

Sweetly

by Jackson Pearce



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TO SAUNDRA
(FOR ALL THE CANDY)



PROLOGUE

(*Twelve Years Ago*)

The book said there was a witch in the woods.

That's why they were among the thick trees to begin with—to find her. The three of them trudged along, weaving through the hemlocks and maples, long out of sight of their house, their father's happy smiles, their mother's soft hands.

A sharp ripping sound bounced through the trees. The boy whirled around.

"Sorry," one of the girls said, though she clearly didn't mean it. Her cheeks were still lined with baby fat and her hair was like broken sunlight, identical to the girl's standing beside her. She held up the bag of chocolate candies that she'd just torn open. "You can have all the yellows, Ansel, if you want."

"No one likes the yellows," Ansel said, rolling his eyes.

"Mom does," one of the twins argued, but he'd turned his back and couldn't tell which one. That was how it normally

was with them—they blended, so much so that you sometimes couldn't tell if they were two people or the same person twice. The sister with the candy emptied a handful of them into her palm, picking out the yellows and dropping them as they continued to trudge forward.

“When we find the witch,” Ansel told his sisters, “if she chases us, we should split up. That way she can only eat one of us.”

“What if she catches me, though?” one of the girls asked, alarmed.

“Well, what if she catches me, Gretchen?” Ansel replied.

“You're bigger. She should chase you,” the other sister told him, pouting. “That's the way they work.” She was the only one who claimed to know the ways of witches—she was the one with the stories, the made-up maps, the pages and pages of books stored away in her head. She reached into her twin's bag of candy and pegged Ansel in the back of the head with a yellow candy. He didn't react, so she prepared to throw another one —

“Wait... do you know where we are?” he asked.

One of the twins raised her eyes to the forest canopy and scanned the closest tree trunks, while her sister turned slowly in the leaves. They knew these woods by heart but had never ventured quite so far before. The shadows from branches felt like strangers, the cracks and pops of nature turned eerie.

The twins simultaneously shook their heads and their brother nodded curtly, trying to hide the fact that being out

so far made him uneasy. He hurried forward, eager to keep moving.

“Ansel? Wait!” one asked, and ran a little to close the space between them. “Are we lost?”

“Only a little,” he answered, jumping at the sound of a particularly loud falling branch. “Don’t be scared.”

“I’m not,” she lied. She began to wish she’d packed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for their adventure, instead of two Barbies and a bag of candy, which Gretchen had almost finished off anyway. What if they were stuck out here past dinnertime?

“Besides,” Ansel said over his shoulder, “maybe she’ll be a good witch, like Glinda, and help us get unlost.”

“I thought you said she might want to eat us.”

“Well, maybe, but we won’t know until we find her. Unless you want to go back,” Ansel said. He didn’t entirely believe the stories about the witch, but his sisters did and he didn’t want to ruin it for them. Another pop in the woods made him jump; he shook off the nerves and sang their favorite song, one from a plastic record player that had been their father’s.

“In the Big Rock Candy Mountain, you never change your socks.” The twins began to hum along, adding words here or there, until they got to the line all three of them loved and they sang in unison.

“There’s a lake of stew and soda, too, in the Big Rock Candy Mountain!” The familiar words calmed them, made

things fun again, as though their combined voices swept the fear away.

Ansel was about to begin another verse when a new noise came from farther in the forest—not a pop, not a crack, but a footstep. A slow, rolling foot on dried leaves, then another, then another. He grabbed his sisters' hands, one of their sticky palms in each of his. The bag of candies fell to the ground and scattered, rainbow colors in the dead leaves.

They waited. There was nothing.

And yet there was something—there was something, something breathing, something dripping, something still and hard in the trees. Ansel's eyes raced across the trunks, looking for whatever it was that he was certain, beyond all doubt, had its eyes locked on them.

“Who's there?” Ansel shouted. His voice shook, and it made the twins quiver. Ansel was never scared. He was their big brother. He protected them from boys with sticks and thunderstorms.

But he was scared now, and they were torn between wonder and horror at the sight.

Nothing answered Ansel's question. It got quieter. Birds stilled, trees silenced, breath stopped, his grip on his sisters' hands tightened. It was still there, whatever it was, but it was motionless, waiting, waiting, waiting . . .

It finally spoke, a low, whispery voice, something that could be mistaken for wind in the trees, something that made Ansel's throat dry. He couldn't pick out the words—they were torn apart, and they were dark. Low, guttural, threatening.

The words stopped.

And it laughed.

Ansel squeezed his sisters' hands and took off the way they had come. He yanked them along and ran fast as he could, over brush and under limbs. The twins screamed, a single high-pitched note that ripped through the trees and swam around Ansel's head. He couldn't look back, not without slowing.

It was behind them. Right behind them, chasing them.

Gretchen stumbled but held tightly to Ansel, let herself be dragged to her feet just as something grasped at her ankles, missed. They had to move faster; it was coming, crunching leaves, grabbing at the hems of their clothes.

It's going to catch us.

The twins slowed Ansel down—their joined hands slowed everyone down. They'd promised to split up so the witch could eat only one of them, but now . . .

It's going to catch us.

Ansel lightened his grip, just the smallest bit, and suddenly his hands were free and the three of them were sprinting through the trees. The thing behind them roared, an even darker version of the words they'd heard earlier.

Both twins knew the other couldn't run much longer. Did Ansel know the way out?

Candy.

On the ground, yellow candies. Ansel was following them, slicing around trees while the twins followed along desperately, eyes focused on finding the next piece, the trail

back to the part of the forest they knew. The monster leapt for one of the twins, missed her, made a breathy, hissing sound of frustration. She dared to glance back.

Yellow, sick-looking eyes found hers.

She turned forward and sped up, faster than the others, driven by the yellow eyes that overpowered the sharp aches in her chest, her legs begging for rest. There was light ahead, shapes that weren't trees. Their house, their house was close—the candy trail had worked. She couldn't feel her feet anymore, her lungs were bursting, eyes watering, cheeks scratched, but there was the house.

