

When vengeful ghosts come howling with the wind,
you must do whatever it takes to survive.

Dust Spells



A N D R E A L Y N N

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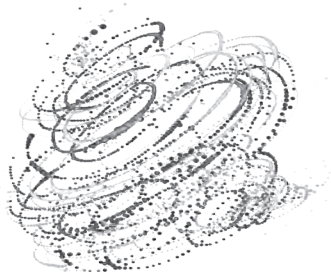
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To my cheerleader, hero, and forever friend—my sister.







CHAPTER



Stella would have thought the sky was a harbinger of the apocalypse if her world hadn't already ended. The early morning light was sickly yellow and filthy as always. The clear, blue skies and lush green fields of five years ago seemed a dream. It was hard to imagine her home had ever been anything but diseased and covered in dust, though she knew it had. She knew a lot of things she didn't want to know, like how the entire world could be upended overnight, forever changing not only her life but the lives of millions, and none of them had the power to change it back again. Not ever.

Stella pulled her family's Chevrolet pickup into Jane's driveway and put it in park. When she cut the ignition, the engine sighed, as if as tired as she was.

Don't you die on me now, she thought. You're the last luxury we have.

A harsh, discordant clanging met her ears when she stepped outside. Jane's neighbor, a widow named Mrs. Woodrow, had an ungodly number of wind chimes on her already cluttered porch. Stella cursed her silently as she hurried up Jane's drive. Why have even *one* wind

chime in a place where the grimy, choking wind never let up? Where dust storms called Black Blizzards rose up and blotted out the sky, raining debris on cars and buildings, tearing through the cracks in the most well-sealed homes, and mutilating the Great Plains as thoroughly as they had mutilated Stella's life forever.

Stella opened Jane's back door and let herself in. She closed it behind her, muting the chimes, but then heard the equally irritating sound of a baby's cry.

"Morning, Stella," Jane called, rushing into the kitchen with Jasper in her arms. She sat down at the table and opened her blouse, baring her right breast. "Sorry. I meant to feed him before you got here, but he wasn't hungry."

"Not a problem," Stella replied, grateful no writhing parasite depended on her for its sustenance. She had too many people dependent on her as it was. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes," Jane said as Jasper found her nipple and quieted. "I filled the jars last night."

Grateful that part was already done, Stella turned and crept down the rickety stairs to Jane's basement. When she passed the large copper still, she fought the urge to blow it a kiss.

When Jane's parents died, they left her two blessings: a house with a paid-off mortgage and her father's old moonshine still. President Roosevelt had repealed prohibition the previous year, but that didn't matter in Kansas, which had been dry since the last century, and Stella—who almost never prayed—prayed it would stay that way. With liquor outlawed, she and Jane could make fifty cents a pint.

The idea had been Stella's. Though Jane was four years older, the two of them had been friends since childhood. Jane married right out of high school, but her dirtbag husband abandoned her and Jasper after losing his job last winter. Jane made ends meet by taking in laundry, but when Stella remembered Jane's father's old still, she suggested they go into business. Jane brewed the moonshine, and Stella delivered it,

hidden among the laundry. Her heart thumped as she crouched down and picked up the crate. Sixteen beautiful jars. She held the equivalent of eight dollars in her hands. After three months, she and Jane had twelve consistent clients. And the demand was growing. Their only competition was the local drug store where the owner sold malt whiskey smuggled in from Colorado, but most people couldn't afford it. Jane's moonshine wasn't cheap, but it wasn't so expensive it would break the average person. If they had a bigger still, or more people to help, Stella knew they could make their little sideline a real business.

But they didn't. And Stella knew enough to be grateful for what she did have. She started up the stairs, holding the crate that would bring her the only thing in the world that was hers alone. The thing that, once a week, brought her closer to her dreams.

Jane had finished feeding Jasper by the time Stella finished loading the crate and laundry into her truck. When Stella walked back inside, Jane was burping him over her shoulder.

"Do you ever want to murder Mrs. Woodrow?" Stella asked, closing the door behind her.

Jane laughed. "I hardly notice those wind chimes anymore."

"How? They're maddening."

"She thinks they ward off evil spirits."

"They're about to ward off my sanity."

Jane laughed again, and Stella wiped her brow.

"How are you on ingredients?" Stella asked.

"I have plenty of corn and yeast, but I'm running low on sugar."

"I'll pick some up." She smoothed her hair and checked to make sure the patches she'd sewn beneath the worn spots on her dress were well-concealed. "How do I look?"

