

# 1.

## *Sparkles Speak Louder than Words*

**I** FEEL LIKE I'M ABOUT TO JUMP RIGHT OUT of my skin.

It's a silly metaphor, I know, but it's one my grandmother uses all the time—usually in reference to how the nymphs who live in the forest behind her house are acting. I can't see the nymphs the way she can—it's not my gift—so I've always wondered what exactly she means by the expression. Not to mention what it would look like if a person, or a nymph, actually *jumped* out of their skin. But right now, I totally get it. Because no matter how hard I try, I can't keep still as we wind our way along this narrow mountain road in my father's trusty silver Subaru.

My leg is shaking up and down, my eyes keep scanning the tall, dark woods around us for I don't even *know* what, and I feel like I've suddenly forgotten what to do with my

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hands. One minute I'm rubbing them up and down my thighs like I'm trying to keep warm and the next I'm twining and twisting my fingers together into a series of complicated knots.

If we don't get there soon, I swear I'm going to explode . . . or, at the very least, end up with my fingers tied together. Not exactly the first impression I'm hoping to make when I get to Athena Hall and am finally—finally—assigned my twelve labors.

On a day like today, it's hard to believe my twin brother, Paris, is the calm one between the two of us—he's normally the one who gets all wild and worked up about things—but it's true. Right now, he's acting like it's any other day. Face buried in his PlayStation Portal, brown eyes focused on whatever game he's currently obsessed with, auburn hair falling over his forehead into his eyes. It's like he doesn't even *care* that this is the most important day of our lives.

Then again, he always makes a good first impression. I'm the one whose delivery usually needs work, the one who sneezes too loud and walks too fast, whose curly red hair is too wild. Not this time, though. This time, I'm going to do everything right. I've been practicing for *months*. As for my hair, I've got that locked down in the tightest braid known to humankind.

"Aren't you even the smallest bit excited?" The words burst out of me like air from a leaky balloon—strange sounding, unexpected, and, if I'm being honest, more than a little bit on the shrill side.

## THE AFTERMYTH

What can I say? I may be the planner, but when I freak out, I *really* freak out.

“I’ll get excited when we’re actually there,” Paris shoots back without so much as glancing up from his game. “Besides, you’re wound up tight enough for the both of us.”

I want to argue, but he’s not wrong. So instead, I ignore him and lean forward, doing my best to peer through the windshield. I don’t know what I’m expecting—what I’m hoping—to see, but it’s not what’s actually there. The same old road we’ve driven on a million times before.

Winding curves.

Narrow lanes.

Not a lot of traffic.

And tons and tons of giant trees in whatever direction you happen to glance.

Basically, it looks like every other road out here in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts. It’s pretty—really pretty—but not exactly what I’d call extraordinary. And definitely not where I’d expect a school like Anaximander’s to be located.

“Sit back, Penelope,” my dad orders as we wind around a particularly sharp curve. “It’s not safe for you to be leaning forward like that.”

I roll my eyes but do what he says. Watching him and Paris go at it over the last couple of years has proven that my father’s not above pulling the car over and stopping in the middle of nowhere just to make a point. And right now, the only point I want to hear him make is that we’ve finally—*finally*—arrived.

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“Don’t worry.” My mother glances over her shoulder at me. “We’re almost there.”

I find that hard to believe, considering—“What was that?” I ask, a combination of nerves and excitement suddenly thrumming in my stomach.

“What was what?” My dad’s perfectly manicured brown mustache quivers just a little with the words.

“There was a flash of light.” I point to the big red barn we’re passing on the left. “Right over there.”

My parents exchange a look. “It was probably nothing.” It didn’t feel like nothing. In fact—“There it is again!”

I point directly to it this time—a rainbow-colored sparkle just beyond the barn.

Even Paris raises his head at the urgency in my voice. But by the time the three of them look at where I’m gesturing, the flash of colors is gone. Again.

“It’s probably just the sun bouncing off the barn’s roof,” my mom replies.

“What sun?” I ask, because it’s actually a really dull, really gray-looking day.

Dark, sinister clouds fill the sky, and though I haven’t heard any thunder yet, the promise of rain feels more like a threat as fog rolls in from the top of the mountain. The higher we climb, the more misty and out-of-time things are starting to look.

“You know what your mom means,” my dad answers. “If it’s not from the roof, maybe you’re seeing a glint from the metal on some old tractor or something.”

## THE AFTERMYTH

Once again, if there's no sun, there's obviously nothing to glint off metal, either. But I keep my mouth shut, mostly because experience has taught me that it's not worth arguing with either of my parents when they're dead set against believing me.

Still, I crane my neck as far to the left as it will go so I can keep watching the barn even after we drive past it.

Sure enough, a few seconds later I see another rainbow-colored spark—this one bigger than the other two put together—but before I can say anything, the road curves to the right. The barn, and the mysterious sparkles, disappear.

And just like that, the fog turns thicker—much thicker—and the sky around us turns the same ominous color as the clouds.

“What happened?” My brother looks up for the first time. “Why's it so dark at ten a.m.?”

“Just the weather,” my mom trills. “Nothing to worry about.”

This time it's Paris and me who exchange looks, but then he shrugs and goes back to his game—leaving me with nothing to do but continue staring out the window in hopes of finally catching a glimpse of Anaximander's.

Thirteen excruciating minutes later, my dad finally pulls the car into a small—and by small, I mean almost nonexistent—shoulder at the curve in the road.

“Wait. Why are we stopping?” I ask as my chest tightens and my palms start to sweat. “Are we finally there?”