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WORLDS APART.

Unspoken

THE LYNBURN LEGACY

SARAH REES BRENNAN

THE DEMON'S LEXICON

THE DEMON'S COVENANT

THE DEMON'S SURRENDER



By Sarah Rees Brennan and Justine Larbalestier

TEAM HUMAN



Sarah Rees Brennan's short stories included in:

ENTHRALLED: PARANORMAL DIVERSIONS

THE GIRL WHO WAS ON FIRE

Unspoken

THE LYNBURN LEGACY

BOOK I

SARAH REES BRENNAN

RANDOM HOUSE  NEW YORK

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Summary: "Kami Glass is in love with someone she's never met—a boy she's talked to in her head since she was born. That boy has made her an outsider in the sleepy English town of Sorry-in-the-Vale, but she has learned ways to turn that to her advantage. Her life seems to be in order, until disturbing events begin to occur. There has been screaming in the woods and the manor overlooking the town has lit up for the first time in 10 years. The Lynburn family, who ruled the town a generation ago and who all left without warning, have returned. Now Kami can see that the town she has known and loved all her life is hiding a multitude of secrets—and a murderer. The key to it all just might be the boy in her head. The boy she thought was imaginary is real, and definitely and deliciously dangerous." —Provided by the publisher.

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For Natasha

IOU approximately four million dollars for early-morning wake-up calls with cups of tea, listening to involved plot summaries, museum stories about daggers and teeth, company on a trip to Egypt, and company on a thousand trips to the cinema. For being excited about this book, and your eternal devotion to lady sleuths in general, Miss Marple and Veronica Mars in specific.

What do I owe you for being so awesome, and living with me longer than anyone aside from my family (who, poor soul, had no choice in the matter)? Well, nothing. That is priceless.

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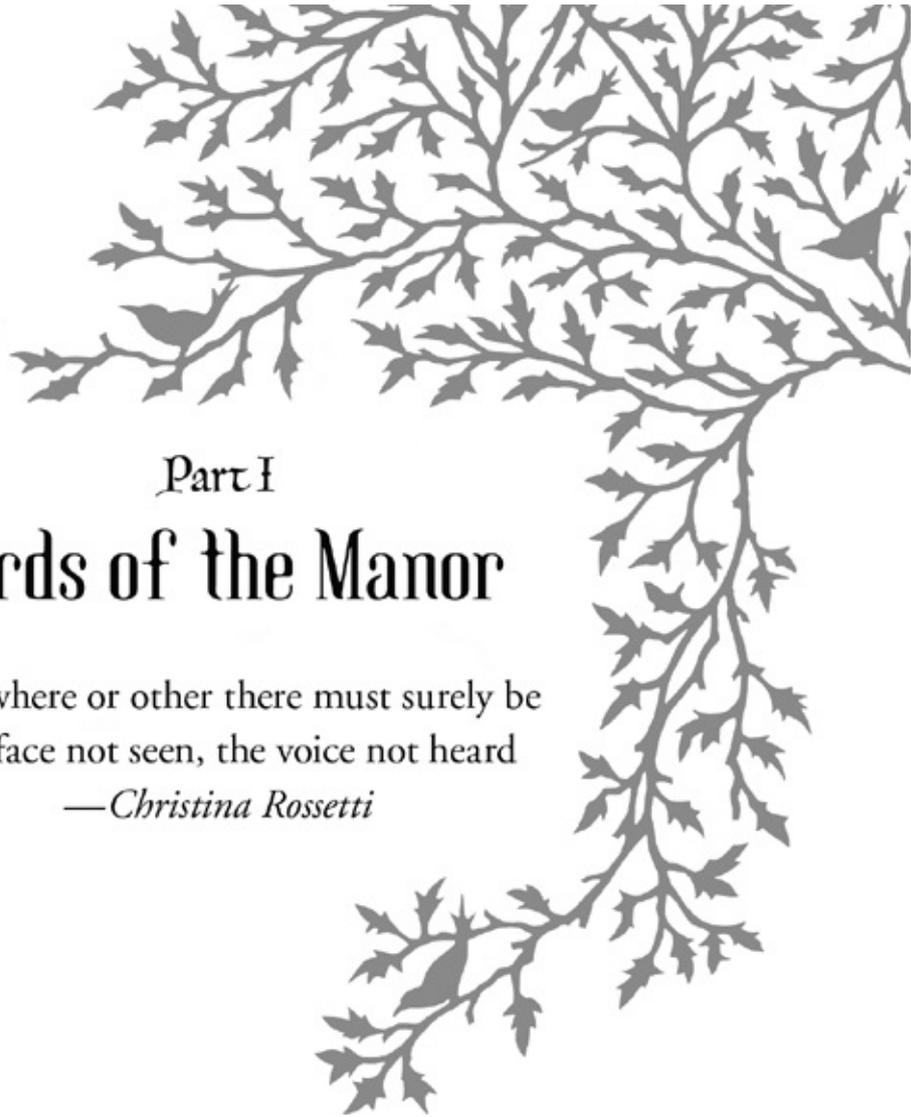
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Part I

Lords of the Manor

Somewhere or other there must surely be
The face not seen, the voice not heard

—*Christina Rossetti*

Chapter One

The First Story

THE RETURN OF THE LYNBURNS

by Kami Glass

Every town in England has a story. One day I am going to find out Sorry-in-the-Vale's.

