

ENDORSEMENTS

In the world of magical realism, Jennifer Moorman is an important new voice. She is a sensitive, engaging, quirky, and soulful storyteller. Her characters speak their truths only to inspire us, the reader, to embrace and respect our own true gifts. As a lifelong fan of Alice Hoffman, I am adding Jennifer to a short list of writers who can carry the torch forward to a new generation.

—JANE UBELL-MEYER | *FOUNDER OF BEDSIDE READING*

Full Moon Press

The Necessity of Lavender Tea has the delicate magical allure and heartwarming storyline that make a truly memorable coming-of-age classic. In this inspiring tale, Jennifer Moorman takes us on Kate Muir's tender journey through profound loss and budding love, and guides her to trust in the transforming power of her choices when she's faced with a troubling vision. Readers looking for a vibrant splash of Southern charm will fall in love with Moorman's vividly painted Mystic Water and the wise, whispering nature and compelling characters who inhabit it.

—JEANNE ARNOLD | *BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE YOUNG ADULT STUBBORN SERIES*

A sweet, magical coming-of-age tale about the best and hardest parts of love and friendship and family.

—AMY IMPELLIZZERI | *AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF LEMONGRASS HOPE AND I KNOW HOW THIS ENDS*

What can I say about the world Jennifer Moorman has created in her series about the inhabitants of the town of Mystic Water? I was moved to tears when I finished reading *The Necessity of Lavender Tea*. Jennifer writes so beautifully about life and love, growing up and trying to fit in. Sprinkled with just the right amount of magic, this heartwarming second book in the series, will bring you to tears as you become one with Kate as she struggles through hiding her ability to see the future, the pain of wanting to belong, love, and the awkwardness of being different. The book leaves you wanting to visit Mystic Water again and again.

—ELISA FERSHTADT, *HOSPITALITY PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSULTANT*

THE
NECESSITY
OF
LAVENDER
TEA



THE
NECESSITY
OF
LAVENDER
TEA

A NOVEL

JENNIFER MOORMAN



Full Moon Press

The Necessity of Lavender Tea

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*To everyone and anyone who has struggled to be normal in order to fit in. You are
unrepeatable. Let the world see how extraordinary you are.*



To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON



Full Moon Press

CHAPTER 1

Mystic Water, 1950s

KATE MUIR COULDN'T STOP the inevitable. Couldn't stop dragging around a worthless, damaged ability that would, year after year, destroy her. She hated her cursed fate. She would give anything to sever the curse, hack it away like a toxic poison ivy vine. But that wasn't an option, not according to her mama, who assured her this ability would make Kate's life a tragedy, trapping her forever inside her mind with no escape. No redemption.

Kate kicked her sandaled feet through fresh pine needles and bright-green sycamore leaves that had only yesterday been part of the forest canopy above her. Last night's storm—in its desperate madness—had stripped trees of their summer growth and coated the forest floor like a crisp, verdant blanket, potent with scents of sweet sap and rain-soaked earth.

Midsummer storms blown in by east winds brought mischief and rebellion. The oppressive summer heat had been replaced with a cool breeze, making it feel as though autumn crept in early and without permission, like the weather was up to something.

Gentle breezes in July could never be trusted. July was anything but gentle; July was intense, sweltering, burning. July made people in Mystic Water want to live in the water like mermaids. A few dozen people would dive into Jordan Pond in July and not emerge until Labor Day.

Normally, Kate loved summer vacation, the days that stretched out long and free. During the summer, she didn't worry about whether or not her classmates liked her or if they would avoid her during group activities. She wouldn't have to suffocate beneath their pity, wouldn't have to hear anyone whisper the name Evan. It didn't matter if she was the darkest face in the woods or if she was so

skinny that her sixteen-year-old body still resembled a boy's. She could just be. Outside among the flowers and the wildness of the forest, Kate felt free.

But today the world around her seemed to be plotting for a surprise attack, tugging her into a false sense of security, cooling her with its whispery breeze, coaxing her to relax. But she couldn't. Her fingers tingled, and she felt as unsettled as a caged canary in a coal mine. The periwinkle-blue sky stretched like a bowl over the too-quiet woodlands.

The silence reminded Kate of the caves upriver, where the deeper you ventured, the stiller and more extreme the darkness became—a silence so profound that you could hear the heartbeats of those around you. Now in this wooded hush, she heard nothing but her own breath, which unnerved her. Where were the birds, the chattering squirrels? The breeze died, further dampening life. Kate started humming one of her mama's Cherokee songs, trying to settle her anxiety. It didn't help.

Ahead, the pine trees became sparse, leaving an open space covered in juvenile ferns and mats of soft ocher and blue-green moss. A cluster of mauve flower heads stretched their blooms above darker foliage, testing the afternoon sunlight. *Eupatorium purpureum*, Kate thought. Joe-Pye weed to everyone else. July was too early for blooming Joe-Pye weed, but the plants boasted their blood-red stalks and deep-pink buds. A harbinger that something was definitely out of sync.

Monarch butterflies darted in and out of the flowers, acting just as surprised as Kate was to see the plants. Kate knelt in front of the blooms. The storm had not snatched the vibrant petals from their delicate stalks. An orange-and-yellow butterfly fluttered above her, and she reached out her hand like a damsel asking a prince for the honor of kissing her hand. The monarch landed on her knuckle and shivered against her skin.

