

A still life painting featuring a large, vibrant red apple as the central subject. A yellowish-brown snake with dark, irregular markings is coiled around the apple. The snake's head is positioned near the top of the apple, and its body winds around it. The background is dark and indistinct, focusing attention on the apple and the snake. The lighting creates strong highlights on the apple's surface and the snake's scales.

GUTHRIE'S LOST

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Chapter 1

The Icy Nights of Guthrie, Oregon, April 8th, 1987

Millard Scott stared at his reflection in the glass of the kitchen cabinets, embracing the photograph of his dead son. It was the closest he could be to him now, remembering the joy he had when he first lifted Theodore in the air, or the pride he felt when he could hear his son ask for him from the other room. He wanted nothing more than to go back six years and see Theodore's bright eyes smile at him as they did in the picture he held so tightly. But, staring at himself in the glass, watching his eyes through his thick bottlecap glasses, Millard's moment remembering his pride and joy was fleeting, and the swelling ring of guilt chimed in.

Theodore drowned. He washed up on the shore of Lost Lake with bloated skin and clothes so wet they fell off like soaked paper. And before that there were five days of searching, then five more days of uncertainty; hope and despair.

"He knows how to swim!" Millard pleaded, watching the police drag his son from the marshy shore of Lost Lake. *How could he drown? He knew how to swim...*

If he had only been paying attention, he would have seen Theodore run out of the shop... *he would be fourteen now.* Just two years younger than his daughter, Cindy.

She was in the shop the day Theodore disappeared. And Millard couldn't help but wonder how she had lost track of him too, how Theodore had arrived at Lost Lake, miles south of his shop, without

anyone seeing him. Cindy was responsible for Theodore too, even at her age. She acted as his babysitter on more than one occasion. It wasn't a stretch to think that Cindy should have been watching Theodore when he couldn't.

Betsy told him it wasn't fair to put blame on his daughter. His wife was right, as usual. The poor girl was only ten. Even still, he found himself condemning her privately, and he would do things, maybe unconsciously, to requite her. His mind would drift away when Cindy spoke, or he'd "forget" he was supposed to pick her up from cheer practices after school. He didn't mean to be so detached, but there were times Millard would look his daughter in the face and wonder if he still loved her like he did before Theo died. And there was a quiet celebration when she bought a car and found a boyfriend because it meant he wouldn't see her as often around the house.

Millard sat at the kitchen table and set the photograph of Theodore down beside the unsealed letter whose envelope read, "*details inside*". He had already read the details inside. They were straightforward — if not a little confusing — and Millard had half a mind to call the man that sent him the letter to tell him he wouldn't do it. But he had to keep his ice cream shop afloat, and the strange request fastened inside the contents of the letter seemed to be his only option. He wasn't certain if he could act so violently... or so destructive... and he never considered himself to be much of a liar...

Millard wondered if Theo would understand. He wondered if he would have ever told him just how desperate a situation they were in, or if his son would still look so proudly at his father, just as he did in the photograph.

"Weller," Millard muttered woefully as he laid the photo of his son flat on the kitchen table.

"What was that, Milly?" Betsy asked, coming down the stairs in a thick overcoat, covering her frilly blonde hair.

"Oh, it was nothing. Just saying goodbye before we head off." He patted the photo of his son.

Millard was not looking forward to his workday. The Big Scoop's heating system had been on the fritz since late January. He figured he would get enough business to fix it before the season ended, but just to his luck, the winter cold had stuck around a few more weeks, leveling his hopes of a strong spring season. It left him more vulnerable than he found to be comfortable. He had to work. As much as working in an ice cream shop on the coldest days of the year may have seemed strange, and it was, he had to be there as instructed by the letter. He had to wait for the order to go ahead. Another letter, he presumed.

Millard grabbed his jacket off the rack by the front door; Betsy grabbed the paper from the porch, and in predictable fashion, she began driving him downtown in their Ford Fairmont. She cranked the heater up as far as it could go but the car was a crapper, and the heat (if you could call it that) seemed to sputter at them infrequently. Millard had half a mind to take Cindy's Mustang to work instead. Not that her car worked any better, but this way he would at the very least look more like a man, flying down the street in a muscle car instead of playing passenger to his wife and getting dropped off at work like a child.

If there was any heat coming out of the Fairmont's vents, Millard couldn't feel it. He couldn't feel anything. And Betsy must have felt the same, clutching at the wheel every so often as if to check if she was

still holding on. The two of them quietly shivered while she avoided slipping and sliding the car along the icy road. For as long as they had lived in Guthrie, they had never experienced a cold like this.

Betsy slowed the car up against the curb; the tires ruffed against the concrete.

"Careful!" Millard said.

Betsy glared at him.

He looked out at his shop. Big colorful painted letters arched the front windows — "The Big Scoop" — it read. The letters were still legible through the worn paint. Just as the ice cream scoop painted underneath could be seen despite the red chipping from the cherry on top. People in town knew what it was, and that was all that mattered.

Millard shuddered at the thought of his next few hours, sitting alone in the cold shop.

"M-maybe you sh-shouldn't go in today," Betsy said, her teeth chattering. "W-ho's gonna come in, M-Milly... a cold day like this?"

Although his wife was giving him exactly what he wanted — an excuse to go home — Millard could not go now. He had promised he would be there to receive the letter, no matter the cold. The building could be on fire and he would have to stay.

"I expect they'll be lining up a-all the way outside, Bets," he said, smiling and pushing his glasses up tightly into the ridge of his nose. Betsy looked back at him strangely, like he'd made a face. Like she had seen something crawl out of his mouth and fly under his eyelid. He had only ever seen her look that way once, the day Theo had gone missing, she'd known something was wrong. He never expected to see the look again. He watched her silently as she breathed vapor and stared into his eyes, waiting for her to say what she saw in him.

"W-what's wrong?" he asked.

And for a few moments, she seemed to consider the question. The heat sputtered and she looked away.

"No-nothing."

Millard placed the newspaper under his arm and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. His thick-rimmed glasses were fogging up from the increasing heat. He took a moment or two to sit in the car, relishing in its budding warmth.

"D-do you mind? I'd like to g-get back home and jump under a blanket," Betsy said without looking at him.

Millard waited for his moment to jump out and sprint inside. Breathing quickly, he slammed the Fairmont door shut. *Lucky it didn't shatter*, he thought, before dropping his keys, cursing at himself, unlocking the door, and finally lurching into the shop. The bell chimed above him, and despite successfully making it inside, Millard kicked himself. It would be just the same as the outside with the broken heater, just as painfully cold. He huffed, crossing his arms so his jacket would pull tightly against his chest.

Millard's hands shook as he twisted the open sign forward. It was more to tell whoever carried the letter that he was there than it was to attract customers. He even ignored pulling the lids off of the ice-cream pails. Instead, Millard rushed towards his stool behind the cash register and turned on the makeshift space heater he found in the basement earlier that week. It was his father-in-law's space heater, made some time in the forties, taped up to a slow desk fan. It took some time to get going, and apart from the constant unidentifiable fumes, it was loud. But after a few minutes, his corner was lukewarm, and he could unlatch his arms from under his pits and read from *The Times*, the

paper from Brownsville, OR. Millard skipped right to the weather section.

"What a joke!" he said, whacking the paper against the counter as he saw the unreasonably high spread of 64 degrees for the week. Even Sisters — the city closest to Guthrie — sported a 70 in the paper. "These damn, no-good weathermen..." he cursed. "Just because we're some know-nothing mountain town doesn't mean they get to half-ass these weather reports!"

By the time he reached the sports section, he had drifted off to sleep, slumping forward on his stool.

Millard woke to the door chime. He straightened himself up in his chair and blinked, quickly adjusting his eyes. *Must be the letter*, he thought. But as his eyesight sharpened, he saw that it was Dick Weller instead. A large pot of something steaming held firmly between his mittened hands. Dick set the pot on the counter and pulled the mittens from his thumbs.

"Sorry to wake you! Thought I'd drop by with something warm!" Dick shouted over Millard's space heater. "Don't know how you can sleep with this racket!" He poured some of the soup out into bowls he had placed over the top of the pot. "It's a bit of a slow day at the diner! I'll tell ya, DeWitt's the only one that came in, and he just picked up some soup to go! So, well, I figured the rest shouldn't go to waste! Here!" Dick handed Millard the bowl of soup and a plastic spoon.

All of Dick's yelling was making Millard nauseous, though it was more likely the space heater, which was emitting a thin stream of smoke and a pungent odor of something burning from the inside. The smell was becoming noxious. Millard pulled the plug. Though it had

not immediately soothed his nausea, and Millard assumed it must have been Dick's yelling after all.

"Thank you." Millard glared up at Dick. He was tall. Maybe too tall. And the smile on his face said, let me hold still while you punch it in. The words 'thank you,' to a man like Dick, felt like ooze leaving his lips. Though, any other day, Millard thought, Dick might be a fine man. He grabbed the bowl of soup. "Not doing too good on the customer front myself."

Dick smiled as if Millard had meant it as a joke and Millard could feel the superiority emanating from the man. Dick was so self-righteous, standing there like Millard was just some charity case, some lowlife that needed saving with a hot bowl and some company. Millard tried to keep a welcoming smile on his face as Dick sipped.

"That's pretty creative," Dick said, motioning to the old space heater. "You get to spread out some of that heat. Too bad it's not working out so well anymore, huh?"

The bastard still had his apron on. He didn't even have the decency to leave it at the diner, the wet smock, the greasy gristle. It was an offense to the eyes.

"Did you hear me?" Dick asked.

"What?" Millard straightened up on his stool. Oblivious to the fact he was just blankly staring at Dick's apron.

"I said, that's creative." Dick pointed at the space heater once again.

"It did the trick," Millard said, bundling up more in his coat. "At least until you got here."

