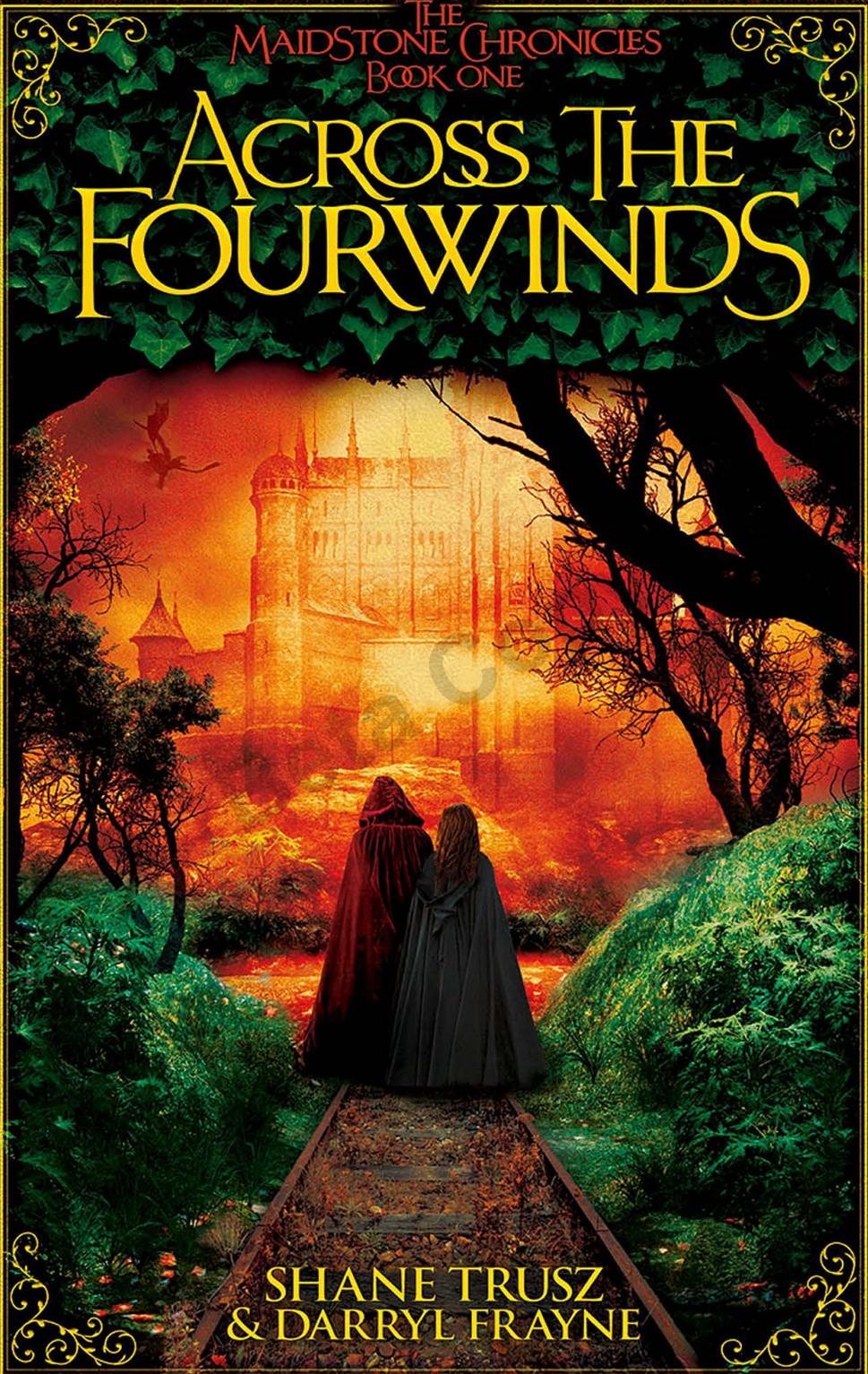


THE
MAIDSTONE CHRONICLES
BOOK ONE

ACROSS THE FOURWINDS



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& DARRYL FRAYNE

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-1-

DARK DAYS

Morgan stepped back as her foil whistled through a circular parry, deflecting Coach's advancing foil with a loud snap. Against anyone else, Coach's powerful attack would have certainly taken the point. He outmatched his student in both size and experience, but Morgan remained poised, tendons tight as piano wires. Without hesitation, she lunged forward. As Coach parried she shifted her feint, moving with savage grace. Before Coach could counter-attack, Morgan lunged below his guard. Extending her foil, she struck his bright white jacket low in the chest.

