

THE CONCEALING



SPIRIT WARRIORS

D.E.L. CONNOR

SPIRIT WARRIORS: THE CONCEALING

D.E.L. CONNOR



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As long as what you are afraid of is something evil, you may still hope that the good may come to your rescue. But suppose you struggle through to the good and find that it also is dreadful? How if food itself turns out to be the very thing you can't eat, and home the very place you can't live, and your very comforter the person who makes you uncomfortable? Then, indeed, there is no rescue possible: the last card has been played.

—C.S. LEWIS, *Perelandra*

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*To my parents, Phil and Beverly,
for your never ending love and support,
for showing me the value of hard work,
for not giving me everything I wanted,
but giving me everything I needed,
for making the first letter of my first, middle, and last name
spell out the first three letters of my first name,
thus giving me an awesome author name!
I am blessed to be
Forever your daughter*

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A BATTLE WAS WAGING in our beautiful clearing and I watched it unfold. The winner had been determined before the battle had even begun. This battle was the same every time. We have re-enacted this battle for years, since we were in fourth grade. We didn't play it anymore since we had gotten to be in high school but today for the first time, we brought my nine-year-old brother with us, and he begged us to play it again so he could finally be a part of the battle.

The battle wouldn't always be this way. I knew I would die when the real battle came. I have known how it would end since I was a toddler. The dream followed me-- no, haunted me--every night of my life. I had hoped my life would not end the way my dream does, but Charlie pretty much told me my life would end as I dreamt it.

In this battle being waged, I was always General George Armstrong Custer, only because of my long, blonde wavy hair and blue eyes. I hated it because I always had to die, every time. The irony did not escape me.

Lilly with her curly chestnut brown hair and soft brown eyes was portraying Chief Gall. Lilly was small and fragile. My mom called her petite. Lilly hated to be called petite, or small, or even short. Lilly had on a pink t-shirt and a pink headband holding her hair back. Her hair was almost the color of our quarter horse Princess's mane. Lilly had soft, beautiful curls. The kind of curls that made complete strangers want to touch her hair. Lilly galloped Princess, her curls flying behind her, with her right hand in a cast holding the reins while she waved her "lance" in her left hand. Her pale face was focused as she rode.

Betsy with her strawberry blonde hair and green-gold eyes was Captain Benteen or Major Reno, "as every good fight needs a perceived coward," or so Bets claimed. Bets was the beautiful one with her perfect curvy figure and wavy hair. When we were younger, she was the first of us girls to get boobs, and because I was still pretty much flat chested, I was envious. Lilly told me once, "More than a handful is a waste." Where she heard that I had no idea. I think it was something that people gifted with big knockers told others who were hardly gifted with any.

Bets had on jeans with a green tank top covered with a denim jacket. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Her eyes flashed as she looked around to see where everyone else was. She spotted me and saluted. I straightened my back and returned the salute.

Charlie, the only true Native American in our group--though he preferred the term Indian--was Chief Crazy Horse and said the name fit him perfectly. Charlie was tall and muscular with dark tanned skin and straight blackish brown hair that hung over his forehead. His eyes were a light brown that merged with a dark gold color on the outer edges. He was the only one in our group who was taller than I was. He wore jeans and no shirt, and his muscles rippled under his skin as he leaned over Duke's mane. He looked up and caught me watching him. He smiled, showing his white teeth. I was too far away to hear, but I saw his lips move as he said my name, "Emme." Actually, Emme is not my real name. It is Emmeline, but no one calls me that anymore. Not since Gramps died.

My little brother Ben, who idolized both Lilly and Charlie, was portraying an Indian warrior, Little Whirlwind. Oliver, because of his distinctive Samoan look and wide nose, was General Custer's Crow Indian guide Bloody Knife. Like Bets and me, he got to die every time we played the re-enactment game. Ollie was wearing jeans with a plain black t-shirt. His arms were wiry. He looked awkward astride his horse, Bolt. Ollie was painfully thin with thick, black curly hair and skin the color of milk chocolate.

The "Indians" started circling the first group of mounted "Cavalry" in the shallow creek bed. I watched from the side of the hill. I would be the last to fall.

I watched Charlie, Lilly and Ben circling Bets and Ollie. Ollie was awkwardly mounted on Bolt. Bolt was jittery and Ollie struggled to control him as the Indians splashed around them in the shallow creek bed. Ben was whooping and boasting of how he, Chief Gall, and Chief Crazy Horse would kill all the blue coats. I laughed while I watched white-headed little Ben as an Indian warrior. He had on an odd black wig that I braided into two braids that hung down around his ears. Around his head was an old necktie of Dad's and a feather from the chicken coop was stuck in his wig. He rode Thunder bareback. I told him to use his saddle, but because Charlie rode bareback, Ben insisted on it too.

As they circled for another round of fighting, Ben fell off of Thunder and landed butt first in the cold water. I grabbed Gus's bridle, turned to mount Gus and ride to Ben, but Charlie swung by on Duke. He scooped Ben out of the water and dropped Ben on Duke behind him, all in one motion.

I swung my leg back down, and as I turned around, I saw something on the sloping hill behind me. The sun was in my eyes and it was hard to make out what it was. Was it a person? Or a shadow? I shaded my eyes with my hand and moved a few feet to the right. The sun went behind a cloud and I dropped my hand. I stood very still as the shadowy figure stared at me.

This was no real person. He stood tall and proud and stared straight at me. His hair was long with an eagle feather braided on one side of his head. His eyes were dark. His face was painted with red handprints laying one on top of the other on both sides of his high cheekbones. There was a long, thick black line from his forehead down his nose and chin. His skin was the same color as Charlie's skin. He was wearing buckskin leggings and his chest was muscular and bare except for a bear's claw chest shield around his neck. His arms were by his side. In his waistband were a tomahawk and a knife. Behind his back I could see a bow and arrows. In his right hand he carried a lance with what looked like many scalps. One of the scalps was the same color as my hair.

I stared straight back at him. His eyes were like two hard pieces of coal in his face. But something about him made me not be scared of him. We stood there for several long moments until I heard Ollie riding towards us. I turned to look at Ollie and when I did, I saw the figure twirl up in a gust of wind and disappear.

"Did you see that?" I yelled at Ollie.

"See what?" Ollie replied.

"That Indian ghost thing!" I yelled back.

"You're seeing things, Em, there is nothing there." Ollie slid off of Bolt and walked towards me.

"I'm serious, Ollie, it was standing there watching me."

Ollie shook his head and laughed. "He was probably watching you thinking what a pathetic fighter you are!" I grabbed his arm and threw him to the ground and lay on top of him.

"Take it back, Ollie!"

Ollie laughed, “Oh all right, I take it back.”

The sounds of “pows” and “whams” were exchanged as the others battled with wooden lances, tomahawks and guns. The soldiers fell off their horses and after being scalped, snuck off to the next hill to be killed again. After the soldiers were killed on the next hill, they made their way to me over the rocks on the sloping hill. We formed a circle, the three of us, and we fought valiantly. We lunged, shot, and stabbed, but of course we fell at the end.

The ‘Indians’ whooped and hollered as they scalped us with their wooden knives. As Ollie was lying there, pretending to be dead, he farted. It was not a little one. Ollie whispered, “Damn barking spiders, they are everywhere.” He started swatting the ground. “And they stink when you squish them,” he added. We all started laughing and fell in a heap on top of each other.

We had a lot of Montana history in school and we learned both the Native American and United States Cavalry versions of the battle. I liked the Native American version. It made more sense. When we were younger, Mom and Dad took Ben and me one June day on the anniversary of the battle to watch the Custer’s Last Stand re-enactment.

We drove in our old blue Chevy Tahoe to watch the Native American version, and then we drove to a different area where we could watch the cavalry version. We had a picnic lunch on some old picnic benches out by the re-enactment site. We ate sandwiches and potato chips, and Ben and I shared a pop. Ben and I ate quickly. I foot-raced with some Native American kids my age, chasing each other in the tall wavy grass until Mom and Dad called for us to go.

After that, they took us to the site of the battle at the Crow Reservation and we walked through the museum. Then the US Park Service guides let us walk out among the graves. The wind was blowing hard, whipping my hair around my head, and laying the prairie grass flat. The sky was magnificently blue, and the flat prairie grass made a sharp line in the blue horizon.

A white stone marker marked the spot where each member of the 7th Cavalry had fallen. It was like looking for Easter eggs. The wind would blow and you could see the white marker clearly. As you stood looking out, you could see a lone white marker on the side of a hill. If you looked in

another direction, you could see a cluster of white markers where a small group of cavalry fell together while trying to escape. I twirled around in a circle with my eyes shut. When I stopped, I would count how many markers I saw in each direction. I finally stopped counting when I realized how many I could see. It wasn't fun anymore. I wondered about the lone white markers off by themselves. My dad said they were probably trying to escape when they were killed. I wondered if any of them knew that there would be no escape. I wondered if they woke up that morning and knew it was the end. I wasn't sure what would be easier, just dying or knowing you would die.

Our pretend battle was over. We finally stopped laughing, brushed ourselves off, and helped each other up. Charlie jumped on Duke's back. "Race you to the tepees," he hollered back.

"No fair," I yelled, "you have Duke!"

I was in no hurry, as Gus was no competition for Duke. Gus, with his competitive heart, thought he could take Duke but I couldn't take the chance that Gus would hurt himself. Gus was getting older. He was not as strong as he used to be.

I grabbed hold of Thunder's reins as Ben prepared to gallop off. "Whoa, slow down, Ben. You are not galloping off with Charlie."

Ben raised his blue eyes that are so like mine and begged, "Please, Emme."

I wanted to let him go, but Dad's voice echoed in my mind: "Em, you have to protect Ben."

I looked at Ben. "Remember, Thunder might have a seizure."

Ben looked worried. "I forgot about that." He patted Thunder on the neck. "You're a good boy, Thunder."

I'm not sure how we managed to own a horse with seizures, but we did. I seem to attract misfit animals and people. I'm sure there is a reason for that, but right now I just don't want to think about it.

As we made our way to the tepees, Ben asked about the clearing. Today was the first day we had let him come with us to the clearing. "I like your clearing," Ben said.

"Technically, it does not belong to us," I explained. "It belongs to Zach Arrington."

Ben looked confused. “I thought it belonged to Charlie and his Grandpa Archie.”

I shook my head. “No, Charlie just lives on the Flying A ranch with Archie. Archie is the foreman. He takes care of the horses and the ranch.” Ben nodded.

“Our ranch is bigger, right?” he asked.

I smiled. “Not hardly. The only thing we have in common with the Flying A is a five-mile stretch of fences that divide our land.”

Ben continued, “But we’re better than them, right?”

I smiled at him. “Of course we are!”

Ben rode quietly for several minutes then asked, “How did you find your clearing? Was it on a treasure map?”

I laughed. “No map, but I can tell you the story of how we found it.”

Ben squealed excitedly, “Okay, and don’t leave out anything, except if there are snakes in the story.” Ben was scared of rattlesnakes. I didn’t blame him. If the truth were known, I was not fond of them myself.

Archie trained all of the Arrington horses to attack and kill rattlesnakes. He would get rubber rattlesnakes and move them with a stick while he shook a real rattle that he got off a dead rattlesnake. He would force the horses up on their hind legs, and eventually he would show them how to hit the snake with their hooves. He would plant the rubber snakes in the prairie grass. As I huddled behind a rock shaking the rattles, Archie would ride up on the snake. Archie would yell “Snake, kill!” and the horse would tear the rubber snake apart.

I trained all of our horses to do the same thing. I have only had to do it once. I was scared when I yelled “SNAKE, KILL!” Gus immediately attacked the snake and would not stop until I finally calmed him down. I dismounted to look at the snake and there wasn’t enough left of it to even recognize that it had been a snake. Gus was covered with sweat and his eyes were wild. Archie said that my fear made Gus go crazy. Archie said that because Gus loved me, he went crazy trying to protect me.

I started the story of the clearing for Ben, minus the mention of any snakes.

“Charlie was the one who first led us to the clearing about six or seven years ago. You were just a baby then. He took us to his grandfather’s house. We rode our horses past the main house, dark and closed up, past Charlie’s

gray-blue house, past the small houses where the hired hands lived, and a couple of miles up into the low hills. As we crested this same hill that you and I are going down, the most beautiful clearing appeared with short prairie grass and flowers. It was surrounded by pine trees and miles and miles of nothingness. All of it was framed by the beautiful blue sky. A small creek ran through it with water so clear you could see every rock and turtle. The breeze was scented with lilacs. ‘Where are the lilacs?’ I asked Charlie. He pointed to the low scrubs in the middle of the clearing. ‘They grow wild here,’ he said.” I mimicked Charlie’s low voice and Ben laughed.

“‘Absolutely amazing,’ I whispered back to Charlie. We dismounted and Lilly ran ahead to braid dandelions and lilacs into a crown with Bets. We ate lunch there and spent the rest of that day playing Custer’s Last Stand, dying and re-dying.”

Ben interrupted, “Just like today?”

I nodded. “Just like today.

“The clearing became our special place; we hunted for arrowheads, picked flowers, lied on our backs with our arms touching, and identified shapes of clouds in the deep blue skies. We picked wild huckleberries and ate them by the handful. Our lips, mouth and hands would be stained purple. One day we tried to eat the wild chokecherries, but they were bitter and after we ate them, our mouths were sore.”

“I already knew that about chokecherries, Emme,” Ben boasted to me.

I went on, “We couldn’t drink enough water to make our mouths stop hurting. Instead, we brought the rest of them home to mom and she made chokecherry jelly out of them. It sure does take a lot of sugar to make chokecherries edible. I guess that’s why they call them chokecherries. You literally choke on them.”

Ben smiled. “I do love chokecherry syrup on pancakes, though.”

“We would take off our shoes and wade in the slow cold waters of the stream. Tiny turtles sunned themselves on the banks and we would catch them and race them in the clearing. About a quarter of a mile downstream, the creek makes a turn and the water is deep enough to swim.”

Ben looked excited. “Can we swim today, please Em?”

I shook my head. “Another time. I promise I will bring you again.

“There is also a small hot spring that feeds into the creek above the turn. It spouts burning hot water off and on with no predictable rhyme or

reason. As hot as it is, the water in the creek is still icy cold. We would bring hot dogs and roast them in the boiling water of the hot spring. We are careful to keep the horses away from the area. Not that we have to worry about it, they are spooked long before they get to the hot spring.”

Ben looked scared. “It’s not scary, Ben, but you can burn yourself if you get too close,” I told him. Ben nodded his white head.

Ben demanded, “Tell me more stories about the clearing.”

I shook my head. “We are almost there, Ben. There is not enough time.”

I didn’t tell him what the adults said about the hot spring, as it would have frightened him. Archie said hot springs are made of evil spirits trying to get out, and Nana said they are pits of fire where the Devil escaped to torment the souls on earth. I think they just made that up to keep me away from the hot springs.

I heard Ollie yelling at us, and I nudged Gus. “Let’s go, Gus.” Ben followed behind me. We galloped up to a group of tepees and I slide off. Ben followed behind me. I staked Gus out in a field of green prairie grass and he grazed contentedly.

I walked toward my tepee to put on a jacket before we ate supper. I went inside and laid out dry clothes for Ben.

“When you are done changing, wrap your wet clothes up and put them in your bag,” I told Ben.

Ben pouted at me. “I want to stay.”

I patted his downy soft head. “Of course you do, but Dad says not until you are older.”

Ben stuck his tongue out at me. “You suck, Emme.”

I smiled back at him. “One day, big boy, one day you will be able to stay.” We stepped out of my tepee.

Archie helped Ben mount Thunder and rode with him back to the main ranch house where Dad was waiting with the trailer to pick him and Thunder up.

Ben turned around and waved at us. “Goodbye, General Custer, Chief Gall, Chief Crazy Horse, Captain Benteen and Bloody Knife.” We raised our fists in the air, whooping and yelling, “Little Whirlwind, Little Whirlwind, Little Whirlwind.” Ben raised his right fist and galloped off.

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THE SUN WAS SLOWLY SETTING and a bone-chilling coolness set in. The evenings are always cool in this eastern part of Montana where the prairies meet the mountains. A wind picked up and seemed to steal my breath. I looked around at the beauty of the land around me and I felt peaceful. I love this land because I see it for what it is. I am not deceived by it, nor do I take it for granted. It is a cold, savage, beautiful place where the living is hard and dying is way too easy.

We would be spending another night with Archie in the tepees tonight. We had spent many nights out here with each other and with Archie. I couldn't even begin to count them. Almost every weekend and more often in the summer, for years, we had been out there. At first our parents wouldn't even entertain the idea of all of us being out there, a bunch of kids out alone in the woods. But Archie changed their minds. Archie and the hired hands at the Flying A looked out for us and Archie was always with us. Our parents respected and trusted Archie; everyone did. Ollie's parents were the last to allow Archie to have us out overnight, but Ollie knew how to throw a fit and pout until he got what he wanted. Ollie said, "Being an only child has privileges." If the rest of us tried that crap, we would have gotten a good whipping or been grounded forever.

Ollie's parents finally learned what the rest of us already knew, that Archie would always protect us. Plus Archie didn't put up with too much fooling around.

I looked around at our collection of five tepees. I had to smile when I looked at Lilly's pink tepee and Bets's green one.

Archie had shown all of us how to make and assemble a canvas tepee and he spent nights with us in the clearing. It took us a long time to make a big tepee. First, we had to assemble the frame, and that took several months to find the tallest thin trees to lie at the correct angles to form the frame. Then we had to have enough canvas to fit the big tepee. We laid the canvas in the grass and all of us painted bows and arrows and spears on it, and then sewed the canvas into the shape we needed to cover the tepee. Finally, we draped the canvas on the frame. Ollie climbed up the poles and tied the

canvas down, careful to leave a hole for the fire to smoke. This first tepee was for Charlie.

That first summer, we all slept in Charlie's tepee. Every night, we would call out "goodnight" to each other. It took a while by the time we all said it to each other. We giggled and laughed when we missed someone, or made up funny names for each other.

We laughed the hardest at Ollie and his "barking spiders." That boy had some serious gas. He said he was lactose intolerant, but even when he didn't have milk or anything with milk in it, he was still the gassiest person ever. Ollie wanted to try and light one of his farts on fire and see if he could start a fire. Archie told him, "Son, you will burn your tepee to the ground." We laughed so hard we couldn't stop.

I made sure that my pallet was next to Charlie's and away from Ollie's. My nightmares didn't bother Charlie like they did the others, and he didn't fart all night long.

Every summer we finished a tepee. The second summer, we worked on Lilly's tepee. Charlie said she was next, and although we didn't know why then, we all went along with the plan. Lilly wanted a pink tepee, and we dyed the canvas pink for her and painted white roses and lilies on it.

Ollie thought it was weird. "Whoever has heard of a pink tepee?" he asked.

Lilly just laughed a delighted happy laugh. "It doesn't matter, Ollie. It is mine. And besides, you were born in a pink hospital." She stuck out her tongue at him.

"Whatever," he yelled back.

Lilly turned and looked at her tepee with her arms crossed around herself like she was hugging herself. Her head was down. I walked behind her. "Hey, what's up?" I asked.

Lilly looked at me with her warm brown eyes. "I was just thinking that this is the first time that I have ever had a real place of my own. Something that was made just for me."

I grabbed her hand. "It's only a not-so-sturdy tepee, Lilly." I replied.

Lilly looked back at the tepee. "But it's mine," she said.

"Yes," I whispered to her, "it's all yours." I grabbed her crutches and handed them to her. "How much longer before you get that cast off?"

Lilly smiled. “Only one more week, then I get to wear a walking boot and no more crutches!”

“You need to be more careful, Lilly,” I scolded her.

“I’ll try,” Lilly said and smiled. “Damn prairie dog hole! I didn’t even see it.”

“Don’t be hating on my prairie dogs!” I told Lilly as I smiled back at her.

“You’re a freaking tree-hugger, that’s what you are, Em!” she laughed. I didn’t try to deny it.

We divided, and the girls slept in Lilly’s tepee, the boys in Charlie’s. Archie slept on the ground between our tepees with the horses.

The next summer, we made Ollie’s tepee and decorated it with arrows and stick animals. We rotated sleeping in the three tepees that year. The following summer, we made Bets a green tepee with painted yellow dandelions. She made a wreath out of dandelions to lie over the flap of her tepee. Ollie and Charlie rolled their eyes at her. I divided my sleeping time between Bets’s and Lilly’s tepee, but mostly I slept with Lilly. Her little hand would reach for me in the dark. I would fall asleep with my arm on her arm.

Finally, we finished my tepee. Archie drew birds and horses on it for me. I had Gus walk in paint and then walk on the canvas. I drew a path around the outside of the canvas that ended at the opening on the top. I had all of us paint our feet and we walked on the path on the canvas. Our footprints were mixed up with each other’s footprints. There would be a print of one of Charlie’s feet with one of Bets’s feet. Then Ollie and me, and then Lilly’s and Bets’s footprints. It went that way until we got to the very top and then it ended with one of Charlie’s footprints and one of mine. Our tepees sat facing the clearing and the stream. It was only later that I noticed that the other four tepees formed a circle with mine in the middle.

My memories were interrupted when Charlie called out, “Grub is ready. Come and get it or go hungry.” I walked to Charlie’s tepee and grabbed a plate of food.

I looked around the fire at the people I loved most in this world. One I loved different than the others. I thought—no, I knew--I was in love with Charlie. I gazed over at him from under my eyelashes. I couldn’t tell him

how I felt; I couldn't stand for anything that we shared to change. So I found myself staring at him.

I was embarrassed when he looked up and caught me. He looked at me. "Em, is something wrong?" I hurriedly told him no, but I felt his troubled gaze following me as I walked off.

Bets and Lilly followed after me. Lilly grabbed my arm. "You should tell him how you feel about him."

I couldn't find the courage to say it. "Not tonight. Maybe later."

Later, as we lay around the campfire looking at the stars, Archie pointed out the Big Dipper. "See how the two stars on the end of the cup point toward the last star on the end of the Little Dipper's handle?" Archie pointed. "That star at the end of the handle is the North Star. If you can find that star, you can find your way home. Remember that, kids," Archie said.

Bets added, "The North Star is also called Polaris and those two pointing stars on the Big Dipper are called Dubhe and Merak. The Big Dipper and Little Dipper are also called Ursa Major and Minor, which means Great Bear and Little Bear."

We all rolled our eyes and Lilly stuck out her tongue at Bets. "Smart ass," I called out.

"Don't be haters," Bets laughed at us.

Archie went on, "There is an ancient Indian legend about the Big Dipper." We all groaned. Archie has an "Indian legend" for everything from why the sky is blue to why the grass is green. Archie acted offended, and Lilly couldn't stand that. She asked him to tell us about it.

Archie began.

"Many years ago when the animals ruled this world before we humans came, there was a group of five brother wolves. They befriended a coyote. As time went on the wolves told the coyote how they saw two animals up in the night sky that they couldn't get to. The coyote figured out a way to get up there. He shot hundreds of arrows up to the sky. As the first one stuck, the second one was shot just below it until the coyote had made a ladder for the wolves to climb. They climbed for many days and nights, the wolves, their pet dog, and the coyote. When they finally reached the top, they saw that the two figures were big grizzly bears.

"Even though the coyote told them not to go to the bears, the first two wolves went to them and started talking. Soon the other two wolves headed

toward the bears, and finally, the last wolf walked toward them with his dog by his side. The coyote decided that they looked good in the sky, and he left them there so that others will look up in the sky and tell the story about how Coyote made it. He quickly went back down the arrows and removed each one as he stepped off of it. The wolves and the bear would never be able to return and no one else would ever be able to go to them.

“The stars still look the same. The two pointer stars are the bears with the first two wolf brothers as the cup. The other stars are the other three wolf brothers with the wolf in the middle with his dog companion. The coyote liked how they looked as stars, so he arranged other stars in shapes. He added birds, lions, horses and even fish. He asked the meadowlark to tell his story after he was gone and let everyone know that he, the coyote, made all of the heavens.”

“What do you think about that?” Archie asked.

Bets answered, “I think it is nonsense. It is not possible for arrows to stick in the sky.”

Charlie smiled. “I liked it.”

Lilly looked up. “I think that all of us will be stars up there when we leave here. I know my mom is up there waiting for me.”

Archie nodded and reaching over, he hugged Lilly. “Yes, my child, she is waiting for you.”

Lilly rolled over and looked at us. “I will be the star of the wolf with his dog. Emme, you and Charlie are the bear pointer stars. Bets and Ollie, you are the other two wolves in the cup part. If something happens to any of us, all the others have to do is call out our name and look to our star. We can be together that way.”

“Lilly, we are young, and I doubt any of us will die anytime soon,” Bets said as she shook her head.

“Just saying,” Lilly added, and she looked pointedly at me.

As we put out the fire, Lilly grabbed my hand. “Please stay with me tonight in my tepee.” I looked at Lilly’s sweet face.

“Of course, just let me get my pallet out of my tepee.” I hollered to Archie, “Archie, hey I’m bunking with Lilly tonight.”

“Ok,” he yelled back, “see you in the morning.”

I laid my pallet next to Lilly’s in the pink tepee. She curled up in her pallet. I saw her breath as she talked. “Em, are you awake?”

“Yes,” I answered her.

“I miss my Mom,” Lilly whispered.

I didn’t know what to say. “I know,” I said finally, and I reached out and held her hand until she fell asleep. I missed her mom too. When she died, everything changed for Lilly. I stared at the pink canvas wall of Lilly’s tepee and I remembered Josephine Grayson.

I idolized Lilly’s mother. She looked like an older version of Lilly, and she wore a stunning strand of real pearls around her neck. She dressed up every day in a dress or a pair of slacks with a soft pastel sweater. She was beautiful and elegant.

She was something that didn’t come along very often in my world. Most of the women my mom’s age were practical. They wore jeans and had “work boots” to work outside in. They dressed up only for church or a special occasion, and then it was more of a dressed-down way of dressing up. I secretly thought Mrs. Grayson was a Kennedy. She reminded me of pictures of Jackie Kennedy Onassis. Of course she wasn’t, but she was the closest I had come to being around someone like that. Someone who could have lived in a big city and seen things I had never seen and probably wouldn’t get to see.

She would hug me when I came over and she smelled soft. She would tuck a stray hair of mine back into my ponytail. “You have beautiful hair, Emme,” she would say. “You should always play up your strong points.” I think that meant I should let my hair down and brush it. I wasn’t sure. But the fact that Mrs. Grayson thought that my hair was pretty made me feel pretty.

Before Lilly’s mom died, Bets and I would occasionally go over to Lilly’s house. It was a beautiful old two-story house that Mrs. Grayson had restored and re-decorated. It had a huge dining room with a large, sturdy-looking table that could seat at least twenty people, and extra chairs were sitting against the walls. Lilly said at one time the room was a meeting place and a ballroom. A wealthy businessman once owned the house and let General Miles use it as his command post after the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Lilly said if we closed our eyes in that room, we could hear the sounds of the military men planning the decimation of the hostile Native American population. I tried it several times, but all I heard was the creaking of the wood floors as Bets and I shifted our weight.

Lilly had a beautiful room upstairs with a canopy bed covered in pink lace. She had a bathroom that had an old claw foot tub, and all of us girls would play and take baths together in it. Mrs. Grayson would come and wrap us in warm soft towels when we were done. We would put on our pajamas, go downstairs and drink rich hot chocolate in front of the fire while our hair dried.

Mrs. Grayson would make us popcorn and we would watch old movies with her and Rose. She loved *Gone with the Wind* and we would watch it every time we went over to spend the night. In the mornings, the three of us would wake up in the pink canopy bed and giggle and laugh under the covers. Rose, Lilly's older sister, would come in and put her cold feet on us. We would push her out of the bed, all the time laughing and squealing.

Mrs. Grayson would bring us breakfast in bed and sit on the side of the bed and talk to us while we ate. She was beautiful and elegant. I marveled at how she could sit so straight and tall. Her manicured hands would be wrapped around her coffee mug, and her diamond wedding band would catch the rays of the sun and bounce off the walls.

It was always time for us to leave when Mr. Grayson was around. Mrs. Grayson would tell us to call our parents to come get us when she heard Mr. Grayson's car come in the driveway. She would bring us to the front porch as we waited on our parents to arrive. When our parents showed up, Lilly, Bets and I would hug each other tightly and run off to our cars. Mrs. Grayson would hug each of us and tell us to make sure we came back soon. I would watch her as we drove off and she would have her arms wrapped around Rose and Lilly, her "precious flowers."

All of that was just a memory now. Josephine Grayson was dead and buried, the house was in a shambles with Mr. Grayson and Joe in charge, and Lilly boomeranged from her dad's house to either Bets' or my house and then back again to her dad. Rose left as soon as she could get away. I sighed, rolled over and drifted off to sleep for as long as I could before the dream found me.



AS THE SUN ROSE IN THE SKY the next morning, I heard Archie out moving around. I pulled on my boots and straightened my t-shirt over my jeans. I pulled on my denim jacket and ran my fingers through my long hair. I crouched as I rolled my pallet up. I was tall enough that the only place I stood upright was in the middle of the tepee. I looked at Lilly sleeping so peacefully, and looking much younger than her age.

I ran to the fire to help Archie cook breakfast. Archie took out his huge, black cast iron skillet. He carefully laid the bacon strips in a row and put the skillet over the fire. I put water in the coffeepot and cracked an egg over the water. I put the grounds on top of the egg. Archie taught me how to make coffee like that. The egg would catch and hold the coffee grounds and you wouldn't have to drink the grounds. I nestled the coffee pot in the fire.

Archie was laying the bread out for toast and I stood up and walked over to him. We worked together quietly. I looked over at Archie. I don't really remember a time when Archie wasn't a part of my life. I was just a kid when I first met him.

He had helped me one time when I had been thrown by one of our horses. I was lying out in his field trying to catch my breath and his shadow fell over me. "Are you hurt, child?" he asked. I jumped to my feet to assure him I was okay.

He scared me that day with his long, thick black hair peppered with white pulled back in a low ponytail. His face was like wrinkled leather with dark quick eyes--the same color as Charlie's—eyes that sized me up immediately. He was dressed in a regular western shirt and jeans and boots like my dad, but he had a fringed leather vest and a feather woven into his hair. My gaze fixed on the hatchet he had slung in his waistband. He smiled at me and asked if I was Scott's daughter. I nodded.

He walked me home that day and stayed to visit with my dad. When he left he bowed his head to me. "Come see me and I'll give you some riding lessons." I saw dad stiffen. We didn't have any extra money for lessons.

I looked at Archie. "I would love that. How much do they cost?"

Archie smiled at me. "For you they are free."

I looked at Dad and over at Archie. “When can I come?” I asked quickly. I was afraid Archie might change his mind.

“How about tomorrow after breakfast?” Archie asked. I hurriedly nodded my head.

I could hardly sleep that night. I was excited to get to see the Arrington place. Although Archie works for the Arringtons, I didn’t personally know them. I did know that Zach Arrington was a bachelor, a lawyer who served in the Montana Senate. He specialized in gas and oil law, and he traveled. He was never at the ranch. Archie ran the ranch and worked with the thoroughbreds that Zach Arrington raised and raced.

The day after he found me in the field, Archie took me to the barn to meet the horses. They were beautiful animals, sleek and pampered. Their barn was even heated in the winter and cooled in the summer. Archie rode and trained them and they devotedly ran to him when he whistled. My favorite was Deuces Wild. Archie called him Duke. He was a glossy black gelding with white up to his knees on his front legs. He pranced contentedly around the pen with his tail high. Duke could run like the wind.

Archie gave me lessons on Duke. Duke rode smoothly. I laid my head down next to his ear and whispered to him, telling him to run as fast as he could, and he snorted and threw his head around and took off with me. Archie said he had an attitude, but I liked his attitude. When you are the best, you can be cocky, and Duke was the best.

When I rode Duke, I made sure Gus was not around. When he first saw me on Duke, he tried to jump the fence and cut his leg. My dad was angry with me since it cost a lot for the vet to come and take care of him. I didn’t want Gus to be jealous. Gus and I were soulmates. Two beautiful souls trapped in ugly bodies. Duke was beautiful and fast, but he was not the horse for me. Give me Gus with his stamina, heart, and loyalty any day.

All of the Arrington horses had funny names. They each had an identifying tattoo under their lips. When I fed the horses their carrots, I lifted up their lips and looked at their tattoos. Duke would not let you look at his tattoo. He threw his head back and forth and stared you down with his dark brown eyes. Archie said the tattoo told people who the horse was and its family lineage.

The horses were registered with the Jockey Club, and Archie submitted six name options for each colt before the Club decided which one the colt

got to have. I helped him come up with funny names, but Ollie was the best at it. Ollie got on the computer on the dictionary website and randomly put words that started with different letters together. He named almost every horse that Zach Arrington owned and yet Zach Arrington had never even met Ollie, or any of us, for that matter.

Over the years, Archie helped me with my horses and even my injured birds and animals that I brought home. I felt at ease with him and I trusted him. I could tell him pretty much everything.

At the campfire, making breakfast, I smiled and Archie looked over at me and asked, "You are happy?" I smiled more.

"Archie, I am always happy when I am out here with you," I told him.

Archie smiled back. "I suspect it is Charlie and not me who makes you smile."

I felt myself turning red. My neck went first, then my ears, and finally my cheeks. "Archie!" I exclaimed, but I didn't deny it. I really couldn't. Archie knew the truth. "And," Archie added, "I don't want any hanky-panky out here either. You hear me, Emme?" I was too embarrassed to even look up at Archie.

"Yes," I whispered then changed the subject. "Yesterday in the clearing, I saw an Indian warrior."

Archie stopped what he was doing and looked at me. "Describe him to me," Archie replied.

"Well, he was tall and stood ramrod straight, with buckskin leggings and a bare chest. His eyes were dark and his face was painted with hands and a dark line down his face."

Archie's face was pale. "And he wore a bear's claw breast plate." Archie added.

"How did you know?" I asked.

Archie ignored my question. "You need to tell Charlie."

I nodded. "Okay, I will."

When breakfast was ready, I snuck into the others' tepees to wake them up by pouncing on them. I started with Ollie. I opened the flap and sprinted across the tepee. I snatched his covers off and put my cold hands on his bare arms. "Shit, Emme, I'm going to get you!" Ollie bounded out of the tepee in his pants and bare chest. I sprinted toward Charlie's tepee with Ollie following.

I threw open the flap and look around. The pallet was empty. I turned around and Charlie grabbed me in a bear hug. "Get her, Ollie," he hollered. I struggled, but they managed to get me down and tickle me unmercifully until Bets and Lilly came to my rescue. We wrestled around until Archie came to the tepee.

"Your breakfast is getting cold," he chastised us. We hung our heads and walked toward the fire.

Charlie had transferred to our school when we were both nine years old from the reservation about twenty-five miles away. He walked to the front of our small rural school combined fourth and fifth grade classes and faced us. My first thought was that I would not be the tallest student! His head was down, and when he looked up our eyes met. I felt a cold shiver run down my neck. I felt like I knew him and that he had just 'walked on my grave,' as my sweet Southern Nana Ida Mae would say. I never knew what she meant until that exact moment. He looked as startled as I did.

At recess, Charlie walked toward me, Lilly, and Bets. As he was walking, he put his hands on the side of his head and then fell to the ground. His teeth were clenched together and his right arm was flailing around like it wasn't attached to his body. The tendons in his neck stood out like ropes and his eyes were open, but he didn't appear to be in there with them. One of the teachers ran toward him and was trying to put something in his mouth. I jumped up and ran to him. I don't know why I did it, but I knew they shouldn't try to stick something in his mouth when his soul didn't seem to be in his body. I pushed the teacher aside and laid most of my body over his, and yelled for everyone to get away and give him room to breathe. Because of Thunder and his seizures, I had an idea of what to do. I was just hoping you did the same thing for people.

Charlie started to come around about the time the designated school nurse/teacher arrived. Miss Agnes was once a nun who had returned to school and become a nurse and then a teacher. She could be bitchy, but I liked her. She was thin and birdlike with a long, hooked nose and short cropped hair.

Agnes knew right away what to do and she had everyone dispatched in less than a minute. Charlie was sitting up with his head in his hands, visibly weak and pale. Agnes was quizzing him. I heard Charlie say that he hadn't had one in a really long time and wasn't taking medication. Agnes

mumbled under her breath something about “once a kid with seizures, always a kid with seizures,” then she spotted me.

“How did you know what to do?” Agnes asked.

“I didn’t know for sure, but my horse Thunder has seizures and that is what we do for him.” Agnes laughed her high-pitched shrill laugh, shook her head, and went to get a wet towel for Charlie.

I crouched by his side and introduced myself. I don’t really know why. Charlie looked at me with those unusual eyes and said the most amazing thing. He said, “I know who you are. I have been looking for you.”

“Looking for me?” I stammered. “Why?”

“It’s a long story and one that will take time to tell,” he replied.

“Where do you live?” I asked. It turned out that he was now living with his grandfather, Archie.

Bets, Lilly and I took him home that day, and I invited Charlie in to have a snack. Dad knew who he was and clapped him on the back. “You have to be Archie’s grandson,” he proclaimed. “The resemblance is uncanny.”

Charlie murmured, “Yes.” Dad went on to say what an excellent horseman and neighbor Archie was.

The rule in our house was that after school, if the weather was nice, you had to be outside. Charlie and I headed outside with carrots from the root cellar to feed the horses. I introduced him to Gus, who seemed to like him right away, and then to the rest of the stable.

“What happened to you today?” I asked.

“The Indian Health doctor calls them seizures, but they are really visions from the Spirit Warriors.” He said this with a straight face, so I couldn’t laugh.

“Seriously?” I asked.

“Yah,” he replied.

“So, what did the Spirit Warriors have to say today?” I asked flippantly.

Charlie replied, “You will die and I must help you to find a way back.” His face was earnest.

“You are crazy, Charlie, and I am crazy to listen to you.”

He grabbed my hand and looked me in the face. “I know about your dreams. I know how you wake up screaming. I know what you dream about.”

“You lie!” I screamed at him, startling Gus. I had never told anyone, not even my parents of the dream. It haunted me every night of my life. My parents had gotten used to it and now could sleep through it. I lied to them when they asked what I was dreaming about and told them I didn’t know. But I did know and it scared me to think about it even in the daylight.

“What is it then, Charlie, if you are so freaking smart?”

He lowered his head, and his voice became soft. “You dream of being in a car that drives off a bridge into ice cold water. The doors are locked, and the windows are up. You cannot get out and you try everything. You scream and no one hears you. The dark cold water laps at your face until you can’t breathe.”

