

Chapter One

The Story of Almus Raine

The spectral auburn rays cast their shadow over Almus's room, waking him up to another day of uncertainty. As he heard the slow, mechanical clanking of his machines working in the background, so too the animals on the farm awoke.

Another day in his converted downstairs bedroom, the family library. His bookcase remained in its place, but the large table had gone to make room for a bed enough for him to sleep on. Bronwyn, his wife, had long since given up their upstairs bedroom, sleeping in the next room in an uncomfortable wooden chair. She had become used to this but still longed for the day when her husband would recover.

Almus steadied himself, aware his body was fighting him all the way. He went over to shave in the kitchen sink. Bronwyn had fixed a small mirror for him on the wall; this was just one of many adjustments the family had to make for him in the short-term.

As with every day, he stared at his rust-coloured

fingernails, hoping his infection would soon leave him. After a comfortable shave, Almus went outside to catch the morning sun, allowing the rays to caress his tan-tinted skin, then returning to his room to the sound of his two excited working sheepdogs, Mollie and Aratus, leaping and barking at him.

This was his routine. If it rained, he would stay inside, but his working life as he knew it was over. He had been a promising handfacturer in Town, specialising in commercial engineering, but he'd taken over the family nine-acre farm from his ageing father. He had married Bronwyn, his long-term sweetheart, some years later and raised two young daughters, Foxy, his oldest and Persephone, with great joy.

With grease in his blood, he could not resist improving the farm machines, utilising new industrial methods to improve the collection of milk from their Overmorrow dairy cows. He also set about working with other handfacturers to increase the efficiency of collecting and distributing eggs, his machines being ahead of their time.

Almus owned three work suits, no more. His personal tailor on Merchant Street had altered his favourite one for the annual herders' convention, a regional social event, but

there it remained motionless on its hangar in the wardrobe. He was now too unwell to attend.

Moving forward was difficult for him as he adjusted to this alternative lifestyle, unable to help his daughters with their chores, often stopping to clench his stomach and sitting down to recover.

Today was a better day. Never one to leave old habits behind, he sat by his desk to read the morning newspaper. Bronwyn brought him a fresh pot of Auld Aviemore, allowing the bags to stew, just the way he liked it, with two slices of buttered toast. His eyes caught the headlines on the front page.

'Government Scientist Remains Missing!' He turned the page over to see what other stories interested him. Crime, always a topic which took up valuable column inches, and a growing empty homes scandal, occupied the following pages. Almus returned to the front page to read the cover story.

"Manpurial has a problem on his hands. Hope he can get to the bottom of it," he said, as Bronwyn read the story over his shoulder, her hands gently rubbing his neck. "This

disappearing business, it's most odd."

The missing scientist, Dr Clement Attwater, had led the government's response into the strange phenomenon but his mysterious departure from the mainland was causing much concern. His research into the Fade or the Sepia, was the same condition Almus had since succumbed to, caused by overseeing the large handfacturing machines out of Town. Whilst he read the morning paper, Bronwyn kept her thoughts to herself, knowing something terrible had afflicted him.

Almus put the paper aside and began writing his diary. Monday 3rd April 1837. His physician had asked him to keep a record three times a day to observe any changes in his health. There was little anyone could do for him other than to make him feel comfortable. He considered this morning's headline. Whoever this Attwater was, his loss was a significant setback to finding a cure or remedy for the problem.

Following Attwater's research, doctors had discovered the Sepia had three distinct stages. Almus had the earliest common symptoms of discoloured fingernails. He had hoped it would not progress any further, but soon he had to hide his disappointment when he learnt that the staining had spread

onto his skin.

The government's efforts to manage the Sepia had been made worse by the additional epidemic of mental health, leaving hospices and charitable foundations unable to cope. It was the last stage to which no-one had the answer: Stage Three, the onset of fading and the sufferers' eventual and sudden disappearance. They recorded cases of fading on the Register of the Lost with no rational explanation for it. Medical professionals and others could only surmise where people faded to, leaving families to mourn their lost relative with frustration adding to their grief. No one knew how the fading occurred, but the issues of rising crime, mental health and the Sepia were inexplicably linked, as one affected the other.

Almus was never one to give up, always having time for his workers. He was keen to listen to their stories, making them the centre of his attention whilst the Sepia took over his health. Despite this he kept strong, facing his fears, not wanting to upset his loving wife or children.

Faced with such uncertainty, Almus remained resolute about maintaining his dignity and character. He fought on as

his condition worsened. He was not in pain, but he felt lighter, becoming woven into time itself, as though it were eating away at his very fabric. Almus had now entered the fading part of the condition, with the symptoms working rapidly through his system. His physician, powerless to intervene, visited him to observe the staining which had spread across his entire body.

