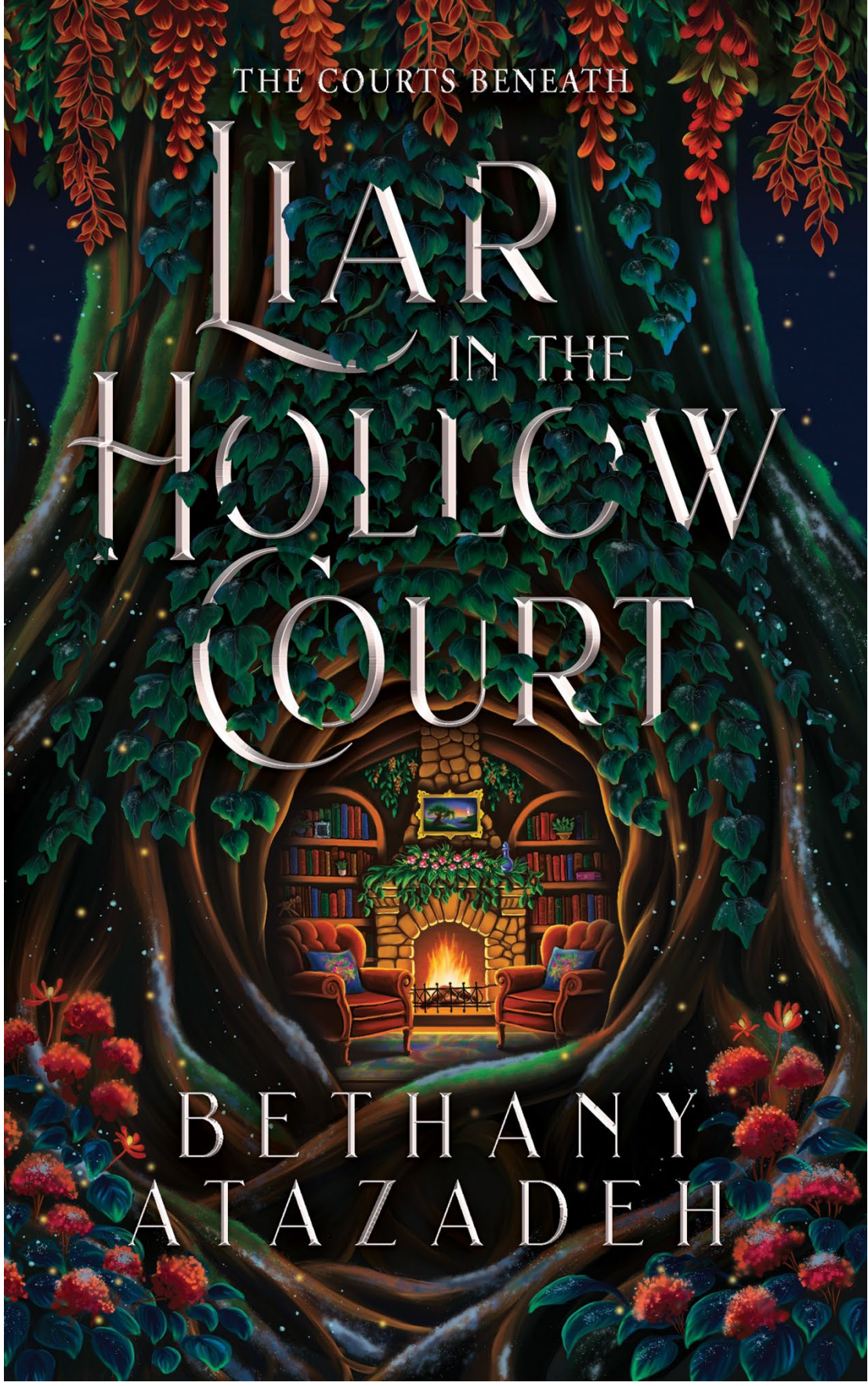


THE COURTS BENEATH

LIAR
IN THE
HOLLOW
COURT

BETHANY
ATAZADEH



LIAR IN THE HOLLOW COURT

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COURT

BETHANY ATAZADEH



Grace House Press

LIAR IN THE HOLLOW COURT

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For everyone who supported this book from outlining it on my YouTube channel in 2023 to the moment it reached your hands, this story is for

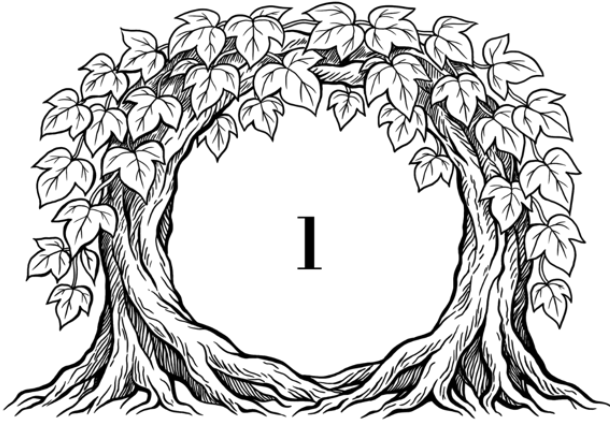




BETHANY ATAZADEH

LIAR
IN THE
HOLLOW
COURT

A COURTS BENEATH NOVEL



THE FAE WERE just a town legend until the day they took Mom.

“Movie starts in twenty minutes!” I hollered from the front door of our little house, pulling on my puffy red winter coat. “Hurry up!”

My younger sister, Marissa, appeared first. Her eyeliner was thick, as always, despite the fact that we’d be sitting in the dark for the next few hours. “It’d better be good,” she grumbled. Our town’s sole movie theater only played one movie at a time, so we didn’t have a lot of options.

Hot on her heels, our youngest sister, Olive, nearly bumped into the doorframe coming from the kitchen because she couldn’t be bothered to look up from her phone. “The website says it’s a rom-com!” she chirped, dancing an excited jig on the way to the door.

“No. They forgot to update the page again. That was last week’s movie.” I sighed as I pulled on my gloves, since we had to walk to the other side of town. Thankfully, it wasn’t far. Selmo only had 783 residents total.

Both Olive and Rissa groaned, because that meant we’d probably get an action movie, or worse, a thriller. But none of us stopped putting on

layers, because what else did we have to do?

“Mom! You coming?” I yelled when she still hadn’t shown. Usually on Saturdays when Dad got called into work, going to the movies was our tradition. We typically went to the town’s one and only gas station beforehand, bought snacks to sneak in, and then wandered the three blocks of stores on Main Street after.

“I’ve got a last-minute meeting, girls,” Mom called, poking her head out from the kitchen, without her usual smile. “Go on without me.”

Slightly odd that she was working on a Saturday, especially a few days before Christmas.

That should’ve been my first clue.

But as we headed out the door, Rissa and Olive distracted me with bickering over which kind of candy to get.

“Seriously, if it doesn’t have chocolate, it’s not worth eating,” I reminded them, stepping around a slushy pile of melting snow on the path as we cut through the park in the center of town. “And it’s my turn to buy, so I have final say.”

“Heads up!” a male voice hollered right before a snowball smacked me in the face.

It knocked me sideways.

My phone flew out of my hands as I slipped on a patch of ice, arms flailing like a cartoon character.

I hit the paved path hard.

My butt took the brunt of the fall, but my wrist also slammed into the black pavement, hard enough to bruise.

I hissed in pain.

“Brynn!” Olive grabbed my elbow to help me up.

Rissa turned to glare at the older boys fooling around on the playground. Despite being only a junior, she could be fairly intimidating. “You did that on purpose!”

They definitely had. But I didn’t want to pick a fight. I preferred not to be noticed at all, really.

Ethan, a fellow senior at Mackenzie High with floppy brown hair and an irritatingly attractive face, jumped off the merry-go-round, where he and his friends had been spinning wildly, trying to unseat one another. I’d had a crush on him freshman year, but three years later and lots of time in

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his company had cured me.

As he approached, he held his hands up at Rissa's accusation, stopping by the playground swings. "Sorry!" he called to me, jumping up to stand on one of them, swaying back and forth, but his unrepentant grin said he definitely wasn't. "My bad."

