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First Edition

THE MOON SISTERS

What one commonly takes as “the reality” . . . by no means signifies something fixed, but rather something that is ambiguous. . . . There are many realities.

—*Albert Hofmann*

\*

Action is the antidote to despair.

—*Joan Baez*

FEBRUARY

GROUND ZERO

## The End of the Beginning

\* OLIVIA \*

The night before the worst day of my life, I dreamed the sun went dark and ice cracked every mirror in the house, but I didn't take it for a warning.

The day itself seemed like any other Tuesday at the start. Papa made pancakes, then went to the bakery to prepare for deliveries with Babka. My sister, Jazz, followed behind him shortly after that. Even though it was one of the coldest stretches we'd had that February, I chose a button-down shirt from the pile of clothes on the floor of my room instead of my wool pullover, because I planned to see Stan.

When I went to say goodbye to Mama, I found the door to the kitchen closed from the living room. She'd have the oven on to battle back the chill in our house. The kitchen, at least, could be warmed quickly this way, a small room shaped like a stubby number 7 that doubled as Mama's office in the wintertime.

"What's out there?" I asked when I stepped inside to find her staring out the room's lone window. She wore her frayed blue robe, thick socks, and a ponytail that was just to the right of center. It was still cold in there; the oven had yet to warm the room.

“Nothing,” she said. “A gray sky.”

I was hardly aware. Even though it was the middle of winter, my nose filled with the scent of clothes right off the line on a summer day, like sunshine itself. That’s what seeing Mama always did to me; it was my favorite part of having synesthesia.

“If you live your whole life hoping and dreaming the wrong things,” she said, “what does that mean about your whole life?”

Her voice sank low, looked like roots descending in a slow and seeking way into the earth, which told me she was in what she called one of her “up-and-downs.”

I sat at the table, littered with manuscript pages, a plateful of cold pancakes, and a typewriter older than my mother. She’d been working on a fairy tale called *A Foolish Fire* nearly my entire life but had yet to finish it. I knew this was what she was talking about.

“There’s nothing wrong with your dreams, Mama,” I told her. “Believe, believe.”

“Not everyone has your courage, Olivia.”

I might’ve suggested she take the trip she dreamed of taking, go to the setting of her story—a bog in our state of West Virginia called Cranberry Glades. But I knew a mention of the ghost lights she hoped to see there could send my mother’s mood up or further down, and that maybe this wasn’t the time to risk it.

“Maybe you’ll feel better after you take a nap,” I said, because Mama called *sleep* her personal tonic.

She said, “I take too many naps as it is,” which is when I pulled off a boot.

“I’ll stay home with you today. If you’re up for it, we can dream together for a while. We haven’t done that in a long time.”

When I was younger, we called it “the dream game.” Sometimes I’d describe life through my eyes—like the way thunder filled the air with a mustard-gold fog—because she enjoyed hearing about it. Sometimes we’d both poke our heads through the clouds, especially after math, when we were worn out from too much thinking. She’d lie on the couch with her eyes locked shut, and I’d fling myself

over a chair with my eyes wide open, and we'd unloose our wildest imaginings. Trees rained soft white buds the size of platters onto our shoulders and into our hair, covered us until we looked like exotic birds. We'd fly to Iceland or France or Russia or Brazil. Visit creamy blue pools and limestone cliffs and waterfalls that went on for miles.

Sometimes we'd visit the bog and see the ghost lights, which Mama said were like a vision of hope itself, and she'd have a revelation about the end of her story.

But it was all just dreaming.

She told me she wasn't in the mood for that and urged me to go on with my plans. I took it as a positive sign that she sounded calmer when she said it, that the downward trek of her voice had stilled. I half expected her to say something about Stan—*Don't let that boy into your knickers*—even though I was nearly eighteen and we lived in the middle of nowhere.

"Will you write today?" I asked, when she stayed quiet.

She nodded but never turned around. I pulled my boot back on. I told her to stay warm. I told her I loved her. And then I left.

I was the one who found her later—not moving, not breathing, dead with her head on the kitchen table. The gas on and the pilot light out, the windows and doors closed, sealing the room as tight as the envelope sitting beside her.

I have a hard time recalling what I did in those next minutes. Screamed. Felt for a pulse that wasn't there. Called 911. Pulled her to the floor. Held my mother, and rocked us both, the way she'd rocked me over endless hours when I was a child.

