

*PROLOGUE - "CELESTE"*

It was still so cold that late March night our spit froze into globby rivulets atop the ice flow drifting by under the rickety pier. We thought we were hot stuff, out late, a quarter klick away from our tiny cabin. We slurped cheap beer out of cans, briny slush from the weather, and took turns lighting each other's cigarettes. Three siblings, lumpy silhouettes in the bright moonlight, barely distinguishable amid all our bulky workwear. Curly mop tops of shaggy, dark hair under knitted caps, double layered coveralls and frostbitten balaclavas.

Pops was gone again, weeks and months on the road as a long haul trucker and Moms was taking a double shift at the hospital two counties over, leaving us with no vehicle but a battered ATV that sputtered constantly and reeked of animal hides and gasoline fumes. We piled on, pooled our pocket change, and drove down to argue with Gertrude at the local Feed & Seed till she sold illicit goods to us underaged hoodlums knowing full well there was no way we could get trashed on a six pack of Stroh's split between three scraggly teenagers.

We shared the two remaining smokes in the crumbled pack scrounged from the local dive bar trash can that Aggie, solidly the middlest of middle children, snatched on their afternoon cleaning shift. Too young to sling pints but old enough to mop floors and wipe down the sticky laminate bar tops. The acrid smoke swirled away in the bitter wind while we gleefully traded rumors. Twins. We all heard it from different folks in town. Twins on the way. We were safe though, unusual but not in the usual way, the odd ones out, us being triplets and all.

The rumor mill always cranks into high gear whenever word burbles through our county that there are twins on the way. Will the Magic arrive again? If now, why now? One thing is for sure, the Magic is embodied, is bodied, lives present and accounted for in the bodies of whoever it chooses. Their blood literally runs a little bit hotter than everyone else, even in negative 20 degrees Fahrenheit, they'll be sweating through their clothes. The Magic doesn't always manifest at birth, and there's no clear age notation when it does present itself.

We've always known there is magic in our family, it's the backbone of our legends, rural myths, backwater folklore and spooky bedtime stories. It comes like the sudden squalls whipping up off the lake, rarely convenient or predictable but always revealing the chinks in the armor of our small resort town. Stark indications that we'd slipped into siloed tendencies and knee-jerk self protections and things needed to be shaken up.

We were first a town of French and Native fur trappers, then German and Scandinavian miners and fisherman, now we're a whole big mixture of all those backgrounds and more, much to the chagrin of the old white men who sit outside the bar and can't seem to shut the fuck up. Our town's "industry" now primarily caters to rich folks summering at their third homes during the warm months and to agitated wildlife and those who hunt them once the snows set in.

We are all so very accommodating. The Magic is not. The Magic is brash and prickly and full of demands. It'll skip multiple generations without so much as a murmur of explanation and then one-two punch its way into bristling outness. It is genderless but favors twins which happens less than genetics say they should but more often than my elders think is reasonable.

Sometimes the Magic looks like my Great Great Uncles', rail thin and dark skinned, infused with West Africa propelled toward the lake shores and stark piney forests by the river forces of The Great Migration. As my grandmother would tell it, they could communicate with all manner

of flora and fauna, speech translated to words through their minds (buzzing bees those minds were) and their vice grip gaze. The Magic refuses isolation or mindless consumption as fuel, always comes in the form of further connection, to entanglement, to a deepening, demanding an interrogation of forms and moving through the world like worms in a compost heap, transmuting waste into something that nourishes growth and resilience.

“I fucking want superpowers.” Quinton huffed between cigarette drags.

“Its not like Spiderman, dickwad. You owe some shit if you get chosen.” I muttered, slinging back the last dregs of my beer.

“Whatchya mean, Spiderman owed shit. ‘With Great Power comes Great Responsibility.’”

“To apparently be bad at saving New York City, taking mediocre photos and getting his girlfriend and best friend killed.”

“That’s only one timeline of Canon.”

“Whatever, pass me another.”

“Who said you get the last one?”

“We each get two, that’s how math works.”

“What, you a fucking communist, who said this shit was equitable, I’m the oldest.”

“I am not doing this with you, who gives a shit if you’re the oldest and what if I am a communist, huh? I look good in red.”

“Hey guys?” Aggie broke us out of our banter.

Me and Quinton always went on like this and Aggie pretty much stayed out of our verbal fisticuffs unless they had something real important to say.

