

THE NIGHT MY SISTER DISAPPEARS is wild, with a waxing moon sinking dull and red into the leafless claws of the trees.

Mom bursts into my chilly basement room, startling me awake. I blink in the sudden flood of light framing her silhouette. Even in the split second before she speaks, it's obvious—something's wrong. I'm coiled rigid on my bed, bracing for it.

"Skye, have you seen Deirdre?" She barely waits for me to shake my head before she turns away. Her footsteps hammer up the stairs, her voice echoing through the house. "Deirdre! This isn't funny!"

I'm stuck in slow motion. Maybe I'm still dreaming. If I just wait here long enough, I'll wake up for real. On the night table the clock flicks from 11:37 to 11:38. That can't be right, but my phone,

lying on the bed beside me, confirms it. A half-composed message to the group chat is still waiting for me when I swipe at the screen.

How could I have slept so long? I wasn't *that* tired. It was broad daylight.

And Deirdre was outside.

The wind whistles and mutters at the window. Instead of fading, the fear unfurls, blooms into an almost physical thing, a near-definable quality in the air that thickens around me until I can barely breathe. I fumble to my feet. She's thirteen, I tell myself. She wanders around out there on her own all the time. She doesn't need me looking after her. This is some sort of trick. Some sort of game. The sort of thing she'd think was perfect for the night before Halloween.

I'm on my way up the stairs when the front door slams; outside, Dad hurries away from the light, shrugging his coat on. The darkness swallows him, leaving only the muffled echo of Deirdre's name shouted into the night, over and over. Mom yanks closet doors open, hauls the couch away from the wall, slaps at every switch until the house swims with light, every corner exposed.

I watch her in silence, hugging my sweater around myself, winding my icy fingers in the wool. I should help. I should do *something*. But the thought is distant, muted, like it's trapped under a thick pane of glass. Outside, a little cone of white light from Dad's flashlight tracks his path around the yard, the tree trunks flashing thin and gray when he turns it toward the woods.

"Where could she have gone?" Mom cries, throwing the back door open and storming out into the garage. "Deirdre! *Deirdre!*"

The seconds tick by on the grandfather clock as I stand frozen,

alone in the living room. Years ago, by accident, Deirdre hit me in the head while she was throwing rocks in the river. That's what this is like: the ringing, muffled space before the pain came crashing in.

They'll find her. Any minute now. They have to.

The door to her room stands slightly ajar, and it swings open soundlessly at my touch. The closet doors are hanging wide from Mom's frantic search, the drawers pulled out from under the bed. The bedside light throws shadows all over the room. Its pale circle falls over Deirdre's dented pillow, the blankets rumpled, tossed aside.

The bed is full of leaves. Pinecones. Gray sticks, forked and bent. They're heaped over the mattress in a little drift; a few of the leaves are curled and scattered on the carpet, ground into brittle fragments. Dad's voice drifts in through the open window with a spill of cold air, a distant shout, thin and ineffectual. *Deirdre! Deirdre!* The leaves twitch and ruffle as if they're stirring at her name.



When tearing the house apart hasn't turned up any sign of her, Mom starts making phone calls. One after another, panic simmering in every word. I head for the closet to get my coat, but Mom looks up sharply from the phone.

"Where are you going?" she demands.

"To help Dad?"

She shakes her head, and I start to protest, but she interrupts me.

"Stay here, Skye!" She takes a deep breath, moderates her

voice. “You’re not leaving this house. Understand? Not until we find her.”

There’s no arguing with that. I sink into a chair at the kitchen table as Mom punches in another number. The wind whines at the windows. Two more numbers, two more weird truncated conversations. Then she hangs up, lets the phone clatter onto the table, and puts the heels of her hands to her eyes for a moment.

“Was she here when you got home from school?”

“I thought so,” I stammer. “I mean, I thought she was outside. Her boots were gone.”

“And you didn’t go looking for her? After *hours*? We went out for *one* evening, Skye! We left you in charge!”

Trapped in my chair, I can’t back away from her rising voice. I scrunch down a little lower.

“I fell asleep! It’s not like I—”

Mom shakes her head, puts a weary hand out, cutting me off.

“I’m calling the police.”

I can’t bear to sit next to her while she answers questions for 911, explaining how she’d gone into Deirdre’s room to turn off her light and found only the leaves in her bed. I get up to look out the patio doors for a moment, at the distant gleam of the neighbor’s porch light, then put the kettle on and pull boxes of tea from the cupboard. It doesn’t keep me busy for nearly long enough. The glass wall of my calm is spiderwebbed with cracks, bright, sharp threads that fill my head, a labyrinth of what-ifs and maybes.