Tears rolled down my face, and I realized I was shaking.

“I’m sorry, Emme,” he said. “I was sent to protect you.”

“Why do I need protecting?” I asked.

“Because, Emme, you are a very special spirit warrior. The balance of good and evil lies with you and your destiny. If the evil wins, the world as you and I know it will cease to exist.”

“Why would the Spirit Warriors pick a skinny white girl like me with no talent to be an Indian spirit warrior?” I asked.

“No one understands the ways of the warriors, Emme. We must follow the path that has been laid out for you,” Charlie said.

“Oh, hell no,” I muttered. “If you think for one minute that I will just die for your dumb ‘Spirit Warriors’ you are nuts. Actually, I think you are touched in the head.”

Charlie looked up at me. “What you say doesn’t hurt me. I have heard it all before. I have always been an outcast, even in my own tribe. When I started talking about the Spirit Warriors, there were many people who thought I was crazy. They still do, and that is why I am here with Grandfather. My mother couldn’t stand the stress of my father leaving and then me being, well, different. She drank more and more until she couldn’t remember that she had a son. Grandfather came and took me. He understands my gift. He told me there has not been a seer in our people for many generations. That is why I frighten people. The last seer brought us visions of the evil white man that led the Bighorn Battle. The battle between good and evil was won that time but our people lost the war and suffered for generations. The Spirit Warriors have been silent for a long

time, but what is coming must be planned. You must be protected and trained.”

“Charlie, we are just kids,” I said. “I am just a girl with no talent. How the hell can we fight anyone?”

Charlie smiled at me. “Just believe and trust me. The Spirit Warriors are strong and we have time.”

That night in my dream, Charlie is underwater on the outside of the car under the water with a hatchet just like the one his grandfather has. I do not wake screaming for the first time in my life.

Charlie and I did not tell the others about the Spirit Warriors. Charlie said it was too soon. Charlie hadn’t had any more seizures or visions or whatever you called them since that day.

The sun was quickly warming up the ground around the tepees and it was going to be an unseasonably warm spring day. We peeled off our jackets and went to the horses. Gus nuzzled his square head in my neck as I put his bridle on. His breath was warm and wet. I stroked his neck and his square-shaped head.

Gus had once been named BrickHead. The poor horse literally had a head shaped like a brick, hence the name. Archie had heard me speak harshly to BrickHead one time when I was angry. Archie walked up to BrickHead. He spoke softly to him in a language that I could not understand and scratched his ears. BrickHead nickered softly and laid his head against Archie’s chest. BrickHead had never once let anyone that close to him.

“Even when others look different from you, they deserve to be cared for and loved. That is the key to working with him. Treat him as you treat your friends,” Archie said. I was ashamed for him to know that I treated BrickHead badly. After that, BrickHead became Gus. Gus followed me everywhere.

Bets walked up next to me. “Poor Gus, he has to be the ugliest horse I have ever seen.” I felt myself getting angry. I covered Gus’s ears.

“Shame on you, Bets, Gus has feelings too. I would take Gus, with his courage, any day over a prettier horse. Gus would kill himself to help me. We can’t all be pretty like you, Bets.”

Bets put her hand on my arm, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend Gus or you. I know you think you aren’t pretty Em, but you are. You have an unusual beauty.”

“Right,” I muttered. “Mom and Dad keep saying I will grow into my beauty but so far it hasn’t happened. I am convinced that I will have to be fifty before I will find any so-called beauty.”

Bets smiled. “I doubt it takes that long. It may take that long for you to buy you a set of fake boobies, though!” She broke out laughing and started running.

I dropped Gus’s reins. Bets ran down a small ravine. I chased after her. Lilly saw me and started running after Bets as well. I tackled Bets in the tall grass. She and I and Lilly rolled around in the grass.

“Take it back!” I yelled at Bets as Lilly and I tickled her.

“All right, all right, just stop,” Bets said. Lilly and I stopped tickling her and we all sat back, catching our breath.

Bets stood up and brushed off her jeans. “I take it back, you will be sixty before you can afford to buy fake ones and then they will just hang to your knees!”

She took off running again. Lilly and I looked at each other, shook our heads, and quickly got up and gave chase.

Charlie rode up on Duke as we were chasing Bets. “What are you doing?”

I was gaining on Bets. “Can’t talk, I have to catch Bets,” I told him.

“Why?” Charlie asked.

“I can’t tell you, it’s embarrassing,” I yelled over my shoulder.

“I can tell,” Lilly said, and she slowed down. I kept running. I heard Lilly telling Charlie, “Bets told Emme that she wouldn’t have big boobs until she bought some when she was sixty and by then they would hang to her knees.”

Charlie howled with laughter. I turned around and ran toward Lilly. “Lilly, I swear, you are such a tattletale. Charlie, it is NOT FUNNY!”

Charlie wiped the grin off of his face. “Sorry, I forgot myself.”

I ran back to Gus. I laid my face in his warm neck and he whinnied softly. I reached over and grabbed the saddle horn, and I heard the leather of the saddle creak as I threw my leg over.

We turned the horses to ride out to the clearing. Archie walked over and handed us each a sack lunch. “Make sure you are back by one o’clock,” Archie said. “Remember you are supposed to help Wayne move sculptures this afternoon.”

We nodded and galloped off across the small hill and into the clearing. We followed the stream downstream until it turned into our waterhole. We stripped down to our underwear to swim. We weren't embarrassed to swim in our underwear. I was only embarrassed because I didn't look like Bets and Lilly in their bras. They had cleavage and even with a push up bra I couldn't make cleavage! Mom said it didn't help that I wore sports bras all the time, but it didn't really matter. I looked the same in a sports bra as I did in a regular bra.

Charlie and Ollie tied a rope over the huge oak tree and we swung into the water. We jumped off singly, then in pairs, and then all of us climbed on the rope and we all jumped in the water. The water was bitterly cold. While we waited turns to jump in, we lay in the warm grass shivering.

As Ollie, Bets, and Lilly took turns jumping into the water, Charlie and I lay in the warm, sun-kissed grass. I turned to Charlie.

"Yesterday I saw an Indian warrior in the clearing. It wasn't a person, it was more like a shadow, but it looked real."

Charlie sat up and looked down at me. "Describe him to me." I once again described the mysterious figure. After I finished Charlie looked at me. "Remember what I told you when we were young? How the Spirit Warriors need you? They are here with us, Emme. The time is fast approaching when all five of us will be called to be warriors. When we will all be changed to fight the worst evil you can imagine."

I sat up and looked at Charlie. "I don't want to do this."

Charlie looked back at me, "If you don't help them, all of us, all of this —," he pointed around to the clearing and beyond— "will cease to exist. We will be lost, neither dead nor alive, for all eternity." He pointed to Ollie, Lilly and Bets. "We will lose them and many others. Friends are a liability to us with this kind of evil. He will destroy all of us in order to destroy you. He has done it before over and over."

I looked at the three of them frolicking in the water, laughing and playing. My heart felt heavy and a wave of sadness washed across me as painful as vomiting. I broke out in a sweat and felt like I was going to pass out. Charlie leaned forward and grabbed me with his strong arms. He nestled me in his arms and pulled me into his lap. I lay there curled up with my head on his chest listening to his slow, hard, heartbeat, reminding me that for right now we were both painfully alive. I could feel every inch of

his skin through his wet underwear and I knew he could feel mine. I wanted nothing more than to be alone with him, just the two of us, this close with no wet clothes between us.

Charlie and I were startled out of our secret world when Bets screamed at us, "Get a room, or your own tepee!" Ollie, Bets and Lilly stood at the creek looking at us and laughing. I flushed and pulled myself out of Charlie's arms. Charlie groaned, brushed off his underwear and jumped in the creek, splashing water on the others.

Ollie jumped out of the creek and ran towards the swing. Ollie lost his bottoms practically every time he jumped in the water. He was so straight and thin that even his underwear fell off his butt. He was so skinny. He didn't even have to unbutton his jeans; he just stepped out of them.

We screamed, "Crack attack!" when Ollie jumped in the water. Ollie just laughed it off and wiggled his skinny butt at us. "Get a good look, ladies, you will never see a better arse anywhere!"

I kept stealing glances at Charlie when we swam. His chest was tan, smooth and muscular, and he shook the water out of his hair in an arc. His stomach had ripples and he had muscles around his waist that looked like they were used to keep his pants up. I found everything about Charlie fascinating.

Charlie snuck out of the water and ran off with Ollie's clothes. Ollie jumped out of the water and gave chase. He tackled Charlie on the far bank and they rolled in the dirt and into the water along with Ollie's clothes.

Ollie got up and yelled to us girls, "Come on, you squaws. Come wash this warrior's clothes."

I stood up to him and squared my shoulders. "General Custer does not wash clothes." Bets and Lilly chased him down and dunked him in the creek. He sat in the shallow water with his clothes floating around him.

"Gee," he said, "what kind of friends are you guys?"

"Real friends," I yelled back. "The kind who keeps you grounded, Mr. Big Shot Warrior."

We swung from the rope into the water over and over until we were starving. Charlie threw our sack lunches to us. I looked into mine.

"Oh no," I exclaimed. "Tuna, I hate tuna."

Charlie grabbed my sandwich and swapped with me. "Here. Have my peanut butter." I smiled at him.

“Thanks,” I said gratefully.

Charlie swung his hair out of his eyes, “No prob.”

When we finished, we put our clothes on and rode back to the tepees. We quietly packed our clothes into our bags and pulled the flaps down on our tepees. We loaded up our bags behind our saddles and rode off to the main house.

Archie was waiting for us by my beat-up old two-tone blue GMC Jimmy. I opened the back, and I threw my bag into the hatchback. Ollie walked over to his new black Ford Mustang convertible and threw his bag in the back seat. Charlie handed his bag to Archie and yelled at Lilly. “Hey, Lilly, you riding with me or with Em?”

Lilly paused and looked at me. “With Em, I don’t need to lose any more brain cells.”

Charlie laughed. “The head-banger isn’t good enough for you anymore?”

Bets laughed too. “You can ride with me, Lilly.”

Lilly smiled. “So I can ride in the rat-mobile or the head-banger, that is a hard choice.”

Ollie chimed in, “Or you could be swag and ride with me in my fine ride.”

Lilly laughed her tinkling soft laugh. “Oh all right, Ollie, I’ll ride with you.”

Charlie looked offended. “You traitor, Lilly.” Charlie handed Lilly her bag and then took it back as Lilly struggled to hold it with her arm in the cast. “Let me carry it to Ollie’s car for you,” Charlie said.

Lilly smiled up at him. “Thanks, Lover Boy!”

Charlie flushed, “I swear Lilly, you can be a pain in the ass.” Lilly laughed and opened the door to the mustang and climbed in.

“Truth hurts? Huh Charlie?” Lilly taunted Charlie. Charlie just shook his head and walked back to the head-banger.

Charlie had an older model Ford F150 pickup truck. It was square and white with a maroon stripe that ran horizontally between the white top and white bottom. Every ride in it involved a head banging on the ceiling, which we swore that Charlie did on purpose. Bets insisted he would give us brain damage, and that was a “certifiable medical condition.”

Bets had her mom's hand-me-down grey Honda Civic. We called it the rat-mobile. A rat had gotten in the car years ago and died and it still stunk. I had gotten used to the smell, but Bets seldom drove and preferred to ride with one of us.

Lilly rode with us everywhere we went. She didn't seem to mind that she didn't have a car or know how to drive. She said that since she pretty much lived with Bets and me, that our car was like her car. Wayne, Bets's dad, had been teaching Lilly how to drive in the rat-mobile, and the next month when she turned seventeen, we planned on taking her to get her license. All the rest of us had gotten our licenses the year before as "hardships" since we were needed on the farms to move machinery and trucks around. Except for Ollie, he got his because his parents signed the form for him.

Ollie peeled off down the gravel road leaving a trail of dust as the black Mustang turned onto the highway. The top was down and Lilly's right hand with its cast, this time a pale blue one, was hanging out the window. She waved to us.

Bets pulled out in the rat-mobile and I followed her. Bets was a careful driver. Actually she drove like a grandma, but I didn't tell her that. Bets thought she was the best driver out of all of us. Charlie followed behind me, revving the engine of the old Ford. I shrugged my shoulders and pointed to Bets ahead of me, and made motions like I was an old lady driving. Charlie smiled, and I saw his white teeth flash as he threw back his head and laughed.



IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG to get to Bets's house. Bets lived on the other side of our place, which borders the Arrington place. Lilly and Ollie were already out of the Mustang and walking toward Wayne's shop when Bets, Charlie and I pulled up.

Bets's dad had a big building close to his house that he made his sculptures in. The building was really tall and huge. It had to be because he made large sculptures. One time he made a bear that was twenty feet tall out of copper. It was beautiful, reared up on its hind legs, and the mouth was open in an imaginary roar. It took him almost two years to finish. It went to a museum in Western Montana and stands proudly outside the entrance. I hadn't seen it since he made it, but I had seen a picture of it standing at the entrance. He made smaller things also, but mostly he made bigger things, mainly animals. He had a way of making them seem real.

Right now he was finishing a herd of copper, life-sized cattle for Oscar Hines. Old Man Hines was too old to run cattle anymore and he missed seeing them. He hired Bets's dad to make him a herd of cows. Wayne had made 125 cows and calves and just finished the two bulls. He had been working on the herd for almost five years. He paid us ten bucks each to help him deliver the copper cows. We brought them out to the Hines ranch in groups of two and three at a time as he finished them.

I walked into the shop with the others. The bulls stood there staring us down. I stepped back.

Bets laughed. "They aren't real, Em."

"I know that, but they seem real," I said. We walked around them, caressing their smooth sides and touching their horns.

Wayne backed his pickup truck with the flatbed trailer into the shop. He jumped down out of the cab and walked toward us. I thought he must have been a hippie in another life. His jeans were ragged; his faded t-shirt had "Sturgis Bike Rally" emblazoned on the chest. His red hair was pulled back in a ponytail and he had a blue bandana tied around his head. He wore big, black leather boots. "Hey kids," he called out. When he smiled, he looked like Bets.

He said to Bets, “Betsy, will you grab the chains for me?”

Bets looked at him. “Dad! You know I go by Bets, don’t call me that!”

Wayne shrugged his shoulders. “It is your real name.”

Bets crossed her arms, “I can’t help it that you and mom picked an asinine name like Betsy for me, especially when our last name is Ross! I think you must have had something against me before I was even born.”

Wayne smiled. “It’s a beautiful name and no one ever forgets it.”

Bets shrugged. “Whatever.” If you wanted to get Bets riled up, all you had to do was call her Betsy Ross.

Bets grabbed the chain and we attached it to the boards around the bulls’ feet. Wayne moved the hoist over and attached it to the chains. The first bull swung over to the trailer. The second bull soon joined the first and Wayne chained them to the trailer. The bulls stood facing the front of the trailer. I grabbed the thick packing blankets and we threw them over the bulls and tied them down with baling twine. All of us girls climbed into the cab of the pickup. The boys stood in the back holding onto the bulls.

It took over an hour to drive the bulls to the Hines place. It was on the opposite side of the Flying A Ranch, and Wayne could only drive about 20 miles per hour with the trailer. He had his flashers on and we crept along the road.

Finally we got to the Hines ranch. He turned down the long gravel driveway. It was another two miles to the ranch house. We slowly pulled into the driveway.

Oscar Hines opened the door and walked over to us. “Wayne,” he said, and extended his hand. Wayne grabbed it. They shook hands.

Oscar said, “Where are they?”

Ollie and Charlie cut the twine and pulled the blankets off of the bulls. Oscar sucked in his breath. “Magnificent,” he sighed and his eyes looked wet. “I have the perfect place for them.”

Oscar got his motorized Mule out of the shed. He drove down the hill behind the house. We followed in Wayne’s truck.

Spread out before us was an amazing sight. The copper herd of cattle was spread out, some of them grazing, some standing together, calves suckling on the momma cows, and others drinking out of the creek. As far as the eye could see were the life-sized metal animals.

Oscar was out among them and leading us across the creek. We crossed the shallow creek and drove up the hill. On the side of the hill was a level spot and Oscar pointed to it. Wayne pulled up and parked. We put the chains around the first bull and lifted it off the flatbed trailer with the hoist. It wobbled, then finally righted itself, and we placed it facing the rest of the herd below us. We moved the second bull about six feet from the first. This one looked to the east.

Oscar looked at us. "Head back to the house and I will meet you there." I looked back at him as we drove off. He was standing between the two bulls, staring wistfully at his metal herd of cattle.

Wayne pulled in the yard next to the house. He killed the engine.

Lilly said, "I feel sorry for him. He's all alone. My Mom used to come out here and visit with him and his wife. They went to our church and I remember his wife Mrs. Betty, she was nice and smelled like vanilla sugar cookies. "

"I didn't know that. Why haven't you said something before?" I ask Lilly.

Lilly shrugged her shoulders. "Guess I didn't think it mattered. Mom visited all the shut-ins and the sick people in the church. Mr. Oscar and Mrs. Betty came to Mom's funeral. I remember. I hate seeing Mr. Oscar like this. He's been lonely too long."

Wayne nodded. "It is a sad state of affairs, that is for sure. Since Betty Hines died last year, he has been more and more isolated. Every time I come out here, he is sitting out there with the herd of cows I made him."

Ollie added, "Dad says people in town say he is crazy."

Wayne shook his head. "No, he is not crazy. Sad and lonely maybe, but not crazy."

Oscar pulled up in the Mule beside Wayne. Wayne rolled down the window. "Wayne, I have one more job for you."

Wayne nodded. "More cattle?" Oscar looked at his boots and then at Wayne.

"No. This time I want you to make a statue of me on my favorite horse, Trigger. I want my wife Betty on her horse Cinnamon next to me. I want it made as one piece with the horses' sides joining us together."

Wayne looked thoughtful. "I need some pictures of Betty and Cinnamon, and you and Trigger."

Oscar straightened up. "Come in the house. I'll pay you for the bulls and give you the pictures. How long before you can finish this piece for me?"

Wayne chewed on his thumbnail. "Nine months at least."

Oscar looked worried, "Can you do it any faster?"

"Maybe," Wayne replied, "but it will cost you more."

"I don't care what it costs," Oscar said. "My kids couldn't get out of here fast enough, they didn't have the decency to visit their mother before she died, and then didn't bother to come to her funeral. They said they were too busy at work or too busy with their kids to make the trip home. I am spending all of our money on the herd. When I'm gone, I'm turning our ranch into a preserve. Betty would like that. Those selfish bastards won't get a dime."

We sat there awkwardly. Then Lilly stepped out of the truck and walked up to Oscar. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know how it feels to lose the only person who loved you." She leaned forward as he bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

He ran his hands across her hair. "You've always been such a sweet girl, Lilly."

She whispered in his ear, "You are not alone."

Oscar smiled at her, but his eyes looked wet. "Wayne," Oscar called out, "can the kids drive the Mule into the shed for me?"

Wayne nodded. "Hop to it kids."

We raced to the Mule for the right to drive it to the shed. I won the footrace. I knew I would. I was faster than even the boys. I jumped in the driver's seat and the others climbed in. I drove the Mule across the threshold of the shed. We turned off the light and pulled the shed doors shut.

Wayne had the pickup started. We piled into the cab. Charlie, Bets and Ollie sat in the back seat, and Lilly and I sat in the front. Oscar Hines was standing in the doorway. We waved at him. Lilly waved, pointed up, and blew him a kiss. Oscar smiled.

Wayne was quiet on the ride home. When we got to their house, parked, and got out, he turned to Lilly. "Old Man Hines said to give you this." "This" was a plain white envelope.

Lilly looked puzzled. "Why?"

Wayne said, "Open it."

Inside was a check for a thousand dollars! Lilly stood there looking astonished. "Why would he do that?" she asked.

"He asked me what he could do to help you. He said it was the least he could do for your mother and for you. He said your mother came over and helped his wife when she had heart surgery and even bathed her and cooked for them."

Lilly's eyes filled with tears, "I remember."

"I told him that you needed money for clothes, school supplies, and to try out for cheerleading." Wayne smiled at her. She dropped the check on the ground, ran to Wayne, and hugged him as tight as she could with her arm that didn't have the cast. She turned to us and let out a squeal as she ran to us. We came together in a five-person bear hug. "I have money to spend!" she cried out. "I can try out for cheerleading!"

Lilly had always wanted to take dance and cheerleading lessons, but her dickhead father wouldn't do anything for her, ever. He would promise that he would let her take dance lessons if she came home. Lilly believed him every time, but he never did anything he promised.

If it weren't for the rest of our families, Lilly would have no clothes, school supplies, or even a place to live. Every year, our parents bought extra stuff for Lilly. Ollie's parents gave her school supplies and shoes, my parents and Bets's parents bought her clothes.

Last month Bets's dad, Wayne, told Lilly's dad he needed to pay for what she needed. Lilly's dad, Kevin, just snorted and said that if Lilly wanted something she could stay at home with him and Joe and he would gladly buy her what she needed. Lilly went home with him but ended up back with us the next week.

Wayne cleared his throat. "Lilly, Oscar will be giving me a check for you every month."

Lilly reached over to her arm above the cast and pinched it hard. "I really am not dreaming, am I?" We all laughed.

"This week, I will take you to the bank and open up a checking account for you, Lilly," Wayne stated.

Lilly sighed, and looked at us. "I have enough money to open a checking account! Who would have thought?" Then Lilly looked

thoughtful. “Thank you, Mr. Wayne. After we go to the bank, can you drive me to the Hines place? I have something to give to Mr. Hines.”

“Of course,” Wayne answered.

I looked around. The sun was low on the horizon. I turned to Lilly. “Lilly, we have to get home and get chores done before dark.” Lilly nodded. We waved goodbye to the others and jumped in the Jimmy. It took less than five minutes to get to our place.

I drove down the short gravel road to the house. I pulled in next to the barn and Lilly stepped out of the Jimmy and walked to the barn to feed the horses. I jogged over to the chicken house to gather the eggs and put down more straw in the nest boxes. I muttered curses under my breath. I care nothing about chickens, they are messy and the roosters try to spur my legs with their talons. They are also mean-spirited creatures. If they find a sore spot or something else wrong with another chicken, they will eventually peck it to death. Dad says it is survival of the fittest, but I can’t understand why other bird’s imperfections should mean that they have to die.

I was thinking out loud as I said, “Good thing people are better than chickens.”

Dad poked his head out of the shed. “What did you say, Em?”

I looked at Dad. “I was just commenting that I’m glad we don’t kill others just because they are different from us. We wouldn’t have Thunder or Gus.” I whispered to myself, “Or even Charlie.”

Dad called out, “Feeling philosophical tonight, Em?”

“Maybe,” I yelled back.

Dad used to be an English teacher. He quit teaching several years ago to take over my grandparents’ ranch after my grandmother died and my grandfather became the town drunk. We don’t talk about that. Sometimes I’ve heard Mom and Dad whispering in the dark at night and I know they are talking about Grandpa Ed.

Dad walked back to the house with us. As I opened the door, Ben came running up the stairs. “Lilly,” he yelled, “come downstairs and listen, please?” Lilly smiled at me as she walked down the stairs. In a few minutes, I heard Ben playing his cello. Tonight was violin and cello practice. I cringed.

I walked to the spot in the corner of the basement where I practiced my violin and Ben practiced his cello. My dad put up sheetrock on one side of

the wall and Mom painted it with chalkboard paint. She wrote our lessons on it and illustrated different types of notes and music. It was filled with hundreds of short chords and ideas that Ben had for songs. Our mom played both instruments, and she gave us lessons every week. There was no arguing about the lessons. We were required to take a lesson and practice at least twice a week. "Tonight is the magic night," I thought sarcastically to myself.

Mom also worked with us on composing. She tried to teach us all the basics to composing. I couldn't tell the difference between a prelude and a finale, but Ben could. Ben was much better than I was at it, but together we made a good duo. Ben had also learned to play the violin, and even at his young age, he was better than my mom. Ben told me once that he could "see" music. That when music played, he could hear it and close his eyes, and he could see the music in his head in the colors of the rainbow, fluctuating with the beat of the music. He could see the music before the next beat played in the colors in his head. Music made him feel things. I wasn't sure what he felt, but I could tell the incredible gift Ben had. Mom called him a prodigy. I thought if we lived anywhere else but here, Ben would be famous.

I watched him now playing the cello, his face intent, and his eyes closed with a mop of whitish blond hair falling across his forehead. Lilly was sitting across from him. The song Ben played was unusual. It had long crescendos with short bursts of staccato beats in it, almost like gunshots or thunder. Ben finished it and looked excitedly at Lilly.

"Guess what the song is about?" he asked her.

Lilly looked serious. "I think it is about the battle we had yesterday in the clearing."

Ben nodded. "I knew you would understand what it was, Lilly. Not like other people in the room, who just don't get songs."

Ben looked pointedly at me. "I get your songs, Ben," I argued back.

Ben looked at me with a serious look. "No you don't, because you don't feel music, you only hear it."

"Well, Ben, not all of us are as gifted as you are," I told him.

"It's not a gift," he retorted, "it's a choice, Em. You just choose to not hear what it is trying to tell you."

I rolled my eyes at Lilly. “Geez, I know you don’t feel the music, do you Lilly?”

Lilly’s eyes looked sad and old. “Some day, Em, your life will depend on you being able to feel music. It will depend on you believing in things you can only feel and cannot hear or see.”

I shrugged my shoulders. In some ways Lilly was a lot like Charlie, always saying things about what she thought the future would be like. “I am through with the two of you.” I walked back up the stairs.

After supper and violin practice, Lilly and I headed to my room to change into our pajamas and study for school. Our house was small and my room was small as well. The walls were painted light blue and my bedspread on my twin bed was white lace. Lilly’s twin bed was pushed next to mine and had a pink blanket on it. I had a small chest of drawers with a mirror above it where Lilly and I could comb our hair and use the blow dryer.

The closet once had a sliding door that opened. It was always falling off the track and one day I took it off and carried it to the basement. It made the room seem a little bigger that way. On one side of the closet hung my clothes; the other side belonged to Lilly. Most of my clothes were jeans and workout clothes. There was one sundress hanging toward the back of the closet. That was as close as I got to “girlie” things.

I was never much for decorations or possessions. I had pictures on the wall that other people gave me, mainly Bets and Lilly. The pictures were of horses and pretty scenery. I had a small pink jewelry box and when you lifted the lid, a ballerina popped up and twirled around gracefully while a tinny song played. I had a few small pieces of jewelry in there, but nothing expensive. If a burglar broke in, he would be disappointed. Everything that I owned worth anything was in the tack room in the horse shed.

The thing I valued most wasn’t worth anything. It was a double picture frame. On one side were my Mom and Dad, Ben, Nana and I; the other side was me with my four dearest friends in the world. The five of us were skinny, gangly and awkward. Our left arms were wrapped around each other and our right arms were raised to the sky with our palms facing up. Our faces, arms and legs were covered in red mud and green leaves and grass. We were dirty but happy. Our smiles were bright beneath our dingy faces. I was next to Charlie and Lilly and I could feel how tight they were

holding on to me. Charlie was the only one not looking into the camera. He was looking at me with his intense, beautiful, gold-rimmed brown eyes.

That night I woke up screaming, and I felt Lilly's skinny arms around me. "Shhh, just feel the music," she whispered, and she hummed a song to me. I drifted back to sleep. A drumbeat played over and over in my head, trying to tell me something. I tossed and turned desperately trying to figure out what the drum was telling me.

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THE NEXT MORNING, Lilly and I got in the Jimmy and drove down the road to pick up Bets. After we got Bets, we stopped and picked up Ollie.

Ollie lived fairly close to Charlie, Bets, Lilly, and me. His house was much bigger than ours and Oliver had the whole second floor to himself. He also had his own bathroom, a game room with a kitchenette, and an extra bedroom with bunk beds for the guys when they slept over. Oliver had all the latest technology and video games. He loved music and spent his allowance on music from obscure alternative bands. He had great taste and his mixes were always our favorite music. Oliver was not a snob and he shared anything he had with us. His parents were nice, but their lives were busy, and they weren't around much. His dad was a surgeon and his mom was a nurse who worked in the office with his dad.

After we got Ollie, we picked up Charlie. As we drove into town to the high school, we played one of Ollie's playlists. We pulled into the parking lot.

The routine was the same every school day. We always rode together to and from school. We divided at the door and headed to our different classes. After school, we stayed for Ollie and Lilly. It was nearing the end of basketball season and Ollie had basketball practice.

Lilly was attending the information session to try out for the cheerleading team for the fall, and she was trying to convince Bets to try out as well. She knew better than to even ask me. I was about as far from cheerleading material as you can be. My talents lay in sports. I liked to run, and it was something I was pretty good at. In the fall, I ran on the cross-country team. Since it was spring, I ran on the track team now. We didn't have practice that week as our coach was sick with a stomach virus.

Charlie played football in the fall and ran track in the spring with me. Since Charlie and I had free time after school, we decided to go to the cheerleading information session with Bets and Lilly.

Lizzie was leading the talk. She was elected head cheerleader last summer during cheerleader camp, and that meant she would be the head cheerleader again this year. She was a good cheerleader, but she had a mean

streak. Her dad owned the Chevy car dealership, so she drove a brand new Camaro every year and flaunted her tickets to rock bands and her designer clothes. Everyone gleefully called her Lizzie the Lizard. She dated Lilly's older brother Joe. While Lilly was small, graceful and soft, Joe was big and obnoxious. He was also a bully.

Lizzie and Joe deserved each other. They walked down the hall with their hands in each other's back pockets and kissed in the hallway. Unfortunately for me, Lizzie was in every class with me so I got a snoot full of them every day.

I looked around and saw Joe in the stands. He narrowed his eyes and flipped me off.

Charlie looked at me. "Whatever happened between the two of you to make him hate you so much?"

I sighed. "One time when I was a kid, before you moved here, I told Archie about Joe. I told Archie all the things that Joe did to the other kids. Joe would steal the other kids' stuff, like their money or lunch. If the other kids complained to the teacher, Joe would tell them he would hurt them twice as bad when he could. After a while, no one would tell the teacher. Archie listened patiently to me. Then he asked me. 'What are you most afraid of? Confronting Joe or being like him?' I had to think about it for a moment. 'Being like him,' I answered. Archie told me, 'When confronted by a bear, you can do one of two things, you can eat the bear or you can be bear poop.'

"The next day I confronted Joe when he stole another kid's lunch. 'Give it back,' I told him. 'Who's going to make me?' Joe asked. I didn't answer him. I just did a roundhouse kick that I learned in karate and knocked him to the ground. When he got up and charged me, I knocked him down again. I did it again and again until he wouldn't get up. I walked over and handed the lunch back to the kid he stole it from. I grabbed Lilly's arm and walked off. 'What was that all about?' she asked me. I just smiled at her. 'Bear poop.' Lilly looked confused and I laughed.

"To say Joe hates me is probably putting it mildly. He has never forgiven me for the day on the playground when I knocked him down over and over. I am not worried about him," I told Charlie.

Charlie shook his head. "Hatred that strong only breeds violence."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I am so not worried," I replied flippantly.

I was better at karate than Joe was, and Charlie was twice his size. Joe wouldn't dare mess with any of us. That included Lilly.

I whispered to Charlie, "I hope Lizzie at least gives Bets and Lilly a fair shake."

Charlie snorted, "Fat chance."

I listened to Lizzie as she explained the rules. The tryouts for the cheerleaders for next fall were to be in two weeks. They would all wear white t-shirts and navy shorts with a number pinned on them to audition. Tomorrow they would learn the cheer and the dance, and then they would have the rest of the two weeks to practice. A panel of ex-cheerleaders and junior college cheerleaders would pick the team, except for Lizzie, who was exempt from auditions as head cheerleader.

After the meeting, Lilly talked to Audra who was on the squad the year before, and Audra told Lilly to get a coach to work with her on the cheer. Lizzie overheard and walked up to Lilly and Audra.

"Don't bother with telling her that, she can't afford to hire anyone, she doesn't even have a place to live," Lizzie said, glaring at Lilly.

Lilly just smiled at Audra and said, "Thank you."

When we got outside, Lilly borrowed Ollie's cell to call the coach that Audra suggested. When she hung up, she beamed at us. "I hired a coach. It costs \$100.00 a week, but it will be so worth it. Can you believe I did that? And guess what Bets? You get to come with me to the lessons."

Bets squealed, "Thank you, Lilly!"

When we got to Bets's house, I dropped off Lilly. She was going to spend a few nights with them so Wayne could take her to the bank and over to Oscar Hine's place. I pulled up in the tree-lined driveway to our house and saw Ben sitting by the door.

"Where is Lilly?" Ben asked.

"She's going to spend a few days with Bets," I told him.

"I hate that!" Ben pouted.

I grabbed him by the hand and made him stand up and walk with me. "Have I ever told you that you are my favorite brother?"

He smiled. "Really?"

I smiled back at him. "Really." He gave me a quick hug and ran into the house.

The next day when I picked Lilly and Bets up for school, Lilly jumped in and started talking excitedly. “I opened up my checking account yesterday! And I’m getting a debit card. And I have cash until I get my debit card. Bets and I are going to buy our t-shirts and shorts today for tryouts after school--if you will take us, Em?”

“Of course I will. Anything for the big spender,” I teased Lilly. She laughed.

“I am in too good of a mood to jack with you today, Em!”

I answered, “I can hardly believe that!”

After school, Charlie and I watched Lizzie teach the cheer and dance to everyone. Lilly and Bets seemed to catch on quick, or maybe I was just biased.

When they were finished, we sat in the bleachers watching Ollie practice basketball. His final game was Saturday, and unfortunately, the team had not played well enough to win a spot in the district finals even if they won on Saturday. Ollie didn’t seem to mind.

When they finished, Ollie ran over to us. “Let me change my clothes and I am ready to go.”

Lilly said, “I am sorry you won’t get to go to district.”

Ollie smiled back. “We are a young team, and we have a couple more years to kick ass.” As he ran to the locker room, he farted.

Bets shook her head. “Ollie, you must have worms, ’cause you are rotten inside.”

“Hater!” Ollie yelled back. The rest of us laughed.

We stopped to let Lilly and Bets pick up their t-shirt and shorts. When they went to pay, Lilly whipped out her wallet and paid cash for both sets of clothes.

Bets protested, “Dad will pay for mine.”

Lilly looked at her. “Just let me do this, okay? I’m always at the receiving end and I want to be on the giving end for once.”

Bets smiled at her. “Just this one time.” Lilly’s face was happy and she grabbed the sack and swung it back and forth.

The next day after school, I dropped Bets and Lilly off for cheerleading lessons with their coach, Carla. We left Ollie at school for basketball practice. I had karate lessons to teach.

I had taken karate lessons since I was six years old. I earned my black belt when I was fourteen and had been teaching karate lessons to the smaller children for the last year. Charlie came with me to help out and be my sparring partner. The beginner's class was small, about ten students. I watched them file in. Ben is in this group. I waved at him as Mom dropped him off at the door.

"Em, I'm going to the grocery store. Can you bring Ben home?" Mom asked.

"Sure, Mom," I answered.

We were working on self-defensive moves in class today. I started with showing the kids how to get away from someone who had hold of their wrist, then showed them how to do it when the person had hold of both of their wrists. I showed them what to do if someone had them in a front-choke hold, or a shoulder grab.

I finished with showing them how to escape from a bear hug. I got Charlie to get behind me wrapping both of his arms tightly around my arms from behind. I reached down and pinched Charlie's inner thigh as hard as I could. Charlie hollered and released his hold and I struck at his groin with my knee. I didn't actually do it. I just pretended to. Charlie playfully dropped to his knees and rolled on his side yelling.

I had Charlie stand up again and this time I got away by using the back of my head to hit Charlie's nose. The next time I got away by stomping on Charlie's foot. We broke up. I let the students pretend to practice on each other. Ben clamored for Charlie to practice with him, but Charlie waved him off. "No can do young buddy, your sister just beat me up."

Ben glared at me. "Thanks for nothing, Emme."

I looked at Charlie. "Don't egg him on."

Charlie smiled. "Well, it is the truth, you can outrun me and outfight me."

"And your point is?" I said.

"Don't have a point, just stating the obvious," Charlie said.

"You don't seem to mind," I told him.

"Nope, I don't," Charlie said and smiled at me. "I don't mind because I am smarter than you are."

I stared at Charlie with my eyes narrowed, "You wish." Charlie laughed and walked off.

After class was over, we locked up and drove to Carla's to pick up Bets and Lilly. They ran to the car and talked excitedly. "We learned the whole cheer tonight," Bets said. "And Lilly is going to be a flyer. That's something she can do with her cast."

I looked at Lilly. "Is that a good idea? No offense, but you are the most accident prone person I know." I smiled as I said it. "I mean, geez, you have a cast now, you broke your other wrist last summer, and the Christmas before that you broke your leg. That's not counting the ones you had when you were younger."

Lilly ignored me. "Carla says I am small and quick enough and she worked with me tonight."

Bets talked on, "Carla and I threw Lilly into the air and she did a flip. Lilly learned how to do a flip in one lesson. Carla said that she has never coached anyone who learned as fast as Lilly."

Lilly blushed. "I pay her to say that."

Bets looked at Lilly. "Like hell you do. You have talent."

Charlie looked at Bets. "How did you do, Bets?"

"Oh, all right, Carla said I should be good enough to make the team if I learn the dance as well as I learned the cheer," Bets answered.

"You will both make the team," I predicted.

We drove back to the school and picked up Ollie. He was standing outside talking to some kids he knew from chess competition. I noticed Raymond standing next to him talking with his hands.

Raymond was probably the best singer our school had. He was amazingly talented and a fierce chess player. He and Ollie were talking fast together. Bets looked at them. "Bet ya they are talking about a new killer band."

Sure enough, when Ollie got in the car he said, "Guess what? Raymond just told me about a new rad band from L.A."

We burst out laughing. "What's so funny?" Ollie demanded to know.

Ben said, "Bets said you would say exactly what you said."

Ollie smiled. "Well, I guess I am predictable in some ways." He stared out the window as I drove us home.



THAT SATURDAY, LILLY CALLED and asked us to go to the Hines ranch with her. Ollie was out of town playing basketball, but he gave us his latest playlist. I picked the others up and we drove to the Hines ranch with Ollie's playlist blaring, the windows down, and the warm breeze blowing through the Jimmy.

When we got there, Lilly looked at us. "Please give me a few minutes, ok?" She had a package under her arm. We sat quietly in the Jimmy listening to the music. When she returned, the package was gone.

