

EXCERPT FROM EPIC READS WEBSITE: <https://www.epicreads.com/blog/sneak-peek-wise-and-the-wicked/>

In an old house built of bloodred bricks, with a tea shop in the converted front rooms, there lived three sisters and their mother.

Solnyshko, the eldest, was willow-tree tall and sweet. Zvyozdochka, the middle child, was beautiful and sharp as a cut diamond. The youngest, Zerkal'tse, was small but hard, like an unshelled nut. Each was different as could be from her sisters, except that all three had their mother's eyes, the deep green of leaves in the part of the forest where sunlight doesn't reach. Of course they did; you can always recognize heroines in stories by their eyes, a sign of powerful gifts within. And this was a family with very powerful gifts.

Or they had been, once upon a time.

Once upon a time, their ancestors had lived inside an immense forest of towering pines beside the republic of Russian Karelia, south of the White Sea.

Once upon a time, the forest was cold and foreboding, and braved only by those seeking miracles. Those who'd heard whispers that the woman in the woods could foretell a person's fate, could grant wisdom and health, and—if the seeker was worthy—could ward off death itself. She and her daughters

were revered and respected by those who believed. They were legends.

But the world around them changed, as it does. The cities to the west were touched by war. Political factions wrestled for the land, fighting and dying and destroying, in the way men do. Farms lay fallow; bridges and buildings were demolished. Factories and processing plants sprouted up. Typhus and cholera and diseases of deprivation burned through settlements, killing thousands.

So it was that the people became fearful for their lives. Stirred by rumors—by stories—and hungry for the power to save themselves, a band of city-dwelling men went into the forest. They trampled brush that had gone unstirred for centuries, hacked through delicate black thorns, and sloshed through clean river water with their foul boots to steal the secrets of the woman in the woods for themselves.

Long had the woman believed they would come. She had heard the tales of the settlements from miracle seekers, caught the stench of desperation and decay and greed on the westerly wind. She knew of the darkness in these men that stained what was good, like blood in water. And so she was prepared.

She sent her daughters away on a ship bound for America to protect them. But they left their greatest secrets behind, and by the time they'd crossed the ocean, they had become shadows of themselves, believing it better to be small and safe than strong and hunted.

This was the legacy of Solnyshko, Zvyodochka, and Zerkal'tse. Deep green eyes, greatly weakened gifts, and the stories their mother—the granddaughter of the woman in the woods—told them in their beds in the old brick house. Each night, she passed along what diminished wisdom their ancestors had brought with them to their new home, this foremost: that the world has never been very kind to powerful women.

• ONE •

Ruby was in the tub with a teacup of Stolichnaya, when her sisters rattled the door.

“Occupied!” she called, hunting for a spot to stash the cup before they barged in. There wasn’t any. Their only bathroom was tiny, stuffed with a pedestal sink, toilet, and a cracked claw-foot tub that took up three-quarters of the black-tiled floor. The whole house was like that: small, splintered,

overcrowded. There was nowhere to hide, and no space to keep secrets, at least not between the sisters. With a resigned sigh, Ruby plunged her cup beneath a veil of bubbles and let it sink, hitting the bottom with a small, sad *thunk*. She squirted another dollop of Dahlia’s Flower Empower bath bubbles into the water, snatched whichever book topped Ginger’s pile on the toilet tank, and settled back just as the door burst open.

When the steam cleared, Ginger leaned against the frame, long fingers twisting the doorknob back and forth in its socket. “A little Tolstoy before bed?” she asked, lemon-mouthed.

Ruby glanced down at the spine of the book. “*Anna Karnina* is awesome.”

Her sister snorted. “*Kar-e-nin-a*.”

“I said that.”

“Uh-huh. Just get out of the tub. I need the mirror.”

“But I’m at the best part,” she protested as Dahlia slipped into the bathroom beside Ginger.

“What part is that?”

“... Where everyone is like, ‘Oh my god, Anna Kar-enin- a, she’s so crazy.’ You know?”

“Ah, yes, that classic scene,” Ginger deadpanned.

Ignoring them, Dahlia smiled sunnily. “Time to get out, Ruby! Polina’s coming over.”

“Okay, yeah,” Ruby relented. She reached for her towel, but stubbornly waited to take it until they’d turned to leave.

“Whatever, it’s all fogged up in here anyway,” Ginger muttered on her way out.

Once they’d gone, Ruby fished the teacup out of the bath. The Stoli had been hard-won; her sisters kept the vodka in the back of the highest kitchen cabinet, not an easy climb for her five-foot body. She didn’t know why they bothered. A little vodka wasn’t going to kill her.

That isn’t how Ruby dies.

She scrubbed a towel over her head until her jaw-length brown hair puffed up around her ears like ruffled feathers. She wrapped the towel around herself and headed toward her bedroom at the end of the narrow hall, but paused in Dahlia’s doorway.

As always, her oldest sister’s bedroom looked like an occult shop rammed by a tornado. Colorful beaded necklaces glittered in piles on the rug. Tarot cards and finger-thick crystals spilled across her desk beside a day-or-two-old bowl of cereal.

Ruby liked this room. She liked that she could plunge her hand into any pile and pluck out something she’d never seen there before: a silver ring with an opal the size of a grape, or a black candle that smelled like pepper, or an entire loaf of bread in its plastic package.

Her middle sister settled at the vanity and cleared a spot with her elbow, scowling but silent. Dahlia had three years on Ginger and eleven on Ruby, and was undeniably in charge, even if it was Ginger who made sure their bills were paid, their groceries shopped, and their small, scrubby lawn weeded in spring.

Ruby was banned from Ginger’s room, and that was fine. From the hallway, it looked like a dentist’s office—softly colored, clean, and cold.

