

THE CHANGING ROLE AND REPRESENTATION
OF THE FATHER IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
FROM THE 20TH CENTURY ONWARD

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THE ROLE AND REPRESENTATION OF THE FATHER IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE.

MADELINE BIGNILL

ABSTRACT

The father is a significant figure in life, which is frequently underrepresented in children's literature. For convenience, the father is traditionally sidelined from the story so that the children may have the freedom and independence to adventure. Perhaps this explains the dearth of research on the role of the father in children's literature, with most of the existing research pertaining to the presence of the father in children's picture books. In my thesis I focus on the father in children's literature and explore how the different forms of father influence the genre, including the use and subversion of previously identified metaplots, setting of the text, including the house and home, and the manner in which we view the concept of childhood. Gathering information from a diverse array of secondary sources and using a wide range of popular children's books from the United Kingdom, Australia, and the USA, for children aged 8-12, my thesis examines how the role and form of the father has changed over time and identifies five different forms of father from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. This is presented through both my examination of pre-existing theories and the creation of my own theories in my exegesis, my experimental use of the different forms of father in my creative thesis, and my reflection upon this experimentation within my exegesis. As I demonstrate, the role of the father has greater depth and influence in children's literature than has been commonly acknowledged, and my examination of this role reveals the shifting perception of the father, the family, the child and the home in western culture.

CREATIVE THESIS

THE PLACE WITH NO NAME

- CHAPTER ONE -

A PLACE CALLED TREACHERY

I'm going to tell you everything. Everything as I saw it and as I felt it. You won't believe me, but that's not what's important. I just need someone to know.

When it began, I hadn't slept in four days. It turns out sleeping is something like hunger; when it doesn't get sated right away, the urgency and the sharpness dulls. I was left with a slow throbbing between my eyes, unpleasant, but bearable. It's not that I tried to stay up. I wanted to go to sleep, especially at the start, but I was getting used to it.

Three in the morning is my favourite time. Even the workaholics and the night owls are dreaming by three and it's as though I had the whole quiet world to myself. The air was cool and sharp, bringing my tired, fuzzy mind into focus. Everything is louder in the quiet. I could hear the soft scraping of my pyjamas rubbing together as I walked, the soft padding of my feet on the wooden floor, and the low, rumbling woooosh of the ocean in the distance.

I stepped to the side of the stairs, my right arm pressed against the railing as I made my way down, one foot stepping in front of the other like a tight rope. Stairs always creak the most in the middle. In the kitchen I grabbed the yoghurt from the fridge and a spoon from the drawer. I hoisted myself onto the counter and settled into my spot by the sink. The window there has the best view of the street.

On my first night without sleep, I waited in bed the whole night. I'd never thought about how long the night was before. I would just lie down in darkness and wake up to light, as though no time had elapsed. Now the darkness stretched. The night, I now know, is long and empty, with little noise or movement to grab attention and swallow up time. It's a whole different world and I decided to make it my own.

I learnt who kept their lights on the latest. I learnt which people snuck garbage into their neighbour's bins. I learnt it was Mrs Longworth who was feeding the stray terrier that

had appeared six months ago and decided to stay. I learnt that Mitch, from across the road, would have the film *Roman Holiday* on repeat all night. He would wake up when it stopped, hit play and fall back to sleep during the opening credits. Sometimes I'd read, sometimes I'd draw, sometimes I would doze against the wall, the painted plaster cool against my forehead. At five in the morning I would be back in bed. I'd close my eyes and wait for the sun to come up, wait for my dad to start moving about the house.

That night, I watched as Mr Gallagher mowed his lawn in his dressing gown. He had one of those really old lawn mowers without a motor. The mower made a clicking sound as he slowly pushed it around his front yard, the wheels squeaking every five steps. Mr Gallagher had lived in Treachery longer than anyone I knew. Whenever he got the chance he told me about the days when there was only half a dozen weatherboard houses and no sealed roads.

When I was little, and cousins would come to visit from the city, they would say Treachery was at the end of the world; like the world was this flat plain rather than a sphere without edges. The closest shops were only a thirty minute drive, but masses of trees surrounding the loose gravel road into our town blocked out everything. Treachery consisted of fifty-one houses, two bus stops, one corner shop, one multi-purpose town hall and no traffic lights. A third of the houses were holiday homes that sat empty all through winter and the bus stops were for school buses only. Treachery is famous for its beach. At the best of times it was a risky swim. From the moment the water reached your knees it was a battle against the current. There's not a single house in town where you could escape the sound of the waves or the taste of salt in the air.

I finished my yoghurt, tossed the container and washed my spoon, leaving no traces. I grabbed my books, my maths homework and Sarah's stash of chocolate from behind the rice. Setting myself up at the breakfast table I alternated between maths problems, reading my book and eating chocolate. When my eyes felt too dry to keep reading and my mouth tasted

funny from the chocolate, I packed everything away and crept up to my room. I brushed my teeth, stretched out on my bed, closed my eyes and waited for the next day to come.

I heard a bang and jolted up in my bed. My head was fuzzy and heavy and it took me a few seconds to figure out that it was a door slamming in the hallway. The room was sharp and bright. The sunlight cut through my bedroom window, picking up the dust on my desk and my floor. I slumped back down in bed with a huff, and jumped again when three sharp and fast knocks landed on my door.

“Up,” Sarah called through the door. “Now, Everly. You’re late.”

“I’m up,” I groaned. She knocked sharply again. “I’m up!” I repeated louder.

I got dressed for school, grabbed my bag and shuffled downstairs. Sarah was at the breakfast table, finishing off her cereal. She was already dressed, her dark blonde hair pulled back into a low ponytail. Her school jumper was bunched up in the middle of the table, propping up her history book as she read.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked, my voice still thick with sleep. Sarah chewed slowly and swallowed before she answered.

“Gone to work. Lunches are on the kitchen bench,” she said glancing up at me. “Put your shoes on and I’ll give you a lift to school. You’ll have missed the bus by now.” I was in my last year at the primary school one town over, but Sarah went to high school an hour away. She got up to rinse her bowl and I started to look for my shoes.

“Come on,” Sarah called from the front door. I found my shoes under the lounge and jammed my feet inside without doing the laces.

“Textbook?” I called back. Sarah rushed back to the breakfast table and I grabbed my lunch. I did one of my laces as she locked the door and then shuffled to the car trying to keep my other shoe on. The air outside was biting cold and a little wet, which woke me up and

helped me focus. I breathed in deep.

Sarah's car was an old two door thing, made before we were born. She loved it because it was purple and it worked. She didn't need anything from a car other than that. The inside always smelt like the vanilla from the air freshener she plugged into her vents, and old paper from the pile of books on her back seats. Sarah handed me two slices of toast wrapped in a serviette. They were cold, but I ate them anyway.

"Got everything you need?" she asked as we backed out of the driveway.

"Yeah, I packed last night. Will you pick me up this arvo too?"

"No," she snorted.

"Fine," I muttered, slouching down in my seat.

"I could've just left you at home." I stayed silent and stared ahead at the road. "I'll be home for dinner," she added more softly. "All right?"

"Yeah, that's fine," I said quietly and watched the tree line blur into a mess of brown and green.

I sat on our bench and picked at my sandwich, pinching tiny pieces of white fluffy bread between my fingers and rolling them until they compacted into hard pebbles. Lux and I sat at the back of the school yard at the top of the hill. Lux found me when I had torn through a third of my lunch. She sat beside me with a sigh.

"Mrs Holt?" she guessed.

"Every day. Every single day she asks me what's wrong, because I'm frowning. I'm just thinking! It's my thinking face."

"I know-"

“And she gets this smarmy, almost smile on her face while she’s pretending to be concerned. Why can’t she just leave me alone?”

“She’s unsatisfied with her life and she’s taking it out on you.”

“Don’t quote that anti-bullying crap.”

“Often when people feel they have no control in one area of their life they try to…”

“I will leave you on this bench and go hang out with those kids from year four,” I threatened, but I was smiling and feeling a little less heavy.

“If you want to pretend to be a pony for the rest of lunch,” she snorted. I barked a laugh and the sound came out short and sharp.

“Look,” Lux said, holding her hands out in front of her like she was about to catch something. This was her theorizing voice, her “let me tell you about the world” voice. She always got this way when talking about adults. “Some people can’t be reasoned out. I bet you she doesn’t even know why she does it. She decided that she didn’t like you at the beginning of the year and nothing is going to change that now. If you point it out, she’ll just deny it.”

“But I haven’t done anything! I don’t mess around in class. I don’t fail any subjects. I’m not at the top or the bottom of the class. I am spectacularly mediocre. I’m unremarkable. She shouldn’t even know I exist.”

“She obviously doesn’t think you’re unremarkable.”

“She does! That’s what she wrote on my report card. Unremarkable. Mediocre.”

“What did your dad say about that?”

“He hasn’t read it. I don’t think he knows about the mid-year report card. He just expects one at the end.”

“And you didn’t show him?” Lux asked, surprised. It wasn’t like me.

“Nah.”

“Why not?”

“Just didn’t,” I shrugged.

“You would’ve shown your mum.” Lux was looking at me, but I couldn’t look at her.

“Yeah, well, Mum would’ve had a fit, come down to the school and torn Mrs Holt’s head off.” My throat had closed up and my voice sounded strangled. “Dad wouldn’t know what to do.”

“Well, we’ll never know unless...”

“No,” I said, sharply stopping her. “I know. I know what’ll happen. I’ll show him, he won’t know what to do, then he’ll think how Mum would normally handle this, then he’ll be thinking about how Mum isn’t there and it’ll just be another thing on the, “How Life Is So Much Harder Now’ list. And that list really doesn’t need any help.”

I’d lost the laughter I had a few minutes ago. My sandwich was torn to shreds and I felt hungry, but I had nothing left.

“You’re right,” Lux said. She didn’t do gentle or soft, but her voice got really calm and level. I liked it better that way, it lacked pity. We sat in quiet for a while, watching the birds eat my crumbs, Lux waiting for me to cool off.

“Come on,” she said, giving me a shove. “I’ll buy you some lunch. I gave a heavy dose of guilt to my keeper last night about the lack of food in the house and now I’m cashed up for the week.” She fished around in her jacket pocket and pulled out a couple of twenties.

“You have better things to spend it on,” I muttered sullenly.

“No, I don’t.” She spoke lightly, but stood before me, staring, waiting for me to go with her.

Lux wore her uniform with individuality. Her shirt never seemed long enough to tuck in and she had drawn on the sleeves with permanent marker. Her hair never stayed in its tie, but slipped out so the dark curls slithered about her head and fell over her shoulders as though alive. I loved Lux because she was wild and freer and braver than me. She loved me because I loved her. Lux never needed to think about it more than that. She only needed to know I would go with her. So, I stood up and went with her.

It was one of those days I needed time to move faster. I needed to finish school and go home. I would mumble under my breath, *I need to go home, I need to go home*. Thinking that when I got there I would lose the urge to crawl out of my own skin. But when I got home that afternoon I still didn’t want to be where I was. I didn’t want to be at home. I didn’t want to be at school. I didn’t want to be anywhere.

Lux had an appointment at the dentist and was picked up by her aunt’s personal assistant after lunch, so I rode the school bus alone. She’d spent our wait in the canteen line cursing out her aunt for outsourcing her care. Lux moved to Treachery to live with her aunt after her parents had died in a car crash when she was eight. Lux alternated between complaining about her aunt’s complacency as a carer and bragging about her lack of supervision. “Fiona was a woman with a plan,” she would say of her aunt. “And I was not a part of that plan.” Lux never spoke about her parents. And, though I tried, I couldn’t imagine a version of Lux with parents, couldn’t imagine someone worrying over her school grades or her scraped knees. Lux was nobody’s child.

I had at least an hour when I got home before my sister would arrive. She hung around with her friends after school, in parks, at their houses, spending as long as she could out of the house. I used to love that time. I used to tear off my shoes and raid the kitchen for food. I would play my music and do what I wanted without any harassment from Sarah. I used to have Mum all to myself.

Now the house was quiet. Not the quiet of the night, when I had the company of other heartbeats in the house, but a sterile silence. My stomach felt heavy and unsettled from the pie Lux bought me at lunch and I didn't tear off my shoes because I wouldn't be staying here any longer than I had to. I trudged upstairs to dump my school bag and change out of my uniform. I pulled on thick, heavy, comforting clothes, Sarah's old clothes which were still too big for me. I grabbed my book, my music and my headphones and left the quiet behind.

I walked towards the north end of the beach, where the sand was built up high and grass roots stretched over the shallow dunes. It was an unpopular part of the beach even when the weather was good, and on that afternoon, when the wind picked up and whipped sharply around my ears, it was deserted.

For a while I walked up and down the sand, looking for the perfect spot. I found a valley between two dunes, sheltered from the wind, where the afternoon sun was still strong. I lied down, pulled out my book, buried my headphones in my ears and prepared to stay until the sun went down.

When I got back to the house it was almost dark, the last low bits of sun soaking everything in a shade of violet. My muscles were stiff from lying on the beach and there was a bit of sand around the collar of my jumper that I couldn't shake loose. I came to the house

by the back door, which was closer to the beach. The path was brightly lit because Sarah had turned on every light in the house.

She was sitting on the coffee table, eating a bowl of cereal and glaring at the news.

She didn't look at me when I came in, but her frown got deeper.

"We're supposed to eat those meals he froze," I said, passing her on my way to the kitchen.

"You eat them then," she said through a mouthful. I pulled open the freezer and started digging through the drawers.

"He's going to notice if we don't," I said. The problem with Dad's frozen meals was that he never labelled them and once things get frozen they tend to all look the same: a little white, a little brown, with every container clouded by frost. I pressed my fingers against the plastic lid, trying to melt the ice with my hand so I could see inside. Playing the guessing game with your dinner never made any food particularly appealing. My fingers were frozen and nothing looked good, so I grabbed a bowl of cereal and joined Sarah on the coffee table. She suppressed a smile when I sat next to her.

"Leave me a note next time you disappear, okay?" She said it like a question, but it wasn't a question.

"Okay," I said easily. She switched the channel to something friendlier. "No Dad tonight?"

"Nah, he's getting back late. But probably tomorrow."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Yeah, maybe," Sarah agreed.

CHAPTER TWO

A SICKNESS, A STORM, A BEGINNING

The next day Lux wasn't at school. She did that sometimes, just didn't show up. She used to tell me that she couldn't come in, like it wasn't physically possible that day. Her aunt would leave for work before Lux was up and when Fiona got home Lux would tell her she'd been sick. Fiona never questioned it. Neither did I.

I never knew what to do with myself when Lux didn't come in. Recess and lunch became less of a relief and more a tactical mission of avoiding sympathetic teachers who tried to encourage me to make more friends. It started raining at lunch, not heavily, but enough to confine us inside. Mrs Holt sat sourly behind her desk, barking at the boys to stop throwing things, snarling at the girls to stop sitting on the desks. Sometimes she was more pit-bull than human. After I wolfed down my lunch, I went over to her desk.

"Can I-" I started.

"I need to go to the toilet," Molly declared.

"It's not possible that you need to visit the bathroom for the third time in an hour, Miss Lucas," Mrs Holt said tiredly.

"I've been drinking heaps of water," Molly whined, shooting a glance to her friends who were edging out the door without her.

"Go sit down," Mrs Holt said, waving her away. "What do you want, Everly?"

"Can I go to the library?" I asked. "Please," I added quickly.

"You can't take food into the library."

"I've finished my lunch."

“Fine, go. But be back before lunch is over.”

The library was anyone’s safest bet on a rainy day. Most students never thought to come here at lunch. All the computers were taken, but the clean air was heaven after the stuffy classroom and the quiet was even better. I grabbed one of my old favourites off the shelf and settled myself into the back corner of the library, in the section with the ancient encyclopaedias and dictionaries. I flicked the book open, but didn’t get any further. My skin felt too warm and my mouth was dry. I leant my forehead against the shelf. It pressed uncomfortably into my skull, but the cold of the metal felt good. I closed my eyes, happy to let lunch slide quietly by, with the quiet scrape of pages turning and the tapping of computer keyboards keeping me company.

“Everly?” I opened my eyes and found Miss Supline, one of the overly concerned teachers. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” I nodded, then stopped because it was making my head hurt. “Just escaping the classroom fever.” She smiled in the pacifying way that I hated.

“You look like you’ve got a bit of a fever yourself. Maybe you should go to the sick bay.” She crouched down to my level and squinted at my face.

“I’m fine.” I turned to the next page of the book in my hands, as though I’d been reading all along.

“Are you sure? I’d let Mrs Holt know so you could go straight there. You could call your dad to come get you.” I could feel her staring at the side of my face. She wasn’t going to let up. I tucked my feet underneath me and stood up.

“Look I’m...” I started, but had to stop. Dark clouds blotted out my vision and the dull thudding in my head increased to a bang. I could feel my brain pulsing against the inside

of my skull. I gripped the shelf behind me to keep balance and squeezed my eyes shut until my head quietened down. “Uh, yeah, sick bay would be good thanks.”

The office lady looked at my grey, sweat-shiny skin and frowned. “Are you sure you don’t want us to call your father?” She didn’t ask about my mum. Nobody did. Everyone knew the story and they were careful not bring her up.

“There’s no point. By the time he’d get here school would be over,” I explained again, wondering how much time we could all save if the adults accepted what I said the first time I said it.

She hummed, unimpressed. “Well, we can’t send you back to class as you are.” She wanted me to say sorry, but I wouldn’t. The silence ticked on tensely.

“If I could just lie down somewhere...” I trailed off, successfully sounding as pathetic as I felt.

“Yes, yes, of course,” she murmured, more to herself than to me. “Follow me.”

She led me down the hall to a room that seemed to be more junk room than sick bay. There was a line of desk chairs against the wall, most from classrooms, but one was a proper office chair with five of its six wheels. There was a sink with overhead cabinets, a poster for CPR and an old, green lounge. I shuffled over to the lounge, dropped my bag and lied down, curling onto one side and throwing an arm over my eyes to block out the yellow fluorescent light.

“You’ll have to be quiet and no messing around on your phone. If you’re sick then you just get to rest, it’s not a...”

“Mmhm,” I grunted.

“Well, alright then.” The door shut with a click and I was alone. The room was cool, if a little bit musty. I settled into the lounge, happy to wait out the rest of the day.

I thought about messaging my dad. I thought about him arriving to pick me up, like all the times he did before. I remembered the last time he did, almost a year ago. We’d lost my mum the week before and it was my first day back at school. Riley Stuart told me that if my mum had loved me she would have found a way to stay. I walked out of my classroom, went to the toilets, and threw up. Clarence had stormed into the office, picked me up and carried me home. But that was before everything changed, before the grief and silence settled over our house. I dozed and I dreamed. I woke confused, thinking he had really come, but it was only the office lady, telling me I needed to hurry if I wanted to catch my bus.

The light rain had turned into a heavy storm. The kind where the rain hits you like a bullet from every direction and no tree or overhang can offer any refuge. I watched it all from inside the house. We had one of those glass houses, the ones that look like a giant fishbowl. The entire east side of the house was made of floor to ceiling windows to best show off the ocean across the road. That day I couldn’t see more than three metres away. A thick, white wash of water hung like a curtain around the house. Spasmodically, the wind would shift and shots of rain would spray against the glass, making me flinch. But still, I sat and I watched. It was magnificent.

Sarah floated around behind me. My sister moves. Always. She doesn’t stomp or hover. If you didn’t know her you might not even have noticed. She moves gently and quietly. There’s never any rush, but there’s always motion, a foot swaying side to side, a piece of hair being combed back over and over. If life was an ocean, then Sarah rippled

serenely along invisible currents, always moving, never struggling. Lux charged forward, kicking and thrashing, spraying water all around. Dad paddled like mad, trying to keep his head above the water. And I was sitting on the shore, terrified of getting wet.

I am stillness. My fever crawled under my skin. Every move made me ache, so I sat and I observed. I saw my sister swim about the house, going from room to room. From the kitchen, to the lounge room, up the stairs and down again, always leaving a wide berth around me. I don't know if she realised she was doing it. But I saw it, as I see everything.

She didn't want me to be there. I didn't want to be there. But Dad had sent us a text at the end of the school day when the rain started in earnest. The ancient flip phone that floated around the bottom of my school bag had vibrated against my drink bottle. The clattering cut through the quiet of the administration office. The office lady had whipped into the sick bay, demanding I hand over the "illegal device." But I just frowned in confusion and lied back down and closed my eyes until she left. After her footsteps had disappeared down the hall I dug the phone out.

The message read: THE ROADS ARE DANGEROUS. COME STRAIGHT HOME. Dad always wrote with the caps lock on making every message seem urgent, angry or both. I didn't want to go straight home. I wanted to go to the library until it closed and catch the last bus home; but it made me a sad kind of happy that he had remembered us in the middle of his work day. So after the school day ended I found myself on the bus, with its wheels sloshing through the dangerous road, heading straight home.

The afternoon bus is one of my least favourite places. The morning bus is usually okay: everyone is still half asleep. It's like library rules: soft conversation only. But the afternoon bus is my kind of hell. Everyone is awake, excited by the end of the school day and the lack of supervision. The rain only makes it worse. We had to have lunch inside, so all the

younger ones had the pent up energy of a dog that hasn't been taken for its walk. They ran up and down the aisles of the bus trying to weave in and out of people, but really just shoving everyone about. There were a dozen conversations being shouted over the top of one another and a girl sitting in the baggage area sobbing, while her friends gathered around her and collectively glared at a boy across the aisle.

Rain seeped in through the window's seals. Everything and everyone was damp. Between the rain in our clothes and the energy vibrating around the bus, the air had become thick and heavy. When I breathed in, I felt I could taste everyone on the bus: the sweat, the half-eaten lunches, pencil shavings and glue from end of day craft sessions. It made me nauseous. I gripped the pole where I stood, breathed as shallowly as I could and counted backwards until the bus rounded onto my street.

Sarah still took longer than me to get home. I had a shower hot enough to turn my whole body red. I had a grilled cheese sandwich made with three different kinds of cheese. And I had ten minutes of solitude to watch the storm beat against the world outside, while sitting in that delicious feeling of being warm, dry and clean after being so cold and wet. But then Sarah came home.

I could tell when she spotted me; there was a pause in her footsteps.

"Hey," she called, before dropping her bag to ground with a crash.

"Hey," I said back, not turning to face her, but keeping my eyes on the storm.

I heard the soft quick steps of her running up the stairs and we were done. Sarah wasn't bad; she was lovely. As far as siblings went, from what I could tell, she was basically as good as it got. We hardly ever fought. We hardly ever spoke. She had never liked Lux, but I'd noticed that a lot of people didn't like Lux. Sarah and I just didn't know what to do with each other. We were strangers who instinctively loved each other, but strangers all the same.

As quiet as Sarah was herself, she liked noise. When she went upstairs she turned her stereo on. When she came back down, she turned on the TV in the lounge room and went to grab some food, turning on the radio in the kitchen while the microwave buzzed. Her mobile phone chimed again and again, as her friends urged her to go out. All of a sudden our home was full of voices and noise, as though there were a dozen people instead of just us two.

I got up from my post and passed Sarah on my way to the kitchen. She was on the lounge, sandwich by her side, laptop on her knees, with the TV murmuring softly in the background. She hated all the kid's shows that were on in the afternoon, so she had it switched to some infomercial channel selling a new kind of blender.

I turned the radio off in the kitchen and saw her shoot me a look when I went by her again to go upstairs. Her look said she wasn't happy, but there was no legitimate argument to keep it on so she would just be quietly displeased with me instead. I raised my eyebrows just a little, a challenge that said "Go on, say something," knowing that she wouldn't, and continued on my way to my room.

I could hear her stereo from my bedroom. I wanted to get up and turn it off. I kept thinking about doing it. It was like wanting to scratch and itch when you knew you'd break the skin and make it worse. I knew Sarah and I would have a real fight if I went into her room. I knew I shouldn't do it, but that didn't make the wanting to do it go away.

I poked my head out into the hallway. Her door was ajar. I took two steps out and stopped, took half a step back. The song changed and the bass picked up, becoming a constant, low buzz in my ear. I stepped forward, turning to the side and slid through the gap in her door. I moved through her room like a game of operation, trying not to touch anything, tip-toeing around the clothes on her floor and the books which spilled from the shelves. I turned the stereo dial down a little and tried to hear her moving downstairs. I heard the

microwave go off and open. I turned the dial again, counting under my breath, trying to keep myself slow. When all the buzzing was gone, I hit the power switch and turned the volume back up. I had twenty minutes of near quiet, lying in my room and doing my homework, before Sarah burst in.

“Stay out of my room,” she growled. She’d pulled her hair back into a ponytail. She always wore it down at school. That’s what all the girls in her year did, but when she came home she pulled it back, liking it better off her face.

“Why would I go in your room?” I asked, not lying.

“You turned my music off.”

“Maybe the CD finished,” I said, looking back to my books.

“It wasn’t a CD. You know it wasn’t. You’re not being clever,” she sniped. “Stay out of my room.”

“I don’t want to go in your room,” I said calmly, turning pages without reading them.

“That’s not the same thing. Say you won’t go in my room.”

“How about you get out of my room?” I cracked, sitting up.

“How about...” she started.

“Shut up, just shut up. Why do you have to be so loud all the time? I hate it and you don’t care. You don’t care that I’m here. You make me pretend like I’m not here. Just shut up and leave me alone.”

“Everly-” she tried.

“Get out!” I pushed myself up and started shoving her out the door, my head down and my hands in her stomach. She let me push her into the hallway. I closed the door and

rested my head against the wood. I still felt sick and I wanted someone to notice, but there wasn't anyone left to do that. I wanted my mum.

"Everly," Sarah said gently from the other side.

"Go away, go away, go away, go away, go away," I whispered. I heard her walk away and it was quiet again.

Sarah felt bad for yelling at me, so she cooked chicken wings for dinner. When the smell drifted upstairs, a plum and something marinade that was rich and sweet, I wandered downstairs, following my nose to the kitchen. Sarah was sitting on the kitchen bench, legs dangling over the edge, heels knocking against the cabinet, hunched over a book on her lap. She looked up at me when I sidled around the corner, frowned for a second, then looked back down before she spoke.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Yeah." My voice sounded like I'd been sleeping. "The chicken's meant to be for Saturday night."

"Dad can buy more chicken," she yawned. She looked up when I didn't respond. "It's fine, Evers."

"Thought he was coming home tonight," I said, glaring at the oven.

"He is. He's just going to be late."

"I thought he wasn't going to be late." I was getting louder.

"He wasn't, but now he is. Don't get cranky with me, I'm just passing along the message," she sighed, closing her book and jumping off the counter.

“What message?”

“He called when you were upstairs, wanted to check that we came straight home and said he was going to be late. A couple of the roads have been closed and he’s taking the long way home.”

“And he left work late?” I added.

“And he left work late,” she agreed. She grabbed a couple of tea towels and pulled open the oven, a wave of hot air making her face flush.

“You’ll burn your hands,” I told her. She grabbed the tray out of the oven, and dropped it onto the stove top, hissing under her breath. I went to the sink and turned on the cold water. Sarah stuck her hands under the stream. I turned and looked at the side of her face; her nose was wrinkled up and her forehead crunched as she looked at the water run over her burnt palms.

“Thanks for making dinner,” I said quietly. Her face smoothed out and she smiled a little.

“Get the bowls out,” she responded.

“Should we make some veggies to eat with it?” I asked, glancing back at the tray of chicken.

“Nah.”

When I woke up from an uneasy doze the storm had passed, leaving the night dense and wet. The humid air sat heavy on my chest, making my breath come out in pants. I needed to move. I needed to sleep. A strange coolness had taken the fever ache from my body, but instead of feeling calm, I buzzed, alert and feeling so much sharper than I had in weeks.

My phone rattled at the bottom of my school bag. Before I could pick it up, it buzzed again and again. It was Lux. *Come outside*, she said. *Come outside. I'm here. Come outside.* Step one, two. I heard the soft scrape of feet skimming through grass, the muted rip of roots tearing under foot. The gentle thud of someone stumbling and the muffled laughter of a girl. I dropped my phone in my sheets, crawled to the end of my bed and clambered over, using all four limbs, dextrous as an animal. Lux was waiting under my window, in an oversized Lynyrd Skynyrd shirt and a pair of black gym shorts, her stretching grin a flash of light in the darkness. I grinned back and ran through the house to meet her, quick and quiet as a cat.

She met me by the back door and grabbed my hand, giving me a spin. I laughed and spun her back and then we were moving. Lux and I started this when I first lost Mum and stopped sleeping. We never spoke, never picked a place to go. We walked and ran and twirled and jumped. We climbed through people's backyards and waded through their pools. We walked up, up, up until we ended up at the Big Tree. We climbed up through the branches, sitting on the highest comfortable bough. Lux pulled half a packet of Oreos from her pocket and we savoured the particular joy of being somewhere we weren't supposed to be and eating something we shouldn't.

We ran home by the beach. It was the longest way to my house, but we could move faster on the sand without fear of falling. We followed the curve of the shore, just close enough to keep our feet wet. The sun started to rise. It was just a thin sliver of wavering light sitting over the dark water, but it flooded the cloudy sky with pink and yellow and grey. The tide had pulled back quickly, leaving an expanse of hard-packed, wet sand, covered by a thin layer of water. The sheet of water reflected the sky like a mirror. The more the sun rose, the more we began to feel as though we were running on the sky, toes curling through clouds and feet pushing against the light.

I was a faster runner than Lux. The beach was the one place I was fearless. I pushed

harder into the sand with each step, stretching my legs further. With every drag of breath into my lungs, I felt as though I was on the edge of flying. Just one more step, one more bit of speed and I could take off.

Then, without warning, I fell through the sand and into the sky.

- CHAPTER THREE -

A JUNGLE, A HOUSE, A STRANGER

I snapped to consciousness like an elastic band: sharp and cruel. I was lying on my stomach on the beach. Sand pressed into my cheek and crept into my mouth, but the fall had knocked the air out of my chest and I couldn't think of anything but breathing in. The sound of my gasping made me panic. I closed my eyes and pressed my forehead into the ground, dragging my knees into my chest.

When my breath was back in my body I pulled my hands from where they were clenched in the sand. I brushed them against my legs, trying to shed the grains on my palms, when I remembered Lux. My head jerked up and my eyes whipped along the shoreline. A dozen steps away I saw a dark sodden form, crawling forward, dragging itself away from the water. I levered myself to my feet and stumbled forward until I reached her.

She had managed to prop herself up on her knees, but her head hung forward, shoulders curling in. She was dripping with black. Her dark hair hung heavy and wet, blurring into her shirt which had stretched with the weight of the water to fold at the ground around her knees. I dropped to my knees in front of her, waiting for her to recover, still feeling heavy myself. When she looked up her eyes were red from the salt. Her gaze slid inland, towards home. Or where home should have been. Instead of the parking lot, instead of roads, instead of my house, stretching across the land and rolling over the hills was a dense and savage jungle. Layers of leaves, vines and moss-covered branches seemed to press outward as if reaching for us. The mess of green stood so thickly that I could only see three steps in, before everything became obscured by shadows and leaves.

"What happened?" I rasped. My throat felt as though I'd been drinking sand. Lux said nothing, but rose to her feet and stepped closer to the jungle.

"Where are we?" I said, stronger. She didn't answer and I rose to follow her, but

trying to prop my legs up underneath my torso felt like a balancing act. My wet clothes weighted me like lead and my bones had the density of a sponge. I struggled forward, tipping and stumbling, gradually finding my footing. We first heard it when I caught up to Lux: a roar. It was gravelly and full. It seemed far away, but it filled up all the air. It sounded like a warning.

“Was that...?” she started, but stopped, her face falling into a weighted frown. I started to shake my head, hard and fast, but could feel my brain hard against my skull and I had to stop. My hands clutched the side of my face and I shut my eyes, waiting for everything in my body to go quiet again.

Lux was still looking towards the trees. Her hands were held in front of her at shoulder height, palms facing forward, fingers twitching. This was deep thought Lux. Calculating Lux. She whipped around to face me, hair spinning out and hitting her body with a splat and her weighted gaze settling on me.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” she asked. Her voice was gritty like mine, but stronger.

“Um, I... We were running on the beach and then... then I felt like I was falling?” My voice rose at the end, uncertain. I’d never felt the way I had on the beach and I didn’t know how to describe it. Perhaps what I’d felt was flying, but I’d never felt that either.

“Yeah,” Lux nodded, eyes becoming a little brighter. “Yeah, kind of like that, like falling.”

“So, how did we get here?”

“I’m not sure. Time rift? A wormhole? A portal? I don’t... I can’t... I don’t know.”

“But how do we get home?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t...” she said, patting herself down. “I don’t have my phone. I don’t know

where it's gone.”

I pointed wordlessly to the ocean. Lux sunk down and sat in the sand.

We sat on the beach. The sun was searing and merciless. It dried out our clothes, and tempted me to wade into the water once more. I licked my lips for the third time that minute and tried to swallow, but my throat was too dry. Lux turned her face away from the jungle and looked at me, eyes narrow and calculating.

“We should go,” she said, with a short, firm nod, as though she were agreeing with herself and stood up.

“Why? We need to stay where we can be seen. We’ll be too hard to find otherwise,” I said, staying seated.

“There is no one to find us. No one knows we’re here. No one is coming for us. Not my aunt, not your dad.” I felt a little sick when she mentioned Clarence. He would be panicked. If he noticed. I grimaced. Lux carried on speaking, “We need to find water, then food and maybe shelter. Then, we figure out where we are.” She set off with new energy, beating off some sand and walking towards the jungle.

“Where are you going?” I called to her back.

“Where do you think?” She didn’t turn around, but she paused where sand started to end and the grass began to take over, stance wide, hands settling on her hips.

“You want to go into that?” My tone was disbelieving as I stared at the dark unknown of the trees and shadows.

“You don’t?” She turned to face me. Her tone was as disbelieving as mine. No matter how close you grow to someone, the difference in how you both see the world can always be surprising.

“Why?” I implored.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s dumb. Going into a forest for no reason, with no resources, is dumb. If this was a horror film, that would be the creepy basement door and we would be the dumb college kids.”

“You don’t even like horror movies.”

“But we are not dumb, we are smart, we are the ones who make it to the end of the film.”

“Actually, you’re unremarkable and mediocre,” she pointed out, pinching her lips together, trying not to laugh at her own joke. “They’re your words!” she added when I glared at her.

“Mrs Holt’s words. Do you want to talk about your report card?”

“Lux is intelligent, but wilful and does not use her mind constructively. She has a habit of making bad decisions and what’s worse, enjoying them,” she parroted, trying to adopt a formal tone. “See? Intelligent.”

“And a chronic maker of bad decisions,” I yelled, throwing my hands out, gesturing to the expanse of the jungle. “This is a bad decision.”

“Do you know why I make bad choices?” She asked, infuriatingly calm and sure.

“Because you enjoy the misery of others?” I sulked. This was not the first time I had wished that I could be sure like Lux. I could never make a decision easily. I would think everything over in my head a thousand times, even after it was done. I’d never seen Lux uncertain.

“Because, it’s always more fun.”

She gave me her best smile, happy and excited in a way that I hadn’t seen for a long time, and she marched towards the forest edge. Arms swinging and voice strong she yelled back to me, “Come on, kid, let’s have an adventure.”

And that’s when the trouble really started. Not with the beach or when she showed up at my window, but when for a moment, I tried to be Lux and I followed her in.

“Evers.”

“What?” I muttered, trudging forward. We moved slowly because we had to push dense foliage away whenever we stepped forward. I had fallen twice and so had taken to looking at my feet as I walked, not wanting to trip again. My legs were smeared with drying mud, the rest of my body was sticky with sweat, but my insides felt bone dry.

“Look!” Her voice sounded further away, as though she had stopped walking as I continued.

“At what?” I groaned, finally stopping. I looked at Lux, who was looking into the trees, her face a mixture of wonder and triumph. I stomped back to where she’d stopped and tried to follow her gaze. I narrowed my eyes looking deep into the green, and then, in a flash, I saw it: sunlight hitting glass.

A window.

Once I saw the window I could see the rest of the house spread out around it. It was easy to miss: the house looked as though it was being eaten by the jungle. Rich, green moss crept up the foundations. Ferns burst through walls having pushed their way through the mortar. Stones from the walls had fallen to the ground and become wrapped up in vines, as

though they were reaching fingers trying to pull crumbs of the house into the jungle's waiting mouth. Trees had burst through the roof, their limbs stretching out of empty windows.

We couldn't see the whole place from where we stood; it was too large, and the greenery pressed in too close. The closer we crept, the further back the walls disappeared into the jungle.

"How big is this thing?" Lux muttered as we crept forward. A low branch was slung across our path. I dropped to a crouch and scuttled underneath. Lux leapt over the top and landed with a graceless crash into a fern. She wrested herself free, shook herself to dislodge the leaves and dirt from her clothes and, unfazed and unembarrassed, continued moving towards the house.

We reached the edge of the house and tried to peer in through a window, but the tree limbs pressing outwards made it hard to get close. Lux tried shuffling sideways through branches when a bird burst from the dimness of the house with a heart-jolting shriek. It tore by Lux's head, a flurry of rainbow feathers. Lux let out a scream and dropped to the ground, covering her head.

I watched the red, blue and yellow of the bird disappear into the green of the jungle and turned back to Lux to find her still kneeling on the ground, covering her head.

"Lux?" I tried to keep the laughter out of my voice, but failed.

Her head lifted and she looked at me from the ground, wide eyes through a mess of hair. I began to laugh in a choked sort of way. Lux glared at me and pushed herself off the ground, snapping any branches which got in her way. I reached through the tree towards her and held out my hand. She slapped my hand away and, once she was free, led our way around the house, searching for another way in.

“Who would build a house out here?” I wondered aloud. Talking to Lux was generally easy as talking to myself, except it had the added benefit of not feeling as crazy or dim-witted.

“I would,” she declared.

“Well, this wasn’t you, unless you’re a few hundred years older than you let on.”

“Then someone like me.”

“I wonder what happened to them.”

“What makes you think something happened?”

“Well, they’re not here now. Are they?”

“Maybe they just died out...” Lux suggested.

“Leaving one daughter behind...” I continued.

“Who went mad with loneliness...”

“And ran off into the jungle...”

“To marry the monkey king!” she shouted, stopping in her path and spinning around to face me.

“Gross, Lux. Why?” I groaned.

“Well what would you do?” She said turning around again and stomping forward through the low shrubs around the edge of the house.

“What would I do if I was orphaned and left alone in a mansion in the middle of the jungle and went crazy?”

“Yeah.”

“*Not* marry the monkey king!”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know what Crazy Everly would do.”

“I—” I started.

“Look!” she yelled over me, turning to the right and running to the house.

I ran to catch up to her and found her in an alcove at the side of the house, tugging at the vines that stretched over the walls.

