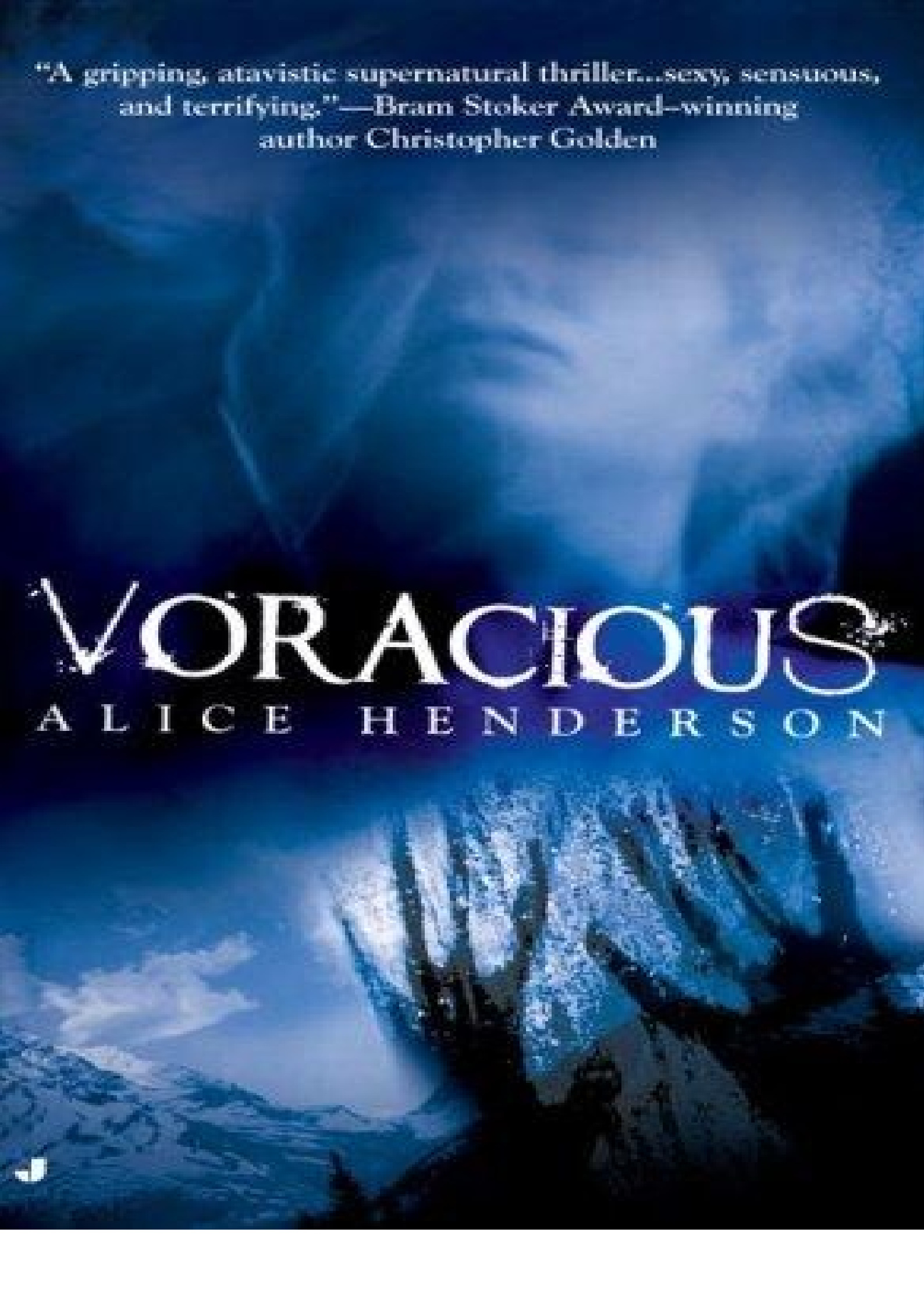


"A gripping, atavistic supernatural thriller...sexy, sensuous,
and terrifying."—Bram Stoker Award-winning
author Christopher Golden

VORACIOUS

A L I C E H E N D E R S O N



Voracious

ALICE HENDERSON

Penguin Group USA

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~~“With *Voracious*, Alice Henderson has created a gripping, atavistic supernatural thriller, a sex, sensuous, and terrifying dark fantasy. It’s breathtaking and merciless, and I can’t wait to see what she does for an encore.”~~

—Christopher Golden,

Bram Stoker Award-winning author

“Heralds the arrival of a major new talent in the dark fiction field. Henderson brings tremendous tension, suspense, and atmosphere with this modern twist on the shape-shifter tale. This is one cool book.”—J. A. Konrath, author of the Jacqueline “Jack” Daniels mystery series

“A terrific debut. Alice Henderson has the talent to evoke nature as an extraordinarily potent force that is nothing short of breathtaking. [Her] vivid evocation of wilderness places is superb in this page-turning story. A writer to watch.”

