

The background of the cover is a light olive green. On the left side, there are black silhouettes of a bird perched on a branch with leaves, and two trees on a hillside. On the right side, there is a large black silhouette of a man in a suit, standing and looking towards the left. The text is centered in the upper half of the cover.

A LYNBURN LEGACY

e-original short story

The
Spring
Before
I Met
You

Sarah Rees Brennan

INTRODUCTION BY HOLLY BLACK



I had the privilege of reading this story many months ago and swooning over it almost as much as I swooned over *Unspoken*, the first book of Sarah Rees Brennan's gorgeously crafted modern gothic trilogy. Sarah's writing is incredible in that she is able to write these witty, lush scenes that have you smiling along until suddenly, in a single sentence, she reaches out to break your heart.

This story introduces us to one of the main characters of *Unspoken*, Jared Lynburn. Seeing him as the broken, dangerous, closed-off teenager that he appears to be

from the outside allows us to anticipate all of the insight we'll have into his character when we get inside his head—which we will, since he's the heroine's "imaginary friend."

I enjoy the contrast of Jared's loneliness in the rough streets of Hunters Point/Bayview in San Francisco and the small, strange English town Jared is headed toward, and the girl he is about to meet. But most of all, in this story, I enjoy Jared himself, a character who is a study in contrasts—pushed to such extremes of despair and fury that he's truly capable of anything and yet capable of vast kindness, gentleness and humor.



The Spring Before I Met You

*Night was void arms and you a phantom still,
And day your far light swaying down the street.
As never fool for love, I starved for you.*

—Rupert Brooke

There were certain kids at school who could only be described as mad, bad, and dangerous to teach, and Jared Moore was their king.

Mariel had only seen him from a distance, wandering around in a leather jacket and a scowl, and she had made sure they stayed distant. When Mariel was asked to talk to Jared Moore, she felt the need to point out, “I’m not actually a guidance counselor, you know.”

She wasn’t. The real guidance counselor had quit early on in the year, due to “health problems.” Half true, if you substituted “drinking” for “health,” and some days Mariel couldn’t blame her.

Hunters Point High School, in San Francisco, was not the area or the school Mariel would have chosen to work in, but she’d had to take what she could get. She’d been teaching art part-time at Hunters Point, and one day there had been an upset student in class she had talked to.

After that, the principal had called her to his office and murmured vague things about

Mariel being good with the kids, close to their age, and no suitable candidates, and would she consider unofficially filling in for this school year?

It was cheap for the school, and it paid Mariel’s rent. She liked listening to the kids, mostly; the ones who came of their own accord wanted a friend, and it felt good to be that. Thirteen-year-old Vicente Carrera had come to her about being bullied, and she’d talked to the other boys, made it better even if she hadn’t made them all friends. Fifteen-year-old Cindy St. Clair had come to her mostly to cry and have a Coke, but Mariel had talked to the other teachers about Cindy having to deal with schoolwork and her baby. That had lightened the load enough so Cindy could stay in school.

Making a difference in kids’ lives was not the airy dream Mariel had thought of it as in teachers’ college, but it felt worthwhile in a way she could hang on to when she came home tired to her crappy apartment and the roommate who wrote her name on all her eggs. She felt she had chosen the right path, that she had a solid place to stand and build her life on.

But there were other kids.

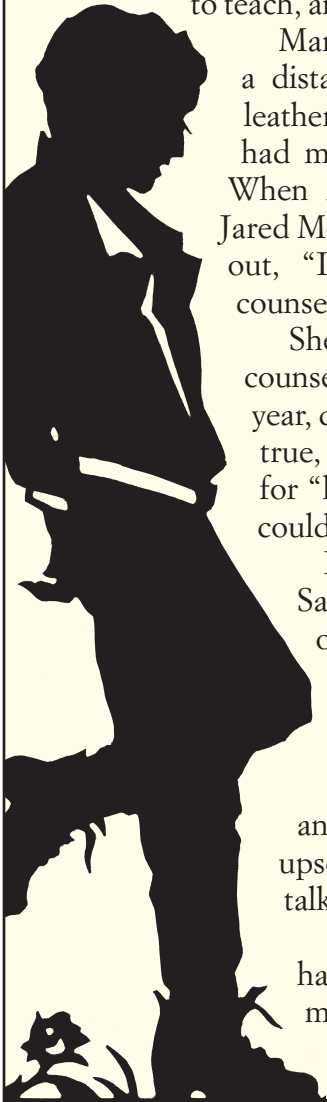
From the beginning, before she ever actually met him, she believed that she could not help Jared Moore.

She was right.

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“The kid with the motorcycle?” she said in the staff room, stabbing her salad with a plastic fork so hard she went through lettuce and hit plastic container. “He’s a classic HISS.”

“The three stood for “How’d the Idiot Stay in



School?" Mariel had been appalled the first time she'd heard it at Hunters Point, but she'd started to use it a month later.

The older boys were always the worst; there wasn't much of an age gap between seventeen and twenty-three, and there was a mean swagger to some of them, the unspoken need to make it clear they were bigger and stronger than she was. They made passes and threw insults, and both were about wanting to see the teacher just a little scared.

Mariel had not had much contact with Jared Moore, who was clearly not the artistic type. He was one of the biggest guys. Mariel was not looking forward to being trapped in the tiny counselor's office with six feet of troubled teenager. Those boys grew up faster physically than they did emotionally or mentally: childish spite made powerful and, as a result, damage wreaked on the world far greater than they even intended.

"He is legit troubled, though," said Susan, the only other teacher within a decade of Mariel's age. "His father died at the start of the year."

Sympathy woke reluctantly in Mariel's chest, the same warm wish to help that she'd felt with Cindy.

It died the next moment when Susan said thoughtfully, "Word is that Jared killed him."

"Pretty sure you get sent to the principal's office for murder," Mariel said. "At least."

