



a novel

The

ATLAS of

UNTOLD

STORIES

SARA BRUNSVOLD

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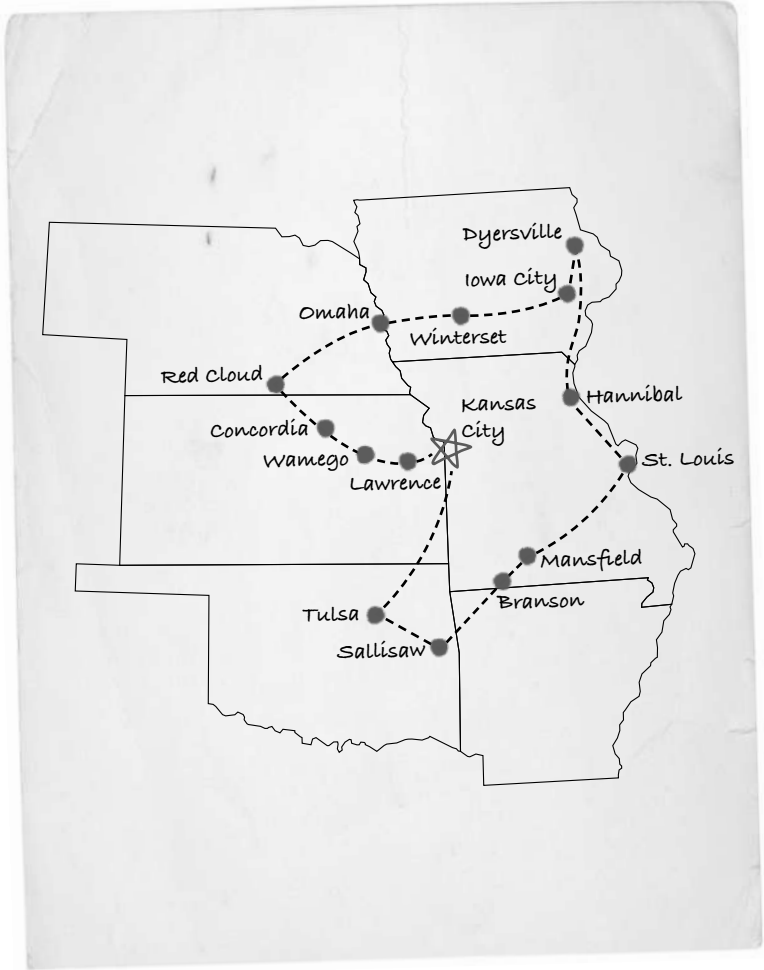
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For my daughters.
Who teach each other,
and who teach me.



Sara Brunsvold, The Atlas of Untold Stories
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1



Strange how an empty room could be haunted by sound, especially a sound as whispery and distant as the *shiff* of sand between the bowls of an hourglass. Tendrils of the memory prickled Edie Vance's skin. She hugged her arms to her stomach. The Persian rug under her feet still bore the indents from the weight of her mother's grand mahogany desk. Her spirit zapped back to those afternoons decades prior.

Her eight-year-old form in the wingback chair in the corner, in the room but out of the way, the chair far too big for her body, and the book open on her lap far too dense for her comprehension. Across the room, in the soft touch of light from the bay window, her only remaining parent sat bent over an English major's research paper, red pen scratching across it. Between them was the antique hourglass, enthroned on the corner of the imposing desk. She could not see her mother without first seeing it. Every grain that fell was one second less of her time allotted in her mother's presence. The sand ran faster than her eyes across the page. The page could never hold her attention for long anyway. None of the books in her mother's ample collection lining the walls ever had pictures.

And none of those minutes measured out by the hourglass included a glance from her mother, not until the last grain had slipped to the bottom bowl.

“Did you enjoy your book, Edith?” her mother would ask. *Your book*, as if Edie had any rights to it.

Edie took her time answering. The longer the wait, the longer her mother’s eyes had rested upon her.

