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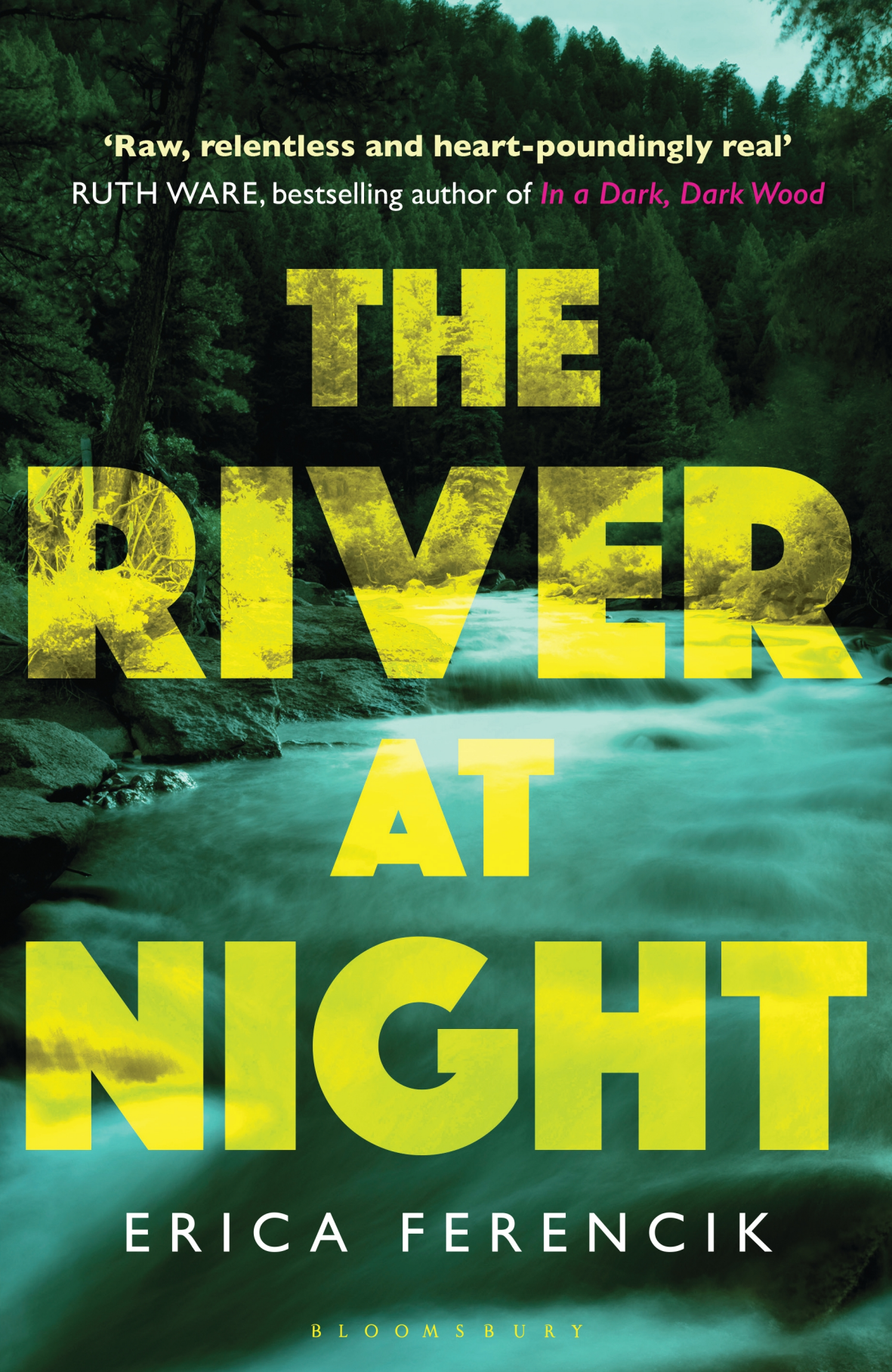
The River at Night

Written by Erica Ferencik

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THE RIVER AT NIGHT
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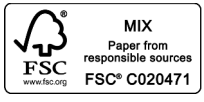
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Before

March 20

1

Early one morning in late March, Pia forced my hand.

A slapping spring wind ushered me through the heavy doors of the YMCA lobby as the minute hand of the yellowing 1950s-era clock over the check-in desk snapped to 7:09. Head down and on task to be in my preferred lane by precisely 7:15, I rushed along the glass corridor next to the pool. The chemical stink leaked from the ancient windows, as did the muffled shrieks of children and the lifeguard's whistle. I felt cosseted by the shabby walls, by my self-righteous routine, by the fact that I'd ousted myself from my warm bed to face another tedious day head-on. Small victories.