They burst from the woods onto their cool lawn. *Get inside, get inside.* Ansel flung the back door open and they stumbled in, slamming the door shut. Their father and mother ran down the stairs, saw their children sweaty and panting and quivering, and asked in panicky, perfect unison:

“Where’s your sister?”

CHAPTER ONE



The truth is, I can't believe it took our stepmother this long to throw us out.

She's never liked us, after all, especially me—she didn't like the way my father loved me, didn't like the fact that I perfectly matched the daughter she'd never met but my father ached for, the way I looked like his dead wife when she'd been a teenager. She said she just couldn't afford to keep us on anymore and, with me having just turned eighteen and Ansel nineteen, was no longer obligated to.

Obligated. We were obligations left behind by a father eaten alive by mourning, remnants of a shattered family.

“Are we in South Carolina yet? I zoned out,” Ansel says, his voice a forced calm as he peers over the steering wheel. Ansel likes to have a plan of attack, like he did back on the football field in high school, but right now, we've got nothing more than the clothes in the car and the gasoline in the tank.

He doesn't want me to see him worrying, but the truth is, I'm happy to be gone. I feel freer without a plan in the middle of nowhere than I did back in Washington.

"Yeah, we crossed the border a few hours ago," I answer, kicking my feet up onto the dash. The backs of my knees are sticky and sweat trickles down my chest—it uses too much gas to run the AC and the heat here is heavy. It's a little easier to bear if I imagine we're on an epic road trip, the kind that's a fun adventure, like you see in movies. "We should be there in another three or four hours, I think," I add.

"There" is the direct result of the folded and refolded pastel brochure in my hands: *Folly Beach, South Carolina: The Edge of America*. I picked up the brochure at a Tennessee rest stop, and ever since, we've been moving toward it, at my behest and Ansel's ever-accommodating apathy.

The photo on the front is of a peaceful, quiet beach with a red and white lighthouse by the water's edge. The sand goes on for miles, golden and flat, while the water peaks into elegant waves. It's the place of my dreams—western Washington State, with its dense forests, was full of places for girls to disappear, to vanish into the trees at the hands of a witch.

A witch. The only term I have for whatever it was that took my sister. I visualize the witch as a twisted villain, an evil woman, a monster, a demon, a near-invisible force, every man in our neighborhood, a trick of the light—something with horribly golden eyes that only I saw and Ansel has long insisted never existed in the first place. Whatever the witch is, she lives among dark trees, deep valleys, craggy ocean

cliffs. I've spent my whole life longing for soft, endless sand and crashing waves that blur the sounds of the world so I no longer stare at the trees and wonder where the other half of me is among them. I've spent my whole life wanting to escape the memory of my sister, wanting to start over, and hating myself for wanting that. How could I want to run away from a lost little girl?

But still. I open the brochure again and read.

A picturesque town of painted sunsets, elegant dining, and endless beaches, Folly Beach is truly the Edge of America—where the everyday ends and serenity begins.

Each second we drive, we get closer to the water, the sand, the flat shore where it's impossible to vanish, where I have plans: Plans to start over. Plans to be someone new, someone who isn't haunted by a dead sister. We fly past exits that have nothing at them and finally see hints of the beach only a few hours ahead. Signs advertising resorts and speed-boat rentals and little shops boasting floats and giant-size beach towels—it's early June, prime beach season, and most of the other cars on the road seem packed to the brim with vacationing families. I inhale the hot scent of cut hay and try to imagine that it's the ocean's salt.

The Jeep kicks. There's a loud crack, a boom, and the smell of smoke suddenly overpowers the air.

Ansel veers off the nearly empty road just as gray smoke billows from the front of the car. He jumps out, slamming the door as he runs around and opens the hood. I can't see him anymore, but his coughs and curses make their way to

my ears. I lean out my window, trying to see what's going on, just as Ansel makes his way back around the car.

"The whole damn thing is burned up," Ansel snaps, throwing himself back into the driver's seat. He shakes his head and punches at the steering wheel. "We only have fifty-seven dollars left and the car burns to pieces."

Ansel mutters another string of curse words, flipping through his wallet as if he may find an extra twenty-dollar bill hidden between old receipts. When he doesn't, he shakes his head, grits his teeth, and breathes slowly. He has a fast temper, but he knows it and tries to keep it at bay around me. It was my mother's suggestion, when Ansel started to heal and I still stared at the forest, waiting for my sister to stumble out.

"Make sure Gretchen knows you're there for her. Don't upset her—be her rock, Ansel. You have to help her move on."

It's a shame my mother couldn't listen to her own advice. She couldn't be anyone's rock, curled up in her bedroom until the grief devoured her. We weren't even allowed to say our sister's name in front of her, because it would set her off, either make her sob or yell at us, scream that *we* had lost her. So we were supposed to act as if nothing was wrong. As if there'd always been only two Kassel children, Ansel constantly trying to find whatever it was that would make up for our sister's absence, doing everything he could to be my rock, the person I hold on to when I feel as though I might slide off the world and vanish like she did.

Ansel leans across me and opens the glove compartment, then pulls out a crumbly map, folded in all the wrong ways.

He stares at it for a moment. “We’re closer to the town we just passed than we are to the next one. We’ll have to walk.”

“What if we called a tow truck?”

“I don’t think we can afford it, but either way my phone is dead. Wait—yours hasn’t been used much. Does it have any bars out here?”

Of course it hasn’t been used—no one would think to call me. I wanted friends, really, but at the same time, how could I go to the mall and laugh at movies when my sister was out there in the darkness? Ansel, somehow, forced himself over that hurdle—every time he hangs up the phone, he touches the thick class ring on his finger, as if it’s his last connection to normal, to his friends, to their world. I feel bad that he’s back in mine, despite how much I need him.

I shake my head at Ansel. “My phone died this morning. I forgot to bring a car charger.”

“Then we walk,” Ansel says with a sigh. I grab my purse and climb out of the car.

And we start to walk.

