



SKIP BRITTENHAM

Between  
WORLDS



with art by  
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*For the love of my life, Heather,  
who inspired me to write;  
my fabulous daughters, Kristina, Shauna, and India,  
who encouraged me to keep going;  
and my buddy Tom,  
who never lets me forget how important it is to have fun.*



## PROLOGUE



**A**FTER THE LITTLE GIRL'S FUNERAL, the mourners crowded together in her parents' living room. A cloud of regret hung in the air like an impending storm, masking the fragrance of the traditional white lilies that filled the room. Dozens of tribute posters handcrafted by Laura's classmates hung in neat rows above the mantelpiece.

But neither art nor words of sympathy could diminish the pain of Laura's heartbroken parents. Their other child, a twelve-year-old boy named Aaron, huddled on a chair in the corner of the living room, his red hair standing out like a flag against his ashen skin.

A few days ago, he'd started a snowball fight with his little sister Laura at a local park. To escape the rain of snowballs Aaron was hurling, Laura had bolted out onto the snow-covered ice on the surface of the park's pond—she couldn't tell that

there was water beneath her feet because the heavy snow had erased any definable shore.

The ice cracked and Laura fell through. Aaron yelled for help, but no one was nearby. He quickly slid on his belly out onto the frozen pond, until he was right in front of the open hole. Aaron couldn't make out Laura's bright purple jacket under the jagged pieces of ice, but he plunged his arms deep into the frigid water and felt desperately for her, screaming her name. His hands couldn't find any part of her. He continued to scream and splash long after he knew it was too late.

Now a steady stream of family friends and classmates shuffled toward his corner, trying to comfort him, all making a point of emphasizing that it wasn't his fault. But their words only tormented him: they knew and he knew that it could only be his fault. He should have been protecting her, not hitting her with snowballs.

Mary, a friend of Aaron's mom, walked over and put a hand on his shoulder, then crouched so she was at his eye level. "You did your best," she said, wiping away the tears and mascara that trailed down her face. "It was just . . . her time."

But it *shouldn't* have been her time. Aaron vaulted to his feet, swept past Mary's legs, then pushed clumsily through the cluster of mourners. He plucked his black winter parka from a wooden peg near the front door and hastily put it on, then opened the door to an arctic blast and a cold, bleak landscape.

Aaron's mother had been sitting on a couch with her head in her hands, weeping, but she looked up when she felt the

cold air rushing in. “Where are you going, Aaron?” she called out feebly. It was all well and good for her to wonder what he was doing *now*, but she and his father had been holed up in their bedroom for days, ignoring him and crying together. He knew they didn’t want him anymore—not after what he’d done to Laura.

Without replying, Aaron walked out into the bitter Minnesota midwinter cold and closed the door behind him. He grabbed the handlebars of his blue Electra cruiser, which was leaning against the deck, and used the pair of fur-lined leather gloves he pulled from his pockets to slap the snow off the seat.

The curtains were pulled open by a handful of wide-eyed adults, who stared out at him. Aaron flipped up the hood of his parka, mounted the bike, and pedaled around the parked cars and down the snow-covered driveway, then turned onto the slushy country road.

Powdery white snowflakes were falling, but the ominous gray sky boiling above him foreshadowed more severe weather on the way. His teary eyes made the pine trees blur into vague masses of green and brown that streamed past him as he raced down the road. Aaron didn’t have any particular destination in mind; he just needed to find a way to stop thinking about how guilty he felt—at least for a while.

A half hour later, the wheels of his bike skittered into a gravel parking lot pockmarked with lumps of ice and snow. The fast-paced ride had made him sweaty, and the white dress shirt he’d worn to the funeral was sticking to his skin. As he

stepped off the bike, a gust of wind enveloped him, sending a chill down his spine. He reached down and zipped the parka to his chin.

A battered gray split-rail fence with two yellow NO TRESPASSING signs lined the edge of a large open meadow carpeted with patches of snow. Next to the fence, a log pole bore a cracked wooden sign, which read MYSTERY FOREST VIEWING AREA. Underneath it was a MYSTERY FOREST LEGENDS sign.

A shabby rangers' log cabin sat at the west end of the "viewing area," but the windows were dark, and it appeared to be as unoccupied as the parking lot.

Aaron wiped his nose with the back of his hand and looked around. He had no idea what had drawn him there. The town council had attached the word *Mystery* to the aspen grove over a decade ago, in a lame attempt to create a tourist attraction. There was nothing mysterious about the Mystery Forest, though—it was just a big aspen grove that butted against an old-growth pine forest.

