

Chapter Three

The pregnancy was uneventful. The morning sickness during the first trimester wasn't fun, but it was bearable. Her midwife was from the next small town over and willing to do house calls. She never pressed Rose for information on the baby's father. Rose compartmentalized the pain of that situation as much as possible. She shoved the thought to the back of her mind.

Celeste was soft spoken and kind. Each week, the two women sat and drank tea in comfortable silence. Rose sat in her mother's old floral armchair while Celeste would occasionally break the silence with some tidbit of birthing or breastfeeding knowledge or simply to ask Rose how she was feeling. Rose assumed she was partially retired as the woman never seemed in a rush to leave. Rose was glad for the company. Celeste never pushed her to speak about her baby's father, and it was as if she knew not to breach that topic. Rose needed the kind of support Celeste offered. She was there for her, but never attempted to crack Rose open as a psychologist would.

Although she knew keeping it all inside wasn't healthy, there was no way in hell she could explain herself without drawing unwanted attention. She was the only person who would

be there for her baby. She had no family to help her, and no partner. She didn't want anyone, Celeste included, to think she wasn't capable of caring for her child.

Rose planned a homebirth. A bit controversial, but she felt it was the best choice for her and her baby; plus, Celeste would be there. Rose knew she was in capable hands. Her baby would be born in the comfort of their home.

She spent more and more time outside by the stream. She dipped her swollen, aching feet in the coolness of the water. They had grown more than a shoe size in the last trimester. She was uncomfortable and ready to meet her baby.

One afternoon she sat outside, feet in the stream as usual. The weather was getting colder and the leaves had begun to change.

What will I tell her about you? I can hardly remember that day.

Rose was staring blankly into the woods when movement caught her eye. Her heart pounded and her stomach dropped.

“Just a bird,” she sighed.

Rose watched the little creature hop from one branch to the next. The bird never took his eyes off of her, leaving her feeling oddly exposed. A painful cramp across her lower stomach stole the attention from the red bird. She rolled over to her side, holding her swollen belly.

“Maybe this is it?” she said aloud.

She had some light, sporadic cramping over the last couple weeks, but Celeste had assured her they were just Braxton Hicks. This was different. Once the pain passed, she rolled onto her back and looked up at the sky. She grabbed the grass underneath her palms and gently tugged the blades. The clouds morphed into shapes, and one looked like a fat cherub. Very soon, she would be responsible for not just herself, but an actual living, breathing child. She would be

someone's mother. Excited and scared, she pulled herself up to a sitting position, stood up, and headed for the back door. Just as she reached for the door, she felt another contraction. This time, she felt a gush of water.

She went inside and called Celeste.

"I think this is it."

Celeste yipped, "I'm on my way!"

Rose's baby, Amaryllis, was breathtakingly beautiful, unlike most newborns. She didn't have that typical wrinkled, alien look. Her thick brown hair covered her scalp in wispy, loose curls. Also, unlike most newborns, she had striking crystal clear green eyes. The little baby's deep red lips resembled that of her father's. Little Amaryllis was a sight to behold.

Rose took Amaryllis home to the little white cottage, to the little stream, and to the forest behind the house. Her broken heart had fewer jagged edges with each passing day. Her little baby filled her heart with love.

Little Amaryllis learned to crawl in the soft, green grass. Wherever the baby touched, flowers would grow at an eerily fast rate. Within a day or two, anywhere Amaryllis had played, full-grown plants full of flowers in bloom appeared. The patch of grass next to the little stream where they sat and played soon became a bed of wildflowers. Butterflies landed on Amaryllis's little head. Fireflies danced around her. The baby simply giggled. Rose couldn't deny the draw living things had to her daughter. It both terrified and warmed her heart.

One afternoon, Rose watched as Amaryllis sat in the grass, smacking her chubby little hands to her chubby little knees. Amaryllis looked up, stopped the tapping, and sat unnaturally still. Rose held her breath as she waited to see what Amaryllis would do next.

A yellow butterfly, a Tiger Swallowtail, floated gently over to the baby. She held out her chubby little hand and the butterfly landed in her palm. Instead of squeezing her hand shut in reflex, she didn't move. Rose jumped up to stop the would-be kill, but halted as she watched her baby gently turn her hand from side-to-side. Amaryllis goo'd at the butterfly with a smile. She giggled, lifted her hand up to the sky, and the butterfly flew off.