Everything seemed hot before, when we were sitting in the car. But now things are *truly* hot, stifling in a way I’ve never known. The air doesn’t move—it sits on us like a weight, crushing us into the long grasses we trudge through. The sky is cloudless, imposing, and for what feels like a million years the scenery doesn’t change. The pine-saturated forest feels as though it’s growing oppressively closer, and I can sense the familiar fear bubbling up in my chest. There could be something in the leaves; there could be something

that makes me disappear. Ansel sees it and quietly moves so that he's in between me and the tree line. He thinks that makes it better, but really, who would I rather the witch take this time around—Ansel or me?

Finally, the exit ramp appears ahead, just as the feeling of insects nipping at my ankles is becoming too much to handle. Rivers of sweat carve down my back and Ansel's shirt is drenched, but we huff and jog up the ramp to a crossroad. There are two signs at the top of the ramp surrounded by black-eyed Susans. One is hand-painted with red and blue lettering and reads SEE ROBERT E. LEE'S RIDING BOOTS. The other is wooden with a white background and red lettering that isn't entirely even, as if it was hand-carved. LIVE OAK, SOUTH CAROLINA. HOME OF THE ACORNS—1969 COUNTY CHAMPIONS.

"1969?" Ansel says, surprised. "And they still have the sign up?"

"Maybe it's the only time they've won," I suggest. Ansel frowns—in Washington, his school's football team won the state championship so regularly that they had to shift the oldest "state champs" plaque off the sign every year to make way for the newest one. Ansel was a defensive lineman—I think I see him smirk a little at the sign as we pass it. He loved all sports, but football was his obsession—he memorized plays, other players' stats, training regimens. He told me once that it was because he liked getting hit. That being knocked to the ground reminded him he was here.

"It looks like our options are limited," he says. There's

nothing but farmland to our right. To our left is a large store—floats in the shapes of orcas and alligators rest in bins outside, and beach towels are hanging in the window. Beside that is a gas station attached to a long diner with giant glass windows. Even from here, I can see people watching us as they eat lunch. They look as if they're glaring at us, but I can't really tell for sure.

Ansel walks quickly to get in front of me, and within a few moments we're close enough that people have stopped staring for fear of being caught. There's a faded red cursive sign over the diner: JUDY'S. Painted letters on the windows advertise famous blackberry pie and muscadine grape preserves. All the people inside are hunched over whatever they're eating, as though they worry someone might snatch it away from them.

When Ansel pushes the door open, a wind chime hung on the interior knocks against it. The diner is mostly occupied by sun-spotted old men wearing baseball caps and jeans, though there are a few soft-looking women as well, all completely silent, eyes on us. I was right—they *are* glaring, but I'm not sure why.

"All right, all right, give them some space," a weary-looking waitress calls from the other end of the diner, waving a rag at the patrons. They give her dark looks but abandon the suspicious glares at Ansel and me. The waitress drops off a stack of napkins by an old man, then walks our way. Her yellow dress stands out against the faded aquamarine and

black that decks out the diner. “Forgive them. They don’t like outsiders. I see enough that I’m over it, I guess. What’ll you have? Coca-Cola? Sweet tea? You look roasted.”

“Uh, neither, actually. We broke down about a mile ahead on the road. I wanted to see if we can get a tow truck,” Ansel says.

“Closest tow company is over in Lake City, ever since the Bakers left town. They can be out here in about an hour, though, if you want their number,” the waitress tells us with a pitying frown.

“Can I use your phone to call?” Ansel asks. The waitress reaches down below the register and pulls up an ancient-looking phone, and she and Ansel begin flipping through a series of tattered business cards, looking for the tow company’s number. I ease myself onto one of the bar stools and look around the diner.

Along with a few older blue-collar men sitting at the bar is a man—boy?—about Ansel’s age, though something about him feels *old*. It’s not his skin, not his hands, but something in the way he holds his shoulders, in the way his head droops down, something that makes me think he’s handsome and dangerous at once. Our eyes lock for a small moment through his layer of shaggy, almost-black hair. Bright eyes as green as mine are blue, eyes that don’t match the tired look of the rest of his body—the gaze shoots through the air and startles me. I glance down, and when I look back up, the boy is hunched over his coffee again.

I'm jarred away from him by the sound of Ansel hanging up the phone harder than necessary.

"Interested in that sweet tea now? How about a Cheerwine?" the waitress asks Ansel.

"Why not? Two teas, I guess," Ansel mutters in response. The waitress nods and jogs toward a silver urn of tea labeled SWEET with a permanent marker. I don't totally get the need for the marker, because the identical one beside it is also labeled SWEET.

Ansel slides onto the stool next to me. "The guy says it'll cost a hundred and fifty dollars. Might as well be a hundred and fifty thousand. I told him never mind. I didn't even ask how much it would be to fix the car." Ansel sighs and rubs his forehead. "I could do it if I had the tools, but I didn't have room to pack them."

The waitress slides two glasses of amber tea packed with ice onto the counter; I sip on mine tentatively. It's tremendously sweet, so much so that I feel the sugar coating the inside of my mouth. Ansel and I sit in silence for a moment, until an old man a few seats down coughs loudly and wipes his mouth with a handkerchief.

"Okay, okay, you got my pity. You good with your hands, by chance?" the old man asks.

"Good enough," Ansel answers carefully, rising. He walks over and shakes the man's hand.

"Ansel Kassel"—Ansel nods toward me—"and my sister, Gretchen."

“Jed Wilkes,” the man replies.

Other people stare at Jed, as though he’s broken some sort of oath about talking to strangers. He doesn’t notice, though—he takes off his NRA ball cap and runs a hand over his mostly bald head. “Well, if you can do some basic repair sort of stuff, I might be able to point you in the right direction to make a little cash.”

“I can do basic repairs—more than basic repairs. What do you need done?” Ansel says eagerly.

“Not me—Sophia Kelly. She runs a candy shop way out in the near middle of nowhere. Had some stuff she needed fixed up, last I talked to her.”

