



A SEA OF
UNSPOKEN
THINGS

A Novel

ADRIENNE
YOUNG

New York Times bestselling author of
THE UNMAKING OF JUNE FARROW

BY ADRIENNE YOUNG

A Sea of Unspoken Things

The Unmaking of June Farrow

Spells for Forgetting

Sky in the Deep

The Girl the Sea Gave Back

Fable

Namesake

The Last Legacy

Saint

A
SEA
of
UNSPOKEN THINGS



A NOVEL

ADRIENNE YOUNG



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For Adam,
my first friend, and the only one I get to keep for life—
first heartbeats to last

ONE



We were made in the dark. I used to hate it when Johnny said that, but now I know it's true.

Sunlight flickered on the windshield as I turned the wheel and the road curved, tightening. Trees pressed in like a wall on both sides of the cracked asphalt, making the old highway that snaked through the Six Rivers National Forest look impossibly narrower. I could feel that cinching in my lungs, too, the air squeezing from them just a little more the deeper into the forest I drove. I'd expected that.

From above, the little blue car would look like an insect between the giant, towering redwoods, and even just imagining it made me uneasy. I'd never liked the feeling that I couldn't see into the distance, like the whole world might have ended on the other side of those trees and I wouldn't know it. I guess, really, it had.

There was no world without Johnny.

The thought made the ache rising in my throat travel down my arms, into the fingers that curled around the smooth leather of the steering wheel. It had been three and a half months since I got the call that my brother was gone, but I'd known at least a day before that. The part of me that wasn't constructed of bone and blood had just...*known*. Maybe even down to the minute.

I glanced at the duffel bag on the passenger seat, the only luggage I'd brought for the two weeks I'd be in Six Rivers. I couldn't remember now what I'd even packed. In fact, I hadn't even been able to think of what I

might need. In the twenty years since I'd seen the tiny, claustrophobic logging town, I'd done my best to forget it. I'd avoided these winding mountain roads, using every excuse I could think of to keep from coming back to this place. But there was no denying that leaving Six Rivers and never looking back had come at a cost.

Only days after I turned eighteen, I left and never returned. I'd spent my youth hidden in the labyrinth-like forest before I'd all but clawed my way out into the light. Now, my life in San Francisco was exactly what I'd made it, as if I'd painted it onto a canvas and conjured it to life. The days that made up that version of me were filled with gallery openings, poetry readings, and cocktail hours—things that made me forget the sun-starved, evergreen-scented life I'd left behind.

But that cost—the unexpected conditions for that disentanglement—wasn't just the home I knew or the memories I'd made there. In the end, the price I'd paid had been giving up Johnny. There was a time when I thought we could never truly be separated, because we weren't just siblings. We were twins. For half of my life, there was nowhere I existed without him, and it didn't feel like we were knit together by only blood and genetics. We were connected in places that no one could see, in ways that I still didn't understand.

There had always been a kind of blur that existed between us. The anecdotal stories about twins portrayed on viral social media posts and afternoon talk shows weren't just entertaining tales that skirted the line of the supernatural. For me, they'd always been real. Sometimes, terrifyingly so.

It wasn't until I left that I felt some semblance of separation from Johnny. In a way, it felt like he had slowly been scraped from the cracks of my life, just like Six Rivers. In the beginning, he would make the trip down to the city on visits that were hardly ever planned. I would come home to find him cooking in my kitchen or standing fully clothed in the shower with a wrench to tighten the dripping faucet. He would just appear out of nowhere before vanishing like a ghost, and he never stayed long. He was a creature of quiet, unnerved by the buzz of the city and the twinkling lights it

cast on the bay. The visits became less and less frequent, and he hadn't shown up like that in years now.

Johnny wasn't one for phone calls or emails. Half the time, he didn't even respond to text messages. So, my only window into his quiet life in Northern California was the Instagram account he kept updated. From 349 miles away, the bits I got to see of my brother's existence in the redwoods were through the lens of the old analog camera we'd found sitting on top of a neighbor's garbage can when we were sixteen years old. Twenty years later, he had still refused to switch to digital, and after he started the Instagram account, it soon became filled with those little bits of the world that only Johnny seemed to notice. Sunlight gleaming on dewdrops. A swath of lace-like frost clinging to a pane of glass. The owls.