"Come in for a few minutes and have lemonade with Mr. Hines," she said. We got out and walked into the house. Mr. Hines had cookies set out with tall glasses of ice. We sat down at the table and grabbed cookies as Lilly poured lemonade over the ice. We munched on the cookies as Mr. Hines looked at each of us.

"What are your names again?" he asked. We went around the table and told him our names and who our parents were. When we got to me, I said, "Emme Belrose, and my parents are Scott and Becky Belrose."

Mr. Hines looked thoughtful. "You Edwin Belrose's granddaughter?" I nodded and said yes, but my voice was sarcastic. He looked pointedly at me. "Your grandfather is a hero. He saved my life when we served together in the war. He saved my life along with Archie Hunt and Tom Arrington."

I looked up at him startled. "Seriously?"

"Yes, and I promised him to never speak of it. I will keep my promise to him and take it to my grave. You will need to learn how to make peace with the man he is now, Emme. Don't have regrets. Life is too short."

We sat there quietly. I looked over his shoulder at a beautiful metal picture frame with an iridescent butterfly that appeared to be flying out of the frame. In it was a picture of a young cowboy astride a beautiful quarter horse. Behind him on the horse was a girl with honey blonde, wavy hair and an elfin look. Her head poked out from behind him and a look of pure joy was on her face. The young cowboy was holding the hand she had around his chest tightly to his heart and smiling at her. In her hand, she clutched a pure white lily. I felt guilty looking at it, like I was intruding in something

too beautiful to be shared. Mr. Hines saw me staring at the picture and he reached back and turned the picture around.

After we finished drinking our lemonade, we thanked Mr. Hines and waved goodbye. He waved back.

“Lilly, I’ll have the papers ready next week, come back then. Okay?”

Lilly nodded and waved back. “I’ll be here.”

On the way home, we asked Lilly about the papers. Lilly was quiet. “Nothing really. Mr. Hines wants to give me the right to survival to his house and land after he dies. That just means that I can live there until I die. After I die, the house and land will pass into a preserve where it will be left as it is forever. No one will be allowed to hunt or farm, or do anything to the place. I told him I won’t need it, but he insists on doing it. I finally just agreed.”

We all sat in the car astonished. “What the hell?” Bets asked.

“Zach Arrington is drawing up the paperwork for Mr. Hines,” Lilly confided.

We drove home quietly. What do you say to that? Something Lilly said resonated over and over in my head. “I told him I wouldn’t need it.” Why wouldn’t she need it?

Lilly spent the weekend and the following week with Bets so they could practice their cheer and dance. The week went by quickly, and soon Friday was here and it was time for tryouts. The tryouts started at 5:00 pm and we stayed after school.

We drove to the taco place and ate nachos and tacos while we waited. We got back in time for Lilly and Bets to change into their t-shirts and shorts. Lilly was number 29 and Bets was number 30. They fastened their numbers on their t-shirts and waited nervously outside the gym.

Lilly was picking on the edges of her cast. She had cut the thumb out of the cast so she could clap her hands. Without the thumb part of the cast, the rest of the cast rolled around on her arm. “You shouldn’t have done that, Lilly,” I told her.

Lilly looked up at me. “It doesn’t matter, I get it off next week anyway.”

The judges called them in groups of five. When it was their turn, we waved thumbs up and yelled, “Good luck.”

They were gone for about ten minutes, and when they got back, Lilly ran past us and into the bathroom. Bets and I followed her. Lilly was vomiting into the toilet. I grabbed paper towels and wetted them. Bets put a hand on Lilly's shoulder. After she finished, I wiped her face with the wet towels.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Lilly was pale and shaking. "I messed up and now Bets won't get to be a cheerleader either."

Bets smiled at her. "I wouldn't care anyway, I only did it for you. You didn't mess up. Lizzie yanked her hands back. They dropped you."

I looked horrified. "I'll kill that bitch, Lilly, I swear I will."

Lilly grabbed my hand. "She's not worth it. It will be all right."

We helped her up and walked back to Ollie and Charlie. Charlie looked worried. I touched his arm. "She's okay. Lizzie intentionally dropped her."

Charlie narrowed his eyes and clenched his teeth. Ollie sucked in his breath. "Really? What a bitch." Ollie grabbed Lilly and swung her around. "You are so much better than her."

Lilly smiled. "Thanks, Ollie."

The results would be posted at 8 pm, and we decided to drive around and listen to Ollie's new "kick ass" playlist until then. At 7:45 we pulled up in front of the gym. We all got out and walked up to the board. There was a drape over it. Everyone was crowding around it waiting to see who would be chosen. Lilly stood back behind Charlie and me.

At eight, Lizzie came out, and with a dramatic flair yelled, "Our new varsity cheerleaders, the chosen few!" She whipped back the drape. The girls lunged forward. Within minutes there were tears of joy and tears of pain. Lizzie stood there staring at us. Bets and Lilly made no move toward the board.

Lizzie sneered at me. I narrowed my eyes at her. "Bear poop," I said under my breath. I marched toward the board and pushed my way to the front. I quickly saw Bets's name, and I ran my finger down the rest of the names until I saw Lilly's name written in on the very last line. It had been written and erased and crossed out and re-written in. I glared at Lizzie. I knew she had done that to make Lilly feel like she barely made it. I walked past Lizzie and hissed under my breath, "If you ever hurt her again, I will personally make you wish you had never been born."

Lizzie hissed back, "Is that a threat?"

I glared at her. "No, it is a promise. I always keep my promises. Just ask Joe. I'm sure he will remember."

I smiled and broke into a run toward Bets and Lilly. "You made it!" I screamed. We jumped around, in and out of each other's arms. I ran to the Jimmy. I pulled out a bouquet of lilies for Lilly and a bouquet of roses for Bets. I had hidden them under my seat hoping they would make the team. I wasn't sure what I would have done with the flowers if they hadn't. I took a picture of the two of them, clutching their flowers in their try-out outfits, with my cell phone. I group texted the picture and wonderful news to my parents, Bets's parents, and Ollie's parents. As they texted back congratulating Bets and Lilly, we walked back to the Jimmy. Girls were running up to Bets and Lilly, congratulating them and hugging them. Lilly was smiling from ear to ear. I made sure that neither one of them saw the try-out board results. What Lilly didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

That weekend, we took Lilly to Mr. Hines's ranch and she signed the papers that would give her rights to the ranch and Mr. Hines's money after Mr. Hines had passed. There was a person from Zach Arrington's office there. She was there to be a witness, along with another older man who was a private detective for Zach Arrington. This stranger looked at me hard like he was trying to place me. I ignored him and stood by Lilly.

As everyone left, Mr. Hines handed Lilly another check. Lilly grabbed his hard callused hands and put the check between them. "Please, just let me tell you when I need something?" she asked. Oscar Hines nodded and grabbed her in a bear hug. Lilly hugged him tightly.

We drove out to the Flying A ranch and parked at Archie's. He and Ernie had the horses saddled and waiting. Ernie was the man who took care of the stables. He was tall and skinny with a funny-looking sunken-in chest. It looked like someone had punched him in the chest and it stayed that way. Ernie was a gentle giant. He looked out for us girls, especially Lilly. When we needed something from the stables, Ernie was always the one to help us. He lived in one of the houses on the ranch. He used to have a wife and a daughter, but they were killed in a head-on car crash. Archie said a drunk driver hit the car they were riding in. The drunk driver was driving without his lights on, going the wrong way on the Interstate. Ernie tried to steer away from him, but like a moth drawn to a light, the drunk driver headed

straight toward Ernie's car lights. Ernie was the only survivor. Ernie never talked about it. We only knew about it because Archie told us.

Ernie waved to us. "Congrats, Bets and Lilly." Bets and Lilly waved at Ernie, and Lilly ran to Ernie and he hugged her. "Good job," I heard him whisper in her ear. Lilly smiled.

"You headed out to the tepees for the weekend?" Ernie asked. I nodded.

"Yes, we are going to celebrate and have s'mores."

Bets laughed, "That is your favorite, Em."

"Well," I argued, "you like them too."

Lilly butted in. "I like them."

Ernie waved us off. "Have fun, kids."

Archie called after us. "I will be out with the supplies at dusk."

"Okay," I yelled. "Giddy up Gus, let's go," I laid my head next to Gus's neck and he exploded, galloping across the pasture headed for the hills and the clearing. I looked to my left and saw Charlie on Duke gaining on me, and on my right, Ollie on Bolt. On the far side of Ollie, Lilly and Princess were pulling ahead. On the far side of Charlie, Bets and Ginger were neck and neck with Charlie and Duke. We were spread out in a line just like when we were little on the playground.

At recess when we were young, we would play Red Rover. We would divide into two teams with an equal number of players and stand facing each other with about twenty-five yards in between us and join hands. Whoever was called from the other team tried to break the link between our hands, and if they did, then the two people who broke the link had to go to the other side. If the person who was called couldn't break the link between our hands, that person had to join our team. The goal of the game was to get all the members of the opposite side on your team.

The five of us always formed a line together. The order never changed. It was Charlie, me, Lilly, Bets and Ollie. I grabbed Lilly's arm above whatever cast or splint she had on and Bets did the same on her other arm. Joe made sure he was always on the opposite team, and when it was his turn he headed straight for Lilly and me. Joe was always trying to hurt Lilly, even though she was his sister. Our side finally had to call him and we said "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Joe over." Joe ran as fast as he could and put all of his weight on us. As Joe ran Charlie would call out to us, "Hold the line. We are strong together. Be brave." I looked at Lilly's scared face. "Girl

power, Lilly. We won't let him hurt you." Bets narrowed her eyes and glared at Joe. Charlie threw back his head and yelled a war cry and the rest of us would join in. I gripped Lilly's upper arm as tight as I could and leaned toward Lilly and planted my feet. Joe tried to swing his weight toward Lilly, but I was taller and stronger and he fell between us with all his weight on us. Lilly grimaced and I knew she was hurt, but she wouldn't say a word as Joe fell to the ground. As Joe got up, she laughed delightedly. Joe tried to kick her or push her down but Charlie stepped up and looked down on Joe with his arms folded and Joe walked off in a huff. The five of us never lost a game of Red Rover, not ever. In fact, we never lost a game of anything on the playground. We watched out for each other and were steadfast in our friendship to each other. No one could divide us.

I let out a war whoop and Charlie joined in, then Bets, Lilly, and Ollie. We whooped as we crested the hill into the clearing. The tepees were dappled in sunlight, and the sky was bright blue. I took a deep breath. The winters might be cold and harsh, but the springs and summers were breathtakingly beautiful. I especially loved the summers when everything was warm, the air smelled of sunshine, and the sky was a beautiful hue of blue. At that moment, I was just thankful to be alive.



WE SPENT SATURDAY basking in the sunshine, splashing in the creek, eating s'mores, and playing Custer's Last Stand. After the sun set on Saturday, Archie called us together in front of the fire. "Tonight, I am going to teach you my ancestors' war dance and rain dance." He had us pile more wood on the fire until it was huge. Then he showed us how to paint our faces and arms and legs. We searched for bird feathers to put in our hair. I found a tiny meadowlark feather that I wove into my hair. We carried pieces of wood that we imagined as our scalping knives.

Archie led the way around the fire and we followed him, dragging our feet at first, and then dancing with a toe to heel movement faster and faster. Archie chanted and sang. "We are coming, we are coming to get the pale face scalp. We are coming, we are coming on the war trail." We all joined in singing until we were too short of breath to both sing and dance.

I watched our faces in the light from the fire as we circled the fire. Charlie was intent and focused. Lilly was a graceful ballerina floating around the fire. Bets had her nose crinkled ready to tell the rest of us exactly how it should be done. Ollie was all lanky and awkward and hanging close to Archie. I followed behind Lilly and in front of Charlie. I turned and found Charlie's beautiful eyes on me, and I stared back, lost in the emotion between us. I felt like Charlie and I had done this before, that we had been here before doing this same dance in this same place. That was not possible, and I shook my head and hurried to catch up to Lilly.

We danced and sang for over an hour. We learned the rain dance as well, and Lilly was the best at it. Archie beat on his big drum. He beat it slowly at first, and then faster and faster as we danced about.

As we were doing the rain dance, it started to thunder and began to pour rain! Archie yelled at us, "Head to your tepees it's time for bed anyway." We ran laughing and dashing between the rain puddles to our tepees. After all that dancing and singing, we fell onto our pallets, too tired to even take off our boots and wet jackets.

The next morning after breakfast, Lilly asked Archie, "Did we really make it rain?"

Archie nodded. "Yes, but we shouldn't waste what we don't need. We can only do the rain dance when we really need the rain." Lilly nodded seriously as Bets rolled her eyes and snorted.

Archie asked us to ride to the clearing and come back when we heard his drum. He said he would beat on the drum when he wanted us to come back to the tepees from the clearing. The signal was first slow warning beats, and then beat faster until we came back to the tepees.

We rode out to the clearing and after about five minutes, I heard the drum. I looked around. "Let's head back. I hear the drum."

The others looked at me. Charlie said, "I don't hear it."

"Really?" I answered. I looked around. "Does anyone else hear it?" They all shook their heads no.

As we crested the hill back toward the tepees, the others said they finally heard Archie's drum. He was beating the drum fast at that point. We galloped the horses to the tepees.

Archie stopped beating the drum, "Did you hear it in the clearing?" he asked.

"I am the only one who could hear it there," I told him.

Archie said, "If you lay your head on the ground when I am beating the drum, Em, you can hear what I need to tell you." He had me ride out to the hill. I jumped off of Gus and put my ear to the ground. I heard the drum, but I couldn't hear the message.

Archie yelled out to me, "You hear it?"

I yelled back, "No."

Archie yelled, "You have to concentrate." I tried for several minutes but it didn't work. I rode back to the others.

"I guess I wasn't trying hard enough," I told Archie.

He shook his head. "It just takes time. We'll work on it again."

Sunday afternoon we headed home. Lilly had to practice her driving. That week she would be taking the driving test. She had been studying the book, and Wayne had been teaching her to drive. She could do it all but the parallel parking, and my dad had promised to set up hay bales for her to practice parking.

All of us went to my house to help Lilly. As promised, Dad had the bales set up. Lilly got in the driver's side of the rat-mobile and we all piled in the car. Lilly hit the bales the first few tries, but then she seemed to get

the hang of it and she successfully parallel parked the car. We exchanged high fives. "Tomorrow is the day," I told Lilly.

"It sure is," she said.

Monday after school, we took her in the rat-mobile to the department of motor vehicles office to take the driving test. After she passed, Ollie let her drive the Mustang. Lilly was excited and careful with the car. "That was fun," she told Ollie, "and so much better than the rat-mobile!"

"Don't be hating on the rat-mobile, it gets us places," Bets yelled back at her. Lilly smiled. "I guess it does."

School was almost over. We only had two more weeks left before summer vacation. I would have to help Dad during the summer. I knew how to drive a tractor, a swather, and a baler. A swather is a huge piece of farm equipment that cuts down our alfalfa grass crop, and the baler pulls the hay into a bale that we use to feed our cattle and horses. I didn't like to drive farm equipment. I far preferred to ride horses and help Dad work the cattle. We would ride out on the horses to the far pastures, and with one of us riding from the right and one from the left, we drove the cattle into pens. This summer, we would separate the calves from the moms in the pens, and in the fall, we would pull the steers out to send to the slaughterhouse or processing plant. I hated that part.

Bets and Lilly had their first cheerleading practice on Saturday, and Ollie had to go to his grandparents' wedding anniversary party. That left Charlie and me with nothing to do. We decided to go to the clearing and do some much-needed repairs on the tepees. We left Charlie's house in the morning and rode Duke and Gus out to the clearing. After a while, we stopped working on the repairs, had lunch, and settled down eating huckleberries, lying on our backs in the clearing, identifying shapes in the clouds.

Charlie turned and stared at me. "Do you ever think of me as more than a friend?" he asked. My heart jumped and my face turned red.

"Mostly at night," I answered honestly. "I lie awake and dream that you are in love with me."

Charlie sat up and stared down at me. "Really? Do you want me to be in love with you?"

Charlie seemed surprised. I smiled. "Of course I do. Since that day at school when we first met, it is all I have thought about."

Charlie laughed. “We were what, nine years old? Em, you were so skinny and tall.”

“And you were huge like a bear.” I laughed. I knew he was thinking about that day because I was thinking about it.

“Do you think that we were destined to be together?” Charlie asked.

I nodded. “Yes. You can’t deny what happened when we first saw each other.” I rolled over and put my arm under my head.

“You know lately, I think about you every day in a different way,” Charlie confessed. “I used to think of you like a sister, someone I needed to protect, but now when I’m with you I just want to kiss you.”

I stared into his eyes. “Then do it.” I sat up and stared at my hands in my lap. Charlie leaned toward me. I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted to taste his lips on mine and feel him hold me close. He leaned forward and softly kissed me on the lips. His mouth was warm and tender and tasted sweetly of huckleberries. He ran his hands through my hair and I put my arms around his neck. I felt a shock of electricity go through me. I felt weak and dizzy, but alive, all at the same time.

As we were kissing, I felt his neck stiffen. He pushed me away and fell backward to the ground with his right arm flopping uselessly and his body contorted. I dropped to my knees and touched his face, telling him he would be okay. Finally, after what seemed like hours, he sat up and wrapped his arms around his knees and rested his chin on his knees.

“What happened?” I asked gingerly.

“It is time to begin,” he said.

My heart raced and I felt sick. “Is it time for me to die?” I asked.

Charlie nodded “It is getting closer,” he said, and I felt a wave of sadness. I always dreamed I would have a family with Charlie. What would my parents do without me? What would happen to Ben? What would happen to my friends? How could I be strong enough to die with dignity and did it matter?

I threw myself in Charlie’s arms. “I don’t want to die,” I said.

He kissed me hungrily, but I felt his resistance. “We have some time, Emme, I promise you that,” he whispered.

We saddled back up and in silence rode back. Even Gus was subdued. When we got in cell phone range, we texted the others and told them we

needed to meet in Bets's parents' basement tonight. Charlie said we must tell them now. We would need them for the battle.

Bets's parents had redone their basement for us to use in the winter when it was too cold to go to the clearing. They felt bad that we spent so much time at Ollie's and wanted to shoulder some of the "teenager time" with Ollie's parents. When we were younger, Ollie's parents had hired my Aunt Laura, who was in junior college at that time, to take Ollie to school and pick him up. After school in the winter, we would all hang out at his house and play video games. Aunt Laura taught us to play poker and made us chocolate chip cookies.

We all felt like one of the family at Bets's house, and we had keys to the basement and were welcome to come and go. The basement had two old plaid sofas with sagging cushions, a scratched coffee table and a TV. There was a tiny bathroom with a shower, and a small cabinet with a microwave and tiny refrigerator. We had snacks and drinks there.

Bets was making microwave popcorn and the others were crashed out on the sofa watching TV and drinking hot chocolate. Lilly was lying with her thin legs draped over Ollie's legs on one of the sofas. When we walked in, the others knew right away that something had happened. Lilly figured it out first. Sweet Lilly, always the first to sense when things weren't right, and always wanting to try and fix them.

We told them the whole story and included the kiss. They smiled at each other when we told that part, and at the same time said they weren't surprised. I guess we didn't hide our feelings as well as we thought. Ollie joked that he wouldn't want to kiss me if it caused seizures. We sat in a circle on the plaid braided rug, eating popcorn and drinking hot chocolate as Charlie told us the story of the ancestor's curse.

"Many years ago," Charlie began, "a machayiwiiw or evil spirit was thrust into the spirit world. Up to that point, the spirit world was made up of honorable warriors who had died bravely. This evil spirit was once a powerful medicine man. He was a vengeful man and he had a score to settle with another tribe. He had wanted to take the daughter of the chief of this tribe in order to possess her power and beauty, but he was first driven out and then humiliated by the chief. The chief's daughter's name was Golden Flower, and she was light skinned with light hair. Her mother had been captured during a wagon raid and was a white, blue-eyed woman."

Charlie went on to explain that he was a seer. During his seizures, he could see where the evil spirit was and where he was headed, so the Spirit Warriors could finally find him and destroy him. That was where we five came into the picture.

What Charlie could see was that the machayiwiiw was coming after me. He couldn't see whose body or animal shape he was in. He saw me in the car under the water, and he saw that it would take all the rest of them to vanquish the machayiwiiw.

Charlie also knew that we would not be able to win the fight in the bodies we had; we would have to take animal forms. Charlie had the knowledge of how to get our spirits in these animals, but did not know how to move the ancient Spirit Warriors into human bodies as other medicine men in the past did. He and Archie thought it was possible that each seer had unique abilities. If so, Charlie might only be able to move us into animal forms, and as such, we would have to fight the machayiwiiw.

Ollie, Bets, and Lilly looked incredulously at Charlie. Bets said, "Come again?"

Charlie started to repeat the story.

Bets held up her hand. "No, I heard what you said. I just don't believe you. There is no physical way to move anyone's spirit. When a spirit is moved out of a body, it is called death." Bets looked at Charlie with her left eyebrow lifted and a sarcastic look on her face.

Lilly glanced at Charlie and then at Bets. "I believe you. What do we need to do?"

Bets looked at Lilly. "Why do you always believe Charlie? Can't you ever have a thought in your head that Charlie didn't think of first?"

Lilly looked at Bets. "Because I know that Charlie is doing what he needs to do to save Emme, and I will do whatever it takes to save her. She's our best friend, Bets. You have to help us."

Bets stared back at Lilly and Charlie. "Count me out. I have listened to Archie tell your ancestors' stories my entire life. They were garbage then and they are garbage now."

Charlie flinched. He grabbed Bets's hand. "Bets, look at me. Have I ever lied to you? Have I ever told you anything that wasn't the truth or that didn't happen?" Bets shook her head no. Charlie went on, "We need you, Bets. We need all of us. Trust me."

Bets looked at their hands. "I just can't."

Charlie breathed in deeply. "Think of one thing that has happened in your life, Bets, that no one in this room could possibly know. Think of your deepest, darkest secret. Have you thought of it?" Bets nodded. Charlie sat still for several moments with his eyes closed and his back straight. He opened his eyes and whispered in Bets's ear.

Bets's face turned white and then red. She turned to Charlie and hugged him. Charlie held her as she buried her face in his chest. She turned around and looked at the rest of us. "He knew. There was no possible way he could have known it. Charlie's legit."

I smiled, "I already knew he was legit."

Lilly chimed in, "Me too."

Ollie looked around at us. "I didn't know he was legit, but I would give anything to be a tiger, or a bear!" Ollie jumped up and started chasing us around, crawling on all fours and growling like a bear.

Charlie stopped us. "I want all of you to know that this is not without risk. It's not like a video game where you get killed and get a million more chances to come back and win. We will probably just have one good chance to kill the machayiwiiw, and it will take all of us to do it."

Ollie asked if I would live, and I held my breath as Charlie said he didn't know.

"So we could do all of this and Emme could still die?" Bets asked.

Charlie nodded and lowered his head. "We could do all this and all of us could die," he said.

It was silent as we looked around at each other. Lilly spoke first. "I am not afraid to die," she said. "This life hasn't been so great anyway."

"I can't ask you to do this, Lilly," I said. But she wasn't listening to me; none of them were. They were looking at Charlie, and he was having another seizure.

When Charlie roused after the seizure, he looked tired and unfocused. It seemed like the more often he had these visions, the weaker he became. It took over an hour before he could talk coherently, and then his speech sounded like his tongue was too big in his mouth. "We must meet tomorrow and spend Sunday and Monday at the tepees," he said. "The change will happen then and we need time to practice." Luckily, we had Monday and Tuesday off for teacher conferences.

Ollie helped Charlie to his pickup and drove him down the gravel road to Archie's house. It hurt me to see Charlie like that. I was used to his strength and stability. If this could happen to him, what would happen to the rest of us?

Lilly and I headed back to my house, and Bets went upstairs to her room to go to bed. That night Lilly cried out, and when I reached for her she asked me if I was afraid to die. I knew the answer and it came so easily.

"Yes, Lilly, I am scared."

"I'm not," she whispered. "I think death would be a relief for me."

"Oh, Lilly," I said. I climbed under the covers with her and stroked her hair until she fell asleep.



THE NEXT DAY, we rode in my old GMC Jimmy as close as we could get to the clearing. We had everything packed that we would need: food, sleeping bags, portable showers, clothes, and cooking utensils. Archie would be around later as we prepared ourselves for the conversion and our ability to move our spirit. Archie said that we would not be in our right minds, and he would be here to make sure we were safe. Our parents only knew that we were camping with Archie. Lilly's dad had no idea where she was, but that was nothing new.

We spent the morning and part of the afternoon getting our tepees set up and cooking lunch. Lilly didn't want to be alone in her tepee, so she put her sleeping bag in with Bets. Lilly didn't want to cramp my space in case Charlie and I "hooked up", as she crassly put it. I had told her and Bets that I didn't want to die a virgin. Bets thought it didn't matter since she didn't think I would die anyway, but Lilly understood and she thought we just needed to "do it."

I secretly wished only Charlie and I were here alone. I looked at him, so bronzed and beautiful, chopping wood with his shirt open and my heart ached to be with him. He looked up at me and his eyes lit up. I realized I was in love with him and I must not die!

Lilly walked up at that exact moment and sat down next to me. "Are you going to use protection? I wouldn't if I were you. You might die anyway, so it won't matter."

"Lilly, you are nuts," I scolded her. "We haven't even talked about it. And Archie would beat us with a stick if he caught us. You know that."

"Well don't get caught! Just saying," she sang out, as she scooted down the path toward Ollie to help him with his tepee.

That night under the full moon, we built a huge bonfire. Archie had moved his sleeping bag into Lilly's tepee for the night. We sat in a circle around the fire. The night air was cool and Lilly shivered until Charlie handed her his coat.

"Tonight," Charlie said, "we will become one with the animal spirits and then later, one with each other. We will each drink from the cups I have

set before you. After you drink it, you will become violently ill. You will see things, animals, places, and people. Remember what you see. This will only last for about an hour.”

At the count of three, we all raised our cups and quickly drank the bitter, slimy drink. Within several moments, my stomach started rolling, my head was pounding, and my legs had stopped working. I tried to walk, but I couldn't. I looked around and saw Ollie struggling to stand up, Lilly vomiting, and Charlie lying straight down by the fire. I sat up and then I threw up. I looked up at the sun and watched the dark sky fall into the green grass. “The sky is falling! says Chicken Little.” I laughed as I repeated it. I was now lying face down in the grass and each blade of grass looked huge. I slowly tried to get on my hands and knees.

I looked up toward the sky again, and this time, I saw the biggest osprey I had ever seen in my life. It had long, dark brown wings and a white head and throat. It looked at me with its yellow eyes. Around its yellow eyes, a dark stripe ran through the feathers around its eyes. The osprey had a sharply hooked black bill. It swooped toward me with its talons extended. Its wingspan was at least six feet and it shrieked with a sound like Nana's whistling teakettle as it made its way toward me. I put my hands over my head hoping it would not hurt me, but it grabbed ahold of my right arm and dragged me as its talons ripped my flesh.

The osprey was flying with me now to a tree where I could watch his nest. The nest was empty and the bird sat forlornly on the edge. Another osprey flew up, this one smaller and not as pretty. A female, I think. Before I could fathom what was happening, the two birds were having bird sex! I looked away and tried to figure out where I was and how I could get back to the clearing.

I climbed down the tree and a grizzly bear ran toward me. I shouted and waved my arms like my dad taught me, but it kept coming. I turned to run, but I tripped and fell. The bear ran past me, pausing to turn its head and gaze at me. I started running in the opposite direction from the bear and I heard a rustling in the bushes. I looked out in the bushes and a tall, grey coyote bared his teeth at me. I turned and ran again, falling, and the coyote ran past me, pausing to look at me. My heart was beating hard and fast, and I saw the clearing. I ran faster, and suddenly a reddish-brown colored mountain lion crouched in front of me. I moved to the right and it moved to

the right. I moved to the left and it moved to the left. I was too scared and tired to fight, and I sat down in the grass. The mountain lion leaped gracefully over my head and bounded off into the woods. As it left, it stopped and looked back at me.

I sat for a while with my head in my hands. I got up and walked slowly back to the clearing. I could see the fire. I heard pounding hooves and a magnificent, solid black, wild mustang stallion reared up on its hind legs, nickered, and turned to look at me before it crashed into the woods.

I was running toward the fire, but I was not running anymore; I was flying! I saw the fire, but I was over it. I saw Charlie lying on his stomach next to the fire. Lilly was lying on her side, Ollie was sitting with his back against his tepee, Bets was propped against a tree, Archie was pacing nervously, and I was lying on my back looking up toward the sky. What? I looked again. I could see my body! Where the hell am I?

I saw forms of people in the trees, but I couldn't make out their faces. I knew they were people, though. I looked around, and I was flying toward a nest on the very top of a tree. I stopped short and sat on the edge of the nest. I saw Archie and I called out to him, but I only made a screeching sound. I jumped off the nest. I raised my arms and I was flying. I flew fast and slow, high and low. Finally, I swooped down with my talons and legs extended, caught a fish, and then dropped it back in the silver-colored water. I flew close to the fire, and I hopped down. I reached over to touch my body and instantly I was back in my body. I sat up, and although I felt groggy, I was starting to feel more like myself.

Archie came running up to me with gauze and tape. "I'm not hurt, Archie," I said. He pointed to my right arm and the puncture wounds and torn skin, which all of a sudden were bleeding profusely. It was not a dream; I was actually a predator flying the skies!

Everyone else started to slowly revive and we came back to the fire. Charlie asked me to tell everyone about what happened to me, and I told them about the osprey and the wound to my arm, the two birds having bird sex, (I blushed,) the bear, the coyote, the mountain lion, and the stallion, and how I saw all of them from the air. Charlie asked me if I saw any people and I answered no, just outlines of people.

Charlie told a similar story, although from his perspective, he saw an osprey, a coyote, a mountain lion, and a stallion. It very quickly dawned on

us that each of us was one of the animals. I looked at Bets. "You are the mountain lion?" I asked. She nodded. "Ollie, you are the coyote?" He nodded. "Lilly, you are the wild mustang stallion?" She smiled shyly.

"Did any of you see an unusual person or persons?" Charlie asked. We all shook our heads. "I had hoped," said Charlie, "that whatever person the machayiwiiw was in would show in our dreams." We found out much later that indeed the machayiwiiw did show itself that night, but we were not prepared for whose form it took.

We ended up falling into our individual tepees wearing our clothes, and sleeping soundly until morning, too sick and exhausted to even call out goodnight to each other. The way I felt, there was no way I could even sneak out to Charlie. I rolled into a ball and hugged my stomach, trying to keep it from rolling.

At dawn, Archie yelled, "Grub is ready." We filed out of the tepees and looked at each other. My arm was swollen and red, and all of us had headaches and a sickly green color to our faces. Archie forced us to drink a dark black tea and we all felt better.

"We must not waste time," Charlie said. "We only have a limited amount of time to practice." Charlie started chanting, and Archie sat down and rhythmically beat on a drum. Within minutes, the giant grizzly bear ambled toward us on four legs, followed by the stallion on the opposite side of the clearing, the mountain lion, the coyote, and gliding above, the large osprey.

They advanced, and slowly Lilly walked toward the stallion and laid her head on his mane. "Arion," she whispered, "I shall call you Arion." Arion whinnied and rested his head on Lilly's little shoulder.

Ollie went to the coyote and held out his hand. Amazingly, the coyote put his paw over Ollie's hand. Ollie looked at us. "I think his name should be Zephyr. That will keep with the Greek names." We all smiled at him. Entranced, Ollie stared into Zephyr's eyes. "It's like he understands me," Ollie remarked.

Bets had her arms around the mountain lion with its copper coat and soft brownish green eyes. "Electra," she said.

I looked up to the sky and the osprey flew down toward me. I grabbed my coat and wrapped it around my uninjured arm. The osprey landed gracefully on my arm. He leaned toward me and nudged my cheek with his

beak. I laughed at his antics. “You are Eros,” I told him. Everyone laughed as I again recounted his “adventure” with the lady osprey.

Charlie laughed and said, “Yes, he is truly a god of love.”

We all looked at Charlie as he faced the grizzly. “Hercules,” he said with conviction. The giant bear leaned forward and head butted Charlie in the chest and knocked him to the ground. We all laughed as Charlie stood up and dusted off his jeans. “Well,” he said, “this is going to be an adventure.” And so the Greek names stuck for all of them. We did not mean to name them after Greek mythological figures, but it seemed to work.

The rest of the day we practiced shifting spirits. It seemed easy in theory, but was incredibly hard in real life. Charlie started by telling all of us that we needed to envision ourselves in the animal body with our companion and then start to run. When running, we needed to reach out and touch them.

Charlie called out, “Protect your body. We must have one to return to.” He took off running, calling out to Hercules while making a sound like Hercules. Hercules quickly gained speed running side by side with Charlie. Charlie reached over and touched Hercules. At that moment, Charlie’s body crumpled, dropped swiftly and rolled several times before coming to rest with a sickening thud next to a tree. Hercules stopped, walked back to Charlie’s body and looked at it, and then looked at us. I walked toward him. “Charlie?” I asked softly. Hercules nodded his head up and down. I stroked his coarse hair and Hercules leaned into my hand. He swung his head toward Eros.

I walked over to Charlie’s body. He had a bruise on his head and was breathing so slowly and shallowly it was hard to determine if he was alive. Archie appeared at my side. “The body has shut down and is only performing what functions it must perform to stay alive. Go.” He pointed to Eros.

I took off running and opened my mouth to call Eros’s name. As I opened my mouth, I heard the shrill cry of the osprey come out. Eros swooped down and flew directly over my head. As I stretched out my arms to touch him, I felt myself flying upward over the tops of the trees that ringed the clearing. I turned to fly around and I saw my body lying face down in the clearing. I circled as Archie turned my body over, and I saw a

scratch down the side of my face that wasn't even bleeding. It didn't matter to me right now as Eros and I flew high and low.

I swooped downed and landed on Hercules's neck folds. We sat together watching as Lilly moved into Arion, Bets into Electra, and Ollie into Zephyr. Our bodies lay scattered around the clearing. Archie was busy moving our bodies onto their backs and checking for any major injuries. He gave us thumbs up and Hercules nodded his head to the left and we took off running or in my case, flying.

We were clumsy. I flew into a tree branch and knocked Eros to the ground. He shook it off and we flew again. I learned to let him guide, and when I needed to go in a certain direction, I willed my mind to go there and we did. I couldn't hear Eros's thoughts, but I could sense his needs and wants and he could do the same with me.

Electra and Bets came together gracefully and moved as one. Charlie and Hercules were awkward, and when Hercules stood on his hind legs wobbling, we all laughed. Except we were not really laughing, we were making animal sounds. Ollie and Zephyr were as gangly together as they were apart. Lilly and Arion seemed to be one being. They were beautiful together, as if they belonged that way.

We spent the rest of the day running and playing together. I felt Eros's presence and sensed when he was hungry. We broke to hunt, and I let Eros soar out of the sky and dip claws down over the small creek, emerging clutching a fish. He took it to his nest and hungrily tore the scales off. I smelled and tasted the raw fish. When he finished, I headed back to the others.

Hercules motioned toward our bodies with his head. It was early afternoon when Eros touched down to my body. He hopped to the ground and put his beak against my arm. Instantly, my spirit moved back and I gasped in air. I sat up breathing heavily. The cut on my cheek started to bleed. Charlie sat with his head in his hands. A knot the size of an egg was visible on his forehead. Ollie had bruises on his shoulders from falling and rolling. Bets had a huge blue bruise on her leg above her left knee, where her body hit a rock, and Lilly's arm was bruised and swollen. Archie looked at it. "Is this the arm you just got the cast off of?"

Lilly nodded as Archie shook his head. "Looks like you may get another cast. Does it hurt?"

Lilly shook her head no. “If I’m getting another cast, I’m getting camouflage color this time!”

Bets rolled her eyes, “Good grief. I hope you don’t need another one. I can hardly remember what you look like without a cast on.”

Lilly shrugged her shoulders, “They don’t hurt. And Bets, I look like me, Lilly, durr.” We all laughed, but we looked a sight.

We all started talking at once, wanting to share how excited we felt. Ollie talked first and loudest. “That was the coolest thing ever! It was even better than a video game!” he said. We all smiled at him, but we were so tired we didn’t say much more.

Archie had food ready and we all ate hungrily. I reached for the tuna fish. Charlie grabbed my hand. “You hate tuna, remember?”

“Not any more,” I laughed.

Archie gave us more of his black tea. Lilly yawned. I felt exhausted. Archie motioned us to Lilly’s tepee. “You kids climb in there with Lilly and take a nap.” We climbed over each other into the tepee and fell asleep instantly. We spent the rest of the afternoon sleeping. At dusk, we met in front of the fire.

“Tonight, “ Charlie said, “we will come together so our spirits are joined with each other. I want you to be sure about this because I’m really not sure we can ever come apart after this, or even what will happen if something happens to one of us.” He looked pointedly at me.

Bets, being ever practical, asked, “How will this help us?”

“By doing this,” Charlie explained, “we will be able to communicate with each other in the animal form.”

Charlie looked at each of us and clapped his fist to the left side of his chest. He threw back his head and growled a spine-tingling grizzly growl. Lilly made the same gesture and whinnied, a loud angry sound. Ollie followed with a yapping and howling, and then Bets with a deep gurgling growl. I finally joined in with a high-pitched shrieking sound that startled even me.

Charlie pulled out his knife and we all put our right hands out, one on top of the other. Charlie cut his right palm first. The blood dripped from his cut down all of our hands. Lily held her swollen hand up and she didn’t flinch when she felt the cut. Her blood flowed over our hands. My hand was sticky with everyone’s blood by the time it was my turn. I felt nauseous as

Charlie said, "I'm sorry, Emme," and swiftly cut my palm. I felt the pain as my blood dripped and mingled with everyone else's. We dripped our mingled blood into the fire and a smoky haze enveloped us. We breathed it in deeply.

I didn't feel different. I just felt sticky and dizzy. I called out to Eros and I ran toward him as he swung down to reach my outstretched arms. We circled the clearing as the sun dipped to the horizon.

I saw Hercules running beside Charlie. Then I heard Charlie's voice in my head. "Emme? Can you hear me?" I answered yes, only I just said it in my mind. Then I heard Ollie, Bets, and Lilly. Only instead of hearing just Lilly, I could hear Arion. We all could.