The closest this reporter has come to getting our town's scoop is when I asked Mr. Roger Stearn (age seventy-six but young at heart) to tell me a secret about our town. He confidently said that he believed the secret to Sorry-in-the-Vale's high yield of wool was in the sheep feed. I think I may have betrayed some slight disappointment, because he stared at me for a while and then said, "Respect the sheep, young lady," and ended the interview. Which leaves us with a town in the Cotswolds that has a lot of wool and no secrets. Which is plainly ridiculous. Sorry-in-the-Vale's records date back to the 1400s. Six hundred years do not go by without someone doing something nefarious.

The Lynburns are the town's founding family, and we all know what the lords of the manor get up to. Ravishing the peasants, burning their humble cottages. Fox hunting. The list goes on and on.

The Lynburns have "dark secret" written all over them. There is even a skipping song about them. Skipping songs may not seem dark to you, but consider "Ring Around the Rosy," a happy children's rhyme about the plague. In Sorry-in-the-Vale they sing this song:

*Forest deep, silent bells
There's a secret no one tells
Valley quiet, water still
Lynburns watching on the hill
Apples red, corn gold
Almost everyone grows old.*

The song even talks about secrets.

During this dauntless reporter's lifetime, however, the only Lynburn in Aurimere House was Marigold Lynburn (now deceased). Far be it from me to speak ill of the dead, but it cannot be denied that Mrs. Lynburn was a ferociously private person. To the point of ferociously throwing her walker at certain innocently curious children.

Today, after seventeen years in America, Marigold Lynburn's daughters have returned to Sorry-in-the-Vale. If the family does have any dark secrets, dear readers, you can have faith that I will uncover them.

Kami stopped typing and glared at the screen. She wasn't sure about the tone of her article. serious journalist should probably not make so many jokes, but whenever Kami sat down at the computer it was as if the jokes were already there, hiding behind the keys, waiting to spring out at her.

Kami knew there was a story in the Lynburns. They had gone away before she was born, but all her life she had heard people wishing that someone sick would recover, or a storm would bypass the valley, and in the same breath say, "but the Lynburns are gone." She had spent the summer since she heard of their return asking questions all over town, and had people instantly hush her as if the Lynburns might be listening. Kami's own mother cut her off every time, her voice equal parts severe and scared about her dangerously disrespectful daughter.

Kami looked back at the screen. She couldn't think of a title besides "The Lynburn Return." She blamed the Lynburns, because their surname rhymed with "return." She also blamed the kids who were messing around in the woods beyond her garden: tonight they were making a sound that was almost howling. It went on and on, a noise that struck her ears hard and set her temples throbbing.

Kami jumped up from her chair and ran out of her bedroom. She thumped down the narrow creaking stairs and out the back door into the silver-touched square that was her garden at night. The dark curve of the woods held the glittering lights of Sorry-in-the-Valley like a handful of stars in a shadowy palm. On the other end of the woods, high above the town, was Aurimere House, its bell tower a skeletal finger pointing at the sky. Aurimere House, which the Lynburns had built when they founded the town, and where they had lived for generations, the masters of all they surveyed. There was no place in Sorry-in-the-Valley where you could not see the mansion, its windows like watching eyes. Kami always found herself watching it in return.

For the first time Kami could remember, every window was lit from within, shining gold.

The Lynburns were home at last.

The howling reached a pitch that raked up Kami's spine and sent her running to the garden gate, where she stood with her eyes full of darkness. Then the sound died abruptly. Suddenly there was nothing but the night wind, shushing Kami as if she'd had a bad dream and running cold fingers through her hair. Kami reached out past the boundaries of her own mind and called for comfort.

What's wrong? the voice in Kami's head asked at once, his concern wrapping around her. She felt warmer instantly, despite the wind.

Nothing's wrong, Kami answered.

She felt Jared's presence slip away from her as she stood in the moonlit garden for another moment, listening to the silence of the woods. Then she went back inside to finish her article. She still hadn't told Angela about the paper.



Kami had been hearing a voice in her head all her life. When she was eight, people had thought it was cute that she had an imaginary friend. It was very different now that she was seventeen. Kami was accustomed to people thinking she was crazy.

“You’re crazy,” said her best friend, Angela, as the bell rang to signal five minutes before the first class on the first day back at school.

Angela had moved from London to Sorry-in-the-Vale when Kami was twelve. The timing had been perfect because Kami’s first best friend, Nicola Prendergast, had just dropped her for being too weird.

“They said that about all the great visionaries,” Kami informed her, hurrying down the hallway to match Angela’s long-legged stride.

“You know who else they said it about?” Angela demanded. “All the actual crazy people.” She gave Kami a look that said she wished Kami would stop bothering her.

Normally this would not have worried Kami. Angela always looked at people with that expression, and Kami could usually talk her into doing what Kami wanted anyway. But Kami had never wanted something as much as this.

