

PROLOGUE



Water crawled inch by inch, pulling itself onto the bridge and slithering through the village streets. The swell turned violent, slamming people down in its path. It barreled into homes, clutching anything within its reach and dragging it out to the streets. Dwellings crumbled as people sprinted for higher ground. Too few reached the hill's peak as water devoured the tops of fir trees.

"No!" the young girl gasped.

Her mother laughed. "It's all right, little one. I can stop reading if you're too scared."

The girl curled up to her mother. "No, it's okay." She scooped even closer, placing her mother's arm around her. "Ready."

The girl's mother smiled before returning to the book:

Villagers plunged their arms into the merciless river,

reaching for the hands of people rushing by that grabbed for anything outside the raging waters. Women screamed as loved ones disappeared beneath the surface, dragged away by the current and swallowed whole.

The three goddesses laughed at the little humans scurrying about and screaming as the river washed so many of them away. Amphitrite adjusted her crown of seashells and jewels and clanked her glass with Demeter's. "This was an inspired idea."

"Truly," Demeter replied, sweeping her golden tresses from her shoulder. "I can't believe it took us so long to finally do this. It's even more fun than I thought it would be." She beamed and turned to face her sister. "What do you think, Hecate?"

Hecate scoffed. "I think you both waited too long. These humans are softer than the old ones. I'm not sure they'll be able to handle it." Hecate put on her best pouty face, though it could never work as well as Demeter's baby cheeks and wide eyes. Hecate's narrowed brows and stern face worked better for intimidation than anything else, so she returned to her usual annoyed look.

"Nonsense," Amphitrite said. "These will work just fine for us. I'm having fun already." Hecate rolled her eyes, and Amphitrite continued. "Oh, lighten up, dear sister. Enjoy the show. It's about to happen!"

The three goddesses huddled together, peering down from Olympus over the balcony ledge. They waited impatiently as the wave built higher, blotting out the sun and obstructing their view of everything below. The deafening crash of the wave thundered around them as it submerged the villages. When the water receded, a smile crept onto each goddess's face. Their plan had worked—the only remnant of the villages being a large hollow in the earth.

Demeter sprang up from the bench, almost knocking over the bottle of wine on the railing. "We did it!"

The goddesses joined hands and jumped together, rejoicing in their triumph. When they finally calmed down, they picked up their glasses and went over the plan again.

"How long should we give them?" Demeter asked.

Amphitrite replied, "Let's give them some time to adjust. They've had a great upset. We don't want to frighten them further."

The two goddesses nodded in agreement. Amphitrite was always best at making important decisions.

Hecate spoke. "One more round, then we will greet them in their new home, far from this world." She winked at her sisters. "Our little secret." Hecate grabbed the bottle

and poured them each another glass as they giggled to themselves.

Once the goddesses had finished off their drinks, it was time for the next step. They joined hands and set off for the far side of the universe. Sparks rained behind the goddesses as they soared through space. Just before their arrival, they unbound their hands so each could make an entrance into the new world.

Amphitrite, goddess of the seas, plunged deep into the ocean. She grabbed on to a dolphin, riding it to shore on a wave fifty feet high. Her jewels and skin glistened in the water.

The humans stopped their frantic scrambling to marvel at her arrival. When she stepped foot onto the sand, she kissed the dolphin, thanking him, and he swam back to sea. Amphitrite gazed upon the humans she and her sisters had brought to this new world. The crowd stared back from a distance, not daring to come closer to the power that exuded from such a being. Some dropped to their knees as they recognized the sea goddess.

Before a word could be spoken, the ground quaked, and the crowd screamed out in terror. They dispersed, until they realized they had nowhere to go. They grabbed whatever was near—a tree, a rock, even a loved one—until the ground settled. A stalk shot out of the soil, reaching one hundred feet into the air, adorned on top

with the goddess of harvest herself, Demeter. The stalk bowed to lower the goddess beside her sister, who welcomed her with a simple nod. When Demeter stepped off her stalk, it sprung back up and turned into roses, showering the humans in white petals. The crowd stared bewildered at the goddesses. But the sisters did not look back. Instead, they looked to the skies.

Day instantly turned to night, and a large violet moon rose in the sky. The air became thin, and a chill descended on the crowd, a collective shiver sent up their spines. As the beam from the moon kissed the beach, Hecate—goddess of the night, moon, and magic—rode it down to complete the trinity sisterhood. Once her toes met the sand, daylight returned, and the humans exhaled a breath of relief.

Side by side, the goddesses walked toward the cowering humans. Three brave souls stepped forward. The largest of them spoke.

“What is the meaning of this? Where are our homes?” He motioned to the empty land around him that had once contained the flourishing villages they had built by hand.

“And what have you done with our land? And the skies?” the second man said.

A young woman chimed in, “We never settled on a beach. And the sun is not blue. The clouds are not pink.”

The crowd nodded their agreement with the three but didn't dare speak a word as the goddesses looked among them.

