up there was this yowling. I must have just materialized suddenly and surprised it. I wonder if I made a sound?” That's like Robin, try to analyze the event, break it down. She'd be fine. “What about you, are you okay?”

“I'm fine.” The tone was disastrously flat, so I tried again, “I'm fine!”

It sounded like I was practicing in a mirror. Not convincing. Peter was- He's- Teddy couldn't even sense him. 'Dead' or 'gone' at the end of the day, they meant the same thing. I wanted to see him, talk to him, have him tease me. I know Peter had thought he was an idealized copy of the real Peter, but the Peter I met was real, he was my friend and I never even told him that. My head hurt and I felt tired. Sleeping too long in a drug-induced coma will do that to you. I missed something Robin was saying.

“I'm sorry, say that again?”

“I asked what you're going to do.”

“Oh.” The thought hadn't crossed my mind. It was hard enough getting through each moment, like being stuck in an iron maiden, let alone planning the future. “Well, what are you going to do?”

“I'm going home. My mom's probably attempting to mobilize the army to aid the search effort as we speak.” A joke. I was supposed to laugh, but I didn't. It created an uncomfortable moment between us. She could still joke because she hadn't known him. There was very little connecting them and it wasn't surprising she couldn't hold him in her heart the way I could. But it was still hard not to hold it against her. He'd gone to save her, after all. A little gratitude wouldn't hurt. I turned to the window. The sunlight hurt my eyes, so I leaned back on the pillow and closed them. “Anyway, I'm trying to come up with a good excuse for why I've been gone.”

“Whatcha got so far?” I asked.

“I'm thinking I'll tell my mom I ran away from home. Too much pressure from college applications. Pretty good, right?” she said, sounding pleased with herself.

“Honestly, it's pretty bad, Robin.” Unusually harsh for me in general, but especially towards her.

“Is...it?” She said, trying to navigate my tone. I felt a flicker of guilt, so I softened my reply.

“Yeah, cause you were a Disappearance victim. You don't have to convince your mom, you've got to convince the police department. If you say you ran away from home they'll want to know where, for how long, who saw you, what you did, everything. You'll slip up somewhere and then it'll just blow up into this huge thing.”

“I suppose you're right. Any advice, Mr. Experienced Liar?”

I was. To Dad, myself, just about everyone now. I didn't feel like lying to Peter. Well, not by

the end. I wanted him to know the truth of me and I wanted to know him in turn.

“Just tell them you can't remember anything. You were there one minute then next thing you know, a few days later, you're back. It's basically just a heavily cut down version of the truth. No details to get tripped up on.”

“I guess that works.”

I thought about offering to go with her. Walk her through everything, keeping the story on track, but my presence would just raise questions, it'd be too coincidental that we were together. Anyway, she was smart, she'd be fine as long as she stuck to the story and didn't pull anyone for the interview like Peter- like Dad, who could smell a liar a mile off. A loud thump came from outside the room. Instinctively I looked, but the door was shut.

“Look, Robin I've gotta go. I need to face my own parental firing squad.”

She laughed, just a little. “Sure. See you at Talisman?”

I frowned. Right, work. Peter's presence would linger there for me. I wasn't sure I was ready to go back to where we'd spent such an intense time together. I'm no doctor, but even I could tell my emotions were muted. I think most people would expect me to be wailing and tearing at my clothes like an ancient Greek widow, given I could be emotional at the best of times. It was shock, obviously. It was pretty lucky it hadn't triggered a second panic attack.

“Yeah, probably.” There was another thump. I hung up, letting that last comment serve as a 'goodbye'. Me and Robin. Not sure where we stood, but I could hardly think about that. There again! Another thump. Curiosity had not been my friend lately, but I couldn't help it. I shivered at seeing the hallway. It was built in the same style as Robin's dream house. The stairs cut through the middle of the floor and divided it into wings. At least this one was brightly lit. And wasn't the home of an insane spirit. “Teddy?”

No reply. But nothing seemed amiss. I mean, if Teddy hadn't made the sound then there's only one place it could have come from. Iris' room. I took two steps towards the door to her bedroom and- Bang! That had been loud, something falling. If it wasn't her, then something was in there causing a heck of a racket. Okay, no time for hesitation. It wasn't a dream, it was the real world. Peter would have already leapt into action; I could honor his memory by doing at least that much! I ran for the door and opened it, proud of my barely trembling fingers. The courage was weak and temporary, I was already regretting my haste as I turned the knob, but it was too late to back down.

“Nathan?” Teddy's voice floated from downstairs. He sounded concerned, but I ignored him. There she was, gaunt and emaciated, gray skin and waxy black hair, pale lips with very little color left in them. Her eyes narrowed and unfocused. It had been some medical equipment that had fallen

over. She must have disturbed it somehow when she woke up. Iris had been in her dream coma for a long time and hadn't woken up. But all of a sudden- Peter. His sacrifice. He'd been right, it really was starting to heal the world. Finally Iris' soul and her body could reunite.

“Iris?”

Her eyes snapped to me. Her head lolled a little. No surprise, her muscles must have been incredibly weak, even with great physical therapy. Trust me, I knew.

“Nat-? Ship-?” She gurgled. It wasn't much, but it was something. People don't just suddenly wake up from comas and then everything's fine. It can take weeks to get on a normal sleep/wake cycle, and then months or years of speech or physical therapy on top of that to fully recover. Some never did, especially in severe cases like Iris'. She laid back down and closed her eyes. I called to her and her eyes fluttered but didn't open.

“Iris!” I had no idea if that was normal. Could she be having a seizure or something?

“Teddy! Teddy, up here, in Iris' room!”

There was a crash and a series of thumps as Teddy raced up the stairs and down the hall. He all but shoved me out of the way in order to get to her side as quickly as possible. He righted the equipment that had fallen and began checking her vitals, asking me questions. “What happened?” “Well, what did she say?” “You called out to her? How did she react?” It went on like that for awhile. Eventually he said that he needed to call an ambulance and get her to a real hospital, which I agreed was probably the best thing for her. Hopefully she'd come all the way back. Teddy strongly hinted that it would be better if I wasn't here when the paramedics arrived. I mean, he was right, it was true I'd only add to the confusion, but... first Robin in the alleyway, and then Iris' house. It seemed like there was no shortage of places where it'd be better if I wasn't. Were there any places that would be better if I *was* there? I couldn't think of any. Maybe home, if only to delay Dad's impending coronary. When Robin resurfaced, he was going to hear about it pretty fast. If she came back and he didn't know where I was, he'd go into panic mode for sure. I probably should have called him, let him know I was okay. But... I don't know. He would have come picked me up. Insisted. And I wanted the walk to myself.

We'd done it. We'd saved Robin. I could see her frowning and spouting off interesting facts and smiling (rarely) anytime I wanted (within reason). Not only that, but Peter had taken the spirit down with him, so he'd prevented who knows how many deaths. Countless. And on top of all that, it'd brought Iris back from her half-death. All things considered, I'd gotten more than what I'd set out for. And the only price that had been paid was Peter. A man who shouldn't have even been alive; who himself believed didn't have a right to exist.

The weather was still hot. I bet some lazy reporter had called it heatwave to add some drama

to the forecast, even though it was just normal summer sun. I tried to empty my mind, focus on my steps, putting one foot in front of the other, trying to ignore the sweat as it started to pour out from my skin and irritate my scars. The dream world had been scary, sure, but at least there weren't scars there. It worked a little too well. It was a surprise when I almost bumped headfirst into my own house. Muscle memory, I guessed.

My hand hesitated over my front doorknob. Dad would be waiting inside. Probably should have spent some of that walk thinking of an explanation. An excuse, at least. I wondered for a second if Dad would slap handcuffs on me and toss me into jail so he'd be able to keep track of me. I let myself smile, just a little. I'd made things tough on him in the last few days. The last few years. I'd have to apologize. A lot. And maybe tell him about Peter. In vague terms, obviously.

"Hello?" I called, the door creaking.

"Nathan?"

Dad rounded the corner from the kitchen, still holding a drying towel, which he promptly dropped when he saw me.

"Dad..." the voice came out watery. Dad practically sprinted at me, instantly wrapping me in his arms. I hugged back. Lightly at first, so hard my side started protesting the pressure. I ignored it. If it knocked me to the ground, so be it. I was having this. He was shaking. Just enough for it to be perceptible. "Dad."

"Nathan," he said with a deep relief, like he was Atlas finally having the world lifted off his shoulders. "Oh son. You know I love you, right?"

I'd always known that. I wanted to tell him that I'd always known, that it was blindingly obvious. This was just the first time since the accident I'd let myself FEEL it. The words stuck in my throat, though, so I just nodded.

