

PILGRIM OF THE SKY



NATANIA BARRON

Eight Worlds Must Unite...

The light that came from her was as brilliant as sunlight, and it filled cold, dark First World with golden hues and brilliant greens. For a moment, the skies lit up, bright blue and clear. Nearby animals called out; plants strained toward the source, toward Maddie herself.

How long had they been lost in this sunless, sad world? Maddie would have wept to see it, but her heart was too full of power. She was lost to it.

What Others Are Saying:

“... a lush, dreamy fable—both vintage gothic, and modern mystery ... lovingly laced with magic and darkness from start to finish.”

—*Cherie Priest, author of **Boneshaker***

“Barron’s book is a sexy trek through alternate worlds, with a fascinating and detailed mythology. This one is a steampunk tale that doesn’t play by the rules.”

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“A brilliant, eloquent adventure through time, space, and the human heart.”

—*Jonathan Wood, author of **No Hero***

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OF THE
SKY

Natania Barron



Candlemark & Gleam

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For my sister Llana,
my first companion to worlds beyond.

1

The Last Box

Just one last box. That was Maddie's mantra. The rest of the apartment was empty, with the exception of a broom and the blinds. Five years of entrances and exits, of kisses and arguments, of conversations and pillow talk; it all became very final for Maddie Angler as she dropped the last box on the front stoop and shut the door one last time.

She felt her chest twist with the memories. Of Alvin. Of everything they'd had. Everything she'd lost.

Alvin was dead, after all. At least that's what Maddie had to believe. A year of searching for clues with the help of private investigators and half the police force of Amherst, Massachusetts, had turned up nothing. He'd gone out for a walk one day, and never come back. She'd been left to pick up the pieces.

But that wasn't all. The last box was more than just a jumble of Alvin's unfinished dissertation research. It was part of a promise Maddie had made to herself: When she moved out of their Amity Street apartment, she was going to move on, too. With everything. And that meant severing herself from Alvin's

mother and his brother, Randy.

They were waiting for her down by the street. Waiting for her to say goodbye. And Maddie knew that the moment she turned around to see them, everything would get harder than it already was.

Maddie picked the box back up and turned, taking two steps before she hit an icy patch and almost went down. She righted herself at the last second, coughing on cold air.

Mrs. Roth gasped, "Oh heavens, Madeline!" She had come to help Maddie with the last few things, but really had done little more than talk incessantly and fret over Randy, who was nowhere to be seen at the moment.

Mrs. Roth was fifty-something, with a crop of short, badly dyed hair. She was fat and red-cheeked, and had a penchant for wearing sweatshirts with playful kittens on them, as well as a taste for garish handbags. To keep out the cold she wore an apple-red parka and gold-trimmed galoshes.

"I'm fine," Maddie said. "This is the last of it. Mostly papers. God, he left behind so many papers."

Mrs. Roth frowned, putting out her hands to take the box, but Maddie passed by her and went toward her car, a brown '88 Civic. The last Maddie had seen Randy, he was picking his way around it in his usual unusual manner. But now he was not in sight.

"It's hard to believe you're really leaving," Mrs. Roth said.

Maddie craned her neck. "Hey, where'd Randy go?"

"He was chasing some crows over that way," Mrs. Roth said, indicating the east-facing side of the building.

As if on cue, Randy emerged from the side of the apartment building—a converted Colonial with black and white siding—and Maddie bit down on her lip, the pain cutting through the numbness. In that first moment, Randy always looked ordinary. He was tall and slim, always more handsome than Alvin had ever been, still in his late twenties. His hat, something

Maddie had knitted for him, was pulled down over his hair, sending his rusty brown curls out in various directions and doing nothing to dissipate just how charming he could look.

Randy's eyes were downcast. But then he looked up at Maddie, and the look said it all. Just like the children's book of Madeline's namesake: "*Ms. Clavel said, 'Something is not right.'*"

With Randy, it wasn't autism. It wasn't schizophrenia. It wasn't anything a doctor could identify, though many had tried. One day, while in high school, after a bad spill on the baseball diamond, part of Randy had just shut off. Even the simplest tasks made him confused, brought him to the point of panic, made him turn inward and go silent. He was obsessive about walking certain pathways, about drumming out certain beats, about always having things in a certain order. He had good days, and bad days. Mostly good days, but the bad days were a nightmare.

Randy mistrusted most people, but he loved Maddie without pretense. He always had. And that's why she'd been his companion since Alvin died, spending at least three days a week with him. Until Alvin's disappearance, Randy was watched by a never-ending rotation of assorted professionals, but it was agreed that after the family trauma, a little routine would be good for him, and Maddie entered his life as his companion—not his nurse, or his primary caregiver, but someone to hold his hand and help make things a little more stable, a little more normal. Mrs. Roth managed Randy on her off days, but more often than not, Maddie found herself hanging around their rambling house in Sunderland even when she wasn't on the clock. And Mrs. Roth paid her well for her trouble, if that's what it could be called.