There’s a sharp movement next to me; I turn to see that the green-eyed boy has lifted his head. “Yeah, *she* needs help,” he mutters, slamming his coffee mug down so hard that liquid sloshes out the sides. The waitress cusses at him under her breath, lifts the mug, and runs a wet rag over the spill. Everyone else in the diner seems to share the waitress’s sentiment—annoyed eye rolls and irritated glances fly his way. No one offers any sort of explanation before Jed continues.

“Anyway, interested?”

“Yes,” Ansel answers immediately. “Absolutely. If I buy your meal for you, would you give us a ride back to my car first? I don’t want to leave our suitcases out there all day.”

“Hell, don’t worry about it, kid. I feel bad for you—you remind me of my grandson, before my daughter up and moved to the city with him. I’ll give you a ride to your car. Just remember to tell Miss Kelly how gentlemanly I was,” Jed

says with a loud chuckle. The green-eyed boy responds by dropping a ten-dollar bill onto the counter and jumping from his seat. He moves to leave the diner but suddenly stops in front of me, eyes piercing my own.

“Stay away from her,” he tells me, loud enough that the rest of the diner can hear but so seriously, so desperately, that I feel as though he and I are the only ones in the room. “Stay as far away from her as you can.”

Ansel makes it from Jed back to me in record time, but the boy is already gone—he storms out of the diner and slides onto an ancient-looking motorcycle, then squeals out of the parking lot. I’m left shaken, not by what he said, but by the way he looked at me, the way he spoke to me, the way he... everything. I try to swallow my reaction. *Being afraid of a crazy kid in a diner is no way to start a new life, Gretchen.*

“I’m fine. Seriously,” I tell Ansel. I hate him and love him for being this way, ready to run to my side. It makes me feel safe, but I wish so badly that I didn’t need a rock to cling to.

“Ah, so you do speak, Skittles!” Jed says. Ansel takes the green-eyed boy’s vacant seat, still warily watching the cloud of exhaust he left.

“Skittles?” I ask.

“Never seen so many colors since lookin’ in a bag of Skittles,” Jed says, nodding toward the tips of my hair. Pink, blue, purple, faded strands of orange. I thought that maybe if I made myself stand out, I wouldn’t feel so scared of slipping off the world and vanishing like my sister—if people noticed me, they could hold me here. Ansel didn’t understand, but I

still think it makes sense—you forget the number of wrens and sparrows you see every day, but if a macaw flies by, you notice her. You wouldn't stop using her name and try to forget she ever existed.

It didn't work, though, so I'm left with almost-healed piercings and a rainbow of faded dyes in the lower half of my hair.

Jed continues through my silence. "He's got a thing against Miss Kelly. Don't you mind him, don't you mind any of 'em. People think she's either the patron saint of candy or the first sign of Live Oak's end days. She's the saint, I promise you that."

"Right," my brother says, as if that makes complete sense. If he's as taken aback by Jed's description of Sophia Kelly as I am, he's not letting it show.

"Any reason I should bother trying to find out what you two kids are doing out here all alone?" Jed asks.

"Our stepmother asked us to leave," Ansel says shortly. "So we did."

"Right." Jed shoves a forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth. "We don't get runaways too often," he says with a laugh. "But then, we don't get too many young people, period."

"We're not runaways," I correct Jed quietly. "We were thrown out."

"Yeah, yeah," Jed says. His eyes sparkle. "But if your stepmother is the type to throw you out, you probably woulda run away sooner or later."

Without doubt, I think. I know I couldn't have lived with

her in the shell of our childhood home for too much longer. Ansel shakes his head and takes a drink of his yet-untouched tea; his eyes widen in surprise at how sweet it is.

“Well, let’s head out, then,” Jed finally says, nodding at the waitress. She takes a ten-dollar bill from his hand. Ansel fumbles with his wallet to pay for our drinks.

“Don’t worry about it, hon. On the house,” she says with a kind smile. Usually Ansel would be too proud to walk away without paying, but I suppose being this broke has challenged his pride. He gives her an appreciative look as I follow Jed outside; the diner begins buzzing again behind us, as if they’d been holding in their conversations while strangers were around. There’s a faded red truck that I already can tell belongs to Jed—it doesn’t surprise me at all when he opens the door and waves us over. I let Ansel have the front, since he’s huge and the back is crammed with tools and cigarette packages.

With the windows open, hot wind whipping through the air, we cut down the interstate to Ansel’s Jeep. He grabs most of our things, tosses them into the back of Jed’s truck beside some rusty animal traps, and we’re on our way again.

The first stoplight we see is simply flashing yellow, and Jed coasts through it. The town appears ahead—strings of brick buildings connected to one another, though each with a slightly different storefront. On the sides of the buildings are old signs from businesses long closed, painted on the brick in faded colors. It’d be idyllic, if it didn’t have a feel of abandonment about it—as though the buildings are stores

merely because that's what they've always been. I feel as if the empty windows are watching me.

Finally, there's a break in the buildings: a town square, with a traffic circle around its border. In the center is a statue of a Confederate soldier on a rearing horse. On the far side of the square, set just off the road, is a wooden building with an American flag out front and a bright red acorn logo above it. The windows are boarded up.

"Is that a school?" Ansel asks over the clattering of the truck's engine struggling down the road.

"Was. Ten or so years ago we stopped havin' enough students to fill it. All the kids are bused down to Lake City now—hour ride, but the government paid for a bus to come and get 'em. Though rumor has it that might stop, what with there not bein' too many kids left in Live Oak."

"You won the county championship in sixty-nine, I saw," Ansel adds with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Bet your sweet ass our boys did—against Lake City High, biggest showdown in the county. I was second-string, didn't get to play in the game, but Sophia's daddy was the big star of it. Touchdown, seventy-three yards. Proudest moment Live Oak's ever had!" Jed exclaims. If that was their proudest moment, I can't help but wonder what's been going on in the decades since, but I keep my mouth shut.

We emerge on the other side of town and delve back onto roads lined with pastures or trees. Jed begins taking strange turns onto roads that I'm certain can't lead anywhere, since they're all overgrown with branches and the paving is barely

there at all, but no, eventually we come out on a decently paved street with forests looming on either side. They're just starting to bear down on me when I spot a break in the trees, and when Jed slows down, I realize what it is—a front yard. We're here.

