



## PROLOGUE

The afternoon is violet and full of minor chords when I find my mother splayed on the foothills of VanVere. I approach her slowly, uncertain. My mother is unpredictable but even she wouldn't lie down on a hill in the middle of a lightning storm.

“Mom?” I call, as I move towards her. “It's late. Dad's been wondering where you were.”

No reply. Not a fraction of movement except

her hair

and

her dress

as they twitch in the wind.

A tight panic seeps into my muscles.

Lightning snakes across the sky, lighting up the lilac underbellies of the clouds and ending in a crash that vibrates through my bones.

In the midst of that storm, the stillness of Mom's body screams that there is something wrong with this scene.

“Mom?” My voice comes out feathered. I rush forward, scraping my knees as I kneel beside her.

The ground is burnt beneath her too-still body, her skin cold. She looks as though she is asleep.

She isn't.

My mother is dead.



## CHAPTER ONE

When I was ten, the year was filled with iridescent yellow, and music played in major chords. It was a summer filled with birdsong and baboon calls; a summer I saw something through the trees – a boy in the forest with wings on his back and wide, staring eyes in his face.

I saw him a lot that year, in the distance, as I walked the mountain forests of the Berg. He would stand quietly, watching, sometimes waving.

It was a summer filled with magic, and I thought he was my wild imagination made manifest by my mother's stories.

I'm not ten anymore, and the year is not yellow or filled with birdsong; it is grey and abounding in minor chords.

My mother is dead; magic with her. No amount of imagining can bring either of them back.

On the day of Mom's funeral, our house is full. May and Lark are mother-henning in the kitchen despite their fancy black dresses: washing up, packing away, storing meal upon meal in the freezer. Stoney van den Burgh and Pastor Rose are in the lounge talking in hushed tones about tourists, preparing for the dry season, and melancholy of lightning

storms.

Dad is in a corner with Ms Olive, she is crouched down in front of him, hand on his shoulder. He's not listening. His eyes are glazed and distant, his mind elsewhere.

Community is a low hum filling every nook and cranny in the space. These are our people, here to rally around us in our hour of need.

Mom would love her house so full. She would flit between all the people, refilling drinks, handing out ribbons with whatever happy emotions she could conjure, and begging Pastor Rose to play the piano so that I could sing – which I never would. She would be a tide inside the house, pushing and pulling us together.

I'm tired of it now, though – my head is a beehive, and I'm going mad from the low, constant buzz. I need quiet. I need space. I love all these people but they need to go home. I thought I saw my winged boy today, on the way home from the church, so I know my brain must be past coping with all of this.

Jade catches me leaning against the wall, staring out at nothing. Her blond hair is pulled tight away from her face, making her soft features severe. Her eyes and nose are red from crying, her pale skin blotchy. She doesn't look at me, probably because she knows if we look each other in the eye we'll start crying again.

Instead, she pulls at my elbow. "Bedroom. Now."

I don't argue. I follow her upstairs where she drags me into my room and closes the door behind us. The sudden dulling of the noise is a blessed relief. I flop down onto my unmade bed.

"You okay?" asks Jade, crouching in front of me.

It's a simple question, one I've been asked a lot lately, one I answer with an insincere 'fine'. All day long, from the march to the

church service, to the sad, polite ‘I’m sorrys’ downstairs, I have been holding myself together. I’ve been playing strong – for Mom, for Dad, probably even for me. Now Jade, with her genuine love for me, undoes all my resolve to be ‘okay’, and I shake my head, tears coming hard and fast.

Jade sinks down beside me on the bed and throws her skinny arms around me. “Sorry, Bird,” she whispers my mom’s favourite nickname for me into my hair, hugging me fiercely. “I wish I could tell you it’s going to be all right but I don’t know if it will. Sorry.” She squeezes tighter. “But no matter how long it takes, I’ll be here to hold your hand while you cry. As long as it takes.”