“Last summer, when we volunteered as assistants at cricket camp—”

“When *you* volunteered us without asking me, yes,” said Angela.

Kami ignored this trifle. “Remember how I encouraged the kids to keep diaries, which turned into an exposé about the seamy underbelly of cricket camp?”

“I have found it impossible to forget,” Angela told her.

“And remember last year when I started the petition to get Miss Mackenzie fired, and she chased me around the pitch waving a hockey stick, and we had to speak before the school board?”

“Again, unforgettable,” said Angela.

“My point is, here we have an opportunity to champion truth that doesn’t involve sports,” Kami persisted. “It’s a step toward me becoming the greatest journalist of our time. You have to help, Angela, because Ms. Dollard has this notion that I’m a troublemaker and she’s only—*finally*—letting me set up a school paper because I told her you were on board.”

Angela rounded on Kami, her dark eyes blazing. “You did *what*?”

“I knew that once I explained the situation, you would understand,” Kami said, holding her ground despite Angela’s looming over her, alarming and overly tall. She continued swiftly in case Angela was considering beating her to death with her schoolbag. “I was hoping you would agree out of real enthusiasm for the project and because you are a true friend, but you insist on being without vision—”

“I do,” Angela said firmly. “Oh, I do.”

“There is one other factor,” Kami said. “The office we’re being given to run the school paper has a sofa in it.” She paused for effect. “And we’re allowed to go to the office during free periods to tirelessly pursue truth and justice. Or, say—”

“*Nap*,” Angela finished, in the reverent tones of a knight who has finally spotted the Holy Grail. She stood lost in thought, her fingers tapping against the strap of her schoolbag. Then her perfect mouth curved ever so slightly. “I guess I do have a few ideas for articles.”

They walked into class in full accord, Kami beaming with victory. “I have more than a few. I’ve already started an article.”

Angela slipped into a chair one over from the window, and Kami took the place beside her. “About what?”

Kami leaned across the desk, keeping her voice low. “Yesterday I was at the sweets shop talking to Mrs. Thompson about the Lynburns coming back.” She glanced out the window

the classroom. Fields stretched to the south in a green blanket. To the north rose a hill steep enough to look like a cliff. On the edge of that rise stood Aurimere House, and below it were the woods, like a regiment of dark soldiers with a bright general.

She looked back at her friend in time to see Angela's raised eyebrows. "So you were basically interrogating poor Mrs. Thompson, who is probably a hundred and twenty years old?"

"I was acquiring information," Kami said calmly. "Also licorice."

"You are shameless," Angela said. "I hope you feel good about your life choices."

Kami looked out at the valley again. There were stories to be found here, and she was going to discover them all.

"You know," she said, "I really do."

They were interrupted by the entrance of Miss Mackenzie, which forced both of them—Kami smiling and Angela shaking her head, to turn to their books.



It wasn't until the end of the day that Kami and Angela had time to make their way up the stairs to the second floor and check out their newspaper office. The Sorry-in-the-Vale school building—the town was so small that there was no need to have more than one—was over a hundred years old. It accommodated all Vale kids from age five to eighteen, and there were still quite a few rooms in the school that weren't used. Kami couldn't wait to use this one.

"So tell me about the articles *you* have in mind," Kami said to Angela on the first step.

"I was thinking I could write tips for people who are too busy to exercise but want to stay in shape," Angela said. "People like me."

Kami nodded. "You're always busy trying to find a napping spot."

"Exactly," Angela told her. "I can't be distracted from my search by having to do Pilates or whatever. Here's one of my tips: always take steps two at a time."

She demonstrated.

"I thought you did that just to mock my stumpy legs."

"That too," Angela conceded. "But the main thing is that taking steps two at a time is like StairMaster workout. The result? Buns of steel." Angela casually slapped the buns she referred to, proving her point.

Angela had a perfect body. She had a perfect face too, but at least she put some effort into that, her makeup always flawless and her abilities with eyeliner unnatural. Kami focused more on clothes than on makeup. She was always forgetting to put on lip gloss as she rushed out the door, but she felt the likelihood of forgetting her clothes was not high.

Kami slapped her own ass experimentally and made a face. "Buns of corrugated tin," she said. "On a good day."

What's going on with you? Jared asked out of the blue. Kami felt his mind turn toward her away from his own life. It was like being in the middle of a conversation in a crowded room and having someone in an entirely different conversation among an entirely different group of people catch your eye. Multiplied by a thousand because, instead of eyes meeting, it was minds.

Beginning a new era of journalistic history, Kami told him, sending her cheer through the connection. *Also, to be perfectly honest, Angela and I were slapping our asses.*

As one does, said Jared.

And you?

There was a feeling like a shadow touching her, letting slip that Jared was unhappy, but he answered: *Just reading. Beginning a new era of being a useless layabout.* He absorbed her cheerfulness gratefully, and she could tell he was pleased for her.

Kami grinned up at Angela, who gave her a forbearing look. Kami realized that she had been standing and staring blankly for a little too long.

“Coming?” Angela asked with a small smile. She knew about Jared, though Kami tried not to talk about him too much. That was what had lost her Nicola Prendergast.

“Have I mentioned, thanks for doing this?” Kami asked.

