



Kate
Pearsall

BITTERSWEET IN THE HOLLOW

"Positively spellbinding."

—Sasha Peyton Smith, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *The Witch Haven*

**FREE
SAMPLER!**

ATTENTION, READER:

**PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS
IS NOT A FINISHED BOOK.**

An advance readers copy is the first stage of printer's proofs, which has not been corrected by the author, publisher, or printer.

The design, artwork, page length, and format are subject to changes, and typographical errors will be corrected during the course of production.

If you quote from this advance readers copy, please indicate that your review is based on uncorrected text.

Thank you.

Bittersweet in the Hollow • Kate Pearsall

ISBN: 978-0-593-53102-0

Trim: 5 1/2" x 8 1/4"

On Sale: October 2023

Ages 12 up • Grades 7 up

384 pages

\$18.99 USA / \$25.99 CAN

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

BITTERSWEET IN THE HOLLOW

Kate Pearsall

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by G. P. Putnam's Sons,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by Kate Pearsall

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.
The Penguin colophon is a registered trademark of Penguin Books Limited.

Visit us online at [PenguinRandomHouse.com](https://www.PenguinRandomHouse.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

[CIP TK]

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780593531020

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

[Vendor Code TK]

Design by Nicole Rheingans
Text set in Perrywood MT Std

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

June

➡➡ Strawberry Moon ⚡⚡

June's full moon peaks as wild strawberries blush to ripening. Emotions run high on full moon nights, and summer heat brings with it a restless energy that heightens our intuition. Beware of fiery tempers, unnecessary risks, igniting passions, and well-concealed deception. An ideal time for working charms of protection, decisiveness, strength, love, and fertility.

➡➡ In Season ⚡⚡

Garden: asparagus, beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cherries, greens, green onions, herbs, peas, radishes, rhubarb, strawberries, and sweet peppers.

Forage: wild strawberries, sarvisberries (gather from the trees on top of the mountain to avoid worms), stinging nettles, dandelion greens, chicken of the woods mushrooms, wild carrot, arrow leaf, and cow lily root.

➡➡ Stinging Nettle Rope for Protection ⚡⚡

Spin the long fibers from stinging nettle into yarn under the full moon and braid three strands into a rope. Knot the rope around the doorknob to protect a place, or around the wrist to protect a person. When the threat has passed, burn the rope or invite new trouble. A bowl of beer in the garden will get rid of snails and slugs, but of late has proven to attract the eldest son of the family on the hill. Placing a slug in the bowl before setting it out seems to work, judging from the gagging and spitting sounds last night.

—Elora James, June 1935



CHAPTER ONE

HERE'S WHAT I know for sure: A cast iron skillet must be seasoned with lard. Pickling and preserving are best done during a waning moon. And secrets buried deep never stay that way.

I plant myself in front of the box fan wedged into the window and lift the hem of my shirt so the air can move across my skin. The Harvest Moon was once a grist mill, and its thick, old limestone walls help cool the inside. But we serve breakfast and lunch six days a week, and there's no escaping the heat once it really gets cooking.

Gran eyes me from the opposite side of the small kitchen where she's prepping food for tomorrow night's festival. She runs the blade of her knife between the ribs of a side of pork she was given for curing the Thompson baby of colic. Breaking through the bone, dismantling it piece by piece,

her hands never pause, never falter, even with her gaze on me. She tosses strips of meat into a bowl of spicy marinade, her own secret recipe, and the bones into a roasting pan for broth. Nothing ever wasted.

My sisters and I grew up in this kitchen with its stainless steel tables, white walls, and faint scent of bleach. We've been rolling out biscuit dough, scrubbing salt into cast iron, and sneaking spoonfuls of strawberry moonshine jam from the time we could barely see over the counter. So I know what Gran is thinking: Standing here next to the fan could be construed as idleness, something she cannot abide, even if it's only June and already ninety degrees in the shade.

A bead of sweat slides down the back of my neck, drawn out by the humidity that's been hunkered down around the base of the mountains for weeks now. I once read that there's a correlation between an increase in temperature and in brutality. That hotter summers are violent ones. I don't know if that's true, but with the way the air sits now, thick and heavy, everyone's temper seems set to boil.

At the back of the kitchen, Rowan, my older sister by eleven months, lifts the metal handle of the commercial dishwasher, releasing a cloud of steam that plasters her dark hair against her pretty face. All four of us sisters have long dark hair, bright blue eyes and rosy full lips, but Rowan has the darkest and the bluest and the fullest. Yet she wears her beauty like armor to keep others from getting too close. A rose with sharpened thorns.

Her shirt lifts as she reaches up to put some glasses away on a high shelf, just enough to expose a few lines of the

black ink that slithers and curls along her hip. It was Mama's discovery of the snake tattoo that relegated Rowan to dish duty this month. And much as I'd like to avoid the dining room, I don't envy her. It's the hottest job in the kitchen.

Sorrel, our eldest sister, shoves through the swinging door, a tray piled high with dirty dishes on one shoulder. She rushes past me toward the dishwashing station as Rowan turns, likely unable to hear Sorrel's approach over the rattle of the high-pressure wash cycle. They collide with a clatter, and the entire tray tips backward. Plates and glasses clang against each other, and all I can do is watch, waiting for everything to come crashing down. Yet somehow, at the last possible second, Sorrel manages to right it.

She lets out a slow breath of relief just as a single steak knife, teetering on the edge, topples over the side. It lands on its point with a sharp thunk, quivering as it sticks straight up from the floorboards.

"Knife fell," Mama warns from her station, pausing in drawing her own serrated blade through the green skin of a tomato.

"Trouble's comin'," Gran finishes the old bit of folk wisdom with a glance toward the window. The skies have gone a sickly shade of green as storm clouds gather strength over the mountains.

It may sound like superstitious nonsense, but this is the true James family legacy. For as long as I can remember, in the evenings, long after the last customer had gone home, we'd write our wishes in white ink on bay leaves, crushing them between our fingers and releasing them to the wind

over and over until all the air around us was scented with their bitter green bite. We learned special words, never to be written down, that must be said in one whispered breath. We watched as burns from hot pans disappeared clean off the skin with little more than Gran's gentle murmur of a few of those words.

"Watch yourself," Sorrel snaps at Rowan as she bends to slide the tray off her shoulder and onto the counter. Then she spins to glare at me. "And thanks for just standing there, Linden. As usual." It's snakebite quick, and by the time I feel the sting, she's already turning away.