"Match!" she shouted, whipping off her mask and bib. Strands of sweat-soaked auburn hair clung to her tanned face

as she raised her gloved hand, foil facing up in salute. Her black-flecked hazel eyes flashed with the energy and maturity of someone about to graduate from university instead of high school.

Coach returned the salute. “Impressive, Miss Finley.”

He pulled a small towel from his back pocket and dabbed a line of sweat rolling freely from his high forehead. “A well-executed passata-sotto,” he said between heavy breaths. “Bold move.”

Morgan’s full lips parted into a brilliant smile, her lean form drawing appreciative glances from the boys warming up along the periphery. Five other fencing matches in the school gym continued around them, their footwork echoing off the walls. From the rafters, two Fencing World Championship banners with Morgan’s name on them swayed beneath the air ducts.

“Thought I had you there.” Coach wiped the towel over his thinning grey hair.

“Oh please,” Morgan said, placing a hand on her hip. “I was watching the clock.”

Coach smirked and drank deeply from his water bottle. “Well, I’m not foolish enough to stick my hand in the same fire twice; let’s call it a morning.”

“Do you want me to help out here?” Morgan asked as they approached the main doors.

“No, I’ll be fine. Off to class for you, Finley. Fencing earned you that nice Yale scholarship, but you’ll need to keep your studies up to maintain it.”

Morgan paused at the gym door, observing her favorite

teacher in action. Of all the people in this hick town, she would miss him most after she moved away to attend university.

Coach's commanding voice jolted students into fearful acquiescence. "Hops! NOW!" he shouted.

Morgan walked down the hall to the girls' locker room as the pounding and squeaking of running shoes filled the gym. She smiled slightly, knowing that Coach would not blow his whistle until the students' legs burned, or until one senior boy vomited across the floor.

As the soothing warmth of the shower cascaded over her body, Morgan's adrenaline subsided and thoughts of the odd little town flooded her unsettled mind. Only during practice could she truly be herself, uninhibited and confident. Even there, she was finding it difficult to be genuine. She missed the simple authenticity of childhood friendships. Opening the hot water tap as far as it would go, she tried to relax as steam slowly filled the locker room.

Morgan's family had moved four times in her life, making it challenging to form deep friendships. Her mother always managed to find stable part-time work as a nurse, but her father struggled to find a church that would keep him as a long-term pastor. Three years ago, her father uprooted the family from Cleveland, Ohio, telling Morgan she would have more opportunity to stand out as a young fencer if they lived in Canada. She had hoped that would mean returning to her birthplace in Niagara Falls, Ontario; instead, they moved to a small northern town where she couldn't help but stand out.

On the surface, Cochrane appeared a quiet, secluded hamlet, but Morgan was sensitive to what most townsfolk accepted as commonplace: rumors, innuendos, and the secrets revolving around the Arden Forest that bordered the eastern edge of town. At first, she had thought the gossip all rather comical, like childish ghost stories told by old-timers in wallpapered kitchens. Now her father was being pulled into something she did not understand.

As she stood motionless in the silent, simple honesty that a shower provides, Morgan considered how her family had drifted apart since coming to Cochrane. Until a few years ago, her parents would openly display their affection for one another. Now, tension and angry words filled their home. The most recent conversation between her parents burned in Morgan's memory. Her father routinely raised his voice, but that day he also spoke with his hands. The kitchen wall bore the brunt of his outbursts before he left the house, slamming the door behind him. Morgan had recoiled in the shadows of the dining room as her mother cringed in silence as if expecting the blows to shift in her direction. Fear of her father was slowly replacing childhood adoration.

Since her first class was a spare, Morgan decided to run home and check on her mom before second block. The combined chill of the tile floor and thoughts of her father strengthened her resolve as she dried off before slipping on socks, t-shirt, and baggy track pants. She grabbed her favorite oversized hoodie she often wore in a vain attempt to hide her form from prying eyes while she ran.

With every step, anxious thoughts cooled the calmness she had sought in the warmth of the shower. Her father's simmering anger over the past few months threatened to boil over into open hostility. The thought of angry words turning to a physical attack on her mother was not as outlandish as it had once been. She turned down her street, and noticed her father's car was still gone. She breathed a grateful sigh.

