

ENSNARED



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A NOVEL BY

A. G. HOWARD

ENSNARED



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To Mom:

*I miss you. Thank you for giving me the courage to fly high
and catch my dreams, and for being the wind beneath my wings.*





MEMORY'S MYSTIC BAND

It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.
—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass,*
and What Alice Found There

I once thought memories were something better left behind . . . frozen pockets of time you could revisit for sentimental value, but more of an indulgence than a necessity. That was before I realized memories could be the key to moving forward, to recovering the fate and future of everyone you love and treasure most in the world.

I stand outside the glossy red door of a private chamber on the memory train. *Thomas Gardner* is engraved on the removable nameplate inserted inside the brackets.

“An unnecessary formality, since he’s here in the flesh,” the conductor—a carpeted beetle close to my size—said when I first requested the nameplate. I shot him an angry glare, then insisted he do as I ask.

Now, as I press my forehead hard against the brass, letting the metal chill my skin, I consider Dad’s name, how it means more than I ever imagined . . . how he *himself* is more than I ever could’ve dreamed.

I almost followed him into the room when we first arrived. He was so shaky, even before we had landed in London.

Who wouldn’t be? Shrunk to the size of a bug, flying across the ocean on the back of a monarch. I can still taste the residue of salty air. At dawn, when Dad started to accept we were actually riding on butterflies, we slipped through a hole in the foundation of a giant iron bridge and landed beside a rusted toy train in an underground tunnel. The fact that we were small enough to step into the train made Dad’s eyes so wide, I thought they’d pop out of his head.

I want to protect him, but he’s not weak. I won’t treat him like he is. Not anymore.

He was nine—just two years older than Alice had been—when he wandered into Wonderland and was trapped by a spidery grave keeper, yet somehow he survived. Better he face that memory alone. Otherwise, he might try to protect me. And I don’t need protection any more than he does.

It took me losing my mind to gain my perspective. If that’s what it takes for my dad, too, so be it.

My fingertip trembles as I trace the letters: *T-h-o-m-a-s*. Dad will find out his real name today, not the one given him by Mom. All the revelations, all the monstrosities he lived as a child, those

experiences will lead us to AnyElsewhere—the looking-glass world where Wonderland’s exiles are banished. A dome of iron covers it, holding them prisoner and warping their magic somehow, should they use it while inside. Red and White knights keep watch over AnyElsewhere’s two gateways.

My own two knights, Jeb and Morpheus, are trapped there. A month has passed since they were swallowed up. I want to believe they’re still alive.

I have to.

And then there’s Mom, stranded in a crumbling Wonderland, hostage to the same spiteful spider creature who once held Dad in her webby thrall. The rabbit hole, the portal into the nether-realm, has been destroyed at my hand. AnyElsewhere is the only way inside now.

We’re on a rescue mission, and Dad’s memory is the key to it all.

I drag my muddy feet along the red and black tiled floor, headed toward the passenger car’s front. My muscles ache from riding a monarch for twenty-four hours. It would’ve taken much longer had we not been picked up by a storm and lifted several thousand feet in the air, covering hundreds of miles in mere minutes—a mad ride my Dad and I won’t soon forget.

My hair drapes my shoulders in a wild snarl of platinum blond, limp from rain. The tangles are fitting, since that’s how I feel inside: chaotic, yet drained. The netherling half of my heart swells to break free of the human emotions ensnared around it. There will be no respite until I’ve found my loved ones and made things right in Wonderland.

Even then, I know none of us will ever be the same again.

A half dozen queer creatures occupy the white vinyl seats. They aren’t waiting to reunite with lost memories. They’re here because

they're stranded, too. Since the rabbit hole is gone, they have no way back to Wonderland, their home.

One creature is a pale, cone-headed humanoid whose cranium pops open sporadically so she can argue with a smaller version of herself. Next, the smaller version's cranium opens to reveal an even littler likeness. The tiniest one is a male with a large nose. He bonks his female counterparts with a teensy rolling pin before hiding away again. It's like watching a nightmarish nesting-doll version of *Punch and Judy*, a vintage puppet show I studied during drama class at school.

Two other passengers are pixies, and I wonder if they were part of the group I met last year in Wonderland's cemetery. They look different without their miner's caps: bald, scaly heads with tufts of silvery hair. A plastic bag rattles between them as they take turns tossing peanuts at the cone-headed creature, inciting more arguments.

The pixies' long tails twitch and their spider-monkey faces twist to studious expressions as I meet their silver gazes. They have no pupils or irises, and their eyelids blink vertically like theater curtains.

They whisper to one another as I cup a hand over my nose to stifle the rotten meat stench oozing in silvery slime from their hides.

"Alice, sparkly talkeress," one says in a breathy voice as I come within hearing distance. "No ostlay isthay times?"

The dialect is an odd mix of pig latin and nonsense. He wants to know if I'm lost this time.

"Not Alice, stupidess," the other shushes before I can answer. "And only thinkers ostlay here. Thinkers and omentsmays."

I continue down the aisle, too absorbed in my problems to engage.

The beetle conductor scribbles something on a clipboard while chatting with the last three passengers. These are round and fluffy,

with eyes affixed to tall, fuzzy stems that look more like rabbit ears than eye sockets. They watch as I pass, their pupils dilating with each rotation of their ears.

The fattest one sneezes in answer to a question the conductor asks, and a cloud of dirt puffs up from its fur.

"Blasted dust bunnies," the beetle bellows, and drags a vacuum cleaner from a holster at his waist, proceeding to suck the dirt from his carpeted hide.

I settle in an unoccupied row up front and hunch down by a window, waiting for the conductor. He was supposed to check on something—lost memories I need to see. They're not mine. I'll be spying on someone else's missing moments.

Mom felt guilty for visiting Dad's lost memories behind his back. Her wisdom makes me cautious. But the one whose mind I'll be violating doesn't deserve my respect. She's vicious and vengeful. She almost stole my body, and has managed to tear apart my life and most of Wonderland's landscapes.

Morpheus always says that everyone has a weakness. If he were here, he would tell me to find hers, so when I face her again I can crush her.

I intend to do just that.

The carpet beetle's vacuum whines, muffling the arguing, sneezing, and shushing going on around me. I lean back and look up at the chandeliers made of fireflies—each half the size of my arm—bound together by brass harnesses and chains. The glowing insects dip and dive, painting brushstrokes of yellow light across the red velvet walls. I tilt my head and stare out the window. More firefly fixtures illuminate the darkness, rolling across the tunnel's ceiling like glittery Ferris wheels.