Jane smiled, her dimples showing. "Like a sweet eighteen-year-old girl."

"Wash your mouth out with soap. There is nothing sweet about me."

The last thing Stella wanted to be was sweet. Greta Garbo and Jean Harlow weren't sweet. They were vixens wrapped in diamonds and furs who consumed men like champagne. Jane was a sweet girl.

Sweet girls ended up alone with a baby.

"But sweet girls aren't bootleggers," Jane countered. "They'll never suspect."

"True," Stella agreed. "I'll be back with some sweet, sweet dough."

THE SUN HAD BARELY RISEN, but the inside of the truck already felt like an oven by the time Stella reached her first stop. She dabbed at her forehead with a handkerchief and checked her lipstick in the rearview mirror. Just because she lived in a dusty, prairie town didn't mean she had to look like it. The money she would earn today could buy her powder, blush, mascara, and maybe even a new dress, but it was going straight into her Folger's can in the attic, so lipstick alone had to do. The crimson stain was perfect, so she stepped out of the truck.

Her first client was a man named Lewis Johnston, who lived with his mother and preferred to take his deliveries at work. Stella always made his stop first because he worked at the train station, and the train-hopping bums who littered the place were mostly asleep in the morning. They camped in the hobo "jungle" in the nearby woods, and some of them liked to whistle and yell at the women who walked by.

That morning, the coast seemed clear as Stella clipped up the drive to the station, holding Lewis's shirts with the mason jar between the folds. But then she heard shouts, and two men tumbled out from between the trees. The first one fell onto his back, and the second leapt on top of him and punched him square in the face. Stella shrieked and jumped back. With a savage groan, the first man shoved the other man off and scrambled back to his feet. Then, he gripped the man's shoulder and swung his fist deep into his stomach. The second man

doubled over, and the first seized his head and drove it down into his knee. Blood burst from his nose and splattered the pavement as well as the first man's pants. He crumpled to the ground, and the first man spat on him.

"You bastards always make the same mistake," he sneered. "You go for the face."

"What's going on here?"

Both men looked in Stella's direction. She blinked and spun around. A police officer was jogging up the drive. She heard a scuffle and turned back around to see both men bolting toward the trees; the first moving like lightening, and the second stumbling and clutching his stomach.

"That's right, get out of here," the cop yelled, and Stella turned back to face him. He nodded and tipped his hat. "You okay, Miss?"

Stella stared at him, suddenly very aware of the mason jar in her arms.

"Oh, yes. They didn't hurt me. They were fighting each other."

"Dirty bums," the cop grumbled. "Why can't they kill each other out in that jungle, away from decent folks?"

Stella nodded and started back toward the station.

"What's a young lady like you doing here so early anyway?"

She stopped. After closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she turned back around.

"I'm delivering laundry. To a man who works at the station."

The cop stepped closer, glancing down at the shirts. "He doesn't want it delivered to his house?"

He looked back up, but before he met her gaze, his eyes lingered on a few other places. Her crimson lips, her dark curls, the swell of her breasts beneath her dress.

Men.

"I guess not," Stella said with a laugh. She stepped closer, glad she'd taken the time to dab on a bit of her dwindling reserve of perfume. "You men can be so silly sometimes. I never know what you're thinking."

He smiled sheepishly and blushed. "I suppose we can be. Well, go ahead. I'll make sure no more of these hobos get in your way."

"Thank you, so much," Stella said, flashing a smile. Then she turned and walked up the drive, thinking Jean Harlow couldn't have done any better.

OVER THE NEXT HOUR, Stella made the rest of her deliveries. Not all were for moonshine; some were just laundry. When she finished, however, she cursed herself. She needed to get more sugar for Jane, but the general store was all the way by the train station. She should have gotten it after her first delivery. Now, she would have to go all the way back and risk arriving home late, running behind on her chores, and disappointing her Aunt Elsa. She sped to the store and used two of the eight dollars she'd made to buy fifty pounds of sugar. Then, she hoisted the two twenty-five-pound sacks over each of her shoulders and trudged out into the heat.

"That's a mighty amount of sugar."

She turned around and stifled a gasp. The man who'd beaten up and spit on the other man at the train station was leaning against the wall. He was more of a boy than a man, she now saw. Just a year or two older than she was. His lower lip had been split by the blow he'd taken to the face, and he was picking small chunks from a stale loaf of bread, eating carefully. There was a bakery next door, and Stella guessed the loaf had been thrown out with last night's trash. Her stomach turned, and she flopped the sacks onto the bed of her truck.