When we got back to our bodies, we were freaked out by being able to hear Arion. Charlie and Archie talked quietly about it with their heads together. We didn't understand why we heard both Lilly and Arion. Archie said it was because the link between them was so strong. Lilly didn't care. She loved that Arion knew her thoughts and she knew Arion's. I was glad that Eros and I were not that close.

We headed to bed, once again exhausted beyond belief. There was no way Charlie and I were ever going to get together if we couldn't get enough sleep! Maybe Archie had planned this to keep us away from each other. Or maybe I was just so exhausted I couldn't think clearly. Either way, I fell asleep before my body was even flat on the pallet. The next morning we walked to the Jimmy, loaded up and headed home. We talked of how we would explain our unusual injuries and decided to say that we had been hiking and fell when a mud-soaked path broke off on the side of a hill. As we were driving off, we saw Arion following. After several miles, Lilly couldn't stand it and she rode Arion home.

When we got to my house, we all talked about what to do with Arion. We were afraid to let Lilly's family be around him, but Lilly said her father never went to their stables anymore and Arion would be safe there.

After that day, Lilly stayed at her house. We thought it was to protect Arion and for Arion to protect her. When we went to the clearing to practice after that, Lilly always met us there bareback on Arion. Arion had no halter, bridle or saddle. It was just Arion and tiny Lilly perched on his back, smiling and waving at us.

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WHENEVER WE COULD, we practiced communicating with each other and learned to filter out the extra thoughts. We worked to protect our bodies as we merged. Charlie's warning was always in our thoughts: "Protect your body."

We had designated practice times. Archie would meet us in the clearing. We spent time learning how to quickly merge. The faster we were going when we merged, the worse the injuries were to our body. Sprinting seemed to be the best way for us to merge. I started the first practice, sprinting and calling Eros. As Eros circled above me, I slowed to a jog. When I thought he was close enough, I lifted my arms to the sky and merged. The last thing I felt was my body crumble to the ground. The two of us flew off. Archie ran over to my body and gave us a thumbs up. We had merged without hurting my body.

The others followed. Charlie was next, sprinting as Hercules lumbered out of the tree line and headed in his direction. As Hercules gained speed, Charlie slowed down to a jog and reached over to Hercules. Charlie's strong body rolled over twice and lay with his face up. Archie walked over and gave us another thumbs up.

Lilly never hurt her body after the first merge. She and Arion were so much in tune that every movement was as if they were one. Now Ollie, that was another story. He was clumsy, sprinting and slowing with no rhyme or reason. Zephyr was confused and kept coming to a complete stop and staring at Ollie like he was stupid. It took days of practice before Ollie could even reasonably safely merge with Zephyr. Finally one day it happened and Ollie managed to merge without hurting his poor bruised body. Bets caught on quickly, and within a couple of tries she was able to leave her body face up and uninjured.

Once we had mastered that task, Archie started working with us on offensive maneuvers. Archie had a suit that you wore when you were training attack dogs. It was padded on the legs, arms and chest, and made Archie look huge. Archie would get his tomahawk, gun, bow and arrows,

and knife and stand in the middle of the clearing. He would call one of us out.

I was the first to go. Eros and I flew overhead, trying to find an opening to attack. When we swooped down to attack, Archie threw his tomahawk at us! It sailed through the air and Eros and I banked sharply to the left and the tomahawk whizzed by us. I could feel Eros's heart beating hard and fast. I was pissed! How dare Archie try to kill us!

Eros and I flew back up and I decided to try a side approach. This time Archie had time to get his bow and arrows out. Eros and I heard the zing of the bowstring. In a panic, we flew hard straight up. The arrow barely missed Eros's tail feathers.

Now I was really pissed. I decided to let Eros take the lead. He flew straight down and at the last possible minute banked hard to the left, then to the right. Archie had his knife but we were too close and flying too fast. Eros and I reached out feet first and grabbed Archie's arm with his talons. As we latched on, Eros flapped hard and twisted. We released Eros's talons as Archie fell hard to the ground. Eros and I flew off to the tree top as Archie brushed himself off, smiled and gave us a thumbs up.

Lilly and Arion were next. They went for a direct attack. Arion thundered full force towards Archie. Archie reached for his gun and fired off a shot towards Arion. Arion twisted sharply to the right, stumbled and almost went down. Arion's flanks were wet with sweat. He came from an angle this time as Archie sailed an arrow at his flank. Arion skidded to a stop and the arrow flew by his head.

Arion was now only a few feet from Archie and he surged, jumping forward and knocking Archie to the ground with his front feet. Arion turned around and galloped off with his tail high. Archie jumped up and gave Arion a thumbs up.

Ollie and Zephyr were nervously pacing as Archie motioned for them to attack. Zephyr was hesitant, and Archie fired his rifle straight at them! Zephyr panicked and ran off in the tree line. Archie gave chase, firing his gun in Zephyr's direction. Zephyr was running, flat out scared and panicking.

Up to now all of us had been quiet, letting the others concentrate while they were attacking. Now I started talking to Ollie. "Ollie! Shit! Get your

head together. Come on, do something and quit running scared before Archie shoots Zephyr in the ass.”

I could hear Lilly, “Outflank him Ollie, get around Archie on his right.” Zephyr veered to the right and came out behind Archie and knocked him down from behind.

Archie rolled around a couple of times and stood up. He called out to Ollie, “Don’t you ever run again. You make the decision to fight and you stand your ground and fight. You hear me Ollie?” Zephyr walked out of the trees with his head down. “That goes for all of you as well. You will never get a second chance to defeat evil. Never show weakness.” We were all quiet.

Bets and Electra stood at the edge of the clearing. Archie motioned to them. Electra bounded forward. As Archie sent an arrow towards Electra, she dropped to the ground and crawled forward, hidden in the tall prairie grass. Archie fired several shots into the grass and we all held our breath. The wind was moving the grass and we weren’t sure if he hit Electra or not.

Suddenly Electra pounced from only five feet away and sailed through the air. She knocked Archie several feet through the air, and it took him a few minutes to get up. We patiently waited. Archie got up and gave Electra a thumbs up.

Finally it was just Charlie and Hercules. Hercules was impatient, rearing up and bellowing. Archie motioned them forward. Hercules dropped to all fours as Archie fired his shotgun at him. One shot grazed Hercules’s ear and he roared with rage. Within seconds, he had run the distance to Archie, and with one swipe of his huge paw he knocked Archie through the air. As Archie fell down, Hercules was after him, roaring with his teeth bared.

I started to panic. “CHARLIE!” I screamed. “STOP.”

I heard Bets and Lilly yelling as well. But Hercules continued on. We were screaming at Charlie, and I saw Archie with his tomahawk and knife preparing to defend himself. I was panicked that we would lose Charlie or Archie. Electra jumped over Archie’s head and crouched down, growling at Hercules. Zephyr joined in, running to get next to Electra and growling, crouched down low. I saw Arion headed to the left of Hercules, and I distracted Hercules by circling overhead and shrieking. My diversion

worked, as Arion backed close to Hercules and delivered a hoof kick straight to his head. Hercules dropped to the ground.

Suddenly we heard Charlie. “What happened? What happened?”

I said sarcastically, “You tried to kill Archie and all of us.”

“I would never do that,” Charlie said.

“Well, you did,” Ollie interjected.

Archie motioned us toward our bodies. As we returned to our bodies, Hercules, Zephyr and Electra took off into the woods and Eros flew to his nest.

We went to Archie. Charlie was looking at the ground. Archie looked at him. “Tell me what happened with Hercules.”

Charlie looked at us. “I’m not sure. I think I might have had a seizure and I lost control of Hercules. It didn’t feel like a seizure, but something happened to make me lose Hercules.”

Archie looked upset. “I hope you kids remember what can happen if you lose focus. These are wild animals, and without you they will be what they always are. You must be vigilant.” We nodded our heads.

The next lesson was on teamwork. We learned how to attack, practicing once again with Archie. This time Archie put football tackling forms on the field and lined them up around him in a circle. Once we all merged, we discussed with each other what to do in order to bring down all the football forms that represented people and Archie as well. If the forms represented people, then they would be able to shoot us or hurt us if we hit them individually.

We decided to get Hercules in the middle, as he could take stabbing and gunshot wounds without being hurt as bad. My job was to draw the gunfire. Eros and I flew up and then over the area. Archie fired off several shots as Eros and I dodged. The others were running in a V formation with Hercules in the lead. They hit the first tackling forms and knocked down half of them. Then they divided and Hercules took out three more while Electra and Zephyr finished off the rest. Arion hit Archie in the chest as they jumped the forms and knocked him down. Within moments the pretend battle was over. Archie smiled and waved at us.

We spent many hours and days practicing everything Archie could think of. Archie cut us no slack, and sometimes he hurt one of us, but it was never serious and we never made the same mistake twice.

We developed an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each animal. We protected the others' weaknesses and used their strengths to our advantage. Eros was extremely vulnerable in the air, but when he flew low nestled between the others he had the ultimate advantage. Eros could tear a fake human head to pieces with his talons. Hercules could tear anything apart with his claws or his teeth. Electra could drop out of a tree silently and suffocate someone with her teeth on their neck without rustling a leaf. Zephyr could bring down a runner with his teeth and crush their windpipe. Arion was lethal with his hooves. One strong kick and he could fracture a skull. We were trained to be killers, but none of us thought we would ever really need to kill someone. We thought maybe just the machayiwiiw and that would be it.

When we were not in our spirit form, I couldn't hear the others. We worked out a code to talk with each other when one of us was in the host body and the other was in human form. Lilly's code was our two front paws, feet, or hooves clasped together like we were holding a bouquet. Ollie's was holding one paw, foot, or hoof up like someone was tall over our head. Charlie was two front paws, feet, or hooves held apart like showing someone was big. Bets was the motion like the talons or claws were out in both front appendages. Arion just made a pawing motion. I was the flying motion with the front arms making a swooping motion. "Run" was simply moving the arms forward quickly fast, and "attack" was slapping right arm across left side of the chest. "Help" was touching the head with one of the front arms or feet. We practiced signaling each other when we were in our different forms.

Because we could hear each other when we were one with our hosts, I learned to guard my thoughts when we were all together. I never let my mind wander to Charlie. What we had couldn't be shared with the others. It was too personal even for our best friends.

One day, Charlie and I drove the Jimmy down to the Yellowstone River, and lying on the roof, we watched the sunset over the river. We walked to the water and tossed the smooth stones into the cold water. Charlie picked up a rock and handed it to me. "It's an agate inside," he said.

"Really?" I asked. "It looks like a plain old rock to me."

Charlie laid the rock down, and taking a heavy rock, he dropped it forcefully on the stone. The stone broke into two pieces and the inside was

a beautiful whirl of colors. Starting from the outside of the rock, the layers were gray, then purple, and green, and brown, and gold. Each layer made a thin irregular circle until the middle of the rock, where it was almost white.

“It’s pretty, Em, but it isn’t very strong. You can break it with a heavy object,” Charlie said.

“It is beautiful,” I told Charlie.

“Just like you, Em,” Charlie said. “Breathtakingly beautiful and strong, but breakable.”

We kissed until we were out of breath. We lay back down on the roof of the Jimmy and we talked about our future. “When the time comes, Em,” Charlie asked, “would you marry me?”

“Well, of course,” I answered.

“I’ll never be able to give you all the fancy things in life,” Charlie said.

“I don’t care as long as I have you,” I told him.

Charlie whooped and yelled in the warm night, “I love you, Emmeline Belrose!” I smiled at him. I loved him so much that the idea of spending even a few hours away from him made me feel sick to my stomach. I took half of the agate home and gave the other half to Charlie to keep at his house. That night, I stared dreamily into the agate tracing its beautiful colors with my finger.



WHEN I WAS NOT WITH MY FRIENDS, I kept busy helping Dad on the ranch. The warm summer days were filled from sunup to sundown. In the early morning hours, I got up with Dad, and we headed out to cut the alfalfa grass while the dew was still on it. The machinery ran constantly. When we finished swathing, it was time to bale and then to stack the bales. Then we irrigated the alfalfa again. We got three cuttings of alfalfa in the summer months.

When we were out working in the field in the afternoon, Dad let me off on the end of the windrow to get lemonade. I sprinted to the house, holding onto my hat. Mom had a glass jar full of ice and lemonade and two red plastic cups. I grabbed them and sprinted back to the field and waved at Dad. He caught sight of me and stood up from the tractor seat, took off his hat and waved it at me. The sun was behind him and it caught his blond hair. His teeth were white against his tanned face. I waved back. He picked up speed, then slowed down when he got close to me. I grabbed hold of the bar and swung myself onto the tractor. I poured the lemonade into the cups, and we drank every bit of the lemonade as Dad drove from one end of the field to another. We talked about everything and nothing. Mainly we talked about ranching and livestock.

Lilly's birthday was the next day, August the first. She had asked us to spend the weekend at the clearing to celebrate with her. Lilly would be seventeen. She was the first of us to turn seventeen, the old lady of our group.

The last day of July, we were going to Mr. Hines's ranch to help Wayne set up the statue of Mr. Hines and his wife Betty. I hadn't seen the statue in a month. Last time I saw it, the horses were almost done but the human parts of it weren't on it.

I hopped in the Jimmy and drove to Bets's house. I parked close to the shop and walked in the open door. Wayne was hammering nails in the boards that formed the support piece of the statue. I walked around the front of the statue. Oscar and Betty Hines looked down on me. They were smiling. Oscar was looking at Betty, and they were close enough that Oscar

was reaching out to her. He was holding a bronze lily in his right hand and the reins in his left hand. Betty was smiling at him. Cinnamon, Betty's horse, had her head thrown back and her eyes were soft and gentle. Trigger, Oscar's horse, was in a prancing gait, and his head was turned into the wind with his mane flying around him. Oscar's hat was tilted back and his shirt collar was open. On Betty's left shoulder was a tiny iridescent copper butterfly. I felt sad looking at it.

Wayne looked up at me. "Hey, Em. Are you okay?"

I smiled. "Yah, it's beautiful."

Wayne stood back and looked at the statue. "It turned out better than I even imagined."

I looked at the tiny butterfly. "What's with the butterfly?"

Wayne looked at the statue. "I'm not sure, but it has something to do with Lilly." I remembered the picture frame with the same butterfly. The picture of Betty with her lily, clutching Oscar from behind on the horse. Lilly must have given Oscar that frame and picture.

Bets and Lilly walked in. "Hi, everyone," Lilly called out. She walked to the statue and whistled. "Wow," she said, "it looks just like Oscar." Her eyes filled with tears and she looked away.

I heard Charlie's old truck in the yard and then Charlie and Ollie walking on the gravel path to the shop. I looked toward the door and the sun blinded me as Charlie walked in. I wanted to run to him and hold him. I wanted to be alone with him. Charlie walked toward me and grabbed my hand. I squeezed his hand. Ollie walked around the statue. "Amazing," he said.

Charlie looked at me and smiled. Lilly turned around and said, "You two look like the statue. Probably because you are in love just like Oscar Hines and his wife." It was dead silent in the shop. I looked at Lilly horrified at what she had said.

Then Ollie laughed. "Well, glad we got that straightened out."

Now I know why I felt sad looking at the statue. They were so happy and they lived to grow old together. I would not be growing old with Charlie. Our love was only for right now. We had no future. Charlie squeezed my hand and I sighed. The scar on my palm seemed to throb with my heartbeat.

We were all quiet on the drive to the Hines ranch. Even Wayne noticed. “Geez, you girls are so quiet.” I turned around to watch Charlie and Ollie as they held the statue on the trailer.

As we turned down the driveway, I saw a tiny speck moving out among the metal herd. It was Oscar Hines. By the time we got to the house, he was walking up to greet us. Lilly jumped out of the truck and Mr. Hines grabbed her and hugged her tight. Lilly had been to see him every day all summer. He gave her his car so she could drive back and forth. She kept the car at our house. She didn’t want her dad to know anything about Oscar Hines.

“We have it,” she whispered to him. He took her tiny hand and they walked to the trailer. Charlie took off the old quilts, and Oscar Hines stared at Oscar and Betty Hines. Wayne called out to us, “Bets, Em, Ollie, Charlie, come with me and let’s get the Mule out of the shed for Mr. Hines.”

As we walked away, I looked back and saw Mr. Hines down on one knee with his tears falling on the ground. Lilly had her hand on his shoulder. Charlie grabbed my hand and squeezed it. I squeezed his hand back.

By the time we got back with the Mule, Mr. Hines was standing up, and he and Lilly were discussing where it would go. Lilly took his hand and led him to a small hill. From the hill, the metal herd was visible and a huge cottonwood tree stood nearby. Mr. Hines smiled at Lilly. “Excellent choice, my child,” he said. Lilly smiled back at him.

It took several hours to get the statue moved and mounted on the hilltop. Wayne would have to come back out and build a base for it, but it would be all right for a while. As we walked back, Lilly was talking to Mr. Hines. “I will be gone this weekend, but I will back Monday for lunch. Remember, no mustard, only mayo on my sandwich.”

Mr. Hines smiled at her. “Of course.” He waved us off.

Lilly seemed hesitant to leave. Finally Mr. Hines shooed her off. “Go with your friends and have fun. I’ll have your present ready when you get back. Happy Birthday!”

Lilly hugged him tight. As we drove off, she yelled back, “I love you!”

Oscar Hines waved back. “I love you too, my sweet child.”

The next morning, we loaded the horses up in the trailer to take them to the Flying A. Lilly would meet us there. She headed cross-country on Arion. We drove to Charlie’s and unloaded Bolt, Gus, and Princess. We

galloped off toward the tepees and the clearing. Lilly was already there, standing in the opening of her tepee. "I'm checking for snakes," she yelled at us. I shivered. That was one of my biggest fears, bedding down with a snake. "Check mine too," I yelled back.

We unloaded and checked the rest of the tepees. We mounted back up and rode to the creek. We were blessed with a beautiful day to celebrate Lilly's birthday. The sun was warm and the breeze was cool. The creek water was refreshing. We spent all day out there laughing and swimming. In the late afternoon, we climbed on the bank and dozed in the sun.

When we got back to the tepees, Archie was there and he had cooked supper. We ate hungrily, and after supper, Archie brought out a huge chocolate cake with chocolate icing for Lilly. She blew out the seventeen candles. Her eyes were closed as she made a wish.

I took a picture of her blowing out the candles. When I looked at the picture on my camera, I saw a tiny yellow iridescent butterfly perched on her shoulder. I looked back at her again. There was no yellow butterfly. I took another picture and the yellow butterfly was there again when I looked at the picture.

I walked over to Lilly and touched her shoulder. There was no butterfly. She looked up. "What's up?" she asked. I showed her the picture on the camera and she gasped when she saw the butterfly. She screamed, "Oscar!"

Lilly ran toward the horses, spooking them. Arion raced toward her as fast as he could. She was screaming "Arion," and Arion was galloping and whinnying with his tail held high. Arion barely slowed down and Lilly threw herself on his back. They thundered past us in a blast of dust. Lilly had her head down and was clutching tightly onto Arion's mane.

Charlie yelled, "Get to Eros, Electra, and Zephyr." I called out to Eros and ran toward the tree line. I saw Eros flying out of the trees toward me. I lifted up my arms as I ran, and I touched Eros as he swooped down. I saw the others as they were transitioning. I started talking in my mind, "I'm heading to the Hines ranch."

I picked up speed and flew hard with Eros toward the ranch. Eros and I passed Lilly and Arion as they crested the hill by the statue. We flew overhead as Lilly jumped off of Arion and ran into the house. I heard her screaming "Oscar, Oscar, Oscar."

Eros and I circled around and flew out over the metal herd. I flew by the statue on the hill and I saw Oscar lying face down. I flew back to Lilly. She was standing in the yard screaming Oscar's name. I flew low and motioned with Eros's head to follow. She jumped on Arion and they ran after me. I led her to Oscar. Lilly jumped off Arion and ran to him. I flew with Eros to the ground and hopped next to them.

Oscar was lying face down in front of the statue. A single white lily was on the ground. Lilly rolled him over. His face was a bluish color and his eyes were closed. Lilly placed her fingers on his neck and then laid her head on his chest. Oscar Hines was dead.

I hopped over and spread Eros's wing over her arm. She looked at us with tears running down her face. "He's gone," she told me. I nodded, and she stroked Eros's downy feathers. Within seconds, Electra was next to us and Lilly buried her face in Electra's soft fur, sobbing uncontrollably. Zephyr stood next to Electra with his head down. Hercules was panting as he crested the hill. Lilly saw him and ran for him. Hercules lay down and Lilly curled herself up next to him, wrapping her arms around his neck and whispering to him.

They stayed that way until Archie got there in the pickup truck. Archie walked over and picked up Lilly and carried her to the pickup. He spoke to Arion, and Arion galloped off across the hill. He looked at us and at Oscar Hines's body.

"Head home, kids, while I call the sheriff's office," he told us.

We took off. I flew fast and hard and got to the clearing first. I touched my body. I gasped in air and took off running for Gus. I jumped on and rode him bareback to the ranch house. I got in the Jimmy and as I pulled away I saw the others riding up and running toward Ollie's car. I drove as fast as I could to the Hines ranch.

Ollie's Mustang got to the Hines ranch at about the same time I did. The sheriff cars were in the driveway, and an ambulance with its lights flashing was pulling out on the road. I ran up to Archie and Lilly. Archie was telling the sheriff's deputies how he and Lilly found Mr. Hines. Lilly said nothing and her head was down. I pressed up next to her and grabbed her hand.

The deputy sheriff was asking Archie if he knew the phone number of the Hines children. Archie shook his head. "No, but Zach Arrington is his

lawyer. I can get him.” Archie moved away a little and took out his cell phone, and I heard him talking. Archie hung up and walked back over. “Zach said that Oscar left him power of attorney, and he has a will and request for burial and funeral services that Zach will be taking care of.”

“Okay then,” the deputy said.

Archie shut the house up, and he and Lilly drove back to the ranch. The rest of us followed. When we got to Charlie’s house, Archie asked us to come in. “Zach Arrington said there is nothing we can do at this point,” he told us. “He will make the arrangements as Oscar wanted and let us know when they will be. Lilly, he is sending his partner to visit with you tomorrow. They need some papers signed and to talk to you about what your plans are.” We were all quiet.

Archie softly asked, “Lilly, where would you like to sleep tonight?”

“In Charlie’s tepee with all of us,” she answered. We got back on the horses and rode out to the clearing.

We all crowded in Charlie’s tepee like we did when we were young. Our pallets were almost on top of each other. We lay so close together, our arms touched each other. We lay there quietly, comfortable in the silence. Before long, Lilly’s small hand found my arm and she sighed and fell asleep. Sleep eluded the rest of us.

At daybreak, we packed up and rode back. We rode past the uneaten birthday cake. Archie said he would clean it up. We loaded the horses in the trailer and drove back to my house. Lilly would meet us there with Arion.

When I walked in the house, my dad looked up, surprised. “What are you doing back so soon?” I ran to him and buried my head in his chest.

“Oscar Hines died.”

“Oh no,” my dad whispered. “Where is Lilly?”

“She is on her way here with Arion,” I told him.

By the time Lily got back to our house, James Littleton, Zach Arrington’s partner, had called and asked to meet with Lilly. She asked to meet him later that afternoon.

Archie called the house and talked to my dad. I heard Dad say, “That soon? Sure that will work. I will call Wayne and Melvin to get it set up with the kids.” Dad turned to Lilly and me.

“The service is tomorrow at dusk at the Hines ranch. Mr. Hines will be buried under the statue. They will move Betty Hines’s remains to lie next to

him under the statue. He asked for only a gravesite service with you kids, us, the Arringtons, the Rosses, the Graves and the Hunts. He asked us to bring your grandfather, Em. I have no idea why.”

I looked at Dad. “He had his reasons. Maybe if you call Grandpa Ed he can be sober by then.”

Dad shook his head. “Don’t get your hopes up, Em.”

Ben, sitting quietly at the table with Lilly, said, “I don’t want him there.”

I looked at Ben. “He deserves to be there, Ben. It’s not for us to decide.”

Dad smiled at me “I’m proud of you, Em.” I wasn’t doing it for Grandpa Ed. I was doing it for Mr. Hines.

Lilly went to my bedroom. Ben jumped up to go with her. I shook my head at him. “Let her have some time to herself.” Ben scowled, but he sat back down.

We left Lilly alone in my room until the lawyer came. When I heard the car come down the driveway, I walked to my room and tapped on the door. “Lilly, he’s here.”

She opened the door. Her eyes were red. “Okay, I’m ready. Would your family mind going outside so I can talk to him in private?”

I nodded. “Sure, just come get us when you are done.” I gathered up Mom, Dad, and Ben. We decided to saddle the horses and go for a ride in the hills behind the house.

James Littleton got out of his car and walked up the sidewalk to our small house. He was about as tall as he was round, and he had a friendly smile. Lilly stood in the doorway. I saw her open the door and shake his hand. She closed the door as we rode off.

When we got back, Lilly was sitting on the step in front of the house. On the ground around her were stacks of papers. She had her face buried in our dog Mitzi’s neck and Mitzi was sitting perfectly still. Dad waved us off to the barn. I stayed mounted on Gus and watched him.

Dad walked toward Lilly and bent down and picked up the papers. “Lilly,” he said, “Can I help?”

Lilly looked up. “Only if you can bring him back.” Dad sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. I turned Gus around and we went to the barn.

Lilly and Arion spent the night with us that night. Her dad called and wanted her home, but I heard Lilly lie to him and tell him Ben was sick and wanted her to stay with him. I could hear his angry voice through the phone. I pretended I didn't hear the conversation.

The next afternoon, my family and I put on our nice church clothes and we got in the Tahoe to drive to the Hines ranch. Lilly met us there wearing one of her mother's dresses. It was pastel pink with an off-white lace collar. It fit her perfectly. She stepped away from Mr. Hines's car and walked toward us. Ben ran forward to hold her hand.

Everyone else was there, including Grandpa Ed. He rode out with the Catholic priest. I looked carefully at him. He appeared to be sober. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The priest led us to the hill. The statue had been moved to the right and there was a deep hole with a plain pine box suspended over the hole. Folding chairs were set up around the casket. Dad led Lilly to the closest one to the pine box. The air smelled like dirt.

There were two pictures on the casket. The first one was the picture that Lilly gave Mr. Hines of him and Betty and the butterfly.

The second one was of four young men in military uniforms. Their arms were around each other and they were smiling. They had guns slung over their shoulders and they were stripped down to their t-shirts and pants. I recognized some of them. I quickly found Mr. Hines, tall and lanky. Archie with his hair cut short, stocky with powerful arms and chest. The other two I didn't recognize. I knew one was Grandpa Ed. Which one was it? The skinny, tall, young kid with the cowlick, close cut hair, and quick dark eyes? Or the other kid, standing straight with a cigarette dangling in his long fingers, and a look of wisdom on his face?

Archie walked up. "Your grandfather," he said, and pointed to the young kid with a cowlick. "Tom Arrington," he said, and pointed to the other with the wise face and dangling cigarette.

"What happened with the four of you?" I asked Archie.

Archie looked at me. "We vowed to never discuss it and none of us ever will."

The priest raised his arms, and we quieted down. He opened with a prayer and then read the 21st Psalm. He talked of Oscar's love for life and for Betty, and how they were together again. The service was short, and

when he finished talking, Lilly stood up and placed a single white lily on the pine box. Everyone was there that Mr. Hines wanted here except for Zach Arrington. None of his children were there. I wondered how long it would be before they realized he was gone.

Lilly led us to the house and asked us to divide the food up and take it home. We cleaned out the refrigerator and freezer. My mom and I went downstairs and cleaned out the canned goods in the basement.

When we got back upstairs, Lilly asked to speak to all of us. She clapped her hand above her elbow and cleared her throat. "Yesterday I met with the attorney about what Oscar Hines wanted done with his land and money. He left everything he had to me in trust with the condition that the land be converted to a preserve when I am gone. I cannot live here by myself and I can't begin to run a profitable ranch. I have decided that I will convert the ranch to a preserve now. I will maintain directorship of the preserve. I plan to build a home and hire a caretaker to live out here and take care of things. The original ranch house will be left as it is right now. I need it to be here for me if I ever need it. The money will remain in the trust. I didn't need it before, and I don't need it now. There will be no hunting, fishing or trespassing on the preserve. Only those of you in this room will be allowed to freely come and go on the Hines Preserve."

Lilly looked at me. "Emme, if something happens to me, I have made arrangements for you and your descendants to step up as the director and protect the preserve."

I nodded my head. "I will protect it."

Lilly looked around the room. "I wanted all of you to know what Oscar Hines wanted and what I want."

"There are a few extra things that Oscar wanted to give some of you." Lilly continued. "Mr. Wayne, Oscar left you fifty thousand dollars to expand your shop and add central heat and air."

Wayne shook his head. "I'll be damned."

Lilly walked over to Grandpa Ed and handed him a box. "Oscar said this would finally right a wrong." Grandpa Ed opened the box and inside was a Purple Heart medal. Grandpa Ed cradled it in his hands and walked out of the room.

Lilly went to Archie and handed him a big box. Archie opened it up and inside was an obviously old chieftain headdress. Archie had tears in his

eyes. Lilly said, “Oscar looked for it for years and finally found it last month. It is your great-great-great-great-grandfather’s headdress, the one you remember from your childhood.” Archie lifted it out of the box and placed it on his head. Charlie walked up and ran his hand across the feathers.

Lilly came to me and handed me an envelope. I looked inside and it was empty. I looked at Lilly. “What is it supposed to be?”

Lilly smiled at me. “Hope. One day a letter from Oscar will come to you and you will finally know the story of your grandfather.”

“When?” I asked.

“In due time,” Lilly answered.

There were other small gifts: a watch to the priest, a generous gift to the church for a chapel at the new assisted living facility in town, silver spurs to Charlie, and a gold belt buckle to Ollie, and to Bets, Betty Hines’s greenhouse.

We left after that. Lilly walked through the house and locked everything up. We loaded up the food into our vehicles. Lilly took nothing. “I need to get home to take care of Arion,” she whispered to me. “Can I leave the car permanently at your house? I don’t want my dad to know what I have inherited from Mr. Hines.”

“Sure,” I murmured.

The week flew by. Lilly met with James Littleton several more times. The foundation was laid on the Hines preserve for a caretaker’s house. A huge twelve-foot fence was started around the preserve. The only place it would not be put up is around the land that connected the Arrington ranch to the Hines preserve. Betty Hines’s remains were moved to the hill next to Oscar, and the statue was placed on top of their graves. Every day, a single white lily was placed in front of the statue. James Littleton hired a caretaker and his family to take care of the preserve. Great care was taken to make sure that no one besides us knew that Oscar Hines left all his money and land to Lilly.

As the summer passed, we, the Spirit Warriors, grew stronger. Archie set up one last obstacle for us to practice before the snow set in. He had hidden in the trees dummy models that he could remotely control to shoot at us. They were set up around the clearing. We would have to find them and destroy the dummy shooters before any of us were injured.

Archie fired a gunshot in the air and we spread out. I told the others, "I'll fly around and see where they are." As I flew out of the cover of the trees, gunshots rang out on all sides of Eros. We quickly became disoriented and flew back to the others. "Well," I said, "that didn't work."

Ollie raised his snout to the wind. "I can smell the heat and gunshot residue."

Electra and Hercules did the same. "Me too," they both said.

We decided to break up and each of them would take out a shooter. I would wait until they had destroyed some of the dummy shooters, then Eros and I would find the other shooters and tell them where they were.

It only took a few minutes for Hercules, Zephyr and Electra to bring down the first dummy shooters. Eros and I headed to the sky and directed Arion to the next set of shooters. We systematically eliminated all the shooters including the one 20 feet up in a tree. Electra got that one. We tore the dummy shooters to pieces. That was actually the fun part. Eros and I blinded the dummies with a talon attack and left the others to tear them to pieces. We were confident when we went back to Archie.

Archie quickly put us in our places after we merged back to our bodies. "It is easy to destroy a non-thinking object. The real challenge is to do that with real people. These people will have no qualms about eliminating you. They have no redeeming qualities and they will show you no mercy, nor will you show them any." Archie had a way of being a buzzkill. When you thought you were great, he reminded you that you could just as easily have been bear poop.

We walked back to the fire that Archie had started in front of the tepees and drank hot chocolate. We could see our breath as we talked. Lilly looked worried. "What's up?" I asked her.

"I was thinking. How will we find the machayiwiv?" Lilly asked.

Charlie spoke, "He will find us."

Ollie asked, "But what is he? An animal, a person, a spook like Emme's warrior?" Ollie looked at me and laughed.

"Shut up, Ollie," I told him.

Charlie looked thoughtful, "He could be either an animal or a person, male or female. He has been all of them at some point. He has to have a host--without them, he is forced back to the spirit world. He will do everything he can to keep his host as long as he can."

Bets said, "I can't think of anyone I know evil enough to be the machayiw. He must be in an animal."

Charlie shook his head, "He only keeps animal forms for short times, only until he can get to a human form. Animal forms don't allow him to manipulate others to help him. He could be anywhere, and he is probably not in someone near us. I suspect he will be a stranger."

Lilly furrowed her brow. "I wish we knew where he was."

I walked over next to her and sat down, "We will, Lilly, we will know when the time comes."

Archie said we were not yet ready to be warriors, but winter loomed and Hercules would be hibernating, and Eros would be migrating to South America. Archie told us to spend time with our hosts, our animal partners, and so we did.

I bought a nice set of binoculars to watch Eros and a leather guard for my arm and shoulder for him to land on. I climbed up the closest tree and sat for hours and watched him flying and interacting with his mate and his two hatchlings. I watched Dino and Tino learn to fly and leave the nest. Eros tolerated my presence. His mate did not, and I was careful with her -- she tried to knock me out of the tree more than once! Eros liked to fly to me and perch on my shoulder and play with my jewelry. He playfully flipped my earrings up and down. We laughed at his antics and remarked if he were a human, he would be like Ollie.

Electra had a litter of three kittens and Bets spent time in the lair playing with the kittens. Electra did not allow any of the rest of us to touch them, but she let us watch them play.

Ollie smelled like a coyote so much that we asked him to spend time with Zephyr somewhere other than Zephyr's lair. Of course Ollie thought it was funny. "I smell like manhood," he boasted.

"Hardly," Bets said. "You smell worse than a fart, if that is possible."

Charlie was quiet about Hercules, and even when asked, he told us essentially nothing and changed the conversation. We knew that Hercules was a loner and unpredictable; perhaps there was just nothing to tell. But I felt there was something Charlie was hiding from me.

Still, we developed a closeness with our hosts and their families. Eros started following me just like Gus did. One day I looked down and saw the

shadow of Eros that looked like the letter M, and for a moment I forgot who I was. Am I Emme, or am I Eros? I thought.

Charlie said you could get trapped in your host and lose your spirit if you lost your human body. He said that the longer you were trapped in the host body, the more of your spirit you lost, until nothing remained of your spirit. It would take the death of the host to free the trapped spirit and allow it to rise to the spirit world. In the meantime our spirits would walk in the shadow of the spirit world, tortured. I guess that would be a form of hell. I said a prayer for all of us that we would not lose our spirits.

As fall fast approached, we pulled the canvas off the tepees and prepared for the winter. School was starting again and we all felt strange to be starting back with our friends at school. I didn't feel like the same person I was last May, and all of us seemed to be more serious. The thought of my death hung over us, and I had heard Lilly's thoughts; I knew she worried for me. Sometimes when her guard was down, I heard her communicating about it with Arion.



ONE DAY LILLY RECEIVED A CALL from James Littleton. Oscar Hines's children finally figured out that he was dead. They told Mr. Littleton that they would be suing to claim "their rightful inheritance." Mr. Littleton was calling to let Lilly know that he would eventually be forced to reveal that she had inherited everything. The official lawsuit would be coming in the next week or so. Lilly was distressed. "What if the judge gives them everything?" Lilly worried.

"Mr. Hines did not want them to have it." Mr. Littleton assured her that there is no loophole in the paperwork that they filed for Oscar Hines.

When the papers arrived, Mr. Littleton called Lilly to his office. I drove her there. We opened the glass door. Mr. Littleton met us at the door. "Lilly, hello, come on back to the conference room." We walked down the hallway.

Mr. Littleton shut the door behind us. We sat down and he opened up a thick file. "Well, here is what they are trying to do. They are alleging that Oscar Hines was senile and not in his right mind when he left everything to you. They are also alleging that you exploited his mental state and coerced him into leaving you everything."

I butted in, "We all know Lilly would never do that."

Mr. Littleton looked at me. "It really doesn't matter. They can say whatever they want to say, but finding evidence to support it will be hard." He looked at Lilly, "Don't worry. You have the best lawyers, and this will be over before you know it." He smiled.

But Lilly did worry about it. She couldn't help herself. She worried that somehow they would manage to convince the judge that Oscar wasn't in his right mind. I told her not to worry, but Lilly said, "I promised him I would do what he wanted done. I always keep my promises."

Lilly and Bets went to cheerleading camp the week before school started. Charlie was at football camp and Ollie was at a chess competition. I missed them, after being together pretty much every day. Charlie and I grew closer, but in some ways farther apart too. It seemed that by guarding ourselves when our spirits were out, it was becoming harder to open up when we were together. I was crazy head-over-heels in love with him. I had

one of his shirts that he gave me the weekend we became Spirit Warriors. At night, I wrapped it around my pillow and breathed deeply to take in his scent. Every night in my sleep, he rescued me from the underwater car. I couldn't imagine life without him.

When school started, the five of us were walking down the hall as we normally did. Lilly and Bets were wearing their cheerleading t-shirts, jeans and matching hair ribbons. The t-shirts were baby blue and had their names spelled out in silver in cursive letters. Lilly had her hair pulled back and the blue and silver bow tied in her ponytail. Bets had her hair pulled in a bun on the top of her head with the bow stuck in front. On anyone else it would have looked ridiculous, but Bets could pull off most anything.

People called out to Charlie. He was wearing his silver football jersey and the thin fabric clung to his muscles. Rumor had it he would be the starting quarterback this year. I guess you could say we were popular, but not in the traditional way. We were misfit popular. We were not the pretty or rich ones, but we were good at sports and school--and we had each other, which made us untouchable.

As Charlie stopped at the water fountain, we joked and laughed. We did not show any personal stuff. That was not our style. Let people think what they wanted. Our relationship was private.

