



The  
Rhythm  
Of The  
Rain

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## Prologue

He used to believe rain was just water falling from the sky. It would fall and land in his hair. It would gather on his eyelashes, blur his vision. It would make his shirt wet. The water would soak through his shoes to his socks, making it almost unbearable to make the ten minute walk to the town's nearest grocery store. Once inside the store, he despised the wet floors. Just that year—the year before he met the person who changed his life—he had slipped and fallen down nearly a dozen times. Then, after finding the food his mother needed for that night's dinner, the cashier packed all his items into a paper bag. On a day without rain, he would have supported his town's eco-friendly activities, but the bag fell apart as soon as the droplets of water touched it.

Not only did the rain make him cold and wet, and not only did it make it nearly impossible to efficiently complete his mother's task, the rain brought ash colored clouds that filled the sky he imagines to be blue. The sight of the gloomy sky above him made him grumpy and difficult to be around. His younger sister, Nola, hated the rain for that reason. Her usually tolerable brother turned into a mean beast when the clouds come.

The rain was the only reason he disliked the town of Clara.

It rained all the time.



She, on the other hand, danced in the rain. Before she met the person who changed her life—which just so happens to be the boy whose life she changed—the rain was one of the only things that kept her happy. The fact that it rained consistently was some how reassuring. The rain was something she could always count on being there, always falling into her golden hair and into her amber-colored eyes.

She loved to wander. She lived with only one other, and he was the reason she never left Clara.

She lived off of what Clara provided her, whether that be a kind gentleman who bestowed her a couple of dollars or the vegetation that grew around Maybelle Lake, or the apples she occasionally stole—*borrowed*—from Palmer's Plantation. She was a very resourceful person, and wherever the universe took her, she was always able to survive.

However, “loved” might've been strong for her opinion on wandering. Often, she would get lonely. It may sound pathetic, considering she was almost always with someone else. She clearly chose this life for herself... Right? *This is what I want*, she'd always tried to convince herself. *I need no one but myself and the rain, for the rain is the only thing that makes me happy.*

The rain was the only reason she liked the town of Clara.

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# One

“Finley Hunts, where have you been?” Nola asked with her hands on her hips. Finn had just walked in the door. He was soaking wet and holding the ingredients for dinner.

“Don’t call me Finley.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“You can call me Magnolia,” she argued.

“Yeah, but I don’t.” Finn turned around and walked to the kitchen. His mother, Beatrix, who goes by Bee, was in there preparing a pot for the stew. Bee had black hair– the same black hair that Finn had– swept into a bun that sat on top of her head. She stood in front of the silver stove and was stirring the boiling broth with a wooden spoon.

“Where have you been?” Bee asked Finn. “It took you fifteen extra minutes to get back from the store today!” she said, attempting to be angry. Then she smiled. Bee could never really be mad at Finn, no matter how hard she tried.

Finn shrugged. He didn’t have an explanation for why he was late. Well, a reasonable explanation. Truthfully, he had thought he had seen something. Or someone; he wasn’t really sure. On his way home, he had backtracked a little ways and peered through the trees of Palmer’s Plantation. He thought he saw something dart from one tree to another, but the heavy sheets of rain fell into his eyes, blocking his vision.

Finn didn’t realize how long he had been standing there until someone bumped into him, nearly causing him to drop his groceries. The person that had pulled Finn from his thoughts disappeared before he even had a chance to call out. Figuring he had wasted enough time, Finn hurried home afterwards.

When Finn gave a small smile to Bee, she said, “Alright, time to help.”

While Finn was chopping the carrots for the soup, his father walked into the kitchen. His hazel eyes were glued to his newspaper. He was in a tee-shirt and sweatpants and his greying hair was a mess. Finn figured he was finally hungry enough to emerge from his cave.

“Hello, Clay,” Bee said as she dumped in the onions Finn had cut a few minutes before. Clay smiled, nodded, and grunted. He sat down on one of the dinner chairs. Once he got into his newspaper, he wouldn’t come back out for much. Bee just smiled sadly.

When dinner was ready, Nola joined Finn, Clay, and Bee, and they ate. Clay read his newspaper that he held underneath the table. Bee listened patiently to Nola rant about whatever her thirteen-year-old mind was upset about. Something about her seventh-grade language arts teacher, but Finn didn’t really know. He was lost in his own mind, as usual.

He wanted to know what he saw that day. He would’ve known if it wasn’t for the ridiculous rain. The stupid, stupid rain. Without the rain he wouldn’t have to be careful about where he stepped; there would be no puddles in the middle of the uneven sidewalk. Without the

rain, he would have been able to spend more time searching for what he saw. Without the rain, his wet hair would never drip into his eyes and he would always be able to see what was ahead of him; he would've been able to see the figure's face.

Finn stood up and cleared his dishes with a sigh. He told everyone good-night, and went to bed.

He would have to wake up early the next day if he wanted to search for the figure.



She wanted to know who he was. While collecting apples from Palmer's Plantation, she saw a boy and instantly wanted to know who he was. Was it the way he carried himself, all hunched over trying to use his body to protect whatever was in his brown grocery bags from the pouring rain? The way his eyebrows were furrowed, his lips drawn into a thin line? At the time, she couldn't tell why.

With her pockets bulging and bag full of apples, she left the plantation. As she walked along the sidewalks, she splashed in the puddles, her blue rain boots keeping her feet dry. All the people around her were with someone. A little boy with his mother, a group of school friends.

On her way to the place she called home, she passed a small alley between two brick buildings. A few minutes later, she turned onto Clarkson Street and walked over the bridge that stood over Maybelle Lake.

Finally, she made it to her abandoned house. It was a lucky find; she had found it only three days after her parents' deaths. The house was small and made of red bricks. Inside, there was one bathroom, one bedroom with an old, worn-out bed, and a couch facing the small kitchen with a broken refrigerator. It was close to nothing, but it had a roof. It was enough.

She quietly opened the door. She gently set down her floral bag, emptied her pockets, and kicked off her rain boots. Biting into an apple, she walked into the bathroom and grabbed a towel to dry off her hair. When she was mostly dry and in new clothing, she went to the bedroom.