"What's it to you?"

"Just wondering if you might have the same amount of yeast and corn somewhere."

She froze and then spun back to face him. He read the guilty look on her face and grinned.

“That’s what I thought.”

She stared at him. Besides the split lip, he had a yellowing bruise beneath one eye and a scar through his other eyebrow. His skin and clothes were filthy, and his hair was a rumpled mess beneath his flat cap. Her gaze slid down to the knee of his pants, stained with the other man’s blood. He followed her gaze, popped a piece of bread into his mouth, and looked back up.

“Don’t worry,” he said as he chewed, “I’d never hit a woman. You could come at me with a knife, and I’d just let you stab me, sugar.”

She flushed, determined not to let him know she was afraid. “How thoughtful. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Hold on.” He stood up from the wall and stepped into the sunlight. “I’m interested in becoming a customer.”

He had a backwoods, southern accent. Maybe Texas or Louisiana. Some desolate, nothing place even dustier than Kansas.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on, now. No girl in worn-out heels is gonna spend that much money on sugar unless she expects some kind of return. And I watched you work that lawman this morning. Saw the fear on your face when he looked at those shirts. Saw the way you turned on the charm to fool him. Pretty impressive.”

Stella’s lips parted. Even the man who’d sold her the sugar hadn’t questioned why she’d bought it. He was just happy to make the sale. This boy talked like a hick, but he was smart. She studied his face. It was pleasant. Beneath the dirt and scars anyway.

But then she remembered his rude remark about her shoes.

“You couldn’t afford it.”

She purposefully raked her eyes over his filthy clothes as she said it. But his grin only curled, and he stepped closer.

“Ain’t you heard, sugar? We got a depression on. People trade and barter for things all the time.”

“Stop calling me that. And you have nothing I want.”

He placed another chunk of bread in his mouth and looked her over. “We’ve only just met.” He lifted his gaze. “You don’t know what I got to offer.”

She flushed again. “You’re disgusting.”

“Disgusting?” He cocked his head to the side. “My, what dirty thoughts you’ve got in that pretty head of yours.”

Feeling a sudden kinship with the man who’d punched him in the face, she spat, “Don’t flatter yourself,” and turned away, tossing her curls.

“I see those patches in your skirt, sugar,” he called. “Don’t pretend you’re better than me.”

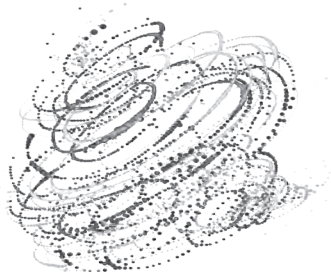
“At least I’ve taken a bath this century.”

She didn’t look back when she said it, but she caught sight of his face in her peripheral vision when she opened the door to the truck. His smile was gone. Guilt rose in her throat, but she swallowed it, got in her truck, and drove away.

She sped toward Jane’s house, now certain she would be facing Aunt Elsa’s wrath when she arrived home. There were six dollars in her pocket, three of which were hers, but she found herself too shaken to enjoy their comforting presence.

Because, the boy had been right. Her family was barely hanging on by a thread, and though they weren’t sleeping in hobo jungles and fishing stale bread out of the garbage, that could change at any moment.

Nothing was certain. No one was safe.



CHAPTER

2



Stella parked outside her family's three-story Victorian house, its former cheerful robin's egg blue exterior now gray and peeling. She'd taken its luxury for granted until four years ago, because—while she still lived there—it wasn't *her* house anymore.

For the first few months following the stock market crash, Stella's family remained one of the most comfortable in Dodge City. But as fewer and fewer people could afford cars, her father's dealership suffered, especially when the dust storms arrived to terrorize the farmland. It was 1930 when Stella's world imploded.

The dealership went bankrupt, her mother died, her father left to search for work in Wichita, her Aunt Elsa turned their home into a boarding house to make ends meet, and Stella and her sisters moved into the attic to help her run it. The creaking of the old walls against the wind was the only sound Stella heard when she crept inside which told her the boarders had already left for work.

Dammit.

She trudged to the kitchen. When she stepped inside, her older sister, Lavinia, spoke without looking up from the dishes.

“Aunt Elsa’s stripping the beds. And yes, she’s mad.”

Stella groaned, pulled an apron from one of the pegs near the door, and joined her at the sink.