As I leaned against the classroom door, a male voice said, "Pardon me. I think my next class is in this room." I turned around and faced a muscular guy who was a couple of inches taller than me. He stuck out his hand. "G'day, I'm Lachlan Arrington, but I go by Jackson or Jack." He had a cute Australian accent, and I smiled in spite of myself.

Charlie reached around me. "Hi, I'm Charlie Hunt. I heard you were here."

"Are you Archie's grandson?" Jackson asked.

"I am," Charlie replied, "and this is Emmeline Belrose." I reached out to shake Jack's hand and smiled at him. As our hands connected, I accidentally shocked him with static electricity. You could hear the pop, and Jack pulled back his hand.

"Bloody hell, that hurt."

"I'm sorry," I told him.

Jack smiled. "Do you have any other supernatural talents?"

I looked worriedly at Charlie. Could Jack sense that we had special talents? I laughed and responded, “Not that I know of!”

Jack leaned forward. “Let’s try that handshake again, Emmeline.”

“I go by Emme.” We reached out to shake hands and I shocked him again! Jack shook his head, “I know when I am beat.” He had an open, warm, tanned face framed by wavy dark blond hair. But it was his eyes that drew my attention. They were an astonishing turquoise blue color. My own blue eyes were a gray blue, and I thought to myself that a girl needed those eyes, and it should have been me.

Jack smiled back at me. “Archie has told me so much about all of you. I’m excited to finally get to meet you. Would all of you like to come to the ranch house after school and meet my uncle?”

We were shocked that Zach Arrington was even in town, let alone at the ranch house. The ranch had been Zach Arrington’s parents’ ranch and people said he couldn’t let it go. He had an identical twin brother named Jack, a missionary who was killed in a car wreck in Australia several years ago. I was thinking that must have been Jackson’s father. My parents talked of the family in hushed voices. The tragedies they endured, with Zach Arrington’s mother and father being killed in a railroad crossing collision with a train just a short time before Jack was killed. Everyone liked the elder Arringtons, and old man Arrington had been a childhood friend of Archie’s. My dad said Zach Arrington was filthy rich from investing in the oil boom in North Dakota. It was hard to know what filthy rich looked like. I didn’t know anyone who was rich, let alone filthy rich. I imagined him, though, dressed in a suit with shiny leather shoes and driving a new car. That, to me, was filthy rich.

The ranch house was the one that had stood with everything in it just as Jack’s grandparents left it before they were killed more than ten years ago. “We would love to,” I answered for all of us. Charlie lived about a half a mile from the main ranch house and none of us, except for Archie, had ever set foot in the main house.

As we drove up to the house in the Jimmy, the lights were on in all the rooms. That seemed strange, as we had passed it sitting there cold and dark for years. I noticed that it was really a large house with an upstairs and what looked like a basement. There was a deep porch that extended around three sides of the house. Old rattan furniture sat decayed on the porch. Next to

one of the chairs was a small table with a pitcher and glasses on it. It had been there so long the glasses were covered in dirt and stuck to the table. It looked like someone left it, thinking they would be right back to pick it up. But they never came back, and all these years, the pitcher and glasses had sat here. The porch had once been painted white, but the paint was chipping off. The porch swing seat had caved in, and now the cushions and pillows rested on the floor. We walked across the porch to the large wooden door and it swung open. Jack stood there smiling, and behind him I could see another man.

Zach Arrington stepped forward and offered his hand to shake. He was an older version of Jack with a slight graying of the temples and those turquoise blue, piercing eyes. He didn't look like my imagined version of filthy rich. He had on jeans and boots and a pale blue western shirt with a dark brown leather jacket. He stood next to Jack and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "Come on in," he said, "and help me welcome Jackson back. He has been gone too long."

They led us into a beautiful living area with leather chairs and a couch and huge stone fireplace. The walls were dusty and the bookshelves were coated in dust and cobwebs. To the left of the living area, I noticed the formal dining room. It had a beautiful claw-foot table with twelve chairs around it. Like the table on the porch, dishes sat on it like they had been waiting for someone to return. An apron was draped across a chair. Could it really be left from that fateful day when the elder Arringtons were killed in the accident?

Mr. Arrington apologized, saying "Sorry about the mess. I haven't had time to get a housekeeper to help me with things. I came here as fast as I could when I found out Jackson would be living here. I wanted to open things up and make him feel welcome."

"You didn't need to do that, Uncle Zach. I am just happy to be here with you in our home," Jackson said.

Mr. Arrington's face clouded over and his eyes turned a darker shade as he looked away. "Make yourself at home, kids, while I check on supper and see where Archie is." Mr. Arrington walked away and we sat on the dusty furniture looking at Jack.

Lilly talked first. "Why does he call you Jackson?"

Jack smiled. “My dad’s name was Jack, I was named Jackson, son of Jack literally. Uncle Zach thinks of my dad as Jack and me as Jackson. I grew up as Jackson, but started going by Jack after Dad was killed.”

“Why did you move back here?” asked the ever-inquisitive Bets.

“My mother wanted me to have the experience of going to high school in America as she and Dad did. I hated to leave her but she had her mission work teaching the aborigines. They were both missionaries. Dad was killed in a car accident coming to pick me up from surf lessons. It was a freak thing. Mom and I decided to stay and continue their work. I worked as a lifeguard in the summers, which would be your wintertime, and the rest of the year I went to school and helped Mom teach school and soccer to the aboriginal children. Uncle Zach asked Mom to send me back, and at first she said no, but I wanted to come. I remember this place and all the happy times I had here as a child with my parents, Pappy and Gammy, and Uncle Zach. I sleep in the same room that was my dad’s. It makes me feel closer to him. When I look at Uncle Zach I see my dad. In a weird way, my dad seems to still be alive.” He looked away as he said, “I don’t know why I told all of you this.”

Charlie spoke up and said, “Because you needed to.” Ollie jumped in with a joke, and before long, we were filling Jack in on everyone and everything in the school.

Jack wanted to know about how we all became friends, and we spent the next hour telling him about all of our families. I told him about how Lilly and Bets and I grew up together. “I know everything about them and they know everything about me.” Bets and Lilly smiled at me.

Bets said, “And what she is not telling you is that she bosses us around.”

“I do not!” I said indignantly.

Charlie and Ollie laughed.

I went on, “We have been in school together since kindergarten, walking the dusty path the two miles to school, and then later, after elementary school, riding the bus into town.” I told him about our parents and what they did and where we lived. “Lilly spends a lot of time with Bets and me since her Mom died.”

By this time, the others had wandered off into the kitchen to get something to drink and look for something for Ollie to eat. I curled my legs

up beneath me on the sofa and turned to Jack.

Jack looked at me. “What happened with Lilly’s mom?”

I whispered back to him. “Josephine Grayson died of breast cancer when we were in sixth grade. I will never forget the sadness of Lilly’s face at the funeral. Charlie, Bets, Ollie and I came and stood around her at the gravesite long after everyone had left and she stood there so still and quiet. She had a hot pink cast on her right arm that was covered in names, and she looked so alone. Her shoulders were hunched and her left arm was holding her right arm at the elbow. Charlie quietly started chanting in a low sad monotone and Lilly broke down and cried. We all held her small shivering body until she stopped. She told us, ‘You are the only family I have now.’ I told her she had her dad, her older sister, Rose, and her brother, Joe. She sadly shook her head. ‘We are not a family any more, my dad cared nothing for my mother or for me or Rosie. Why do you think Rosie left?’

“I guess I had never thought of that. I figured Rose grew up and moved away as a lot of kids do. But she was right, Rose had never come back, not even for a visit. Not even for the funeral. ‘You all know that Joe is a mean bully and I am all alone in the house with him and dad,’ Lilly told us. It worried us to think that Lilly would be alone and so she came to spend days on end with any of us that she could. Kevin, her dad, would call her after a few days and force her to come back, but it wouldn’t last for more than week at the most and Lilly would be back with Bets or I. The only thing she brings when she goes back and forth is her poetry journal.”

Jack nodded thoughtfully. “And Bets, has she always been so, well, intense?”

I laughed. “Yes! I think it comes from being named Betsy Ross. My Dad said her parents were leftover hippies because her Dad, Wayne, is an artist who makes sculptures out of metal and didn’t have a real job, and her mom doesn’t believe in wearing a bra. They are easy-going people who live quietly with nature. Bets loves flowers and plants of any kind. She has us help her pick strawberries, corn, and pumpkins to sell in her family’s roadside produce stand.

“Bets is the beautiful, smart one with that strawberry blonde hair and those grey-green eyes. Bets likes everything to be in order and she is the glue that keeps all of us together. She excels in science and math and hates every other class. That is Bets. There is no mediocre anything with her. She

either likes you or hates you, but can't tolerate anybody who she deems 'wishy-washy.'

"If there is a question to be asked, Bets will ask it. She has to know 'why' in any situation. Most of the teachers don't like her and she doesn't care. She is stubborn and opinionated, but she is our loyal, brave friend."

Jack nodded. "I can see that. And Charlie and Ollie?"

"Charlie and Oliver came later. I remember the first time I ever saw Charlie. He moved here from the reservation to live with Archie. The reservation is about 20 miles southeast of us, closer as the crow flies. He goes home to visit quite a bit. His mom and little sister Irene still live on the reservation.

"The following year in fifth grade, Oliver joined us. He had been home schooled, but his father thought it was time he interacted with other kids. The only problem with that was Oliver didn't know how to interact with anyone but the teacher. He talked like an adult, and he said the dumbest things to us kids. Like, 'What about that homework assignment? Pretty lame, huh?' Everyone just stared at him."

Jack laughed, "Oh my god, I can so picture that!"

"Joe picked on Ollie, and me when I stood up to him," I told Jack. "'Whatcha doing, Emme? Defending more half-breeds?' 'I don't care what he looks like Joe, just leave him be,' I told Joe and he huffed off." Oliver didn't appear to be Indian, but his curly hair and dark skin made me think at first he was part African American. I wasn't sure as there weren't any around here, and except for TV, I had never seen a real African American person. "Turns out Ollie is Samoan," I explained. "He was adopted as a baby when his parents were stationed in Hawaii for the Army."

Jack nodded again and picked a piece of yarn from a quilt on the back of the leather sofa and twirled it around and around between his fingers. "What about Joe?"

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair. "Besides the fact that he is a prick?"

Jack smiled. "Yah, I figured that out in one day."

"Joe is just mean and a bully. Joe has a couple of friends who are as mean as he is, but they are cowards and they will back down from Charlie and me, even when Joe won't. Matt is probably his best friend, if Joe is able to be a friend. Matt follows him around mimicking Joe's swagger and

acting tough. If Joe told Matt to jump off a cliff, Matt would do it. Matt is a smart kid, but when he is with Joe he acts stupid with the teacher and never turns in his homework. The two of them are always getting detention and staying after school. They are proud of their 'bad boy' reputations. Joe's one of those kids who always has to have something better than someone else. He has to be able to 'one-up' everyone. When he can't do that, like with the five of us, he turns mean and vindictive.

"One time when we were little, he hurt another kid on the playground. Miss Agnes our teacher and school nurse told him the devil was in him. Joe just laughed and said 'I'm not scared of the devil. He should be scared of me!' Miss Agnes would make the sign of the cross when she saw Joe. She told me that she would not be surprised if Joe or Matt ended up in prison. She said, 'They seem to be the kind of people who like matching silver bracelets,' and then she winked at me.

"I personally don't think they'll end up in prison," I went on. "I think someone will get them before that happens. My dad calls it 'frontier justice.' When someone does something bad, they meet with a horrible accident, and they can never convict the person who dispensed the justice. The jury always acquits the person who did it.

"My dad sat on a jury like that one time. A teenaged girl in a neighboring town was raped and killed when I was about seven. Her dad beat the guy who they convicted to death with a tire tool when they were walking him into the courthouse for sentencing. The officers with him made a half-hearted attempt to stop the girl's dad, but he had the power of pure rage behind him. After he killed him, her dad put his hands out and let them handcuff him. They moved his trial to our town since no one in his town would sit on his jury. Dad was chosen and he came home the first day and said that what was done was done. It only took the jury five minutes to acquit the girl's dad. The really sad part was the girl's mom committed suicide, and her dad died of a heart attack the same year. That one random act of violence destroyed an entire family."

Jack handed me the piece of yarn and I twirled it around. "That makes sense about Joe," he said. "I think you are probably right. Someone will dispense him with a taste of your 'frontier justice.' "

The others walked back in. Ollie jumped over the back of the sofa and plopped down between Jack and me, kicking up a plume of dust. "So now

you know all the gossip.”

Jack nodded his head, “Well most of it anyway.”

Ollie let loose with one of his infamous farts. Jack and I bailed off of the sofa as Ollie chased after his “barking spider” happily slapping the ground and laughing. “Crikey, Ollie,” Jack said. “You stink!”

Jack looked confused as Ollie explained to him, “It’s not me. It’s these American barking spiders. They stink when you squish them.”

Jack looked puzzled, “I have never heard of them,” he said seriously. We all broke out laughing and I explained to Jack that Ollie had serious bowel issues and he make up “barking spiders” so he could blame someone else for the stench. Jack threw back his head and laughed. “I’ll remember that, Ollie!”

I noticed Charlie looking at a picture on the dusty bookshelves. He walked over and cleaned the picture frame off with his sleeve. It was a picture of two young men smiling with their arms draped around one another. Jack walked up and said, “Hey, you found that picture of Pappy and Archie.”

I blurted out, “I thought it was you and Charlie!” It could have been a picture of the two of them, and it startled me how incredibly much they looked like their grandfathers.



IT WAS AS IF that picture was an omen, and in the weeks to come, Charlie and Jack became inseparable. They finished each other's sentences and Charlie even started talking with an Australian accent. Charlie worked with Jack, who had been an excellent soccer player before becoming a football receiver, and before long, Jack was the "it man" for Charlie as the quarterback.

I found their "bromance" irritating and frustrating. Charlie seemed to begrudge the rest of us any of his time, or so it felt to me. The others felt I was being jealous and petty, and they embraced Jack. He fit into our misfit, non-perfect group. Lilly once said that each of us was damaged by something. We belonged together because we saw the damage in each other and were able to recognize it and love each other in spite of it.

I had never really thought about it before, but she was right. Charlie had his seizures, I had my nightmares, Lilly had her fragility and messed-up family, Ollie had his innate ability to be an outcast, and Bets had her need for perfection. Jack was a misfit just like us. He had lost so much. He could never be a kid again. He had lost his father and his grandparents in horrific "now they are here and now they are gone" accidents, and had left his mother to live with an uncle he only remembered from childhood. We could understand his hurt, and he knew his imperfections were nothing different to the rest of us. We were not chickens pecking on the different one. What if all the chickens had imperfections? Who would they pick on and kill then?

One day at school, all of us were standing around outside before the bell rang for first period. Lizzie walked up to Jack and said hello. Jack turned to her and said hello back. Lizzie turned her back to us. "Jack, I just wanted you to know that you and I have a lot in common. You know our families were good friends and all."

She placed her hand on his neck and started to rub the back of his neck and shoulders. Jack shrugged her off. She went on, "You and I have the same background and upbringing."

Jack looked at her and said in a serious voice, "Your dad was a Baptist missionary? How cool! Let's get together and you can tell me where you

were and what you did.” Jack smiled at her and we all snickered.

Lizzie stamped her foot. “You know what I mean! I’m trying to save your reputation from these lowlifes and rednecks.” She swung her head in our direction.

Jack looked confused. “I’m not sure who you are talking about.” He looked at us. “All I see are my friends and you. I think I have a pretty good idea of who the lowlifes are and who my friends are.” He looked at Lizzie. “Thanks for the heads up.”

Lizzie stormed off and we all shook our heads. “Well, you were right about her. She is a selfish piece of work,” he said, smiling.

“Be careful,” I told him. “You have just made two powerful enemies, Lizzie and Joe.”

“Like you, Em, I’m not scared of them,” he said.

One thing that was still secret from Jack was the clearing and our practice time. Technically, the clearing belonged to his Uncle Zach, and therefore to Jack, but so far he had not shown an interest in the clearing.

My time alone with Charlie became shorter and shorter as the demands of Charlie’s football, schoolwork, my cross-country running, and my part-time job all conspired to keep us away from one another. But I caught Charlie looking at me, and I felt the love between us. Even the demands and fun of high school could not change what was going to happen to me or to us.

Our football team, which had sucked before Charlie and Jack, went all the way to the playoffs. They were both named to the state team, and with another year for them to play, most people were predicting a state win.

Uncle Zach attended all the games, and his pride for Jack was evident in the t-shirts he wore supporting the team. We had taken to calling him Uncle Zach and he said he liked it. He became “Uncle Zach” to our group. Many times I would sit with him in the bleachers cheering for Charlie and Jack. Lilly and Bets were front and center cheering on the team. Lilly was smiling, running up and down in front of the stands encouraging everyone to yell louder. At half time the cheerleaders would do their dance routine with the band.

The finale was always Lilly doing the helicopter flip. Lilly would be held cradled in a horizontal position by two of the girls. They would toss her upward and tiny Lilly would rotate 360 degrees parallel to the ground

before landing back in the two girls' arms. She looked like a blur of blue and silver helicopter blades in the air. The crowd clapped enthusiastically and Uncle Zach and I stood up and screamed Lilly's name. Lilly ran back to the stands and waved at us, her cast rolling around her arm.

Charlie would look for me periodically throughout the game, always on guard to make sure I was protected. It had gotten to the point that Jack would look at Charlie and see him looking for me, and he would look for me as well. The coach would give the two of them multiple laps after the games for not paying attention and for being distracted by a girl. Coach threatened to bench them, but Charlie and Jack were too valuable as players. They knew that they wouldn't be benched.

During out of town games, Ollie and I rode with Archie and Uncle Zach to the games. Lilly and Bets rode in the bus with the cheerleaders and the drill team and Charlie and Jack rode in the bus with the football team. Archie and I talked about anything and everything while Ollie listened to his music on his headphones. Uncle Zach was more reserved. Sometimes he would talk about his job or something that happened in the Senate. Many times he was called to North Dakota to talk to investors and Archie would drive us. Charlie would make sure that Archie followed in the truck behind the bus with me. I could not be far from him.

In the late fall when the air had turned really cold, we were out practicing in the clearing. It would probably be our last practice before Eros left and Hercules hibernated. Eros should have already left, but Archie said he was holding back for as long as possible to stay with me. We had stopped to take a break and a light skiff of snow had started to fall. We could see each other's breath. Lilly dropped off of Arion and warmed her hands before the fire.

"Hey everyone. What do you think about me learning to do barrel racing with Arion?" Lilly asked. "Archie said he would help me."

Bets piped up, "You would need a horse trailer, and I personally think you would have an unfair advantage." Bets smiled when she said it. Charlie said that he and Archie would be glad to take her in their trailer.

I finally asked the obvious question. "Lilly, what if your dad finds out about Arion?"

Lilly thought for a minute or two. "I know, we will paint a bolt on Arion's forehead and say it's Ollie's horse, Bolt."

I shook my head. "It's too dangerous, Lilly."

Lilly looked angrily at me. "Every one of you has something you are good at, something that everyone talks about. Not me. I have nothing. I just want something I can be the best at for just once in my life. I want to be good at something!"

She stood there with her head bowed. She was right. Charlie and Jack had football, Ollie had basketball, Bets had her blue-ribbon winning gardening and classwork, and I was good at any sport I tried. I had even run at the state cross-country meet and placed third just two weeks before.

"Okay, Lilly, let's make you the best barrel racer ever!" I smiled at her. Lilly ran to each of us and hugged us.

"It will be fun, you will see," she promised. "Just saying," she laughed as she ran off. That was her favorite thing to say. "Just saying."

The next weekend, we rolled barrels into the clearing and Archie started working with Lilly and Arion. We put the barrels in a triangle shape and Lilly and Arion started running them in a cloverleaf pattern. Archie measured 90 feet between barrel one and two. Then he measured 105 feet between barrel one and barrel three, and the same between barrel two and barrel three. There is 60 feet from barrel one and barrel two to the finish line.

Lilly rode bareback and Arion had no halter or bridle, as always. Archie shook his head. "I don't think they will let you ride like that, Lilly." Lilly agreed to a halter with no bridle or bit on Arion, but she refused a saddle.

We stood to one side of the barrels and watched as Lilly ran, and touching Arion, merged. They ran the first few times around the barrels together. Finally Archie called to Arion and Lilly to come in and try with Lilly on Arion's back. Lilly had a unique way of mounting Arion. Arion slightly bent his left front leg with his head almost bowed, and Lilly literally ran up his leg and grabbed his mane and threw herself on his back in one smooth motion.

They trotted to the starting line and Archie yelled, "Go!" They took off with Lilly lying close to Arion's mane and leaning into each change of direction Arion made. Archie watched his stopwatch. When they finished, he whooped loudly.

“Lilly, my child, you just broke the National High School Rodeo Association’s best barrel racing time! You were just under 17 seconds!”

Lilly yelled, “Woo hoo!”

As winter set in and the snow fell, Lilly was not able to practice, but she said she was ready to kick butt in the spring.

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AROUND CHRISTMAS, the Arringtons held a huge supper party and all of us neighbors dressed in our finery came to the party. The house had been cleaned up and Uncle Zach had hired a housekeeper/ cook named Edna. She was an older, big-boned woman with a large apron that she wore above her protruding belly. She was sweet-tempered and seemed to love taking care of the Arringtons.

This was the first time others had been in the house since Jack had come back, and after the party my Mom said how creeped out she was by everything being just like the Arringtons left it before they died. I asked why it mattered and she seemed to think that Uncle Zach should have changed at least a few things. She couldn't understand, like we did, that Jack and Uncle Zach needed the security that the old house offered. The people they loved had come and gone, but they had the house and the good memories that went with it.

My dad found the picture of Archie and old man Arrington, and like me, was amazed at the resemblance. "Well, he said, "the Arringtons can't deny Jackson. He's a chip off the old block."

Lilly's dad, Kevin, came with Joe. Joe looked nervous and out of place in his dress pants and button down shirt. Lilly's dad was muscular from working out in the gym all the time. He wore his hair slicked back and behind his ears. I could swear he looked tan like he went to a tanning bed. His nose was sharp and his eyes were dark. He and Lilly had the same dark brown eyes. On Kevin they looked evil, but on Lilly they were soft and doelike.

Kevin walked over to my dad. "Hello, Scott," he called out. My dad said hello to him. I knew Dad didn't like him because of the way he treated Lilly, but he at least would be civil.

Bets's parents wouldn't even speak to Kevin. They had tried to adopt Lilly after her mother died, but Lilly's dad threatened them by saying he had the power to plant drugs on their property and send them to jail since he was the district attorney in town. His exact words to them were, "No one will believe you and everyone will believe me. I can prove you are

crackheads.” I’m not sure what he was talking about because we had been to Bets’s house many times and we had never seen either one of them use drugs or even drink alcohol. Bets’s parents knew Kevin was serious and they did not have the money or the power to fight him. We kept all of this from Lilly. She already had a huge burden to bear.

As Dad and Kevin talked, I saw Lilly come in the door. Her lips were bluish and her cheeks were pink. “Come in Lilly,” I said, as I grabbed her and pulled her over to the fire.

“Why are you so cold?” I asked.

“I rode Arion over,” she replied.

“Why?” I whispered.

“I need to talk to Jack, please,” Lilly begged. I ran to get Jack and Charlie who were talking to Ollie and Bets. We took Lilly into Jack’s room and shut the door.

“What’s up?” Jack asked.

Lilly looked around at us. “I need somewhere safe for Arion to stay and no one must know that he is still here or even that he is alive.”

“What happened?” asked Bets.

“My old man found out about Arion, and he beat Arion with a whip.” Lilly started crying. “I tried to stop him; I did. I did try. Arion was trying to get away, and he kept whipping him. I finally got him out of the pen, but he’s hurt and needs help. I put him in your barn, Jack. Please help us.” As Lilly covered her face with her hands, we saw the whip marks on her arms and the blood on the bottom of her dress.

Jack jumped up with Charlie. “Charlie, get Archie, and do it quietly,” Jack ordered. Archie came to the door and whispered to Jack. The four of them left.

Bets and I took Lilly into Jack’s bathroom and cleaned her wounds and wiped Arion’s blood off her dress as best we could. Her pretty blue dress that had belonged to her mother was torn at the shoulder, and lacking anything else to fix it with, we found some duct tape and taped it together on the inside so it wouldn’t show. Lilly said nothing and sat with her head hanging down and her hair falling over her face. Occasionally, a tear fell off her nose and landed on her dress.

Finally, she sat up straight and looked around. “Arion is better. They have helped him,” she said, and she lay down on Jack’s bed, curled into a

ball, and fell asleep.

In a couple of minutes, the others came back. Archie's face was contorted and his hands were balled into fists. "How is Arion?" I asked.

Charlie shook his head. "He will have some bad scars, but he is safe now."

"I have asked Uncle Zach if Arion can stay, and he says it is okay to put him with the herd," Jack said. "I didn't tell him what happened."

"We have bigger problems now, like what to do with Lilly," I whispered. "He beat her," and I felt my eyes fill with tears. I hate criers. I had probably cried only once or twice in my life. Now I couldn't seem to stop. Bets had tears running down her face, and Charlie and Ollie grabbed us and wrapped their arms around us. We stood there holding each other and watched Lilly sleep on Jack's bed. Archie stood with his arm on Jack's shoulders.

Archie finally spoke up. "Emme, you will ask your parents and Lilly's dad if she can spend the night with you. Don't go to her house to get anything. Be casual and calm. All of you know what he is capable of and anyone who would beat an innocent animal and child like that will do anything."

"She can stay here," Jack whispered.

"That's nice of you, Jack, but she needs to go with Emme," Archie said, "and Arion will stay here hidden with the herd. I will put him out in the north pasture with the rest of the herd as soon as he heals."

Charlie spoke up, "We know from experience that Lilly can stay away for a long time, so let's keep her with Emme or Bets for as long as possible and then do what we have to do after that. There is no reason to report it; we all know that no one will believe any of us."

I wiped my tears, placed a fake smile on my face and headed out to ask my parents if Lilly could spend the night. I found my dad still talking with Lilly's dad, Kevin. I took a deep breath and willed myself to act normal and casual.

"Hey, Dad," I called out.

He looked up. "What's up, Emme?"

"If it's okay with the two of you, could Lilly spend the night with us?" Kevin focused his dark cruel eyes on me and I smiled winningly at him. "Please," I begged while I smiled.

“Of course,” my dad said, and Kevin slowly stared at me.

“Only for tonight,” he said. “She is my daughter, and I will decide where she spends her time.” I sensed the veiled threat, but I smiled and called, “Thank you,” over my shoulder as I scooted back to Jack’s room.

When I got back, we all sat on the floor, talked softly, and played video games while Lilly slept. That night Lilly came home with me, and I heard my parents talking in their room about what to do about Lilly. They were afraid of what Kevin could do, just as Bets’s parents were. We seem to be the only people who know the truth about him. At the party he was walking around slapping shoulders and talking to others, showing his politician side off. Lilly slept fitfully and at one point, she woke up, looked around, and said, “I’m coming, Dad.” Then she lay back down and fell asleep. I lay awake watching Lilly sleep, and I worried.

Lilly ended up staying with us after all. Occasionally she went to Bets’s house, but mainly she lived with us for the rest of the winter. She went to see Arion every day at Jack’s place, and Arion stayed at the fence waiting for her. She climbed on him and put her face in his mane, and they rode off.

Uncle Zach saw her riding without a bridle or saddle and was amazed. He said he had never seen anyone as good with horses as Lilly. He just didn’t know her connection to Arion. She never went home and Kevin never came to our house to see her, either. He called my dad and Bets’s dad, Wayne, to see if they had Arion. He seemed more upset about Arion than he did about Lilly. Once he figured out that neither of our families had Arion, he seemed to be able to let Lilly go. He still called Lilly off and on and begged her to come home, telling her that he would change, promising her a new car and fancy clothes. Lilly would just hang up on him.

At Christmas, I gave Charlie a woven bracelet made out of parachute cord with a bear figure sewn into the middle of it. I told him the bracelet could be unraveled if he ever needed a rope or he got in a bind. It made me feel good to give him something to protect himself. After all, he was protecting me and I needed him.

He gave me a silver necklace with what looked like an antique key with a bird charm, a bear charm, a coyote charm, a horse charm, and a mountain lion charm hanging with it. “The key,” he said, “is the key to my heart that only you can open.” His cousin worked as a jewelry designer for Montana Silverworks. Charlie had him design it for me. Montana

Silverworks was famous for their intricate silver designs, which were usually quite expensive. Like Black Hills gold, it was distinctive to our part of the country.

I wore the necklace everywhere, even to shower. I never took it off. When I was stressed, I rubbed each tiny charm between my fingers and finished with the key, rubbing it until my fingers hurt.

The five of us chipped in and bought Lilly a pair of western boots to use when she barrel raced. They were beautiful, with hot pink roses sewn into the side of them and running up to the top of the boot. Uncle Zach and Archie gave her a western long sleeve shirt and a tiny pair of Wranglers to wear when she competed.

I bought Bets and Lilly each a beautiful gold necklace with a tiny pearl on it. I remembered Mrs. Grayson's pearls. I bought one for myself so we all matched. I put on the necklace and it fit perfectly on top of Charlie's necklace. I wore them together; the necklaces were inseparable to me. I wore one for Charlie and the other for the best girlfriends in the world. Lilly and Bets did the same.

Lilly was overjoyed to have a necklace like her mother's and to have something that was only hers. Like me, she never took her necklace off.

At Christmas, Ben watched the movie *A Christmas Story*, and he begged for a BB gun just like the one in the movie. We managed to keep it a secret, and he got one for Christmas. Mom made him promise not to shoot any living thing with it. Of course, he promised that, and he went out the day after Christmas and shot Mom's favorite rooster in the head and killed it.

Mom was so angry. She cleaned and fried the rooster, and Ben had to eat it for every meal until it was all gone. He sat at the table crying, and I felt sorry for him. I secretly helped him by giving pieces of it to our dog Mitzi. When he found out, he hugged me. "You're the best sister, Emme," he said.

If the truth were known, I had a huge soft spot for Ben. I once overheard my mom tell my Aunt Laura that Ben was an accident. I was little then, and I literally thought that my parents had been in a car wreck or fallen off one of the horses, and Ben just appeared. Later, I figured it out that they hadn't planned on having another child. That would explain the

big gap in years between Ben and me. It must run in our family as Dad and Aunt Laura had a big gap between them as well, except Dad is the oldest.

Most of the time, I was glad to have Ben around. I loved that he had blond hair like me, although he had a huge cowlick in the front of his hair above his forehead. Every spring, his hair turned white and I would jokingly call him “ice head.” He also had my blue eyes, but somehow they seemed better on him. He was happy and fun-loving, and he filled our tiny house with his boisterous friends.

On Valentine’s Day, Aunt Laura and Chris finally got married. Aunt Laura had dated Chris since we were young, and she babysat all of us at Ollie’s house. Chris’s last name was Wooten, and he was a Montana game warden. I remembered his last name because he always said, “The Wooten is a-hooting,” when he saw Laura. Aunt Laura laughed at his sense of humor. He was funny, and he pulled quarters out from behind our ears. Even though I knew it was a trick, I went along with him, mainly for Ben who thinks Chris is a real magician.

He told us kids stories of the poachers who stole onto public and private land and looked for “trophy” animals to kill. I once asked him what a trophy animal was. Chris replied, “It is any specimen of an animal that is bigger or has bigger horns than normal that someone would want to mount on a wall or have stuffed.” I cringed. The boys were interested and listened intently as he told them stories of the poachers he had caught. Most of them were from out of state and they had come here to go on a guided hunt. But little did they know that the guides leading the hunts were doing so illegally. They ended up getting their trophy animal confiscated and going to jail or having to pay thousands of dollars in fines.

Chris took us into town one day to look at all the animal hides and horns they had collected from these trophy hunters. I was horrified at the hundreds of hides, antlers, bones, and teeth that were stored in the room. It was a room full of carnage and sadness.

Aunt Laura asked me to be a bridesmaid in their wedding and Ben to be a junior groomsman. Ollie, Charlie, and Jack would all be ushers, and Lilly and Bets would be in charge of the guest book and cake cutting.

They were married in the Catholic church. The priest droned on and on for parts of the service. Aunt Laura and Chris stood at the front for a long time while the priest talked and the Catholic members received communion.

I stood there off to the side of Aunt Laura wearing my turquoise long dress that made me look six feet tall. I was carrying white roses tied with a turquoise bow. I couldn't have stuck out more if I tried. My feet hurt in the silver heels that all of the bridesmaids had to wear. My hair was curled and fell in ringlets around my shoulders. The hairdresser had insisted on fluffing it up and using a can of hair spray to hold it in place. It felt like I had a plastic ball wrapped on my head.

Charlie looked at me, pantomimed the outline of my hair, and winked. I smiled at him, and my Mom gave me a "mind your manners" look. Ben looked as out of place as I felt in his black tux with a turquoise shirt. He was almost as tall as the older groomsmen. He looked over at me and sighed. I smiled at him.

When the wedding ceremony finally ended, I kicked off the silver shoes and carried them as Charlie picked me up to carry me through the snow. Jack, Ollie, Lilly, and Bets walked beside us to the reception at the VFW hall. The boys reached out to touch my hair, and they agreed that it felt like a wig.

We ate supper at the reception and watched Laura and Chris cut the wedding cake. We danced together and apart, and I danced with my dad in the Father's Dance while Laura danced with Grandpa Ed to Louis Armstrong's "It's a Wonderful World". Grandpa Ed had the Purple Heart from Oscar Hines pinned on his lapel.

I looked at Grandpa Ed hoping that he wasn't already drunk. I looked up at Dad's face. I saw him watching Grandpa Ed, and I could tell he was thinking the same thing.

Grandpa Ed wasn't always the town drunk. He became a drunk after Grannie Fran died. I remembered when Grannie Fran was still alive. She died when I was six. Ben never even met her. Dad said she died from eating too much. He said that she got sick and the doctors told her she needed to lose weight, stop smoking, and not eat as many sweets. Grannie Fran didn't like that idea at all. She would sneak out of the house with her pack of cigarettes hidden in the folds of her apron. She would stand with her back to the house and puff away on her cigarettes. She would smoke two of them really fast and then she would say, "Well, let's enjoy this last one. I'm going to quit tomorrow." But she never quit.

She made huge pans of her famous fudge, and she showed me where she hid them. Grannie Fran and I would sneak into the walk-in pantry where the flour sacks and sugar sacks were stored in huge containers. She reached behind the canned jars of pickled beets and pulled out an old beat-up cookie tin. She opened the tin, and I smelled the rush of sweet chocolate. “A piece for me and a piece for you, Engelchen.”

Engelchen meant “little angel” in German. Grannie Fran was from Germany. Grandpa Ed met her when he was stationed there when he was in the military. Grandpa Ed said she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He said her hair was like mine and she had beautiful blue eyes and strong, tanned arms. I always wondered why he thought strong arms were attractive in a woman. There was a picture in an oval wooden frame in their bedroom of the two of them on their wedding day in Germany. They were both staring at the camera and neither one was smiling. I asked Grannie Fran once why she wasn’t smiling. “Everyone was serious then, Emme; we didn’t have much to smile about,” she told me.

Grandpa Ed was getting transferred back to the States and he asked Grannie Fran to marry him. They had only known each other a month! She agreed, and they got married in her church. She wore her best Sunday dress and Grandpa Ed wore his uniform. Grannie Fran moved to the States with Grandpa Ed, and they moved around until finally, after ten years, they returned to Montana to the ranch where Grandpa Ed’s family lived. By that time, they had my dad, Scott Edwin. Laura Beth came a few years later.

Grannie Fran took off her shoes one day and two of her toes were black. Grandpa Ed took her to the doctor and they put her in the hospital. When she came home a month later, her lower leg had been cut off. Grannie Fran had a wheelchair and she would wheel it outside and sit there smoking. My dad begged her to stop but she just stared off at something in the distance. By Christmas, Grannie Fran was back in the hospital and, this time she came back without her other leg. I overheard my dad tell my mom it was Chinese torture. He said, “The Chinese people used to kill their enemies by cutting off their fingers, toes, and finally their arms and legs, until they died.”

On the first warm day of spring, Grannie Fran died. The only time I ever saw my dad cry was at Grannie Fran’s funeral. He and Aunt Laura stood together with their arms around each other and tears rolled down their

faces. I stood next to Mom, terrified of the raw emotion on my dad's face. Grandpa Ed stood by himself with his hands clasped together. Dad walked over to him, but Grandpa Ed just turned his head away and walked off.

The night of Grannie Fran's funeral was the only night Grandpa Ed was voluntarily sober since she died. He stayed drunk all the time and Dad forbade me from going to see him. Dad told me, "Grandpa Ed made his choice. I won't have my children exposed to him."

When Grandpa Ed got drunk, he was mean. He called Dad and they argued. Sometimes the police called and Dad would go and check on him. Grandpa Ed just cursed at him. One time the police picked him up naked and drunk walking down the highway. Another time he threatened someone with a gun and that earned him thirty days in the jail. Dad went to see him in jail, and even though he was sober, he still cursed Dad.

He had been arrested for drunk driving so many times they had taken away his driver's license and Dad had to sell his car. Grandpa Ed bought a riding lawnmower and he drove it all over town, to the grocery store, to the bars; anywhere he went, he went on the lawnmower. It was about three miles from Grandpa Ed's ranch house to town. He rode the lawnmower in the rain, sun, snow, or even in a blizzard if he wanted a drink bad enough. It hurt Dad that Grandpa Ed had cut him out of his life. It seemed to me that Grandpa Ed is like a child that Dad had to take care of.

Ben had seen Grandpa Ed one Christmas when he came to our house drunk and staggering around. Ben was only about four, and he hung to my legs looking around me at Grandpa Ed. Grandpa Ed hollered at him, "Come out from behind her. Are you a coward? You need to man up. Are you a man or a mouse?" Ben didn't say a word.

Dad walked to Grandpa Ed. "Come on, Ed, let's take you home."

Grandpa Ed looked up confused. "Who the hell are you?"

"Dad, it's me, Scott," my dad told him. Grandpa Ed looked confused. Then he sat on the floor and started crying. I could feel Ben's arms shaking as he clung tightly to me. My dad walked over and helped him up and drove him home.

Later, he told my mom that the house was full of dirt and mice, and that there wasn't much food in the house. My mom started bringing food weekly over to Grandpa Ed, but he wouldn't open the door for her and she set it on the porch. I sat in the car looking at all the places that Grannie Fran and I

used to sit and talk when she was alive. When Grannie Fran died, I felt like I lost Grandpa Ed as well. I was pretty sure my dad felt the same way. I was happy for Aunt Laura that Grandpa Ed had showed up for her wedding and was sober enough to walk her down the aisle and dance with her.