In my head I trace and retrace every path Deirdre could have taken. I imagine her stalking down the road, the gravel crunching

under her ugly, black rain boots, turning her head like a deer in the flare of oncoming headlights. There's not many ways to walk away from here. At the top of the hill, between the two old stone farmhouses, you can turn right, where the road eventually ends in a snowmobile trail that winds through the woods or left toward the highway.

How could I have just fallen asleep? The afternoon was perfectly normal; Deirdre's always outside when I get home. If I'd been awake, at least I would have noticed when she didn't come back. Surely, even if it's been hours, she can't have gone that far. It's cold out. All our coats are on their hangers in the closet.

Unless a car pulled over, unless the passing headlights caught her pale hair in the dark—if she was cold enough, maybe she'd get in. Maybe she told them home was somewhere far from here. She never would have wanted to go back to our old neighborhood—and that's two thousand miles from here, anyway—but maybe anywhere else would do, as long as it was away from us. Away from me. If that's what happened, she'd disappear as surely as if she'd stepped into the river. Swallowed up.

But every time I come to the end of those thin speculations, I find them skittering over the one I can't let go. That she slipped into the forest, a shadow among shadows, to wade through the stagnant pools between the tree roots. Or that she splashed down the narrow path of the creek under the sinking moon. But that's as far as I can follow her. I don't know what's back there—I have only the sketchiest mental map—and she's disappeared into its empty spaces like a fish, or a frog, or a dryad.

Those woods devour everything.

Mom accepts a cup of tea but doesn't drink.

"She'll be okay," I tell Mom as she puts the phone down again, because she's cracking too, trembling on the edge of shattering into a million pieces. Not like it will do much good. I'm putting scotch tape on a broken window. "She's out there all the time."

"Not at night," Mom says, and that shuts me up. She drums her fingers against the handle of her mug for a moment, then gets up to retrieve her laptop from the living room.

"What are you doing?" If she says *work*, I think I'll scream. But not even Mom is that hardcore.

"Sending messages. Just in case."

The computer screen washes ghost-pale light over her face, blue and unforgiving, flickering with all the possibilities.

"How long until the police get here?"

Mom rakes a hand through her hair in a familiar gesture that says *I'm busy, don't talk to me*. "They said they'd send someone right away."

Did a root reach out for her foot? Did a puddle turn into a sinkhole under her step? You can't trust the ground back there. You could break something just trying to navigate it. Especially in the dark. There are *things* back there, Deirdre told me once.

Please let her be crouched somewhere, crying, waiting for Dad's voice, waiting for him to find her. Please let her come home in her own good time, like our cat Mog used to.

But Mog didn't come home, in the end.

The thought twists my stomach. Every time I yelled at Deirdre, ignored her, rolled my eyes—every time I kept my mouth

shut instead of asking if she was okay—everything I've done was the wrong thing. The memories go round and round, a nauseating spiral.

Come home. I push the thought out toward the woods as if she'll hear it. *I'll play whatever stupid game you want. I promise. Just come home.*



The police officer has a kind face and a military-wannabe haircut. He listens solemnly to Mom's semi-coherent rambling, making notes on a long, white form on a clipboard. The questions are icy in their practicality: What was she wearing? Can she swim? Mom keeps circling back to the leaves in Deirdre's bed.

"That's strange, isn't it?" she pleads. "Isn't that strange? I don't understand what she was doing. Could it have been somebody else who put them there, or...well, I left them where they were. I thought maybe you might need to see them. In case—I don't know, just in case."

"We'll take a look," he says solemnly, again and again. "We'll take a look."

We all turn at the sound of the back door opening, but it's only Dad, empty-handed, looking pale and shell-shocked.

"They sent me inside," he says. "They need something of Deirdre's. For the dogs, so they can track her."

Outside, more flashlights weave back and forth across the yard now, winking in and out of the trees. The night is coming alive with sirens and flashing lights that strobe against the branches.

I stand at the window, watching them. The bare branches quiver against the sky. The moon is almost down now, a scrap of clotted light visible between the trees. I don't turn when the policeman—Officer Leduc—sits in the armchair next to me.

“Do you have any ideas about where she might have gone?” he asks. “Does she have a friend she might have gone to visit, anything like that?”

“Deirdre doesn't have friends,” I reply dully. She has make-believe worlds instead. Stick monsters and animal bones.

“She's having some trouble adjusting,” Mom adds, her voice high. “We've only been here a few months. Since July. And she's never had great social skills, she's”—the words wobble, and I glance around just in time to see the tears start sliding down her cheeks—“she's just been having trouble.”

A flare of anger makes me turn away from her pinched, weepy face. I haven't had trouble “adjusting.” I'm not the reason our yard is crawling with police officers at one in the morning. It's Deirdre, as usual, who's in trouble; and it's me, as usual, who was supposed to save her.

And I'm done with that. She *knew* I was done with that.

