

# THE GARDEN OF WHISPERS

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in  
English

Charlotte

2021

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## ABSTRACT

MIKAYLA S. MARLOW. *The Garden of Whispers*.  
(Under the Direction of DR. ELIZABETH GARGANO)

The following creative thesis includes the first 100 pages of a young adult fantasy novel, in which the child protagonist uses a creative outlet as means of coping with the challenges of reality. This thesis is divided into six sections with three different points of view as well as embedded textuality as characters communicate with one another through various modes of writing.

Thirteen-year-old Melody Jones is a mystery-loving writer and storyteller. After her father vanishes in the middle of the night, Melody's life is uprooted as her mother moves the family to their grandmother's vacant log house. As Melody adjusts to a new 'normal' without her father, she is presented with many challenges in her new home and new town. The backyard of the house is a beautiful, mystical garden that slowly unravels the dark secrets of the town. As Melody pieces together the mystery of her father's disappearance, she fights with her mother about the hidden family secrets within the enchanted house. Her writing becomes her only escape, and she shares her stories with her younger sisters, Angie and Rosalie. They meet Jonathan, a nearby neighbor with a questionable past, who tells Melody that her writings are more than just stories on a page. They're real. Together, the sisters follow Jonathan into the world of Melody's stories to find their father and bring him home without erasing the rest of reality.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor and chair, Dr. Elizabeth Gargano, and my committee members, Dr. Paula T. Connolly and Dr. Mark I. West. To Dr. Gargano, without your detailed revisions, professionalism, and words of encouragement, this thesis would never have taken form. Thank you for devoting numerous emails and remote meetings to me and to this project. I have grown as both a writer and a storyteller under your guidance. Dr. Connolly, thank you for your enthusiasm and for your kind words regarding my story. Dr. West, thank you for lending me books from your personal library that you felt would inspire key moments of my plot. Thank you both for your feedback and for having confidence in me and in my success.

A special thank you to Dr. Lara Vetter and to Tom and Ellen Ruff. Dr. Vetter, thank you for your constant guidance and for leading me to the members of my committee when I initially expressed interest in this thesis. Tom and Ellen Ruff, thank you for your financial support during the critical research phase of this thesis. It is because of your generosity that I was able to devote an entire summer to setting up the groundwork for this thesis despite the challenges of a pandemic.

To my parents, Jatana Helms and James Marlow, thank you for supporting me emotionally and financially in my decision to pursue higher education. Thank you for challenging me and for believing in me and my writing.

Lastly, I would like to thank the two people who volunteered countless hours of reading and re-reading every draft I created: Madison Stegall and Kristina Duemmler. Without your honest feedback and endless support, I would not be where I am today with this story. Thank you both for your friendship and your selflessness. Thank you for your expertise and for letting me lean on you.

## DEDICATION

To the wonderfully wise and witty women who have molded and shaped my life. Thank you for the faith, compassion, and strength you each have instilled in me. Thank you for giving me a story to tell:

Marjorie Laney Bernabe, Mary Kirk Laney Matthews, Meldonna Bernabe Goodwin, Johnnie Tarleton Bernabe, Vergie McGlamery, Patty Hammond, Sadie Helms, Debra Sistare Helms, Elizabeth Sistare Ligon, Jatana Helms.

And to Jonathan.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales and fables often depict death, grief, and issues of abandonment. Through fantastical plots and magical settings, child readers learn that even young characters face hardships, but are often given the tools they need to overcome those hardships. Over the years, children's fiction has transformed from didactic and cautionary tales—meant to scare children into submission—to stories that are more imaginative and adventurous, allowing readers to experience and empathize with cultures and customs different from their own. Many modern works of children's literature still incorporate traditional motifs that are commonly seen in early, didactic tales or works of adult Gothic and horror fiction, though serving a different purpose. In stories such as Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, or Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* trilogy, reading and imagination are offered as combative tools against issues such as bullying, loss, and grief. While each of these stories is written from the perspective of a limited, child narrator, each includes an ensemble cast of characters featuring both adults and children. The adults in each of these stories serve as archetypes of 'good' and 'bad' parenting in order to create more empathy for the child protagonist. This is commonly seen in works of children's fiction as the adult figures must be flawed, deceased, or absent in order to allow the child protagonist the opportunity to become the hero/heroine.

In the following creative thesis, I expand upon Anderson, Funke, and Paterson's use of creativity and imagination as tools for overcoming the challenges of reality. Drawing inspiration from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, my thesis includes an absent father figure and a single mother who both greatly affect the challenges that the main heroine faces. Just as the works before me, my thesis attempts to address issues of grief, loss, abandonment, and coming of age. I divided this thesis into six sections, beginning with the father's disappearance and following

Melody's journey to discovering the doorway into her fictive world. My thesis also contains multiple changes in narration in which both children and adults are given a voice. Throughout the different sections, Melody and Jonathan share the majority of the narration as they work together to unleash the garden's spellbound magic through Melody's writings.

When questioned on my decision to include various points of view, I looked to authors such as Michele Campbell, Laurie Faria Stolarz, and Erin Entrada Kelly for inspiration. Each point of view shift offers readers new and important information regarding the mystery that circles the Jones family, while also driving forward the story's momentum and Melody's quest to find her father. Each point of view develops round, complex characters that directly contribute to the story's plot. The first two sections of this thesis work to introduce Melody and the key aspects of her characterization: her struggle with Irlen Syndrome—a perception and processing disorder caused by the brain's inability to process visual information—, the loss of her father, her fear of growing up and starting high school, and her transition to a new life in a new town. I also use the first two sections to establish my desired genre of young adult fantasy. As the old house comes to life and casts the Jones family out, I utilize the imagery of a storm to conjure recognizable tropes of Gothic and horror fiction. I continue the Gothic atmosphere through various supernatural conflicts as Melody adjusts to the new town once her family moves into the log house. The new house and its garden serve as the thematic Gothic house, offering both refuge and potential harm to the Jones family.

The third section introduces the first point of view shift. Lily Jones provides readers with a horrifying revelation regarding the magic of the house and garden. Lily observes her children playing in the yard and is transported in time to when she was a child playing in the exact same yard. This section not only reveals the family's history, but also works to introduce an adult,



parental character as one that is complex and not fully villainous. Lily Jones defies the good/bad archetype and encourages readers to empathize with her own feelings of grief and abandonment despite her constant conflicts with Melody. Readers are only able to learn the backstory of the enchanted garden through Lily's former experience. Therefore, the addition of her voice drives the story forward while also endearing readers to a parental figure who is being villainized through the perspective of her daughter. Melody both resents and respects her mother; she works with and against her, as most adolescent readers may experience in their own relationships with parental figures. It is my hope that Melody herself becomes a more rounded and complex character as readers view her through Lily's perspective rather than only her own.

In the fourth section, readers are introduced to Jonathan's point of view. Jonathan is the only present male character within this half of the story, and he heightens the story's mysterious and magical atmosphere through his lack of memory and lack of parental figures. Readers discover important connections to Mr. Jones's disappearance through Jonathan's point of view, placing readers in a position of power over the protagonist. Jonathan also becomes a source of conflict for Melody as he constantly deceives her and suggests that she alter her writings. Readers experience this conflict through Jonathan's voice, allowing them to see potential flaws in the story's main protagonist that they otherwise might ignore if the section was delivered solely through Melody's point of view. Therefore, by implementing shifting points of view throughout this thesis, it is my hope to encourage critical thinking in my readers as they determine for themselves the unbiased truths that exist between the different narrations.

The fifth and sixth sections are narrated once again by Melody, in hopes that she is not overshadowed by the previous two points of view. Melody processes the information learned in the previous sections and pieces the mystery of her father's disappearance together for readers.

While readers learn about the garden before Melody, she ultimately dominates the narrative once more as she leads her family into the fictive world in which she has created. In these final sections, the traditional haunted house trope is transformed into what I deem an *enchanted* house, in which the characters are offered sanctuary rather than cast out. The Jones family does not seek to destroy the home or dispel the garden's magical qualities. Instead, the magic of the home is embraced and is used as a form of protection against the common fears of life. The enchanted house is a liminal space as it sits between a magical and flourishing backyard and a dead and dreary front yard that extends to the larger, dismal town of Basswood. In these final sections, Melody's writings transform into an alternate reality as she pieces together the town's history with the origin of the garden's design. This new fantastical world introduces doppelgängers and new sources of conflict for Melody and for the ensemble cast. This creative thesis ends as Melody prepares to enter the alternate world without becoming lost in it forever. The thesis as a whole begins and ends with Melody's point of view, allowing her to remain central as the story's main protagonist and storyteller.

In addition to the varying narrations, this project attempts to explore writing as a craft through the use of embedded textuality. The meta-narrative includes various modes of first-person writings: journal entries, letters, poems, lists, and short stories. These writings contribute to the overarching third-person narrative in order to reveal insights regarding the mystery of the English family's garden. I chose this particular method of writing due to influences of Herman Melville, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Richardson as each author attempted to expand the craftsmanship and form of the literary novel. Melody combats the struggles of her reality through a creative outlet, and so, that outlet exists within this story. Just as the changing points of view offer readers moments of conflict or discovery, the embedded texts also drive the narrative

forward as Melody learns something new and valuable about her craft and its effect on her reality. Therefore, this modern fairy tale is a story within a story that details a family's fantastical adventure into an imaginative world. It is also a commentary on writing practices and various modes of storytelling. Borrowing influences from Joanne Harris and Shannon Hale, this creative thesis follows the story of a mostly female, ensemble cast. The magic within the story originates from maternal figures as well as instincts and practices traditionally associated with motherhood such as cooking, gardening, and child raising.

The following thesis is also largely influenced by my own life and the women who contributed to my growth and education. The log house on 124 Hawthorn Park in the town of Basswood was built by my great-grandmother in a small town in North Carolina. The garden that fosters the story's magic is one that was planted by her hands. I lived in this house for a short time when my parents divorced. I played in the massive backyard of eclectic plants, and I wrote stories for my younger brothers to read and play act. My mom filled the kitchen with baked goods and Russian tea, and she always made enough to share with Jonathan, the boy who lived across the street. Melody shares my rare and challenging vision disorder as well as my love for writing, creating, and storytelling. The creaky log house and its colorful yard fostered the imaginations of three young children during a transitional time in their lives, and I wanted to convey that home and its significance to me in this story.

Finally, when writing this thesis, my goal was to create a meta-narrative, young adult fantasy novel with undertones of children's Gothic and horror literature. The story is about writing and the ways in which writing and literature affect the surrounding world. Melody experiences a self-reflective journey as she leaves childhood and enters adolescence during a state of emotional turmoil. She learns to broaden her view of the world while simultaneously

fighting to preserve her childhood innocence through attempts of putting her family back together. Her struggles typify those that young audiences experience during transitional times in their lives. With influences of my own life and of authors whom I admire greatly, I offer readers a creative thesis that reflects my learning experiences and educational insights. I worked closely with my advisor and tried to focus my writing practices on building characters, settings, motives, and actions that are as believable as they are complex. It is my hope to engage readers in a story about family and imagination while also showcasing my writing experience. I have experimented with narration and plot development in ways that have significantly challenged my writing practices over the past two years. I only hope that through these risks and areas of personal growth, I have managed to depict a story and a cast of characters that appeal to young adult fantasy readers. As I continue my work beyond this creative thesis, I plan to introduce the fantastical world of Melody's writings through meaningful shifts in point of view as the characters journey to find their dad and learn the magical ways of the English family garden. I hope to inspire young readers and foster an appreciation for creativity and imagination as healthy coping strategies. Lastly, I hope to tell an enchanting story that captures the beautiful complexity of the very real influences that have contributed to and affected my own journey.

## PROLOGUE

The whispers began as the power died; at first, soft flutters pattering in Melody's ears like light rain on a tin roof just as the digital clock flashed from 3:15AM to black, the ceiling fan humming as it slowed to a stop.

She sat up fast. Her heart hammered in her chest as beads of sweat formed around her brows. But the house was silent aside from her shaky breathing. "Just a dream." She sank back against her pillow and inhaled slowly. After a few moments, she turned back over on her side and readjusted her pillow. She tossed and turned and kicked her quilt to the floor. Nothing felt comfortable. Giving up, Melody pulled her journal out from under her pillow and opened to the last page she'd been writing. She reached for her glasses on the nightstand, but they weren't there with her pens. Had she fallen asleep while wearing them again? Mom and Dad had warned her not to do that. Grabbing a flashlight, she held her nose just inches from the page and wrote,

*January 27 2002: And deep within this forest lived a wise and powerful woman named Marah. She knew that the village people were starving, and there was nothing they could do to survive the brutal winter. Marah scrunched her nose and pulled on her fingers. It was up to her, and there was only one thing to be done. She pulled the dusty old cauldron out of her broom closet.*

The whispers swarmed again, a chilling breeze circling her bed and knocking her Lauren Graham poster to the floor. Her body tensed, and her skin prickled. "Wh-who's there?" She snapped her journal shut and slid off the edge of her bed, her bare feet crunching down and snapping her glasses into two. Groaning, she fumbled in the dark to pick up the pieces. Maybe Dad could tape them back together tomorrow. Careful not to make any noise, she tiptoed until

she found the doorknob with her outstretched hand. Without her glasses, she could normally see shapes and outlines, but not at all in the dark. And darkness from a power outage was a special kind of dark.

Her hand remained frozen on the knob as she listened and worked up the courage to leave the safety of her room. Was it just Rosalie trying to wake her up? She didn't think her sister would come to her for help in the middle of the night. And if she had, she would have just opened the door.

Taking a deep breath, she cracked her door open and peered out into the hall.

It was empty. And silent.

The door to her sisters' shared room was open. "Angie? Rosalie?"

"Melly?" Rosalie's voice shook. "I want Daddy."

"Okay." Melody shined her flashlight toward her parents' room. "I'll go get him."

"Hurry! Daddy's in trouble!"

"Shh. He's fine, Rosa. You just had a bad dream. I'll go get him, and he'll tell you a story to help you fall back to sleep."

Angie moaned and turned in her sleep.

"Careful," Rosalie whispered.

*One...Two...Three...Four.* It was twenty-three steps from their room to her parents'. She traced the wall with her fingers. If the sliding door to the laundry room was open, she didn't want to smash her nose...again. Her breathing was shallow, like she couldn't force her lungs to fill with enough air to take a deep breath.

*Twenty-one...twenty-two...twenty-three.* Mom's loud snoring filled the quiet night. Dad wasn't in bed with her. Had he heard the whisperings too?

“Mom?”

Her snoring continued rhythmically.

Melody crept down the carpeted stairs until her feet were directly in front of her father’s red-painted office door. A pale, quivering light shone beneath the crack. Unintelligible murmurings and whispers came from inside, barely audible. As she rapped her knuckles against the door, it opened with a loud creak. The voices whooshed to a hush.

“Dad?”

No reply.

She entered her father’s office—his sacred space. The old oil lamp on his desk flickered, creating dancing shadows on the wall. Dad had a passion for antiques and relics. He always said he preferred to work under the same conditions as the great writers who inspired him. He’d once even tried writing with a quill and homemade ink, but that proved to be tedious and messy. “Dad? Are you in here?” She knew she hadn’t imagined the whispering, but even in the dim light, she could see the study was empty.

As she approached his large, oak desk, the hardwood floors were icy against the soles of her feet. She shivered and pulled her hand back from the wall, folding her arms tightly. Her eyes fixed on the blurry, waltzing shadows from the flickering flame. Her toe slammed against something hard, and she clamped her lips tight to keep from whimpering. His typewriter was lying on the floor. Fuzzy outlines were spread all around, and his desk chair was turned upside down. There were scattered pages everywhere and a perfume that she couldn’t quite place. Crouching, she felt along the floor until her fingers found something coarse. It was a sachet of something dry and crumbly that smelled of fruit and soil.

*Potpourri?*

She'd never known Dad to keep something fragrant in his office before. Next to her knee was his reading glasses. Her stomach somersaulted. Something horrible had happened in here.

She reached up to grab the oil lamp.

"What are you doing?"

The sudden voice startled her, and she knocked over her father's bottle of scotch that sat next to the lamp. "Crap!" This would make him mad. He always saved that scotch for 'special occasions.' She'd at least managed to catch the bottle before it rolled onto the floor. "You scared me." Her voice trembled as she turned to face her mother standing in the doorway. "I-I just came looking for Dad. I heard voices, and Rosa was scared. He wasn't in your room."

"Mel, what did you do to his things?" Mom picked up the typewriter and righted the chair. "It looks like a tornado blew through. You know how he feels about this sort of thing."

"No, I didn't touch anything. It was already like this, I swear."

"And why aren't you wearing your glasses?"

"They...uh...they broke."

"Mel—"

"There was whispering! I thought someone was in the house, and it scared me. I went to find Dad, but there's no one here, and I can't find him, and—"

"Alright, just calm down. Wait here."

Mom returned with a roll of paper towels. "Help me clean this up. We're gonna hear about this tomorrow."

While her mother wiped away the spilled scotch, Melody collected the bag of potpourri and the scattered papers. "This must be the new book he's writing." She held the unfinished pages close to her nose and bent over the oil lamp to read aloud. "Is Dad trying to write in a



different language or something?” She sounded out the unfamiliar words before her, each rolling off her tongue more easily than the word before like a repressed lullaby.

*A sombra da noite*

*O preto e a lua*

The door to the study slammed against its frame, rattling the walls. Melody turned fast and sent the oil lamp toppling to the floor. The room went dark.

Mom lunged for the door and jerked the knob. “It won’t open!” She twisted it harder. Rosalie and Angie screamed from upstairs.

“Samuel? Sam!” Mom beat her fists against the wood. “Sam, open this door! Sam!”

“Mommy!” It was Rosalie.

The office grew so cold that Melody could see her own breath. A loud, persistent murmuring sounded in her ears, and her temples pulsed. The whispers were back; their voices hissed and swished inside her head, but she couldn’t make out their words.

“M-m-mom? Do you hear that? What’s happening?” She plugged her ears to drown the murmurings, but it only made the whispering louder. “Mom?”