I cried. I cried for Mom, Teddy, Iris, Robin, myself, and Peter. It lasted a long time. I think I might have tried to tell Dad about Peter, but it came out unintelligible. I got frustrated, which just made me cry harder, but he just shushed me and patted my head, tightening his grip a little, which I hadn't thought possible.

Man, what a crybaby, definitely got that from Mom; Dad had been the stoic one. I tried really hard to accept what he was giving me, his sad smile, his unconditional love, without expectation. And when that didn't feel bad, when it actually felt incredible, I tried, a little bit, just for a moment, to believe that I deserved it.

Robin, Nathan, and Peter

Two weeks after everything happened, the bell chimed and like Pavlov's dog, my head snapped from the book I was appraising to the door. I was already chastising myself when my brain registered who it was.

“Hey Robin,” he said, shifting his feet, looking uncomfortable.

Nathan looked okay, actually. Better than I expected. Maybe a little paler than usual, but it didn't seem like he'd stopped eating or anything. But I recognized the cloud that hung over him. It's the same one my family had. An afterimage of death. Happened when you lose someone close to you. Something shifts and those with it recognize others of their kind. He was wearing an orange t-shirt, brown shorts and sandals. I'd never seen him wear sandals before. He caught me staring and tried to hide one foot behind the other. It was cute. My heart started beating. Fast. Was I anxious because I hadn't seen him in awhile and we had a lot to talk about?

“My muscle coordination on my left side isn't so good, so sandals are kind of hard to wear. But it's too hot for anything else today,” he explained.

Okay, big revelation. Well, not revelation. But big step forward for Nathan to share that so openly. He'd like me to pass over it naturally, right? Like it wasn't a big deal? I hoped so, because that's what I did. In his hand he held two bouquets. Both were lovely, one was the classic white lilies you see at a grave or funeral. The others were yellow roses. For a moment I wondered if the roses were for me and my heart soared. Like with the sandals, he noticed me staring, but unlike last time, chose not to explain them.

“Do you have some time?” he asked. “I want to show you something.”

“Sure.”

Where had that come from? Even if it wasn't exactly jam packed I couldn't just leave, could I? He raised his eyebrows, clearly expecting me to say 'no'.

“Are you sure? Aren't you working?”

Something was happening between us. There was something in his seriousness, his slightly cold demeanor, that told me if I said 'no' here that something important would pass me by. The two of us would drift apart. I was surprised to realize that I didn't want our relationship to end, so I shrugged and stepped out from behind the counter. I asked if I could at least turn the lights out and he agreed. It would have gone faster if he'd helped, but he just stood there, staring at the flowers. I was beginning to figure out their purpose, as well as why he'd sought me out.

As soon as I swung the sign from 'OPEN' to 'CLOSED' and locked the door, Nathan took off, barely sparing me a glance. What he did glance at was the alley where we'd both first encountered the spirit. Nathan's face was steel. I was rather impressed by it. It was hard for me to

walk past that alley every day. We took a meandering path through the suburbs, through areas I didn't really frequent. Our one conversation was brief.

“I wanted say thank you. For everything you and him did for me. I wasn't grateful at the time, but I am now. You risked a lot to save me. Thank you,” I said.

He closed his eyes, as if in great pain, breathed in and out and in the end simply said, “You're welcome.”

That was fine though. For all his usual chatty talkative nonsense, Nathan was a great walking partner. He could get surprisingly quiet when we were walking. It worked well for me, because I preferred to use walks to order my thoughts. And boy did I have a lot of them to order right then. Seeing him was bringing up a great deal of emotion. Gratitude, relief, and something I didn't recognize. Well, if I'm honest it was something I didn't want to recognize. Because that ephemeral, hard to define feeling that sent butterflies cascading through my whole body could have been one thing and one thing only. I liked Nathan. Romantically. He'd been after me all that time and it'd finally worked. I wasn't sure how or when. Had I liked him back before I'd Disappeared and simply never realized? I certainly spent more time thinking about him than I wanted to, even back then. But I wasn't sure. It definitely hadn't felt romantic at the time. Still, Nathan had always liked me, maybe since we'd met! Now that I liked him back we-

“We're here,” he said.

It was a graveyard. Without further explanation, he entered, following a path he was already familiar with. We wound our way through row after row of deceased people. I wondered if any other Disappearance victims had been interred here. I wouldn't have been. I'd have been cremated like Dad, most likely. I shuddered thinking about it. That had almost happened. I read the headstones as we walked past them, looking for one name in particular. There was only one person's grave Nathan would take me to see.

“How did you find it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “He lived in this town. I found all the graveyards in the area. It took awhile, but I knew I'd find him eventually.”

He stopped suddenly. There it was.

Peter August Daniels

Beloved Son,

Resting Peacefully

The grave was poorly maintained, the dates of his birth and death were obscured by plant life. I suppose it hardly mattered to Mr. Daniels, who hadn't seemed the type to care about things like that, but it seemed disrespectful nonetheless. This was the site of his first death before his

resurrection. Although we hadn't spoken much, I did manage to wring out the details of what had happened from Nathan over series of phone calls. Had I been alone I would have cleaned the headstone a little, but I wasn't sure how Nathan would react. He probably felt a sense of ownership over this place, especially since he seemed to be the only one who had visited in awhile. Even the caretaker hadn't been by lately. Perhaps I should have come by myself already. Pay respects to the man who'd helped save my life. Nathan knelt and placed both bouquets down in front of the grave. He made no effort to clear the plants away. When he rose after several long moments, tears were falling down his face. He made little effort to hide or stop them. He wept openly, staring at the grave. Yes, I'd experienced sadness myself. But from him, the image had a striking quality- to see him in so much despair was hard to watch, but even harder to look away. I had a tissue in my pocket which I offered to him. He took it without comment and dried his face. His eyes were red, but he calmed down after a minute or two. I felt brave enough to ask a question.

“Why two bouquets?”

He sniffed.

“One's from Iris. She's not strong enough to leave the hospital yet. She's lucid, can hold a conversation when she's awake, but she slips back asleep at a moment's notice. Apparently that's normal with coma patients. It takes awhile for them to come out of it. A doctor told me it's like a see-saw. She asked me to bring the lilies.”

“I'm glad to hear she's doing better.”

“Yeah.”

“So the roses are from you?”

“Yes.” I think for a moment that's all he's going to say, but then he starts up again, “I read that yellow roses represent friendship. And I wanted to bring something bright. I'm hoping the caretaker notices and weeds the area. I'd do it myself, but I don't want to disturb anything.”

I had a thought then. Nathan wasn't just mourning a friend. His flowers may mean 'friendship', but it had been more than that. For Nathan, anyway. Feeling brave, I voiced the thought.

“Maybe you should have brought red ones.”

He turned to me with a total poker face. It scared me. A person with a face like that could move to any emotion in an instant. The one Nathan settled on was resignation and the ghost of a smile. “Yeah, maybe I should have. I'm not sure. Guess I'll never know now. ... Should have known you'd pick up on that.”

Fast as they'd appeared, I gave up on my newly discovered feelings for Nathan. Maybe, just maybe, if Peter had still been here I could have competed with him, at least put up a fight. But how

can you fight a ghost? You can't. Pointless to try. And anyway, my feelings hardly mattered. It was Nathan's that counted.

“So why exactly are we here?”

I doubted he simply wanted a companion to lay down some flowers.

“I-” he paused, “I've been going through his things. I went to his house, when we were looking for you. Photo albums, he kept a journal, little notes to himself, and trophies in his room. He played soccer. He won a school spelling bee in his grade when he was eight. I just... I feel like I might be the only person in the whole world who knows his whole story, now that Teddy's dropped off the face of the Earth. I wanted to tell someone else. I thought it was sad to be the only person who knew him. And you're the only other person besides Iris who'd give me the time of day about supernatural stuff. So...”

“Nathan, of course. Tell me about him. Tell me everything.”

We sat down in the shade of a nearby tree. He spoke. I listened.

And we remembered.

The End

Journeys and Healing: The Hero, Trauma, Healing Dreams, and Shamanism

Introduction

Although rarely acknowledged, many periods of our lives are related through the lens of a journey. Sometimes it is the vague sense that we're starting on a series of tasks that will help us achieve our goals, such as a 'pathway to success'. While others are more analogous, such as Alcoholics Anonymous' twelve step program, where sobriety from any addiction is framed as an ongoing process, the main goal being to keep moving forward on the same path. The process of a young person's maturation and entering into society is often referred to as a 'road to adulthood', and indeed, the idea of life's journeys can be seen as central to Western narrative culture.