"You're not dead, you're not dead," I chanted, rocked harder, hoped harder, as cold air from a window I must've opened poured over us both. "Mama! Mama, please, wake up!"

She did not wake up. The ambulance came and took her away, and I saw no colors or shapes from the siren—the beginning of a landslide of change.

I hid the letter in the torn lining of my coat, where it dug at my heart like a spade, and I told no one. It was not a letter meant for

us—me and my father and sister. It was not *Goodbye, life wasn't what I thought it would be. I've lived and dreamed the wrong things, and I no longer believe, so I am gone*. Mama had turned on the oven, and the pilot light flickered out because it was an old stove in an old house, and she'd fallen asleep with the door closed, because that's what she did all the time.

An accident.

Ghosts sometimes visited from the other side, Babka always said; they breathed on glass as a sign of their discontentment. It was only later that I noticed frost on the bathroom mirror.

JULY

FIRST STAGE:  
DENIAL

Hope is the denial of reality.

—*Margaret Weis*

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Foolish Fire of Olivia Moon

\* J A Z Z \*

**M**y sister began staring at the sun after our mother died, because she swore it smelled like her. For me, it would always be the scent of oven gas, since that's how Mom went—fumes pouring out, her breathing them in. Like Sylvia Plath, my father said, because my mother was a tortured writer, too.

Olivia's actions were just as purposeful. Burned her retinas out over a period of months, made it so she couldn't drive or even read. Well, she could've, if she'd used the glasses the doctor gave her—those big things that look like telescopes on her face—but she wouldn't. So no reading. No driving. Instead, she lived with her head always tilted to the side, with an oil smudge in the center of everything she might want to see.

My sister's reality had always been bizarre, though, with her ability to taste words and see sounds and smell a person on the sun. So when she decided to toss our dead mother's ashes into a suitcase and go off to the setting of our dead mother's story to find a ghost light, I wasn't all that surprised. She'd never been the poster child for sense.

There were dozens of tales about ghost lights, or will-o'-the-wisps,

as they're sometimes called—those slow-blinking lights that folks claim appear over bogs and swamplands. Some say they're the spirits of dead Indians or disgruntled miners, even unborn children. They're lost souls trying to find their missing parts. They're mercurial sprites who'll lead you to hidden treasure or danger if you follow, which is why they're also called *Foolish Fires*; trusting in them is not a sensible thing. Scientists say they're just swamp gases blinking to a strange pseudo-life now and then. A reasonable explanation, if you ask me.

Olivia did not ask me.

She woke up one day determined to find them. As if she might see with her blind eyes just when she needed to see—notice those lights hiding in a mushroom ring, or hanging alongside a thousand leaves in a hickory tree, or drowning with a bunch of cranberries in a bog. As if finding them might matter somehow, when our lives had been upended and nothing could ever be the same again.

I knew better.

“I’m not a cripple, Jazz, and I can see well enough to walk around without falling into a ditch. I’ll be just fine.”

Olivia stood at the end of the lane, a small tattered suitcase in one hand and a bag lunch in the other. Dirt swirled around her ankles when Old Man Williams rattled by in his pickup.

I pulled as close to the curb as I could and glared out at her from the small window of the biscuit bus. The shame I’d felt having to drive the ancient red-and-rust beast, which my grandmother and father didn’t even use anymore but which seemed unwilling to quit, had been worth it in the end. I’d won the job in Kennaton. I’d won it, and I couldn’t even enjoy it. Not when my eighteen-year-old, legally blind sister was about to do another stupid thing.

“And what happens when you get thirsty?” I asked.

“I’ll buy water.” She rattled her pocket. Coins jangled from within.

At least those denim shorts were hers. The bleach-streaked blue

V-neck she wore—like so many of the things she wore now—had been our mother’s. Taking her things was Olivia’s latest obsession, as was trying to braid her hair the way our mother did for her when she was young, when her hair was an artful mix of curls and waves. The opposite of the nest of neglect on her head now, with braids wound so tight they jutted from her skull like worms with rigor mortis.

“What if you’re not near a store?”

“There are streams all over the state,” she said. “I’ll find water.”

“You’ll get giardia.”

She didn’t blink.

My fingers dug into the cracked plastic steering wheel as the bus coughed. “And what happens when you’re tired?”

“I’ll sleep.”

“Where?”

She shrugged. “Wherever I am.”

