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*As the story goes, the town of Lost Creek, Alaska, isn't named after the eponymous stream. It's named after its first group of colonial settlers, a handful of adventurers for whom the world didn't have a place anymore. Lost men, who didn't belong anywhere else. They set down their roots, stealing land that was never theirs, and carved their home between the mountains and the mines, the hot springs, the river, and the lake, during those long summer days when anything seemed possible.*

*Then the cold came. And these settlers discovered that they had built their home in the heart of winter. They'd come for new opportunity, but they found that winter is not malleable, and frost settles too. And no matter how hard they tried, they could not escape being lost.*

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# DAY ONE

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## MIDNIGHT FLIGHT

THE AIRPLANE'S ENGINES RUMBLE. THE SHADES ARE drawn, and the lights are on low. The few passengers around me listen to music or try to sleep in their uncomfortable seats as we fly toward a harsher winter.

I can't sleep. I haven't been able to since the call came. I stare blankly at the seat in front of me, but all I can see is her. Dark curls. Hazel eyes. Big heart. A girl who smiled even when the sun did not rise in the morning, who laughed in the face of darkness, who embraced her nights and cherished her days.

She took my heart and held it safe. She promised to

wait for me, with words that echo in my mind and tender touches that I can still feel on my skin.

She.

Kyra.

*Mine.*

Let me tell you a story.

She was my best friend. She was my everything. And I lost her.

## PHONE CALL

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"Corey?"

"Mom? I just got back from the gym with Noa, and Eileen gave me your message. What's wrong? Are you okay? Is it Luke? What happened?"

"Luke's all right, honey. But I got a call this morning. I—I wanted you to hear it from me..."

"A call?"

"Lynda—Mrs. Henderson. Something happened in Lost Creek."

MARIEKE NIJKAMP

"Kyra? Did she have an episode? Did she run away again?"

"No, it's not that. It's... She..."

"Mom, tell me. Please."

"Corey, I'm sorry."

"Mom, are you crying?"

"No one knows quite what happened, but they think she wandered across the lake and found a weak spot. They found her under the ice."

"Wait—what?"

"She drowned. Kyra's d—"

"No."

"Corey..."

"No. No."

"Corey, sweetheart, listen to me."

"No. I don't want to hear this. I don't believe you."

"Corey—Corey. Slow breaths. Listen to me. I spoke to your headmistress. Come home."

"No."

"You're hurting—"

"Kyra can't be dead. She promised to wait for me. She knows I'm coming to visit. She can't be dead."

BEFORE I LET GO

"Lynda thinks—"

"It's January! The lake should be frozen solid! It's not possible."

"Sheriff Flynn is investigating, but nothing suggests that her death was suspicious. Honey, Lynda thinks Kyra went looking for a crack in the ice."

"No, no, no."

"Kyra was ill. They tried to help her, but sometimes there's nothing anyone can do."

"I shouldn't have left her. I never even replied to her last letters."

"Oh, Corey."

"I need to go to Lost, Mom. I promised I'd go back to her. I promised."

"Come here first. Come home. I know I worked a lot of overtime at the hospital over the holidays, but come home. We'll postpone your trip and spend time together, just the three of us."

"I'd like that. I would, Mom. But I can't not go. Can I still stay with the Hendersons?"

"Yes, but—"

MARIEKE NIJKAMP

"I need to go home-home, Mom. I'm sorry."

"I never knew, between the two of you girls, who was more headstrong. Lynda said the school will host a memorial service next week. And Joe found a handwritten letter to you in her room. He thought having it might help. I'll forward you his email with the photo."

"Thanks."

"Honey, everyone will understand if you want to cancel your trip."

"I'll be there. I want to go. I need to go."

Kyra needs me.



LETTER FROM KYRA TO COREY

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UNSENT

A bonfire lights the town square to mark the longest night. Remember how we thought that the world would be a happier place with more celebrations? I'm not sure that's true. I'm not sure I'm happier.

Someone left me salmonberries and flowers this morning. People do that a lot these days. Where the fruit and the flowers come from, I don't know. Jan's grocery store doesn't sell them. Yet here they are.

How is life outside the boundaries of endless time? Are you enjoying your classes at St. James? Are you as happy as I thought you would be?