“There’s a door,” she grunted, still tugging at the vines. I stepped closer and saw the wood of the door, the black of the handle. Lux tore at the vines rooted around the handle. When she got it clear she began to twist and push. She threw her bodyweight into the door.

“It moved,” she panted, stopping for a breath.

“You moved, the door did not.”

She ignored me and gave the door another shove. I squeezed in beside her and placed my shoulder against the door. She copied my position.

“Three, two, one,” I counted down and together we threw our weight into the door. It gave a little. We went again, over and over. Our shoulders were sore, but the door had moved a little. It was enough to reach our fingers around the edge. We continued until there was enough space to squeeze through. Our clothes caught against wood, the stone scratched our skin and ribs pressed in too tight. Lux went first and I held onto her hand, neither one of us wanting to lose the other.

Inside it was dark and cool, though the air still felt heavy and wet. The stone floor was chilling underfoot, sending shivers up my spine. We stood there for a moment, neither of us

moving, not sure where to go. It took a while for our eyes to adjust to the dimness and another moment to figure out what we were seeing.

We were in the entrance hall, or what was left of it. We'd come in through a side door, something discreet, meant for servants or keeping secrets. Two broad staircases started in the centre of the room, wrapping up the walls to a landing on the second floor. The carpet on the stairs had long ago been eaten away, but the stone underneath seemed strong and smooth. The ceiling was a large glass dome, pointed at its peak. Though most of the glass panes were broken, a few had survived intact. The windows too stood empty of glass; the long narrow slits, which let in little light, had become an open door for new life. Moss and small ferns crept in through the narrow entrance, edging their way inside. While some of the walls stood tall and mostly intact, in other places the plaster had crumbled revealing the stonework underneath. To our left stood an entrance to a narrow staircase. The wooden door lay on the floor and the stonework around the door frame had begun to disintegrate, leaving crumbled stone piled on the floor.

At the centre of the room was a tree. It was huge, taking up most of the oversized room. I'd never seen a tree that large. I felt as though I'd never seen *anything* that large. The trunk folded in and out like the pleats on a skirt. The depths of the folds were in shadows and appeared to run deep into the trunk. Its branches stood straight and strong from its centre, thicker than most tree trunks. The higher branches pushed towards the sky, through the empty metal frames of the ceiling and spread outwards, armed with masses of rich green leaves. The leaves blocked out most of the sun, leaving the room cool and dim.

"It's magnificent, isn't it? The tree?" said a voice. Lux and I both jumped in surprise, but as I moved back to the shadow of our doorway, Lux stepped further into the room. The

voice was clear and level and although it wasn't loud it filled the room, making it hard to determine its source.

“Where are you?” Lux demanded. I could hear the frustration in her voice, her dislike for being at a disadvantage. I tried to pull her back to the door with our joined hands, but she wouldn't be moved.

The owner of the voice appeared from the shadows of the tree, stepping into the light. She smiled at us, genuine and wide, like we were old friends, like she'd been waiting for us. She came towards us, moving with confidence and easy strength over the roots of the tree. She stopped a few steps from us, as though fearful of startling us.

She was tall and lean, but not slight. There was strength in the way she stood, feet apart, ready to move again. Her dark blonde hair hung in matted locks down to her waist. Her eyes were a clear and bright blue, flecked with laughter. She wore a dress of rich blue, which moved with her so easily, even as she climbed and jumped, that it seemed to be alive itself. Across all the skin we could see were tattoos of butterflies, all sizes, shapes, colours and patterns. In the dappled light they almost looked like they were moving on her skin, wings fluttering slowly in the soft breeze.

“Sometimes I try to see all the way to the top, but I get dizzy and have to stop,” she continued, still smiling, as though we weren't staring at her, mouths hanging open in surprise.

“Who are you?” Lux asked, her tone still disgruntled, though now it was also laced with confusion. The woman smiled again, mouth closed and corners twitching up in amusement.

“Khadi Ishtar Wolfe-Brooke,” she offered, speaking slowly and clearly. “You're in my house.”

“Your house?” Lux said incredulously.

“We’re so sorry,” I said stepping forward quickly, shooting Lux a glare when she looked at me. “We didn’t think anyone lived here. We don’t really know where we are.”

“Your house alone?” Lux continued, unwavering. I sighed and let go of her hand.

“Not mine alone,” the woman said to Lux. “It’s alright,” she said turning to me, “An easy mistake to make.”

“Where are we?” demanded Lux.

“No one has ever given it a name,” she answered.

“That’s ridiculous. How are we supposed to know where we are?” Lux asked, turning around in the room as though it might give her a clue.

“If I made up a name, would that help you?” Her smile opened again, showing a row of oddly sharp, white teeth.

“Not now,” Lux said petulantly.

“Sorry, Khadi um Ish...” I tried.

“Khadi is enough. What’s your name?” Khadi asked.

“I’m, um, Everly.” She made me nervous, but I didn’t know why. I took a short breath in and a moment to exhale through my nose. “And this is Lux,” I managed more calmly.

“We’re sorry we broke in. And about the door. But we’re not really sure what to do or how to get home. Would you know or would anyone else here know?”

“Possibly,” she said, drawing out the word as she thought. A small line appeared between her eyebrows and the butterflies on her skin stilled. “I’ll show you around and we’ll see who’s awake.”

“Alright,” Lux said, marching forward, curiosity overshadowing her earlier upset. She drew closer to Khadi and reached to touch the butterflies on her skin. “Are they real?”

“Of course,” Khadi said, a little bit of laughter disrupting the smoothness of her voice. She took Lux’s hand and walked around the base of the stairs to a corridor that sat underneath the landing.

“Real butterflies or real tattoos?” Lux asked.

“Of course,” Khadi repeated. “Come on, Everly,” she called back to me.

The hallway was lighter than I expected. There was a courtyard on the right side and wide windows built into the stonework. Small trees had sprouted up in the garden;

most of the ground was taken up by a large pond, its still waters covered with reeds and large, flat, overlapping lily pads.

“How many people live here?” Lux asked as we walked.

“I’ve never counted,” Khadi replied.

“An estimate?”

“Quite a few.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Many years.”

“How did you find this place?”

“The same as you; I walked.”

“That’s not exactly what we did,” I interjected, still trailing along behind.

“What did you do?” Khadi turned to face me, twirling Lux as she moved. Lux laughed and they switched hands so she continued to face forward, while Khadi faced me and walked backwards. It didn’t slow her down at all.

“I... I’m not sure,” I said quietly. Khadi let out a low hum. The crease reappeared between her eyes as she considered me. We came to the end of the courtyard and the open corridor. A dim hallway lay ahead. Khadi’s head turned to the left.

“Here,” she exclaimed and pulled Lux through a doorway and down a darkened set of stairs. I followed slowly, uncertain on the unfamiliar stairs in the half-light.

“How big is this place?” Lux went on.

“Never measured it,” Khadi said. “I’m not even sure that I’ve seen all of it. It seems to go on and on and on. Now, I’m not certain that she’ll be here, I think it’s a bit early, but I’ll show you anyway. You’ll want to see it.”

We twisted further and further down. The staircase was narrow and coiled tightly. I kept my eyes firmly on my feet, always trying to make out the steps in front of me, but I was quickly getting unsteady from turning constantly clockwise.

“Almost there,” Khadi called from further down.

I could smell the wet before we even stepped into the room, not a heavy stagnant smell, but something fresh and clean, like rain. Rather than moving water, we found a pool. It was large and roughly oval shaped, not like the clean square lines of the pool in Lux’s backyard. The edges sloped smoothly into the water and I got the unsteady feeling that if I stood too close I would slide right in. The rim of the pool was sealed with a mess of tiles, all different sizes shapes and patterns, but half a metre into the water the tiles stopped and smoothly cut stone ran as far as we could see into the cloudy water.

But it was the water that caught our attention first and held it the longest: it glowed. The glow was the only light in the room, painting the stone walls with pale wavering lines. The water itself didn't seem to be one mass, but a mess of white, pale-blue and teal streaks, twisting and rolling and moving around one another.

"They're dreams," Khadi said to us. I looked up at her, confused, and saw the butterflies flutter lazily against her skin in the swirling, blue light.

"There's dreams in the water?" I asked.

Lux dropped to all fours and crept closer to the edge of the pool, trying to peer in.

"There is no water," Khadi said. "Only dreams."

"Dreams? Like when you sleep?" Lux said, wrinkling her nose and tipping further over the edge again.

"Sleeping dreams, daydreams, dreams for the future. All kinds, but only the good ones."

"Happy dreams?" I asked.

"Happy, restful, peaceful, sweet," Khadi said, drifting around the edge of the pool.

"Happy dreams," Lux murmured and reached her hand forward to touch the surface of the pool of light. Streaks of white reached up to her fingertips, like fish seeking food.

"Lux," I said in warning, as her weight tipped forward again.

"It's alright," Khadi said from across the room, her voice echoing over the tiles and the surface of the pool. "You can go in."

"We can?" Lux said, looking up in surprise.

“That’s why they’re here.” Khadi gave her dress a few practised tugs and it fell from her body to the ground. She stepped to the edge of the pool and the butterflies lifted off her skin and flew to the wall. Lifting her arms overhead, she pushed off the floor and floated into a high arc. She hung in the air for what felt like an unnatural length of time before dipping forward and slipping into the pool without a splash.

Lux watched, wide eyed and intense, as Khadi’s shadow glided beneath the surface of the dreams. Then she shimmied out of her clothes, tugging her shirt roughly overhead and kicking her shorts to the side. Dropping to her bottom, she scooted forward over the rounded edge of the pool and slid down into the mess of dreams.

“Lux,” I called out, but too late because her hair had already disappeared into the milky depths. My legs were stiff and wouldn’t move. My thoughts were fast, but short. The same line circled my mind again and again: “I should go in and get her. I should go in and get her. I should go in and get her.” But I didn’t. I was stiff legs and a panicked mind. I was a scared child. I was stuck.

Then her head appeared.

She was down the other end of the pool, clinging to the side to hoist herself a little higher. She turned to look at me and her smile was bright with easy joy. It was the kind of smile that made other people happy, like her joy was catching.

“Get in!” she demanded. Her hair was heavy, curls loosened with the weight of whatever she was swimming in. With a laugh, she let go of the edge and dove back underneath. I pulled off my pyjamas, covered with earth and sweat and sea water from our journey in. I took a few quick steps forward and pressed my feet into the stone, launching into the air, before falling gracelessly into the centre of the pool.

- CHAPTER FOUR -
A MOTH, A BAT, A MYSTERY

The dreams didn't slow me as I fell. I went down fast and easy like slipping through air, deeper and deeper. I never did find the bottom of the pool; instead I felt a hand around my wrist, stopping my descent. I looked up and saw Khadi, blonde hair floating around her head like a lion's mane, tiny bubbles forming and drifting away at the corners of her mouth and the base of her nose. She laughed, a muffled, distant sound and a mess of bubbles escaping from her smile. She kicked in long steady strokes and brought us both to the surface. Putting her hand on my back, she lifted me up until I was floating on my back across the dreams, arms and legs stretched out long, lazily swiping up and down as I drifted around the pool.

The dreams made me feel light and happy in a fuzzy kind of way. With my eyes open, I could see the rough stone ceiling and Khadi's butterflies. When I closed my eyes I could see the dreams, like a movie scene, only a little out of focus. A holiday at the beach, a lazy Sunday morning, an hour stolen away to lie in the sun. It was easy to stay on the surface when I was spread out like a starfish. As I floated around, I bumped into Lux and she splashed lazily at my face.

"Come on," Khadi called. I looked up and she was out of the pool, back in her dress and wringing the dream out of her hair. Her butterflies fluttered around her nervously, wanting to settle onto her skin, waiting for the damp to lift.

"No," Lux yelled. Her voice bounced around the stone walls, getting louder than when it started.

"Yes," Khadi shouted back, but joyfully. "More to see, more to do and some friends to meet."

“Friends? There’s more people here?” Lux asked. She started splashing to the side of the pool, without waiting for an answer.

“There are others that live here, I told you that.” Lux was out of the pull and trying to shake the dreams from her skin. She started to pull her clothes on while she was still wet.

“Are there other visitors? Like us?” I asked, still floating in the centre of the pool, feeling no compulsion to get out.

“Come on, Evers,” Lux demanded. “Get out!”

“We haven’t had visitors here for quite some time,” said Khadi, crouching by the pool. Her head tipped to the side as she studied my face. “Though they were a lot like you.”

“Get out, get out, get out!” demanded Lux, bouncing on her toes.

I drifted back over to the side of the pool and reluctantly hauled myself out. Most of the dreams fell easily off my skin, hit the ground with a splash and slid back to the pool, as though they were being drawn in by some kind of magnetism. A thin layer of dreams still sat on my skin, like water does, like dampness, but I felt warm all over instead of cold. I pulled my clothes back on, took Lux’s hand as she took Khadi’s and we climbed the stairs together, back to the surface.

Khadi took us to a conservatory, a glass room filled with hundreds of different plants I couldn’t recognise, let alone name, some of which didn’t even seem real. There was a jazz record playing somewhere in the room, a little fuzzy and distorted, but it rang around the glass dome ceiling and I couldn’t tell where it came from. Tiny blue flowers, dangling from their stems like bells, swayed together in time with the music and when the song changed and the tempo went faster, so did they. There were large red flowers with ruffled petals that

reached out to brush our skin as we walked by. There were purple and green vines that crept across the floor towards our feet until Khadi bared her teeth and hissed and they shrank away. The tattoos on her skin lifted and flew away to rest upon the flowers, feeding on the feast the conservatory had to offer.

There wasn't any order to the room that I could see. Plants stood in pots, wooden crates, mixing bowls, teapots and in one case an urn. These then rested upon the tables or stools or sets of shelves that were scattered about the room. There was one large, red pot that came up to our shoulders and stood a metre and a half wide. It was filled with water and weeds and tiny yellow fish that would dart to the surface to eat the floating algae, before shooting back to the depths of the pot. The fish glowed with yellow light and when I looked into the pot it was like watching stars swim around a night sky. Khadi walked ahead of us, and we raced to catch up, fascinated and frightened at the same time.

We followed Khadi to the back of the room. We reached the glass wall at the back and found someone was already there. She was short, with strong shoulders and wide hips. Her only bare skin were her forearms and her feet. She wore a long black skirt that brushed the floor, embroidered with flowers around the hem and up the sides. Her bare feet poked out from the hem of skirt. They were crusted with dead leaves and dirt from the floor. Her forearms were strong, smooth, dark, and spattered in paint. Her black hair was smoothed back over her head in a large bun at the nape of her neck. She had her back to us, watering the plants which sat on an old children's bookcase with an old, bottle-green watering can.

"Marie? I've brought someone to meet you," Khadi said. Marie set down her watering can and turned to us. Her eyes made me take a step back, so dark I couldn't tell her pupil from her iris. There was only black, like the eyes of an insect. Like a black moth. When she looked at me I felt sure she could read my mind. "Marie, this is Lux and Everly."

“Marie? That’s it? That’s your whole name?” said Lux, disappointed.

“Marie Talbot-Stokes,” Marie said. Her voice low, but strong. It matched her eyes. She looked at Lux warily and stayed close to the glass wall.

“Your plants are beautiful. I’ve never even seen some of them before,” I said. She glanced to me then back to her flowers, gently touching the petals and the leaves. She was like one of Khadi’s butterflies, hovering over the plants, barely grazing them with the tips of her fingers.

“Marie saved them,” Khadi said. “This room was dying until she moved in and started caring for it.”

“Where are you from?” Lux asked.

“Here,” Marie said, not turning away from her plants.

“But before here, where did you live?” Lux persisted. Marie turned to frown at her, heavy eyebrows crunching up in confusion.

“Would you like to give them a tour, Marie?” Khadi suggested.

“No,” she replied, her frown getting deeper still. It made me smile, her bluntness.

“That was rude,” muttered Lux.

“She’s honest,” I whispered back.

“*She* can hear you,” Marie snapped, turning away from her plants, to glare at us both.

“Can we look around, Marie?” I asked. “Would you mind?” She stared at me for a moment and I stayed as still as I could, not sure what she was assessing, but I didn’t think flinching or fidgeting would help my case. And I wanted to pass, I wanted to stay, I wanted to see more. I could have spent a year in that room and found something new every day.

“Not today,” she said. I’d failed, though I wasn’t sure how. I wanted to ask again, but I knew it wouldn’t work. Marie turned to Khadi. “Has she been here before?”

Khadi shook her head.

“She’s familiar,” Marie insisted.

“I know,” said Khadi. “I thought that too.”

“Who’s familiar?” I asked. Marie stared at my face again and Khadi just smiled.

“Neither of us have been here before,” I insisted.

“I want to stay,” griped Lux, but Khadi turned to leave.

“I’ll come by later, Marie,” she called over her shoulder. One of Khadi’s butterflies landed on her nose, like a kiss, and Marie gave a gentle smile that changed her whole face into something less fearful, more peaceful. She nodded and walked away, disappearing into the green.

Khadi, Lux and I walked together down a wide, cold hall. The marble floor was made of giant black and pale-yellow diamonds. Ahead laid a set of double doors inset with decorative glass. Light filtered through the little coloured panes onto the pale yellow marble below so the pattern of the glass was mirrored like a reflection in a pond. When we reached the end of the hall Khadi grabbed both doorknobs and, with a twist, pushed the doors open.

It was a *library*. It was a two-storeyed library, complete with balconies, sliding ladders, twisting staircases with filigree ironwork and thousands upon thousands of books. I could smell the pages from where I stood, spellbound in the entryway: musty paper, ink, old leather and something sweet. At the back of the room was a pear tree flowering with white blossoms. Its trunk and roots had broken through the marble and grown around the shards

until it looked as much a part of the building's structure as a staircase or a support beam. Massive ripe pears hung lazy and low on its branches. Vines crawled up the glass of the tall, arched windows, but hadn't yet reached the top. Rivers of yellow light spilled into the library, making every book spine glimmer enticingly. I was surprised when my first thought was *Dad would love this*.

In the centre of the room was a large, rough table that looked as though it belonged more in a kitchen than a library. Its surface was covered in books: thick books cracking at the spine, books small enough to slip into a pocket, yellowing pamphlets and loose slips of paper stacked in piles around the edges. At the centre were at least a dozen open books with a dark figure hovering over them like a shadow.

As we walked forward into the room the figure jolted up. His eyes narrowed as he took us in. He was a large, dark creature, more human than anything we'd seen so far, with heavy eyebrows and a long, hooked nose, but his eyes were a warm dark yellow, large and round like a child. He wore layers of black under a long, heavy cloak. When his arms stretched across his books, his sleeves moved like wings. He wasn't happy to see us, but I was inclined to like him anyway. Maybe it was all the books.

"Why on earth would you bring them in here?" he said, not sharp like I thought he'd be, but lowly with a rumble, quietly displeased. I stopped walking forward, feeling unwelcome. Lux kept moving forward, eyes darting around the room, unaware and unaffected. Khadi glided forward, circled around the table and arrived at his side.

"Because I knew they'd want to see it," she said, speaking to his turned head as he kept his gaze on Lux and I, wary of what we would do. "And Everly loves it. Don't you, Everly?" I nodded silently, then stepped to the side to study the books lining the wall so I wouldn't have to look at them, looking at me. The creature snorted.

“Really? More than your moth woman?” he asked.

“Marie is not a moth. If anything, she’s a butterfly,” interrupted Lux.

“She’s a moth,” he responded firmly. “Do they love this more than your pool of dreams?”

“Yes,” I said, surprising myself. He looked to me and I held his gaze as steadily as I could. “What do we call you?”

“Jarius,” he said, straightening fully from his table. He shook out his black robes, and they flapped about him like wings. He clasped his hands behind his back.

“Is this your library?” I asked.

“It belongs to the house, I just mind the books.”

“Who owns the house?”

“Who indeed,” he murmured, eyeing Khadi before stooping back over his books.

“You may read anything you like, but no books leave the library. I don’t want them scattered throughout the house, getting lost or damaged.”

“It’s your job to look after the library?” Lux asked, having crept up by his side. Jarius jolted a little when she appeared at his elbow.

“It’s a duty,” he clarified. “The library is under my care.”

“There’s a tree growing through the floor,” Lux said pointedly. Jarius glanced over his shoulder to the lazy, swaying tree.

“It was like that when I got here,” he muttered, and I had to hold in a laugh.

“What are you reading?” I asked, creeping closer to his table, trying to read his papers upside down. Jarius reached a hand protectively over his writing. I took a step closer and he

started shuffling his papers together. When I reached the edge of the table I turned one of the open books towards me. It was wrapped in leather so old it felt like stone, I could see the fibres of the page's heavy paper pressed together. But the writing was so thick and old I could barely decipher it.

"I'm compiling a history," he said.

"A history of the house?" I asked looking up. He nodded once, slow and dignified.

"How far back does it go?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "I haven't found an end yet."

"You mean a start?" Lux said with a sugar sweet smile.

"I meant an end to the research," he said testily. "But no, I haven't found a beginning either."

"Can I read it?" I asked.

"It's not finished," he responded.

"That's not an answer," I said, frowning. Jarius huffed and narrowed his round eyes.

"No," he said.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Why ask for an answer if you're just going to argue it?"

"Because I couldn't argue a "no" until you gave it to me," I reasoned. Khadi laughed in delight. I jumped, having forgotten she was there, and looked up to find her on one of the balconies, leaning over the railing and watching us all as if she were watching a play. Her butterflies darted around her head.

"They're good ones, aren't they, Jarius?" she asked.

“We’ll see,” he said solemnly. He leaned back over his books. “It’ll be dark soon,” he murmured, more to the pages beneath him than anyone else.

“You’re right,” Khadi hummed, looking up to the window where the last of the day’s sun drizzled in, golden yellow and soft, blushing red. “Come on, new friends, we move on to the next.”

“But I want to look around,” I said.

“Come on, Evers. More to see,” ordered Lux, dancing back to the library doors. I stayed still, frowning at her back. Khadi glided over to me and rested her hands on my shoulders.

“Later,” she promised quietly, and gently pushed me out the door. The cold hallway was a shock to the bones after the warmth of the library. Between the chill and the strangeness of the night I started to feel the weight of my head was too much to carry. My head drooped forward and I watched my feet shuffle across the floor, from white diamond to black and to white again. My eyes sank shut and I felt myself start to fall forward, then jolted awake as I stumbled. I glanced over to Lux; she’d lost her spring and was as wilted as me.

With her hands on our shoulders, Khadi steered us to the left to a set of stairs. They were the tight, twisting kind that make you feel dizzy when you climb them too fast. The roof over the stairs was missing, but the foliage overhead kept it dim. The remnants of the carpet covering the stairs was soggy and smelled as though it had been wet for a while. As we began to climb and my feet pushed into the carpet, I felt the stagnant water push against my soles, cold and creeping.

The stairway was narrow, so we marched in a line with Khadi bringing up the rear. Round and round and round we trudged. Doorways opened to different floors, but we kept climbing up until Khadi finally steered us off to the side. We walked down a hallway and I

couldn't tell the colour of the walls or the carpet or the furniture because the pale blue light which soaked the room bleached everything to black, white and grey. The ceilings were lower here and I couldn't decide if it felt comforting or suffocating.

We walked into a round, cluttered room with a massive four poster bed. The bed was covered in a dozen different blankets, some linen, some satin, some silk, and some wool: all of them green. Across from the bed was a large window made of hundreds of small diamond panes. It looked out across the whole jungle and I imagined in the daylight I would be able to see the ocean. Khadi opened the window and I could hear the waves crashing far, far away. I could smell the salt and the fresh earth. I felt as though I was home.

Lux climbed onto the bed, wading into the blankets and sinking down into the pillows. I walked around the bed to climb in the other side. Most of the clutter had been pushed to this side of the room. There were mismatched chairs, most of which had a broken seat or tipped awkwardly on uneven legs. On an ancient travelling trunk was an old wooden rocking horse, its mane thin and scraggly, and on the seat of that horse was a precarious stack of books. There was a white wicker cradle, a large metal washing tub and half a dozen paintings stacked together, leaning against the wall.

To get to my side of the bed, I had to squeeze between the dresser and the mattress. The dresser was petite, but solid, like an intimidating old woman. It was made of dark wood, with a white marble top and had a clouded oval mirror balanced on top. A dozen fading photos were pinned around the edge of the mirror. In every one were the same two people, a boy with a mess of dark hair and a girl whose smile took up half of her face. I looked into the mirror, trying to see my reflection through the patchy glass. It was made harder by the ever diminishing light. When I angled my head to the side I managed to catch the outline of the right side of my face. But when I leaned in closer, I found it wasn't my own face looking

back at me. It was the boy from the pictures, with the dark freckles scattered across his nose. He didn't mirror my movements. When I realised I wasn't looking at my own reflection and flinched back from the glass he leaned closer and reached out his hand, resting his palm on his side of the glass. I reached a hand out to meet his, but pulled back before I touched the mirror.

“Lux,” I whispered, leaning back into the mattress, away from the dresser. I could hear her shallow breathing and turned to find her in a still and peaceful sleep. “Lux,” I hissed and reached out to nudge her. She was too far over on her side and I had to crawl onto the bed.

The bed was five different kinds of softness. I felt myself sinking even as I crawled across the bed, as though the softness was going to swallow me up. I tried to pull myself up, to find Lux or get off the bed, but it felt as though I was wading through sand, so I let myself fall. The ceiling was black or my eyes were closed, I couldn't tell. Before I could think about it too much, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I was home.

- CHAPTER FIVE -

HOME AGAIN, HOME AGAIN

I woke up in my own bed in my own room. At first I expected the dreams to dissolve like all dreams do, to fade so much that the only thing could I remember was how it made me feel. But it stayed, sharp and vivid and fresh and more real than anything I'd felt in a year. Still, I wasn't convinced. I didn't truly believe it had happened until I pulled back my sheets and saw my feet, crusted in dirt, dead leaves and crushed petals, with just a little bit of sand stuck between my toes. My sheets were smeared with soil and red juice from the flowers. I could smell it: earth, sweet, sticky redness and the sweat of last night all rested on my skin like a secret. I stared and smelled and wondered at the mess of myself and my bed until my sister banged on the door and told me to get up, because she wasn't driving me to school today.

I had to take a shower. I was sure Sarah would smell it on me, this not-a-dream place; even when I dried off and got dressed for school I could still smell it. Maybe it was in my head or at least just my nose, because my sister didn't say anything except "hurry up." She gave me some money for lunch and dropped me at the bus stop.

I wasn't sleepy slow that morning. I was awake, awake, awake. I was vibrating out of my skin. I needed to see Lux. I needed to get to school. I watched everyone on the bus that morning. Everyone was quiet, eyes half-closed and headphones buried deep into their ears. I'd always known the morning bus was quieter, cleaner and all around less harrowing, but I never realised how tired everyone looked. Not morning tired, not even a-bad-night's-sleep kind of tired, but a bone-weary, blank-faced kind of tired. I studied their faces, trying to figure out why we looked so wrecked when most of us weren't even twelve years old, but their faces were hidden behind collars or jacket hoods or pressed against the bus window, and I couldn't get a good enough look to make any decent observations.

So I waited in my seat as patiently as I could, sniffing my hair to see if still smelled of the place with no name — it did—and feeling my newfound energy run through my body, occasionally checking my finger tips to see if they were shooting sparks: they weren't. We pulled up to the school and I was the first off the bus, with the others trundling slowly behind me. Lux was waiting for me inside the gate. She tackled me in a hug when I stepped through, pinning my arms to my sides and pressing her forehead against mine. I pressed my forehead into hers to reciprocate as best I could. She let me go and I gave her a shove.

“You couldn't be up in time for the bus? Just this once?” I tried to sound angry, but I was laughing.

“I got into a fight with Fiona about the mud and everything else I must have dragged in last night. Do you remember how we got home? I don't know how I got home.” I was shaking my head when Mr Rowe called out to us.

“Time to head into school, you two.” Mr Rowe wasn't so bad, but it was his first year teaching and he didn't seem to know which battles to fight.

“The bell doesn't ring for another six minutes,” said Lux dismissively.

“You're standing in the entryway.”

“We're standing off the path, on the grass,” said Lux, gesturing towards our feet.

“Well you definitely shouldn't be standing on the grass.” He looked out our feet with concern, as if he could see the grass suffering underneath.

“Ever noticed how the list of things we can't do is so much longer than the list of things we can do?” Lux griped.

“I know it feels that way...” he started.

“It feels that way because it is that way,” Lux cut him off.

“It’s for your safety,” Mr Rowe reasoned.

“You mean the grass’s safety,” corrected Lux. Mr Rowe was still trying not to laugh when the bell rang.

“Enjoy your day, Lux,” he said and still smiling, waved us into school. Lux linked her arm through mine and as she pulled me to class started whispering orders quickly in my ear.

“Write down everything you remember about last night. How we got there. Everything. We’ll compare notes at recess.” I nodded automatically, then stopped, confused.

“Wait. Why?” I asked.

“Inside, Everly. Now,” barked Mrs Holt from behind me. I pulled away from Lux and started to walk inside, but she snatched my hand up and tugged me back.

“So we can figure out how to get back,” she said hushed and serious.

“Everly!” shouted Mrs Holt, and Lux and I were separated.

Lux and I didn’t get to talk at recess. I forgot to order lunch before school started and I spent most of recess convincing the mothers that ran the canteen to take my late order. It was frustrating because we both knew they had to, but they wanted me to beg for it so they could be pretend to be accommodating and kind by allowing it. Then Lux got detention at lunch because she threw paint at her teacher, accidentally she says, but when it happened, she laughed, hard. So, we had to meet at Lux’s house.

Her house was further up the hill, one of the older houses that was fixed up to be a weekend getaway. Her aunt worked in the city an hour away, something high profile and

demanding. It gave Lux a lot of freedom. That's the word she used anyway. Her house wasn't fancy or large, but it was still intimidating. It was like a magazine: warm and impersonal at the same time. Everything was white and beige and carefully placed. I was afraid to sit down. Afraid I would ruin something.

Lux dropped her bag when she walked in the door, kicked off her shoes and left them in the hallway, then pulled off her jumper and threw it on the lounge. She pushed the Beechwood coffee table out of the way and started laying out her scraps of paper on the floor with care. Most were torn from her exercise book, but there were some from her diary and one large sheet that looked like the title page from her geography textbook.

"How long do we have?" Lux asked.

"What do you mean?" I asked in return

"Is there anyone at home to notice that you aren't? Will anyone miss you?"

"Uh, no," I answered, my voice unexpectedly hoarse.

"Good," said Lux and turned back to her notes.

"Yeah. Great." I said flatly.

"This is what I can remember and the order in which it happened," she said sitting back on her heels to get a bird's eye view of her notes. "I don't know the hows, or the whys, but we know the when and the where. What do you have?"

I had my notebook, spiral bound with a purple cover. My dad had given it to me when I kept getting into trouble for writing nonsense in the margins of my school books. Over the course of the day I had written down everything I remembered, carefully and in order. But suddenly and inexplicably I didn't want to hand it over. I flipped it open to the right page and stood over Lux's notes, comparing the two. Lux sprang up and began to read over my

shoulder. Her recount started earlier than mine, when she woke up and snuck out to get me. Mine started on the beach, trying to figure out the exact moment the ground disappeared and I started to fall.

“Why did you wake up?” she asked, her eyes flitting down my timeline, back to the top and then all the way down again.

“You were at my house. Remember?” I told her frowning.

“Is that what woke you up?” she pressed. I stopped to think, running over the moment of waking again and again, trying to pinpoint the feeling that woke me.

“I don’t know what woke me. I just woke up, like I wasn’t tired any more, like I’d already had enough sleep,” I tried to explain.

“Like when you wake up in the morning?” Lux asked.

“I never feel like that in the morning.”

“I knew something was going to happen. I could feel it. Couldn’t you feel it?” She was bouncing on the balls of her feet, tugging at me sleeve.

“You knew that was going to happen?” I asked drily.

“Not *that*, but something. Something BIG,” she shouted springing back from me and crouching over her notes again. I stared at her back and discovered it was easier to think without her eyes on me.

“I felt something, but I didn’t know. I didn’t think about it. I just climbed out the window,” I said.

“I knew,” she repeated. I rolled my eyes.

“I’m starving. Have you got any food or is your aunt on a health kick again?”

“Everly, would you please focus?” she sighed, slumping forward.

“I can’t focus when I’m hungry.” She tried to stare me down, but I pull my notebook into my chest and made myself look bored until she relented.

“There’s chips in the freezer,” she grouched and snatched my notebook when I walked past her to the kitchen. I was on my second bowl of chips, face and fingers greasy and belly warm, when Lux decided to tell me her plan. “We should try again tonight. We don’t know how much longer it’ll be open.”

“We don’t know if it’s open now. We don’t know anything,” I reasoned.

“So? We should try. We’ll go to the same place at the same time.” She’d stopped bouncing, her knees were locked and her feet planted firmly on the wide, sand-toned floorboards.

“How do we even know that we’ll get to go back? What if we only get it once, Lux?” I said, putting my bowl down and standing to face her.

“She said later.”

“What?”

“Khadi. She said she’d show us stuff *later*. She said we’d have more time to look around *later*.”

“Lux...” I started.

“Don’t you want to go back?” she snapped.

“Of course I do,” I said, not feeling the conviction of my words, “but—”

“But what?” she shouted.

“But what the hell was that, Lux?” I yelled. “Who were they? Those people? And how did we even get there? What kind of a place doesn’t have a name?”

“I don’t care,” she shouted back.

“You don’t care?” I asked, incredulous.

“I don’t care enough to stop,” she clarified. “We’ll figure it out, but not here. We need to go back.”

“What am I supposed to tell my dad?”

“Nothing. Why would you tell him anything?”

“Because, he’s my dad.”

“He didn’t even notice you were gone. Did he?” She was getting frustrated with me. She didn’t understand it. The family thing. I wondered again what her parents were like. Lux never wanted to talk about it. So we didn’t talk about it.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him yet,” I told her.

“Exactly. We can go back and he won’t even know.” I wasn’t convinced and Lux knew it. She took a breath and tried to be understanding. “What is it, Evers? Do you want someone to stop us?”

I shook my head. But I did want someone to stop us. I wanted someone to notice when I disappeared all night. I was getting a deep sense of foreboding. We were in over our heads and there was no one around to stop us.

“This kind of thing just doesn’t happen,” I said quietly, filled with doubt.

“It happened,” she said quietly.

“It’s weird.”

“It *is* weird,” she confirmed.

“It shouldn’t be real.”

“It is real,” she said firmly.

“But it…”

“I know.” She looked so sure and something else. Hungry. She looked hungry. I felt hungry too. It was a twist in my stomach; I ached to go back, but the need frightened me. I felt everything that which had been bleak and heavy was lifting, like sun burning away the mist. I didn’t want to go back to how I was before we fell and I was starting to think that if I didn’t go, she would leave without me.

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay? Tonight?” she brightened and started bouncing again.

“Tonight.”

We heard a car pull into the driveway and scrambled to pack up the notes.

“She’s supposed to be at a dinner tonight. Why is she early? She’s never early,” Lux muttered to herself, pulling the coffee table back to the centre of the room. But instead of Lux’s aunt bursting in, there was a knock on the door. Lux stopped, baffled, her papers a messy bundle in her arms. I opened the door while she hid them under her school books. It was my dad.

I have always been told how much I look like my dad. Anyone who knows both of us point it out. I have the same dark-brown mess of hair, the same olive skin, the same long sharp face, the same sprinkling of freckles across my nose. We have long limbs, and a wide mouth. I am my father’s daughter. That day, it took me a moment to recognise him. He

looked so pale, almost transparent, as if he might flicker away any moment. His hard-worked suit was rumpled against his skin. He always looked silly in office clothes, like a kid playing dress-ups. The lines in the corners of his eyes were set deeper and the circles underneath were painted darker. Then he smiled, turned bright as a light, and I felt the pain of missing him and the relief of having him back all at once.

“Evers!” he exclaimed.

“Dad,” I cried. Two quick steps and I barrelled into his chest. He stumbled back and I fell with him, my arms locked around his waist. When he steadied himself he hugged me back.

“Hey, kid. It’s been an age,” he said. “Ready for home?”

“Hey, Clarence,” said Lux from behind me.

“Hey, Lux,” he laughed. He still found it funny when she used his first name. “Fiona home? Want to join us for dinner?”

“Nah,” she said easily. “She’ll be home soon and I have a few things to do.”

“Grab your stuff,” he said to me. I got my backpack and looked around for my notebook. Lux had it hugged against her chest. She didn’t hold it out, so I went over and hugged her, pinning her arms down like she did to me that morning, my forehead against hers.

“Tonight,” she said to me quietly, not a question, but a confirmation. I nodded then pulled away from her, taking my notebook with me.

“You’re alive,” Sarah said flatly when Dad and I walked inside. She was sitting on the stairs, still in her uniform. Clarence dropped my bag by the door and offered her a tentative smile.

“Hey, kid. How are you handling things?” he asked.

“Well enough,” she said. Her smile was vinegar. “And you, Clarence? How’s your life?”

If I am my father’s daughter, then Sarah belonged to Mum. She has her dark blonde hair, her honeyed skin, and her toffee eyes. She has her temper and her strength. No one ever picked Sarah and me for being sisters. I think that’s why Dad struggles to talk to her like he used to. It is hard to look at Sarah without seeing Mum.

“I’m scraping by,” Dad said. “Anything I should know?” Sarah didn’t say anything for a minute, just stared at him for a while. Then she scrubbed her face with her heels of her hands and spoke.

“You look like a corpse,” she muttered. He looked down at his suit and smiled, but it was brittle. “Have you even made it home this week?”

“I have. You know I have,” he said softly.

“Notes on this kitchen counter? Is that what’s passing for parenting these days?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest, and I could tell she’d been turning the words around in her head for a while.

“I’m trying, kid.”

“It’s not good enough.” Sarah shook her head. “You think this is working? That we can keep going like this? Everly needs you around.”

“I’m fine,” I protested.

“No, you’re not,” she snapped.

“How would you know? You’re home as little as you can be.”

“What?” Clarence barked, looking to Sarah. “You’re not coming home after school?”

“I’m seeing friends. I’m allowed to see friends. I am not your babysitter. I’m your daughter.”

“I told you—” started Clarence.

“I don’t need someone to look after me. I’m old enough. I’m fine,” I interrupted.

“I’m always home by dark. Which is more than can be said of you,” retorted Sarah.

“Stop it!” I shouted at her.

“That’s enough.” Clarence didn’t yell, but his voice silenced us both. He was breathing heavily, his shoulders rising and falling. His hand sat over his eyes, shielding them, blocking us. “I need a shower and I need to sleep for a thousand years.” He shed his jacket, balled it up and threw it on the floor. He tugged off his shoes, balancing on one foot as he struggled with the laces.