“And where are you going to find these ghost lights, Olivia? Do you even know?”

She looked sidelong at me with big, blue, broken eyes set in a pale face, and said, “Cranberry Glades,” as if I’d asked her the time of day.

I was sicker than I could say of hearing about the bogs and ghost lights of the Monongahela Forest. Our mother had talked about them a lot over the years, always in relation to her book. *One of these days I’ll visit that bog, see those wisps, and figure out the ending—you’ll see*, she’d say.

I might’ve asked her how that could matter, tried to impress upon her the impossibility of finding the end to a fictional story out in the real world and that she didn’t need a trip so much as dogged determination and hard work to finish. But logic wasn’t my family’s strong suit, and my mother had never been one to actualize a dream—even one as straightforward as *Visit Cranberry Glades*.

“That trip isn’t for you to worry about, Olivia. It isn’t anyone’s to worry about anymore,” I said, giving logic a try despite what I knew about my blood. “We need to let it go.”

"It's unfinished business," she said, and sounded for a moment like my grandmother—a woman I respected for being both a dreamer and a doer, even if she was far too superstitious for my taste.

*The dead remain when there's unfinished business*, Babka had said after the funeral, reciting one of her Old World beliefs and covering the mirrors in our house lest my mother's spirit reenter our world through a looking glass. They were still covered, too, even though it had been five months since my mother died. *The business is still unfinished*, Babka insisted whenever I pressed her on it.

Maybe my mother's ashes were scattered in my sister's suitcase, but I had no doubt that my mother's spirit had long since moved on. I'd seen the way she looked through magazines, planning trips we'd never be able to afford. I'd heard her gasp with longing over any number of things in *People* magazine: the latest red-carpet dress, elaborate mansions with manicured lawns, even a lobster drowned in a pool of butter—things you'd never find in our hometown.

Dreaming. Always wanting what wasn't.

No, my mother's spirit wasn't hanging around Tramp. She was gone. Free, finally, of the cement shoes that had always been of her own construction. She might've worn those shoes right out to the deepest part of the stream running through our town, let nature take its course, but that wasn't the path she chose when at last she chose.

I knew something was wrong with me.

I should've felt something about her death, more than I did—something that I could label and understand, instead of the knot that I couldn't. All I knew for sure was what that knot *wasn't*. It wasn't what I'd believed grief would be. And it wasn't the desire to memorialize my mother in marble or the stars, or make good on any of the dreams she'd abandoned along with her family.

At the other end of the spectrum lay my father, whose grief was so evident that it hurt to look at him. Sometimes he stood in the bathroom with a portion of the mirror uncovered—staring into his own vacant eyes, his face half-shaved—hoping, praying maybe, that

my mother would sneak back through the glass. He blamed himself for her death, I knew, though I didn't understand the *why* of that; it's not like he'd turned on the gas.

A few weeks ago, I came home to find her favorite chair gone. I couldn't begin to guess the number of naps my mother had taken in that seat, or the number of library books she'd read there, either. Maybe my father thought he'd miss her less if he didn't see that empty dented cushion every day. But if that was the reason he would've done well to get rid of all her things instead of leaving the most significant reminders of her right where they'd been.

The typewriter in our tiny kitchen.

Her manuscript tucked under that.

The makeshift desk in their bedroom.

*Maybe it's time the rest went away, too*, I told him just yesterday, hoping we could be rid of it all, quick and done. But spontaneous, dramatic gestures weren't his nature.

A dog's bark brought me back to the present.

"Olivia!" I shouted, when I noticed her start to walk away again—noticed Mrs. Lynch, too, on her porch across the road, staring at the two of us. I pulled the door handle, a snakelike metal bar angled up and out of the dashboard, until the squeezebox doors creaked open. "Get in, Olivia. Right now."

"Goodbye, Jazz. Try not to worry," she said, and continued down the lane.

Our hometown of Tramp, West Virginia, had about a hundred homes, all of them old firetrap constructions, and only six businesses: a post office, a liquor store, St. Cyril's Church, a gas station, a corner store, and my grandmother's bakery. Everyone in town called the business Susie's—even though its real name was Sušienka, a Slovakian word for *biscuit*—and they called my grandmother Susie—even though her real name was Drahomíra. She didn't mind. Not so long as they came in every morning and bought a bag of her warm small cakes. I tried to steer clear of them myself,

since most of my neighbors could probably attribute their potbellies to Susie's biscuits.

