

BLOOD RED ROAD

Moira Young



DOUBLEDAY CANADA

DUSTLANDS BOOK ONE

BLOOD RED ROAD

MOIRA YOUNG



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CONTENTS

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication

SILVERLAKE

THE TRACKWAY

CROSSCREEK

SANDSEA

HOPETOWN

HOPETOWN: ONE MONTH LATER

DARKTREES

THE BLACK MOUNTAINS

FREEDOM FIELDS

Acknowledgments

LUGH GOT BORN FIRST. ON MIDWINTER DAY WHEN THE SUN hangs low in the sky.

Then me. Two hours later.

That pretty much says it all.

Lugh goes first, always first, an I follow on behind.

An that's fine.

That's right.

That's how it's meant to be.

Because everythin's set. It's all fixed.

~~The lives of everybody who's ever bin born.~~

The lives of everybody still waitin to be born.

It was all set in the stars the moment the world began. The time of yer birthin, the time of yer death. Even what kinda person yer gonna be, good or bad.

If you know how to read the stars, you can read the story of people's lives. The story of yer own life. What's gone, what's now an what's still to come.

Back when Pa was a boy, he met up with a traveler, a man who knew many things. He learned Pa how to read the stars. Pa never says what he sees in the night sky but you can see it lays heavy on him.

Because you cain't change what's written.

Even if Pa was to say what he knew, even if he was to warn you, it would still come to pass.

I see the way he looks at Lugh sometimes. The way he looks at me.

An I wish he'd tell us what he knows.

I believe Pa wishes he'd never met that traveler.

If you seen me an Lugh together, you'd never think we was the same blood.

~~Never think we grew together in the same womb.~~

He's got gold hair. I got black.

Blue eyes. Brown eyes.

Strong. Scrawny.

Beautiful. Ugly.

He's my light.

I'm his shadow.

Lugh shines like the sun.

That must of made it easy fer them to find him.

All they had to do was follow his light.

SILVERLAKE

THE DAY'S HOT. SO HOT AN SO DRY THAT ALL I CAN TASTE IN my mouth is dust. The kinda white heat day where you can hear th'earth crack.

We ain't had a drop of rain fer near six months now. Even the spring that feeds the lake startin to run dry. You gotta walk some ways out now to fill a bucket. Pretty soon, there won't be no point in callin it by its name.

Silverlake.

Every day Pa tries another one of his charms or spells. An every day, big bellied rainclouds gather on the horizon. Our hearts beat faster an our hopes rise as they creep our way. But well before they reach us, they break apart, thin out an disappear. Every time.

Pa never says naught. He jest stares at the sky, the clear cruel sky. Then he gathers up the stones or twigs or whatever he's set out on the ground this time, an puts 'em away for tomorrow.

Today, he shoves his hat back. Tips his head up an studies the sky fer a long while.

I do believe I'll try a circle, he says. Yuh, I reckon a circle might be jest the thing.

Lugh's bin sayin it fer a while now. Pa's gittin worse. With every dry day that passes, a little bit more of Pa seems to ... I guess disappear's the best word fer it.

Once we could count on pullin a fish from the lake an a beast from our traps. Fer everythin else, we planted some, foraged some, an, all in all, we made out okay. But fer the last year whatever we do, however hard we try, it jest ain't enough. Not without rain. We bin watchin the land die, bit by bit.

An it's the same with Pa. Day by day, what's best in him withers away. Mind you, he ain't bin right fer a long time. Not since Ma died. But what Lugh says is true. Jest like the land Pa's gittin worse an his eyes look more'n more to the sky instead of what's here in front of him.

I don't think he even sees us no more. Not really.

Emmi runs wild these days, with filthy hair an a runny nose. If it warn't fer Lugh, I don't think she'd ever wash at all.

Before Emmi was born, when Ma was still alive an everythin was happy, Pa was different. Ma could always make him laugh. He'd chase me an Lugh around, or throw us up over his head till we shrieked fer him to stop. An he'd warn us about the wickedness of the world beyond Silverlake. Back then, I didn't think there could be anybody ever lived who was taller or stronger or smarter'n our pa.

I watch him outta the corner of my eye while me an Lugh git on with repairs to the shanty roof. The walls is sturdy enough, bein that they're made from tires all piled one on top of th'other. But the wicked hotwinds that whip across the lake sneak their way into the smallest chink an lift whole parts of the roof at once. We're always havin to mend the damn thing.

So, after last night's hotwind, me an Lugh was down at the landfill at first light scavengin. We dug around a part of it we ain't never tried before an damn if we didn't manage to score ourselves some primo Wrecker junk. A nice big sheet of metal, not too rusted, an a cooking pot that's still got its handle.

Lugh works on the roof while I do what I always do, which is clamber up an down the

ladder an hand him what he needs.

Nero does what he always does, which is perch on my shoulder an caw real loud, right in my ear, to tell me what he's thinkin. He's always got a opinion does Nero, an he's real smart too. I figger if only we could unnerstand crow talk, we'd find he was tellin us a thing or two about the best way to fix a roof.

