



I'm not afraid because I sense that I'm not alone. I don't see anyone, but I hear a familiar voice. Though it sounds like it's coming from far, far away, being carried by the wind, I hear it clearly. The voice reminds me to breathe. I inhale, and the darkness enters my lungs, spreading throughout my body, filling me with energy.

Power.

Hunger.

With outstretched arms, I reach higher and higher. Between the shadows, splinters of light glisten just out of my grasp—morphing into thousands of fireflies caught in a tornado. I kick and claw my way up, through layers of dirt, roots, grasses, tree trunks, branches, twigs, leaves.

Then—nothing but air.

The wind blows through my hair as I throw my head back and blink in the sudden brightness. The full moon illuminates the land, and I'm filled with reverence and warmth.



Saturday, May 12

I woke up in a sweat and kicked off my covers. The quilts and fur pelts tumbled to the floor, landing in a heap. Warm sunlight poured through my bedroom window, and outside, the rooster crowed hoarsely. Blinking and stretching away my drowsiness, I realized I'd had one of my dreams last night, and that meant Wolfstime was coming.

Three and a half years ago, when I turned thirteen, I started having the Wolfstime dreams. Though each was different, they always began in complete darkness. It wasn't ordinary darkness—say, a night without moon or stars, or the deepest cave, or how I imagined it looked at the very bottom of a well. It was much, much darker than

that. Like I was completely submerged in a sea of tar.

I never told anybody about my dreams—not Vicar Clemmons, not my friend Peter, not the girls at school, and most certainly not Granny. I knew that the dreams were strange, which meant *I* was strange, and that was the last thing I wanted people to think. Besides, my dreams felt sacred, like they were a secret part of me—and it was up to me to put the pieces together and somehow make sense of the bizarre images, sounds, and emotions.

Before my grandmother could poke her nose in and scold me for having slept in nothing but my undergarments again, I wiggled into my blouse, bodice, and skirt and ventured through the living room into the kitchen.

"Hello? Granny, where are you?"

To get a head start on the day's baking, my grandmother usually awakened well before me and even before the rooster—which was a good thing because I hated to imagine how grumpy she was before getting a couple cups of coffee in her. Not bothering to cover my yawn, I filled the pot with water and lit a fire below it.

Granny's snores thundered through the cottage, and I shook my head. She said it was unladylike to sleep in nothing but one's undergarments, yet I couldn't think of anything more unladylike than snoring. Well, maybe scratching oneself in public. Or growing a beard. Still, it sounded like a mean ole grizzly was hibernating in Granny's bedroom.

I pondered waking her up but decided against it. Tonight was Peter's birthday party, and I wanted to bake a cake for him—and having the kitchen all to myself was a rare and beautiful thing. Just think: I could put whatever I pleased in a bowl and mix it all up without having her breathing down my neck. Besides, the little kitchen didn't seem nearly as cramped without Granny.

The bowls, plates, and cups were stacked neatly in the pale yellow cabinets. A pitcher and a skillet sat on the countertop where they'd dried overnight, and behind them, jars of spices, flour, and sugar were lined up against the wall. Sunlight shone through the window, already warming up the room.

When I reached for Granny's cookbook, which she kept on the top shelf, a tiny midnight blue jar came tumbling down. I screamed a little and caught it a mere inch before it crashed on the floor. POPPY DUST, JUST A PINCH DOES THE TRICK, the label read. "So it does," I said out loud. Last night, Granny had complained that her arm ached. She probably used a little poppy dust to help her sleep when it was particularly painful. As I returned the jar to its hideaway on the shelf, I hoped Granny would sleep at least another hour, even if it meant having to bear her terrible snoring.

I leafed through the yellowed pages of the cookbook—each recipe recorded in small, neat script—until I found BIRTHDAY CAKE. Donning Granny's favorite apron, I mixed the ingredients and poured the creamy batter into three round pans. "Now bake up nice and pretty like the ones Granny makes," I said as I slid the pans into the sweltering oven. Oh, how I wanted to be finished! But there was still frosting to be made, so with a sigh, I flipped through the cookbook again.

These recipes had been passed down from mother to daughter for three generations. My mother, Anita, would have been next in line to inherit the cookbook—if she were still alive. Thinking of her with a sudden wave of sadness, I touched the cross pendant that hung around my neck. The smooth gold felt warm against my fingertips. On its reverse side was an engraving barely visible to the naked eye. It appeared to be a sliver of a moon, with a tiny dot in its middle. The cross had been my mother's, and I wore it always. It helped me feel closer to her. Sometimes it even made me feel more like her, especially when I desperately needed to be brave.

I had no memories of my mother, and Granny told me very little about her—yet somehow I couldn't picture her baking day in and day out, like Granny, or delivering baked goods all over the village, like I do. From what I'd gleaned over the years, my mother had been a strong, wildly beautiful woman. She'd had an endless supply of the most fascinating friends and a new adventure waiting around every bend.

In other words, the very opposite of me.