Angela slung an arm around Kami’s shoulders as they went up the stairs. “Your soul is like the souls of a thousand monkeys on crack, all smushed together,” she told Kami. “But enough about you. Show me to my napping sofa.”

They reached the blue door at the top of the stairs. It had a little window of clouded glass and wire mesh. Kami pulled out the chunky silver key that Ms. Dollard had somewhat reluctantly entrusted her with, turned it in the lock, and opened the door with a flourish. “Tadah!”

Kami and Angela peered into their new headquarters. The room was small. It had a wire gray carpet, whitewashed brick walls, a big cupboard, several desks, and Angela’s much desired sofa. It was also filled, floor to ceiling, with empty cardboard boxes.

“I hate you so much right now,” said Angela.

Kami and Angela spent twenty minutes clearing out their new office together. Then Angela gave up, gave a low moan, and fell onto the sofa, which was still covered in boxes. She lay there, her arm thrown over her eyes.

Kami kept cleaning up, whistling to herself as she folded and stacked piles of cardboard and dust fell around her like soft gray rain. Her glittery blue scarf, pencil skirt, and vintage Liberty blouse were not, she had to admit, the ideal clothes for manual labor. But she wanted to make a statement on her first day as a journalistic pioneer.

Kami was wrestling with a box that was determined never to fold, when there came a tap on the open door. She looked up from her giant origami creation, into the eyes of the best looking guy she had ever seen.

There were two things about him that were more important than good looks. One was that he had a serious, substantial camera hanging from around his neck. The other was that Kami had never seen him before in her life, which meant he must be a Lynburn.

Chapter Two

The Prince of Aurimere

Kami'd always retold her fairy tales to make the fair maidens braver and more self-sufficient but she had never had any real objection to the handsome prince. And here one was, wearing a white T-shirt and jeans instead of armor, with golden hair that curled at the ends and eyes the ridiculous blue of high-summer skies, drenched in sunlight and melted clouds.

Those blue eyes were, of course, fixed on Angela. "Uh, hi," said the Lynburn, wearing the same expression all boys did when they met Angela, as if they had been smacked in the face and were enjoying it. "Are you Kami Glass?"

Angela lifted the arm over her eyes a fraction. "Go away," she commanded. "I only date college guys."

"You don't know any college guys," Kami pointed out.

Angela's gaze went to Kami, and she smiled. "Which leaves me with more time for napping." She closed her eyes again, leaving Kami and the Lynburn looking at each other.

Kami had to hand it to the guy. Most males were in retreat or infuriated when faced with Angela's inexplicable rudeness. This guy's expression had not changed, apart from a slight widening of his eyes. She admired his self-control.

"I saw a flyer on the bulletin board about the school newspaper needing a photographer and it said to come here after school." He had a lovely, drawling American accent: more proof he was a Lynburn.

His voice also sounded unruffled. Was he really offering to be a photographer for the paper, despite the fact that he'd just been insulted and their office was awash in cardboard?

Angela sat bolt upright and glared at Kami. "You put up a flyer? Before you even talked me into this?"

"Angela, Angela," Kami said. "We can dwell on the past or we can move into the future!"

"I can hide your body in these piles of boxes. Nobody will ever find it." Angela made a gesture of dismissal at the new kid. "Do you mind?"

He looked at Kami, who gave him a winning smile. This was how it went after Angela dismissed a guy: *then* he would take a look at Kami. Which didn't always work out for Kami. Angela was the one with the exotic beauty, which was unfair considering that Kami was the one with the Japanese grandmother. Kami's hair was black but shot with brown, not the raven's-wing black of Angela's hair. Kami's features were subtly different from her schoolmates', and her skin was pale gold, but she was betrayed by a nose dusted with freckles. Exotic beauties did not sport freckles.

The Lynburn smiled back at her. Kami liked his smile almost as much as she liked his camera.

"Seriously," said Angela. "Go away now."

There was only so much rudeness anyone could be expected to take. Kami seized Angela's arm and pulled her from the sofa. "Would you excuse us for just one moment?" she said to the Lynburn. "My colleague and I need to confer in our office." With that, she hauled Angela

into the empty stationery cupboard and shut the door behind them.

In the darkness, Angela asked, "Why am I in a cupboard?"

"There are only two important things for us to discuss right now," Kami said. "The first that to be a success, our newspaper requires a photographer."

"What's the other thing?"

"He'd be excellent decoration for our headquarters," Kami said. "You have to admit, he's very good-looking, and I need a photographer, so can I keep him, please, oh, please?"

Angela sighed. In the cupboard, the sigh was like a gust of wind. "Kami, you know I have guys being around all the time. They won't stop staring and bothering me and giving me those sad, sad eyes like a puppy dog until I just want to kick them. Like a puppy dog."

"So you have some puppy issues," Kami observed.

The cupboard door swung suddenly open.

The new boy stood framed by the bright light of the office. "Sorry to interrupt," he said. "But I can hear everything you're saying."

"Ah," said Kami.

"Don't worry," he said. "I can take a hint. Especially if the hint is along the lines of—" He did a good imitation of Angela's dismissive gesture. "Go away now."