We've always been close, four sisters born in as many years meant we had to be. But now that Sorrel is back from college, everything feels different. The first James girl ever to go, it's like she doesn't quite fit in the same space she left behind.

Mama wipes her hands on the dish towel tucked into the apron strings around her waist, then sets two final plates on a large tray. "Order's up," she tells me with a nod toward the dining room.

No amount of wishing on bay leaves will get me out of work. I glance once more at the knife in the floor and push past Sorrel and out of the kitchen.

When I reach my table, I set the tray on a stand, then slide each plate in front of the proper customer. Fried green tomato BLT for the man with the beard, buttermilk biscuits and sausage gravy for the younger one with a tiny hole in his collar, skillet-fried chicken drizzled with honey and a side of soup beans for the woman with the glasses, and a slaw

dog with thick-cut homemade potato chips for the little boy who keeps wiping his nose on his sleeve.

“Let me know if y’all need anything else,” I say, dropping an extra stack of paper napkins next to the boy as they tuck into their lunches.

I move to pick up the empty tray, and a taste like the candied jalapeños Gran makes at the end of the summer, sweet and hot, lights up my tongue. My head jerks up in surprise, catching the younger man gazing toward the woman when the bearded man isn’t looking.

I turn toward the kitchen, eager to avoid secrets I shouldn’t know, only to collide with someone. Hard. The edge of the tray smashes into my chin and drives my teeth into my tongue. I stumble backward, tripping over my feet. Just as I’m about to end up ass over teakettle in front of everyone, a hand shoots out to grab my shoulder. When my gaze travels up the strong arm to an all too perfect face, it’s only my stomach that plummets to the floor.

Cole Spencer. The town’s golden boy, at least according to the gossip that fills the diner day in, and day out. Class president, valedictorian, star quarterback, basically God’s blessed gift to Caball Hollow all wrapped up in a six-foot package of muscles and glowing skin. His sun-kissed hair might as well be a goddamn halo.

He drops my arm and slides his hands into his pockets. “Watch where you’re going, James.”

James, like he can’t tell me apart from my sisters. Like we’d never been close. Like none of it had ever happened.

He hasn't been in here much since last year, but I heard he's helping with football training camp this summer, and it's tradition to come to the Harvest Moon after. A tradition Cole started back when his dad and mine still used to camp out at the corner table between shifts. Back when things were different.

"Sorry." I nod slowly, sucking the sting out of my tongue. "Not all of us can float above the earth on angel wings."

The corners of his eyes narrow, and his body tenses up underneath his worn gray T-shirt. A reaction so subtle, I might have missed it if I hadn't been watching for it. While the entire town may revere the Spencer family, Cole has never been comfortable with the adoration or the pressure of keeping up appearances. Not when the Spencers have secrets of their own.

But my petty victory is short-lived, as a taste like raw ramps slides under my tongue, pungent and sharp with fear and disgust. My nose wrinkles reflexively, and I swallow hard against the invasion, struggling to push away any feelings that aren't my own. The kind that seep in whenever I'm not careful, until I'm heavy and bloated with them.

It's bad enough to be unwillingly privy to someone's innermost feelings, but it's gutting to have such a potent reminder of how differently Cole sees me now. And that he's right to.

"So can we sit here, or . . . ?" Bryson Ivers, the kicker for the football team and Cole's frequent shadow, slings an arm around Cole's shoulders and gestures toward an empty table near the door. I startle at his sudden appearance.

“Whoa, sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt . . .” He waves his hand between Cole and me. “Whatever this is.”

My fingers tighten against the tray and my cheeks warm as Cole’s honey-colored eyes come back into focus. There’s something in his expression, gone too quick for me to name. A self-satisfied grin spreads across his lips in its place, and it dawns on me just how long I’ve been staring at him. I blink and look away.

“What was that all about?” Bryson asks as he pulls Cole toward the open table, not realizing or not caring that I’m still close enough to hear.

“You know how she is,” Cole says with a half shrug. His voice drops lower, and I can’t make out the rest of his words, but Bryson throws back his head and laughs.

I push through the swinging door to the kitchen, a bitter taste like chicory root in my mouth. I’m sure Cole will have forgotten all about me by the time he finishes his lunch, but I’ll be replaying this moment for a good long while and kicking myself for letting him get under my skin.

“What’s wrong?” Rowan asks when I scramble to the back of the kitchen.

“I can’t take the new table,” I urgently whisper with a glance toward Mama and Gran. “Sorrel, will you do it?”

“My section is chock-full, Linden.” Sorrel doesn’t even look up as she checks over a tray, waiting for the rest of the order. “I have enough of my own tables to worry about.”

“Who jerked a knot in your tail?” Rowan leans a hip against the counter next to Sorrel and crosses her arms. “You know Linden would do it for you.”

Sorrel huffs and turns back to me. “There’s not always going to be someone here to fight your battles, Linden. The sooner you learn that, the better.” She shoots a dark look at Rowan. “That’s how I’m helping her.” As she shoves her order pad into the front pocket of her apron, she leans in and murmurs low so only I can hear her. “Good lord, quit being such a baby.”

I look down and study my hands. “It’s Cole,” I say softly, the words sticking in my throat like gristle. I hate that he can still get to me after all this time.

With a pointed sigh in Sorrel’s direction, Rowan pushes off the counter and pulls off her dirty kitchen apron, the kind that’s plain white and easy to bleach, exchanging it for the pretty embroidered one on the hook by the door.

Sorrel is already shaking her head at Rowan. “Mama said you’re pearl diving all month—no tables and no tips. She’ll be madder’n fire if you’re not back here washing dishes.”

I glance over to where Mama stands with her back to us, scribbling on a notepad with the phone squeezed between her ear and shoulder. She’s probably taking an order or placing one with a supplier. Either way, she won’t be distracted long.

Before I can muster the courage to stop her, Rowan squeezes past Sorrel and pushes through the swinging door. “Be back directly,” she tosses over her shoulder.

Sorrel watches her go, mouth set in a hard line. I hesitate for a moment more, then follow Rowan out of the kitchen, pausing behind the front counter. She’s already made it to the long table where Cole sits surrounded by his friends and

is scribbling their orders down on her pad, flatly denying Bryson's substitution request. As she passes me on her way back to the kitchen, she slides me the ticket with a wink. I'll hang it on the order rail, and Mama will be none the wiser.