“I would have made it back in time, but I was accosted by a vagrant.”

Lavinia’s head shot up, her coffee brown eyes bulging. “What?”

“Well, not exactly *accosted*,” Stella clarified. “He tried to get me to sell him some moonshine. I did see him beat up another bum by the station earlier, though.”

Lavinia let out a breath and returned to the dishes. “You shouldn’t go down there alone. It isn’t safe.”

“Don’t worry. There was a cop who put a stop to it before anyone got killed.”

Lavinia’s head shot up again, which, this time, had been Stella’s intention.

“It was fine,” Stella assured her, laughing as she took the dripping bowl from her hands and dried it off with a towel. “He didn’t suspect a thing.”

“You take too many risks,” Lavinia scolded her, picking up the next bowl.

And you don’t take enough, Stella thought as she watched her scrape the oatmeal out from the bowl. Lavinia’s hair was as curly as Stella’s, but instead of a black so black it was almost blue, her hair was a vibrant, apple red. She wore it the same way as Stella, but for a different reason. Stella cut her curls in a chin-length bob because that’s how Myrna Loy wore her hair in *Penthouse*, but Lavinia did it so she could hide her face more easily.

Over the last three years, Stella had grown used to the jagged scars that covered the left side of Lavinia’s face: a patchwork of puckered, white gashes that clawed their way from beneath her left eye to the

hinge of her jaw, as if she were a porcelain doll whose left side had been smashed and pasted back together by a hasty, trembling hand. Lavinia had always been the most reserved of the Fischer girls, but since receiving the scars, she'd withdrawn even more, rarely leaving the house or looking strangers in the eye.

Stella wasn't sure how she would have reacted if it had happened to her, which it could have just as easily. Perhaps, she would have withdrawn as well, but she still wished her sister wouldn't act as if her life was over at twenty-two, resigned to working at the Fischer boarding house the rest of her life, the husband and children she desperately longed for forever out of reach. To Stella, Lavinia was still beautiful, as well as good, loyal, and hardworking. She was nearly as bright as their younger sister, Mattie, and as nurturing and resilient as their mother had been. Not what Stella sometimes suspected she thought she was.

Which was worthless.

"Jane says, 'hello,'" Stella said as Lavinia handed her the next bowl. Jane hadn't, but she would have if they'd had more time to talk. She and Lavinia were the same age and had been good friends in school. "You should visit her sometime."

Lavinia looked away. "I know. It's just hard to find the time. Things being the way they are . . ." She paused, glanced up from the sink, and lowered her voice. "And I think things are even worse than Aunt Elsa is letting on. I saw the water bill in her room this morning. It's due tomorrow, and I don't think we have enough. Daddy hasn't sent money in over a month. And I know Aunt Elsa paid for Mrs. Kelly's last doctor visit."

Stella gaped at her. Mrs. Kelly, one of their boarders, was an older woman with lung trouble, exacerbated by the dust. Dust pneumonia, they called it. Mrs. Kelly slept in a gas mask at night, and her room, which used to be Stella's, always smelled of Vicks VapoRub. Stella pitied the woman, but still wished Aunt Elsa would control her damn bleeding heart.

“You don’t think they’ll turn off our water?” Stella whispered. “The boarders—they’d leave, and we’d—”

“Stella Marie Fischer.”

Stella looked up to see Aunt Elsa hurrying in with a basket of sheets. She plopped it on the floor and slammed her hands on her hips.

“Aunt Elsa, I’m sorry—”

“When I said you could help Jane with her laundry business, you promised it wouldn’t interfere with your duties here. Mattie had to help Lavinia and I make breakfast this morning, and now she’s behind on weeding the garden, and I’m behind on the laundry.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t understand why Jane needs the laundry delivered anyway,” Aunt Elsa went on. “Why can’t her clients come to her place and pick it up themselves?”

Lavinia met Stella’s gaze and then turned to the sink to hide her face. At least she was aware of how bad she was at concealing things.

“She can charge more money if she delivers,” Stella replied calmly. “But of course, she can’t do it herself. Not with Jasper.”

As she’d expected, mentioning the baby deflated Aunt Elsa’s anger. Her face lit up, and she pressed her hand to her heart. She looked more like her brother, Stella’s father, when she smiled, her emerald green eyes crinkling at the corners.

“How is Jasper? He must be getting so big.”

“He’s got more hair,” Stella said with a smile. “Silvery blond, like Jane’s. Not dirty blond like that low-life Jacob Ryan’s.”

