



The future is just
the beginning...

ORDER OF THE SEERS

Cerece Rennie Murphy

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This book is dedicated to my mother:

“Every good thing I am, you taught me... You don’t have to keep on paying for what you bought me, just look at me—here I stand. I’m your girl, your little girl, then and now and always.”

– Phoebe Snow

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Chapter 1: The End

Sunday, June 22, 2008

Liam was losing his patience. “Aw, come on! Are you serious? You can’t want to ride this thing again!”

Instead of answering her older brother, Lilli remained in her seat as the Ferris wheel conductor looked on expectantly, hand outstretched and waiting for another two tokens.

The way Lilli’s skinny arms hugged her book bag while she stared blankly at the pressed metal floor of their “Fairy Land Caboose” made it hard for Liam to stay angry. The sight of her looking so dejected softened him enough to give the conductor his fifth set of tokens in less than 45 minutes. Liam settled back into his seat just as the lap bar clamped down uncomfortably against his thighs.

“Lilli, say something. Why’d you drag me out here if you were just gonna sulk? I hate the carnival, you know that.”

“I know something... okay? Just... trust me. We have to stay here.” Her voice was so low he could barely hear her over the wind-up music that was blaring from the overhead speakers.

“Did Mom say something to you?”

Lilli responded to his question with silence and a barely discernable shake of her head back and forth. He tried again.

“Lilli! Did Mom...?”

“Yes,” she snapped.

They both fell silent again as Liam took in the latest weird thing of the day. Lilith Knight, or Lilli as she preferred to be called, had always been

strange. Even when she was five, she could beat Liam at chess lazily, without even thinking about it. She would find things and give them to you before you asked for them. Before you, or even she, knew why. Up until recently, he thought she was just a freak. *No biggie. All little sisters are like that*, he told himself.

It was only in the past few months that his perception of her began to shift, after her prediction that he would catch his new girlfriend, Krista, kissing his teammate Lance in the locker room after their championship game. At the time, he'd brushed off her premonition as meddling. Krista wasn't even his girlfriend and his team was 1-1 with the whole basketball season ahead of them.

He'd forgotten her warning completely until two months later when he ran back into the locker room after winning the championship to get the jacket he'd left behind and immediately smelled Krista's perfume. When he found them, two thoughts overshadowed the scene unfolding in front of him. The first was that what they were doing wasn't really "kissing," though he could see how a sheltered thirteen-year-old would describe it that way. His second thought was that Lilli was right; she was exactly right. He was so stunned by Lilli's accuracy that he didn't even bother to disturb them, leaving his new ex-girlfriend and her new boyfriend to their business. From that moment, Liam understood that Lilli wasn't *just* a freak, or more accurately, that she wasn't a freak at all. She was special...gifted.

The sound of Lilli's sniffing followed by the trembling of her body as she began to cry uncontrollably broke the long silence that had fallen between them. *What the...*, Liam half-mumbled as his mind swung from irritation to absolute bewilderment. Slowly and deliberately, Liam moved his palms down the front of his face as he fought the urge to shake the truth right out of her and end whatever this was. But he couldn't. *She's so brittle already*, he thought, without any idea as to why. So instead, he reached out to envelop his sister in his arms, trying to soothe her and comfort her from some unknown force.

"Lilli, it's all right. I'm sorry, okay? Don't cry. Just... tell me what's going on. Why are we here?"

He tried to wait patiently, to rein in the confusion and frustration that had been piercing through the calm day he had planned for himself when he woke up that morning, as cool and carefree as any sixteen-year-old boy. It was Lilli who had dragged him out of the house before he could even wolf down his second bowl of Honeycombs. “*Mom said you have to take me to the carnival. NOW!*” She had demanded.

He had started to head upstairs to launch his appeal when his eye caught his mother’s note on the refrigerator door. “Take Lilli to the fair. NOW.—Love, Mom,” it read. He knew that meant his mother had left the house early; there was no appeal to be made. Begrudgingly, he slipped on his sneakers and grabbed the car keys, all the while wondering if Lilli was still too young to be left at the fair by herself.

His earlier thoughts of abandonment brought him back to his sister’s form beside him. Not knowing what else to do, Liam simply held her tight as her convulsing turned to trembling, and finally, back to stillness. At the top of the Ferris wheel, she finally spoke.

