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The Dream Thieves

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PROLOGUE

A secret is a strange thing.

There are three kinds of secrets. One is the sort everyone knows about, the sort you need at least two people for. One to keep it. One to never know. The second is a harder kind of secret: one you keep from yourself. Every day, thousands of confessions are kept from their would-be confessors, none of these people knowing that their never-admitted secrets all boil down to the same three words: *I am afraid*.

And then there is the third kind of secret, the most hidden kind. A secret no one knows about. Perhaps it was known once, but was taken to the grave. Or maybe it is a useless mystery, arcane and lonely, unfound because no one ever looked for it.

Sometimes, some rare times, a secret stays undiscovered because it is something too big for the mind to hold. It is too strange, too vast, too terrifying to contemplate.

All of us have secrets in our lives. We're keepers or kept-from, players or played. Secrets and cockroaches – that's what will be left at the end of it all.

Ronan Lynch lived with every sort of secret.

His first secret involved his father. Niall Lynch was a braggart poet, a loser musician, a charming bit of hard luck bred in Belfast but born in Cumbria, and Ronan loved him like he loved nothing else.

Though Niall was a rogue and a fiend, the Lynches were rich. Niall's employment was mysterious. He was gone for months at a time, though it was hard to say if this was because of his career or because of his being a scoundrel. He always returned with gifts, treasure and unimaginable amounts of money, but to Ronan, the most wondrous thing was Niall himself. Every parting felt like it would be the last, and so every return was like a miracle.

"When I was born," Niall Lynch told his middle son, "God broke the mould so hard the ground shook."

This was already a lie, because if God truly had broken the mould for Niall, He'd made Himself a knock-off twenty years later to craft Ronan and his two brothers, Declan and Matthew. The three brothers were nothing if not handsome copies of their father, although each flattered a different side of Niall. Declan had the same way of taking a room and shaking its hand. Matthew's curls were netted with Niall's charm and humour. And Ronan was everything that was left: molten eyes and a smile made for war.

There was little to nothing of their mother in any of them.

"It was a proper earthquake," Niall clarified, as if anyone had asked him – and knowing Niall, they probably had. "Four point one on the Richter scale. Anything under four would've just cracked the mould, not broken it."

Back then, Ronan was not in the business of believing, but that was all right, because his father wanted adoration, not trust.

"And you, Ronan," Niall said. He always said *Ronan* differently from other words. As if he had meant to say another word entirely – something like *knife* or *poison* or *revenge* – and then swapped it out for Ronan's name at the

last moment. "When you were born, the rivers dried up and the cattle in Rockingham County wept blood."

It was a story he had told more than once, but Ronan's mother, Aurora, insisted it was a lie. She said when Ronan emerged, the trees all grew flowers and the Henrietta ravens laughed. When his parents bickered back and forth about his birth, Ronan never pointed out that both versions could be true.

Declan, the oldest of the Lynch brothers, once asked, "And what happened when I was born?"

Niall Lynch looked at him and said, "I wouldn't know. I wasn't here."

When Niall said *Declan*, it always sounded like he meant to say *Declan*.

And then Niall vanished for another month. Ronan took the opportunity to search the Barns, which is what the sprawling Lynch farm was known as, for evidence of where Niall's money came from. He found no clues of his father's work, but he did discover a yellowed newspaper clipping in a rusting metal box. It was from the year his father was born. Drily it reported the story of the Kirkby Stephen earthquake, felt through northern England and southern Scotland. Four point one. Anything less than a four wouldn't have broken it, only cracked it.

That night, Niall Lynch came home in the blackness, and when he woke, he found Ronan standing above him in the small white master bedroom. The morning sun made them both snowy as angels, which was the better part of a lie already. Niall's face was smeared with blood and blue petals.

"I was just dreaming of the day you were born," Niall said, "Ronan."

He wiped the blood on his forehead to show Ronan

that there was no wound beneath it. The petals snared in the blood were shaped like tiny stars. Ronan was struck with how sure he was that they had come from his father's mind. He'd never been more sure of anything.

The world gaped and stretched, suddenly infinite.

Ronan told him, "I know where the money comes from."

"Don't tell anyone," his father said.

That was the first secret.

The second secret was perfect in its concealment. Ronan did not say it. Ronan did not think it. He never put lyrics to the second secret, the one he kept from himself.

But it still played in the background.

And then there was this: three years later, Ronan dreaming of his friend Richard C. Gansey III's car. Gansey trusted him with all things, except for weapons. Never with weapons and never with this, not Gansey's hell-tinged '73 Camaro slicked with black stripes. In his waking hours, Ronan never got any further than the passenger seat. When Gansey left town, he took the keys with him.