Amphitrite lifted her hand. "We have made you a new home, a new world."

The first man spoke again, "A new what?" He stepped toward the goddesses; his hands balled into tight fists.

"Oh hush," Hecate said. "What was so great about the old one? This one is going to be much more fun."

"How's that?" the man asked.

"Because this one is all about us," Demeter said with a smug look on her face.

The crowd murmured among themselves. The young woman stepped forward, crossing her arms. "How is this world about you, Demeter?"

Demeter laughed. "Because the only goddesses you'll be worshipping are us."

A voice from the crowd broke through. "Never!"

Several humans chanted in agreement, though most only cowered.

The goddesses did not waver, but the skies turned dark, the ground shook, and the waters rose. Children screamed, and mothers comforted them with anticipation of the end. Just as quickly as the threat of death loomed over them, it retreated.

The large man yelled out to the goddesses, "You cannot win our affections with your threats!"

The goddesses paused, turning away from the humans and discussing the matter among themselves.

"Perhaps they will not give in to fear," Amphitrite said.

"We don't want their fear; we want their love, their adoration," Hecate said.

"Then maybe that man is right. If we want love and adoration, then that is what we must give. Agreed?" Demeter said.

The three goddesses nodded and turned back to address the crowd. "We apologize for frightening you and your children. All we wanted was your love. We do not consider ourselves goddesses of hate. For our indiscretion, we each have a gift for you all, for this new world."

The young woman called out, "That's it? An apology and a gift fix what you've done here?"

The crowd nodded their agreement.

The sisters stood stunned. They'd done everything right. Why wouldn't these humans accept their new lives and praise them for it?

Hecate rolled her eyes and stepped forward in a huff. "Enough!" She held up her hands, waves of blue energy flowing and dancing around her arms. Many of the humans cowered and fell back with a gasp. In one quick motion, Hecate cast her arms out wide and sent the energy from her being into the sky. It exploded in a flash of light, and flecks of blue dust rained over the humans and the land. Hecate turned on her heel and walked back to her sisters, who stared at her with brows raised. With a quick smile, she turned back to them to watch her work in action.

The humans' faces softened before they each knelt before the goddesses.

Demeter whispered out of the corner of her mouth, "You did it."

Amphitrite smiled and looked toward the other goddesses. "Let's finish what we started, my sisters."

Demeter stepped toward the crowd and extended her hand. The young woman, who had spoken earlier, hesitated a moment, then joined hands with the goddess.

“For this land, I give everlasting prosperity and life. And for your bravery to speak for the people, I grant you command over the land. A queen among men. Your family shall be granted the same favor, your lineage shall bear this responsibility for all of time.”

The woman bowed to Demeter. “I accept this honor, Demeter. We shall worship you as our truest goddess in our new home. Thank you.”

Hecate stepped forward, offering her hand to the second brave man. “For your world, I grant magic, woven with the fertility of the land. You will be granted favor as well, and your family under the same conditions, with rule over all magic entails.”

The man bowed, accepting his new role, and naming Hecate his family’s truest goddess.

Amphitrite offered her hand to the large man. “I will grant you and your family the same stature and responsibilities in this new world. You will have command in the sea.”

The man wrinkled his brow.

“I am granting you this.” Amphitrite guided the man to the edge of the water, laid her hands on his shoulders, and motioned for him to step in. Once his feet hit the water, his legs turned to fins. He was a merman—a king

of the sea. He bowed to Amphitrite. “Thank you, Amphitrite, truest goddess to our home of the sea.”

The goddesses turned back to speak to the crowd. “Find the others on the far side of this world and tell them what has happened here,” Amphitrite said. “Use these gifts to build new homes.” The humans shouted their thanks to the goddesses, whose hearts filled with love and joy they had long been searching for.

The goddesses left their new world to return home to Olympus, keeping their little secret all to themselves and never returning.

But any time one of them felt a twinge of loneliness in their heart, they looked across the universe to that small world they’d created, where those humans had kept their promises and built temples honoring only them.

The young girl snored as her mother closed the book, kissed her on the forehead, and quietly walked out of the room.

CHAPTER ONE



Frogs hopped along the edge of the lake. Their splashes blended with the chirping crickets, nearly drowning out the hiss and whistle of the passing locomotive. Even after nightfall, the heat from the southern summer left beads of sweat under Sam's shirt.

He swatted at the mosquito that pricked his neck, then went back to reading the letter in his hand while he waited for Annabelle, hoping she'd been able to sneak out to meet him safely. The thought of her walking the streets alone after dark worried him, but the women's boarding house stood much too far away on days he was set up at the market.

Sam's brows rose at the words in front of him, a laugh escaping his lips.

"What's so funny?"

The delicate voice bade Sam to spin around. Annabelle stood directly in front of him, showing off her breathtaking smile. Her face glistening in the moonlight emptied his head

from all other thoughts. He could manage no more than to stare at her sparkling blue eyes and freckles—like stars in the sky.