Everything was a stone's throw from everything else in Tramp, so I drove a stone's throw and left the keys in the ignition. My grandmother was inside, cleaning a countertop. She stopped when she saw me, her face full of animation and an unspoken question.

"I got the job," I said.

She pressed her thick lips together and narrowed her wrinkled eyelids. "When will you start? Tell me everything."

"In a minute, Babka. Is Dad here?"

When she looked over her shoulder, I ducked under the counter and walked past her, into the kitchen, where the scent of bread had long ago been baked right into the walls. Now early afternoon, appliances sat cool and settled from the morning's work. My father was also settled—bottom in a chair, top slumped over a desk in the corner. There was an open bottle of something beside him—an increasingly common sight this summer.

"Was he drunk for deliveries? When did he start?"

"After lunch. He is just sad," she said. "Give him time. It has only been five months."

It felt more like five years.

I took the bottle. Vodka. Walked it over to the wide porcelain sink.

"Don't," she said. "He'll just buy more."

More of what we couldn't afford to begin with. Still, I knew she was right. I screwed the cap on the bottle and put it back beside him, then gripped his shoulder and shook.

"Dad. Dad, wake up." He didn't stir. "Dad, come on. It's about Olivia. Olivia's in trouble."

One eye squinted up at me. "Liv?" he said. "What?"

"She's halfway down the street, heading out of town with Mom's ashes in a suitcase. She's keen on walking them all the way to the bogs, but with her miswired senses she'll probably end up in Canada."

Or dead. Flattened under someone's tires. Dead. Picked up by some hitchhiker killer. Dead from dehydration, from being lost or—

"You have to tell her to come home," I said. "She won't listen to me."

Vodka poured off him in sheets as he righted himself. *Three sheets to the wind*. Maybe that's where the saying had come from.

"Ready?" I asked.

He pulled himself upright, his hands on the desk, his left cheek coated in flour, his mass of dark, wavy hair—something Olivia and I had both inherited—in desperate need of a trim. His eyes looked a little screwed up. If my mother were suddenly brought back from the grave, she'd die all over again seeing him like this; she'd always thought him the handsomest guy on the planet. At least he never threw up on himself.

"I can't drive," he said.

As if. "I'll drive. Come on, she can't be too far." I pulled at his sleeve, but he didn't budge.

"I should've taken Beth to the bogs," he said, almost moaning the words. "Why didn't I take her?"

Another replayed topic. But you couldn't turn back time, or halt it, no matter how many clock batteries you chucked out the window. I felt the presence of the three ovens behind me as if they'd come to life and nodded their heads, mouths snapped shut.

"Because she didn't want you to take her," I said, hoping my pointed words cut through his fog. "Remember how she always had an excuse whenever you brought it up? Remember how you tried that one time and she couldn't bring herself to get in the car?"

What an ordeal that had been, what a disappointment for us all, but especially my father, who'd taken great pains to try to make it happen.

"She didn't *want* to go," I continued. "Not really."

"You'll have to take her down there, Jazz," he said. "In the bus."

"You can't be serious."

"Drive her down to Monon—Monongahela. Go on and find

those berry bogs for your mother.” His eyes came into focus when he said it, too, which made my pulse race in a fight-or-flight kind of way.

“Can we take a moment to ground ourselves in the reality of the situation here?” I said. “Olivia doesn’t just want to visit the bog, have a moment, then turn around again right after. She wants to play hide-and-seek with a will-o’-the-wisp. She wants to find one. That could take an eternity, if they even appear down there, and for what purpose? It’s not like seeing a light is going to bring Mom back. It’s not like her ashes are going to care, either.”

My blood pumped harder when my father’s expression didn’t change.

“All right,” I said. “What if we find a ghost light but it’s not the good sort of spirit Mom imagined? What if it’s a trickster goblin who’ll charm us right off a cliff edge?”

His eyes lost their clarity, and I knew I should’ve taken more care with my words. But was it my fault that I had to sink to the level of superstitious bullshittery in order to make a point?

“It’s such a small thing to do for your father, to bring peace,” Babka said. “Such a small thing for your sister, to keep her safe.”

My grandmother had such a wise way about her; that’s what made her guilt trips especially potent. But driving around the state in an ancient bus searching for ether was not how I wanted to spend my time. Not when my life was about to change so dramatically.

