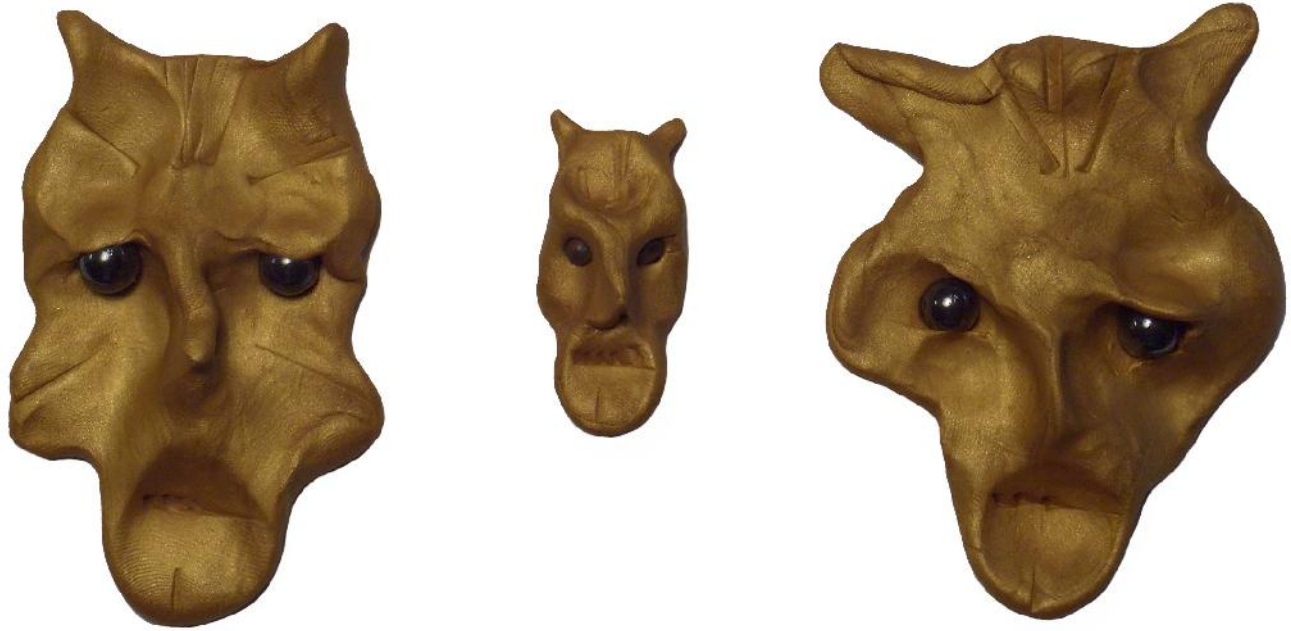


# THE GUARDIANS OF SKYLARK



h. LORE



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Dedicated to Michael, Erika, and Derek

<http://www.skyegg.com/>

## Prologue

Since the closing of the Einselmann Amusement Park, many of Althea Kaiser's young friends whose families had made their living in Einselmann's traveling circus, had moved away from Aberdale, Virginia. Althea's mother, Sasha, had been enchanted by the beauty of the wooded Einselmann estate, with its woods divided by streams and creeks into small meadows dotted with primroses and clover and groves of native trees like tulip and white pine. Tobar, Althea's father, had died the same year that they had immigrated to America with the Einselmann family--Mr. Heinrich Einselmann and his daughter, Eva--and the other circus entertainers in their employ. Althea's brother, who was named after his father, Tobar, left Aberdale along with most of the other circus performers in search of new lives and new lines of work. They took some secrets with them when they went but some they left behind in Sasha's care.

Sasha Kaiser convinced Mr. Einselmann to sell her two lots on his property. She built a small house and rose garden on one lot and left the other for later development as it did not have many trees upon it. When Eva Einselmann sold the family's real estate holdings to a developer, Althea--who had inherited the two lots from her mother--chose to buy into the development and to raise her only daughter, Ingeldell, there.

Althea's husband, Mason Wallis, was a craftsman who created dispenser machines once featured in the great arcades of the Nineteenth Century. Mr. Wallis repaired modern soda machines and other vending machines and even managed to secure a few patents for his own inventions related to the business. Eva Einselmann's vision of a neighborhood friendly to such gifted entrepreneurs was inspired by Mr. Wallis and his amazing machines. She often rode her horse, Freya, down the estate lane to his workshop in the barn for a visit. Upon Mr. Wallis' death, his daughter, Ingeldell, continued the family business, though her work ended up largely in the hands of private collectors and museums. Ingeldell, and her husband, Connor Stewart, settled in the Skylark development, in a house not far from Althea's property.

Althea did not speak about the past with her daughter, Ingeldell. Both focused on the activities of the present as if yesterday had happened so long ago that it no longer had any bearing upon their lives. The past is not happily ignored. Fate often brings reminders at times which are inconvenient, or at the least, unexpected.



## Chapter One

Wind rattled the stained glass windows of the silo. The drafty but enchanting building housed Mary Alice McCarthy's mother's design studio where she stored bolts of fabrics gleaned from markets foreign and domestic and dreamed up innovative patterns from which to form them into stunning and trendy articles of clothing. Cait McCarthy owned a clothing store called The Black Rose Boutique in Aberdale, Virginia. For the moment, Cait was hunched over her massive teak drafting table on the bottom floor of the silo; she was sketching out possibilities to include in her upcoming Summer line. Her daughter, Mary Alice, peered over the edge of the iron railing that formed a protective circular fence around the perimeter of the first and second landings. The upper stories of the silo were shaped like donuts with the center cut out to reveal the floors below them. An iron spiral staircase rose up through the cut to connect the floors. The roof of the silo had been replaced with an antique stained glass conservatory dome. White doves roosted in the rafters above the second story. Their feathers rained down from where they cooed and nested.

“What's she doing?” asked Mary Alice's best friend, Wynna, who was sprawled across the chaise lounge which rested against the curve of the wall. Sunlight streamed through the window, a recessed slit into which glass had been fitted when the silo had been restored. The light illuminated dust particles giving them the appearance of dancing jewels suspended in mid-air.

“Still working,” sighed Mary Alice who turned from the railing and flopped down beside Wynna on the chaise.

Wynna Stewart marked her place with an errant dove feather and set down the book she had been reading. Mary Alice smiled apologetically.

“So, I guess we aren't going into Aberdale today,” said Wynna in a dull tone.

“No, it doesn't look good for it, does it?” agreed Mary Alice, “What's that you're reading, anyways?” She tapped the cover of the book with her forefinger.

“Oh, it's about a girl who solves mysteries. Nothing too complicated that you have to really think about,” laughed Wynna.

“Sounds perfect. I think too much during the week at school. I need something to take my mind off of all that. Let me know when you finish with it, so I can check it out next,” said Mary Alice.

“It's just from the neighborhood library. I'll return it this weekend and put a reserved card in it with your name on it,” promised Wynna.

“Last time you did that someone took the book. I found the card on the floor in front of the desk when I went to ask Althea if I could get it,” said Mary Alice, “I think it was that girl, Monica Davis, who did it because her name was the one on the list after yours.”

“She lives on Juggler's Lane, doesn't she? Yeah, I'll bet it was Monica. In fifth grade, she stole my box of crayons out of my desk the first week of school, but I could never prove it. It still burns me up that she got away with it,” said Wynna who folded her arms across her chest in anger.

“You have a long memory. Remind me to never make you angry,” said Mary Alice laughing.

“Those crayons still had the original points on the end. They were in mint condition. Of course, I remember!” replied Wynna with a grin.

“Not to change the subject...,” began Mary Alice with a sidelong glance at Wynna, “Dominic wore that shirt again on Friday. The one I told you about. The black one with a gargoyle printed on it. The gargoyle's eyes were the same shade of green as Dom's.”

“Uh, when did you start calling him Dom?” asked Wynna with a slight edge in her voice.

“Does it matter?” replied Mary Alice and then she continued, “I wonder who he is going to have for Science when we switch classes in the Spring. I can't wait to get my new schedule to see if he's in any of the same classes.”

Wynna grimaced but Mary Alice failed to notice.

“Let's take a walk or something,” said Wynna who picked up the book.

“Sure, I can't think of anything better to do, and it looks like Mom is going to be working late tonight,” replied Mary Alice.

“We never finished exploring that old stone trail in the woods by the estate,” remarked Wynna.

“I heard someone bought the estate. Some guy named Edmund,” said Mary Alice.

“Guess we'd better get over there today then because once he moves in I'm sure he won't want weirdos like us lurking around in his woods,” laughed Wynna as she descended the staircase.

“Hey, speak for yourself,” said Mary Alice as she followed her, “I wonder if he has children.”

“They're probably trolls,” said Wynna.

“You're awful,” said Mary Alice.

“And, I like having the last word,” said Wynna.

“Me, too,” said Mary Alice as she ran out of the silo entrance before Wynna could reply.



## Chapter Two

Dusk turned the white birch a pale blue and wove the canopy above their heads into a dense, navy blanket. Wynna shivered in the evening chill and zipped her coat up to her chin. Mary Alice took her gloves out of her coat pocket and slipped them over her hands.

“I guess we should head home now. There's not much point in staying out here in the dark,” said Wynna where she stood on the stone path.

“It's a shame that we couldn't get through that dense brush to see if the trail ended or if it kept going,” remarked Mary Alice.

“We'll come back again, M.A.” Wynna replied and then she added, “New owner or no new owner.” She glanced over at the desolate manor house where it stood in a clearing on the old estate property.

“That place is seriously creepy at night,” said Mary Alice refusing to turn around and look at the house.

“Yeah, Wayn and his buddies used to try to scare me with stories they made up about it,” laughed Wynna.

“Your brother makes me happy I'm an only child,” laughed Mary Alice.

“He told me that he saw a light on in one of the windows once. Said he got close enough to the manor house to touch the stone wall. And, when he did. At that very moment, the light in the window went out,” said Wynna in a low voice.

“Nice,” said Mary Alice with a shiver.

There were no lights in the house that evening. As the darkness deepened in the trees bordering the stone path which led to the old estate lane, moonlight shone on the stones of the trail. It gave them a mystical charm as if the stones were individual guides out of the night as well as the road itself.

“I'm sorry it's sold,” said Wynna as she walked the trail with her friend.

“Well, it would be nice if someone our age lived there. I've always wanted to look inside that place...during the day time, of course,” said Mary Alice.

“Of course,” laughed Wynna, “Like I said, I'm sure they're trolls so you'll have to learn to like the dark.”

Mary Alice did not reply. She smiled at Wynna when she reached the road circling the commons and waved her hand in parting. Wynna saw a light on in the library in the commons and went over to see who was inside the building.

Althea, Wynna's grandmother, looked up from the desk when Wynna entered the building.

“Ah, Wynna, did Dell send you to bring me home for dinner?” Althea asked her.

“No, grandmother, Mary Alice and I were just out for a walk in the...” Wynna broke off her sentence rather awkwardly and bit her bottom lip.

Althea smiled and raised her hand as if to say that she understood and that there was no need for Wynna to break a confidence on her account, but she did add one comment of her own.

“I used to have a favorite haunt of my own in the woods of that old estate. I'd forgotten about it completely. It was an island tucked away behind a dense growth of trees and protected from view by a

high bank on all sides. Used to picnic there with my friends—at least until they all moved away,” said Althea nostalgically.

“I’m almost finished reading the book,” said Wynna as she brought it out of her jacket pocket to show her grandmother.

“Did you enjoy it?” asked Althea.

“It was all right. Mary Alice wants to read it next. Last time I tried to reserve a book for her someone took it,” said Wynna.

“I see,” said Althea, “Then, we have to make sure she gets this one. When you return it, put the reserved card in it and place the book inside my desk drawer here. Tell Mary Alice to get it out of the drawer.”

“Thanks, grandmother. You’re brilliant,” said Wynna and she hugged her.

“As a Betsy-bug,” laughed Althea, “We need to head home now. Your mother will be wondering what’s become of us.”

Althea shut off the lights, set the security alarm, and locked the main door. Wynna and her grandmother crossed the gravel walk encircling the gazebo and soon exited the commons where it joined with their street, New Estate Road. Though the house was veiled in darkness, its windows shone brightly through the gloom.

They entered the house through the back door. As they passed by the rope bridge leading off the deck to the tree house, Althea asked Wynna, “Have you packed up your things yet?”

“No, I have one box filled, but I just don’t want to give up on it yet. I love staying in the tree house. I plan to stay out there until the last of the leaves fall and my breath comes out in frosty puffs.”

“Take some extra blankets then,” advised Althea sagely.

Wynna nodded as they entered the kitchen via the back porch door. Her mother, Ingeldell, looked up from where she was standing over the stove.

“Oh, good, you’re here just in time. Wynna, could you help your brother finish setting the table? Mother, could I trouble you to warm the rolls in the oven? It’s been preheated,” said Ingeldell as she removed a pot of boiling water and softened noodles from the range and went to the sink to strain them.

Wynna’s father entered the kitchen from the garage. He kissed Ingeldell on the cheek and then said, “What can I do to help out?”

Ingeldell smiled and handed him the dish of strained noodles and said, “You can set this on the dining table on your way upstairs.” Conner Stewart took the dish in his free hand and left the room. Once he deposited the dish onto the table, he hung his coat on the hall rack and then went upstairs with his laptop case. When he returned, everyone else was seated around the table and engaged in lively conversation. He paused and then snapped his fingers. Ingeldell looked up at his ascending figure and then shrugged her shoulders. Shortly, he returned with a pale orange t-shirt and handed it to Wynna where she sat.

“Thought you might like this,” he said as he slipped into his chair at the head of the table.

Wynna spread open the shirt so she could read the print on the front. On the front of the shirt was printed the slogan, “Paradise is Pago Pago.”

“It’s in the Pacific,” offered Wayn just after he swallowed a bite of food.

“Yes, I know that,” snapped Wynna. Then, she turned to her father and said, “Thanks, Dad. It’s cool.”