—Simon Clark,

British Fantasy Award-winning author

“A polished and well-focused novel of raw animal terror. It pits a gutsy, outdoors-loving protagonist against an alluring, shape-shifting demon out of time who lusts not only for her flesh, but also for her extraordinary talent. Alice Henderson deftly crafts her own convincing mythology while telling a compelling, page-turning adventure that makes Glacier National Park itself into a character. Offering crisp action and tingly eroticism, *Voracious* also boasts an environmental subtext blended with astute philosophical explorations of the predator-prey symbiosis. Henderson’s first novel is both accomplished and a shining promise of more to come. A winner!”—William D. Gagliani, author of *Wolf’s Trap* and *Shadowplays*

“You will tear through this book the way Alice Henderson’s monstrous creature tears through its prey. A combination of awe-inspiring setting and deeply personal terror, *Voracious* is irresistible.”—Richard Dansky, author of *Firefly Rain*

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For Norma, who always supported;

Gordon, who ever encouraged;

Becky, who tirelessly read;

and Jason, who always believed

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~~MADLINE~~ was sure she was being watched. She squatted at the edge of the icy river, pausing a moment to dip her hand into the cold water and glance around behind her. For the past half hour, she had the most peculiar feeling that someone was following her, keeping just out of her sight. But she was in the wilderness, the far backcountry, and hadn't seen another hiker in two days.

She paused at the bottom of a cliff, a waterfall streaming from the top and plunging a hundred feet from the river at her feet. Mist plumed around her, beading in her eyelashes. The icy bite of the glacier meltwater stung her hand, but it felt good. The air was so *hot*. She'd never known it to be so hot in the mountains. For the past five days it had been well into the upper nineties. A strenuous four-hour hike had brought her up high into this mountain pass, where waterfalls cascaded over brilliantly green mossy slopes, and marmots scurried through wildflower-strewn meadows before darting back into their safe homes inside rocky slopes.

The feeling of being watched faded. Madeline glanced around her. No one was in sight, just the cloudless blue sky above her and the mountains, immense and snow-covered. It wasn't like her to get jittery in the backcountry.

She let the water cascade over her hand. It made her feel more than cool; she felt free. She was in the mountains, away from her problems and the pressure of decisions. The wind was stronger by the current, sweeping along the water and bringing with it the cold from the glaciers above.

As she sat at the edge of the water, watching the sun bathe the brilliant yellows and reds of the wildflowers, a tremendous rumble thundered against the mountain. She peered upward toward the sound, where the waterfall disappeared above the cliff face. A resonant crack shook the mountain again, making her jump. She went off balance and crashed onto her knees. Icy water swallowed her hands. Quickly she scrambled away from the river's edge and got to her feet. Another deep boom cracked against the mountain, sending a shower of pebbles and sand down on her from the cliff above. Madeline readjusted her backpack and looked up nervously to the top of the waterfall. It was definitely coming from up there. But what could it be? She wasn't close enough to the snowpack for an avalanche.

Boom!

The earth quaked beneath her.

A sudden shrill symphony of whistles echoed up from the marmots. She glanced over to the nearby rockslide remains, and to her surprise saw marmots fleeing down the side of the mountain, at least twenty of them, skittering and leaping and running.

She suddenly knew that she didn't have time. She should have run when she first heard it.

Madeline turned and leapt away from the river, the weight of her backpack slamming against her back as she ran, *thump, thump, thump*.

And then the rumble became a roar, the roar a deafening cacophony of thunder, and in her peripheral vision Madeline saw a wall of water rising up at the top of the waterfall, a tremendous wave of white turbulence. And she saw trees in the whiteness, their skeletal roots writhing in the tumult, like

gigantic, fleshless hands, flexing and grabbing the air.