If life can be seen as a series of interconnected journeys, then *The Disappearance of Robin Melling* should be read as a fantastical examination of those journeys. This essay examines these journeys in detail, linking them to Shamanism, another kind of spiritual journey, which provides the mythological underpinning of my novel. Beginning with Joseph Campbell's seminal work on 'The Hero's Journey' in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, the essay explores the idea of the journey as a healing ritual for psychological trauma, linking the novel to dreams, guilt, and therapeutic practice. The aim throughout is to illuminate the themes, ideas and motifs of my novel.

The Disappearance of Robin Melling is a fantasy novel where a young boy, Nathan Alexander, must travel through the world of dreams to rescue the titular girl, Robin Melling. The journey he, and other characters, undertake is as much an emotional one as a physical one. This essay will explore both these key modes of journey in greater detail.

Part 1- The Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey is a cataloging of myth and story that gives voice to the instinctive structure of a journey- from setting out all the way to returning home- that exists in a great deal of narratives worldwide, both contemporary and ancient. The journey laid out by *The Hero's Journey* will be familiar to those well versed in created narratives, be they novels, films, or even video games. Direct awareness of it is rare, however. As such, I will explain one by one the steps of *The Hero's Journey* and how they were used in my novel. In this way, the way my novel uses the structure laid out will become clear.

The Disappearance of Robin Melling is a realistic fantastical narration centered on a teenager teetering on the precipice of adulthood. A *Bildungsroman*: “a class of novel that deals with the maturation process, with how and why the protagonist develops as he does, both morally and psychologically”¹. It is an adventure story, a story of change and self discovery and trauma and guilt. A classic tale where a young knight tries to rescue a kidnapped princess. The skeletal frame of the narrative is *The Hero's Journey*, which posits that stories, particularly myths, occur over a series of steps, or tropes, and that many of our greatest narrative works have used it, wittingly or not, as a form of particular resonance. These narrative steps need not occur in a particular order or be read literally. For example, the hero may not speak with an actual deity; as the step titled 'The Meeting with the Goddess' might imply, only confer with a figure that fills that symbolic role. Additionally, the framework is flexible enough to accommodate modest deviations; few narratives will contain clear examples of all steps and many, including mine, switch up their order. However, when a good number of the following tropes appear in the same novel, that novel is echoing *The Hero's Journey*.

The first narrative step is 'The Call to Adventure'. Joseph Campbell, the one who discovered, articulated, and named these archetypes, explains it thusly:

“The first stage of the mythological journey- which we have designated the 'call to adventure'- signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown.”²

The dream world of my novel serves as the unknown zone referenced. 'The Call to Adventure' is delivered through Nathan's fainting spells and his moments of seeing the world in hyper-vivid color. More directly, his discovery of Robin's research and her subsequent disappearance triggers his active involvement in the narrative. Closely following this first step is the second 'The Refusal of the Call'. In Nathan's case there is no direct refusal; he's eager to help Robin. But, as mentioned, these stages are not always to be read literally. Instead, his refusal is his failure in recognizing the call in the first place. He ignores his feelings and symptoms of an iciness crawling up his body and vivid flashes of color.

Supernatural Aid, Campbell's third stage of the journey, comes in the guise of a bookmark. A seemingly innocuous object at first, it protects Nathan and later Robin from the spirit and in the real

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Thinley Kalsang Bhutia, *Bildungsroman* (2017), <https://www.britannica.com/art/bildungsroman> [accessed 22 June 2019] (para. 1 of 4)

² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, (Novato, California: Pantheon Books, 1949), p. 48.

world, it is his only link to Robin while she's confined to the realm of dreams. And though she has a more direct connection to Shamanism, discussed later, the helpful rainbow swallow Amelia also qualifies as 'Supernatural Aid'. In Nathan's journey, this step is intertwined with 'The Crossing of the First Threshold', the fourth narrative stage, which Campbell describes in terms of destiny. "With the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the 'threshold guardian' at the entrance of a zone of magnified power."³ Nathan passes this threshold, a subtle point of no return, by inadvertently following Robin into dreams and stands at the entrance of Campbell's 'zone of magnified power' before attaining his 'Supernatural Aid', both events occurring in tandem. Next, 'The Belly of the Whale' supposes that:

"The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and would have appeared to have died."⁴

This is Nathan's first encounter with the dream world. He feels exhilaration, yes, but he is primarily driven by his desire to find Robin. Racing through a land he doesn't understand or recognize, his body lies on the ground, unconscious in the 'real' world. His 'death', which necessitates his rebirth, a common theme in both my novel and journeys generally. This in addition applies to Robin. The world believes the Disappearance victims are dead. Once she joins their number, her death must be presumed by the larger community. After passing the trial of the 'Threshold Guardian', in this narrative's case a confrontation with the spirit, and being blasted through the 'Belly of the Whale' he comes face to face with Iris. This is 'The Meeting with the Goddess'. In an earlier draft of my novel Nathan described Iris with particular language:

"Her dress is ornate. It's like a short sleeved kimono, red, patterned in butterflies and flowers. A sash is pulled around her waist, like a corset. She's not sexy, though. Nah, she looks more like a Renaissance painting come to life. Actually, most of the women in those are nobles or queens. Should I kneel?"⁵

Nathan senses he is in the presence of someone of high standing, of advanced knowledge. Crucially, he does not kneel. Joseph Campbell describes the role of the goddess, and women in

³ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p. 64.

⁴ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p. 74.

⁵ Andrew A. Eck, *The Disappearance of Robin Melling*, (unpublished thesis draft, Swansea University, 2003).

general, as follows:

“Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of understanding.”⁶

Iris, shown to be a goddess of sorts, is one of the most powerful allies a hero can have. A woman can also present herself as a temptress, seeking to thwart or delay the hero's progress. In truth, though there are moments in my novel that could be construed as depicting 'Woman as Temptress', it would be reaching to say there was an easy, direct comparison. Campbell's understanding of women may be outdated, however the term is not necessarily gender specific, and could therefore apply to Peter, in that Nathan is often distracted from his goal of saving Robin by thoughts of Peter. Still, the Temptress figure is an intentional, sinister one, and Peter isn't trying to distract Nathan, his existence is the distraction. This unused narrative step instead illustrates that the structure laid out here is not one that needs to be rigidly adhered to.

After 'The Meeting with the Goddess', the hero must seek 'Atonement with the Father'.

“It is in this ordeal that the hero may derive hope and assurance from the helpful female figure by whose magic he is protected, through all the frightening experiences of his father's ego-shattering initiation. For if it is impossible to trust the terrifying father-face, then one's faith must be centered elsewhere[...]; and with that reliance for support, one endures the crisis- only to find, in the end, that the father and mother reflect each other, and are in essence the same.”⁷

For Nathan, atonement plays out in both the domestic world of home and the fantastical world of dreams. Nathan must disobey his father to continue his quest, and he must even steal secret knowledge from him, an act of defiance that results in his father being fired. Nathan's father, magnanimous, forgives all transgressions. As a quasi dream father figure, Peter is initially an ambiguous presence, a complicating factor to Nathan's journey. At first eager to be rid of him, Nathan and Peter reach an understanding. This is again through the transmission of secret

⁶ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p. 97.

⁷ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p. 110.

knowledge. They share secrets and forgive one another. It is 'Atonement', which precedes 'Apotheosis', a kind of 'spiritual enlightenment'. Narratively, it need not be as dramatic as ascending to Nirvana or receiving a divine revelation, only resonate metaphorically as such. For Nathan, his moment of 'Apotheosis' comes when he begins to take charge of his life, particularly with regards to his accident and resulting trauma, as well as Robin's. Instead of merely reacting to the flow of the narrative he is caught in, he begins to exert direct influence in it with a plan to rescue Robin. That is not to say he doesn't need help- he seeks out the guidance of the 'Goddess', Iris, and relies on Peter's assistance. However, it is vitally important that Nathan be the one who takes control of his own destiny.