Mariel knew some of the kids at Hunters Point were involved in crime. She would not have been surprised by a stolen car, or a knife, or drugs of any kind. But the idea of murder was too big, so terrible it was ridiculous. Still, a whisper that dark clinging to a kid . . .

There had to be something about him, something off. They were making him come to see her, after all. This hadn't been Jared's idea.

The thought of the meeting hung heavier and heavier on Mariel, making her snap at her roommate that morning, making her steps drag to every class. Mariel's mother would say "The crow is flying over you" when she felt like something bad was going to happen to her, and the crow was flying over Mariel that entire day, unreasonable dread hovering like a shadow.

By the time she made her reluctant way to the guidance counselor's office, she was relieved: no matter how bad it was, how bad he was, it would

be over soon. How big of a jerk, how scary, could a kid be?

She opened the door, a thin chipboard she knew people could hear crying through, and it squeaked. The light was already on, and the boy was slouching in the chair in front of her desk, twisted at a weird angle and sunk so far down he couldn't have been comfortable, though the stretch of his long lean body seemed easy. Most of what she could see of him was battered leather and slumped shoulders. He was reading a book.

When he heard the door he glanced quickly around and stuffed the book in his jacket.

"What's that you're reading?" Mariel asked, casual and pleasant. You had to start off light.

"*The Three Musketeers*," said the boy, his voice rough and adult.

"Oh," said Mariel. "For class?"

"Yeah," Jared said slowly, as if he were imparting state secrets. "I'm finding it really rough going. Too many long words, you know what I mean? But I'm hoping things will get better when the musketeers show up."

"The musketeers?" Mariel asked. She hadn't read the book, but she was fairly certain that the guys were in it from the start.

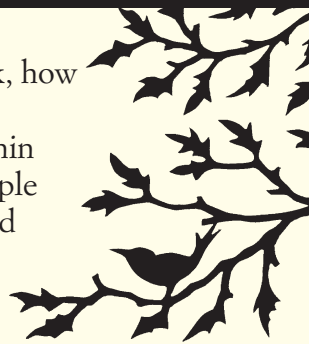
"Yeah," Jared said again, this time speaking a little more rapidly, as if he were confident on the subject. "I'm pretty sure they're weapons, right? Musketeers? They sound like weapons. I'm kinda hoping that they'll blow stuff up."

"Are you?"

"All fiction is better with explosions," said Jared. "Basic fact of life."

Mariel was not entirely sure how to respond to this. She took a moment to sit at her desk and organize some papers, as if they would be useful and germane to this discussion.

Up close, Jared Moore was even bigger than she'd thought: tall, and one of those boys who obviously worked out a lot. He wasn't making any effort to look bigger than he actually was, though. She didn't think he was trying to intimidate her. She'd seen elaborate pretenses of indifference, designed to make her feel small, but this was different. Jared



was looking through her with an almost total lack of interest, not blank but distant.

The boy had strange eyes, a very pale, cold gray, going on for bleak miles. Mariel found herself suppressing a shiver. She remembered Susan saying that Jared was really troubled.

Looking into those eyes, it was not hard to believe.

He was a handsome boy, she supposed, but it wasn't what you noticed first: that was the cold crystalline stare, and the scar.

It was a white slash on the left side of his face, from set jaw to high cheekbone, a line so stark it made the rest of his angular face look secretive and sinister.

He was a kid, Mariel reminded herself. She was supposed to help him. She had to try.

"Is there anything you want to talk about?" she asked, and gave him, with effort, an easy smile. "Since we're here."

"No," said Jared, and his voice turned solicitous, mocking hers. "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

There was a silence.

"Good talk," said Jared. "You think I could go now?"

"I really don't," said Mariel.

He didn't leave, as she had half expected him to and would not have been able to stop. But all she was able to coax out of him were monosyllabic responses like:

"How are your classes going?"

"Fine."

"Some of your grades seem to be really slipping."

"All right, not fine."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Fine."

The boy's eyes disturbed her more than they should have; he watched her with his dark-blond head tipped back as if she were a game he was playing, one he was not enjoying.

There were no surprises until their time was up, when Mariel got up at the same time he did. A lot of the boys deliberately got in her space, but she was not expecting that from Jared.

Nor was she expecting what did happen: he moved from the chair, an easy fluid motion, and away from her and the door, keeping a wary

distance between them, as if she was some kind of threat.

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"Who has the kids reading *The Three Musketeers*?" Mariel asked, making coffee the next day.

Universal puzzlement followed, until it became clear that nobody was, and that the boy had been making fun of Mariel.

"I see him reading quite a bit," said Deirdre Monaghan, the English teacher. "Shame it doesn't seem to affect his godawful performance in school."

Mariel was briefly embarrassed, but she kept thinking about it while she was teaching class. The kid had intended to be mean, but this evidence of imagination and a sense of humor made him seem a little more accessible, younger, like she could help him.

She looked up his records, not just the grades but stuff from his middle school, remarks from actual, qualified counselors. He'd seen rather a lot of them.

His father had died just before school started, in what was described as an accident. There were a lot of fights on Jared Moore's record, which was not news to Mariel, but there was something else that did surprise her.

This boy was apparently full of surprises.

Mariel asked for him to come see her again.

She wasn't sure he would show up, but he did, opening the door without knocking.

"You rang, Ms. Delgado?"

"I did," said Mariel. "Come sit."

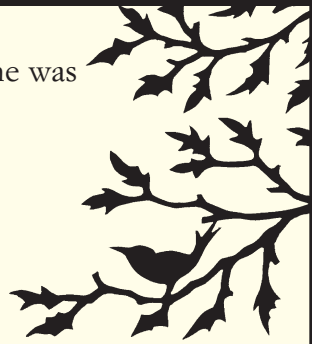
Jared did. His approach was wary, and once in his chair he started staring again, looking in her direction but not quite at her. She found it much easier to feel sympathy for him when she was not looking into those eyes.

But she'd made a decision; she'd worked out what to say before he arrived.

"So, what are you reading today, you punk kid?" Mariel asked.

