

# PROLOGUE

GRACEN

Meander, Oregon—2006

Dougy pouts in Gracen's doorway while he stuffs his backpack with everything he'll need for overnight. He ignores her. He's about to poison both their lives, but he doesn't know that yet. He only knows it's his best friend's birthday, and there will be a trip to the wave pool and a sleepover party after school. Waterslides, pizza, and *Super Mario Bros.* dance through Gracen's mind, and he skips the stupid-looking pajamas Mom told him to bring. Bathing suit—check. Sweatpants—check. Clean underwear and toothbrushes are for babies.

Dougy, nicknamed for the Doug firs that grow around their house because she wants to be a tree when she grows up, is only in kindergarten. With her arms crossed over her chest,

she sighs loudly in his doorway. The two of them usually play “Highest Tower” before school, a made-up game that combines their old wooden blocks and a knock-knock joke book Mom bought at a yard sale. Yesterday his tower was almost waist-high before Douggy giggled so hard she knocked it over. Today, he needs to pack, though, and he’s explained that twice.

After more sighs and recrossing of the arms, Douggy says in her best trying-to-sound-grown-up voice, “Fine. We can play tomorrow morning.”

He shoots her a frustrated look as he struggles with his backpack zipper. “No, dummy. It’s a sleepover. I’ll be at Blake’s, and you have ballet on Saturdays.”

Douggy’s chin juts, and her lip trembles. He opens his mouth to take it back, but it’s too late. She runs to tell Mom, who’s in the bathroom getting ready for work. Gracen follows to defend himself. Mom emerges with tight lips, her hair half-curled, and shakes her head. “You guys are going to miss the bus. Gracen, hold Douggy’s hand. Get out of here, quick!”

“Can’t Dad drive us? I’m not ready!” Douggy’s whining now.

Gracen checks the clock. He’s dressed and the backpack zipper is almost entirely closed, but Douggy doesn’t have socks on yet. Snot shines between her nose and mouth.

Mom swipes a tissue at Douggy’s face. “He went to work early today because he’s helping with the Mushroom Festival this afternoon, and I don’t have time to drive you. Now, go!”

She shoves Douggy's bare feet into rainbow sneakers and kisses the top of her head. "You're going to have fun today, you'll see. Got your lucky rock?"

Douggy nods, but her face screws up. "My feet feel weird without socks," she complains but shrugs her fuzzy panda backpack onto her shoulders.

"It's no big deal. I do it all the time," Gracen tells her. Mom blows him a kiss before returning to the bathroom, and Gracen leads the way outside. The sunny day has a crisp bite to the air, and his heart lifts. At school all his friends will compare waterslide stories and make plans for tonight. It's going to be awesome. His steps quicken.

"Mom said you have to hold my hand," Douggy calls, trotting after him.

"You're not a baby." Why can't she act her age for once? He's got big-kid things to do. And she better not count on sitting with him on the bus. He's sitting with Blake today.

A low chain link fence encloses their yard, and Gracen waits at the gate for Douggy. The grass is brown from a dry summer, dotted with fallen leaves. Douggy's nose is running again. She wipes a slug trail across her face with the back of her hand and glares at him. "Why are you so mean today?"

He teeters on the brink of apologizing and making her laugh with a stupid joke. Someday, he'll distill the trajectory of his life down to this moment, the choice that ruins everything—but it doesn't feel like a choice, just an

inconsequential prickle of spite. He's usually a good big brother, but it's work. Today is for fun.

"Not my fault you're a loser." He starts down the street, hands around his backpack straps. Their house, at the end of a gravel road, is two blocks from the bus stop. No sidewalk, but people drive slow because of all the ruts and potholes. It's safe except for what Gracen calls the "danger zone."

The challenges face each other on either side of the street. On the right, a scary bearded man lives in a trailer with weird stains along the sides like veins. Every day, rain or shine, he's smoking on his sagging porch when Gracen walks by. Sometimes he mutters softly, and other times he talks loud enough to make out the words: stuff about the president and the FBI and the whole neighborhood being under surveillance. His eyes bore into Gracen long after he walks past. Mom and Dad say he's a good guy—a war hero who got hurt and can't be a soldier anymore, but when he's staring bullets at Gracen, it's hard to believe.

