

A LYNBURN LEGACY

e-original short story

The
Summer
Before
I Met
You



Sarah Rees Brennan

The Summer Before I Met You

I go to you ceaselessly along dream paths—Ono no Komachi

The first thing Liz thought when she saw them was: Those girls look like they stepped out of a movie.

Liz had agreed to be the coach for the cricket camp on a whim. She'd played cricket for years, in school, through college, and she'd been a teaching assistant and a residential assistant at college too.

Now it was time to be done with college and make a decision about her life, and she didn't want to go into Mum's business right away. The Featherstonehaughs were family friends, albeit family friends nobody in the family actually liked.

The news that they were looking around for a nice, responsible girl to coach thirty kids in cricket near a cute little town in the Cotswolds seemed like a sign from above. Or at least like an excellent opportunity to

put off any decisions for one last long summer.

Liz had been promised two local assistants; when she arrived and saw the Sorry-in-the-Vale woods, lush and green and going on for miles, with promise of hidden lakes and fields of lavender somewhere, she made a private selfish resolution to push off as much responsibility as she could on the girls and go hiking.

This was before Clarice Featherstonehaugh had told her that the girls were arriving that evening and she would have to manage the kids alone all day.

Sitting on the steps of one of the kids' cabins that evening, listening like a frightened rabbit for one of the tiny horrors to make any noise, Liz now thought she knew what war felt like. When the car drove up, she had to restrain herself from throwing her body on the hood and crying out "Saved! I'm saved! My deliverers!"

The impulse to fall on them with embraces faded as soon as the first girl got out of the car.

She was intimidatingly and unquestionably beautiful, hair a shimmering black veil, scarf a scarlet trail that streamed out and mingled with her flying jet-black locks. She was wearing sunglasses, and she leaned against the car as if she found the prospect before her fatiguing.

Liz had known the two girls were coming in the same car, but she'd expected a mix of their families; instead, after a moment's puzzlement, she realized that the first girl, the beautiful one, was alone. The family was all the second girl's: an older Asian woman with a deeply lined face and a severe expression; an Asian guy and a gorgeous woman with bronze-colored hair who Liz thought were the parents; and two little boys, one with black hair and



one with bronze. Liz stiffened at the sight of them; she'd had enough children for the day.

The second girl had climbed out with the first but then proceeded to perform an elaborate goodbye dance with every member of her family.

When the two girls stood together, they really did look like something from a movie. The second girl looked like the goofy sidekick, short and a little plump, more colorful and less dignified than her friend. She was wearing a hat that looked like a daisy, yellow on top with a plastic white-petaled brim, and a yellow skirt covered in daisies.

Liz got up and introduced herself as Elizabeth Watson, shaking hands with the adults and trying not to look too young or overwhelmed.

"I'm Jon Glass," said the Asian guy, who looked young to have a teenage daughter. "This is my mother, Megumi, and my wife, Claire."

"Thanks so much for bringing the girls," said Liz. "I can't wait to get them settled in and tell them all about the camp and the kids here."

The beautiful girl pushed her sunglasses a fraction down her perfect nose and gave Liz a supremely unimpressed look. "I'm Angela Montgomery," she drawled, barely making the effort to part her impeccably glossed lips. "And I'm not interested."

The second girl chased the boy with bronze hair like his mother's, a lovely light brown mingled with russet and gold tones that looked better on Claire Glass than on a skinny little kid. Once the girl had caught him, she kissed him soundly four times on his face until his glasses were lopsided.

"Bye, brat," she said, and then turned to Liz with a smile, sunshine that thawed Liz from the deep freeze of Angela's regard. "I'm Kami Glass."

"I'm pleased to meet both of you," Liz said, and Kami took Liz's hand and shook it firmly.

"I have so many ideas for the camp," she said. "Seriously. So many."

Under the daisy hat was a small, pretty face, a pointed chin and dark eyes that were slightly strange, dreamy and giving the impression of being focused elsewhere. But over all of it she wore an expression of enthusiasm and determination that Liz found almost as intimidating as Angela's chilly demeanor.

"She's going to be a great help," said Claire

Glass.

"Plus it's nice to be rid of one of them," Jon Glass added. "I was afraid we'd have to put them all down the Hope Well to get some peace and quiet."

Megumi, the older woman, shook Liz's hand with the same firm grip as Kami's.

"I have no doubt Kami is going to be a great help," she said. "But you should watch her every minute."

"Obaasan!" Kami protested.

"Every minute," the grandmother insisted. "She means well but she should not be let out alone."

"All right, everybody, go away, I have things to do and I'm tired of your faces," Kami announced. She captured the other brother with more ease than the first; he turned his face up for a kiss with a grin. She saved the goodbye to her grandmother for last, holding on to both her hands. "You take care of yourself until I get back."

"Take care of your spirit, Kami," said Megumi. "And don't burn the place down."

The girls collected their suitcases, and Jon Glass gave Angela a farewell shoulder squeeze; Liz had to admire his courage. Kami grabbed both the suitcases and headed for the cabin she was sharing with Liz and Angela. Liz walked with her, and on their way Kami stopped.

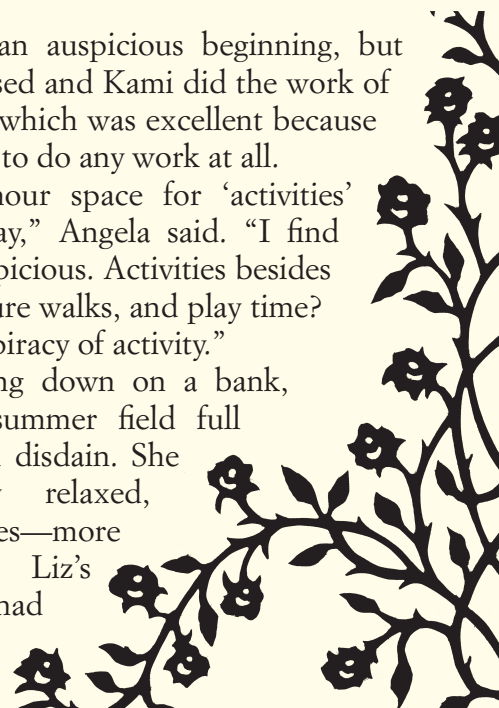
"My Sobo was exaggerating," she said earnestly. "There have been very few fires."

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It was not an auspicious beginning, but several days passed and Kami did the work of three assistants, which was excellent because Angela declined to do any work at all.

"This four-hour space for 'activities' every second day," Angela said. "I find the wording suspicious. Activities besides cricket, and nature walks, and play time? I suspect a conspiracy of activity."