I thank her with a nod, my tears spilling onto her navy jersey. There is a bright yellow ribbon around her wrist – one of my mom’s. I stroke the silk and she starts crying too. We cry and cry until I fall asleep.

I wake, much, much later, to a dark sky and a silent house. I find a pot of tea and a tea cup on a warming tray with a note from Jade: Remember how your mom used to say tea fixes everything? I think she was wrong in this case, but it might help for a little while. And when it wears off, call me and I’ll come hold your hand – we’ll swim the sea of tears together.

I smile-cry through my strong tea, thankful for Jade and her solidness in a world that feels so unbelievable right now.

“Ava?” calls Dad. Asher.

He is not usually the colour his name evokes. He is not grey or dirt. My mother would not have loved him if he were. He is rich ground,

restful and earthy – a solid, hopeful thing. Usually. Grief has sapped him to a washed-out version of himself, a self more apt for his name. His eyes are sunken and dark, his cheeks blotchy, his clothes crumpled. He's been sleeping in his clothes again, forgetting to change them.

I caught him last night, mid-mourning: His face was buried in Mother's favourite dress, as if her lingering scent might bring resurrect her. I went back to bed and pulled the covers over my head, trying to dull the sound of his sobbing.

“Ava?” His papery voice is on the verge of breaking.

I don't want to deal with his grief right now – I can barely handle my own – so I avoid his gaze.

“Have I been staring?” I ask.

He tries a weak smile but it doesn't suit him. “Yes, you have.” He sighs, stretching. “We should eat.”

“Not hungry,” I say.

He looks away, through the window, out to the foothills where Mom used to wander. “No. Me either.”

We sit in silence. We don't lie to one another. We don't pretend. I find great comfort in this.

“Did I ever tell you about the day I first saw her?” By the sound of Dad's voice, he is already shrouded in the memory, encased in it, hanging on to the pleasure and pain as though his life depended on it.

I don't look at him but I smile. I love this story. “Tell me again.”

“I left VanVere to study in Port Cora and fell in love with the sea and the town. Every house was a different colour. Every boat on the water brighter than the next, every person dressed in the boldest colours – colours I could never imagine in VanVere. But beside Ginger, all those colours were nothing. She was the brightest thing I'd ever seen – it was

like the sea lived in her eyes, like the sun lit her hair on fire. And she had this strength, in the way she stood, as if life had tried to knock her down and she'd stood firm. She was not tame or soft, she was fierce and wild, and I fell in love with her the very first moment I saw her." He always pauses here, licking his lips, lacing his fingers together, staring at them as if he can see her fingers there, if he imagines hard enough.

"Even in a place as colourful as Port Cora, she stood out. She had this magical way about her. Real magic, the long-forgotten kind. The kind that could change your mind or make you laugh for no reason. She could light up a room with her magic. No one believes me when I say that. Not really." His sigh shudders out of him, and I dare not look at his face. "And for some reason she fell in love with me too. She chose me over all the slobbering scholars that followed her every footstep. And not only did she love me, but she followed me into the mists of VanVere and all its greyness and gave me you..." He swallows. "She wasn't always happy here, you know? There were times I thought she was going mad. Did you know that?"

I shake my head. Mom was always volatile but mad? I find it hard to believe.

"She was happy in the end, though. I know she was. She loved it here. She loved you. Ah, Ava, I miss her so much."

I brave the sea of grief that crashes in my chest to look at him. I grab his hand, squeezing tight. The memories always do that: They bring tears. Which is why, when I start school again, I will not say a word to anyone about my mother.

## ASIDE : RUSSET



Ginger hadn't come to the Sanctuary for a week. It wasn't like her.

"Wasn't me," said Ebony when Russet went to the window for the tenth time that morning and stared out at the forest. His wings twitched, agitated.

"No." Russet took a breath, turning to her. "But you didn't say anything...about wanting to leave again... about..."