Almost instantly, a dark veil dropped over Kate's vision, graying the colors and creating a world that was clouded and out of focus. She recognized the rush of icy prickles across her taut skin. A sickly sensation gathered in her stomach, causing heat to rise inside her like a stoked fire. Instinctively, she lay flat on her back, spreading her arms out as though she might create an angel in the pine

needles. The butterfly flapped its wings above her, sending sighs of air across her cheeks. Before the darkness overtook her, Kate breathed in the scents of burning rubber, sour breath, and men's cologne.



When Kate was five years old, she experienced her first premonition. She'd woken up disoriented on the floor of her bedroom, drooling on the threadbare rug, arms and legs crumpled beneath her. Broken images of her parents, a man with blue eyes, and a semitruck with shattered headlights lingered in her mind for a few seconds, but the vision soon burned away like fog in sunlight. She didn't tell her parents what happened, mostly because she didn't understand it herself. Kate didn't have another vision for five years.

On her tenth birthday, Kate watched her older brother, Evan, swim through the gentle currents of the Red River, which snaked behind their house. During heavy spring rains, the river swelled and flooded the banks like the Nile, leaving behind fertile soil where cattails and American lotus thrived. When the summer heat parched the land and the thin blue skies withheld rain for weeks, the river turned into a rock-filled creek where tadpoles flailed in tiny puddles.

"Hey, birthday, girl!" Evan climbed onto a water-slicked rock and called her to join him, motioning enthusiastically as the sunlight turned his skin to the color of caramel.

The heavy rains had swollen the river to twice its summertime size, and swirls of water churned and gurgled as it rushed by. Kate shook her head, but Evan's laugh could persuade a recluse to rejoin society, and she knew she wouldn't stay on the riverbank. Not with his attention so focused on her, knowing he wanted to spend time with her.

Kate put one foot into the water, but her vision tunneled, her legs buckled at the knees, and she fell sideways like a discarded doll. She knocked her head on the smooth stones and succumbed to the persistent darkness.

When Kate awoke, her clothes were soaked. She blinked up at her mama whose dark eyes were as large as walnuts and lips were taut and trembling;

her sharp cheekbones angled and gleamed like polished obsidian. Evan hovered nearby; his grass-green eyes were overly bright, and the muscles in his neck strained against his skin.

“What happened?” Kate mumbled, her voice thick and unsure.

“You fell in,” Evan said. “The current dragged you downstream about fifty yards. I didn’t think I could get to you before you rounded the bend—”

“But you did,” her mama interrupted. “Help me get her inside.”

Once inside the house, her mama forced Kate to stay awake and sit at the kitchen table. Her head throbbed like an intruder was trying to push its way out of her skull, and she couldn’t stop shivering. Something was different inside her; her bones ached with the awareness. Kate’s mama wrapped her in a wool blanket like a swaddled baby to help battle the October chill.

“What did you see?” her mama asked as she busied herself in the kitchen, staring at the kettle as if willing it to whistle. Her pacing caused pots to rattle in the cabinets.

Kate’s insides clenched. “What do you mean?” But Kate knew what her mama meant.

“She was out cold,” Evan said. “She didn’t see anything.”

Kate shuddered and avoided her mama’s intense gaze. Images surfaced in her mind: blue eyes and fingers linked with hers, an upside-down car. She kept seeing a man with dark hair, laughing, picking daisies from the forest and then headlights shining through the fog straight into her eyes, blinding her, and her heartbeat exploded. She tried to remember what happened, how the images might be connected, but her thoughts muddled as the seconds ticked.

Dissatisfied with her answer, her mama sent her daddy and Evan to the store for traditional remedies—Tylenol—but Kate knew Evan had disobeyed. She felt her brother’s presence in the hallway, just out of her mama’s sight in the kitchen.

Her mama poured boiling water into a teacup. She placed a tea infuser stuffed full of dried lavender into the steaming liquid and set the cup in front of Kate. She motioned for Kate to swirl the infuser around through the liquid. The clinking of metal against porcelain exaggerated how silent the rest of the house

was, as if everything else had stopped and waited for what was coming. Kate's body started trembling.

"Little Blackbird," her mama said, "it's time you know the truth. You are cursed."

"What?" Kate asked, dropping the tea infuser. Her fingers itched, and she reached up to touch the darkening bruise on her forehead.

"My grandmother had premonitions too. Her life was a tragedy because of it. You will see slivers of the future. Both your own and futures belonging to others. You cannot change them. You cannot interfere with what you see. That alone will drive you crazy."

Her mama walked to the suncatcher hanging above the kitchen window. She lifted the colorful glass in her fingers, tracing the bronze welding lines connecting the fragments together. Vibrant flashes of light danced across the kitchen floor. "Sometimes you will see the future in broken pieces. It will be like trying to make complete pictures out of the shattered glass in a suncatcher. Impossible. Other times the future will be a clear path, but you cannot change it. You can only see and know—but never act."

Kate grasped the teacup to hide her unsteady hands. The words *tragedy* and *broken* joined the ache in her head, hammering away like a woodpecker on a mature pine. Her tongue tasted like dry earth and bitter leaves.

Her mama walked to her and stood beside the table. Her strong gaze locked onto Kate's face. "No matter what you see, you cannot try to alter it. Interfering with the future is forbidden. There are no exceptions."

"Forbidden?" Kate asked. The word sounded archaic, plucked from a fairy tale. "By who? What if I see something bad happening to someone else?"

Her mama shook her head. "No exceptions. Changing the future could have terrible consequences."

"But what if I could help—"

Her mama stamped her foot. "No exceptions. Now, drink your tea."

Kate glanced up and caught Evan's eyes in his hiding place just inside the shadowed hallway. His brow wrinkled when he frowned.

"Can I control when these visions happen?"