I suppress a yawn. I'm exhausted, but too keyed up to close my eyes. I can't seem to settle in time and place. Just yesterday, I was at a table in the asylum's sun-filled courtyard, tricking my dad into eating a mushroom that would shrink him. That seems like an eternity ago, but not nearly as long as it's been since I've hugged Mom . . . argued with Morpheus . . . kissed Jeb. I miss Mom's scent, how she smells after working in the garden—like overturned soil and flowers. I miss the way Morpheus's jeweled eye markings flit through a rainbow of emotions when he challenges me, and I miss the arrested expression Jeb always used to wear when he painted.

The littlest things I once took for granted have become priceless treasures.

My stomach growls. Dad and I didn't have breakfast, and my body tells me it's lunchtime. I tuck my hand into the apron tied over my stiff, mud-caked hospital gown and roll the remaining mushrooms between my fingers. I'm hungry enough to consider eating one but won't. The magic within that made us small enough to ride butterflies will make us big once we're done here. I need to preserve them.

My outline reflects back from the windowpane: blue gown, white apron, frazzled blond hair with a streak of crimson down one side.

The first pixie was right. I'm the epitome of Alice.

A nightmare Alice.

An Alice gone mad, who thirsts for blood.

When I find Queen Red, she'll *beg* me to stop at her head.

I snort at the silly rhyme, then sober as the beetle turns off his vacuum attachment. He straightens his black conductor hat and hobbles over on two of his six twiggy legs. The other two sets serve as arms, cradling a clipboard.

"Well?" I ask, looking up at him.

"I found three memories. From long ago, when she was young and unmarried. Before she was"—he looks around and lowers his voice to a whisper—"queen."

"Perfect," I answer. I start to stand but settle in my seat again as he pushes my shoulder with a spiny arm.

"First you ruin the one way back to Wonderland, making me a babysitter of dust bunnies and smelly pixies. Now you want I should endanger my life by showing you . . ."—he studies the passengers behind me, his crisscrossed mandibles trembling—"her *private memories*." There's a clicking sound surrounding his whisper, like snapping fingers.

I grind my teeth. "Since when do netherlings respect anyone's privacy? That's not in your code of ethics. In fact, most of you don't know what ethics are."

"I know all I need to know. I know that she's not forgiving, that one." He's avoiding her name, keeping her anonymous.

I follow his lead. "She'll never know you showed me."

The conductor flips pages on his clipboard and scribbles something with his pen, stalling. "There's another issue of concern," he says louder this time. "The memories are repudiated."

"What does that mean?"

"She wasn't forced to forget. She *chose* to. Took a forgetting potion."

"Even better," I say. "She's afraid of them for some reason. That's to my advantage."

The clicking sound grows as his mandibles quiver. "Ideally, you could use them as a weapon. Repudiated memories are tainted with volatile emotional magic. They want revenge against the one who

made and discarded them. But you would have to carry them to her, keeping them dormant in your mind. Being a half-blood, you aren't strong enough."

I bristle at his condescension. "Mortals have their own way of making memories dormant. They write them down so the past doesn't preoccupy their thoughts. All I need is a journal."

He holds his pen an inch from my nose. "That won't work with enchanted memories, lessen your book is filled with enchanted paper to bind them. Sadly, I've ne'er heard of such a magic journal. You?"

I glare in silence.

"I thought not." The beetle taps my nose with the pen's tip.

Snarling, I snatch it away and shove it in my pocket, daring him to get it back.

"Fool girl. When repudiated memories nest inside a mind, they become like earworms, playing over and over to a painful degree. Best-case scenario, they cause you to sympathize with your prey so you're worthless against them. Worst case, you're driven to madness. Are you willing to risk losing so much?"

I rub my hands along my bent knees, then tuck the excess material of my hospital gown under my hips. No matter how terrifying it is to imagine someone else's hostile memories eating away my mind, finding Red's weakness is the only way to defeat her.

"I've already lost everything and I've already gone mad." I meet his bulbous gaze. "Need a demonstration?"

Multiple eyelids flick across his compound eyes. Bugs aren't supposed to have eyelids or lashes, but this isn't a typical bug. He's a looking-glass insect, or *reject*, depending on if you choose Carroll's terminology or the carpet beetle's.

The beetle was swallowed by tulgey wood and turned away at

AnyElsewhere's gate. He was then coughed back up as a mutant. Which is exactly what almost happened to Jeb and Morpheus. Thankfully, they were accepted into the looking-glass world, although the thought of them alone there opens a whole new level of horror. Morpheus won't be able to use his magic because of the iron dome, and Jeb is only human. How does either of them stand a chance in a land of murderous, exiled netherlings?

A silent scream of frustration burns inside my lungs.

I lower my voice so only the conductor can hear. "I used to collect insects. I'd pin them to corkboards. Had them plastered all over my walls. I've been thinking of taking it up again. Maybe you'd like to be my first piece."

The conductor either grimaces or frowns—a tough call with all those moving facial features. He motions toward the aisle. "This way, madam."

We head toward the private rooms. Two doors down from Dad's, the beetle stops, looks over his shoulder to assure we weren't followed, and drops a brass nameplate into place: *Queen Red*.

My wing buds tingle, wanting to burst free. A brew of magic and rage simmers just beneath my skin. Ready, waiting.

The conductor starts to unlock the door, then pauses. "I attended a garden party at her palace once." He's whispering again. "Watched her shave the skin off that Door Mouse's friend . . . that hare fellow."

I cringe, remembering when I first saw the hare at the tea party a year ago, how he appeared to be turned inside out. "March Hairless? Red skinned him?"

The beetle nods so frantically his cap nearly falls off. "She caught him nibbling the rose petals. Granted, they'd been planted in honor of her dead father. But still. She used a garden hoe to do it, like

a vegetable peeler . . . flayed his hide. Blood spritzed all over the guests. Ruined everyone's best white suits and all the daisies. Ever hear a rabbit scream? You don't forget a sound like that."

I study the bug's blinking eyelids. He's losing his nerve. I sympathize, having been on the receiving end of Red's violence myself. She once used my blood veins like marionette strings—the most physically excruciating experience of my life. She even left behind an imprint on my heart . . . one that I can still feel, a distinct pressure.

Lately, it's more than just pressure. Ever since that fated night when everything went wrong at prom, when I embraced my madness, the press upon my heart has evolved to a recurrent twinge of pain, like something inside is slowly unraveling.

I haven't told Dad. I was busy practicing my magic, concocting my plan. My loved ones need me to win this battle, to be stronger than Red for good this time.

I don't have the luxury of getting a doctor's appointment. And it wouldn't help anyway. Whatever's wrong with me was brought on by magic. *Red's* magic. My gut knows. And I'm going to make her fix it before I end her sorry existence forever.