She was lying down on a bank, regarding the summer field full of children with disdain. She looked deeply relaxed, and her clothes—more expensive than Liz's clothes, and Liz had always thought



she wore pretty nice clothes—seemed immune to grass stains. Possibly the grass was afraid of Angela.

Liz was tempted to join her, but it seemed mean to leave all the work up to Kami, who was running around with hoops and skipping ropes, yelling instructions and darting between them at intervals to join in the conversation.

“So why did you sign up to assist at cricket camp, Angela?” Liz asked, standing uneasily on the bank.

“Kami made me,” Angela said. “Crossing her is more trouble than doing what she wants. She’s very annoying.”

“And Angela is my very best friend and wants me to be happy,” Kami put in, throwing a plastic hoop like a lasso.

“And I am her only friend on account of she is peculiar in her brain,” Angela said disdainfully. “And she is my only friend because I hate everybody.”

Kami bit her lip at the first part of the sentence, but after an instant’s pause she smiled. Liz didn’t think Angela even saw the instant of dismay; Kami bounced back from anything and came at it twice as hard.

“Except for me,” Kami said.

“We’ll see,” Angela remarked darkly.

Kami favored Angela with a smile of especial affection, as if Angela had said something nice to her, and then turned to Liz. “Do you have any ideas for activities time?” she asked. “Because if you don’t have a preference, I have a few. I was thinking we could get the kids to record their time here in diaries to be shared. Sort of like a public record: the cricket camp dailies, if you will.”

“That sounds okay,” Liz said doubtfully.

“Great!” said Kami.

Angela covered her eyes. “Someone stop her,” she moaned. “Can nobody see she’s a monster?”

Kami gave her finger guns.

“I cannot believe you just did that,” Angela said after a pause. Apparently she could see through the barrier of sunglasses and her own arm.

“Finger guns are okay if they’re ironic,” Kami claimed. “Which those were. At least seventy percent ironic. That’s irony maths.”

Some of the Sorry-in-the-Vale kids, who were a pretty tight-knit bunch, seemed to be playing a skipping game. Liz heard them chant as they kept

time with two girls’ jumps.

*“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.”*

“Whaaaaaat?” said Liz.

“It’s better than the one where after a hundred jumps everyone gets to pull Sara Manning’s pigtails,” Kami said. “Loads of kids in Sorry-in-the-Vale sing it.”

“It’s one of the quaint town customs,” Angela said. “Like inbreeding.”

“My grandmother is from Japan,” Kami pointed out. “Chances are, I’m less inbred than you. Angela thinks she’s fancy because she was born in London.”

“I think I’m fancy for so many reasons,” Angela murmured.

“What’s a Lidburn?” Liz asked.

“Lynburn,” said Kami. “Lynburns watching on the hill.”

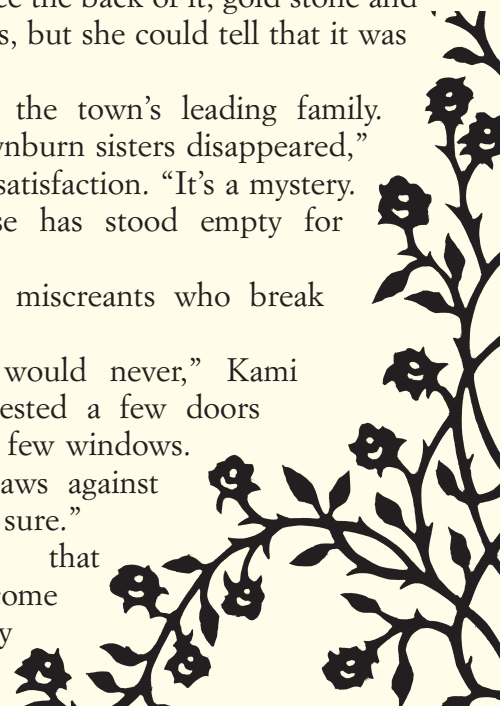
The town the camp was closest to, Sorry-in-the-Vale, was set in a valley. From certain points at the camp, they could see most of the town from above, but when Liz looked in the direction Kami was pointing, she saw that one house was higher than they were, set on a rise and looking over the valley. Liz could only see the back of it, gold stone and glinting windows, but she could tell that it was massive.

“They were the town’s leading family. Until the two Lynburn sisters disappeared,” Kami said with satisfaction. “It’s a mystery. Aurimere House has stood empty for years.”

“Except for miscreants who break in,” said Angela.

“Angela, I would never,” Kami exclaimed. “I tested a few doors and looked in a few windows. There are no laws against that, I am pretty sure.”

She saw that someone had become inextricably



tangled in her skipping rope and ran off to rescue her.

Sometimes Kami said disquieting things, but she was undeniably efficient and enthusiastic. Liz began to relax.

That turned out to be a mistake.

*

Nature walks sometimes extended to Marchton, the town next to Sorry-in-the-Vale. If the kids behaved in an exemplary fashion, they were allowed to buy one sweet each.

There were more than thirty kids to keep track of. Liz was distracted enough that she didn't notice any warning signs, didn't even notice the guy in the thick coat near the cash register until she heard one of the children scream.

She looked over aisles of cereal and baby supplies and saw the glint of a knife. She also saw Kami and Angela immediately pushing the children back.

So far, so good in a terrible situation, but then Liz saw Kami catch Angela's eye and raise her eyebrow. She saw the shallow dip of Angela's head in response.

Kami flew at the guy. He stumbled backward and into Angela, suddenly on her hands and knees and providing a trip wire. He fell flat on his back.

Angela, from her position on the floor, placed a hand on his chest. Kami planted her foot, wearing a pink rubber sandal tied at the ankle with black ribbons, firmly on the wrist of the hand that held the knife. Then she stooped and confiscated it.

"These aren't toys and nobody should play with them," Kami told the kids. "Now, who's going to win the race to get to the phone and call the police?"

It all ended well. But Liz had thought for a minute that she was going to have a heart attack at the age of twenty-three, right in front of the cornflakes.

*

"You two have to know things don't always work out," she told Angela the next day. "You can't just do stuff like that."

"I don't do anything of my own accord," Angela drawled. "Thus I don't know why you're talking to me."

Liz looked over at Kami, who had just stepped up to the wicket and was swinging the cricket bat and laughing.

"Come on," she called, dark hair gleaming in the sun and eyes bright with a challenge. "Come at me."

"Best to let her have her way," Angela said. "Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

She opened a fashion magazine and started to read it. Eventually the concentrated force of her disregard caused Liz to get up and help Kami.

Liz was not the only one worried by Kami and Angela's little escapade.

It was evening, and the kids were all drawing their most memorable moments of the day. Liz was mystified by the amount of glitter guns required; it had been a day largely without glitter.

Sara Manning put up her hand. "Can I draw my invisible friend?" she asked.

"Uh, well . . .," said Liz.