“No.” Her mama returned to the stove. “They will come whenever they want to, even at the most inconvenient times. But the tea will help. It helped my grandmother not lose control as often. The lavender soothes, and a calm mind does not receive as many visions.”

What if she had a vision in school? She grimaced. “But I don’t want to be different. I want to fit in.”

“Fit in with whom?” her mama asked.

Kate shrugged and looked away from her mama’s knowing gaze. “Other kids? The kids in town?” Anyone.

Evan waved at her from the hallway. When she looked at him, he mouthed, “You fit in with me.”

“Little Blackbird,” her mama asked, “why do assume you don’t fit in?”

She looked at her mama, but she had already turned away. “What happened to your grandmother?”

“She lost her mind,” her mama said matter-of-factly. “Ended up ranting and blubbing like a child.” Her mama’s sigh caused the dishtowel to shudder on the counter. “There was too much in her head, too much that wouldn’t leave. Trapped there by the curse.” Only then did her mama turn to her and offer a comforting smile. “Drink your tea.”

Later that night Kate sat cross-legged on the floor with her back propped against her bed. Her birthday joy curdled like buttermilk. She forced herself to eat cake after dinner, but now her growing despair caused her stomach to respond like she’d eaten hemlock flowers.

“Hey,” Evan said, pushing open her bedroom door and walking in. He sat beside her, stretching out his long muscular legs beside hers. “Not quite the birthday you imagined.”

Kate mimed handing Evan a box. “You’ll never guess what your gift is—a curse.”

Evan leaned his shoulder against hers. Her trembling lip stopped his teasing. “Hey, I’m sorry. Mama . . . well, she’s like the *rosa rugosa*.” When Kate looked at him, he added, “Beautiful and hardy but with great, big thorns.”

“I’m not sure what’s worse, that she told me I’m cursed or that she said her grandma went insane.” Kate stared at her open palms. “Here’s to the future.”

“What I meant was,” Evan said, “it might not be as bad as she says. Maybe it will be cool to see things, to know what’s happening.”

Kate half-smiled at him. Evan, the relentless optimist.

“Maybe you could get a second opinion,” he offered.

“From a doctor?”

He shook his head. “I was thinking about one of Mama’s people. Aurora Catawnee—”

“The crazy lady?” Kate balked. “No way. Everyone knows she’s kooky.”

Evan’s eyebrows raised. “Have you ever met her?”

“No.”

“So you’re basing your judgment of her on someone else’s opinion?” he asked. “That’s shaky ground, Little Blackbird. I’ve met her a few times. She’s wise and has a way of speaking that makes you feel calm. If Mama’s grandma had what you have, Aurora Catawnee will know all about it. Maybe it’s worth learning what she knows, hear another perspective.”

Kate shrugged. She wasn’t ready to talk about the curse with anyone yet, and what could a kooky old Cherokee woman possibly know anyway?

After her birthday, Kate had premonitions at least once a month, sometimes as often as once a week if she forgot to drink lavender tea daily. Her mama explained how the tea would slow the premonitions, perhaps even put them to sleep for a while. Kate fretted about having an episode—as she’d named them—during school. Wasn’t it bad enough that she was already physically different with her too-black eyes, hair as dark as ravens, and skin the color of Georgia clay? Now her insides were jumbled, broken, and manic. Now she saw familiar faces in her visions—her schoolmate Sally’s blue eyes haunted and lost, a schoolmate Mikey skipping rocks across the river, her daddy’s tears on his fingers.

None of her visions made sense. Most of them frightened her. Sometimes she’d wake in the middle of the night and eat dried lavender by the handfuls just to stop seeing anything at all.

Kate never had the same vision twice, and she never had premonitions that followed a chronological timeline. Not until three months after Evan turned eighteen and he left for college.

She'd been dreading his departure for college like someone walking a pirate ship plank. She'd never known life in Mystic Water without Evan. He was a shield, a first line of protection between her and the whole world. Most days Kate felt Evan was the only person who really saw her. Saw her and loved her just as she was. What would life be like without him singing "Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy" through the garden? Who would make her laugh at the dinner table when Mama was discussing her midwifery and Daddy's mind was preoccupied with work, imagining architectural designs, mm-hmming and saying, "Yes, love" in all the right spaces?

The state university offered Evan a football and an academic scholarship. Everyone in town overflowed with excitement for him, slapping his back and telling him they couldn't wait to see all he would accomplish. No one doubted he would succeed, because Evan had remarkable talent. There didn't seem to be anything he couldn't master. Many believed Evan's athletic prowess was his greatest talent; others said it was his uncanny ability to remember everything he read. Kate believed his greatest talent was making her feel like she belonged somewhere, which was a feat no one else in town had even attempted.

So while the town couldn't stop talking about Evan's future after Mystic Water, Kate obstinately denied he was leaving until she stood in the front yard that fall, staring as his car bounced up the dirt driveway toward new beginnings. With his arm hanging out the window, Evan waved enthusiastically, happy to be spreading his wings and flying away.

That night, Kate had a vision that dropped her like a mayfly. She saw a man with heavy eyelids wearing a cowboy hat, hands loosened on a faded-leather steering wheel, headlights veering across solid yellow lines on a blacktop. When she awoke in her bedroom, a pool of tears stained the hardwood floor the color of drying blood.

Two weeks later, Kate blacked out while planting yellow roses in the backyard and saw wheels spinning on a car that was crushed like an accordion. A blurry

face stared at her through the shattered windshield. Without his cowboy hat, the man's bald head shined like a polished pearl in the moonlight as he staggered away from a tractor trailer and across the road, blubbering sloppy, broken prayers.