"I never said anything," Ebony said, clenching her jaw, grabbing fistfuls of her trousers, her birds flapping about her head in an agitated cloud. If there was one thing about Ebony, it was that she didn't like to be accused of things she hadn't done.

"It's just... she's never done this."

"So, go look for her. Ask her yourself. You're being a pain." Ebony flopped down on her bed with a giant book, her birds settling on her headboard and in her hair, unperturbed.

Russet didn't like it. The air had smelled wrong for days, ever since the lightning storm. Ginger always came to check on them – especially after a storm.

He waited until dusk, when the shadows were longer, when people would be home and not out among the trees. He knew the way by heart because he'd followed Ginger home more than he cared to admit. He had a fleeting hope Ava would be outside this evening – she liked to sing and dance around in the backyard sometimes, and even though

Ginger had told him he wasn't allowed to meet her, it still made him feel a little closer to her. From all the stories Ginger told them about Ava, he felt as if he knew her.

When he neared the house, where the trees thinned and the grasses lengthened, he knew something was amiss. That wrongness he'd smelled in the air was thicker here, and there were too many people at the house – filing out in twos and threes, marching down the road in a procession of black.

At the back, were Ava and Asher, eyes red-ringed, faces pale. Ava's dress was sashed by a bright red scarf, bright amid all that black. But where was Ginger?

His hands gripped the dogwood tree, keeping himself steady on his suddenly unreliable legs. Something terrible had happened, something irreversible.

Staying hidden in the treeline, he followed the long line of black-clad villagers down to the cemetery, hoping Ginger was there waiting, comforting a mourner or helping to decorate the church but she wasn't. She was nowhere.

As soon as they were all tightly packed into the tiny church, Russet risked crossing the road, pulling his wings about him like a coat, and stood at one of the windows. Inside, Ava stood stoically while Asher sobbed. Still, Ginger was nowhere to be seen.

The church was decorated with hundreds of glowing candles and a multitude of ribbons, casting everyone in a kind of rainbow light. Pastor Rose stood up behind the pulpit and rested her hands on either side of it, her usually sunny face grave. She had geelbossies in her hair, Ginger's favourite, and a dwarf protea in the lapel of her jacket. She took a moment to compose herself then smiled out at everyone gathered.

Russet would not let himself believe the truth until Pastor Rose said the words: “Ginger Olsen is dead, and this evening we mourn her passing together...”

“No, no, no, no, no...” Russet’s knees buckled, his head spun. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. How could Ginger be dead? How could magic die?

He stayed there for the whole funeral, tears streaming down his face, wondering how he would tell Ebony, wondering how they would live, wondering how much pain Ava must be in. He watched her, when she stood up to sing a solo piece – a song she had written for Ginger. He watched how ferociously she sang, how she leaned into her own pain, how she let herself remember every beautiful-terrible thing. She was singing his pain – all of theirs.

When the people started to leave the church, he wiped his eyes and slipped back into the forest where he could stay hidden. He watched Ava, following the road where she walked.

She loved Ginger as much as he did, and she shared his pain. The only difference was that she thought she was alone. She didn’t know there were two other people who felt as broken as she did. He would have to remedy that as soon as he could. He couldn’t abandon her, even though there was no longer a Ginger to tie them to one another.

For a moment, Ava looked into the forest and he could have sworn she saw him but then her eyes unfocused again and she kept walking.

Russet waited until he was sure everyone was gone until he slipped into the church. There was no coffin – he knew Ginger had wanted to be cremated – but there was a life-sized photograph of her. It didn’t do her justice, even though someone had taken the time to

colour the black-and-white image – it just wasn't Ginger unless colour was screaming off her. Still, Russet reached his hand out to touch the image of her face.

He broke then, sinking to his knees, leaning his head against the image, letting his tears run him dry.



## CHAPTER TWO

I start school in February, two weeks later than everyone else because Dad didn't want to push me to go back before I was ready. I drag it out, lingering in the house, waiting to feel ready. I never do. Eventually, I realise I never will be, so I may as well go.