More determined than before, I reach for the key the conductor's holding.

He tucks it under his hat and then fiddles with the nameplate, trying to get it out of its slot. "I changed my mind," he says through popping mandibles. "A bug is wont to do that, at times."

"No." I grip his twiglike arm. It would be so easy to snap. A fluttering temptation shadows my thoughts—taunting me to be cut-throat—but I pull back and lay a palm across my chest, pledging. "I vow on my life-magic, I'll never tell her you showed me."

"Best you have a seat and wait for your father," the conductor

says. Fumbling around beneath the shag that covers his thorax, he pulls out a package of peanuts and hands them to me. "You must be hungry after your journey. Have some lunch."

"I'm not budging until I see her memories, *bug in a rug*." I drop the peanuts at my feet and press my back to the door, blocking the nameplate.

The beetle makes an angry gurgling sound. "Doesn't matter if my body is made of rugs. My mind works just as well as yours."

"Obviously not. You've forgotten what Morpheus told you. I'm royalty."

"Ah, but Morpheus isn't here, is he?"

I struggle to think of a comeback, but the memory of *why* Morpheus isn't here ices through me, making my tongue as ineffective as a slab of frozen beef.

"You're nothing more than a royal *pain*," the conductor taunts. "You are aware we're under an iron bridge? Netherling magic is limited here. It's why we store the lost memories in this place—to keep them safe. So you can't force me to do anything. And I won't get squashed under the thumb of Queen Red for a scrawny, powerless half-blood snippet."

A hot flash of pride pulses through me, defrosting my tongue. "Maybe you should worry more about being trapped than being squashed."

I call upon the firefly chandeliers overhead, envisioning them as giant metal jellyfish. Chains rattle and bolts snap loose from the ceiling. The harnesses pop open, releasing their firefly captives. Thrilled to be free, the glowing insects bounce and spiral around the car like a planetarium show on steroids. The other passengers screech and burrow under their seats.

Yelping, the conductor tries to back away as the chandelier contraptions swim toward us through the air—their metal tentacles propelling them in a graceful yet disturbing display. I duck and the chains capture the bug, knocking off his hat and thrusting him toward a wall. The bolts snap into place and form a giant metal net. He's pinned inside, high enough that his legs dangle off the ground.

The fireflies hover and cast a soft glow.

Teeth clenched, I fish the key from beneath the conductor's fallen hat along with the bag of peanuts. "There's a new queen in town." I glare up at him. "And *because* of my human-tainted blood, my magic is unaffected by iron. So Red's got nothing on me." I start toward Queen Red's door.

"Wait," the beetle pleads. "Forgive my impertinence, Your Majesty. You've made a fair point. But I'm the conductor. I must protect the reserves of lost memories from the stowaways. Let me down, I beg of you!"

I swivel on my heel to face the others. They peer out from under their seats—eyes ogling, tails drooping, hair frizzed—sneezing and trembling in fear.

The conductor whimpers as I toss the bag of peanuts at him. It snags inside one of the chains close to his left arms.

"He's on his lunch break," I tell the passengers. "Anyone who leaves their seats for any reason will have to deal with me. Are we clear?"

The stowaways answer with a collective nod and cautiously settle back into their places. A tendril of satisfaction unfurls within me.

Smirking, I slip the key into place, and open the door to my enemy's past.



DESCENDING

The instant I shut the door behind me, all my confidence wavers.

The room is small and windowless. An ivory tapestry hangs above a cream-colored chaise lounge and a tall lamp stands beside it, casting a glow on the checked floor.

An almond scent drifts from the moonbeam cookies that always seem to be waiting on a plate. As hungry as I am, I can't eat them. Everything is too painfully familiar here.

I hugged Jeb and Mom in this place, felt their love as they embraced me back. My arms ache with longing. On the opposite wall, red velvet curtains wait to open and unveil hidden snippets from the past. I viewed my parents' love story on this train, watched

Jeb's memories, too. I walked in their heads and wore their emotions as if they were mine.

I felt Mom's change of heart when she gave up the ruby crown to give my dad a chance at life . . . even saw Morpheus as he helped her, carrying my dad through the portal into the human realm, despite that it was putting all of his meticulous plans at risk. I experienced Jeb's nobility and courage when he turned his back on his future so I could have one instead.

So many sacrifices have led to this moment. I would do anything to reverse the clock and set things right. But time is merciless.

"Time. You'll have no such constraints in Wonderland. Let that be your silver lining. Now pull yourself together. We must prepare for Red." Those were Morpheus's words on prom night, mere hours before everything fell apart. The message is so resonant, it's as if he were connected to my mind; but that's impossible with the iron dome between us. Still, it makes sense that his insight echoes through my soul when I'm teetering at the edge of insecurity, considering he's Wonderland's wisdom keeper, the custodian of all things mad and daring.

Jeb is an anchor; he holds me grounded to my humanity and compassion. But Morpheus is the wind; he drags me kicking and screaming to the highest precipice, shoves me off, then watches me fly with netherling wings. When Jeb's at my side, the world is a canvas—unblemished and welcoming; when I'm with Morpheus, it's a wanton playground—wicked and addictive.

Each guy occupies a different side of my dual heart. Together, they bridge my netherling and human worlds. What I'm supposed to do with that knowledge, I'm not sure. And unless my dad emerges from his room with memories intact, I might never get the chance to figure it out.

Tears prick my eyes for the first time in weeks. I've become good at hiding my despair. It was part of my crazy act for the asylum—to appear numb and detached. But that's the furthest from how I feel.

Refusing to cry, I lift my chin. Morpheus would say that I'm a queen, and queens don't cry. And Jeb would say, *"You got this, skater girl."*

They're both right.

I turn the dial on the wall to dim the lamp. The stage curtains open, revealing a movie screen. "Picture her face in your mind whilst staring at the empty screen"—I mimic the conductor's instructions from the last time I was here—"and you will experience her past as if it were today."

I'm surprised how easy it is to recall Red's image in the sketches from my mom's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* book. Before little Alice fell down the rabbit hole, before the queen's world was shattered by an unfaithful husband . . . before she was betrayed by her king. Back when Red was only a princess.

The screen lights up, and I burst apart into a thousand pieces, reuniting on the screen inside Red's body and point of view.

She's small and young, maybe ten in human years. Although children are different in the netherling realm—wiser and more cynical, lacking innocence and imagination. Her breath rattles in her lungs as she chases a band of pixies. They're dragging a dead body draped in red velvet. The pixies don't stop until they're within the cemetery gate, safe inside the covered gardens.

"Wait! Bring her back!" Red screams.