He'll of thought about it, you can bet on that. He's watched us fix it fer five year now. Even since I found him fell outta the nest an his ma nowhere to be seen. Pa warn't too happy to see me bring a crow babby home. He told me some folk consider crows bring death, but I was set on rearin him by hand an once I set my mind on somethin I stick with it.

An then there's Emmi. She's doin what she always does, which is pester me an Lugh. She kicks dogs my heels as I go from the ladder to the junk pile an back.

I wanna help, she says.

Hold the ladder then, I says.

No! I mean really help! All you ever let me do is hold the ladder!

Well, I says, maybe that's all yer fit fer. You ever think of that?

She folds her arms across her skinny little chest an scowls at me. Yer mean, she says.

So you keep tellin me, I says.

I start up the ladder, a piece of rusty metal in my hand, but I ain't gone more'n three rungs before she takes hold an starts shakin it. I grab on to stop myself from fallin. Nero squawls an flaps off in a flurry of feathers. I glare down at Em.

Cut that out! I says. What're you tryin to do, break my neck?

Lugh's head pops over the side of the roof. All right, Em, he says, that's enough. Go help Pa.

Right away, she lets go. Emmi always does what Lugh tells her.

But I wanna help you, she says with her sulky face.

We don't need yer help, I says. We're doin jest fine without you.

Yer the meanest sister that ever lived! I hate you, Saba!

Good! Cuz I hate you too!

That's enough! says Lugh. Both of yuz!

Emmi sticks her tongue out at me an stomps off. I shin up the ladder onto the roof, crawling along an hand him the metal sheet.

I swear I'm gonna kill her one of these days, I says.

She's only nine, Saba, says Lugh. You might try bein nice to her fer a change.

I grunt an hunker down nearby. Up here on the roof, I can see everythin. Emmi rides around on her rickety two-wheeler that Lugh found in the landfill. Pa at his spell circle.

It ain't nuthin more'n a bit of ground that he leveled off by stompin it down with his boots. We ain't permitted nowhere near it, not without his say so. He's always fussin around sweepin clear any twigs or sand that blow onto it. He ain't set out none of the sticks fer his rain circle on the ground yet. I watch as he lays down the broom. Then he takes three steps to the right an three steps to the left. Then he does it agin. An agin.

You seen what Pa's up to? I says to Lugh.

He don't raise his head. Jest starts hammerin away at the sheet to straighten it.

I seen, he says. He did it yesterday too. An the day before.

What's all that about? I says. Goin right, then left, over an over.

How should I know? he says. His lips is pressed together in a tight line. He's got that look on his face agin. The blank look he gits when Pa says somethin or asks him to do somethin. I see it on him more an more these days.

Lugh! Pa lifts his head, shadin his eyes. I could use yer help here, son!

Foolish old man, Lugh mutters. He gives the metal sheet a extra hard whack with the hammer.

Don't say that, I says. Pa knows what he's doin. He's a star reader.

Lugh looks at me. Shakes his head, like he cain't believe I jest said what I did.

Ain't you figgered it out yet? It's all in his head. Made up. There ain't nuthin written in the stars. There ain't no great plan. The world goes on. Our lives jest go on an on in this gawdfersaken place. An that's it. Till the day we die. I tell you what, Saba, I've took about as much as I can take.

I stare at him.

Lugh! Pa yells.

I'm busy! Lugh yells back.

Right now, son!

Lugh swears unner his breath. He throws the hammer down, pushes past me an pratikal. He runs down the ladder. He rushes over to Pa. He snatches the sticks from him an throws 'em to the ground. They scatter all over.

There! Lugh shouts. There you go! That should help! That should make the gawdam rain come! He kicks Pa's new-swept spell circle till the dust flies. He pokes his finger hard into Pa's chest. Wake up, old man! Yer livin in a dream! The rain ain't never gonna come! This hellhole is dyin an we're gonna die too if we stay here. Well, guess what? I ain't doin it no more! I'm outta here!

I knew this would come, says Pa. The stars told me you was unhappy, son. He reaches over an puts a hand on Lugh's arm. Lugh flings it off so fierce it makes Pa stagger backwards.

Yer crazy, you know that? Lugh shouts it right in his face. The stars told you! Why don't you jest try listenin to what I say fer once?

He runs off. I hurry down the ladder. Pa's starin at the ground, his shoulders slumped.

I don't unnerstand, he says. I see the rain comin.... I read it in the stars but ... it don't come. Why don't it come?

It's okay, Pa, says Emmi. I'll help you. I'll put 'em where you want. She scrabbles about on her knees, collectin all the sticks. She looks at him with a anxious smile.

Lugh didn't mean it Pa, she says. I know he didn't.

I go right on past 'em.

I know where Lugh's headed.



I find him at Ma's rock garden.

He sits on the ground, in the middle of the swirlin patterns, the squares an circles an little paths made from all different stones, each their own shade an size. Every last tiny pebble set out by Ma with her own hands. She wouldn't allow that anybody should help her.