His friends followed, taking over the remaining swings or leaning against the swingset poles. They cracked more jokes that I could only half hear through the pounding in my ears.

Giggles came from the top of the playground behind them. I glanced up to find a group of senior girls from my class witnessing my humiliation as well. They'd camped out at the top of the jungle gym tower with blankets and nail polish. They snickered loud enough for me to hear. That was probably intentional.

I didn't really fit in at Mackenzie High. Or anywhere.

Half the senior class seemed to be hanging out at the park despite the cold. I couldn't blame them. There was nothing to do in this town. But now every single one of them would gossip to their friends. Everyone at school would think it was hilarious.

"Can you see the steam rising off me?" Rissa growled. I couldn't tell if she was asking me or them. "That's how pissed I am!"

"I thought she was one of the fae, coming to steal us away," Ethan told us, pressing a dramatic hand to his chest and pointing at me. The other seniors cracked up all over again.

"Uh-huh," I muttered, dusting the snow off my knees and bum, leaving wet patches behind on my jeans.

People disappeared often, and instead of realizing the obvious—that Selmo was the most boring city in the entire world and of course they would leave if they could—people liked to blame the imaginary fae.

It'd become a sort of weird small-town habit to blame them for any bad thing that happened, even something as ridiculous as this.

"You actually believe the fae are real?" Rissa mocked Ethan, standing up for me. "I guess you're as dumb as you look."

"Oh, they're definitely real," Ethan swore with mock innocence. "Although..." He looked me up and down. "You're right, they're supposed to be good-looking. I should've known better."

My face flamed.

I lifted a hand up to my plain brown hair and brown eyes, self-consciously brushing a finger through my bangs to straighten them out. Clumps of snow fell out as I did, leftover spray from the snowball. The throbbing pain in my cheek told me I probably had a huge red spot on my usually pale skin and that Ethan hadn't bothered to check if his snowball had ice.

I cleared my throat, trying to ignore him and his friends and the way half my face was on fire, and swiveled around to look at the ground. "Where's my phone?" The colorful phone case should've stood out against the snow. It was custom—an early Christmas present from Mom—with pretty bookshelves full of vintage books and flowers.

"Um . . . It's not good," Olive said in response, which didn't make sense at first. That wasn't what I'd asked at all.

I turned to find her holding it out to me.

My brand-new iPhone, the one I'd worked hundreds of shifts at the library and saved up for months to get, had a massive spiderweb of cracks filling the entire top half of the screen.

"No . . ." I whispered. Swallowing hard, I blinked quickly, trying not to cry and give Ethan something else to make fun of.

"You're really not supposed to throw those," Ethan called, shrugging as if it weren't a big deal. Maybe to him it wasn't. Not everyone in Selmo struggled to make ends meet. But for me, I'd have to work a million more part-time shifts at the library to afford to fix it.

"Yep," was all I said in response.

I wish I could say this was because I was taking the high road, but it was more that I could never think of a good comeback on the spot. Whenever I tried, I always gave him or his friends more ammunition.

"That's all you're going to say?" Rissa hissed at me, running to catch up as I tucked my injured phone into my coat pocket and continued down the path without a word.

Olive caught up too, holding up her own sparkly pink phone to show a video. "You guys should see this."

I held my breath and stopped walking. My impressive fall from a minute ago happened in slow motion on the screen. A second later, snickers behind us had me moving again, shoulders hunched.

"Seriously, he's a jerk. You have to stand up to him, Brynn," Rissa

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snapped, speed walking next to me, glaring back over her shoulder. Her dark eyeliner and dyed-black hair contributed to her overall fierce confidence, which I wished I could emulate.

“What do you want me to say?”

Olive frowned, blue eyes glued to her phone, thumb swiping over and over. “Maybe it’s better she didn’t say anything.” At first, I was glad she took my side, until she added, “They would’ve just recorded that too.”

Even she thought I was a loser who could never say the right thing.

“Let’s just go enjoy the movie.” Rissa looped her arm through mine as the path ahead split, tugging me to the left, toward the theater.

But as we reached the intersection, I slowed. “I don’t really want to go anymore.”

“Seriously, Brynn?” Olive brushed her dark blond hair out of her face as she looked up from her phone. “Don’t let them get to you.”

“Yeah,” Rissa agreed. “It’s not that big of a deal. They’ll forget about it by the time the movie is over.”

But I wouldn’t.

“I know it’s not a big deal,” I lied. “But now I need to save all my money to fix the screen.”

Olive’s nose scrunched up. “I can buy the snacks. It’s my turn next week anyway.”

“But there’s also the ticket,” I said lamely.

Rissa turned her glare on me, not believing a word. “You can’t just wallow in your room all day. Come on, Brynn.”

“I won’t, I swear.” With my throbbing face and burning eyes, it was hard to force a smile, but I did. “I also want to try to pick up a shift at the library. It’s going to take weeks to pay for this.”

“Oh. . . Yeah.” Olive winced, clutching her own phone a bit tighter.

Rissa squinted at me, not as quick to accept my excuse, but eventually, she grumbled. “Fine. See you at home.”

My smile fell once their backs turned. Maybe I actually should try to pick up a shift. That’d be a nice distraction.

I tried to call first. But with the cracked screen, dialing each number was a struggle. I got stuck on the two at the top. Worried that someone from the park might come this direction, I gave up.

Shoving my hands into my coat pockets, I stepped off the path to the

library and cut through the woods, taking a shortcut.

In an attempt to avoid a pity party, I tried to think about unimportant things. It was cold enough that we might get snow again tonight. I wished I'd worn my hat. It sucked growing up in this town where everyone knew everyone else.

They'd all decided early on who fit in and who didn't.

And I definitely didn't.

Rissa always knew what to say. Olive usually could hold her own too. I'd probably think of a good comeback tonight in bed as I tried to fall asleep.

Raising my chin higher, I stomped across the crunchy ice-covered ground harder than necessary, taking my anger out on the snow. The guys in this town sucked. They weren't worth it.

Ever since Calvin and Miriam's joint birthday party in sixth grade, they'd decided to shun me. I'd told Ethan's friend Caleb how people used to believe the platypus was fake—because it looked like a bunch of other animals all pieced together—and he'd nodded along seriously before going off to whisper to the others about “that weird Donovan girl.”

I wasn't *obsessive* like Caleb had told everyone. I just loved researching and strange facts. Now, though, years later, I still hadn't shaken that label.

“Hey,” I said wearily to Taisha as I walked through the front door of the library. She worked part-time here, like me. “I came to see if I could pick up some hours.”

She smacked her gum as her gaze drifted from the computer to my face. “You can try, but Pearl just told me to go home in fifteen, so. . .”

Gritting my teeth, I nodded. I still asked Pearl, just in case, but unfortunately, Taisha had told the truth.

With nowhere else to go, I headed home.

By the time I got to my street, my whole face was numb from the cold. It made my cheek hurt less where the snowball had hit, so that was a plus, I supposed.

Walking up the shoveled path to our little white house with dark green trim, I took the two concrete steps to the front door, hoping Mom wasn't inside.

The living room was empty. I tucked my coat and boots into the closet

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and considered dropping onto the worn couch to watch some TV, but I wasn't in the mood to sort through garbage on our seven channels.

I peeked through the doorframe that led to the kitchen. Though the light was on, no one was there either.

The bolt on the back door by the sink was unlocked, but that didn't mean much. Nobody in Selmo bothered to lock their doors.

I crossed the yellowed tile, running a hand over the backs of the kitchen chairs on my right, noting the dishes still in the sink on my left. Nothing had changed from this morning, which most likely meant Mom was out.

Stepping around the table, I passed the ancient pale blue fridge. Mom called it retro because she romanticized everything. In the little two-foot hallway, I turned away from the bathroom and Mom and Dad's bedroom, entering the other bedroom that my sisters and I shared.

Still no sign of Mom.

I let out a sigh of relief. She'd want to know why I wasn't at the movies, and the last thing I wanted right now was to have another pep talk.

