

THE SCENT OF A STORM

by Annette Oppenlander

EXCERPT

Somewhere beyond the forest, thunder rolls. The sun has disappeared behind hazy clouds and a gust of wind travels between the trunks, rippling the pond's surface.

Werner's gaze travels upward, a frown on his forehead. "We better go, before this thing hits."

As an answer I pull on my clothes in silence and climb on my bike. We take off at breakneck speed across the uneven forest floor that turns dark instantly with pelting raindrops. Every so often Werner slows down to let me catch up. His bike is much larger than mine and he can fly like a swallow hunting bugs.

When we pull away from the stand of trees, the wind hits us like a wall. The sky has turned charcoal and the clouds are so low, they seem to press down on me. My ears are filled with the roar of thunder, the wind, and the smacking sounds of tires on wet ground. Water fills my eyes, nose, and mouth. It runs down my bare arms, soaking into my clothes and shoes.

The path is no more than a blur. A flash of lightening cuts the sky into ragged brightness. My thoughts wander to the story I heard years ago about a boy being killed by lightning. Out here on the open fields, wet and tall on our bikes, we're lightning rods. Anxiety creeps up my spine. If it weren't for me, Werner would be home already. Instead, he goes slowly to keep an eye—

The ground rushes up to me, cold muddy water hitting my face and neck. Pain shoots up my wrist into the elbow and then further up into my shoulder. The world lies on its side, the bike still between my legs. Blood colors the mud, gaudy and bright against the leaden sky.

"Annie?" Werner appears by my side and carefully lifts away the bicycle.

I try to sit, but my wrist screams.