For suffering through these trials, Nathan is gifted Campbell's conception of a final reward, 'The Ultimate Boon'. His quest is completed and goal achieved- the saving of Robin's life. However, 'The Boon' is more than physical, it is the embodiment of knowledge, power and the grace of the immortals. It is a state of being as much as an end result. Campbell elaborates:

“The gods and goddesses then are to be understood as embodiments and custodians of the elixir of Imperishable Being [Immortality], but not themselves the Ultimate Boon in its primary state. What the hero seeks through his intercourse with them is therefore not finally themselves, but their grace i.e, the power of their sustaining substance. This miraculous energy-substance and this alone is Imperishable; the names and forms of deities who everywhere embody, disperse and represent it come and go. This is the miraculous energy of the thunderbolts of Zeus, Yawheh, and the Supreme Buddha, the fertility of the rain of Virococha, the virtue announced by the bell rung in the Mass at consecration, and the light of the ultimate illumination of the saint and sage.”⁸

Having completed his quest and received his reward, Nathan must leave the hidden world and return, boon in hand, to the mundane world. However, sometimes the hero, pleased beyond belief with his reward or the magical world or the opposite, so disillusioned that he no longer harbors a desire to return, declines to journey home. This is called 'Refusal of the Return' and Campbell states:

“When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal personification, the adventurer still must return with his life transmuting trophy. [...] But the responsibility has been frequently

⁸ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p. 155.

refused. Even the Buddha, after his triumph, doubted whether the message of realization could be communicated, and saints are reported to have passed away while in the supernatural ecstasy.”⁹

Nathan is of course gripped by a despondency at his journey's end. For him, the price for Robin's life has been too high. Peter may have been a willing sacrifice, but Nathan is deeply upset to trade one life for another, particularly his life, as a recurring psychological fault of his is the way he undervalues himself. Unsatisfied with the terms, he attempts to fight inevitability, to struggle against a world he sees as unfair. In his final moments, Peter changes his mind, their journey together having forged Nathan into a person who is psychologically strong enough to make a hard sacrifice.

'The Magic Flight' is the ultimate trial of the hero, the one that facilitates his return home, the truly final journey. The hero is harassed along the way, most often by a final effort from forces who all along steadfastly opposed him. In my novel, this stage is inextricably linked to 'Refusal of the Return'. As Nathan, Peter, and Robin are attempting a magical flight but are delayed when it becomes clear something has gone wrong. Peter will not be returning with them. This leads to an intense moment of internal crisis for Nathan. Sometimes, as in this case, the hero fails to get away during 'The Magic Flight' and the mundane world must marshal its forces to drag a hero across the finish line. This is called 'Rescue from Without'. In my narrative it is the simple act of waking up that pulls a defeated and listless Nathan out of the world of dreams. What could be more mundane than the simple act of waking up? In doing this, Nathan 'Crosses the Return Threshold', the final border between the mundane and fantastical world and completes his journey. He's despondent, crying and saying that dream or not, Peter had been real. What he's feeling, but is not able to name, is the truth that the mundane and fantastic worlds are intertwined so thoroughly with each other as to be indistinguishable from each other. Campbell states that:

“The two worlds, the divine and the human, can be pictured only as distinct from each other- different as life and death, as day and night. The hero adventures out of the land we know into darkness; there accomplishes his adventure, or gain is simply lost to us, imprisoned, or in danger; and his return is described as coming back out of that yonder zone. Nevertheless- and here is a great key to the understanding of myth and symbol- the two kingdoms are actually one. The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know.”¹⁰

⁹ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p. 167.

¹⁰ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p. 188.

Having endured all manner of hardship and in the process saving Robin's life, but failing to save Peter's, Nathan finally becomes the 'Master of the Two Worlds' and is given 'Freedom to Live'. Or, more accurately, he gives it to himself. He comes to terms with Peter's death, as well as his own unspoken feelings for Peter, in the epilogue, where he and Robin talk in front of Peter's grave.

One of Campbell's other works *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* evokes a method to understand all ancient tales, whether they be Greek myths or parables from the Bible. In truth, all narratives, including contemporary constructions, are a part of a larger singular mythology, which *The Disappearance of Robin Melling* now joins company.

“And whether it was Finnegans Wake or the Navaho material or the Hindu material, or Heinrich Zimmer's, it was all the same material. That was when I realized- and no one can tell me anything differently- that there's one mythology in the world. It has been inflected in various cultures in terms of their historical and social circumstances and need and particular local ethic systems, but it's *one mythology*.”¹¹

As such, it should come as no surprise that *The Hero's Journey* bears several parallels to Shamanism, a set of religious beliefs referenced frequently in my novel. These similarities will be examined in the final section of this essay. For now, however, we'll move on to discuss another no less elemental journey, one which encompasses the major theme of my novel: Trauma.

Part 2- Trauma in *The Disappearance of Robin Melling*

The theme underpinning *The Disappearance of Robin Melling* is trauma, particularly how the aftermath of trauma affects guilt directed towards the self, preventing self-forgiveness. In terms of journeys, trauma in and of itself is not a journey, but the process by which we overcome trauma, as briefly touched on in my introduction. Simply put, the road to recovery from trauma is a journey. The primary characters in *The Disappearance of Robin Melling* struggle to overcome various forms of trauma throughout the novel, both mental and physical. In this section I shall primarily focus on their mental traumas. All have been dealt serious mental traumas and the novel invites readers to watch as they finally recover from their traumas them as such, overcoming neurotic guilt, and forgiving themselves. The topic first drew my eye a few years ago, when I bore witness to a traumatic event.

¹¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero's Journey*, (New York: Harper & Row, 2003), p. 150.

The Swansea University Ultimate Frisbee Club, of which I am a member, meets every Monday in the Singleton sports hall. We were having our usual training session when one of our players began to feel faint. I saw him stumble before collapsing. The room was oppressively hot; forty university students gathered in one place can make the air thick and humid. I thought he might have overexerted himself, or had mild dehydration. In fact, he had an underlying heart condition that had been triggered by exertion. Essentially, he had a heart attack. We were quickly cleared from the room as a player trained in CPR, began to follow the instructions bellowed out by the sports hall's defibrillator. His heart stopped for three minutes. But our collapsed friend was revived and he fully recovered, much to everyone's relief. But certain elements of the event still lingered in my subconscious, even after my friend's recovery. The way he fell, the sound of the machine's robotic instructions, the silence as we sat in the upstairs lounge, not making eye contact. A brief stint in therapy helped me to recognize that the incident had had a traumatic effect on me. Once I saw this as trauma, I began to notice that my writing had absorbed this trauma, specifically in the principle characters of Nathan, Robin, and Peter, all of whom experienced deep psychic trauma. This realization became the spine of the novel; these traumas shaped and informed their character motivations, driving both plot and dialogue. Often I manifested these narrative devices through the character's self-guilt.

Dreams are an especially potent battleground when trying to deal with a trauma, be it physical or mental. Nader says in her essay 'Children's Traumatic Dreams' that:

“The severity of the incident, including the degree of a sense of threat or horror, may increase traumatic dreaming ...”

“Bad or trauma related dreams and sleep disturbances were associated with difficulty concentrating and memory difficulties.” as well as “reduced enjoyment of activities.”¹²

The mental toll of a trauma, whether it was directly experienced or merely witnessed, has a profound impact on a person's mental and emotional stability. In children, psychological development is often impaired, such as in the case of a young male burn victim:

“-a dream of himself and his brother riding in the red sports car that was on a poster in his hospital room. He spoke of feeling of freedom, excitement, and the sense of being in control.

A month later he described a different type of dream. This involved romantic fantasies

¹² Kathleen Nader, 'Children's Traumatic Dreams', in *Trauma and Dreams*, ed. by Deirdre Barrett (London: Harvard University Press 1996), pp. 9-24 (pp. 10-11).

about a female occupational therapist and the nurses caring for him. He and his therapist were able to talk about how such a dream is not unusual when a close relationship develops between a patient and caregiver. The dream also related to his being able to begin again to acknowledge age-appropriate emotions.”¹³

Though sixteen, Nathan behavior and thoughts are often intentionally portrayed as more immature than might be expected for his numerical age. The accident which has left him crippled and unable to pursue a genuine physical talent for tennis has also crippled him emotionally. His nascent crush on Robin is notably immature, his thoughts do not often drift beyond vague fetishization, of her. “-she totally had a sexy librarian thing going on. And she even had brown eyes! All librarians should have brown eyes.”¹⁴ Nathan's body is on the cusp of adulthood, but his mentality remains underdeveloped. This is consistent with children who experience significant trauma. Similarly to the young burn victim noted in *Trauma and Dreams*, Nathan experiences an advancement in his ability to 'acknowledge age-appropriate emotions' through experience and dreams. Instead of this growth being achieved through therapy, it is instead gained through his experiences with Peter. This growth metastasizes in the final chapter of the novel when he acknowledges his feelings towards Peter to Robin:

I had a thought then. Nathan wasn't just mourning a friend. His flowers may mean 'friendship', but it had been more than that. For Nathan, anyway. Feeling brave, I voiced the thought.

“Maybe you should have brought red ones.”