“What’s up, Ruby?” Dahlia chirped as she stepped into a silky, voluminous skirt patterned with blackbirds and ivy vines, the one she wore for clients. Ginger had a skirt just like it.

“Is Polina bringing somebody?” she asked, eyeing her sister’s outfit.

“Someone’s meeting us here.”

“Who?”

Dahlia hesitated, sorting out how much to tell her, Ruby knew. She wasn’t allowed to see clients with her sisters, judged too young for the “sensitive nature” of the family practice. She did not yet have her own skirt. Ginger dotted on cherry lipstick in Dahlia’s mirror, pressing together and then popping her lips. “She’s from out of town. Nobody you know.” Recapping her lipstick, she swept a highlighter stick above her cheekbones, flecked with the same

perfect constellation of freckles as Dahlia's. They'd inherited them from their mother, just like the straw-gold hair they dyed regularly. They did this at home, so every six weeks when they emerged from the little bathroom, it was splashed and stained, as if they'd been in there murdering fairies with jewel-colored blood—right now, Dahlia's was a bright sky blue, Ginger's a bold sapphire. They'd tried to convince Ruby to join them, but her overgrown pixie cut was too dark for dye to show; it only made her look pale and ambiguously Goth. Although her mother's nickname for her had been *zerkal'tse*—little mirror—she'd never looked much like her, or like Ginger (*zvyozdochka*, the little star) or Dahlia (*solnyshko*, the little sun.)

Except for their eyes—Chernyavsky eyes.

Ginger cut those familiar eyes toward Ruby. “Were you gonna dress for company, or . . .”

Remembering her nakedness, Ruby shoved off from the wall and trudged on down the hallway.

If Dahlia's bedroom looked like it belonged to the Mad Hatter, and Ginger's to an accountant, then Ruby's looked a bit like it belonged to nobody, but was frequented by drifters who sometimes left possessions behind when they moved on. The bookshelf was bare except for strange little trinkets—a tube of lip gloss she'd never worn, with a unicorn's head on the cap; a fist-sized garden stone with a rooster painted on it; a striped yellow billiard ball. On her nightstand, on top of a library copy of Carl Sagan's *Pale Blue Dot*, sat an unopened jar of Vegemite she'd taken from the World Market three months ago. Some would've kept their acquisitions stashed in the back of a closet or deep in an underwear drawer, but Ruby preferred to hide things in plain sight. There was one photo taped to the wall above the bed—Ruby and her cousins Oksana, Mikki, Lili, and Cece on the front steps of Polina's house, arms slung around each other—but that was one of few identifying artifacts.

She dressed quickly in sweats and a T-shirt, then met her sisters in the kitchen. Dahlia was boiling water, silver bracelets with tiny bells tinkling against her graceful wrists as she scooped loose tea into the strainer. Squeezing passed her in the tight space, Ginger extracted cups from the cabinets and placed them on saucers on the counter. Three in all, none of them meant for Ruby.

In the next room, the front door opened and shut without a knock to warn them, and before the sisters could move to greet her, Great-Aunt Polina stood in the kitchen in her steel-gray coat, unwrapping a black headscarf from her steel-gray hair in its tightly braided bun. Her broom skirt, unlike Dahlia's or Ginger's—embroidered with silver moons and stars—was plain black, brushing the tops of her dull black oxfords. “Girls,” she said in her Russian accent, the curled *R* and guttural *L* and the single syllable stretched into two. Nearly eighty years in America had not stamped it out.

She lowered herself into one of the mismatched chairs around their kitchen table that still had its cushion. Dahlia set a steaming cup of tea in front of her at once, while Ginger whisked her coat and scarf off to the living room closet. Ruby stood without a specific duty, waiting to be summoned.

“Come sit, kroschka,” Polina said as expected, pointing to the chair beside hers.

She did so as her great-aunt riffled through the compartments of her oversized brown handbag, pulling out a little bag of homemade pastila baked in the old way, with honey and egg whites and sour apples from Polina’s backyard. Even the traditional Russian bakery in Portland didn’t make them like that anymore. Polina plunked it down on the table, waiting until Ruby slipped a square into her mouth to ask the usual questions.

“How are you going in school?”

“Okay. We were on Christmas break, but it ends tomorrow, so—”

“Science is A, yes? What about English?”

Ruby grimaced. “Maybe a B . . . minus.”

“You’re too smart for B minus.”

“I’m trying.”

Polina patted her cheek once, her hand wrinkled and livers-potted, but strong for ninety-five, and perfectly steady. That was her great-aunt all over. “You must work harder, because life is also hard. But you can do it. You are tough, kroschka. If only that cousin of yours is so tough. I see her yesterday, and she is dressed like a payats! Like a little clown! I tell her she is a woman now, a true Chernyavsky woman. She must act like it.”

Polina could only be talking about Cece, who dressed in clothes as bright as she was.

“What do you mean, she’s a true Chernyavsky?” Dahlia spoke up, settling on Polina’s other side with her own cup of tea. “Do you mean . . .”

Polina nodded gravely. “Anfisa’s daughter sees her Time.”

Ruby’s heart stuttered. “What? When?” There was a proud light in Polina’s still-clear green eyes, despite her harsh words.

“Yesterday, I say this already. Her party is being planned now.”

Ginger, standing behind Polina with the third cup in hand, raised a pale eyebrow at Ruby. “She didn’t tell you?”

Ruby shook her head, fist tightening around the bag of pastila. While there were a few Chernyavsky cousins close to Ruby’s age, most of them attended private schools in nearby towns. Cece and Ruby went to Saltville High and were in the same class. Anfisa, who went by Annie and was their mother’s

younger sister, had married a respectable gastroenterologist named Neil Baker. They lived on the west side of Saltville. Aunt Annie didn't work, but was on the PTO as a full-time volunteer, decorating their gym for the annual Halloween dances and making cupcakes for every bake sale.

