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Young Adult

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(6 Chapters)

## DARWINIAN MYSTICS: BOOK OF THE NORTH

by

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### PROLOGUE

The sun had been down for hours when the office door snapped open and the visitor scurried in unannounced, “We think we’ve found the Book of the North.”

The man behind the desk looked up and silently evaluated the statement for a moment before replying, “Where?”

“Lincoln, Maine.”

“Lincoln, Maine. . .” The man behind the desk contemplated this information, “Is it hidden?”

“We’ve taken the usual precautions.”

“Well done. Keep the Book secure and under constant surveillance. We can’t afford to lose another one.”

With the sharp click of the closing door, the visitor left as quickly as he had arrived.

## CHAPTER 1

*Who's going to love me now?* I can't believe that's the first stupid thought that came to mind. It sounds so desperate. The question keeps creeping back into my head, though, like some obnoxious troll.

I can't keep the tears from streaming down my face as I saddle my horse. My breath comes in shattered waves. I try to push the emotion down by focusing on each clasp, but the harder I try to hold on, the more the world around me begins to blur. ~~The ground rolls under my feet. The sky swims over my head.~~ Shadow knows something is wrong and turns his large head to nuzzle my shoulder. Giving his tail an agitated swish, he snorts and shifts his weight from one foot to another. A familiar pressure tightens in my chest, and a fog descends over my brain. I can't fall apart right now. I need to pull myself together. I stand there for a moment, burying my face in Shadow's coat, breathing deeply. His familiar, musky smell calms me a little. Then, with one swift movement, I place a foot in the stirrup and fling myself up into the saddle. This is where I feel strong. This is where I feel free. Everything will be ok.

Bing!

I tense immediately at the sound of the text alert. Pulling my phone out of my back pocket, I open the message: WHERE ARE YOU?!!!

I can barely hold back the string of profanities flowing through my mind as I read Mom's message, so I shut off the phone. Ignoring her means there will be hell to pay later, but I can't deal with her emotional manipulation right now. I need to clear the confusion in my head. I need to loosen the knot in my chest. Shadow prances underneath me. He's ready to run. Giving him the reins and clicking my tongue, he takes off down the trail.

Shadow's thick neck pumps with every lunge forward. He races along the dirt path, hooves digging into the moist earth, tossing up soil and autumn leaves. The air is crisp and chills my lungs. The veil between horse and rider begins to drop ~~and~~, my heart pounds ~~ing~~ to the rhythm of Shadow's stride. The trail winds its way through the trees, ~~the green pines standing~~ ~~vigil against the changing canvas of maples and oaks~~. The sunlight slices through the branches, vibrating light that cuts through the canopy.

Commented [NM1]: unclear

As Shadow races through the woods ~~the world around me becomes a blur pierced only by~~ ~~the transient sunlight—the transient light blurs to another light...~~

\*\*\*\*

The ~~afternoon sunlight reminds me of the~~ ~~light in the~~ doctor's office: ~~the way the~~ ~~afternoon sun~~ cut through the blinds, sending shards of light across the psychiatrist's desk. I ~~sat~~ ~~was~~ mesmerized by the little rainbows of refracted light divided by the crystal paper weight. Perhaps I had gone into shock. I just sat there staring at the paper weight, the exhausted image of Atlas etched into it. I felt like ~~Atlas~~ ~~that man~~, straining under the weight of the world.

There wasn't anyone waiting in the lobby when we arrived twenty minutes earlier. The

office assistant was a mousy brunette. She worked quickly and quietly. We signed in and took a seat. Neither of us spoke as mom flipped through the latest edition of Glamour magazine. I gave an involuntary sigh as I wiggled in my chair.

“Amber!” my mother snapped in a hushed tone.

“What?” The question came out in a confused, almost inaudible squeak.

My mother gave me a sharp glance over the pages of her magazine, but before she could say anything else, an older women ~~came down the hall~~ arrived with a file in her hand.

~~She was~~ I thought her frightening. ~~Her~~ bleach blond hair stood on end like Albert Einstein and she wore a large grey muumuu that made her look like a giant flying squirrel. She carried herself with indisputable authority as she led a woman and her young son back to her assistant.

“Give them some samples and set an appointment for next month.” ~~s~~She said in ~~had~~ a thick German accent, but her tone was dull, as though bored with the entire transaction. She exchanged the file in her hand for a new one. She retrieved the glasses that hung on a chain around her neck and peered through them as she opened the file.

“Amber?” she said looking up at me. It sounded more like an accusation than a question.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Come with me.”

As I rose, so did my mother.

“Just Amber.” ~~T~~The doctor said, ~~easting an icy stare in mom’s direction~~ ~~staring my mom~~ back into her seat. Mom sat back down and with a broad sweep of her arm, indicated that I should follow the doctor. As I walked down the hall, I could hear my mother’s irritation in the steady swish slap of each glossy page she turned.

**Commented [NM2]:** suggest making this more animated... makes the whole scene move more and more tense... e.g. and was about to make some rejoinder but stopped herself at the arrival of ...

**Commented [NM3]:** need to introduce the most apparent feature first here.. I'd say imposing or large or intimidating or something of that nature...

**Commented [NM4]:** I'd rather SEE this... if you show it instead of tell it... for instance, in how she walked... did she march with clipped steps like a Nazi SS soldier? What is her body language? Use metaphor to create a real vision of this woman

**Commented [NM5]:** Could describe this exchange... it is telling too ... how does she treat her underling?

**Commented [NM6]:** How? How did she peer? Can use metaphor here too...

**Commented [NM7]:** Did Amber start or flinch or fight from flinching at the mention of her name? how does the woman “look” at Amber... look is such a weak verb... find another verb to describe how she looked at Amber

**Commented [NM8]:** What kind of reaction did her mom enact? frustration? open acquiescence? nervousness? this can give us a little information about the mother too...

**Commented [NM9]:** Give us better choreography...she is following the doctor ... another chance to describe how she walks...

The door to the office was open and the doctor let me pass as she reached for the door to close it. For a moment, I wondered where I should sit, the chair in front of the desk or the small sofa just beyond it. My options were soon limited, however, when the doctor sat behind a large mahogany desk. I moved to the upholstered chair in front of it. As I sat, the cushion sank down much further than I expected. I felt trapped and small.

“So why are you here?”

“Because my mother scheduled an appointment--”

“Yes, but why?” ~~her second question felt impatient, almost demanding~~ she cut in, clearly irritated. Everything was starting to feel very convoluted. There was something artificial about the whole thing: the sunken seat; the imposing desk; the big haired, muumuu wearing, sharp toned, glaring doctor. It felt like it was all designed to intimidate.

“You do know why you are here, don’t you?” Her questions crashed through the inner fog that was forming in my brain.

“Yes,” I said quietly. “I am having trouble concentrating, ~~anxious~~. I can’t focus.”

“Why? Has anything changed recently?” she boomed in that harsh accented voice.

I felt like I was sliding on the edge of a slippery slope. *Don’t say it. Don’t say it.* Then I ~~opened my mouth~~ blurted, “I’m hearing things. Sometimes I see something move out of the corner of my eye, but when I turn, nothing is there.”

The doctor scribbled some notes in my file, and without looking up asked, “What kind of things are you hearing?” (what is her voice like now? more analytical? Less irritated? Excited?)

“Just murmurs. I don’t know. I can’t quite tell what it is, but it’s there.” I knew this was going bad. I knew I sounded insane, but if I wanted to get better, I needed to be honest.

The doctor stopped writing, set her pen down, and folded her hands ~~and~~ lifted her stone

eyes ~~lifted towards to look directly at~~ me, “You know these voices are not real, right?” Her voice was stern.

I stopped to think. Did I call them voices?

“I don’t know, I . . .”

“They are not real,” she insisted with a little more force. She picked up her pen and made some more notes.

I contemplated her words in silence. Maybe she was right, maybe it was all my imagination. It’s just . . . it seemed so real.

“I want you to fill both of these prescriptions, and start with a half dose for the first week.

One is a mood stabilizer, the other is an anti-psychotic.”

~~\*\*\*\*~~

~~A~~ chocolate lab races out of the woods, barking as it breaks through the tree line. Shadow stops short and rears. Leaning into the stirrups, I grab his mane, “whoa . . . easy boy.” I stroke his neck as he settles back onto all fours.

“Oh man, sorry about that,” a young man jogs out of the woods where the dog first appeared.

Shadow snorts and shakes his head, stomping his hooves in protest. “Easy boy,” I reach out and pat Shadow’s neck once again. When he seems composed, I turn on the mysterious intruder. “You really need to control that dog of yours!” My words are laced with a bitterness I don’t really intend.

The young man’s easy going demeanor becomes stiff and defensive. “Hey look, I’m sorry. He wasn’t trying to hurt anybody. He’s just excited. I’m sure he just wanted to run with you.” The ~~young man boy now stands there,~~ glares ~~ing~~ at me, daring me to challenge his

interpretation of events. His gaze rubs an already open wound. I can feel the tears starting to prick at the corners of my eyes again.

The stranger seems to soften a little. He gives a sharp whistle and slaps his outer thigh, “Come Winston.” The dog turns and races to his side, sitting obediently. I take the opportunity to shift in my saddle and look down the trail as if gauging the distance to my destination. Taking a deep breath, I push the tears back and try to look self-assured.

“Sorry, you just surprised us. That’s all.” I let Shadow draw closer to Winston, ~~T~~the horse drop~~s~~ping his head and inhale~~s~~ing deeply. The lab jumps back, crouching and wagging his tail, giving an enthusiastic yelp ~~and~~, bearing his teeth in a silly dog smile.

“The name is James, by the way.” The young man extends his hand in my direction. I reach out and give a timid shake while my brain tries to calculate the right amount of pressure to apply: soft and welcoming? Firm and independent? Definitely not weak and uncommitted . . . too late, the action is over before my brain can decide on a tactic. James doesn't seem to notice.

“Don’t you go to Lincoln High School?” ~~h~~e asks.

“Yeah.” There was something vaguely familiar about him.

“I believe we have English together . . . Ms. Tuttle?”

“Oh right,” I say with a nod and ~~a~~ smile, I am totally faking it, but it’s not like I’m a snob. School just started last week, and as a freshman, I’ve been pretty nervous. As a general rule, I keep my head low and try to avoid any drama.

I have the same urge to do that now, but before I have the chance to politely excuse myself, James continues, ~~:-~~

“At Pinecrest Farm,” I can see he’s clueless, ~~:-~~ “~~A~~bout 10 minutes down the trail there.”

“Oh, ~~H~~he seems pleased, “I’m surprised our paths haven’t crossed before. Winston

**Commented [NM10]:** How? Is he now friendly? Smiling?

**Commented [NM11]:** What kind of smile? There are a bazillion kinds of smiles... essentially the word “smile” means nothing... it can be a mean smile, a friendly open smile, a guarded smile, a tense smile, an evil smile...

loves these trails. You don't ride much?"

"Every day actually, but not out here." I feel awkward as I look into his gentle brown eyes. "I do show jumping, so I practice . . . a lot." Why do I sound like such an idiot?

"So . . . you practice jumping . . . over things . . . ?" There's an edge of humor under his serious expression.

"Right," I said, "on horseback." I add feeling a little ridiculous.

"I see." He smiles.

I'm trying to think of a witty comeback when a large brown mass moves between the trees in the distance. It's slow and lumbering with muscles undulating under thick fur, and then it's gone. I search, but I can't see it anywhere. James turns to look in the same direction, but when he looks back at me, he's obviously confused.

"I thought I saw something," the hair stands up on the back of my neck.

We both pause a moment longer, watching, listening. James turns to Winston and then eyes Shadow, quietly.

"Well, the animals don't seem to be concerned," he says.

"True." I still feel uneasy. "I could have sworn . . ."

"Still, it's probably safer if we stick together." His concern sounds manufactured, but his smile is absolutely adorable.

I don't think I am hiding my relief well, but I try to appear indifferent. I already skipped jump practice, and I ignored mom's text. Although I don't relish the idea of being eaten by some mysterious woodland creature, I would rather strike off into the unknown than face the rage that is waiting for me at home. The idea of confronting her renews the tight, twisting feeling in my chest. I close my eyes, and I slowly inhale and exhale. The air stumbles in and out of my lungs in

an uneven flow.

When I open my eyes, James is watching me with this intense blend of curiosity and compassion that makes me uncomfortable. I look back down at the ground.

“You know where I like to go when I need to relax?” James begins a casual stroll down the path, “The stone circle.”

“Stone circle?” I have no idea what he is taking about.

“You’ve never seen it?” He smiles in my direction. “Excellent! An adventure!” His wink promises the revelation of a great secret.

As we head to the stone circle, we talk about our classes and the hefty summer reading list. He admits he didn’t finish it. We talk about my love for horses, and he tells me the must see sights of Chicago. The idea of traveling always sparks my imagination: adventure, freedom, and excitement. We stay on the path for another twenty minutes until James suddenly veers off into the woods.