“I’m hungry,” muttered Sarah.

“Yes, dinner. What are we having?”

“That’s not funny,” Sarah said flatly.

“Alright, brat,” he said lightly. “What do you want?”

“Food,” she said petulantly. Sarah was easily tortured by both the idea of her making dinner and the suggestion that she should make a decision.

“Spaghetti,” I suggested.

“Aha, genius, yes,” he said, pointing at me. He made his way to the stairs and ran up calling back for us to put the water on to boil.

“You know, some families eat dinner at seven,” Sarah called up the stairs.

“It’s only seven thirty,” I said to her.

“He has to cook the food. It’ll be past eight by the time we get to eat,” she griped.

“Give it a rest,” I told her quietly and left her behind, going into the kitchen to start the pasta.

Clarence came downstairs, damp from the shower, steam still rising from his skin.

“Never, music,” he said, pointing at me. “Rah, turn the TV off, get in here and help.”

“Do you really need help with spaghetti?” Sarah said, leaning against the counter.

“Preheat oven, garlic bread,” he answered. “Never?”

“Yep,” I said.

“Dice the tomatoes.”

“Just use the jar sauce,” Sarah said, her head in the freezer.

“Heathen,” said Clarence.

“Hungry,” she repeated.

Clarence and I cooked and Sarah sulked on the counter, testing the pasta every couple of minutes. We ate until we were too full for comfort. Clarence volunteered to do the dishes,

which was his way of sending us bed. Sarah was too sleepy to argue, moving quickly towards the stairs to get the bathroom first.

I stayed slouched on the lounge, watching Clarence gather up the bowls. I tried to focus on the warm feeling in my stomach and less on the fact that I had seventy-five minutes with my dad today and that it felt like a gift instead of something ordinary.

I was in the halfway place. That spot between waking and sleeping where your mind rests in reality, but keeps getting twisted up by your dreams. I knew it was late. I knew there was no one in the house but my family and myself. But I could hear a floorboard grunt under the weight of a foot. I could hear the house breathing; air rushing in, billowing the curtains into the room, and air rushing out, sucking curtains against flyscreen. I could hear the house speaking, “They’re coming. They’re here. Get out. Get out. Get out.”

When I heard house grunt again, I woke up, my body jolting in my bed like I’d received an electric shock. I stared at the ceiling, except I couldn’t see it, so I stared at the darkness where the ceiling should be. My heart was fast, but light in my chest. My skin was chilled, even under my blanket. Curling my legs beneath me I crouched on my bed, covers still caped over my back like a hood. I peered around my room, trying to see movement in the shadows.

I heard the grunt again, coming from downstairs. I expected the floor to be cold when I got up, but my feet were a little numb, so I didn’t feel much at all. I padded down the hall, still feeling clumsy and stiff with sleep, hands stretched out in front as though I could part the darkness with my fingertips and see the house more clearly.

From the bottom of the stairs I saw light creeping around the edge of the closed office door. The door move silently when I opened it, but my dad still turned around, knowing I was there all the same.

“Hey, Never,” he croaked, as though he had run out of voice. “What are you doing up?”

His face was in shadows, but I could imagine his expression: a little confused, a little concerned. It was the face he always wore in those days. The blue light of the computer backlit his silhouette, his broad shoulders that now caved forward, masses of dark brown hair sticking out of his head. He was wearing an old shirt that I got him for his birthday when I was six; it said “Every now and then I fall apart” and had a picture of a taco on it. He used to wear it every day and I laughed every time I saw it.

“Couldn’t sleep,” I whispered, but my voice still seemed loud.

He nodded and kept looking at me. We stood for a moment like strangers, like acquaintances who had run into at Woolworths, and weren’t sure whether to step forward and talk or wave awkwardly and move to the next aisle. I stepped forward.

I sat on his lap and curled myself into a ball against his chest. I was getting too big to share a chair with him. He wrapped his arms around me, swivelled the office chair back towards his desk and kept reading from his computer screen, his chin resting on my head.

“Gotta be sharp for school tomorrow, Never,” he mumbled into my hair. “Can’t make a habit out of this.”

I could have laughed or cried at how little my dad knew about what was going on. *This is when you tell him, Everly,* I thought to myself. *This is when you tell him everything.* But I didn’t. And I couldn’t decide if that was his fault or mine.

“Gotta be sharp for work tomorrow, Clarence,” I murmured. He chuckled and went back to typing. Clarence used to be a historian. He quit when I was seven and Mum told him he needed to start taking life more seriously. I never understood that. I never saw anyone more serious about anything than Clarence was with his books. I didn’t understand his new job. I knew he didn’t like it. When we lost Mum, I thought he would quit. Instead he spent more hours there than ever. I wanted to tell him there wasn’t anyone left to prove himself to. But we never spoke about Mum.

I ignored how uncomfortable I was, how tired I was, and ignored the blue light that was giving me a headache. Instead I stayed where I was for as long as I could, until I started to doze again. I don’t remember him carrying me, but I woke up in bed.

- CHAPTER SIX -

A JELLYFISH IN THE BALLROOM

Lux was coughing up saltwater when I woke up. I was lying on my back looking up at a sky so strongly blue it hurt my eyes. I felt raw: saltwater-washed from the inside out. My ribs ached when I breathed too deep, so I took short shallow breaths until everything stopped hurting. I closed my eyes against the blue, but the light was still strong and made my eyelids glow red. Then a shadow fell over my face and I opened my eyes to see Lux leaning over me, her hair hanging like a curtain of wet, dark curls around her face, dripping water onto mine. I squinted and tried to rub the sting away with my hands.

I hadn't wanted to come. Lux's text message had dragged me from my sleep. I was warm and calm from sitting with Clarence. I wanted to stay in my bed and fall back asleep. It felt worse sneaking out when I knew Clarence was home, knowing he had put me to bed and trusted I would stay there until morning. But Lux had been waiting under my window. Lux had a plan.

"Well, that was worse than last time," I croaked. Lux started to laugh, but it turned into a cough and she slumped back down onto the sand.

"I thought it might be easier this time," she panted.

"Why?" I asked.

"Not sure, just assumed." She rose and stood over me again, offering out her hand.

"Let's go."

The walk seemed faster that second time, whether because we knew our way or because we moved faster, I didn't know. We had somewhere to be this time and we didn't know how long we would get. When we arrived at the side door it was still ajar from our last

visit. Lux didn't grab onto my hand this time, but darted straight through, light-footed and eager. I moved a little faster to catch-up and slid in after her. The cool of the house was bliss after the jungle. Our clothes were warm and heavy with wetness, though whether from seawater or our own sweat we couldn't tell.

"Khadi," called Lux, running around the tree. She moved close to the trunk, trying to get there faster, but the roots were high and climbing over them slowed her down. "Khadi, we're back. Khadi!"

"Lux," I hissed, wanting her to be quiet. I wasn't as comfortable as she was in that place. This time we knew we were stepping into someone's house. Someone we still hadn't met. Knowing it was real this time, knowing that it wasn't a dream, made everything feel stranger than the first time. But Lux wasn't hesitant. She wanted more. She ignored me and kept on shouting.

"Khadi," Lux yelled, less patient. I couldn't see her on the other side of the tree, so I followed her around, circling wide where the roots snaked smaller so I could step easily over the ground. I could hear Lux still calling for Khadi. As I rounded the tree I saw a tall set of doors, once gilded and pretty, now water-stained with paint peeling away in massive sheets. Lux grunted as she shoved against the door, her feet sliding against the dead leaves on the floor. There was a sharp bang as the hinges released and the doors eased open. "Khadi," she called again, disappearing into the room and then there was silence. Lux had stopped shouting and I couldn't hear her move. The crunch of dead leaves under my feet and the sound of my own breath seemed thunderous.

"Lux?" I called, but my voice was too soft. Without realising it I had stopped moving. Without Lux's urgency or bravery I found it very hard to move. "Lux," I said a little louder, my voice still choked. "Move," I thought, hating myself for my fear. "Move, move, move." I

picked my foot up and stomped it down, like my fear was an ant I could crush under my toe. “Lux,” I shouted, clear and loud. There was a thud. Another step. I started to run, stumbling, scrambling and sliding over roots and leaves. “Lux!” I barked as I reached the door. I pushed my way inside.

Lux was a few steps inside, staring up to the ceiling. I slammed into her back and we both staggered forward, but she didn’t complain or make a noise, just righted herself then kept staring up.

“Lux,” I demanded, relieved and annoyed all at once. She pointed up. The ceiling was far, far away, domed and painted elaborately with a scene which might have been people flying or swimming, but it was too faded and damaged with damp to make out. The whole room was dim; leaves pressed against the long glass windows and blocked out the sunlight. I followed Lux’s stare.

They were floating around the dome of the ceiling, men in long jackets and women in full-skirted ball gowns. They were almost transparent, like cloudy water, like the dream pool. They glowed with a pale blue light which pulsed as they swam through the air. Their skirts and jacket tails moved like the bell of a jellyfish as it swims through the ocean. And just like Lux I was caught, watching them slowly circle around the ceiling, emitting their gentle rhythm of light. Then one, the one who appeared to be in the lead, paused to watch us as we watched her and descended cautiously until she was halfway between the ceiling and the floor, still metres overhead. The closer she came the calmer I felt, and I would have called her closer but I feared scaring her away. Lux, who was never patient, stood unmoving by my side watching the ghost as she edged closer and closer. When her feet touched the floor, first her toes and then her heels, the thick layer of dust on the marble floor rippled away from her feet in small waves. Only when her skirts had settled did she speak.

“I had heard new guests had come to the house, but wasn’t quite sure I believed,” her voice was thinner than I had expected and not as comforting as her light. “Marie is not a wholly reliable source and Jarius says little if anything at all. What do they call you?”

“I’m Everly,” I said, glancing at Lux. I saw her as dream-struck as ever, so I answered for her. “And this is Lux. What about you?” She looked displeased with what I said, though again I couldn’t pick what I’d done wrong, and her lips, or what I could see of them, became pinched. I seemed to have this effect on people, Mrs Holt, Lux’s aunt, my sister. Though I never knew when I was saying something wrong, I could always pick their distaste straight afterwards.

“Blythe Rigby,” she declared.

“Are you a ghost?” I asked bluntly, trying to look at her and not through her. She laughed, high and reedy, but free and it made me like her a little more.

“No, not a ghost,” she said, her smile still. “But still not like you. See?” She held out her hand to me. Shoulder to shoulder Lux and I crept forward and, when we grew close enough, reached out to touch her hand. It wasn’t like skin, it was too cool, too smooth. I didn’t like it and pulled my hand away, but Lux took Blythe’s hand in her own and held it firmly.

“Will you show me how to fly?” Lux asked Blythe, speaking at last. She spoke to Blythe like she did to Khadi, with awe and wanting. Blythe’s light pulsed brighter and her smile grew further across her face.

“No,” she said gently. “As I said, you and I are not the same.”

“I’ll hold your hand,” Lux persisted, stepping away from me and closer to Blythe.

“You’ll anchor me down,” she responded gentler still. Lux started to pull her hand back, but Blythe held it firm and pulled her closer, reaching out a hand to touch Lux’s cheek.

“Then what are you?” I said, stepping closer so I was once again shoulder to shoulder with Lux. “If you’re not a ghost.” Blythe turned to me.

“What do you think me to be?” she asked, releasing Lux from her hold and floating a few steps back, her arms held wide, an actor on a stage. “Am I a spectre? Perhaps a water nymph?” She twirled and her hair floated about her and when she stopped to face us once more, each lock remained suspended as though she were underwater. “Maybe you see a bird floating upon the buoying winds. Or do you see me as...?”

“A jellyfish,” exclaimed Lux. Blythe began to float towards her again.

“A drowned thing,” I said low, but firm. Blythe stopped in her path to Lux. She stared at me with her milky white eyes. Her light dimmed and started to beat faster and my pulse quickened to match. When I looked up I saw the others had stopped in their rotation and were now slowly lowering to the floor. A dozen of them formed a circle around us. Their light had also dimmed and had started to beat in time with Blythe’s, causing the room to slip from dim shadows to total darkness and back again.

“That’s not a kind thing to say.” Her voice played at being hurt, but her face was hard. Lux gave a shove to my arm and glared at me, but I shoved her back, turning her to see the others surrounding us. She stepped closer to me and looking into my eyes gave an almost imperceptible nod. Seeing her eyes were no longer wide and entranced I felt better, even as we were surrounded.

“Don’t mind her,” Lux said consolingly to Blythe. Her voice was earnest, but she stayed by my side. “We were looking for Khadi. Do you know where she is?”

“She’s everywhere, into everything, but never easy to pin down,” Blythe responded, sounding mollified. Her friends stayed close. I tried to count them, but they wove back and forth, their dance still going, and I couldn’t get a certain number. I guessed a dozen, but some were so misty that I my eyes skated over them when I looked around too quickly.

“We might try the pool,” said Lux easily.

“Be careful not to fall in. With no one there to catch you, there’ll be no coming back up.” Blythe bent her knees and then, with a push to straighten her legs, she lifted off the ground and ascended to the ceiling, her friends following suit.

“Lovely to meet you, Miss Rigby,” Lux called after her, but before she finished speaking I grabbed her arm and tugged her out of the room. We didn’t stop moving until we were on the other side of Khadi’s tree. Wending our way to the trunk, we sat down amongst the tall roots which hid us from view.

“The worst yet,” I determined, flexing my hands as the warmth seeped back into them. I hadn’t realised how cold I’d grown.

“We would have been fine if you hadn’t called her a drowned thing,” argued Lux.

“She only got upset because that’s what she is,” I pointed out.

“She’s not dead. She’s not a ghost, she said so. And besides, she’s here.”

“So?” I asked, baffled.

“So how can she be here if she’s dead?”

“Where is here, Lux? How do you know that ... What if that’s what this place is?” I whispered. “What if this is some kind of afterlife?”

Lux rolled her eyes. “They’re not dead, Everly.”

“How do you know?”

“I know. I know a dead thing from a live thing.”

“Blythe Rigby had you. You were caught by her light. She had you.”

“Right,” Lux snorted.

“She did!”

“I just wanted to fly,” Lux said casually, trying to shrug it off, but her voice was odd and I kept shaking my head.

“She had you. It was like a trap, like some predatory lure or something,” I muttered.

“There you are,” said Khadi, appearing at the end of the roots. Lux and I both screamed. Khadi laughed. Walking further into the tree she sat down across from us, folding herself easily amongst the roots, as though they had grown in that shape to give her comfort. That day her dress was a deep, mossy green with dark stitching that started around her neck and disappeared over her shoulder.

“What have you been up to?” she asked.

“We met Blythe Rigby and her friends,” I said flatly.

“Ah,” she hummed.

“And Everly accused her of being dead. Twice,” said Lux. Khadi grimaced and nodded in understanding.

“They are a sensitive group,” she explained. “But I’ve yet to see them cause real harm.”

“As opposed to fake harm?” I sniped, still shaken and not willing to be pacified so easily. And I was angry. It didn’t make sense, but I was angry that she hadn’t found us first as she did before. “And what do you mean by “yet”?”

“Are you going to hide in the roots all day?” Khadi asked playfully, keeping her voice low as though she too were hiding.

“All night,” I muttered to myself, correcting her. I stared at my hands, my fingers linked together, my knuckles turning white with the pressure. I looked to Khadi. Her eyes were three different shades of blue. “Who says I’m hiding? Maybe I’m a tree.”

Khadi chuckled and, planting her feet beneath her, she stood with ease. She jumped and balanced on top of one of the roots. Her left foot moved into my eye-line and I saw a new tattoo. Small green leaves shot from the sole of her foot and curled up around her ankle, reaching to the middle of her calf. The vines were slim and delicate, sprouting small heart-shaped leaves which shivered gently as she moved. Crouching down she held out her hands to us.

“Will you let me show you something new?” Khadi tempted. Lux grabbed Khadi’s hand and sprang to her feet, clambering up onto the rooftop like Khadi. Not as steady, Lux wobbled back and forth and grabbed onto Khadi’s shoulder for balance. Khadi remained steady despite Lux’s pulling. She was surefooted as a cat.

“Will your next friends be kinder than the last ones? Less sensitive?” I asked staying firmly in my seat, my hands still interlaced.

“I promise,” said Khadi, without a smile.

“Shouldn’t make promises,” I told her, but I stood up and took her hand.

We walked down a narrow windowless hall. The ceilings were still high, but the walls were plain. I felt as though we were inside the walls. There was little light and not much grew except for moss, which pushed between the tiles and sometimes made my feet slip. Lux took the lead, one hand on the wall to keep her steady in the dimness. Khadi followed next, pulling me along behind her with a solid grip on my hand. There was nowhere to go but forward or back, so I let myself be led. In the distance a lock was released; the sound echoed down the walls, bouncing on the floor. Way down the end of the tunnel a door opened and our path was flooded with golden light.

- CHAPTER SEVEN -

A PANTHER OUT OF PLACE

For a moment I couldn't see. The room was too bright after the long, dark tunnel; it hurt my eyes and I had to close them until it became more bearable. So it was that the first thing I noticed about the room was the air. The room was filled with a crisp, dry heat, so different from the humidity which permeated the rest of the house. Stepping into the room was like stepping into an oven.

When the light eased I opened my eyes. The room was thirty different colours. I could see at least six different patterns of wallpaper peeling from the walls. Dozens of Persian rugs overlapped each other on the floor and in the centre of the room sat a chaise lounge of deep, ruby red velvet covered in long tears at either end as though it had been clawed by a large cat.

As we walked forward our footsteps were muted by the layers of carpets. Underneath the windows, set low to the floor were shelves lined with books. Not Jarius's heavy leather-bound tomes, carefully organised and cared for. These were paperbacks with beaten covers that curled in on themselves, stacked and shoved into shelves without order or care. The windows looked out on a courtyard, paved with large slate tiles that caught the warmth of the sun and threw it back to the sky in waves of heat, which made the air ripple and wrinkle. The stones ran flat across the ground for twelve paces before they buckled, cracking under roots of trees and vines and becoming displaced by the small, determined plants which pushed from underneath. Eventually, the courtyard disappeared into the tall green wall of the jungle that pressed all around the house.

Khadi walked forward to the centre of the room and Lux and I shuffled alongside, eyes searching the length of the room for the next extraordinary creature Khadi wanted to introduce us to, but there was no one there. I looked to Khadi, half-expecting her to be

looking at something that I couldn't see, but her eyes darted back and forth searching just as we did.

“Ummm,” hummed Lux.

“Where is he?” Khadi hissed to herself, stalking forward to circle the lounge.

“Who?” I asked, but was ignored. Khadi spoke to herself, her mouth moved, but produced no sound. She stared fiercely at an empty cup of tea which rested on a low table by the lounge. One of her butterflies fluttered nervously on her arm, but she slapped her hand over it to still it. Lux and I watched the standoff for a moment, Khadi versus the teacup. Then, bored, we separated to poke around the room.

To my right was a wall with a large fireplace of cleanly cut, grey stone. The mantel across the top was littered with strange yet ordinary things. There were balled up scraps of paper, several fountain pens, a letter opener, the skin of a mandarin, a dark red leather notebook, a stack of yellowing letters and a hairbrush from which curled several strands of black hair.

On either side of the fireplace there were shelves built into the wall. Like the fireplace mantel, the shelves were scattered with possessions. Some items belonged to a child's treasure, the glass marbles, the pretty coloured stones, several pressed flowers, an autumn leaf which was half yellow and half purple, a jar of sea-glass and an array of bleached white seashells. Other items were less playful, the thin and elegant hatchet, the old, stately binoculars, the lantern and the white ceramic bowl filled with keys. The items appeared strewn about without care, but I noticed there was no dust or cobwebs on the items, as though they were still regularly used or touched.

In the corner to the right stood a washbasin and jug on a wooden stand. At the washing station was a shaving brush, a cutthroat razor, a pair of silver scissors and a damp

cloth. The basin was wet and lightly sprinkled with short dark hairs. A valet stand was draped with a dark green linen shirt, a blood-red waistcoat and black jacket. On the stand's tray rested a pair of cufflinks, needle and thread, a packet of matches and an empty glass. I felt, more than ever before, that I was intruding.

I turned away, as though to give this absent stranger privacy, and as I turned I caught sight of the back wall. It was covered in pictures from the floor to the ceiling, frames stacked on frames, crowded together like puzzle pieces so not an inch of the wall beneath could be seen. Some of the pictures I knew, paintings by famous artists long dead, which I'd seen on postcards and magnets. Others were unfamiliar, painted portraits of strangers mixed with photographs and crumpled sketches in charcoal.

There was too much to see, too much to take in. I crouched down to look at the ones stacked along the baseboard. I craned my neck and stood on my toes to see the pictures hanging near the ceiling. My eyes were skimming up and down the wall, trying to take note of everything, when I saw the photographs and stalled. The first was slotted below a framed postcard from Cairo. It was a Polaroid of two children, a little older than Lux and I. The girl was turning away from the camera, her face obscured by a blur of long, light hair. The boy was looking straight into the lens. He had a mess of dark curls, a sprinkle of freckles across his nose and a smile which took up half his face. It was the boy from the mirror. "He was here," I whispered to myself. "He was here in the house."

The second photograph was wedged underneath Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and over a Picasso I couldn't name. It was a small, grainy photograph of a house, grand and stately. Surrounded by well-trimmed gardens, it stretched four storeys high. The wood of the door and the glass of the windows gleamed in the sunlight, showing up white in the old black and white photograph. For a few breaths the house in the picture seemed unnervingly familiar,

until I realised it was this house, the very house in which I stood, only whole and new and fresh. The jungle was there, in the background of the photograph, a fuzzy, dark mass kept at a safe distance.

I crept closer to the picture, trying to discern finer details from the poor print. Before I reached the wall my toes got hooked on the curling corner of one of the rugs and I stumbled forward hard. My hands, stretched forward to catch myself, landed with a softened thump onto the rug below, but my right knee landed with a sharp crack and a shock of pain that vibrated through my leg bones. Hissing with pain I eased back to sit on the floor and gingerly stretched out my right leg. It was tender and I could see a bruise forming, but before I could feel sorry for myself I spotted it, a sharp white stick poking from beneath the side of the rug where I had landed. Reaching over I grabbed the upturned corner of the carpet and peeled it back from the floor. Underneath lay another two carpets and a collection of small bones. The bones were old, brittle and white. Most of them were broken, crushed by my knee in the fall, leaving splinters and a fine mist of dust on the red weave of the carpet below. But some were whole, and I could make out a rib bone, a piece of spine and most of the skull.

My hand froze on the corner of the rug. I felt a little sick and a little curious, then I felt sick at my curiosity. I heard the whisper of bare feet against carpet and then Lux was crouched down beside me. Silently we stared at the small mess of bones, jumbled together like a game of pick-up-sticks. Lux reached out to touch the skull, but I grabbed her hand and pulled it back. Carefully, I laid the rug back down over the bones and keeping Lux's hand in mine, I stood and drew her up with me.

“I found some too,” she said softly. “A cat, I think, and a few birds.”

“So that was...”

“A rabbit,” she said confidently. “I’ve seen rabbit skulls before, in the scrub around the headland. Some people leave poison out for them.”

“It’s like a den,” I whispered. “Whatever lives here, brings its food back and…”

“Whatever lives here?” Lux repeated. “Whoever lives here, you mean. They’re not animals, Evers.”

“They’re not human either,” I whispered, glancing over my shoulder to Khadi. “Humans don’t live like this. It’s not normal.”

“So maybe they’re just weird. You’ve met Jarius and Marie, they’re different. They’re our friends,” Lux said, getting spiky.

“We’ve met them once, Lux. *Once*. We don’t know these people. And they’re not even people, not fully anyway.”

“Maybe not any more, but they were,” she argued. I frowned, confused.

“What?” Lux grabbed my arm and pulled me along the wall of pictures until we reached the end and pointed to a frame. Tucked into the corner, framed in dark wood, was another photograph. This one wasn’t as old as the other; the print was clearer and done in sepia. It was a photograph of three people. At the centre stood a stranger, tall and slim, in a dark suit and a well-trimmed beard. His smile was reserved, but genuine; it crinkled his eyes at the corners.

One of the stranger’s arms was wrapped around the shoulder of a girl. She wore a white shirt tucked into high-waisted pants and heavy boots on her feet. Her light hair was braided back from her face and her hands were planted on her hips. She looked like an explorer in an old movie. Her smile was huge, showing all her teeth, and her nose was scrunched up. It looked like she was laughing.

“Khadi,” Lux said. And she was right. It was Khadi, but it wasn’t *our* Khadi. This Khadi wasn’t smooth and calm. This Khadi didn’t have creeping tattoos of butterflies and flowers. This Khadi was just a girl. She was young, Sarah’s age. And she was very, very human.

“And Jarius,” she said. I looked to the boy on the other side of the stranger and it was Jarius, a very young Jarius, with grudging smile and a mess of dark hair that fell around his shoulders. He wasn’t the bat we had met before. He wasn’t a creature at all.

“This photo is too old,” I said.

“The photo is fine. It’s them. You can tell easily. Can’t you tell?” she asked, incredulous.

“No, the photo’s fine. I mean, it’s them. I know it’s them,” I tried to explain.

“Then what?” she groaned.

“It’s too old. Or they’re not old enough. Look at their clothes. Jarius and that man, they’re wearing waistcoats. And Khadi, she looks like she’s out of a movie set in the thirties or something.” I looked to Lux, but she was just scowling. “If this photo was taken when it looks like it was taken, then Khadi and Jarius should be like a hundred and twenty years old.”

“But they’re not a hundred and twenty years old,” she said tiredly. “Maybe it’s fake.” I stepped closer to Lux, grabbed her sleeve of her shirt to hold her close and lowered my voice.

“But why? Why do that? In a place like this, who would take a novelty photo?” I whispered quickly, one question rushing after the other. “When did these people come here, Lux? How did they get here? What is this place? It’s not just a house. We haven’t just washed up on an island. Where are we, Lux?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered back, exasperated.

“But you’re acting like you know, like you’ve got this all figured out.”

“I don’t know, I just don’t care. Being able to explain it won’t make it better.”

“Don’t you want to find out?” I pressed.

“I want to stay. I want to figure out how to stay,” she huffed, trying to shrug me off.

“You don’t even know where you are!” I hissed. She tried to pull away again, but I held on and said her name until she looked at me. She was hurt, like I was trying to take something from her. “We need to find out more,” I said carefully.

“Everything,” she nodded. “We’ll find out everything. How to stay, but everything else too.” I nodded back, feeling like I’d brought her back to me a little. Her gaze shifted over my shoulder and she frowned. “Where’s Khadi?” I turned around and found an empty room and a teacup knocked to floor.

“There,” Lux said, pointing to a door in the side of the room. It was open just a little, like someone had left in a hurry and not bothered to close it. We raced towards it, swung it open and found a short, empty hall. It was friendlier than the last hallway, wide and filled with light from windows set high in the tall walls. There were paintings too, portraits of more strangers staring at us as we walked by. There was one of the man from the centre of the photograph, though he was sterner in this painting, looking at us as though we were trespassing. I felt he was right. The nameplate on his frame read *Hugo Rathbone*. His birth year was inscribed as 1828 and though there was a space left for the year of his death, it was blank.

There were two doors at the end of the hall, both closed and quiet, giving no clue of which way Khadi had gone. The door to the left was wide and welcoming, a large piece of

wood carved in simple straight lines which looked as though it led somewhere promising. The door to the right was standard in size, made of four vertical planks of wood fixed together. It looked as though it would lead to another servant's hall or a cupboard. This door sat deep in the stonework of the door frame, shadowed and trying very hard to be unappealing.

Together, Lux and I stepped to the right, towards the smaller and suspiciously simple door. Lux chose it because she feared being predictable and I chose it because I felt I was being led and I didn't like it. It pulled open easily, though it slumped violently on its hinges when it wasn't resting in its frame, and we weren't able to get it shut again. It opened to a staircase, another staircase of spiralling stones like the one that led to the pool of dreams, but instead of going down, this one went up, up, up and it didn't smell of damp.

The staircase was narrow so we walked in single file, myself in the lead and Lux close behind. The curve of the staircase made it impossible to see more than three steps ahead. I moved slowly, trying to make my footsteps and my breathing as quiet as possible. As we neared the top we were able to hear three voices arguing. I dropped down onto all fours, Lux followed suit and we climbed the remaining stairs like spiders, our limbs stretching out and our bodies low to the floor.

The door at the top of the staircase stood open to a small, empty balcony. The three tense voices floated up from the room below, their words muffled, but their tones clear. As one voice hissed, another growled and the third voice rumbled like thunder. Lux and I slithered across the balcony floor to peer through the railings at the scene below. I recognised the musty smell of old books and the sweet scent of the pear-tree blossoms. We were back in the library, on one of the landings made to reach the higher shelves.

On the library floor below I could see the three figures. Jarius stood with his back pressed against the shelves, his body curling into itself as though he wished to disappear into his books. He spoke the least, only contributing a few lowly growled words to the argument every so often. Khadi paced the length of the desk, back and forth, her butterflies chasing after her. Her words were hissed and too slippery to hear, but I could taste their bitterness even from a distance. The third figure had his back turned to us. He had an easy stillness to him. Though his voice spilled out across the room like a low growl of thunder, his shoulders would sometimes shiver with laughter.

“Look,” Lux breathed. “Isn’t that him? The one from the picture.” I shifted forward, tilted my head and squinted, trying to recognise a stranger from a photo by the back of his head, when suddenly Lux sneezed, the stranger spun around and I was met with the eyes of the very recognizable and eerily young Hugo Rathbone.

- CHAPTER EIGHT -

INTRODUCING MR HUGO RATHBONE

Hugo Rathbone was unnervingly like his portrait. His beard was dark and closely trimmed. His black hair was smoothed back and cut neatly above his shirt collar. His clothes were well kept but worn; the cotton of his white dress shirt was as thin as crepe paper and near translucent. He still stood tall, trim and strong, as elegant as his portrait, though he lacked his jacket and, oddest of all, his shoes. Mr Rathbone appeared not to have changed much at all, except for his eyes. His eyes were yellower than his portrait, though I would never know if that was just the painter's choice or part of the general strangeness of Hugo Rathbone.

Lux and I were lying stiffly on our stomachs, caught in his eyes like rabbits in headlights. I took short, shallow breaths, in through my nose, out through my nose, waiting to see what he would do next, ready to run if he pounced. After two breaths his eyes lost the roundness of surprise. After four breaths a smile unfolded across his face, wide, toothy and a little too sharp.

“Are you friend or foe?” he called up to us, his voice rolling with laughter. I came to my knees and shifted forward, peering over the bannister. His eyes followed me as I moved. Lux stayed on her stomach, peering between the railings, her hands curled around the wooden posts.

“Um, a friend?” I said, a few beats too late to be comfortable.

“Are you not sure?” he chuckled, stalking closer towards our balcony. I dropped back down to a crouch and Lux snatched her hands back from the railings.

“How do we know that you're a friend?” I challenged.

“You *are* in my house,” he said. “I think I get to ask first.”

“No one said it was your house,” blurted Lux.

“Didn’t they? Well, that’s very interesting.” Rathbone ambled forward again, drawing underneath the balcony and disappearing from view. Lux and I scrambled to our feet, staring at the forest green carpet beneath us as though he might burst up through the floor.

“Khadi,” Lux called, uncertainty drawing out the name.

“Come down, Lux,” Khadi said firmly. But before we could think about moving Rathbone appeared behind us, arriving through the same door we did. Lux shrieked and jumped in surprise. I ducked down, dropping to the floor and covering my head. I’m still not sure why I did that. A few moments passed and nothing happened. Dropping my arms from over my head, I looked up from my spot on the floor and found Rathbone standing over us, his expression in part bemused but mostly alarmed.

“Shall we introduce ourselves?” His voice was lower and smoother now, as though he were making an effort not to frighten us.

“We know who you are,” spat Lux. She didn’t like being surprised.

“Do you? You didn’t know it was my house. You don’t consider me a friend. And yet you know me?” he asked.

“We saw your portrait,” said Lux.

“Ah, it’s very good, isn’t it?”

“Eerily so,” I said, catching his gaze. From this distance it was possible to see some of the ways he had changed: the blue-black smudges under his eyes, the permanence of the creases around his mouth and eyes, a touch of grey in his hair. “We know your name, but that doesn’t mean we know who you are.”

“I am the owner of this house,” he declared. He unfolded his hands from behind his back and opened them out to the side, as if presenting the strange place in which we stood.

“And I’m the owner of a bike,” I shot back. “But that doesn’t mean anything. Not really.” He laughed. He did that a lot it seemed, and it suited him, made him look more human.

“Fair point,” he conceded. “But this house is a different kind of beast than any bike. Have you seen it all yet?” We shook our heads. “Neither have I. Doesn’t that sound strange? But this house, this bizarre beast, grows as though it were alive. I have been here more days than numbers can count and I still stumble into rooms I’ve never seen. I get lost down the twisting corridors and have to walk backwards to find my way home. I’ll enter a room that I know and it will have changed so much I’ll believe I have lost my way once more.”

“Hugo.” Khadi’s voice rose from the library floor, heated with warning. As he was speaking Rathbone had crept forward, dropping down onto his hands and prowling forward like a cat, his movements graceful and certain. He stopped before us, one knee bent and the other on the floor.

“It’s an easy place to lose yourself in,” he said. “But you’ll be careful, won’t you, girls?” We nodded. “And stay together?” We nodded again. “Good.” His smile was small, barely a twitch of his lips and it didn’t make it to his eyes before it faded altogether. He stood and straightened himself, tugging the bottom of his waistcoat as though to smooth out the creases. “I’d best be away. It was a pleasure to meet you both. Jarius!” he boomed “Come and find me later. Khadi,” he paused, considering her, “I’ll find you.” With a final nod to Lux and me, he left.

“Where is he going?” hissed Khadi to Jarius.

“Let him alone, Khadi,” sighed Jarius.

“Jarius,” she said sternly, stepping closer. He sighed and brought his hand to his face, rubbing his eyes as though he were trying to be rid of something. Khadi’s hands unclenched and her shoulders dropped. Stepping closer she gently grabbed his arm and pulled his hand away from his face. Her voice had softened when she spoke. “You’ll ruin your eyes with all this reading.” Jarius gave a soft laugh. “You need to rest.”

“I have a feeling,” Jarius said slowly, as though he was trying to find the right words, “that if I step away, for a moment too long, that I’ll never start up again.”

“Would that be so bad?” asked Khadi.

“Yes! Yes, it would. Sometimes I feel like I’m barely here at all and it’s only because I focus and do not waver that I am not gone all together.”

“Jarius,” she whispered, glancing up the balcony where Lux and I still watched.

“Khadi, I will fade away,” he said evenly, placing a hand on her cheek as he spoke.

“You won’t, I won’t let you.”

“It’s not up to you. You have as much control here as the rest of us.”

“No. It’s different for me.” She spoke with a certainty nearing faith. Jarius’s hand fell from her face.

“Because you love this place,” he said scornfully. “Do you still think that will save you? This house eats people up, Khadi. It’s a beast.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. You speak like people are disappearing.”

“They are,” he cried.

“Stop it,” she said sharply, glancing to the balcony again. “They just changed. That’s all. Others change, but you and Hugo and I, look how long we’ve lasted. We’re different. It’s different for us.”

Jarius shook his head and began to scrub at his eyes again. I got the feeling it was a conversation they’d had many times before. “I think he said something about sorting out your fish friends. He wasn’t happy about their performance earlier today.” It took me a moment to realise he was talking about Rathbone.

Khadi scowled, but hesitated to move, knowing Jarius was trying to distract her. “We’ll talk about this later.” He nodded. She hesitated a moment more and then turned on her heel, walking to the spot beneath our balcony where Rathbone had disappeared.

“Are you ever coming down?” Jarius called, squinting up at us.

I trekked downstairs slowly, my head too messy with thoughts to take the steps with speed. Lux bounded down and swung around the banister at the bottom to find the place where Khadi had disappeared. But when I rounded the base of the stairs I found Lux staring not at a door, but at a solid wall of books.

“It’s a secret passage,” she whispered reverently. Then beginning to bounce on her toes she shouted, “It’s a secret passage!”

“There’s no secret passage or hidden door...” started Jarius, but there was an edge of a smile on his tired face.

“Of course you would say that!” Lux turned to him, still shouting. “It wouldn’t be a *secret* passage if you went around telling everyone.” She turned back to the shelves, eyes electric with excitement. “I’m going to find it.”

I wandered over to Jarius's desk. His books were piled higher than before and the table was littered with crumpled sheets of paper, pencil shavings and empty and half-drunk mugs of tea. Before his chair rested an open book. Like all the others it was written by hand, but its pages were still fresh, flat and white, untouched by age. A pen wrested in the gutter of the page, its tip dripping ink into the spine. The final sentences on the page glimmered, still wet from when they were written. A single sheet of paper caught my eye; it was half wedged between two journals. Instead of being covered in a scrawl of words and jumble of diagrams, it was a drawing. A thousand short lines crawled up the page and formed a forest. Not a chaos of slippery, lush leaves and crawling moss like the jungle outside; but an orderly range of tall, slim trees. I gave the page a tug, trying to pull it free.

"Everly," Jarius huffed, shoos my hands away from his desk.

"Is that where you're from?" I asked, my eyes still fixed on the drawing.

"No." He closed his journal and started to shuffle papers together, unstacking and restacking and shifting the piles around.

"Then how do you know it?"

"I..." he started.

"It's got to be one of the books," called Lux. "Pull the right one and the door will open."

"We saw the photograph," I said to Jarius. "The one of you and Khadi and Rathbone." His hands stilled and his gaze jerked up to me. "You looked different then."

"It was a long time ago," he said softly, dropping his gaze back to the desk.

"You didn't look that much younger, just different. Lighter and less..."

“Less? Less what?” he asked.

“More human.” His eyes squeezed shut and he let out a shaky breath. “I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s true,” he said.

“We just have to pick the right book,” Lux went on. “It’s probably one of the really high ones, so nobody accidentally finds the passage.”

“You’re writing a history. You have to know this place better than anyone,” I said to him. He shook his head.

“This place doesn’t like me. It knows.”

“Knows what?” I ask, baffled.

“Never mind, I’m getting ahead of myself. Why don’t you help Lux with her secret passage?”

“You said there wasn’t one,” I pointed out.

“I lied.” He shrugged.

I shook my head. “Stop trying to get rid of me. I’ll go through all the books myself if I have to. I’ll write my own history of this place.” He straightened from his desk and turned to face me, arms folded over his chest. “Or you could tell me. Tell me everything you know and I could find some things out for you.”

“You could find out things? Things that I couldn’t?” he scoffed. “Do you know how long I’ve been here? How many books I’ve read? How many crevices of this house I’ve explored?”