The other side of the street has the mean dog behind a leaning wooden fence. Gracen can see through gaps and missing slats to a mossy, swaybacked house. Weeds straggle around a dirt yard with one tall Doug fir that casts everything into shadow.

The chained-up dog looks like a German shepherd, one of Mom's favorite breeds. Whenever the family goes for a walk, Mom shakes her head sadly. The poor thing is always chained.

He goes nuts, barking and lunging whenever anyone passes, the chain jerking him to a stop just short of the fence.

Gracen used to speed past the danger zone in the middle of the street. Now that Douggy's with him, he has to be a good example, or she'll tell. He usually takes her the dog way. Dad says even if the wood rots away, that heavy chain is forever.

Douggy's stuck in her mood, scuffing her feet far behind him.

"Hurry up," he calls. "You'll ruin your shoes."

She pouts. "There's dirt on my toes. It's gross."

He rolls his eyes. "You're making it worse. If we miss the bus, Mom will kill us." Worse, she might change her mind about the sleepover.

Douggy halts, brow coming down and lower lip sticking out—the signs of an oncoming tantrum. He forces a lilt into his voice. "If you hurry, I'll bring you some birthday cake tomorrow!"

"I don't care."

The bus stop is a block and a half away. Cleo, the fourth grader who shows up at the last minute, is already there.

"Fine. I'll go without you. When you miss the bus, run home and tell Mom by yourself."

Douggy narrows her eyes. "Mom said you have to stay with me."

"Not if you're this slow. Kids get in big trouble if they don't go to school when they're not sick, you know."

He turns his back and walks away. Only five steps, and she yells for him.

“Wait!” she cries. “It’s the danger zone!”

He smiles to himself. He’d known that would do the trick. He can already hear the dog’s chain clinking through the fence. Across the street, the scraggly guy mumbles to himself and taps his cigarettes against the table.

Gracen walks backward, keeping an eye on Douggy, who runs to catch up. She’s halfway to him when she trips, falling to her hands and knees. The brakes of a bus screech as it pulls around the corner, but it doesn’t stop. It must be the high school bus. Theirs won’t be far behind. Douggy climbs to her feet, red-faced, and pats her pockets with a panicky look.

The dog pants rapidly, chain jingling as he runs back and forth.

“You’re okay. Come on!” Gracen calls. The dog barks as if in response.

“My rock is gone!”

Under his breath, Gracen says, “For shit’s sake,” which is what Dad mutters when Mom nags at him to pick up after himself. The lucky rock is just a random rock that’s sort of heart-shaped. Louder, he says, “We’ll find another one at the bus stop. Let’s go!”

The dog yelps when it hits the end of the chain. Probably no one’s stood next to his fence for this long since...ever. Through a gap, the dog’s shape blocks the light as it lunges

again. Gracen channels Mom's stern voice. "Now. Or turn around and go home."

Dougy takes a few uncertain steps, then stops. "I'm scared."

Gracen darts a glance across the street. The scary guy/war hero blows a plume of smoke from his mouth like a dragon in a jean jacket, gazing toward the sky as if the kids weren't there.

Gracen sighs. "Okay, 'fraidy-cat. See you tomorrow, after ballet. No cake for you." He picks up a stick, turns his back on Dougy, and drags it along the fence in a show of fearlessness. Dougy ruins everything. They should have been at the bus stop five minutes ago, and he's the one who'll get in trouble if they don't make it.

"Stop!" she yells. He glances back to see her eyes squeezed shut and her hands over her ears. "I'm telling Mom!"

"Good!" He keeps going, thwacking marks into the soft dark wood of each fence slat. Will he be called to the principal's office if he arrives at school without his sister?

No way. Dougy's the one being a pill. She'll go home in tears, and Mom won't have time to do anything but drop her off at school. After the party tomorrow he'll get a talking-to, and that will be that.