Jared blinked at her, as if considering, and then produced an old copy of *Ivanhoe* from his brown leather jacket.

"Any explosions?" Mariel said.



"I'm still hoping," Jared told her. "I'm a very optimistic guy."

He awarded her a tiny smile, possibly more of a smirk: one corner of his mouth tugged up briefly. Mariel would take it; she was used to accepting small victories when trying to win over a kid.

"Read a lot, I hear."

"My mom and I don't have a TV."

"How do you get on with your mom?"

"Fine," said Jared, falling back on his bored monosyllables.

His distant stare intensified, gray eyes sky-distant and cold. Mariel felt as if she herself might soon be convinced that she was not there.

Surprising him again seemed like her best bet. "When you were a kid, you had an imaginary friend."

Jared straightened in his chair. "Are you asking me how I get on with her?"

His voice was a little sharper; for the first time, Mariel felt as if there was a faint suggestion of threat directed at her.

She also noticed that Jared said "her" and used the present tense.

"Maybe," Mariel said. "I never had an imaginary friend, but I know a lot of people do. What's it like? Please don't say fine."

"Okay," Jared told her perversely, and Mariel thought that was all she was getting. There was a pause, and Jared looked slightly more pleasant in an indefinable way, something about his face softening. "She's not too much of a hassle," he said, his voice almost teasing, but not as if he was teasing Mariel. "I think I'll keep her around."

"So she is still around?" Mariel inquired, and then changed tacks because the answer was obvious and Jared was looking bored again. "What kind of things do you talk to her about?"

"Mainly she tells me to burn stuff down," Jared said. "Think that's a good idea?"

Mariel felt she was getting used to the deadpan. She only raised an eyebrow.

"She doesn't tell me to burn stuff down," Jared admitted after a moment. "She's not like that. She's . . . you know. She's nice. She thinks school is important."

"She sounds nice," Mariel said cautiously. "She sounds . . . perhaps a little like a mom?"

Jared smiled again, this time with a flash of teeth. "She's not anything like a mom."

"Not like your mom is?"

"No," said Jared. "She's just my age. And my mom doesn't like me much. I don't blame her."

"You don't blame your mom for . . . You think she doesn't like you? Jared, I'm sure that's not true."

Jared was silent and indifferent as a stone. Mariel knew only one way to return brief animation to his face.

"But she likes you?" Mariel said. "The imaginary friend?"

Jared was silent for a while longer, though his face didn't look so much like stone.

"She does," he said at last, rough voice a little gentler. "And my mom doesn't. And you think I'm crazy," he added, scooping up his schoolbag. "I don't blame you either."

He was intent on going now; she didn't think there was a way to stop him.

"I'd like it if you came to see me again," she said.

She didn't know if he would.

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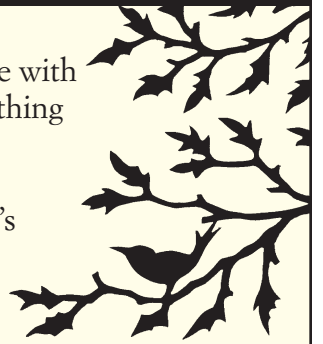
He did. Mariel wasn't certain why; she worried for days that it was a cry for help she wasn't interpreting correctly.

She noticed, though, that he was cagey on every topic but one. She finally decided that Jared came to her in the same way that kids drift toward anyone who will discuss what they want to discuss: video games or movies, a special friend or a favorite relative or a crush. Jared wanted to talk about the imaginary friend, and he had nobody else.

"She makes me laugh," he volunteered at their third session, his smile self-mocking but not as bitter as usual. "That can sometimes be a problem. Disruptive in class. Makes me look crazy."

"Does that bother you?" Mariel asked.

"No," said Jared. "It's a problem, but I like it when she talks to me. She's funny, and she's—she's kind. She tells me about all these mystery books she



likes to read, books where the butler did it with a chandelier, and she lives in a house with a thatched roof and she has two brothers.”

“Sounds like you know a lot about her,” Mariel said as neutrally as she could.

“She doesn’t tell me as much as she used to when we were kids,” Jared said. “But I remember everything.”

It was pitiful, hearing a kid talk about an imaginary home, the home of someone he had made up. But it was also very weird, to see this big, dangerous-looking boy talking about his imaginary friend, this silly idea of a girl who lived in a thatched cottage.

There was a light in his eyes when he talked about her, which wasn’t there any other time. It was horribly sad.

It was also a little terrifying.

“You said to me that you thought you would keep her,” Mariel ventured, since the only other thing she could think of to say was “Maybe your imaginary friend should get an imaginary restraining order.”

Jared said, “Yeah.”

Mariel had learned to wait for the pauses in his speech. This time Jared’s face did not soften: he watched her as if she was a thief.

“She’s mine,” he said. “She’s the only thing I ever had for my own.”

“So there aren’t any other relatives in the picture?” Mariel asked. “You don’t have grandparents, or a cousin?”

“There’s no-one but the two of us,” Jared told her, and Mariel was not sure if he meant himself and his mother, or himself and the imaginary girl.

“Does your friend have a name?” Mariel asked, morbidly curious as to how far this delusion went.

Jared hesitated. Then, as if he was trusting her with a secret, he said, “Kami.”

Mariel thought a lot about what this imaginary friend might mean; she took out books from the library about schizophrenia, but she didn’t read them all the way through. It was such a big thing, it was frightening; when she thought about it too much, it made the horizons of her mind go dark with panic. She was just an art teacher; she wanted to help him, but she couldn’t help him with something like that.

Because she wanted to help him, she told herself that the imaginary friend was a comforting fiction, a sister almost, an imaginative kid’s story to make his bad home life better, a source of affection and something to lavish affection on. It was sad when she thought about it that way, but it seemed fixable. He seemed fixable.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” she said at one of their sessions, “is there a girlfriend around? Anyone at school you like?”

The girls at school did look Jared’s way, though she had never seen one of them actually approach him. Mariel thought the suggestion that he had healthy options might help. She knew immediately that she’d said the wrong thing.

