

A woman in a purple dress is shown from the waist up, holding a large, dark purple flower. She is looking upwards and to the right. The background is dark with some purple light effects. The text is overlaid on the image.

Crazy never looked so beautiful.

Bleeding Violet

Dia Reeves

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To my mother, Glenda, who always lets me be myself

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Chapter One

The truck driver let me off on Lamartine, on the odd side of the street. I felt odd to be standing in the town where my mother lived. For the first seven years of my life, we hadn't even lived on the same continent, and now she waited only a few houses away.

Unreal.

Why didn't you have the truck driver let you off right in front of her house? Poppa's voice echoed peevishly in my head, as if he were the one having to navigate alone in the dark.

"I have to creep up on her," I whispered, unwilling to disturb the extreme quiet of midnight, "otherwise my heart might explode."

What's her house number?

"1821," I told him, noting mailboxes of castles and pirate ships and the street numbers painted on them. I had to fish my penlight from my pack to see the numbers; streetlights were scarce, and the sky bulged with low, sooty clouds instead of helpful moonlight.

Portero sat in a part of East Texas right on the tip of the Piney Woods; wild tangles of ancient pine and oak twisted throughout the town. But here on Lamartine, the trees had been tamed, corralled behind ornamental fences and yoked with tire swings.

"It's pretty here, isn't it?"

Disturbingly pretty. said Poppa. *Where are the slaughterhouses? The oil oozing from every pore of the land? Where's the brimstone?*

"Don't be so dramatic, Poppa. She's not that bad. She can't be."

No? His grim tone unnerved me as it always did when he spoke of my mother. *Rosebushes and novelty mailboxes don't explain her attitude. I never imagined she would live in such a place. She isn't the type.*

"Maybe she's changed."

Ha!

"Then I'll make her change," I said, passing a mailbox shaped like a chicken—1817.

How had I gotten so close?

A few short feet later, I was better than close—I was there: 1821.

My mother's house huddled in the middle of a great expanse of lawn. None of the other houses nestled chummily near hers; even her garage was unattached. A lone tree decorated her lawn, a sweet gum, bare and ugly—nothing like her neighbors' gracefully spreading shade trees. Her mailbox was strictly utilitarian, and the fence that circled her property was chain-link, high and unfriendly.

Ah. said Poppa, vindicated. *That's more like it.*

I ignored him and crept through the unfriendly gate and up the porch steps. The screen

door wasn't locked—didn't even have a lock—so I let myself into the dark space and sat in the little garden chair to the left of the front door. I sat for a long time, catching my breath. I sat and I breathed. I breathed and I sat—

Stop stalling, Hanna.

My hands knotted over my stomach, over the swarm of butterflies warring within. I gazed at the dark length of the front door, consumed with what was on the other side of it. “Do you think she'll be happy to see me?” I asked Poppa. “Even a little?”

Not if you go in with that attitude. Where's your spine?

“What if she doesn't believe I'm her daughter?”

You look exactly like her. How many times have I told you? Now, stop being silly and go introduce yourself.

Poppa always knew how to press my “rational” button. “You're right. I am being silly.” I straightened my dress, hitched up my pack, marched to the front door, and raised my fist

—
NO. The force of the word rattled my brain. *Don't knock. It's after midnight. You'll wake her up, and she awakens badly.*

“How badly?” I whispered, hand to my ringing skull.

As badly as you.

Uh-oh.

Nine times out of ten, I awoke on my own, naturally, even without an alarm clock, but if I was awoken before I was ready, things could get ... interesting. And apparently, I'd gotten that trait from my mother.

Cool.

Just let yourself in. said Poppa, his advice rock solid as always. *It's practically your house anyway.*

I crouched on the porch, the wood unkind to my bare knees, and folded back the welcome mat. A stubby bronze key glinted in the glow of my penlight.

A spare key.

“Only in a small town,” I whispered, snatching it up.

I unlocked the door and slipped inside.

A red metallic floor lamp with spotlights stuck all over it stood in the center of the room. One of the spotlights beamed coldly—as though my mother had known I was coming and had left the light on for me.

