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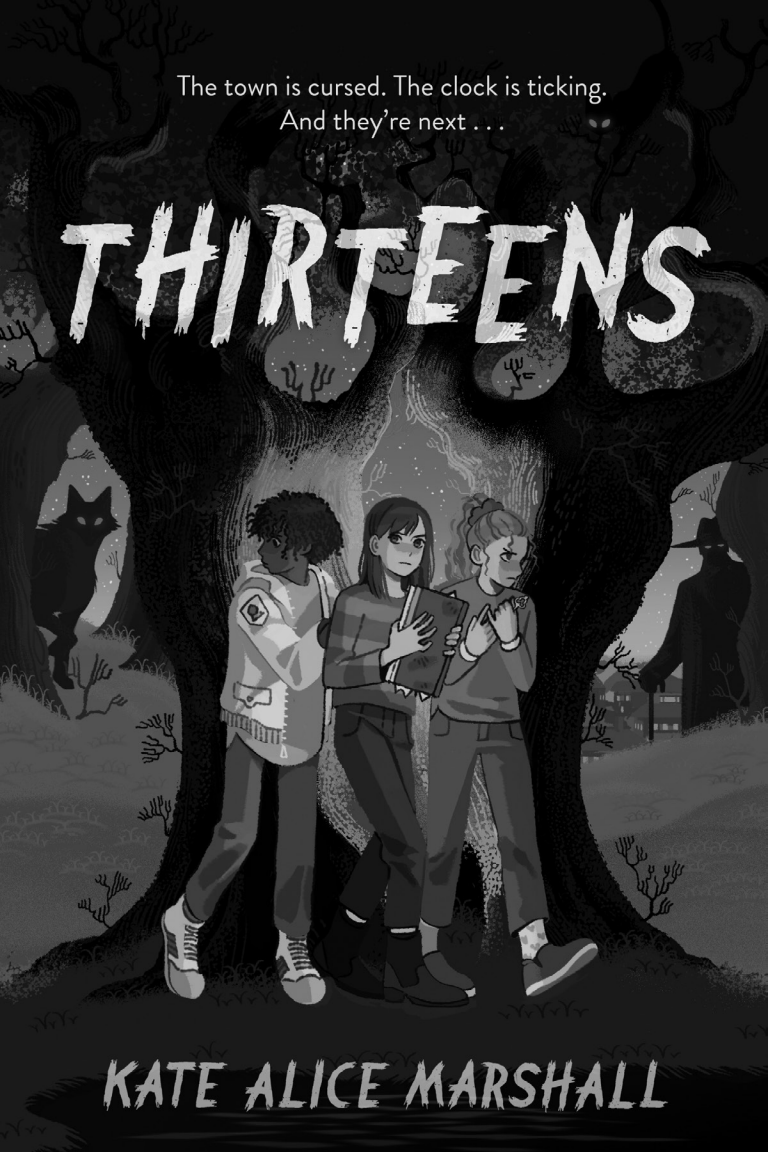
The town is cursed. The clock is ticking.
And they're next . . .

THIRTEENS



KATE ALICE MARSHALL

One

Eleanor stared at the grandfather clock in the third-floor hall. It stood eight feet tall, made of dark oak. A bone-white pendulum hung within the case, carved like cords woven together in a loose diamond. It reminded her of the end of a key, but maybe that was only because of the keys that were painted on the wood around the clock face: thirteen identical keys in gold. The last key was almost entirely rubbed away.

The clock must be very old. It felt like it had tracked the passing of years and years. But she was not staring at the clock because it was tall, or impressive, or old. She was staring at for three reasons.

The first was that the clock hadn't been there when she went to sleep last night. Eleanor was sure of it. It stood opposite her door, and she felt certain she would have noticed an eight-foot-tall clock outside her bedroom or heard someone moving it into place.

The second was that those thirteen keys, gleaming against the dark wood, were the precise shape of the birthmark on her wrist.

The third was that the hands of the clock were running backward.

It's just a clock, she told herself. Nothing sinister. Maybe it had belonged to her grandparents, and Aunt Jenny had inherited it along with this house and the old car in the back shed that didn't run and the rambling, neglected orchard that spilled out behind the house like a half-grown forest.

Except that it hadn't been here last night.

And that wouldn't explain the keys. Or why the hands were moving backward—the second hand gliding from twelve to eleven to ten, all the way around to one; the minute hand clicking back every sixty seconds as the pendulum went left to right to left to right.

The clock chimed. The liquid, bottomless sound filled the hall, bouncing off the walls with their faded green wallpaper, spilling down toward the spiral staircase. Eleanor counted the chimes.

Seven.

Her phone agreed with the chimes—seven o'clock—but the contrary hands of the clock pointed instead to five and twelve. Seven hours backward from midnight, she thought, and rubbed the birthmark on her wrist reflexively.

"Eleanor!" Aunt Jenny called. "Come grab some breakfast before the bus comes. You don't want to be hungry on your first day."

Eleanor didn't want to be *anything* on her first day of school at Eden Eld Academy. She didn't want to *have* a first day at Eden Eld Academy. But she had promised Aunt Jenny and Ben, and she had already broken enough promises.

She didn't want to turn her back on the clock, either, but she did, and scurried down the hall with her backpack over one shoulder. The boards creaked and groaned even with the hall rug to cushion her steps, and so did the stairs, which curled in a tight curve down to the first floor. She'd never lived in a house with a spiral staircase. Ashford House, which her grandparents had bought before her mother was born, had two of them. The house was full of odd things like that. Crooked hallways, skewed rooms, a stairway to nowhere. The clock ought to have fit right in.

Except—except she was sure, absolutely sure, it hadn't been there last night.

Aunt Jenny was in the kitchen, her back to the hall, pushing scrambled eggs out of a pan and onto an old china plate covered in a pattern of blue vines. Normally she had a thin face, like Eleanor, but right now it was soft and round, along with the rest of her. Her belly was so big she bumped against the counter, and as she finished with the eggs, she winced and muttered, "Oh, that's enough of that, you rascal," which meant the baby was kicking her ribs again.

Eleanor had always thought she looked more like Jenny than her own mother. They had the same brown hair, though instead of hanging straight down to her shoulders like Eleanor's, Jenny's sprang out around her face, escaping her braid. They had the same long nose, the same fair skin and murky green eyes, the same penchant for striped sweaters, and even the exact same glasses, but somehow Jenny always looked romantic and artistic, and Eleanor just felt gawky and plain.

Eleanor's step creaked a floorboard, and Jenny turned with a beaming smile. Too bright, Eleanor thought; it meant she was trying, which meant she wasn't *really* smiling. "Here you go, hon," Aunt Jenny said. The eggs steamed. The toast was perfectly toasted, just the right shade of brown. The jam was raspberry, thick and homemade.

Eleanor's stomach turned, and so did her mouth, downward in a little frown she couldn't stop. She pushed her glasses up, trying to use the movement to hide the frown.

"Nervous belly?" Aunt Jenny asked. She sighed, setting the plate down on the kitchen island between them. "I know it's tough. But if you don't start school now, you're going to get too far behind, and then you might have to stay back a year."

"I know," Eleanor said. She looked down at the Eden Eld Academy uniform she'd put on that morning—blue

plaid skirt that fell to her knees, polo shirt, dark blue jacket with the school crest on the front. Everything was a bit too stiff and a touch too large. Aunt Jenny had worked hard to get her into Eden Eld instead of the public middle school, which was farther away and allegedly full of kids who cut school and watched R-rated movies without permission, which passed for juvenile delinquency in a town as sleepy as Eden Eld.

Eleanor was supposed to be grateful that she got into Eden Eld Academy, but it was hard to be grateful for anything these days.

"Couldn't you homeschool me, or something? I can learn on my own. It's all online now—I can design my own classes. You'd hardly have to do a thing."

Aunt Jenny put a hand on her belly and looked sad. Eleanor felt a twinge of anger that Aunt Jenny didn't deserve, but she couldn't help it. Every time someone looked at her like that, she felt like it was her job to cheer them up. To promise she was okay, even though she wasn't. Like *she* had to make *them* feel better, instead of the other way around.

"I would, hon. But with the baby due any day, and Ben working such long hours, we just can't. And Eden Eld is a great school. Your mom and I—" Aunt Jenny stopped. It was an unspoken rule that they didn't talk about Eleanor's mom. "Just give it a week or two, okay? And then we can see how it's going." She

nudged the plate toward Eleanor. "Try some toast, at least?"

Eleanor bit back the urge to argue. Aunt Jenny was right. She had to go to school. Going to school was *normal*, and Eleanor needed to be normal. Needed everyone else to think she was normal. She'd made a plan. Her How to Be Normal plan.

1. *Don't talk about Mom.*
2. *Go to school.*
3. *Don't talk about things that aren't there.*
4. *Smile.*

So Eleanor smiled. She imagined puppet strings on the corners of her mouth, pulling them up. She made her eyes smile, too, wrinkling a little at the edges. That smile was the most useful kind of lie she'd learned to tell in the past couple of months. "Thanks, Aunt Jenny," she said, taking the toast. "I think I hear the bus. I'd better go."

She felt Aunt Jenny's so, so worried look on her back all the way to the hall.

She'd stepped out into the brisk late-October air before she realized she'd forgotten to ask about the clock.

But now she wasn't sure she should. The clock was strange. All of Ashford House was strange, but the clock seemed different. What if it was one of those

things she saw that she shouldn't see? That wasn't really there?

Her mother saw things she shouldn't. Things she couldn't. Eleanor used to see them, too, but then she got better. But her mother hadn't. She didn't want anyone, especially Jenny, thinking she might be like her mom. Even if it was true.

Especially if it was true.

So Eleanor trudged up the driveway, determined to forget about the clock.

She hadn't really heard the bus. That was another lie. She kept a list in the back of her mind of the lies she told Aunt Jenny and Uncle Ben. She'd pay off each lie, one by one, but for now she needed them. For now, the lies were what let her breathe and talk without coughing, without feeling smoke in her lungs.

She reached the end of the long dirt driveway and waited by the mailbox and the huge old pine tree that loomed there.

A chill wind sent a few dead leaves skittering and scuttering over the road, and the branches above her sighed and swayed. Mixed in with all those noises was another. Something rattling up in the tree: a clacking, hollow noise that sent a line of cold like a finger trailing down her spine. She craned her neck up, peering into the branches. They were drawn tightly together, the needles a prickly curtain hiding the trunk from her, but within

them something moved. And the rattle came again. *Clackclackclack. Clackclackclack.*

Whatever was moving was big, and dark as the shadows around it. Eleanor's fingertips were cold, like she'd brushed them against ice. Her breath came out in quick puffs of mist, and she fought the urge to back away or run back to the house.

She was tired of being afraid. She'd had enough *afraid* to last her whole life. So instead of stepping back, she stepped forward, closer to the tree, and peered into those caught-together branches.

Clackclackclack. Clackclackclack.

The dark thing shifted and lurched. It looked like a crow, but much too big, made of ragged, overlapping shadows. She inched another step closer and then—then a big, yellow eye peered at her from between the branches.

She yelped, and now she did jump back, almost tripping over her own feet. She barely caught her balance and looked up quick into the tree again—but the eye was gone, and so was the shape, and so was the sound. She held her breath and she watched, but nothing moved. Only the wind making the branches shake.

The bus pulled up at the end of the drive. The doors hissed open. She still held her toast in one hand, hopelessly cold by now. She glanced back at the tree.

"Getting on?" the bus driver asked. She was a big woman, her body built in straight lines as if constructed entirely out of rectangles, except for her hair, which was frizzy and yellow and burst out in curls all around her face.

"Yes," Eleanor said. She couldn't see anything in the tree now. Nothing at all. She climbed on board. *Normal*, she reminded herself.

She didn't look back.

Two

Ashford House sat a couple miles out of what passed for downtown Eden Eld, far enough that the town border ran right through the middle of it, leaving the house half in and half out. Eleanor was the first one on the bus, and she took a seat all the way in the back, scrunching up in the corner. She watched the landscape flow by. Trees and more trees, mostly, and a few bare meadows, gone gray this late in the season. Not too many houses until they got closer to Eden Eld.

The bus stopped a few times, letting kids on one and two and three at a time, dressed in matching uniforms. Carefully pleated skirts for the girls, slacks for the boys, everyone wearing jackets bearing school crests, thirteen pine trees in a ring around a rose. They all ignored her. Good. She didn't want to talk to anyone. She didn't want to get to know anyone. She just wanted to get through the day and get home.

Not home. Back to Ashford House, because home was gone.

"Are you going to eat that?"

She jerked, startled, and realized that someone had taken the seat in front of her. He hung over the back, pointing at her toast with one hand while the other dangled loose. He had brown skin and glossy black hair that curled and tumbled and coiled every which way, hiding one eye. He looked like a pirate or a poet, or maybe a bit of both. He also looked hungry.

"I guess not," she said. "It's pretty cold."

He shrugged. "I don't mind."

She handed him the toast and he ate it in five massive bites before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, then reached out to shake hers. She eyed the smear of crumbs and jam on his knuckles, then shook his hand anyway. She'd promised to be friendly. When her hand touched his, her skin prickled, like a bug running over her wrist. She shivered and pulled away. He looked a little puzzled, but his smile didn't falter.

"I'm Otto," he said. "Otto Ellis."

"Eleanor Barton."

"You're new."

"I knew that, actually," she said sharply. But he laughed, a bright, startling sound that made her grin on reflex, forgetting that strange, scuttling sensation in the face of his open friendliness.

"Sorry," he said. "I wasn't telling, I was just saying. I talk too much and point out the obvious. Or so I've been told."

"How could you tell? That I'm new?" she asked. Did she stand out? She'd planned on not standing out. It was basically her entire plan for surviving Eden Eld, in fact, and it was off to a bad start.

"It's a small school," he said. "Not that hard to memorize all the faces. Especially all seventeen of us that ride the number seven bus. Eighteen now, I guess."

He drummed his fingers on the back of the seat, then seemed to make a decision. He grabbed his backpack and swung himself around, plopping down in the seat right next to her and dumping his worn, dog-hair-covered backpack on top of his feet. She resisted the urge to scrunch farther away.

"Did you just move here?" he asked.

"Um. A couple weeks ago," Eleanor said. "But I was taking some time off."

"Was it because of your parents' jobs or something?"

"No," Eleanor said, flushing. Instinctively she pressed her fingertips against the flat, shiny skin on her palm. "It was—I'm staying with my aunt. At Ashford House."

His eyebrows went up, vanishing under the beautiful briar of his hair. "Ashford House? That weird, spooky place at the edge of town?"

"That's the one," Eleanor said, trying to sound as casual as she could. Ashford House made *normal* harder.

"Awesome," he said with feeling. "You know it's supposed to be haunted? Or some people say that, anyway,

but I think it's just because it's big and old and weird. I went looking and it turns out no one's ever even died there, so how could it be haunted? And actually that's *really* weird given how old it is. Somebody's died just about anywhere that's more than a hundred years old. Does it really have nine staircases?"

"Only seven," Eleanor corrected. He looked at her with rapt attention. She had to admit it was kind of nice, being the authority on something. "But they're really strange. There are two spiral staircases, and one that wraps around a corner at the very edge of the house and is so narrow Ben—that's my uncle—can't even get in. And one of them you can only get to if you walk through the giant fireplace in the living room, and it doesn't go anywhere at all. It just stops at a wall. And Uncle Ben says it's on the original plans that way, too. It never went anywhere."

"Cool," Otto said, grinning, and Eleanor couldn't help but smile back. "So why are you living with your aunt and uncle?"

Her smile wavered.

She could refuse to answer. Then she'd seem weird and rude.

She could tell him the truth. Then she'd seem weird and tragic.

Or she could lie.

"My parents died in a car accident," she said. Car accidents were normal.

He looked stricken. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"It's okay," she said, feeling guilty. But the truth would have only made him feel worse for asking. She added the lie to her list.

The bus pulled up in front of the school a few minutes later, and the rest of the students started grabbing their bags and rushing off. The school was a huge, imposing brick building, standing against the dark backdrop of the towering pines that were everywhere in Eden Eld.

One side of the front courtyard had been decorated with hay bales and scarecrows and pumpkins, and fake spiderwebs stretched over the front archway, but the Halloween decorations somehow made the place *less* spooky. It was scarier by itself, with its tall, narrow windows and the looming clock tower on the north side of the building.

Halloween. She'd been able to ignore that it was coming, holed up in Ashford House, but she couldn't get away from it now. Today was Wednesday. Saturday was Halloween, and that meant it was her birthday. She was going to be thirteen.

The first birthday she would celebrate without her mother.

"Who do you have first period?" Otto asked. She forced herself to look away from the decorations.

"Mr. Blackham?" she said. "Chemistry."

"Oh, he's great," he said. "He lets us light things on fire for science and make ice cream with liquid nitrogen, which is totally dangerous and awesome. I can show you how to get there, if you want. This place is kind of a labyrinth." He said *labyrinth* with clear enthusiasm for both the word and the concept. There wasn't any pity in his eyes at all. A little sympathy, but not that oh-you-poor-kitten look she was so used to. Her stomach balled up in one big knot. Now she felt even worse for lying to him. But how did you tell someone you just met *I live with my aunt because my mother tried to kill me?*

You didn't. Not if you wanted to be normal.

"That would be great," she said, feeling the puppet strings at the corners of her mouth. "That would be perfect."

THE DAY'S LESSON did not involve lighting anything on fire, for science or otherwise, to Eleanor's great relief. She knew fire too well now. She knew how different things smelled when they burned—walls, carpet, furniture. She knew the sound of glass cracking from heat and the grit of ash and soot that never seemed to scrub off her skin. So it was a relief to simply open a textbook and stare down at the diagram of a water molecule as Mr. Blackham directed them to the vocabulary lesson.

But they had hardly begun when a boy with mousy brown hair and mousy brown eyes darted in and handed a note to Mr. Blackham. He squinted at it before calling out, "Eleanor?"