But in Ronan's dream, Gansey was not there and the Camaro was. The car was poised on the sloped corner of an abandoned car park, mountains ghosted blue in the distance. Ronan's hand closed around the driver's side door handle. He tried his grip. It was a dream strength, only substantial enough to cling to the idea of opening the door. That was all right. Ronan sank into the driver's seat. The mountains and the car park were a dream, but the smell of the interior was a memory: petrol and vinyl and carpet and years whirring against one another.

The keys are in it, Ronan thought.

And they were.

The keys dangled from the ignition like metallic fruit,

and Ronan spent a long moment holding them in his mind. He shuffled the keys from dream to memory and back again, and then he closed his palm around them. He felt the soft leather and the worn edge of the fob; the cold metal of the ring and the boot key; the thin, sharp promise of the ignition key between his fingers.

Then he woke up.

When he opened his hand, the keys lay in his palm. Dream to reality.

This was his third secret.



One

Theoretically, Blue Sargent was probably going to kill one of these boys.

"Jane!" The shout came from across the hill. It was directed towards Blue, although Jane was not her real name. "Hurry up!"

As the only non-clairvoyant in a very psychic family, she'd had her future told again and again, and each time it said she would kill her true love if she tried to kiss him. Moreover, it had been foretold this was the year she'd fall in love. *And* both Blue and her clairvoyant half aunt, Neeve, had seen one of the boys walking along the invisible corpse road this April, which meant he was supposed to die in the next twelve months. It all added up to a fearful equation.

At the moment, that particular boy, Richard Campbell Gansey III, looked pretty unkillable. In the humid wind at the top of the wide green hill, an ardently yellow polo shirt flapped against his chest and a pair of khaki shorts slapped his gloriously tanned legs. Boys like him didn't die; they got bronzed and installed outside public libraries. He held a hand towards Blue as she climbed the hill from the car, a gesture that looked less like encouragement and more like he was directing air traffic.

"*Jane.* You've got to see this!" His voice was full of the honey-baked accent of old Virginia money.

As Blue staggered up the hill, telescope on her shoulder, she mentally tested the danger level: *Am I in love with him yet?*

Gansey galloped down the hill to snatch the telescope from her.

"This isn't that heavy," he told her, and strode back the way he'd come.

She did not think she was in love with him. She hadn't been in love before, but she was still pretty sure she'd be able to tell. Earlier in the year, she *had* had a vision of kissing him, and she could still picture *that* quite easily. But the sensible part of Blue, which was usually the only part of her, thought that had more to do with Richard Campbell Gansey III having a nice mouth than with any blossoming romance.

Anyway, if fate thought it could tell her who to fall for, fate had another think coming.

Gansey added, "I would've thought you had more muscles. Don't feminists have big muscles?"

Decidedly not in love with him.

"Smiling when you say that doesn't make it funny," Blue said.

As the latest step in his quest to find the Welsh king Owen Glendower, Gansey had been requesting hiking permission from local landowners. Each lot crossed the Henrietta ley line – an invisible, perfectly straight energy line that connected spiritually significant places – and circled Cabeswater, a mystical forest that straddled it. Gansey was certain that Glendower was hidden somewhere within Cabeswater, sleeping away the centuries. Whoever woke the king was supposed to be granted a favour – something that had been on Blue's mind recently. It seemed to her that Gansey was the only one who really *needed* it. Not that

Gansey knew he was supposed to be dead in a few months. And not that she was about to tell him.

If we find Glendower soon, Blue thought, *surely we can save Gansey.*

The steep climb brought them to a vast, grassy crest that arched above the forested foothills. Far, far below was Henrietta, Virginia. The town was flanked by pastures dotted with farmhouses and cattle, as small and tidy as a model railway layout. Everything but the soaring blue mountain range was green and shimmery with the summer heat.

But the boys were not looking at the scenery. They stood in a close circle: Adam Parrish, gaunt and fair; Noah Czerny, smudgy and slouching; and Ronan Lynch, ferocious and dark. On Ronan's tattooed shoulder perched his pet raven, Chainsaw. Although her grip was careful, there were finely drawn lines from her claws on either side of the strap of his black sleeveless T-shirt. They all eyed something Ronan held in his hands. Gansey cavalierly tossed the telescope into the buoyant field grass and joined them.

Adam allowed Blue into their circle as well, his eyes meeting hers for a moment. As always, his features intrigued Blue. They were not quite conventionally handsome, but they were *interesting*. He had the typical Henrietta prominent cheekbones and deep-set eyes, but his version of them was more delicate. It made him seem a little alien. A little impenetrable.

I'm picking this one, Fate, she thought ferociously. *Not Richard Gansey III. You can't tell me what to do.*

Adam's hand glided over her bare elbow. The touch was a whisper in a language she didn't speak very well.

"Open it up," he ordered Ronan. His voice was dubious.