Aside from the red chrysanthemums in a translucent vase above the sham fireplace, and the red throw pillow gracing the single chair near the floor lamp, the entire living room was unrelievedly blue-white.

Modern, the same style Poppa had liked—

Still likes. he said.

—and so I immediately felt at home.

My hopes began to rise again.

I slipped the spare key into the pocket of my dress as I traveled down a short hallway, my French heels clicking musically against the blond wood floor. I put my ear to each of the three doors in the hall, until a slow, deep breathing sighed into my head from behind door number three.

My mother's breath. Soothing and gentle, as if the air that puffed from her lungs was purer than other people's.

I stood with my head to the door, trying to match my breath to hers, until my ear began stinging from the pressure.

I regarded the door thoughtfully. Fingering the brass knob.

No, I told you. Poppa was adamant. *You need to entice her out of bed.*

"I know how to do that," I whispered, the idea coming to me all at once.

I stole into the kitchen and turned on the light near the swinging door. The kitchen, like the living room, was blue-white, with a single lipstick-red dining chair providing the only color aside from me in my violet dress.

I dumped my purple bag by the red chair and went exploring, and after I learned where she kept the plates, the French bread, and the artisanal cheese, I decided to make grilled-cheese sandwiches. I took no especial pains to be quiet—I *wanted* her company. I'd traveled more than one hundred miles in three different crapmobiles and an eighteen-wheeler full of beer just to bask in her presence, but it wasn't until I plated the food that she shoved through the kitchen door.

My grandma Annikki once told me that anyone who looked on the face of God would instantly fall over dead. Looking at my mother—for the first time ever—I wondered if it was because God was beautiful.

I had the same hourglass figure, the same hazel skin, the same turbulence of tight, skinny curls; but while my curls were a capricious brown, hers were shadow black.

Island-girl hair. Poppa whispered admiringly.

I averted my eyes and presented the sandwiches, like an offering. "Do you want any?"

She drifted toward me in a red sleep shirt and bare feet, seeming to bend the air around her. Her mouth was expressive, naturally rosy, and mean. Just like mine. Our lips turned down at the corners and made us look spoiled.

"You broke into my house to fix a snack," she said, testing the words, her East Texas drawl stretching each syllable like warm taffy. "I better be dreaming this up, little girl."

"It's no dream, Rosalee. I'm here. I'm your daughter."

Her hands clutched her sleep shirt, over her heart, otherwise she didn't move. Her oil black eyes raked me in a discomfiting sweep.

"My daughter's in Finland," she said, the words heavy with disbelief.

"Not anymore. Not for years. I'm here now." I reached out to touch her or hug her—any contact would have been staggering—but she stepped away from my questing hands, her mean mouth twisting as she spoke my name.

"Hanna?"

"Yes."

“God.” She seemed to recognize me then, her gaze softening a little. “You even have her eyes.”

“I know.” I marveled over the similarities between us. “Not much else, though.”

Rosalee looked away from me, tugging at her hair as if she wanted to pull it out. “How could he let you come here? Alone. In the middle of the night. Did he crack?”

“He died. Last year.”

She let her hair fall forward, hiding from me, so if any grief or regret touched her face, I didn’t see it.

After a time, Rosalee stalked past me and stood before the picture window. “If he died last year,” she said, “why come to me now? How’d you even know where to find me?”

I sat in the red chair, clashing violently in my purple dress. “I stole your postcard from Poppa’s desk when I was seven, the month before we moved to the States.” I went into my pack for the postcard. It was soft, yellowed with the years. On one side was a photo of Fountain Square, somewhere here in Portero. On the back was my old address in Helsinki and in the body of the card, the single word “NO.”

I showed it to her. “What were you saying no to?”

Rosalee glanced at the postcard but wouldn’t touch it. She settled herself against the window, her back to the lowering sky. “I don’t remember what question he asked: to marry him, to visit y’all, to love y’all. Maybe all three. No to all three.”

I put the postcard away. “When Poppa and I moved to Dallas, the first thing I did was go to the public library and look up your name in the Portero phone book.”