I peeked in the oven and almost squealed out loud. Each layer had turned a lovely golden color with a slightly rounded top. I could have admired my sweet-smelling cake layers all morning, but I didn't want to risk burning them. After removing them from the oven, I set them on racks by the window to cool. Though it had been sunny earlier that morning, clouds had rolled in, no doubt brewing up a May shower.

Then it was back to conquering the frosting. I'd followed the recipe and beat and whipped it with all of my might for at least half an hour, so why wasn't it smooth and fluffy, like Granny's? When I fetched the cake pans from the window, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was as if someone had thrown a rock into the center of each layer. To make matters worse, when I tried to empty the first layer from its pan, it stuck. I jabbed it with a knife, but when it finally came out, it was bumpy. And the other two didn't come out any better.

"What's going on in here?" Granny asked as she

shuffled into the kitchen. With her dimples, wire-rimmed glasses, and gray hair swept into a bun, she looked like a sweet-as-molasses grandma out of a storybook. But I knew a different character, one whose whole purpose in life was to make her sixteen-year-old granddaughter as miserable as possible.

I couldn't even count to ten before the first gibe left her mouth. "You're doing it all wrong."

Biting my lip, I turned my back to her as I continued smearing globs of frosting onto the horrendously misshapen cake.

"Looks to me that you might have forgotten to test it," she said, pointing at the corn-husk broom that hung from a hook behind the oven.

Part of me wanted to ask for help. I loved the idea of presenting Peter with a cake so beautiful and scrumptious it would be the talk of the whole village. If anyone could accomplish making a cake so grand, it was my grandmother. But the other part of me was much too proud to ask Granny for so much as a halfpenny, let alone admit to her that I hadn't remembered to stick a straw from

the little broom into the cake to test that it was done. I couldn't bake worth a bag of beans.

Speaking of beans, "I made coffee," I said. "You should have some." Hopefully it wouldn't be long before the rich black liquid worked its magic on her mood.

"Don't you remember a blasted thing I taught you?" Granny reached for the knife, but I held it out of her reach. "Don't spread it so close to the edges."

"It's for Peter, and he won't care if it isn't perfect." I truly believed this. Peter was the one who taught me that with a bit of hard work, anything could be made beautiful. He did it every day, turning a bucketful of scrap metal into something wonderful.

"If it's in your power to make it perfect, you should never settle for anything less." Granny helped herself to a cup of coffee. "Even if it's for that blacksmith's fool of a son," she added under her breath.

"Peter's no fool," I argued, pushing up my chin. "You might grow to like him, if you'd only give him a chance." When I just started going to school, she allowed Peter to walk me home. Then, around the time I turned thirteen,

she said I was safer walking through the woods alone than with the likes of Peter. I honestly didn't know what I'd said or done—or what he had said or done—to turn Granny against him. In her mind, the blacksmith's son was only after one thing, and she insisted he would not be getting that from her granddaughter—not if she and her trusty crossbow had anything to say about it. Granny tilted the cup to her lips and glugged half of it down.

"He's really nice," I tried again. "Smart, too. Maybe we can invite him over for supper someti—"

She sputtered and slammed her cup down on the counter. "If that boy sets foot in this house, I'll put an arrow right through him." As I squeezed in to fill her cup to the rim, my eyes flickered to her crossbow, which was conveniently—and ominously—propped against the back door. "And I won't aim for his heart, if you follow my drift. Maybe if I'd shot the boys who came to call on your mother . . ."

This time, I bit my lip too hard—and when I swallowed, I tasted a little blood. It was no secret Granny wished her only daughter's life had turned out differently.

I knew Granny loved me and was happy I had been born. Still, it wasn't like she'd chosen to raise me.

It didn't have to be this way forever, though. *Someday, I'm going to leave this stupid village. I'll be adventurous, like my mother was.* I'd been saving my delivery tips in a secret wooden box, waiting for the perfect time to make my grand escape. Was a happy ending too much to wish for?

As I daydreamed about all the places I'd go and people I'd meet, I absently swiped my finger around the rim of the bowl and tasted the frosting. My taste buds all but exploded, and not in a good way. *Blech.* I tried not to gag as I pondered what I'd done wrong. Had I added a tablespoon of salt when I was supposed to use a teaspoon? It looked terrible, too, I realized with mounting panic. It was the color of a witch's teeth and as lumpy as porridge. How in the world did Granny make her frosting so smooth and fluffy, and as white as freshly fallen snow?

With a heavy sigh, I plunked the knife on the countertop. I was clearly failing on my own, but asking Granny to help me make Peter's birthday cake—especially when she was already so busy and had gotten a late start on her

day—would only make her more cantankerous. Whether I liked it or not, I needed Granny's permission to go to Peter's party. So I took a deep breath and relaxed my face into what I hoped was a pleasant expression. *Stay on Granny's good side, Red.*

Although, now that I thought about it, had I ever been on Granny's good side? I wasn't even sure she *had* a good side.