He turned to me with a total poker face. It scared me. A person with a face like that could move to any emotion in an instant. The one Nathan settled on was resignation and the ghost of a smile. “Yeah, maybe I should have. I'm not sure. Guess I'll never know now. ... Should have known you'd pick up on that.”¹⁵

This soft acknowledgment of his feelings is a deceptively large psychological step forward for Nathan. His initial reaction to Peter (as a person, not an authority figure) is touched with attraction, which Nathan declines to acknowledge, instead framing it as simple description:

¹³ Frederick J. Stoddard, David S. Chedekal, and Laura Shakun, 'Dreams and Nightmares of Burned Children', in *Trauma and Dreams*, ed. by Deirdre Barrett (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 25-45 (p.38).

¹⁴ Andrew A. Eck, 'The Disappearance of Robin Melling' (unpublished doctoral thesis Swansea University, 2019), p. 15

¹⁵ Eck, p. 238

“He cut a much less intimidating figure without the uniform, but he still retained that brightness I remembered from our first encounter. His orange hair burned brightest in the sunlight, his pale skin, too. Made me squint. He was handsome, I could admit, if you were into the square jawed all-American type. Young, more like a college student than a real adult.”¹⁶

It's a larger jump than it seems because of who he's admitting to having feelings for. Though he is not ready to do so directly, he has tacitly accepted his bisexuality. His view of sex and sexuality remain vague, the internal shift within him is significant enough to allow him to internalize emotions and physical feelings more appropriate for his age.

Nathan's sexual development isn't all that's been impaired, however. His relationship with his father has also become strained. Nathan has a neurotic guilt over his accident, he repeatedly discounts his own worth, especially when his father is attempting to dote on him. Nader's essay 'Children's Traumatic Dreams' she writes how:

“A seven year old boy described how during a tornado he had a painful moment of indecision when a wall collapsed. He did not know whether to freeze or run. He froze, and the bricks landed on top of the area where he would have been if he had run. He was very angry with his parents for not preparing him for this moment.”¹⁷

The sentiment is not exactly the same, Nathan's father brushes up against the heart of Nathan's psychological issues, albeit from the parental side:

“You got hurt when you were fourteen,” he said. I stopped, but didn't turn around. “Right when kids start pushing boundaries. And then suddenly you were more reliant on me than ever before. Even for simple stuff like walking or going to the bathroom. [...] But I wouldn't mind it if you talked to me a little more. You can, you know. Talk to me, if you want.”¹⁸

Nathan's father recognizes that Nathan's emotional development has been stunted by his accident, leading to suppressed emotions. Though Nathan loves his dad and is aware that his father loves him back, this passage illustrates a deep fault line of tension between them, fueled by

¹⁶ Eck, pp. 107-108

¹⁷ Nader, *Trauma and Dreams*, p. 22.

¹⁸ Eck, p. 120

Nathan's guilty feelings.

The novel is partially metaphor for Nathan's attempts to deal with and rationalize his trauma. It is another form of journey; a figurative journey happening in parallel with the actual physical journey to rescue Robin. He dreams or fantasizes about Robin many times, often accompanied by repetitive symbols, such as that of his spirit animal, the swallow Amelia, or consistent saturations of color. This repetition is also recurrent among the dreams of the traumatized, as is suggested by Nader:

“Over the course of recovery, a focus on traumatic issues or a refocus on the deeper meaning of aspects of the event may be reflected in dreams. Dreams may serve as one of the guideposts to the need for therapeutic attention on some aspect of traumatic experience. Moreover, the themes in repetitive dreams may become replicated in later actions (for example, enactment of revenge or rescue fantasies) or emotional experiences (such as a sense of being overwhelmed and/or of isolation).”¹⁹

Although in the context of my novel Nathan's dreams are not mere images playing in his mind, but are a distinct reality separate from the waking world, they can be read metaphorically as an attempt by his subconscious mind to vocalize with his left over anxiety and fear from his accident. However, Nathan's nightmares do not involve cars or accidents; they instead feature unrelated horror-filled adventures. This seemingly indirect link to his initial trauma is consistent with the dreams of trauma survivors. Belicki and Cuddy explain an intriguing commonality found during their survey of the dreaming of sexual trauma survivors:

“Overall, what is perhaps most interesting in these findings was that the nightmares typically did not replay the actual abusive event. This is consistent with Finkelhor's (1978) theory that many survivors of sexual abuse do not fit a typical PTSD profile. What these nightmares seemed to portray was the emotional reality of the event, for example, that for many women the trauma did not feel like a sexual event, but an act of profound violence.”²⁰

The three primary protagonists, Nathan, Robin, and Peter each suffered an intense personal trauma. Along with Nathan's accident, there was the Disappearance of Robin's father and for Peter it was experiencing his own death and rebirth, as well as his role in the Disappearances. Peter, a few

¹⁹ Nader, *Trauma and Dreams*, p. 24.

²⁰ Kathryn Belicki and Marion Cuddy, 'Identifying Sexual Trauma Histories from Patterns of Sleep and Dreams', in *Trauma and Dreams*, ed. by Deirdre Barrett (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 46-55 (p.53).

years into his twenties, was the oldest at the time, however, all three were young. This is significant because young people are far more susceptible to psychological damage:

Another point not often appreciated is that the soldiers who developed PTSD were very young when the serious traumatic event occurred. In our sample, we calculated as closely as possible the age of the soldiers at the time when their buddy had been killed, the results showed a mean age of 17.4 years. [...] This is consistent with the work of others showing that trauma has a greater effect on younger persons.²¹

Robin, for example, shows that her feelings of grief at her father's 'Disappearance' are complex, her coping mechanisms insufficient and exacerbated by constant research into the subject:

...she had used the space to come to terms with her father's Disappearance and then later, accept his probable death. At the end of the document, on a single line by itself, she'd written:

*I know that even if I find him, he's not coming back*²²

The three are given an opportunity to begin the healing journey through the attack, and eventual defeat, of the dream spirit. Through the confrontation with physical and emotional danger, Nathan finds himself able, at last, to move forward, to step forward on the journey to becoming an adult. Robin finds closure in learning what really happened to her father. Peter appears to be at peace with his second death, sanguine to have found a purpose to his sudden resurrection. However, the closure of their individual traumas is only one piece of the puzzle. They must also resolve their deep senses of guilt, which prevent them from true recovery.

The contradictory responses that occur in *Stavrogin's Confession* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky outline a number of ideas I attempted to weave into my narrative. Dostoyevsky writes:

“Immediately I felt that I had done something vile. At the same time I experienced a pleasurable sensation because suddenly a certain desire pierced me like a blade, and I began to busy myself with it.”²³

²¹ Ernest Hartman, 'Who Develops PTSD Nightmares and Who Doesn't', in *Trauma and Dreams*, ed. by Deirdre Barrett (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 100-113 (pp.110-111).

²² Eck, p. 129

²³ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 'Stavrogin's Confession', in *Guilt and Shame*, ed. by Herbert Morris, trans. by Avraham Yarmolinsky, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 6-39 (p. 17).

In this story Stavrogin has committed vague, but serious, non-sexual intentional harm to a young girl. He experiences glee at the thought of the act, but simultaneously a deep sense of shame, especially after the girl commits suicide. In the story he seeks forgiveness, all while insisting his actions were not so very bad. He delivers his written confession to a priest, and then claims:

“I want to forgive myself. That's my chief object, that's my whole aim! [...] That is why I seek measureless suffering, I seek it myself.”²⁴

He later claims his only absolution will come from the publication of the sheets of paper he has shown the priest. To which the priest counters:

“No, not after the publication, but even before it, a day, an hour perhaps, before the great step, you will plunge into a new crime as a way out, and you will commit it solely to avoid publication of these sheets, upon which you now insist.”²⁵

Much as Stavrogin has an erratic and contradictory response to his guilt, so too do the protagonists of *The Disappearance of Robin Melling*. Guilt is more complex than popularly imagined. Freud suggests:

“If we ask how a person comes to have a sense of guilt, we arrive at an answer which cannot be disputed: a person feels guilty when he has done something which he knows to be 'bad'. But then we notice how little this answer tells us. Perhaps, after some hesitation, we shall add that even when a person has not actually *done* a bad thing but has only recognized in himself an *intention* to do it, he may regard himself as guilty.”²⁶

On the surface, this may seem relatively simple. If you have a desire to do something bad, whether you do it or not, you may feel guilt. However, this doesn't account for the kind of guilt Peter, Robin, and Nathan experience. Theirs is a less rational form of guilt. It is a form of survivor's guilt, where lone survivors of tragedies feel guilty to have been the only one to live, as if their life had come at the cost of the others. Nathan's guilt over his accident is apparent in his interactions with his father; he feels he are too kind, too understanding. “Dad didn't have to be so damn nice. I

²⁴ Dostoyevsky, *Guilt and Shame*, p. 36.