She almost trips over her gown, but flaps her wings and lifts off the ground. She lands outside the gate just as it slams closed. Standing alone,

she peers through the bars. Sister One scuttles out from the labyrinth of shrubbery, her eight shiny spider legs kicking up her skirt's hem. The gardener's humanoid torso leans over Red's mother and coaxes the spirit from her body. It wriggles, rising from the corpse like a fluorescent vine.

Sister One winds the spirit around her wrist and sends the pixies off with the empty body.

"No, you can't have her!" Red shouts, a weight in her chest so heavy it hurts to breathe. The stench of mildew and scorched leaves stings her nostrils. She's never been this close to the garden of souls, having grown up on horror stories of the keepers and the grounds. But tales of scissored hands and trespassers left in bloody shreds hold no sway today. Not with her mother being taken away forever.

Sister One stares back from inside the gate, a frown on her face. "This is hallowed ground, child-queen. Whatever you be thinking, 'tis foolish. You haven't the power here that you wield in your kingdom."

Red scowls. Her entire body glows crimson as she concentrates on the spidery woman's hair. Strands, as shimmery and fine as pencil shavings, flutter around the gardener's face with a breeze, but Red's magic has no effect.

Red looks up and down the tall fence and the thorny branches that stretch over the expanse of the cemetery gardens like a roof. There's no way to breach the defenses.

Sister One smirks haughtily. "It would be a mistake to attempt to find a way in, little princess, lest you wish to know my sister personally. She has a gift for making confetti of delicate little imps like yourself."

A shudder races from Red's spine to the tips of her wings.

With a final glare at Red, Sister One winds the whimpering, glowing spirit through her fingers. In a sweep of skirts and spidery legs, she disappears into the maze of foliage.

Red's kingly father arrives, his face flushed from trying to catch his daughter.

"What's the good of being immortal," Red asks, her nose wedged against the gate and cold from the metal, "if we can't be together eternally?"

"Immortality merely means you reach a point and stop aging . . . and your spirit never dies," he responds between panting. He squeezes her shoulder. "But the body is vulnerable to some things, and can be left but a shell."

Red's arms and legs go numb. Her own body feels like a shell. Empty and brittle, as if it might blow away at the first gust of wind.

She clasps the bars, holding herself steady. "But why can't we bury her in the ground, amongst the begonias and daisies in our palace courtyard? Like the humans do? If she lived in the flowers, we could visit her every day."

Her father frowns, as if considering. "You know our spirits need dreams to satiate them, to keep them from being restless . . . from possessing living bodies. Only the Twidsters can find and supply such things."

"Dreams." Red snuffles. "One day, I'll bring dreams to our kind, Father. They'll be in abundance everywhere, not just in the cemetery. One day, I'll free the spirits, so they can sleep inside our gardens, brushing our windows at night, and bumping against our feet in the day. I'll bring imagination to our world so everyone might always be with those they treasure."

He pats her head, a tender gesture that almost fills the gaping hole in her chest. "That would make you the most beloved queen of all time, scarlet rosebud. But until then we are bound to follow rules like everyone else. We cannot abuse our power and status, or endanger our subjects. No matter how much we love her." He blots his eyes with a handkerchief. "Understand?"

Red nods.

The scene scrambles and blurs. I'm dragged out of the memory and dropped back into my seat, cradled by the darkness around me. A knocking sensation shakes my skull, as if a fist punches it from the inside. I press my hands to my temples until it stops.

It must be the repudiated memory nesting inside my cranium, because I didn't experience anything like that the last time I was here.

The screen flicks on again. A vivid rainbow smears across the room to jerk me back to the stage. My bones settle into Red's, and my skin conforms to hers.

She's older by six years or so. Her father married a widowed netherling after her mother's death, so the Red Court would have a queen to rule until Red was of age. But in just a few more months, Red will have her coronation, and the crown-magic will fill her blood . . .

Red hides behind some bushes in the castle courtyard's garden. The purple-striped zinnias wilt from the anger seeping off of her as she spies on her father and younger stepsister. Grenadine is the daughter from the new queen's prior marriage, and has proven to be a thorn in Red's side.

It isn't enough that her hair shimmers with the sheen of rubies, and her silver eyes dance beneath thick lavender lashes. She's constantly forgetful—a blank slate waiting to be written upon. Her frailty and dependence offer a distraction for the king's grieving heart, one that Red's strength and independence can't.

The king leans down to show Grenadine for the hundredth time how to play croquet, having already reminded her for the thousandth time he's her new father. He points to the U-shaped metal hoops that form a diamond-patterned run in the ground. Pink and gray stakes mark each end, and two sets of balls lie in a box lined with satin.

"We follow the circuit of wickets," the king says gently. "My red color races against your silver. The first side to get their balls through the wickets in order and hit the peg wins."

Grenadine shakes her head, her ruby curls bouncing about her shoulders. "What is a peg, again?"

"The stake, at the end of the run."

"And a wicket . . . is that this?" Grenadine holds up a flamingo-necked fae whose body has been magically stiffened to the shape of a hockey stick. The blush-colored feathers ruffle as if the fae is offended by the misnomer.

"That is a mallet, darling. Wickets are the hoops we hit our balls through."

Grenadine's dimples appear like they always do when she's bewildered. "Oh, Father, I simply can't remember."

He smiles, charmed by her mindless grace. "I've found a way around that, I think. Sir Bill?" He waves someone into the scene.

Bill the Lizard—a reptilian netherling with the ability to write without ink—scrambles into view and bows. His red tailcoat and pants shift to green leaves, matching the bush he's beside so convincingly, he appears to be a decapitated head and clawed hands floating in midair.

Grenadine curtsies in return. "Nice to meet you, sir."

The lizard smiles, beguiled by her sweetness like everyone.

"Sir Bill is the Red Court's stenographer. He has the ability to eat whispers," the king explains. "And afterward, he can write them out on any surface, where they'll adhere forever as quiet murmurings, so they can be heard and not seen. Whisper something you wish to remember."

Grenadine mumbles the rules of croquet she heard moments before.

Bill's chameleon-like jaws unhinge, and his tongue snaps out in mid-air, capturing the echo of her whispers. His bulbous eyes rotate in different

directions as he swallows a rather large lump. Next, he takes a velvet ribbon from his pocket and writes on it with a clawed fingertip.

Blinking, he hands the red strip to the king.

"Listen," the king says, holding it to Grenadine's ear.

She waits, then bursts into rosy-cheeked giggles. "It whispered the rules!"

The king ties the ribbon in a bow around her pinky. "Now you'll never forget them. I've asked Sir Bill to be your very own royal consultant. He'll make enchanted ribbons for as long as you need."