But Mom wasn’t looking at her. The stench of burning oil had drawn her attention away from the door, and she stared in horror at the flames lapping the side of the desk. “Mel, move!” Mom tore off her robe and used it to stamp out the fire before it could spread any farther.

The office door swung open and crashed against the wall, shuddering the tiny space. Every light in the house was on as the power roared back to life. Alarm clocks buzzed and wailed. The smoke detector screamed even though Mom quieted the flames. The walls shook with rage—cracking, popping, heaving.

“Run, Mel. Now!”

She raced upstairs, grabbed her sisters, and pulled them out to the front lawn. Rosalie trembled from the brisk night.

“Melly.” She buried her face in Melody’s night shirt. “I told you. Something happened to Daddy. I told you.”

“Something happened to Dad? What’s she talking about?” Angie’s nightgown flapped around her legs in the breeze.

But Melody couldn’t answer. Even once Mom joined them outside and reassured her sisters that everything would be okay, she couldn’t move. She felt sick. Her insides hurt. Rosalie whispered something else to her, but she could hardly hear over the buzzing in her ears. “What, Rosa?” She couldn’t feel her mouth speak the words.

“Daddy needs help. He told me so.”

Melody felt dizzy as her feet went numb and her vision blurred. The house thundered from inside as though in a scary movie, and everything went dark once more.

## CHAPTER ONE

“Melody?” Angie’s voice stirred her awake as the minivan bumped to a halt. Her chest slumped against the seatbelt. “We’re here.”

124 Hawthorne Park.

Meemaw’s vacant log house loomed up through the minivan window. The front door was a faded green, the paint chipping away. There were green shutters too, but they hung crookedly. An overgrown rosebush was the only living plant in the front flowerbed. Light pink buds drooped toward the once mulched bed. The thin, yellowed grass reached up to the first porch step.

Melody hadn’t seen this house since she, Mom, and Dad had packed up some old books and pictures. Meemaw and Peepaw had called and said they’d taken off for Tennessee, just like that, and wanted Mom to bring them some mementoes. That was five years ago. Mom had tried to help sell the place. She’d agreed to stay at the house for the first month in order to care for it. But on the third day, she called home in the middle of the night demanding that Dad fly her back to Alabama as soon as the sun was up. The next week, Melody had overheard Mom talking to the realtor on the phone. “Believe me, Nancy, I know more than anyone that it’s stigmatized property, but there has to be something you can do!” Eventually, Mom had given up, and they never visited the log house in North Carolina again. Until now.

“Home-sweet-home.” Mom pulled the minivan into the gravel driveway and turned the key, resting her head back against the seat. Melody pressed a finger to her lips to signal her sisters not to say anything. It had been a long two days of driving. They’d spent the night with their cousins in Atlanta the night before. Mom didn’t get along much with her older brother’s wife, so even the short stay had exhausted her. Actually, the last six months had exhausted her,

and she didn't seem to want to be here anymore than they did. After a few, quiet moments, she let out a breath. "Okay. Let's start unloading boxes. Peepaw will be here later with the rest of our stuff."

The front yard was littered with skinny trees and dead shrubs lining the sides of the driveway. Honeysuckle and wisteria wound from the backyard fence and encroached on the sides of the house, their vines a sickly green that seemed to strangle the home. Their splash of color contrasted the dullness of the front yard. How long ago was it that someone tended to the place? She'd asked Mom once what 'stigmatized property' meant. But Mom only said it was a stupid rumor and nothing more. She wondered how it would be described now.

She helped her sisters carry the banana boxes full of their belongings up the driveway, grateful for the chance to finally stretch her legs. Everything ached, and the bright sun made her eyes water. The three of them staggered over to the side of the house and waited for Mom to open the garage door from inside.

"She expects us to live *here*?" Angie scowled at the disheveled house, likely imagining every single germ that could attach itself to her.

Melody sat her box down on the gravel. "Let's just get all the boxes out, okay?" The sweltering July heat sent beads of perspiration down her temples; her dampened tee-shirt clung to her sticky armpits.

"Stop acting like you're the boss of us!"

"Angie, just do what I—"

"Oof!" Rosalie gasped as a heavy box fell from the backend of the minivan and crashed to the ground. Chips, dice, chess pieces, coins, and other game pieces scattered among the painted rocks. "Melly! I spilled it."

“Can I help?” A gangly boy with tanned skin and uncombed curls appeared suddenly from the side of the yard. “I’m Jonathan.” He bent and scooped up some of the chess pieces. “Nice to meet you all.” His eyes were a strange amber color, and his lashes were long and thick.

“Thanks, but we got—”

“Oh, hello!” Mom approached the group with a wide smile. “Jonathan, did you say? I’m Lily. We won’t turn down help, will we Melody?”

“Whatever.” She wasn’t in the mood to meet people on a day that was already miserable.

“I’m happy to help, Mrs.—”

“Jones.”

“Right.”

“And my name is Row-sa-wee!” She hopped down from the van and clasped his hand in hers. Mom carried the suitcases into the house.

Rosalie swiped at her thick curls that were the color of coffee. “I’m all sweaty, so my hand slid and the box, it fell.”

Jonathan laughed. “How old are you?”

“Five!” She showed him with her fingers. “But I’ll be six next June.”

“Cool! So, where are you guys from?”

“Alabama. I’m Angie, by the way.”

“Is that far?”

“Yeah. Like eight hours.”

“Look, if you’re gonna help, could you get the rest of the boxes from the van? We’re really busy.”

“Ignore her.” Angie climbed into the backseat and handed out a box of books. “Here, Mel.”

“Wow. Lots of books there.” Jonathan smiled.

Melody didn’t respond.

He walked to the back of the car. “What’s this cage thing?”

“Careful!” Angie sprang across the seat and anchored her hand to the birdcage. “It’s the only one I’ve got, and it’s very expensive.”

“Hey, I’m sorry. I’ll be really careful.” Jonathan wiggled the cage free and set it gently on the driveway. “Er...where’s the bird?”

“Obviously, he wouldn’t be safe traveling in the cage.” Angie pulled her carrier cage from the front seat. “Meet Dorian.” The African Grey shook his head and flapped his slatey wings. “He was a birthday gift from my dad. He was only four years old when I got him. Dad named him.” Dorian was her pride and joy.

“I didn’t get a present from Daddy this year because he left us.” Rosalie stared at her feet.

The tense moment somehow made the heat even hotter. Melody tried to stammer out a response, but as she did, Jonathan bent toward Angie and held a finger against the carrier cage. “Hello, Dorian.”

Dorian let out a piercing squawk. “Dorian not a bad bird, Dorian a pretty bird.”

“Whoa!” Jonathan jumped back. “H-he talks! And he sounds just like you! What kinda bird is that?”

“He’s a parrot. Yeah, he talks.” Melody suppressed a laugh.

“*Mimics*. Not talks.” Angie pulled a cracker from her pocket and slipped it between the bars. “I need to get him inside. He’s probably tired from the long trip.”

“C’mon, Jonathan! You have to help me find a new room.” Rosalie picked up a box labeled PILLOWS and sauntered after Angie. Jonathan followed up the driveway and into the garage.

“Rosa, I don’t think he wants to come inside. And we have a lot to do.” Melody turned to ask Jonathan to leave, but his face was grimaced and pale. He stumbled down the steps and a few paces back out to the driveway. “Er...you good?”

He was panting and bent over at the waist. “Yeah, just got overheated is all.” He wiped the perspiration from his forehead. “I think I’ll just head out. Bye.”

“Well, that was weird.” It was the first thing Angie had said all day that Melody could agree with.

“Let’s go inside.”

The breakfast room contained plastic-covered furniture that Meemaw and Peepaw had left behind years ago. This room led to into the kitchen, which stretched to an empty dining room in the far corner.

Mom was already pulling dishes from the cabinets to load into the sink. “Mel, the dining room steps down into the living room, and through there you’ll see the hall where the bedrooms are.”

“Do we even have running water in this place?”

“Mel—” A dish slipped and clattered into the sink. “Don’t start with me. Not today.”

“Come on.” Melody led her sisters to a narrow hallway. There were two tiny bedrooms with a bathroom in between. On the other side of the hall was a large room littered with more plastic-covered furniture.

“What’s in there?” Angie held Dorian up to see.

“The rec room.” They used to celebrate Christmas in this room. Great-grandma Marjorie would push the pool table over to the corner to make room for a tall spruce tree that stood by the French doors, decorated with carved, wooden angels and crystal icicles. She’d had a tree for every main room, each decorated with a different theme. If she inhaled deeply, Melody could almost smell the honey-baked Christmas ham and the mouth-watering macaroni and cheese.

“Let me see, Melly.”

“Just pick a bedroom, okay? We can tour the house later.”

With a pout, Rosalie shoved past her and into the first bedroom. “This one!”

Angie sat Dorian’s carrier on the lower bunk. “This is our new home, Dori. New home. Say it.”

Melody trudged to the end of the hall and set her box in the musty room. The plastic groaned as she sat down on the twin mattress. Dust particles floated and circled her head. Spider webs clung to the walls and ceilings. It would take hours of dusting before this place was actually livable. She wanted to go home.

“Why do I still have to share with *you*?” Rosalie whined from the other room.

“Shut up, Rosa. Go bother Melody.”

“Ever since Daddy left, you’ve been mean to me! I don’t want to share with you.”

“Okay, Rosa. Come help me carry in more boxes.” Melody pulled Rosalie from the room and helped her bring in her toys and shoes while Angie set up Dorian’s cage in the living room.

“This is the last box!” Rosalie announced when Mom met them in her new room.

“Great! What do you say we run to the store and buy the stuff to bake some cookies?” Mom must have found a baking sheet in the kitchen.

“Yeah, cookies!”



“Your double chocolate cranberry cookies?” Angie lined the boxes of Dorian’s different flavored crackers along the counter.

“Sure. Let’s go.”

At the store, Melody dragged her feet down the aisles searching for the chocolate chips and cocoa powder. There was no exact recipe; Mom had received a jar of ingredients as a teacher appreciation gift once and tried to recreate it on her own. Melody read the signs above her head. The aisles were all different here compared to the large chain store back home.

“Looking for something, dear?” An older woman with bright red lipstick smiled so hard at her, Melody wondered if her cheeks hurt. “I don’t believe I’ve seen you about before. Are you visiting with your family?”

“No, ma’am. I just moved here today.”

“Oh, how wonderful! My name is Mrs. Rosenberger. I’m on the City Council. My husband owns the bakery. We have the best scones imaginable. You’ll love them. Are you the nice little family that moved in on Linden Lane?”

“No. We moved into the house on Hawthorne Park.”

“Oh my stars!” Mrs. Rosenberger dropped the can of Bush’s beans in her hand. “You mean to say you moved into old Marjorie English’s home?”

“That was my great-grand—”

“Fannie! Fannie, the English girls have come back in town. Did you know?”

A woman with the same red lipstick came bustling out of Aisle Four, her matching feathered hat slipping from its place atop fresh permed curls as white as little clouds. “What’s the matter, dear?”

“That there is Marjorie English’s great-granddaughter. Moved back in with her family, she says.” She pointed a dark, crimson fingernail at Melody’s face.

“Well, that’s certainly interesting, now isn’t it? We thought we’d seen the last of the English girls here in Basswood when your momma high-tailed it out of here.”

“I would reckon there’s a good reason you all came back?” Mrs. Rosenberger pushed her round glasses closer to her face.

“Uh—”

“Never the mind about that. Come, Violet. Or we’ll be late for Mildred’s potluck.” The gossipy old ladies looked her over as though on the verge of discovering some rare disease. They turned away whispering.

Melody found a place at the front of the store to wait for her mom and sisters. “Here.” She threw the chocolate ingredients into the cart as soon as they approached. “Can we go?”

“Why, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She scanned the aisles to see if the chattering women were nearby. Mom had never talked about her childhood here. Maybe Mrs. Rosenberger knew stories about her from back then. She’d need to find Mr. Rosenberger’s bakery to know for sure.

“Lily? Lily Proctor, is that you?” A woman with large breasts and a teased ponytail was running toward them, arms outstretched and shrieking as her electric blue hoop earrings smacked against the sides of her face. “Oh. My. God. It *is* you!” She wrapped Mom into an unreturned hug. “I haven’t seen you since we were wearing matching cheer uniforms and sneaking out of your house to meet the Lawson boys down at the creek. How have you been, sugar?” She smacked cinnamon chewing gum between plump, purple painted lips. “Bobby, get over here and look who I found. Lily Proctor is back in town!”

“It’s Jones, now. Good to see you, Sandy. Bob.”

“My, my, my. I just can’t believe you’re back after all these years. And didn’t even think to call me!” She playfully punched Mom’s arm. “Oh, and who all do we have here?”

“Sandy, these are my girls. Melody, Angie, Rosalie. We’re just picking up a few things to help us get settled. We’re moving in today.”

“Back into your mother’s place? Why the hell would you want to do something like that?” Bob was a large man with a gruff voice. Tiny white flecks colored his dark beard.

“Bad word,” Rosalie whispered. She hid behind Angie.

“We just thought after what happened, you’d never—”

“We’ll have coffee sometime and catch up, Sandy. Give me a call.” Mom steered them out of the store, her cheeks turning a soft pink.

The car ride home was awkward and silent. Mom sped down the winding backroad, her chest almost touching the steering wheel. “Bring the groceries in,” was all she said when they pulled into their drive. She didn’t even wait for them to get out of the car before heading inside and slamming the door.

“Here.” Melody set the bags in the kitchen and kicked off her shoes. She flopped down hard on the worn sectional in the living room. It sank low, and the springs whined. She shifted her weight, but there was no comfort to be found. It was too bad they had to sell their nice, leather couch. Mom clattered around the kitchen making the cookies. She used to sing when she baked, but tonight, the mixing was the only sound.

“Cracker?” Angie slid a Saltine through Dorian’s cage.

“Melly, come see!” Rosalie raced across the floor.

“Watch the step!” Melody sprang from the couch and caught Rosalie’s arm just as she tripped over the ledge. “You have to be careful.”

But Rosalie was unfazed. She tugged hard on Melody’s arm and led her to the breakfast room. “The chairs are like buckets!”

“Barrels. Peepaw made them.” She faked a smile for Rosalie.

They had been a Christmas gift for Meemaw the last year they’d lived in the house. He and Dad had carried them in together and set them around the little table. Angie had to sit on Mom’s lap to eat because they were so big and deep. Melody was only eight that year. Her dad had carried her around the house, swinging her back and forth shouting ‘Ho-ho-ho! What a heavy sack of presents this is.’ She’d laughed as she soared through the air in the safety of his strong arms. Her mom had sat on the step stuffing a large trash bag with scraps of wrapping paper. She’d given Meemaw and Peepaw coffee mugs that said ‘#1 Grandparents’ as a way of announcing that a new baby was coming.

The old table and chairs didn’t seem as magical as they once did. The house felt cold. She missed her old house.

*Old house.*

She cringed at the words. Everything had changed for their family so quickly. They’d had to sell or leave behind most of their furniture. Minimizing, as Mom had called it. She didn’t even get to officially say goodbye to her friends.

“Who was that at the store?” She swiveled in one of the chairs. It popped and groaned from the years of stillness. Rosalie danced and twirled around her.

“Who, Bob and Sandy? Friends. Old friends.” Mom didn’t look up from the cookie batter. “Rosa, stop spinning in the kitchen, please.”

“What did they mean about something happening here?”

The wooden spoon tapped furiously against the metal mixing bowl. “Don’t worry about what they said, Mel. They were just chatting.”

“There were these two women at the store that said something about Great-grandma Marjorie and Meemaw. And you.”

Mom wiped her brow with her forearm.

“Mrs. Rosenberger. Her husband owns the bakery. Did you know her when you were a kid? Is there something wrong with this house that you’re not telling us?”

“Dammit, Rosalie, I said stop spinning!” The spoon clattered to the floor.

Rosalie froze. She hadn’t meant to bump into her. “Bad word.” Her mouth quivered like she’d been struck.

“Hand me the spoon.” Mom massaged her temples with one hand. “I’m sorry.”

“Rosa, go finish setting up your new room. I’ll come tell you a story later.” Melody stood in silence as Mom continued mixing. For the first time since Dad had disappeared, she saw tears in her mother’s eyes. She looked older; harder. Her knuckles were white where she gripped the bowl. Her hair was tied back at the nape of her neck; she usually curled it and wore it down. Purple Band-Aids replaced fresh manicures to hide her chewed, bleeding nailbeds.

“Mom—”

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” Peepaw came through the garage with a loud bang. “Looks like you ladies moved in here nicely!” He kissed Mom on the cheek.

“What took you so long?” Angie came from the living room to give him a hug.

“Well, now, I’m not like Mother. I follow the speed limit!” He’d stayed with them in their old house two nights ago to help them pack. When they left for Atlanta, he’d promised to

hand off the keys to the realtor so Mom wouldn't have to. She couldn't imagine how stiff he must have felt after making the long drive in only a day.

"Help me scoop this dough, Ange." Mom wiped her hands on her jeans.

Angie took over and rolled the dough into perfectly even spheres. Baking always took her twice as long as Mom because she felt everything had to be pretty.

"Whoo-wee, I'll take some cookies." Peepaw patted Angie's hair.

"How about we order some pizza before it gets too late?" Mom flipped through the phone book.

"Pizza for me too?" Rosalie peeked in from the living room to see if Mom had forgiven her yet.

"Pizza for everybody." She pressed the buttons on the phone attached to the kitchen wall. "Order for delivery, please."

"Pepperoni and cheesy bread," Melody whispered.

"I got something for you out in my truck, Mel." Peepaw led her outside and uncovered the large oak desk from Dad's office. "He'd want you to have it."

She ran her fingers over the smooth surface. "Please don't talk about him like he's dead." Her eyes traced the grain of the wood down to the drawers where he kept his best whiskey and research materials. The bottom drawer was scorched a little from the fire.

"I brought the rest of the suitcases. Help me get them inside."