“She was outside when you got home,” Officer Leduc prompts. “Is that right?”

“She likes to explore,” Mom says unsteadily, behind me, as I nod. “She was so excited to move here. She loves the woods.”

“How about you?” Officer Leduc continues. “Have you done much exploring around here? Is there anywhere we should look?”

“Did you bring hip waders?” I ask. His eyebrows go up. I

sigh. "It's practically a lake back there. I gave up after the first time. Maybe she found a way through that wasn't too deep." Or maybe she just doesn't care if she gets wet. She came home soaked and muddy often enough. "Or you could try the castle, I guess."

"She means that big pile of dirt," Mom clarifies. "On the empty lot next door. Some of the other neighborhood kids like to hang out there."

I rest my forehead against the window. The glass is cold. *Castle* is Deirdre's word for it, not mine. "Yeah. That."

"Okay." He scrawls a few notes, frowning at his clipboard, gives me a sympathetic look. "You tell me if you think of anything else, all right?"

"Sure." They'll find her. Maybe she's just camped out somewhere, curled in a sleeping bag at the foot of the castle. Hill, dirt pile, whatever. They'll drag her home muddy and unrepentant, leaves in her hair, sticking her chin out and daring us to yell at her.

Eventually the door opens, admitting men's low voices, and Mom almost knocks her chair over as she hurries to meet them. Officer Leduc follows her. I stay put by the window, waiting. Waiting.

But Mom's sobs start low and echo up to me, and some police officer is saying something grim and professional, and when I shuffle to the top of the stairs and look down at them, she's cradled against Dad's chest, and he's buried his face in her hair. It's not Deirdre they've brought back.

It's her boots.

PART ONE

DEIRDRE

This land like a mirror turns you inward
And you become a forest in a furtive lake;
The dark pines of your mind reach downward,
You dream in the green of your time,
Your memory is a row of sinking pines.

—GWENDOLYN MACEWAN, "DARK PINES UNDER WATER"



ONE

July

THE NAME DEIRDRE MEANS STORMY, according to Mom's old baby name book. It suits her. She's rail-thin and pale as dandelion fluff, and behind her ice-blue eyes there are always tempests brewing. Our parents are perpetually perplexed by her; there are constant strategies, negotiations, teachers' conferences, therapists' appointments. Worried, low-voiced conversations down the hall. She's always been the one in tears at the sad movie, the one who wakes up screaming.

I'm easier. Straightforward, dependable. When they told me we were moving, I said "great!" It was a no brainer; somewhere nobody knew either of us. Somewhere to start over. Not that things

were likely to be any different for Deirdre across the country—or anywhere, really, no matter what our parents told themselves. It doesn't matter how hard you dig your heels in and refuse to grow up; time marches on with or without you. At thirteen, she's almost as tall as Mom, all elbows and knees. She refuses to wear anything but dresses, and she leaves her hair unwashed until it's hanging in lank strings and Mom finally orders her into the shower. She owns a bra, but after the one time last year some loser snapped one of its straps at school, she's insisted on going without.

We've always been at the same school before. Not this year. Here, middle and high school are firmly separated: Deirdre at Hillcrest, me at Lanark Centennial. Mostly, it's been a relief. But though I never let it show, I was afraid for her. She doesn't know how to put on a brave face. Instead of bending in the wind, she snaps like chalk or a flower stem. I'm not exactly a master of camouflage myself, but I can get by. Or at least I can now, since I've kicked loose from having to ride to her rescue all the time. I didn't know how to teach her how to blend in. I never have.

If I wanted to cross to the other side of the street and pretend we weren't related, it's not like it would have been hard. I'm dark and quiet compared to her. Practical, undramatic. I keep my hair cut close to my ears because it's easier, and maybe because she's always refused to cut hers. I've never had much patience for fashion, but at least I wear jeans. On good days it's a family joke, how opposite we are, and we laugh together at the teachers who claim to see a sisterly resemblance.

Our names are about the only things tying us together. My

parents' attempt at instilling some sense of family heritage. When you hear *Skye*, the first thing you think about is the clouds—insubstantial, wispy. Moody and changeable, like my sister. When I was younger, I got so many rapid compliments that I was annoyed at them for picking it. But Dad explained that *Skye* is a place, an island. If you google it, you see a place full of crags and stony slopes, rocks that stand unmoved as the sea breaks over them. The green slopes are a thin veneer over hard bone.