As Dad and I danced, I glanced at Lilly as she sat forlornly at an empty table. “Dad,” I asked, “would you mind asking Lilly to dance?”

He looked at Lilly, and as Charlie stepped up in his place, my precious dad went to Lilly and bowed in front of her to ask her for this dance. Lilly’s face lighted up with a huge smile. She headed out to dance the Father’s Dance with my dad. I loved him so much at that moment.

Charlie looked at me. “Your dad is amazing.”

“I know, believe me, I know,” I told him.

After the cake cutting, Chris lined up the single men so he could throw Laura’s garter. He stood with his back to the single men and threw the garter. Ben ran forward and grabbed it out of Jack’s reach. He jumped up in the air and yelled, “Lilly, I am going to marry you!”

The crowd broke out in laughter, and Lilly stepped forward and kissed Ben on the cheek. “Grow up some more, Ben, and I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Bets caught the bouquet and we teased her about being a teenaged bride. Bets just laughed it off. “Everyone should catch a bouquet at least once,” she declared. “Besides, it’s beautiful, and the rest of you are just jealous.”

Ollie laughed, “I think one of us guys should have caught it anyway.”

“You can’t have it, Ollie, even if you want it!” Bets taunted.

As the evening wore on, I edged closer to Dad to tell him Ben had fallen asleep in a chair at one of the tables and to see if he wanted us to take him home. Dad was talking to Chris. I heard Chris say, “It is an organized group. Whoever is behind it has money and power.”

Dad asked, “They are only after trophies?”

Chris answered, “Yes, and they will stop at nothing. They cross private land, tear down fences, kill livestock that gets in the way, and bait the area sometimes with the livestock. When the animal comes to eat the bait, they kill it and hightail it out of there with just the skin and the claws or horns or anything else they need to mount it. They leave the rest of the carcass.” Chris went on, “Someone will get killed at some point, probably by being at

the wrong place at the wrong time. Scott,” he told my dad, “you need to be careful and make sure the kids are careful. I have heard reports of a large bear and mountain lions in the woods around the Arrington place.”

My dad told Chris, “The kids are out with Archie and he is one of the best hunters I know, so I’m not overly worried.”

Chris reiterated his point. “I care about those kids and like I said, someone could get hurt.”

My dad saw me out of the corner of his eye. He turned to me. “What’s up Emme?”

“I’m thinking we should take Ben home,” I replied, and pointed to Ben asleep in his tuxedo with his head on the table. Dad smiled at me and we laughed together. “Take him home, Emme, and be careful,” he said.

“Always,” I replied.

On the way home, I saw Grandpa Ed’s lawnmower parked in front of the Covered Wagon Bar. I shook my head and told the others, “Well, at least he made it to the wedding.”

Charlie looked at me and said, “He is sick, Em. His spirit is sick.”

I looked back at Charlie. “He made a choice, Charlie, and he gave up all of us for his booze.”

“He will always be your family, Em.” Charlie stared pointedly at me.

“Lucky me,” I told Charlie sarcastically.



THE WINTER WENT BY QUICKLY with Ollie playing basketball and Bets and Lilly cheering at the basketball games. Charlie, Jack, and I spent a lot of time together now that football and cross-country were over. I had more classes with Jack than I did with Charlie and it gave me a chance to get to know him. He wanted to learn karate and how to ride, so I gave him karate lessons along with my beginner karate class, and Archie and I taught him how to ride. He turned out to be a natural at both of them.

Jack played the guitar, and he taught me some chords. He wanted to hear me play the violin. I brought it to his house one time and played a song for him when the sun was out and had warmed the land. The cool wind was blowing that day as we sat on his porch, and the music carried away on the breeze. Jack clapped and said it was really good. I smiled and told him that Ben had actually composed it. Jack hummed the tune and played it on his guitar.

Lilly rode up on Arion. “What’s up?” she asked.

I looked up at her, “Nothing, just playing one of Ben’s songs for Jack.”

Lilly slid off of Arion. “Which one?”

“Listen,” I told her. I played the song again and Jack strummed along on his guitar.

Lilly looked serious. “I know the perfect words for this song.” She sat down with Jack and she wrote lyrics to Ben’s song. She called it “Friends”, because it was about the six of us. I played the violin while Jack played his guitar and Lilly hauntingly and softly sang the words.

My friends,

These are my friends

I’m comfortable with them

And all that they do

When I look at them

I see me, too

My friends,

These are my friends

My secrets are safe

When I look at them

My happy face

Is reflected back at me

My friends,

These are my friends

Loyal and true

Forming a line

To stand with me

My friends,

These are my friends.

These are my friends.

When the others joined us later that day, we played our “Friends” song. Lilly sang along and danced whirling around, and when it was finished, delightedly clapped and whooped. When I got home that night, I told Ben that Lilly had added lyrics to his song. He was excited that we liked it and was especially pleased that Lilly loved it enough to write lyrics for it.

Jack also played the didgeridoo. It was this Australian instrument, a long, weird, hollow-looking stick that made a humming sound. I guess you could say he was good at playing it. We had no idea what it was supposed to sound like. It sounded sad to me, and it seemed the times Jack played it were the times he missed his family the most.

That weekend, while the five of us were spending the night in the clearing for the first time that spring, Lilly saw a shooting star. "Make a wish," we called out to her.

She lifted her face to the sky. "I wished for you to live, Emme, until you are an old woman," she told me.

"Don't tell me, you'll wreck the wish. Besides," I added, "you are supposed to wish something for yourself."

"I just did," she said and she laughed, climbed over me, and lay between Charlie and me, putting her thin arms across our necks and hugging us.

"Lilly, you are nuts," I told her.

Lilly laughed and looked at me. "You need to think about your time with Charlie. When will it ever be the right time, Emme?"

"Don't start that, Lilly, you know Archie would kill us," I told her.

"All I hear are excuses, Em, excuses," Lilly said.

I rolled over and looked at Charlie. His beautiful eyes stared back at me. I was lost staring at him. His hand reached for mine and I pulled our clasped hands to my heart and rolled into his shoulder. I felt his breath on my neck and I had goose bumps all over. Charlie said nothing. We never needed words.

Archie's booming voice carried over to us. "Time for bed, kids. Head to your tepees. I'll come by and help you with your fire." We helped each other up. At my tepee, Charlie stopped and I laid my head in the crook of his neck. "Goodnight, Em," he said. I kissed him on the lips, soft and gentle, "Goodnight, Charlie."

I bent over and crawled into my tepee and started my fire. Within a few minutes Archie came in and stoked the flames. "I will be in Lilly's tepee tonight if you need anything. Lilly decided to sleep with Bets." "Thanks, Archie, I'm good." I told him. I lay awake for a long time, and then I slept fitfully for a couple of hours until I woke up with my nightly nightmare.

Now that I was awake, I knew what I had to do. I crawled out of my teepee and walked over to Charlie's teepee. The air was so cold. I shivered as I opened the flap to Charlie's teepee. The light from the glowing embers cast a golden shine on Charlie's beautiful face. I stood by the fire and watched him sleep. As if he sensed me there, Charlie opened his eyes, "Emme," he whispered. He opened his blankets and I crawled in and molded my body into his. I felt his desire. I rolled over and we kissed hungrily. Charlie softly outlined my lips with his fingers. Our hands were under each other's clothes. I breathed deeply and kissed the base of his neck with my lips as he nestled his face in my hair. He was struggling to get my pants off and I was unbuttoning his shirt when he grabbed my hands.

"Let's slow it down, okay?" Charlie stared in my eyes as he said it.

I was breathless and my heart was racing. I groaned. "Please, Charlie, I'm tired of waiting. I have waited for so long. Please?"

Charlie leaned forward and kissed me slowly, "I have never been able to deny you anything. You are so easy for me to love, my Emmeline." He softly kissed me in the hollow of my neck where his necklace lay next to the tiny pearl necklace, and I slowly stood up. In front of the glow from the fire, I took off my clothes and stood in front of him wearing only the necklaces.

Charlie hissed with a sharp inward breath, and we stared at each other for what seemed like several minutes. I saw the love in his eyes. Charlie kicked off his pants, and he walked over, picked me up and carried me to the blankets. As we lay next to one another, he ran his fingers across my face and down my body. I leaned towards him and felt a cold breeze and heard the flap of the teepee open.

I heard Ollie's voice call from behind the flap. "Charlie, I can't sleep. Can I talk to you?" Charlie groaned, but he slipped on his clothes and called out, "I'll be out in a minute." I heard him talking to Ollie. I couldn't make out what he said, but they were out there a long time. I finally fell asleep.

When I woke up, I was dressed and back in my teepee. I turned my head toward the canvas and cried. I wanted this more than I have ever wanted anything. Charlie slipped in and held me. "I am glad it didn't happen like that, Em. I want it to be right. I want to do the honorable thing for you."

“Like what?” I sarcastically asked. “Like give my Dad ten horses and a buffalo skin for me?”

Charlie cringed, “No, but have a service for your family and one for my family so we are joined together in their eyes. Em, you know deep in your heart that it is the honorable thing for me to do. I hope you realize what it took for me not to finish what we started last night.” Charlie looked down. “The memory of you standing naked in front of the fire will be the best memory I will ever have.” He held my head between his hands and ran his hands through my hair. “I love you, Em, and only you, and I will until my spirit leaves this earth, and even long after that.”

I laid my head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat. “I love you so much, Charlie,” I whispered.

Archie’s voice broke us up. “Emme and Charlie! Get out here and help with breakfast.”

“Coming,” I called out.

Charlie and I were subdued. Archie looked at us. “You two fighting?”

I smiled wryly, “No Archie, just tired.” We ate breakfast, cleaned up and saddled up for the ride back to the ranch house.

When we got back to the house, Jack was feeding carrots to the horses. He had extra ones for Arion when Lilly turned him loose in the pen. He gave Arion the carrots and rubbed the scars on his neck with salve Archie gave him. The hair had grown back over most of the scars, but they were raised with scar tissue and you could see them, even from a distance. I stopped and talked with Jack as the others walked towards Jack’s house. Jack and I made plans to work on a project we had due in our chemistry class. I helped him rub salve in Arion’s scars. Arion stood quietly as we worked on him.

Jack looked at Arion’s scars. “I could kill someone who would hurt an animal like this.”

I touched Jack’s arm. “I know, but one day he will get what’s coming to him.”

Jack laid his hand over mine. “I hope you are right, Em.”

Arion still tolerated no one but Archie and us. Archie said his trust had been broken and it would take a long time before Arion was like he was before, if ever. Lilly didn’t care; she climbed on his back, wrapped her thin arms around his neck, and off they went.

Gus developed pneumonia that winter. I thought we would lose him, and it broke my heart to see him so sick. The vet came and went. The bills piled up. I spent as much time as I could in the barn with him. I would have slept there, but my Dad forbade it. I talked Archie into coming over, and I helped him make a poultice that we tied on Gus's chest and neck with old rags. It smelled of mustard and garlic and grease. I think Gus finally got better because he thought we would tie more of the poultice on him! One morning he whinnied when I came to his stall, and I ran to him and hugged him tight. His recovery was slow, and the vet said he was getting old and it would be a long recovery. In my mind Gus was not old, but in my heart, I knew he was. I didn't ride Gus the rest of the winter; I kept him in the barn and curried him every day. I gave my dad the money I had saved to pay for Gus's vet bill. It was worth it. My square-headed Gus was alive.

One warm winter day, while Gus was recuperating, I rode Princess to the clearing to meet with the others. Princess was the mother of Ollie's Bolt, a beautiful chestnut quarter horse with soft, dark brown eyes framed by long black lashes.

We built a fire and after sliding down the hill in the slushy snow on toboggans until we were exhausted, we climbed back up the hill and stood around the fire roasting marshmallows and drinking hot chocolate. I stood with Charlie. He had unzipped his jacket and I had my arms wrapped around him and he had pulled his jacket together around me. I could feel the heat from his body warming me in ways I couldn't even begin to understand. Lilly looked at us and shook her head.

Lilly looked around. "Where is Arion?" I looked around. "I don't see Princess either." I separated from Charlie and we took off running, calling for Arion and Princess. We were frightened. I looked up and the sun was almost at the horizon. When it is dark out there, the cold settles around you like a mantle willing you to die.

When we found them, they were grazing contentedly. I climbed on Princess, and Lilly climbed on Arion's back. We rode back to the clearing and climbed down. The days are short in the winter and by 4:30 it was almost dark. We headed back early. None of us wanted to get caught in the dark winter.

When we got back to the others. I slid off of Princess and climbed on Duke in front of Charlie and leaned back against him. We tied Princess on a

lead rope behind us. We rode quietly back to the main house. I was warm tucked against Charlie with Duke cantering slowly. "I wish I could stay with you forever," I told Charlie.

He smiled at me and his white teeth flashed against the darkening sky. "You will always be with me, Emme, always."

I sighed. "I wish it were enough."

"What?" Charlie asked, "eternity isn't good enough for you?"

I laughed. "It will do for now."

We were waiting to practice until Hercules was finished hibernating and Eros returned. I missed Eros. When I looked around the clearing, I expected to see him flying out of the trees toward me. I looked up at the sky and wishfully hoped to see his M-shaped outline against the sun.

I figured it would be spring before we finally told Jack about our secret life. Charlie said he wouldn't be able to be a Spirit Warrior, but we would need his help in other ways. Charlie had not had any seizures in many months, and the Spirit Warriors seemed to be hibernating as well. I was relieved because I knew when it started again, I would be even closer to death.

I was starting to come to grips with dying. I had talked to Nana about what she thought about death. I figured Nana was an expert on the subject of death. She had outlived four husbands, each one leaving her more money than the one before. In Texas, Nana said other people talked behind her back about how she had "snuffed them out," but she really hadn't. My real Grandpa, Mom's dad, died when his tractor flipped backwards on him as he tried to lift a bale that was too heavy for the front-end loader. I was only a baby then, and I didn't remember him at all. I had seen the pictures that were taken when my mom went back to Texas with me for the funeral. I was about nine months old and she was holding me while Nana had her arms around both of us. We all looked so solemn.

Nana remarried that same year. Dad said she was one of those women who couldn't live without a man. He said it like it was a bad thing, and I vowed to myself that when I grew up I would be a woman who didn't have to have a man.

Grandpa Bob was an elder at her church in East Texas and he had recently lost his wife to a heart attack. He owned a car dealership and bought Nana a new gold Cadillac. They were married just weeks after they

started dating. I met Grandpa Bob once when they came to visit and I was about four. I remember he smelled like a pipe. It was a good smell, strong and woody.

Grandpa Bob was killed early one morning when he left for work at dawn. A driver who was still drunk from a party the night before ran into his car at a stoplight. After that, Grandpa Pete came along. I never met him. He died in a fishing accident with a friend. They were on a lake when a big storm came up and swamped their boat and Grandpa Pete and his friend drowned.

Then Nana married Gramps. They came to visit us a lot and I loved Gramps. He was tall and wore denim overalls with suspenders over a white t-shirt. He always tucked his pant bottoms into his boots. He smoked Cuban cigars. He said they were illegal in the U.S., but he managed to get them from friends. He read me stories and went riding horses with me in his lap. He bought me the saddle I have now. It was made specially for me in Texas by his best friend. If you look under the seat of the saddle, it reads, "Emmeline", then a heart shape, and then "Gramps". He always called me Emmeline. He was the only one who did. Everyone else called me Emme or Em.

He made up stories, too, and most of them were about what an incredible hunter and fisherman he was. Mom and Dad called him a blowhard and a braggart. None of that mattered to me, and I don't think it mattered to Mom and Dad either, as he made Nana happy. Mom and Nana were very close. Mom was an only child, and Ben and I the only grandchildren.

When Gramps died of lung cancer, Nana moved from Texas to live closer to us. It was after Gramps died that Nana started stealing things. She didn't need them. Mom said she could afford them but that she liked the "thrill of the steal." Mom and Dad tried everything to get her to stop. Nana went to see a counselor and promised to stop, but she didn't. They started her on medication, but she told them she took the pills and then buried them in the yard. Finally Mom and Dad went to the people who owned shops that she routinely stole things from and asked them to keep a list, then they would come and pay for what she took. It was usually not more than twenty dollars' worth of stuff, but the phone would ring and I would know Nana had been stealing again. I would not go shopping with her at all. Not

anywhere, not for anything. I was embarrassed by her stealing things, and when I confronted her, her eyes filled with tears and she said, “Oh no, not you too, Emme.” My heart was sad for her, and because I loved her, I couldn’t be angry with her.

She bought a big, beautiful old house in town, and I spent days on end with her. She served tea and coffee out of china cups and silver pots. Nana always had a coiffed head of hair. She went to her beautician once a week and got her hair teased into a shaped, sculpted, hair-sprayed masterpiece. Nana dressed up like it was church every day. She matched all her jewelry to her clothes, shoes and handbag. She was the ultimate “girly” girl, even if she was old. She had her fingernails and toenails done weekly and she would get a massage at least twice a week. I guess for her age, she was an attractive woman. All I knew was that she loved me unconditionally.

Many times, I would bring Lilly to Nana’s house. Nana seemed to know that Lilly needed someone to love her and she would always call her “Sugar.” I wasn’t sure she even knew Lilly’s real name. She was just “Sugar.” Lilly and I would pick strawberries out of her garden and Nana would make us ice cream shakes in the blender with them. Lilly called Nana “Mrs. Nana.” Nana and I laughed every time she said it.

One day I was curled up next to Nana at her house watching TV when I asked her what she thought it felt like to die. “Well, Emme, I think it is a wonderful feeling to be released from your body and see your loved ones in Heaven.”

I thought about that for a while. “What if I end up going to hell instead?”

Nana leaned over and looked me in the eye. “Emme, you know that you control your destiny. I’m not sure what happens, but I think the people who loved you on this earth are waiting to take you home.”

“Do you think Gramps will come for me?”

Nana smiled. “He wouldn’t miss it! Now stop all this dying talk. You are way too young to worry about this.” But I did worry and I fretted that perhaps, if they couldn’t find me, I would lose my way to Gramps and to heaven, and land for all eternity in hell.

Charlie told me not to worry. He didn’t believe the same things I did. His version of hell was not being able to go to the spirit world, to be trapped wandering around with the living for eternity.

When Mom rounded us up for Sunday school and church that Sunday, I was suddenly the first one in the car. “What’s gotten into you, Emme?” Mom asked me and I responded, “Nothing, just hate to be late.” At church, I prayed over and over to go to heaven when the time comes. Ollie watched my lips move and he grasped my hand. “We will be safe, Em,” he said.

Jack sat across the aisle from us with Uncle Zach. Jack never raised his head and sat for the entire service staring at his hands. Nana watched us and softly raised her hands up and loudly said, “Amen” and “Hallelujah!” I used to be embarrassed when she did that, but she was from the South where good Baptists worshipped loudly and with gusto.

After church Jack walked up to us. I waved at him. “Hey, Jack.” Jack looked over at Ollie and me, and motioned outside. We cut out the side entrance and met Jack.

Jack looked at us. “I hate this place.” I was horrified by the tone of his voice.

“Come again?” Ollie asked.

“I hate this place,” Jack said again. “It is full of lies and half-truths. They tell you all the good things that all these wonderful people in the Bible did. What they don’t tell you is all the bad things they did. They were wicked deceitful people like most of the people who sit in there. They are pretending to be better than everyone else. Liars and hypocrites. No one will ever say the truth. No one will ever tell you that God has deceived you and destroyed your family. Screw them.”

I stared at Jack. “Surely you are not serious?”

He looked at me. “I am, and I won’t be coming back either. Eventually, you will find out what I already know. There is no God. There is no Savior. Only people can save people. That is, if they care enough to try.”

Jack turned around and walked back to Uncle Zach. Ollie and I stood watching him walk off. I reached for Ollie’s hand. Ollie took my hand and squeezed it.

“Ollie,” I said, “do you think there is a God?”

Ollie looked me in the eye. “Yes, and he is a good God who loves us, and he is hurting right now for Jack.”

“I am hurting right now for Jack too,” I said.

“Me too,” Ollie said.

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WHEN THE SNOW STARTED TO MELT, Lilly started practicing barrel racing again with Arion. She had signed up to compete in the first high school rodeo event of the year. Archie went over the rules with her.

Early one spring morning, we loaded up Arion with his white painted thunderbolt on his forehead into the horse trailer. Uncle Zach, Lilly, and Archie rode in the truck that was pulling Arion, while Bets, Charlie and I rode in Ollie's black mustang with the top down. The first rodeo was in a town about fifty miles away. The drive went by fast as we sang along with Ollie's latest playlist. We passed up the truck at one point and Lilly waved and smiled at us.

When we got there, we girls took Lilly into the bathroom and got her dressed. She had to wear a long sleeved western shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots and have a cowboy hat. Her wardrobe from Christmas fit her perfectly and we helped her braid her curls into two small braids on the sides of her face.

When we got outside, the guys had Arion outside of the trailer and Archie was putting Arion's halter on. Archie smiled at Lilly in her cowgirl attire. Uncle Zach went and paid Lilly's entry fees and came back with her number. He registered her as Lilly Belrose. I hugged her. "You are truly my sister now," I told her.

We pinned her number on her shirt. She was number thirteen. "Oh, no," Bets said when she realized what number Lilly had.

Lilly just laughed. "I'm not worried about a silly number. Thirteen is my lucky number."

We tied up Arion to the trailer and walked around with Lilly. We knew several of the kids who were competing, and we stopped and spoke to them. One of the local girls came up to welcome us. Her name was Meredith, and she was competing in the barrel racing. Lilly asked her how long she had been barrel racing, and Meredith said since she was four years old. When Meredith asked Lilly how long *she* had been barrel racing, Lilly told her, "A few months."

Meredith laughed and said, “Well, it will be good experience for you to lose so you can learn what you need to do to get better.”

Lillie looked at her and said, “I don’t intend to lose today. I came here to win.”

Meredith laughed again. “My, aren’t you arrogant?” As she walked off, she called over her shoulder to Lilly. “By the way, I hold the state championship time in barrel racing and I won’t be losing to a poor, pitiful person like you!”

Lilly whispered to me, “Why does she think I’m poor?”

I whispered back, “We are poor, Lilly, except for Uncle Zach and now you.” I squeezed her hand and smiled. “Don’t you worry about her. You and Arion show them what you are made of.” But it made me think of the chickens again. Always pecking at the injured one trying to kill it. Except people did it by trying to kill other people’s dreams. I laughed to myself as I pictured Meredith as a fluffy, fat chicken, and Joe as a mean banty rooster. Lilly laughed delightedly when I told her about my chicken observations.

Lilly was the last to ride. We watched the other girls race, and sure enough, Meredith was way ahead of the others. When it came to Lilly’s turn, she ran up Arion’s leg and perched on his bare back. Archie walked them to the starting line and gave her the rope to Arion’s halter. “At least make it look like you need to use it,” he told her.

They counted her down, and when the light showed green, Arion and Lilly took off with Lilly holding tightly to Arion’s back with her legs, clasping the rope and Arion’s mane in her hands. They went effortlessly around the barrels and galloped over the finish line, beating Meredith by over a second.

Archie pulled Lilly off Arion and we all hugged her and Arion. As we were walking back with Arion, two men stepped up to talk with Archie and Uncle Zach. They were judges, and they were going to disqualify Lilly because she rode without a saddle. Uncle Zach’s face turned red and then his ears turned red.

He calmly told them to look in the National High School Rodeo Association’s rules, where it says that “western type equipment” must be used. “It does not say that she must have a saddle, and she had western type equipment on her horse,” he argued. The judges put their heads together, came back and declared her the winner. Uncle Zach warned her that they

would probably change the rules, and eventually, she would have to ride with a saddle.

Lilly didn't care--she finally was the best in something! They gave her a belt buckle with a drawing of a girl barrel racing on it. The buckle was as big as Lilly's whole belly. She also got a blue ribbon that she tied on Arion's halter, and a trophy. Lilly danced happily around us, showing off her buckle to anyone who would stop and look. Meredith walked by with her horse and called Lilly a bitch under her breath. Lilly ignored her. After all the years Lilly had put up with her brother Joe, she was good at ignoring people.

A tall thin man in a huge cowboy hat walked over to us and offered his hand to Lilly. "Hello, young lady, I am Walter Ketchum. I coach barrel racing, and I can honestly say I have never seen anyone do what you just did, and bareback, no less. I would like to work with you. I think you could easily win the NHSRA barrel racing." Uncle Zach walked up, and he and Mr. Ketchum talked softly.

When we stopped to eat at Hardee's, Uncle Zach told Lilly that Mr. Ketchum wanted Lilly to move to western Montana with his family and he would coach her for free. Lilly looked around the table at each of us. "I won't leave you guys," Lilly said.

Archie spoke up. "This may be the chance you have always dreamed of, Lilly."

"Not like this, it isn't," Lilly said.

We traveled several more weekends, and by the time the state barrel racing championships came, Lilly and Arion were undefeated and everyone was watching her, hoping to see her break the NHSRA record barrel racing time. She still rode bareback and in the same clothes every time. My mom carefully washed and pressed them for her. Although she had money from Mr. Hines, she insisted she didn't need it. When I pressed her about using the money that Mr. Hines left her, Lilly looked at me. "Money won't make Arion and me win. New clothes won't make us win. Only our combined spirits and determination will make us win. My life is defined by love, not money. I have no need for money, and frankly I have lived for so long without it, I don't care to have a life with money."

"Lilly," I said gently, "you are a millionaire whether you acknowledge it or not."

“Big whoop,” Lilly replied, and walked out of the room.

We had heard all the rumors by the time we pulled up in the trailer with Lilly and Arion for the state rodeo: How she was so poor she couldn't afford a saddle or any other clothes. How Arion was abused and beaten. How she would lose if they made her use a saddle.

Mr. Ketchum bought her a saddle, but she refused to use it saying that Arion didn't like a saddle. But her sweet smile and unusual mount on Arion caused a lot of positive attention, and young girls clamored to try and pet Arion and surround Lilly. Arion would still tolerate no one but us, and we were careful to keep him away from others.

A camera crew was there to film the barrel racing and hopefully see Lilly break the record. They filmed her running up Arion's leg and perching bareback on his back.

When Archie walked Arion and Lilly to the starting point, he told them to run like they did that day in the clearing in front of the tepees, and Lilly nodded. She lay her head down next to Arion's, and when the light turned green, Arion broke out so fast they were a blur going around the barrels. As they crossed the finish line, the crowd went wild and came to their feet. Lilly did it! She came in two seconds under the record.

Uncle Zach lifted her off Arion with his painted thunderbolt and onto his shoulder. We all ran to her and took turns hugging her. Lilly got a championship saddle this time that would have her name on it. Reporters from several TV stations and magazines interviewed her. Everyone was talking at the same time, and Lilly happily posed with Arion.

Mr. Ketchum was no longer the only one interested in Lilly and Arion. She was offered full scholarships to several colleges in the western states. Cruel Girl Clothing wanted to talk to her about modeling and wearing their jeans and shirts. Lilly turned them all down. “I have a job to do here,” she told them.

Uncle Zach officially filed the papers that would make Lilly an emancipated minor, so Lilly would finally be able to choose where and with whom she lived. Lilly hugged Uncle Zach when he told her that. She turned to us. “Did you hear that? I am free!”

After the state win, Lilly decided she was through barrel racing. “I did what I set out to do, and that was to excel at something. Arion and I are ready to rest on our laurels, whatever that means.” We all laughed. Lilly

decided to stay with me until the summer and then stay with Rose for several weeks. After that, she would decide where to live.

The next week, the six of us were in Bets's basement watching TV. I'm not sure how the conversation came around, but we ended up talking about gay celebrities and the others that we suspected were gay. We were having a spirited discussion when Ollie stopped all of us by saying, "What would you think if I said I was gay?"

We laughed it off at first. It was just another of Ollie's weird ponderings. "I'm serious, guys," Ollie said emphatically. "I think I am gay."

Bets asked, "How do you know that, Ollie?"

"I don't know for certain, Bets," Ollie answered.

"Well, then, you must not be gay, because if you were you would know it," Bets reasoned.

Lilly looked at Ollie. "Do you like girls or boys, Ollie? Do you think I'm cute or do you think Charlie is cute?"

Ollie's face turned red. "Well Lilly, I think you are cute, but Charlie is not my type." All of us laughed but Charlie. All of a sudden, I knew that Charlie had already known and seen this.

I stopped smiling and went to Ollie. "Well," I said, "I guess I don't have to worry about you asking me out on a date." Ollie's face lit up and he smiled at me.

"So do you have a boyfriend or is it a boy girlfriend?" asked Bets as she laughed. "How do you know which one is the girl and which one is the boy?"

Bets kept on firing questions. I shook my head. Jack laughed, "Crikey, Bets," he said. Then we all laughed.

Ollie smiled and looked down at his hands. "We're both boyfriends, Bets, but I like Raymond," he confessed. I guess I could say I wasn't surprised. I remembered all the times I had seen them together with Raymond passionately waving his arms around as he talked.

"Hey, I think Raymond is all right," Jack said.

"Me too." Ollie blushed when he said it.

"Sooo, Raymond likes you back?" Lilly asked.

"We talked, and he feels like I do," Ollie explained. "We have both felt this way since we were little. I remember Adam talking to me about you,

Emme, and how pretty you were and how he would like to be your boyfriend. I thought I would rather be Adam's boyfriend than yours!"

Ollie looked at me and smiled, and I stuck out my tongue at him. "I'm sure nerdy Adam Kinkaid was thinking of Bets, anyway," I said. "When did you figure this out, Ollie?"

"I was probably about ten, Emme, when I suspected then that I wasn't the same as the rest of you," Ollie confessed. "I have watched you and Charlie together, and I know what you share is the same thing I feel with Raymond."

Bets started up again, "What if you are just screwed up, Ollie?" she asked, sounding pious. I hit her with a pillow and rolled my eyes at her.

Ollie looked at Bets. "At night, when you dream of kissing someone, is it a boy or a girl?"

Bets furrowed her brow and blushed and said, "A boy."

"For me," Ollie said, "it is also a boy, never a girl, Bets. Never, not once, have I ever wanted to kiss a girl." Ollie looked at his feet. "I am worried about going to hell."

Charlie spoke up for the first time. "I know we don't believe the same things, Ollie, but in my world, gay people are revered and treasured, and that is what you will be to me." Charlie went on, "Archie talks about cattle and horses that are gay, and I tend to think like he does, that this is something you are born with." What Charlie did not tell Ollie was how the other animals would kill the different one given a chance.

Bets butted in, "There is no scientific evidence to support homosexuality as some sort of gene mutation. You know that, Ollie. That is why you are worried about going to hell."

Jack looked at Bets. "Sometimes you really suck, Bets."

She looked up at Jack with her brow furrowed. "Why would you say that to me, Jack?"

"Because it is true. At some point, Bets, you are going to have to believe in something or someone that you can't prove or disprove with some fancy scientific study."

Bets stared at Jack. "You have no idea what I already believe in. You have no idea of who I am, or even what I am capable of becoming."

Jack brushed it off and looked at Ollie. "You are not going to hell, and there is no such thing anyway."

Lilly stepped between them, touching Bets's arm. "He didn't mean any harm. You know that, Bets." Bets leaned into Lilly as Lilly wrapped her skinny arms around Bets and gave her a bear hug.

Ollie looked at me. "Em, you haven't said much." I struggled in my mind. In church, I was taught that being queer was a fast, one-way ticket to hell. But as I stared at Ollie, all I saw was my friend that I loved standing there in front of me, waiting for me to speak. His sweet heart shone in his eyes.

I took a deep breath and smiled. "Ollie, in my heart you will always be my best friend and I will love you as long as I suck wind."

Ollie looked at me with his eyes full of happiness. "Thank you," he said. I smiled and hugged my Ollie.

Jack walked over to us. "You are starting to see what I told you about the church, aren't you Em? It will only get worse from here. You'll see."

I reached out for Jack's hand. "Jack, people save people, remember? We have to protect Ollie and Raymond. Let's not argue, okay? Please?"

Jack smiled at me. "For you, anything." I turned my head away and looked at Ollie.

Jack clapped Ollie on the back, "We will always be your friends even if you are not my bowl of rice!"

Ollie hit him on the arm, laughing. "You suck, Jack."

Lilly laughed her tinkling laugh. "Well, I am still mad that you don't think I am cuter than Charlie!" Ollie grabbed her and lifted her off the ground and twirled her around.

Bets looked worried. "This will complicate your life, Ollie. Are you really ready to have people hate you? Just because of this?"

Ollie looked at Bets. "I have to live my life, Bets. Even if it is not what you would want for me." He turned to us. "I have one more announcement."

"You're pregnant?" Jack said. We all broke out in laughter, and Ollie head-butted Jack.

"Raymond and I want to go to the prom together," Ollie said.

"Holy crap, Ollie," Bets said, "that will never happen. You must be smoking crack again." Ollie just smiled.

"You need to think about that Ollie, this is a small, narrow-minded town," I said. In my mind, I saw the chickens slowly pecking to death my

Ollie. What would others do to him or to Raymond when the rest of us were not around?

I asked if Ollie had told his parents, and his brave smile disappeared. “I’m not sure they will understand,” he said.

Charlie interrupted, “Ollie, they may not understand, but they will always love you.” Ollie breathed out loudly through his mouth. He knew that Charlie had already seen this and that he was safe in telling his parents.



WE ALL TALKED ABOUT THE PROM and decided that I would ask Mr. Martin “theoretically” if same-sex couples could attend the prom, since I was the only one who had him for a class, and he was the teacher in charge of the prom. The next day, Mr. Martin was talking about the plans for the prom and I raised my hand and asked him if a same-sex couple could attend the prom. Mr. Martin looked at me. “No same-sex students may come together as a date. They can come stag, but not together.”

Lizzie snickered behind me. “Always knew you were a lesbo,” she mocked. I ignored her then, and later, I ignored her and Lilly’s bully brother Joe when they came behind me and laughed about me being a “fag.”

“Hey, is Lilly your dyke girlfriend?” Joe taunted. I kept walking.

That night in Bets’s basement, we talked about how to handle the prom. Ollie and Raymond were devastated that they couldn’t attend the prom together. Lilly looked up and said, “I have an idea, a brilliant idea at that! What if all seven of us wore tuxes to the prom? We could each wear a different color of shirt and that way Ollie and Raymond could be together and no one would know.” We all joined in telling Lilly it was a wonderful idea. Bets was initially sad that she couldn’t wear a dress, but we reminded her that we had next year to wear a dress.

We talked to our parents about wanting to wear tuxes, and while they weren’t excited about it, they said it was okay. We didn’t tell them about Ollie and Raymond.

Ollie told his parents. His mother gave him the standard talk about how this is a hard thing to see your son being different from what they had planned for him. But while they weren’t crazy about it, and his Dad felt he would “grow out of it,” they weren’t wildly angry or bitter. We were all thankful for that. Ollie was our friend and we didn’t care who he dated.

We planned the colors and flowers we would wear. Lilly chose a pink shirt, Ollie would wear a red shirt, and Raymond would be in black. Bets would be in green, Jack would be in turquoise, I would be in navy, and Charlie would be in white. We all planned to wear white lilies.

The people who worked at the tuxedo shop thought we were all crazy. They charged us extra to fit the suits for us girls. I told them that was asinine, but they were the only business in town, and we were forced to do business with them. Nana paid for our lilies. We were excited about prom, and as May loomed, prom was only a week away.

The day of prom, Lilly, Bets and I went to have our hair done. Nana came with us and we all had a manicure and pedicure. We laughed over the smallest of things. Lilly's wild choice of "smoking hot red" nails. Bets's choice of leopard print toenails. Go figure on that one. Me, I liked the plain simple just pink. Boring, but me.

Nana joked that the only reason I agreed to wear a tux was so I could wear a sports bra. We all laughed at that. "So true, Nana," I said. Bets didn't think I needed to wear a bra at all and we all started giggling again.

"Well, you and Lilly definitely need one, and I don't need them, they would just get in my way!" I smiled.

Lilly impishly looked at me. "Well, Charlie seems to like that you are a member of the tiny titty committee."

"Lilly! Stop."

"Just saying," she chirped. I looked down, knowing my ears and face were bright red.

Nana laughed the hardest. "It's not what's on the outside that matters, girls, although I must admit it helps."

That night Uncle Zach rented us a limousine. We had never seen one before, and he seemed proud to show us what all the limousine has to offer. We went to each house and took pictures with each set of parents, except for Lilly's. She took pictures with each family, and her smile was infectious. My dad was upset that his daughter "dressed like a boy." He got over it, though, and we took a picture with us and Ben and Lilly.

When we arrived at prom, the limo driver opened the door and we got out one at a time. Everyone stopped to look at us. Before long, we had a crowd looking at the limo and talking to us about our tuxes. We walked hand in hand into the prom. I was between Charlie and Jack, Bets was on the other side of Charlie, and Lilly was on the other side of Jack next to Ollie and Raymond. We stopped and took pictures, all of us together, arms draped over each other. For that one moment in time with our arms all intertwined, I felt truly happy. I didn't care about the future or what would

happen. It was just all of us, with Charlie's arm around my waist drawing me close to him. I looked over at Lilly and she winked at me. I didn't want this night to ever end.

The seven of us danced as a group and then individually with each other. As the night wore on, someone yelled for Jack to come play guitar. Jack and Charlie decided to play Ben's "Friends" song with Raymond singing the words Lilly wrote. While they played it acoustically and Raymond sang, the other kids just swayed to the music with their arms up in the air. We yelled encore, but they were through for the evening.

Charlie came to me and wrapped his arms around me, and we danced off. I loved everything about him: his smell, his strength, and his kindness. He breathed in my ear and I whispered in his ear, "Charlie, when will we ever be together?" I blushed when I said it.

"We are together now, Em."

I swatted him. "You know what I mean."

"Patience, my beauty, patience," Charlie breathed. "Everything must happen as it is destined." I stopped dancing.

"Seriously, we have to ask the spirits if we can be together?"

"Not exactly like that, Em, but something similar." He looked in my eyes. "Em, you have to trust me. My whole and only purpose in life is to protect you. I cannot screw that up." I looked into his eyes, and I finally realized how it must feel to be put on this earth only to protect someone else. Charlie would never have a destiny that was different from mine. He would never have a life that was centered on what he wanted to do. He would never live his life with abandon or freedom. As if sensing my thoughts, Charlie smiled and drew me closer and swayed to the music. He whispered in my ear, "My sweet flower, long after this life is over, I will still love you and protect you."