"Well, that's different," said Rose with a sigh.

Each day it became more obvious that her daughter wasn't a typical baby. The day would come when Amaryllis would ask about her background, more specifically, her father. A lie was the best protection she could think of.

Rose listened as a chorus of birds sang for the two of them. All of the forest animals seemed to be unafraid of Amaryllis. Raccoons and squirrels crept slowly to the baby's blanketed spot, sometimes alarming the young mother. Once, a baby raccoon crept over to little Amaryllis, curled up next to her, and fell asleep against her leg just as a kitten would.

The red cardinal frequented the two of them. The bird watched Rose and the baby, from a distance, as they went about their life. He usually sat on a limb at the edge of the forest, completely still. Rose noticed and left a bird feeder out for him. The bird's steadfast presence became a comfort. Was this the same bird she had seen right before she felt that first contraction by the stream?

"We'll call him Ezra. Seems like a nice enough name for a bird."

As Amaryllis grew into a child, her undeniable magnetism became more noticeable. People were drawn to her. Animals were drawn to her. Stray dogs and cats showed up on their doorstep quite regularly. It was only a matter of time before Amaryllis realized she was different.

By the time Amaryllis was three years old, she could convince every employee at the grocery store to give her free cookies. They all knew Rose and Amaryllis by name. They always seemed to have a special gift waiting for Amaryllis, whether it was a balloon, candy, or a dessert. Anything Amaryllis reached for on the shelves soon became hers. The kindness people bestowed unto Amaryllis was uncanny and far more direct than other children received. The attention Amaryllis received alarmed Rose at times. As Amaryllis grew older, people's attention on her daughter made her uncomfortable, and it wasn't just because she was an introverted hermit who preferred painting and reading books. People fumbled over themselves around Amaryllis, but the girl was special.

In the second grade, Amaryllis brought home an injured baby squirrel. She wrapped the little squirrel in brown paper towels and tucked him away in the front pocket of her pink backpack. At only eight years old, she had convinced her mother to let her nurse the little injured squirrel back to health.

“Mom, I must take care of this little baby squirrel. He needs me until he gets stronger. Plus, I've already named him Bob.”

“I guess it couldn't hurt. Bob will have to be your responsibility until he's strong enough to be set free.”

“That's fine. He already told me that once he's strong enough, he won't need me. He said he'll go live in the trees with his own kind,” said Amaryllis.

“He told you that? Do you mean that's what you'd like to believe he'd say if he could talk?”

“No mom, that's what he told me. He didn't use words though. He sent pictures to my mind.”

Rose didn't know how to respond. Instead, she gave her a forced half smile and a hmpf.

Over that next month, Amaryllis spent much of her time with the little squirrel. She held him in her hands, closed her eyes, and felt him grow stronger as she radiated warmth from her palms. She did not tell her mother this part of the squirrel's rehabilitation.

As she grew into a teenager, Amaryllis had an almost wild side (as most teens do). Stubborn to a fault, she never took no for an answer. There was never much resistance when it came to getting her way, except when it came to her mother. Rose was a closed book.

"Mom, I need you to tell me about my father. People are talking. I punched a boy in the nose today because he said you were a hoe who must have slept with so many guys you didn't even know who my father is."

"That was rude of him, but you don't need to punch people over their careless words."

"I need you to tell me who my fucking father is and why I've never met him."

"Amaryllis, don't you dare talk to me like that!"

"I'm sorry Mom, but it isn't fair. I want to know."

"I promise we'll talk about it soon. It's an extremely complicated...situation."

"Obviously," snorted Amaryllis.

Rose flinched at her words. Amaryllis, no longer on the defense, reached to her mother. Rose folded her arms across her chest and dropped her head. She closed her eyes. She would try another time.

Amaryllis enjoyed school for the most part. She convinced her teachers to let her run their classes more times than she could count. She took the role and told the students to take out their notes and something to write with. She enjoyed reading short stories to the class. Students

thought she was funny; teachers thought she was a future educator. Either way, Amaryllis seemed to be in control.