²⁵ Dostoyevsky, *Guilt and Shame*, p. 39.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Origin of the Sense of Guilt', in *Guilt and Shame*, ed. by Herbert Morris, trans. by James Strachey, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 54-57 (pp. 54-55).

wish he would just stop spending so much effort on me!”²⁷

He also experiences self doubt when it comes to believing people like him. Robin also has her share of misplaced guilt. She spoke to her father in the moments moments before he Disappeared. She had noticed his odd behavior which felt off, but failed to alert anyone. In time, she came to blame herself for not preventing it. This is what triggered her obsessive investigation into the Disappearances, which is a clear manifestation of her guilt. And although the reader sees comparatively less of Peter's thinking, it's clear from his sudden career change from nurse to police officer and his sacrifice that he too is working out his guilt and feels responsible for far the events that led to the Earthquake and, by extension, the Disappearances.

It's clear these are not rational emotions of guilt. With my novel I wanted to deliver a creative narrative process that fully explored these guilty feelings in an empathetic and deeply human way. My intent was to show how their individual journeys towards healing had been arrested by feelings of guilt. Nathan, Robin, and Peter's guilt does not fit the Freudian definition. None of my characters have done, or even thought, anything inherently 'bad' and yet they still feel terrible guilt.

The writer and philosopher Herbert Fingarette, describing Martin Buber's ontological expansion of the definition of guilt and so called 'guilty feelings', fleshes out Freud's definition of guilt:

“On the one hand, he speaks of “authentic”, “real”, “ontic”, and in its most “intense” form, “existential” guilt. On the other hand, there are “neurotic”, “psychological” guilt feelings: the “anxiety induced bugbears that are generated in the cavern of the unconscious.” Neurotic and real guilt, says Buber, are “fundamentally different”.”²⁸

The guilt my three protagonists feel is akin to the 'neurotic guilt' described by Buber and Fingarette. Nathan, Robin, and Peter's ownership of responsibility for the tragedies that have affected those close to them was an essential element of their characterization. The three of them are good people, but do not believe that about themselves. Freud suggests:

“For the more virtuous a man is, the more severe and distrustful is its behavior, so that ultimately it is precisely those people who have carried saintliness furthest who reproach

²⁷ Eck, p. 120

²⁸ Herbert Fingarette, 'Real Guilt and Neurotic Guilt', in *Guilt and Shame*, ed. by Herbert Morris, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 82-94 (p. 82).

themselves with the worst sinfulness.”²⁹

We see shades of what we might call a martyr complex in each of them. However, it is Nathan who is particularly adept at playing the martyr. His inability to contextualize, to reconcile the loss physical sporting virility after the accident, is exacerbated by an excessive guilt over the aftermath of that same accident. The black shadow it casts over his heart causes him to blame himself for every other little thing that goes wrong:

“It was all my fault and if I hadn't stuck my damn nose in-”³⁰

And:

“-it really was my fault Robin got taken by the demon.”³¹

And:

“I blame myself-”³²

Nathan begins beating himself up over not only the accident, but all subsequent setbacks. He feels guilty of a great crime: changes to his family life. Gripped by his neurotic guilt, he subconsciously feels that he has yet to be properly punished for this. Martin Buber explains how this is a common syndrome for the neurotically guilty, as Martin Buber explains:

“The feeling of guilt was now to be understood as essentially only the consequence of dread of punishment and censure by this tribunal, as the consequence of the child's fear of “loss of love” or, at times when it was a question of imaginary guilt, as a “need for punishment” of a libidinal nature, as “moral masochism” which is complemented by the sadism of the superego.”³³

Destructive guilt is a common theme in literature. The most famous work which narrates a descending spiral of guilt is likely Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Both Macbeth and his wife commit terrible deeds for power. Their guilt eventually causes both of their downfalls, most notably with Lady Macbeth, who commits suicide to escape her guilty conscience. However, there are few clear cut instances of misplaced 'neurotic' guilt leading to a similar spiral in literature. Robin and Peter,

²⁹ Freud, *Guilt and Shame*, p. 56.

³⁰ Eck, p. 69

³¹ Eck, p. 108

³² Eck, p. 217

³³ Martin Buber, 'Guilt and Guilt Feelings', in *Guilt and Shame*, ed. by Herbert Morris, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing House, Inc., 1971), pp. 58-81 (pp. 60-61).

both more emotionally mature at the time of their traumas, channel their trauma outwards into investigative projects. Nathan, however, is different. The Earthquake cripples him, forever destroying his athleticism. Yet searching for answers, like the others, is not in his nature. He mirrors the feelings of real world children who absorb what happens to them and turn inwards, creating alternate realities that have dark meanings, then tending and feeding this pain so it fires back on themselves. Nader states:

“Throughout the phases of trauma recovery, children often incorporate traumatic imagery into their dreams. Dreams may replicate visual, auditory, and/or kinesthetic experiences.”³⁴

In a sense, the principle characters' journeys from the onset of their trauma to the resolution of those traumas through the course of the novel is essentially a successful intensive therapy session. Nathan has been told over and over by his father and others that he need not blame himself, but while he hears the words, he does not take them to heart. He's so wrapped up in his neurotic guilt that he can't see how his attitude towards himself might be flawed and how he might be harming others. The successor to Freud, Carl Jung, spoke about this problem:

“The patient, that is to say, does not need to have a truth inculcated to him- if we do that, we only reach his head; he needs far more to grow up to this truth, and in that way we reach his heart and the appeal goes deeper and works more powerfully.”³⁵

Nathan's recovery adheres to this supposition. He initially cannot recover because words only reach his head. Nathan's journey through adolescence is stunted by his inability to understand or resolve his trauma; he can only begin moving forward again once he faces his nightmares, once the truth reaches his heart. In the denouement, his emotional blockage fractures. He cries, in his father's arms, and forgives himself. He can finally heal from his trauma.

Part 3- *The Disappearance of Robin Melling* as Healing Dream

This journey and the one previous are highly interrelated. While trauma and the recovery from trauma can be applied to either mental or physical trauma, I primarily used this term in the

³⁴ Nader, *Trauma and Dreams*, p. 16.

³⁵ C.G. Jung, 'The Practical Use of Dream Analysis', in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung Volume 16: The Practice of Psychotherapy*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, (London, England, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1954), pp. 141-162 (pp. 146)

previous section to describe the healing of Robin, Nathan, and Peter on a mental level. This is because I want to examine Robin's physical Disappearance and subsequent 'recovery' from that state with another lens: the healing dream.

The symbolic resonance of Nathan defeating a nightmare and then being freed from a mental weight should be obvious. However, we need not be so metaphorical. Dreams have long been held by ancient cultures to have an impact on the real world. They were often consulted or elicited for practical medical advice in addition to portents from the future or missives from a supernatural being.

The study of dreams is called oneirology. It comes to us from the Greek word for dream *Oneiro*. To be clear, the oneirology is not the study of sleep or the mechanisms of such; it isn't concerned with REM cycles or the chemicals released in the brain during sleep. Instead, www.yourdefinition.com warns us in the notes that “Oneirology is more concerned with dreams as personal experiences and their interpretation.”³⁶

In ancient medicine dreams functioned as tools for a medical diagnosis. This was commonplace for medical personnel we might today refer to as medicine men or shamans who utilize a more magical framework. However, specialized physicians who today we would call doctors who utilize a (for the time) scientific framework also found use for dreams. Holowchak elaborates:

“On the magical side, healing deities at religious sanctuaries were believed to offer a type of medical assistance that centered on dreams. The ill traveled to a religious sanctuary, gave a votive offering, and then retreated to a sleeping parlour where a healing god was believed to visit them in a dream and administer or suggest a cure for what ailed them.