“Hey city boy, you’re not going to get us lost out here are you?”

“Nope. Scout’s honor.” He holds up his hand in a Boy Scout salute.

I’m not convinced, but I know Shadow can get me home even if James can’t.

I was expecting something like Stonehenge, but when we arrive I discover it’s just a circle of basketball size stones. A few feet away an old stone wall marks an ancient property line.

James looks at me and laughs, “Well, I’m sure it doesn’t look like much from up there.”

I humor my new friend by dismounting.

“Come here,” James waves in his direction, “I have something else to show you.” He turns and starts walking away.

“Did you drag me all the way out here to play doctor?”

James looks back at me with one eyebrow arched. The corners of his mouth turn up slightly as he tries not to laugh. He straightens his shoulders and speaks in a dignified tone, “I am deeply offended by your accusation.”

It's my turn not to laugh. It's nice being around someone like James, but I don't want him to take my growing affection the wrong way.

After walking a few paces north of the stone circle, James pulls aside some dense brush and waits for me. As I get closer, I see the wild patch of golden daffodils growing along the outer wall of an old stone foundation.

“Cool right?” He smiles.

I ~~have~~ to admit he's ~~was~~ right. I try to imagine the people who used to live here, people who probably planted a few daffodil bulbs in the front yard. The people were gone, ~~but~~ the daffodils thrived. The forest had reclaimed civilization, covering every nook and cranny with moss and ferns. It's peaceful here, like a place stuck in time, or in between time.

As I walk back to the circle, I notice other stones peeking through the debris that has settled on the forest floor. I begin to wonder if there is more to the circle than James realizes. I want to investigate, but the light is starting to change, and I know dusk is approaching.

“I should head back,” I say, not feeling committed to the decision.

James looks up at the bits of sky scattered through the tree tops. “Yeah, it's going to start getting dark soon.”

We head back the way we came. I walk with James, leading Shadow, as Winston roams the woods along the path.

“He seems to be enjoying himself,” I say with a nod in the dog's direction.

“Oh, yes. There’s much more freedom out here.” On cue, Winston spots a squirrel and takes off. James doesn’t seem worried. He has an easy confidence that I like.

For the rest of our walk, we discuss the differences between growing up in rural Maine and the suburbs of Chicago. I envy the opportunities of city life. He prefers the slow, natural pace of country life. He calls it refreshing. I call it boring. We part ways with a promise to see each other at school.

With one hand on the reins, I swing back up into the saddle and ride Shadow home. As I get closer to the house, my imagination begins to conjure the worst. I suspect my mother will be distressed to the point of a "debilitating" migraine, a state that makes her particularly volatile. I hope quiet arrival will allow me to slip in unnoticed.

When I arrive at the farm, I brush Shadow down and settle him into his stall before heading inside. I even stop to give Achilles a few friendly rubs.

As I enter through the back door, the house is quiet. Mom is obviously up in her room, lying down with the lights off, a cool face cloth over her eyes.

I silently move through the house, but as I reach the banister at the foot of the stairs, I hear my father’s lowered voice greet me from the living room, “Welcome home, Amber.” The sarcasm sends a shudder up my spine. I’m sure he received the brunt of mom’s rage, but just once I’d like him to stick up for me. I open my mouth, but before I can apologize, my father raises his hand and speaks again, “Go to your room and stay there until tomorrow.” I shut my jaw and head upstairs.

I know I deserve his cool rebuke. I’m not the type to blatantly disregard the rules. I had been out of line this afternoon. I was emotional and irrational, further evidence that my diagnosis

was correct. I'll never be more than damaged goods.

When I reach my room, I collapse on my bed. I reach for each bottle of medication sitting on the night stand, and with a swig from my water bottle, I swallow both of the little elliptical tablets.

Feeling emotionally drained, I get back up and change into a pair of shorts and a tank top then I crawl under the covers without dinner. I'm not really hungry anyway.

I'm almost asleep when I feel a cool hand touch my face. Without opening my eyes, I know it has to be my grandmother. If anyone was going to comfort me, it would be her.

When I open my eyes, though, no one is there. My hand automatically flies to my cheek, but there's nothing there either. Even the cool sensation is gone. I realize that my imagination has taken a leap off the sanity tracks, and I try to shake the odd sensation with a couple deep breaths.

As I close my eyes, I hear a muffled whispering sound. My heart leaps as my eyelids fly open. There's nothing but darkness. I feel myself instinctively curling up into the fetal position, pulling the blankets tighter. I shut my eyes with no intention of opening them until morning. The idea of speaking never crosses my mind. *It's not real. It's not real. It's not real.*

## CHAPTER 2

Morning comes too swiftly. The night had been a patchwork of insomnia and bizarre dreams that lingered ~~irretrievable~~ just below the surface of irretrievability. Despite being in bed for a good ten hours, the alarm comes too soon, and I hit the snooze button three times. I'm just about to drift back into oblivion when I hear a soft knock on the door and my grandmother speaks from the other side, "Amber?"

I take a deep breath, then project my voice through the quilt that covers my head, "Come in, Mima."

I hear the door open and close, so I pull the covers back as she sits on the bed. She softly brushes my long brown hair away from my face. "Oh, my poor little china doll. You look so fragile, today." She smiles her warm, approving smile,

Mima chuckles like she's revealing a great family secret, and I can't help but smile. "He didn't hold back. When he was mad, he let the whole world know about it, and his tongue was razor sharp." She rolls her eyes.

**Commented [NM12]:** Hmm... need a better description ... plus a better description of Mima here

“What I’m saying, pumpkin, is don’t let their labels get to you. Everyone is just making this shit up as they go along,” she whispers the profanity like we are partaking in a great conspiracy. “People haven’t changed in thousands of years. It’s just their excuses that keep changing.”

She gives my back a few comforting pats like she did when I was little.

“Here, I brought you something.” She reaches for a slim book that’s lying in her lap, “I know you’re not much into religion . . .” she pauses, sensing I’m ~~was~~ about to interrupt, so I close my mouth and let her continue, “so I thought you might like this instead.” The little book is covered with intricate artwork: strange creatures and complex knot designs. The title reads: *Celtic Devotional*.

“I found it at the bookstore. It has little daily meditations and reflections. I thought it might help you keep things in perspective. The world can only spin as fast as you let it.” She gives me one more pat on the back and ~~stands~~ to leave.

“Mima . . .”

“Yes, dear?”

“Thank you,” I tuck the little book against my chest and smile at her. I don’t really care about the contents. I just appreciate her attempt to see things my way. She’s the only one who ever tries.

After Mima leaves the room, I go into autopilot. My feet carry me through a mindless routine until I find myself sitting on a bench in the school courtyard, waiting for my best friend. When Alex arrives, I can see the concern on her face.

“Hey,” she says as she sits down next to me. “How was the doctor’s visit, yesterday?”

“A disaster.”

Alex sits quietly, waiting for details.

“I don’t really want to talk about it.” I shove newly laid mulch around with my feet. Lincoln High puts a lot of money into the courtyard, maintaining manicured hedges that wind around replicas of Greek statuary. If you ask me, it’s a bit much and looks pretentious.

“Ok,” Alex says, and we sit in silence for a couple minutes, as if she were giving me space to change my mind. When I don’t, she quickly moves on to a new topic.

“Hey, I have something for you,” she says, pulling a brochure out of her backpack.

“Paris!”

As I take it, I realize the brochure is for a study abroad program in France

“We can get all of our French credits in one summer - and shall I repeat - in Paris!” She’s beaming.

My imagination drifts a little, a wispy dance through French cafes and the salons of the Louvre, and then my practical brain harshly rejects the idea, “Sorry, I’m sure ~~M~~mom won’t approve.”

“What?! They even have scholarships, Amber. With your grades, you probably won’t even have to pay for it.”

I handed the brochure back to her, “It’s not about the money, Alex. I would miss a lot of jump practice. Mom always says, ‘A jack of all trades, a master of none.’”

“Your mom is psycho,” Alex says raising one eyebrow.

“I know,” I concede.

“Do you even like horse jumping? I mean really like it.”

“I’m good at it.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

**Commented [NM13]:** How does she say this ... need a bit more here...

I knew what she was asking, but I'm uncomfortable with the question. So, I recited my mantra: "Of course, I like it. I love horses. I'm a quick learner and a fierce competitor. Each competition I win builds my reputation, and one day I'll be the instructor, and eventually, I will have a horse farm of my own."

Alex is clearly unimpressed. "Amber, really, who has their career path mapped out at sixteen?"

"Someone who wants to get the hell out of here," the words lash out with an anger that seems to rise up from somewhere deep inside me.

"Ok, ok." Alex looks a little perplexed, and uses that soothing tone reserved for injured animals.

Damn it. Did I just have an irrational mood swing? Did I lash out without provocation? Before I can figure out what happened, Alex changes the subject. \_

"Aww crap! I forgot all about it." We have fifteen minutes before the first bell, so I grab my textbook and start working through the first set of problems with Alex.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk?" Alex pries as I work through the first problem. My muscles tense.

"I mean, you're here but . . . you're not really here. You know what I mean?"

Great, now I feel like crying. I manage to pull myself together and respond with a calm even tone: "Alex, I just want to focus on the homework, OK?"

I try to push through the Algebra, but my brain begins to grow tendrils, my thoughts branch off in random directions. Can I actually get it done before third period? What if I don't? What will happen to my grade point average? What if there's a quiz? Mom would not be happy with bad grades especially after what I pulled yesterday. Missing practice was stupid. Getting

upset and running off didn't solve anything. What kind of girl wanders around in the woods with a boy she doesn't even know? A crazy girl. A girl who sees animals, imaginary animals, lurking between the trees. Great, now I am probably just blowing it all out of proportion. I'm a teenager. Shouldn't I be rebellious and emotionally unstable? Where does normal stop and crazy start? I lean back against the bench, close my eyes, and try to focus on the warm sun on the back of my eyelids.

"Amber?" I hear Alex's voice echoing in some distant reality.

"I'm just tired Alex. I didn't sleep well." So, this is what losing your mind feels like.

"Hey," his voice snaps me back to the present. As I open my eyes, James is standing over me.

"Hi," I felt my lip curl into an involuntary smile. For a moment, I am lost in our private world, deep in the woods. Then Alex kicks my shin. "Oh James, this is Alex. Alex, this is James."

Alex glares at him, her jaw set in displeasure.

James chuckles, "We've met."

"Biology." Alex adds as she swivels towards me in an act of exclusion. Fortunately, the bell rings and the tension shatters against the shuffle of feet and book bags.

"Talk to you later," James calls out as Alex hooks her arm through mine and drags me off.

"Don't tell me you know him," Alex quips as we pass through the double doors.

"I met him in passing. Why?"

"He's kinda creepy."

"Creepy?" The idea surprises me.

“Yeah he sits in the back of class and watches everyone, doodling in his notebook. When he does speak, he asks some of the weirdest questions.”

“Weird questions?”

“He has this bizarre fascination with brain chemistry, receptors and neurons, or something like that. And, he’s always completely off topic-like he’s listening to a totally different lecture.”

“Oooo sounds dangerous.”

“I didn’t say dangerous. I said creepy.”

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As always, homeroom begins with a moment of silence. I sit still and close my eyes, I breathe deeply, trying to relax, focusing on the birds singing outside. My mind starts to drift. Fragments of last night's dream begin to surface. I remember walking in the woods . . .

*I will not be silenced.*

My heart jumps and my eyes snap open, at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. The room is still and silent with the exception of an occasional student shifting in a seat. I lift my hand to my ear, but I know I did not hear an audible whisper. It was a voice in my head. Not my voice. Not my thoughts. It was the voice of someone else.

*Am I about to have a mental breakdown right here in class?*

Now, that was my thought. That was my inner voice doing what my inner voice does best: running through a check list of consequences for every action.

I can feel the tears gathering in the corner of my eyes. I stare up at the ceiling, hoping the air will dry my eyes before I embarrass myself. My muscles tense beneath my skin. My brain feels like it is swimming through plasma. The PA system crackles to life with morning

announcements, a droning background noise to my desperation. I shut my eyes and try to breath, talking myself down from this invisible precipice. Paranoia? Schizophrenia? I tell myself it's just a chemical imbalance, nothing pharmaceuticals can't fix.

I watch the clock count down the final minutes of homeroom and bolt out the door with the bell. I crave the solitude of the restroom, the big handicap stall that will buffer me from the rest of humanity. I ignore the flow of people passing by as I push myself forward.

Once I am behind the locked door, I face myself in the mirror, looking for some sign of insanity. Is it something you can see? I splash cold water on my face. I know I'm being ridiculous, melodramatic. I simply have a biological condition, like diabetes. "Two weeks," I say to my reflection in the mirror. I take two deep breaths, dry my face with a paper towel, and step out of the stall.