Hoping her mother was asleep after working the night shift, Morgan entered the silent house and walked quietly upstairs. Halfway up, she stopped. In the upstairs hall, the spring-loaded ladder hung down from the ceiling. Having never seen the attic open since the day they moved in, she was surprised to see a soft glow emanating from beyond the small rectangular opening. Morgan listened carefully. Hearing nothing but sensing that someone was there, her pulse quickened. A knot tightened in her throat, stifling a breath as a brief image of her mother's beaten body flashed in her mind.

Clutching the creaking ladder, she started up. The air above was cool. Hesitating near the top, Morgan shivered as the hairs on the nape of her neck bristled. She listened. Adrenalin flowed like a nervous fish in shallow water. With shorter breaths, she reached up quickly before she lost her nerve.

The dark rooflines of the narrow attic formed sharp angles that prevented most adults from standing upright. A light bulb dangled from a single black wire several feet away. Morgan shifted her view, avoiding the shadowy cobwebbed corners. At first, the room appeared empty, but then Morgan saw her mother kneeling at the other end of the attic.

Wearing her work scrubs, Julie Finley stared at the floor before her. Morgan exhaled as her mother slowly turned her head, but her familiar features were unreadable.

“What...are...you...doing up here, mom? You okay?” Morgan pulled herself through the trap door.

Julie blinked. The usual subtle creases around her limpid eyes now resembled miniature chasms. Her skin had an ashen tint to it. Approaching one slow step at a time, Morgan noticed that a long, wide floor plank had been removed. Kneeling beside her mother, Morgan gasped.

“Don’t get close,” Julie warned, her voice raspy.

Morgan kneeled, transfixed. “I don’t understand.”

“I tried to pick it up, but...” Julie said, raising her reddened hand.

In the space beneath the missing floorboard was a sword unlike any Morgan had ever seen. Its blade was slender and graceful, with an ethereal green glow visible deep within the unblemished alloy. The grip, wrapped with tightly woven strands of black leather, could easily accommodate two hands. A gentle round cross-guard circled the area between the grip and the blade. The weapon was lying across a crimson fabric that amplified the surrounding light. It was magnificent.

“I’ve seen this before,” Morgan breathed.

“What do you mean, you’ve seen this before?” Julie’s eyes were wild like those of a skittish horse.

The angles of Morgan’s willowy face sharpened in the harsh light cast by the single bulb. She reached down and slid a hand around the hilt before her mom could stop her. Morgan pulled

the sword from its hiding place.

Julie was dumbfounded. “How...why isn’t *your* hand burning?”

“I don’t know why it burned you, mom, but I know I’ve seen this before.” She raised the sword into the light, never flinching as she studied the weapon. The size and weight were a perfect match for Morgan as though the sword had been forged specifically for her.

Julie stared. “Where did you see this before, Morgan?”

“Not sure. I was young.” She paused. “Dad was there.”

“Put it back,” Julie snapped irritably.

Morgan remained transfixed. The sword felt so alive, so regal in her hand that returning it to the humble hiding place would be a dishonor. Coach had once allowed her to hold an expensive sabre at the World Championships, but that one paled by comparison. After a moment, she slowly responded to her mother’s command, placing the sword gently on the crimson fabric. The difficulty with which she released her grip, however, was not lost on her.

“How’d you find this?” Morgan asked.

Julie ignored the question as she slid the wooden plank back into place. “Don’t say anything to your father.”

“Do you think *he* put it here?”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Julie said as Morgan helped her stand on shaky legs. A labored stretch suggested that Julie had been up here for hours.

She raised a stern finger and held Morgan’s dark eyes. “Not a word to anyone, Morgan.”

“I won’t say anything, mom.”

Julie spoke quickly now as she guided Morgan away from the sword’s hiding place and back to the attic opening. “He should be home tomorrow afternoon and I know you’ll want to ask him about it. Lord knows I certainly do, but something isn’t right here. I don’t know why, but we need to keep this from him.”

“All right, mom.” Morgan met Julie’s earnest gaze. She had grown accustomed to secrets—even in her own family—but this was frightening. Without another word, she helped her mother down the narrow opening. As she followed down the ladder, an unfamiliar sensation washed over her. Morgan gazed into the attic as if the sword were drawing her back. In spite of the strange seductive summons, she managed to ignore it.

At the foot of the ladder, Julie gave Morgan a tight hug. “Good. In the meantime, I need to get some sleep and you need to get to school, kiddo.”

