THE ANGEL AND THE WOLF

by

Will Fawley
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

Committee:

Director

Department Chairperson

Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

Date: April 23, 2013

Spring Semester 2013
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
The Angel and the Wolf

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Will Fawley
Bachelor of Arts
James Madison University, 2008

Director: Helon Habila, Professor
Department of Creative Writing

Spring Semester 2013
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
This work is licensed under a creative commons attribution-noderivs 3.0 unported license.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents and my sisters who taught me that it is possible to fly.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the professors who inspired me, encouraged me, and most importantly, challenged me to grow, especially Helon Habila, Susan Shreve, Alan Cheuse, Margaret Yocom, and Robert Nadeau.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eight</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Nine</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Ten</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eleven</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Twelve</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Thirteen</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Fourteen</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Fifteen</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Sixteen</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seventeen</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eighteen</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Nineteen</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Twenty................................................................. 201
Chapter Twenty-One............................................................ 218
Chapter Twenty-Two ............................................................. 228
Chapter Twenty-Three ........................................................... 237
Epilogue ............................................................................. 239
ABSTRACT

THE ANGEL AND THE WOLF

Will Fawley, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2013

Thesis Director: Helon Habila

This thesis is a novel about a Native American girl named Angela, who lives with her grandmother, until one day Grandmother vanishes. In the wake of her grandmother’s disappearance, Angela notices that the scars on her back have split open and wings are beginning to grow from the wounds. She soon realizes that the wings and her grandmother’s disappearance are somehow connected, and begins searching for Grandmother in an attempt to figure out what secrets are twisted in the roots of her family tree and what kind of future exists for a girl with wings.
PROLOGUE

“This story begins after the world was created and destroyed and created again, long before you were born. Even before I was born. Before the sun was burnt and the moon grew cold, and before the animals forgot how to talk, the world was a different place. You’ve heard stories of fox and coyote, of wolf and bear, and of man and woman, but there was a time when these stories were not separate, but all part of one story. In those days wolf stood tall like a man and man crawled on all fours if he pleased, free to talk to the moon. It was in these times that a little girl, not much older than yourself, lived with her parents and animal family in the Great Plains. Her tribe was called the Animal People because they did not distinguish between animal and human, but were all part of one big family that lived together in a forest that grew straight up out of the flat land. Some of the Animal People had two legs and two arms. Others had tails or wings, claws or fins. But they were all Animal People. The little girl’s parents called her Cloud because she liked to climb up to the top of the trees and feel the air rush through her hair and between her fingers.

Little Cloud lived in harmony with her family and with the sky for many years. But then people came from far away. They crossed seas and forests, mountains and Great Plains, losing pieces of themselves with each step. And as they lost pieces of themselves and memories of their home, they lost connection to the animals of their home land.
These people had no wings or tails, nor the freedom of the wolf to talk to the moon. They were trapped on two legs and forgot how to live with their animal-selves.

When the Newcomers reached Cloud’s tribe, they were taken in by the Animal People, who showed them how to farm the plains, hunt in the forests, and fish the rivers. In exchange, the Newcomers gave the Animal People Christian names. The Animal People were soon infected by the forgetfulness of the Newcomers; they caught it like a disease. They soon forgot their true names, and with them their true selves. They forgot that they were all children of the Great Spirit, that humans are no different from animals. The Animal People grew uneasy and fearful as the forgetful-sickness divided them in two. Half of them became people, and the other half became animals, their very lives separated between the two worlds. The Great Spirit became very saddened by the Animal People’s forgetfulness and took away their ability to communicate, leaving them with only their own voices echoing in their heads. He made humans forgot how to talk to the animals and made the animals forgot how to talk at all. It was terrible.

But, that is not all, Angela. You see, over time the Great Spirit began to feel sorry for the humans living all alone without their silent brothers and sisters, so he decided to give them a Second Chance. But first he had to give them a test to see if they were worthy of the gift of talking to the world again.

One day, Cloud decided to climb the tallest tree in the forest in hopes of getting a view of a mother Deer and her Fawns in a clearing. For you see, humans and animals had lived apart for many years by this point and the forgetful-sickness of the Newcomers had made them forget that they had ever lived together. And without communication the
animals and people learned to fear each other and stay apart. Cloud knew the deer would run if she got close, but she remembered her brothers and sisters and she missed them, so she climbed up and up the branches of the tallest tree like she was climbing a giant ladder to the sun. She saw the Deer below in the clearing, but the other trees blocked her view, so she climbed up above the treetops, up the thinnest branches that grew like grasses from the trunk. From that height she could see the Deer clearly - the Fawns’ wet noses and the Doe’s white tail. But light as Cloud was, the thin branches couldn’t hold her for long and they snapped under her weight. And instead of falling to the ground, she was lifted by a gentle wind that carried her up into the clouds.

Cloud began to scream, and flapped her arms and legs wildly. For you see, Cloud was a little girl just like you, with two arms and two legs, and a belly button. But as she flapped her arms, great feathered wings sprouted from her back like corn stalks. She stretched and flapped her wings proudly and flew just over the Deer who looked up at her but didn’t run. She flew up to the treetops and into the clouds she was named for.

Little Cloud was the Second Chance for all people.”
As the years passed, Angela reached up toward the sky like a flowering tree rising from the earth as she transformed from a child into a young woman. Her legs and arms grew long and lanky like the thinnest branches, her girl’s body stretched upward toward the sky taking and in the process becoming a woman’s, and her role as granddaughter began to switch into that of caretaker as she came to do most of the cooking and a good deal of the cleaning. Despite these changes, most things in her life didn’t change. She still shared the house with Grandmother, her scars across her shoulder blades remained just as jagged and defined, and the birthmark on her face also grew with the rest of her.

Low branches and wiry thorned bushes tried to scratch through Angela’s jeans and into the skin of her bare legs as she pushed through the forest with her best friend Jade. The path was lower than the rest of the forest floor, as if it had been carved by an arm of the river that no longer existed. It was as narrow as a deer trail - it was a deer trail actually, that led from the crops and clearing beside Angela’s house, through the forest, and to a wild bend in the Platte River where Angela and Jade escaped from the rest of the world, the boring small town of North Platte, the ignorance of their peers, and the watchful eyes of their elders. The forest canopy was both protection and privacy from the outside world, its leaves, trunks, and branches blocking and enhancing the light as it pressed through the slivers between trees. No one else knew about The Bend. It was theirs - and the deer’s. They had found it by following the deer, so of course it belonged
to them first. But as far as humans went, it was their private place, their refuge and sanctuary.

As the girls neared the Bend they began gathering kindling. Though it was only late August, the cool evening light breathed the warning of an early fall. The orange of sunset rested on the water’s surface, allowing the water to become a part of itself.

When they reached their spot, Angela tossed her backpack onto the riverbank beside the fire pit. The girls piled the kindling on the ground and began leaning the sticks against each other in a teepee formation within the fire pit.

“What did you bring?” Angela asked.

Jade slipped her backpack off of one shoulder and unzipped the main pouch. “I have half a pack of cigarettes from the beginning of summer. One cigarette was enough for life, anyway.” She tossed the box on the sticks.

“Good riddance.” Angela winced, remembering the stench of smoke swirling through her nose and the way it burned her lungs. “What else?”

“A couple of movie tickets.” She let them flutter to the ground like leaves. “This plastic key to symbolize my freedom.” She threw the key down as well. “This journal that I filled with crap about Lance, and a bunch of nonsense about the fleeting summer representing my fleeting youth.” She turned the backpack upside down and let the journal fall onto the pile with a Pink Floyd t-shirt, a to-go cup from Farmer Brother’s Coffee, and a salad of notebook paper and sketches.

“What about you, Angela?”
“I picked a few leaves and grasses on the way here to represent the path to the Bend that we won’t be walking again for a while. And these sticks we gathered are for the Bend itself.”

“Wow, the wise First Nations girl - is that what they’re calling you these days? - doesn’t disappoint.”

“Shut up. I’m going to throw you in there next to remember all the times we had together.” Angela pushed Jade toward the pile of memorabilia from the summer. “I also have a bunch of lame stuff like magazines and crap. Very insightful, right?”

Jade pulled some pages from the journal and the magazine and crumpled them up. The sun had fallen below the horizon, taking all of its colors with it. The light transitioned into night so gradually that the girls didn’t notice until it was gone. Jade pulled a lighter from her pocket and lit the pile ablaze. “By the power vested in me as a teenager sentenced with another year in public school starting tomorrow, I now pronounce summer officially over. We will always remember you as the brief moment of freedom between hellish school years.”

“Amen,” Angela said. The crumpled pages of Jade’s diary and the glossy magazine paper crumbled into red embers that spread to the sticks and the other articles of the girls’ summer, flames eating the last pieces of summer.

The girls sat on stumps they had dragged to the edge of the Bend when they had first discovered it years ago. The fire crackled, sending clouds of nicotine smoke and ash popping into the sky as the fire splintered the wood. Ash floated into the sky until it disappeared and became indistinguishable from the fireflies, as if they were the fire’s
own language of communicating with the world. The water had turned black with the
night, but now rippled orange again with the fire.

“I so don’t want to go back to school,” Jade said.

“I know, I can’t believe another summer is gone forever. And we are going to be
trapped in hell for another year. It’s like a fucking residential school in there.”

“Too soon!”

“It’s been generations, it’s distant memory by now.”

“True, but some things you can never get over. Example: The Holocaust. Is it too
soon to make jokes about the holocaust? Yes.”

“You didn’t let me answer.”

“Would you have said no?”

“No.”

“Ok then. You don’t feel just a little bad about white people rounding up Indians,
no offense, and forcing them into ‘schools’ that are basically just prison camps to break
kids and make sure their culture dies with their spirit?”

“Well, when you put it like that…”

“I’m not putting it like that, that’s what happened.”

“You’re exhausting Jade. Can’t we just relax and enjoy our last night of freedom
without your humanitarian reverse-racist debate. It’s too heavy for such a peaceful night.”

The river sank and swam over stones, the sound of its imperfections rolling through the
air like wind rattling the brown corn stalks.
“I like that, reverse-racism. Ok, I’ll give it a rest, but first, you know how they say everybody’s racist?” Jade said.

“Uh oh…” Angela rolled her eyes. “Is this about the First Nations comment earlier? You know you don’t have to apologize for that stuff.”

“No, well kind of.” She closed her fingers, the nails painted purple, around the Celtic pendant she wore around her neck, and focused on the black horizon. Her mother, head instructor at Organic Yoga, had given her the necklace to ward off “bad energy.”

“Do you think that a lot of racism comes from jealousy instead of hatred or fear? I mean, look at the US. The Europeans came, displaced from their lands and found the Indians. No offense.”

“None taken, unless you keep being all P.C. It’s annoying.”

Jade nodded. “I have to be P.C., it’s the cardinal rule of Reverse Racism. So, the Europeans come and live alongside the Indians, learning how to plant crops and stuff like that, but then as time goes by, they lose sight of their European ancestry, they forget their grandparents and on back, they forget where they came from and who they are. That’s when they get jealous about the Indians living here for thousands of years, rooted in custom and culture.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Yeah, and then look what they do, they bring slaves from Africa. More displacement. But again, these African slaves hold onto their culture, squeeze it to their hearts and don’t let go, don’t forget. And the Europeans hate them for it, because their past is already gone.”
“That’s actually pretty interesting.”

“Yeah, I think that’s what it is for me. I’m jealous of you, Angela, for having this rich family ancestry.” She closed her fingers around the pendant. “That’s why I’m all mystical and shit.”

“Racist.”

Jade playfully pushed Angela toward the fire and both girls fell off of the stump seats onto the ground which had already cooled in absence of sunlight. The girls sat on the cold earth and grass with the ants while the fire burned out. “That’s it,” Jade said. “The wood and the mementos of our summer have been transformed into ash and embers.”

“Don’t remind me that we have to take chemistry again this year.” Angela pushed Jade with her fists that were rolled up to hold the sleeves of her hoodie over them to keep warm. She walked to the river and filled up her water bottle to drown the red embers.

“Nothing has been destroyed, it was just changed - different. Matter can neither be created nor destroyed.”

“Maybe not, but it can be soaked,” Angela threatened, holding the water bottle above Jade’s head. “You’re lucky I’m too lazy to fill this up again.” She poured the water over the embers, changing them from red to white.

“You’re lucky you didn’t pour that water on me, because water cannot be created or destroyed, but this shirt can be destroyed by water, and your face can be destroyed by my fist.”

“I thought Reverse Racism was a pacifistic world view.”
“You’re right, but what’s a world view without exceptions?”

The girls walked back to Angela’s house in the dark, their path blazed by the deer and lit by the moon and starlight bouncing through the leaves.
CHAPTER TWO

The next morning Angela woke up before her alarm, as the sun reached its first rays through her window. As she looked out, tracing the rays back to their source, she imagined the cottage sitting like a lone brick on the flat land which stretched onward through the forest to the west, through the cornfield to the north, the street to the south, and unfolded endlessly to the south until it became the sky, which of course was limitless itself. It all became one endless cycle of infinite expanse, a ring of openness that sometimes made Angela feel as if she might float right up off the Earth and into space at any moment.

The last days of summer blew through the branches of the old Apple Tree, prematurely painting the leaves orange with autumn light. Angela took her time getting ready for school, brushing out her hair and taking a long hot shower. When she walked out to the kitchen, Grandmother was setting the table with bannock and fruit.

“Remember, Angela,” Grandmother said, “First days are hard, but everything you do has to start somewhere. And if anyone gives you trouble…”

“Yeah, I know just punch them in the face, right?”

Grandmother bit into her bannock and spoke with her mouth full: “I was going to say, ‘Stay strong.’” Crumbs spilled onto her turtleneck.

Angela began her first day of high school with that familiar feeling that every beginning brings, lost somewhere between anticipation and fear. She met Jade in the hall as they found their new lockers.
“Hey,” Jade said. She tossed her books into the empty locker.

“Hey.”

“Here we are, another school.”

“The fun never ends.”

“Seriously. The teachers, the rules, the schedules, it’s all so oppressive, soul-crushing, tragic.”

“Totally. Isn’t it a waste of time to spend your time anywhere less beautiful than the Bend?”

“I can already feel the hours of my life ticking away into the future.”

“Yeah, the next few years of high school can be fast-forwarded as far as I’m concerned.”

The girls walked to history class together and suffered through their day at North Platte High School. After a comprehensive overview of American History from the dawn of time until the present, a look at every song ever written that could possibly be sung by the Chorus, a deconstruction of the Spanish language from “e” to “si”, some Neils but mostly Bohr in Chemistry, and repeating in each class “My name is Angela, I like rock climbing and singing, and I didn’t do anything over summer vacation,” she was more than ready to go home.

Angela climbed aboard the ugly yellow bus, found an empty stretch of slashed imitation leather which exposed yellowed foam underneath, and folded her long legs in half against the seat in front of her in preparation for the 20 minute ride. Etched into the seat beside her knee, someone had drawn selected portions of both male and female
anatomy in painstaking detail. How did she deserve to be on this mobile prison with the future convicts and teenage parents? Her body was stuck on the bus, but her spirit didn’t have to be. Angela dreamed of leaping out the emergency exit in the roof and flying up into the clouds, gliding home on a gentle updraft.

Finally, she reached the house, leapt off the final step of the bus and walked the path to the house. As she watched her green Converse All Stars kick up the dusty dirt, Angela made a list of all the things she wanted to tell Grandmother about her first day of high school. They would sit and talk over Grandmother’s bitter home-brewed herbal tea as they did every afternoon and Angela would explain how much she had missed chorus over the summer, how one day of chemistry was already too much, and how she was going on strike this year and not doing any homework. It worked for professional athletes and union workers, why couldn’t it work for her?

But when Angela got home, Grandmother did not have the tea ready. She wasn’t in the kitchen at all. She wasn’t in the living room watching TV and she wasn’t taking a nap. _She must be outside taking a walk through the cornfields_, Angela thought. It was uncharacteristic of her to not be waiting for Angela with their tea, but she could have stepped out for a breath of the early fall chill as it wove through the cornfield and into the forest. Angela dropped her backpack off in her room, and turned the radio on to ROC 106.3, The ROC. She unpacked her books and stacked them on the floor beside her desk, the largest one always on the bottom. Peeling her denim jacket off, she hung it on the chair as she moved her head to the beat of “Another Brick in the Wall.”
When three songs had passed and Grandmother had not returned, Angela slid the denim jacket back over her shoulders and walked out into the sharp air of an uncharacteristically early autumn. Red leaves swirled from the trees and trailed from her sneakers as she walked out toward the corn field. She followed the trail around the perimeter, where the field met the forest, and all the way back to the house again with no sign of Grandmother.

It wasn’t strange for Grandmother to be out of the house, but it was uncharacteristic of her to not be waiting for Angela, especially on the first day of school. The only other place Angela could think of where Grandmother might have gone was her Aunt Margaret and Uncle Charles’ house. They lived about a mile away and sometimes Grandmother would walk there, but usually Angela went with her. Angela stood on the front porch, unsure whether she had a better choice of finding Grandmother inside or outside. She pulled her phone from her pocket, the tips of her fingers tingling with the cold air, and dialed her aunt.

The phone ringing on the other end of the line sounded farther away than the horizon and was barely audible above the roaring of the leaves as the wind blew through them like water over rocks at the Bend.

It rang. Angela stood in silence leaning on the porch rail, its paint peeling off like the leaves from the trees to reveal the wood beneath.

It rang. She felt her toes sting with cold as she tapped them inside her shoes.
It rang. Angela was still alone. She rested her thumb on the end call button, waiting for the final ring to echo until it became nothing, lost in the wind. But just as she began pressing the button, Aunt Margaret answered.

“Hi Angela, how are you?”

“Do you know where Grandma is? She wasn’t here when I got home and she’s still not back.”

“That’s strange,” Margaret replied, “Did you check out back in the field?”

“Yeah, I looked everywhere. You haven’t seen her? You don’t think she’s walking to your place?” Angela asked.

Aunt Margaret’s voice muffled as she turned away from the phone. “Have you seen grandma? Angela. She wasn’t there when she got off the bus.” And then increasing in volume again, “We haven’t seen her. I don’t know where she could be then. It’s not like her at all. I tell you what Angie, you call the police, just as a precaution and I’ll be right over there.”

“OK.”

Her thumb felt numb as she dialed 911. It felt wrong to type those forbidden numbers. Grandmother would be back soon anyway. But before she could hang up a woman answered on the other line. “Emergency services. State your emergency.”

“My Grandmother is missing.”

“Missing? For how long.”

“Since, I don’t know. She wasn’t here when I came home from school.”
“Are you in danger?”

“Danger?”

“Yes, is there someone in the house with you?”

“No.”

“No there’s not someone in the house or no you’re not in danger.”

“Both.”

“Ok, I’m going to dispatch your local law enforcement. Would you like me to stay on the line with you until they arrive?”

“No.”

She closed the phone, put it in her pocket, and went back in the house to start preparing dinner so it would be ready when Grandmother returned. When she entered the house, Grandmother’s jacket was hanging on the rack and her watch lying on the table by the door. She never left the house without them.

Angela made Grandmother’s favorite, chicken chipotle bannock wraps, frying fresh bread and sautéing the chicken with the sauce. The spicy smell filled the kitchen and made Angela’s eyes tingle just as her fingers had in the cold. With the wraps prepared, she set the table for two and sat at her place. Fifteen minutes passed and Angela was still staring at the empty chair across from her. She picked up her wrap and took a bite. The sauce was perfect, sweet and spicy flavors both tickling her tongue. But she wasn’t hungry. She left the food on the table and went back outside.

The falling sun cast the purple elongated shadows of autumn over the fields. Angela pulled the collar of her jacket up against the wind and walked out toward the
cornfield. As she reached the edge of the field that met the forest, Angela noticed paw tracks leading from the edge of the woods to the yard. She bent down to get a closer look, four large toes with claws extending from the tips, the tracks were definitely from some kind of dog or coyote. There was also another set of human footprints in the soil. These tracks led from the far side of the woods, met the dog tracks in the yard, and then went back into the woods about 100 meters away. Where the tracks intersected, the footprints became indistinguishable amidst a deep red stain in the dirt.

The bootprints looked too large to belong to Grandmother, but the scene was too strange to ignore. Angela went inside and called the police immediately. As she waited for the policeman to arrive, she stood by the front window in the living room, looking out at the road fading into the darkening horizon. Something might have actually happened to Grandmother, Angela thought. She may be in trouble, maybe even lost or hurt. Angela knew that Grandmother was getting older, and knew that she would one day reach a point she could no longer care for herself. But she had always thought that wouldn’t happen until she was older, until Angela was older, at least out of high school. But Angela also knew that life didn’t follow some neat plan. It never did. It simply flowed and unfolded like rivers and wind, usually wrapping closely around objects in its path, but sometimes smoothing them likes stones and other times completely destroying them.

Angela rubbed her eyes, hoping that they were still just stinging from the peppers in the chipotle sauce. It was dark now and she could see her reflection in the window, her long body, her black hair styled by the wind, even her birthmark crying from her eye. The reflection flashed white as the headlights of Aunt Margaret’s car passed through the trees.
Angela opened the door and stood in the frame, the light from the house behind her, the dark of the night ahead. Aunt Margaret slammed the car door and walked quickly up the stairs. “Are you alright, Angie?” Aunt Margaret hugged her.

“I’m fine.”

“Did you call the police?”

“They’re sending someone over.”

“Okay.”

Before they closed the door police car drove up the driveway.

“Evenin’ ma’am. I’m Officer Hunter.” The policeman said as he scratched the blond stubble on his head with a pen. “Someone’s missing?”

“Yes,” Aunt Margaret said. “My mother. This is her granddaughter.”

“I’m Officer Hunter,” he said, shaking their hands firmly.

“And what’s the missing woman’s name?”

“Noko Earthsong.”

“Uh-huh, and when did you last see her?”

“It was this morning,” Angela said, “before I left for school.”

“Any ideas where she might be? Is she on anyone’s bad side, received any threats?”

“Not that I know of,” Aunt Margaret said. Angela shook her head.

“I’m not sure if this is important, but there might have been an animal attack.”

Angela led the policeman and Aunt Margaret to the struggle scene. As they walked around the house in the dark, she told him how Grandmother had not been home when
she arrived, how she had looked everywhere, and that she had found these tracks. The officer ignored her, looking between the invisible horizon and a clipboard.

“Don’t be alarmed, but there have been a number of animal attacks around here lately. Just the other day I got a call from a man who said his horses were all dead with teeth marks in their necks. I went out there and sure enough, it was a coyote attack if I’ve ever seen one.”

Angela hugged herself, trying to stay warm, and wished Grandmother’s arms were around her. The officer’s flashlight illuminated the tracks as he shone it from the red patch into the woods.

“Ok, here’s what I’m gonna do. We’re gonna get someone out here to take a sample of this blood in order to determine whether it’s from the animal or the human. And we’ll dispatch an officer to patrol this area to see if anything else turns up.”

Angela nodded. “What about my Grandmother?” Her voice quivering as she tried to stay strong.

“For now all I can do is keep an eye out. State law says I can’t file a missing persons report until at least 24 hours after the disappearance. She’s only been missing for a few hours, so she’s not even missing yet, just not here.”

Angela’s eyes followed the tracks. In the dark they could go anywhere. The flashlight cast one final flickering shadow through the prints, then they turned away from the tracks and walked back to the house.
“Are you ok, Angie?” Aunt Margaret asked as they got into the car. The twins were in the back seat slapping each other with foam swords.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“It’s really odd, Mom not being around when you got off the bus.”

“Yeah.”

“Where is Grandma?” Josh said from the back.

“I don’t know honey.”

“When’s she coming back?” Chris asked.

Aunt Margaret hesitated. She looked over at Angela, who was focusing on the horizon slipping by, an endless line interrupted by electric poles, trees, and silos. “Soon. She’ll be home soon.”

The rest of the short drive passed in silence, or at least what passes for silence when there are two 7 year old boys in the backseat. Angela helped the twins out of the van and followed Aunt Margaret to the door, her bag bouncing against her back. “You’re welcome to stay with us as long as you need to Angie.”

“Thanks, Aunt Margaret.”

The boys ran to the living room to watch TV and Aunt Margaret began preparing dinner. Angela still stood in the hallway, the weight of her bag digging into her shoulder and keeping her rooted to the ground. “I’m sorry Angie, please make yourself at home. Rachel is in her room, you can put your bag in there.”
Angela walked down the hallway to Rachel’s room, passing pictures of her Aunt and Uncle, her cousins, smiling and wrapping their arms around each other. She stopped as she saw the one of her and Grandmother that had been taken last Christmas. They had come over to Aunt Margaret’s house and sat by the fire while the twins played with their toys and Rachel texted everyone she knew on her new cell phone. She could feel Grandmother’s arms around her, just the way they were in the picture, strong, the rough skin of her hands was reassuring, gritty, earthen, real.

“Aunt Margaret?”

“Hm?” She looked up over her glasses, flour caked on her hands.

“Do you really think she’ll be home soon?”

Aunt Margaret labored a smile. She washed her hands and wrapped her arms around Angela. As they faced in opposite directions, arms locked around each other, she said, “Of course she will, Angie.”

“Thanks. For letting me stay with you.”

“Of course, that’s what family’s for. Now why don’t you put that bag down and make yourself comfortable? Rachel, your cousin’s here!” Aunt Margaret went back to preparing dinner and Angela walked down the hallway to Rachel’s room. The door was closed so she knocked. “I’m busy Mom.”

“It’s Angela.”

The door opened. “Hey Angela. Sorry, I thought you were my mom. So, I guess we’re sharing the room. You can have the other bed. This used to be the twins’ room, so
that’s why there’s two beds, but I only need one, so one’s yours, I guess.” Her phone vibrated and she reached for it.

Angela laid back on the bed and looked up at the plaster ceiling. If she focused hard enough, she could ignore Rachel and the rest of the pastel room in her peripheral vision. The plaster above could be the ceiling back home, and she could be a kid again, waiting for Grandmother to tuck her in.

Rachel laughed again. “No way,” she said to her phone. Then to Angela, “Sorry, it’s about a guy. We have a lot of catching up to do if we’re sharing a room. So do you think Grandma’s really missing, like missing persons missing?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like her. Something feels wrong.”

“I’m sure there’s a perfectly good reason, like she went on a vision quest or something,” Rachel laughed at her own joke.

“Yeah, maybe.”

*       *       *

Angela lay in Rachel’s spare bed, focusing on a point of the ceiling, trying to forget where she was and what had happened. She could lose herself in memories for a few minutes at a time, but then a strange shadow would creep across the room, or Rachel would snore or roll over and she would be transported back to the present where she was in a girly room, where the night was somehow darker, the heater made thumping noises she wasn’t used to, and the sheets even felt different, softer against her skin.

She got up and walked to the living room to sit up for a while. The red digital display on the microwave in the kitchen said it was 2:14. Jade hadn’t texted back yet. She
sat on the couch, the family dog whimpering and nuzzling his nose in Angela’s lap. He was a Border Collie mix that the twins had named Cucumber because it had been their favorite word when they got him. Angela scratched the dog’s head slowly and cautiously. Petting animals made her feel strange. No one would pet a human like that, so why treat a dog that way? Grandmother said that it was wrong to own pets because they didn’t belong under a roof, and no creature belonged to anyone. It was even worse to own a dog, because dogs are man’s brothers, just like wolves and should be treated as equals rather than property. The dog continued to whimper and Angela looked into Cucumber’s eyes, thinking he must sense that she was broken. She scratched his head again, looking at all of the strange things that reminded her she wasn’t at home, the glowing thermostat display, the shelf of DVDs and videogames, the ornamental rug, and the leather sofa she was sitting on. She missed the simple wood floor at home and the heat of the wood-burning fireplace. She almost wished she could have stayed at home alone. Maybe she shouldn’t have called the cops or Aunt Margaret. Maybe she was overreacting.

Aunt Margaret’s voice trailed down the stairs, “Hi. Yes, Officer Hunter? I called earlier about my mom. She’s missing and I wanted to give you more details. Yes they told me about the 24 hour period, but I want to…Yes, ok. She’s 5’6”, 120 lbs., 57 years old, salt and pepper hair. No I don’t know what she was wearing, I didn’t see her today, or yesterday, rather. It was yesterday. Doesn’t that count as 24 hours? I see, yes. Thank you for your help.”

That morning when Angela left for school she remembered Grandmother had been wearing a teal turtleneck and the scratchy brown pants she had had for years.
Angela could feel the way they scratched against her bare legs when she sat on
Grandmother’s lap and the way they felt under her fingertips, almost like tree bark. She
stretched out across the couch, laid her head back on the armrest, and fell asleep with
Cucumber at her feet.
CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning Angela woke to the sound of the twins running down the stairs. She sat up on the couch, running a hand over the imprint of the sofa fabric on her cheek. Aunt Margaret was in the kitchen brewing a pot of coffee and frying eggs.

“Trouble sleeping?” Aunt Margaret asked, nodding to the couch where Angela had slept.

Angela nodded. Cucumber sat at the edge of the kitchen so he could watch the food cooking but also keep watch on Angela.

“Me too. But I’m sure she’s fine.”

“Right,” Angela said, remembering the frantic phone conversations she had overheard during the night.

“Well, you better get in the shower if you want to make it to school on time. You can use Rachel’s bathroom, and there are towels in the hall closet by the bathroom.”

Angela leaned forward and rested her head in her hands, closing her eyes. “I wasn’t really planning on going to school today.”

“Well, it’s up to you, but it seems to me it’s better than sitting around the house alone all day. I’d stay with you, but I have a meeting at 9.”

Stretching and getting up from the couch, Angela walked to the bathroom to take a shower. Cucumber sniffed the air as the eggs sizzled in the pan, then followed her down the hallway. “Morning,” Rachel said as she came out of the bathroom.
Angela forced the corners of her mouth into what she hoped was a smile, and peeled off the wrinkled clothes she had slept in. The shower was a place like the bed, where if she closed her eyes and just felt the hot water pounding against her back she could imagine herself back home. Her cousins’ house was familiar, but it wasn’t home. It wasn’t the first place Grandmother would go when she returned either.

On her way to school Angela thought about what Aunt Margaret had said about school being better than staying at home alone and tried to focus on the details of the previous night to tell Jade about when she arrived. When she got to American History and saw that Jade’s desk was empty, she tried to keep her mind busy by focusing on her new classes. Angela was groggy from her restless night on the couch, so the teacher’s words became nonsense and she melted into a stream of daydreams and fogginess. *If I could come to school the morning after my grandmother disappeared, surely Jade could make it to school too,* Angela thought. The girls had been sure to schedule their classes together, so Angela stared at the empty seat imagining everyone disappearing one by one until she was the only person left in a world of echoes and shadows.

She ate her lunch alone in a corner of the cafeteria, watching her classmates talk excitedly about their summers. She imagined them vanishing one by one until she was left in a room full of ownerless lunch trays and backpacks.

After lunch she was supposed to have chemistry with Jade, and Angela hoped she would arrive by then so she could tell her all about Grandmother’s disappearance and the strange tracks she had found in the yard.
She arrived at Chemistry class early, hoping to talk with Jade before it started. But Jade still wasn’t there. She was glad that she was the first one to class so no one could see her wincing to hold back her tears. She rubbed her eyes with her sweater sleeve and pretended to be engrossed in the periodic table as the other students started taking their seats. The teacher arrived and still her friend was not there. Then, just before the bell rang, Jade walked in wearing her Che Guevara military cap, which was against school policy both because it was controversial and because it was a hat, and took her seat next to Angela.

“Where were you?” Angela whispered.

“I had to take my car to the shop because my genius dad made the appointment for a school day because he thinks that maintaining the car is more important than my education!”

“Your parents are so crazy.”

“Tell me about it. The worst part is that they’re total poseurs. I mean, what kind of hippie parents by their kid a brand new VW? Shouldn’t I be driving an old VW beetle or at least a Shaggin’ Wagon?”

“Nah, you’re more a New Age kind of girl. I think a hybrid would be a better match. And what’s with the military hat? Isn’t military force contradictory to the pacifistic teachings of Reverse Racism?”

“Yes. That’s the point. It’s an ironic statement.”

“Ok.” Angela sighed and rushed through the details of Grandmother’s disappearance as Mrs. Marlwood began the lesson.
“So what are you gonna do?” Jade whispered. She caught a warning glare from Mrs. Marlwood and took her hat off, revealing her straight chin-length hair, jet black but streaked with purple highlights.

“I dunno. But, I need to go back to my house today to pick up a few things.” She felt some invisible force pulling her home. What if Grandmother was there now, waiting for her? “Do you wanna come with me?” She knew that Jade was intrigued by her story. Her friend was fascinated by anything that had to do with mysteries or the occult.

“Sure, but I can’t drive because my car’s in the shop. That’s why I was late.

“Is there a problem girls?” Mrs. Marlwood asked.

“No Mrs. Marlwood,” the girls said, turning back to their books.

“Well then, let’s continue with the lesson…”

* * *

The sun was already dropping beneath the clouds as the bus dropped the girls off in front of Angela’s driveway. The Apple Tree’s Orange leaves leaked a golden glow, illuminated by the falling light. Angela walked up to the front door, but Jade wandered around the side of the house. “Where are you going?” she asked. Jade didn’t respond, but walked directly to the red spot where the tracks intersected. It looked less ominous during the day as the sunlight danced on every detail. She could make out each tread mark from the boot and each toe print of the dog as it struggled.
“There’s definitely a lot of bad energy here,” Jade said. Angela massaged the goosebumps on her arms and pulled her denim jacket closed. A jagged gust bent the grass and trees, rising up from the ground and flowing through the girls’ hair.

“Come on,” Angela said. She grabbed Jade’s arm and pulled her toward the house. Jade kept watching the prints, tripping over the porch steps as she walked.

“Klutz!” Angela said.

“You were pulling me, Angela!”

“Whatever.”

“Let’s just get your stuff and get out of here,” Jade said. “I’m getting bad vibes.”