In one week and one day, I would start my job at Rutherford & Son Funeral Home in Kennaton, working directly with Emilia Bryce. I would be there four days a week as a rule, though my official start date—August 1st—was a Thursday. Emilia liked the neatness of the idea: new month, new staff member. I couldn’t use my job as an excuse, though, because I hadn’t told my father about my interview yet; I didn’t know how he’d feel about me taking work in the same funeral home Mom’s body had been laid out in.

Babka had asked me at least a dozen times if the job was what I wanted, if something more than money motivated my decision.

I knew she asked for a bigger reason than being sorry to lose my dough-rolling hands at Susie's, too. It was hard for her to accept that I was a twenty-two-year-old doer who was not a dreamer—that such a thing could exist with the involvement of her DNA—or that my choices didn't have to satisfy a deep need of any sort. And, if they did, I didn't know about it; self-analysis was anything but my talent. The bottom line was that I wanted the job and wouldn't risk it on my sister's whim.

Babka seemed to read my mind. "It will not take long to drive there, little *macka*." *Much-ka*. Cat. An endearment as well as a reminder to use my claws for good, to scabble on behalf of my family, toward and not away from them. "You know your mother would want you to go after her, to protect."

Oh, yes, I knew. I could almost hear her voice.

*Find your sister and bring her home, Jazz. She's off wandering again.*

When wasn't she? Following her impulses, regardless of sense. As predictable as smoke in the wind. But I could not live my life as my sister's keeper. I wouldn't.

*Please, Jazz. Be good.*

I was sick of being good.

"Thank you, Jazz," my father said.

I stomped my foot—"Wait a second!"—but he'd slumped down again, his head already returned to the desk.

Babka led me out of the back room by the hand. "I have a map for you," she said, also assuming.

I kept up my end of the argument, but I knew I was finished when she started to pack a bag full of biscuits for me, when I realized that's what Olivia had held, too—not a bag lunch but a sack from Susie's—that Babka had been aware of Olivia's plans all along. She handed it to me along with a jar of peanut butter and a dull knife, and said, "You never know. Maybe you'll find the end of the story." An inside joke I'd never found funny.

Any doubt that I'd been bamboozled evaporated when she told

me she'd put the sleeping bags in the storage room and reminded me how to unstick the tricky latch on the back of the bus—the cheapest motel one could find, as the bus was all but gutted. Once home to racks of biscuits, the wide floor now housed only dust.

She tucked money into my hand, if I needed to call or buy more food.

“I thought you said this would take just a few hours.”

“A few to drive. A few to look. A few to sleep. A few to look again. A few to drive back. Just a few.” She landed a wet kiss on my cheek, and her features turned serious when she said it: “Keep your sister safe. Keep *you* safe. And do not worry about Miss Emilia Bryce. Some dead can wait with patience. Some dead cannot.”

The air that rushed out at me when I opened the door to the house nearly melted my skin, and that's saying something, seeing as I was coming from the hottest bus ever manufactured. But, along with covering all our mirrors, Babka had insisted we keep the windows closed. Those spirits—you never did know how they might slip in. And, of course, there was no air-conditioning in our house—or in any house in Tramp. There were no cordless teakettles, either, or iPads or flat-screen TVs. We knew they existed, out there in another sphere, but they were not a part of our world any more than was the water found recently, supposedly, on Mars. A lack of money had a way of repressing a life, turning it back a few years—sometimes a few centuries. I suspected that it had a way of taking the dream out of you, too, that you cashed it in at some point in exchange for a few dollars.

It was while I rushed around, grabbing what I thought we'd need for an overnighter, that I noted the latest change: My mother's desk had been moved out of my parents' room and into Olivia's. There it sat—two tall crates bridged with a plywood worktop—buted up against the end of my sister's bed. In the warmer months, my mother would spend hours there, writing longhand and typing and staring off into space.

On top of the desk's usual tablecloth covering were Olivia's rejected glasses—exhumed from a small drawer filled with other things I was probably never meant to find, including an unopened pack of condoms. Sitting beside the glasses was the framed photograph that had always been on the desk—a picture of a man with steel eyes and a thin smile, his hand held in the air in the manner of a wave, or the waving off of a photographer. My grandfather. My mother's father.

Sometimes my mother called this desk her *altar*, though I never understood why. She didn't exactly believe in God, though she wouldn't admit that and risk an eternity in hell; she'd always preferred purgatory to making a real choice. And now there it was—desk or altar—taken by my sister the way she took everything else.