Riding to her rescue was my job before I ever had to do it in real life. In the kingdoms Deirdre invented, I was the Queen of Swords. All the kingdoms were ruled by queens. Deirdre was the first, of course—originally she was just *the* Queen, which always made me complain because I got stuck being her subservient knight. But then she discovered tarot cards and adopted the figures from the deck: Queen of Swords, Queen of Wands, Queen of Cups, Queen of Coins. But even those weren't enough to contain her stories, and they spilled over into monarchs visiting from faraway lands, outlines blooming on her map. Queen of Feathers. Queen of Leaves. Queen of Fire. Queen of the Sea. There were too many kingdoms to keep track of. Even if we stuck to the ones we knew best, the ones where we'd named the roads, the ones with magic systems and long-standing feuds, there were more than a dozen. The others branched off them—not incomplete so much as undiscovered. Places we hadn't gotten around to exploring yet.

I preferred to play *in big*, acting everything out. That way I got to wield my sword in fight scenes. She loved playing *in small* just as much. Barbies made pretty good queens, with their elaborate dresses, but Deirdre found them limiting. The most magical they got was plastic fairy wings.

She preferred to make the denizens of the kingdoms herself. Clay, popsicle sticks, feathers, felt, whatever. Construction paper silhouettes would do in a pinch, adorned with crowns of tin foil or pipe cleaner. If the results were misshapen, so much the better. Monsters were way more interesting to Deirdre than animals, even talking ones.

She built dioramas to house them, decorated with scraps of the river valley—smooth gray stones painted with nail polish, sprigs of pussy willows, peeling sticks glued together to make branching trees or bridges or limbs for magical creatures. Disney princesses and little ceramic figurines vied for space with the monstrosities she made herself. Plastic spiders sat on webs woven from acrylic yarn. Pieces from a broken mirror winked out from unexpected corners. Her walls were covered in long scrolls written in a language she'd invented, papier mâché masks bedecked with feathers and ribbons, painted maps—some of them corresponding to the places in the dioramas, others a world removed.

Deirdre's role wasn't fixed; with just the two of us to direct, she spun all the characters out around me. The Queen of Swords was still more like a knight of the realm, really, protecting her from villainy, following her on her epic quests. But since I got to be a queen and still be a fighter, I accepted that position without

dispute. I became sort of a queen-errant, too restless for the throne, lending my peerless martial skills to worthy causes wherever I found them. My kingdom had been attacked and overrun in my absence, I think. It was very tragic. Most of Deirdre's stories turned out that way in the end.

Sometimes she'd accept my contributions—take an idea and run with it, unwinding all the consequences. But the kingdoms were hers, unquestionably and forever. I liked being the Queen of Swords: towering, fierce, unconquerable. But I was always traveling in Deirdre's country. She was all the queens and none of them. She belonged there.

And where I belonged? That was more complicated.



For two months I crossed days off the calendar with big red Xs. Counting down to a fresh start. I wouldn't be Psycho Skye after we moved. Away from Deirdre, at a different school, I wouldn't have to be.

It was a grueling three-day drive, and we pulled into the neighborhood past ten o'clock, all of us tired and frazzled, Mog yowling in her carrier, Mom yelling at the GPS. The new house was only a year old, and it stood alone on its street, an island of welcoming yellow light.

We ricocheted through it, running from room to room to take it all in. It didn't take long. Deirdre and I would be sharing a room, a prospect she claimed to be excited about. I wasn't so sure. I smiled and nodded for Dad's benefit when he showed me the

dank little corner room in the basement that he planned to transform for me. The floor was bare concrete, a low opening in the far wall revealing a dark, spiderwebby crawl space. A ragged rectangle, traced in marker across the plastic skin of the insulation, would be a window. It looked like something Deirdre might have drawn there, pretending it was a magical secret passage.

“Nothing to it,” Dad said, hugging my shoulders and giving me a little reassuring shake. “Right?”

Deirdre kept coming back to the tall windows that filled the back wall of the living and dining rooms. The light from the house vanished across a long, grassy slope, and beyond that the woods were an undifferentiated wall of shadow, darker than the sky. She sat there looking hungrily out at them even after Mom and Dad went to bed.

While Deirdre sat perched by the window, I made midnight fries. Cooking was only going to make the heat more oppressive, but rituals were rituals, and she insisted. The sticky dark pressed up against the glass, and a fan purred in the corner, pushing the air around. I was pulling the tray from the oven when she flapped a hand at me suddenly, her voice an urgent half whisper.

“Turn off the light!”

“Why?”

“You have to see this!”

I shut the oven door, scraped my bangs off my forehead.

“Is it something real?” I demanded. “I’m not budging for one of your—”

“Yes,” she hissed impatiently, her nose pressed up against the screen. “Come on!”

I left the fries sizzling on the stovetop—too hot to eat yet anyway—and snapped the light off, felt my way carefully around the haphazard mountains of moving boxes. Deirdre was a spare shadow in the luminous oblong of the window, her hair lifting a little as the fan rotated away from her.

“Look,” she whispered. Outside, a point of pale green light winked on and off, on and off, bobbing erratically. And there—another. And another. As my eyes adjusted, the yard became full of them, like a bowl full of stars, stirred and left slowly revolving. Beside me, Deirdre’s smile was the faintest gleam.

