



From the towering heights of the tree, the little girl could see everything. The sleepy village of Daggorn lay low in the bowl of the valley. From above, it looked like a faraway, foreign land. A place she knew nothing about, a place without spikes or barbs, a place where fear did not hover like an anxious parent.

Being this far up in the air made Valerie feel as if she could be someone else, too. She could be an animal: a hawk, chilly with self-survival, arrogant and apart.

Even at age seven, she knew that, somehow, she was different from the other villagers. She couldn't help keeping them at a distance, even her friends, who were open and wonderful. Her older sister, Lucie, was the one person in the world to whom Valerie felt connected. She and Lucie

were like the two vines that grew twisted together in the old song the elders of the village sang.

Lucie was the only one.

Valerie peered past her dangling bare feet and thought about why she had climbed up here. She wasn't allowed to, of course, but that wasn't it. And it wasn't for the challenge of the climb, either—that had lost its thrill a year earlier, when she first reached the tallest branch and found nowhere left to go but the open sky.

She climbed up high because she couldn't breathe down there, in the town. If she didn't get out, the unhappiness would settle upon her, piling up like snow until she was buried beneath it. Up here in her tree, the air was cool on her face and she felt invincible. She never worried about falling; such a thing was not possible in this weightless universe.

“Valerie!”

Suzette's voice sounded upward through the leaves, calling for her like a hand tugging Valerie back down to earth.

By the tone of her mother's voice, Valerie knew it was time to go. Valerie pulled her knees up under her, rose to a crouch, and began her descent. Looking straight down, she could see the steeply pitched roof of Grandmother's house, built right into the branches of the tree and covered in a thick shag of pine needles. The house was wedged in a flowering of branches as if it had lodged there during a storm. Valerie always wondered how it had gotten there,

but she never asked, because something so wonderful should never be explained.

It was nearing winter, and the leaves had begun to loosen themselves from their branches, easing their autumn grasp. Some shuddered and fell free as Valerie moved down the tree. She had perched in the tree all afternoon, listening to the low murmur of women's voices wafting up from below. It seemed like they were more cautious today, huskier than usual, as though the women were keeping secrets.

Nearing the lower branches that grazed the tree house roof, Valerie saw Grandmother float out onto the porch, her feet not visible beneath her dress. Grandmother was the most beautiful woman Valerie knew. She wore long layered skirts that swayed as she walked. If her right foot went forward, her silk skirt breezed to the left. Her ankles were delicate and lovely, like the tiny wooden dancer's in Lucie's jewelry box. This both delighted and frightened Valerie, because they looked like they could snap.

Valerie, herself unsnappable, leapt off the lowest branch and onto the porch with a solid thump.

She was not excitable like other girls, whose cheeks were pink or round. Valerie's were smooth and even and pale white. Valerie didn't really think of herself as pretty, or think about what she looked like, for that matter. No one else, though, could forget the corn-husk blonde with unsettling green eyes that lit up like they were charged by lightning. Her eyes, that knowing look she had, made her seem older than she was.

“Girls, come on!” her mother called from inside the house, anxiety bristling through her voice. “We need to be back early tonight.” Valerie made it down before anyone could see that she had been in the tree at all.

Through the open door, Valerie saw Lucie bustle over to their mother clutching a doll she had dressed in scraps that Grandmother had donated to the cause. Valerie wished she could be more like her sister.

Lucie’s hands were soft and round, a little bit pillowy, something Valerie admired. Her own hands were knobby and thin, tough with calluses. Her body was all angles. She felt deep inside that this made her unlovable, someone no one would want to touch.

Her older sister was better than she was, that much Valerie knew. Lucie was kinder, more generous, more patient. She never would have climbed above the tree house, where she knew sensible people didn’t belong.

“Girls! It’s a full moon tonight.” Her mother’s voice carried out to her now. “And it’s our turn,” she added sadly, her voice trailing off.

Valerie didn’t know what to make of it being their turn. She hoped it was a surprise, maybe a present.

Looking down to the ground, she saw some markings in the dirt that formed the shape of an arrow.

Peter.

Her eyes widening, she headed down the steep, dusty stairs from the tree house to examine the marks.

No, *it isn't Peter*, she thought, seeing that they were just random scratches in the soil.

But what if—?

The marks stretched away from her into the woods. Instinctively, ignoring what she *should* do, what Lucie would do, she followed them.