“Belli!” Sam jumped up to embrace her. “Nothing. I just got this interesting letter.”

“Oh?” A giggling Annabelle kissed Sam’s cheek. “What’s that, now?”

“Remember Jimmy? He worked down at the docks but moved north to follow that Du Bois fella?”

Annabelle nodded.

“Well, he sent me this.” Sam handed the paper to Annabelle. “Read on the back page.”

Annabelle tilted the letter to read in the moonlight. “I met her, the woman of my dreams. I know I’ve only been gone a few weeks, but this is true love. Mary is—”

“After that,” Sam insisted.

Squinting at the paper, Annabelle continued, “Professor Du Bois has officially formed the group, calling us the Niagara Movement. The mission is equal rights for us Black folk. I know you lost hope in that after what happened to your family, but this time, it feels different. I think this may be the start of a better future.

“You need to come up here, Sam. Big things are happening, and we can finally get you a lady. Mary has a sister . . .” The rest she read in silence. “Oh, Sam. This is wonderful!” She threw her hands around his neck. “Do you think it’s true?”

Sam shrugged. “Jimmy’s no sucker, except for being fooled in thinking I don’t already have a beautiful lady.” He twirled Annabelle around as if to show her off, then turned to speak to no one but the lake. “Isn’t she stunning?”

Pretty as a peach, his mama would say.

Annabelle laughed. “Ain’t that the point? We would’ve been doing something wrong if someone knew about us.” Her tone shifted more serious. “But really, Sam, maybe we don’t have to run away. If things are changing—”

“Things ain’t changing that fast. Don’t be duped into thinking anything will happen in the South. Folks around here don’t care about movements for people like me. They’ll be the last in this country to do what’s right.”

Annabelle sighed. “You’re right. I was just hoping . . .”

“I know, my sweet Belli.” The urge to comfort her took over—he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her close. Looping her arms through his, she settled into his chest.

Sam swayed side to side, carrying Annabelle with him. A smile snuck across his face as he imagined them in the middle of a dance hall, moving with the slow melody of a piano and violin. In his mind, they didn’t have to hide—they were free to listen to the local musicians and enjoy a few drinks before heading home together. Annabelle would insist on him doing a real dance, and he’d object like always. *My feet don’t pick up the music right*, he’d say.

She had tried to teach him to dance for so long; it was almost embarrassing how he couldn’t get it down. The thought made Sam let out a breath of laughter.

Another splash pulled him back to reality, the dream slipping between his fingers. He held Annabelle tighter. A droplet of sweat trailed down between his shoulder blades, collecting in a pool. He didn’t mind the damp spot growing on his lower back. As long as Annabelle was in his arms, he’d put up with a little extra perspiration.

Sam closed his eyes to take in the smell of the surrounding woods, letting the sharp scent of pines envelop him. After a few breaths, the fragrance turned sweet. Sam swept Annabelle's pearly tresses to one side so he could nuzzle his head on her shoulder. The scent changed from pines to soap, and he welcomed it. He could never afford such a luxury.

When the dance ended, Sam smiled as Annabelle kicked off her boots and removed her stockings to dip her feet into the lake. She hiked up her skirt to keep it out of the water, taking care to keep it below her knees. The moonlight bounced off of her pale feet.

Laughing to himself, Sam joined her in the water and watched his dark brown feet disappear in the lake alongside hers, slipping his arm around her shoulders and holding her hand. His toes waded, side to side, under the surface, and he was thankful for the small bit of relief from the heat. Sam wouldn't miss anything about Charleston, except their lake.

A slight tilt of his head allowed Sam to take in Annabelle's half smile as she stared out at the water. "What are you thinking about, Belli?" Sam playfully nudged Annabelle as he planted tiny kisses on the nape of her neck.

The gesture elicited a giggle as Annabelle leaned into his nibbles. "I can't believe we're leaving tomorrow—we finally won't have to hide. Not everyone will be thrilled with it, but at least away from here, we'll have a chance." Annabelle squeezed Sam's hands tight and sighed. "With the way I grew up, I never thought I would find happi—"

A flash momentarily blinded Sam as white consumed everything around him. All at once, everything went black, and agony surged through his body. A ringing started in the

distance, intensifying to the point where Sam was sure his ears would explode. He cried out as another flash of white sparked in his eyes.

The pain was gone.

When he could see again, Annabelle stood a few paces from where they had been sitting. With all color absent from her cheeks, she stared at him expressionless.

A shiver from the abnormal chill in the humid southern air took over, and his feet were completely dry. The look on Annabelle's face twisted his stomach as he stared at his hands. Horrified by the blood painting his arms, he refused to look down again.

Annabelle ran to Sam and collapsed onto her knees in front of him. "Sam, oh deary me, you're all right! I thought you were gone." Tears streamed down Annabelle's face.