I hope you are. I know you never wanted to

escape, but I'm glad you did. I can't wait to escape too. I'm trying so hard to wait for you. But it's hard, Cor. Lost is emptier now that you're gone. And I'm lonelier. I'm less without you, and Lost wants more. I don't remember the last time I slept. I don't remember the last time I smiled. The night is not dark enough. The stars you love still whisper their secrets, but sometimes I think I know too much. Around here, everyone wants answers, but I am the only one with questions.

I miss you.

I miss the dark nights.

I miss the dawn.

I miss you.

And I'm sorry.

—Kyra

## A LAND OF GOLD AND LONELINESS

THE AIRPORT IS QUIET, STERILE. THIS EARLY IN THE morning, the few people in the terminal are lost in predawn slumber, and I am lost too. I've been traveling for thirteen hours. Three thousand miles. I settle on the floor in front of the tall glass windows, as Alaska wakes up to another day with scarce sunlight. I watch planes taxi to and from the runways.

In the reflection of the window, a young girl stares at me. She sits a few seats down, her dress bright against the darkness outside and the gray of the terminal. Although she can't be more than eight or nine, even younger than my brother, I don't see anyone with her. The traveler to

her left rests his head against his backpack, but he keeps shifting, as if in a restless sleep. An elderly couple reads a day-old newspaper. And the girl's eyes meet mine.

She holds a handful of flowers in front of her green dress. The petals are a familiar magenta, and she picks them off one at a time.

Salmonberries don't grow here, not at an airport on the outskirts of a city. They're not the kind of flower you'd find at a florist's shop, and they certainly don't bloom in January. The girl holds flowers that shouldn't be. From this distance, I shouldn't be able to hear what she's saying either, but I do, as clearly as if she were standing next to me.

*Endless day, endless night, come to set your heart alight.*

With each cadence, she plucks off another petal.

At the end of her tune, she smiles.

My heart stutters. I clamber to my feet and turn to get a better look at her. But the waiting area is nearly empty. I spot the backpacker. The elderly couple. A family with twin boys. There's no sign of the girl, as if she'd only existed in the window's reflection.

Except that flower petals lie scattered across the floor, and her voice still swirls around me, singing the song that Kyra sang to me first.

*Endless night, endless day, come to steal your soul away.*

.....

The fifth and final leg of the trip gets me going. I cling to my coffee, the deception of daylight, and a combination of restlessness and homesickness. I transfer to a small floatplane that will fly me northwest, to Lost Creek, where I'll stay for the next five days, until another plane can bring me back here. Cramming my backpack into the seat next to me, I buckle up behind the pilot. I nod to him, but from the moment we take off, my forehead is glued to the window.

The lights of Fairbanks International Airport glimmer below us. To the east, the city glows electric and yellow under a blanket of clouds. At the start of the year, Fairbanks sees fewer than four hours of sunlight a day, and Lost Creek fewer still.

Kyra loved coming to Fairbanks. She thought Lost was claustrophobic. She wanted to travel. She wanted to study and explore. But the city never called to me. It always felt too large, too anonymous. Life may be softer here, the winters less threatening, but back home in Lost, people looked out for one another. In our tight-knit community, surrounded by nothing for miles, we had each other and the deep blue of twilight. To me, Lost felt safe.

Even now, I'm more at ease at St. James's small boarding school in Dauphin than I am in the large house Mom bought in Winnipeg. She calls the neighborhood affluent and prosperous, though people never leave the confines of

their own yards. Mom is rarely there to notice, because she works long days at the children's hospital. At least at school I have a community, friends, teammates. Still, we may have made our home in Canada, but I left my heart in Lost.

The plane leans north, and Fairbanks disappears behind us. We fly to an otherworldly place, one that does not play by the same rules. The evergreens wear an armor of snow. The air shimmers with cold. Lost Creek is godforsaken, with winters that feel cruel and permanent, and we are proud of our resilience. The journey to Lost is a rush of turbulence through snow and memories, and the refrain of those same awful words. *Endless night, endless day. Come to steal your soul away.*

By the time Lost comes into view, I'm spread thin by exhaustion and fear. Time flies like we do, and I'm not ready, I'm not ready to face that Kyra won't be waiting for me, and I'm not sure I ever will be. I'm torn between homesickness so deep it aches and the debilitating uncertainty of what lies ahead, of not understanding what happened to my best friend.