Barely a week ago, right before Christmas break, one of the cheerleaders had dubbed me *Most Likely to Die Alone with a Herd of Cats*.

Upsetting, clearly, and not just for the obvious humiliating reasons. It was also so morbid. And so off base. If I had to pick, dogs always trumped cats, obviously.

Mom had made me bake chocolate chip cookies with her that day after school. Just when I'd thought she'd let me off the hook, she'd sat me down with a warm cookie and a glass of milk, like I was still a shy five-year-old, embarrassed by kids on the playground.

"Their opinions don't matter, Brynn," she'd said, eyeing me. "They only have power over you if you give it to them."

"I know," I'd said, hoping she'd let it go.

She didn't get it.

She'd always been a free spirit. Growing up with her as a mom, I used to love that she encouraged us to be weird. "Being different makes you special, my darling girls," she'd say.

But I'd learned the hard way that being weird didn't make me special. It just made me an outcast.

Now, with those thoughts weighing me down, I stepped into the

bathroom and turned on the light. After a quick glance in the mirror to inspect the light bruise forming on my cheek, I turned on the shower until my view turned foggy, then stepped under the hot stream of water and let the tears fall.

Twenty minutes later, I snuggled up in bed under my cozy purple comforter and grabbed a book off the stack on the nightstand. I settled in with a happy sigh, ready to forget the park and the stupid boys . . . all of Selmo, really. If only I could live in this book instead. A good *Pride and Prejudice* retelling always trumped reality.

When I heard Mom come through the front door, I briefly considered calling out to let her know I was home. *No*. Knowing her, she might do something crazy, like march down to the park and give the boys a piece of her mind, and that'd just make it worse. I'd much rather think about fictional problems right now.

The shower turned on a second time, and I got lost in the story. I barely heard the water shut off or Mom briefly using the hair dryer. I was so immersed in the story that I startled when the back doorknob jiggled in the otherwise silent house.

It was loud enough for me to hear even with my door closed.

The back door squeaked as it opened.

I frowned. Were Rissa and Olive already back from the movies? I must've been reading longer than I'd thought. Searching for my phone to check the time, I sighed when I remembered I'd left it in my coat pocket so I wouldn't have to look at the cracked screen.

I turned the page, unwilling to put my book down to check. I was at the best part, where the girl caught herself wanting to be around the guy she supposedly couldn't stand, making excuses to see him.

Mom's voice rose suddenly—not enough for me to make out what she was saying, but her tone had me swinging my feet over the side of the bed to stand.

What on earth?

A sharp male voice made me pause with my hand on the doorknob.

That wasn't Dad.

Another even deeper voice muttered something. It made my hackles rise. I wished suddenly that I hadn't left my phone by the door, though who knew if I'd even be able to dial 911 on that screen.

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I opened my door as silently as possible.
From my angle, all I could see was the fridge.
I scooted forward to peek around the wall.

I didn't know what I expected to find, but the two costumed people in the kitchen weren't it.

The closest one stood taller than the back door he was closing and equally as wide. Thick muscles corded as he crossed his arms, which were dark blue. Actually, all of him was blue, except where black paint streaked his face and the tips of his pointed ears.

Beside him was a little kid, maybe seven or eight. He had pointy ears too. He wore a fuzzy green cap and a vest that matched. They looked straight out of a play in those costumes. Weird.

Though I knew everyone from school, the library, the theater, the gas station, Mom's work, the grocery store, and the neighborhood, they weren't familiar. Even if I crossed paths with someone I didn't know in Selmo, I usually still recognized their face. So, what were two strangers doing in our house?

"You signed the contract," the deep voice said.

I did a double take—that voice was coming from the kid.

Squinting, I studied him closer. Did he have a bit of a beard? And was his hat made of actual moss?

Maybe the snowball earlier had given me a concussion.

I scrubbed at my eyes and looked again, but it didn't change.

"I thought I'd have a little more time," Mom said, which confused me further. She was acting like she knew them.

The short one held up a piece of paper. "You committed to your time here being temporary. That isn't negotiable."

Mom reached down to take it, but she didn't bother to read it.

"Unfulfilled contracts have consequences." Again, the deep voice was disconcerting coming from someone with rosy round cheeks like the toddler I sometimes babysat down the street. "I don't think you need me to list them out for *you*."

From where I peeked around the corner, I couldn't see Mom's expression, but her back stiffened. After a pause, she pleaded in a whisper, "Please, my girls . . . I need to tell them something. I haven't had a chance to prepare them. I can't just disappear."

The small mossy one sighed. “We’ll take care of it.”

Big Blue Muscles took a huge stride forward, taking Mom by the elbow.

Though he wasn’t strong-arming her, she obediently walked to the door without a struggle.

What?

I didn’t think before jumping out after them. “You’re not taking her anywhere! I called the police. They’re on their way—”

I squeaked and cut off abruptly as their eyes turned on me, pinning me in place.

Moss-Boy-Man didn’t have any whites around his eyes—they were deep black. He blinked once, then snapped at my mother, “The mortals aren’t allowed to know. It was part of the deal.”

“She was supposed to be at the movies.” Mom made excuses for me, as if somehow *I* was in the wrong in the situation, adding in a stronger voice, “She didn’t sign anything.” She struggled for the first time against the brute who held her arm. “You can’t touch her.”

“Oh, I won’t touch her.” The mossy one’s smile twisted. Up close, he no longer looked anything like a human child to me. “But the contract will. When you agreed no one could know, it was binding.”

A fuzzy feeling made my head buzz.

Mom hissed, sounding frustrated but not surprised.

For the first time, she spoke to me, eyes bright with unshed tears, “I’m sorry, Brynn.”

That was it.

No explanation.

They muscled her out the door in her slippers and her soft bathrobe over her clothes as a poor substitute for a coat, though she still managed to look elegant.

The room in front of me grew blurry, but not from tears so much as a spinning sensation.

Had Mom actually been home, or had I imagined everything?

Confusion gripped me.

I fought against it out of pure stubbornness.

I *knew* what I’d seen.

Getting my feet to move felt like pulling them out of drying concrete,

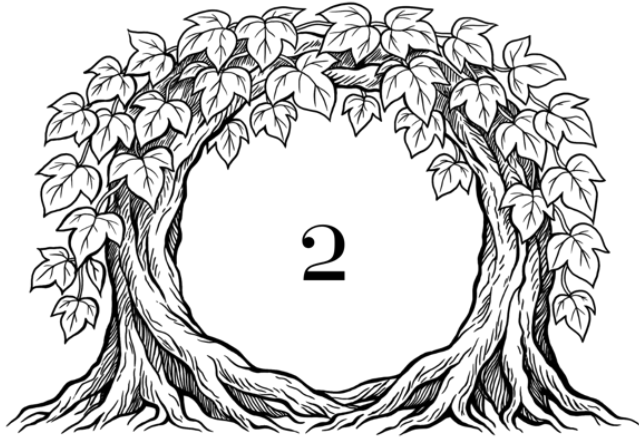
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which didn't make sense—was it my body physically reacting to my panic or something else? Either way, I dragged myself toward the back door, one struggling step at a time.

Opening it, I stepped barefoot onto the cold cement steps, which helped break through some of the fog in my head.

The trees murmured softly in the breeze, and birds warbled cheerful songs, but there wasn't a single figure to be seen in any direction.

They were gone.



I PUSHED THROUGH the dazed feelings and ran on wobbly legs to call 911, like any sane person would.

Thankfully, the cracks in those corners of the screen weren't quite as thick. It only took a couple tries before it rang.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"My mom has been—" I choked slightly on the word "taken" and instead said, "Going out in her bathrobe lately."

What the heck? I hadn't meant to say that. An icy chill passed over my skin, raising goose bumps.

"Miss . . . ?" The operator slowly asked, "Are you safe?"

She probably thought I was trying to talk in code or something. Was I? I honestly didn't know. I felt like I was losing it.

"Yes, I'm fine!" I tried again. "But my mom—" My throat closed unexpectedly on the words "was kidnapped," and instead, I said, "Didn't even finish putting her makeup on!"