Just as I start to let myself relax, the Harvest Moon is plunged into darkness. A hush falls over the dining room as the sky outside swiftly turns black. I look toward the big front window as the long-distance bus turns on its headlights and pulls away from the stop at the corner. Summer storms can be sudden and powerful in Caball Hollow, but this one is blowing up especially quick.

In a burst of wind, the front door blows open so hard it bangs into the wall. I lift a hand to protect against the onslaught of dust and debris that gusts in on the draft, scented faintly with sweet asphodel blossoms and peppercorns, until the wind shifts again and the door swings shut.

When I open my eyes, a face I haven't seen in a long while is looking back at me from the other side of the counter.

"Dahlia," I force out as my mouth goes dry. "I didn't know you were back in town."

Dahlia Calhoun graduated with Sorrel, went off to college in the city, and never looked back. We'd been friends once, an unexpected pair perhaps, as she was outspoken and well-liked, and I was quiet and strange. I nearly didn't recognize her because her hair, which had been the color of mouse fur, is now an improbable shade of red, like it's been poured directly out of a Cheerwine bottle.

"Hi, Linden." She leans across the laminate countertop to pull me into a quick hug, and the brightness of lemon bursts

against the roof of my mouth. “You know how it goes. The reigning Moth Queen has to crown the new one, so here I am.” She shrugs, but then something sparks in her eyes. “You’re going to try for queen next year, right?”

Each year during the Moth Festival, senior girls complete projects that honor the history of Caball Hollow in the hopes of being crowned Moth Queen and earning a college scholarship. Dahlia’s project was a podcast about the legend of the Moth-Winged Man that inspired the festival. Now she’s majoring in broadcast journalism, which is no surprise, considering her voice, all smoky and buttery like sourwood honey, and her habit of never running out of questions. But the idea of me ever being the Moth Queen is laughable for all manner of reasons.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” I hedge.

“Are you kidding? With your recipe collection project, you’d be a sure thing. You know my mamaw was so pleased when you wanted to learn her old recipes. She used to love to talk about the time she spent with you before she passed.”

Asking elderly neighbors to share their old family recipes was plain natural curiosity at first. I’d always liked to bake, but so often favorite dishes come with as many memories as ingredients, and I could tell it made folks happy to share their knowledge with someone who was keen to listen.

Dahlia’s grandmother, Parlee Wilkerson, agreed to teach me how to make her famous salt-rising bread. It had once been a tradition in Caball Hollow with nearly as many variations as there were families, but these days few have the time or inclination for such labor-intensive baking. Dahlia

lived with her grandmother then, and we'd gotten to know each other during the two-day process. Afterward, Mrs. Wilkerson kept inviting me back to share more: the vinegar pie her great-aunt had perfected, the blackberry dumplings made from leftover biscuit dough that were a favorite of her mother, and the cinnamon apple cake that had a splash of her husband's homemade moonshine. Through it all, Dahlia and I became closer, our friendship spilling out of the kitchen to school and beyond.

But all that was before. Salt-rising bread is notoriously finicky dough, and tradition says a failed loaf is a sign of ill fortune. That day in the kitchen with Dahlia and her grandmother, the recipe worked, but it never has for me since.

"I'm not really doing that anymore." My neck goes hot, but my fingertips feel cold. How is it possible to both long for something and dread it at the same time? My eyes slide away from Dahlia to the table where Cole sits with his friends. "Not since last summer."

"Oh." Her eyebrows draw together in sympathy, and I watch as she comes to the wrong conclusion. "If you're worried the judges will hold what happened last year against you, don't be. Everyone knows it was a terrible accident."

"An accident, right." I shrug and glance away. More like a scandal.

When I meet her eyes again, she gives me a sympathetic smile and leans closer. "You really can't remember anything?"

A chill goes through my body like my blood has been switched for ice water, and I squeeze my eyes shut. This is why I avoid everyone who was there the night I went

missing. I've spent the last twelve months trying to forget what little I remember, and now, with just a few words, I'm back in those woods. The darkness pressing in on me with an unnatural weight, unseen branches pulling at my hair and tearing at my skin as I run fast. Faster. Fast as I can. My chest heaves, the memory fragment stealing my breath even now. Dahlia doesn't seem to notice.

"Only bits and pieces," I finally answer. My hand trembles as I press it to my brow. "Nothing that makes any kinda sense. The doctors call it post-traumatic amnesia."

A horn honks out front, and Dahlia turns to look. "I've got to go, but there's something I want to talk to you about. You'll be at the festival tomorrow, right?"

I swallow the tang of hot fear and manage a nod. She smiles wide and squeezes my hand, then hustles toward the door, pausing a moment to pat Cole's shoulder and wave to Bryson across the table. A man I don't recognize, in a Caball Hollow High School Athletics polo shirt, holds the door open for her, and then she's gone.

When I can't see her anymore, I let my mind press around the edges of that night last summer, like mapping the shape of a bruise. But all I have is the tattered edges of moth-eaten fabric.

The Appalachians are among the oldest mountains in the world, once connected to the same ancient range as the Scottish Highlands. These hills and hollows are where legends and lore thrive, alive and well. Mine is a story of being lost for a night in the vastness of the National Forest, of

fearing the unknown and what may be hiding in shadows of the deepest dark. But make no mistake, it's far from the only mystery held beneath these ancient peaks.

And as much as I want to forget, I know that sometimes secrets are seeds, just waiting for the right conditions to sprout. The deeper you bury them, the stronger they grow.



CHAPTER TWO

SOMEWHERE WAY up in the middle of the night, I kick off the last stretch of tangled sheets and stare at the whorls and knots in the tongue-and-groove ceiling. The storm clouds never did deliver on their threat of rain, and now the humidity is so thick that the air feels heavy with it. The farmhouse itself seems to sag under its weight.

Bittersweet Farm doesn't have air-conditioning. Gran claims the house is too old and temperamental to retrofit with central air, but I have my suspicions she just doesn't want to give us any excuse to sleep in on summer mornings and shirk our chores.

I roll over, searching for a cool spot on my pillow, when a sound reverberates in the distance. Church bells. Not the dutiful call to Sunday service or the joyful chime of a wedding

celebration. No, these bells mean something else entirely. Mournfully deep and slow, they toll death.

As the quiet starts to close back in, leaving only the even sound of my younger sister Juniper's sleeping breath in the bed next to mine, a knock at the front door startles me back from the edge of sleep. Late-night visitors aren't all that unusual at Bittersweet Farm. At the end of the day, long after the one streetlight in town switches to blinking yellow, those in need of our special skills seek us out.