“Fairies,” she said, and I snorted.

“What, fireflies aren’t cool enough for you?”

“Come on, they’re obviously magic.” She didn’t see me roll my eyes, too caught up in the dancing lights outside. “They’re totally fairies.”

Even after she reluctantly agreed we should go to bed, it was hard to sleep. Without streetlights to dilute it, night here was dense and deep, and it was full of sounds I didn’t know. I hadn’t expected the air to be different—sluggish, clingy. Hot breath on your neck. A room for me was only part of Dad’s grand plans for the basement, so at least there would be somewhere cool to retreat to eventually. But the room I shared with Deirdre was stifling, even with the windows flung wide open.

“Skye.” Deirdre’s whisper slid across the room. “Are you asleep?”

“Not anymore,” I growled, although I hadn’t been.

“Oh. Sorry.” She rolled over, the blankets rustling. Sighed.

“Are you okay?” I relented.

"It's just so dark. You know? It's so different."

"Yeah." Outside the window, beyond the black overhang of the roof, the Milky Way threw a long arm across the sky. "Look. You can see the stars."

She wrestled with the blankets for a long minute, flopped down with her pillow at the foot of the bed, making me snort.

"There," she said. "Now I can. D'you think they should be fairies too? From another kingdom, maybe?"

I ignored her question. "You can't sleep like that."

"Sure I can." She lifted her feet, waved them in the air for emphasis. "Why not?"

I rolled over, feeling for a cooler spot on the pillow, sticking a leg outside my thin quilt.

"Did we move to the Amazon?" I muttered. "It's like breathing soup."

"Maybe it'll get better if it rains. Is that crickets, do you think? That sound?"

"I guess. Or frogs, maybe." I'd never heard them before either. "I guess it was too cold for them back home."

We listened to the singing night in silence for a little while, until I started to think Deirdre had gone to sleep, but then she spoke again.

"The creek can be the gate to the kingdoms." I could hear her smile in the words. "We could even fish for algae. Remember that?"

One time we'd found a stick wedged upright among the river stones, the water chattering around it. Deirdre had declared that it marked the way from the ordinary world to ours. She'd

twisted it in place—like you'd turn a key—and pulled it free to use as a scepter, since I already had a sword. After a long morning successfully beating back the invading hordes, she'd insisted we leave it behind, a testament to our reign. And after that, we found a new key at every visit and left it pointing skywards from the river. Layers of ritual accumulated around it: you had to walk around it three times; you had to swear undying loyalty by wood, stone, water, and bone. Anything done once becomes a ritual for Deirdre. It's as if she's trying to make reality cooperate through sheer, stubborn force. Wearing it down with repetition.

"I remember the gate," I said eventually, when she made an impatient noise, "but fishing for—what? How do you fish for algae? That doesn't even make sense."

Deirdre sprang upright, the pillow falling to the floor unheeded.

"You don't remember that?" she cried.

"Shhh," I hissed. She ignored me and jumped over to my bed, curled up at its end, shoving my feet out of her way.

"How can you not remember this? I was, like, six years old and I remember this. Look. You know when we went walking in the valley? That little piece of the river that came under the bridge?"

Under the blanket I went tense, something pressing its way up through my memory, rolling over in its sleep. "You mean the lagoon?"

"No, no." Deirdre thumped her head back against the footboard. "It was part of the river. Just slower. And really shallow. There was all that tall grass, remember? And it froze solid in the winter."

"Right." I rolled my shoulders, forced myself to relax. That

chattering tributary was the scene of a hundred memories, after all, most of them benign. We'd gotten in the worst trouble one time for walking on the ice there. We hadn't been in any danger—we'd punched through the ice with rocks to see how thick it was, and found just the slick riverbed underneath, the barest trickle of water. Though, of course, it had been no use telling Mom that.

"We used to try to catch water bugs there. But it was too hard, because they were so fast and tiny. And so Dad gave us sticks and told us to fish for algae. Remember? It came up in these long, gross strings, like—" She pulled her hand away from her nose and giggled, snorting. "Remember?"

I smiled back in the dark, unevenly. It sounded like something we would do.

"This is going to be great," Deirdre said with a sigh of satisfaction. Her upturned face was a faint, pale oval in the starlight. "Imagine. It'll be like if we had the valley all to ourselves, just for us."

The valley. Long after Deirdre crawled back into her own bed and finally grew still, her breathing evening into sleep, I lay there listening to the alien chorus in the woods, the memories pulling me along. Down the plunge of the ravine, along the bike path that wound down to the river at the bottom. Beneath the houses perched at the crests of the hills on either side, silhouetted against the thin clouds. I knew when I'd walked there for the last time, past the furry petals of crocuses in the brown grass. But I'd been back in my dreams. Again and again.