Angela looked fondly reminiscent. "We've had some good times together, haven't we? I always remember them. After you go away."

The boy's brow wrinkled slightly. "Also, you might not have noticed, but this is a cupboard."

"I admit our private office is of modest dimensions," Kami told him. "But that's the way we like it. Just because we're the editors doesn't mean we need special privileges. We're not snobs." She climbed out of the cupboard, and the new guy offered his hand. She didn't need it, but she took it all the same.

He smiled again. "My name's Ash Lynburn."

Kami beamed at him. "I thought so. We don't get many new people in town. Tell me a bit about yourself, and let me get a pen so I can write it down. Did I mention that you're hired?"

"Kami's always like this," said Angela.

Even though Kami knew Angela was saying it with love, she was saying it in front of someone Kami wanted to impress. She hesitated, then reached out to Jared in her mind, and her uncertainty washed away in the wave of reassurance she got back. "True," Kami said cheerfully. "I am a born reporter. But you know, the old family moving back into the manor house—everyone who comes into my mother's place is talking about it." She looked at Ash. "My mum's place is Claire's," she said. "Bakery in the morning, restaurant in the evening. Best food in Sorry-in-the-Vale. We'll take you there when we have weekend staff meetings."

"I'll look forward to it," Ash said. He still had hold of her hand.

Kami shook hands firmly, then pulled her hand away and walked over to her desk: she needed it to take notes. "I'm Kami Glass," she said once she had a pen and a notepad. She waved at Angela. "This one-woman welcoming committee is Angela Montgomery. Congratulations! You're part of the team. Your first assignment is to go out to the stairs and take some pictures of Angela standing on them slapping her ass."

Angela said, "I'm going back to the cupboard."

They all ended up at the stairs, Kami coming in order to drag Angela and staying in order

to interview Ash. Ash ran from the top to the bottom of the stairs a few times, trying to get the best shot of Angela (though there was no way to get a bad shot of Angela, all swishing hair, snapping eyes, and perennial annoyance), and answered all Kami's questions pleasantly and easily: Where had the Lynburns been? Oh, all around. Where had he liked living most? Oh, here.

"So, now that you're back, do you think you'll be staying?" Kami looked down at Ash, poised over her notepad.

Ash lowered his camera and looked up at her. Light flooded down the corridor, lending her hair a sheen of hazy brightness. "Sorry-in-the-Vale is where we belong," he answered, and for the first time he did not sound calm and lighthearted. He sounded as if he was making a promise, one he intended to keep. "We're going to stay here forever."



Kami woke that night from a dream of being someone else, to the sound of screaming in the woods. She reached for Jared.

He answered, awake too, comforting and curious at once. *Are we going to go see what's happening?*

As soon as the silent voice in her mind asked that, the sound stopped.

Kami told herself to get a grip: she was only allowed to be a certain degree of crazy. There were always kids messing around in the woods. These noises were perfectly normal.

Through her connection to Jared she could feel again the chill she'd felt earlier today, the knowledge that he was unhappy. *I'll be intrepid another time*, she told him. *I was just dreaming about you. How are you doing?*

Kami had to reach for him across the boundaries they had built up so they could both have their own lives and not look entirely insane. She only got bits and pieces of what Jared was thinking, especially since the summer before last. She thought of it as their decision: Kami had found it was easier to act like he was real, and they'd both made the rules.

She leaned against the boundaries between them now, venturing into his space a little, and tried to make out his feelings. His weariness dragged at her senses, like holding hands with someone who was walking slowly.

Does it matter? he asked.

Of course it matters, Kami said, and pushed at him, bullying a little. *Tell me.*

My mother asked me if I still talked to you, said Jared. *I said yes.*

Neither of them really talked about the other: hearing a voice in your head made you a weirdly enough without discussing the voices. Back when they were kids, when Kami had been young enough to send an English penny to an address she'd made up somewhere in America, their mothers had both been worried. Kami's mother had been really scared, obviously convinced that Kami might actually be going crazy. Kami had been the only child for years before her brothers arrived. She'd been brought up by young, frantic parents and her grandmother, knowing they all had to work together to make their family work at all. She was supposed to be self-sufficient. She was not supposed to be a problem child who terrified her mother by inventing an entire fantasy life for her imaginary friend.

Her mother's fear had made Kami scared as well, but not scared enough to give Jared up. She stopped asking Jared questions about his life, though, and she stopped talking about

Jared to other people. He was her secret, and that meant she could keep him.

Kami did not feel comfortable talking about Jared's mother, but she knew they didn't have a good relationship. She also knew it was irrational and illogical and insane to worry about his family troubles. It was insane to care so much in the first place. He was a voice in her head, after all: she tried not to think about it too much because it made her think she really might be crazy.

Jared filled in the silence. *She wants me to stop talking to you.*

Kami did not let her dread touch him. *And will you stop?* she asked, trying to show him nothing but support.

I told her I had to think about it, said Jared wearily.

Kami curled tighter under the covers, feeling cold. Jared said nothing else. There was silence in her head and silence beneath her window, and still she could not sleep.