They come when the sky is inky purple and moonlight limns the gravel path down to the old summer kitchen behind the farmhouse. Some have been up for hours, rocking babies with earaches or children with fevers, and are too fretful to wait for morning. They're willing, at last, to try the old ways they look down their noses at us for practicing. So embarrassingly backward, they snicker, until it's them that need our help. Then they hope the rumors might be true, that somehow our homemade remedies and whispered words can do more than should be possible.

Others wait longer still, until the deepest part of night, before they summon the courage to ask for what they want. Those are usually the ones desperate for something, love or money, though they sometimes ask for other things too, dark things like revenge or harm. Things we won't do. Gran always says we mustn't ever use our abilities to unduly influence the lives of others. It's our most important rule.

I crawl out of bed and creep down the front stairs, skipping over the one that creaks and stopping just before the turn that opens up to the first floor.

“Odette, get the candles and the salt bowl,” Gran murmurs as she pulls open the front door.

The man on the porch is standing just out of sight, and I lean forward as much as I dare to catch a glimpse. “Sorry to disturb y’all at this time of night.” His voice is like an old gravel road, dry and worn. “She was betwixt this place and the next most of the afternoon, but she’s passed on now.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Amos.” Gran reaches out to briefly clasp the man’s hand.

“If’n it weren’t too much trouble, ma’am, would you come sit up with her?” he asks. “I know most people don’t bother anymore, but Nora found comfort in the old ways.”

Even people who don’t believe in anything tend to get superstitious around death, and when they do, they come to Gran. With flame and salt, she’ll bless the body and protect the spirit on its journey, like her mother and grandmother and all those who came before her did. Saining is an old practice, brought over by Scots-Irish ancestors, then altered and adapted and now, like so many other things, mostly forgotten.

Mama steps into the foyer from the kitchen and hands Gran her bag of supplies. “Better get a chicken ready to fry,” Gran tells her as she steps out the door. Leave it to Gran to think of people’s stomachs as much as their souls.

Out front, a car engine fires up, and the glow of headlights traces a path across the wallpaper, then disappears.

Mama turns from where she's been watching out the window. "Tea?" she asks softly. I make my way down the rest of the stairs, and she wraps an arm around my shoulders, leading me toward the kitchen. Her thick chestnut hair is swept up in a loose ponytail, and she smells like the violet soap she makes every spring.

"Bad dream?" Mama lights the stove and moves the kettle onto the burner.

"Mm-hmm," I murmur, sliding into a chair at the table.

She reaches up to open the cupboard and takes out a mug, her back to me, then stills, cradling it in her hands. It's an old, chipped brown one she made years ago. My father's favorite. It's been months since he moved out. I should be used to it by now, but it all happened so fast, and seeing the things he left behind still feels disorienting, like a glimpse into a different life.

"It's been a while since the last one, hasn't it?" Mama asks as she exchanges the brown mug for a green one.

"A good while, yeah." *No*. The dreams still come nearly every night until I wake up gasping for breath. I rest my elbows on the table and trace a finger across its worn surface. "Dahlia stopped by the diner today. She's home for the festival."

"Ah." Mama stills her hands and turns to face me, leaning against the counter.

I can feel her eyes, but I don't look up. "She wants to talk."

"Maybe that's a good idea," she says gently. "I know you want to put it all behind you, but it might help to talk to someone who was there that night—"

“Mama, stop!” I jerk my head up, pressing my hands against the table, and catch her startled expression. “There is nothing she can say that will change what happened. What good could come from remembering the worst day of my life?”

“I don’t mean to push, sweet girl, but I’ve seen how you’ve pulled away from everyone.” The kettle starts to whistle, and she turns to move it off the heat. “I’m worried about you, that’s all.”

“Sorry.” I drop my head into my hands and blow out a breath. “I just wish . . .” I trail off, there’s so many things I wish were different that I don’t even know where to begin. My eyelids are heavy, but every time I close them, I’m back in those woods, panicked, running. Lost.

When the search party found me early the next morning, only steps from where I’d disappeared the night before, I had a concussion and no memory of what had happened. The official report concluded that I’d fallen—there’s no shortage of hazards up in the mountains—and gotten disoriented then lost in the dark. But that doesn’t explain the nightmares. It doesn’t explain the way my pulse speeds up when the moon casts shadows of tree branches against my bedroom wall or the cold dread that fills my stomach every time I venture too close to the Forest.

Maybe our bodies hold memories, too, written in the bone, woven between sinew, hidden beneath the skin. My fingers trace the scar across my neck, the only reminder of what happened that still remains. That and the guilt, sitting heavy in my chest. “I wish none of it had happened,” I whisper.

I was reckless and foolish in more ways than one, and now everyone around me is paying a price. Mama most of all. For a long time after, she wouldn't let me out of her sight. She slept on the floor next to my bed for weeks, reaching for me in her sleep. Even now, she peeks in my room late some nights. I don't think I'm the only one with bad dreams.

Mama pulls the jar of Gran's special sleep-easy tea from its perch on the back of the stove. She's quiet as she makes the tea, but when she slides the cup in front of me, she rubs a hand across my shoulders. "Linden, you should consider talking to Dahlia, not because of that night but because of all the ones that came before it. This is one page of a much longer story."

I wrap my hands around the mug, swallowing back the emotion that bubbles up inside of me.

"Do you know why I named you Linden?" Mama asks. I nod, this story is a well-trod path, but she keeps going. "The linden tree is known for its power of protection, for luck, and for love. I named you after it to bless you with those same characteristics. And you have them, Linden. There is no one else like you. And there is nothing wrong with being exactly and completely who you are."

Mama gives my shoulder one last squeeze before she heads back to bed. She may believe that, but there are plenty of people in this town who would disagree. I pull the mug closer, staring down into the pinkish liquid as the steam dampens my cheeks.

And, as I lift it to take a sip, I dare to hope that maybe, if I can't wish it away, I can somehow make it up to those I hurt.



By the time the first sherbet shades tint the tops of the mountains, I give up on sleep. I don't really mind early mornings. Lately, it's the only time when it doesn't feel like living inside a dog's mouth. Even now, with the sun barely cresting the hills, steam rises to meet it as the morning dew cooks right out of the grass.

I slap open the screen door with one hand as I pull on a pair of worn sneakers with the other, not bothering to untie them, then tripping and nearly wiping out on the back steps of the wraparound porch.

