

CHAPTER I — THE TWINS AND THE OWL

They have arrived, and their record continues, not in fire and prophecy as before, but in the fury of a storm. I have told you of the prophecies and of what little you need to know of me. The rest belongs to them. So I will inscribe more gently upon these pages. My hand dims, but does not depart.

Above a mortal wood, a burst of blue light splintered the dark of a chilled autumn night. And as abruptly as it had appeared, it snapped away, leaving behind, where only darkness had once been, an owl. Wings spread wide, the Barred owl soared above the treetops, its moon-cast shadow slithering along the forest floor. With ebony eyes seeking, it searched the darkness until at last it saw a faint, solitary glow. He turned toward it, wings tilting with purpose, drawn not by the glow alone, but by something long sought. Something destiny whispered long ago.

The owl circled the campsite before landing on a maple branch that towered over it. He could hear the soft calls of a loon and the steady rush of a river moving through the darkness below. Drawn by voices, he peered down at the entrance of a small, dome-shaped tent. Two mud-crusted bikes briefly caught his attention, but he, having often passed between realms, was familiar with such things. They were but oddities to him. It was the silhouettes of two crawling figures on the tent walls that truly aroused his deepest interest.

Within the maple-scented warmth and scattered clutter of the tent, unaware of the owl's presence, the Twins Eric and Emily prepared to settle in for the night. Eric zipped the tent shut, leaving a small gap at the bottom. He turned to Emily. "I think you should sleep on it."

"You made me a promise, Eric!" snapped Emily, her brown eyes locked fiercely onto her brother.

“Yes, yes, I know I did! But all I’m asking you to do is to give it more thought, Emily. And most of all, think about how miserable we, especially you, were. If in the morning you still want to go back to that wretched place, then I’ll keep my promise, and we’ll go back together.”

Pepper, their mixed-breed black and white puppy, nestled against Emily. She stroked his head and whispered, “We may have been miserable, but at least we were alive, Eric. Sometimes, what you’re running to may be far worse than what you’re running away from.”

“I can’t believe you’d even consider going back, especially since we might be separated this time, and they’d probably take Pepper away.”

Emily’s arms tightened instinctively around Pepper. She said nothing for a moment, her hand moving slowly through his fur. “I hate to think that might happen,” she said quietly, “but if it did, it wouldn’t be for more than two years. Then we’d be on our own.”

“Two years is a long time for us to be separated. I don’t think you’ll be able to handle it. I know I couldn’t, and you’re in far worse shape than I am.”

A tear meandered down Emily’s cheek. “Believe me, Eric, I know. It hurts when I think about it.” She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice had dropped to just above a whisper. “But death is a far greater separator.”

Something in Eric’s expression shifted, there and gone, like a shadow crossing still water. He looked away. Neither of them said anything more about it.

“It’s all in your mind, Em. You’ve been having feelings like this ever since Mom and Dad...” He stopped. The words had taken him somewhere he hadn’t meant to go, somewhere neither of them went willingly. He exhaled slowly, the way one does when putting something carefully back in its place. “Well, nothing’s ever come of these feelings of yours. You’re letting your imagination get the best of you again.”

Emily lifted her nose, bristling with indignation. “Humph!” she huffed, turning her back on her brother and crawling into her sleeping bag with Pepper. “You just don’t understand. You never have. I’m going to try to get some sleep. I suggest you do the same.”

Shuffling into his sleeping bag, Eric crinkled his face. “I know you said you will not change your mind, but I get gut feelings too, Em, and I just don’t see us going back... ever.”

Emily whipped around, her eyes flaring. “I don’t want to discuss this any further. So good night!” she snapped, then tucked her head deep into her sleeping bag, emphasizing an end to their conversation.

“Okay, fine! Good night to you, too,” grumbled Eric as he reached to turn off the lantern. Frustrated, he curled up in his sleeping bag, hissing, “Sisters!”

Emily heard Eric but remained silent in her thoughts. *Could he be right? Was it just her imagination?* She pulled Pepper closer, burying her face briefly in his warm fur, and for a moment, the familiar scent of him was the only thing that did not waver. Then, quietly, without meaning to, she was somewhere else entirely.

She lifted her head. Pepper was watching her with those steady, dark eyes that asked nothing and forgave everything. She whispered, “I miss them so much and wish with all my heart that bad wishes were never granted... or that good wishes could cancel out bad ones.” She closed her eyes. Pepper gently licked a tear from her cheek.