As she had guessed, there was a small lump under the blankets on the bed. There was a little head of golden hair resting on the pillow. She set the apple down on the makeshift table and carefully climbed into the bed and curled her body around the small figure. She stroked the little body's hair and kissed the top of it's head.

"Hi, baby," she whispered to the lump. It twisted around to face her.

"Hi, Ari," he said with a smile.

Even though she wasn't tired, she forced herself to fall asleep. If she was going to find the boy from the plantation, she would need her rest.



Finn woke up early. It was Saturday, but he would still have work to do later in the day. He figured going back to Palmer's Plantation was a decent place to start.

Walking the streets at six in the morning was much different from walking at night. It was quiet then. There were no people to weave around. There were less cars honking in traffic. Of course, there weren't that many people living in Clara to begin with, but the streets looked completely different before the sun was up. Different except for the fact that it was still raining.

Finn got to the plantation. He peered through the trees, but saw nothing but a very wet squirrel and two birds. Finn groaned. The figure wasn't at the plantation. His hopes of this being an easy search quickly fled his mind. He would have to look for him or her the hard way.

Finn wandered around Clara, listening to the monotonous sound of the rain hitting the pavement.

Recently, there had been a number of changes to the town. He walked by the new and improved bridge that allows people to cross over Maybelle Lake. He could see the library being renovated from a distance. He passed the new playground Mayor Matthias had built for the children, which saddened him. The new shiny playground had been built on top of the old one Finn's mother used to take him and Nola to in the summer.

He sighed. Bee never took Nola or him anywhere anymore. She didn't leave the house anymore. Ever since Bee's sister, Evangeline, died almost three years ago, she had stayed within the walls of her home. Finn was twelve when she died, and ever since he had worked small jobs here and there to keep his family out of debt. Even though the Hunts family had saved a lot of Bee's money she earned as a nurse, it was still difficult running the family with no help from Bee or Clay, who stayed confined in his "cave", as the Hunts children called it. To add on top of all that, Finn also had Nola to worry about.

Suddenly, Finn was pulled from his thoughts. He saw something dart between two buildings. Slowly, he crept into the alley. His foot splashed into a puddle of water, but for the first time, he didn't care. He rounded the corner of the brick building and jumped.

There was a pair of dark brown eyes staring back at him.



The boy had been following her for over twenty minutes, and she didn't believe that he knew she was there. She had left her abandoned house early this morning. She wanted to find the boy. Much to her surprise, her search was not as difficult as she thought it would be. In fact, the boy basically came to her.

She hid in the corner of the alley. Now she was second guessing herself. Did she really want to meet him?

He rounded the corner.

It was too late to turn back now.

He had black hair and hazel eyes. She tried to force a smile to cover up her nervousness, but it wouldn't come. She could feel herself shaking, just a little. She was scared. More scared than she needed to be, she knew that, but she also knew that she hadn't talked to another person, other than her little brother, in over twenty-four months. Two years and nine months, to be exact.

"Hi," he whispered, as if he were trying not to scare her. He narrowed his eyes. "Can I trust you?"

She made a little noise, hesitating. She nodded her head, just barely.

The boy finally decided he could trust her. "Good. I'm Finley Hunts, but everyone calls me Finn."

"Arabella," she said in a shaky voice. "People who know me call me Ari. But not a lot of people know me."

Finn tilted his head, thinking. Ari could almost see his mind at work. He reminded her of someone, but she couldn't place it. Was it his black hair curled around his ears? The thoughtful look in his hazel eyes?

"I have a lot of questions," Finn said eventually. "But I'm not going to ask them. Not yet."

Ari wasn't sure if she should've felt glad or fearful. Before Finn could say anything else she chose fear. Ari quickly shouldered her way around him, and disappeared into the rain.

## *Two*

Ari made it to her abandoned house in less than ten minutes. When she got home, she slid down the front of the wooden door, onto the porch. She was suddenly very tired and overwhelmed. Her socks were wet from the water that had splashed into her rain boots.

She tipped her head back against the door. She was out of breath, her chest rising and falling faster than it had in a long time. She struggled to calm it down. Ari counted, one, two, three, and inhaled. Then another one, two, three, and exhaled. As soon as she started to breathe normally, she started to breathe faster again, panicking all over.

Ari's face was wet, but she didn't know whether it was the rain or her crying. She didn't know why she would be crying. She wasn't injured and she wasn't actually sad.

She laid down on her back, letting the water from the porch soak into her shirt.

Perhaps nervous was the word to describe what she felt. By searching for the boy, by letting him find her, Ari had put herself and her younger brother in danger. She didn't know Finn, and she didn't know why it had felt okay to go and talk to him. Not talking to anyone was Ari's number one rule for staying safe, and she had blown that. Now she was either going to have to fix what she had done, or wait it out and hope for the best.

Ari sighed. She hated not knowing what would happen. She hated "waiting it out" and "hoping for the best", but for now, it was all she could do.

Inside the house, Ari kicked off her boots and peeled off her wet socks. She could feel the large, wet splotch on the back of her shirt.

It was quiet inside of the house. Having no electricity, there was no hum of the refrigerator. There was no ticking of the clock, no patter of feet or conversation between mother and father. There was no noise coming from a non-existent TV. Ari had nearly forgotten these sounds; the sounds she used to hear all the time when her parents were alive. The only sound that remained from her childhood was the drizzle or downpour of the rain.

Ari went inside the bedroom. When she had left nearly an hour and a half before, there had been a silent lump of a child, wrapped up in thin, tattered blankets. It was still there, just as Ari had left it.

"Theo," she whispered, "it's time to get up."

There was a small moan from the bed. Ari was dreadfully tired herself, but she knew she had to stay awake. Her younger brother, Theo, had been getting up out of bed less and less lately, and he was definitely getting thinner. Ari herself had noticed that her bones had begun to stick out a bit more, no doubt because of the small amount of nutritious food she had been able to scavenge. It was hard enough feeding herself during the winter, let alone Theo too.