I’d gotten such a thrill seeing her name in stark black letters, Rosalee Price, an actual person—not a legend Poppa had made up to comfort me whenever I wondered aloud why other kids had mothers and I didn’t.

“I memorized your address and phone number. For eight years I recited them to myself before I went to sleep, like a lullaby. I didn’t bother to contact you, though. Poppa had warned me what to expect if I tried. That’s why I just showed up on your doorstep—I didn’t want to give you a chance to say no.”

She regarded me with a reptilian stillness, unmoved by my speech. “Who’ve you been staying with since he died?”

“His sister. My aunt Ulla.”

“She know you’re here?”

“Even our feet are the same.”

“What?”

I took off my purple high heels and showed her my skinny feet—the long toes and high arches. Exactly like hers.

“I asked you about your aunt,” said Rosalee, still unmoved.

I admired the sight of our naked feet, settled so closely together, golden against the inlaid sheen of the kitchen tile.

“I didn’t even know I looked like you. I figured I did. Poppa told me I did. I knew I didn’t look like anybody on Poppa’s side of the family. They’re all tall and blond and white as snow.”

foxes. And here I am, tallish and brunette and brown as sugar. Just like you. My grandmother Annikki used to say if I hadn't been born with gray eyes, no one would have known for sure that I belonged to them. And I did belong to them, but I belong to you, too. I want to know about you."

That Sally Sunshine act won't work on her. Poppa warned.

But it was working. As I spoke, Rosalee's gaze remained focused on me, her unwavering interest startling but welcome in light of her antagonism.

"Poppa told me some things. He'd tell me how beautiful you were, but in the same breath he'd curse you and say you were dead on the inside. So I've always thought of you that way—an undead Cinderella, greenish and corpse-like, but wearing a ball gown. Do you even have a ball gown? I could make one for you. I make all my own clothes. I made this dress. Isn't it sweet?" I stood so she could admire it. "I always feel like Alice when I wear it. That would make this Wonderland, wouldn't it? And you the White Rabbit—always out of reach."

"Why do you have blood on your dress?"

Her intense scrutiny made sense now. She hadn't been interested in me, but in my bloodstains. I followed her gaze to the two dark smudges near my waist.

Sally Sunshine and her bloodstained dress. said Poppa, disappointed in me. *I told you to change clothes, didn't I?*

I fell back into the red chair, the skirt of my dress flouncing about my knees, refusing to let Poppa's negativity derail me.

"What makes you think that's blood? That could be anything. That could be ketchup."

"That ain't ketchup," Rosalee said. "And this ain't Wonderland. This is Portero—I know blood when I see it."

I nibbled my food silently.

"Whose *blood* is that?"

Tell her. Poppa encouraged. *I guarantee she won't care.*

"It's Aunt Ulla's blood," I said. "I hit her on the head with a rolling pin."

I risked another glance into her face. Nothing.

Told you.

"And?" Rosalee prompted.

Did she want *details*?

"Aunt Ulla's blood spurted everywhere, onto my dress, into my eyes." I blinked hard, a remembrance. "It burned." I fingered the smudges at my waist. "I thought I'd cleaned myself up, but apparently—"

"Hanna." Despite her apathy, Rosalee addressed me with an undue amount of care, as though I were a rabid dog she didn't want to spook. "Did you kill your aunt?"

I ate the last bit of grilled cheese. I licked the grease from my fingers. "Probably."

Chapter Two

"It's no use," I told Rosalee when she unearthed a cordless phone and asked for Aunt Ulla's number. I poured myself a big tumbler of milk and resettled into the red chair. "Even if telephoning the dead were possible, I'd be talking to Poppa right now."

We are talking. Poppa said, his voice a snug little bug in my ear. *Who needs phones?*

Rosalee, meanwhile, waited with the phone in her hand, as patient as an Easter Island statue that had stood a thousand years and was ready to stand a thousand more, if that's what it took. So I recited Aunt Ulla's number and watched her dial.

If she wanted to find out the hard way, so be it.

Rosalee's finger froze in the act of dialing, and she studied me head to toe, her face taut. "This aunt of yours ... was she mean to you? Did she hurt you?"