“The girls in this school think I’m a murderer. Just like everybody else.”

“I’m sure they don’t,” said Mariel, and received the extra-blank stare that meant Jared had no response to a statement he considered stupid. “Jared,” she said quietly. “I don’t.”

“That’s nice, Ms. Delgado,” Jared told her. “But you can’t be my girlfriend. That would be highly inappropriate and you would get fired.”

Having efficiently shut her down, he seemed to relent. Mariel had noticed that he often became kinder after a pause, as if to silently consult with someone else.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jared said. “There isn’t anyone at school. I don’t want a girlfriend.”

“Do you . . .,” Mariel began, and considered.

There were pamphlets in her desk, posters on her wall. She could do this; she could be sympathetic and encouraging, draw him out enough to confide in her.

“Does Kami,” she asked delicately, “want a boyfriend?”

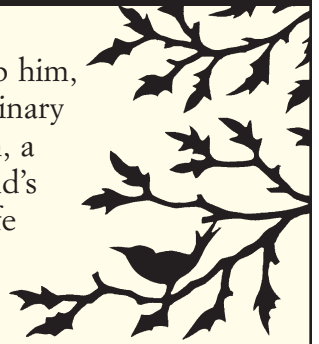
Jared looked both deeply uncomfortable and rather amused. Mariel had no idea what to do with the second one.

“I guess she does. I try to stay out of that.”

“You do?” said Mariel. “I see.”

“I don’t think so,” said Jared.

“Do the lines ever . . . blur between you and your friend?” Mariel asked. “Does it ever get



confusing?”

Amusement had definitely won the upper hand. Jared raised an eyebrow; Mariel was being patronized by a sixteen-year-old boy.

“Not that confusing,” Jared said, and smirked.

He wasn’t offended or upset by the suggestion, as a couple of kids had been. Mariel left it at that.

He was a strange boy, and he worried and sometimes frightened her, but Mariel was surprised to discover that he had become one of her special projects, like Vicente or Cindy, a kid she felt she had to help. Nobody else was helping him.

If she only knew how.

*

Mariel was walking back into school from a lunch outside when she saw the fight break out. It was far away across the gravel, near the parking lot. She saw red hair she recognized as Brad Rowe’s, a boy she’d been keeping her eye on; the small dark figure of Karina Casique, the reason she’d been keeping her eye on him; and Jared’s now-familiar brown jacket and untidy dark-blond hair.

Said hair was in the gravel the next moment: Brad Rowe had a mean left hook.

“Stop it!” Mariel shouted in a tone of threat and command. Brad stopped, squinting at her, but Jared went for him again, teeth bared and eyes wild, and in the process almost crashed into Mariel.

“Come on,” he said, his voice a challenge. “Come at me.”

He was much too close and much too angry. It felt like he was coming at her, and worse than that. Looking into his furious face, she saw something behind the anger: something cold that she had no name for. Mariel stumbled back. She forgot he was a child she felt sorry for; she wanted to be as far away from him as possible.

Jared stopped himself with an obvious wrenching effort, going very pale.

Everyone was still.

Then Karina launched herself in Jared’s direction. Jared backed away from her, but Mariel thought she hadn’t really been trying to connect, just get in his face.

“What is wrong with you, you freaking psycho?” she yelled. “Leave him alone. You’re not going to get away with murdering anyone else!”

Jared smiled, blood on his teeth. “Who knows? I might.”

“You are so unbelievably crazy,” said Karina, quieting down, as if she was actually subdued by the force of his madness.

“Come on, all of you,” Mariel ordered, taking control.

“We’re going to the principal’s office. Come on!”

In the principal’s office, Jared slouched and silently received punishment. But in Mariel’s office the next day, she said, “Why did you think that was a useful or helpful thing to do?”

He stopped slouching. “Karina,” he said. “Rowe shouldn’t have grabbed her.”

Mariel knew what he meant: Brad tended to grab hold of his girlfriend too suddenly, too hard, pushing her or pulling her in directions he chose. It was why she watched him. But it wasn’t a reason to punch him in the face.

“Do you get to decide that?” she asked. “Or does Karina? Instead, you made her defend Brad, think of herself as on his side against you. She’ll keep thinking of herself as on his side. Is that what you wanted?”

Jared was silent, his mouth twisting in an ugly way, like barbed wire.

“Let people make their own decisions and then help them,” Mariel said. “That’s what I do.”

Jared muttered something and looked into the distance, waiting for comfort from within his own mind. After a while, he said, “Yeah. That’s good advice. But . . .”

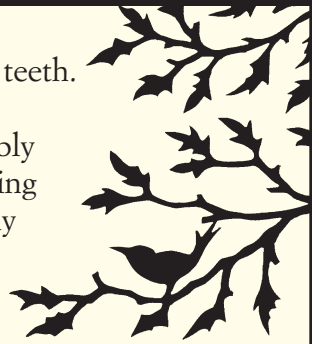
He stopped and said nothing more.

Mariel felt she was putting the pieces together. A mother who hadn’t asked; a father who had died. She didn’t want to put the pieces together, though. It was like when she thought about Jared’s friend, about the idea of madness, so big and dark that it was like storm clouds filling the sky, edge to edge, with no possibility of light.

She wanted to believe he could be well. She wanted to believe he was innocent.

*

Mariel lived in a crappy apartment, but it was in a better part of town than the school. The Point was



not somewhere she felt safe walking after dark. She drove her car, an old junker, back and forth every day; she knew the kids she taught lived in this place, that it influenced everything about them, and being scared of it after dark was being scared of a part of them. She couldn't stop feeling it.

She was incautious enough to stay late one night working, so it was dark, and raining so hard it was as if the entire world had transformed into a black and slightly scary shower when she ran out to her car. Her clothes were drenched in the first minute out of the gate.

