

hears the thoughts of plants and animals. She hides her delusions for now, but she knows her fate: she will end up like her mother, in an institution. Madness has run in her family ever since her great-great-grandmother Alice Liddell told Lewis Carroll her strange dreams, inspiring his classic *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

But perhaps she's not mad. And perhaps Carroll's stories aren't as whimsical as they first seem.

To break the curse of insanity, Alyssa must go down the rabbit hole and right the wrongs of Wonderland, a place full of strange beings with dark agendas. Alyssa brings her real-world crush—the protective Jeb—with her, but once her journey begins, she's torn between his solidity and the enchanting, dangerous magic of Morpheus, her guide to Wonderland.

But no one in Wonderland is who they seem to be—not even Alyssa herself . . .



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SPLINTERED

  
AMULET BOOKS  
NEW YORK

A NOVEL BY  
A. G. HOWARD



# SPLINTERED

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Howard, A. G. (Anita G.)  
Splintered / by A. G. Howard.  
p. cm.

Summary: A descendant of the inspiration for Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, sixteen-year-old Alyssa Gardner fears she is mentally ill like her mother until she finds that Wonderland is real and, if she passes a series of tests to fix Alice's mistakes, she may save her family from their curse.

ISBN 978-1-4197-0428-4 (hardback)

[1. Supernatural—Fiction. 2. Characters in literature—Fiction. 3. Blessing and cursing—Fiction. 4. Mental illness—Fiction. 5. Mothers and Daughters—Fiction. 6. Hargreaves, Alice Pleasance Liddell, 1852–1934—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.H83222Spl 2013

[Fic]—dc23

2012011538

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Book design by Maria T. Middleton

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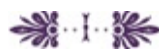
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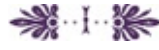
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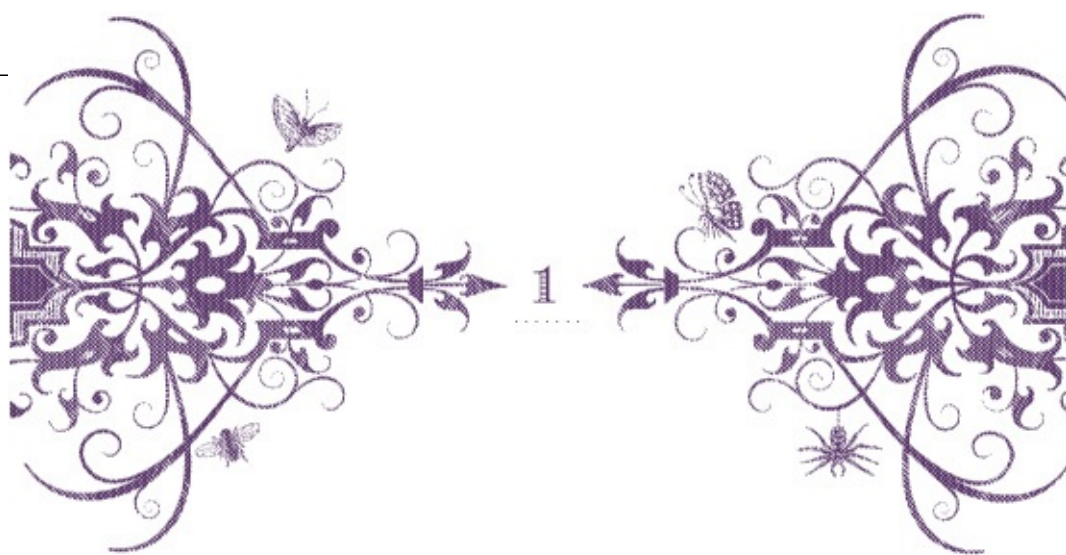
*To my husband and real-life hero, Vince, and to my two wonderful children, Nicole and Ryan. You embraced my dream as if it were your own and gave me the courage to keep flying until I grasped the beautiful shooting star.*



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## ONE-WAY TICKET TO UNDERLAND

I've been collecting bugs since I was ten; it's the only way I can stop their whispers. Sticking a pin through the gut of an insect shuts it up pretty quick.

Some of my victims line the walls in shadow boxes, while others get sorted into mason jars and placed on a bookshelf for later use. Crickets, beetles, spiders ... bees and butterflies. I'm not picky. Once they get chatty, they're fair game.

They're easy enough to capture. All you need is a sealed plastic bucket filled with Kitty Litter and a few banana peels sprinkled in. Drill a hole in the lid, slide in a PVC pipe, and you have a bug snare. The fruit peels attract them, the lid traps them, and the ammonia from the litter smothers and preserves them.

The bugs don't die in vain. I use them in my art, arranging their corpses into outlines and shapes. Dried flowers, leaves, and glass pieces add color and texture to the patterns formed on plaster backgrounds. These are my masterpieces ... my morbid mosaics.

School let out at noon today for the upperclassmen. I've been passing the last hour working on my newest project. A jar of spiders sits among the art tools cluttering my desk.

The sweet scent of goldenrod breezes through my bedroom window. There's a field of herbs next door to my duplex, attracting a genus of crab spider that changes color—like eight-legged chameleons—in order to move undetected among the yellow or white blooms.

Twisting off the jar's lid, I dip out thirty-five of the small white arachnids with long tweezers, careful not to squish their abdomens or break their legs. With tiny straight pins, I secure them onto a black-tinted plaster background already covered with beetles selected for their iridescent night-sheen. What I'm envisioning isn't a typical spatter of stars; it's a constellation that coils like feathered bolts of lightning. I have hundreds of warped scenes like this filling my head and no idea where they came from. My mosaics are the only way to get them out.

Leaning back in my chair, I study the piece. Once the plaster dries, the insects will be permanently in place, so if any adjustments need to be made, it has to be done quickly.

Glancing at the digital clock beside my bed, I tap my bottom lip. I have less than two hours before

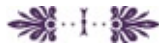


have to meet Dad at the asylum. It's been a Friday tradition ever since kindergarten, to get chocolate cheesecake ice cream at the Scoopin' Stop and take it to share with Alison.

Brain freeze and a frozen heart are not my idea of fun, but Dad insists it's therapy for all of us. Maybe he thinks by seeing my mom, by sitting where I might one day live, I'll somehow beat the odds.

Too bad he's wrong.

At least one good thing has come out of my inherited insanity. Without the delusions, I might never have found my artistic medium.



My obsession with bugs started on a Friday in fifth grade. It had been a rough one. Taelor Tremor told everyone that I was related to Alice Liddell, the girl who inspired Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Since Alice was, in fact, my great-great-great-grandmother, my classmates teased me during recess about dormice and tea parties. I thought things couldn't get much worse until I felt something on my jeans and realized, mortified, that I got my period for the first time and was totally unprepared. On the verge of tears, I lifted a sweater from the lost-and-found pile just inside the main entrance and wrapped it around my waist for the short walk to the office. I kept my head down, unable to meet anyone's gaze.

I pretended to be sick and called my dad to pick me up. While I waited for him in the nurse's office, I imagined a heated argument between the vase of flowers on her desk and the bumblebee buzzing around them. It was one powerful delusion, because I really *heard* it, as sure as I could hear the passing of students from one class to the next on the other side of the closed door.