Then, a week later, Kate stumbled into her bedroom, dizzy and sweating profusely, and collapsed. That night she saw the color of the car—thistle green—with a spot of paint chipped away in the shape of Texas above the front right wheelhouse. Kate knew that car. She had traced that flaked paint outline a dozen times on Evan's car. When she emerged from the vision, her face was wet with tears, and she lay curled on her bedroom floor, wrapping her arms around her knees, pulling them to her chest. She wanted to tell Evan immediately. She wanted to tell him to never drive home or to come home in someone else's car or to ride the bus, but she did none of those things.

You can't change the future. You can't interfere. She repeated her mama's words over and over again.

As silvery moonlight turned her tears to glitter, she prayed that her vision wasn't the future. She prayed Evan would be safe and not trapped inside his busted-up car, but it seemed that nobody was listening to her prayers.

On this July afternoon when Kate awoke in the forest, she blinked up at the cloudless sky and pushed herself into a sitting position. Her heart pounded an unnatural rhythm against her ribcage. A memory of blue streaking across pavement and the stench of blood hung in the air for seconds before fading. Butterflies flitted around her cheeks, and she waved them away before standing on quivering legs. How had she been stupid enough to forget to drink her tea? She rubbed her fingers across her collarbone, trying to smooth away the ache in her chest. Her temples pulsed as though her heart had grown tired of its placement in her chest and risen to her skull instead.

Kate wandered down to the river and removed her sandals. She stepped barefoot into the tepid water and followed the current toward home. Her steps were sluggish, and she tried to grab hold of one thread of the vision. A sense of urgency, a whisper of importance, attached to the vision, but its misty images followed her like a cloud of dust. What good were premonitions? Weren't they

meant to tell the seer something? And even if the visions did reveal a truth, Kate could only watch the world unfold around her. She couldn't stop the inevitable or alter someone's steps. She was useless, dragging around a worthless ability that would, year after year, destroy her more—if her fate were to be the same as her great-grandmother's.

Squealing tires and the crunch of metal caused birds to burst from the tall pines. Kate stopped. She watched the birds fly overhead, blocking out the sun in groups of twos and threes, creating pulsing shadows across her face. Evan's name struck her heart like a lightning bolt. Without thinking, she dropped her sandals and ran in the direction of the sound.



CHAPTER 2

KATE CRASHED THROUGH THE forest, imagining herself as a deer escaping her predator. Why did she feel as though she were running toward the hunter? Wind whipped her hair behind her like a black satin ribbon. Squirrels leaped from branch to branch, barking questions.

Kate smelled gasoline and slowed to a jog and then to a walk. Up the steep embankment in front of her, a royal-blue convertible lay on its side, crashed into the stand of trees. A splintered pine tree had fallen down the slope.

The acrid stench of burned rubber caused her stomach to churn. When she closed her eyes, she imagined Evan behind a windshield that spiderwebbed, creating a thousand separate broken versions of his face. The cool breeze blew across her cheeks, and she exhaled a shuddering breath.

Kate used the tangle of kudzu and ivy to scale the slope. Her pulse throbbed in her neck, and she wiped her clammy, dirty hands on her shirt when she reached the top. The loose gravel scattered across the road dug into her bare feet.

She approached the overturned car, hesitant, blinking rapidly. The silver underbelly of the car faced her, and oil leaked onto the road and formed an inky misshapen stain. She held her breath as she peered around the front bumper now marred by deep gauges that ripped through the once-shiny metal. Broken glass glittered on the road. There were no bodies in the car, beneath the car, or around the car. It was as though the driver had disappeared.

Her gaze fell upon a smear of blood leading to the opposite side of the road and into the weedy grass. A young man slumped against the trunk of a pine. Kate avoided the glass and darted across the road before considering whether or not it was a bad idea. As soon as her feet hit the high grass on the other side, she

recognized his bruised face. Geoffrey Hamilton, the eighteen-year-old son of the wealthiest man in Mystic Water and probably the state.

How many times had she watched Geoffrey from across the schoolyard while he joked around with Evan? How many times had she wondered what it would be like to be a part of his world? Hundreds of times. She'd long ago memorized the way one corner of his mouth lifted into a smirk just before he laughed. She could recognize his gangly stride from across the baseball field. But she'd never been close enough to him to see the dusty shadow of stubble on his face.

Kate dropped down beside him. His head sagged toward his right shoulder. A gash on his high forehead spilled blood into his thick eyebrows and dripped a crimson river down the crooked bridge of his nose. His curly brown hair was plastered to his head in sweaty, dark patches like swirls of mud.

Kate reached out a hesitant hand and poked her finger into his shoulder. "Are you dead?" No answer. She pressed two fingers against the vein in his neck. A slow, steady beat pulsed against her fingertips.

Someone had once pressed fingers to Evan's neck too, but the heart had already given out, and the blood had stilled.

Geoffrey lifted his head. Hazel eyes with dilated pupils gazed at her. "I dunno," he slurred.

Kate exhaled in relief and pressed a shaky hand to her chest. Specks of gold flecked the thin line of hunter green circling his irises. She looked over her shoulder at the wrecked convertible. "How did you get over here?"

"Where am I?" he asked. He tried to shift his weight to see around her, but he groaned and reached for his leg. Losing his balance, he slid from the tree and collapsed onto his side.

Kate gasped, reaching for him. "Are you okay?"

Geoffrey whimpered and rolled onto his back. Blood seeped through a rip in his striped button-down shirt. A tremor rippled through his body, and his eyelids fluttered closed. Was he going into shock? What would her mama do? Kate slapped lightly at Geoffrey's face.