CHAPTER TWO



It's a cottage, tucked away into a nest of mountainous oak trees that are draped with Spanish moss. The exterior is a cinnamon shade of wood, with a stone chimney that's being devoured by ivy. Flower boxes line the white-trimmed windows, filled with what looks like the peppermint plants our mom used to grow. The door is arced and licorice red and sits behind a covered front porch that holds several rocking chairs. A wooden sign with Coca-Cola advertisements on either end hangs from the porch's mottled tin roof; pale violet lettering in its center reads *KELLYS' CHOCOLATIER*. The entire thing looks imaginary, like a gingerbread house in a quiet corner of a hot paradise.

Jed's truck rumbles off the main road and onto the gravel drive as he breathes deeply. "It's a spell, I'm tellin' ya. A magic spell."

I'm not immediately sure what he's talking about, but

just as I'm about to ask for an explanation, I figure it out: the air is filled with sweet vanilla, a scent that makes me think of our mom's cooking and morning sun and summertime. It overpowers the cigarette smell of Jed's truck and thickens as we grow closer to the cottage, and I suddenly find that I don't want to speak—I simply want to breathe it in, close my eyes, and rest. I look to Ansel; his expression matches the same blissful, blurry way that I feel.

Jed pulls the truck into the tiny gravel lot in front of the cottage. Ansel gives me a hopeful look before opening the passenger side door and swinging his legs out of the car; I climb out after him. Outside, the humidity makes the vanilla scent almost drinkable. I pull my hair into a ponytail and try to ignore the forest on either side, and the trees and leaves and darkness behind the house. I prepare for the fear, the familiar twist in my stomach, but...it doesn't come. I inhale, exhale, waiting for it to strike, but I can think only about the vanilla smell. For the first time in ages, the trees are simply trees, instead of places for witches to lurk. Jed's right—it is like a magic spell. How else could a single scent erase years of fear from my mind?

Jed inhales again, then shoves his hands into his overall pockets. He crunches across the gravel in heavy work boots, toward the porch. Before he can go more than a few steps, the door swings open.

The first thing I see is the dog: a golden-colored shaggy creature whose pink tongue lolls out of his mouth. He barks in greeting.

The second thing I see is the beautiful girl. I'm not sure

how I missed her on first glance. She's young and built like a dancer, with a heart-shaped face and long hair that spills like dark chocolate curls. She's wearing a pink flowered apron and holds a lime-colored bowl on her hip, the way a mother might hold her baby. Everything about her is lovely—classic, the kind of pretty that can't be created with mascara or lip gloss. The girl's dark blue eyes find Jed first, and she grins.

“Jed! You haven't been here in ages!” she scolds him playfully. She turns to set the bowl down inside the cottage, dusts her hands on her apron, then starts across the front porch with the dog following.

“I know, Miss Kelly. We're repavin' the road to the Clarks' place. Takin' way more time than we figured,” Jed says apologetically, sweeping the ball cap off his head.

The girl crosses her arms and laughs, a bell-like sound. Her eyes find Ansel and me. My brother inhales and stands up straighter. He's watching her intently, but melancholy edges around his eyes. He's never really dated. Girls have never been able to understand his—our—baggage.

“And you brought company?” the girl asks. At her words, the dog rushes toward us. Ansel steps in front of me protectively, but the dog simply sniffs around our sandaled feet before licking my toes.

“Sorta,” Jed explains, motioning toward my brother and me. “They broke down on the highway and are lookin' to make some cash to fix the car. I was thinkin' if you still needed some work done, this guy might be able to help you out.”

“Hmm, okay,” she says, nodding. The dog sits at my feet;

I lean down to stroke his head. When I look back up, I discover the girl's eyes on mine—and they're no longer sparkly, no longer happy, but rather, *yearning*. Desperate, even, as if she's searching for an answer within me but coming up empty. Her smile fades not into a frown but into a sad sort of expression, the kind you make before you start to cry. She's looking for something, and though I don't know what, I want to help her find it. I want to be her friend. I take a step forward.

She looks away sharply, and her bright smile reappears. Her eyes sparkle again, whatever sadness that had lingered there instantly vanishing.

"Well, if you're interested—what was your name?" she asks my brother.

"Ansel," he says, his voice shaky and nervous. "And my sister, Gretchen."

"Sophia Kelly. I have a few things that'd probably only take the afternoon to knock out. Simple stuff—a few tree limbs that need to come down, a cabinet door that won't stop sticking, that kind of thing. Interested?"

"Yes, yes," Ansel says breathlessly. Jed snickers, but there's a look of understanding on his wrinkled face.

"Great," she says, grinning. She whistles, and the dog trots back toward her. "Are you going to help your brother, Gretchen?"

"I can—" I begin, glancing toward Ansel.

"No. No, I've got it," Ansel answers quickly. I'm not sure if he actually doesn't need my help or if he just wants to appear extra manly.

Sophia nods. “Come on, I’ll get you both a Coke before your brother gets to work,” she says to me.

Jed reaches into the back of his truck to haul my suitcase to the ground; Ansel hops onto the wheel and grabs his own in a much more grandiose display than is probably necessary. I pull the handle up on mine and roll it over the gravel toward Sophia.

“Let me help,” she says when I arrive at the porch steps. She sweeps toward me gracefully and helps me lug the suitcase up the stairs. Even though we’re not that close, I can smell vanilla and strawberries rising from her skin. She gives me another kind smile, then waves me to follow her in. I glance back to see Ansel hurrying to catch up to us, as if he’s afraid to let Sophia out of his sight. Normally I’m the one he watches carefully. It’s a nice change.