The three of them instantly spat at the mention of Jane’s husband, a habit they’d picked up from Stella’s late grandmother, Aunt Elsa’s mother.

“Well, don’t be late again,” Aunt Elsa said, retrieving the basket of sheets. “Lavinia can finish the dishes. You do the dusting, then beat out the front rug. Oh, and feed the chickens. I don’t think Mattie has done that yet.”

Stella dried her hands on her apron and hung it back up on the wall. She left the kitchen, walked up the stairs to the third floor, wrenched down the attic ladder, and climbed.

The stuffy, cramped space was hers and her sisters' bedroom now. They shared a single mattress in the middle, but each of them had a section along the wall that was their own. In one corner, Mattie stored her books, their father's Kodak camera, and a framed picture of their late grandmother. Lavinia's romance novels, old porcelain doll, and empty jewelry box sat nearby. Stella walked to her own corner, which contained her lipstick, magazine cutouts of her favorite movie stars, and her precious Folger's can. She took the three dollars from her pocket and slid them reverently inside, gazing up at Greta Garbo like she was the Virgin Mary.

One day soon she would have enough money to get her to Hollywood and out of this dusty town. Her sisters knew of her plan—as well as the sideline she'd created to make it happen—but not her father or Aunt Elsa. It would break their hearts, she knew, but she had no choice. Lavinia had no desire to leave, and Mattie was smart enough to get a scholarship to Kansas University or Kansas State, which both accepted women, but there was nothing for Stella in Kansas. All she had was her looks, and they would get her nothing in Dodge but marriage, children, and an endless cycle of hard work and misery. Here, she would always remain as she was—a poor, powerless girl who could be blown away and forgotten. But in a big city, or up on the silver screen, she could be someone. Someone high above the chaotic struggle of poverty. Someone respected, admired, and in control of her destiny. Money could make her matter, could make people see her as someone *worth* something, and every dollar she made brought her closer to that dream.

She slid off her dress and put on a white, cotton shirt and overalls, trading her heels for a pair of old, leather boots. Running a boarding house was just like running a hotel. Everything had to be cleaned while the tenants were out, and the constant filth in the air made dusting a

daily activity. Stella ran wet rags over the bannisters, stairs, and floors. Then, she made her way through the boarders' rooms, dusting their shelves. First, her parents' former room, where Aunt Elsa now slept, then Lavinia's, where an old nurse and a young hairdresser now lived, Stella's, where Mrs. Kelly and a railroad telegrapher resided, and Mattie's, which now housed a hardware store clerk and a musician.

Once Stella finished dusting, she grabbed the bucket of chicken feed and trudged to the back yard. After feeding the squawking creatures, she started back inside the house, but then she caught sight of Mattie, kneeling in the vegetable garden. She was picking tomatoes, but as she plucked them, she was bent down over the vines and bowing her head, murmuring something.

"Are you kidding me?" Stella asked, approaching her younger sister. "Please, tell me you didn't take that bunk seriously."

Mattie barely spared her a glance. "You know what *puri daj* would say if she heard you call it bunk."

"How does someone who reads the books you read and gets the grades you get still believe in her grandmother's fairy tales?"

"Stories aren't just stories," Mattie replied. "They contain wisdom gleaned by our ancestors over the ages. That's why they endure." She looked up at Stella, smirking and tossing her braid back over her shoulder. "If *you* read a book every now and then, you'd know that."

"I don't have time for books. Or for talking to plants to make them grow."

"You get out what you put in," Mattie said. "It makes perfect, logical sense. This garden gives because it was given to. Because it was treated with respect. You can't deny that."

Of all of them, Mattie took after their late grandmother the most. She was small with Stella's black hair and Lavinia's coffee brown eyes. She was only sixteen but had acted like an adult since infancy. Partly because of her intellect—she'd learned to read by the time she was three—but partly because of their grandmother's insistence she was

“blessed.” Supposedly, she possessed a “second sight,” but Stella knew it was nothing more than superstitious garbage. Mattie hadn’t foreseen the Depression, their mother’s death, Lavinia’s accident, or anything else that mattered.

Still, Mattie did sometimes seem to know what other people were thinking. And the garden she tended was the only one on the block that consistently thrived, as if it were immune to dust and drought.

But Stella wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of agreeing.

“You’re a nut, you know that?”

“Sticks and stones.”

Stella started back toward the house, but then paused. “Did Lavinia tell you about the water bill?”