An explanation for the terrors refused to come to mind. He sprinted to the water, desperately trying to scrub the blood from his hands. A quick look at his body settled his nerves; he wasn't bleeding from anywhere. The sobs cutting through the air grabbed his attention, and he looked back to Annabelle. "What do you mean? I'm right here. I'm fine."

Annabelle opened her mouth, but only air came out. Shaking it off, she tried again, the words coming out in quavers, "There was a giant flash of light, and you disappeared."

The world went silent as Sam searched for the right words. Any words. "What?"

Erratic breaths consumed Annabelle, and she gripped her stomach while falling to her side, seemingly unable to hold herself up.

Oh no, Belli, not again. Sam rushed to her side. "It's okay; I'm

right here. Everything's all right." He put his hand on her trembling back, then reached for her hands. "Shh." Once Annabelle met his eyes, he took deep breaths, waiting for her to copy him. "Just look at me, Belli. Only me."

Annabelle squeezed Sam's hands tight. "I can't breathe. I can't breathe." Her eyes welled with fear as she choked out the words.

One thing always helped Annabelle when she became overwhelmed. "I can do all things . . ."

Annabelle looked up at Sam with crumpled brows. He squeezed her hands and nodded with encouragement.

With a shaky voice, she finished the verse, ". . . through Christ who strengthens me." The two repeated the mantra three more times before Sam went silent, letting the sounds of the night take over.

Several minutes passed before Annabelle matched Sam's slow breaths. She peered up into his eyes, managing to stop the tears, and calmed.

After a few more moments of staring at one another, and sure Annabelle had gotten through the worst of it, Sam spoke. "What happened?"

Annabelle stumbled over her words, "I don't know. I was sitting against you with your arms around me, then there was a flash, and you were gone. I didn't know what to do. I started to run for help, but then there was another flash, and you were there again, right where you were before."

That didn't make a lick of sense. All he could remember was pain. He couldn't possibly have disappeared, right? He pushed the thought from his mind and placed his hand gently on Annabelle's cheek, his thumb brushing at her freckles. A single

tear fell from Annabelle's eye, and Sam gently kissed it away. He didn't know what happened, couldn't possibly begin to understand it, but that wasn't what Annabelle needed to hear. "I'm fine now. We're okay." Sam helped Annabelle to her feet and wrapped his arms around her, stroking her back until she settled against him, her breathing back to normal.

"Maybe we should have the doctor take a look at you," Annabelle said.

"What for?" Hiding the fear would be easier if he understood what had happened. "I'm not hurt, and no good can come from us going into town together. We've made it this far without getting caught; we just need to make it one more night. The doc can't do anything for me. I'm fine." Sam gazed back at the lake. "Let's just sit here a while longer. It's the last time we're going to see this place. Let's enjoy it." At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to forget everything that had happened, to go back to holding his love by the water.

"You're right."

The pair sat back down at the lake's edge, Annabelle against Sam's chest. The sounds of the night cloaked them once more while Annabelle stroked her fingers along Sam's forearms. A welcomed touch.

A fiery sting shot through his arm, and he bit his lip to stifle a scream as he recoiled.

Annabelle bolted upright. "What's wrong?"

After pulling back his sleeve, he stared in disbelief.

"What is it, Sam?" The tremble in her voice worsened.

Sam shook his head as he lowered his arm to Annabelle. Emblazoned on his forearm, where there should have only been scars from tending to the crops, was a luminescent mark in the

shape of three roses, almost glowing against his dark brown skin.

Annabelle gasped and put her hands over her mouth.

The struggle with whether to focus on the anomaly itself or the unbearable pain battled in his mind. Keeping his composure seemed impossible as he gripped his arm. *God, what is happening?*

Before he could think what to do next, Annabelle grabbed Sam's hand and pulled him toward the lake. Sam resisted, but she kept pulling. It puzzled him to think what she was doing until she submerged his arm in the water. A rush of pain, followed by a wave of relief, washed over him.

After all they'd been through, he should have known better than to doubt the brilliant woman in front of him. Shaking the water from his arm, Sam grabbed her by the waist.

Color rushed to her cheeks when he kissed her forehead.

"I love you," Sam said.

"I love you, too."

The words always made his heart smile, no matter how many times he'd heard them. "Maybe we should call it a night. Tomorrow is a pretty important day. We both need the sleep."

"Are we really going to just ignore this?" She pointed to Sam's arm.

A shrug was all he could muster. "Let's talk on the way?"

The sigh confirmed her frustration. "Yeah."

They laced their fingers together and strolled back to town.

As they left the lake, Sam tried to ignore the hooded figure watching them from the tree line.



ANNABELLE CONTINUED her deep breathing as they walked down the alleyways toward her home. She'd grown accustomed to strolling the dim roads while walking with Sam and used the same path traveling alone in the dark. Being spotted alone on the streets in the middle of the night without a proper explanation of where she was going couldn't happen—she would look like a lady of the night.