Of course, they led nowhere. Within a dozen paces, the marks disappeared. Mad at herself for wishful thinking, she was glad that no one had seen her following nothing to nothing.

Before he'd left, Peter used to leave messages for her by drawing arrows in the dirt with the tip of a stick; the arrows guided her to him, often hiding deep in the woods.

He had been gone for months now, her friend. They had been inseparable, and Valerie still couldn't accept the fact that he wasn't coming back. His leaving had been like snipping off the end of a rope—leaving two unraveling strands.

Peter hadn't been like other boys, who teased and fought. He understood Valerie's impulses. He understood adventure; he understood not following the rules. He never judged her for being a girl.

"Valerie!" Grandmother's voice now called. Her calls were to be answered more urgently than Valerie's mother's because her threats might actually be carried out. Valerie turned from the puzzle pieces that had led to no prize, and hurried back.

"Down here, Grandmother." She leaned against the base

of the tree, delighting in the feel of the sandpaper bark. She closed her eyes to feel it fully—and heard the grumbling of wagon wheels like an approaching thunderstorm.

Hearing it, too, Grandmother slipped down the stairs to the forest floor. She wrapped Valerie in her arms, the cool silk of her blouse and the clunky jumble of her amulets pressing against Valerie's face. Her chin on Grandmother's shoulder, Valerie saw Lucie moving cautiously down the tall stairs, followed by their mother.

“Be strong tonight, my darlings,” Grandmother whispered. Held tightly, Valerie stayed quiet, unable to voice her confusion. For Valerie, each person and place had its own scent—sometimes, the whole world seemed like a garden. She decided that her grandmother smelled like crushed leaves mingled with something deeper, something profound that she could not place.

As soon as Grandmother released Valerie, Lucie handed her sister a bouquet of herbs and flowers she'd gathered from the woods.

The wagon, pulled by two muscular workhorses, came bumping over the ruts in the road. The woodcutters were seated in clusters atop freshly chopped tree stumps that slid forward as the wagon lurched to a stop in front of Grandmother's tree. Branches—the fattest ones at the bottom and the lightest on top—were piled between the men. To Valerie, the riders looked like they were made of wood themselves.

Valerie saw her father, Cesaire, seated near the back of

the cart. He stood and reached down for Lucie. He knew better than to try for Valerie. He reeked of sweat and ale, and she stayed far away from him.

“I love you, Grandmother!” Lucie called over her shoulder as she let Cesaire help her and her mother over the side of the cart. Valerie scrambled up and in on her own. With a snap of the reins, the wagon lumbered to a start.

A woodcutter shifted aside to give Suzette and the girls room, and Cesaire reached over, landing a theatrical kiss on the man’s cheek.

“Cesaire,” Suzette hissed, casting him a quietly reproachful glance as side conversations picked up in the wagon. “I’m surprised you’re still conscious at this late hour.”

Valerie had heard accusations like this before, always veiled behind a false overtone of cleverness or wit. And yet it still jolted her to hear them said with such a tone of contempt.

She looked at her sister, who hadn’t heard their mother because she was laughing at something another woodcutter had said. Lucie always insisted that their parents were in love, that love was not about grand gestures but rather about the day to day, about being there, going to work and coming home in the evening. Valerie had tried to believe that this was true, but she couldn’t help feeling that there had to be something more to love, something less practical.

Now she hung on tight as she leaned over the back rails of the wagon, peering down at the rapidly disappearing ground. Feeling dizzy, she turned to face back in.

“My baby.” Suzette pulled Valerie onto her lap, and Valerie let her. Her pale, pretty mother smelled like almonds and powdery flour.

As the wagon emerged from the Black Raven Woods and rumbled alongside the silver river, the dreary haze of the village came into full view. Its foreboding was palpable even at a distance: Stilts, spikes, and barbs jutted up and out. The granary’s lookout tower, the town’s tallest point, stretched high.

It was the first thing one felt while coming over the ridge: *fear*.

Daggorhorn was a town full of people who were afraid, people who felt unsafe even in their beds and vulnerable with each step, exposed with every turn.

The people had begun to believe that they deserved the torture—that they had done something wrong and that something inside them was bad.

Valerie had watched the villagers cowering in fear every day and felt her difference from them. What she feared more than the outside was a darkness that came from inside her. It seemed as if she was the only one who felt that way.

Other than Peter, that is.

She thought back to when he’d been there, the two of them fearless together and filled with reckless joy. Now she resented the villagers for their fear, for the loss of her friend.