"Yes, absolutely!" said Kami. "Important part of your day, am I right?"

"Here we go," murmured Angela, sitting at a table. She had forbidden any of the kids to sit with her, though a couple of ten-year-old boys were standing at a distance observing her with respectful awe.

"Don't listen," Kami said, and smoothed a protective hand over Sara's pigtails, her dreamy eyes even farther away than usual. "If you care about him and he makes your day better, what does it matter what anyone else thinks?"

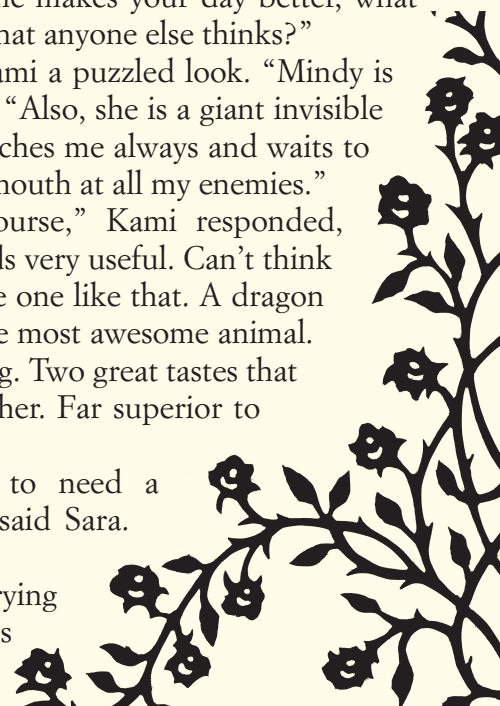
Sara gave Kami a puzzled look. "Mindy is a girl," she said. "Also, she is a giant invisible dragon who watches me always and waits to flame from her mouth at all my enemies."

"Well, of course," Kami responded, unfazed. "Sounds very useful. Can't think why I don't have one like that. A dragon is undeniably the most awesome animal. Flames and flying. Two great tastes that taste great together. Far superior to man."

"I'm going to need a lot of orange," said Sara.

"Like, a *lot*."

Liz was worrying that Sara was



a bit of an Angela in the making, when she heard a car outside. She didn't think much of it, as the Featherstonehaughs were always making weird drop-bys to use the printing room—they seemed to be printing a ton of flyers—except that Angela stood up, looked out the window and left the room.

Angela doing something even vaguely active was noteworthy enough that Liz went out too.

The car outside was battered, not one of the Featherstonehaughs' cars, and the two boys beside it were definitely not the Featherstonehaughs.

One was short, wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt and eyeing Angela with interest. The other, tall and extremely handsome, had his arm around Angela's shoulders. Previous to this, Liz would have imagined that to be a quick way to lose an arm.

The boy looked like Angela, except that he had a red glint in his dark hair and a friendly, approachable expression.

"Who is this lovely lady?" he asked, and smiled a smile that made Liz's knees liquefy in a gentle, pleasant sort of way. "And where's Cambridge?"

"Rusty, you didn't tell me your sister was so stunning," said the boy in the Che Guevara shirt.

"Rusty's terribly forgetful," Angela purred. Her smile suggested a tigress that had somehow acquired lipstick. "I bet he also didn't mention that I stick pins into the eyes of everybody who annoys me. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is the man who was wise enough to only annoy me once."

"My sister Angela, my friend Claud," said Rusty, looking amused.

"I never like your friends, and I don't know why you keep collecting them," Angela announced. "It's not like you get a prize with every dozen."

"I got the charm gene," Rusty said.

"And I got the brains," Angela retorted.

Rusty grinned again and kissed the side of her head. "Seriously, though," he said. "Where's Cambridge?"

"Oh my God, Rusty," said Kami from behind Liz. "What are you doing here? Go away."

"Cambridge at last," Rusty said. "How many times must I tell you not to attack armed felons with your bare hands, young lady? Come to my arms."

Kami strode past Liz, over to Rusty, and punched him in the arm.

"You're meant to be in Kingston getting settled

in," she said. "You cannot fail out of another year, Rusty. You cannot be a college dropout."

"But why not?" Rusty asked her plaintively. "I could find a kind, intelligent lady to keep me in a style to which I could quickly become accustomed."

"No intelligent lady is going to get mixed up with a guy who dropped out of college due to sheer laziness and having the drive of a broken tricycle," Kami told him sternly.

"But consider my beauty and charm," Rusty said. "Could I not be a gorgeous trophy for her shelf?"

"I bet she could find a gorgeous trophy with a college degree," Kami said. "Ladies love graduates."

"Are you okay?" Rusty asked. "Are you both okay?"

"Fine, we're fine, stop yammering on about it, we used all the self-defense moves you taught us, and besides, it happened yesterday, leave the past in the past and stop obsessing. Since you're here, will you help me with some ladders?"

"I don't know," Rusty said. "Ladders are heavy. What will you do for me if I do? Can I stay for dinner?"

"What do you want to do with ladders?" Liz asked uneasily.

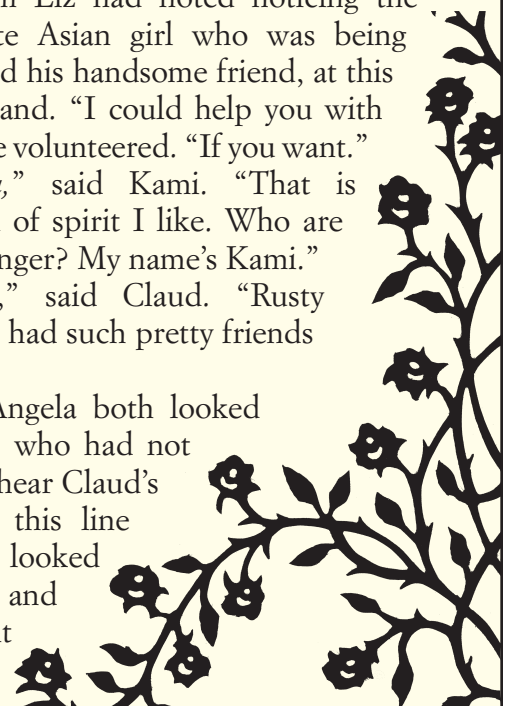
"It's a surprise," Kami told her. "A surprise with lots and lots of ladders. You're going to love it, Liz." She looked disappointed by everyone else's lack of vision.

Claud, whom Liz had noted noticing the arrival of a cute Asian girl who was being dismissive toward his handsome friend, at this point raised a hand. "I could help you with your ladders," he volunteered. "If you want."

"*Thank you,*" said Kami. "That is exactly the kind of spirit I like. Who are you, helpful stranger? My name's Kami."

"I'm Claud," said Claud. "Rusty didn't tell me he had such pretty friends back home."