“What?” Quinton asked, smirking, with the maddeningly superior tone that only older siblings possess.

“What’s that on the horizon?”

Quinton and I squinted.

“I don’t see nothing.” I said, shrugging.

Aggie pointed harder. “There, past the Tomlin place, by the bend in the shore, it’s like a fog that’s breathing or something but it’s too cold for fog and you know, fog don’t normally breathe...”

We saw it this time, I don’t know how we missed it before. A gently undulating mass, an airborne jellyfish composed of water particles and rippled breeze lazily grazing the shoreline, in no hurry to get wherever it was going and not much bothered by our lack of acknowledgement, playing coy almost.

In a hairpin turn’s amount of time something shifted in the atmosphere, just like that feeling you get when you’re underwater playing Marco Polo and you feel one of your friends slither by all snakelike and attempt to be subtle, flowing currents attesting to heightened presence.

“Well, shit.” breathed Quinton.

And without any regard or ceremony he went ramrod stiff and tumbled straight over the side of the pier, hitting the water with a sucking crunch and a sloshy BLURP.

I can’t speak to much that happened after this, mostly because I couldn’t see a goddamn thing, my vision had gone completely black out red, and I was enveloped in a blinding heat that drove

every other sense out the window. I was a winter bonfire doused in gasoline with a set of lungs being ripped apart by soot and scorch. Couldn't see, couldn't move, couldn't really breathe. But I could hear.

“FUCKING HELL, CELESTE, HELP ME, GODDAMNIT!” beer and cigarette smoke had made Aggie's voice rumble and choke in the back of their throat as they screamed for me to help.

Heavy boots on the dock, another splash, Aggie's heaving breaths and the scrape of wood, the groan of rope and clank of metal. The space where bodies had been scrappy minutes before filled up again, seething, seizing, and coughing.

Like windshield wipers across fucked up rose colored glasses, driving away the red and grime, I could see again. My older brother and middle sibling lay prone on the splintered wood, soaked and shivering uncontrollably. A feeling scraped across my synapses, clearing the remaining smoke from my vision and battered skeleton. Against the weight of the entire geological record and volcanic amounts of pressure I rolled over, inelegantly splaying my limbs across my siblings. You could hear the sizzle as soon as we touched, steam instantly plumed in clouds around us, swirling and carried up toward the night sky, phoenix and tornadic waterspout all in one.

And just like that, it was gone. The fog, fire, water, ice. Everything settled back into the same cold, cloudy, moon dulled night. We looked like we coulda just walked outta the makeshift one screen movie theater over in Snug, blurry eyed but dry as a bone. I wrestled myself into a seated position and tried my best to look like I had a plan. Aggie still hadn't caught their breath, gaze darting between Quinton and I, fully panicked.

“Hey, its okay.” I said knowing full well that nothing in fact was actually okay.

“How can you say that, what the actual flying fuck just happened!?”

“Maybe Gertrude slipped up and gave us something stronger than Stroh's.” It was a terrible joke and Aggie ignored me.

They leaned over Quinton. His eyes were closed but the lids fluttered, full on REM sleep. This fucker just looked so goddamn peaceful, what the hell.

“He’s breathing fine.”

“Moms gonna flip her shit.”

Aggie slid back on their hunches, ass hitting the pier with a thunk.

“Celeste, he’s asleep. Just dead asleep. And don’t know, I just got this feeling, I don’t think he’s gonna wake up.”

For the first time in what felt like ages I really looked at my middle sibling and caught the shock of a lifetime, their normally dark brown eyes had gone the cerulean and russet of lake glass and agates with a ten thousand yard stare that would put Clint Eastwood to shame. How could this rail thin teenager look so fucking old all of sudden?

Aggie was right. Quinton didn’t wake up. And in about 12 hours I’d realize I could never go back to sleep. Quniton was now tied to the dreaming world, I was bound to the waking and Aggie was stuck somewhere in between. The Magic had chosen us, who the hell knows why and apparently, not a moment too soon. Cause the thing creeping into our small town—slick and slimy, coal black, up from deep fissures of the earth, liquified crustaceans from millions of years ago—and those who clogged the metal intestines of pipes and tankers with it were careening

pell-mell toward a reckoning. If my Grandmother taught us anything it's that when the Magic calls you, you listen and come correct.

“ Listen and come correct, otherwise, there's hell to pay.”