The bed shook while the little boy turned around and sat up. He too had hazel-colored eyes, just as Ari did, and they looked tired. He pouted a little. "I don't want to get up," he said.

"I know, Theo," Ari said sympathetically, "but it's time to help me make breakfast."

Ari almost thought that Theo was going to protest more. He didn't really like making meals with Ari— it was kind of boring. Well, boring compared to playing with his imaginary friends— but he did it anyway. It made Ari happy that he would get out of bed and help her, and even his little six-year-old mind understood that she wasn't been happy.

After Theo dressed himself in an abundance of dull, worn out colors and patterns of clothing, he shuffled into the kitchen in his mismatched socks. The kitchen consisted of a broken fridge, an oven that didn't turn on, some cabinets and cupboards that were nearly empty, and an island with a sink. One thing that Theo knew had made Ari happy was the running water. She said that it was an extremely lucky find, but Theo just didn't understand why. How could something as simple as tap water make someone so happy?

Somewhere, sometime, Ari had found some oats for oatmeal, so with the tap water, Theo helped Ari make the oatmeal. As he stirred the water and the oats, Ari chopped up an apple with a butterknife she had obtained a few weeks before. Ari rarely stole from anyone, but she always had some lucky finds.

As soon as breakfast was ready, they ate out of the bowl, taking turns eating with one spoon. The apple Ari had cut added a sweet, crunchy texture which covered up the cold oatmeal's weird consistency. It wasn't the breakfast their mother used to make, which included nice, fluffy pancakes and crispy bacon, but it filled their stomachs. It was enough.



Finn had so many questions, and he regretted not asking any. However, he supposed it was a good thing, keeping his mouth shut. All his thoughts were so jumbled in his head. If he had tried to speak, he was sure nothing comprehensible would've come out.

So, instead, Finn decided to follow Ari. He told himself that by the time he caught up to Ari, and as soon as she stopped moving and reached her destination, he would have his thoughts gathered, and would reintroduce himself.

Of course, he was unable to think of anything to say when that time came.

From behind a tree, he watched Ari slide down the door of a small house which appeared to be abandoned. He couldn't see her face very well— she had turned and laid on her back— so he wasn't sure if she was crying or if it was the rain.

Finn felt a slight panic rise in him. He automatically assumed the worst.

Was she okay? Was she just tired, or did he scare her? He hadn't meant to scare her. Truthfully, he didn't know what he had meant to do, but he was nearly positive his goal wasn't to frighten her.

Minutes later, with Finn still panicking in the rain, Ari got up and disappeared into the house. Finn crept closer. Peeking in the window, he didn't see much. A small living room, a tiny kitchen, a narrow hallway. He doubted any of the appliances worked. It was as dull and grey inside the house as out.



Finn jumped backwards, landing flat on his back in the wet grass. Ari had walked into the living room, through the hallway. Behind her, Finn noticed once he got back up, was a little boy, no older than six years old, who was following a few steps behind her.

The little boy had honey-colored hair. He was about as tall as Ari's shoulder. He trudged into the kitchen. They made what seemed to be breakfast. It didn't look that appealing, but they ate it as if they hadn't eaten in weeks. When they were finished, Ari turned on the faucet. A small stream of water came through and spilled into the bowl, rinsing the very little left overs they didn't eat.

That's when Ari looked up. Her eyes stared directly into Finn's through the window. He didn't get a chance to hide. Ari had already seen him, and by the time Finn thought to run she was already rounding the corner of the house.

"What are you doing?" she practically yelled at him. "You can't be here!"

"Uh—" Finn began.

Ari cut him off. "Did you *follow* me? Why would you do that? You can't just follow someone, then stare into the window of their house. That's just not right." She huffed angrily and waved her arms around. "Go. Shoo. Be gone." She herded Finn back to the street. A car whizzed by.

Finn was slightly confused. This was not the same girl he had met in the alley. That girl was small, scared, and timid. This girl was none of those things.

Ari started to walk away.

"Wait!" Finn called after her. "I have a question I want to ask now." Ari glared at him. "Just one," he pleaded.

Ari raised an eyebrow, but gave a slight nod, allowing him to ask.

"Who's the little boy?"



What surprised Ari the most was the genuineness of his question; he truly wanted to know. What confused Ari was why he wanted to know.

When she asked, he just shrugged. Ari knew she shouldn't tell Finn about Theo. She had already messed up rule number one; she had already spoken with Finn. Rule number two was to never trust anyone. Ari was so close to trusting Finn with her secrets, and if she did, she would also break rule number three; don't tell anyone about Theo.

"You can't tell anyone," Ari began, as she walked towards the house. Finn stayed where he was until she turned around. "Come on," she said. "Quickly, before I change my mind."

Finn jogged up behind Ari. When they reached the front door, she hesitated. "Do you promise?" she asked.

"I promise."

Ari opened the door into the house, and walked in, Finn following her. The house's smell, the old musty odor, the way the wooden flooring creaked under footsteps; this was all familiar to Ari.

"Theo, sweetheart," Ari called out. "Where did you go?" She searched around a bit, looking into different rooms, all while Finn stood at the front door.

Theo waddled out of the bedroom. He was the only one completely dry from the rain. His golden hair and hazel eyes matched Ari's.

"Is he your brother?" Finn asked.

Ari nodded and looked at Theo. He looked tired and confused, but not unhappy. He almost looked excited. He looked at his sister, almost asking for permission to talk. Ari smiled at him.

"Hi," Theo said to Finn. Finn still stood by the front door, as if he was afraid to come closer. Luckily, he didn't have to. Theo walked right to Finn, and looked up at him. "I'm Theodore." He smiled, which seemed to relax the older boy. Finn squatted down to Theo's height; Theo wasn't that tall.

"Hey Theodore. I'm Finley, but everyone calls me Finn. Do you want to be called Theodore, or..."

"Theo's fine," he said happily.

While Finn and Theo continued a small conversation, Ari hung back by the ripping couch. Was she doing the right thing? Theo clearly seemed happy and okay with this new boy, but she hardly knew him. He could be a kidnapper, or a snobby rich guy's kid who always "did the right thing" and tattled on everyone, for all she knew. He could be the meanest bully in Clara.