Deep down, Maddie knew that in some ways, she loved Randy more than she loved Alvin. Alvin, the older brilliant brother, the physics savant—he was hard to love; temperamental, work-obsessed, and often distant. Loving him was like stuff-

ing her feet into a gorgeous pair of shoes two sizes too small. They looked good, but it was always punctuated by pain and numbness.

On the other hand, Randy never put on airs. He was raw emotion, and he loved Maddie, and needed her. Alvin had his moments, but as he had so clearly proved with his suicide, there was a darkness inside of him that he concealed from Maddie. Even after five years together, she was not necessary in the long equation of his life. He didn't even leave a note, despite his tendency to scrawl phrases and theorems on almost everything.

But all that time spent with the Roths meant that Alvin's ghost haunted her everywhere. In Randy's inflections, in family portraits. She loved Randy, but she was slowly drowning in the responsibility and the guilt. She couldn't look after him anymore.

And it wasn't as if she was terribly qualified in the first place. There were plenty of nurses and caretakers with actual credentials. Yes, Randy would be fine. But whether she would be okay was another matter. As painful as severing her life from the Roths was, it was necessary for her own self-preservation.

At least that's what she told herself. It wasn't selfish. It was moving on. It just hurt.

"I'm here," Randy said with a shrug. "Didn't go far." He was snapping his fingers. *Snap-a-snap; snap-a-snap-snap.*

"Hey, Randy," Maddie said. "Mind opening the door for me? My hands are full."

"Sure." Randy jogged like an excited kid over to Maddie's rundown brown Civic, bowed at the waist, and opened the door for her, always the gentleman.

"You can always get him to help," Mrs. Roth said. "You've a gift, Madeline—if you just..."

"We talked about this, Mrs. Roth," Maddie said. "I'm sorry."

Mrs. Roth pursed her lips, letting Maddie's words hang in the air. "Well, then. That's that." Her mascara was smudged,

her lips quivering in an attempt to keep from sobbing.

"I won't be far, you know," Maddie said, shoving the box into the last vestige of space in the car. She kicked it with her foot, denting it just enough to allow the door to close.

The box was one among hundreds of items Alvin left when he'd disappeared and died—and while she'd sent most of the boxes away to be recycled, this one was labeled with the name of his dissertation director, Dr. Keats. And Maddie figured it was bad karma to incinerate someone else's stuff.

Even when she found out that Alvin had been cheating on her with his dissertation director's wife, she still couldn't throw out everything. A month before, she'd been cornered by one of Alvin's old classmates from UMass who'd dished the whole scandal while sobbing into her sleeve, believing Mrs. Keats was the cause of Alvin's disappearance. Finding out about the affair made Maddie realize how little of her life she'd been living since Alvin's disappearance, and how imperative it was that she do something about it. While it didn't make it any less painful to leave Mrs. Roth and Randy, it was as if fate had given her a free pass to move on.

You really didn't know him at all. You loved him, but you didn't know him.

She was tired, and mad at herself for being so naive; she'd harbored the delusion that a man like Alvin, all frenetic energy and madness and brilliance, could ever really be happy with her.

She didn't tell Mrs. Roth the sordid details, of course. That would have been beyond cruel. As far as she and Randy were concerned, Maddie was simply moving on with her life, even if Mrs. Roth refused to recognize that Alvin was dead.

To Maddie, he was already dead in a hundred ways, but as soon as she closed the door to their old apartment for the last time, a burden was lifted. Now the setting for the greatest deception of her life was gone.

Maddie pushed up her sunglasses, squinting across the

icy landscape, trying to free herself of those uncomfortable thoughts and keep from crying. The street was familiar once, but that had been when Alvin was alive. His presence, their relationship, had somehow defined how she saw things. It had been charming, with its proximity to the University and all. But now, it was a winter wasteland full of ghosts.

Time to go. February in Amherst was a wasteland to begin with, and Maddie just couldn't do with another dead winter in this place.

"All packed up," Randy declared, descending on Maddie with one of his hugs. He was taller than Maddie by almost a foot, and he smelled faintly of patchouli and wet wool, but she appreciated the sentiment. He squeezed, rocking back and forth a moment before letting go. The rocking was part of the rhythm he always had.

"Thanks, Randy. I think I needed that," Maddie said.

"And you'll be fine in the new place?" asked Mrs. Roth. A tear had fallen halfway down her cheek, resting there. "You've got everything you need?"

"I do," Maddie said. She glanced at Randy and he was still smiling at her. He was so beautiful when he smiled it almost broke her heart.

"When do you start work?" Mrs. Roth asked.

"Next Tuesday," Maddie said. At her friend Ian's instance, she'd found herself a normal job. At least it was something to while away the time. She'd be shelving books in just a few days at the Book-a-Mart in Hadley. But hopefully, in a few months, she'd get herself back into the Art History program at UMass, and resume her studies. Maybe she could even get a TA position.

"Can you get me some books?" Randy asked. "Art books, the ones with the big stones and pyramids."

"I'll see what I can do," Maddie said, rubbing his shoulder. He loved to go through her old art history textbooks, and had a particular affection for Sumerian and Egyptian art. She'd

get half price on most of the books in the store, so she could likely swing something for him.

But she wouldn't be reading them to him, not like before. He had a knack for details and a thing for St. Sebastian. Still, she did love teaching, even if it was just Randy.