"Hey," she said. "Hey, Geoffrey. Wake up. Don't leave me. Stay here. Focus."

She leaned over him. His eyes opened, and he moaned. Kate straightened and grimaced. He smelled sweaty and sour, like the alley behind the bar on the edge of town. Kate had been there only once when she'd gone with her daddy on a job to see if he could help redesign the interior layout. She'd made the mistake of sneaking out the bar's back door and nearly suffocated from the stench of regret and fermented drink.

Kate tapped his cheek again, gentler this time. "I need you to stay awake, and that would be simpler if you were sober."

Geoffrey reached one hand toward his head. Kate grabbed it and shook her head. "Your hands are disgusting. You'll likely infect the wound if you touch it." She needed to get help. But how? This dead-end gravel road led to only two places—Look-Off Pointe and her home. Her daddy was working, and her mama was in town helping Mrs. Tyler deliver her fourth child.

Geoffrey's head lolled to the side, and his eyes focused on the car. "Oh, God." "Were you driving alone?"

"No," he said, "Ben was driving."

His oldest brother. The Hamilton son with the wild eyes and reckless spirit.

Geoffrey tried to sit up, but Kate pressed her hand against his shoulder. "Stay down. Ben isn't here."

"I know." He swallowed. Tears leaked down the sides of his face. "God, it hurts to think. Dad's car. He's going to kill us."

"You and your brother were drinking and driving?"

His glassy gaze met hers. "God, I don't need a lecture from Sacagawea."

Kate narrowed her eyes. "I'm half Cherokee."

"So?"

"Sacagawea was a Shoshone, you rude imbecile. I ought to leave you here on the side of the road." Kate tried to stand, but Geoffrey grabbed her wrist. His fingers were thin and long, looping around her narrow wrist and folding over themselves.

"Don't leave me," he said, pathetic and rasping, before releasing her. "I think my ankle is broken."

“It might be,” she said. “And you have gashes on your forehead and chest.” Not to mention the bruising. “Let me check your ankle.” Both of his shoes were missing. “Where are your shoes?”

“I know *you’re* not judging me for going barefoot. We were just going for a quick spin.”

Kate scooted down toward Geoffrey’s bare feet. They were scraped and bloody, but most of the blood looked to be from topical scratches. “I’m going to check for a pulse.”

“In my foot?”

“Yes, so don’t kick me.” Kate checked for a posterior tibial pulse and found one. She told him to wiggle his toes, and she nodded when he did. His toes were long and thin, causing her to wonder if he could hold a pencil and write his name with his feet. She grabbed hold of his smallest toe. “What am I doing?”

“Squeezing my baby toe?” he asked, as though his answer might not be correct.

She grinned at him.

“What?” he asked, sounding defensive. “My toes are certainly not my good parts.”

She caught his gaze and blushed so hard that the tops of her ears burned.

“Well, that was inappropriate. Just slipped right out.” Geoffrey’s grimace turned into a smile, and he chuckled. “God, it hurts to laugh. It hurts to breathe.”

Then Kate laughed just to release the awkwardness constricting her throat. The limbs of the pine trees swayed around them. “You might have bruised or cracked ribs. Where is your brother? Why would he leave you?”

“He went to get Matt. Or Mom and Dad. Or anyone.”

“Your house is more than five miles away from here. He’s not likely to pass anyone on this road.” Unless someone was going to Look-Off Pointe in daylight, which was doubtful even for the bolder townsfolk.

“I’m going to help you, but I need to run home first. I can get back faster than Benjamin can walk home, and we need to stanch this bleeding. Probably need to splint your ankle too.”

“You’re a kid,” Geoffrey said, shuddering when he tried to move.

“I know *you’re* not judging *me*, and I’m all you have right now.” She stood, and he reached for her. His pupils dilated, causing his pale irises to swell. Was he . . . afraid? On impulse, she grabbed his outstretched hand. His skin felt clammy against her own.

“You’re coming back, right?” he asked.

“Promise.”

“I trust you.” His fingers squeezed hers. “I trusted your brother. He was a good guy. I liked him.”

Kate nodded and dropped Geoffrey’s hand. “Everybody did.”

When she returned half an hour later, she was thankful to find Geoffrey still conscious, even if his mood had soured more than his breath. Sweat saturated his ruined clothes, and his pallid skin had lost some of its youthful color. A flutter of pleasure rose within her at the sight of his relieved smile to see her return. Kate laid out her supplies beside them and started administering to his wounds.

“God, that hurts,” Geoffrey complained. His jaw clenched, and his sweat stunk of whiskey and smoke. “I thought you were going to bring back bandages and antiseptic, not flowers and spit.”

“Stop whining. The yarrow will numb the pain.” Kate pressed the yarrow poultice into the wound on his forehead. “And stop blaspheming, or I’ll tell your mama. I can’t imagine she’s going to be too pleased to find out you were drinking and wrecked your daddy’s car. She doesn’t need to know you’re a blasphemer too.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her. “You don’t even know my mom.”

Kate rubbed the yarrow into the jagged cut on Geoffrey’s chest. Her cheeks burned at the intimate contact, but he didn’t seem to care. His mouth contorted, revealing two crooked bottom teeth that were slightly out of line with the rest.

“I know she volunteers at the Baptist church during the weekdays, and she sings in the choir every Sunday,” Kate said. “She thinks her boys are the best behaved in town.”

“Listening to gossip about my mom doesn’t make you an expert,” he snapped. “You don’t know anything.”