I push my nails deep into the palms of my hands and keep my eyes on the landscape as we prepare to land. To the left are the camping grounds where a handful of tourists spend their summers fishing on the lake and hunting bears in the woods. The cabins are abandoned in winter, groaning under their blanket of snow.

To the right are the old mining works. Gold is still rumored to lie beneath the hills—or heavy metals, perhaps—but the easily accessible ores were all exhausted decades ago. Mining deeper would be expensive, and our mine is too small to be profitable. The land may hold promises of riches, but for Lost Creek, those promises are empty, and people know better than to rush now. Our community has grown to depend on itself and the carefully cultivated land, not on the unpredictable nature.

Our community. Lost Creek, established in 1898, population 247.

I breathe. *Two hundred forty-six.*

Bordered by its eponymous river, Lost Creek stands against the elements. Our small, narrow, gold-rush town has a police station, a combined elementary and high school, an office for the doctor with whom Mom often worked, a moderately well-stocked grocery store, a bakery, a sole café/pub, a post office/tourist center, and an abandoned spa with hot springs, which sits outside the borders of town. The spa is a dash of color on the bleak horizon. The first time Kyra and I went there, we thought it was a superhero headquarters.

The landing gear hits the ground with a jolt and my seat belt strains against my lap from the force. We bump to a stop. This runway and the single road through the Interior are the only paths that connect Lost Creek to civilization.

These two connections to the outside world used to be all we needed to survive. Nothing could harm us within these borders. Within this community, we stood together. All of Lost against the rest of the world.

All of us.

All of us except one. All of us except Kyra, who never felt like she belonged. She never cared for hunting or camping. Like her grandfather, Kyra wanted to study storytelling. She collected the town's myths and legends and she was always curious about what lay beyond. But Lost is a town that thrives on secrets, and in Kyra, all of Lost's secrets lay exposed.



# STARS AND STORIES

## TWO YEARS BEFORE

IN LOST, THE EASIEST WAY TO FIT IN IS TO FALL INTO THE town's rhythm. And on the days when Kyra wasn't with me, I did. I did my homework and my chores. I didn't talk back to the adults in town. I kept an eye on Luke when Mom was away. I had my stars in the sky, and I didn't need to go anywhere to observe them.

"It should be enough," I told Kyra, when I snuck into her room at midnight.

She sat at her desk, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, half a dozen books open in front of her. Her knees

were pulled up to her chin, glasses perched on the tip of her nose. She'd been waiting for me. Of course she had. It was exactly three years since Dad left and—aside from calls and cards on our birthdays—was never heard from again. I hated that anniversary. I didn't want to be alone.

Kyra closed her books, one by one. "What should be enough?"

"All of this. I have you and Luke and Mom. Astronomy and home. I don't want to be as restless as I am. I don't want to care about him anymore. All of this should be enough."

"Why?"

I shrugged.

She sat down on her bed and invited me under the blanket. "You're allowed to be angry. You can be hurt. And more than that, I don't think you should ever settle for 'enough.' Enough by whose standards, anyway?"

I leaned into her. My hands were cold from the night air, but she didn't flinch. She pulled the blanket up higher.

"Mine, I guess?" I said. "Or Lost's?"

"Hopefully those aren't the same," she teased. "What do you dream about?" And then, after a beat, "What would you dream about if it weren't for Lost?"

Because she was right. Those weren't the same. If not for Lost, I would go off to college to study astronomy. Work at one of the observatories around Fairbanks. Maybe study the aurora borealis.

But having Kyra next to me made me feel even braver. “Work on the Giant Magellan Telescope in Chile, to study the evolution of galaxies,” I answered. Once it was completed, the GMT would be the largest optical observatory in the world, ten times stronger than the Hubble Space Telescope. “Or on the E-ELT, to study the evolution of dark matter in high redshift galaxies.”

I stole a sideways glance at Kyra, who blinked at me owlishly. “I didn’t even understand those words separately, let alone together.”

I giggled and it bubbled into laughter. I didn’t know how Kyra did it, but she focused my restlessness, like a telescope, away from the dark energy of Dad’s absence and toward the exoplanets of possibility.