Mrs. Roth pursed her lips, a habit she had when she was about to say something she really shouldn't. But instead of speaking, she threw her arms around Maddie, squeezing her to the point of discomfort.

"I've always thought of you like a daughter, Madeline—and you without so much as a distant cousin to rely on," Mrs. Roth gushed. She pulled away, and touched Maddie on the cheek. "You promise me you'll take care of yourself?"

"Of course," said Maddie. She really didn't need to be reminded of her lack of family at the moment. Her parents had died when she was in her early teens, and both of them had been only children. She had a handful of second or third cousins somewhere in California, but for all intents and purposes she was an island unto herself.

"I'll see you in Boston," said Randy. He spoke with an unusual air of authority, and Maddie looked at him intently, chin down and eyes up.

"I'm just moving a few towns over—nowhere near as far as Boston," said Maddie. "I'm sure we'll see each other soon. I can make breakfast for you or something. Sunday pancakes." Sunday pancakes were one of their rituals, and though she'd promised herself she wouldn't start cracking under the guilt of leaving Randy and Mrs. Roth, she was already making concessions. Ian would laugh in her face to hear her now.

Mrs. Roth sniffled. "Of course. I'll tell you anything I hear, though, okay? If there's any sign of him."

Him. She meant Alvin, though she never spoke his name. In spite of the fact that all signs pointed toward Alvin's death, likely by suicide, Mrs. Roth refused to see reason on the matter.

But Maddie knew what February felt like in Western Massachusetts. The sorrow of it brought her down even now. And sometimes, she couldn't blame Alvin for killing himself.

Maddie walked around to the driver's side of the car. Mrs. Roth's BMW was parked a bit ahead, the engine purring contentedly; the vanity read, "CATS MAMA2". Appropriate, since her house in Sunderland held a veritable pride of Persians.

If she'd been stronger, bolder, Maddie would have told Mrs. Roth not to call her, not to tell her anything she heard. It's what Ian would have wanted her to do. He was always telling her she was too soft, too willing to yield in order to make other people happy. But Ian lived a very different life, completely unfettered. And Maddie wanted that life, too. The cost was just much higher for her.

"You know I understand if you wanted to start dating again," Mrs. Roth said, speaking through her fingers as if it would prevent the awkwardness of the statement.

Maddie cringed inwardly, and slipped into her front seat, angling the vents back toward her. Her gloves were on the passenger's seat, and she pulled them on. "It's, um," she tried to find the words for it. "Yeah."

Maddie almost laughed to think what Mrs. Roth would think of Ian and their casual relationship. She just had no desire whatsoever to share her personal life with Mrs. Roth.

Randy was peering into her window, smiling his full smile, that rare, magical smile, making him almost movie-star handsome for a moment, with those blue eyes and that strong chin. If she didn't know him better, Maddie would kiss him on the lips just for being so perfect.

"Bye, Maddie. Love you," Randy said, tapping in rhythm on her window. *Tap-a-tap, tap-a-tap-tap.*

"Bye, Randy. I'll see you around." She paused, closing her eyes and willing the tears away. "I love you, too."

"I'll see you in Boston," he said again. Randy could sound

remarkably like Alvin sometimes, and his intonation at the moment sent a shiver through Maddie, the cold sweat under her jacket and scarf sticky on her skin.

“Not today, dude. But hey, let’s plan something in a few weeks, if it’s cool with your mom, huh?” Maddie said, shutting the door. The window was frosty, so she rolled it down for a moment, waving to them both.

“I’ll call you in a few days, to see how things are!” called Mrs. Roth as Maddie inched the car forward, then added, “We love you!”



Ian was waiting at the corner of Main Street and Pleasant Street in Northampton, smoking a crumpled cigarette and staring vacantly across the road toward the First Churches.

“Hey,” he said, as Maddie approached him. “New hat?”

He was tall and thin, with black, corkscrew-curly hair and brown-black eyes. He said something once about being Greek or Armenian or Turkish, but Maddie didn’t remember which. He was just vaguely Mediterranean-looking. Somehow Ian never managed a close shave, giving his face an even more sunken look than his sharp bone structure alone.

But he never missed a date, and he drank more than Maddie did, which meant that she could often leave without his notice. Not to mention, he was an artist. Hanging out with Ian was the precise opposite of being with Alvin. Instead of talking about chaos theory, they talked about chiaroscuro.

“No,” she replied. “Had this a while. Found it during the move.” She’d made it herself during a stint with knitting, and it was comfortable enough, though the ochre hue was a little odd.

“The apartment’s all cleaned out, then?” Ian asked.

“Yup. Finally.”

“Great. See? I told you that you weren’t a coward.”

She laughed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Here’s to new beginnings.” He raised his hand high with an invisible glass.

Maddie mimed in response, clinking in the air. “How about some real food and drink?”

“Sounds ideal. It’s too goddamned cold out here.”

They walked, neither holding hands nor making eye contact, down to Pinocchio’s for pizza. They ordered—white pizza for him, vegetarian for her—then ate in the silence so common after walking in the freezing cold and being faced with warm food.