Mattie looked up, her smirk gone. “Yes.”

“How short do you think we are?”

“Stella, I told you to beat the front rug,” Aunt Elsa called as she and Lavinia emerged with a basket of clean, wet sheets and walked to the clothesline.

“I’ll get it now.”

She walked back inside, sat the chicken feed down, and plodded to the front hall. Before she bent down and rolled up the rug, however, she glanced at the coatrack.

Her father’s nicest hat was still there, as if waiting for him. She stood up, picked it up from the rack, and sniffed it. It smelled like his hair: a hint of sweat and the pomade he’d used, back when they could afford it. An ache spread through her chest, and she placed the hat back on the rack.

Her hand drifted up, grasping the ghost of a necklace that wasn’t there. When she and her sisters played dress-up as children or wanted to look like grown-ups at the square dances, county fairs, and town festivals that had blown away with the rest of their former lives four years ago, their mother would let them each wear a piece of her jewelry. They’d felt like princesses in the gifts their father had given their

mother on their first, fifth, and tenth anniversaries—Lavinia in the pearl earrings that gleamed like her hair, Stella in the emerald necklace that matched her eyes, and Mattie in the opal ring she wore on her thumb so it wouldn't fall off her tiny fingers.

Perhaps, after the world changed, her mother would have been forced to sell the treasures, but she never had the chance. Stella could smell her father's scent on his hat every day, and—God willing—in the flesh when he came home, but she would never smell her mother's lavender-powdered skin again, never hear her chirping laughter, never see her eyes well up with love, never taste her strawberry icebox cake, never touch her silky manicured hand, and she and her sisters would never wear her jewelry again, because it was gone forever, just like her.

Stella blinked back tears and bent down to roll up the rug. There was no use in dwelling on her mother or any part of her old, irretrievable life. Only the future remained, and she would flee this barren wasteland and make her dreams come true or die trying.

She heaved the rug up over her shoulder, grabbed a broom from against the wall, and headed back to the porch. But as she neared the door, she heard a man's voice.

"You see, I saw the cat on your mailbox."

Stella groaned. That damned cat. A hobo had drawn it on their mailbox earlier that spring. Apparently, it was a symbol that a kind woman lived in the house, and Aunt Elsa often traded work for food with those in need. Stella admired Aunt Elsa's kindness but couldn't help the panicked feeling that rose every time a tramp came by to deplete her family of their limited resources.

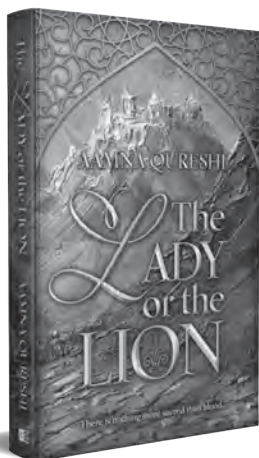
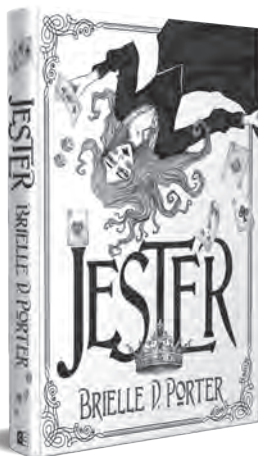
"Goodness, honey," said Aunt Elsa. "What happened to your face?"

Stella stiffened. It couldn't be. She wasn't *that* unlucky. Gripping the rug, she pushed open the screen door and stepped onto the porch.

He was standing just beyond the faded, white picket fence, his cap in his hands. When the screen door slammed shut behind her, he looked up, and his eyes widened.



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She thought a dust storm was getting in the way of her dreams, but there are storms more deadly than dust.

Ever since the dust storms arrived and turned her world upside down, ambitious Stella Fischer spends her mornings hiding moonshine in laundry stacks for delivery before returning home to help her sisters—Lavinia and Mattie—run their family home turned boarding house, hoping to make enough money to finally escape to Hollywood. She has no time for distractions, especially from Lloyd, the handsome drifter who works as a hired hand at the boarding house.

When the group decides to forage for building materials at an abandoned cider mill, they discover a magical passage that sends them back to the mill at its prime. There, they meet Archie, a man trapped in the realm who can conjure lavish parties and bring back a world of joy and splendor. But Archie isn't all he seems, and Stella must discover the truth before a storm more deadly than dust destroys her and everyone she loves.



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