Always, the owls.

Even when we were kids, I knew that Johnny was different. He'd always found comfort in places that most deemed lonely, disappearing for hours without a word, and I would *feel* him go quiet. That stillness would settle right between my ribs, and when I couldn't stand it anymore, I'd go and find him lying on the hot roof of our cabin or tangled high in the branches of a sixty-foot tree. He'd been pulling away from the world for as long as I could remember, but when the photographs of the owls started popping up on his feed, I remember the cold sensation that filled me. He was drawn to them—the secretive creatures that only came out in the darkness. And deep down I knew that it was because he was one of them.

If you'd have told me when we were kids that Johnny would end up a photographer, I probably would have thought it was both surprising and not at all. Growing up, I was the artist. My hands itched for pencils and paintbrushes the way Johnny's mind itched for the quiet. In the end, both Johnny and I wound up trying to capture moments and people and places. Me with my canvas, him with his camera. But eventually, the drawings that filled my notebooks felt like the blueprints of a prison—a way for me to plan my escape. And eventually, I did.

Johnny had spent the last two years working remotely for a conservation project documenting five different owls in and around Six Rivers National

Forest. The opportunity had seemed so serendipitous that I should have known there was something wrong with it. Johnny had never been lucky. Stars didn't align for him and opportunities didn't just drop into his lap. So, when I heard that Quinn Fraser, director of biology at California Academy of Sciences, was looking for someone to cover the Six Rivers area, it should have felt off. But only two weeks after I'd sent Johnny's work to Quinn, Johnny was hired.

I hadn't been able to shake the feeling that in a way, that made all of this my fault. The project was the first job Johnny ever had that wasn't logging, and at the time I'd thought that maybe, finally, it would be the thing that got him out of Six Rivers. But only weeks away from the study's end, Johnny was out on a shoot in Trentham Gorge when a rogue bullet from a hunter's gun slammed into his chest.

My fingers slipped from the steering wheel, instinctively finding the place two and a half inches below my collarbone, where I could still feel it. I rubbed at the phantom ache, pressing the heel of my hand there until the throb began to recede.

The image unfurled, replacing the view of the forest outside the windshield. In my mind's eye, tree limbs bent and swayed, creating blurred shapes of light that punched through the forest canopy high above—a flashing glimpse of the last thing Johnny had seen as he lay there on the forest floor. The rendering had been cast across my mind on a loop, making the connection between me and my brother more than just a sense or a feeling. Now, it was something that felt tangible and tactile. Now, it was *too* real.

Accidental firearm deaths weren't unheard of in the wilderness that surrounded Six Rivers, especially during the elk season that brought hunters from all over the country to town. I could remember more than one that happened when me and Johnny were kids. But I also knew that *accidents* didn't happen in that forest. Not really. There was almost nothing that was random or by chance because the place was alive—intentional.

It was that *feeling* that had compelled me to pack my bag and drive to Six Rivers. It had rooted down into my gut, twisting so tightly that it made

it almost impossible to breathe. Because the link between me and Johnny wasn't just intuition or some cosmic connection. I'd felt the white-hot heat of that bullet pierce between my ribs. I'd seen the forest canopy swaying in the wind. I'd also felt that bone-deep sense that had been coursing through Johnny's veins. That despite what the investigation had uncovered about what Johnny was doing out in the gorge that day, he wasn't alone. More than that, he was afraid.

I returned my hand to the steering wheel, watching the blur of emerald green fly past the window. I'd grown up feeling like the trees had eyes, each tangle of roots like a brain that held memories. I could feel, even now, that they remembered me.

I read once, years after I left, that they could actually speak to one another. That they had the ability to communicate through the network of fungi in the ground over miles and miles of forest. And I believed it. They knew what happened the day my brother died. They'd watched as he grew cold, his blood soaking the earth. And that wasn't all they knew.

I forced my gaze back to the road and let my foot come down on the brake as the sign appeared in the distance.