“No, I don’t.”

“What could you offer me?” He towered over me, eyebrows arched. I hesitated and the corner of his mouth shifted, already forming a smug smile.

“Have you ever spoken to anyone here?” The question popped into my mind and fell out of my mouth without pause.

“Of course I have,” he said, but the corner of his mouth dropped and his smile disappeared.

“So you’ve interviewed them?” I asked. “You’ve asked them about their lives and how they came to be here and why *they* think they’re here and *everything*?” He didn’t say anything, so I barreled on, my thoughts forming as I spoke. “Because, I figure, there’s a common factor, a reason why every one of us is here. Because, really, none of us found this place, did we? We were let in.”

“Or maybe,” Lux exclaimed, clapping her hands together, “it’s one of the books lower down because they think that I would think that it’s one of the ones high up.”

“Have you ever asked them?” I pressed.

“I don’t like people,” he muttered, bending back over his notes.

“Great! I’ll speak to them for you.”

“It’s a waste of time. You’ll never get a word out of Marie. Blythe will speak endlessly and none of it will be true. Khadi will talk in riddles. There’s almost nothing left of Orpheus...”

“Who’s Orpheus?”

“No one has seen Rosamunde or Lionel for months. And Hugo... I never know what Hugo’s going to do.”

There was a series of thuds. I turned to see Lux pulling books randomly from the bookcase. After tugging a volume loose from the shelves she would pause and when no secret door or tunnel revealed itself she dropped the book to the ground and reached for another.

“Lux!” thundered Jarius. She glanced over at Jarius, but turned back to the shelves, unmoved by his anger.

“I can’t put them back, otherwise I won’t know which ones I’ve tried,” she explained with a wave of her hand, as though she were batting away a fly. Another book dropped to the floor and Jarius flinched as it hit the ground.

“What about you?” I asked

“What about me?” He looked baffled.

“How did you come to be here?”

“I... I stayed for someone else,” he looked down again and began to quickly turn through a large volume with pages so thin they were almost transparent. The paper crackled.

“Who?”

“My sister.”

A dozen questions sprang to my mind and I wanted to ask them all. Who was his sister? Was she still here? Had I met her? I hadn’t been this interested in anything in such a long time. The phrase ‘Alive with curiosity’ sprang to mind. I could not remember where I had heard it, but I now understood it. I no longer wanted to withdraw, I wanted to persist. But I held my tongue. I knew if I fired a dozen questions at him he would become quiet and I would learn nothing. I stood at his table and waited quietly, idly examining the titles of his books; *The Discovery of Rooms 37 – 39 and a Hypothesis of their Origin*, *Our Truest Form: An Examination of Individualised Evolution*, *Beware the Beast of the Woods: The Life of*

Roland Tracer. Jarius glided away from the table and plucked a volume from the shelf. The spine creaked loudly as he opened it. He bowed his head over the page, but his eyes would flit up to where I stood at his table. I did not fidget or move from my spot. He returned, placed his book upon the table, and did not look up as he spoke.

“My sister and I had always been close. We were always together. We even worked for the same estate. She would speak always of how we would have adventures. Grand tales, like stories from books. When we were children, my parents found it endearing. When we were grown, they found it impertinent. Were we not blessed enough in finding good work? Did we not have all we needed? Dissatisfaction was a crime. But my sister would not be cowed; she wanted more than a decent life. She wanted wonder and adventure.

“She found this place by herself,” he said, glancing up at me. “She found it and fell in love with it, but she came back for me. To bring me here. Of the two of us she was always the stronger, the leader, the one who reached and took. There was no question of us being without one another. What she wanted she would have and she wanted to stay, so I would stay too.”

“So you never wanted to stay?”

“Do you want to stay?” he asked sharply. He stared across his table at me. I wasn’t sure if he was angry or curious.

“No,” I said. He nodded. It was what he had wanted to hear.

“And why is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, not sure how to explain it.

“Come one, Everly,” he said, tilting his head to the side. “It’s beautiful, mysterious, wild. You could spend the rest of your life exploring this house and never run out of things to find. You’ll never be bored. You’ll never be alone. Why wouldn’t you want to stay?”

“It’s just a feeling.”

“What feeling?” he pressed

“I think about staying and I feel sick.” I pressed my hands to my stomach. “It feels wrong. There’s something wrong with this place. Isn’t there?” Jarius nodded. “It’s a beast,” I said, remembering his argument with Khadi.

“It is a beast,” he confirmed. “You need to leave.” He bent over his book once again. I was being dismissed, but there was more I needed know. I pushed him a little further.

“Why did your sister want to stay? You stayed for her, but what did she stay for?”

Jarius did not look up.

“Because it’s beautiful and mysterious?” I goaded. He closed his book.

“People like Blythe stay because they think this house is pretty, because they want to be the centrepiece of a never ending dance. She revels in reflected grandeur. I think she was a scullery maid, though she would never admit to it. It doesn’t take much to entice someone like her to stay.”

“A scullery maid?”

“A fool. She wanted to dance and wear fine clothing and be admired. My sister saw the power of this house and she wanted it for herself. To become queen of her own kingdom; a chance she would never have had otherwise.”

“I think I might prefer someone who just wanted to dance in pretty dresses.”

“This place is made of wanting. It knows what you desire, the longings you will not admit even to yourself, and it will offer them to you. There are few who have walked away from it.

“I need to convince Lux to leave. She won’t listen to me. I have to find something to show her. I have to make her see. If I don’t find anything, you don’t have to tell me anything,” I bargained. “But if it works, we’re partners and you share everything you have.”

“Fine,” he muttered to me and I was struck with the feeling that he didn’t want Lux to hear. “If you find anything, anything at all, come and tell me. Find me something and I’ll tell you everything I know. I’ll even tell you everything I don’t know. Everything.”

My smile was so wide I could feel it starting to take over my face. Jarius gave me a look I couldn’t name and shook his head with a groan. I turned to Lux, ready to gloat, only to find she wasn’t there. All that remained was a mess of books on the floor and a section of the bookcase standing ajar like a door. She’d found her secret passage.

- CHAPTER NINE -

A SECRET PASSAGE, A SAVAGE GARDEN, A STORY

The secret tunnel was dank and dark. It twisted and turned without reason. There were staircases that wound up and staircases that wended down. I was no longer certain if I was above or below the library. I trailed my hand against the wall, to keep myself steady. Under my fingertips, I could feel moss, wet and slimy, growing over rough uneven stone. Something small, with many legs, scuttled across the back of my hand and I yelped, jumping away from the wall. My heel slipped across the wet rock of the stair beneath me and I fell awkwardly on my side, my knee striking painfully against the lip of the stair above. I bit back a sob and angrily rubbed at the tears which sprang to my eyes.

“Lux,” I shouted. My voice echoed around me, before gradually fading away. I felt strangely apart from time. I couldn’t tell how long I had been walking. Had it been ten minutes or perhaps an hour? There was no light before or behind me and I began to fear that I would never reach the end. I thought about running, but was certain I would fall again. The damp had begun to seep through my clothes from where I was pressed against the ground. Reluctantly, I hauled myself to my feet. My knee ached when I put my weight on it, but it was tolerable; it stung when I ran my fingers over the skin, but I couldn’t see the damage through the dark. Slowly, I edged onward.

I made my way gingerly down three more stairs. Putting my weight onto my good leg, I stretched my other leg forward, toes pointed and pressed against the ground, trying to find any obstacle before I crashed into it. I couldn’t find another stair so I took a step forward, then another, and another. On my next step, my leg swung forward and I stubbed my toes against the base of another stair. I groaned. Cautiously, I crept forward and upwards.

My arms were sweeping blindly out in front of me when my fingers brushed against a wall. I felt both relieved I hadn't been waving my arms around like a magician for nothing and strangely proud I had managed to not run into this wall. I walked closer to it, pressing the flat of palms against it and then stretching my arms out wide, trying to understand the space I was in. I closed my eyes and tried to see the room in my mind. I could no longer walk forward, but as far as I could feel, I was able to turn left or right. I faltered, unsure of which way I should go, unsure of which path Lux had taken. As soon as I made a decision to turn right, I panicked, certain that whatever decision I made would be the wrong one. *This is what you are without Lux*, I thought.

I could hear my shallow, sharp breathing, bouncing of the wall in front of me. I could taste the moss and mould on my tongue. As I breathed I could imagine tiny molecules of green slipping into my lungs and making a home there, covering my insides as they covered these walls. In my head, I saw an image of myself, like a picture taken from far, as a small speck in a maze, the paths of which looped and folded and twisted about, but never gave way to an exit. The small speck of a girl wandered and stumbled, forever looking and never understanding that there was no hope. My leg hurt and my eyes were tired from trying to make shapes of the dark. It felt like a very good choice to sit down and give up.

But I could see home in my head. I could hear Clarence speak as easily as if he were actually here. *Come on, Never*, I imagined Clarence saying. *What would be worse? Taking a chance and failing or staying where you are forever?* The dark was pressing against me like water. I couldn't feel my toes, or my fingers, and I worried that the blackness might be eating me away. I stretched out my left arm and found the far away wall, hoping if I stayed against it, I might, eventually, find my way out. Choosing to turn left, I stubbornly shuffled forward.

My feet scraped against the ground as I took my tiny steps. I liked the sound, it kept me company. I started counting my steps under my breath. By step five hundred and fifty-seven, I feared I had only walked a hundred metres and very slowly. By step eight hundred and thirty-three, I could taste the cleanliness of fresh air, but feared I was imagining it. On step one thousand and three, I edged around another corner and saw a diffused and distant light shine faintly on the clear, wet patches of stone. Three turns and six stairs later, on step one thousand one hundred and twenty-four, I saw a square of light. It was just an outline, thin lines of light that squeezed through the gaps between a door and its frame, but it made me shake with relief. I strode towards the door, righting myself quickly when I tripped and ignoring my stubbed toes. The passage began to narrow and soon I could touch both walls with my arms outstretched.

I reached instinctively for the door handle and panicked when I only found wood. My fingers scrabbled across the door; the soft, water-damaged surface came away under my nails. My knuckles knocked against cool metal. I wrapped my fingers around a ring with relief and pulled. The door gave a snort, as though it had been disturbed from a deep sleep. I pulled again and again and just as I began to fear the door could not be moved, I realised it was latched. I pulled the ring downwards and gave another tug. The door grunted and shifted, but settled again, determined to ignore me. I grabbed the ring with both hands, my fingers squishing together, and threw my weight backwards. The door gave a squeal of surprise and flew open, tossing me backwards. My legs became tangled and I fell. The light from the open door was white and blinding. I screwed my eyes shut and crawled towards it, my eyelids glowing red and my knees scraping the ground.

The floor under my palms changed from rough rock to smooth tile. I could smell fresh, wet earth and the clean, green scent of newly opened flowers mixed with the sweet and sticky smell of rotting ones. My eyes stopped stinging. I brought my hand to my forehead like

a visor and slowly let them open. I saw my palm, crusted in dirt, and when I let my hand fall I saw green.

I was in a corner populated with ferns. They grew from massive, painted pots to all different heights, their long, thin leaves weaving into each other and making a wall of soft green; I could see nothing else. The pots were clustered closely together. I squeezed in between them where I could find a gap, and stepped over when I couldn't. Waves of leaves pushed against my face, scratching lightly as they slid by. I wobbled on one leg as my other foot became caught between three pots. I lost several minutes trying to angle myself free, reasoning that if I managed to get my foot down there without injuring myself, I should be able to get it back out again. In the end, I managed to slide the smallest of the three large pots a few centimetres to the right and wrenched myself free with only a small amount of pain.

“What are you doing here?” a voice echoed across the tiles. I couldn't tell where it came from. I couldn't see anything but green. “You shouldn't be here. You weren't invited. Go back.”

I thought of the dark passage and felt my stomach roll with nausea. Going back wasn't an option. I shook my head to the voice and pushed forward. I stumbled free of the potted fern jungle, and only when I saw the glass ceiling and the rows and rows of curious plants, stacked and slotted together like an ever-growing puzzle, did I realise I was in the conservatory again.

“I said go back,” the voice demanded again, now edged with nervousness. I scanned the room for Marie and spotted the flutter of a skirt behind a wooden ladder overgrown with a flowering vine. I gave a small wave to the ladder and wandered over to a table full of succulents lazing in the sun. Half-turned away from her I pretended to study the succulents, and tried to watch Marie without appearing as though I was looking at her. I did not do this

well. Every time I snuck a glance towards Marie, I would catch her head poking around the vines; then she would see me watching and lurch back into place behind the ladder. So I paid attention to this succulents. This, I also did not do well. At the centre of one of the small succulents was a ring of pink spores which looked almost like feathers. I reached forward to touch them, but as soon as my finger grazed them, the fat and stubby leaves of the plant began to close around my finger like a mouth around food. I whipped my hand away in shock. I fisted my hand, instinctively protecting my fingers, and held it to my chest, scowling at the tiny succulent as it leisurely unfurled its thick leaves once more.

I heard a snort, then a broken, choking chortle from behind the ladder and realised Marie was laughing. I folded my arms and glared at the vine-covered ladder, stepping cautiously away from the table. Marie padded out from her hiding place, bare feet comfortably tapping against the tiled floor and a reluctant smile on her face. She wore an orange skirt, with white, embroidered flowers. Her shirt was a deep red and made her look even fiercer than our first meeting.

“They won’t take your finger,” she said, laughter coating her voice. “Not the small ones, anyway.”

“They don’t do that where I’m from,” I told her, feeling silly all the same.

“I know,” she nodded. “It’s always interesting to see what something is capable of, once you take away your expectations. Stranger still, that you expect something here to be normal, even after you have seen the strangeness of this house.”

At first, I was too surprised she was speaking to me to respond. Then, I chose to be quiet, hoping she would keep speaking. The vine around the ladder began to slither and reach, its green tendril sliding from the highest step onto Marie’s shoulder. As it began to curl

around her collar, she batted it away, muttering to herself as she stepped clear of its reach, “Ridiculous thing! What kind of vine is afraid of heights? I am not a lattice!”

“I told you to go back,” she said flatly, turning to me, the warmth disappearing from her voice. I shook my head vigorously. She stood in silence, her dark eyes locked onto mine. I twitched under her gaze, shifting from foot to foot, waiting for her to speak.

“Have you seen Lux?” I blurted, breaking the silence.

“No,” she frowned and walked towards the table of savage succulents.

“I know she went into the tunnel, but I was few minutes behind and it was really dark...”

“The passage goes all over the house, but there’s no map, no logic, there’s no way to know where you will end up,” she interrupted. “You’re lucky you came out here. Your friend could be anywhere.”

“Anywhere?” I asked, nervously. “But I have to find her and it’s not...”

“She will be fine,” Marie said firmly, interrupting me again. She looked up at me and tilted her head to the left like a bird. Her eyes were calculating and a little sympathetic. Her voice was softer when she spoke again, “This place suits her, doesn’t it?”

“You don’t like her,” I muttered, wandering around the other side of the table.

“No, I don’t,” she said simply.

“But, you’re part of this place.”

She hesitated. “I am. I am now. I wasn’t... I did not fall into place here, the way your friend has. It took time. Most things do.”

“Did it take time for Khadi?” I asked.

“I don’t know, she was here before me.”

“What about Jarius?”

“The same.”

“What about...”

“Stop.” The small pot she was holding cracked in her hands. I fell silent. She let the ceramic pieces fall to the table in a waterfall of soil, gingerly cradling the flowering succulent in her palm. Clumps of dirt clung to its fragile roots and she gently brushed them loose. With a tilt of her head she called me over. I rounded the table and she placed the small plant in my hands. Marie turned and led me to a spot by the furthest glass wall where five tiles were missing from the floor. The small patch was overflowing with soil. Marie knelt on the ground, letting her skirt rub in the dirt and began to carve a small bowl in the earth with her hands. She patted the ground beside her and I sat down next to her. Leaning over my folded legs, I placed the small plant in the hole, folded the soil over its roots and pressed it down.

“I was born on the sixth of July, 1907, in Mexico,” she said quietly. She reached to her left and grabbed a tea tray loaded with plants which had outgrown their pots and tugged it to her side. She passed one to me and took one herself. I followed her lead as she gently freed her plant from its container and carved it a new home in the floor. “My father kept the gardens at the house of a government official. I never learnt who, I didn’t care. When I was eleven, I was expelled from school. There was no one to watch me at home and so my father took me to work with him. He taught me everything: all the names of his plants, what they needed, how to care for them, how to understand them. He was a gentle man who lived in an angry time. No, not like that,” she said, breaking her story. “You need the hole to be deeper, give the roots the room they need.”

Instead of returning to her story, she fell silent. I imagined this was how she spent most of her time. Silence was her natural state. I was wary of pushing her, worried she would close off. Instead of asking her to continue, I offered something of myself.

“My father was an historian. Sometimes he would take me to different libraries and archives and he would show me how to find the right text, how to handle old books and take notes.” Marie’s hands didn’t slow and her eyes didn’t lift from her task, but I could tell she was listening. “I don’t think he was ever meant to bring me along, but he always said it was the best way to learn.”

“He was right,” Marie said. “My father believed the same. I learnt more from him than any school teacher.” She drew in a breath, bracing herself. “One day, he was tending to plants inside. I wasn’t allowed to come inside, so I waited in the greenhouse. I was watering the violets, these rare black and purple violets. They were so dark, so perfect, they didn’t seem real. The kind my father’s employer would show off to guests, proud to own them, though he never really appreciated them. I was watering the violets when I heard the gunshots.” Marie paused to pass me another plant. She took one herself, but didn’t plant it; she just turned the pot around in her hands. “There were gunshots from the house and uniformed men everywhere. I hid behind the greenhouse, with the piles of old pallets and discarded pots. I stayed, even as it began to rain. I fell asleep pressed against the walls of the greenhouse for warmth, hiding beneath old boxes. And then I woke up here.”

We finished planting everything on her tea tray without speaking. She handed me a dark green watering can with red roses painted on the side. I tipped the water over the flowers, taking my time. When I finished, she filled my watering can again and pointed me to another spot.

“Did you ever go back?” I asked. She was spraying a large yellow orchid with what looked a giant perfume bottle. As she squeezed the pump, a mist of water would spray out and the centre orchid would extend like a tongue to drink from the cloud.

“No,” she shook her head. “I had nothing to return to.”

My hands were even filthier than before, but instead of the stale dirt of the tunnel, I had healthy, rich earth packed under my fingernails and pressed into the creases of my palms. I took a deep breath in and tried to pull everything about that room into my lungs: the strange and dangerous succulents, the gentle chime of the bell flowers, the scent of a thousand species of flowers, the splash of the glowing fish in their pot, Marie’s calm certainty.

“I can understand not wanting to leave,” I said.

“You can?” she questioned, dark eyebrows rising.

“It’s beautiful and it’s...” I struggled to find my words. “You know when people say they want to go far, far away? I think this is the place they mean. There is nothing further away from everything than this.”

“When I first came here, I thought this house was a miracle, an escape from my life, but even then I was uncertain about staying. I did not stay for its beauty or adventure. I stayed because I didn’t know where else I could go.”

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she sighed.

“Can you guess?” I pressed. “Just pick a number.”

She hesitated before answering. Putting down her watering can she rubbed the back of her hand with her thumb, as if she could count her years by the lines on her skin. “Maybe ten

years,” she said quietly and more to herself than to me. “No, more. Something like fourteen. Fourteen years.” She turned to me and looked me over. “When did you come from?” she asked.

“Later,” I said. “Much later than that.”

She shrugged. “Time is another thing that won’t conform to your expectations here. Blythe arrived after me, though she appears to come from a time before my own. Though one never really knows with Blythe. It’s just as likely she came across her clothes in an attic.”

“Would you go back now?”

“I can’t.”

“Have you tried?”

She sighed. “When I first arrived here and I found this room, everything was dead. I searched the house and the jungle and the gardens. I found extraordinary things. Flora my father could never have dreamt of. I worked and they grew, plants with more life than most people. But when they wilt, I feel it. When they go unwatered, I go thirsty. They give me life as I do to them. I can’t go back now. I can’t leave. I am part of this place.”

“A house is just bricks and mortar,” I quoted, not able to remember where I had heard it.

“Not this one,” she laughed mirthlessly.

“Then what is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Something else.”

- CHAPTER TEN -

AN EXPECTED ENEMY AND A DUBIOUS ALLY

Marie didn't want to speak to me anymore. She went quiet and when I asked questions, she didn't even lift her head, as though she didn't hear me. The flowers around us had begun to wilt, slowly drooping forward like Marie bowing over her plants. Vines began to slither slowly across the ground, rasping across leaves and twisting around my toes. I stumbled back, pulling my feet free. Marie said nothing and the plants kept crawling towards me. I decided it was time to leave.

I found the door to the hallway behind a waterfall of ivy. I didn't remember it being there before. I circled around the room twice, dancing on my toes to keep my feet free and only found the door when I tripped and fell through the curtain of leaves. I had the uneasy feeling something was trying to keep me there.

Out in the hall, I closed the door firmly behind me. I heard gentle tapping as the vines prodded against the door, trying to find a way through to me. I held my breath and watched their shadows move beneath the door. When the shadows stilled, I breathed again. Still keeping my eyes on the door, I slowly backed away until I turned a corner. I wandered the halls, not knowing where I was going, my head still in the conservatory with Marie rather than the path I walked. I paced my steps evenly, lining up my heel with the base of the tile on the floor and counting those steps under my breath. And as I walked, I thought.

I wasn't sure what to make of Marie's story. The house came to her when she had nowhere else to go. Lux and I had homes and families; we couldn't claim the same. How does a house get this kind of magic anyway? I wasn't sure what to tell Jarius or if he would be pleased with what I had found. Then, I realised, I wasn't sure how to find Jarius at all.

Shaking myself free of thoughts, I looked at the hall in which I walked and found I was once again in the foyer of the house, with the tree in which we had found Khadi.

But that day, the tree was empty, and though I called for her, I received no response. The door that Lux and I used to get into the house still stood ajar, but no breeze came through. The dry leaves did not rustle and scrape across the floor and the branches of the tree stood still. I could hear no life moving, not even from the jungle, not even when I strained my ears. I breathed in, I breathed out, but I couldn't hear it. Everything was terribly, terribly still.

Then there was a rattle. And a shake.

My eyes slid to the ballroom doors. The doors pushed out a little and then sucked back in, never opening or leaving their frame, as though the house was breathing. I imagined the room on the other side of that door, Blythe Rigby and her friends dancing through air, pulsing blue lights and that cold, cold feeling in this strange, warm world. In the centre of it all, I imagined Lux.

Then my mind did what it always does when I need to make a decision, it split in two and I began to argue with myself. *You should go in there*, my mind said. I shook my head urgently in reply. *Lux could be in there*, my mind insisted. "I don't know that," I whispered to myself. *She could be and that's enough reason*, my mind reasoned. "They won't hurt her. They like her. They'll hurt me for sure." But even as I said it, I knew I would go in anyway. I felt a stone grow in my stomach just thinking about it. I walked towards to the doors and as I stepped closer, they drew open, a mouth ready to swallow me up.

When I stepped into the ballroom I felt the coldness straight away. The doors swung closed gently behind me. I let out a shiver and tried to swallow my fear. The stone in my stomach grew heavier. I strode to the centre of the room, putting all my strength in my steps. I wanted to look strong, even though I didn't feel it. Blythe twirled around and around in the

centre of the ceiling, like a ballerina in a jewellery box. When she saw me, she laughed and dove from the chandelier, a huge, arching swan dive. She hurtled towards the floor, skirts streaming madly around her. I stumbled back, fearful I was in her path. She stopped and hovered horizontal with floor. Her head was level with mine and she folded her hands under her chin, as though she were resting on a bed.

“It’s you,” she said hungrily, her eyes shining. “I did not expect the pleasure of your company again so soon. And all alone.” She let out a low chuckle. “I did not believe you to be this brave. Or this foolish. Those two things are so frequently confused.”

“I’m looking for Lux,” I said, quieter than I meant to.

“Ah, that makes a bit of sense,” she sang. “Though I’m not sure why you would come looking here. There are so many places she could be. So many places it would be better for you to check first.” Her head tilted to the side and I thought I saw her teeth grow sharper.

“She liked you,” I said simply, adding a shrug. Blythe smiled, wide and beautiful and little bit mad.

“We liked her too. So much fun, that girl. And so polite,” she added with bite.

“I know, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” she hissed. I swallowed.

“I’m sorry,” I tried again, trying to meet her eyes and not peer straight through her. Her light was pulsing a dark, murky blue and it was difficult to make out her features. “Have you seen Lux?”

“Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps,” she chanted, her eyes still hard and dark. “Perhaps she came to us and flew. Maybe she wanted to be away from you.”

“That’s not true,” I argued. “She just got lost. We got separated and I need to find her.”

“You were separated?” she asked, her feet floating down to hover a few inches above the floor.

“Yes!”

“How?” she hummed, inching closer.

“She found a tunnel and went down, but it was dark and when I followed her I…”

“So she went ahead of you?”

“Yes.”

“She went without you?”

“No,” I protested, though shakily. “She just got excited. It was a secret tunnel in a library! She got excited and wasn’t thinking.”

“And she left you behind,” Blythe concluded. “Perhaps she does not want to be found, Everly. Perhaps she has found better, more exciting friends.”

“No!” My eyes stung with tears and my breath rattled in and out of my body. Blythe became a blurry smudge in front of me. She swam closer and I tried to shove her away, but her hands folded around my wrists and she began to float up, up, up and I flew with her. My arms burned where her icy skin touched mine. My feet floated off the ground and I pulled and thrashed to get free of Blythe’s hold, but too quickly we were high above the floor and I knew I would be hurt if I fell so far. Instead of fighting, I tried to grasp hold of Blythe, fearing she would let me go without warning, but each time I tried to grip her arm she would slip through my hand, slick and smooth, like seaweed.

“Everly,” she whispered to me. We had reached the ceiling. I reached up and tried to dig my fingers into the mouldings, but they were too shallow and I was too weak. My fingers quickly grew tired. I twisted around in Blythe’s grip, trying to see anything which could help me, but I only saw her friends, clustering together in twos and threes, watching their leader from a safe distance. I caught sight of the floor, which was even further away than my fear-soaked mind imagined. I whimpered. Blythe’s hold on my wrist was starting to ache. “Do you think you will fall, dear Everly?” Blythe hummed in my ear. I nodded urgently. “Lux did not believe she would fall. She is so much braver than you, but that is why you like her.”

Lux was here, I realised, but my eyes were still stuck on the faraway ground and I couldn’t give much energy to the thought. My feet dangled heavily and my wrist felt so frozen I feared it may shatter.

“We like her too,” said Blythe. “We want to keep her, but you are getting in the way, causing all kinds of uncertainty. If it was up to Lux, she would never leave us.” Blythe took hold of my other wrist and began to dance with me. I was a rag doll in a waltz with a ghost, miles above the ballroom floor. As we spun, she laughed and her light began to pulse faster, turning a pale, blinding blue.

Her friends, partnered together and forming a circle around us, joined the dance. Their lights pulsed brighter and beat faster, though none so bright as Blythe Rigby. My arms ached in their sockets. I tried to pull myself up against her hands, but my muscles were cold and weak and I could barely lift myself an inch. Blythe laughed again and spun me faster.

Tears ran down my cheeks and I had lost all feeling from my fingers to my elbows when Blythe began to slow down. She slid her grip along my forearms and pinned my elbows to my ribs. Lifting me so we floated nose to nose and drawing me in close, she hissed, “You

should go back home, little Everly. Go back and leave Lux with us. You are not wanted here, little Everly. You don't fit."

All around us her friends whispered in chorus, "Go home. Go home. You're not wanted. Go home." They pressed in closer and I could feel their cold, damp breath on the back of my neck. Blythe began to loosen her grip and I tried to scream, but it came out choked and gargled. I watched my arm slide out of her hand, and even as I was swallowed in fear, I thought about how strange it was I couldn't feel myself sliding free. I watched my numb limb slip through her hand and caught sight of the vicious joy on her face and it was almost like it was happening to somebody else, as though I were stuck watching a terrifying film, unable to look away.

"Blythe!" a voice bellowed from below. Blythe froze. Her light quickly dimmed and her hand tightened around my blue fingers, crushing them together. "Blythe, you will not let her fall." Hugo Rathbone's voice filled the room. I couldn't look down. I kept my eyes on our hands, Blythe's and mine, squeezed together so tightly, but I could still feel myself slowly slipping free.

"You do not command me," Blythe hissed, but her grip tightened again.

"You forget in whose house you stand," Rathbone rumbled like thunder, echoing throughout the room.

"It is not yours," she spat. "This house does not *belong* to anyone."

"Lower her down gently, Blythe."

"We belong to it. And it cannot be controlled by you. Not anymore."

"Blythe..." he growled.

"This beast has grown too big, old Rathbone, and your strength is not what it was."

“Blythe Rigby,” he shouted. The windows rattled in their panes. “If you hurt the girl, you will not enjoy what comes to you. Do you understand?” he asked slowly. Blythe fell silent, her face twitching and flickering with suppressed rage. Without a word, she began to float down to the floor. When my toes touched the floor she let go of my fingers and I crumpled into a heap. I drew my frozen arm into my chest and tried to rub some warmth back into it. Hugo Rathbone stalked towards me and Blythe floated up, out of arm’s reach.

“Take her then,” she spat petulantly. “Take her and let us be rid of her. We do not want her here.” Rathbone gave a mirthless chuckle.

“To not be desired by you, Blythe Rigby, can only be considered a blessing.” Then he reached down, scooped me up in his arms and carried me from the room.

He didn’t carry me far. He placed me at the bottom of the stairs in the entrance hall and knelt down in front of me. I felt heavy and drained. I tried to curl my fingers into a fist, but they wouldn’t move. Slowly, slowly the feeling began to return and as my limbs defrosted they were flooded with heat. I stamped my feet and they prickled dimly as the feeling returned.

“Everly,” Rathbone said gently. I kept looking to my feet and scrunching my toes, wincing as the feeling came back. “Everly,” he tried again. “Everly, what did she say to you?” He reached for my arm, but his hand was too hot on my skin and I flinched away. “Everly, you must not believe anything she tells you.”

“Was she lying?” I croaked, lifting my heavy head. Rathbone sighed and sat back on his heels.

“Blythe will tell a story as she wants it to be. She will tell her version of the story over and over again, until even she believes it is true. It doesn’t mean that anything she says has any root in reality or truth,” he reasoned. I nodded gently and looked at my feet again.

“What about you?” I lifted my head, but my eyes were still teary and he looked blurry.

“What about me?” he asked, his head cocked to the side.

“Are you a liar?” His face darkened. I had crossed a line. “Jarius said Blythe is a liar and that he never knows what you are going to do. What did he mean? Was he saying he can’t trust you?”

“I am not a liar,” Rathbone said slowly. “I am, perhaps, not always forthcoming.”

“Unpredictable?”

“Possibly.”

“Dangerous?”

“No,” he said emphatically. I held his stare and waited. He took a deep breath and when he spoke again his words were measured. “I was once here by myself. The only resident of this house. When Khadi and Jarius first arrived, I had been without company for a long time. They were so curious and enthralled by the place, it reminded me of when I first arrived here. I wanted them to stay. I wanted to share this with them. At the time I thought this place was a miracle; I wasn’t fully aware of the effect this house had over an extended period. I convinced them to stay. No,” he paused, considering. “Khadi was always going to stay. Jarius was wary and wiser than me. He wanted to go back. He knew he wasn’t safe. But he stayed for Khadi.”

“Why isn’t he safe?” I asked, but he spoke as though he hadn’t heard me.

“Do not stay here, Everly. You must return home.”

“I need to find Lux.”

Rathbone paused. “And if she chooses not to come with you?” I flinched. “You cannot decide for her and she cannot decide for you.”

He doesn't know her, I told myself. I'll find her and we will go home. She knows we can't stay here. “Tell me why it's not safe.”

“Come with me,” he commanded, springing quickly to his feet. “I will lead you back to Jarius. He will keep you safe until you return home.”

“No,” I said, remaining seated. “I need to find Lux.”

“I will take you to Jarius and you can wait for your friend in the library,” he said firmly.

“No! I'm going to find Lux.”

“I will find Lux for you, but I need you to return to the library, Everly,” he growled. He reached forward to pull me up and I scrambled back, climbing further up the stairs. I remembered all the skeletons on the floor of his room and felt fear rush into my body, like the warmth which burned back into my limbs. I rose cautiously to my feet, my eyes following him, ready to run if he stepped closer. He held up his hands, as though he were approaching a volatile animal and trying to show he posed no threat. My legs were still strange to me, stiff and slow to respond. I reached out a hand for the bannister and grabbing hold for balance, took a careful step back. “Everly, please listen...”

I turned and ran, stumbling up the stairs. He called after me, but I heard no footsteps following me. I reached the landing and risked looking back down to the ground floor. Hugo Rathbone stood below, making no movement to come after me, but watching me with his steady, yellow eyes.

- CHAPTER ELEVEN -

MR ORPHEUS BLACK

I was once again in a part of the house I had never seen before. Leaving Hugo Rathbone behind, I had run through the hallways of the second story, darting around random corners and stumbling up and down staircases. I ran so hard and fast to make myself difficult to find that, when I stopped to catch my breath, I found I was wholly lost.

I was in a long curving hall, which bent so sharply I couldn't see more than two metres ahead of me. Here, the corridor ceiling arched to a point, like the top of a soft-serve ice cream. The walls were covered in hundreds and thousands of small, colourful tiles, none the same, but all belonging. The dirt on my skin and under my nails didn't feel fresh and alive anymore, but itched. I tried to rub the dirt from my arms and my hands, but only managed to rub it more deeply into my skin. In the creases of my palms and in the crooks of my elbows, where sweat collected, the small grains of dirt became mud and stained my skin. The tiles were cool under my sore feet and so I lay down on my stomach across the hallway and felt the coolness everywhere. I pressed my cheek to the ground and a shiver ran across my belly, under my arms, to the palms of my hands and along the front of my legs and feet.

When my front felt cool and calm, I flipped over to my back and stared up at the strange peaked ceiling and the tiles which bordered it. I tried to focus on a single tile and make sense of it. Some looked like flowers, others looked like butterflies, and some I could not make a picture from at all. When I lost focus, the tiles would blur into each other, a happy chaos of colour. When the colours started to hurt my head, I closed my eyes and thought.

I didn't mind being lost at that moment, because I wasn't sure who I should talk to next. I trusted Khadi less and did not know what to make of Hugo Rathbone. I worried about where Lux and gone, but found, strangely, I didn't really want to see her either. My body was

scratched, bruised and beaten. My mind felt like a stirred up puddle, a confusing swirl of murky water. I didn't know what to do. My body began to shake, then I started to sob, and then I began to cry. I wanted a shower and my own bed, in my own house, with my familiar sadness to wrap around me like a blanket. Sadness was so much easier than all this unknowing.

This visit felt so much longer than the last. I was sure I had been awake for days. I wondered how much time had passed back home. I thought about Clarence and I wondered if he had noticed I was gone yet. I wanted him to notice. I didn't want him to notice. The thought of him knowing made me nauseous. But the thought of days going by, without him realising I was gone, made it hard to breathe.

A shadow moved across my face and I opened my eyes and saw a window where I had not noticed one before. Given the strangeness of the house, it had probably appeared while I was staring at the ceiling. It had the same shape as the corridor, square at the base and then peaked like a soft-serve ice cream. It had no glass or screen and through its empty frame reached the arm of a tree. From the end of this branch reached five smaller sticks, like fingers. The branch reached until its end rested over my face, then it waved back and forth, as if to say hello, or maybe check I was awake. I propped myself up with my elbows and its spindly stick fingers gently touched my cheek and collected my tears. The tree arm drew back through the window, its fingers curling into its branch, as though to beckon me outside.

The base of the window was low, and I was able to step over it with ease and onto a small landing at the top of a very narrow, stone staircase. The staircase hugged the wall of the house and led down into a small garden. The garden was an enclosed semicircle, the curve of the corridor providing one boundary and another was provided by a straight, but crumbling, stone fence which ran along the outer wall of the house. The space was overshadowed by a

looming tree. Its trunk was made of dozens of separate trees, twisting and twining together to form one whole. The pavers had been pulled from the ground and stacked haphazardly against the side of the curving staircase, and the roots of the tree looped in and out of the exposed dirt like threads stitched through fabric.

In the shade of the tree grew clumps of purple flowers. A warm breeze curled into the small alcove making the flowers sway and bump against one another. Their leaves and stems rustled as they moved and made it sound as though they were chattering. I picked my way carefully across the garden, not wanting to stumble over roots or crush flowers and shortly I found myself standing before the centre of the strange, twisting, reaching tree.

I waited for the tree to speak. Then I felt mad for doing so. I cleared my throat and straightened my spine. “Are um... you able to talk?” I asked tentatively. The whole tree shook, its leaves rustling lightly and from somewhere within its twisted trunk, there came a deep creaking sound and I had the uncomfortable notion I was being laughed at.

“Oh yes, oh yes,” a scraping voice chuckled. “I have not lost that much of myself yet. But I have been asleep for some time. How long have you been here, young one?”

“Not long. Just once before and only for the day.”

“Aaaaah, good, yes, very good. Not made up your mind yet, then? That’s good.” The shoots which made up the trunk began to twist and slither around one another and the tree pulled itself up taller where it sat, all its branches pulling taut, before relaxing once more. “A very important decision and not one to be made with haste, no matter what that girl whispers in your ear. It is your choice and yours alone.”

“What girl?”

“Hmmm?” He hummed. “Oh, that one... that one that moves like a cat. Believes she owns the house. Very much like a cat, indeed.”

“Khadi?” I asked, trying to make out a face in the slipping, sliding wood.

“Yes, yes, that’s the one,” he creaked. “Strange, that she should let you out of her sight. Very strange. Not often that cat will let a little bird flit away. No.”

“She might be with Lux.”

“Hmmm?”

“Lux, my friend, she came here with me.”

“Two little birds?” he rasped with surprise. “It is rare to receive two guests. The last time, well, it must have been the cat and that sour one.”

“Sour one?”

“Always moping about his books. Trying to create order in his little library. Foolish boy, trying to keep order in this place.”

“Jarius? You mean Jarius,” I realised.

“Yes, yes, I said that. Jarius and the cat came here together. It will happen with siblings, sometimes, when they are close. But you and your friend...”

“Lux,” I prompted.

“Yes, you must be very close to come here together.”

“Jarius and Khadi are brother and sister? They came here together?” I asked. I didn’t trust this tree. His memory seemed patchy. Khadi and Jarius didn’t look or act like siblings, and they definitely didn’t seem close.

“Yes, yes,” he said vaguely, his branches swaying. Then his movement paused, his trunk stiffened, and he spoke in a voice, low and strong and almost human. “No. There was another pair. Another pair of visitors. A girl and a boy.” His trunk leaned forward and though I could not make out his face well, I felt he was peering at me. “You are familiar. Did you come with a boy?”