I'd just squeezed myself into my old-lady swimsuit when the phone in my bag began to bleat. I dug it out. The screen pulsed with the image of Pia Zanderlee ski-racing down a double black diamond slope somewhere in Banff.

My choices? Answer it now or play phone tag for another week. Pia was that friend you love with a twinge of resentment. The sparkly one who never has time for you unless it's on her schedule, but you like her too much to flush her down the friendship toilet.

"Wow, a phone call—from you!" I said as I mercilessly assessed

my middle-aged pudge in the greasy mirror. "To what do I owe the honor?"

Of course I knew the reason. Five unanswered texts.

Pia laughed. "Hey, Win, listen. We need to make our reservations. Like, by tomorrow."

I fished around in my swim bag for my goggles. "Yeah, I haven't—"

"I get it. Nature's not your thing, but you're going to love it once you're out there. Rachel and Sandra are chomping at the bit to go, but they have to make their travel plans. We all do."

With a shudder, I recalled my frantic Google search the night before for Winnegosset River Rafting, Maine.

No results.

"Just wondering why this place doesn't have some kind of website. I mean, is it legit?" I asked, my voice coming out all high and tinny. Already I was ashamed of my wussiness. "I'd hate to get all the way up there and find out this is some sort of shady operation—"

I could feel her roll her eyes. "Wini, just because some place or something or someone doesn't have a website doesn't mean they don't exist." She sounded windblown, breathless. I pictured her power walking through her Cambridge neighborhood, wrist weights flashing neon. "It's a big old world out there. One of the reasons this place is so awesome is because no one knows about it yet, so it's not booked solid before the snow's even melted. That's why there's space for the weekend we all want, get it? This year, it's the world's best-kept secret—next year, forget it!"

"I don't know, Pia . . ." I glanced at the time: 7:14.

She laughed, softening to me now. "Look, the guy who runs the white-water tours is a good friend of my dad—he's my dad's friend's son, I mean, so it's cool."

"Can't believe Rachel would want to—"

"Are you crazy? She's dying to go. And Sandra? Please. She'd get on a plane right now if she could."

With a wave of affection I pictured my last Skype with Sandra: kids running around screaming in the background, papers to correct stacked next to her. When I brought up the trip, she'd groaned, *Hell, yes, I'm game for anything—just get me out of Dodge!*

"Wini, listen up: Next year—I promise, we'll go to a beach somewhere. Cancún, Key West, you choose. Do nothing and just bake."

"Look, Pia, I'm at the pool and I'm going to lose my lane—"

"Okay. Swim. Then call me."

I tucked my flyaway dirty-blond bob—the compromise cut for all hopelessly shitty hair—under my bathing cap, then hustled my stuff into a locker and slammed it shut. *Do nothing and just bake*. Did she really think that was all I was interested in? Who was the one who rented the bike the last time we went to the Cape? Just me, as I recalled, while all of them sat around the rental pouring more and more tequila into the blender each day. And my God—we were all pushing forty—shouldn't *awesome* and *cool* be in the rearview mirror by now?

I crossed the slimy tiles of the dressing room and pushed open the swinging doors to the pool. The air hit me, muggy and warm, dense with chlorine that barely masked an underwhiff of urine and sweat. Children laughed and punched at the blue water in the shallow end as I padded over to my favorite lane, which was . . . occupied.

It was 7:16 and frog man had beat me to it. Fuck.

For close to a year, this nonagenarian ear, nose, and throat doc-

tor and I had been locked in a mostly silent daily battle over the best lane—far left-hand side, under the skylights—from 7:15 to 8:00 each weekday morning. Usually I was the victor, something about which I'd felt ridiculous glee. We'd only ever exchanged the briefest of greetings; both of us getting to the Y a notch earlier each day. I imagined we both craved this mindless exercise, thoughts freed by the calming boredom of swimming and near weightlessness.

But today I'd lost the battle. I plopped down on a hard plastic seat, pouting inside but feigning serenity as I watched him slap through his slow-motion crawl. He appeared to lose steam near the end of a lap, then climbed the ladder out of the pool as only a ninety-year-old can: with careful deliberation in every step. As I watched the water drip off his flat ass and down his pencil legs, I realized that he was making his way to me, or rather to a stack of towels next to me, and in a few seconds I'd pretty much have to talk to him. He uncorked his goggles with a soft sucking sound. I noticed his eyes seemed a bit wearier than usual, even for a man his age who had just worked his daily laps.