Grenadine crinkles her nose. "Bill? I don't believe I've met him."

The king chuckles. "Of course you have. He's right here."

Bill the Lizard takes another bow.

Weary of the spectacle, Red concentrates on the ribbon tied upon her sister's finger. Her body glows crimson as her magic unties the bow. The velvet strip flutters from Grenadine to land in Red's palm. She steps out from her hiding place.

The king's face flushes. He dismisses Bill, sending him with Grenadine into the palace so they can bring more whispers to life.

"Why would you do that?" Red's father asks her, reaching for the stolen ribbon.

Red curls her fingers around it. "Perhaps I should appoint Bill to make ribbons for you, so you might remember you have another daughter. One whom you never spend time with."

The king looks down at his red slippers. "Ribbons wouldn't help. For I haven't forgotten."

Red's chin stiffens. "She's not even yours! I am, by blood."

"Yes, my scarlet rosebud. Every day you look more and more like your mother. And every day I feel the pain of being torn away from her anew. You're braver than me."

"That's why I'm going to be queen," Red says, trying to harden her heart.

"Yes, because you embrace the things that remind you of her. You drink ash in your tea, to remember how she shushed you when you were a babe. You ask Cook for her favorite Tumtum-berry tarts, so you might remember sharing them with her. And you hum her songs."

Red doesn't answer.

"Please understand, dearest daughter. I only avoid you so I won't drag you down. You're too important to the kingdom for me to hinder you. So I watch from afar. I'm a lucky man, to have a daughter who has grown into such a strong young woman."

Red scorns the empty flattery. "Grenadine is the lucky one. Because she has no memory. She can forget any rule that would confine her actions, blot out any failure that would cripple her confidence, misplace any sadness that would inhibit her to love. She has no standards to live by. She's immune—by her own limitations—to everything that would limit her. She views the world with the wide-eyed cheeriness of a slithy tove pup who has never been kicked or strapped to a chain."

The king nudges the croquet-ball box with his toe. "It doesn't make her stronger to forget. You're the one who's strong. For you remember, and yet you go on. That is what will make you a wonderful ruler one day, just like your mother—sympathetic and understanding."

Red's fist tightens around the ribbon. "Emotions born of weakness. I want nothing to do with them."

"Oh?" Her father's stern voice startles her. "Would you disrespect your mother's memory? All for a small seed of jealousy?"

Red grits her teeth, feeling her mother's gaze on her even though she's far away—a crystalline rose inside the garden of souls.

The king narrows his eyes beneath his crown's shadow. "You have the

same dark strain as all of the Red royal lineage. Your mother was the first to learn to balance madness with wisdom. Do not forsake that legacy. Make her proud.” He holds out his hand.

Tears singe Red’s eyes as she drops the whispering ribbon into his palm, an unspoken promise to honor her mother’s memory, to never forget her example.

My bones jitter and my head hurts as again I’m thrown into the chaise lounge, only to be jerked back on-screen for the final memory:

Red kneels beside a rosebush, breathing in the sweet scent. The blooms are such a deep red, they look like puddles of fresh blood against the unnaturally bright teal leaves. She planted the bush in the courtyard as a tribute to her father after his death. She yearns for his spirit. She wishes he were here in the ground instead of locked inside the garden of souls, though she’s comforted to know he’s been reunited with her mother at last.

“I should be with you both in the cemetery,” she mumbles to the roses. “Now that my life is over.” She rotates a bottle in her hand to reveal the label: Forgetting Potion.

Her shoulders hunch, as in the distance her stepsister’s giggle rings out, accompanied by the chortle of Red’s husband. Red met him one week after her father died. He had a kind heart like her father’s, and proved to be the only man who could reason with her anger, temper her bitterness. His strength was his compassion, and he adored Red. But the queen became obsessed with her pursuit to bring dreams to Wonderland and neglected her marriage, never even taking the time to give her king the children he yearned for. In her absence, her husband was often left alone with Grenadine.

Gradually, Red watched her husband try to befriend her sister, although Grenadine always pushed him away. When Red’s king would return to her side like a wounded puppy, his sadness stoked her jealousy. She did the only thing she could: She stole her sister’s ribbons to show her husband what a forgetful buffoon Grenadine was.

Every day for months, each time her sister tied bows to her fingers or toes, Red would magically coax them away and send them fluttering into the sky. Soon, they eclipsed the sun like a cloud of glimmering crimson butterflies. Darkness fell upon the kingdom, but Red didn’t care. She had no desire to call the ribbons back or to listen to Grenadine’s mundane and irrelevant reminders.

Red’s ribbon stealing became a game of malice and great satisfaction, until at last Grenadine stopped wearing them altogether. And soon thereafter, she stopped fighting the Red King’s advances.

The two fell in love each day, anew, and Red witnessed it over and over again. Furious, she called the ribbons from the sky. They scattered across the castle courtyard in a sweep of crimson rain. Red stood in their midst as hundreds of whispers spun around her, repeating the same words: Keep Red’s husband from your heart. She is your sister, a love that’s precious. Always be faithful to Red.

Grenadine had been reminding herself daily to do the right thing, and Red had made it impossible for her to remember. The responsibility for her broken marriage was upon her own shoulders. The only way Red could survive was to become like Grenadine and forget her role in everything. Red determined to remember only the betrayals of others, so their wrongs could harden her heart.

Stroking a rose petal, Red whispers one last time: “Mother, Father, I hope you both can forgive me, because unless I forget, I’ll never forgive myself.” Then she lifts the bottle to her lips.



The image flicks off, the curtains drop, and the lamp snaps on.

Slumped in the chaise lounge, I hold my temples until the drumming inside my skull subsides. I almost choke on the bittersweet tang of roses firmly pressed on my senses. At last I can acknowledge what I've never let myself admit: I'm a descendant of Queen Red. She's an eternal part of me. I can accept it because she did have a heart once. A heart that felt similar losses to mine: the absence of a mother she adored; the fear of losing her father's admiration; the regret of a mistake so monumental, it cost her the love of her life.

Red locked away her most vulnerable moments so she wouldn't hesitate in her quest for vengeance. So she could make the descent into ruthless abandon without remorse.

Empathy pricks my conscience, but I push it away. Mercy has no place on any battlefield . . . magical or otherwise.

If I can contain her scorned memories long enough to reunite them with her mind, they'll rail against her, fill her with regret. Then, while she's vulnerable, I'll swoop in and Wonderland will never have to fear her rage again.

Adrift in a dark swirl of emotions, I stand and smooth the wrinkles from my hospital gown. I'm only a few steps from the door when it flings open to reveal Dad—his brown eyes lit with a fiery light.