It was busy and the food was a caloric comfort to counter the cold numbness outside. The Northampton crowd was out in force: the hippie mother who reeked of pot, the suit with his tie undone, the computer repair guys from down the street. Everyone seemed to be talking too loud, gesturing too wildly. Maddie just concentrated on the cheese that had pooled on her plate to keep herself calm. She was thinking about Randy.

“You okay?” Ian asked, a surprisingly compassionate moment from him. “You’re even more contemplative than usual, almost sulky. It doesn’t become you.”

Maddie glared up at him and Ian’s thick eyebrows quirked in response. “I’m fine,” she said. “Just a little pensive. Mrs. Roth came by as I was getting the last few boxes out, with Randy, and that was... interesting.”

“You’re free of her now, though, right? She can’t keep following you if you’re not taking care of Randall.”

“It’s *Randy*, and no, technically she can’t,” Maddie replied with a sigh. She twisted the cheese around a plastic fork and frowned, knowing that feeling all too well. “Randy honestly needs someone who cares about *him*, instead of seeing him as just a patient or something, and he’s all alone now; we were making really good progress—better than he’d been doing with just his nurse. I just feel like such a jerk.”

“But you can’t be that person. That’s not your job, and

you're not trained for it. Randy needs a professional to look after him. You're not a jerk."

"Yeah, really, I'm an outright humanitarian."

"Hey, you're not a home health aide. You're just a good person. And Book-a-Mart? It's just a stop along the way. You've got dreams, Maddie. It's time you at least made the attempt."

"Yeah, me and my *artistic* calling," Maddie said, laying on the sarcasm as thick as possible.

"Art history's a noble pursuit."

"*Noble?* Right. Because life depends on my ability to distinguish Rococo from late Baroque."

Ian laughed. "Shit, I hate Rococo."

Maddie had set her cell phone on the table next to her, a habit she had learned in the weeks after Alvin's disappearance, and it started vibrating. She hesitated, seeing the number and picture—Mrs. Roth—and then picked it up.

She cringed, and Ian looked disgusted.

"Speak of the devil," he muttered.

"Hey, Mrs. Roth," said Maddie into the receiver.

There was a bit of crackling on the other end, and then Mrs. Roth said, "Madeline?"

"Yeah," Maddie said, rolling her eyes at Ian who was trying to stifle a laugh. "I'm here."

"Well, I just got a phone call from someone, and I'm sorry to call you on such short notice. But I couldn't think of anyone else who could help me in a pinch."

Maddie sighed. "Sure, what's up?"

Mrs. Roth took a deep breath on the other end of the line, and from across the table Ian gestured to his pack of cigarettes, then to the door, to which Maddie nodded. She felt herself blush with embarrassment. How long had she managed to be free of Mrs. Roth? Three hours, tops.

Mrs. Roth continued. "Well, I got a call from Dr. Keats, that's Alvin's old professor, out in Boston. He called to see how

I was, and to say that Alvin had some of his books and that he needed them.”

There was that last box, thought Maddie, the one that was labeled “Dr. Keats”, the one that she had so unceremoniously shoved into her car, the one that had been her mantra for moving on.

Just perfect.

“Yeah, I’ve got them,” Maddie said. She wanted to punch herself for caving so quickly. “I can send the box out to him.”

Mrs. Roth paused, coughing. “Well, Randy’s got this idea in his head that you’re taking him to Boston. And I know it’s a lot to ask, but you could take him about, show him Boston. He’d love the Science Museum. I’ll pay for the trip of course, and you could return the books to Dr. Keats. He says they’ve very valuable.”

The situation seemed far too convenient, even by Mrs. Roth’s standards. Maddie took a deep breath, and twirled the ring she wore on her right hand, a garnet cabochon set in gold, which she’d been given by Alvin.

And why the hell do I still wear this? she asked herself before slapping her forehead with the palm of her hand.

Maddie tried to go the passive route, “Well, I haven’t seen my schedule yet for the week after next, but—”

“Oh, please, Madeline. Randy thinks the world of you; it would mean so much to him.”

Randy also “thought the world” of Pez dispensers, malt balls, and ball bearings, so the compliment was hardly as effective as it was intended to be. On his bad days, which were more frequent since Alvin’s death, he’d spend hours in his room lining up his various collections in intricate patterns, staring at them for hours on end, tapping on every surface in the same rhythm over and over.

It was hard for Maddie to imagine what he must have been like before the accident. Like all of the changes in him

after that day more than ten years ago, the tapping was just something he did. No reason for it. It was just Randy, now, and defied medical explanation.

“I’ll see what I can do, okay?” she said, finally, her heart in her throat.

When Maddie finally hung up, she waited a few moments before standing and joining Ian outside. She hated herself for giving up so easily, and she knew Ian would be even harder on her.

“So much for overcoming cowardice,” Ian said as she approached him. It didn’t sound as cruel as it could, but Maddie didn’t argue. Apparently it was written all over her face.

“Gimme a cigarette,” she said.

He handed one over. “It never ceases to amaze me how much affection you have for the family of a man who slept around behind your back, and then offed himself. Whatever happened to you that destroyed your self-esteem so much?”