But he didn't seem like it. He seemed kind and trustworthy. And, thinking back to all the times she had seen Finn, she finally understood what had drawn her to him. Everybody knew everybody in Clara. Wherever one friend went, the other followed. Except Finn didn't have a friend. He always walked alone, and that had sparked Ari's interest in him, especially because she didn't have anyone to walk with either.

*Perhaps, Ari thought, Finn could be my friend.*



Somehow, Finn ended up talking about Theo's invisible friend, Milo. Milo supposedly had blue-black hair and heterochromatic eyes, or as Theo said, "one purple eye and one brown eye". Finn couldn't even imagine where Theo got his ideas for Milo, but it was entertaining to listen to the six-year-old talk about him.

While Milo was "talking" to Theo, Finn noticed that Ari had disappeared and come back. When she returned, she held out an apple for Finn to snack on.

“Thanks,” he said, taking the apple from her. When he bit into the fruit, he realized how hungry he had been. He also realized that his conversation with Theo had lasted nearly an hour. *How did that happen?* he wondered.

She sat down next to him.

“Now,” Ari said, looking at Finn. “When you leave this house, you mustn’t speak a word about us to anyone. You *can’t*. Do you understand?”

“Not really.”

Ari sighed. She turned her head to Theo, who was off playing with Milo. From what Finn could tell, the two boys were acting as detectives. Theo was looking around the corner of the walls and into different rooms. Theo occasionally whispered something, probably talking with Milo some more. “We can’t be found,” Ari said. “We’ve been hiding for nearly three years. Being caught and brought to an orphanage isn’t an option.”

“And I suppose you won’t tell me why?”

Ari smiled a little. “See. You get it. If everything works out, I’ll tell you eventually.” She stood up and gestured to the door. “You have places to be, don’t you?”

## Three

“Where were you?” Nola asked angrily as soon as Finn walked into the house. “This is two days in a row you disappear. First you were home late last night, and now you sneak out of the house early in the morning, forgetting it was your turn to haul the trash to the community dump.”

“It’s none of your business,” Finn said trying to keep a neutral face.

“No, I took care of your work for you. I deserve an explanation.” Nola glared Finn.

“Fine. I was wandering the streets in the morning, and saw Old Vera over at Maybelle’s Bridge struggling with her groceries. I went and helped her the rest of the way home.” Finn had hoped it would be a believable story, but Nola didn’t take it.

“Whatever,” she said. “Don’t tell me. But you owe me a trash day.” Before she turned, she saw his expression, clearly wondering what had given it away. “You’d never walk out in the rain without a purpose.” She walked away, into the kitchen.

She was right. Finn wouldn’t have walked in the rain without being forced to.

He sighed and got to work. As he went through his day, he mentally checked off each of his task. Bring Clay food; check. Make sure Bee is awake and okay; check. School work; check. Clean room; check. Make sure Nola did her chores; check.

It was nearly four o’clock when he headed out into the rain to complete his last task. He trudged around people and puddles, all the way to the grocery store. On his way through the doors, he passed Mayor Matthias and politely said hello.

“Hi, Mr. Mayor,” Finn responded.

“How’s the family doing?” Mayor Matthias asked.

“Same as always,” Finn said with a small, yet convincing smile. He wasn’t in the mood to talk about his family problems with the Mayor, so he avoided further questioning by kindly saying good-bye, and running into the store.

It took Finn less than eight minutes to find the nine items Bee needed to for dinner. From the ingredients he picked up—the chicken broth, the carrots, the celery—Finn guessed they were having stew again, which was unfortunate, but after his visit with Ari and Theo, he decided to consider himself lucky. At least it tasted okay.



The next day, Ari woke up next to Theo, who was still asleep. Carefully, she got out of bed and got dressed. While walking into the kitchen, there was a knock on the front door. Ari panicked. Before opening the front door, she closed the door to the bedroom, in hope that whoever was at the door wouldn’t realize that she was hiding something.

Ari opened the door, and who she saw surprised her. It was Finn and he was holding a wet plastic tupperware.

“Hi,” he said. “I made pancakes.”

From behind Ari, Theo, who had woken up and come out of the bedroom, let out a loud gasp. He ran towards the door and ducked in between her legs, grinning from ear to ear. Finn smiled at his excitement. He didn’t realize how such a small thing could make such a small boy happy.

Even though Ari looked skeptical—as if she was wondering *why would this stranger make me food?*— she stepped aside and let Finn into her abandoned home.

He set the container onto the island in the kitchen. Ari pulled out three plates, but Finn shook his head. “I already ate. These are for you.”

Hesitantly, Ari put one plate back. She carefully opened the tupperware, and pulled out two pancakes; one for Theo, one for herself. As she handed a plate to Theo, she took her pancake, and folded in half. It had no syrup, and she didn’t want to waste too many utensils.

She bit into the pancake. It was *delicious*. It had been a long time since she had pancakes, and it was like heaven. Honestly, she couldn’t remember what her mother’s pancakes had tasted like, but these had to be just as good.

Just as Ari was about to thank Finn, who was smiling pleasantly, watching Theo scarf his breakfast down, there was a noise outside of the house. Everyone fell silent.



Crap.

Nola had stepped closer to the door and slipped. She thudded down the porch steps of the mysterious house her brother and walked into.

Early that morning, Nola had noticed Finn making pancakes, which he almost never did anymore. Years ago, he’d wake up on the weekends to make her pancakes, but he hadn’t done that in at least three years.

Nola watched from behind a tree as Finn snuck out of the house. Curious, she followed him in the rain, over Maybelle’s Bridge, and all the way to an old house. *What is he doing?* she thought. The house was clearly abandoned. What good would knocking on the door of a house where nobody lives do?

But, to her surprise, the door opened, and Finn was greeted by a girl, who looked about his age. When he held out the container of pancakes, a little boy came running to the door. He was clearly excited about the breakfast Finn had made.