When Angela had walked into the house, she had somehow hoped that Grandmother would be there waiting for her. But of course she wasn’t. And the jacket and watch were only reminders that Grandmother hadn’t planned to do anything more than step outside to check the mail before Angela got home from school the day before. Angela didn’t like the way the house felt without Grandmother, so cold and empty, like it didn’t want her to be there.

Jade sat on Angela’s bed as she packed, twirling her hair around her fingers, purple hair on purple nails. Angela hoped Grandmother wouldn’t be gone long and couldn’t imagine staying with her cousins for longer than a few days, so she only packed a few articles of clothing and her toothbrush. She had to use her little cousin’s shampoo and hairbrush that morning, and her hair wasn’t too happy about that. Running her fingers through the tangles, Angela loaded a large duffel bag with all of her toiletries, filling in the open spaces with long sleeve t-shirts and jeans. She packed her iPod and the book that
she was reading, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Then she opened her jewelry box.

Inside were a pair of feather-shaped earrings that she had worn when she was younger, a few bracelets and necklaces, and something that suddenly became far more valuable to Angela than any precious stone or metal. It was the silver and turquoise turtle ring that Grandmother had given her on her seventh birthday.

She slipped the ring through her fingers, remembering that day so clearly. Angela hadn’t worn it much over the years, thinking the turtle was tacky, and the stone too large for her thin fingers. But now she slipped the ring onto her index finger and imagined Grandmother wearing it when she was a girl. She smiled, feeling tears collect at the corner of her eyelids.

“Are you almost done?” Jade asked, flipping through a copy of *Rolling Stone* on Angela’s bed. “I told my mom I’d be back for dinner.”

“Yeah,” Angela said, “Let me just finish packing and call my Aunt Margaret to come get us.”

10 minutes later, the girls were outside waiting for their ride with a pile of bags. While they were waiting, Angela’s curiosity led her over to the side of the house. The sun was just below the horizon now, and the shadows grew long, just as they were the day before when she had first found the tracks. Jade was talking, but Angela couldn’t hear her. As she stared at the footprints, a gust of leaves flew past and filled Angela with the hollow cold of night’s breath.

“Angela! Angela!” Jade’s voice broke Angela’s focus on the tracks. “Are you OK, Angela? You looked like you were in a trance.”
“Yeah, I’m fine. Just tired I guess,” Angela said, noticing that her aunt’s Camry was now parked in the driveway. How long had it been there?

The girls loaded the car and slid into the back seat. “How was your day, Angela?” Aunt Margaret asked. Angela stared out the window, back toward the black yard. Even though it was dark now, the last traces of sunlight reflected off the grass and leaves, illuminating the tracks and the red spot. “Angela?”

“Oh, sorry, Aunt Margaret. It was fine.”

“Are you okay dear?” Aunt Margaret looked into the rearview mirror for an answer.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just tired I guess.”

“I never should have let you come over here by yourself. Are you sure you’re okay, Angela?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Angela replied. She looked down at the turtle ring and twirled it around her finger.
“Watch this Angela!” Kyle ran from the school bus, his backpack dangling from one arm, and leapt over a pile of leaves that sat in the front yard.

“I can jump higher,” Josh said, following his brother over the leaf pile.

“Can not,” Kyle pushed Josh into the leaves and was dragged in himself as the twins wrestled.

“Come on,” Angela said, pulling Kyle by his shirt to separate the two. “You can both jump really high, but let’s go inside now so we don’t freeze to death.”

“Good luck getting them to move,” Rachel said. The twins emerged from the pile, leaves stuck to their clothes and sandy hair.

“We just don’t listen to you ’cause you’re our sister,” Kyle said.

“Yeah!” Josh stuck his tongue out at his Rachel. “Angela’s cool.” Rachel rolled her eyes, pushing her brothers into the house. The twins ran upstairs to their room, leaving the girls in the hallway.

“I’m glad you’re here to distract them, Angela. They’re such brats.”

“They’ve just got a lot of energy. I’m jealous actually, you know, since I don’t have any brothers or sisters.”

“Trust me, you’re lucky. You have peace and quiet.” Rachel dropped her bag in her room. The bedroom was barely big enough for one person, but now both girls were sharing the space. The ceiling overhead thumped with footsteps and shouts. “See what I mean?” Rachel said.
“Yeah, I guess.” Angela looked at the bag she brought over the day before. She didn’t know if she should unpack it or not. She didn’t feel quite at home here, and didn’t expect to stay longer than a week or so. On top of that, she felt bad that she was taking away what little privacy Rachel had.

As Angela pulled her books out to begin her homework, Rachel looked in the mirror. She held her thick black hair up above her head with both hands and combed her bangs with her fingers “Angela, can you show me how to do that,” Rachel motioned toward Angela’s woven braid. Angela looked over Rachel’s shoulder and saw her own reflection. She normally cringed at the silver dollar sized birthmark beside her left eye. But now she smiled at it. Grandmother told her that it was a kiss from the Sun Spirit.

“Sure.” Angela was glad to have an excuse to avoid homework.

“Thanks,” Rachel said. She sat on the side of the bed as Angela braided her hair. “It’s kind of weird isn’t it? I mean we live so close, but we never really do stuff together. It’s nice having another girl around.” Just then, the boys ran by the room and stopped at the door.

“Angela,” Kyle asked, “Wanna come see our new cars?”

“We just got them for our birthday,” Josh added.

“Yeah, and they can drive over anything and they can go really fast and…”

“Sure. I’ll come get you after I braid Rachel’s hair.”

“Okay.” Then they ran back upstairs to get their cars.

“So annoying,” Rachel said. “So, are you going with anyone to the fall dance?”
“I haven’t really had time to think about it,” Angela said. Her mind wandered to Max, or “Double X” as everyone called him. His real last name was Max Fox, hence the two Double X. She’d always thought of him as Max though. Max sat behind her in History class, but he never said a word. Angela felt guilty thinking about something as petty as a boy when her grandmother was missing, but it wasn’t like she was trying to think about him. He just popped into her mind now and then.

“Yeah, I’m sure you’ve got other things on your mind.”

“What about you?”

“Well it’s not official yet, but I’m pretty sure Bryan Adams is going to ask me.”

“Mr. Bryan the Brain? Really?”

“Haha, yeah he’s a total nerd, but he’s really sweet. Yvonne said he was asking about me.”

“Ooo,” Angela teased. She was just weaving the last hairs into Rachel’s braid as Aunt Margaret got home.

“Hey kids!” she called from the hall. She poked her head into Rachel’s room. “It looks like you’re popular around here Angela. How was school, girls?”

“Pretty good,” Rachel said. Angela nodded in agreement.

“I’m gonna clean up and start getting dinner ready.” Aunt Margaret adjusted her glasses as they slid down her nose.

“I can help,” Angela offered.

“That would be great if you just want to get it started. I’ll just get everything ready for you and leave it out on the counter. There’s some pasta and sauce, lettuce in the
fridge. Maybe you could learn a thing or two from your cousin, Rachel.” Aunt Margaret went back to her room to unwind.

Rachel rolled her eyes and followed Angela to the kitchen, texting as she walked. Angela filled a large pot with water, hoping it was enough for the whole family since she was used to cooking for only two. Rachel sat on a stool at the island, staring at her phone. As Angela opened to noodle package, the twins ran down the stairs with their new cars.

“Angela, can you come see our cars now?” Josh asked. “Come on!” Kyle pulled on her shirt.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming.”

The three ran outside, the twins in lead. “My car is called the Speed Demon,” Josh said. “See how fast it can go over the gravel?”

“Whoa, that’s pretty fast Josh.”

“And mine,” said Kyle, “is the Crash N Smash. See how it can drive over the dirt pile with its huge tires?”

“Yeah, that’s awesome Kyle.”

“It’s fun having you here Angela, Rachel never plays with us.”

“Are you gonna stay with us forever?”

“I don’t know,” Angela said. She looked up at the broken sky. The sun was well below the horizon and its light was fading fast. A sharp wind grabbed at her jacket and whipped her braid against the back of her neck, so she tightened her arms across her chest to stay warm. “Can I drive one of those?”
“Here.” Josh handed her the controls to the Speed Demon. “Woah, this thing is fast!” A car came down the road, its headlights glowing in the first shadows of the night. Angela swerved the Speed Demon off the road and handed the controls back to Josh. “Here, you better drive this thing before I break it.” She tousled his hair. “Actually, we better go inside and get dinner ready. It’s getting dark and your dad will be home soon.” The twins scooped up their cars and the three went inside.

Angela removed her turtle ring and set it on the counter before she began cooking. She put the noodles on to boil, heated up the sauce, and ran the lettuce leaves under a fall of cold water, her hands still numb from the cold outside. Rachel sat at the kitchen table doing her homework, her cellphone resting beside the textbook.

“Hey girls!” Uncle Charles shivered as he came inside. He ran a hand over his wavy hair, loosened his tie, and set his briefcase down on the kitchen island.

“Hey, Uncle Charles.”

“Hey, dad.”

“Mmm, smells good, Angela. Has Margaret got you working already?” He laughed at his own joke.

Angela shrugged. “She just seemed busy so I thought I’d help out.”

“Well, that’s nice of you,” he said. “But you’re our guest. You shouldn’t be cooking.”

“I really don’t mind. I cook at home all the time.”

“Let me get changed and I’ll take care of it.”
Angela sat at the table with Rachel and worked on her homework while Uncle Charles finished preparing dinner. She had been busy with school and her cousins, but Grandmother was always on her mind. Staying busy was the best way to keep calm, but in quiet moments like these she had to fight herself just to stay upright.

Dinner was a nice distraction with the twins constantly asking for more spaghetti and Aunt Margaret and Uncle Charles keeping the conversation flowing. Angela kept quiet, watching this other family that she wasn’t quite a part of. It was reassuring, like watching a sitcom where nothing really bad ever happens, and the things that do happen can be forgotten with laugh tracks. She didn’t want to spoil the illusion by intruding into it and remembering that she wasn’t a part of that easy world. She lived somewhere heavier and too real. “So Angela,” Uncle Charles said as the twins left their seats and ran to the living room, “It’s really nice having you around. You know you’re welcome to stay as long as you need to.”

Angela nodded, hoping she wouldn’t need to stay much longer.

After dinner, as Margaret was cleaning up, Angela sat at the table finishing her homework. “You were quiet at dinner. Are you doing okay Angela?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. I guess.”

“Listen, I need to tell you something.” Aunt Margaret set down the rag that she had been wiping the table with and sat down across from Angela. “Officer Hunter called today. He said they ran a test on the blood that,” she took a deep breath and adjusted her glasses, “that they found the other day.”

“And?” Angela closed her History book.
“And it was a match with your grandmother’s DNA.” Here was the truth: she was missing and she was hurt, or worse. Aunt Margaret’s cheeks were wet with helplessness. She reached across the table and laid her palm on Angela’s fist.

“Did the police say anything else?” Angela asked.

“No, they haven’t gotten any leads. They’re guessing it’s an animal attack. Probably a rabid coyote.”

“Guessing? If it was a coyote, where’s her body? Do they expect us to believe that a coyote kidnapped her?”

“Yeah, I know it doesn’t make sense. But all we can do for now is hold on to each other.”

Angela took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She stood up and wrapped her arms around Aunt Margaret’s shoulders. Her aunt’s glasses dug into her face, but she didn’t care. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. And she’ll come home soon.”

“Right.” Aunt Margaret picked up her cloth and returned to wiping the table. Angela picked up her book from the island and went back to Rachel’s room to call Jade.

“It was your grandmother’s blood?”

“Yeah.”

“So what do you think happened?”

“The police said it was a rabid coyote that attacked her. But…”

“But what?”

“Nothing. Just a crazy idea.”

“Like?”
“No, it’s too crazy.”

“What? Crazy is good!”

“Well, what if my grandmother didn’t get attacked by the wolf?”

“Yeah, but they found her blood there at the scene.”

“Right.”

“What? I don’t get it.”

“I just realized what happened.”

Angela told Jade the story that Grandmother had told her when she was a little girl, about Cloud and the animal people, and the strange dog that she had seen outside her window.

“Oh my God,” Jade said.

Angela forced the words out of her mouth.

“My Grandmother was the wolf!”

She ended the call and laid back on the bed, thankful that Rachel was out in the living room watching TV. The conversation with Jade echoed in her head: “It’s the only thing that makes sense,” she had said. How did this possibly make sense? Yes, the blood taken from the red spot was confirmed to belong to Grandmother. And yes, in her mysterious vision she had seen the wolf or dog or whatever it was bleeding right there on the grass. The blood evidence was solid proof. But a vision? How could she trust that it was anything more than a daydream? And more importantly, how could Grandmother actually be a wolf? Sure, it made sense in stories about her people where animal qualities
manifested themselves in humans as metaphors for bravery and courage, but in real life it just wasn’t possible. Nothing since Grandmother’s disappearance felt real. She tried to look out the window, but it was dark already and all she could see was her reflection in the glass superimposed over the moonlight.

Looking into the reflection of her own face, she decided she would sleep on it. She was too tired to distinguish real from imaginary right now. Morning would bring its clarity, the reassurance that the rational waking world was back and more real than any dream. Tomorrow she would be able to look past her reflection and out into the true world.

After a restless night lost between the sleeping and waking worlds, the morning came and Angela felt even more tired than she had the night before. Fog crept up to the window, distorting the yard and then blurring into white. Still, nothing made sense. She didn’t have the energy to process her conversation with Jade the night before, so she let herself blur into the world around her just as the fog had.

Days went by, maybe a week, she didn’t know. Her alarm went off so she got up. The bus came, so she went to school. Her teachers told her to pay attention and do her homework, so she did. Her relatives and friends talked, so she listened. She felt herself moving inevitably onward like a river, unable to think or stop. Whether there was an explanation for what was going on or not, it didn’t seem to matter. The world kept turning, and gravity gave her no choice but to turn with it.
CHAPTER SIX

Jade lived in a three-story farmhouse that had stood high on the plains for nearly a century. The roof was steep and topped with three tall gables. And on the top where such a house would usually have a weather vane, a laughing gargoyle perched, looking over the house. Angela’s mother greeted them as they stepped through the door. She held a wooden spoon in her hand. “Hi girls,” she said, as if she had expected Angela all along. “I’m a bit behind on dinner because I worked a double shift last night and I just woke up.”

Jade walked into the kitchen with her mother and Angela followed. Mr. Burroughs sat at the kitchen table watching TV. The table was a long rustic slab of wood with bench seating. “Hey dad,” Jade said. “Hey Jade,” he said, turning away from the TV to face them. “And Angela.”

“Hi Mr. Burroughs,” Angela said. The TV reflected in his glasses and Angela watched as a dragon flew across the lenses.

“They’re playing this documentary on the science behind dragons, to see if it’s possible that fire-breathing lizards once roamed the Earth.”

“Cool,” Jade said. She sat on the sectional sofa with her dad.

“I’m in,” Angela said. She liked the way Jade’s family was so laid back and just hung out together. Even at her cousins’ house everyone was always doing their own thing, and the kids and grownups almost never spent time hanging out together.

“So what’s the latest on Dragons?” Jade asked.
“Well their wings had to be really powerful to support their weight,” Mr. Burroughs said. Angela felt her face growing hot and hoped they wouldn’t look at her. “And they had to be able to produce some kind of chemical reaction in their throats or stomachs to produce the fire.”

“Flawless logic!” Jade said. “Dragons were real, case closed.” Angela forced a laugh. They watched the dragon documentary as they set the table and poured the drinks. Jade and her parents joked about the “science” behind the documentary, but all Angela could think about were the wings. Massive enough to support a giant creature. How big would a pair of wings have to be to hold up a human? A flash of memory hit her from a dream. She was Icarus flying up toward the sun, triumphant at conquering gravity. She flew high, her wings strong and proud. But then she realized they were made of wax as they began to melt, dripping down her back, the hot wax burning her flesh as she screamed and fell through the clouds. She could still feel that moment of acceleration when she went from weightlessness to a sudden plummet to the Earth. She awoke in a sweat, disoriented and panicking until she realized it was only sweat on her sheets, not wax.

“Angela? Earth to Angela,” Jade said as she brought a salad bowl to the table.

Angela’s vision drifted back into focus just in time to see two dragons locked in battle, their fiery breath burning each other’s wings. “Yeah. I’m here. It’s just this dragon show. I mean, I know it’s cheesy, but it’s really cool to imagine real live dragons flying around.”
“Yeah,” Mrs. Burroughs said, “Who knows what’s walked on this planet, or flown through its skies.”

The room was quiet as everyone ate. The silence made Angela’s ears ring and left her alone with her thoughts. Dragons, wings, Icarus, fire, falling. Words and images flashing through her mind. What was she? How could she live with this secret? The air felt thin in her lungs and her throat felt like it was closing completely, its walls collapsing. She couldn’t eat anymore and she couldn’t stand the silence so she said, “The salad is really good Mrs. Burroughs.”

“Thank you, Angela, glad you like it. Those are mixed local greens from the farmers market with Quinoa and chickpeas in my special dressing.”

Her throat was opening again and she took a bite. “And the special dressing?” she asked.

“Olive oil, garlic, and a pinch of ‘I could tell you but then I’d have to kill you!’” she pointed he fork at Angela and they all laughed. Mr. Burroughs and Jade reached for the bowl at the same time and pulled the bowl playfully from each other to steal the last of the salad.

“It’s mine, Dad!” Jade said.

“You haven’t even finished what’s on your plate!” he said.

“So Angela, Mrs. Burroughs said over them,” I’ve heard there’s someone special. A boy?”

Angela felt the blood rising to her cheeks. “Yeah, sort of.”

“Jade has told us all about him. He sounds like a nice boy. Are you two serious?”
Jade gave up on the salad, and turned to Angela, “Yeah, Angela, what’s going on with you and Max? You didn’t even kiss him goodbye or anything today.”

“Keep that ‘or anything’ to a minimum girls,” Mr. Burroughs said, cracking a smile as he scooped the rest of the salad onto his plate.

“I dunno. It’s nothing. Everything’s fine. I was just in a hurry because I didn’t want to make you wait.”

The room got quiet again and Angela stared at the last few leaves on her plate.

“So, how about those dragons,” Mr. Burroughs said.

“Smooth segway, Dad,” Jade said.

“What? The poor girl’s getting grilled over here, somebody’s gotta say something.”

“Thank you Mr. Burroughs,” Angela said, folding her hands together as if in prayer. Mrs. Burroughs laughed, her voice echoing in the wood beams above.

When everyone had finished eating and they had devoured an entire vegan raspberry pie and a few fair trade lattes, Angela and Jade walked up the two long staircases to Jade’s room on the third floor. It was long and spacious and had two tall windows that overlooked the pool and the pastures. Though the property had once been a large farm, the Burroughs now only kept a small garden, a dozen chickens, and a few horses.

Jade’s bed was bunked, though she only liked to sleep on the bottom bunk. There was a sofa at the other side of the room, a TV, and the far wall had been painted to look like a dark cavern full of crystals and giant rock formations. In front of the mural was a
shelf that stretched across the entire wall. On the shelf were real crystals, geodes, and other stones. In the centre of the shelf sat a metre-long Chinese dragon carved from jadeite stone. It clutched two glass balls in its front claws. Why didn’t this dragon have wings? Angela wondered.

Jade picked a remote up from a side table and turned on the stereo. Angela tried to even the pace of her breaths as she watched her friend sing along with some punk band Lance had gotten her into. Rat Sauce or Rad Saws or something like that. Normally she would have given Jade a hard time about letting a guy take over her life, and worse, listening to this garbage. But she was too busy thinking about the vision she had, the scene in the woods.

“Wanna go to the Bend?” Angela shouted over the music.

“The what?”

“The Bend. Wanna go there? Now?”

Jade turned the music down. “The Bend? It’s freezing out there!”

“Yeah, I know. I just want to check out, you know, the forest. See if I can find anything.”

“I admire your spirit, but it’s been too long, I doubt the footprints are even there anymore.”

“I know, but there’s got to be something there.”

“I really don’t think we’ll find anything, but what the hell, I’m in.”
When they got to Angela’s house the full moon was high above the treetops. A slate grey glow hummed around it and faded into the black that filled the space between the stars. Sharp blasts of wind blew in from the river and pulled at the girls’ hair.

“Yeah, I don’t see anything, let’s go back.” Jade rubbed her arms with gloved hands.

“You can wait in the car if you want. I have to at least look.”

“I know. It’s fine,” Jade followed Angela as she scraped the leaves from the ground and followed the tracks into the woods. They walked this way for fifteen minutes, until the footprints disappeared into the river bend.

“That’s it. They just stop,” Angela said, wiping her nose with a glove.

“That’s it. Unless they come out on the other side.”

“I doubt it.”

“What happened to, ‘I have to look?’”

“I don’t know I just have a feeling that whoever made these tracks did this deliberately, made sure they couldn’t be traced back.”

“Makes sense.”

“So what now?”

“I don’t know. I just thought I’d find something.” The river rippled over stones below, the sound crisp in the night air. Angela watched as her breath floated into a cloud and then vanished above the river.

“Yeah, you will. Sooner or later, you’ll find something.”
Angela threw a rock in the river and watched as the reflection of the moon scattered as its light collected in the ripples on the water’s surface.

“Noko.”

“What is it Angela?”

“Noko, my Grandmother’s name. It means ‘moon.’ The footprints led to the moon.”

“You don’t think…..”

Angela closed her eyes and felt the darkness of the night around her. “I…I don’t know.”
CHAPTER SEVEN

Her legs dangling along the rock face, Angela struggled to lift herself using just her arms. She was about to fall 3 stories unless she could pull herself up high enough to reach a foothold. With her right arm supporting the weight of her body for a second, she reached for a new hold on the rock with her left. The summit of the cliff was almost in reach now. Just two more feet and she could finally relax. But two more feet was a long way to go without the help of her dangling legs. Angela didn’t want to risk losing her grip by pulling far enough away from the cliff to see her feet, so she felt blindly with her left foot for a crevice or bump in the rock’s surface, anything to support herself.

She let her muscles relax as she felt just enough of a bulge in the rockface to support her toes. Her arms trembled from strain, and as she hurried to support herself on her left leg, Angela’s arms gave out and she fell from the cliff. “You almost had it that time!” Jade shouted from below. She gradually released the pressure on the rope and let Angela propel slowly down the climbing wall.

The girls had taken a climbing class over the summer, and ever since, they had been coming to the climbing wall at the gym every weekend, gaining skill and confidence, with the goal of one day making it to the top of the expert wall - a height of over three stories. “Now it’s my turn,” Jade said. Angela unhooked the rope from her carabineer and helped Jade get suited up for her climb.
Angela stretched to relieve the burning throughout her body as Jade began to climb. “Guess who called me last night,” Jade said. She turned her head away from the wall to see Angela’s face.

“Who?” Angela rolled her eyes; Jade could never keep her focus. It was a good thing that the first several feet of the wall were fitted with large, flat beginner holds, and that there was a rope attached to her waist.

“Lance!” Jade turned again to see Angela’s reaction.

“Lance Benson?”

“Mhmmm!”

“Oh my God, finally!”

“Yeah I know! And we’re going out tonight!”

“Cool,” Angela said. “But I thought we were supposed to go to the movies tonight?” Jade had finally picked up speed in her climb as she thought about her date. Her head was always full of dreams, but when it came to boys she was focused. Angela could hear that Jade was still talking as she climbed. Though Jade was already too high up to hear what she was saying, Angela was sure she was going on about her conversation with Lance the night before.

Propelled by her excitement, Jade reached the top of the expert wall with hardly any trouble. Angela was the better climber, so it came as a surprise to both girls that Jade was the first one to reach the top. “That was awesome!” Jade shouted as Angela lowered her back to the ground.

“You did it!” The girls high-fived.
“That was so cool! I can’t believe I finally made it to the top. And you were almost there too Angela!”

“Yeah, I’ll get there next time.” Angela rotated her shoulders and stretched her arms. “Actually, if we have a few minutes, I’m gonna go ahead and try now.”

“Sure, my mom won’t be here for another fifteen minutes.” Jade helped Angela get fitted up again. “What am I gonna wear tonight?”

“Didn’t you just get some new shirt last week? The one you were going on about in Chemistry I think your exact description of it was ‘charmingly revealing’,” Angela said, beginning her second climb.

“Yeah, but it’s getting too cold to wear short sleeves at night.”

“So wear a jacket over it,” Angela said.

“I guess I could, but I’d rather…” Angela was in the zone now, and she wasn’t going to let herself fall again. The feeling of climbing was exhilarating. She loved the way the world looked from up high. Everything down below was so small and insignificant. Even in the gym with the roof above, she felt closer to heaven at this height. Her arms reached easily and her legs targeted the footholds as she scaled the wall. She reached the top and let out a cry of joy at finally reaching her goal. Perched at the top, her arms and legs throbbed with exhaustion. She felt at peace and connected with everything around her from this height the world she looked down on was a completely different one than she was just standing on. She looked out the window and imagined she could see the curve of the horizon, the earth bending under the weight of the sky. But the perfection only lasted a moment, and soon she was repelling down the wall again.
As she neared the bottom of the wall, Angela noticed a throbbing pain in her shoulder blades, as if her scars were being torn open. The combination of pain and exhaustion made her dizzy, but the moment her feet touched the ground, the pain was gone. “I don’t really want to wear a jacket the whole time,” Jade said. Angela laughed. “You are so boy crazy. If you’re really worried about it, we can swing by my house on the way home and you can borrow something.”

“Really? That would be great!” Jade’s phone rang with her gong ringtone.

“Oh god, the bells. Answer it,” Angela said. “People are staring.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? It’s not bells, it’s a meditation gong.”

The gong sounded again, sounding remarkably like a bell.

“Like I said, bells. Just answer it.”

Jade glared at Angela “Hey mom. Yeah we’re done. Okay, we’ll be right out. Okay, you too.” The girls packed up their things and walked toward to exit.

“Have a great day,” the guy at the front desk said as they walked out.

“Do you think he’s cute, Angela?”

“I told you you’re boy crazy! And no I don’t think teen wolf with the lion mane sideburns is cute.”

“I am not boy crazy! I’m just an average girl with realistic standards. You’re the one who turns every guy down without even giving him a chance!”

“First, ‘realistic standards’ is code for ‘low standards,’ and second, that’s not true. I don’t turn down every…Okay, so maybe it’s kinda true.” Angela was very much an average teenage girl as well, and the topic of boys led her mind to wander to Max, the
boy who sat behind her in history. His black hair, messy but in a good way. Not tangled but more windswept. His eyes, brown, but somehow with a hint of blue. His skin, both smooth and tough as if it was layered with both callouses and lotion. His arms, the muscles twitching as he wrote. She turned in her seat watching the class in front of her a blur, but Max clear in her peripheral vision. Angela realized she had been quiet for too long so she started speaking her thoughts. “I’m just not like you Jade. I’m not good with boys.”

“That’s not true, you’re just inexperienced. I mean, how many boyfriends have you had?”

“None.”

“That’s not true either, what about Christopher last year?”

“Christopher doesn’t count. We just held hands walking to class and talked on the phone twice.”

“Romantic.”

“Shut up.”

“Sorry. So you’ve never had a real boyfriend?”

“Nope.”

“Well isn’t there anybody you like?”

Angela was saved by Jade’s mom. She pulled up in her Jetta and waved to the girls. “We’re continuing this conversation later,” Jade said as the girls got into the car.

“How was the climbing, girls?” Jade’s mom asked.

“We both made it to the top of the expert wall!” Jade said.
“That’s great, you’re getting really good!”

“Getting really good…” Jade began.

“Or are really good?” Angela finished, both girls laughing at their joke.

“Hey mom? Can you drive us by Angela’s house so we can pick up some clothes?”

“Sure Jade-beam, it’s on the way.”

“That doesn’t even make sense mom.”

“Nothing makes sense on its own. You have to find the meaning.”

“Whatever mom.”

As they neared the driveway of Grandmother’s house, Angela noticed her aunt’s car in the driveway. “Should I just wait in here?” Jade’s mom asked.

“Sure, we’ll be quick,” Angela said. Curious to see what her aunt was up to, she ran inside the house. “Aunt Margaret?”

“Angela? Is that you?” Aunt Margaret’s voice echoed through the empty house.

“Yeah.” Angela followed the voice to the living room. Aunt Margaret was sitting at Grandmother’s desk, papers strewn across its wooden surface. “What are you doing here?” Angela asked.

A strange look of disapproval came over Aunt Margaret’s face. “I just came over to make sure the bills get paid and check on the house. What are you doing here Angela?”

“Jade and I just stopped by for a minute to pick up some clothes.”

“Oh, okay. I can give you a ride home when you’re done so Jade’s mom doesn’t have to swing by. Unless you girls are going to hang out more?”
“No, Jade has a date, so I can ride back with you.”

“Okay. I’ll be here a while, so take your time.”

When Angela got to her room, Jade was already going through the closet, throwing clothes across the bed. “Do you think I should wear this black top with the black skirt, or the purple top with jeans?”

Angela shivered. She felt the cool air of the empty house tickling her skin which was still wet with sweat. She imagined a wolf limping into the hallway, a trail of blood dripping from its hip as it whimpered.

“Angela?”

“Huh?” Jade held up the clothes to her body as she asked Angela’s opinion again.

“Eww,” Angela said, “the black would make it look like you’re going to a funeral. Wear the purple top. It’ll look good with your hair anyway.”

“Yeah, good point! Purple is kind of my thing. But you don’t think jeans will make me look like one of those old ladies who camps out at Pizza Palace on buffet night?”

“Oh my God Jade, calm down. He’s a sixteen-year-old guy. He’s not going to care what you’re wearing anyway.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Jade said. She held both outfits up against herself again, checking them out in the mirror. “So is there anyone you like, Angela?”

“Ughh, I thought you forgot about that conversation.”

“Nope. I told you we’d finish it later,” Jade said. She gave Angela a playful push. “No, there’s really no one.”
“Oh, come on, Angela, there has to be someone you like!” Angela didn’t dare utter a word. “Okay, I’ll stop beating around the bush. I’ve seen the way you sigh when you walk into history class and the way you lean back in your seat so Double X. can get a whiff of your hair.”

“Shut up! I do not!”

“It’s obvious Angela. You should totally talk to him.”

“No way! He would never like me anyway.”

“Ha! You admitted it! You want him to like you too.”

“No I didn’t,” Angela said. She pushed Jade’s mock kissing lips away from her face.

“Whatever. I’m sure he likes you. You’re smart, and pretty, and fun.”

“I may be smart, and who isn’t fun? But I’m definitely not pretty. I mean look at this thing. It looks like I fell into a mud puddle.” Angela pointed to the birthmark that seemed to leak out of her left eye.

“Oh come on, Angela. It doesn’t look bad at all. It just gives you character.”

“Great, just what I want, character. That’s code for ‘ugly.’”

“Stop being a butt. You know that’s not what I meant. You’re beautiful. I mean, I would give anything for your hair or your eyes.”

“Really, you think I’m pretty?”

“Of course I do Angela. Why else would I be your friend?” Jade stuck her tongue out playfully. She jumped on Angela and the girls wrestled just as they had when they were kids.
“Jade!” Jade’s mother called from the living room where she had been waiting with Aunt Margaret.

“Oh, sorry. Coming mom!” Jade shouted, grabbing the purple top from the bed. “And what would I do without your fashion advice. Or your clothes!” The girls laughed and hugged goodbye. “Okay, have fun tonight Jade. I expect details tomorrow.”

“Oh, you’ll hear more than you want to know,” Jade said. “Thanks again! Bye!”

Angela sat on her bed for a minute before going out to see if Aunt Margaret was ready to go. Just days ago Grandmother was here, and now she was gone. If Angela closed her eyes, she could imagine that Grandmother was in the kitchen cooking. She could almost smell the stew and hear the wooden spoon scraping against the pot as Grandmother stirred the broth. When she was at school or at Aunt Margaret’s house, she only wanted to be back home. But now that she was here, the memories only made Grandmother’s absence worse. Angela took a deep breath of the familiar air and went out to the living room. “Are you ready Aunt Margaret?”

“Almost, I just need to crunch a few numbers. I’ll be ready in about ten minutes,” she said, not looking up from the papers on the desk.

Angela walked to the front door and looked out the window at the Apple tree in the yard. The leaves were mostly brown now and were dropping from its boughs. Instinctively, she walked out the door and began climbing the tree as she had when she was a little girl.

Her arms and legs still burned from the climb at the gym, but she clung to the branches and nimbly navigated her way to the highest branch that could support her
weight. Up here in the Tree, her place, she felt so much more at peace than she did anywhere else. It was like she was just where she was meant to be. Angela felt at peace with the world and everything in it. In her relaxed state, a song came to her. It was the song that Grandmother had taught her.

“Young sparrow perched high on the bough,  
Sister and brother flew up from the ground.  
Winter came, left sparrow alone,  
Wing broken, in air he was stone.

Until one day his wings did heal  
Young sparrow flew up high  
The winds as his map, he sailed the skies

Above the Great Gray Forest,  
Over the Turtle Hill,  
Across the Stormy River,  
He flew til day was through.

Young sparrow flew home  
To a place he’d never been,  
At last with his true brothers  
In the land where all are whole.”

Most of the birds had already flown to warmer places when the early autumn chill had warned them of a cold winter to come. But a few still flew nearby, attracted to her song as they had always been. A lone blue bird flew into the protection of the branches, desperately flapping and chirping, like it needed something from her. Angela flinched as the bird landed on her arm, chirping at various tones and pitches. The chirps changed into a song, awakening something in Angela. She felt like she was melting into the branches of the tree, into the breeze, and into the song itself.
The notes of the song began to change into thoughts in her head. At first they only gave her vague impressions, but soon they became concrete messages: “Your Grandmother is safe. You are the one in danger, Angela. Be very careful.” Adrenaline pulsed through Angela’s body as she realized what had just happened. She had an active imagination and she wasn’t sure what she thought of the old stories anymore, but this was no trick of the mind. The bird had come to bring her this message. Angela shivered with fear. Where was Grandmother? What did the bird know? And why was she in danger?