\*\*\*\*

"There." Mom fluffed the last pillow. The newly made bed with the brown and teal quilt set from back home made the room a little more inviting. "That's at least everything we need for tonight. We'll finish unpacking tomorrow." Mom set the suitcases in the closet with the rest of

the unpacked boxes, her back stiffening a little. “Check Rosa while I go help Angie.” She hurried out of the room.

Melody drained Rosalie’s bath water and wrapped her in a warm towel. “Here, let me comb out your hair.”

“Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.” Rosalie was a wimp whenever anyone combed her wet hair. “Ouch. Stop it!”

“You don’t know that.” Angie argued with Mom from the bedroom. “When Maddie’s dad left, he found a new family. And he never came back.”

“What’s she talking about, Melly?”

“Nothing. Just a friend from school. Our dad’s not like that.”

*Is he?* She chased away the thought.

“Okay. You didn’t read me a story like you said.”

“Let’s ask Mom to read one. *Amelia Bedelia*?”

“Yeah, Meelia Deelia.”

When her sisters were finally tucked into bed, and Mom headed upstairs to the loft, Melody slipped into the living room with Peepaw. He sat in front of the old TV set watching the credits roll. “There’s more pizza.” He offered her the box.

“No thanks.”

“Well, I best be heading out.” He clicked the TV off and handed her the remote.

“You’re not spending the night here?”

“Oh no, no. You all need time to adjust, so I got me a hotel room, and I’m driving home first thing in the morning. I’m not too far away if you need me.” He tugged at his beard and

readjusted his glasses. “You’ll be fine. Tell Mother I love her, and I’ll call her when I get back up the mountain.”

She stood in front of the TV listening as his tires pulled away from the house. Her reflection shone in the darkened screen. Her blonde, stringy hair clung to her scalp from the accumulated sweat and oil of the day. Behind her glasses, her eyes were barely visible, and her mouth was a thin, chapped line. She hardly recognized herself.

*Tick.*

The TV flickered on. A static screen with a dizzying dotted pattern of pixels erased her reflection. Melody pointed the remote toward the VCR and pressed the power button. The screen didn’t change. She tried again and this time, pressed hard with her thumb. The noise continued and the picture remained unyielding.

“Turn off.” She smacked the back of the remote against her palm.

*Tick.*

The screen blackened and fell silent. Maybe the remote needed new batteries.

*Plop.*

The sound came from the kitchen.

*Plop. Plop. Plop.*

She tightened the valve to stop the faucet from leaking. Mom had forgotten to put the cookies away before going to bed. She scooped some onto a plate and sat down at the breakfast table. Her mind flashed back to the last night she saw her dad. He was shaving in the bathroom while Mom read to Rosalie. He and Angie had just finished the corner of a puzzle together before he’d sent her to bed.



“Five stars.” Melody had waved the book she’d just finished at his reflection in the mirror.

“Too generous. Save your stars for the books that really grab your attention. The ones you think about even years after reading.”

“You’re right. I’ll give *your* book five stars because I’ll be forced to think about it every time you bring it up.”

This had made him laugh. He’d said goodnight, and then he’d gone to bed. And then...what?

Whispers. Power outage. Overturned chair. Rifled papers. Spilled whiskey. Reading glasses. Lamp burning. Potpourri. None of it made any sense.

A stripe of lightning flashed blue at the window followed by a loud crack of thunder that shuddered the walls and made her jump in her seat. Abandoning her uneaten cookies, she hurried toward her room. She hated trying to sleep through a storm.

*Tick.*

The TV flashed to the loud, static screen as she passed. “What is wrong with this stupid thing?” She punched the power button with her thumb and slipped out into the hall. Tiptoeing, she checked on her sisters in their new room. They were both already fast asleep and breathing deeply. She crept over to the creaky staircase and checked Mom’s room. The door was cracked open. That was new since Dad disappeared. Mom was curled into a tight ball on her side, clutching one pillow to her chest, her face buried into the other. She was safe. They all were. No one had disappeared.

She turned to go back downstairs and was startled to see Rosalie standing at the bottom of the landing. “Geez, you scared the crap out of me! What are you doing?”

Rosalie hovered, but didn't speak. She'd been suffering from night terrors lately.

"Rosa, let's go back to bed, okay?" She approached Rosalie carefully and guided her toward her room by the shoulders. "You're sleepwalking. It's okay. Let's get back to bed."

"It's happening again." Rosalie stopped walking and raised a pointed finger toward the living room. "Daddy need us."

"You're dreaming. Come on."

*Tick.*

The TV turned back on. The static filled the quiet house. Melody felt paralyzed in place.

*Click.*

The theme song to *Friends* played. That was Dad's favorite show.

*Click.*

Voices chattered followed by audience laughter. The volume increased as the channel changed again and loud, booming voices echoed into the hall. Melody rushed into the room and grabbed the remote. The screen violently flashed.

*Click.Click.Click.Click.Click.*

"What's happening?" She pounded the remote against her hand and tried furiously to turn the picture off. The channels cycled back through, a mixture of loud voices and commercial jingles echoing through the room.

*Click.Click.Click.*

"I'll be there for yo—"

*Click. Click.*

Audience laughter.

*Click.*

“BUT WAIT, THERE’S MORE!”

*Tick.*

She let the remote fall to the floor. The silence settled around her like dust, and she drew in a shaky breath. “Rosa?” Her sister was no longer in the foyer. “Rosalie?”

“GET OUT!”

A yellowed face with glowing red eyes flashed on the screen as a loud organ boomed, rattling her chest. Her feet carried her down the hall, past the bathroom, and into her room. She slammed the door behind her. Another clap of thunder shook the house. The organ music died down. She pressed an ear to the door.

*Tick.*

All was quiet in the house. She sat motionless and waited for her heart to still, but the beating grew louder and faster, echoing throughout the entire house. Faster and faster, the pounding grew; it was not coming from her chest but from the hall.

Footsteps.

The doorknob twisted, and she jumped to her feet, grabbing the nearest thing she could reach as the door flew open.

“GET AWAY FROM—”

“Laurel Melody Jones!” Mom caught her elbow just as she swung the lamp. “What is going on?” Mom was red-faced and wearing one of Dad’s favorite t-shirts. Her hair was tangled around her face. She tightened her grasp on Melody’s arm as she pried the lamp away with her free hand.

“Mommy?” Rosalie poked her head out of her room, Angie following close behind.

“What’s wrong? We heard yelling.”

“Nothing. Go back to bed, both of you.”

“Melly, was it Daddy?”

“Bed, Rosalie. I’ll be there in a minute.” Mom closed the bedroom door. “Mel. What is going on?”

“N-nothing. Go back to sleep.”

“Nothing? You woke us all up screaming, and you were ready to take off my head with that lamp. And ‘nothing’ is all you have to say?”

“I don’t know.” Her lips trembled. “The TV. It just kept turning on. And then this thing popped up on the screen.”

Mom led her back to the living room. The remote was on the floor with the batteries spilled beside it. Mom popped them back into place and powered on the TV. “Ah,” she said, scrolling through the channel guide. “This?” The same demonic face lit up the screen as the organ sounded once again. “It’s just a movie. See?”

Melody stared at the TV in disbelief. “But, the sounds and the channels, and the remote wasn’t working and—”

“It’s an old set, Mel. And the remote probably just needs new batteries.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought. But—”

Mom pulled her into a hug. “I told your dad not to let you watch scary movies before bed all those years. Look what it’s done to you.” She was trying to be funny. “We just have to get used to this place, okay?”

“Whatever. Night.”

For the rest of the night, she tossed uncomfortably in her new bed, staring at the exposed beams of the vaulted ceiling.

*Rosalie. Angie. Mom. Dad.* She counted their names in her head, one at a time. It was a trick Mom taught her when she was little. List the people and things you're thankful for when trying to fall asleep, she'd say. It fights off any nightmare or bad storm. Of course, at that time, she'd believed everything Mom said.

Shivering, Melody pulled her quilt closer to her face and begged for sleep.

*Rosalie. Angie. Mom...Good books. Rosalie. Angie. Mom. Good books.*

## CHAPTER TWO

“Seven...eight...nine...TEN! Weady or not, here I come!” Rosalie’s voice echoed across the dense yard and reverberated from the trees. She loved being ‘it.’ Melody balanced on a broad maple branch and peeked down at Angie, who crouched behind a blueberry bush. They preferred being the hidiers; hiding meant less running. Rosalie sprang into the yard like a wild rabbit. “Here I *come!*” She darted back and forth between bushes and trees.

From her perch, the backyard glowed with massive trees and bright, flowering shrubs. Not like the front yard, which seemed so dead. Neglected. Shriveled and forgotten, just like the rest of the house. In the middle of the backyard, stood the mulberry tree that Great-grandma Marjorie had planted when she and Granddaddy first built the house. Even though it wasn’t as big as the other trees, it was the prettiest, with its clusters of small, bright red berries. Sunny and filled with trees, the yard looked like the fantastical fortresses Melody enjoyed reading about in books—more beautiful than the neatly mowed lawn back at her old house. This yard felt safe and comforting, like it had been waiting for her to come enjoy its beauty.

*Like a garden*, she thought. A garden that had continued to live and bloom in spite of being forgotten.

She looked up. Low-hanging branches were woven into a thick canopy that blocked the view of the sky. At least the sun wouldn’t glare down on their heads by lunchtime. Yawning, she tried to keep her thoughts focused on the beauty of flowers and vines below. She didn’t want to think about all that had happened last night.

“Ah-ha! You’re it!” Rosalie danced around the blueberry bush and clapped her hands together while Angie stood and dusted the dirt from her knees.

“Am not! You found me, but you didn’t tag me. This is hide-and-seek *tag!*” She took a couple of steps away from her hiding spot while Rosalie’s smile faded to a pout. “The mulberry tree is base. Can’t catch me!”

Before Rosalie’s little legs kicked into action, Angie already had her arms wrapped around the base tree, hugging it tightly.

“Safe!”

Rosalie stamped her foot and sat on the dampened ground.

“Aw, don’t be like that. You still haven’t found Melody. You might tag her.”

“This yard is too big,” Rosalie whined. “I’ll never find her.” She scrambled to her feet and slouched her shoulders, slinging her hands side to side. “And it’s hot!” She almost always gave up before the game was over—she didn’t like losing. A soft breeze lifted her dark curls. The thin branches swayed and rocked; the leaves rustled and crunched. Rosalie looked up. “Hey!” She thrust a pointed finger in the air. “I found you!” She scampered up the trunk of the tree, her short body shimmying as she reached for nearby branches to cling to. Melody held tightly to her branch and swung her feet down and onto the one below until she dropped effortlessly to the ground.

“Safe!” She slapped the base of the mulberry tree.

“Rosa, you should’ve just stayed on the ground. She would’ve had to come down, and then you could have tagged her.” Angie always wanted everyone to think like her.

Plucking a mulberry and popping it into her mouth, Melody rushed to her sister’s rescue. She was a great climber, but Rosalie could never get down on her own.

“Swing your feet down, Rosa.” Rosalie’s Barbie tennis shoe smacked her in the temple. “Carefully!” Grabbing onto Rosalie’s swinging legs, she hoisted her sister down from the branch

and set her safely on her feet again. Rosalie's bright green eyes frowned up at her. "What? There were no rules about hiding in trees. And you found me, so you did a great job." She high-fived her sister.

"Better start counting again." Angie smiled smugly.

"Nuh uh, you're it!" Rosalie pushed hard against her waist. "You came off base! I tag you!"

For the rest of the late morning, they played outside together running, hiding, and braiding wildflowers into crowns. When Mom called them inside for lunch, Melody grabbed her journal from her bedroom and asked to eat her neatly cut peanut butter sandwich outside. Nestling against the trunk of the mulberry tree, she felt the moisture from last night's rain seep through her t-shirt. Her jean shorts brushed against the clumped soil, causing some of the dampened dirt to cling to the backs of her thighs as she crossed her legs and balanced her story journal on her knee. Some of the pages were folded and stapled in, and others had yellow sticky notes with jotted down ideas, so she had to be careful not to lose anything when flipping through the pages. Her recurring dreams, the make-believe games she invented for her sisters, original poems, songs, and stories were all scribbled between the dark purple binding.

She traced a finger over the gold etching on the cover:

*Imagination is a good servant, and a bad master.*

*The simplest explanation is always the most likely.*

It was a quotation from one of Dad's favorite authors. He'd given her this journal as her eleventh birthday gift. That was the year he published the last finished novel in his detective series. The journal had been a gift from his agent, but he'd wanted Melody to have it instead.



“It’s your turn, Mel,” he’d said in a soft, excited voice. “Tell your stories. Maybe we’ll write one together some day.” On the first page, he’d written,

*To my beautiful Mel,*

*Happy birthday! Anything you can imagine, you can create through the power of words. Don’t hold back. You make me proud.*

*-Dad.*

Before she could stop them, hot tears trickled down her cheeks. They wouldn’t write a story together. Not if he never came back from wherever he was. Her mind wandered back to the vision of his unfinished work scattered on his office floor. He hadn’t told her much about his newest novel. Just that this one would be different than the others in the series. Most of the pages had been completely ruined in the small fire that horrible night. If he didn’t come back, she’d never fully know what new story he was crafting. Unless he published it from wherever he was. Would she find his work in a corner bookstore someday, while browsing through the shelves? Or in the quarterly magazine that came to her school? Or the bookfair?

*No.*

He’d never do something as horrible as that. He was gone for a reason. Dad would never walk away from their family without a reason. But what was it?

Melody flipped to a blank page and steadied her trembling hand.

*I stand in the red room, squinting in the dim light. I smell his whiskey as it*

*saturates the musty floorboards. Stale smoke hovers, making the air thick to breathe.*

*His office is in shambles. Obvious signs of a struggle.*

*I place a pouch of dried leaves and berries into the evidence bag. His intuitive, thirteen-year-old daughter thought that was out of the ordinary, so it requires some investigation, no doubt. I jot in my notebook as my partner turns to me, puzzled.*

*"You think this was a robbery, Detective?" Joe asks, sipping his black, gas station coffee. I shake my head and tuck the pencil back behind my ear.*

*"Kidnapping."*

A light breeze tickled her neck. Whispers hissed in her ears like running creek water. Her head swirled, and suddenly, she was no longer picturing, but instead standing outside of Dad's red office door. Her feet wouldn't move. She remained transfixed, the door moving in and out of focus as the incomprehensible whispers echoed around her. The journal slipped from her hand, clattering into the leaves, and she was jolted back to her seated position against the mulberry tree. All was quiet and still.

She rubbed her eyes with her fists.

Despite the warm sun beams sneaking through the canopy, she felt cold. Had she dozed off while writing? That didn't seem likely. It had seemed so real, like she had actually been standing in front of the office door. But that wasn't possible.

Shakily, she stood and headed inside with her family. The salty smell of peanut butter hit her hard in the face as she pushed open the dining room door.

"Melly, we're making peanut butter bumble bee cookies!" Rosalie held out her palms to showcase the sticky proof that she'd helped roll the peanut butter and powdered sugar into their shapes. "You come add the wings!"

Forcing a smile, Melody scooched in around the cloth-covered pool table from the rec room—they had sold their real dining room table in the move—and with a gentle touch, stuck the sliced almonds on either side of the body, just as the torn-out magazine recipe showed. Angie squeezed the leftover chocolate into her mouth from the piping tube.

“Gross. Don’t do that.”

“Alright,” Mom clapped her hands together before an argument could start. “These are ready to go in the fridge.”

“I’m gonna watch TV!” Rosalie sprinted toward the living room.

“Whoa, whoa, I don’t think so!” Mom caught Rosalie’s elbow just before she stepped down from the ledge. “Wash those hands before you go anywhere near that couch.” She pulled her over to the sink where Angie started on the dishes. The cookies must’ve been her request, so she had to be the one to clean the mess. Rosalie giggled. The peanut butter had found its way to her nose, and some clung to her curls. “Maybe you need a bath instead.” Mom carried Rosalie off at arm’s length like a bag of sticky trash. Rosalie gave Melody a sad wave.

*Tick.*

“Here’s the mail, it never fails!” Rosalie’s favorite show blasted at full volume.

Melody’s throat tightened. The red light glowed on the VCR as she bumped down the volume. “Hey, is someone recording something?”

*Click.*

The picture on the screen flickered and the channel changed.

“Not again.” She grabbed the remote and tried turning the TV back off. “Mom!” She could hear her mom and Rosalie already singing and splashing in the running water. “Get some batteries for this stupid remote!”

*Click.*

*Click.*

*Click-click-click-click-click.*

Once again, the channels scrolled in wild fashion, the sounds from different shows and commercials blurring together. She emptied the batteries from the remote, but the channels still scrolled until they reached the end and started back over. “MOM!”

“In a minute, Mel! Kinda busy!”

The screen paused on a picture of a man with dark, curly hair that was pulled back from his face. He wore a red flannel shirt that had been a Father’s Day gift. Melody leaned toward the TV set, looking deep into his blue jean eyes and slanted smile. “Dad?”

“In other news, mystery author, Samuel Jones, is still missing, according to officials.” The news anchor’s high-pitched voice was annoyingly chipper. “Police say there have been no new leads at this time. The investigation remains open, and authorities encourage anyone with any information to come forward at once. Jones was a creative writing professor in his hometown Auburn, Alabama. Officials say he was last seen on the night of January 27th, and there has been no contact or reported sightings since. Jones was the author of the *Alice Wilde* series as well as an autobiography about his oldest daughter’s rare vision disorder. Anyone with any information should call the number at the bottom of the screen.”

*Tick.*

“They talk about him like he’s dead.” Angie stood on the ledge, soap dripping from the plate that was still in her hand.

“He’s not.” The detective had told their mom that it was highly unlikely that he was dead. He’d said that Dad was only missing because he didn’t want to be found. “He’s coming back. Go finish the dishes.”

“What’s the problem, Mel?” Mom finally appeared from around the corner.