I stop at the water fountain, giving the hallway enough time to fall into silence. I jump when the bell rings. *I can do this*. I stand tall, and I put one foot in front of the other.

"You're late Miss Johnson," Ms. Tuttle makes a tick on the attendance sheet as I walk through the door.

"Sorry, Ma'am." I don't try to make an excuse. She has stated a fact. It is correct. No need to draw more attention to myself.

As I turn to find a seat, I discover that James is indeed in my English class. He motions to an empty seat in front of him. He's in the last row, and the idea of disappearing in the back of the class appeals to me today. I slouch into the seat, trying to blend in with the furniture, yearning to be invisible.

I feel James lean forward and subtly reach around me. He quietly slides my composition book off my desk. I hear him open it and write something, but I pretend not to notice. Instead, I

watch Ms. Tuttle scribble the title *Atlas Shrugged* on the board.

"Does anyone know who Atlas is?" Ms. Tuttle throws out the question and scans the room for a response.

I feel James sliding my composition book back on my desk as a student in the front row begins to speak, "Wasn't he like a Greek God or something? He holds the world on his shoulders." The student lifts his copy of the book to indicate the illustration on the cover.

"OK." Ms. Tuttle turns back to the board, and I open my composition book as if to take notes.

"Celestial sphere," James speaks up from behind me, "He's a Titan and he holds the celestial sphere on his shoulders."

Ms. Tuttle turns and looks at James. A pleasant smile spreads across her face. "Yes, exactly." She turns to write on the board again.

I look down at my notebook and see a short note scribbled on the first empty page:

Everything OK? If you need anything, call -- followed by his number and his first name printed in thin slanted letters.

~~A warm feeling~~The warmth of relief and appreciation spreads through me, ~~like a sense of relief and appreciation all mixed together~~. I turn the page and start taking notes from the board.

As I step off the bus, I'm relieved to see that mom's car is not in the driveway. I know this only delays the inevitable, but for now, I'm safe.

I unlocked the front door and push it through the silence that waits on the other side. Something is wrong. I drop my book bag by the entry as I close the door behind me. "Mima?"

The house is quiet. At the foot of the stairs, I call up to the second floor, "Mima?" Again,

the house is silent. I go to the kitchen, but no one is there, either. Then I see the note on the refrigerator:

*Amber,*

*Taking your grandmother to the hospital. I'll call when I know more.*

*Mom*

I feel my heart crumple like a wad of paper about to be discarded. ~~Call me when she knows more?~~ How could she just dismiss me like that? Know more about what? What was she trying to protect me from? That was so like her, trying to control everything: even information.

I pull my cell phone from my backpack and hit speed dial one. Naturally, I get her voice mail. I try to keep my voice calm. It trembles as I hold back my accusations. “Mom, I just found your note. Is everything ok? What happened to Mima?” I hit *end call*, ~~with a shaking my hands~~ speed dial two. Dad’s cell phone goes directly to voice mail, too. This time, I don’t bother to leave a message. I feel smothered in systematic isolation.

~~P~~The panic begins to set in again. I try to make excuses for why they will not answer, until the excuses become even more frightening than the idea of simple neglect. I need a distraction, and studying is not going to work.

I go to my room and change into my running gear. I need to push myself. I need to exhaust the energy that threatens to rip my mind apart. I jog back down the stairs and once outside, I make a half-hearted attempt to stretch before launching into a run.

I'm not a distance runner. I'm a sprinter. As a competition rider, I am methodical and controlled. As a runner, I have one objective, to feel the high of breaking through barriers. For me, running is not about endurance, it's about adrenaline.

The crisp fall air chills my lungs as I follow the horse path I ~~had taken~~ took the day

before. I feel my muscles fatiguing as I push for more speed. I know the resistance won't last long. I keep pushing. Suddenly, there it is. The pain suddenly vanishes and my legs move beneath me like disembodied limbs. My heart pounds ~~sing~~ against my chest. I suck air in and out like ~~oxygenated~~ fuel. My pulse pounds through my ears in time with my footsteps crunching through the autumn leaves. Smash, crunch, pulse. Smash, crunch, pulse. Smash, crunch, pulse. Smash, Smash, Smash. Suddenly, I realize that I am not alone.

I hear it bounding in great strides behind me. I can hear it crashing through the underbrush. I'm afraid to look back. *Run, run, run!* Iron fingernails scrape through my lungs, and my legs begin to shake; my runner's high is collapsing into exhaustion. The adrenaline will soon be spent. Whatever it is, it's gaining on me. I can hear its gurgling breath panting behind me. I know my next move is inevitable.

I stop in mid-stride, turning to face my pursuer. ~~But~~ there is nothing there. The early September breeze tosses the leaves along the path I ~~had~~ just ~~run~~.

I lower my head, collapsing at the waist, holding the stitch in my side. Stupid, I reprimand myself. I'm stuck somewhere between crying and laughing at myself. What the hell is happening to me?

As I stand there, the footprints begin to appear: massive ones. They press the leaves into the damp soil as they approach one slow step at a time. I can see the padded imprint of large animal feet with extended claws. Fear crushes my chest.

"That's it! I've had enough of you!" The thought fills my brain and my muscles tense as I prepare for impact. "Bring it," I growl through clenched teeth. A stench-filled blast of air hits my face as I hear the bellowing roar. I close my eyes, clench my fist, and stand my ground. I would rather be ripped apart than live in fear.

I feel a vibration building inside of me: rolling and dark. It fills my core. The intensity shuts down my mind, and my limbs start to shake. I open my mouth and scream. A wave of sound rushes out of my lungs, blasting leaves from the path like a shock wave. I scream until there is no more air in my lungs. I stand, hands still clasped, gasping for air. There is no sound, no movement.

The pain of my clenched fingers begins to register in my brain, and I finally let go. I relax and shake the tension out of my arms. The tears I ~~had been~~was holding back ~~now~~begin to stream down my face. ~~unimpeded~~, ~~uncontrollably~~.

I walk home in a daze. What the hell did I just experience? I search for a logical explanation, but I find no comfort in science and psychology. As I walk, that familiar ball of tension begins to twist in my chest. Panic begins to set in again. *Just take the medicine*, I ~~start to~~ repeat to myself. Maybe, just maybe, I'm a little crazy. Maybe, it's all a trick of a twisted brain. Maybe, I created something out of nothing. Maybe, it was a distortion of sun and shade and autumn wind. Maybe. Maybe, I could make it all go away.

Once home, I retrieve a bottle of water from the refrigerator. *Can dehydration lead to hallucinations?* As I crack the seal with a twist, I hear mom's key in the door.

“Amber?”

“Here!” I call from the kitchen. As I walk into the living room, I stop in my tracks. I realize my grandmother is not with her. “Where’s Mima?”

“Maybe we should sit.” ~~M~~mom motions to the sofa.

“I don’t need to sit.” I watch her nervously.

Mom sighs and sets her purse down. “Your grandmother is scheduled for heart surgery tomorrow.”

**Commented [NM14]:** This is not as clear as it could be... did the “beast” disappear? And if so, when? Did Amber really scream or just in her imagination?

“What?!” I was prepared for some diabetic complication, ~~but heart surgery?~~

“She started having chest pain and we took her to the hospital. There is plaque buildup in her arteries . . .” her sentence starts to trail off as she starts to withdraw. This always happens when she's stressed.

“Is that why you didn't answer my call?” I try to keep my tone neutral, but when I see that defensive look in her eyes, I see I miscalculated.

“Not answer YOUR call? Why yes, at the time I was concerned about my mother dying. What was YOUR excuse for not answering MY text, yesterday?”

And, there it was. The transgression I knew I would pay for. “I'm sorry,” I croak.

“OH YOU'RE SORRY!” Her arms wave in animated hysteria. “Damn it, Amber. You can be so selfish sometimes. I was worried sick about you. You know you need help. You can't just go running off like that. We have to deal with this issue . . . we need to work with professionals.”

I want to object. I want to tell her I needed time alone in the woods with my horse. Instead, I take a sip of water.

“Well?!” She stands there glaring at me.

“I just went for a ride.” My voice is soft.

“I know that.” ~~S~~he stomps off towards the kitchen. “I checked the stables.” I wonder if I am supposed to follow her or if this is my chance to escape. “Don't let it happen, again!” That's the signal. The conversation is over, and I quickly retreat to my room.

“Don't forget,” she calls behind me as I go, “the trainer is coming today.”

Of course. Even with her mother in the hospital, she would make sure that preparations for greatness went on as usual.

## CHAPTER 3

As soon as I walk into the barn, Achilles pins his ears back and starts tossing his head.

“Really? You, too?”

Although his ears stand up, I can tell he is still in an agitated mood. I scratch his cheek and the blaze on his forehead before I move away to retrieve his tack. When I return to his stable, he steps aside to let me enter, but I can sense the limits of his cooperation, today.

He bloats his belly as I try to saddle him, “Knock it off, Achilles.” I give his stomach a quick pop with my knuckle. Although he lets the air out, he starts chomping at his bit. I stand to face him, my fists against my hips. “Horse, are you challenging me?” He snorts and looks away, still chewing on the metal in his mouth. I ~~cannot~~ tell this ~~is~~ was going to be a rough ride.

When I lead Achilles to the practice ring, my mom and my trainer are already waiting for me, exchanging words in hushed tones. As I approach, they steal a glimpse at me. Mom’s face is set in resignation. My trainer looks almost sympathetic.

“Hi Jeff,” ~~M~~my voice feels flat and defeated.

“Hi kiddo.” Jeff gives me an encouraging pat on the back as I pass by. Something has changed. I am no longer his star, but his charity case. Achilles seems to notice too, balking at my lead, refusing to move forward. I turn to face his resistance. There is defiance in his dark eyes. He tosses his head, and I sigh. It’s so hard to stay strong when everyone else is making it difficult.

“Why don’t you try lunging him, first?” Jeff suggests, walking up and patting the horse on the shoulders. “He seems a bit moody, today.” I wonder if he is talking about Achilles or talking about me.

I walk Achilles back out of the ring, and grab a lead. For the next twenty minutes, I instruct the horse to walk, trot, and gallop.

“So, Achilles, this is what we’ve come to? Running around in circles?” He flicks his ears in my direction, listening as he does another loop.

When we return to the ring, Achilles is more cooperative and he jumps with his usual precision, but his agitated mood is still evident as he wrings his tail. Mom and Jeff watch from the fence.

I try to assert myself with a strong hand on the reigns and a firm grip with my heels, but Achilles nicks the next jump, dropping the rail.

“Amber! What are you doing?” The hostility in mom’s voice sets off an explosion of anger in my head. Of course, she’s going to blame me for the bad attitude of her horse. I clench my jaw and try to focus. As I round the last turn, Achilles pulls up short and shies away from the jump.

“Amber!” Her rebuke is clipped and sharp. She turns and walks back towards the house. I can feel the rage rising as I hold back tears and my hands start to shake.

Riding over to Jeff, I see his mouth curl into a reassuring smile, “Don’t worry, kid. I’m sure she’s just worried about your grandmother.”

“Yeah, she doesn’t handle stress well.” We both know we are making excuses to alleviate the tension.

“And what about you? How do you feel?” His ~~voicequestion~~ is gentle.

“Staying busy is the best solution for me. It keeps me from over-thinking the situation.”  
Actually, it’s the only solution I know. Is there really any other way?

“OK, then. Let’s give it another try.”

I sit up straight in the saddle and take Achilles once around the ring. I remind myself that I have been doing this since I was five: take the reins, on your toes, stop thinking, stop feeling, just do it. I take a deep breath as we complete the canter and head towards the first jump. We clear it. We land solid, but something just doesn’t feel right. I feel a little off. The ride feels unnatural, and I am second guessing my abilities.

We’re nearing the end of the second round when my chest tightens, and I feel lightheaded. My vision begins to blur. I inhale deeply, trying to push the wave back. I exhale hard, trying to release the anxiety. I try to hang on. It’s a battle I’m losing. The more I try to fight it, the more intense the disorientation becomes. There’s a flash of white light.

When I open my eyes, my head is throbbing. “Ow.” I instinctively reach for my head and find my helmet. For a moment, I ~~had forgotten~~ I was riding.

“Don’t move,” Jeff warns. “You fell off the horse.”

“Does mom know?”

“No one knows Amber. It just happened. But I do have to tell her. Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Yeah, my head.”

Jeff releases the strap under my chin, takes off my helmet, and begins to feel the back of my head, “You weren't knocked unconscious from the fall. It looked like you blacked out and then fell. But we'll need to watch for signs of concussion.”

“Yeah, I felt a little dizzy--must be low blood sugar or something.” I slowly sit up.

“OK, Amber. Let's call it a day.” This time I don't argue. I am resigned to my limitations . . . at least for the moment.

Shadow nickers from his stall as I lead Achilles back into the stables. I scratch his nose and give him a gentle smile as I go by.