SIX RIVERS, CALIFORNIA

4.5 MILES

A reflective white arrow pointed in the direction of the hidden turnoff on the only sign I'd seen in the last half hour. The blinker clicked on, and I let the car drift onto the gravel track that disappeared into the trees. Almost immediately, the silence grew thick in that way I remembered, making my ears feel like they needed to pop. It was an eerie absence of sound that resonated around the car, broken only by the crack of rocks under the tires.

The light had changed, too, adding to the stillness. The canopy far above diffused the sun into nothing more than glowing, golden air that hovered, suspended between the trees. The whole scene gave the innate feeling that you were leaving the world behind, entering into some imaginary place that didn't really exist. I wished that were true.

The blue dot blinking on the dash's GPS crept along the hairpin-turn road, deeper and deeper into the sea of green that covered the screen. The national forest was almost completely uninhabited by people except for the town that lay at its center. The map took me around turn after turn until the trees began to spread out just enough to reveal a house here and there. They were almost camouflaged against the colors of the landscape, with moss-covered roofs and wood-plank siding that was dotted with pine knots. The little red pin on the map crept closer until the cabin finally came into view.

The car rolled to a stop and I went stiff in my seat, eyes pinned to the old blue 4Runner parked out front. A nauseous, liquid feeling pooled in my belly as I shifted the gear into park. The cabin we'd grown up in was tiny, with two square windows that looked out at the road and a screen door that had once been painted a rust red. Pine needles that looked at least a foot deep were piled up around the porch like drifts of snow. As soon as I opened the car door, I could smell them.

My stomach turned a little as I let my eyes drift to the next house up the road. Set back in the trees, at the end of a long blacktop drive, was the Walkers' place. The windows were dark, the drive empty, but it still looked lived in. Looking at it almost made me feel like I was right back there again—eighteen years old and no idea that everything was about to change.

I forced my gaze back to our cabin, but it took a few seconds for my foot to lift and touch down on the ground. It took much longer for me to actually get out. Almost immediately, I could feel my brother spilling from inside the walls of the house we grew up in, thickening in the air around me.

"I'm here, Johnny," I breathed.

My hand clenched painfully around my keys as I rounded the car and got my bag, slinging it over my shoulder. My reflection moved over the windows of the 4Runner, and flashes of my younger self were there, behind the glass. Riding in the passenger seat with Johnny driving and Micah in the back. Flying down the highway sipping a lukewarm soda with music blaring from the only speaker that wasn't busted. I could see my bare feet propped up on the dash and catch the scent of burning oil leaking through the air vents.

I stepped up onto the porch, eyeing a fluttering square of white behind the screen door where something was taped to the window. I pulled the handle, and the springs creaked and popped as the door opened. It was a folded piece of paper with my name written on the front.

I opened it, reading the handwritten script.

James, welcome home. Please come by the office when you get a chance.

—*Amelia Travis*

My spine straightened when I saw the name. Amelia Travis was one of the rangers stationed in the national forest, a replacement for the decades-long tenure of Timothy Branson, who'd had the position in our town when I was growing up. The purview of the ranger who occupied the U.S. National Forest office mostly entailed things like permits and protections and land management. But they were also the closest thing we'd had to law enforcement, which meant that Johnny's death ultimately had fallen into Amelia Travis's jurisdiction.

She'd been the one to call me that day. I could still clearly remember the nothingness that had seized my body as the woman's words buzzed against my ear. Like every inch of empty space in the universe had hollowed me out. It was still there, a chasm that had no end, no edges.

I refolded the paper and lifted the mat, finding the rusted key that had been kept there for decades. It took a few tries to turn it in the lock, and I had to shove my shoulder into the door to get it open. But when it did, that chasm within me stretched so wide the whole earth could fall into it.

The presence that had hovered around the cabin was so heavy on the other side of the door that it knocked the wind from my lungs. My brother was like a gathering smoke in the air, choking out the oxygen. Like at any second, I'd hear him call my name from the other room.

James?

His voice echoed inside of me and I pinched my eyes closed, trying to push the overwhelming feeling down. I'd waited for that tether between me

and Johnny to dim after I got the news that he was gone. I was sure that at some point, it would grow thin as he pulled away from this world. But the hope I'd held on to that I would walk through that door and finally begin to sense his absence was a point of fading light now. He was still here. He was still everywhere.