She carefully laid the last stone in place. Sat back on her heels an smiled at me, rubbin at her baby-swolled belly. Her long golden hair in a braid over one shoulder.

There! You see, Saba? There can be beauty anywhere. Even here. An if it ain't there, you can make it yerself.

The day after that, she birthed Emmi. A month too early. Ma bled fer two days, then she died. We built her funeral pyre high an sent her spirit back to the stars. Once we'd scattered her ash to the winds, all we was left with was Em.

A ugly little red scrap with a heartbeat like a whisper. More like a newborn mouse than a person. By rights, she shouldn't of lasted longer'n a day or two. But somehow she hung on an she's still here. Small fer her age though, an scrawny.

Fer a long time, I couldn't stand even lookin at her. When Lugh says I shouldn't be so hard on her, I says that if it warn't fer Emmi, Ma 'ud still be alive. He ain't got no answer to that cuz he knows it's true, but he always shakes his head an says somethin like, It's time you get over it, Saba, an that kinda thing.

I put up with Emmi these days, but that's about as far as it goes.

Now I set myself down on the hard-packed earth so's my back leans against Lugh's. I like when we sit like this. I can feel his voice rumble inside my body when he talks. It must of be like this when the two of us was inside Ma's belly together. Esseptin that neether of us could talk then, of course.

We sit there fer a bit, silent. Then, We should of left here a long time ago, he says. There gotta be better places'n this. Pa should of took us away.

You ain't really leavin, I says.

Ain't I? There ain't no reason to stay. I cain't jest sit around waitin to die.

Where would you go?

It don't matter. Anywhere, so long as it ain't Silverlake.

But you cain't. It's too dangerous.

We only got Pa's word fer that. You do know that you an me ain't ever bin more'n one day's walk in any direction our whole lives. We never see nobody essept ourselves.

That ain't true, I says. What about that crazy medicine woman on her camel last year? An ... we see Potbelly Pete. He's always got a story or two about where he's bin an who he's seen.

I ain't talkin about some shyster pedlar man stoppin by every couple of months, he says. By the way, I'm still sore about them britches he tried to unload on me last time.

They was hummin all right, I says. Like a skunk wore 'em last. Hey wait, you fergo Procter.

Our only neighbor's four leagues north of here. He's a lone man, name of Procter John. He set up homestead jest around the time Lugh an me got born. He drops by once a month or so. Not that he ever stops proper, mind. He don't git down offa his horse, Hob, but jest pulls up by the hut. Then he says the same thing, every time.

G'day, Willem. How's the young 'uns? All right?

They're fine, Procter, says Pa. You?

Well enough to last a bit longer.

Then he tips his hat an goes off an we don't see him fer another month. Pa don't like him. He never says so, but you can tell. You'd think he'd be glad of somebody to talk to besides us, but he never invites Procter to stay an take a dram.

Lugh says it's on account of the chaal. We only know that's what it's called because on

time I asked Pa what it is that Procter's always chewin an Pa's face went all tight an it w
like he didn't wanna tell us. But then he said it's called chaal an it's poison to the mind a
soul, an if anybody ever offers us any we're to say no. But since we never see nobody, such
offer don't seem too likely.

Now Lugh shakes his head. You cain't count Procter John, he says. Nero's got mo
conversation than him. I swear, Saba, if I stay here, I'll eether go crazy or I'll end up kill
Pa. I gotta go.

I scramble around, kneel in front of him.

I'm comin with you, I says.

Of course, he says. An we'll take Emmi with us.

I don't think Pa 'ud let us, I says. An she wouldn't wanna go anyways. She'd rather sta
with him.

You mean you'd rather she stayed, he says. We gotta take her with us, Saba. We cair
leave her behind.

What about ... maybe if you was to talk to Pa, he might see sense, I says. Then we cou
all go to a new place together.

He won't, Lugh says. He cain't leave Ma.

Whaddy mean? I says. Ma's dead.

Lugh says, What I mean is ... him an Ma made this place together an, in his mind, she's st
here. He cain't leave her memory, that's what I'm sayin.

But we're the ones still alive, I says. You an me.

An Emmi, he says. I know that. But you see how he is. It's like we don't exist. He don
give two hoots fer us.

Lugh thinks fer a moment. Then he says, Love makes you weak. Carin fer somebody th
much means you cain't think straight. Look at Pa. Who'd wanna end up like him? I ain
never gonna love nobody. It's better that way.

I don't say naught. Jest trace circles in the dirt with my finger.

My gut twists. Like a mean hand reached right inside me an grabbed it.

Then I says, What about me?

Yer my sister, he says. It ain't the same.

But what if I died? You'd miss me, wouldn't you?

Huh, he says. Fat chance of you dyin an leavin me in peace. Always followin m
everywhere, drivin me nuts. Since the day we was born.

It ain't my fault yer the tallest thing around, I says. You make a good sunshade.

Hey! He pushes me onto my back.

I push him with my foot. Hey yerself! I prop myself up on my elbows. Well, I says, wou
you?

What?

Miss me.

Don't be stupid, he says.