She raised a tentative hand to shoulder height. He smiled a little, and she flushed. Of course he knew who she was. She was the New Girl. "Ms. Foster would like to speak to you," Mr. Blackham said. At her blank look, he sighed and pulled his glasses down his nose so he could look over them at her. "The headmistress. Left, down the hall, right, the office is right there."

"Is something wrong?" she asked. Her mind raced through every terrible thing she could imagine—Uncle Ben hurt at work. Something wrong with the baby, with Jenny. The house—houses as old as Ashford House had old wiring, too. All it took was a spark to start a fire.

"I wouldn't know," Mr. Blackham said, with the sort of tenderness that meant he knew about her mother and would be one of those adults who treated her like she was seven, not almost thirteen. "I'm sure everything's fine."

If he didn't know, he couldn't be sure.

She hopped off her stool and grabbed her bag. She hurried out of the classroom, a sour taste at the back of her throat. Her fingers found the shiny patch of skin on her palm. Without any students in the halls, her shoes echoed on the tiles, the sounds bouncing against the

walls and falling back at her until it sounded like copies of her were walking to either side.

Being called to the headmistress's office wasn't good, was it? Not on her first day. Had she done something wrong? She couldn't think of anything. She'd been normal. Mostly.

Except for the clock, maybe. And the bird, maybe. But no one else knew about those.

Mr. Blackham's directions brought her to a large oak door, like something borrowed from a castle. She reached for the knob, but it flew open of its own accord, nearly hitting her. The girl who hurtled out of the office *did* hit her—a glancing blow on the shoulder that still nearly took them both tumbling to the ground. The girl caught her by the arm, hauling her upright.

At the touch, Eleanor's skin crawled, like insects scuttling over her wrist—the same feeling she'd gotten when Otto took her hand. The girl dropped her arm and blew out a breath, kicking loose strands of coppery hair away from her face. The rest of it was back in a sloppy ponytail. She wasn't wearing her school blazer, and her white polo shirt was wrinkled and only half tucked in to her slacks.

"Watch out!" the girl chided her. "Don't you know it's dangerous around here?"

"I—" Eleanor began, but the girl was taking off again down the hall already, her sneakers squeaking on the

tile. Eleanor watched her go, rubbing her wrist, though the tingling had already stopped.

She shook her head. It was probably nothing. Nerves.

She turned back to the door, which had swung shut. Tentatively, she opened it. This time, nothing jumped out at her, and she stepped into the office. Inside, a gray-haired woman with purple lipstick sat typing at a computer. She looked up when Eleanor entered and pursed her lips.

"She's waiting for you," the woman said in the kind of scratchy voice you got from smoking cigarettes all your life, and pointed over her shoulder at a second, much less intimidating door leading to an interior office. Eleanor slinked past her desk. The woman started typing furiously.

The inner office door stood open a crack. Eleanor knocked tentatively, pushing it open a bit at the same time, and poked her head in.

A woman about her mom's age sat behind a huge oak desk that matched the large office door. The legs were carved into gnarled tree trunks that bulged outward before curving back in toward the wide, flat surface. The woman behind the desk had skin as milky as white marble, her features precise, giving her a sculpted look. She wore her orange-red hair scraped back in a tight bun. Her lipstick was bright red and her eyes bright green—everything about her was bright as polished gems. She

made Eleanor think of serpents and of wicked queens, like in the fairy tales her mother used to read to her.

"Miss Barton. Please, take a seat." She waved at the armchair opposite her, across the desk, and Eleanor sank into it. She felt like she should say something, but she couldn't imagine what. Ms. Foster folded her hands on top of the desk and peered at her through black-rimmed glasses. "How is your first day going so far?" she asked.

"Um. All right," Eleanor said. "I was only in class for a few minutes."

"But you haven't encountered any problems?"

"No," Eleanor said. "No problems."

"Good. Very good. Now, I'm sorry that we haven't met before today. Normally I insist on meeting all of our students at some point in the application process—but you didn't have a normal application process, did you?"

"No, I guess not. I don't really know—I know my aunt—"

"Jenny is a delightful woman," Ms. Foster said with a wide smile. Her teeth were very white and very straight. "But it's not really on her account that I waived the usual procedure."

"It isn't?" Eleanor asked.

"Your mother. Claire. She was a dear friend of mine," Ms. Foster said. "We grew up together, here in Eden Eld. When my father was the headmaster. We got into all sorts of trouble." She chuckled like she expected Eleanor

to join in, but Eleanor's mouth was dry. No one had said her mother's name out loud to Eleanor, not that she could remember, since the fire. "I know that you are having a very difficult time right now. But I want you to know that you can come to me. For whatever you need," Ms. Foster said.

Her words overflowed with warmth, but a cold shiver went down Eleanor's spine. She mumbled that she understood. Her eyes dropped away from Ms. Foster's. It was hard to hold that bright green gaze.

A silver picture frame sat on the corner of Ms. Foster's desk. The photo was of a smiling Ms. Foster, in the same dark blue suit she wore now. Next to her stood a weary-looking man with gray at his temples and a long, sorrowful nose. And between them, their hands on her shoulders, was the redheaded girl who'd nearly knocked Eleanor over, a smudge of dirt on her cheek and a grin stretched so wide you knew she was faking for the camera.

"My daughter," Ms. Foster said. "Pip."

"We've met. Sort of," Eleanor said. If you could call that a meeting.

"My one and only," Ms. Foster said with a kind of sigh, and then she clapped her hands, making Eleanor jump in her seat. "Well! You had better get back to class. You don't want to get too far behind. So much to do and so *very* little time."

She smiled with those perfectly white, perfectly straight teeth. Eleanor stood. And then she paused. "You said you were friends with my mom?" she asked.

"Very good friends. Everyone knows each other in Eden Eld, of course, but Claire and I shared a number of interests in common," Ms. Foster said, tapping one long nail on the desktop thoughtfully.

"What kind of interests?" Eleanor asked.

"Oh, you know the sorts of things that teenage girls can get up to," Ms. Foster said. A strange look flashed over her face. Something that was nearly sadness, and nearly satisfaction. "Or you wouldn't know quite yet, I suppose. Claire and I had a special interest in local history. Though it led us to quite different places."

"I see," Eleanor said, though she didn't. She could tell that Ms. Foster wasn't going to say any more about it, though, and there was something very uncomfortable about standing in front of that huge desk with those perfectly green eyes fixed on her. She swallowed. "I should go, then."

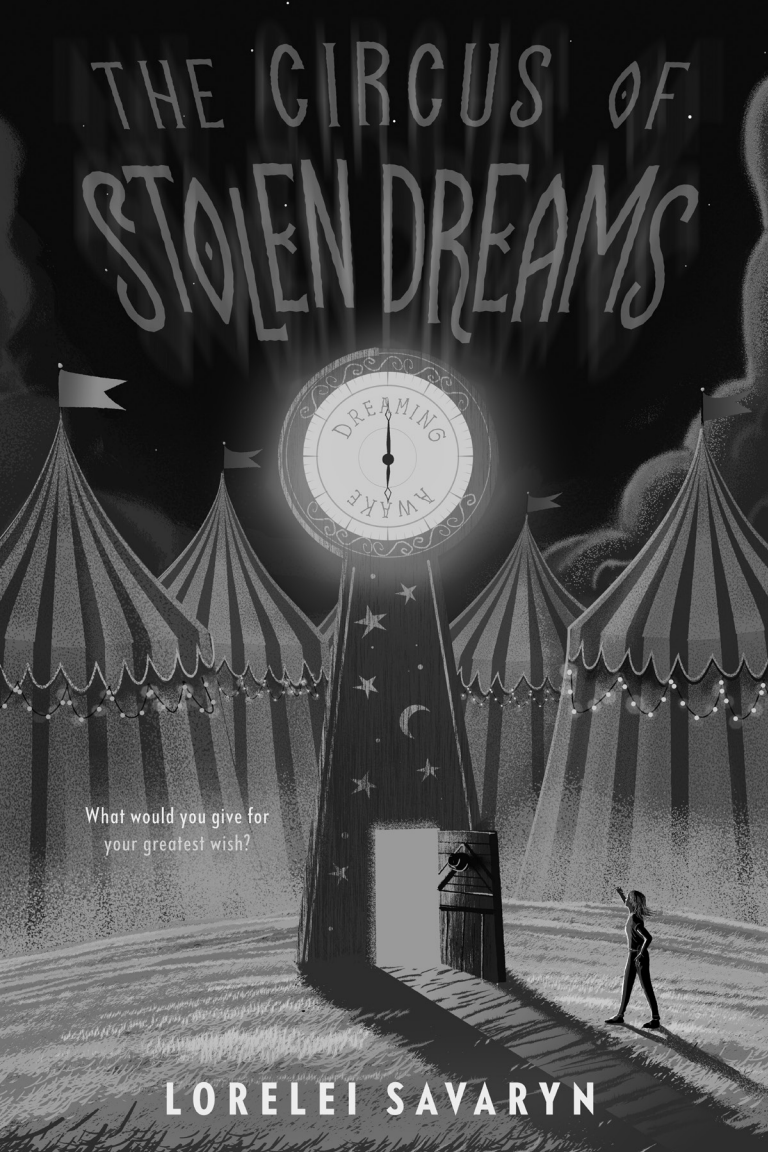
"Wonderful," Ms. Foster said with another sparkling smile, and Eleanor backed away two steps before turning and hurrying from the room. She shut the door behind her and started to walk back out past the secretary's desk, but then she froze. The secretary had stopped typing and was staring in confused puzzlement at the last line she'd written.

Get out gET out GET OUT get OUT GeT OuT get oUt of Eden eLd

"Well," the secretary said in her hoarse, cigarette-wrecked voice. "Well." Her chin wagged back and forth, an odd sort of twitching, and she stabbed one yellow-stained finger against the backspace key. "Well. Well," she said with each stab, and one by one the letters vanished, until all that was left was a normal email. Then she blinked and smiled brightly at Eleanor. "Is there anything else you need, dear?" she asked.

"No," Eleanor said hastily. "Nothing, thanks."

She fled.


THE CIRCUS OF
STOLEN DREAMS
DREAMING
AWAKE
What would you give for
your greatest wish?
LORELEI SAVARYN

THE GIRL WITHOUT A SHADOW

The dining room window reflected the blurred façade of a happy family at dinner: a mom and dad and their one and only child. Andrea glared through the silent, transparent scene, up at the moon and the way it shone like a spotlight, piercing them with its otherworldly glow.

Family dinners used to be loud. Francis would tell jokes from his joke book and make ridiculous noises just to get Andrea to laugh. Andrea would cut in, the words pouring out of her like water in a swift current as she told them all every single detail about her day. Their mom and dad would look at each other, their faces a mixture of wide eyes and amused smiles.

Now no one, not her parents sitting next to her at the table, not the blurred family in the window,

not even the man in the moon knew what to do other than steep in the silence.

Andrea stabbed a piece of chicken.

Her mother put her fork down and folded her hands as if in prayer, giving a slight nudge of the elbow to her father. "Just tell her," she whispered, as if Andrea couldn't hear.

Her father shuffled carrots around his plate, then cleared his throat. "Your mother and I . . . We know this hasn't been easy on you."

Andrea's breathing grew shallow. She curled her fingers into a ball, pressing her nails hard into her palms, making mini moon marks against her skin.

"But we think it's time to let go," he continued. "Winter's coming. Your mother could use the space in the garage."

"And we think it would be healthy, Drea." Her mother stared empty-eyed at the wood grain on the table. "We'd like you to go through his boxes and choose a few things you'd like to keep."

Any food Andrea had already eaten formed itself into a knot in her stomach, threatening to make its way back up.

Her father reached out a hand to touch her shoulder, but Andrea recoiled, pressing her back into her chair. For the past three years, Andrea had blamed him for everything: for the divorce, for showing up

on Sunday nights and making them sit through Fake Family Dinner. She had even tried to blame him for what happened to Francis. But, as always, the steady pulsing rhythm of blame grew a little louder from a dark place deep inside.

Your fault, your fault, your fault.

Andrea tilted her chair away from the empty seat at the end of the table. "I'm not ready." She tried the three words that had gotten her out of so much since it happened. Homework, soccer, talking about the night Francis disappeared. She didn't want to go through her brother's things, but the thought of the boxes being discarded unseen scrubbed at Andrea's scabbed-over wounds like an eraser, hot with friction.

"**I** can't keep looking at them every time I walk in the garage," her mother snapped, her voice cracking on the last word, ripping **garage** right in half like it was a piece of paper. "Someone is coming to pick them up tomorrow. You don't have to go through them. We just wanted to let you know. It's time."

Her father drummed his fingers on the tabletop, then sighed. "Thanks for dinner, Sus," he said, picking up his plate and carrying it to the kitchen.

Her mother watched Andrea with dark, sad eyes, and her mouth fell open for a moment like she was about to say something else. Instead, she picked up her own plate and followed him, her shoulders

curved inward as if the air had been sucked straight out of her chest.

"Fine, I'll look," Andrea said, tossing her crumpled napkin on her plate, though there was no one left to hear her. There was just the silent house, weighted with the words no one had been able to say, for so much longer than the three years Francis had been gone.

⁂

Andrea ran up to her room as soon as her father's engine faded down the street, which had followed the stiff hugs and the **see you laters** and the **love you, kiddos—**her father's faltering attempts to bridge the gap that had formed between them. She sat on the floor, her back to the bottom bunk, hugging a gray pillow shaped like a star against her chest and staring at the bookshelf against the opposite wall. Gathering her strength. Her parents made it sound so easy. Like sending Francis's belongings away on a donation truck would somehow fix things. Like erasing the evidence her brother had existed would take away the pain of how he disappeared.

Andrea wished every single day that she could erase the terrible thing that had happened and the relentless, silent guilt she carried on her shoulders,

but never once had she wanted to erase Francis. He had been her little shadow. Andrea smiled now at all the times he had annoyed her, like when he followed her on a bike ride, his tiny little legs pedaling so hard to keep up as she fell to a painfully slow pace so she wouldn't leave him behind. She had read **Peter Pan** once and couldn't understand why the boy was so desperate to have Wendy sew his annoying shadow back onto his feet.

She understood now.

No matter what other people did, Andrea would never forget her brother, even though so many others had chosen that as their way to navigate the strangeness of a boy who had disappeared from his room in the middle of the night. The kids who changed the subject when Andrea mentioned Francis's name, the neighbor who once stupidly said how lucky Andrea was to not have to share. And now, this—her parents giving away all his things. She would hold him inside the hollow space in her heart created by the Great Missing. Her heart would shout: **He was here. He was here.**

Andrea's mom shuffled by in the hall a few moments later, poking her head inside the door. "I'm going to watch TV for a bit in my room," she said, resting her fingers along the doorframe. "Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

"Okay."

"I love you."

Her mom's **I love yous** came too fast and too often. They tilted up at the end like a question, an unspoken pleading for reassurance that somehow, even after all that had happened, she hadn't let Andrea down.

Andrea hugged the pillow a little tighter. Of course she loved her mom, but sometimes, saying so was hard for her now.

"I love you, too," Andrea said, just loud enough to be heard.

Her mom exhaled, the kind of exhale that was saturated in relief. She walked away, clicking Andrea's bedroom door shut behind her.

Andrea stayed until she heard the familiar muffled sound of her mother surfing through TV channels before dropping the pillow and padding down the stairs and to the garage. She might as well get this over with, so at least she could say that she tried.

She flipped on the switch, giving her eyes a moment to adjust to the unforgiving yellow light. An electric hum buzzed from the bulb above her head and she walked, slow and tentative, like the floor might break away underneath her, toward the pile in the corner she had ignored for three whole years.

Seven stacked, unlabeled cardboard boxes

contained nearly all of Francis's belongings. Unlike some parents when their kid goes missing, Andrea's mother had packed everything up in a flurry the day after snow dusted the earth and the trails had all run cold and the police told them they were calling off the local search. They concluded that someone had climbed up their trellis, slipped in through their open bedroom window, and taken Francis away in the night.

In response to the news, her mom had blazed through their house, unable to stand the thought of sitting still and desperate to keep her hands moving as she tried to add a hint of order to the chaos. Since then, Andrea had caught her mom glimpsing at the boxes with regret each time they got into the car, but no one ever touched them.

Andrea ran her hand along one of the tops, leaving a path through the dust. The logical side of her knew none of this was the boxes' fault, but she hated them just the same. Hated what they stood for. That there was a reason they were here, full of her brother's stuff while his half of their room sat empty.

Empty because of her.

A tentative finger slid under one of the box's folded flaps, popping it open. Inside rested dozens of objects: Francis's favorite framed pictures, a stray blue sock, a miniature slinky.

Andrea reached down and pressed her pale hand firmly against the pocket of her jeans, reassured at the outline of the small item resting carefully inside it. Her parents didn't know that she had already kept something precious of her brother's. That she kept it with her at all times.

It was such a ridiculous little thing to keep, but Andrea didn't care that it didn't make sense. Her parents had done all sorts of things that didn't make sense in the months after Francis disappeared. Her mother had slept with his blanket tucked tight around her. Her father had sat in the living room watching football, unblinking, like a zombie, like he still lived in their house.

It was her very last connection to her brother. The day he disappeared, Andrea had tucked the trinket away in her pocket, hoping against hope that Francis had left her some sort of secret clue, something that would help her find him.

It had turned out to be useless. But it was still the last thing he had left behind.

In the box, the ghosts of who they all used to be stared up at Andrea with frozen smiles on their faces in brightly colored frames, a brazen reminder of how much they had lost. In one picture, taken at a photo studio inside a department store on a mild spring day, the family posed in coordinating outfits of blue jeans

and white T-shirts, a similar outfit to the one Andrea wore now. They had gone out for milkshakes after to celebrate, and both Andrea and Francis ordered a large, **promising** their parents they'd finish the whole thing. But little stomachs fill quickly, and instead of letting the shakes go to waste, their dad insisted on finishing them off. They watched in awe as he braced himself, refusing to stand until he had swallowed the last drop. He was the dad with three full milkshakes rolling around in his belly and he definitely played up the part, making them all laugh with loud gurgling noises and exaggerated warnings that if they didn't hold his trembling stomach together, he might explode in front of their very eyes.