I walk to school alone, through the town where my mother used to walk with me. There's a vacuum of space on my left side where she would have been – should have been.

VanVere is called a town, but it's more like a village. It's set in a valley between two mountains my mom used to call Helga and Hubert. Those are not their actual names, but I refuse to call them anything else.

Like my father, I love VanVere. It is not as colourless as my mother liked to pretend; its palette is simply limited. Here there is every shade of green imaginable. The only colours to break them are the blue of the wide sky, the brown of dirt and the off-white of the clouds that show their faces daily, in varying measure. Sometimes the clouds hang so low they leak into the foothills, turning the green a sullen grey. Though these are the only hues – a fact that my mother often complained about – they are vivid and I love them. Then again, I have never been near her home town of Port Cora, so I have no means to compare.

Our house is close to the foothills, furthest from town. I like that

it's solitary and partially hidden. I love that it's so close to the wood and the mountain. Most days, we feel as if we're the only people living here, and I can stand in the back yard and sing my lungs out to the mountains and not have anyone rolling their eyes at me while they hang up their washing.

The roads of VanVere twist and turn against the contours of the mountain. Houses are built above and below the badly worn roads, nestled by groves and paddocks. Because of the way the land dips and rises, most neighbours are a fair distance away. The centre of our little community clusters near the main road, where we have a small fresh-goods market, a post office, a church and a school. Behind us, on the foothills of another set of mountains, are the vast forest plantations and hotels that are the reason for this town's existence. In VanVere the grasses grow too long in between the bushes and trees, except where people keep goats or cows to trim the grass and give them milk, or where people have worn footpaths into the ground. These paths wind like snail trails on either side of the road, especially in the winter when the trails glisten wetly with frost.

Just over Hubert's nearest foothills are the dam and source of the river that keep our town alive. Over the centuries the river has carved deep canyons into the foothills, their crumbling walls a dangerous lure for curious, thrill-seeking children and hiding poachers. The walls of the canyon are pockmarked with small caves and adorned with the mud clusters of swallow nests. These canyons are constantly filled with the swooping of swallow flocks and the high-pitched trill of their song.

We are surrounded, hemmed in, ensconced by mountains that have been here so much longer than we have. I see changes in VanVere, but these stoic giants never move. Sometimes they burn with veld fires,

sometimes they wear the green gown of a wet summer, or the pale-yellow hems of a drought, sometimes a grey cloak of mist or a crown of snow, but underneath, they are constant – at least so far as my human eyes can see. Right now, I find great comfort in their never-changing faces and shoulders and hips. They remind me that many people have lived and died in their shadows, and the world still turns on and on and on. We are fleeting and ineffectual. I try to believe that last part but being the child of a mother who affected the world around her with the ferocity of weather, I am inclined to think differently.

VanVere is small – only about seven hundred strong when the older kids are back from boarding school – and everyone knows everyone else's business. The next village is not far away, only over or around Helga's rounded hip, but in the mountains, you may as well be alone if you can't see anyone. When you live in a small place like this, there are few spots you can go to get away from things, and when death is hanging over your family, everyone has their eyes on it.

I don't hate VanVere as much as my mother did, I'm just struggling to love it nowadays. Without her there to walk me to school or sing me to sleep, I see things I've never noticed before: the greying walls of the stone houses, the unkempt gardens with their wilting flowers, the potholes in the road. Life has taken its toll on VanVere, and the scars are obvious. That's what life does – it leaves scars.

The point is driven home when I pass Amber Harper, sitting on her veranda. She rocks in her rocking chair, her empty arms held out as though there is something in them. I swallow when I catch her blank stare. I know that look well. Two days ago, Amber lost her child. The baby, a beautiful little girl only days old, had succumbed to some sickness. Now, Amber looks so much older – scarred by life like the rest

of us.