“No, Lux is a girl. What boy?”

“Mustn’t be you, then. Mustn’t have stayed. Everyone makes their choice.” His trunk leaned back into place, but his branches did not sway. The breeze moved through his leaves, the flowers chattered quietly, and I waited for him to speak again. Beginning to fear he had fallen asleep, I blurted out the first question which my mind formed.

“Were you a person?” I half shouted. He answered with another shiver of leaves and a creaking laugh.

“Was I a *person*? *Was* I a person?” he echoed like a parrot. “Have you ever spoken to someone other than a person, little bird? What a strange question. But, I have neglected to introduce myself. I am Orpheus Black, youngest of Lord Faustus Black, Keeper of Gatwyn.” He extended one arm towards me and taking an extended stick in hand, I shook it in greeting as best I could, though it was too large and I didn’t have the strength to move it.

“Everly,” I returned.

“And what trouble has brought you to our shores, young Everly?”

“Um... I fell through the sand.”

“A sinkhole?” he croaked.

“No, no, just a beach,” I said, confused. I stared at this branches and his roots in the soil, unsure of how to ask him again. “I’m sorry, Mr Black, but you know you’re not... I mean, you have branches...” I petered out.

“Yes,” he said easily. “And I am not less a person because of them. Where is your friend?”

“I don’t know,” I said and he hummed low again, deep in thought. “Mr Black, Khadi never told me you were here. She introduced us to everyone else.”

“That’s nothing strange, they often forget I’m here,” he sighed.

“Because you’re a tree?”

“Perhaps,” he grated, shaking his limbs and pulling himself tall. “Little bird, I am concerned. The separation of you and your friend does not bode well.”

“I mean, yeah, I’m worried. I tried to follow her down the tunnel, but it was dark and I couldn’t see and the walls were slimy...”

“And you did not find her?”

“I think I took a wrong turn.”

“I would like to assist you. I will take you to her,” he grandly declared.

“You know where she is?”

“Well, no,” he faltered. “But I shall take you on an exploration of this house, of a kind no other can offer.” He shifted his trunk a little and the ground began to split. I staggered on the lurching ground and he paused. “Climb up the stairs, little bird. You had best be out of the way for this.”

I scrambled up the stairs and sat at the top with my back pressed against the wall. Once I was safely out the way, Orpheus began to shift and grunt, the ground tore open and his roots shook free of the earth. The small flowers shrieked and shaking loose their roots, they fled through the gaps in the crumbling garden wall. The roots of Orpheus were longer than his branches were tall. They curled beneath him and could barely be contained within the confines of the small garden.

He sighed in relief and gave the tips of his roots a wriggle. "Climb aboard, little bird," he said, extending a branch to me. Gingerly, I did as he said, deciding if I were to trust any creature in this place, it would be a tree. *Trees are always a relief after people*, Clarence would quote to me. It was true. I felt better in Orpheus's company. I settled into a fork of the tree and braced myself against its branches. He curled his roots beneath him and rising higher, stepped over the low garden wall. The uprooted flowers squealed again and darted around his base as he stepped on the overgrown lawn which surrounded the house.

"Well, then get out of the way," he griped. "Melodramatic, over sheltered, seedlings. Couldn't withstand a sharp breeze with all their precious petals."

"Can you understand them? The flowers," I asked.

"Yes. Yes, that is something which comes with time," he said. "Not as enjoyable as it sounds. A great deal to say, have flowers, though little which is of interest."

He began to stride forward, sticking to the perimeter of the house. With each of his steps I was jolted in my seat on his arms. At first I clung to the branches tightly, certain I would fall, but as he strode steadily around the house I gained confidence. Planting my feet beneath me, I pushed myself to my feet. My hands still clung tightly to the branches in my reach, but I found I could steady the impact of each step more easily on my feet.

I peered in windows as we walked. I saw sewing rooms and sitting rooms and reading rooms and bedrooms. Rooms which were overgrown with greenery and others which had become the nesting place for all species of birds. Some rooms were abandoned, covered in thick layers of dust, bed and chairs sagging with age and neglect. Other rooms had been scraped bare, stripped of curtains and linens and pictures, with only a few loose scraps of paper to show they had once been occupied.

When I looked to the right, I could see over the top of the entire jungle. All the wild trees became a carpet of green which led to the sparkling blue of the sea. The sun was hanging low, the base of its circle touching the ocean and dying strips of the water pink and orange. Lux and I had never stayed after dark and I started to wonder what would happen if we were still separated as night fell.

“You would know the house better than anyone,” I thought aloud. Orpheus’s leaves rustled as he shook his head.

“This place is more of a creature than a house. It grows and changes and shifts. Often it seems bigger on the inside than the outside. Sometimes rooms you once relied upon can never be found again. The house gives, and it takes.”

“Why did come here?” I asked. “Why did you stay?” When I was younger, I often imagined what it would be like to be a tree. To be tall, strong and peaceful. It was a nice thought, but only nice as a thought.

“I was the second son, as it often went there was no place for me at home. As a boy, I would take to the forest and take refuge amongst the trees. I would hide from my father and my brother. Some days I was so loathe to return to the house, I would dig my feet into the earth and imagine them taking root. I would become a tree and no one could take me from the

forest again. As a man, my place was in the navy. I loathed it. The sea was flat and vast and barren. I longed for my home, for the shelter of my trees.

“I was thinking of home when I was washed overboard. The water swallowed me up and as I sank the light from the world above me shrank to a pinpoint. I remember nothing after that, until I woke up here. This place has a propensity for finding the lost and unwanted. When one has naught to return to it does not take much convincing to stay.”

“You don’t have a room,” I noted. “Everybody else has one. Jarius has the library. Blythe has the ballroom. Marie has the conservatory. Rathbone has the lounge. Why don’t you have a room?”

“I chose my space,” he said simply. “A place in the sun, with the scent and sounds of the jungle and pretty flowers playing at my feet. I grew comfortable there. Far more comfortable than I should. One day I will be rooted far too deeply to ever pull free. One day I will grow stiff and unyielding, like the trees of your world.”

“Won’t you try to leave? Aren’t you frightened?”

“It is far too late to think of leaving, and as it is, I still have no place to go. This house has given what it promised. I have a place in which I belong. I wish I had known how much it would ask in return, how much I would lose of myself. But, for now I will walk with you, little bird, and we will rescue your friend.”

“I’m not sure she needs rescuing at all,” I admitted. “Lux can do pretty well on her own.”

“Surely she will be glad to reunite with you?”

“Yeah,” I said, because it seemed like the thing I should say, but when said it felt heavy and untrue. Lux had left me in the library. Maybe she didn’t want to be found at all.

We turned around the corner of the house. The sun was sinking into the water and the shadows of the jungle trees stretched across grass. “Orpheus, what happens if Lux and I don’t find each other in time to go home?”

“Yours is a rare case, little bird. It is not often guests are able to travel here with their friends. I am concerned what may occur if the night rises and you and your friend are not side by side.”

“Will we not be able to get home?” I asked, panic creeping into my voice.

“I do not know, little bird. Perhaps you will return to your home separately. Perhaps one may return, while the other stays. It is not a question I wish answered. We will find your friend Lux and you may be sure of your course,” he answered with determination.

“And if we don’t find her?”

“We must, little bird, we must.”

- CHAPTER TWELVE -

CLIMBING AND FALLING

We heard voices in the distance and Orpheus gestured for me to slide further down the branch, closer to his trunk. I couldn't see as well from my new spot, sheltered by branches and leaves. It made me wonder if he was nervous about what we would find. We rounded another corner of the house, our thirteenth so far. At the other end of this wall stretched a tower. It looked less as though it had been built and more like it had grown from the roof of the house. The tower leaned dangerously to the left, like a wilting flower. Dozens of vines, green and tenacious, snaked up its length straining to keep the structure from toppling over.

We walked closer to the tower and the voices became clearer. I could hear Lux shouting and Khadi laughing. We reached the base of the tower, stood silently and listened. I held my breath and strained my ears. Orpheus stilled his rustling leaves and shoed any twittering bird that came to rest on his limbs. I heard a scream, a snap, and more laughter.

"Can you get me up there?" I asked Orpheus, quiet and urgent.

"I could reach, little bird," he replied, "but I will not. There is trouble above our heads. It is best to be rooted here."

"But, Lux is up there. I hear her voice. She screamed."

"She will come down in time. We will wait," he said firmly.

"We don't have time. We can't wait," I cried. I turned my head to the pink and orange sky. I could not see the sun over the trees and knew it would soon disappear into the ocean.

"It is too dangerous to wait. You said Lux and I should not be apart and it's almost dark. You have to take me up there."

“I can get you up to the top of the tower, but I cannot come with you. Trees must stay upon the ground.”

“But you are not a tree!” I argued. “You told me.”

Orpheus laughed in a slow, sad way. “I fear I am not so much a person as I would like to believe. Before you came to visit me, little bird, I had not spoken to another in many years. I had not thought a human thought in months. I stood silently and steadily as a tree is expected to stand. No, I am too deeply rooted now.”

“You’re not,” I cried, but even as I spoke, I looked down to his roots and saw them urgently slithering their way into the ground.

“They don’t like to be above the ground too long, you see,” he sighed sadly, watching his roots wriggle deeper and deeper down.

“But you are not less a person because of them,” I countered softly.

“No,” he said gently, the bark of his trunk folding up into a smile. “But I am less and less myself, and more and more something else. And I fear...”

“What?” I asked, when he paused.

“But we must get you up this tower,” he declared. “And you shall rescue your friend and be home before the sun disappears. Do you see this branch above your head?” He gave the branch a little shake. “Yes? Good. Climb onto this branch, it is my longest and will get you the highest.”

Then with a grunt, he ripped his roots from the ground once again. He folded the roots beneath him and then pushed them against the earth, rising tall, like a ballerina standing on the tips of her toes. I gripped his branch tightly and watched the ground shrink further away. Orpheus reached the end of his roots and stilled.

“Climb to the very end of the branch now, little bird, and hold on tight,” he ordered. I scrambled to the end of the branch. It became thinner the further along I crawled. The width of the branch was thinner than my foot and I thought it would break if I went any further, so I crouched down and wrapped my hands around the limb. My breath was short and sharp and my legs shook with the effort of keeping steady.

Then Orpheus reached his limbs to the sky, straightening them overhead. As the branch swung tall, my legs slid off until I was dangling only by my hands. The smooth wood became slick with my sweat and my hands prickled painfully all over. I stared at my fingers as they turned red then white with the effort.

“I can go no further,” said Orpheus, his voice a strained creak. I looked between my dangling arms expecting to see the top of the tower, but saw only a wall of stone covered in vines. “I am not tall enough,” he sighed. “I will bring you back down.”

“No,” I breathed. I thought about jumping onto the wall and hoped the vines would hold me up. I thought of jumping and digging my fingers into the crumbling mortar. I started to swing back and forth on my branch, building momentum, getting ready to jump. Then, I thought about falling. I thought about the sick fear of rushing towards the ground, knowing I could do nothing about it. I thought about my head hitting the ground and cracking open like a watermelon. Slowly, I stopped swinging, until I hung limply from Orpheus’s arm.

“Are you ready to come down, Everly?” Orpheus asked gently, as though he could see the hope wrung out of me, dripping from my toes.

I looked up at the tower, about to say yes, when in the corner of my eye I saw a dark, square shadow. Around the curve of the tower wall was the edge of a window. Vines from the wall streamed from inside, like water from a glass. My shoulders ached and I was so tired, but I swallowed my answer to Orpheus and little by little, slid my hands along his limb, up

and away from Orpheus's trunk, to the very tip of the branch. As I got closer to the edge, the branch grew slimmer and began to bow under my weight. I was so close to the window, I could brush the stones around it with my hand. Then I heard a muted crack and Orpheus called to me, his voice wavering with pain.

"That branch will not hold much longer. Come back, Everly, come back now."

"I'm almost there," I said, as much to myself as to him. "I can almost reach."

"It's too high. Climb back down or you will fall."

For a moment I paused. Unsure of whether it was Orpheus who spoke, or the voice in my own head. The voice that talked me down and kept me quiet, the voice that kept me safe. But I could still hear Lux's scream in my ear like an echo, so I began to swing back and forth on the branch again. This time, when I saw myself falling, instead of stopping, I let go of the branch and flew towards the window.

It felt like a week before I touched the wall. I let go of the branch and the air grew thick, like honey. I oozed through the air, my limbs heavy and stuck in position. My feet hit the wall first and bounced back a little. My legs came next. They scraped against the stone, but I felt the sting in a distant kind of way. My hands still needed to reach the window frame and I was worried I would start to fall backwards before I made it. But I kept sliding forward through the honey air. My hands slid over the bottom of the window sill and my ribs crashed into the stone, pushing all the air from my lungs. Then everything sped up.

My fingers tried to latch onto the windowsill, but it was deep, deeper than the length of my arms. I slid back out the window, my feet scrambling for purchase against the wall, my fingers burning as they slid against the rough stone. I dug my elbows into the corners of the window like a joist, which scraped the skin from my arms, and for a moment I stopped falling. Hanging from the tower, with most of my body still out the window, I sucked in air,

quick and desperate, then choked on it and coughed most of it out again. Orpheus called out to me, but I couldn't answer him. There was too much fear and too little air inside of me.

You have to climb in the window, I told myself. But my arms were shaking just from keeping still and I was sure that if I were to move, I would fall. *You have to climb in the window and get to Lux. Move, Everly. Move.* I let a breath out and as I took another in tried to lean forward, imagining I could somehow roll into the room. The pull on my shoulder eased as my weight tipped forward. I slid one elbow forward, then the other, then I wriggled my stomach forward. This was how I got inside. I inched further in, making the same movements over and over again. Even when the skin on my arms and my elbows and my stomach became raw and every wriggle made me wince, I kept going.

When my arms could reach into the room and my stomach was fully upon the windowsill and only my legs dangled outside, I was able to grab onto the inside wall and drag myself inside and fall in a heap on the floor. For a moment I kept still, feeling the solidity of the cool stone floor beneath me with immense relief. When the worst of my fear and trembling shrank away, I sat up and inspected my knees and elbows. They were rubbed red and stung, too tender to touch and embedded with dirt. I rose wonkily to my feet and stuck my head out the window, looking for Orpheus. From the tower I could only see the top of his green and leafy branches.

“Orpheus,” I called. He didn't answer. “Orpheus!” His leaves swayed gently and he stayed silent. The sun burned low and red in the distance. I pulled my head back inside and peered about the room. It was the bedroom Lux and I fell asleep in on our first night. The large four poster bed was still smothered with a dozen different green blankets. On a dark dresser at the side of the room rested the music box which had put us to sleep. In the glowing half-light of near night, the room was a cluster of moving shadows and glinting lights. The

wardrobe in the corner stood tall and imposing, but its open door revealed a crystal beaded dress which glimmered in a sliver of light. A painting above the fireplace seemed to shimmer when I walked and when I came up close I could see it inlaid with the thinnest peelings of gold. The painting was of a woman who reminded me of my mother, though she looked nothing like her. Her hair hung loose down her back and her face was tilted up to the sky. She wore a look I used to see on my mum's face: distant and hungry. The sun flowed from its place in the corner of the painting, into her outstretched hand and poured into her mouth, as though she were drinking its fire.

I circled the room, searching for the door and found it behind a heavy, embroidered curtain. The curtain slid aside with a jingle and a scrape, and the door opened with a grunt and a whine. I stepped onto the winding staircase and started to run. My bare feet slapped against the floor as I circled up until I ran out of stairs and met a stone wall. It was the same stone as the rest of tower, odd pieces which folded together like a puzzle. I placed my palms against it and pushed. It didn't move. I ran my hands over the stones, searching for a switch, hoping it might open another secret door. I found nothing. I screamed and kicked the wall and hurt my foot. I dropped to the floor, feeling defeated, and tilted my head back against the wall.

There was a trap-door in the ceiling. Four broad planks of wood held together with black metal brackets. There was a ring for a handle and from the ring dangled a frayed strip of rope. I scrambled to my feet, stood on my toes and reached for it. My fingertips brushed the loose strands at the end. I jumped and grabbed the rope with both hands. I fell back to the ground and the trap door fell open. As it fell, a ladder slid to the ground and clattered against the floor. It was made of a dark wood, so old it felt like stone, cold and smooth to the touch. I climbed the ladder. The rungs were solid and steady and silent under my hands and feet.

I lifted my head through the trapdoor, until I could peer over the edge, showing only my eyes and the top of my head. The first thing I spotted were feet. Khadi's bare, tattooed feet, with long, wriggling pieces of grass, struggling in the wind. Her dress whipped around her legs, fabric snapping outwards like a flag, then curling back in and plastering her legs like paint. Under the moving skirt, her butterflies struggled to stay fixed to her skin. Their delicate, little wings trembled violently and in a particularly vicious gust of wind an orange and red butterfly was ripped from Khadi's skin, tossed about in the air and sucked into the distance. Khadi took no notice.

There was a low wall encircling the flat roof of the tower. At intervals it rose up into spikes, then sank back down low, giving glimpses of the shadowy jungle trees and pink tinged ocean. On a low section of wall, next to a crumbling spike, stood Lux, silhouetted against the orange sky. The wind was strong on the roof and Lux's hair whipped back and forth, loose curls snaking about her head as though they had come to life. She leaned forward, peering over the edge of the tower.

"Lux," I yelled, pulling myself through the trap door. She whipped her head around and pushed the hair from her face.

"Everly," she yelled back, her smile wide enough to split her face. "Watch this!" She stretched her hands out either side of her body and started to tip backwards.

"Lux, no," I yelled, running to her, but before I could reach her, she fell over the edge, screaming. I kept running until I hit the tower wall. I could see Lux hurtling down, down, down. Then, the vines covering the tower snapped away from the walls. As they pulled free, tiny pieces of mortar and stone crumbled to the ground. Streams of vines plummeted down, reaching for Lux. They wrapped around her ankles, her wrists, her shoulders and her stomach. Before she hit the ground, the vines pulled tight and Lux vaulted back up into the

air. She cut through the sky in a high arc over my head, vines flowing after her like ribbons. She dropped to the roof, the ropey, green tendrils slowing her descent, until she landed gently back upon the stones. Lux gave a sweeping bow.

“An excellent landing, Lux,” Khadi applauded.

“Evers, come and try!” Lux yelled. She bounded towards me and grabbed my hand. Her eyes were wide and sparking with light. I could feel the joy rolling off her in feverish waves, leaving her hands shaking and skin clammy. She tugged me over to the edge of the tower.

“No, Lux,” I said, trying to tug my hand free. But she barrelled on, not registering a word I said.

“See? See all the vines? You just have to jump and they’ll catch you before you hit the ground. Step up here.” She patted the grey stone of the tower wall and turned back to look at me expectantly.

I shook my head. She huffed.

“It’s fine. You won’t fall,” she said impatiently. She looked me over, calculating, then stepped closer. “Everly, right after you jump, before the vines catch you, there’s a moment where you’re just flying. You have to try it.”

“That’s called falling, Lux,” I said flatly.

“You have nothing to fear, Everly,” called Khadi from her perch on the wall. “If you jump, the house will keep you safe. It will catch you.” Her voice was smooth and sure and would be so easy to trust. But her face wore a Cheshire cat grin, hungry and cunning, and I imagined with frightening clarity that if I were to jump I wouldn’t be kept safe like Lux.

I turned my back to Khadi, blocking her from Lux. “Lux,” I said, icily. “I need to talk to you.”

“Just try jumping,” whined Lux. I pulled back from her, disconcerted. It was as though she wasn’t hearing me at all.

“Lux,” I barked. “Come downstairs and talk to me now.” Without waiting for her to answer I grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the trapdoor. “Climb down,” I ordered.

“Everly,” called Khadi.

“Just give us a minute,” I bit out, keeping my back towards her. Lux tried to pull free and I dropped her wrist. “Just climb down, Lux. We need to talk. Then you can jump off the roof as many times as you want.”

Lux climbed through the trapdoor and down the ladder. I followed her, pulling the door closed between us and Khadi. I led Lux to our room and closed that door too, smoothing the tapestry over the entryway. I hoped to seal Khadi out, but I feared she would find a way to hear us, no matter how many doors were between us. Lux stood in the centre of the room with her arms crossed and her feet twitching, ready to leave before we ever began.

“So,” she spat. “What do you want?”

I gaped at her. She had to know what this was about. Lux always knew what I was talking about. I needed to stay calm.

“I’ve been looking for you all day,” I told her. “I crawled through that secret passage. I almost got eaten by Marie’s plants. Blythe tried to kill me. Rathbone tried to stop me from finding you. I climbed a tower! I spent all this time looking for you, worried about you and you were just playing games?”

“I didn’t ask you to look for me. I was fine,” she retorted. “And Blythe didn’t try to kill you. You’re just saying that because you don’t like her.”

“How would you know? You weren’t there. You weren’t even worried about me. Did you think about where I was at all?”

“I thought you were in the library. I thought you would stay put with Jarius, reading books and talking about the house, until I came back.”

“You didn’t think I would come after you? You disappeared into a tunnel through a secret doorway.”

“No, I thought you would stay put, because you don’t do anything, Everly. You wouldn’t have come out of your house that night, you wouldn’t have gone into the jungle, you would be at home in bed. You don’t move unless I move you. I thought you’d do what was safe and just stay in the library.”

“Well you were wrong, weren’t you?” I challenged, but she only snorted a laugh. “I can do things on my own. I just don’t do things without thinking. It’s easy to do whatever you want, whenever you want, when you never think about anyone other than yourself.”

“You’re not being a hero, Evers. You’re just scared. That’s why followed me.”

“I followed you because I thought you were in trouble.”

“Why would you think I was in trouble?”

“Because it’s not safe here,” I hissed, stalking towards her. “You know it’s not safe, you have to see that.” But even as I said it, I realised she didn’t see the house as I had come to see it. She saw the strangeness and the beauty and the freedom, but none of the consequences. She was having fun and she didn’t want it to stop. She left me behind because she thought I was going to stop her fun. And I did.

I didn't know what would bring us home, but I knew it was in this room. The tower was almost dark and I feared what staying into the night would bring. It was difficult to make out the objects of the room in the dim light. It was as though a veil had been drawn over my eyes, everything was seen through a haze. The mirror glinted dimly, catching the final pieces of the red sunlight as I circled the room.

I darted over to the mirror and stood before it. Pressing my hands against the marble top of the dresser I leant forward, searching the reflective glass. At first, I only saw my own face, brow furrowed and eyes roving. Then I focused on my eyes, plain brown eyes, ringed in black. I growled in frustration, pushed myself back from the mirror, ready to give up and that's when I saw him. The boy with the slippery, black curls stood as I stood, breathing short, shallow breaths as I did. We swallowed in unison.

"Lux," I called. "Come and see this." I heard her grumble and heard her footsteps as she stomped across the room, deadened by the layers of carpets.

"What?" she groused.

"Can you see him?" I asked, pointing at the mirror.

"See who?" she frowned, leaning closer to the glass.

"The boy."

"There's no boy. I see you and I see me," she said. "It's just a mirror, Everly."

"Stand here," I commanded. I stepped to the side and tugged her to stand before the centre of the mirror. The boy's eyes followed me. "Can you see him? He has dark hair and..."

“There’s no one there,” Lux insisted, growing impatient. She shifted, ready to step away from me, but I grabbed her hand and kept her by my side. She tried to tug herself free. “I’m going back up to Khadi.”

I squeezed her hand tighter and leaned into the mirror. “What do I do?” I whispered. He reached his hand forward and pressed it against the glass on his side. I reached my hand forward and placed it to mirror his. I could feel the warmth of his palm through the glass. Then we were falling.

Just as we had on the beach on our way here, the world seemed to slip away from around us. I sucked a breath in as the floor disappeared and then found I could not breathe. My heart was drumming quickly, but I could feel little else of my body. My legs were not my own. My arms were not my own. I could sense Lux’s hand in mine. I wanted to squeeze tighter, to keep her close, but my fingers would not do as I ordered and her hand began to slip free from mine as we hurtled down, down, down.

The air around us became thick like water and our descent slowed. My eyes began to sting and I realised there was salt in the water around us. We were in the ocean. I needed to breathe. It had been too long and my lungs ached for air. Black fireworks exploded across my eyes. I tilted my head back, looking desperately for the light, praying it would lead me to the surface. Everything was dark.

I don’t remember losing consciousness, but next I knew we had washed up on the beach. The sun was up and we were home.

- CHAPTER THIRTEEN -

CONSEQUENCES

We woke up on the beach the next morning. The sun was high and warm. It beat down on my bare skin and dried the shirt on my back until it was stiff and crusty with salt and sand. I could hear the familiar noises of morning: the muffled sound of people calling to each other in their homes, the handful of cars which rolled through the streets to join the morning traffic.

It was worse this time - the transition. I could hear my heart beating in my head, like it was trying to break out through my eyes. I pulled my knees into my chest, but it hurt my stomach. I tried to squeeze my hand into a fist, but I couldn't move my fingers. I didn't know what to do and it was too hard to think between the pulses in my brain, so I closed my eyes and waited for the pain to go away.

I heard a groan and then a grunt. Lux's head loomed over mine. She was shouting, but I couldn't make out the words; they were muffled, like she was far away and in a padded room. She reached down and shook my shoulder. I whimpered and tried to roll away. She grabbed my arm and pulled me up so I was sitting. I moved like a ragdoll, my head rolled limply around my shoulders, my chest slumped forward and hands fell to the wet, packed sand with a splat.

Lux kept shouting at me with muffled, distant words. My head was worse for sitting up, beating louder and sharper than before. I wedged my tongue between my teeth and bit down to distract myself from the pain. I tasted a little blood, like a coin on my tongue, and Lux's words came into focus.

"Why did you bring us back? I didn't want to come back. We could have stayed. We could have stayed, but you brought us back *here*. I don't have anything here. And everything

is there, *everything*. So much better than this stupid world which has nothing. Why did you do it?"

"We couldn't stay, Lux." My voice sounded like an old, crackling record, scraping and jumping over sounds. She didn't hear me at first. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was too dry. Lux kept yelling, saying the same words over and over, and getting angrier and angrier. She tugged at her hair and rubbed at her face, as though she might scrape off her skin. I spoke louder, pushing the sound out of my chest, ignoring the pain in my throat.

"We couldn't stay."

Lux stopped midsentence. Her eyes settled on mine, dark and icy with a touch of madness. The eyes of a stranger. I flinched back.

"Why?" she bit out.

"The people who go there, they change. They weren't always like that. You'll change. You'll become a thing if you stay. You'll be lost. It's not safe."

"You don't know that. You've only been there twice, like me. We haven't even seen the whole house. What could you know?"

"They told me."

"Who told you?"

"The moth and the tree and... and..."

"Well, they want me there. Khadi and Blythe, they want me to stay."

"They want you, they don't care about you."

"It's the same thing!"

“It’s not,” I insisted. “It’s not. It’s like hunger. It’s like they need you. They’ll eat you up. There won’t be anything left of you. It’s not safe.”

“I don’t want to be safe. I want to be happy.”

“Please, Lux, please don’t go back.”

“You don’t care,” she roared. “You don’t care what I want. You didn’t care that I wanted to stay because you wanted to come back.”

“We had to come back,” I tried weakly, but she kept speaking as though I hadn’t said a word.

“Well, guess what,” she said, her voice steely and fists balled. “I don’t care either. I don’t care what you do. You can stay here. I’ll find a way back by myself.”

“Lux...” I started with no idea of what I would say next. Something clever. I needed to say something clever to make her say. But I felt small and stupid and my head was empty of words. Then I heard my father’s voice and my chance was gone.

“Everly,” he bellowed. He was running towards us, stumbling as his feet sunk into the soft sand higher on the shore. I clambered onto my feet and stood on my watery legs. He reached us and grabbed my arm as though to catch me, though I wasn’t running away. “Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” I said quietly.

“You’re fine?” he asked, incredulous. “Where have you been?”

“I... we...” I tried.

“I’ve been looking for you since five.” I could hear the panic in his voice sinking down, leaving him hollow and tired. He was dressed for work, but the legs of his pants were

sandy and damp with morning dew. His shirt was wrecked with creases and damp with sweat. He looked as bad as I felt.

“We went for a walk,” Lux said flatly. Clarence’s head spun to her, only then realising she was there.

“Your aunt is worried, Lux.”

“Because you called her about Everly,” she shot back. “She wouldn’t have known otherwise.” Clarence stared at her hard and then sighed, scrunching his eyes closed.

“Come on,” he muttered, “I’ll drive you home.”

The drive to Lux’s house was silent. Lux and I sat in the back of Clarence’s car. I stared at the fabric of the seat in front of me and Lux scraped the sand off her legs in long smooth motions, scattering the grains on the floor of the car and over the seat. She seemed calm in a dangerous way. Cool and decided and so far away from me. When we reached her house her aunt came outside, wrapped in her green silk dressing gown, her arms folded across her chest.

“See?” Clarence said to Lux. “She’s worried.” He sounded as though he was trying to convince himself as much as her.

“Yeah,” Lux snorted. “She’s just taking a break from her frantic searching.”

Lux and Clarence climbed out of the car. I reached to undo my seatbelt and Clarence told me to stay put. I shifted to the centre of the backseat and peered in between the front headrests. Lux walked to meet her aunt with a skip in her step, swinging her arms. She leapt up the steps to the front door and came toe to toe with Fiona. Her aunt stumbled back a step

and Lux grinned. Clarence stalked forward, hands shoved into his pockets and his shoulders bunched up around his neck, as though he were the child about to be told off by his parents.

Fiona started shouting. As least, I think she was shouting. Her face was red and her mouth was wide and moving quickly, but her voice was muffled by the car and I couldn't make out her words. Lux mirrored her aunt's stance, crossing her arms and leaning back on her heels. Clarence stood a few paces behind, at the base of the steps. As Fiona shouted he shuffled back, unsure of how to leave. Lux answered her aunt, her mouth moving slower, her lip curling into a snarl, her bare teeth stretching in a spiteful smile. Fiona started up again, her hands cutting wildly through the air and I wondered if it was to demonstrate what she was saying or a just a way to keep Lux from stepping too close again.

It didn't work. Even as her aunt spoke Lux pushed past and made her way inside, pulling the front door shut behind her. The two adults stared at the closed door with their mouths shut. Clarence shuffled on his feet and spoke to his shoes. Fiona turned away from him and looked out to the water. Clarence waited a few minutes more, looking to the door, then to Lux's aunt, then to the car. Finally he spoke, turned away and walked back to the car. Fiona said nothing and did nothing, but kept looking out to the water.

Clarence got into the car and without a word to me, backed out of the driveway and started home. I slid back into my seat and waited for him to speak.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"That she was worried," he muttered tightly.

"What did Lux say?"

"That she was tired." I nodded. I was tired too. I felt like our night in the strange place had lasted for a week. Too much had happened and I'd had too little sleep. The car smelt like

home and felt safe like a capsule, muffling the noise of the outside world. I closed my eyes and start to drift, but the car bumped into our driveway and woke me in a sharp and unpleasant way.

Clarence turned off the engine and for a moment we sat in silence. I didn't want to get out of the car. I didn't want to look Clarence in the eye or try to make up answers to all of his questions. I didn't like having secrets, not when it involved so much lying. Lux was good at lying, not me. But Lux wasn't on my side anymore. I was finding it very hard to breathe. Clarence climbed out of the car and when I didn't follow, he opened my door, wordlessly telling me to get inside the house.

Clarence shut the front door behind us with a threatening and final thud. Sarah skidded out of the kitchen, slipping on the floorboards in a pair of fluffy, grey socks.

"Everly," she shouted and wrapped me up in a hug, pinning my arms to my side. Unable to hug her back, I pressed my forehead into her shoulder.

"Why aren't you at school, Sarah?" Clarence said to her over my shoulder.

"It's Saturday," Sarah said, confused, releasing me from her hold. I tucked myself into her side, curled my hand into the hem of her shirt and turned to face Clarence. He looked at me, sheltering under Sarah's arm, and frowned.

"Sarah, can you go upstairs for a moment? I need to speak to you sister."

"I think I should be here for this," she said firmly.

"No," he shouted. Sarah and I stiffened. "Go upstairs, Sarah."

Sarah gave me another hug. "I'll come and talk to you after, okay?" she said and, shooting a glare at Clarence, she walked upstairs.

We stood in the hallway, both filthy with sand and crusted in salt from the ocean. Clarence waited until Lux's footsteps had faded and then he spoke.

"Where have you been?"

"I don't know," I said honestly, keeping my eyes on my feet. There was still dirt between my toes and under my nails which the ocean hadn't washed away.

"You don't know?" he shouted. "Don't lie to me, Everly. I tried calling you and texting you, then I found your phone in your room. I need to know where you were. I need to know what you were doing. Why would think this was okay? Why start doing this now? I can't have you doing this now. I don't know what to do about this."

"I'm not lying."

"You don't know where you were? Was this the first time you went there?"

"No," I mumbled, impulsively deciding to stick to the truth. He took a deep breath in and let it out with a shudder.

"How many times?" he asked, his voice was calmer, but desolate. I felt he was starting to believe me. It made me want to tell him everything, but there was too much strangeness and too much I couldn't explain.

"Twice," I said quietly.

"Did you walk there?" he tried. "Is it close?"

"Kind of. I don't know."

"Everly..."

“I don’t know. I’m tired. I want to go to sleep.” I felt like crying. My brain was melted ice-cream and all the words of my thoughts were floating loosely in a puddle of sugary, thawed dairy.

“We’re going to talk about this now,” he said firmly.

“I don’t want to talk about it now.”

“Well, we’re…”

“No,” I said coldly. Clarence stopped talking and stared at me with a mix of rage and sadness. I had never challenged him before. He didn’t know what to do about it. I wasn’t sure either. I felt guilt, anger and a heavy form of fear churning my stomach into a confusing, sickening mass. I breathed heavily and spoke quietly. “I’m going to bed.”

I thought my head would be too full to sleep. I thought I would lie awake, my eyes stinging with fatigue and body restless with anxiety. But I fell onto my bed, feet filthy and pyjamas torn, and I switched off like a light.

I woke up, wide awake. Not jolted awake or slowly returning to consciousness through the fog of sleep, but *awake*. Again, like a light. Click. Clear, bright and ready. It was late afternoon and the sky was pink and orange. The warmth of the afternoon was beginning to lift, slipping into the cool of the evening. Beside my bed was a plate of toast and a glass of water. The toast was cold, but I ate it anyway. The water was stale, but I drank it all. I climbed into the shower and washed all the mud and salt away. I picked the dirt from beneath my nails and scrubbed my hair with conditioner until the matted lump at the base of my neck untangled.

I tugged on my oldest shirt, blue and thin with a Ravenclaw crest at the centre and a pair of black denim shorts which Sarah let me steal the year before. When I came back into my room, beads of water dripping down my neck from my hair, Sarah was sitting in the middle of my unmade bed. I sat next to her, crossing my legs beneath me.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, her eyes locked on my knee. There was a long scrape across the top. It looked deep, but I couldn’t remember specifically when I had gotten it. Too much had happened.

“I’m okay. Are you okay?” I said, looking at her sleeves.

“Yeah,” she frowned, glancing up to my face. “But you went missing, Everly. Dad was looking for you all night.”

“I’m fine.”

“Did you get lost?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t get it. Where were you?” Her voice was getting sharper and her gaze kept shifting to the side of my face before it darted back down to her hands.

I knew if I told her the truth, she would get angry. She wouldn’t believe me and she would think I was making fun of her. So I told her what I could, smaller bites of the truth which were easier to swallow.

“Lux and I found this house. This really old, weird house. We’ve been exploring it.”

“Where?”

“We’re not sure. We’ve just found it a couple of times. But it’s in the middle of nowhere and there are no roads around it. We were just out walking and we found it. I didn’t

mean to stay out that long, but I lost Lux and the house is huge and weird. Like rooms aren't where you think they should be. And it was fun, at first, when I was with Lux. But then, I lost her. It wasn't fun anymore and I was trying to get home. I just didn't know how."

"You were out walking?" she said, incredulous. I nodded. "In the middle of the night?"

"Uh, yeah," I mumbled.

"Why?"

"I..." I looked down to my hands, curled into fists in my lap. I hadn't thought about explaining this part. I hadn't been thinking about this part myself. I thought Sarah would ask about the house. I would have asked about the house. "I haven't been sleeping much. I don't mean to stay up. I just... I haven't been able to go to sleep."

"Since when?"

"Since Mum. Lux knows. She comes over sometimes and we go for walks or down to the beach." I looked up to Sarah. She was looking straight ahead, but she wasn't seeing anything, her focus turned inward to her thoughts.

"That's why I can't get you up in the mornings," she said more to herself than to me. Her face sunk into a frown and she turned to me, her eyes refocused. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"That I was having trouble sleeping?" I asked confused.

"Yes."

"What would you have done?" I laughed once, but my smile fell.

“I don’t know,” she said after a beat. We sat in silence, which was nice of Sarah, because I knew she hated it as much as I loved it. “At least you got some sleep now.”

“Yeah, like six hours. I haven’t felt this good in ages.”

“Everly?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Sunday.”

“What?”

“You’ve been sleeping for like thirty hours. We tried to wake you up this morning, but you were so out of it. That was the third plate of toast I made you. The first two got really soggy.” She scrunched her nose.

“Thanks.” I knocked my shoulder into hers and she shouldered me back.

“You should probably go talk to Dad. At least let him know you’re awake. He’s pretty freaked out.”

“He’s just going to yell at me again,” I sighed, but I slid off the bed and made my way downstairs.

“Where’s Lux?” Clarence growled, grabbing my arm and pulling me down the last three stairs.

“What?” I asked, too confused to angry.

“Lux’s aunt just called, she’s missing again. Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. I was here. I was asleep. You know that.”

“Did you plan to meet up somewhere?”

“No.”

“When?”

“We didn’t plan anything. You’re not listening to me.”

“Where did you go, Everly?” he hissed through clenched teeth. I drew back as far as I could, pulling against his grip. It was like saying a word over and over again until it lost meaning. I looked at my father’s face and it was not my father’s face. His skin looked yellow in the afternoon light and the patches beneath his eyes were creased and dark. His teeth were bared and his jaw was tight and he looked like a poor imitation of the figure I knew as my father.

I broke my eyes away from his and looked to his hand where it was wound tight around my arm. His gaze followed mine, then flickered. He let go and took a step back. “You need to tell me where you went.” I didn’t tell him, and so he sighed and sat down on the stairs. “Do you know where Lux would go? Everly, if you know where she is you need to tell me.”

I was getting that feeling again, like that first night, a current of energy running through my bones, stealing my calm and pulling everything into a sharp and blistering focus. I knew where Lux was, or at least where she would try to go.

“I don’t know anything,” I lied to my father calmly, keeping my eyes on his. “But I’m hungry. I need to eat something.” He stared at me a moment, trying to find truth or falsehood in my eyes and discovering neither.

“Yeah, okay, of course,” he mumbled, getting to his feet and going to the kitchen. “I’ll fix you up something. But then we need to talk more, alright?”

“Okay,” I said softly. When he left my line of sight, I got up and ran out the front door.

I knew I didn’t have long until Clarence realised I was gone. I circled around our front yard and cut between our house and our neighbour’s. There was no fence, but a row of what were once well groomed hedges, grown wild and reaching. I ducked to my neighbour’s side and kept my left shoulder pressed into the brush as I ran across the length of their property towards the ocean.

I was forced to pause at the road as a car drove by. It was going too fast for the small residential area and its wake pulled at my clothes and hair. As I paused at the side of the road I heard my father’s voice call for me. It was distant. He was still around the front of the house. His voice rose at the end of my name like a question, so I knew he hadn’t spotted me. The car passed and I ran across the road, bare feet slapping against the warm asphalt.

“Everly!” Clarence bellowed. I ran faster and made my steps longer. I ran so fast I felt as though I was losing control over my body, as though at any moment my legs would tangle and I would fall, or perhaps take flight. My steps slowed when I reach the sand. On the pale yellow grains, my steps became shorter and twice as hard to take. Clarence was catching up with me, his voice was getting closer as he called my name. I struggled towards the water, seeking the denser, hard packed sand, seeking speed and distance from my father.

The water was just as it was meant to be – the tide had pulled back leaving a thin, veil of water over the flat, wet shore. Like a mirror, it reflected the sky so clearly, it was as though there was a hole in the earth, a place in which one wrong step could take you tumbling into another world. I ran towards it.

Clarence was closer now. He wasn’t calling for me, but I felt his movement behind me, heard the fabric of his clothes skating against each other, and I heard his breath coming

out in short, steady pants. I wanted to turn around and look. I wanted to see how close he was. I wanted to know if I would get away. But it would slow me down, so I kept my eyes forward and ran. Just as I reached the edge of the mirrored sky, I felt a hand catch the back of my shirt, below my shoulder blade. I was moving too fast and the difference in my balance made me stumble. I rolled forward, pulling Clarence along with me, and together we fell down into the sky.

- CHAPTER FOURTEEN -

CLARENCE JOINS THE GAME

I woke up drowning. Clarence and I hadn't washed up on the beach as Lux and I had before. We awoke in the water, twisting slowly in the currents which churned below the surface of the ocean. There was a dim light overhead. I struggled up, kicking painfully to the surface. I needed to move faster. I needed to breathe, but I felt weak and even the feeble strokes I took were a great effort. My head broke the surface and I desperately clawed air into my lungs with aching relief. The water was twisting and churning. It seemed as though the waves were coming at me from every direction. I tipped my head back, trying to keep my mouth out of the water. I stayed like that for a while, paddling and breathing, too exhausted to move any further. Then I remembered Clarence.

"Dad," I tried to yell, but got choked off when I received a mouthful of seawater. I spat it out and tried to pull my head further above the surface. Wherever I looked waves rose up in my line of vision, the ocean itself trying to wall me in and stop me from seeing. On my third mouthful of water I stopped looking for Clarence and started to swim to shore. The ocean rewarded me and I felt a current form around my body which pushed me towards the beach. I arrived quickly and with very little effort, but when I reached the shallows and tried to stand my legs slid from beneath me. I fell back into the water with a splash and crawled onto dry sand.

The journey had always been hard, but that time it was so much worse. I kept waiting for the ache to wear off, expecting to feel better. I needed to be stronger. I needed to find Clarence and Lux and I needed to find a way home. But I could only think of the pain in every joint of my body. I could feel it tapping at the base of my skull, like a monster had crawled up my spine and was knocking at the door of my mind, demanding to be let in. In a

small, protected corner of my mind, I imagined lying on the beach until the sun set again. I could see Clarence being tugged away by the tides and Lux sitting in a house like a queen upon her throne. None of this could be allowed to happen.

I planted my feet beneath me and took my time to stand. My legs were wobbly stilts and I had to concentrate on not falling. Being upright made my head so much worse, the knocking at the base of my skull became more insistent. I brought my hands to either side of my head to keep it from falling apart. Holding myself together, I scanned the water for Clarence and saw a dark, limp form washed up against a rock at the end of the beach. I stumbled across the sand, gritting my teeth, stubborn and angrier with every step.

I reached the end of the beach and started to climb across the rocks. I took a step, then checked my footing, putting more weight onto my leading foot, checking the steadiness of the stone and myself. When I felt as stable as my head would allow, I stepped forward. Then I started the process again. I was close to Clarence, his head was above the water, but I couldn't tell if he was breathing. From the corner of my eye I saw a wave, great and formidable, rise like a beast from the surface of the water. It reached for me and tried to swipe me from the rock. I dropped to my knees and tried to wrap my arms around the stone. My hands searched for crevices and crags, something to hold onto. I pressed my head into the crook of my arm for protection. The wave broke over me and battered me down onto the stone and bounced my head where it rested against my arms. The water slid back into the sea and I began to slide with it. When my hands slipped from the rock, I scrambled to find a new purchase. By the time all the water had slithered back into the ocean, I was sprawled against the side of the stone. I climbed back on top, put my hands on my knees and breathed. As my breathing slowed, so did the knocking on my skull.

Three more waves tried to pull me back into the sea, before I was able to reach Clarence. At first I tried to pull him up onto the rock with me, but he was too heavy and I could barely shift him, let alone carry him back to shore. I shook him and pushed him and slapped him and he started to wake up. He groaned and coughed up seawater, which landed thick on the rocks, laced with lines of red. He propped himself up on his forearms and lifted his head to look at me. The whites of his eyes were red and there was swelling on the right side of his face where he was thrown against the rocks. He struggled to his knees and coughed up more water. I slid his left arm over my shoulder and placed myself between Clarence and the tempestuous water. Together we stood. He leaned heavily on my shoulder and I almost fell down again. We inched back to the shore, slower and even more hesitant than when I climbed out here myself. The ocean didn't throw any more waves at us, but it churned and writhed, barely containing its rage.

We reached dry sand and I let Clarence slide off my arm and fall to the ground. I almost didn't want to sit down. It took so much effort to stand and I needed to find my way to the house. I needed to find Lux. But my legs were shaking and my head was spinning. I thought about sitting down and the relief it would bring. I imagined collapsing on the sand by Clarence and staying there until I felt better. I thought about sitting down to the point where I found myself sitting, though I never made the decision to do so. The relief was blissful. I folded forward and dropped my head between my knees. My head hung heavily from my neck. Clarence and I sat without speaking. He was slumped forward like me. From the corner of my eye I saw his back expand and retract. His breathing rasped.

“Where are we?” Clarence choked out.

“It doesn't have a name,” I replied. He turned to look at me and I felt his eyes boring into the side of my face. I turned to face him and rested the side of my head on my knee. The

swelling on his face was starting to bruise. There was a cut by his eye, which I hadn't seen before, and his hair was plastered to his face in dark, wet clumps. "I don't know where we are. I don't know how we got here. But it's not just an island."

"What does that mean?" he growled, his teeth clenched.

"Uhhh," I hummed, trying to think around my swollen head.

"Everly," Clarence warned.

"I'm thinking," I said, holding up my hands. "Okay. Okay, so, if we got a boat and started to sail away from this island, I don't think we would ever find the world that we know. I don't think we could find home or Greece or, or like South America. I don't think that they're there."

"The world isn't there?" he asked, incredulous.

"If it is, we can't reach it. Not the normal way anyway."

"Everly, that doesn't make any sense," he said.

"This place doesn't make any sense," I shouted, waving my arms at the water. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Locking my eyes onto him, I said, "This is where I went with Lux. When I snuck out, this is where we ended up."

"You came here? To this beach? How?"

"The same way we did. Only... not really. It was a bit easier. Less painful." I tried to explain, but my thoughts were broken. "We washed up on the beach. But this time it was worse, much, much worse."

I scanned the beach, the water. I twisted over onto my knees to inspect the jungle, tried to spot the difference, tried to find whatever it was that made everything so much harder this time. Everything looked the same.

“Except you’re here!” I shouted at Clarence, who startled, tipped to the side and caught himself on his forearm.

“What?” he asked, bewildered.

“You’re the difference. You’re not supposed to be here. This place doesn’t like you being here. It didn’t want me to go and get you,” I exclaimed, too excited to control my voice. “That’s explains all the waves.”

“The waves? It’s the *ocean*. The ocean has waves.” Clarence was starting to look more concerned than frustrated. I shook my head emphatically.

“Not like this. These were... *targeted*.”

“Targeted waves?”

“Definitely.” I looked over to the jungle again. It was going to be so much harder to get to the house this time.

“How are you feeling?” I asked him.

“Beaten,” he muttered, then remembered himself. “What about you? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine. But we have to get to the house.”

“There’s a house?” Clarence asked, his back straightening with hope. “Where?”

“Through there,” I said, pointing at the jungle. He glanced to the forest, then back to me.

“That’s a terrible plan,” he said flatly.

“It’s fine. We’ve done it before.”

“Everly, how do we get back?” he said, biting out each word.

“I’m not totally sure, but I was always in the house.”

“The house that’s through the jungle?”

I nodded.

“Dad, we have to go,” I implored. “We have to find Lux and bring her back.”

“Lux?”

“Yes! This is where she went. This is why she ran away. She wanted to come here,” I said. “And now I have to go and find her and get her to come back home.”

“We’re not going to run through the jungle on your weird, magical island. We are going home. Now,” he shouted.

“I’m not leaving her,” I said quietly. “She’s my family.”

“I’m your family!”

“Barely,” I retorted. His face dropped and I wanted to take it back, but I kept going. It all came out, sharp and angry. I was spitting nails. “You’re a ghost. You’ve been a ghost since we lost Mum and Lux has always been there.” He flinched when I mentioned Mum and I felt a sick satisfaction. None of us had spoken of her since she’d gone. “And now... now I can do something for her. I can help her. So I’m going. And you can come with me if you want to help or you can sit here and keep thinking I’m crazy, but that won’t get you home.” I sucked in a shuddering breath and waited for him to answer.

“I’m not going anywhere without you,” he said softly.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere without Lux.”

He paused, staring at me, and I could tell he had something to say, but it was bad and he didn’t want to say it. “She came here without you, Never.” He spoke gently, which made it worse.

I sucked in a breath and took a step back. He let me step away. “I came here without you. You’re not supposed to be here. It’s mine and it’s Lux’s. I don’t want you here.”

“You don’t owe her anything. You have always run after her, always done what she wanted. You’re just chasing her again.”

“You would leave her here?” I asked, thinking that would stop him, that he would never leave a kid by themselves in a place like this.

“Yes,” he said flatly. “If it meant that you got home safe, I would leave her here.” I was stunned. He read my face and nodded. “I’m your father. That’s my job.”

My throat was dry. I tried to swallow. “Well, she’s my friend and this is my job.”

“I’m not leaving you,” he said again.

“Because you have nowhere else to go.”

“No,” he said, frustrated. He stepped closer when I stepped away and grabbed onto my shoulders. “Everly, I will not leave you.”

I nodded once.

“Let’s go find her then.”

I walked into the jungle and he followed.

“I can’t believe you never told me about this place. You never told me this was happening,” Clarence said. We were trudging through the jungle. Everything was dim and shadowed. Dark, grey clouds, heavy and low crept across the sky. I was aching and nauseous, but determined enough that I kept moving forward. Clarence didn’t want to leave me on my own; that kept him moving forward. The foliage was denser and the leaves pressed closer. I’d taken to watching branches and roots to see if I could catch them creeping forward.

“You wouldn’t have believed me. You barely believe me now when you’re in it.” My voice is irritated, but too weary to be sharp.

“You still could have tried,” he grumbled.

“When?” I asked, stopping in my tracks. “When you got home at one in the morning? Should I have called you at work? Maybe in the *one time* you’ve been home for dinner in the past week? You’re not there to tell. You’re not there to talk to about anything. And even when you are, you’re wrecked. Worse than Sarah or me. If I told you this was happening you would’ve lost your mind.”

“You can’t just guess how I’ll react to something, Everly. I’m handling it now,” he responded.

“There’s blood on your face, Dad,” I said. “You still think we just washed up on some island off the coast. And it’s going to get worse.”

“Then let’s go back to the beach,” he exclaimed.

“No!”

Something moved behind the ferns to my right. It rustled the leaves and they brushed gently against my face, lightly scratching my skin. Clarence and I froze. Then something snapped, a twig underfoot. A low rumble sounded, signalling the start of a growl. Clarence

grabbed my arm and ran. We tripped over roots and stones. I held my free hand out in front of me to catch the branches before they hit my face. I couldn't tell how fast we were moving, everything was too close and all the same. Just a mess of green, green, green, without relief. So we kept moving.

The thing, whatever it was, skittered around in front of us. I could see a tail, long, thin and black, slinking above the low branch of a tree. I spied a pair of dark, yellow eyes sitting in the gloom, patient and attentive. Clarence stopped and tightened his grip on my arm to stop me with him. There was a sharp pain in my shoulder and I hissed. The thing hissed back. Clarence tugged me to the right and we started running again. I stepped onto a patch of mud, my feet slid backwards and I fell onto my knees. Clarence pulled me up and dragged me forward.

I heard a light panting from behind us. It was as though the thing was everywhere. It bounded behind us, landing to the right and then to the left of our path; great leaps which ended in deadened thuds as its paws hit the jungle floor. *It's playing with us*, I realised. *It could snatch us up any time it wants*. Still, I ran harder, until I kept up with Clarence. Using his hold, I directed Clarence back on path to the house. I heard a growl and a hollow snap of teeth which was decidedly not playful. Running towards the house was making it angry. There was nothing to do, but move as fast as we could and hope the thing didn't feel hungry enough to end its game.

We were almost at the clearing which encircled the house. Narrow ropes of light pushed through gaps in the thinning jungle. The beams of light fluttered, appearing and disappearing as the growing wind moved the branches and leaves. I was moving too fast to be careful; I tripped and allowed branches to flick and scratch at my skin, but I wanted to get to the house. The thing was circling closer. I heard it land so near to me I stumbled to the right,

bumping into Clarence as we ran. We took three more steps, then I felt a sharp downward tug on my right hand. I turned as I fell to the ground. My feet were moving too fast to stop, so my body spun like a dial, my right hand the unmoving point at the centre. I crashed, first to my knees, then to my stomach. My chin bounced as it hit the ground, clashing my teeth together. I bit my tongue. I tasted blood.

I lifted my head and saw a dark mass poised on Clarence's back. I couldn't make out the form of the creature. It was as though it was made of shifting shadows, never fully there, but strong all the same. When it was at its darkest and most focused form, it reminded me of a panther, blackened skin and coiled strength. It lifted its head, fixed its yellow eyes on me and opened its mouth to roar. It had long, thin teeth, which were clustered closely together and ran four rows deep into its mouth.

A gust of wind ripped through the trees and light broke through the foliage overhead. Where the light ran over it, the creature disappeared. Clarence lifted his head slowly, confused and cautious about the disappearance of the thing. He shifted to his elbows and looked at me for an explanation. I shook my head. He rose to his knees, then the ropes of light disappeared and he crashed back onto the ground, the beast perched upon his back. The thing roared at me and Clarence bellowed in pain. I couldn't make out what it was doing to him.

"Everly, run," he yelled, but I was stuck, caught in its eyes and held in place by my fear. Clarence bellowed again and the thing hissed at me, baring its teeth. I turned and ran. I crashed through the undergrowth, drew closer to the clearing, and stopped at its edge. I reached up and tore at the branches. The leaves and twigs ripped away easily, I dropped handfuls onto the ground, but the larger branches were healthy and strong and even when I lifted my feet off the ground they barely bowed under my weight and did not break. I pulled

at the end of a large branch; it sunk under my weight and let in the grey light. The thing of shadows was washed away again. Clarence scrambled off his stomach and half ran, half crawled towards me. When he reached me I let the branch loose and together we ran from the shade of the trees into the clearing before the thing could take form again.

We didn't stop running until we were halfway between the house and the jungle wall. Clarence doubled over, braced his hands against his knees and breathed deeply. There were tears on the back of his shirt where the thing had placed its paws. Five bleeding patches beneath each shoulder.

"Was it a dog?" he rasped between breathes.

"Didn't you see it?" I asked. He shook his head.

"It got me from behind." He lifted his head and squinted at me. "What was it?"

"Not a dog," I replied after a pause. "We should get inside the house."

Clarence pushed off his knees and looked at the house, noticing it for the first time. He frowned at the crumbling expanse, so unlike any house there was in Treachery. He made no move towards it, but stood and stared.

"Where are we, Everly?" he asked, not looking away from the house.

"If it had a name, would it make more sense for you?" I asked, echoing Khadi's words.

"I can't believe you found this place," he said hoarsely. "How did you find this place?"

"I already told you."

"You were never meant to be here. We need to go."

I straightened my spine and met his eyes. “No.” He went to speak again, but I shook my head and he stopped, clenching his jaw. “Come on. We need to find Lux.”

- CHAPTER FIFTEEN -

STRANGER AND STRANGER AGAIN

I pointed out the side entrance to a silent and stunned Clarence. He didn't respond, but stared up at the house, eyebrows knitted together, as though he couldn't believe it was actually there. I bit back my *I told you so* and grabbed onto his sleeve to tug him around the side of the house. I didn't want to take Clarence to the side door where Lux and I once entered. I wanted to enter the house unseen, sneakily and stealthily, and surprise anyone I met. I wanted to have the upper hand and I knew a way in that I hadn't used before.

Clarence stumbled as we walked, his eyes stuck on the house, not watching his feet. I kept a tight grip on his sleeve. My eyes were on the path ahead, but my mind wandered to the red stains on the back of his shirt, the salt crusted in the creases of his face and the stiff and ungainly movement of his shock-wearied limbs. Everything I needed to do was too big, too hard, so impossible and I was too small, too scared, and so inadequate. *It's not going to work. I'm going to fail and we'll be trapped and Clarence will get eaten by something.* I felt my heartrate pick up and my breathing became shallow and short. I tripped over a stick on the path and it woke me up. There was nothing to do but walk forward. One step, two steps. Get the job done.

Orpheus's courtyard was quiet. All his birds had flown away and his leaves hung limply from his branches. Orpheus stood tall and grand and still. In the stillness, his face was difficult to distinguish from the folds in his bark, and the branches and sticks, that had so clearly been his arms and fingers, then seemed to be just branches and sticks. I tiptoed

respectfully through his roots, apologising quietly where the shoots had grown too close together and I was forced to step on him. I reached his trunk and gently traced his face, hoping to stir him, but he remained stony.

“Orpheus,” I whispered, and tapped urgently against his brow. I glanced back over my shoulder to check on Clarence, but his attention was not with me. He was circling the small courtyard, head tipped back to take in the full and extensive height of the house’s walls.

“Orpheus,” I hissed, and knocked my knuckles against his cheek. “Please, please, please.”

But he didn’t wake up.

I stopped rapping against his trunk in horror, realising what his stillness meant. I placed my hand gently against the side of his face. Tears, warm and salty, pushed against my eyes, ready to slip out, but I scrunched my eyes closed and trapped them. I had lost an ally. I had lost my only sure ally. I felt as though I had cement in my veins. It was hardening and immobilising me where I stood. Fear had always had that effect on me. Others felt the need to fight or flee. I became useless. If a confusion of wildebeest were to run at me, I would freeze in place and watch in terror as they ran me down.

“Everly?” Clarence said loudly, appearing right behind me, his hand landing on my shoulder. I jumped. I got the feeling that he had been calling me for a while. I tried to speak, but nothing came out. I cleared my throat and tried again.

“This is Orpheus,” I said, still faced to the tree, keeping my face hidden. Clarence ducked his head by mine and, lifting his hand, traced the shape of Orpheus’s face. His hands were gentle, barely touching the wood.

“It does look like a face, doesn’t it?” he said softly. If I had listened, I would have heard the grief in his voice, but I only heard his words.

“It is a face,” I said, turning to him. “It’s his face.” He caught sight of my red eyes and pulled his hand away from the tree. I didn’t think he believed me, but I was grateful for his silence all the same.

“He’s not waking up,” I said, frowning at the tree. “He was fine the last time I saw him. He was a little slow, but he was okay.”

Clarence took a few steps back. “Let’s go inside. We need to find Lux, yeah?”

I sniffed and turned to look at him. He was looking at me with intense concern, whether it was for my sanity or my safety I couldn’t tell. He looked so odd in that place, like he had been photoshopped into a scene. A businessman grafted onto a beach. A tired old dad cut and pasted into a child’s dreamland. I thought of the water which tried to drown him, the thing which tried to hunt him, and I started to wonder when a stone wall would crumble down onto him. Or maybe it would be Blythe who caught him, lifted him up, and let him drop.

I needed to get him out of here. We needed to find Lux and leave. With a final pat to his smooth cool bark, I said goodbye to Orpheus and led Clarence inside.

Clarence stalked sullenly behind me. He wanted to be in front, the first to face the danger, but I told him that he didn’t know where we were going, so I was in the lead. He compensated for this by walking right on my heels. When I slowed my pace, he stumbled into me. I turned and glared at him and he glared right back. He was twitching and nervous, but so was I. The house was too quiet. Not the still peace I had known before. No, before it was as though the house wanted to be explored, and it unfolded wherever we roamed, but this time the air was tight and biting. *We are not welcome here*, I thought to myself. It sounded like one of the old sci-fi films I would watch on a Sunday afternoon. It felt like that too, like that moment on the enemy ship, right before the alarms go off and the rescue team is captured by

evil alien troops. It always made me jump, even when I knew it was coming. I knew something was coming. My muscles were coiled and ready to spring into action, but the silence ticked by with each step we took, and we were still waiting.

I came to a stop. Clarence collided with my back, and I stumbled forward. The doors to the conservatory were open. The right door had been ripped off its hinges and leant, wounded against the wall. The creeping, crawling plant life had started to spill into the hallway. Vines slithered across the floor, over the broken door and clung to the moulding on the ceiling. The strongest vine, dark green with thick, ropey tendrils, was already sprouting deep purple buds. As I tiptoed closer, stepping around the roots on the floor, the flowers opened, like mouths ready to be fed.

“What is it?” Clarence asked when I didn’t move.

“The doors are falling down,” I said. “They’ve been ripped off their hinges.”

“Everly, the whole house is falling down,” he sighed. “The wood has probably rotted.”

“They weren’t like this before,” I argued. “And look, everything is getting out!”

Clarence looked down to his feet and stumbled back when he saw the weeds had almost reached his shoes. One tendril lifted at the end and waved blindly in the air, like a hand searching for something it couldn’t see. Clarence crouched down, cautious but fascinated, and narrowed his eyes at the plant.

“This is... odd,” he murmured. He reached to his face to push his reading glasses up his nose and faltered when he found them absent. While he was preoccupied, I tiptoed over the plants and into the conservatory. Three steps into the room and Clarence disappeared from view, lost to layers of moving, growing greenness.

“Everly?” I heard Clarence call, the rise in his voice hinted at panic.

“In here,” I called back over my shoulder. Not waiting for him, I went further into the room.

Plants pressed in from all sides. As long as I kept moving I could keep my feet free from the vines which crept around the floor. But the large red flowers, which had once brushed gently against my skin, nipped at my arms, impatient and wanting. The sweet bluebell flowers, which had once swayed in time to Marie’s music, trembled out of sync from one another in the silence of the room. The small, strange succulents and seedlings, which had lived in teacups and bowls and painted pots, had broken from their confines. Some, the younger, more delicate plants, appeared as though they were trying to flee. They had ripped their roots from the soil and scrambled over the edge of their container, only to be captured and strangled by the roots of a larger plant. Other larger and sturdier plants pushed their roots outwards, cracking their pots and spreading to take over more territory. The garden had turned from Marie’s loving and beautiful chaos into savage calamity.

“Marie?” I called out tentatively. There was no response.

I pushed my way to the back of the room, dodging the attention of the plants. I tried hissing at the more aggressive ones, like Khadi had. It worked a little. I made it to the glass wall. It was grimier than before and the flora was creeping in from all sides, blocking out what little light there is to be had from the overcast day. Hanging from the ceiling, at the far end of the glass wall, was a cocoon. It was twice my size in height and four times my width. Its surface had a milky translucence and a smooth finish, like rice paper. I gently brushed the cocoon with my fingers and found it dry and papery. I had expected it to be tacky and a little damp.

I heard quick footsteps, dulled by the mess of vines, soil and dead leaves on the floor, but firm and determined all the same. Clarence appeared by the wall of glass and caught sight of me with a sigh of relief.

“Try not to leave me behind,” he muttered tensely.

I didn't respond. I circled the cocoon, peering through the milky sheets, and tried to discern its occupant. I was on my third circle, treading slowly, when I managed to make out the outline of a face near the base of the cocoon. At first glance, it was only a shadow, but as I crouched down, bringing my face to its level, I could make out the point of a nose, the shallow inset of eyes and the dark line of the brow. Whoever was inside was hanging upside down like a sleeping bat. I tipped myself to the side, trying to turn my head upside down, so I could make out the face. I ended up with all my weight on my right foot, with my right hand stretched to the floor for balance and my left leg kicked into the air. At first, it was difficult to concentrate on the shadowed face, as most of my mind was set on not falling over. But, once I was stable enough, I peered through the shroud and recognised the small and serious face of Marie Talbot-Stokes. I lost my balance and fell to a heap on the ground, landing uncomfortably on my right wrist. Clarence rushed to my side.

“It's Marie,” I said, pointing at the cocoon.

Clarence leaned forward, squinting. I grabbed onto the back of his shirt to stop him from getting too close.

“There's a woman in there,” Clarence said. He leaned away, looking sick.

“Marie,” I repeated. “Is she dead? Do we cut her out?”

Clarence looked back to me and shook his head.

“No,” he said. “No, it’s like a hibernation or gestation. Like a butterfly. She’s transforming.”

“Or a moth,” I mumbled to myself, leaning in closer, until my nose grazed the surface. Her eyelids flickered, the dark line of her lashes splitting and resealing, and I pulled away again. “Why would she do that?”

“Go into cocoon? I don’t know. Maybe she’s ready for the next stage.”

“She’s a grown woman, she doesn’t have a next stage.”

“She’s not human, Evers.”

“She was the last time I saw her,” I said defensively. “Mostly anyway.”

“Mostly,” he echoed under his breath as he leaned in again to examine Marie again.

“Why would she do this now? I *need* her,” I said, thinking out loud. “She would know that. She had more to tell me. I know she did.” I thought I could learn more about this place from her. I thought I could learn more about Khadi and Blythe and finding a way out. I thought I could get ahead of the game. But my source of information had buried herself away. There were too many secrets to this house and no time to learn them.

“Maybe something upset her,” suggested Clarence. “You said this place didn’t always look like this, right? Maybe she got upset and tore it up, then hid herself away.”

“Who would do that?”

“You did. With every art project you ever tried. You were never happy with what you did, so you would pull it apart and go and sulk in your room.”

“I don’t remember that,” I muttered. “Marie would never wreck this place, she loved it, she nurtured it, she made it. She was so gentle with everything, I don’t think she could do this.” I paused. “We’re running out of friends.”

“Everly-”

“Maybe it was somebody else. Maybe Marie was going to tell me something and they wanted to scare her, so they wrecked her room and... and...”

“Everly,” Clarence said quietly. “I think we should go.”

There was a soft hissing sound. All around us, vines were slithering across the ground, down the walls and over tables. Some were thin, wispy, light green tendrils, moving swiftly. Others were a dark heavy green, thick as rope, moving steady and determined. They scraped lightly over leaves and slid gently through the muck on the floor, barely making a sound as they crawled towards us.

We took slow careful steps, backing out of the room. There was a crack as a torrent of vines snapped the trunk of a Japanese Maple sapling that lay in their path. As though the sound were a gunshot, Clarence and I turned and ran for the door. We kept our steps high, pulling our feet free of the tide of creepers which tried to latch onto us with every step. The waiting vines in the hall dove at us as we left the conservatory. A red vine, waxy and thin, wound around my calf. I look over my shoulder and saw the vines rolling en masse towards me, a terrible, green wave.

Clarence dropped to my feet, picked up the red vine and in one bite, cut through the vine with his teeth. I grabbed his hand and hauled him to his feet. The green wave bore down upon us. I spotted a door to the side of the hall. Small and made of aged grey wood, it almost blended into the stone of the wall. I grabbed the handle and found it unlocked. I pushed the door open and pulled Clarence inside.

Together, Clarence and I threw our weight against the door, slamming it shut. I slid a latch into place, locking us inside. I let out a breath as I slid down the door and sat heavily on the floor of dry, yellow sand.

- CHAPTER SIXTEEN -

A SERPENT IN THE SAND

The air in the room was hot and dry. After the cloying, storm-ready air outside, it was like opening an oven and stepping inside. The sand was everywhere, piled high in dunes which blocked our view of the rest of the room. The wall behind us was made of worn, white stone, covered in patterns of fading pink paint. Dazzling light rained from above; it turned about the room, glinting light into my eyes. If there was a ceiling I couldn't see it. I couldn't look up long enough to make it out.

"Great," Clarence said dryly. "So we're in a desert now."

"Looks like it," I said, standing up and dusting the sand from my hands and the back of my legs. It stuck to the creases behind my knees, where my skin was still sweaty.

"It's never going to end. We'll keep going from one world to another and never find our way out again," he huffed.

"It's not Narnia. This isn't a different world. It's just another room in the house. We'll be fine."

"Is there another way out of here?"

"What?"

"Well, it's best if we don't have to go back into the hall again. At least not that close to the plants."

"Well, yeah. That's obvious."

"So, is there another way out? A side door or a low window?"

"I don't know. I've never been in here before."

“You said you’ve been to this house twice.”

“It’s a big house. I haven’t had the chance to look at everything.”

“You don’t know how to get out of here?”

“No. And don’t look at me like that.”

“No, it’s fine. We’ll be fine.” He craned his neck back, trying in vain to see over the dunes. “We’ll stick against the wall and find another door. There’ll be another way out. The room is too big to just have one way in and out.”

“I don’t think you can be sure of anything in this place.” Nevertheless, I placed my left hand against the wall and we started to walk around the border of the room. My hand trailed lightly over the stone wall, which was warm and pock-marked with age. I knew I didn’t need to keep my hand against the wall, but it felt good and grounding and safe. An anchor.

To walk around the room was difficult because the dunes ran down to the wall. As we walked the steep slope, our left legs constantly dipped lower than our right and our right legs had to lift our weight up the dune with every second step. It was an awkward and tiring trudge and the wall of the dunes stopped us from seeing any progress we had made or if there was any relief ahead. I was tempted to push off the wall and run up a hill of sand to see if I could get the lay of the land, see if I could find a door or a window and faster route to go by. But staying by the wall was safe. It was smart. *It was taking forever.* Still, the dry heat and the difficult walk were bliss when I thought of what was waiting for us in the hall. We trudged on without complaint.

It was a quiet walk. Each step was muffled as our feet sank a little into the dry, fluid sand. Clarence wasn’t speaking and I found myself looking over my shoulder to check he was

still there. He kept a steady pace behind me, but his eyes were darting all around. He looked to the ceiling, across the dunes, to the sand under his feet, then back to me and, once he made sure I was still there, he started the cycle all over again. Sometimes he paused, leant forward and scooped up a handful of sand. When he stood again, he let the sand run through his fingers, eyes fixed on the yellow grains as they trickled down. Then, he started to walk again, brushing his hand clean against his pants.

It was hard to tell how long we had been walking or how large the room was. The same wall stretched on and on and on.

“Do you think the room is growing?” Clarence grumbled, cracking the silence. I laughed a little. My legs ached, and it felt good to know I was not alone.

“Or maybe the whole room is just a really big circle, and we’ll wind up back at the same door thinking it’s safe,” I said facetiously.

“Funny girl,” he said drily. “This whole house is a trick.”

“Still don’t think it’s real?”

“It’s real enough; I just don’t think it’s being honest.”

“It’s just a house,” I said.

“But it’s not though, is it?” he argued. “It’s not *just* a house.”

The sand to our right gave a shiver and we stopped. From the peak of a dune, which stood a metre over my head, thousands of tiny grains trickled lightly down the slope. There was no wind to push the sand and our steps were too low and too soft too have caused sand so far from us to move. Clarence stepped away from the wall and placed himself in between me and the shivering dune. We stood, muscles poised to run, waiting for something or someone

to appear at the top of the hill. But nothing came and the sand stilled. I looked to Clarence, who nodded and we walk on.

I took a step, maybe two, and then a great snake shot from the peak of the dune. My eyes followed its pointed black nose as it soared higher, until the light above became unbearable, and I had to turn my head away. It wriggled through the air, its long, thin body curling back and forth. At the ground its body continued to unfurl from the sand. When its tail pulled free from the sand, the top half of its body began to fall.

“Go,” Clarence bellowed. His hand landed on my shoulder, turned me away from the snake and pushed me along the wall. Running along the uneven ground was worse. My panic made me clumsy and the harder my feet landed on the sand, the further they sank into it. Every step was more effort and I was making less progress. The falling snake landed and the ground shuddered and shifted. A spray of sand hit my skin like a thousand, small, stinging needles. I lost my unsteady footing and dropped to my knees. Clarence grabbed me under both arms, hoisted me to my feet and we ran.

I pushed away from the wall, seeking a more even footing. In my periphery, I saw Clarence reach for me, to pull me back into line and as far as possible away from the giant, flailing serpent, but my gait was faster and he couldn't catch me. I slid down the face of a dune, bringing an avalanche of sand with me. The next incline was steeper. I climbed, digging my hands into the sand to hoist myself up. I could hear a whoosh, like the sound of a wave rushing into shore. The sound grew louder and in my mind's eye I could see the snake charging closer, jaws ready to open wide and swallow me whole. I didn't turn. I didn't look. I kept my eyes on the path ahead and moved.

Then I heard a whisper of movement through sand, so much closer, and I turned to look. The head of the snake was twice my height. Its smooth, black scales cut seamlessly

through the sand, throwing rivulets of grains to the side as it moved. I found myself transfixed by its thin, red eyes. Ten paces from me it lifted its head from the ground. Then it dove, jaws swinging open to reveal a yellow mouth, a purple tongue and two tapered fangs.

A hand wrapped around my ankle. Clarence was at my feet, crawling up the hill. He yanked at my leg until I fell and together we tumbled back down the slope and out of the snake's immediate diving range. The serpent clicked its mouth shut just before it hit the sand where I had stood a few seconds ago. Its nose pushed into the dune and it dove beneath the ground, as easily as if it were diving into water. The long body of the snake took time to follow its head, but Clarence and I didn't wait to watch it disappear; we ran. My eyes were fixed on the wall, willing a door or a window to appear. Around the heavy beat of my heart and the pant of my breathing, I listened for the whoosh of sand, waiting for the serpent to rise again.

Clarence paused at the top of a dune and scanned the sand for movement. I ran down the dune's face. The hill was steep and I moved quickly. Fearing I would topple forward, I threw my weight back and landed with my right leg beneath me. The base of the dune seemed to get further away, though I skated down faster and faster. The trench between the dunes sunk and darkened as sand from all sides drained into an unseen void.

"Everly," Clarence bellowed. I twisted onto my stomach and saw him stumbling down from the top of the hill, trying to keep his feet beneath him, trying to reach me. I held out a hand, not to reach for him, but to warn him away. I felt the void first with my toes, the new sensation of empty space where there was once the dense cover of sand. The rest of my body followed smoothly and I fell down into darkness with a shower of sand.

There was the sense of the suspension of time, like tripping over and seeing the ground slowly coming closer. The mind gained speed, but the body became too heavy and too slow to be of use saving itself from a painful landing. There was the nauseating lift of the stomach and the silent, freezing fear of the certain pain to come.

My fall ended and I crashed to the ground, but the ground opened around me, swallowing me whole. My fear softened and dissipated, and where I once felt cumbersome and slow, I now felt light and clear. My mind swam with pictures: a city under the sea, a train rattling through a drift of snow. I opened my eyes, realising I'd squeezed them shut, and found I was swimming in familiar milky waters.

The dream pool was seemingly bottomless. I kept slipping further down. The dreams were ribbons streaming about me, brushing against my skin. They held a gentle, silver light, like the reflection of sunlight on water on a grey cool day. And because the light was everywhere, no matter how far I sank, I couldn't tell how deep I had fallen. My hands trailed overhead, skin flickering in and out of shadows.

I was moving so quickly that I only got a glimpse of a dream from each of them, a second of a film shown and then snatched away to be replaced by the next. The blurry, detached feeling I enjoyed so much during my first swim in the dream pool persisted, but the images moved too quickly. Still, I fell. I knew I wanted to get out, but the feeling was distant and hard to hold onto. I tried kicking, but the dreams tangled around my legs like seaweed, until I was so enmeshed I could no longer move. I stopped trying to kick my way free and instead attempted to draw my right knee to my chest, to untangle the mess instead of breaking it. As I began to slip their hold, one ribbon of dream darkened. Its colour turned to grey and red, and instead of emitting soft light, it absorbed all light in and made the ever-deepening pool darker. The darkened dream pulled tight, lashing my ankles together. The snippets of

warm dreams which once skated across my mind were lost to something more sinister. A nightmare.

The nightmare which grabbed me was clumsy, like all dreams. I was in the upstairs hallway of my house, but it was so much longer, spanning dozens of doors on either side, instead of the familiar four. I knew I needed to find my sister. It was an urgent and definite need, though I didn't know why I needed to find her. I ran along the hallway trying to open doors, but they were all locked and the handles unyielding. If I tried one door too long, the handle grew hot in my hand and burned my palm. By the time I was halfway down the hall my hand was blistered and shaking.

There was a clatter of footsteps behind me. I turned and Sarah collided with my shoulder and knocked me back against the wall. I was dully aware that it hurt me, but my attention was on the rapidly disappearing form of Sarah and the giant butterfly net in her hand. The hoop of the net was as big as a car wheel and its handle was the length of Sarah herself. She held the butterfly net over her head; the white netting streamed behind her as she ran. The hallway grew to accommodate the height of them together.

“Sarah,” I yelled and began to run after her. “Sarah, what are you doing?”

“We need to catch the ghosts, Everly,” she called, her voice as clear as if she were standing by my side. “Come on.” A door opened to Sarah's left and she darted through. Before I could reach her the door smacked shut and I burned my hand again, trying to get inside.

“Sarah,” I screamed, smacking the wood of the door with the flat of my left hand. “Sarah, come back. Please, Sarah.” I gave up with a shuddering sob and rested my forehead against the door. Then there was a click and a groan and the door eased open.

I entered the room with slow small steps, uneasy with this newfound, but inexplicable, invitation inside. The walls of the room wavered, growing closer only to shift away. It happened in a steady rhythm and I was given to think the house was breathing. The door closed, shutting me in and in a blink I was surrounded by ghosts. They lined the breathing walls, drifting in and drifting out like the tide lapping at the shore. They looked hungry and I knew with certainty, in the way I always know in dreams, they were going to eat me, piece by piece. Waterfalls of tears ran from my eyes, as I stood quietly without hope. As the first hand reached forward and grabbed my own, my last thought was *I thought they'd go for the eyes first.*

Then I woke up.

As quickly as I fell, I began to rise out of the pool. The nightmare had been untangled from my legs and there was a hand holding my own. There was a stranger swimming above, who cut through the dreams with ease, and was pulling me back towards the surface. Her face was turned upwards, masses of dull, blonde hair streamed behind her as we swam. I was travelling in her wake. Her legs, which were covered in a soft, blonde, dense fur, moved in one motion forward and back. Her movements were graceful and easy, but her grip on my hand was tight.

We broke the surface and she let go of my hand to grab me under my arm and hoisted me out of the pool. I rolled gracelessly onto the cool, smooth stones. The dreams dripped off my skin and slid back into the pool. My head became clear, free of the fuzzy, warm memories which were never my own. I rolled my head to the side and found my deliverer watching me with dark steady eyes and a tempered curiosity.

“Thank you,” I said. Her arms are folded over one another on the edge of the pool, her chin rested on her forearms. As she nodded lightly in response, her chin dug into her arm.

“What’s your name?” I asked. She lifted her head from her arms and I sensed she was readying herself to dive beneath the surface and disappear. I didn’t want her to go. It was a deep, desperate feeling and I wasn’t sure where it was coming from. So I asked another question to distract both her and me. “What happened? Why did I see that?”

“Just a bad dream,” she said, in a familiar voice which made me feel warm and sad, all at once.

“Khadi said there were no bad dreams in the pool. Only good things.”

The woman tipped her head back and looked at the ceiling. The wriggling light of the dreams reflected on the rock overhead, bringing it to life. Everything in the house seemed to have life, even the things that shouldn’t.

“There is nothing which is wholly good or wholly bad. And nothing which stays the same forever. A dream can become a nightmare, under the wrong circumstances.”

“I can’t trust her at all, can I?” I asked. She stared, silent, but I knew my answer. “Will you help me?”

The woman narrowed her eyes. “I just did,” she said.

“I know,” I stammered. “I just... I don’t think I have a lot of friends left here.”

“Even fewer than you know,” she said gently. A warning. I moved to stand, but paused when she spoke again. “Everly,” she said quietly, her voice cracking. “I’m really sorry.”

Her words were heavy, so heavy that for several long moments I didn’t respond.

“You don’t have to be sorry. You saved me,” I told her, unsure what she was apologising for. She shook her head, like it was a lost cause, and I knew I’d gotten something wrong.

“Goodbye, Everly,” she said with a nod. The woman pushed away from the edge of the pool and disappeared beneath the surface. Instinctively, I leaned forward, reached out, as if to grab her and make her stay. But my new wariness of the pool drew me back before I could slip over the edge. Letting out a heavy breath, I got to my feet and began to climb the stone steps. It was only when my foot hit the first step that I realised she knew my name, though I had never told her.

- CHAPTER SEVENTEEN -

A ROOM FOR EVERLY

Khadi was waiting for me at the top of the stairs. She stood in the doorway, blocking most of the light so only her silhouette and the outline of two feebly fluttering butterflies could be made out as I climbed.

“Hello, darling,” she said, her voice thin. When I was within reach, she latched onto my forearms, her long fingers wrapped all the way around. “I’ve got something to show you,” she whispered, as though conveying a secret. “Something new.”

She let go of one of my arms and turned to walk up the hall, trying to pull me with her. But I braced myself and shifted my weight back and she lurched to a halt. She turned back to look at me, her gaze confused and her countenance brittle. I had the feeling it would be foolish to confront Khadi by myself, but I didn’t like the idea of following her blindly along either. My hesitation was making it worse and she was getting agitated. I couldn’t think what to do. I could only see two treacherous paths.

“Come on!” she said, falsely bright, tugging my arm. “You’ll love this. Just wait and see.”

“I need to find Lux,” I said honestly. I tried not to think of Clarence or escaping. I got the unnerving feeling that Khadi could peek in through my eyes and read my thoughts. The less she knew the better. I wondered if she knew that Clarence was in the house.

“We’ll find her after,” she said with another tug.

“Won’t she want to see it too?” I asked.

“No, no, no.” Khadi shook her head brightly. A speck of genuine excitement gleamed in her eyes. “This one’s just for you.”

I let her pull me along. My arm grew hot under her grip, a damp, uncomfortable heat that made my skin itch. We went upstairs to an unfamiliar part of the house. The ceiling was low, and the corridor was narrow, like a house from my own world. The carpet was worn flat and dull, its once rich red faded to a murky pink. Closed, white doors lined the long hall on either side. Still tugging me along, Khadi led me to the fifth door on the left and pushed it open, drawing me inside.

The room was the cleanest I had seen in the house. It was square and generous without being excessive. Tall windows looked out to the grey ocean, and I could smell the salt in the air and the electricity of the brewing storm outside. The walls were a gentle green-blue and the high ceiling was clean and white. A daybed sat against the far wall and a single armchair had been placed by one of the open windows. There were books stacked by the bed, on the chair, and on a low, worn children's bookcase. The books looked warm and inviting, with covers that had borne the touch of dozens of hands and yellowed pages that had been read by many eyes.

It was all too familiar, though I had never seen it before. It was my room. A room made for me in a place I could not stay. I couldn't stay. But I felt weary, and the bed looked so soft. And it felt *safe*.

"We'll keep the windows open always," said Khadi from the door. I turned as she spoke and only then realised I had walked into the middle of the room.

"Why?" I croaked.

"So you can fly in and out whenever you need. We want you to stay, Everly. There's a place for you here. I know you think it's all a trap, but it's not."

"Fly..." I muttered to myself. "I'm not much good with heights," I said louder.

“You’ll love it. You’ll see. You’re made for this place. Some of them didn’t think you were meant to stay, but I see it. I see you. You’re a bird.”

“And this is a nest?”

Khadi smiled brightly. The last of her butterflies flapped feverishly around her head. “A quiet world just for you. *Safe*. Why don’t you try the bed? You can stay as long as you want. And later, when you feel better, we can find Lux together.”

I swayed on my feet. When I closed my eyes, they stung with tiredness.

“Go on, lie down,” urged Khadi. I shook my head. ‘You’re so tired, Everly. Doesn’t that other world make you so tired? You could rest here. You would feel awake and alive every day. Just lie down. Everything will feel right and better after you sleep.’”

I was tired. So exhausted I could cry. I could imagine myself slipping between the sheets, giving in, going to sleep, and never having to fight my way through the day again.

I touched the cover on the bed. It was satin, cool and smooth on my too warm skin. But as I touched it, I caught sight of my hand. My nails were clogged with dirt and other filth, there was a smear of dried blood across my knuckles and a bruise was forming at the base of my thumb. I snatched my hand back before it could dirty the blanket and mess up the room.

“I want to see Lux,” I said, folding my arms around myself and clamping my hands to my side.

“We will later,” Khadi said, her voice growing brittle again. She took a deep breath and smoothed out her brow. *Serenity as a weapon*, I wondered to myself. Her voice was smoother when she spoke again, low and calm as when I first met her. “Rest, little bird.”

But I didn't want to anymore. The pet name called up Orpheus's still and stony face and the feeling of safety waned. I remembered his fear, his trembling branches, how hard he pushed against his wooden, stagnant roots to get me to Lux, to get us away.

A voice rose through the window, carried on the growing wind. As the air whipped about the room, tugged at the blanket and threaded through my hair, I heard snatches of what the voice was saying. It was as though the words had been caught up in the wind-like leaves, not fading over distance, but tumbling about in pieces. As the wind curled by my face I heard one word, my name, spoken in my father's voice. I took a deep breath, filling myself with his strength and turned to face Khadi.

"I'm not a bird," I told her. "I'm a girl. And I'm going to go and get Lux, even if you don't show me where she is."

Her head twitched to the side, and I heard a crack. She stood across the doorway, silent and unyielding. One of her butterflies spun to the ground. It crawled limply around the floor and fitfully batted its wings, unable to fly. I unfolded my arms, glanced towards the open window and lurched to my left as though intending to dive out. Khadi snarled and lunged forward in a movement both beautiful and vicious. Changing my path, I ducked to the ground and dove beneath her soaring legs. My knees and hands hit the ground hard. I scrambled out the door on all fours, only rising to run once I was out in the hall once more. Khadi's screech rung through my head as my feet struck the worn carpet. I didn't look back.

I sprinted down the hall thinking only of the speed of my feet and of reaching the door at the end. I flew almost silently along the corridor. As I passed each door they started to shake violently in their frames, as though there was someone on the other side trying to beat their way through. By the time I reached the end of the hall, the hammering was so loud it hurt my ears. I closed my hand over the brass doorknob and wrenched the door open. I risked

a look over my shoulder. Khadi stood in the centre of the hall, by the open door to my room. The wind from my open windows cut into the hall and caused her hair to whip about her head. At a distance her eyes appeared entirely black. Her hands were clenched into fists by her sides. She opened her mouth and screamed. Every door flew open, slamming so hard against the wall that their handles embed in the plaster. Ghosts spilled into the hall, not as finely dressed as Blythe's dancers, but pulsing with the same pale blue light. They rushed towards me, eyes hungry. *They're going to eat you up.* I slipped through the door and pulled it shut behind me.

I was being chased by ghosts.

I kept my eyes forward. I couldn't see them, but I could feel them coming for me. I could feel the chill of their gaze crawling up my spine. *They're going to eat you up.* I raced through the halls of the house, turning down a different passage every chance I got. I moved through halls. They were wide, decorated with paintings and sculptures, and their ceilings were high. I scurried through passages that were narrow and poorly lit, aged brick, bare, and musty. I raced over sheltered bridges of stone, grand and impervious to the dereliction all around. I ran through sunrooms, filled with warm colours, broken-down furniture and carpet so worn I could see through to the floor. All the while I felt ice on my spine and a fist closing around my heart.

Run, run, run. I couldn't slow down. I couldn't stop. *They'll eat me up.* There was no air left in my lungs or in my blood or in my bones. My body had run dry. The pain in my body began to out scream my fear and I had to stop. But my feet kept moving. I couldn't slow them down. It was as though they have taken on a life of their own. I had a horrifying image of being trapped in that running form forever, of grooves being worn into the stone under my feet as I circled through the halls over and again, until my body fell apart.

I came to a fork in the path and decided to turn right, because I felt as though I should turn left, and I didn't want to be predictable. I reached out with my right hand, ready to hook onto the corner of the wall, so I could swing myself around the bend without losing speed. As I reached a hand snaked out from behind a tapestry and grabbed my own. Too surprised to think, I let myself be pulled behind the tapestry and into a hidden tunnel.

My back hit the uneven brick wall, but I barely felt the pain of it, so strong was my relief to not be running. I slid to the ground, scraping my back as I sank. My whole body trembled. I gulped the damp and stale air into my lungs, but it slipped out again just as quickly. It took me a long time to regain my breath. Eventually I calmed, my eyes adjusted to the near dark of the tunnel and the thundering in my ears reduced to a steadier beat. Able to hear more than my own pulse, I made out the voice of Lux whispering rapidly in the dim.

"... four new rooms and their residents, Evers. Four! And that's just what I've discovered here today. Think of what we could find if we stayed. I can't find the end of this house and even if I did, I would just start all over again and choose my favourite places. We never have to go back. Khadi told me. We can choose to stay, just as she did. Did you know that? She used to live out there, just like we did."

"Where the hell have you been?" I glared up at her from the floor.

"Shhhhh. They'll hear you," she hissed, crouching down in front of me. "I don't like them as much as Blythe's dancers." She glanced furtively towards the tapestry as though expecting a ghost to appear any second. The rough hole in the wall was framed with light, which crept in around the edges of the fabric. "They're usually kept in the East Hall. I don't know how they got out."

"Khadi let them out."

“She wouldn’t do that. She doesn’t like them either,” she said, dismissive. I sighed. The great and unflappable loyalty of Lux who won’t know anything she doesn’t want to know.

“Where have you been, Lux?” I said again, my voice low but hard.

“Exploring. I just told you.”

“You left. You came here without me. You ran away from home.”

“And you followed easily enough, didn’t you? It’s fine,” she said defensively.

I stared at her silently. She got like this. Refused to admit she’d done anything wrong and cut at those who challenged her. I’d just never been on the other side of it before. The quiet was too much for Lux and she started talking again, angry and low, ready to spit fire.

“And you didn’t want to come back anyway, did you? If I had told you, you would have tried to stop me. The only way to get you here was for me to go without telling you.”

“Is that what you were doing? You were trying to get me here?” I asked. “Or were you just doing what you want?”

“I want you here!”

“And if I don’t want to be here? What then?”

“Who wouldn’t want to be here?” she yelled, standing, her voice echoing down the tunnel. “Who would choose where we came from over this?”

“It’s not safe,” I whispered sharply.

“I don’t care,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t want to go home. I don’t want to see my aunt. I don’t want to be in a school where everyone thinks I’m insane or a deviant.”

“I’ve never thought that.”

“You’re the only one! The only good thing.”

“There’s more...” I started.

“There’s not. I’ve looked for it,” she interrupted. “I couldn’t find anything else. Anything good. I can’t be there anymore. I won’t last. *That* place is dangerous for me. This is my safety.”

“Fiona loves you,” I tried.

“Maybe, but not very well. She won’t mind, really. Not in the long run. She didn’t want kids. I was never part of her plan. She was just doing the right thing. And now she’s free.”

“She’ll be frantic.”

“No, she’ll be angry. Angry, but not sad. She should be devastated. A normal family would be devastated. But she won’t be. She doesn’t have it in her,” she shrugged. “Your dad might be sad about you. But he’s always sad now, isn’t he?”

She didn’t say it cruelly, but as an observation. She viewed her aunt the same way, as something to be measured, as something separate from herself. But Clarence wasn’t separate from me, and I felt a low and unfamiliar kind of anger at her words which I couldn’t quite rationalise.

“He’s here,” I said lightly.

“What?”

“My dad. He’s here. He followed me through.”

“That’s not possible,” she murmured.

“*That’s* not possible?” I snorted. “But the ghost people and the secret tunnel are cool?”

“He can’t come through,” she insisted.

“And yet he did.”

“Where is he then?” she challenged.

“I don’t know,” I said swallowing thickly. “We got separated.”

Lux was quiet for a moment. “You want to find him?” I nodded, knowing I was disappointing her. “I know it hurt when your mum left-”

“Lux-”

“No, listen. You think that you need them, but you don’t. It’s only hurting you because you keep waiting for things to go back to normal. But we have had more fun together this year than any other. *They* are making you miserable. You don’t need to be sad. You don’t need them. And if you drop all this stuff about your mum and dad you will be totally free.”

“Like you?”

“Yes,” she shouted, jubilant. She grabbed my hands and we stood as a mirrored pair.

I shook my head. “Lux,” I said gently, “you didn’t let go of your parents; they died.”

“Same thing.”

“It’s not. You don’t look free, Lux.”

“I am,” she said flatly and dropped my hands. “I am free.”

“Lux-”

“I thought you knew. I thought you felt the same. There’s no place for me there.”

“I do know. I know what you mean.”

“You don’t, or you’d want to stay too. But you won’t leave him, will you?”

“I’m not ready to give up.” I wasn’t sure if I was talking about her or Clarence.

“I haven’t got anything to give up.”

There’s me, I thought, but I didn’t dare say it aloud. I had started to realise I wasn’t enough.

“I came here to find you,” I told her, but it was poor consolation.

Lux scrubbed her eyes with heels of her hands. “I’ll help you, but I’m not going back. Don’t try and make me go back.”

The tapestry rippled, shifted away from the wall and let more light in. I flinched. The tension broke.

“Where does this tunnel go?” I asked.

Lux recovered fast, as she always did, and was excited to show me all she knew. “All over,” she said grandly, holding her arms out with a smile.

“Can you get me to the library?” I needed to talk to Jarius.

Lux rolled her eyes but held out her hand. I let her pull me up and she led me into the belly of the house.

- CHAPTER EIGHTEEN -

A TUNNEL, A SICKNESS, A SECRET

As we walked through the tunnel, Lux talked ceaselessly in a hushed and excited voice. I could almost imagine it was one of those nights again, and we'd snuck out through our windows to run all over Treachery. Lux was just the same, whispering secrets in the dark and revelling in the pleasure of doing something which shouldn't be done. But it felt different and as I watched Lux it was as though she was in some kind of fever, talking too fast and seeing everything in a distorted, technicolour glow. I was on the outside of the dream looking in.

"...and then there was the theatre room. None of the chairs matched. Some were just dining table chairs, but others were these big squishy armchairs, and some were rocking chairs. They all faced this wall, which was painted to look like an old playhouse. But I didn't like it. All the movies were black-and-white and there was no sound."

I didn't say anything in response, but Lux didn't seem to mind. She led us through the maze of tunnels inside the walls of the house. She decided her path, her lefts and rights, with the easy confidence of a resident rather than a guest. She walked in front, with a light, skipping step, and kept her eyes on the path ahead. I didn't have to feign excitement.

"I found another courtyard. It was full of this yellow stone that felt like sandpaper under my feet. The sun was straight overhead and didn't move the entire time I was there. And there was this man, I thought he was dead when I got there. He was lying so still and the room was so hot. But when I got close he moved, like lightning. He was so quick, Evers. I barely even saw it. He was lying across the sand and then SNAP," she whisper-shouted, clicking her fingers, "he was right in front of me. His skin was so dark, and it shimmered under all that sun. He called himself Zevvi. I'll introduce you later. You'll like him."

A faint murmur of voices tumbled across the floor of the tunnel. I hurried my steps to catch up with Lux and put a hand on her shoulder to stop her. She started to complain, but I hushed her and tapped my ear, silently telling her to listen. Without the shuffle of our footsteps or Lux's low, consistent chatter the voices became clearer and more distinguished from one another. I could hear the anxious snarl of Jarius, the low rumble of Hugo Rathbone and, to my great relief, the stressed, gruff tones of my dad. I couldn't make out the words, but I could hear the conversation switch back and forth between its three members. Jarius and Dad spoke shortly and urgently with one another, and Rathbone's unceasing monologue rolled on throughout.

"Where's that coming from?" I asked Lux quietly.

"The library," she said, irritated. "I would have told you if didn't tell me to be quiet. We're almost there."

I strode forward, driving past Lux and got closer to the voices. Miffed, she pushed in front of me and picked up her pace. I moved faster to keep up with her. We walked quietly for a few seconds, then Lux slowed. She trailed her left hand against the wall, taking measured, staccato steps. Her hand stuttered lightly. She stopped and turned to the wall. Reaching up to eyelevel, she slid a piece of cardboard away from the wall, revealing a set of eye shaped holes, and let it fall to the ground.

She waved me over, smiling proudly. I stepped forward and we stood together, her left shoulder pressed against my right. She got the right eyehole, and I got the left. It took a moment to make sense of what I was seeing. My eyelashes kept scraping against the wall and the more I tried to stop blinking the more I found it necessary to blink. The small hole meant I could only make out part of the room and my periphery was entirely blacked out.

Everything I saw was revealed like a play upon a stage. The scene was the library, but more specifically, Jarius's large desk, which was laden with more books than ever. The three players moved in and out of my line of vision as though they were walking on and off stage. From our view I guessed we were looking through the eyes of the painting over the fireplace: the dark-haired girl looking down to her left, with the crow perched on her shoulder.

Jarius stood by the edge of his desk. His chair was haphazardly pushed to the side, as though it had gotten in the way too many times. He was flipping through a book, his eyes skidding down the page, the paper almost tearing as he turned it.

Clarence was at the opposite end of the table. He was turning through a massive, dark volume with greater care. Though his forehead was creased in concentration, his heavy eyebrows pushed together, there was a light in his eyes and an eagerness. He was fascinated, drinking it all in. Rathbone moved in and out of sight, pacing in circles around the room. But his gait was off, his steps fell heavily and unevenly, and whenever he straightened his spine fully, he winced.

"Have you found anything yet?" muttered Jarius.

"No, not since the last time you asked," Clarence responded mildly. He stayed bent over his book but lifted his head to look at Jarius. "Are you sure you've never come across anything before? I won't be able to match the time you've spent in this library."

"I've been through this library at least six times," Jarius said tersely. "Every time I look, I find something new: a new book, a new pamphlet, a new note shoved in between pages. It's as if somebody else is living in this room, but I'm always here. Always. It's not possible."

"Stranger things have happened in this house," Clarence said and leaned back over his book.

Rathbone circled around the room, muttering to himself. His voice was low, and I only caught snatches as he spoke. “It has to be her. It has to be... It’s never touched me before.”

“We are short on time,” Jarius said as Clarence gingerly turned a page.

“There’s no point in trying by halves,” Clarence said. “What we are looking for will have no heading or reference. It will be in between the lines. Be thorough or don’t bother.”

Jarius snarled and continued flipping through a few pages, periodically glancing darkly at Clarence. Clarence turned another page and after examining it, he sighed.

“Can you describe your symptoms?” he asked. “Rathbone?”

Rathbone stopped in place on the periphery of my vision. He rocked back and forth on his feet, swaying in and out of view.

“Symptoms?” He barked a laugh. “It’s not influenza, boy.”

“It would help if I knew what you were experiencing, to see if there is any reference to any of it in the books,” Clarence explained. “When did it start? You’ve been here since the beginning. Why is it happening now?”

“It happens to everyone eventually,” Rathbone said, pacing closer.

“Not you, though. You’ve been here since the beginning, and you haven’t changed at all. Why?”

“It’s my house,” he said tiredly. “I built it, you know. It didn’t start as something magical. I found this place, stumbled across it at a time when I didn’t want to be anywhere else. But I found this land and I never wanted to leave.”

“How long ago was that?”

“I’m not sure. Time doesn’t behave here. We do not progress through time; it moves around us in a tangle. You know, Blythe arrived here after me, but she came from a time before my own? It’s madness not to question it, really. If I were a more intelligent man, I would have studied it. But I thought I had found it.”

“Found what?”

“Immortality.”

“Is it still your house?” Clarence asked.

“I’m not sure anymore. Not sure that it ever was. Just because a beast responds to you, it doesn’t make it yours. That’s what this house is, a beast. All the creatures have become restless, they respond to me less and I... I feel different.”

“How?”

“I feel,” he paused, and his gaze turned inwards. “I feel less and less myself and more and more something else. It’s a terrible thing to slowly wear away, to see yourself shrink and fade and have no way to stop it.”

“We will stop it, Hugo,” Jarius said earnestly. “There will be something here. We can stop you changing. I just have to find it.”

“You know we lost Orpheus?” Rathbone asked Jarius, as though he hadn’t heard him.

“Yes. Yes, I went to visit him yesterday.”

“Always was as sturdy as a tree, old Orpheus. At least, that’s what he wanted to be.”

“And Marie,” Clarence added.

“Marie,” Rathbone repeated, as though dredging up her memory from the depths of his mind. “There’s another who should never have stayed. Khadi crawled into the mind of

that girl. She should never have stayed.” He drifted as he spoke, coming to the base of the pear tree and laying a hand against its trunk. “You were clever,” he said, turning to Clarence. “Not clever enough to stay away though. I didn’t think we would see you again.”

I flinched back from the wall. “Again?” I hissed. Lux waved me away, refusing to be distracted from the scene in the library. I peered through the hole again.

“Are you in pain?” Clarence interjected softly.

Rathbone looked in him in the eye and paused there, as though caught.

“No, no,” he assured, Clarence. “Easy as falling asleep. That’s the trouble with it, it’s far too easy.”

Clarence appeared far from convinced, but he returned to his books. Closing his last one with care he scanned through a stack of titles and picked out a small volume, bound in red fabric. It crackled when he opened it, its spine protesting after being left so long. For a while everything was quiet, yet tense and unsettling. Clarence read on, paging through his new book. Jarius made a show of reading, but he kept glancing over to Rathbone with a mixture of curiosity and terror. Rathbone took up his stalking again, only now he stumbled over shorter distances. He crossed the room and caught himself on the bookshelves, paused, and then turned and walked back again.

The doors to the library were out of my line of vision, but I heard them open. They were too grand and old for a subtle entrance.

“Here you all are,” said Khadi as she walked into view.

Rathbone, who was hanging onto one of the bookshelves, didn’t move to pace across the room again, but leant more heavily upon the wooden shelves. His face drawn and pallid.

Jarius looked up and scowled, then buried his nose further into his text, determined to ignore her. Clarence, who had his back to the door, spun around and froze, his eyes fixed on Khadi.

“Clarence?” Khadi asked, her surprise was too genuine to be faked. She knew him. Khadi knew my dad. *Someone must have told her.* But she wasn’t expecting him. She knew who he was, but didn’t know he was in the house. I could see her mind ticking as she took him in. I could see the shock gradually fade and calculation start to take place. When I first saw her, I thought nothing looked freer and wilder, but I had learnt how fast her mind moved, how there was design to everything she did.

“Little Clarence, I can’t believe it. We never thought you would come back. Of all the people who left us, you were so serious and firm. And you were only what? Thirteen?” Khadi walked towards him with staggered steps, as though in shock. I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. I didn’t want to miss anything.

“How does she know *him*?” Lux hissed at me, livid at Khadi’s attention on Clarence. I wondered if she could see how false it was. I hushed her, waving her down. With a huff she placed her eye back to the peep hole.

“Look at you now,” she said with apparent wonder, coming to stand in front of him. “You got old,” she laughed, bringing her hands either side of his face. He flinched as she reached for him, but allowed himself to be caught, eyes round with surprise, body stiff with shock. “It seems like you were only just here. How long has it been?”

Clarence stepped back and pulling himself free of her hold. “Not long enough. Where is—”

“You came with that girl. What was her name?” Khadi asked, tilting her head to the side. Clarence’s hands clenched at his sides, his jaw clamped, and he did not speak. I had only seen my father that way twice before. Once when Sarah dislocated her shoulder jumping

off a bridge into the river, and once in the week after Mum left. Mum once told me that Dad was the calmest man she had ever met, that he didn't have a temper, and I was just like him. I knew she was wrong. I knew Dad felt everything strongly, because I felt everything strongly. It just takes more to let it out. This was more. This was too much. He was shaking. He hated her. "Hugo," she called, looking over Clarence's shoulder. "What was that girl's name? Clarence's friend?"

Rathbone stalked forward. "Khadi that is enough."

"Teresa!" she exclaimed with triumph. "That was it."

I stumbled back from the wall as though burnt. Lux pulled away from the wall and stared at me.

"Everly," she breathed. "Your mum? Your mum was here."

"I want to get in there," I said. Lux reached for me, but I shrugged her off and strode back to the wall, peering into the library again. "Tell me how to get in there."

Khadi looked between Clarence and the others, barely concealing a smile. "She's here. She came back. Didn't you know?"

I expected Clarence to break. I waited for him to yell or crumble. But when he spoke his voice was calm. "I knew."

- CHAPTER NINETEEN -

THE DISINTEGRATION OF HUGO RATHBONE

Lux led me through the dark. I was right on her heels, stepping on them when she moved too slowly. *She's moving too slowly.* I needed to get in the room. I needed to question Khadi myself. And Jarius and Rathbone. I needed them to tell me everything. I would make them.

“How do we get in?” I snarled at Lux.

“It’s here. Just give me a minute.” She was flustered. I had never seen Lux flustered. I’d seen her angry, elated, wicked and wilful. I’d seen her playful, morose and wild, but never flustered. Lux had always given the impression of being exactly as she wanted to be.

“Lux,” I growled in warning.

“Just give me a minute.” The walls of the tunnel were made of small, dark red bricks, inset between thick, wooden pillars. Lux walked between the pillars and reached into shadowy corners near the ceiling where timber met brick. Once she swiped her hands through the shadows and failed to find whatever it was she was looking to find, she moved over to the next corner. I stood by her shoulder, hands twitching.

“Lux,” I whispered, my voice cracking.

“I know, Evers,” she said, reaching up into another corner. “I... I have it.” Her right hand grasped something in the shadows, and she pulled down sharply. There was a deep boom, then a grating sound of brick scraping against brick, mixed with deep and rhythmic clicking. The wall between the two pillars shifted and slowly opened into the tunnel.

The voices came through louder with the door open.

Leaving Lux, I slipped through the opening and into the library. The tunnel door opened on the far side of the room, near the pear tree. The sky had darkened. There was little light being given from the tall, arched windows and I entered the room in shadows. There was a fire in the grate, dancing quietly and as it moved so did the light over each person's face. The fire cast their features in and out of shadow, distorting and accentuating them so that any face which held cruelty appeared wicked, any face which held sadness was buried in grief, and any eyes which held confusion seemed lost in madness.

Clarence didn't notice when I entered the room. He had his back turned to me and his hands braced against the side of the desk. In the far-right corner Rathbone had slumped onto a side table, pushing a stack of books and papers to the floor. His arms were folded across his chest as though he was binding himself together. When I entered the room, he lifted his head to look at me before letting it fall back to his chest. His skin was grey, and his eyes were slack and ringed in red. Each breath he took inflated his upper body, lifting his spine a little and each exhalation made him crumple and bow forward. He looked too tired to stay alive.

Khadi stood to my left, soured by Clarence's calm acceptance of her news. Her hair was hanging heavily down her back, matted into one greasy, neglected mass. She had no butterflies left. When she noticed me she smiled.

Perceiving Khadi's attention had shifted behind him, Clarence turned to follow her gaze, and found me. For a moment he paused, his eyes round with shock, as though seeing a ghost instead of his own daughter. Then he rushed forwards, opened his arms and embraced me, lifting me off the ground so that my feet dangled over the floor. I folded my arms around his neck and pressed my cheek to his. His skin was clammy, and he smelt awful, of stress and fear and too little rest; but I held onto him tightly. He pulled back to look at my face, pushing my hair out of the way and tucking it behind my ears.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Lux,” he said, placing me back on my feet. I turned and saw Lux coming out of the tunnel. She skulked around the edge of the fire, more a savage thing than a girl. She looked how I had always imagined her to be in my head: hair wild, legs spattered with mud, feet bare and stained green with grass, and dirt smudged on her face like war paint. She was so much more herself than she had ever been in her school uniform.

“Lux, are you alright?” Clarence asked.

“Yep,” she responded. She stopped in place and considered him with narrowed eyes. “How’d you get here, Clarence?”

“The same way you did, Lux.”

“That’s not possible though. Is it, Khadi?”

Khadi’s smile softened. She came a few steps closer, but I moved in between them, and she stopped.

“Not normally,” said Khadi. “But there’s a bit of a story to that.”

“Then why don’t you tell it?” I challenged. Clarence put his hand on my shoulder.

“Teresa and your dad visited here, when they were kids. A bit older than you,” said Jarius hoarsely. “Just as you have visited us now. They didn’t stay. Not everyone chooses to stay, and they wanted to go home. Just as you should do now.”

“But it’s not quite as simple as that, is it Jarius?” interjected Khadi. “Clarence wanted to go. He was very firm, so certain of himself. But Teresa... Teresa only left because Clarence begged her to.”

“She made the choice herself,” Clarence said, slow and firm.

“That’s not how I remember it,” Khadi said archly.

“Nobody could make Teresa do something she didn’t want to do,” said Clarence.

“Not me, not anyone. She came home because she wanted to.”

“And then she left,” taunted Khadi, “because she wanted to.”

“How do you know that?” I asked. “How do you know she left us?”

“Because she’s here, Everly,” Khadi said softly, as though she cared, as though she was trying to not hurt me.

“And you knew?” I said, turning to Clarence. “You knew that she came here.”

“I suspected,” he said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have believed me?” he said, echoing what I once told him. He reached out for me, but I stepped back. He looked hurt, but I didn’t want anyone to touch me. My breathing was shallow and uneven.

“Why would she leave me for *this*?” I spat. Clarence shook his head. “And you,” I said turning to Jarius. “Did you know she was here?”

“I don’t meet everyone who comes through. Some stay, some don’t. And I have work to do,” he said, placing his hands on the books spread out before him. “We don’t have time for this now. Hugo needs our help. We need to find a way to fix it.”

“There is no fix, Jarius,” said Khadi. “There is nothing to fix. It’s not a problem. Stop seeing it as a problem.”

“We will lose him,” he shouted at her.

“He’s not dying. He’s changing,” she insisted.

“Like Orpheus?” he retorted.

“Did you know who I was?” I asked. “I mean, did you know who my parents were when I got here?”

“No,” Jarius said.

“We didn’t know, Everly,” confirmed Khadi. “You were familiar, though.”

“Where’s my mum?” I asked.

“I can show you, Everly,” Khadi said, stepping towards me and away from Lux. Lux’s face twisted.

“Where?”

“No, don’t listen to her,” insisted Clarence.

“Stop it,” I said to him without turning around. “Khadi, where is she in this stupid, monster, mess of a house?”

Khadi hesitated, her mouth tightening.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I haven’t seen her for a while. She’s buried herself in here somewhere.”

“I thought this was your house now,” I said, stepping towards her. “Shouldn’t you know what’s going on here?”

Khadi’s eyes narrowed and her hands curled at her sides.

“It’s a very big house,” she said flatly.

“We can find her,” said Lux, stepping around Khadi and grabbing my hand. There was fire in her eyes, reflected from the grate. It made her look insane, and I automatically stepped back from her, pulling my hand free. “We can stay and find her.”

I breathed in. I breathed out. My lips were dry, so I tried to lick them, but my whole mouth was a dustbowl, and it didn’t help. I tried to swallow every revelation, but the portions were too large, and I was choking. I couldn’t think.

“Everly?” My dad’s voice was quiet next to my head. “It doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t. She left us, Everly. It doesn’t matter why she did or where she went. She chose something else over us. No reason or excuse or justification will make that okay. It doesn’t matter if we find her, because she won’t come home. And she won’t say anything that’ll make it better.”

“What if I want to say something to her?”

“Like what, Never?”

And the thing was, I couldn’t think of anything.

“Enough,” shouted Jarius. “I know you’re angry with me, but you have to help me,” he said to Clarence.

“You told me you were compiling a history,” I said to him.

“I lied,” he responded.

“Enough, Jarius,” said Khadi. “You can’t solve everything with your stupid books.”

“He’s a father to you as well. You should be trying...” He stopped speaking with a sigh. “Get out, Khadi.” He waved her away like he was swatting a fly.

Khadi's eyes turned black, and she lurched towards Jarius. "You don't-" she started, but then stopped at a sickening sound.

It was halfway between a shout and scream. Collectively we flinched and covered our ears. The thing which used to be Hugo Rathbone dropped to the floor and curled in on itself. The mass on the floor was a tangle of flailing limbs, caught up in the shredded remains of Rathbone's clothes. After a few minutes it stopped moving. Jarius rushed forward, but Khadi, her face stripped of any of its joy, called him back in fear. He stopped, poised on the tips of his toes, drawn forward by Rathbone and pulled back by Khadi.

The thing rose on all fours and shook loose from Rathbone's clothing, sending the rags to the floor. What emerged was a panther-like thing, with legs too long, a tongue too red and eerily familiar, yellow eyes. At first it was clumsy; unstable on its unfamiliar legs as it swayed from side to side, almost falling to the ground before it caught itself on a frantically outstretched paw. Once all its feet were beneath it, it tested its new body, bending and straightening its legs, flicking its tail and flexing its spine. As it moved there were a series of audible cracks, the sound of bones snapping in or out of place. All too quickly the panther became comfortable and confident in its form and turned its yellow eyes on us.

Jarius was closest to the thing that was once Rathbone and was the first to fall under its stare. There was a touch of fear in Jarius's face when the panther's eyes fix on him, but it was overshadowed by his overwhelming sense of defeat. His whole face hung from his bones and the fighting fire which had once sparked his eyes had drowned. He had lost the battle for Hugo Rathbone's humanity and stared at the panther with the numb shock of grief. The panther stepped towards him.

I took my father's hand and together we stepped back. The panther turned its head towards us and growled. Clarence and I stilled, understanding the wordless warning, and the panther turned its attention back to Jarius.

"Jarius," whispered Khadi, her voice wavering. The panther growled again and turned his eyes on her. Her nose scrunched and her mouth pinched and for a moment she looked just as she did in Rathbone's photographs, young, defiant, and very human. There was no humour about her mouth anymore. Her eyes darted between the beast and her brother. I wondered if it was the first time a resident of the house had turned into a threat or if there were other wicked beings roaming the halls which I'd yet to meet. "Jarius," she called again. But he would not move. He only stared at the thing that was his father.

The panther loped closer to Jarius and, when it reached him, ran its nose along his side, taking a deep breath in. Jarius bowed his head, searching its face as though he might find Rathbone somewhere in it. Tentatively, he reached out a hand to place on the side of its head, but the beast bared its teeth.

"Jarius, please," Khadi cried.

That time Khadi's voice caused him to stumble back. His back slammed into the wooden shelves behind him and several books fell to the floor. Khadi rushed to Jarius and pulled him to the side of the room, placing the book-laden table between them and the beast. The panther leapt onto the table. His paws scrambled across the paper, tearing pages from books and shredding them into confetti. He howled again; it was a terrible sound, more human than animal, which somehow made it worse.

Its head turned from side to side; yellow eyes landed first on Khadi and Jarius, who stood closest to the door. Khadi still held Jarius's arm. Then the eyes turned to us. Its slippery, black coat glistened in the light of the fire. Its red tongue, fat and wide, lolled out of

its mouth and dragged across its nose. Clarence shifted his weight, subtly placing himself further between the beast and me. I could still see one of its eyes around the side of Clarence's arm. Keeping my eyes locked on the beast, I reached behind with one arm, wordlessly telling Lux to grab my hand. She didn't. And when I risked turning my head to look to her, I realised she was gone.

I started to breathe faster. I wanted to search the room and find her. But I locked my muscles against my instincts and turned my head back towards the panther. His eyes were set on me, and I was rooted to the floor.

Then the panther leapt from the table to the floor, and we scattered like rabbits, darting in all directions. Clarence pulled me around the desk, almost circling it completely to get to the door without passing by the panther. As we ran behind it, it turned and snarled at us, feeling threatened.

Clarence and I reached the door. Khadi had moved to the secret passage and stood in its doorway, Jarius ran to us, his robe flapping behind him, drawing the attention of the panther. It leapt at him, and he stumbled. Khadi let out a strangled sound, like a scream couldn't get out of her throat. I waited for Jarius to hit the ground, ready for his screams, but the panther had only caught the flapping hem of his robes and Jarius shrugged himself free. Clarence let go of my hand to pull Jarius off the floor and towards the library doors.