The last of the haloed moon disappeared behind a shroud of seething clouds, plunging the campsite into an oppressive gloom. The owl turned its head slowly toward the ground. For a moment, the storm seemed to hold its breath. The owl slowly blinked an eye. Then, from the deepest fold of shadow at the maple’s roots, a fawn stumbled forward as though the darkness had simply released it.

Trembling at the foot of the maple, its ears stiffly pointed, the confused fawn inhaled the night air, searching for its mother’s scent. Lightning flashed, followed by a clap of thunder,

startling the fawn and causing it to buckle its hind legs as if to run, but it froze in fear instead. The owl did not flinch. It watched the fawn with the same still, patient attention it had given the tent, as though both were pieces of the same unfolding thing.

Wind rippled the tent's walls as a barrage of raindrops pounded frantically against them, as if trying to enter or get someone to come out. Pepper, stirred by the storm and sensing the fawn, waddled over Eric to the tent's entrance. She slipped her twitching nose through the gap and sniffed.

Awakened by Pepper's prodding paws, Eric crawled over to her and extended the opening just enough for them both to see. "It's just a storm, girl," he whispered as they watched dark trees whipping wildly in the wind.

The owl, untouched by the storm's fury, widened its eyes and stretched its neck to study him more closely. Recognition flared within him like an ember finding dry wood, quiet, absolute, and ancient. He did not move. He did not need to. Something in the night had shifted, and he felt its pull. Having heard the conversation between the Twins, he was certain Eric was the one.

Emily stirred in her sleep, whispering, "No! No! Go away, go away!"

Hairs raised and tail prickled, Pepper snarled a puppy growl. "Easy, girl, there's nothing there," insisted Eric, stroking her gently.

Lightning revealed the frightened fawn, and a loud boom of thunder sent it fleeing. Pepper darted after it, barking, and both quickly disappeared into the darkness.

"Pepper, get back here!" shouted Eric, even though he knew calling out to a puppy chasing imaginary prey was hopeless. He turned on the lantern and slipped into his hiking boots. "Em, get up! We've got to go after—"

Emily grabbed his arm, her grip trembling. "No, Eric, no, she'll be back. We shouldn't go out there! Something's waiting. It wants us, not her."

“Stay here then. I’ll get her myself. She’s only a puppy, Em, and she’ll get lost.”

Emily stayed still for just a moment, her hand still on his arm, listening to the storm and to something beneath the storm that only she could hear. Then she reached for her hiking boots. “No matter how dangerous I think it may be, I’m not letting you go alone. But if we die from this, I’m never speaking to you again.”

“Is that a promise?” said Eric in a teasing tone that shifted to a more sincere one. “I know you’re scared, so thanks for coming, Em. We’ll be okay.”

Pulses racing, the Twins slipped into their hooded jackets. Emily grabbed a flashlight from her backpack and turned it on. Eric reached for the lantern.

“No, leave it here. It’ll help us find our way back. Take this one. I have a spare,” said Emily, handing her flashlight to Eric while grabbing another from her backpack.

The Twins scurried to the exit. Eric unzipped it. A rush of wet air swept in, causing the tent to swell. And with it came the full voice of the storm. No longer muffled and distant. Immediate and vast, filling the small space around them as though the night itself had leaned in. Unfazed, they held their flashlights high into the raging night. Wind-driven sheets of rain pounded the forest. But within their beams, Pepper was nowhere to be seen.

Emily pulled up her hood, tucked in her loose hair, and tightened the strings. “You should put yours up, too.”

Eric pulled his hood over his head. “Stay close, Em.”

“Don’t worry, I intend to.”

Together, they stepped out. The cold struck them at once, sharp and wet and absolute, the kind that finds its way through fabric and skin and settles into the bones before you have taken your second breath. Emily quickly turned and aimed her flashlight at the exit while Eric zipped

the tent behind them. Then Eric ran toward the last place he saw Pepper, and Emily followed close behind, and the storm closed around them both like a shroud.

They stopped at the foot of the maple. Rain pelted their faces. Nearby, the river roared with a fury that the storm had given it, swollen far beyond its familiar voice. Behind them, in the storm's fury, the lantern cast its warm, inviting glow against the tent walls, small, golden, and steady against the chaos around it. Emily turned and looked, as though it were calling them back. It was the kind of light that makes the dark feel darker by comparison.