What?

Was that what I'd intended to tell her? My head was full of fog and a

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strange buzzing. No, I wouldn't have called 911 for something stupid like that . . .

Think, Brynn.

Pacing across the kitchen floor as the operator spoke, I glanced at the back door, still cracked open and letting in gusts of icy winter air, and it all came back.

Mom was taken. I'm forgetting—I can't forget!

"Ma'am," the operator repeated in a harsher tone. "If this is a prank call—"

"No! No." I swallowed hard. Why couldn't I get the words out? "My mom is . . ."

Wheezing, I forgot about the call for a second as I gasped for air.

"Do you need us to send an ambulance?" the operator prompted when I didn't speak.

"No, she's—" I caught myself before I said some other stupid observation that didn't make sense. Racking my brain for a word I could actually say, I coughed two more times before I was able to yell unexpectedly, "Gone!"

I let out a breath of relief that I'd finally found a word my mouth would accept.

"Has she been missing twenty-four hours?" the dispatcher asked.

"No, she just left."

"Then I'm afraid there's nothing I can do, honey." The dispatcher's voice grew less formal and more empathetic. "Do you have parental supervision from another adult or do I need to send a unit over?"

"Oh . . . No, um, I'm a grown-up." I winced at the word choice. It sounded like something a little kid would say. "I mean, I'm eighteen." Awkwardly, I added, "Thanks, uh . . . I gotta go."

I hung up as she started to say something else.

That was a dead end.

My fingers pushed the speed dial for Dad next without thinking. He'd know what to do.

"Brynn?" His normally cheerful voice sounded distant. "How come you're calling me at work? My shift doesn't end for another fifteen minutes. What's wrong?"

Once again, I opened my mouth to say, "They took Mom!" but I

choked before saying, “I just called the cops!” instead.

“What?” His voice sounded closer now, worried.

I tried to take a deep breath and breathe through the panic. What had I said on the phone that had finally worked?

“Mom is gone!” I croaked, sucking in a deep breath. “Dad, she was—” I felt my throat close up and stopped myself.

“What do you mean?” Dad asked.

But I couldn’t explain without that increasingly familiar sensation of word vomit rising up, so in the end, I had to settle for a vague, “Something’s wrong!”

“She probably just went to the grocery store.” Dad’s tone had shifted to slightly annoyed. “Brynn, I’ve gotta get back to work. My shift isn’t over yet.”

He wasn’t taking me seriously. I couldn’t blame him.

“Dad, I saw her leave, and . . .” I swiped angrily at the tears trying to fall. Once again, my mouth refused to cooperate. “I can’t explain,” I finally said. “But she didn’t go to the grocery store. And she’s not coming back.”

After shushing someone on the other end of the line, Dad sounded louder this time, like he’d gone into another room. “What do you mean, not coming back?” He was finally paying attention.

“I mean . . .” I started to say, “She was taken by two creepy aliens or something,” but in a split second I forgot about my strange observational word vomit, and my mouth yelled something totally different. “My books are coming to life!”

Technically true, but *not* helpful right now.

Silence on the other end. “Brynn, can we talk about this when I get home?”

Letting out a guttural sound, I hit the red button to end the call and slammed the phone down on the table. Then I groaned and wanted to kick myself as I carefully picked it back up. The impact had made the initial cracks grow and spread across the phone. Only a small corner along the bottom was still unscathed.

The plastic covering on the kitchen chair creaked as I sank down into it.

What had the mossy one said before they left? *When you agreed no one could know, it was binding.*

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No one could know.

Binding.

No one else could know.

But I still did.

I refused to forget.

Though even now, there was a part of me that still tried to reason it away, to tell me I'd imagined the whole thing. It made me dig in my heels further. I would *not* forget what I'd seen. Even if, for reasons I didn't understand, I couldn't seem to physically tell anyone.

No one could know.

The words came back to me again.

Impossible.

They couldn't control what I said. This was just some weird mental block I needed to work through.

Right?

Though I tried to view the problem from all sides and possibilities, none made sense.

I was pacing the kitchen—all four steps across the yellowed vinyl floor and back—when Dad burst through the front door about twenty minutes later.

“Brynn?” he called, appearing in the kitchen doorway, still wearing his heavy winter coat. He pulled the crochet hat I'd made him off his head, revealing a large balding spot surrounded by graying hair. His glasses had fogged up from the shift in temperature, and he paused to wipe the condensation off before putting them back on.

With his vision cleared, he found me standing there and frowned. “Explain yourself. Is this some sort of joke? Did your mother put you up to this?”

Though he still *sounded* doubtful, I caught a worried twitch of his brows, like he might actually believe me.

Something in my own expression made him soften. “I don't know what happened to worry you, kiddo, but I promise Mom isn't gone.”

“You shouldn't make promises you can't keep,” I managed to say through gritted teeth, because they'd started to chatter. I wrapped my arms around myself to stop the shivering that was turning into shaking.

Dad grabbed me and pulled me into a hug, pressing my face against

his rough woolen jacket. “Shh,” he murmured, though I wasn’t actually crying. I was too numb for that. “I’m sure there’s some explanation and this is just a misunderstanding—”

A crinkling sound came from the door as someone shoved an envelope beneath it.

Dad snatched it up.

A real mailman would’ve used the front door mail slot. I whipped the back door open.

“Hey!” I yelled at the figure in a dark blue coat moving away from our house.

The guy who turned around had a mustache, a mailbag, and normal rounded ears. He gave me a confused look as he pulled one of his headphones out. It was Raines.

“What is this?” Dad asked behind me, and his shift in tone caught my attention.

“Never mind,” I snapped at Raines. Apparently, he needed some training. I shut the door in his face.

Dad had grown quiet. A typed letter printed on a weird cream parchment paper trembled in his hands.

I stepped around to read over his shoulder.

*Dear Harold, Brynn, Rissa, and Olive,
I’ve met a pilot and am moving to Fiji.
Please don’t come looking for me.
I love you,
Maeve Donovan*

That didn’t sound like Mom at all.

She always signed her notes just “Mom,” not her full name, for one thing. And that was probably the least unusual thing about the entire note.

Those creeps who took Mom must’ve sent it. Was Raines in on it? It didn’t matter. Dad would know it was fake.

Pulling out his cell phone, Dad dialed Mom’s number. I fully expected him to get her voicemail, but it didn’t even get that far before we both heard a ringing coming from the kitchen counter.

Her phone lay there, buzzing in its bright red case, next to the novelty

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salt and pepper shakers shaped like Santa and Mrs. Claus.

More evidence that the note was false. Because who in their right mind would leave their phone behind?

The paper trembled in Dad's hands.

Soft crinkling filled the room as he balled it up in his fist.

Dad's head bowed.

Did he actually believe Mom was gone?

I opened my mouth to say, "That's not real. Mom didn't write that," only to once again choke and say, "That's really high-quality paper!"

He barely noticed my odd behavior. My jaw dropped.

Sure, I like to share random facts in a normal situation, but not at a time like this. C'mon, Dad!

Staring down at the crumpled ball in his hand, he whispered, "I need a minute."

He shuffled into the short hallway toward the bedroom across from the one I shared with my sisters, closing the door behind him with a sharp click.

I clenched my fists.

He finally believed that Mom was gone, but he had the details all wrong!

I stood there, blinking at the old fridge, barely seeing the photos, grocery list, and other items hanging from Mom's exotic-bird magnets.

With half an idea forming, I grabbed the grocery list off the fridge and turned it over, searching for a pen.

I found one in the junk drawer. Dropping into a kitchen chair, I flipped the page over to write on the blank side: *Mom was kidnapped!*

I added three exclamation points.

There! It worked!

I jumped up, knocking the chair over in my hurry to rap on Dad's bedroom door.

When Dad opened it, red-eyed, I held up my note.

"We need bananas and cereal," he read out loud, then met my eyes, squinting. "Brynn . . . I'm sorry, but I can't think about groceries right now."

My lips parted.

As he closed the door in my face, I frowned and turned the paper

over. Sure enough, it was a repeat of the grocery list on the front.