They were nothing like Ruby's small branch of the family— if the Bakers' home was a tulip, hers was an old cactus—but it didn't matter. Cece had always been her best friend.

And yet a whole day had passed, and she hadn't mentioned her Time.

"I can't believe she's old enough." Dahlia smiled down into her tea. "I remember when she was born."

"Whatever, she's sixteen. That's three years older than Ruby was," Ginger reminded her. "And I was only twelve. I handled it fine."

"Okay, enough chat, girls." Polina tapped Ruby's cheek again, a bit more sharply to catch her attention. "It is almost time for us to work, so now you must go away," she commanded.

Though Ruby loved Polina—of course she did, Polina was blood—she knew her great-aunt wasn't easy to like. Cece was a little terrified of her; most of the cousins were.

Not Ruby. True, Polina looked at her from time to time as if searching for something Ruby was pretty sure wasn't there, and it made her skin itch. But she preferred that to the way Aunt Annie watched her, as though Ruby was barely herself; as though she was just the glass pane in a picture frame that held a photo of her mother behind it. Aunt Annie's face would twist with pity and betrayal at once. Polina's never did. She hadn't mentioned Ruby's mother, hadn't even said her name aloud since the night she left them all.

Whatever her great-aunt did or did not see in Ruby, at least she *saw* her.

Rising obediently, Ruby pressed a light kiss to Polina's leathery cheek as tradition dictated, then slipped away to her room.

Collapsing onto her bed, she stared up at Cece in the photo on the wall over the headboard. Pretty, chubby, colorful Cece. Cece, who'd never kissed a boy with tongue. Cece, who'd once collected caterpillars in a paper milk carton so they'd have someplace safe and warm to become butterflies, and peed her pants with grief when the girls peeled back the lips a week later to find a pile of dried husks.

Cece, finally seeing her Time.

Ruby had been waiting for this day for three long years, and now it was here. She wanted to meet up with Cece, now. She thought about texting her cousin their Super-Actual-Emergency Code, but as she imagined sitting across from Cece in their booth at the Rooster,

ready to compare futures at last, Ruby's throat closed tight as a fist. She suspected she'd need the rest of the bottle of Stoli to loosen it.

She was still trying to work up the courage to send the text when she heard the car. The sputtering engine grew louder, and she crept to the window, kneeling with her elbows propped on the sill to peer out as the car turned into their driveway.

Once upon a time, Ruby and her sisters would've been sought by despairing folk who trekked through the cold, endless woods to reach them. Now a woman climbed out of a gray car spattered with rust, stuffing a tissue under her nose. She looked up at the yard, and Ruby knew what she saw: a tiny house, the orange paint blistered, curling away in spots like half-peeled fruit. Battered wind chimes over a front stoop hardly any wider than Ruby.

If they'd still lived in the big brick house where Ruby had been born, if their mother were still around . . . but she didn't like to think about her old life, and neither did Dahlia or Ginger. They pretended their family had always existed in this diminished state. That was the story they all told themselves. On most nights, anyway.

By day, they were the kind of people who seemed to belong in the house on Stone Road. Ruby went to school while her sisters worked the part-time jobs they could get without college degrees, scrambling to save for Ruby's own (ultimately pointless) college fund. Ginger was an office assistant at a feed store, while Dahlia currently worked at 'Wiches and Wings, a butterfly conservatory and sandwich shop in one.

And then some nights, rare but constant for the last few years, they were different people altogether. Polina would come with a client, or one would follow. Always women, always in dark plain clothing, in stained pants and with no jewelry or lipstick. Often, their cars had out-of-state plates. They looked desperate, as though they would have walked through the woods all night to get here, if necessary. Ruby wasn't sure how clients actually found Polina, or where Polina found *them*. Nor was she completely sure what went on after she was sent to her room, but she knew enough.

Her sisters, with Polina's guidance, did what their ancestors had always done. They helped people. They welcomed them into this unextraordinary little house, listened to them, counseled them with the gift that remained to the Chernyavskys: the empathetic, righteous rage of women who knew what it meant to have everything taken away from them.

So it wasn't like the stories their mother had told them, which she'd been told by Polina when she was a girl. They weren't fortune-tellers or miracle workers any longer, if they ever were. Polina insisted it was so, but she was the family matriarch, the oldest daughter of the woman in the woods

and the keeper of the family myths, so she *had* to say that. Yes, they were special. Strange. They had their Times, and she had never read anything that could explain them. But it wasn't exactly the kind of magic that existed in fairy tales.

Whatever the truth, it didn't make much difference to Ruby now.

And anyway, it was a legacy she was proud to be a part of . . . even if she wasn't really a part of it. Someday, her sisters had promised, she'd join them in the family practice. When she was older. More mature. When she was ready.

She wasn't holding her breath.

Out in the driveway, the client stopped to gather herself before hunching forward against the wind and making her way up the walk. She disappeared from Ruby's sightline, and then the front door opened. The wind chimes jangled out of tune as Polina's voice, unlovely but beloved, welcomed her inside.

• TWO •

Though it was freezing cold and snowing on Monday morning, Ruby parked the dented gray Malibu she'd inherited from Ginger—who herself had inherited it from Dahlia—in the very back of the Saltville High student lot. She was claiming the spot closest to the loop of pavement where the buses dropped off. If she wanted any time with Cece before school, she'd have to catch her cousin as soon as she disembarked. In the same grade but six months younger than Ruby, Cece had just turned sixteen in October. And though she'd likely have a beautiful Prius topped with a bow waiting

in her driveway the day she finished driver's ed, Cece had yet to sign up for the class. Unlike Ruby, she was happier in the passenger seat.