Alison had warned me of the day I would "become a woman." Of the voices that would follow. I just assumed it was her mental instability making her say that ...

The whispers were impossible to ignore, just like the sobs building in my throat. I did the only thing I could: I denied what was happening inside me. Rolling a poster of the four basic food groups into a cylinder, I tapped the bee hard enough to stun it. Then I whisked the flowers out of the water and pressed them between the pages of a spiral notebook, to silence their chattering petals.

When we got home, poor, oblivious Dad offered to make some chicken soup. I shrugged him off and went to my room.

"Do you think you'll feel well enough to visit Mom later tonight?" he asked from the hallway, always reluctant to upset Alison's delicate sense of routine.

I shut my door without answering. My hands shook and my blood felt jittery in my veins. There had to be an explanation for what had happened in the nurse's office. I was stressed about the Wonderland jokes, and when my hormones kicked in, I'd had a panic attack. Yeah. That made sense.

But I knew deep down I was lying to myself, and the last place I wanted to visit was an asylum. A few minutes later, I went back to the living room.

Dad sat in his favorite recliner—a worn-out corduroy lump covered with daisy appliqués. In one corner her "spells," Alison had sewn the cloth flowers all over it. Now he would never part with the chair.

"You feeling better, Butterfly?" he asked, looking up from his fishing magazine.

Musty dampness blasted into my face from the air conditioner as I leaned against the closest wood-paneled wall. Our two-bedroom duplex had never offered much in the way of privacy, and on that day it felt smaller than ever before. The waves of his dark hair moved in the rattling gusts.

I shuffled my feet. This was the part of being an only child I hated—having no one but Dad

confide in. "I need some more stuff. They only gave us one sample."

His eyes were blank, like those of a deer staring down traffic during morning rush hour.

"The special talk they give at school," I said, my stomach in knots. "The one where boys aren't invited?" I flashed the purple pamphlet they'd handed out to all the girls in third grade. It was creased because I'd shoved it and the sample sanitary pad into a drawer beneath my socks.

After an uncomfortable pause, Dad's face flushed red. "Oh. So that's why ..." He suddenly became preoccupied with a colorful array of saltwater lures. He was embarrassed or worried or both, because there wasn't any salt water within a five-hundred-mile radius of Pleasance, Texas.

"You know what this means, right?" I pressed. "Alison is going to give me the puberty speech again."

The blush spread from his face to his ears. He flipped a couple of pages, staring blankly at the pictures. "Well, who better to tell you about the birds and the bees than your mom. Right?"

An unspoken answer echoed inside my head: *Who better but the bees themselves?*

I cleared my throat. "Not that speech, Dad. The nutso one. The 'It can't be stopped. You can't escape the voices any more than I could. Great-great-gran never should've gone down the rabbit hole' speech."

It didn't matter that Alison might be right about the voices after all. I wasn't ready to admit that to Dad or myself.

He sat rigid, as if the air conditioner had iced his spine.

I studied the crisscross scars on my palms. He and I both knew it was less what Alison was going to say than what she might do. If she had another meltdown, they'd slap her into the straitjacket.

I learned early on why it's spelled *strait*. That particular spelling means *tight*. Tight enough that blood pools in the elbows and the hands become numb. Tight enough that there's no escape, no matter how loud the patient screams. Tight enough that it suffocates the hearts of the wearer's loved ones.

My eyes felt swollen, like they might burst another leak. "Look, Dad, I've already had a real sucky day. Can we please just not go tonight? Just this once?"

Dad sighed. "I'll call Soul's Asylum and let them know we'll visit Mom tomorrow instead. But you'll need to tell her eventually. It's important to her, you know? To stay involved in your life."

I nodded. I might have to tell her about becoming a woman, but I didn't have to tell her about becoming *her*.

Hooking a finger in the fuchsia scarf tied around my jean shorts, I glanced at my feet. Shiny pink toenails reflected the afternoon light where it streamed from the window. Pink had always been Alison's favorite color. That's why I wore it.

"Dad," I mumbled loud enough for him to hear. "What if Alison's right? I've noticed some things today. Things that just aren't ... normal. *I'm* not normal."

"Normal." His lips turned up in an Elvis curl. He once told me his smirk won Alison over. I think it was his gentleness and sense of humor, because those two things kept me from crying every night after she was first committed.

Rolling his magazine, he shoved it into the recliner between the seat cushion and the arm. He stood at his six-foot-one height towering over me as he tapped the dimple in my chin—the one part that didn't match him instead of Alison. "Now, you listen, Alyssa Victoria Gardner. *Normal* is subjective. Don't ever let anyone tell you you're not normal. Because you are to me. And my opinion is all that matters. Got it?"

"Got it," I whispered.

"Good." He squeezed my shoulder, his fingers warm and strong. Too bad the twitch in his leg

eyelid gave him away. He was worried, and he didn't even know the half of it.

~~I tossed and turned in bed that night. Once I finally fell asleep, I had the Alice nightmare for the first time, and it's haunted my dreams ever since.~~

In it, I stumble across a chessboard in Wonderland, tripping over jagged squares of black and white. Only I'm not me. I'm Alice in a blue dress and lacy pinafore, trying to escape the ticktock of the White Rabbit's pocket watch. He looks like he's been skinned alive—nothing but bones and bunnies ears.

The Queen of Hearts has commanded that my head be chopped off and stuck into a jar of formaldehyde. I've stolen the royal sword and am on the run, desperate to find the Caterpillar and the Cheshire Cat. They're the only allies I have left.

Ducking into a forest, I slice the sword at vines hanging in my path. A thicket of thorns sprouts from the ground. They snag my apron and gouge my skin like angry talons. Dandelion trees tower in every direction. I'm the size of a cricket, along with everyone else.

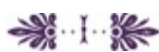
Must've been something we ate ...

Close behind, the White Rabbit's pocket watch ticks louder, audible even over the marching steps of a thousand playing-card soldiers. Choking on a cloud of dust, I plunge into the Caterpillar's lair where mushrooms loom with caps the size of truck tires. It's a dead end.

One look at the tallest mushroom and my heart caves. The place where the Caterpillar once sat to offer advice and friendship is a mass of thick white web. Something moves in the center, a face pressed against the filmy case, shifting just enough that I can make out the shape of the features you see no clear details. I inch closer, desperate to identify who or what is inside ... but the Cheshire Cat's mouth floats by, screaming that he's lost his body, and distracts me.

The card army appears. Within an instant, I am surrounded. I toss out the sword blindly, but the Queen of Hearts steps forward and snatches it in midair. Falling to my knees at the army's feet, I plead for my life.

It's pointless. Cards don't have ears. And I no longer have a head.



After covering my starry spider mosaic with a protective cloth while the plaster dries, I grab a quick lunch of nachos and drive over to Pleasance's underground skate park to kill time before meeting Dad at the asylum.

I've always felt at home here, in the shadows. The park is located in an old, abandoned salt dome, a huge underground cave with a ceiling reaching as high as forty-eight feet in places. Prior to the conversion, the dome had been used for storing bulk goods for a military base.