I kneel in front of him. He looks at me. Lugh's got eyes as blue as the summer sky. Blue a
the clearest water. Ma used to say his eyes was so blue, it made her want to sail away o
'em.

I'd miss you, I says. If you died, I'd miss you so much I'd wanna kill myself.

Don't talk foolish, Saba.

Promise me you won't, I says.

Won't what?

Die.

Everybody's gotta die one day, he says.

I reach out an touch his birthmoon tattoo. High on his right cheekbone, jest like mine, shows how the moon looked in the sky the night we was born. It was a full moon the midwinter. That's a rare thing. But twins born unner a full moon at the turnin of the year that's even rarer. Pa did the tattoos hisself, to mark us out as special.

We was eighteen year our last birthday. That must be four month ago, near enough.

When we die, I says, d'you think we'll end up stars together, side by side?

You gotta stop thinkin like that, he says. I told you, that's jest Pa's nonsense.

Go on then, if you know so much, tell me what happens when you die.

I dunno. He sighs an flops back on the ground, squintin at the sky. You jest ... stop. Your heart don't beat no more, you don't breathe an then yer jest ... gone.

An that's it, I says.

Yeah.

Well that's stupid, I says. I mean, we spend our lives doin all this ... sleepin an eatin an fixin roofs an then it all jest ... ends. Hardly seems worth the trouble.

Well, that's the way it is, he says.

You ... hey Lugh, you wouldn't ever leave without me, would you?

Of course not, he says. But even if I did, you'd only follow me.

I will follow you ... everywhere you go! When I say it, I make crazy eyes an a crazy face because it creeps him out when I do that. To the bottom of the lake, I says, ... to the ends of the earth ... to the moon ... to the stars ...!

Shut up! He leaps to his feet. Bet you don't follow me to skip rocks, he says an runs off.

Hey! I yell. Wait fer me!

† † †

We run a fair ways out onto the dry lakebed before we find water enough to skip stones. We pass the skiff that Pa helped me an Lugh build when we was little kids. Now it lies high an dry where the shoreline used to be.

We walk till we're outta sight of the shanty, outta sight of Pa an Emmi. The fierce noonda sun beats down an I wrap my sheema around my head so's I don't fry too much. I wish I too after Ma, like Lugh, but I favor Pa. It's strange, but even with our dark hair, our skin burns we don't cover up.

Lugh never wears a sheema. Says they make him feel trapped an anyways the sun don't bother him none. Not like me. When I tell him it'll deserve him right if he drops dead from sunstroke one day, he says, well if that happens you can say I told you so. I will, too.

I find a pretty good stone right off. I rub my fingers over its flat smoothness. Feel its weight.

I got a lucky one here, I says.

Lugh hunts around to find one fer hisself. While he does it, I walk up an down on my hands. It's about th'only thing I can do that he cain't. He pretends he don't care, but I know

he does.

You look funny upside down, I says.

Lugh's golden hair gleams in the sun. He wears it tied back in one long braid that reaches almost to his waist. I wear mine the same, only my hair's black as Nero's feathers.

His necklace catches the light. I found the little ring of shiny green glass in the landfill and threaded it on a piece of leather. I gave it to him for our eighteen year birthday and he ain't took it off since.

What did he give me? Nuthin. Like always.

Okay I got a good one, he calls.

I go runnin over to take a look. Not as good as mine, I says.

I'm gonna skip eight today, he says. I feel it in my bones.

In yer dreams, I says. I'm callin a seven.

I whip my arm back and send the stone skimmin over the water. It skips once, twice, three times. Four, five, six ...

Seven! I says. Seven! Didya see that?

I cain't hardly believe it. I ain't never done more'n five before.

Sorry, Lugh says. I warn't lookin. Guess you'll hafta do it agin.

What! My best ever and you didn't ... you rat! You did see! Yer jest sick with jealousy. I fold my arms over my chest. Go on. Let's see you do eight. Betcha cain't.

He does seven. Then I do my usual five. He's jest pullin his arm back for another try when it's outta nowhere, Nero comes swoopin down at us, cawin his head off.

Damn bird, says Lugh, he made me drop my stone. He gits on his knees to look for it.

Go away! I says, flappin my hands at Nero. Shoo, you bad boy! Go find somebody else to-

A dustcloud's jest appeared on the horizon. A billowin orange mountain of dust. It's so tall it scrapes against the sun. It's movin fast. Headed straight at us.

Uh ... Lugh, I says.

There must be somethin in my voice. He looks up sharpish. Drops the stone in his hand. Gits slowly to his feet.

Holy crap, he says.

We jest stand there. Stand and stare. We git all kinda weather here. Hotwinds, firestorms, tornadoes, and once or twice we even had snow in high summer. So I seen plenty of dust storms. But never one like this.

That's one bastard of a cloud, I says.

We better git outta here, says Lugh.

We start to back away slow, still starin. Then, Run, Saba! Lugh yells.

He grabs my hand, yankin at me till my feet move, and then we're runnin. Runnin for home as fast as wolfdogs on the hunt.