“It’s over now, we can go home,” she whispered. But as impatient for answers and a reprieve from big brother duties as he was, Liam knew that it was not over. The emotionless tone in her voice scared him. It made him want to stay on the Ferris wheel he’d been begging to get off of a few short minutes ago. As the music died down and their feet got closer to the ground, he suddenly felt conflicting urges to stay where he was and to rush home to his mother. As the ride came to a stop, he suddenly realized with profound certainty that this was much more than one of Lilli’s “episodes.” Something was very, very wrong.

When Liam pulled his father’s green 2002 Saab in front of their small brick house, everything seemed as it always did—quiet and predictable in their modest yet comfortable home. They had lived in a much bigger house before his father died, but Liam never minded sharing a bathroom with his mother and sister. All the toys and trinkets that had mattered to him when he was a child were rendered insignificant the moment his mother told him that his father would never come home again. As he got out of the car and began to take the front steps two at a time, he noticed that Lilli had stopped

at the tree stump his mother had cut down the week before. Sitting down, her eyes remained on the ground. Just as his mouth formed the shape of a question, she spoke.

“No, you go. I can’t see it again.”

Liam didn’t stop to ask what she meant. Whatever she meant, he was sure it was worse than he thought. He tried to hold back the swell of fear in his chest as he ran to the front door, but his emotions spun out of control the moment he tested the front door knob and found it opened—easily. They never left the front door unlocked.

When he stepped into the house, he actually felt the life, the person he had been, rush past him and out the door as his eyes took in the overturned, splintered remains of their living room. It was a feeling he’d felt only once before, when his father died. But what made it worse, what made it permanent, was lying in the middle of the floor, with its contents thrown everywhere. It was his mother’s purse, which had not been there when he left that morning.

“Mom!” he shouted as he raced up the stairs to her room. “Mom. Please!” he shouted again, but no one answered. In every room he looked, it was the same - scattered clothes, broken mirrors, and silence—a deafening silence that rang louder than the sound of his own shallow breathing.

If he took the stairs at lightning speed to make it to the second floor, an age could have passed during his descent. The entire house consisted of three bedrooms, one and a half bathrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and a small open dining area that you could see clearly from the front door. As he walked down the steps, he knew there was only one room left to check. His mind was frozen on what to hope for as his hand reached the end of the banister. If she wasn’t in the kitchen, she might have been taken, but at least there was a chance she was still alive. If she was in the kitchen, it was unthinkable.

Lilli’s words came to him just as he rounded the doorway to the kitchen.

“No, you go. I can’t see it again.”

He found his mother sitting with her feet planted on the floor, shoulder width apart, bright eyes open and cast to the ceiling, with a hole blown through the middle of her chest.

Liam braced himself against the door frame as he began to sob, the sounds seemingly emanating from a place far away from where he stood. He could not look away from the horrific image before him, the last image of his mother. He stood there with wide-eyed and tear-stained pain as the last measure of his youth drained from him like blood rushing from an open vein. When it was done, his body slid to the ground.

We are alone, he thought. *There's no one left.*

Ever since his father had died, Liam lived in fear that one day he would lose her. Unable to tear his eyes away from her body, he could hear her vehemently denying that there would ever be a time when she wasn't with them. "Never," she would say.

Never, he thought, *has finally come.*

Though Liam had been staring at her body since he entered the kitchen, he had not seen the gun in her hand until he noticed a fly land on it. Years of training to keep the gun out of Lilli's sight made him jump to his feet until he remembered that Lilli was still outside. He knew the gun well; it was his mother's. She had taught him how to use it and to keep it out of Lilli's reach when she was small.

At first his mind could not decipher the meaning of the scene before him. *Was he meant to believe that she did this to herself? Why would the people who broke into their house ransack the place and then try to make it look like a suicide? But he couldn't think straight, couldn't figure out the logic or the answer to any of the crazy questions running through his mind. Why would she kill herself? He was sure the answers were obvious; he just wasn't making sense. None of this was making any sense.*

His confusion caused him to draw closer to her body. Kneeling down beside his mother, Liam took the lifeless hand that dangled at her side, the one that was not holding the gun. Though his eyes were still filled with tears, they were no longer breaking through the barriers of his lower lids. This momentary fortitude allowed him to have the courage to look directly into her face and see her open smile. The sight of it knocked him down and back into the base cabinets. *She was smiling. She was smiling,* he thought. *She had known what was coming, and she was smiling.*

Suddenly, he remembered his mother's constant warning every time they went to the shooting range. "*Don't pick up a gun unless you mean to use it. There can be no hesitation. Do you understand me?*" she would ask him sternly. Liam knew Jill Knight was skilled at using a firearm. If she had a chance to draw her gun, no one could take it from her. The implications made him immediately sick and angry before their full meaning could even register.