When she turned the key in the ignition, the car coughed and died like a sick cat. Mariel cursed at it, checked her phone, which was out of battery, and with no other choice before her got out of her car, popped the hood and stared at the engine. She could barely see it in the dark and the rain, let alone work out what was wrong.

Across the road there was a warehouse building painted with yellow graffiti, lurid in the dim light: the streetlights were too far apart, and the one closest was broken. It looked as if someone had driven a car into the building at one point, which, given that it was near a school and a parking lot, was a pretty safe bet. The streets around Hunters Point Public were familiar to Mariel, boring as the back of her hand, but the dark alchemized them into sinister shapes, slanting alleys and broken things that looked like jagged teeth.

"Hey," a voice said behind her, and she started violently. The voice sounded sinister too, sounded like part of the night. "Ms. Delgado?"

Creatures of the night or, more realistically, muggers were not likely to address her as Ms. Delgado.

She pressed a hand to her heart, trying to slow and soothe the rapid beat, and looked across the hood of her car to see Jared on his motorbike, collar turned up, poor shelter against the insistent rain. His hair was dark with water, and he looked more adult and more dangerous than he ever had in the contained safe space of her office.

"Can I give you a hand?"

"Do you know anything about engines?" Mariel asked.

"No," said Jared. After a moment, he added, "Kami does, but that doesn't really—"

"I'm not in the mood to hear about your imaginary friend!" Mariel snapped.

She was sorry an instant later. She might have been cold and scared, but that was no excuse for losing her temper with a disturbed kid.

Jared said nothing, not even retreating to the security of his own mind as she had expected. He leaned on the handlebars of his motorbike and looked at her as if he was actually focusing on her.

"Do you need to call someone?" he asked. "I have a phone."

Mariel felt thoroughly ashamed of herself and nodded. Jared dropped the phone into her hand without touching her, still wary as a wild animal even after all their sessions. Mariel called for her car to be towed, then gave Jared back his phone.

"Thank you," she said. "That was very kind of you."

"I'm a giver," Jared said, his tone mocking, but she thought mocking himself rather than her.

"I'll get in my car and wait now," Mariel said. "I'll be fine. You go home; you're already soaked through."

Jared said nothing to indicate that he would not, but when she got back in her car she waited a little while, and he stayed. She rolled down the window.

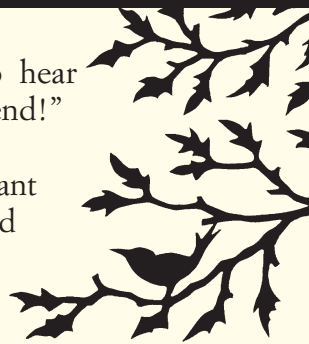
"Do you want to wait in here?"

"No," said Jared. "I'm good."

Mariel hesitated. This boy should not be sitting out in the pouring rain; she should order him to go home. But she wasn't sure he would do it, stubborn as he was, and she did not want to curb a good impulse of his.

Besides which, she did feel safer with him there. He was silent company, but she could glance through the rain-slicked glass of her window, touched with the orange glow of distant streetlights, and see him in profile. His arms were still crossed over the handlebars of his bike, his head bowed, shoulders braced and rain running down that strange, scarred, high-cheekboned face. He looked like a statue of a guard at a temple.

She let him stay, and when AAA came he drove off without a word. He drove that bike like a lunatic,



with a screech of tires and a splash.

“Hope he doesn’t end up in a mess,” said the guy in the tow truck.

“Yes,” said Mariel. “I hope so too.”

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At their next session, in the comfortable familiar surroundings of her office, Mariel said, “Thank you again for the other night.”

It came out awkwardly, but Jared didn’t make a joke of it. Instead he brightened, a little shy, and it was the first moment she’d seen a chink in the armor of hard-edged and hard-won maturity: he actually looked his age.

“Let people make their own decisions and then help them, right?” he said.

“Right,” said Mariel.

*

Parent-teacher night was not a stressful time for Mariel, not the way it was for the math and science teachers who had spent the previous few weeks in tormented anticipation of anguished scenes. Mariel merely came, smiled and described a lot of students’ art as “unique.” The Carreras and Vicente spent half an hour with her, mostly to smile and congratulate each other about how well Vicente was doing now, while Vicente squirmed in his chair, half pleased and half deeply embarrassed.

She had been looking around for Jared. She was curious to meet his mother. When they came over to her, Mariel did not know what she had expected, but she knew she was surprised.

“I’m Rosalind Moore,” said the woman beside Jared, shaking Mariel’s hand. “Ms. Delgado? Jared has spoken about you.”

The words were ordinary; the woman was not. She spoke in a voice that was both decidedly cultured and distinctly English, about as unlike her son’s accent as it was possible to imagine. She also spoke very softly. She was tall but smaller than her son, her frame thin and her long, light blond hair a sheet streaming around her shoulders. She looked like a naiad hopelessly strayed from her pool, grown older in a confusing world.

Most of the parents had dressed up a little, and Jared himself had dispensed with his ubiquitous leather jacket for the occasion. Rosalind Moore

was wearing a faded sundress. She and Jared stood together but did not touch at any point.

Mariel did note that he had spoken of her to his mother, and was pleased: not only because it meant she was having some effect on him, but because it meant he was still trying to connect to his mother.

Jared moved his chair away from his mother’s as they sat down.

“Well, Jared doesn’t take art, as you know,” Mariel said, “but we have been having several pleasant discussions about how he’s doing and the books he’s reading. He reads a lot.”

Rosalind looked distant in a different way than Jared usually did. Jared was usually intensely focused, though not on anything real. Rosalind looked like she was absent herself, as if neither she nor anything else in the world mattered. She simply did not respond to Mariel.

“Mom reads too,” said Jared, glancing back and forth between them. His big shoulders were slightly hunched, as if he already knew this was not going to end well.

“Something for you two to talk about,” Mariel proposed optimistically. She was used to belligerent parents, but a parent who looked as if she was mildly puzzled about why she was there... that was new. “You know, I’m sure, that Jared sometimes gets into trouble at school, but I think—”

“It’s very good of you to be concerned,” Rosalind told her quietly. “It is not necessary, though. You should understand that it is no use to try and save him.”