Once through the massive wooden gates, the town looked like any other in the kingdom. The horses kicked up pock-

ets of dust as they did in all such towns, and every face was familiar. Stray dogs roamed the streets, their bellies empty and drooping, sucked in impossibly tight at the sides so that their fur looked striped. Ladders rested gently against porches. Moss spilled out from crevices in roofs and crawled across the fronts of houses, and no one did anything about it.

Tonight, the villagers were hurrying to bring their animals inside.

It was Wolf night, just as it had been every full moon for as long as anyone could remember.

Sheep were herded and locked behind heavy doors. Handed off from one family member to another, chickens strained their necks as they were thrust up ladders, stretching them out so far that Valerie worried they would rip them clean off their own bodies.



As they reached home, Valerie's parents spoke to each other in low voices. Instead of climbing up the ladder to their raised cottage, Cesaire and Suzette approached the stable underneath, which was darkened by the shady gloom of their house. The girls ran ahead of them to greet Flora, their pet goat. Seeing them, she clattered her hooves against the rickety boards of the pen, her clear eyes watery with anticipation.

“It’s time now,” Valerie’s father said, coming up behind Valerie and Lucie and laying his hands on their shoulders.

“Time for what?” Lucie asked.

“It’s our turn.”

Valerie saw something in his stance that she didn’t like, something menacing, and she backed away from him. Lucie reached for Valerie’s hand, steadying her as she always did.

A man who believed in speaking truthfully to his children, Cesaire plucked at the fabric of his pants and bent down to have a word with his two little girls. He told them that Flora was to be this month’s sacrifice.

“The chickens provide us with eggs,” he reminded them. “The goat is all we can afford to offer.”

Valerie stood in stupefied disbelief. Lucie knelt down sorrowfully, scratching her little fingernails up and down the goat’s neck and pulling softly at her ears in the way that animals will only allow children to do. Flora nudged Lucie’s palm with her newly sprouted horns, trying them out.

Suzette glanced at the goat and then looked at Valerie expectantly.

“Say good-bye, Valerie,” she said, resting her hand on her daughter’s slender arm.

But Valerie couldn’t—something held her back.

“Valerie?” Lucie looked at her imploringly.

She knew her mother and sister thought she was being cold. Only her father understood, nodding at her as he led the goat away. He steered Flora by a thin rope, her nostrils

flaring and her eyes sharp with unease. Holding back bitter tears, Valerie hated her father, for his sympathy and for his betrayal.

Valerie was careful, though. She never let anyone see her cry.



That night, Valerie lay awake after her mother had put them to bed. The glow of the moon streamed through her window, stretching across the floorboards in one great pillar.

She thought hard. Her father had taken Flora, their precious goat. Valerie had seen Flora birthed on the floor of the stable, the mother goat bleating in pain as Cesaire brought the small, damp kid forth into the world.

She knew what she had to do.

Lucie padded along beside Valerie, leaving the warmth of their bed and heading down the loft ladder and to the front door.

“We’ve got to do something!” Valerie whispered urgently, beckoning for her sister to join her.

But Lucie stayed back, fearful, shaking her head and wordlessly willing Valerie to stay, too. Valerie knew that she couldn’t do as her elder sister did, huddling in the doorway, clutching her doe hide. She would not just stand by and watch the events of her life unfold. But just as Lucie

had always admired Valerie's commitment, Valerie admired her sister's restraint.

Valerie wanted to cover up her uneasy sister now and tell her not to worry, to say, "Shhhh, sweet Lucie, everything will be all right by morning." Instead, she turned, holding down the latch of the door with her thumb and letting it ease noiselessly into the jamb before she plunged into the cold.



The village was especially sinister that night, backlit by the brightness of the moon, the color of shells that had been bleached by the sun. The houses hulked like tall ships, and the branches of the trees jutted out like barbed masts against the night sky. As Valerie set out for the first time on her own, she felt like she was discovering a new world.

To reach the altar more quickly, Valerie took a shortcut through the woods. She stepped through the moss, which had the texture of bread soaked through with milk, and avoided the mushrooms, white blisters whose tops were speckled with brown, as if dusted with cinnamon.

Something pulled at her out of the dark, clinging to her cheek like wet silk. A spider's web. It felt like her entire body was crawling with invisible insects. She tore at her face, trying to brush off the filmy web, but the strands were too thin, and there was nothing to hold on to.

