

“Miranda...Miranda...” The voice is muffled but I know it’s coming from the closet. I leap out of bed and slam my closet door open. I step in and hear a cracking sound. Ice. And then I start falling...

I sit straight up in bed. It’s only 2:37 in the morning. I try to calm myself down. It was just a stupid dream, Miranda. But the calling is still ringing in my ears. The voice sounded so much like Mara. My sister, the one who died last month, the sister I miss every morning when I wake up. I try to shake thoughts of her from my head, but I’m struggling to hold back tears. My mind flashes back to that day in December. It was all my fault. I decided to go out on the lake, which was completely iced over. Mara was outside too, throwing snowballs to our dog Cupcake. “Go ahead,” Mara told me when I walked out on the lake, “See if I care when you fall in.” But she did care. The ice started to break and she came running out to get me. I hugged her and promised never to do it again. Then we both slipped and Mara fell through the crack I had made with my boot. Everything was happening at once. Mara was falling in the freezing cold water. Suddenly she was gone, and a blob of bubbles replacing her. I ran back to the house, screaming at the top of my lungs. Dad put on his boots and searched the ice all day, but no one dared go in. So now Mara is somewhere at the bottom of the lake. Everyone tells me she’s dead. But I don’t believe them. I bet she crawled back out or swam around or something, but I refuse to believe that my sister is truly gone forever.

There’s no use trying to fall back asleep now, because memories of Mara are just replaying in my head. I sneak downstairs and put a mug of milk in the microwave. I grab a pencil and my sketchbook because I know sketching will calm me down. It’s the only thing of Mara I really can do too. As I start, crazy ideas come to me. I make up the rest of my dream, trying to make it happy. I leave out the part where I fell through the ice, and instead pretend that I just slipped into a hole and fell, far. Like, Alice in Wonderland far. Each step I took is on the pages in front of me, each tree I see and all the crazy animals I can imagine. I draw a furry orange bird with tiny blue wings. A strange purple-haired man who talks to me. A dark, mysterious castle. But then I remember ice. Ice that cracked. Ice that gave way to poisonous snakes, weeds that grabbed my ankles and fish that swarmed around me.

I stop sketching and listen intently. The calling still rings through my head as though it’s coming from my bedroom. The sound pulls me upstairs. Back in my room, Mara’s voice is still there, I’m still

imagining it. No, wait. That's coming from the closet. I cautiously open the door. I remember my dream, but it starts to meld together with the story I sketched. I look down and realize I'm standing on ice. I'm not dreaming this time. This is real. And suddenly I start to fall. It feels like I always imagined Alice to feel, almost bored. But I'm falling through a tornado of glitter, and I'm so fascinated by the colors swirling around me that I forget to put my feet down and find myself tumbling across a spongy dirt floor. I'm surrounded by strange green plants, some of which I remember sketching. Slowly, I stand up. I still hear Mara, but she's distant. Nowhere near me. I'll find her later. I just want to explore this place.

As I walk through the shimmery woods, I hear strange bird calls. They make up a sort of choppy melody that repeats over and over. Up one particular tree with reddish-orange leaves, I notice a bird that I remember sketching. "Jay-jay-jay," it calls. I name it a Jayjay bird. The fluffy orange Jayjay bird flits down out of its tree and lands on my shoulder. But instead of pecking at my face, a tiny purple tongue pops out of its beak and licks my ear. It's so cute I immediately decide these birds are something good I will get out of these crazy woods.

I walk around, inspecting animals and plants. I try to ignore my growing urge to look for Mara, because she doesn't feel so distant any more. A ways down the path I'm following, I spot a log cabin half-buried in the strangely-colored plants. It seems like no one has been there for a long time. The door is almost completely covered in a sheet of pink ivy, and birds are nestled in the cracks. The latch on the door is rusted, and even the logs seem dull compared to the shimmer that illuminates the rest of the trees. I tiptoe over to the window, and Mara's voice in my head seems to get louder. I shove open the dusty window and force my shoulders through it, trying not to get stuck. Someone is huddled in the corner inside the house. And I think it's Mara.

I barely have time to launch myself backwards into a glittery bush before Mara stands up and walks slowly towards me. I stare, trying to take in everything about her that makes her Mara. Brown hair brushed neatly into a ponytail. Soft, sweet smile that could turn into a mischievous one in a second. Bright green eyes that bore into you and make you wish you could just melt into the ground. Wait, as far as I can remember, my sister's eyes were calm, understanding, caring, loving, beautiful. And then I know this isn't Mara.

The girl is walking faster now, with that mischievous smile that she stole from my sister.

“Who are you?” I screech.

I don't expect her to answer, because she looks more like a robot than a person. But she does answer me.