Another thud and a strangled yelp end in a clanky jangle. Gracen looks through a crack. The dog hesitates over a tangle of chain topped by a broken leather collar. Free.

Faster than thought, the dog hurls itself against the rotting planks near Gracen. The fence shudders and creaks. The paws and the huge head loom at the top as it scrabbles for purchase, whining and growling. Gracen's frozen, staring at its grizzled muzzle.

"Gracen!" Douggy runs toward him. The last glimpse of his sister before he falls is carved deep: her sweet brown eyes and stubborn chin, her pumping elbows. Her determination to save him.

Then—pain. His skull lights up, and he crumples. There's a weird crunch—his neck?—and sparkly stars fill his vision. The ground slams him, forces the air from his lungs, and he gasps with a sound like a drain. He gropes for understanding—why is he down on the road?—when a snarl snaps him back to alertness.

Douggy shrieks. Gracen squirms to get free, but he's stuck. He can't breathe. He can't move. A man yells: "Down! Stop! No!" Douggy's shrieks fade to whimpers. Gracen tries to yell, "Run!" but only wheezes.

A gunshot cleaves the world.

The ringing silence goes on and on until Gracen whimpers and pushes out from the fallen boards. He gasps like a drowning man. His shirt and the skin of his back are shredded, but he barely notices. Something warm and sticky drips in his eye, and he wipes it away, blinking at Douggy.

The scary guy is kneeling beside her, the German shepherd behind him as still as if it were a stuffed animal. There's red on his sister's face and shirt. Red on the man's hands where they press, trying to keep it in.

This can't be real. It's like a movie, the kind he's not allowed to watch. Pretend blood, like a video game.

His stomach twists. When he asks, "Is it bad?" his voice is small and far away.

Clear gray eyes meet Gracen's. Same old scraggly beard and hollow cheeks, but this close, the deep lines of his face make him look sad and scared instead of crazy. His voice is calm, but he doesn't answer Gracen's question.

"Nine-one-one, boy," he says. "Phone's inside the door. Haul ass."

Gracen hauls ass and answers his own question. Over and over he'll answer it, through the coming decades. It's bad now, and it only gets worse.

"Gracen Ridpath of *Gracen's Hot Mess* here. Yeah, that funny guy who does stupid food tricks and dropped sixty-five pounds on Oreos and orange juice alone. (Remember, kids—don't try this at home, especially if there's no one else to clean up the vomit.) If you've ever wondered what caused the mental dumpster fire behind my quirky exterior, check out my new limited series vod-cast where I open up about a family tragedy. Maybe it'll help someone to hear it, and maybe I need to share. *The Ridpath Girl*... on your favorite podcast platforms."

—trailer for *The Ridpath Girl*, present day

# 1

## QUINN

In the predawn darkness, Quinn sits cross-legged on the bare twin-sized mattress that serves as their bed, sleeping bag draped around narrow shoulders. Quinn's eyes are closed as they replay the last lines of the podcast episode yet again, despite knowing them by heart: "Douggy wasn't the happy child we wanted to think she was, and her death was no accident."

For Quinn, it's like picking a scab. An infected scab.

With a twitch, Quinn taps to stop Gracen Ridpath's rumination on his dysfunctional parents, his scarred little sister, and the dual tragedies that reduced his once-happy family to a husk. Gracen's little sister had been Quinn's best friend. The podcast takes the only time in Quinn's life when they experienced unconditional acceptance and poisons it. Douggy was a joyful, fierce, loyal friend, and she didn't kill herself. No fucking way.

They take a deep breath and reach for the clean clothes piled next to the mattress. It's been ten days since they moved in, but they haven't bothered with furnishings or decor. This is a temporary home—just another couple of weeks, and they'll go back to their real life in Portland, or whatever's left of it.

In the past ten days, Quinn's located Mom's address, done several walk-bys, rehearsed their pitch, and changed the words a hundred times. They even approached the door once and retreated, shaking. Procrastinating has been easy to rationalize because they've been working so much. Family emergency or not, they have to eat.

Today, they only have an evening shift—nearly twelve hours from now. It's time to act.