The new owners took out the traditional lighting and, with some fluorescent paint and the addition of black lights, morphed it into every teen's fantasy—a dark and atmospheric ultraviolet playground complete with a skateboard park, glow-in-the-dark miniature golf, an arcade, and a café.

With its citrusy neon paint job, the giant cement bowl for skateboarders stands out like a green beacon. All skaters must sign a release form and put orange fluorescent grip tape on the decks of their boards to avoid collisions in the dark. From a distance, we look like we're riding fireflies across the northern lights, sweeping in and out of one another's glowing jet streams.

I started boarding when I was fourteen. I needed a sport I could do while wearing my iPod and earbuds to muffle the whispers of stray bugs and flowers. For the most part, I've learned to ignore my delusions. The things I hear are usually nonsensical and random, and blend together in crackles and hums like radio static. Most of the time I can convince myself it's nothing more than white noise.

Yet there are moments when a bug or flower says something louder than the others—something timely, personal, or relevant—and throws me off my game. So when I'm sleeping or involved in anything that requires intense concentration, my iPod is crucial.

At the skate park, everything from eighties music to alternative rock blasts from speakers and blocks out any possible distractions. I don't even have to wear my earbuds. The only drawback is that Taelor Tremont's family owns the place.

She called before the grand opening two years ago. "Thought you would be interested in what we're naming the center," she said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Yeah, why's that?" I attempted civility because her dad, Mr. Tremont, had contracted my dad's sporting goods store to be the sole supplier for the megacenter. It's a good thing, too, considering we had been on the verge of bankruptcy because of Alison's medical bills. Also, as an added bonus, I got a free lifetime membership.

"Well ..." Taelor snickered softly. I heard her friends laughing in the background. I must've been on speakerphone. "Dad wants to call it Wonderland." Giggles bubbled through the line. "I thought you'd love it, knowing how proud you are of your great-great-great-grand-rabbit."

The jibe hurt more than it should have. I must've been quiet for too long, because Taelor's giggles faded.

"Actually"—she half coughed the word—"I'm thinking that's way overused. Underland's better. You know, since it's underground. How's that sound, Alyssa?"

I recall that rare glimpse of regret from Taelor today as I carve the middle of the skateboard bowl beneath the bright neon UNDERLAND sign hanging from the ceiling. It's nice to be reminded that she has a human side. A rock song pipes through the speakers. As I come down the lower half of the skating bowl, dark silhouettes swoop around me against the neon backdrop.

Balancing my back foot on the tail of the board, I prepare to pull up on the nose with my front. An attempt at an ollie a few weeks ago won me a bruised tailbone. I now have a deathly fear of the move, but something inside me won't let me give up.

I have to keep trying or I'll never get enough air to learn any real tricks, but my determination goes much deeper. It's visceral—a flutter that jumbles my thoughts and nerves until I'm convinced I'm not scared. Sometimes I think I'm not alone in my own head, that there's a part of someone lingering there, someone who chides me to push myself beyond my limits.

Embracing the adrenaline surge, I launch. Curious how much air I'm clearing, I snap my eyes open. I'm midjump, cement coming up fast beneath me. My spine prickles. I lose my nerve and my front foot slips, sending me down to the ground with a loud *oomph*.

My left leg and arm make first contact. Pain jolts through every bone. The impact knocks the breath from my lungs and I skid to a stop in the basin. My board rolls after me like a faithful pet, stopping to nudge my ribs.

Gasping for air, I flip onto my back. Every nerve in my knee and ankle blazes. My pad's strap is ripped loose, leaving a tear in the black leggings I wear beneath my purple bike shorts. Against the neon green surface slanting beside me, I see a dark smear. Blood ...

I draw my split knee up, inhaling a sharp breath. Within seconds of my crash landing, three employees blow whistles and Rollerblade through the lines of slowing skaters. They wear mini caps, with a light affixed to the front, but they're more like lifeguards—stationed for easy access and certified in the fundamentals of first aid.

They form a visible barrier with their bright crossing-guard vests to deter other boarders from tripping over us while they bandage me up and clean my blood from the cement with disinfectant.

A fourth employee rolls up in a manager's vest. Of all people, it has to be Jebediah Holt.

“I should’ve bailed,” I mumble grudgingly.

“Are you kidding? Nobody could’ve seen that slam coming in time.” His deep voice soothes as I kneels beside me. “And glad to see you’re speaking to me again.” He wears cargo shorts and a dark t-shirt beneath his vest. The black lights glide over his skin, highlighting his toned arms with bluish flashes.

I tug at the helmet’s straps beneath my chin. His miner beam is singling me out like a spotlight. “Help me take this off?” I ask.

Jeb bends closer to hear me over the wailing vocals overhead. His cologne—a mix of chocolate and lavender—blends with his sweat into a scent as familiar and appealing as cotton candy to a kid at the fair.

His fingers curve under my chin and he snaps the buckle free. As he helps me push the helmet off, his thumb grazes my earlobe, making it tingle. The glare of his lamp blinds me. I can only make out the dark stubble on his jaw, those straight white teeth (with the exception of the left incisor that slants slightly across his front tooth), and the small iron spike centered beneath his lower lip.

Taelor raked him up and down about his piercing, but he refuses to get rid of it, which makes me like it all the more. She’s only been his girlfriend for a couple of months. She has no claim over what he does.

Jeb’s callused palm cups my elbow. “Can you stand?”

“Of course I can,” I snap, not intentionally harsh, just not the biggest fan of being on display. The minute I put weight on my leg, a jab shoots through my ankle and doubles me over. An employee supports me from behind while Jeb sits down to strip off his blades and socks. Before I know what he’s doing, he lifts me and carries me out of the bowl.

“Jeb, I want to walk.” I wrap my arms around his neck to stay balanced. I can feel the smirks of the other skaters as we pass even if I can’t see them in the dark. They’ll never let me forget being carried away like a diva.

Jeb cradles me tighter, which makes it hard not to notice how close we are: my hands locked around his neck, his chest rubbing against my ribs ... those biceps pressed to my shoulder blade and knee.

I give up fighting as he steps off the cement onto the wood-planked floor.

At first I think we’re headed to the café, but we pass the arcade and swing a right toward the entrance ramp, following the arc of light laid out by his helmet. Jeb’s hip shoves the gym-style door open. I blink, trying to adjust to the brightness outside. Warm gusts of wind slap hair around my face.

He perches me gently on the sunbaked cement, then drops beside me and takes off his helmet, shaking out his hair. He hasn’t cut it in a few weeks, and it’s long enough to graze his shoulders. Thick bangs dip low—a black curtain touching his nose. He loosens the red and navy bandana from around his thigh and wraps it over his head, securing it in a knot at his nape to push back the strands from his face.

Those dark green eyes study the bandage where blood drips from my knee. “I told you to replace your gear. Your strap’s been unraveling for weeks.”

Here we go. He’s already in surrogate-big-brother mode, even though he’s only two and a half years older and one grade ahead of me. “Been talking to my dad again, have you?”

A strained expression crosses his face as he starts messing with his knee pads. I follow his lead and take my remaining one off.

“Actually,” I say, mentally berating myself for not having the sense to fall back into my silent treatment bubble, “I should be grateful you and Dad allow me to come here at all. Seeing as it’s so dark, and all sorts of scary, bad things could happen to my helpless little self.”

