



THE STORYTELLER

BRANDON HOBSON



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A Town Called Poisonberry

I have dreams that Moon and I came here from the past.

In these dreams, my sister, Moon, and I come from a different time period, over two hundred years ago, when we lived in the south before our tribe was removed and forced west by President Andrew Jackson.

And here we are now, in real life, where we live in this desert town in New Mexico called Poisonberry. It's called Poisonberry because there are nasty, bloodred poisonous berries growing all around town. Their shrubs are covered in thorns and grow quickly, sprouting through the cracks in the streets, twisting around houses and buildings, and growing as high as ten feet. Exterminators wearing protective masks and chemical-resistant, baggy clothes have sprayed them, cut them down, destroyed them, but their juice emits a vapor in the air that spreads and makes them multiply even worse.

The weather made it this way. All the rain over the past ten years, even here in the desert, made things grow that have never grown before. My dad says the earth deals with trauma just like people do. The earth remembers how we've treated it for thousands and thousands of years, and now it reacts to the trauma: We have tempestuous seasons, strong rains, high winds, furious storms. The flooding is getting worse. The tornadoes are rolling farther across the country.

Moon and I have lived here in Poisonberry our whole lives. In my dreams, soldiers made us walk until we fell down somewhere in the middle of the desert. In real life, my grandma has told us stories about how our ancestors were removed from their homes. As far back as I can remember, she's always told us stories because we've had to deal with one of the hardest things ever, a tragedy.

When Moon and I were little, our mom disappeared.

Native women go missing all over the country. Nobody seems to be doing much about it. In my mom's case, the sheriff and the police have given up trying to find her. But it's not just her. My friend Sheila has an aunt who is missing. A few other Native kids at my school have relatives who are missing. It's been going on way too long.

I wish I had memories of my mom, but I was just a baby when she vanished. Moon vaguely remembers sitting on her lap, being rocked, listening to her hum. My dad doesn't like to talk about it too much, because it's so painful, but once, he told us that she read and sang to us every night. I wish I remembered

that. My memories, instead, involve our dad crying in the house, on their anniversary or on holidays. Our grandma still cries sometimes, too.

So the way it all happened, our mom disappeared and nobody could find her. She was in class at nursing school and didn't come home. Two days after she disappeared, her car was found a few miles away, and she wasn't inside it.

We don't really understand what happened. I wanted my dreams to be true so I could have the power to step through time. I wanted to go back to the past and see her and tell her to stay home from class that night.

It's hard to understand sadness, and how someone can just disappear.

In my dreams, our mom and dad came from the past as well. We live together with our Cherokee ancestors. We are all together, the four of us, and we're happy.

A teacher once told me I daydream a lot and create pretend scenarios in my mind, which is fine, but the teacher thought I couldn't tell the difference between what was real and what wasn't. I know the difference. I know life is life and history is history. But still, I can't help but think of what my life would have been like, back in history. My Cherokee ancestors spent their days hunting for food, skinning deer or elk, and cooking it. They ate under the night sky and listened to elders tell stories or sing. Then everything changed when President Jackson ordered his soldiers to remove the Cherokees from their land,

west to Oklahoma, where generations later my mom and dad grew up.

I wish I could go back to the past and fight those soldiers or find a way to trick them. I sometimes pretend I've time-traveled from two hundred years ago and I'm living in this strange world. Once, across the street from the mall, I walked up to the drive-through window of a fast-food restaurant and tried to order a cheeseburger. The guy working there stuck his head out the window and said, "Ya gotta come inside to order on foot." He wore a rumpled paper hat and his eyeglasses were at an angle. I could see the sweat glistening on his forehead.

"I need lunch," I told him. "You cook meat?"

"What are you talking about?" he whined.

Cars were honking at me. I turned and stared at them, a line of automobiles. A man got out of his car and put his hands on his hips.

"Ya gotta come inside to order," the hat guy kept saying from the window. "This lane is for cars."

Another time, at a parade downtown, when I pretended to be from the past, there was a white man dressed as an Indian Chief mascot walking by. I mean, he was wearing a headdress and everything, which is disrespectful to Native culture. I picked up the first thing I could find—a rock about the size of a baseball—and charged him, hitting him in the arm with the rock until the guy got really mad and started yelling at me and pushing me away.

Not long after that, my dad took me to a behavior

specialist, and it turns out I'm introverted and daydreamy and sad a lot, and it can be hard for me to look people directly in the eyes when they talk to me. I like to do things most other kids don't care about, like making long lists of my favorite songs or movies or sitting in my room and talking to my poster of Michael Jordan.

The behavior specialist prescribed a type of medication that I take every day and said I can ask for extra time to do homework and extra test time if I need it. I guess the medication helps me feel better, but I don't really know because it's hard for me to remember what I was like before. It turns out there are lots of kids like me, but I don't know any of them—at least not at Yona Middle School.

My therapist, Kari, says I have anxiety, which can make school and life harder in many ways. She says everyone has anxiety at some point in their lives and it's nothing to be ashamed of. I have trouble making friends, although I have a few good friends at school who don't tease me. I also miss my mom a lot, and I tell Kari about that, too. Kari's nice about it, but that doesn't stop me from wishing it was my mom I was talking to, not her.

Moon has a much easier time than I do at school and around other kids. My grandma says the day after our mom disappeared, Moon stayed in her room all day and wouldn't come out. She never even talked that day. Dad kept banging on the door for her to unlock it and let him in, but she wouldn't. He had to go outside around to the window and force

it open, only to find her hiding under her bed with her stuffed animals.

Our dad has never been good about talking about our mom being gone. He's not too good at talking to us about anything serious, to be honest. He means well; he just has a hard time expressing his feelings. He doesn't think I notice this, but I do.

According to my grandma, this wasn't always the case. "It's normal to be afraid and sad," my dad told Moon in a soft voice once he got into her room that first night, as she crawled from underneath the bed. "We're all sad about your mom being gone. I want her to come back, too. We have to learn to accept what we are given in this world."

Unsure of what to say next, he hugged her and left the room.

Weeks passed without a trace of our mom. Months passed, and then a year. *We all became numb from crying*, Grandma told me later. I think you can only cry so much before your body gives up and you feel like all you can do is sleep. I don't like to think about our mom dying, or being kidnapped, but here we are, still without her. Here we are, *ten whole years* after our mom disappeared, still trying to figure out where she is.

As I said, the police gave up on the case a long time ago, which makes me mad.

My history teacher says there are thousands of Native women who go missing every year. Where do they go? Some live, some die, but Moon and I don't want to lose hope. We wonder whether she's alive or dead even though our dad gave up his hope when the police considered the case cold.

I haven't tried to talk to Dad about it in a long time. The last time I tried, I saw the tears gather in his eyes.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said.

Still, he must wonder, too.

I wonder all the time.