The air in the garage pressed heavy against Andrea's chest, growing tighter by the second.

"I'm sorry," she said to the boxes, pushing down the lump in her throat. "I can't look anymore." Her one item would have to be enough. She couldn't bear the weight of carrying any more pieces of her missing brother inside her pockets.

Andrea backed away and grabbed hold of her bike where it stood propped against the garage wall. She strapped on her helmet and pushed down, sinking the heels of her shoes heavily on the pedals. She rode past the house of nosy Ms. Penelope, the lady who brought them tins of cookies and too often peeked

outside at the world through her large window. She passed a game of kickball being played on a side street by a bunch of neighbor kids, most of whom had little siblings sitting on the curb chewing on ropes of taffy candy. Someone shouted out to her, but Andrea pretended she didn't hear. She rode past row after row of houses settling into the silence of night, pedaling farther and farther down the street and away from her house until her thighs and calves burned. Then she pushed some more.

Going through Francis's boxes wouldn't fix any of the things that had broken. But she could feel the crisp fall breeze on her face, and she could fly like the wind on her bike. She could imagine she was somewhere far, far away. Somewhere bad things didn't happen. Somewhere brothers didn't disappear.

It was a game she played with herself. If she rode fast enough, maybe she could outrun the sadness, the guilt, the pain of a cracked heart. If she rode fast enough, maybe she wouldn't break.

FORGET YOUR TROUBLES

Andrea biked past where the road ended and onto a trail that ran over a small bridge and through a park before finally giving way to a dark, thick wood. Memories lurked everywhere in this place, especially now with the trees tinted orange. She and Francis had spent many afternoons playing in the park when they were smaller, going down slides, sharing Goldfish crackers, and getting their parents to give them underdogs on the swings.

There were also the nightmares Francis used to have about this place. Nightmares about a river and an evil tree determined to turn him into stone. Francis dealt with more nightmares than she ever had, and this had been a recurring one. It clung to Andrea, made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end as if the nightmare had been hers, too.

Once she crossed into the forest, the moonlight shone brightly enough to light Andrea's way, but even

if it hadn't, she knew the path by heart. Eventually it would curve around and spit her out back near her home, but not before it wound through groves of trees and shallow ravines and a quiet, empty field where deer would rest in the sun during the day.

The air around Andrea buzzed, almost electric, like lightning might strike at any moment, though above her hovered a cloudless sky. The leaves left on the trees took on a silvery shine, washed in the moon's light. The woods wore the scent of velvety secrets and sadness blanketed by something sweet, like a box of her mother's dark chocolate.

Andrea drew in one long, deep breath, letting the calm of the forest at nightfall weave its way through her. Her heart, mind, and pace slowed, until she became as still and quiet as the stars that hung above her head.

She hopped off her bike and propped the kickstand, then cast her gaze around the woods, landing on a soft column of glow. The moon had shifted its unforgiving spotlight off her and onto a gnarled old tree near the path, rough and widened with age. Its knobby limbs twisted upward like fingers, bending to the sky. On its wrist-like trunk hung a single piece of parchment, fluttering as if desperate to break free.

Fresh-fallen leaves crunched under Andrea's sneakers as she moved toward the tree. Her mind

flashed back to the flyers for her brother they had plastered up all around town within hours of finding him gone, stapling his picture to poles and taping it to shopwindows. His face flashed nightly on the news, and in online searches beneath the word **Missing** and a phone number for the police. Andrea half expected this to be another one. A poster of Francis that had somehow survived three years of winters and spring rains, that had lasted long past when the neighbors stopped dropping casseroles off at the door and the news vans found other stories to tell. She paused, her shoes sinking into the soft, damp earth.

If it was Francis's face, faded and mottled with age, she didn't want to see it.

A sudden, cool breeze kicked up around her, sending branches bowing sideways. The poster tore free from the tree and flew, looping over and over in the air before sticking itself to Andrea's face, unwilling to be ignored. Andrea clawed at the paper, pulling it from her nose and cheeks. The wind died down to nothing and the woods hushed as Andrea took a reluctant peek at what she now held in her hands.

Thick and yellowed and curled in at the edges, the paper had the appearance of age, as if it had hung there for a hundred years or more. It shimmered gold, then silver, depending on which way the moonlight hit. Elaborate scrolling words framed the top and

bottom of an image of sweeping striped circus tents surrounded by a sky full of twinkling stars.

Andrea covered her mouth with her hand as she lingered on a single phrase. **Forget your troubles.** She had tried so many things to help her deal with

what had happened, like riding fast on her bike, or throwing herself into schoolwork, or sitting on a couch playing card games with Dr. Tammy, who asked too many questions and acted like they were friends.

The boxes in the garage had helped her deal with it, too. As long as the boxes sat there, Andrea was free to secretly dream that one day her brother might return home, somehow. She imagined her parents kept the boxes because they harbored a quiet faith, too. But now that her parents were giving away all of Francis's things, the final, unspoken hope the boxes represented floated away into the night sky, leaving her as empty as the corner in the garage would be once they were gone.

This was what she needed right now—to escape the pain. If it was possible, if the poster was real and she could actually forget her troubles, even for a little while, Andrea would accept the offer in a heartbeat.

Another breeze blew by, lifting leaves off the ground and swirling them around Andrea and the poster and the tree, ripping the poster from her fingers and sending it into the night sky.

The scent of pine needles and decaying leaves and the soil after a storm wasn't a surprise—Andrea was used to the smells of the forest from exploring and biking through them for so many years. But this tickling wind brought with it an aroma that belonged

at the county fair instead of tucked away in the woods. Cotton candy and cinnamon. Nearly burnt caramel and crisp, red apples. Fresh-popped corn.

Whatever this was, something was happening. Something big. A pinprick of hope leapt up in Andrea's stomach as the moon lent a hypnotic yellow-green illumination to the wooded path ahead. She grabbed the handlebars of her bike and walked forward, following the moonlight up a hill and to the edge of the abandoned field.

But it wasn't abandoned anymore.

Andrea gasped, eyes wide, and dropped her bike to the dirt.

A wrought iron fence encircled the field. At the top of the fence, the tips of the posts splayed in every direction and a pointed star adorned the end of each, like hundreds of starbursts stretching to the sky. The fence culminated in a tall iron gate next to where Andrea stood. The iron twisted into a pattern of stars and one crescent moon, smiling like he kept a secret. Worked into the iron, over the gate in scrolling, glittering metal, was the word **Reverie.** And under it, in slightly smaller print: **Land of Dreams.**

The very air surrounding Reverie pulled her in, drew her to it like a magnet. She couldn't help but wonder if the circus had somehow sought her out and placed itself right where she would find it, though of

course it was a silly thought. Circuses traveled from town to town, but not solely for the benefit of one single girl.

Andrea walked forward with cautious, measured steps until she reached the gate, a spark of energy taking hold inside her chest. Clutching clammy hands around the spindling metal, she peered through to what was inside, barely daring to blink as she took it all in.

Behind the gate, the world of Reverie buzzed with movement, with light. With people laughing, smiling, and eating cotton candy saturated with wild colors off striped sticks. Andrea pressed her forehead against the cold fence and squinted her eyes.

There was something . . . different about the crowd roaming inside the fence—people as young as three with bouncing, curly hair and others who were long and gangly-limbed and well into their teens. The group of revelers was built out of not just people but children. **Only** children. Not a single adult in sight.

Children ran and skipped through a long fairway lined with bright shops that led away from the gate. The windows of each shop bore large signs that promised an assortment of delectable treats. A pink-and-yellow storefront offered magical lollipops that had the power to make you dizzy in the best of ways. Another, right next to it, painted black as night,

offered poisoned apples meant to turn the stomach of an enemy. Another, built of scrap wood, sold oddities—ground unicorn horn, bottled color extracted from rainbows, fossilized fairy wings. Andrea's grip tightened on the fence as her mind hummed, imagining what other wonders the rest of the shops would claim to hold.

Surrounding the fairway and spreading out in all directions stood a seemingly endless array of tents. More tent tops spread to the horizon than should fit in the fenced-in space or within the bounds of the field. All striped the same color, alternating glittering-star bright and midnight blue, each tent drew gracefully upward to a single peak. At the topmost point of each waved a pennant flag, striped just the same.

Andrea pinched her arm, pulling the skin tight between her thumb and finger. If she was dreaming, she wouldn't feel an ounce of sting. She had done it dozens of times over the past three years—even pinching herself over and over again in the weeks after Francis disappeared. She had hoped she'd one day discover she'd only been trapped in a terrible, horrible dream and that when she woke up, she'd find Francis, sleeping and safe on the bottom bunk. But each and every time it hurt, and she had to realize

anew that the nightmare of losing him had been—was still—real.

Now, standing outside Reverie's gates, the stinging of her skin more than answered her question. This place seemed almost impossible. Yet here it was, drawing her to it with the promise of forgetting, as real as anything she'd ever seen.

STEP RIGHT UP

"Come to forget your troubles?"

Andrea startled as a smooth voice behind her broke the silence. She turned away from Reverie's gate to find a girl with a friendly-looking expression, about nine or ten years old, with a head full of long dark curls and a hand on her hip. She wore a bright red coat with tails and tight, black pants and shining riding boots, like she was the ringmaster of her own little circus. The girl tilted her chin upward, with a face so pale it almost shone silver in the light of the moon.

Andrea glanced back at the circus, whispering, almost pleading her answer. "Yes."

The girl giggled. "Of course you have. No one comes to Reverie by chance."

"But how is it possible?" Andrea asked. "How did it get here?"

"Reverie has always been there for those who need it, of course. It's waiting for any child in desperate enough need of escape to find it. It's just around the bend of a curving mountain road, behind a shopping mall in a bustling city, and in the desert at the edge of a dusty old town. And right now, in these woods, it is here for you."

For her. And all those children running around inside Reverie's gates, each with some trouble they longed to forget. Andrea had so often assumed that others didn't have it as bad. So many of the kids she knew had lives that seemed nearly perfect, had hearts that seemed whole. Knowing that she and the children inside Reverie had something so huge in common made Andrea feel less alone, and braver, somehow.

The girl reached forward, offering Andrea her hand. "Come along now. I'm going to show you how to get your ticket. I'm Margaret Grace."

"I'm Andrea," she said, her fingers twitching at her sides. "But I don't have any money for a ticket."

Margaret Grace stifled another laugh with a pale palm. "Oh, we use something ever so much better than money. Come away with us, Andrea," she said softly. Her lips pulled upward in a gentle smile, revealing a set of deep dimples, one for each cheek. Her almost black eyes opened wide in expectation, like chocolate

cookies in a sea of white milk. “It’s all right. Take my hand. It’s time to play.”

Andrea wanted **in**. This could be exactly what she needed. To forget. To let the guilt, and the empty seat at the dining room table, and the sadness of losing her brother fall away and disappear. She didn’t even glance back at the woods from where she came. She took hold of Margaret Grace’s hand and let her lead the way.

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Each of Margaret Grace’s thin fingers burned Andrea’s skin with cold, as if she were holding on to an icicle. She clenched her teeth, hoping to learn how to get her ticket before her fingers turned blue from frostbite.

Hidden in the shadows of the forest just out of sight from the gates stood a wooden booth, as golden and shining as the star on the top of a Christmas tree. A sign in scrolling print that matched the poster on the tree read **Tickets**. Margaret Grace gave Andrea a reassuring glance and led her a bit farther into the darkened woods. Andrea followed until they reached a grove shrouded in moonglow where a hammock that could have been made out of Rumpelstiltskin’s thread rested, strung between two silver, lanky birch trees almost emptied of leaves.

"The cost of admission is one dream," Margaret Grace whispered, like she was imparting an exciting and valuable secret. "But it's not such a price to pay, as you can experience it anytime you like in a dream tent. It's how we keep Reverie growing and changing. Some children who come here choose to give up a good dream, so they can live it again and again inside Reverie's walls. Some children, though, give up a nightmare, so it can be gone and forgotten."

Margaret Grace leaned in closer, her voice almost too quiet to be heard.

"And some give up a **memory**. It works the same as dreams, and it can be a good memory or a bad one. You can relive it in Reverie or you can let it be gone. **Forgotten**, for the entire time you're here." With that last word she let go of Andrea's hand.

Andrea stilled, her breath hitching in her chest. She didn't want to exhale, shatter the fragile potential contained inside this moment, break whatever spell this girl had spun.

Margaret Grace exhaled and smiled. "Now then. We put you to sleep here for a moment." She pointed to the hammock hanging between the trees. You give us one dream, then wake up with a ticket to **all** the dreams you could ever hope to have."

Andrea stuffed her frozen fingers into her pocket, wrapping them around the small item that she had

kept hidden inside. Everything about her life had grown so awful. The boxes in the garage. The empty seat at the table. The unrelenting guilt.

She would never forget Francis, but she could forget the reason for all her guilt and sadness. She could forget the night he disappeared.

A wide smile spread over Margaret Grace's face. "You're ready, aren't you?"

Andrea nodded, the memory she needed to give up clawing deep inside her. She would do anything to forget that night, even for a little while.

Before Margaret Grace could direct her, Andrea climbed into the hammock and rested her body inside it. Margaret Grace knelt to the earth next to Andrea's head and lifted up the bottom of her shirt to reveal a small leather pouch. "Now you must name your dream. We put the names of the dreams outside the tents so children get a hint at what they'll find inside."

Andrea lowered her head and stared through a gap in the trees at the twinkling white dots of light far above her in the blackened sky. The lump formed in her throat again and she fought once more to swallow it down. Surely she could face her memory long enough to name it. The pulsing voice inside her hummed a hungry, longing rhythm, nearly free of any hint of blame for the first time in three years.

It murmured softly. **Relief. Relief. Relief.**

Andrea's voice wavered. **"The Night You Left Us."**

Margaret Grace followed Andrea's eyes to the night sky and nodded slowly. "Very, very good."

Opening the pouch, Margaret Grace pulled out a pinch of a substance and released it into her palm, revealing hundreds of grains of glittering silver sand.

"Now close your eyes and repeat after me," Margaret Grace said. "I ask the Sandman."

"I ask the Sandman."

"To take me away."

"To take me away."

"To a land of dreams, in which I can play."

"To a land of dreams, in which I can play."

Margaret Grace sprinkled the sand over Andrea's closed eyes, and Andrea's mind grew slippery, thoughts shifting against one another and then falling away. There was something about the sand itself. Something about the way it glimmered. Something she wanted to hold on to.

But it was too late. Because at that exact moment, Andrea fell into a deep and deathlike sleep.

THE RULES

Andrea shot upright, half expecting to wake in her room. That Margaret Grace, the lights of Reverie, the strange leather pouch would have all been a bizarre dream, even though she had pinched herself outside the circus gates. But the hammock surged to one side, forcing Andrea to grasp at its golden braided edges. She gripped them tightly until the swaying slowed to a stop. Once stilled, Andrea reached up toward her eyes, which watered and stung like something sat stuck inside them. An eyelash, a piece of dust . . .

Grains of silver sand.

Andrea rubbed at her eyes, fast and hard, until the few remaining grains fell out and dropped to the forest floor. It had definitely, actually happened. She was really here.

In those brief, fleeting moments between the sleeping world and the world of the awake, Andrea

could still feel the fragments of the memory she had lost as the price of her admission. It was less a feeling of an existing thing than an awareness that something was gone. A hole lived inside her now that she couldn't quite account for, as if she'd lost a piece of a puzzle to a dark and dusty corner. According to Margaret Grace, whatever she had lost would be used for Reverie, become a dream tent that children could experience if they so chose.

Andrea swung her legs over the side of the hammock and found the ground with her feet, lighter than before, like gravity bound her a bit less tightly to the earth. She shook her head, flinging off the grogginess that stuck to her mind like a crawling fog until her gaze landed on a leather pocket nailed to one of the birch trees nearby.

A piece of parchment rested inside it, which glowed, slightly, in the light of the full moon. Andrea snatched it from the pouch.

Printed in deep blue ink, the ticket read:

ADMISSION TO REVERIE
"LAND OF DREAMS"
ONE NIGHT ONLY
PAID IN FULL

Her ticket to Reverie.

She had done it. She had earned her ticket inside.

Andrea lifted her face toward the noise up ahead and marched to the ticket booth.

"Welcome to Reverie," Margaret Grace said, her eyes gleaming. She held out her palm. "Ticket, please."

Andrea handed over her ticket. Margaret Grace looked it over with approving, hungry eyes, then tucked it somewhere under the counter and folded her hands over the edge of the opening in the booth.

"There are a few rules that you must agree to before entering Reverie," she said. "Nothing too alarming, but make sure you pay attention and follow them for the ultimate Reverie experience. One," she held up a single finger. "Reverie is a land of dreams. It is **very** important that you remember that. Sometimes dreams can feel very real. Two," she held up a second finger. "The dreams are what they are; they're already in place. Don't go thinking you can change what happens in them, because you can't. Think of them like a ride at a theme park. In some dreams you have choices, but you're always following a track. You follow the track, you'll find the exit. Three," a third finger joined the other two. "Whatever you do, don't stay too long in a nightmare. And, lastly," she added a fourth and final finger. "Don't try to remember

the dream you gave up for admission without going through its tent."

"Why not?" Andrea asked, confused. "And what do you mean about the nightmares?"

Margaret Grace offered Andrea a reassuring smile. "It's the rules, darling, and dreams can be tricky. Nightmares can be fun, but if you stay too long inside one, or try to remember the price of admission you just paid without going through the tent it turned into, it can cause your mind to react in some strange, strange ways. Things get rather . . . confusing, and nothing good can ever come of that. Of course, nightmares can also be fun, but if you're in one, make sure you get out quickly. And if you want to remember what you gave up to enter, simply find the tent and go in."