A muscle in Jeb's jaw twitches, a sure sign I've struck a nerve. "This has nothing to do with your dad. ~~Other than the fact that he owns a sporting goods store, which means you have no excuse for not maintaining your gear. Boarding can be dangerous.~~"

"Yeah. Just like London is dangerous, right?" I glare across the gleaming cars in the parking lot, smoothing the wrinkles from my red T-shirt's design: a bleeding heart wrapped in barbed wire. Might as well be an X-ray of my chest.

"Great." He tosses his knee pads aside. "So, you're not over it."

"What's to get over? Instead of standing up for me, you took his side. Now I can't go until I graduate. Why should that bother me?" I pluck at my fingerless gloves to suppress the acid bite of anger burning on my tongue.

"At least by staying home, you *will* graduate." Jeb moves to his elbow pads and rips off the Velcro, punctuating his point.

"I would've graduated there, too."

He huffs.

We shouldn't be discussing this. The disappointment is too fresh. I was so psyched about the study abroad program that allowed seniors to finish out their final year of high school in London while getting college credits from one of the best art universities there. The very university Jeb's going to.

Since he's already received his scholarship and plans to move to London later this summer, Dad asked him to dinner a couple of weeks ago to talk about the program. I thought it was a great idea, though with Jeb in my corner I was as good as on a plane. And then, together, they decided it wasn't the right time for me to go. *They* decided.

Dad worries because Alison has an aversion to England—too much Liddell family history. He thinks my going would cause a relapse. She's already being prodded with more needles than most junkies on the street.

At least his reasons made sense. I still haven't figured out why Jeb vetoed the idea. But what does it matter at this point? The sign-up deadline was last Friday, so there's no changing things now.

"Traitor," I mumble.

He dips his head down, forcing me to look at him. "I'm trying to be your friend. You're not ready to move so far from your dad ... you'll have no one to look out for you."

"You'll be there."

"But I can't be with you every second. My schedule's going to be insane."

"I don't need someone with me every second. I'm not a kid."

"Never said you were a kid. But you don't always make the best decisions. Case in point." He pinches my shin, popping the torn knit leggings with a snap.

A jolt of excitement runs through my leg. I frown, convincing myself I'm just ticklish. "So, I'm not allowed to make a few mistakes?"

"Not mistakes that can hurt you."

I shake my head. "Like being stuck here doesn't hurt. At a school I can't stand, with classmates whose idea of fun is making cracks about the white rabbit tail I'm hiding. Thanks for that, Jeb."

He sighs and sits up. "Right. Everything is my fault. I guess your eating cement in there was my fault, too."

The strain behind his voice tugs at my heart. "Well, the slam was *kind* of your fault." My voice softens, a conscious effort to ease the tension between us. "I would've already aced an ollie if you were still teaching the skateboard class."

Jeb's lips twitch. "So, the new teacher, Hitch ... he's not doin' it for ya?"

I punch him, releasing some pent-up frustration. “No, he’s not *doing* it for me.”

Jeb fakes a wince. “He’d sure like to. But I told him I’d kick his—”

“As if you have a say.” Hitch is nineteen and the go-to king for fake IDs and recreational drugs. He’s a prison sentence waiting to happen. I know better than to get tangled up with him, but that’s my call.

Jeb shoots me a look. I sense a talk coming on about the evils of dating players.

I flick a grasshopper off my leg with a blue fingernail, refusing to let its whispers make the moment any more awkward than it is.

Mercifully, the double doors swing open from behind. Jeb scoots away to let a couple of girls go through. A cloud of powdery perfume wafts over us as they pass and wave at Jeb. He nods back. We watch them get into a car and peel out of the parking lot.

“Hey,” Jeb says. “It’s Friday. Aren’t you supposed to visit your mom?”

I jump on the subject change. “Meeting Dad there. And then I promised Jen I’d take the last two hours of her shift.” After looking at my torn clothes, I glance into the sky—the same striking blue as Alison’s eyes. “I hope I have time to drop home and change before work.”

Jeb stands. “Let me clock out,” he says. “I’ll get your board and backpack and drive you to Soul’s. That’s the last thing I need.”

Neither Jeb nor his sister, Jenara, have ever met Alison; they’ve only seen pictures of her. They don’t even know the truth about my scars or why I wear the gloves. My friends all think I was in a car accident with my mom as a kid and that the windshield messed up my hands and injured her brain. Dad doesn’t like the lie, but the reality is so bizarre, he lets me embellish.

“What about your bike?” I’m grasping at straws, considering Jeb’s souped-up vintage Honda CT75 isn’t anywhere on the lot.

“They predicted rain, so Jen dropped me off,” he answers. “Your dad can take you to work late and I’ll drive your car home. It’s not like it’s out of my way.”

Jeb’s family shares the other side of our duplex. Dad and I went over to introduce ourselves one summer morning after they first moved in. Jeb, Jenara, and I became tight before sixth grade started the next fall—tight enough that on the first day of school, Jeb beat up a guy in the breezeway for calling me the Mad Hatter’s love slave.

Jeb slides on some shades and repositions the bandana’s knot at the back of his head. Sunlight highlights the shiny, round scars peppered along his forearms.

I turn to the cars in the lot. Gizmo—my 1975 Gremlin, named after a character in the eighties movie Dad took Alison to on their first date—is only a couple of yards away. There’s a chance Alison will be waiting in the lounge with Dad. If I can’t count on Jeb to back me up about London, I can’t trust him to meet the biggest nut who’s fallen from my family tree.

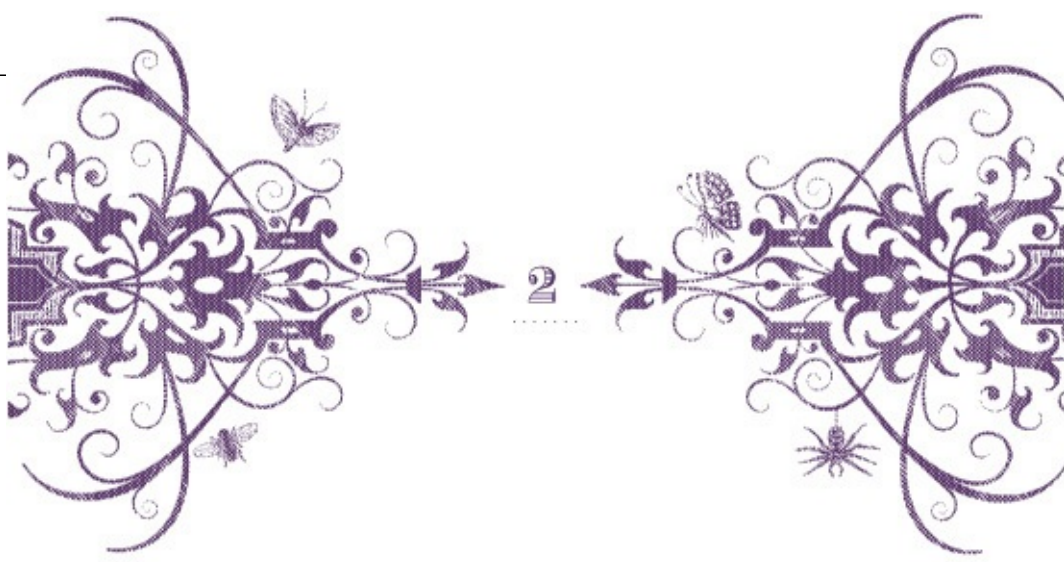
“Uh-uh,” Jeb says. “I see that look. No way you can drive a standard with a sprained ankle.” He holds out a palm. “Fork ’em over.”