“You know me, I'm Mara,” the thing says in my sister's voice. But it isn't the voice I really know. It's too high, too wrong. Hearing my dead sister should make me sad. I should miss her even more than I did two weeks ago when I was staring into the water, waiting for her to come back. But instead I'm angry. This thing stole my sister from me and I want her back, even if she is dead at the bottom of the lake.

“Come with me,” the thing says. Too syrup-y. Too unnatural. Not right. Not Mara. “Let's go home. I know how. Let me show you.” The robotic Mara is closing in on me. I spot a way out. So I take it. I get up and sprint through the woods until I can't run anymore. This part of the woods isn't glittery. It's dark and dangerous. The sweet bird calls have been drowned out by the crackling noises. Ice. The trees around me seem to be swaying. I look up, expecting to see a dark cloudy sky, maybe some scary lightning. But instead I see ice. I look away. Across the woods I see a castle. I can hear Mara now, loud and clear. Not in my head. I have to save her. She's in that castle.

My feet are pounding into the dark dirt. When I get to the door of the castle, I see a crack in the ice above my head. It's the same shape as the crack Mara fell into, that crack I've stared into every day for hours since the day she died. Realization hits me like a ton of bricks. This is where Mara fell. My sister is still alive. She's here, in these crazy woods, in this castle. Now all I have to do is find a way in.

“Thud. Thud. Thud.” I bang on the door of the castle with the rusty knocker, which is shaped like some sort of horned monster. I'm expecting a creepy mechanical voice to tell me to come in when a small man with purple hair opens the door. Like the one I sketched in what seems like a lifetime ago. The man seems harmless, so I hesitantly give him a smile. He suddenly seems very nervous, and answers me in a stuttering voice,

“Don't come in! Go away! The master will hear you.” I assume the master is the one who has Mara.

“Please, I just want to know. Does he have a girl here?” I try to sound less desperate than I feel.

“Oh, maybe.” The man answers. Then he sighs. “Many people have been prisoners here.”

Anyone who drowns in the lake above.” He points up, muttering something under his breath. “Most just die in the castle. Of old age, of course. The master isn’ t *cruel* to them. He just... keeps them safe.”

“By doing what? Holding them captive?” I say, trying not to yell. “I want my sister back!”

The

man seems to be getting taller. Suddenly he is no longer a small man but a monstrous replica of the face on the knocker.

“GO AWAY! NEVER COME BACK HERE!” His voice is deep and frightening. The robotic version of Mara I ran away from earlier is behind him, multiplying by the second. “CLONES! ATTACK HER!” Mara’ s voice swirls around me, trying to calm me down. I feel myself drifting away. I have to find the real Mara in this crowd of clones. I blink. My family is around me. Including Mara. I can’ t tell what’ s real anymore. I do what I know will clear up all this mess. I close my eyes. I remember everything I sketched. And I erase the purple man. I erase the castle. I draw Mara in perfect detail, making sure her eyes look just right, not like the clones. I open my eyes, search the sea of Maras, and I pick out the right one. I squirm through everything, remembering to erase in my head as I go. The monstrous man disappears, along with all the clones of Mara. I grab the real Mara’ s hand and pull her away from everything. The calling that’ s been ringing through my head all day is gone. Because Mara is safe now, and she knows I’ m okay.

We run. We run far away from the castle, into the glittery forest. We curl up behind a tree. A Jayjay bird lands beside us, tweeting its happy little tune. I hug Mara; squeeze her until I’ m sure she can barely breathe.

“Miranda? Have you really thought about getting home without everyone wondering?” She asks. “I mean, if we just show up, we can’ t tell everyone about this place. We need some explanation.” I hesitate for a minute. That is a good point. I can’ t just show up and say, ‘Oh yeah, I just erased some stuff down there and got my sister back.’ Erase. That’ s it! I’ ll just erase everyone else’ s memory’ s of the past 3 weeks.

I answer, “I think I can do it. You know how everyone just disappeared? That was because I erased them. I used your good eraser, the one you used when you used to sketch. Well, not

literally. But the reason they' re gone is because I drew them all in the first place. I was dreaming about you, and I couldn' t get back to sleep and- Oh, Mara. I missed you so much. When you fell in, it was all my fault.”

“Well, yeah. It was. But I shouldn' t have let you out on the ice in the first place.” And there' s the old Mara again, blaming her little sister for everything. “Hey, do you know how to get out of this place?”

“Well, I fell in through my closet. So let' s go back there. It was this way,” I say, pointing

in the direction of the Jayjay bird tree. “But first let me… fix something.” I close my eyes, and picture everyone who knew about Mara. All the people at school, our relatives, everyone we know and all the people in our town. I close in on one piece of information: Mara Richardson died in December. I erase it, good and clean, so there' s not one smudge left on the paper. Just like Mara taught me.