Inside the chocolatier I feel as though I’m somewhere magical, somewhere exciting. Gently sloping light pours in the front windows, illuminating shelves that line two walls of the main room. They’re filled to the front with crinkly cellophane bags packed with chocolates in every shape and size. Tiny ribbons are tied into perfect bows, their color reflected in the glass cases on the opposite side of the room. Behind the glass are bright, ripe pieces of fruit dipped into chocolate—white chocolate, dark chocolate, milk chocolate, dotted with nuts or dusted with cocoa powder. Other trays boast chocolate truffles, thick, enormous chocolate cakes and cupcakes, baskets full of cocoa beans, and jars of hot chocolate powder. There’s a fireplace and mantel with an antique-looking

gun over it; the mantel is lined with stacks of chocolate bars in perfect rectangles with gold and silver foil wrappers.

“I’ll put your things in the stairwell for now,” Sophia says. Before I can stop her, she heaves my suitcase toward a door at the back of the shop, tucking it just behind the door frame. “What’d you pack, bricks?” she teases me.

“Books,” I say, and my cheeks flush. I started reading after my sister vanished because it made me feel as if I were her—as though she weren’t lost after all. But then it became something else; in someone else’s story, I could become a whole character instead of half a girl.

Our mom used to sneak up, watch me read. She’d always start to cry, and I would close the book to make the tears stop. She wasn’t really watching me. She was watching my sister.

I search for words, trying to find a less weighted explanation as to why I brought so many books with me, but Sophia is laughing, bright and happy. “A library’s worth of books, from the feel of it. Hey, Jed!” she shouts toward the screen door. “Don’t leave yet—I need to give you something!”

“Right, Miss Sophia,” I hear Jed call back. Sophia scans the shelves quickly, then snags a bag of chocolate candies and dashes out the door, past Ansel. He looks spellbound and holds the door open as he watches her run toward Jed. I glance at the empty spot on the shelf—pecan clusters, assorted. The remaining bags are full of round white, dark, and milk chocolate circles that look so perfect, I wonder how they can be real.

“Anyway,” Sophia says, jogging back in; I can hear the crunching of gravel as Jed backs out of the driveway. Sophia walks to the shelf with the pecan clusters and pulls the remaining bags to the front. Everything she does is intentional—beautiful, in a way. She is confident, and I am jealous, but at the same time I want to study her, copy her.

When I start over, I want to be like her—even though I’ve known her for only minutes.

“So, you run this shop alone?” My brother’s voice is soft, gentle, and even.

Sophia spins back to face us and nods. “Eh, it’s a big difference from being at the university, but it’s not *that* lonely,” she lies. I know it’s a lie—it’s the same lie I tell people when they comment on how I am quiet or never go to the movies or never talk about having friends. I lie because I’m scared. I’m scared for my sister, scared for Ansel, scared of the witch. But what—or whom—does Sophia need to lie for? I give her a reassuring smile. *It’s okay. I get it, really.*

“Don’t you think it’s risky, though? Out here all alone?” Ansel asks.

Sophia shrugs. “It takes a lot to scare me. Besides, what’s left of Live Oak isn’t especially welcoming—how many dirty looks did you get in town?”

“A few dozen,” I admit.

“It wasn’t always like that here, I promise. When I was a little girl, I thought I lived in heaven.” She gives me a nostalgic look, then brushes her hair from her face and turns to walk through a set of doors just behind the glass cases. They’re

shutterlike, something I'd expect to see in a Wild West saloon, and painted jade green. I can see over the top as Sophia opens an avocado-colored refrigerator, grabs three cans, then sweeps back through the saloon doors. After an endless sea of fast-food restaurants with surly employees, having someone like Sophia offer you a drink feels like a great kindness.

"I'll be honest—I can't pay you all that much. I mean, I *can* pay you, but—"

"That's fine," Ansel cuts her off. She nods at him, smiling sweetly. I'm not sure if it's her beauty or hospitality that has Ansel so quick to work for cheap, but I suspect it's some of both.

Sophia leads Ansel through the kitchen; there's a loud clanking as he lifts, then drops, the toolbox—Sophia laughs. I hear a screen door squeal open, slam shut, then silence, broken apart only by the occasional muffled noise of Sophia and Ansel's conversations.

The golden dog trots back in through the kitchen, panting; he stops to grab a rope toy before bounding over to me. He drops the toy and looks at me expectantly. A red leather collar is around his neck, with a silver name tag that says LUXE. I reach down and flip the name tag over. It reads THE KELLY FAMILY, followed by a phone number. *Does Sophia constitute the whole Kelly family?* I think just as she comes back inside and grins when she sees Luxe looking between me and the rope toy in anticipation. I toss it for him; he takes off after it gleefully, a clatter of nails on hardwood.

"He's a lover, not a fighter," she tells me, and I laugh. "I

was just making some candied orange slices — want to come back here for some company that isn't going to demand you play fetch?"

"I can help, if you want," I offer, and follow Sophia into the kitchen. It's brighter than the main shop area, with a huge window that opens out to the backyard. There's a swing out there, and a shed with a padlocked door, not to mention more trees dripping with curling Spanish moss. I hear Ansel sawing away as Sophia opens the refrigerator and takes out a bowl of oranges, setting them down on an enormous stainless-steel counter. I take a seat on a bar stool on the other side. She grabs an orange and begins to peel it; I follow suit.

"I love making these, even though I end up eating more of them than I sell," Sophia says absently, brushing the rinds into a little pile. "I swear, they've got magic powers or something. I can be having a terrible day, and I eat these and it feels like everything is right in the world."

"You'll have to sell some to Ansel and me later, then," I joke back.

Sophia laughs. "I don't know if my candy is powerful enough to fix a busted car, but it's worth a try. Do you like almonds? You should try these. They're my specialty," Sophia says, pushing a tray of cooling chocolates toward me. They're molded into little gingerbread men. "They've got gingerbread and caramel in them too," Sophia adds.

I lift one of the gingerbread men and bite into it. It's immediately clear why these are her specialty — they taste amazing. I feel light-headed almost, and the room gets warmer. The

taste of gingerbread and chocolate spins through me and makes me feel...like before. I feel the excited, eager way we felt when we first set out into the forest, when we were on an adventure instead of running from a witch. When everything was happy and storybook and we were leaving a trail of candy in the leaves.