Ruby left the engine running and her phone plugged in so she could keep listening to *Solving for X-traordinary* over the speakers. It was her favorite podcast, a drama about the ongoing adventures of Kerrigan Black, college student, who'd been catapulted back through time after an unfortunate Bunsen burner explosion in her chemistry lab. By engineering explosions to blow herself up in each era, she hopped around throughout the centuries, using her present-day knowledge and the scientific method to solve mysteries and right wrongs, pausing occasionally to kiss sexy land barons and peasants alike. It was cheesy, and as Cece often reminded her, Ruby had little patience for fiction.

But this, she loved.

Maybe because she loved science, and had since she was a kid, and would've studied it in college if it were possible. She'd taken her first book by Carl Sagan out of the Saltville Public Library when she was just shy of eleven, and then another after that, reading them all again and again over the years with the goal of understanding each word; by now she had page-long passages memorized. In seventh grade, she'd researched a science camp in Boston and campaigned for months for Dahlia

to send her, revisiting the website until the description—“campers use the scientific method to uncover the mysteries of the world around them”—was engraved in her hippocampus

(which she knew about from her extracurricular research on the human brain.) And she'd been fascinated by their unit on genetics last year, particularly the section on genetic abnormalities, and done her final report on Barbara McClintock.

Her science classes were the only ones she regularly did the homework for, much less showed up for. Dahlia would look at the Cs on each report card, earned with the barest of efforts, and proclaim Ruby to be "differently talented."

Ginger said she was just lazy.

Either way, she was obsessed with *Solving for X-traordinary*, began every bimonthly episode the moment it was posted. Ruby cranked up the volume to better hear it above the heat roaring out of the vents:

The last thing I see as the flame alights, licking down the hollow bamboo tube toward the huoyao—the mixture of saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal I'd heated and dried to black powder in the kitchens these past few nights—is the sturdy face of Xuan Bang through the smoke. I see his lips move, though

he stands too far away for me to hear and answer. Instead, I press my fingers to my own lips just as a

thunder-like rumble rents the air, and I'm lifted off my feet.

When I land, I know at once I'm not in eleventh-century China anymore, nor am I safely back in the

chemistry lab at Princeton. I'm standing in a flat expanse of pale orange desert, a herd of sturdy cows

grazing on spiny tufts of gray grass all around me. In the near distance, a tiny village just darker than the sand.

I'll miss Bang and the sensual fit of his military tunic, but I have work to do. Once again, I must learn everything I can about this time and place if I'm ever to return to mine.

The episode ended just as she saw her cousin. Or rather, just as she saw a sturdy pair of legs in bright pink tights shuffling through the slush, and knew immediately that it was Cece in the middle of her pack of friends. Ruby leaned across the seat and cranked open the passenger side window, letting winter in.

“Cece!” she screamed. “Ceceeeee!”

Her cousin’s friends stopped all at once, a school of fish scared by the cry of the common loon.

Cece peered between them until she spotted Ruby, then waved them off and trudged toward the Malibu. She bent down to stare expectantly through the driver side window, her hair sequined with snowflakes. As usual, she wore her piles of ice-blond waves in a perfect sloppy bun, so that with her pale skin and the massive globe of her pale hair, her head was shaped like a luminous snowman.

“Hey, Bebe.”

“Hi. What, um, how was your weekend?”

Cece’s nearly invisible eyelashes flickered twice against her pink cheeks, and the breath puffed from between her parted lips. “Fine,” she said. “Boring. You know.”

Cece had never lied to Ruby, so she hadn’t been sure what her cousin’s lie face looked like. She guessed she was seeing it for the first time.

The warning bell toned over the loudspeakers in the entranceway.

Straightening quickly, Cece swiped melted snow from the tip of her nose. “I gotta get my books out of my locker. See you in the caf, okay?” She hurried for the propped-open school doors.

A likely story, Ruby thought, watching her go.

Cece wasn’t in any classes with Ruby, mostly because her cousin took all AP courses, while Ruby was lumped in with the rest of the “differently talented.” So Ruby had to sit through US history, hide out in the bathroom during wood shop, and make it through a gym period where they didn’t even change into their uniforms, only sat on the dull floorboards while Mr. Pfeffer explained the anatomy of a tennis racket and the artistry of the backhand grip. All the while, Ruby thought about nothing but the next chance to talk to her cousin.

Finally lunch arrived, and she snaked through the food line in the cafeteria as quickly as possible, pausing only to palm a Nutty Bar from the rack and stuff it up her sleeve.

Like everything in Saltville with the exception of the Chernyavskys and the pollution level of the tea-brown river that cut through downtown, their school cafeteria was impeccably average. There was a small stage for announcements, and below that, rows of tables crowding the white cinderblock walls. The third on the left was Cece's, and so of course it was Ruby's table, too.

Ruby's first real, true memory of her cousin—beyond blurry birthday parties and backyard swings—was a county fair in Bluebar. Uncle Neil took them one year, and a fortuneteller read their palms inside her tent. She wore glittery eye makeup and had big white arms that oozed out of her costume like batter from a waffle iron. She told the cousins they'd been a single soul in their past lives, only recently split into two bodies in this life. They'd been born by the sea two centuries

ago, and they'd painted the face of an Egyptian princess for a living. They'd once been a man with three wives in Utah (here, Cece's dad had groaned from the door flap of the tent).

At that, Cece turned to Ruby and smiled, a lollipop tucked in the pouch of her cheek, smudged with sunburn. Five-year-old Cece had looked like a baby Disney princess; Ruby, meanwhile, was pale and dark-haired, less Snow White than Samara from *The Ring*. Ginger once put it bluntly: "You looked

like a creep when you were a kid. I'd get up to pee at night, and I'd check behind the shower curtain for *you*." It was the shape of her mouth, Ruby thought, a permanent frown carved by nature; Cece's pink lips were curved upward, always.