Rusty and Angela both looked outraged. Kami, who had not been present to hear Claud's first version of this line or his rebuff, looked surprised and pleased. Faint



pink crept into her cheeks.

"I can help with the ladders," Rusty offered hastily.

"No, no," said Kami. "I have Claud now. Claud and I have it well in hand. Wouldn't dream of bothering you."

She pulled Claud around the back of a cabin.

"But what are you doing with all those ladders?" Liz cried after her.

"I told you that your having friends was a bad idea," Angela told Rusty. "But would you listen? No."

*

Rusty and Claud came back several times over the next weeks. Rusty did not appear to be settling in at college, and Claud, in Liz's expert opinion, was the kind of guy who dated girls a bit younger, girls with less experience who would buy his act more than girls his own age.

Liz wasn't sure if it was Claud following Rusty there, or Rusty following Claud, but Claud was at least getting Kami's attention out of his visits. Rusty's only net gain was the company of his sister and the acquiring of many, many miniature cheese-and-cracker boxes.

Rusty was crazy good-looking and only three years younger than Liz; being honest with herself, Liz had to admit if he'd tried he could have gotten her full attention. But Rusty seemed to have a policy of never trying at anything; he drifted through life like a handsome cloud, lazily flirting and never following through.

Kami was reading a book Claud had given her: Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. "Not sure about the philosophy of slaughtering all the useless people in the world," was her verdict. "But I enjoy the pirate."

Her new romance was not holding Kami back even slightly from her projects with the kids. Which was why Liz had to spend a day listening to the reports on what kids considered newsworthy items.

"I believe what you've just described, Sara, is attempted murder," Kami observed as Sara Manning sat down. "Well done! Strangulation with a skipping rope is definitely news. In fact, I believe it's a headline. However, it's also a crime; please don't do it again."

Sara preened. A boy with red curls, who at nine

years old was the youngest kid in the cricket camp and called Clive Green, stepped up to his audience. Kami, undaunted by sixteen reports so far, sat up straight and gave an anticipatory fluttering clap. Liz tried to look attentive. Angela was already sleeping on the desk, black head cradled in her arms.

"Hem-hem," said Clive. "Last night I woke up and needed some water. But we are forbidden to leave the cabins and go to the kitchens during the night. But . . . I needed water."

"A dilemma of our times," Kami murmured, making a note.

"I went out to get the water," Clive summed up. "I knew it was wrong and I didn't care! While I was out with my water—and okay, Kami says we have to disclose details that might be pertinent, so I'll admit I got a few crackers while I was there—I saw two cars drive up near the cricket pitch. A lady got out of the car and it was Mrs. Featherstonehaugh. I figured she was here to print more flyers because she always does, so I hid. But she didn't print more flyers. A man got out of the car and she gave him a packet and said, 'These passports look better than the real thing.' Then he gave her a packet. It was like a really boring game of Pass the Parcel. They both got into their cars and drove away, and I went back to my bunk with my water. And my crackers. I also brought some cookies. This is the story of how I escaped detection, and you can't punish me for it now because Kami said she would treat these reports as under the seal of the confessional."

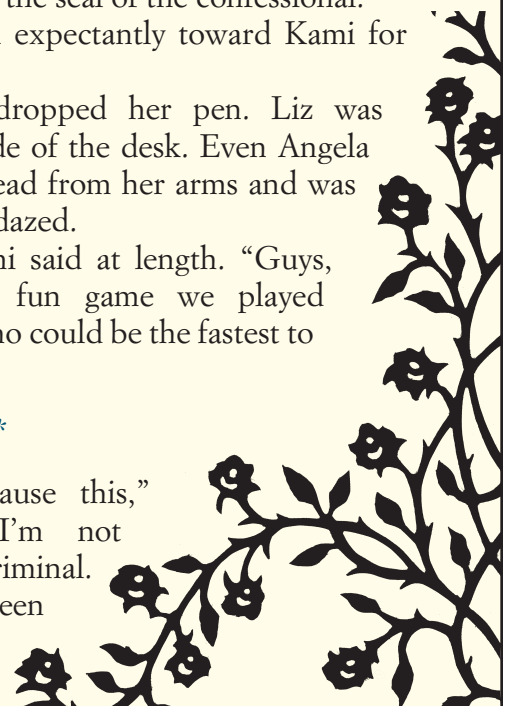
Clive looked expectantly toward Kami for applause.

Kami had dropped her pen. Liz was clutching the side of the desk. Even Angela had lifted her head from her arms and was looking slightly dazed.

"Huh," Kami said at length. "Guys, remember that fun game we played before, about who could be the fastest to call the police?"

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"I didn't cause this," Kami said. "I'm not a master criminal. I haven't been counterfeiting



papers using a cricket club as a front.”

“I didn’t say you had been, though I wouldn’t put it past you,” said Angela. “I said that of course this happened. Because this kind of stuff always happens around you. You are a beacon for weirdness. You are flypaper for freaks. A bird bearing weird tidings flies over your head.”

Kami, unusually for Kami, did not respond. Liz, Kami, Angela, Claud and Rusty were all sitting at the kitchen table, watching the news report of the Featherstonehaughs’ arrest.

Liz had never been so embarrassed in her life. She just hadn’t wanted to be an actuary quite yet; she’d wanted a last summer off. She hadn’t wanted to be mixed up in a crime. She was such an idiot; her mother was right, she didn’t know what was good for her, and she had proved she couldn’t make adult decisions.

The cricket camp wasn’t officially closed yet, though some parents had taken their kids away.

“It’s possible you were a little impulsive, honey,” said Claud, reaching out to squeeze Kami’s hand. “Next time maybe call me and ask for some advice.”

“Don’t,” Kami said absently, pulling her hand away and frowning at him.

Rusty and Angela were both glowering in Claud’s direction. Kami didn’t seem to be paying much attention. Her strange eyes were more dreamy and distant than ever; she seemed removed from them all.

Liz supposed that was how it was with people like Kami: either all the way switched on, or all the way switched off. Liz was disappointed and sorry too.

But she wasn’t going to let a twerp like Claud make Kami feel bad, and besides which, she was worried about Angela and her brother committing murder.

She reached over and touched Kami’s shoulder lightly. “You did the right thing, Kami.”

“I know I did,” Kami said, still absently. “But we have to figure out how to turn that to our advantage. We have to figure out how to make the story ours.”

Apparently by “we” she meant “I,” or at least didn’t mean any of them, because a second later her face lit up and she darted out of the room.

Claud had the expression of a man who had not only bitten off more than he could chew, but had

bitten into a stick of peppermint that he was now worried might be dynamite.

“Serves you right,” Rusty told him.

Claud’s mouth was turning toward something like a pout. “I thought we were friends.”