Many decades removed from those afternoons, Edie stood freely in the middle of the study and breathed in what once was so real in that space. The desk, the books, the wingback chair, the silent cascade of sand were all gone. The last grain had fallen, for good. Still she waited for her mother’s eyes to fall upon her. Could her mother see her now, through the veil between eternity and present?

A knock on the open door drew her attention.

“Me,” Grant said. “It’s quarter to two. Don’t want to be late.”

“Coming, dear.”

He adjusted his bifocals on the bridge of his nose and swept his gaze across the room. “Seems bigger now that it’s empty.”

“Bigger in so many ways,” she murmured.

“Want me to take the rug downstairs, put it with everything else?”

The plush piling cushioned the soles of her flats. She curled her toes as if attempting to root herself in deeper. The ornate gold and burgundy paisley had elevated the richness of the wood furniture with which her mother once surrounded herself with pride, a victory statement after being left with nothing when her husband abandoned her and their two small children. The rug was all that remained of the Moria Mondell dynasty. The walls bore scars from the dismantled bookshelves. The books, once so prized, faced an unknown fate at the estate sale.

“I’ll bring it down later,” she replied to his offer.

“Meet you downstairs.” Promise given, he headed back toward the stairs.

His occasional habit of shortening sentences, leaving off the subject and sometimes the predicate, had been the first hash mark

against him on her mother's mental scorecard. The second, his openness to any financial advice other than Warren Buffett's.

She squeezed her arms tighter, traced her fingertips along her sides. If given the choice between her husband and her mother, she would always choose her husband.

So why did she still dream of those afternoons?

2

Chloe Vance traced her Pitt pen along the penciled sketch marks she had made earlier on the page, angling the ultra-fine point down and to the left. She then carefully cross-hatched over the dark line to convey the softness of the jawline she had known all of her twenty-six years. The softness of her mom's jaw complemented the delicate nature of her fingertips, which always bore some dainty shade of pink or red. Maybe only artists noticed such details.

The framed photo of her mom sat to the right of her sketchbook. Without question, the photo was the best Chloe had ever taken of her. It provided the perfect reference for what she had tried three times so far to bring to the page as a surprise parting gift for her mom. She needed something of great value to demonstrate that her talents and gifting could be a blessing to others, a way to help them notice the world, and themselves, in richer ways.

If only she could get her mom's eyes right. She could never quite capture all the nuance they possessed. The eyes contained the light of a person, a collision of past and future, with soul secrets that couldn't stay hidden entirely. Where words failed, drawings spoke. They could speak a language all their own. They held the striking tension of whimsy and reverence, hope and fear, longing

and duty. To express all that required the right combinations of forms and shadows.

Maybe the fourth attempt would be different.

She sang along to the praise music rising from her phone. She worshiped with her voice as well as her pen, pouring out the talents her Creator had entrusted to her, believing that someday others would see it as wise stewardship as well. Others including those who shared her last name.

Her bearded dragon supervised from under his terrarium lights.

“What do you think so far, Jeremy?” She kept her eyes on the paper, guiding the pen with a loose wrist. “This time will be different,” she said, more in a prayer of assurance than in conversation.

It had to be different. Because *everything* was about to be different.

A chime cut into the song, bringing her sketching to a momentary halt. The final of the three reminders she had set blazed across the screen of her phone, in all caps: FOR REAL THIS TIME: LEAVE.

She sighed. Time bore down on two o’clock, and getting to the Kansas City Central Library down Main Street would take more minutes than she had before her mom arrived, promptly as always. Of all the times not to ruffle her mom, the day she told her she was leaving the country was it.

She slipped her pen back among its cohorts in the Gates Bar-B-Q cup at the top of her desk, then tapped pause on her playlist. “She’s going to be mad, Jeremy.”

He flicked his tongue, wishing her luck.

“Thank you, bud.” She stepped over to his abode and stroked her fingertips down his spiny back. “I think I’m ready. But probably not.”