When Finn went inside, Nola crept onto the porch and tried to listen through the door. Who were these people? She had never see the older girl at school, and she doubted she would’ve seen the little boy; he looked too young to be in the middle school building.

She leaned closer to the door. She could just barely hear them talking. Taking another step, she suddenly slipped on the wet cement. She crashed down to the ground, making

noticeable noise on the way down. The cement tore holes in her leggings and ripped through her skin. She began to bleed.

As Nola picked herself up, the front door opened. Finn stared at her, and slipped out of the door, closing it behind him. Before he said anything, Nola already knew he was mad. Not worried about her bleeding shins; she didn't think that he had even noticed. Not curious about how she had fallen. Not curious about why she was at the abandoned house, which was what Nola desperately wanted to know about Finn. No, he was just *furious*.

"What are you doing here? Did you *follow* me?" he said through clenched teeth.

Nola just nodded, too afraid to say anything. She shivered. She didn't know whether she was shivering because of the cold rain, or if it was out of fear of her angry brother. Finn got upset about very little, and whenever he did, it was usually centered around the rain.

"You can not be here," Finn told her. Before Nola even got a chance to ask why not, he said, "You just can't. You don't need to know about everything I do, or everything I know. I am allowed to keep secrets, especially when they don't concern you."

"I just wanted to know what you were doing," Nola said in a small voice. "I wanted to know if I could help you."

Finn huffed, his nostrils flaring. "You can't. Nothing you do helps. *Ever*."

That stung. Finn rarely ever said anything that would hurt Nola—usually he was protecting her from other kids who said mean things—but that wrenched Nola's heart. She never tried to ruin things. She was usually respectful, and always tried to do the right thing, always tried to help others. But, apparently, it wasn't enough for Finn. Even though he was only two years older than her, Nola was still a little kid who always destroyed things for everyone, who always made a mess.

Nola turned to leave. The front door opened and the girl came out and stood next to Finn. Nola walked away. The girl whispered something to Nola's brother. Then, she called out to Nola. "Nola, sweetheart, come back. Please."

Something about the girl's voice made Nola turn back around. It sounded very motherly and mature. It was sweet and eloquent. It reminded Nola of something, but she couldn't place it.

The girl beckoned for Nola. Nervously, she looked at her brother, who was scowling, but wasn't stopping the girl or Nola.

The three of them went into the house. Immediately, Nola felt the comfort of the small, yet coziness of the house. There was a small kitchen and living room. There was a white door that was closed. The girl sat both Finn and Nola on an old couch.

Ari looked at Nola. "Hi, Nola, I'm Ari. I heard that you are the curious type," she said with a kind smile. "If you want, I am willing to share a secret with you that only your brother knows. However, you *must* keep it a secret. If you cannot promise me, then I cannot tell you. This is very important to me and I need to trust you. Can I do that? Can I trust you to keep my secret?"

Nola nodded. “Yes. You can trust me.” Finn didn’t look too pleased, but at least his scowl disappeared. That almost made Nola smile and giggle. *That is the one thing he can’t do*, she thought. He can’t stay mad at anyone.

Ari told Nola everything. She brought a little boy out from the closed door. She explained that his name was Theo and that he was her younger brother. He was six and she was fifteen, and nearly three years ago, their parents had died in car crash. All of their living relatives were assumed to be either dead, not close to family, or just didn’t know of the sibling’s existence. Three days after their parents died, Ari was lucky enough to find her abandoned house, and has taken care of little Theo ever since.

The whole story took Nola by surprise. She felt sorry for the siblings. She wished she could help, but she knew she couldn’t tell anyone; she had promised not to, afterall.

## Four

By the time Nola and Finn had gotten home, it was nearly twelve o'clock. They both changed into new, dry clothes and ate lunch. They barely spoke to each other. Nola didn't know if Finn was still mad at her or just shocked like she was. At first, she didn't believe Ari's story. It was too crazy. Her parents die in a car crash, and *none* of her relatives cared enough to even acknowledge her? What a crappy family.

There must be something I can do, she thought. But no. She had promised not to tell anyone about the siblings. She didn't even know why they were hiding instead of getting help from an orphanage. She didn't even know their last name! She knew nothing about them. There was literally nothing she could do to help them, besides becoming friends with them and keeping their secret.

Well. *Almost* literally nothing.



Finn finally finished his school work. He had four assignments in math, two in language arts, one project due in science, and one extra credit assignment for history. It took him nearly five hours to complete it all. While he was doing it all, he was aware of Nola sitting outside of the kitchen, but he didn't think anything of it. He just wanted to get his work done.



Ari had broken rules one, two, and three, not once, but twice now. She talked to Finn and Nola. She learned to trust both of them, and she told them about Theo.

She sighed. Nola and Finn had gone home after breakfast. Finn had left the rest of the pancakes with Ari and Theo. It was enough to feed them at least four breakfasts, or a day and a half, but Ari didn't plan on feeding her six-year-old brother only pancakes for every meal. She was thankful for the food though. It made the day a little easier.

Before Finn left, however, he turned to Ari. Nola was descending the porch steps and was already walking home when he asked a question. "Why don't you go to an orphanage?"

Truthfully, Ari admitted to him, she had pondered that idea ever since her parents had died and she and Theo had run. It would make sense, she had told him, to go to a place where she didn't have to steal food to survive. It wasn't the orphanage that scared Ari. It was the possibility of adoption.

"Anyone looking to adopt a kid would be willing to adopt a cute six-year-old," she said. "But who wants a fifteen-year-old? I wouldn't be able to stand it if Theo and I were separated. Plus, I'm not even sure they would let someone my age in. You never know, and I just can't afford to take any chances, no matter how selfish that may sound."



Finn didn't seem to want to ask anymore questions afterwards, which was a relief. He just told Ari that it was okay and that he understood, and then left, jogging to catch up to Nola.



Is this the right thing to do? Nola wondered for about the sixtieth time in the past twenty minutes. She was sitting on the floor outside of the kitchen. Bee was in there, probably mindlessly cooking dinner. Nola sighed, finally deciding what she was about to do would help.

“Mom,” she said walking into the kitchen. “I have something to tell you.”