Julie spoke as if everything was normal but held her daughter longer than usual. She broke from the embrace and turned quickly into her room. The door closed softly, leaving Morgan completely unsettled. She considered her options. Respect for her mother trumped her impulse to return to the attic; with a sigh, she headed down to the kitchen. To walk away from the sword took a concentrated effort.

Morgan was eager to leave the house, but could not ignore her growling stomach. She quickly poured herself a bowl of Shreddies and ate while pacing around the kitchen. The attic captivated her thoughts. She was certain she had seen the sword

before, and could not forget how its smooth leather pressed against her palms. After starting to leave the house twice, she eventually conceded and tiptoed upstairs.

Without checking to see if her mom had fallen asleep, she climbed the rickety rungs as quietly as possible. Trembling with excitement, she reached the hidden sword, inhaled sharply and removed the floorboard. She wrapped both hands around the grip, lifting the gleaming blade in front of herself. Her breathing slowed to a steady rhythm. A sudden burst of self-confidence mingled with profound peace, lifting the burdens of adolescence she had carried for three years. She felt like a child again. All was right in her world. She admired the intricate details of the sword, much like she had done on the first day her father introduced her to fencing.

As soon as Morgan's thoughts turned to her father, the sword became lighter, as if intentionally drawing her away from the hiding place in the floor. Instinctively, she knew she had to move the weapon to a safer location in the house.

Moments later, Morgan stepped outside and welcomed the sun's warmth against her skin. She flexed her fingers into fists as though the sword remained in her hands. At least now the mysterious blade was safe. Her mother had shown genuine fear at the mere mention of her father. The thought of him using such a weapon on his own family provoked a cold shiver from Morgan, despite the comforting sun.

Walking down the front steps, and seeing no one on the sidewalk and not a single vehicle on her street, Morgan stretched

briefly in preparation for her return run to school. The empty driveway reminded her of her most recent conversation with her father before he left for his conference. It had not been *what* he was saying that unnerved her, but *how* he was saying it. From the pulpit, his speech was always fluid and practiced, but that day he spoke one awkward word at a time. Something was wrong. He was withdrawing from the family and spending more time at the church, in that dark musty office. Even as he spoke, she had sensed a new aggression in his tone. She felt it more than heard it, like the sudden shift before a gale.

“I won’t be able to come with you to Germany,” he had said without a hint of regret.

“But Dad...this is the World Championships. My last tournament before I go to Yale. I thought...” Morgan fumbled for words. She had been so focused on defending her title in Women’s Sabre that she had little time to think about what had happened to her biggest fan. A former successful college athlete himself, her father had always encouraged a strict training regime. Having never missed a tournament, he even took in countless practices, supporting her every chance he could. That had all changed since their sudden move to Cochrane.

He stepped forward, raising a warning finger. “Don’t question me again, Morgan!”

Morgan could not believe what she was hearing. She simply stared at him like he was a stranger, as if someone were impersonating him without knowing who he truly was. Before she could respond, he had simply backed out of the driveway and pulled away without another look.

Determined to shake the growing bitterness that now fused with her growing fear of her father, Morgan started a fast pace down the driveway. Her first few strides felt sluggish, so she opted to take the long way to school, down Nineteenth Avenue. She needed time to consider the possible connection between her mysterious affinity with the sword and the expanding alienation from her father. Nineteenth Avenue was as close as anyone went to the Arden Forest these days, but she was ready to find out why.



-2-

DREAMS AND REALITY

With almost every light on in the house at #25 Nineteenth Avenue, Will Owens studied the shadowy border of the Arden Forest across the field from what had once been his parents' home. He stood alone in the kitchen, waiting.

Two small, dark forms darted from the trees and scurried into the grassy field. Once in the open, they rushed to Will's house. In the front yard, they stopped in their tracks and glared at Will standing behind the kitchen window. Will drew his father's old Springfield 1911 handgun from the back of his cargo pants and raised it threateningly. The creatures narrowed

spiteful, yellow eyes as their disfigured black forms covered. One flashed a small claw and spat at Will before they both turned and disappeared down the street.