Chapter Three

The Secret in the Woods

The first issue of *The Nosy Parker* came out two days later. It was a huge success. Kami was unsurprised, as the entire front page was a certain picture of Angela. Since Angela was wandering around looking like she wanted an excuse to kick someone's kneecaps, Kami was getting all the compliments.

"I really liked your tell-all article about the cricket camp," said Holly Prescott, the second best-looking girl in school. She kept up with Kami as they made their way through the riotous hallway that was the hallway at the end of school. "How old were those kids, eleven?"

"Nine," said Kami. "But old in sin."

Holly laughed. She'd always been nice to Kami, but since she mostly hung around with a succession of guys, or several guys at once, they never really felt like friends. "I've got a few ideas for articles," Holly offered, to Kami's surprise.

Kami was struck by the thought of how many copies a picture of Holly's clear green eyes and clearly dangerous curves would move. "What kind of ideas?" she asked, and smiled.

Holly grinned back and hugged her books to her chest. Ross Phillips stopped in his tracks, obviously wishing he was a biology textbook. "Well, you know I have a motorbike," Holly said. "I was zipping round past Shepherd's Corner, by the woods, you know? And there was this dead badger."

"Animals are always getting knocked down at the Corner," said Kami, not sure where Holly's story was going.

"Yeah," Holly answered. "But this badger hadn't been hit by a car. I mean, I was on my motorbike, I didn't get a good look at it, but I got a better look at it than someone in a car would've. It had been cut up."

Kami recoiled. "Oh my God."

"I know," said Holly. "And, I mean, maybe I got it wrong, but it just kept bugging me. I started thinking that if some horrible little kids hurt an animal, it'd be smart to put it at the Corner so it'd get run over by a car and it'd look like that's why it died."

Some subtle signal, perhaps the fact that Kami looked like she wanted to be sick, made Holly stop and backpedal. "I'm probably just being paranoid," she said hurriedly. "God, you must think I'm so strange. Look, forget about it, okay?"

"My house is right next to the woods," Kami said, thinking out loud. "We keep hearing stuff like yelling at all hours, waking my brothers. I'd been wondering about it. I'll look into this. Thanks, Holly."

Holly looked half pleased and half terrified. "No problem," she murmured. She left Kami at the top of the school steps with a wave, heading for her motorbike.

From her vantage point on the steps, Kami could see Ash Lynburn's head bent over the exposed engine of a sleek black car, expensive-looking but about twenty years old. It seemed like he was having some issues with it. She went down the steps and came up behind him. "Car trouble?"

Ash banged his head on the car bonnet. "Oh, hey, Kami," he said, giving her a smile even though she'd practically given him a concussion. "No, no car trouble. The car would have started for there to be trouble." He kicked a tire.

Kami stepped forward to take a look. When she was a kid, her grandmother had decided their mechanic was dishonest and had taught herself and Kami the basics of car repair, and since Sobo had died Kami was the only one who knew how to fix anything at home. "Not a problem," she said. "A wire's loose, that's it. Easy fix." Kami leaned forward and tugged on the offending wire to demonstrate.

Ash puffed out a sharp, frustrated breath. "Right. I'm an idiot." Kami leaned away and he looked from the car engine to her. "I'm sorry, let me try again," he said. "Thank you. I'm in a rotten mood, but I really appreciate it."

"It's okay," Kami said. "Though I will take a favor in exchange. Since you did not spill all the incriminating details I desire in your interview, I want you to help me write an article about moving back to England."

"Moving back?" Ash asked. "I wasn't even born when my parents left."

"I'm still calling the article 'Return of the Lynburns,'" Kami informed him. "And we're taking a picture of you being all lord of the manor, outside on the hill. Do you own, like, an old-fashioned white shirt? Because you should wear it, and maybe it should be all wet, as if you were swimming in the lake."

Ash laughed. "What lake would that be?"

"Any lake. There are two lakes in the woods. Doesn't matter."

"Fixing the car wasn't *that* big a favor," Ash said. "If you want me in a wet white shirt, you're going to have to do something else for me."

Kami raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

"Show me around?" Ash suggested. "I hear this place called Claire's is good. Uh, how watchful is your mum?"

Kami let herself be swayed by his easy charm. "She neglects me horribly. It's kind of tragic."

Ash's eyes lit up. "Great."

Kami'd had exactly one boyfriend in her entire life, and Claud had been a college friend of Angela's brother and a terrible mistake with a goatee. Sometimes guys thought she was cute. But sometimes they measured her up and visibly found her chubby or dressed weirdly or—always a risk—looking like she was listening to the voice in her head.

She certainly wasn't used to attention from guys this attractive. She looked away from Ash and down at the gravel of the parking lot. "So," she said, keeping her tone casual, "why are you in a rotten mood? Someone bullying you at school? You can talk to me, I know how it is. Everyone's always so cruel to the glamorous guy who lives in the big mansion."

"My aunt and my cousin just moved in with us," Ash said, his voice back to its usual light tone. "We're still getting things sorted out so he can go to school, so you haven't had the doubtful pleasure of meeting him yet. We don't exactly get on."

Kami glanced up and saw Ash was studying her. His habitual pleasant expression had returned. "Let me reference the mansion again," Kami said. "Put the jerk in the south wing. You won't see him for weeks at a time. Or lock him in the attic. The law will not be on your side, but literary precedent will."