"Allie, I remember . . . everything."



PINT-SIZE PREDICAMENTS

Dad tells me his real name is David Skeffington.

"Interesting," I say as we stride down the aisle. "And here I thought we'd end up related to Martin Gardner."

Dad frowns. "Who's that?"

"The guy behind *The Annotated Alice*. Some math wizard." I shrug. "Just shows how preoccupied Mom's thoughts were with Wonderland. When she couldn't find your real name, she gave you one that fit into the Lewis Carroll legacy."

"Little knowing I already did fit," Dad says.

"Why? Who are the Skeffingtons?" I ask.

Noticing the conductor hanging on the wall, Dad doesn't answer.

I help him free the wriggling beetle. "Mr. Bug-in-a-rug wasn't cooperating," I explain, working my captive's tangled fur from the wires and hardware.

"There are other ways to be persuasive." Dad's expression is stern as he lowers the disheveled insect to the floor. "Less violent ways."

I bite my tongue out of respect, though I want to tell him he's oblivious about dealing with netherlings.

After an apology that wins a cautious albeit reverential bow from the conductor and two complimentary bags of peanuts, Dad takes my hand and we step together onto the toy train's platform. The car door shuts behind us with a loud scrape.

I yawn, inhaling the scent of dust and powdery stones in the coolness of the dimly lit tunnel. The whispers of a hundred bugs blend together—a soothing distraction. Red's memories keep nudging me, blurring my mind with disconcerting crimson stains: her flushed face as she tried to hold on to her mother's spirit, the ruby shimmer of her stepsister's hair during a painful croquet lesson as her father slipped away, and the deep bloody hue of whispering ribbons heralding Red's most devastating mistake.

I *can't* sympathize. I have to be strong.

I grip my abdomen, nauseated and unbalanced. I had no idea the earworm effect would be this powerful. I've got to find a way to control it.

Dad notices me rubbing my stomach and holds out a bag of peanuts. "You need to eat."

I pop a few peanuts into my mouth. The salty crunchiness appeases my hunger, but it doesn't quell the splashes of red drizzling in my mind.

"Tell me where your mom is," Dad says abruptly.

I almost strangle.

"Tell me she's not in the looking-glass world."

After swallowing, I answer, "She's in Wonderland."

He lets out a relieved sigh. "Good. There are creatures in AnyElsewhere that no human—" He cuts himself short, as if remembering Mom's the furthest thing from human. "She's one of them. Like that winged boy who carried me through the portal. She's a netherling."

"Partly," I whisper. The *so am I* sits on my tongue, unsaid.

"She's stronger than I ever could've imagined," he mumbles. "She can protect Jeb. They have each other to lean on."

He's halfway right. Mom is strong, and I have to believe she's surviving in Wonderland. If only Jeb *was* with her, he'd be safer, too. I won't tell Dad they're not together yet. First, he needs to digest all he's learned. "They're okay. They all—*both* are."

Dad's struggling enough with the memory of the winged fae helping Mom break him out of Wonderland's garden of souls. He doesn't need to know Morpheus is part of our rescue mission just now. But later, I'll have to explain the huge role Morpheus has played in my life since childhood. Although I can never confess the part he's slated to play in my future, because I made a life-magic vow not to say a word. I can't even tell Morpheus that I've seen what's coming, even though he's seen it himself.

"The problem is," I continue, "the rabbit hole has been filled in. All the portals are tied together. So if the entrance isn't working, neither are the ways out."

"That's why you brought me here for my memories." Dad picks up the dangling threads of my explanation. "To find another way into Wonderland."

I dread telling him the state Wonderland is in. Worst of all, that I'm to blame for it. That my ineptitude in using undernourished and neglected powers caused this entire tragedy. And that to fix it, I'll have to face my biggest fear.

We have a lot to discuss before I toss Red into the mix.

"So what happened between you and the conductor?" Dad changes the subject, much to my relief. "Why did you bully him like that?"

I drop a peanut into my mouth. "He called me a half-blood snippet," I say between crunches. "I thought my solution was pretty creative." My voice is muffled by the sounds of motors and chatty people drifting from the bridge through the vents overhead.

Dad brushes crumbs off his Tom's Sporting Goods polo. "Just like the lies you and your mother came up with were creative."

Ouch. I shove another handful of peanuts in my mouth, wishing things were like they used to be between us. How strange that somehow the lies became the foundation to our relationship. Without them, our bond is shaky . . . precarious.

I ache to reach out and hug him, but the void between us is too vast.

"If we're going to help her and Jeb," Dad continues, "I need honest answers from you. The whole truth. No more sugarcoating."

I study my bare toes, wincing as we step down onto pebbles and broken rock. My soles aren't the only things feeling exposed and tender. "I have no idea where to start, Dad."

He frowns. "I don't expect answers right this minute. We have to find Humphrey's Inn first."

"*Humphrey's* Inn?" I bite my inner cheek. The only Humphrey

I've ever met is the egg-man creature in Wonderland, the one called Humpty Dumpty in the Lewis Carroll novel. "What's that?"

"It's the one clue I have to my family's whereabouts. It was my home here."

"Here, as in London?"

"As in this world. Humphrey's Inn is some kind of halfway house between the magi-kind and mortal realms. It's hidden underground."

His outright acknowledgment of a magical otherworld leaves me reeling. Maybe I was wrong about him being oblivious in dealing with netherlings. Maybe I even suspected as much, but it's still hard to grasp how deeply Wonderland runs through my blood—on *both* sides of my family.

That thought triggers another splash of Red's memories. I waver in place.

Dad steadies me. "You okay?"

"Just a headache," I answer as the sensation subsides. I'll have to make a concerted effort not to think of my great-great-great-grandmother until I can figure out a way to suppress these episodes. "You were telling me about the inn."

"Yeah. It's somewhere in Oxford."

"Seriously? That's where Alice Liddell grew up. Where she met Lewis Carroll."

Dad rubs the stubble on his chin. "Somehow, way down the line, the Skeffingtons were related to the Dodgsons, which was Carroll's surname before he took on a pseudonym. I hope to get more details once we find the inn."

I don't press any further. I can't imagine the information overload he's experiencing.

Off in the distance, the monarchs that provided our rides are hanging on the tunnel walls, wings flapping slow and relaxed. The firefly chandeliers reflect off their orange and black markings. It reminds me of tigers gliding through the silhouettes of jungle trees during a nature show.

The butterflies whisper: *We know the way to Humphrey's Inn. Would you like an escort, little flower queen?*

Goose bumps coat my arms when I think of jostling through another bout of wind and rain. It's not fear. It's electrified anticipation—like standing in line for a favorite roller coaster. My wing buds nudge. The right one isn't fully healed yet. Maybe I can let it out while riding, exercise my wings without the danger of falling.