Kate’s skin prickled. The grass around his body browned in his anger, and she moved her hands away. His gaze couldn’t seem to settle on anything, and his eyes sluggishly moved from one spot to another. His anger didn’t feel intentionally directed toward her. No one really knew what happened behind closed doors, and people often pretended to be one version of themselves in public and something else entirely in private. Maybe the Hamilton family had its own closet of secrets.

Kate didn’t know much about Geoffrey’s mom, Doreen Hamilton. He was right about that. Kate had only gathered information based on what she’d seen or heard around town. Mrs. Hamilton didn’t appear to do anything but brag about her sons and her volunteer work. Her outfits were always pressed so severely that she reminded Kate of a paper doll come to life—perfection in an angular form with sharp edges. Even her smile was rigid and perfectly drawn. She looked like the kind of woman who never laughed.

“I’ll tell you what I do know. I know how to splint an ankle,” Kate said. “But you’re going to have to stay still.”

“Pretty sure I couldn’t move far if I tried.” Geoffrey’s voice had grown thicker, slower, spilling heavy over the grass like turpentine. His arms splayed out beside him, palms facing up as though he were lying in a meadow soaking up the sunlight.

Kate grabbed the short boards and scarves. She tucked an aqua scarf beneath his calf and wrapped it around to the other side. Then she slid the purple scarf below his ankle. She propped the boards on either side of his leg before she lifted the scarves around the boards and tied knots, creating a tight bond around his leg.

“That should keep you from hurting yourself further,” she said. “Don’t put any weight on it. The splint will hinder movement until they come back for you.”

Geoffrey’s eyes were closed, and his chin rested against his shoulder. Her heart slapped against her ribcage. She pressed her fingers against his throat.

He reached up a lazy hand and touched hers. "I'm not dead," he mumbled.

She exhaled. The sound of a car engine rumbled up the street. Kate pulled her hand away and leaped to her feet. She couldn't be with Geoffrey when they found him. What would people say? She could already hear their voices. *What did she do to him? What was she doing out there alone? She's crazy, you know, especially after they lost Evan.* Kate glanced down at Geoffrey, feeling guilty for leaving him alone, but still she shot off through the woods and hid herself behind a fat pine.

The car neared, and as soon as she heard voices and car doors slamming, she took off running toward home. She didn't stop running until she reached her backyard. For the rest of the day, she couldn't stop thinking about Geoffrey Hamilton. Was he okay? Had he been grounded to infinity? Did he tell anyone about her? Two nights later, her questions were answered.



CHAPTER 3

SOMETHING WOKE KATE IN the darkness of her room. A faraway sound. She focused all of her concentration on heightening her sense of hearing. The cuckoo clock in the kitchen ticked with each swing of its pendulum. A whippoorwill called from its nest in a nearby tree. The steady rise and fall of her daddy's snores crept out from beneath her parents' closed bedroom door. She heard nothing strange or jarring. But something felt out of place.

Kate sensed the intruder before she saw him. Her eyes darted toward the window. A shadow stretched from the glass, across her floor, and over her blankets. She thought of Peter Pan coming to the Darlings' window, but the man at her window was tall and thin and too old to be called a boy. She sat up and pulled the cotton blankets against her, pressing fistfuls of fabric against her chest.

The young man outside the window rapped his knuckles against the glass, a gentle *tap, tap, tap*. A tentative sound beat to the rhythm of "Shave and a Haircut." Kate cut her eyes to her open bedroom door. Any good daughter who awoke to find a young man at her window would have gone straight to her parents, but Kate didn't. Instead, she tugged the quilt off her bed and wrapped it around her body to conceal her nightgown. She closed her bedroom door and tiptoed toward the window because she recognized the dark silhouette—Geoffrey Hamilton.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for the window latch. She slid up the sash. Nighttime sounds pushed inside her bedroom on humid summertime air. Crickets chirped and the river gurgled. Kate couldn't get her mouth to

form words, so she stood and waited for whatever happened next. In all of her imaginings, she'd never once pictured Geoffrey Hamilton outside her window.

"Finally," he whispered. "You sleep like the dead. I've been knocking for ages."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know I was here?"

"In the middle of the night? In your house? Lucky guess," he said, and he smiled at her for the first time ever.

Kate leaned away from the shine of a smile directed at only her. It pulled all the air from her lungs and caused a ringing in her right ear. She looked over her shoulder at her bed to see if her body was still tucked beneath the covers. Could this be a vivid premonition? Why else would Geoffrey Hamilton, Mr. Popularity, be standing outside her house? But her bed was empty, and a summer breeze slipped into her room, shivered across her skin, and threaded itself through her hair, calling her attention back to Geoffrey.

She placed her hands on the windowsill, draping her fingers across the wooden frame. "What are you doing here? It's not a common practice to visit strangers in the middle of the night."

He chuckled. "You're not a stranger. I know who you are."

She shook her head, and pieces of hair tumbled from her loose braid. "You know nothing about me."

Lightning bugs flickered messages in the trees behind Geoffrey. Kate glanced at them quickly, trying to interpret the pulsing messages but unable to concentrate because of the way her heartbeat quickened.

"I know you live here," he said, smiling again, causing the air around him to feel charged with electricity.

"The amount of information you know about me is staggering."

Geoffrey burst out laughing, and Kate immediately shushed him. He slapped a hand over his mouth, but she almost wished he hadn't. She wanted to scoop up his laughter and hide it beneath her pillow like a good-luck charm. She wanted to bring it out on those nights when she lay awake eating lavender.

"Come outside," he whispered.