The two took a moment to sip on their soup. Millard nearly spit it out, out of principle, but even he could not deny that the soup was

good: creamy, brothy, with heaps and heaps of pulled meats and soft vegetables. *Theo would have loved this. It was like the Crock-Pot dinners Betsy would make on Wednesdays — the only time Theodore would actually eat his carrots.* Millard held back the compliments that were forming in his mind. He couldn't express his admiration to Dick; he had to hate him.

"You wouldn't want to sit down at my place, would you?" Dick asked. "Heater's runnin' there."

"No!" Millard said gruffly, conflicted by the wondrous tastes coming from every spoonful of soup. There was a moment of silence between the two as Millard thought of an excuse as to why he should not stay in a warm and comfortable place. He wanted to avoid Dick catching on to how much he despised him.

"I better stay here and wait it out," Millard coughed. "Someone might just stumble in." Millard watched Dick's face for any indication that he was in the clear — that his excuse was good enough to keep him from walking across the street and into Dick's hospitality.

Dick smiled politely.

"Welp, I suppose I should do the same," Dick grabbed his nearly empty pot of soup from the counter. "Try and stay warm. With all this ice cream, don't want you catchin' cold." Dick watched Millard for a moment, almost waiting for him to change his mind. But Millard just continued to show him a false smile; that is, until Dick left the shop, at which point Millard's smile quickly turned repulsive.

Dick was too kind. It gave Millard a bad taste in his mouth. His presence was an assault on Millard's wellbeing. The air was getting colder in his shop, and as far as Millard was concerned, it was because Dick had walked through the door.

"*Don't want you catchin' cold,*" Millard mocked. "What a prick." He pulled the paper from the ground and continued from where he left off. The space heater's fumes continued to fill the air. He looked up at it. It was beginning to look like a face: two eyes, a mocking toothy smile. It looked like Dick. He kicked it off the counter.

That night Millard shuffled beneath the sheets. It was almost two in the morning, and he could not stop ruminating on Dick Weller's pot of soup. Millard did not appreciate Dick's pity; he could afford his own food; he did not need the charity. No matter how good that charity tasted.

"Millard," Betsy whispered, only half awake. "*I cannot* sleep with you moving about like that."

Millard laid still as could be, but he could not stop thinking about Dick Weller and his damned diner. He gave a violent shake of frustration and kicked Betsy in the shin. She yelped.

"Millard!" Betsy turned on the lamp and sat up in bed.

He crumpled up in the sheets, hiding in them. But still, Betsy smacked him in the arm. The sheets could not protect him. He grabbed at his sore shoulder, rubbing it.

"You're gonna wake Cindy," Millard mumbled from under the sheets.

"Well, you woke me. And don't you act as if nothing's the matter. You only ever act this way when something's on your mind." She crossed her arms. "And it better be worth kicking me — acting like a child."

Millard brought his head out from under the covers like a turtle. Instead of turning over and facing his wife, he continued, looking out the window of their second-floor bedroom at the pine tree outside.

"It's Dick Weller," he scoffed.

"What about him?" she asked, still agitated from being kicked in the shin.

"He's taking all of my business," Millard said.

"Our business," Betsy corrected him.

"Our business," Millard restated. He was feeling pouty. *Betsy was right; he was acting like a child; this is what Dick Weller was doing to him, making him act like a child.*

"You've never had a problem with him before," she said, her voice inflecting upward like she could not imagine her husband and Dick Weller in a feud.

Her misapprehension was upsetting Millard. He could not bring up the truth, and it was tearing at his very soul. He turned around dramatically in the sheets to face her.

"It's the cold, woman, the cold!" he lied. "It's everywhere — the shop — the car — the streets — hell, it's cold in here!"

"Well, I don't need your attitude! And I most certainly do not understand what that has to do with Dick Weller!"

Millard stared at his wife, trying to find a reason to give her; something that would shut her up about the whole thing for good.

"Is everything okay?" Cindy asked from the bedroom door.

"Wonderful! You woke Cindy!" Betsy got out of bed in a huff and walked Cindy back down the hallway to her room, likely talking badly of Millard on their way.

He turned around in the sheets to face the pine again. He watched as the wind pulled the needles from the bark.

The next morning, Millard pulled himself from the couch in the living room. His shoulder ached; a result of bad positioning on the couch no doubt, and seeing that no one was home, he stumbled into the kitchen and looked out the window to see that Betsy had already left with the car, a petty response to their fight from the night before. Cindy had also already driven off to school in her Mustang. Had it been any other day, Millard would have just given up and stayed home, waiting on the couch to apologize and beg forgiveness from his wife. But today was April 8th, and Millard was still waiting for the letter to arrive.

He grabbed the bottle of whiskey that Betsy had stored above the cabinet for a rainy day, storing it mischievously in the lining of his jacket.

It was a long frigid walk from the house before he arrived downtown, shuffling down the cold and quiet street of Guthrie Main, finding it difficult to keep his balance on the icy sidewalk. He worried that if he took too much of a step forward the cold would grab at his leg, keeping it extended out before he would fall and shatter to pieces. If he had bothered to look into a window at his reflection he figured he'd see the Snow Miser from one of those animated specials they play on CBS around Christmastime.

"Millard!" a woman yelled at him from across the street. Millard turned. It was Mrs. Stevenson, owner of the Guthrie Supply, waving at him as though he had not seen her. "Bramleys' sent us a whole mess of apples, so we're having a bit of a sale today!"

"That's great to hear, Mrs. Stevenson!" Millard said, rolling his eyes and continuing to shiver his way to the shop.

"Two for the price of one, Millard! And they're dirt cheap too! Millard?"

He was fiddling with his keys by the door to the Big Scoop, having a difficult time grasping the correct key between his mittened fingers, the bottle of whiskey slipping down the inner pocket of his coat.

"Maybe Dick will bite if you won't!" Mrs. Stevenson yelled, sounding unreasonably offended. She continued mumbling to herself, watching Millard at the door to his shop.

Millard stopped fiddling with his keys and looked down at his clenched fist. Hearing Dick's name was enough to sour his mood further. He was just about to turn around and tell Mrs. Stevenson off, but by the time he did, she had already gone back inside Guthrie Supply. He slipped into the Big Scoop, the bell ringing in his ears. He looked down at the broken heater on the ground and snarled. It still had Dick's pretentious face. He grabbed it from its top and threw it down the steps to the freezer in the basement.

Millard walked back to the stool behind the checkout, acting as though he had not just thrown a small tantrum. He rubbed his hands together and placed them beneath his armpits. Betsy had deliberately taken the paper from the porch before leaving but she never could have accounted for the whiskey. It was teetering on the edge of the inner pocket of his jacket. He pulled it out before it could shatter and popped the cork from the neck.

The drink warmed him up faster than he could have thought, and just as well, it nulled the pain of his aching shoulder. A few swigs and an hour later, he finally started to get a clearer head about the whole

thing. If the letter had not come the day before, it was sure to arrive this afternoon. He had succeeded in hating Dick Weller, that was for sure. The man made him start an argument with his wife, he reasoned, made him stay the night on the couch, and kept him from his daily ride to work.

Millard stared drunkenly out the window to Dick's Diner but his attention was drawn to a hazy shadow that weaved left and right — or was it right and left — in the street towards the Big Scoop. He smacked himself in the head. For a moment, the shadow came into focus, but a second too late. The door chimed, and just as Millard predicted, his letter had arrived.

"Oi — ey — Chief!" Millard slurred. "How're we doing today?"

"About the usual, Millard."

"Oh yeah?" He took a good look at Chief Parker. A tall man in his mid-forties. Nearly everything about him said cop, from the thick black mustache on his lip to the reflective aviators beneath his brow (and, of course, the brown police uniform). On his chest was a strikingly silver badge, and on his shoulder was a rather peculiar patch of two snakes coiling around an apple that Millard knew to be Guthrie's insignia. "So you're the one to 'ave it?" Millard asked, tilting in his chair as he reached for the whiskey bottle on the ground.

Chief Parker pulled a sealed envelope from his back pocket and tossed it on the table. Millard didn't bother looking at it.

"I'm delivering this as a favor. Don't go expecting me as your regular mailman."

"I don't suppose yew'd want a drink?" Millard asked, bringing the bottle up from behind the counter and pointing it towards Chief Parker, his fist firmly grasped around the neck.

"Not for me," the Chief said, leaning against the counter.

But, it did not matter much if the Chief did or did not want whiskey because when Millard took a closer look, he noticed the bottle was empty. He inspected it closely in his fist, checking it against the light as if it would refill by magic.

"Are you going to read it?" Chief Parker said, motioning to the letter on the counter.

Millard waved him off. "I already know what it's about."

"Oh yeah?" Chief Parker asked, tapping his fingers on the counter. Can you tell me?"

"You wouldn't want to hear it. Just a bit of iss-cram-related business."

"You seem upset about it."

Millard just sighed. He could not tell the Chief that it was more than a bit of business. It was an invasion of sorts, a result of the scant season.

Chief Parker's walkie-talkie buzzed. "*Chief*," a woman's voice said.

"Yeah?" he responded.

"Got some kids breaking windows at the mill again. Jones is still in the bathroom."

"I'll be over there in a moment. Just down the road." Chief Parker clicked off the walkie. "Well, Millard, maybe next time I'll come by and pick up some ice cream." The bell chimed as the Chief walked out the door, becoming more and more like the hazy shadow he was before he walked in.

Millard grabbed the envelope from the counter and stared at it. "I'll pull yur litl' prank," he said to himself before tossing the envelope flippantly into the basement freezer. Millard dropped the empty bottle

of whiskey onto the floor and stared out at Dick's Diner, trying to see Dick through the blinds. It seemed he had some customers. "Getting no business too, uh, Dick?" He squinted to get a clearer view of the kind of people that would eat the slop that Dick served, but he could only see a couple of silhouettes shuffling by the diner's windows. His vision made everything more than ten feet away look like it was jumping side to side, which didn't help. But as he really focused on the figures leaving the diner, Millard began to see them. His wife and daughter were walking out of the diner, take-out wrapped under Cindy's arm. Betsy glared at Millard through the window and grabbed Cindy's arm as they hurried to the car.