Maddie coughed as she inhaled on the cigarette, mostly from Ian’s harsh words. Maddie didn’t smoke often, but just enough that Ian’s constant supply was welcome. “Ian. She’s a woman who’s lost her son,” she countered, somewhat lamely.

“No,” Ian corrected. “She’s batshit crazy. She’s got more issues than cats. And you’re letting her walk over you like a fucking carpet. You should call her back and tell her you won’t do whatever it is you just agreed to.”

“I’m just taking Randy to Boston to return some of Alvin’s old books to Dr. Keats.”

“Wait. Dr. Keats’s wife was the one who—”

“Yes. I *know*,” Maddie said, setting her jaw. She stared down at her boots. It wasn’t as if she valued Ian’s opinion *that* much, and it made sense that he’d advise her to do the self-ish thing; it’s what he’d have done, after all. But when it came down to it, he just didn’t understand. No matter how many times she tried to explain her deep-seated sense of duty to the

Roths, he never would. He just didn't connect to people like she did.

"Christ, Maddie. You're like a human pincushion," Ian said, flicking his cigarette to the ground. He crushed it with his heel. He was disappointed in her. "A glutton for punishment."

"Just call me St. Sebastian."

He sighed, rolling his eyes. "Let's go back to my place."

"Sure," Maddie said, knowing what it meant. In a few hours she'd go back to her empty new apartment wondering why she even bothered with Ian in the first place. But he was conversation, he was sex, and he was something that wasn't Alvin.

That had to count for something.



Two weeks passed, and Maddie started her job, where she shelved many insipid books, helped many insipid customers, and, for reasons she couldn't fathom, bought a book of Wordsworth's collected poetry.

She found the little book tucked away in the Classics section as she was tidying the store late at night. It was not a section that got trashed as sensationally as the rest of the store, and she sought it out to avoid her coworkers, who were mostly too embroiled in their own dramas to even notice her absence.

With her discount, *The Collected Works of William Wordsworth* set her back less than ten bucks. She'd stayed up that night and read the book, cover to cover, immersing herself in poem after poem. Then she'd gone to the computer and researched all she could about the poet, learning of his relatively conventional life, but large impact on the world around him. Wikipedia was surprisingly helpful on the matter.

When time came to visit Dr. Keats along with Randy, she made conversation as they drove down the Masspike, talking about the poet.

In the silence between Zeppelin and Sarah McLachlan, Maddie chatted. "I'm not typically a fan of poetry. Too much formality, you know?" she said. "But Wordsworth just works for me. I've been reciting his poems when I'm feeling super bummed about something. Which is a lot of the time lately. And it helps. I think you'd even like it."

Randy rocked slightly, his hands perched on the door right below the windows. His breath had frosted the pane so much that it was now sweating, streaking through the dew. *Tap-a-tap, tap-a-tap-tap* on the side of the door went his fingers.

"Sometimes reading books makes you feel better," he said, not looking at her. "Alvin used to read the Narnia books to me when I got scared. I always liked those."

Maddie couldn't help but smile at his response. She loved when she could get him to talk; he had the gentlest voice, low and sweet. If he sang, he'd be a baritone. But she'd never heard him sing.

"Yeah, maybe it's just a coping mechanism."

"You miss me?" he asked, tilting his head at her.

It was a good thing that she was driving, because when he was having one of his normative days, she always felt drawn to him. Physically. It was unnerving, knowing him as she did. He was so like Alvin, in some ways, and so unlike him, and so uncommonly handsome.

"Of course I do," Maddie said, clutching the steering wheel a little tighter.

"You went away, though."

"I know. It's just that I can't spend the rest of my life taking care of people, making everyone else feel better."

"Why not?" Randy asked. And when he asked it did, indeed, seem like a perfectly noble calling.

Maddie's face burned with shame.

"Because sometimes you have to take care of yourself," Maddie said.

The Turnpike was bleak, thought Maddie, and the trip no comfort. Just an endless succession of towns, each more urbanized by the next, with conveniently located rest stops all along the way gleaming fluorescent and neon. She didn't really like Boston, and had only visited a handful of times. It was a messy city, she thought, too difficult to navigate, and she never liked public transportation.

"Do you have to use the bathroom?" asked Maddie.

He shook his head. "Nah, no whizz," he said. Then: "Ethereal minstrel! Pilgrim of the sky."

Maddie felt like her stomach slipped down to her intestines. "You—you know Wordsworth?"

"Nope, not really," said Randy, sighing, and went back to looking out the window. "Just that part."

Maddie was not, as a rule, a superstitious individual. Nor was she religious, prone to wonder, or a believer in the supernatural. But there was no denying that there was something peculiar about Randy, something that often transcended his disability—or, as his mother insisted, his *ability*. Like the Boston thing, she thought. He'd been harping on about Boston even before Dr. Keats had called. Had he planted the idea, somehow? Had Mrs. Roth called Dr. Keats, knowing he was in Boston, to placate Randy, or had Randy somehow known?

But Randy's prescience was the least of Maddie's worries. Being around him was just too conflicting. Even now, she felt crawly and awkward, caught between genuine giddiness at seeing him again and the guilt of knowing this had to come to an end. Again.