I gripped the pen.

Turning to brace the paper on the wall, I wrote the same thing again below the first line, moving the pen more carefully this time. I even went over the letters twice to be sure, then stared at it for a full ten seconds after that.

I glanced at Dad's door, raising my knuckles to knock again, and then paused.

When I returned my eyes to the paper, the words had shifted again.

Bananas! Cereal! And chocolate!

My frown deepened.

I wasn't stupid enough to try a third time. But just because I understood what was happening didn't mean I actually *understood what was happening!* Because what in the name of *Ethan and his stupid face* was going on?

Rubbing my eyes, I checked the paper one final time and groaned softly, letting it fall to the floor.

It was useless.

I was the last person to believe in magic. In fact, I still didn't want to. But I had to admit those strange creatures who'd taken Mom had done *something*.

What I needed to figure out, besides why they'd said no one could know, was *how* they enforced it. Because there had to be a way around this.

They couldn't just take Mom and get away with it.

I shoved on my winter boots and puffy red coat, slamming the back door on the way out.

If I couldn't send someone after Mom, I'd find her myself.

Thankfully, no one else had gone into the backyard since the last snowfall, which left fresh tracks leading into the woods. They'd walked in single file, probably to hide their trail, since the packed-down snow made it impossible to know if the tracks were human or animal unless someone had seen them being made.

Picking up my pace, I got excited that the kidnapppers might've been stupid enough to lead me straight to them, only to slow a minute later as the tracks faded away. Deeper in the woods, the foliage grew too dense for

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much snow to reach the ground. What might've made it through had already melted. There were only pine trees in all directions. I bent down, trying to find a clue. Even a broken twig or something to signal which way they'd gone would help.

Nothing.

Despite knowing she was long gone, I yelled, "Mom! Mom, can you hear me?"

Silence.

With no one around to hear my frustration, I let out a scream.

I stood there, breathing hard, not knowing what to do, and slowly sank down onto the ground.

Eventually, birdsong resumed.

After sitting in pine needles and defeat for a while, I took out my disfigured phone and pulled up a search website. It took ages to painstakingly type a description of the creatures who'd taken Mom into the search bar.

When I finally pressed enter, I couldn't even read half of the text on the screen through the web of cracks.

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against a tree.

This day could not get any worse.

I couldn't give up yet though. Shivering, I stood and headed for the library. If Pearl hadn't closed early, I could use one of the two working computers. The third hadn't turned on in years. Kids usually used it to prop up their phones and books.

Fortunately, one was free when I arrived.

I signed up for my turn on the schedule and dropped into the squeaky rolling chair, typing lightning fast. First, I googled "funny-looking creatures," then added "moss hats" and "black eyes" and "blue skin" and so on. It wasn't until I put in "pointed ears" that I finally got a hit.

The fair folk.

Also known as fae, faeries, fey, and similar terms, depending on where they are in the world.

Found it. My shoulders tensed. If I looked away, would it disappear or turn into a web page about cooking or a school project?

I risked glancing away and back. The page didn't change. Maybe because no one here cared, much less would know how to connect my

weird searches to Mom.

Blowing out a breath, I leaned in to read more.

The fae come in many shapes and forms, the article read. But no matter their species, they're all known by their penchant for making deals, their inability to lie, and their pointed ears.

The “pointed ears” part was highlighted as the reason Google had sent me here. But the part about deals caught my eye.

What had the short one said? *The mortals aren't allowed to know. . . Part of the deal.* And later, he'd said something about. . . I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself to wade through the murky memories until the word finally came back to me: *contract.*

“No,” I whispered.

Across from me, the kid on the other computer gave me a weird look. His friend in the chair next to him rolled his eyes.

But for once, I didn't care.

It couldn't be fae. The fae weren't *real.*

They were just a Selmo legend because our national forests butted up to the town and hikers occasionally went missing. The crazy stories were something we peddled for fun and tourism in the summer. Even the most dedicated people in town didn't actually believe the nonsense they spewed.

Normally, I managed to be pretty open-minded, but this stretched reality a little too far.

Why was I resisting the idea? It almost felt like I *couldn't* consider it.

No one could know. The words came back to me again.

Was it. . . Was it possible they actually could influence my mind? That they'd put some sort of spell on me to make me forget?

I wasn't accepting the existence of fae just yet, but. . . it couldn't hurt to keep reading.

The fae are a species of magical beings known for their glittery wings, untrustworthy bargains, and inability to give a straight answer.

Commonly found in forests, garden centers, and mysteriously sticky pub bathrooms, the fae subsist entirely on honey, moonlight, and the chaos of poorly worded wishes.

Oookay.

Right.

This was probably a dead end.

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The two creatures I'd seen hadn't had wings, which brought everything else in the article into question.

I dragged the mouse up to the corner to click the little X and close the window, then stopped.

It might be total fiction, but what if something in here was true?

With nothing else to go on, I scrolled down.

Approaching the fae requires caution: Never accept gifts, never drink their wine, and under no circumstances make a deal or sign anything. This is a binding contract, enforceable by magic, and you now owe them three secrets, a sock, and your middle name.

I snorted at that bit, earning another glare from the boys at the computer across from mine.

What kind of nonsense was this?

It sounded like they'd pulled a list of random things out of a hat. A sock?

I scoffed again.

Mumbling came from the two boys as they packed up and left, but I ignored them.

It sounded suspiciously like that popular novel everyone my age had read growing up, which made me wonder if this whole site was just some sort of fan fiction.

My eyes returned to the line above it though: *And under no circumstances make a deal or sign anything. This is a binding contract, enforceable by magic.*

I mentally compared this info to what I knew:

1. Magic or no, they'd said Mom had signed a contract, and she hadn't argued. She'd just let them take her.
2. *Something* kept me from telling Dad or anyone else.

As much as my mind resisted the idea, a question forced its way to the surface: *Do fae actually exist?*

I dropped my elbows onto the desk and put my head in my hands.

Did it really matter what they were called?

Whatever they were, they'd taken Mom. And no one else knew what had really happened.

All that mattered now was finding a way to get her back.

The rest of the article was barely longer than a page. None of it seemed remotely true, and it was one of those sites where anyone could rewrite the info, so not exactly trustworthy either.

Clicking out of it, I returned to the library home page and scoured the database for books on fae.

I found only a handful.

All but one were in the fiction section.

That wasn't promising.

Still, I tracked down and checked out every single available book, shoving all four into my bag as the library closed.

Dragging my feet on the way home, I slipped inside to find Dad at the dining table with Rissa and Olive.

The crumpled note from "Mom" had been spread flat on the kitchen table between them.

From the shock on their faces and the way Olive's fingers didn't even touch her phone, it was clear they'd just read it.

They barely registered me shutting the door.

I took off my boots and shucked my coat as Rissa whispered, "But, Dad, she wouldn't really leave forever. . . Would she?"

The urge to tell them the truth sat in the back of my throat, stuck, refusing to come up.

"I don't know." Dad's voice cracked.

Rissa looked at me then, like she was hoping I might do something, say something.

My chest ached from the pressure of holding in what had actually happened against my will.

I had to say *something*!

"Where would Mom have met a pilot?" I snapped, trying to wake them up from this strange trance they were in. "We live in Selmo!"

Olive stared at nothing, shaking her head.

Rissa, blinking, picked up the note, and I thought, *Finally, someone will challenge this!* But as she touched the paper, she slumped back in her chair, and a look of despair settled on her face.

"And what about this weird paper?" I pointed to the thick parchment. "Mom doesn't even own this kind of paper. Plus she wouldn't sign her full

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name. Don't you see anything about this that isn't—" My throat tightened, cutting me off as I drew too close to saying what had really happened.

"Yeah, it's weird," Olive said with a frown.

But then Rissa wordlessly passed the note over to Olive, who took it without looking. A few seconds later, Olive slowly stopped shaking her head and didn't say anything else.

"It's more than weird." I turned to Dad, who'd taken the note from Olive next and now held it in trembling fingers. It drained the fight out of him, just like it had with my sisters.