Her father nodded to her but did not halt his conversation with Ingeldell. They were discussing the upcoming neighborhood board meeting. Wynna concentrated on her dinner until she heard something that caught her interest. She looked up from her plate.

“Emery Edmund’s bought the old place?” asked Ingeldell.



“The renovations start next week. Should take about a month for the exterior work. They'll begin by grafting on the stones of the Bavarian castle ruins he had shipped here,” said Conner.

“That's what all those trucks were hauling. I saw a couple going down Old Estate Road last week,” said Wayn.

“That explains the phone message then. Reginald Davis was afraid someone was trying to dump garbage illegally back in the woods,” said Althea.

“I guess I'll have to call him back tonight and straighten it out before the rumors start,” said Conner.

Wynna frowned at her plate. District Court Judge Reginald Davis was the father of the alleged crayon thief, Monica. Wynna pictured the long-lost box of crayons and then she sighed.

“Something wrong, darling?” her mother asked her.

“No, it's nothing,” said Wynna suddenly realizing that she was the center of attention.

Wayn looked at her as if he thought she was on the verge of a mad fit. He pulled his plate closer to him and edged himself slightly away from her side of the table. Wynna glared at him and stabbed at her noodles with her fork.

“That's enough, Wayn,” said her father without bothering to look up from his plate.

Wayn shot Wynna a conspiratorial grin but moved his plate back to its former position and resumed eating without further provocation.

Wynna relaxed and finished her meal. She helped clear the table of the dishes and was about to start washing them when Althea stopped her.

“No, it's Wayn's turn tonight,” said Althea as she handed Wayn a soap-sudsy sponge. Wayn bit his cheek as if he truly wanted to complain but he accepted the sponge and hugged his grandmother. As Wynna skipped out of the room, Althea reminded her to take the extra blankets out to the tree house.

Wynna went into the hall storage closet and chose two blankets from the stack on the shelf. One fleece blanket was red; the other was camel colored. She took the blankets and her book with her.

The handle of the porch gate was ice-cold when she pushed it open. A layer of frost covered the grass below the wooden deck. The boards creaked as she walked across them to the bridge which connected the deck to the tree house. Once she crossed the bridge, she set the blankets on the narrow walkway encircling the tree house landing and pulled a key out of her jean's pocket. She unlocked the sky blue painted door. It opened inward to reveal the interior of the first floor of the tree house. Just inside the door, she flipped the switch on the wall and the room was filled with sudden light. Wynna kept the door propped open with her foot and retrieved the blankets and book from where they had been deposited on the walkway. She pushed them through the doorway with her free foot and then allowed the door to close behind her. Once inside, she glanced around the room. The windows were still closed and latched. A layer of frost had gathered along their bottom rims. The lamps ringing the tree trunk which rose through the center of the house cast a cheery glow on the built-in bookshelves lining the walls of the first floor. A window seat rested between two shelves. Its corduroy light blue cushion looked inviting but Wynna was tired and just wanted to curl up in one of the bunk beds on the upper story and finish her book. Somewhat awkwardly, she—with her blankets and book in tow--ascended the ladder and emerged into the second story. Two bunk beds were built into the wall opposite the windows. She walked over to the lower bunk on the left side of the room and tossed the blankets onto the bed along with her book. Then, she flipped on the reading lamp located on the wall beside the bed. The lantern lights ringing the upper portion of the trunk made the room seem warmer even though no additional heat source was present.

Wynna kicked off her shoes, and they clattered to the wooden floor beside the bunk. She snuggled under the extra covers and was soon comfortably warm and settled in for the night. She was

glad that her father had wired the lights to respond to remote control. She took the remote control off the shelf beside her bunk and switched off the lower lantern lights. The first floor went suddenly dark beneath her. Still, the upper story was bright and merry, so she was not afraid. For the better part of Summer, she had spent every evening in the tree house. As a result, it felt more like home than her own bedroom did in the main house. The idea of having to abandon her Summer sanctuary for the Winter made her heartsick. She refused to dwell on the idea and turned her attention back to the mystery novel. In a short time, she had reached the last page and had drifted off to sleep. The book slipped out of her grasp and into a fold of the blanket. After an hour of slumber, Wynna woke just long enough to turn off the remaining lights. Then, she surrendered to dreams.



### Chapter Three

In a bedroom of his mother's high rise condominium, Carl Edmund sat in front of his computer. He read his father's email again. His father had invited him to come live in the Skylark neighborhood once the renovations to his father's estate were completed. Carl tried to picture what life might be like in Skylark which was sited near the city limits. It would be the country life or as close as Carl had ever been to it.

Aberdale, with its manicured parks and historic buildings modernized to house banks and other businesses like his father's real estate offices, appealed to Carl's sense of entitlement to finding what he needed or wanted within easy reach, especially if that desired item happened to be the latest technological product. From his mother's condominium, he could walk to the best computer store in town and purchase the latest upgrade for his system. He winced at the thought of suddenly having to wait till his father or someone else had time to drive him into Aberdale on such occasions.

Still, in the email, his father had described a neighborhood full of old trees and houses surrounded by untamed woods riddled with creeks and streams. His father had purchased the manor house as well as the surrounding lands comprising the old Einselmann estate in Skylark. Plans were underway to restore the manor to its former glory as well as to enhance its outward appearance with some salvaged architectural features from the ruins of a Bavarian castle. According to his father, the house exterior was near completion and the interior clearly inhabitable during its upgrading. In the manor house, there was an interior courtyard with surrounding apartments—one of which would be Carl's own—as well as several upper-storied gardens.

Still, Carl knew very little about castles and estate living. In fact, the only thing he knew for certain about castles was that their walls tended to be comprised of stone several feet thick. He worried that the thickness of the walls might adversely affect his computer's Internet connection, not to mention the reception of his cell phone! Though, he wished that he hadn't mentioned his reservations to his older brother, Cassidy, who had taken to addressing him as Lord Carl in his emails which Carl didn't think a bit funny. However, Carl had to admit that he missed his brother's company despite the teasing.

Cassidy had left for the university in August and despite their weekly email exchange, Carl felt a profound loneliness. The boys' mother, Trista Edmund, purchased the condominium after the divorce, and the two boys came to live with her there. Trista Edmund's spending habits were partly to blame for the divorce. Carl had hoped that his parents would reach a truce once the divorce was final, but somehow Trista still managed to spend his father's money recklessly which incensed the man.

His mother's plethora of purchases had reduced their former home, a large house in an affluent suburb of Aberdale, to a poorly organized warehouse. At first, his father ignored the situation and stayed away from the house as much as possible by filling his time with business pursuits. Eventually, he rented storage facilities and had many of the items hauled away only to find that Trista quickly compensated by purchasing more items which overran the house anew. Carl remembered hearing his father's voice bellowing over the home's personal address system: "Trista, I'm drawing the line on this ridiculous spending spree! When a man can't even take a proper shower in his own home..." Apparently, Trista had converted the master bedroom shower stall into a closet. When Emery Edmund

entered the bath expecting to take his morning shower, he was greeted with a floor-to-ceiling tower of totes and boxes from local shops. When the house was sold as part of the divorce settlement, Carl overheard the real estate agent laud the amount of storage space in the home to the potential buyers. Carl noticed that the agent no longer worked at his father's Aberdale office, but he did not have the nerve to ask his father where she had gone.

Loneliness and claustrophobia compelled Carl to inform Cassidy—via a handy cell phone camera shot—of the dire situation developing at his mother's condominium. Trista had filled the condominium with so many totes and boxes that even Carl's bedroom was more like a walk-in closet than a boy's sleeping quarters. Cassidy had forwarded Carl's email to their father.

The phone in the den rang, but Carl could not dislodge the totes stacked outside his bedroom door in order to gain access to the hallway. He sighed. Soon, the answering machine intercepted the message on his behalf. Carl could hear his father's voice echoing in the den via the machine's speaker. His father was coming the following morning to conduct an inspection of Carl's living conditions as well as to break the news to Trista that he was asking Carl to come stay with him in Skylark.

Carl looked around his bedroom. He needed to pack his belongings; he reached over and emptied a nearby tote of its contents and began to fill it with his music collection. After an hour of packing, he realized that he was too hungry to continue, so he forced his way out into the hallway and waded through the sea of shopping totes. Once he reached the kitchen, he scavenged a meal from the restaurant carry-out containers which filled the refrigerator. He dined on a culinary potluck of Pad Thai, Chicken Marsala, Black bean and tortilla soup, and some dinner rolls. Carl was drinking from the last soda bottle which he had discovered on its side behind the Pad Thai container in the refrigerator, when his mother returned home from shopping with her girlfriends.

Outside the front door, he heard the telltale sounds of shopping bags and boxes hitting the ground. Carl knew that Mr. Phelps, the doorman, had brought them up for his mother and that he would soon ring the bell for Carl to come to the door. Carl sat on the barstool at the counter until the bell rang. He sipped the soda as he waited.

When Carl opened the door, Mr. Phelps nodded to him and cast a wary glance into the condominium. Carl ignored the look and walked away from the front entrance. He left the bags in the hallway. His mother arrived from the elevator a few minutes later, and he heard her say in passing that there were packages in the hallway as if she had expected him to bring them inside the condominium for her.

“There are bags everywhere. Have you not noticed?” muttered Carl under his breath. He set the soda bottle on the counter and went to retrieve the bags. Then, he sat down to finish his meal and called out to his mother, who had gone—with some difficulty--down the hallway, that his father was intending to visit in the morning.

Suddenly, the condominium became very quiet.

His mother came into the kitchen. Her arms were folded across her chest and she gave him a hard stare. Carl gulped his soda. For a moment, he was certain that he was either going to choke to death or that his nose would erupt into a soda volcano. His mother pretended not to notice his sputtering.

“When was this decided?” she asked in a rather acidic tone.

“Dad called. I couldn't get to the phone. So, I decided...” began Carl after he recovered from the soda incident.

“Your father is coming here tomorrow to pick you up...for how long?” his mother continued.

Carl shrugged his shoulders and realized unhappily that things were not going according to plan. Though, perhaps more accurately, he had not thought things through well enough before acting on his impulse to send the camera-phone picture to his brother.

“Are you packed?” his mother asked him.

“Yes, I just have a few more things to do,” said Carl.

His mother started down the hallway, and Carl followed her. She entered his room and stood for a moment without saying a word.

Carl had stacked all his boxed belongings onto the bed. His computer was stacked in its components and the rolled cables were leaning against the box. The rest of the room was filled with Trista's totes and former purchases which though unpacked had found no useful place other than resting one on top of the other in a sort of loosely-assembled totem pole.

His mother looked him in the eye and said, “Thank you for bringing in the bags for me.”

Carl managed a weak, “You're welcome.”

His mother left his room and shut the door behind her. Carl heard her bedroom door close a few seconds later; he ventured down the hall to her room. While he stood just outside her door, he could hear the sounds of his mother's muffled crying coming from within the room. He knocked gingerly on the door. Then, he eased it open and let himself inside the room.

His mother was curled up on her side on the bed. One side of the bed was piled with boxes and shopping totes. There were just as many unpacked bags in her room as there were in the rest of the condominium; Carl hadn't realized.

He shoved a box from the bed to the floor and sat down on the edge of the bed. His mother placed a hand over her eyes.

“I don't blame you for wanting to leave,” his mother said.

Carl went over and hugged his mother. Then, he freed himself from her embrace and took all the boxes off the bed. He began to open the boxes and bags and to unpack them. He stacked the contents in one side of the room, and he shredded the boxes and tucked the pieces into the shopping bags which he tossed into a pile in the other side of the room. Trista watched him from the bed.

Then, she sat up and said, “Stop, honey. There's no point. He knows. He already knows now. It's all right. I'll figure out something.”

Carl ignored her comment and kept to the task. When his supply of totes ran out, he brought in garbage bags from the kitchen and stuffed them full of shredded boxes, tissue, and totes. While he worked, Trista stole from the room.

Carl could hear that she was speaking with someone on the telephone in the den. He leaned out into the hallway, so he could see her. She had her address book open and was chatting with someone at the storage rental center which was located adjacent to the condominium complex. Apparently, the center was open to late hour business; she had scheduled someone to come to the condominium that evening to remove most of the accumulated items to two new storage sheds at the center. Carl tossed the tote that he was holding in his hand onto the floor; he sat on the edge of her bed till she returned.

She walked into the room with a triumphant look on her face and said merrily, “That's that. They're coming tonight to get the lot of it. By tomorrow morning, this place will be clutter-free.”

“But, after tomorrow, mother? What will it be then?” asked Carl as he brushed past her to go to his own room.

Carl was watching television in the den when the men arrived from the storage facility. He admitted them into the condominium. One of the men was older and had a scruffy appearance; his face was peppered with a gray-black stubble-of-a-beard, though his hair was cut extremely short as if to compensate for an obvious receding hairline. The other man was much younger; he appeared to be a teenager and seemed to take more pride in his appearance and with the way he presented himself to the customers. He greeted Carl with a smile and introduced himself and his partner upon entering the foyer.

“I'm Jack, and this is Stone. We're here on a scheduled removal,” the young man offered.

“Sure, I'll go get my mom,” answered Carl.

The men waited in the foyer until Carl returned with Trista who directed the men to which items they were to remove to the storage sheds. Carl went back to watching television while the men worked. Every now and again he would catch glimpses of the red-embroidered slogan on the back of their navy blue windbreakers: “24/7 Storage Heaven.”

Once the men had departed with the items, Carl went into his bedroom. His bed was piled with moving boxes, so he tossed a pillow and blanket onto the floor and curled up onto it. His mother came into the room to check on him.

“Wouldn't you rather sleep on the guest bed or on the sofa?” she asked quietly.

“No, I'm fine here. Goodnight,” Carl muttered.

“Goodnight,” Trista leaned down and gave him a kiss on the cheek which was something that she hadn't done since he was a toddler. Carl had no reaction. He closed his eyes and tried to quiet his mind into immediate slumber.