"How are you?" I shifted in my seat, conscious of my bathing cap squeezing my head and distorting my face as I stole the odd glance at the deliciously empty lane.

"I'm well, thank you. Though very sad today."

I studied him more closely now, caught off guard by his intimate tone. "Why?"

Though his expression was grim, I wasn't prepared for what he said.

"I just lost my daughter to cancer."

"I'm sorry," I choked out. I felt socked in the soft fleshy parts; smacked off the rails of my deeply grooved routine and whipped around to face something I didn't want to see.

He took a towel and poked at his ears with it. A gold cross hung from a glimmering chain around his thin neck, the skin white and rubbery looking. "It was a long struggle. Part of me is glad it's over." He squinted at me as if seeing me for the first time. "She was about your age," he added, turning to walk away before I could utter a word of comfort. I watched him travel in his flap step the length of the pool to the men's lockers, his head held down so low I could barely see the top of it.

My hands trembled as I gripped the steel ladder and made my way down into the antiseptic blue. I pushed off. Eyes shut tight and heart pumping, I watched the words *She was about your age* hover in my brain until the letters dissolved into nothingness. The horror of his offhand observation numbed me as I turned and floated on my back, breathing heavily in the oppressive air. As I slogged joylessly through my laps, I thought of my own father rolling his eyes when I said I was afraid of sleepaway camp, of third grade, of walking on grass barefoot "because of worms." As cold as he could be to my brother and me, not a thing on earth seemed to frighten him.

I had barely toweled myself off when my phone lit up with a text from Pia. A question mark, that was it. Followed by three more. Methodically I removed my work clothes from my locker, arranging them neatly on the bench behind me. I pulled off my bathing cap, sat down, and picked up the phone.

My thumbs hovered over the keys as I shivered in the overheated locker room. I took a deep breath—shampoo, rubber, mold, a sting of disinfectant—and slowly let it out, a sharp pain lodging in my gut. I couldn't tell which was worse, the fear of being left behind by my friends as they dashed away on some überbonding, unforgettable adventure, or the inevitable self-loathing if I stayed behind like some gutless wimp—safe, always safe—half-fucking-

dead with safety. Why couldn't I just say yes to a camping trip with three of my best friends? What was I so afraid of?

Pool water dripped from my hair, beading on the phone as I commanded myself to text something.

Anything.

I watched my fingers as they typed, Okay, I'm in, and pressed send.

2

The lurch and grind of the Green Line trolley, Monday morning, inbound to Boston. Sunshine filtered through grimy windows, warming the solemn faces of nine-to-fivers dressed for the office, coffee cups in hand. My phone beeped with a new message from Pia, titled Our fearless leader! :), CC'ed to Rachel and Sandra. Attached were photos of our white-water rafting/hiking guide, twenty-year-old University of Orono student Rory Ekhart.

Shoulder-length dreadlocks, eyes the exact green of an asparagus mousse we'd featured in our March issue. And that bursting-wide smile—as if whoever took the photo caught him laughing or in a state of joy. Rangy and loose-limbed in a mud-spattered T-shirt and shorts, he stood straddling a narrow stream banked by white birches. An ax dangled from one hand. The tagline read, "Third-year SAG undergrad Rory Ekhart on the trail maintenance crew this summer at Orient Ridge."

In another shot he could have been anyone: a man in a cyan-blue parka, hood up and slightly cinched, face in shadow as he held a hiking pole up in victory or salute against a setting sun behind a snowy mountaintop. In the last photo he wore his biggest

grin yet; he was beaming. In full camouflage he knelt on some treeless ridge, the butt of his rifle jammed into the dirt next to his kill: an enormous moose lying on its side, its expression even in death both ferocious and sad.

I finally got around to Pia's actual message, where I found myself scrolling through a bottomless list of camping gear needed for the trip: thirty-nine must-haves, not including optional stuff such as playing cards and a sun shower, whatever that was.

I looked up to see I'd traveled two stops past my own. I jumped to my feet, my mind a whirlwind of wicking shirts, water-purifying tablets, carabiners, Dr. Bronner's soap, and bags with hooks I imagined suspended from trees and batted about by the giant paws of nine-foot bears on their hind legs. Excusing myself through jam-packed commuters to the platform, I hoofed it hard back up toward Beacon Street and my office, regretting my choice of stacked heels and narrow skirt, which shortened my already-short stride.