“Well,” Rusty said, “I’ve taken against you.”

*

“I don’t know, Liz,” said Kami the next day when Liz asked her what activity she’d like to do with the kids. “Why don’t you pick? What do you feel like doing today?”

Liz clutched at her empty cereal bowl. Angela cradled her coffee mug to her chest as if it were her baby.

Kami sat with her cup of coffee and a piece of toast spread with strawberry jam. She was wearing a headband with plastic strawberries attached, and a pink T-shirt with an upside-down rainbow on it. The big rainbow smile looked menacing somehow.

“What have you done?” Angela said.

“Not sure what you mean, pal,” Kami said.

They heard the sound of a car outside. Liz and Angela both scrambled to their feet and ran to the window.

Liz glanced over her shoulder and saw Kami smiling happily as she ate her toast.

Once Kami was quite done with breakfast she came outside into the chaos she had created. Liz was sitting in the dirt trying to calm Sara Manning, who was in tears and pulling out the hair in her pigtails.

“Please don’t let them take away our cricket camp!” she said. “It and dragons are all I live for!”

“And then Kami and Angela tackled a criminal,” said Frank Fairchild, looking over to Kami for approval. She gave him a tiny nod. “They are tireless in their purse suit of justice,” he added.

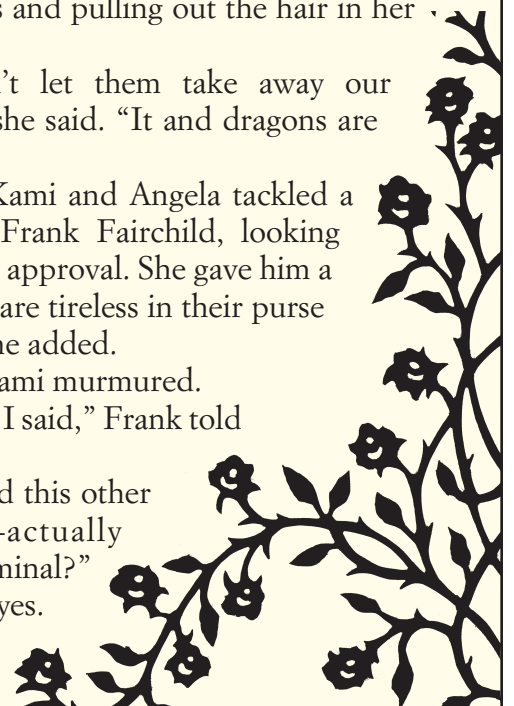
“Pursuit,” Kami murmured.

“That’s what I said,” Frank told her.

“Did you and this other girl—Angela—actually apprehend a criminal?”

“Oh yes.

Angela, come



here and tell them!”

Angela came, looking homicidal but undeniably photogenic. Kami linked her fingers with Angela’s and smiled.

“There are police records,” Angela grated out. “Go away and check them.”

“We only did what we had to do,” Kami said earnestly, swinging Angela’s hand. “We had to protect the kiddies.”

Liz was still staring in horror when a different reporter—apparently several had received exciting-sounding anonymous tips—came over to her and said, “Several of the children have described you as a mentor and an inspiration.”

“They what?” said Liz.

She wondered if they had been sniffing glue, but she knew glue was not the real culprit. She knew it was Kami.

“Though it was a black and midnight hour, I sensed something was afoot, and my cricket instructors and my mum taught me to be a brave crusader in the fight against evil. So I went out and discovered Mrs. Featherstonehaugh’s dark deeds. I wouldn’t call myself a hero.” Clive Green looked noble. “But you could call me a hero. Like Batman. You could write that down in your newspaper if you want.”

“Did you prepare those children’s statements for the press?” Liz asked in despair once the journalists had left, many hours later. Everyone was lying around in heaps except for Kami, who looked as if she had had a marvelous time and couldn’t wait to do it again.

They were sitting outside the cabin. Angela was lying on the steps above them, either very gracefully passed out or making a beautiful corpse.

“I told them they had to tell the press the truth,” Kami declared. “And I might have made a few small suggestions about how they wished to present the truth.”

“Small?” Liz asked.

Kami held her fingers a fraction of an inch apart, and then threw her head back and laughed.

“Truth’s important,” she said. “So is presentation.”

Some of the journalists had already talked about sponsorship for the cricket club so they could finish up the month. Liz would look something like a hero

instead of a screwup.

She felt ashamed worrying about how she looked, when this kid who was still in school had done something about it.

“You always believe in yourself, don’t you?” she asked a little enviously.

Kami smiled, her eyes looking strange again. “Someone believes in me, I guess.”

“And nothing defeats you.”

“I don’t know why anything should,” Kami said. “I don’t see why anything should even slow me down.”

*

Liz wasn’t there when it happened. They were doing a project where they stuck leaves on cardboard and hung them all over the walls, making their rooms forests. Kami and Angela were supervising the sticking and Liz was escorting the kids on leaf-collection duty. This mostly meant watching everyone like a hawk to make sure they would not climb trees.

When she got back to the cabin, the phone call had already arrived. Kami had already hung up the phone.

The first thing Liz heard as she and the children climbed the cabin steps was Kami’s voice, cold and almost shrill in a way it had never been before..

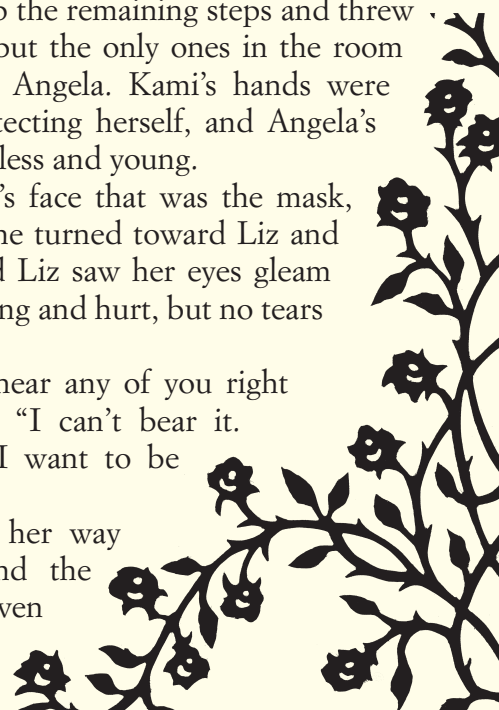
“Don’t touch me!” she said. “Don’t come anywhere near me.”

Liz bolted up the remaining steps and threw open the door, but the only ones in the room were Kami and Angela. Kami’s hands were thrown up, protecting herself, and Angela’s face looked helpless and young.

It was Kami’s face that was the mask, still and cold. She turned toward Liz and the children and Liz saw her eyes gleam in that mask, living and hurt, but no tears fell.