But Ruby remembered smiling right back at Cece across that stuffy dim tent and thinking, of course they were the same. It seemed they had been born knowing each other.

Cece, a rare and shining double rainbow of a human being, was the best luck that being a Chernyavsky had brought Ruby.

She slid onto the bench across from her cousin, who was in the process of twisting half of Talia Mahalel's waist-length black hair into a pigtail braid. Talia was helping by hoisting Cece's slice of pizza up for her, and Ruby studied her cousin as she bit down. Did she look different? Older? Sadder? Did they look more alike now than they had before Christmas? On the outside, Cece was the same. A baggy band T-shirt (today's was Neutral Milk Hotel) over a long-sleeved waffle shirt, a not-too-mini yellow miniskirt and her neon pink tights. It was her customary ensemble, except that the colors of her tights rotated, and the band tee was occasionally switched out for a shirt advertising some indie movie theater in New York they'd definitely never been to.

Ruby squinted across the table, searching for deeper marks that Cece's Time might have left on her.

That was when boy's-name-that-started-with-a-D dropped his tray down beside Ruby, from a great enough height that it clattered against the table and then partway onto her tray. His pizza slice flopped over the side, dripping grease on her unwrapped Nutty Bar. As he slipped

onto the bench, his elbow knocked the Nutty Bar to the floor. He didn't seem to notice as he flashed a white, impersonal smile, then turned and said, "Hey, Cee."

Swiveling her head, Cece dropped Talia's hair and yanked the pizza out from between her teeth, her pink cheeks glowing mauve.

Ruby took note.

Boy's-name-that-started-with-a-D was Talia's brother—the other half of the Mahalel twins, who'd moved to Saltville last summer from "The South." "The South" could be any place below Bangor, but Ruby guessed they'd come farther than that. Their naturally olive skin was still beach-tanned despite the winter months, and sometimes, a long vowel would stretch taffy-like from their full lips. Talia was a regular at Cece's table of popular AP kids (plus Ruby) while her brother was the smallest and darkest of the unironically flannel-wearing bros who normally sat a few tables back. Despite being a transplant, he'd slotted right in with the townies. They were boys who got stoned around bonfires and snowmobiled through the woods in winter; summers, they got stoned around bonfires and went mudding in their pickups, and maybe worked on their uncle's fishing boats. If any of them had ambitions beyond that—if they dreamed of being professional basketball players, or doctors, or tech-startup starter-uppers, or whatever boys dreamed about—they certainly weren't letting on.

"Can I still get your trig notes?" he asked Cece, rhythmically zipping and unzipping his Creatures Such As We hoodie. CSAW were a big-deal indie band that played electric guitars and ukuleles in the same songs. Ruby despised them.

Talia rolled her eyes. "I already said you could have mine."

"*Your* handwriting looks like you dipped a chicken in ink, set it on fire, and let it run across your notebook. *Cece* types."

His sister threw a greasy balled-up napkin at him, which he batted aside smoothly as he jerked his head to knock his black bangs out of his eyes. Under the harsh strip lighting of the cafeteria, his hair looked as soft as his brown skin. "This class . . . Cee, I'm doomed."

"At least it won't be *bubble letters* hard," she said, some inside joke that cracked him up, showed his pointed canines.

Ruby glanced between them to keep from rolling her eyes. Not that she was jealous. Not of him, or Talia, or any of them. Just because Cece was Ruby's only friend at school didn't mean that Ruby had to be hers. Ruby knew that wasn't how it worked. And Cece was always trying to rope her into group hangs, no matter how many times Ruby refused.

Still, she took pleasure in interrupting them to ask, "Cece, can I sleep over tonight? Levi's coming for dinner. I think he's gonna stay."

"Yeah, obviously." Her cousin smiled.

Of course she'd say yes to Ruby. Cece was good to her because Cece was *good*, the way that summer rain and ripe fruit and kittens in wicker baskets were good. It was just that she was different around these people than she was with *their* people. It would be pointless to try and get anything out of her now, so Ruby would bide her time.

Cece only said true things, important things—Chernyavsky things—when they were alone.

• THREE •

Levi Dorgan, Ginger's boyfriend, did indeed come for dinner that night, and he brought their mail with him. Levi was the sorter at the Saltville Post Office. Ginger claimed she was dating him because it was helpful for a mostly fake psychic to know everyone's secrets, and Levi usually did. Not only because of his job, but because he was also everybody's friend's cousin's dealer, who grew his own plants in the root cellar of the house he'd inherited from his parents.

He dropped onto the couch beside Ruby and propped his boots on their chipped coffee table, nearly taking out Dahlia's salt lamp, softly glowing pink. While Ginger was fetching him a beer, gushing that he was *the best* even though he could've just let their mail carrier bring their mail five hours earlier, he tossed Dahlia a small twist-tied baggie of weed. She disappeared with it into her bedroom before Ginger could see.

Levi was handsome, his biceps straining the sleeves of the T-shirts he wore all winter, his teeth impossibly straight, and his hair perfectly fluffed and sprayed, graceful in its architecture, like a beautifully constructed cake. But his usefulness as a busybody aside, Ruby wasn't sure why Ginger genuinely seemed to like him, or any of the substandard boys she'd been bringing home since high school.

Still, she wasn't worried. The romance wouldn't last, and soon enough it would be only the three of them around the dinner table again.

Ginger was a Chernyavsky, after all.