The council encouraged the townspeople to create and circulate rumors about the grove, anyway, and the town and local paper had adopted the task with enthusiasm. Of the tales that had emerged—the dumbest and most improbable one—was that a Wishing Tree lived at the grove's center. If it was in the right mood, the Tree would grant a wish to whoever touched it. As far as Aaron knew, no one had ever found the Tree, much less had a wish granted . . . probably because it didn't exist. After numerous hikers trying to find the Tree or unearth the



“mystery” had become lost or required rescue, Forest Service officials severely reduced access by requiring hikers to apply for special entry permits, which were rarely granted.

Eventually, the myth of the Tree died, along with the town’s other fanciful forest stories. The smattering of people who still came here did so to photograph the herds of pewter-colored mule deer that the rangers lured into the meadow with grain and fresh hay.

The Tree might not be real, but Aaron desperately wanted to believe that *something* could alter his sister’s fate—and his. Ignoring the NO TRESPASSING signs, he climbed over the sagging fence and tramped toward the pine forest at the meadow’s end. After crossing the rickety covered bridge that spanned the slowly meandering river, he finally reached the tree line. His heart began to pound, and his mouth went dry. Aaron clenched his fists into tight balls and took a step into the forest. No matter how improbable his quest for the Tree was, he felt compelled to trespass into the forbidden forest to continue it.

The snow danced wildly in the wind and began to fall harder, quickly covering the trails like lacy white curtains. Not knowing which way to go, Aaron dashed into the largest open space between the trees and began to march through the woods. Soon, heavy clumps of slush caked his boots, making every step harder, but he couldn’t stop, and he definitely couldn’t go home.

Before long, the huge stands of green pine, fir, and spruce disappeared. Only a wall of aspen trees remained: tall and

regal, with bright white trunks streaked with black. They crowded close together, like the Red Queen's soldiers standing at attention. *Good*, Aaron thought, his spirits lifting. He was actually in the Mystery Forest where he needed to be, and maybe something . . . better . . . would happen. Whether he found the Tree or not, the walk would distract him. Either way, it was better than being at the wake.

A half hour later, as dusk neared, a searing blast of wind slapped his face, burnishing the raw pink marks on his cheeks. He was weary and disoriented, and his pace had slowed to a depressing trudge. The temperature was continuing to dip, and he felt his first real pulse of fear. He was lost, like all those other hikers.

In this section of the grove, the aspens grew closer together, making his passage even more difficult. Their skeletal branches swayed in the dim light, vaguely menacing, as though warning him to turn back. Nevertheless, he kept forcing choppy, determined steps out of his weary legs.

After several more minutes of plodding, he noticed that the snow had stopped falling. Then he realized that the slush he'd been walking through was thinning. Aaron continued to weave between the aspens, drawn ever onward by an inner strength he hadn't known he possessed. A mild breeze stroked his sore cheeks, like a warm current in the ocean. He turned his head around, and it was cold again, then moved his face back toward the warmth and followed his feet in that direction.

He'd been picking his way through the trees for so long, it

took him a moment to realize that he'd finally come to a clearing. In its center stood a solitary aspen, its bright white bark glistening in the twilight. The circumference of its trunk was huge: it was as if dozens of aspens had been fused together to create a Goliath. The tree was so tall and so wide, with such a multitude of branches, that Aaron couldn't see its top, even with his head tilted all the way back. This was absolutely the biggest tree he'd ever seen.

If there was a Wishing Tree, this had to be it. At this point, he had nothing to lose by trying. Aaron pulled off his soggy gloves and stroked the trunk, which was surprisingly warm. The wood seemed to pulse, as though it had a heartbeat of its own.

Maybe the Tree *could* do magic. Tears rushed to Aaron's eyes as he thought about how much he missed Laura. He would never forget the last time he saw her, laughing as she ran out onto the ice. He leaned against the tree and slid his hands along the trunk until he was sitting. Aaron was bone-weary, and his eyelids were growing heavy. He yawned—then yawned again. Feeling like he needed to close his eyes, just for a minute, he scooped out a hollow in the leaves so he could lie down with his head next to the Tree.

None of the stories he'd heard revealed how to make a particular wish come true. Maybe just really *wanting* it to come true was enough. He stretched his palms over his head so he could touch the warm bark, and wished for the Tree to bring his sister back to life.

Then, right before his consciousness slipped away, he added a postscript: “If you can’t bring her back, please take me *far away*, to a place where no one will know me and I can do something to make up for my mistake.”

As Aaron drifted off, golden leaves from the giant aspen—which *should* have been bare like all the other trees—fell from the branches, then swirled around him on a warm wind before rising back into the air.