Everything except what had lain hidden under the loose floorboard in our mother's room. Twenty-two letters, and they all began the same way.

*Dear Dad.*

*Dear Dad.*

*Dear Dad.*

"Must be nice to always do whatever the hell you want," I muttered, taking one last look at the desk before zipping up my mother's old Kennaton State backpack, where those letters lay snug under food and water bottles.

The pack was tucked away under the bus's dash when I reunited with my sister on the road, about half a mile from where I'd last seen her. This time, when I swung open the door, she stepped up and in.

"You can be dangerously passive-aggressive," I told her.

In an unusual display of good sense, she said nothing. Just settled into the seat behind me as we headed out of town.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Blue and Chocolate

\* OLIVIA \*

I was seven years and seven months when my father said he could hear music in the box fan that sat on the floor of our living room. It was fiddler's music, he said, well bowed and true. Mama, Jazz, and I couldn't hear anything but the sound of blades cutting into the hot summer air, but he hummed the tune for us and it was nice. I was so excited that maybe he was like me, but it only happened the one time.

Back then, everyone but my family thought I was either crazy or had the wildest imagination they'd ever heard expressed. They didn't know that there were others who could smell sights (Papa was fresh-mown grass, the sun was Mama) or taste words (not every word, and not the way regular people taste, either; *freckle*, like the dots all over Mama's face, tasted like togetherness). They didn't know that others could see sounds (Babka's voice looked like a tumble of soft flour). They didn't know that I wasn't the only one who could see a calendar in her own head, with days and numbers that lingered in the background, like a hungry dog when you're eating a sandwich.

They didn't know there was a word for what I had.

*synesthesia (n.):* the stimulation of a sense other than the one receiving input; sensory areas with faulty wiring

That's what the dictionary might say, my doctor explained when he figured it out. After that, my mother told the school they needed to stop using colored chalk and ink in my classes, because if a letter was written in the wrong color (like *A* written in sky blue instead of cranberry red, which was the color it always was to me) it made my brain stall. But they didn't change, so she took me out of there in the sixth grade and taught me at home after that. Taught me everything I needed to know and everything she'd learned in three years of college besides. She always used black ink on white paper, which left my letters free to be themselves. *D* was a superior sort of hot orange, standing beside *C*, so modest in her buttery tones. *O* was my favorite, like water shooting out of a hose in summertime.

My mother liked hearing about my letters about as much as Jazz *didn't* like hearing about them. Maybe that's because my sister had to stay in school even after I was taken out of it, and I was able to finish my twelfth-grade requirements early. The trouble between us began before that, though.

The year I turned six, Jazz got a lava lamp for Christmas. It transfixed us both from the second she plugged it in, with globs of oily crimson that rose and fell like sleepy dancers in a pool of green.

*That's how "Silent Night" looks!* I'd said, excited to share what I saw every time I heard the song. I grabbed the lamp, but it slid out of my hands and broke, spilling all those little dancers onto the kitchen floor.

When my parents walked into the room seconds later to find Jazz boring holes into my skull with her eyes like some medieval torturer, Papa covered one of his own eyes to remind us that there were two ways to look at everything.

*It's not the end of the world,* Mama said. *Maybe Santa will bring you an even better lava lamp next Christmas.*

Jazz's eyes flicked away from me and to my parents, where they stayed for a long second before she stormed away. *I hate your synesthesia. And there's no such thing as Santa Claus*, she said, already halfway up the stairs.

I might've cried for a week over the death of Santa, but my mother pulled me onto her lap and reminded me of one of her life truths: It was okay to believe in things that others didn't believe in. It was okay not to believe, too.

I leaned my forehead against the rattling window as Jazz merged onto the highway on the way to the glades, my nose raised to catch the slim breeze sneaking in through the permanently stuck window. The world was still an interesting place to see, even now that I was blind in the legal sense of things, unable to clearly make out expressions on faces or my colored letters. Being left with only the periphery made you look at life in a unique way, consider its exhalations and auras—like the deep, deep green of the forested hills on either side of us and the secrets it might hide. And in many ways I could still see more than most: The red-streak sounds left by passing trucks and cars looked like rubber eraser bits on paper, and a clear blue sky always smelled of warm chocolate and adrenaline.