Ash looked mildly puzzled, but smiled at the joke anyway. "I'll take that in consideration. Can I offer you a lift home?"

"Nah. I don't really trust your car, buddy," Kami said. "Heard you've been having trouble with it."

She always talked to Jared on her walks home. She reached for the connection to him as she left the school gates, letting him know that the next time there were screams in the woods, they were investigating.

Neither of them mentioned their last conversation.



That night Kami was so jumpy waiting for a scream and trying not to think about Jared that she couldn't sleep. As a result, she spent the following day staggering from one class to the next. Angela gave up asking her what was wrong and just steered her in the right direction through the halls. Kami was wearily relieved when the last bell rang and she could stumble home.

Kami's day wasn't over yet. Her father greeted her at the door and asked if she could watch her younger brothers while he finished up a big project. Kami was used to this. Luckily, Ten and Tomo were absorbed in front of the television, so she was able to drift in and out of a doze while curled up in the window seat.

Kami's mind was turned toward Jared, without her normal barriers up between them. She could not help thinking of how soon she might lose him, and she kept reaching for him without meaning to. If he was gone, she would stop being distracted at odd times, would be a little more normal. Her mother would be so pleased. Everyone would think it was the best thing for her. Except that Kami couldn't think of it as the best thing for her. Not when every time she thought of losing Jared, her heart beat out an insistent rhythm of sheer desolation and misery and all she could think about was how she would miss him.

If she thought about him as if he was real, insane though that was, it was different. Cutting ties would make his life better, she could bear it.

I was thinking maybe ..., Kami said, and thought about him, what was best for him, steadily so he knew she was sure. *Maybe things would be better for you if you do what your mother wants. Maybe it's the right thing to do.*

Jared said, *I don't care.*

Too many of their walls were coming down with their shared distress, blazing a channel open between them. She should pull back. She would in a moment.

I don't want to be sane. I don't want to be normal, said Jared. *I just want you.*

Kami rested her cheek against the cool glass of the window. It was as if he was real for a moment, as if he was close, with just a windowpane between them. Hardly any barrier at all.

Then Tomo laughed at something on the television. Kami turned back to the real world, to share Tomo's laugh and catch Ten's usually solemn eyes glinting with appreciation behind his glasses, to home.



That night Kami woke to the sound of screaming again. She flailed herself awake, knocking

her alarm clock and her latest mystery novel, *The Nefarious Mezzanine*, off her bedside table in the process. Then she cast away her bedclothes and seized her flashlight. It was exactly where she'd left it, wedged between books and her nightlight.

Kami grabbed her coat, shoved her feet into shoes, and launched herself down the stairs terrified that the screaming would stop before she could get there.

The door of their house tended to stick, but now the latch lifted easily, the door swung open smoothly, and the night air blew cool through her hair.

Jared, Kami said, reaching out for him. Want to go on an adventure?

You even have to ask?

Kami was fiercely glad he was still there. She stepped out onto the garden path, shutting the door carefully behind her. Where the garden ended, the woods began. It was almost autumn, and the trees were still thick with leaves but more subdued, closed off as if they were keeping secrets. In the darkness Kami couldn't see the trees for the forest. She switched on her flashlight and the circle of light finally found a path into the woods.

Kami set off. The night had a different quality here, as if the trees curving over her head gave weight to the air. The sound of screaming was fainter. It was a far-off sound, but now that Kami was really listening she thought she heard a whine to it. She didn't know how she had mistaken it for kids' voices.

Kami hurried, feet flying over logs and leaves almost before her flashlight beam found them.

Because God forbid we miss the screaming, said Jared, growing more guarded as they drew closer, the feeling like an arm held out protectively in front her.

The sound was terrible, this near.

I don't want to miss the screaming, Kami told him. She slid her hand into her coat pocket and found her phone in there beside her keys as she ran. *I want to catch them in the act.*

Kami ducked and just missed banging her head on a low-hanging branch. She almost dropped her flashlight and the beam went wide.

The scream stopped abruptly.

The yellow circle of light caught on a wall.

It was rough wood, unpolished, the wall sagging a little. But it was a wall. As Kami drew closer, she was able to make out the shape of something like a sagging hut or maybe a shed, something that had been built.

A thought crept into her head, cold and sly as a draft beneath a door: What if this place had been built just for this?

Kami, run, Jared ordered.

Kami wanted to run, but she wouldn't. Not until she found out the truth. She crept forward.

Kami, break a branch off a tree so you can fight at least!

I can fight bare-handed if I have to, said Kami. She put her hand on the soft, weathered wood of the hut door.

It swung open at her touch.

There were candles, some burning and some blown out, their wax still running liquid and hot. There was a table covered in a white cloth. On the cloth there lay a fox. It was dead. There was blood all over the cloth. Kami knew that if she touched the blood it would still be warm, only just spilled, like the candle wax.

Jared's fear scythed through her, sharp as a blade. That, more than anything, almost made Kami panic.

Kami, run!

But she couldn't run yet. She held the flashlight in one hand and with the other took out her cell. She kept both hands steady as she took picture after picture with her camera phone.