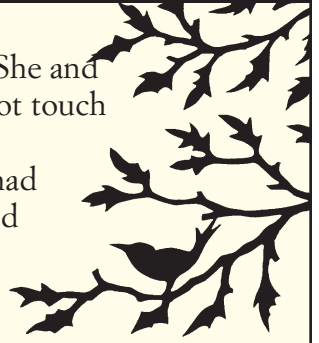
Jared’s body turned into a tense bow, braced as if for an attack.

“Mom,” he said in a low voice.

Rosalind did not look at him, but she said in a gentle voice, “It’s not his fault. He was born lost. We are the creatures of red and gold. Our inheritance is blood and tears. He killed his father, you know.”

Mariel thought with extreme clarity: I am not qualified for this.

Jared did not correct his mother. He did not speak at all, once she had ignored his single appeal; he sat with his jaw set and his eyes paler than usual, like a winter sky with snow coming, looking at and



listening to something that was not there.

“Rosalind, I’m certain he didn’t . . .”

“And I am certain he did,” said Rosalind. “Threw his father down a flight of stairs on one long night, broke his father’s neck. I am only telling you this so you know there is no use in trying to redeem him. Our family does not abide mercy. The blood and tears aren’t ours. We drink them.”

“It’s true,” Jared said, his voice determinedly indifferent. “I’m totally a vampire. It’s why I’m so chiseled. Comes with the undead territory: insatiable thirst for blood, excellent bone structure.”

Rosalind seemed not to notice the joke.

“We’re much worse than that,” she murmured.

“Okay,” Jared said. “That’s enough.”

He stood up. Rosalind looked up at him, cornflower-blue eyes wide and startled, as if she’d thought the meeting was going perfectly normally. Other parents and students looked around at the sight of him on his feet, at the sound of his raised voice.

Jared stood there. For a moment Mariel thought he would grab his mother and yank her to her feet. Jared looked as if he thought he would too, but a sharp tremor ran through his body and he did not touch her.

He left, stalking across the waxed floor of the gym, a plastic chair screeching on metal legs out of his path.

Rosalind sat staring politely in Mariel’s direction.

“Someone should go after him,” Mariel said pointedly.

A shadow passed over Rosalind’s pale face. She looked suddenly very tired. “It won’t do any good,” she said. “You can’t do good, for any one of us. Goodness won’t help us; we twist everything we touch.”

“I’ll do it, then, if you won’t,” said Mariel, and got to her feet.

She tried to leave the room casually, as if she were just going to the bathroom. She didn’t know if she managed it. He was a hurt boy, and his mother was worse and stranger than she had imagined. She only wanted to help, wished there was some way, and did not see one.

She caught up with Jared in the hall.

“Come to my office for a minute,” she said, and he swerved away from her, putting space between

them, but he went, striding several paces in front.

When they got to the office he slammed that door open too, and went straight for the window. He banged into the desk, pens and lamps flying, but ignored that.

He stood staring outside with his arms crossed, his whole body straining toward the glass as if he wanted to escape. He had not turned on the light, and it was dark in the office. Mariel stood at her door and watched him.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“She’s not usually that bad,” Jared told her. “I told her that I talked to you about . . . about Kami. She doesn’t like me talking about her.”

Mariel could understand that, but she could not understand a mother who would talk about her child as lost, unless Jared really had . . . but no. People did not get away with murder. Rosalind Moore was a very troubled woman.

“What she said was terrible,” Mariel said. “You know that none of it was true. If there is anything that you want to tell me about your home life, I’d be glad to listen.”

“No.” Jared’s tone was flat and his eyes were filled with moonlight, luminous and blank. “I don’t want to talk about anything except Kami. That’s why I come to you.”

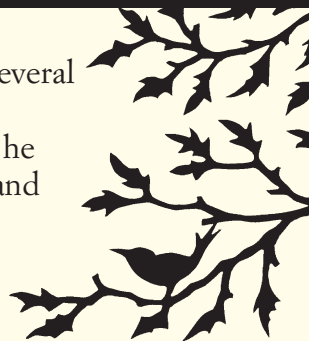
“There isn’t any other reason?” Mariel asked almost desperately. He had to want help for her to give it, had to be searching for something healthier than his mad mother and the inside of his own head.

Jared looked a little smaller and a lot more vulnerable without his jacket, the long line of his back under his thin gray shirt bowed as if carrying something heavy. He kept staring out the window, face struck by white light and eyes bleak.

“There isn’t ever any other reason,” he said, his voice soft as his mad mother’s. “Not for me.”

“Do you want an escape?” Mariel asked, and made an effort to be more specific. “Would you want not to live with your mother?”

“Sure. I want to get away from her and from everyone else. I wish I could just get an apartment and nobody else would live there; there wouldn’t be anyone to turn their backs or accuse me. I don’t



want anybody else around.”

“Jared,” Mariel said. She tried to sound kind when she was scared, when this was a problem of such towering proportions she couldn’t see a way around it, when he was as mad as his mother. “You cannot live your life entirely alone.”

Jared looked around. In the shadows his face and his hair looked the same golden shade; “creature of red and gold,” his mother had called him, all gold except for the silver strike of his scar. His voice was chill as a whisper of winter wind.

“I wouldn’t be alone. I never am.”

That was it, Mariel told herself. He didn’t want help, wouldn’t accept it, and so she couldn’t help him. Rosalind was mad, but she was right about one thing: it was no use trying to save him.

*

Mariel had a few appointments run late the next week; she was spending more time in the guidance counselor’s office than the art room. She finished up things with Karina Casique—“Just because the Moore boy is a jerk doesn’t mean that Brad isn’t a jerk too. A lot of people are jerks,” she said. And Karina snorted, said “That’s the truth” and looked thoughtful.