This old rambling farmhouse has been home to James women for generations, the fieldstone wing tacked on to the clapboard extension of what remains of the original eighteenth-century log cabin, the structure itself growing right along with the family at Bittersweet Farm. It's said that the protective bittersweet vines sprung up at the fence line of their own accord, surrounding the land and giving it its name.

There has always been something of the unexplainable here, an air of strangeness around us James women that keeps others at a distance. The old story goes that way back when Caball Hollow was little more than a handful of neighboring homesteads, the first James woman walked out of the Forest all alone. No one knew where she'd come from. She was said to be a bit peculiar and kept to herself. But that was nothing unusual for West Virginia, and she

had a special knack for getting anything to grow even in the most inhospitable soil.

I don't know if any of it is true or not, but I do know that James women are born with certain talents. Sorrel, as nocturnal as a brown bat, can charm bees to make honey that will bind any promise or strengthen any spell. Rowan can smell a lie on the teller's breath and talk sour milk sweet. Juniper has one eye between this world and the next, like Great-Granny Sudie before her.

But we never talk about our abilities outside of the family. People fear what they don't understand, and fear can make them dangerous. It's a lesson we've learned well enough through the generations, and one the scorch marks on the wall of the old log cabin won't let us ever forget.

With my shoes securely on, I trudge along the dirt path from the back porch to the barn. When we were little, we never wore shoes in the summer. We'd race over the crabgrass and run down the rocky mountain paths, thickening up the soles of our feet as we searched for crawdad holes in the crick behind the farm or plucked sun-warmed raspberries from where the vines grew wild. In the barn, we'd swing from a rope high up in the hayloft and drop onto the pile of fresh sawdust meant for the livestock stalls, until the day Rowan tried to do a flip in midair and missed the pile entirely. She might have broken an arm, but we're lucky we didn't all break our fool necks.

Today, I bypass the ladder to the hayloft and pull out the old bike that has faded to the mottled pink of an unripe

strawberry. It was secondhand before it belonged Sorrel, then it went to Rowan, and now Juniper and I share it. Sorrel and Rowan can drive, so they have little use for it, but I don't have my license yet, even though I've been old enough for more than a year.

As I push the bike out of the barn, a clod of dirt whizzes past my head and explodes against the wall behind me.

"If you can't be bothered to tell the truth, at least keep your stinking lies from spoiling my breakfast," Rowan yells from the porch, one hand covered in dirt and hovering over the flower box, the other pointing at a dumbfounded Hadrian Fitch where he stands at the gate to the sheep pen.

The lone masculine presence on Bittersweet Farm, Hadrian showed up just in time for the harvest last year, looking for work in mirrored aviator sunglasses, jeans with holes ripped in both knees, and a fiddle case tucked under one arm.

He's no one's idea of a farmer. Black tattoos trail across his skin, down his arms, across both hands, along his fingers, even crawling out from under his collar and up his neck, getting lost in the ever-present scruff on his face that leads up to his unruly swath of dark hair.

He told us he'd run out of money up near Rawbone while searching for his brother after aging out of the system a couple years ago. It didn't take long for Rowan to pronounce him a liar, but there are a million reasons people lie, not all of them malicious, and to her all lies smell the same. We were desperate for the help, and he was willing to work for little more than room and board and the freedom to take on

other odd jobs in the area. In the months since, he's proven himself to be a hard worker who doesn't say much, which means Gran will never let him go, no matter how much Rowan protests.

He lifts a single dark brow at her. "What are you on about now?"

"You told Gran you needed the truck today so you could go to the feed store," Rowan grinds out between clenched teeth. She chucks another dirt clod at Hadrian's head that misses him by inches and peppers his hair, then stalks down the steps toward him. "But you and I both know that's not true. So where are you really going?"

"Rowan, stop." I drop the bike and move to intercept her. "You know what Gran said." I lower my voice as I catch her around the wrist.

She looks at me, her eyes still flashing, but a voice interrupts us before she can speak. "Rowan Persephone," Gran calls as she steps out onto the porch. "I told you to leave that boy alone and let him do his work. Come in here now, please. I have a job for you."

Rowan lets out a tiny growl of frustration and sends a dark glare in Hadrian's direction. "This isn't over," she threatens low, then turns to stomp back up the porch steps toward what is sure to be an unpleasant task as she wipes the dirt from her hands onto the side of her jeans.

"It never is." Hadrian's voice is quiet behind me.

I glance over my shoulder, but he's already gone. Instead, a woman stands in the driveway. She's wearing black boots and a motorcycle jacket that makes me sweat just to look at

it but doesn't seem to bother her in the least. Tossing back her long dark hair, she slides off her sunglasses, revealing sparkling eyes the color of wood smoke, framed by perfectly winged liner. A slow smile works its way across cherry-red lips like sticky-sweet sorghum syrup.

An amused snort comes from the porch, and I look to see Gran holding the door open. "Land sakes alive, trouble indeed. Hurricane Salome just blew into town."

"Hey there, Mama. You miss me?" Aunt Salome walks toward the house but stops in front of me and puts her hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm's length. "And this can't be my sweet little Linden. You've gone and grown up while I was away."

"You wouldn't miss so much if you came home more often," Gran chides.

Caball Hollow has never been big enough for fiddle-footed Aunt Sissy. She lit out of here as soon as she could. Off hither, thither, and yon, yet always returning to this little scooped-out tablespoon of a town about two hours from anywhere. The only way in or out is a switchback that washes out a few times a year. It's so far off the beaten path that Gran says electricity didn't even find its way to Caball Hollow until she was in the fourth grade.

It's been almost a year since Salome rushed home at the news of my disappearance, the longest stretch between visits that I can remember, though Mama and Gran say there's been longer. "Welcome home, Aunt Sissy," I tell her, my voice thick with emotion. We do love our nicknames

in Caball Hollow, the way they're a shorthand for shared history or a shortcut back to another time.

She leans in to press a quick kiss to my cheek, but for a brief moment, it looks like all the shine's gone out of her. A furrow between her brows replaces her easy smile and the oily taste of sardines coats my tongue. Guilt. For a moment I'm not sure if it's hers or mine, then a wash of shame prickles under my skin.

I pull away as Gran reaches to give Sissy a hug of her own, rushing to pick up the bike and be anywhere but here. "I better get to the diner or Mama will have my hide," I call, already standing up on the pedals to push hard up the hill and out onto the dirt road without a backward glance.