The full moon hung lifeless overhead.

Once she reached the clearing, her steps became more cautious. She felt queasy as she walked, the same feeling she got while cleaning a sharp knife—the feeling that one small slip could be disastrous. The villagers had dug a sink-hole trap into the soil, staked sharpened wooden rods into the ditch, and covered them with a false ground of grass. Valerie knew that the hole was somewhere near, but she had always been led safely around it. Now, even though she thought she'd passed it, she wasn't entirely sure.

A familiar bleating pulled her on, though, and there ahead she could see Flora, pathetic and alone, stumbling in the wind and crying out. Valerie began to run toward the goat's sad form struggling alone in the bone-white moonlit clearing. Seeing Valerie, Flora reared up wildly and craned her slender neck in Valerie's direction as much as her rope would allow.

"I'm here, I'm here," Valerie began to call out, but the words died in her throat.

She heard something bounding furiously over a great length at a quick pace, coming closer and closer still through the darkness. Valerie's feet refused to move, much as she tried to continue.

In a moment, everything went still again.

And it appeared.

At first, just a streak of black. Then the Wolf was there, facing away from her, its back massive and monstrous,

its tail moving seductively back and forth, tracing a pattern in the dust. It was so big that she could not see it all at once.

Valerie's breath burst out in a gasp, jagged with fear. The Wolf's ears froze, then quivered, and it turned its eyes to meet hers.

Eyes that were savage and beautiful.

Eyes that *saw* her.

Not an ordinary kind of seeing, but seeing in a way that no one had seen her before. Its eyes penetrated her, recognizing something. The terror hit her then. She crumpled to the ground, unable to look any longer, and burrowed deep into the refuge of darkness.

A great shadow loomed over her. She was so small and it was so immense that she felt the cover of the standing figure weigh down upon her as though her body were sinking into the ground. A shiver coursed through her body as it responded to the threat. She imagined the Wolf tearing through her flesh with its hooked canines.

There was a roar.

Valerie waited to feel the leap, to feel the snap of its jaws and the ripping of claws, but she felt nothing. She heard a scuffling and a tinkling of Flora's bells, and it was only then that she realized the shape had lifted. From her crouch, she heard gnashing and gnarling. But there was something else, another sound that she couldn't identify. Much later, she would learn that it was the roar of a dark rage being let loose.

Then there followed a panicked silence, a frenetic calm. Finally, she couldn't resist slowly lifting her head to look for Flora.

All was still.

Nothing was left but the broken tether still tied to the stake, lying slack on the dusty ground.

FREE PREVIEW



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FREE PREVIEW



Valerie sat waiting at the edge of the road with her legs outstretched, the ground damp with early morning dew. She didn't worry about her feet getting run over; she never worried about things like that. She was older now—ten years had passed since the awful night when she had looked into the eyes of evil. Walking past the sacrificial altar today, though, Valerie hadn't even noticed the pile of bones left over from the previous night's offering. Like all the other children in the village, she'd seen it once a month all her life and stopped thinking about what it meant.

Most children became obsessed with full-moon nights at some point in their lives, stopping at the altar the following

mornings to examine the dried blood and asking questions: *Does the Wolf talk? Is it like the other wolves in the forest? Why is the Wolf so bad?* The answers they were given were often more frustrating than none at all. Parents tried to protect the children, shushing them, telling them not to talk about it. But sometimes they let slip some information, saying, “We put a sacrifice here so that the Wolf doesn’t come and eat up cute little girls like you,” while nipping their noses.

Ever since her encounter with the Wolf, Valerie had stopped asking about it. Often at night, though, she would become overwhelmed by the memory. She would wake up and watch Lucie, an easy sleeper, lying much too still in their shared bed. Feeling desperately alone, Valerie would gaze at her sister for a long time until the panic became too much, and she would reach up to feel Lucie’s heartbeat.

“Stop it!” Lucie would slur sleepily, reaching up and swatting at Valerie’s hand. Valerie knew that her sister didn’t like to think of her heartbeat. It reminded her that she was alive, that she was fallible, just flesh and bones.

Now Valerie ran her fingers over the chilled ground of the walkway, feeling the grooves between the hunks of old sandstone. The stone felt like it might collapse, like it was rotting from the inside and, with just a little more time, she would be able to crumble off bits with her fingers. The leaves of the trees were yellow, as though they had absorbed all the spring sunshine and were saving it for winter.