If I'd been in the bus with anyone else, I might've shared that the day was like a cup of chocolate coffee, but I knew better than to bother with Jazz, especially when everything down to her clothing choice of gray shorts and a black T-shirt revealed her storm-cloud mood. She was driving us to the glades against her will and better judgment, she'd said, which meant I would get the mostly silent treatment from her for the duration, with a few snippety snap comments thrown in for good measure. How was I supposed to know she'd come home today with a job in her back pocket? It's not like my sister told me anything. And now I couldn't get it out of my head.

A funeral home. *The* funeral home.

I recalled my mother in her casket with her eyes closed, how

I'd stood beside her with my hand on her hair. They'd covered her cinnamon-sugar freckles with wrong-colored makeup, and I wanted to rub it off her face.

*I want to see Mama's eyes one last time*, I told Missy Finnegan, one of Babka's oldest customers from Tramp, who'd stepped up to pay her respects.

She'd lifted her glasses off her nose, looked at me with her tiny black eyes, and wiggled her teeth. *They take the eyeballs out of 'em before now, child. Hang on to your memories.*

"Will you have to do the eyes?" I asked the back of my sister's head.

"What?" she said, the word like a bite.

"They take the eyes out of corpses, don't they? You won't have anything to do with that, will you?"

"We don't remove the eyes, only the tongues."

"Really?" I asked, before my brain kicked in.

Maybe it was because Jazz always treated me like a five-year-old that I sometimes felt like one with her. She was the only person who'd ever made my mouth run off out of nerves. Sometimes I wished I were still five when I was around her. My five-year-old self never cared what my sister thought of me, or knew that what she thought of me didn't amount to much.

I twined my fingers through a section of hair, started another braid, as Jazz ended our not-quite conversation by turning on the radio. A familiar lime static appeared as she searched in vain for a station. I was glad to see that static—glad to have it back.

Grief had turned everything black as coal for weeks after Mama died. Even my inner calendar shut down then, when everything tasted like ashes and dust. No one knew. Not about that, and not about my eyes. Not until late May, when Jazz made me go with her to the bakery and asked me to list what was low on the pantry shelves but I couldn't, because I couldn't read the labels.

Maybe Jazz wanted to be with dead people because she was in a dark place—so dark you sometimes forgot yourself and did things

you normally wouldn't do. Like drink half a bottle of vodka in the middle of a workday. Like stare at the sun.

I turned my head, tried to see the sphere of fire in the sky, catch a hint of Mama's scent, but it was too far over the bus and I would never see it straight on again anyhow. The dark blot was there, though—to remind me of what happened, what I'd done. The eclipse of my central vision.

The lime static disappeared as Jazz turned off the radio with a curse. Papa had put that radio in the bus years ago, when it was still used for deliveries, but he'd learned pretty quick what we all knew now. It wasn't the quality of the receiver that mattered in our neck of the deep woods; nothing ever sounded quite right near Tramp. I tried to make my voice light as I quoted a saying as well worn by our father as his shoes.

"The mountains of West Virginia—can't live with 'em, can't imagine living without 'em."

"How could you when they're all over the damned place, crowding around us like buildings ready to collapse?" Jazz said, which made me think of dead folk again, hollow of their organs and crowding the ground with their bones.

"Will you have to do anything at all with the bodies at the funeral home? What will you have to do there, exactly?"

"I'm in charge of the glitter nail polish."

Not even my inner five-year-old could miss that sarcasm. I asked the question that got to the heart of the matter.

"Why do you want this job, Jazz? Why now?"

She flung the question back like a grenade. "Why do you want to drag us to the glades, Olivia? Why now?"

I lost track of where I was in my braid, started another.

Why now? Because this was something I could do in a sea of things I couldn't.

Last night I'd found Papa disassembling Mama's desk in their bedroom, the tablecloth stripped off the crates and plywood, like flesh off old bones.

*Don't throw it away, I said. That was her altar, remember? It gave her so much hope.*

I was glad not to be able to see the details of his face—the grooved lines near his mouth, the shallow pools that made his eyes, once deep puddles of blue. It was hard enough to see his voice, its edges frayed like butchered thread.

*There's nothing to hope for anymore, Liv, he said. Your mother's gone, and there's no undoing that. No way to wish or hope or pray it undone. She killed herself.*

*She didn't kill herself, I said, as my insides twisted in my chest—my heart pulled over my lungs, my liver tugged up and turned, a braid of organs. It was an accident.* And then I hugged him, kissed the top of his head, thick with the scent of alcohol and unwashed hair, and he buckled over and began to cry.