Their relationship had been a secret ever since they'd met ten years before. If they were caught together, it would mean death for them both. But Annabelle had stopped thinking about that long ago, or the thought would've consumed her every waking moment. Every morning and night, she thanked God for the man next to her—she couldn't imagine her life without him.

Annabelle leaned into Sam as they rounded the next corner. Even though it was easily the hottest day of the year, Annabelle ignored the heat in favor of Sam's arms.

The events of the evening raced through her mind, but it wasn't safe to talk yet. To avoid suspicions, at the heart of the town, Annabelle released Sam and walked several paces ahead. One more street to go before they could breathe. Before they could make a sound.

Darting up the street, Sam offered his hand in assistance. Only a few more steps and they'd be safe behind the gate and under the steel staircase attached to the apartment building.

As Annabelle pulled her leg through the gap, she tripped on a lid that had rolled away from its trash bin, falling into Sam's arms. Covering her lips stifled the slight squeal. Sam raised his eyebrows to Annabelle, asking if she was all right, and she nodded back to him.

The slow creak of metal cut through the air, and the pair turned around in horror as two bins tipped over in the alleyway. The cans made a deafening clatter in the silent night, and Sam and Annabelle had no choice but to run for cover against the nearest building wall.

Several windows thrust open above them, the groans of upset men turning Annabelle's stomach upside down. Deep breaths and prayers kept her calm as she looked to Sam, whose smile and big, round eyes reassured her as always.

A woman's voice emerged. "What is it, Harold?"

"Just an animal digging through the garbage again. Go back to bed."

Once the windows closed, Sam grabbed Annabelle's hand and pulled her around the corner. They ran until they knew they were safe and let out sighs of relief. Though they had done the routine for years, it was no less of a risk each time.

Sam spoke first, "I know how worried you are about all of this, but nothing has changed. This mark on my arm . . . we can't dig any further."

Annabelle bit at her lip. "It's not normal, Sam. Something here ain't right. People don't just disappear and then get burning marks on their arms. And where did all that blood come from?"

"I ain't saying it's normal. What I'm saying is we have to let it go. Besides this mark on my arm, I feel totally fine."

Annabelle narrowed her eyes, and she could have sworn she saw the slightest twitch on Sam's face.

"I promise, Belli. But we can't go to anyone in town. There is no one we can trust."

"What about Helen? She's always been nice to me. Her

mother was a nurse; perhaps she can . . .” The downturn of Sam’s eyes made her stop.

“I know you mean well, but Helen doesn’t like me. Any time I see her around, she pretends like I ain’t even there.”

“But she’s always been so kind to the school children and me.”

“Well, you aren’t Black. I’m telling you, you’re barking up the wrong tree with that one.” Sam awkwardly shifted, pinching the bridge of his nose, and let out a sigh. “Look, we leave tomorrow, and then we can leave this behind too, as if it never happened. Please, can we just forget about this?”

Annabelle stared at her feet. Not having any answers gutted her. “What matters to me is that you’re all right. I trust you.”

Sam kissed her forehead. “Thank you.”

In all the commotion, Annabelle hadn’t realized how close they were to the boarding house.

She had requested the only private room when she moved in, as a means to accommodate her students without disturbing the rest of the girls, but not having to sneak by other girls in the hallway or tiptoe past their rooms made the meetings with Sam easier. Though she knew better than to ever have him inside.

Annabelle turned to Sam, who still held her hand, and reached up to kiss him goodnight. She was tall for a woman, nearly a head above the others, and with the help of her boots, only had a few inches between her and Sam’s lips.

“Goodnight, my love.” Annabelle smiled before she snuck another kiss, unable to resist the feel of his full lips against her own.

“Goodnight, Belli. I will meet you here before sunrise, as planned. I can’t wait. I love you.”

“I love you.” Annabelle turned and walked back toward her room, leaving Sam to walk home alone in the dark.



AFTER TAKING ANNABELLE HOME, Sam sat on his lumpy, hay-stuffed bed, examining the scar etched into his forearm. *Where did this come from?*

He got up from his bed and paced the room, trying to think of any explanation as to why Annabelle had been so scared, why he had a scar, and why, for some reason, he couldn't remember any of it. Arm still throbbing from the burn, Sam grabbed some water to help cool it off again. It took only two large steps to get from one side of the room to the other.

When he leaned over the pail, a hooded figure reflected on the surface. Overcome with shock, Sam fell backward, hitting the pail and sending it into a spin. The water dripped into a puddle next to him.

“Who are you? Get out of my house!”

The cloaked figure removed his hood, revealing a short man with slicked-back brown hair. “Please, there is no need to be afraid. I am a friend.”

Sam slowly stood, clenching his jaw and curling his fists. “I'm not going to say it again: leave my house!”

“Then who is going to tell you what that scar on your arm means?”