“It’s a shame that Jared kid’s a total maniac,” she added. “He’s scorching hot. Why is hotness wasted on the crazy?”

Mariel had been trying not to think of him as crazy. Karina misinterpreted her stricken look. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I think I’m done with bad boys for a while.”

Mariel opened the door after Karina was gone, to see Vicente and Jared both outside.

She hesitated, checking to see if Vicente was scared, but Jared was the one who looked uneasy. Vicente was peering doubtfully at Jared’s battered copy of Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales.”

“It’s honestly a good story,” Jared said, his voice gruff. Mariel thought he was trying to be nice without quite knowing how. “This dude goes on a trip to his friend’s house, and his friend’s like ‘My house is breathing! My sister isn’t!’ And people run around the place during a storm vomiting up blood, and eventually the house explodes. Not a relaxing vacation, is what I’m saying.”

“I guess it’s short,” Vicente conceded. “But they should have called it something better. Something like ‘Murder on Death Island.’”

“Good title,” said Jared. “Makes the hero look a little dumb, though. I mean, you vacation on Death Island, you get what you get.”

“You can come in now, Vicente,” Mariel told him. “Jared, could we maybe reschedule for tomorrow?”

Jared nodded fast and hid his book away as if it were evidence of a crime.

He wasn’t a bad kid; that was the heartbreaking part. He was just in a terrible situation and didn’t want to look for a way out, perhaps didn’t understand there was any escape for him outside his own mind.

Threw his father down a flight of stairs on one long night, broke his father’s neck.

She was almost sure he wasn’t bad.

*

The next day, Mariel was on her second cup of coffee when she was told there was a situation in the gym. Two was not enough cups of coffee for a situation, but she went anyway: it could be one of her kids.

When she stepped into the gym, for a moment she thought it was.

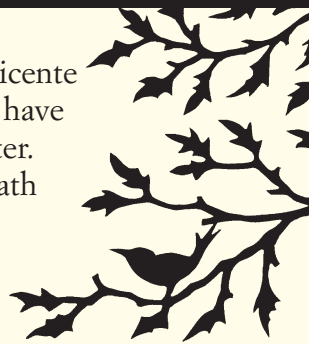
At first glance, she saw Jared, Rosalind Moore and a strange man, and wondered who he was.

Then the blond boy turned at the sound of the door closing behind her, and she saw him face on.

It wasn’t Jared, though he looked very much like him.

The sight of him made Mariel’s heart go out to Jared, wherever he was.. Imagine being faced with a mirror of yourself perfected.

Something had clicked into place with the features of this boy, so his face was smoothly, classically handsome, a face from a painting or a book, absolutely perfect and without scar or blemish. There were no hard edges to this one, and though he was tall, he was also slim; nobody could have been afraid of him. His hair was shades lighter



than Jared's, burnished gold, and his eyes were a deep, perfect blue. He smiled when he saw Mariel, and Mariel thought that girls his own age definitely would not shrink away from this one.

"I want to know where Rosalind is immediately!" said the woman with the boy, her voice as English as Rosalind's, but cutting through the air with the force of a scythe wielded in expert hands. "Rosalind Lynburn. She must work here. She's been here, I know it. I can tell. Don't lie to me."

Mariel looked at her and gaped.

The woman didn't look like Rosalind, as the boy looked like Jared. She was Rosalind; they had the same face, with a different personality behind it. This woman's lemon-blond hair was done up in a tight chignon, her mouth was painted red and sneering, and she was wearing expensive but terribly practical black clothes. Rosalind's wide blue eyes were narrowed in her face, regarding Mariel with an expression of disdain and command.

"Forgive my wife," said the man beside her. "She's extremely anxious for news of her sister."

He was tall and blond too, with features very similar to his wife's and his son's, to Jared's and Rosalind's, but at least his was not a strange mirror of a face Mariel already knew. He smiled at her, not with the reflexive dazzling charm of his son, but in a way that was down-to-earth and reassuring.

Mariel scanned the faces of her colleagues. Everyone looked absolutely puzzled, except for the people who appeared a bit traumatized. The blond woman who was Rosalind Moore's image was prowling like a creature in search of prey; the way she moved across the floor reminded Mariel of Jared.

"Might I be able to talk to you all in my office?" she asked.

Everyone looked very relieved except for the blond woman, who continued to look imperious.

"My name is Mariel Delgado," said Mariel once she was at her desk. "I am the guidance counselor here."

She did not mention the part about actually teaching art, and not being qualified. It seemed less impressive, and the blond woman had obviously already come pre-unimpressed.

"I'm Rob Lynburn," said the tall man, eyes crinkling with another smile. "This is my boy, Ash.

And this is—"

"I'm Lillian Lynburn," snapped the woman. "Now that all the useless pleasantries are behind us, do you know where my sister is?"

"The resemblance is remarkable," Mariel said.

"So you have seen her," said Lillian Lynburn. "I knew we hadn't been led astray. I knew she'd been here. Why was she here, in this wretched place? What's happened to her? Where is she?"

"She was here for our parents and teachers meeting," Mariel said. "With her son."

She had not expected that news to strike them like a lightning bolt, spreading silence instead of fire. The boy, Ash Lynburn, looked especially startled, though his face cleared almost immediately.

"A child," breathed Lillian Lynburn. "There was a child?"

"Mom," said Ash. "We are in a school."

"Lillian, that man's child—" began Rob.

"If he's only—" began Ash.

"Be quiet, both of you," said Lillian, regaining her composure in a breath, as if it had never been lost.

Rob sent Mariel a glance that was half amusement and half apology, obviously well used to his wife's behavior.

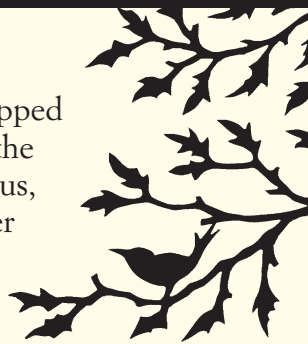
Lillian set her shoulders. "So there's a child," she said. "Then I want them both."