I leaned into the heavy doors of our charming but drafty 1920s brick building. Yanked skirt into place, tucked wind-whipped hair behind ears, jabbed at the going-up button. Five floors later the doors sucked open on the fancy new marble-floored lobby, which had felt empty since we let our receptionist go. An antiquated concept, receptionists, we'd been advised at our last come-to-Jesus meeting. Nobody wanders in from the street, after all, and those with appointments know to expect their visitors at the agreed-upon time. With our numbers so low overall, it was time to cut the wheat from the chaff, or whatever expression was used to send this lovely and kind—if a bit scattered—single mother of twin girls packing. But in the end I didn't have much to say, considering my position as a graphic designer at *Chef's Illustrated* had been cut in half just months before, my benefits shredded, and my

corner office lost to our new Web developer, a toothy, twenty-five-year-old MIT grad named Sarah.

I tossed my purse on my desk, picked up the phone, and dialed.

"Pia Zanderlee," she answered breathlessly.

"You okay?" I tapped my machine awake and inhaled the smell of hot German spice cookies and *bûche de Noël*. We'd been testing Christmas recipes from around the world the past few weeks. "You sound like you're running."

"I'm trying to make this eleven o'clock flight to Chicago."

I heard muffled airport sounds in the background: kids crying, flight announcements, snippets of conversation amid the bustle of travel; sounds from lives I imagined were immeasurably more exciting than my own. "Should I call you back?"

"No, just . . . what's up?"

"Well, I got that list and . . . what's 'wicking'?"

"It's fabric that pulls sweat away from your skin, so you don't get cold and get hypothermia."

I googled *wicking*. An athletic young woman jogged across the screen. Animated steam flowed out of her shirt and shorts. "What about coming with me to REI sometime, help me pick out some of this stuff?"

"I don't know, Win, maybe. I've got a pretty full schedule till we head out."

But you live one town away, I thought. *What's the big deal? Help me navigate this terrifying list you sent*. "You traveling a lot these days?"

"Just this one trip for work. I'm back Thursday." I heard her drop the phone, then pick it up. "Everything okay, Win?"

"Yeah, great, just . . . you know, wanted to be ready for the trip." I cleared my throat. "So . . . will there be bears, do you think?"

Pia laughed. I pictured her: tall and graceful as she stood in line for her flight, chestnut hair shining under bright airport lights. Confidence emanating from her; an utter lack of self-consciousness making heads turn. People mused, *How do I know her? From television? The movies? Somewhere* . . . "We're gonna be fine, Win. Bears don't care about us. You leave them alone, they leave you alone."

"What are water shoes?"

"Can I call you when I land?"

"Sure," I said, knowing she would forget. A few taps on my keyboard brought up *shoes, amphibious*.

"Go to REI. You'll be cool. I'll see you in a few weeks." She hung up.

Loneliness occupied the air around me, even buzzing as it was with chatter, with activity, with sounds and smells. *I thought it would be fun,* I mentally said to the dial tone, *to go to REI together. To laugh about amphibious shoes. To hang out and catch up before we go on the trip. You know, like friends do*.

Alissa, one of an endless parade of college-age interns we cycled through *Chef's*, joined me at my desk. She wore a sad black dress inexplicably off the shoulder, an odd choice for such a cold morning, her pale flesh sprayed with freckles. I tugged at my turtleneck, trying to remember the last time I'd even made a stab at such a casually sexy look.

"So," I said as I pulled up the May issue, "what brings you to graphic design? Are you a closet fine artist?"

Her eyes were bright blue but oddly sparkless. "No. I can't draw at all."

"But you want to be a pixel pusher? A Photoshop queen like me?"

"I guess," she said. "I couldn't think of anything else to do." She crossed pasty white hands in her lap and stared at my screen.

Wow, I thought, *if you're this uninspired by life at your age, you'll be a corpse by the time you're thirty*. But I held back from sharing how I mastered graphic design in the dark ages with T squares and X-Acto knives. I'd learned through experience that kids don't think it's cute or even interesting—who can blame them?—that you happen to be a dinosaur. It frankly scores you no points at all.

I also spared the poor girl my history as a fine arts major at the Massachusetts College of Art, where I met my now ex-husband, Richard Allen, a printmaking student I used to make love to in empty classrooms redolent of oil paint and turpentine. I didn't disclose to Alissa that we knew our union was forever, that we swore to be artists no matter what it took, and that we were going to change the world.

Instead, I pulled out some "before" and "after" proofs. "My job is to make the food look even better than it is—better than Suzanne can make it look, even with all her lenses and filters. See? I toned down the red in the red velvet cake here, got the frosting to glisten, sexed up the greens in the arugula, painted some dewdrops on the tomatoes . . ."

Alissa cocked her head and doled me out a real smile. "Pretty cool."