On the secular side, medical practice was sometimes guided by the conviction that certain dreams were indicative of bodily health [...]. A person's soul, ancient physicians argued, surveyed one's bodily functions during sleep and brought about dreams that indicated, by a scrutiny of their content, bodily health.”³⁷

In ancient times, the domains of science and magic were not very far removed from each other. This mixing of fantastical and realistic is important because *The Disappearance of Robin Melling* also features a mixture of scientific and supernatural approaches. Most obvious is the spirit

³⁶ Oneirology, *YourDictionary*. (n.d.), <https://www.yourdictionary.com/Oneirology> [accessed 13th March 2020] (para. 2 of 3)

³⁷ M. Andrew Holowchak, 'Oneirology in Ancient Medicine' in *Ancient Science and Dreams: Oneirology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2002), pp. 127.

and its kidnap of Robin. Iris or Teddy might be considered a sort of 'medicine man/woman', attacking the problem from a supernatural angle. Teddy's powers are certainly of a supernatural origin. We then have the side grounded in reality, represented by Nathan's father and the police force he is a part of. And though she may in her own words be "casting a wide net"³⁸, Robin is also thoroughly entrenched in a realistic conception of the Disappearances. Neither side experiences much success in figuring out what's going on or administering a solution. Peter, however, exists in the liminal space between these two modes of thought. First, he is a police officer and former nurse and thus fully invested in the physical world and the importance of the Disappearances as a physical act. Second, though, his close association with Teddy and subsequent resurrection place him firmly on the more magical, metaphorical side of the fence as well. He is in tune with the both physical and magical nature of the Disappearances in a way the other characters are not. He is privileged with knowledge gained from being brought back from the dead. This special knowledge is shared by the spirit. Peter himself says as much in his final moments when he says "But I already died, Nathan. I shouldn't be here, you know that. Both me and the spirit are like an infection. We're corrosive to the world. We're breaking both dreams and reality down."³⁹

Nathan too is a blending of the physical world and dream world, at least with regards to the Disappearances. When the Earthquake occurred, he was struck down by a distracted driver, leaving him with a lifelong physical impairment. However, in his dream state after that event, he witnessed the start point for the Disappearances- Peter's resurrection. Nathan was there at the beginning of this story, both physically and spiritually. Together, Nathan and Peter are able to 'heal' Robin and, implicitly, the scar and therefore world. Note how this neatly dovetails with Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, where the hero returns from his journey with an 'Ultimate Boon' that ends up bringing sacred knowledge to the whole world.

Nathan achieves this by following a process known as 'incubation'. In the context of dreams and Ancient Greece, the word held a very different meaning to the ones that readily spring to mind. It was a form of religious ceremony that involved seeking a cure from a god. It was a complex religious practice, as Gil H. Renberg notes:

"Nor was incubation undertaken simply by showing up at a sanctuary, and bedding down for the night, since in general it involved preparatory rituals and offerings that normally required the involvement of priests or other cult officials, and, as at other oracles, the worshipper often had to pay a fee."⁴⁰

³⁸ Eck, pp. 32

³⁹ Eck, pp. 225

⁴⁰ Gil H. Renberg, 'Incubation Terminology', in *Where Dreams May Come: Incubation Ceremonies in the Greco-*

Of course, Nathan experiences a number of dreams throughout the novel. However, no direct aid is received. No one is cured from their ailment, nor is a solution prescribed by a deity or otherwise. Nathan's dreams instead serve as the other type of healing dreams in Greek medicine, that of a diagnostic dream. Greek physicians analyzed the contents of dreams to determine a patient's health and, if unwell, where their medical trouble might reside.

“It is likely that physicians who used dreams as diagnostic tools looked at all dreams of patients as potential diagnostic tools, though they only focused attention on particularly striking elements or on certain key episodes. Most of these concerned natural phenomena that were taken as indications of underlying bodily conditions.”⁴¹

They even had criteria with which to measure the dream's severity and measure how severe the problem plaguing the patient was.

“Dreams in accordance with the way things generally turn out in waking reality indicate health; those contrary to waking events indicate incipient or existing illness due to humoral imbalance. The greater the discord that the dream exhibits with waking reality, the greater the underlying humoral imbalance.”⁴²

Following that logic, and given Nathan's dreams are filled with an abundance dire imagery, it's little wonder the situation was so unfavorable. Of course in Greek Antiquity his troubles would have been reduced to a simple imbalance of the humors. Although not a major consideration for my novel, the four humors are blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Nathan lacks in blood due to his accident, an imbalance that can be read as the underlying cause of his problems- physical and mental. However, the important element here is that Nathan's, and Robin's, dreams are quite out of the ordinary and indicate severe health dysfunction.

Robin's case presents interesting dichotomy. While her dreams initially appear normal, with few extraneous elements, as the novel wears on, and, crucially, the protection from her bookmark fades, the dreams become more sinister, more at odds with reality. As her prognosis worsens, so too does the content of her 'diagnostic' dreams.

One dream, however, does follow the criteria of the healing dream I initially highlighted.

Roman World Volume 1, (Leiden, The Netherlands, Koninklijke Brill NV, 2016), pp. 7-18 (pp. 13)

⁴¹ Holowchak, *Ancient Science and Dreams: Oneirology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, pp. 134

⁴² Holowchak, *Ancient Science and Dreams: Oneirology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, pp. 147

This is the final dream where Nathan and Peter venture into dreams with the help of Teddy. It features a ceremony common in ritual incubation conducted at designated sanctuaries. Nathan and Peter travel to a metaphorical place of worship and encounter a priest, Teddy. They are then induced into a medical sleep and watched over by said priest. In dreams they meet a goddess figure, Iris (another connection to the Hero's Journey), and she offers them answers and a potential course of treatment, though vague, for Robin's malady. And of course a heavy price is extracted when Peter is forced to sacrifice himself to heal her. Though none realize it at the time, these five characters are conducting an incubation ritual, which succeeds. This mixed result was common, even expected, at the time of ancient Greece. Perfection was not expected from the god of healing.

“-there were two sides to Asklepios the healer: an omnipotent god who performed superhuman healing miracles, and a medical practitioner who issued prescriptions and assigned dietary or physical regimens, and even- like mortal practitioners- sometimes experienced failures.”⁴³

However, there is also a hint of the healer as an all-powerful practitioner in the apparent recovery of Iris. As soon as the spirit is banished, Peter along with it, her soul is able to return to her body and she regains consciousness. The journey of healing is complete, from onset of illness, to diagnostic dream, to incubation ceremony, and recovery.

Conclusion- The Shaman Ties The Threads

Though these various modes of journey, from a narrative/metaphorical Hero's Journey, to the journey of recovering from mental and physical trauma, may at first seem to have only passing commonalities, there is a philosophy of thought that encompasses all three. Shamanism. Shamanism is an umbrella term used to refer to the varied belief systems of a number of often tribal peoples around the world. Getting more specific than that can prove difficult. One of the first religions of the world may very well have been Shamanistic in nature; this mythological framework that reflects and refracts throughout the world began to develop in the Upper Paleolithic and Mesozoic eras.

“Practices concerning the resurrection of animals and the preservation of species evidently played an important part and were closely tied to animalistic conceptions. [...] Although shamanism may have been initiated earlier, it was now somewhat evident, at least in some of

⁴³ Renberg, *Where Dreams May Come: Incubation Ceremonies in the Greco-Roman World*, pp. 218

its aspects.”⁴⁴

So from the beginning of mankind's development, shamanism has been present. The trial of the shaman is seminal to the core of humanity. It is a deeply spiritual practice, a 'wholing' of human experience. “The shaman unites areas such as religion, psychology, medicine, and theology which in Western life have become separate.”⁴⁵ There's no doubt that the echoes of shamanistic ways of thought are deeply engraved on the collective human consciousness. Csordas speculates that “Given the prevalence of religious healing and the global interrelation of religion and healing, the category of the holy man in its own way may be fundamental to our understanding of health and health problems.”⁴⁶ The shaman is one such holy man. However, not every religious practitioner is a shaman. Eliade elaborates: “Hence any ecstatic cannot be considered a shaman; the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld.”⁴⁷

The journeys to zones of significance that the shaman takes bear a striking, not coincidental, similarity to the ones of *The Hero's Journey*.

“The role of trance and journeying is taken by dreaming or a 'vision quest', especially in the Plains area. Young men, and sometimes women, go into the wilderness and fast for some days to seek a vision from the spirits.

“The shaman is chosen by the spirits and in the central experience of initiation is often symbolically killed by the spirits and reborn.

“Shamans cannot function unaided and are dependent for their achievements on helpers, so that their feats are not so much super human as super-assisted.

“Often they provide the shaman with magical abilities or strengths which correspond to their own properties.”⁴⁸

The immediate comparisons to *The Hero's Journey* continue in that symbolic resurrection

⁴⁴ Karl J. Narr, *Prehistoric Religion* (2018), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/prehistoric-religion> [accessed 23 January 2019] (para. 27 of 32).

⁴⁵ Piers Vitebsky, *Shamanism*, (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 1995), p. 154.