The cloudy January sky lightens through the bare window, and Quinn pulls on black cargo pants and a burgundy wool sweater, wool socks, and their lace-up Doc Marten boots. One thigh pocket holds their phone, the other a Ziploc bag with a woven bracelet in it, all Quinn has left of Duggy. Too frayed and old to wear safely, but here in Meander, Quinn's been carrying it for luck.

Duggy's death had been their mother's excuse for sending Quinn and their brother away, nearly fifteen years ago, and Quinn hasn't been back until now. An untimely end of childhood, at age eleven. Maybe that's why they feel so old.

As Quinn emerges from the bedroom, the scent of coffee greets them, along with the sounds of humming and chopping.

Viveca, Quinn's landlord and roommate, must be up and getting ready to leave for work. Since moving in, Quinn's seen Viveca mostly in passing, which is as it should be. Nothing against Vee, as she likes to be called, but Quinn usually avoids small talk. Today's not a day for retreat, though, and Quinn enters the kitchen with a polite, nervous nod.

"Good morning!" Viveca says with a broad smile as she dumps a handful of celery sticks into a container. With her curvaceous figure, understated makeup, and close-cropped natural hair, she has more presence in purple scrubs than Quinn would have in a tux with tails.

Quinn offers a reserved smile back. "Morning." They start the water for tea, then rummage in the cupboard where they keep their small stash of food.

Vee says, "Morning shift today?"

"Just errands."

"You look tired! There's coffee and muffins if you want."

"No, thanks." Guilt pinches at Quinn for turning down the hospitality, but caffeine is worse than small talk for making their anxiety go haywire. It's the last thing they need before facing their mother. They carry crackers, peanut butter, a banana, and a butter knife to the table, then return for their mug of tea.

Viveca doesn't seem offended. She sips from her steaming dolphin mug, one among many ocean-themed collectibles that colonize the house. "I've been meaning to ask you. What year did you move away, again?"

Quinn suppresses a sigh. When Vee first asked why Quinn wanted to rent a room in Meander, Quinn was less than truthful, leading her to believe they were moving here because they had happy memories of living here as a child. They didn't want Viveca to know they planned to leave as soon as they connected with their mother. The hotel is too expensive, but Viveca would probably prefer a renter who'd stay for months, not weeks.

Unfortunately, the story caused its own problems. Viveca, a Meanderite from birth, is perplexed about why she can't remember Quinn. Quinn hasn't felt like explaining that back then, they had a different name, a different hair color, a different gender, and a different body type. But now, looking at Viveca's open, friendly face, they realize their instinct toward privacy may be hobbling them. Douggy and Quinn were too young to be Viveca's friends, but Gracen was older, closer to her age. Maybe the two of them were in touch. While in Meander, Quinn means to confront Gracen, but he's proven a hard man to reach.

Quinn says, "It was the year Douggy Ridpath died. She was my best friend."

Viveca's eyes widen with dawning recognition. "Oh. I didn't realize. You—you're Kathy?"

Quinn's ears grow hot. "Not anymore."

Viveca nods slowly. "Got it. I remember you now. You were so shy!" She snaps her lunch box shut and shakes her

head. “My god, Douggy’s death—it was awful. You must have been devastated.”

Quinn hides their discomfort by carefully applying peanut butter to several more crackers. They regret it immediately as they chew through dry, sticky crumbs. With a hand shielding their mouth, they ask, “Did you keep in touch with Gracen?”

Viveca raises elegant eyebrows. “He’s a little high and mighty for the likes of me. And I doubt he’s shown his face here since sticking his mom in the nursing home.”

“You don’t sound like you like him much.”

“Are you kidding? Have you been following him online? His food channel was hilarious, and I even think his new podcast is cute, the stay-at-home dad thing. But this limited series where he’s trash-talking Meander—” She frowns at Quinn. “You’ve heard it, right? About Douggy?”