"I won't break the rules," Andrea said, trying to keep her voice steady. She was sure she wouldn't want to end up in any nightmares if she could help it, and she was even more certain she would have no reason to remember whatever she had been so eager to forget.

"Wonderful." Margaret Grace beamed. "Then just sign the waiver." She held out a clipboard with a gaudy feather pen attached by a string. "This says that you've heard the rules and understand it's your

responsibility to follow them. And that it isn't our fault if you make a mistake."

Andrea signed her name without hesitation.

Margaret Grace looked over Andrea's signature approvingly. "Now then, I think it's time, don't you?"

Andrea nodded, her eyes wide and her heart yearning to immerse itself in the promises of a night of escape.

Margaret Grace hopped out of the booth, and both girls walked with purposeful strides toward Reverie's gate, stopping next to a wide metal lever stuck into the earth.

"Welcome to Reverie," Margaret Grace said as she pulled back the lever. Andrea watched as Reverie's impressive gates opened with a giant creak.

The warmth and buzz and delicious aromas of Reverie wound around Andrea and seeped through her lungs and the pores of her skin, filling her from the inside out as she entered into its glow, one hopeful step at a time.

PENNY

Andrea stepped onto the fairway lit overhead by strings of bright lights and filled with children from all over the world, looks of pure delight spread over all their faces as the gate creaked shut behind her. Children with dark hair and dark eyes, and light hair with green eyes, and red hair with blue eyes, and every combination in between scurried in and out of shops. They ran through the fairway in saris and sweatpants, in burlap and blue jeans. Some wore outfits Andrea had only seen in pictures during social studies class, like they were from a different time period altogether. Girls in dresses with big red bows, and boys with shorts and socks pulled up almost to their knees. Some clothes were dirty, with stains and holes, others were bleach white and without a wrinkle. Many of the children held in their hands one kind or another of some delicious-looking treat.


THIS TOWN IS NOT ALL RIGHT
M. K. KRYS

1

It had been ten minutes since they'd passed the "Driftwood Harbor, Population 203" sign, and ten minutes since anyone had said a word.

Out one window, the Atlantic Ocean stretched out like a big gray void as far as the eye could see. Out the other, a fog so thick, you could choke on it hung over a dense forest of scrabbly pine trees. A few miles back they'd passed a tumbledown house with an old truck in the driveway, but they hadn't spotted any actual life since they left the interstate more than an hour ago. (Unless you counted the seagulls that circled overhead, and even they looked like the type that would purposely poop on your head.)

It was desolate and depressing, and Beacon could tell from the way his twin sister, Everleigh, glared out the window that she was regretting not flinging herself out of the car when she'd had the chance.

"I hear they have fantastic lobster," the twins' dad said.

The tires' whirring underneath the Ford Taurus came into focus. A breeze whistled through a cracked-open

window, ruffling the fine brown hairs clinging to the top of their dad's head and sending his tie over his shoulder.

"I love lobster," Beacon said, just to break the tense silence.

From the front seat, Everleigh snorted.

She was part of the reason they were moving from Los Angeles all the way to the tiny fishing village of Driftwood Harbor on the Eastern Seaboard. Their dad was hoping that the fresh air and change of scenery would help her. Nothing else had.

That's why Beacon tried to be optimistic about the move, even if he wasn't actually happy about it. He'd had friends in LA. He had the skate park downtown, where he practiced his jumps until it got dark. He had his bedroom full of Tony Hawk posters and a spot under the floorboards where he hid private stuff from his nosy twin sister. But he just wanted his family to go back to normal. Or as close to normal as they would ever get, now. After. If this place helped, then none of that other stuff mattered.

"Where is the actual town?" Everleigh grumbled. "If there even is one."

"Should be coming up to it soon," Beacon said brightly. "Right, Dad?"

He'd been doing that lately. Saying everything as if it had an exclamation point at the end, as if his enthusiasm might be contagious. So far, it only seemed to make Everleigh more annoyed.

Beacon looked out the window at the forest blurring past. Suddenly a flash of movement caught his eye. A figure darted out of the trees. It was white and hunched, with a pair of huge round eyes.

And it was looking right at him.

Beacon gasped.

"What?" Everleigh said.

He was about to explain, but his words were cut short by a loud clunk from under the car's floor. Before he knew it, the car was fishtailing wildly across the road. The kids screamed as their dad fought to get control, the forest and road spinning around them in a streak of gray and green. The car careened toward a thick pine. Closer, closer, closer—they were going to hit it!

At the last moment, their dad braked hard. The car jerked to an abrupt stop. Beacon's head slammed against the window. Stars exploded across his eyes.

And then everything was still. The engine knocked over the ringing in Beacon's ears. Beacon blinked away the spots in his vision, searching through the cloud of dust outside the window for the creature in the woods. But if it was there, he couldn't see it.

"What. Was. *That*," Everleigh finally said.

"I don't know." Their dad gripped the steering wheel with white-knuckled fingers. "I was driving along normally and then all of a sudden something just *gave* and I lost control."

Beacon blew out a relieved breath.

"You okay, Beaks?" their dad asked, twisting around to check him over for injury. "Is everyone okay?"

Once he confirmed that no one was missing an arm or needed CPR, he climbed out of the car, briskly wiping the wrinkles out of his suit. The twins weren't far behind. Smoke billowed from underneath the hood of the car like a huffing dragon. Their dad coughed and blew away the fumes as he tried unsuccessfully to open the hood. Everleigh released an annoyed sigh and nudged him aside with her hip, then she unlatched the hood with a practiced flick of her wrist and peered underneath at the tangle of metal and wires.

"What is it?" their dad asked eagerly.

"Radiator's blown," Everleigh said, hands balled on her hips.

Everleigh was practically a pro mechanic. She'd been fixing cars with their older brother, Jasper, ever since she was in diapers.

Now she fixed them alone.

"Can you fix it?" their dad asked.

"Not without some leak sealant, and we don't have any on hand. If we were back at *home* . . . ," she said meaningfully, "now that would be a different story."

Their dad ignored the barb.

"We'll need to call a tow truck, then." He ducked away to the driver's seat, and Beacon got out his cell

phone. He tapped the screen, but the browser wouldn't load.

"The Internet isn't working," Beacon said.

Everleigh snatched the phone from his hand.

"Hey, give that back!" Beacon said, but his sister twisted out of his reach to type.

Even though they were twins, Everleigh had at least two inches on her brother, a fact she used to her advantage at every opportunity.

"No reception," Everleigh said. "That's just great." She shoved the phone back at Beacon's chest.

Beacon grumbled and stowed the cell in his pocket. Then the twins looked down either side of the isolated road. That's when Beacon realized just how late it was. It hadn't exactly been bright and sunny before, but now the trees looked black against the bruised-fruit sky. It was so quiet, he could actually hear insects chirping and trilling in the long grass on the side of the road, instead of just cars and people like back in LA.

A fine mist sprayed off the ocean, and the air bit through Beacon's thin sweatshirt with razor-sharp teeth. Everleigh rubbed warmth back into her arms, which were prickled with goose bumps. Their dad had warned them that it would be chilly by the water, but it seemed to be getting cooler with every passing second.

Beacon thought of the movement he'd seen in the woods before the car broke down, and a shiver scuttled

down his spine. Those eyes had been *huge*. He didn't even want to think about what kind of animal they belonged to.

"Well, I guess we'll have to walk," their dad said, jolting Beacon from his thoughts.

"I am *not* walking." His dad and sister stared at him, and Beacon crossed his arms stiffly. "I saw something in the woods before the car broke down."

"Don't tell me you're worried about aliens," Everleigh said.

"Don't be stupid," Beacon retorted.

They'd googled Driftwood Harbor before the move. The only things they could find about the place were some old newspaper articles about a large object that had crashed in the water back in 1960-something-or-other. Of course, a bunch of weirdos on the Internet had insisted it was a UFO.

"It was probably just a deer," their dad said.

"Or a bear," Everleigh said casually. "I hear they have tons of them around here. Huge ones, too, with paws the size of dinner plates and claws like Wolverine."

Beacon's eyes widened.

"Leave your brother alone," their dad said.

Just then, a white light beamed across the road. Beacon shielded his eyes as a pair of headlights rumbled toward them, the vehicle kicking up dust.

"Someone's coming!" Beacon said.

"Boy, nothing gets past you," Everleigh replied dryly.

Beacon didn't even care about coming up with a good comeback—he was just happy help was on the way.

As the vehicle got closer, a crane and rigging equipment took shape in the moonlight. A tow truck. What were the odds of that?

The truck pulled to a stop next to their car. There were at least two inches of dust and grease on the windows, and the wheel wells were so rusted, it looked as if the car was disintegrating. *Murray's Auto Body* was written on the side of the sun-faded, burnt-orange body. The driver leaned across the empty seats to look through the window. His cheeks were ruddy and deeply wrinkled, and a cigarette dangled from his lips, sending smoke curling into the air.

"Need a hitch?" he asked. Or at least that's what Beacon thought he'd said. His accent reminded him of some of the Irish action movies his uncle Stanley liked to watch, where Beacon could only make out about one of every dozen words, and it was usually a cuss.

"Wow, perfect timing!" their dad said. He tripped over himself to thank the man, and ten minutes later, they were all crammed into the box of the tow truck as they rumbled toward the town—term used loosely. Beacon was grateful when they finally saw some signs of civilization. They rolled slowly past a harbor. The weathered pier didn't look trustworthy enough to hold the weight of a toddler, let alone the dozens of boats anchored to it. If you could even call them boats. He saw tattered sails and broken masts and barnacles clinging to thick rope nets. Fishermen in chest waders and rubber boots stood in waist-deep, murky

water, yelling at one another around a partially submerged tugboat with a big hole in its side.

A short while later, the tow truck lurched to a stop in front of a service shop. The domed, corrugated roof was sloping in the center and looked as if a strong breeze might knock it down.

They climbed out of the truck and followed the adults inside through the metal delivery bay doors. A van hovered on a platform in the middle of the room, and there was a giant puddle of oil underneath it. There were tools and gas cans and tins of nails everywhere. The smell of gasoline hung in the air.

Their dad and the mechanic fell into a discussion about the radiator, and the twins began wandering through the shop. Beacon was looking at some old pictures tacked to a corkboard when he heard Everleigh gasp. She had her hands cupped around her face and was peering out of a dirty window at the back of the shop. Beacon joined her and saw dozens and dozens of cars stretched out across a dusty lot, the metal shining dully under the orange light of a single lamppost. Before he could say anything, she was tumbling through the back door. He followed her out into the junkyard.

"I don't think we should be out here," Beacon said.

"Then go back," Everleigh said.

She weaved through the makeshift aisles, peering into the cars with a grin tugging at her lips. She looked like

she was in heaven. Beacon was pretty sure it was the first time he'd seen his sister smile since . . . he couldn't even remember.

Maybe that's why he couldn't quite convince himself to tell her not to climb into the cars like she owned the place, as she was doing right now.

Beacon followed his sister's path through the junkyard. Before he realized it, they were near the back of the lot, where the light of the lamppost struggled to reach. The aisles melted into darkness. The bodies of the cars were swallowed by jagged shadows. The light flickered, and Beacon once again thought of that movement in the woods. A crawly feeling roiled inside his gut.

"We should go back," he said.

"Quit being such a wimp," Everleigh said.

"I am *not* a wimp," Beacon said defensively.

Everleigh gasped, and Beacon yelped.

"What, what is it?" he asked, whipping around.

"A 1968 Mercury Cougar," Everleigh said, pointing at an old car. Beacon's face melted into a scowl, and Everleigh laughed riotously, clutching her stomach. "Oh my God, you should have seen your face!"

"You're a real jer . . ." Beacon's words trailed off, his eyes widening at something behind his sister. Three sets of gleaming eyes stared out of the darkness.

2

"Nice try," Everleigh said. She turned around on a laugh, but her face froze as a body materialized from the darkness. She screamed, scrabbling back into Beacon.

Three kids stepped out of the shadows, wearing matching puffy gold-and-blue varsity jackets and strangely blank expressions.

"Sorry, we didn't mean to scare you," the girl said. Her hair was the kind of bright blond that almost looked white; the glossy curls bounced around her shoulders as she moved. "I'm Jane Middleton. And this is Perry Thompson and Nixon Sims." She nodded at the two boys standing on either side of her. One was short with shoulders so wide Beacon couldn't be sure he wasn't wearing football pads under his jacket; his light hair stuck up in spikes all over his head. The other was tall and thin, with tight, wiry black curls that matched his dark skin.

"I'm Beacon McCullough," Beacon said, then nudged

his sister when she didn't offer her name. "And this is my rude sister, Everleigh."

Everleigh narrowed her eyes at the kids. "What were you doing out here in the dark?"

Before they could answer, the twins' dad ran out into the yard. The mechanic stumbled behind him.

"What's going on out here?" their dad asked breathlessly. "Is everyone okay? I heard a scream."

Jane stepped forward stiffly, her hands clasped in front of her like a mannequin.

"I'm afraid we scared them. We cut through the junkyard to get to the church on the hill, where we hold our meetings." She pointed up at a big stone church that loomed ominously out of the fog on a hilltop overlooking the ocean. "We don't usually come across anyone."

"Hey there, Jane. Nice to see ya. Nixon, Perry." The mechanic nodded at the kids.

"Hi, Mr. Murray," they all responded together.

"Meetings?" the twins' dad asked.

"We volunteer for the Gold Stars," Jane explained. "We're a youth group that aims to promote social responsibility in kids."

"Isn't that something!" their dad said.

"We're always looking for new members." Jane looked at the twins. "If you two want to join, we'd be happy to take you to a meeting."

Everleigh snorted, and their dad cut her a look that could slice through a ten-ton truck.

"That's a very nice offer," their dad said, a warning note in his voice. "I'm sure they'd love that."

Jane smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes. "We should get going so we're not late to our meeting."

"Oh, by all means!" He stepped aside to let them pass. "It was great to meet you."

"You too," Jane said.

The Gold Stars gave them another one of their blank-stared smiles before they disappeared through a hole in the fence.

"They seemed nice," their dad said.

"They seemed *weird*," Everleigh replied. "I've seen livelier personalities on some two-by-fours."

"Everleigh!" Their dad darted an embarrassed look at the mechanic.

"Oh, it's all right," Mr. Murray said, waving away his concern. "Probably just tired from the long drive. Why don't we go inside and square up for that sealant? I bet you kids want to get out of here."

"*That's* an understatement," Everleigh muttered.

The mechanic charitably pretended not to hear her.

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Soon, they arrived at their home for the foreseeable future. The A-frame was set on a rocky jut of land overlooking the ocean. Thick vines climbed the yellow-stained siding like they were trying to swallow the house, and black shutters on the windows snapped open and closed in the wind. The roof was completely lost to the fog. A sign out front said "Welcome to Blackwater Lookout Bed-and-Breakfast!" in looping cursive script.

Beacon's lips twitched from the effort to keep the smile pasted on his face.

"This looks great and everything," he said, "but do you think there's someplace a little more . . . modern we can stay?"

"This is the only hotel in town," their dad said. He parked the car next to an ancient blue truck with wood paneling on the side that Beacon had only ever seen in '80s movies. "The lady on the phone said we were lucky to get rooms at all."

"Yeah, because tourism is obviously booming here," Everleigh deadpanned.

There were no cars. There were no people. There were no neighbors for miles. It looked like you could go days without ever having contact with another person, if you wanted. It was so different from LA, where you couldn't step out of your front door without bumping into someone.

"It's just temporary while we do some house hunting," their dad said. "A couple of those places we found online looked very promising."

"I'm sure it will be fine," Beacon said without much conviction.

A thickset woman with ruddy cheeks and wiry gray Brillo Pad hair came out of the front doors. She shielded her face and scowled down at the family, the wind sucking her apron away from her body.

"That must be Donna," their dad said.

"Donna seems like a blast," Everleigh replied.

"Who are ye?" Donna called over the wind. Beacon didn't know whether to be annoyed at Everleigh's rudeness or respect her honesty, because really, there was nothing to be happy about here. He'd been trying to be optimistic for his dad's sake, but it was getting hard. Couldn't he have found anyplace better for their fresh start? He didn't see anything appealing about this town. It was as if their dad had thrown a dart at a map and said, "Driftwood Harbor it is!"

"Malcolm McCullough," their dad said. "And these are my kids, Beacon and Everleigh."

For a minute, Donna looked as if she was going to turn them away, and Beacon got hopeful that they would have to leave after all. A whole sequence played out in his head. They wouldn't find anywhere else to stay in town, so they'd be forced to leave entirely, and once they did, they

would decide to never come back. Maybe they'd move to Hawaii instead. Canada, even. He wasn't picky.

But then Donna gave a curt nod and said, "Welcome to Blackwater."

"Welcome to Blackwater, my butt," Everleigh said under her breath.

Beacon and Everleigh followed their dad into the inn.

Happily, the inside was a lot cheerier than the outside. The walls were made up of knotted-wood paneling, and there were overstuffed couches set around a stone hearth that had a crackling fire inside. It smelled like baking, which was another improvement over the outside, which smelled like fish.

"You kids must be hungry," Donna said. "I'll get the oven going."

"Oh, it's okay," their dad said. "That's very kind of you, but we had a bite to eat at that Home Sweet Home diner on the highway. The kids ate their weight in crinkle-cut fries. I think we'd all just like to get some sleep."

"Very well," Donna said. Her mouth pursed as if she'd sucked on a sour candy. Beacon made a mental note never to refuse her cooking.

They followed her brisk footsteps through the inn.

"I suppose you'll be wanting the bigger room for yourself?" she said to their dad, gesturing to a large bedroom on the main floor. She raised her eyebrows, as if challenging him to disagree.

"Well, yes," he stuttered.

"I figured," she said. "I'll let you get settled in. Kids, follow me."

She led them up a set of narrow, winding stairs to the second floor.

"The bedroom at the end of the hall is free, but one of you will need to stay here." She used a hook from the hall closet to reach up and unlatch a door in the ceiling. She pulled down a set of accordion stairs that led up into the darkness.