It was as if I left part of myself behind. As if it were still there, walking through all the places I used to know. They wound

out like tree roots to unknowable depths. Maybe that's what it means to put down roots in a place—laying down paths that you can trace with your eyes closed. All the places that make you who you are. All the things you wish you could forget.

I had no roots here. The forest had its own depth. It was a sinkhole, bottomless. But we floated on its surface like leaves in water, unanchored.

It didn't matter, I told myself over and over. Didn't matter. You could pull up a plant, set it down in new soil. Roots could be severed. I didn't tell Deirdre about the dreams, the footsteps that dogged me, though she'd have understood.

I didn't want Deirdre to be the one who understood.

I'd help Mom plant a new garden. I'd help Dad finish the basement. Left behind in the dark, those roots would disappear eventually. And I'd grow upwards, toward the light.

TWO

OFFICER LEDUC TAKES PITY ON me, trailing uselessly around the kitchen, and puts me in charge of making a page for the search. I set it up as dawn starts to show around the edges of the sky. Mom manages to track down a picture on her thumb drive where Deirdre's actually smiling. I'm tempted to tell Mom that nobody will recognize her if we post that. She looks so innocent, squinting into the camera in the sun. Her white-blond hair is braided—probably by me—and she's wearing a blue sundress that makes her look about three years younger than she is. But in the end, I can't bring myself to say anything, and I post it dutifully. Retweet the police, share posts from the news stations as they start to pick it up.

The day turns crisp and pumpkin-golden, and the police

go on scouring the neighborhood. Knocking on doors, asking questions. Looking under decks, in sheds. Following dogs back and forth across the face of the forest, in and out of the tangle. I close the window but can't shut out the voices, the barking, the pulse of helicopter blades. Heavy foreign footsteps echo through the house, a counterpoint to Mom's tearful voice.

The doorbell rings more constantly than it ever would for trick-or-treaters, heralding a parade of reporters and neighbors bringing food: lasagna, chili, muffins, bread. I'd kind of forgotten that other people live here, that there are actual human beings behind the blank closed faces of the houses scattered up the hill. We're not even a suburb out here. *Exurb*, Mom called it once. A tiny constellation of human presence, perched on the edge of the swamp.

One of the casserole bearers is a boy with long, wheat-colored hair pulled into a messy ponytail, broad-shouldered in a black-and-yellow Lanark Centennial athletic jacket. William Wright. He stands waiting on our doorstep, his hands buried in flowered oven mitts to carry a big white ceramic dish. I should be glad to see him. I could have summoned him by text anytime today, if I wanted a shoulder to cry on. That's probably what he's hoping for—a chance to be the hero. The thought makes me want to disappear back down the hall above the foyer, so he'll have to leave his offering there and go away.

Before I can act on the impulse, he glances up and meets my eyes through the glass, offers an awkward smile, lifts the casserole apologetically.

"Hey," he says when I open the door. "I brought dinner."

I don't tell him that he's only the latest in our stream of visitors. He's the first one my age, anyway.

"Thanks," I say instead.

"Do you mind if I come in? This is just, um, kind of hot, where can I—"

"Just put it on the stairs, I guess." I stand back to let him in, and he deposits it on the carpeted step, pulls off the silly oven mitts.

"I'm really sorry," he says. "About your sister. I mean, I hope she's okay."

I'm probably giving him the look that makes Deirdre roll her eyes. When I slip into it in front of other people, they get shifty and uncomfortable. But William knows it by now—he's teased me about my resting bitch face often enough. Anyway, better stone-faced than crying. There's no way I'm crying in front of William.

"I thought...did you want to talk about it? We don't have to, but—"

I shake my head, fold my arms. He returns my stare for a moment, at a loss, then glances back out the window at the giant police trailer filling half the driveway—their mobile headquarters, Officer Leduc explained. Beyond it, the road is lined with vans from the news stations. An ambulance waits off to one side, just in case. Police officers hurry back and forth, and cameramen and neighbors stand around in little knots. Ants milling around a nest.

"Has this all been here since last night?"

"Basically." There, I sound sort of human again. "It's kind of a circus."

"Do they need volunteers or anything? To help look?"

“I don’t think so. I don’t know. They’ve got the helicopter, right? And the dogs.”

He nods, sympathetic. There’s a long silence. Flash forward to what I can expect at school as *that girl with the missing sister*. No one will know what to say, including me. Count on Deirdre to ruin everything, leave me cut off, spreading awkward silence like a plague. I can practically hear her sniff of satisfaction. But William’s trying, at least. He’s here. He’s making a gesture. I kind of wish he hadn’t.

“If there’s anything I can do, let me know,” he says finally. “I’m around, you know, if you want some company or anything. I’m...guessing you’re not going to be at Kevin’s tonight.”