## Chapter Four

Dominic let himself into the apartment by using the extra key that his sister, Sasha, had made for him. He wasn't surprised that she wasn't home; she worked several jobs and had varying hours. He entered the apartment and tossed his backpack onto the sofa. Then, he noticed that the light was blinking on the answering machine. He played back the messages. There were two incomplete calls and one from his sister: "Dom, it's me, Sashi. Listen, I'm in trouble. I need you to get down here to the police station as fast as you can. Bring money...whatever you can find. I'm counting on you. Please hurry. I have to go now."

Dominic searched the apartment for every bit of loose change. He found \$50 total from looking under cushions and in drawers. When he had the money collected, he shoved it in his pocket and left the apartment. Some of the money went to bus fare, but he arrived at the station with most of the salvaged change. When he entered the police station, he went straight to the reception desk. The clerk directed him to another office down the hall. The uniformed officer sitting behind the desk in the office did not even look up at him but instead said in more of a statement than a question, "Name?"

"Mine?" asked Dominic hesitantly.

"Are you trying to make bail for yourself or someone else, son?" asked the officer in a disinterested, sarcastic tone.

"Oh, for my sister....Sasha Kaiser," replied Dominic.

He waited while the officer scanned the records on the computer in an attempt to locate his sister's name. When the officer located the name, he excused himself from the room and went down the hallway. The officer returned with an envelope in his hand which he extended to Dominic who rose slowly to retrieve it from him as if he were prolonging the inevitability of horrible news.

"Hurry up, kid. I don't have all day," said the officer in an irritated tone. When Dominic took the letter, the officer commented on his being the one to come to the station rather than an adult family member. The officer's curiosity made Dominic choose his words carefully so as not to arouse the man's suspicions.

"Mom, was going to come but she has been sick with some kind of virus. I didn't want her to get out of bed just for this, so I came," lied Dominic casually as he was leaving.

"You're a good son. I don't think my kid would do the same. I'm sad to say it," replied the officer whose face relaxed into an honest smile of admiration.

"I've had to be there for her...since Dad left us," said Dominic.

"You have no idea how often I hear that same story. You take care of yourself. Bye now," said the officer who returned to his paperwork as Dominic exited the office.

Just outside the police station there was a courtyard with a concrete patio and low walls framing raised beds with small trees and seasonal flowers. Dominic sat down on the edge of one of the raised beds and opened his sister's letter:

Domi,

Jeff made bail for me. He's taking me to California. To Los Angeles. Jeff has connections, and he is going to help me become an actress. Gracie knows about this and you're supposed to go stay with her and her family while I'm gone. I have a job waiting for me, and I will send money for you. I'll come back for you when I'm settled in and have things together. I promise. I love you!

Love,  
Sashi

Dominic folded the letter and put it in his pocket. For a while, he sat on the low wall just watching the cars drive by until the feeling of numbness gave way to a sense of panic. Gracie was one of seven children in the family; they all lived in the apartment across the hall from Sasha's apartment. Dominic doubted that one more mouth to feed would be welcome in their family no matter what his sister had arranged. He didn't want to be a burden to anyone; he figured that if his sister had run off to California then there was nothing to stop Gracie's family from being overwhelmed by his being with them. Dominic was alone—promises or no promises.

When he returned to the apartment complex, he went straight to his sister's apartment. The apartment across the hall seemed oddly quiet. Normally, the door was standing open, and the youngest would habitually ride a tricycle up and down the hallway during the daylight hours.

Dominic let himself into his sister's place. That night he slept on the sofa and left the television playing all night for company. In the morning, he ate a toaster pastry for breakfast. Again, the hallway outside the apartment was silent. Dominic peered outside the front door. The manager of the complex was just letting himself into the apartment across the hall—the one in which Gracie and her siblings lived. The manager turned around to greet Dominic.

“Hey there. Guess you heard all about it. Seems to be happening more and more these days. And they were such nice people, too,” said the man. Dominic nodded and waited for the manager to continue. Then, the man said, “Immigration. They came yesterday afternoon. Cleared out the lot of them. Rent's paid up for the month, too. It's a shame. Well, I gotta get this unit ready for other renters. Have a good one.” With the parting comment, the manager disappeared inside the apartment and left Dominic to his own thoughts.

Dominic knew that Gracie and her family were in the country illegally. That the two oldest brothers worked on construction jobs and as handymen for people who were willing to hire them without asking too many questions. Gracie had worked as a maid for several months under the same conditions. Now, they were all gone. Probably deported to El Salvador from whence they originally hailed.

Dominic collected the mail from the box in the hallway. A rent letter was among the direct mail advertisements. To his dismay, he saw that the rent was overdue for the current month. He tossed the mail and the bill into the kitchen trash can and went to sit in the corner of the enclosed patio. He curled himself up into a tight ball and hunched against the corner wall of the patio as if he were trying to separate himself from the world at large and all its consequences. Outside the fence, he could hear the sounds of people going about their daily routine—the children's voices laughing, crying, shouting, and singing in a wild melody into which adults inserted a harmony of their own. Dogs went on barking. Cars kept their tires on the road and their engines humming in a continual pattern of coming and going. Nobody noticed the young boy hiding in the corner of the patio; Dominic wondered how long he could sit there in that same position. A knock on the door roused him to his senses. He collected himself and



went inside to answer it.

The apartment manager had finished clearing out Gracie's apartment and was now eager to collect the rent from Sasha. Dominic quickly made up a story to appease the man, but the manager insisted that the payment be on his desk by ten o' clock the following morning or he would begin the process to evict them. Unfortunately, the manager seemed to know that Sasha was no longer in town. He hinted that Dominic shouldn't be afraid to ask for help if he needed it. Though the man's intentions weren't sinister, Dominic had no intention of surrendering himself to the care of a foster family because he wanted to find his sister. He had to find a place to stay and learn to make it on his own; he had to prove to Sasha that he could be more than a burden. Then, he would go find her, and they could be together on equal terms. When the manager left, Dominic collected every item of value from the apartment that he could carry and headed to the corner pawn shop. The loot yielded \$300 which seemed a king's ransom, although it did not meet the required rental amount.

The following morning, Dominic locked up the apartment for the final time. He had to leave most of his belongings behind. As he locked the apartment door, he thought briefly about his bedroom with its toys and remnants of his boyhood. He closed his eyes and said goodbye to them and with them to his childhood. He was a man; he was finished with childish things.

On his way to the school bus stop, he put the apartment key in the manager's drop box. He heard it hit the office floor carpet with a dull thud. Then, he adjusted his backpack to a comfortably distributed load on his back, and he joined the other children who were waiting in the chill for the bus to arrive. As the bus pulled out of the apartment complex parking lot, he turned to look out the window at his old apartment one last time. The dark patio window was visible, and it gave the place the appearance of having been vacant for a long time. It was already foreign to him. It was not home.

He closed his eyes and dozed as the bus made its way to Jonathan Aberdale Junior High. At school, he managed to feign an accidental spill of milk onto his clothing. When the secretary left him in the storage room to find some dry clothes among those in the lost and found bin, he quickly pulled on two shirts, a pair of jeans—wearable though torn at the knees—and a pair of sweat pants. He stuffed his own soiled clothes into his backpack. Earlier in the day, he had emptied his backpack of all his school items. He wouldn't need them where he was going. Clearly, he would have to leave school behind as well. He put the \$300 in the front pocket of the pack. When he left the office, he thanked the secretary. Though she cast him a curious glance as he went by her, she did not question him about his bulky clothing style. She was accustomed to the unconventional clothing choices that teenagers often made.

After school, Dominic went past his usual bus and boarded the one that went to the Skylark neighborhood which was located at the edge of the city limits. It was a free ride as close as he could get out of the city. Dominic slid into a seat in the back next to a boy who was engrossed in reading a book, and Dominic did his best to give the impression that they were traveling together. When one of the other boys recognized him from class and turned around to ask him what he was doing on the bus, Dominic replied with a wry smile, "I'm going home with him. Can you believe it?" The boy shook his head but turned around and sat in his seat without further questions as the bus pulled away from the school. The boy kept his nose in the book and ignored them both.

At the last stop, Dominic disembarked. He headed across the street, Einselmann Road, toward what appeared to be a circular park at the center of the neighborhood. One of the children called out to him but he pretended not to hear him clearly; Dominic shouted an equally unintelligible reply. The children left him to his peace and went their own ways.

Discreetly, he walked over to one of the buildings that looked like a small barn and tried the door. He had no luck with that one so he continued to the next which opened easily for him. He slipped inside the building and closed the door behind him.



## Chapter Five

Wynna woke to the sounds of birds singing in the branches above her. The wind was picking up and rain was likely later that morning. A cool damp had settled into the tree house and even the extra blankets did little to quell its effect. She balled herself up under the blankets in an attempt to conserve heat.

Presently, she heard the tree house door open. Someone ascended the ladder to reach the second story. Wynna peeked out from under the blankets to see who had emerged onto the landing. Mary Alice who was holding a basket from which emanated the smell of fresh-baked blueberry muffins smiled at her from where she stood by the ladder. The girl set the basket onto the floor and from it produced two bottles of orange juice, two plates, and one muffin apiece. Wynna flung the blankets from over herself and fairly bounced of bed despite the chill. She joined her friend where she sat on the floor.

“Althea's worried about your staying out here now that it's gotten cold. You should pack up and move back in the house before you get sick,” said Mary Alice.

“No, I'm fine,” insisted Wynna as she opened the bottle of juice.

Mary Alice studied her friend's face for a moment and then said, “So, like I was saying the other day...about Dom. He has great clothes. His fashion sense is almost as good as mine.” She wrinkled her nose as if to mock herself and then dusted a few stray crumbs from the folds of her trademark black clothing.

“Is that a new outfit?” asked Wynna interrupting her friend's thought.

“No, it's part of the collection I made for this past Winter. I just didn't get around to wearing it till now,” said Mary Alice in a slightly edgy voice that indicated her disapproval at being distracted. Mary Alice designed her own clothing for every season. Her mother had her designs converted into articles of clothing which were always some shade of black. Since she was five years old, Mary Alice had not worn any other color. Her corn-silk-blond hair and pale skin stood out in sharp contrast to her clothing. To avoid monotony, the fabrics were many textures, shades, and featured embellishments like embroidered designs and occasional bead-work. Admittedly, on any other child, the devotion to such a sophisticated and dark color might be mistaken as an act of rebellion against society but Mary Alice's designs focused on glamor and not adolescent attention-seeking.

Wynna had stopped eating and was focusing her attention out the window of the tree house. She wore an expression that indicated she was viewing something particularly horrible through it.

“I don't like him,” Wynna said.

“Who?” asked Mary Alice.

“Dominic!” shouted Wynna and she threw her muffin down on the plate on her way over to the bunk bed onto which she flung herself. Then, she continued, “He and his friends are mean to me. They make fun of me all the time. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about because you have been there. You've seen it. I know you have. Everyone has!”

Mary Alice looked stunned at first and then her face reddened. She replied angrily, “He has never said anything about you! He doesn't even know you exist!” Then, Mary Alice rose from the

floor and said in a cruel tone, “Maybe that is the real problem. You're jealous because he isn't interested in you!”

Wynna looked up in shock and said with equal indignation, “I am not jealous! I think he's a total idiot and so are his friends!”

“Well, I'm his friend. Guess that makes me an idiot. You know what? I'm sorry I came over here. I'm going home to await an apology from you. Bye!” said Mary Alice as she descended the ladder. She left the tree house and slammed the door for good measure as she did so.

“Bye yourself,” muttered Wynna but she was crying when she said it so it wasn't half as menacing as she had hoped it would sound.



## Chapter Six

Trista leaned into the car window and gave Carl a kiss on the cheek. She ran a hand across his cheek and placed a book with a card tucked into it in his lap. “For your thoughts,” she said about the book. The cover was black leather and was embossed with an ebony skull-like mask, the eyes of which shone like jewels fashioned from the blue sky. Carl thought that it looked like the face of a genie though he had never seen one to be sure about the resemblance. His mother asked him to call her at least weekly and she promised to come visit him whenever he asked her to do so. He promised in turn to keep in touch with her and agreed to extending frequent invitations for a meeting. When his father's SUV pulled away from the condominium complex, Carl could not bear to look back at his mother whom he knew to be standing in tears on the curb. Instead, he focused on the book she had given him.

He opened the book and saw that a key had been taped to the inside cover. He doubted that he would ever have a reason to use the key. There was nothing interesting to disclose in a diary; he had nothing to write in it about his life. In addition, despite his attending school at the best private academy in Aberdale, he could not read and write well. He lamented once to his bother, Cassidy, that while he could play lacrosse as well as the other boys, he could not spell it. His brother had suggested that he use a dictionary, but Carl didn't bother to explain that a dictionary was not user-friendly when one did not know the correct order of the letters comprising the word. He closed the book and held it to his chest.

They soon left the city behind. The roads were lined with scraggly trees and vines. The median was strewn with tall grasses and wildflowers. A stone sign marked the entrance to the Skylark neighborhood. If not for the sign, Carl would never have guessed that there was anything but untamed woods for miles. His father turned the SUV onto Einselmann road. Through the loosely spaced Leland Cypress which lined the road, Carl could catch glimpses of houses. Eventually, the road joined with the commons circle and Carl saw the park and the outbuildings—three red barn buildings and one white one--that had once been a part of the old amusement park and estate. His father followed the curve of the road and then turned right onto Old Estate Road which led to his new home.

When they arrived at the manor house, Carl saw that a truck from the 24/7 Storage Heaven was parked on the circular drive. The young man and his partner whom had helped his mother with her removal were standing on the drive outside the truck. Jack, the younger of the two, strode over to introduce himself to Carl's father. Carl smiled at him in recognition and Jack shook his hand as if they were equals. He seemed genuinely interested in Carl's well-being and commented on the interesting image on the book cover.

“It's from Mom,” said Carl quietly.

Jack sensed that Carl might be sensitive and so he said simply, “She's a nice lady. Good to work for. Here, let me help you take some of these boxes inside. You lead the way, Carl.”