With a roll of my eyes, I drop my keys into his hand.

He pushes his shades to the bandana at his hairline. “Wait here and I’ll walk you.”

A burst of air-conditioning hits my face as the door to the complex slams shut behind him. There’s a tickle on my leg. This time, I don’t swish the grasshopper away, and I hear its whisper loud and clear: “*Doomed.*”

“Yeah,” I whisper back, stroking its veined wings and surrendering to my delusions. “It’s all over once Jeb meets Alison.”



## BARBED WIRE & BLACK WINGS

Soul's Asylum is a twenty-five-minute drive outside the city limits.

Afternoon sun beats down, glaring off the car's hood. Once you get past the buildings, strip mall, and houses, there's not much landscaping in Pleasance. Just flat, dry plains with sparse growths of shrubbery and spindly trees.

Each time Jeb starts to talk, I mumble a monosyllabic response, then crank up the volume on the newly installed CD player.

Finally, a song comes on—an acoustic, moody number I've heard Jeb listen to when he paints—and he drives in silent contemplation. The baggie of ice he brought for my swollen ankle has melted, and I move my foot to let it roll off.

I fight drowsiness, knowing what waits on the other side of sleep. I don't need to revisit my Alison nightmare in midafternoon.

As a teenager, Alison's mom, Alicia, painted the Wonderland characters on every wall of her home, insisting that they were real and talked to her in dreams. Years later, Alicia took a flying leap out of her second-story hospital room window to test her "wings," just a few hours after giving birth to me, her mom. She landed in a rosebush and broke her neck.

Some say she committed suicide—postpartum depression and grief over losing her husband months earlier in a factory accident. Others say she should've been locked away long before she had a child.

After her mom's death, Alison was left to be raised by a long line of foster parents. Dad thinks the instability contributed to her illness. I know it's something more, something hereditary, because of my recurrent nightmare and the bugs and plants. And then there's the presence I feel inside. The one that vibrates and shadows me when I'm scared or hesitant, prodding me to push my limits.

I've researched schizophrenia. They say one of the symptoms is hearing voices, not a winglike thumping in the skull. Then again, if I were to count the whispers of flowers and bugs, I hear plenty of voices. By any of those measurements, I'm sick.

My throat swells on a lump and I swallow it down.

The CD changes songs, and I concentrate on the melody, trying to forget everything else. Dust slaps



against the car as Jeb shifts gears. I glance sideways at his profile. There's Italian somewhere in his  
bloodline, and he has a really great complexion—olive-toned and clear, soft to the touch.

He tilts his head my way. I turn to the rearview mirror and watch the car freshener swing. Today  
the first day I've had it hanging in place.

On eBay, there's a store that sells customized fresheners for ten bucks apiece. Just e-mail a photo  
and they print it onto a scented card, then snail-mail the finished product to you. A couple of weeks  
ago, I used some birthday money and bought two of them, one for me and one for Dad—which he hasn't  
yet to hang in his truck. He has it tucked in his wallet; I wonder if it will always stay hidden in there,  
too painful for him to see every day.

"It turned out good," Jeb says, referring to the air freshener.

"Yeah," I mumble. "It's Alison's shot, so it was bound to."

Jeb nods, his unspoken understanding more comforting than other people's well-intentioned words.

I stare at the photo. It's an image of a huge black-winged moth from one of Alison's old albums.  
The shot is amazing, the way the wings are splayed on a flower between a slant of sun and shadow,  
teetering between two worlds. Alison used to capture things most people wouldn't notice—moments  
in time when opposites collide, then merge seamlessly together. Makes me wonder how successful she  
might've been if she hadn't lost her mind.

I tap the air freshener, following its sway.

The bug has always seemed familiar—eerily fascinating yet at the same time calming.

It occurs to me I don't know its history—what species it is, where it lives. If I found out, I would  
know where Alison might've been when she shot the picture and could feel closer to her somehow, but  
I can't ask. She's sensitive about her albums.

I reach behind the bucket seat, dig my iPhone out of my backpack, and open a search for *glowing  
moth*.

After twenty-some pages of tattoos, logos, Lunesta ads, and costume designs, a moth sketch catches  
my eye. Not a perfect match to Alison's, but the body's a bright blue and the wings shimmer black, so  
it's close enough.

Clicking on the image turns the screen blank. I'm about to restart the browser when a strobe  
bright red stops me. The screen throbs as if I'm looking at a heartbeat. The air seems to pulse around  
me in synchrony.

A Web page flickers to life. White font and colorful graphics stand out vividly against the black  
background. The first thing that hits me is the title: *Netherlings—denizens of the nether-realm*.

Next follows a definition: *A dark and twisted race of supernatural beings indigenous to an ancient  
world hidden deep within the heart of the earth. Most use their magic for mischief and revenge, though  
a rare few have a penchant for kindness and courage.*

I scroll past images every bit as violent and beautiful as Jeb's paintings: luminous, rainbow-  
skinned creatures with bulbous eyes and sparkly, silken wings who carry knives and swords; hideous  
naked hobgoblins in chains who crawl on all fours and have corkscrew tails and cloven feet like pigs;  
silvery pixel-like beings trapped in cages and crying oily black tears.

According to the text, in their truest forms, netherlings can look like almost anything—they can be  
as small as a rosebud or larger than a man. Some can even emulate mortals, taking on the likeness of  
existing humans to deceive the people around them.

An uneasy knot forms in my chest at the next line of text: *While wreaking havoc in the mortal  
world, netherlings stay connected to their kind by using plants and insects as conduits to the nether  
realm.*

My breath catches. The words dance around me, a dizzying rise and fall of broken logic. If they were true and not just some Web weirdo's fantasy, it would mean Alison and I share the traits of some creepy, mystical creatures. But that's not even possible.

The car bounces over a bump and I drop the cell. When I pick it up, I've lost the website and all signal. "Crap!"

"Nope. Pothole." Downshifting gears, Jeb sidles a lazy gaze my way—Mr. Cool behind those shades.

I glare at him. "You should probably keep your eyes on the road in case there's any more, genius."

He shifts back from third to fourth gear, grinning. "Fierce game of solitaire?"

"Bug research. Make a right here." I drop the phone into my backpack. I'm so uptight about going to Soul's, I probably read the words wrong. Even though I'm almost convinced of that, the kink in my stomach won't loosen.

Jeb turns onto a long, winding road. We pass a faded sign: SOUL'S ASYLUM: OFFERING PEACE AND RESCUE TO THE WEARY MIND SINCE 1942.

Peace. Yeah, right. More like drug-induced catatonia.

I roll down the window and let in a warm breeze. Gizmo idles while we wait for the automated wrought-iron gates to respond.