Quinn nods. Episode two *is* harsh. Gracen ruthlessly describes the treatment his sister suffered at the hands of townspeople who responded to a little girl’s scars with cruel words and stares. He doesn’t name Meander, calling it “a small town in Oregon,” and he hasn’t named anyone but himself and Douggy. All the same, a quick look at Wikipedia identifies Meander as Gracen’s birthplace, and some of the citizens in Gracen’s episodes would be easy to identify with a little detective work. Quinn isn’t surprised some Meanderites feel defensive.

Quinn remembers everything differently. The town hadn’t seemed so bad, and Douggy wasn’t scarred on the inside,

where it counted. But it's not just the podcast that concerns them. The last time Quinn spoke with Douggy, days before she died, was a late-night phone call. Douggy begged Quinn to sneak over so she could tell them something important, but Quinn wimped out. If Douggy died by accident, like everyone always said, that's bad enough. But if Douggy killed herself, it's Quinn's fault, for failing to come when they were needed.

Vee presses her lips together, then shrugs. "It probably wouldn't bother me so much, except the Parents and Teachers Association invited him to speak to the middle schoolers this year. A friend at work is one of the moms. They're celebrating his success to inspire the kids because he grew up here, and meanwhile he's claiming we bullied Douggy into killing herself. It's ridiculous. This town was good to her, no matter what Gracen seems to think."

"You really think so?"

"Yes!" Viveca smacks the counter. "Because guess what. I'm the evil babysitter Gracen talks about. Only I wasn't." Her dark skin turns rosy. "Yes, maybe I said something thoughtless, trying to impress some stupid boy. But Douggy knew I loved her. And she was self-conscious about her scars, but once she relaxed, she was a ray of sunshine! Maybe some people stared, but, hey, I got looks too, as one of the only Black kids in town. There was no bullying, no 'pattern of abuse.'"

Douggy was eight when Quinn met her, and ten-year-old Gracen was in charge when their parents were out. Gracen

and Douggy's dad was usually home anyway, unemployed or working short hours at one garage or another. Viveca must have babysat for them before the Fontaines moved to the neighborhood.

Quinn says, "I agree. I didn't think she was—"

"You know what I think? Gracen's trying to wring a few extra dollars out of the tragedy now that their parents are both gone. Such a pathetic thing to do! He'd sell his soul for another hundred K, let alone the memory of his sister."

She pulls her quilted jacket off the back of the chair and heaves her stuffed bag to her shoulder. "Anyway. If I can't get the school to cancel his visit, I'll tell him to his face when he comes to town." She turns to go.

"Wait!"

Viveca turns, jingling her keys impatiently. "What?"

"Your friend in the PTA. Do you think they'd have his contact info?"

"I'll ask." She throws Quinn a quick smile. "He'd probably be happy to hear from you, since you were Douggy's friend. Maybe you can get him to stop bad-mouthing us." She twinkles her fingers in Quinn's general direction. "See you later! Lock up if I'm not home. I've got plans tonight." She winks.

When the door closes, Quinn stares at the crumbs on their plate, heart pounding. Gracen had been ignoring Quinn's emails for months now—or maybe it was his assistant, or his agent, whoever acts as a filter—and Quinn had almost given

up. Suddenly, the possibility of talking to him seems very real. But today is Sheila day, for Kade's sake. They need to stay focused.

Rising, they clear Vee's mess, then duck into the bathroom to check their look in the mirror, trying to see through Sheila's eyes. The difference between the woman their mother thought their child would grow into and the Quinn who actually exists might startle her—Gran had certainly had a problem—and for a split second, they fantasize about jumping in the shower, then borrowing clothes and makeup from Viveca. A disguise. Quinn shakes it off. They're not looking for acceptance. Today, the focus is on Kade and what Kade needs.

Mom's going to step up, for once in her life.

They zip their worn black hoodie over their sweater, add the bulky black jacket, then step outside. The sky is low over the thick trees that surround the town, but the rain, which has been nearly constant for weeks, is holding off. Meander feels like it used to, a two-stoplight town nestled in the folds of a deep, dark forest. Downtown is only two blocks long, and, across the street from a single-truck fire station, the library and town hall share space in an old Victorian. Quinn had researched their mother's current address there, under her husband's name, in the county clerk's office.