She waited for the blue bird to continue, to tell her more, but it flew away with the other birds as the front door opened. Grandmother is coming to tell me it’s time to come in for dinner, Angela thought. But it was Aunt Margaret who came through the doorway.

“Angela! What are you doing outside? You know it’s not safe. You shouldn’t be out here alone after what happened. Get in the car now!”

Angela was scared and confused. Her aunt’s words echoed in her head: “You know it’s not safe.” What did she mean?

“Get down here now Angela! We’re going home.”

“You’re not my mother! This is my home.” The birds had nested for the night, leaving her alone the empty branches. She looked over at the shadows falling across the tracks which still lingered by the side of the house and remembered why it wasn’t safe. She climbed down from the tree and got in the car without saying a word.

As Aunt Margaret started the car, Angela’s mind churned with questions. Had a bird really come to give her a message? Was Grandmother really safe wherever and whatever she was? And why was she the one in danger now?
Angela’s questions only raised more questions, so she did her best to push them to the back of her mind. During the rest of the drive back, she was eaten by guilt over what she had said to her aunt. “Aunt Margaret,” she said that evening as she helped her aunt prepare dinner, “I’m really sorry about earlier. You’ve been so nice to me. And all I do to repay you is be a jerk.” Angela’s voice cracked as she fell into tears.

“It’s alright, Angie,” Aunt Margaret said, dropping her fork and taking Angela into her arms. “I know you didn’t mean to say anything bad, and you aren’t any trouble at all. You help out with the kids and you help me cook. It’s actually easier with you here!” Angela chuckled through her tears. “I know you’re going through a lot now. And I’m sorry if I pushed your buttons. I love you like one of my own kids and I just want to make sure you’re safe.

“Really, I think I said that because I wish you were my mom. I mean, you’re the closest thing I have to her. Can you tell me more about her? What was she like?”

“Aww, you’re a sweet girl Angela. I can tell you what I know and what I remember, but your mother was always very reserved, and I don’t think anyone ever knew what she was really like, except for your father.” Angela perked up at this. “My father? Can you tell me about him too?”

“Charles!” Aunt Margaret called to her husband. “Can you finish up on dinner? Angela and I are busy.” Then she took Angela into her bedroom and closed the door, motioning for Angela to sit on the bed. Aunt Margaret sat beside her and began, “Well, no one knows the whole story, but I can tell you what I remember about your parents. As you know, your father was my brother. I never knew your mother very well though. Sure,
I met her a couple times, but mom, your grandmother, never approved of her. And as you know, what she says goes.” Angela chuckled at this. Grandmother had been the leader of the family for as long as Angela could remember, but it seemed like it went back even further than that.

“Anyway, from what I remember, your father was a normal, mischievous boy.” Margaret looked up toward the wall as if she were reading the past in the wallpaper. “He got into trouble now and then because he was always bringing animals home. I’ll never forget the time he tried to bring a fawn into the house. Mom was so gentle with animals, but she didn’t hesitate to shoo that poor deer off with a broom.” Angela laughed at the image of Grandmother as a feisty young woman. Aunt Margaret’s eyes smiled as she melted into her memory.

“He always had a way with animals. He was never that great with people though. I used to tease him that he should have been born as a deer.” Aunt Margaret laughed again. “It wasn’t until I was older that I understood the truth to my jokes.”

“What do you mean, Aunt Margaret?”

“Well, you’re probably not going to believe me when I tell you this, in fact I’m not really sure if I believe it anymore.” Angela’s eyebrows raised as she waited to see what her aunt would say. “The old legends of our people talk of shifters, people or animals who can…”

“Change form at will,” Angela finished.

“Right,” Margaret continued. “Well, when your father was about the age you are now, he went into the woods one day and didn’t return for a year. He said I had been
right, he wasn’t meant to live as a human. I was never sure what to make of it. At the
time, I just thought he was crazy. But as I grow older, I feel closer to the ancestors and
the stories of our people.

“When I was a girl, I rejected my heritage. I wanted to go to a school off the
reservation, where I could be more than just another stupid Indian. That’s why we moved
off the reservation, why Grandmother moved us to North Platte, and why we live here
today. But your father was just the opposite. Ever since he was a child, he was fascinated
by the stories of the elders. He had a lot of respect for the old ways. He was the model
child, following in our parents’ footsteps, always pleasing the elders. Back then, I was the
black sheep of the family. I just wanted to be like the white girls and fit in with the other
kids.

“Anyway, your father came of age around the time we moved. He hated the white
world, North Platte, all of it. So when we moved he decided to escape by embarking on a
quest of manhood, a vision quest. The young man lives in the forest with nothing but
himself and the Great Spirit until his power animal reveals itself to him. This usually
takes less than a week. But like I said before, your father was gone for a year. When he
returned, he claimed the spirit had bestowed the highest honor on him. He had become
his power animal, the deer.

After he left for his vision quest, I never saw much of him. He claimed the
ancestors had chosen him because he was one of the few who revered the old ways of our
people. But I never knew what to make of it. I’ve always been a skeptic. And when he
returned, he claimed he would never leave the forest again. And he disappeared for many years, returning one day with a woman who he intended to be his bride.

She was tall, and beautiful, with dark hair and strong cheekbones. She was a good woman, but she was white, a French woman who had moved down from Canada. Your grandmother never approved of her. In those days she had a lot of anger at the way the Europeans had come, taken our land, and then continued to live on it as if nothing had happened. So it was a slap in the face to her when her son brought a white woman home. And since mom didn’t approve, no one approved. That’s why we never saw much of your mother. And that was the last we saw of your father until he returned two years later. The light was gone from his eyes. He was broken and mangy. His wife had died in childbirth, and he was in no condition to raise a child on his own in the woods. So he returned one last time to leave the baby with your grandmother.”

“The baby was me,” Angela acknowledged. Aunt Margaret nodded.

“We knew, but we didn’t want to confuse you.” Angela was hurt that no one had trusted her with the truth. She had been told that her parents had died in a car accident. But as her mind pulsed with anger through memories of her past and how she had been lied to, she realized that Grandmother had told her the story. She had just told it in her own way, as she told every story. It was all true. Everything. Animals and people living together, becoming each other. Angela felt her anger redirecting itself from her family to herself. She was the one who was to blame for her ignorance. She had doubted the truth of the stories. But now she knew better. She knew that even the most fantastical story was based on some kind of truth.
Aunt Margaret held Angela close. “I know it’s a lot to take in Angie, and I know it doesn’t make sense. But that’s all I can really tell you.”

Angela turned sideways on the bed to look her aunt in the eye. “Thanks for telling me Aunt Margaret, but I have one more question.”

“Shoot.”

“Is Grandmother one of the animal people, like my father?”

“She didn’t want you to know until you figured it out on your own. Yes, she is. That’s why I wasn’t worried at first. I thought she was just living her animal life. But then there was the blood, and oh, I don’t know.”

“It’s ok,” Angela said, wrapping her arm around her aunt. “She’s ok now.”

“How do you know that?”

“A little bird told me.”
CHAPTER EIGHT

Early Sunday morning Angela awoke to the buzz of her phone as it vibrated against the nightstand. It was still dark. The pre-dawn glow hadn’t even begun to illuminate the blinds yet. She twisted to look at the clock, 1 AM. Angela turned her head to see if the ringing phone had woken her cousin up too. But upon seeing that Rachel’s bed was empty, she remembered that her cousin was at a friend’s house for the night. She looked at the phone to see who would be calling her at this time. Of course it was Jade. If she had been awake, she would have realized that Jade was probably calling to tell her about her date. But she was still groggy and worried that Jade might be in trouble.

“Jade, are you ok?” Angela was fully awake now.

“Yeah. I just got home from my date! Were you asleep?”

“Yeah. I thought it was something important.” Angela fell back onto her pillow.

“Oh, sorry. I can call you back tomorrow. I just wanted to tell you all about it.”

“I’m awake now, so go ahead and give me the details.”

“Okay, Lance just got his license last week, so he came to pick me up. And you’ll never guess where we went for dinner!”

“Where?”

“I’ll give you a hint. Think road-kill pizza.”

“Eww! He took you to Pizza Palace?”

“Yup. ‘As much pizza as you can eat for $7!’” Jade quoted.

“That would be a great deal,” Angela began.
“If the pizza wasn’t disgusting!” Jade added. The girls laughed. “I didn’t say anything, ‘cause I wanted to see what he was really like, you know?”

“Sure…” Angela laughed. “So what’s he like? Quantity over quality?”

“Shut up! It’s a very good method of dating, thank you very much. It saves you the trouble of getting into a relationship with a guy who tries to impress you at first and then turns out to be a loser. Anyway, he just made a bad choice with dinner. The rest of the night was really fun.”

“What, did he proceed to take you back to his trailer for a romantic evening?”

“No, for your information, he took me to see the new Harry Potter movie.”

“Aww man, I thought we were gonna go together!”

“I can go again, with you. It was so good! There’s this part when Hermione and Ron…”

“Shh! Don’t ruin it!”

“You already read the books, Angela. I can’t ruin it!”

“Oh yeah. So what did you think of Lance? Will there be a second date?”

“I dunno. But I think so. I mean, he wasn’t Mr. Perfect or anything, but he wasn’t bad. And,” her voice trailed off suggestively, “he knows Double X.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, apparently their dads are both cops and they’re best friends or something. So I said maybe the four of us should hang out some time.”

“Oh my God, no you didn’t!”

“I did. You should be happy Angela!”
“I admitted it. I have a crush on him, but I…”

“But what? It’ll be fun Angela. We’ll all be hanging out. You need this now.”

“We’ll see.” Angela hung on to the last part of what Jade said. She did need some fun now, with everything that was going on. Her mind drifted to Grandmother, and then to her parents. “I asked my aunt about my parents today.”

“Really? What did you find out?”

“Apparently my Grandmother didn’t like my mom so much because she was white, French or French Canadian or something, so that’s why no one ever talks about her. And she died when I was born.”

“Woah. That’s heavy. No car accident?”

“Nope. And my dad was apparently some crazy mountain man who lived in the woods, and he dumped me off with my grandmother when I was a baby.”

“Wow. And I thought my family was crazy!”

“They are. I mean, your mom wards off spirits with lime juice!”

“Well, you know what I mean.”

“Trust me, I know!” The girls laughed again. “And, I think I believe it all now. My grandmother being the wolf and all.”

“I told you to stop doubting it. Yeah, it’s crazy, but what isn’t. The truth is more complicated than the lies that cover it up. I mean, isn’t the easy answer that your parents died in a car wreck? Not that they, whatever?”

“Yeah, I think I know what you mean.”
“Ugh, I’m crashing, but we have to talk more about this,” Jade said. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Night.”

Angela set her phone on the table by her bed and rolled back onto the pillow. She wanted to go back to sleep, but she was too awake now, so she watched the moonlight dancing across the ceiling. Restless tree branches cast their shadows across the room as they swayed in the wind. Angela rolled onto her side to look out the window. The full moon reflected light across the horizon, making trees and plants clearly visible in the dark.

She thought about what Jade had said. She did need some fun right now. She still didn’t know where Grandmother was, but she felt a little stability coming back to her life as she learned the truth about her past and who she was. Things in her life were crazy and it would be nice to just enjoy being a teenage girl and lose herself in her hormones. She decided she would take Jade up on her offer for a double date, if Max was interested.

Her eyes still watched the grass and trees swaying in the moonlight as her mind wandered. Suddenly, her focus shifted from her thoughts to the night landscape as she noticed a shadow moving across the yard. She was overwhelmed with a sense of déjà vu, and for a second she was convinced that she was looking at the wolf she had seen as a child, the wolf that would mean Grandmother had returned. But as her sleepy eyes focused, Angela realized that it was just a deer licking the salt that Uncle Charles had put at the side of the house to lure them away from the garden. As she watched the deer calmly licking the salt block in the moonlight, she thought about her father. She liked to
think that he had been watching over her all these years, caring for her in the only way he knew how. As Angela fell asleep, she was comforted by the fact that someone was watching over her, whether it was her father or just another son of the forest.
CHAPTER NINE

After what seemed like a short but very eventful weekend, the Monday morning sun signaled the beginning of another week. Angela didn’t want to go to school. This simple but mundane thought made her feel like her life was getting back to normal, or at least stabilizing in a new form of normalcy. Even though the weekend’s revelations seemed crazy, she took comfort in knowing that Aunt Margaret was part of her family secret, and that Grandmother was safe.

As she brushed her teeth, she looked at her birthmark in the mirror and tried to scrub it off of her skin. *How is a boy ever going to like me with this thing on my face?* she thought. She couldn’t go out, that was that. She would live alone and have lots of cats to keep her company. For a moment, becoming a cat lady seemed like a good idea. But she was taking comfort in the dullness of day to day life. It was routine and boring and normal.

After curling up sleeping in her seat on the school bus, bouncing down the back roads of North Platte, Angela arrived at school in a groggy stupor. During her first class of the day, American History, she fought just to keep her eyes open. Each time she blinked, her eyelashes seemed to clasp together like the teeth of a Venus flytrap. Her head began to bob, so she rested it on her arm to avoid falling out of the desk. Mr. Maxwell went on about the American Revolution, but Angela spent all of her energy trying to look like she paying attention, and couldn’t actually focus on anything he was saying.
When class ended, she dragged herself out of the desk and went to meet Jade as
she was getting out of Geometry. Their classes were right next to each other, so the girls
walked to Chorus together every day. “Hey!” Jade said.

“How was your weekend?”

“It was okay. I just ended up hanging around the house, talking to my aunt.”

“That’s cool, and I want to hear more about it later, but I just got a text from
Lance while I was in Geometry. He said that he and Double X are up for hanging out this
weekend.”

“Cool.”

“So? Are you in?”

“I dunno. I think Aunt Margaret wants me to babysit.”

“Oh, come on! She never makes you babysit. And even if she did it wouldn’t be
for the whole weekend. Come on, Angela. This is your chance!”

“Okay, fine. But can we talk about it later?”

“Sure Debbie Downer.” Jade rolled her eyes.

“How can anyone have so much energy on Monday morning?”

“Some of us let ourselves be happy,” Jade muttered as they arrived at Chorus
class.

“What ever.” The girls took their place on the risers as Ms. Brinks took role.
“Alright, let’s begin. The Christmas Concert is only a little over a month away and we have a long way to go. After we warm up, let’s go straight into ‘Carol of the Bells.’”

As she started running through the scales to warm up her voice, Angela began to feel more awake, and optimistic about Monday and about everything. Singing was something she could get lost in. It was one of the things that made all of her problems fade away. When she felt her spirit vibrate with the power and beauty of her voice, Angela felt peaceful and perfect. It was the same feeling she had when she climbed high on the rock wall and looked at the world from a new perspective.

As the chorus began singing ‘Carol of the Bells’, Angela melted into the song. About 30 seconds in she felt a sharp pain in her back, but continued. She figured the pain was just caused by her chest adjusting to the expansion and contraction of her lungs and windpipe. But several minutes later the pain had reached a crescendo and her voice quivered. Suddenly the pain became paralyzing and she fell forward. Luckily, the students in front were able to catch her in her fall, and gently lowered her to the ground.

“Give her some room,” Ms. Brinks said. “Craig, go get some wet paper towels from the bathroom. Are you feeling okay Angela?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Angela’s voice broke.

“Just relax there for a minute. I’ve seen this happen a million times. You probably just locked your knees and got light-headed. If you feel like that again, don’t hesitate to come sit down and breathe deeply until you feel better.”
“Thanks.” Angela was relieved that Ms. Brinks wasn’t making a big deal of this. She hadn’t felt light-headed at all, just that intense pain, like her scars were ripping apart.

“Thank you Craig.” Ms. Brinks pressed the towel to Angela’s forehead. “Do you feel like sitting up now?”

“I think so.” Angela sat up with ease. The pain had faded to a dull ache.

“Just take it easy,” Ms. Brinks said. “Jade, when she feels up to it, walk Angela to the nurse just to make sure everything’s ok.”

“Okay,” Jade said, kneeling by Angela’s side.

“Now, everyone else, take a few deep breaths and let’s get back to the Christmas Concert!”

As the rest of the class resumed singing, Angela and Jade sat on the floor at the side of the stage.

“Are you ok?” Jade asked.

“I think so.”

“What happened? What’s going on with you?”

“I dunno. You heard Ms. Brinks. She said it happens all the time.” Angela was trying to reassure herself as much as she was trying to convince Jade that everything was ok.

“Come on Angela. What really happened? I know something is going on with you.”

“Let’s go to the nurse’s office.” Angela stood up. As she continued directing the chorus, Ms. Brinks waved to Angela and mouthed, “I hope you feel better.”
Once they were in the empty hallway, Jade asked Angela again. “What’s up with you?”

“I’ve been having these pains in my back. And it just got so intense, I guess I passed out.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah”

“Oh, that’s nothing. That happens to my mom all the time. Her back is really bad, so she goes to the chiropractor twice a week. It’s probably from all the climbing we’ve been doing lately.”

“Yeah, that’s probably it.” Angela shrugged her shoulders to shake off the feeling that something wasn’t right.

Jade reached over and started massaging Angela’s back. “What’s that?” she said.

“What’s what?”

“Oh my God.”

“What?” Jade pulled Angela into the bathroom and lifted up the back of her shirt.

“You’re bleeding Angela! Your scars are split open and there’s something poking out! I’m calling 911!”

“No, don’t!” Angela finally understood where the pain was coming from. “I should have realized it sooner!” Angela said. “I am Cloud!”

“What?” Jade asked. She was still holding Angela’s shirt up and looking at the scars.
“I’ve gotta get home,” Angela said. She pulled away from Jade and adjusted her shirt.

“You need a doctor.”

“No I don’t. I need to go home.” Angela started walking to her locker and Jade followed. “I should have known.”

“What, Angela? You’re being crazy. You need a doctor.” Jade’s hands shook as she tried to make Angela stop walking. She grew more worried by the second, not understanding what was wrong with her friend.

Angela talked out loud to herself. “I should have known that my wings were growing. I mean, my grandmother…” She lowered her voice and then began directing her thoughts toward Jade. “My Grandmother is a wolf. My dad was a deer. And my Grandmother told me a story when I was a kid about a little girl named Cloud who had wings, but I thought it was just a story, like how this,” she pointed to her birthmark, “was a kiss from the Sun Spirit, and how the Earth rests on the back of a giant turtle.”

“What? Slow down Angela. You never told me that your dad was a deer! You just said he was a ‘crazy mountain man.’”

“No, he was an animal person too. It’s in my blood. But all of the stories, they’re true!”

“Of course they are! People can’t come up with these things. That’s the Mystery’s work, or God, or whatever you want to call it.”

“I should have known,” Angela said. She grabbed her coat from her locker and was careful to slip the coat over her back quickly so that no one would notice the blood
that had begun to soak through her shirt. She walked down the hallway toward the parking lot, Jade in tow. “I felt the pain when I was climbing, singing, doing bird things! I’ve always had this weird connection to birds.”

“Really? You never told me that.”

“Yeah, I can sort of, talk to them.”

“What? Angela this is too weird. We have to get you to the doctor.”

“No! I can’t go to a doctor. No one can know about this, got it?”

“Yeah, okay, but at least let me take a look at it so I can clean the wounds and bandage them. I’m a pretty good vet!”

“Shut up,” Angela said. “Just because you volunteered walking dogs at the SPCA for a summer doesn’t mean you know how to take care of a bird…girl.”

“Hey, it was a good opportunity. And I learned a lot about taking care of injured animals there.”

“Whatever. Let’s get out of here.”

“Let’s go back to my house, it’s closer. And my mom has all the stuff I need to bandage you.”

“And your car’s out of the shop so you can drive, right?”

“Finally. The bus was killing me.”

The girls sat in silence for a moment after they got into the VW Golf that Jade’s parents had bought for her when she got her learner’s permit. As she pulled out onto the road, Jade asked, “So what does it feel like?”
“Being a bird-girl?” Angela laughed. “Surreal, I guess. I mean this can’t be real can it?”

“Why can’t it? Your people have a much better relationship with this land than my European ancestors and I will ever have. Don’t you think your Grandmother and everyone is closer to the truth of this world than anyone?”

“I never really thought about it that way.” Angela took off her seat belt and leaned forward so her scars didn’t rub against the seat.

“Why not? People these days are so jaded. They expect the world to be boring, so it is. They want everything to be ordered and segregated, so it is. The bottom line is: they want to control everything and make it all the same. That’s why there aren’t more people like you today. And if there are, I’m sure they don’t want anyone to know what they’re really like.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. I don’t know what’s true anymore. Ugh, I have this gross mental image of bones growing out of my back, like teeth coming in.”

“Yeah, but they’re wings.” Jade’s comment broke the heavy feeling of their conversation, and both girls laughed as they pulled into Jade’s driveway.

Angela stopped laughing as soon as she saw that the Jetta that belonged to Jade’s mother was parked in the carport. Jade’s parents were laid back, but she would be in trouble if they found out she was skipping school.

“Shit! Turn around, let’s go to my house.” Angela leaned back in the seat as she panicked, grimacing as her open wounds rubbed against the back of her seat.
“Relax, Angela. We can just tell my mom the truth. She’ll understand why we’re not at school when she sees your scars.”

“No, she can’t see them Jade! No one can see them! Turn the car around before she sees us.”

“It’s fine Angela, she won’t judge you. She probably came home early to perform a solstice ritual or something.” Jade started laughing, but quickly stopped as she saw the look of desperation in Angela’s eyes.

“Please, Jade. No one can find out about this. You have to keep it a secret. Just drive!”

“Okay, okay. Don’t have an aneurism.” Angela sighed with relief as Jade pulled back onto the road.

“I understand that you don’t want people to think you’re crazy. But my mom wouldn’t judge you, you know that.”

“It’s not about that. I have this bad feeling. It’s just one of those things you know you should keep secret.”

“Fair enough.”

“This has got to be what the bird was talking about.”

“Okay, Angela, I’m trying to keep your secret safe, but now you really sound crazy!”

“You know how I told you I’ve always felt close to birds?”

“Yeah?”
“Well, it happened the other day when we were at my house picking out clothes for your date. After you left I was sitting in the Apple Tree where I used to always sit when I was a kid. I was singing, and the pain was in my back again. Then this bird flew to me and it told me that my Grandmother was safe for now, but I should be careful because now I’m the one in danger.”

“The bird actually talked to you?”

“It wasn’t talking like we’re talking. But I could somehow understand it.”

“So you think you’re in danger now because of this?”

“Turn here. Let’s go to my house. The only thing that makes sense is that she was kidnapped. Grandmother told me a story about how the Europeans killed our people when they came here. They didn’t stop after they pushed us off of our land and onto reservations. They just found ways to cover it up. They discovered our secret, that some of us were something between animal and human. They thought it was witchcraft and declared them demons. Of course they proclaimed that God wanted them to kill the demons, but they knew it would look bad if they went around killing people. So they discovered that they could wait until the people changed into animals and then go hunt them. A person would go missing and never come back. There would be no body, just a dead animal, so no one would be suspicious.”

“Woah, that is so creepy. So you think that someone was stalking your Grandmother?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense, isn’t it? Someone figured out what she was and they took it as their mission from God to get rid of her. And that’s why I’m in danger
now that my wings are growing back. I’m a target. That’s why no one can find out about this. Got it?’

Jade nodded. “Wow Angela, I always sensed something was different about you, but I never had an idea that it would be anything like this!”

“Me neither. I think my grandmother left me these clues to who I am through her stories. It was the only way I guess, to figure it out myself. You can’t just tell someone, ‘hey, you’re a bird-girl.’” The girls both laughed at this, glad for an opportunity to break the tension. Jade parked at Grandmother’s house and Angela let them in. “The truth was always the one place I never expected to find it. Right inside my head.”

“Come on, Angela. We need to clean you up.” Jade led Angela to the bathroom and began cleaning the wounds with peroxide.

“Ouch!”

“Hold still. I’m just cleaning it.” Angela winced as she tried to bear the pain. The scars were split open, with new bone growth poking out of her skin. Jade reached into the wound with a pair of tweezers and pulled out a tiny feather. “Well, here’s proof that you’re not crazy.” She showed Angela the feather. Angela took it in her fingers and looked at it with awe. She really was a bird-girl.

“It’s weird,” Angela said.

“Yeah, you can say that again.”

“That’s not what I mean. It’s weird because my life is so confusing right now, but I feel a little better all of a sudden.”

“Better? There are bones poking out of your back.”
“Yeah, but things are finally starting to make sense. All the stories and everything."

“I know what you mean. I wish I had the strong heritance that you have. I’m a mutt!”

“What are you again? Half English, half German, half Polish?”

“And don’t forget half Irish!”

“Wow, you’re like two people!”

“I am!”

“Well apparently I’m a mix too. I’m only half Indian because of my mom, so that’s probably why I don’t change into an animal, I just grow wings.”

“Hold still Angela, let me wrap this gauze around you. It’s gonna be really uncomfortable for a while, but you have to keep it wrapped until new skin starts growing over the bones.”

“Thanks Doctor.”

“No problem. Hey, I’m hungry. Wanna go to Taco Bell?”

“That sounds good. I want to get some Tylenol first, though.”

“Oh yeah, is it still hurting a lot? My mom has some painkillers she gets from the hospital. Strong stuff. Let me see. Yeah here, take the bottle, she won’t notice. Should we go back to school after we eat?”

“What time is it?”

“1:24”

“Maybe.”
“I vote for no. Part of me says I don’t feel like going back. The other part says you really need to be careful and take it easy.”

“What about all the other parts? You’re two people right?” Angela teased.

“The other me agrees equally with both opinions. Seriously, how are you?”

“I’m fine. The pain is growing and it hurts like hell, but it actually feels okay considering.”

“So you want to go back to school?”

“I never said that.”
CHAPTER TEN

The girls timed their return carefully so that no one would suspect them of skipping school. Jade dropped Angela off at her aunt’s house promptly at 3:38, the time she would have gotten home if Jade had driven them straight home after 4th period.

“See you tomorrow Angela.”

“See ya,” Angela said as she got out of the car.

“Wait!” Angela opened the door to see what Jade wanted.

“Your bandage.” Jade pointed to a small length of gauze dangling from the bottom of Angela’s coat.

“Close one, thanks. See ya Jade.”

Angela walked up the driveway to the house and unlocked the front door. She set her bag down in Rachel’s room. “Rachel?” she went to the kitchen to get a snack. “Josh? Kyle?” Angela suddenly realized she hadn’t timed it right. She could hear her cousins getting off the bus.

“Hey Angela,” Rachel said. “Why weren’t you on the bus?”

“Jade gave me a ride.” Angela tried to sound nonchalant.

“Oh.” Rachel went into her room. Angela felt bad that Rachel had to ride the bus, but it wasn’t like she could have offered her a ride today. She hadn’t exactly been expecting to ride home with Jade, or to skip school for that matter.

“Hi Angela!” The twins ran upstairs to their room.
“Hi!” She called after them. Alone in the kitchen, she leaned over the counter and let out a sigh. She stretched her back and ran a hand over one of the scars.

“Are you ok?” Angela looked back to see Rachel standing in the doorway.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little sore from the rock climbing.”

“You guys are crazy.”

Angela nodded. “Tell me about it.”

“So did anyone ask you to the dance yet?”

“Not yet. What about you?”

“Yup! Bryan just asked me today! I thought maybe we could go shopping together if…”

“I don’t know if I’m going.” Not only had no one asked Angela, but she suddenly realized how hard it would be to hide the bandages if she were wearing a dress. She saw the disappointment in Rachel’s eyes and added, “But we can still go shopping if you want.” She was no longer reacting to the world around her, but now making a conscious choice to hide the wing growths which stuck out from her back like budding horns. Angela figured it would be easier to blend in with everyone else if she acted like everyone else. If this meant going shopping for a dance she probably wouldn’t attend, so be it.

“Cool! Maybe we can go this weekend? I’m sure you’ll have a date by then.”

“Yeah. Do you want some popcorn if I make it?” Angela was already reading the instructions on the bag.
“Sure.” Rachel went to the living room and turned on the TV. As the popcorn bag heated and the corn started popping, Angela thought about how much her life had changed recently. She really felt like a character in Grandmother’s stories, Little Cloud, flying farther and farther from her parents to seek a new life.

“Angela, come see this!” Rachel called from the living room.

“What is it?” Angela turned off the popcorn and went into the living room to see what Rachel was talking about. “This is News 2 reporting from what seems to be yet another in a series of coyote attacks. We’re here with a local man who has reported a number of attacks on his livestock.”

“Look where he is Angela!” The background was a field on the edge of a forest. It could have been anywhere. But then the camera panned out as it focused on the man being interviewed, it was the policeman who had come to the house when she called about the tracks and Grandmother’s disappearance. Now he was wearing jeans and a leather jacket, and was listed on screen as John Hunter, not Officer Hunter. Angela also recognized the house in the background. It was just down the street from Grandmother’s house.

“Woah! That’s weird,” Angela said.

“Can you tell us about what you’ve been witnessing around here?” The newscaster offered her microphone to Officer Hunter.

“As you can see,” he led the reporter to a mauled horse corpse, “We’ve found a number of dead animals here in North Platte lately. We’ve been getting reports down at the station at least once a week, sometimes as many as three times. First it was just
farmers, then it started happening to my own animals. Killed 3 animals. They all had these teeth marks in their necks.” He pointed with a stick to a row of slashes in the horse’s neck. “And one day I seen a coyote eating one of my animals. I came outside with my shotgun and he ran off into those trees.” He pointed into the forest that bordered Grandmother’s house.

“As you can see, North Platte does indeed have a coyote problem. Thank you sir. A local woman, Noko Earthsong is still missing in another possibly related incident. This is News 2. Now back to you Jim.”

“Wow.” Angela’s eyes unfocused and she saw herself in the screen, standing in the middle of the living room holding a bowl of popcorn.

Later that night, Angela twisted in her sheets, somewhere trying to pull herself free from the waking world into the dream world. She was physically exhausted, but she couldn’t stop thinking about what she had seen on the news, and about her wings. Normally she slept on her back, but it was raw from the bones which protruded from the scars, and she couldn’t quite get used to lying on her stomach or her side. Luckily, Jade’s mother had a stash of high-powered painkillers that she’d gotten from the hospital where she had worked before she quit to start Organic Yoga, and Jade had managed to “borrow” some for Angela. Once she had learned how to stagger the painkillers just right, she almost never felt pain in her back anymore, but it was still uncomfortable to lie on her back.
At 3am, she gave up on sleep. She picked up Grandmother’s ring from the bedside table and twirled it around her finger as she always did. The ring hung loosely from her narrow fingers, so Angela took it off when she was cooking, cleaning, or sleeping. The metal was comforting as it warmed against her fingers. There was no magic in it, but instead a power much stronger. She imagined the ring on Grandmother’s finger. This piece of jewelry had become a part of her, of both grandmother and granddaughter, and even more importantly, it linked them in a physical way, beyond their genetics, beyond their love. It was an object of permanence, a solid thing that could never be destroyed. Even when the metal was cool, it would still flow with the warmth of their bond.

As these thoughts flew through Angela’s head, comforting her, she finally fell asleep on her side. Her consciousness was released from its struggle against sleep, and now seeped through the crevices of her brain like water over ice. In her dream she saw Grandmother. They were back at home together, drinking tea over the oak table in the kitchen. But then Grandmother began to fade like fog ascending into the sky.

“I miss you Grandmother,” Angela said aloud. But by the time the words left her mouth, Grandmother was completely gone. Angela woke up in her bed at Grandmother’s house. She reached over to her bedside table for her ring as she did every morning. But it wasn’t there. Her heart pounded in her fingertips as she got out of bed and ran her hands across floor. The ring was gone.

Angela woke up in a sweat, wrapped up in her sheets. She reached over to the bedside table and her heart skipped as she realized that the ring really wasn’t there. The
last thing she remembered before falling asleep was that she had been twirling it on her finger, but the ring wasn’t on her finger now. Was this another dream? She realized then that Grandmother wasn’t just gone, but fading from her life as she got used to living with her cousins and went back to her routine.

“‘I won’t let you go,’” Angela said aloud, tearing the sheets from her bed. And with a gentle metallic clink, the ring hit the ground and rolled up to her foot. Angela grabbed the ring and held it tight in her fist. She couldn’t control Grandmother’s absence, but she could hold tight to her memories. Angela took a silver chain from her jewelry box and secured the ring against her neck. As she fastened the clasp, she felt empowered. *Maybe her absence isn’t beyond my control. Maybe I can get her back!*

Rachel was still asleep so Angela quietly gathered her bandages and painkillers from her backpack and crept into the bathroom. As she wrapped the bandages around her torso to hide the bulge in her back, Angela for once felt less like a victim hiding herself from the world, and more like a warrior preparing for battle.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

A girl digs into the earth with her fingernails. She kneels in the grass of her backyard and buries the few apple seeds which her mother gave her before she died.

“Plant these seeds when I am gone and I will always be with you,” she said. So the girl slices into the ground with a garden trowel, breaking through the grass roots and scratching at the soil with her fingers. As she digs she cried, remembering the hole in the ground where her mother now rested. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand, dirt streaking across her cheeks and turning to mud when it met her tears.

The Apple Tree stood tall outside the house, watching over the girl as she became a woman and had a daughter of her own. She named the girl Noko because she had a glow like the moon. The tree’s branches twisted upward into a spiral, making them perfect for climbing, and the daughter found security in its branches just as her mother had.

A boy lived next door and he would sometimes play with the little girl. His name was John. But his parents didn’t like the little girl’s parents. They didn’t like the neighbors’ wild, wolf-like dog which they let out at night to growl at the moon. They didn’t like the Apple Tree either and complained that its fruit fell in their yard and decayed there, attracting swarms of bugs which infested their house. But the woman refused to cut the tree, even to trim it back.
Storms often slid across the plains because nothing stood in their way but the trees. The boy’s parents watched the Apple Tree’s branches shaking over the roof when the winds gathered in its boughs. Sure enough, a violent storm ripped over the plains one hot summer day and a branch from the tree fell on the boy’s house. His parents were furious with the neighbors and the roof had to be repaired. The boy liked the way sunlight came in through the hole in the ceiling now, but he knew he should be mad like his parents. So he did not play with the little girl any more.