Millard leaned forward in his chair, watching them as they drove off. The whiskey was hitting him harder now; it seemed to be coming all at once. He was too dizzy to stay on the stool, and he felt his eyes rolling as he tumbled forward onto the floor.

"Millard!" a voice cried as the front door of the Big Scoop chimed open. Millard's eyes opened to see his empty bottle of whiskey and some frozen upchuck that had seeped down towards the basement from the side of his left cheek. "Millard?" Betsy called again as she rounded the counter. "What are you doing on the floor? Is that whiskey? Do you even know what time it is?"

"Ahhhh... Nope," Millard said from the floor, still trying to piece his mind together, something quite difficult considering he was still buzzing.

"Well, get off the ground!" Betsy barked at him. "I came to pick you up. It's nearly nine, you know." Millard could hear that she was concerned as much as she was upset. He began pushing himself up

from the ground, but his face seemed stuck, and his arms wobbled more than expected of a grown man in his forties. So Betsy helped pull him to the stool.

"Is that the whiskey my dad gave us for our wedding?" Betsy said, crossing her arms.

"Well, I—"

"I cannot believe you! My father's whiskey!" Her face was turning red, though Millard avoided looking her in the eyes. "What else have you brought with you? Huh? Did you decide to throw up in my mother's urn, or did you forget that at home?"

"Well, let's not exaggerate here. It's clear I threw up on the ground. And your mother's ashes are still completely undisturbed in the garage," Millard chuckled, though, by the expression on his wife's face, it was not the time for jokes.

"You're still drunk!"

"Oh yeah?" Millard asked wet-mouthed, getting angrier now that the tension between them hadn't diffused. "And what about you! I saw you!"

"You saw me?" asked Betsy, who couldn't look more confused at Millard's vague accusation.

"Yes," Millard hissed, pointing his finger at her. "Coming from Dick's Diner. Fancied a bit of take-out, did ya?"

"What are you saying? That I'm having an affair with Dick Weller?"

Now Millard was confused; he hadn't thought that Betsy could be having an affair with Dick Weller; but now that she said it, his blood began to boil. He stared off to Dick's Diner across the street.

"I'm leaving," Betsy said abruptly. "And I'm taking this back with me." She grabbed the empty bottle of whiskey off the floor. "You can find your own way home!" Betsy strutted out of the shop and drove off, but Millard paid her no mind. He still focused on the diner.

By now, it was just past nine; Guthrie Main was dark and quiet. Millard stumbled out the door of the Big Scoop. He would have heard the door chime, but he was too focused on accomplishing a goal. Destroy it. Destroy Dick's Diner. Not even the cold got in his way — or that small line of frozen throwup still stuck to the side of his face. If he had paused for a moment he'd know it was colder than that morning, with just a few street lights casting harsh shadows on the single downtown street's sidewalks and buildings. The few cars parked during the day had gone. The emptiness of the small town felt even emptier. It was just Millard and Dick's Diner across the way.

Millard moved with a drunken stride to the back end of the diner, steadying himself against the cold chromatic wall as he walked. Millard peered through the small window of the back door. No one to be seen amongst the red faux-leather booths or behind the long bar top counter.

He smashed the window and unlatched the lock. His shirt snagged on some of the broken glass as he stumbled forward. His eyes were as wide as ever; he was crazed. Millard looked around for something to smash or cut. Anything that would make the diner as cold as his ice cream shop; anything that might bring Dick down to his level. He had not seen the heating on the roof; though, if he had, he may have climbed up to sabotage it. He settled instead for knocking over a large stack of dishes and a few glasses from the bar. Then, before anyone could see him, Millard ran out of the diner and back to the Big Scoop.

He had not been inside Dick's Diner for some time and could not for the life of him understand why anyone would want to eat inside. It smelled like rotten eggs.

Millard pulled the stool from behind the counter to the front window of the Big Scoop.

"Call the Weller's," he said to himself, then repeated. He looked at the phone by the register. *I'm in too deep now*, he thought to himself. He grabbed it, pulling the phone to the counter beside the window. He was delighted that the phone could go that far; it gave him a better view of the action. He sat down, picked up the phone, and dialed Dick's home number, which he had written on a strip of paper, preparing for this very moment.

"Hello?" A girl answered.

"Hello there. Is this Sarah? It's Cindy's dad, Mr. Scott."

"Uhhh — yes," Sarah said before her father's voice came on the phone. "Hello?" Dick answered.

"Ey Dick, it's Millard." He blocked the mouthpiece; Millard could hear the uneasiness in his voice. He breathed in deeply, trying to maintain his composure. "I was just closing up for the night and... well, it sounded like someone broke into the diner."

"Did you see anybody? Are they still there?" Dick seemed more concerned than Millard expected; it caught him off guard. And for a moment, Millard sat there silently on the stool.

"Hello?" Dick asked urgently.

"Oh — well — um, I wen home for the night. I suppose they must've left by now. Ya might wanna check up on the place anyway." He was still slurring a bit. There was a moment of silence. Millard thought that Dick might have caught on to the ruse.

"Alright, I'll head on over."

"Come by quick! They're making lots of noise," Millard stumbled before slamming the phone on the hook. He was sure Dick took the bait. He watched and waited, looking out the window for Dick's arrival. A worried excitement brewing in his stomach as he watched the dark outline of Dick's Diner, unlit and quiet; he could not smile. The realization of what he had done was settling in again, he'd be in the black again soon, the letter said so. Millard looked down at his shaking hands, though he was not so sure whether they were shaking from the cold, and before he could figure it out, Dick had pulled up to Dick's Diner.

Dick stood in front of the diner, looking to see if anyone might be inside. He unlocked the front door and walked in, quickly out of Millard's sight. He couldn't see Dick's reaction to the broken plates and glasses. It was dark and started to snow; all Millard could see was Dick's flashlight as it traveled across the diner's windows. *Why isn't he turning on the lights?* Millard thought.

For a long while, nothing seemed to be happening. Nothing more than a wave of the flashlight here and a wave of the flashlight there. All was quiet until there was a yell from the diner. Dick must have finally seen the smashed plates behind the bar.

"Took him long enough," Millard chuckled, though he chuckled briefly. Millard was still not sure why he was asked to make the call. Millard put his face to the glass — there was a bright light moving throughout the back of the diner. It was a fire! Millard stood up, continuing to press his forehead against the glass of the Big Scoop, using his hands like a pair of binoculars. The fire rushed along the bartop. But just before Millard could get a better look inside, the

windows of the diner exploded. Glass shot out in all directions, sprinkling against the windows of the Big Scoop. Millard shot back, knocking his stool to the ground.

He ducked down, crumpling to his knees and looking at the checkered floor, ready for another explosion, but it did not come. He pulled himself from the floor, thoughtlessly running out of the shop towards the burning diner. A wave of guilt began to pass over him. The guilt that had been bubbling up inside him ever since he had decided to do what the letter asked. Maybe he could undo what he had done? Maybe Dick had gotten out just in time?

"Weller!" he yelled, desperate for Dick's voice to come out from the flames. But there was no answer. Dick's car sat still, outside the diner; its windows sunken in from the blast. There was nothing he could do. The wave of guilt would not pass over, and he did not expect it ever would. *Just like Theo*, he thought.

He thought of Betsy and Cindy; he wanted to hold them in his arms. Millard frowned. *Dick had a family*. He had just spoken to one of his daughters on the phone.

Then it occurred to him. What would people think ... seeing him at the scene? They would think that he did something! They would know he did something!

He sprinted off down the street. *Anyone could show up after an explosion like that!*

He wouldn't think about it. He wouldn't talk about it. As far as he was concerned, he didn't see a thing. He was on his way home when it happened. He only heard it, that's all. He imagined the look of horror on his family's faces, what they would think of him if they knew. *What*

would Theo have thought? He wouldn't tell them a thing, just a loud noise.

He shivered in the cold as he ran. He never hated Dick Weller. Weller had always been good to him and his family. "He brought me soup for Christ's sake!" But Millard knew he could not have stopped himself from hating him. He had to hate him if he was ever going to shatter the plates and glasses, to call him under false pretenses, to do just as the letter asked of him.

Chapter 2

Little Town in the Mountains

Sarah looked into the bathroom mirror and tied her long reddish-brown hair into a ponytail, placing the BIG SCOOP cap onto her head just inches above her bushy, unkempt eyebrows. The Big Scoop's bathroom was cramped, barely big enough for her and Cindy to be in at the same time. It was cold just from the look of it; checkered black and white tiles plastered the sink wall with a thin stripe of grime lining where the wall meets the floor; partly Sarah's fault, she supposed, but it was grimy before she started working there and Mr. Scott had never said a word about cleaning it.

Sarah wondered how the BIG SCOOP cap hadn't ripped in the half-a-year she worked there. She had never seen a thinner material. *Thinner than paper...* Sarah was too thin too, according to her mother, but compared to Cindy, she felt like a beluga. And whenever she looked at herself in the mirror, she could never see past her bushy eyebrows, the small bump in the ridge of her nose, or that lip of fat just below her navel. Maybe it was just that her waistbands were too tight.

Cindy sat on top of the toilet seat, watching Sarah from behind as she got ready for work. Her permed blonde hair seemed perfect as always even though she had come to her dad's ice cream shop straight from cheer practice. There was no question that Cindy's hair stayed so perfect because of the amount of hairspray she used. She would never admit to using so much. She would even say it was just naturally curly, pretending she didn't have a perm kit at home, hiding it poorly from view whenever Sarah came to her house. Sarah never brought any of it up with Cindy, even though she could smell the spray through the

perfume Cindy stole from her mother, which, by itself, was quite strong.