Carl nodded in appreciation, and they followed his father into the house.



## Chapter Seven

Ingeldell ran a hand across her forehead. She had spent the better part of the morning clearing the workshop of clutter which she planned to store elsewhere. She needed as much space as possible to begin work on the dispensing machine that had been her father's last design. It was his dream machine; she was determined to make the dream into a reality in his honor. The plans were spread across the rustic wood table—a relic from the estate in its hey day.

Althea had brought her a carafe of warm coffee. She had pulled up a stool and was looking at the design. She took slow sips of her own cup of coffee as she silently surveyed her late husband's plans.

“It is magnificent, isn't it,” commented Ingeldell as she hauled a box out of the barn which served as her workshop as it had for her father.

“Absolutely,” replied Althea, “Dell, I'm proud of you. Are you too grown up to hear that from your mother? I know Dad would be so proud of you, too.”

Ingeldell walked over and wrapped her arms around her mother's shoulders and said, “I'll never be too big to hear that, Mom.”

Someone cleared his throat from the doorway of the barn. The two women looked up to see a young man wearing a navy windbreaker. He walked over to Ingeldell and introduced himself.

“Nice to meet you, Jack. I'm Dell, and this is my mother, Althea,” replied Ingeldell, “Let's get started. Here, these boxes should go first.” Jack noticed that Althea looked at him as if she were seeing a familiar face, but she did not elaborate on the look.

Jack was soon sorting and hauling boxes alongside Ingeldell. His partner, Stone, had remained at the Edmund house. The two planned to meet later that afternoon to consolidate the removed items and haul them back to the storage center in Aberdale.

As they worked, Jack commented on the machines that Ingeldell had designed. She was impressed by his knowledge of how they worked and asked him if he had any experience working on them.

“I learned a lot about those machines when I was a kid. My dad and I traveled around together. He was a handyman. Taught me a thing or two about fixing various things. I worked as a delivery man for a soda company a few years back, too,” explained Jack.

“And your father? Is he retired?” asked Ingeldell.

“I wouldn't know. He and I parted ways years ago. Been traveling from place to place with my partner, Stone, ever since Dad left. He and Stone had been partners. I guess you could say I picked up with Stone where Dad left off because it seemed like the best thing to do at the time,” replied Jack as he set a large box next to another outside the barn.

“I think I understand. I inherited this business from my father. It's one reason I'm storing so much of this stuff from the workshop. I need to make room for a special project. Come here, I want you to see something,” said Ingeldell as she motioned for Jack to follow her into the barn. She led him to the table across which the plans were spread for her father's last design. Jack placed his hands on either side of the design to brace himself as he leaned over the table to look at the plans. He let out a

low whistle as if to indicate his admiration for the scope of the project.

“Your father was something else. I’m particularly impressed with how well he incorporated the beauty of the machine with its inner workings. He was a master craftsman,” said Jack.

“Indeed, he was,” replied Althea and she winked at her daughter.

Jack thanked Ingeldell for sharing the viewing of the plans with him and then went back to his work. He wanted to be finished by the time he had arranged to meet up with Stone.

An hour later, a boy ran up the steps of the Stewart's house. Wynna greeted him at the door and he asked her, “Is there a guy here named Jack? His partner is waiting for him in the truck back at my dad's place. He's been waiting a long time now. I think he's kind of upset about being kept waiting for so long.”

“Well, there's a guy from the storage company out in the barn helping my mother move some boxes. That must be Jack,” replied Wynna. Then, she asked him, “What's your name, anyway?”

“Carl Edmund,” replied the boy.

“I'm Wynna Stewart. Here, follow me,” she said as she started down the gravel drive toward the barn.

As they walked together, Wynna asked him, “Are you the one who owns the estate now?”

“That would be my father, actually,” said Carl who smiled at his own joke.

“So, what's it like then?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” he pretended not to understand her question.

“Living in a manor house on a massive estate property. At least, tell me a little about yourself...besides your name,” probed Wynna.

“What's to tell?” asked Carl who knew he was being difficult.

“Where did you come from? I mean, you didn't just fall from the sky,” she said sarcastically.

“No,” replied Carl without offering any of the requested information.

“All right, so you have no sense of humor. That's useful to know,” replied Wynna.

“It is?” asked Carl as he cast her glance.

“Sure, it means you're smart,” replied Wynna sagely.

“I'm smart because I don't laugh easily?” asked Carl in a mocking tone.

“Yes,” replied Wynna.

“Well, I'll bet you can't figure anything else out about me,” snorted Carl in disdain.

“You'll tell me everything I want to know,” said Wynna confidently.

Carl saw the barn and waved to Jack who stood in its doorway. Jack seemed to know that he had missed the deadline and ran toward them after bidding farewell to the two women. He promised to return with the truck.

Jack clapped Carl on the back as he ran past him and headed at a fast pace across the commons and down the lane to the estate. Carl turned slowly to follow him, but Wynna continued the conversation.

“I know you came from the estate and that your father's name is Emery Edmund,” said Wynna.

“You sure I didn't just fall from the sky?” asked Carl who had his back to her. He was smiling.

“Very funny,” remarked Wynna.

“I thought that you decided I had no sense of humor,” corrected Carl.

“Plenty of people who have no sense of humor know how to crack jokes,” replied Wynna.

“True,” replied Carl. He turned to face her and said, “Look, I came from Aberdale where I used to live with my mother and brother. I'm living with my father for now. End of story. All right?”

“Oh, it's not the end,” replied Wynna with a smile, and then she added, “You just got here.”

“I'm not sure how long I'm going to stay. I may not even like it here,” replied Carl.

“Do you have a key to the house?” asked Wynna suddenly.

“Yeah, why?” asked Carl.

“May I see it?” asked Wynna.

“Why?” asked Carl.

“I'm curious how big it is. Some keys to old houses and castles are enormous. I collect keys. I've got hundreds,” replied Wynna.

“Right. Girls collect dolls and things. I don't believe you. Prove it, and then maybe I will show you the key,” replied Carl.

They entered the Stewart house together, and Wynna led him up the stairs to her room. Carl entered her room and looked around in amazement. Shadowboxes full of keys of every size and description hung on the walls which were covered in blue and ivory striped linen. The walls were divided by chair-rail height cream molding. Rows of built-in small cabinets lined the lower portions of the walls. Each cabinet door sported a uniquely carved wood or embossed metal design. Carl's gaze fixed upon the cabinet just under the spiral staircase that led to Wynna's small loft study. He seemed drawn to that particular cabinet and began to walk in its direction. Wynna felt the key suspended from the chain around her neck grow hot; her heart pounded beneath the warm metal. She caught his arm and said, “See, keys of every size and description. Just like I said.”

“What's up there?” asked Carl as he looked up the stairs leading to the loft.

“My study. It's not very big. Come on, you go first,” she said as she gestured for him to ascend the stairs.

As they climbed, Carl glanced through the iron steps of the stair to see the mysterious cabinet tucked into the wall beneath them. Once in the loft, Carl saw that it was a small turret room ringed with windows. The view through the windows was stunning enough to cause him to draw in his breath. Through the windows, he could see a sloping valley dotted with trees and laced with small streams lit by the amber light of the sun. Threads of sunlight wove through the trees and foliage to reveal a carpet of burnished leaves and the tips of wild fern which were moving in the breeze. Far below them, a doe darted across a diamond-studded brook to disappear into the forest veil.

“That's your father's land,” said Wynna as she swept her hand in a wave to the left.

“So, you've been all over it. Haven't you,” said Carl smiling.

“Yeah, along with every other kid in the neighborhood. There's this old stone trail that I've been trying to get to the end of for the longest time but it's so covered in debris. Maybe, we could explore it sometime,” offered Wynna.

“Sounds good,” said Carl as he leaned on the sill to peer out the window.

The key began to weigh like an anchor around her neck. The loft suddenly seemed too small and too exposed with its bold circle of shadeless windows. Wynna took an awkward step toward the stairs and lost her footing. Carl caught her by the shoulder before she fell. They both broke into nervous laughter.

A glance below them revealed that late afternoon shadows had crept into the bedroom while they were aloft. There was little to see between the steps of the open staircase but darkness. As they made their way down the stairs, the key began to cool against Wynna's skin. She felt a wave of relief. Carl exited her room, and she followed him.



## Chapter Eight

Mary Alice and Wynna avoided each other at school and for the first time in years did not walk home together from the bus stop. They lived on the same street, “New Estate Road,” which made the situation hard to ignore. Wynna was relieved to find her house empty when she arrived. Althea had left her a note which indicated that her grandmother had gone grocery shopping.

Wynna grabbed a green apple from the bowl on the kitchen counter as she passed though on her way to the tree house. Clouds had been gathering all day; a strong storm system had moved into the area. As she stepped out onto the deck, a gust of wind scattered leaves across the boards. The exterior house lights and the ones of the tree house had switched on via the automatic sensor as if they too had been tricked into believing it was dusk several hours earlier than normal. Wynna let herself into the tree house and switched on the interior lights.

She lay down on the bunk and looked over at the shelf beside the bed. A newly borrowed library book lay there. She had returned the mystery novel and reserved it for Mary Alice as promised though she did not check to see if her former friend had collected it. The new book was a non-fiction reference about the Einselmann family—their land and their circus business. She was curious to know more about her neighborhood which comprised much of what had once been the family's property. Of particular interest to her was a section on items from the circus that were donated to museums or bought by private collectors.

As she read, she came across a page listing hand-rendered signs that once advertised events at the circus. One of the signs was particularly lovely; it sported a white snake enclosed in a circle. Rays of red light were emanating from the forehead of the serpent as if coming from a stone or something embedded there. The sign was advertising the talents of a fortuneteller named Sasha, the Seer. Wynna had marked the page with the dove feather from the silo. The sight of the feather made her heartache. Truthfully, she wished that she had never started the fight because she missed Mary Alice. Wynna decided to apologize to her and hoped that it would be enough to restore their friendship. She rolled over on her side and took the book from the shelf. A loud clap of thunder sounded in the vicinity of the commons. She shuddered and drew the covers around her.

Dominic's eyes adjusted to the dim light of the barn in the commons. He'd spent several days investigating the contents of the barn. There were large items in the middle of the room that were covered in tarp; these proved to be carousel ponies in various stages of disrepair. Wide wooden shelves lined the walls on either side of the barn; on a second-tier shelf, he had fashioned a bed out of an old tarp—serving as a makeshift mattress--and his backpack as a pillow. There was nothing to use for cover so he kept wearing his layers of pilfered clothing. A lantern stood by the mattress. He found it on one of the shelves and was happy to learn that the batteries were in good condition. As he sat on the mattress, he surveyed the contents of his backpack. Though he had carefully rationed the food that he had brought with him, his supply was alarmingly low. He needed to find a source of drinking water from which to refill his bottle. Just outside one of the buildings in the commons, he had noticed a faucet. If he were careful, late at night, he might be able to refill his bottle from that faucet. The wind blew hard, and the building shuddered.



Dominic cast a nervous glance around the room but was reassured to see that there was no history of water-damage on any of the wood within it. Judging from the layers of dust around the objects stored on the shelves, it was doubtful that anyone else had entered the barn in years which made it a decent hiding place even in a storm. Still, the storm would make his plan to refill the water bottle nearly impossible to realize. He lay down on the mattress and tried to forget his thirst.

About two o' clock in the morning, a huge clap of thunder woke Wynna to sitting. She pulled the covers around her in fright. She switched on the lights via the remote control and decided to read a while till she could get back to sleep.

The storm was worse than Dominic had expected. He had forgotten something important about storage buildings; the shelter they provide is inviting to many creatures. He was glad to have chosen a shelf from the second level to serve as a bed because through the sound of the driving rain and howling wind, he could hear scurrying and squeaking creatures beneath him. He aimed the lantern's light at the corner of the room opposite him. Something fairly large and dark slipped out of the light to hide beneath the shelves. He switched off the lantern and lay back down on the mattress. He was wide awake. Still, he was dry and felt certain that the building would still be standing in the morning.

The storm broke shortly before dawn, and Wynna yawned as she closed her book. Instead of going back to sleep, she had read the rest of the night. She decided to return the book to the library; Althea would give her a key to the library at breakfast.

After breakfast, Wynna headed to the library to exchange her book. She passed between two of the barns on her way across the commons. The library was a converted out-building that was open only for Skylark residents' use. Althea was the head librarian as well as community historian; she managed the volunteer schedule for the neighborhood. Often, she allowed Wynna to use her key to the library because she was glad that her granddaughter shared her love of literature.

Wynna unlocked the library door and switched off the security alarm. The foyer walls were lined with fun house mirrors—remnants of the circus--which were integrated into the building during its conversion into the library. The additions of a small office, storage area, and large community meeting room had been added after the initial renovation. Additional fun house mirrors had been installed at the heads of the aisles. Wynna giggled as she caught sight of her squashed-looking reflection placing the loaner book onto the book return cart. For her new selection, she chose a novel featuring a haunted mansion on its cover. She thought about Carl as she added her name to the list of borrowers. Then, she looked inside the desk drawer into which she had placed the book Mary Alice wanted to borrow. It was still in the drawer. Wynna retrieved it and added Mary Alice's name to the list. Then, she left the library and locked it.

As she passed the barns, she noticed one of the doors open slightly and then shut. She paused and walked over to it; she leaned her head against the door and listened. There were no sounds coming from inside so she continued on her way. Inside the barn, Dominic had been holding his breath waiting for her to leave, and he counted every one of her footsteps as they crunched down the gravel walk between the buildings till he could no longer hear them. He drew a sigh of relief and chided himself for his being careless. To avoid being detected, he would have to wait until nightfall to seek fresh water and food. His stomach growled in protest, and he decided that the best thing to do would be to distract himself by continuing his search in the barn for objects of interests, some of which might prove valuable should he decide—in his desperation to fund the California trip--to steal them.

Wynna went to Mary Alice's house to give her the book and to apologize. When Mary Alice opened the door, she could tell that something was terribly wrong. Mary Alice had been crying. Wynna entered the foyer and put the book down on the table.