Shadow watches with his usual patience as I lead Achilles to his stall. As I begin our usual grooming ritual, my mind jumps from one random thought to another. It's distracting and irritating, but I know that grooming is the sort of repetitive, concentrated labor that will sooth my overactive imagination. My hand grips the brush, my arm swings back and forth, the bristles slide through the smooth coat. Touch, slide, release. Touch, slide, release. I relax into the rhythm.

As I work, the barn door squeaks and I can hear footsteps approaching. I know it's Mom coming to give me a detailed critique of my riding performance. Shadow whinnies a greeting, and I turn to face her judgment. No one is there. I look at Shadow for confirmation. He's watching me. I exhale in frustration and go back to grooming Achilles.

“Amber,” the voice is soft and distant and unrecognizable. I freeze.

“Amber,” This time Achilles raises his head, ears rotating. He hears it. He can't find it, but he hears it. I'm not crazy. I hug his muscular neck. Despite his obnoxious behavior, today, Achilles is a good horse. Although Shadow is my joy and freedom, Achilles is my strength and

discipline. I need his strength right now.

I stand there for a moment listening until I feel Achilles relax. As I begin to groom his withers, something hits the side of the barn with a bang. The tack swings on the hooks, and I jump. Achilles rears, slamming his hooves against the wall, snorting in protest. A disembodied growl bellows through the barn, sending both horses into a frenzy. I want to run, but my instinct to protect the horses keeps me frozen in place, looking and listening. I feel anger swelling inside of me.

"Not this time," I whisper.

I leave the stall and stand in the middle of the barn. I call to Shadow, soothing him. Achilles has regained his composure, but he is tense and alert, just as I am.

"Amber," the gentle voice calls again. This time, I do see something. A soft white fog begins to gather at the back of the barn. It condenses into a wispy form, a cloaked figure with no distinguishable features. It slowly moves forward.

My pulse pounds through my ears. "Not this time!" I call out as I stand my ground.

Suddenly, the barn door opens. "Amber?" I turned to see my dad staring at me. "Who are you talking to in here?" I look back, but the apparition is gone. I shoot a quick glance at the horses. They are both agitated.

"Just the horses, dad."

"Well, wrap it up in here. Dinner is ready." He turns to leave.

"Dad, how's Mima?"

He stops, but he doesn't turn around. "We'll talk about it when you come in." Then he leaves.

When I make it to the table, dinner is served as usual: the food is warm, the atmosphere is

chilly. I take my first ~~morsel of (name the food)~~~~bite~~ ~~in~~s silence, silverware scrapping against small bites chewed with my mouth closed, elbows off the table.

“Amber, are you remembering to take your medication?”

“Yes, ~~M~~om, but the doctor did say it would take a couple weeks for it to build up in my system.”

“Yes, I recall.” Her response sounds flat, and I am not sure what emotion lies underneath it.

“How is Mima?” I ask. I can see ~~M~~om’s jaw clench as she tosses her steamed vegetables around with her fork. I turn to look at ~~D~~ad. He looks up at me, lost somewhere behind his glassy look.

“The doctor is concerned, Amber. Recovering from heart surgery is difficult, and your grandmother is weak.” He pauses before adding, “She really misses your grandfather.”

What ~~is~~was he saying? ~~Is~~Was he suggesting that Mima ~~is~~was ready to die? My family is like that, always implying things rather than saying them directly. It makes every conversation a riddle. Like ~~M~~om’s question about medication, it ~~is~~wasn’t just a question about medication. I’m sure she’s drawing ~~ing~~ some parallel between today’s ride and my diagnosis. Mima’s the only comforting force in this dysfunctional family. I stab a broccoli spear.

“Your English teacher called,” Mom ~~say~~s, ~~id~~ setting down her fork and lacing her fingers together in front of her, “She said you seemed disengaged. I told her you were upset about your grandmother.” She ~~had~~ omitted the part about the diagnosis, protecting the family’s reputation, I suppose. I exhale and nod my consent. She picks up her fork and pokes at her food, again. *Two weeks, Amber, two weeks.* It’s a thought that’s becoming my mantra.

“I’ll be heading back to the hospital early in the morning, so I won’t be here when you

wake up," This time she ~~speaks~~ without looking at me. "I know I can trust you to get ready get to school on time, right?"

"Yeah, of course." I watch her for a moment, looking for some sign of hope. "Your dad will pick you up after school," She finally looks up, first at ~~D~~ad, then at me, "your grandmother will be in recovery by then, and you should be able to see her." Looking back down at her plate, she continues, "No sense waiting around the hospital all day. It's better to stay occupied."

"Ok," I ~~feel~~ a wave of guilt for giving her such a hard time. Sometimes I'm such a bitch. First, she finds out her daughter is crazy, then her mother winds up in the hospital. Who wouldn't be an emotional mess right now?

We don't talk much for the rest of the meal. When it appears everyone is done, I collect the dishes and take them to the kitchen. My mind wanders through possible scenarios as I scrape the remaining food off the plates, rinse them, and put them in the dishwasher. When, I'm done, I'm ready for bed, but not because I am tired, really. My brain feels like it has seized up, incapable of intelligent thought, and I just want to disappear for a while.

Once I'm in my room, I change into my shorts and t-shirt, and decide to take an extra dose of medication, just for good measure. If one was good, two must be better.

I can feel my body surrendering to the drugs. It's a heavy, drifting feeling. I'm relieved insomnia will not find me tonight. I can feel myself sliding into a dream state, that half-conscious place where the thoughts in your ~~head~~ slowly turn into reality. I find myself walking through the woods, alone at first, but soon I am escorted by a little red fox that runs alongside me. My bare feet crunch on the autumn leaves, and the night air chills me through the ~~long, sleeveless,~~ ~~nightgown.~~

The fox jogs ahead of me as we reach a small clearing in the woods. A cottage sits at the

**Commented [NM15]:** Ok ... but she's actually in shorts and a t-shirt... makes sense that she's still in them...

center. Yellow daffodils line the front porch and there's a worn path leading to the front steps. I follow the path and climb the stairs. A gentle breeze tosses my hair and caresses my bare arms into goose-flesh. I smell the light scent of the flowers drifting over the earthy scent of moss, dirt, and decay. From the porch, I stop and survey the surroundings, mostly woods and a low stone wall. My friend, the fox, stops at the bottom of the stairs, sits, watches, and waits.

I step to the front door and press against it with my fingertips. There is no resistance and the door slowly swings open. The warm air curls out around me as I hear the crackle of a fire inside. I step across the threshold. The interior is simple, but cozy. Fresh cut flowers sit at the center of a wooden table with a single chair.

As I move into the room, the door slams behind me and the fire goes out. Startled, I turn as the cold and dark rush in from all sides. I hear hooves pounding down the path. As the strangers come to a halt outside, I hear the men calling, "Victoria! Come out or we will make you!" I can't respond. I stand there shocked and confused. I have the odd feeling they are talking to me.

"Victoria!" I hear the heavy thud of men dismounting and climbing the stairs. They try the door knob, but the door is locked. Boots scuffle across the porch. I smell smoke and hear the crackle of fire as flickering light moves back and forth under the door. Are they carrying torches? They rapidly descend the stairs, but the flickering light remains. It grows brighter and crackles with a desperate hunger. Smoke begins to billow underneath the door as I hear the horses galloping away.

I dash to the door, but it's stuck, braced from the outside. I run to the window, but it's too late. The fire rages beneath it, Flames climbing up the wall.

I choke and gasp. Thick burning smoke invades my lungs and burns my eyes. I cover my

**Commented [NM16]:** Could add a simile or metaphor here

face. I try to think. What can I do? Where do I go? My thoughts are jumbled. I can't seem to untangle them. I can't breathe.

I feel myself falling . . . falling . . . falling . . . or am I being pulled back? With a snap, I jolt awake. The silence is disorienting. A dream. It was only a dream. I lie back down, and I try to steady my breath.

Soon, I'm asleep. I feel the autumn leaves beneath my bare feet and the red fox is waiting for me on the trail.

## CHAPTER 4

The alarm clock is blaring when I finally claw my way back to consciousness. Blindly pawing around the nightstand, I find the snooze button. Just five more minutes. When I finally pry my eyes open, it's an hour later. Oh crap! I was turning into one major screw up. Obviously, Mom was at the hospital again, or she would have been in here yelling at me 45 minutes ago.

I pull myself out of bed, still feeling the weight of the medication. I briefly consider calling Mom and telling her I don't feel well, but I know she doesn't need the added stress right now. I promised I would get to school unsupervised, and that's what I needed to do.

I'm trying to pull my thoughts together, when I hear the bus honking at the end of the driveway. Oh, awesome. I absently run my hands over my face as I consider my options. Then, I remember James.

Grabbing my composition book, I find his number. Didn't he mention driving to school? I fumble for my cell phone and dial his number.

“Hello?” Even in the morning, his voice is relaxed and confident.

“James?”

“Yeah. Amber?”

“Um . . . Yeaaaah.” I need a really big favor. Can you help me out?”

“Well, that depends.” His tone becomes a bit mischievous.

“I overslept . . . big time. Can you give me a ride to school?”

“Oh, is that all?” his voice returns to its usual nonchalance. “Of course.”

I express my gratitude in an exhale of relief.

After giving him my address, I agree to be ready in 20 minutes. Just enough time for a quick shower.

When I hear the knock on the door, I'm already dressed and pulling my wet hair back into a pony tail.

“Coming!” I yell as I sprint down the stairs, “Coming, coming, coming,” I chant all the way to the front entrance.

As I open the door, the cool September air pinches my face. A greeting puffs out of James' mouth like a little mushroom cloud.

“Oh my god, thank you,” I grab his forearm and pull him inside, “I'll be ready in two secs. I need to get my shoes.”

I jog back up the stairs and pull my leather boots out of my disorganized closet. I decide I should probably dress in layers, as I grab a sweater, a scarf, and a matching beret. By midafternoon, it will probably feel like late August, and I will be shedding my fashionable knits like lizard skin. As I leave the bedroom, I snatch my cosmetic case off the dresser. My pale reflection mocks me from the mirror. I pause for a moment, noticing the dark circles under my eyes and the deep tissue acne forming around my hairline. “Great,” I mumble to myself. “I look like one of the walking dead.”

When I make it down stairs, juggling my wardrobe, I find James is still standing by the front door. He seems to be hiding some sort of amusement as he watches me.

“Come, sit.” I instruct as I plop everything on the living room sofa and start pulling on my left boot.

“Are you sure you want to go to school?” He looks concerned this time. I stop and glare at him.

“Ahh . . . thanks. Did you just imply I look like crap?”

“No,” he chuckles. “You just look like you’re struggling this morning. Maybe some rest would do you some good.”

“Paahh!” I dismiss the logic of the idea as I wiggle my right foot into the remaining boot. I pull my sweater over my head ~~and~~ stand.

James stands to follow me, as I retrieve a leather jacket from the coat rack.

I’m pulling the front door open when I hear James behind me, “Do you need these?” My house keys dangle from his hand. As I try to snatch them, he pulls his hand away.

“What?” I snap. The question sends him into a fit of laughter.

“Well, I am a city boy,” he says between chuckles, “and I have never actually seen a decapitated chicken, but I imagine this is exactly what it looks like running around all headless.” He waves his hands for effect.

“Ha, ha.” I push him out the front door.

When I turn towards the driveway, I notice his mode of transportation: a truck. A very old truck. I have nothing against a modest ride, but come on. This thing looks like it should be up on cinder blocks. Apparently it was white at one time, but now it is a patch work of primer gray and orange rust. I stop in my tracks.

**Commented [NM17]:** Rephrase, reword... choreograph better

“What? You don’t recognize a classic when you see one?” He ~~is~~ grins<sup>ning</sup> with amusement. “1976 Dodge Pickup.”

“Ummm, I am less concerned about its age than its ability to get us to school.”

“Don’t worry, the engine is solid.” He grabs me by the elbow, leading me to his death box on wheels.

I hesitate, staring at him.

“The frame is solid, too,” he adds.

“The frame?”

He laughs and tugs on my elbow a little harder. I follow him with a bit of trepidation. When James tries to open the passenger’s door, it resists. He tries again, pulling a little harder. It creaks and groans as it begrudgingly moves on its hinges. James looks at me with satisfied amusement, “Your chariot awaits, my lady.” He gives a gallant flourish towards the interior.

Commented [NM18]: ?????

“Lovely.” I emphasize my sarcasm with a raised eyebrow, and his smirk broadens into a disarming smile.

Getting up into the truck feels like a hike up the Appalachians, and the vinyl bench that stretches across the cab is hard with springs that complain every time you move. Slamming my door shut, James jogs around the front of the truck to his side.

He opens his door and swings himself up into the seat in one fluid movement. He has to turn the key in the ignition a couple of times, pumping the gas pedal to get the truck to finally start. I give him a concerned look, and he laughs.