“I’ll come to visit you in Chile,” Kyra said. “And then I’ll drag you with me to Antarctica. We’ll see what the other side of the world looks like. See the southern lights together. I’ll tell you stories about them.” A smile tugged at her lips. “What if they’re upside down?”

I scowled. “That’s not how science works.”

She grinned.

I punched her softly in the arm. “What will you do until then?”

“Travel too, if I can. Study narrative culture around the Arctic.” She motioned to one of the books on her desk. “I don’t want to collect and claim stories like Granddad did.

I want to be respectful to Indigenous cultures. But I want to understand how our stories came to be. I don't want them, and our histories, to melt along with the ice."

"Do you think you'll be able to?" I asked, wondering, *Will Kyra get out of here? Pursue her dreams? Be well enough to do so?*

She recoiled, as if I'd hit her. "Yes. Somehow or other, I'll find a way."

"Then we'll have to find a good college for both of us," I offered.

Kyra rested her head back on the pillow. "We'll go farther than anyone in Lost ever has. Adventurers, looking for stories and stars."

"But we'll always come home, right?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "Maybe. Maybe I'll get lost on the ice instead."

# UNPREDICTABLE

## A YEAR AND A HALF BEFORE

KYRA DIDN'T KEEP HER HEAD DOWN. SHE DIDN'T FIT IN.

*She's crazy.* The words followed her wherever she went. In the conservative white world of Lost, standing out was a mortal sin. When she came to school, the other juniors and seniors in our class would slide their desks away from us. They'd invite me over for hot chocolate after class, but never her. They'd steal her books. They'd throw her homework—and sometimes the essays she wrote on storytelling—into White Wolf Lake.

She kept her head held high. She never let me yell at

them. And she never let anyone but me see how much their cruelty hurt her.

*She's crazy. Batshit. Insane. Nuts. A freak.*

The people of Lost Creek had a particular affinity for that last word. *Freak*. It floated around her, spoken in hatred and whispered in fear.

And fear was the worst part. Too often, people who'd known her since she was a baby, who'd watched her grow up, would talk about her as if she were a threat. And they weren't even subtle about it.

They wanted her gone.

"Joe, I've heard about a good residential treatment center in Fairbanks. It might be better for your daughter there," Mr. Lucas would say.

"We've been over this a million times. No," Mr. Henderson would reply.

"You have to understand it from my point of view. Kyra goes to the same school as my daughters."

"And she has since they were all toddlers."

"But now she has this *diagnosis*. What if something happens? What if—"

"What could possibly happen?"

"What if she sna—what if she has one of her episodes?"

"When she has one of her episodes, she *paints*. Do you think your daughters are in danger from Kyra's crafts?"

But that, of course, wasn't Mr. Lucas's point. It was never

anyone's point. They weren't worried about the creative ways Kyra burned off energy; they were worried about her escapades. When her manic episodes overwhelmed her, she became unstoppable. She could lose herself in the woods for days. Once, she sneaked to the river and dumped the fishermen's catch back into the water. Another time, she ventured down the closed mine, and it took our parents the better part of a day and a night to find her.

The people of Lost were worried because they had seen her vanish. They were convinced that she'd drag one of them along, and that they'd stray too far. That they, too, would disappear in the dangerous terrain outside of Lost. But she wouldn't do that. Kyra pushed everyone away during those episodes. Even me.

So Mr. H would willfully misunderstand the community's remarks. Eventually, out of respect for him and his status as the owner of the mine, they'd concede that, of course, they were only worried about Kyra's welfare.

But every time she overheard one of those conversations, Kyra would stare at me with tears in her eyes. The first time it happened, I tried to explain the town's fear, but she challenged it. We were sitting in her window seat, and she tensed all over, her cheeks turning pink with frustration. The second time, she ran away. I'd lost count of the incidents since then, but this time, she was still in flight mode when she asked me, "I'm not enough, am I?"

“You should never settle for ‘enough.’” I hoped that hearing the same words she’d told me would make her feel braver.

“You know, a couple of centuries ago, I would’ve been called a witch.” She clung to her windowsill, as if to stop herself from running away from all of us, and all of this. “They would’ve burned me at the stake.”

“I wouldn’t have let them.”

“Do you think I should go? To the treatment center in Fairbanks?”

