



Monday, October 8
2:00 a.m.

Dreams fascinate me. They're like movies that play in my mind, full of people I know and many I haven't met. I'm deep into a dream about a polka dot bear, a plaid moose, and a striped chipmunk having a picnic. They're arguing about who gets the last chicken drumstick, and I'm explaining it's mine, when I hear a snuffling noise.

Someone is crying. I scan the forest, trying to find the source of the noise. I lift a leaf to reveal a glittering raccoon. It gives me a relieved look and says, "You found me."

The sniffing continues, and as I search, the noise becomes louder. I lie down on the grass, crawling and patting the ground near my head.

"Hey!" Maggie yelps.

I sit up, abruptly leaving the peaceful forest, and find myself face to face with my little sister. Even in the moonlight, I can see the tears streaking her cheeks.

"Magpie," I say hoarsely, trying to orient myself back into reality. "What's wrong?"

“The cougar was watching me.”

I gather her close and pull the blanket around us. “I’m sorry you had a bad dream. You can sleep here.”

“It wasn’t a dream.”

“Of course, it was,” I yawn. “There’s no such thing as a polka dot bear.”

Maggie gives me a strange look. “No.” Her tone is impatient. “*You* were dreaming. Not me. The cougar was in the tree outside my window, watching me.”

I smooth Maggie’s auburn curls away from her face. “Honey, Grace screamed so loudly that cougar is in Canada by now. You were dreaming.”

I snuggle down into the bed, already half asleep.

“You don’t believe me.” The hurt in her tone alerts me, and I face her, silently saying good night to my colorful forest friends.

“Maggie, it’s not that I don’t believe you. But it only makes sense you would dream about the cougar after everything that happened tonight. It’s easy to assume dreams are real when you first wake up.”

Maggie sits up and says, “The cougar was in my tree. When I came back from the bathroom, he was sitting there, staring directly at me. I made myself stay calm and came in here because I figured you would understand how scary he is.” Maggie’s tight voice and straight back show her offense.

I consider asking if she might have been sleepwalking but change my mind. Maggie has made a lot of progress overcoming the nightmares that began when our parents died. She’s been seeing a counselor who helps all three of us navigate the stages of grief. Sleepwalking isn’t a problem so far, and I have a sense if I suggest it, I will put a wall between us.

“Okay,” I say. “I believe you.” I shiver at the idea the cougar might have followed Grace and me to my home. Why? I don’t know much about cougars, but I can’t understand why he would bypass a town full of tasty morsels to follow me. But one glance at Maggie’s face convinces me. She believes she saw the cougar.

The next moment a chill covers me when Maggie says, “You didn’t mention he only has one eye.”

“What?” I squeak.

“One eye.” Maggie is calmer now that she has shared her terror with me, and she scoots down into the bed, wiggling to find a comfortable spot. “His left eye is missing.”

7:30 a.m.

IT’S Grace’s turn to drive, and, as usual, I’m running late. I snag a Pop-Tart from the kitchen and reach the porch as Grace’s car pulls into the driveway.

“One second,” I call, then jog down the stairs and around the side yard. As I approach the enormous tree outside Maggie’s window, I tell myself to relax—there’s no way the cougar was in this tree last night.

But he was.

The deep claw marks on the tree trunk prove it. For a second, I try to convince myself it was Mrs. Mendelssohn’s cat who made the marks. Then I remember Peaches is declawed.

“His left eye is gone.” I shiver as I remember Maggie’s words from last night. That was one fact Grace and I hadn’t told Maggie when we were reporting about our encounter with the cougar. Instead, we’d agreed it could cause more nightmares.

I trace my finger down the deep grooves in the tree.

“Whatcha’ doin’?”

I yelp and drop my bookbag.

“Grace! Don’t do that.” I glower at her and pick up my bag.

“Do what?” Grace studies me as she munches an apple. For some reason, the fact she is eating a healthy breakfast while I’m currently digesting a chocolate Pop-Tart irritates me even more.

“Sneak up on me.”

“You’re kind of crabby this morning,” Graces observes, taking another nibble of her apple. “Didn’t you get any sleep?”