Using whatever time he had remaining, he dictated his will. Bronwyn could no longer hold back the sorrow or shield the children from the reality of their father's illness. Foxy would take her sister out to play whenever she saw her mother upset but felt a sense of dread and braced herself for the worst.

It was now almost too late to consider a move to a rural hospice, as Almus insisted he wished to stay in his own home. In the meantime, the family worked around him, his daughters recalling their day to him, and Persephone desperate to play cards with him. Not wanting to scare her away, he would see two games through and then take his rest. Persephone was young, not able to see what was unfolding before her, but Foxy took on more responsibility, enabling her mother to sleep in

her father's chair whilst he rested on his bed.

Autumn passed with no further change, and later, summer arrived, leaving Almus sufficiently energised to take encouraging short walks around the farmhouse but this was enough to leave him drained for the day. As always, Bronwyn brought him tea and some toast. Whether he enjoyed it one could not say, as he felt it passing through his body, not even nourishing him. Clenching his stomach out of Bronwyn's sight, he asked for his children to sit with him for a while.

He sat upright in his bed, holding back his condition with every effort he could muster. Foxy and Persephone ran into his room, jumping onto his bed. Bronwyn kept up her pretence of strength, despite the feeling of emptiness, whilst the children laughed, as did Almus. She held his hand, listening to their conversation.

"And what did he do?" he asked.

"The cow licked Mollie! You should have seen her face!" said Persephone, laughing uncontrollably.

Almus smiled as Mollie trotted in, before being shooed off the bed, but kept his own thoughts hidden, his brown

stained pupils moving rapidly to each person: originally his eyes had been green.

Then, asking for a few sips of water before returning the glass on the locker, he gazed into each one of his family's eyes. With one last look, he captured them all in his mind like a photogram and, in a moment, disappeared with a bright, white flash out of their sight.

Bronwyn screamed in disbelief. Mollie barked as Persephone burst into tears. Foxy remained motionless as the noise engulfed her, sitting in silent shock for almost an hour.

"He's gone. He's gone," Foxy said at last, unable to take in anything more, not wishing to touch her father's glass, shying well away from it.

Her blouse soaked through and her nose running uncontrollably brought Bronwyn back to their present and difficult reality. She picked herself up, doing her best to console Persephone, who had become hysterical, shrieking and wailing to the point of becoming unwell.

"Please stop!" said Bronwyn, holding her youngest daughter until she could collect herself.

As the dark evening clouds engulfed the farm, Bronwyn asked a herder to fetch the doctor so he could record and certify the time of passing. The doctor wasted no time in coming over as Almus was a popular man in the community. However, the doctor struggled to conduct his business, knowing Almus well, the Sepia had placed such burdens upon him. He recorded the time of his disappearance in an official book. Another victim of this terrible, unknown sickness.

Chapter Two

Foxy Raine

After some time, Bronwyn cancelled the lease on her husband's machines to reduce any risk from the condition by downsizing to a traditional farming set-up with her two daughters and remaining herdsmen. In the meantime, the family continued with their lives, with both sisters helping their mother and the other workers with their responsibilities.

Foxy, being the oldest, was further tasked with handling the various purchase orders. She would struggle with calculating their monthly income, entering the numbers carefully in their respective entry in her father's brown leathered accounts book, straining her eyes as she did so, often falling asleep on the table.

She did, however, love to feed the animals on the farm, getting up early in the morning to sneak in the odd treat or two, sliced carrots and apples for the horses and biscuits for the dogs.

These habits were difficult to break and no-one had any reason to speak an unkind word about this exceptionally

strong-minded but caring young woman, full of life, who earned the respect of everyone. However, no-one ever saw her working through her grief, staring into the night sky, ruminating over her father's disappearance before struggling to sleep.

Her real name was Alicia, but most knew her as Foxy. It was a pet-name given to her by Persephone whilst playing hide and seek in the woods when they were young. Alicia had crouched behind a log with some fallen branches, throwing over brown and orange leaves to hide herself. Persephone had frantically searched, turning around to see the oddly contoured shape of a person, almost like a hibernating fox. Foxy leapt out from the pile, making her sister jump, shaking down the leaves from her clothes and taking some from her hair.

"You're like a fox!" said Persephone enthusiastically. This moniker would later become 'Foxy' and so the name stuck.

Foxy never fully understood what had happened to her father. Almus was in his late forties and looked after his health well. He never smoked or drank liquor, if those were the reasons for a person's downfall, so she wondered how something so violent as this condition could have overtaken

him so easily. Surely there had to be a reason why this had happened?