“Only if you want to. Only if you think it’ll help. But not because the rest of the town has forgotten who you really are. If that’s the only reason, I’d rather you stay here with me.”

“I want to feel better. I want to get these episodes under control.” Her shoulders drooped. “I want to belong here, like you and Luke do.”

I stared at her for the longest time. The setting sun cast her face in an orange glow, making her hair look auburn and her hazel eyes almost green. I loved Lost, because it was the only home I’d ever known, but I hated how the town had treated her since she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder three years before. It was as if, overnight, they’d decided that she was no longer the girl they knew, but a danger. “I want you to feel better. I want you to belong too.”



BEFORE I LET GO

“Why is everyone so afraid of me?”

“Because you’re unpredictable.” *Like spring storms and inaccessible mines.* “In *Lost*, unpredictability has never been good.”

# STRANGERS, TRAITORS, GHOSTS

I OPEN THE DOOR AND JUMP OUT OF THE PLANE AS SOON as we land on the narrow strip. The concrete shocks my knees and I stretch in the freezing cold air. I expect to find Mr. Henderson's 4x4 waiting for me, or Sheriff Flynn, maybe. Instead, a lone figure stands against the rising sun. With the light at her back, I can only see her silhouette—a tall, gangly figure whose long hair dances in the wind. She raises a hesitant hand.

My heart skips a beat. *Kyra*. Without thinking, I start toward her, her name on the tip of my tongue.

Then the light clears. Her nose is smaller. Her hair lighter. And the shout of recognition dies in my throat.

Piper Morden.

Not Kyra.

I forgot. Now I ache to forget again.

Behind me, the pilot disembarks. He grabs my backpack and hands it to me. “Your return flight is booked. Be here on time. See you in five days.”

So little time, but it has to be enough. “I’ll make sure of it. Thank you.”

The man hesitates, then says, “Be careful in Lost Creek. Not everything is as it seems here.”

Before I can reply with a simple, *I know. We’ve always gone our own way*, he turns on his heels with military precision and stalks back to the plane. I head toward Piper, who smirks. Plenty of people don’t understand our closed community, our way of living. We’re all used to odd comments like these.

Piper wraps her arms around me. She’s never done so before, but I cling to her. She’s strong and familiar. She smells of winter and home. “Hey, big city girl.”

“Hey.”

“How was your flight?”

“It was good. Quiet. Early.” *Strange.*

“I can only imagine.” Her smile fades. “Mr. H has a business meeting, so he asked me to pick you up. We’re glad you’re here. Kyra would’ve liked that.”

That’s new. These last few years, Piper never

considered Kyra's feelings, and now that she's dead doesn't seem like the right time to start.

I sling my backpack over my shoulders, wondering how to phrase this question without sounding accusatory. "What can I expect here, Piper? I know Kyra wasn't exactly...loved."

Piper stiffens, as if I'd slapped her. Then she flicks a wayward lock of hair out of her face. "Do you think us so cold that we wouldn't mourn her?"

"No, but—"

"Things changed after you left."

"Nothing ever changes in Lost Creek," I say, out of habit. The only way to mark the passage of time here is by the aging of the children. They grow older, as they're meant to, every birthday the start of a new year. The adults somehow appear to stop aging, and the elderly stop counting the years altogether.

Piper's mouth quirks up, twisting her face into a harsh grimace. "Never mind. You'll come to understand."

"Understand what?" I ask, but Piper has already turned away from me.

"We take care of our own here. You ought to know that."

I trek after her and regret not changing into my bunny boots. My sneakers are fit for traveling, but not for withstanding miles of snow. The cold bites.

At least I've arrived with the sun. When Piper and

I turn away from the airstrip, toward Lost, bright light peeks out over the horizon. Anticipation takes over and the churning in my stomach settles. I breathe. This is home. The zingy smell of ice in the air. The snow, layered over the permafrost, that crunches beneath our feet.

Amid the gentle hills and pine-tree forests lies the town of Lost Creek. Our small, private universe. From our vantage point, it looks tiny, like a collection of dollhouses rather than a place where people live.

But it is home.

*Welcome home.*

Piper leads me, as if I didn't know my way around. We walk along the single road toward Main Street, one of a grand total of five streets in Lost Creek. It's also the town's busiest street.