When he held it out to me, I backed away.

I couldn't be sure of anything right now, but if that paper was contributing to their blind faith, I wanted nothing to do with it.

"I wish I knew more," Dad finally said on a sigh, putting a heavy hand on my shoulder as he stood. "It's been a long day. We can talk about it more tomorrow," he promised, before unceremoniously going to bed.

We did not, however, talk about it tomorrow.

Or the next day, or the next.

We couldn't.

And the only one who remembered *why* we couldn't was me.



BARELY A WEEK later, winter break officially ended, and we were supposed to go back to school like nothing had happened, though it felt like time had stopped.

We'd never even celebrated Christmas. We couldn't without Mom. Our artificial tree sat unlit in the corner, presents untouched, and on Christmas day itself, we'd all quietly grieved in our own ways, barely talking to one another.

Honestly, each time I tried, it made me furious. Whatever magic in that note that made them accept it at face value drove me insane. How could they believe Mom would do that to us? Why didn't they ask any questions?

Meanwhile, they acted hurt when I talked about fae or my books whenever Mom came up, because in their eyes, I was changing the subject to some new hyperfixation.

"What's wrong with you?" Rissa had yelled at me yesterday. "You aren't even upset about Mom leaving!"

They didn't get that I was devastated too, just not for the same

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reasons.

Each night, one of us would attempt to cook one of the dinners Mom had been teaching us recently, while the other two read a book or watched a movie. Dad kept picking up extra shifts and mumbling excuses for why he couldn't be home until late. Now, apparently, one week off of school was "enough" for us to get over it and move on.

We were definitely not over it.

I couldn't stand the idea of someone bringing up Mom and the "Fiji pilot." In a small town, people talked. Even if Dad only told one person, all of Selmo would've heard the gossip by now. Plus, while I'd stayed offline, blaming my broken phone, I was pretty sure Olive had blasted our personal trauma all over social media.

As we walked to school, I slowed about two blocks away and stopped, unable to fathom going through the school day right now.

"I forgot my phone," I called to Rissa and Olive, turning back before they could say anything.

Since Dad had left for work already, I didn't need to sneak into the house.

Falling onto my bed with a huff, I pressed my cheek into the pillow and eyed the books I'd borrowed from the library on my nightstand. The fiction was useless: made-up stories about a human fighting to make their way in a fae world, only to marry a prince. Cute, but not helpful. The nonfiction wasn't any better. Because what were the odds that the author had interviewed an actual fae?

Despite that, I'd come to accept that the kidnappers were fae. They had to be.

So, I'd read the books front to back, trying to figure out what might be true, or at least, commonly believed. Like how fae can't lie. Or those tricky deals that the internet and books all agreed were a sure thing, though none of them could articulate *why*.

Apparently, everyone in the world *except* my mother knew better than to make a deal with them.

In the end, though, the only facts I could really trust came from experience. If they could force Mom to abandon us, prevent me from telling anyone, and somehow stop everyone else from questioning their ridiculous story, that told me two things: They were cruel, and they were

dangerous.

With a huff, I shoved the stack of library books off the nightstand. They crashed to the floor with a thunk. Pearl would be furious if she knew how I treated the books, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Moving to prop my feet up on the wall, I stared up at my bare toes without really seeing them.

I'd discovered I could talk about Mom as long as I didn't try to tell anyone what had happened. I could also talk about the fae from my books until I was blue in the face. But I couldn't talk about my actual encounter with them unless I wanted to spout random observations instead and sound like a crazy person.

With a groan, I flung an arm over my eyes.

I stayed that way for a good chunk of the day, getting up to eat lunch and then falling back into bed to stare aimlessly out the window.

I picked up my phone multiple times out of habit, frowning at the cracked screen.

At this point, the cracks had spread so far it was nearly unusable, forcing me to do most of my research at the library, which limited me since they often closed early.

Still, I'd found dozens of articles on Selmo disappearances, and many had family claiming the fae took them. So, how was it possible that all of Selmo, myself included before this week, thought the fae were just a funny story we peddled because it was good for tourism?

The weirdest part though? When I tried to find people who'd seen the fae, I couldn't track down a single one. I'd spend hours gathering information, only to stumble into a dead end. Each of them had just. . . disappeared.

Like they'd been taken too.

I paced across my small bedroom, unwilling to go out into the living room where the Christmas tree was still up.

For every answer, I uncovered a hundred more questions. Yes, Mom had made a deal, but what exactly was it? How did they enforce it? What were the consequences that one fae had mentioned? How long did it last? Was she gone forever, or would she randomly come back in a month, or a year, or a decade?

That last thought was new, and a burning need to find out if anyone

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else had ever “come back” from a fae encounter washed over me.

While I’d managed to move the most important apps to the bottom of my phone screen and could *technically* access them, the idea of trying to read an article through the spiderweb of cracks made my head hurt.

I grabbed my coat and boots, heading for the library.

School wasn’t out yet, but it wasn’t hard to sneak by Pearl, who was on break, watching a soap on her phone. I went straight to the computers in the back.

Pulling out my notebook, I opened the page with a list of names and started searching each person who’d disappeared to see if anyone had ever been found.

Not one.

Crossing off each name on the list as the search came up empty, I frowned at the final name at the top: Raines. He’d been my first lead. Tracking him down at the post office, I’d demanded to know who gave him the letter.

He’d squinted at me, genuinely confused. “Young lady, I haven’t delivered mail to your route in months.” Pointing toward the man behind the post office counter, he’d added, “That’s his route. You could ask him, but, uh. . . You do know how letters work, right?” His voice took on a mocking tone. “There are these newfangled inventions called mailboxes that people drop letters in. If you can believe it, we never even see them—”

Face flushed, I’d snapped, “‘Kay, thanks,” and left.

He obviously didn’t remember delivering it, so he wouldn’t remember who—human or fae—had written it either.

Now, I flipped the pages in my notebook to my bullet-point list of fae details that seemed somewhat believable, where I’d made a few notes beside them:

- Fae are allergic and/or vulnerable to iron (and other metals). *Not sure? There’s metal in our kitchen and they didn’t seem to care?*
- They like to mislead humans into making ill-fated deals. *This has to be what happened to Mom.*
- Fae are often depicted as having an ability to change their

appearance and disguise themselves, creating an illusion of something else. *Seriously creepy. If this is true, we could be seeing fae all the time and not even know it.*

Some websites and books called the last one shape-shifting, while others called it illusion. Even fiction books mentioned it, calling it a glamour, as if the ability were charming and elegant.

It was mentioned frequently enough that my gut said it was probably genuine. That was terrifying.

I closed the notebook and tucked it into my backpack. It was late enough now that Pearl shouldn't question why I wasn't at school. Turning off the computer, I went back to the front desk to find her.

"Hey," I said, waiting for her to pause her soap and look up. "Can I pick up a shift today or later this week?"

Despite having seen her multiple times in the last few days, she gave me a pitying look I pretended not to see. She believed, like everyone else, that Mom had abandoned us.

It made me question my own sanity, if I'd imagined the whole thing. I worried the spell that made everyone else buy this ridiculous story might still suck me under.

"I'm sorry, Brynn," Pearl said slowly, nose scrunching as she tried to look empathetic. "I was just about to call you. . . We may actually need to cut your hours down. The budget, you know. . ."

My heart sank. "Sure," I told Pearl, turning to leave with a sigh. "I understand."

At this rate, I'd never fix my phone. In light of everything that had happened, it didn't seem nearly as important, but I still spent the whole walk home in a funk. My boots sank into the freshly fallen snow from the night before, making me sweat with the extra effort despite only walking a few blocks.

Too soon, I stood in front of our house, staring at the icicles hanging from the roof.

This late in the afternoon, Dad would be home from work, probably on the couch watching TV. It was Rissa's turn to cook tonight. She might already be in the kitchen, while Olive would be in our shared bedroom. She wasn't allowed to go out until she did her homework for the day,

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otherwise it never got done.

I couldn't handle being around them right now.