Growing up, my connection with Johnny was something that had always just existed, like the color of the sunlight when it came through the kitchen window or the familiar sounds of the forest at night. When I left home for the city, I finally experienced what it was like for that connection between us to stretch. He was still there—always there—and I didn't realize how grafted into me it was until there were miles between us. But long before that, I'd begun to recognize when that feeling settled into my gut, telling me that something was wrong. I'd learned the hard way to listen when that happened.

For months before he died, I'd had the nagging sense that something was going on with Johnny. He was harder to get ahold of than usual. Less responsive to my texts. When I tried to press, tugging at the thread of that unsettled instinct, he'd pulled away even farther. Maybe farther than he'd ever been from me. But then he was gone, and now I was convinced that all of it had been some kind of premonition of what was coming.

When I opened my eyes again, the saturated colors of the space came into focus, painting a scene that made my heart come up into my throat. The navy checkered sofa and corduroy armchair were still set neatly on a fraying Turkish rug that half covered the scratched wooden floor. The fireplace was stacked with large, misshapen stones, and a shelf on one wall was filled with dozens of books. One corner of the rectangular room was carved out as a small kitchen with an old green stove and a window that looked out into the forest. Even the mismatched pottery dishes on the shelves had a humble charm to them, glazed in shades of brown and cream.

I let my hand slide over the tops of the books, reading their spines. With just Johnny, me, and Dad living here, the place had always been distinctly masculine in a way that hadn't changed at all. Every detail was the same, as

if it hadn't been years since I'd left. As if I'd walked out that door only days ago.

We were seventeen when Dad took a temporary logging job up in Oregon that turned out to be mostly permanent, and our mother had left long before that, extricating herself from the hungry forest after years of being trapped here. Pregnant only three months after high school graduation, she'd married our father for no other reason than the fact that that's what you did. He got a job with the logging company, and she gave birth to not one but two babies. She named us James and Johnny, and I couldn't help but wonder if that's because she wished we'd both been boys. Like maybe she could somehow spare me her own fate if I wasn't a girl.

Only a few years later, she was gone. If I had any memories of the woman, they were folded so deep in my mind that they couldn't be summoned, and the ones I did have of my father were like faded pictures that blurred at the edges. It was this place I remembered most. The cabin, and Johnny. But my mother's story had been a kind of cautionary tale for me as a kid. One that haunted me through adolescence, all the way up to the day I left. I'd spent all those years trying not to become her, but when I got on that bus to San Francisco, it wasn't just to dig myself out of the hole my mother had trapped herself in. I was running from more than that.

An engine rumbled outside, growing loud before it was interrupted by the screech of brakes. Through the window, I could see the red truck pulling into the dirt drive, and even from this distance, with only the shape of his shadowed profile visible, I recognized him.

Micah Rhodes.

I let the duffel slide from my shoulder and hit the ground by my feet as I took a step closer to the window. Instantly, I started counting the years since the last time I'd laid eyes on him, but I already knew the answer: twenty. It had been twenty years, and somehow, I could still feel that rush of blood beneath my skin.

Smoke, the wolflike dog that had shown up on our doorstep when Johnny and I were teenagers, was in the cab beside him, and at first glance, a shiver snaked up between my shoulder blades. The dog should have died

years ago, but he looked exactly the same. Just like the cabin. As if he was part of the immortal landscape that was this life.

The engine cut off, and for nearly a minute Micah just sat there. I could already see his nerves, and something about that made me feel just a little less crazy. I wasn't the only one dreading this moment. I'd hoped there was a way to avoid it altogether, but for all its miles of trees and trails and ravines, Six Rivers was much too small for that.

He raked a hand through his hair before he got out, and when I could finally see his face properly, my stomach dropped just a little more. His denim-blue button-up was opened over an old T-shirt, his jeans faded. This was a version of him that was achingly familiar, always a bit thrown together, everything about him worn in and frayed.

His not quite blond, not quite brown hair had been the same shade since we were kids, but it was much longer now. It waved at the ends where he had it tucked behind his ears, and the scruff along his jaw was the same color. His face was different, less youthful than it had been all those years ago, of course. But the light in his eyes had changed, too. There was less light in them now.