Will slowly released the breath he had been holding and carefully placed the .45 caliber handgun on the counter. The presence of the hideous creatures frightened him, but not as much as the increasing frequency of their emergence from the forest over the past month. They were also growing bolder. A week ago, Will had chased one from his house. In his panic, he had fired a shot at the creature, but the bullet passed harmlessly through its lanky body and into the hallway wall outside his bedroom. He was amazed the police never came by. Neighbors had grown accustomed to Will's oddities since his parents died three years ago, so their only response was more sideways glances and whispers that fueled the town's busy rumor mill.

Will had first noticed the dark creatures shortly after his mother's tragic accident. He had searched the internet in a vain attempt to identify the small humanoid beasts. For lack of a better name, he referred to them as Lessers, perhaps because he suspected a more significant creature to follow. He had quickly discerned that while he could see the Lessers, other people could not. Each attempt to point them out or describe them to others further alienated him, so he stopped saying anything about them. Like a miry swamp, a deep loneliness gradually pulled Will into its bottomless pit.

The flat metal finish of the handgun absorbed the light in the small kitchen like an anglerfish in the darkness, luring him closer. Will blinked and turned away. Too many times he had

thought about using the 1911 to terminate his crippling loneliness as his father had done three years ago. Threads of hope slipped through the fingers of his soul, but he grit his teeth and resolved that today would not be his last. With clenched fists, he rubbed his eyes as if trying to erase the vision of a dream that persistently interrupted his life.

Walking slowly across a frozen river, the ice collapses abruptly. Plunging into the frigid darkness, he tries to cry out, but he is alone. Opening his eyes, he finds himself standing on a high ridge staring down into seven waterfalls spilling into a yawning canyon. With every recurrence of the dream, the roar of the waterfalls grows with alarming clarity. Staring wide-eyed at the canyon, he turns his right shoulder to see a massive dark tower. Ancient blackened mortar holds rough stone blocks, their lines barely visible behind centuries-old moss and vine. An enormous cone roof covered with weathered shakes protects the structure from the rain that falls relentlessly from heavy grey clouds, nourishing the seven royal waterfalls like obedient cupbearers. The tower's design whispers of an age Will could not begin to fathom. There are no window openings. A solitary solid wooden door at the base of the tower, set back in the stone behind a heavy shroud of mist, offers the only access into this enigmatic fortress.

Over his left shoulder, within his peripheral vision, Will sees the snout of a large horse whose hide mirrors the blackness of this place. Despite his desperate attempts to turn and examine the creature, something prevents him. Then, like the water's

crash at the base of the seven waterfalls, the horse releases a sudden, impatient huff. With each huff, Will awakens with a start in a cold sweat.

When the dreams had first begun, Will spent hours at his computer trying to find a place in the world with seven waterfalls cascading into a single canyon. He could find nothing remotely close to his vision, but each time his search ended with an image of the Arden Forest spread across Google Earth. Like the mystery of the Lessers, the dream baffled him. With each futile attempt to share his unique visions with someone, the deep loneliness tightened its grip.

He poured himself another cup of coffee and stepped out the front door to breathe more clearly. Like the ivy of the dark tower in his dream, a deep-rooted conviction spread over him. The creatures and the forest were inextricably linked to the images in his dreams.

Seeing no sign of the two small creatures, Will sat on the front steps and breathed in the cool morning air. Wearing faded jeans and a red t-shirt with a Coca-Cola logo across the chest, he rubbed his arms, trying to decide if the chill was from the temperature or his nerves. His lean form spoke to the endless miles he walked each night while the rest of the town slept. He raked his fingers through thick hair, reminiscing. The basketball hoop on the garage reminded him of simpler days a few years ago when he had a smooth jump shot and friends at every turn.

As the morning sun worked its way across his front yard, Will watched the dark forest of spruce trees with renewed

apprehension. A few lower branches shifted. With a dry mouth, he pursed his lips and swallowed hard, shrugging off the inexorable heaviness settling on his shoulders.

Something broke from the trees and Will stiffened. He rubbed his eyes to be certain of what he was seeing. To anyone else, a tall brown-haired middle-aged man had stepped out of the forest for an early morning walk. Dressed in pleated khakis, black dress shoes, and a crisp blue Oxford shirt, the man was vaguely familiar. Beyond the simple shell, Will saw someone, no, *something* terrifying. The Lessers were little more than dried leaves in this impending hurricane of evil.

A flash of movement where Iroquois Road curved into Nineteenth Avenue caught Will's eye: a young female jogger ran alone down the street. Turning his attention back to the forest, Will saw the pseudo-man now halfway across the field, walking the land like a king. Will's mind raced. He realized the jogger would not make the distance to the next street without a confrontation.