“Nothing. Just buy some batteries, please.” She didn’t feel like talking. The news station had used the photo from the back cover of Dad’s last published book—his first ever nonfiction work that had been all about her. He had worked so hard and had been so thrilled with it, but she remembered him saying to Mom that he couldn’t wait to go back to fiction writing. She fidgeted with her glasses.

The phone rang, and Angie pulled the receiver from its hook. “Mom, it’s Peepaw! He says he just made it back to the mountains...”

“He’s coming back,” Melody whispered, drowning out the phone conversation. “He’ll find us.” She’d nailed a Ziploc bag with a note for him to the swing set back home to make sure of that.

There was a loud rapping at the front door. She wasn’t in the mood to accept a casserole from some friendly neighbor down the street, but she shuffled over to the door anyway. The sun’s glare stung her eyes. No one was there.

“Hello?” The street was clear and the only sound was the chirping of the birds. She swung the door closed. “Jerks.” It was probably some neighborhood kids playing ding-dong-ditch.

There was another knock.

She pulled the door back and again stared out to an empty yard. Annoyed, she pushed the door closed and turned back toward the kitchen.

More knocking. She twisted the knob hard and threw back the door. “Look, kid, this isn’t funny!”

“Dorry pretty bird.” Dorian squawked and bobbed his head as though he were laughing.

*Stupid, rotten bird!*

He loved imitating the doorbell or the phone ringing. Apparently, now he knew how to knock. “Ha-ha. Very funny.” Annoyed, she latched the deadbolt.

There was another knock at the door, this time louder than before. “You can cut it out now, Dorian.”

But Dorian only cocked his grey head to the side. “Bad bird.” His voice imitated Dad’s, but more echoey.

“Yeah. Bad bird.” She moved toward the kitchen to find his box of crackers. He usually acted out when he wanted attention, or when he wanted food.

More knocking sounded. She ignored it. The doorbell rang like the sound of an old, tired grandfather clock. “I’m getting you a cracker! Chill.”

“He’s just trying to play.” Angie put away the last dish.

Another knock pounded. He wouldn’t stop until she played along. Melody marched back to the front door, undid the latch and yanked it open, the blinds clanging against the unfinished wood. “Are you happy now?”

“Uh. Hey?” Jonathan stood in the un-mowed grass with a goofy grin and uncombed hair.

Her cheeks were hot. Dorian clucked and cackled behind her.

“I was coming to see if you guys wanted to ride bikes or something.” He ran a hand through his tousled curls.

“We don’t have bikes.” Melody moved to slam the door, but he stopped it with his foot.

“Hey, hold up. I could...um...let you borrow mine. Take turns?”

“Take turns what?” Angie squeezed between Melody and the door frame.

“Riding bikes. I was coming over to see...”

“You can teach me to ride a bike?” Rosalie appeared behind them in the hall, her hair wrapped in a towel.

Melody groaned. She was outnumbered.

“We have to ask our mom first. And she’s going to say no because we still have unpacking to do.”

“Ask Mom what?”

“He wants to teach me to ride a bike, Mommy!”

Mom ruffled Rosalie’s hair. “Well, that’s sweet! Hey, would you like some cookies, Jonathan?”

“But they have to cool.”

“Oh, they’ll be fine, Mel. You can share.”

Melody followed her sisters down the driveway. Angie handed Jonathan a bag of Mom’s cookies.

“Okay, who first?” Jonathan kicked in the stand that propped his bike up.

Rosalie’s hand shot straight into the air. He scooped her up, twirled her around, and then lowered her onto the seat. Her legs swung wildly in the wind—she was nowhere near reaching the pedals.

“Just one sec.” Jonathan wrapped an arm around her waist and dropped the seat lower. Rosalie’s infectious laugh carried on the breeze as he pushed her down the driveway and toward the cul-de-sac.

This was Dad's job. He'd taught her and Angie to ride. Would Rosalie even remember him before too long?

"I ready! Angie, come on!" Rosalie bounced on the seat and clapped her hands against the handlebars. Today was clearly one of her good mood days. Jonathan held onto the bar with one hand and kept his other hand on the small of her back. Angie did the same on the other side.

"Okay, Rose—Rosie—"

"Row-sa-ee!"

"Right. Start pedaling!" With their help, Rosalie wheeled the bike further down the gravel driveway and into the street of Hawthorne Park. She laughed and giggled and chattered the entire way until it was Angie's turn. Jonathan readjusted the seat, and she took off down toward the end of the road, her long, blonde hair flying behind her like a cape.

Jonathan squatted at the end of the driveway, and Rosalie skipped over to him, nestling into his side, probably telling him how amazingly wonderful riding the bike had been. She thought every new experience was amazingly wonderful lately. Mom said it was a coping strategy. That was probably what the guidance counselor had told her.

Angie skidded to a stop in front of Jonathan's feet. "Your turn."

Jonathan shook his head. "Her turn!" He steered the bicycle over to Melody.

"I don't ride bikes."



Lily Jones stood in the foyer watching her kids play with the neighbor boy. She breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to see them having fun for a change. They'd all been upset with her when she told them they'd be moving. Melody had been so angry the entire trip, barely speaking



the whole way. The week before they moved, she'd made Lily swear that her dad's belongings would not be sold off like the rest of their stuff. She'd called her heartless. Blamed her for the entire six months of misery. So, she'd called her stepdad and asked him to make the long drive down to Auburn from Trade, Tennessee to help them pack Samuel's things. What else could she have done? Her husband had left her and their three girls to have these fights on their own. And though she couldn't bear to see all of his belonging in her daughter's room like trophies, the thought of risking her future relationship with Mel was a bigger burden. So, she'd conceded.

She hadn't wanted to be angry with Sam. Not at first, that is. She'd wanted to believe that something truly terrible had happened to him. That he'd gotten into some kind of trouble. That he had to leave. But she could never ignore the hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach when she'd called his agent, Jennifer, and she'd seemed so calm about his disappearance. Like she knew he hadn't really just disappeared that night.

*And god, what an awful night that was!*

She shuddered. Nothing quite like that had ever happened before, or ever again in the months they stayed. She'd tried to make it work there, she really had. The extra tutoring hours she'd picked up helped a little; her feeble teacher salary was only enough to cover the house payment and bills. But it still hadn't been enough. The car had to be paid for. Angie's softball cost monthly fees. Dorian's outrageous vet bills, Rosalie's ballet, Melody's guitar lessons. And the house was just too damn quiet; too empty without Sam. Momma's house was already paid for, just sitting empty, waiting for a buyer that would never come. No one wanted to live in the murder house, after all.

The dryer beeped. Lily sighed and went about folding the family's laundry. This house was quiet too. Mel's freak-outs over the TV made her instantly regret moving her daughters into

this house that she hated so much. Switching on the light, she set her basket down in Rosa and Angie's room—her brother's old room.

She hadn't always hated it here. Grandma Marjorie had always cooked delicious meals while Momma and Weenee worked. Her beauty parlor always closed around four in the afternoon, just when Lily got off the school bus. Together, they'd cook and bake in the tiny kitchen until her mom and stepdad returned. Then, they'd all just sit around the table and talk for hours. Better times. A happy home and a happy family. Until she'd turned thirteen.

Carrying the laundry basket into the girls' bathroom, she hung the freshly cleaned towels back on the wall. She caught her reflection in the darkened mirror. Her hair was a frizzy mess, and her skin was drained of its color. Her cheeks sagged, and her eyes were barely visible. Who was this woman? Pressing her knuckles into the counter, Lily rocked forward, hanging her head as she inhaled deeply. She couldn't cry; she'd done enough of that already and was fresh out of tears.

*Don't let this house get to you.*

But it *was* getting to her. The memories threatened to consume her. Had the house lured them back? Did it really have that kind of power over her? It seemed too coincidental that mere months after Mel's thirteenth birthday, Sam vanished into thin air, causing her to have nowhere to turn but back home.

She pushed open the door to Melody's room—her old room. The one where she'd spent countless hours on the phone with her best friend. The one she'd been so desperate to leave behind as soon as she was old enough. The one she could hardly stand in now without vomiting. Thousands of pages of reading and long nights of restless dreaming had taken place behind this door. But none of those memories gripped her, holding her in a frozen stance while the air

around her thinned. No. The only fear that tugged at her mind was the one she'd spent twenty-eight years trying to forget.

"Dammit." She thought about leaving the basket on the bed for Mel to sort through later, but she was already too late. Footsteps sounded from the front door, the shuffling of a school bag swaying and thwacking against the walls approaching the back bedroom.

"Adam!" Her own voice echoed down the hall. Adam was her cousin. He'd visited from St. Louis the week of her birthday while his college was out for spring break. Her school cafeteria had served cheeseburgers that day, and she'd swiped two of them to run home and share with him. He would be returning home in two days, so Lily had wanted to enjoy his company for as long as possible. She had felt sure she could convince him to draw something really pretty to hang in her room as a birthday present to her. "Adam, I got us some burgers, and I thought maybe I could watch you draw some because, you know, it's my birthday, and—"

But her brother's room had been empty when she'd swung the door open. Adam's sleeping bag was crumpled on the floor next to Kevin's bed, an opened sketchbook on top.

"Adam?" The door to her own room at the end of the hall was open. She'd always kept it closed. A sickening sweet stench greeted her in the doorway, and the house was strangely cold. Her vanity table had been overturned, differing shades of foundation and eye shadow staining the beige carpet. The bottle of Momma's perfume that she'd stolen and stashed away on top of her chest of drawers was also spilled. Books and loose pages littered the floor, and her mattress was overturned, the pillows and sheet from her bed lying up against the wall. The window was open; the blinds were torn and flapping in the wind. And then she saw it. Her lamp was broken into pieces, specks of blood spotting the carpet around where it lay. Barely making a sound, Lily had dialed 911 from the phone on her nightstand, whispered her address into the receiver, and set it

down off the hook before burying herself as far back into her closet as she could. She'd held her breath and covered herself with her clothes until the booming voices of police officers eventually sounded from the kitchen.

She'd listened in petrified silence as the police combed through her house, shouting to one another when they'd cleared a room. A kind officer with a rough, scraggly beard had found her in the closet and pulled her into his arms as though she were a little girl. She'd tucked her face just beneath his chin as he'd lifted her up.

Where was Adam?

"Do you know your mother's work number? We need to give her a call." He'd sounded far away. "Come on. Let's get you some water." The kitchen had been ransacked. Shards of glass had covered the floor next to the door that led out to the backyard. There were large slashes in the living room couch cushions that spilled the stuffing. Every family picture was spray-painted over with red X's.

"We think he tried to escape out the window in the back bedroom, but somebody hit him in the head and dragged him back out here." The officer was bent over a pool of blood next to the counter. She hadn't seen Lily standing next to her partner. "Hey, get her out of here, will you?"

They'd found Adam's body in the backyard. He'd been stabbed, strangled, and hit over the head. They said he'd put up a fight, but had likely been outnumbered and overpowered. The police thought the attack was random. Just some town junkies scouring empty houses for drugs who hadn't expected to walk in on someone. Lily would never forget the sound of Momma's screams when she saw the body. It was lucky, the officers had said, that Grandma Marjorie had been out for a doctor's appointment that day. Otherwise, she may have been hurt too.

The oxidized mirror glinted in the sun. Only a patch in the corner was left to see a reflection in. Pink and orange post-it notes were taped to the sides with the phone numbers of Mel's friends from back home. She'd promised to do chores and babysit her sisters if Lily would agree to pay for long distance. The dresser and its mirror were the only items in the room that hadn't been replaced after the murder. She'd found a charcoal portrait of herself from Adam's sketchbook and taped it right where Mel's cursive handwriting hung now. He'd scrawled "Happy thirteenth!" in the bottom corner, followed by his slanted signature. Her last memory of him.

Lily propped the window open to let the room breathe a little. Outside, she could hear Rosalie's laughter from the driveway. She pulled one of the unpacked boxes from the closet and sorted through the books Mel had packed in neatly. Most of them were from Sam's library. His own novels were in the box too. The Alice Wilde series. He'd written seven books in the span of eight years. Their covers were dark green with twisting vines and crimson flowerings winding around a young girl's golden crown of hair. Sam had chosen the design after seeing her mother's honeysuckle and wisteria vines. He'd been so impressed with her family's eclectic taste in flowers and trees.

In the months following the murder, Momma and Grandma Marjorie had taken to buying and planting all kinds of plants and flowers in the backyard. They even did a complete purge of the entire house with the insurance money, ripping up the floors in every room and replacing them all with hardwoods, painting the kitchen cabinets, and even buying new mattresses and bedding for all three rooms. Even the beauty parlor in the basement had been enhanced. Incense burned in every room, and Grandma Marjorie set pots of aloe vera and Zanzibar gems everywhere, their plump foliage lifting and reaching toward the nearest window in need of sunlight. Sometimes, Lily would walk past and twist off a leaf, until Grandma Marjorie caught

her and made her promise never to do that again. Their living room had been divided to create a rec room that Momma filled with pool, foosball, and shuffleboard tables. A new home, a new start. Or so they'd hoped. Each night, they'd invite Mrs. Vergie—Momma's best friend—over to hold hands and stand in front of the young mulberry tree whispering together. She'd never understood what exactly they thought they were doing. There had always been rumors about her family. School bullies called them wiccans. Town gossips referred to them as the 'weird sisters in the night.' Garbage.

Lily set the Alice Wilde series aside. She'd never shared Sam's fascination with Momma's weird ways. What he called inspiring, she called obsessive. There was always a new herb, or a new sprout being brought home. Even when they'd moved to Tennessee, Momma and Grandma Marjorie still stuck with their gardening as though the house would crumble if they didn't dig a hole somewhere in the already crowded flowerbed. They'd tried to share their newfound hobby with her in the weeks after Adam's murder.

"Well, she's thirteen, the same age you were, the same age I was," Grandma Marjorie said one night in a hushed tone. "It's time. Despite what's happened, it's her time."

"She just doesn't have it, Mother. I'm telling you."

"Such a shame." The next afternoon, Grandma Marjorie had taken her out into the backyard to tend to the honeysuckle. She'd brought with her a large, heavy book. Lily had tried pronouncing the unfamiliar words with the same rhythm and inflections as her grandmother, but the phrases felt unnatural, foreign to her, and Grandma Marjorie seemed more disappointed with each attempt. It was never mentioned between them again. But she and Momma went on year after year planting and whispering in the garden with Mrs. Vergie while Lily started high school

and then moved away to Alabama for college, and she'd never seen that book again until five years ago.

Momma had called to say they'd moved to Tennessee and needed her to handle the estate. She never gave a reason why they moved so suddenly. Down in the basement, Lily had closed off the beauty parlor when she'd found the book in the reception desk drawer. On the inside cover, she'd found a note.

*To Laurel: Open October 13, 2001.*

Mel's thirteenth birthday. She'd been so angry that they would share something like this with her daughter without her permission. And of course, it was typical that they used only her daughter's first name, ignoring the fact that everyone else called her Melody. She'd donated the book to the local library and never mentioned it to anyone, not even to Sam.

In the sunlight, the gold letterings on the cover of Sam's book reflected onto the wall. She'd never noticed before, but the braided title letters resembled those of that old dusty book. Was it a coincidence? The publisher's choice instead of his? Or maybe she was only overreacting. Mountains out of molehills, Momma would say.

The kitchen phone rang, startling her and sending the box of books tumbling to the floor.

*Christ!*

"Hello?" She hoped her tone didn't sound as irritated as she felt. "Sandy, hi. No, now is as good a time as ever, I suppose. So, how have you been?"

Sandy had been her best friend growing up, and her only friend after the murder. The story had been the talk of the town for the rest of that year, and even in the years following. Ugly rumors had circulated suggesting that Adam ran with a rough crew and had owed them a debt. But no one had ever been convicted, and Adam hadn't even been from this small town. His

mother had left when he was a baby. His father had been a drunkard. He'd been bounced around different foster cares in St. Louis until he put himself through art school, so there hadn't been anyone to ask back home whether or not he had enemies that would've followed him halfway across the country. It seemed highly unlikely he'd been targeted, but then again, who knew? Nothing like that had ever happened on Hawthorne Park before. Hell, nothing like that had happened in the entire town before. Momma and Grandma Marjorie blamed themselves for his death.

"I'm fine, Sandy, really. Just trying to sort things out... Yeah, I guess it's hard being back and all...uh huh...right."

Sandy had heard about Sam's disappearance on the news. They'd lost touch after Lily left for college, and Sandy gave birth to her oldest. On weekends, she would call from her dorm room to check in, but each time, Sandy would beg her to come home. So, she eventually stopped calling altogether. On holidays, she'd send a postcard. Then, once she married Sam, she stopped doing even that. It wasn't until Melody was almost three years old and she was pregnant with Angie that Sam insisted they visit her old home for Christmas. He'd said it wasn't fair for her parents to make the long drive to Alabama with Grandma Marjorie's condition. She'd given in, but never in the years that they visited did she reach out to Sandy. Sam didn't know why she ran away from her past life, and he'd always respected her enough not to ask. A rekindled friendship with Sandy would've ruined that in a heartbeat. Now, Lily supposed, it didn't much matter.

"Mh-hmm. And how's your mom?"

The front door opened and slammed closed. Melody stomped into the kitchen and slumped down at the breakfast table.



“Sandy, let me call you back. Now isn’t a great time after all.” She put on the coffee pot and sat next to Mel. “Something wrong?”

“I think it was a mistake moving here. Dad doesn’t know we’re here, and I know you think he’s not coming back, but I know that’s just not true. And this house is *creepy*, Mom! I hate it here.”

“Listen, I know it’s a bit of an adjustment, but—”

“And that boy is weird. What teenager wants to hang out with a bunch of girls who are younger? He’s in high school.”

“Well, hun, you’ll be in high school this year too. And I think it’s sweet.”

“Of course you do.”

“Excuse me?” The coffee pot rattled and rumbled as the water heated. Lily grabbed two mugs and spoons from the cabinet, annoyed at Melody’s sour mood. It seemed to be her *only* mood lately.

“You’re never on my side for anything.” Mel buried her face in her arms. The dripping of the pot ticked away the uncomfortably silent seconds.