His parents often shouted at each other because of the tree. As he walked past the neighbor’s house the next week the boughs began shaking in the wind again, taunting the boy and a rage came over him. The tree wanted to destroy his family. He slipped his Swiss Army Knife from his pocket and climbed over the fence with the blade clutched between his molars. Kneeling beside the base of the trunk, he carved the blade into the bark and felt the branches shake once more. He continued cutting into the tree.

The wolf or dog or whatever it was emerged from the house’s shadow. It ran toward the boy and he ran back toward the fence, leaving the knife resting against a root. The wolf closed its teeth around his calf as he climbed back over the fence. He screamed and kicked at its head with his other foot as he hung by his arms from the top of the fence. The wolf released its grip and disappeared back into the shadow. The boy could still hear it growling as he crossed to his side of the fence.

When he looked back toward the neighbor’s house he saw that the girl was watching him through the window. She pulled the curtains shut. An apple lay at his feet and he picked it up and cracked through its crisp skin with his teeth, feeling the sour
juices emerge and drip down his chin. He threw the apple back across the fence and it broke the glass of the window where the girl had stood. He hated her. Hated her family as much as his parents, especially the girl’s mother, the woman who had planted the tree. It had created all the problems.

Even after a rough night, Angela felt a little better about everything when she got up the next morning. With a little help from the painkillers she was starting to get used to the strange feeling of the bones poking out of her back. But most importantly, Angela had decided that she wasn’t going to be a victim anymore. She wouldn’t let Grandmother be forgotten, and whether the police were still searching or not, she would not be passive any longer.

It was one of those days when your mood changes everything. Angela could feel that today wasn’t going to be anything like yesterday. That’s why she wasn’t as surprised as she normally would have been when she was greeted by Max when she walked into history class. “Hey,” he said. It was quiet and timid, but it was the most acknowledgement he had ever given her.

“Hi Max.” Angela smiled at him as she set her bag down. She sat down and turned her body ever so slightly toward the back of her desk, inviting Max to continue the conversation. 30 seconds passed and she figured he had given it up, but then he responded.

“Hey Angela, did you, uh, finish the reading for today?” Angela turned around in her seat. At first she just smiled.
“The reading? I just skimmed over it. I don’t think the American Revolution changed much since we studied it last year.”

Max laughed, a little too generously. “I know, right? I was just wondering what you thought of early America. For most people it’s this big patriotic event, but you’re…different.”

“Huh?” Angela began to sweat. She had wrapped herself in bandages and covered herself in a baggy sweater so no one would notice the protrusions in her back. Were they that obvious already?

“I mean, you’re Native right?”

Angela relaxed. “Oh, yeah.” Just as she was finally talking to Max, Mr. Arthur walked in. Angela reluctantly turned around to face the teacher as she pulled her history book from her bag.

“Angela?” Max whispered.

“Yes?” she said, turning herself slightly toward him again.

“I was, uh, wondering. Do you want to go to the dance with me?”

A smile spread across Angela’s face. She could feel herself blushing, so she faced forward again. “Sure.”

“Now who can tell me,” Mr. Arthur began, “what were the major events that set the revolution in motion?” Angela wasn’t listening. She pulled her cellphone from her pocket, making sure to keep her eyes focused evenly between her textbook and Mr. Arthur. She texted Jade first: “Max just asked me to the dance!” Then she texted Rachel: “The shopping trip is on! Max just asked me!”
As class was letting out, Angela wrote her cell number on a corner of notebook paper and handed it to Max as they were packing up. “Here’s my number. You know, so we can plan the details for the dance.”

“Thanks. I’ll text you later so you get my number.” Max followed her out the door. “You never answered my question from before,” he said.

“Which one?”

“About your perspective of American history. I mean, they teach us about how hard it was for the colonists to gain their independence and how they had it so bad, taking orders from England. But they were murderers, taking everything from the people who had lived here for centuries. As a native myself, I’ve always had this feeling of rage when I hear about the Europeans coming to America.”

“I don’t know. I mean, yeah it sucks. But I always saw it as distant history. I never really thought about it much, until recently.”

“What about this one?” Rachel lifted a navy blue dress off of the rack.

“It’s okay.”

“Come on Angela, that’s like the hundredth ‘okay’ dress you’ve seen. Can’t you at least just try it on? The dance is only a week away.”

“Sorry. I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately. I’m gonna go try it on now.” She was getting good at acting like there wasn’t a giant hole inside her from Grandmother’s absence. In fact, there were actually two holes in her back. But sometimes she just
couldn’t escape those twin holes, she felt like she was sinking back into them, back inside of herself. She had to blend in. It was a matter of life and death. Angela took the dress.

Meanwhile, Angela was in the dressing room. She hung both dresses on the wall hooks and pulled her cellphone from her pocket. To Jade: “Still shopping w Rachel. Where r u?” Angela reluctantly took the blue dress from its hanger. She had never liked wearing dresses. Sure they were pretty, but they made her feel more like a doll than a person. She ran the silky fabric through her fingers and imagined the way it would flow on the dance floor, giving her an ethereal beauty as she spun in delicate circles with Max. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad to be a princess just for one night. She smiled to herself and pulled the dress on. It had a conservative neckline, but the back was open, and would reveal her scars. This would be trickier than she had first thought.

“Are you okay in there?” Rachel asked through the door. “Come out and show me how they look on you.” Angela struggled to put her shirt back on quickly so Rachel wouldn’t see the scars. “I already changed,” Angela answered.

She came out of the dressing room seconds later. “No, they were actually really pretty. I liked them a lot. But I think I can find something better.”

“It’s a miracle! You’re finally having fun!” The girls smiled. But Angela quickly became serious as she recognized the grin on her cousin’s face. It was the same grin that shaped Grandmother’s lips when she laughed.

“Thanks, Rachel. For shopping with me. It’s nice to spend time with family.”

“Yeah, it is. It’s been really great having you around lately. You’ve become the sister I always wanted.”
“Oh stop it, you’re making me cry.” Angela wiped the corners of her eyes with her fingers and wrapped her arms tightly around Rachel. As they separated, Angela’s phone beeped with a text message. “Sorry I haven’t been answering ur txts, I’ve been with Lance all weekend :).” Just as Angela was closing her phone, it rang with a call from an unknown number.

“Hello?”

“Hey Angela, it’s Max.”

“Oh, hi Max!” Angela looked toward Rachel, who gave her a thumbs up and went back to dress hunting to give her cousin some privacy.

“Are you busy? I can call you back later if…”

“Ok, great! Well, have fun shopping, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Rachel had been watching for her cousin’s reactions and she ran over to Angela with two dresses in her hand.

“What did he say?”

“He asked me to go on a double date with Jade and Lance. Apparently he and Lance are friends.”
“It sounds like you two are becoming quite an item.

“Maybe.” Angela shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant. But a smile escaped and she laughed at her own excitement. Max made it easier to act normal, because he made the holes feel a little less like quicksand pits and a little more like potholes that could be filled in or stepped over. “Come on, I need to find a dress. The dance is next week after all!”

“Oh, how about this one.” Rachel held up a short metallic gray dress. It was beautiful, but the back was wide open.

“It’s not really me.”

“What is you?”

“I dunno. I guess I’m just looking for something that will cover more skin.”

“I saw some hot mumus in the expecting mothers section.”

“Very funny. You know what I mean, just something that will cover me up without making me look like a cat lady.”

“Oh wait, I actually saw a really cute dress over…” Angela followed Rachel through the store, afraid of what she had in mind. “…here!” Rachel pulled a beautiful white dress off of the rack. It was cut in a modest, yet form-fitting fashion with silver piping, making it look like an intricately patterned snowflake with a Neo-Victorian flair.

“It’s…” Angela began, not wanting to look too excited until she saw the back. She took the dress from Jade and twirled the hanger around to see how high the back was. “It’s perfect!”

“Finally! Go try it on!” Rachel urged Angela toward the dressing room.
“It’s so beautiful!” Angela was excited to have found such a perfect dress, but also she was relieved that she was not only able to hide her scars from her cousin, but also to make sure they would stay hidden at the dance as well.

The dress slipped smoothly over her skin, fitting snugly, yet comfortably. She felt as Cinderella must have when the prince slid the glass slipper onto her foot, a perfect fit, tailored by a divine force.

“Come out here and show me how it looks!”

“Ok, I’m coming.”

“Wow, Angela, it’s beautiful. And it’s so you!”

“Thanks. It is, isn’t it?” Angela gave a little twirl, still caught up in her princess fantasy.

After their day of shopping, Angela and Rachel were tired and ready for a quiet evening at home. It was Saturday, pizza night. The girls were welcomed by the smell of pepperoni and cheese as they opened the door. “How was the shopping trip?” Aunt Margaret asked.

“It was fun,” Rachel said. She smiled at Angela, who smiled back.

“Yeah it was really fun.”

“Did you find the perfect dresses?”

“Yeah, we both did!” Rachel held up her bag, and Angela did as well.

“Great, you’ll have to model them for us later. But for now, go hang up your dresses and get ready to eat while the pizza’s hot!”
As usual, Kyle and Josh were running around the house, this time with Transformers action figures, flying them like space ships. “Watch out for the space monster!” Uncle Charles lifted Kyle into the air and flew him around as if he were an action figure. Kyle giggled and played along.

“Fly me, fly me, dad!” Josh jumped in place, eager to be lifted off the ground as well.

“It’s time to eat boys. But how about I fly you to the table?”

“Yeah!”

After dinner, the family watched a movie together as they usually did on pizza night. This week the twins chose the newest installment in the Transformers saga, and Angela wasn’t really into it, so when her phone rang in the middle of the movie, she went to Rachel’s room to take the call.

“Hey Angela!”

“Hey Jade. What’s up?”

“I just got back from Lance’s house. What about you?”

“Just hanging out. Did you meet his parents already?”

“Yeah, they’re pretty cool. Not nearly as crazy as my parents.” The girls both laughed at this. “How was shopping with Rachel? Did you find it, the Holy Grail of dresses?”

“I did! It’s this really cute white dress. It’s pretty and fun, but it’s…sophisticated. Totally not Barbie at all.”
“Oh, cool. I’m making Lance go with me to get a dress tomorrow after school.”

“Wow, you two are like, married already!”

“I wish!”

“Wait, what?”

“Well we talked about it already and Lance ‘doesn’t believe in marriage.’”

Angela could hear the air quotes in her friend’s voice.

“Well, yeah, don’t you think it’s a little soon to be worrying about that?”

“Hey, it’s never too soon to plan your future.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I know. Oh, I meant to ask you, did Max call you today?”

“Yeah, he did. What are we doing?”

“We were thinking maybe dinner tomorrow night. I don’t know where yet.”

“That sounds good, as long as it’s not roadkill pizza! I mean isn’t Pizza Palace like your place or something?”

“Shut up!”

“I’m just saying.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Not off the top of my head. Unless you want to try that new Thai place. I heard it’s pretty good.”

“The one across from the movie theater? Yeah that sounds good. I’ll let the boys know. And I’ll call you back tomorrow.”

“Ok, night Jade.”
“Night Bird-girl.”

“That is not becoming a thing.”

“Whatever you say Bird-girl.”

Angela fell back on her bed. She could hear muffled shouts and explosions from the movie in the living room. It felt so absurd to be shopping and planning dates, so ordinary and unimportant in Grandmother’s absence. Angela grabbed the turtle ring tightly in her fist and reminded herself that she would not let Grandmother slip from her life. She would keep Grandmother’s memory alive if that was the best she could do. But Angela felt that she could do better. She vowed that she would begin searching for Grandmother on her own. The police weren’t really doing anything. It was a shot in the dark. But at least it was a shot.
CHAPTER TWELVE

The routine of Monday classes slipped past Angela like a river rolling over a rock in its path. On a good day she had a million things to focus on other than her teachers’ lectures. But today she had a one track mind, which still didn’t involve classes. In her first class of the day, American History, Angela’s fantasy began before class even started. She imagined herself as a hero, saving Grandmother from a gang of captors. Grandmother would be tied up in a boathouse or cavern hideout, and Angela would sneak her way in and toss a smoke bomb to get past the guards. Then she would unleash the karate skills which her imaginary self was versed in, and beat the crap out of the bad guys, rescuing Grandmother. With a mysterious explosion in their wake, she would drive them home on the imaginary motorcycle, which her imaginary self drove at dangerously high speeds along narrow, winding cliff roads that were too small for cars, to the secluded beachside training place where she had developed her lethal ninja-like finesse.

“Hey Angela,” Max said, popping her imaginary as he sat down behind her.

“Hey Max.”

“So are we on for tonight?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Jade and I were talking about going to the new Thai place.”

“Oh yeah, Lance just texted me about it.”

“I’ll see you tonight,” Angela whispered. She turned forward as Mr. Arthur walked in. She had almost forgotten about the date. And she forgot about it again as her mind wandered. She saw herself as a brave warrior, a superhero in brightly colored
spandex with her underwear on the outside, beating the crap out of a gang who had
Grandmother hostage on a rooftop. Angela had never taken a single martial arts class, but
her imaginary ninja training had convinced her that she could take on 10 criminals at
once with just her bare hands, sending them flying from the roof one by one.

The bell rang, bringing Angela back to the real world, where she was not a highly
trained killer. She packed her things and turned around to talk to Max, but the room was
mostly empty already and he was gone.

On the way to Chorus her dreams were disturbed again as Jade joined her. “So the
guys are all set for Thai. Are you excited Angela?”

“What? Oh yeah, it should be fun.”

“Oh, here’s the note you asked for. Mom was a little suspicious, but I told her you
had a sore throat and didn’t have time to go to the doctor.” Jade handed Angela the
doctor’s note that her mother had written for Angela to be excused from singing in
Chorus class “due to inflammation of the throat and possible bronchitis.” It left out the
part about how singing made her wings grow at an increased rate.

“Awesome, thanks!”

“Sure, no problem. She has tons of those notepads lying around. She writes notes
for my dad to get out of stuff all the time. Are you sure you don’t want her to take a look
at your.” Jade paused. She was about to say wings, but they were entering the Chorus
classroom now. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell her about your condition? You
really should get a professional to look at it.”

“No, I definitely can’t do that.”
“Whatever. I’m just looking out for you, Angela. I mean, they’re still growing, right?” Angela nodded, glancing around nervously to see if anyone was listening to them. Luckily there were only a few students in class so far and they were huddled in the corner by the radiator talking amongst themselves. “I mean, what are you gonna do when they get too big to hide?”

“Trust me. I’ve thought about it. I’ll think of something.”

“Can you just remove them? Since you had scars, I assume that’s what your parents did, right? Or will they grow back?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, I guess no one really knows. It’s not exactly like there’s a specialist for bird girls. Hey, since you don’t want to see a doctor, maybe you should talk to someone from your people, like an elder or something. Someone who’s already in on the secret and maybe knows something about it.

“That’s actually a pretty good idea, but I don’t know of anyone other than my Grandmother and my Aunt.”

“Why can’t you ask your aunt? She knows what you’re dealing with.”

“She knows about animal people and all, but she can’t know about me Jade. No one can, remember?”

“Yeah but she’s your aunt and she would totally understand.”

“She can’t know. Only me and you. It’s not about understanding. In her case it’s about keeping her safe and not letting anyone find out. Once one person finds out, it will spread, and then it’s all over.”
“Sheesh, just a thought Ms. Doomsday.” As the class warmed up, Angela’s mind wandered off again. This time she imagined herself as a detective. She would go back to Grandmother’s house and study the footprints like she was on CSI. She would send her team to comb the woods, looking for any clues that might explain Grandmother’s disappearance.

At lunch Jade brought her back to the real world. “Lance is planning to come pick everyone up tonight, is that ok with you?”

“Sure, that sounds good.” Angela peeled the cheese off of her ham sandwich and traded it for Jade’s ham. Since Angela was lactose intolerant and Jade was Vegetarian, the two had been making these trades for years. “What time is he coming to pick me up?”

“Well, he’s coming over to my house after school, and then we’re coming to pick you up, probably around 6:30 if that’s ok.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“And then we’re going to pick up Max from his Uncle’s house, which is on the way. I think it’s actually near your Grandmother’s house. I don’t know exactly where it is, but Lance does.”

Angela’s mind drifted off again. Maybe she could make up an excuse to go to Grandmother’s house to look for some clues. She didn’t have the CSI equipment or experience, but it was a much more realistic plan than battling an imaginary secret criminal organization. She could say she needed some clothes from Grandmother’s house for the date. Then she would have some time to look for clues. And she would already be near Max when they got picked up.
“Do you think it would be easier for Lance to pick me up at my Grandmother’s house?”

“I guess so, why?” Jade’s eyes narrowed.

“I have this really cute blouse there that I was thinking of wearing tonight.”

“Oh yeah, sure. That sounds good.”

“Cool.”

During Spanish class, Angela filtered out verb conjugations and escaped back into her thoughts again. She dismissed her over-eager rescue plans of being Superwoman or Nancy Drew, and started jotting down a realistic plan of attack. It was just a list of places and ideas, but it was a start.

Possible leads:

Grandmother’s house

Officer Hunter’s house (coyote attack?)

Elder?

By the time she got to Chemistry, Angela felt a little better. She was being proactive now. Even if she was only in the planning stage, at least she wasn’t sitting around waiting for a phone call that would probably never come. Sharing one of the long black lab tables with Jade, she allowed herself to get caught up in anticipation for the date. During the lecture, the girls passed a piece of paper, a sort of antiquated IM.
Has Max called u yet?

Just when I was shopping w Rachel

O well that’s gonna change soon?

Lance says he talks about u all the time. Asks questions about u Creepy

Naw its sweet hes crushing on u Ang

I hope ur right. I like him and all but I have this weird feeling about him Huh? Like how?

Idk like hes a creeper and hes stalking me because he disappeared after history Crzy! U know that’s not tru. u r just being a girl

Yeah I know im crazy that’s nothing new Ha that’s wh

The note stopped here because class had ended and the girls were frantically writing down their homework assignment so they could get to their lockers before the afternoon rush in the hallways. On the way to her locker, she saw Max standing in the hall like he had been waiting for her. He leaned against the locker, his hands in the pockets of the baggy jeans which covered most of his shoes.

“Hey Max.”

“Hey Angela. What’s up.”
“Just headed to my Grandmother’s house to pick up some clothes. I heard it’s close to your uncle’s house.”

“Well, he’s not really my uncle. He’s, well it’s complicated. Anyway, yeah, it’s just down the street.”

“Okay, cool.” Angela couldn’t help wondering how he knew where Grandmother’s house was, but she assumed Lance had told him.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you tonight then?”

“Hey, why don’t I give you a ride since I’m going that way anyway?”

“Yeah, that would be great.”

Max opened the passenger door of his old blue pickup truck for her. What a gentleman, she thought. Angela grew light-headed as her heart thumped like the drum set of a heavy metal band. She had anticipated this moment for so long. Being alone with Max. She had dreamed about it, but had never really expected it to happen. Yet here she was, sitting in the passenger seat of his truck. There was still the awkward distance of strangers between them, but with two dates already planned, Angela was sure that feeling would pass soon.

“Oh, I better call my aunt quick. I told her I was coming home before we went out.”

“Hey Angie.”

“Hi Aunt Margaret, I just wanted to let you know that I’m going to Jade’s house to get ready for dinner, so I won’t be back until later.” She looked to Max for affirmation.
He had scowled when she said she was going to Jade’s house. But he nodded when she told her aunt she would be home around nine.

“Alright, have fun. And be safe.”

“I will.”

“I love you Angie.”

“I love you too Aunt Margaret. Bye.”

Max turned to her. “I thought you were going to your Grandmother’s house?”

“I am. I just didn’t really want her to know because she worries about me being alone.”

“I see.”

“So,” Angela began, looking for something to fill the silence. “Are you native too?”

“Yup, I’m a local.”

Angela laughed at his joke.

“We’re a model couple!” He tapped her leg. Angela blushed at his reference to them as a couple. She was smiling at his joke, and smiled even wider to hide her blush.

“Well I’m mixed, I just found out. Half native, half French I think. In Canada they call it Metis, which literally means “mixed” in French.

“Best of both worlds!”

“Maybe. But it feels more like I don’t quite fit in to either world. Sorry, I’m rambling.”
Max laughed. “Don’t apologize. That’s why I like you Angela. You’re deep. And pretty,” he added. Angela felt her face growing hot and pretended to focus on the road as it was swallowed by the hood of the truck.

When they turned onto her street, Angela noticed the house of Officer Hunter, which she recognized from the interview on the news. She was about to mention it when Max pointed to it and said, “That’s my uncle’s house.”
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Angela waved goodbye to Max and slipped inside Grandmother’s house. It was true that most of her clothes were still there, but she didn’t come to look for a skirt or a blouse. Once he pulled out of the driveway, she ran outside to look for something, anything to give her a clue as to what had happened to Grandmother. When she stepped outside into the crisp November air she could smell decaying leaves mixed with the scent of chimney smoke and the dry smell of brown grass and barren fields harvested before the first frost.

She walked around the back of the house, and kicked the leaves in front of her. The dog tracks and footprints were still there under the leaves. A gust of wind swept past, clearing the intersection of the dog and human tracks. Then she was there, standing in exactly the same spot, but before the tracks were made. In the woods ahead, she saw an animal running toward her, the awkward steps of a human not far behind. The sound of crunching leaves filled her ears as a wild dog emerged from the woods. Angela stepped back in fear as the large wolf-like dog ran toward her, but the animal didn’t seem to notice her. It paused, turning its stone gray head to sniff the air behind it. I’ve seen that creature somewhere before, she thought. The autumn air cracked like thunder as the man fired a shot and the creature fell to the ground with a bullet lodged in its hip. The man ran toward the yard and was just about to emerge from the woods.

The vision faded as quickly as it had come. She looked over the fields, running her hand over the grass. The footprints were now just faint impressions, covered with
brown leaf skeletons. She wouldn’t have even noticed them if she didn’t know where to look. She walked by the tracks, following them into the woods, but there they disappeared.

Birds flew from the trees as they heard her coming, not because they were disturbed by her footfalls crunching the leaves and twigs, but instead they flew out to greet her. They seemed to be telling her hello and goodbye as they left the trees, swirled briefly around her, chirping, and then flew off into the clouds toward warmer skies. The birds didn’t talk to her this time, but she could feel their intentions. “We must go. It is too cold here. If only you could come with us. Goodbye, good luck,” they seemed to say. Angela smiled as she watched them take flight. She wished for a moment that her wings were fully grown and she could fly after them, away from her whole human life and all of its problems.

She felt stupid, following these tracks, looking for some type of Sherlock Holmes-worthy clue that didn’t exist in real life. With one last attempt at finding some kind of substantial evidence, she kicked the leaves from her path, hoping to uncover something, anything. But of course the only thing under the leaves were more leaves, and then grass and dirt. A squirrel raced up the side of a tree and watched her curiously from above. Angela felt embarrassed and foolish. What had she expected to find? Clear footprints leading directly to Grandmother? Or maybe a large arrow pointing to her?

She kicked the leaves out of her path as she walked back to the house, turning around to glare at the squirrel which seemed to be mocking her. *Stupid squirrel.* She glanced at the microwave clock on her way into the house. It was nearly 5:30, and Angela
decided she better start getting ready for the date. Running down the hall to her old bedroom, she felt the emptiness of the house like a physical presence closing around her. Angela grasped the ring around her neck to reassure herself that Grandmother was still with her. She looked into Grandmother’s empty room as she walked down the hall. On a whim, she walked into the room. Angela had never been in Grandmother’s room by herself and she felt like a criminal sneaking into a building to look for a top secret file, like Grandmother would walk in and catch her at any moment.

Angela ran her fingers over the quilt which had been in the family forever as far as she was concerned. The women of the family had passed it down to their daughters for generations, each woman adding a piece to it. She surveyed the nearly bare walls, stopping when she came to one of the only pictures in the house. It was a photograph of Grandmother and Angela, when Angela was 5 years old. She sat on Grandmother’s lap, smiling, with a light in her eyes, the kind of pure light that only shines from a child’s heart. She focused on the glass and couldn’t find that light in her reflection.

Then she looked down from the picture to Grandmother’s desk and noticed, among the books and papers there, a letter. It was sealed and addressed to Chief Thunder, yet had never been sent. Her phone beeped with a text message from Jade. “r u ready? We r leaving now! Be there in 20 min”

“Crap!” Angela pocketed the letter and ran to her old bedroom to get changed. Luckily, winter was fast approaching, so she was able to conspicuously cover her bulging wounds by layering her favorite blue V-neck sweater on top of her t-shirt, and cover it all with a heavy coat. As she was getting dressed, Angela kept thinking about that letter.
Chief Thunder was an old family friend. Angela wasn’t sure if he was really a Chief or not, but she had met him several times and knew that he lived on the reservation just outside of town, the one that her family had once lived on before they moved to North Platte. She wanted to open the letter and see what Grandmother had written, maybe just hours or minutes from her disappearance, but she restrained herself. She would deliver the letter herself. Maybe Chief Thunder was the clue she had been looking for all along.

Angela was quickly brought back to the immediacy of the date as she heard the crackle of gravel crunching under car tires. The sound was quickly joined by the beep of her phone. “We r here,” Jade texted. Angela folded the letter in half and slipped it into her purse. It was time to be a normal teenager again. And suddenly, she was. She glanced in the mirror before she left, quickly brushing out her hair, which now tried to cling to her sweater with static. She ran a hand over her hair to calm it and sucked up her nerves. It was now or never.

“Hey Angela!” Jade said as Angela climbed into the backseat of Lance's Jeep.

“Hey,” Lance nodded as he looked up at her in the rearview mirror.

“Hi everybody.” Angela turned to look toward Max in the seat beside her.

“Hey.” He said with a smile. Angela could feel her hair sticking to the headrest. Jade and Lance were already giggling about some inside joke, leaving Angela and Max in silence in the back seat. They both watched nervously as their friends held hands in front of them. “You look nice,” Angela said. Max normally wore a t-shirt and jeans, but he had made the effort of upgrading to a blue-striped dress shirt with his jeans. She also noted
that his short hair was as dark as hers, and was sticking up a little in the back too. She felt a little better. He was human too. Actually, he was more human than she was.

“Thanks, Angela. You look beautiful as always.” Angela’s hand was resting on the seat beside her and Max carefully placed his hand on hers. Their eyes met and they both smiled and laughed nervously. Angela allowed her thumb to rub across his hand. It was surprisingly smooth, still covered in baby skin, but she could feel the strength and warmth of the muscles under that skin.

Jade started telling everyone about some new band she had just discovered. But Angela and Max weren’t listening. They were caught up in the newness of each other. They enjoyed the excuse of pretending to listen to Jade. It meant they didn’t have to speak, but could just enjoy each other’s company. Soon they reached the Thai restaurant and Angela almost fell from the Jeep as she tried to step down to the ground. Max caught her in his gentle hands and took her hand again as they walked into the restaurant.

“What the hell is larb?” Jade pointed to an item on the menu. Lance laughed and poked her in the side. “It’s the sound you’re gonna make when you’re puking up the dog you eat for dinner. Larb! Laaarb!” Jade laughed hysterically, leaving Angela and Max to look at each other and shrug.

“Hello. Welcome to Thai Palace. My name’s Tony. Would you like some drinks?” Angela noticed that Jade barely looked up at the waiter, but kept her eyes on Lance and her menu. Just a month ago she would have been shamelessly ogling over the waiter. He was no supermodel, but he was decently attractive and Jade had always had a
fascination with all things Asian, including boys. Though he could be very inappropriate, Lance seemed to be a good thing for Jade, keeping her focused and happy.

“I’m ok with water,” Jade said. “But I think we’d like to start with an order of Larb.” Lance chuckled, and Jade kicked him under the table, about to burst into laughter herself. “You two are quiet,” she said, seeming to take notice of Angela and Max for the first time.

Angela didn’t know how to respond. Although things were going well with Max, she was still nervous and self-conscious. Luckily, Max spoke up. “I’m starving! What’s good? I’ve never eaten Thai food.”

“Pad Thai’s pretty good,” Lance said.

“Yeah, I think you’d like it. It’s like the standard Thai dish,” Jade added.

Max read over the menu description. “It says it has shrimp and peanuts?”

“Yeah, it’s a little different than traditional All-American cooking, but it’s really good,” Angela offered.

“I guess I’ll just have to trust you since I don’t know what anything on the menu is.”

“Uh oh. I don’t want to be responsible for you larbing all over the place later,” Angela said. Everyone laughed. Their laughter grew harder as the waiter arrived.

“Here is your Larb.” He placed the dish on the table. Angela blushed, wondering if he had heard her comment.

“Laaaaarb!” Jade sang. She scooped some of the minced chicken onto her plate.

“What, you guys aren’t gonna try some? It’s Larb people, come on, dig in!”
“We’re waiting to see what happens to you.” Angela stuck out her tongue. Again she blushed. She felt so stupid. She had made the effort of sitting on Max’s left side so that he wouldn’t be looking at her birthmark. But now here she was sticking out her tongue.

“Weird!” Jade looked confused as she reached for another spoonful of the Larb.

“Is it gross?” Lance asked.

“No it’s not gross, just really weird. It tastes kind of weird, but mostly it just feels weird!” The other three studied her face, deciding if they really wanted to try it or not. Lance scooped out a small spoonful and stuck it right in his mouth. He made fake gagging noises, then said, “No it’s actually pretty good, but you’re right. It does feel weird.” Now Angela and Max had to try it. They both reached for it at the same time, and then drew away. Max handed the plate to Angela.

“Thanks. Let’s see how weird it is.” She tasted her spoonful as Max was scooping some onto a plate for himself. They all watched Angela’s face in anticipation. “Oh yeah, you’re right. It actually tastes pretty good, but the texture is really weird. It’s like eating sand!”

“Yeah, that’s it!” Jade said. “It’s like eating sand.” Lance nodded in agreement.

“I’m not sure I want to try it now.” Max reluctantly lifted his spoon with hardly any Larb on it. He quickly swallowed it. “Ew, gross! It is like sand. That stuff is nasty!” Everyone laughed. They hesitantly scooped more Larb onto their plates, except for Max, who avoided it altogether.
As they left the restaurant, Jade pulled off Lance’s toboggan and ran to the car. “Hey, give me back my hat!” He chased after her and grabbed her with his arms wrapped around hers so she couldn’t keep the hat from him. Angela and Max joined hands more naturally now. They walked slowly to the car, enjoying a moment of privacy.

“That Pad Thai was actually really good,” Max said. He popped a mint into his mouth and handed one to Angela.

“Thanks. You were brave to try it after that whole Larb thing.”

“Tell me about it.” Suddenly Max stopped walking. They were still a couple of rows away from Lance’s Jeep. “I just wanted to get something out of the way before Saturday.”

“What’s that?” Angela was silenced as Max gently brushed his lips against hers. He pulled away slowly, looking into her eyes. They both smiled with relief and euphoria.

“I guess we better get back to the car before they notice we’re missing.”

They clasped hands again, tighter, and with more confidence this time.

Once they were in the car, Jade asked “Are you guys up for a movie?” She motioned toward the theater across the street.

“Sure,” Angela said. The guys nodded in agreement.

“I think the werewolf movie is playing at 7:30.” Lance said.

“Is that ok with everybody?” Jade asked, looking directly at Angela. “I know you don’t really like horror movies.”

“No, that’s fine.”
“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“No, really, that sounds good.” Angela shivered, and Max wrapped his arm around her, mistaking her tremor for a cold shiver.

“Ok,” Jade said, “Then I guess we can just walk over there.”

Jade and Lance walked ahead, leaving Angela and Max to walk slowly behind them. They walked in silence, hand in hand. The idea of going to see a werewolf movie had reminded Angela that this mundane world of boys and dates was more fictional than the reality of being part animal. She was thinking about wolves and Grandmother, and the news interview she had seen with Rachel played itself in her mind. “Hey Max?”

“Yeah?”

“What did you mean when you said that your uncle is sort of your uncle?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Oh, I see, not really first date material. Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.”

“No, that’s ok Angela. I call him my uncle sometimes, but John isn’t really related to me. He’s more like a godfather, I guess.” Angela didn’t want to be nosy, so she let the subject drop. But for some reason she was still curious about Max’s “uncle.” Why couldn’t he have just said it was his godfather before and left it at that?

“I just wish there had been more blood,” Lance said as they were driving home. Jade pulled his hat to the side.

“Boys,” she said, rolling her eyes.
“Don’t mess with the hat.” Lance adjusted the visor of his toboggan at an angle to rest just over his left eye.

“I just wish you wouldn’t wear that hat all the time. Or at least wash it once in a while!”

“Do you think they could be real?” Max asked suddenly.

“What?” Angela asked.

“Werewolves.” Angela could feel her face getting warm. Beads of sweat began to form on her forehead, and she tried to wipe them away without anyone noticing.

“Werewolves? Of course not. They’re just movie monsters.” Angela hoped she sounded convincing.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Max squeezed her hand and laughed. “Sometimes I just get too wrapped up in movies and stories, you know?” Angela was still blushing and sweating. She had to change the subject.

“Yeah, I can get really into them too.” She paused for a moment, trying to casually change the flow of conversation. “So, what are we gonna do for the dance?” Now it was Max’s turn to sweat.

“Well, I hadn’t really thought about it yet. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know yet either. Just asking.”
“We could all go together,” Jade said, turning to the back seat.

“Yeah, that would be cool.” Angela looked to Max to see if he was interested. He ran his smooth fingers across the back of Angela’s hand. “Sure, that sounds like fun,” he said.

As they approached Max’s house, he leaned over and kissed Angela quickly before getting out of the car. “Bye.” She waved.

“See you tomorrow.”

“See you then.”