Sam's hand instantly went to his arm, wondering how this man could possibly know anything about the scar. “I don't care about the scar. It was a fluke, a flash of lightning. Now get out!” His theory didn't hold any water, but it was all he had.

“I cannot leave—I made a promise to you. I am here to help Annabelle.”

At the mention of Annabelle’s name, Sam swung. This had to be a trick. He threw his right arm straight for the man’s face, but his hand went through him. “What the . . . ? This is the Devil’s work!” He swung again. This time, Sam slipped on the puddle of water, and his entire body went through the man.

“As I said, I am a friend. I am not here to harm you, but I cannot stay long. Projecting myself to your world is difficult, and I fear she will soon find me.” The man kept glancing over his shoulder nervously, but Sam only saw the empty wall behind him. “I come with a warning.”

Sam barely heard the man speak, trying to figure out how he had just gone through a . . . man . . . ghost . . . projection? Powerless to make the man go away on his own, he had no choice but to listen. “Who are you?”

The figure smiled. “I am your friend, Keres.”



THE HOT NIGHT air gave no mercy as Annabelle hummed to herself, navigating back through the streets with expertise, but she enjoyed the song of the crickets as she neared Sam’s home. Seeing the streets of Charleston for the last time made her a bit sentimental. After all, it was the only home she’d ever known. She had never imagined missing anything about South Carolina. It was the place her parents had abandoned her as a baby, where she had to figure out the whole world on her own. Well, until she met Sam.

That day at the orphanage, she had peered out the window

as Sam arrived. There was something special about him; his gentleness drew her in. Though Sam was quite strong and large for a child, he spoke with such tenderness—his soulful brown eyes gave him away.

Excitement pushed her toward Sam's house, though she expected him to be asleep by now. When she'd arrived home, a delivery of the newest addition to the Oz story, *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, sat on her doorstep. It had been a year since its release, and she'd spent all that time trying to acquire a new copy, but she didn't have the money to spare. Though now, it meant more than just reliving her and Sam's favorite world—she would give this copy to the students at the schoolhouse as a parting gift.

But first, she wanted to bring it to Sam. Of all the wondrous books they'd read together, they held *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* most dear, discovering it Sam's last year before he'd aged out of the orphanage. Oz had become an escape for them.

Sam read more than anyone she had ever met. It was part of what made him such a wonderful poet. In case inspiration struck, he carried a little notebook with him everywhere he went, and she considered herself blessed when she noticed a sketch of herself inside the front cover. She loved being his muse—that's what he'd called her. It made her feel like the most loved woman in the world. His crooked smile every time he became entranced in another poem made her giggle.

The front door stood as a reminder of how close she dared to get to Sam's house. After she dropped off the book and gave Sam the morning to read it, she would take it to the schoolhouse on their way out of the city.

As she bent down to lean the book against the door, the light

from inside caught her eye. Curiosity overcame her, and she peeked in to see what had kept Sam up so late.

A cloaked man she'd never seen before stood in the center of the room, much shorter than Sam, with perfectly groomed brown hair and deep olive skin.

Sam always had his window open, and she could hear everything they were saying.



“KERES? I don’t know any Keres.” Sam’s blood heated.

“I need you to believe me, to remember. You cannot run away with Annabelle. The Dark Queen is searching for you. She figured out a way around the spell. She is going to kill you.”

Someone burst through the front door.

“Sam, what’s happening?”

Sam balled his fists and wrinkled his brows. “Annabelle? What are you doing here?” He released his knuckles.

“What am I doing here? What is *he* doing here?” Annabelle looked at the stranger, tilting her head and raising a brow. “Who are you?”

“I am Keres. But I do not have time to do this all again. Sam, you and Annabelle are in danger. You need to find the oracle; he can help you get back here. He can work miracles.” Keres pointed to a spot on a map that appeared out of nowhere.

Before Sam or Annabelle could react, Keres charged at Sam, who instinctively stumbled back into the wall behind him. He went straight through Sam’s chest, but when Sam turned around, Keres had already disappeared, taking the light with him.

Sam and Annabelle searched for a match. Once the candles near the bed and on the table were lit, Sam looked at Annabelle with only confusion. Annabelle sat on Sam's bed, and he knelt on the floor in front of her.

"What just happened? Are we going crazy?" Annabelle buried her head in her hands.

"No, my love. I have an idea." Sam rubbed at his chest. "I think maybe we were struck by lightning tonight, and it's making us see some impossible things. That is the only possible explanation." Something was wrong, but that was the last thing she needed to hear. His gut churned, unable to stomach lying to Annabelle.

"Are you feeling all right? Did it hurt when . . ."

"I feel fine; I'm just a bit on edge, is all."

Annabelle looked into Sam's eyes and grabbed his hands. They were both shaking. "What if he's right? What if we really are somehow in danger?"