"You think *anyone* will come in today?" Sarah asked Cindy, trading places on the toilet seat. "Other than your dad, I mean."

Cindy pulled her Big Scoop uniform down from the top of the door. "Angela said she might stop by — but she always says that... Especially when Rachel isn't around."

Cindy dropped her cheer skirt to the ground and picked it up from her feet. The uniform looked to have been passed between cheerleaders since Guthrie High acquired them in the fifties, except the skirt had been cut higher up every decade since.

"Do you see this shit all over my face?" Cindy said, walking up to the mirror.

"What? Your make-up?"

"The glitter," Cindy sighed, bringing her face right up to the glass. "Rachel's making us wear it every game, which would be fine, but now she's making us wear it every practice too. It takes forever to get off — it doesn't make any sense. It's not like people come to watch our practices. Well... except maybe that Liam kid. You know, the kid that's homeschooled." She wiped the glittery gunk off her face as best she could and quickly put her outfit on. "You think my lashes look all right?" Cindy asked her, but before Sarah could respond, Cindy had already grabbed a brush and began pumping them up. She pulled her curled hair back behind her ears and placed her BIG SCOOP cap onto her head, tying it delicately at the back so as not to disturb her hair.

Sarah looked down, checking her clip-on bow tie; it was a bit crooked, but in the end, who would care?

Once Cindy finished pulling her white slacks up, the two of them looked like soda clerks. It always seemed odd that they dressed in all white. On a busy day, they would just end up getting their shirts ruined with chocolate stains and the juices from the jar of Maraschino cherries. The amount of bleach required to keep the uniform clean was likely a higher cost than what she was getting paid. But they weren't busy in April; no one in their right mind would want ice cream before the spring when the air would finally heat up. It was a mountain town, and a lake town, *sometimes*, but most of all a nothing town, with nothing people that no one ever knew. As far as Sarah was concerned, they may as well be in their very own world.

If only Mr. Scott sold hot chocolate instead of ice cream, Sarah thought, Angela might actually visit us in the shop.

The lack of customers wasn't an issue for Sarah. She preferred not having to deal with customers. It was much more relaxing and it gave her and Cindy more time for themselves. Better yet, it was just another excuse to get out of the house.

Sarah had already made bubblegum shakes — Cindy's favorite — and sat with her at the counter. She nearly got a third of her shake down before Cindy began gossiping about Rachel Crawford, the Guthrie High cheer captain. And between the sips of shake and the slights at Rachel's expense, Cindy couldn't help but bring up how much she missed Stacy Callow, who was last year's cheer captain. Stacy Callow had graduated from high school senior to a full-time store clerk at Guthrie Supply down the street and seemed to have forgotten all about her high school friends. Cindy said it had something to do with a controlling boyfriend. It was hard to tell

sometimes with the amount of information Cindy would bring up all at once. Most of it wasn't important anyway, Sarah figured.

"I really do miss her," Cindy sighed, "She would never force me to be bottom row on the pyramid... Rachel keeps blaming me for the tower falling, but that's just because it takes her thirty minutes to get set. I've always been a flyer. I can't hold the corner. I'm the smallest in the group, half the time my shoulders don't even line up in the row. And Rachel's not even flexible. She pretends she's the star of the show, but she can't even hold a smile when she's on top," Cindy scoffed. "She can't even do a bow-and-arrow."

"What's a bow and arrow?" Sarah asked.

"It's where you pull your leg up beside your head. I'd do it now, but *you know* these pants would rip," Cindy said, stirring the straw in her glass.

The door chimed and Cindy's father, Millard Scott, walked into the shop. The thick glasses on his face looked like they could fall off at any moment. His obnoxiously patterned shirt was a good indication that he hadn't bought any sort of new clothes in at least ten years. And though Sarah was glad to have the job, she felt uncomfortable around him in the six months she worked at the Big Scoop. He would go to great lengths to make her more comfortable at the shop and all it did was make her less so. But that wasn't quite as obvious as the fact that he couldn't look her in the eyes.

Mr. Scott peered down at the glasses on the counter and pouted. "Didn't I tell you about making shakes, Cindy?" said Mr. Scott, staring at the two of them, but just low enough to miss Sarah's gaze.

Cindy's eyes rolled, then she walked over to the sink to wash out the remnants of her shake.

"I saw that Cynthia. We talked about rolling eyes too, didn't we?"

"Sorry, Mr. Scott," Sarah said quickly.

Mr. Scott smiled uneasily. "Just... uhh, this is the last one. No more milkshakes — no malts either, Cindy, I can see you're already thinking of a way around."

"It's too cold out," Cindy said matter-of-factly, "no one's coming in today anyway."

Mr. Scott opened his mouth as if to say something but instead stared dazedly out the window before meandering off into the small office by the bathroom.

Cindy sat on the cushioned barstool across Sarah and hunched over, holding her head up lazily over the counter.

"How's Tracy been?"

"*Ugh*, can we not talk about my mom?"

"Okay... fine. How about Maggie then? I haven't seen her much at school." Cindy sat up straighter. "Is she still, you know... grieving?"

Sarah looked at Cindy indignantly. "Maggie's not grieving. She's fine."

"Well... if she's so fine then you should invite her to Jackson's party tomorrow. I wanna see her. And I'm sure everyone else wants to see her too. It'd be good for her I think."

"Yeah, maybe. I don't think she'd want to go."

"Fine, we'll just have to tie her up and throw her in your car." Cindy grabbed Sarah's empty glass and began washing it in the sink.

"About that..." Sarah started, "the Chevette broke down again. I think it's for good this time."

"Why didn't you get rid of it? Didn't you say you were going to trade it in a month ago for something way cooler?"

"Yeah, but I dunno. I guess I was just feeling sentimental about it or something. It's a piece of shit, but it's still my first car."

"Well, I can drive you both to the party if you need me to. It's only a few miles away. It's down the same street, isn't it?"

"I think I'll just walk over." Sarah scooped the last bit of her shake out with a spoon. "Oh, right, I almost forgot. Tim told me Jackson got a keg for Friday. But, you know Tim... I'm not sure I believe him."

"Oh, well... about that..." said Cindy, looking guilty, "Clark is in town for spring break—"

"Oh." Sarah hadn't seen Clark in nearly a year since he went off to college. They'd talk on the phone all the time. In fact, it had only been a few days since they'd talked last. "You'd think that Jackson would have told me at least."

"I'm telling you now. *They* were trying to keep it a surprise. But you know I can't keep anything a secret." Cindy walked back to the counter. "Ooh, you should tell Maggie. Maybe Clark would get her to come."

"I don't think anything would get Maggie to go anywhere. The surprise would have been nice though."

Cindy looked guilty.

"Don't worry about it," Sarah said. "It'll still be a surprise when I see him tomorrow. I'm sure of it."

"Where do you think you're going?" Tracy said from the dinner table without her usual bottle of something toxic. Her hair was in a frizz and her makeup was somewhere between all over the place and nowhere at the same time. She'd start her day drunk and then look it the rest of the day.

Maggie sat at the table next to their mother staring down at her plate of rice and beans.

"I'm heading up to my room," Sarah said, stopping on the staircase, "I already ate at work."

"I don't care where you ate. You're sitting at this table."

Sarah walked down the stairs and sat in a huff. It had been a long time since they had sat at the dinner table together, and judging by the look on Maggie's face, she seemed to be thinking the same.

"So?" Sarah asked.

"Nothing," Tracy said stiffly, "I thought it would be nice if I made dinner."

Sarah looked at the dish in the middle of the table. It had been what she made for them two nights ago; what was left she had placed in the fridge for leftovers. If everyone at the table didn't already know she had made the dinner, she would have said something.

"Well, I'm not eating..." Sarah said, staring coldly at her mother.

Maggie shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"Did you hear Mr. Bramley is making another donation to Guthrie High?" Maggie said nervously, clearly hoping to change the subject. "They're thinking about building an auditorium."

"He's such a wonderful man," Tracy said. "There's no one in Guthrie that man won't help grow. He even tried to support the diner. Your dad never much cared for him—"

"Can we not talk about dad," Sarah interrupted.

"Maybe Mr. Bramley would give us some money to rebuild the diner," Maggie said.

"I already told him no," Tracy said as she scooped a hearty spoonful of beans.

"Maggie's right! We need that money, Mom." Sarah leaned in. "We can't just have the diner sit there. It still looks like it did a year ago!"

"Oh," Tracy said, "And what do you suppose we do when it's finished, huh?" She wiped her face sloppily with her napkin. "I don't know how to run a business. I can't handle running a business."

"You can't handle anything..." Sarah whispered.

"What did you say, darling?" Tracy asked, her eyes unblinking at Sarah and her lips pursed so tight Sarah figured they could pop off from her mouth at any second.

"Oh, nothing. It's just that Ms. Turniput told me you called in five times last week. She said you were sick. I think we all know what you really were, though, don't we?"

Maggie stood up and rushed upstairs to her room, slamming the door.

Sarah sat back down in her chair and slouched, tapping her fingers lightly on the table, feeling guilty. And as she glanced briefly up at her mother she saw that she looked guilty too.

"I'm just not ready for it, honey," Tracy said, and she walked off to her room, leaving Sarah with the dishes.

At school the next morning, nearly everyone was talking about Jackson's party. There really wasn't much else to talk about with Guthrie being so small. Even the not-so-popular geeks and nerds and creeps and losers would end up hearing about Jackson's party one way or another by the end of the day.

"I heard he got a keg," Angela whispered to Jennifer in Mrs. Filcher's Chemistry class.

"There's no way he got a keg," Jennifer replied, "I know for a fact you can only get one at Guthrie Supply or that bar off Ramshead. Even if Jackson has a fake, they'll still know who he is."

"You don't think that his dad got one for him?"

"You think Chief Parker would buy a keg for Jackson's party? You're joking."

"It was just a thought. I didn't know Mr. Parker is a cop."

"God, Angela, we've only met him a thousand times."