After the date, Angela couldn’t sleep. There was too much going on in her life. She got out of bed and grabbed her messenger bag. Digging through the contents, she pulled out the letter. As she stared down at Grandmother’s handwriting on the front, she had to fight her desire to rip it open right away. But she had to leave it sealed. It was her ticket to see Chief Thunder and ask him the truth about the animal people and the truth about Grandmother.

She picked up her phone. 11:30. Jade would still be up.

“Hey, Angela. What’s up?” Jade answered.

“Can’t sleep.”

“Me neither. But then again I never sleep. Did you have fun tonight?”

“Yeah. It was really fun.”

“You mean Max was really fun?”

“Actually, yeah. He was shy at first, but he really opened up tonight.”
“Cool. I’m glad you two are finally hitting it off. You’ve both been ogling each other in the hallways for, like, a year.” Angela started to protest, but realized Jade’s statement was more or less true.

“So Max is native too, right?”

“Yeah. There are different groups of us all over the place though. We’re not related or anything.”

“Relax, I’m not accusing you of incest.” Jade laughed, and Angela joined her to cover up the awkward moment. “But that’s cute though.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of nice. There’s one less thing he will think is weird about me.”

“Oh, stop it Angela. You’re not weird at all.”

“Whatever. I have a hideous birthmark, I do embarrassing things on dates, and, oh yeah, I have wings growing out of my back!”

“You’re totally normal Angela, you didn’t do anything embarrassing. The wings thing is a little unusual though. Speaking of your wings, how do they feel? Is there anything new going on in that part of your life.”

“The wings are ok for now. I’m still popping those pills you got me, so they don’t hurt too much. But there is something new.” She turned the envelope over in her hands, tracing Grandmother’s handwriting.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. I found this letter in my grandmother’s bedroom.”

“What kind of letter?”

“One she wrote but never sent.”
“What did it say?”

“That’s the thing. It’s sealed. It’s addressed to Chief Thunder.”

“Do you know who that is?”

“Sort of. He’s this old guy. I don’t know if he’s really a chief. I think it’s just a nickname. But he lives on the reservation just outside of town. So I think I’m gonna take your advice and go see him.”

“My advice? I never said to go see some strange old guy who may or may not be a chief!”

“You said I should see an elder for advice about my wings. And I thought I could ask him if he knows anything about disappearances in the past. You know, if he has any idea as to what might have happened to my grandmother, or where she might be.”

“Well, when you put it that way, it does sound like a good idea. I’ll take credit for it after all.”

“Of course, you always have the best ideas,” Angela said sarcastically. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Lance and I were going to go to the skatepark after school.”

“Oh. That’s okay Jade. I’ll just…”

“No. I’ll come. Watching Lance roll back and forth gets boring after about five minutes anyway.”

“Cool!”

“Am I even allowed there? The white girl on the native lands,” Jade joked, lowering her voice.
“Of course you’re welcome, Jade. It’s not like you’re going to get scalped. We’re not greedy and hateful like you people.”

“What do you mean, you people?” The girls laughed hysterically.

“You set me up for that one!”

“I guess I did, didn’t I. Ugh. I’ve gotta get some sleep. We’ll talk about this more tomorrow.”

“Alright. Night Angela.”
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As the rest of the class practiced for the Christmas Concert, Angela sat in the audience of the auditorium, wishing she could join them. There was so much going on in her life, and she couldn’t relieve her stress by singing or climbing as she usually did. If she did the things she loved, her wings would continue to grow at an accelerated rate and she would no longer be able to hide them. She imagined herself perched at the top of the rock wall at the gym, singing her soul out. Up at the top of the wall, her wings would emerge completely, full and beautiful. They were probably going to grow back someday, why not get it over with?

Since Jade’s mother had written another note excusing her from singing indefinitely, Chorus class had become a study hall for Angela. Ms. Brinks didn’t seem to mind. She even seemed to take a special interest in Angela after her fall. Angela liked to think it was because she had been one of the best singers, but in reality, she knew it was because Ms. Brinks felt sorry for her since she was “too sick” to sing.

“If I have to sing ‘Carol of the Bells’ one more time, I think I might stop ringing bells and start wringing necks.” Jade grabbed her backpack as the girls left for lunch.

“Ding dong, ding dong,” Angela sang.

“Ah make it stop! This sucks. I mean, you’re the singer. I just signed up for Chorus so we could have more classes together. I like singing and all, I’m just not as into it as you are.”

“Sometimes I just want to sing until my wings grow back, just to get it over with.”
“You can’t do that! Well, you could, but…”

“I know. That’s why we need to talk about today. I already told Aunt Margaret that I’m going to the reservation. She seemed a little worried, but I told her it was because I was interested in our people and wanted to learn about my ancestry. Then she got all excited and offered to take me herself.”

“Oh no!”

“Yeah, but I told her you were coming with me because you’re interested too. Then she offered to take both of us, so I told her you were just gonna drive us there after school.”

“Nice save.”

“I know, right?” Angela grimaced and readjusted the straps on her backpack so they weren’t pushing on her wounds. “So is that cool?”

“Yeah. Do you know how to get there?”

“Not really. I haven’t been there since I was like ten. But I have my phone’s GPS, so we can just put in the address on the envelope.”

“Ok, cool. Let me guess, you still haven’t opened it?”

“No. I told you, I need it. It’s the perfect excuse to visit the reservation.” Angela quickly stopped talking as Max and Lance met up with them for lunch.

“Hey Angela,” Lance waved. “And hello to you, baby.” He lifted Jade halfway off of the ground in a hug that made her wince.

“Hey.” Max gave Angela a peck on the lips.

“Hey Max!”
“Were you just talking about a reservation?” Max asked as the four walked to the cafeteria.

“Oh, yeah. Jade and I are going there after school.” Angela let her hand hang at her side, hoping Max would take the hint. Sure enough, he quickly wrapped his fingers around hers.

“Oh, cool. Which one?”

“Um, I think it’s near Turtle Lake. I haven’t been there in years.”

“Oh yeah, the one down 83?”

“Um, I don’t really remember.”

“Yeah, I think that’s the one. I have some cousins that live there.”

Angela struggled to be polite, yet avoid extending an invitation for Max to go with them. “Yeah we’re going to visit…some friends.”

“I should go visit my cousins some time too.”

“Do you want to come with us?” Angela forced the words out, not wanting to sound like she was excluding him.

“No, that’s ok. Lance and I are hanging out with some friends after school anyway. But some other time?”

“Yeah. Definitely.” Angela rushed through the lunch line to join Jade at the table before the cafeteria got crowded. Jade was always the first one to sit down. There weren’t very many vegetarian options in North Platt High, so she grabbed whatever bread or fruit she could find and got a seat for everyone else. “Jade, is it okay with you if we leave right after school?”
“Yeah, that’s fine.” Jade peeled her banana slowly as she talked. “Did you hear that the guys are all going to the skatepark after school anyway?”

“Oh yeah, Max said they were hanging out today.”

“Angela, I know you’re scared of people finding out about…you.” She looked around to make sure no one could hear her. “But you really don’t have to be this secretive. It’s not like your boyfriend, who is also native, by the way and grew up with the same stories, is going to think you’re a monster if he finds out about your secret. And just telling him about visiting the elder or whoever, or that you’re looking for your grandmother, won’t even reveal the thing you really want to keep hidden.”

“What are you two whispering about over here?” Lance set his tray down on the table and kissed Jade as he sat down beside her. Angela could feel herself blush, and the sweat leaking from her brow line.

“Just about boys and what takes them so long to get through a lunch line.” Jade grabbed a roll from Lance’s tray. “I didn’t see those!”

“See,” Lance said. “That’s why we take so long. We’re thorough and we don’t want to miss any of this delicious cafeteria food.”

“Whatever.” She put the half-eaten roll back on his tray. “I think these are stale anyway. They feel a little Larb-y.”

When Angela and Jade got out of Chemistry class, the late fall sun was already resting on the horizon. Cool, sharp gusts whipped Angela’s hair across her face and twisted Jade’s hair into a purple tornado. Angela could feel winter creeping up on North
Platte, its silent winds weaving through the naked tree branches. She saw its inevitability in the gray-blue clouds swelling over the land like a black eye on the face of the sky. She could feel it, not just in the temperature of the air, but in the sharp way it filled her lungs, the way the sun filtered through the heavy clouds, struggling to warm her goosebumps.

“Damn, it’s freezing out there!” Jade turned the heat in her car to high.

“Yeah, I know! Isn’t winter still a month away?”

“Solstice is on December 21, so technically it is still about a month away. But it sure feels like winter right now! Wait, do you know which way we should go?” Jade asked as she waited to pull out of the parking lot.

“Hold on, my GPS is loading. Go ahead and turn right and go to 83 south.”

“Ok. So what are you going to ask this guy?”

“It’s loading now. It says 17 miles to address. I guess it depends on what the letter says, and what he’s willing to tell me. I’m not just gonna walk up to him and say, ‘here’s a letter for you. By the way do you know where my grandmother is and why there are wings growing out of my back?’”

“Well, you could start with that, but you’re right, it does sound like a little much.”

“Maybe just a little.”

“I’m turning onto 83 now. What does the GPS say now?”

“It says drive for 14 miles and then make a left onto Lake Street.”

“Let me know when we’re getting close.”

“What am I doing, Jade?”
“What do you mean? You’re delivering a letter and trying to find out some answers right?”

“Well, yeah, I know what I’m doing. But why am I doing it? Why do I have wings, and where the hell is my grandmother? Why is all of this happening to me? I am, well I was just an average girl, living in a normal world. Now this!”

“Don’t you remember what we’ve been rebelling against since we were old enough to understand how fucked up the world is? I thought normal was the last thing you wanted. But everybody has their own shit, something they wish they didn’t have to deal with. I think everybody feels that way. I know I do. But it’s what makes you who you are, you know? I always feel like such a weirdo. And I know I am. I feel like, why did my parents have to live here in the middle of nowhere, where I stick out like a sore thumb. And if they raised me here, why didn’t they raise me to be another boring North Platte girl. At least then I would fit in. But that’s who I am, the freak of North Platte, like it or not.

Anyway, I didn’t mean to ramble. I just want you to know that you’re not the only one who feels that way, you know?”

“Yeah. Normal is boring anyway I guess. I never really wanted to blend into the crows until now, when there’s no way in hell I can. For the first time in my life I just want to be another boring, soulless Barbie, like Cassandra.”

“Oh God, never say that again. If you say that three times, your soul will shrivel up and die just like hers did when she bleached her hair in seventh grade and became a
Future Slut of America. Anyway, that’s beside the point. There’s a quote I always think of when I feel like the world’s unfair. It’s from ‘The Lord of the Rings.’

“Oh no. here we go again! You’re gonna tell me I’m like the elves because I’m part of a dying world or some crap like that!”

“No, I promise this isn’t one of my crazy nerd analogies, just a simple quote.”

“Ok.”

“So Frodo has to hide the ring and he has just realized how much trouble he is in and how fucked up his whole situation is. And he says to Gandalf, “I wish none of this had happened.”

“Spot on Elijah Wood impression. You had the puppy dog eyes just right,”

“Shut up, here’s the good part. Then Gandalf says, “So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All you have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to you.”

Angela sat in silence for a moment, digesting the words. “That’s a good way of looking at it. I mean, this is who I am now. It doesn’t do me any good to feel sorry for myself does it?”

“Nope.”

“Maybe I should read those Lord of the Rings books after all.”

“Finally! I told you they were better than the movies, but you just kept saying they were even longer and more boring!”

“Well they’re definitely long, but I guess I’ll have to give them a chance. Oh crap! That’s Lake Street! Turn here!”
Jade swerved, making the turn just in time. The car bounced over the dirt road, kicking rocks behind it. “Wow, and I thought we lived in the middle of nowhere,” Jade said.

“Yeah, I know, right? I’m not sure if Chief Thunder even lives on the reservation proper.”

“I guess we just keep following the GPS?” Jade asked.

“It says to turn left in 2 miles and then it’s gonna be just off the next road.” Jade turned the car off of the highway and onto a side street paved in a swirling dust that didn’t seem capable of staying on the ground and providing a solid surface for the car to drive over. “Arrive at destination on right,” Angela read.

“Are you sure this is it?”

“I guess so. It has to be, right?”

“It does look kind of like a hermit’s cabin. Very fitting for someone named ‘Chief Thunder.’ Oh man, I thought the road was bad, but I don’t know if my car can take much more of this driveway,” said Jade. She parked the car in front of the one-room cabin that looked as if it were made from the fossils of some prehistoric forest. The cabin was surrounded by a dense forest of pine trees and undergrowth. “Are you sure he still lives here?”

“No,” Angela replied. The girls walked through the trees, up to the front door that had no windows.

“There’s no doorbell.”

“Just knock then.”
“You knock, this is your mission.” Jade scanned the trees, looking a little paranoid.

“Fine,” Angela said as she stepped up to the door. Just as she raised her hand to knock on the splintered wood, she heard a rustling in the trees.

“Did you hear that Angela?”

“Yeah.” Angela felt uneasy, here at a stranger’s doorstep, surrounded by trees which surrounded the cabin like fortress walls, blocking out the setting sun light. She tried to shake off the feeling that someone was watching them. “It’s probably just a squirrel.”

“If it was, it was a big squirrel. I have a weird feeling about this.”

“It’s fine Jade, don’t worry. I’m gonna knock now.” Angela pounded her knuckles against the door. At first, the knock seemed to echo through the wooden door and into the trees, but then Angela realized that the sound wasn’t an echo, but the deep voice of a man behind them. The girls turned around in surprise. It seemed as if the figure had suddenly materialized behind them. He towered over the girls, his figure more like that of a bear than a man. In the cold November air he wore nothing but jeans and a light deerskin jacket. His black hair hung down his back where it coiled into snake-like braids. A wispy beard grew from his chin, grey hairs woven into the black tangle. Around his neck, a single black claw hung on a leather cord. Angela noticed that the exposed skin of his hands and face was covered in rough scars, as if it had been burned. But it was his eyes that made the girls shiver. They were so black they were almost purple, yet they glowed with the electric intensity of a gathering storm.
“Hello young ones.”

“Um, hi,” Jade said. Angela sucked up her nerves. It was now or never.

“Hello, Chief Thunder?”

“There are some who call me by that name. But how can anything have only one name? There is nothing under the great sky that is but one thing. Every animal, every grain of dirt is a fluid piece of the Great Spirit. Our life is but one breath of the sky, one heartbeat of earth. Isn’t that right, little Angela, Daughter of the Sky?”

Angela and Jade looked to each other to make sure they had both heard the same thing. Jade furrowed her brow as Angela tried to speak. “Yes, that makes sense.” Chief Thunder nodded toward her, and motioned for the girls to follow him inside. “It is good to see you again Angela. You are growing into a beautiful young woman.”

“Thank you. It’s good to see you too.”

“And who is your friend?”

“Hi, I’m Jade.” Jade extended her hand, and Chief Thunder shook it firmly.

“Welcome Jade, Daughter of Wind.” Confusion swept over Jade’s face, slowly melting into a grin. Angela knew that Jade was flattered to be given a spirit-name.


Chief Thunder motioned for the girls to sit on a long wooden bench, and sat himself on a rustic chair. “I can sense, Jade, that you are in tune with the breath of the earth. You are aware of the constant winds of change that are moving and transforming each grain of the Great Spirit every moment.”

“Oh.”
“Now, you girls did not come here to hear an old man talk. Why did you come?”

Angela’s heart thumped so hard she felt her pulse in her fingers as she gripped the letter and slowly pulled it from her bag. Taking one last glance at her grandmother’s handwriting, she handed him the letter.

“Ah. I see. I have been waiting for this.” Angela and Jade watched expectantly as he tore the envelope with his large fingers. Chief Thunder stared at the letter and nodded. Jade couldn’t take the anticipation any longer. “What does it say?” she asked. Chief Thunder handed the letter to her.

Dear Thunder,

As you know, the world isn’t what it once was. Humanity is no longer living with the earth, but instead is living on it. I fear for the future. I know that I am in danger, but I carry no fear. What I fear is Angela’s safety.

I dared not to tell her, but I know I am in grave danger now. I want to protect her at all costs. It is because of this that I accept your request as she needs all the protection she can get. I also ask a favor of you as well. If I should no longer be able to care for Angela for any reason, will you please protect her?

Always yours,

Noko

“She knew someone was after her?” Angela asked.
“Of course she knew,” Chief Thunder said. “During times of change such as these, there is always more danger. It happened when the white man came. It happened many times before that. And it will happen many more times before the sun sets on this world.”

“So you knew she was missing?”

“So of course, Angela. I am connected to her just as I am connected to the sky, to the land, to you even. If you listen with your heart, you need not hear with your ears.”

“So why haven’t you been looking for her?”

“I am always looking, Angela. But we can never find what doesn’t want to be found.”

“What do you mean? Why wouldn’t she want to be found?”

“Angela, your grandmother knows her place in the world. She knows that, for whatever reason, she must stay where she is. I know it makes no sense, but the way of the Universe is not always rational. She probably knows not why she is there either.”

“I’m not giving up,” Angela said. Wiping her eyes with her sweater sleeve. “Even if you don’t think it’s worth looking for her, I’m not giving up.”

“Angela. I never said it was not worth the search, only that she is where she is meant to be for the moment. Worry not young one. The winds of change are blowing, and even the fiercest storm is followed by a peaceful calm. It is the way of all things.

Now, I can tell there is something else on your mind. The biggest change is not in the world around us, but inside you.” Angela readjusted herself on the bench. Her butt
was going numb, and she had to sit up straight to keep her wounds from grinding into the wood as well.

“Yes. I am changing,” Angela said quietly. She spoke louder now. “I am changing. Like the stories. Do you know of my scars, sir?”

“I do. I know all about your scars. Is it time? Have the wounds begun to reopen, have you begun to heal?”

“Yes, I have. You knew all along?” Jade rested her arm on Angela’s leg and wrapped her other arm around Angela’s shoulders.

“Of course I knew about you Angela. You have always been special. Those scars on your back were not from a car accident as you were told. Your wings had to be removed in order for you to live with the people. But it seems you were never meant to live that life. Just as your grandmother is now where she is meant to be, so you are meant to live a much greater life. Angela, you are the Daughter of the Sky. This is what I asked of your grandmother. I thought it was time you know. She wanted you to figure it out on your own. You were never meant to be grounded. And even as your father tried to keep you safe on the ground, the Universe had other plans in motion.”

“I’ve pieced most of it together already,” Angela said.

“But what do I do now? How do I live this way?” She motioned toward the bone that was now causing her sweater to protrude unnaturally even under the bandages.

“My dear, there is only one way for you to live. Full, complete, no longer crippled as you have been for so long.”

“But how will I hide my wings?”
“Some things cannot be hidden. And in your case, the sky is the limit.” Chief Thunder chuckled from deep in his throat. It was funny, but at the same time it was an ominous laugh. Suddenly he grew quiet and serious. “The legends speak of a place. A reservation where blessed people such as you live in safety.”

“Where is it?”

“I do not know for sure. It is too sacred to be widely known. Only the animal people know this secret. Perhaps your grandmother knows. Perhaps she mentioned a place, a wonderful land of peace and harmony, a place where the old ways still exist?”

“I don’t remember her ever talking about a place like that.”

“Perhaps that place is the key to finding your grandmother as well.” At this Chief Thunder looked out the window, up at the slate blue clouds which filtered the dying sunlight.

“Thank you Chief Thunder. For everything.”

“You are welcome Angela. And Jade. Come see me any time you like, or any time you are in need.” He followed the girls outside and shut the door behind him.

“Woah,” Jade said. “That was intense.” Jade said as they walked through the clearing.

Angela turned to wave goodbye to Chief Thunder as she was getting in the car, but had disappeared into the trees.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Angela arrived back at her cousins’ house, Aunt Margaret was in the kitchen washing up after dinner. Cucumber sniffed her hands, thumping his tail back and forth in excitement. Aunt Margaret came down the hallway and Cucumber barked and continued sniffing her pants.

“Let me get that for you.” Aunt Margaret reached to take Angela’s coat off.

“No, don’t!” Angela tugged at the collar of the coat to keep her back covered. “It’s cold out there and I want to leave my coat on until I warm up.” She wrapped her arms around herself to keep up the charade.

“Suit yourself. How was the reservation Angie?”

“It was pretty good.”

“Come into the kitchen. I’ll heat up some lasagna for you.” Aunt Margaret put what was left of dinner back in the oven and turned to Angela, who was now seated at the table. “So what did you girls do there?”

“We just talked to people.” Angela could tell that Aunt Margaret was growing suspicious, so she decided that she could offer a few details. “Well, mostly only one person. Remember Grandmother’s old friend, Chief Thunder?”

“Oh, yes, that crazy old hermit.” Aunt Margaret’s eyebrows came together as if an invisible drawstring were being pulled at the back of her head. “What kind of things did you talk about?” She brought Angela a glass of iced tea and a bowl full of rolls.
“All kinds of things. He told us about the past, and even told me some things about me and our family that I didn’t know.” Angela stuffed a roll in her mouth to have an excuse to stop talking.

“Oh, he told you Angela?” Angela nodded, feeling her blood rushing through her neck, her throat felt tight and she thought she would choke on the bread. Aunt Margaret scraped crumbs off the table and placed them on a napkin. “Your grandmother and I discussed it several times. When would be the right time to tell you? We didn’t know. I’m sorry it took this long for you to find out. But it was best to hear it from him wasn’t it?”

Oh my God, Angela thought. Everyone knew about my wings but me? “Yeah, I guess so. I mean he seems to know a lot about, well, everything.”

“Of course he does Angela. He is the chief after all. How does it feel to know that you are the granddaughter of one of the greatest chiefs in our people’s history?”

“Granddaughter?”

“Yes, Angela. Generally that’s how it works. If someone is your grandfather, then you are his granddaughter.” She playfully nudged Angela’s arm, but quickly became serious at the sight of Angela’s confused expression. “That is what he told you, right?”

What? Chief Thunder is my Grandfather? Angela thought. That must be what the letter was about, what he asked Grandmother’s permission to tell me about! And that also means that Aunt Margaret doesn’t know about my wings! She let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, yeah, of course that’s what he told me.”

“Oh, good. I was starting to worry that I had let the cat out of the bag.”
“No, of course not. The cat was already out of the bag.”

“I’m just surprised you didn’t figure it out sooner. Ever since you were old enough to talk you’ve been so inquisitive.”

“I guess Grandmother is just such a strong woman, it never really occurred to me that she would need anyone else, you know?”

“I know what you mean, Angie. But didn’t you wonder, since he’s pretty much the only man other than your Uncle Charles that she ever even talks to?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. I remember Chief…I mean Grandfather, visiting now and then when I was really little. And I do remember going to visit him too. What happened? Why didn’t they stay together?”

“Well, Angela, I think you really put it best yourself when you said she never really needed anyone else. Your grandfather is the same. They are two very independent people who are too in tune with the Spirit World to really have time for the world around them. You were the exception. As soon as your father dropped you off, you became her world. Your grandfather was already long out of the picture by then. You are, and really always have been, the only person who she could really connect with.

“God knows I tried. She was always so distant.” Aunt Margaret’s eyes glossed over with tears. Angela rested a hand on her arm. “I always wanted to stay up late talking with her, for her to pass on her jewelry to me, to cry as she watched Charles take me away from her at our wedding.” Angela self-consciously hid her ring under the table.

“And then, Dad, well he always came and went. I never really found out about him until I was your age either.
“Then seeing Mom with you, it made me realize how much I wish she had treated me like that, and how I had to treat my children. For the first time in my life, my emotionally distant mother made me realize how important compassion is, and how I needed to treat people. All because of you Angie.

“And that’s why I’ve taken to you so much since you’ve been here. I know what it’s like to feel alone. I’ve noticed you acting a little strange lately, and I’ve been worried about you. And I know that it can be hard. So damn hard. And I just want you to know that you can always come to me. You can tell me anything, okay? Anything.”

“Sure. Thanks Aunt Margaret, for everything.”

The next day, Max drove Angela home from school. “So you went to the reservation yesterday, Angela?”

“Yeah. Well, I’m not sure if it was technically part of the reservation, but yeah.”

“Did you cross the river?”

“I don’t really remember. Wait, oh yeah, I do remember because Jade said something about crossing a bridge being some kind of omen.”

Max laughed. “Your friend is a little nuts isn’t she?”

“Yup, that’s why we love her!” Max ran his fingers across her arm.

“Well, if you crossed the river, then you technically were on the reservation.”

“Oh, okay. It makes sense that the chief would live on the reservation.”

“You went to see the chief? Wait, you don’t mean the old chief do you? Crazy old Chief Thunder?” Max parked his Ford in Aunt Margaret’s driveway.
“Yeah, that’s the one.” Angela began to get out of the car and asked, “Do you want to come in for a minute?” But Max kept his door closed. He wasn’t even listening.

“Really? He’s like, one of the most respected elders in the Midwest for making peace with the white man and still keeping our land and traditions. Did you know some people even say he is descended from the animal people, the Son of the Storms and the Buffalo? Some even say he still has animal blood in his veins.” Goosebumps began to crawl across Angela’s skin.

“Yeah, but those are just old stories, right?”

“John doesn’t think so. He said that old Chief Thunder…” Max looked straight ahead, looking at the windshield, instead of through it.

“What? What did he say? And what does your “uncle” know about my grandfather anyway?”

“What? He’s your grandfather? A strange look came over Max. His eyes glazed over almost as if he was possessed. Angela thought he might begin to cry.

“I better go.”

“Oh, okay. Then I guess I’ll see you at the dance?”

“Angela. I don’t…”

“Don’t what Max? You’re acting really weird. Are you sure you’re okay?” Angela slid back inside the car and rested her hand on his thigh. He trembled and tried to pull his leg away from her.

“Don’t touch me! I have to go.”
“I think that’s a good idea.” Angela slammed the car door and walked to the front door. The falling sun left a faint stain of orange on the clouds and the ground became a dull brown as the already decaying leaf skeletons smothered the grass, turning it brown as well. It was as if the winter air were pulling all the color from the world.

The next day at school, Max and Angela avoided each other. “What, did you two break up after like, two days?” Jade asked at lunch.

“It was more like three. But I don’t know what happened. He just freaked out yesterday and I don’t know if we’re going to the dance anymore.”

“Yikes.”

“I know. I thought he was cool. And he is, but he’s just acting really weird.”

“I’m sorry Ang. If you don’t hear from him you can still come with me and Lance.”

“No, that’s okay. You guys have fun.”

“I’m not going to have fun without my best friend. This sucks!”

“It’s totally fine Jade.” Angela gave Jade her apple. “It’s just one stupid dance. It’s not like it’s even prom or homecoming.”

“You’re sure you’d be OK with missing it?”

“Positive.”

“You’re just saying that to sound noble aren’t you?”

“You know me too well.” Lance and Max walked through the lunch line together, but separated as Lance came to sit with Jade and Max wandered off on his own. Angela
got up as Jade and Lance kissed. This is how the dance would be if I went with them, she thought.

“You’re not going to finish your chili dog?” Lance asked. The lunch lady had put cheese on it without asking and Angela hadn’t felt like taking the time to explain that she was lactose intolerant, so she just picked at the edges.

“It’s all yours,” she said, pushing the tray with the half eaten chili dog to him and walking out of the cafeteria alone.

By the end of the day, Angela had resigned herself to being alone and skipping the dance altogether. That’s why her heart skipped a beat when her phone rang with a call from Max later that night.

“Hey.”

“Hey Angela.” The line was silent for a minute and Angela considered hanging up. She felt so stupid. Why had she even picked up? What did she expect? “Look Angela, I’m really sorry about yesterday. I was way out of line.”

“Yeah, you were acting really weird.”

“I know. It’s just that…I don’t know what’s going on lately. Did you ever have the feeling that a lot of things that didn’t make sense were finally starting to come together all at once, only not in a good way?”

“Actually, I know exactly what that feels like.”

“Me too. And I’m really sorry about yesterday.”
Angela decided she would push her luck now that she had some leverage over the situation. “So what is really going on with your ‘Uncle,’ Max? I know that’s at least part of your problem.” The line went quiet again and Angela checked her phone to make sure they were still connected. “Sorry, I’m just asking because I care Max.”

“I know, it’s okay. It’s just that he’s always been there for me, even in a way my foster parents never have been. Like he really cared about me, you know? Like I wasn’t just some burden or pet. But now I’m starting to realize that that’s exactly what I’ve become, a pet. I’ve always looked up to him, but I don’t think he’s the person I thought he was. I’m sorry, I’m talking too much.”

“No you’re not. I’m glad you’re finally talking about it. I guess it’s just part of growing up, right? Realizing that nobody’s perfect, not even our heroes and role models.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Thanks Angela.”

“No problem. Just one question.”

“Yeah?”

“Are we still on for the dance?”

“Of course we are! If you can forgive me, that is.”

“Forgiven. I’ll see you tomorrow night then?”

“See you then.”
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“So you’re sure things are cool between you and Max now?” Jade asked when she called the day of the dance.

“Better than ever,” Angela said. She was already dressed.

“Ok, great, because Lance and I will be there in about an hour. Then we’ll all go to pick up Max. After that it’s dinner and off to the Fall Dance! Come on Angela, you could at least pretend to be excited.”

“I am! But I’m nervous. It’s just that I’ve never done this before. You know, getting all dressed up, dancing, the whole thing.”

“You’ll be fine Ang. It’ll be fun. And I’m sure you look like a princess!”

“I do!” Angela spun in front of the mirror, letting the bottom of her dress raise and fall in time with her twirls.

“That’s my girl. Okay, see you soon.”

Angela examined her profile in the mirror. Even though she had wrapped her torso in bandages, her wings were growing rapidly and the bulge wasn’t completely hidden. She would just have to wear her jacket all night.

“Wow, Angela! You look really beautiful.” Max took her hand as she attempted to step elegantly from the Jeep.

“And you’re my prince charming.” Angela offered her arm. The couple linked arms as they walked into the school dance.
“Wow, these are some pretty unforgettable decorations aren’t they?” Max said.

“It’s not every day you get all dressed up for a gymnasium full of crepe paper streamers.”

“No it’s not,” Angela agreed.

“Hey, Angela!” Rachel appeared out of the crowd, Bryan in tow.

“Hey Rachel! That dress is so pretty on you.”

“Aww, thanks. Yours is perfect Angela. But you’re going to have to take off that jacket at some point.” Angela adjusted the jacket carefully over her back.

“I’ll take it off eventually. It’s just so cold in here.”

“Yeah it is, isn’t it?” Jade offered. She rubbed her hands over her bare arms to play along.

“Woah! Gotta go.” Bryan dragged Rachel off for a slow dance.

“Okay, see you at home Rachel.” As Angela turned back to Max, he held out his hand.

“May I have this dance?” Angela put her hand in his.

“I don’t know how to dance,” she said.

“Just put your hands here.” He took her hands in his and placed them over his shoulders. “And then just follow my feet. The pair started off with a body of empty space between them, but a few rotations later, their torsos and hips were pressed closely together. “See, it’s not that bad,” he said.

“No, it’s not. It’s kind of nice actually.” She rested her head on Max’s shoulder and followed the beat of his heart and the rhythm of the music.
“Now that you’re comfortable, you can take this off.” He reached over and pulled on Angela’s jacket. Her hands shot up to pull the jacket down.

“I’m still cold.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep you warm.”

“I’d really rather leave it on.”

“Suit yourself. You know, Angela, you really do look beautiful tonight. Well, not just tonight, but every day.” Angela focused on his lips as he talked, thinking every slight movement was a sign that he was leaning in to kiss her. Finally, she tilted her head toward his and their cheeks brushed up against each other. Angela turned her head so they were eye to eye, and their lips met. They melted into the bliss of each other’s lips, talking without words. As they kissed, Max moved his arms up Angela’s back to hold her closer. Beneath the jacket, his hand brushed against the bulge of one of Angela’s budding wings.

Angela pulled away from Max’s arms. “Oh my God. You felt my…”

“What was that Angela?”

“Oh my God!” Angela pulled her jacket tightly over her shoulders and fled from the dance floor.

“Wait!” Max called, chasing her through the crowd. Angela pushed through the double doors of the gym and out into the lobby. Her breathing grew more and more rapid, until she was gasping for air, pulling the cold air deeper into her lungs as she ran outside into the cold night air and paced frantically on the front steps, on the brink of a panic attack. Her vision blurred and her blood pumped with adrenaline. Looking across the
parking lot at the forest beyond, she tried to focus on breathing in the cold air and the way it stung her throat and lungs, but the stinging only made her gasp even more. A second later, Max caught up with her. “Angela, what’s wrong?”

She didn’t look up. She could barely hear him through the sound of blood rushing through her head. It was like listening to the ocean in a shell, but without the shell. Adjusting her dress, she climbed onto the cement wall above the stairs and tried to catch her breath. “Look, Angela, I’m sorry if I did something you didn’t like. The last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable.”

Angela’s breathing slowed and she began to return to a rational state of mind. “No, you didn’t do anything Max. It’s just me. I’m a freak.”

“No you’re not Angela. Why are you acting like this?”

“Can we go?”

“Yeah this place is pretty lame anyway.”

They walked out to the car in silence. “So where do you want to go?”

“The Bend?”

“Yeah, sure let’s see if Lance and Jade want to split too.”

Lance dropped Angela and Max off by the river and drove back to Jade’s house. Angela and Max could see their breath joining together into a single cloud in front of them as they walked along the Bend hand in hand. Though her nose and ears were tingling from the cold air, the sun warmed Angela’s face and painted the current ripples in the river with an orange afternoon light.
Angela felt the blood pumping throughout her body. It throbbed in strange places. In her throat, in her hips, in her feet and hands and especially in her scars which now sprouted budding wings. She had brought Max here because she needed to tell someone about the wings. She had kept the secret to herself for so long it had grown into something larger than her now and she knew that if she didn't let it out it would explode out of her, destroying her and everything around her. She felt her hand throbbing inside the grip of Max's own hand, her blood running desperately through her body, running from the secret deep inside her, looking for a way out. Her fingers throbbed in Max's grasp.