God, it was hard enough the first time.

Randy was wearing the scarf she'd knitted for last Christmas, blue and yellow like a prop out of *Harry Potter*, but he had on Alvin's old parka and hat, and as he sat there in the car, she felt he was some phantom of Alvin. How many times had they made this very drive together? How many passionate lectures

had he given her while she half listened?

“Anyway,” Maddie said, feeling once again as if she was being stalked by Alvin, even though he was dead, “You know that after today, well, you probably won’t see me much. I’m really trying to move on, Randy. And I want to start a new life.”

“Maybe you’ll *like* the doctor. Maybe he can help with your new life.”

“Well, probably not. I’m not into old dudes. But you’re lucky. You have your mom. She’s your family. My parents died when I was a teenager, and I’ve been, I don’t know, trying to replace them or something ever since. And I...”

“You’ll find a family, Maddie. I know it,” Randy said, squeezing her hand through his gloves.

She shivered. “Thanks, Randy. Hey, anyway. Let’s get this over with, okay? We’ll just drop off the books, really quick; then we can go to the Science Museum and have some real fun. I need some fun right about now.”

“Good. Can we go see the mummies?” Randy asked, all seriousness. *Tap-a-tap, tap-a-tap-tap* on the window.

“Sure thing, kiddo.”



Dr. Keats lived in an odd, somewhat dilapidated bungalow on Savin Hill Road in Dorchester, nestled next to a copse of pine trees. Both the house and the trees looked out of place in the neighborhood, a contrast against the neat lawns and well-preserved homes. His car, just as Maddie had remembered it from his frequent visits to the apartment, was a teal ‘92 Geo Metro Wagon, still pristine despite its age.

The snow picked up, sharp little ice crystals pinging off her windshield and starting to crust over. Just great; all she needed was a blizzard.

Maddie had barely come to a stop on the already slick

road when she noticed Dr. Keats sitting on a chair on his front porch, wrapped in a long, camel-colored snow jacket, red scarf, and a fedora. His long, wispy silver hair peeped out of the sides, and even from this distance Maddie recognized the dark horn-rimmed glasses.

He was a handsome man, albeit old enough to be her father, and she'd always liked him—at least, more than the other professors she'd been introduced to during Alvin's time at UMass. He seemed more comfortable around her than the others did.

She hadn't stopped to question her motives until now, as she carefully parked the car in the road. Randy was nonplussed, and continued to work at the edge of his coat, moving it back and forth between his thumb and forefinger, a hushed version of his regular beat, which didn't help. The sound alone made her nervous.

Ian was right, though. She should have fought harder to refuse Mrs. Roth's orders. This wasn't her business. And Maddie was readily able to recognize her shortcomings. She loved people too easily, saw the good in them too quickly, and never could sever ties. Even with her own parents, before they'd died, she'd simply acted, never questioned, had always done as she was told, because it was the right thing to do. She suspected, in time, she'd be happy if everyone else was happy. That's how it had to work.

But it never seemed to. She was neither the smartest, nor the prettiest. She was forever middling. And no amount of good deeds or guilt-ridden self-sacrifice could change that.

"We're here, I think," Randy said suddenly, leveling Maddie with a very Alvin-like stare. "Aren't we going to get out of the car? Look! There's Dr. Keats."

Maddie nodded and stuffed the keys into her purse along with her cell phone. There were no missed calls, because the only person on earth who really wondered where she was,

knew where she was. Damn Mrs. Roth.

Dr. Keats, as of yet, had not raised his eyes from the book he was reading, and Maddie had parked far enough down the street that she doubted her presence would attract his immediate attention.

“Here, Randy. D’you think you can carry some of these books for me? We’re just walking over to that gray house over there,” she asked.

Randy’s ensuing smile, in normal circumstances, would have cheered her up. In the past, such expressions from Randy, who was a blank canvas around most people, would have sent Maddie’s heart soaring. But not now. No, now she only saw Alvin in Randy’s face, the specter of his brilliant, departed, brother. And it sent an ache through her body of a kind she hadn’t experienced since the first few months of his disappearance.

“I can help, I can help,” Randy said, nodding a few too many times than would be considered acceptable for most people. But it meant he was listening to her, and that, at least, was a comfort. “I can carry boxes.”

She loaded Randy up with one of the boxes and took the remaining box and bag. “Well, here goes nothing,” she said.

They made it to the front path before Dr. Keats made any notice. And when he did, he stood straight up, dropping his book, which went skidding across the deck and off into the bushes.

“Oh dear,” Dr. Keats said, righting his glasses. “It’s you, Madeline, and—why, Randy, hello again. It’s been some time.”

“Hello, Dr. Keats,” Maddie said, from behind the box she was carrying. “I didn’t think you’d be here. I’m sorry for the—”

“Nonsense, nonsense. I’d called Mrs. Roth about the books, but I hadn’t expected she send couriers. Goodness,” said Dr. Keats, shuffling down the stairs, careful to step right to avoid slipping. He hadn’t, apparently, thought of sanding or salting his stairs to clear the ice in some time. “And please, call me Geoff.”