When her father contracted the Sepia, the family encountered a wall of incompetence by the medical profession, who were unable to provide any answers about his condition or a prognosis. Foxy had put it down to a lack of will present to compel them to understand it, but the entire episode of her father's condition troubled her deeply. If anyone knew anything about the facts and figures of the condition, then the answer to these questions would have to be found in Town. Whoever Almus had been before his passing, he had since long left them. Foxy resented how people forgot her father as a man with an adventurous look in his eye, the way he had been when he was in full health and still with them.

Her mother always did her best to carry on in her Lost husband's name but hid her grief away from her daughters less they too surrendered to their own hopelessness. The last thing she wanted was her daughters falling unwell with their own mental health problems, something she could not afford. Foxy often shared her frustrations about the lack of knowledge about the condition with her mother, who tried to console her.

One evening, Foxy confessed how she felt about her father's disappearance. She had knocked on the door of her mother's room; it was coming onto nine in the evening and almost time to sleep.

Though she entered the room in her usual way, Bronwyn sensed immediately that something was troubling her daughter.

"Alicia, you know how well we've kept going since your father was Lost. You remember how we watched him disappear right in front of us?" said Bronwyn.

"Yes but surely someone can tell us what happened? Why him?" Foxy asked. Bronwyn took her breath, placing her towel gently on the bed.

"Alicia, you've always been so strong and you're right. This whole Sepia business is beyond us. Give it some time and if you still feel you need take some sort of action, do what you have to do," she said.

Three years passed, and the farm continued to grow, but the work became harder as Foxy felt her burden becoming heavier. The time felt right. It was time to leave. Foxy, now twenty-one, could no longer wrestle with her questions about

the Sepia. She trusted Persephone to take over her responsibilities and so, on one Friday in mid-Autumn, Foxy came once more to speak with her mother as she had done three years before. She knocked on her mother's room door as she had before. Bronwyn ushered her in, fearing the subject of Foxy's departure rearing its head again. Bronwyn had seen this look before so many times.

"You've decided, haven't you?" said Bronwyn.

"I have to go. Maybe I'll find someone in Town who can help me," replied Foxy.

"Alicia, you're such a wonderful daughter. Your father would be so proud of you to see you today. You remind me so much of him," she continued. "Persephone will miss you, as will I. Here, take some money and some good clothes. I don't want you catching your death because of not having the right ones." She pulled Foxy close, looked into her eyes, and hugged her.

"I intend to leave for Town first thing on Monday. If I find what I'm looking for, I'll come back. I'll send a telegram," said Foxy. She closed the door behind her as

Bronwyn sat down in front of her mirror, burying her head in her hands.

Foxy packed some clothes in her rucksack; not wanting to leave anything out, she slung a small string bag over her jacket, enough for her counting beads, bait, wire-cutters, a penknife, and other such things a young woman might need. Life on the farm had taught her how to take care of herself, but she was not a 'Town' girl by any means. Having packed everything, she slept well for the first time in a long while.

After eating a hastily prepared oat breakfast, she waited for the carriage to take her to the station. The sound of heavy hooves pounding the pathway brought her to her senses. It was time for her to leave everything behind her. She half-smiled but held back tears of her own, embracing her mother and sister. The two dogs sniffed and barked, leaping up excitedly as Persephone struggled to wipe her tears whilst simultaneously controlling the dogs. Foxy teased them with a biscuit before mounting the carriage as they ran back to her sister's side. The farm was all she knew. This was a significant change in her life, but also the first step in a journey that would take her on an epic adventure.

Chapter Three

The Journey

Foxy travelled to the station, taking in the countryside and catching the last views of the mountains as she passed by. She remembered the times when she and her sister used to fish by the river with the other herders. She remembered reading under the solitary oak tree just by the gate on sunny days. It was autumn now, just before the rains started. She wondered where the time had gone and where this adventure would lead.

She arrived at the station thankful that she did not have to wait long as the direct train would take her less than five hours in all to reach Town. If she missed it, she would have to either take the local service that stopped everywhere, and then change half-way. Not liking this idea at all, she was glad she arrived in good time to take the earlier train which called at the four major stops. However, it would still be a long journey and Foxy was now on her own.

The Station Master blew his whistle. 'All aboard!' he shouted loudly. "All stops for Town! Please have your tickets ready for inspection. Thank you."

With that, the train bellowed and moved. She had started her journey. She was in a roomy compartment, enough to have some decent leg-space. Given the early start of day, there were only a few people who had boarded the train with her. Some passengers were already in their seats having joined earlier, most likely travelling into the suburbs for work. She could see some well-dressed men, probably herders, with office jobs in Town.