Madeline ran, muscles burning with the effort.

She tore across the mountainside, not going down, but going up and across, thinking the water would be less likely to reach her there. If one of those trees hit her in the head, she'd never survive. The air was burning in her lungs now, veins standing out on her neck as she struggled against the weight of her pack that wanted to pull her back.

She thought of dumping it, but there wasn't time. Madeline raced on, trying not to think about the weight or the crashing water, trying just to flee.

And then the water hit her.

With tremendous force she smashed face-first toward the ground, but before the rocks there could catch her, she was swept off her feet in a torrent of water, tumbling and twisting and going under. Her nose filled with water, and she gasped for breath as her head went down into the frigid torrent. The fierce current whipped her around mercilessly, as if she weighed no more than a leaf.

As Madeline struggled to right herself beneath the water, her feet tangled in something hard and unyielding with a million fingers that snaked out to grab her. Rough wood and branches cut into her legs and arms, and she realized it was a tree, rolling in the current beneath her.

The air burned in her lungs. She had to get a breath. Twisting and contorting, she couldn't even flip herself over. It was as if something was holding her down, *trying* to drown her. She struggled more, pushing against the rough bark of the tree while struggling to hold her breath. But she couldn't wriggle free. Her backpack caught in the branches, holding her fast.

Forcing herself to calm down, she unbuckled the straps around her hips and chest, then slipped her arms out. Kicking out vigorously, she broke branches and got free. She desperately swam toward what she thought was the surface. But her grappling hands found only branches and the rough rocks. She bounced against them painfully, cracking her knee and bashing her elbow.

Over and over she somersaulted in the freezing water, until she was so disoriented she had no idea which way was toward air. Tumbling, crashing, pounding over rock after rock, plunging even deeper downward, down the mountain.

She grasped desperately at branches and rocks as they passed by over and under and next to her. And then she was careening head over foot, arms flailing in the frigid water, legs scraping painfully against passing granite beneath her, bones connecting painfully with solid rock, jutting edges and boulders and slabs of scraping roughness.

She coughed involuntarily, her lungs out of air.

She tried to swim in the other direction, kicking out frantically. For a second she was fighting through a maze of branches, and then a hard slap of water hit her in the face. Her head reached air. She gasped deeply, saw a moment of blue sky just before the tremendous trunk of a tree spun into her line of sight and connected violently with her head.

A blinding light erupted behind her eyes, and her muscles refused to work as she sank down into the frigid darkness.

WHEN the knock sounded on Madeline's door, she started so badly that tea sloshed out of her cup and onto her book. She looked up from the couch, seeing the outline of someone behind the door curtain. She glanced down at her watch. It couldn't be George. He wasn't due back in town until later that day.

Her stomach went sour as she rose, trying to make out the shape behind the curtain: a woman.

The knock came again, but Madeline stood frozen in the middle of the tiny apartment. After a moment's hesitation she sat back down, opening her book once more. Then the knocking started again. Incessant knocking.

"Madeline?" came a woman's voice from the other side of the door. "Are you in there?"

Who the hell?

"Please, Madeline. It's a matter of life and death. We need you."

Need her? No one had ever needed her before. Avoided her at all costs, but not *needed* her.

"It's my daughter. She's missing."

The book fell out of Madeline's loose fingers. Slowly she rose to her feet, then walked numbly to the door. Pulling aside the little curtain, she saw Natalie Stevenson, a young mother who had often whispered about Madeline at the grocery store or in the line at the post office.

"Your mom told me where I could find you," Natalie said through the glass.

"My mom?" A daze filled Madeline's head. She didn't realize her parents knew anything but her P.O. address.

"Please." Natalie's tearstained face was pitifully red and swollen.

Then Madeline felt herself opening the door though everything inside her screamed to just lower the curtain and walk away.

Ten minutes later, Madeline raced across a field behind the Stevensons' house, clutching the last thing little Kate Stevenson had been known to touch; a small robot action figure. She tried not to stumble, speeding faster and faster as she leapt through the tall grass. Clearing her mind, she let the imagination come to her freely.

The little girl in a white dress, playing and laughing behind the Stevensons' house with a stuffed dinosaur and the robot toy.

Two older boys approaching. Teasing the little girl about her dad. "He's a drunk."