Amaryllis lacked the inhibition and embarrassment most girls her age experience. She wore a string bikini to the ninth grade school picnic at the lake. All the other girls wore t-shirts and cover ups. She simply didn't give a shit what anyone else thought about her.

"Who does she think she is? She's not really that pretty, anyway. She's probably a slut," said a female classmate.

"Yeah, okay, she's the prettiest girl in school. Don't be jealous because you're not as confident as her. Amaryllis is actually really cool but she'll kick your ass if she hears you talking shit," said another.

On warm nights, she would go barefoot into the woods behind her house and dance under the moonlight. Rose had once seen a print by Edward Robert Hughes. In the painting a girl is surrounded by fairies. Everytime Amaryllis watched her daughter in the moonlight she couldn't help but see the comparison. Amaryllis was a fairy princess, to her at least.

Rose watched unseen from the kitchen window as Amaryllis danced. She swooped her arms down and then reached for the sky, hopping from one foot and then the other. Amaryllis danced to a beat, although there was never any music that Rose could hear. Amaryllis, her half-Fae daughter danced, sprinkling magic around with each step. There was no denying her otherworldliness. Rose feared what that meant for her daughter's future.

Amaryllis skipped to the backdoor.

"Amaryllis, I know you love to dance out there. Is there a certain song in your head? There's no music playing that I can hear."

Amaryllis laughed, “No, there isn’t a song on my phone or anything like that. When the moon is full, or even nearly full. It makes me feel alive! Everything just zings! There’s a sort of rhythm to it, kind of like crickets talking to each other in the early evening.”

Rose pondered for a moment before responding, “I guess some people really can tell when it’s a full moon. They say it makes people feel out of sorts.”

“It doesn’t make me feel out of sorts at all. It makes me feel like dancing and singing. I guess I’m just weird!”

Rose tried not to show her trepidation as she smiled at her daughter.

Amaryllis could sense her mother’s uneasiness so she left out some of the details. She actually could hear a song. Not like a song on the radio though; it was different. It was a rhythmic series of chimes and buzzing. She first noticed the sound when she was very young. The night itself played the song just for her.

Rose knew little about her daughter’s background or what the strange moon dancing meant. The man in the woods was not wholly human, she remembered that much from her memory of the day, and her daughter confirmed that. Was he an elf? A fairy? Maybe he was an alien disguised as a human. It felt ridiculous to even think it, but she knew in her heart that her daughter was not like other people. What were the implications of being only half human? What if someone wanted to harm her or take her away if they knew?

Amaryllis was always running off to the woods. She wanted her daughter to have freedom, but feared one day she might lose Amaryllis to that same magic of the forest she was lost to that day. She saw the connection Amaryllis had with nature, the moon, the animals. It wasn’t just a simple love of those things. It was becoming more apparent as she grew older that she was a part of those things.

The irony is that in many other ways, Amaryllis was a typical child, and then a typical teen. She went to school. She had friends. She had boyfriends. She was just...more.

The whole town seemed to be enamored with her. Going to the grocery store was equivalent to a social event, just as it had when she was little. Her perfectly timed jokes and mild sarcasm helped her earn the unofficial title of “Funniest Girl in School.”

Her musical laugh resonated from the heart with a twinkle. Rose could hear the lilting in the tone of her laugh, probably because she knew what Amaryllis was. To anyone else, her laugh was simply infectious.

When Amaryllis walked into a room, all eyes turned to her. She was the center of everyone’s attention, even when she wasn’t cracking jokes. Rose noticed.

She never told the secret of her daughter’s conception to a soul. It was too unbelievable to the outside world. Plus, she wanted to protect Amaryllis. Rose never ventured to have a life outside of her daughter. She didn’t want to. She felt she needed to stay one step ahead of everyone else.

Although Amaryllis hadn’t asked too many questions about him, she began to wonder about her father. He was never even spoken of. Her mother never mentioned him by name, or at all really.

She came home everyday from school and walked over to the woods to say hello to her friend, Ezra, the red cardinal.

“Hey you! Did you miss me while I was at school today?”

She sat under a nearby tree and spoke: “Today was okay, school was a little boring, especially math. It’s too bad you can’t tell me about your day. I bet it was exciting. Did you find any tasty berries? Did you soar high into the sky and do a nose-dive back down to Earth?”

She knew he was listening to her.