I look over my shoulder and git a shock. The dustcloud's halfway across the lake. I never seen one move so fast. We got a minute, two at most, before it's on us.

We cain't outrun it! I yell at Lugh. It's comin too fast!

The shanty comes into view and we start to shout and wave our arms.

Emmi's still ridin around on her two-wheeler.

Pa! we scream. Pa! Emmi! Dust storm!

Pa appears in the doorway. Shades his eyes with his hand. Then he makes a dash for Emmi.

snatches her an runs full pelt fer the unnerground storm cellar.

The cellar ain't more'n fifty paces from the shanty. He hauls up the wooden door set in the ground an drops Emmi inside. He waves his arms at us, frantic.

I look back. Gasp. The great mountain of orange dust races towards us with a roar. Like a ravenous beast, gobblin the ground as it goes.

Faster, Saba! Lugh yells. He rips off his shirt an starts wrappin it around his face.

Nero! I says. I stop, look all around. Where's Nero?

No time! Lugh grabs my wrist, pulls at me.

Pa yells somethin I cain't hear. He climbs into the storm cellar an pulls the door to.

I cain't leave him out here! I pull myself free. Nero! I yell. Nero!

It's too late! Lugh says. He'll save hisself! C'mon!

A fork of lightnin slashes down an lands with a almighty crack an hiss.

One Missus Ippi, two Missus Ippi, three—

There's a sullen rumble of thunder.

Less'n a league! Lugh says.

Everythin goes black. The cloud's on us. I cain't see a thing.

Lugh! I scream.

Hang on! he yells. Don't let go!

The next thing I know, a tingle runs across my skin. I gasp. Lugh must feel it too because he lets go my hand like he's bin scalded.

Lightnin's comin! he yells. Git down!

We hunker down, some ways apart. We crouch as low to the ground as we can git. My heart's stuck in my throat.

One more time, Saba. If lightnin catches you out in the open, whaddya do?

Crouch down, head down, feet together, hands on knees. Don't let my hands or knees touch the ground. That's right, ain't it, Pa?

An never lie down. Don't ferget that, Saba, never lie down.

I hear Pa's voice loud an clear in my head. He got struck by lightnin as a boy. Nearly got killed from not knowin the right thing to do, so he's made damn sure we all know what to—

Crack! The darkness splits open with a bright flash an a slam boom. It sends me flyin. I bang my head against the ground—hard. Try to pull myself up but fall back. Dizzy. My head spins round an round. I groan.

Saba! Lugh shouts. Are y'okay?

Another flash an boom splits the darkness. I think it's headed away from us, but I cain't be sure, my head's so muddled. My ears ring.

Saba! Lugh yells. Where are you?

Over here! I call out, my voice all thin an shaky. I'm here!

An then Lugh's there, kneelin beside me an pullin me up to sit.

Are you hurt? he says. Are y'okay? He slips his arm around me, helps me to stand. My legs feel all wobbly. Did it hit you?

I ... uh ... it ... knocked me offa my feet, is all, I says.

Then, as we stand there, the dark rolls away.

An the world's turned red.

Bright red like the heart of a fire. Everythin. The ground, the sky, the shanty, me, Lugh-

all red. Fine red dust fills the air, touches every single thing. A red red world. I ain't never seen nuthin like it before.

Me an Lugh stare at each other.

Looks like the end of the world, I says. My voice sounds muffled, like I'm talkin unner blanket.

An then, outta that red dust haze, the men on horses appear.

† † †

There's five of 'em. Ridin sturdy, shaggy coat mustangs.

Even in normal times we don't git folk passin by Silverlake, so it's a shock to see strange blowin in on the tail of the worst dust storm in years. The horsemen pull up near the shant. They don't dismount. We start over.

Let me do the talkin, Lugh says.

Four of the riders is dressed in long black robes. They got on heavy leather vests strapped over top an sheemas wrapped round their heads. They're dusted head to foot with red earth. As we git closer, I can see the fifth man's our neighbor, Procter John. He's ridin his horse Hob.

As we come in earshot, Lugh calls out, Strange kinda day fer a ride, ain't it, Procter John?

Nobody says nuthin. Their sheemas cover the riders' faces so's we can't see the expressions.

Now we're right up near 'em.

Procter, Lugh nods. Who's yer friends?

Procter still says naught. Jest stares down at his hands holdin the reins.

Look, I whisper to Lugh. Blood trickles out from unner Procter John's hat, snakes down his face.

What's goin on here? says Lugh. Procter? By the sound of his voice, I can tell he think somethin ain't right about this. Me too. My heartbeat picks up.

Is this him? says one of the men to Procter John. Golden Boy here? Is he the one born at midwinter?

Procter John don't look up. He nods. That be him, he says in a low voice.

How many years you got, boy? the man says to Lugh.

Eighteen, says Lugh. What's it to you anyways?

An you was fer definite born at midwinter?

Yeah. Look, what's all this about?

I told you he's the right one, says Procter John. I should know. I bin keepin a eye on him all this time like you told me to. Can I go now?

The man nods.

Sorry, Lugh, says Procter John, still not lookin at us. They didn't give me no choice.