I nodded. "She hurt my feelings."

"*Feelings?*" Rosalee finished dialing, her face relaxing back into its mask of indifference.

"Emotional abuse is just as bad as physical abuse. Worse! You can heal broken bones; you can't heal a broken mind. Not easily." But Rosalee wouldn't hear it. "She's not going to answer."

"I remember how Järvinens are," said Rosalee, disturbingly patient. "None of y'all even pick up within the first minute. 'People who hang up quickly—'"

"Never want anything important," I finished. She knew us!

I made a baby with her. She couldn't help but pick up a few things.

"You'll wanna talk to her, I guess," said Rosalee, waiting and waiting for my dead aunt to answer the phone.

"I have nothing to say to her."

"Well, she'll have plenty to say to you, that's for sure."

I shrugged and drank, smugness pouring into me along with the ice-cold milk as the wind manhandled the sweet gum on the lawn and sent its branches scraping along the house. The wind wasn't manhandling me. My brief day of homelessness had ended with me sheltered and well fed, not by Child Protective Services or a pimp, but by my own mother. How many other runaways could make that claim?

"Ulla?" Rosalee stopped pacing and leaned against the counter. "This is Rosalee Price. Yeah, *me.*"

I almost choked on my milk, my smugness evaporating into sour gas. "*She's alive?*"

Rosalee put her hand over the phone. "Sounds like it."

I slammed the glass to the table.

Rosalee slanted a dark look at me but spoke into the phone, "I *know* that. She just turned

up on my doorstep.”

I heard Aunt Ulla’s heated voice all the way from my chair. Rosalee had to hold the phone away from her ear.

When the screaming died down, Rosalee said, “*How* many stitches? Oh. Too bad. Well, what do you want me to do? Burst into flames? I *said* it was bad.”

Louder, angrier yelling.

“Don’t yell at me. Yell at your niece when you pick her up. Well, you *have* to see her again. She’s your family. Don’t put that daughter shit on me! I never even seen her before today.” Pause. “What? Diagnosed as *what*?”

Panic sent me scurrying out of the kitchen, my pack slung over my shoulder. What was I doing sitting around like the battle was won? She knew about me now. Aunt Ulla was giving me a play-by-play of all my antics over the past year, including the incident from the morning. Rosalee would be more desperate than ever to send me away. I had to move quickly and stake out a bit of earth for myself before Rosalee got off the phone.

I found a switch on the wall that lit the living room: one chair and one footstool, but no futon or foldout couch. No couches, period. Down a hallway to my left was a bathroom, a linen closet, an office the *size* of a closet, and finally Rosalee’s bedroom, which housed a twin-size bed.

I went back to the living room, worried. One chair in the kitchen, one chair in the living room, a twin bed in the bedroom. It wasn’t that Rosalee didn’t have room in her life for me. Rosalee didn’t have room for *anybody*.

Opposite the front door was a staircase. I went up expecting more of the same antisocial layout, but on opening the single door at the top of the stairs, I discovered a large, empty attic space shaped like the top half of a stop sign. The walls were white and the same blond wood from downstairs covered the floor. A large window with brass-handled casement overlooked the dark, dreaming street.

Such good bones this room had. Such potential. It even had its own bathroom with a shower, sink, and toilet so white I doubted they’d ever been used.

A guest room. Empty because Rosalee clearly didn’t want any guests. Luckily, I wasn’t a guest.

I was family.

I set my bag on the floor and unpacked: seven purple dresses, purple underclothes, my purple purse, the big wooden swan Poppa had carved for me, and my cell phone. Since the room had no closet, I placed everything on the built-in shelves along the wall opposite the door, including my pills, which took up almost all the top shelf. I put the few toiletries I packed into the medicine cabinet. And that was it.

I was home.

We’re both home. Poppa agreed, satisfied. He had been waiting to reunite with Rosalee even longer than I had.

I went downstairs and paused for a bit outside the kitchen door. When I heard nothing but Rosalee’s sporadic murmurings, I continued down the hall to the linen closet and commandeered several thick blankets and one purple bath towel.

The purple I took as an omen—a good one.