The girl, defiant at first. "No, he's not."

The boys continue taunting, malice in their eyes. "Saw him. Wrecked the company car. He's a useless drunk."

The girl, sobbing. "No, he's not!"

"Didn't you hear? Old Man Taggart fired him. You're going to starve. He won't work in this town again."

"No!" The little girl dropping the robot, running out of the yard, clutching her dinosaur. Entering the field at the edge of the property.

The boys laughing, staying behind.

Madeline ran on. The blond grass whipped and stung her bare legs below her shorts.

In a place where the grass was smashed flat, she spotted something brown. She raced to the spot and looked down. The brown, furry face of a brontosaurus smiled up at her. Bending over, she picked up the toy. Emotions swept over her. Images.

The little girl in the white dress sobbing uncontrollably in the grass, chest heaving, thinking about her dad, of the stink of alcohol on his breath.

Memories of a time the girl had spied on him from the stairs as he pulled a bottle of vodka out from behind the worn couch cushions and took a long, deep drink.

The girl kneeling in the grass for a long time, sobbing until her chest shuddered when she inhaled.

Then dropping the dinosaur and running on, toward her secret place, a lightning-scarred hollow tree beyond the old dam.

The girl had left for it just a few moments before.

Clutching the brontosaurus tight under her arm, Madeline raced forward. Ahead lay the edge of the woods. Beyond that bubbled the rushing white water of the North Cascade River and the old cement dam, abandoned in the 1940s. She raced to the edge of the woods and entered the forest, the rich scent of sun-warmed pine greeting her. Following the worn path that dam workers had used decades before, she strained her ears for any sound of the girl, but the gentle whisper of wind in the pine needles muffled the sounds around her. A pounding cacophony erupted, slowing her pace, but she realized instantly it was a woodpecker, high in the trees, thrumming away on a decaying tree. She ran on.

Soon the roar of white water replaced the whisper of wind. The air temperature dropped noticeably as the cool air blew off the river. The old dam came into view, a narrow expanse of concrete built over the tumbling teal water. The large turbines had been removed in the '40s, leaving large holes through which the water now filtered.

On one side of the dam the glacier-fed river ran wide and deep. In the beginning of the century, when the dam was still relatively new, a lake had formed on that side of the barrier. But over the years

slowly drained away as more and more cracks opened in the old cement. On the other side of the dam water gushed from the turbine holes with explosive force, returning to its native river form, free from its man-made confines.

Madeline stopped, staring at that white churning water, a vivid memory of her friend Ellie floating down those seething depths. She couldn't do this. Not the river.

She stopped short of crossing the dam and looked around for the girl. "Kate!" she yelled. The roar of the water filled her ears. Even if the girl yelled back, Madeline might not be able to hear her.

The hollowed-out tree lay on the other side of the dam. To reach it, Madeline would have to walk over the top of the dam, a narrow ridge of concrete spanning the rapids below. She hadn't crossed the dam since the day she lost Ellie. She couldn't do it again. "Kate!" she called.

Nothing.

Kneeling down into the soft bed of pine needles, she touched the edge of the dam, hoping to get an image that would tell her if the girl had run this far. Her fingers rested on the rough concrete, and images rushed into her.

Kate, reaching the dam and starting across it, hands thrust out to maintain her balance, eyes blurring with tears, barely able to see the concrete ridge under her feet.

Balance failing, arms windmilling, the girl, terrified, falling over the side.

Freezing water engulfing her, desperate swimming, rough rocks banging her knees and scraping her arms.

Then the black mouth of the turbine hole fast approaching, the water sucking her inside. Crashing into a clump of sharp debris on the opposite side of the hole, held there, stuck there, lungs burning with lack of air as the water flooded past her body, stealing her warmth.

Trying to scramble free, but too weak against the strength of the current, too hung up in long, snaking arms of old, slimy branches.

Madeline gasped and straightened up.

The girl was drowning.

Or dead already. *Ellie.*

Without thinking, she dropped the stuffed dinosaur and robot, tore off her boots, threw them to the side, and ran onto the dam. Leaping off where the girl had fallen, she drew in a breath as she plunged into the icy cold below. Instantly the numbing water knocked the air from her chest. She fought to the surface, gasped in fresh air, and then plunged back in, swimming up next to the dam. The force of the water against her was incredible, and for a moment she didn't think she'd be able to move where she wanted. It slammed her against the side of the dam and held her there.