Struggling to hear beyond the roar of the storm, they stood with their eyes closed, shifting and turning their heads, listening as if forever. "I hear her!" Eric finally yelled, his voice full of excitement. With Eric leading, the Twins took chase. Tall, slender, and athletic, they ran like gazelles, leaping over shrubs and sprinting uphill into a howling wind that carried the distant sound of Pepper's barking.

The owl took flight, stalking after them.

Heart pounding, Emily kept Eric in sight, just ahead of her, bounding through the forest, bold and unafraid but also unaware. He did not feel what she felt. Even if he had, his firm belief in a rational explanation for everything would cause him to dismiss it as if it had never existed. But her experience had taught her not to trust her physical senses alone. They are masters of deception, rarely revealing all that is truly there. Something more than nature was lurking in these woods tonight. Her instinct knew it with a certainty her words could never quite carry.

The distance between them grew. Branches came at her from the dark, and shrubs caught at her boots, and the ground shifted and sucked beneath her feet with every stride. She pushed harder, ducking and twisting, fighting for every step, watching Eric pull further ahead and not knowing whether the forest was simply indifferent or something else entirely.

Then something shadowy swooped down from the dark, knocking her to the ground. She screamed, "Eric!"

Hearing Emily's cry, Eric stopped. He turned around, but Emily was not in sight. "Emily! Emily! Where are you?" he shouted, anxiously retracing his steps.

Her breath shallow, Emily struggled to stand. When she was nearly upright, the dark figure moved toward her again. It was an owl, claws out, eyes glowing. It screeched. She screamed!

"Em, I'm coming," cried Eric, racing toward his sister's scream. He ducked branches that thrashed at him, stumbled over shrubs that clung to him, and struggled with mud puddles that grabbed and pulled at his feet. It was as if the forest was doing everything possible to keep him from reaching her. Could it be possible Emily was right? Was there something wicked in these woods, and now, because he hadn't listened to her, it had taken his sister away? No, he refused to let his imagination get the best of him. *It's only the storm*, he told himself. *Only the storm... nothing more.*

Eric stopped. His heart pounding, he scanned the area with his flashlight from left to right and behind him. "Em, where are you?" Only the howling wind and splattering rain answered. *It's his fault*, he thought. He focused only on Pepper and should have been watching for his sister as well. *It would be unbearable if anything...* "Emily!" Rain streamed down his face as he held his breath and listened.

"I'm over here, at the bottom of the hill," called his sister.

"Keep talking. I'll find you."

"Keep talking, he says. About what?" muttered Emily to herself. "I think this is going to be another one of those times when you should've listened to me, Eric," said Emily in a chastising tone.

"That works... I guess," said Eric as he rushed toward his sister's voice, stopping when his flashlight revealed Emily on her hands and knees at the bottom of a steep slope. "What happened? Are you okay?"

She looked up, her face streaked with rain and mud. “Some nutty owl flew into my face and knocked me down twice! The second time, I tumbled over and thought I’d never stop rolling down this dumb hill,” she said while brushing through the leaves for her flashlight.

Eric sighed, nearly in tears, relieved he had found his sister unharmed. “Hang on, I’ll be right there.”

“No, I’m okay. Just wait a minute,” said Emily, finally finding her flashlight. It was out. She shook it to get it working and pointed it toward Eric. “Like I said, I’m okay. You need to get after Pepper before we lose her.” She stood coated in wet autumn-colored leaves.

Eric smiled. “You should see yourself, Em, and I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“Listen, Eric. We can barely hear her.”

Eric listened. The barking faded and drifted further away.

“See what I mean? She’s more likely to get lost now than I am. You must go after her while you can still hear her. I’ll be all right,” insisted Emily as she started back up the slope. She paused, swallowed hard, and whispered to herself, “I hope...”

“Okay, okay, I’m going, but catch up with me as soon as you can. And if you lose sight or sound of me, return to camp and wait. Understood?”

“Yes, but I’ll be right behind you. Now go get her.”

Eric had disappeared deeper into the forest by the time Emily reached the top of the slope. After brushing off the leaves that hadn’t fallen during her climb, Emily slumped against a tree to catch her breath. Her flashlight dimmed, then went out. “Great!” she grumbled as she shook it again. The foreboding feelings she had all day still lingered, but Pepper had strayed much too far. Shaking her flashlight whenever it flickered out, Emily hurried after Eric’s distant calls for Pepper.