“I’m your mother. I’m always on your side.”

“Not like Dad was.”

No. Not like Sam was. That was true. They’d always shared a special bond from the moment she was born. He’d loved all of his daughters, of course, but he’d never bonded with the other two like he had with Mel. He’d even named her Melody after his mother, something that had sparked an argument with Momma, who believed if men had the luxury of naming their sons after their lineage, then women should have power in naming daughters after their own lineage. It was the most absurd argument Lily had ever had with her mother, but in the end, she and Sam

had agreed to make peace and named her Laurel Melody Jones after both family traditions. To Sam's annoyance, Momma and Grandma Marjorie made a point to only use Mel's first name. But still, he'd insist on spending holidays with them.

"I'm on your side." She poured sugar and half and half into the mugs, stirring the freshly brewed coffee until it turned a caramel, milky brown. Fresh coffee was her favorite smell. She'd breathed it in every day as a barista in undergrad, working double shifts at the university's café. It was how she'd met Sam. The long-haired musician was earning his degree in creative writing and would play open mic nights in her shop. He'd started coming regularly in the mornings, asking for an exact measurement of cream and sugar in order to ensure it didn't drown out the coffee's strength. He wanted to teach, he'd said, and so did she. So, they became study partners, taking classes in alternating semesters so they could share their books and their notes. Study sessions led to bakery dates, which led to dinner and movies, which ultimately led to her moving in with him in a grungy studio apartment near campus that they could barely afford.

The warmth from the coffee felt good against her skin as she held the mug up to her face and inhaled. Mel did the same, her glasses fogging over.

"Here," Lily reached over and lifted them from Melody's face, wiping away the smudges like she did when Mel first had to get glasses. She'd been in second grade, and her classmates had celebrated her for being the first kid in the grade to get glasses. It was a sweet moment Sam had captured on camera that was now tucked somewhere in an old photo album.

"Dad makes it stronger...Made." They sipped in silence.

"Mel?" She gulped down another sip that burned the sides of her throat. "You asked me before what 'stigmatized' meant. Well, it usually means that something happened in the house that makes people not want to buy it."

“Like what?”

“Like a death. Well, more than that. Like a murder. When I was your age, something horrible happened here.”

Mel didn’t move after Lily had finished telling her story. She just sat staring at her hands that were clasped tightly around her mug.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Melody finally asked.

“What?”

“Ghosts. Maybe he’s still here and angry about what happened to him.” She flipped open her journal.

“No.”

“Maybe that’s why the TV keeps acting all weird and—”

“Mel, stop.”

“No, Mom, really. This is just like something I read before where this awful thing happened in some house, and for years it was haunted.”

“I said stop! This is not a game or a stupid story for you to write in that journal you keep.” She regretted her words as soon as they spilled from her lips. Her daughter looked like a wounded animal. “Mel, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Just leave me alone.” She ran back outside with her notebook and pen.

*Nicely done, Lil.*

She poured the unfinished coffee down the drain, watching as the dark liquid pooled around the metal ring before washing away with the running water. She’d always had a strength in pushing people away. Even her own family. The pricking fear that maybe Sam had left because of her gnawed at her heart. Had he had enough?

He'd become a teacher just as he'd wanted, and so did she. Then he explored graduate school and began his career as a professor. But then he'd changed his mind again. He wanted to write. And she'd supported him. But the bills piled up. He took a sabbatical, and then another before abandoning his tenure track altogether. She was only a fourth-grade teacher at a local private school. Her salary was never enough to make up for the absence of his, but they'd managed. Together. Then he'd started traveling for book tours and attending writers' conferences for weeks at a time. And still she'd remained supportive, never nagging him. Never questioning him about the truths of his whereabouts or why Jennifer always sent home nice gifts. Yet still, he left. And now she'd have to plan the rest of her life as a single mother in a house she despised. She didn't want to hate him. But that was getting too hard.

## CHAPTER THREE

“What’s that?” Jonathan stood over the oldest daughter, who only seemed to frown, as she crouched on the porch step. He couldn’t remember her name. Without speaking, she’d just stomped back outside and sat down, her face hidden behind her hair. She was whispering, reading whatever was in her little book aloud to herself.

“It’s just her story journal. As I was saying ...” The middle daughter—Annie? Angie?—continued chattering to him about something to do with the backyard, but he could barely hear her over the loud buzzing that filled in his ears. He’d heard it earlier that morning too when the sisters were playing in the yard. His yard.

“So, are you coming?” Annie-Angie was in front of him now, hands on her hips, one foot supporting most of her weight.

“What?”

She looked annoyed. “To the backyard!”

Jonathan let himself be led over to the side of the house. Rosalie tugged on the gate.

“It’s broken. You gotta jump the fence, like this!” He hoisted himself effortlessly into the yard and reached over to lift Rosalie.

“How did you know that?” Annie-Angie climbed over, and he held her hands to help her jump down.

“Know what?”

“That the gate was broken.” The girl who only frowned joined them, her book in hand.

“You hang out in other people’s backyards or something?”

“Lucky guess.” If they did find out, would they let him stay? He didn’t want to take that chance.

“Over here! Up, Melly?”

*Melanie!*

That was her name. She lifted Rosalie up to reach the lowest branch. “They’re mulberries.”

“I know.”

Now all three girls frowned at him. He twisted a piece of hair around his index finger. “Uh. The guy who lived here before you let me hang out. Mr. Grey. He was cool. He told me about this tree.”

“What? No one has lived here.” Melanie’s eyes looked a shade darker. Like she was afraid. She put a hand on Rosalie’s shoulder like she was protecting her from him. “Our grandparents lived her, but they moved five years ago. No one else has lived here until now. No one would want to.”

“Well, he didn’t really *live* here. He just owned the place and was here a lot.”

“My mom owns the place. And I just said no one’s lived here for *five years*.”

“Well, it’s not like I could’ve made up a whole person or something.” Could he? Mr. Grey had stopped coming so suddenly without a word. But the money for food kept showing up, and the place always seemed to be cleaned by someone. Jonathan had been on his own until this family pulled up in his driveway. He was reading up in the mulberry tree when he’d heard the van pull into the driveway. But it wasn’t Mr. Grey. He hadn’t known what to make of the family just unpacking and moving in upstairs. No one in town knew that he’d been living alone in the basement of this abandoned house. Mr. Grey had warned him about fitting in. Now, that was going to be even harder.

“A ghost,” Rosalie whispered.

“Ghosts aren’t real, stupid.” Annie-Angie grabbed a fistful of berries.

“Are so!”

Melanie pulled a branch down for Rosalie to reach more berries. “Ignore her, Rosa. Ghosts can be real if you want them to be. Right, Angie?”

*Angie. Right.*

“So, hey? Your grandparents lived here, which means you know the town. What’s your favorite place?” He needed to change the subject before they asked too many questions.

Melanie smiled. “There was a little place where our great-grandma liked to get breakfast. Right next to the library. She took me every morning when I stayed here one summer. It was inside an old train car.”

“Elena’s Creperie?”

“That’s it! Great-grandma Marjorie owned a beauty shop in the basement. Shear Majick. She’d always bring back tea and crepes for her clients.” Melanie thumbed the crystal that hung from her neck. “Her beauty shop was the best part of the whole house. It’s boarded up now.”

“So...you can’t get inside.” He breathed a sigh of relief. There was still time to form a plan. He just had to be careful coming and going. If they saw him in the yard without permission, they might get suspicious. And he had nowhere else to go.

Rosalie flopped to the ground next to him. She wiped her sticky fingers against the dirt and rocks. She reminded him of someone. Angie sat across from her and drew pictures in the dirt with a stick.

“Can I join?” With his finger, he traced the outlines of trees into the soft ground. He added a sun with a smiling face and a squiggly butterfly, which Angie described as the ugliest

thing she'd ever seen. Melanie kept her distance, scribbling away in her book. "What does she write about anyway?"

"Well, sometimes she makes games for me and Angie to play. But she and Daddy write stories. And they read them to me!" She scratched out his smiling sun with her palm.

"Wrote. Dad wrote stories, Rosa. He's not here anymore." Angie drew an equally ugly butterfly in the dirt.

"Yes, he is." Rosalie looked up at him. "Right?"

"Oh...um, yeah. I'm sure he is." Jonathan stood and dusted his knees. "I lost someone too. The guy who...Mr. Grey. He just stopped coming." It wasn't the same as losing a dad, but Mr. Grey had been like a dad to him for almost a year.

He was always busy working in the garden, but he'd give Jonathan money to go into town as long as he didn't tell anyone where he was living. The first time Jonathan had tried to visit town, he hadn't even stepped off the driveway before he'd doubled over in pain. His brain swelled so much he thought his head would explode. Mr. Grey had grabbed Jonathan by his arms and dragged him back toward the mulberry tree until he could breathe and stand again.

Boundaries, Mr. Grey had said. A few days later, Mr. Grey handed him a bag with mulberries and leaves. He'd been afraid to step into the street, but Mr. Grey had been so sure it would work. And he'd been right. Jonathan had stepped into the street and walked the length of the cul-de-sac and back. Then, he walked to the main road and back. The next day, he made it into town, just past the sign that read "Welcome to Basswood Downtown Historic District." A pretty pink tree had stood just behind the sign, its blossoms reaching down as though underlining the town's name. Around the front of the sign were white, lacey flowers that spread around the entrance like a net. His head had pounded then, and the air was sucked from his lungs. Somehow, he'd



managed to run back to Mr. Grey's garden before collapsing. But for the rest of that day, he'd been sick and weak. Mr. Grey spent hours bent over books, mumbling about spellbinding and talismans. A few weeks later, he'd returned with a new charm that he wanted Jonathan to carry in his pocket. It had to be *fresh* at all times, he'd warned. Jonathan never questioned Mr. Grey. He admired him too much. On his next visit to town, he walked safely down the block to the corner bakery and the historic library. This became a frequent trip whenever Mr. Grey was in town. He'd send Jonathan to collect books from the library, or to the bakery to buy doughnuts.

"Hey, why did some random guy hang around here anyway?" Melanie had stopped writing in her book.

"He just did. I thought he owned this place. He came a couple times a month and checked in on me."

"So, you live across the street?"

"Yeah." Mr. Helms lived across the street. His wife had died a few months ago, and he hardly ever left his house. They would never see him.

"And your parents didn't care that some stranger just came and invited you over a few times a month? My mom would never be okay with that."

This chick asked a lot of questions. Did she have any friends back in her old neighborhood? Probably not. She frowned too much. But she seemed so familiar. She even *sounded* familiar. He couldn't remember much about how he came to Basswood. Or where he'd been before. There was just darkness. And confusion. Panic. And then...Mr. Grey.

The main door leading into the basement had been boarded up. What the Jones family didn't seem to know was that over by the side of the house—hidden behind the overgrown vines and a few shrubs Mr. Grey had planted—was a heavy, wooden cellar door. Mr. Grey had busted

the rusted padlock and pulled the cobwebbed door up, leading Jonathan down a dark, cement staircase. Plastic covered furniture that had been left behind turned into an office for Mr. Grey and a home for Jonathan. When he wasn't in town, Mr. Grey would write letters and send little blue envelopes with money. But there was never a return address to send back a response. Mr. Grey talked about his childhood, his love for Classic Rock, or how his favorite ice cream was just plain vanilla, and his research. So much about his research. None of this was enough to help find him, of course, after he stopped writing and visiting. No one in town had heard of a Mr. Grey from out of town who liked boring ice cream flavors and read tons of books about herbal magic and home gardening.

“Let’s just do something, okay? I’m bored.” He chewed his lip.

“So it’s my job to make you feel less bored?”

“Hey, I shared my bike and—”

“I don’t—”

“Ride bikes. Yeah. I got that. But I offered anyhow. And it was fun! What’s your problem, Melanie?”

“It’s Mel-o-*dy*!”

*Close enough.*

She stomped back over to the deck. Why was she so annoying about everything? He already missed having the place to himself.

Rosalie wanted to climb trees, so he lifted her up to the lowest branch. Angie brought out cookies and pink lemonade from Mrs. Jones. She showed him how to solve Sudoku puzzles. He preferred jigsaw puzzles with pictures. It was how he’d passed the time in the winter when he was alone. He only had three puzzles. His favorite was the picture of a toy nutcracker standing

tall next to sheet music for “Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy.” When he was tired of piecing together the same puzzle over and over, he taught himself to play the blurb of music with the small keyboard Mr. Grey left. The notes drawn on the puzzle picture weren’t actually correct because the song sounded terrible. He’d wanted to ask Mr. Grey for official lessons once he came back. Eventually, even the other two puzzles bored him, so he’d started reading instead.

The afternoon breeze picked up, rustling the leaves that surrounded Rosalie’s tiny body as she climbed higher and higher. Melody was writing again. He stepped closer to where she sat on the steps. “You okay?” He offered her one of the cookies.

She laid her pencil in the crease of the notebook. “It’s just my mom. You ever feel like your parents are lying to you? Like they think they’re trying to protect you, but don’t realize you’re old enough to just be told the truth?”

“What’s your mom lying about?”

“Nothing.” She played with the plastic piece on her flip-flops. “Everything.”

She reached for another cookie. “Do you know a Mrs. Rosenberger? Her husband owns a bakery in town. Do you know what it’s called?”

“Eddy’s?”

“I think I need to go there. She knew my mom when she was a kid. Can you take me?”

He needed a fresh charm to go into town. “Sure. How about tomorrow?”

She seemed disappointed to have to wait, but she nodded.

“So, how long have you been a writer?”

“Forever. My dad taught me.” She was silent for a moment. “I know you probably think I’m lame. A girl about to go into high school writes dumb fairy tales for her sisters to act out and play. Stupid. But I want to write books for kids someday. This is like practice.”

“*Not* lame. Just...different.” He meant it. It was actually pretty cool. Cooler than anything he’d ever done. “What do you write about?”

This time, she handed over her notebook. He looked down at the opened page and read her twirly handwriting.

*The leaves are ripe with color, a stark contrast to the branches’ sickly brown and grey hues. The hodgepodge of plants and flowers create a sophisticated and surreal beauty. The lady ferns next to the side of the house are vibrant and green and smell like hummus. This is nothing compared to the sweetness of the honeysuckles that grow on the other side of the yard, their red trumpets erecting over the wooden fence. These you can smell even from high up in the trees. Both vines are in desperate need of a trim, but still just as breathtaking.*

“My great-grandma planted almost everything in this yard years ago. I wanted to write it all down. Those,” she gestured toward the cotton candy-colored flowers, “are called hyacinth. You think they’re pretty now, you should see them when they first bloom. You’ll never see anything as blue, pink, or purple.”

Jonathan nodded as though he knew what she’d meant. The flowers in this yard were pretty, sure. But he’d never really cared enough to ask Mr. Grey about them.

“You can’t touch them, though,” she continued. “They’re mildly toxic and make your skin crawl. Those over there are marigolds.” She pointed to a plant with bright yellow and

orange pompoms. “And those,” she pointed to the white, wispy flowers that looked a little like corndogs, “are called yucca. Out front are rosebushes and granddaddy graybeard trees and wisteria. You probably saw them yesterday. The graybeards are dead, though.”

“Yeah. He was gonna get to them this spring.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Grey. He planted that rosebush. He wanted to dig up the trees and replace them later.” But later didn’t come. “You know a lot about flowers. And your grandparents sure seemed to like color. It’s like looking at a box of crayons.”

Melody laughed. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows along the ground. She described the different flowers around the yard until she’d provided a detailed history of every plant except for the grass itself. Jonathan took it all in. Mr. Grey would talk about the garden while he worked, but not like Melody did. Her voice had such a fierce passion when she described each flower. It was as if she’d created each plant herself. Or like listening to a song.

“And that’s all of them.” Melody slid closer to him on the step.

“Can I keep reading?” He turned the page.

“This is my newest story. It started as a dream that I had the night my dad...here.” She slid closer and read the words aloud over his shoulder.

*Queen Marah looked out from her palace window. Miles of mountains and hills rolled beyond the horizon. She re-positioned the newly given crown over her thick, golden hair and sighed. She missed her snug little cottage once buried in a thicket of trees.*

*Now, Marah's castle hovered among the tops of those towering trees, twenty feet off the ground. The weather was colder up here than she ever remembered it being when she lived among the Grounds.*

"Can I make a suggestion?"

She pursed her lips.

"Uh. I just think it would be cooler if the trees were like two hundred *miles* from the ground. Since it's colder and all."

She pulled the journal away from him and he fumbled for an apology. It was her story. Maybe she didn't want suggestions. But the plot was familiar. Like a story his mom used to tell him before bed when he was little. Or like the puzzle he could piece together from memory from having seen the picture so many times.

"Like this?"

*Now, Marah's castle hovered among the tops of those towering trees, ~~twenty~~ two hundred ~~feet~~ miles off the ground. The weather was colder up here than she ever remembered it being when she lived among the Grounds. This was just one more thing for her to get used to. Why did her coronation have to take place in the dead of winter?*

*Her youngest sister, Rowan, came running down the foyer, feet skipping and gliding across the golden tile. She stopped abruptly and gave a clumsy curtsy.*

*"Your Highness, Sister," she chirped in her sing-song voice. Marah smiled and patted her head. At least she had been able to save one of her sisters.*

*“Rowan, your skirts are wet. And your boots are leaving puddles all over the floor!”*

*Rowan looked at her hands, her hair falling like curtains over her eyes. She’d left the High Lands again, even though she knew better.*

*“Rowan, how many times must I tell you—”*

*“But the snow is so pretty in the Grounds! And the village is so nice, Marah. I don’t like it here!”*

As she read, the air around them cooled. The porch steps vanished beneath them, and Jonathan stood, his feet sinking into freezing fluff that pricked his toes.

*Snow?*

“Hey, do you see this?” But he was alone. “Melody? Hey!”

“Follow me!” An invisible voice rang from above.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness. He was standing in a dense, snowy forest. Looking up, the massive trees stretched for miles up into the moonlit sky, their tops hidden beyond the clouds.