"It's not ideal," Donna said, "but we're tight on space."

Beacon peered warily into the attic, then at his sister. Everleigh crossed her arms and lifted her chin. It was a look he knew all too well. She was prepared to argue to the death until she got what she wanted.

Beacon sighed. "I guess I'll take the attic bedroom."

He hiked his backpack over his shoulder, then gripped both sides of the steep wooden ladder and climbed up. When he got to the top, he poked his head into the room. Pale moonlight slanted in from a small window in the corner, but otherwise, it was completely dark. He couldn't even see his hand when he waved it in front of his face.

"Light switch is on the wall!" Donna called from below.

"Okay!" Beacon replied shakily.

He gulped, climbing up farther, wondering idly if he'd somehow walked into a trap. Maybe this woman wasn't

really an innkeeper. Maybe she was a serial killer, and this hotel was just a clever ruse so she could lure unsuspecting families into her death trap.

He'd been halfway expecting chains and bloodstains, but when he flicked on the light switch, he was happy to find a queen-size bed with a patchwork quilt and a braided rug thrown down over the wooden floor. The peaked ceiling was so low in spots, he couldn't stand upright near the walls, but other than that, it wasn't so bad after all. In fact, it would be nice to have this space away from the rest of his family and Donna.

That's what he told himself as he emptied his belongings into the dresser, changed into his pajamas, and climbed underneath the covers.

He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but the old house creaked and groaned. Outside, the ocean bashed against the rocks in a rhythmic roar and crash.

A memory came flooding back. The Halloween before Jasper died, his older brother had had a bunch of his friends over to marathon scary movies. Jasper invited the twins to watch, and Everleigh had immediately plopped down onto the couch. Even though Beacon actually wanted to go trick-or-treating, he'd wanted to seem cool, and Everleigh and Jasper were always spending so much time together fixing cars and talking about cars and poring over car magazines that he sometimes felt left out. So he'd joined his sister and the older kids, who were in the middle of a

movie about an evil clown who lived in the sewers. Beacon couldn't sleep for weeks after that, and even though he was eleven, he'd crawled into his dad's bed every night. Every day, he'd lived in fear of Everleigh finding out. If she did, he'd never hear the end of it.

One night, as he was trekking to his dad's room, he ran into Jasper, who was in the hall on the way to the bathroom. Jasper asked what he was doing up, and Beacon admitted that he hadn't been able to sleep ever since that movie with the evil clown. Jasper's face had grown serious, and even though Beacon knew Jasper wouldn't make fun of him, he'd gotten embarrassed. But then Jasper told him to wait right there. He came back a minute later, wielding Beacon's Little League baseball bat.

"Come on, little brother," he said, all business. Then he'd stormed into Beacon's room and flicked on the light. He yelled at the empty room that he was here, he wasn't scared, and he was ready to fight anyone who messed with his brother. Then he hit his chest like a caveman and spit into the garbage. It was so ridiculous that Beacon couldn't help laughing. Soon, they were both keeled over. Everleigh came in moments later, blearily rubbing her eyes, and their dad wasn't far behind, wielding his own baseball bat like he was going to strike an intruder. But neither Beacon nor Jasper could get control of their laughter long enough to explain what had actually happened, so eventually their dad and sister both got annoyed and went back to bed,

leaving Beacon and Jasper wiping their tears. Evil clowns never seemed so scary after that.

But Jasper wasn't here now.

It took him a while, but Beacon finally drifted off to sleep.

That night, he dreamed of the ocean. He stood on a ledge of sharp rocks. The wind howled in his ears, and huge, angry waves crashed against his feet. But somehow, Beacon stayed dry. He bent down and touched the water. Suddenly he was tumbling through the ocean, and then the dream changed, and he was standing on the seafloor, the muted roar of the wind still loud in his ears. Jasper lay on a bed of bright green coral, his pale white hands clasped over his stomach. Fish darted around his body, flashes of silver and scales. Beacon called his brother's name over the thunderous scream of the water. Jasper's chest heaved, as if he were trying to speak. Beacon stepped closer to hear what his brother would say. Then Jasper's mouth gaped open wide, and a big black fish swam out of his mouth.

Beacon screamed.

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He woke with a start. His cheeks were wet, and his body was drenched in cold sweat. His heart pounded against his chest.

The room was dark, and for a minute, Beacon forgot where he was. Outside, the wind shrieked against the windowpanes. Branches from a nearby tree scritched over the rain-splattered glass and made ugly, sharp shadows dance across the walls. His nightmare trickled away, and memories of the previous day came flooding back—the car wreck, the junkyard, the bedroom in the attic. He was in Driftwood Harbor. This was Blackwater Lookout. And something had woken him up.

Beacon pulled the covers up to his chin. It was just the storm, he told himself. He closed his eyes. But it was no use. He was wide-awake now.

He whipped off the covers and sat up. A gust of chilly air sent goose bumps racing up his back. He set his feet onto the cold wood floor, feeling exactly like those idiots in horror movies who hear a noise and go investigating even though you know it's a terrible idea.

One peek, he told himself. Just to make sure it was the trees that had woken him up. Then he could go back to bed.

The floor creaked and groaned as he crept toward the window. He peered outside, through the frosty glass.

Without all the lights and smog of the city, he could actually see the stars. They shone above, illuminating the angry black waves that battered the rocky shore below. He squinted into the dark, but he couldn't see anything wrong.

And then a lighthouse beacon trailed lazily over the ocean, and he caught something in the water. Or rather, *someone* in the water.

Beacon gasped, and the person in the water whirled around, almost as if hearing him. Her hair was plastered against her head, but he recognized the bright blond curls and blue-and-gold varsity jacket instantly.

Their eyes connected for a brief moment. And then a huge wave reared up and swallowed Jane's body whole.

"Terrifying and fun."—R.L. STINE, author of *Goosebumps*

SMALL SPACES

KATHERINE ARDEN

The New York Times bestselling author of
The Bear and the Nightingale

1

OCTOBER IN EAST Evansburg, and the last warm sun of the year slanted red through the sugar maples. Olivia Adler sat nearest the big window in Mr. Easton's math class, trying, catlike, to fit her entire body into a patch of light. She wished she were on the other side of the glass. You don't waste October sunshine. Soon the old autumn sun would bed down in cloud blankets, and there would be weeks of gray rain before it finally decided to snow. But Mr. Easton was teaching fractions and had no sympathy for Olivia's fidgets.

"Now," he said from the front of the room. His chalk squeaked on the board. Mike Campbell flinched. Mike Campbell got the shivers from squeaking blackboards and, for some reason, from people licking paper napkins. The sixth grade licked napkins around him as much as possible.

"Can anyone tell me how to convert three-sixteenths to a decimal?" asked Mr. Easton. He scanned the room for a victim. "Coco?"

"Um," said Coco Zintner, hastily shutting a sparkling pink notebook. "Ah," she added wisely, squinting at the board.

Point one eight seven five, thought Olivia idly, but she did not raise her hand to rescue Coco. She made a line of purple ink on her scratch paper, turned it into a flower, then a palm tree. Her attention wandered back to the window. *What if a vampire army came through the gates right now? Or no, it's sunny. Werewolves? Or what if the Brewsters' Halloween skeleton decided to unhook himself from the third-floor window and lurch out the door?*

Ollie liked this idea. She had a mental image of Officer Perkins, who got cats out of trees and filed police reports about pies stolen off windowsills, approaching a wandering skeleton. *I'm sorry, Mr. Bones, you're going to have to put your skin on—*

A large foot landed by her desk. Ollie jumped. Coco had either conquered or been conquered by three-sixteenths, and now Mr. Easton was passing out math quizzes. The whole class groaned.

"Were you paying attention, Ollie?" asked Mr. Easton, putting her paper on her desk.

"Yep," said Ollie, and added, a little at random, "point one eight seven five." Mr. Bones had failed to appear. Lazy skeleton. He could have gotten them out of their math quiz.

Mr. Easton looked unconvinced but moved on.

Ollie eyed her quiz. *Please convert 9/8 to a decimal. Right.* Ollie didn't use a calculator or scratch paper. The idea of using either had always puzzled her, as

though someone had suggested she needed a spyglass to read a book. She scribbled answers as fast as her pencil could write, put her quiz on Mr. Easton's desk, and waited, half out of her seat, for the bell to ring.

Before the ringing had died away, Ollie seized her bag, inserted a crumpled heap of would-be homework, stowed a novel, and bolted for the door.

She had almost made it out when a voice behind her said, "Ollie."

Ollie stopped; Lily Mayhew and Jenna Gehrmann nearly tripped over her. Then the whole class was going around her like she was a rock in a river. Ollie trudged back to Mr. Easton's desk.

Why me, she wondered irritably. Phil Greenblatt had spent the last hour picking his nose and sticking boogers onto the seat in front of him. Lily had hacked her big sister's phone and screenshotted some texts Annabelle sent her boyfriend. The sixth grade had been giggling over them all day. And Mr. Easton wanted to talk to *her*?

Ollie stopped in front of the teacher's desk. "Yes? I turned in my quiz and everything so—"

Mr. Easton had a wide mouth and a large nose that drooped over his upper lip. A neatly trimmed mustache took up the tiny bit of space remaining. Usually he looked like a friendly walrus. Now he looked

impatient. "Your quiz is letter-perfect, as you know, Ollie," he said. "No complaints on that score."

Ollie knew that. She waited.

"You should be doing eighth-grade math," Mr. Easton said. "At least."

"No," said Ollie.

Mr. Easton looked sympathetic now, as though he knew why she didn't want to do eighth-grade math. He probably did. Ollie had him for homeroom and life sciences, as well as math.

Ollie did not mind impatient teachers, but she did not like sympathy face. She crossed her arms.

Mr. Easton hastily changed the subject. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about chess club. We're missing you this fall. The other kids, you know, really appreciated that you took the time to work with them on their opening gambits last year, and there's the interscholastic tournament coming up soon so—"

He went on about chess club. Ollie bit her tongue. She wanted to go outside, she wanted to ride her bike, and she didn't want to rejoin chess club.

When Mr. Easton finally came to a stop, she said, not quite meeting his eyes, "I'll send the club some links about opening gambits. Super helpful. They'll work fine. Um, tell everyone I'm sorry."

He sighed. "Well, it's your decision. But if you were to change your mind, we'd love—"

"Yeah," said Ollie. "I'll think about it." Hastily she added, "Gotta run. Have a good day. Bye." She was out the door before Mr. Easton could object, but she could feel him watching her go.

Past the green lockers, thirty-six on each side, down the hall that always smelled like bleach and old sandwiches. Out the double doors and onto the front lawn. All around was bright sun and cool air shaking golden trees: fall in East Evansburg. Ollie took a glad breath. She was going to ride her bike down along the creek as far and as fast as she could go. Maybe she'd jump in the water. The creek wasn't *that* cold. She would go home at dusk—sunset at 5:58. She had lots of time. Her dad would be mad that she got home late, but he was always worrying about something. Ollie could take care of herself.

Her bike was a Schwinn, plum-colored. She had locked it neatly to the space nearest the gate. No one in Evansburg would steal your bike—*probably*—but Ollie loved hers and sometimes people would prank you by stealing your wheels and hiding them.

She had both hands on her bike lock, tongue sticking out as she wrestled with the combination, when a shriek split the air. "It's *mine*!" a voice yelled. "Give it back! No—you can't touch that. NO!"

Ollie turned.

Most of the sixth grade was milling on the front lawn, watching Coco Zintner hop around like a flea—it

was she who'd screamed. Coco would not have been out of place in a troop of flower fairies. Her eyes were large, slanting, and ice-blue. Her strawberry-blond hair was so strawberry that in the sunshine it looked pink. You could imagine Coco crawling out of a daffodil each morning and sipping nectar for breakfast. Ollie was a little jealous. She herself had a headful of messy brown curls and no one would ever mistake her for a flower fairy. *But at least,* Ollie reminded herself, *if Phil Greenblatt steals something from me, I'm big enough to sock him.*

Phil Greenblatt had stolen Coco's sparkly notebook. The one Coco had closed when Mr. Easton called on her. Phil was ignoring Coco's attempts to get it back—he was a foot taller than her. Coco was *tiny*. He held the notebook easily over Coco's head, flipped to the page he wanted, and snickered. Coco shrieked with frustration.

"Hey, Brian," called Phil. "Take a look at this."

Coco burst into tears.

Brian Battersby was the star of the middle school hockey team even though he was only twelve himself. He was way shorter than Phil, but looked like he fit together better, instead of sprouting limbs like a praying mantis. He was lounging against the brick wall of the school building, watching Phil and Coco with interest.

Ollie started to get mad. No one *liked* Coco much—she had just moved from the city and her squeaky enthusiasm annoyed everyone. But really, make her cry in school?

Brian looked at the notebook Phil held out to him. He shrugged. Ollie thought he looked more embarrassed than anything.

Coco started crying harder.

Brian definitely looked uncomfortable. "Come on, Phil, it might not be me."

Mike Campbell said, elbowing Brian, "No, it's totally you." He eyed the notebook page again. "I guess it could be a dog that looks like you."

"Give it *back*!" yelled Coco through her tears. She snatched again. Phil was waving the notebook right over her head, laughing. The sixth grade was laughing too, and now Ollie could see what they were all looking at. It was a picture—a good picture, Coco could really draw—of Brian and Coco's faces nestled together with a heart around them.

Phil sat behind Coco in math class; he must have seen her drawing. Poor dumb Coco—why would you do that if you were sitting in front of nosy Philip Greenblatt?

"Come on, Brian," Mike was saying. "Don't you want to go out with Hot Cocoa here?"

Coco looked like she wanted to run away except that she really wanted her notebook back and Ollie had pretty much had enough of the whole situation, and so she bent down, got a moderate-sized rock, and let it fly.

Numbers and throwing things, those were the two talents of Olivia Adler. She'd quit the softball team last year too, but her aim was still on.

Her rock caught Brian squarely in the back of the head, dropped him *thump* onto the grass, and turned everyone's attention from Coco Zintner to her.

Ideally, Ollie would have hit Phil, but Phil was facing her and Ollie didn't want to put out an eye. Besides, she didn't have a lot of sympathy for Brian. He knew perfectly well that he was the best at hockey, and half the girls giggled about him, and he wasn't coming to Coco's rescue even though he'd more or less gotten her into this with his dumb friends and his dumb charming smile.

Ollie crossed her arms, thought in her mom's voice, *Well, in for a penny . . . ,* hefted another rock, and said, "Oops. My hand slipped." The entire sixth grade was staring. The kids in front started backing away. A lot of them thought she had cracked since last year. "Um, seriously, guys," she said. "Doesn't *anyone* have anything better to do?"

Coco Zintner took advantage of Phil's distraction to snatch her notebook back. She gave Ollie a long look, and darted away.

Ollie thought, *I'm going to have detention for a year,* and then Brian got up, spitting out dirt, and said, "That was a pretty good throw."

The noise began. Ms. Mouton, that day's lawn monitor, finally noticed the commotion. "Now," she said, hurrying over. "Now, now." Ms. Mouton was the librarian and she was not the best lawn monitor.

Ollie decided that she wasn't going to say sorry or anything. Let them call her dad, let them shake their heads, let them give her detention tomorrow. At least tomorrow the weather would change and she would not be stuck in school on a nice day, answering questions.

Ollie jumped onto her bike and raced out of the school yard, wheels spitting gravel, before anyone could tell her to stop.

2

SHE PEDALED HARD past the hay bales in the roundabout on Main Street, turned onto Daisy Lane, and raced past the clapboard houses, where jack-o'-lanterns grinned on every front porch. She aimed her bike to knock down a rotting gray rubber hand groping up out of the earth in the Steiners' yard, turned again at Johnson Hill, and climbed, panting, up the steep dirt road.

No one came after her. *Well, why would they,* Ollie thought. She was Off School Property.

Ollie let her bike coast down the other side of Johnson Hill. It was good to be alone in the warm sunshine. The river ran silver to her right, chattering over rocks. The fire-colored trees shook their leaves down around her. It wasn't *hot*, exactly—but warm for October. Just cool enough for jeans, but the sun was warm when you tilted your face to it.

The swimming hole was Ollie's favorite place. Not far from her house, it had a secret spot on a rock half-hidden by a waterfall. That spot was *Ollie's*, especially on fall days. After mid-September, she was the only one who went there. People didn't go to swimming holes once the weather turned chilly.

Other than her homework, Ollie was carrying *Captain Blood* by Rafael Sabatini, a broken-spined paperback that she'd dug out of her dad's bookshelves. She mostly liked it. Peter Blood outsmarted everyone, which was a feature she liked in heroes, although she wished Peter were a girl, or the villain were a girl, or *someone* in the book besides his boat and his girlfriend (both named Arabella) were a girl. But at least the book had romance and high-seas adventures and other *absolutely not Evansburg* things. Ollie liked that. Reading it meant going to a new place where she wasn't Olivia Adler at all.

Ollie braked her bike. The ground by the road was carpeted with scarlet leaves; sugar maples start losing their leaves before other trees. Ollie kept a running list in her head of sugar maples in Evansburg that didn't belong to anyone. When the sap ran, she and her mom would—

Nope. No, they wouldn't. They could buy maple syrup.

The road that ran beside the swimming hole looked like any other stretch of road. A person just driving by wouldn't know the swimming hole was there. But, if you knew just where to look, you'd see a skinny dirt trail that went from the road to the water. Ollie walked her bike down the trail. The trees seemed to close in around her. Above was a

white-railed bridge. Below, the creek paused in its trip down the mountain. It spread out, grew deep and quiet enough for swimming. There was a cliff for jumping and plenty of hiding places for one girl and her book. Ollie hurried. She was eager to go and read by the water and be alone.

The trees ended suddenly, and Ollie was standing on the bank of a cheerful brown swimming hole.

But, to her surprise, someone was already there.

A slender woman, wearing jeans and flannel, stood at the edge of the water.