Flipping open the glove compartment, I dig out a small cosmetics bag along with the hair extensions that Jenara helped me make out of shimmery blue yarn. They're strung together and clipped for a dreadlocks effect.

We cruise toward the four-story brick building in the distance; it stands out bloodred against the clear sky. It could've been a gingerbread mansion, but the white shingles on the gabled roof look more like jagged teeth than icing.

Jeb finds a parking space next to my dad's Ford pickup and cuts the engine. The motor grinds to a stop.

"Has the car been making that sound long?" He tosses his shades onto the dash and concentrates on the panel behind the steering wheel, checking out dials and numbers.

I lift my braid over my shoulder, sliding the elastic band from the end. "About a week." Hair hangs across my chest in platinum waves just like Alison's. Per Dad's request, I don't dye it or cut it because it reminds him of hers. So I've had to find other creative ways of ramping up my style.

I bend at the waist until my hair flows like a stream over my knees. Once the dreadlocks feel secure, I flip my head upright and catch Jeb watching me.

He jerks his gaze back to the dashboard. "If you hadn't been ignoring my calls, I could've already taken a look at your engine. You shouldn't drive this until it's fixed."

"Gizmo's fine. Just a little hoarse. Maybe he needs to gargle some salt water."

"This isn't a joke. What are you going to do if you get stalled out in the middle of nowhere?"

I twirl a strand of hair around my finger. "Hmm. Show some cleavage to a passing trucker?"

Jeb's jaw clenches. "That's not funny."

I giggle. "Oh, come on. I'm kidding. All it would really take is a little leg."

His lips curve slightly, but the smile is gone in a blink. "This from the girl who's never even had a first kiss."

He's always teased that I'm a mix between skate glam and American sweetheart. Looks like I've just been downgraded to prude.

I groan. It won't do any good to deny it. "Fine. I would call someone on my cell and wait safely by my car with all the doors locked and Mace in hand until help arrived. There, do I win a cookie?"

He thumps a finger against the dash. "I'll come over to look at it later. You can hang with me in the garage. Just like we used to."

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I pull some eye shadow out of the cosmetics bag. "I'd like that."

His smile makes a full appearance—dimples and all—a glimpse of the old, playful, teasing Jeb. My pulse quickens at the sight of it.

"Great," he says. "How about tonight?"

I huff. "Right. Taelor would have a litter of kittens if you left prom early to tinker with my car."

He drops his forehead to the steering wheel. "Ugh. I forgot about the dance. I still have to pick up my tux." He glances at the clock on my dash. "Jen said some guy asked you but you didn't want to go. Why not?"

I shrug. "I have this character flaw? Called dignity?"

He snorts and picks up a bottle of raspberry-flavored water wedged between the emergency brake and console and drinks what's left.

I open my compact and apply a smear of kohl eye shadow atop what's already there, and then I elongate the outside corner like a cat's eye. Once I finish both eyes with a sweep along the bottom lashes, my ice-blue irises stand out against the black like a fluorescent shirt beneath the UV lights in Underland.

Jeb leans back in his seat. "Well done. You've managed to destroy any resemblance to your mom."

I freeze. "I'm not trying—"

"C'mon, Al. It's me." He stretches out a hand to bat the air freshener. The moth spins, reminding me of the website. The pinch in my sternum tightens.

I drop my eye shadow into the bag and fish out some silver gloss to spread over my lips, then stuff the bag back into the glove compartment.

Jeb's hand rests next to my elbow on the console, his warmth seeping over to me. "You're scared because you look like her, you'll be like her. And end up here, too."

I'm speechless. He's always been able to read me. But this ... it's like he's crawled inside my head. *God forbid.*

My throat dries, and I stare at the empty water bottle between us.

"It's not easy to live in someone's shadow." His face darkens.

He would know. He's got the scars to prove it, deeper than the cigarette burns on his torso and arms. I still remember after they first moved in: the blood-chilling screams next door at two in the morning as he tried to protect his sister and mom from his drunken dad. The best thing that ever happened to Jeb's family was when Mr. Holt wrapped his truck around a tree one night three years ago. His blood alcohol level was at 0.3.

Thankfully, Jeb never touches the stuff. His dark moods don't mix well with alcohol. He found that out a few years back, after nearly killing some guy in a fight. The court sent Jeb to a youth detention center for a year, which is why he graduated at age nineteen. He lost twelve months of his life but gained a future, because at the center a psychologist helped him rein in his bitterness through his anger and taught him that having structure and balance was the best way to contain his rage.

"Just remember," he says, weaving our fingers together. "With you, it's not hereditary. Your mom didn't have an accident."

Our palms touch with only my knit gloves between us, and I press my forearm to his to align the ridges of his scars against my skin.

*You're wrong, I want to say. I'm exactly like you.* But I can't. The fact is, alcoholics have programs and steps to take so they can fit into society and function. Crazy people like Alison—all they have are padded

cells and blunted utensils. That's their normal.

*Our normal.*

Looking down, I notice blood has seeped and dried on the bandage at my knee. I run a hand over my forehead, worried about Alison. She flips out at the sight of blood.

"Here." Without my even saying a word, Jeb works the bandana off his head. Leaning over, he tucks the cloth around my knee to hide the soiled bandage. When he's done, instead of moving back to his driver's side of the car, he props an elbow on the console and runs a finger along one of the blue falls in my hair. Either it's vibes from our unresolved issues or from our intimate conversation, but his expression is serious.

"Those dreadlocks are wicked tight." His voice is low and velvety, filling my stomach with knots. "You know, you really should go to prom. Show up just like this and knock everyone on their asses. I can guarantee you'll still have your dignity."

He studies my face with an expression I've only seen when he paints. Intense. Absorbed. As if he's been considering the painting from every angle. *Me* from every angle.

He's so close, I smell the raspberry on his hot breath. His gaze shifts to the dimple in my chin and my cheeks flame.

In the back of my head, that shadowy sensation rouses, not so much a voice as a presence, like the shudder of wings scrambling my insides ... urging me to touch the labret beneath his lower lip. Instinctively, I reach out. He doesn't even flinch as I trace the silvery spike.

The metal is warm, and his stubble tickles my fingertip on either side. Hit full-on by the intimacy of my action, I start to draw back.

He grabs my hand and holds my finger against his lips. His eyes darken, thick lashes narrowing. "Al," he whispers.

"Butterfly!" Dad's shout carries through the open window. I jump, and Jeb boomerangs to his side of the car. Dad saunters down the immaculate lawn toward Gizmo, wearing khaki pants and a royal blue polo embroidered with *TOM'S SPORTING GOODS* in silver thread.

I soothe my racing pulse with a few deep breaths.

Dad bends over to look through my window. "Hello, Jebediah."

Jeb clears his throat. "Hey there, Mr. Gardner."

"Hmm. Maybe you should finally start calling me Thomas." Dad grins, arm propped on the window's edge. "After all, you graduated last night."

Jeb smirks, proud and boyish. He gets that way around my dad. Mr. Holt used to tell him he'd never amount to anything, pressuring him to drop out and work at the garage full-time, but my dad always encouraged Jeb to stay in school. If I wasn't still ticked over how they'd teamed up against me about London, I might actually enjoy their moment of bonding.