By the time the creature passed behind the tranquil houses on the far side of the avenue, the jogger had come to an abrupt halt, and Will sprang to his feet. She stood in the pathway between two houses. Then, slowly at first, she walked up a driveway.

"DON'T!" Will shouted, shattering the morning silence.

The jogger disappeared behind a white van in the driveway. A pang of fear struck Will so hard, it nearly threw him off the porch. *That thing could kill her!* Instinctively, he wanted to turn and run into the house but a foreign flicker of inner strength

held him steadfast. He balled his hands into fists. Resisting the natural urge to dissociate himself from the affairs of the town, he opted to intervene.

As if struck in the heart with a syringe of adrenaline, Will leaped off the concrete porch and sprinted across the lawn. His stride widened so quickly that he leaned forward to keep his legs beneath him. The houses blurred as he passed and charged around the van.

The girl jumped back as Will skidded to an awkward stop a few feet from her. Expecting to confront the creature, he saw only the girl standing next to a small dog tangled up in its chain.

“Wh-what the...?” the girl said.

“I...saw...thought I saw...big dog follow...neighbor has a vicious...” Will stammered while she regained her composure. He could see she was surprised, but her unruffled confidence contradicted his reeling mind.

“You scared me.” She picked up the dog’s chain. “I was just gonna give this little guy a hand.”

Acutely aware of the evil lurking close, Will cleared his throat nervously but could think of nothing to say.

“Are you new to Cochrane?” she asked.

Her calm, tolerant tone surprised Will. In the moment he took to find his voice, he was startled by how beautiful she was.

“Kind of,” he replied, wiping a line of sweat from his face with the back of his hand. “I grew up here, but... I was away for a while.”

He shifted awkwardly, bracing himself for the inevitable jeering and judgment that most people extended him. She must

have something to say about his stilted speech or his pasty skin and weary eyes that betrayed too many nights without a decent sleep. Instead, the girl simply bent down and quickly untangled the dog's chain that had been caught in a small bicycle.

"That about does it." She stepped back from the excited puppy intent on climbing her legs. "Guess that other dog must be inside."

Will waited for her to say more. Most people in town avoided him. A few openly mocked him as a lunatic, especially after spending six months in the North Bay psychiatric ward. But this girl's simple acceptance of his peculiar presence and the unpretentious way she spoke astounded him.

The puppy shifted its interest to him, chewing on his leather moccasin. Morgan smiled as they both noticed the other moccasin was missing entirely. Embarrassed, Will tried to think of something to say, some explanation for his odd behavior, but nothing came.

"I'd better get going—I'm already late for class," the girl said with a wave.

Will offered a weak wave in return as the girl continued her run down Nineteenth Avenue before she turned left up Seventh Street and was gone.

Left alone, Will slowly backed away, glancing from house to house, expecting the creature to materialize at any moment. What he failed to realize was that it was already inside a house, harvesting.



-3-

SOME DAYS

Morgan walked through the open door of Coach's small office cluttered with sports equipment, stacks of textbooks, and an undersized desk. Math class was important to Morgan, but the odd encounters with her mother in the attic and with the boy on Nineteenth Avenue consumed her thoughts. Moreover, her fascination with the strange sword refused to be ignored. The only person she could trust to help unclutter her thoughts worked in this messy office.

While Coach finished one last report, Morgan had a chance to catch her breath. She sat down heavily on the old couch across from his desk, squeezing between a cardboard box of small trophies and a sack of baseball helmets. She breathed

in the comforting smell of coffee already dripping from an aging 4-cup maker.

“Not interested in class this morning, Miss Finley?”

“Don’t worry, Coach; my A is all but in the books. I decided to run home for a second breakfast and I took the long way back,” she offered before considering her words.

Coach stopped writing. Morgan had grown accustomed to him peering over the thin black frame of his glasses with a disapproving gaze.

“I know, I know,” she sighed, mimicking his familiar phrase before he had a chance to remind her. “‘It’s a dangerous part of town.’ But I didn’t go anywhere near Arden Road.”

“Nineteenth Avenue?”

She nodded.

Coach tossed her a water bottle filled with orange Powerade and sat back thoughtfully.

“I can offer you advice, Morgan. It’s up to you what you do with it.”

“Do you know how crazy it sounds, the way you all talk about the Arden Forest? I mean, to someone who hasn’t grown up here?” Morgan took a drink.