She had been over it in her head a hundred times. She would take Max to a private place, like here at the Bend. And then she would just say it. Max, I have wings. There, that simple. But as the words formed in her mind the air seemed to evaporate from her lungs and she gasped for air.

"What's wrong, Angela?" Max asked. He furrowed his brow in concern and the orange light caught in his eyebrows and made them look reddish brown instead of black.

"It's..." she started. It would be so easy to just spill those words out now. This was the moment she had been preparing for. She looked into the river, trying to see below the brilliant sunlight coating its surface.

"It's what?" Max asked after a few seconds.

"It's nothing."

"Are you sure, because you seem really out of it today. It's your Grandmother isn't it?"
"Hmm? Oh, yeah, that's what it is."

"I know what it's like to not have anyone to look out for you. But at least you've got your aunt and uncle."

"Yeah, sure," Angela said. Her pulse began to slow again as she realized she wouldn't have to speak those words. Not yet. But she still couldn't get a deep breath. The air seemed to flow down her throat and catch there, gagging her and forcing her to exhale before it ever reached her lungs. She would have to let it out sooner or later, she could feel the weight of her secret slowly turning her inside out. It was like the world inside her and the world outside her didn’t want to coexist.

Despite not being able to tell him the one thing that truly mattered to her, Angela was glad Max was with her and she squeezed his hand. They continued to walk along the Bend, all the way back to the house. As they walked, the sun fell toward the horizon and their shadows grew taller than the trees.

"You know if you want to stay over you can," Max said.

"Ok."

"My parents won't be home until tomorrow."

Angela nodded. Something about the way he said his parents were away made her feel uncomfortable. She was excited by the idea of being alone with Max. No cousins or parents to bother them. Their bodies close. But then she thought of the wings and her pulse began to throb again. She couldn't get that close to him without telling him. Or worse, him finding out.
Max still wasn’t used to the new doorknob on the front door of his house and he slammed the door behind them as they entered the house. Tarps still hung across the living room walls, blocking it off from the rest of the house. The changes around the house usually bothered Max, but being with Angela made him calm.

Angela looked around the house as they walked in. It was like a maze of constructions walls appearing out of nowhere or disappearing, exposing rooms from angles that had kept them hidden before. “Come on, I want to take you somewhere,” Max said. He held out his hand and Angela grabbed onto it. She laughed has he used their joined hands to pull up the waist of his sagging jeans while they walked up the stairs.

“Your room?” Angela asked as Max opened the door.

“Nope.” Angela stopped to look around the room. For someone who hated the constant physical change in his house Max sure did like to change his room. The walls were a collage of photos and logos from skateboarding magazines like Transworld and Thrasher, people flying down stairsets and over gaps between rooftops, strange symbols Angela didn’t recognize. The clippings were pasted over all four walls, floor to ceiling and Max had drawn with sharpie over the images. The marker lines scratched jagged across the glossy paper, and formed dogs of all shapes and sizes that formed a pack and ran toward the window.

Max tugged on Angela’s arm. “Come on.”

“This is really cool Max.”
Max shrugged. He opened the window and stepped out onto the roof. Angela followed him, ducking through the narrow opening. The rooftop was tin and absorbed the sunlight, so they sat on it and looked over the fields.

“This is where I come when I don’t want to be in there,” Max gestured toward the window. “Things out here, they just make more sense sometimes, you know?”

Angela nodded. Max put an arm around her and her pulse thumped against his embrace. *He has to feel the lumps on my back,* she thought. “It’s stupid, but sometimes I imagine I’m a bird, flying away from all this human shit. Houses and school and all of it.” She felt the heat in her cheeks and gasped to pull air into her lungs. Max turned toward Angela and looked into her eyes, his green and brown eye mirroring hers as if they each held separate halves of the same creature, like they had put together wrong, divided into separate beings along the wrong seams.

“I love you, Angela.” Her heart raced and she looked away, back toward the horizon that burned with late afternoon shadow. She cared about him too, but she could only think about her wings. She took a deep breath, but the more desperate she became for oxygen.

“What’s wrong Angela? I’m sorry if…”

“I’m just cold. Maybe we should go inside.”

“Yeah.” Max gestured for her to go first and she slid through the window, her jacket catching on the top of the window and pulling it up, scraping the skin of her lower back. “Shit!” she said as she tumbled back into Max’s bedroom. Max quickly ducked
through the opening and stood beside her. He closed the window behind them. “Did it cut you deep?”

“I don’t think so,” Angela said, pulling the waist of her coat down with both hands.

“Take off your shirt,” Max said.

“What?”

“Sorry, that came out wrong.” Max blushed.

Angela giggled with relief, at least he hadn’t seen her budding wings. “No, it’s fine Max. It just sounded like you were asking for something else.” She sat on the bed and stared at the dirty brown rubber of her shoes that used to be white.

Max tried to hide a grin but his mouth just twisted into an awkward smirk. “Well, if you want, you could take off your shirt. You know, just so I could look at it for you. I mean, your back. Or whatever.”

“This isn’t about my back is it?”

“I don’t want to keep pressuring you, I know you want to wait ‘til you’re ready. But you could just take off your shirt, you know, so I can check out your back.”

“It's not that I don't want to, I do. It's, there's something I need to tell you.” She pulled the sleeve of her coat until it came off her arm and then she set the coat across her lap and squeeze it until her knuckles turned white.

“What's up?”
Angela’s hearth pumped so hard she felt it in her eyes and her vision pulsed with her pulse. She really thought her heart would burst as she began to speak. “Did you ever have a secret you couldn’t tell anyone?”

“Sure, everyone has secrets”

“Not the normal kind. The kind that you really have to keep secret or you could die?”

“What's going on Angela?”

Angela looked back out the window at the roof and the dying daylight that clung to the jagged horizon. “I have...this condition where I can't take off my shirt and...”

“Like you’re embarrassed?”

“Well, kind of.”

“You're beautiful Angela. You don't have anything to worry about.”

“No, I do. I really can’t take off my shirt.”

Max chuckled. The way she said it, it sounded ridiculous. “Like it's stuck to you or like you physically can't pull it over your head? Maybe I can help you.” He reached over to pull her sweater off and she let him pull it over her head.

Angela’s heart pounded and she was sure the blood would finally burst her heart and veins. She took a deep breath, feeling a pop in her chest as she took in more air than she needed. Under Angela’s sweater she wore a tank top which left her shoulders exposed so there was space for the bandages which covered her wings. Max stared at the lumps of gauze.

“What is that?” he asked, forcing his voice to sound relaxed.
It was now or never. “I have wings Max. I was born with wings and my parents cut them off and now they're growing back.”

“What?” As Max stared at Angela, the color began to fade from the room until Angela herself, sitting beside him, was a blur of grey and white and black. But her smell, why hadn’t he noticed it before. She smelled like a bird, like a dove actually, that grainy smell that’s a blend of both dirt and atmosphere, the way the wind smells when you sit in the top of a tree’s branches and breathe the pure air.

“Max?” Angela said. “Say something.” She wrapped her arms around herself and gasped for air.

This was it, Max thought. This was the real reason John wanted me to get close to her. As bursts of adrenaline shook his body and instinct kicked in it was all he could do to growl, “Sorry Angela, I have to go.” And then he sprinted from the room, down the stairs.

Angela watched through the window as he ran out into the fields and disappeared into the forest. She sat alone on his bed looking at the walls covered in a collage of images. But she saw nothing. Goosebumps had sprung up on her arms, but she couldn’t feel them. There was a dent in the blanket beside her where Max had been sitting. But she didn’t care. She imagined herself as something other than herself, looking down on the world from high above the clouds. Below the earth was a ball of green and brown and blue. Somewhere down among the green and the brown were miles of empty fields that stretched until they curved under themselves at the circular horizon. And somewhere in
the midst of those plains was Max’s house. She couldn’t see it from that height, but she knew it was there. And inside that invisible house was her, and her alone.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A child crawls through dirt and crackling pine needles. His parents have left the forest without him. He cries. His tail curls between his legs. It is a long bushy tail with warm brown fur that fades to a reddish color at its tip. In the distance he hears his father shout and his mother growl, their voices echoing through the trees. Then a gunshot. Silence.

He huddles in a hollow tree stump and continues to cry, tears interrupted only by whimpers. A man emerges from between the tightly grown tree trunks. He squats down in front of the tree stump and the baby looks out from the protection of the tree and sees an unfamiliar face. But he stops crying.

The man clutches his head in one hand for a moment, then looks up through the forest canopy at the grey clouds that have begun to bleed with the silent falling of the sun. He reaches his arms out and the baby crawls to him, his tail twitching slowly from side to side like a cat’s.

Now the man cries as he holds the baby in his arms, its head cradled against his flannel chest. He holds it there a moment and then sets him softly down upon the top of the stump and pulls a rusted hunting knife from his pocket. Its teeth are jagged for ripping through the muscle and tissues of deer and wild birds.

The man removes the baby’s pants and diaper, fold them delicately and places them on top of the stump and the baby crawls over them. The man holds the baby in his left arm, and behind him so he can’t see, he rests the knife against the base of the child’s
tail. The baby begins to cry and the man looks toward the sky again. He pauses for only a moment, then begins to saw at hair and muscle and bone.

The baby screams as his blood drips down through a hole in the stump. His arms and legs flail wildly but the man holds him tight, tells him it will be over soon. Pop, the bone cracks like a tree branch snapping under foot and the man saws through the last strands of muscle and skin. Now he is holding the baby in one hand, the tail in the other. The baby still cries and the tail continues to twitch.

He sets the tail down on the stump, watching it writhe like a burning snake, and wraps the child’s pants tightly between his legs and around his waist to slow the blood flow. Then he pulls the diaper up over the pants to keep pressure on the wound.

The child screams and continues to flail but his parents do not come. The man holds him closely to his chest and kisses him on the forehead. “You’ll be alright now. I’ve brought you back unto the Lord.” He took the tailless child home with him and cared for him the way he had cared for his own son before he died and his wife left him.

The day after the fall dance Angela slept in until the midday sun covered the room from wall to wall. It was the first day of fall break so she wasn’t surprised that Rachel was still curled in a deep sleep. Angela rolled over onto her back, forgetting about her wings. “Ouch!” She sat up, massaging her shoulder. She had forgotten her problems while she slept, but now they rushed back and weighed upon her chest and mind once again.
She pulled in a deep breath as she got out of bed and looked at her birthmark in the mirror. Making sure Rachel was still asleep, she pulled off her shirt to examine the fledgling wings.

“What happened to you?” Angela jumped at the sound of Rachel’s voice. She quickly pulled her shirt back on. Rachel sat up on her bed, holding the comforter to her chest. “I saw you running out of the dance. And Jade said you and Max were fighting the other day.”

“She told you that? That girl needs to learn to keep her mouth shut. It was nothing. It was just so hot in there. I needed to get some air.” Angela took another breath. She felt like she was on top of a mountain and her lungs were trying to pull every ounce of oxygen from the air.

“You looked like you had just seen a ghost or something.”

“Nothing that dramatic. Sorry to disappoint.”

“So things are good with you and Max then?”

“Yeah, they’re good.” Angela had just answered out of habit, trying to make things sound more normal than they really were. But she realized it was true. Despite everything, she was really starting to like Max, and now that they shared a secret, she trusted him with her life. “Things are really good actually.”

“Cool. I’m happy for you Angela.”

“Thanks Rach. How are things with you and…uh.”

“Bryan? They’re going okay. Well, honestly, it’s been a little boring lately. But last night was really nice. After the dance we went back to his house.”
“Oh really? My innocent little cousin?”

“Shut up!”

“I was wondering why you weren’t here last night. I must have fallen asleep before you got back. You guys didn’t do anything did you?”

“Oh please, you make me sound like a tramp. I got back like an hour after you did. And no we didn’t do anything! We just talked…and made out a little.”

“Steamy!” Angela said with a laugh. Rachel threw her pillow across the room at Angela. “Ow!” Angela turned away from the pillow and it hit her back.

“Angela? What’s that!?” Rachel motioned toward the pillow. There was a small spot of blood on the corner and a tiny feather sticking out of it.

“I don’t know, I guess it scratched me. And a feather came out of it?” Rachel looked up from the pillow on the ground, to Angela’s torso. She got up and tried to see Angela’s back, but Angela kept turning to keep it hidden.

“I’m not stupid Angela. You know I’m allergic to down pillows. This is foam. And I know something’s going on with you. I’ve seen how you bandage your back. And the pain pills lying around.”

“You weren’t supposed to see those.”

“Yeah, well I did. What’s going on Angela?”

“I’ve just got a lot going on right now.”

“Tell me what’s wrong Angela. You’re scaring me.”

“I can’t tell you Rachel. I just can’t.”
“If you don’t tell me what it is, I’m gonna tell mom about the pills.” Rachel walked toward the door. Angela grabbed her arm and pulled her back into the room.

“Okay, fine, I’ll tell you. But you have to promise not to say a word to anyone.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Good.” Angela told Rachel all about her wings and how they had started to grow back. Rachel sat on her bed, listening in silence. When Angela was done telling her cousin the unbelievable truth about her wings, Rachel narrowed her eyes.

“So what you’re trying to tell me is that you’re some kind of bird-girl? Nice try Angela. Looks like I’m gonna have to tell mom about the pills after all.”

“No, wait Rachel. Don’t tell Aunt Margaret. Look.” She pulled her shirt off and showed her cousin the new wings.

“Oh my God Angela! You really do have wings.”

“I told you so! Now you see why I didn’t want to tell you? Why you can’t tell anybody?”

“Right. Your secret’s safe with me.”

As soon as Rachel left the room to shower, Angela called Max.

“Hey Angela, what’s up?”

“We need to talk.”

“What’s wrong? Did I say something at the dance to upset you?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. Well, it is. It’s about what we talked about. Anyway, I need to see you.”
“I can come pick you up in about an hour. Do you know Deer Forest Cafe, on Sapling Street?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“So what’s up?” Max asked, taking a sip of his latte.

“Let’s sit down first. How about over there?” Angela motioned toward a table in the corner of the café. It had an industrial look, with exposed ducts in the ceiling and unfinished table tops.

“Sure. What does a soy cappuccino taste like anyway?’

“It’s pretty good.” Angela offered her drink to Max.

“That’s nasty! Just kidding, it’s actually pretty good.”

“I told my cousin, Max.”

“What did you tell your cousin?”

“About my wings, everything. She saw the blood and feathers and we share a room so she’s seen everything anyway. I just don’t know what to do Max. I don’t know who I can trust. I just don’t know anything!”

“Slow down Angela. It’s not that big of a deal. Your cousin is family. It’s not so bad if she knows is it? She knows all the old stories too. And what’s she gonna do, tell everyone at school that her cousin has wings? Who’s gonna believe that.”

“I know I’m overreacting. It’s just that once a secret is shared it branches out, you know? It’s not like, once you tell someone a secret, that’s it. I know Rachel will tell her
BFF, and then she’ll tell someone, who will tell someone else. Soon the whole town will know about me. And even if they don’t believe it, that doesn’t make it any less true!”

“Calm down Angela. This is your cousin we’re talking about. She wouldn’t do that to you, right?”

“You’re probably right. But this is just the beginning. I have the option to keep it secret now, but what about a few months down the road. People are going to look at me weird if I’m wearing a winter coat in May. And even that won’t keep them hidden if they keep growing.”

“Let’s stay rational Angela. You don’t even know how big they will grow, do you? Or even if they will grow back fully at all.”

“Rational, Max? What the hell is rational about any of this?”

“You’ve got a point.”

“I just feel like it’s time to start thinking about the future. Has your tail ever grown back?”

“Nope. And I hope it doesn’t start now.”

“Have you ever heard of a reservation for animal people?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard stories, but I never really thought it was a real place. Do you?”

“I think it is. Chief Thunder mentioned it to me. He said that’s pretty much my only option at this point. And it makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“I guess so. Do you know where it is?”

“That’s the problem. I have a vague memory of my grandmother mentioning a
safe place in her stories. But I don’t remember her ever saying anything about where it was.”

“Great. So now we’re supposed to look all over the Earth for the lost city of Atlantis?”

“We?” Angela looked down into her cappuccino, hoping she had heard correctly.

“Angela, look at me.” Angela looked up into Max’s face.

“Yes, ‘we.’ Everything’s gonna be alright, okay? I’m gonna help you through this. Whatever happens, I’ll stay by your side and we’ll face whatever the future holds together.”

“You mean you’re coming with me?” Angela looked into his warm eyes, glowing like the deep brown reflection on the surface of a cup of coffee. He took her hand in his.

“Of course I am Angela. I want to help you.”

“You know I can never come back, right?”

“Never say never Angela. But yeah, I know we can never come back.”

Looking into his eyes, she couldn’t help but to trust him, and to believe that everything would be alright as long as they were together.

For the rest of the fall break, Angela stayed in the house, quiet and cozy. Outside, the cold winds plucked the few remaining leaves from the trees. Except for during Thanksgiving, when she tried to appear happy and festive, she spent most of the holiday in her room, racking her brain for any recollection of the secret reservation.
She browsed online, looking for hints in the few old stories told by her people which had been recorded on the web. It was bad luck to share a story with anyone outside the tribe, so there weren’t many. She travelled back in time through her earliest memories, looking for answers. She even tried writing down all of the stories she could remember, hoping that something would trigger a memory that would help her figure out where the reservation was.

After several days with no luck, Angela decided she would use the last Sunday of fall break to visit her grandmother’s house. She hoped that being there in that house surrounded by things from her past would trigger some long-lost memory. Aunt Margaret didn’t like her going to the empty house by herself, so she needed a cover story. Max had a car, and she needed his support anyway, so she gave him a call. As soon as Max agreed to her plan, she went to the living room to tell Aunt Margaret where she wanted her aunt to think she was going.

“Aunt Margaret?” Margaret looked up from the TV.

“I’m gonna go out with Max for a bit.”

“Where are you going?”

“We were just gonna go to the coffee shop, and maybe to an early movie.”

“Okay, Angie. Listen, I know I’m not your mother, but I can’t help but look out for you.” Angela looked at her aunt quizzically. “I know how intense and exciting young love is, but be careful. Max seems like a very nice boy, and he probably is. But I just want you to be careful Angie. Can you promise me that?”

“Yeah, sure. Max is really nice. There’s no need to worry.”
“You’re probably right. But all the same, keep your eye out for trouble.”

“Okay, see you Aunt Margaret.”

“Be home before dark Angela.”

“I will. Bye!” Angela called as she walked out the door.

“So why are we here again?” Max asked as they pulled into the driveway of Grandmother’s house.

“Because I’ve tried everything else. I’m just hoping that being here will stir up some memories.”

“So where do we begin?” Max asked. Angela looked up at the Apple tree as she got out of the car. The last orange leaf clung to one of the highest branches and she watched as a gust of icy wind grabbed the leaf and pulled it from the tree. It blew horizontally from the tree and out of sight, leaving the tree naked and cold.

“Are you going to give me the grand tour?” he asked as Angela opened the door.

“This is the kitchen. My grandmother and I used to eat every meal here. And in the afternoon and evening we would sit at this table and drink the tea that she picked and dried herself.”

“What was in the tea?”

“I’m not really sure. But it tasted kind of grainy, you know, like oolong. See those dried herbs hanging from the ceiling? She would hang the plants there. And over here is the living room. Grandmother used to always sit in that old brown chair.”

“Ew! It must be fifty years old!”
“I know, right? I’m pretty sure Buffalo Bill used to own it. I always used tell her that she should get a new one, but she insisted that it was too good to get rid of. ‘It’s still comfy.’ She always used to use that word.” Angela smiled at the memory. “‘Comfy.’ The chair is comfy, the sofa is comfy, the bed is comfy, I’m comfy here.”

“She sounds like a fun lady. I hope I get to meet her some day.”

“She was. I mean is.” Angela corrected herself.

“And this is her room.”

“I don’t feel like I should go in there while she’s not here.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean, but I just want to show you one thing. Come over here. See this quilt? It’s been passed down for generations. Each woman adds to it and then passes it down to her daughter.”

“It’s beautiful. I guess you’ll have to add a bird?”

“I guess so, but I don’t even know how to sew.”

“Don’t worry, you’ve got plenty of time to learn.” As they turned to leave the room, Max noticed the picture over the desk. “Is this you and her?”

“Yeah. I was little then, huh?”

“Yeah, you were a cute kid.”

“Thanks.”

“Has being here jogged any memories yet?”

“No. I mean, yeah it has, but not the ones I’m looking for.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Go upstairs I guess. This is, or was, my room.”
“Wow, you’ve always had a thing for birds, huh?” Angela looked around, noticing for the first time how many pictures of birds covered her walls.

“Just family portraits,” she joked. “This one is my sister,” She pointed to a picture of a bluebird, “and that one over there,” she gestured to a photo of a cardinal, “is my great uncle who died in the war.”

“Oh, I see. What an interesting family you’ve got. You haven’t remembered anything yet have you?”

“Not a thing.” Angela collapsed onto her bed. She let herself fall back, twisting onto her side as she did, to make sure that she didn’t rest her weight on the wings. She put an arm across her face and tried to forget about everything. Max sat down beside her and put his hand on her knee.

“It’s okay, Angela. There’s no rush. At least not yet.”

“I know. It’s just so frustrating to think that the information I’m looking for is probably hiding somewhere in my own head!”

“I hate it when that happens. It’s like the harder you try to remember something, the less you can remember.”

Angela stared at the wall.

“What are you thinking about, Angela?”

“It’s just something that my grandfather said. It was something about not being able to find things that don’t want to be found.”

“He has a point, you know. I think you’re trying too hard.”
“You’re right. I’m just trying to jog my memory, but apparently I’m going about it the wrong way.”

“You just need to relax Angela.”

“Relax,” she said with a sigh, as if the word held magic power that would calm her nerves. She closed her eyes and listened to the silence of the house without TVs chattering, cell phones beeping, or heaters thumping. She could almost pretend she had never left her own bed. But the spicy scent of Max’s deodorant and the wood smoke smell that clung to his hoodie reminded her that she couldn’t live in a memory.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Monday morning came too soon after the holiday weekend. Angela spent the next few days trying to relax, hoping that the memory she was looking for would come into her thoughts naturally if she didn’t push herself, but she was getting discouraged.

On Wednesday afternoon, Max offered her a ride home. As she walked out the double doors of the high school, the first flurries of winter danced between wintry gusts. The sky was painted with thick brushstrokes of gray and white - the heavy skies of snow. As she walked to Max’s truck, she noticed a few birds pecking at seeds that had fallen from the birdfeeder on the front lawn. She stopped in front of the birdfeeder and watched them dig between the grass blades for the best seeds. The birds watched her as well, chirping and hopping across the lawn.

A male cardinal perched on the feeder, above the others. His bright red feathers stood out against the pale sky. He sang as he rocked the feeder to release seeds to the birds below. Angela hummed along as she began walking again, and was still humming as she got into the truck. “Long time no see,” Max said.

“Yeah, it’s been a whole two minutes since I saw you at your locker.” Angela kissed him on the cheek and he took her hand in his. She began humming again.

“What is that?” Max tried to mimic her tune.

“Just a birdsong I heard.”

“My little bird-girl.”

“Hey, you’re lucky. Not every guy gets a bird-girl as a girlfriend,” Angela joked.
“I know, I’m very lucky.” Max said, without a strain of humor in his voice. He lifted her hand and kissed it softly. Again, Angela continued humming. Slowly, words started coming to her and she was singing them before she realized it was a song she had been singing for years. The song about the bird that longed to fly.

“So now the birdsong has words?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s not just a birdsong after all. It’s an old song my grandmother taught me.”

“Oh, cool. I don’t think I’ve ever heard that one before.”

“Really? I thought it was just a traditional song of our people that all kids learn.”

Max shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. How does it go?”

“Young sparrow perched high on a bough,
Wind blew and he fell to the ground.
Wing broken, in air he was stone.
Winter came, Sister and Brother

left sparrow alone.
Until one day his wings did heal
Young sparrow flew up high
The winds his map, he sailed the skies

Above the Great Gray Forest,
Over the Turtle Hill,
Across the Stormy River,
He flew til day was through.

Young sparrow flew home
To a place he’d never been,
At last with his true brothers
In the land where all are whole.”

“Wow,” Max said. “That’s a beautiful song. But it’s really sad.”

“I know, I always used to imagine how badly the sparrow wanted to follow his family.” Angela watched as the brown trees and grasses melted into a single blur of motion on the other side of the car window.

“I thought it was about death. Like returning home to heaven.”

“That makes sense, I guess. When I was a kid it always seemed so straightforward to me.”

“I know what you mean. Things are so much simpler for kids. Angela?”

“Yeah?” She looked over at him and watched as the falling afternoon sun brought a hint of red from his black hair.”

“Sing the last part again.”

“Which part?”

“About when the bird goes home.”
“Above the Great Gray Forest,
Over the Turtle Hill,
Across the Stormy River,
He flew til day was through.

Young sparrow flew home
To a place he’d never been,
At last with his true brothers
In the land where all are whole.”

“You realize what you just found don’t you?”
“What do you mean?”
“Angela, you just found the map to the reservation!”

Instead of dropping Angela off at her cousins’ house that evening as he usually did, Max and Angela went straight to Deer Forest Cafe. Once they sat down at their usual corner table, Angela pulled a notebook out of her backpack and wrote the lines down. Above the Great Gray Forest. Over the Turtle Hill. Across the Stormy River. He flew til day was through.

“Any idea where those places are?” Max asked.

“No clue.” Angela adjusted the hood of her sweatshirt to make sure it was covering the lumps on her back.

“I’m searching for Great Gray forest.” Max typed the name into his phone.
“Anything?”

“Nope. Just a bunch of results for great gray owl.”

“What about Turtle Hill?”

“Hmmm. Apparently it’s a banjo company and a golf course in Texas.”

“That doesn’t sound right. Anything else?”

“It says here that it’s also the name of a Buddhist colony in Tennessee, and a farm in California.”

“That doesn’t sound promising either, but I guess it’s worth checking out.” She opened the GPS on her phone and used it as a guide to draw a US map in her notebook, carefully locating the Buddhist colony and the farm and labeling them: Turtle Hill?

“Okay, now what about Stormy River?

“It looks like it’s a song. And a ranch.”

“Where’s the ranch?”

“Oregon,” Max said. Angela drew a dot for Stormy River on the map.

“This is hopeless,” she said.

“Don’t get discouraged already, Angela. The hardest part is already done. We have the clues. We just need to think this through. Do any of those names have any meaning to you?”

“Gray Forest doesn’t ring a bell. Turtle Mountain sounds familiar, but that’s all. And Stormy River...the only thing I can think of to do with storms is Chief Thunder.”

“Your grandfather.”

“Yeah.”
“I guess that would make sense. Maybe you should pay him a visit.”

“I guess that’s not a bad place to start.” Angela looked into her coffee then up at the exposed ducts in the ceiling for answers. “Hey Max?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t worry, the latte was only $3.00.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about dummy. I mean thanks for everything. For being so understanding and for being such a great boyfriend.”

“It’s easy when I’ve got a girlfriend like you.” He got up and pulled Angela to her feet. The cafe was nearly empty, and he leaned in to kiss her. Angela pulled him in close, tight to her body, feeling the warmth of his chest through their clothes. After several minutes, they pulled apart and looked into each other’s eyes. Angela almost felt as if there were something physical tying them together, a gravity pulling her in. She smiled and squeezed his hand. He hugged her tightly again. “I guess we better get you home. Your Aunt wanted you back in time for dinner, didn’t she?”

When Angela arrived home, her body went on autopilot. She smiled politely at her aunt, uncle, and cousins during dinner. And she must have been making conversation, but she barely knew what she’d said. She was too busy thinking about finding the reservation, humming the song over and over again, and reciting the lyrics.

After dinner, Angela googled all of the locations again. Then she pulled up a map of the US. She typed each name into her GPS and made a list of the possible locations:
Turtle Mountain, SD. Turtle Hill, WY. Grey Forest, TX. So far she had seven locations pinpointed on the map. She sighed as she looked at the map with the seven dots scattered randomly across the country. But then she noticed that there were a Turtle Hill and a Grey Forest in Texas. She searched for a map of Texas and took a closer look. Angela realized that the Colorado River ran near both of the locations, and was large and rough, probably making noises like thunder.

Her pulse quickened. It wasn’t perfect, but so far the three points lined up, more or less, on her map. She searched for reservations near the Colorado River. Only two reservations appeared in her search. And only one, the Alabama-Coushatta Reservation, was anywhere near the river. This had to be it. Angela called Max immediately.

“I found it!”

“Really? Awesome!”

“How did you do it?”

“Let’s just say, I have my ways…”

“Wow, good job Sherlock.”

“I just searched for the name of every place in the song. And the only place that had everything was Texas. Well, it didn’t have a Stormy River. But I think it means the Colorado River.”

“Wait, Angela. Are you sure, you’re not getting ahead of yourself? I mean, Texas, really?”
“I know, I thought it was weird too, but no one would ever think to look there would they?”

“You’ve got a point there.”

“This has to be it!”

“Cool Angela! I told you you’d find it! I still think you should talk to your grandfather though, even if it is just to tell him that you found it.”

“Yeah, maybe I can go see him tomorrow after school.”

“How are we gonna get to Texas, Angela?”

“Well, I was thinking I could tell my aunt that I’m going on a trip with Jade’s family. And you can tell your parents that you’re going on a trip with Lance’s family. You know, just so we can scope out the reservation for a few days and see what it’s like.”

“MapQuest says it will take over 16 hours.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why we’re gonna have to wait until after Christmas. Then I guess we can use New Year’s as an excuse.”

“Are you sure about this Angela?”

“Yeah, it’s not like I really have a choice. I’m like the bird from the song. My family’s gone, and I’m looking for a home that I’ve never been to before.”

“I know what you mean. But you always have a choice. Always.”

“I guess so.”

“I just want to make sure you realize the magnitude of everything. I know what it’s like to not have your real parents nearby. But it’s the people we’re with that are our
family Angela. I’ll always love and remember my parents, but where my foster parents are, where my friends are, where you are, that’s home Angela.”

“That’s sweet Max, but I really need to get out of here sooner rather than later. These wings aren’t getting any smaller, and waiting is only going to make this harder.”

“That’s true. Well, I’ve gotta get going. Dad needs help with the computer again.”

“Doesn’t he need help with it every day?”

“Yeah, it seems like it, doesn’t it? Well, goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

“Hey Angela?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too Max.” Angela let the phone drop to the bed and then followed its motion. She stared up at the ceiling, lost between excitement and uncertainty.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

Angela decided to pay a visit to her grandfather the next weekend, but she couldn’t wait any longer. After school on Tuesday, Max drove her to Chief Thunder’s house.

“Hello?” Chief Thunder answered the door. “Ah, Angela. And another familiar face. Welcome back young coyote.”

“Hi. You can call me Max.” Chief Thunder nodded in acknowledgement and turned back to Angela. “Come in, my dear. I was just brewing a pot of tea. The winds told me a visitor was coming,”

“Thank you.” Angela led Max inside the cabin and they sat together on a long woodframe sofa.

“It is nice to see you again Angela. How are your wings?” Chief Thunder walked into the small kitchen and poured three cups of tea.

“They’re growing quickly.”

“It is time then,” Chief Thunder called from the kitchen

“Time for what?” Max asked.

“Time for animal and man to live in harmony again.” Chief Thunder handed each of them an elegant china cup.

“About that,” Angela began, “I think I’ve found the reservation, the one I need to go to.”
“I knew the map was inside you.” Chief Thunder’s eyes crackled with an electric gleam.

“It was,” Angela said. “It came to me through a birdsong, a song that Grandmother used to sing to me.” An electric energy seemed to flow through the room as Angela sang the end of the song.

“Yes, you have found the map. And where do you think the reservation is?”

“Well, I tracked down a Grey Forest, Texas and a Turtle Hill in Texas as well. And then I figured that the stormy river must be the Colorado River. I did some research, and it led me to the Alabama-Coushatta Reservation.”

“Hmm…I see.” Chief Thunder massaged the wispy hairs on his chin.

“What is it?” Angela asked.

“Unless I am mistaken, that is not the place you are looking for.”

“What?”

“I have eyes in the clouds, Angela. And I have seen their people. None of those people share the blood of the old animal people.” Angela gulped her tea, even though it was still hot. She slumped on the couch, her head in her hands.

“I really thought I’d found it. I thought I finally had an answer.”

“Be patient young one. Now that you have the map, I can help you.”

“Really, you know where it is?”

“Well, I am not certain, but the song seems to point the way.”

“Where is it?” Angela sat on the edge of the couch, watching her grandfather’s lips closely, waiting for an answer.
“You were on the wrong track before. The clues in the song are not about places on any map, but instead places from our stories. Do you remember the story of the Angry Sun?

“The one about the people who lived in the woods? And when they began to cut down the trees from the forest to make their homes, the Angry Sun shot its fire down to burn their homes?”

“That is the very story, Angela.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember that one too!” Max said. “The fire spread through the entire forest, driving the people into the plains.”

“Right,” Chief Thunder said. “Leaving the forest charred, the trees grayed with ash.”


“There is a forest to the north, near the Pine Ridge Reservation, just between the border of Nebraska and South Dakota. Some say the forest bears a curse. It is a barren place. About every ten years, for as long as I can remember, there has been a great fire in those woods. Even before my time, the elders talked of these woods as a place where the spirits of the people lived, the very people who were burned by the Angry Sun. They spoke of it as a place of the dead, not like the lush green forests of the living world.

“So the reservation is definitely to the North?”

“I believe so.”

“I was totally wrong about Texas then.”
“I told you that you were getting carried away,” Max said. Angela glared at him.


“Well, that brings us to another story, doesn’t it? Have you ever heard the story about turtle that carries the world on his shell?”

“Yeah?” Angela said.

“Well, the turtle can not stay in his shell forever can he?”

“I guess not.”

“The legends speak of the turtle poking his great head out of the earth. That, I suspect, would be the Turtle Hill mentioned in the song. The people of Pine Ridge claim to have found the turtle’s head. It is a giant rock mountain that rises from the ground in an area known as Badlands National Park.”