Bone-chilled, soaked, and unable to see, hear, or smell the fawn any longer, Pepper stopped. She perked up at Eric's distant calls, but before she could respond, the owl swooped down on her. Its sharp talons raked deep into her flesh. Crumbling to the ground, Pepper yelped. The owl's grip tightened. Air blasted out of Pepper's lungs. Blood pulsed from her wounds, mixing with the rain. The forest fell away beneath her, rain slicing sideways across her limp body.

The owl's eyes reflected nothing as it rose from the ground with slow, deliberate wings, carrying Pepper toward a nearby ridge. There was no urgency in its flight, no wildness. Only purpose.

Hearing the yelp, Eric shuddered as dread seized his heart. "Pepper!"

The wind moaned, and in a flash of light followed by crackling thunder, the image of the owl clutching Pepper passed unseen across the sky above Eric. Pepper gasped for breath, her pain fading into numbness, and with her vision blurred, she could not see the edge of the ridge below. Exhausted and dying, Pepper fell silently as the owl released her into the black abyss beyond it.

The owl landed on a branch of a tree standing between Eric and the ridge. It settled its feathers once, fell still, then did what no other owl could. It barked Pepper's bark, unmistakable even over the storm's roar. The sound carried with an ease that should have been impossible: too clear, too close, too perfectly shaped to stop a panicked running boy in his tracks.

Eric spun to his left, taken aback by the sudden change of direction. "How'd you get..." he began, then, casting confusion aside with a sigh of relief that he heard from what appeared to be an unharmed Pepper, he rushed toward the ridge. "Stay, girl, stay, I'm coming!"

A whipping wind whispered past, "*Beware... he beckons you.*" Eric stopped and shook his head. His brow tightened as he squinted into the wind, wondering whether he had heard what he thought he had just heard. Then, finally, ignoring what he certainly believed was nothing more than the fury of the storm deceiving his senses, he continued his search for Pepper.

Whenever Eric drew near, the owl flew to another tree and barked again to lure Eric closer to the trap that waited.

The ground turned into slippery mud, and the howling wind blocked every move Eric made. Gasping for air and nearing exhaustion, he fought to keep his balance as he ran along the ridge's edge toward the elusive barking. Earth-shaking thunder followed a double flash of lightning as the ground beneath Eric gave way. He tumbled down a slope with mud and water rushing over him. His hands frantically searched for something to grab, anything to stop his slide.

His fingers found and grabbed a small shrub. As he dangled from the ledge, mud ran over his arms and shoulders. He could hear rushing water from below, which sounded close, but he could only see darkness. The pouring rain and mud made it even harder for him to hold on. His grip slipped. "Help! Emily, help me!" He listened for Emily, but wind-whipped trees and pounding rain were all he heard.

"Emily!" he cried desperately, but still there was no response. *Had she returned to camp?* He looked down again. If only he could see how far he might fall. Lightning flashed, revealing everything around him except the void below. The void only seemed darker as raindrops silently disappeared into it. He shuddered. A sense of hopelessness washed over him. His tears mingled with the rain as the fear that he would never see his sister again took hold. She would be alone without him. They needed each other. He had to get back to her.

Above, a beam of light streaked past and then disappeared. Eric's breath caught. He knew that light. "Eric!" called an anxious voice.

"I'm over here," yelled Eric with a burst of hope. A shadowed figure appeared above and reached out to him. "Emily, is that you?" he called, his voice torn by the storm. The figure didn't answer. Not a word. Then, a sudden thud. The figure fell past him, screaming.

Eric's mind split in two directions at once. She was supposed to go back. She was supposed to be safe at camp, he had told her... he had been clear, and yet that scream, that voice,

that light. “Emily!” he yelled, his eyes searching the darkness below. He saw nothing but heard, beyond the storm’s fury, a dwindling scream echoing in the void below.

“No! No! It can’t be—” His own voice broke against the storm, swallowed almost as quickly as the fading scream in the dark abyss below.

Startled by a screech that cut through the storm like something older than weather, Eric looked up. A flash of lightning revealed the owl, diving at him with its wings swept back and claws extended. Eric covered his face. It struck him, knocking him back. His shifting weight ripped the shrub from the ground. A brilliant flash and a thunderous roar masked Eric’s fading cry as he fell into the darkness, still clutching the root-torn shrub.

The storm raged on. The ridge stood empty. The owl settled on the broken branch above the abyss and folded its wings. It did not look down. It did not need to. It simply waited, still and unhurried, while the wind screamed around it and the rain hammered the dark earth below.

Then, when the moment was its own, the owl dropped silently from the branch and fell into the abyss, wings folded, ebony eyes open, as though returning to a place it had always known.