

## Upside Down

It was cold outside, colder than I had expected. Although it was already May, the winter still seemed to cling to the nights, reluctant to surrender the last remnants of his reign. I took a deep breath, letting the cool air fill my lungs. I was glad to have escaped the closeness of the house, the thought-stifling music and the heat of the crowded room. I welcomed the cold besieging my body. Let it enter, I thought, let it spread through all my limbs. Maybe it would numb this inexplicable ache that was burning in my heart.

I stepped from the porch into the garden. It slumbered beneath the silver sheen of a full moon, while clouds chased each other over the sky, eclipsing the stars. To my left, a few people were standing around a small fire and their words mingled with the sparks that danced in the dark. Someone waved at me and I nodded in return, but my feet carried me away from the warmth and the voices to the edge of the garden. There, just behind the lawn, loomed the forest, like a thick, impenetrable wall. Like the entrance to a secret world. Darkness emanated from its trees, reaching out with black fingers, beckoning me to come closer. To enter. I tore my gaze away and shook my head, trying to chase away these strange thoughts. The forest whispered words I didn't want to hear.

I looked back at the house. Someone had opened the porch door and the noises of the party spilled into the night, the music and the shrieks and the laughter shattering the peace, before the closing door confined them once more. Silence returned and with it came a sense of distance, of detachment, like I had stepped out of the screen and was watching the movie from the outside now. I turned back to the forest. Maybe I would just stay here for a while, at the edge of this garden that felt like the edge of the world, and absorb the calm and the cold of the night.

It wasn't like I would be missed any time soon, anyway.

I had been excited at first to come along. It had been Sylvia's idea, of course. Robin had been sceptical. After all, I was only fifteen, I didn't know any of their classmates and I was such a delicate flower, I probably couldn't tolerate one drop of alcohol. Sylvia had only laughed. "You worry too much," she had told Robin. "Besides, this could be the last opportunity for us to go to a party. All the three of us, together."

Together. Right. I thought back to how I had stood at the margins of the party, awkward and alone, watching all those guys with their smart-alec comments and the pretty girls with their sparkling giggles and the two persons at the centre of it all,

surrounded by crowds of admirers. Sylvia and Robin. My sister and her best friend. I hadn't known how popular they were. We three had always been a team, even though I was younger, ever since Robin's family had moved into the house next to ours. We were an entity. Or at least, that's what I had thought. But there was no room for me now, no way I fitted in.

They were already starting to leave me behind.

A breeze brushed through the leaves above me and I shivered. I had left my jacket inside the house but I felt no desire whatsoever to go and get it. I had seen enough.

"Are you cold?" Robin was suddenly beside me, nearly making me jump out of my skin. My heart pounded violently and the forest rustled in response. I told them both to shut up.

"I'm fine." I tried to hide my frustration behind what I hoped was a reassuring smile and resisted the urge to rub my bare arms. Of course, it didn't work.

"No, you're not. You're only wearing a T-Shirt, Sky! You're going to freeze straight through, thin as you are! Here, take my jacket." Robin started to slip out of it even though I shook my head.

"I said I'm fine!" My irritation got the better of me. I ducked away when Robin tried to put the jacket around my shoulders, stepping nearer to the forest. Childish, I know. It really was freezing. But I just hated to be treated like this, like someone who had to be taken care of, a liability. I didn't want that Robin saw me as a liability.

"Whoa, no need to be rude about it. What is going on? Did something bother you? What are you doing out here, anyway? And where is Sylvia? She was supposed to take care of you. She shouldn't have left you on your own." An exasperated sigh. "I told her that you were too young to come along."

Not this again! They were only two years older than me! Anger warmed my blood and I forgot the cold. "Stop treating me like a little child!", I snapped. "I can take care of myself! I don't need Sylvia and I don't need you either. In two month you're both off to college anyway. So just go back to your stupid party and stop pretending that you care about me."

"Sky..."

But I was on a roll now, the words tumbling out of my mouth before I could stop them, unchecked, out of control. "Because, you know what? I don't care either. I don't care that this is our first party together and at the same time probably the last. I don't care that you are leaving, I don't care that I will stay behind and I don't care that

you will forget me as soon as you cross the town's border. I don't care! I won't even miss you!" I laughed but it sounded too shrill. "I mean, it's not like I need you. It's not like I'm... I'm... in love with you." The last words left my mouth in a whisper. I had meant them to be scathing, sneering. Instead, they sounded like a confession.

Time seemed to stop while we stared at each other in shock. My words hung in the air between us, heavy like rain clouds. I knew that they would change us, change everything. But maybe it wasn't too late yet. Maybe, if I could take them back, just grab them, plug them out of the air...