“Oh, Wynna. I have to tell you something,” said Mary Alice sniffing.

“What's wrong?” asked Wynna. Mary Alice looked around the foyer nervously as if she feared

being overheard.

“Not here,” she whispered and gestured for Wynna to follow her outside. Wynna went with her and followed as Mary Alice headed to a bench near the barns in the commons. They sat down together.

“I know you don't like it when I talk about him, but I'm so worried about Dominic,” began Mary Alice. Wynna smiled weakly but nodded. Mary Alice continued, “Dominic hasn't been at school all week, and on Friday, the police came to the school looking for him.”

Wynna did not know what to say to her friend. She kept her suspicions on what Dominic may or may not have done to warrant the attention of the police to herself. Instead, she said, “You know you can tell me anything.”

“I know,” said Mary Alice, “Still, I can't help but worry about him. He must've run away. Oh, Wynna, he could be starving to death! If he were here right now, why I'd do anything to help him.”

“Anything?” a boy's voice interjected itself into their conversation. It came from the vicinity of the barn.

Wynna and Mary Alice ran over to the door of the barn through which someone quickly yanked them. The door closed behind them.

“Dominic!” said Mary Alice in delight. He clasped his hand over her mouth and gave her the quiet sign. Wynna stood in front of them with a slight scowl on her face.

“Hi, Wynna,” said Dominic.

“Hello, yourself,” replied Wynna.

“Something wrong?” asked Dominic who seemed genuinely surprised at her response.

“Yeah, I know what you think of me so don't act all cool like nothing has ever happened,” said Wynna.

“All right. I won't. But, what exactly happened?” asked Dominic smiling.

“You and your friends have made fun of me so much at school. Did you think I wouldn't notice?” asked Wynna.

“We did?” he asked her in a bewildered voice, “When?”

“In the cafeteria, every day at lunch,” said Wynna.

“The cafeteria?” he said and was lost in thought for a minute. Then, he snapped his fingers and said, “You always sit at the second to last table by the food service door, right?”

“Yeah, so?” asked Wynna suddenly curious.

“Never bothered to look behind you, did you. We weren't laughing at you, Wynna. Every day at lunch, Nathan Kidman would pull some stunt like blowing jello through his nose or building a tower out of mashed potatoes. You know, he was an attention-junkie. But, he was funny, so we all watched him to see what he would do. Sure, we laughed. You would've too if you had bothered to turn around. Besides, none of the guys would have dared to make fun of you in front of Jimmy Best. He's had a crush on you since last year.”

Wynna's face turned beet red, and she was glad that the barn was dark. Mary Alice giggled and then whispered an apology. Dominic continued, “I wouldn't have let any of the guys talk trash about you either, Wynna. I don't believe in doing that kind of thing. It's stupid.”

Mary Alice beamed at him and then interrupted, “Dominic, what can we do to help you? What happened?”

“First, promise me that you won't let them find me,” he said. Both girls nodded in agreement. Then, he continued, “My sister left town, and I had nowhere else to go. I have to go to California to find her. That's why I came here. It's the easiest and cheapest way out of town.”

“I never thought I'd say this, but I'm going to help you,” said Wynna, “Tonight, when the neighborhood quiets down, come to the back of my house. I have a tree house there where I've been staying since the Summer. I'll leave food, water, a sleeping bag, and a pillow out by the deck for you.”

I'd let you stay in the tree house, but it's too risky. Besides, if we were caught, my brother would never let us live it down."

"I'm fine here," said Dominic and then he added, "Thanks, Wynna. I mean it."

"You're welcome," she replied smiling then she grabbed Mary Alice's arm and said, "We'd better go before we give him away." Mary Alice reluctantly agreed and left with Wynna. Fortunately, none of the neighbors noticed their activity as it wasn't unusual to see children in the commons.

When Wynna and Mary Alice returned to the Stewart house, they gathered the needed supplies and took them to the tree house. Then, they went back inside to prepare themselves a snack.

"I feel guilty sitting here eating this when Dom's out there starving," said Mary Alice morosely. She put a chip back in the bowl. Wynna was about to answer her when someone knocked on the front door. When Wynna answered it, she saw Carl standing on the porch. He had a book with him; it had a black mask on the cover.

"Hi, you busy?" he asked.

"No, come on in. You can meet Mary Alice," said Wynna as she stepped aside to allow him to enter.

"Hi," Mary Alice greeted him from the doorway of the kitchen. She was visibly impressed with his appearance which made him ill-at-ease.

"I'm Carl," he introduced himself, "I just moved here."

"To the mansion. I know. Welcome to Skylark. Like it so far?" Mary Alice asked him.

"It's different. I'm used to city-living," he admitted.

"Did you live in Aberdale?" asked Mary Alice.

"Yeah, with my mom in her condominium," he replied.

"My mom has a shop in Aberdale; it's called The Black Rose Boutique. Heard of it?" asked Mary Alice.

"Yes, my mother used to shop there...a lot," he said. Then, he changed the subject, "So, what's up? What are you doing?"

The girls exchanged glances and then said, "Just come with us." They went to the tree house and told him all about Dominic and his troubles. After hearing the story, Carl wanted to help, too.

"He can't keep hiding in that barn. Somebody's going to find him," said Carl and then he said, "Ask him if he wants my help. I can hide him on the estate. My suite is huge and nobody comes to bother me there. Dad's almost always working away from the house, and I have the run of the place because there are no live-in staff yet. By the time we need to worry about that kind of thing, Dominic will be on his way to California to find his sister. Wish I could go with him. Sounds like an adventure."

"Write him a note. Tell him where to contact you if he wants to take you up on your offer. I can put the note with the supplies. He's coming to get them later tonight," said Wynna.

"He's not staying at the tree house, too," Carl said in more of a statement than a question. Mary Alice raised her eyebrow but Wynna pretended not to notice.

"Oh course not," Wynna replied with a smile, "You jealous?"

"Jealous? Me? No...I..." sputtered Carl. Both girls laughed and he joined them and then said, "Maybe, a little bit."

"Good," said Wynna and she patted him on the back. Then, she noticed the book that he'd brought with him.

"Cool, can I see this?" she asked him. Before he could answer her, Mary Alice looked at the oven clock and said that she had to head home. Her mother was taking her into town for a haircut. Wynna let her out the back door and then turned her attention back to Carl's book.

"It's a journal. Oh, great. A key," she said as she handed it back to him.

“I was planning to give it to you,” he said.

“Don't you want to use it?” she asked him.

“Nah, I don't write well and have nothing to say worth noting in a book,” he said laughing.

“I have an idea. Why don't you and I write back and forth to each other using this book. I can help you with the spelling and stuff. What do you say?” she asked him.

“I guess that would be all right,” he replied and then he added, “You take it first.”

“As you wish. Here. Make that note for Dominic,” she said as she handed him a sheet of paper and a pencil. Carl scribbled down the invitation and advised Dominic to knock on the window which he indicated in a crude sketch of the manor. Wynna took the note and put it with the supplies that she had gathered. Carl said that he had to go home; he had to finish some Math homework. She walked him to the front door.

“See you later,” she called to him as he went down the walk.

“Later,” he said in reply with a wave in her direction.



## Chapter Nine

After being discovered by Wynna and Mary Alice, Dominic resumed his search of the contents of the barn. He had gleaned a few items and put them in his backpack for safe keeping. Chief among them was a diary, a distressed brown leather book embossed in gold with the initials, S. K. Inside the diary, Dominic had discovered a paper sleeve containing a map bearing landmarks from what appeared to be the surrounding area. There was a symbol—a small black hand--on what appeared to be a stone circle hidden in the woods of the estate. Secretly, Dominic hoped that the map would lead him to some kind of treasure. Treasure that could be exchanged for monies plentiful enough to secure a good life for his sister and himself. Wynna and Mary Alice might be able to help him find it; he assumed that their knowledge of the neighborhood included the estate property.

Later that evening, Dominic stole out of the barn and went to the Stewart's house. He found the supplies—along with Carl's note—beside the deck as Wynna had promised. As stealth as a cat, he slinked back to the barn with the supplies. He read Carl's note by lantern light. Carl's option seemed the best idea, so he shouldered his backpack and carried the sleeping bag and pillow along with him in case he needed them. Using Carl's drawing of the manor house as a guide, Dominic located the window indicated on it and knocked softly on the pane. Presently, he saw the curtains stir and then draw aside. A boy's face appeared in the window. He smiled at Dominic and held his hand aloft as if to tell him to remain by the window. After some minutes, the boy rounded the corner of the house to meet Dominic.

"I'm Carl. Come on, let's get inside before anyone notices us," the boy said quietly as he motioned for Dominic to follow him. Once inside the great house, Dominic nearly stopped in his tracks at the grandeur. In front of them, a corridor stretched on for what appeared to be an infinite distance, with doors bordering it at intervals on either side. The corridor was dimly lit with hanging lanterns suspended from the ceiling by massive, ornate chains. Dominic feared that the slightest sound made in such a place might carry for miles so he stayed rooted to the spot in the stone floored entrance.

"Come on. This side of the house isn't finished yet. Nobody comes here. Relax. Follow me," said Carl. Dominic did as he was told. The boys were just entering an adjacent corridor when the sound of footsteps on stone made it clear that Carl had been mistaken.

"Carl? Is that you?" called his father.

"Yes, it's me. Just couldn't sleep," called Carl as he motioned for Dominic to step into an alcove and hide in the shadows there.

Emery Edmund stood in the hall entrance. The light from behind him cast his shadow—a looming gray giant—over the stones of the hallway floor and walls. Carl smiled at him.

"Carl, you may go anywhere in this house that you wish except for the room at the end of this hallway. Is that clear?" said his father sternly and then he added, "It's the room with the red door there. It's locked. The room and its contents are my business and mine alone. That is to be understood and respected completely."

"Yes, sir," replied Carl.

His father's face relaxed into a smile and then he motioned for Carl to come to him. Carl did

not dare to look in Dominic's direction. He had no choice but to abandon his new friend to the shadows and follow his father as he was bidden. Dominic sank into the shadows and clutched his sleeping bag to him. He watched helplessly as the two figures departed leaving him alone in the massive, unfamiliar house.

Their footfalls grew fainter and fainter. The silence of the hallway was that of a curious animal watching prey from a vantage point in the wild. Dominic had no intention of spending the entire night huddled in the shadows of the alcove.

He explored the hallway and began to try doorknobs to see if any yielded to turning. He paused in front of the red door. It was painted a bright, brick red, and it had a shiny brass door handle--the kind that did not turn like a knob but rather latched and unlatched with a press of the mechanism built into the handle. The door was clearly substantial—on the threshold of something valuable. He ran his hand over the grain of the wood. His hand came to rest on the door handle, but he did not even try to open it as Carl's father's words were fresh on his mind.

He chose to enter a room that was unlocked several doors down from the red door. Once inside, he flipped the switch and found that the lights were in working order. The room was empty, and its window faced out toward the anterior gardens. To his left, he saw another door and opened it. It led to a private bath. He closed his eyes and uttered a grateful prayer. Before taking a hot shower, he spread out the sleeping bag and adjusted the pillow. He also filled his water bottle from the tap and placed it beside his bedroll after taking a long drink from the bottle. Then, he got settled in for the evening. After the bath, he opened his backpack and retrieved the diary. He pulled out the map and spread it out across his lap. As soon as possible, he planned to hunt down the landmarks inscribed upon it and with it discover the location of that odd stone circle.

Setting the map aside, he turned to the contents of the diary. After scanning the entry pages, he came across a page that had a colorful sketch of a white cobra—the scales of which had been enhanced to look like opals. Inserted in the forehead of the cobra was a massive red stone. Rays were emanating from the stone in a circular pattern like that of a sun. Encircling the cobra was a circle etched with a hand similar to the one that he had seen on the map. He studied the drawing for a long time. A flash of insight revealed to him that the stone might be the treasure. Rubies were red. Perhaps, there was a massive ruby buried in the location of the circle. His heart began to beat rapidly at the thought of how much a stone like that would be worth, then he chided himself for getting his hopes up and decided not to dwell on the possibilities as the disappointment could be just as great as the potential discovery at the site. He closed the diary and retrieved the map to study it.

He fell into a dreamless sleep with the map still open across his chest. Someone's merry whistling in the corridor woke him later the next morning. He opened the door a crack and peered into the hallway to see Carl who was carrying a large tray laden with breakfast items. Dominic invited him into the interior of the room with a sweep of his arm and a deep bow.

“Sorry about last night. I see you managed to find a place to sleep at least,” said Carl as he placed the tray on the floor between them.

“That and a hot shower,” said Dominic with a smile, “There were towels but no soap or anything but still it was nice.”

“I'll get some stuff for you. Every time I go to the dentist I get a free toothbrush. I'll bet Dad's is the same way; he's probably got loads of ones he never even opened the packages of tucked in one of the drawers of his bath. I'll check for you later,” said Carl as he ate a bite of toast. He glanced over at the sleeping bag and noticed the map.

“Let me show you that. It's interesting. Plus, I think it's a treasure map of some kind. Check it out,” said Dominic. He handed Carl the map. Carl studied it and said that he didn't recognize any of the places indicated on it but admitted that he hadn't taken the time to explore the estate grounds.

"I'll bet Wynna knows where these places are; you should show her this," said Carl.

"How am I going to do that?" asked Dominic laughing as he took the map from Carl.

"We could meet the girls in the woods...at night," said Carl.

"They won't do it. I don't believe they will sneak out of the house," scoffed Dominic.

"They might. If they thought it would help you get to California," replied Carl.

"Maybe. Hey, thanks for breakfast...for everything really. I was seriously getting hungry, and I was pretty much a rat-in-a-trap in the barn out there," said Dominic as he gestured in what he presumed to be the direction of the commons.

"It's not like we don't have the room here," said Carl with a quiet laugh.

"This place is unreal," admitted Dominic.