In the week she’d had to prepare for their Friday afternoon coffee date, she had tried on several potential ways to break the news of her acceptance of the elementary art instructor job at the Redeemer International School of Prague, even practiced a few

with her dad, but none of them had held up against the imagined scrutiny of Edie Vance. Her mom hadn't traveled farther than the other side of Missouri. It was one thing to tell her mom she was going halfway around the world. It was another to tell her she would be gone for two years. Still another to reveal she had to raise her own salary to be on mission at RISP.

All the things she needed to say bucked her mom's idea of what Chloe's life should be like "by this point." That seemed to be one of Edie Vance's most-repeated phrases—"by this point"—a constant reminder to Chloe that she was in some way always missing a mark she'd never agreed to meet.

"I had been married for four years by this point"—said on Chloe's last birthday. "All the girls your age have an advanced degree by this point"—said the previous Thanksgiving. "Aren't you tired of being a barista by this point?"—said more than once. Her mom's measure of an adult had nothing to do with mastering the art of conveying a magnificent collision in another's eyes or the ability to teach others how to do it.

Chloe stopped in her kitchen before heading out the door. Two containers of protein balls waited on the counter. So simple and easy to make, and a runaway bestseller with her coworker Sori's MBA classmates, especially as spring finals approached. Thanks to Sori, she had learned that her customers' wallets opened widest when presented with a healthy, filling snack in the most stressful points of the semester. Two protein balls huddled together in adorable little cellophane bags, and each bag was adorned with a sticker featuring an inspirational quote. The added touch made the treats all the more sellable, Sori said. After two years, the joint endeavor had given Sori real-world business experience and Chloe a savings surplus that would cover her flight to Prague, with some to spare.

She tucked the containers into her backpack and paused at the small mirror by the front door. Red curls as gregarious as ever. Freckles a little darker after spending more time in the embrace

of the outdoors. But her eyes—those eyes. Emerald glinting from a dream so close the taste never left her tongue.

So close, yet one giant mom-shaped step away.

My boldness is in you, God.

She pulled open the door, then trooped down the stairs of her fourplex.

Out on the porch, her landlord, Seymour Bove, looked up from his usual chair where he worked on his afternoon crossword puzzle. Thick-frame glasses dominated his face. His short white hair offset his deep bronze complexion.

“Afternoon, Seymour!”

“Purse,” he reminded her.

Her shoe scuffed against the concrete as she came to a halt. “Right.” She set down her backpack against the brick facade and hustled back up the stairs. Her purse hung on the hook Seymour had installed by that little mirror specifically to help her remember to take her purse. Most days, it worked. Other days, it took a village.

By the time she arrived back on the porch, Seymour had helped himself to a treat. He stood by the door holding her backpack, crumbs on his lips.

“You’re eating my fundraising,” she playfully reprimanded him.

“This batch is better,” he replied as if not hearing. “What’s that I taste?”

She turned toward her bike in the opposite corner of the porch. “Almond extract. Like it?”

“Not bad. You late for work again?”

“Late, yes, but to meet my mom at the library. Figured I’d drop off more product with Sori while I’m there. She’s working the coffee shop today.”

“You’re late meeting your mom?” He gave a low whistle.

“I question my choices too.” She unlocked her bike and wheeled it toward him.

“You have a car, you know.” He nodded toward the bright yellow Xterra in the driveway, wedged between their fourplex and the

neighboring one. “Four wheels’re better’n two when you’re late. Not to mention an engine.”

“Goldie and I have an agreement. I only drive her on the week-ends. Gotta make her last.”

“Junkyard don’t care if a car runs or not.”

“She’s got plenty of life left, Seymour. Something I’m sure you can appreciate.”

He looked up at her over the rims of his glasses. “Just for that, I’m taking another package.” He swiped a cellophane-wrapped treat, then handed her the backpack.

She chuckled and zipped the bag. If her mom had been there to witness his act, she would have been incredulous. But a ten-dollar bill would “somehow” appear under Chloe’s door before she got home, more than three times the value of the snacks.

Chloe strapped on her backpack and lifted her bike down the stairs. “See you later, Seymour. Keep everyone in line while I’m gone.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.”