Foxy remembered Almus had made similar trips into the busyness of Town and wondered what he had done and if they even knew him. She felt like a goldfish in a small tank peering out into the world, unsure of her new role. She no longer had the protection of the familiar surroundings of the farm and found herself as a single young woman making her way into the world of Overmorrow. It would be an education for sure and she had no idea whom she would meet or what she would find.

Foxy gazed out of the window, now half an hour into her journey. She recognised some landmarks near her home, such as the four large windmills dotted around the small holdings, but as these faded from sight, she found herself with a new sense of purpose. She had never been to Town before.

Her eyes became heavy as she took in the surrounding landscape, gradually falling asleep, wakingasleep, waking up with just two stations to go before her destination. She stretched and yawned. It so happened she had been lucky to have no-one in her compartment, so she had felt able to put her feet up. But when the train pulled into the next stop, her journey, which had been mostly pleasant until now, began to cause her some concern. More people joined the train and took up their seats. Three young men sat next to her in the adjacent seats.

The men were office workers, though definitely not middle managers. At first, their conversation revolved around what each had been doing over the weekend. Initially, the conversation seemed placid and innocent, almost mellow in tone. They laughed and joked, perhapsjoked, perhaps typical for men talking about their lives, until one of them said something about a chap whom they knew who had tawny eyes. One of them attempted to change the conversation back to the weather as the clouds darkened above them, but his strategy failed. His friend continued his tirade.

"That chap Murphy has the Grege. Why can't he stay away

from the office? I don't want to catch it!" he said. Foxy had tried her best to ignore the conversation, but when she heard this, she looked across and stared at the man.

"Are you always this rude?" she asked pointedly.

The man turned across to her, flabbergasted by her remark. Who was this young lady poking her nose into their conversation? He stared back at her.

"I beg your pardon?" he said, looking at her almost mockingly, seeking approval from his friends.

"Yes, you! Whatever he's going through, he sounds braver than all of you. If you had gone through it yourself, you'd understand," said Foxy as she folded her arms and rolled her eyes at the ignorance of the man.

He coughed as he chided her. "Look, I don't know who you are, Miss, but mind your own business!" he retorted, attempting to put her in her place. Foxy became too involved to back down and after her sleep, she felt she could go toe-to-toe with anyone, particularly as this man clearly did not understand what it was like to have the condition or to

watch a parent fade from one's sight.

"Maybe when you've grown up, you won't sound like a...."
She paused before speaking again. "... a gobbling turkey!"
snapped Foxy. She was never one to insult anyone, but she
would hold her ground, no matter what.

After this, the man turned away and started a new
conversation. She hadn't thought the rebuke through, almost on
instinct, just like her namesake.

She left them to wax lyrical about their next topic
whilst keeping their eyes to themselves, but two seats further
down the carriage, a bespectacled man could not help smiling
to himself. She would never know this, but he was a hospice
worker on his way into Town.

'Good for you!' he thought to himself. 'We need people
like you in this world.' He carried on with his journey,
reading his newspaper, but the incident had probably made his
day. It was Monday and if the rains were going to come, let it
pour. It was a good way to start the week.

Foxy left the men to their conversation, giving the

occasional stare to the worker she had spoken to earlier. The man still annoyed her, but Foxy decided she had made her point and resumed looking out of the window, whilst eating a cheese sandwich. This would be her lunch, but she would have to find somewhere to eat when she arrived in Town. She thought the scenery was more interesting than staring at three gobbling turkeys puffing out their chests and making a lot of unwanted noise.

As her journey reached its end, she could see how the landscape had morphed from rural countryside to a more industrialised one. Tall water containers, chimneys and dark looking shapes had replaced the green rolling hills and windmills. She could see cobbled streets and endless rows of houses and buildings which were unfamiliar to her. She wondered how people could live in such a polluted city and not be able to breathe in the fresh country air.

The train made its way rapidly into the suburbs and then into Town. She stood up and put her rucksack onto her shoulders, tying her hair into a ponytail as she waited for the train to pull up into Gerrard's Cross Station. It had been a long and thought-provoking journey. She pushed aside the encounter on the train from her mind which had marred the

experience, wondering if this was a taste of what was to come. As she stepped off from her carriage, she could see the three men fading out of sight into the mosaic of Town.

'Gobble! Gobble! Gobble!' She thought to herself as she reachedshe reached into her pocket to retrieve her ticket. The bespectacled man saw her and did likewise, walking towards the ticket barrier as they went their separate ways, though she would never know why. Foxy had arrived, but her real journey had just begun.

Meanwhile, over in Town, a young man named Edwin Gastrell was starting his regular duties as Captain of the Town Guard.