Though Ruby had been edging up the TV volume to block them both out, she suddenly wasn't interested in the *Real Housewives* or their impressive lip augmentations. Their purses and personal chefs blurred into watercolor as she watched from the corner of her eye as Ginger climbed into Levi's lap and kissed him gratefully. No longer caring which *Housewife* was mad at which for forgetting to chill the pinot grigio, Ruby levered herself off the couch, stepping through Levi's legs as she went.

In her bedroom, she grabbed her backpack from the closet floor, shoving her phone and wallet into its plastic front pouch. She stuffed in her pajamas and an outfit for tomorrow, a hand-me-down baseball tee from Ginger with an embroidered cheeseburger on the pocket. All the money her sisters made seemed to go toward their pitiful house or into Ruby's

pointless college fund, and so with a bit of hemming and tucking from Dahlia, Ruby could fit into her sisters' old clothes.

She passed Ginger and Levi in the kitchen, him clearly towing her toward her bedroom. When only Ginger could see, Ruby fake-vomited into the fruit bowl that contained a single twig of withered grapes. Her sister scowled back at her before she was whisked through the doorway.

As Ruby grabbed her coat from the front closet, Dahlia poked her head into the living room. "Mac and cheese okay for dinner?"

"I'm actually going to Cece's."

"In this weather? You'll get soaked!"

"It stopped snowing two hours ago," Ruby informed her.

With her back to Dahlia, she plunged a quick hand into the pocket of Levi's jacket. Ginger must've hung it up, because her boyfriend wouldn't have bothered. She surfaced with the two crumpled twenties Dahlia had just handed him and another small baggie, all of which she slipped into her own pocket.

Fruit Street, where the Bakers lived, was a long row of well-kept colonials on the west side of Saltville only slightly smaller than the Colonials on Oak, the next neighborhood over, where the mayor of Saltville lived. Oak Lane had block parties in the summer, an Easter egg hunt in spring, a Halloween parade in the fall, and carolers in winter. Fruit Street made do with a Fourth of July cookout and an unofficial Christmas lights competition.

Stone Road's only community event was a twice-a-year spraying with repellent for its wasp problem.

Ruby parked in Cece's hedge-lined driveway—the Fruit Street Block Association didn't like cars on the curb, especially not scabby lemons like the Malibu—behind Uncle Neil's fog-colored Porsche Cayenne. A lighted stone walk led to the Bakers' house, bright-looking even after the sun had set. There were blue cedar shingles, butter-yellow shutters with hearts carved out of the wood, and soft tulips in the flower patch. The doorbell played the first few notes of "Auld Lang Syne" when Ruby rang, because the Bakers changed their chime for the holidays.

Aunt Annie answered with a curious, could-be-the-neighbors smile. It became stoic when she saw Ruby. "Oh. I forgot Cece mentioned you might drop in."

"Is that okay?" she asked, teeth clicking in the January cold.

“No, of course.” She stepped back to let Ruby inside. “You know you’re always welcome in this house.”

Ruby knew she was something more like tolerated, but it was enough.

The Bakers were in the middle of their own dinner, also mac and cheese (these coincidences happened more often than you’d guess) but the fancy sort made with crumbled breadcrumbs

and truffle oil. Aunt Annie grabbed an extra glass bowl out of the cabinet, and Cece waved around a full mouth.

“Hey there, Ruby,” Uncle Neil said, patting a cloth napkin across his mustache. “What’s the word?”

“Not much.” Ruby dropped her bag in the doorway. “What’s been going on around here? Anything new?”

“Same old, same old,” Uncle Neil said, the last word was cut off by Aunt Annie loudly clattering the silverware as she pulled a fork out of the drawer for Ruby.

After dinner, the girls went upstairs to Cece’s room. To look at Cece, you’d think it would be plastered with concert memorabilia or posters for quirky French movies, with her tights strewn all over like rainbow-colored streamers. Maybe a Styrofoam head on the dresser, speared with funky earrings.

In reality, the framed art on her delicate peach walls was of pleasantly innocuous items like sneakers, and starfish. There was even a plaque that said: THINK HAPPY, BE HAPPY.

There *was* a composition book on her white wicker dresser, filled with song lyrics and poems she let Ruby read once or twice a year, peering through the fence of her fingers the whole time. Ruby had even less patience for poetry than for fiction, but anything Cece wrote was an exception, and Ruby was the only person in the world she would show them to.

Mostly, though, this bedroom resembled a page off the Pottery Barn Teen website (carefully designed by her parents, in other words).

Ruby dropped her backpack and sat down on the crisp white quilt while Cece plugged her phone into the charger on the nightstand. She brought up Spotify and a song began. With a twinge, Ruby recognized the electric guitars, the ukuleles, the lyrics:

If I were a sea cucumber

Beneath the briny waves I’d slumber

No eyes to weep, no heart to beat,

By sorrow I'd be unencumbered.

“Why are you listening to this?” she asked, her stomach rolling.

“Dov made me a playlist.”

“Who?”

Cece lowered her eyes, the same shadowy green as Ruby's, and climbed onto the bed beside her. “You know. Dov Mahalel. He sat with us at lunch today.”

“You don't even like Creatures Such As We,” Ruby pointed out, maybe a little too smugly.

“I'm learning to like them.”

“Because you like Dov Mahalel?”

Her ears went pink. “Why wouldn't I? He's cute, right?”

Opting out of that conversation, Ruby scooted forward so she could throw the quilt back, and Cece tossed her own side back. Together, they piled the pillows against the headboard, then lay flat, flinging the quilt up over their heads and across the pillows so that the blankets sloped up and away from their faces, just the way they liked it. Ruby turned her head to look at Cece, and Cece turned hers, bun mussed into a bomb mid-explosion.

“Hi, Bebe,” she said.