“Grandmother took me there when I was a kid!”

“No accident, my dear. She was giving you clues all along.”

“But why did she make it so complicated! What if I never figured it out?”

“Your grandmother has always had faith in you, Angela. She knew in her heart that you would one day need to know the location of the safe lands, and so she put the information deep inside you. For the location is too sacred and vulnerable to be passed from ear to ear with ease. It must be kept secret. You both must understand this.” Angela and Max nodded solemnly.

“Okay,” Max said, “That puts us in the middle of South Dakota so far. Now what about the Stormy River?”
“I believe that the Stormy River’s name is derived from the story of the Ghost Rain.”

“I know that one,” Max said. “Do you remember it Angela?” Angela nodded.

“That’s the one about the people who heard a strong storm growing in the distance. And they found a cave to hide in while the storm passed. But after weeks of living in the cave, the storm was still far in the distance. Eventually, they came outside to see what was going on and they found that the rumbling sound of thunder was actually coming from a huge river. By that point they had gotten used to the comforts of the cave, so they went back inside and continued living there for generations.”

“That is how the story goes. And judging by geography and the direction the song has sent us so far, what river do you think that would be?”

“It would have to be the Cheyenne River, wouldn’t it?” Angela asked.

“That is exactly what I was thinking. And surrounding the strongest parts of the river is the Cheyenne River Reservation.”

“Oh my God! That’s it,” Angela said. “We’ve found the reservation!”

“I suspect the area you are looking for is a smaller section of the reservation, but that should be the general area.”

“I can’t believe we finally found it!” Angela wrapped her arms around Max.

“Angela.” Chief Thunder’s echoing voice startled her. “There is something else you must know. I wanted your grandmother to be around for this, but I think it is even more important now that she is gone.” Max and Angela looked at each other. “Angela, I am your grandfather.” Max looked confused.
“I know,” Angela said.

“You already knew? Did she tell you?”

“No. Aunt Margaret just told me a few days ago.”

“I see.” He said. “Well, I am glad you know you are not alone, Angela. I am sorry I could not be with you more, but I have always watched over you, and I will always protect you. Good luck on your journey, Granddaughter.”

“Thanks.” Chief Thunder showed Max and Angela to the door. He gave them a solemn wave and disappeared into the house as they pulled out onto the dirt road.

“But didn’t you already know he was your grandfather? Why did it seem like he was telling you like it was a surprise?” Max asked as they got into the truck.

“I’ll explain later. Now we have to get ready for our trip.”
CHAPTER TWENTY

Snow covered the ground outside as Angela and her cousins sat by the Christmas tree exchanging presents. Max and Angela had decided it would be best to leave for the reservation after Christmas. This would give them a chance to spend the holiday with their families before leaving them indefinitely. Angela figured her relatives could come visit her at the reservation once in a while, but things would never be the same again. This was goodbye.

She watched Josh and Kyle unwrapping their new Xbox 360. The boys forgot all of their other presents and went to hook it up to the TV right away. Angela couldn’t help but wonder how old they would be the next time she saw them. Would they still have that pure sense of excitement?

Aunt Margaret handed Angela a small box wrapped in Santa Claus paper. “This is from us,” she said. Uncle Charles added, “You’ve really become part of our family, Angie.”

“Thanks,” Angela said. She pulled the ribbon off and carefully peeled away the tape. Inside, she found a gold locket in the shape of a heart. “Family” was inscribed onto the front. Opening the locket, Angela found a tiny picture of the family, including her, that had been taken at Thanksgiving. She hadn’t thought much about it as she posed for the photo, but looking at it now she realized its significance and how, years from now, it would help her remember their faces as they were that day when she was still a part of them.
“We noticed that you’ve started taking an interest in jewelry lately,” Aunt Margaret said, motioning to the turtle ring hanging around Angela’s neck. “And we wanted you to know how much you mean to all of us.”

“It’s perfect.” Angela wrapped her arms around her aunt and uncle. “Thank you. Thanks for everything.” She fastened the locket around her neck and let it hang against her chest with the ring.

“You’re welcome, Angela. It’s been great having you here.”

“Open mine next,” Rachel said. Angela opened the gift and glared at her cousin as she pulled the birdwatching book from its paper. Rachel fought back a chuckle. “There’s another book in there too Angela.”

“Collected Stories By Gabriel Garcia Marquez,” Angela read.

“I know how much you love books, and I saw you had finished the one you were reading, so I wanted to get you another one by the same author.”

“Thanks Rachel, I can’t wait to read it!” She gave her cousin a hug. “I wish I had gotten you something more thoughtful.”

“You did, Angela. I really like the perfume. That is, unless you’re trying to tell me that I stink!” Angela blushed. She hadn’t meant to offend her cousin. “I’m just kidding, Angela, I love it!”

Christmas seemed to pass by too quickly. The twins played video games for the rest of the day, only pulled away for a few minutes by Aunt Margaret’s famous Christmas ham. Angela tried to hold on to every moment of what was to be the last normal event with her family, focusing on each detail as they sat around the living room eating.
Christmas cookies and snacks until Rachel and her parents fell asleep on the sofa. Angela sat with a mug of hot chocolate in her hands, watching as the electric fire cast a glow on the sleeping faces of her aunt and uncle, and Rachel as well. They were so relaxed, happy, and they had no idea this would be one Angela’s last days with them.

The day after Christmas stung with a bitter chill that made it seem as if the festive cheer had vanished overnight. Angela’s wings weighed upon her body and her mind, itching and burning with a persistence that made her feel as though they were impatient to reach their full growth. She had debated with Max many times about when would be the best time to leave. They had agreed on December 27, which gave her one more day at home. Since they had both started dating, Angela and Jade hadn’t seen much of each other, so Angela decided to spend the day with Jade to say goodbye to her best friend.

“What do you mean you can’t tell me where you’re going Angela?” Jade and Angela were sitting on Jade’s bed, staring out the window at the snow that stretched past the horizon, carrying its white into the sky.

“I just can’t, Jade. No one is supposed to know the location of this reservation. It’s just not safe.”

“It sounds like a freakin’ cult. I haven’t told anyone about you, Angela, and I wouldn’t tell anyone where you are.”

“I know, Jade. But at least this way you won’t have to lie when people ask you where I am. And we’ll definitely see each other again. Eventually.”
“Yeah, eventually.” Jade let out a sigh. “It’s okay Angela. I understand. I know this is something you have to do. There’s no other way. I just wish you didn’t have to go.” Angela pulled Jade close and held her tight.

“I love you Angela. You’re the best friend I’ll ever have.”

“I love you too Jade. Don’t make me cry.”

“Fine. Enough mushy stuff. Let’s go outside and play in the snow like we did when we were kids.”

“That sounds like just what I need right now.” The girls spent their last few hours together tumbling through the snow, throwing snowballs, building snowmen, making snow angels, just as they had for years. But this time was different because it was the last time.

“I’m not saying goodbye,” Jade said as she dropped Angela off at her cousins’ house.

Angela saw her words collecting in the cold car and they stung just as much as the empty air. “Ok,” she said. She wanted to say goodbye and that she would never forget Jade and that they would see each other again soon, but she knew that it was a lie and mostly she just didn’t know what to say at all. She had been left, first by her parents, then by her grandmother, but she had never been the one leaving. So she gave Jade a hug even though they couldn’t feel the warmth of each other’s bodies through their parkas, and got out of the car without saying anything. As she walked to the house, Angela looked up at the sky and felt like she was rising upward as the snowflakes fell past her to the ground.
Angela spent her last few hours at home trying to squeeze in as much time with her relatives as possible. She packed her backpack with fresh clothes, toothbrush and toothpaste, and the book Rachel had given her for Christmas and then ran out into the living room. She played Xbox with the twins and Rachel until her thumbs hurt, and then she stayed up talking with her aunt and uncle until they went to sleep.

Once she was in bed, she talked to Rachel until her cousin stopped responding, leaving her the last one awake. She twisted in her sheets all night, and when the alarm clock read 7:00 AM, she couldn’t remember if she’d fallen asleep at all.

Even after Angela had showered, gotten dressed, and eaten breakfast, everyone else was still asleep. She considered waiting until they woke up so she could say goodbye, but they didn’t even know she was leaving for good. She left the house quietly, taking in the glow of the Christmas tree and the familiar sweet smells of Aunt Margaret’s cooking. She knew she would be sad later, but for now she was too tired to feel much of anything.

Angela walked down the gravel driveway to the road because she didn’t want the sound of Max’s engine to wake her family up. She waited in the cold, feeling the icy air claw at the exposed skin of her face and hands. The sun was up, but its light was quiet, and hadn’t begun to warm the air yet. Putting her hands in her pockets, she turned to look at the house that she had begun to call home. She imagined its future without her. Her relatives going about their routines behind its walls, sharing Christmases every year without her.

At exactly 7:45 Max pulled up in front of the driveway as they had planned.
“Morning, Angela.”

“Morning.” Angela tossed her bag on the floor of the truck. She was still struggling to keep her eyes open.

“I thought it might be nice to stop for breakfast before we go. You know, one last normal thing.”

“Yeah, sure. That sounds good.” They drove north out of town, looking for a diner or coffee shop for breakfast. Snow still covered the ground and parts of the road. It was early, and most people were still enjoying their holiday vacations, so the roads were nearly empty. As the sun rose higher in the sky, its light reflected off of the snow, making the landscape sparkle.

“What about over there?” Angela pointed to a 24 hour truck stop diner by the side of the road.

“Sure, that works.” As they got out of the truck, Angela noticed that Max didn’t take her hand as he normally did. He seemed distant, but she just assumed that he was as tired as she was.

They sat in a blue and silver booth, lost in their sleepy thoughts. It wasn’t until the greasy eggs and pancakes arrived that Angela broke the silence. “Delicious,” she said. Grease dribbled from her fork as she cut into the eggwhite.

“Yeah, there’s no better way to say good morning to your body than by clogging your arteries first thing.”

“I know, right?” Angela took a bite of the egg. “It’s actually pretty good.” Max didn’t respond, but looked down at his plate.
“Angela, there’s something I need to tell you.” He still didn’t look up from his plate.

“Yeah?”

“I…” He began, but then shoved half of a pancake into his mouth.

“What is it Max?”

“We can’t go to the reservation, Angela. It’s all wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Angela almost yelled. She looked around the diner and lowered her voice as the other earlybird customers looked up from their coffees. “What do you mean it’s all wrong? It’s the only right thing to do! You don’t have to come. I totally understand, but I have to go.”

“I do want to go, Angela. It’s just that now might not be the best time, that’s all. Maybe we should rethink it, and plan to go a month from now, or maybe even in the summer.”

“Have you seen these things, Max?” Angela pointed to her back. “I need to go now!”

“I can’t stop you, Angela, but I can’t go now. And I think it would be better if you waited, too.”

“Fine,” Angela said. “Just drive me home then. We can talk about it later.”

“Really?” Max asked.

“Yeah, sure. I’ve been hiding my wings this long, what’s another month or so.”

“You’re the best, Angela. I’m glad you understand.” Angela nodded and finished her food as quickly as she could.
After breakfast, Max dropped Angela off at her grandmother’s house since he was stopping by John’s anyway. She insisted that she would walk from there. It was now 9:30 AM, and Angela slowly walked inside and watched as Max drove down the street. The house felt empty since Grandmother left, but it had never seemed as hollow as it did now. It was like a bone with all the marrow sucked out. It might just collapse at any moment. Angela walked down the hallway toward the back of the house. All the lights were off and the hallway was dark, but a light shone in through the window in Grandmother’s room.

She walked toward it and thought she saw a dark shape out of the corner of her eye as she walked past the kitchen. But when she looked there was nothing there. Her footsteps echoed through the hollow house as she made her way to Grandmother’s room. When she got there she found the picture of her and Grandmother had fallen to the floor, the glass shattered. She picked the frame up. The crack slit right down the middle of the picture, between granddaughter and grandmother.

Two shadows moved across the opposite wall and Angela turned toward the hallway, gripping the picture tightly in her hands. As her fingers closed around the frame the jagged glass dug into her hand, but she held tight. There was nothing in the hallway. She walked as quietly as she could, back out to the kitchen. The floor creaked behind her and she whirled around just in time to see a man standing behind her. He wore a ball cap which cast a shadow over his face. Angela watched him for a moment, wondering if he was real. And then she ran as he lunged at her. “Get her,” the man yelled to someone else.
As she neared the front door another man emerged from the kitchen. He carried a red plastic gas can in one hand and grabbed her arm with his other. He wore a ball pulled low over his face as well, but she recognized his mouth and chin in the light that came in through the front windows.

“Uncle Charles? What are you doing?”

Uncle Charles poured the gas on the floor and led Angela toward the door as the other man struck a match and held it up as if it were a cross.

“God’s will be done,” Uncle Charles said.

“On Earth as it is in Heaven,” the other man responded and dropped the match on the floor. Angela pushed Uncle Charles toward the flames and he released her as he caught his balance to stop himself from being engulfed. Coughing on the thick smoke, Angela grabbed Grandmother’s keys from the rack by the door and ran out to the car. When she turned the ignition, the engine coughed and then went silent. Grandmother hardly ever drove her car, and it surely hadn’t been used in months. “Come on, come on!” She tried again. And again. On her third attempt, the car started, just as Uncle Charles and the other man reached her. She hit the gas and the wheels spun, kicking up a cloud of dust.

As she drove toward the highway, eyes on the rearview mirror, she called Max. The phone rang. “Pick up, pick up!” It rang and rang until it reached voicemail.

“Sup, this is Max, leave me a message.”

“Max, pick up your fucking phone! We have to go now! I can’t stop so give me a call and meet me as soon as you can.”
She hung up the phone and kept watching the road behind her in the mirror. They would have caught up to her by now if they wanted to follow her. By the time she was on the highway, it was 10:17 AM. Angela followed her phone’s GPS, and stuffed an extra sweatshirt behind her shoulder blades for padding. It was a good thing she wouldn’t have to hide her wings much longer, because they were beginning to create an obvious bulge that even a winter coat couldn’t fully hide. She enjoyed the freedom of the car, watching snow covered trees and towns pass by like memories. Soon she was crossing the South Dakota border, and her stomach was growling.

Angela exited at another truckstop diner along the way. As she was eating her hamburger, her phone vibrated with a text from Max. “U were right. We need to go now. I’m coming 2 pick u up. R u still at ur grandmother’s?”

Angela typed with one hand as she ate French fries with the other. “No. I left already. I’m in Mission, SD.”

“From Max: Wait for me there. I’m leaving now.” Angela took her time finishing lunch. She figured she had driven for about three hours so far and still no one was chasing her. After she finished eating, she went outside to get the book that Rachel had given her, and brought it back inside the diner to read while she waited. Outside, a few birds hopped across the snow. They seemed to be hopping toward the window beside her seat. Angela was used to birds following her so she turned back to her book and got lost in a story about an angel that fell from the sky and was kept in a cage by the townspeople. _It was like Frankenstein, _she thought, _the misunderstood creature becoming the victim of_
the masses. Time seemed to fly as Angela became absorbed by the story about a winged human. She barely noticed that nearly three hours had passed when her phone rang.

“Hey Max.”

“Look, I’m sorry about this morning. You were right all along. Anyway, I just saw a sign for Mission in ten miles. Where are you again?”

“Some truckstop diner in the middle of nowhere. You’ll see it just off the road on your right after 83 crosses 18. And you’ll see my grandmother’s Toyota parked outside.”

“You took your grandmother’s Corolla? Man, you really were anxious to leave! I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Okay, see you soon.”

Angela went outside to greet Max just in time to see him pull into the parking lot in his old blue pickup truck. “I’m so sorry.” Max took her into his arms in the parking lot.

Angela wasn’t sure what was going on with Max, but she could definitely tell that he had been acting strange. Why had he suddenly decided this morning that they shouldn’t leave today? And why had he then just driven three hours by himself to make sure that they did leave today? Even now Max looked past her, scanning the parking lot and the fields, looking for someone. “I’m right here,” Angela said.

“Right,” he said, still looking toward the road. “Sorry. Let’s go inside. Mind if I eat lunch? I’m starving. And I need to tell you something.”

“Okay.” Angela said. “I’ve already been here for almost four hours, what’s another one?”
“On second thought, you’re right, Angela. It would take too much time. I can talk and drive. Come on, grab your stuff and get in my truck.”

“What about my grandmother’s car?”

“We can come back for it.”

“Okay…” Angela grabbed her backpack out of the Toyota and got into Max’s truck.

After 20 minutes on the highway, Angela started falling asleep. She tried to focus on the cars ahead, or on the white lines on the pavement, but her head was too heavy and she began to doze. She had just fallen asleep when she felt a jerk as the truck accelerated.

“Is everything okay, Max?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.” He focused intently on the road ahead and started weaving in and out of traffic. Angela noticed that Max kept looking in the rearview mirror.

She turned around and noticed an SUV tailgating them. “Is he following us?” She squinted to get a better look at the vehicle. “Is that John?”

“Yeah. I wanted to tell you Angela, but I couldn’t. That’s why I didn’t want us to leave now.”

“Wait, what? Slow down Max. What is going on?”

“Well, it’s a long story.” He pushed the gas pedal to the floor. Angela clung to the dashboard as she watched the speedometer hit 90 mph. “But yes, John is chasing us. Here’s the thing, Angela. I’m really sorry about all of this. I never wanted you to find out like this. But you know I love you right? I really do.”
“I love you too Max. Keep your eyes on the road. What’s going on?”

“Well, I’ve always looked up to John and believed that everything he said was true. But you’ve made me realize how manipulative and downright evil he is. From the time he rescued me, John always made me feel like crap. He told me I was a son of the devil. That Satan’s blood flowed through my veins.

“You see, John knows all about people like us. He thinks we’re demons. And he’s taken it upon himself to ‘rid the world of our evil.’ I’ve always been his little pet. I know it sounds stupid that I trusted him. But he saved my life when I was a baby, so I always felt this guilt to be loyal to him and to not question his actions. I’ve been so eager to please him that I would do anything for him without question. I swear I never would have done it if I thought it might hurt you.”

“What did he ask you to do Max?” Angela winced and grabbed the overhead strap as they barely slid in front of an 18 wheeler.

“Well, I didn’t know what he was getting at at first. But he asked me to keep an eye on you.” Angela glared at him. “Not to do anything bad or anything, just to see what you were up to.”

“You’ve been spying on me? What the hell Max! And I thought you really loved me! I’m so stupid.” She glared at her birthmark in the mirror as tears of rage and confusion collected in her eyes.

“I do, Angela. And I’m sorry. I know how this looks. Believe me, I’ve played it over and over in my head, how and when to tell you. Because I’m done with that asshole.
You’re what’s important to me. And if John comes in the way of that, then he’s my enemy.”

Angela gasped for air, sinking between emotional trauma and the fear of the truck crashing at any moment.

“Look, I’m really sorry Angela. I never meant to hurt you, and I promise I’ll do whatever it takes to make it up to you and to show you that I truly care about you. John’s been using me all along. I’m his little damned pawn. I know exactly how it feels to be let down by someone you trust. And I swear I never knew what he meant to do. I didn’t even know until now.”

“What the hell Max!” Angela yelled through her tears. “So everything was a lie? You liking me? Going to the dance with me? ‘Us?’”

“No, Angela, not for a second.” He took her hand in his, but she pulled it away. “I admit, it wasn’t a good way to start things off. But every moment we’ve shared together, every connection has been real. You can feel this, can’t you, the love between us?”

“Yeah,” Angela choked, not wanting to feel anything but hatred and hurt. She rubbed her eyes. “But what do you mean, you never knew til now what he meant to do?”

“I pieced it together slowly. When I realized you were one of the animal people, that’s when I understood why he was interested in you. He keeps tabs on all the people like us. Then I found out Chief Thunder was your grandfather, and even more importantly, that you knew where the reservation was. Looking for the reservation is his life’s work. That’s what he’s trying to get to through us. He figures if he can wipe out the
reservation, he will be carrying out ‘God’s will’ and bringing Eden, or The Kingdom of Heaven, or some shit like that, back to the earth.”

“Wow. He sounds really crazy!”

“Thanks to you, I finally realize that.”

“Thanks to me?”

“When you left by yourself, everything suddenly became clear. I mean, I always knew you weren’t a monster. But thanks to John, I’ve had this self-loathing sense of myself as an irredeemable sinner. When you left, I realized how much I really cared about you. I realized that you were doing the right thing. And that I needed to tell you the truth, because we’re in this together.”

“If I hadn’t just found out that our whole relationship is the result of you spying on me, I would say that sounded sweet.”

“Yeah, I deserve that. I’ve been a dumbass.”

“Wait, so if John was using me to get to the reservation, and he keeps tabs on all the animal people, then he must have something to do with my grandmother’s disappearance!”

“Or be responsible for it.”

“What? You don’t even sound shocked. Have you known about her all along?”

“No. But piecing everything together, it makes sense.”

“Do you think he has her somewhere?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.” Max looked up into the rearview mirror and glared at John with an animalistic hatred. “I’ve had enough of this.” He slammed on the brakes and
swerved into the left lane. John did the same. Desperate to catch his prey, he clipped the side of a BMW and his SUV swerved off of the highway. Angela turned around to see Johns’ vehicle spinning off the road in a whirlwind of slush and debris. For a second she thought it was over, but as the trucks rear wiper cleared the window, she saw the SUV turn around and start making its way back onto the highway. Max looked into the rearview mirror and swore. He positioned the truck out of John’s view in front of an 18 wheeler, and hoped that John wouldn’t see them.

After a couple of miles, Angela’s pulse slowed and she was able to breathe evenly. Still, she didn’t feel like telling Max about Uncle Charles yet. Just as Max sped up to pass an RV, John’s SUV drove onto the shoulder and passed the RV on the right, pulling in front of Max’s truck and boxing them in. Max slammed on the brakes, but there wasn’t enough time to stop and the tractor trailer was right behind him. He veered off onto the shoulder, wincing as the 18 wheeler crashed into the back of John’s truck, sending it flipping off of the highway, end over end. Max wasted no time in accelerating back to 80 mph, driving on the shoulder until they were able to merge back into traffic.

Angela craned her neck to see the accident behind them.

“Where did you learn to drive like that?” she asked.

“Just instinct, I guess.”
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

After hours of driving through snow covered rock plains and farmland, Angela and Max arrived in the Cheyenne River Valley. “Well, I guess this is it,” Max said. The truck kicked black snow under its tires, dirty slush flying spraying in their wake.

“So we’re safe now?” Angela asked.

“Yeah, I guess so. Welcome home, Angela.”

“Turn here.” Angela motioned to a turn-off into the woods.

“What? Do you know where we’re going?”

“Not really, but I have a feeling.”

“Ok.”

“And just park over there next to the hill.” As she dropped down from the truck, Angela closed her eyes and breathed deeply. It was a relief to finally feel the earth beneath her feet after such a long and tortuous ride. Max followed Angela as she walked up a steep slope covered in brown grasses and wild flowers. As they grew closer to the river, the birds’ songs were drowned out by the rumble of the water weaving through rocks and ice in the riverbed. A small forest of shrubs covered the riverbank and the surrounding plains.

“Where are you going, Angela?”

“I don’t know. But something is telling me to go this way.” They crossed the river on a decaying footbridge. Between the gaps in the boards of the bridge, Angela could see the river churning below. She smiled as she felt the rumble of the water consume her. She
could feel its vibrations through her feet, feel her eardrums ringing with its noise, and feel its icy mist in the air around her. The sky was so large and perfectly painted with gray clouds that she thought she might fall from the Earth and float into space if it weren’t for her hands holding onto the rails of the bridge.

As they reached the other side of the river, Angela continued to walk briskly, several yards ahead of Max, who struggled to keep up. But just a few steps from the bridge, Angela stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Max asked as he caught up to her.

“Nothing. I just don’t have that feeling I had before, about which way to go.”

Angela looked up at the open sky above. *Home*, she thought. She massaged her shoulder with one hand and winced in pain.

“What are you ok?”

“It’s my back. The wings. They’ve never hurt this much before.”

“My daughter,” the river called, “come to me.”

*This is it,* Angela thought. *My life is over.* If her wings grew back she could never live a normal life. She would have to stay hidden and would never see Jade or her cousins ever again. But as horrible as it was, she didn’t have a choice. The wings would keep growing whether she liked it or not. At least this way she could decide when. She would disappear just like Grandmother.

The plains that surrounded the riverbank were covered in tall grasses which had turned brown after the first frosts of winter froze the color out of them. Leafless shrubs grew sparsely along the bank, skeletons of plants, their life hidden dormant somewhere
down in their roots beneath the cold ground. In the absence of tall trees to separate one patch of grass from the next, the flat land was disorienting, and Angela stumbled as she walked toward the river, pulling her coat tight to protect her neck from the icy wind. The shrub-skeletons rocked in the wind and looked like they would blow over into the river, but their roots kept them firmly in place as the wind whistled through their thin branches that curled in on themselves like a fish's rib bones. The sky above was grey and mottled with clouds of a darker grey which clung to its surface like leaves floating on an upside-down pond. The dead brown grass tugged at Angela's ankles and ripped apart as she continuously pulled her feet from its grasp, tearing it from the earth as she ran toward the river.

The river was calling louder now, pulling her toward it with its own gravity. "Angela," it called, "Come to me, Angela," its voice trickling like current between stones. Images flashed in Angela's mind as she ran, memories from events that she’d never experienced. A man twisting into a deer. A wolf running through the woods by her house. They were blurry in her mind but she knew them well. A cold wind came down from the clouds and whistled across the length of the river toward Angela, curling the surface of the water up upon itself in frothing waves. The rushing air pulled Angela’s hair tight against her face. She tried to breathe deeply, but the air only whistled as it pulled through the strands of hair that covered her face. The hair covered her eyes as well and made the river and the surrounding plains look like they were covered in black stripes.

She pulled in another breath trying to focus on the whistle of the air through the hairs again as it stung her mouth and throat and burned her lungs, making her cough.
Though there were no trees in sight, a short length of tree branch blew past, and a few brown leaves which were still attached rattled in the wind. As the wind pulled it along the ground, the branch stuck in the wiry grasses which covered the earth and cracked, releasing an acorn. When the seed connected with the ground it began to grow at once, twisting upward toward the cold sun. Angela pulled her hair from her face to watch it climb as she filled her lungs with the sharp, cold air.

She squinted into the sunlight as branches shot out from the tree's trunk, growing more delicate as they extended from its center. Angela was overcome with a feeling she’d known before as a child and again as she scaled the rock wall at the gym. It was a lack of gravity, like she had to will herself to stay connected to the earth. She pushed her shoes down into the soil as a powerful gust moved along the ground and then shifted upward around her and the growing tree. Her hair blew straight up and her feet lost their grip on the ground. She hung above the world for a split second, floating above the grass before the wind released her and she fell back down, tumbling onto her knees and resting a hand against the gritty tree bark for support.

The branches continued to radiate outward, and as they grew she anticipated their splits. She knew their pattern, for these branches were arranged just like those of the Apple Tree she had climbed day after day, learning where to grasp and where to step to reach the top. And there, three-quarters of the way up its trunk, was the very same black scar she knew better than herself, from where the greatest branch had snapped off in a windstorm. It was a gaping hole in the bark where the tree had been so soft and vulnerable until it weather-beaten surface scabbed over. Angela ran her hands over the
trees scar, enjoying the sensation of the tiny splinters feeling their way into the skin of her palms, poking beneath its surface, but not quite getting stuck in her hands.

When Angela touched the scar in the bark, the scars in her own skin began to tingle with energy. Above, the sky churned in on itself, clouds evaporating and reassembling into new shapes. But they all looked like twisted wings and feathers, misshapen, disfigured crows and jays. Angela’s scars itched and burned like they were covered in hives. She smacked at her back as best she could, but her arms couldn’t quite reach the scars. Her fingernails tore at her shirt, but the scars still burned with the fiery itching. The intense agony made her mind go blank and Angela’s instinct kicked in. She ripped her shirt off and tore her bra lose too, not caring that her breasts were exposed in the wind. She clawed her fingernails into the flesh of her back as she ran into the river, stumbling across sunken stones. Her skin flaked off and she had to pull it from her fingernails so she could scrape at her back again. She scratched violently at the scars, desperately trying to tear the pain away from herself. But her skin burned and itched even more as strips of it peeled off in her hands, which were now coated in sticky blood.

She plunged her bloody hands into the river and dove in to submerge her burning scars. Falling into the cold water it was like falling from a cliff, the running water impacting her and knocking the air from her lungs. She opened her eyes, trying to figure out which direction the sunlight was coming from, but she could only see the cold, white water. She swung her limbs wildly underwater, grabbing for the surface, using up what little air her lungs still held. As Angela slipped from consciousness the water around her became a rushing wave of ancestral memories growing up from the roots of the tree
which snaked down into the water around her. She saw her parents Deer and human, The
wolf and the Thunder bird, and more animals in a series of dark shapes that became less
human as the branches stretched up and out to a time before the fall when animals were
cursed to walk on 2 legs with the barrier of words separating them from the world and
each other.

Angela felt the wind on her face and realized that she had washed up on the bank.
The cold air sliced her throat and lungs as she took in a breath. She coughed the icy water
from her lungs and shook and shivered as she pulled herself out onto the land with her
blue arms which shook as she shivered. After she crawled out of the water, Angela tried
to work her numb fingers to pull her coat back on, but as she did, a searing pain shot
through the scars, more intense than before. She screamed into the wind, the sound
drifting off into the sky. The pain was hot and enveloped her, warming her frozen body.

The river water had exposed a thin membrane which covered the bones that were
still enshrouded in flesh, and Angela ripped and tore at it, letting the membrane fall like
an eggshell as the wings emerged. They were covered in small, downy feathers like those
of a newborn chick. They dripped with mucous that swirled into a pink color as it mixed
with blood. A spasm shot through the wings and Angela struggled to control them but
couldn't figure out how to move their muscles.

They shook again and she felt the wind, cold on her wet wings and body. The
weight of the wings felt strange, like being attached to someone else. Angela lost her
balance and began to fall backwards with their weight and tried to catch herself, but
instead she tumbled forward onto the ground, the dry grass and dirt cold as they stuck to her stomach and breasts.

With her cheek pressed to the ground, Angela's vision was split in two. One half saw the plains stretching endlessly. The other half saw the cold grey sky full of the clouds which had resumed their abstract shapes.

Her wings stretched out to their full span and flapped of their own accord as they began to dry in the sun, the drops of the pink mucous like a sticky dew on her feathers.

She thought of Grandmother and the animal people. She had thought she understood before, but she had known nothing. This was what it meant to be both animal and human. This pain and powerlessness. The plains, the earth, the clouds. All extending toward some unseen end.

Angela knew the stories, understood them. She knew them so well she inhabited them without making a conscious effort. She knew them like her lungs knew how to breathe or her heart knew how to beat. She knew humans and animals weren’t separate, knew that she had once had wings. But that knowledge was something locked away inside her that she hadn’t fully realized until now. She looked down the length of her wing, feathers smoothed back along its powerful length. Where it ended she saw the horizon blurring in and out of focus in the distance.

These wings were definitely real. It was a sensation like the first time she and Jade had tried a cigarette over the summer or choked down a gulp of her dad’s whiskey. They were sensations she’d heard about all her life, but they hadn’t seemed real, hadn’t meant anything until she experienced them. She remembered another sensation. Max’s
naked body sliding against her own when they had sex. It had changed the way the world looked, awoken a part of it and herself that had been dormant until she released it.

Once Angela had the strength to lift herself from the ground, she walked slowly toward the Apple Tree that now stood by the riverbank, reaching its twisting branches up into the clouds. The earth along the bank of the river was soft and Angela's feet sunk into it as she walked, her wings bouncing slightly with the impact of each footstep. She felt the roots beneath her feet through the thin soles of her shoes and the spongy dirt. When she reached the tree, she stroked its trunk again, letting her thin fingers bounce along the knots and cracks in the bark. She grasped the lowest branch firmly in her hand as she had learned to do as a child, and climbed the Apple Tree before her, nimbly swinging her weight up through the branches as she ascended, her wings dodging and folding to avoid the branches.

When Angela reached the top she felt the wind pulling against each individual feather, pulling and pushing, calling to them. And her wings felt their animal memory, could hear the calling of the wind pulling them upward. They tilted into it, and the winds lifted them upward. Angela felt the tug in her shoulder blades as the wind lifted her wings. And then she was above the tree, her feet dangling limply in the air. Her wings adjusted, catching an updraft and she soared upward toward the clouds.

She screamed as the ground dropped away beneath her and the clouds fell around her. The wind now changed directions too and her upward motion made it feel like she was breaking through the atmosphere into whatever dark space lay beyond the stars.
She flew on like this, letting the wings’ instinct take control. They had been trapped inside her for so long that she felt she owed them this freedom to take control now, however terrifying it may be. They pulled her through clouds which dissolved into thick fog as she neared them, the tiny droplets smacking her face like rocks kicked up from a truck’s tires on a dirt road. From this height the ground had long since faded away and Angela sucked in a deep breath of cloud moisture as she flailed her arms and legs, trying to right herself in the air. Though she couldn’t remember which way was up or down, the wings flapped powerfully, stabilizing her in the air and pulling her straight forward at a level height.

When she first took flight, Angela screamed with shock and terror. After years of being stuck to the Earth by gravity, she was free from its pull and that sudden freedom from the known was terrifying. But now that she was flying, moving forward instead of up or down, she shouted again, this time releasing an overwhelming feeling of a different freedom, one that made anything possible.

The muscles of Angela’s wings had never been used before and they ached with the strain of their first flight, pushing against the weight of the world. From above, the land looked completely different. The horizon was still impossibly far from reach, but now it was curved and blurred with the atmosphere which hung above the ground like an evaporated ocean. The ground was no longer a series of rippling dirt and plants, but now something completely other. There was the sky and there was the ground. She was in the sky, and from up there it was hard to distinguish one part of the land from the next. But she could see the river, rushing below like a brown snake through the grass. She traced its
length as she descended, and soon saw the tree from overhead, a circle of branches extending outward from a central point.