Lilly floated by with Ollie and Raymond and demanded a cut. As Lilly and Charlie danced off, I heard her asking Charlie if we were ever going to have sex or if I was going to die a virgin. Leave it to Lilly!

Jack wandered up and we started dancing. "You smell nice," I said, and then cringed. What a weird thing to say, as if he didn't always smell nice.

He laughed. "Just good old soap and deodorant. What do you think Charlie and Lilly are talking about?"

“Beats me,” I answered, blushing. Jack looked at me strangely and then changed the subject and pointed to Ollie and Raymond. “I’m glad we did this for them,” he said.

“Me too,” I whispered.

Finally the night had to end, and we loaded up into the limo to go out for an early breakfast at the truck stop with a bunch of other people. As we walked in, I saw Joe, Lizzie, and several of their cruel friends. Joe stood up and shouted, “Look at my sister with her queer friends!” We walked to a table and tried to ignore him. He persisted and started in with Lilly. “Hey, Lilly-lesbo, want to introduce us to your partner?”

Lilly turned around and said, “Shut the hell up, Joseph.” We all laughed at her calling him Joseph.

He clenched his fists. “Well, Lilly-lesbo, wait until I tell Dad what you have done and that you have turned lesbo.” I saw Lilly’s face whiten and I knew this would not be good.

Jack stood up. “I am going to give him a gobful.” Jack walked over to Joe and whispered something in his ear. Joe’s face turned white but he sat down. We asked Jack what he said to Joe. He just laughed and answered, “I told him he was such a figjam and his freckle was showing. Then I added that if he kept at it, he was going to come a gutser.”

“English please?” Bets asked.

Jack laughed. “Figjam means ‘F I’m good, just ask me,’ and freckle is a butthole, and come a gutser means he is going to make a bad mistake. Then I laughed and left. He’s such a fruit loop.” Jack put his hand over Lilly’s. “It will be okay, Lilly.”

Bets shook her head and laughed, “I will be glad when you learn to speak American English.”

Jack smiled and said, “I thought I was.” After that, we laughed and joked and enjoyed our breakfast. Lilly had stopped laughing though and looked worried, and I knew what Joe said about telling her dad bothered her.

The limo driver dropped us off at our house as the sun was coming out. Lilly and I walked into the house arm in arm. Dad and Mom were up, and we drank coffee with them and told them all about the magical evening we had. We stumbled into the bedroom, and Lilly fell asleep wearing her tux

and her pink shirt. I carefully put mine up and changed into jeans. I was still too happy and excited to sleep.

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I SLIPPED OUT OF THE HOUSE, saddled up Gus and headed to the clearing. The sun was just starting to warm up the sky, and the sky was so blue it hurt to look at it. The grass smelled fresh, and I jumped off of Gus's back to pick tiny spears of wild asparagus to eat. When I got to the clearing, I unsaddled Gus and let him graze.

I looked up and saw Eros! He was back! I called to him, and he came to my shoulder and rubbed my neck with his beak. I found myself telling him all about what had happened since he was gone and all about last night, while he sat patiently listening to me talk. I knew he didn't understand it, but he knew I needed to talk about it. I stroked his feathers and rubbed his neck. I finished the story with Charlie. Everything in my world seemed to start and end with Charlie.

Suddenly Eros flew off. I looked up and saw Jack stride into the clearing. I had never seen him there before. He looked around and headed toward me. "What is this place and who made the tepees?" he asked. I filled him in on the games we played as children, how Custer's Last Stand took place here for us over and over, and how we made the tepees with Archie's help.

Jack looked around. "I used to come here on picnics with my parents."

"This is a special spot for all of us then," I answered. He asked about Eros and I told him I was interested in all animals, especially birds. He laughed and said he had figured that out already.

Just as I was finishing the story of how we made the tepees, I heard a sound in the woods. I looked up and saw Hercules. He was throwing his head back and forth, and suddenly he stood on his hind legs and made the Lilly sign.

Jack was craning his neck to see what I was looking at. "What's in there?" he asked.

"I think it is the osprey," I lied. Hercules was motioning toward the hills and I knew it was serious. I turned to Jack.

"Jack, if I needed you to do something for me, would you?" I asked.

Jack looked serious as he replied, "Of course."

“I need you to turn around and go back to the house and don’t look back. Get Archie and bring him here. Tell him it is about Lilly and that the rest of us are going to find her.”

“I will saddle up and help you,” he offered, but I grabbed his hands and told him, “Please, just do what I ask. We don’t have much time.” I think he finally grasped the gravity of the situation, and he turned and headed out of the clearing. “Run!” I yelled at him and he took off running.

I shrieked at Eros, and he came flying out of the trees. I started running parallel to him, and in my haste I had a huge amount of power behind my run when I merged with Eros. I watched my body roll several times, and I could tell by the angle when my body fell that I was going to be injured.

“Damn it,” I thought to myself. “Why did I do that?”

Charlie’s thoughts interrupted, “Do what?”

“I think I hurt my body, but let’s not dwell on that. Where’s Lilly?”

Charlie seemed worried. “Em, you have to have a body to come back to.”

“I do, Charlie, it’s ok.”

As I swooped down past the clearing, I saw Jack. He was running, but toward my body, not away like I told him to.

“Oh, shoot.” I thought to myself.

“What’s wrong?” Bets asked.

“Jack found my body and now he is trying to sit it up. I told him to go and get Archie, and he is still in the clearing. He’s looking at me and up at Eros. He knows what just happened.”

Charlie broke in, “We will worry about that later. Right now we have to find Lilly.”

“Have you heard her?” I asked.

Ollie responded, “I heard her about ten minutes ago, but nothing since.”

“She’s in human form, then. Can anyone hear Arion?”

We concentrated, but all we heard was Arion’s labored breathing. “Where else would she go?” Charlie asked. None of us knew.

“I will find her,” I told them, and Eros and I flew straight up, higher in the sky. We flew north for about five minutes, and I saw Lilly and Arion climbing up the side of a steep hill in the distance. She was at least five minutes fly time from me and more than that from the others.

“I found her,” I called out in my head. “Ollie, you and Bets need to run with Electra and Zephyr as fast as you can.” Within several minutes, I saw Zephyr headed behind me. Suddenly, for a second I sensed Arion’s need to get to the top of the hill. I wondered why. It was a solid cliff that dropped to the rocks below. Why would they be headed there?

It dawned on me that they were going to jump off of the cliff. I screamed out, “Arion! Lilly! NO!”

I heard Charlie, “Em, try to deflect them when they jump and push them away from the rocks. Ol and Bets, head with me to the bottom of the cliff to try to clear a spot for Em to steer them to.”

As I got closer to Arion and Lilly, I saw that Lilly was tied onto Arion. As she saw me, I noticed how floppy she was on Arion’s back. Then I heard her. She opened up her mind to us and the thoughts came pouring out so strong that I lost my connection with Eros and he glided lost.

I heard and felt Lilly’s pain. She was little, maybe two or three and I heard her with her mother, laughing. Then a door slammed and angry voices filled the room. Lilly’s dad hit her mother as she was trying to protect Lilly. He kicked Lilly so hard she fell against the table, and I felt her pain as her leg broke. Rose ran for the bedroom and hid under the bed. Joe stood there watching. In the hospital, I heard her dad telling the doctor how she fell off the bed.

Every cast that I remembered her having was revealed to us. The pink one at the funeral, she got when he threw her against the side of the barn. Then I heard Lilly talking to her mom. Her mom was dying, and Lilly begged her to leave and go live with Rose. Her dad overheard and walked into the room, slapped Lilly to the floor, and walking over to her mother, drew up a vial of morphine. “Tell your ugly ass Mother goodbye, Lilly. I’m sending her to hell.” I heard Lilly’s screams as she wrapped her thin arms around her mother and watched her die.

We heard every assault including the attack on Arion, and we felt the blows on both Arion and Lilly. I was having trouble breathing, and I saw Electra lying listless in the grass. The pain was unbearable! How could Lilly endure this? Yet the pain went on.

Finally we saw this morning. Kevin at my house after I left, yelling for Lilly. My dad trying to stop him. My dad had his rifle, telling Kevin to

leave, and Lilly slipped out my bedroom window and went to her dad. “Here I am, don’t hurt them.”

My mom called the police. Ben ran after them screaming and shooting at the car with his BB gun as Kevin drove off with Lilly. As soon as they pulled in their driveway, he grabbed her by the hair and threw her out of the car. “You ugly little slut! Did you honestly think you would get away with ruining my reputation in this town? Did you think I wouldn’t find you just like I found your ugly ass mother every time she tried to leave with you?” The blows rained down, and between the kicks, I felt Lilly’s ribs break. I tasted the blood in her mouth. I saw Kevin’s pointed-toe boot kick her again in the chest. I could hear everyone struggling to breathe. My chest was on fire and it felt like my ribs were broken.

Bets and Electra struggled to stand. Every motion forward with her left front paw made her fall down. Finally she took off on her three other legs, and I noticed Ollie and Zephyr doing the same. The cut above Lilly’s eye ran blood into my right eye and I couldn’t see out of that eye.

As Kevin dragged her into the barn, Arion jumped the fence and ran him down. It gave Lilly time to grab a rope, get on Arion and ride off. Kevin got to his feet just as they swept by him, and he lashed out with barbed wire, laying Arion’s flank open.

They stopped by the road and Lilly tied herself to Arion. Her injuries made it impossible to hold herself on. As Arion ran, the blood poured from both of them. Lilly moved into Arion, but quickly moved back out when she realized that Ollie was out with Zephyr and that he felt her pain.

She and Arion were going to kill themselves. We all screamed out for them to stop, but they kept going. I had recovered enough to fly with Eros and get closer. I could see Lilly’s tiny body draped on Arion’s shoulder. She was wearing her tuxedo with the pink shirt, and her lily was wilted and drenched in blood. Arion’s flank was a bloody mess, and the muscle was exposed under it.

I saw the others moving under the cliff as Arion neared the top of the hill. “Arion, Lilly, please don’t do this,” I begged.

I heard Lilly’s thoughts. “I have to, Em. My death will flush out the machayiwiw and you can finally destroy him. I have finished what I was sent here to do. I’m tired of all the evil, Em, I’m tired of being beaten and losing people I love. Arion and I have been through so much. Arion and I

are just tired and we need to go someplace where there is no more evil or pain. I love all of you. You know that.” Lilly gathered her strength and spoke again. “Watch my star. When you need me the most I will be there,” and then her thoughts ended.

As Arion gained speed and headed toward the cliff edge, Eros and I flew straight up and veered off to the left. When Arion sailed off the cliff, Eros and I rammed into them from the side hoping to push them into the area that the others had cleared. Arion and Lilly both knew what we had planned. At the last minute Arion shifted his body to the right and Eros and I bounced forcefully into Arion’s withers. In a ball, Eros and I and Arion and Lilly fell through the air. Eros pulled us out when we were mere feet from the ground, but we flew into the top of a jagged rock and I felt Eros’s wing break as we fell onto the ground. The last thing I saw was Arion and Lilly hitting the rocks, and the last thing I heard was the screams. All of the screams merged together that seemed like one big scream.

I don’t know how long I was out; probably just a few minutes. When I came to, Hercules and Charlie were standing over me.

“Don’t move. Eros has broken his wing. You have to keep him still and quiet.”

“Lilly!” I screamed, and tried to get Eros to his feet.

Charlie yelled at me. “Stop it! You are hurting Eros!” His voice cracked. “Lilly and Arion are gone.” I started crying, only it was a shrieking bird sound. Zephyr and Electra were lying over Lilly and Arion.

Hercules’s head came up, “We are not alone. Everyone scatter.”

I hopped over behind a rock. Jack came into view riding Gus and carrying my body. I had forgotten about my body. Jack lay my body down, and suddenly he saw Lilly and Arion. He started screaming, “Archie! Archie!” He grabbed my shotgun off of Gus’s saddle and fired a blast into the air. Gus reared up on his hind legs and snorted, reacting to the sound of the gunshot.

Jack ran to Lilly and touched her face and her neck. He untied her from Arion and laid her down and touched her neck for a pulse. When he found none, he fell back on his heels and picked up Lilly, cradling her and moaning. He reached over to Arion and held them both while he screamed, jagged and tortured.

I told Eros to rest and I would be back to help him. I hopped over to my body and touched it. As soon I got into my body, I reached out for Eros and laid him safely between two rocks. I was bruised and bloody, but I could move.

I moved quickly to Jack and Lilly and Arion. I threw myself on Lilly's still warm body and I screamed and screamed. I couldn't stop it. My mind was wondering who was screaming, and I couldn't seem to figure out that it was me. I felt anger and helplessness and hate. My body felt hot and red. I threw back my head and when my voice came out, it was a mixture of indiscernible sounds. My body felt like it was floating off somewhere else. I was above the treetops, and as I continued to make the sounds, I saw animals of every kind below me. They looked up at me. I lifted my arms and pointed to Lilly, and they started to run frantically. It was a mass exodus of every living creature below me. It looked like they were running away from a forest fire. It felt like I was directing them.

I felt Jack trying to pull me off Lilly, and I struck him off. I rocked Lilly, my sweet Lilly, and the sounds I made got louder and louder. I could feel the earth moving beneath us, and the fastest of the animals were almost upon us when Archie pulled up in the jeep and jumped down.

He ran to us, and instantly he knew what had happened. He looked me in the face. "Emme, look at me. STOP IT NOW! Focus. Look at me. EMME, LOOK AT ME!"

I looked at him, dazed. Who was Archie screaming at? The earth stopped moving. The heat evaporated from my body. Archie grabbed my arms. "You and the others need to get together right now around Arion and Lilly. Hurry!" Hercules, Zephyr, and Electra emerged from behind the rocks.

Jack backed up. "What the hell?" he said.

Archie looked at Jack, "Trust me, Jack, they will not hurt you." Archie brought Eros to me and I held him.

We all came together over Arion and Lilly's bodies. As our bodies touched, a fierce wind kicked up and the clouds obscured the sun. I felt my hair flying around. Looking up, I saw shapes in the clouds. Were they people?

That thought was knocked out of my brain by an intense pain in my belly. It felt like a red-hot poker stuck in my guts. I tried not to scream, but I

couldn't stop. I saw the others writhing and twisting in pain. Eros struggled to get out of my grasp, shrieking with pain. We struggled to keep touching one another. I had hold of Hercules and my bloody left hand was twisted in his fur. My right hand was on fire. Hercules, Zephyr and Electra were all holding their right paws up, and their bodies were contorted like they were trying to stop their paws from pulling off their bodies. I felt the same way, like my hand was trying to separate itself from my body. I clenched my teeth to make myself stop screaming. The scar on my hand twisted and pulled, then it started to bleed. I saw the blood on the others' right paws as well.

Jack was yelling and trying to reach us, but Archie held him back. Archie was saying something to us, but the red-hot pain was so strong that I couldn't hear him. I looked up and saw the white shape of Lilly. She was smiling. I grabbed onto her hand, but it was nothingness.

"Let her go, Emme," Archie yelled. "Let her go or all of you risk being pulled into the spirit world."

"No!" I yelled. "Lilly, don't leave us." She pointed toward the white clouds. I saw the shape of something. Suddenly it cleared enough, and I saw her mom. I saw Lilly's joy. I dropped my hand as she took off running. The sun suddenly came back out and the four of us dropped back exhausted and listless.

Archie and Jack ran to us. Archie shouted at the others, "Get back to your bodies quickly and meet us back here." They slowly moved out, each of them leaving one bloody paw print.

Archie ordered, "Jack, drive the jeep down to the road until you get cell coverage and call 911. Don't tell anyone what you have seen. We will explain it all to you." Archie followed behind the others, covering up the bloody tracks while Jack drove the Jeep off.

I sat there holding Lilly's body with my back resting on Arion. I held her still warm hand and stroked her shiny red fingernails. I was lost in my thoughts and went back in my mind to when Lilly and I were small kids and we were walking home. "I'll race you home, Emme," she yelled.

"You know I can run faster than you can, Lilly."

She turned to me. "It doesn't matter. It will be fun to try, come on Emme, RUN!"

I chased after her with my long braid bouncing. I overtook her and we fell in the ditch laughing. Lilly looked at me and smiled. "You are my bestest, ever after friend, Emme."

"No, you are my bester, bestest friend forever, and ever, Lilly." Only forever and ever didn't last. "Oh Lilly," I cried out. "Why did you have to leave me? Why?"

Archie walked over and put his hand on my shoulder. "Lilly is at peace now, Emme. She and Arion deserve that."

"I know," I whispered. "I just miss them."

"Let me look at your hand." It had stopped bleeding and already had a scab. "As soon as we get things situated here, Emme, I will take Eros to the vet for you."

"Thank you," I whispered, and I drifted back again to an innocent time when Lilly and the rest of us were just five friends having fun.

We are young kids in the clearing, laughing, playing Custer's Last Stand. Lilly plants the coup on me as General Custer. I fall off of Gus and onto the ground. She jumps off to scalp my pretty blonde hair, and then for whatever reason, falls on top of me laughing. I try to be serious, but I can't. Before long, we are rolling in the grass laughing uncontrollably. Charlie rides up and wonders what's so funny, but he doesn't get it. Bets rides up and joins in. We laugh until our stomachs are sore and our heads hurt. Charlie shakes his head at us and climbs down and before long, Ollie joins us. All five of us are sitting in a tight circle laughing and talking.



I WAS LOST IN OUR WORLD when I saw the police and ambulance lights bounce up the road. I didn't really know they were there until they tried to pull Lilly's bloody body from me. Jack held me as I hit and kicked, trying to stop them from taking her. "Emme, please, she's gone. Let them have her." I finally turned my head into his chest. I covered my face as they took Lilly's body and placed it on the stretcher. The deputy walked up to me. "What happened here?"

At that exact moment, Kevin pulled up and ran toward the stretcher, putting on a show. "Lilly, my baby."

Before I could stop myself, I ran toward him screaming obscenities. "You lying son-of-a-bitch, you killed Lilly. You beat her and you killed her mother. I know the truth about you and the whole world will learn the truth now. When they do the autopsy, they will find your boot mark on her belly along with her broken ribs and the perfect mark of your ring in her cheek. Then maybe someone will wonder how the hell Lilly managed to break all those bones. She was only three when you broke her leg. Remember that? I will watch you go down and I will laugh the whole way as you go to hell, you bastard!"

Everyone stood speechless, staring at me. I was not sure where all those words came from. His cold dark eyes looked at me. "You better be careful who you accuse of things, young lady. Let me tell you something else, there will be no autopsy. We can all see that this was a tragic accident, nothing more."

He looked at the police and the ambulance drivers. I yelled at them, "Please stand up to him for Lilly's sake. Please. We need to know the truth." The sheriff's deputy finally looked at the ambulance drivers. He told them to take her body to the medical examiner over 200 miles away.

Kevin yelled at the deputy, "You have no authority here."

The deputy walked by him. "We will see."

I smiled and looked up to the heavens, "Lilly, that asshole is mine." Kevin drove off in a swirl of dust.

I saw the others coming in their human form. Ollie, Bets, and Charlie ran to me and Jack. We all hugged each other and cried.

We stood by Arion while Archie performed a ceremony for him. Tomorrow we would come back and return Arion to the earth. For now, Archie covered him with a tarp and I picked a lone yellow flower and laid it on the tarp.

Archie loaded all of us up in the jeep. He took us as close as we could get to the clearing. Archie was going to let Gus stay at the ranch until I came back and got him, but Gus had other ideas and he took off for home.

Archie called our parents and told them about Arion and Lilly. Archie dropped me off at my house. When I walked up the path to our house, I saw Ben sitting on the steps hugging our dog Mitzi, just like Lilly did the day after Oscar Hines died. When I walked by, he looked up with tears in his eyes. I stopped and hugged him.

“I loved her,” he said.

“I know, we all did, Ben,” I replied.

I heard a ruckus in the chicken pen. I turned to see a group of chickens attacking another chicken and pecking it mercilessly. It was squawking helplessly, and I knew they would kill it. I ran to the pen, threw open the door and started kicking the chickens off of the chicken they were attacking. I picked it up and held it to my chest as I chased the other chickens around, kicking them and screaming. I could feel the little chicken’s heart beating wildly under my arm. I aimed my boot at one of the leaders of the chicken attack and swung my boot back to kick it. I screamed at them, “You mean damn chickens, you all deserve to die!”

Ben grabbed me around the waist. “Emme, please stop. Let me have the chicken,” Ben pleaded. I wordlessly handed the chicken to him. I crumpled to my knees in the chicken pen crying, trying to wipe the chicken’s blood that had mixed with Lilly’s blood off of my shirt.

I felt my dad’s strong arms lift me up and hold me tight. I soaked his shirt with my tears, and I felt his tears wet the back of my shirt. He led me to the house. He called to Ben to put the chicken in the barn for now.

At the door, Mom took my arm and led me to the bathroom and ran a warm bath for me. I stood there motionless while Mom undressed me, just like when I was a child, and led me to the water. I felt her hiss under her breath when she saw all the bruises and cuts I had, especially on my hand,

but she said nothing. The warm water felt good and I started to relax. My mom slipped out. She came back, washed my hair and dried me off. She brushed my hair and helped me into my pajamas. Even though it was still light, I suddenly realized how exhausted I was and how I hadn't slept since prom. Was that only twenty-four hours ago? Was it only twenty-four hours ago that we were so happy?

I fell asleep only to wake up screaming. I was trapped in the car, only this time there was no Charlie, no savior, and Lilly came to take me home. My mom crawled in bed with me, and when I woke up again I heard the sound of hammering.

I walked outside and saw Dad and Ben making a pen. Ben looked up at me. "We are making another pen for your chicken so the others can't hurt it," Ben explained. I grabbed him and hugged him.

"Thank you, Ben," I said. "What time is it, anyway?"

Dad answered, "You have been asleep for almost a day."

I was frantic. "What has happened to Lilly's body? Where is Kevin? Where is Eros?"

I heard Charlie's voice, "Hello, Sleeping Beauty, let's go for a ride." He was saddled up on Trigger. Gus was saddled up as well. We headed toward the clearing. "I'm not sure I can do this, Charlie," I whispered.

"The others are there. We just need to talk," he replied. "I have been at your house since the accident waiting for you." I think somehow I knew that. I knew now when I was hurting the most he wouldn't, or couldn't, leave me.

We rode silently to the clearing, each of us lost in our thoughts of Arion and Lilly. When we got to the clearing, I saw Uncle Zach, Archie, Bets, Ollie, Raymond and Jack. They had built a pyre with Arion's body lying on top of it. Archie performed a mourning ceremony. He and Charlie started chanting as all of us grabbed a stick from the fire and lit the pyre. It took several moments for the flames to pick up, but before long they had enveloped the entire pyre, and Arion was no longer visible.

The smoke choked all of us. Jack looked up and pointed toward the sky. The smoke had formed what looked like a tunnel that seemed to reach a cloud and as we watched, shapes moved from the clouds to the tunnel. "They are coming to get Arion," I thought to myself. I called out, "Goodbye, Arion, we love you and Lilly." The shadow stopped moving and

seemed suspended for several long moments before it moved on into the cloud. Immediately, the fire died and the smoke stopped. Uncle Zach handed us each a pink lily and we laid them down in front of the pyre.

Archie came to me. "Eros is with Esther White being rehabbed," Archie confided. I had spent some time with Miss Esther in the past helping her with her bird refuge.

To say Esther White was strange would be an understatement. She had a tic that made her left cheek and mouth spasm. It did not happen all the time, but when it did it was very noticeable. She also talked to herself and to the injured birds. I mean talked to them like they were human, not like how people talk to animals normally. She always wore a long, pleated skirt that dragged on the ground. She had on plastic clogs that would routinely fall off as she walked around. Her hair was grey and long. She wore it in a bun on the top of her head. She wore shirts that were at least two sizes too big for her. On top of those mismatched clothes, she would have on a man's canvas coat with a brown corduroy collar. She also chewed tobacco. It had stained her teeth to a darkish brown color.

She lived in an old, dilapidated one-room cabin with a large wood porch. Surrounding her house were three sheds full of pens for the birds. For the raptors, she had two large, screened enclosures with pieces of trees scattered on the ground.

Esther was grumpy. She told me once, "I only like animals and small children. Everyone else can go to hell." I asked her if she liked me since I had grown up. Esther looked at me. Her tic started to act up, making her face jump. "Not particularly, but you are better than most." Then she spit on the ground. I didn't let her bother me. I loved her beautiful birds. I would do whatever it took to spend time with them. Many times I would take Lilly with me. Lilly would help, doing whatever was needed without ever being asked.

One time Miss Esther had a beautiful, male mountain bluebird. He was a brilliant turquoise blue color. When you held him up to the sky, he was the same color. He was super friendly. We called him Bluey. He would hop on your hand for a treat of birdseed.

Bluey had been found after a summer hailstorm that produced hail the size of quarters. One of the pieces of hail had broken his wing. He had been with Miss Esther for almost a year. One day Lilly asked Miss Esther why

Bluey didn't fly away since his wing was healed. Miss Esther looked at us. "Well, 'pears he's a useless male, getting everyone else to take care of him. Even in the wild, his female mate builds the nest while he pretends to collect materials. He either never shows up with the materials, or he drops them before he gets to the nest. Worthless is what he is, just like all men. Remember that, men are useless."

I smiled at Lilly. Lilly smiled back and asked, "Miss Esther, maybe he is just scared?"

"Hogwash," she snorted. "You can't make a bird fly. You can heal its wings. You can nurse it. But if that bird don't wanna fly, it ain't gonna fly. Don't matter what the reason." Lilly hung her head and stroked Bluey's soft feathers. I walked off with Miss Esther to watch her work with the raptors. Miss Esther looked at me, "Lilly is just like that bird. She ain't never gonna be right. That poor, little bird ain't never gonna fly." I had no idea at the time what she was talking about. Now I knew.

"Eros will be safe with Esther until his wing heals," Archie added.

"I am going to see him today when we finish here," I promised Archie. "Thank you," I added and grabbed his hand.

Uncle Zach had a picnic lunch for all of us and we all picked at our food. I wasn't sure about the others, but my belly was too sore to eat much of anything. After lunch, Archie, Uncle Zach, and Raymond headed out, leaving us "to talk this out."

Jack broke the silence. "Will one of you please explain what has happened? Don't try and pull one over on me either. I am not stupid." I was suddenly tired, too tired to want to explain anything to anyone, even Jack. I could tell the others felt the same way.

Charlie finally spoke up. "Jack, it is a long story. We are all weak from losing Lilly. We were joined together in a way I will try to make you understand, but for now please trust us. Let us rest."

I had already felt myself sink away, and as Jack paced nervously, the rest of us piled into Lilly's pink tepee. With arms touching, we fell asleep.

I woke everyone up less than an hour later with my screams. Jack came running. The others just sat up sleepily. They were accustomed to my screams.

It was time to tell Jack the whole story. I started from where I left off the story that day in the clearing when Hercules came and Lilly and Arion

died. I told him everything. After I finished, he just looked at all of us.

I looked up at Jack. "Please tell me what you are thinking," I begged.

He just shook his head. "My friends are all weird bunyips." I cringed even though I had no idea what a bunyip was, but it didn't sound nice. "Well, at least he believes us," I thought to myself.

I found myself rubbing my palm over and over. I saw the others doing the same. Jack looked at us and asked, "Why do you do that?" I stopped and looked around. "It burns," I said.

Bets added, "It has burned since Lilly and Arion died." She said it breathlessly like she couldn't gasp in enough air. I felt the same way. If this weakened state we were in was permanent, we would need help to catch and kill the machayiwiv.

Charlie looked up at Jack. "We will need your help to save Emme." I had forgotten to tell him that part. My subconscious would not allow me to bring it up. Charlie told him as much as we knew about how I would be trapped in the car under the water. I broke out in a sweat while he was telling it, and even though I was with the others, I felt alone.

Jack listened, and when Charlie had finished, he turned toward the tepee opening. "I need time to think," he said. He took off running toward the house. I turned to leave.

"I need to see Eros," I told everyone. "I will see all of you tonight at Bets's house. OK?" They nodded and I walked slowly toward Gus. Gus sensed my fatigue and pain. He cantered gently and we headed toward Miss Esther's. It would have been faster to drive the Jimmy, but I needed the air to clear my thoughts. It took us almost an hour before we got there. I felt some better; at least my thoughts seemed clear.

Miss Esther came running outside, and as soon as I dismounted, she grabbed me in a bear hug with her muscular arms. I drew back in surprise.

"Ain't you ever been hugged before?" Miss Esther asked.

"You just caught me by surprise," I stammered. She was wearing arm protection, and I knew she was working with one of the predators.

"I am sorry 'bout Lilly. I cared about that little wounded bird. Hey, speaking of wounded birds, Bluey flew off yesterday." Miss Esther looked heavenward as she said it.

"Seriously?" I asked.

She nodded her head. “ ’Pears Bluey decided he was gonna fly after all.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled, and I grabbed her hand. I saw her face soften. She turned away. “ ’Spect you came to see that osprey Archie brought in yesterday.”

“Can I see him? Can I see Eros?” I asked.

“Is that what you call him?” she asked. “He is probably the biggest osprey I have ever done seen! Did you know that ospreys are one of the only predators that carry their prey vertically ’stead of horizontally? He is probably three years old and in the good shape he is in, might live to be twenty-five or thirty years old, maybe more.” She chattered on. I didn’t even hear her.

I saw Eros in a large screened pen by one of the sheds. I broke into a run, threw open the gate and lay on my back with my hand out to him. He hopped over and laid his head down on my arm. I stroked his back and lay there crying with my tears running into my ears. I talked to Eros, telling him about Lilly and Arion. I finally stopped and lay there sobbing. Eros was making his shrieking whistle sound. Later, Miss Esther called my mom and told her that the two of us were shrieking to each other and it was the eeriest thing she had seen, like we were crying.

It would be six weeks before Eros could fly, and we, the Spirit Warriors, were even more vulnerable. We were no closer to finding the machayiw. We were weaker and missing a member. I was ready to give up and die. I didn’t sign on for this in the first place, and without Lilly, I didn’t really care to live.

My mind was weak when I got home. Dad was waiting in the barn. “Let me curry Gus,” he said. “Why don’t you go and get something to eat?” My dad was a firm believer that hard work cured everything, so I knew he was worried about me when I got out of chores that easily.

As I walked into the house, I heard my mom on the phone. “Emme will damn well come if she pleases. I thank you to never call here again!” I heard the phone slam. I walked in. “Mom?”

“Oh, Em, hi. I was just having a conversation with Kevin.” My stomach turned. “He doesn’t want you or the others at Lilly’s funeral. He is telling everyone in town that you pushed Lilly and Arion off the cliff and then tried to blame him.”

I shook my head. “Why would I want to kill them?” I asked.

“He’s saying you and Lilly were lesbians.” I saw the anger toward Kevin in my mom’s face.

“Mom, look at me. We don’t care what he says. He beat Lilly. He killed her Mom; he beat Arion. In the end he will rot in hell and I will make sure it happens.”

I went to my room. My head hurt and my ribs ached. I thought they were broken, but right then it didn’t matter. Our twin beds were still pushed together, just like Lilly and I left them that fateful morning. I lay face down on Lilly’s bed and breathed in her sweet fragrance. I fell asleep in my jeans and boots.

I woke up screaming in the middle of the night. I felt my mom’s warm hand on my face shushing me and stroking my face. She slept in my bed every night after that until the day I died. Charlie slept in Ben’s room every night until I died. No one saved me from the car anymore, not even Charlie.



WHEN I WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, I heard Charlie and another female voice. I walked out and saw Rose! I ran to her and hugged her. She reminded me so much of Lilly, only older and sadder.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I’ll be staying here until the funeral. I will never set foot back in Kevin’s house.” I noticed she only called him Kevin and never Dad. I squeezed her hand. I pulled her into my room and we sat on the two twin beds cross-legged just like Lilly and I used to do.

I told Rose everything that had happened since she left, except for the spirit warrior part. She listened intently, laughing and smiling when I spoke of the good times Lilly and the rest of us shared. When I got to the prom, I stopped. But Rose wanted to know exactly how Lilly died and I finally told her.

When I finished, she stood up and looked out my window clutching Lilly’s pillow. “I intend to kill Kevin,” she said. “The sad part about it is that he wasn’t that bad when I was little. If you can believe it, I have some really good memories of the four of us. When Lilly was born, he changed into a monster. He became Kevin and stopped being Dad.”

I stood up and put my arm around her. “You won’t need to kill him, Rose. His time in hell is already pre-destined.”

Rose looked at me and said, “I feel bad that I didn’t save Lilly.”

“Me too,” I whispered, “but you need to know that both she and your mom tried to come to you more than once and each time they were beaten and brought back. They loved you, Rose.”

I left her standing at the window, staring at the tire swing under the tree that is mysteriously swaying back and forth. I gave her Lilly’s pillow. Somehow, I thought Rose needed it more than I did.

My dad moved to the couch. Rose slept in their bed so that Mom could sleep with me. Our family wanted her to stay. Like Lilly, Rose was quiet, gentle, and kind. I could tell that she would leave. The memories were too real for her here and a special man was waiting for her back home. She shared that much with me after I shared my relationship with Charlie. Rose

liked Charlie and she wished us happiness together. “Lilly would want to know that you were together,” Rose said. I smiled at the irony in those words.

That afternoon after I spent time with Miss Esther and Eros, I drove the Jimmy to the police station. I walked in and asked to talk with the chief of police. I had watched enough TV to know how to do this.

The officer helping me raised an eyebrow. “What exactly is your business with him?” he asked.

“I want to talk to him about the murder of Lilly Grayson,” I replied.

“Well now, young lady, we don’t know that it was a murder and even you yourself said she jumped off that cliff,” he replied.

“I don’t care what you say, I will sit here until the chief talks to me. And I will be as noisy as possible for as long as it takes.” I smiled sweetly and sat down. I reached for my smartphone, turned on my music loudly and started singing along. Now I couldn’t carry a tune at all, and it quickly became painful for anyone to hear. Before fifteen minutes had passed, I was in the chief’s office.

I told him all of Lilly’s story: her abuse, her mother’s murder, and Arion’s abuse. He listened quietly, and then he sighed. “I guess you realize what a quandary this puts us in, don’t you?”

I answered, “I don’t care about your quandary, I only care about justice for Lilly and her mom. Maybe in death, they can have the justice that was denied them while they were alive.”

He looked up at me. “I will be discussing this with the Mayor and asking him to suspend Kevin Grayson with pay while we sort this out.” I breathed a sigh of relief.

As I walked out, I heard the officer who helped me talking in a low voice to someone on the other line. “Oh, she’s here, all right. I just thought you would want to know.” I tried not to be paranoid. Surely he wasn’t talking about me, but I felt his eyes follow me and I thought he was talking to Kevin. Well, as my Nana said, “Hold your friends close and your enemies closer.” I wasn’t sure I wanted Kevin any closer.

I didn’t tell my parents I went to the police station. They had enough to worry about with me. Charlie and Rose were there for supper, and after we ate, Charlie and I went to Bets’s house to meet the others.

Rose decided to stay at my house and play card games with Ben. Ben fancied himself a card shark and Rose intended to “bring him down.” I was grateful to see Ben smiling.

Charlie drove the Jimmy to Bets’s house and we got out and walked down the basement steps. Jack was there as well as Ollie and Bets. He had decided to help us. He said he wasn’t sure why, but he felt drawn to help us.

I looked at Jack. “What is a bunyip?”

Jack looked at his feet. “The Aborigines, or native Australians, thought they were lake monsters who jumped out of a body of water to kill people, especially liking women and children. The word bunyip means devil or spirit. It is a mean, nasty, hairy creature with supernatural powers.”

“Why would you call us that?” I asked Jack.

Jack’s clear blue eyes looked at me. “I didn’t know any other word for what I saw and heard. I didn’t mean it, Emme.”

I stared back at Jack. “I’m beginning to believe that your bunyip is our machayiwiv.”

Charlie reached out to him and they clasped hands and slapped each other on the back. “Whatever it is, we will kill it, Jack,” Charlie assured him.

We sat down and as we did, we all groaned at the same time. Charlie lifted up his shirt and revealed a huge bruise over his left lower ribs. Ollie had the same bruise, and so did Bets. I already knew I had it. It went with our burning hands. It was the kick from Kevin that broke Lilly’s ribs.

Charlie spoke first. “When Lilly released her pain and thoughts to us, the connection between us made us feel her pain. Losing her has weakened us and I don’t know how fast, or even if, we will regain our strength.” Charlie shifted his weight. I noticed the tremor in his arm. I reached for him as he fell backward off the sofa, his arm flailing, his eyes rolled back in his head, and his neck arched. As we lowered him to the floor, he jerked over and over. I looked at the clock.

Several minutes went by, and Charlie was turning blue around his lips. I grabbed him and screamed at him, “Breathe, Charlie, breathe!” His jerking slowed and his breathing became regular. We laid him on the sofa, and although he tried to speak, it was over two hours before his words were coherent. “It begins,” he said.

“What begins?” Ollie asked.

“The battle is almost upon us,” Charlie said as he looked around for me. “Em, I have to teach you to die, tonight.”

I started shaking, “So soon after we lost Lilly? Charlie, you are too weak.”

“I’m not that weak that I can’t talk to you,” he retorted.

Bets looked at me. “I can’t watch this, Em. I’m sorry, I can’t do it.”

Ollie looked at me like I was already dead. “Me neither, Em,” and I saw the tears in his eyes.

In the end, it was just Charlie and Jack and me. Charlie had me sit on my haunches with my arms behind me. “You will be tied up, Emme. The first thing you have to remember is not to panic. Panic raises your heart rate and burns up your oxygen supply. The first thing that you will feel is the cold water. Embrace it, Em. Welcome the cold; breathe deeply and slowly. Go back, Em, relive the best parts of your life. Remember how you love and are loved.”

After I sat there for thirty minutes, my legs and arms were numb. Charlie told me to sit on my knees and tilt my head to get the air that would be trapped after the car submerged. “Don’t look outside, Emme, just concentrate on breathing. By this time, hypothermia will be setting in and you have to remember to breathe, or you will die from lack of oxygen.”

After another fifteen minutes, Charlie stated, “The car is now completely filled with water.” I started to panic. Charlie leaned toward me. “Em! Breathe the water in through your nose and close your eyes. Fill your mind with happy times and let your soul go. We will be coming for you, Em. You have to work your hardest to keep your body alive as long as possible.”