Maddie just nodded as Dr. Keats took the box from her, and stood a moment, awkwardly looking back and forth between her and Randy.

“Well, we can just leave these here, and—” she gestured to the car with her chin. Drop off the books and go—that was the plan.

“No, please. Come in for a bit of tea, would you? I haven’t got much more than some bagged Lipton, but it’s something warm in this bitterest cold. I’m afraid we’re out of sugar, too. But—would you join me, both of you? Please, I insist.”

Randy was already making his way up the stairs, and Maddie stared after him. There was no sign of another car, or any indication that a woman had lived here save for a dried wreath on the door, with the berries shriveled or fallen off.

“Make yourself at home, Randy,” said Dr. Keats. “You remember where the study is. Down the hall, second door on the left, right?”

“Second door, yup,” echoed Randy, as he pushed the screen door open with his boot and went in.

Maddie shivered, and not just on account of the cold. “Randy’s been here before?” she asked.

“Of course. Alvin brings him by,” Dr. Keats said, then corrected himself. “Brought. Before, well... how do you like your tea?”

Dr. Keats’s measure of cleanliness left plenty to be desired, and his home was full of holes. What surfaces were not strewn with books, papers, and notes had been so long covered with dust that the end result was a filmy, tacky grime resembling greyed patina. The house itself smelled of mildew and burnt toast, with a hint of something sour that reminded Maddie of her of high school chemistry class. Everything was sticky.

As Maddie sat in the armchair, she noted the lack of other furniture. There was a space by the window, and gaps in the dining room where furniture should be. And pictures on the

walls that were no longer arranged right due to the absence of their counterparts.

She wasn't the only one who had holes in her life, it seemed.

The tea tasted as if it dated from the last century, stale and bitter, having likely spent most of its existence in an opened cardboard container. But it was warm, and Maddie was still chilly, so she drank small sips. Randy had assumed a perch on one of the larger stuffed chairs, this one done in green and purple paisley, and was smiling like a contented hyena after dining on an antelope.

"How have you been holding up?" Dr. Keats asked, still awkward. He grimaced, then took a sip of tea as if to hide it. For some reason, Maddie had the feeling he was nervous.

Maddie licked her lips. "Okay, I guess." *How's your wife?* she wanted to ask.

"Let's go find Alvin," Randy said, with such innocent abandon that Maddie closed her eyes and took a breath to calm herself. He was being particularly odd, even for Randy.

"Oh, shall we?" Dr. Keats said, as if Randy's suggestion had merit.

"You don't have to talk to him like he's an imbecile," Maddie said. She didn't take kindly to people overcompensating for Randy's disability. And Dr. Keats should have known better. It was not the day to piss her off.

Dr. Keats ruffled slightly, pressing his chin down into his chest, his eyebrows sliding down over his eyes. "I know quite well that he's no idiot, Madeline. It just appears to me that he's bringing up the proverbial elephant in the room, isn't he?"

"I don't want to talk about Alvin," Maddie said, as cordially as she could manage. "Or your wife."

"My ex-wife," said Dr. Keats. "But you know, you're allowed to be angry. This is all very difficult."

"*Seriously*, Dr. Keats," Maddie said, standing, and brush-

ing the front of her jacket. “You have no idea what *difficult* is. Your wife didn’t kill herself! I said I don’t want to talk about Alvin, and I mean it—”

“Yes, Frances and Alvin were frequently intimate,” Dr. Keats said, placidly and plainly. He sipped his tea again. “Which I imagine is the source of your frustration, or at least in part. You’re right in being angry with him for that transgression. But you’re mistaken in thinking him dead, in thinking that he killed himself. You knew him well enough to know better, I’d think.”

“Come on Randy, we’re *going*,” Maddie said, her anger flaring uncontrollably. Everything about Dr. Keats rubbed her the wrong way: the house, the tea, the attitude, the pedantic tone. She hadn’t been this angry since she’d decided that Alvin had, in fact, killed himself, but then she’d had no one to talk to.

Dr. Keats smiled at Randy. “Why don’t *you* tell her, Randy?”

A pause, and Randy nodded precisely seven times before saying: “Alvin is alive. He’s just not here.”

Maddie had a sudden urge to strike Randy, to knock sense into him. She imagined it in full detail, her hand arcing in the air, contacting with his cheek, the look on his face afterwards. It would break his heart, but at the moment, she felt that destruction was her only course of action. She was broken. Maybe the only way to rid herself of the past, of Alvin, of Randy was by breaking them, too.

It was rare that she lost her patience so completely, and the unfamiliar emotion made her feel sick to her stomach. Her hands were balled into fists, and if it weren’t for the fingerless gloves still on her hands, she’d have bored her nails straight through her palms. Every muscle in her body strained, but she fought against the instinct to flee.

“Madeline, you should calm yourself. Anger is part of the process. But harness it, dear—use it to clear your mind, to think with more *precision*,” Dr. Keats said, still not rising from his seat.

"You, like Randy and Alvin, are a *remarkable* person."

"We're *leaving*," Maddie said through clenched teeth. "Come on, Randy."