"What? No," she said, looking at her bedroom door. It was still closed, but the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. She sensed her mama turning over

in her sleep down the hallway. She looked back at Geoffrey and startled at the sincerity in his eyes. He wanted her to come outside with him.

Alarms should have been going off in her mind—the kind of sirens that activated when a bank was being robbed of its valuables. Or the kind her Sunday school teacher said should be triggered when someone tempted you to sin. But Kate didn't hear any warning bells. Maybe having a late-night conversation with a young man wasn't that big of a deal.

Everybody had a different opinion on what was acceptable versus shameful. And they weren't shy about telling you all the rules you needed to follow to live a virtuous, upstanding life. Those rules sometimes felt more constricting than a straitjacket and were about as clear as a smoke-filled room. Kate found most people cherry picked the rules that applied to them and broke the rest. A small-eyed sphinx moth flew near Geoffrey's head and flapped in an arch over him, sending ripples of temptation on fluttery wings. Kate never believed she would have been given a chance to cherry pick this moment.

"Come on," he begged. "Just for a minute. I didn't get to thank you properly for helping me."

Oh, how temptation swelled inside her. She could imagine herself scrambling out the window like someone was offering free orange Creamsicles, but she located her good-daughter response. "You're welcome. Now go before my parents wake up."

Geoffrey leaned one arm on the windowsill. His skin touched hers. "Come outside and have a proper conversation with me." When he smiled again, the moon drew nearer and brightened. His face illuminated like carved Italian marble. Kate felt herself leaning toward him, drawn in by the pull of his gravity.

Her mama's voice crackled to life in a distant part of her mind. Kate forced herself away from the window. "There is nothing proper about a conversation in the middle of the night with a young man and no chaperones."

Geoffrey laughed again. "Oh, come on. Cool it. I just want to talk. No one will even know."

She knew she should slam her window shut, jump into her bed, and cover her head until the morning. But she wanted to go outside. She wanted to be near

Geoffrey. Should she risk it? Her curiosity was momentarily quelled by doubt. “Is this some sort of trick?” Were there others waiting outside just to laugh at her for thinking someone like Geoffrey Hamilton would want her to sneak out of her house with him?

He frowned. “Why would I trick you?”

“Are you alone?” Kate asked.

“Yeah.”

“How did you get here?”

“I rode a horse.”

Kate’s brow furrowed, and he smiled again. At her.

“I drove, of course, and it wasn’t easy. Are you coming out or not?”

Lightness filled her chest as though a balloon had expanded and lifted her onto her tiptoes. Her mouth formed the word *yes*, but she immediately shook her head. Then she closed the window.

Geoffrey’s shadow lingered outside. He didn’t move. They stood in a silence so profound, with Kate on one side of the glass and Geoffrey on the other, that she heard her heartbeat thundering around the room sounding like a freight train barreling through Mystic Water.

Geoffrey tapped the glass. Moonlight reflected off his dark hair. He tapped again.

Kate bit her bottom lip and raised the window a few inches. She squatted down, propped her fingers on the sill, and whispered through the crack. “You said thank you. Now go away.”

Geoffrey’s long fingers stretched through the narrow opening and touched hers. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Not until you come outside. Are you going to make me beg again?” His voice slipped through the opening and warmed her cheeks, circled her chest, and squeezed. “Please?”

Without a doubt, Kate knew she should say no again, but instead, she said, “Let me change. Go down to the river and take a left. I’ll meet you beside the magnolia tree.”

“Sounds like you give these directions often. How many men come to your window at night?” he asked.

Her chin dipped down, and she wondered if there was such a thing as a negative number of people who wanted to spend time with her. “Go.” She closed the sash.

As soon as his shadow moved away from the window, she tossed off the quilt and stared around her room. Was this what people would say was an out-of-body experience? Like they’re watching their lives from somewhere up above? Kate’s bones vibrated with excitement and apprehension. Thoughts immediately formed in her mind, questioning her sanity and her morals. Geoffrey Hamilton was just another boy, so why was her body responding like she’d been eating fireworks instead of lavender?

She shushed her mind because it was making her temples throb, and she pulled on a light cotton shirt and a pair of capris she usually wore for gardening. Halfway down to the river, Kate began to think meeting Geoffrey was a terrible idea. She slowed her pace as she approached the tree because she didn’t see him anywhere. Had he changed his mind and run off? Had it really been a trick? The river babbled, and fireflies blinked across the water, looking like shooting stars dancing across the rocks.

“Psst.”

Kate looked into the shadowy stand of trees nearby. Her heart slammed so hard against her ribcage that her body lurched forward.

“I’m over here,” Geoffrey said. “I can’t get my leg wet.”

His leg? Kate followed the sound of his voice and found him sitting on a boulder, stretching out his long legs. That’s when she saw the short, white cast glowing in the darkness like a snow boot. A pair of crutches lay across the ground beside him.

“Broken?” she asked.

“Fractured my fibula, but you knew that didn’t you?” he said. “You’re a regular Florence Nightingale.”

“That’s an exaggeration.”

He pointed toward a spot by the river. “You know there’s a bench over there.”

Kate glanced over her shoulder. Her daddy had handcrafted the bench for her and Evan when they were younger. Evan called it the Magic Bench. He said when they were sitting there together, no one could see them, nothing could harm them, and everything would be okay. No matter what was happening around them, the Magic Bench would set everything right again. And he'd been right; anytime she'd sat with him on the bench, she felt instantly better. But maybe that had been Evan and not the bench. Maybe his special gift had been to make everyone feel loved, cared for, and seen. Kate hadn't sat on the bench since Evan died; she didn't want to give her assumptions the opportunity to be the heartbreaking, dreadful truth. The bench wasn't magic; Evan was, and when he left, he took all the magic with him.