Yes, please take us. I send the silent answer back to the butterflies.

"Are they talking to you now?" Dad asks when he catches me staring at them.

I swallow. It's hard to get used to not pretending with someone I've been fooling my whole life. "Uh-huh."

He studies me, his complexion almost green in the dim light. I wonder if it's hit him yet, that we allowed Mom to be locked in an asylum for something that was really happening and not a delusion.

"The butterflies know where the inn is," I say.

Dad makes a disgruntled sound. "After we get there, can we please return to our normal size?"

"Sure. I've got just what we'll need." I pat my pocket where the mushrooms wait, surprised to feel the conductor's pen alongside them. I'd forgotten I still have it.

Dad slips out his wallet and sifts through receipts, money, and pictures. He pauses at the family portrait we had made a few months ago and traces Mom's outline with a shaky fingertip. "I can't believe

what she did for me," he murmurs, and I wonder if I was supposed to hear, or if it's a private moment. I've never doubted how strong Dad's love is for her, but only recently did I learn how strong hers is for him.

I'm curious how much he's remembered, if he understands that she was going to be queen before she found him.

Dad's jaw clenches as he slides the picture back into its sleeve. "We don't have the right currency. We'll have to use my credit cards. It should be around dinnertime when we arrive. While we eat, we'll discuss things." He looks tired, yet more alert than I've seen him in years. "We'll plan our next move. But it's important we lay low and try not to draw attention to ourselves. Considering my family's profession, they could've made some very dangerous enemies."

An uneasy knot forms in my throat. "What profession?"

He tucks his wallet into his pocket. "Gatekeepers. They're the guardians of AnyElsewhere."

My knees wobble. "*What?*"

"That's enough discussion for now. I'm still processing."

His curtness stings. But what right do I have to feel wounded? I made him wait seventeen years to learn the truth about me.

"Okay." I stifle an apology and study my ragged gown. "It won't be easy to stay under the radar while wearing asylum clothes. You'll need to change, too."

"Any ideas?" Dad asks, then holds up a hand. "And before you say it, we're not stealing something off a clothesline."

It's like he read my mind. "Why not? Motivation always justifies the crime." I clamp down on my tongue. That's Morpheus's reasoning, not mine. It's both frightening and liberating that his illogic is starting to make perfect sense.

Dad narrows his eyes. “Tell me you did not just say that.”

I push away the desire to argue my point. Justifying crimes may be the law of the land in the nether-realm, but that doesn’t make it lawful to my dad at this moment. “I just meant it would be *borrowing*, if we bought new clothes later and returned the others.”

“Too many steps. We need a quick fix. Makeshift clothes.”

Makeshift clothes. If only Jenara were here with her designer talents. I miss her more than ever. Over the past month in the asylum, I wasn’t allowed any visitors other than Dad. But Jen sent notes, and Dad always saw that I got them. Jen didn’t blame me for her missing brother, in spite of the rumors that I was in a cult that victimized him and Mom. She refused to believe I’d be involved in anything that would hurt either of them.

If only I deserved her faith.

I wish she was here. She’d know what to do about the clothes. Jenara can make outfits out of anything. One time, for a mythology project, she transformed a Barbie into Medusa by spray-painting the doll silver and crafting a “stone” gown out of a strip of aluminum foil and white chalk.

Dolls . . .

“Hey!” I shout up at the closest Ferris-wheel-firefly chandelier. “Could you guys give us some light, please?”

They roll across the ceiling and stop overhead, illuminating our surroundings. This place was once an elevator passageway where train passengers would wait for rides up to the village after arriving on the train. Distracted parents and careless children left behind toys which are comparable to our size: wooden blocks that could double as garden sheds, a pinwheel that could pass for a windmill,

and a few rubber jacks bigger than the tumbleweeds I’ve seen bounce alongside the roads in Pleasance, Texas.

A sign hangs over the toys. The words LOST AND FOUND have been marked out and replaced by TRAIN OF THOUGHT.

Past a pile of mildewed picture books, there’s a child’s round suitcase propped up so the front is visible. The style is retro—pink, cushiony vinyl with a ponytailed girl standing in front of an airplane. Her faded dress was blue at one time. Under the zipper, scribbled in black marker, is a child’s handwriting: *Emily’s Dress Shoppe*. Sprawled on the ground beside the case is a half-naked vintage Barbie.

“Doll clothes,” I whisper.

Dad squints. “We need things that’ll fit when we’re normal-size, Allie.”

“They grow and shrink with you. It’s part of the magic.”

He glances down at his muddy, torn work uniform. “Oh. Right . . .”

“C’mon.” I catch his hand and weave toward the case, suppressing yelps as the rocky terrain jabs my feet. Dad stops long enough to take off his shoes and help me step into them.

They’re too big, of course, but the tender gesture reminds me of times when I used to stand on the toes of his shoes so we could dance together. I smile. He smiles back, and I’m his little girl again. Then his expression changes from awe to disappointment, as if he’s coming to terms all over again with what I am, what Mom is, and how long we’ve kept it hidden from him.

My stomach feels like it’s caving in. Why did we rob him of such a big part of ourselves? Such an integral part of *him*? “Dad, I’m so sorr—”

“No, Allie. I can’t hear that yet.” His left eyelid starts to twitch

and he looks away, his socked feet cautiously feeling around the debris.

I follow and sniffle, telling myself it's the dust making my eyes water.

When we arrive at the doll-clothing case, it's as tall as a two-story building, and the zipper handle is the length of my leg.

"How are we supposed to open this thing?" I ask.

"Better question: How are you supposed to fit into her clothes?" Dad points to the dust-caked Barbie. "You're barely the size of her head."

The doll's irises are painted as if she's looking off to one side. Paired with her catty makeup, she appears to be sneering at me. Exasperated, I thrust my hands in my apron pockets. My knuckle nudges the conductor's pen. Digging deeper, I hit the mushrooms and an idea forms in my mind. "Let's sit her against the case."

Dad shoots me a puzzled glance but doesn't hesitate. He grabs her shoulders and I take her ankles. A yellowish spider the size of a cocker spaniel scuttles out, grumbling at us for ruining its web. It disappears into the pile of books. Once we have the Barbie seated upright, I settle beside her.

I hand Dad a mushroom and kick off his shoes so he can put them on again. Next, I take a mushroom for myself and nibble the speckled side. I grit my teeth against the discomfort of sinews extending, bones enlarging, and skin and cartilage expanding. The surroundings shrink as I continue to eat until I'm head to head with the doll.