As if retching the contents of his stomach into the kitchen sink made room for clarity, he suddenly understood the reason behind her smile. She had killed herself. She had done this to herself, on purpose. He threw up again in a wave of protest at the notion that she would abandon them, even as the resentment of her betrayal took root. When he was done, he didn't want to turn around, didn't want to face her.

How could she do this? She wouldn't do this. She promised.

Holding himself up at the sink, his thoughts turned to Lilli. *Is this what she saw?*, he wondered, fighting a new wave of nausea. *No wonder she cried like that. No wonder...* Rather than try to sort out the conflict of thoughts and emotions inside him, he decided to check on Lilli and make sure that she remained outside while he tried to figure out what to do next.

As he peered over his shoulder toward the doorway, his eyes caught the folded cuff of his mother's sweatshirt, which was turquoise save for the blood, and a little corner of white paper that was peeking out. He knew his mother hid things in the cuff of her sleeve all the time; it was one of the many old lady habits Liam enjoyed teasing her about. He stared at the white edge of paper for a long time, warring with his own feelings of anger and grief before simple curiosity forced him to bend down and retrieve it. As his fingers curved around the edge of her sleeve, he could feel something flat and hard inside. When he rolled down her sleeve to get it, the key to his gym locker at school slipped out before he could fully unroll the note. When he did, it unleashed a new avalanche of questions upon heartbreak over questions.

In his mother's tiny cursive handwriting, the note read, '*Go now. Protect her.*' Liam felt a new level of understanding peel back in his mind as he read her note again. He began to see the very real possibility that perhaps his mother

had not wanted to do this to herself. Perhaps she was forced by the same people who came into their home. The same people who she wanted him to protect Lilli from now. Liam grabbed the key off the floor before rising to meet his mother's eyes one last time. They looked so different from how they had even two minutes ago and held so much he couldn't understand, couldn't handle right now. He closed his eyes and softly kissed her on her forehead before running out of his home for what he knew would be the last time.

Liam closed the front door behind him and turned to find Lilli sitting exactly where he left her twenty minutes before. He had only two objectives at that point - making sure that she was safe, and getting the hell out of there. As Liam scanned the neighborhood for anything suspicious, he took in the studied quiet of his block. There was no one on the street at 11:23 am on a beautiful Sunday morning. *Where is everyone*, he wondered, suddenly wary of the neighbors with whom he had grown up. *How had no one heard the gunshot? Why didn't anyone call the police?*

The tremor in his neighbors' curtains gave credence to the sensation that they were being watched, but no one would step outside to help them. This realization came over him with a bitterness that cast itself over all the sorrow he held inside. *They had all been witnesses*, he guessed, *but they would no longer be friends.*

Watching Liam as he crossed the small front lawn to reach her, Lilli was struck by how much older her brother looked compared to just a few hours ago. Though his straight black hair hung as sloppy and heavy as it always did over his blue-green eyes, there was none of the playful nonchalance that usually characterized her brother's disposition. His hair was slick, spiked, and jet black with sweat, and it framed the angles of his face in a way that made her easy-going brother look cold and menacing. But it wasn't a surprise, Lilli could see everything Liam felt on his face—anger, sorrow, betrayal, and a ferocity emerging that she did not understand. Seeing her brother so unlike himself made Lilli's face crumple in agony as she trembled under the weight of her own choices.

“I’m sorry, Liam,” she begged in between sobs. “I know you’re mad at me for not telling you. Mom told me that if I did, they would kill you. She said I had to be strong enough... strong enough to save you.”

“Shhh, Lilli. It’s all right. We’ll talk about this later. Don’t cry. Shhh.”

Lilli knew Liam meant his response to be soothing, but his words came out cold, devoid of any life or feeling behind them. When she looked up to search his face and understand the hollowness in his voice, she found him scanning the street with the same look of fierceness. Something in the clenched set of his jaw made her finally understand. He was determined, to keep her alive, to protect the only family he had left.

“We need to go,” he said, as he led her to the car.

“Where?”

“I don’t know, Lilli. I don’t know.”

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