Despite the snow, it wasn't that cold today, so I headed toward the bench in the backyard at the edge of the woods. Brushing off the light dusting of snow, I dropped onto it. Warm sunlight tickled my face as I closed my eyes.

The whole setting was too cheerful.

Crossing my arms, I turned to scowl at the house.

The back door caught my eye.

It was open.



THOUGH ONLY A crack, it was enough to make me jump off the bench and race across the yard.

I hadn't reacted in time with Mom. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

Creeping up the stone steps, I peered through the one-inch gap.

"You know for a fact she's not in Fiji?" It was Dad's voice. That was his arm by the kitchen table.

"That's our belief, sir," a feminine voice replied. "We can tell you everything we know if you'll sign here."

I tried to get a peek at who Dad was talking to without opening the door.

Blue skin.

I clapped a hand over my mouth to cover my gasp. It was that hulk thing that had taken Mom! Except, maybe not... This one seemed about two feet shorter. Were there a lot of blue fae? Another fae shifted behind the first, mostly blocked from my view. How was Dad so calm?

"No problem." The paper crackled as Dad took it. "Like I told you

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when we crossed paths earlier, I had a gut feeling I had false information. I'll do anything to get her back."

He wouldn't actually sign something, would he?

Dad, don't be stupid! I wanted to yell.

But after confronting the fae last time without a plan and failing miserably, I wasn't going to repeat my mistakes.

Instead, I leaned over the thin metal railing beside the steps to peek through the window over the sink.

"Ouch," Dad hissed. "That pen is sharp."

"Did it make you bleed?" the fae said with an innocent tone that I didn't buy for a second.

"It's fine," Dad assured them. A second later, I caught a glimpse of his solemn face as he held the paper out. "Here you go, officers."

Officers?

A hand snaked out to take it, the same pasty-white color as the paper. Something that looked like ivy wrapped around the slender forearm.

Nothing about these two said "police."

The list I'd made in my notebook, still in my backpack by the bench, came to mind. *Are they doing that illusion thing? Making Dad see what they want him to see?*

That made sense, except—*why can I see through it, then?*

It must've been because they didn't know I was here. They probably needed to focus on people to make it work.

"You said you have daughters?" the female voice asked.

"Yes," Dad agreed distractedly, waving at the bedroom behind him. "Thr—"

"They'll need to sign as well," she said, cutting him off. "We need all the family signatures."

Nope, nope, nope, I chanted internally. Nothing about that statement made sense. Dad would realize they were faking it now. Even if his eyes somehow saw uniforms and normal-looking people, his ears still worked, right?

"Well, Rissa and Olive are in their room, and Bry—" He stopped abruptly. "What're you doing?"

I leaned so far over the railing to see that my feet lifted off the ground. The big blue brute had shouldered past Dad to open the bedroom door.

“We’re in a hurry,” the woman—or fae—said in a soothing tone. “Please ask them to join us.”

“Oh, okay,” Dad agreed, too easily. “Um, girls? Can you come out here please? The police need to talk to you.”

Olive came out first, eyes glued to her sparkly pink phone. She definitely hadn’t been doing her homework. Rissa shuffled out a few moments later in her blue robe, yawning, dark hair sticking out in multiple directions. “Dad,” she whined, eyeing the big blue fae staring at them but not seeming to notice anything unusual. “I was napping.”

If I weren’t so worried, I would’ve snorted. She’d completely forgotten about making dinner.

“These officers are helping search for Mom,” Dad told them.

“But. . . don’t we know where she is?” Olive said slowly, glancing at Rissa, who chimed in, “Yeah, the note said Fiji, didn’t it?”

“Well, that’s what we thought, but today these officers were explaining—”

Once again, he was cut off. “We believe she was likely taken.” The other fae moved into view as she spoke to my sisters. Her hair was as white as her skin, and she had pale blue eyes lined in black with equally black lips, but it was her translucent wings that caught my eye. They stretched out gracefully from her back and shimmered different colors in the sunlight, waving gently, as if there were a breeze inside. “We will tell you everything we know if you’ll write your signature here besides your father’s.”

Olive grabbed the pen, eager to sign. “Ah, it cut me!” It barely slowed her down. She signed the page, then handed the pen to Rissa to excitedly text someone.

I huffed silently. She hadn’t even bothered to read what she was signing.

“Ugh, why’d you give me the pen that cut you?” Rissa grumbled, pulling her finger away to reveal a small spot of blood. She, at least, tried to read the contract first as she sucked on her sore finger. But the fae cleared her throat, rushing her, and my middle sister caved to the pressure. Putting her hand on the table, she carefully signed on the same line as Dad and Olive.

“Well,” Dad said with a heavy sigh. “That just leaves Bry—”

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He stopped abruptly, eyes widening.

I couldn't tell what had stopped him, but Olive glanced up from her phone at that same moment and dropped it with a scream. Rissa joined her. Dad stepped protectively in front of them. "What's going on? How did you do that? You're not the police!"

Ah, they'd dropped their illusion.

"You are correct, Mister. . ." The pale one paused to pick up the paper and read the signature. "Donovan."

I frowned. They didn't even know Dad's name? The ones that'd taken Mom had seemed to know her. Were they not working together?

Dad paled. "I knew she didn't leave us," he whispered to himself. He raised his voice. "You took her!"

Fiiiiiiiiinally. I didn't know how he'd pieced that together, but at least he was figuring it out. The mixture of relief and stress made my chest hurt.

"Oh, no, not us personally," the female replied calmly, waving toward the blue one. "But Toothaker here heard a rumor that you were searching for our kind."

Wait, what? Dad had been looking for answers too—did that mean he'd suspected Mom's note wasn't real all this time? Did he actually know about the fae? Why hadn't he said anything?

"It's my personal policy to take the entire family when possible," the fae was saying. "No loose ends that way. But it seems someone was lazy and missed the three of you."

Four of us, I thought. But she obviously didn't know she'd missed one.

"Now, please," she said cheerfully, as if inviting them to a tea party. "Come with us."

"Absolutely not." Dad crossed his arms, shifting on his feet. "I think you should leave."

I'd never heard him fight with anyone in his life, not even Mom, but there was iron in his voice.

The female pointed to the contract. "That's binding. You don't really have a choice."

"First of all," Dad snapped, "that's not going to hold up in court. And second, you promised to bring my wife back if I signed."

The fae cackled. “I made no such promise. I only agreed to tell you everything I know, which, as it turns out, is nothing at all besides a suspicion that one of the fair folk may have led her away. There, I’ve fulfilled my end of the bargain.”

Dad pushed Rissa and Olive behind him, subtly moving them toward the archway that led from the kitchen to the living room.

Without missing a beat, the female followed them step for step as she continued, “As for your human courts, they mean nothing to me. You will fulfill your side of the agreement, or the magic will bend you to its will and enforce the contract that way. And I guarantee it will be more painful.”

A flash of emotion that looked like genuine fear flew across Dad’s face. His voice trembled slightly as he asked, “What is ‘our side’ of the agreement?”

That’s why you should have read the contract! I wanted to yell at him.

“You’re coming with us.”

A metallic taste filled my mouth, and my whole body went cold. I felt lightheaded.

This can not be happening.

“Girls.” Dad’s voice lowered to a dangerous level I’d never heard from him before. “Run!” he yelled, pushing them toward the front door, grabbing one of our pans off the counter where it’d been drying. He swung it wildly at the creatures.

Rissa only hesitated a second before she took off, dragging Olive by her collar, both of them looking over their shoulders at Dad with sickened expressions.

The blue one caught Dad’s frying pan in one big hand.

If the cheap metal bothered him, he didn’t show it.

Calmly, the other fae moved to the table where Rissa had last signed the paper. She touched it.

The paper glowed softly.

With that one touch, she ripped the fight out of them.

Dad let go of the frying pan, hands falling limply to his sides. But the worst part was the way his face went slack, like the lights had turned off.

A few seconds later, Rissa and Olive shuffled back into the kitchen with their jackets half zipped and boots thrown on, laces untied. Though tears left tracks across their cheeks, their eyes were dry. Blank. Just like

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Dad's.