On any given day of the week, Main would be crowded. Even in the middle of winter, this is the day when gossip gets shared and the grocery store and the physician's pharmacy are stocked, when fishermen return from their camps along the creek with their catch.

But today is different.

The grocery store is closed. The street is abandoned. Well-cared-for houses are the only assurance that people actually live here. Fresh paint makes the town look newer than I've ever seen it. When I left, the houses were weather-worn and lived-through, perennially smudged

with sleet and mud. Today, they are pristine. A dash of color sidles up the wall of the old post office, though from this angle, I can't make out the design. It's as if, with Kyra gone, Lost had painted over all its cracks and creases.

"What happened here?" I ask.

"Hope," Piper says, quietly. She reverently touches a ribbon that's tied around a gate. "And remembrance."

I raise my eyebrows. "What does that mean?"

Piper doesn't answer, but now I notice that the ribbons are everywhere, tied around every flagpole and every door handle. Bows in magenta and black—Kyra's favorite color and the color of mourning. It's like Lost is demonstrating its sorrow. But we've never made our grief public, beyond funeral gatherings. When Kyra's grandfather passed away, the town honored him with a somber service. And *he* was liked by everyone.

It must be a coincidence.

"Look, I'm sorry if you thought I was being harsh before," I try. "I just want to understand what happened to Kyra."

Piper shakes her head. Her gaze searches Main. I have no idea what she's looking for, but I glance surreptitiously over my own shoulder. We're as alone as we were the moment we stepped into town. The street is empty, but the sunlight isn't as bright here. The shadows are longer and darker.

“You’ll find out,” Piper says. “Someday, you’ll understand.”

The wind picks up, weaving around the houses and whispering.

*Stranger.*

*Traitor.*

*Outsider.*

The words float in the same tune as the girl’s at the airport, soft and out of reach. I swirl around, but no one’s there.

I pull at the straps of my backpack to cinch it closer and fall into step with Piper, who keeps a firm pace. She doesn’t seem to mind the wind. Or maybe she doesn’t hear it.

At the turn that leads to my old house, I pause. Piper grabs my hand and pulls me in the other direction.

“I promised Mrs. Henderson I would take you to her as soon as you arrived, but once you’ve settled in, you should walk over.” Her voice is neutral.

We follow a side street until we reach a large, nineteenth-century townhouse on the edge of the creek. It’s the biggest plot of land in Lost, barring the spa outside the town’s borders. When settlers arrived in Lost Creek, Mr. Henderson’s great-grandfather was the first to find gold here—and his grandfather, the last. Over the years, the Henderson family had built a legacy of industry and investment. And although Mr. Henderson hasn’t been

able to reopen our mine, it's only right that their house reflects their status.

But while the house may appear imposing to outsiders, to Kyra and me, it was home. And now it's in mourning. I drop my backpack and gape.

The gate and flagpole are covered with black ribbons. On either side of the driveway, small flowers lie strewn across the snow. Bright pink salmonberry flowers. They're the same flowers the girl at the airport held. They're the same flowers Kyra used to scatter around town.

I squint. No, not blossoms, but flowers made of magenta ribbons, like the ones that hang on Main Street. They remind me of Kyra's paintings from her manic periods—not quite real enough, but still too close for comfort.

Maybe, just maybe, life is still a little unpredictable here.

"He was right, you know." Piper's words are so soft, they don't immediately register.

"Who?" I ask.

"The pilot. Not everything is as it seems. I'll see you at the service, if I don't see you before then. Come find me if you have questions." She starts back toward Main.

"Piper?"

She pauses and turns. "Yes?"

My stomach roils. *Wait. Don't leave me. I can't face Kyra's absence yet. Let me cling for one more moment to the world I used to know.*



I hesitate. “Tell Tobias that Luke said hi?”

At this, Piper smiles again, but I know it’s not for me.  
“Of course.”

Although Piper and I were friendly, we were never as close as our brothers. When Mom spent long days in Fairbanks and the surrounding towns seeing patients, I would often stay with Kyra, and Luke with Tobias. Luke had been furious when he found out that I’d made plans to come back to Lost to see Kyra without him. To see Kyra.

Before.

She knew I was coming. How could she not wait for me?