“I can’t be near any of you right now,” she said. “I can’t bear it. I want to be—I want to be alone.”

She pushed her way between Liz and the kids, hardly even having to push



because they were all so stunned by the change in her. Her wet eyes were somehow piercing and distant at once, looking over a thousand cold miles and never at you.

It was ridiculous: this was small, sweet and slightly absurd Kami, but something about her at that moment sent a chill coursing through Liz, like a ghost whispering the time of your death in your ear.

The door slammed and Kami was gone.

Angela, pale and still looking vulnerable, as if only she or Kami could remain guarded at a time, said, "Kami's grandmother is dead."

Kami had seemed utterly beyond comfort, so certain that she wanted none of them. Liz would not have thought that it would be Angela who was less self-sufficient in the end, Angela whom she wanted to take in her arms.

Angela remained Angela, and a moment later she gave Liz a look that suggested she certainly would not welcome any embraces. She went and stood at a window, looking across the way, into the depths of the woods where Kami had disappeared.

*

Kami was gone for a long time, so long that the sky was going a little dark over the trees, as if someone had spilled black ink into its clear pale blue. Night and clouds were both closing in, and Kami's family was coming.

Rusty got there first, driving as if he was in a hurry for the first time Liz had ever seen, his car sailing in on a cresting wave of gravel. He was out of the car almost before it had stopped, and in the cabin a few moments later. Rusty could move when he wanted to.

"I thought that car was Claud's," Angela said distantly, still at the window.

"It is," said Rusty. "I requisitioned it. Where is she?"

"She said she wanted to be alone," Liz told him.

Kami might need time alone, but her family was coming and they would be frantic if they couldn't find her. And Liz was the adult here; she was responsible for Kami and Angela, just as much as she was responsible for any of the kids.

"I'll go get her," Liz said, and was surprised to hear her voice so firm that neither Angela nor Rusty

argued with her, but instead gave her lost looks as if they were glad she was in charge.

Of course, that meant that Liz had to leave the cabin and company to go into the woods under the darkening sky.

She had taken the kids on nature walks a dozen times, but she had never walked through these woods alone, and never so near to night. Liz was more of a city girl, used to the clean lines of a world built to order, and she found herself uneasy under the whispering shadows of the trees.

She had always thought of herself as a nature lover. But there was something about the woods as light was dying. The sunset made a cluster of dark leaves above Liz's head look dipped in blood, and in the stretches of space under the leaves the light had turned gray and green, every hollow a pocket of darkness, like seeing underwater.

All she could see, all that let her know the woods were not the whole world, was the high golden shape of Aurimere House beyond the trees.

Lynburns watching on the hill.

She called out Kami's name a few times, but the leaves seemed to hush her, and she walked on in silence.

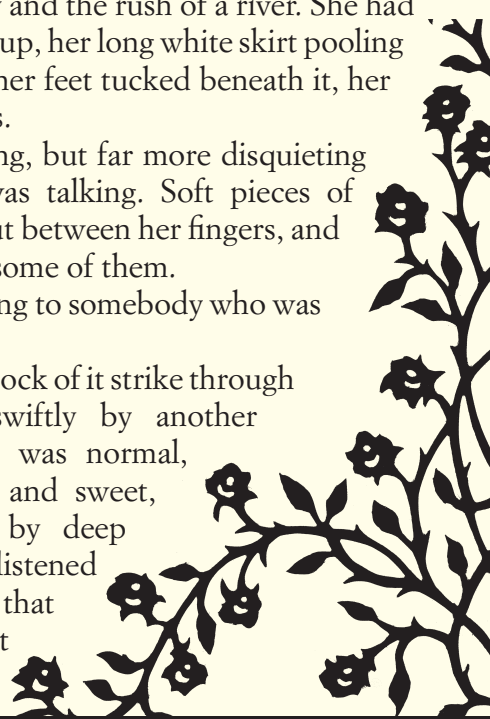
She stumbled on Kami almost accidentally, as she might have discovered a flower or a plant, something that belonged there and would not answer her.

Kami was sitting in the shadow between the curve of a quarry and the rush of a river. She had her knees drawn up, her long white skirt pooling around her and her feet tucked beneath it, her face in her hands.

She was crying, but far more disquieting than that she was talking. Soft pieces of words slipped out between her fingers, and Liz only caught some of them.

She was talking to somebody who was not there.

Liz felt the shock of it strike through her, followed swiftly by another thought: that it was normal, that it was sad and sweet, followed again by deep unease as she listened and realized that Kami was not



talking to her grandmother.

The things Kami had said over the last weeks, little careless things, came together in Liz's mind and formed a terrible picture. Liz thought of Kami's eyes and their blind and distant look.

Blind to what was real, she thought, pushing back people to go and indulge in madness in the woods. This brave, smart, funny girl, and when she was pushed to extremity, this was where she found herself.

Kami wrung her hands, head bowed, and talked to the woods and the sky as if they were a person, someone with her and able to offer comfort nobody else could.

Quietly, hardly daring to trust her voice, Liz said her name.

Kami lifted her face from her hands. Her eyes still looked dazed, dazzled, a thousand miles away and safe there, tears marking her face and her situation dawning on her anew: bereaved and alone in the woods, young and shivering with shock as well as pain.

"Come on, sweetheart," Liz said. "Your family will be here soon. They'll want to see you."

She expected a fresh burst of tears, but Kami surprised her again. She paused briefly, then set her jaw in a determined line and scrambled to her feet. "Yeah," she said. "You're right. They will need me. So I have to be there."

When Liz tried to put a hand on her shoulder as Kami went past, Kami smiled at her but moved away, her shoulders squared, making for the cabin like a woman on a mission.

The Glass car was outside the cabin, and Liz and Kami both quickened their pace. Kami got there before Liz did, and by the time Liz was at the door she saw Kami standing in the middle of the floor, hesitating.

The black-haired boy was in Claire Glass's arms, weeping openly, and the boy with his mother's hair and glasses was in Jon Glass's. Both her parents were looking up at Kami and Kami was wavering, caught in a moment of obviously painful indecision, as if she was not used to being the odd one out, as if she had always had someone to go to before.

Rusty and Angela were leaning back against the window. Rusty's face changed when he saw Kami's; he straightened up.

But it was Angela—aloof, superior Angela—who crossed the room like a missile and almost collided into an embrace with Kami. Kami made a quick, soft exclamation of surprise, but her arms went around Angela immediately, fingers gripping the shoulder of Angela's shirt tight, Angela's long raven-black hair mingling with Kami's shorter glossy hair, black shot with brown, even mixed so easy to tell apart, so different. The two girls clung together.

"Hey, Kami," Angela said. "Don't run off like that. I thought you were lost."