Angela felt the presence of her animal ancestors in the tree as she descended. They were watching her, pulling her back down to the Earth. Her wings beat backward against the air, slowing her descent as her sneakers touched down on one of the highest branches. It felt strange to have something under her feet even if she was still several meters above the ground. Angela could still feel the motion of the air as she slipped through it, became part of it. And now she was stuck by gravity again, her wings folded uselessly behind her as she repelled back down the tree to the ground.

The winds ripped across the surface of the river again, pulling at Angela’s feathers and hair, the moisture of the water splashing against her skin. She breathed in a sharp breath as she remembered her plunge under the river’s surface. She had been below the air, missing it in her lungs, and then she had been a part of it. Angela placed her hand against the tree once more and felt the echoing of her animal ancestors rippling through time. “You are whole now, Angela,” they said.

As she flew along the river, Angela noticed several cabins built on a small plateau. She suddenly remembered why she was there in the first place and flew down to tell Max what she had seen. At first she panicked when she couldn’t find Max below. But as she followed the line of the river, she soon recognized him down on the ground. “This is amazing, Max! And I found where we need to go. Follow me.” Angela flew with confidence now.
“Hey, wait! I can’t fly, remember?”

“Oh, sorry.” Angela swooped down and wrapped her arms around Max. She had trouble taking off with the extra weight. Even after they left the ground, gravity tugged them toward the earth. But Angela flapped her wings with a new strength. They had been waiting to fly for years and were eager for the challenge. Soon they were flying smoothly in the air currents, looking down on the massive river which now looked like a loose thread trailing across the land.

“See over there by the trees?” Angela pointed toward the cabins.

“Are you sure those are cabins? They just look like pebbles from here.”

“Yeah, I can see them clearly.”

“Must be a bird thing.”

“I guess so.” Angela descended slowly, keeping her arms wrapped tightly around Max. It was tough to balance without the help of her arms, but it came instinctually, and after a near miss with a tree, Angela landed smoothly.

“Thanks for the lift, babe.” Max hunched over, catching his breath.

“No prob. I had to pay you back for the heart attack you nearly gave me when John was chasing us.”

“I guess we’re even then,” Max said. They now stood about twenty yards from the nearest cabin. Angela took a deep breath. She expected to struggle for oxygen as she often did lately due to all the stress in her life, but the air filled her lungs quickly and easily now.
They walked around the cabins, twelve in all, each very small, probably one room buildings. And they were made of rough logs that still wore their bark. It looked as if the logs had been piled carelessly, without much concern for insulation or appearance. “Do you see anyone around, Max?”

“No one.”

“That’s weird.” They circled the small community several times without seeing signs of a single person anywhere nearby.

“Should we try one of the cabins?” Max suggested.

“I guess so.” Angela walked up to the door of the nearest cabin. She looked at Max, who nodded for her to go ahead and knock. She tapped on the gnarled wooden door gently at first, then banged harder, scraping her knuckles on its splintered surface. Still no response. She knocked again, harder this time, and the door swung open slightly.

Angela hesitated before walking inside. The air smelled like dirt and wet fur. As they walked farther into the building, they realized that it was almost completely empty. There was a small kitchen in one corner, a naked mattress in another, and an antique couch placed carelessly against the wall. “It doesn’t look like anyone’s lived here in years,” Angela said, motioning toward the cobwebs on the faucet of the kitchen sink.

“This is creepy.”

“Let’s try another one.” Angela knocked again. Again, no response. And just like the first house, the second one looked to be abandoned as well. Angela didn’t even knock at the third house. She walked in, followed by Max, and found that cabin to be empty as well.
“This must not be it after all,” Angela said. She sighed, looking around at all of the empty cabins.

“I guess not,” Max said. As they neared the small wooded area to the side of the third cabin, Angela thought she saw something out of the corner of her eye. “Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“Must’ve been nothing. I’m still getting used to these bird eyes,” she said. But just as she said that, she saw it again.

“I saw it that time,” Max said. Angela jumped as an owl seemed to appear out of nowhere. One moment they were alone, the next, the owl was perched on a branch within two feet of her head. The owl turned her head quizzically. Suddenly, a deer ran through the trees, bounding to a stop a few meters away. Within moments Angela and Max were surrounded by animals. A wolf paced by the treeline to their left and a bear lumbered into the clearing on their right. At least a dozen animals in total stood around them, watching.

“Who-who,” the owl whispered. “We know who you are. Welcome my sister, daughter of the skies. Welcome home.”

“Why does that owl keep hooting at you,” Max asked.

“You can’t understand it?”

“No. Should I be able to?” Max asked. The owl’s fierce predatory gaze fixed on Max as it asked, “Is he trustworthy? Coyotes are known to be tricksters.” Angela struggled with the question for a moment, wondering if Max was worthy of trust after what he had put her through. She decided to trust her heart instead of her brain so she
nodded. Suddenly, the owl floated from the tree. It seemed to spill off of the branch like rainwater, and flow to the ground below in a blur of feathers and light. But when it landed on the ground, it was no longer an owl, but a woman, strong and beautiful, no more than a decade older than Angela.

“I am sorry,” the woman said. “In your tongue,” she motioned toward Max, “I am called Silver Feather.”

“Hi. I’m Max, Coyote, I guess.”

“Welcome brother.”

“Thank you,” Max said. Angela glared at Max as his eyes carelessly wandered over Silver Feather’s naked body. Silver Feather gave a flick of her wrist, and the other animals disappeared into the trees again. “Follow me,” she said. She led them to a fallen log and motioned for them to sit. From under the log, she grabbed a cloth of roughly woven threads and wrapped it around herself as she perched on a nearby stump.

“Sister, you have found us. I am so glad that you came. Now you will always be safe with your brothers and sisters. You too, Coyote.”

“Thank you,” Angela said. Her eyes burned golden with a new light. She suddenly felt older and wiser, as if she was finally worthy of being a character in one of Grandmother’s stories. She could be a proud animal woman who fought to be who she was in a world that wanted to leave her kind in the past. She was that woman.

“I’m sorry if my body offended you,” Silver Feather said to Max, who blushed. “I spend most of my time as an owl. I suppose I am beginning to forget my human habits. It is the same for all of us here.”
“Is that why the cabins are so empty?” Max asked.

“Yes. When we arrived here we were used to being human, so we still slept in beds and lived indoors. But now we only keep the cabins for appearance, so if we need to disguise ourselves as only human, we can display a normal life. You are welcome to live in any of these cabins for as long as you like.”

Angela nodded. It was hard to acknowledge the fact that she was giving up not only the people and the places that she loved, but the very world which she lived in. But she had no choice if she wanted to be free. And now, here, she would be free to live her life without struggling to contain any secrets.

Angela and Max moved into a cabin that had two twin beds. They spent the first two days cleaning and making it comfortable. Max swept and rearranged the furniture to form a separate sleeping area, while Angela wrestled cobwebs and arranged fresh wild flowers in the kitchen. There was no food other than a few berries, but each day, a bear left several fish on the doorstep of the cabin. Other than the bear and Silver Feather flying overhead, they rarely saw any other people or animals.

Angela and Max were out gathering fire-wood as the sun sank below the horizon on their second day at the cabin. The winter sun cast an orange glow over the trees and shrubs. “So this is it,” Max said, “the reservation. We’re here. Now what do we do?”

“Wait to lose our humanity,” Angela offered dryly.

“I’m serious. I mean, I know we’re finally here, at this place we’ve been trying to find for so long. But where does this leave us? And where do we go from here?”
“I don’t know. My grandmother is still missing. And now I’m stuck with a guy who’s been spying on me for some creep who tried to kill us on the highway.”

“Angela, I’m really sorry about all that. We’ve talked about it, and you know I would never do anything to hurt you. You know how sorry I am, don’t you?”

“I know. I think.” Angela helped Max carry the logs and kindling back to the cabin. “I’m gonna go for a fly while you get the fire started.”

“Okay.” Max looked down at the logs and dropped them on the floor. “I know you’re still upset with me even though you’re too nice to show it.” He took her face in his hands and held her against his body until she looked up into his eyes. “I know I don’t deserve to be trusted, or even forgiven. But please, Angela, all I ask is that you never forget that I love you more than anything.” He pulled her in closer, until they were sharing breaths. As the light dripped from the world around them, they kissed softly and passionately, yearning to mend their wounded love.

“I love you too,” Angela said. And she meant it, but she needed space. “I’ll be back soon.” She climbed up the chimney of the cabin and leapt from the top. As she soared upward in the last light of the day, she watched Max’s silhouette grow smaller, until it disappeared into the darkness that crept over the plains.

She flew just above the fields, white with snow, flying toward, but never reaching the horizon. The white fields blurred into the white snow clouds. Angela realized that she would never be able to find the horizon because it wasn’t a clear line of separation – it was a meeting point, a melting point that marked the unity of sky and ground, not their separation. It was not a specific point at all in fact, but a connection of limitless points.
like the messy meeting of riverbank and river, the rocks at the edge wet with river, and the river itself lined with rocks.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The next morning Angela and Max were awakened by someone pounding on the door of their cabin. Angela rolled over and tried to go back to sleep. When the pounding continued, Max got out of bed. “It must be the bear again,” he said. “He probably brought us some more fish. I’ll go check.”

“No, wait,” Angela said. She rolled out of bed and threw on her jeans, barely managing to fit her wings into her coat. “I’ll get it.”

“I was already up, but ok.”

“I just have that feeling again. Like I’m supposed to open the door or something.”

“The prophecy of the one who will open the cabin door,” Max teased. But he sobered instantly as soon as Angela opened the door.

“Grandmother?” Angela said. She didn’t dare trust her eyes. It couldn’t really be her grandmother after all this time, could it? The woman that stood before her was hunched with age. Her face bore thick wrinkles and bruises, and her wrists, which stuck out from her worn coat, were ringed with bruises.

“My little Angela,” The woman said. She began to shake, and fell forward toward Angela. Her granddaughter caught her firmly and held her close. “Grandmother, I missed you so much.” Tears of relief streamed down Angela’s face and into her grandmother’s hair as Max helped her carry Grandmother to the bed.

“Are you alright?” Max asked her.
“Don’t worry about me. I just need to rest.” Her eyes fell closed and Angela took her grandmother’s hand in her own. Feeling the physical presence of the woman she had been missing for so long made Angela sob. Just days, hours ago even, she had doubted whether she would ever see her grandmother again, and now, here she was. Angela felt like a child again, wishing her grandmother would take care of her and make all of the bad things disappear from the world. But here was Angela’s protector, feeble and lying in her bed.

Max wrapped his arms around Angela as they stood by the bed. He kissed the top of her head sweetly and held her close. Angela couldn’t leave her grandmother so soon after they had been reunited, so they stood there by the bed, watching the wrinkles of her skin rise and fall with her breaths.

Angela didn’t want to leave Grandmother’s side now that she had returned, so she and Max sat on the other bed she was sleeping. After half an hour of watching Grandmother to make sure she was really there, Angela laid down and fell asleep beside Max.

They awoke late in the afternoon as the sun was creeping into the trees. Grandmother was not in the bed anymore. As she sat up, Angela’s face flushed as she realized that her grandmother must have seen them lying together on the bed. She looked up, expecting to see grandmother sitting at the table that Max had built from scraps of wood that he had collected from the other cabins, but the house was empty. How could
Grandmother disappear again when she had only just returned? Angela threw open the door of the cabin and ran outside.

Her pulse slowed as she found Grandmother sitting on a log by the edge of the Forest. Grandmother spoke without turning around. “My dear Angela. It’s so nice to see you.” Angela sat down beside her grandmother. She looked back over her shoulder and saw that Max was watching them from the doorway.

“I’m really glad to see you too.” Angela put an arm around her grandmother. She felt so empty and thin, like the shell of the woman that Angela had known as a child.

“He seems like a nice boy.” Grandmother gestured behind them toward Max.

“He is.” Angela realized how happy Max made her. Despite everything, she knew he loved her. “There’s so much to tell you, Grandmother. But I don’t even know where to begin.”

“I know, my dear. I can see that you have grown.” Angela’s wing twitched as Grandmother ran a hand along its feathers.

“They are so beautiful. It’s a shame you had to hide them for so long.”

“Thanks. For keeping me safe all those years. For everything.”

“I knew you would figure it all out, Angela. The clues to who you are were with you all along.”

“I guess so. But how did you know I’d figure it out, that I’d be here, or even that I would find this place at all?”

“Sometimes we have a feeling?” Grandmother raised a knowing eyebrow. “When we just know something in our heart. I knew you had the clues, and I knew that your
wings must be growing rapidly while I was gone. When the time was right, I knew you would figure it out. You must understand that it wasn’t safe to just tell you everything.”

“I know. I don’t think I would have believed you anyway.”

“Ah, I can see that the girl has become a woman. You have a much clearer understanding of the world now. A year ago, you would not have understood why I could not tell you the truth, how it would not have made sense. To truly understand, you must hear the truth from only one mouth, your own.”

Angela nodded. “I understand Grandmother. But there’s one thing I still don’t know. Where have you been all this time?”

Grandmother sighed deeply and massaged her wrists. “Well, Angela, I’m sure that you understand that people are terrified of things they do not understand. In an attempt to put their fears in place, they label the unknowable, and name things larger than words can ever contain. Even the words “God” and “Great Spirit” are examples of our desire to comprehend things that are too large to hold in our minds.

“And as I am sure you are aware, judging by your instinctual decision to keep your wings a secret, many people fear us for who we are or what we can do. And their need to label gives rise to misnomers and legends, sightings of things such as mermaids and Bigfoots.” Angela nodded as she tried to follow her grandmother’s thought process. “Your father’s decision to remove your wings was not an easy one. And it was not for completely practical reasons either. Of course it would be hard to fit in normal chairs or wear normal clothes with wings like yours,” she motioned toward the back that was torn
out of Angela’s coat, “but that isn’t the reason your wings were removed. It was for your own safety.

For as long as the white man has been here, there have been people who feared and hated us. When they first arrived, they struggled to define us, coming to the hasty conclusion that we must be witches using dark magic to transform into animals. They used this excuse to claim we were controlled by Satan or his demons, and that was all they needed to justify killing.

There are still many who fear and despise us, but they are more secretive today, as we are. Instead of large groups publicly executing or burning “witches,” now small groups or individuals take it upon themselves to stealthily dispose of us in our animal forms. That way there is nothing left to explain, other than an accident if they kill an animal out of hunting season.

It was one of these righteous disciples of ‘God’s Army,’ who captured me. He had been following me for years.” Oh my God! Angela thought. It was John! “I do not know what triggered his actions, but one day he chased me through the woods when I was in wolf form. I ran through the trees and made it all the way back to our yard before he shot me in the leg.” Suddenly the image Angela had seen in the yard as she followed the tracks rushed back to her.

“I tried to run, but I wasn’t fast enough on three legs. He caught me and dragged me into his basement, where he kept me in a cage with other animals. At first he just left me in the cage with a bowl of water. I probably could have escaped then in wolf form,
but I was hurt, and I knew there was a purpose for being there. So I waited in the cage, soon returning to human form.

The next morning, he began talking to me. He let me out of the cage, only to tie me to a chair.” She motioned to the bruises on her wrists. Angela winced with empathy. “That’s when he began preaching to me. The poor man had so much hatred in his heart, and he wanted so desperately to share his fear and anger with me, to rid himself of its bindings.

‘You know what you are, don’t ya woman?’ he said to me. I nodded and told him I was a child of the Great Spirit. ‘You ain’t nothin’ woman. You’re a beast and a demon,’ he said. At then he punched me and hit me, still trying to release that pain that he felt by attempting to transfer it to me. ‘You knew I been watchin’ you all this time?’ he asked. I nodded. ‘Then you know why I haven’t killed you yet?”

I shook my head. I did know that he had been watching me for years, but I did not know why he chose this time to take me, or why he had not killed me. ‘What’s somethin’ you know, that nobody else knows?’ he said with an evil gleam in his eye. First my mind raced to you Angela, and I felt sick with worry. But then I realized what he was really after. This place.” Grandmother motioned to the reservation land where they sat.

“’Bingo!’ he said. ‘My father, my grandfather, and on back, we all been huntin’ demons. If we don’t keep God’s land free of the devil’s children, then who will?’ he asked.
“God,” I responded. It wasn’t a smart idea to give him the truth. He couldn’t understand it. I knew that, but I could not resist. At that remark, he hit me with the back of his hand.

“You’re just a demon, woman. You don’t know nothing about God.” He walked over to the corner, out of my vision. I could not turn to see him, because I was tied in place on the chair. He returned a few moments later with a hunting rifle. Delicately, and with more care than I’m sure he had shown to any living creature in his life, the man polished his weapon. ‘Now my daddy, and his daddy before him, they done good. They kept North Platte safe from demons like you. But I got bigger plans. It’s a fine idea to keep our town safe, but what about our country? Now I seen a lot in my days, and I heard a lot of stories too. I know there’s a place where your kind goes to hide. And If I can figure out where that place is, I can make sure God’s children are safe from the Devil’s spawn once and for all.

‘Now we can do this the easy way…’ He loaded the rifle and pointed it at me, ‘or we can do this the hard way. Your choice.’ I did not know how far he would go, but I knew that no matter what, I could not give up the secret.

‘Okay, the hard way it is,’ he said. ‘If you don’t care about yourself, maybe you care about your little granddaughter.’ My heart sank when he said those words. My main reason for keeping the reservation safe was so that you would have a place to live, free. ‘Now I got a friend keepin’ tabs on her. So if you don’t let me know where this Hell on Earth is within twenty-four hours, you can say goodbye to her.”’ Angela blushed as she hoped Grandmother wouldn’t find out that Max was the one who had been spying on her.
“I did not know what to do at this point,” Grandmother said. “If I did not tell him the location, then he would kill you. If I did tell him, then he would find you and kill you later. Now the man couldn’t watch me all the time. He had a family upstairs, and a whole world that didn’t know, or didn’t want to know I was locked up in the basement with several other animals. The next morning, while he was away, the Great Spirit sent a blue-bird to the basement window sill. I was able to send a message to you through the bird.”

“That’s right!” Angela said. “The bird told me that you were safe, but that I was in danger.”

“Correct. Now after twenty-four hours the man did not return and I began to worry. He left me alone in the basement with the caged wolves for many days. We only had a bowl of moldy water to share. I am sure he was hoping the wolves would break free from the cage and eat me, but instead, the wolves and I formed a pack and found strength and reassurance in each other.

A couple of days later, the man came back into the basement. He had his rifle with him and the evil gleam was back in his eyes. Without saying a word, he walked over to the cage and shot one of the wolves in the head. The other wolves whimpered, and he just smiled. ‘I found somethin’ out today,’ the man said. ‘Turns out your granddaughter is not so innocent after all. I got word she has a little secret of her own.’ He hung the gun back up on the wall and laughed. ‘Don’t worry. I ain’t gonna kill either of you. Yet. I know one of you monsters is gonna lead me where I gotta go.’

I do not know how long it was, but I waited in that basement, not knowing when he would return, or what would happen to you. Occasionally, he would replace the water
and bring us a bowl of raw potatoes. Then one day, he cut me free of the chair and threw me back into the wolf cage, but he didn’t lock it. He just laughed as he left.

I waited, wondering what he had in mind. Surely he knew I would escape. I knew it must be a trap, but there was no other choice. I opened the cage and climbed out of the window. The wolves leapt out behind me and disappeared into the woods as I staggered away from the house. Dazed by my time in captivity, I hardly noticed that winter had taken over the land. Soon I realized that I wasn’t far from home, and I walked back to the house.

As I was walking, I realized what he had in mind. I knew you would be connected to the ways of our people as you tried to sort through my disappearance. That connection made your wings grow as you remembered the ways of our ancestors. I knew your wings would grow, because the animal medicine comes to us when we need it most. They grew faster when you encouraged your birdself didn’t they?”

Angela nodded. “When I was signing or climbing.”

Grandmother smiled a knowing smile. “I knew that you would be figuring everything out and must have made it safely to the reservation at this point. I was also sure that he had not gotten to you yet, otherwise he would have just killed me. But instead, he set me free, because he knew I would go to you, and lead him here.”

“Oh my God!” Angela said, “He followed you here?”

“Yes. I am sorry again that I couldn’t warn you right away, but you needed to know the danger that awaits us. I did not see him on my way here, but I am sure he wasn’t far behind me.”
“But how did you get here when I took the car?” Angela asked.

“I stopped by Margaret’s house. There was no time to explain, so I told them we were both safe, but that I needed a car to come get you.”

“So what should we do now?” The comfort of being reunited with Grandmother quickly vanished as Angela realized the level of threat that was upon them and the entire reservation.

“Do not worry, my dear. There is still plenty of time to prepare if we act quickly and trust our ancestors,” Grandmother said. Max was gathering firewood nearby, and had heard the end of the conversation. He looked up nervously toward grandmother.

“Prepare for what?” Max asked.

“War.”

Angela looked out at the river in the distance. The water rushed past, countless molecules moving by faster than her eyes could follow them. She thought of the Bend, of Jade and the ceremony they had before the first day of school. It didn’t only mark the last day of that summer. It had marked the end of every summer, every season Angela had ever known. It had been a goodbye to her whole life as she knew it.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Max and Grandmother ran through the forest alerting the animal people about the coming threat. Angela flew above, singing a song of warning to the birds. Although everyone was in great danger, Angela still felt joy in flight. It was so new and exhilarating, even in the jagged January air. The cold air particles were like tiny icicles, stabbing her exposed flesh as she flew. She watched her breath as it curled out of her mouth and floated away into the low-hanging clouds.

On the ground below, Angela could see Grandmother at the edge of the forest with a deer. As she flew on, she saw just how many animals there were on the ground below. They were everywhere, climbing trees, walking through clearings, hiding in bushes, and of course, in the air as well. She saw Max by the edge of the forest and descended.

“Have you told everyone down here what’s coming?”

“Yeah, I think so. How’s everything upstairs?” Max pointed toward the sky.

“Good. I told Silver Feather and she passed the word on to everyone else.”

“Cool.”

“Are you okay Max?”

“I’m fine. It’s just that I can’t help thinking this whole thing is my fault. And your poor grandmother. I was in John’s house so many times and she was down there in the basement the whole time. I heard howls from the basement but I didn’t dare question...
him. I should have known. I should have done something. And now she still doesn’t even know I played a part in this.”

“Geez, is that all?” Angela asked. Max avoided her gaze. “Kidding, kidding. Max, you can’t worry about it. The past is gone. It’s done. Now you know better. None of this was your fault. Look at me Max.” He timidly lifted his head. “None of this was your fault. You need to believe that. And regardless of everything that happened, I know you’re a good guy Max. I trust you.”

Max took in a deep breath. “You really mean it?”

“Of course I do. There’s just something about you that I can’t resist. Even when I shouldn’t have, I trusted you.”

“Yeah, you trusted the stupid spy.”

“Yes, but I also trusted my boyfriend.” She squeezed his hand in hers.

“I love you Angela.” Max held her close to his body. “You always make me feel good.”

“That’s what I’m here for!”

“And I didn’t want to tell you before, but my tail started growing back when I started following you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s not very long yet, but it keeps growing. I won’t be able to hide it in my pants much longer.”

“Wow,” Angela said, “Welcome to the freak show. I thought I was the only one.”

“Now there’s just one thing I need to take care of. Where’s your grandmother?”
“I just saw her over near the cabin by the forest. Why?”

“I have to get the rest of this weight off my chest.” Max stood up, gently pulling Angela to her feet as well. They clasped hands while walking over stones and brush.

“What are you going to tell her?”

“The truth. About what John sent me to do.”

“You don’t have to do that Max. It’s done. “

“I do have to,” he whispered as they approached Grandmother, who was still standing with the deer.

“Ah, hello young ones,” Grandmother said. At the sight of them, the deer leapt into the trees.

“I was just telling your father how proud I am of you,” Grandmother said to Angela.

“What?” Angela watched the deer as it disappeared into the forest. “You mean, that deer was my father?”

“Of course, Angela. Where did you think he was all these years?”

“I heard that he disappeared into the woods, but I didn’t think he would be here, that I would see him.”

“You will meet him soon enough, but like most of the creatures here, he has grown shy of humans. He is spreading word of the gathering danger.”

“Grandmother?” Max asked, unsure of how to address the old woman.

“What is it young Coyote?”
“I have to tell you something. Angela told me all about what happened to you and…it was all my fault.”

“Nonsense young one.”

“No, really. You see, John, the guy that captured you, he’s sort of like my godfather. He took me in as a baby and watched over me as my foster parents raised me. And I trusted and looked up to him, so I agreed to watch Angela for him.” Max paused for a reaction, but Grandmother just nodded. “So it’s all my fault, everything that has happened.”

“Do not worry Coyote. It is your nature to be deceptive. That’s a part of the Coyote medicine. Of course I already knew the part you played. It was not right, nor was it wrong. It was simply your role. As it was my role to remain in the cage.”

“You did?” Max and Angela said in unison.

“I may be old, but with age comes wisdom. As the cage of the body grows weaker, the spirit grows stronger. Now what is important, young ones, is not what happened, but what will happen. Coyote, we need you more now than ever. You are the only one who knows the enemy. You must tell us everything you know, so we may be prepared for the coming battle. And you must use your medicine to deceive the enemy. That is your role now.

The afternoon sunlight illuminated the pale grasses that grew by the Cheyenne River. Everything looked ordinary on the reservation, but there was an army of animals in hiding, ready to defend their home and their world.
Max, Angela, and Grandmother sat inside their cabin to discuss the battle ahead.

“Okay,” Angela said, “Since Max told us about John’s “Prayer Group,” which is basically his squadron on the police force, we can safely assume that there will be about five to ten people coming to attack us. And because they are all NRA members, they will have a large arsenal of weapons.”

“And since they are mostly over 40,” Max added, “they won’t be fast, unless they bring vehicles. But we’re prepared for that, right?” Grandmother nodded.

“So we’re ready then?” Angela looked between her boyfriend and her grandmother.

“Yup,” Max said. “And now we wait.” Just as he said that, the air cracked with the pop of gunfire. “The bastard couldn’t even have the decency to be subtle.”

“I’m going to take Grandmother to the cave now,” Angela said to Max. “You go tell everyone to get into position.”

“Got it.” Angela and Max embraced. “Be careful, Angela,” he said.

“You too.” Angela pulled away from his arms and then led Grandmother to a cave in the forest where she would be safe during the fight. Meanwhile, Max sprinted across the reservation, letting everyone know that the enemy was upon them. Once the animals were in position, Max ran back toward the gunfire. He hid behind a tree and watched as John led several men toward the cabins. Most of them were riding fourwheelers, but two men walked on foot beside John.

“Luke and Mark come with me,” John barked, “the rest of you secure the perimeter.” What an idiot, Max thought. John was using stupid phrases like ‘secure the
perimeter,’ trying to live his stupid cop and war hero dreams. For a second, Max felt a sense of betrayal towards the man he had looked up to for most of his life. But now he knew better. He knew who the real demon was. Max glared at John, feeling a hatred boiling inside himself.

The men on fourwheelers surrounded the cabins. They pulled out their hunting rifles and shotguns, facing the cabins. Max laughed to himself. *They’re so stupid. They should realize they’re not dealing with people.* John sniffed the air and sneered. “This one!” He made his way toward the cabin that Angela and Max had been living in. He banged on the door and shouted, “Open the damn door, you little bastards! I know you’re in there.” When no one responded, John kicked the door in. A cloud of dust burst from the cabin as the door fell onto the dirt floor, and John stepped out of the doorway as the dirt cloud settled around him. There was a new sense of ferocity about him, making him look more savage than any animal. “They’re not here! Let’s check the other cabins. The rest of you, hold your ground!”

Since the men were all focused on the cabins, they didn’t notice the animals sneaking out of the forest and brush around them. Bears, wolves, and wild cats all crept stealthily toward their prey. As they closed in on the men, they picked up speed. John was inside one of the cabins, cursing to himself when he heard the first scream, followed by a storm of gunfire. One of the men on the fourwheelers had been watching John investigate the cabin and hadn’t noticed as a bear and a wild cat snuck up behind him. The animals mauled him as he fired his gun desperately into the air.
All of the men turned toward the sound. Distracted again, the second wave of animals struck. Two more men were taken down, and several animals were shot as they defended their land. Meanwhile, John and his bodyguards had turned one of their cabins into a small fort. John’s gun stuck out of the doorway, and the other two men aimed through the windows, all firing blindly at what they hoped were the animals nearby.

The animal people continued to close in. They had the advantage of both instinctual animal prowess and human intellect. Using the cabins as cover, they crept closer toward the men who were now surrounded. One of the men on a fourwheeler had survived, and he drove as fast as he could, toward the middle of the cabins where John was making his stand. He took out several animals on the way, but was no match for their volume and strength. The men in the cabin kept firing, holding the animals back as long as they could.

Soon they ran out of ammunition, and the animals surrounded them. “Follow me!” John yelled. Mark and Luke followed him closely, holding their rifles like clubs as they slipped through the door of the cabin. “Run!” John said. As his bodyguards were fending off the animals, John made his way toward the nearby fourwheeler. His men were no match for the animals, but he sped away while they were distracted. As John made his escape from the reservation, he drove past Max. Max tried to hide before John noticed him, but he was too late. John saw him and couldn’t resist stopping.

“There you are, you little shit!” John dismounted from the fourwheeler and approached Max. “This is all your fault. This shoulda been easy, but you betrayed me.
And now your friends are all gonna pay because you’re a spineless Judas. I’m gonna come back, and next time, you ain’t gonna win.”

“I know it’s my fault,” Max said. “But I also know you’re full of shit, this whole stupid crusade of yours. I trusted you John. You’re the one who betrayed me. You were never looking out for me, just using me for your own evil plan.”

“I wasn’t using no one. I tried to help save you from the Devil’s sin. Otherwise you woulda still been back there living like them demons. I thought I could help you, you know, make you repent for the evils of your family, and God would forgive you. But it ain’t that simple is it? You can’t take the sin out of the sinner.”

“What do you mean, the ‘evils of my family?’”

“You knew it, didn’t you, boy? I guess I been givin’ you more credit’n you deserve. ‘Member that story I told you ‘bout when I found you?”

“Yeah?”

“Those bears, they were your parents. I been followin’ ‘em for years, tryin’ to track ‘em and purge the earth of that filth. See, you were marked from the moment you were born. I tried to save you from sin, but now I can see it was useless. You were born into it.”

Max felt his Coyote blood surging with adrenaline as his animal rage took over.

“You made me feel like a monster, but you’re the real monster, John! It’s not up to you to decide good from evil or who lives and who dies!”

“I’m not decidin’ anything. This is God’s will, Max. Just accept it. But I learnt my lesson. You can’t never save a sinner. So I’m gonna have to send you to God an’ let him
take care of it.” John approached Max, his empty rifle in his hands. Max clenched his fists, ready to run. John saw the gesture and leapt for Max, who ran. But the reach of the rifle was too far, and Max fell as it slammed into his legs. John put a foot on Max’s chest, and raising the rifle above his head, he prayed, “Lord, take this soul and make it pay for its sins.”

Max closed his eyes, waiting for the impact. Suddenly, he felt the weight of John’s foot lift from his chest. When he opened his eyes, he saw Angela lifting into the air with John in her arms, struggling to break her grasp. But as they climbed higher, he stopped struggling and held on.

“Don’t mess with my boyfriend,” Angela growled. She dangled John in the air, his legs hanging helplessly as they brushed against the tree tops.

“Put me down, you monster!”

“Here?”

“No, no!” John yelled. Angela lowered him over the raging Cheyenne River.

“Do you promise never to mess with us again?”

“No. I promise to follow God and to keep his world safe. ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.’”

“Then I can’t promise to put you down the way you want. You better keep praying, because I’m going to put you down on my terms. Bye John.” Angela released him above the churning river and watched as he fell toward the rocks and rapids below. His scream grew fainter until it ended in an abrupt smack as he hit the water below.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

After the battle, Max and Angela regrouped with Grandmother in the cabin which they shared. It was in a state of disarray because John had thrown their few belongings to the ground as he searched the building. “So that’s it,” Max said. The table he had built lay upside down in the middle of the cabin with only three of its legs still attached, the other splintered and lying in the corner behind his bed. “It’s all over.”

“Yup.” Angela held onto his arm, leaning against his shoulder. “It’s okay, you know.”

“What is?”

“To miss him. He meant a lot to you, even if he was a jerk.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And we don’t know whether he’s still alive or not.”

“I’m sure he is,” Max said. “That guy is indestructible. You saw that car wreck he walked away from. And there wasn’t even a scratch on him today.”

“Which is why we’re no longer safe here,” Grandmother added. “The secret is out, whether John survives or not.”

“But the reservation is the only place we have,” Angela said. “Can’t we just move it to a new location, move everybody?”

“I am not talking about the reservation, Angela. I am talking about the world. It is no longer the place our ancestors called home. This land is a new country, and now that the secret has leaked, our way of life is no longer safe. We must all disperse, for there is
danger in numbers. Alone, we may survive if we are clever, which we are.” Grandmother winked at her granddaughter.

“But where can we go?” Angela asked. “They burned down our house and they exposed the reservation.”

“We disappear.”
EPILOGUE

The world is no longer the land of our ancestors who knew that man and animal must live in harmony. Instead of trusting our animal instincts and finding the animal heart within, we struggle to separate ourselves from ourselves, building walls and fences to keep the animal out. But man and animal will never be completely separate, not as long as Angela and her friends stay hidden.

Whenever you hear the rumor of a mermaid, an angel, or a werewolf, you’ll know they’re here. When you hear a rustling in the brush, a whistling in the treetops, a ripple in the water, each time you feel a pair of eyes watching you and turn to find no one there, you will know they’re still here, and they’re part of you.
CURRICULUM VITAE

Will Fawley received his Bachelor of Arts from James Madison University in 2008. During his time at George Mason University he served as Assistant Fiction Editor at *Phoebe: A Journal of Literature and Art* and Conference Assistant for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs.