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## **Mrs. Blackbird and the Visiting Chair**

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**MRS. BLACKBIRD AND THE VISITING CHAIR**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Taylor Barnhart

December 2022

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# **MRS. BLACKBIRD AND THE VISITING CHAIR**

English

Missouri State University, December 2022

Master of Arts

Taylor Barnhart

## **ABSTRACT**

The following thesis is a middle grade novel exploring the events of one summer in the lives of two siblings, Susannah and Sawyer. The siblings are grieving the recent death of their mother and, at the same time, attempting to navigate the emotional withdrawal of their father. During the summer, the siblings get to know their eccentric neighbor, Mrs. Blackbird, who communicates with the spirit of her dead husband through an old armchair which is rumored to have magical powers. The novel deals primarily with the theme of grief and its pervasive nature in people's lives. The story looks at how community and the practice of storytelling can help people in processing the pain of devastating loss.

**KEYWORDS:** middle grade, grief, family, storytelling, loss, magical realism, siblings, spirituality

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to the ones I've lost. I loved you. You blessed my life with yours. I'm sorry you had to go.

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## INTRODUCTION

In deciding what kind of project to undertake for my thesis, I was, at first, tempted to continue work on a collection of short stories and prose poems. I preferred, for most of my undergraduate studies at Missouri State, to work on short fiction, as I felt more comfortable crafting plots and sharpening prose in that form. At the same time, I think I was probably outrunning an eventual confrontation with writing a novel. I decided, in the end, that I wanted my graduate thesis project to be a challenge, to require me to work in a form I wasn't used to. So, a novel it would have to be. I was somewhat surprised when the idea for the novel materialized, and I realized that it would be a middle grade narrative. Working on a middle grade novel allowed me a wider scope for applying the skills I acquired during my studies in the Creative Writing program. This critical introduction will explore the central plot and characters of my novel and some literary devices I wished to employ in writing it. The introduction will also encompass some of the craft techniques and specific writers I turned to for inspiration as I worked on constructing the story. I will also touch on some of the personal inspiration behind the story's main themes.

At first glance, the characteristics that define a middle grade story are fairly straightforward. For instance, *Writer's Digest* explains that middle grade fiction is typically targeted at readers aged 8 to 12 years old, that it is mostly free from "...profanity, graphic violence, or sexuality..." and that it tends to "focus on friends, family, and the character's immediate world and relationship to it..." (Lamba). Marie Lamba's article for *Writer's Digest* goes on to discuss some of the subtleties that distinguish middle grade from young adult fiction. While these distinctions are important to keep in mind from a writer's perspective, I also feel that the best novels, whether middle grade or young adult, are capable of having lasting resonance



with adult readers as well as young. In fact, this is part of what motivated me to attempt a middle grade story myself. When I reflect on the books that shaped me most profoundly as a reader, and the books that first made me interested in becoming a writer, middle grade stories are there. Books by Gail Carson Levine, E.B. White, L.M. Montgomery, Roald Dahl, Sharon Creech, and, probably most importantly, Kate DiCamillo, are the books that remain on my shelves as some of the most significant and impactful reading experiences of my life. The enchantment, meaning, and wonder I derived from the books of these writers is something I would love to be able to create in my own work. It was also important to me to keep in mind that the best of middle grade fiction does not shy away from some of the most complex and difficult issues in the human experience. Middle grade fiction may present this subject matter bound up in magic or whimsy, in ways that young readers can engage with more readily, but there is real depth and grit to be found within it, all the same.

The central plot of my novel focuses on eleven-year-old Susannah and her seven-year-old brother, Sawyer, both of whom are grieving the recent death of their mother. The novel looks at the fallout of grief in Susannah and Sawyer's household, particularly its effects on their relationship with their father. Over the course of one summer, Susannah and Sawyer get to know their neighbor, Mrs. Blackbird, an eccentric widow whose front porch becomes a gathering place for friends in the neighborhood. Mrs. Blackbird is caught up in an ongoing grief of her own: the death of her husband, Emilio, years ago. While the children try to learn to cope with their mother's absence, Mrs. Blackbird is known throughout the town for continuing to speak to her husband—his ghost, perhaps?—through the vehicle of what she calls "The Visiting Chair." The chair is kept locked up in a shed and said to be full of a magic that allows Mrs. Blackbird to see Emilio's spirit. Susannah, Sawyer, and their new friend, Jolee, all decide to gain access to the

Visiting Chair in order to have one more chance to speak to their lost loved ones. The novel is, essentially, an extended metaphor of grief and its power to rule our lives if we let it.

John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* was helpful to me in conceptualizing how novels can achieve a lasting sense of emotional resonance. This is one of the keys in middle grade novels in particular, since the writer has a comparatively short space in which to capture and sustain a reader's emotional interest. In the chapter titled "Interest and Truth," Gardner discusses the universal emotional resonance that underlies effective fiction. Gardner explains that these deep chords of emotion may not be immediately recognizable or even explainable, but that we feel them, as readers, through a sense of connection to characters and the universality of their emotions:

But however it may be achieved, in all great fiction, primary emotion (our emotion as we read, or the characters' emotions, or some combination of both) must sooner or later lift off from the particular and be transformed to an expression of what is universally good in human life—what promotes happiness for the individual alone and in society; in other words, some statement on value... (Gardner 63).

Gardner is careful to point out the subtlety of this phenomenon in fiction, noting that "...fiction provides, at its best, trustworthy but inexpressible models. We ingest metaphors of good..." (63). I take from this that Gardner is not advocating that we preach through our fiction or loudly exclaim our deepest-held beliefs. Rather, in this model of fiction writing, the writer is capable of creating a resonance with the reader by weaving honest, believable qualities into his or her characters. The reader feels a sense of authenticity within these characters; despite their fictionality, the characters speak, think, and behave in ways that feel so real to us as readers that we almost inhabit them. That is to say, we see ourselves so much in the characters that, as we learn about their feelings, thoughts, and experiences, we also learn, intrinsically, about our own.

This craft of emotionally resonant, true-feeling characters is one of Kate DiCamillo's greatest strengths as a writer. It is not through preaching or long, didactic passages of narrative that she achieves the lasting, meaningful beauty of her books. Instead, she achieves this through characters such as Despereaux Tilling. Despereaux's character is quietly but earnestly drawn; DiCamillo allows us a close psychic distance to his thoughts and feelings, but she does not overdraw him. She allows him the simplicity of a couple of deeply cherished desires, and she gives him a mission he is eager to pursue. This is one of the gifts of excellent middle grade fiction: its characters are allowed to be simply and honestly exposed. As long as they are drawn with enough nuance of circumstances, enough attention from the writer to make them individual, the comparatively simplistic presentation we get of these characters is more than adequate, and even capable of universal resonance. In *Because of Winn-Dixie*, for instance, India Opal is wounded by the absence of her mother and the emotional withdrawing of her father. These are the central sorrows that motivate her action and behavior throughout the story. Despite the apparent simplicity of this, *Because of Winn-Dixie* remains a novel full of universal emotional resonance. Almost all of its characters carry some kind of personal sorrow. Almost all of them feel isolated or lonely in some way and find company together. Nevertheless, all the characters, even those we meet fairly fleetingly, feel honest and true. Therefore, as the characters interact and learn from one another, we are able to glean universal emotional resonance from their experiences.

Krista Tippett interviewed Newberry-winner Kate DiCamillo in an episode of Tippett's podcast, *On Being*. In the episode titled, "Kate DiCamillo: For the Eight Year Old in You," she sums up the duality of pain and beauty in DiCamillo's work: "With honesty and wisdom, laughter and tears, Kate DiCamillo makes bearable the mysterious fact that hope and heartbreak

live so close, side by side, in real life” (Tippett). Tippett describes Kate DiCamillo’s deft understanding of how much children see and know of the world around them, though adults often think they are capable of shielding children from this knowledge. Tippett says, “They see that people die. They see that people are bad to each other. They know that their parents are fighting...” In response to this, DiCamillo explains, “...the instinct comes from the eight-year-old in me that is just kind of right at the surface for some reason, and it’s the hope and fear of that kid that helps guide me through the stories” (Tippett). This is the essential task of the writer of middle grade fiction: to craft story and character with the skills gleaned from a robust practice of the craft, and, at the same time, to write with the lingering emotional honesty of an eight-year-old. This strange balance is what I aimed for as I worked on the draft of *Mrs. Blackbird and the Visiting Chair*, and it will be my goal as I revise and continue the project.

Katherine Paterson wrote her Newberry Award-winning *Bridge to Terabithia* in part to process the tragic death of her son’s best friend during his childhood. The novel’s central character, Jess Aarons, is confronted with the loss of his best friend, Leslie Burke, who helped him create the magic land of Terabithia in the woods between their two houses. In her Newberry Medal Acceptance speech for the book, Paterson said, “I still mourn for Leslie, and when children ask me why she had to die, I want to weep, because it is a question for which I have no answer” (Paterson 177). This is one of the gifts of the book; it does attempt to answer every question a child might have about death and the nature of loss. Perhaps the novel even raises more questions than it answers. Answering questions is, importantly, not the primary goal of the book. Instead, *Bridge to Terabithia* focuses more on the concept that, like a deep river, grief is something we can get across. It is a raw and terrible experience which a person is, nevertheless, capable of passing through. When Jess builds the bridge at the end of the novel, it is because he

has chosen resilience and a fragile sense of hope in the face of his ongoing loss. He is both in terrible pain and experiencing healing at the same time. He is, essentially, encountering the heavy emotional complexity of human life. Yes, one of Jess's goals is to be "the fastest runner in the fifth grade" (Paterson 2). He deals with problems and desires common to a child of his age: school, making and keeping friends, finding time for his interests and hobbies, wanting to explore the world around him. However, his world is not limited to events and emotions which might be deemed "age-appropriate." Grief does not discriminate according to age. Shouldn't young readers have a place to find reflections of their own true emotional experience?

It is clear within the pages of *Bridge to Terabithia* that its author has experienced the rawness of catastrophe, the staggering, unanswerable sadness of a suffered loss. One of the reasons why this novel remains legendary in the realm of middle grade fiction is that Paterson had the wisdom to understand that children are aware of this grief and, most importantly, that they experience it. Now, adults and children alike can read the novel and feel understood in their pain. The respect that both Kate DiCamillo and Katherine Paterson have for children's emotional experiences is something I hope to practice in my own work.

*Mrs. Blackbird* is written primarily in the first-person singular point of view, but it drifts, at times, into first-person plural, as Susannah describes the experiences she shares with her brother, Sawyer. I had two young voices to keep in mind as I worked on the draft, and I had often to pause, in my adult analysis, to wonder what they might be thinking and feeling as they engaged with the people around them and processed their own grief. Doing this forced me to listen for the voice of my own inner eight-year-old, to have empathy for a part of myself that has long been outgrown. I learned new things as I wrote this draft, not just about the craft of writing a novel, but about my own emotional experience and the nature of grief itself.

In her interview for *On Being*, Kate DiCamillo describes the work E.B. White achieved in writing *Charlotte's Web*: "E. B. White loved the world. And in loving the world, he told the truth about it — its sorrow, its heartbreak, its devastating beauty. He trusted his readers enough to tell them the truth, and with that truth came comfort and a feeling that we were not alone" (Tippett). Within the last year of my life, I have experienced several losses, the first of which was my paternal grandfather, who died after struggling with severe dementia for two years. This was followed by the death of our dog, Maci, who was part of our family for sixteen years. Finally, I lost an old friend from high school to suicide. Attending his funeral was a kind of real-life emotional horror I had never experienced before. It is likely that these losses informed the plot and characters of *Mrs. Blackbird and the Visiting Chair*. Mrs. Blackbird is a character who is stuck in the middle of a grieving process; it looks, at first, as though she may never come out of it. By the novel's ending (which this thesis will not cover), Mrs. Blackbird decides to begin a healing process she never thought was possible. She abandons her obsession with a ghost in order to live more fully herself. I wanted this novel to make room both for sadness and healing; this is what my most treasured middle grade books have done for me, making me feel less alone during seasons of pain or loss and reminding me that hope is possible. It is what I hope my book will do for any who read it.

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"Good-night! good-night! as we so oft have said  
Beneath this roof at midnight, in the days  
That are no more, and shall no more return.  
Thou hast but taken thy lamp and gone to bed;  
I stay a little longer, as one stays  
To cover up the embers that still burn."

~ from "Three Friends of Mine," by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

## PROLOGUE

"Have you heard about old Eleonora Blackbird?" Jim Parker said to his neighbor one day, peering over the brim of the fence.

"D'ya know about that chair she's got? Thinks it's a magic chair that lets her speak to the dead! Yes, ma'am, the dead!" Ms. Ellie Wentworth said to Francie Drake at the bake sale.

"Horrible, tacky thing it is, and who would ever choose that shade of green?" said Francie.

"She's got it all covered in shawls and cheap plastic roses, keeps it out in the shed in her backyard, it's probably rotting away out there," Annie Barker said to her cousin in the grocer's.

"I bet something's nesting in it," Danny Applewhite said while he and Willie Chapman sat waiting for the fish to bite.

"She'll probably be nesting in it 'fore long, the old witch!" Willie laughed.

"I heard she waits until it's dark, lights a candle, sits in that chair and thinks she's talking to Emilio! It's like she thinks she's in church or something! 'Course, we wouldn't exactly do that



kind of thing in church. Can you imagine it?" Betty Winters hissed to her husband just before service started.

"I just can't imagine it," said he.

"Says it's the only thing that keeps her sane, poor dear. She was in the hospital just after he died, you know. Lost her wits for a while. Says she got the idea for the chair straight from the angels. I worry about her, you know, I really do," April Carmichael said with her head under the dryer at the salon.

"It's such a pity," Ramona Sanchez said in the next dryer over. "They were so happy, once, she and Emilio. The parties they used to have! You could stay at their house until morning, and not even know it 'till the sun turned up! Remember how they used to dance?"

And again, and again, they said to one another whenever they spoke of Eleonora Blackbird:

"Remember her singing?"

## **CHAPTER 1: THE STREET AND THE STRANGE GIRL**

One stifling June morning in a summer long ago, we found a strange girl sitting on Mrs. Blackbird's porch. The town of Immaculate, Kansas, was like a magnet for still, sticky heat in the summertime, and although it was only June, already the air was heavy with summer. School had let out the previous week, and the months of freedom seemed to stretch out endlessly ahead of us.

The strange girl was blonde-haired, curly-haired, frizz-haired. Her hair didn't know which way it wanted to go, and it seemed to have decided to just go everywhere. It stuck out in all directions and bounced when she talked, bounced even more when she waved her arms

around or used her hands to paint pictures in the air for Mrs. Blackbird. Her voice was high and soft like cotton candy. I hated the softness of it, and I hated her pink-tinted cheeks and her sweet, shy smile. Mrs. Blackbird, however, must have felt differently. She was nodding at the little frizz-headed thing and smiling real big right back at her.

A lot of people came to sit on Mrs. Blackbird's porch, especially in summer when the days were lazy and long. But until that morning, Sawyer and I were the only kids to sit there. The only two kids on the street. Well, there was the Morgans' new baby, but she wasn't big enough to be sitting on any porches yet.

Sawyer and I went to sit on Mrs. Blackbird's porch every Saturday morning. Sometimes, we stayed there all through Saturday afternoon, or even until the fireflies drifted out from their hiding places. We liked to spend time on Mrs. Blackbird's porch. There was always something interesting going on. There were warm voices to hear. We liked it better at her house than ours.

Mrs. Blackbird knew things about us, now. She knew our Mamma had died last winter and that nothing at home was the same anymore. She knew our Daddy had turned mean and forgotten all the things he used to love in life, including us. She knew he was spending most of his evenings with Dee Louise Smith, who always wore lime-green high heels and sequins and sour purple lipstick. She knew that we hated Dee Louise and that Dee Louise hated us. She didn't know that we were also beginning to hate Daddy. Well, she might have guessed, but she was nice enough not to ask about it.

The point is, Mrs. Blackbird was our Mrs. Blackbird. Her porch was our porch. She had told us so, in her slow, deep voice, her black-lined, violet eyes looking like two big moons hovering above us.

“This porch is your porch now, you hear?” she’d said. “You’re my neighbors. We’ve visited with each other enough now to be friendly. We’ll talk on the porch quite regularly, now, and have a grand old time. And if you should ever need anything, if there’s ever...ah, any trouble at home, you just come right over and knock on my door. Have we an agreement?”

She was like that, Mrs. Blackbird, talking normal one minute and saying something fancy and sounding like literature the next. Mrs. Blackbird loved books. There were stacks and stacks of them in her house, on tables and chairs and slanting like staircases from the floor to the ceiling. We could see them through the windows. I was desperate to go in and look at them all, but no one was ever invited into Mrs. Blackbird’s house. She kept it to herself. The porch was the place for talking and visiting—just the porch.

When she’d said that about her porch being our porch and us being neighbors, she’d turned her violet eyes on us. She’d looked like some kind of towering, wild bird. Towering, graceful, and strange, and we hadn’t known what to do but nod and say “Yes, ma’am, thank you.”

Walking home, we had whispered about it. This porch is your porch. Our porch, we said. We’d felt proud. And sort of special. We had a secret now, a secret good thing, something that was just ours and not Daddy’s. We told ourselves he’d be jealous if he knew, jealous that her porch was our porch, that we’d been invited to sit with all the grownups and look down over the whole street. But we knew the truth. That he really wouldn’t care about it at all.

And now, some twig of a little blonde-headed girl was sitting right on that porch, the porch that was our porch, blabbing away. And Mrs. Blackbird was watching her with interest, nodding along, smiling the way she smiled at us. It was a friendly smile, a smile that said, “What you’ve got to say is just as important as what I’m saying.” It was a listening kind of a smile. Mrs.

Blackbird knew how to make proper iced tea and she made real good lemon cookies, but it was that smile, really, that made people want to take up space on the porch and stay there.

Sawyer and I had got used to being the only two kids on Mrs. Blackbird's porch. Grown-ups don't always make a lot of time for what kids have to say, but on Mrs. Blackbird's porch, everyone got their turn to talk, and when it was somebody's turn, you shut up and paid attention. Only now, it would be me and Sawyer and this new little priss-faced scrap of fluff who was talking a mile a minute.

Well, we would just see about that.

## **CHAPTER 2: JOLEE'S CALAMITY**

Mrs. Blackbird's house stood out like a tropical flower on a street full of brown, gray, and white. It was painted bright turquoise, and it made me think of clear ocean water. Her porch was big and roomy and packed with as many rocking chairs as she could fit on it. Mismatched rocking chairs, some more worn-in than others, with cushions of different patterns tied on the seats. She had always loved to have neighbors and friends around, but especially since her husband, Emilio Blackbird, had died six years ago. Mrs. Blackbird still called herself "Mrs.," even though her husband was dead. If anyone was ever foolish enough to ask her about this, she would look at them with sharp, accusing eyes.

"My husband is not dead," she would say, lifting her chin and looking even taller than usual, "He was taken. Carried away from me on enormous black wings."

That was usually enough to put a stop to the questions.

Emilio was the reason that we hadn't ever been into Mrs. Blackbird's house. All his things were in there, still, and they were precious. She just couldn't bear for people to be looking

at the things and asking questions, because it was too painful for her to have to talk about him. But she couldn't stand to get rid of the stuff, either. So, she kept the inside of the house as just her own. At least, that's what we'd heard. Mrs. Blackbird hadn't told us any of these things herself (except for the "not dead/enormous black wings" part). Emilio was the only subject off-limits on Mrs. Blackbird's porch. She would mention him offhand or by accident, sometimes. But mostly, she only talked about him—or, to him—in the Visiting Chair. The Visiting Chair was off-limits, too. No questions. That was the rule. People liked Mrs. Blackbird's porch so much, and her good tea and her lemon cookies, that they kept quiet about Emilio and the Visiting Chair. At least, in front of her. So did we.

Singing happened on Mrs. Blackbird's porch (that is, we all sang—Mrs. Blackbird didn't). And guitar and banjo playing. And long, meandering conversations that went every which direction. Chess and checkers games happened there, and trivia games, and "Remember when?" games where the grownups would talk about the times when they were young. You could just sit and let it all wash over you, on Mrs. Blackbird's porch. You didn't have to sit up straight or act tough, like at school. People felt a little more free, a little easier in their minds, on Mrs. Blackbird's porch. We did. And, apparently, so did the little stranger who sat there on that Saturday morning in June, chattering on and on.

We were closer to the house, now, me and Sawyer, headed for the porch steps. We could catch some of what she was saying.

"...let her outside sometimes and she's real good never runs away not ever and she sniffs around and barks at birds and gets her paws all muddy, and Mamma hollers at me for letting her get dirty and I have to give her a bath with an old rag and some dish soap, but I don't mind cuz—" she sucked in a great balloon of air and went on, "it's fuunnn, ma'am, so fun and she splashes

and shakes around and I can hardly hold her to wash her and there's water just everywhere and have you ever had a dog?"

Sawyer looked at me as if to say, she sure can talk. Sawyer didn't talk much, himself. He said a lot of things without saying them.

I was surprised that the new girl had warmed up to Mrs. Blackbird so quickly. Mrs. Blackbird could be sort of intimidating when you first met her. She was tall, and her dark hair was pinned up tall on top of her head. Curls of it coiled down around her neck, almost like little snakes or trailing ivy. The black around her eyes made her look like a witch or a fortune-teller, someone who might say things you didn't want to hear. She dressed oddly, too, in long skirts that twirled around her ankles and bracelets that jangled on her arms. She'd told us that she used to work for the circus, and people would come from miles around to see her act.

"It was an exhausting life," she would say, and then smile like she had a secret, "but thrilling."

When you first met Mrs. Blackbird and she looked at you with her violet eyes and her wild snake-hair, you didn't know what to think. But, apparently, none of this had bothered the little stranger, for she was still chattering on at a startling speed, and Mrs. Blackbird was still nodding.

"A dog can be a wonderful gift," Mrs. Blackbird said to the new girl. "Although, I had one, once, who ran off with my favorite pair of silk slippers."

They laughed together, the new girl's blonde curls bouncing, and it was then that Mrs. Blackbird noticed us.

"Sawyer and Susannah! Come on up here and meet our new neighbor. This is Jolee Thompson. She lives on the next street over, just around the corner."

Sawyer and I looked at each other, thinking the same thought. She doesn't live on the street. She's not even a real neighbor!

Mrs. Blackbird saw the look, and her eyes turned from round moons to sharp slits.

"And," she said, with a note of sternness in her voice, "she has recently suffered a devastating personal calamity."

"A personal...huh?" said Sawyer. Sawyer was seven, and didn't like to read much. And none of the books he did read had words like "calamity" in them. I was eleven and couldn't get enough of the contents of the library shelves. I seemed to always be hungry for one story after another.

"A calamity," I said. "It's when something awful happens to you. Something out of nowhere."

Then, to my annoyance, Jolee of the Flouncy Hair nodded solemnly at me, like I'd said that as a favor to her, which I hadn't.

"That's right," she said, and there were tears almost brimming over in her eyes, "That's just how it was. Out of nowhere. Boom."

"Boom," Mrs. Blackbird said, and she was nodding slowly, now, and looking out at the sky above the rooftops of the houses. "This is, indeed, the nature of calamity. Boom."

Sawyer and I were polite to Miss Jolee Flounce-Hair Thompson that afternoon. Mamma had taught us to be polite to strangers, and we certainly didn't want to take after Daddy's new rough manner toward people. But I could tell that Sawyer found her flounce and her chatter somewhat staggering, and I could hardly stand the sight of her, myself. She was an interloper. A

stranger in our midst. A rambling, cotton-candy-talking nobody from the next street over, for crying out loud.

We didn't know what her personal calamity was, yet. Mrs. Blackbird said that "Little Jolee" wasn't quite ready to talk about it. "Little Jolee" was actually nine years old, as it turned out. But she was so small that she looked like nothing but a doll in a giant's rocking chair. She had on a pale blue dress with matching shoes that looked like they didn't have a speck on them. I looked down at my scuffed, dirt-stained sneakers with pride.

The neighbors started arriving on the porch before too long. Mrs. Delaware, looking tired, as she always did, and with her apron tied on backwards. Jonas Engman, in his dusty overalls and boots, carrying his bag of carpenter's tools, his eyes heavy with sadness. Mr. and Mrs. Bailey came hobbling up the steps and sat down in their next-door-to-each-other rocking chairs. And there was Bonnie, who always stopped by Mrs. Blackbird's after her shift at the bakery, and who always wore long-sleeved shirts, even in terrible heat. If you asked her about this, she'd just laugh—a strange, excited laugh that made you want to change the subject.

"Little Jolee" was introduced to everyone and, predictably, they spent the rest of the afternoon fawning over her and listening to story after story about her dog. Daddy wouldn't let us have a dog, but I told myself that this had nothing to do with my distaste for the stories.

After a little while, it was Mrs. Delaware's turn to ask a question. She'd been rocking away in her chair, fanning herself with a paper menu from The Chicken Coop, where she worked most days of the week. Suddenly, she sat up, looked right at Jolee, and said, "Child, does your Mamma know you're here?"

Mrs. Blackbird suddenly started, too, putting a hand on her chest. Her fingernails were painted dark purple, and they gleamed in the sunlight.



“By my stars,” she said to Jolee, “does she?”

With creaks and groans, all the rocking chairs slowed to stillness. Everyone looked at Jolee, waiting for her answer.

“No,” she said simply.

In the rush of noise that followed, none of the grownups heard her say, “But it doesn’t matter.” Only Sawyer and I heard that part.

The rocking chairs scraped and skidded as everyone flew up out of them. Everyone except Mr. Bailey, who was always very slow to stand up or sit down. He just kept on rocking, and said, “Well, damn me!”

“We must get the child home,” Mrs. Blackbird said, “And speak to her mother this instant.”

All the women fluttered around Jolee, each of them trying to pick her up at the same time, so that they sort of half-carried her off the porch, holding on to different parts of her. Jonas just stood there, holding his bag of tools, and looking very uncomfortable, as if he would like to disappear. Jonas looked like that a lot. Mr. Bailey said, “Damn me!” again, and then, “Is there any more lemonade?”

Jonas poured Mr. Bailey some lemonade, looked at us, and mumbled, “Better be going.”

He picked up his bag and headed down the street to his pale-gray house, looking lonely.

The afternoon was over. Who knew when they’d all be back, and I certainly wasn’t going to stick around to hear about how darling “Little Jolee’s” house was or how darling her mother was or how darling she was.

“Let’s go,” I said to Sawyer, and we started the walk back home.

“She’s got to go,” I said to Sawyer as we went, and he looked at me. There was skepticism on his face, and sympathy at the same time, and he looked more like Mamma than ever. Sawyer looked a lot like Mamma. Everybody said so. His hair was honey-colored and curly like hers had been, and his eyes were a clear, light green, like hers were. I wished I looked like her, too. I didn’t really look like Mamma or Daddy. Sometimes, I felt like I didn’t even look like me, didn’t look like anyone. It would have been nice to look like Mamma, like carrying her picture around with me all the time. But nothing about me reminded me of her. Everybody said my red hair and dark blue eyes had come “out of nowhere.” Boom.

Since Mamma died, Daddy had hardly looked at Sawyer, and when he did, he clenched up his fists. Daddy’s fists were clenched a lot, now, the ends of his fingers squeezed white from the pressure. He hadn’t hit anything with them yet. Hadn’t hit us. We didn’t think he would. But there was hot, boiling hurt in his silence toward us, and that stung plenty on its own.

“I don’t know,” Sawyer said, kicking a pebble off the sidewalk. “If she’s had a calamity, maybe we ought to let her hang around.”

“Calamity,” I said. “You ought to read books more, you know.”

“I’ll read when I feel like it,” Sawyer said, and his jaw tightened with stubbornness, the way Daddy’s did.

“And anyway,” I said, “she can deal with her personal calamity on her own. It’s personal, after all. You want her taking all the attention on Mrs. Blackbird’s porch? Telling some stupid dog story every Saturday?”

“Not really,” Sawyer said, a soft grin forming at the corner of his mouth, “but I do like dogs.”

I rolled my eyes. Sawyer was one of those people who always seem to be relaxed. *Too* relaxed, sometimes, in my opinion. But something else was bothering me. Something I didn't want to share with Sawyer, or with anyone.

Normally, it was fun to hang around on Mrs. Blackbird's porch. The talk of the grownups was warm and easy, filling the air around us with comforting noise. But lately, being on Mrs. Blackbird's porch wasn't as enjoyable for me. It left me with an odd, heavy feeling in my gut, like I had committed some kind of terrible crime. I hadn't committed any crimes, of course. That is, I hadn't committed any yet. But I had a secret. No, worse than a secret: I had a plan. I was going to figure out how to use the magic of Mrs. Blackbird's Visiting Chair. The rumor around town was that Mrs. Blackbird used the Visiting Chair, which was full of magic, to talk to Emilio's ghost. I had tried not to think too much about this fact when we had first started going over to Mrs. Blackbird's. It had felt indecent to think about it, somehow. And it was certainly a little frightening. I mean, she was talking to a *ghost*? In her own backyard shed?

It seemed too bizarre a story even to be real. Maybe it wasn't real. Maybe, as much as I didn't want to think of her that way, Mrs. Blackbird was just a little bit crazy. But, no matter how much I tried, I couldn't seem to stop thinking about the Visiting Chair and what it might be able to do. What if it really was magic? What if it actually worked? If it did, wouldn't I be crazy not to at least try it?

That's when I came up with my plan. I was going to see my mother again. I was going to hear her voice. And to do that, I had to figure out a way to get to that chair. I just hadn't figured out the right time, yet, or the right way to do it. I was worried that Miss Flounce Hair would get in the way, somehow.

The odd, heavy feeling in my stomach suddenly got heavier; it was dark and dragging, like a cloud full of water.

We were home.

### **CHAPTER 3: HOME**

“Home” used to be a good word. A word we knew, a word we loved, a word that conjured up the way the sunlight fell on the kitchen floorboards, the smell of good things baking in the oven, the warm, crackling sound of records playing in the living room. Flowers on the kitchen table. The shine of beeswax polish on the old wood furniture. Laughter drifting like a breeze between the rooms. “Home” was a good word. A sweet word. We hadn’t even known how good it was—not until we’d lost it.

The house was still there, of course. The same white paint covering the outside. The same rooms spread through the inside, the same old wood furniture. But so much had been taken from the house—little things taken away, one by one, spaces left empty. Dust gathered in every room. No more flowers sprouting in the front yard or in the window boxes. No smells of cinnamon and vanilla coming from the oven. There was no warm crackle of the records playing, either. The record player, and the records with it, were covered by a tarp in the garage. If we laughed, we laughed muffled and hushed, so as not to bother Daddy. The rooms echoed with our footsteps, and our words seemed magnified in the empty spaces. There were empty spaces in the rooms, on the walls—and especially in the kitchen. So many of her favorite things had been in there, and he had gone through the whole house, room by room, and taken them away. Mamma’s things. Mamma’s ghost. Her apron with the blue and white flowers. The wooden red rooster her grandmother had given her. All her mixing bowls and wooden spoons, handed down from the women in her family. All her pretty kitchen things were gone, now. Daddy had replaced them

with things in plain white or made of plastic. The heart sewn from an old quilt—it had hung above the kitchen window. The chipped pitchers she'd used for flower vases. The embroidered tablecloths she'd loved. The little stone-carved family of rabbits that had lived on the mantel over the living room fireplace. The black-and-white checkered curtains she'd made herself. All her jewelry, her perfume that smelled bright and soft, like flowers and oranges. All her clothes. The scarves she used to tie her hair back with. All her things were wrapped up tight in the dark of the garage. Asleep and absent, like Mamma. "Home" was not a good word anymore. It wasn't quite a bad word—not yet. But it was a word that hung heavy with silence and cold, empty air. A word that conjured up other things, now. Sharp, sad things. The grate of Daddy's voice, the glint of something hard, like metal, in his eyes. His eyes that turned away from us, looking anywhere but at our faces, looking at nothing. The silence that stretched on from afternoon through to evening—the silence which, if broken by our "carrying on," would be met with sharper words than he'd ever used at us when she was alive. I preferred to think of it as a house, now—to avoid using the old word at all. It's just a house, I'd tell myself. It's just the house where we live. It helped, sometimes. But everywhere, everywhere, there was the absence of her, and we ached with it. All of us.

In the days just after Mamma died, we had been comforted by the sight, touch, and smell of all her things. Everything spoke of her, whispered of her as we moved through the house. Sure, it was painful to be so reminded of her, but it helped, too. It seemed like she wasn't gone completely. The house smelled of her—of flowers, oranges, dough in the oven. Nothing made sense. She was gone, buried in the church graveyard, miles away. Yet, she was here—she was all around.

We'd hated the things and loved them. We'd flinch and close our eyes every time we looked at them—but, always, we'd open our eyes again, drink in the bittersweetness of the memories. Her presence was still in the house. We all knew it, though it was something we probably couldn't have said in words. We knew she was in Heaven with God, now, safe and full of joy. But, somehow—how was it possible?—she was still in the house. Undeniably real, though absent. Daddy hid in their bedroom most of the time, with the door closed. He came out only to feed us, and sometimes, he'd sit on the couch with us, and hold us while we cried. He cried, too. Neighbors came and went from the house, bringing plates and casserole dishes of food. It helped to have voices in the house, and hands holding ours. But almost as soon as they'd arrive, parts of us were wishing them gone again. We wanted to be alone with our hurting. Once, I spent a whole afternoon in Mamma's closet, sitting under the soft brush of her dresses and skirts. All the clothes were full of her smell—that bright, citrus perfume. Sunlight slanted onto me, and the jagged edges of my grief seemed a little softer. It was the closest I could feel to her. I told myself I could come back to the closet whenever I liked. It would be a place to escape to. But it was only a week later that Daddy had started putting all her things away.

He'd started in the kitchen. It was too early for dinner, and we'd already had lunch, so I'd gone to see what he was up to. He was putting the dishes into a cardboard box. They were butter-yellow, the dishes, bordered with pale green leaves. He held each plate, each bowl carefully, wrapped them in tissue paper, laid them softly into the box. His face was set in sadness. He glanced up at me. Didn't say anything. An anger I'd never known before boiled up in me. I could feel it, curling like a dragon in the pit of my stomach. He was taking her things away. Taking her away. She'd only been gone three weeks. Not even a whole month. And he was taking her away. Putting her away. Locking her out of our sight. How could he?

“How could you?”

I had thundered the words, and they slammed into the walls all around us, rattling. I'd wanted to say more, but suddenly, my throat was dry as dust, and tears were burning on my cheeks. He'd just looked at me—a long, steady look—heartbroken, but not changing his mind. Sawyer had been watching from just outside the kitchen, and he was crying, too. I'd felt an urge to break things. To throw things at Daddy, to watch things shattering at his feet, and to tell him it was his fault they were broken. I was frightened of the feeling. I turned and ran from the house. I ran to the end of the street, which was the end of the town, where the cement of the street spilled into the wide, golden expanse of Meriam's Field. In the middle of the field was Starlight Pond, with a great, big oak tree standing beside it. Starlight Pond was a thinking place. A watching and listening place. You stared out at the field, watched birds swooping above it, looked up at the green oak leaves that shaded you, and looked down into the dark pond water. You felt what you had to feel, but maybe it didn't feel as much like the world was going to knock you over out there. You had things to look at, and, thanks to the oak tree, something sturdy to lean on. I sat by Starlight Pond until after sundown. I ran my fingers along the surface of the water, missing Mamma and being angry at Daddy so much I could hardly breathe. I fell asleep for awhile, and it was sweet to escape from feeling so full of sorrow and rage. When the fireflies were starting to come out, Sawyer had stepped into the field and sat down beside me.

“He's put it all away,” Sawyer said, looking up at the blue-and-purple sky. “Mamma's things are all gone.”

All my rage had left me. I felt only a shrinking, now, somewhere near my middle, a shrinking and a feeling of lonely, empty cold.

“All—all of it?” I asked, and my voice rasped like the dry grass of the field.

“Except their bedroom,” Sawyer said, looking out at the field now, the same direction I was staring. “I didn’t see him go in there.”

We hadn’t known what to say. Nothing seemed to fit, and everything was suddenly so heavy, so lost.

“Let’s go home,” I’d said to Sawyer, but when we’d walked through the front door and seen the bare walls, felt the terrible silence, it hadn’t felt like we were home at all.

#### **CHAPTER 4: JOLEE’S HOUSE AND THE DEAL**

The next Saturday dawned with a misty, pale-yellow shine, the shine of a summer day full of nothing much to do, hours of freedom waiting to be filled. I loved to watch the morning come in, how it slowly spilled its light into the room until everything was covered in it. I sat at the desk in front of my window, drawing clouds and twisted curls of vines in a notebook Mamma had given me for my last birthday. It had a pale green cover with dark green leaves along the borders. The paper inside was cream-colored and soft, and every blank page made me want to fill it with things I saw. I couldn’t fill it with all the things I saw, of course—there were so many things I couldn’t capture, things that wouldn’t come out of the pencil no matter how hard I tried to make them. But the smooth glide of the lead across the paper soothed me, and there was always something interesting to ponder on from my window that looked out over the street. This morning, it was the clouds—some of them looked like vines, twisting around each other, so I ended up drawing clouds with vines growing out of them. When my bedroom was full of the yellow light, I put my pencils down and got dressed. Sawyer and I had cereal for breakfast, as we did most mornings. Daddy would sleep until almost noon on weekends. We didn’t mind, though,



because we felt like we had the house to ourselves, and we could leave it quietly, unnoticed, to go to Mrs. Blackbird's.

Something was different that morning when the sidewalk led us to her front yard. The grownups weren't on the porch itself, but gathered just in front of it, talking in lowered voices. Mrs. Delaware had her hands set firmly on her hips, a look of stout determination on her face. Jonas was nodding at pretty much anything anyone said. Bonnie looked concerned, and the Baileys were exchanging eager thoughts with Mrs. Blackbird.

"...child can't just go wandering here and there, unaccompanied, without her mamma's knowing!" Mrs. Bailey said.

Mrs. Bailey had beautiful, soft white hair, which fell in loose curls around her face. Her eyes were soft, too, softly blue and full of sincerity. She was only a little taller than me, and I always felt grown-up and sure of myself standing next to her, like I'd achieved something by being almost as tall as a woman who'd recently had her seventy-first birthday.

"Ain't right," was Mr. Bailey's simple contribution.

He was the same height as Mrs. Bailey, though he claimed he'd been miles taller than her when he was young. His hair was a sandy brown, streaked with grey, and it crept farther and farther back on his head, announcing its slow disappearance.

"I agree entirely," Mrs. Blackbird said, nodding seriously. She had midnight-blue skirts on that swished around her ankles, and blue bangles on her arms to match. "We will go to Jolee's house this very morning, to meet her mother and ask permission for Jolee to join us for our Saturday visiting."

Sawyer looked confused, and I said, "I thought you all went over there last Saturday?"

Mrs. Blackbird, Bonnie, Mrs. Bailey, and Mrs. Delaware all exchanged looks.

Bonnie said in her quiet, papery voice, “We tried. Jolee’s mamma wasn’t home. Jolee knows where they keep the key to the front door, and she let herself in and said she hoped we all had a good afternoon.”

“That’s right,” Mrs. Bailey said, her eyes wide with leftover surprise. “Then, the child closed the door and left us all just standing there.”

Mrs. Delaware rolled her eyes and sort of muttered to herself, “Child running around and her mamma’s not home. Hmph. Can’t rely on folks.”

“We will go to the house...now?” Jonas asked, his hands in his pockets, looking like he was about to invent some excuse.

“I think it important that the child’s mother meets all of us,” Mrs. Blackbird said, taking a long look around at everyone. Her gaze landed on me when she said, “And I think it important for Jolee to know that we all welcome her and wish her to feel at home here.”

And then, Mrs. Blackbird said something no one could argue with, “If my beloved Emilio were with me, I am sure he would agree.”

Her saying that felt like a flurry of snow and icy wind rushing past us. Everyone looked at their shoes or up at the slats of the porch roof, anywhere but at Mrs. Blackbird.

Finally, Mr. Bailey cleared his throat and said, “Well, that’s that.”

“But are you sure...?” Jonas looked imploringly at Mrs. Blackbird, “I don’t know how I can help...”

“It’ll be alright, Jonas,” Mrs. Delaware said, patting his arm. “You just stand there and look tall and let us do the talking.”

Jonas looked as though he were wondering what it meant, exactly, to “look tall.”

“Morning,” Bonnie said quietly to Sawyer and me, brushing stray wisps of straight dark hair off her face.

We said “hi” to Bonnie, and then we all set off, up the street and around the corner, to the house of Miss Flounce-Hair.

Sawyer talked cheerfully to Jonas as we went, but I was quiet. All this fuss for a girl who had spotless shoes and a mysterious calamity. I didn’t see why she was worth so much effort. My thoughts were bitter toward the new girl for reasons I didn’t quite understand and didn’t want to, and I ignored the voice in my head that told me I was being unfair. It had a gentle, honeyed tinge to it, that voice, letting me know I was acting wrong in a way that made me want to straighten up and do right. It reminded me of Mamma’s voice. I pushed it hard from my mind.

The house was painted somewhere between peach and pink, with a clean white trim around the edges, and my first impression of it was that it was, somehow, shiny. Far shinier than most of the neighborhood houses, which had been around a long time and looked worn-in. Most of the houses had scuffed paint in places, doors that creaked, roofs or chimneys that needed some fixing. They had yards and gardens that were just a little overgrown or wild at the edges, some brown spots on the grass. They looked used and lived-in. This house had a totally different look about it, as though it had just been dropped off from some kind of factory. There was nothing, not even a little thing, that I could see, wrong with it. The paint was fresh, the windows gleamed. The yard was bright green and perfectly trimmed. Yellow and pink flowers bloomed below the windows, and the roof slats looked brand-new. The sight of all this shiny newness elicited “Oh-my’s” from the grownups. There was a van in the driveway that said “Hal’s Home Repair and Renovation” on the side in bright orange letters.

I don’t think we were at all prepared for what met us at the door.

When Jolee's mamma opened the door to us, she was in the middle of a conversation, talking over her shoulder to someone we couldn't see. We heard hammering and men's voices.

"...that color will clash with the kitchen cabinets, it's nothing like the sample I ordered in the mail...yes, what is it?" she asked, turning to us at last.

We all shifted uncomfortably. Bonnie was hugging her arms loosely around herself. Jonas was standing straight as a pole and not moving a muscle.

Even Mrs. Blackbird looked a little nervous. She cleared her throat with a soft little cough and said, "Hello. My name is Eleonora Blackbird. We are your neighbors from the next street over. We met your lovely Jolee last week, and we tried to come by to introduce ourselves, but you weren't home."

Jolee's mamma was as shiny-looking as her house. Her hair was bright blonde and piled up in a neat bun on top of her head. Her lipstick was hot pink, and her cheeks were rose-tinted. Her eyes were a bright, startling blue. She was wearing light pink trousers that stopped at her ankles and a crisp, white shirt tucked into them. I noticed that her toenails were painted the same hot pink as her lips.

She was still carrying on the conversation over her shoulder. "Yes, that's fine, Hal, we'll wait on that until I get the new paint samples in, just as long as the rest of that hideous wallpaper comes down today..."

She turned back to us. She gave us all a quick, fluttering look, and we felt dusty and scruffy under her gaze. She directed her attention back to Mrs. Blackbird. "Yes, well, I pop in and out of the house during the day, you know. So much to do. Never enough time for it all, is there?" She tried for a smile, but it came out looking weak and slanted.

Mrs. Blackbird seemed to be trying to find the right thing to say. She half-turned toward us all for a second, as if to ask someone to help her, but she took a breath and faced Jolee's mamma again. "I see. Well. We, ah, just wanted to ask: would it be alright if Jolee joined us at my house on Saturday mornings? We meet up on the front porch most Saturdays—we talk, play board games, tell stories—"

"Drink lemonade," Mr. Bailey interjected.

"Yes, and drink lemonade," Mrs. Blackbird finished somewhat lamely. "Jolee found us last week and seemed to have a nice time, and we just wanted to make sure it was alright with you for her to come by again if she ever feels like it."

At this moment, I heard the whisper of a swishing skirt and saw a white, spotless shoe poke out from behind the door. Flounce-Hair was back. She held on to the edge of the door and peered around at all of us. Jonas gave her a little wave, then seemed to wonder what on earth he was doing and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Jolee's mamma didn't seem to notice that she was there. She looked over her shoulder at whatever was going on in the house, and it was plain she wanted to be in there rather than out here talking to us.

"Saturdays, you said?" she asked, lighting up a cigarette and putting it delicately between her lips. "You want Jolee to come over?"

"Only if she wants to," Mrs. Blackbird said quickly. She had her hands clasped together now, and she took a small step further into us and away from Jolee's mamma, as though she wanted to make it clear she wasn't trying to force things. "We just wanted to make sure it was alright with you. We'd hate to make a mother worry."

“Worry?” Jolee’s mamma gave a short laugh that sounded more like a cough. “Oh, I’m not worried about Jolee. She’s fine, she’s always just fine. I thought it would be so hard, being a mother, but kids look after themselves a lot more than people tell you! Don’t you think?”

“Er,” said Mrs. Blackbird.

“Ah,” said Mrs. Bailey.

“Hmph,” said Mrs. Delaware.

All three of them looked at each other, seeming unsure what to do or say next. Jolee hadn’t said a word, just continued looking back and forth between all of us and the unruffled, bright pink figure of her mother standing above her.

“Well,” Mrs. Blackbird finally said, “if it’s alright with you, we’ll look forward to seeing Jolee anytime she feels like stopping by.”

Mrs. Blackbird hesitated for a second. Then, she put her hands on her knees and bent down to get eye-level with Jolee. “Mr. Bailey and Jonas are having a checkers match today,” she said with a soft smile, “And we’ll be telling stories, I’m guessing. You are most welcome to come on over anytime you feel like it. Will that be agreeable?”

Jolee had one finger twirled into one of her blonde curls. She nodded silently at Mrs. Blackbird.

“What’s that, Hal? I can’t hear you, hold on, let me get rid of—I mean to say—” Jolee’s mamma looked at us with a slightly embarrassed expression and said, “I’m sorry, I’ve got to get back there. Thanks for stopping by, it was real nice to meet you all...”

Without looking at Jolee, she gently steered her by the shoulders away from the door, nodded quickly in our general direction with that slanted smile stuck on her face, and closed the door on us.

We were back on Mrs. Blackbird's porch, now. Jonas and Mr. Bailey had started their checkers match, and everyone had a glass of cold lemonade. Mrs. Bailey had taken out her knitting project—something sort of lumpy with different shades of blue in it, I couldn't figure out what it was supposed to be. All the women looked concerned, and I knew they were going to spend an irritating amount of time talking over what had just happened at Jolee's house.

Sawyer was making different stacks and shapes with his collection of pebbles and flat marbles—Daddy had given him the bag of marbles last year, and Sawyer made a habit of collecting interesting rocks or pebbles anywhere he could find them. He was also glancing over at Jonas and Mr. Bailey's game of checkers every now and again. He was more interested in that than what the ladies were getting ready to talk about.

I took out my notebook and started drawing. I wasn't drawing anything particular, just lines and shapes. I tried not to listen too much to the conversation. Did we have to talk about Miss Perfect Shoes and her mamma? There were plenty of other more interesting subjects.

But I listened, anyway. I couldn't help it. Soon, though, I would begin to wish I had run off Mrs. Blackbird's porch entirely. Maybe then I could have avoided the deal.

"Clearly," Mrs. Blackbird said, a frown pulling down the corners of her mouth, "We have a situation."

"Hmph," Mrs. Delaware said, crossing her arms over her chest, "Child's mother don't know what's what. Never paid her any mind all the time we were there."

"Like Jolee was invisible," Bonnie said sadly, not looking at anyone, but staring at some vague point over the rooftops of the houses.

Mrs. Bailey put down her knitting needles and said, “Our boys are grown, now, grown and gone far away,” and her eyes looked sort of misty, and her voice sounded like it had a crack in it, like she might cry, “But even when they were little, I sure can’t imagine not caring who they met or where they went. I’d worry about them. I still do.”

“Ah, the boys are alright, Mrs. Bailey,” said her husband sort of absently, not taking his eyes off the checkers board.

“It is, indeed, lamentable,” said Mrs. Blackbird. Her mouth left a dark plum-colored stain on her glass of lemonade whenever she took a drink. She always wore lipsticks in dark crimson shades, or in a color so dark purple it was almost black. “I was not expecting...but never mind. We must look at what we know, and what we can do.”

Mrs. Bailey and Mrs. Delaware nodded. Bonnie was still looking at something, somewhere, I couldn’t see.

“We have been given permission for Jolee to visit with us,” Mrs. Blackbird said. “That is one good thing, I suppose. We have done our duty as neighbors, haven’t we?”

Here, she looked around at the other women, wanting their agreement.

“We have,” was Mrs. Delaware’s simple answer.

“We’ve certainly tried,” Mrs. Bailey said rather weakly.

Bonnie just nodded.

“The child seems so little,” Mrs. Delaware said, a line of worry creasing her forehead, “So small for her age. I hate thinkin’ of her going here and there all by herself.”

“But what can we do?” said Mrs. Bailey. Mrs. Bailey was old—her wrinkles and her soft white hair proved it—but, still, she looked as though she’d like to have a grownup around to handle the situation.



“I think,” said Mrs. Blackbird, “I may have a reasonable solution.”

And before I knew it, she was turning her weighty, violet gaze on me. And I knew that whatever “solution” Mrs. Blackbird had come up with had something to do with me. Oh, great, I thought.

And then, Mrs. Blackbird said the words that started off everything that would happen the rest of that summer. “I propose that Susannah and Sawyer go to Jolee’s house every Saturday and walk her over here, to the front porch.”

At first, I was too shocked to speak. Pretty soon after that, I felt full of a hot, wild anger. I felt it bloom around my ears and along the back of my neck. It itched like an uncomfortable wool sweater. I didn’t know what, exactly, I was so angry for, but it was all I could focus on, and I couldn’t think of what to say.

I expected Sawyer to at least look surprised. But he didn’t even glance in Mrs. Blackbird’s direction, just went on arranging his marbles and rocks on the slats of the porch floor.

“Alright,” he said, shrugging, and he didn’t say another word.

I shot daggers in Sawyer’s direction with my eyes, but he didn’t notice.

I felt Mrs. Blackbird’s stare. I knew I wouldn’t be able to get out from under it, no matter what I tried. Even if I argued with her, I knew that I would feel that look for the rest of the day, even tucked up in my bed at night. I knew I would feel it every day until I did what she was willing me to do.

I brushed my hand across the back of my neck, took a breath to steady myself, and made my eyes meet Mrs. Blackbird’s.

She wasn't giving me a hard, angry look, like the way Daddy did. It wasn't a mean look. I don't know how else to say it, it was just heavy. Carrying everything she thought was important about the situation, about Flounce-Hair and her calamity and her pink-painted, cigarette-smoking mamma. Mrs. Blackbird kept her eyes steady on mine. Her look was saying, "This matters, this matters, this matters."

"Okay," I said, and picked up my pencil again. I tilted my notebook so Mrs. Blackbird wouldn't see. I decided I was going to draw a big pair of violet eyes.

"A fine idea, Eleonora." Mrs. Delaware said, nodding her approval.

"I'm sure little Jolee won't be quite so lonely that way." Mrs. Bailey said.

Bonnie gave me a soft smile and went back to staring across the rooftops of the houses. Jonas and Mr. Bailey were absorbed in their checkers game, not paying us any mind at all.

Mrs. Blackbird stood up to refill the pitcher of lemonade. You wouldn't notice unless you were looking for it, but I could tell immediately that everyone's attention had shifted just a little. We all wanted to get just a little glimpse inside the house.

Though we all sat on her porch every Saturday morning, most of us had never been in Mrs. Blackbird's house. Ever since her husband, Emilio, had died years ago, Mrs. Blackbird hadn't had any visitors in her house. She kept it shut up tight. Mr. and Mrs. Bailey were the only ones who had known Mrs. Blackbird back when Emilio was alive. But, even though they were such good friends with her, they hadn't been let into her house ever since he'd died.

Everyone said the house was still full of Emilio's things—his clothes, his shoes, even his socks and underwear. And all the treasures he'd gathered from his travels around the world. We'd heard that she'd never been able to get rid of it all. Everything was just the way it used to

be, except that Emilio wasn't there. The windows were always shut tight, covered with heavy curtains.

Mrs. Blackbird never mentioned her house. Whenever we stopped by on Saturday mornings—however long we stayed—it was like the front porch was the only world she lived in, the only place that was real.

Mrs. Blackbird stopped before she reached the front door. She turned to where Sawyer and I were sitting. “Thank you,” she said, and there was something different about her voice. “It is a terrible, terrible thing to be lonely. To feel that you don't belong. I appreciate your effort, Sawyer and Susannah, to make Jolee feel that she can belong here.”

Mrs. Blackbird opened the door just wide enough to let herself slip through it with the lemonade pitcher. I looked away from her to see what everyone else was doing.

They all had their heads just slightly, just barely inclined in the direction of the door. Mr. Bailey had even gone so far as to drop one of his checkers pieces. While he bent to pick it up, I saw him glance toward that shadowy space between the door and the frame. Everyone else was looking, too. We all tried not to let Mrs. Blackbird notice how curious we were about her house. I figured she could tell, but she never let on. I wondered if any of us would ever be brave enough to just ask her about it. I wondered what would happen if, one day, I just stood up and said, “Mrs. Blackbird, could I go into your house for just a minute, please?”

I don't know what I thought would happen if I did that, but I had a feeling it wouldn't be good.

As she slipped through the door, all I could see between the shadows was a tiny corner of a patterned rug on the floor. It looked like it had been brightly colored, once. Some shade of

orange. But it was faded, now, and it was so dark in the house that I couldn't see any details of the design.

It was funny, I thought. I kept on sketching the pair of eyes, trying to get across how heavy they felt when they stared at you. I thought about seeing. I didn't want to admit it, but it bothered me, the way Mrs. Blackbird seemed to see through me every time she looked at me. The way that, no matter how I wanted to, I couldn't ever really see her.

## **CHAPTER 5: DEE LOUISE AND STARLIGHT POND**

That next week, I counted the number of times Daddy actually looked at me.

On Monday afternoon, as I went downstairs for a glass of orange juice, I passed him in the hall. He had just gotten home from work. He was walking out of his bedroom (I didn't like to think of it as "their" bedroom anymore), which I had to pass to get to the stairs, and he looked at me so he could make sure not to run into me.

On Tuesday afternoon, I went with Sawyer on one of his walks to Mason Park, where he liked to look for smooth rocks and sticks that were "shaped right" (only Sawyer seemed to know what exactly "shaped right" meant). Mason Park took us about twenty minutes of walking. We passed Mrs. Blackbird's house and Mrs. Delaware's, too. We passed the house that was full of apartments, one of which was Bonnie's. We passed Jonas's house—we yelled a hello to his dog, Arrow, who was playing in the front yard. Arrow was a golden retriever, and one of the nicest dogs we'd ever met. He often joined Jonas on Mrs. Blackbird's porch on Saturday mornings.

Sawyer looked for rocks at the park, and I sat under a tree and sketched a little. I was still working on drawing Mrs. Blackbird's eyes, but there was something about them I couldn't capture. Whenever we would go to the park together, Sawyer was usually content to look for

things to add to his marble and rock collection, or to work on making shapes and figures with them in the grass. I, on the other hand, was always looking up from my sketchbook, looking at all the people who walked through the park. I liked to see what people were wearing, what they looked like, all the small, funny things that made everybody so different from one another. Sometimes, I would see a person walking by who looked “bone-deep weary,” as Mrs. Delaware would say. Sometimes, I would see a person who ran terribly fast, as though, if they ran fast enough, they could get away from whatever bad thing was chasing them. Sometimes, I would see two people walking together, their heads bent and their voices bitter; they were arguing while they walked.

Sometimes, I would see a person who just looked lost in the world. Someone in ragged, loose-fitting clothes that didn't look clean, someone who was just wandering through the park all alone, looking for a shady spot to rest in. Or else, wandering through the park on their way to somewhere else. Sometimes, I got the feeling that even they didn't know where they were going. I never tried to draw those people when I saw them. It made me too sad.

Daddy had been at the house when we'd left that morning. He had Tuesdays off of work, and he'd been getting ready to go over to Dee Louise Smith's place. He hadn't said a word to us. He hadn't looked at me. He came home and fixed us macaroni and cheese for dinner that night. He walked out of the kitchen as soon as it was done and didn't look at us at all.

On Wednesday and Thursday, we heard his truck rumble out of the driveway before we were even out of bed. He worked late both of those nights, and went to see Dee Louise Smith after work. He'd left pizzas in the freezer for me to heat up in the oven for dinner. I didn't see him leave in the morning, and I didn't see him when he got home.

On Friday, Dee Louise Smith came over to our house. The days when Dee Louise came over, Daddy had to look at us more than he usually did, because whenever she was around, he tried to act like things were more normal. Dee Louise was usually focused on her hair and whether her grape-colored lipstick was still stuck on her lips—she didn't notice us much. Daddy liked for us to greet Dee Louise and say something to her whenever she arrived at the house. Luckily, these conversations never lasted long, and we were free, then, to get out of the house as soon as we could. I usually spent every Friday morning thinking of what Sawyer and I could do that afternoon to get away from the house, so we didn't have to listen to the high, metallic whine of Dee Louise's voice.

Daddy got home from the shop at four o'clock. He worked as a mechanic at Tom Beckett's Car Repair, and he usually took a shower and changed into fresh clothes as soon as he got home. Then, if it was a Friday and Dee Louise was coming over, he'd wash the dishes in the kitchen, clear up the newspapers and coffee mugs from the living room table, and then he'd put something on the T.V. and sit on the couch with his hands on his knees until Dee Louise arrived.

Sawyer and I stayed in the kitchen until we heard the creak of the front door. Those moments of waiting felt as slow as a long winter. I tapped my foot on the floor until Sawyer asked why I didn't just get up and run around the room in circles. Sawyer was always more patient than me. He made a small spiral of pebbles and marbles—mostly gray and blue ones—on the kitchen table. When Dee Louise arrived, I knew he would sweep them all back into his marble bag immediately. Dee Louise liked to comment on anything she found unusual, and if she knew that Sawyer liked to make shapes and designs with stuff he found outside, she would probably have a lot to say.

We heard her knock. Sawyer swept the spiral back into the bag of marbles, and I closed my sketchbook. We went out into the living room to say hello to Dee Louise Smith.

Some people seem to wear all kinds of colors, or maybe they wear a few shades most regularly, and then there are some who love one color the best and find as many ways to wear it as they can. Dee Louise Smith was this kind of person, and the color she liked to wear was purple. She liked all shades of it. She wore purple shoes and purple shirts, purple earrings and glittery purple barrettes in her hair. And always that same sour-looking shade of purple lipstick. Dee Louise worked at the post office, and she said that she liked to wear bright, pretty things whenever she wasn't having to wear "that miserable old uniform."

"Well, there they are." She usually said something like this whenever Sawyer and I showed up in the living room. She spent a lot of time talking about Sawyer and I instead of talking to us. This had grated on my nerves at first, but, eventually, I realized I found no pleasure in Dee Louise talking to me. So, I didn't mind as much.

She kissed Daddy on the cheek, curling her purple-painted fingernails around his shoulders.

Dee Louise was always a bit fidgety whenever she came over to our house. We knew that she didn't like it when we were there—we could tell by the way she talked about us like we weren't there and because she'd say things like "Now, what are you two going to do to occupy yourselves while your daddy and I spend some time together?"

She preferred to go out with Daddy, over to Mabel's bar on fourth street, or to one of the few restaurants we had in town. I wasn't sure, but I had a feeling Dee Louise didn't like being in the house where mamma had lived. She didn't like knowing that Daddy had been happy here before mamma died, before he even met Dee Louise.

Dee Louise sat down on the couch with a sigh that let us know she was already bored. She took out a hand mirror and started fixing her bright red hair. I hated that Dee Louise had red hair like me. I hated to think that we could have anything in common with each other. I often tried to think of everything that was different between us. How my hair was several shades darker than hers, and how mine was naturally curly like mamma's had been. How I wore t-shirts and shorts and scuffed sneakers while she wore her prissy purple outfits, and how I would never, ever wear grape-colored lipstick, even when I was a grown woman. I liked to tell myself that I would always be different from Dee Louise and that this would be some kind of accomplishment.

While Dee Louise fixed her hair, I could feel Daddy looking at me. I'd been counting all week, and so far, he'd only looked at me one time that I'd noticed. I was sure he'd had to have looked at me some other times, but I never saw him do it, and I told myself bitterly that he probably hadn't looked at me any other time at all. But he was looking at me now, wanting me to make conversation with Dee Louise. Wanting me to be polite, to make her feel welcome.

I was so sick of politeness. How we all politely moved around each other in the house, everybody being so polite in their silence and their not-looking. I wanted to be impolite, to yell at somebody until there was no more breath in my lungs, no more sound in my voice. But there was another part of me—some small, quiet part—that was grateful. Grateful that Daddy was looking at me on purpose, for the second time that week. I felt angry and grateful at the same time, and all I wanted to do was run out of the house.

Sawyer wasn't expected to talk to Dee Louise. At least, not as much as I was. He usually just held on tight to his bag of marbles and looked at the floor until we were allowed to go. I



didn't want him to have to talk to her, but I was always a little annoyed at him just because he didn't have to stand there and struggle for words like I did.

I closed my eyes for a few seconds, trying to think of something safe to say.

There were plenty of things I wanted to say to Dee Louise Smith. Things like, "Why are you with my Daddy, anyway?" Or, even more so, "What on earth is my Daddy doing hanging around with you?"

But those were not safe things for me to say to Dee Louise. So, I usually said the only thing I could think of, which was, "How's the post office, Dee Louise?"

She replied as she usually did, with a sigh and, "Oh, child, do you think I want to talk about that awful place for one second when I'm not on the clock? Sakes!"

"Sakes!" was one of Dee Louise's favorite things to say. I didn't understand what it meant, exactly, but I told myself I would never grow up to be a woman who said "Sakes!" at every little thing, like she did.

After that, I looked back at Daddy. This was difficult, as I'd gotten used to the way he didn't look at us if he could avoid it, and we didn't look at him. But I made myself do it, so that he could see in my face the words that weren't safe to say to him. I tried to look at him as hard as I could, as if he might be able to see the words writing themselves across my skin. See how I tried? How am I supposed to talk to someone like her? What are you doing hanging around with her, anyway? Can we go now?

Whenever I did this, he usually flinched a little and crossed the room to sit next to Dee Louise.

"Be safe. Home when it gets dark," he'd say to me and Sawyer, but his eyes were on whatever was playing on the T.V.

It was over. The waiting, the talking to Dee Louise, the looks that traveled between Daddy and me.

I grabbed Sawyer's hand, and we hurried out the door. I had decided earlier that morning: on this Friday, we would go out to Meriam's Field, out in to the very middle of it, where Starlight Pond was. And I would tell Sawyer the story of how Starlight Pond got started, like Mamma used to tell it to us.

Meriam's Field was always my favorite place in town. It was a wide, wide field at the end of our street. Nothing grew in it but tall grass. I loved Meriam's Field because it was a wide, peaceful space where you could sit and be by yourself without feeling alone. Maybe some people don't appreciate that kind of feeling, but I always did.

Sawyer liked Meriam's Field because it was quiet and peaceful, but also because it was a good place to look for rocks and twigs. We went to Meriam's Field together a lot, but I also went there by myself whenever the world started to feel too loud, too full of people and chatter.

We left the house that afternoon and passed the few houses at the end of the street before the street drifted into the dirt and grass of Meriam's Field. We walked far out into the field, into the very middle, where the ash tree stood tall next to the dark water of Starlight Pond. It was a big pond, as ponds go. It gave you plenty of room to swim. Bees and butterflies liked to hang around near the pond because wildflowers and lavender grew all around it.

Sawyer always liked to hear stories, to sit and just let the words wash over him. I liked that, too, but I liked it best whenever Mamma would tell us stories. She had a soft rhythm to her voice that made all the words sound better, and her voice would propel you along until, when it

was done, you'd forgotten yourself, because you'd been wrapped up in what was happening in the story.

Out in the middle of Meriam's Field, with the sounds of the bugs in the grass and the wind making hush, hush sounds through the leaves of the ash tree, the stillness of Starlight Pond, it felt like everything that was sad, everything that didn't make sense, was a little easier, a little smaller than we thought it was.

Sawyer and I sat under the ash tree and I told him the story of Starlight Pond; even though we'd heard it a hundred times from mamma, we never got tired of it, and it always made us feel like things would work themselves out.

"There was a time," I started out, "about a hundred years ago, when the town of Immaculate, Kansas, was new and mostly empty.

"Not a lot of folks had come to live here yet. There were a few stores and a few houses, but not much else. Some woodlands surrounded the town, other than that, it was miles of Kansas prairie all around. Open spaces in the land don't seem to last long. People make their way through the world, looking for spaces of their own to set up homes, to build their lives. One of the people who came to build a life here was someone who would change the story of the town forever. His name was Henry Whitaker.

"Henry Whitaker came to live here when he was just twenty-one years old. He arrived with his wife, Meriam. They had only been married for a year. They were both going to work as teachers in Immaculate's first school. They had a love for learning and for helping others to learn. Whenever they weren't teaching, they loved to explore the land and look for any bugs or

animals they could find. Henry kept a sketchbook of the animals they observed over the years; you can still look at those drawings over at the Immaculate Museum of History.

“Meriam had come from a country surrounded by water. She had gone to the beach almost every day since she was a little girl. She missed the feeling of the water, the sight of the vast ocean stretching out before her. She would say to Henry that the golden wheat fields of Kansas were her only ocean now. Some days, her longing for the sea made Meriam grow sad and quiet. She loved her husband and she loved her work, but there’s no real cure for missing home.

“Compared to the ocean, there isn’t much water to be found in Kansas. But, one day, Henry thought of a way to help Meriam with her loneliness for the sea. He couldn’t give her an ocean, but he did have a shovel and he wasn’t afraid of hard work.

“Henry’s grandfather had left him some property in Immaculate, and it was on this land that Henry and Meriam lived. A couple of acres, a simple farmhouse. That summer, Henry spent a few hours almost every day digging a hole. He dug and he kept on digging. His hands got rough and calloused from the work, but he kept going. And every day while he worked, Henry prayed that, one day, he and Meriam would be able to travel to the seashore so that Meriam could see an ocean again. And while he was praying, he also asked for rain. Enough rain to fill up the hole and make a pond.

“Henry had thought it out carefully. He measured and he worked steadily. He wanted the pond to be just deep enough to swim in. He thought of their future together in the little house, how eventually, they could plant Queen Anne’s lace and lavender around the pond, and their children and grandchildren could swim in it and hear stories of faraway oceans.

“Soon, people in town heard about Henry’s stubborn plan to make a pond for Meriam. They started leaving their own farms, their own houses for a few hours each week to come by

Henry's place and help him dig. They drank cold tea, lemonade, and sometimes, beer. Children and wives came to watch. Sometimes, the women helped, too. The hole was deep enough, now, that whoever was digging had to be lifted in and out of it on ropes.

“It took a long time. It was well into the autumn before the digging was done. But, with the colder winds of autumn and the dying of the leaves, there was also more rain than the state of Kansas had seen in years. The hole on the Whitackers' land began, very slowly, to fill up with water. Rain came and went throughout that winter, mixed with snow and ice. Henry also siphoned water from a small but steady stream that ran through the back of the property. The water in the pond froze and filled, froze and filled some more. Meriam waited with happy anticipation for the day when it would be finished. Another full year passed before it was done.

“But eventually, the pond was full of rainwater and water from the stream. Henry and Meriam had to wake early to head to the school, but Henry woke her even earlier on a morning in late April. He took her outside to show her the pond.

“‘I know it's not much,’ Henry said, wondering if Meriam would be pleased, in the end, with the gift he'd spent so many long months working on.

“Meriam had long, dark hair that hung over one shoulder in a braid. Her eyes were hazel-colored and bright with life and energy. She looked up at Henry, took his face in her hands, and said, ‘It's lovely. But you, Henry Whitaker, are lovelier still.’

“Meriam rejoiced in the pond. Not because it was an ocean (and if you have ever seen the sea, you know that a pond—even a good one—is really no comparison). She loved it because Henry had worked so hard on it for her, because half the town had pitched in to help, and because it allowed her to put her hands and feet in the water whenever she wanted. She went swimming in the pond on almost any warm day.

“But Meriam’s favorite time to be at the pond was at night. She loved to see how the dark surface of the water reflected the wide, starry Kansas sky. She liked to say that Henry had given her ‘a bowlful of starlight.’ That’s why we call it Starlight Pond.”

At this point in the story, Sawyer looked up from his rocks and marbles. He was making a whole slew of little fish with them, this time. “Now tell the part where Mamma would say how she loved Starlight Pond,” he said.

“I’m getting to it,” I replied, and I went on.

“That’s why I love it, too. If you look at the right time, it’s like seeing the sky looking back at itself.

“I like to think we’re remembering Meriam whenever we go to Starlight Pond. We’re remembering how she worked hard, but she also knew enough to let people love her. I think about Henry and Meriam a lot. How life is full of hard work and how everyone carries some sadness, the way Meriam carried her longing for the ocean. But, in spite of all of that, love makes things that can last. We’re still enjoying the pond that Henry made for Meriam all those years ago. It was Henry’s love for her that inspired him to dig that pond in the first place. And it’s here for us, still. It’s lasted all this time. I like to think it will keep on lasting, and your own children will be able to swim in it one day. Maybe it’s silly, but that’s how I like to think about it.”

Sawyer and I stayed out by Starlight Pond until it was dark. It wasn’t late enough for all the stars to be out, so the surface of the water didn’t exactly look like a bowlful of starlight. But we stood beside the water for a minute, looking down at it. A light breeze drifted across the surface of the water, making it look soft and sort of blurry. I thought about Meriam. How this whole field had been named after her. How the Whitaker land had been donated to the town

when Henry and Meriam had died (their farmhouse was now the home of the Immaculate Museum of History.) I didn't think I believed in ghosts, but I found myself wondering if Meriam's spirit sometimes lingered around Starlight Pond. If she liked to come back and see the field that shared her name. I wondered whether Meriam's spirit could do that, even if it wanted to. And, if her spirit was just stuck in Heaven or wherever it was (my thoughts about Heaven had grown a little hazy since Mamma had died), was she ever lonely? Did she wish she could travel back here, to this land where she'd lived a good, happy life?

While Sawyer and I walked back home, I told myself I was only thinking about Meriam. I didn't like to think that I was also wondering about Mamma. About her spirit. Where it was. Where it could go. What it might wish for. If I thought about that for too long, I felt like I was staring into the murky dark of Starlight Pond. Like I was staring at it too hard, losing my sense of the ground under my feet.

Like if I wasn't careful, I could stare at the water until I let myself fall and sink under that darkness.

## **CHAPTER 6: ARROW, THE STORIES, AND THE VISITING CHAIR**

Sawyer and I went to get Jolee Thompson from her house the next Saturday morning. She was waiting for us at the end of her driveway when we got there. She was leaning against the mailbox, twirling a spiral strand of yellow hair around one finger. Sawyer waved at her.

"Well, come on, then," I said to Jolee. I turned around right away and started walking back to our street, toward Mrs. Blackbird's house.

We were a few houses away from Mrs. Blackbird's when we saw Jonas Engman. Jonas was in the habit of taking his dog, Arrow, on early morning walks around the neighborhood.

When Jolee noticed the dog, she was instantly excited. If her voice hadn't been so high and soft all the time, she would have been shouting. "A dog, a dog!" she squeaked, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk, so that Jonas and Arrow almost ran right into her.

Jolee just stood there, staring at Arrow like he was a Christmas present. Jonas stood there, too, shifting his weight awkwardly like he didn't know what to do. Finally, he said, "Would you—er—like to pet him? He's friendly."

"Oh, can I, can I?" squeaked Jolee.

"He just said you could," I said.

Arrow came up to each of us in turn, looking for scratches on his head and around his ears. Arrow was big, and Jolee looked laughably tiny next to him. When Arrow got to Jolee, he sniffed her frizzy hair for a second, seemed to decide that she was trustworthy, and then he licked her twice on the cheek. Jolee grinned at Arrow and looked delighted as she scratched him around the ears. An odd thing happened after that, though. A strange look came over Jolee's face, and she stopped petting Arrow. "Thank you for letting me pet him," she said to Jonas, "He isn't as cute as my dog, but he's very nice."

And she started walking again, toward Mrs. Blackbird's house. Jonas looked a little startled, cleared his throat, and started walking that way, too. He and Arrow were soon ahead of us. I wondered why Jolee had been so excited about Arrow, only to say that thing about her dog and walk away, as though Arrow wasn't much of a big deal after all.

That day at Mrs. Blackbird's was a storytelling day. These came around often on Mrs. Blackbird's porch, days where the grownups would take it in turn to tell stories about their lives. Sometimes, the stories were funny. Sometimes, they were full of adventure or fear, and



sometimes, they were sad. The sad stories didn't come around too often, though. Bonnie, especially, seemed to get uncomfortable whenever any sad talk started.

So far that morning, Mr. and Mrs. Bailey had told the story of how their two boys had snuck out to go camping with their friends one weekend when they were teenagers. "Scared us half to death," Mr. Bailey had said, shaking his head slowly back and forth.

"Yes, they did," Mrs. Bailey had said, smiling at the memory but also looking wistful, "Half to death."

Now, Mrs. Blackbird was telling us about her years in the circus. She and her husband, Emilio, had traveled in the circus together when they were young. That's where they'd met, working for the same circus company. They had traveled around the country together, doing their trapeze act. Mrs. Blackbird had been trained as a ballerina in the years before she joined the circus. But she'd learned to do trapeze from Emilio, who was, as she liked to say, "The most brilliant trapeze artist I have ever known. He was full of grace."

Anyway, Emilio had trained Mrs. Blackbird, and then the two of them had become friends.

"We would talk late into the night, after training," Mrs. Blackbird said. "The tent was empty except for us. I remember how the dust would float in front of the stage lights. The light in the tent glowed warm and orange, like amber. White moths would float around us as we talked. We told one another about our childhoods, our dreams, our terrible mistakes. He was fascinating to talk to, my Emilio. But he was also a beautiful listener."

I didn't know what she meant by that, exactly (what was a beautiful listener?). But I liked to hear the circus stories. She'd tell us funny ones or crazy ones, sometimes, about people they'd

known or wild things they'd done during those years. But my favorite stories were those like the one she was telling today, about her and Emilio.

“He was also a wonderful teacher, my Emilio,” she said. She had that look on her face that she always had whenever she talked about him. She wasn't there with us on the porch anymore, not exactly. Her big, round eyes were full of memory, and it was like she was there in the tent with him, and all of us were like the moths, floating in the air around the two of them, watching.

“He never made me feel weak or incapable for the things I didn't know,” she said, a soft smile forming at the corners of her mouth. Her lipstick today was the color of dark berries. “He was patient, encouraging. He made me feel that I could do it, even before I was able to. He was like this with everyone he trained, patient and gracious. He loved teaching even more than he loved performing. That is why, when our years in the circus were finally over, he became a history teacher.”

“Tell about the wedding, Eleonora,” Mrs. Bailey said, her eyes on her knitting.

“Ah,” said Mrs. Blackbird. “We were married in the tent, on a morning in late autumn. A light mist fanned out around the tent, and all through it. I couldn't afford a proper wedding dress, you know. We had very little money in those days. We were so young—I was twenty-one years old at the time, and Emilio had just had his twenty-third birthday. One of our friends, Isabelle (she was a dancer), lent me one of her dresses. It was pale silver, covered in lace and scattered here and there with gleaming sequins. I felt beautiful in it, and I cherished every moment of wearing it, for I knew I would have to give it back to Isabelle once the wedding was over. All our friends from the troupe were there, and my family, and Emilio's. All twelve of his cousins came to the wedding, and most of them had families of their own, so there was quite a crowd.”

Mrs. Blackbird tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear, smiling.

“We were married in the amber light of the tent. The moths fluttered in the air around us as we said our vows.”

“Tell what the vows were,” said Mrs. Delaware, who was, as usual, fanning herself with a menu from The Chicken Coop. “That’s my favorite part.”

“A thin silk scarf was wound around our hands,” said Mrs. Blackbird, and her voice had a softer, darker tone to it, now. “And we looked into one another’s eyes, and said: ‘Whatever storms come to us, I promise to shelter you. Whatever sadness falls upon us, I promise to comfort you. Whatever battles we must face in this life, I promise to fight alongside you. Whatever joys we are blessed with, I promise to celebrate with you. Whatever roads we must travel, I promise to be at your side, all the days of my life.’”

There was silence for a few minutes after that. Everyone looked lost in imagining the circus tent and the vows Emilio and Mrs. Blackbird had said to each other. Or, maybe they were thinking about their own lives, their own bittersweet memories. I couldn’t tell. Even Sawyer had stopped working with his marbles and pebbles for a minute. He’d been making the shape of a circus tent against the wooden boards of the porch. I wondered what it would be like to make all of those promises to someone. It seemed like an awful lot to promise, with all that talk of storms and battles and who knew what kind of sorrows. You had to be brave, I figured, to do something like that, never knowing what could happen or what you might lose. Or maybe you just had to be crazy.

“He was good to you, then?” said Bonnie quietly, breaking the silence. She was wearing a long-sleeved, button-down shirt even though it was already getting hot outside. It was dark

blue, and it brought out the blue in her eyes. Bonnie's hair was long and light brown, and half of it always seemed to hang in front of her face, like it was helping to hide her from other people.

Everyone looked at Bonnie, who she seemed to wish she hadn't spoken.

Mrs. Blackbird seemed to come out of her trance.

"Good to me?" she asked, looking at Bonnie.

Bonnie was hugging her arms around herself, now, and she looked as though she would like to simply vanish off the porch altogether. Her answer to Mrs. Blackbird was so quiet, we almost couldn't make out the words.

"Yes, um," she faltered, "you know, you were married a long time, right?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Blackbird. "Forty-two years."

"So, I just mean, did it last?" Bonnie said, trying to meet Mrs. Blackbird's inquisitive gaze, but spending more time looking down at her own shoes. "Was he good to you, you know, always? That's how it always is in wedding vows, it seems. You make all these wonderful promises. But how can it stay like that? How does it last—you know, really last—in real life?"

It was something for Bonnie to talk this much. She wasn't one of the storytellers on Mrs. Blackbird's porch. She was a story-listener. Mrs. Blackbird always said that story-listeners mattered just as much as storytellers, because what point was there in a story if there was no one to be still and listen to it? But I often wondered what stories Bonnie would tell if she ever felt like it, if she could ever make herself talk for long enough.

Mrs. Blackbird did something I wasn't expecting. She got up from her rocking chair and crossed over to the porch swing, where Bonnie had been sitting with her legs folded up in front of her. Mrs. Blackbird sat down next to Bonnie and gently took Bonnie's hand in hers. She

sighed and took a minute to think about what she was going to say. Then, she looked at Bonnie, smiling softly at her. They looked almost like a mother and a daughter, sitting there like that.

“I understand your question, dear,” Mrs. Blackbird said. “It’s one I thought about often myself in the years before I married. In fact, I thought about it from time to time even after I was married. Emilio never gave me a reason to reconsider my choice to trust him—yes, he was good to me. But still, it’s a frightening choice to make, isn’t it? Giving your heart to someone like that—trusting it to someone else’s care so entirely. It’s a choice more terrifying, and with far greater consequences, than even the long, fearsome walk across a tightrope.”

No one was moving. Mr. Bailey and Jonas were totally ignoring their game of checkers. Everyone’s attention was entirely focused on what Mrs. Blackbird was saying, and on how Bonnie was looking up at her, the way a child looks to a parent for help and advice.

“I say he never gave me a reason to reconsider, and that’s the truth,” said Mrs. Blackbird. “But that doesn’t mean that we didn’t have our challenges. We had them, of course—I don’t know of any marriage that doesn’t. We were the best of friends, but we were also two individual souls, and the binding of two souls together is always a tricky endeavor.”

Mrs. Blackbird smiled and ran her fingers gently across the back of Bonnie’s hand. “But what I mean is that Emilio never lost my trust. Even during our hard times, our struggles, nights when we stayed awake arguing...even when we hurt one another, it was never out of spite. If Emilio ever erred in his judgement or spoke too sharply, neglected to do something, or if he hurt my feelings in some way...he was quick to apologize. To seek forgiveness, reconciliation between us. And for my own mistakes...the times when I reacted in anger or impatience, when I failed him in some way, he was always quick to forgive me. He had a heart that longed for peace, not discord. I always felt that his love for me was stronger than whatever came between us. And

even during the times when I doubted, when fear hunted me like a wolf in the dark...slowly, as the years went on, his faith in me allowed me to trust that we would make it through whatever happened. Sometimes, in a marriage, you feel lost from one another, as though you're both separated by a dark and cavernous divide. But over the years, through all our difficulties, he helped me to see that we could always find one another again, because, no matter what happened or how we hurt each other inadvertently, we always made the choice to turn toward one another again. To look for each other in the darkness..."

Mrs. Blackbird's voice trailed off. She had that lost look again, like she was living in a memory. She still stroked the back of Bonnie's hand very gently, but I could tell that she was lost in thinking of Emilio. Mrs. Bailey and Mrs. Delaware both wiped tears from their eyes. Bonnie blinked hard, like she was trying not to let herself cry. Jolee was sitting on the floor next to Mrs. Blackbird's chair, and she was looking back and forth between Bonnie and Mrs. Blackbird, a curious expression on her face.

Mr. Bailey cleared his throat. This made Mrs. Blackbird wake up from remembering, and she gave a little start. "I'm sorry," she said, looking around at everyone. "I wandered off in my thoughts for a moment. Does that—does that answer your question, dear?" she asked, looking back at Bonnie.

Bonnie finally met Mrs. Blackbird's eyes, and a quiet, solemn look passed between them. "Yes," said Bonnie softly, "Yes, I think so. Thank you."

It was a little after 11:00 a.m. when Mrs. Blackbird finished her storytelling. Normally, other stories would have followed, along with several more games of checkers and refilled glasses of lemonade. But that morning, something about Bonnie's question, and Mrs. Blackbird's

answer, seemed to put everyone in sort of a strange mood. A few more stories started and trailed off into nothing, with a lot of pausing and quiet thinking in between.

Finally, Bonnie said she had some things to do, and she left abruptly.

Mrs. Blackbird said she was tired and felt a headache coming on. She said we would have to continue the storytelling next week. She thanked us all for coming by, and everyone started getting ready to leave.

While Sawyer packed up his marbles and Jolee fixed her flouncy skirt, I went down the front porch steps and stood at the corner of Mrs. Blackbird's front yard. From there, I could see just a little into her backyard. In the back corner of the yard was the garden shed where she kept the Visiting Chair.

It was funny, I thought, how the whole town talked about the Visiting Chair. Whispered about it everywhere. But we never talked about it, any of us, unless Mrs. Blackbird happened to mention something about it. If she did, we usually had the impression that it was by accident, and she always changed the subject as quickly as she could. But it was there, all the time, sitting quietly in her backyard while we drank our lemonade and told our stories.

Mrs. Blackbird kept the shed door locked. Some of the stupid boys from school had tried to get into it a time or two, but Mrs. Blackbird always caught them and chased them out of her yard, shrieking at the top of her voice.

She'd said she had a headache. But after the stories she'd told and all those lost looks she'd had while she was remembering things about Emilio, I was pretty sure that she wanted us all to leave so that she could go into that garden shed and talk to Emilio's spirit. That's what everyone said she used the Visiting Chair for. They said she thought it was full of some kind of magic, a magic that allowed her to leave this world for a while and be with Emilio's ghost. Or,

maybe, that it allowed Emilio to leave the world where his spirit lived and talk to Mrs. Blackbird. Nobody was sure exactly how it worked. The stories about the Visiting Chair were woven limply together by things Mrs. Blackbird had said to people over the years since Emilio died, but during those years, the stories had become overgrown with rumors and embellishments from the more colorful of the town imaginations.

We had heard Mrs. Blackbird talk about the Visiting Chair only a few times. Always on accident, if she was in the middle of a story about Emilio, or if anyone was talking about someone they remembered from long ago, someone they'd loved and lost (these were the sad stories that we usually stayed away from, but any sad story always seemed to bring the Visiting Chair into the conversation).

Whenever Mrs. Blackbird said anything about the Visiting Chair, I always wrote it down in my sketchbook. These are some of the things she said, the ones I scribbled amongst my drawings:

*“My husband did not die. He was taken. Carried away from me on enormous, black wings.”*

*“There are places, you know, some places, where the light lingers. Even though my Emilio is gone from me, I see him from time to time. And whenever I see him, I see also that beautiful, amber light of the circus tent. Sometimes, I see the faintest trace of a moth's wings.”*

*“People leave us, yes. But if we are lucky, sometimes, they are able to return. Just for a little while. Just here and there. But it happens, you know. No matter what people say. I've seen it, and I know.”*



*“The weight of grief is heavier than anything else. It hangs over you, like a horrible, hovering mist. But there are ways of easing it. There are ways of making the weight a little lighter.”*

*“Yes, I was just saying to Emilio the other night...oh, that is, I...never mind.”*

*“I have known darkness and pain before in my life, as everyone has. Sorrow comes to everyone. It comes as early as childhood, usually. But I have never known a sorrow so great, a night so seemingly long and endless as I have known since I lost Emilio.”*

*“Yes, it’s a risk, in many ways, to love someone. If you love nothing, you have nothing to lose. I chose the way of love. And I would choose it again. Yes. But it costs something. It truly does.”*

While we walked Jolee back to her house, I thought about all those strange things Mrs. Blackbird had said about Emilio and how he’d been “taken from her.” The things she’d said about losing people, about memories and grieving. Thinking about those things made me feel sort of like I felt when I thought too much about the dark water of Starlight Pond. I didn’t like to think too much about those things she said. They made me feel strange, like I was floating in feelings too heavy for me. That mist she talked about—I especially didn’t like to think about that.

I didn’t like to think about it because I knew what it was. I’d felt it every day since Mamma had died. Sometimes, it felt like that mist—the heaviness of it—was hovering over our whole house. Weaving itself through all the windows. Twisting its way up the stairs, into all of our bedrooms. Staying in our rooms while we slept. That was part of what made it so nice to be on Mrs. Blackbird’s porch. Or at the park. Or in Meriam’s Field. In those places, the mist was less present, and we had a break from its terrible closeness for a while. But, whenever Mrs.

Blackbird said those strange things, it was like I could feel the mist coming up the front porch steps. I could see how everyone else felt it, too. It made everyone remember whatever sad things had happened to them. Whatever they had lost.

Jolee was quiet on the walk home that day.

Sawyer asked her about her dog.

“Why don’t you bring it over to Mrs. Blackbird’s?” he asked. “I don’t guess she would mind.”

Jolee looked at Sawyer like he had surprised her.

“I don’t take her anywhere,” she said, and her voice that sounded almost stern. “She doesn’t like to leave the house. Strangers make her shy.”

We didn’t talk anymore until we got to Jolee’s house. We didn’t see her mom or her dad anywhere as she opened the front door.

“Bye,” she said.

“Bye,” we said, and we headed back home.

I wasn’t sure why, but I had a feeling there was something strange about Jolee Thompson. There was definitely something strange about her mamma, something strange about her house. I just had this sense that there was something—I didn’t know what—that Jolee was hiding from us. But then, I realized, everyone who hung around Mrs. Blackbird’s seemed to have something to hide. Not bad things. More like sad things, things too sad for them to talk about. Bonnie had a sadness about her all the time. Jonas was always quiet, but sometimes, there was something melancholy about his quietness. Even Mr. and Mrs. Bailey sometimes got sad about their two grown boys who lived far away. I knew that Mrs. Delaware had been married a couple of times, and that her husbands hadn’t been very nice to her. I also knew that one of her

children—a grown woman whose name I didn't know—was in jail. That was something Mrs. Delaware never, ever talked about.

Mostly, though, I couldn't stop wondering about all the sadness Mrs. Blackbird carried, and the secrets she kept from all of us. Her whole house felt like one big secret, since we were never allowed inside it. All those rooms crammed with secrets. I often tried to imagine what the inside of her house might look like, but I found it difficult. In some ways, I felt that I didn't know enough about her to have any idea what her home might look like. I imagined that, maybe, she had a lot of old stuff from when she and Emilio had been in the circus together. But then again, maybe all of that stuff would make her too sad. Maybe she got rid of it all a long time ago.

And always, I wondered about the Visiting Chair. It seemed like a silly idea at times, having a chair in your backyard that was supposed to be magic. At other times, it was almost frightening. I pictured Mrs. Blackbird in her long skirts, the shadowy makeup around her eyes, lighting candles and chanting spells as she summoned Emilio's ghost. But, whenever she mentioned the Visiting Chair, she made it sound so ordinary, as though she and Emilio were simply continuing a conversation they'd been having for years.

Sometimes, it felt like Mrs. Blackbird was a stranger to us all. But we kept on showing up at her front porch every Saturday morning, telling stories and listening to them. I wondered what kept us all there. I wondered what Mrs. Blackbird's life would be like if none of us ever went to see her and tell stories with her. I pictured her in that house at night, all alone, not even a ghost to keep her company.

I guessed that the house was awfully quiet. I guessed that talking to a ghost was maybe better than talking to no one at all.

## THINGS WE REMEMBER ABOUT MAMMA

That summer, I started keeping a list in my sketchbook. I started the list because I was trying to draw a picture of Mamma one day. As I was drawing, I got the sudden feeling that I wasn't sure if that was what her eyes really looked like. Were they rounder? Were they closer together? Had that really been their shade of green?

I had started to panic. I ran into my bathroom to sit on the cold tile floor. I tried to breathe, to tell myself that it was alright, I wasn't forgetting her. I was just forgetting one tiny detail about her eyes. I told myself that this did not mean something terrible. It did not mean I didn't love her anymore. It did not mean I hadn't known her at all. I told myself that it was hard to remember every little thing about a person when they weren't always right in front of you. And Mamma had been gone for over a year.

She died in the winter. She died of cancer, cancer that spread all through her body. She died at home, on the couch in the living room. She had wanted to come home, in the end, where she was happiest. A vase of yellow roses had been sitting on the table next to the couch. Sawyer had picked them out for her at the supermarket. Daddy had helped Sawyer put the roses in a vase. Yellow had been Mamma's favorite color. She was wearing a yellow scarf around her head that day. She looked so pale and tired. She could hardly stay awake, and when she could, it was only for a few minutes. She didn't really look like herself at all by that time. We had started to get used to not recognizing her.

She was looking at the flowers when she died. She was looking at those yellow roses and smiling.

Daddy had started to put all her things away pretty quickly after she died. The house got emptier and emptier, but at the same time, it seemed to fill up with blank, horribly silent places

where good things used to be. I hated it. Sawyer hated it, too. I didn't think Sawyer was angry at Daddy for it, anymore. He had made his peace with it. But I was still angry at Daddy for hiding all of her things away. And I planned to stay angry until he put them all back.

When Daddy had started hiding her things, I had snuck around and taken a few of them for myself. I took her wooden hairbrush. It still had a few strands of her curly, yellow hair in it. I took her peach-colored lipstick, the one she wore almost every day. I took one of the little bundles of dried lavender she had kept in the dresser drawers with all her clothes. I took her favorite bracelet, the one that had tiny, golden sunflowers on it. I took the yellow and white striped dishcloth she had always used to cover the bowl of bread dough—she made homemade bread almost every week. I took two paperback books of poetry; she had kept them both on her nightstand. One of the books was by Mary Oliver, and the other was by Edna St. Vincent Millay. They were old copies; the spines were all creased, and a lot of the pages were bent at the corners. She would read some of those poems to us once in a while.

I wanted to take more things, but I was afraid Daddy would notice and make me give back everything else I'd taken.

I put all the things in a shoebox under my bed. Every once in a while, if I started to feel like I was forgetting something about Mamma, I would take out the box of her things and I would start adding to the list in my sketchbook. It helped that awful, breathless feeling in my chest to calm down. It helped me feel like I was making sure I would never forget her. Plus, I felt like I was defying all of Daddy's plans to hide her away, and something about that felt good.

Sometimes, I invited Sawyer to come and look through the box of her things with me, and I would ask him if he had anything he wanted to add to the list.

So, these are some of the things I remember about Mamma. I noted the things on the list that were Sawyer's additions.

1. She had long, very curly, golden-yellow hair.
2. She liked to wear long, loose-fitting dresses.
3. She liked to be barefoot.
4. She loved to make bread, and to let us help her make it. (Sawyer always got to punch the dough back down once it had risen).
5. She loved summer. She didn't like the long, dark nights of winter very much.
6. She loved sunflowers and yellow was her favorite color. She had a small tattoo of a sunflower on her wrist.
7. (Sawyer): She was good at whistling.
8. Her perfume smelled like roses and oranges.
9. (Sawyer): She made really good pancakes and always let me have extra.
10. She made homemade peppermint candy at Christmas.
11. She loved to take walks in Meriam's Field. She loved to look at the stars. She loved Starlight Pond.
12. She got irritated when she was hungry. She would say that being hungry made her feel like a wild, gruff old bear. We called it her "bear mood."
13. She was terrible with any kind of technology. Anything that required batteries or plugging in, she almost always got frustrated with, and Daddy or one of us would come and fix it for her. She didn't like to watch television, except for very old movies in black and white. She and Daddy would watch them together, sometimes.
14. (Sawyer): She taught me how to climb trees. She was good at climbing.

15. (Sawyer): She gave me my favorite marbles. There are six of them. They are all different colors of blue.

16. She used to make pottery when she was in college. She said she wanted to do it again someday and she could teach us.

17. She loved ducks. She thought they were funny.

18. She used to call us “sweet things.”

19. She was not afraid of bugs. If a bug ever got into the house, she would put a cup over it to catch it and take it back outside.

20. (Sawyer): Her laugh sounded nice.

One afternoon, I had the shoebox full of Mamma’s things out on my bed. I was trying a sketch of the tied bunch of lavender. Sawyer went by and saw that the shoebox was out. He came into my room, sat on my bed, and picked up the book of poems by Mary Oliver.

“You could maybe read some of these at Mrs. Blackbird’s,” he said.

“I—what do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean you could read them. To everyone. They might like it,” he said simply.

He got up to leave, but he turned back to me when he was at the door. A slanted ray of sunlight coming through the window was brushing the top of his head. His hair was the exact same color that Mamma’s had been.

“You should read some of the poems,” he said. “Mamma would probably like it, too.”

He left the room. I stared after him, and as soon as he was gone, I put everything back into the shoebox, including the books. I put the box back under my bed and fidgeted for something else to do.

What a stupid idea, I thought. As if everyone wants to listen to me read some old poems.

But I ached for Mamma's voice, the sound of it as she was reading. I ached thinking of how we would never hear her reading to us again.

## CHAPTER 7: THE CONVERSATION

The next night, we knew Daddy was going to be out late with Dee Louise. They were going to the Grasshopper, which was a bar downtown. They went to the Grasshopper every once in a while—it was Dee Louise's favorite place in town. Daddy had never liked going out to bars before.

He had left us fried chicken and mashed potatoes for dinner; he'd picked them up at the store on the way home from work. It was eight o'clock, and were supposed to be going to bed, but the house felt too quiet, too still, and I wasn't tired. I asked Sawyer if he wanted to go for a walk. Just once or twice up and down the street. There was a soft, lavender light outside, fading to blue.

Sawyer and I started out on our walk. I realized as soon as we left the house that I wanted to go to Mrs. Blackbird's. I wasn't sure why. It wasn't a Saturday. It wasn't the right time of day to be over there. I just couldn't stop thinking about her and Emilio. How she had found a way to talk to him, even though he wasn't around anymore. What a wonderful thing she had, I thought. What a crazy and wonderful thing.

I didn't want to be like the stupid boys from school who tried to spy on Mrs. Blackbird. I didn't want to be like the people in town who whispered vicious things about her. I didn't want to be like them. I didn't want to make a spectacle of Mrs. Blackbird or pretend that she was something in a museum. Something to stare at.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the Visiting Chair. I was curious about Emilio, but more than that, I couldn't shake off the feeling—the terrible, wonderful thought. The thought



that, if I could just try the Visiting Chair once—if it was really magic, if it really worked—I could see Mamma again. I could hear her voice.

I knew this was no time to think of trying to get to the Visiting Chair. I still didn't have an idea of how I was going to do it. I just wanted a glance at the garden shed. Maybe, if I looked hard enough, I could see a clear way to get in.

We passed the Baileys' house, and Jonas's house. The street was empty of people. The evening was warm and quiet. So quiet that, when we got to Mrs. Blackbird's, I told Sawyer to stop walking.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Hush," I said, listening hard.

I heard the sound of a screen door opening and swinging shut. I heard the sound of Mrs. Blackbird's feet walk across the back porch and down the steps. But more than that—I could hear her talking.

I motioned at Sawyer, made sure he knew not to make a sound. We crept over to the side of Mrs. Blackbird's fence, and snuck along it as quiet as we could. We stopped around the middle, knelt down in the grass, and listened.

"...it's a beautiful night, my love. You loved these warm evenings, remember?"

I could see a little bit through the white wooden slats of the fence. Mrs. Blackbird was making her way slowly across the backyard. She wasn't wearing shoes, and her feet danced lightly through the grass. There was nobody with her.

I looked at Sawyer. He looked at me. And we both knew it: she was talking to Emilio.

We heard the click and jangle of a key going into a lock, and the groan of an opening door. Mrs. Blackbird stopped before she went into the shed. I pushed my hair out of my face and pressed my cheek against the fence, trying to get a good look at her.