“It will get us there.” He reassures me. I raise my eyebrows and twist the corner of my mouth into an expression of doubt, but say nothing. Instead, I reach over to the dashboard and adjust a lever that indicates some relationship to heat.

“Yeaah, that’s not going to help much.”

“Oh my god, is that broke, too?”

“Ah no, not exactly,” he says as he starts to propel the truck down the driveway, “It just takes a while to warm up. We’ll probably be at school before you notice a difference.”

“Oh that will come in real handy . . . in Maine . . . in the middle of January.” As I speak, I feel my phone vibrate.

James **just** shrugs, still clearly amused, “Obviously, you’ve never been to Chicago.”

“Obviously.” I state absently as I pull my phone out and check the incoming text:

Alex: Hey, where are you?

Out of the corner of my eye, I see James glancing at my phone as he drives.

"Alex," I explain not wanting to be rude, "my best friend. Remember her?"

"Who could forget?" James says as I text a reply:

Me: running late, getting a ride, explain later.

“She doesn't like me much does she?"

"Don't feel special," I shrug, "she doesn't like anyone."

This confession makes him smile, and I can't help but smile back.

I abandon the idea of putting makeup on as the truck bucks its way down the road.

Despite the rough delivery to my destination, I truly am grateful, so when James parks the truck and turns it off, I touch his forearm to get his attention.

“Thank you.”

“No problem,” he replies with a **genuine smile**.

James is about to get out of the truck when I open my backpack and pull out a notebook.

He stops with his hand on the door. “What are you doing?”

**Commented [NM19]:** he's done far too much smiling in amusement and casual looks... without defining him very well... try some finer nuances and describing other aspects of him ... eyes, face generally, body language... how his clothes sit on him, etc...

“I need a note. Any unexcused absence will result in a phone call to the parental units.”

I scribble two lines:

Please excuse Amber’s tardiness. Her grandmother is in the hospital.

I do my best to forge my mom’s signature. It’s a risky move, but if I can get away with it, no one gets hurt. In fact, I am doing ~~M~~mom a favor. The less she has to worry about, the better.

“Do you think they’ll buy it?” James ~~was~~ readsing the note over my shoulder.

“Actually, my grandmother *is* sick.” My voice softens. “She goes in for heart surgery today.”

“Oh.” James looks at me with a mixture of pity and surprise. I can see an unasked question in his eyes. I ~~give him a~~ shrug and ~~tear~~ore the page from my notebook before putting it back in my bag.

James is still sitting there a little stunned when I reach for the handle of the passenger’s side door.

Naturally, the unlatched door barely budes, so I give it a good body slam. The door jolts open on its rusty hinges. When I turn to look at James, he is still sitting their staring at me.

“No, No. I’ve got it,” I say as I wave my hand for him to sit (as if he weren’t already). I give him a mischievous little smile as I jump out of the truck and slam the door shut. I can’t hear him, but it looks as if he’s shaking his head and chuckling as he turns to open his door.

I ~~can~~ hear the crunch of shoes against gravel as James jogs to catch up. As we head to the front door, another young man slides up beside me and leans towards my ear.

“I wouldn’t hang out with this guy if I were you. Bad influence.”

I try not to look startled by his sudden appearance. Although he pretends to be speaking to me, he talks loud enough for James to hear him.

Commented [NM20]: what does that look like on James?

Commented [NM21]: ????

Commented [NM22]: not sure about this part...

"Watch it," James scolds as he reaches behind my back to shove the interloper away.

The new guy chuckles with amusement.

"This is Erik." James introduces the young man with copper skin and long, black hair.

He's slightly taller than James with a slender build. His smile is broad and friendly compared to James's boyish grin, but he smells of nicotine.

Erik offers his hand, and I accept it's warm hospitality.

"Amber," I say in return.

"Nice to meet you, Amber, but seriously," he continues, as he adjusts the strap of his backpack. "This guy is not going to get you a seat at the popular table."

I laugh. "I don't belong there anyway."

"Ok," he shrugs, "You've been warned."

James narrows his eyes at Erik in a silent warning. I try not to smile, but I have to admit the banter on my behalf is flattering.

"If he's such a bad influence, why do *you* hang out with him?" I try to sound casual.

"Because," Erik defiantly looks at James, "I like trouble."

This makes James laugh.

"What kind of trouble does he get into?" Now, I start to suspect there might be some truth to Erik's claim.

"I have issues with authority," James admits before Erik can respond.

"Oh, really?" This information doesn't seem to match his playful personality. "James, the rebel?"

"More a rebel of thought than action," Erik intervenes.

"Meaning?"

**Commented [NM23]:** better to have her guess that he is from some tribe for us to nail down he is a native indian... copper skin could be a tan... give us more...

**Commented [NM24]:** fix ... weak

**Commented [NM25]:** fix ... weak

"He's the type that follows instructions, but questions everything." Erik rolls his eyes dramatically to emphasize the word 'everything.'

"You *should* question everything," James replies, "and there is no point rebelling unless you're actually going to make a difference. Some people just rebel for the sake of being difficult." He eyes Erik as if making an accusation.

"How about you, Amber? Are you a rebel?" Erik asks.

James laughs again.

"What?" I ask at James.

"Nothing. Nothing." James tries to look serious, but Erik is already smiling.

"So what kind of things do you question, Mr. Intellectual Rebel?"

"Oh, don't get him started with his conspiracy theories." Erik does a dramatic facepalm. I look at James who simply raises an eyebrow.

"He's right. I am full of conspiracy theories." Turning to Erik, he raises his voice slightly, "because the world is full of conspiracies."

"You see," Erik says, "I told you. Secret societies, government projects, hidden knowledge. If you ask me, he spends too much time on Youtube."

"And you worry about big fish in little ponds, my friend." James nods to me like he has just proved a point, but I have no idea what he is talking about.

Erik gaufs, "and you're worried about the boogeyman under the bed." The comeback makes me uncomfortable.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Stargate was an actual government project. There are declassified documents and everything." Hhe looks at me and shakes his head. "And it has nothing to do with the boogeyman or aliens. It was legitimate parapsychological research.

**Commented [NM26]:** What's this about? Not clear...

**Commented [NM27]:** Too simple... weak verb "look" and adopt some clear character-specific body language

**Commented [NM28]:** ???

**Commented [NM29]:** weak verb... HOW does he look at her?

It is legitimate parapsychological research.”

Erik rolls his eyes and looks at me, "As a member of the Cherokee Nation, I have legitimate beef with the United States government. Privileged white boy, here, needs to make up psychic spy shit to justify his false sense of marginalization."

"Privileged?" James scowls at Erik.

"Oh don't let that truck fool you, Amber." Erik gives a wink before jogging to the door and holding it open for me. He doesn't elaborate, and James doesn't disagree. A new mysterious nugget to fester in my head all day.

"Well, it's been nice meeting you," Erik says as I pass, "but I'm already running late for homeroom." He lets the door go behind me and points at James, "See you at lunch?"

"Yeap," James turns his attention to me, and for a moment I feel the palm of his hand on my back, "I'm going to head to class, too," he says nodding in the opposite direction.

"I'm sorry I made you late. You won't get in trouble will you?"

"Nah, my dad already knows," and with that he waves goodbye. I head to the office with my forged note.

I finally catch up with Alex just before French class. She seesaw me in the hallway and puts her fist on her hip as I approached.

"Girl, where have you been? You missed the cat fight in the courtyard this morning. Jaden and Alison were fighting over some boy who . . ." She stopsped mid-sentence. "You don't look so good."

"Thanks."

"You know what I mean. You look pale and exhausted."

"Yes, Alex. I have a mirror."

Commented [NM30]: ?????

Commented [NM31]: how?

Commented [NM32]: Yes... I was starting to wonder where they were ... too long a time in "talking heads" conversation has passed with no sense of where they are... walking slowly in the hallway... are they late and all classes going on so the hallway is empty? Need to sprinkle setting throughout ...

"Are you sick?"

If she only knew. Then I remember. She doesn't know about Mima.

"My grandmother is in the hospital and scheduled for heart surgery today."

"What?! Oh my god. Why didn't you call and tell me?" She stepsped closer and hugged me. It ~~was~~ almost enough to make me cry. Alex does not hug.

"It was a weird afternoon. And you know ~~Mom~~. ~~S~~he's not handling the stress well."

Alex rolled her eyes, "I'm sure. Is it serious? I mean I know, it's heart surgery, but she'll recover, right?"

"Yeah, Yeah, of course." I shrug. "She's tough."

"Runs in the family." ~~S~~he tries to give me an encouraging smile, but we both know we're pretending.

The bell rings and Alex gives an annoyed sigh. We make our way into class and I try my best to concentrate.

Despite my best efforts, my day is a haze of anger, frustration, and desperation. I spend half of my time fighting back tears as the disconnected world ticks past me. I make several trips to the restroom just to be alone. I just want to get back to that place. That place where you can function without thinking about functioning, but I can't seem to find it. Every thought is filled with self-doubt. I watch every passing minute of the clock as if strapped to a bomb. I just want to get out of here before it goes off. I just want to be alone when the anxiety attack hits. I can't bare the pressure of performing for all of these people: needy, greedy people who want, want, want. I stop myself in mid thought. I feel guilty. How can I blame others for what I feel? How can I blame others for what I am? I excuse myself five minutes before the final bell, "I'm sorry. I don't feel well," and I make my way to the parking lot.

Dad's already there.

"Hey, you're early," he says as I open the passenger door.

"Yeah, I wasn't feeling well." I lean back in the seat and close my eyes. Don't cry, Amber, Don't cry. There is silence for a moment, and I suspect ~~D~~ad is watching me. I feel my lip tremble. Then his hand is on my knee. I open my eyes to see him looking at me.

Commented [NM33]: How?

"It's ok, pumpkin. We'll get through this."

A single tear falls from my eye, and I swallow hard to push the rest back down. I take a deep breath and try to think of nothing. I desperately want to join the nothing.

"Amber, she may not recognize you," Dad warns me as he pulls into the hospital parking lot, "She's awake but not very lucid. It's probably the pain medication." He watches for a reaction, and I just nod. "Your Aunt Lilith and Uncle Patrick are here. The others couldn't make it on such short notice."

Mom ~~i~~was one of five kids, but the family ~~i~~was not particularly close. One ~~i~~was a lawyer in Kentucky; another was a Realtor in New Mexico. Uncle Patrick ~~i~~was a recovering alcoholic who ~~lives~~d in Boston while Aunt Lilith ~~lives~~d in Miami. Aunt Lilith ~~i~~was the flaky one who ~~i~~was all love and light and sold incense and crystals down by the beach.

When we enter the room, Aunt Lilith is seated by the head of Mima's bed. She immediately smiles and stands to greet me, her flowing skirt falls down around her sandals and her bare arms outstretch in a greeting. "Snuggle bug!" Her arms wrap around me like a familiar blanket, and she rocks me back and forth. She smells like sandalwood and hyacinths. When she let's go, she doesn't really let go. She takes me by the shoulders and holds me at arm's length, "my you're getting big." She hugs me again, but this time she does let me go, and she turns to Mima. "Mom, look who's here."

Mima's eyes drift over the room, vaguely registering her guests, until they settle on me. Her eyes seem to clear for a moment, "Amber, you came." A slight smile broadens her lips as she whispers, but in a moment, Mima is gone again, distant and lost.

I stand there watching her, the shell of someone I once knew. It's a familiar pain, like witnessing the Alzheimer that wiped my grandfather away. I smile back at her and say hi, but I can't bring myself to approach or retreat. There is nothing I can do here that will change anything, so I just stand, a sign of solidarity for the grandmother I love. Patrick and mom try to chit chat with Mima a little and Lilith sits back down and holds her hand, offering her ice chips for her parched throat. Mima's eyes gently flutter open and closed like tired butterflies looking for a place to land.

"My little china doll," she whispers and ~~she~~ drifts to sleep. Mom ~~looks at me~~ and reaches for my hand.

**Commented [NM34]:** Try another verb for look

"I think she's going to sleep for a while," Lilith says, "Morgan, you should get some rest. Patrick and I can watch her for a while."

Mom nods, "Come on," she says quietly and ~~she~~ ~~moves her hand to~~ my shoulder, "Let's go home."

**Commented [NM35]:** Try something more here... more demonstrative

When we get to the house, I notice a duffle bag sitting in the living room.

"Aunt Lily will be staying here while Mima is in the hospital," Mom explains as she walks to the kitchen with the take out we ordered on the way home.

"What about Uncle Patrick?" I call back as I set my backpack near the door.

"He's staying at a hotel near the hospital," Dad says as he closes the door behind us. "Stephen," Mom calls from the other room, "Do you want chicken chow mien or pork fried rice?"

"Chow mien," my father answers as he heads to the kitchen.

"Amber?" I hear mom in the distance as I stand transfixed by Aunt Lily's duffle bag. It's frayed and faded. I wonder where the bag has been.

"Amber?"

"Fried Rice."