The woman was sobbing.

Maybe Ollie's foot scuffed a rock, because the woman jumped and whirled around. Ollie gulped. The woman was pretty, with amber-honey hair. But she had circles under her eyes like purple thumbprints. Streaks of mascara had run down her face, like she'd been crying for a while.

"Hello," the woman said, trying to smile. "You surprised me." Her white-knuckled hands gripped a small, dark thing.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Ollie said cautiously.

Why are you crying? she wanted to ask. But it seemed impolite to ask that question of a grown-up, even if her face was streaked with the runoff from her tears.

The woman didn't reply; she darted a glance to the rocky path by the creek, then back to the water. Like she was looking out for something. Or someone.

Ollie felt a chill creep down her spine. She said, "Are you okay?"

"Of course." The woman tried to smile again. Fail. The wind rustled the leaves. Ollie glanced behind her. Nothing.

"I'm fine," said the woman. She turned the dark thing over in her hands. Then she said, in a rush, "I just have to get rid of this. Put it in the water. And then—" The woman broke off.

Then? What then? The woman held the thing out over the water. Ollie saw that it was a small black book, the size of her spread-out hand.

Her reaction was pure reflex. "You can't throw away a book!" Ollie let go of her bike and jumped forward. Part of her wondered, *Why would you come here to throw a book in the creek? You can donate a book.* There were donation boxes all over Evansburg.

"I have to!" snapped the woman, bringing Ollie up short. The woman went on, half to herself, "That's the bargain. Make the arrangements. Then give the book to the water." She gave Ollie a pleading look. "I don't have a choice, you see."

Ollie tried to drag the conversation out of crazy town. "You can donate a book if you don't want it," she said firmly. "Or—or give it to someone. Don't just throw it in the creek."

"I *have* to," said the woman again.

"Have to drop a book in the creek?"

"Before tomorrow," said the woman. Almost to herself, she whispered, "Tomorrow's the day."

Ollie was nearly within arm's reach now. The woman smelled sour—frightened. Ollie, completely bewildered, decided to ignore the stranger elements of the conversation. Later, she would wish she hadn't. "If you don't want that book, I'll take it," said Ollie. "I like books."

The woman shook her head. "He said water. Upstream. Where Lethe Creek runs out of the mountain. I'm here. I'm *doing* it!" She shrieked the last sentence as though someone besides Ollie were listening. Ollie had to stop herself from looking behind her again.

"Why?" she asked. Little mouse feet crept up her spine.

"Who knows?" the woman whispered. "Just his game, maybe. He enjoys what he does, you know, and that is why he's always smiling—" She smiled too, a joyless pumpkin-head grin.

Ollie nearly yelped. But instead, her hand darted up and she snatched the book. It felt fragile under her

fingers, gritty with dust. Surprised at her own daring, Ollie hurriedly backed up.

The woman's face turned red. "Give that back!" A glob of spit hit Ollie in the cheek.

"I don't think so," said Ollie. "You don't want it anyway." She was backing toward her bike, half expecting the woman to fling herself forward.

The woman was staring at Ollie as if really seeing her for the first time. "Why—?" A horrified understanding dawned on her face that Ollie didn't understand. "How old are you?"

Ollie was still backing toward her bike. "Eleven," she answered, by reflex. Almost there . . .

"Eleven?" the woman breathed. "Eleven. Of course, eleven." Ollie couldn't tell if the woman was giggling or crying. Maybe both. "It's his kind of joke—" She broke off, leaned forward to whisper. "Listen to me, Eleven. I'm going to tell you one thing, because I'm not a bad person. I just didn't have a choice. I'll give you some advice, and you give me the book." She had her hand out, fingers crooked like claws.

Ollie, poised on the edge of flight, said, "Tell me what?" The creek rushed and rippled, but the harsh sounds of the woman's breathing were louder than the water.

"Avoid large places at night," the woman said. "Keep to small."

"Small?" Ollie was torn between wanting to run and wanting to understand. "That's it?"

"Small!" shrieked the woman. *"Small spaces! Keep to small spaces or see what happens to you! Just see!"* She burst into wild laughter. The plastic witch sitting on the Brewsters' porch laughed like that. *"Now give me that book!"* Her laughter turned into a whistling sob.

Ollie heaved the Schwinn around and fled with it up the trail. The woman's footsteps scraped behind. "Come back!" she panted. "Come back!"

Ollie was already on the main road, her leg thrown over the bike's saddle. She rode home as fast as she could, bent low over her handlebars, hair streaming in the wind, the book lying in her pocket like a secret.

3

OLIVIA ADLER'S HOUSE was tall and lupine-purple and old. Her dad had bought the house before he and Mom had ever met. The first time Ollie's mom saw it, she said to Ollie's dad, "Who *are* you, the Easter Bunny?" because her dad had painted the house the colors of an Easter egg, and ever since, they'd called the house the Egg. The outside had plum-colored trim and a bright red door. The kitchen was green, like mint ice cream. The bedrooms were sunset-orange and candy-pink and fire-red. Dad liked colors. "Why have a gray kitchen if you can have a green one?" he would ask.

Ollie loved her house. When her grandparents visited, they would always shake their heads and say how white walls really opened up a place. Dad would nod agreeably, and then wink at Ollie when Grandma wasn't looking.

Mom had given the rooms names.

"Dawn Room," Ollie remembered her mother saying, holding her hand and walking her through the house, waiting while Ollie's stumpy legs climbed the stairs. Ollie must have just been learning to read, because she remembered looking up at the sign on

each door and trying to sound out the words: *"D-a-w-n.* Dawn." Her mother's hand was warm and strong, callused from climbing and paddling. Ollie could still remember her small fat fingers secure in her mother's thin brown ones.

"That means when the sun comes up, Olivia."

Ollie's mom was the only one who called her *Olivia*. "If you have a brother, we're going to name him Sebastian. Two beautiful names. Why make them shorter?"

Ms. Carruthers had tried to call Ollie *Olivia* at the end of fifth grade, and a few teachers had tried since, but Ollie refused to answer. All the best heroines of Ollie's books were stubborn as rocks, or roots, or whatever the author liked to call them. Only her mom called her Olivia and that was that.

"Dusk Room," Ollie's mother said, tilting the sign on the door so Ollie could see. She and Dad had painted the signs themselves. Dad's were perfect, with suns and moons and tiny flowers. Dad was crafty; he painted and knitted hats and baked. Ollie's mom liked digging in the dirt and running and flying and adventurous things. Her signs were exuberant blobs of paint in which the letters were barely visible.

"Dusk means when the sun goes down!" Ollie's voice piped in delighted reply.

"And this one?" said Ollie's mother at the end of the hallway. The door to this room had an old-fashioned keyhole and a doorknob shaped like a dragon.

"Your mother found that doorknob in some yard sale," her dad told Ollie once. "She had to have it. 'For my daughter,' she said."

"Ollie's room!" Ollie cried triumphantly. Her mother had laughed and scooped her up and run with her upside-down all the way back to the kitchen.

Ollie had to pass the Brewsters' house on her way home. During the day, the skeleton in their attic looked silly, but now, at dusk, it looked sinister. Its lit-up green eyes seemed to follow her. The witch on the front porch grinned and cackled. Ollie hurried past, trying not to look over her shoulder.

Just a crazy person. I just met a crazy person. That's all. That doesn't mean I have to be scared of everything now, come on . . .

And stole something from a crazy person, another part of her replied. *They put people in the slammer for stealing stuff. Juvenile detention. You'll have to graduate high school in prison pajamas.*

It was easier thinking that than the other thought. *What if she knocks on the door at midnight, with that same look in her eyes, wanting the book back?*

Ollie heaved her bike into the toolshed and clattered through the front door. The streaky shadows on the lawn seemed to chase her indoors. The weather was changing; the wind that had rattled the leaves by the swimming hole was now tearing down the mountain, swinging arcs of sunset shadows across the Egg. Rain began to spatter the driveway. The warm weather was over.

But inside the Egg, everything was bright and normal. Ollie hung her jacket on its peg, pocket heavy with the weight of her prize. She reached for the book, then thought better of it. If she didn't show it to anyone, she could always *deny* taking it. Would anyone believe her?

Would they believe the woman by the river?

Her dad was in the kitchen. Simon and Garfunkel crooned on the speakers, accompanied by the clanking of pots. Over the music her dad called, "That you, Ollie?"

"Nope," said Ollie, still a little shaky. "It's the postman. Someone just sent me a puppy, a kitten, and a pony for my birthday."

"Great," came her dad's voice from the kitchen. "The pony can mow the lawn, and I will personally feed the kitten to Mrs. Who." Dad didn't like cats. Mrs. Who was the great horned owl that lived in the dead hickory tree at the far corner of their yard. "But you can keep the puppy," her dad added with an air of

generosity. "Although I thought your birthday was in April."

"Ha-ha," said Ollie. She crossed the slate floor of the entryway, edged around the piano, stepped into the living room. As she did, some of that afternoon's weirdness started to lose its grip.

Ollie's dad sold people solar panels. He liked it fine. But what he really loved was making things. Ollie had never seen his hands still, not since she was a baby. In the long summer afternoons, he built birdhouses or furniture; in the evenings he cooked or knitted or showed her how to make plates out of clay.

That evening, her dad was baking. The whole house smelled like bread. Ollie sniffed. Garlic bread. There was tomato sauce. And Dad, seeing her come in, had just dumped a pile of noodles into a pot of boiling water. Spaghetti. Great. She was starving.

The living room and the kitchen were one big space, with a kitchen island separating them. Ollie dropped her backpack and threw herself backward over the couch.

Ollie's dad stood behind the kitchen island, stirring, humming along with the music. His shirt was long sleeved and mustard colored. Dad liked colors on clothes like he liked colors on houses—the brighter the better. Sometimes they didn't go together. Mom teased him for it.

Ordinarily her dad would have handed her a piece of garlic bread and while Ollie ate it, they would have argued over her drinking a ginger ale before dinner, and by the time she'd worn him down, the pasta would have been ready, and it wouldn't be *before dinner* anymore. But now her dad's expression had turned serious and the garlic bread stayed in the oven. Ollie thought about staging an oven raid and then thought better of it.

She surveyed her dad upside down. It was possible the school hadn't called.

Her dad pressed pause on Simon and Garfunkel. "Ollie."

"The school called," said Ollie.

"Brian Battersby's mother called me first," said her dad. He couldn't maintain angry-dad voice even when he was trying; now he just sounded exasperated. "I got an earful, let me tell you. And *then* the school called. You have to go to the principal tomorrow. Ollie, you could have really hurt that boy."

"No, I couldn't!" said Ollie, sitting up. "It was only a tiny rock. Besides, they were being mean to Coco Zintner. *You* always tell me I should stick up for people."

Her dad quit stirring the sauce and came and sat down beside her. Now he was going to be understanding. She hated understanding voice as much as she hated sympathy face. Ollie felt her ears start to burn.

"Ollie," he said. "I'm really glad you were trying to help someone. But don't try that innocent face with me. There's about a million ways to help a friend out without giving anyone stitches, as you know perfectly well. I don't care if Brian was being a little turd. Next time get a teacher, use *words*, blind 'em with mathematics; God, use that imagination of yours." He knocked playfully on Ollie's forehead. "First thing tomorrow morning at the principal's office, young lady. You're going to be in detention for a while if Brian's mother has anything to say about it." He paused, added mildly, "Brian is fine, by the way. His mother seemed to think he wasn't taking the incident as seriously as he should be."

"Of course he's not. His head's about seven inches thick," grumbled Ollie. "I could have thrown a brick and he'd be fine."

"Please don't," said her dad. "As the caterpillar said to the blackbird. Also, Coco Zintner's mother called. Coco says thanks for standing up to them. Apparently, no one else did."

Ollie said nothing. She felt bad now about hitting Brian in the head with a rock, and also bad because she didn't really *like* Coco Zintner. Coco squeaked too much. Ollie just didn't like watching someone get teased. She was also hungry, and she wanted to tell her dad about the woman beside the swimming hole, but it didn't seem like the time. She did *not* want to be in detention until Christmas.

Well, Ollie thought, *if they put me in jail for stealing a book, I won't be.* But that was hardly better. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

"If you want to throw things," her dad said gently, "why not rejoin the softball team? They'd take you back in a heartbeat, I know, slugger. Remember your home run last—"

She stiffened. "Don't want to."

Her dad stood up. He didn't look mad or exasperated. He just looked hurt, which was worst of all.

"'Kay, fine," he said, heading back toward the stove. "You don't have to. But, Ollie, you can't hide in your books forever. There are all kinds of people, and good things, and life, just waiting for you to—"

She had known he was going to say that, or something like that. She was on her feet. "To what? Forget? I won't, even if you have. I'll do what I want. You are not the boss of me."

"I am the dad of you," her dad pointed out. He had gone pale under his beard. "I'm trying to help, kiddo. I'm sad still too, you know, but I—"

She didn't want to hear it. Of all the things in the world, it was the last thing she wanted to hear. "I'm not hungry," said Ollie. "I'm going to bed."

"Ollie—"

"Not hungry."

She grabbed her backpack, made for the stairs, in the entryway, scooped up her prize from the swimming

hole in passing. The stairs were steep, the hallway to her room long and full of shadows. She sped down it.

Part of her wanted her dad to follow her, tell her she was being silly. She wanted him to crack a dumb joke and coax her downstairs to dinner. But only silence chased her up the stairs to her room.

Ollie didn't slam the door. No, she'd already had her tantrum. To slam the door would be too obvious. Make her an angry kid (*which you are, dummy*) instead of an angry almost-teenager who Had the Right to Be Mad.

So Ollie gritted her teeth and closed her door very softly. Then, where no one could see, she threw herself onto her comforter and buried her face in her pillow. She didn't cry. She squeezed her eyes shut but she didn't cry. It wasn't something she had tears for, anyway. Tears were for things like skinning your knee, not for . . .

Whatever. Ollie just got mad sometimes, and people talking to her made it worse. It was easier to be by herself, up here where it was quiet. Even though she *was* hungry. She could still smell garlic. But her dad would want to talk more and Ollie didn't have any words for him.

Or maybe he'd let her be quiet. Sometimes he did. But in its way, silence between them was worse. Better to stay up here.

Ollie dug a russet apple out of her bag. Evansburg had the best apples. It was harvest time and the market

was full of fresh cider and every type of apple in the world. Red and purple and yellow and green apples. *Crunch.* Ollie bit down. Apples were good. She would think about apples. Ollie practically lived on apples in October. She tried to convince herself that an apple was as good as pasta. Fail. But it was something. She'd sneak down later for a proper snack. Snacks. She thought about snacks.

Not enough. She needed a better distraction. Distractions were good. Then she wouldn't have to think of her dad, pale under his beard. She wouldn't have to think of Mr. Easton and his too-sympathetic face. She wouldn't have to think about fire in a torn-up field beneath the rain. She wouldn't have to think at all.

Ollie had dropped her backpack on the rug and tossed the old book onto the desk when she first came in. Now she got off her bed and wandered over to examine it. The book had a worn-out cloth cover with its title stamped in faded gold letters. It was very thin, less than a hundred pages. Ollie picked it up.

Small Spaces. No author. Just the title.

Ollie opened the book, scanned the copyright page.

1895. *Wow,* Ollie thought. *Super old.* Printed in Boston.

Ollie turned the page.

It started with a letter.

My Dearest Margaret,

I wish I could have told you this story in person. More than anything, I wish I had one more hour, one more day, a little more time.

Ollie bit her lip. She too had wished for more time. She sank down on her bed, reading, chewing her apple without really noticing.

But I don't. This—these words are all I have.

I know you have often wondered why I do not speak of your father. I am going to tell you why. I do not know if you will believe me. Set down in black and white, I barely believe these words myself.

But I promise you that everything I say in here is true.

Once you have read, I hope you will forget. The farm is yours now. Sell it, if you can. Above all, I beg you to leave the past alone. Think of the future. Think of your family.

Do not go back to Smoke Hollow. The twilights when the mist rises—the dangerous nights—get more frequent as the year draws to a close. Jonathan told me that. Before he . . . well. I will come to that.

I can't tell you how I have thought of leaving this place. I meant to, you know. Your father and I even talked of it. But he said the curse was his alone, and he could not escape it. I would not leave him.

Now he is gone.

There—the candle is guttering. Lights flicker, you know, when they are near. Sometimes I hope desperately that Jonathan is with them. That he has never left me at all. But mostly I hope he is safely dead, and that I will see him in the next world.

Because the alternative is so much worse.

God bless you, my dear. Even if this story seems strange, I beg you will read it. For my sake.

With all my love,
Beth Webster, née Bouvier
Smoke Hollow, 1895

Ollie turned the page, fascinated. The next page only had an epigraph:

When the mist rises, and the smiling man comes walking, you must avoid large places at night.
Keep to small.

Ollie frowned.

Small spaces, said the woman by the creek.

Well, the woman was obviously not right in the head; maybe the book had set her off somehow? Ollie eyed the epigraph with puzzlement. The rain tapped against her skylight; the wind was working up a temper outside. Ollie turned another page.