I hadn't packed any nightgowns, so after I undressed and washed up, I wrapped myself in the towel and combed out my hair, which was always a chore. Island-girl hair did not like to be combed.

"What're you doing?"

Rosalee stood in the doorway of the attic room, staring at my belongings on the shelf and at her blankets on the floor.

Staring in horror.

I untangled the comb from my hair and knelt next to the pile of blankets. "I'm nesting."

"Like hell you are! You can't stay here!"

Aunt Ulla *had* poisoned her mind against me.

"Yes, I can." I unfolded the blankets and piled them atop one another. "What you mean to say is, you don't want me here."

"That's right! I don't!"

I sang, "You can't always *get* what you want."

Rosalee stared at me as though she'd never seen anything like me before. "Are you even going to ask how your aunt's doing? Least you could do after what you did to her."

"You said she's alive." I tested the softness of the pallet and found it lacking. I added two more blankets. "What else do I need to know?"

"It took *eleven stitches* to put her head back together. She only just got home from the hospital. You're lucky she didn't call the cops. You're lucky she didn't die."

When I didn't say anything, Rosalee knelt across from me, keeping the pallet between us. Her shiny red bracelet encircled her left wrist, a bracelet with an old-fashioned silver key as long as my pinky dangling from it. I wondered what she'd do if I touched her hand, touched her anywhere, to see what it felt like.

"Why'd you hit her?" Rosalee asked.

"Didn't *she* tell you?"

"You tell me."

I stopped fiddling with the blankets. "She wanted to send me back to the psych ward so they could lock me away forever, and I told her I didn't *want* to be locked away forever, but she wouldn't listen. So I had to show her."

I illustrated just how I'd shown Aunt Ulla by miming a heavy blow to Rosalee's head. The unable to resist, I brushed my fingertips across the soft silk of Rosalee's cheek. She felt feverish. Familiar. My fingers knew her. "But I wouldn't do to you what I did to her. Forget about what she told you. You don't have to be afraid of me."

Rosalee smacked my hand away as though it were a fly, the key attached to her bracelet jingling angrily. "Even if you were Hannibal Lecter himself," she said, rising to her feet with careless grace, "around here you're nothing special. *You're* the one who should be afraid." She began to pace. "You know your aunt's packing up your stuff as we speak? Says she's either going to ship it all here or to the state hospital."

"Tell her to ship it here."

“Only thing’s getting shipped is *you*.” Her footsteps echoed in the empty room, exaggerating the distance between us. “You think I aim to be responsible for what would happen to you if you stay in this town?”

“You haven’t been responsible for me for sixteen years,” I said. “Why should it bother you now? It doesn’t bother me.”

“I’ll drive you to Dallas myself if I have to,” she muttered to herself, ignoring me.

“And then what? You come back here and live your life of solitary splendor? To hell with that. I don’t care if you don’t want me—I need a mother more than you need solitude.”

Rosalee stopped pacing and looked down at me, tight-lipped. “What I *need* is to not have to chase after a bipolar-disordered kid.”

If she thought that name-calling would put me in my place, she was sadly mistaken. “I prefer manic-depressive,” I told her, “if it’s all the same to you. It’s much more explicit, don’t you think? More honest? But really, you can call me whatever you like as long as I get to stay.”

“I don’t know anything about *normal* kids, let alone ...” Rosalee waved her hand at me and all my disordered glory.

“There’s nothing to know,” I told her. “All I have to do is take some pills and everything’s jolly.”

“Your definition of ‘jolly’ includes assault and battery? *You put your aunt in the hospital!*”

“I haven’t taken my pills in a while,” I conceded.

Rosalee stomped to the shelf and snatched up a random handful of pill bottles. “So take ‘em now.”

She took up her Easter Island stance, so I got up and got the right bottles from the shelf—lithium and Seroquel.

“What’re all these other ones for?” Rosalee asked, examining the bottles she’d picked up.

“Different things: depression, insomnia, anxiety, hyperactivity, blah, blah, blah.” I held up the lithium. “This one evens me out. And this one”—I held up the Seroquel—“makes the hallucinations go away.”