The shortest route from Bittersweet Farm to the Harvest Moon goes directly past the Caball Hollow cemetery. Back in our loft-jumping days, Rowan used to tell us that if we didn't hold our breath as we passed, the spirits would steal it and we'd be the next to die. Until Gran caught wind of it and told us it was pure and utter foolishness. What would haints be hanging around a cemetery of all places for, anyhow?

But sometimes, on days like today, right before the solstice when the air feels thick and close, I still take a big gulp of air and hold my breath, just in case. I'm fixin' to speed past the cemetery as fast as I can when a dirty white pickup truck shoots out of the gates without stopping, nearly putting me in need of a plot myself.

Pulling the bike to the right, I brake with all my strength. It wobbles hard, and I barely have time to jump off before

it crashes into one of the ornamental pear trees that line the street.

I push myself off the ground and kick some loose gravel in the direction the truck sped off in. When I reach down to pick up the bike, a sting blazes across the skin of my elbow. As I twist to inspect the injury, something else catches my eye. Near the river, in the shade of the big sweet gum tree beside the Spencer family mausoleum, a backhoe rests near the gaping hole of a freshly dug grave.

The loamy, sunbaked smell of dirt floats to me across the still morning air. Two men in coveralls stand solemnly near the machinery. One holds a shovel; the other clasps his hat in front of him. But it's the man standing next to the open earth that draws my attention. He's hunched in on himself, his white hair unkempt as if he's been running his hands through it, and though he wears a suit, it's a bit snug around the middle, faded and moth-eaten like it hasn't been worn in years. He digs a handkerchief out of his pocket and holds it up to his face. His shoulders shake, but he doesn't make a sound.

The man drops a handful of dirt into the open earth and as my gaze follows it down, a noise like the buzz of a cicada or a power line zips through the air and along my spine. I should give him his privacy, but there's a pull low in my stomach now that urges me closer. He looks familiar somehow, and as I draw nearer, I realize it's the man who came to the house last night.

There's something strange about all this. After all, what kind of burial has only one mourner and takes place so

soon after death? But as I reach the mausoleum, a taste like Mama's pickled beets fills my mouth, and I realize I've let my curiosity override my common sense. Not suppressing my ability is an especially foolish mistake after what just happened with Aunt Sissy. And this time it's so much worse. I brace myself as the flavors overwhelm me. It would be obvious to anyone that he's heartbroken, but it's more than that—the earthiness of guilt, the vinegary bite of anger, the pungent whiff of despair.

Violating this man's innermost feelings at a time like this makes my stomach twist. It's like eavesdropping on a private conversation or reading someone's diary. It's wrong to know these things about someone without their permission. I stumble backward, away from the power of his emotions, blinking against the press of my own tears as I make my way back to my bike as quietly as I can. It's not until I'm halfway to the Harvest Moon that I realize I forgot to hold my breath.



CHAPTER THREE

TODAY IS exactly one year from the day I went missing. By the time Mama flips the sign on the door of the diner to **CLOSED**, I've already reached the limit of my antiperspirant and my nerves are fully fried. The whispers and the curious stares cast my way throughout the day prove no one has forgotten what happened, but work isn't even close to over. It's the biggest night of the year in Caball Hollow.

The Moth Festival is a celebration born in part from one of the town's oldest fears. The legend of the Moth-Winged Man is whispered over campfires and into the ears of children up past their bedtimes. Set to the creak of a porch swing or the tap of rain against a metal roof, it's the tale of a mysterious creature—the sight of which is a sure sign of impending death—that haunts the Forest and travels on moonlight.

The festival itself is so old no one remembers exactly how it began, but it's always held on the summer solstice, the day with the longest period of light. A date chosen as a precaution against the nocturnal Moth-Winged Man, maybe. Or is it something else? The old ways teach that the solstice is liminal, a time between time, as we shift from days growing longer to shorter. A time when magic weighs heavy in the air and the line between the known world and the unknown blurs.

According to legend, the white moths that appear on the night of the solstice are the spirits of our lost loved ones, come to say hello. But there's an old rhyme we learn as children: *Moth of white, loved one in flight; moth of red, you'll soon be dead.* The Moth-Winged Man appears sometimes as a red moth that flies in through an open window and lands on the person marked for death. And other times—worse times—he comes as a man with the wings of a moth. He comes as a warning of a violent and tragic death. Maybe that's why we still celebrate, year after year, like an offering to a vengeful god.

Mama catches hold of my hand before I can follow the others out the Harvest Moon's back door. When I look at her, I know what she's going to say from the tightness around her mouth. "You can go home if you want. You don't have to work the festival. Everyone will understand."

I stare back at her bleakly. That everyone will note my absence and pity me is exactly why I can't skip out tonight. "No, I want to go. I should try to talk to Dahlia, like you said."

She studies me a moment more, just long enough that I start to worry she'll insist I go home where it's safe. Finally, she squeezes my hand. "If you're sure."

Our festival booth is set up in the center of town, a small white tent above folding tables covered in white cloth with a garland of cedar boughs and eucalyptus swagged across the front to keep the bugs away. It's one of many booths that line the sides of the street with café-style lights strung in between, leading to the stage where a handful of middling local bands will take turns playing later in the evening.

"Hey, where are the porta potties?" a man wearing a headband with giant, feathery moth antennae asks, and I point him toward the school parking lot at the other end of town.

Caball Hollow isn't big enough to attract many tourists, but those we do get come tonight. All because twenty years ago, reported sightings of the Moth-Winged Man made the local news and suddenly the town's oldest fear became its biggest claim to fame. It still draws in those who want to believe there's something more than their everyday lives, despite the fact that saying you'd seen the Moth-Winged Man now would be like declaring you'd spotted Bigfoot—likely to be met with laughter at your expense.

Beyond the stage, where the lone road into Caball Hollow dead-ends, is the National Forest. But it isn't only there. At nearly one million acres, it surrounds us, pushing in on three sides like a beast cornering its prey. The Appalachian Mountain range forms its spine. Its muscle and sinew are rocky crevices, steep passes, dense woods, and thick

underbrush. And at its center, its very heart is mystery, massive, shifting, and unknowable.

It's there, deep inside the hidden places, where the Moth-Winged Man is said to make his home. When we were little, tales of the monster terrified me, but they thrilled Rowan. Maybe it's innate in some of us to be drawn to the unknown, to both fear and desire it in equal parts. She'd tease me relentlessly, hiding dead moths under my pillow and tickling a blade of switchgrass against my skin like the brush of a wing, all while filling my head with the most lurid tales she could imagine until I'd run crying to Mama.