“What is it, Nola?” Bee said stirring what smelled like beef stew. *Stew* again, Nola thought randomly.

“So, I met these two kids today,” Nola started. Then, she launched into a story about Theo and Ari, and about how their parents had died in a car crash, and how they were living alone. When she was finished, she realized that it was a mistake to mention Ari's parents dying in a car accident. Just three years ago, Bee had lost her sister to a car accident, and the subject still brought Bee into a daze.

“That's nice, sweetheart,” Bee said mindlessly.

Nola sighed. Bee wasn't going to help at all.



The next day, after school, Finn went to Ari's abandoned house and Nola hung out with her friend, Ria, who was the Mayor's daughter.

“Are you okay?” Ria asked as the two girls swung back and forth on swings at the park.

“Not really,” Nola said. “I have this problem that I told my mom about, but I don't think she's going to help. The thing is, it's not even my problem, and I still feel the need to help. And I just don't know how.”

Ria looked worried. “Do you want to tell me? I mean, normally I don't ask for favors from my dad, but I could see if he could help.”

Nola thought about that, weighing the possible outcomes. Finally, she decided. Her thirteen-year-old mind couldn't think of a negative result, so, once again, she launched into another story about Ari and her little brother.

The whole time Ria just nodded, her eyes widening as Nola continued. Eventually, when Nola was finished, Ria said, “Wow. Alright, yeah. I'll tell him tonight. I'm sure he'll be able to help tomorrow, if not today.”



When Ria told her father, Matthias became worried, and decided to act quickly about the whole situation. The town of Clara was a very small community and there was no reason for those poor children to continue living like they had been. He set out for them immediately. Ria informed Nola that Matthias was going to help them, and that everything would be fine. This was relieving news for Nola, who ultimately decided she did the right thing.



Not even fifteen minutes after Finn left for the night, there was a knock on the door. As Ari opened the door, she expected to see Finn again, or even Nola, but she was surprised to see an older man in a fancy suit standing on the porch. He held no umbrella to protect himself from the rain, so his suit and gelled hair were soaking wet.

“Hello,” he said, taking a step closer to Ari. “I’m Mayor Matthias. Are you the girl I was informed about?”

“The girl you were informed about? I’m afraid I don’t know what or who you’re talking about,” Ari said, trying to sound older than she actually was. Older and more confident, because truthfully, she was scared out of her mind.

“My daughter told me that her friend told her that there was a girl and her younger brother living here, alone, with no parents, and my daughter’s friend was very concerned. Now, are you that girl? Is your name Ari?”

Just as Ari was about to say no, Theo came tip-toeing to the door. He looked in between Ari’s legs, and then around the door, still playing detective. “Hi, Ari,” he said. “Milo wants to ask you—”

“Not now,” Ari said through clenched teeth. She watched Mayor Matthias as he nodded at her.

“Is it true that your parents passed away in a car crash? And that you’ve been living on your own since?”

“Yes,” Ari said hesitantly. There was no way around this. She had messed up. She had trusted not one, but two people, and in Clara, news travels quickly.

“And is this the little boy, your brother, Theo?”

“Yes.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen,” Ari whispered.

The Mayor had heard enough. “Alright, Ari, will you come with me? You and your brother?” Ari sighed, picked up Theo, and allowed Mayor Matthias bring them to his black car. They drove to a small brick building where a middle-aged woman with dull, greying orange hair greeted them at the door.

“Hello, darlings,” she said. “My name is Bridget. For tonight, you’ll stay here, and tomorrow morning, we’ll figure out your situation. Does that sound okay?”

Ari nodded. She still held Theo, who had fallen asleep in the car. Mayor Matthias, with a nod, left Ari and Theo with Bridget. Bridget led the siblings to a room that was down the hallway from the front desk.

“This room here is mine, if you need anything,” she said pointing to the last door on the right. “And this is your room.” She opened a tall door into a large room. There was a small bed in the corner of the room, and a tiny bathroom in the opposite corner. It was smaller than the room that they had at Ari’s abandoned house, and much older.

“Well, I’ll let you sweethearts get settled. You know where to find me.” Bridget slammed the old door shut. The loud noise woke up Theo.

“Where are we now,” he asked. “When do we go home?”

Ari sighed. “I don’t think we’ll be going home, Theo. Not now. But we won’t be staying here. We’re leaving tomorrow morning.”

## Five

“YOU *WHAT?*” Finn shouted at Nola. Nola was crying, hard.

It was after school Monday, and Mayor Matthias had come to the Hunts’ house to tell them that Theo and Ari were missing. They had run away early that morning. As calmly as he could, Finn thanked the Mayor for the information, but as soon as he closed the door, he spun around and asked Nola why they had been found in the first place. Sobbing, she told him that she had told Ria.

“You *promised!*” Finn screamed at his younger sister. Finn was yelling loud enough to get Clay and Bee to come into the living, wondering what was wrong. “I can not believe you. I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry,” Nola wept. “I didn’t know they’d run away.”

“You didn’t know... ugh! This is why I didn’t want you to know about them in the first place! You always make a mess. You ruin *everything!* Do you even know why they were hiding in the first place?” Nola shook her head. “Because Ari was afraid. How many people do you think would adopt someone her age? She and Theo would be separated, and she couldn’t have that. *You* ruined that for her. You made her run away. Now she has to find a new place to stay. Somewhere new to find shelter, and food, and water. You *never* think about the consequences. You. Mess. Up. Everything!” Finn’s face was turning red. He inhaled once he realized he was forgetting to breathe.

Finn gave one last glance around the room. Nola was still crying, although the tears were slowing. Bee stared at Finn. She never sees Finn this upset. Clay stared at his newspaper, oblivious to Finn’s angry yelling. Then, Finn walked out the door, and into the rain.



“And where are you off to?” Bridget asked sweetly when she noticed Ari trying sneak out the front door with Theo in her arms.

“Nowhere?” Ari tried.

“Oh, come on now, I don’t care if you leave. I know this place is a dump. I just want to know where you’re off to.”

Even though promises didn’t work last time, Ari asked, “Do you promise you won’t tell anyone?”