Aaron’s eyelids fluttered. Once. Then again. The first thing he remembered was that Laura was dead. Then he remembered it was his fault. He leaped to his feet as he recalled the hike through the forest and falling asleep next to the gigantic tree.

He looked up through the thick branches of the Wishing Tree, shading his eyes from the bright sunlight that filtered through. Surely only a few hours had passed, but there was no trace of winter, and the ground was bone-dry. The air had gone from frigid to warm to humid—hot, even. It had to be hot, he thought, to have melted the snow so fast—but he couldn’t have slept *that* long. He stripped off his heavy parka and tied its arms snugly around his waist. His sleep-addled brain jerked awkwardly back to life as his senses confirmed that it wasn’t winter anymore. The giant tree—and the other aspens—were adorned with the full green leaves of summer. He smelled fresh grass and heard the hum of insects.

“Laura,” he cried.

Leaves rustled, but no one replied.



He yelled again, louder, "Laura!"

The pocket of solace he had enjoyed while sleeping under the Tree evaporated. *Something* had happened, but certainly the most important part of his wish hadn't been granted, because there was no sign of his sister.

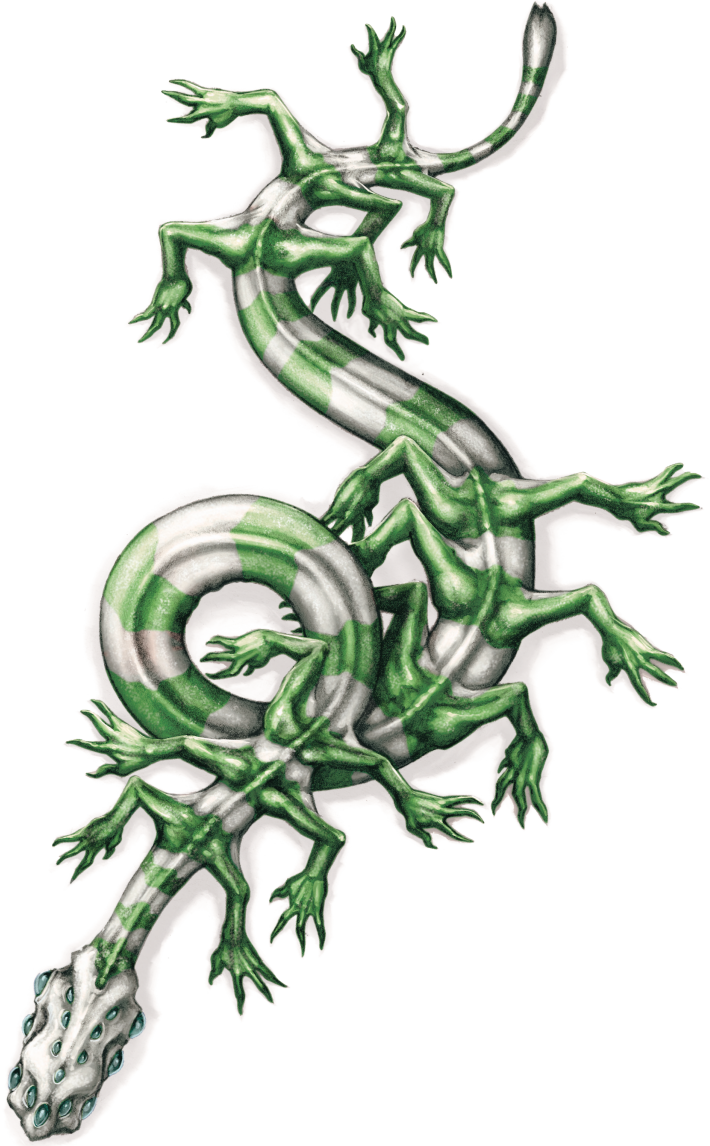
He plunged into the aspen forest as quickly as his unsteady legs allowed, tacking away from the Wishing Tree and through the tightly packed aspens. About ten minutes later, he broke from the cover of the grove and entered a lush meadow without ever having passed through the pine forest, which made no sense at all. A few feet into the meadow, he stopped and gaped. Acres and acres of land were blanketed with thick, green, shoulder-high grass.

Thunderstruck, Aaron stared at the meadow, not sure if he was dreaming or hallucinating. A clump of grass near his right boot stirred, and a mound of moist earth began to rise. A green and white head with too many eyes poked out of the dirt. At first glance, it appeared to be a large salamander, but then it used long claws at the ends of three sets of front legs to dig out its hindquarters, which revealed six additional sets of legs. Its eyes slid over Aaron as it paddled out of the hole, slithered over his boot like a centipede, then rapidly dug and vanished into a hole on the boot's other side.