For a second I almost felt hip, pitiful as that sounds. I shuffled the proofs into piles, sat back, and regarded her. Hell, maybe she had something to teach me. "So, have you ever been white-water rafting?"

Her eyes grew wide, and for a moment I thought I detected life there. "Oh my God, no, I would never do that."

I felt validated, terrified. "Why not?"

"I just think it's stupid. It's so dangerous."

"But—you've never been?"

"No. And I don't hang glide either, or go skydiving." She recoiled a bit. "Why, you're not going, are you?"

"Actually, yes," I said. "I'm afraid I am."

I was brain-deep in an ad for oatmeal raisin cookies around three that afternoon when a rush of mortality flooded over me. I felt my face flush as a vague nausea suffused my body. It felt almost like embarrassment, as if I were caught deleting raisins as I was waiting, at age thirty-nine, for my life to begin. I'd tasted whiffs of this particular despair in the past, but never like that day. Maybe it was the swimmer and his dead daughter, maybe it was Alissa's horrid youth freshly in my face.

All I could bring myself to do was gaze out the window, marvel at how a few flakes earlier in the day had gathered forces into an early-spring blizzard of stunning beauty. I tried to recall—couldn't—the last time I'd taken up a paintbrush with any joy, or for how long I'd forced the square of my creativity into the round hole of graphic design. The day Richard left, I'd stuffed my paintings-in-progress, sketchbooks, easels—every last brush and tube of paint—in the back of my closet. I wanted no more to do with that part of myself.

So I forgot about beauty—not only what bloomed in my head and wanted to be on canvas, but the wild, flawed kind all around me. In fact I'd been whoring up the imperfect for a paycheck for so long I couldn't face the real anymore: my aging body, the crash and burn of my marriage, the unfathomable loss of my brother, Marcus.

I gathered my things, made some noises about not feeling well, and left the building.

Snow swirled around me, making magic every detail of the city. No cornice, streetlamp, awning, or tree branch had been left unadorned. Packed trains rumbled by as I trudged along Beacon Street, but I had no interest in climbing aboard—even in my office clothes and heels—to arrive at my lonely apartment sooner than absolutely necessary. Block after block, all I could think about was Marcus and how much he had loved the snow.

One winter night, when Marcus was five and I was eleven, we built a snowman together in our front yard in Lee, Massachusetts, by the light of a full moon. I picked him up in his snowsuit and held him—his face flushed with excitement—as he popped in buttons for eyes, poked in a carrot for a nose, and with profound concentration arranged pebbles in a crooked smile.

I set him down and we stood back, admiring our work. He signed, red gloves moving quick, "Is snowman alive?"

Snowflakes melted on his cheeks, stuck to his long black eyelashes. I said and signed, "No."

Brow furrowed, he signed, "Is it dead?"

"No." I shook my head slowly, wondering.

"It's alive!" he signed, then smiled and clapped and ran off into the yard. Snowsuit swishing, he pelted me with snowballs.

That night I tucked him in. It was something I did a lot since Mom slept most of the time and Dad worked constantly. Marcus signed with a hopeful smile, "No school tomorrow?"

I looked out at the driving snow and wind. "Probably not. But don't get too excited. Just go to sleep." I smoothed his hair and kissed him on the head. He was asleep in seconds.

In the morning, Marcus thundered down the stairs and leapt on the couch to look out the window. He made a small, agonized cry and sprinted to the door. Before I could stop him, he flew outside in his Bugs Bunny pajamas, barefoot. The world of white

was gone and our yard had turned muddy and green again. The temperature had risen in the night as a rainstorm blew past; our snowman had melted into a gray lump, eyeless, carrot nose drooping into the dirt.

"Snowman dead!" he signed again and again, his face contorted with panic. He tore off to the far corners of the yard, frantically gathering the pitiful lumps of snow that remained. Suddenly he stopped, overwhelmed by the futility of it all.

I ran outside and caught his arm as he raised it to hit himself in the forehead, already bruised from some earlier disappointment. I wrapped my arms around him, straitjacketing in all his little-boy rage and pain, feeling his hitting energy ripple through him in cycles until he had worn himself out. Shirtless, Dad stood in the doorway, a hulking shadow. "He okay?"

"It's all right, Dad. He'll be fine in a few minutes."

Marcus smelled like warm milk and Lucky Charms. With hot, sticky fingers he signed into my chest, "Want snowman alive. Sad, sad."

I tucked his body tight into mine, my knees wedged in the cold, muddy ground. He felt like part of my body, the part that cried and laughed and let myself be silly. "It'll snow again, Marcus," I whispered. "And we'll make an even better one." I held him as long as I could, knowing that sooner than I wanted to, I'd have to let him go.