Bridget thought for a second. “No. I can’t promise you that. But I won’t tell people randomly. Only people who are truly looking.”

At least she’s honest, Ari thought. “Alright. To be honest, I don’t know where I’m going. Somewhere out of Clara.”

Bridget pulled a map out from her desk. “Try here,” she said pointing.

“Well, it’s a place,” Ari said. “Are you really just going to let us go?”

“Yes. I can tell that even if I said no, you’d still end up gone.” Bridget winked at Ari. “Now go.”

Ari thanked Bridget. On her way out, as she closed the door, she thought she heard Bridget say something else to her, but she missed it. It sounded like “see you later”, but that couldn’t be right. No, that’d be ridiculous. She was leaving Clara and she wasn’t going to come back.

Ari looked at her map. “Well,” she said to Theo, who was trying to hide from the rain in Ari’s jacket. “Here we go.”



“Perfectly timed,” Bridget said happily when she opened the door to let Finn in.

“You knew I’d be here?” Finn asked, surprised.

“Eh, I knew someone would come around after the girl left. I didn’t know it’d be you exactly, but I figured someone would come.”

“Did you *let* Ari leave?”

“Well, she was going to anyways. I just told her where to go.”

“Could you, you know, possibly tell me where she went?”

Bridget went behind her desk and pulled out a map. With a red pen, she drew a small circle on the paper. “Here. This is where I told her to go. I’m not quite sure if she wants to be found, but here it is.” She handed the map to Finn. “I expect you to return this map. This is my last one.”



The town, called Adreana, that Bridget told Ari to go to was a half a mile away from Clara. Ari and Theo got to Adreana in less than fifteen minutes. It was a small, rundown place. All of the buildings were falling apart. All the people on the streets were either old and slow, or young and mischievous. Everybody looked like they were going to give you a cookie or steal your wallet. It made Ari nervous to be walking around a place like that with Theo.

However, that wasn’t the worst part of the whole place.

There was no rain. The sun was out, the streets and people were dry. Only a half mile away from Clara, the weather was completely different, and Ari hated it.

The constant falling of the rain had comforted Ari. It had reassured her when she was a little kid. It had reassured her when she was living in her abandoned house for the first few months. It had comforted her when she was struggling when she met Finn for the first time.

Now, that rhythm was gone.



It should've been relatively easy to find Adreana. It wasn't a long walk. It was just a few left turns and right turns. Just follow the street signs. It was easy for about four minutes. After four minutes, Finn's quick walk into one that would last longer than necessary.

"What the heck are you doing here? How did you find me?" Finn asked, surprised, when he turned to see Nola a few feet behind him.

"That one lady from that one place," Nola said confidently. "She told me that you had visited her a few minutes before I had come, and told me to walk a few yards south. She didn't think you'd get too far."

"What?"

"You know. What's her face. Brenda, or Becky, or Bethany, or Barb—"

"Bridget?"

"That's her name? Wow, I need to pay more attention."

"Yes, you do, but what are you *doing*? You need to go home!"

"I need to go home? What about you? What are *you* doing?"

Finn was suddenly mad. Why couldn't he just get a straight answer out of Nola? A simply "Sorry" and "Okay".

"What am I doing? I'm trying to fix the mess you made! I'm trying to find Ari and Theo and bring them back to Clara!"

"Well, then, I want to help!"

Finn glared at Nola, but didn't say no. So, Nola took that as a yes.

Throughout the rest of the walk, Nola constantly talked. She blabbered about random topics, then switched without a segue. It was difficult to keep up, so Finn eventually just stopped listening, and started focusing on the landscape. Trees lined the streets that they turned onto. There weren't very many cars, but there were a few bikers.

Ten minutes later, Finn and Nola stood in front of a sign that read:

***WELCOME TO ADREANA***

*POPULATION: 159*

*Est. 1903*

"Is this the place we're looking for?" Nola asked.

"Let's hope so," Finn replied, walking into the town.



Bridget opened the door to see the Mayor. She nodded a greeting and let him in. He was wearing his usual suit; grey and boring.

“Hello, Ms. Vanderson,” Mayor Matthias said. “I have come back to ask the same simple question I asked earlier.” Bridget nodded. “Do you know where the little girl and boy may have run off to?”

They Mayor looked at Bridget expectantly. Of course, Bridget did know where the children went, and this *was* the Mayor. Any good person would tell the authorities the truth. It was the right thing to do. With one glance at Mayor Matthias’s face, Bridget knew what to say.

Bridget responded, “I haven’t the slightest clue as to where they might be. When I woke up this morning, they were just gone.”



“Should we shout for them?” Nola asked. They had had no luck finding Ari and Theo. When they asked people if they had seen them, they either laughed in their faces and walked away or offered them a cookie, which they politely refused.

“No,” Finn said. “I don’t want to draw any more attention to us. I don’t really like these people. They make me nervous.”

Nola shrugged. They continued to walk for another thirty minutes. They had been gone for nearly an hour and a half, and only then did Nola noticed something was off.

“Finn,” she said. “It’s not raining.”

Finn stopped walking and looked up to see a bright sun and blue sky. “Huh,” he said. He realize that his clothes were dry, and his eyelashes weren’t dripping with water. Everything was dry. Only a half mile away from Clara, the weather was completely different, and Finn loved it.

Just as Finn and Nola began walking again, Finn saw something out of the corner of his eye.



Theo saw them even before Ari did. Ari was carrying Theo on her hip. They were still walking through the streets of Adreana. Ari wanted to find a place to get food before she settled down somewhere.

Theo pointed behind Ari. “Look!” he said to Ari, who turned around. Theo twisted in Ari’s arms so he could see again. “Finn!” His little voice said. “Hi!”

Two people started coming closer to Ari. It took her a minute to realize that it was actually Finn and Nola. She was shocked.

“What are you doing?” Ari asked when they got closer.

Finn seemed out of breath. He kept starting sentences, but didn’t finish any, like he couldn’t find the right words to use.

“Spit it out!” Ari said, getting annoyed. This wasn’t the original plan. She was going to run away from the people who ratted her out, and they weren’t supposed to follow.