“You *hallucinate*?”

Having her undivided attention was making me giddy. “That’s why my latest shrink decided I was manic-depressive. He said it was either that or schizophrenia, and I’m way too charming and rational to be a schizophrene. His words, not mine.”

I washed down the pills with water, which I drank straight from the tap in the bathroom. When I came out, I said, “Is that better? Are you happy? Can I stay now?”

“No!”

So much for giddiness. “No it’s not better, no you’re not happy, or no I can’t stay?”

“All of the above.”

I picked up Swan from the shelf and cuddled her. She was cold and heavy and made of wood, but a girl like me had to take comfort wherever she could get it.

“Why do you want me to leave?” I said. “I’ll be eighteen in two years. All the hard work of raising me has been done. I’m old enough to see to my own needs. You don’t have to c

anything. What's the big deal?"

Rosalee had hidden her arms behind her back so I wouldn't get the idea that I could cuddle with her, too. "You wouldn't fit in here." She sounded desperate. "I keep telling you. A girl like you could never learn to adapt. And why would you want to? You think you're crazy now? There's things in this town that'd drive anybody—What the hell's so funny?"

I could barely hear her, I was laughing so hard. "Let me get this straight: You want me to leave because you don't think I can *adapt*?"

"I *know* you can't."

Was she serious?

I was biracial and bicultural—a walking billboard for adaptation. And what did she expect me to adapt to? Fishing in the crick? Baking pies from scratch? Small-town life was sure to be slow and boring, but maybe that was what I needed—Dallas sure hadn't done me any good.

"I'll make you a deal," I said. "Let me stay for one month. If I can fit in, make friends, and do that, then I get to stay. But if I fail, then I'll leave, and you'll never have to see me again."

Rosalee was quiet a long time. "One week."

"Two weeks."

More quiet. "And you'll go back to your aunt?"

I stroked Swan's long, straight neck. "I didn't say that."

"Then say it now or no deal."

She seemed to be blanking on the fact that Aunt Ulla didn't want me anymore—never had, actually—but if Rosalee wanted to listen to me lie, I didn't mind indulging her. "If I can't fit in, I'll go back to Aunt Ulla."

Rosalee sighed, a step-off-the-cliff, no-hope-for-it-now kind of sigh. "Please yourself, then. Just don't say I didn't warn you."

I couldn't believe it. Even knowing what she knew about me, she'd agreed to let me stay. "Yippee!" I waltzed Swan around the room.

Rosalee watched me dance—again as though she'd never seen anything like me—and went to the door, shaking her head.

"Good night, Momma." The name immediately felt weird in my mouth, in my ears.

It must have sounded weird to Rosalee as well. "Don't call me that," she said. "I don't even know you."

I hadn't thought black eyes could look icy, but Rosalee's did. I stopped dancing and squeezed Swan against my chest. "If that's the way you want it."

"It is." She left, and everything felt empty: the room, me.

She hates you. Poppa said. I told you she would. I told you she was unfeeling.

I set Swan on the shelf and curtsied to her, thanking her for the dance. "She can feel plenty. She just doesn't want to. I'll make her feel. I'll make her want to keep me."

In a week?

"Two weeks." I switched off the overhead light. "That's plenty of time. I'm a likable person, aren't I? And she *is* my mother. Her instincts will kick in."

After sixteen years? I think her instincts died a long time ago.

“Don’t be so gloomy, Poppa.” I scooped the pallet closer to the shelves so that Swan could better watch over me. I ditched the towel and lay naked on the pallet, pulling the chilly to blanket to my chin. “I can win her over. I know it.”

What if you can’t?

I yawned. “If I can’t, then I’ll paint the walls of her house with my blood.” A roll of thunder crashed outside and echoed beneath me along the floorboards.

“No matter what happens, one way or another, I’m here to stay.”

Chapter Three

Thunder awakened me.

The heavy rain drilling against the window made dark wriggling shadows against the oblique ceiling. The rain echoed in the shadowy attic space and made me feel small and fragile, like a lace glove left behind on moving day—mateless and abandoned.