It was easier to shrug off last night's full moon on a day like today. The whole village was in a commotion as everyone prepared for the harvest: Men ran with rusty scythes, and women leaned out of their cottage windows, dropping loaves of bread into passing baskets.

Soon Valerie saw Lucie's broad, beautiful face as her sister came up the walk on the way back from taking a broken latch to the blacksmith for repair. As Lucie came up the path, some of the villagers' young daughters trailed behind her doing a strange, ritualistic walk. As they came closer, Valerie realized that Lucie was teaching the four little girls how to curtsy.

Lucie was soft in a way that no one else was, a softness of nature and being. Her hair was not red or blond; it was both. She didn't belong here in Daggornhorn; she belonged in a cottony land where the skies were marbled yellow, blue, and pink, like watercolors. She spoke in poetry, her voice sweet like a song. Valerie felt as if her family were just borrowing Lucie.

How strange it is to have a sister, Valerie thought. Someone you might have been.

Lucie stopped in front of Valerie, and the train of girls stopped, too. A small one with dirt-stained knees looked at Valerie judgmentally, disappointed in her for not being more like her older sister. The village had always thought of Valerie as the other one, the more mysterious sister, the not-Lucie. Two of the girls studied a man across the road who was frantically trying to yoke his ox to his wagon.

“Hi!” Lucie twirled the fourth young girl around, bending down to hold the girl’s small hand above her head. The girl was hesitant to make the turn, to look away from her idol. The other girls looked impatient, feeling as if they, too, should be included.

Valerie scratched her leg, peeling at a scab.

Lucie stayed her sister’s hand. “It’ll scar.” Lucie’s legs were unblemished, flawless. She moisturized them with a concoction of wheat flour and oil when there was extra to be had.

Examining her own legs—bug-bitten, bruised, and picked at—Valerie asked, “Have you heard anything about the campout?”

Lucie leaned in. “Everyone else has permission!” she whispered. “Now we *have* to go.”

“Well, now it comes down to convincing Mother.”

“You try.”

“Are you mad? She’ll never say yes to me. You’re the one who always gets whatever it is you want.”

“Maybe.” Lucie’s lips were big and pink. When she was nervous, she chewed them pinker. “Maybe you’re right,” she said, grinning. “In any case, I’m a step ahead of you.”

With a sly smile, she held her basket out to Valerie, who guessed what was inside before she saw. Or maybe she’d smelled them. Their mother’s favorite sweet cakes.

“*Such* a good idea!” Valerie stood, brushing the dirt off the back of her tunic.

Lucie, pleased with her foresight, put her arm around Valerie. Together, they returned the little girls to their mothers, who were working in the gardens. Women were tough in this village, and yet even the gruffest among them smiled up at Lucie.

Heading home, they passed a few pigs wheezing like sick old men, a baby goat that tried to tag along with some disdainful chickens, and a serene cow munching on hay.

They passed the long row of houses, standing on their stilts as if ready to wander away, and arrived at the second one from the end. Hoisting themselves up the ladder, the girls entered the landscape of their lives. The wood dresser was so warped that the drawers refused to close. The wooden rope bed gave splinters. The washboard their father had made for their mother the winter before was worn down now — she needed another. The basket for berries was low and flat, to ensure that none got crushed. In a shaft of light from the window, a few bits of feather stuffing hung in the air, reminding Valerie of when they jumped on the mattress as girls and entire clouds of feathers would float around them.

There wasn't much to distinguish their home from the others. The furniture in Daggornhorn was simple and functional. Everything served a purpose. A table had four legs and a flat top, nothing more.

Their mother was home, of course. Working over the stove, she was lost in thought. Her hair was pulled into a

loose bun at the top of her head, a few strands hanging free at the nape of her neck.

Before the girls came in, Suzette had been thinking of her husband, of all his faults and all his virtues. The fault that she blamed him for most of all—the fault that was not forgivable—was that he was unimaginative. She was thinking of a recent day. Feeling dreamy, feeling like giving him a chance, she'd asked hopefully: *What is outside the walls, do you think?* He'd chewed his food, swallowed. Even tossed back some ale. He'd looked like he was thinking. *A whole lot more of the same, I reckon.* Suzette had felt like falling to the ground.

People left her family alone. Suzette felt cut off from things, like a marionette whose strings had been snipped.

Stirring the stew, she realized she was caught in a whirlpool—the more she struggled to get out, the more vehemently she was dragged down, down, down. . . .