"He's always just been Mr. Parker to me, I dunno."

Sarah turned around excitedly in her chair and whispered. "Clark is bringing one from Salem."

"Clark is coming?" Jennifer said, almost jumping up and down in her seat. "He must have come to surprise me. The things I'd let that boy do to me..."

Sarah and Angela rolled their eyes.

"What?" she asked. "It was a joke."

"Girls!" Mrs. Filcher yelled from the front of the room, "If you don't quiet down I'll have you three writing lines until your fingers fall off..."

Sarah couldn't pay attention for the rest of her classes. All she could think about was how she might be able to get Maggie to go to Jackson's party. And in a lapse of judgment, she decided to ask the two most boneheaded goofballs she knew, Tim and Roger.

"Well, if I were you, I would trick her into going," Tim said. He and Roger were sitting at the same pottery table as Sarah. Tim, who was very large and pale — apart from his red sunburned face — sat comfortably on the high stool. Roger was practically the opposite of

Tim in every way, he was small for a boy of seventeen and bronzed with thick black hair. Like Sarah, he sat with his feet just barely dangling from his stool, and judging from that alone, he must have been about five foot seven.

"And how would I trick her?" asked Sarah skeptically. She was almost certain it was a bad plan to trick Maggie into going to the party, but still, Tim and Roger were always entertaining with their stupid plans — and pranks.

"You could tell her that there will be a keg!" Roger said, looking like he just thought of the ultimate lure.

"Roger, there *will* be a keg," said Tim. "Jackson said so on Monday."

"No way! Really?"

"You were there!"

Tim turned back to Sarah.

"Listen, Maggie's always been pretty outdoorsy, right? Just say you want to go for a walk or something and then take that old path to the Parker Cabin through Lost Woods. You know, the one that we used to take when we were like eight," Tim said.

"That's ridiculous," Sarah chuckled nervously. "I can't just trick her..."

"I'm serious, Sarah," Tim said. "We want the old Maggie back. We don't care if she'll be quiet or whatever. We just want to see her again."

Roger nodded.

Sarah hugged Tim's arm and smiled at Roger. "That's really sweet, you guys. But Maggie would know where we were going."

"Not if it's dark out," Roger said. "It's supposed to rain a bit before the party — my dad wouldn't stop talking about it this morning — the trail should be unrecognizable."

Sarah placed her head against the glass window of the bus. She could see the dark clouds in the distance. Grease and grime lined the metal windows, and the asphalt outside blurred the closer she looked at it. The bus was much worse than she could have imagined. It vibrated her head against the window, but somehow it was far more comfortable than laying her head on the back of her seat — which felt more like a stone than a cushion. She blew her hair away from her face in a huff, then watched as the trees went by.

Before long, the bus traveled down Guthrie Main, and the demolished remains of Dick's Diner came into view. Scorch marks painted the dirtied chrome finish; glass lay untouched in the small parking lot...

"Taking the bus today, huh?" the boy sitting beside her said. Sarah knew him as Ricky, a not-so-shy sophomore that Sarah had made a point of looking uncomfortable to when he sat down beside her. He didn't take the hint.

"You know, I was invited to Jackson's party tonight." He grinned stupidly.

"Oh yeah? Jackson invited you?"

"No."

"Then how do you know you're actually invited?"

"Tim and Roger invited me. They're my workmates in Biology — i-is it true that Jackson's brother got a keg?" Ricky asked, then looked

around anxiously, realizing he probably shouldn't have said that out loud.

The bus hit a pothole, bouncing some of the students to the roof of the bus. Sarah looked forward into the bus mirror at the driver who seemed more preoccupied chomping on his candy apple than he was with paying attention to the road.

The bus came to a halt at Sarah's stop, and the driver let loose the stop sign before wiping away some caramel that had stuck against the topside of his lip.

"I've got to go," Sarah said, feeling much better now that she was about to leave the bus.

"Hey, you left your bag," Ricky said, grabbing it and handing it over.

"Heya, Weller-girl," The bus driver yelled from the front, turning around in his seat. "You gonna get off the bus, or are you gonna chit-chat all day with your boyfriend?"

Some of the students snickered. And Sarah picked up the pace, walking down the aisle, making sure to avoid loose backpacks and the legs of lankier students. But before she could leave, the bus driver reached his arm out.

"You having a party, huh? What time's it at?" the bus driver asked as he cleaned his teeth with his tongue. "Maybe I'll stop by."

Sarah started to brush past but he stopped her again.

"Wait, hold up. Where's your sister been? She hasn't been riding the bus for weeks." Despite the man's best efforts, caramel dripped from his stubbled chin. "Usually I wouldn't care, you know. But I can't say I don't miss that pretty face of hers."

"I don't know. Can I go now?"

Sarah could feel the driver's eyes on her back as she stepped down the bus steps and onto the dirt. He continued staring at her from the side mirror as the bus pulled away.

It hadn't even occurred to Sarah that Maggie wasn't on the bus. She thought about what Maggie might have been doing instead on the way home, walking down Braebury Lane.

After the long stroll from the bus stop, Sarah arrived home. Her house was a half-mile away from the next home and nearly surrounded by woods. That is, apart from the stretch of road and telephone wires that paralleled the treeline. Sarah walked up the stairs of the porch and keyed inside. She opened the fridge, checking to see if they had food of any sort, but, unsurprisingly, it was bare. Tracy hadn't even bothered getting groceries.

Her mother had set bills on the kitchen counter, only opening one before abandoning the rest in a small heap. Sarah grabbed a blanket from the hall closet and arranged it over her mother who lay clumsily across the living room couch. A small bottle of rum dangled from her mother's fingers, spilling across the already stained living room carpet. Sarah dropped her bag by the front door and quietly cleaned up the mess, dumping the rest of the rum down the drain in the kitchen before lightly placing the bottle into the trash can and running up the stairs.

Maggie's door was open; she hadn't gotten home yet. It wasn't much of a surprise to Sarah, who couldn't imagine how Maggie could arrive before the bus anyway. She wouldn't blame Maggie for wanting to walk home instead of taking the bus. The driver was an absolute creepshow. And the more time outside of the house and away from their mother was just an added bonus.

It was already 6 o'clock, and just as Roger's father had predicted, it was raining. The rain tapped Sarah's windows as she debated amongst the clothing that lay all over her floor — one big mess of clothes.

Maggie had come home and snuck herself into her room without a word, but Sarah had heard her footfalls on the stairs and the creaking of the door when it shut into place.

Sarah knocked on her door and opened it before Maggie could respond. She was comfortably laying on her bed, reading a book, and writing a few notes on a small piece of paper. She looked nearly identical to Sarah, enough so that most people who didn't know them would have assumed they were twins. At a glance, the only noticeable difference was Maggie's darker brown hair, like their father. Sarah's hair was lighter and redder, just as Tracy's had been before it started greying.

"Hey... whatcha doing?" Sarah asked from the doorframe.

"Just reading." Maggie jotted down another note and went back to studying the book. "I know what you're going to ask. You can forget it."

"What am I going to ask?"

"You want to see if I'll go to Jackson's stupid kegger party."

"Why not? — Cindy will be there. Jennifer and Angela will be there... For some reason, Tim and Roger invited Ricky... So he'll be there."

"Shut up!" Maggie smiled. "Ricky Wilson? Really?" For a moment Sarah saw the gossipy, popular, fun, excited Maggie, the one before a year ago, but her smile faded. "I'm not sure I want to see so many

people. And Cindy'll be with Jackson the whole night anyway. It's his party."

"Okay, then, just the four of us will hang out. Cindy will understand and Jackson's practically our brother."

"Like Clark is practically our brother too?"

"Shut up." Sarah turned, closing the door behind her and looking red in the face. "That's different." Sarah smiled. "I'm sure Ricky wants you to be there."

"Oh my god, now *I have* to go," Maggie said sarcastically.

She sat down on Maggie's bed. "C'mon. What can I do to get you to come with me?"

"You're still going to go, even if I don't?"

"Yeah, of course I'm going. It's just *you* with the hangup."

"It's just... why does it have to be tonight?"

"It's Friday. The Chief will be out at the station. There will be a keg..."

Maggie rolled her eyes.

"Ok, fine, you don't want to go... But, you have to tell me why you haven't been taking the bus..."

Maggie put the book down and sat up, smiling. "Can you guess?"

"It's the bus driver, isn't it?"

"He's such a creep, right?" Maggie said.

"At least *he* wanted to go to the party," Sarah smiled; Maggie looked at her funny. "Ricky practically shouted about it to the entire bus." She leaned in. "But that can't be why you don't take the bus. You have to be with someone... or doing *something* — it doesn't take hours to walk home from school..."

Maggie's cheeks reddened.

"You have a boyfriend! I knew it!"

"No, I don't," Maggie said quickly, but her cheeks defied her. "I would tell you if I had a boyfriend."

Sarah thought about who Maggie's boyfriend might be, but couldn't come up with a reasonable answer. Then she thought about how sweet Tim and Roger had been about wanting to see Maggie, how everyone would be disappointed to see that Maggie hadn't come with her to the party. There was really only one good way to get her to go...

"I have an idea," Sarah said jovially. "How about we go for a walk through Lost Woods?"

"Right now? What about your party?"

"I'll skip it with you, so what if it's raining a bit. It'd be raining at the party too."

"You really want to go for a walk?" Maggie asked, holding back a smile.

"I'll go to Jackson's next party. He'll understand I'm sure. Now, I'm going to get my boots and a flashlight. Go get some rain stuff on." Sarah said, jumping off the bed and leaving the room before Maggie could argue.

Sarah jogged to her room and opened the closet door for her boots and the flashlight her father gave her for a camping trip that they took with the Parkers a few years ago. It looked specially made, steel except for the switch, made of some dark, almost black wood. He had written her initials in black marker on the hilt, *SW*.