"Shhhhhh, someone's coming," cautioned Carl. Both boys sat still as they heard footsteps approaching. Someone stopped just down the hall from them. Carl knew that it was his father and that he was standing in front of the red door. He could not resist a glimpse into the hallway. Carefully and quietly, he edged the door open wide enough to allow a view of the red door and that end of the hallway. His father's back was to him. He saw his father produce a key from his pocket and unlock the door. Then, the red door opened just wide enough for his father to slip through it. In the brief time that it remained open, Carl caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a light-infused pattern of water shimmering and dancing on the walls of the room. The scent of sandalwood incense hung briefly on the air as if it had come within the forbidden room. Even with those clues, it was impossible for Carl to discern what his father might be hiding in the room or why it was so important to his father that it be kept a secret in the first place. Carl closed the door and joined Dominic in finishing their meal.

As they ate, Dominic showed Carl the things he had discovered in the diary and on the map. Carl agreed that the treasure was likely a ruby of considerable value. Carl set his plate aside and picked up the diary. He scanned the pages following the one depicting the serpent. In his reading, he came across an entry that mentioned a stone—something called the Eye Stone. He showed the entry to Dominic. Then, he continued to skim the pages. He found one other reference in the book to the stone, it was mentioned on a page fragment--obviously torn from another book--that had been inserted into the diary. The fragment indicated that the stone had been discovered by someone in the Middle Ages in Europe—though it was not believed to be of European origin but rather hailing from an ancient civilization located in the Indus Valley, and it was believed to grant the owner special powers including precognition—advance knowledge of future events. Dominic let out a low whistle, but Carl raised his hand in warning as his father might be within hearing distance of them.

Quietly, they finished the meal. They waited till the sound of Mr. Edmund's footsteps again indicated that he had left the area. Then, they ventured out together.



## Chapter Ten

Jack heard the truck's engine rev up as he rounded the corner of the estate drive. The window on the driver's side was down and through it, he could see Stone's scowling face aimed in his direction.

"Bout time," Stone mumbled, "Trucks loaded. Hop in."

"Stuff's all stacked outside the barn. Won't take more than a few minutes to load," offered Jack.

The truck was soon filled with the boxes from Ingeldell's workshop. The men exited Einselmann Road and entered the main highway heading back to Aberdale. Behind them, ominous dark clouds loomed over the neighborhood.

"Winds blowing it away from us. Don't worry. You'll get your beauty sleep," said Stone.

"Funny," said Jack and he rolled down the window to let the breeze blow into the cab.

They entered the Aberdale city limits, went through the drive-through window of a hamburger restaurant, and drove the truck to the parking lot adjacent to Trista Edmund's condominium complex. Then, they walked across the street to the storage center. The place had obviously been secured for the evening. Stone punched in the security code on the main gate which opened easily, and both men slipped inside closing the gate behind them. They walked to the back of the center and stopped in front of one of the last storage units. Stone flipped open the key pad on the door and typed in the code. The unit's door lifted to allow them entry.

The interior of the unit was spacious and had only a few boxes and furniture pieces stored within it. Two sleeping bags were spread across the floor of the unit. Clearly, someone had been living within the shed for some time. Stone peeled the foil wrapper away from his hamburger and began eating. He paused to take a sip of his soda. Jack leaned against the wall by the door and ate his french fries from their grease-soaked paper wrapper. He wiped his face on his sleeve in disgust. Then, he took a sip of his own soda. When he finished his meal, Stone tossed the trash into a bin by the door and went to lay down on his sleeping bag. Jack wasn't ready to sleep. He paced around the room for a moment and finally threw his arms in the air.

"I can't breathe in here," Jack cried.

Stone heaved himself up to sitting and said, "Fine. I'll let you out for the night but I'm not getting up to let you back in again if you change your mind and can't remember the security code."

"I won't change my mind," promised Jack. He rolled up his own sleeping bag and took it with him outside. Stone closed and locked the door.

Jack climbed onto the roof of the storage unit and spread his sleeping bag across it. Then, he sat down to watch the sunset. Stone had been right about the storm; the night was fair and unseasonably warm. Jack lay down across the sleeping bag and fell asleep under the stars. In the cooling night air, his breath came out in puffs of steam.





## Chapter Eleven

Emery Edmund had arrived early to the neighborhood board meeting in order to set up his presentation. The board held its monthly meetings in the commons library's meeting room. Edmund had a projector set up at the head of a long table. He had set up the chairs around the table and supplied every seating with a handout outlining his proposal for the upcoming Skylark Saturday. Traditionally, the annual event had focused on service projects directed at the various communities within Aberdale. Edmund sought to incorporate a commercial side to the event.

Connor Stewart, Wynna's father, was the board president. He had arrived at the library at the same time as Edmund and helped him bring in his supplies and set up the table. Stewart was reading the Aberdale Daily News when the other board members arrived. Finally, with everyone seated, Edmund cleared his throat to get Stewart's attention and asked, "Shall we begin?"

"Sure, read the minutes, Alison," said Stewart as he folded the newspaper and placed it on the table beside Edmund's handout. After the secretary, Alison DeWitt, finished reading the minutes and they had been entered into the record, Stewart introduced the first item on the board's agenda—Edmund's Skylark Saturday proposal.

Edmund proposed that the two remaining out-buildings on the commons be converted into shops from which residents could sell some of their goods at the event. There would be room in the buildings for at least four or five small shops or stalls which could be reserved on a first-come-first-served basis ahead of the event. He wanted to use the event as a test market and if it proved a success to begin hosting monthly events. Katie Nakamura, the board vice-president, interrupted Edmund and said, "We would lose our non-profit status."

Edmund looked helplessly at Stewart who said, "The man has the floor; let him finish speaking."

Edmund continued to explain that the buildings might qualify for historical status. Althea volunteered as the neighborhood historian to make inquiries in Richmond, Virginia as to the possibility of truth to Edmund's assertion. The board members agreed, at least, to Althea's making the inquiry. Stewart suggested that they hold an additional meeting prior to making a final decision and in the interim canvas the neighborhood for people's opinions on the proposal. In his final comments, Edmund offered to purchase the undeveloped lot from Althea which had been used in the past as parking for attendees of the event. Althea politely declined his offer but did not disagree entirely with his line of thinking.

Later that evening, as Connor Stewart and Althea sat together in the living room of the house, they discussed Edmund's proposal over mugs of tea which they enjoyed by the fire. Ingeldell joined them after she finished sorting the day's mail.

"These two barns are in disrepair and should be either renovated or torn down. If we wait much longer to act, they will be too far gone to restore. I'll do the work of securing their historical markers, and I think we should seriously consider Edmund's generous offer to finance their restoration as a gift to our neighborhood," said Althea.

"I'm sure his offer comes with strings, Althea," said Connor.

“I remember another community debate when a businessman tried to make his contribution to the neighborhood. We wouldn't have a library were it not for Mr. Moreland. Bless him,” she said.

“Mr. Moreland was a wonderful man, mother. We don't know Emery Edmund that well,” commented Ingeldell.

“I know him well enough. Deal with him all the time at the Chamber of Commerce,” snorted Connor and then he added, “Edmund is first and foremost a business man. Keep that in mind ladies, as you make your decision. We'll put this to a vote at the end of the month.”

“Mother, you said that Emery offered to buy your land...the lot next to the Pan's house and garden. I'm not sure that Lynne would be so happy with that arrangement,” remarked Ingeldell.

“I will talk to her about it,” said Althea, “Change scares most people. The unconventional idea is seldom embraced without a certain amount of anxiety. But, can you say that you'd have the career you do otherwise? And, what about this very neighborhood? It took a certain insanity to conceive of making a neighborhood out of an old amusement park. And one that welcomes...even encourages private enterprise to boot. Don't you agree?”

Connor and Ingeldell silently agreed with Althea by nodding their heads in unison and laughing quietly.



## Chapter Twelve

Wynna went from house to house delivering surveys to the residents regarding Edmund's Skylark Saturday proposal. When she reached the Pan's house, she paused at the garden gate. She looked into the garden at the faded rose blooms on the vines and bushes. Seated with his back to her was an elderly gentleman on a black ceramic stool. He was sipping tea from a small ceramic, handle-less cup. Without turning in her direction, he asked, "Little bird on the fence. Why don't you sing?"

Wynna gave a start and then laughed.

He turned to smile at her and said, "Ah, all wild creatures are startled at the point of discovery. Come in. Sit down."

Wynna entered the garden and was immediately overcome by the scent of the roses which had infused the air with their essence even as their Summer glory faded. She could picture the garden at the height of its beauty with the roses all in bloom and insects darting among the plantings.

"Yes, the scent lingers. It is a promise to us that they will return," remarked the man.

"I'm Wynna. I'm supposed to give you this. It's a survey about Skylark Saturday. There's a meeting that you can come to if you want to add anything to the discussion. The date and time are on the survey," she told him. He nodded and took the survey from her.

"Wynna, I am Mr. Pan. Do you know my granddaughter, Robin?" he asked her.

"No, I've never met her," said Wynna.

"She studied so hard while she lived here. I always told my daughter that she should let Robin join the other children who were roaming around in the commons but she disagreed with me. Now, Robin is attending private school in Oregon and living with her uncle at his vineyard. I will see her when I visit in Summer, but I miss her," said the man.

"Father, it is time to come inside now," said a woman who had entered the garden from the house. She took the survey and as she scanned it her face furrowed into a frown.

Wynna introduced herself but the woman said, "I know who you are, Wynna. I am Lynne Pan. Thank you for visiting with Father. He has been lonely since Robin has been away at school. Still, he does enjoy the garden."

"It's beautiful out here. Peaceful," commented Wynna with a smile.

"Let us hope it stays that way," remarked Ms. Pan coldly.

"Please tell your grandmother that I said hello to her," said Mr. Pan as he rose from his garden stool to follow his daughter into the house. Wynna waved goodbye to him and let herself out via the garden gate.



## Chapter Thirteen

Dominic decided that it was too risky--his attempting to meet with the girls in order to discuss the validity of the map and the contents of the diary, so Carl went in his stead. Carl met up with the girls at Wynna's house. He was sprawled across the floor of Wynna's bedroom. She and Mary Alice were pouring over the map. They had no trouble identifying the landmarks indicated on it.

"Well, this has to be the stone trail we found," said Wynna pointing to a broken line on the map that began at the estate lane and entered the woods.

"I can't think of anything else it could be either. According to the map it ends just across this stream here at what looks like some sort of island," mused Mary Alice.

"Of course, my grandmother mentioned an island where she used to go for picnics when she was a young girl. I'll bet it's the same one!" said Wynna excitedly.

"What about the Eye Stone? Have either one of you ever heard of it?" asked Carl.

Mary Alice shook her head and said, "No."

"Well, I did come across a poster in a book about the Einselmann estate when it was still used to host the circus. There was a snake...a white one...and there were red rays shooting out from its forehead like the pattern of a sun. I think it was advertising a fortuneteller," said Wynna.

"Dominic thinks the stone may be a huge ruby," said Carl in an excited whisper.

Jack had been working with Ingeldell in the barn. He had gone upstairs to retrieve Ingeldell's reading glasses for her and overheard Carl's comment through Wynna's open door. He paused in the shadows of the hallway and listened.

"I'm sure it would be priceless," marveled Mary Alice.

"Let's not get our hopes up yet. We don't know if it's buried out there or not. All we have are some clues from the diary and this old map. We don't want to count on its being there for Dominic's sake. Still, it would be wonderful to find it," cautioned Wynna.

The three children made sounds as if they were preparing to enter the hallway so Jack stole casually, quietly down the stairs. As he walked to the barn, he thought about what he'd overheard. So, there might be a treasure buried somewhere on the old estate. That map looked genuinely aged. He wanted a better look at it, and he decided not to mention it to Stone until he knew more about it.



## Chapter Fourteen

The neighborhood residents voted to approve Edmund's Skylark Saturday proposal as a trial run. They wanted the chance to review the event after the fact to see if such an event would be beneficial to the community on a monthly basis. Lynne Pan was the only one who was completely opposed to the idea because she believed that the fumes from the cars and the overflow parking on the lot Althea owned adjacent to her own would damage the flowers in her garden; Pan depended on the flowers in her garden for her business. She sold floral essences from rare and antique roses to makers of perfumes and gourmet candies. The risk to her business was not clear so the rest of the community did not back her negative vote. She was incensed with the outcome. Her negative reaction to the outcome of the vote had become a sore subject with the other residents.

The air was crisp, and Wynna set out at a brisk pace toward the Pan's cottage. A gust of wind whipped through the trees on either side of the road, and Wynna wrapped her sweater tightly around her and ducked her head as she went along. When she reached the cottage, she wasn't surprised to see Mr. Pan's sitting on the porch. He was delighted to see her and invited her to join him on the bench.

"I've brought something to show you," Wynna said smiling with wind-reddened cheeks.

Mr. Pan nodded with interest and set his tea cup down on a small table beside the bench. Wynna retrieved a small leather pouch from her sweater pocket. She extracted several small keys from the pouch and handed them to Mr. Pan.

"I've been collecting keys since I was five years old. This one is my first. I found it in the woods while I was on a walk with my grandmother. I've got hundreds of keys but I have some favorites. In fact, I never take this one off," she said. She showed him the key on the chain around her neck.

"Thank you for sharing some of your collection with me. I wish Robin were here to see it, too. I think you and Robin would like each other. I've told her some things about you. Do you like to write letters? Perhaps, you could write to her, if you have time," suggested Mr. Pan.

"I would love to do that," said Wynna excitedly. Mr. Pan excused himself and went inside briefly. When he returned, he handed Wynna a small piece of paper on which he had written Robin's address in Oregon.

Mr. Pan put his hand on her shoulder as she turned to go and said, "It has meant a great deal to me that you have taken the time to visit me so often. I will miss you, Wynna. My daughter has decided to sell this house and to move to Oregon to work with her brother on his vineyard. It was not an easy decision but I believe it is for the best. It is one way for our family to be together. Do you understand?"

Wynna nodded but was afraid to speak for fear that she would not be able to hold back the tears which were welling up behind her eyes. Finally, she managed to whisper, "But, your garden..."