He clicks Hob an makes to leave. The man slides a bolt shooter from his robe. I know he must be movin fast, but it all seems to go so slow. He pulls the trigger an shoots Procter. He rears in fright. Procter slides off an lands in a heap on the ground. He don't move.

A cold jolt runs through me. We're in trouble. I grab Lugh's arm. The four men start movin towards us.

Fetch Pa, Lugh says. Quick. I'll draw 'em away from the house.

No, I says. It's too dangerous.

Move, gawdammit!

He turns. Starts runnin back towards the lake. The men heel their horses an head after him.

I run like stink fer the storm cellar, fast as my feet'll carry me.

Pa! I yell. Pa! Come quick!

I look over my shoulder. Lugh's halfway to the lake. The four riders is spreadin out to make a big circle. Lugh keeps runnin, but he's caught in the middle. They start to close in on him. They tighten up. They're trappin him. One unhooks a rope from his saddle.

I pound my foot on the door of the storm cellar.

Pa! I scream. Pa! Open up!

The door creaks open. Pa's head appears.

Are they here? he says. Have they come?

You seen this comin. You read it in the stars.

Four men! I says. Quick! We gotta stop 'em!

Emmi, stay here! Pa scrambles outta the cellar. They cain't be stopped, Saba. It's begun.

His eyes look flat. Dead.

No, I says. Don't say that.

Now Lugh's trapped by the circlin horsemen. He darts at a gap. They block it. He stumbles an falls, picks hisself back up agin. In the dusty red haze, it don't look real.

Don't jest stand here! I yell at Pa. Help me!

I dive into the shanty. Grab my crossbow, sling my quiver on my back. Grab Pa's bow an shooter. Empty. I throw it down with a curse. Snatch up his crossbow an quiver.

I come runnin out.

Pa! I yell. They got Lugh! I grab his arm, give him a hard shake. This is real! You got to fight!

Then it's like he comes to life. He pulls hisself tall, his eyes spark an the Pa I remember from back. He hauls me to him, holds me so tight I cain't hardly breathe.

My time's nearly up, he says quickly.

No, Pa!

Listen. I dunno what happens after this. I could only see glimpses. But they're gonna need you, Saba. Lugh an Emmi. An there'll be others too. Many others. Don't give in to fear. Be strong, like I know you are. An never give up, d'you unnerstand, never. No matter what happens.

I stare at him.

I won't, I says. I ain't no quitter, Pa.

That's my girl.

He takes the crossbow. Slings the quiver on his back.

Ready? he says.

Ready, I says.

We start runnin. Runnin towards Lugh an the men on horseback.

One of the riders is loopin his rope into a lasso.

Load! yells Pa. We each snatch a arrow. Load.

The roper twirls the lasso once, twice. Throws.

Aim! yells Pa.

The lasso grabs Lugh's leg. The roper yanks on it, brings him down.

Fire! yells Pa.

We let fly. The arrows land short.

Load! Pa yells agin.

The roper an another rider leap offa their horses. They flip Lugh onto his back. One sits on him. Th'other one yanks his arms over his head, ties his wrists together, then his ankles.

Stop! says Pa. Let him go!

We're still runnin. We take aim. One of the mounted riders turns. Sees us comin at 'em. He raises his bolt shooter. He fires.

Pa cries out. His arms fly up in the air.

Pa! I scream.

He staggers. He falls.

Pa! I throw myself down beside him. The bolt's gone right through his heart. I grab his shoulders, pull him up. His head flops forwards.

No! I shake him. No no no no no no no! Don't do this, Pa! You cain't die! Please don't die!

I give him another shake. His head lolls back.

Pa, I whisper. I'm froze. I cain't move. He's dead. They've killed my pa.

A wild rage rises up in me. Red hot. Floodin me. Chokin me. I grab my crossbow. Leap on my feet an start runnin towards the men. As I run, I load my bow.

Aaaaaah! I scream. Aaaaaah!

I take aim. I shoot. But the red hot's makin my hands shake so much that I shoot wild. The arrow flies wide.

A shot comes whistlin at me. Sharp pain. Right hand. I cry out. My bow flies from my hand.

I keep runnin.

I burst past the horses, throw myself at the man tyin up Lugh. We roll on the ground, over an over. I kick at him, punch at him, screamin. He pushes me off. He's on his feet. Grabs my arm, hauls me up, slams me down. I land on my back. I gasp. Gasp. Cain't breathe. Cain't breathe. Cain't git my breath.

Then. Then.

I pull myself to my feet an face 'em, swayin.

The four horsemen's all down on the ground now. On foot. They surround Lugh. They don't even look my way. It's like I ain't here. Like I don't exist.

I hold my bleedin hand to my chest. Let him go, I says.

They don't pay me no heed.

Lugh raises his head. Eyes wide. Face white. Terrified. Like I ain't never seen him before.

I step closer. Take me with you, I says.

The one in charge jerks his head. They lift Lugh an sling him over one of the horses.

Please, I says. Please ... take me with you. I won't give you no trouble. Jest don't leave me here without him.