"I'm sorry," Kami said. "No. I'm right here."

Angela let her go after a minute, but after the embrace Kami seemed steadier, as she had after her fit of madness in the woods. It had also given Jon and Claire Glass the minute they needed to extricate themselves and bring both their sons over to Kami, so they could all converge.

Kami went to her father, holding on to the collar of his shirt and smoothing his hair back, more like a mother than a child.

"Oh, Dad, are you okay?"

"Oh, Kami," said her father in the same tones she'd used, a sad, affectionate mimicry. "Don't worry about me. My girl."

They held on to each other a moment, the boy with glasses between them, Kami's other hand curled around his thin shoulder. Then Kami went to her mother, trying to soothe her as well, trying to manage everything and not getting a moment alone with either parent.

She didn't notice Rusty for a while, and when she did her eyes narrowed.

"What are you doing here?"

"College is so boring," Rusty said plaintively.

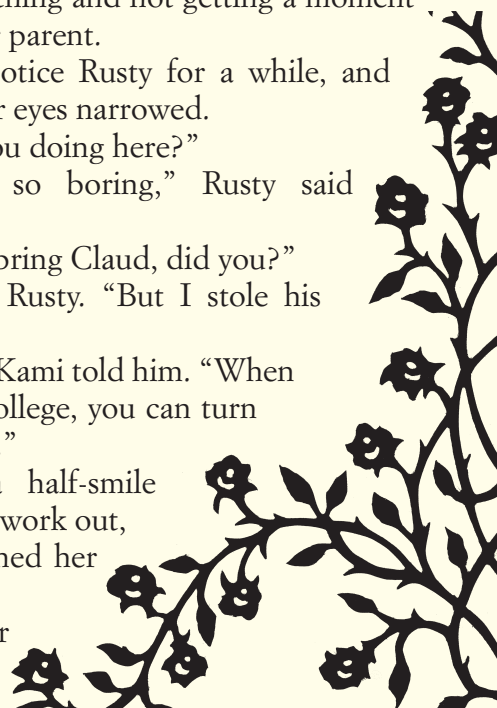
"You didn't bring Claud, did you?"

"Nah," said Rusty. "But I stole his car."

"Fantastic," Kami told him. "When you fail out of college, you can turn to a life of crime."

She tried a half-smile that didn't quite work out, and Rusty punched her in the shoulder.

"Thanks for



coming,” Kami said, and turned back to her family. After a while, they left. Kami told Liz thank you as well and promised she would come back soon.

“Actually, I’ve officially quit college,” Rusty told his sister as the Glass car drove away. He slouched at the window with the sunset bringing out the red glints in his hair, his easy drawl belied by the tiny line etched between his dark brows. “It really wasn’t going well. And I pine, thinking about you and Cambridge having adventures without me.”

*

Liz had assumed Kami would not be back, but apparently Kami always kept her word and liked to keep busy. Only a few days after the funeral, which the entire cricket camp attended with a solemnity that Liz did not have to enforce, Kami came back.

She seemed much the same, resolutely so. If her moments of distance were more frequent and came with the shadow of sorrow on her face, Liz would have assumed it was natural, if not for her glimpse at Kami unguarded in the woods.

Liz tried to think of a way to bring it up, but she didn’t know how. Kami seemed all right; she instantly threw herself into preparations for the leaving dance, and was very reproachful about Liz and Angela not thinking to acquire more tinfoil, drums and gummy bears. Liz was very concerned about what she was planning: the words “gummy bear piñata” did nothing to assuage her fears.

She held the ladder for Kami as Kami affixed the piñata to the ceiling, despite her misgivings.

“Nice skirt,” Liz said, since she was eye level with it; it was black and frilly, done up with brass buttons. “Claud coming down?”

“Yes, I was thinking we’d make out passionately on the dance floor in front of the kids,” Kami said. “Twining around each other like eels in love. Eels who have moves. That’s cool, right?”

“Sounds educational,” Liz observed.

“No,” said Kami. “We broke up. He came to see me a couple of times at the house, and it didn’t go well, and . . . I think we broke up. He stopped calling me, and I stopped calling him and stopped wanting him to call. It was all a bit anticlimactic. I was kind of hoping my first breakup would involve me slapping someone in the face with a napkin and pouring red wine over their head.”

“Someday,” Liz offered.

“I think it’s for the best,” Kami said. “He was a tool, wasn’t he? And everybody knew but me.”

Liz was tactfully silent. Kami climbed down the ladder and gave Liz a bright smile.

“It’s okay, really.”

“You sure?” Liz asked. “It’s normal to like guys who seem to like you; it’s normal to want to be loved.”

Kami raised her eyebrows. “I’m sixteen,” she said. “I’m not looking for love.”

“Oh,” said Liz. “Uh, what are you looking for?”

“Cheap thrills, mostly,” said Kami, and laughed at the look on Liz’s face.

Liz worried that she was becoming a maiden aunt who was scandalized by the children’s ways. She and Kami walked out of the partied-up cabin to the field where Angela was meant to keep the children contained; Liz hoped there had been no fatalities.

“The thing is, I’ve got love,” Kami said. “I guess what I wanted was . . . to be chosen. The guys in Sorry-in-the-Vale think I’m weird.” Kami lifted a shoulder uncomfortably. “More than weird, I guess.”

Liz remembered Kami, deep in the woods, talking to someone who was not there. She said nothing.

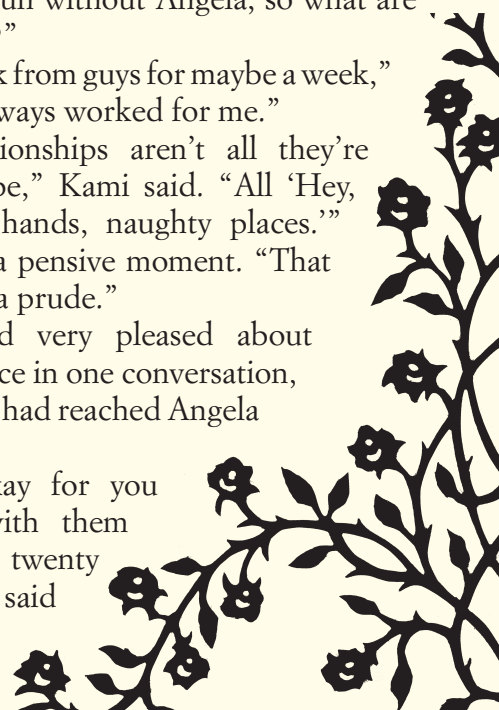
“Plus standing next to Angela really puts me off my game,” Kami said. “My gentleman-killer game. But life isn’t as fun without Angela, so what are you going to do?”

“Take a break from guys for maybe a week,” Liz advised. “Always worked for me.”