“I will try,” I whispered.

Charlie spoke harshly, “You have to do better than try. You have to promise me that you will do exactly as I taught you.”

“I promise,” I said.

“How much time do I have left until it happens?” I asked Charlie.

He looked at Jack and back to me. “Not much, maybe forty-eight hours.” I covered my mouth with my hands. What do you do when you only have forty-eight hours to live? I sat there stunned.

Jack reached for my hand. “I am an expert swimmer and lifeguard, Em. I will be with Charlie and the others to help find you. Remember, people

save people.”

Charlie asked Jack to take me home and come back so he and Jack could map out where they thought I would be. The Spirit Warriors showed Charlie what it looked like, but he needed to try and locate it on a map. I heard Charlie say, “Yellowstone River,” and I cringed. The Yellowstone River was fast moving, treacherous, and icy cold, even in the summer. Many people had died in it. My dad did not allow us to even wade in its waters. “Great,” I thought, “this is just great.” Jack dropped me off and went back to meet with Charlie.

Charlie did not come home to my house until late that night. He and Jack mapped several potential areas and looked at the speed of the river, as the car would move with the current. Around dawn, I woke the entire house screaming. I screamed like I had never done before, and even my mother couldn’t calm me. It felt like the screams I had made when Lilly died, the ones that I wasn’t even sure came from me. It took almost an hour before Charlie got me calmed down.

When I finally stopped screaming, I threw up huge amounts of water over and over again. Rose was holding Ben’s hand and they were both crying. Dad was holding Mom. She was crying. “What can scare her that badly?” she kept asking, but no one could answer but me. I would not, could not, tell her what the dream was about.

This time the dream was the same, but as I was drowning I was incoherently screaming again, and all the animals came to the river and jumped in, drowning in the water. I watched it happen over and over until there were no more animals left on earth to die. The Yellowstone was clogged with animal carcasses. I could not get through them to get to the surface of the water. My body lay with them. My hand was on Eros’s dead, featherless body. That was when I woke up screaming.

We all lay awake watching the sunrise. Charlie was in Lilly’s twin bed next to me. Each of us was lost in our own thoughts. I watched and thought that this might be my last sunrise.

Mom called Nana, and as the sun rose overhead, she pulled into the driveway. I watched her walk to the door. “I will miss her,” I thought to myself. Nana headed straight to my room. Charlie hugged Nana and walked out of the room. Nana shut the door and turned to look at me. “I have lived

a long time on this earth and I have seen a lot of things. I know when a soul is troubled.”

Before I could think, I blurted out, “I’m going to die, Nana, probably before the sun comes up tomorrow.” Nana grabbed my hands and pulled me to my knees with her. She grabbed my hands and enclosed them with hers in prayer. She prayed loudly and swayed back and forth. She prayed for me long enough that our legs went to sleep. “There now,” she said as we stood up, “it will be what it will be.”

We left my room to eat breakfast. I felt peaceful now. I apologized to everyone for disrupting their sleep. Nana interrupted, “Can we just eat?” And so we did.

Mom hurried Ben off to school. He wanted to stay home with me, as our parents had agreed to let the rest of us stay out of school until Lilly’s funeral. Dad headed out to do chores. I walked down the hall to take a shower. I heard Mom and Nana talking. My mom was scared and didn’t know what to do to help me. Nana’s soothing voice reassured her that she was a good mother and had done what she needed to do to raise me. I wrapped my arms around myself and pretended it was my mom holding me. “You are a great mom, the best,” I whispered.

After I was dressed, I headed out to saddle up Gus to go see Eros at Miss Esther’s. He came and put his square head on my shoulder. “Oh, Gus,” and I wrapped my arms around him. “You be good to Ben and Mom and Dad, and let them love you.” Princess nickered softly; I reached over and rubbed her velvet nose. “Same for you, Princess.” I rubbed my hand over her flank. “Gee, Princess, you are getting fat.” I had noticed that she was getting heavier. I made a mental note to ask Dad if he was feeding her more or if maybe we just needed to ride her more often. I lay my head on the saddle that Gramps had made for me. I swung my leg over Gus and we galloped off down the road.

When we got to her house, Miss Esther came out in her bathrobe. “My, you are an early bird, Emme.”

“Is it okay if I go and see Eros?” I asked.

“Of course,” she replied. As I headed around the corner of the barn, I noticed that Eros’s pen was empty. I looked around and I didn’t see him. I started to feel panicked. He couldn’t have gotten far with his broken wing. I walked over to the door of the pen.

I noticed a small pearl necklace wrapped around the latch. I picked it up. It was Lilly's. Kevin had to have taken it off her after she died. As I looked closer, I noticed that the clasp was missing like it had been ripped off her, and there was dried blood on the pearl. I clenched the necklace in my hand so hard that my scar started throbbing. Kevin had Eros!

As I ran back to Gus, my cell phone rang. I didn't need to look at the number to know who it was. "I swear I will kill you if you hurt one feather on Eros."

"Oh, really," Kevin laughed. "I seem to be in possession of something you want and you seem to possess something I want."

"What is it you want?"

"I want you to go back to the police station and tell them you were lying, that you were the one who pushed Lilly off the cliff and you made up the lies about me hurting her. When you finish that, and I will know when you do it, I will send you instructions on where to find Eros. If you tell your little boyfriend or any of your friends about this, I will kill your bird and boil him. I think you know what I am capable of now, don't you, Em? Be a good girl and get to town by noon. I'll have the water boiling in case you are late." Then he hung up.

I stood there shaking with rage. I ran past Miss Esther. "Emme," she called, "are you okay?" I waved her off and jumped on Gus and galloped home as fast as I could.

When I got home, I found Rose and pulled her outside. "If Kevin were going to hide something or someone, where would he hide them?"

"Emme, what's happened?"

"Nothing yet, Rose," I lied. "I'm just trying to get inside his head."

She thought for a minute. "He used to go fishing on a stretch of land he rents from a man in town."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"It is down Road 414 and the first cattleguard to the right. Go down it about a mile and you end at the river."

"The Yellowstone."

"Yes," Rose said. I already knew that. This was the beginning of the end.

The day was turning overcast. I ran to the Jimmy and drove to town. I stopped at the police station. A different officer was at the desk.

“I need to talk to the chief,” I demanded. He looked at me funny, but he took me right back. The chief looked up and motioned for me to sit down.

“I don’t have any news yet, if that is why you are here,” he said.

“That is not why I am here,” I said, talking fast. “I am here to tell you that I spooked Arion and he fell over the edge of the cliff with Lilly. It was an accident and I am sorry I lied to you. Kevin Grayson had nothing to do with Lilly’s death; I made that up.” I turned to go.

“Just wait a damn minute,” the chief yelled. “You are not going to prance in here and tell me you are lying and then just run off.”

I turned around and even though I tried to stop them, my hands were shaking and my breathing was hard. “I have to go. I am sorry for wasting your time.” I ran out of his office, and on the way out, I saw the officer that called Kevin the last time. I watched furtively as he picked up the phone. Good, that would give me time.



I RAN TO THE JIMMY and drove fast out to 414. I knew that Kevin would kill Eros even though I did as he ordered. I had to get to him before Kevin did. There was no cell phone coverage that far out on 414 so I knew he couldn't be by the river.

I turned at the cattleguard and drove fast down the bumpy gravel road. I was driving too fast as I hit a pothole and bounced my head into the roof of the Jimmy. "Damn, that hurt," I said to myself.

There were a lot of trees around the river and I quickly parked the Jimmy. I threw open the door and started shrieking for Eros. I heard something to my left. I broke out in a run and found Eros hanging upside down in a tree, his bandaged wing dangling and his beak taped shut. I looked around for a trap. Sure enough, there was a snare under Eros.

I climbed the tree and slowly pulled him up. I reached down in my boot and pulled out my pocketknife. I cut his legs free. I cut the duct tape off his beak. Eros laid his head against my chest. "We have to hide you," I told him. I held Eros and climbed back down. I walked carefully around the snare.

I ran upstream carrying him for about half a mile, and I spotted a hollowed out log. I stroked his head as I placed him in it. "You must stay hidden here until you hear Kevin leave. Then head back to Miss Esther as fast as you can." Eros shook his head up and down. I wasn't sure what he could understand, but I kept saying it in my mind as I touched him, hoping that even though we were not together, he could still understand me. I put moss all around the tree trunk.

I ran back through the trees. I saw Kevin pull up and look inside the Jimmy. He broke into a run and headed toward where Eros had been tied up. I ran as fast as I could past him on the outside, as quietly as I could, to get beyond him down river. I wanted him to think I was there with Eros. I made enough noise to let him know I was downstream of him.

After I heard him start following me, I doubled back and headed back to the Jimmy. I intended to get to the Jimmy, drive to town, and call Charlie. By now, he would know something was wrong. I listened carefully as I

reached the clearing where the Jimmy was parked. I heard nothing behind me and I saw nothing in the clearing. I sprinted toward the Jimmy. I opened the door, and as I swung my body into the car, I heard a meadowlark call out. How strange, I thought, that a meadowlark would be around here. I looked around to see where it was, and I felt a tremendous shattering pain in my head. Everything went black.

When I woke up, I was tied up in the back of the Jimmy and there was duct tape over my mouth. My neck felt sticky and I could tell I was bleeding. My head was throbbing, and as I opened my eyes, the brightness of the day made me feel nauseous. When I turned my head, I saw Kevin standing there.

“Well, well,” he said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. “Let me remember how this goes. You were saying something about laughing as I go all the way to hell. Looks like I will be the one who laughs now. I will be laughing, Emme, and that will be the last thing you hear before you go spend time with Lilly. Give her my regards,” he added, and smiled.

As he slammed the hatchback on the Jimmy, I arched my body and reached into my boot to get my knife. I had it between my hands when he opened the door again, but he saw it and grabbed it away from me.

“Aren’t you full of tricks?” he sneered. He put my pocketknife in his pocket. “You see that big rock over there, Em? It is okay if I call you Em, isn’t it?”

I narrowed my eyes and glared at him. “That’s where I am going to watch and laugh as you drown.” I felt my heart quicken. “But I’m thinking I need to add some tape to those hands and feet. It wouldn’t do for you to get away from me now, would it?”

He reached for the roll of duct tape, and as he pulled the duct tape around my right hand, he stopped and ran his hand over my scar. He seemed agitated now. “Where did you get this scar from?” he demanded. He pulled the duct tape off my mouth in a searing motion. My mouth was on fire, but I said nothing. He slapped me and my head rang. I felt nauseous again. “Talk, or I will choke you to death right here.”

I realized our plan depended on me being alive in the water, not dead before I got there. “What do you want to know?” I asked.

“Don’t play stupid with me,” he yelled, as he grabbed my hair and twisted my head up.

“I was cut with a knife when I was a child,” I answered.

“By whom?” he demanded.

“My brother Ben. It was an accident,” I lied.

I felt his hands around my throat. “One more time, Em, or I will kill you now.”

“Charlie did it.” I said. His hands tightened.

“Why?”

I planned my words carefully. “So we can talk to one another without using our voices.”

Kevin rolled back his head, released my neck and let loose with a piercing war whoop. Then he came back to me and pulled his face close to mine and stared deep into my eyes for several minutes. I stared back to let him know I wasn't scared of him. He reached behind me and pulled my hair out of the ponytail holder and wrapped my hair around his hands and buried his face in it. Now I was scared. I was prepared to drown, but not to be raped.

“Oh, Charlie,” I called out in my mind. He caressed my face and reached over and kissed my neck. I thought I heard him say “Golden Flower,” but I'm not sure. I started to struggle and he abruptly let go of me.

“This is getting interesting,” he said out loud, and started to pace. “I'm thinking you know some of my old friends that I am going to get to play with, if I am patient and wait long enough.”

My eyes widened. I suddenly realized who he was. He was not Kevin Grayson! He was the machayiw! He had been here all along. That explained Rose's story--how her dad had been good when she was little and horrible after Lilly was born. That's when the machayiw had found him. The evil we had prepared to meet was with us all the time! With Lilly, all this time in her home, in our homes. I felt sick with revulsion. That was why we didn't see him when we became one with the spirits. Charlie had asked if we had seen anyone unusual. Lilly had seen her dad; that wasn't unusual. I remembered seeing other human shapes. Who were they? I wished I could ask Lilly, now that I knew the truth.

Kevin put the tape back on my mouth and slammed the hatchback down. I lay on the floor while he wedged a rock on the accelerator and jumped out of the car, and the Jimmy moved forward. As promised, the last human sound I heard was his laughter. The Jimmy hit the water and the

current caught it and bounced it along, slowly taking in water. I started praying as the cold water slowly moved up my legs and then to my stomach, and finally covered my chest.

The cold water was now up to my neck. I remembered Charlie's words. "By now hypothermia will have set in. You will have to remember to breathe deeply." Every part of my body shook. I struggled to breathe. My arms and legs were numb. I saw my hair floating around me. I struggled up further on my knees and put my face close to the ceiling. Now I had more room and more time. I remembered my promise not to look outside. I took a deep breath and slowly closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, Lilly was sitting there looking at me with her chin on her knees. "Lilly," I cried out, only I couldn't talk.

She nodded. "Remember to breathe, Emme." I concentrated on breathing. "It won't be long now, don't be scared," she said. I felt peaceful with her there, even though I knew she was coming to take me with her. She motioned toward the headrest on the seat ahead of me. It had a jagged edge where it met the seat cushion. I had meant to get Dad to fix it but I kept forgetting. "You can get the duct tape off your mouth, Emme." Lilly pointed toward the edge.

I worked my way over to it and managed to get the edge of the tape against the sharp edge. It took some doing, but I managed to get it off my mouth and right cheek but leave it stuck on my left cheek. I cut my lip in the process. I dipped my chin in the water to rinse it off. "Oh Lilly, I have missed you." I leaned toward her. Lilly smiled and looked up and around. "Me too, Em, me too."

Lilly jerked her head up. She looked around twisting and turning as if to get a better view. "What are you looking at?" I asked Lilly. She concentrated with her brow furrowed. "Hercules, Electra, and Zephyr are here. They are running parallel to the riverbank. They are looking for Kevin. Kevin hears them coming. He has left the rock where he was sitting after he pushed you in the river. He is moving to the left of them. He is hiding behind a tree. Kevin has a gun and a big hunting knife!"

Lilly put her clenched fist in front of her mouth. She went on, "Hercules is getting closer and closer to the tree where Kevin is hiding. Electra and Zephyr have slowed down. Electra has stopped and is sniffing the air. She bares her teeth. Electra has leaped over a fallen tree and is on

the branches above Kevin. The battle has begun,” she said. Now Lilly looked like she was far away. “Hercules has attacked first. He has lunged around the tree, and knocked Kevin to the ground. Kevin is up and running. Hercules is charging towards Kevin. His mouth is open and his teeth are showing. He is snarling as he runs. Kevin dodges Hercules’ attack and stabs him in the shoulder. Hercules is still standing, but he has backed off, bellowing, trying to get the knife out of his shoulder. Hercules is hurt. Electra has dropped down on Kevin from the tree branch. He’s fired the gun. He missed Electra! Electra grabs his arm with her teeth; the gun falls to the ground. Zephyr is joining from the right. Electra, Zephyr and Kevin have fallen down in a heap and are rolling around. Electra has a tight grip on his neck, and she is throwing him back and forth. Kevin finds a rock and is holding it in his hand. He swings it at Electra’s head. Electra has fallen. She is not moving.” Lilly once again placed her clenched fist in front of her mouth. “Hercules is back in the fight and attacking again, as Zephyr holds Kevin by the leg with his teeth.”

Lilly looked at me. “Breathe, Emme, breathe.” I made an effort to breathe deeply. Lilly looked off. “Hercules has jumped on Kevin. He has hold of him by the neck. They are rolling around. Kevin has kicked off Zephyr. Kevin is throwing dirt in Hercules’ eyes. Hercules is upright, shaking it off. Kevin is up and running, Zephyr is by his right side, Hercules is coming behind him on the left. They are herding him towards the snare he had set for you, Em. The snare just went off.

“Kevin is in the snare now. He is dangling about six feet off the ground and screaming obscenities at Hercules and Zephyr. He’s telling them, ‘I killed you sons-of-bitches before, I will kill you again. I have beaten you over and over again. You sorry assholes! I will win again, you will see.’ Hercules is attacking Kevin in the snare. Zephyr is hanging off the ground in the snare with his mouth and claws, tearing the snare apart. The snare has broken. Kevin is on the ground. Hercules and Zephyr are attacking him. They are bloody.” Lilly looked concerned. “They have completely lost themselves in the kill.” Lilly turned her face away, as if what she saw was too bad to watch. “Kevin will not survive this,” Lilly said very matter-of-factly.

“Lilly!” I cried out. The water was up to my nose and there was no longer any air left near the roof of the Jimmy. I tilted my head up. I felt

Lilly next to me. "I'm here, Em, it's time, breathe the water, Em, and come to the clearing with me."

I breathed the cold water into my lungs and looked outside. I could swear I saw Jack with the tomahawk, but when I looked again, it was darkness. Lilly reached out her hand and I grabbed it.

Lilly and I were lying in the clearing, breathless and happy. We hugged for a long time. I looked around the clearing. It had never been more beautiful than now. The flowers were all in bloom, and the sun was warm in the turquoise blue sky. I felt high with the smell of lilacs carried on the warm breeze. White fluffy clouds like cotton candy floated by us as we lay on our sides talking excitedly. I was happy and at peace.

I looked at Lilly. Her hair was soft and silky and her skin was radiant and pink. She was dressed in a shiny, soft, goldish gown that flowed around her like silk. Her eyes were a brilliant, glossy brown and they gazed into my soul. I felt the love radiate outward from her.

"Oh, Lilly. I have missed you," I told her. "Are you happy?"

"Yes, I am loved," Lilly answered.

I smiled. "Are the streets lined in gold?" Lilly laughed with her head thrown back and leaned forward to hug me. As I leaned close to Lilly to hug her back, I felt her slipping away. "Lilly," I cried out, but she was on the edge of the clearing running in the opposite direction. She turned and smiled and blew me a kiss, and she was gone. I felt the clearing slipping away, and suddenly I was back in my body.

I was lying on my side on the bank of the Yellowstone, vomiting up river water. Jack was holding me as I tried to sit up. I was leaning into him, and he had on a sleeveless wetsuit that was slippery and cold. "Easy now, chunder it up," he said. I have no idea what a chunder is. And up came more river water.

Now I was on my hands and knees. "Charlie," I cried out.

Jack looked pained. "I don't know where they are," he said.

I felt a sense of urgency. Something was wrong. "We have to get out of here right now." I struggled to stand and he picked me up and carried me. He walked swiftly upstream, careful to stay in the shadows.

It didn't take long until Zephyr found us on the riverbank. He made the hurt sign, putting his paw to his head, and then made the signs for Hercules and Electra. I felt stronger now, and Jack helped me as we ran after Zephyr.

We paused for a moment when we see Kevin's mangled body under the snare.

Zephyr ran upstream where I had left Eros. We found Hercules and Electra there. Hercules had dragged Electra to the bank. He motioned for all of us to come together. I grabbed Eros and wrapped my arms around Hercules and Zephyr. I grabbed Jack, and as he crouched on top of Electra, we lay on top of him.

The only hope we had of resisting the loose spirit of the machayiwiiw was to join together. A hot wind picked up, and as the sun lowered behind the clouds, a bolt of lightning struck down from the heavens. The wind whipped at us as we lay together. We lay motionless for about fifteen minutes, and as abruptly as the storm had started, it stopped.

Hercules stood up and I looked at his stab wound. "It will need looking after, Charlie," I said. "Let's get Hercules and Electra to Archie."

Zephyr trotted off, and in a few minutes, Ollie returned carrying Bets's body. "I can't lift Charlie," he hollered, and Jack ran down the path to help. I helped Ollie lay Bets next to Electra. Within minutes, Bets rolled over and sat up.

"How's Electra?" she asked.

"Not sure," I said.

Jack and Ollie came with Charlie, and as we lay him next to Hercules, his body jumped up. He looked around, grabbed me, and lifted me off the ground. "We did it!" he yelled. "Em, you're alive!"

Charlie looked at Jack. "I can never repay you for saving Em."

"My pleasure," Jack smiled back. We ran to each other and hugged and laughed. Charlie slapped his fist to his chest and raised his scar to the sky. We all followed suit, and yapping, howling, and screeching, we celebrated. When we were done, we formed a circle and raised our right hands up again. "For Lilly," Charlie said. We all followed. "For you, Lilly."

Bets and I stayed with Electra while the boys started walking back to Charlie's truck. They didn't know exactly where I would be when they came, but they ended up only being a couple of miles away. They planned to drive the truck a few miles back toward town until they had cell coverage, and once they had called for help, they would come back for us. Kevin's car sat with the driver door open, but the keys were probably on him and none of us was willing to go anywhere near his body.

Jack had given me his jacket to wear, but I was still shivering and cold. Bets had me lie next to Electra and she lay on the other side of me with her arms wrapped around both of us. Now that the adrenaline had passed, I felt weak and sick. My head was throbbing again, my lip had started bleeding, and I sat up and vomited more water.

I looked down at the mixture of vomited river water and blood. It looked all swirled pretty and pink, like Lilly's pink flowers. "Lilly," I said to the pile of bloody water. "Your flowers are so pretty." I lay back down and I heard Bets's voice talking softly, but I couldn't hear the words and I drifted away.

I heard Bets yelling for Charlie. Electra was trying to stand. Bets was trying to hold Electra down and rouse me at the same time. I sensed what she was trying to do, but I couldn't make any of my muscles work anymore. Charlie came running and pulled off his jacket and shirt and then started pulling my clothes off. Bets looked at him like he had lost his mind. When he got all but my underwear off, he yelled for Bets to cover us with our clothes, and he wrapped his muscular body around my shaking sick self. I seemed to know what he was doing, but I didn't care and the darkness found me.

I was once again with Lilly in the clearing where I was warm and safe and loved. Lilly and I were lying there watching the fluffy clouds float by in the turquoise sky. Her skinny warm arm lay over my arm and she was smiling at me. The breeze was warm, and it smelled like grass and prairie flowers and our beautiful lilacs. I felt like I was lying on marshmallows. The sun suddenly went behind a cloud and my world went dark. I didn't see the ambulance, or Archie or Uncle Zach or Dad or Hercules, Electra, or Eros. I didn't even see the red eyes at the top of the tree line that followed the ambulance as it drove away.

When I opened my eyes the next time, I had no idea where I was, and I struggled to understand whether I was dead or alive. The first thing I saw was Charlie asleep in the chair with his head on the bed next to me. I called to him but nothing came out. I started to panic, but Charlie was by my side.

"Your voice is weak, Em. They had to put a tube down your throat to help you breathe."

I nodded and whispered, "How long have I been here?"

Charlie looked down. "Almost two days," he answered.

“That long?” I whispered again.

Charlie nodded. “They kept you sedated because you kept trying to pull the tube out of your throat. I’ll go get your Mom,” he said, “she and I have been taking turns staying with you during visiting hours.” I turned my head to the wall. I was tired and ready to go home.

When Mom came in, I hugged her long and hard. I had thought I would never get to see her again. “I want to go home,” I told her. “I know, baby, I know, but you have been really sick.” I fell back asleep clutching Mom’s hand in my left hand and feeling Charlie’s scar and mine touch on my right hand. This time, I dreamed of Lilly and me in the clearing, and I smiled in my sleep and whispered, “Lilly.”



I GOT TO GO HOME EARLY the next morning. The police had been by to talk to me about what happened with Kevin Grayson. I told them the story as it happened. How he kidnapped Eros to get me to go to the police station and lie. How I talked to Rose to see where he might have taken Eros, and how I drove out there and freed Eros, but was captured by Kevin and sent into the river in my Jimmy. I told them I didn't remember anything else, and I was careful to not tell them anything about the others.

The police officer asked me if I remembered who got me out of the sinking Jimmy and I said, "No." He said that I needed to thank Jack Arrington. "He swam for almost a mile in the freezing water and dove over fifteen feet below in the water to rescue you. Not everyone is capable of doing that," he added.

"I will be sure to thank him," I said.

"Archie's boy Charlie also saved you by keeping you warm. Did you know the ambulance took almost an hour to find you kids? It might have been even longer, but some huge, fool, rabid coyote stood in the road until they turned down the cattleguard."

I smiled to myself and made a mental note to thank Ollie. "I am blessed," I told him. And I truly was. I asked about what happened to Kevin. The officer shook his head. "He must have gotten trapped in his own snare. He was attacked and killed by a bear. It was an awful sight." My Mom made a noise and motioned for him to stop.

I asked about the Jimmy. The officer looked at his notebook and shook his head. "We'll never see it again. Zach Arrington drove Kevin's car back to the Grayson's house for Rose. I don't imagine she wants it," he added. "The Arringtons are good people, though," he told us. As if I hadn't figured that one out.

He took pictures of my injuries, and my Mom put her fist to her mouth and cried as she saw for the first time what Kevin Grayson did to me. My lip took six stitches to sew it back together and Melvin, Ollie's dad, had already talked to my mom about getting laser surgery on it after it heals, as it would leave a scar. There was a perfect outline in red of the duct tape that

was around my mouth. I turned around and parted my hair to let them take a picture of the fourteen staples it took Melvin to put the skin back together. I lifted my head up so they could take a picture of the finger mark bruises on my neck. I lifted my left arm and the boot shaped bruise was visible under my ribs. "It's ok, Mom, it's over now." She smiled at me and rubbed my back.

Lilly's funeral was the next day. Rose had taken over the arrangements and their old house. It was hard to believe that it had only been six days since Lilly died. Rose asked us what Lilly would have wanted, and we asked to have her buried in the clearing with Arion's remains. Uncle Zach helped with the arrangements and paid for a beautiful casket lined in white silk for Lilly. Nana bought a huge bouquet of pink lilies to lay on her casket. We agreed to have a public celebration of Lilly's life and then a private burial, with only Rose and us and our families. Joe would not be welcome at the burial.

The school gymnasium was packed. Lilly was loved, there was no question about that. Our Baptist preacher got up, started the service, and talked about how hard it was to imagine the kind of violence that Lilly had endured, but yet kept her good, sweet heart and faith. As Jack and Charlie played Ben and Lilly's "Friends" song and Raymond sang, we watched a slide show of Lilly's life. I watched her life play out before us. Her sweet cherub baby smile in her mom's arms, her first grade picture with her missing front tooth, a picture of her standing with her arms wrapped around Rose in matching Christmas pajamas, and a picture of the three of us girls together when we were in third grade. I stand a foot taller than Lilly and Bets. We have our heads together laughing.

More pictures of the five of us. We were always happy and smiling. Lilly on Arion, proudly displaying her saddle from her state barrel racing championship, with the rest of us around her. The picture of her and Bets the night they found out they made the varsity cheerleading squad. The picture of the five of us the weekend we learned how to become Spirit Warriors. The same one I now keep in my bedroom facing my bed. The picture of Lilly with her birthday cake and the yellow butterfly on her shoulder. The final pictures are of Lilly at our houses before the prom. The last picture, which stayed up for the rest of the service, was of the seven of us at the prom. In it, we stand in our tuxes with our arms draped over each

other. Jack has his head thrown back in laughter. Charlie has his head next to mine and we are both smiling with wide, happy smiles. I have my head leaning on his shoulder. Ollie and Raymond are looking at each other and laughing and Bets and Lily are looking straight at the camera smiling. The song finished and there was not a dry eye in the house, save Joe's.

I glanced at Ben. His face was contorted and red. I reached over and touched him and squeezed his hand. He grabbed hold of my hand and hung onto it. Rose was sitting with us, and Joe was in the back with his friends. Rose had asked me to say something at the funeral. For the life of me, I couldn't think of anything to say, but Nana and I talked, and I knew what Lilly would want me to do.

I walked to the front. I heard people gasp and whisper. I knew I looked terrible. Mom and I tried to put makeup on the worst of it, but I finally I took it off. "The truth needs to be seen," I told my Mom.

I started by thanking everyone for coming. Lilly always liked for people to be civil to each other. She got that from her mother. "We are here today to honor Lilly Grayson's life and memory," I started. "Everyone in here has been treated to Lilly's sweetness and love. She was given the worst lot in life, and yet somehow she reached above that and reached above all of us. She showed us love in grace and acceptance, and even though she had little joy or love in her life, she brought joy and love to others. Lilly would not want her funeral to be about how she died, she would want it to be about how she lived. I am going to share Lilly's Grayson's secrets to a happy life with you, so you can pass the love and happiness on to others just as Lilly did.

"First, love those who hate you. It is not as hard as you think it will be.

"Spend time with animals. We are all on this earth together and they need us as much as we need them.

"Give as much as you get. Give a smile, or your time, when someone gives you something. Ask for nothing in return.

"And love your friends."

I looked down at my hands. "Lilly would want something good to come out of her death, so let's be kind to one another in honor of Lilly. Let's be civil to one another in honor of Lilly. Let's show respect to each other in honor of Lilly. And finally, let's show love to each other in honor of Lilly." I stepped away from the podium and hit my right fist over my heart,

raising my right palm to the sky. Charlie, Jack, Ollie, Raymond, and Bets stood up. “In honor of Lilly,” we said at the same time with our right hands raised up. The entire auditorium came to its feet with right arms extended. “In honor of Lilly,” they chanted. I walked by her casket back to my seat and rubbed my hand the length of it and whispered, “In honor of my Lilly.”

Ben had composed a tune for Lilly, and he walked up the steps to the podium. He picked up his violin and played. His piece was called “Lilies in the Wind”, and it was beautiful. It started with a soft soothing sound that reminded me of the wind blowing through the grass. As he played, the violin sounded almost angry, like a storm had swept across the clearing. The music ended with the same soft soothing sound. It was a perfect representation of Lilly’s life--the soft calm joy she brought, the angry trying times of abuse, and the peaceful place where she was now. I felt the music. I finally felt it. I noticed several people holding their cell phones up, recording his performance.

Ben noticed no one. Ben’s face was composed, but when the song ended, he dropped his bow and buried his face in his hands as the crowd walked out. Bets and I went to him and hugged him. “I wish I could have grown up faster,” Ben lamented.

“Lilly will always be here, and here, Ben.” I touched his chest over his heart and his head. “We will keep her memory alive and she will always be young and beautiful, even when we are old.”

We buried Lilly in the clearing one week to the day after prom. The only access to the clearing was on foot or horseback. Archie and my dad saddled up all the horses. Uncle Zach pulled the horse drawn wagon out of the barn, and he and Archie washed and painted it. Nana had the florist decorate it in greens and pink lilies. The funeral home delivered the casket to the Arrington house and Charlie, Jack, Bets, Ollie and I carried it from the car to the wagon.

We had Lilly dressed in her western shirt and Wranglers that she wore when she won her barrel racing at the rodeos. We laid the belt buckles and ribbons in her casket along with her cheerleading uniform. The saddle would be buried in the grave with her and Arion’s remains. We waved the funeral home people off after we loaded the casket. I tied Gus up to the back of the wagon with the pair of Lilly’s tiny empty cowboy boots with the pink roses in the stirrups.

Archie climbed on the wagon and we helped Nana up. Archie yelled, “Giddy up” and the wagon slowly moved forward with Gus walking behind. The rest of us mounted up and slowly rode to the clearing. I had come up yesterday to show Uncle Zach the exact place in the clearing that Lilly and I had lain after I drowned. The exact place where the air smelled of sunshine and wild lilacs. The exact place where Lilly would be forever with us. As I laid face up on the grass, he walked around me and marked out a rectangular shape to dig for Lilly’s grave.

The wagon lurched past the tepees and into the clearing, stopping at the pile of dirt. Archie helped Nana down. The men tied ropes to Lilly’s casket and we slowly lowered it into the ground. Archie gave her a warrior sendoff and Nana said a prayer as we lowered. Ben played “Lilies in the Wind” on his violin. We dropped lilies on the casket and placed her saddle in the grave.

We passed out shovels and the men started shoveling dirt on the casket and the saddle. They finished the burial quickly. I picked some of the wild lilacs and laid them with the pink lilies in the shape of a peace sign. I patted the ground, warm from the sun. “Rest in peace, Lilly, my Lilly,” and the tears fell off my cheeks into the warm earth.

Jack walked over to me, and saying nothing, sat down and grabbed my hand. I leaned into him and we sat there together. I was lost in remorse and regret. I should have saved her; I, above all people, should have known what she was living through. How could I have not seen it, the abuse?

Jack whispered as if he had read my thoughts, “You couldn’t fix this, Em. I feel the same way.” I looked at him and wondered if I really said it out loud or whether he just guessed how I was feeling. Jack turned and walked slowly back to the others.

I felt Charlie’s presence. Charlie knelt down and put his arm across my shoulder. I leaned into him. I sighed. “Why did Lilly have to die? I would have given my life to save her.”

Charlie looked at me. “Lilly told me once that she knew what she would have to do to save you. She always knew that her life was intertwined with yours. That you must go on. You are the key, Em, the only person who can change what is to come. Lilly made the ultimate sacrifice so that we could kill the machayiwiiw.”

I looked down at the fragrant dirt and up to Charlie's face. "What? Lilly knew she would have to die to save me? Why didn't she say something? I could have saved her, Charlie. I would have died for her. I would have. I would have. I would have. I swayed back and forth and my voice was a whisper now. "I grew up knowing I would die, I wasn't afraid to die for Lilly."

Charlie knelt in front of me and grabbed my hands. "Don't you think Lilly knew that? She was your best friend. She knew what you would do before you knew. This was the only way Lilly knew to save you."

I looked at Charlie. "I just want her back. Charlie you are powerful, you could bring her back. I just know you could."

Charlie looked at Lilly's grave. "None of us will survive this thing called life, Em. What we have after this life is what counts. There we will always, for all eternity, be together. Lilly is there, Em, waiting for us, loving us, and wishing us happiness. We have to go on and live our lives until we are with her again."

I nodded and wiped my eyes with my sleeve. Charlie stood up and extended his hands. I grabbed them and he pulled me up. We walked back to the others.

Charlie called out to the others, "Before you leave, how about a game of General Custer's Last Stand?" Bets and Ollie and Charlie and I smiled.

"Okay," I yelled, "everyone on Custer's side, get your horse and line up behind me."

Charlie yelled out, "The winners' side is over here!" Ben scrambled to join Charlie. True to form, Ollie was behind me and Bets was beside me. Jack swayed back and forth between us, and finally he headed to Charlie's side when Uncle Zach did. My mom and dad filed in behind me. Archie and Nana decided to sit it out, and Raymond joined our side, although he barely knew how to ride. Bets's mom was on our side, and her dad went to Charlie as they all laughed. Ollie's parents came to my side to be with Ollie. Rose rode up to me. "I always did favor losers," she said. We all laughed.

Charlie and I laid out the ground rules. It had to follow The People's version of the story, and he showed everyone where he or she would ride to and where he or she would fight. As I yelled, "Go," the People started circling the first group of mounted cavalry in the creek. The sounds of pows and whams were exchanged. The soldiers fell off the horses and then snuck

off to the next hill to be killed again. Some of the People fell as well, and scalps were taken.

I watched from the middle of the hill with Ollie. Ollie played General Custer's brother, so he would fall with me, as would Raymond. It took a while as Ollie, Raymond and I waited in a circle with our pretend guns and knives, waiting for the battle.

Ollie reached out to me and I grabbed his hand. "In the end," Ollie said, "I will be standing here with you, Em."

I looked at him, puzzled. "It's just a game, Ollie."

"Today it is, but I feel in my heart that when the time comes, it will happen just like this." Ollie looked straight at me. "Maybe then I can repay you for saving me from Joe and rescuing my lunch, and for being my friend when I needed one the most."

I thought back to that day in grade school when I knocked Joe down over and over again. "Bear poop," I thought to myself. "Oh, Ollie" I murmured, "You don't owe me anything and besides that, we defeated the machayiwiv."

When the fight reached us, we powed and whammed and stabbed, but we fell at the end and the People whooped and hollered as they scalped us. They were not very serious scalpers, and before long we were all in a heap laughing just like we did a long time ago when we were young and innocent. Everyone clamored for another game, and we played until the sun was almost down.

Archie called out to us. "It's time to go."

Charlie, Bets, Ollie, Jack, and I would be sleeping in the tepees tonight with Archie. We would not leave Lilly alone on her first night here. We hugged our families, and Charlie and Jack made a fire.

Zach Arrington was one of the last to leave. He turned to me. "Emme, I just wanted to let you know that the lawsuit was settled over the Hines ranch today. His children lost the suit. The judge ruled in our favor, and Oscar Hines's last will stands as we wrote it. Lilly had the papers drawn up to place you in a guardianship position with the preserve should something happen to her. I'll call you tomorrow and we can talk about the papers I need signed right away." I nodded wearily.

Archie waved to us and said he would be back later. We stood and looked at each other. We felt a warm breeze slide around us. I felt the soft

breeze touch my face, as soft as a Lilly touch and smelling of lilacs. I closed my eyes. "Lilly is happy," I said. We all nodded in agreement. We joined hands, and on the count of three, we all screamed "Lilly," and looked up at her star. The ones on the Big Dipper that were the Wolf and his dog were now Lilly and Arion. As we looked up, I could have sworn Lilly's star got brighter for a moment and then looked like the others.

"Did you see that?" Bets cried. "It was Lilly!" We all smiled at each other.

"It sure was," Charlie said.

I looked back towards the hill and the light from the fire highlighted an area off to the right. In it stood my warrior, staring at me with his dark eyes. We stared at each other for what seemed like several really long moments. I made a fist with my right hand and struck the left side of my chest with it and raised my arm up with my palm facing the warrior. He stood quietly for several seconds and then mimicked my movement. We stood there looking at each other with our palms up. A gust of wind whipped the fire up and my warrior disappeared. I turned around to find Charlie's eyes on me. I grabbed his hand tightly and we walked back to the fire. Together.

Looking back, that day was one of the saddest and happiest of my life. We buried Lilly, but we had defeated the machayiwiiw. I had survived!

We were invincible. Nothing could touch us now. I had Charlie and the others. An uneasy part of me felt that this battle was too easy. I felt it would not be this simple. I had a feeling what was to come would test and divide the Spirit Warriors. But for tonight, we sat around the fire telling stories about Lilly and laughing like we had all the rest of our lives.

In the distance, a pair of red eyes watched us from the top of one of the trees and a meadowlark chattered angrily. But none of us heard it.

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