“So, what brought you two to Live Oak, anyway?” Sophia asks as I continue to feel as though I’m melting in front of her.

“Our stepmother threw us out because she couldn’t afford us anymore. Live Oak just happens to be where we ran out of money,” I say immediately.

“What’d you do to get thrown out?” she asks, surprised.

I shrug. “We exist? She never liked us. She just liked our dad, but he wasn’t really over our mother dying, and then *he* died—” I pause. Why am I telling her all this? I see Sophia’s eyes run over my multicolored hair and she shrugs, then starts peeling another orange.

“She sounds like a nut job. You and Ansel must be close, though, to hit the road together. Is it just the two of you?” she asks as I finish the chocolate. The almonds crunch and the warm feeling grows. Sophia picks up a knife and starts cutting an orange against the grain; the tart and lovely smell fills the room.

“It is now. I had a twin sister, but she vanished.”

Wait. Did I just say that? To a complete stranger? I blink. Guilt swims over me, though I’m not sure why. She’s not secret. She’s just...gone.

Sophia looks at me, eyebrow raised. “Vanished?”

I speak without meaning to, as if the words are finding their own way past my lips. “In the forest. Something chased us, and when Ansel and I stopped, she was gone.”

Where’s your sister?

Words still want to spill from me—I slam my jaw shut to keep from letting everything out, all the memories, the search parties, the nothingness they found among the trees. It was as though the little girl who was half of me never existed at all, as if my family had just been seeing double all these years instead of actually having twins.

“That’s so sad,” Sophia says, and her voice cracks a little. She hurries over to the sink and pours a glass of water, but I can tell it’s mostly to busy her hands and hide her eyes. It’s not strange for people to cry for my sister, but Sophia barely knows me. “When was that? Recently?” she asks over her shoulder.

“No. We were just kids, but it didn’t stop people from blaming us for her disappearing. My sister and I were six, Ansel was seven. Twelve years ago, I guess.”

Sophia’s hands freeze; her eyes jump up, find mine. “You’re eighteen?” She walks back over to me.

I nod. “My birthday was a few weeks ago. That’s why our stepmother threw us out—she can finally do it legally. She hated us. Dad married her a year after Mom died. I think he just wanted to start everything over again.”

Sophia slides the glass of water toward me quickly, as if it’s a lifeline. She looks alarmed, and I feel my cheeks heating

up over telling this near stranger my family history in detail. I take a gulp of water and it cools the warmth that was building inside me. I feel as though I'm just waking up, as if the words spilling from me moments ago were just the result of some kind of stupor.

"I'm sorry," I mutter. "I don't know why I told you all that."

"It's okay," Sophia answers hurriedly, smiling—although her smile has a certain sort of nervousness around the edges. "People say I'm easy to open up to."

"Right." I nod, taking another drink of water. I've hardly had a bite of chocolate since my sister—usually all I can think of when I'm around it is little yellow candies on the forest floor. Is this how it's supposed to make you feel? As if you're happy, as if you're safe?

Sophia drops the orange slices into a cooking pot before speaking. "My dad is gone too. That's why I came back here, actually, to run the chocolatier after he...left." Her final word is heavy, but she looks away so fast that I can tell she doesn't want to talk about whatever the truth about her family is—and I understand entirely. I move on.

"Where did you come back from?"

"College. I was studying philosophy," she says, teasing herself a little in the phrase. "Big money in that, you know. I'm the only one in twenty-three years to leave Live Oak and come back." She pauses to pull a glass jar of sugar from a wooden cabinet and proceeds to sprinkle half the jar over the oranges, then looks up at me. Her eyes look the same way

they did earlier outside—as though she thinks I can help her, as if she’s desperate for me to help her. “It’s hard, losing your parents. Right when you think it’s getting better, it starts to hurt again,” she says softly, her voice wounded.

I smile a little. “I know. I understand.”

Sophia’s eyes fill with water and gratitude almost instantly. She sniffs and nods at me. “You know what it’s like.” I don’t say anything as Sophia takes a moment and collects herself, staring intently at the stove as she does so. When she looks back up at me, she’s grinning, all signs of sadness gone. “But at least I can make some badass candy oranges,” she says.

The afternoon passes quickly—Ansel hauling heavy things by the open door, poking his head in to ask Sophia little questions, dropping in compliments here and there. It doesn’t exactly bother me, but it is interesting to watch my brother act this way over a girl—I guess I just never thought of him like this. Sophia and I seem to have somehow instantly bonded over our shared lost parents. She tells jokes and funny stories about her father and we laugh as though we’re old friends; it makes me feel grounded, as if in this moment, Ansel isn’t my only rock, isn’t the only thing keeping me from vanishing. Sophia has a plate of sandwiches ready for dinner when Ansel trudges inside, long after the sun has dropped into the horizon.

“I have to admit, I’m impressed,” Sophia says with a grin as she pours him water from an amber pitcher. She hands

him the glass and rustles through a flour jar before emerging with a ragged hundred-dollar bill.

“That enough?” she says, passing the money to me. I fumble to accept it mid-sandwich bite.

“Sure, of course,” Ansel says quickly. “I don’t suppose you’d give us a ride out to our car, by the way? It’s still on the interstate. I think this is enough to get us towed.”

“Um . . .” Sophia sways a little, lets her dress twirl around her knees. “I was wondering if you guys would mind staying here tonight? I just realized I’ve got a few other things you could do tomorrow, if you don’t mind . . .”

“Stay here?” I ask, surprised, but the pink tint around Ansel’s ears doesn’t escape me.

“No, no, we couldn’t,” Ansel says quickly.

“It’s no big deal, I swear,” Sophia insists. “Besides, the hotel in Live Oak closed a million years ago. Unless you want to camp out in your car, you’ll have to practically make it all the way to the beach before you get to one that’s open.”

Ansel looks at a loss for words, floundering in the lack of a plan for us.

“Come on. I’ve got a spare bedroom and a couch,” Sophia tempts us. “Please? I never have company. It’ll be fun.” Her voice seems almost desperate, and I feel a wave of pity for her. I don’t have friends, not really—who am I to turn down someone who wants to be mine?