Quinn walks briskly. Where Main Street crosses the swollen river, they lean against the balustrade and look into the rushing waters, icy fingers curled into their cuffs. They have

a right to ask for Sheila's help. Quinn is a confident adult, an artist—they rub the tattoo on their left hand—*not* a kid begging for crumbs of attention. They're demanding a pittance of what is owed to Kade—some small token of care.

An SUV passes too close, shushing through the puddles and dashing their clean black pants with mud. Quinn moves on, only to slow again as they come to an empty lot where a For Sale sign sprouts optimistically from a bed of weeds and broken concrete.

Here, the Fontaine kids once lived with Sheila in a one-bedroom duplex where water stains marred the ceiling, mold freckled the drywall, and grime mapped the linoleum floor. Quinn pauses for a moment, watching the ghost of a house that isn't there.

They haven't had the courage to walk by Douggy's old house yet.

Mom and her replacement family live in the antithesis of the old duplex: an imposing two-story new build with a double garage and a landscaped yard. Until Kade needed it, you couldn't have paid Quinn enough to visit. Why waste time on someone who'd abandoned them?

A cowardly part of them hopes the husband's car will be in the driveway—any excuse to put off the door knock for another day. This visit requires privacy. Quinn can't imagine what she's told him. Do her new kids know she abandoned her last set? Her husband must, unless they never socialize or shop

in town. Someone would have asked after Kathy and Kade, at least once. Or maybe not. It all feels like a very long time ago.

Too soon, the house is in front of them. They clamp their teeth together. If they blow this, Kade could end up with a life sentence. They force their feet along a concrete path lined with potted yucca in beds of lava rock. Mouth dry, they mount the slate steps and hesitate in front of the holly wreath on the shiny red door.

On a previous walk, they watched Sheila shepherd two brown-haired girls in white karate uniforms into the back seat of an SUV. She was chatting away on Bluetooth as she slammed the car door and paused with her hand on top of the vehicle. Confidence exuded from her highlighted hair to her high-heeled leather boots. She looked good for forty-five. If Quinn hadn't caught a distracted expression that echoed the exhausted, tearful, resentful woman they lived with for their first decade, Quinn would have concluded they had the wrong address.

When Quinn was younger, they fantasized about confronting that old version of their mother. Puffy and straggle-haired, in worn leggings and pilly sweatshirts, smelling of cigarettes. Defensive and short-tempered, and no match for Quinn's spiky, righteous anger. The present version looks well-armored, like she could step over a discarded child and keep right on going. Which she had, all the way to her nice house and her beautiful children.

With a deep breath, Quinn jabs their finger at the doorbell. A moment later, the door swings open.

Sheila DeCelles Fontaine Ehler looks Quinn up and down with distaste. “No soliciting.” The door starts to close.

Despite the time Quinn’s put into rehearsing this moment, despite the anger and fear burning inside, a weak and pathetic “Mom?” escapes their lips.

Sheila’s still-familiar hazel eyes widen. Her lips open, maybe to speak, maybe for an indrawn breath.

Then she slams the door.

"Thank you for sharing, it helps so many broken people even if they don't know it. You are an enlightened soul in a cruel world, and you've inspired me so much."

—*The Ridpath Girl*, Episode 1: "A Family in Pain," Comments section, 3 months ago

# 2

## KIRSTEN

The throbbing behind my forehead may fade if I sit here at the dining room table massaging my temples instead of following Trav to the kitchen. One minute of peace. With my eyes closed, I hear the fridge door bang open, then the freezer, then more drawers and cupboards than seem reasonable for a simple before-school breakfast. He's going for noise, a passive-aggressive move, since he knows I have a headache.

When I was a child, my parents' bedtime stories all began with the words *Once upon a time, there was a beautiful young princess*. The princess's name was Kirsten, and she lived in a land of splendor and kindness, and the challenges she faced were always surmountable. Friendly, misunderstood dragons. Lima beans. Marauding wolves.