“Mother!” Lucie came up behind her and gently tickled her back.

Suzette returned to the world of daughters and uncooked stew.

“Are you girls thirsty?” Suzette brightened, pouring out two cups of water. She sweetened Lucie's with a nip of honey, but Valerie, she knew, had no use for it. “You two have a big day today,” she said, handing the appropriate glass to each girl.

Suzette was grateful that she had the excuse of staying

home to cook the men's harvest meal. She went back to stirring the stew in a huge round pot with handles on both sides. The pot had a low-seated belly that always made Lucie feel strange because it was not quite a half sphere. Lucie didn't like things that seemed incomplete. Valerie peered in. In the pot was a medley of brown oats and tan and gray seeds—some green peas stood out garishly.

Lucie chattered while Valerie set to work helping Suzette chop the spindly strands off the carrots. Suzette was silent. Lucie's talking filled the dead air, but Valerie wondered whether something was wrong. Waiting out her mother's mood, as she had learned to do in the past, she added some vegetables to the pot. Collards, garlic, onions, leeks, spinach, and parsley.

What Valerie could not know was that Suzette had returned to thoughts of her husband. Cesaire was a caring father, a supportive husband. But that was not all Suzette had promised herself. If expectations had been set lower, his failures might not have been so devastating.

For what he did do, for the end that he *had* held up, Suzette was grateful. For those things, she felt she had repaid him sufficiently by keeping a tidy household and by loving their children. She had to acknowledge that maybe in marriage, as in any contractual obligation, in matters of owing and being owed, there was no allowance for love.

Feeling satisfied with this conclusion, Suzette turned to

her girls to find Valerie gazing at her with those penetrating green eyes, almost as though she could hear her mother's thoughts. Suzette didn't know where Valerie's eyes had come from; both hers and Cesaire's were fawn brown. She cleared her throat.

"Good that you girls are helping out like this. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: You'll need to be able to cook, Valerie, when you start to build your own home. Lucie already knows."

Lucie was like Suzette. They foresaw and planned. Valerie and Cesaire were quick to think and quick to act.

"I'm *seventeen*. Let's not rush it." Valerie sliced a potato through the skin and the dull velvety meat. She let the two halves fall open and bobble on the uneven table. She didn't like to think of the things her mother always insisted on talking about.

"You are of marriageable age, Valerie. You're a young woman now."

With this concession, all thoughts of any future responsibility dissipated from the sisters' minds. They saw their moment.

"So, Mother. We're leaving for the harvest soon," Lucie began.

"Yes, of course. Your first time, Valerie," Suzette said, looking down to conceal her pride. She had begun grating cabbage.

"Some people, some women, are staying on afterward . . ." Valerie added.

“...for the little campfire thing,” Lucie continued.

“Mm-hmmm,” Suzette allowed, her mind beginning to wander.

“Prudence’s mother is taking some of the other girls to camp out...” said Valerie.

“...and we wanted to know if we could go,” Lucie finished.

“With Prudence’s mother?” Suzette processed the one piece of concrete information she’d been given.

“Yes,” said Valerie.

She seemed to accept this explanation. “The other mothers already said yes?”

“Yes,” Valerie said again.

“All right. I guess that would be okay,” she said absentmindedly.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

It was only then, seeing the extent of their gratitude, that Suzette realized she’d consented to something maybe she shouldn’t have.



“I can’t believe she said yes!” Valerie exclaimed.

“That was so good, how you kept saying yes, so she didn’t have time to think about it!”

The girls ambled down the rutty road to the town square.

“And you were so good, tickling her back!”

“That was good, right? I know she likes it.” Lucie smiled in satisfaction.

“Lucie! Don’t tell me you brought your whole wardrobe.” Their friend Roxanne peered at them from around the corner, her pale brow knit into lines of concern. Two more girls came into view behind her: Prudence and Rose.

Lucie was cradling her pack in her arms, and Valerie belatedly realized that it was bulging.

“You’re going to have to carry it around all day,” Valerie said.

Prudence scowled, knowing Lucie got overambitious sometimes. “We are *not* going to carry it for you if you get tired.”

“Extra blankets.” Lucie smiled. She got cold easily.

“Planning on having company?” Rose asked, one eyebrow arched.

Valerie thought their three friends looked like a trio of mythical goddesses. Roxanne’s hair was rust-colored and smooth. It was so fine, it looked as though all of it could fit inside one stalk of straw. Her freckles were faint, like spots on a butterfly’s wings. Between all her corsets and blouses and shawls, it was obvious to Valerie that she was shy about her body.