“Yeah, relationships aren’t all they’re cracked up to be,” Kami said. “All ‘Hey, watch it, busy hands, naughty places.’” She paused for a pensive moment. “That Claud was such a prude.”

Kami looked very pleased about shocking Liz twice in one conversation, and by then they had reached Angela and the kids.

“It’s not okay for you to leave me with them for more than twenty minutes,” said Angela.



“Did you lose any of them?” Kami asked.

“I have no idea,” said Angela. “I have taken great care to learn none of their names or faces.”

“Good enough!” Kami announced. “Party time.”

*

“Angela,” said Liz, “could you maybe pretend that you’re at an actual party?”

Angela, who was lying back in the dark with sunglasses on and had cruelly turned down nine twelve-year-old boys for a dance, raised her eyebrows over her sunglasses. “This is how I behave at an actual party.”

“This is true,” Kami admitted. “Sad but true.”

Clive Green, who had been standing at a distance regarding them with a thoughtful air, came to a decision and marched over to the group.

“Kami,” he said. “Would you like to dance?”

Kami beamed. “Usually I like my men the same way I like my bank account—in double digits. But you take what you can get. Lead on, Sir Clive.”

“Oh no, here we go,” said Angela.

Kami danced the same way she did everything, with boundless enthusiasm and little regard for the rules. Liz watched carefully in case one of her flailing arms hit a child. Angela pushed her sunglasses up her nose and turned her face away.

“Good heavens, Cambridge is dancing,” said Rusty from behind them. Liz barely jumped; he had been haunting the place even more now that he was officially out of college and back in Sorry-in-the-Vale. Rusty regarded Kami fondly and added, “I hope someone has safeguarded the valuables. Want to dance?”

He was holding out his hand to his sister, Liz recognized, and was slightly disappointed. But they were sweet together, both good and graceful dancers, their performance considerably more languid than Kami’s. Rusty grabbed Kami’s hand and twirled her on the dance floor; all the kids were laughing, Rusty, Angela and Kami included, and Liz could see several of the girls sidling over to Rusty. Smart money was on Sara Manning.

Everyone seemed okay. Liz went out for a breath of air, sat on the steps and called her mother. If a girl six years younger than she was could be sure about what she wanted, Liz could be sure enough to say

what she didn’t want.

They talked a bit about Liz coming home, about seeing her sister, and then Liz said, “I was thinking about doing some work experience next, since I don’t want to join the firm.”

Her mother hesitated and did not, as Liz had expected, protest. “If that’s what you want,” she answered at last.

“Yes,” said Liz. “It is.”

And there was no more argument, the subject she had been dreading closed once and forever in a moment. Liz sat on the steps feeling mildly stunned.

Kami poked her head around the door.

“Hey,” she said. “Everyone’s wondering where you are. Clive has tossed me to one side like a soiled glove and has a gleam in his eye, seeking fresh prey. What are you up to?”

“Nothing much,” Liz replied, smiling at her. “Just feeling generally good about life.”

Kami looked up at the darkening sky. The sunset turned the irises of her strange eyes briefly scarlet, and Liz wondered if she was talking inside her head to someone who wasn’t there.

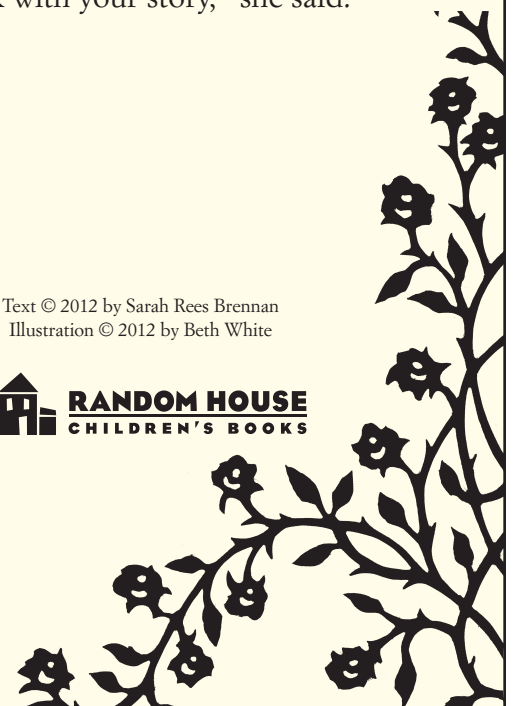
Liz’s worry evaporated when Kami smiled in return. “Me too,” she said. “Rusty brought some exciting gossip back from Sorry-in-the-Vale. He hears that the Lynburns are coming back. I can’t wait. I bet there’s a story there.”

Liz got up, dusting off her jeans, and walked in with Kami to rejoin the dancing and the laughter.

“Best of luck with your story,” she said.

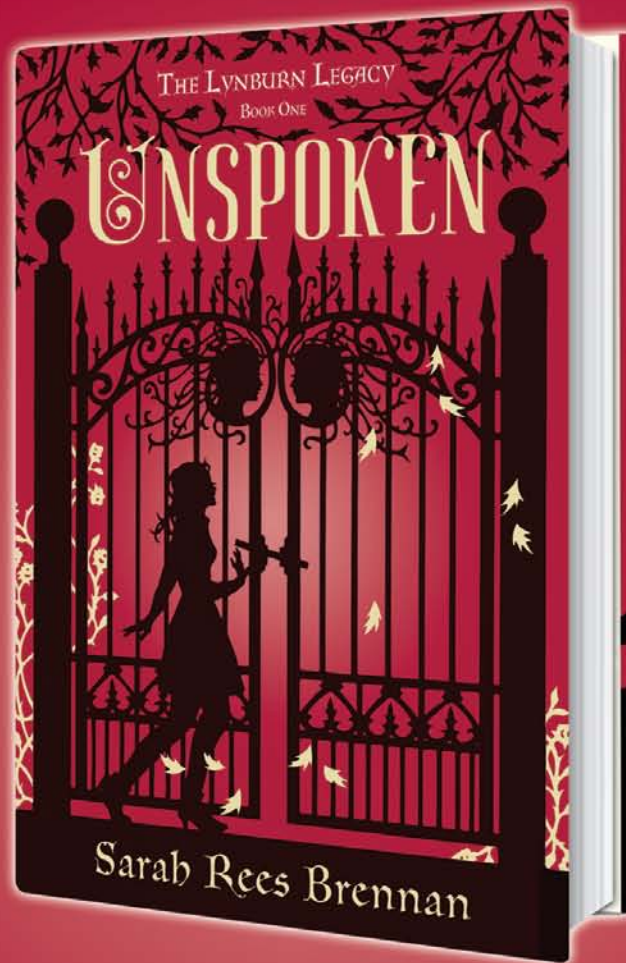
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