“Sorry.” I sigh and take a deep breath. “No, I didn’t sleep much.”

Then I step aside, revealing the claw marks the cougar left in the tree outside my little sister’s bedroom window.

Grace leans over to examine the gouges. “Are those what I think?”

“Yep.” I use my phone to take several pictures for Nick. He may be able to find the animal’s size based on how wide and deep the marks are. At least, I think I saw that on the Discovery Channel once.

“The cougar woke Maggie last night. At first, I thought she had a bad dream, but when she mentioned it only had one eye, I realized it was really there.”

I slide my phone into my bag and follow Grace to her car.

“Weird,” Grace says as she pulls out of the driveway. “What are the odds you would see a cougar, and that same night it would be outside your house? I mean, he had the entire town of Justice to terrorize.”

I shrug, trying to shake off my uneasiness. “He probably visited a lot of places last night. I’m trying not to take it personally.”

When I send the pic to Sly and Nick’s phones, Nick texts back that a wildlife expert will take a look ASAP. I try to relax in the assurance the trackers are on their way to Justice.

But deep down, a nagging suspicion says this won’t be my last encounter with the cougar.

12:00 p.m.

GRACE and I try to keep a low profile at school. But, thanks to Kylie Warren, news has spread about our encounter with the

cougar last night. At lunch, we're surrounded by students who usually ignore us, begging for details.

"I can't discuss an ongoing investigation," I repeat something I heard Nick say once. Most people nod in acceptance and walk away.

Grace snickers. "I'm going to use that line the next time someone asks me a question I don't want to answer."

"Feel free," I say.

Terri and Macy join us, and Terri says, "Guess what?"

Before we can answer, Terri turns to her cousin and says, "Go on, Mace, you tell them."

Macy's rosy cheeks turn even brighter, but she gives a shy smile.

"Caleb and I are going to sing the national anthem at the game in two weeks."

"Wow, that's awesome," Grace says, and I nod.

"Which of you will play the guitar?" I ask.

"Caleb," Macy says. "At first, he wanted us to both play and sing, but I want to concentrate on my vocals since I'm singing harmony."

"It's going to be amazing," Terri says. "I heard them practice, and they sound so good together. Todd's going to video the performance and upload it to YouTube."

I unzip my bookbag and remove a piece of notebook paper and pen. When I place them in front of Macy, she looks confused.

"What's this for?"

"I want to be the first person ever to get your autograph." Macy's blush deepens, but when she sees I'm serious, she carefully signs her name.

"By the way, you made my mom cry in church yesterday," Grace says.

Macy frowns. "Why?"

Grace smiles and touches Macy's arm. "It was a good kind of

cry. When you and Caleb sang “I Can Only Imagine,” she lost it. Your voices blend so beautifully.”

Terri nods, “Yes, my mom had the same reaction.”

I’m quiet, remembering my own jumbled emotions yesterday. When Pastor Jeff announced Caleb and Macy’s duet, I was eager to hear them sing together for the first time. But when Caleb began strumming the song’s melody, my heart pounded, and for a moment, I almost jumped up to run from the sanctuary.

But then Sly reached for my hand just as she took Maggie’s on her other side. My sisters and I listened to the comforting words that the church choir had sung at our parent’s funeral. Even as grief tried to drown me, the words gave me unwavering hope that we would see our parents again someday—in heaven.

Grace notices my silence and touches my hand. “Are you okay?” she whispers.

I nod, rapidly blinking hot tears from my eyes. Then, turning to Macy, I say, “I can’t wait to hear you sing again. Cole and I will be on the front bleachers, cheering you on.”

The conversation continues around me as I feel the sadness ebb away. For long months I fought my grief, thinking it was better to push it down. But I’m learning to let myself feel, even when it comes at unexpected times, like today.

“Everyone grieves in their own way, Jess.” Our counselor described the five stages of grief and is helping each of us find our own path. But there are times, like yesterday, when the Thomas sisters still grieve together.

I think about the letter Daddy wrote, and although I wonder if more pain is coming, I know we’ll face the future the best way we can. Together.