Smoke was whining the moment he jumped out of the truck, pacing the drive with his sharp, tawny eyes on the cabin. His ears were back, his head ducked low, like he could feel it, too—Johnny. He was tall enough that the tips of his ears reached my waist, with huge paws at the end of his long, lanky legs. Wide, uneven paint strokes of varying shades of gray covered him from head to toe.

Micah's gaze dropped from the top of the roof to the front door, and I was suddenly overcome with the hope that he wouldn't knock. That he would just turn around and leave, sparing us both the tidal wave of heartache that was seconds from running ashore.

Johnny and Micah had been friends since we were kids, and he was the only person I could think of that might know even a fraction of what it felt like to lose Johnny. They'd been inseparable for most of our lives. All three of us were.

He started toward the porch, and I forced myself to reach for the door. As soon as it swung open, Smoke scrambled up the steps, his whimper stuttering into a cry when he saw me. He nearly knocked me over, meeting my height when he jumped up, and I couldn't help the smile that broke on my lips or the rush of emotion that followed it. He pushed his nose into my shirt as my hands stroked down the length of his face and scratched behind his ears. When he slipped from my grasp, he leaned into me so heavily that I had to counterbalance his weight with my own.

Behind him, Micah was staring at me. There was no hiding that stiff, rigid shape that straightened the line of him, and the same tension that drew his shoulders up was now snaking around me, too.

“Hey, James.”

My name spoken in his deep voice made the less familiar parts of him snap into focus. Just like that, we were sixteen years old again, staring at each other like we were waiting to see who would be first to cross the line between us.

“Thought I'd beat you here,” he said, catching the edge of the screen door and holding it open.

When he just stood there, I realized he was waiting to be invited in, and that was unfamiliar, too. After our dad moved to Oregon, Micah had spent so much time here that he practically lived in this house with us.

I swallowed. “Do you want to come in?”

He hesitated for just a moment before he finally crossed the threshold, and the door closed behind him. As soon as it did, the room felt even smaller, like everything left unresolved when I went to San Francisco was taking up what little space there was.

“Was the drive okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” My voice came out a bit misshapen.

His hands slid into his pockets, and he watched as Smoke's nose went to the ground. Anxiously, the dog explored each room of the small cabin, as if checking to see if Johnny was here. I'd had the same urge when I walked through the door.

“I dropped off a few things earlier.” Micah’s eyes moved to the kitchen. “There’s milk and eggs in the fridge. Bread. The market will be closed already, but you can go by tomorrow and get anything else you need.”

He was talking fast, and I didn’t know if that was the nerves or if he was just trying to get this over with as quickly as possible. When I didn’t respond, he searched for something else to say.

“I left a bag of dog food, too, if you’re sure you’re okay with Smoke being here. I don’t mind looking after him,” he said.

“It’s fine.”

Despite my best efforts, I still didn’t sound like myself, and Micah seemed to notice. His eyes ran over me a little more slowly, as if he was tracing the bloom of red that I could feel creeping up my throat, into my cheeks.

He glanced toward the window. “There’s still not much in town, but the diner is open. Sadie Cross owns it now, actually.”

Sadie. The mention of the name made me blink. She’d been Johnny’s on-again, off-again girlfriend for years, the epitome of the kind of girl who ended up like our mother. And if she was still here in Six Rivers, running the diner, I guessed she had.

“It’s really the only place to eat or get coffee around here, but there’s Wi-Fi there now. Pretty decent cell service, too,” he added.

“I’m not here that long, Micah.” I said it for myself as much as for him because it felt like a necessary reassurance for both of us.

“I know.” He met my eyes again, making that bloom of red feel like a tangle of flames. Then he stepped around me, disappearing into the hall.

I closed my eyes, letting out an uneven breath before I followed, and the click of a lamp being turned on sounded just before I rounded the corner. Yellow light washed over the wood paneling of a shadowed alcove just outside the closed bedroom door, where there had once been a twin bed pushed against the wall. Now, it had been replaced by an old wooden desk, and I felt some sense of relief that not everything in this place had remained unchanged.