"A garden does not belong to someone, Wynna. It shares itself with anyone willing to take the time to experience its beauty. Write to Robin," he said.

"I will. I promise," replied Wynna as she waved goodbye to him. When she reached her own house, she sat on the porch and let the news of the Pan's moving sink into her thoughts. She wondered

to what extent her grandmother's support of Edmund's idea for Skylark Saturday had been instrumental in Ms. Pan's decision to leave the neighborhood.



## Chapter Fifteen

One by one, Wynna and her friends slipped away from the bustle of Skylark Saturday to meet in to woods on the estate. Carl stayed at the event until his mother left because he had invited her to attend and felt obligated to visit with her while she was there. He met Wynna, Mary Alice, and Dominic at the stream just where the stone trail was blocked by the tangled foliage. Dominic tossed him a pair of thick work gloves, and together they began the arduous task of uncovering the path. The undergrowth around it was too thick to navigate. They had no choice but to toil until they broke the trail anew.

After an hour of labor, Carl caught sight of a wall of sand and rock looming just beyond the tangled brush. He worked to free more of the view so that he could show the others his discovery. When they saw his progress, they worked with renewed vigor to free the trail completely. Dominic and Carl cleared the path to allow for single-file passage. They went through it and followed the trail where it crossed the stream. Wynna scrambled over the sandy embankment and called to the others below to join her.

“You've got to see this,” she said in wonderment.

They soon joined her where she sat and peered down over the ridge. Below them, there was an island complete with sandy beach and a small grove of trees. Around it surged the stream which disappeared in a dark line through a crevice in the embankment on the other side of the trail. They went down to cross the stream and gain access to the island. The girls found a shallow way across and gingerly waded through the clear water which cascaded over small agate-style stones lining the stream-bed. The boys leapt across the stream and lay on the sand. They were exhausted from all the work of freeing the trail.

Once they had rested, Dominic produced the map from his pocket and they scrutinized it to see if they were close to the stone circle.

“It's here. Just a few feet into these woods on the island,” said Wynna. She got up and brushed the sand from her jeans. Then, she slowly made her way into the trees. Mary Alice and the others followed her. Carl lagged a few feet behind them and had stepped a few feet to the right of the path they were creating as they waded through the undergrowth. Suddenly, his foot struck something hard and screened from view by entwined vines and grasses, He sailed over the object and landed hard on the ground. Mary Alice ran over to him, but he was already at his feet and heading back to the site.

“I think I found it,” he said laughing at his misfortune.

“Are you bleeding?” asked Wynna when she caught up with them.

“No, I'm fine,” he insisted. Dominic was already pulling back the vines and ripping apart the net of grasses that covered the object. As Carl had suspected, it was the stone circle.

“It's a cistern cover,” said Wynna, “They must have used this place as a water supply for the estate.”

“It looks heavy,” said Mary Alice skeptically.

Dominic tried to move it aside and found that it was indeed a heavy stone. He and Carl agreed to come back later with pry bars to attempt to dislodge it.

“At least we found it. We know where it is. And, we know where the treasure—hopefully the ruby--must be,” said Wynna.

Jack had been watching them for some time from behind some foliage on the ridge above. He had to admire their resolve. Still, he wanted that treasure—if it existed—for himself. He decided it was time to tell Stone about it and to plunder the site later that evening before the children had the chance to return. He called Stone on his cell phone to tell him the plan. He was surprised that Stone failed to answer the call. A check of the time on his watch showed that Stone should be en route to pick him up from the estate. They had agreed to split the day's job. Stone would haul away Trista's latest removal and he would deal with Emery's. Then, Stone would pick him up in the truck and head back into town. Jack started back to the estate.





## Chapter Sixteen

Stone was putting the last box in storage from the latest Trista Edmund job, when the box slipped off the trolley and opened as it hit the ground. Its contents spilled over the ground in front of him. There were rolls of cash, a diamond necklace, several large-carat gem cocktail rings, and a slew of jewelry items that were obviously solid gold and of custom design. He trembled as he surveyed the spoils.

There was no time to include Jack. He had to pocket the loot and get out of town. The boy would be fine. Stone reassured himself that Jack had made plenty of connections at Skylark and that his leaving him would actually be doing him a favor. In minutes, he had his belongings cleared from the shed and the loot from the broken box packed into his truck. He set off down the road without even bothering to inform the manager of the center of his resignation. Though, he did pitch his cell phone into the storage shed that he had shared with Jack. He figured Jack would get the message.



## Chapter Seventeen

When Wynna, Carl, and Mary Alice returned to the Skylark Saturday event in the commons, they were surprised to see that there were still so many people walking around the shops and visiting the booths. Wynna had gone around the neighborhood that week with Mary Alice and collected books for the book sale. They piled the books into a wagon and brought them to be sorted by volunteers at the library in the commons. Althea waved to them from where she sat at the table outside the library. There were few books left on the display; Wynna assumed that plenty of money had been raised for the three schools serving the neighborhood.

Carl walked over to Wynna and pulled her aside. He said, "There's a problem. We need to talk."

"Sure, let's go over here away from the crowd," said Wynna. They stood by one of the trees near the library.

"I overheard some men talking about when they cleared out those barns to make room for the shop stalls. They said that some stuff had been moved around in one of them and that some things were missing," said Carl.

"Well, I guess Dominic was looking for things to sell so he could get to California," said Wynna.

"That's not all. They found his school identification tag. The one with his photo on it. Wynna, they know he's here in Skylark. They've called the police," said Carl.

"We have to act tonight then. There's no time to lose," said Wynna. She went in search of Mary Alice to break the news to her, and Carl went back to the manor house to warn Dominic.

Wynna found Mary Alice at her mother's shop stall in one of the barns. Ironically, it was the same barn in which Dominic had sought refuge. Mary Alice was helping her mother sort clothing by size on a hanging rack. She smiled as Wynna approached.

"Hi, M.A.," said Wynna as she discreetly gestured with her hand for Mary Alice to follow her outside so they could talk without being overheard.

"Go on, I'll manage," teased Cait McCarthy as her daughter hesitated.

"Thanks, Mom," said Mary Alice and followed Wynna outside.

When she heard the news about Dominic, Wynna feared that her friend would faint. She told her to keep her cool for Dominic's sake. They would meet that evening back at the cistern and find the treasure. Then, he would sneak out of town by following the main highway as far as he could and then hitching a ride from there to California.

"I don't like the idea of hitchhiking," said Mary Alice.

"Don't get cold feet now. We're so close," said Wynna.

"I know," said Mary Alice, "That's what worries me. Wynna, what will he do if there's nothing there?"

"It has to be," replied Wynna.

Both girls rejoined Mary Alice's mother in her boutique stall. Cait could tell that something was bothering her daughter, but she did not like to interfere with her daughter's relationships. She knew

from past experience that Mary Alice usually confided in her when she needed advice.

When her mother was standing several feet away from them and chatting with a customer, Mary Alice held up a pink floral shirt and said, “Oh, this is so pretty. I wish I could wear it.”

“I thought you only wore black,” said Wynna in surprise.

Mary Alice glanced around the barn nervously and then whispered, “Promise you won't tell?”

Wynna nodded and Mary Alice continued, “Pink is my favorite color. All my clothes have been black because Mom misunderstood something about the first designs I drew when I was five years old. I was using a black crayon and there was this word written in French, noir—which means black. I wrote the word, noir, on the top of the page with the clothing sketches. I guess Mom thought that was what color I wanted them to be. She was so happy when she gave me the clothes based on my designs that I didn't have the heart to tell her the truth.”

“So, you've worn black ever since,” said Wynna with a painful smile.

“Yeah, pretty much,” said Mary Alice.

“Ever going to tell her?” asked Wynna.

“Yeah, well...no...maybe...eventually,” admitted Mary Alice.

Wynna just laughed and went back to sorting the clothing into piles.



## Chapter Eighteen

Jack gave up on waiting for Stone at the manor and headed back into the woods. It was getting late. He was surprised to see that Wynna and her friends were already working on prying the cistern cover off with crowbars. He sat on the ridge above them and watched.

Dogs began to bark in the distance. Carl looked up in concern, but Wynna winked at him and said, “Mrs. Choi. She raises Belgian Shepherds. They howl at the moon sometimes; you get used to it once you've been here long enough. Keep working.”

The barking stopped briefly but when it resumed it was clearly closer than before.

“I don't think that's coming from Mrs. Choi's,” said Mary Alice, her eyes widening with fright.

“It's me they're after. Must've picked up my scent in the barn and now they're tracking it here,” said Dominic, “You should go.”

“We're not leaving you. We'll just have to work faster,” said Wynna and she wedged the crowbar under the widening opening between the cistern and the lid and heaved her weight on it. It began to slide sideways, dislodging itself from the cistern opening. The boys inserted their own crowbars into it and heaved it the rest of the way free. It slid down the sloped beach and came to rest in the shallow stream. Unfortunately, the lid created a dam and the blocked water surged into the island woods from behind where they were working. Dominic grabbed a black wooden box from within the cistern before they were swept out of the woods by the flood. He held the box in one hand and frantically attempted to swim up to the embankment with the other. His friends had already reached its safety and were cheering him on from where they waited.

Jack watched in concern from where he hid as Dominic was pulled underwater from the strength of the current. Instantly, Jack left the security of his hiding place and entered the water to pull the boy out of the current. He hauled Dominic who was still clutching the box to his chest out of the water and up the embankment across from the other children. At that moment, the dogs broke into the clearing. They circled the Wynna, Carl, and Mary Alice, and kept them cornered until the police arrived. One of the officers called off the dogs and another officer went over to check on the children.

“What have we here? Do your parents know that you are out here in the woods tonight?” he asked them as he shone a light on their immediate surroundings.

“This is private property. Do you have a warrant?” asked Carl shivering.

“I've got better, son. The owner called us out here personally. Seems there's been some suspicious activity in the area recently. Some things have gone missing. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that would you?” the officer asked them.

“No,” said Carl.

The officer swept his light across the island to illuminate the bank on the other side. Jack covered Dominic with his body and placed his hand over the boy's mouth in order to ensure his silence.

“Willy, unleash those hounds there. The water's gone back down now. Let's see if they can find that trail again,” the officer said casually as he watched the faces of the children for any sign of reaction.

“No,” pleaded Mary Alice.

The officer motioned for the handler to hold the dogs, and he walked over to her and said, "Well, now. I see someone has decided to be reasonable. Go ahead. Tell me what's on your mind."

"They...they might drown...the dogs, I mean," stammered Mary Alice.

"Um...hum. That all?" the officer replied and then gestured for the handler to release the dogs. When the dogs set off down the embankment, Mary Alice screamed out, "Run! Dominic! Run!"

The officer turned to her in surprise but before he could speak, Jack stood up from where they were hiding on the opposite bank and said, "Call them off. We're over here. This one's a minor and he's hurt. We need help."

The officer called back the dogs, and the men made their way across the island to retrieve Dominic from the embankment. He was still choking on floodwater and was barely conscious when they carried him out of the woods. The other children followed with crestfallen looks upon their faces. Jack carried the box.

Spectators converged onto the drive of the manor. Those who had been cleaning the commons after the event. Neighbors who had been alerted to the activity in the woods by the presence of police cars and the barking of the dogs had gathered to discuss the situation. Emery Edmund pushed his way through the throng to embrace his son, Carl. Wynna's father and Mary Alice's mother came over to check on their respective children. Edmund motioned for the officer to bring Dominic inside the manor while they waited for the ambulance to take him to Aberdale Hospital. Some of the more vocal neighbors had followed them inside and were demanding an explanation. Dominic tried to sit up from where he lay on the sofa and to speak in his defense, but Edmund silenced him.

"Nonsense, boy. Stay where you are. We'll get to the bottom of this in due time and in due course of the law," said Edmund addressing the adults in the room.

"He stole things from the barn. We want them back," complained one of the men.

"It's in the rules here that entering the barns without permission is criminal trespass. This boy needs to learn a lesson. I say send him to jail," commented Eli Stephenson, a neighbor.

"If I may," began Edmund.

"The boy's name is Dominic Kaiser. Anybody here know him other than these three kids?" asked the officer leading the investigation.

"Kaiser?" asked Jack who had been standing at the back of the room. He was still holding the box.

"Yes" confirmed the officer.

"I think I'm his brother," revealed Jack, "My real name is Tobar Kaiser. I'm named after my father. My father took me when I was about Dominic's age and ran off from our mother. I knew that I had a sister named Sasha, but I didn't know that Mom was pregnant when he left her."

Althea entered the house and forced her way through the crowd to stand between Dominic and his accusers. She looked at the crowd and then said dramatically, "Tobar, you look so much like my brother. That box you are holding belongs to me. Give it to me." Jack handed her the box. Then, she addressed the crowd, "Who among you has ever known one day of hunger? Have you ever had to wonder for one minute about your well-being? Haven't you always had a roof over your heads? This young man—whom I believe is my nephew--stole those items because he was trying to get to his sister in California. Yes, Wynna, I overheard your conversation with Mary Alice the other day. Forgive my intrusion but I see now it is for the best that I intervened before a serious mistake in judgment was made."

"Rules are rules," said Stephenson.

"I trust that he still has the items in question," she said as she cast a glance at Dominic who nodded weakly in agreement. Carl ran off down the hall to retrieve the bag.

When Carl returned with Dominic's backpack, Stephenson reached out to take possession of it

but Althea intercepted the bag.

"I think you will find, Mr. Stephenson that some of the contents of this backpack belong to the boy and to me, as well. As I suspected," said Althea as she drew out the leather book and continued, "My mother, Sasha's, diary. Mr. Stephenson are you suggesting that I surrender this or any other item clearly belonging to my family to you?"

"Well, no, I..." he stammered.

"And, as all of the items in this backpack can be traced directly to my family and are still indeed owned by my family then they can't be considered stolen as we just found them to be in the possession of one of the members of MY FAMILY," declared Althea, the last portion of which she fairly roared at Mr. Stephenson who sought any sign of solidarity from the crowd and found none.