I shake my head again. I would rather be just about anywhere other than here. But my presence at the party would be either a total downer or inexcusably weird. I don’t need everyone watching me, waiting for me to fall apart. I definitely don’t need to fake my way through dealing with Kevin. “It’s not like he’s going to miss me.”

My tone makes William’s eyebrows go up in surprise, though he covers it with an answering shrug. I’m off-balance, forgetting the rules. I shouldn’t have let that slip, and I fumble for a way to take it back. I can’t mess things up with William’s friends. My friends, I correct myself. But the idea feels angular and foreign in a way it didn’t yesterday. Like a stone in my mouth.

“He’s your friend more than mine, is all,” I come up with after a too-long pause.

“Well. You kind of intimidate him.”

“That’s what Sophie said.” I sigh. “I don’t know. *You* manage to hang out with me without being a douchebag.”

“Somehow.” His smile is brief, self-deprecating.

“Look, forget I said anything, okay? I don’t mean to be bitchy.”

“I think you’re allowed. And anyway, it’s Kevin. He kind of brings it on himself.”

“Yeah. Well. Anyway, I’m sorry. I’m just...”

“Don’t worry about it. Seriously.” There’s another silence. He passes the oven mitts from hand to hand for a moment before meeting my eyes again. “Well. I’ll get out of your hair. Text me, okay?”

“Sure.” I try not to sound too relieved. “Thanks. I will.”

“I hope they find her,” he says, retreating through the door.

“Yeah. Me too.”



They haul me upstairs out of hiding so the social worker can talk to all three of us together. *To get a picture of the family situation*, she says. *To get an idea of why this happened*. Janelle, as she introduces herself, is an ample, motherly-looking person, with a waterfall of black curls, bright red lipstick, and a soft, high voice. My mom looks cold and hard sitting beside her, eyes red-rimmed and haggard but her back poker-straight.

“You said she was having some trouble, Sarah,” Janelle prompts. “Is that right?”

Mom gives a tight little nod.

“Could you tell me about that?”

“She’s always had trouble making friends,” Mom says. “She and Skye were really close, and that was just...all she needed, I guess.”

I study the carpet and refuse to respond.

“She didn’t quite know how to connect with other kids. She was just so...lost in her own little world, really. And lately, well, Skye’s been making her own friends, and Deirdre...kind of felt like she’d been left behind.”

I kick at the legs of my chair. I’m not listening. This is not my fault. My armor is forged from steel plates. Mom’s barbs bounce right off me.

“Is that how you’d put it, Skye?”

I mumble an indifferent response. Mom gives an aggrieved little huff, looks away out the window.

“The learning resource staff at Hillcrest said you’d been in touch about seeking counseling for Deirdre.”

“She’s always been kind of explosive,” Dad puts in, “and we keep trying to get a handle on it, but—”

“We?” Mom doesn’t raise her voice. Her mouth is a thin line.

“Oh, Sarah, come on, don’t start.”

“Who’s the one who always takes time for appointments? Who’s the one making the phone calls?”

“We talked about this. Didn’t we talk about this? You’re the one with an office job, you’re the one with the flexibility—”

“All right, let me jump in here,” Janelle interrupts. “Brent, what is it you do?”

“Drywall.” He sighs. “With a buddy of mine.”

“And Sarah?”

“I’m a project manager,” she says stiffly. “For Cambria. It’s a tech start-up.”

“So you’ve both been working some pretty intense hours, I guess.”

“Hey,” Dad protests, “I’m home at four to be with the kids. Usually.”

“Sometimes five,” Mom mutters, “sometimes six...”

“Jesus, Sarah, they’re teenagers now. They can look after themselves. They don’t need me around to...”

Dad’s words falter and sink under Mom’s arctic silence. He scrubs a hand over his face.

“And how do you feel about that, Skye?”

They all turn to look at me. I fold my arms.

“Perfectly fine. *I* can look after myself.”

Dad’s shoulders take on a defeated slouch, and Mom bristles all over again, glaring at me. I’m done with this. I shove my chair back and stalk from the kitchen. Behind me, Janelle goes on trying to play referee while they snipe at each other.

My room is as much of a refuge as I’ve got: quiet and sunny, my plants filling one wall on the stand Dad built for me. But even here, there’s no escape. When I fling myself onto the bed and pull out my phone, there’s a million notifications, all about Deirdre. Sympathy. People asking if there’s anything they can do. Sophie has texted—*OMG!!! ARE YOU OKAY???*—and I don’t know how to answer that, so I don’t. I scroll through the group chat about

Kevin's party instead. Who's going as what. I hadn't decided on a costume yet. I bet they're too hip to do Halloween for real; it's probably all ironic accessories. I was waiting to see what Sophie and Bethany were planning.