Dozens of papers, handwritten notes, photographs, and envelopes were pinned to a corkboard that was hung on the wall, and a laptop was sitting closed in the middle of the mess. When I spotted Johnny's camera bag beside the chair on the floor, I had to look away.

"This is everything." Micah gestured to the desk. "Not the most organized, but you should be able to find what you need."

I crossed my arms, eyes running over the remnants of Johnny's work. It was haphazardly sorted, arranged in teetering piles, and when I caught a glimpse of his handwriting on a notepad, I couldn't let my gaze linger too long.

"I would have been happy to pack all this up for you, James. You didn't need to come all the way up here," Micah said.

He'd said the same thing a couple of weeks ago when I called to let him know I was coming. He'd insisted, really, even offering to drive everything down to San Francisco himself. It didn't make sense for me to be here. Compiling and submitting Johnny's work for the conservation project had been my excuse for coming back, but the look Micah gave me now was a suspicious one. Like he knew it didn't quite add up. And it didn't.

Eventually, we'd have to have that conversation. I just hadn't figured out how to do that yet. I didn't know how to tell Micah why I'd come, because I could hardly make sense of it myself. I'd just been certain that I'd *had* to. Between the feeling of that bullet in my chest and the guilt that I carried for leaving Johnny behind, I couldn't let go of the feeling that there was something *more* to all of this. Like the forest had finally balanced the scales. Like she'd waited all this time to punish us for what we'd done.

Finally, I let my eyes meet Micah's, and I could see there was some part of him that was thinking the same thing. That we'd gotten what we deserved, just twenty years late.

He cleared his throat, dropping his gaze. "I told Olivia you'd be coming by."

"Olivia?"

"Olivia Shaw."

I wished I could pretend I hadn't thought about Olivia in years, but that wasn't true. Proximity in a town like this meant that your friends were chosen for you, and Olivia Shaw had been in our same year at school. By the time we were teenagers, a natural distinction had formed around us. There was me and Olivia, and Johnny and Micah. Then there was Johnny's girlfriend Sadie, and Griffin Walker.

As soon as that last name flitted through my mind, I felt instantly colder.

"I can give you her number," Micah continued. "She's the art teacher over at the high school now. Johnny was using their darkroom for the project, and some of his stuff is still there. You should be able to set up a time with her to go by."

I nodded slowly, trying to recall the details of Olivia's face so that I could reconstruct them into how I imagined she would look now. We hadn't kept in touch after I left, and I'd always wanted to believe that had been a mutual decision. But the truth was, it wasn't.

After a few long seconds, Micah exhaled. "Are you okay, James?"

I blinked, unsure if I'd heard him right. Was I *okay*?

"We don't need to do this, Micah." My voice was a tightrope.

That stiffness in his shoulders resurfaced, his lips pressing into a line like he was biting back what he wanted to say. We were both good at that. At least, we had been. I hadn't answered his call after I got the news about Johnny for this very reason. I didn't want to fall apart with Micah, because I couldn't.

"Fine. Just call me if you need anything," he said.

He went back to the door, and I didn't let myself breathe until it was closed behind him. I stared at the floor as the truck's engine roared back to life and listened as it backed down the drive. By the time he was gone, my knuckles ached, fingernails like knives against my palms.

I leaned into the wall and sank down, back sliding along the wood panels until I was sitting on the floor. That's when it really hit me—the enormity of Johnny's presence that lived between these walls. The bits of him that clung to the objects around me hadn't dimmed. There was no indication of them fading away or flickering out.

Down the hall, Smoke was watching me. His focused golden eyes bored directly into mine with an intensity that seemed much too human to be real, like he could feel it, too. Like he could sense Johnny in the still air between us.

We watched each other for a long time before he inched his way across the rug. When he reached me, his nose found my hair and he whimpered again. That was the thing that finally undid it—all those bound-up tears that I hadn't been able to let fall. The tightly spooled grief pulled taut behind my ribs, unclenching just enough for me to feel the ocean of pain inside me.

I pressed my forehead to Smoke's, breathing through the emptiness that filled the cabin around us. A place where Johnny shouldn't be anymore. But somehow, he was.

He was there the first time my heart beat, the first time air entered my lungs, the first time the sun touched my face. But now, he'd gone back to the dark without me.