The turbine holes lay on the bottom of the dam, and she managed to creep downward, using the force

of water to steady herself against the dam. Her eyes wide in the clear water, she found the edge of an opening and pulled herself downward to peer inside.

White fabric filled the hole, plastered against the tumble of branches and mud beyond, and she realized it was the little girl's dress, tossed in the powerful current. The hole reached back at least three feet, and Madeline could barely make out the girl's hair-plastered face, just a hint of pale in the turbulence among a dozen twigs and sticks and leaves spiraling madly inside. While the openings between the debris were certainly large enough for water to get through, they weren't large enough for a human to escape.

Snaking her arm into the opening, she attempted to grab Kate, Madeline's arm whipping violently in the current. The little girl wasn't moving. Her hair parted in a gust of current, and Madeline saw with horror that her eyes and mouth gaped open.

Pulling herself down farther, she managed to make contact with the girl's arm. She tugged fiercely but couldn't even budge her. The current was both helpful and harmful; while it kept her plastered against the side of the dam, it was just too powerful to yank Kate out.

But Madeline tried again, this time reaching both arms into the large hole and grasping one of Kate's legs. Suddenly Madeline slid down farther, crying out underwater for fear that she, too, would be sucked into the hole. But then her position stabilized. Pulling with all her strength, Madeline squeezed her eyes shut, no air left in her lungs. Kate's body gave a little, but she realized there was no way she'd be able to pull her free from the hole and then around the lip and up to safety.

She had to think of something else.

Letting go, she crawled up the side of the dam and burst into the air above. Gasping, she didn't stop to recover, instead gripping the edge of the dam and pulling herself up dripping onto the top.

The glacial meltwater had robbed her of every bit of warmth, her cold muscles rebelling with even the slightest movement. She peered over the other side of the dam. If she couldn't pull Kate out, maybe she could yank the debris free from the other side.

Knowing she couldn't fight the current if she just leapt in, Madeline dashed back to the bank of the river, ran around the dam, and waded into the frigid water on the other side. Before her the water roared out of the four turbine holes. Kate lay trapped in the second. Pressing against the wall of the dam, Madeline waded out to the first out spout in thigh-high water. It was too high to leap over, and she couldn't crawl under it because it rushed out flush with the riverbed. Her only option was to wade out farther into the torrent where the current would be less powerful and then burst across the outpour. Leaving the safety of the dam wall, she cut out diagonally, reached the rushing column of water, and then made a dash across it. Instantly her feet swept out from under her, and she desperately kicked and swam, angling back toward the dam. Her feet hit large rocks beneath, and she used them to spring back into the shallows next to the dam.

Now she was between the first two turbine holes. She ran toward the second one. Roughly four feet across, the dark hole erupted water at a violent rate. She wasn't sure if she could even thrust her hands into the outpour. Approaching the opening from the side, Madeline braced one foot against the dam and forced her arms into the frigid water. Immediately the water spat her hands back out. She tried

again, more quickly this time, and her fingers laced around a thick, knotted branch inside the hole. She pulled, straining, to no avail, the algae on the wood making the branch too slippery to hang on to. The angle was too awkward, not giving her enough leverage.

Not letting go of the branch, Madeline moved forward, plunging her entire body into the outflow and bracing her legs on the dam below the opening. Cold water exploded over her body, bursting up under her chin and spraying out behind her. Throwing her back into the effort, Madeline strained against the branch, gritting her teeth, gasping for air when she got the chance.

The thick branch slipped and shifted a little to one side, and she strained harder. It shifted again and came free in a wave of debris, hurtling Madeline backward into the river with explosive force. Twigs and branches lashed at her arms and legs as she gasped for breath and went under, releasing the heavy branch to the depths below.

Turbulent water tossed and somersaulted her, dashing her against slippery rocks. She found her bearings and righted herself in the current, head bobbing above the surface. Desperately she looked around for Kate, for a hint of white fabric among the deep teal and thrashing whitecaps of the river.

Sun-bleached branches floated by her, twigs, leaves, and then she saw the girl, bobbing facedown on the surface a few feet away. *Just like Ellie.* Madeline swam toward her, coughing up icy water and struggling against the current. Her hand closed around gauzy fabric, and she pulled, reeling the girl against her body. She turned her over quickly, horrified to see the wide-open eyes, the blue lips of the tiny mouth.