Maybe it's because my mother's altar sat beside me all night that I dreamed of the bogs. I stepped over a wriggling and saturated earth until I found one: a will-o'-the-wisp, full bright, darting here and there.

It smelled so strongly of hope that I could taste it.

Hope that Mama hadn't killed herself.

Of course I wanted to catch the wisp. I wanted Mama's dreams to have meant something, couldn't bear the thought that she'd died believing the opposite about that or her very life. But when I turned to tell my family, who were nearby but in that weird way of dreams also in a long, dark hall, they would not run with me to follow the wisp. And they smelled atrocious—like a stew of alcohol and unwashed hair, sadness and fear and confusion, and ellipses that went on forever, circling them and rattling like a snake. I ran from the ellipses, because running eased the pain of the letter jabbing at me through my coat. I ran for three days before I found the light again, and I swear it looked like someone smiled at me from within all that bobbing bright.

Mama.

I woke before I could reach for her, opened my eyes to find a

light still dancing like a grin in my blind spot. Impossible; I would never see anything in that spot again, Dr. Patrick had said so. Yet there it was.

The sensation faded within a minute, but for the first time since my mother died I felt glad. Expectant. It had seemed like a sign.

Talking to Babka about it decided me. I told her of the dream, how vivid it had been, like it was speaking to me, and how I didn't want to make the same mistake twice.

*Twice?* she asked.

I described the visions I'd had the night before Mama died, with the sun dying in the sky and mirrors turning to ice.

*Maybe my dreams are trying to tell me something,* I said. *But I'm not sure what they want me to do.*

Babka nodded. *Maybe you won't understand it until later, but here is something I know for sure: Dreams like feet better than knees. What do your insides tell you?*

That's when I packed my bag.

That's when I decided I wasn't going to take the trip alone, either, though my thoughts weren't on my sister. I found the blue jar with a small portion of Mama's ashes—the part of her we hadn't buried—next to my father's side of the bed. Mama had always loved the jar's vibrant hue, a match for Papa's eyes. Now it leaned against the wall beside an empty bottle of vodka.

*We'll do this together,* I told her. *You'll get to the bog yet, and we'll finish some business. Believe, believe.*

I leaned my leg up against my suitcase, where Mama's ashes now lay inside a sealed plastic bag. "Jazz?"

My sister grunted in reply.

"You're not doing the cremating, are you?"

"Oh, for God's sake!" she said.

That marked the end of her mostly silent treatment, when she let me know what she was really thinking. This trip was ridiculous. If I thought we'd stumble upon a will-o'-the-wisp when they were the definition of unpredictable, then *I* was ridiculous. Waste of

time. Driving around in this stupid bus. Daddy would drink himself into oblivion while we were away, because Babka wouldn't do a damned thing about it, and I knew it. One night. One night at the most, because we were going to be back in Tramp by Thursday, and then I was going to sit at home and behave, because she had a new job to worry about. Real money. Stop haranguing her about the funeral home. She knew I didn't like it, and that was too bad. And if I thought she wanted to sleep in this friggin' antique when it was so hot and unventilated, I had another thing coming.

*Thursday* tasted like disappointment, like dry Cheerios without the sugar.

She swore then with more conviction, and I could tell it wasn't at me. The bus buzzed, and my ears filled with the sound of tired brakes straining to slow, to stop, of tires riding over the rumble strips on the highway. I thought I saw a green sign to my right, the kind that tells you the name of the town off an exit ramp, but then it was gone and I couldn't have read it anyhow.

"Hang on!" Jazz said, too late.

The bus lurched, and somehow I landed on my belly, the floor heaving beneath me.

"Are you all right?" I felt her beside me, her hand on my back. "Move something."

I lifted my head. "I'm all right."

"Good," she said, her voice thready with adrenaline. "I've got to check the bus. You stay put."

"What happened?" I asked, but then I heard the door open in a shimmer of amber starbursts, and knew she was already gone.

I flipped over and opened my eyes. Decade-old flour motes floated all around me, shook up like the rattled specks inside a snow globe. It was beautiful, the way they coated my inner calendar of numbers, days of the week, months of the year. There was a veritable blizzard of motes over July. July, which was now, this month.

*Catch them, Olivia*, I imagined my mother saying, as I lifted my palm and smiled.