Then she ran, stumbling faster than she had come, back through the night to the safety of home. She called the police as she went.

Blood and Sunlight

When Sergeant Kenn interviewed Kami, he was very kind, told her she had done her civic duty, and even gave her a quote for the paper.

Kami closed her article on the animal killing in the Vale woods with “The police investigation is ongoing. And so, I can assure my readers, is my own.” The second issue of *The Nosy Parker*—Kami had decided to put out two issues in the first week of school, to gain momentum—was even more popular than the first.

“People took home copies for their parents,” Kami announced, and did a victory dance in the privacy of her headquarters. “The photocopier overheated and broke down. I think I can still hear the sound of it sobbing and wanting to talk about its childhood.”

Ash leaned in the doorway, his eyes averted from the sight of Kami dancing. The dance involved flailing, brandishing of a vase of flowers, and most importantly the victory shimmy, so Kami could not really blame him.

“Walk you to class?” he asked.

“Well,” Kami said, “sure.”

Ash pushed himself off the doorframe and into the room, toward her. “You did an awesome job out there in the woods,” he said. “And with the article.”

Kami beamed. “Thank you.”

“But I think you and Angela should leave this to the police from now on.”

“What an interesting thought,” Kami said. “Thank you for sharing it with me. Let me share a thought with you: Actually, I can walk myself to class. And I can also handle myself, so I can be doing what I want.” She shouldered her bag and headed out, moving past him.

“Kami, wait,” Ash called out.

She paused at the top of the stairs and looked back. The newspaper headquarters looked great, she thought proudly. The boxes were gone and the desks were shiny nut-brown. Karina had borrowed a few colorful lamps from home and had plans for a filing cabinet. The office looked great, and Ash looked great in it: arms crossed over his chest, staring at her with eyes turned dark blue with concern.

“Whoever’s doing this—” he began, then switched thoughts. “What if you got hurt?”

“Here’s the thing,” said Kami. “Holly came to me with this story because nobody else would have listened to it. And nobody would have listened to me if I’d called the police and said, ‘Oh, the kids are making too much noise in the woods.’ They’re listening to me now because I went out and found something. *I* found something. And it was horrible, and the only way I know how to deal with something horrible is to do something about it. This is *my* story. And I’m not going to give it up. I’m going to see how it ends. You don’t get a say.”

“I’m getting that impression,” Ash remarked. He uncrossed his arms and walked over to where Kami stood, still undecided. “I am worried about you, though.”

Kami smiled; she couldn’t help it. She wasn’t used to guys looking at her with concern, or drawing near her being all conciliatory and handsome. Except Angela’s brother, of course, but

Rusty hardly counted. "I guess you can be worried if you really want," Kami conceded. She went on tiptoe and kissed Ash on the cheek. She felt him smile, then eased back down and saw him lean in toward her.

"So, you're okay?" Ash murmured.

Kami wasn't sure, despite her exhilaration over the newspaper. The police had scared her. How worried her parents were had scared her more. She kept thinking about that night, and the blood. But her secret fears were for her and Jared: she hardly knew this boy, no matter how beautiful his smile.

She just smiled back at him. She knew her smile was not as convincing as his, but it seemed to be enough. Ash's smile spread, brighter than before, and he leaned down closer. Kami's breath snagged in her throat. She did not move away.

An explosion of noise came from the stairwell: the sound of so many people running and yelling at once that it sounded like an earthquake. Kami and Ash broke apart without even coming together.

Kami went running down the stairs, Ash right behind her. She rounded a corner and headed down the school steps, then out the doors to the back of the school. There was a courtyard there, raised a few steps above the cricket pitch.

The cricket pitch was chaos.

"What's going on?" Ash demanded behind Kami, just as Holly Prescott came rushing up the steps.

"Your brother is fighting the cricket team," Holly announced, flushed with excitement.

"He's not my brother," Ash snapped, his cool cracking instead of just ruffling for the first time since Kami had met him.

"Who on the cricket team?" Kami asked at once, producing her emergency notebook from her bra.

"Sort of the whole team," Holly said.

Kami went forward, shielding her eyes against the sun's rays. She could only see one person not in cricket whites. All she could make out were shoulders, and a fist going into someone's face.

Miss Mackenzie and Ms. Dollard were both crossing the pitch and moving fast. Kami hurtled down the stairs and got to the combatants at the same time the teachers did. Over the noise Kami yelled: "Any comment for the school newspaper?"

Only the new boy's head turned. The sun was still in her eyes, but she thought he grinned at her over his shoulder. His teeth were dark with blood.

"Hell of a first day," he said.

Then Ash's cousin—the other Lynburn—and four members of the cricket team were marched off to Ms. Dollard's office.

Kami ran back up the steps to Holly, pen at the ready. "What happened?"

Holly looked delighted to be asked. "The way I heard it, Matthew Hughes said something and shoved him, and then the new guy punched him, and, well, you know how the cricket guys stick together—"

"Who won the fight?"

"Some of the team were still carrying their bats," Holly said. "New boy got his ass kicked. It doesn't mean to pry," she added to Ash. "But does he have issues?"

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