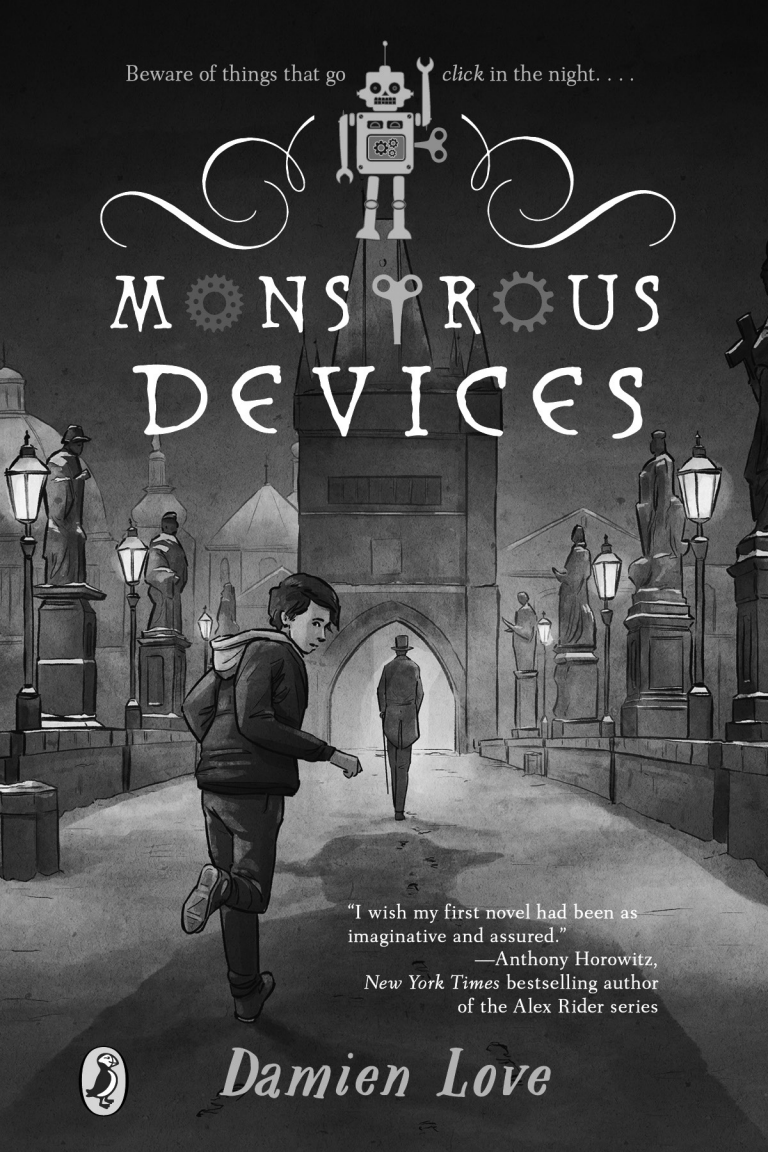
I was born just after the end of the war. And I was a child in 1876 when Jonathan and Caleb and their mother, Cathy Webster, came to Smoke Hollow. They were all dusty, the boys barefoot, wearing patchwork shirts. Between the three of them, they had nothing but a little bread and smoked ham tied up in a napkin.

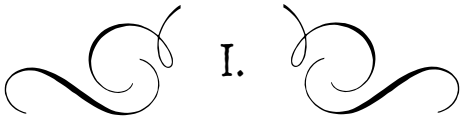
They walked past the farm gate, past the hog pens and the chicken coop. When they got to the barnyard, the first thing they saw was me, as I was then. A pigtailed girl, wearing brown calico, red-faced from the oven and holding a pie dish.

"Mister," I said to Jonathan. "Pop's in the north field."

Jonathan was fourteen then: nearly a man in my eyes. But he grinned at me, like we'd known each other forever.

"We'll wait," Jonathan said cheerfully. "I was hoping your pop was hiring."


Beware of things that go *click* in the night. . . .
MONSTROUS DEVICES
"I wish my first novel had been as imaginative and assured."
—Anthony Horowitz,
New York Times bestselling author
of the Alex Rider series
Damien Love



I.

THE GIFT

"THIS ONE IS special," his grandfather had told him. And it was.

Alex sat at his desk, alone in his bedroom, gazing at the old toy robot that stood beside his laptop, when he should have been looking at the screen.

The cursor blinked impatiently at him from his unfinished composition on the symbolism of the novel they were reading in English. He had started to write about decaying teeth, then given up. He didn't know what decaying teeth were supposed to symbolize, except maybe decay. He couldn't stretch that to eight hundred words.

The computer's clock showed 11:34 p.m. He leaned and pulled back the curtain. Outside, snow fell from a low and heavy British sky, gray clouds stained orange by drab suburban streetlights. A thin, gray-looking fox ran into the small back garden, something white in its

mouth. The animal stopped, dropped whatever it was carrying, then lifted its head and barked out its harsh and awful cry.

As always, whenever he heard that shriek, Alex felt a chill crawl up his spine, over his scalp. The loneliest sound in the world.

The fox stood, head cocked. It screeched again. Faintly, Alex heard another, higher, answering bark. The fox picked up its food and trotted off. The friendless sound was not so friendless after all.

His computer chimed and his phone vibrated. On each, eight new messages. From eight different people. All saying the same thing:

YOUR GETTING IT PATHETIC FREAK

He deleted them, looked at his essay, typed some words, deleted them. He leaned back heavily in his chair.

His eyes settled on the photograph of his father on the wall above his desk. The only photograph he had ever seen of him. "Never liked anyone taking his picture," his mum always said when she looked at it, in the same sad, apologetic tone.

It showed the two of them, his dad and mum, caught in a red-black party haze. His mum young and

happy, with bad hair. His dad behind, half turned away, blurring in the shadows. A vague, tall man, black hair pushed back from a high forehead. For the millionth time, Alex found himself squinting at the picture, trying almost to will it into focus. For the millionth time, the man refused to become any clearer.

His gaze returned to the robot. A small, bright army of these things lined three shelves above his desk, tin and plastic toy robots of all shapes and sizes, from all corners of the world. Battery-operated and clockwork, some new, the majority decades old. Many still in their deliriously illustrated boxes, or standing proudly beside them.

A few he had found himself, in thrift stores and online auctions. Most, though, the oldest and strangest, the most fantastic, had come from his grandfather, his father's father, who had started his collection, and his fascination.

The old man picked up these toys on his travels around the globe, and this newest robot—or rather, this oldest, for Alex sensed it was very old indeed—had just arrived out of the blue a few days earlier: a brick-shaped package in the post, brown paper tied with string, his grandfather's spidery scribble across the front. The parcel bore stamps and postmarks Alex didn't recognize at first—*Praha, Česká Republika*—and when he tore it open, he discovered newspaper scrunched up as

wrapping inside, printed in a language that made no sense to him.

There was a plain white postcard, too, with his grandfather's scrawl, elegant yet somehow hasty:

Greetings from sunny Prague!
What do you say to this ugly little brute?
This one is special. Take good care!
See you soon.
I hope.

The toy stood about five inches tall and was wonderfully grotesque. Angry and pathetic-looking, it was made from a cheap, thin gray-green tin, with a bulky torso resembling an ancient boiler, held together with tiny rivets. Little dials were painted on its chest, as if it ran on steam. It grimaced with a mouth like a tiny letterbox, filled with a jagged nightmare of ferocious metal teeth. Its eyes were two holes, framing a hollow interior blackness.

Alex picked it up and brought it into the light from his desk lamp. Angling the lamp, he turned the robot, carefully.

Not carefully enough.

"Ow."

In places, the rough edges of old tin were sharp enough to draw blood. Dark red pulsed in a sticky stream from a scratch in his thumb.

Setting down the toy, he hissed and sucked at the cut while he hunted for tissues, wrapping one around the bleeding finger. He noticed he had left a thick red smear on the robot. Blood formed a bubble-like skin over one of its eyes. He poked another tissue in there, hoping not too much had leaked inside.

"If you only had a key," he murmured, rubbing more blood away from the hole where the key to wind the clockwork mechanism would go. Often, keys from one old toy would fit another, but none in his collection had worked. He squinted into the inky eyeholes. In the space where the robot's head was welded to its hollow body, the tiniest dark edge of something was just visible. Part of the clockworks, he guessed, but when he tried to look directly at it, it faded from his sight.

Looking deeper, he was seized by something like the same icy, tingling sensation he had felt when he heard the fox crying. The room got heavy and cold. The robot's empty eyes stared up. At the periphery of his vision, Alex sensed the room beginning to dim, beginning to flicker, beginning to change, becoming like a room in some old, scratched sepia film.

Frozen, eyes wide, he saw himself now as if from above, saw himself sitting in this strange, changed room, saw things moving in the shadows. The world grew woozy. A dim figure, enormous and misshapen, stepped from a dark corner down there, stood hulking, unmoving, right behind him.

A cold white glow shone now from the toy robot's eyeholes, growing starker as the light around began to fade, until blackness and the glowing white eyeholes were all there was.

And then, there was only black.

II.

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST

"ALEX."

A voice, gentle.

Then not so gentle: "Alex!"

He woke with a start, lifted his head too fast, sat dazed, surprised to find himself still at his desk, stiff from a night spent sleeping slumped over the computer keyboard. A small puddle of drool shone by the space bar.

His mother stood over him, trying to smooth down the strange quiff of hair that stuck up where he had been sleeping on it. In the other hand, she held a bowl of cereal.

"I've been shouting at you for half an hour. I keep telling you: get your homework done when you get in, then you won't have to stay up all night. Here." She handed him the bowl. "That, then shower. You've got about ten minutes before the bus."

After she left, Alex sat blinking, still stunned by sleep. He began to spoon cereal automatically into his mouth, then stopped, frowning, as half-caught memories started playing at the edges of his mind. His mother's voice from downstairs brought him back.

"Nine minutes!"

He shook his head, spooned faster.

His mother's shout halted him again as he was halfway down the street. Looking back, he could see her in her bathrobe, leaning over the gate, waving sheets of paper at him.

"You stay up half the night writing it," she said as he ran back, "then you leave it lying in the printer."

"What?" Alex puffed, reaching to take the pages. "What's this?"

"Honestly." She shivered, pulling her robe together at the neck. "About to turn thirteen, you'd think you'd be able to pack your own schoolbag. And now, if you don't mind, I'm going back in before I catch my death."

"But . . ." Alex stood staring at the pages. "But, I didn't," he tried again as the front door closed. He started reading. His English composition. Completed and spell-checked.

"But I didn't write this. At least, I don't think . . ."

A sharp rapping made him look up. His mother stood at the living room window, sipping tea from her

Johnny Cash mug. She raised her eyebrows and made a shooing motion with her hand, turning it into a smile and a wave as he set off at a trot.

Slipping through snow, Alex reached the corner in time to see his bus signaling to pull away.

"No!"

He sprinted to the stop, where his right foot hit a patch of ice and skidded from under him. Going into a tumble, he landed hard in a sitting position, kept moving, sliding, watching in interested horror as his legs, splayed before him, headed directly into the path of the bus's very large back wheel as it started rolling forward.

The air under the bus was warmer, he noted. It smelled terribly of spent oil and rubber. He was about to watch his legs get crushed, he thought, weirdly calm.

The wheel stopped. He heard the hiss of brakes, the other hiss of the bus's door. Scrambling up, he walked shakily to the front of the vehicle, feeling his face flood red. The driver shook his head as he mounted the stairs.

"Honest to God, Alex. There'd have been another bus seven minutes from now. It's not worth it, mate, it's really not."

The doors hissed again as the bus lurched off.

"Loser," a girl named Alice Fenwick muttered as Alex passed up the aisle.

"Loser," her friend Patricia Babcock chorused.

"Thank you for your messages of last evening," Alex chirruped back, dusting snow from his trousers. "Your thoughts are always appreciated."

"Loser."

He swung into an empty seat and busied himself with the pages from his bag. His essay, just as he had started it, and, he realized as he read, just as he would have *finished* it, had he been able to marshal all his vague thoughts. It was pretty good.

He thought back. He remembered sitting at the computer, fuggily deleting and retyping the same lines. He remembered looking at the clock. The fox. The toy robot. Then waking this morning, slumped over his desk.

He must have woken and finished the composition during the night without remembering. Either that, or he had typed it while he was asleep. That was a thought. That would be fantastic. Auto-homework. Maybe he could train himself to do it.

His reverie was interrupted by his friend David Anderson sliding onto the seat beside him, already chewing the bubblegum he would keep working on for the rest of the day.

David leaned over, blew a green bubble, letting it pop before sucking it back in.

"God, did you get that done? I forgot until this morning. Let's have a look."

He lifted the pages easily from Alex's hand, read them over, frowning, cracking gum.

"Yeah," Alex began. "I'm not really sure about this, see—"

"Shut up," David said. "Your stuff's always brilliant. Miss Johnson loves you." He read on, blew out an impressed puff. "Yeah, man. That's brilliant. She's going to love this all over the place. I can't understand a word of it."

Alex began to say something, decided not to, shoved the pages back into his bag. As he did, his fingers touched something cold. Peering in, he saw the toy robot gazing up from the darkness with its empty eyes.

"Hey, how did you get in there?" Pulling it out, he offered it for David's inspection. "Check this dude out. This is the one I was telling you about."

As he handed it over, Alex felt something cold creep across his scalp. For half a second, he recalled the weird, woozy sensation he had felt the night before. But this was a much more familiar, much more mundane feeling.

Looking up, he saw the potatoey face and porcupine hair of Kenzie Mitchell leaning over from the seat behind, Alice Fenwick and Patricia Babcock at his shoulders, giggling. Kenzie was in the process of letting a long, thick loogie dribble from his mouth into Alex's hair. Across the aisle, the five other members of his

little group sat snickering, interchangeable boys whose names Alex had never bothered to remember.

"All right, toy boy?" Kenzie said, slurping what was left of his spit back in and wiping his mouth. "You and your girlfriend playing with your dolls again?" He lunged and plucked the robot from David's hand, then swung back across the aisle.

"Look at this, boys," he said, holding it aloft. "Little freak's brought another freaky little toy to school."

Alex stepped into the aisle. "Give me that back."

"Whoa, look." Kenzie snickered. "It's getting angry. What's the matter, toy boy? Daddy never teach you to share? Oh, wait: don't have a daddy, do you? Just mummy and her boyfriend."

"Give me it."

"Or what—Jesus!" Kenzie stopped. The hand that held the robot was running red. "Poxy thing's dangerous," he said. "Too dangerous for little toy boys like you. Not suitable for children under three. Reckon I'll have to keep it out your reach. In fact," he went on, rising and yanking open the window above his seat, "best thing would be to destroy it for your own safety."

"No, you won't. You'll give it back." Alex swallowed, mouth dry, copper-tasting, trying not to stutter. "Now."

"Will I? Or what?" Kenzie held the robot out the window, dangling above the cars swishing through the

slush in the other direction, enjoying it. "What you going to do about it, fetus?"

It was the eternal Kenzie question. Alex had been pondering it for years.

A couple of grades ahead of him, Kenzie had been a leering cloud on his horizon since primary school. Alex retained the sharp memory of their first encounter, a jeer in the playground, a stubby finger pointing down: "Look! It's a wittle *BABY*-boy!"

When Alex had started there, he was small and young-looking even for a five-year-old. *Closer to three*, one teacher had murmured to another above his head. As it happened, she was wrong. In the same album from which he'd lifted the photograph of his mum and dad, there was a picture Alex particularly hated: himself at three, balanced bewildered on his mother's knee, a frail, pale, underdeveloped little creature, gazing out with owlish black eyes, oversized round head still bald, save for a few fragile wisps of downy baby hair.

Eventually, though, the puzzled prophecies of the endless doctors his mum had taken him to during those years proved true. None could find anything wrong, all promised everything would be right in time, and at around nine, his body had taken a sudden stretch and caught up with his classmates. His mother's constant worry gradually lifted and, with the older boy gone, his

last two years at primary had been a happy, Kenzie-free zone.

But when he went to secondary school, he found Kenzie waiting. By now, the taunts—"It's the Umbilical Kid!"—were meaningless. Nevertheless, Kenzie's crew took it as gospel: he was a little freak. Whenever Kenzie rounded on him, Alex felt he was looking at that photograph of himself again. Or rather, still trapped *staring out* from that picture, still that strange, frozen little creature.

What you going to do about it?

Blood hammered in his ears. He felt his face burn, his hands tremble. He looked out at the spiteful staring faces swimming before him. Kenzie's hand waggling the robot out the window.

"I'm not going to do anything, Kenzie," he croaked. "All I'm saying is, I'd like you to give me that back, please."

As he spoke, Alex dimly felt a small, odd sensation, like something shifting slightly in his mind. And something curious happened. Kenzie grew silent. Color drained from his already pale face. He suddenly looked very young, and very sad—lost, even. He pulled the robot back in and, to the bewilderment of his gang and everyone else watching, solemnly handed it to Alex, before sitting down without another word, staring at his knees.

Sitting, Alex pulled a tissue from his pocket and wiped Kenzie's blood from the robot. He put the old toy

back in his bag and zipped it shut.

The seats around remained silent for a spell, but, as the bus rumbled toward school, the usual morning buzz gradually grew again, although Kenzie's seats remained uncharacteristically subdued. After a while, David leaned to Alex.

"What was that? Jedi mind magic?"

"I don't know," Alex replied.

"Big respect, man." David whistled. "You need to teach me that stuff."

"I don't know," Alex said again, looking out at the grimy white streets rolling past the window.

"TOLD YOU SHE'D love your essay, man." David cracked a triumphant pop on his gum.

"Yeah, well, I wish she hadn't loved it."

"She went nuts! She was making classes two years above us read it this afternoon."

"And I wish she hadn't done that, either."

They were walking across the path worn into the grass toward the stop to catch the bus home.

"That bit about 'the bleached angst,'" David continued. "Awesome. What does that even mean? I'm going to use that. When I form my band, I'm going to call it the Bleached Angst." Then he said an odd thing. "Look out."

Alex looked at him, then the world lurched on its axis and grew dark.

His jacket had been pulled savagely over his head from behind. His bag pressed against his face. He couldn't see. Breathing was getting hard. He was pitching forward, hands tangled, helpless to break his fall. What felt like punches rained on his back on the way down. A muffled voice: ". . . bad enough we have to read Shakespeare, now she's got us reading *you*?"

Sprawled on the grass, Alex felt a few misaimed kicks glance off his leg. He braced himself for more but none came. He rose to his knees and pulled his head free from his jacket.

The first thing he saw was Kenzie. Kenzie lying on the ground. Kenzie lying on the ground with all his friends standing around him. All of Kenzie's friends looking up, looking angry but uncertain. And standing over Kenzie, a tall, elegant figure in a long dove-gray coat, a hand in a dove-gray glove holding a long black cane with a silver tip. The silver tip pressed hard to Kenzie's throat.