They tie him to the horse. The rider holds the horse's reins an jumps on behind one of th'other men. They start to move out in a swirl of red dust.

Lugh! I cry. I run alongside him. I gasp. Cain't git a breath.

Lugh lifts his head. Our eyes meet. Lugh's eyes. Blue as the summer sky. I grab his hands.

I'll find you, I says. Wherever they take you, I swear I'll find you.

No, he says. It's too dangerous. Keep yerself safe. You an Emmi. Promise me you will.

They grab Hob's rope as they pass. They're takin him too.

They break into a canter.

I cain't keep up. My hand slides away from Lugh's.

Promise me, Saba, Lugh says.

I keep runnin after 'em.

I'll find you! I scream.

They disappear into the red haze.

Lugh! I scream. Lugh! Come back!

My legs go out from unner me. I fall to my knees.

Emmi comes runnin outta the storm cellar. She stops. Stares at the hazy red world.

Procter John, lyin next to the hut. Then she sees Pa.

Pa! she screams an goes runnin towards him.

I cain't speak. Cain't breathe.

Lugh's gone.

Gone.

My golden heart is gone.

I kneel in the dust.

The tears roll down my face.

An a hard red rain starts to fall.

† † †

There's a knife in my gut.

It twists, rips me open. With every heartbeat, it slides in a bit further. I cain't feel su pain an live. I wrap my arms around my body, double over. My mouth opens in a sile scream.

I stay there a long time.

The rain don't let up. Around me, the parched earth turns into a churnin sea of mud.

Look, Pa, it's rainin.

Too late.

Nero flaps down an lands on my shoulder. Tugs at my hair.

I straighten up. Move slow. I'm numb. I don't feel nuthin.

Git up. You got things to do.

My hand. I look at it. Seems like it's a long ways off. Like it belongs to somebody else. Th shot scraped the skin off in a long strip. It must hurt.

I stand. Make my feet move. Right. Left. So heavy. I wade through the mud to the shant Nero flies off to huddle unner the eaves.

Hand. Clean yer hand.

I pour water over it. Pack it with fireweed leaf an tie a cloth around it.

Pa's dead. You gotta burn him. Set his spirit free so's it can journey back to the stars where come from.

I look in the wood store. There ain't enough to build a proper pyre. But I gotta burn him.

Think. Think.

I find our little handcart. Wheel it towards the lake. Shove it through the mud till I come where Emmi's standin by Pa.

She's got bare feet. She's soaked to the skin. Her hair hangs in wet rat's tails. They dr down her face, her neck.

She don't move. Don't look at me. She stares at nuthin.

I grab both her arms, give her a shake.

Pa's dead, I says. We gotta move him.

She leans over an retches into the mud. I wait till she's finished. She looks at me sidewis wipes a shaky hand across her mouth. She's cryin.

All right? I says. She nods. Take his feet, I says.

I take him unner his armpits an pull. Emmi takes his feet. Pa's got skinnier the past s months. No rain fer so long meant food's bin harder to find, pretty much impossible to grow

You ain't finished yer supper, Pa. Ain't you hungry?

Oh, I've et plenty, child. Here. Share the rest out between yuz.

He knew he warn't foolin us, but we all played along anyways.

Skinny as Pa is, he's a grown man. Too heavy to lift fer a scrappy little girl an me. W hafta heave him, inch by inch. Em slips an slides. She don't stop cryin. Pretty soon she covered head to toe in red mud.

At last we git him on the cart. Pa's tall, so only the top half of him fits in. His legs trail o behind.

Where's Lugh? Emmi sobs. I want Lugh.

He ain't here, I says.

Wh-wh-where is he?

Gone, I says. Some men took him.

He's dead, she says. You jest don't wanna tell me. He's dead! Lugh's dead! He's-dead-he's-dead-he's-dead-he's-dead-he's—

Shut up! I says.

She starts to scream. She gasps an sobs an screams an screams an screams.

Emmi! I yell. Stop it!

But she cain't. She's gone. Outta control.

So I slap her.

An she stops.

She gasps with shock. Takes in great shudderin breaths till she calms down. She wipes h nose on her sleeve. Looks at me. There's a red mark on her cheek. I shouldn't of done that. know I shouldn't. Lugh wouldn't of. She's too little to take a hit.

I'm sorry, I says. But you shouldn't of said that. Lugh ain't dead. Don't ever say he is. No hold Pa's feet outta the mud. Use his bootlaces. It'll be easier.

She does it.

I turn an start pullin the cart behind me. It's hard goin in the rain an mud. Water runs in my eyes, my mouth, my ears. Mud coats my boots an I slide.

Em's hopeless like always. She keeps fallin over, but every time she does I stop an help h up an we keep goin. At least she ain't cryin no more. We reach the shanty. We shove an pu the cart with Pa on it inside.

The shanty walls is made from tires.

The home Pa built with his own hands is gonna be his funeral pyre. I bet he didn't even think of that.

Emmi helps me turn our big old wooden table upside down an we drag Pa offa the cart an lay him on the table.