Robin blinked, time snapped back into place and the moment was gone. My words fell like drops, hit like bombs. And I did the only other thing that was left to me: I flung myself into the forest and ran.

It was like stepping into a different world. The air was damp and thick, tasting of earth and rain. Noises faded and darkness deepened and winter's icy breath surrounded me. It didn't help. Hot tears of embarrassment prickled in my eyes, streamed down my burning cheeks. My heart was aflame. I had just made a major fool of myself.

"Sky! Hey, Sky, wait!" I didn't listen. I stumbled blindly through the dark, trying to get away as fast as I could. How? How was this possible? Because there was no denying it anymore, no way I could ignore these feelings blazing in my chest. I was in love with Robin. But how? How did you not notice the fire until it was already too late to put it out?

Behind me branches snapped and leaves whispered. Robin was following me. I ran faster. Go away, I thought, go away, go away, go away. But the noise continued, grew louder. I could hear some muttered curses.

This was such a mess. It was stupid to run around in a dark, unknown forest, I knew that, but I couldn't bring myself to stop. My legs just kept moving, trying to escape the words which still echoed inside my head. *I'm in love with you*. I pressed my hands to my ears.

My foot caught on a root and I stumbled again, twisting my ankle. I went down hard. The air was knocked straight out of my lungs, not even leaving enough breath to curse.

For a moment I just lied there, stunned.

"Sky? Where are you? Are you okay?" Robin's voice travelled through the dark, sounding worried.

I considered not to answer. But the prospect of lying in a cold, dark forest all night long, with a twisted ankle was even worse than the thought of confronting Robin after my ridiculous confession.

“I’m here,” I said weakly. I tried to stand up but a sharp pain shot through my foot, causing me to cry out.

“Sky!” I heard leaves rustle and then a dark shape emerged from the trees and knelt at my side. “Is everything okay? Are you hurt?” A hand squeezed my shoulder and in the darkness I could just make out Robin’s face. I looked down, speaking my words to the forest floor. “I think I twisted my ankle.”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay.”

I didn’t dare to look up. I didn’t want to see the pity in those wonderful brown eyes.

“Sky.” A hand under my chin, forcing it up. “Look at me.” The words were spoken softly, pleadingly. I had known Robin for most of my life but I had never heard this tone before. Gentle as a stroke and as warm as sunshine. It wrapped me like a hug. I looked up.

Robin was kneeling before me, frowning with concern. Our gazes met, melted into each other. The forest around us held its breath.

“I won’t forget you. Ever. I will miss you every single day that I’m gone, every hour, every minute. Because I care about you. A lot.”

My heart beat frantically in my chest and I was lost, lost, lost in those beautiful eyes.

“I know that you’re not a child anymore. I’m not blind. Every time I look at you it takes my breath away how beautiful you are. That’s why I didn’t want you to come along, I was afraid that others would notice as well. I guess I... I just wanted to keep you for myself.” Robin’s words were almost inaudible but they echoed inside me, filled my whole body with happiness. When our lips met, the cold was nothing but a distant memory.

The forest whooshed triumphantly around us or maybe it was the blood in my ears and we could have sat there forever or maybe it were only minutes, I couldn’t tell. I just closed my eyes and I forgot that time existed, I forgot the party and the world outside this forest.

Everything was upside down but it felt good that way. I wanted it to stay like this forever.

And then I felt myself being lifted off the ground and before I knew it I was in Robin’s arms and we were moving through the forest quite quickly. I gasped. “Let me

down!", I demanded, half ashamed at this treatment, half enjoying it. The shame won, though, and was soon joined by guilt. "Robin, please. I'm too heavy. I can walk on my own."

The only answer I got was a tightening of the arms around me. "Robin!" My outcry was met with a laugh. "Don't worry! I'm strong. And you clearly can't walk on your own. Besides, who would guarantee me that you wouldn't try to run away from me again?"

I just sighed and resigned myself to my fate.

When we emerged from the woods my sister was there, waiting for us. She rushed to our side and helped Robin lower me to the ground. "I see you had all the fun while you left me here alone at the boring party. What happened?"

"Twisted ankle," Robin explained. "That's what you get when you run around in a dark forest."

Sylvia shook her head at me. "Really, little brother. Why is it that Robin and I always have to rescue you? We can't let you out of our sights even once, you always get into trouble. Seriously. What would you ever do without us?"

She threw her arm around Robin and the two girls smiled down on me. Sylvia and Robin. My sister and the girl I had fallen in love with.

I couldn't help but grin in return. "I don't know," I told them. "I honestly don't know."