Dad follows my lead, nibbling his mushroom until we're both big enough to unzip the case and wear the 1950s-style Barbie and Ken outfits that slide out.

I shove aside silver bell-bottom pants and a black-and-white striped swimsuit, uncovering a leotard and matching attached tutu the same watery green as Jeb's eyes at times when he's upset. The exact shade they were when he caught me and Morpheus kissing in my room before prom.

Regret gnaws at my stomach. All these weeks, Jeb's been thinking I betrayed him. In the last moment we shared at prom, he grabbed the pendant at my neck—a metal clump that had once been my Wonderland key, his heart locket, and his engagement ring—and kissed me. He promised we were far from over. Even after I'd destroyed his trust, he was still planning to fight for me.

A ticklish sensation brings my attention to my ankle where a spiderweb dangles at the edges of my wing tattoo. I got it months ago to camouflage my netherling birthmark. Here in the shadows, I realize how much the tattoo really does look like a moth, just as Morpheus has always said. I can almost see his lips curl up in smug delight at the acknowledgement.

That strange unraveling pain gnaws in my chest again. It hits most often when I'm teetering between my two worlds.

What did Red do to me?

Red . . .

Her repudiated memories thunder through my skull once more. I groan softly.

"Did you say something, Allie?" Dad looks up from the Ken clothes he's sorting through.

After rubbing my temples, I lift out a sleeveless shirtdress with snaps down the front and a cherry and green-stem print that matches the leotard. "Just that I think I found something." I hold it up for Dad's inspection.

“Looks good. I’ll be over here.” Dad grabs his bundle and goes to the other side of the case.

I peel off my asylum clothes, careful not to let the remaining mushrooms spill from the apron pocket. I’ll have to find another way to carry them.

Before I undress, I search for some lacy lingerie. I’ve been wearing generic cotton underthings since I’ve been at the asylum. Something pretty would be nice. Unable to find anything, I settle for what I have on and slip into the green leotard. The ballet outfit’s best feature is the open back. It will make it easy to free my wings. The satiny fabric smells of crayons and gumdrops, making me long for my childhood before Mom was committed.

Next, I shrug into the shirtdress and secure the metal snaps along the cherry-print bodice, leaving the skirt open to display the three tiers of green netting that puff out above my knees.

A fuchsia ribbon serves as a belt. Pink stockings complete the outfit. They fit perfectly from my thighs to my calves, but the toes are pointed. I fold the excess under before slipping into a pair of squishy, knee-high red boots.

Red boots. Red’s memories bash against my cranium until I feel so much sadness for her I drop onto the pile of leftover clothes. I fist my hands against my head until it passes. When I open my eyes, I’m half-buried in Barbie shoes and accessories, as if I thrashed around half-consciously.

“Everything okay over there?” Dad asks from his side of the case.

I grunt softly, clearing everything off me. “Having trouble with my stockings.” Maybe stealing Red’s memories was a big mistake after all. I’m going to end up wearing a straitjacket again—this time for real.

As I stand, my foot kicks a Barbie-size diary with a key that must be one quarter the size of a straight pin to a normal human.

The conductor said it would take enchanted paper to contain repudiated memories. A year ago in Wonderland’s cemetery, Sister One told me that toys from the human realm were used to trap souls in her twin’s lair.

Sister One said that when the most cherished toys are abandoned, they want those things that once filled and warmed them. They become lonely and crave what they had. And if someone gives them those things, they’ll hold on to it with every portion of their strength and will.

I flip through the diary. A few of the tiny pages have been written on—hearts and initials and flowers, because writing actual words this size would be difficult for any child. The last two thirds of the pages are bare.

Maybe this diary has missed being written upon.

Morpheus himself said toys harbor the residue of a child’s innocent love, the world’s most binding magic. If that’s true, then maybe these pages are enchanted enough to contain Red’s memories, to keep the emotional ties out of my mind.

I bite my lower lip. *Look at that, bug in a rug. I just found a magic journal.*

“Almost done?” Dad moves around on the other side of the case, as if he’s pacing.

“Just a sec!” I scramble to find the apron I was wearing earlier and pull the pen from the pocket.

“Netherling logic resides in the hazy border between sense and nonsense.” I mouth Morpheus’s words so Dad won’t hear.

I jot down Red’s memories on the remaining pages, writing as

fast as I can. The emotions drain from me onto the page, a cathartic experience, like journaling to soften the blow of something tragic.

When I'm done, I close the book. It wriggles in my hands, opening enough to rustle the paper. The memories are trying to break free. Clamping my fingers tight around the covers, I clasp the latch and lock it with the key and the wiggling stops.

My head feels better, my thoughts clearer, and my sympathies are dulled. The transfer must've worked. I can still recall Red's forgotten past, but they feel like events that happened to someone else, not ones I experienced and felt myself. The memories grow distant, silencing the sympathetic thunder in my head.

"Allie, we need to get going."

"I'm looking for something to keep the mushrooms safe," I stall.

As I dig, a pink ballet bag with a drawstring appears. I tuck the diary inside and thread a piece of cording through the diary's key to fashion a necklace. Ever since the prom disaster, I've felt lost without my Wonderland key. This one isn't ruby-tipped and won't open another world. Still, it's a comfort to have it dangling at my collarbone.

Setting aside two mushrooms for me and Dad, I stuff the rest into the bag with the diary, pull the drawstring shut, knot it securely, then hang it over my shoulder.

With a plastic brush, I work the tangles out and braid my hair down both sides. I stare at a crocheted hat and scarf made of soft purple and scarlet yarn, testing to see if Red's memories stay dormant. I have to be sure before we leave. I can't risk losing control when I'm thousands of miles in the air.

When nothing happens, I pull on the scarf and hat.

I step around to the front of the case. Dad's waiting in a Ken

outfit: black-and-white plaid jacket, gray flannel pleated pants, and white dress shirt.

I pat the skin under my eyes, worried my netherling markings are showing after all the magic I've performed. "Do I look okay?"

"You look beautiful, Butterfly," he says. His fingertip traces the edges of my eyes, following a phantom pattern that can only mean my markings are in full bloom.

His use of my nickname fills me with gratitude. He's trying to accept me with all my peculiarities, even though he's been dealt a huge shock.

I straighten his collar and brush dust off his jacket. "Best thing about these clothes? We know we're the first people to ever wear them," I tease.

Dad snorts. The sound echoes in the tunnel as we nibble our mushrooms—the smooth sides—until we shrink enough to fit on the butterflies' backs again. We climb atop our winged mounts, flutter through the hole in the bridge's foundation, and take to the sky for Oxford.