I go to the chest where we keep what clothes we got, which ain't much. When I lift the lid the smell of dried sage rises up. I pull out Pa's thick winter tunic an toss it to Emmi.

Tear it into strips, I says.

I lift out Lugh's winter tunic. I bury my face in it an breathe in deep. But we put it away clean. It smells of clean cloth an sage. It don't smell of him.

I git on with tearin it into strips.

Once we're done, there's a good-size pile. I dig out the jug of rootmash whisky. Pa brewed it when times was better. We soak all the cloth strips in it. Then I set Em to stuffin 'em into the walls, into the cracks between the tires. I put the rest around Pa's body.

I start fillin my barksack with necessaries. Red gizmo knife, flint, medicine herbs, spare shirt.

The same men that killed Pa took Lugh, I says. I'm goin after 'em. I dunno where they took him. It might be a long ways from here. It might take me a while to find him. But I will. I'm gonna bring him back.

I put in a waterskin, nettlecord rope, an enough sourberry seed jerky an dried rootcakes to last us a few days. If we run out, I'll jest hafta hunt.

They got a head start an they're on four legs, not two, I says. I'm gonna hafta travel fast.

I collect Emmi's waterskin, her tunic an her dogskin cloak. I don't look at her when I say I'm leavin you with Mercy by Crosscreek.

No, says Emmi.

I put her stuff in another barksack. Pa an Lugh told me to keep you safe, I says, an you'll be safe there. Mercy an Ma was friends. She helped when me an Lugh was born. She came when you was born too.

I know, says Em.

What we both know but don't say is that Mercy came too late. Emmi came early, Ma died an Mercy might as well of spared herself the trouble of a three day walk.

Mercy's a good woman, I says. Pa always said that if anythin was to ever happen to him we should go to her. He told me an Lugh the way to Crosscreek. She might even have a knife fer you to play with.

I don't care, says Emmi. I'm comin with you.

You cain't, I says. I dunno where I'm goin or how long it'll take me. Besides, yer too little. You'll only hold me back.

Emmi crosses her arms an sets her chin in that stubborn way she's got. Lugh's my brother too! she says. I got a right to look fer him, jest the same as you.

Don't give me no trouble, Emmi. I pick up the little peg doll Pa made her an throw it in the sack. It's fer the best. Once I find Lugh, I promise we'll come back an git you.

No you won't, she says. You hate me. You love Lugh an you hate me. I wish they'd took you instead!

Well they didn't, I says. Pa an Lugh left me in charge of you an I say yer goin to Mercy's. Let that be a end to it.

I shove Lugh's slingshot into my belt. Tuck Pa's knife into a sheath inside my boot. Slip my quiver an pistol crossbow on my back.

Hazy red light trickles through the small window. It lands across Pa's face.

I kneel beside him, take his hand in mine. Emmi kneels across from me an takes his other hand. He's still warm, she whispers.

After a little bit she says, You need to say the words now.

She's right. You always say special words to send a dead person on their way.

Pa said some fer Ma, before he lit her funeral pyre all them years ago, but I cain't remember what they was. Guess I was too young to take proper notice. Now it's his turn to have words said an I cain't think of nuthin.

Go on, says Emmi.

Then, Sorry, Pa, I says.

I didn't mean to say that, but my mouth moved an those're the words that come out. But I realize I am sorry. Truly.

I'm sorry yer dead, I says. I'm sorry you had it so hard here, specially the last while. Mostly I'm sorry you lost Ma when you loved her so much. I know you ain't had no joy since she went. Well ... now you'll be happy. You'll be together agin. Two stars, side by side.

I'm goin after Lugh, I says. I'm gonna git him back, Pa. I won't rest till I find him. I promise.

I look at Em. D'you wanna ... kiss him g'bye? I says.

She kisses him on the cheek, then I strike my flint an light the spills around his body.

Willem by Silverlake, I says, I set yer spirit free to return to its home among the stars.

The flames start to lick at the table.

G'bye, Pa, Emmi whispers. I'm gonna miss you.

We stand. I hand her the barksacks.

Go on outside, I says.

I light the spills set into the walls. I wait till the tires catch fire, till the flames start to run along the walls.

G'bye, Pa, I says.

I close the door behind me as I go.



The rain stops. A hot southerly starts to blow. The afternoon sun blazes down.

Nero hangs in the air above us, ridin the thermals in lazy spirals. Jest like Lugh said he would, he fled the storm an saved hisself. If only we could of done the same.

It looks like any other day. It could be yesterday, last week, a month ago. But it ain't. This ain't any other day.

I never knew. Didn't know everythin could be fine one moment an then the next moment so bad that it 'ud be like the time before that moment was all a dream.

Or maybe this is the dream. A long an terrible dream about a storm an some men in black who killed Pa an took Lugh away. Maybe I'll wake up soon. I'll tell everybody about it an we'll shake our heads about how strange dreams can be.

I feel a dull throb in my right hand. I look at it. There's a cloth wrapped around it, all filthy an torn. I prod it. A sharp pain shoots along my arm. Feels real enough.

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