“Hi, Cece,” Ruby said.

They giggled in the close air.

“How was English?”

“Shrug. How was Levi?”

“*Ugh*. How was your weekend?”

“It was fine.”

“Cece.” Ruby watched her cousin in the filtered light. “Come on. You can tell me. We *promised*—”

Her cousin bolted upright, destabilizing their fort so that the ceiling collapsed onto Ruby’s face, quilt and pillows and all. “Who even told you?” she asked sharply.

Ruby clawed her way out and brushed at the short strands of hair static-clinging to her face, trying not to feel wounded.

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

Cece looked away, plucking fuzz off her tights with great determination until Ruby laid her hand palm up on the quilt, and Cece took it. They both stared at their interlocked fingers—Ruby’s topped by rough purple polish, Cece’s soft and clean. “Mom and Polina are already planning my party.”

Ruby nodded, wishing fiercely that she’d smuggled the Stoli out of the house with her. They could both use the courage. She caught Cece’s eye again. “It’s your turn.” *Finally*, she

didn’t say. *I’ve been waiting*, she didn’t say. *I want to tell you mine*, she didn’t say.

“I know, I just . . . didn’t think it would be like this,” Cece whispered, and it was in the older, wiser, stranger voice Ruby had been awaiting for three long years.

• FOUR •

This was how Dahlia had explained the Chernyavsky “Gift” to Ruby.

One afternoon in early April six years ago, the breeze damp and cool and the clouds bone-bright above them, her sisters sat her down at a picnic table outside of the Cone Zone. Ruby remembered the year clearly, because both she and Dahlia had birthdays in April, and Dahlia had just turned twenty-two, while Ruby was about to turn eleven. She remembered *that* because their mother had left the morning after Dahlia’s birthday, which was probably why Ruby received “the talk” so young. Not only to explain the curse, but to explain their mother, too.

The Cone Zone was a seasonal ice cream place in down-town Saltville. Their big attraction was something called the Danger Cone. Each week, they’d create some new unusual, ambitious, often foul flavor—spaghetti sauce, broccoli, fish-and-chips. That month it was garlic and mint, so when Ruby thought of the talk, she’d forever taste toothpaste and mashed potatoes. When she was younger, Ruby would order every strange flavor she could just to disgust Ginger, but she’d since

realized that Ginger didn't care that much what Ruby did, so she was only hurting herself.

That day, she sat shivering as rivulets of her unappealing ice cream ran off the scoop and down her fingers—it really was too cold to eat ice cream outdoors—when Dahlia asked, “Ruby, what do you know about astral projection?”

“Um,” she'd answered. “Is it about space?” On her nightstand was a library copy of *The Demon-Haunted World* in its battered plastic sleeve, and she was picking her slow way through it as best she could. Her first ever Sagan book, she'd borrowed it from the school media center after her fifth-grade science teacher posted a quote from it on their bulletin board: *Science is an attempt, largely successful, to understand the world, to get a grip on things, to get hold of ourselves, to steer a safe course.*

She'd already loved science books, and at the moment, getting a grip on things sounded good to Ruby. Their lives had flipped upside down in their mother's absence. Dahlia had left college and stayed home to take care of them, but she wasn't very good at it yet. The day before, she'd packed an entire sealed box of granola bars, no juice, and two pieces of bare white bread in Ruby's lunch, forgetting to spread them with peanut butter. But at least she was trying. Ginger, a senior in high school, would barely look at her sisters. She'd sit at the register counter in the closed tea shop in the front room of their house for hours every evening, reading one of her bleak and sophisticated novels, or swirling a finger through a pile of shredded peppermint leaves, or just staring out the window until the setting sun flared one last time over the pine trees, then sank.

“It makes Ginger feel better to be alone,” Dahlia had said one night when she pulled Ruby away from spying at the shop door. That didn't make sense to Ruby, but the world didn't make much sense anymore. Maybe if she could decode the too-big words and ideas in her Carl Sagan book, it would again.

“No, space is astronomy. Right?” Dahlia looked over at Ginger, who sat on the opposite bench from them with a book propped open and a practical juice smoothie instead of a cone.

“Oh my god, Dahlia,” she muttered, but never looked up from the page she was pretending to read. Her blond hair whipped in the wind, still natural back then.

“Right, okay,” Dahlia continued, folding her hands atop the table. She hadn't gotten anything for herself. “Astral projection is . . . it's kind of like a superpower. And it's a power the women in the Chernyavsky family have.”

“You're lying,” Ruby protested.

“Why do you think so?”

“Because superpowers aren't real,” she said. “And neither are Mom's stories.”

They had all grown up on their mother's stories of the Chernyavsky family, their gifts and their downfall, which were one and the same. How the Chernyavsky women had been powerful in the old country—healers, seers of fate, sources of great wisdom. How they'd helped the worthy people who

sought them out in the deep woods, and punished the wicked. And how they'd been hunted for their abilities, and had all but abandoned them when they fled Russia, arriving in America with few possessions and fewer gifts left to them.

Ruby didn't really believe the stories—not when her mother told them, or their great-aunt Polina. At least, not all of them. She knew about the human brain and space and the periodic table of elements, but had never come across anything like the powers her mother had spoken of in her own books, books about *real* things, provable things. . . . Except that when her second cousin Alyona had died of breast cancer last year, she *had* felt the chill sweep through her; that icy premonition her mother had told her Chernyavsky women felt when a light among them was snuffed out.

Back then, she hadn't been so sure what to make of that.

“Believe me,” Dahlia assured her, “it's something we all do, and someday you will, too. But only once.”

Across from them, Ginger slapped her book shut. “You're doing it wrong. You're just going to mess her up! You'll ruin her for life if you tell her like that!”