⁴⁶ Tomas J. Csordas, 'The Rhetoric of Transformation in Ritual Healing', in *Body/Meaning/Healing*, (Hampshire, England, Pargrave Macmillan 2002) pp. 11-57 (pp. 11)

⁴⁷ Mircea Eliade, “General Considerations, Recruiting Methods, Shamanism and Mystical Vocation Approaches” in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, (London, England, Routledge & Keegan 1964) pp. 3-32 (pp. 5)

⁴⁸ Vitebsky, pp. 42-43, 52, and 66.

and themes of initiation exist in both, as do Campbell's ideas of gathering powerful allies and gaining supernatural assistance. Of course, in *The Hero's Journey* the supernatural quality of the allies can be, and often are, symbolic, while for shamanic persona supernaturalism is a real vital force. In a sense, the shaman's initiation and the daily rites they perform are a precursor to the modern myth construction of *The Hero's Journey*. The fundamental similarities between the two show that the shamanistic practice of religion may be the root ancestor of all myths, all stories. Nathan's story is littered with references to shamanism:

“*Callings* was the book that was as close to a Bible that modern shamans had.”⁴⁹

There are also more oblique references to shamanic practices:

“I bit the pen cap off and held it in my mouth. I scribbled a quick message onto the surface of the bookmark, Robin's totem.”⁵⁰

“Among the shamans, butterflies are symbols of change and rebirth. They're a little bit magic, spinning us off into new paths and stories we'd never imagined. And yet they're my spirit animal.”⁵¹

What of Robin? The roles of Peter, Iris, and Nathan's spirit animal, Amelia are clearly delineated in both *The Hero's Journey* and serve a function in his shamanic trial. But Robin seems to fit cleanly only in the former, as Nathan's 'Ultimate Boon' (in a figurative sense). However, shamans are fundamentally healers, and a healer without a patient is of little use. She is laid low by a spirit, one of considerable power and malevolent intent. It is up to Nathan to cleanse her soul by engaging the spirit in combat, often lethal combat: “The main part of my job is killing witches and sorcerers. I am terrified every time before I perform a big ritual because I know that each time, one of us has to die.”⁵² This notion of healing is important. And for Csordas, it is not only physical healing that is important:

“The tripartite concept of the person is the basis for three distinct but interrelated types of healing: physical healing of bodily illness, inner healing of emotional illness or distress, and deliverance from the adverse effects of demons or evil spirits. [...] Inner healing may be aimed at removing the effects of a particular life trauma.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Eck, p. 20

⁵⁰ Eck, p. 127

⁵¹ Eck, p. 43

⁵² Vitebsky, p.74.

⁵³ Csordas, *Body/Meaning/Healing*, pp. 14

These are the elements of healing I went through in the previous sections. Shamans are responsible for all kinds of healing. We see Robin experience physical healing and 'recover' from her non-corporeal state of kidnap as well as Iris' miraculous reawakening. Though in the case of my novel it overlaps with physical healing, Robin also experiences deliverance from an evil spirit. And of course in the previous section on trauma I detailed how Peter, Nathan, and Robin complete or begin inner healing of emotional traumas.

Who, then, is our shaman, the person administering this 'tripartite' healing? Peter is a possible candidate as he undergoes the death and rebirth necessary for shamans.

“Like the sick man, the religious man is projected onto a vital plane that shows him the fundamental data of human existence, that is, solitude, danger, hostility of the surrounding world. But the primitive magician, the medicine man, or the shaman is not only a sick man; he is, above all, a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself. Often the shaman's or medicine man's vocation is revealed through an illness or an epileptoid attack, the initiation of the candidate is equivalent to a cure.”⁵⁴

This is a similar circumstance to Peter's rebirth at the hands of Teddy. Also, “The pre-eminently shamanic technique is the passage from one cosmic region to another- from earth to sky, or from earth to Underworld.”⁵⁵ Peter displays complete mastery of this ability. He is able to slip in and out of the dream world without the aid of Teddy's drugs. “I won't need any equipment, or drugs,' Peter said, looking uncomfortable. 'I've been able to sleep whenever and for as long as I want, since that day.’”⁵⁶

Teddy, Iris, Robin, perhaps even Nathan's father also display various shamanic traits, but of course it is Nathan who is the primary shaman, though he is unaware of it. The two points presented as evidence of Peter's shamanic abilities also apply to Nathan. The young man also experienced a sort of death and resurrection when he was struck by a car at the onset of the Earthquake. Though it was more of a metaphorical 'death', it is common for these elements to be symbolic for real life shamans as well. Eliade once again elaborates on this- “We have several times observed the initiatory essence of the candidates 'death' followed by his 'resurrection' in whatever form this takes place- ecstatic dreams, sickness, unusual events, or ritual proper.”⁵⁷ And though his control is not as refined as Peter's, Nathan drifts in and out of dreams frequently.

⁵⁴ Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, pp. 27

⁵⁵ Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, pp. 259

⁵⁶ Eck, pp. 175

⁵⁷ Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, pp. 64

However Nathan has many traits beyond though that make him a fit for the shaman archetype. For example, when shamans are recruited it happens in one of two ways: “(1) hereditary transmission of the shamanic profession and (2) spontaneous vocation ('call' or 'election')” Nathan falls into the second category, the calling more or less pressed onto him by Teddy and, to a lesser extent, Iris. Next: “However selected, a shaman is not recognized as such until after he has received two kinds of teaching: (1) ecstatic (dreams, trances, etc.) and (2) traditional (shamanic techniques, names and functions of spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etc.)”⁵⁸ Nathan receives both kinds of training. He gets what we might glibly call 'on the job' training by being thrust several times into dreamscapes, where he also receives tutelage from Iris. Through the course of the novel, while doing research on the spirit in the occult bookstore Talisman, he receives a 'traditional' shamanic education, as well as from interactions with Teddy and Peter.

Nathan also gains the aid of helping spirits frequently associated with Shamans. “Meanwhile, we must note that the majority of these familiar and helping spirits have animal forms. [...] they can appear in the form of bears, wolves, stags, hares, all kinds of birds.”⁵⁹

It is Nathan who experiences a shamanic initiation and subsequent teaching. Nathan receives the helping spirit animal. Nathan travels through other planes of existence in order to bring about healing, in both Robin's physical trauma and his own mental trauma, succeeding in healing himself. How does all this tie together with the concepts laid out in the other sections of this essay?

As previously stated, the concept of traveling through dreams is deeply connected to shamanism, as Piers Vitebsky notes: “Shamanic logic starts from the idea that the soul can leave the body. This happens to everyone at death, but the experience of dreaming is taken to show that the soul can also wander independently and return without causing death.”⁶⁰ Nathan is going through a 'vision quest' of sorts, his soul leaving his body in sleep, but without causing death. This is yet another kind of journey, one that envelops all the others.

For his part, Nathan is not a strong believer in shamanic precepts, but that doesn't matter. Just like it doesn't matter that a story doesn't closely hew to *The Hero's Journey* guidelines. Both Campbell's framework and Shamanism are symbols of something greater.

“People say they believe in God. God is a metaphor for a mystery that absolutely transcends all categories of human thought. Even the categories of being and nonbeing. Those are categories of thought. I mean it's as simple as that. It depends on how much you want to think about it. Whether it's putting you in touch with the mystery that is the ground of your

⁵⁸ Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, pp. 13

⁵⁹ Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, pp. 89

⁶⁰ Vitebsky, p. 12.

own being. If it isn't, well, it's a lie.

So half the people in the world are religious people who think that their metaphors are facts. Those are what we call theists. The other half are people who know that metaphors are not facts and so they're lies. Those are the atheists.”⁶¹

Nathan's journey is the journey all shamans and heroes take. The story of Nathan, Robin, and Peter is an echoing of an ancient form. The trial of the shaman. A *Hero's Journey*, a trial of trauma and recovery and healing. *The Hero's Journey* may be the narrative framework of the novel, the bones of how it works, trauma, guilt, and self-forgiveness are the three interrelated themes wound throughout the meat of *The Disappearance of Robin Melling*, and the notion of the healing power of dreams may be a recurring motif throughout the story, but shamanism is the underlying mythology which binds them, and the novel itself, together.

And, of course, the practice of writing a novel itself is a kind of healing, a therapy for the mind. Art has always been therapeutic, going back to those same peoples who first developed shamans- they also painted on cave walls. And why do you suppose they were moved to create them? The answer, of course, is healing. As Vogler says, “I'm retelling the hero myth in my own way, and you should feel free to do the same. Every storyteller bends the mythic pattern to his or her how purpose or needs of a particular culture. That's why the hero has a thousand faces”⁶²

⁶¹ Campbell, *The Hero's Journey*, p. 161.

⁶² Vogler, p. 7.

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