"So my girl lassoed you into being her chauffeur?" Dad asks, shooting me a teasing glance.

"Yep. She even sprained an ankle to get her way," Jeb ribs back. How can his voice sound so steady, while I feel like a hurricane has been set loose in my chest? Isn't he even a little rattled by what happened between us two seconds ago?

He reaches into the backseat and tugs on the handles of the wooden crutches he borrowed from Underland's medical supply room.

"What did you do?" Dad opens my car door, worry apparent on his face.

I swing out my legs slowly, gritting my teeth against the throb as blood rushes to my ankle. "That's usual. Skateboarding is trial and error, you know?" I glance at Jeb as he comes around to the passenger side, mentally forbidding him to tell Dad about the worn-out knee pad.

Jeb gives his head a shake, and for a second, I think he's going to turn on me again. Instead, our eyes lock and my insides tangle. ~~What made me touch him like that earlier? Things are weird enough between us as is.~~

Dad helps me stand and crouches to look at my ankle. "Interesting. Your mom was convinced something happened. She said you'd hurt yourself." He stands, an inch shorter than Jeb. "I suppose she just assumes the worst any time you're late. You should've called." He cups my elbow while positioning the crutches under my arms.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Let's get you inside before she does something—" Dad stops himself in answer to my pleading gaze. "Uh, before our ice cream melts to cheesecake soup."

We start toward the sidewalk lined with peonies. Bugs dance atop the flowers and white noise grows around me, making me wish I had my earbuds and iPod.

Dad throws a glance over his shoulder when we're halfway to the door. "Could you park the car in the garage, in case it rains?"

"Sure thing," Jeb's voice answers back. "Hey, skater girl ..."

I pause behind Dad and pivot on my good foot, fingers tight around the cushioned crutch grips as I study Jeb's expression in the distance. He looks as confused as I feel.

"When do you work tomorrow?" he asks.

I stand there like a brainless mannequin. "Um ... Jen and I are on the noon shift."

"Okay. Get a ride with her. I'll come by then to look at Gizmo's engine."

My heart sinks. So much for hanging out like old times. Looks like he's going to avoid *me* now. "Right. Sure." I bite back my disappointment and turn to hobble with Dad up the path.

He catches my eye. "Everything all right between you two? I can't remember a time you didn't tinker in the garage together."

I shrug as he opens the glass door. "Maybe we're growing apart." It hurts to say it, more than I've ever admit out loud.

"He's always been a good friend," Dad says. "You should work it out."

"A friend doesn't try to run your life. That's what dads are for." Raising my eyebrows to make my point, I limp into the air-conditioned building. He steps in behind me, silent.

I shiver. The hallways here unsettle me with their long, empty stretches and yellow blinking lights. White tiles magnify the sounds, and nurses in peppermint-striped scrubs blur in my peripheral vision. The uniforms make them look more like candy strippers than certified health-care professionals.

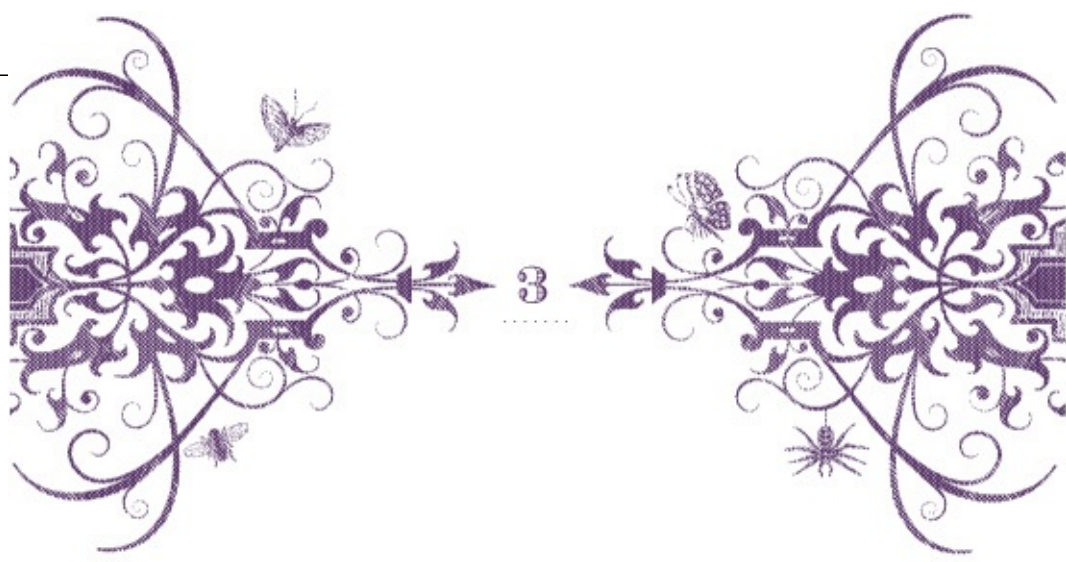
Counting the barbs painted on my T-shirt, I wait for Dad to talk to the nurse behind the main desk. A fly lands on my arm and I swat at it. It swoops around my head with a loud buzz that almost sounds like "*He's here,*" before darting down the corridor.

Dad pauses beside me as I stare after the fly. "You sure you're all right?"

I nod, shaking off the delusion. "Just don't know what to expect today." It's only a half lie. Alison gets too distracted around plants and insects to go outside very often, but she's been begging for fresh air, and Dad talked her doctor into trying. Who knows what might come of it?

"Yeah. I'm hoping this doesn't unbalance her too much ..." His voice trails off, and his shoulders slouch, as if all the sadness of the last eleven years weighs on them. "I wish you could remember her the way she was before." He places a hand on my nape as we head toward the courtyard. "She was so levelheaded. So together. *So much like you.*" He whispers that last part, maybe in hopes I won't hear.

But I do, and the barbed wire tightens once more, until my heart is strangled and broken.



## THE SPIDER & THE FLY

Other than Alison, her nurse, and a couple of groundskeepers, the courtyard is deserted. Alison sits at one of the black cast-iron bistro tables on a cement patio that's been stamped to look like cobblestones. Even the decor has to be chosen carefully in a place like this. There's no glass anywhere, only a reflective silver gazing globe secured tightly to its pedestal base.

Since some patients are known to pick up chairs or tables and throw them, the legs of the furniture are bolted into the cement. A black and red polka-dotted parasol sprouts up from the center of the table like a giant mushroom and shades half of Alison's face. Silver teacups and saucers glisten in the sunlight. Three settings: one for me, one for Dad, and one for her.

We brought the tea service from home years ago when she first checked in. It's an indulgence the asylum caters to in order to keep her alive. Alison won't eat anything—be it Salisbury steak or fruit cobbler—unless it's in a teacup.

Our pint of chocolate-cheesecake ice cream waits on a place mat, ready to be scooped out. Condensation rolls down the cardboard packaging.

Alison's platinum braid swings over her chair's back, almost touching the ground. She has her hair bangs tucked beneath a black headband. Wearing a blue gown with a long bib apron to keep her clothes clean, she looks more like Alice at the Mad Hatter's tea party than most of the illustrations I've seen.