After dinner, I go to my room and get ready for bed. The sun is just starting to set, but I have had enough of this day. In fact, I have had enough of these days in general. The endless march of survival day in and day out. What '-was the damn point? In the end, I 'll-would grow up like Mom, or Uncle Patrick, or Aunt Lily. Never satisfied, never healthy, never reaching my destination. I amwas starting to feel that irrational anger again. There's only one way to handle this. I swallow three pills and crawl under the covers. I just want to hide. I just want to be alone until this feeling goes away. Will this feeling ever go away? I welcome the oblivion of sleep as the medication slowly pulls me under.

## CHAPTER 5

When the alarm goes off in the morning, I feel heavy. Waking up feels like a hard climb out of a dark pit. I just want to sleep, but I'll be late for school. I drag myself from bed into the shower. The water is hot, and I just want to stand there forever, steam billowing through the air. Eventually, I step out and wrap myself in a towel. I slide my palm across the mirror, and as my image appears before me, my memory breaks through the fog. Oh my god! Panic rises to the surface.

I try to breathe deeply, but the steam is suffocating. I open door and step into my room where the air is cooler. I sit on my bed. Tears start rolling down my face, and I can't control my feelings anymore. My shoulders rise and fall as I sob, pain wells up from some deep, undefined place, a pathetic moan escapes in rolling waves. I try to harness the emotion, to reign it in: Please be a dream. Please be a dream. I'm not sure if it's a prayer. It feels like a prayer, but I am not sure if anyone or anything is listening. I focus on stopping the pain. I cut it off, like the head of a snake. I take a few more deep breaths, and I wipe the tears from my face.

**Commented [NM36]:** This bumps me out ... what is it describing? It's as if it's describing her reaction to something off-stage and I'm scrambling to figure out what it is... needs to be revised...

Finally, my logical brain kicks in. The medication is making me sleep more, deeper, and my dreams are becoming increasingly vivid. I'm sure there is a suitable psychological explanation. I get dressed and head down stairs.

From the top landing, I see Aunt Lily, the souls of her feet and the palms of her hands flat on a mat with her rear end in the air. As I come down the stairs, she steps back into a plank position, lowers herself to the mat, then arches her back, lifting her face up to the ceiling. She opens her eyes, "Good morning, snuggle bug." She exhales deeply and folds herself back onto her knees.

"Good morning, Aunt Lily."

I head to the kitchen where I smell coffee and toast. I've never had coffee, but I love the smell. It reminds me of Mima. Mima. Fear begins to crush my chest. I push it away and focus on Mom, who stands in her pajamas, buttering her toast.

"Mom, is Aunt Lily doing yoga in the living room?"

"Yes. Yes, she is," in the condescending tone of a big sister. I can't help but smile. Then mom looks up at me, and I see the redness in her eyes. I stop short. Mom takes a deep breath as she looks up at the ceiling. Her eyes moisten. She exhales and blinks before looking at me again, "Take a seat, sweetie."

I can't move. The tears start to flow again. This time there is no heaving, no gulping for air, just the steady flow of tears. I feel disconnected, disoriented. Mom leaves her toast and comes to wrap her arms around me. "Mima is gone," she whispers in my ear. I cling to her, and I can hear my sobs in the distance. I feel Aunt Lily behind me. She rubs my back with the palm of her hand then runs her fingers through my hair.

"Come," Mom leads me to the table, "sit. I'll get you some orange juice." I put my head

**Commented [NM37]:** Same... needs to be tied into the rest of the narrative...

**Commented [NM38]:** Explain... to the reader... is she doing yoga?

**Commented [NM39]:** Fear of???

down on my arms and try to regain my composure. It takes three tries before I can stop sobbing. I hear the scraping of chairs as mom and Aunt Lily sit down. The room is silent as they patiently wait. When I feel like I have pulled myself together, I sit up.

Aunt Lily wraps her arm around my shoulder and pulls me towards her until I am leaning against her. "She didn't suffer. She stopped breathing in her sleep."

"They tried to resuscitate her," Mom adds.

I nod.

"We have to wait 48 hours, then we'll have her cremated like grandpa," Mom says.

I do the calculation in my head: Sunday. Sunday Mima will be nothing but dust. My eyes start to tear up again.

"You'll stay home today, Ok?" Mom reaches out to pat my hand before getting up to pour a cup of coffee.

"Lil?"

"No, thank you. I'll make a cup of tea in a minute." Then she turns to me. "I'll be here until everything is settled with Mima, if you need me." She gave me a hug then went to the cupboard to fetch a mug.

"Would you like some breakfast," Mom asks, "maybe some toast?"

"No, thank you." I feel numb. Everything feels so unreal. "I think I want to go for walk in the woods."

Mom looks at me a little concerned.

Aunt Lily glances at her, then me. "I think that's a great idea."

Mom glares at her ~~with an~~ unspoken accusation ~~in her eyes~~.

"It would be good for her, Morgan. Exercise and nature helps relieve stress." Aunt Lily

turns back to me, "So does crying."

Mom rolls her eyes, but says nothing until I stand. "Be careful."

"OK."

This time, I walk past the barn and head for the riding trail ~~alone~~. My brain feels like it has been bludgeoned like a baby seal. Part of me wants to crawl in bed and hide under the covers, but there's also a part of me that just wants to move forward without thinking. The air is still cool as it fills my lungs, and it extends throughout my body like little fingers tickling each cell.

The scent of soil and vegetation fills my head, inviting me deeper into the secret world of non-humans. Birds twitter in the canopy and small critters scurry ~~ing~~ across the forest floor. My feet tromp over the worn path, snapping twigs. I stop and squat, running my hands over the ground in front of me. It's cool and slightly wet with dew. Frost did not come last night.

I sit and take off my shoes. I slowly slide my bare feet back and forth in front of me, feeling the earth beneath them. I pull my knees to my chest and rest my forehead against them. I think of the trees around me, and their roots extending deep into the earth. I envy their simple lives. I hear a slight breeze rustle the leaves above me. I ~~turn my head slightly and~~ watch them wave in the air. *Come*, they beckon. *Come. Come.* They wave further down the path. I ~~lift my head and look~~ gaze down the trail. I stand and continue barefoot.

I move forward, tentatively at first, feeling for rocks and sticks. Dew covered leaves stick to the soles of my feet. Soon, I am walking without thinking. My mind floats along the path with my feet. I watch the light ping off the many shades of orange, red, and yellow that ripple through the fading green. In just a few weeks, the forest will be ablaze with color, but not yet. For now, the remnants of summer ~~desperately~~ cling to the woods. I absently wander through time, my

mind flutters to memories of the past and speculation of the future like a bird trying to land on twigs that are not quite sturdy enough to bare its weight. I am aware of the sun shifting above me, but the passage of time seems warped somehow.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of a bushy auburn tail bobbing through woods. I stop and watch as it disappears into the brush. I listen, but everything is still ~~and quiet~~. I put my shoes on and turn off the path. I catch a flash of rusty red fur out of the corner of my eye, and I head in that direction. I hear the odd little yip of a fox. I try to creep quietly through the forest. Pine cones and small branches crunch under foot as I weave around fallen branches and saplings. I hear another yip a little farther to my right. I slowly move forward, following the sound. I'm sure he hears me. He probably smells me, too. Another yip, a little farther off. He has vanished into the distant woods.

I sigh in disappointment, but as I turn around, the low rock wall catches my attention. Could it be? Is it the same rock wall I saw with James? Reaching the wall, I survey the area. The stone circle should be near. A light breeze tosses the trees, and I catch the faint scent of daffodils. It was close. I walk along the wall until I recognize the football sized rocks strategically laid out on the ground.

I step inside the circle and sit on my knees, looking for the inner stones I had seen before. I spot one, slightly protruding through the forest floor. I brush away dirt and leaves to discover another stone adjacent to it. And then another. I crawl on my hands and knees, uncovering one stone after another. The inner set of stones twist and turn, moving in one direction then doubling back on itself. The snaking line of stones never intersects, although it often runs parallel to itself at a consistent distance of about two feet. Some stones only require a light brush with my palm to reveal their presence. Others are almost entirely covered with dirt and plants.

**Commented [NM40]:** Really? A light breeze can do this?

**Commented [NM41]:** Reword this ... the stones themselves aren't moving ... they have been placed that way...

I crawl around until the midday sun is directly over me. I clear away small clumps of fiddlehead ferns and dogbane. The knees of my jeans are wet and grimy, my palms are covered with dirt, and soil is embedded in my nails. At last, I uncover the entire pattern. It looks like a maze from a coloring book. It starts with an opening in the outer circle (a space I mistook for missing stones), and weaves its way into the center. It's a simple maze with no dead ends or misdirections, like it was designed for a child.

A stabbing pain punctures my chest and tears gather in my eyes again.

Memories of Mima fill my mind. Memories trip over the smell of new crayons and the slightly rough pages of a coloring book. I remember sitting side by side coloring as she sipped her strong black coffee, and I drank my bitter sweet hot cocoa. I marveled at her steady hand and her consistent application of color. I tried to copy her, but I failed miserably. I was only six. "Mine sucks!" I would declare as my crayon slipped outside of the line.

Mima would laugh while gently patting my hand, "It takes practice, Amber." Then she would turn the page and direct my attention to something new, nodding with approval as I connected the dots, decoded words, or successfully navigated a maze.

"Nice," she would say with a warm smile. With my inadequacies forgotten, we would return to coloring.

I really miss coloring.

My growling stomach draws me back to the present, and I realize I am sitting with my knees curled up to my chin gently rocking myself. Tears rolling down my face. I stretch my legs and wipe my face with my sleeve.

I realize I need to get home before ~~M~~mom sends a search party, and ~~I stand to leave~~make my way back home.

**Commented [NM42]:** Can rework this with more metaphor, tighten up and use more sensual language... it reads a little too formulated... she went there she did that ...

I quietly creep into the house, and snag a banana from the fruit bowl. Mima loved bananas. Peanut butter and banana sandwiches. And diet Moxie. I'm on the verge of tears again, but I don't feel the despair anymore. Just a numb exhaustion. The house feels quiet and empty as I move from the kitchen to the stairs. Somewhere at the top of the landing, I hear muffled sobbing and soft words of comfort from Aunt Lily. Mom must be crying in her room.

I go to my room, and pull the blinds shut. I pull the curtains closed, too, to smother the remaining flecks of light. I'm tired, so very tired, but in a worn out sort of way. My life ~~is~~was falling apart one piece at a time. I ~~can~~couldn't concentrate in school--soon I'd be failing; I'm ~~was~~ falling off my horse--one Olympic dream down the drain; I'm ~~was~~ slowly losing my grip on reality--one psychotic episode at a time; mom ~~is~~was constantly trying to bend me to her will--and I ~~have~~ed no choice but to submit; and now Mima ~~is~~was gone--gone--forever.

This time the tears ~~bring~~rought the despair with them. It feels like a monster trying to rip its way through my chest from the inside out. I want to scream and rage and break things, but not external things, internal things. I want to rip and tear at the pain. I want it to be something tangible that I can fight, that I can destroy, but it's like grasping at shadows--dark, cackling shadows that know they have the upper hand at last. They dig their slender fingers into my brain. Their fists clench around my heart, and slowly crush the life out of it. "Nothing," it whispers.

I curl up on the bed, crying, hoping for the sweet release of purged emotion, but I can't reach the bottom. It claws at me, deeper, and deeper, "Nothing," it whispers again, and I begin to realize that the shadows are right. I have nothing. I am nothing. It's all pointless, this fight to be the best. I'm a bit of broken biology, riding a rock around the sun. Nothing I do matters. It's all just a meaningless cycle of birth, life, death. What is the point? I remember the medication on the nightstand.

I pick up the bottle. What if there was a way out? What if I could just stop the pain now? What if I could just drift off into the nothingness? What if I could lose myself in it? The numbness has returned. The prescription label is not very helpful, no cautions, no overdoese warnings. I go to my desk and turn on my laptop. I wait with an almost Zen like resolve. I look at the bottle again. A thirty day prescription, was there still enough in the bottle? I watched someone get their stomach pumped on TV before. That looked painful and humiliating. Finally, the computer was ready and I opened a browser, googling the name on the label. It's easy to find information about the drug, uses, usual dosage, recommendations for starting and stopping treatment, but it is hard to find anything that says how much is too much. Finally, I find overdose information: "dizziness, sweating, nausea and vomiting, shakiness (tremors), drowsiness, fast heartbeat (tachycardia), confusion, seizures, and muscle pain. In studies, very high doses (up to 2000 mg) did not cause loss of life." *Well fuck*. Each dose in this pathetic bottle iwas no more than 10mg. I sit there staring at the screen for a while.

I think about other ways I could do it, but they're all so painful and gruesome. And what if I failed? I wanted to eliminate pain, not inflict it. I doidn't want to traumatize anyone with a violent death scene, or gain pity and reproach from a botched suicide attempt. I just wanted it all to end. I just wanted to blink out, like an exhausted candle.