“I can’t see you!” It was Rosalie’s voice. “Where are you?”

“I’m down here!” He waited, but she didn’t respond. “Rosa?” His toes burned against his sandals, turning numb from the cold. “Rosalie!”

“Up here! Follow me!” A girl laughed. Was she with Rosalie? And what had happened to Melody? Angie?

Checking that his charm was tucked safely in his pocket, he wrapped his arms around one of the fat trees and climbed. “Rosa, I’m coming, okay? Stay where you are!” But where was

that? He still couldn't see anything other than stretching trees and pale moonlight. He climbed higher until the ground was too far away to see. And suddenly, the branches weren't actually branches anymore. They were *icicles*. Soon, he wasn't climbing at all. He was crouching on the steps of a glittering castle the color of pearls. "What the hell?"

"Language!" A small girl smacked the back of his head. Her cheeks were pink. She wore a long red cloak that was soaked around the hem and thick black boots. "Who are you?"

"Who are *you*?" He rubbed the place on his head where she'd hit him. Had she used a stick? "And what is this place?" Was he dreaming? Losing his mind?

"I'm Rowan, and I'm practically a princess even though I'm only ten and you have to be twelve to be coronated as a Royal in the High Lands."

"What?" Definitely losing his mind.

"I demand to know who you are!"

*Rowan.* That was a name Melody had used in her story.

"Not until you tell me where I am." He liked her. She was sassy like Rosalie.

*Rosalie.* Where was she?

"Rowan? Who's at the gate?" A young woman with golden braids twirled around her head appeared behind the pink crystal gate.

Before he could speak, the castle rumbled and quaked.

*"Times have changed, Rowan," Marah said. "You know we can't return to the*

*Grounds. This has to be our home now."*

Melody's voice echoed around him. He turned away from the strange women and grabbed onto an icicle, sliding down until his hands scraped the gray, bumpy bark of a tree, and the crystal gates above him changed to midnight sky. He climbed down to where the snow faded



to wet grass, the air catching in his lungs. He was frozen in place surrounded by nothing but black.

“Jonathan?” Melody tapped him with her pencil.

He was seated beside her on the porch step. The late afternoon sun shone through the backyard trees.

“Weren’t you listening? I think two hundred miles is too much. Even for magic trees.”

His head swam. He looked down at his toes. They were bright red and wet. He hadn’t imagined it. But he couldn’t explain it. “Sure. Did you see—”

A loud shriek cut him off.

With the snap of a branch, Rosalie’s tiny body tumbled and plummeted from the oak tree nearest the house. Jonathan charged forward, following Melody to where Rosalie was crumpled on the ground. She was so small, and she wasn’t moving. He didn’t know if he should try to lift her. Angie jumped to her feet and hurried over.

“What is it, what happened?” Mrs. Jones rushed into the yard. “Oh my god, Rosalie!”

“Mommy?” When Rosalie finally rolled over, her face was contorted and pallid. Her leg was tucked under her body, twisting at the knee and lying limp in the dirt. Jonathan clamped his teeth tight together, forcing the bile back down his throat with a sting. “I thought it wouldn’t hurt because of the snow, Mommy. I just wanted to know what the girl was saying.”

His spine tingled. She had been there, just as he thought. She’d seen the snow and girl, Rowan, who was practically a princess. But why hadn’t he seen her? Had she seen him?

“Shhh. It’s okay, baby. Jonathan, help me get her up?”

He gently helped Mrs. Jones lift Rosalie from the ground, careful not to move her any more than they had to. She was crying now and wailing that it hurt. Her mom shushed and soothed, but Rosalie's cries drowned out her attempts to chase the pain away.

"I need to get her to the car. The emergency room is a short drive from here." Mrs. Jones was fighting tears as she held Rosalie closer to her chest. "Let's go!" She carried Rosalie inside, Angie following close behind.

"Come on, we can meet them in the garage." Melody grabbed his hand and pulled him over to the side of house. She hopped the gate. "Hurry!"

He couldn't argue. They hopped in the minivan, and he climbed over to the backseat behind the sisters.

"Hold my hand?" Melody let Rosalie squeeze her hand tight while she wiped Rosalie's tears away with her sleeve.

"It hurts, Melly."

"I know."

The minivan bumped and jolted. When they arrived at the hospital, Mrs. Jones sat Rosalie in a waiting room wheelchair. She followed closely behind the nurse through the closing double-doors.

"I'll go get some drinks while we wait." He trudged over to the vending machine and pulled the money from his pocket. He'd had a twenty-dollar bill that morning when he took the blue envelope from the drawer. Now, the envelope was heavy with some coins and folded bills, and he counted seventy dollars total. Collecting a few quarters, he punched the buttons for two Cokes and a Sprite. "Here." He offered the Cokes to the sisters. He felt sick. But he also felt something else. Relief? Hope? He'd heard the whispers before. He'd even felt the world around

him shift slightly, but he'd never been able to make out the visions in front of him. Not like today. And today, he hadn't been alone. Was Rosalie like him? But what *was* he? Why couldn't he remember anything before Basswood?

The emergency room buzzed with energy. Ringing phones, beeping pagers, patients crying, curses calling. The noise was rattling. Melody cupped her head in her hands and leaned forward, pressing her elbows into her knees. Angie paced back and forth in front of them. Jonathan's head swirled, but not to the degree it usually did when his charm wore off. He pulled it from his pocket, his breath catching in his throat. The sprigs were withered and dead. They'd frozen in the cold. He had time. But how much? The hospital was on the edge of town, and Mrs. Jones had driven around rather than through the downtown limits. Probably to avoid the slower speed limit. If she took the same way back, maybe he'd be okay.

Mrs. Jones joined them in the waiting room. She twisted and pulled on her fingers. "They want to get a CT scan. They think she could've hit her head. She just keeps talking about snow and a girl she was chasing. She's confused. And hurt." She raked her fingers through her hair. Melody and Angie sat on either side and hugged her tight.

The ER visit felt like an eternity. They were allowed in the room with Rosalie once the x-rays and scans were done. The doctor would be in to go over the findings, the nurse explained. Jonathan left the smothering room and found a bustling cafeteria downstairs. He ordered five greasy cheeseburgers. Rosalie couldn't eat until the doctor came back, but she'd likely be hungry as soon as she was cleared. He stopped at the vending machine once more, his coins clunking as he punched the buttons for two more drinks. When his arms could carry no more, he returned to the tiny room and passed out the food. Mrs. Jones was grateful for the cold soda to settle her stomach. Rosalie stared longingly at her food.

“Is it time to go home yet?” She was feeling slightly better from the medications they’d given her. A soft rapping announced the doctor’s arrival. The sky darkened in the window. Hues of pinks and oranges reached down to the roofs of the houses in the distance.

“Good news, little lady.” Dr. Linderman tucked a pen into the pocket of his lab coat where his name badge hung. He waved the chart in his hand. “Closed fracture. No surgery needed. And no signs of head injury or concussion” He placed a hand on Mrs. Jones shoulder. “She’ll be just fine. We’ll get her in a cast, and you can all go home. She’ll need lots of rest. Keep that leg elevated as much as possible.” He pulled out a prescription pad and handed Mrs. Jones a torn off sheet. “For pain. Come back in six weeks, and we’ll see how she’s holding up.” The doctor winked in Rosalie’s direction. “Collect lots of signatures.” They waited while the nurse wrapped Rosalie’s leg. She explained to Mrs. Jones how the cast would need to be cared for. Rosalie asked Jonathan to pick a color for her because she was too tired.

“I like blue.”

She smiled. “I want blue!”

Jonathan’s knees wobbled. He struggled to take a breath. Time was running out. He stared at the nurse’s hands, willing her to work faster. His stomach churned; his hands tingled. What would happen if he didn’t make it back? Mr. Grey said he could be sucked back in. Back where?

The clock on the wall showed that it was nearly nine. The ticking of seconds swarmed his brain. Was it really this loud, or was he imagining it?

“You okay?” Melody offered him the rest of her cheeseburger.

“Fine.” He chugged the last swig of his Sprite.

*Stay calm.*

Finally, Mrs. Jones was handed discharge papers. Jonathan ran to the minivan while the others rolled Rosalie out in a wheelchair. The sky darkened and closed around him. Or was he imagining that too? He couldn't see the Jones's car. Only a freezing snowy field and a young woman calling to him from a distance. Reaching out his hand, he tried to take a step toward her.

*Johnnie?*

He recognized her voice. But he couldn't see her face from where he was.

*Venha.*

His entire body shivered, and a heavy weight pressed down against the top of his head. Again, he tried to walk toward the woman.

"Jonathan?" Rosalie's hand slipped into his as Mrs. Jones locked the brakes on the wheelchair. "Look what I picked this morning." She pulled one of the marigolds from the garden out of her pocket. "It's for you."

The weight lifted slightly. He managed to climb back in the minivan, and he rested his head against the window as they drove toward home. It had been too close of a call.

"Jonathan, I'll walk you home once I get Rosa inside. I want your parents to know how helpful you've been to us."

"Oh, no ma'am, you don't need to do that. My dad's still at work, anyway."

Mrs. Jones didn't seem convinced. "This late at night? What does he do?"

Rosalie whined in pain, saving him from having to give an answer. He waved goodbye and waited until they closed the garage door. Ducking beneath the windows, he crept back toward the side of the house and climbed over the fence. He retrieved his bike and propped it against the house, hidden behind the holly bushes Mr. Grey had planted over a year ago. He brushed aside the overgrown honeysuckle and wisteria vines, snapping off a few sprouts and

adding them to his charm bag. Shuffling down the steep steps, he paused only to switch the light on. His feet hurt, and his nose wrinkled at the single, moldy apple in the fruit basket next to the vase of Zanzibar gems. He'd throw it away tomorrow. He was too drained. And starving. The last box of cereal for the week was almost empty. He poured what was left into a bowl and emptied the carton of milk from the mini fridge. He needed to go shopping. But how would he sneak back home carrying bags of groceries? Melody had asked about going to the bakery in town. All he had to do was distract her enough to slip into the basement once they got back. Maybe he'd offer to pick some things up for Mrs. Jones. This way, Melody would need to carry those groceries inside while he took his own bags home. It could work.

He tossed his empty bowl in the basin of one of the three sinks that lined the wall. It made sense to him now why there were so many. This had been the beauty shop Melody told him about. Mr. Grey had never mentioned it or even explained why he owned an abandoned house that he didn't have a key to. There was a lot he'd never explained and now never would. Jonathan missed his friend.

Exhausted, he flopped down to the stiff sheets of the rickety futon, careful not to knock over the tripod fort that surrounded his bedding. Mr. Grey had built it using branches from the mulberry and maple trees. He'd moved Jonathan in over a weekend. That much, Jonathan remembered. Little by little, he'd brought back second-hand furniture to fill the spacious rooms. Jonathan wondered if his room had been Marjorie's front office. It was small and right next to the boarded-up entrance that customers probably used.

He stared up at the intertwined branches of the fort. He wanted to talk to Mr. Grey. Maybe then he'd have some answers as to why he'd stood in a snowy field twice today. Could he

talk to Melody about it? She had her own mystery to solve. But maybe they could help each other. Turning on his side, he drifted into a deep, dreamless sleep.

He woke the next morning to the distant screeching of Angie's pet bird. Would he get used to this being his new alarm? The clock next to his bedding read 7:57AM. He didn't want to move. But he had to. The Jones family was already awake and would likely come outside soon. Their footsteps pounded above.

His muscles were stiff and his head foggy. A sour taste was in the back of his throat. He combed his fingers through his limp curls to brush them out of his eyes—he was growing his hair out long like Mr. Grey's, so he just had to deal with this annoying stage. Grunting, he pulled himself up and changed quickly. More thumping and thudding sounded from upstairs and music played. After washing his face and brushing his teeth, he pinched off the tip of the aloe plant on his dresser and applied the fresh gel to the small blemishes along his jawline. Mr. Grey had called them ingrown hairs and had promised to teach him to shave properly. He'd only nicked himself a few times so far.

In the kitchen, last night's bowl was now cleaned and tucked into the cabinet over the middle sink. Three new boxes of cereal sat on the counter. A new carton of milk was on the shelf in mini fridge. There was no need for grocery shopping after all. As he collected his money for the day, he found a yellow box on top of stacked books. A new puzzle. There was a picture of a cozy tree house frosted with snow. Golden lights were painted through the windows. The loft sat between massive trees covered in icicles. The sky was painted a dark navy blue. A wooden, swinging bridge lined with fairy lights stretched toward the front of the picture as though welcoming him across. He set the puzzle aside. Turning a bright, scarlet apple from the fruit basket over in his hand, Jonathan climbed the steps and pushed the cellar door up.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The pale morning sunlight filled the room as the outside birds chirped and sang. Melody swiped a brush across her cheeks to cover the blemishes. She smeared black eyeliner under her eyes and brushed on gloopy mascara. It was old, mostly dried makeup that Mom gave to her for practice instead of throwing away. Now that she was going to be in high school, Mom said she could wear makeup.

“Whoa.” Angie stood in the doorway, spying. “You look kind of like a demon.”

“Get out of my room!” Melody chased Angie away and slammed the door. She switched on her radio and cranked the volume loud. This would send Dorian into a squawking fit, but she didn’t care. She ran a brush through her hair, flinching each time the rough bristles snagged on a knot. Twirling around her room, she sang loudly over the CD, using her hairbrush as a microphone. Her room was a stage; she closed her eyes and belted out every note. The hairbrush was now a guitar as she strummed the air and swished her hair around her face, tangling it all over again. She hadn’t danced around her room like this in a long time.

Her breathing was heavy, and her face was red, but still she jumped around the room, arms flailing to the beat. In her mind, she was back home in her room with the pretty bookcases and large mirror. It was the weekend, so Sarah was there too, dancing and singing the morning after their sleepover. They’d had sleepovers almost every weekend since the first grade. Dad knocked at the door to see where all the noise was coming from and then joined their dance party. The three of them would dance in their pajamas on Saturday mornings, laughing, shouting out the lyrics, and then would sit down to his homemade chocolate-chip waffles for breakfast.

“Mel!” Mom pounded on her door. “Turn it down, now!”



She stopped dancing. With her eyes opened, reality settled back in. There were no more sleepovers with Sarah. No more dance parties. No Dad. She switched off the music and dragged her feet down the hall.

“Good morning, Dory! Breakfast!” Angie slid a bowl of a chopped vegetable and fruit mash into Dorian’s cage. Melody sat down beside Rosalie while Mom brought over milk and chocolate-chip Poptarts.

“Melly, you believe that I saw snow, right?” Rosalie sat with her forehead on the breakfast table.

“Well...”

“I’m not lying! I saw it.”

“Okay, Rosa. I believe you. I believe you think you saw snow.” It was enough to make Rosalie happy.

“And I saw a castle.”

“Okay.” She should have been paying attention to her sister instead of reading to Jonathan. He hadn’t even been listening anyway. She’d been distracted, and her little sister was hurt because of it. And now Rosa wouldn’t stop talking about snow. Was she embarrassed about falling? Had she been daydreaming and couldn’t tell the difference between what had really happened?

Rain drummed down against the chimney. The gas fireplace rattled and hummed. Angie brought out the box that had their movies from back home. They always watched movies together on rainy Saturdays.

“Land Before Time!” It was Rosa’s favorite. Melody carried her into the living room.

“Whatever you want.” Melody pushed the tape in, and they waited for it to rewind back to the beginning. They sat in their pajamas, scrunched together on the couch. The tape was old and worn, so it stuttered and stopped some. They’d watched this movie a hundred times together. Melody could quote every line, could play the scenes over in head if she’d wanted to. She knew what was coming, but it wasn’t enough to keep the tears from running down her face as the mother’s death scene flashed across the screen. The little dinosaur cried out. His mother was his best friend. Without her, he was on his own.

“Melly, are you okay?” Rosalie reached for her hand.

“I’m fine.” Melody sniffed and wiped her face.

“Okay, but your eyes look like you’re a zombie.”

Melody escaped to the bathroom and closed the door. The makeup clumped under her eyes like bruises. She rubbed it all off, the water warming her skin that was now blotchy and red. She felt stupid for reacting so strongly to a movie. For relating her life to a silly dinosaur cartoon. Dad wasn’t dead. It wasn’t the same. She needed to get a grip. Upstairs, Mom turned on the shower. The water whistled in the pipes overhead. The lights flickered.

She padded back to her room and made up her bed. Her story journal fell to the floor when she fluffed the pillow, opened to the last page she’d written.

*“But the snow is so pretty in the Grounds! And the village is so nice, Marah. I*

*don’t like it here!”*

*“Times have changed, Rowan,” Marah said. “You know we can’t return to the*

*Grounds. This has to be our home now.”*

She sat on the floor and held the journal in her lap.

*This ~~has to be~~ is our home now.*

She turned the page. The empty lines blurred together, and she took a deep breath to steady her vision before pressing her pencil to the page.

*Deep in the valley, beneath the thick protections of trees, Aspen lives alone in a small, weathered cottage. Every morning, she ventures through the woods and chops firewood from the saplings—the only trees the Grounds people are allowed to use without punishment. It provides feeble firewood, but it will have to do. Before returning home, Aspen pulls the seeds from her pockets and plants three new trees. Her open palm hovers above the soil. Squeezing her eyes shut she whispers,*

*“Earth and seed join as one*

*A crop to harvest, the hunger gone.*

*By moon and by sun...”*

Her vision blurred again, and a dull ringing sounded in her ears. She wiped her glasses on her shirt. The words she’d written jumbled and faded on the page. She rubbed her eyes and squeezed them tight together. When she opened them, the words were back.

*By moon and by sun...”*

“Melly! Angie won’t fix me some milk!” Rosa shouted from the living room.