Angling an arm beneath the girl's chin, Madeline swam on her side toward the shore, a tangle of sodden logs, pine needles, and kinnikinnick bushes. She reached the bank, hauled the girl out in front of her, and then crawled onto the soggy earth beside her.

Immediately she felt for a pulse and was relieved to find one, though it was very weak. But the girl was not breathing.

Madeline's father was a wildlands firefighter and emergency medical technician and had taught her CPR when she was just a kid.

Madeline went to work.

She remembered she had to check three things: airway, breathing, and circulation. Rolling the girl onto her side, Madeline reached into her mouth and checked for obstructions. Her index finger hooked around a small twig and a plug of mud, and she fished them out. Squeezing the girl, she forced water from her lungs. A stream of fluid escaped between the blue lips, followed, to Madeline's great relief by a small gasp. Quickly she worked to stabilize her, administering a ten-count of mouth-to-mouth. Kate coughed and sputtered, drawing in a ragged breath, her eyes fluttering, blinking, and tearing up. Madeline checked her pulse. It was stronger.

The girl coughed again, flecks of water raining from her mouth.

Madeline had to get help. Knowing it was too dangerous to move her, she spoke softly to her. "Can you hear me?" After a moment, Kate's eyes turned and attempted to focus on Madeline. "I have to go"

help. You have to lie here very still while I'm gone, do you understand? You could have other injuries and moving around might make them worse." The girl didn't speak, just continued to breathe raggedly, her eyes dazed and wide. "I'll be back as fast as I can." Madeline didn't like how blue the girl's skin was. Hypothermia. She had to move quickly.

Trying to determine how far they'd drifted downstream, she stood, shivering in her own soaked clothing. "I'll be back," she said, looking back down at the girl reassuringly.

The girl's mouth moved, a whisper escaping her lips.

"What?" Madeline bent down to listen.

"Winthrop," the girl whispered.

Madeline raised her eyebrows. "Winthrop?"

"My ... my dino."

Madeline thought of the smiling brontosaurus she'd found in the field. "He's fine," she told Kate. "I found him myself. He's waiting for you."

The girl shuddered and coughed again.

"Try to stay awake," Madeline told her, and then dashed off along the riverbank in her sock feet. Avoiding sharp rocks and pointed branches, she soon reached the dam and the worn path. Grabbing her shoes, she slid them on, not bothering to lace them. Stooping again, she grabbed Winthrop and the robot and took off for town.

Madeline reached the Stevensons' house in under ten minutes, a painful stitch in her side and her lungs on fire. Kate's parents summoned the paramedics. The minutes stretched endlessly as they waited. Madeline knew her father would likely be one of the respondents, and she dreaded seeing him, not knowing what to say. The ambulance roared up, and he jumped out of the back, saving her the awkwardness of talking to him by completely ignoring her. Even as she led them back to Kate, he didn't so much as meet her eyes. On the riverbank, the EMTs immobilized Kate on a gurney and transported her back to the ambulance. Madeline placed Winthrop next to Kate's thin arm as they loaded her inside.

Her chest expanded with relief as her father drove away. Another moment of uneasiness over, another moment of their inevitable encounters survived. It hit her powerfully then that when she moved, she wouldn't have to see either parent ever again.

Now she sat in a worn-out cushioned chair in the emergency room, having been checked for hypothermia herself. Luckily she was all right and had changed into dry clothes. Her long, wavy brown hair hung in wet tangles around her shoulders. Across from her, Kate's father wept noisily, holding the girl's robot, and her mother looked exhausted, anxiously glancing up every time a doctor entered the room to talk to a nurse or another family.

As Kate's father cried, Madeline couldn't help but notice the stench of alcohol radiating from him. He smelled saturated with it.

It made her profoundly sad. Paul Stevenson was a nice man, a creative genius who had never been able to realize his dream in life: to make a living at painting. He had turned to drinking just last year and lost his job because of it. The whole town knew about it, and small towns could be as cruel as the people were kind. The rumors were tearing his family apart, and Paul wept now, openly and grievously, in the face of such a near tragedy.