"Make sure to cover our tracks," the pale one said to the blue hulk, turning to the back door. "And get more creative while you're at it. It needs to be something different than the last few times or the humans will get suspicious."

I ducked before she saw me in the window and threw myself off the steps, landing by the corner of the house and rolling around it as if I were in a clumsy spy movie. I barely made it out of sight before the door swung open.

Breathing hard, I caught the air in my lungs and refused to let it out.

If they discovered me—well, I didn't honestly know what they'd do, but I didn't want to find out.

They'd clearly come for our whole family. That explained why I'd had so much trouble tracking down family members of people who'd been taken before. Dad had never gotten a chance to tell them about me though. They didn't know I existed. Which meant I had an advantage.

Slipping my beat-up phone from my coat pocket, I tried to call 911, desperately hoping the word vomit issue wouldn't apply this time since their contract seemed different than Mom's.

The nine worked fine, but the cracks across the top left corner had spread so far that no matter how many times and ways I tapped the screen, the one wouldn't dial.

My eyes swung wildly about the yard, searching for a weapon.

Nothing.

Not even a shovel for the sidewalk, because none of us had gotten around to doing it yet.

Gritting my teeth, I pressed into the shadows along the side of the house, careful not to let them see me as they passed by.

They trailed out the back door single file, following the fae female toward the woods.

Dad, Rissa, and Olive didn't say a word.

They moved after her like obedient zombies, and a second later, the big blue one shut the back door with a quiet click and brought up the tail.

It was an exact repeat of Mom's kidnapping.

Except this time, a crazy plan formed.



I'D FOLLOW THEM.

One way or another, I'd rescue my family before they disappeared like Mom.

Luckily, I already had my phone, puffy coat, and winter boots. Best-case scenario, I'd wait until they let their guard down, then sneak my family away without the fae even knowing it. We could use one of their phones to call the police. Let them handle it. Worst-case scenario, though, I'd need some kind of weapon so I wasn't completely defenseless if I had to fight. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

According to my cell, it was 3:58 p.m.

If I hurried, I could arm myself and still catch up to them.

Kitchen knife!

Even though it stretched something in my chest like a rubber band, I turned to slip inside the house.

I snatched the biggest one out of the knife block, shoved it into my pocket, and whirled back to the door.

It fell out as I moved, clattering onto the linoleum.

LIAR IN THE HOLLOW COURT

I gritted my teeth.

The blade was too light and the handle too heavy.

If I shoved it through my coat pocket, it might stay, but it'd probably also cut a hole in my leg as I ran.

Iron! I need iron!

Yanking the back door open, I left it that way, hoping it'd mess up whatever magical alibi the blue hulk had come up with.

The garden tools were made out of iron. Hopefully.

Running to the shed, I ripped open the door and grabbed the nearest tools. A small metal gardening shovel went into one pocket, and a matching weeder went into the other. Not as sharp as a knife, but they'd be heavy enough to knock someone out.

I snatched up a hoe leaning against the wall for good measure. The long wooden handle had a solid chunk of metal at the end. Even if it wasn't made of iron, it could do some damage.

Hefting it, I turned and ran for the woods where I'd last seen them.

Every second counted.

It'd been more than a minute, despite my best efforts.

Panic gripped me. I shouldn't have let them out of my sight! What had I been thinking?

The impending sense that I'd already lost them caused a ringing in my brain.

Late-afternoon sun trickled through the tall pines.

In some spots, the fresh snowfall had already melted to the point that I lost their tracks for a few seconds.

My heart spasmed.

I'd waited too long.

I should've followed right away. I was going to be all alone for the rest of my life, always wondering where they'd gone, guilt-ridden for making the wrong decisions under duress and—*wait, tracks!*

There, maybe thirty feet ahead and a little to the right, a splash of color peeked through the trees. Neon pink. It stood out amidst the brown and white. Olive's coat.

I hadn't lost them.

Gasping for breath, I slowed to a brisk walk.

I didn't want to lose them but also didn't want to get too close.

I gripped the hoe.

What exactly *was* my plan here?

Follow or fight?

To be totally honest, I didn't think I could take them.

But if I waited, two fae could turn into twenty. Then my odds of rescuing them would decrease even further.

Swallowing hard, I figured following had a small chance of also leading to Mom.

So I decided to risk it.

We passed one landmark after another: first the little spring, currently frozen solid, then the small cave where we'd once hidden buried treasure—aka some cheap jewelry—and finally that thick tree where we'd carved our names once when we'd traveled the farthest we ever dared.

Supposedly, there were bears this deep in the woods, and the occasional hiker disappeared every so often. It hit me now that this was probably another cover for the fae.

Still the fae continued on.

The woods were quiet. Not even birdsong overhead covered the soft crunch of my boots through bits of snow and pine needles. Hopefully their own footsteps would keep them from hearing mine.

My phone said 4:27 p.m.

Keeping one eye on the flashes of pink and purple through the trees far ahead, struggling not to trip over roots and undergrowth, I tried to dial 911 again. The one still didn't work.

Ducking behind trees slowed me down, but I couldn't risk the fae seeing my ridiculously bright red coat if they looked back.

My fingers grew numb. I tucked the hoe under my arm so I could put a hand in my pocket while I kept trying to dial the one with the other. This far out, though, reception would be spotty even if it did work. Plus, if the police came, they wouldn't get here quickly, so it was looking more and more like I was on my own.

An odd darkness fell over the woods, not the typical twilight before sunset but almost like something had covered the sun altogether.

Now, despite walking in the hardened trail they'd left behind, my footsteps in the snow sounded like punches.

The farther we went, the stronger my desire to turn back grew.

LIAR IN THE HOLLOW COURT

It was almost a need.

I wanted to follow my family more than anything, but for some strange reason, part of me also really, really didn't.

The only thing that stopped me from turning back was the way the eerie sensation tickled the back of my neck just like the magic from Mom's contract.

I fought it with each step, dragging myself forward.

A minute later, my ears popped.

It felt like a bubble had burst.

The sun came out from behind the clouds, and it got brighter again. The fog over my mind lifted as well, along with the urge to turn back.

I glanced behind me. The woods appeared unchanged. The tiny steeple of the town church rose above the trees, barely tall enough to be visible. Taking a few steps in the direction I'd come, the pressure in my ears built again.

Definitely magic.

I shivered, and not from the cold.

No time to figure it out now. The sun set early in the winter. Peeking through the branches, it brushed the tips of the trees. Dusk would come soon, and it'd be fully dark in another fifteen to twenty minutes. Maybe less.

Above the tree line, in the opposite direction of town, a tall tree caught my eye.

It rose high above the rest, like an ancient redwood, except we didn't have redwoods in Selmo. How far had we walked, exactly?

When I dragged my eyes back down, I'd lost sight of them.

I broke into a run.

This far out in the woods, I felt small and helpless.

A fleeting glimpse of Rissa's purple coat had me blinking back tears.

I squeezed the sides of my phone—hard. The pressure on the buttons made it unexpectedly light up, and at the bottom of the screen, where the cracks barely reached, a bright red button said, *EMERGENCY SOS*.

I gasped and hit it.

Nothing happened.

My eyes went to the top right corner—no signal.

Not even one bar.

I groaned.

Shoving my useless phone into my coat pocket, I gave up and gripped the hoe with both hands.

Keeping an eye on their flashy coats, I slowed when they stopped moving. Was this my chance? Had they seen me coming?

At the edge of a clearing, I hid behind a tree, trying to decide what to do, but I wasn't fast enough.

One second, they stood at the base of that huge tree.

The next, they'd vanished.

[END OF EXCERPT]

Thank you for reading! Want to find out what happens next? [Click here to get your copy of LIAR IN THE HOLLOW COURT](#) and find out...

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Once upon a time, Bethany Atazadeh escaped into writing YA fantasy—and never came back. Now she’s the award-winning author of The Stolen Kingdom Series, a wife, mom of two, and professional chocolate taster (unofficial title), who shares her writing adventures and helpful tips she’s learned about publishing on YouTube. To find out when her next book arrives, sign up at bethanyatazadeh.com.

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