“Well, who's gonna explain it better? You, or Mom?” Then Dahlia blanched, looking pained, as if she'd stubbed a recently broken toe, or slapped a fresh sunburn.

Ginger reopened her book, pretending not to care. “Be my guest,” she said, eyebrows folded up beneath her blunt high school bangs.

“Thank you. Ruby, astral projection is this theory some people have, where you can leave your body. Because there's your body, right, and then there's whatever's inside of it.”

“Your guts?” Ruby panicked. Pictures of intestines and blood and bones floating up from a rubbery pile of skin blossomed before her.

Ginger glanced back up, aghast.

“No, no, no, oh my god no,” Dahlia hurried to say. “I mean, like, your spirit, you know?”

Ruby sort of knew. The Chernyavskys didn't attend churches or synagogues or mosques, but Saltville was the kind of place that put up a nativity in the town square each December, and piped not just “Rudolph” or “Frosty” but the heavy-hitter Christmas tunes over department store speakers; the slow, epic Jesus jams. So she'd gotten the gist. “That's real?”

“In a way. It’s, like, your thoughts and your feelings and your *energy*. And imagine those parts of you drifting up out of your body. Okay? Now imagine that you could be out of your body, but you can still move around. You can look down on your house, or your street, or you could land on the front lawn of Great-Aunt Polina’s house, and nobody would see you or know you were there, because you’re not in your body. But you could see everything. Are you imagining that?”

“Yeah.” She stared at the table trying to picture it. By this time, her ice cream—named Cool Vampire—had been reduced to a minty, tangy puddle on the weather-bleached wood, with its cone like a ruined tower in the center.

“Good!” Dahlia bobbed her head. “So now imagine something else. You can’t just travel from place to place, you can also travel in time. *But*”—she held up one long finger, stacked with silver rings—“you can only go forward into the future. And you can’t go just anywhere. You can only go into your own body, wherever your body will be in the future.”

This made no sense, and she was about to say so before Ginger added wryly, “Why don’t you just call it time travel?”

“No, Ginger,” Dahlia answered, her voice overly sweet. “Because that’s you going into the future *inside* your body, so you’re a whole person when you get there, and you can run into your future self in the mall, or wherever.”

“Is time travel real?” Ruby asked, distracted, because in between her science books, she’d also been reading a book for history class called *11,000 Years Lost*, about a girl who, while hunting for Paleo-Indian artifacts near her school, wound up going back in time to the end of the Ice Age. And to be honest, that seemed like a much better power.

“No.” Dahlia dashed her hopes. “I don’t think so, at least. But the point is this: someday, probably when you’re a teenager, you’ll be standing in our kitchen, or watching TV, or taking a shower, and then all of a sudden, you’ll blink and be in the body of your future self. And you could be fifty, or seventy, or one hundred. There’s no way to know.”

“... Why?” Ruby dared to ask.

Dahlia sighed and fiddled with the clasp on her chunky bracelet, the one their mother had just given her for her birthday. “Because,” she said, looking not in Ruby’s eyes, but at a nonspecific spot on her forehead, “you’re going to be whatever age you are when you die.”

Here, Dahlia had fumbled the explanation a bit. For years, from their talk until the middle of a random gym period in eighth grade, Ruby had thought that when she saw her Time, as her family called it, she’d slough her body and slip into the future just in time to see her own demise. She then believed she’d pop back, like a video game restarting after a lost life, aware

that she'd someday die in a plane crash, or clipped by a car, or falling off a ladder, or poisoned by Ginger when she'd mouthed off once too often. She thought that bitter kernel of knowledge was the whole point, and one could see, from Dahlia's fumbling speech, how she'd gotten the idea.

But no. This was what actually happened.

When a Chernyavsky girl was old enough—maybe thirteen like Ruby was, maybe fifteen, maybe more—you didn't really see *how* you'd die. You could guess, a lot of the time, but you only saw who you'd *be* when you died. Who you'd be in the minutes or hours or some small, useless amount of time before the end.

There was one thing Dahlia did manage to get across that day at the Cone Zone, though: whatever Ruby saw during her one-time-only, nonrefundable trip into her future, it was inevitable.

"If you don't like your . . . your Time," Ruby had asked, "why don't you just change it? Like, if you're supposed to die on a roller coaster, you could just make sure you never go to Six Flags. Then you won't die."

Across the table, Ginger put her book down spine-up on the wood. She'd dropped the smug smile that had lingered throughout Dahlia's explanation and was instead pressing her top teeth into her bottom lip until the pink skin paled. "It doesn't work like that," she said.

Dahlia nodded in agreement. "Remember when Alyona died last year? She had seen herself having cancer treatment when she was a teenager. She never smoked a cigarette after that, or drank, or dyed her hair, or lived near power lines, or went outside without sunscreen. It didn't change anything."

"Okay, so why didn't she run away? Like, instead of going to that hospital for treatment, why didn't she just go to Japan or something? Has anyone tried that?"

"Somebody has," Ginger muttered at last.

"Mom?" Ruby guessed, a cold, fizzy feeling in her head as if she'd actually eaten her ice cream, gulped it down in one greedy bite.

"You don't know that," Dahlia said, glaring at Ginger.

"Polina basically told you—"

"No she didn't. That's your interpretation. We don't know why she—"

"Abandoned us?" Ginger cut in. "Maybe you don't want to believe it, but I know why. Anyways, *Ruby*," she said, turning pointedly away from Dahlia, "it won't work. Running

away from fate won't change anything. It never does. It just makes everything worse, for everybody."

So that was that. Your Time couldn't be changed, and to try to alter fate wasn't the point. Good or bad, it was impossible to fight the future. Whatever powers the Chernyavskys had, that wasn't one of them.

At least, not anymore.