“I suppose.”

“I did have a good scare though. I went to untangle a little dog from its chain and some guy came running over. Scared the bejeebies outta me.”

The disapproving expression on Coach’s face led her to believe she had said too much.

“Who was it?” he asked, setting down his pen.

“Some guy—about my age I think. I haven’t seen him in school though. He said something about a dangerous dog in the area.”

“Did he tell you his name?” Coach pressed.

“The dog?” Morgan tried to break the uncomfortable seriousness of the early morning lecture.

“The boy. Did he have a name?”

“Probably.” Frustration crept into Morgan’s voice. She made a mental note to consider her words more wisely next time.

Her eyes followed Coach as he walked over to a small bookshelf between two trays of basketballs. He pulled out a few yearbooks. Choosing one, he brought it back to his desk and flipped through the pages.

“Is this him?” he asked in a low voice. Morgan leaned forward slowly to scan the page. Because her family had moved to Cochrane halfway through the year, she was not in this yearbook. Coach tapped his index finger next to the portrait of a boy.

“How on earth did you know that?” Morgan narrowed her eyes.

Coach pulled the yearbook back and after another brief look at the photo closed it. Somehow, his brow furrowed even deeper than it had been. Morgan waited for an explanation.

“Since you’re blowing off math class, let’s head up to the gym and I’ll tell you on the way.” Coach pushed aside the messy heap of papers on his desk, found a Toronto Maple Leafs cup, and filled it with fresh coffee. With his free hand, he grabbed a bulging file folder and motioned with his head for Morgan

to follow.

As soon as they entered the hallway, Coach began. “His name is Will Owens. He used to hang around with my son when we lived on Eighteenth Avenue. He had some...well... *emotional* issues. Soon after that yearbook picture was taken, he had a small breakdown. He was sent to a psychiatric facility in North Bay for help and shortly thereafter his mom drowned in the Frederick House River. Her snowmobile had crashed through the ice.”

“That’s horrible,” Morgan whispered.

“Worse, they were unable to recover her body from the river. His father had been driving the sled and, overcome with guilt and grief, took his own life a month later. The last I heard, Will was back in his parents’ house.”

Morgan stared in stunned disbelief as her pace slowed. Reaching the top of the stairs a few steps behind Coach, Morgan found her voice, which sounded small. “How could anyone *not* have emotional issues after something like that?”

Coach remained silent as she processed the story.

“That explains *after* the accident,” she said thoughtfully. “But what kind of issues did he have before? I mean, what teenager doesn’t have issues?”

“This was different.” Coach faltered, as if deciding either how to continue the story or if he even wanted to say anything at all.

Without knowing why, Morgan pushed the subject. Maybe she was tired of the secrets surrounding the Arden Forest. Or maybe her family’s secrets, hidden behind church office doors

and beneath attic floorboards, had grown too burdensome. Whatever the cause, she realized she was in too deep now.

“Does all this have anything to do with the forest?” she asked.

Coach’s expression hardened so much she reconsidered her question.

“Why would you ask that?” he asked, brushing a few wisps of hair from his forehead.

“Does it?” she pressed.

“Listen, Morgan.” Coach paused to reposition the file folder under his arm. “Some things are best left alone.”

Morgan sighed as she opened the gymnasium door. “I hate this town! Spinning stories is all it is, one rolling into the next.”

She paused in the doorway as Coach took another gulp of coffee. His voice lowered.

“I’ll tell you this, only because I trust you, Morgan. This has to remain between the two of us.”

“You know me, Coach.”

“I do, but Will has endured a lot, and I don’t want to add to his... well, he’s had a hard go.”

“I can appreciate that.”

“I’m not sure you can,” he said as they walked across the polished hardwood.

“What do you mean?”

“He started having severe mood swings about three years ago,” Coach explained in a hushed voice. “You could be having a normal conversation one minute, then the next he would act strangely, frantically glancing this way and that, often staring

into the shadows of a room. His swings kept getting worse and after several months of it, he finally confided in a friend, and word got out. The teasing was relentless. We tried to help, but you know how kids can be.”

“What did he tell his friend?” Morgan raised her voice. “Coach. What did he tell him?”

Coach was fiddling with the keys to the equipment room. His hand trembled as he turned the lock and pushed the door open with his foot. He turned to her.

“That he could see dark creatures lurking...everywhere.”

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