Kate cleared her throat. "It's a . . . special bench."

Geoffrey grinned. "I see. Not meant for strangers in the night?" He patted the boulder with his hand. "Won't you sit down?"

She clutched her hands together in front of her. "I'm comfortable standing, but thank you." She knew she'd come apart at the seams if she sat near him. Her body was already humming with frenetic energy. In the moonlight, his bruises looked like ink smears across his pale face. "You look better."

He smirked. "Get outta here. I look like I got in a fight with Sugar Ray Robinson."

Kate allowed herself to smile. "Okay, so maybe you look worse, but the cut on your forehead is healing."

"Because of your Indian magic," he said with a smile. He touched his forehead with his fingertips. "It stopped bleeding and hurting, and my dad couldn't believe it was already healing without stitches."

Indian magic? Kate's brows drew together. The differences between her and Geoffrey glowed like the fireflies in the trees. Even in the darkness, she couldn't hide the fact that she wasn't like Geoffrey. Geoffrey's family heritage probably descended from some highfalutin British bloodline. She wouldn't be surprised if the Hamiltons could trace their ancestry back to the monarchy, especially with the way his mother carried herself. Did she drink tea with her pinky finger raised?

Kate's family, by contrast, was anything but light skinned and regal. Her daddy, Sean Muir, was a second-generation American born to Scottish parents who emigrated from the small seaside village of Dunbar. His parents and his three siblings uprooted their lives in hopes for a better future during difficult economic times in Scotland. Kate's grandfather, who died before she was born, was a professionally trained doctor. Not long after arriving in the US, he was fortunate enough to find someone who hired him as a medical assistant. Then a local hospital sponsored him as a resident so he could be qualified to practice full time, but it hadn't been an easy journey for any of them. Diversity wasn't always welcome, and more often than not, people refused to see how they were alike, choosing to focus only on the minor things that made them different.

To add more to her mixed family ancestry, Kate's mama, Ama Alunahaka, was from the Cherokee Nation. Her family, 100 percent indigenous people, had been living in the area for more than a hundred years. When others had been forced—or strongly coerced—to leave Georgia, Ama's family group had resisted. Because of their determination to stay on their land combined with the compassion of those around them, her family had stayed with little to no conflict. That didn't mean the Cherokee in the area were openly accepted by everyone. Ama often described people as “tolerating” the Cherokee presence.

Most of the Cherokee stuck close to their homes and worked with other members of the tribe, but growing up, her mama had a rebellious streak and wanted to move around and through any town however she pleased. She wasn't always welcomed with open arms, but Mystic Water had a way of bringing together all sorts of people with myriad backgrounds and giving them all a place to call home.

Having been taught ways to use nature to heal, support, and comfort people, Ama was not only a sought-after healer but also a reputable midwife. She'd been helping deliver babies in Mystic Water long before her own children were born.

Even with mixed ancestry, Evan always had a way of fitting in with everyone around him. He inherited the best qualities of both their parents. Tall, athletic, and dark skinned with high cheekbones and a wide smile, he was distractingly handsome. People found ways to be near him, ways to make him laugh just so

they could hear it. No one seemed to care that he was half-Indian because he was friendly, well-mannered, and charismatic—the opposite of Kate.

“It wasn’t Indian magic. I used plants that grow around here. If people took any time to study herbs, they’d find there are hundreds of ways the earth can help them heal.”

Geoffrey held up his hands and chuckled. “Okay, okay, don’t have a cow. I was trying to say that whatever you did worked well. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Looking at his cast, she asked, “How’s Benjamin?”

“Ben? He’s fine,” Geoffrey huffed. “A few bruises and a busted lip, but he got off easy compared to me.” Geoffrey rapped his knuckles against the cast in a one-two beat.

“And the car?” she asked. She wondered how his father had reacted to learning his convertible was wrecked. Based on Geoffrey’s words, if he hadn’t been delirious, he acted like his dad was going to go ape.

Geoffrey grimaced and tugged a blade of grass growing between the rocks. “The car is totaled,” he admitted. “Dad yelled a lot, but after Benjamin explained a family of deer ran across the road and he tried to avoid them, he calmed down.”

Kate’s mouth dropped open. “Did that really happen?” She assumed they’d been drinking alcohol and Benjamin had lost control of the car.

Geoffrey’s cynical laugh answered the question before he did. “Nope, but we do what we have to do to keep the peace.”

Meaning Geoffrey lied to get what he wanted. “I should get back inside.”

“You just got out here.” The moonlight reflected in his pale eyes, and Kate knew she had to look away. She had to turn around and march herself home, close her bedroom door, and forget about Geoffrey Hamilton.

“You wanted to express your appreciation, and you have. Good night.”

Geoffrey leaned over and grabbed his crutches. He hoisted himself from the boulder and wobbled for a moment. He tipped an imaginary hat. “Good night, Miss Muir.”

Kate made a noise in her throat. “‘Miss Muir’ sounds like you’re talking to my mama. ‘Kate’ is good enough for me.”

Geoffrey grinned. “Then, good night, Miss Kate. I hope to see you again soon.”

Did she want to see him again, outside the safety of school walls and dozens of people separating them? Perhaps seeing him this way once—alone, without barriers between them—was enough. Because already her heartbeat was erratic, and her fingers twitched. Seeing him a second time felt like a dangerous idea, a fuse already burning toward a stick of dynamite. She turned and fled toward her house without looking back at Geoffrey.