While Granny started whipping up breakfast, I rolled up my sleeves and scrubbed the dishes harder than necessary, trying to drown out Granny's voice as she scolded me for splattering batter on the cookbook. Like a cat about to pounce on a mouse, she paced alongside my disaster of a cake. Regrettably, the lumpy frosting did not disguise its deformities, not even a teensy bit. It actually made it look worse.

Still, did Granny think I was blind? Plain as day, it was the most pitiful excuse for a cake in the land. So *why isn't she saying anything?* My nerves were frazzled, and when I got down to my last one, I knew my plan to butter Granny up would have to wait.

"Well, Granny?" I untied the apron from my waist and slapped it onto the countertop next to the cake. "Aren't you going to tell me what a disgrace I am to the Lucas family? I'm all ears." I went back to drying dishes and continued, "Or maybe something like 'If I hadn't delivered you with my own two hands, I would've sworn you were born of trolls?'" Everyone knew that trolls were worse cooks than ogres—or even royal princesses, for that matter.

"I'm certain it will taste fine," Granny said.

The bowl I'd been drying made a terrible racket when I dropped it into the sink. "Granny, are you feeling all right? You just said something *nice*."

"It's not the first time. You just refuse to hear, or choose to forget." A shadow fell over the cottage and, seconds later, rain began to fall. "Come to the table, child. Breakfast is ready."

Before sitting, I filled Granny's cup with another serving of steaming coffee. "How many deliveries do I have today?" I asked.

"Eleven."

I nodded, relieved. Normally there were about twenty. It wouldn't take very long to bring Granny's baked goods to eleven customers, which was good news because I needed to bake a whole new cake. But Granny was quick to crush my joy. "Between stops, you'll peddle the extra goodies I baked last night. I need to find a way to bring in more money, and after thinking about it long and hard, this is the best way I see how, apart from becoming bandits."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They're the sorts of people who plan some kind of distraction so a carriage that is passing through must stop. Then the bandits pounce, stealing everything they can get their hands on."

I shook my head. "I know what a bandit is. But you want me to knock on random people's doors?" I couldn't think of anything more humiliating than begging strangers to buy a crumpet. Clutching my fork tightly, I stuffed a large piece of flapjack into my mouth. "If I'm always making deliveries and having to sell goods door-to-door," I continued between chews, "when will I find time to study

my lessons, or go to the swimming hole, or spend time with my friends?" As I spluttered the bit about friends, a lump of chewed-up flapjack lodged in my throat.

My coughing caught Granny's attention, and she raised her eyebrows in alarm. "Gracious, child!" She flung her fork across the floor and sprung up like a snake had bitten her bottom. Her chair toppled over as she chopped my back with the side of her hand, one strike for each word: "There's. A. Reason. You're. Not. Supposed. To. Talk. With. Your. Mouth. Full!"

"I'm *fine*, Granny," I said as best I could with a mad-woman beating my back. "Stop it! I just need a swig of milk, that's all."

When I finally convinced her I wasn't choking to death, she righted her chair and sat down quietly, strands of hair falling loose from her bun. From her flashing green eyes, I could tell she remained on high alert. She'd already lost her only daughter, and I had a feeling that to keep me safe from harm, she'd fight anyone—or anything—to the death. Even inanimate objects like flapjacks.

Granny wasted little time before looping back to

the topic of my dreaded new duty. Of all the grandmas in the world, I was stuck with one whose memory was as sharp as a dragon's claw. "Yes, you'll go door-to-door hawking baked goods. Might not sound appealing, but you'll live."

Before I could hold my tongue, I muttered, "Ugh. Sounds even more miserable than being cooped up in the cottage with you."

"No use complaining," Granny said. "It must be done."

"But, why? I know I complained that all the other girls had new springtime frocks and boots, but honestly, I'll get by just fine with what I have."

Granny rolled the hem of her apron with her calloused fingers. Three flapjacks were stacked on her tin plate, drizzled with maple syrup and dolloped with creamy butter. She hadn't taken a bite, not even a nibble—which was quite a feat, considering that as far as I was concerned, her flapjacks were the fluffiest in the land.

I listened to myself chewing, and it made me ponder if people chitchatted at meals so they didn't have to

hear each other sipping, slurping, and smacking. "Are you going to eat those?" I asked when the silence grew uncomfortable. "Because if not, I'll be happy to finish them up for you."

Without a word, she slid her plate across the table. I hacked off a big bite with my fork. While I chewed, Granny went back to picking at the fabric of her apron. Oh, no. Granny never surrendered her flapjacks. *What have I said to upset her this much?* "All right, all right. I'll try my best to get some new regulars today," I said once I'd swallowed. "Don't worry, Granny. Your treats sell themselves."

While I cleared the table, Granny started wrapping the baked goods for delivery. If I could sell everything in my basket, maybe it would please her so much she might even consider letting me go to Peter's party. What good was having any hope at all if I didn't reach for the moon?