"Don't believe a word that . . . thing said. It's not possible to travel to another world because this is the only world. There is no magic, or Dark Queen, or any danger. Going to some lake a hundred miles away in . . ." Sam looked at the map. ". . . Savannah, ain't gonna show us anything other than we listened to our imaginations. Let's get some sleep, and tomorrow we can leave this place, just like we've always wanted." Sam stood, pulling Annabelle with him. He held Annabelle in his arms until she stopped shaking.

"You're right. We don't need to worry about anything other than leaving and going west tomorrow."

"That's it, Belli. Tomorrow, we can start a new life."

Annabelle sniffled and gazed up at Sam. "Can I stay?"

Sam hesitated. In all the uproar, he hadn't let it sink in that Annabelle was in his home. She'd never been inside before—they were careful never to be caught like that. "We really shouldn't..."

"We're leaving before sunrise. Please, I'm scared."

Sam couldn't send her back out into the night feeling frightened. "All right." His bed he gave to Annabelle, and he lay on the floor beside her. Before blowing out the candle, he caught a hint of a shadow on the floor in the corner of the room.

Walking over to pick up the book, Sam smiled to himself as he read the cover, then turned to Annabelle. "You got it." He hadn't realized Annabelle had already fallen asleep, so he sat back down and opened the book.

A message from Annabelle to the children decorated the inside cover. The children held a special place in Annabelle's heart. It would be hard for her to leave them behind, and she'd picked the perfect parting gift for them. Sam turned to page one and began reading, falling asleep with the book still open on his chest.



AS HE ALWAYS DID, Sam awoke before sunrise. Final preparations needed to be done for their big day. Though he didn't want to admit it, Annabelle staying the night made him glad. He didn't want to scare her any more than she already was, but he wasn't sure he would have been able to sleep without her there, not with everything that had been going on.

All he wanted was to build her a home and give her the

family she'd never had. He'd written two poems about sitting on the front porch in their rocking chairs, watching their grandchildren play in the fields as they held hands, living a truly blessed life.

With Annabelle sleeping peacefully in his bed, Sam stared at her snowy waves strewn over her face in a way that made him chuckle to himself. Quick to get dressed and ready, Sam looked around the room to see what needed to be done.

He grabbed a rag from the table and soaked up the rest of the water on the floor, then finished packing his belongings for their journey. Sure he had nothing else to do, Sam walked over to the chair and opened his notebook to a clean sheet.

That's odd. The last page in his notebook, which should have been blank, displayed a string of tally marks. *One, two . . . twenty-nine.* Unsure of how they'd gotten there, Sam ignored the marks and instead searched for a blank piece of parchment from somewhere else in the house.

After several minutes of scouring, Sam found a stack of unused papers under an old notebook. He didn't yet know what to say, but he owed the old man something.

Dear Mr. Anderson . . .

When he was just fourteen, Sam started working for Mr. Anderson—the year he left the orphanage. Mr. Anderson let Sam stay in the shack on the far side of the field from the main house, as long as Sam agreed to help keep the farm running and stay out of trouble. And any food Sam had helped grow that didn't sell became Sam's to eat. Besides Annabelle, Sam only had respect for one person in this town, and that was dear old Mr. Anderson.

Everyone else had treated Sam as less than human for no

reason other than he was Black. It stung that Sam couldn't give him a proper goodbye, but this was the best he could do without putting him and Annabelle in danger. He hoped Mr. Anderson would understand.

Once Sam finished his letter, he reached for the book Annabelle had brought. Then he grabbed a basket and left the house to do his final errands on the farm.



LIFTING the world would have been easier than Annabelle trying to open her eyelids. Exhaustion had its hold on her, and it had no plans of releasing her anytime soon. After everything that had happened the night before, she had sweat throughout her sleep. But now it all felt like a distant dream—the kind where mind and body were disconnected and the only way to watch everything happening was behind hazy, broken glass—and that's how she wanted to keep those memories.

A quick scan of the room showed Sam had left. Annabelle made her way over to one of the two chairs at the table to wait for him. When she sat down, she saw a note with her name on it.

My Belli,

I have gone to get us some food. I will return shortly, and we can begin the first day of the rest of our lives together.

And thank you for the book. It was wonderful. It made me feel fourteen again, falling in love with your big blue eyes and reading about fantastic adventures. You are so thoughtful.

I noticed your inscription and have already returned it to the children at the schoolhouse.

Love always,

Sam

His thoughtfulness brought a smile to her face. The map Keres had pointed to the previous night beckoned her over. A large circle drawn near a lake had the words *oracle* and *miracle* written next to it. Just the sight of it put the fear back into Annabelle, so she took the map down, crumpled it, and tossed it away. As she paced the room, her mood lightened with the whistling tune of Sam walking toward the house.

The door creaked as Sam pushed it open and quietly walked in with a basket full of fruits and vegetables from the field. “Good morning. I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“No, I’ve been up for a bit now.” Annabelle nodded at the basket of food. “That looks delicious. Thank you for getting those.”