“We came to apologize and ask you to come back to Clara,” Nola finally said for her brother.

“Where would I go?” Ari replied. “I can’t go back to my abandoned house. I don’t want to go to the orphanage; Theo and I could be separated. I don’t have a life back in Clara.”

“But we could help you!” Nola said desperately. “I am truly sorry. I thought I was helping. But I was wrong, and now I want a chance to make it right. You can come back with us. You can come live with us!”

When Nola said that, Finn’s eyebrows shot up. From the looks of it, Nola hadn’t discussed that option with Finn. But, Finn didn’t say no.

Hesitantly, Finn nodded. “Just come back with us,” he said.

“Okay,” Ari said. Theo smiled brightly.



## Six

“Mom, Dad, this is Ari and Theo,” Finn said when Nola, Ari, Theo, and himself got home. “It’s a long complicated story as to how we met, and why they’re here now, and we’ll tell you, but we need to know if they can stay. Here. With us.”

Ari looked uncomfortable. Finn could tell she didn’t like being introduced to anyone new, especially adults. But, he could also tell that she knew that by coming to the Hunts family, she was helping Theo.

Theo was looking around the living room on the Hunts house. He seemed interested in nearly everything. His eyes seemed to light up when he saw a bookcase full of rainbow colored books. However, he was being held by Ari, so he couldn’t go and look. Maybe later, Finn thought.

“Of course they can stay,” Bee said. She stared at Theo, watched every one of his moves. She spoke slowly and quietly. “I have made more than enough stew for tonight.”

Finn fought back a sigh.

After a quick dinner, Ari told her story. She talked about how her parents had died in a car crash, how she and Theo had run away, how they had met Finn and then Nola, and everything in between. The whole time Bee looked wondrously at Theo.

When Ari’s story was complete, Bee suddenly sat up straight. She spoke an inaudible “Oh”. Finn could almost see her brain working.

“You said your parents died in a car crash, right?” She asked Ari, who nodded. “Oh. Oh, oh, oh. My goodness, I didn’t realize she even had kids.”

“Who, Mom?” Finn asked. “What are you talking about.”

“Your mother,” Bee said. “What was her name?”

“Evangeline. My father’s name was Theodore Tucker. Theo was named after him.” Ari looked at Bee, concerned.

“Oh, Evvy,” Bee whispered.

“Mom. Please. Tell us what you’re thinking,” Nola said.

“Your mother was Evvy Lazard, wasn’t she?” Bee asked. Ari nodded, still confused. “That means you’re my niece. And Theo is my nephew.” Everyone still didn’t get it. “Evvy Lazard was my sister.”



“So, we’re cousins?” Nola asked. Ari, Theo, Finn, and Nola were all sitting on the floor in the living room. Clay had gone back into his cave and Bee had gone to set the table.

“I guess so,” Ari said.

“That’s pretty cool, right?” Finn asked. Everyone, except for Theo who was studying the pictures in a picture book off of the bookcase, nodded.

Nola remembered the first time Ari had told her about her parents, and how no relatives had known about Ari or Theo. She remembered thinking “what a crappy family”. Now, she felt terrible. She was part of that crappy family. It was almost unreal, yet Nola believed it all.

At dinner, Finn noticed that Bee was more lively than usual. She told everyone that she would enroll Ari and Theo into school.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “while Finn and Nola are at school, I’ll leave Ari and Theo at home with Clay, and go out and look for a job. I have to try to get some extra money, now that this is a six-person family.”

Finn was astonished. Bee hadn’t been out of the house in months. She must’ve seen the disbelief on his face. She smiled. “It was Theo originally. He looks exactly like Evvy.”

The next day, Finn and Nola go to school, Bee got a job and enrolled Ari and Theo into school. Ari and Theo stayed home, read books, and Ari even talked about the newspaper with Clay when he came downstairs for lunch.

At Theo’s request, Finn helped Bee make pancakes for dinner. Finn noted that it was the first time they didn’t have stew for dinner in a long time, and it was glorious. The pancakes were fluffy and sweet. Everybody enjoyed them, especially Theo, who ate three and a half pancakes, which was a lot for his small size.

At night, Theo slept with Finn in his room, and Ari slept in Nola’s room with Nola. For a while, everybody shared a bed, but eventually, Bee earned enough money to buy beds for Ari and Theo. It had been a long time since Ari and Theo slept in new, comfortable beds.



Night after night, week after week, month after month, Finn’s, Nola’s, Ari’s, Theo’s, Bee’s, and even Clay’s relationships with each other grew stronger and stronger. Ari and Theo were no longer just cousins; they were a part of the Hunts family, and without them, the family would be incomplete.

And, just as their relationship stayed consistent, so did the rain. Night after night, week after week, month after month, it poured. The thrum of the rain was always there. Ari still loved the rain, and Finn started to realize it’s comforting ways.

## Epilogue

Before, he used to believe rain was just water falling from the sky. It made him miserable. The water dripping from his hair, eyelashes, clothes. He wanted nothing to do with it. He wished it would just go away.

Before, the rain was the only thing that he didn't like about Clara.

Then he met a girl who changed his life.

She, unlike the boy, danced in the rain. Before she met the boy who changed her life, the rain was the only thing that kept her happy. She was under a lot of stress. She had to keep her little brother safe, and she had to keep him and herself together.

Before, the rain was the only thing that she liked about Clara.

Now, they both have two reasons they love Clara.

One; It always rained. The girl changed the boy's mind about the rain. She taught him about it's rhythmic beat, and how it always comforted her. Now the rain comforts him whenever he needs it.

Two; They always had their family. The girl no longer had to scavenge for food. Now she had a family—one brother, two cousins, an aunt and an uncle—that kept her safe. The boy no longer had to go out and buy the groceries. His cousins had brought back life into his mother, and are slowly bringing back his father.

Everything had worked out for the best. They had the rain and their family, and that was all they needed.



As for Bridget, she was always watching the family from afar. She was always around, but never seen. She was just waiting until they noticed her.

Afterall, she still needed her maps back.