Sighing, Melody carried her journal into the kitchen and poured milk into a plastic Cinderella cup for Rosa. The carton was almost empty from all of Mom’s baking. “Don’t spill it.” A shadow passed over her face. Through the curtains in the rec room, she saw something moving across the backyard. Leaving her sisters to finish their movie, she tiptoed into the rec

room and peeked through the curtain. The backyard was empty. Sliding the door open, she stepped out into the rain. “Hello?” The garden was quiet. She walked down the porch steps, straining to see between the trees. “Someone there?” There was a quiet rustling over by the side of the house. She stepped between the shrubs, the holly bush catching on her pajama bottoms. The ground was mushy beneath her bare feet. Leaning against what used to be the beauty shop door was Jonathan’s bike. He’d had it in the yard the day before. But why was it hidden in the bushes? She placed her hand against the boarded-up entrance, wishing she could see Great-grandma Marjorie’s shop one more time. From her place in the bushes, she could almost smell the perms and cans of hairspray.

The air was muggy from the morning rain. Her hair stuck to her forehead, and her pajama bottoms were soggy. She headed back inside to change into clothes. Her sports bra was tight as she pulled it down over her still damp skin. She fished a pink tank top from her drawer and smelled it to make sure it was actually clean.

The doorbell rang.

“Who is it?” Dorian chirped from the living room. “Hello! Who is it? Hello!”

“I got it.” Melody rushed down the hall.

“Hey.” Jonathan stood in a blue raincoat, fat drops of water plunking down on his forehead. “You still want to find that bakery today?”

She’d forgotten all about it and Mrs. Rosenberger. “Yeah. Just let me ask my mom.” She ran upstairs where Mom was blow drying her hair. “Mom?” She waved to catch Mom’s attention over the loud noise of the dryer. “Can I go into town with Jonathan?”

“Where?”

Mom wouldn't like knowing she was going to see the gossipy Mrs. Rosenberger. "To the movies."

"Alright. Just come straight back when it's over. I still need you to do some unpacking and cleaning. There's money on the dresser."

Melody tucked the cash between the pages of her journal and stuffed it into her purse. She'd never lied to her parents before. She shrugged into her raincoat and pulled on her rubber boots. "Ready!" They had only two hours before she'd need to be back. It wasn't a lot of time, but it was better than nothing.

It was fifteen blocks to town. A beautiful pink tree welcomed them. "Cherry blossom." Melody plucked one of the plump flowers and tucked it behind her ear. "It's my favorite kind of tree. We used to have one in my old yard."

Jonathan looked uncomfortable. "Let's keep going."

"I found your bike. You left it behind some bushes."

"Uh, yeah. I didn't want anyone to steal it while we were at the hospital. Then, I guess I just forgot it."

"Who did you think would steal your bike from our backyard?"

"We're here!" He pointed to the purple door of *Eddy's Café and Bakery*. They climbed the brick steps and picked a round, metal table toward the back. The menus were printed on light purple paper.

"Welcome to Eddy's. My name is Dani, what can I get started for you?" A young woman with a round, pregnant belly flipped open a spiral notepad and untucked a pencil from behind her ear. She wore her hair up in a bun, which was a faded mix of blue and purple. Her glasses were a

matching bright blue. The bakery buzzed with conversation and smelled of freshly brewed coffee and homemade bread. Dani was the only server.

“Maple doughnut, please.” Jonathan handed Dani his menu.

“As always. How’s your dad doing, by the way?”

Jonathan looked sideways at Melody then back to Dani. “Uh. Fine. Could I get a coffee too?”

“What’s wrong with your dad?”

Jonathan squirmed in his chair. “Do you know what you want?” He picked his menu back up. “They have good doughnuts here. And scones. The blueberry is best, but they have chocolate-chip and orange or cranberry—”

“Yeah. I can read the menu. You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’ll give you folks a minute to decide.” Dani moved to the next table where a woman sat with four small children.

“It’s nothing. He’s just been sick. That’s all.”

“But last night you told my mom he was at work.”

“Yeah. He’s better now. Didn’t you just hear me say that?”

They were silent. Why was he acting weird all of a sudden?

“Here you are.” Dani placed a maple glazed doughnut with bacon on top in front of Jonathan. She handed him a mug of steaming black coffee. “And for you, hun?”

“Actually, I was wondering if I could speak to Mrs. Rosenberger?”

“Violet? Well, today’s Friday, so she’s getting her hair done at Patty’s. You might catch her in the square later this afternoon. She knits with Mildred at four.” Dani smacked her chewing gum.

“Oh. Alright. I guess I’ll take a chai latte, please. To go.”

Melody felt the disappointment down to her bones. There wasn’t time to wait until later that afternoon. Mom would know she hadn’t gone to the movies. The trip had been for nothing.

“Can I ask you something?” Jonathan licked the frosting from his fingers. “What were you wanting to talk about with old Violet, anyway?”

Would he understand? Or would he think she was crazy? “Remember how I told you I think my mom has been lying to me? Well, Mrs. Rosenberger knew her when she was a kid.” She told him about Adam and how Mom had never liked coming back here for holidays. She told him about the night Dad disappeared and how the whispers woke her up. How she’d heard those same whispers again when she was sitting by the mulberry tree. She even told him how the TV had seemed possessed the night they moved in. “I just think it’s all connected somehow. But my mom won’t talk to me. So, do you think I’m cracked?”

Jonathan didn’t look up.

“Well, say something!”

Before he could, Dani returned with her latte to go. “It’s going to be nine dollars even.”

“I got it.” Jonathan slid his money forward and waited for Dani to leave again. “I believe you.” He kept his voice low. “I believe you because I’ve noticed some weird things too. I wasn’t sure if I should say anything, but there’s a reason Rosa talked about snow at the hospital last night. I saw it too. And here’s the thing. I saw *Rowan*.”

“Rowan? As in from my story?”

“Yeah, Mel. It was all there. The super tall trees, the snowy field, the castle. Crazy, right?”

He was making fun of her. She slid her chair back and stood. “You’re such a jerk.”

“Melody, just listen.”

“Thanks for the latte.”

She pushed past the people coming into the shop and walked quickly toward the door.

“Laurel?” An older woman with pretty, silver hair and glasses shaped like hexagons reached up and caught Melody’s elbow. “You probably don’t remember me. I’m Vergie. Vergie Fox. I’m good friends with Belle Donna. Your Meemaw? My, you look just like your momma Your great-grandma Marge always talked about you. She had big hopes. Such a clever girl, she’d always say.” She gestured for Melody to sit beside her.

“Nice to meet you. You know my mom?”

Jonathan stood awkwardly nearby with his hands in his pockets.

“I did. Back when she was about your age. I overheard you asking to speak to Violet. My sister.” Vergie smelled of cinnamon.

“Sister?”

“That’s right. Vie didn’t like me hanging around your grandmothers much. But, I reckon you already know that.” Vergie winked.

“Could you tell me more about them? I don’t understand is why my grandparents left this place so suddenly. They don’t like to talk about it. Or the house. And the house is a little—”

“How are you liking the garden?” Vergie sipped her coffee. “I helped Marge and Bee with that for years.”

Melody looked back at Jonathan. “It’s...alright. But as I was saying, I’m wondering if you know—”

Vergie leaned forward and touched the stone Melody wore around her neck.

“Moonstone.” She pulled a matching silver chain out from beneath her shirt. “I wear emerald.”



Melody leaned away. The necklace had been a gift from Great-grandma Marjorie on her eleventh birthday. She nodded to the glowing emerald that clung to Vergie's blue sweater. "Does it mean something? Is there anything you can tell me about my family? Please?"

"Not here, dear." She pulled a coin purse from her handbag and slid a business card across the table. "Come by soon, and we'll have tea together." Without another word, she stood and left the bakery, the silver bell on the door tinkling as it closed.

Melody turned the card over in her hand.

Vergie Fox

421 Eden St.

Basswood Apothecary

555.0787

Jonathan sat down beside her. She handed the card to him.

"I've never seen this store in town."

"That's because it's not a store." Dani wiped down the table with a coffee-stained cloth. "It's her home. She lives about twenty blocks that way." She pointed outside as if they were supposed to know exactly where the house was. "Aunt Vergie's a healer."

"Aunt? Wait. Your mom is—"

"Violet. Yeah." Dani brushed back her bangs. "You want on her good side? Don't mention my aunt to her." She blew a bubble with her pink gum. "You live in the old English house, right?"

"Yeah. Marjorie English was my great-grandma."

"Right. You'll want to stay away from Violet. She sees and knows everything that happens in Basswood. And she's not a fan of your family. Just be warned." She waddled back to

the counter and wiped down the bar chairs, keeping one hand on her belly the way Mom did when she was pregnant with Rosalie.

Jonathan flicked Vergie's card back to her. "I wasn't trying to be funny if that's what you thought. I really did see snow. And Rowan. I know it doesn't make any sense, but I *saw* them."

He was right; it didn't make sense. But then, neither did Dad's disappearance. Or the haunted TV. She needed help. Someone to talk to who didn't accuse her of living inside her head. If she was going to find Dad, she needed a partner. A friend.

"Okay." She pulled her journal from her purse and turned to a blank page. "My dad disappears, and the house becomes, like, instantly possessed. We move here, and the TV changes channels all on its own. Then my mom tells me about a creepy murder that took place right in the house, so I'm thinking maybe it's haunted. But what does that have to do with my dad?" She jotted down her thoughts and questions and passed the notebook to Jonathan.

"And now, Rosa and I are seeing snow and people from your story." He took the pencil from her fingers and added to the list. No one but her had ever written in this journal. She bit her lip. "And old Violet Rosenberger hates your family. And some lady named Vergie used to hold hands with your grandmas and plant flowers." He passed the journal back to her.

*Murder. House is abandoned. Dad disappears. House is haunted. Rowan is real.*

She bounced the pencil between her fingers. "What if the house became haunted after Adam died? And my grandparents put up with it for as long as they could because they thought it was just his spirit or something. But it wasn't, and when they realized that, then they had to leave because they were afraid."

He nodded. “And Rosenberger didn’t like them because of the rumors about the house. And no wonder they don’t like to talk about it. Would you have believed them if the whole thing with the TV hadn’t happened?”

She wanted to believe that she would have, but she’d doubted Rosa when she told her about the snow. “But what does any of that have to do with my dad?” They were quiet for a moment.

“Maybe your house was haunted too! You said it was like it came to life when he disappeared. Maybe he pissed off some evil spirit and now is trapped in the beyond.” He was obviously a fan of horror movies.

“I just feel like we’re missing something.”

“Okay. How can I help?”

She closed the notebook and stood. “I need a computer.”

Next to the bakery was the town library. They splashed through the puddles and entered the warm building that smelled of old paper and leather.

“Hey, Mrs. Tarleton.” Jonathan handed his card to the librarian. “One hour please.”

“Jonathan! Good to see you. Is your Dad still traveling?”

“Er...no ma’am. He’s back now.”

“Excellent. I really would like to meet him someday. And maybe read that article he’s been writing.” She smiled over the desk at Melody. “Need a card, sugar?” She passed her the forms to apply for a library card. “Just have your parents sign at the bottom. Computer five. One hour.” She slid Jonathan’s card back across the counter. He steered Melody to the computer station that was nestled between the children’s section and general fiction.

“Traveling? You said your dad had been sick. Now he’s better and working. What’s going on?”

“He’s a travel writer.”

“What’s he writing about?” He’d never mentioned that his dad was a writer too.

“Here, you can use my login.” He offered his chair. She didn’t want to let him off the hook that easy, but she had only an hour to find what she needed and head back home. “It’s just my first and last name. Jonathan Silva.”

She keyed up the search engine and typed in her address.

124 Hawthorn Park Murder House

Newspaper articles and police reports popped up, detailing Adam’s murder. Mom had told the truth so far. They’d never found a suspect, and there was no full story. Only rumors. She searched again using Great-grandma Marjorie’s name. Scrolling, she found an article with a picture of the beauty shop beneath the headline.

#### **Shear Majick: Sorcery in Basswood**

September 2, 1997 – Marjorie English, owner of Shear Majick Beauty Parlor asked to step down from her position in City Council by one Mrs. Violet Rosenberger. Marjorie English was born in Basswood July 26, 1917. Her parents, Flora (d. 1957) and Douglas (d. 1963) Porter were prominent business owners in Basswood until their deaths.

English opened and established Shear Majick in the summer of 1966. Customers say the shop offers the best “hair trimmin’ and ‘politickin’ in town.”

“This was written the year they moved to Tennessee.”

“Sorcery?” Jonathan leaned over her shoulder. “Like magic?”

“Look. It says here that women didn’t just consider her a hairdresser. It says they would pack their lunches for the day and visit the beauty shop for calming teas, healing potions, and...charms?” She rolled past the images to the end of the article. “Look at this.”

Violet Rosenberger calls for the immediate stepping down of Marjorie English from her role as councilwoman, making claims that English knowingly and willingly placed members of Basswood in danger due to unlawful acts. English is refusing to comment at this time, but sources say Shear Majick has been declared closed indefinitely.

“That’s it? What does that have to do with magic?” Jonathan frowned.

“Here. Down at the bottom it says that after closing the beauty shop, the town experienced prolonged darkness and unusual cold temperatures.”

“What, like a magic spell on the whole town?”

She clicked out of the article and scrolled through a few other sources. None shared any information about the *unlawful* acts Great-grandma Marjorie was accused of committing.

Jonathan reached for the computer mouse. “Let’s look up Violet. I’ll bet she has a secret or two.”

He really hated Mrs. Rosenberger. She was starting to feel the same way. This was more than a gossip woman in the supermarket. Mrs. Rosenberger had targeted her family. Had possibly chased them out of town.

“What’s this?” Jonathan pulled up an article about a house fire that had killed a William and Mari Fox.

“Fox? This must be Vergie’s parents.” And Violet Rosenberger’s parents. Melody chewed her lower lip. “This was written the same year. House fire on Linden Lane kills—”

*Tick.*

The monitor flickered and clicked off. She wiggled the mouse and pressed the power button on the console below. Their hour was nowhere near up. The computer flashed a blue screen with white letters and codes. She recognized the screen from when the boys in her class crashed the school computer by playing online games. Mrs. Tarleton hurried over.

“This doesn’t usually happen. You must have clicked on a bad link. What were you trying to find?”

Melody hesitated. Dani’s warning about Mrs. Rosenberger rang in her ears.

“We were just looking up crime in Basswood.” Jonathan squeezed her arm. “It’s for a school project. There was a murder in this town a long time ago. And a few years ago, there was a fire. We couldn’t really find anything else.”

Mrs. Tarleton frowned behind her glasses. “Yes, the Fox house burned down. Tragic story. Not a crime, though. Just an accident. This is a school project?” Her mouth twitched as they smiled politely at her. “Alright. Just come back tomorrow and I’ll have this computer fixed up.” She mumbled under her breath as she restarted the console.

“We could try again tomorrow if you want.” Jonathan finally broke the silence as they walked toward home. The rain had stopped. Sunbeams poked their way through the dark clouds.

“Sure.” Melody tied her raincoat around her waist. Down the block from the library was a hardware store. Across the street from that was a single-truck fire department where three men in volunteer t-shirts hosed down the truck, the rinsed soap leaving a rainbow puddle on the already wet asphalt. Further down the road was Basswood Baptist, the church Great-grandma Marjorie took her to once on Christmas Eve. Soon, they passed the corner store where Melody met Mrs. Rosenberger. She imagined the woman stalking the aisles and spreading rumors to anyone who would listen. She twirled her necklace around her finger as she walked, her mind racing.

*Sorcery.*

What if she'd been wrong all along, and the house wasn't haunted? What if it was  
*enchanted?*

## CHAPTER FIVE

“How was the movie?” Mom was in the kitchen chopping chicken and glazed pecans.

“Fine.” Melody slipped off her rainboots and hung her coat on the hall tree. She paused.

“Mom? Can we maybe take a look around the basement?”

Mom stopped chopping. “What for?”

“I was telling Jonathan about the shop, and I just really wanted to see it.”

Mom’s forehead creased. She wiped her hands on her apron and focused on her cutting again. “It’s not the shop anymore, Mel. And it’s boarded up now anyway. We can’t get in.” She pounded the food chopper against the cutting board. “Where is Jonathan?”

“He had to go home.” Melody poured a bag of cranberries into Mom’s mixing bowl and stirred. “There’s only the one door?” She missed being in the kitchen with Mom talking about school and music.

“Mel, why are you asking about the basement?”

“Okay, sorry. Forget I asked.” She turned to leave, but Mom put a hand on her shoulder.

“There’s a storm door by the gate. It’s been locked since I was a kid. There’s nothing left to see, alright?” Mom tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, and Melody noticed that her wedding ring was on her right hand. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Melody sulked off to her room. She pulled Vergie’s card from her pocket and added it to the mirror with the cluttered post-it notes—phone numbers from friends back home. Friends she hadn’t talked to since Dad disappeared because she’d kept mostly to herself for the rest of the school year. Writing. Reading. Avoiding.

Would she make new friends in high school? Of course, she already had Jonathan. Even if he was two years older. But would he still talk to her once summer ended, or act like he was



too cool to hang out with a freshman? Something off about him anyway. He was lying about his parents. Everyone in town seemed to know something different about his family. And she knew nothing. She hadn't even thought to ask his last name when they'd met. She'd been too busy trying to learn about her family history that she was barely getting to know her friend. And she was really glad to have a friend again.

Melody sat in Dad's old desk chair and played with the knobs of the desk drawers. She breathed in the fading scent of his scotch, wanting to feel close to him. If only she had a computer instead of his old typewriter. Then, she could do her own research and not have to wait until tomorrow. She brought out her journal and studied the list she'd made with Jonathan, trying to connect the dots. Maybe he'd been right about both houses being haunted in some way. Her grandparents had been lucky and had somehow escaped before whatever-it-was had sucked them away. Dad hadn't been so lucky.

### *Sorcery.*

The article had mentioned teas and potions. Vergie had invited her over for tea and asked about the garden. The garden where she would hold hands and chant with Meemaw, according to Mom's story. Dani had called Vergie a healer. Were Meemaw and Great-grandma Marjorie healers too?

She reached into the bottom drawer of the desk and pulled out the sachet of potpourri. She clutched it tight in her palm and twisted the draw strings around her finger as she felt further inside the drawer. Folded inside the last finished novel of his series were the pages she'd saved from Dad's study. The ink was blurred from the spilled scotch, and most of the papers had been burned in the fire before Mom stamped it out. She had only three splotchy pages and could only make out a few of the words.