The double doors of the emergency room slid open, admitting a gush of fresh air. Madeline looked up. George New-castle stood there, his eyes searching the room. He spotted her and rushed over. A tall man in his early twenties, with long black hair swept back in a ponytail, George usually exuded calm. Right now he looked spooked.

"Madeline," he breathed, kneeling down and wrapping his arms around her. "I just heard. Are you okay?" The sensation of being hugged always thrilled her, and she welcomed the familiar scent of his wool jacket.

He pulled away and studied her with his intense brown eyes.

She'd known George for a little over seven months, and he had quickly become her closest friend. Her only friend. He'd moved to her little town and rented a house there to save money while attending the university in Missoula. Rent prices there were highly inflated, so he had chosen to commute instead.

He hugged her again, and she was grateful for him, for her life. She could be bobbing down the river right then, sightless eyes staring up at the darkening sky.

She pulled away, not wanting to hug him for too long. He was very nice, but he had feelings for her that she didn't return, and she didn't like the thought of leading him on.

"Thanks for coming, George," she told him.

George slid in beside her. Taking her hand companion-ably, he whispered, "Any word?"

Madeline shook her head. "We're still waiting."

They returned to silence, listening only to the soft gasps and sniffs from Kate's father.

A few minutes later, the door to the examination rooms opened, and a young Chinese-American doctor with short, spiky hair appeared. He approached them confidently, a pleased look on his face. They all stood up tensely.

"She's going to be fine," he told them, holding his hands out in a placating gesture. "She's suffering from hypothermia and has some superficial cuts and bruises, but she's going to be just fine."

"Oh, God," her dad gasped, bursting into tears again. "I couldn't bear to lose her."

"Well, you're not going to," the doctor reassured him, placing a hand on the man's shoulder. "Madeline here saved her life." The doctor smiled at Madeline and gave her a slight nod.

Kate's mother hugged her husband, then shook the doctor's hand and thanked him over and over again.

"You have some paperwork to fill out, though," the doctor told them.

The mother nodded and then turned to Madeline. "Thank you," she said, her face twisting with emotion. "Words just don't seem enough ..." Then she grabbed Madeline, hugging her so tightly that the air fled from her chest. Madeline grunted from the squeeze. Then reluctantly she released Madeline, gazing at her with such gratitude that Madeline grew uncomfortable. "Thank you," she said again. "A thousand times thank you."

"It's okay," Madeline said quickly. "You're welcome."

"No, it's not enough," Kate's dad put in. "If it weren't for your"—he paused, trying to find a word—"gift, then we wouldn't have found her. Our little girl would be—" He didn't finish.

"It's okay. Really." Madeline hated being the center of attention. She just wanted to slink out of there and go shut herself up in her apartment. "You'd better go finish that paperwork," she said lamely.

To her relief, Kate's parents nodded and turned away to follow the doctor.

"Get me out of here. Please," she breathed to George.

She hoped word of this wouldn't get out. She could already picture herself on assignment with the police, going over grisly photographs and murder weapons, her mind filling with images of horror and murder. It was exactly what she'd been avoiding since she lost Ellie.

George put one protective arm around her and led her out of the hospital. She laid her head on his chest, allowing herself a moment of feeling comforted.

She was about to transfer away from her hometown to a college in San Francisco. Two years at the local community college had only served to make her stigma grow, as more and more people met her as the "Weird Girl." She needed to clear her mind before she left and started a new life.

As the hospital doors whooshed shut behind them, she thought of Kate and her loving parents and felt a little hurt. Maybe even a little jealous. When was the last time she'd talked to her parents? Or rather when was the last time they'd talked to her? Six months? A year? And they lived here in Mothershead.

In the parking lot, George tucked her into his car then went around to the driver's side. "I'll get you home. Bet a hot shower would be nice."

"Yes ..." she answered distantly.

As he drove, she thought of the promise of San Francisco. She'd never lived in a city that big and she relished the thought of being completely anonymous. This town was tiny, full of rumors and small minds, and she wanted out. She was tired of everyone knowing about her and her gift.

When they got to her little apartment, George walked her in, fussing over her to make sure she was okay. She appreciated the fussing. No one had cared since Ellie, and it felt good. At last she convinced

him she was fine and that they'd meet later for dinner.