I glance over at her now and find her already watching me, a crease between her brows. "Why don't you stay here and help ring up orders tonight?" she suggests. There won't be any jokes about the Moth-Winged Man this year.

"Sure," I agree, with a small smile that feels as uneasy as it must look. My gaze slides over her shoulder toward the Forest, straining to see as far into the dense woods as I can. When the crisscrossing branches and shadows trick my eyes into seeing movement that makes my heartbeat falter, I turn away.

Spread out on the table in front of me are infusions, tonics, tinctures, teas, and balms, the recipes of which have been passed down through the women in our family for generations, just like those for green tomato preserves and chowchow relish. Each bottle is labeled with its purpose and key ingredients. Gran still uses the old folk names for the plants to keep our traditions alive. Or maybe it's just

good marketing. rattleweed for black cohosh (to relieve menstrual cramps), serpent's tongue for trout lily (to clear up skin ailments), cranesbill for wild geranium (to reduce inflammation), and newt's eye for black mustard (to soothe a cold) certainly sound magical compared to their more mundane counterparts.

Across the tent, Gran works the little portable grill while Mama dishes up slaw dogs, pork sandwiches, and tiny golden solstice cakes. I baked them before the diner opened this morning with lemon zest, a little ginger, and some of Sorrel's honey. Underneath the table, Gran has a stash of her secret merchandise for special customers: dandelion wine, known to help wishes come true, and apple pie moonshine, which can grant clarity in small doses yet completely obliterate it in larger ones.

After a few hours and a steady stream of customers, Juniper drops a crown made of cedar onto my head before she and Rowan set off toward the stage, their arms lined with more to sell. The Moth-Winged Man may be nothing but a folktale, but it's still our protection charms that sell out first, the cedar crowns and the yarrow sachets, black tourmaline crystals, and tiger's eye bracelets. After all, why tempt fate?

From across the street, Wavelene Edgar approaches the booth like it's against her will. "Do y'all have some of that willow bark cream?" Her face, which always looks a bit like uncooked biscuit dough, twists in distaste. "I don't know how y'all do it, but it's the only thing that works

on my joints.” Her words are pleasant enough, but underneath there’s a hint of something rancid and acidic, like sour milk.

“Sure thing.” Sorrel plucks a jar from the display on the table and wraps it in paper as I ring up the order on the tablet.

Wavelene is careful not to accidentally brush Sorrel’s hand as she takes the package. Once she moves on to a booth selling T-shirts down the street, I can no longer hold my tongue.

“If she thinks we’re so awful, why doesn’t she take her business to the corner drugstore?”

Sorrel and Mama exchange a look, and I know immediately that I’m overreacting, but it only serves to make me angrier.

“She seemed fine to me,” Sorrel says with a shrug.

I untie my apron and pull it off, getting even more frustrated when the strap catches on my hair. “That was our last jar of willow bark cream. I’ll go grab another box from the truck.”

Mama looks like she wants to stop me, but she nods. “Don’t be long.”

It’s not just Wavelene; she’s not even the worst. But no one else seems to see it, the strange sort of way people look at us from the corner of their eyes sometimes. Or when they come to us for a tonic or tincture, something to help them, and buried deep down underneath the surface, where maybe they’re not even aware of it, is a little kernel of fear and disgust. People like her are the reason we keep the full truth of our abilities a secret.

How strange it is to be born and live somewhere our whole lives, to have family and roots here, and yet be made to feel we don't belong. To be outsiders in the only home we've ever known. Could that be the true story of the first James woman all those generations ago: not someone who closed herself off from others, but someone who was shut out? Maybe that's our family legacy.

I used to dream of owning a bakery, maybe starting out with a little counter at the diner to sell my baked goods. But that was before I realized maybe people were right to feel the way they do about me. Before I realized how much of a violation my ability can be.

I'm only halfway back to where the truck is parked by the diner when two older ladies hurriedly cut across the street in front of me, both glancing over their shoulders and whispering to each other. "That's Amos McCoy. Can you believe he'd come here of all places?" the first woman says. "Him walking around free all these years doesn't mean we forgot."

"Murderer," the second one spits in a tone clearly meant to carry. "He has a lot of gall, showing his face in town, mixing with good, normal folks."

When they pass by, I see it's the man from the cemetery, still in his funeral suit, still hunched in on himself, turning down the alley toward the Pub and Grub. I'm thrown for a moment by the vitriol before I connect the dots. McCoy was the last name of the little boy who disappeared without a trace about twenty years ago or so. The reason those sightings of the Moth-Winged Man became newsworthy.

Those who had claimed to see the Moth-Winged Man probably would have been dismissed as tippling fools back then too, if not for Elam McCoy's disappearance during a family fishing trip on the Teays River inside the National Forest. The story has been retold and altered and embellished among the young and foolish of Caball Hollow so many times, it's become something of an urban legend. No trace of him was ever found, and the case remains unsolved. Except for in the court of public opinion, which has clearly tried and convicted the boy's father based on, from what I can tell, merely the fact that he was the last one to see the boy alive. But lord, does this town love to gossip.

"Caball Hollow is a town that honors its history." A voice crackles through a speaker as I near the stage. "Like the very first families who founded this town, we come together to celebrate the Moth-Winged Man festival today. This scholarship was created to ensure our younger generations remember that history. And while the projects were all exemplary, one stood out as the very best. So without further ado . . ." The school superintendent, a man with a shiny bald spot and a thick mustache, signals to the band setting up behind him to play a drumroll. "This year's Moth Queen is Maude Parrish!"

Dahlia stands above the crowd in a diaphanous white dress. Maude bends her knees slightly so Dahlia can place the crown on her head and I hesitate. I told Mama I'd talk to Dahlia, but now I'm not so sure. What's the point in re-kindling a friendship when it's best for everyone if I keep my distance?

When Maude smiles widely toward the audience, I spot Cole standing head and shoulders above the other familiar faces in the crowd. All the people I once considered friends. He sticks two fingers in his mouth and lets out a shrill whistle as the others applaud. It's strange to see everyone together like this, so much like last summer, yet irrevocably altered. It's the fun-house mirror version of what we once were, stretched and distorted until I'm not sure what was ever real in the first place.