Maggie was already waiting for her downstairs in a flannel and jeans. Her yellow rainboots clashed horribly, which made Sarah smile, knowing where she planned to take her sister.

Sarah switched the flashlight on as they walked out of the house. It had stopped raining but the ground was still slick. There was a glimpse of a path out through Lost Wood and even Sarah had to admit that Tim was right; if she were in Maggie's situation, she wouldn't know where they were going.

The path was dark and wet, and trees blocked the light of the moon. Sarah slipped constantly on the muddy ground every few steps and even Maggie would have to catch herself just before falling. It became a game, seeing who could stay up the most. They could barely keep from laughing.

Sarah made sure to stay ahead as she guided Maggie through the old path, only just remembering the markers they took to get to the Parker Cabin when they were kids.

Her flashlight pierced through the trees. The woods seemed dense and endless; until almost suddenly, the trail narrowed to an open road and a cabin-house just off the east end of Lost Lake. It wasn't much longer before they heard the loud cries of drunk teenagers and Billy Idol's *Dancing With Myself* which echoed towards them at the end of the path.

Maggie stopped. "You're joking! We're at the party, aren't we? We're at Jackson's party."

"Yeah, we're already here. You really have no excuse."

"I told you I don't want to go to Jackson's stupid kegger."

"Okay, fine," Sarah conceded, smiling. "It was supposed to be a surprise but... Clark is there! He brought the keg! I mean, come on, I haven't seen him since he left for college."

"I don't care. I thought for once you'd want to hang out, just you and me, no Cindy, no Jackson..." Maggie stopped. "We're supposed to

be sisters, Sarah, and I only ever see you passing by at school. You're always at parties, or Cindy's house, or working."

"I'm trying to hang out with you, Maggie," Sarah said. "This is what hanging out looks like."

"You're not listening! Why can't you just stay home and be with Mom and me?"

"Maybe I just want to be out of the house. Maybe I don't want to have to take care of you and Mom all the time. I'm trying to have a life. I shouldn't have to worry about how you feel about it."

"But today?" Maggie asked. "You can't just take a break today?"

"The party's today, Maggie. It's not tomorrow, it's not next week. I don't know when Clark will be back in town... I'm sorry it doesn't fit into your crazy skitzo schedule."

"It's April 8th, Sarah."

"So?"

"So? Really?" Maggie said, wiping her face against her sleeve. "Dad died last year today! It's only been a year! I should have guessed you wouldn't remember. You *never* talk about it."

"Are you coming to the party or not?" Sarah asked sharply.

Maggie stood still, *waiting for an apology*, Sarah supposed. But as far as Sarah was concerned, there was nothing to apologize for.

"Can we go... please?" Maggie asked somberly.

"We're already at the party, Maggie. It's just right there —"

"Will you at least say something... about dad?"

"What's there to talk about?" she said coldly. "He's dead. Get over it."

Her words seemed to strike like a dagger, and the two of them stood silently, watching each other at the end of the wooded path.

"Just... just, come on, Maggie. I told everyone you were coming. They expect you to be there."

Maggie didn't say a word, but Sarah could hear her as she sobbed in the dark.

"Fine... Here!" Sarah shouted, throwing the flashlight into the mud in front of Maggie. "You'll need that for the walk home."

Maggie grabbed the flashlight from the ground, scraping the mud off with the side of her jeans. She looked tearfully up at Sarah one last time, then walked off into Lost Woods.

MAGGIE'S WALK

Maggie turned to see if Sarah had followed her, but she had already gone. She hadn't walked very far off, maybe ten feet back or so before stopping, and she stood quietly at the end of Lost Woods, listening to the party for what seemed like ages. She hoped that Sarah would call out her name, maybe invite her to the party one last time. Maybe she *would* go. The idea of being alone on the anniversary of her father's death was not comforting, but Maggie couldn't deny that she had not expected it. Mom must have felt the same way, drinking herself into passing out on the couch.

She walked back onto the small path. It would probably be an hour of walking. So she took the time to think about what she might do when she got back. Maybe she'd continue reading the book that Brianne lent her. It was full of monsters and legends: snakes, wendigos, and tricky coyotes. It was an old book; someone had even

written over several pages, and Maggie decided to figure out what it all meant to pass the time.

But despite it all, she couldn't stop thinking about Sarah. They wouldn't be talking for a while, not because they didn't want to, but because that was the way of things for siblings after a meaningful fight. And the thought that they may never speak again had started to cross her mind.

Maggie figured she was about halfway home. She recognized one or two markers on the path on the way to the Parkers Cabin. But the steel flashlight began to dim, and suddenly Sarah, and their fight, was of less concern. Maggie was becoming more and more aware of her surroundings, taking everything in that she could. She didn't want to get lost in the woods at such a dark time.

"How embarrassing would it be to get lost in Lost Woods?" she said to herself as she started to shiver. She could not tell if it was the cold or the growing fear rising in her stomach. *Had it been so cold before?*

She thought of bears, and snakes, and wolves. And she couldn't help but think of the book of monsters that lie on her bed.

Every quiet sound of nature grew louder and louder. Her dimming flashlight began to flicker in and out. The wind crackled between tree branches, and the owls let out eerie hoos. It was only a few steps more when the flashlight dimmed out for good, and nothing but darkness lay in front of her. She lifted her hand in front of her face. It might as well have been gone.

"Okay, okay," Maggie repeated in an attempt to calm herself down. She could feel the condensation from her breath blowing back against

her face. Maggie thought, for a moment, she saw a flash between the trees in the distance. *Is someone else walking on the trail?*

"Hello?" Maggie called out. No answer.

"Hello!" Not a sound.

She must have been wrong. Maggie held her hand out in front of her, guiding her through the dark. She slipped, landing on her shoulder. She felt her arm snap as she landed on an outstretched root, and there was a moment of calm before immense pain. She screamed. She couldn't move her arm; touching it only made it feel worse. Maggie whimpered, bolstering herself up from the mud. She held her left arm to her chest as she reached her right hand out, hoping it would guide her through the dark. She made sure with every step not to slip in the mud or trip over something else. Her hand followed against the rough bark of a tree, slowly wrapping around it as she attempted to catch her breath.

As Maggie stood, hugging the tree, she felt something faintly slink around her right foot. And it began to tighten, gripping between her legs. Her right hand tried to hold firm, but it failed. Bark scraped her arms as she was pulled to the ground, her head crashing into another exposed root.

She could feel something warm drip along her cheek, and there was a small ringing in her ears. She gasped for breath as the fall knocked the wind from her lungs. Sticks began to break around her. Maggie held her chest, regaining control of her breath. Though still heavy, she tried to stay quiet, desperately holding still, sitting upright, listening for anything, anything at all. And for a moment, there was nothing but the whistling of the wind between the trees. Even the sounds of the owls had gone.

Hot breath pressed against her face and she squealed as a sharp pain forced into her, just below her ribs. The sound was knocked from her lungs, becoming nothing more than a wheezing whimper. She could not see, but still, her eyes were wide, desperate to catch any moonlight that might peer through the trees. Steps crunched beside her, the sharp pain dragging her farther and farther into a deeper part of the wood. She kicked, fading, trying to find the strength to breathe and fight. But Maggie knew she did not have the energy to resist, so, before she could no longer, she mustered all of the might she could, and screamed out.

Bats and owls frenzied, flying from the pines of Lost Woods and into the clouded night sky as the shriek echoed throughout Guthrie's mountain pass.

Chapter 3

Jackson and Clark's 'Stupid' Kegger

Sarah brushed through the unkempt bushes at the end of the path. They seemed like they would never end, though she could see the party subtly revealing itself through the brush as the music and laughs got louder.

She looked off to the Parker Cabin. The keg sat in the middle of the porch, just as advertised, displayed as if it were the crown jewels. Nearly the whole of Guthrie High surrounded it like a flock of seagulls around spilled french fries. Jackson was holding Ricky up for a keg stand, and Cindy stood watching with feigned concern. Sarah made her way to the back porch of the cabin. The porch was nearly eight feet above her, and the footsteps of her friends and peers pounded above her head. Countless bouts of rain and snow weathered the porch down; the wood had broken and splintered, looking almost as if it could collapse at any moment. Though it never did, as even Sarah had always felt that despite its appearance, the porch was quite sturdy, enough at least for more than a dozen teenagers to mingle safely upon.

She kept as close to the high porch wall as she could, hiding from the crowd so as not to make a fuss. She wasn't so sure she was in the mood anymore for a party. She planned to act as though she were there the whole time. That way, no one might ask where she had been. If they asked, she might tell them all about her argument with her sister or the fact that she had forgotten about the day of her father's death. Before she finished making her way to the porch steps, she was pulled into a small storage room and was about to scream before...

"Shhh, shh, it's just me!" Clark whispered. The tall, handsome boy before her smiled widely. She could only just see his curly brown hair from the light shining through the splintered wood panels of the porch. Sarah didn't let him get another word out; she jumped into his arms. Her lips pressed against his, those wide hearty lips. She could feel him trying to keep from smiling too widely. She was starting to feel much better since her fight with Maggie. It seemed like nothing could break the moment. That is, until Clark backed into the kayak leaning against the wall. They stopped, listening as it slid down and crashed to the floor. They both held their breath, trying not to laugh too loud. Sarah shushed him, trying to keep herself quiet as well, waiting to see if anyone would come down to check on the sound, but no one came. Clark started unbuttoning his shirt but stopped as Sarah put a hand on his chest. "What's wrong?"

"They'll hear us."

"Isn't that part of the fun?"

"Yeah, but I don't want Cindy to know about this..."

"We haven't been together since June, Sarah," Clark pleaded. "No one heard the kayak."

No one will know." Sarah frowned in the low light. She was feeling a bit guilty. "Okay, maybe they could hear the kayak. I'm just excited to see you again." Clark grabbed the kayak off the floor and put it back against the wall. "Are you surprised? It was a real bitch keeping it a secret over the phone."