Not that it matters now.

I don't bother to answer the knock at my door, so after a pause, the knock comes again.

"Skye?" It's not Mom. Janelle. "Would this be a good time to talk?"

"Whatever." It's not like I have much choice. I don't look up from my phone as she opens the door.

"Wow," she says. "You must have quite the green thumb."

"I guess." I grew some beans from seed in third grade for science class, and ever since, I've been going nonstop, taking cuttings from every houseplant I could lay hands on. My collection is getting pretty impressive—a balancing act of height and texture, long trailing vines arranged just so, framing the others.

"Orchids, even!" Janelle turns her smile on me like a searchlight, and I wince. "A client gave me one of these once, and I killed it stone dead. Is there a secret to it?"

"Not really." Does she think she's being subtle? Get the sulky teenager talking. Get her to open up. Well, I can play along with that. "All you have to do is soak them in a sinkful of water for half an hour every week. And then leave them alone."

"I thought you were supposed to keep them in a tray of water. So they had the humidity."

"No, they hate that. Like, they're from the rainforest, but

they grow in these little hollows in the trees, right? Places that fill up with water every now and again and then drain right out.”

Outside my window, the door to the garage creaks open, slams shut. Mom stalks out to the sad, straggly patch of the garden under the apple tree with a shovel, stabs it into the ground.

“Well, you obviously really know your plants. Do you garden with your mom?”

“Sometimes. It’s pretty much the only thing we have in common.” I was her right-hand man in taming the masterful waterfalls of color she’d orchestrated at our old house. I know more botanical names than she does. She looks at garden magazines for the pictures. I like the Latin words. I found a website that shows you how to pronounce them, even. You can click a button and listen to measured female voices saying: *abelia*, *stephanandra*, *galanthus*, *ludisia*, *araucaria*, *chamaedorea*. They’re like an incantation.

The garden was where I was most at home with Mom. When she comes up for air between all-nighters at work, she throws herself into other projects. Dad is the muscle in our house, the one who builds and fixes things. Eventually. But it’s Mom who makes things happen. Most of the time, trying to help her with something, to be companionable, only slows her down. Her barely concealed impatience is sharp as any rebuke. Back at our old house, at least in the garden, there was space for me too.

But it’s different here. Like everything else.

“What about Deirdre?” Janelle says delicately. “What did you two have in common?”

I scowl. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

She fingers the shiny leaves of the philodendron draped over the shelf. "You know, I'm the oldest of four sisters. I know exactly how big of a pain they can be. Even when you love them."

I look away. This is the part where I'm supposed to open up, I suppose. Spill my guts. Confess my sins. She's trying to earn my trust, hoping I'll reward her with information.

"Did you ever wish you were an only child?" I ask, still looking at the wall.

"I think everyone with siblings wishes that sometimes."

"But not everyone gets their wish."

She sits beside me on the bed.

"You feel responsible for what happened."

"I should have been awake," is all I say.

"Are you often the one looking out for Deirdre?"

"I'm the only one." If that comes out a little more forcefully than I meant it to, well, that's fine. It's true. "I don't understand why she's *like* this. It's like she can't even see herself in the mirror. And people...used to talk about her all the time. At school." They did more than talk. But I'm not going there.

"It's an awkward age," Janelle offers. "Growing up is hard sometimes. I'm sure you had your own bumps in the road."

That's one way of putting it. I hunch my shoulders against the thought.

"Awkward. Whatever. She *makes* it awkward. She makes herself a target. She just...refuses to grow up. It makes no fucking sense; it's like she's doing it on purpose. How many

times do you have to rescue somebody before they figure out how to save themselves?"

I bite the sentence short. She's getting to me.

"Some things just take time," Janelle says. "Right? Everything grows."

I don't answer, and she sighs and stands.

"Here's my card," she says. "You call me anytime you want to talk, okay? Anytime, and I really mean that."

I wait until she's closed the door behind her, and then I shred the card into little pieces and throw it in the trash. That went pretty well, all things considered. I got through it. I didn't let anything slip. I told her what she wanted to hear.

So why do I feel like crying?

Outside, Mom is still attacking the sad remains of the garden. I watch as she levers up sticky clumps of wet earth, turns them over. It refuses to even crumble, and she has to hack every shovelful apart. You could probably make pottery with it. She hasn't bothered with it since a month after we arrived, when the rose bushes she planted withered in the clay and the deer cropped everything else—from the bee balm to the irises to the nasturtiums—right down to the ground, leaving only ragged bits of stem behind.

Everything grows.

Right. Not here it doesn't.

FIREreads

 #getbooklit

Your hub for the hottest young adult books!

Visit us online and sign up for our
newsletter at FIREreads.com



@sourcebookfire



sourcebookfire



firereads.tumblr.com