Talismã...Cinco saimão...moonstone, emerald, ruby, opal, ro—

The rest of the list was smudged. She tried saying the unfamiliar words aloud. Her ears filled with pressure. The desk in front of her disappeared. A kaleidoscope of colors flashed in her eyes, and the frantic whisperings returned. Her heart turned flips in her chest and intense pressure filled her ears and temples. She tried to speak, but a weight pressed hard against her, making it impossible to move.

And then it stopped.

She stood in blackness, a sharp chill hugging her body. The entire room was gone. Only a faint beam of moonlight shone and lit the ground in front of her. She shuffled forward in the dark and freezing air. A dull pain tickled the tops of her bare feet. *Snow?*

“Hello?” Her voice echoed across the wintry field. Her skin prickled. “Hello?”

“Keep it down!” A hushed voice came from somewhere in the dark. “We don’t want any trouble here.”

“Wh-where am I?” Her voice shook.

“In here!” The stranger pulled Melody into a warm room that smelled of burning embers and evergreens. Blinking as her eyes adjusted to the flickering light, she realized she was in some sort of hut. Or cave. The walls were all made from wood, and they curved in strange angles. The ceiling was low, and there was no floor. Just dirt and a few mismatched rugs that overlapped at the corners.

“What is this place?”

“Well, I couldn’t let you just stand out there and freeze.” A young woman grabbed a tin mug and held it near the crackling fireplace in the corner of the room. “Some coffee will do you good.” She poured a kettle of steaming water into the tin while trying to keep her golden, waist-length hair away from the rising flames. Her eggshell chemise stopped too short, just above her

ankles where her short, pointy boots began. “Where’re you from? You don’t look like a Royal none, but you don’t really look like a Grounder either. Are you just one of the High Landers?”

“Wait. The...what?” High Landers, Royals, and Grounders? Those were her words. Her worlds. From her story.

“Here.” The girl slipped the scalding cup of coffee into Melody’s palms. The simmering heat was painful, but it warmed her body from the chill of the snow. “What’s your name?”

“It’s Mel.”

“Funny name.” The room was lit with dozens of candles and oil lamps and smelled of kindling and evergreens. And something else. There was the faintest aroma of orange mixed with cinnamon and clove. Like the smell of Mom’s Russian tea recipe. “You must not be from around here at all.”

“You haven’t told me where I am.”

“You’re in Luaville. Or what used to be. I’m Aspen, by the way.”

Melody gasped. “Aspen? You’re real? Luaville is real?” Jonathan had been telling the truth about this, at least. She was standing inside the world of her very own story. The one she’d written and dreamed about over the past six months. She set the coffee mug on a nearby table and walked out of the hut.

“Hey! You’ll freeze out there!”

She ignored Aspen’s warning and shuffled through the snow. Her feet burned, but she didn’t stop. Luaville stretched out before her. Bare. Frozen. The towering trees stretched for miles above her head. Jonathan had seen the castle. Marah’s castle. From the ground, she could only see night sky that stretched across the horizon, the trees disappearing up into the midnight shadows.

Aspen crunched in the snow behind her. “Will you please come back inside?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“I can’t believe this is real!”

Aspen clamped a cold hand over Melody’s mouth and shushed her. “I told you, keep your voice down.” She dragged Melody backward and into the warm hut. “Look, Mel, was it? You can stay the night here, but tomorrow, you need to go back to wherever you came from. Luaville has nothing to offer you, and we don’t want trouble from the Royals.” The candles flickered, darkening one side of her face. She pulled the door closed and seemed to struggle with its weight.

There were shelves carved out from the wall. They held jars with dried leaves and tinctures with amber liquid. On one, was a large, leather book. Melody opened the cover and coughed as dust particles flew around her head. She turned the page.

“Wait, Mel!”

The ground shook beneath her feet. She turned and reached for Aspen’s outstretched hand, but felt only the air as a weight slammed hard against her chest. Whispers buzzed in her brain, and she once again felt the pressure build in her ears. The walls of the hut were replaced with the floating faces of her family. The candles flickered out, and she fell to her hands and knees.

Her story journal was on the floor in front of her, closed. The bag of potpourri was spilled beside it. Melody gasped for air, her room settling into place around her. Mom’s chopping echoed from the kitchen. Angie and Rosalie chattered from their rooms. The wind rustled outside her bedroom window and birds whistled and chirped. Nothing had happened to anyone other

than her. She needed to tell Jonathan. Tucking the pages back into the book, she picked up her journal and hurried down the hall.

The house across the street was as disheveled as her own. The front porch sagged, its wooden railings rotting away. Spider webs clung to the light fixtures. She pounded on the door and rocked back on her heels. After a few seconds, she pressed the doorbell button. “Jonathan?” There were no lights on in the house. “Jonathan, I found something!” She knocked again.

A skinny, older man jerked the door open. “What’s this? Who the hell are you?”

“Hi, Mr. Silva. My name is Melody. I’m looking for your...I’m looking for Jonathan.”

“Silva?” The man squinted. “You’ve got the wrong house.” He moved to shut the door.

“Wait, sir! I’m Melody Jones, I live across the street. I’m Jonathan’s friend. The one he’s been hanging out with. We were just in town together.”

“Like I said, kid, wrong house.” He closed the door in her face. She heard him latch the deadbolt and shuffle away.

Melody turned back toward home. Jonathan didn’t live here. He’d lied about everything. Who was he? *Where* was he? She sat in the gravel driveway and traced her fingers over the cover of Dad’s book. Her new friend was a liar. Her best friend was missing and couldn’t talk to her. Her story was real and alive. And she didn’t know what to do about any of it. The cloth cover scratched against her finger. It was a special edition copy with gold letterings and a ribbon bookmark.

### Alice Wilde and the Mystery of Linden Lane

Samuel G. Jones

Her breath caught in her throat. Why hadn’t she realized it before? Dad’s middle name was Grey. Jonathan hadn’t been friends with a stranger from across the street. He was friends with *Dad*. Melody sprang to her feet. The house loomed over her as she stood in its shadow on the drive. Its

secrets taunted her. In the months before Dad had disappeared, he'd traveled a lot. Almost every weekend. Sometimes for an entire week at a time. He was attending writers' conferences he'd always say. Then, he'd received a research grant from his university. And once, he was meeting with a new editor. All lies. He'd been coming here, to this house, and he'd been talking to Jonathan. And he'd never told her about any of it. Did Mom know? There had to be a reason for the secrets. Her mind whirled.

She walked to the side of the house and wiggled the broken gate. She shook harder, slapping, kicking, screaming at it. With every hit, she felt a little better.

Jonathan was a liar.

A hard hit with her palm.

Dad was a liar.

A kick.

And she was on her own.

The gate creaked and opened into the garden. Melody stepped forward. She followed the winding wisteria and honeysuckle vines over to the holly bushes. His bike was still propped against house. Mom said there was a cellar door that had always been locked. She walked back toward the fence where the vines were thickest. Pushing them aside, her fingers touched the wooden, slanted door. She pulled hard and stared down at the dark hole. Sunlight trickled in, and she stepped down the cement staircase where there was another door. She twisted the knob and found herself in a large, fragrant room. There was a desk in the middle of the space with an old typewriter and stacks of books. Along the wall were Great-grandma Marjorie's shampoo bowls. But it didn't look like her shop anymore. It looked like a home. Sweet-smelling flowers were hanging and potted everywhere in the room. There was a rug where the desk sat, and a kitchen

area. There was a couch over to the side, and on a table next to it were books and boxes of puzzles. She walked over and searched through the stack of books. It was all seven of the Alice Wilde series.

“Secret’s out.” Jonathan stood in the doorway of what used to be the breakroom where Melody sat and shelled pecans one summer while Great-grandma Marjorie cut hair. “I live here. Sorry I didn’t tell you.” He pulled on his fingers and scratched at his head.

“How could you?” She stepped toward him.

“Look, Melody. I can explain.” He raised his hands in defense.

“Explain? Explain why you’re hiding out in *our* basement. Or why you didn’t bother to tell me that you knew my dad.”

“Your dad?”

“Samuel *Grey* Jones. Don’t pretend you didn’t know. These are his books. You’ve been lying to me and making fun of me this whole time! And I trusted you. You knew I wanted to find out about my family and all along you’ve been living in my mom’s house, talking to my dad, lying to everyone in town about your own family. Who *are* you?” The cherry blossom fell from her hair.

“I don’t know, okay? I don’t know who I am. I don’t remember how I came here or who my family is. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know if your mom would let me stay. I have nowhere else to go, Melody. I have no one. Please.” He stumbled and grabbed the wall for support. “And I didn’t know Mr. Grey was your dad. I swear.” He was panting. Sweat formed in little droplets on his forehead.

“You should’ve told me. I thought you were my friend. You said you wanted to help me.”

He was on his knees and breathing hard. In his hand, he squeezed a little bag with leaves and berries. It was exactly like the one from Dad's desk.

"Hey, let me see that." The cherry blossom crumpled under her shoe as she stood over Jonathan and snatched the bag from him.

"No, wait!" He squeezed his eyes shut and remained frozen on the ground. Bits of dust floated around their heads. Shakily, Jonathan stood up, staring at his hands and touching his chest. He pointed at the crushed flower under her foot. "Boundaries."

"What?"

He grabbed her elbow and dragged her over to the desk. "You want answers? So do I."

"Why do you have this?" She waved the little pouch in front of his face. He sat down in front of the typewriter and pulled a stack of papers out from the drawer. He told her how he had no memories other than meeting Mr. Grey and moving into the basement. The charm, he explained, kept him from feeling sick whenever he left the garden. He showed her an envelope that was always refilled with cash and told her that the space was always cleaned and stocked with food as if a stranger came in each night and looked after him.

"He never told me much. Just that I needed to lie low. And he never wanted to go into town, so he made sure that I could go without feeling the pain and fuzziness."

"Because he didn't want anyone to know." Dad wasn't just a well-known author. He was Lily Proctor's husband. Belle Donna's son-in-law. And Basswood was a gossip town. He didn't want word getting back to Mom that he was camping out in the house she grew up in. The murder house that no one would buy, and that Mom couldn't escape from. Melody's stomach twisted.



“Look.” Jonathan showed Melody Dad’s pages of scribbling. He’d made a list of every plant in the garden. There were sketches of the plants and paragraphs describing each flower’s meaning and how it could be used in recipes for teas, medicines, and *potions*. “He got it all from this,” Jonathan thumped the big, leather book beside the typewriter. “He had me borrow it every week from the library. Mrs. Tarleton finally told me to just keep it. Said I was the only one who ever checked it out.”

“Hold on a second.” She studied the heavy, leather-bound book.

#### De Curandeirismo e Feitiçaria

It was the same book on Aspen’s shelf. “I’ve seen this. And these words. They’re from something my dad was writing. I found some pages in his office right after he’d disappeared. He was writing in another language.” She pulled Dad’s pages from the Alice book and handed them to Jonathan. “This is actually what I came to show you. These are some of the pages I saved from him office.”

“It’s Portuguese.” Jonathan flipped through pages. “Like this book. Folk healing and sorcery. *Talismã, Cinco saimão*. He was learning to make talismans and about the five protection symbols.” He flipped open the book and showed her the images of stones and flowers as he spoke. The text looked like the book could be full of poems. Or recipes.

“You speak Portuguese?”

Jonathan shrugged. “Apparently.”

“You really don’t remember anything about yourself? Where you’re from?” She shouldn’t have yelled at him. He hadn’t lied to hurt her. He’d been afraid. What would it feel like to not know where you came from, to not remember your own family? “What did you mean by boundaries?”

“That’s just what Mr. Grey...er...your dad called it.”

“It’s okay. We knew him as two different people.” She tried to smile. “Did Mr. Grey say anything else?”

“Not really. Just that I had to keep my charm with me and keep it fresh. And that I needed to live *in* the garden to be safe.” He gestured around at the hanging plants. “And then he just stopped coming. Stopped writing letters.” He’d abandoned them both. Jonathan seemed to miss him as much as she did.

“Look.” There was a page tucked into the leather book. It was another list of flowers and trees, but none of these were in Great-grandma’s Marjorie’s garden. “Cherry blossoms. He crossed it out on the list.” She picked the wilted flower off the floor and brought it over to the desk. Jonathan pinched off a petal and doubled over in pain. “The garden protects you. But some flowers hurt you. Flowers that aren’t in the garden maybe?” She touched her necklace and turned the stone over in her fingers. If only she could talk to Great-grandma Marjorie. This was her garden that she’d started after Adam’s death. Mom said she and Meemaw stayed in the garden all night whispering strange sayings from a big book. This must have been the book. There were still pieces missing from the story, and she was determined to understand it all. It was all connected. She just had to prove it.

“I’ve been thinking. What if your grandparents really were practicing sorcery like that article said? The plants! If they can protect and hurt me, then they have to be some sort of magic. Right?”

Magic. Sorcery. Could Meemaw and Great-grandma Marjorie really have powers of some sort? And what about Mom?

*What about...me?*

“There’s something else.” He opened the bottom drawer of the desk. “These pages just show up every day.” He loaded a blank sheet in the typewriter ribbon. “I put a paper in each night, and there’s writing the next day.”

### **Alice Wilde and the Mystery of the Healers**

“I know this.” Melody whispered the words on the first page of the stack. “I wrote this! Or something similar. The night he disappeared, I had a dream, and I wrote it down. It’s how I got the idea for my story.”

Deep in the belly of the rainforest lived a wise and powerful young woman named Marah. The village people were starving, and there was nothing they could do to survive the brutal winter. Marah scrunched her nose and intertwined her fingers. It was up to her, and there was only one thing to be done. She pulled the dusty old cauldron out of the broom closet. She’d never done this before. But it was in her bones. In her blood. This was her calling. And they all depended on her.

“Jonathan, I think this is *my* story.” She flicked through the pages.

Alice crept into the garden, the moon lighting her path. Lightning flashed in the distance. Exhilaration pulsed through her veins. The wise woman’s words whispered in her ear.

*Past the marigolds where the hyacinth blooms,*

*Deep beneath the twisting vines.*

Her feet knew the way. She’d visited this place in her dreams. She treaded down the beaten path, the marigold’s orange globes glowing, lifting as she passed. And almost hidden among the shrubs and blooming flowers was a thicket of vines. They crept up the wall of the old, abandoned home and stretched along the garden floor.

*Let moon and stone be your guide.*

*Keep to the path, do not stray.*

*Those who wander in the garden*

*are forced to stay.*

The wise woman's words weren't exactly clear, but Alice pressed on. She had to find the door.

"I'm here." There was nothing but the sound of crickets singing and owls screeching filling the night air. "I'm here!" Her voice echoed in the wind. Had the woman lied to her? Was there no door, no magical place where flowers bloomed year-round and where her family lived on? It was a cruel joke. A horrible game. Kicking at the vines, Alice let out a strangled cry. She was tired and her feet hurt. Her hands bled from the tiny cuts where the holly bushes and tangled briars had reached out and snagged her as she'd trekked through this hidden garden. Alice sat on the ground, the leaves and vines of surrounding plants comforting her. Hiding her from sight. Not that anyone but her would be out in Mad Marge's garden in the middle of the night.

The moon shimmered from its place in the sky. She reached up and touched the stone around her neck.

*Let moon and stone be your guide.*

The necklace glowed dim and pale. Moon and stone. Moonstone! Alice jumped to her feet. It wasn't the moon she was following. It was the wise woman's necklace. She walked further into the garden, the stone glowing brighter with each step. And then she saw it. A bright, blooming white flower opened its petals just for her. Moonflower. It had to be a sign.

No. It was the door. And her charm was the key. Alice stepped forward, her world spiraling around her as a new world opened its gates and welcomed her in.

“Luaville.” Melody set the pages down and cradled her head in her hands.

“What?”

“Luaville. He was writing about Luaville. That’s where Alice is going. It’s the other thing I came to tell you. You were right about the snow and Rowan. My story is real. And I think my dad might have been writing about the same place.”

Jonathan sat in the desk chair. “So, let me get this straight. Your great grandma was some kind of sorceress and planted all these weird magical plants. And now, your story and Mr. Grey’s story are just coming to life right here in our backyard?” He brushed back his hair. “Whoa.”

“Yeah.” She should be excited. Her writing was somehow connected to Great-grandma Marjorie’s magical garden. It was a fairy tale. A dream come true. But she wasn’t excited. Dad was missing. Adam was murdered. Great-grandma Marjorie was dead. The garden, the house. They were haunting. Enchanting. But what if they were also dangerous? “There’s something else. I didn’t realize before when we were at the library, but in his last book, Alice went back to her hometown on Linden Lane to solve the murder of her parents. At the end, the murderers find her in this really old house, and they set it on fire. Alice gets out alive and stays in small town with her cousin.”

“Okay. And?” Jonathan didn’t seem to understand.

“*Linden Lane*. From the article. That’s where the Fox house burned down five years ago. Dad was writing about Basswood. And I bet his new story started with *this* house.”

Jonathan breathed out a sigh. “Mel? Do you think Mr. Grey is in Luaville? That he’s not trapped in the beyond? He’s trapped in your story?”

Was it possible? She reached for Jonathan's hand. "I think we should go see Vergie."

They gathered Dad's writings and the book and climbed out of the basement together. Melody led Jonathan to her room, not noticing at first how quiet the house was. They stuffed everything into Melody's bookbag and plucked Vergie's card from the mirror. Jonathan scooped the dried leaves and berries back into the little pouch that looked like his charm. He added it to Melody's bag. She tucked her necklace beneath her shirt. "Let's go!" They hurried down the hall toward the front door.

"Melly, look what I got!" Rosa called from the living room. She was sitting with Mom and Angie on the couch. From her neck dangled a silver chain with a shining opal.

"Rosa, where did you get that?"

"Laurel?" Meemaw stood in the kitchen. "Come sit. We need to talk."

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