"Well—" Sarah said, pausing.

"Cindy told you." Clark rolled his eyes. "Jackson said she wouldn't say anything. Now he owes me five bucks."

"Well, you can't blame her."

"No, no, you can't," Clark sighed. "What about Maggie? Did she come?"

"I got her to the bushes, but she went back."

"Back through Lost Woods?" Clark asked.

"She has a flashlight."

"And a gun, I hope," Clark laughed.

"You mind if we don't talk about it?"

"Sure," he said. "You know, I brought a keg with me from Salem. I had some real trouble hiding it from my dad this morning when he wanted to see how my truck's been holding up." Clark chuckled. Something about the way he laughed and smiled warmed Sarah. Every time was like cuddling up in a warm blanket, drinking cocoa by the fireplace on a cold, cold night.

"We should probably head back to the party," Sarah said, distracting herself from Clark's smile. "I'll go out first, I guess," Clark said under his breath. "Don't want anyone to see us. Especially not Jackson or Cindy, the two people who would be just the happiest to know."

"Can we just keep us a secret, for now?"

"There's no reason why we should be keeping anything a secret. It just makes it harder for us to be together when I'm in town. And what are we supposed to say when you graduate and move in with me? That we're just roommates?"

Sarah didn't have the words. He was right, but she could not help but feel that it was wrong to tell people about them. She couldn't explain it, feeling guilty that he was probably right. But she couldn't get herself to feel differently, so she stayed quiet.

Clark sighed; giving up on waiting for an answer, he walked through the small door out of the storage room. Sarah watched his silhouette through the wood before listening to his footsteps reach the top of the porch.

Sarah slid back against the storage room wall and put her hands on her face. Everything seemed to be going so well. She hated how she felt the need to hide their relationship. It didn't even make much sense at all. Clark was right, Cindy and Jackson would be happy to know. But there was just something about it that stopped her from telling them...

Sarah snuck out from the storage room a minute or two after Clark left. She looked around, checking if anyone had noticed that she just exited what amounted to a storage closet before walking towards the cabin.

She nearly bumped into Tim, running haphazardly down the porch steps in a towel.

"Hey, Sarah! You made it!" He said, shivering, only the towel between him and the Oregon mountain climate's low temperatures.

"What's with the towel?"

"Roger, Angela, and Jennifer are out playing chicken in the lake. Who can stay in the longest! You wanna join?"

"No," Sarah laughed. "You guys are crazy."

Tim was jumping up and down, trying to keep warm. "You'd be s-surprised. The lake is hot right now, like a jacuzzi. It's a-almost a game of who's the loser that will get out first. Now, if you don't mind—"

Tim sprinted towards Lost Lake, throwing the towel to the side, revealing his bare bottom, and jumping into the lake with a sigh of relief.

Sarah looked out to the lake. Fog almost wholly covered it past the beach, blocking even the high mountains on the opposite side. It sent a chill down Sarah's spine. She could only just make out the heads of Roger, Angela, and Jennifer bobbing weightlessly on the surface as Tim submerged himself in the lake. He mustn't have been joking about the lake being warm. She tried to look through the fog, searching for the Sunken Estate, the old abandoned home in the middle of the lake that had, as the name implied, sunken sideways into the muck. From a distance, the building would look like it was coasting across the water like a ship. But Sarah couldn't see the odd staple of Guthrie's Lost Lake; the fog buried it in white.

"You're here!" Cindy interrupted, her permed blonde locks bouncing as she barreled down the porch steps and surrounded Sarah in a hug. "Where's Maggie?"

"Oh, uh, she didn't want to come."

"What happened with your face?"

"I don't know?" Sarah said, growing concerned over the question. "What's wrong with my face?"

"You're mascara's running."

Sarah rubbed lightly against her cheek and looked at the stain on her hand. She had been crying. But she wasn't sure when she started. Had her makeup been running with Clark, or after her fight with Maggie?

"Must have been the rain," said Sarah casually.

"But your hair's not wet?" Cindy said, looking at the top of Sarah's head down to the hair resting on Sarah's shoulders.

"Oh, well—"

But before Sarah could finish, Cindy grabbed her arm. "Come on, let's get you fixed up. I want to talk with you about something anyway."

Sarah was worried. Had Cindy seen her and Clark come out of the storage closet? Cindy guided Sarah up the porch and into the Parker Cabin. Sarah was surprised to see that there were twice as many teens inside as there were out. She couldn't recognize the living room; it was so filled. Most everyone at the party was already garbling up their words and stumbling around. *They only bought one keg, didn't they?* Sarah thought as Cindy dragged her between an intimate conversation and a table of teens playing a drinking game Sarah didn't recognize.

Cindy knocked on the bathroom door, opening it to a couple making out over the sink.

"Out!" she demanded. The girl gave Cindy an embarrassed look, while the boy leered at Sarah as they passed by.

Cindy sat Sarah on the toilet lid and took her purse from the bathroom cabinet.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Sarah asked cautiously. She caught a glimpse at herself in the mirror, nearly startling at the dark lines reaching down to her chin, even distracting her from her bushy, unkempt eyebrows.

"Rachel's here."

Sarah sighed quietly in relief. It wasn't about her and Clark.

"Well? Can you believe it?"

"Believe what?" Sarah asked, bemused that she didn't have to explain her relationship.

"Someone invited Rachel... to my party!" Cindy grabbed a wet cloth and began aggressively wiping Sarah's face, apparently putting her anger out on it. "I mean Jackson and Clark's party," Cindy corrected herself. "But it was my idea."

"It looks like *everyone's* at this party, Cindy. It's almost like Ricky and the bus driver told everyone in town. Even Eloise Midgen is here."

"Hey, her acne is getting a lot better recently," Cindy said, distracted as she took some cream from her bag. "Wait, what was that about the bus driver?"

"Nevermind. What I mean is, I think that everyone in town was invited to this party. Of course Rachel is here."

"Yeah, well... I think I might just ask around to see who's responsible. You can be sure that they won't be invited to the next one." Cindy quickly brushed some eyeshadow onto Sarah's lids.

"Is that *orange*?"

"Yeah. It's a look I saw in a magazine last week." Cindy stepped back to get a good look at Sarah. "Hey, speaking of invitations, did Maggie make it?"

"No," Sarah said, holding back from telling Cindy about her and Maggie's argument, "she didn't want to come." She didn't want to make the party all about her and Maggie. Cindy was the type to make big deals of little things, and she was sure to put Sarah's runny mascara and her fight with Maggie together.

There was a knock on the bathroom door. "Hey Cindy, can you grab a bucket? Ricky's about to spew all over the couch and—"

Cindy opened the door quickly. Jackson stood there with his arm leaning against the doorframe. His blonde hair brushed down to his eyebrows, then swerved off casually to the side of his head. But all of that was to distract from his rather oblong and rounded face, which, despite being so fit, always made him seem heavier than he was.

Cindy bent down and opened up the cabinet under the sink, and began searching for the bucket.

"Oh, hey Sarah," he said casually. "You seen Clark yet?"

"Clark!" Sarah said, trying to act surprised.

"It's okay; I told him I let the secret out about Clark," Cindy said, turning back to reach far into the cabinet.

"Not yet," she lied.

"Here you go," Cindy said, handing Jackson the bucket from under the sink. "I told you not to make Ricky do a keg stand!"

"Tim and Roger *made* him. I just held him up," Jackson smiled. "Figured if he wanted to party, he should get the full experience." Ricky made a gurgling sound from the yellow couch in the living room. Jackson turned to leave.

"Wait," Cindy said. "Who invited Rachel?"

"Uhhh," Jackson muttered for a moment, but instead of answering, he walked to Ricky with the bucket.

"Ricky's getting the full experience all right," Sarah said, smiling.

"There, done," Cindy said abruptly, turning Sarah to face the mirror. "What do you think?"

Orange and blue surrounded Sarah's eyes, her cheeks were flush with pink, and her lips glossed enough to reflect the light into people's eyes.

"It looks great!" Sarah said, much to Cindy's delight. Though Sarah didn't have the nerve to tell her, it was a bit more than she preferred, and for a moment, she thought she was looking at someone else in the mirror, someone she hadn't seen in a long time.

The girls walked out into the fray, drinking keg beer and circling the various friend groups. Sarah was finally having a bit of fun. She was even getting on well with Clark after their short but still unpleasant disagreement. And he could not stop complimenting her on her new look, every time Cindy would glow proudly at the two of them.

After half an hour had passed, Sarah and Cindy went outside to see the bonfire that Jackson had cooked up to warm the skinny dippers. All four of them, Tim, Roger, Angela, and Jennifer, shivered around the fire, covered in towels and holding their cups of beer close to the chest.

Ricky sat in a chair on the porch, his large frame glasses dangling from the side of his face as he drooled over a bucket of slop.

Sarah stood by Clark but couldn't help to notice Jennifer had been inching closer and closer to him. Clark was oblivious, though he did step away when she attempted placing her head on his shoulder. All the while, the fire burned comfortably into the cold night sky, casting shadows and light onto everyone's faces.

Sarah turned to Tim, wrapped tightly in a blanket and whose lips were a deep blue. "So, who won the game of chicken?" His mouth began to move, but practically nothing came of it.

"I'd say they all lost," an unfortunately familiar voice mocked as it traveled and stopped at the other side of the fire. It was Rachel Crawford, Guthrie's Cheer Team Captain. Her pretentiously disgusted face illuminated from across the bonfire. "Just look at them; they're

popsicles." The group of frozen teens suddenly had a hint of red on their pale blue faces.

"Who invited you again, Rachel?" Cindy asked.

"Angela, of course."

Angela's face became even redder as the other frozen teens looked over at her. Rachel paid the question no mind. Despite its implication that no one wanted her there.

"What happened to your face?" she said, turning to Sarah. "If you wanted to cover up those runny black eyes, you should have come to me. Maybe then you wouldn't look like a clown."