A loud whomping sound distracted Aaron from what had just happened at his feet. A large shadow swept over his head, and the air was pierced by a high-pitched shriek. Then a huge, fiery red *something* was swooping down with leathery wings

pulled in tight, hugging its belly. The wings extended with a loud *whap*, slowing the creature's dive as it stretched razor-sharp yellow talons toward him. Aaron dove into the grass just as a talon ripped through his shirt, raking out a line of flesh. The rest of the creature's talons closed on empty air.

As adrenaline spiked his brain, he rolled onto his feet and sprinted back to the safety of the aspens. The canopy protected him from further assault, but he still heard the creature's wings thundering in the distance.



*A green and white head with too many eyes poked out of the dirt.*

# CHAPTER 1



**M**AYBERRY SLOUCHED in one of Eden Grove High's straight-backed wooden auditorium seats, so bored she was almost ready for an electrolyte IV and an oxygen mask to revive her fading mind.

She wore a baggy gray Southern Death Cult tee, paired with black cargo pants embellished with metallic zippers, clips, and buckles—an outfit that deliberately revealed nothing about her figure. Her glossy black hair was cut into an angular bob, with bright purple streaks. Below her right eye she sported a black-lined curlicue temporary tattoo of her own creation, and her maroon lipstick went nicely with her jet-black fingernails and precisely drawn eyebrows. She was totally out of place in Eden Grove, Minnesota, where the girls went for a look that was more Kardashian than Blondie.

Any sensible teenager who'd just moved to a new town



would have edited her style to match the local dress code, but Mayberry was stubborn and sometimes more impulsive than sensible. She hated the idea that she had to conform in order to make friends, and her mom's frequent urging to do so didn't make the idea any more palatable. She rolled her head back and stared dully at the auditorium's ceiling.

After Mayberry was born, her mother had taken a hiatus from Columbia University's doctoral program so she could be a full-time parent. Now that Mayberry was fifteen—too old to want or need full-time supervision—the family had moved from New York City to rural Minnesota so her mom could finally finish her thesis. The subject of her doctorate was the pathology of northern aspens, and the forests she'd chosen to study were all within a day's drive of Eden Grove. Her dad hadn't minded the move, since he owned a small software service company and could work from anywhere. Mayberry questioned her mom's timing—why couldn't she just wait until Mayberry was out of the house and in college?

Mayberry might have been . . . quirky . . . but in Manhattan, friends had surrounded her. She'd been going to school with the same group since first grade, and made new friends at local shows and theater performances. There were plenty of like-minded free spirits in Manhattan, and being born there had only helped Mayberry's prospects. She might not have known much about the natural world or outdoor life, but she was a walking subway map.

She'd gradually shied away from her usual social scene,

though, after her parents told her about the impending move. Leaving the only home she had ever known loomed over her like a guillotine's blade. Her best friend, Emily, had stuck around, but her sort-of boyfriend, Peter, had gradually distanced himself. Even though she'd known that they'd never manage a long-distance relationship, she'd never been more heartbroken than when she learned that he and Emily had hooked up. There were angry texts and tearful phone calls between the girls, and for now, they weren't talking. Even more disturbing was the fact that none of her other friends had chosen to jump in and defend her or pop their quills out to skewer Peter and Emily for their betrayal. They had all taken Emily's side, as if Mayberry didn't count anymore, and started keeping their distance, too.

Mayberry's spirit needed a boost, but if there was a more mind-numbing, backward place to get it than Eden Grove, she couldn't imagine where. Nevertheless, here she sat, patiently waiting for a chance to carve a fit-in-with-the-locals niche by auditioning for a small part in the school's upcoming Autumn Chorale production. She was a pretty good singer and had performed in her school's plays for as long as she could remember. Theater geeks were usually a good starting place when it came to finding friends.

Except for Kylie Murphy. Mayberry couldn't categorize *her* as a theater geek. She was more of an archetypal mean girl. Kylie was currently standing in the middle of the auditorium's stage, her arms flung up and out, warbling Céline

Dion's "Taking Chances." She belted it out like a beauty-contest contestant showing off her new "talent," trying to squeeze an entire song's worth of emotion into every line.

Mayberry grimaced at Kylie's pitch—the girl sounded like a parrot getting crushed in a wood chipper. To keep her mind off the unholy sounds coming from the stage, Mayberry doodled a caricature of Kylie on her sketch pad. She smiled as she drew a giraffe's neck, chunky hippo body, twisted mouth, and bugged-out saucer eyes. Mayberry had always liked creating fantastical animals, and seeing another side of Kylie on the page was particularly satisfying.