"Oh, God," Alex moaned. "Grandad."

"Hello, Alex," the old man said cheerily, ignoring the bulky fifteen-year-old gasping at his feet. "Just got into town, dropped in on your mother. Figured I'd come see if I could catch you, maybe have some fish and chips and a catch-up."

"Gttthhhhhhh," said Kenzie.

"Shall we do that?" Alex's grandfather went on. "Fish and chips? And a catch-up? With mushy peas? I've not had decent chips for months."

"Hssssttthhh."

"Grandad, could you let him go?"

"Let him . . . ? Oh, you mean this?" He stepped back, lifting his cane. "There you go, young man, up you pop."

Kenzie hauled himself to his feet, rubbing his red neck.

"Big mistake, Grandad," he seethed in a strangled voice. His staring friends crowded forward. "Don't go walking around on your own. And, you"—he pointed at Alex—"I'll see *you* later."

He turned and started to walk away, but then he was lying on his back again, having tripped somehow over the old man's cane. Alex's grandfather leaned over him, pressing the stick gently to his chest. But not so gently, apparently, that Kenzie could move it.

"That's no way to talk." He grinned.

"I'm going to have the cops on you!" Kenzie spluttered.

"Let you in on a little secret, old chap." Alex's grandfather bowed lower, voice suddenly cold. "I *am* the cops, son. And I'll go walking anywhere I please, on my own or not. And you had better hope that I don't see you later, or even hear about you."

He stood back, let Kenzie to his feet, and watched with a pleasant smile until he and his friends had sloped out of sight. "Now," he said, "fish and chips?"

"Not for me," David said, grinning, beginning a backward jog toward the bus stop. "*Serious* respect, man," he called to Alex's grandfather as he turned.

"Much appreciated." The old man beamed.

"Why did you tell him you were a policeman?" Alex asked as they trudged between snowdrifts in the direction of the chip shop.

"Did I say that?"

"You know you did."

"I have no idea why I would say that." His grandfather frowned. A meager new snow had started, soft white flakes mingling with his crown of thick white hair. "What a strange thing to say."

They walked in silence for a while.

"Uhm," his grandfather said eventually. "Back there. Has that been happening a lot? Does your mother know?"

"It's nothing," Alex said, looking away. "Just a moron. Don't have to worry Mum about it."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about Anne. Bravest person I know, your mother. Tougher than all of us put together."

They trod on without speaking again, but Alex could sense the old man struggling to leave the subject alone.

"You know," his grandad finally burst out, "people like that, you really should stand up to them. I mean, you were raised never to start a fight, I know that. But it doesn't hurt to know how to finish one."

"Grandad." Alex concentrated on staring at the snow under his feet. "A kid in my year got stabbed in a fight last month. He's still in the hospital. I know what you're saying, but things have changed. It's not like when you were young anymore. I can handle it. I just try to keep my head down. I'd rather not get involved."

"Well, yes, but sometimes . . ." His grandfather stopped. "No. I suppose you're right. Times have changed." He smiled. "A wise old head on those young shoulders. Whereas I'm more the other way around."

"That's not such a bad way to be." Alex smiled back, glad the subject was changing. "So long as I'm around to keep you out of trouble."

In the restaurant, Alex munched a small portion of chips and watched happily as his grandfather demolished the biggest plate of battered haddock and chips the waitress could bring, unbuttoning first the jacket, then waistcoat of his immaculate suit to accommodate extra peas and buttered bread, washed down with pots of stewed tea.

"This stuff," the old man mumbled through a full mouth, holding up the remains of a slice he'd been using to wipe his plate, "is extremely bad for you. White

bread, and what's worse, with butter. You should never, ever eat this. It's far too late for me, of course. When I grew up, none of us knew any better. But you should take care of yourself. Never eat it." He popped the morsel, dripping with pea juice and ketchup, into his mouth, making a contented noise that actually sounded like *yum*. "Quite ridiculously bad for you. Now, how's your mother?"

"She's doing okay."

"Um-huh. And the Idiot?"

"Carl's not that bad," Alex replied.

"Ha! *You* were the one moaning about him to *me*!"

"That was months ago. That was the time he said, 'Don't you think you're getting too old to be playing with toy robots?'"

"And what was it you said to him again?" His grandfather leaned in, grinning conspiratorially. Anticipation played about his face.

"I told him I didn't play with them. And I told him a robot like one I bought for five pounds had sold for six hundred dollars on eBay. That seemed to change his mind about it."

"No, no, that wasn't it," his grandfather said, petulant. "That wasn't it at all. What was it you said when he said, 'Don't you think you're getting too old . . .'?"

Alex sighed. "Okay, I said: 'And don't you think you're getting too old to be wearing T-shirts of bands who are all half your age?'"

"Splendid!" his grandfather roared, clapping his hands. "Excellent!"

"Really, though. He's okay. He's okay to me, and he makes Mum laugh and he looks out for her. You should give him a chance."

"I know," his grandfather said, quietly now, gazing down at his empty plate with eyes looking much further down than that. He smiled back up. "Wise head. Come on, let's get home."

"YOU OKAY?" ALEX said as they stepped from the bus. His grandfather stood glancing around the street.

"Hmm?" The old man was looking off over his shoulder. He turned and peered ahead again, flashed a grin, and started walking. "Yes, fine. Oh, now tell me, how's that new, well, that old robot I sent you?"

"See for yourself." Alex rooted in his bag and held the thing up.

His grandfather stopped, suddenly serious and cross.

"You had it *out*? You took it to *school*?"

"No. Well, yes, but—"

"Goodness' sakes, Alex," the old man snapped. "It's not a toy. Well, of course, it is a toy, but you know what I mean."

"No, but listen. I didn't take it out with me. I mean, I didn't mean to. It must have fallen into my bag, I just found it in there this morning."

"Oh." His grandfather pulled at his bottom lip as they resumed walking. "I see. I'm sorry. May I?" He held out a hand.

Alex gave him the robot and watched as he inspected it, turning it carefully, squinting as he held it up to the streetlights.

"Uh-huh. Well, no damage done." He handed the toy back. "Maybe pay to have a look in your bag before you leave the house, though."

"Yeah," Alex said, pushing open the gate. "Mum was saying the same thing."

"Clever woman, your mother." His grandfather nodded, adding, as the door opened to reveal Carl wrestling out a bulging bag of recycling, "most of the time."

A little later, they all sat at the kitchen table. Alex watched his grandfather decimate a plate of biscuits and pretend to be interested in what his mother and Carl were telling him about their plans to extend the room by four feet when they got the money together. He could tell there was something on the old man's

mind. When his grandad rubbed his chin, drummed his fingers, and said, "Well, now, so," Alex knew he was getting around to it.

"I was thinking"—he beamed at Alex—"that old robot. It's rather a curiosity. I can't quite place it. Now, I have to pop over to France, and I have a friend there—a dealer, in Paris—who might be able to help identify where and when it comes from. Would you mind terribly if I took it with me for him to have a look at? I'd be sure to take care of it, old chap.

"I mean," he continued, pulling at his ear, "ideally, I'd love for you to come along and see his place. He has wonderful pieces, has Harry, amazing old toys and gizmos. But, you know, can't have you missing school. But next time, for certain—"

"But we only have a couple of days of school left," Alex interrupted. "The holidays start next week. I could come with you. Couldn't I, Mum?"

He looked at his mother, who turned to his grandfather with the beginnings of a nod, a smile, and a yes, all of which faded as she saw the worried look on the old man's face, the slight shake of his head.

"Well, no, son," she said, looking back to Alex. "You can't just take days off school. And your grandfather won't want you in the way; he'll have his work to do."

"Next time, for definite." His grandfather smiled sadly.

"Yeah. Sure, okay." Alex knew he hadn't concealed his disappointment. "I should go up and do my homework."

BY 11:34 P.M. on the computer's clock, he had finally admitted to himself he had long given up on the last three math questions. He would ask David about them on the bus tomorrow. David was miles better at math.

Sitting chin in hands, staring idly at the old robot, Alex noticed a small black spot beside the hole where the key should go. Licking his finger, he rubbed at it, looked at the red smear. A little dried blood. He used his sleeve to polish it clean.

The bus tomorrow. He winced.

Things had taken on a more serious edge with Kenzie the past week. Alex's project "Like Clockwork: An Illustrated History of the Toy Robot, from Postwar Tin to Tomorrow's Tech" had been voted winner at the end-of-term Christmas exhibition, beating Kenzie's glossy, multiscreen presentation of "Soccer Stars' Sports Cars." Kenzie's father had paid a lot of money for a former soccer player to make an appearance and bring his car with him, but people had been more interested in winding up Alex's old toys and watching them walk.

There had been a hard punch to the back of his head in the corridor the next day, the promise of more to

come. After his run-in with Alex's grandfather, Kenzie would be out for serious revenge. Maybe that's why he'd felt so keen to get away on a trip with the old man.

Alex sighed and turned to the window. Pushing back the curtains, he was surprised to see his grandfather in the dim garden below. He stood silent and alone with his back to the house, leaning on his cane, watching the night. He looked almost as though he was on guard. A thin line of smoke rose from a cigarette in his right hand.

Alex pushed open the window, letting in the knifing air.

"I wish you'd stop," he called as the old man turned sharply at the sound.

"Huh? Oh." He waved the cigarette. "Quite right. Absolutely disgusting habit. What I'm doing here, Alex, is vile and stupid and unimaginably bad for you. You really must promise me that you will never, ever do it. Seriously. Of course, it's far, far too late for me. When I grew up, none of us knew any better. But never take this up. Or, if you do, wait until you're about seventy-four before you start. And take care of yourself until then."

"You could stop if you really wanted."

"Ha. Well, let's see." He puffed again at the cigarette, let it drop to the snow, snubbing it out with his cane.

"Well, look at that." He grinned. "True enough. I've stopped. Alex, you don't mind me not taking you with me, do you? You know I'd love to have you along. It's high time we took a trip again. It's just that things will be a little hectic this time out."

"It's okay." Alex forced a smile. "Watch you don't get cold. I'll see you in the morning. Good night, Grandad."

"G'night, Alex."

III.

A RUDE AWAKENING

HE BECAME AWARE he was awake.

Alex lay on his back in bed, eyes focusing on the thin, dim orange line on the ceiling, where street light squeezed in through the curtains.

Something had woken him. He lay listening, trying to work out what it might have been.

The room was dark, silent. The house around it dark and silent, save for the slow tick of the clock in the hall downstairs. His eyelids wanted to close. He let them.

Seven ticks later, his eyes popped wide. He had definitely heard something. A small *click*. Followed by a smaller *whirr*. Frowning, fully awake now, he strained to catch it again.

Click. Whirrrrr. Click. Whirrrrr.

Alex sat bolt upright, peering in the direction of the noise. The noise stopped. Reaching out, he pushed the switch on the reading lamp above his bed.

Click. Whirrrrr.

The sound came from somewhere around his desk. He couldn't think what could be making it. His eyes ran over the pile of math books, the unlit desk lamp, his laptop, the old toy robot beside it.

His jacket hung over the chair, his schoolbag over that. He thought about his cell phone, in his jacket, but he knew he had turned it off—the usual evening's worth of texts from Kenzie and crew would be waiting in the morning. Anyway, it wasn't that sort of sound.

Alex wet his lips. Kenzie. Maybe his grandfather had pushed the bully over the edge. Maybe instead of virtual harassment, Kenzie had come in person tonight, to finish him off.

Alex turned to his window in alarm. Nothing. He looked back at the door, his desk, the chair.

And there.

Just visible, behind the chair leg, the edge of . . . something. Something that shouldn't be behind the leg of his chair.

He angled the lamp to shine on that spot, sending long shadows shifting around the room. He stared at the thing, trying to identify it. The small shape remained mysterious and, the longer he stared in the dim yellow light, somehow more threatening.

Click. Whirrrrr.

The whatever it was edged back out of sight.

Puzzled, Alex stepped one foot out of bed. There came a furious little run of many clicks and whirrs, and the something came out from behind the chair, moving fast, into the middle of the floor, where it stopped.

Startled, Alex pulled his leg quickly back under the covers and sat blinking at the thing on the carpet.

A toy robot.

One he had never seen. It looked old, like clockwork. Red mottled tin. Boxy and square, with tiny vents in its chest and a sad little face painted onto a cube head topped with a flimsy wire hoop, like an ancient TV antenna. With a *whirrrrr*, the head turned, until the face seemed to be looking at him.

Alex sat transfixed.

Whirrrrr. Click.

This time, the robot on the floor hadn't moved. This sound was coming from somewhere else.

Lifting his eyes with effort, Alex looked behind it.

There were two.

This one was much the same design but silvery blue. It was somehow climbing, *whirrrrr, click, whirrrrr, click*, up the leg of his chair, as though heading toward his desk.

The red robot stood, looking disconcertingly like it was watching him. The blue robot climbed higher, scrambling onto the seat of the chair with awkward

little movements that would have been funny, were they not so weird.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the red robot, and with no clear plan in his suddenly empty mind, Alex, moving very slowly, started gingerly to lift the bedcovers away.

A sudden, fast *click-click-click-click-click* made him freeze. This sound was angry, and very close.

Alex turned toward the bottom of his bed, where there now stood a small, thin, white robot with a head like an elongated egg and sharp silvery arms. The face on this one was frowning.

Eyes wide, Alex sat motionless, watching as this thing pulled itself steadily up the bed toward him. He opened his mouth to shout but found he couldn't remember how.

Click, click, click, click, click.

He felt it click and clamber along his leg.

Click, click, click, click, click.

Onto his belly.

Click, click, click.

Onto his chest.

Click, click.

It finally stopped where Alex's folded hands lay on top of the quilt. There, with a *click*, it cocked its head, frowning its painted frown.

Neither of them moved for what felt like a long time.

Click.

The thing shook its head from side to side.

Click.

One of its little arms raised. Alex saw that it tapered to a point as sharp as a needle. A thin brown liquid dripped from the tip.

Click.

Only when the robot's arm came down with a violent jabbing motion did he realize it was trying to stab him.

Several things happened almost at once. The robot's needle-arm plunged through the sleeve of his pajamas, narrowly missing his skin, down on into the thick quilt, which Alex, finally managing a cry not nearly as loud as he had wanted, threw violently away from him, sending the white robot flying clicking backward through the air.

Beyond the foot of the bed, his door was thrown open, and his grandfather came bursting in. With one fluid motion, the old man brought his cane up and neatly caught the white robot on the end, plucking it from the air and redirecting its momentum toward the floor, bringing the tip of the cane down onto its belly and pinning it there while its spiky arms whirled.

"Alex. Window," he said.

"Buh—" Alex managed.

"Alex," his grandfather said, with a firm but pleasant nod. "Open the window, there's a good chap."

Flinging himself from bed, Alex ripped back the curtains and pulled the window up as far as he could.

"Now, stand back, if you don't mind." Wielding his cane like a golfer pitching in the rough, his grandfather scooped the flailing white robot up in a smooth arc that sent it sailing *click-click-click-click* out into the night.

"Buh—" said Alex again. He gestured wildly at the red robot whirring over the carpet toward his grandfather's feet, and at his desk, across which the blue robot was now clicking at surprising speed.

"Yes," the old man said. "Good point."

Reaching into his coat pocket, he scattered what looked like white powder over Alex's desk. As the stuff fell around it, the blue robot stopped moving.

The red robot almost at his foot, Alex's grandfather kicked out, sending it flying toward the window but not quite making his target. It bounced off the frame, falling writhing at Alex's feet. With a surge of panicked inspiration, he dropped to his knees and heaved his bed up, dragging it over. Just as the old man said something like "Alex, no!" he let the leg drop heavily onto the little robot's chest, crushing it, splitting it open as its arms and legs whirred and clicked.

On his desk, the blue robot was trying to walk again, but with erratic movements, stumbling in ragged circles closer and closer to the edge, until it finally fell over, at which point, swinging his cane while it was

still in the air, Alex's grandfather batted it surely out through the window.

Kneeling, the old man raised Alex's bed and pulled it off the crushed red robot, which had stopped moving.

"It's . . ." Alex said.

His grandfather produced a large white handkerchief and spread it on the floor, delicately beginning to place the jagged, glistening remains of red robot on it.

"It's . . ." Alex repeated, pointing. "It's wet. Inside it . . . Wet."

"Yes," his grandfather murmured, knotting the handkerchief into a loose, messy bundle. "I'd rather hoped we might avoid that part. I really don't like to kill them if I can help it."

"What—" Alex began, waving his hand at his desk, trying to catch hold of at least one of the scramble of thoughts racing around his mind. "White stuff? The—the white stuff. You threw."

"Huh? Oh, salt. Just salt." His grandfather stood, handkerchief dangling sadly from his hand, looking damp, a little pink. "I stocked up on packets at the chip shop. They don't like it. Confuses them."

"What—" Alex tried again.

"Never mind that right now. I need to check outside."

He turned—then stopped and turned back, stood considering Alex. Gripping him by his shaking shoulders, he steered him gently to the bed and sat him

down. Dropping to one knee, he waited until Alex's eyes locked on his, brown on brown.

"Alex," he said softly. "You know, you look very much like your father did when he was your age? Listen, now. I'm going to check outside. Then we're going to write your mother a note to say we've changed our minds, and you're coming to Paris with me after all, off for the early connection. I don't think you should stay here now. We can phone her later. Now: pack a bag. Not too much. You have a bag?"

Alex nodded.

"Good man." His grandfather patted his shoulder and left, leaving Alex sitting openmouthed.

He stared at the scattered salt grains shining on his desk. He shivered at the touch of icy air from outside. He looked at the window, his mind replaying the image of the white robot flying through it, rattling out its clicks. He shivered more.

His grandfather leaned his head back in the door.

"Chop-chop. Train to catch. And make sure you bring *that*."

He pointed his cane at the old toy robot on Alex's desk.