"Doubting Thomas," Ronan sneered, but without much vitriol. The tiny model plane in his hand spanned the same breadth as his fingers. It was formed of pure white, featureless plastic, almost ludicrously lacking in detail: a plane-shaped thing. He opened the battery hatch on the bottom. It was empty.

"Well, it's impossible, then," Adam said. He picked off a grasshopper that had hurled itself on to his collar. Everyone in the group watched him do it. Since he'd performed a strange ritual bargain the month before, they'd been scrutinizing all of his movements. If Adam noticed this extra attention, he didn't indicate it. "It won't fly if it has no battery and no engine."

Now Blue knew what this thing was. Ronan Lynch, keeper of secrets, fighter of men, devil of a boy, had told them all that he could take objects out of his dreams. Example A: Chainsaw. Gansey had been excited; he was the sort of boy who didn't necessarily believe everything, but wanted to. But Adam, who had only got this far in life by questioning every truth presented to him, had wanted proof.

"'It won't fly if it has no battery and no engine'," Ronan mimicked in a higher-pitched version of Adam's faint Henrietta drawl. "Noah: the controller."

Noah scuffled in the clumpy grass for the radio controller. Like the plane, it was white and shiny, all the edges rounded. His hands looked solid around it. Though he had been dead for quite a while and by all rights should appear more ghostly, he was always rather living-looking when standing on the ley line.

"What's supposed to go inside the plane, if not a battery?" Gansey asked.

Ronan said, "I don't know. In the dream it was little missiles, but I guess they didn't come with."

Blue snarled a few seed heads off the tall grass. "Here."

"Good thinking, maggot." Ronan stuffed them into the hatch. He reached for the controller, but Adam intercepted it and shook it by his ear.

"This doesn't even weigh anything," he said, dropping the controller into Blue's palm.

It *was* very light, Blue thought. It had five tiny white buttons: four arranged in a cross shape, and one off by itself. To Blue, that fifth button was like Adam. Still working towards the same purpose as the other four. But no longer quite as close as the others.

"It will work," Ronan said, taking the controller and handing the plane to Noah. "It worked in the dream, so it'll work now. Hold it up."

Still slouching, Noah lifted the tiny plane between thumb and forefinger, as if he were getting ready to launch a pencil. Something in Blue's chest thrummed with excitement. It was impossible that Ronan had dreamt that little plane. But so many impossible things had happened already.

"*Kerah*," Chainsaw said. This was her name for Ronan.

"Yes," agreed Ronan. Then, to the others, he said imperiously, "Count it down."

Adam made a face, but Gansey, Noah and Blue obligingly chanted, "Five-four-three—"

On *blast-off*, Ronan pressed one of the buttons.

Soundlessly, the tiny plane darted from Noah's hand and into the air.

It worked. It really worked.

Gansey laughed out loud as they all tipped their heads back to watch its ascent. Blue shielded her eyes to keep sight of the tiny white figure in the haze. It was so small and nimble that it looked like a real plane thousands of metres

above the slope. With a frenzied cry, Chainsaw launched herself from Ronan's shoulder to chase it. Ronan pitched the plane left and right, looping it around the crest, Chainsaw close behind. When the plane passed back overhead, he hit that fifth button. Seed heads cascaded from the open hatch, rolling off their shoulders. Blue clapped and reached her palm out to catch one.

"You incredible creature," Gansey said. His delight was infectious and unconditional, broad as his grin. Adam tipped his head back to watch, something still and faraway around his eyes. Noah breathed *whoa*, his palm still lifted as if waiting for the plane to return to it. And Ronan stood there with his hands on the controller and his gaze on the sky, not smiling, but not frowning, either. His eyes were frighteningly alive, the curve of his mouth savage and pleased. It suddenly didn't seem at all surprising that he should be able to pull things from his dreams.

In that moment, Blue was a little in love with all of them. Their magic. Their quest. Their awfulness and strangeness. Her raven boys.

Gansey punched Ronan's shoulder. "Glendower travelled with magi, did you know? Magicians, I mean. Wizards. They helped him control the weather – maybe you could dream us a cold snap."

"Har."

"They also told the future," added Gansey, turning to Blue.

"Don't look at me," she said shortly. Her lack of psychic talents was legendary.

"Or helped *him* tell the future," Gansey went on, which did not particularly make sense, but indicated that he was trying to un-irritate her. Blue's short temper and her ability

to make other people's psychic talents stronger were also legendary. "Shall we go?"

Blue hurried to pick up the telescope before he could get to it – he shot her a look – and the other boys fetched the maps and cameras and electromagnetic-frequency readers. They set off on the perfectly straight ley line, Ronan's gaze still directed up to his plane and to Chainsaw, a white bird and a black bird against the azure ceiling of the world. As they walked, a sudden rush of wind hurled low across the grass, bringing with it the scent of moving water and rocks hidden in shadows, and Blue thrilled again and again with the knowledge that magic was real, magic was real, magic was real.