"Rosalind met a man whom everyone considered very wrong for her," Rob explained, his tone soothing. "We've been looking for her for years, and have never come close to finding her until today. Rosalind has not been in any contact with her family, and we are all deeply worried about her safety and happiness—and of course the safety and happiness of any child she might have. My wife's overwrought."

"David Moore is dead," Mariel told them uncertainly.

Lillian frowned, her arched brows drawing together. "Moore?" she asked. "Was that the name?"

Rob reached over to take his wife's hand, and Lillian shook it off irritably.



"I imagine he was using a false name," Rob said after a minute.

"It doesn't matter," Lillian decided. "The child goes to this school. Tell me where he is."

"Relax, Mom," Ash said in an undertone. Mariel noted that though Rob and Lillian had English accents, Ash spoke with a tinge of the South in his voice. She wondered how long they had been in America.

She saw Ash and Rob exchange looks over Lillian's head, the look of in-family conspiracy to keep another family member in check.

Lillian did not seem daunted by her son any more than she was by his father.

"I will not," she told him sharply. "He's mine. She's mine. I will not allow this person to keep me a moment longer from the people who are mine!"

Lillian rose to her feet, hands on the desk. Her eyes were not like Rosalind's, though they were the same color: they were intense and menacing.

This was a terrible family.

"Jared Moore is a student here."

"Jared Lynburn," Lillian corrected.

"We're not allowed to release students' information," Mariel explained patiently. "I'm sure that Rosalind is listed. You could call her and—"

"What if she's not?" Rob asked, his tone reasonable. "You can see why we're so concerned."

Mariel could. She could also see that Lillian Lynburn, while no prize on the personality front, had laid instant claim to Jared. Rob Lynburn seemed like a nice, reliable man; the boy Ash had been nothing but polite.

Appearances could be deceiving. Rosalind might have left her family for any number of good reasons. Mariel knew that, but Jared was so alone. There were no resources to help a kid like him.

There's no-one, Jared had said when she asked if he had any relatives, but he'd been wrong.

They were a family. Jared needed, more than anything else in the world, real people to care about him, to regard him as something other than lost. Mariel could not take responsibility for him.

She drew back her chair and walked to the window where Jared had stood a few nights before, face flooded by moonlight and voice filled with longing as he spoke of someone he had imagined.

She could take responsibility for this one action.

Mariel opened the filing cabinet by the window, took out Jared's file, and laid it deliberately on the desk.

"If you will excuse me," she said, "I have to step outside for a moment."

By the time she returned, they were all gone, the imperious woman, her long-suffering partner and their beautiful boy. Jared's file had been left open, pages ruffling in the breeze through the window.

It was only then that she remembered Rosalind again, saying "Our family does not abide mercy," and she felt a tremble of apprehension run all the way through her body.

But what could she have done? She could not have left Jared as he was.

Mariel guessed the Lynburns found Jared and his mother.

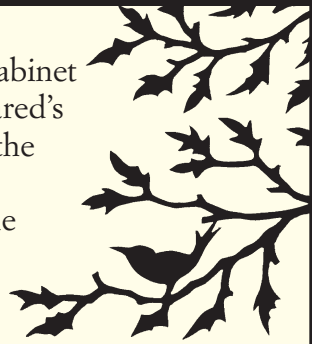
She never knew for certain. She never saw him again.

But in the years afterward, when she had gone back to school and become a qualified counselor, when she was remembering her first kids and the desire to help them, stand for them, speak for them, she would think of Jared. She did not consider him one of her successes. She hadn't been able to do anything for him in the end.

But she would spare a moment to think of him and hope that someone in the world cared about him at last, that he was doing well.

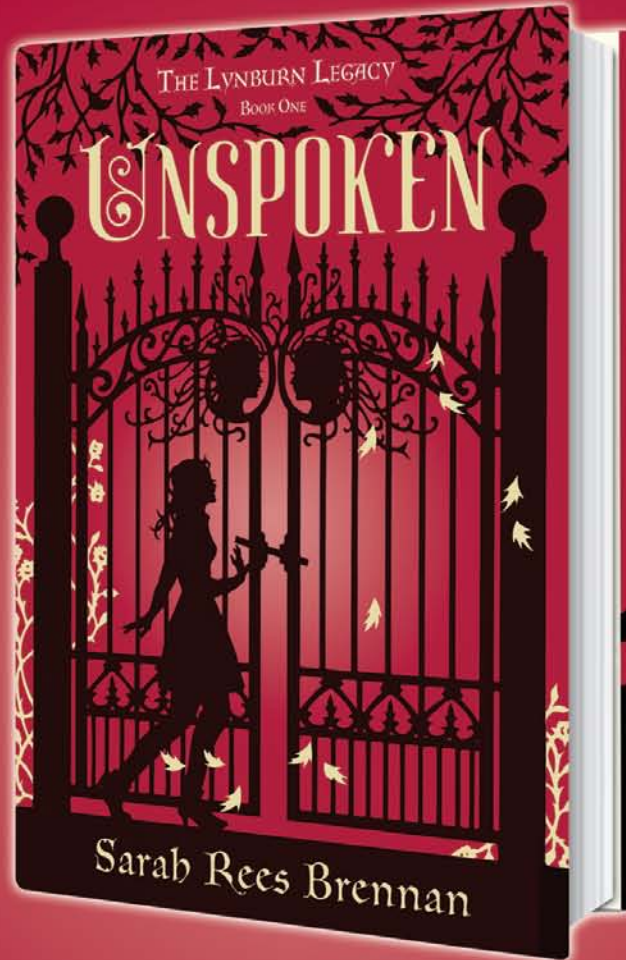
She didn't think of the Lynburns as creatures of red and gold, who drank blood and tears, any more than she allowed herself to contemplate the dark prospect of Jared's madness, or the murder everyone believed he had committed, his father's long fall ending in a broken neck.

She tried to believe his mother had been wrong, and he was not lost.



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