But Randy did not move. He simply stared at her, expectant.

"You should hear something, before you go," said Dr. Keats. "Just... just give me a moment."

Maddie felt rooted to the ground, frozen. Like the tree in the middle of that field she always saw when she visited the Berkshires on Route 9: knotted, gnarled with old age, covered in ice and snow, shuddering against the bitter wind. Her life was the bitter wind, and she was the tree. She didn't bloom in the spring either, she just stood there, crooked and bare, waiting for the next freeze. She was stuck in unending February.

Dr. Keats walked to his side table. An old plastic phone sat there, yellowed with age and grimy, and beside it, an answering machine dating from Reagan's inauguration. It was grey and black with blue writing, and had a huge cassette in the middle, as well as large, square black buttons.

Dr. Keats pressed play and Alvin's voice filled the room.

"*February Twenty-Sixth, Seven Thirty-Two.* Good morning, Dr. K. The trip is going well. Dropped in to see Randall. Just..." the message faded out, but Maddie wasn't sure if it was the quality of the recording or the ringing that was beginning in her ears that was causing it. Her vision swam in and out, and she felt the nausea return again. "... 'Take care. Hopefully next time I call I'll get you. I should need just one more trip, and then we'll be good to go. Everything's settled from this end. See you in March, on the second Saturday, I think.'"

"You see?" Dr. Keats said, clicking off the recorder. "That's Alvin. Clear as day."

"Told you," Randy said. "Told you Alvin came to visit me."

"You're *lying*," said Maddie.

"Randy doesn't make a habit of lying to you, does he?"

said Dr. Keats.

No, Randy didn't lie. Whether it was a result of the injury to his brain, or just part of his personality, it was impossible to know, but she'd often remarked about it to Alvin. She could trust Randy with anything.

Randy sighed, and slid off his chair. He was still wearing his jacket, but had removed the hat. Now his rusty brown hair stood up in wild tufts. "Maddie. Gotta whizz!" he said.

"Jesus Christ," Maddie said. "Go, and then we're leaving. Got it?"

"Got it," echoed Randy, but he didn't move. He looked imploringly at Maddie.

"You need me to come with you." It was an observation, not a question.

Randy started wiggling. This had happened once, early in her time with him, because she hadn't believed the severity of his circumstance. Though he had never had issues going to the bathroom with Alvin, this was a mistake she didn't want to repeat. When she had refused to take him to the bathroom, he had promptly pissed himself in the middle of Big Y. It was the button-fly pants, she thought. He could master the zipper, but never the buttons. And he had buttons again today.

"Down the hall, third door to the left," Dr. Keats said, a little resigned. He sat down on his armchair. "I'll be here."

"As soon as he's done, we're leaving. So don't wait up," Maddie said, her temper slightly receding as she fretted over the bathroom situation.

The bathroom was surprisingly clean considering the state of the rest of Dr. Keats's home. Though the style of the sink and tub were significantly dated, having not been remodeled since the home was built in the 1930s, they were clean. And there was a huge, gaudy mirror above the sink. Silver and seriously out of place.

Randy had developed a habit with the bathroom routine.

He would stand at the toilet, and Maddie would turn around and sing “When the Saints Go Marching In”. Then he’d relieve himself. When she finished the first verse, he’d be finished and ready to go and she’d help him with the buttons.

Maddie sang the song as slowly as possible, muttering it under her breath more than keeping the melody, but Randy didn’t seem to notice.

He went ahead and did his business, as she examined the rest of the bathroom.

“Oh,” she said, noting the mirror above the sink with pause. What she’d taken as a gaudy reproduction was, in fact, authentic—at second glance, anyway.

The mirror stood at two feet high and half as wide, made of silver, judging by the slight tarnish in between the details. And the design was astonishing, the metal writhing and turning in and around itself in the shape of leaves, acanthus and ivy, culminating at the top with a chubby cherub holding a lute. Maddie recognized it immediately as late Baroque, though she was surprised it was silver rather than gold. She’d done a lengthy paper on a grant about mirrors such as this, once, and published it in a respected journal of arts.

“That’s got to be an antique,” she said, leaning closer. Randy had his hands held out, waiting for her to turn on the water as she always did. “Gosh, it’s got to be three hundred years old. I can’t believe the condition. They had to have replaced the glass. It’s just impossible otherwise,” she said leaning forward and touching the glass.

And then, time slipped. It moved, it shuddered and shimmered. Maddie was aware of Randy’s presence behind her, seeing him as she did in the mirror, moving back and forth. *Tap-a-tap, tap-a-tap-tap*. She saw his eyes, that strange blue like the rings around the moon on a winter night, saw his hands flutter up, then flutter down.

“Go find Alvin,” Randy’s voice implored, his hand softly

brushing the side of her face. Still gentle. Still wanting. Still waiting.

Her body responded with an overwhelming rush of energy, and then she was pulled, as if by an invisible hand, forward into the mirror. As she slipped through the glass, she felt a distinct vibration deep down inside of her, in her womb, electric and pulsing. Her breath was gone, and she was no longer falling forward, but falling down, into the floor, into the bathroom, and beyond.