There's a gentle knock on the bedroom door, and my heart leaps to my throat as I slam the laptop closed.

"Yeah?" I ask, not really wanting to invite anyone in.

"It's Aunt Lily. Can I come in?"

"Yeah," I brace myself for the intrusion.

Aunt Lily slides into the room like a moon lit cat crossing the backyard. She gently closes

the bedroom door behind her and perches on the foot of the bed. She tilts her head slightly before asking, "How are you?"

I can't formulate a lie fast enough, so I just shrug my shoulders and look down at the prescription bottle ~~that is~~ still in my hands. I can feel aunt Lily's eyes settle on it, too. As I look up, I realize I am right. Her eyes shift from the pills to my eyes.

"Your mom told me what's going on," ~~s~~She says.

I ~~look back down~~drop my gaze and roll the prescription around between my fingers.

"How are you feeling?"

I can't bring myself to answer.

Aunt Lily braces herself against the bed with the palms of her hands, straightening her spine and lifting her face to the ceiling for a moment. Then she relaxes and begins again, "I'll tell you what, I think it's all a bit overwhelming."

"Yeah." It seems like the appropriate response.

"Your Mom is . . ." she seems to be searching for the rights words. I smile at the difficulty.

"Yeah."

"She does love you, and she means well."

I raise my eyebrows as my diaphragm snaps a tiny puff of air through my vocal cords. A doubtful grunt reverberates behind my closed mouth. It's interesting how automated that reaction is. Aunt Lily chuckles.

"She wants to protect you from all of her mistakes," I don't say anything so she continues, "she doesn't realize mistakes are the only way that we learn."

I finally look at her.

"She wants to get it right. This whole parenting thing." Aunt Lily waves her arm through the air as if parenting somehow existed in my room. "But you can't. Not really. Parenting doesn't come with instructions."

"Neither does life." The bitter words pop out before I can stop them.

"Nope, neither does life." She nods in agreement. "But that sure doesn't stop a whole lot of people from trying to tell you they have the answers."

I feel my face contort in frustration, again.

"You know, I was on meds for a while. They didn't help me much."

I feel my entire body freeze. I am not sure if that statement frightens me, or gives me hope.

"I think meds cover up problems. I mean, usually when you feel pain, your body is trying to tell you something right? You pulled a muscle, broke a bone, have an infection." She pauses for my reaction. I have little to offer, so she continues, "Your mom thinks pain is a weakness instead of a signal. So she covers it up."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Ok. Ok. She tries to cover it up. That's why she's so unpredictable. She keeps it all inside until she explodes like a pressure cooker." Aunt Lily flails her arms like an eruption, and I have to laugh.

"You know we're all a little crazy. We just find people with the same kind of crazy so we feel normal." She smiles. "Your great grandmother, Patricia, was a crazy bird, too. She had all of these weird little superstitions and home remedies, but you know what? People came to her when nothing else worked. She talked to animals and plants like they were people, and after her husband died, she set a place at the table for him every day for the rest of her life."

Commented [NM43]: How???

I feel my eyebrows knit together in confusion.

"Oh she didn't think he was coming. Her mind was clear as a church bell. She was honoring him, acknowledging him, I guess. I'm sure she spoke to him every night just like some people pray before bed." "Aunt Lily paused for a moment.

I sit and wait for her to continue.

"What I'm saying is, there was nothing wrong with her. There's nothing wrong with me. There's nothing wrong with you. There's nothing wrong with . . . well, ok there is something wrong with your mom." We both laugh. "No, no, I'm kidding. She thinks there is something wrong with her, and that's her problem."

I am torn between pity and hate.

"She says you're having anxiety attacks and trouble concentrating?" Aunt Lily nods towards the bottle in my hands.

"Yeah."

"Is the medication helping?"

I shrug.

"Sounds like you're pretty stressed out. Sounds like you need to understand why you're so stressed out instead of covering it up. The meds will help you handle more, but maybe more is not what you need right now."

I have nothing to say, or rather, I am afraid to say what's on my mind. Aunt Lily is quiet. It's like she is using the silence to pry the truth out of me. It's a weight that sinks to the bottom of my dark pool of secrets, until they start to bubble out.

"I think I'm going crazy."

Aunt Lily sits in silence.

"I see things," the tears start to run down my face, "I hear things."

Aunt Lily leans forward and places her hand on my hands, hands that are still clutched around the medicine bottle.

"So do I," Aunt Lily admits softly. "Not all the time, but when I meditate, I feel all tingly, and I have these daydreams, like lucid dreaming, but you're awake."

"No, I don't mean like visualizing things. I mean hallucinations."

Aunt Lily sits up as if considering her next words, "Do you know your mom and I both dreamt of bears when we were pregnant?"

"What? When where you pregnant?"

"I had an entopic when I was younger." She flicks the irrelevant point away with her hand and continues, "The point is we both dreamt about being chased by a bear, after we were pregnant but before we knew we were pregnant." Aunt Lily raises her index finger to emphasize her point. "We used to call ourselves Clan of the Cave Bear." She chuckled.

"Why?"

"Dated literary reference." She waved her hand again. "Before your time. Anyway, back to the point, I think we have ways of knowing without knowing we know, you know?" She smiles at her word play.

"Sure." We both laugh at my sarcasm.

"You know, I asked a therapist once, what is the difference between what I believe and the belief that the world is governed by some invisible being who takes a personal interest in every individual who petitions him? You know what she said? One is a shared common social belief and the other is personal delusion. So, apparently, it's OK to be delusional, as long as you are part of a group." Aunt Lily shrugs, "So, find your group." She smiles.

I sit quietly, considering her words.

"You're not crazy." She pats my hands one more time. Then stands up to leave. "You're just listening to other people, when you should be listening to yourself. You already know what you need to know, you know?" We both smiled as she left the room.

I set the medication down on the desk and went to the window and opened the blinds.

## CHAPTER 6

I'm walking through the woods again, barefoot, but this time, I know it's a dream. Just a moment ago, I was in an empty school, rushing down the hallway, late for class, but when I passed through the door to my English class, I found myself here, back on the familiar wooded path, my friend, the fox, waiting for me. I feel myself gliding over the ground as we move down the trail.

We arrive at the daffodil house once again, and my muscles tense. The fox scampers to the foot of the stairs and waits. This time, I do not approach. I remember the yelling, the burning, the choking. The door slowly opens, and a figure moves just beyond the threshold.

"Amber?"

My breath catches in my throat. "Mima?"

She steps onto the porch and the morning light bathes her features in a youthful glow. I rush up the stairs and throw myself into her arms. She hugs me back, laughing at my enthusiasm. Words begin to pour out my mouth, every fear, every betrayal, every disappointment, as her arms hold me tight, and she rocks me back and forth like a small child. When I am finished,

**Commented [NM44]:** Is this part of the dream or reality?

when my words have exhausted themselves, she runs her hand over my head and kisses me on the forehead. "I know," she says ~~and she~~ gives me one more tight squeeze.

As I pull back to look at her, I see she is looking at something behind me ~~and turn. I turn to face the object of her attention.~~ A short distance away, a female figure in a white cloak is slowly walking barefoot with deliberate steps. I watch as she slowly turns and doubles back, and I realize she is walking through the maze.

"Who is she?" I ask as I slowly pull away from Mima's embrace ~~and walk across the porch.~~

"Our legacy," Mima says ~~as I walk across the porch. I lean against the rail for a better look.~~

*Destiny?* I turn to Mima for clarification, but she is gone. When I turn ~~back towards~~ the figure, she is no longer there, either. I am alone with a fox waiting at the foot of the stairs.

I'm startled awake by my cellphone. At first I am a little disoriented, ~~I don't remember laying down, and I'm not sure if it's morning or afternoon.~~ When I pick up my phone, I see that Alex is calling, so I pick ~~up.~~

"Yeah," my voice is a little raspy from sleep.

"Hey, girl, how are you?"

The question brings a new flood of emotion that I desperately try to hold back.

"I sent you a text this morning when you didn't come to school." It sounds more like a question than a statement.

"Yeah, I was outside. I didn't have my phone."

"How's your grandmother?"

She has torn away the bandage and exposed the raw emotion again. Between sobs I tell

**Commented [NM45]:** Where is she? The last reference to a place was the school...

her that Mima is gone.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry."

I can't respond and she waits patiently on the other end of the call, until the swell of emotion subsides a little.

"I'll come by when school is over. Do you need anything?"

"I need to know what I missed in class."

I hear a sympathetic laugh, "Ok, ~~Ok~~ Amber. I ~~will~~ take care of that. But don't worry, I ~~am~~ sure everyone is going to cut you some slack. Let's just focus on you right now, ok?"

"Yeah."

I set my phone down and just ~~lie~~ in bed for a while, pulling the blankets tight around my body. It feels safe and secure, like the hug I so desperately crave, without the suffocating attention of an actual human being. There really ~~is~~ something wrong with me. The tears prick at my eyes again, and this time I just let them go. What ~~can~~ I do? I ~~couldn't~~ hold them back forever.

So, I cry. I cry about my diagnosis. I cry about my grandmother. I cry about my dysfunctional family. I cry about my life falling apart. I cry about my delusions and my dreams. I cry about losing touch with reality, and I cry about a reality that's too harsh to face. What ~~was~~ the point? Then my stomach reminds me that I am human, and that I am still alive. So, I wipe my eyes and head down stairs.

As I pass through the living room, I notice ~~M~~om thumbing through a worn bible. She does not notice me, or chooses not to, and I am grateful. I continue to the kitchen without speaking, and I make a sandwich.

When I sit down to eat, ~~M~~om enters. She sets the bible on the table and sits across from

me. "How are you feeling?" Her eyes are red and puffy.

"Ok." I shrug, "You?"

She shrugs and sighs. "Ok, I guess."

We sit in silence for a minute. I pick at my sandwich and she thumbs at the corner of the bible.

"I've been going through Mima's stuff," she says.

Tears prick at my eyes again. I breathe deep and blink them away.

"That must be hard." I don't know what else to say.

"Yeah, Aunt Lily is still up there, but I needed a break," she sits in silence for a moment, then pushes the bible towards me, "I found this."

I tense a little as the bible slides my way.

"It's her family bible," she adds, "There's even a family tree the in front. Your name is there."

I lift the worn leather cover. It smells musty, and the thin pages crinkle as I turn them. In the front, I find an elegant gilded tree. My name is penned into one of the top most branches.

"I think you should have it."

The offer makes me tense again. I wait for her to segue into a moral lesson of some sort, but the evangelizing never comes.

"Thank you." Whatever her motives, I am grateful to have this little piece of Mima, especially something so steeped in family history. I follow the family tree through the generations: mom's maiden name "Morgan Abott" and her siblings, Mima's maiden name "Elizabeth Carrol," and other women with other maiden names. I begin to realize the tree traces our family lineage from mother to daughter, from Ailene Mallory to me. Next to Ailene's name

stands Victoria. Victoria Mallory.

The image of the robed figure walking the maze flashes in my mind. My palms sweat and my heart races. I feel stuck, somewhere between here and there. "Amber," the voice echoes through my head. I slam the bible shut and suck in air suddenly aware I was holding my breath.

"Amber?" I jump in my seat as ~~M~~mom's hand touches mine. ~~A~~re you ok?" She looks concerned.

"Yeah, yeah, it's just . . . she's gone, you know?" I cover the truth with the most convenient excuse, as my thoughts spider web in every direction. My brain catches on a thought, "Didn't you inherit this land from grandpa?"

"Yes. Well, Mima actually. It was a wedding gift." She stood and started to make coffee.

"It was Mima's?"

"Yes, she got it as a wedding gift from her mother. I think it's like a family tradition."

I touch the soft leather of the bible as I begin to realize how far back the tradition goes.

As soon as I retreat to my room and close the door, I feel safer. I grab my laptop and go to bed. I pile pillows against the headboard and pull the blankets around me. I'm not tired, but it feels like a warm barrier between ~~myself~~ and the pain I want to escape. I make my personal space as small as possible, shrinking it until there is no room for anyone else. Dealing with others has become so exhausting. People ~~awere~~ always telling me what to do, what to think, how to act, how to feel. When they ~~arweren't~~ issuing orders or trying to influence me, they ~~awere~~ needy soul sucking creatures who demanded more than I ~~canould~~ give. ~~Caouldn't~~ they see that I ~~m-was~~ done? ~~Caouldn't~~ they see I ~~haved~~ given everything I ~~canould~~ give? ~~Caouldn't~~ they see that I ~~haved~~ taken all I ~~canould~~ take? Of course, they ~~doed~~. Mom ~~knowsew~~ something ~~iwat~~ wrong, so she took me to a ~~psychatrist~~psychiatrist who threw pills at the problem. How ~~iwat~~ that

any different than the pot smokers she warned me about?