The world of law enforcement is not full of splendor and kindness. I've worked well with entitled assholes, eaten my

vegetables, and taken out a lot of wolves. That's what I live for, and just because I work in a flawed system that sometimes prosecutes the innocent—

I swallow. Trav's angry words still echo through my mind:  
*You're not fine. Look at you.*

Stifling a groan, I rub my temples.

The Sanchez case went wrong. I did my best. We all did. A little insomnia and a few headaches are a small price to pay. It will pass, and I'll make up this rough patch to Trav and the kids.

A double drumbeat of feet announces the twins are awake. Their voices harmonize in an unintelligible give-and-take that soothes me. The bathroom door slams, and water starts running. One of them—probably Henry—shuffles down the stairs with a pause between each step, as if he were playing on his game console while he walks. Someday, he'll fall and break his crown. I massage my eye sockets, rehearsing the cheerful Mom greeting that will signal to Trav that our daily truce has been called.

Henry appears in the doorway. No game after all. His eyes are bleary, his cheeks splotched red. A blanket is clutched around his shoulders. "Mommy, I don't feel good," he says and rushes to me. I pull him close, inhaling the warm, sour scent of sleep.

Trav appears in the doorway, a spatula in hand. "You okay, bud?" He's transformed from the self-righteous ogre of our

argument into affable Daddy, the sweet, bearded teddy bear of a man with endless patience.

Henry shakes his head against my shoulder. “My tummy hurts.”

The words are muffled, but we both understand. Trav meets my eyes. He lifts his eyebrows. This winter has been one illness after another, with one or both twins sick or recovering at any given moment. Technically it’s Trav’s turn to use a sick day, but I went in Saturday to catch up on paperwork so was considering flexing today off. And—the migraine. I nod that I’ll stay home. Trav pats Henry’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, big guy. Mom will see what she can do about that.”

“First, let’s take your temperature.” I nudge Henry forward and push to my feet. My heartbeat drums inside my skull, and I lean on the table until it eases. Migraines and coffee and sleeplessness, oh my. I’m not sure where one ends and the next begins, but it’s time for meds. And once Trav and Fern leave, Henry and I can doze on the couch with *Kung Fu Panda* on low for the next few hours. Bliss.

When we reach the upstairs hallway, Fern rushes past with a “Hi, Mommy!” Her fine brown hair has a rat’s nest on one side, but three zebra-patterned clips hold her bangs out of her eyes. Good enough.

“Have a great day, sweetheart!” I call. In a moment, her high, clear voice floats up from the kitchen. Something about endangered lemurs and a field trip to the zoo.

In the bathroom, Henry plops on the toilet lid, and I check the medicine cabinet. No thermometer. “Shoot. Wait here. It’s in Mom and Dad’s bathroom.”

Mentally, I correct that to “Dad’s bathroom.” It’s been weeks since I spent the night in our bedroom, which has become a foreign country. Trav’s iPad is on my nightstand, his pillows are in the center of the headboard, his dirty clothes block my closet door. The room smells stuffy and sweaty, an offense to my aching head. Through half-closed drapes, the backyard is a mud pit under layers of gray clouds that have been hovering for weeks.

In the bathroom, ignoring my haggard face in the mirror, I retrieve the thermometer and pop a pain pill. My phone buzzes from the back pocket of my sweats as I return to Henry.

The number is Eb’s. My heart starts racing.

He wastes no time. “Docker, head to Meander. Dunwoody Park, south entrance. There’s a body, and you’re on deck.”

Fantasies of *Kung Fu Panda*, of sleep, of peaceful one-on-one time with Henry all evaporate. My stomach contracts with dread, and for one second, I’m certain I’m going to vomit. *Get help*, Trav says, but it’s not Trav’s face I see. It’s the nineteen-year-old kid who didn’t make it to legal drinking age because I thought—no, *knew*—he was a killer. Because I saw the wolf in his eyes.

I tamp it down.

“On my way,” I tell Eb and hang up.

I force a smile and slip the thermometer into Henry's mouth. "Dad will be up in a minute, okay? Mom has to work after all." I kiss the top of his head, inhale one last breath of his damp, salty hair, then go break the news to Trav.