You’re starting over, remember?

“I don’t—” Ansel begins.

“Come on, Ansel, you’re starting to offend me,” Sophia says, folding her arms, but I catch the glimmer of a smile on the corners of her mouth.

“Sorry,” Ansel says quickly. “Sorry. It’s just always been me and Gretchen and I don’t . . .” He stops. I know what he means, and to my surprise, Sophia seems to know as well: Close your circle long enough, and you forget how to open it back up again.

“Okay. For tonight,” he says, giving in. He sends Sophia an appreciative look and plucks a peanut butter and jelly sandwich off the plate.

An hour or so later Sophia leads us through the storefront to a thin stairwell that creaks loudly as we make our way up. There are pictures on the walls: the chocolate shop in what looks like the twenties, then the fifties or so, the eighties maybe, and the most recent one. In each picture there’s a person standing out front—Sophia is in the final shot, so I presume it’s her father and grandmother in the ones preceding. Our family has nothing like this, and I find myself wondering what it’s like to be locked into a life, a profession, a place, even. It can’t be the worst thing in the world—I mean, how bad could working in a candy store be?

Upstairs has the feel of an attic transformed into a living space—sloped ceilings and oddly placed beams. That said, it’s no less charming than the house below. The main room has a couch and a rocking chair with a crocheted afghan thrown over the arm, and there’s a tiny bathroom with white and black checked tile.

“So, bathroom is there—there are towels in the little closet behind the bathroom door. And Ansel, I assume you want to let your sister have the bedroom?”

“Of course,” Ansel says without a second thought.

Sophia smiles and motions for me to follow her down the hallway. I glance back at Ansel, who looks strangely large and out of place in the tiny room and as if he longs to go after Sophia—but he sits on the couch instead. I catch a hint of jealousy in his eyes as I walk away with her, and I can’t help but be pleased—Ansel is never jealous of me.

“So that’s my room, if you need anything,” Sophia says, pointing to a large bedroom as we pass it—it’s darkened, but there’s just enough light to make out a pale blue coverlet on the bed and a large white wardrobe lurking in the corner. “And this is the spare room. Sorry the bed isn’t bigger,” she says, grimacing. “If it sucks too much, you can have mine. Though that mattress is a little older, so it’s kind of lumpy . . . God, I’m the worst host ever, aren’t I?” she mutters, blushing a little.

“No, no. Trust me, I’ve been sleeping in motels or the car for the past few nights. This is great,” I answer. Actually, this is beautiful. The room is small and cool, with a steeply pitched ceiling and bead-board walls that have been painted pale yellow. There’s a twin bed with a pink floral quilt on top of it. The room itself is perfectly symmetrical—two open windows, two small alcoves (for desks, I presume), matching walls—the single bed and lavender-painted dresser are strange interruptions to the room’s reflection of itself.

“Good,” Sophia says warmly. “I don’t really have company. No one ever uses this room.”

We stand for a moment, unsure what to say to each other. I’m not sure why *she* looks concerned, but I’m totally unpracticed when it comes to people being this kind to me. I rock back on my heels, wishing I knew a way to thank her enough, wishing I could blatantly ask, “What’s your secret?” and figure out the key to being beautiful, confident, and certain, like she is.

“Well...good night!” Sophia says with a grin and a shrug. I open my mouth to echo the sentiment a moment too late—she’s closed the door and I hear her moving down the hall, talking to Ansel about finding extra blankets and pillows for the couch.

I turn to see the the white eyelet curtains stir; a sharp, warm breeze cuts through the room. I thought it was cool in here, but really it’s only in comparison to the sweltering heat outside. I step toward a window to tug it shut, pausing for a moment.

The woods are thick and deep, and in the darkness they seem to sway like a single beast, back and forth, hiding, waiting.

There it is—the fear, crawling up through me from somewhere deep in my chest. It’s darkly comforting and familiar, a friend I despise. I’ve never known myself without the fear—as much as I want it gone, I’m not even sure who I’d be if I woke up without it.

I stare into the trees. They’re different from the forests in

Washington: thinner trees packed tightly together, pine needles that make tinkling sounds as they fall onto the forest floor below. It has the same eeriness, though, the same depth that all forests have. It looks as if it could *swallow* me.

The parade of pastors, policemen, and volunteers who came to the house used that phrase. They said the forest *swallowed* my sister up. They had a million questions, but the only answer I could give was that a yellow-eyed witch had stolen her, and that was never the answer they wanted. Ansel was more useful to them.

“I don’t remember,” Ansel said, crying, which I’d seen him do only once or twice before. “I had both their hands, but we had to let go to run faster. I let go of whomever was on my left first, and then whomever was on my right, but I don’t know who was where or when she was gone . . .”

One of us made it out of the forest, but even Ansel didn’t know who was truly missing for a heartbeat. He just knew one of his sisters was inside and one wasn’t.

Half of me was there, and half wasn’t.

Which means, how do I know I’m really the one who survived? What if I’m the one who disappeared? We were the same girl, perfectly identical: the same hair, same eyes, same hands. Yet one of us is gone. A stupid name was our only difference—is that why I survived? Because I’m Gretchen, and she’s a girl who doesn’t even have a name anymore?

My sister and I—we were born together. I thought we’d die together. I didn’t expect her to just . . . not die. And not live. To just not *be*. We were the same—if I could run fast

enough to escape the witch, so could she. But she didn't, and now everything about my life is wrong, wrong, wrong, because of her—

I slam the window shut; it creaks against stale paint and old grime, but I feel the familiar fear and fury subsiding. We'll go to the ocean tomorrow. Calm down. I breathe slowly, like Ansel does, until another fear strikes me—one I had forgotten about until I climb into bed and pull the crisp sheets up over my body. *Stay away from her. Stay as far away from her as you can.*

He spoke as if he was afraid of her. He spoke of Sophia the way I used to speak of the witch.

But what about Sophia Kelly would warrant such a dire warning?