It's enough to make me physically sick.

At first I think she's talking to the nurse until the woman stands to greet us, smoothing out her peppermint scrubs. Alison doesn't notice, too intent on the metal vase of carnations in front of her.

My nausea escalates when I hear the carnations talking over the drone of white noise in the background. They're saying how painful it is to be snipped at the stems, complaining about the quality of the water they're swimming in, asking to be put back into the ground so they can die in peace.

That's what I hear, anyway. I have to wonder what Alison thinks they're saying in her own warped mind. The doctor can't get details, and I've never brought it up because it would mean admitting I inherited her sickness.

Dad waits for the nurse, but his gaze, heavy with longing and disappointment, stays locked on Alison.

A slight pressure on my right arm shifts my attention to the unnaturally tan face of Nurse Mar Jenkins. ~~The scent radiating off her is a mix of burned toast and talcum powder. Her brown hair pulled up in a bun, and a white, high-voltage smile nearly singes my vision.~~

“Howdy-hi,” she sings. As usual, she’s over-the-top bubbly—like Mary Poppins. She studies my crutches. “Yikes! Did you hurt yourself, honey drop?”

*No. I’ve sprouted wooden appendages.* “Skateboard,” I answer, determined to be on my best behavior for Dad’s sake, in spite of how the yammering flowers on the table have gotten under my skin.

“Still skateboarding? Such an interesting hobby.” Her pitying stare implies “*for a girl*” better than words ever could. She studies my blue dreadlocks and thick eye makeup with a grim expression on her face. “You need to keep in mind that a calamity like this can upset your mother.”

I’m not sure if she’s talking about my injuries or my fashion sense.

The nurse looks over her shoulder at Alison, who’s still whispering to the flowers, oblivious to us. “She’s already a little high-strung today. I should give her something.” Nurse Poppin’ Stuff starts to pull a syringe from the arsenal in her pocket. One of the many things I despise about her: She seems to enjoy giving her patients shots.

Over the years, the doctors have discovered that sedatives work best to control Alison’s outbursts. But they turn her into a drooling zombie, unaware of anything around her. I’d rather see her alert and conversing with a roach than like that.

I scowl at my dad, but he doesn’t even notice because he’s so busy frowning himself.

“No,” he says, and the deep, disciplinarian edge to his voice makes the nurse’s penciled-in eyebrows snap up. “I’ll send Alyssa for you if things get difficult. And we’ve got the gardeners over there for manpower if we need it.” He gestures to the two hulking men in the distance who are pruning some branches from a bush. They could be twins with their huge mustaches and walrus-shaped bodies stuffed in brown coveralls.

“All rightio. I’ll be at the front desk when you need me.” With another glaringly fake smile, she bounces into the building, leaving the three of us in solitude. Or the eight of us, if you count the carnations. At least they’ve finally stopped talking.

The minute Dad’s shadow glides across the vase, Alison looks up. One glance at my crutches, and she launches from her seat, rattling the tea set. “He was right!”

“Who was right, hon?” Dad asks, smoothing back the loose hairs framing her temples. Even after all the years of disappointment, he still can’t resist touching her.

“The grasshopper ...” Alison’s blue eyes glitter with a mix of anxiety and excitement as she points to a thick web in the parasol’s ribs. A silver-dollar-size garden spider scuttles across it, securing a white cocoon against the gusting wind—dinner, no doubt. “Before the spider wrapped him up, the grasshopper shouted something.” Alison’s hands clench together in front of her waist. “The grasshopper said you’d been hurt, Allie. He saw you outside the skating place.”

I stare at the mummified lump in the spider’s web. There was that insect that kept climbing my leg at Underland. What, did it hitch a ride on the car?

My stomach turns over. No way. No possible way it’s the same bug. Alison must’ve overheard me and Dad talking to the nurse about my fall. Sometimes I think she pretends to be oblivious because it’s easier than facing what’s happened to her, or what she’s done to our family.

She grips her hands so hard, the knuckles bulge white. Ever since the day she hurt me, she avoids any physical contact between us. She thinks I’ll break. That’s one of the reasons I wear gloves, so she won’t see the scars and be reminded.

Dad pries her hands apart and laces his fingers through hers. Alison's attention settles on him, and the chaotic intensity melts away.

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"Hi, Tommy-toes," she says, her voice soft and steady.

"Hi, Ali-bear."

"You brought ice cream. Is this a date?"

"Yeah." He kisses her knuckles, flashing his best Elvis smirk. "And Alyssa's here to help us celebrate."

"Perfect." She smiles back, her eyes dancing. No wonder Dad's helplessly in love with her. She's pretty enough to be a fairy.

Dad helps her back to her chair. He lays a cloth napkin in her lap, then slops some drippy ice cream into a teacup. Placing the cup on a saucer, he eases it in front of her along with a plastic spoon.

"*Il tuo gelato, signora bella,*" he says.

"*Grazie* meatball!" she blurts, in a rare moment of levity.

Dad laughs and she giggles, a tinkling sound that makes me think of the silver chimes we have over our back door at home. For the first time in a while, she *feels* like home. I start to think this is going to be one of our good visits. With everything going on in my life lately, it would sure be nice to have a moment of stability.

I sit, and Dad takes my crutches, laying them on the ground, then helps me prop my ankle on an empty chair between Alison and me. He pats my shoulder and takes a seat on the opposite side.

For several minutes, we laugh and sip sticky cheesecake soup from our teacups. We talk about normal things: the end of the school year, tonight's prom, last night's graduation, and Tom's Sporting Goods. It's like I'm in a regular family.

Then Dad ruins it. He takes out his wallet to show Alison snapshots of my mosaics that won ribbons at the county fair. The three photos are stuck in the plastic sleeves along with an assortment of credit cards and receipts.

First is *Murderess Moonlight*, all in blues: blue butterflies, blue flowers, and bits of blue glass. Then *Autumn's Last Breath*—a whirlwind of fall colors made up of brown moths and orange, yellow, and red flower petals. *Winter's Heartbeat*, my pride, is a chaotic tangle of baby's breath and silver glass beads arranged in the image of a tree. Dried winterberries dot the end of each branch, as if the tree is bleeding. Jet-black crickets form the backdrop. As morbid as it sounds, the mixing of bizarre and natural somehow creates beauty.

Alison wriggles in her chair as if disturbed. "What about her music? Is she still practicing her cello?"

Dad squints my way. Alison's had very little to do with my education. But one thing she's always insisted on is my participation in orchestra, maybe because she used to play the cello herself. I dropped out this year when I only had time for one elective. We haven't mentioned it because it seems so important to her that I continue.

"We can talk about that later," Dad says, squeezing her hand. "I wanted you to see her eye for detail. Just like you with your photographs."

"Photographs tell a story," Alison mutters. "But people forget to read between the lines." Breaking her hand out of Dad's, she becomes deathly quiet.

Eyes filled with sadness, Dad's about to close the wallet when Alison spots the air freshener with the moth's picture ... the one he hasn't yet hung in his truck.

With trembling hands, she grabs it. "Why are you carrying this with you?"

"Mom ..." My tongue strains with the effort to form the word, unnatural and stiff, like trying



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