I shivered on the pile of blankets, waiting for Poppa to whisper to me so I'd know I wasn't alone, but I'd silenced him when I'd taken my pills. Insanity or sanity. Poppa or loneliness. Wretched decisions I had to make every day.

Fucking manic depression.

I shuffled into the bathroom, and by the time I'd showered the hitchhiking grit from yesterday down the drain, I'd made my choice for the day.

Sanity.

I took my pills and pulled on the lavender eyelet dress I'd made right before Poppa had died, well before I'd gone into my all-purple phase. Like every dress I made, it had prince-seams that highlighted my curves, a high bodice, and a knee-length skirt. And because frustrating boys was one of my great passions, this particular dress had a row of tiny, jeweled buttons down the front that had stymied many ham-handed Romeos.

I stood at my window, watching the rain try to drown the world. Rosalee and I could still get to know each other, but we would have to spend the day inside. Surely I could convince her not to go to work today; why would she even want to? She could tell her boss to give her retroactive maternity leave or something.

Surely she wouldn't leave me alone and spend the whole day wondering whether I was destroying her house.

I went downstairs to the kitchen, my rumbling stomach as loud as an engine in the silent house ... and saw Rosalee. She was hunched over the dining table, scribbling onto a yellow sheet of paper. She raised her head when I came in.

Even in the dull rainlight, even in her tattered red sleep shirt, she was still too beautiful to look at, and so close I could smell the lingering scent of Dove on her skin. Weird knowing such an intimate thing as what soap she used after years of cluelessness.

A glass bowl of mixed fruit, mostly apples and bananas, sat on the counter separating the cooking and dining areas. A whiff of cleanser, something lemony, hung in the air.

As I grabbed a banana, she said, "Go get your pack."

"Why?"

She went back to her scribbling. "Just do it."

I got my empty pack, reluctantly, and went back to the kitchen.

The key on Rosalee's bracelet jingled as she held out the sheet of notebook paper to me.
"Take this."

I took it.

Rosalee had written directions to a school called Portero High; she'd even drawn a map. She looked at her in disbelief. "You want me to go to *school*?"

"You only got two weeks to fit in. School's the easiest place to start. Gimme that pack."

I gave it to her as a mild case of first-day-of-school jitters struck me, an absurd sensation this late in September. The rain had seemed so cozy a moment before, but now that I had to go out in it ...

I eyed the map dubiously, then watched the perilous sweep of water—framed so beautifully in the picture window—rush along the street, and I couldn't help but imagine myself being swept along with it ... into a drainage ditch.

"You don't expect me to walk, do you? In this storm? I could catch pneumonia."

"I don't mean for you to walk. There's a bike in the garage."

"A bike?"

I went to the back door and peered through the glass panel. Torrents of white water streamed down the driveway from the garage to the street. Waiting to capsize me and Rosalee's alleged bike.

This had to be a test. God tested his followers, didn't he? Cruel tests of faith and devotion. Rosalee wanted to see how far she could push me, see if she could make me snap before I won the bet.

"Here."

Rosalee stood behind me, holding out a shiny black raincoat and a pair of galoshes.

"I don't wear black."

"You're the one don't wanna catch pneumonia." She shoved the rain gear at me. "Take 'em."

I took 'em.

"You need lunch money too." She tucked a five-dollar bill into my dress strap—like I was a stripper!—and shoved notebooks, pencils, and pens into my pack. When she was done, she zipped up the pack and turned to me. "Put on the raincoat!"

I did, feeling drunk on the attention.

"Galoshes too."

Even when a mother's child bashed someone on the head, that mother still wanted her child to be protected against the rain. This was what I'd been missing all my life, that motherly concern.

She gave me the pack, then shooed me out the back door. I stepped out into an almost cool breeze. Thunderclouds had hijacked the whole of the sky; heavy rain obscured the morning air like fog.

"Do you want me to be home by a certain time?" I asked as Rosalee peeked her head out the door to watch the sky.

"I don't care if you ever come back," she said, her voice almost lost beneath the thunder.

rain. "I hope to God you don't."

Rosalee slammed the door and locked me out in the storm.

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