She was looking up. Up at the soft, purple-blue sky. Her voice had sounded light and happy, but her face looked worn-out and sad. She frowned, suddenly, and looked down at the ground.

“I wish so much that you were here.”

Then, she turned, walked into the darkness of the garden shed, and closed the door behind her. We heard the turning of the key again.

Sawyer and I looked at each other again, but we had nothing to say.

We got up and walked home without a word.

I had an odd, heavy feeling in my stomach. I didn't feel thrilled, or even very interested in Emilio or the Visiting Chair, compared to how I'd felt earlier.

I just felt sad, and something else, too. I felt sorry. I felt like I'd just seen something I wasn't supposed to see.

Something, it turned out, I wished I hadn't seen, or heard, at all.

## **CHAPTER 8: THE ALBUM AND THE SPELL**

The next Saturday at Mrs. Blackbird's was a strange one. By the time we all went home, we didn't know what to think. That day, something happened on Mrs. Blackbird's porch that none of us thought was possible, and it was all because of Miss Flounce-Hair Jolee. Because of Jolee, we heard the story of the Visiting Chair, and I took the first step in my plan.

Mr. Bailey started off the morning by telling a story about the time he and his younger brother, Alf, jumped onto a slow train when they were boys. He was telling about how they had

planned to ride the train all the way to Colorado—they had wanted to see the mountains—but Alf got terribly homesick before they even made it out of Kansas.

“It was on the train home that Alf got introduced to the banjo,” Mr. Bailey said. “A man from Omaha was riding with us, and he played the banjo better than anybody we’d ever seen. And Alf, he got this sort of misty look in his eyes, and when we were finally walking back to the house, he said to me, ‘Jim, I am gonna learn that instrument if it’s the last thing I do.’ And you know, he’s still playing the banjo today, and boy, is he good...”

Mr. Bailey was interrupted in his story, much to everyone’s surprise, by a question from Jolee Thompson. Jolee had been particularly quiet when we’d walked her over to Mrs. Blackbird’s that morning. She hadn’t said a word about her dog. She hadn’t said anything at all, as far as I could remember.

But she was looking at Mrs. Blackbird now, looking at her hard. It wasn’t a mean look, just a very serious one. Jolee was sitting cross-legged in a rocking chair close to Mrs. Blackbird’s. The chair was much too big for her. She was wearing a peach-colored dress today, and the skirt on it was so ruffled and poofy that it was drowning her. She was swallowed up by the dress and by the chair, and I couldn’t help thinking that she looked about six years old, even though she was nine.

Mrs. Blackbird was listening to Mr. Bailey’s story attentively. Her hands were folded in her lap. She was wearing dark blue, today. Her skirt was dark blue, her blouse was dark blue and covered in blue lace. She had dark blue, glittering bracelets on her arms, and these odd, dark blue earrings that looked like dragonflies. She was just the right size for her chair, and she looked right and comfortable in it.

When Jolee asked her question, Mrs. Blackbird looked considerably less comfortable.

“Do you really have a magic chair in your backyard?”

Everyone was shocked. Most of the grownups looked around, confused, trying to figure out where the question had come from. I wasn't surprised, though. I had seen Jolee working her way towards asking it, concentrating hard on Mrs. Blackbird like that.

Everyone had forgotten about Mr. Bailey and his banjo-playing brother. Everyone was looking either at Jolee or at Mrs. Blackbird. Jonas was holding a checkers piece in one hand; his hand was suspended over the checkers board. He was staring at Jolee with his mouth slightly open.

Mrs. Bailey, very quietly and under her breath, whispered, “Dear, dear.”

Sawyer had been working on making a flower with his marbles. He had stopped, and he was looking back and forth between Mrs. Blackbird and Jolee.

Jolee had just done something that none of us were ever brave enough to do. She had come right out and asked Mrs. Blackbird about the Visiting Chair.

It was cruel of me, but a small part of me was excited for Mrs. Blackbird to scold Jolee for asking such a question, or at least to say, in her most mysterious, impressive voice, “I do not speak about that.”

But, as I said, something was different about Mrs. Blackbird that day. First of all, she wasn't reacting nearly like I had expected her to. She was looking at Jolee not with anger—not even with much of a sense of shock—but with this quiet, thoughtful expression. I don't know how to describe it, exactly. It was sort of like someone had just thrown water at her face, but she had been expecting it.

Jolee hadn't seemed to notice everyone else's shock and discomfort. She was looking at Mrs. Blackbird expectantly, waiting for a reply. She had one finger twirled around one of her bouncy, blond curls.

Mrs. Blackbird looked around at all of us. She looked a little bit as though she had just woken up.

She stood up out of her rocking chair, and she started to say something, but faltered.

She took a breath, and said, "I suppose I...just give me a moment."

And she opened her front door and went into the house.

Nobody said anything while she was gone. We just sat still and waited.

When she returned, Mrs. Blackbird was carrying a book. As she sat back in her rocking chair, I realized it was a photo album. My rocking chair was situated slightly behind Mrs. Blackbird's, so I could see the cover. It was dark red, almost purple, and there was something written on a little cream-colored card taped to the front. I leaned forward in my chair so I could read it. In dark, thin cursive, it said, "*Cirque Lemaire.*"

Mrs. Blackbird held the album in her lap, and looked around at everyone. This seemed to make her almost change her mind; she made a small movement, like she was going to stand up out of her chair. I imagined she was thinking of running back into the house and maybe not coming out again.

But she took a deep breath, and looked straight at Jolee.

"I do not normally talk of this. But I feel that I...I regret...well, never mind that. I will tell you the story of the Visiting Chair. The story is all true. We won't speak of it anymore after this, though. Are you ready?"

Jolee nodded, saying nothing.

I looked over at Sawyer. He seemed to have forgotten about the flower he'd been working on. He glanced at me quickly and gave a kind of shrug.

"The Visiting Chair," Mrs. Blackbird began, and her voice was low and a little shaky, "was given to me by Madame Lemaire."

"Emilio and I worked for Madame Lemaire and her husband for seven years. They owned the circus company. *Cirque Lemaire*. We traveled with them for years, performing all around the country. They were good to us—good people to work for. But they kept to themselves. They stayed apart from the troupe, for the most part. Madame, especially, was a very private person. She spent a lot of time alone in their caravan. Monsieur Lemaire would say that she devoted a lot of time to reading. We never questioned it."

Everyone's eyes were locked on Mrs. Blackbird. She seemed unable to meet everyone's gaze, though. She mostly focused on Jolee, as though she were telling the story only to her.

"It was the year before Emilio and I would leave the circus. We were planning to get married, start a new life together. That year, Madame Lemaire became ill. One day, we learned that she would not be getting better. After that, some odd things happened. Madame began to give away some of her possessions to people in the troupe. Our friend Phillipa—a dancer—was given Madame Lemaire's collection of expensive fur coats. The fire-eater, Floyd, was given her favorite set of wooden mixing bowls from Morocco. She had a beautiful collection of abalone shells—she gave those to Emilio. I still have them. One morning, we were told that Monsieur and Madame Lemaire had gone back to New York, where they lived, so that Madame could be cared for in a hospital. Three weeks later, we got word that she was gone."

Mrs. Blackbird paused for a moment. Her hands were clasped tightly together in her lap. She took a breath that sounded a little shaky, and she went on.

“I had never been close to Madame Lemaire. I was not hurt or offended that she had not given anything to me before she died. But, when Monsieur Lemaire returned to us, he took me aside one afternoon and told me that Madame had left me something in her will. That night, an old, velvet armchair was brought to my caravan. It came with a sealed letter. I’ll never forget the first time I read that letter. ‘This cannot be true,’ I thought. ‘Madame must have been crazy.’”

She smiled around at all of us, a soft, almost apologetic smile.

“I have learned, since then, that the truth can be something you thought was impossible. The truth can be something so real, so quiet and ordinary, that you almost miss it, if you aren’t looking. But I was young at the time, and hadn’t had much to trouble me in life. I read Madame Lemaire’s letter and shrugged it off as nothing but the sentimental strangeness of an eccentric woman. I kept the chair and resolved to take good care of it, for Madame Lemaire’s sake. But I put that letter in a drawer and, for years, didn’t give it another thought.”

Mrs. Blackbird opened the photo album. Her hand was shaking slightly.

“I will read the letter to you. This is what it said: ‘To Eleonora: Upon my death, I bequeath to you the Visiting Chair. A spell was put on the Chair by my great-great grandmother, who had a broken heart, and who knew the ways of magic. It has been passed down to the women of my family. It is a valuable heirloom. I would not wish any harm to come to it after I am gone. I can see that you are a sensitive soul. ‘Little Bird,’ that is what they all call you, is it not? You are not an ordinary young girl. I know that you will keep the Chair safe; you will see that it is well taken care of. Besides, you will most likely have need of it someday. Whether we are ordinary or not, grief comes to visit us all.’”

Mrs. Blackbird glanced briefly around at everyone. She held the stares of Mr. and Mrs. Bailey for a moment. She looked back down at the photo album.

“There was postscript at the end of the letter,” she said. “*Vouloir, c’est pouvoir*. But, as I said, I put these things out of my mind, at the time. I had no need of whatever magic Madame was talking about, and something about the letter unsettled me. I didn’t like what she said about grief visiting everyone. I wanted to feel young and happy; I put the letter away.”

Mrs. Blackbird handed the book to Jolee.

“There is a picture of all of us there,” she said. “And the letter from Madame Lemaire. Take a look, and pass the book around when you’re done. Please, though, don’t look at any of the other pages, for now. There are more stories to tell, but I don’t think I’m ready to tell them today.”

Sawyer was sitting on the floor next to Jolee’s chair. Jolee studied the picture and the letter with that same quiet, serious look. Sawyer looked at the pages quickly, when it was his turn, but he kept glancing nervously up at Mrs. Blackbird, as though he were about to get in trouble. He got up and handed the album over to Jonas, who gave it the merest glance and thrust it into Mr. Bailey’s hands almost immediately.

The others took their time studying the picture and the letter from Madame Lemaire. They looked at those two pages with wonder on their faces. Mrs. Blackbird sat quietly in her chair while this was going on. She wasn’t looking at anyone, but looking out over the rooftops of the houses on the street. She seemed to be far away in her thoughts.

She wasn’t looking at me when it was my turn to look at the album. In fact, no one was paying much attention to me. They all looked lost in their own thoughts, like Mrs. Blackbird. I stood up out of my chair and walked toward the edge of the porch, facing away from everyone. I looked down at the picture of the “*Cirque Lemaire*” troupe.



I recognized Mrs. Blackbird immediately. She certainly looked older now, but otherwise, she looked very much the same. She wore her hair in the same style as she did now—dark curls piled on top of her head. She had a quiet, regal beauty, like a ballerina. And there—next to her—Emilio!

I couldn't believe it. I wasn't sure why I was so surprised. Had I thought Mrs. Blackbird had made him up? But there he was, a little taller than her, with dark hair and a dark mustache. Everyone else in the troupe was smiling—they all looked happy—but Emilio was laughing. His chin was tilted slightly upward. I could tell that his laugh must have sounded nice.

I had been planning to study everyone else in the troupe pretty closely—I thought I might try to draw them all later. I glanced briefly at the black, scrawling handwriting of the letter, but I noticed something that drew my attention away from the letter and the photograph. A small, barely visible corner of another piece of paper was sticking out from behind that page of the album. I glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching me; they weren't. Gently, I pulled the paper out to see what was on it.

The paper was older and softer than the paper of the letter, and it was a darker shade of cream. The handwriting on this page was even more scrawling than Madame Lemaire's letter—it was an old-fashioned, heavy cursive, and I found it difficult to make out the words.

But I saw a few words: "*Lost Person,*" "*Chair,*" "*one hour,*" "*spell.*"

Before I had really thought about what I was doing, I pulled out the paper, folded it as quietly as I could, and slipped it into the pocket of my jeans. I turned around and handed the album back to Mrs. Blackbird.

I sat down in my rocking chair, pulled out my sketchbook, and started to draw.

The rest of the morning passed quickly. Before too long, Mrs. Blackbird said that she had a headache, and people started leaving. Sawyer and I walked Jolee back to her house. Just like that morning, there wasn't much talking.

As soon as we were home, I closed the door to my bedroom, sat on my bed, and took out the paper from my pocket. I concentrated hard to see through the heavy cursive:

### ***Rules of the Visiting Chair***

*The Chair may only be used to contact one Lost Person.*

*The Visit may last no more than one hour.*

*The Lost Person returns only as a shade of themselves; it can never be a true returning.*

*Should the Chair ever be re-dressed—should its fabric ever be changed—the spell will fade, and the Chair will once again be ordinary.*

*To summon the Lost Person, you must sit in the Chair. You should be in a still, quiet place, without too much light to interfere. Harness the power of your will. Vouloir, c'est pouvoir.*

*Imagine the countenance, the laughter, the soul of your Lost One, and recite the words of the spell in a strong voice:*

***How I long for thee, my Lost One.***

***My heart sings songs of sorrow.***

***Return to me. Return.***

***Let us remember the good days which have passed. Let us remember, though the sun will set again. Let us remember, though the flowers wilt in their jar, and my heart is sore, sore.***

***Return to me. Return.***

I sat still on my bed for a long time. I read the words on the page over and over again. Slowly, I began to realize that this was the secret of how the Visiting Chair worked. This was the spell Mrs. Blackbird used to see Emilio, to talk to him. She had not meant to tell us this part. She had not meant to share this part of the story.

But I had the spell in my hands. I had the words that would let me see my mother again. I would be able to hear her voice.

I pushed away the guilty thoughts that crept into the back of my mind.

I had the secret of the Visiting Chair. Now, I just had to figure out a way to get into Mrs. Blackbird's garden shed, to see if the spell really worked.

I was frightened to imagine how I would feel if it all turned out to be a bunch of nonsense. If Mrs. Blackbird had lied about everything, if all of it—even the spell—was made up. I folded up the paper and put it in the drawer of my nightstand. As I did, I realized that something else was worrying me, too. I was just as afraid of what would happen if the magic worked. If the spell were real. Suddenly, I felt strangely cold. What was it really like, I wondered, to speak to a ghost?