Amaryllis had two best friends, Emily and Olivia. The trio had been inseparable since the third grade. Sometimes trouble found the girls, but usually just in the form of “excessive talking” and general teenage mischief. Amaryllis always came up with grandiose ideas of adventure that usually ended with broken curfews, broken rules, and punishments.

Emily and Olivia loved Amaryllis’s sense of fun and were more than happy to go along with whatever scheme Amaryllis had planned. Amaryllis, even as a young woman, thought of herself as the “Pippie Long-Stocking” of their crew.

Amaryllis thought back to when she was nine or ten and told Ezra all about her Pippie ideology.

“You see, there’s this old book, and a movie too, about this girl. She loves adventures but never quite fits in. Her dad is at sea and her mother is in heaven. She talks to her though. Anyway, Pippie is so fun. She wants everyone around her to be happy. She bought ice cream for every kid in her orphanage, even though that wasn’t allowed. That’s a bullshit rule if you ask me!”

The red cardinal had made a hacking sound. Amaryllis thought it sounded like a laugh. She remembered looking at the bird inquisitively and asking “Did you just laugh? I think you did!”

It wasn’t until high school that she understood she could draw people to her. Up until that point, she thought everyone had that same ability. Amaryllis could bend people to her will. She appeased her own conscience by telling herself she was simply a good negotiator.

She worked part time at a small bookstore. Her love of reading stemmed from her mother. They spent many evenings sitting on the couch reading in amicable silence.

Working at the bookstore seemed like a perfect fit. Whenever a customer walked in without a definite book in mind, she easily convinced them to read whatever was on display or being pushed by the shop owner. A simple, “Hey, you might really like this book!” was generally answered with a smile and a “Sure, I’ll try that one if you think it’s good.”

As much as humans were drawn to her, animals were even more so. Even wild animals seemed tame in her presence. She once swore she saw a black bear wave at her from the woodline, but when she did a doubletake the bear was gone. She sat in the passenger seat of the old Mercedes wondering if she had actually seen the bear or if her mind was playing tricks on her. After all, it wasn’t unusual to see bears in Western North Carolina.

She also knew she was beautiful, but tried not to use that to her own advantage very often. Boys her age were no match for her. There was no challenge with them. They did whatever she asked, agreed with whatever she said. She broke up with her last two boyfriends because they couldn’t seem to think for themselves. Amaryllis shifted her focus from having a boyfriend to just having fun since boys seemed to disappoint her.

She was able to get out of trouble with just a smile. She found that her friends, classmates, even teachers, rarely disagreed with her. She was able to sway people’s opinions in an almost eerie way.

She could even influence the growth of plants. Her freshman horticulture class had been interesting. The students had to grow a basic “salad” garden, which included lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers. Even the teacher was astonished at her plot of the garden. Mr. Stephens, her teacher, encouraged her to join the FFA (Future Farmers of America) due to her green thumb. It wasn’t just that the plants grew lush and bore fruit; they were not affected by pests or blight. Amaryllis’s plants looked like picture-perfect specimens of health and bounty.

Amaryllis wasn't just good at growing vegetables. She excelled in all of her subjects. She sang in the chorus. She was the fastest girl in P.E. She tutored her friends in both math and English. It seemed like there was very little she couldn't do. People definitely noticed. Most loved her, some resented her.

Sometimes, when she was feeling emotional, strange things would happen. When she was angry, light bulbs exploded. When she was happy, butterflies surrounded her in swarms, dancing in a joyous circle.

The wildness she felt inside was unexplainable and she never even attempted to describe it to her mother or best friends.

Amaryllis often thought, *this must be magic*, when these strange, but amazing, things happened. Weird things had happened all her life and seemed to be the norm for her. Her mother never made a fuss over things, so she never felt the need to try and explain.

Emily and Olivia were average teens for all intents and purposes, but sometimes Amaryllis let them catch glimpses of what could only be the supernatural. How else could they experience random animals following them to their car or lighting bugs following as they ran around her yard each summer? Her friends must have noticed...something.

The three girls found time to escape reality. She loved her special connection with nature and her ability to share the experience with Emily and Olivia, but this was one that was all her own. There was no other way to explain it; the moonlight recharged her. Somewhere deep inside, Amaryllis felt baptized in the cold water and moonlight.