I realise I've stopped walking when Lemon Barnes passes by shaking her head sadly. I blink. The long zig-zag of the street remains sepia-toned, innocuous, but I'm filled with dread. Then a hand slips into mine and squeezes tightly.

"You're naughty. You should have said you were coming," says Jade.

"Didn't know I was going to come until this morning."

"You're forgiven then."

"That's a relief," I say. She is a relief. A blessed, blessed relief. I can't be mopey and miserable with Jade around.

She takes a quick catalogue of my uniform: too creased and bearing a few breakfast stains I didn't notice before I left the house. Jade pulls my collar straight and runs a hand over my hair, flattening the stray pieces that have come loose.

"There. You look great," she says. Nothing ever sounds like a lie coming from Jade's lips.

I don't really care what I look like. I hadn't even considered it. I try to remember whether I brushed my unruly hair. Mom always said it has a mind of its own and that I should cut it short. I leave it long and wild and dark. Especially now. My hair echoes my tumultuous insides, and if I can't cry in public, at least my tangled hair can be a testament to my chaotic interior.

We walk the rest of the way in silence, hand in hand. Jade smiles and waves as we pass people's houses, steering attention away from me.

"Ms Olive is going to be so happy to see you. She's been asking after you every single day."

"I know. She brought a pie round on Tuesday."

“Chicken? She makes the best chicken pies, don’t you think?”

I nod and let Jade talk. She fills the empty space, so I can’t linger on the edge of the void. She’s my anchor, my buffer. She reminds me grief is not a thing to be borne alone.

School is a collection of three pre-fab oblongs, one for each season of schooling. Once, each one was painted its own bright shade – red for junior primary, yellow for senior primary and blue for high school – but their colours have long since faded, and now they look pastel against the verdant dogwood trees behind them. The high school building is the smallest, because by high school most kids have been shipped off to the nearby boarding schools.

To one side is a large square of grass used for extra murals. It’s the only regularly manicured lawn in the whole village because it’s used for so many community events, like fetes and village braais.

Jade and I make our way to the faded blue school house, my heart in my throat.

The single school room has a high-raftered ceiling and large windows with a view of Helga and Hubert. It’s not the worst place to be schooled, but today I hate it. The last time I was here, I had a mother. Now, kids glance at me sidelong and I know what they are thinking: There goes the unkempt, motherless child. People won’t look me in the eyes, and they won’t say anything. Jade squeezes my hand to give me courage, but I pull away my hand, nervous.

Jade has no time for my self-inflicted alienation. She grabs my hand again and squeezes, leaning in near my ear to whisper, “Don’t be stubborn. No chance I’m letting you do this alone.”

Something about the hard edge of my grief makes me want to hurt her by withdrawing my hand, but I force myself to keep it there. Force myself not to share my pain in that way. She has a way about her, Jade – a softness that soothes because you know it’s genuine. I muster a smile for her, and she sees right through it, kissing my cheek. It’s a relief. I don’t have to pretend with her either. She doesn’t understand fully, but she is willing to let me be.

I cross the threshold of the classroom, beside Jade, and then I stop.

I thought I was ready for school, but the normalness of it all – the scuffed wooden floorboards, the rows of desks, the faded paintings on the walls, even Ms Olive sitting up front at her desk – is too normal. Life has gone on without my mother. It’s gone on as if she were never here. My stomach churns and I taste the rising bile. I bite my lip, breathing hard through my nose.

Ms. Olive looks up from her desk and catches my gaze. I see the change – her nurturing teacher face turns: surprise, grief, pity.

“Ava, you’re here,” she says, overly kind and careful.

The entire room turns to look at me. Suddenly, I know I’m not ready for normal. I’m not sure I ever will be.

I tear my hand from Jade’s and run the whole way home – ignoring every call of concern from the people I pass.

Closer to my home, I realise how messed up I must be when I think I see my winged boy standing on the edge of the forest behind our house. I shake my head, and when I look again, he is nowhere to be seen. Definitely not ready for normal.