Cindy looked down, embarrassed at what she had thought was a great 'look.' Sarah clenched her fists.

"So how is it that the son — sons," Rachel corrected, "of a Police Chief, can have a keg party so late on a Friday? Or is he really so incompetent not to notice?"

"Will you shut up?" Cindy asked.

"It's okay, Cindy," Clark said solemnly. "Our dad is out setting up a search party. Do any of you know Tonya Baker? She's a freshman."

"Yeah, that's Mr. Baker's daughter!" Jennifer said, nearly warming up on the spot from the chance of gossip. "What happened?"

"She went missing on Thursday," Jackson said, poking the firewood and pushing it around with a stick, "never came home."

"That's awful."

"That must be why Principal Farley taught history today," said Cindy. "He must have been out looking for her. I'm surprised they didn't announce it during morning announcements at school." She turned to Sarah. "And I totally forgot to tell you about it at work yesterday."

But before Sarah could ask Cindy how she could forget something like that, Ricky got up from his chair on the porch, his bucket firmly held under his shoulder. He stumbled down the porch steps and sat crisscrossed by the fire with the rest of the party. Rachel's lip curled at his presence.

"I know a bit about it," he slurred, then promptly retched into the bucket. "Sorry,..." He looked around at everyone's confused faces. "My sister, Jamie — Tonya's her best friend. They walk home from school every day since our houses are so close. We live just a few blocks that way on Gurby Street." Ricky attempted to point towards the road but quickly grasped back at the bucket, pausing with his head in the bucket before continuing. His words rebounded out. "Jamie told me Tonya wanted to walk a bit in the woods. They wanted to see if any flowers have bloomed yet," he pulled his head from the bucket "— which I think is crazy because it's still freezing out." Ricky barfed into the bucket. "Sorry..."

"Um, I-I have to go," Rachel said, holding her hand to her mouth and running back to her car at the front of the cabin.

Ricky adjusted his large frame glasses and looking around the group.

Cindy choked, holding back a laugh. Angela and Jennifer gagged, looking as though they would have liked to follow Rachel, had they not needed the fire.

"Well, Tonya and my sister were looking all over the place for a flower, and by the time Jamie found something, Tonya was gone. Just disappeared... like... like..." Ricky retched over the bucket, spewing into the fire. Everyone jumped back in disgust.

Tim and Roger laughed, already back to their unfrozen selves. Cindy, Jennifer, and Angela looked horrified, and Sarah tried her best not to puke as well. The smell from the fire was awful.

Jackson got up off the ground and lifted Ricky from the ground. "Okay, let's get you back up in your chair, huh."

Ricky flung his arm around Jackson's shoulder and managed to let out a faint and disheartening, "okay."

Just as Jackson and Ricky reached the top step, lights blared through the cabin windows into the backyard. Jackson put his hand up, covering his eyes.

"Cops!" a teen from inside yelled as the party scattered.

Officer Jones walked down the hill to the right of the cabin. He beamed his flashlight on each of their faces, including a few of the other teens, who were either too drunk or too committed pretending to be, to run off when they saw headlights.

"What do we have going on here?" Jones shined the light at Jackson and Ricky on the porch. Ricky was just barely hanging onto Jackson's shoulder. "How old is he?"

"21.." Jackson said quickly.

"16," Ricky muttered without thinking.

"Wait 'til the Chief finds out about this," Jones sighed with a big white fangy grin. A toothpick hung from his lip as if it could fall any moment. "Chief's boy having a party while he's away, tsk tsk tsk."

"Is he here?" asked Jackson, finally setting Ricky down in the corner chair.

"No, your father's out looking for that Tamya girl with Mr. Baker."

"You mean Tonya?" Jennifer corrected.

"Shut it you," he said, withdrawn. "I've always wanted to see how many we can fit in the holding cell." He cast the light towards Clark, who was doing his best to hide his face. "And look here, it's the other son."

Another car pulled up to the cabin. Sarah could hear Clark sigh; he must have thought his dad, Chief Parker, had arrived. But instead, a stout black woman in an officer's uniform came jogging down the hill. "You called in, said it was important?" Officer Halford snapped at Officer Jones as he beamed the light at her. "Get that out of my face!"

He lowered the flashlight.

"Is it the girl?" she asked before looking around and seeing what and who the party left.

"Mrs. Crawford was right about a party of underage drinking at the Chief's cabin," he smirked.

Rachel looked embarrassed.

Officer Halford smacked him in the shoulder. "Don't you think we should be doing more important things, like looking for that girl?"

"Well, sure, but..."

Officer Jones was cut short. A blood-curdling scream reverberated from Lost Woods and all around the valley that surrounded Lost Lake. Everyone stayed silent... and still... Sarah could feel her heartbeat growing louder and louder with every passing moment, a horrific realization burning into her mind. And just as everyone had stayed silent, they suddenly began to talk all at once.

"What was that?"

"Was that Tonya?"

"I thought Ricky said she went missing in the woods by Gurby Street."

"Sarah," Cindy whispered to her. "Are you okay?"

Sarah could feel the blood rushing from her face. Clark looked to her as well, hearing Cindy's whisper, and suddenly his eyes widened.

"MAGGIE!" Sarah screamed. She ran quickly to the bushy path at the edge of Lost Woods. It was pitch black, and as much as Sarah wanted to run into the dark, she knew she would be lost the moment she entered.

"MAGGIE!" she yelled into the woods. The yell dissipated into nothing. The hollowness of the trees in the dark made her feel empty.

Cindy and Clark came running up behind her.

"Maggie?" Cindy asked, out of breath. "You mean Tonya, right? That must have been Tonya? She's out in the woods, just like Ricky said."

Clark pulled Sarah into his arms.

"Maggie's in the woods," Clark said.

Officer Halford jogged up to them breathlessly. "Your sister's in the woods too?"

Sarah nodded.

"Come on, then," she said, grabbing Sarah's arm gently. "I've got Officer Jones calling it in right now; you should come with me to the truck."

"I'll come too," Cindy said.

"No more," Halford said, looking to Clark.

Sarah pulled away from Clark's arms and looked at him with teary eyes. His face said it all. *We'll find her*, it said.

Sarah, Cindy, and Halford got into the Police Bronco parked in front of the Parker's Cabin.

"What are they doing here?" Officer Jones growled.

Officer Halford gave him a look. "Get in, Jones. We'll leave your car here."

"Any of you got a light?" Jones asked, grabbing a cigarette from a hatch under the radio and rolling down the window.

"They're teenagers; I don't expect they have—"

But Cindy had already nervously reached out a lighter.

Jones grunted, winking into the rearview mirror at Cindy, in the most polite gesture any of them had seen from him. Halford shook her head.

After traveling down the dark road of Braebury Lane for some time, they happened upon another Bronco. As their headlights passed, Sarah could just make out the word Chief on the side, along with the strange Guthrie crest of two snakes wrapped around an apple.

"Looks like he's already here," said Halford. She cranked the window down as Chief Parker walked up to them. "You find anything?"

Chief Parker leaned his elbows up against the window. He looked like an older, weathered version of Clark, without the warm smile. A thick bristly beard scratched against his uniform's collar.

"Got a call from the Bramley's that there was a bit of screaming going on out here, thought I'd check up on it — see if it's young Miss Baker."

"Where is Mr. Baker?" she asked, looking behind him as if Sarah's history teacher would just appear near the Chief's Bronco.

"Oh, he went home. He's had a rough couple days, as you can imagine."

Chief Parker looked back into the cab where Sarah and Cindy sat. "What are they doing?"

"Sarah seems to think it might have been Maggie that screamed."

"Now, why would she think that?" the Chief asked, somehow managing to look completely unsurprised.

"Maggie was in the woods," Sarah said urgently, still in shock, almost feeling as though the words she was saying weren't real.

"And why was she in the woods?"

Sarah looked at Cindy, who was just as keen to hear what Sarah had to say as everyone else. She couldn't look at her as she said it. "I tried to trick her into going... to the party." Cindy's mouth was open, but she didn't say a word.

"She didn't want to go... and... and, she decided to head back home... through the woods."

"Yeah, Chief!" Officer Jones began. "Your boys were hosting a drinking party while you were away!" Halford smacked him in the shoulder.

The Chief ignored him. "Do you recognize this, Sarah?" Chief Parker held out a silver flashlight with a dark wooden switch, her initials just visible on the hilt.

Sarah's eyes widened and she nodded slowly. *It was the flashlight. It was Maggie who screamed.*

"Alright, Jones," Chief Parker said, "You and Halford continue searching. But first, I want you to take these girls home and write up a quick report. It looks like we have another girl missing."

"I'm searching too!" Sarah said.

"You'll do as I said." Chief Parker's tone was unwavering.

"It's my sister!" she yelled. "You can't just keep me from looking." Sarah was fuming; her knuckles were turning white.

Cindy sat quietly in the seat next to her, looking at the floor of the Bronco.

"You are to stay safely at home until we find your sister and Tonya. If I see or hear that you have gone searching for Maggie, you'll be staying the night in a cell. And that goes for you too, Cindy."

"Chief—" Halford started.

"I don't want to hear it!"

Chief Parker smacked the back of the Bronco, and Officer Halford drove off with Sarah and Cindy reluctantly in the cab.

"How could you just sit there?" Sarah snapped at Cindy.

"What was I supposed to do? He wasn't going to change his mind!"

"You could have at least stood up for me? Maggie's out there! She needs help!" Sarah was tearing up again, though this time she could feel the mascara running down her face.

"Girls!" Halford yelled. "I suggest you sit silently."

"Thank you!" Jones snarled.

"You shut it too," Halford said, then turned around to face Sarah. "Listen, the Chief's just got your safety in mind... He just wants what's best for you."

Sarah stared out the window at the silhouetted trees passing by, wondering where Maggie was; if she was safe. She had to do something; she had to search for her, anything that would end this nightmare.