The forest behind her home beckoned her. She was drawn to the woods like people were drawn to her.

Anaaa, AAmaryllisaaaa... she swore she heard her name being called from deep within the woods.

It was a constant pull, like when you're out with friends but would rather be home on your couch watching a series on t.v. You might partake in other activities, but there was something else you'd rather be doing. Amaryllis was somewhat obsessed with the woods surrounding her home, but very little information was available. Her mother was certainly no help.

"Mom, why is our town called 'Seven Pines'? Is it because there are seven different species of pine trees?"

Her mother truly had no clue how the town had gotten its name. She did know, however, that her daughter would find out. Rose had no doubt in Amaryllis's ability to accomplish anything she put her mind to.

"I don't know, honey. Maybe it does have something to do with different varieties of the trees. I've never thought about the name before."

"I love the trees here. I love the woods. I've been to other places, other woods. I love them all, but not like I love the woods of Seven Pines. I can't explain it."

Rose gulped. There it was.

"Maybe it's because you've spent your whole life here. The woods feel like home. Generally, people like what they're used to."

"Mom, I'm not one of your therapy clients."

For someone who ran a therapy practice out of her own home, she sure didn't offer much explanation on anything. Rose was more of the strong silent type.

The woods behind her home were made up of mostly pines, but others made their way in the mix. She admired the oaks, the maples, and the poplars among others. About one hundred feet into the woods behind her home stood a very old pine tree. She could barely wrap her arms around one half of the large tree. Amaryllis loved this tree most and enjoyed sitting with her back against it. Her skin warmed and tingled as she placed her body against the tree. She pressed her palms to the bark and absorbed its radiant heat. A warm glow outlined her skin. Although she was comforted by the warmth and light, she never told her mother. It was yet another unexplainable aspect of her life. When she was upset, she ran to this tree. She always had. All the trees called to her, but this one did the most.

“I guess I’m a tree hugger.”

One cool night, Amaryllis cracked the window of her bedroom and listened. A humming sound came in waves as she laid still in her bed. Was she hearing it or just feeling it? She wasn’t sure. It was both maybe. The soft sound resonated in her chest. The hum vibrated around her chest, and then slowly reverberated outward until it reached her fingertips. The sensation warmed and relaxed her whole body, making her feel weightless, almost transcendent.

Questions flooded her mind as she laid there.

Was she an alien baby planted with an unknowing human mother? What did her connection with nature actually mean?

Although she wouldn’t quite say she felt supernatural, she never felt quite human. In all the basic regards she was a normal young woman. In other ways, she was an alien.

The constant longing nagged at her each day. Was it her absentee father? Yes, she wanted to know more about him, however, that wasn’t it. She was not “normal” by any means. She would be lying to herself to believe otherwise.

Even while she spent time with her very best friends and felt happy, something was missing. There was this nagging little feeling in the back of her mind. As she grew older, the feeling grew stronger. The pull was undeniable. She would look over her shoulder everytime she left her home, with a longing to go back. Her friends, her school, all the fun of being a teenager...She enjoyed life but was unfulfilled. She loved her mother with all her heart, but she simply knew there was more out there for her.

Her mother never spoke of her father, which seemed unfair. In her heart, she believed the nagging feeling was not just about her absentee father, because more than half of marriages end in divorce. Many children are raised by a single parent. Yes, it hurt, but it was not completely out of the norm. Amaryllis felt that her mother was hiding something from her. When Amaryllis did question her mother about some of her special abilities, the answer was always a smile and a “Amaryllis, you’re just lucky to be so special.”

And why wasn’t her father around or even spoken of? Maybe she was the result of a one-night stand, maybe some sort of fertility treatment, or an alien abduction even. Although it seemed completely out of character for her mother, perhaps she didn’t know who her real father was. Maybe she was raped. The thought made her shudder, but would explain his absence and her mother’s lack of information and willingness to talk about him.

Amaryllis wanted to know her own truth. Whatever the truth is, it must be painful for her mother to speak about. If she was the product of violence, naturally her mother wouldn't want her to know that. Her mother loved her. She lived for her, but Amaryllis still wanted to know. Her mother’s response of “I’ll tell you when you’re older” wasn’t cutting it anymore.