"But, the boy did trespass..." said Stephenson, "He should be taught a lesson. It will do him good to spend time behind bars thinking about what he has done."

"No, it truly will not," interjected Edmund who had sat silently watching the situation unfold and then he continued, "I know firsthand because I have spent two years behind bars. I was just about one year older than the boy is now. I tried to steal a car. I got caught. In jail, I fell in with an even worse crowd than I was in before I was incarcerated. Almost didn't get my life back together at all. Then, I met someone who made me want to turn my life around, so I did. Mr. Stephenson, this boy has learned more from being on his own than any lesson incarceration could impart to him. I humbly ask you to reconsider your motion to press charges against him."

"I second that request," said Wynna's father, "And, I'm board president so once we vote, it's official."

Lonny Stillwater who volunteered at the Aberdale Youth Center stepped forward and said, "Ay, drop the charges."

"All we say, Ay?" asked Connor as he surveyed the room. Everyone said, "Ay."

"The Ays have it. Motion carried. Now, we can all go home," said Conner. The ambulance arrived for Dominic who reluctantly went with it to the hospital; Althea rode with him.

"Do you think he'll be all right?" asked Mary Alice.

"Are you kidding? He's with Althea," laughed Wynna.

"I see your point," said Mary Alice.

The crowd dispersed. The clean-up crew for Skylark Saturday finished cleaning the commons as best they could in the late-hour darkness. The rest went home for a few hours of rest.

Carl sat in his father's study in a brown leather chair by the fireplace. His father came into the study and handed him an invitation to a charity event.

"I don't normally attend these things but I will make an exception for this one," said his father with a smile. Carl opened the letter and read the invitation.

"It's an auction. Mom's hosting an auction featuring all the loot from all those shopping sprees and the money is going to the Aberdale Youth Center," said Carl as he read the invitation details.

"She told me that she met Lonny Stillwater at Skylark Saturday and decided that she could help him with fund-raising. I hope this is part of a permanent life change for your mother, Carl," said his father quietly, "I loved her very much. She stood by me at a time when nobody else was willing to give me a chance."

"I hope this works for her, too. Is Cassidy coming in town for the event?" asked Carl.

"Yes, he'll be there," said his father and then he changed the subject, "Carl, you know that room that I forbade you to enter? The one with the red door?"

"Dad, I didn't go in there. I respect your privacy," said Carl in a concerned voice.

His father smiled and patted him on the back. As he turned to go, Carl stopped him and said,

“If you ever see a black book with a weird black mask with blue eyes on it, please don't open it. I guess you could say that it's my red door...or the next best thing to it.” His father laughed and assured him that he would also respect his privacy.

“I'm going to bed now, I guess. Can I visit Dominic tomorrow?” Carl asked.

“Connor left me a message that Dominic is at their house now. He's fine. I'm sure they wouldn't mind if you went over there tomorrow to see him,” said his dad.

“Great. Well, goodnight,” said Carl as he left the room.

“The sleeping bag and his backpack are in your room,” said his father with a wink.

“Oh, thanks...,” replied Carl from where he stood in the doorway. He was blushing.

His father waved him off as if he wasn't irritated about the situation but rather amused. Carl smiled, nodded, and then went to his apartment in the mansion.



## Chapter Nineteen

The cottage was dark and empty. Wynna stood on the porch and peered into the windows. The curtains hung open to reveal empty rooms within the house. A realty sign was staked in the yard. Wynna left the porch and entered the garden on the side of the house. The vines and bushes were withered. Winter had taken its toll on them. Wynna sank to sit on the stone slab where Mr. Pan's garden stool once stood. It was hard to imagine the garden full of flowers and insects as he had promised it would be in the Spring.

A shadow passed between her and the sun. When she opened her eyes, she saw Althea sitting on the ground next to her. Althea handed her a letter and said, "This came for you today."

Wynna took the letter and said, "It's from Robin!" She opened it and took out some photographs and a folded note. The smiling face of Mr. Pan beamed up at her from one of the photos. He was seated at a table with a girl who looked to be about Wynna's age. In an instant, Wynna knew the girl was Robin. Mr. Pan and Robin were snipping herbs and weaving them into wreaths; they looked happy to be working together.

"Robin says her grandfather's health is improving. There is a river and park close by and he goes with her there almost every day. They fly kites together. I'm sure he likes that," said Wynna as she read the letter.

She handed Althea a photo and said in delight, "Her bedroom is incredible! Just look at her collection. She has so many wine corks. Jars full of them. She collects them like I collect keys." A shelf constructed of wine casks ran floor to ceiling, and Robin had a bunk bed that was built into the wall in her bedroom in the winery. Althea handed the photo back to Wynna who slipped it and the other photos back into the envelope with the note.

"Did Edmund force them out?" Wynna asked her grandmother suddenly.

"No," said Althea, "It was Ms. Pan's decision. She is old fashioned. Believes in traditional family interactions. She wanted her brother to be closer to their father to help her with his care. She wanted to be with her daughter. She also saw change was coming and decided to flee the inevitability of it to something more familiar. Her family. Her culture."

"But the garden," lamented Wynna.

"I'll do my best to see that it stays in good shape," said Althea.

"You will?" asked Wynna.

"Of course, I grew up in this house, Wynna. I helped my mother plant every rose in this garden," revealed Althea.

"I didn't know that!" exclaimed Wynna.

"Still, I'll need some help taking care of it. I've bought it back, but I am getting on in years," said Althea.

"I'll help you, grandmother," said Wynna.

"Wynna, I've decided to be Dominic's guardian. Jack wants to go after their sister in California. Wayn plans to search for her with him. Dominic needs to get back to school. Do you mind if he helps me out, too?" asked Althea.



“Of course, not,” said Wynna, “Do you think Robin would be allowed to visit me here?”

“Mr. Pan told me that she would like nothing better,” said Althea.

“Mr. Pan?” asked Wynna.

“Wynna, do you think you are the only one in this family who writes letters? Silly girl,” Althea said as she ran her fingers over Wynna's mop of brown curls. Then, she added, “I'm sorry that we haven't had time to plan much by way of a party for your birthday. Things have been so hectic around here.”

“I know, grandmother. It's all right,” said Wynna and she leaned her head to rest on her grandmother's shoulder. Then, she added, “I would just like a cake and some time to hang out with my friends.”

“I believe your friends are arranging something special for you exactly along those lines. Though, I have been sworn to secrecy about the exact details,” said Althea.

They left the garden together. Althea went to the library in the commons to check on her scheduled volunteer. Wynna headed to the tree house



## Chapter Twenty

Carl was the first to arrive at the party. When Wynna answered the door, he thrust a wriggling, whining Belgian Shepherd puppy into her hands and said unceremoniously, “A new addition courtesy of Ms. Choi's Belgians, Happy Birthday.”

Wynna snuggled the fuzzy tan and black puppy to her chest, and it buried its nose under her hair and whined.

“What's that you're whispering?” Wynna asked the quivering pup.

“Great name for a dog... Whisper,” commented Mary Alice who had entered the house via the kitchen door. Wynna turned her head to speak and said, “Really? I was thinking of Nicole.” Carl shook his head as if to veto the idea. He mouthed the name, “Whisper,” and gave her a thumbs-up sign.

Wynna did a double-take when she saw Mary Alice and realized what she was wearing; it was the pink floral blouse that she had admired at her mother's boutique stall. Wynna smiled and nodded. Mary Alice nodded back as if they were sharing a private joke. Before Wynna could respond, Dominic came through the door to the kitchen and called out, “No peeking. Almost ready.” When he saw Mary Alice, he paused and said, “Nice shirt.” Mary Alice's face turned bright red. Dominic smiled broadly at her and excused himself back to the kitchen.

He had been decorating the cake for Althea. When it was complete, he called them all in for the viewing. Wynna was thrilled to see that the cake featured a picture of her tree house depicted in colored icing.

“Dominic, it must've taken you hours,” said Wynna admiringly.

“Four, to be exact, if you include the baking time,” laughed Althea and then she added, “No animals in the house, especially not in the kitchen!” She took the puppy from Wynna and carried it out to the tree house. Then, she returned to the kitchen.

“Wynna, follow me, please,” Althea called her away from the others.

Wynna raised her eyebrows in surprise but did as she was told.

Althea closed the door to the study behind them and said, “Wynna, I am entrusting you with something that has been in our family for generations. You are never to open it. We must be clear about this. It is one thing to be apart from your people, from your family. It is entirely another to break their trust.”

“I won't disappoint you...or them...grandmother,” said Wynna. Althea removed the lid from the age-worn, blackened wood box which they had retrieved from the cistern. She reached inside it and took out a stained linen-wrapped almond-shaped object that was nearly six inches in length but had no other discernible feature.

Althea handed it to Wynna who noted that it was quite heavy and said, “Put this in a place where it will not be disturbed.”

“I know the perfect place,” said Wynna. She left her grandmother and took the linen-wrapped object upstairs to her room. When she reached the spiral staircase leading to her loft, she knelt beneath it to gain access to the cabinet. For a moment, she held the package in her hand and was fighting the urge to open it to see if she were indeed holding the fabled Eye Stone. Then, she recalled Althea's

words and knew that she would not break her trust even though Althea's reasons for secrecy were not apparent to her. From around her neck, she removed the key on the chain and unlocked the cabinet. Inside was the black journal that Carl had entrusted to her. She realized that they hadn't made the time to begin their correspondence. She removed the book and placed the wrapped object inside the cabinet in its stead. Then, she shut the cabinet door and latched it. She replaced the key around her neck and took the book over to her desk. After the party, she promised herself that she would write him a thank you note for the puppy in the book.

She went downstairs and rejoined her friends for some cake. While they were finishing the cake, Wynna's mother came inside from her workshop. She asked everyone to follow her to the barn. Once outside, they could see that the doors to the building were propped open wide; something large and covered in a black tarp was standing in the center of the room. Jack was leaning against the object, and he was grinning broadly.

"I thought you and Wayn were in California!" cried Wynna. She ran up to Jack and hugged him. Her brother, Wayn, stepped out from behind the object and swept her up in his arms.

"We wouldn't miss your birthday, sis," he teased her. They explained that they were in town to follow up on some leads about Sasha's whereabouts. There was a possibility that she had returned to Aberdale on her own and was searching for Dominic.

Ingeldell walked over to the tarp and motioned for Wynna to join her. Then, she said, "Go ahead, unveil it."

Wynna yanked on the tarp and it slipped off the object. The tarp glided gently to the floor. A gleaming red machine embellished with polished brass gargoyle faces stood in front of her. In bold gold script across the top of the machine were the words, "The Guardians of Skylark," and beneath the script was an engraved plaque which bore the dedication: "Dedicated to the children who keep watch over each other's dreams and who make sure those dreams come true."

Jack flipped Wynna a quarter. She slipped the coin into the slot at the back of one of the gargoyle's throat. Then, she twisted its tongue around and heard the coin fall into the machine which sprang to life in a clanking, ringing, and gear-grinding animation. Presently, a gold foil-wrapped candy ball rolled down a chute inside the machine and came to rest in the open mouth of a second gargoyle. The teeth of the gargoyle prevented the candy from rolling off the gargoyle's tongue. Carefully, Wynna reached inside and retrieved the sweet. Then, she unwrapped it and popped the candy into her mouth.

"It's a rose or something sugary like a rose," said Wynna as she tasted the candy. Jack gave the rest of the crowd some coins and soon everyone was commenting on and savoring the unusual mixture of sweetness and floral tastes. Althea explained that the floral extracts had come from Mrs. Pan's business which she had sold to Althea. Althea had worked with another neighbor who owned a gourmet candy business to create the unique treats. Apparently, some of the roses were so rare that there were few left in the world, so—on the market—the candy might prove to be quite expensive.

"Yeah, so don't just spit it out onto the floor if you don't like it," whispered Wayn in a conspiratorial voice to Carl who nearly swallowed his own candy in the effort to suppress a laugh.

"Mom, are we keeping this machine?" asked Wynna.

"Yes, but I think it is the beginning of something new and viable. Hopefully, other people will like my designs, too. We'll see what happens. Now that I have Jack to help me with the mechanics of assembling them, the work goes much faster. I can produce more of them in less time. He has a few ideas of his own that we are going to try. Of course, he needs to find Sasha first, but there is time," replied her mother.

Mary Alice had left the group and returned with the puppy, Whisper, scampering at her heels.

"She was whining so pitifully in the tree house I couldn't leave her there," she said as she

picked up the boisterous animal.

“She needs a house of her own,” said Althea and then she added, “Wynna, perhaps you and your friends could build her one. In the meantime, she can sleep out in the tree house with you.”

“That's a great idea,” said Wynna.

Later that evening, Wynna and Whisper retired to the tree house. Once inside, Wynna found two presents that had been left for her as well as a card from her father on the table near the entrance. She opened the gift from Mary Alice first; Mary Alice had designed a pair of fleece pajamas for her so that she wouldn't be too cold in the tree house at night. They were golden yellow with a sun embroidered in orange threads on one shoulder. Next, she opened the gift from Dominic; it turned out to be an acrylic painting of the tree house—the same design he had created in icing on her birthday cake. She was delighted and placed the painting on the low shelf by her bunk bed.; she propped the canvas to rest against the wall.

She changed into the pajamas. Then, she scooped Whisper up in her arms and ascended to the second story. Once she and the puppy were snuggled into the bunk bed together, she opened the card from her father. He had invited her to come on a trip with him anywhere in the world that she wanted to go as his treat. She was overwhelmed by the choices and she chatted to Whisper about it. The puppy hung on her every word but eventually as she talked it drifted off into a deep, contented slumber.

“Poor thing. It's been such a long day for you. I guess I should go to sleep, too. Like mother said today, there is time,” she said as she stifled a yawn.

Outside, flurries of snow began to swirl in the wind. They frosted the fallen leaves and clung to the branches of the barren trees. By morning, the neighborhood would be a white landscape stretching as far as the eye could see in all directions.