“Of course.” Sam set the basket on the table and leaned in to give Annabelle a kiss on her forehead. “So, are you all packed to go? After breakfast, we need to go grab your things before everyone wakes and notices us leaving.”

“Yes, I’m all packed. I’ll just need a few minutes at home to freshen up.” The thought of knowing how close they were to leaving excited Annabelle.

“You sure you want to do this? Last chance to back out.” Sam chuckled.

“Of course I want to do this. You are the love of my life. And what about you? It’s not like you’re getting a princess out of this.” Annabelle laughed, thinking about the book Sam had read

just that morning. “I don’t have much to offer. I don’t even know how to be a proper wife or mother.” Annabelle’s smile faded at the thought of her childhood.

“Annabelle, you are incredible. I know you will be everything I ever need because you already are. You are going to be a wonderful mother to our future children. I wouldn’t choose anyone else, ever.” Annabelle felt better as she stared into Sam’s deep brown eyes—those eyes that always comforted her and told her everything would be all right, even if she didn’t know how yet. Sam’s kiss on the tip of her nose brought a smile back to her face.

The scar on Sam’s arm refused to let go of her attention. “You should keep that covered so it doesn’t get infected.” The only logical place to look was the single drawer in the room, and when she pulled it open, to her delight, Sam kept a few scraps of fabric and scissors in the drawer, perfect for wrapping his arm.

“Thank you.”

Glad she had thought to cover the scar, Annabelle smiled at Sam. It would make it easier to ignore for a time.

They enjoyed the rest of their breakfast together, then snuck back out to collect the rest of Annabelle’s things. As they stepped through the gate, Sam stayed silent, but Annabelle noticed his glance back at the main house and the way his eyes flicked away just as quickly. They had to make their way through the city swiftly; the sun would be rising in the next hour, which meant that many of the city folks would be up along with it.

The timing had to be just right—if they were on the roads out of town at night, well, that would be much too suspicious.

Even though they'd gone through the plan a hundred times before, now that they were actually going through with it, Annabelle's stomach wouldn't stop turning over, and she knew how red her face was from the burning in her cheeks.

"We have a bit of time left before we leave. Would you like to go to our lake one last time?" Annabelle looked at Sam in excitement but was surprised to see his brows low and lips drawn tight. "Sam?"

Sam looked into Annabelle's eyes. "I'm sorry, but there's one more thing I have to do before we can leave."



THE TWO UNMARKED headstones hid among the field of goldenrods. The light of dawn shone over them, creating a sense of peace with its deep purple clouds hiding the rising sun. Sam stood over the graves, grateful Annabelle was at his side.

He choked back tears as he laid a single yellow flower on each plot. Sam hadn't visited the site since they were buried thirteen years prior. He couldn't bear to relive the memories, so he'd hidden them deep inside. This was his last chance to say goodbye. He wasn't sure what to say or what to do.

"Would you like me to say a prayer?" Annabelle's voice was soft and gentle.

Sam turned to her with tears welling in his eyes. This beautiful, thoughtful woman had chosen him, and he couldn't be more thankful for her gesture. He nodded and turned back toward the graves.

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life . . .'"

Sam listened as Annabelle spoke words of faith and life over

them. The morning breeze calmed his heart. When she was finished, he asked for a moment to say his final goodbyes, and she obliged, making her way back to the road to wait for him. Sam knelt on the ground and kissed each headstone, finally giving in to the tears. He stood and backed away to follow Annabelle. Before the graves were fully out of sight, he let go.

“Goodbye, David. Goodbye, Mama.”



SAM STAYED across the road as Annabelle scurried into her room. She hurriedly washed her face, pulled up her hair, slipped into her best dress, and grabbed her already packed bag. She had to appear the part of a traveling woman, in case anyone asked questions.

Everything needed to be in its proper place, and one last glimpse in the mirror showed Annabelle had done well in her presentation. She grabbed her sunhat that hung from the mirror and put it on, adjusting it just so. Satisfied with her reflection, she took a final glance around the room and walked out the door.

When Annabelle came out of the house, Sam grabbed her bag. Having gone over the plan dozens of times, she had no apprehensions he knew his part well. He would play the role of her employee—at least until they reached a safe distance away from South Carolina. Annabelle looked at Sam, who gave her a reassuring smile, and knew they were ready.

They used the main roads this time—the fastest way out of town—and began what Annabelle thought would be the hardest part of their journey. As neither of them had a good excuse for

traveling, they had no choice but to walk several stations away to buy the tickets. If Tulsa, the first stop, fell short, they could head up north, where plenty of mining jobs existed. A whole exciting life waited for them outside of the Deep South.

When Charleston was almost out of sight, Sam and Annabelle turned to look back at the city they'd called home for so long, just as the sun stretched over the horizon. Annabelle knew the enormity of what they were about to do, and they instinctively reached for the other's hand. With one more breath, they turned toward the west, a limitless land in front of them—their chance at true happiness.

Sam took one step and collapsed.