Madeline squeezed into the corner booth at the diner, glancing around at the other patrons. She heard the whispering. Eyes averted as she met them. The waitress stood behind the counter, serving a platter of greasy eggs to Ed Hanson, one of the local ranchers. She exhaled with distaste when she caught sight of Madeline. Looking back at Ed, she whispered something, and he turned on his stool, staring at Madeline. Then he swiveled back, shaking his head. Madeline caught his murmur: "Don't envy you Edna."

Madeline felt for her bracelet under her sleeve, almost unconsciously. She felt the solid silver, the little box that was the focus of the piece of jewelry. Latched tightly, the decorative box held precious cargo. Through the fabric, she felt the tiny catch, ensuring it was closed. This had become her ritual when she felt sad or isolated. Sometimes, on rare occasions, she even opened the box.

After more than ten minutes, Edna finally made it over to the booth. It was always the same. They hoped Madeline would just leave, or better yet, stop coming altogether.

"Know what you want, honey?" Edna said, not making eye contact.

As if Madeline could see into her mind by meeting her gaze, anyway.

She took a deep breath, summoning up the energy to be polite to people who never gave her that return. "I'm waiting for someone. Can I just get two cups of coffee with cream?"

"Sure thing, hon." Edna pivoted and moved away quickly. She filled up the two cups then frowned. "I just remembered I have to check on a delivery in the back." She looked at Ed. "Would you be a dear?"

He glared at her, then looked at Madeline over his shoulder. "I'm a customer, you know."

"Oh, Ed," she said, waving at him dismissively, then disappeared through the swinging kitchen door. Slowly, Ed got up from his stool, picking up the tray with the coffee and dish of creamer. He meandered over to her table and held the tray down, but stopped short of placing the cups on the table. Finally, Madeline reached up and took the cups and dish of creamers. Ed was so busy looking away from her that the tray started to tip. As the dish of creamers slid toward the floor, both he and Madeline instinctively tried to grab it. She got there first, and Ed's hand landed right on top of hers. He yanked it away, eyes wide, and backed up into the occupied table behind him.

"Goddamn it, Ed!" a woman snarled at him. "You've gone and made me spill my coffee!"

"S-sorry," he slurred, backing around the table without breaking his gaze on Madeline.

The bell over the door rang, and a gush of fresh air spiraled into the hot diner. Madeline turned in the booth, relieved to see George. His long, dark coat caught in the wind as he pushed the door shut behind him. He turned then, scanning the diner, his long, black hair hanging freely about his shoulders.

Madeline's breath caught in her chest. He looked different. More ... vibrant. A spark that hadn't been there before ignited in her belly. His dark brown eyes positively glittered as they surveyed the diner.

and then fell on her. She gave a small wave, and he navigated his way through the tables to where she sat.

“Hello, Madeline,” he said, grinning, his teeth brilliant white against the tanned glow of his skin. Something was undeniably different about him, but Madeline couldn’t quite place it.

“Hi, George,” she said after a moment. “Have a seat.”

He slid into the booth opposite her. “You look good tonight. Are you still doing okay ... you know ... after?”

She nodded, though inside the events at the dam had left her shaken. Her hand felt for her bracelet.

“You’re playing nervously with your bracelet again,” George told her.

“Oh, sorry. It’s a habit.”

“I’ve noticed. What’s in the little box, anyway?”

“A treasure,” Madeline said and didn’t expand.

He glanced around for the waitress then, and Edna didn’t disguise her horror at having to return to the table so soon. She started over empty-handed, and to save her the trip, George called, “Menus?”

Edna froze as if he’d just pulled a gun on her. “Menus?” she said weakly.

“Yeah,” George said, his brow furrowing.

“I can tell you our specials,” she offered after a pause.

“That’s okay,” George said back over the din of the other diners. “I want to peruse it.”

“Um ...” Edna glanced over at the menu box next to the counter, which was full to the top. “You can come up and pick one out ...”

George wrinkled his forehead, obviously confused. “What?”

Madeline knew all too well what was going on. She nudged George’s foot under the table. He turned to her, confused. “She doesn’t want to bring the menus, George. She’d have to touch them, see, then hand them to us.”

His mouth came open. “You’re kidding me.”

She averted her eyes. “Unfortunately, I’m not.”

He’d seen this stuff before with her. But now his eyes flared, and he turned to Edna. “Bring us the menus now!” he said angrily.

Madeline’s face flushed. No one had stood up for her since Ellie all those years ago.

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