Behind Dahlia and Maude, the other Moth Queen nominees clap politely, their heavy gowns and a glaze of sweat shimmering in the stage lights. Dahlia shines like moonlight and beams at Maude. Then the members of the scholarship board surround them, offering smiles and handshakes. Cole and Bryson make their way to Maude and Dahlia, all of them laughing as Cole pulls Maude into a congratulatory hug. I turn away.

After I grab the box of willow bark cream from the truck, it's slow going back through the crowd. Even more people have gathered around the stage as a band gets ready to perform, testing equipment in random bursts of sound. I only make it a few feet before a hand catches my elbow.

"There you are." Dahlia presses closer, glancing over her shoulder, then pulls me back, away from the crush of people. There's something frenetic about her. Maybe it's the excitement of the festival, but she's a flurry of motion. Crossing her arms, uncrossing them, dragging the charm of the necklace she always wears back and forth along the ribbon it

hangs from. She can't be still. "I've been looking for you. Did you see the Moth Queen ceremony?"

I shift the box, balancing the edge on my hip. "A bit."

"Maude Parrish was a surprise," she continues. "I mean, don't get me wrong, she's great, but about as exciting as a glass of warm milk."

A disbelieving huff of laughter escapes me. I forgot she was like this, saying whatever she thinks as though its something everyone does.

"I really hope you reconsider applying next year," she continues without pause. "That scholarship money was the only reason I made it out of this town, and you have so much potential. Remember when you and Mamaw were making her cinnamon apple moonshine cake and she told us about how mad she got when Granddad built that hidey-hole in her kitchen to stash the moonshine he was runnin'?"

I smile at the memory of Dahlia's grandmother telling us that story in the cozy warmth of her small kitchen, the air scented with cinnamon and apple peel. "She invited the sheriff and his wife over for dinner and served them that cake just to make her husband sweat."

"See? That's what I mean." She leans closer. "Those kinds of stories have meaning. They should be remembered." For a moment, it almost looks like her eyes glisten with tears in the glow of the lights above us before she looks away.

"Yeah, they should, but, Dahlia, I don't know if I even want to leave Caball Hollow," I say. As hard as it can be to live here sometimes, it's still home. These mountains are as

much a part of me as my own reflection. “There’s a lot here worth staying for.”

Dahlia considers, then gently shakes her head. “You’re lucky, then. Not everyone has that.” She steps closer and reaches out to squeeze my arm.

When she touches my skin, I’m hit by a wave of emotion. I look down to where her fingers clutch at me and see a deep red bruise across her forearm. There’s something familiar about the shape, but her feelings are a confusing mix of sadness, anticipation, and apprehension so strong I can feel it crawling up my throat, and I can’t focus.

“I need to ask you something.” Dahlia drops her voice to a whisper. “What if there was someone else there that night last summer?”

“Linden James!” a loud voice calls from behind me before I can process Dahlia’s words. I turn, searching the crowd until my eyes land on Malcolm Spencer, Cole’s father and the current mayor of Caball Hollow, as he lifts a hand to wave.

“I was hoping to see you here.” He’s smiling broadly when he reaches me, and it makes him look boyish somehow, though he must be fifty if he’s a day. “How are you?” He doesn’t wait for me to answer but draws his eyebrows together in concern. “Listen, I’ve been thinking a lot about what happened last summer, and I owe you an apology. It was only a matter of time before that foolhardy tradition the kids have of camping out in the Forest ended in disaster. I should have put a stop to it instead of suggesting Cole invite you to join them. It was so adorable the way you

tagged along behind him when you were little, and when you started to do it again . . .” He gives me a sheepish look and shakes his head. “Well, obviously, I had no idea what would happen, but still. It was an error in judgment for me to encourage such a thing. I hope you can forgive me. I’ve requested added patrols this year to make sure nothing like that happens again.”

My face feels wrong, like the muscles are pulling in opposite directions. I can only imagine the grotesque expression I must be making, but I manage a shaky nod.

“I . . . um . . .” Before I can fumble a reply, an older couple approaches to shake hands with the mayor and pull him away to speak with the rest of their group.

I turn back to Dahlia, rattled, only to find she’s gone. Scanning the crowd, I look as far as I can in each direction, but it’s starting to get dark, and the trees cast long shadows over the crowd. I let out a long, slow breath and press a hand to my forehead, not sure if I’m more embarrassed over the fact that I’m clearly so pathetic even Cole’s dad noticed. Or that Cole didn’t even invite me that night. He told me to stay away, but I didn’t listen.

On the night of the Moth Festival, graduating seniors and their friends go to the place in the Forest where Elam McCoy is said to have disappeared and call out to the Moth-Winged Man three times. If he appears, he might grant you your deepest desire. Or he might mark you for death. It’s become more than a tradition; it’s a rite of passage. Everyone dares each other to do it, but last year I was the only one foolish enough to try.

LAST SUMMER

Solstice, 9:22 p.m.

The Moth Festival is my favorite night of the year. The lights, the sounds, the magic. The smells of deep-fried food and freshly squeezed lemonade floating through laughter-filled air.

Daddy and Juniper return to the booth, sticky and triumphant, with plates of enormous elephant ears, crisp dough tossed in cinnamon and sugar. Rowan, wearing moth wings made of gossamer white, hands Mrs. Boggs her change and a bag of elderflower soothers.

“Lyon, will you take that box back to the truck?” Mama asks Daddy, pointing to a crate of supplies under the table as she starts to pack up the booth.

Daddy holds out a piece of his elephant ear, dipped in strawberry jam, offering it to her. She opens her mouth, and he drops it in, a sticky red dollop landing on her lip. He takes Mama’s face in his hands and kisses the jam from her skin. “Delicious,” he proclaims as she laughs.

“Ew,” Rowan objects, averting her eyes.

Juniper giggles as Daddy drops kisses all over Mama’s face.

“You two are so embarrassing.” Sorrel shakes her head, scanning the crowd to make sure no one she knows is watching.

“Linden,” a voice whispers next to my ear as a hand slides into mine. “Can I steal you for a minute?” Cole asks, pulling me away from the booth.

I haven’t seen him for days. He just got back from a visit to Georgetown, where he’ll go after he graduates next year.

Tonight, all our friends will venture out to the Forest, like every year before for as far back as we can remember.

No one really believes that calling the Moth-Winged Man can grant your deepest wish, but somehow, under the twinkling lights, with all the promise of summer spread out before us, it feels like anything is possible.