I open my laptop and turn it on. I start searching for information on Victoria Mallory in Lincoln, Maine, but I can't find anything related to my family. I go to genealogy websites, trying to find a trail of birth records or census information, but the connections are sketchy and I can't get any further than my great-great grandfather. At least, I think he is my great-great grandfather.

~~I'm not wasn't~~ any closer to the truth. The only thing connecting me and Victoria Mallory, ~~i was~~ an old bible and oral history. That ~~i was~~n't going to prove anything to anyone. Then again, what ~~am was~~ I trying to prove? The tears started ~~ed~~ to prick at my eyes again.

"Dammit," I muttered ~~ed~~ to myself. Why should I care about what other people think? Strong, modern women, don't worry about what other people think. My experience is my experience and I shouldn't have to justify myself to anyone else. I slammed ~~ed~~ the laptop shut and ~~ge~~t up to retrieve my ipod. If I ~~ca~~ouldn't stop the nonsense in my head, I ~~can~~would drown it out with music. I ~~'ll~~would pound my insecurities into submission. I am in charge. I am the master of my thoughts and feelings.

I slipped ~~ed~~ on my riding boots and headed ~~ed~~ for the barn. Some good manual labor ~~will~~ould take my mind off everything. No thinking required.

No one ~~i was~~ down stairs as I ~~went~~ slip through the kitchen to the back door. ~~I was glad.~~ ~~Any interaction right now would be unpleasant. I could feel the F~~rustration and rage building inside of me: the pressure to meet everyone's expectations, the struggle to be perfect, to never upset anyone, to remain calm and pleasant no matter how they treated me. I turned ~~ed~~ the music up as loud as it would go and stomped ~~ed~~ to the barn. I ~~m~~ was actually looking forward to mucking the stalls. Maybe I can't shovel the crap out of my life, but at least I ~~ca~~ould toss the crap out of the barn. I'm ready for a fight, and picking a fight with the stalls feels like safest alternative.

I'm lost in my anger and the deafening music when I come around the corner. I almost run into it, the huge brown bear lumbering before me. I freeze. Here it is. The thing that didn't exist, staring me in the face. At least, it looks real. Every ripple of muscle under his thick coat. The slow swing of his head back and forth as he watches me.

I slowly reach up and pull the headphones off my head. Now, I can I hear the huffing of his breath, and the occasional grunt as he tastes the air with his snout. I realize I am shaking with both fear and anger.

The anger surprises me. I'm about to get mauled by this beast, and I am angry. The bear rises on its haunches and bellows.

"Come at me, mother fucker!" The profanity snaps off my tongue like the crack of a whip. I just don't care anymore. I am tired of being frightened and bullied.

The bear bellows once more and drops its front legs to the ground. I stand and glare. Real or imagined, I am not backing down from this fight. The bear grunts a few times, then turns to go. As he retreats around the back of the barn, I run inside and drop to my knees, my legs as limp as wet noodles.

My entire body is shaking as I pull the phone out of my pocket. *Oh my God! Oh my God!* *Oh my God!* I scroll through my contacts. I need to warn them. I have to let them know about the bear. I feel paralyzed for a second time. Who do I contact? What do I say? There's a giant brown bear in the yard? A brown bear? A black bear maybe, but a brown bear? I sit listening. I'm not sure what I am listening for. Am I hoping for the silence of nothingness, or the rustling confirmation of an intruder? I hear nothing.

As the adrenalin subsides, I realize I am clutching my knees to my chest.

"Amber?"

**Commented [NM46]:** Hmmmm.... Need to reword... bad transition from this state of panic about something "real" then a sudden acceptance that it wasn't... and then everything is back to normal when Alex is there...

The voice startles me, but as I turn, I see it's Alex.

"Hey." I slide my legs out in front of me.

Alex lowers herself to the floor, sitting next to me, "How ya doin'?"

I shrug. I pick up a stay piece of straw and start to fold it like a little accordion.

She puts her arm around me and leans her head on my shoulder. My eyes sting with the threat of tears again. I wish she wouldn't do that. Asking me to be all open and vulnerable.

As we quietly sit together, her phone bings with a text message. She pulls it out of her pocket and types a quick message before hitting send.

"Who's that?" I tense at the thought of mom hovering, and throw my straw accordion to the ground.

"James. He wanted to know if I found you. He's waiting at the house. I wanted to talk to you first."

"James? What are you guys buddies now?"

"Hell no! That guy's an ass!"

Her sudden, emphatic use of the word ass makes me smile. Alex smiles back.

"But, he has a truck." She shrugs. "And I wanted to see you."

I nod.

"His friend is pretty cool, though."

"His friend? Oh, you mean Erik?"

"Yeah, he thinks James is an ass, too." This time I chuckle and Alex smiles, knowing she has hit a humor button. My Mom is so uptight about profanity that hearing Alex toss it around like a proper noun amuses me.

"I mean, they're besties and everything, but he still thinks James is an ass." She smiles.

knowing I am on the edge of laughter.

"If you would just get onboard the ass train, it would be unanimous."

"I guess I just haven't seen that side of him, yet," I say with a smile.

Commented [NM47]: What kind of smile?

"Oh you will, honey, you will! He's a smart ass prick who thinks he is better than everyone else. He thinks he understands humanity and the humane psyche with some divine clarity. He's nothing more than a Chicago hipster."

Finally, I laugh. I can't hold it back anymore.

"No seriously, he's an ass."

"You know, I believe Shakespeare said something like that in one of his plays."

"Really?"

"Yeah, something like that." I take out my phone and do a quick google search:

'Shakespeare quotes ass.' "Here we go. From The Comedy of Errors, 'I think thou art an ass.'"

"Nice. I didn't realize I was so cultured."

"Quite so."

"Finally, a Shakespeare quote I can remember." We smile at each other and she gives me a tight hug.

"Should we tell the boys where we are?"

"Boys?"

"Yeah, Erik's here, too."

I shrug.

"We could always hide from them . . . forever."

"Tempting," I say, "but I wouldn't want to leave them with Mom."

"You know, I'd like to see your mom give James a beat down. It would be epic."

"Mom can be a man hating tiger if you piss her off."

"He deserves a little man hating. He thinks too highly of himself."

I smile and stand up, brushing the dirt off my pants. Alex does the same. As I ~~exit the~~ leave the barn, I ~~look at the ground,~~ searching for tracks. I don't see anything, but the ground is hard and fall leaves are scattered everywhere.

"I ordered pizza," ~~M~~mom says ~~as soon~~ as Alex and I walk into the kitchen. She looks exhausted and not up to the task of entertaining.

"Your mom was telling us about your competitive horse jumping."

I purse my lips, slightly embarrassed, but I refrain from rolling my eyes. I'm sure mom ~~i~~was doing her best to interact with a couple high school kids. Socializing is not her forte.

"Thanks, ~~M~~mom. We'll go hang in my room for a while."

She eyes the guys briefly then looks at Alex before responding, "Ok, hun, there's soda in the fridge. I'll bring the pizza up when it gets here."

"Ladies first," Alex says as she laces her arm around mine and pulls me out of the room. I can hear the guys in a hot debate as we head up the stairs. Something about the social value of ~~Y~~youtube.

"It's a democratic platform, in which all opinions can be posted and heard without commercial interference," ~~s~~ays James.

"Not all ideas are created equal, though," ~~s~~aid ~~xxxx~~ (in what kind of tone?). "A guy who posts videos about ~~harrasing~~ harassing drunk chicks does not deserve as much attention as the guy volunteering at the homeless shelter, but guess who gets the most views?"

"Ok, I see your point," James concedes as we make it up stairs. "Hey, cool room." I'm not sure if he is trying to change the subject or if he is truly impressed. The walls are two shades

**Commented [NM48]:** See my comment below... we need a more complete picture of who's there etc. If the boys are there, we need to see this through Amber's eyes and feelings... she would observe them right away... set this up better

**Commented [NM49]:** Who said this?

**Commented [NM50]:** This is the first time you bring them up ... the way it read, I was certain the two boys weren't in the kitchen at all... you need to introduce everyone when the girls enter the kitchen... choreograph this scene better at the outset... you need to "see" what the POV character sees ...

**Commented [NM51]:** The boys aren't there yet in the narrative... need to put them squarely there

**Commented [NM52]:** To who? And in what tone?

of orange and my bedding and curtains are a bright fuchsia. A few fairy statues adorn the shelves on the wall.

**Commented [NM53]:** This is the first time we have any kind of description of her room... need to have had more before...

"I kind of expected more of an earthy palette."

"Palette?" Erik's eyebrows pinch together ~~ands~~ he squints at James.

James ignores him, waiting for my response.

"I like color," I say ~~as I~~and shrug. I don't know what else to say. I know my choices are unusual, but they also feel comfortable and familiar to me, "Happy colors," I add.

"Hey, my girl is more than just brains and show jumping," Alex says ~~as she~~and plops on the bed.

"I see," James says. ~~He as he~~closes the door behind Erik.

I watch~~ing~~ James, wondering if he really does see or if that was just a casual remark made by someone trying to be polite.

I'm not used to having this many people in my room at once. I'm not into the whole group hang out thing, and I'm feeling a little uncomfortable, so I grab the lap top from my desk. "Hey, James, remember that stone circle you show~~ed~~ed me. I went back and started clearing the leaves away and discovered that it's actually a maze."

"Really?"

**Commented [NM54]:** Need body language ... generally need more subtext in this scene

I ~~ssit~~at on the bed and turned on the laptop, "I've been trying to find some information on it."

**Commented [NM55]:** Where is everyone else? How have they positioned themselves in her room? The reader needs a better idea of the setting here and how everyone is relating to each other...

"Try labyrinth," James suggested ~~as he~~and came to sit next to me. ~~He watche~~s the computer screen with intense interest.

**Commented [NM56]:** If you want to make him a true ass have him spell it out for her...

I google~~d~~ the word labyrinth. Jack pot! Along with links to Wikipedia and a 1986 movie by David Bowie, appear~~ed~~ images of circular, maze like structures. I click~~ed~~ the images and

**Commented [NM57]:** What does that look like? Animate him

started scrolling through them.

"That's it!" I pointed at the screen, "It's smaller, maybe not as many twists and turns, but it definitely looks like that."

"Interesting," ~~that was all James had to say about the subject~~says. Erik ~~came to stand~~stands over my shoulder while Alex looksed on from the opposite side.

"What's the difference between a labyrinth and a maze? Or are they the same thing?"

Alex asked.

"A maze has dead ends. A labyrinth does not." James said, ~~guiding the pointer to the back button and giving it a click.~~ He started scrolling down the links, "See all of these websites about spiritual journeys? That's what the labyrinth represents, the spiritual journey in and back out again."

**Commented [NM58]:** Ok... need to indicate that he is "taking over" on her computer... that is an aggressive action... also means he's close enough to her to do this... needs better set up ... show us how she reacts to this close-in intimacy... show through metaphor

"So you walk through it right?" The memory of the cloaked figure plays in my head.

"Yeah, it's ~~symbolize~~ ~~of~~ leaving the outer material world and entering the inner world. The path is full of twists and turns to symbolize the twists and turns of your spiritual journey."

**Commented [NM59]:** Who says this?

Alex sighs and sprawls out on the bed. I watch her for a second as she absently examines the frayed ends of her hair.

"I think it's time for a haircut," she says smiling.

"So, you just walk this path and you connect with the divine? Sounds like a vision quest without any of the physical hardship. How can you really get to the core of your soul without being pushed to your limits?"

**Commented [NM60]:** Set this up better

"I see your point," James concedes, "but it's not really meant to test you. I think life itself is the test, but the labyrinth is supposed to remind you of that. Walking the labyrinth is not a right of passage. It's more like a meditation."

"How do you know all of this?" I ask.

"I just read a lot," James shrugs.

His response feels too casual for me, but I don't press the matter.

"I think the house, the one that used to be out there in the woods, belonged to a relative of mine, Victoria Mallory." I blurt out.

Alex sat up on one elbow with sudden interest. "How do you know?"

"My grandmother had a bible with a family tree." I get up and retrieve it from the desk. "See, a family tree from the two Mallory girls to me."

"Matrilineal," Erik says.

"Matra-what?"

"Matrilineal," Alex repeats. "Where the family line is traced through the women." She looks at Erik. I am not sure if she is seeking conformation, or if that is actually a look of admiration.

Erik nods in agreement, "The Cherokee nations here . . . are matrilineal. We haven't lived on the reservation since I was small." He says sitting on the bed, "Dad moved us to Portland a long time ago for a welding job. We never went back. My grandmother is still considered the 'elder' of the house, though. She knows more about all of this than I do."

"That seems sad," Alex says. "You've lost touch with your heritage?"

"Don't get me started about my heritage, white girl," He tosses the insult at her like a low softball pitch. Alex purses her lips at him and he smiles.

Commented [NM61]: Body language

Commented [NM62]: Where does he sit on the bed? Beside who?

The doorbell rings, and I realize the pizza is here.