Rose, on the other hand, kept the ties of her blouse loose and didn’t rush to fix it if it fell a little too low. She was pretty, with a heart-shaped mouth and a sharp face—she sucked her cheeks in to make it more so. Her hair was so dark that it was black or brown or blue, depending on the

light. If you put her in a finer top, Rose could almost pass for a lady . . . at least until she opened her mouth.

Prudence was a melancholic beauty with light brown hair and a calculating manner. She was often too quick with a sharp word, but she usually apologized. She was tall and somewhat imperious.

All five girls headed out through the village gates and up the hill toward the field, falling in with the parade of men, who were excited, too. The town itself felt wide awake, the anticipation floating in the air like the smell of a strong, unexpected spice.

Roxanne's brother, Claude, caught up with them, stumbling as he tried to kick a stone forward with each step.

"H-h-hi." Claude's eyes were quick and gray. He was a bit younger than the girls, a village outcast who'd always been a little . . . *different*. Claude wore a single suede glove without explanation and was always shuffling a deck of homemade cards that he carried with him at all times. The pockets were forever pulled out of his patchwork pants, a mash-up of all the pieces of burlap and hide his mother had lying around. He was teased about them, but he didn't mind; he was proud of the incredible work by his mother, who stayed up late into the nights sewing, and who worked hard enough at the tavern as it was.

It was said that Claude had been dropped on his head as an infant, and that was why he was strange. Valerie thought that notion was ridiculous. He was a beautiful soul.

The trouble was that instead of rushing to get in his own

words as everyone else did, he really listened. And that made people think he was slow. But he was kind and good, a lover of animals and people.

He never washed his socks. And no one washed them for him, either.

Both he and Roxanne were freckled, but Claude more so, even on his lips.

Everyone called Roxanne and Claude redheads, but Valerie never knew why. She thought it must have been for lack of imagination. She would call them six-o'clock-in-the-evening-sunset-heads. Bottom-of-the-lake-tendrils-of-algae-heads. Valerie grew up feeling envious of those heads of hair because she felt they were something special, a mark from God.

Claude and Valerie listened as the other girls chattered about the boys from neighboring villages who would be coming to help with the harvest. Claude lost interest and ambled back toward the center of town.

Something changed in the air, though, as the girls passed a temporary outdoor blacksmith shop that had been set up on the path to the harvest. A sense of self-awareness set in. A quickening of breath. A loss of focus. Valerie narrowed her eyes in disappointment at her friends; they were too smart for this. Losing it over a boy. *Henry Lazar*.

He was lanky and dashing, with cropped hair and a relaxed smile. The girls saw him at work outside with his equally handsome father, Adrien, repairing axles for the

harvest wagons. The way some people loved to cook or to work in the garden, Henry loved the intricacies of locks, the process of the planning, the designing, the making. He had shown a few he made to Valerie once, square and round, one shaped unwittingly like the head of a cat, another like an upturned house drawn by a child, or a family crest. Some black, some gold, some gold underneath blackened tarnish.

Valerie waved easily as her friends went mute, smiled shyly at their feet, and shuttled past. Only Lucie curtsied politely. Henry shook his head, grinning.

Rose hung back at the last moment to make very sure her eyes met Henry's and held his gaze long enough to make him feel uncomfortable.

Other than that, the girls pretended that Henry hadn't affected them at all, and self-consciously continued with their conversation. Close as they all were, they felt that admitting their attraction would make themselves vulnerable. Besides, this way, each girl got to feel as if she were keeping Henry to herself. Valerie couldn't help wondering why her own reaction was so different from theirs. True, he was good-looking, charming, tall, and kind, but he did not leave her feeling girly and giddy.

"I hope you guys haven't forgotten who's coming today," Valerie teased them.

"Some of them *have* to be handsome," Lucie jumped in. "By the rule of ratios."

The girls looked at one another and reached for each other's hands, jumping up and down in unison. They would be free for the night.

And in Daggornhorn, a night of freedom meant everything.

FREE PREVIEW

RED RIDING HOOD

a novel by Sarah Blakley-Cartwright

based on a screenplay written by David Leslie Johnson

introduction by Catherine Hardwicke



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Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston

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Hachette Book Group
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017

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First Edition: January 2011

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ISBN 978-0-316-17604-0

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Printed in the United States of America