Lux scrambled from beneath the desk and ran to Khadi. Khadi caught her hand and began to pull her into the bookcase passage. I called to Lux, and she turned to me. She held out her hand and nodded insistently. I expected to be conflicted, tortured by indecision, instead I knew what I was going to do and I was heartbroken. Lux was going to stay, and I wasn't going to follow her. Clarence was yelling to me from the hall. I shook my head at

Lux. Her hand fell and her face tightened. She and Khadi turned and ran down the secret passage. Lux didn't look back.

The panther pulled himself free of Jarius's cloak. I darted into the hall. Jarius and Clarence pulled the library doors closed. As we ran away the boom of the panther throwing himself against the doors echoed across the marble floor of the hall. We entered the stairwell, Jarius in the lead, Clarence behind, and me in the middle. I heard splintering and then shattering. The panther had broken through the decorative glass in the door.

We circled up the twisting staircase. Our steps were short and hurried and our feet slapped unpleasantly against the moist and musty carpet. The stairway was dimmer than before, for though the roof was gone, the sky was black with clouds. It could have been night or mid-morning. I'd lost all sense of time. Though we were climbing the stairs faster than I ever had before, the journey felt longer, as though the stairs were growing as we climbed. I kept climbing, because I wasn't sure what else to do.

I felt surprisingly little relief when Jarius turned off the stairwell and into the hall. He led us to our room, the room where Lux and I were able to leave twice before. All was as we had left it before; the bed was still an inviting mess and everything still smelt of the sea, fresh and salty and savage. From the window, the ocean looked as black as the sky. It rumbled malevolently and spat white froth as its waves broke. Jarius led Clarence straight to the mirror and I followed because Clarence wouldn't let me go.

It was only when Clarence stood before the mirror that I realised why the boy I'd seen in the glass is so familiar. It was Dad, not as I knew him, but as I had seen him in photographs. The boy in the mirror was Dad as he would have looked when he first came here himself.

When he looked into the glass, I could only see his reflection, but I knew he was seeing someone else. Jarius appeared at his shoulder and spoke to him quietly, as though he was afraid to be heard.

“Do you remember how it works?” he asked.

“I remember,” Clarence replied. He frowned and turned to Jarius. “You could come with us.”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“You don’t know how it works. You can’t be sure.”

“No one is allowed to go back. Not after this long.”

“How many have tried?” Clarence challenged. “And what will you do if you stay?”

Jarius shrugged. “I’ll do as I’ve always done. I’ll look after the library, and I’ll continue my research.”

“There’s nothing left to save. There’s no one left to save.”

Jarius wouldn’t look Clarence in the eye, but stared at his shoulder.

“How can I leave?” he asked. “I don’t even know if I can leave.”

“What will be worse: trying to leave and failing or staying here as you are?” Clarence replied.

Clarence let go of my arm and took hold of my hand.

“You ready?” he asked me.

“Let’s just go,” I said quietly.

He reached out to the mirror and just before his hand touched the glass, Jarius grabbed his shoulder. The world around us slipped away and we fell.

- CHAPTER TWENTY –

AS IT HAPPENED

We woke up on the beach.

I was awake for a while before I opened my eyes. It wasn't comfortable. The sand irritated my skin and though I was still sodden, my whole body felt dry, as though all the moisture in me had been wrung out. I was desperate for a glass of water. But I didn't move. I didn't want to see where we were yet, and I didn't want to face all that was to come.

Somebody was sitting next to me, and I knew without looking it was Clarence. He leant over me once, to check that I was breathing, then sat back on the sand to wait. It was my thirst which got me to move. My throat kept trying to swallow, but it was too dry, and the movement was starting to hurt.

I sat up slowly without opening my eyes. My pulse beat in my head like a drum and my neck and shoulders ached from lying on my side for too long. My head hung forward. I took a few breaths, opened my eyes and looked up.

Clarence stared out at the ocean. He didn't look at me when I looked at him. He looked boyishly messy, younger than he was when we left. His hair stuck out from his head and his shredded shirt had washed clean of his blood in the ocean. His shoes were gone, though I didn't know when he lost them. Though the lines on his skin were just as deep, there is a smoothness to his face which wasn't there before.

“Where's Jarius?” I asked, my voice scratchy and thin.

Clarence turned to me and spoke. “He didn't make it.”

“What does that mean? Is he still back there?”

He shook his head. “I could feel him holding onto my shirt. I could still feel his hand on my shoulder when we arrived. But when I tried to grab him, to pull him into shore, I couldn’t get a hold of him. He kept reaching for me and then he... faded away? I don’t know how to describe it.”

The drumming in my head made it hard to listen, made it hard to take anything in. Too much had happened, too much loss, too much strangeness, and I was afraid to think about it all at once. I licked my lips, but it made them drier. “Maybe it pulled him back. We don’t know how it works. Maybe it just sucked him back in.”

Clarence grabbed and examined my hand. It was clean now, except for the sand, and every cut, scrape and graze was visible. “He didn’t go back. He didn’t survive, Never. He wasn’t sure if he could make it through. He said that. He was right. I shouldn’t have pushed him.”

He was still studying my hand. I linked my fingers through his and sat closer. “Staying would have been worse. That’s what he decided. That’s why he followed you. He could have ended up like Rathbone. I would’ve done the same thing.” Clarence scowled at the thought, but stayed quiet, considering.

“You went there before,” I said. It wasn’t a question, but Clarence nodded anyway. “You went there with Mum.” He stared towards the ocean again.

“It was over twenty years ago. And we only went once. One time, that was it. Teresa... your mum, she wanted to go back, but I was terrified. I played it off like it was a dream she had. Told her that I didn’t know what she was talking about. I don’t know if she believed me or if she was worried that I thought she was crazy or if she thought she was crazy herself. She stopped talking about it. And I stopped thinking about it. It became just another strange dream.”

“That was cruel,” I said quietly. “Making her question herself. You should have told her the truth.”

“I know,” he said. “I was a kid.”

“You were older than me.”

“And I was scared. At first, I thought it was a dream. If your mum hadn’t been there, hadn’t come to me afterwards wanting to talk about it, wanting to go back, I would have thought it was just a dream. I was already in love with her. She was my best friend, and I knew if I admitted to it, told her that I remembered it all, she would convince me to go back.”

“So, she stayed here for you. Like Jarius stayed there for Khadi. It doesn’t work out, one person making a choice for another.”

“Did you think about staying?” he asked, squeezing my hand a bit tighter.

“Not once,” I said.

“Not even for Lux?”

“No.”

“Then you’re smarter than me already.”

“She never forgot. She never stopped thinking about it. Do you think she went looking for a way back, after all this time? Or do you think she just stumbled upon it again and decided to stay?”

Clarence sighed and rubbed his free hand down his trousers, trying to get the sand off his palm. “I don’t know. I don’t think it matters. It all ends the same. She didn’t pick us. And there’s nothing good or fair in that. And there’s nothing that will make that easier except time.”

“She looked so different. I wish I’d recognised her sooner. I could’ve asked her.”

“You saw her?”

“She saved me. I didn’t realise it was her. She looked different. I could’ve talked to her.”

“Nothing she could say would make it alright, Never. What could you get from asking?”

“Clarity.”

“Everly, look at me and listen,” he said, and I did. “She loves you, but she is a selfish person and selfish people do not love well. It doesn’t matter if you could talk to her again. There will never be a good enough reason for her to leave you.”

“Or you.” I felt I should be crying. Perhaps I was too dehydrated. “We won’t be able to get back in. We won’t see her again. We won’t see either of them again.”

I could hear Sarah shouting for us. She was running down the beach, too fast for her long limbs which threatened to tangle with every step she took. I pushed myself to my feet and held a hand out to my dad. He grabbed hold and pulled himself up. We dusted off the excess sand and walked up the beach to meet the embrace of my hysterical, livid, and joyfully relieved sister.

We couldn’t tell anyone what happened, not even Sarah. They would have thought we were insane. Or lying. The official story was that Lux went missing from her house in the night. That much was true. I told the police that we used to sneak out, that sometimes we went swimming. Treachery is famous for its dangerous waters. Teachers from school told

them that Lux was bright, but troubled. That she made bad decisions. Again, that much was true. Lux was classified as a missing person.

Lux's aunt sold her house and moved back to the city. Lux was right, Fiona wasn't devastated. But before she moved, I ran into her at the shops. She froze when she saw me, dropped her groceries, and walked out of the store.

We stayed until the school year ended and then we moved. I thought Sarah would be angry, but she was excited to go. The police only spoke to us a couple of times, but everybody talked anyway. A missing mother. A missing friend. We had become a curiosity. Sarah was happy to have a fresh start. Clarence got a job at a university teaching history. We moved to a country town, far from the ocean. Sometimes I miss the crash of the waves and the salt in the air. I miss nights of running and climbing and being where I shouldn't be. I miss Lux and I miss my mum. But now I sleep through the night. Most nights I do not dream. But every now and then, I dream of an island, a jungle, and a strange, beautiful, dangerous house. I'm always relieved to wake up at home.

INTRODUCTION

THE FATHER FIGURE IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Of all the traits which come to mind when considering the father in children's literature, the most pervasive and repetitive is his absence. Even more than the mother, the father is set aside, and the reason is clear: it's difficult for any child to have an adventure with an authoritative and protective figure hovering nearby, so he is done away with. However, while the father is almost consistently absent, the manner in which the father is absent is variable. The father is largely omitted from children's literature; at almost every turn and for every possible reason—work, military service, travel, death, uncontrollable travel to other dimensions and neglectful parenting—the father is withdrawn from the plot of the novel. It was my intention when beginning this research to track the characterisation of fathers as they appear in children's literature, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day, to find a pattern in the type of father represented and the manner in which he is absent. I believed I would find a sequence, that one form of absence would lead into another and then another; that each form of absence would reflect the context in which it was written. However, what I found was that while one form of fictional father dominated children's literature of the early twentieth century, the latter half of the twentieth century hosted several forms of fictional father simultaneously.

It is the ambition of my creative thesis to reflect as many forms of the fictional father as possible. This was difficult, as I have attempted to build and maintain a character with some consistency. However, elements of all types of father are visible, even if a type of father is not present in its strictest form. In addition, there are components of father types which cross over. For example, a tendency to be affectionate, or to demonstrate authority over his family, may be demonstrated by multiple forms of father. Furthermore, while I have

identified recurring types of father in children's literature, and noted their characterisations, the father figure does not always exist strictly conforming to type. When a father figure is given fuller characterisation in a novel, he is also given the ability to change form, to transition from one type of father to another. He can show progression or regression over the course of the text. Because of this ambition I took inspiration for my creative thesis from novels which gave the father of the protagonist a substantial presence and a fuller character such as Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) and Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* trilogy (2003-2007). These texts demonstrate a deeper and more complicated relationship between the father and the child. Both of the authors also make use of the portal, and do not use that portal as a means of separating the father and the child. Instead the portal and the adventure it induces is utilised as an opportunity to bring the father and the child closer together, a goal which I have sought to emulate in my creative thesis. Furthermore, there is a lush quality to Funke's writing, which assists in her world-building and makes the secondary world she creates that much more intriguing and enticing.

In chapter one I name, define and discuss several distinct and recurring forms of fathers I have come across in my research; they are the Dead Father, the Traditional Father, the Passive Father, the Absent Father. Though the Traditional Father dominates the role of the father in children's literature of the first half of the twentieth century, from the 1960s on there is no single form of father at any given time, as Passive, Absent, and the Father in the Game are jumbled together. The Dead Father can be present in publications of any period. This does not mean that the father, as he is represented in children's literature, is not reflective of the time in which he is written. The availability of different forms of father in children's literature from the latter half of the twentieth century onwards suggests a kind of freedom and honesty in the representation of the father. He does not exist in a single form, because not all fathers fit under any single form. The father in children's literature then

becomes less of a representation of what fathers are expected to be, and more a reflection of the many kinds of father there are.

Chapter two will discuss the Father in the Game, the rarest form of father in children's literature. This chapter will demonstrate that the absence of the father in children's literature, for whatever reason is provided, is not a necessary plot device. While it may be easiest to remove the father figure so that the story may occur, the rule is not absolute; the father may be present and active in the story, alongside their child for the adventure to be undertaken. This chapter will explore the characterisation of the Father in the Game, giving examples from *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) by Madeleine L'Engle, *Danny the Champion of the World* (1975) by Roald Dahl, and *Inkheart* (2003) by Cornelia Funke, as well as my own creative thesis.

The purpose of chapter three is to explore the genre in which I have set my creative thesis. In this chapter I begin by attempting to define the genre of fantasy, then the concept of portal fantasy, of which I make particular use in my creative thesis. The role of genre can influence the extent to which a father is included in the text. In fantasy the presence of a portal can either lead to the father being excluded from the story, sidelined in the primary world, or can lead to becoming one of the main characters as he adventures alongside his child. The inclusion of the father in any adventure ultimately controls the plot and outcome of the text.

Chapter four will examine the concept of home as it is represented and challenged in children's literature. The influence of the father's character can be represented in the appearance and function of the home and the subsequent behaviour of the child. Each form of father creates a different type of home, with variations of wealth, comfort, stability and emotional support. This, along with the psychic landscape of the home.

The texts used as examples in this study have been restricted those targeted at readers aged 8-12 often referred to as books for middle grade readers. This age range was targeted over a younger demographic as several studies have already been conducted concerning the representation of the father in children's picture books (Adams, et al. 2011, Dewitt et al. 2013), whereas the subject of the father in children's literature of the 8-12 age range has been relatively untouched. The area of young adult fiction was also excluded from this study as a means of restricting the area of study. This study begins with texts from the beginning of the twentieth century as many texts from this period remain popular and influential today. Furthermore, to have a more suitable overview of how the representation of the father in children's literature has changed over time a substantial time period needs to be considered. The texts have primarily been published in English, though two texts, Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1979) and Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* trilogy (2003-2007), which were originally written in German, have been included because of their popularity in the English speaking world after their translation. This will not a comprehensive dive into all pertinent texts for the period addressed, as there is not room to do so, but it is a starting point for a subject area which has received relatively little attention. I will address many texts in this thesis, some to greater depths than others. Some texts have been chosen because of their continued popularity and influence; others have been chosen as they are the most effective examples of the concepts and theories I put forward. Further texts would have been addressed had the space of this thesis allowed for it.

Though his role in texts is often restricted, the impact of the father on the plot, the setting and genre, can be seen in every text. The father is a reflection of changing culture, the evolving family and the shifting way in which we perceive the notion of childhood.

CHAPTER ONE

FATHERS IN ALL FORMS

AN OVERVIEW OF FATHER TYPES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE OF 20TH AND
21ST CENTURY

1.1 “THE OL’ DEAD DAD SYNDROME”: THE POPULARITY OF THE DEAD FATHER

It is well known that the orphan is endemic in children’s literature. He or she is so popular a figure that to be a protagonist in a children’s novel it seems a prerequisite to suffer a great and isolating tragedy. But why is this figure so common? It is imperative to discover why so many writers remove parents thereby leaving children alone. In particular, the implications of this constant disposal of the fictional father figure need to be examined in order to fully understand these texts.

Some attribute the prevalence of the orphan in literature to the reader’s affinity with the orphan’s loneliness and isolation (Crain 13; Friis 5; Kimball 559; Stursova 30; Windling n. pag). Others declare the orphan’s frequent employment by authors is due to the character’s easy sympathy, convenient independence and the ease of having to write two fewer characters and develop two fewer relationships (Mattix 17-18; Tucker 189). The presence of parents in children’s literature would appear to be more trouble than it is worth, and the Orphan Plot is an uncomplicated and has created a narrative precedent. These reasons provide understanding as to why parents are often not used in children’s literature.

According to Leila Sales the overwhelming presence of orphans in children’s literature may be attributed to “lazy writing.” However, a cliché is not indolent if it is handled well. Some texts metaphorically murder the father, resulting in a silent, two-dimensional figure. Authors of such texts do not develop the father as a character and rarely, if ever, mention him again. His role is only to be dead and thus create an orphan. In other texts glimpses of the father demonstrate that his actions and character influence the protagonist and the plot, despite his demise. But, in rare examples, the dead father is made as complex and vibrant as a living character. These dead fathers demonstrate their ongoing influence. Their

presence haunts the borders of the now orphaned child's life as they refuse to fully be put to rest.

As stated above, this appeal of the orphan to the author may simply be one of convenience. Within children's literature the parent is largely a hindrance to adventure. Wilson and Short describe adults in children's literature as "obstacles" (142). If parents were to be living, caring and responsible, it is unlikely that any magical or transformative adventure would unfold. As Nicholas Tucker explains, "one of children's literature's truisms is that it is necessary to get rid of parents early on in a story if the child characters concerned are going to be able to experience really exciting adventures" (189). Adults impede magic. They are the doubters, reasonable and logical, the crushers of quests. It can be concluded that these types of parents must be eliminated from fiction because, as stated by Sales, "Grownups are boring." A narrative about a child living within the safety of their parent's limits is unlikely to be stimulating. The presence of the orphan inherently means the death of the mother and the father; thus orphans are the solution to this hindrance.

If a living fictional parent is a hindrance, however, then a dead fictional parent can become a tool. Within children's literature, the mother has recently received more scholarship than the father (Lisa Rowe Faustino & Karen Coats *Mother's in Children's and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism* 2016), while the father's role in children's literature has received little attention. The Dead Father can serve a function which has little to do with his character and more to do with the fact he is dead. It is not the loss of the father which determines how the novel unfolds, it is the creation of the orphan. The death of the father acts as a trigger, initiating a new story. Within literature, as well as 'real life,' the father is traditionally responsible for the protection and financial security of the family; thus, from the death of the father comes the loss of the home, safety, and normalcy. In Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) the death of Mary's parents results in her

relocation from India to England. In Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006) the death of the Baudelaire parents leads their children to living in a series of questionable homes, encountering increasingly absurd and ineffective carers. Roald Dahl's unnamed child protagonist in *The Witches* (1983) loses his parents and ends up being raised by his grandmother, a retired witch hunter, which leads to his encountering many witches. Neil Gaiman's child protagonist, Nobody, is adopted by Mr and Mrs Owens, ghosts at the local cemetery after the gruesome murder of his parents in *The Graveyard Book* (2008). These examples demonstrate that the death of the father leads to the liberation of the child from the safety of the traditional home. These deaths are often employed as a plot device, throwing the protagonist into mayhem, adventure and growth, for only when the child is away from the protection of the father may the story truly begin. As Windling argues, "A parent's death often sets such tales in motion, casting young people out of their homes or bringing evil right to their front door in the shape of a wicked step-mother, scheming uncle, jealous sibling or lecherous father. Calamity thus has a function in these tales..." (8). The death of the father is the incitement of calamity, igniting the plot which will stimulate the rest of the text. The texts above demonstrate that, within fictional worlds, being an orphan is an adventure in itself.

While the creation of an orphan may work as a narrative device, it most often also results in underwritten parents. Parents already play a minimal role in children's literature and to eliminate them and create an orphan is to limit their presence further. April Mattix attributes the high death rate of the fictional parent to a bid to liberate the author, as she argues "For the author, it removes the need to develop a character and all the relationships that character would be involved in" (18). The swiftest and surest method of avoiding the effort of building the character of the father and developing a relationship between the protagonist and their father is to metaphorically murder him. As Sales declares, "...creating

all those different relationships is hard work, because they are complex and ever shifting.” Once the father is killed off, a task completed at the beginning of the story, if not prior to the timeline of the story, then there is little ever mentioned of them again, except how their deadness has landed the orphan protagonist in a tragedy. In *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) Roald Dahl makes it clear where the reader’s sympathy should lie where he writes of the death of James’ parents, who have been eaten by angry rhinoceros:

Now this... was a rather nasty experience for two such gentle parents. But in the long run it was far nastier for James than it was for them. *Their* trouble was over in a jiffy. They were dead and gone in thirty-five seconds flat. Poor James, on the other hand, was still very much alive and all at once he found himself alone and frightened in a vast unfriendly world. (1-2)

Dahl has eliminated James’s parents by the end of chapter one and they are not referred to again. This demands sympathy for James and entices the reader to develop an interest with the trials he will come to face. Dahl is inviting the reader to forget the parents and join James in his adventures. The parents are gone; wash your hands of them and move on.

In *The Secret Garden*, Frances Hodgson Burnett treats Mary’s parents with the same kind of brutal efficiency, killing them with cholera and leaving Mary alone in her house to be discovered by officers. The demise of Mary’s parents, and Mary’s realisation of her own orphanhood is shown by the unsentimental narrator who states, “It was in that strange sudden way that Mary found out that she had neither father nor mother left; that they had died and been carried away in the night...” (7). There is an estrangement in her parents’ death which summarises Mary’s detached relationship with her parents. The reader is encouraged to be as dismissive and indifferent of the now deceased parents as is Mary herself and to accept Mary’s new status as an orphan.

Some deceased fathers receive even less acknowledgment. The narrative will begin with the orphan, the parents already deceased before the story has begun. The story begins with the orphan, who is often too young to remember their parents. These children are without even the comforting idea of the family. Not only free from parental supervision or the description of the home, these orphans are free from any grief or self-pity which may come from the loss of their parent. They know the world no other way. Dahl depicts such an orphan in his children's novel *BFG* (1982):

“I cannot help thinking,” said the BFG, “about your poor mother and father. By now they must be jipping and skumping all over the house shouting “Hello hello where is Sophie gone?””

“I don't have a mother and father,” Sophie said. “They both died when I was a baby.”

“Oh, you poor little scrumplet!” cried the BFG. “Is you not missing them very badly?”

“Not really,” Sophie said, “because I never knew them.” (30)

In this example the reader receives no description of the parents, nor any idea of their character, only the knowledge that they are dead. Sympathy is immediately taken from the dead parent and transferred to the child, even when she does not desire it.

In these texts, like many others in orphan literature, the father is not a character but a preliminary step to the creation of an orphan, and as such they are reduced to being a plot device. These fathers exist only to be killed, to create the orphan, and so incite adventure. Though the initial impact of their death may bring some sadness to their child and the reader, this does not linger. The orphan is not impacted by grief; they are liberated by their lack of family. As the orphan then has no ties, they are free to adventure in a way that those with a

family cannot. As demonstrated by Dahl in the BFG, Sophie can run away to the land of giants and never return, as there is no one to miss her.

This rootlessness and obliteration of the father, however, cannot be applied to all the orphans of literature. In Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, orphan siblings Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire not only recount fond memories of their parents, thus shaping the parents' characters, but also discover new information about their parents as the series unfolds. The Baudelaire parents were once part of a secret society, and the Baudelaire orphans are met with danger many times as they encounter their parent's enemies. The Baudelaire orphans are not rootless, they do not have a 'clean slate.' Instead, they are constantly affected by the choices their parents made when alive. The Baudelaire parents, though physically dead, are not entirely dismissed. The death of the parents can limit their role in the text, but it does not necessitate that they be entirely excluded. They remain integral to their children's lives, and therefore to the plot.

Any examination of the orphan as a plot device would be incomplete without the examination of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter. At first Harry may seem to be the ultimate example of the freedom fictional orphans gain from the death of their parents. Jeffrey W. Hull describes Harry Potter as one who is isolated, independent of family or family history, a character who inspires sympathy in his suffering and admiration in his victories. He asserts:

Harry is without roots, unburdened by family, culture, genetics. He is without history, and as such, with no story to live up to or to carry on, he is free to create himself afresh, to paint his own picture of who he is to be and how he is to live. The archetype of the orphan, is, in a sense, the ultimate foreigner, one who arrives in our midst—in a basket on the doorstep—helping to break our bonds, and our bondage, with the past, allowing us to see the world anew. (Hull 8)

However, if the archetype of the orphan is to be rootless, to be isolated from even the memory, ties or history of their dead parents, then Harry Potter is not an archetypal orphan. Though many of the dead fathers of children's literature are silenced in their deaths, or restricted in their roles, the father of Harry Potter haunts the borders of the sequence. Rather than being underwritten, as so many dead fathers are, Harry's father is revealed as the sequence unfolds, becoming as real and as full as any living character of the books. Harry is not only burdened by his father, but also by the history of his family. As such, his father's achievements, his relationships and legacies, affect Harry at every stage of his story. Harry is not defined only by his orphanhood; he is, despite James being dead, still his father's son.

In particular, James Potter haunts the sequence in a substantial form in the final novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. As Harry approaches Lord Voldemort, ready to sacrifice himself and end the war, he uses the Resurrection Stone to conjure the ghosts of those he has lost in his battle with Voldemort. James Potter is the first of the spirits described, wearing the clothes in which he died. Harry says to his father:

'You'll stay with me?'

'Until the very end,' said James. (Rowling, *Deathly* 561)

The spirit of James Potter supports Harry throughout the sequence and, in the fantasy world in which the books are set, has the ability to take a form "less substantial than living bodies, but much more than ghosts," and to recognise, speak to and, to a degree, protect his son (*Goblet of Fire* 560). James Potter is dead, but he is not at rest. He does not go quietly to his grave as many dead fictional fathers are apt to do. He lingers in the text, revealing himself to his son and to the reader; in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) James Potter appears as a reflection in the Mirror of Erised, in *Goblet of Fire* (2000) he is a ghost which emerges as Harry battles Voldemort in the graveyard, in *Order of the Phoenix* (2003) James

is shown as a boy in Snape's memory, and in *Deathly Hallows* he materialises before Harry sacrifices himself, to comfort his son. Consequently, Harry is never able to fully let his father go and vice versa. Though he does not dwell in his self-pity, Harry still longs for his father, for his protection and his comfort. When approaching his death, Harry leaves his friends behind, and his father, among other father-like figures, is one of the spirits he calls upon. It is obvious, therefore, that Harry never quite becomes the triumphant orphan, because he never overcomes the sorrow from the loss of his parents. He continues to wish for their presence and, due to extraordinary circumstances of the fantasy world in which he resides, he is able to see them. Harry demonstrates the evolution of the orphan role as Rowling goes beyond the functional orphan popular in previous children's literature. The death of Harry's parents is not a tactic used to liberate the child from familial ties and ready them for adventure. In *Harry Potter* the orphan is not liberated, but carries the loss of his parents always, even when he is victorious.

James Potter, despite being dead, acts as a live character throughout the Harry Potter sequence. His character is not two dimensional, but develops like other supporting characters of the series. Harry learns about his father from James's old friends, teachers and enemies. With each new account Harry receives of James, his relationship with his father develops and changes. The consequences of James's actions continue to affect those who were part of his life—especially Harry. Not only does James's fortune supports Harry, but his cloak of invisibility leads Harry into mischief, and his pained relationship with Snape brings Harry hardship and grief. James's death leaves Harry in a state of liberation, but also state of perpetual loss. James Potter is proof that the 'Ol' Dead Dad' can enhance the plot as well as bring depth to the characters, and that killing the father is does not have to result in an undeveloped or forgotten character.

When written well, the Dead Dad shows his mark throughout the book, the consequences of his actions can be seen and, when observing closely, his spectre can be seen haunting the margins of the story. I address the continuing impact of the dead father in my creative thesis with the character Lux. Lux is a secondary character and so her character is not explored in depth and the story is never told from her perspective. Lux is an orphan, having lost both parents in a car accident. The loss is dealt with in one paragraph in the first chapter and Lux is presented as being as unaffected by her parents' death as Sophie is in Dahl's *BFG*. The death of Lux's parents is used to create a character who is independent, free of familial ties, and seemingly unattached to the world around her. Because of these traits she is able to commit more fully into adventure, and like Sophie going to live in the land of giants, Lux proceeds into the fantasy without hesitation or regret. However, I also wanted add depth to this idea of the liberated orphan. Lux is not simply free of familial ties, like Harry Potter she is untethered and lost. She acts freely, but also recklessly. Lux feels free to move into a world of fantasy because she feels there is no place for her in her own world. The liberated orphan is not simply a joyful larrikin, but a lost child.

1.2 THE TRADITIONAL FATHER

From the beginning of the twentieth century through to the 1950s, the predominant father figure employed in children's literature is what I have labelled the Traditional Father. The Traditional Father, while the leading father figure of the early twentieth century, is not a dominant figure in the texts in which it is featured. Instead, the Traditional Father sits in the background of his novels, a shadow figure. This figure is a stereotype; he is rarely provided with distinguishable characteristics. His traits are customary: the Traditional Father is the authority figure, he is the protector and provider, he is the disciplinarian, he is rarely

affectionate, but often distant both emotionally and physically. The Traditional Father will rarely venture outside these functions.

Historically, the early twentieth century is noted as a period of disruption and change in the form and function of the family and of the father. Laura King, in a study focused on British culture in the early twentieth century, suggests there was an expansion of the role of the father and greater expectations of his involvement than as a provider, 'The bar for 'good' fatherhood was raised by the end of the interwar period; provision of the basics, to work for the provision of his family, was no longer seen as enough. This, along with a new psychological focus on parenting, meant that fathers' roles within family life became increasingly important' (Family Men 193). Furthermore, 'many suggested that the future of Britain was dependent on its children' and so the family and the roles of the parents gained national importance (Hidden Fathers 37). In another paper, King explores the image of 'the pram-pushing father to signify wider changes to both fatherhood and masculinity' (Now You See 604). According to King it was an image widely used in media to encourage 'certain norms in terms of behaviour and attitudes, and asserted that men were embracing a family orientated masculinity' (Now You See 602). Ralph Larossa, making a study of fathers in America in the early twentieth century, notes a similar strain of articles and imagery in American magazines.

Both King and Larossa note that a change in rhetoric does not necessarily constitute a change in behaviour. The idea that a new and progressive view of fatherhood was adopted ubiquitously was an 'optimistic picture of change' (King, Now You See 601) and that 'the press arguably overemphasized an idealized version of fatherhood' (King, Family Men 121). However, it is not unreasonable to think that 'these powerful cultural norms were influencing the behaviour of many men' (King, Now You See 609-610). The extent to which these new ideas were accepted by men of the period cannot be known, but that the ideas were present

and adopted, at least by some, demonstrates that transition from the traditional father type had begun. Both King and Larossa note that this change would have occurred ‘at different rates throughout the country’ (King, *Now You See* 611) and would have differed between social groups, with progressive ideas being adopted first by those of the middle or upper class, as they were the demographic of the newspapers and magazines who were publishing concepts on modern fatherhood (Larossa 9, King 153). ‘What begins in the cities and the middle class often fans out over time to other parts of the country and to other social groups... The diffusion, no doubt, was erratic and uneven, with some ecological areas and some class, racial, and ethnic groups proving to be less porous than others’ (Larossa 10).

Regardless of the progression, or lack thereof, of modern fatherhood in the home and in the media, the father as he was represented in children’s literature remained Victorian and patriarchal. Given the effects of two world wars and an economic collapse, a change in the representation of home and the family could reasonably be expected, but was not present. ‘There existed a marked contrast between what was depicted in children’s literature and what was happening in the rest of the world. In reality many families had lost husbands, fathers and sons, and yet those that we see in the popular children’s literature of the 1920s and 1930s tend to be complete nuclear families’ (Alston, *The Family* 47). Ann Alston attributes the stagnation of the father’s representation in children’s literature to nostalgia (*The Family* 47), ‘writers of children’s literature facing the reality of war turned to the familiar safety and security of the domestic story’ (49). The concepts of tradition, stability and family were upheld in children’s fiction, because of the loss, disruption and suffering experienced in the first half of the twentieth century. Therefore, the fathers, families and homes presented in the following examples are not necessarily representative of the larger reality of the period. However, given that concepts of modern fatherhood were undergoing an ‘erratic and uneven’

diffusion and the traditional ideas of fatherhood were still present, the representations of the fathers in the text are not without merit.

The frequency with which the Traditional Father appears varies between texts. In Enid Blyton's *Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (1937), *The Wishing Chair Again* (1950), and *The Naughtiest Girl in the School* (1940), the father of featured children never appears in the story, nor is his absence ever mentioned or explained. In E. Nesbit's novel *Five Children and It* (1902) the narrator explains, "Father had to go away suddenly on business..." (14), after which he does not return for the rest of the story. He is mentioned a few times by his family, such as when one of the children says, "Father said... there are shells there thousands of years old" (14) or "Oh how I wish daddy [sic] were here!" (182). Though the Traditional Father's role is passive, and he is rarely given any dialogue or an active part to play, this father is still a present figure in the family; his children refer to the knowledge he has taught them, and his wife wishes for his guidance in a time of crisis. Though he is a minimal figure in the novel, his influence over his family and his role as provider and protector is established. This absence of the Traditional Father can also be seen in Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* (1930), which Alston playfully describes as the 'God-given order of the patriarchally constructed family' (50). Edward Walker, father of John, Susan, Titty and Roger, is an officer in the navy and physically absent for the entire text; however, he is still a present figure in his household. The story begins with his children writing to him for permission to camp on an island and he has sent their mother a telegram with his response, as she has referred the decision to him: "BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS IF NOT DUFFERS WONT DROWN" (3). Ransome demonstrates that even from a distance the father still exercises authority, with his wife seeking guidance on raising their children. Even his children's fixation on boats and sailing can be related back to their father's career in the Navy, showing the father's influence over his children and the children's idolisation of their

father. Alston asserts that attitude of Ransome's work is Victorian, 'Ransome portrays a structured, ordered family, with a strong dependable father, an obedient mother, and children who work together to be true to their father's maxims... though physically absent for much of the series (he) maintains control' (The Family 50). The Traditional Father leads the family even when absent. This absence is not only acceptable, but honourable as the father is absent to serve in his duties to the nation.

This subset of the Traditional Father, being the trope of the military father is also adopted by Enid Blyton in her novel *The Adventurous Four* (1941). The association of Empire and family is popular, as the father, protector of the family, also become the protector of the nation (Alston, The Family 50). The father's absence is explained on the first page: "Their father was in the air force..." (Blyton 7). The father remains absent for the majority of the novel, returning only in the final four chapters in order to rescue his children from their mis-adventure. By becoming his children's rescuer, this father simultaneously fulfils his roles as the protector of his family and, as a commander in the air force, a protector of the nation. His role as an authority figure is clear as he takes control of the situation and brings the narrative to its conclusion. Blyton, 'a conservative' (Alston 53), creates this father as a figure to be admired, as narrator states "He thought Tom's father was a fine man, dressed in his grand uniform" (174). However, even this father, despite being a commander pilot and ultimately the hero of the story, is never given a name. He is referred to only as "Tom's father," "the children's father," or "Daddy" (174; 178; 162). This Traditional Father remains a stereotypical figure and his character is never developed beyond the necessary functions he must fulfil, that of provider and protector of his family.

While the Traditional Father displays loyalty, there is generally a lack of interaction and affection shown between him and his offspring. It is worth noting that Blyton's fictional father in *The Adventurous Four* displays an element of affection not yet witnessed in the texts

of this era. The narrator describes the emotional reunion between Tom and his father, “The grave-faced man stared at Tom as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. Then he took the boy into his arms and gave him such a bear-like hug that Tom felt as if his bones would break!” (162). However, it may be contended that this expression of affection is not typical, even for this father, as this father has just recovered his children from a perilous situation. A quantitative study of children’s picture books by Mathew Adam, Carl Walker and Paul O’Connell found that “Fathers are significantly under-represented in general and in terms of physical contact and emotional expression in relation to their children” (Adams, Walker, & O’Connell 267). David A. Anderson and Mykol Hamilton describe the father figure in children’s literature as “... presented as unaffectionate” (p.149). Affection is therefore not a typical trait of the fictional Traditional Father figure.

Another strong example of the Traditional Father can be seen in the character of Mr Banks from P.L. Travers’s *Mary Poppins* (1934). Mr Banks is still largely absent from the story, fulfilling his role as the provider of the Banks family, “... the City was a place where Mr Banks went every day – except Sundays, of course, and Bank Holidays – and while he was there he sat on a large chair in front of a large desk and made money” (Travers 15). As well as being the provider, this Traditional Father is at the apex of the family hierarchy, and he controls the financial standing of the house, “But Mr Banks, who owns it, said to Mrs Banks that she could have either a nice, clean, comfortable house or four children. But not both, for he couldn’t afford it” (14). Another example of this Traditional Father’s authority is when his wife turns to him for advice when their nanny departs, “And what am I to do?” (14). This figure of authority results in his children becoming influenced by their father, mimicking his language when they say, “Pooh, he’s a ninkypoop... I know because I heard Daddy call him one this morning!” (51). While Mr Banks possesses the stock qualities of the Traditional Father, he also possess a comical element as shown:

‘Where is my BAG?’ shouted Mr Banks, turning round and round in the hall like a dog chasing its tail... At last Mr Banks discovered the bag himself in his study, and he rushed into the hall with it, holding it aloft... ‘Who put it in the study?’ he roared.

‘You did, my dear, when you took the Income Tax papers out of it last night,’ said Mrs Banks.

Mr Banks gave her such a hurt look that she wished she had been less tactless and had said she had put it there herself. (Travers 164-65)

In this excerpt Travers can be seen parodying the typically authoritarian figure of the Traditional Father. Though Mr Banks is the head of the household, the provider of his family, and a great influence over his children, he requires the indulgence of his wife to uphold this image, even to himself. He may lead his household, but he also relies on their support. The authority of Mr Banks over his family is not tarnished by this element of his character, but the allusion to a dog chasing its tail provides a comical perspective on what is archetypally a serious and distinguished figure. Though his character is not questioned by his family, the reader may begin to question his infallibility. This is a great contrast to the heroic forms of father depicted in Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* or Blyton’s *The Adventurous Four*. If any kind of fault exists with these fathers depicted by Blyton, Ransome, and Nesbit, it cannot be known, as these authors do not provide adequate description or character development which would allow the reader to perceive it.

The Traditional Father in American children’s literature of the early twentieth century plays a more frequent and established role than his English counterpart. While the Traditional Father in American literature still maintains his role at the head of the household, the provider and ultimate voice of authority, he has more interactions with his children. He is still a strong

figure, but he shows a kinder and more affectionate nature when he is present. However, his increased presence in the narrative also serves as a plot device. When the Traditional American Father is present in the narrative, he is serving his role as a disciplinary figure, being sought out for permission as the voice of authority, aiding in a crisis under his role as protector or acting as the novel's informant, a source of information to the outside world which the child protagonists are not yet privy to, which results in the father informing the reader. In Laura Lee Hope's *The Bobbsey Twins* (1904), Mr Bobbsey owns a lumberyard and comes home every day for lunch. This is noted in the text as being routine, thereby establishing his presence in the family. However, Mr Bobbsey is often only given an active part to play in the text in times of crisis, such as when Grace faints while skipping (21), when Bert injures his ankle (57), when Freddie goes missing (89), when the twins' iceboat capsizes (107) or when the children are being bullied (165). Mr Bobbsey makes a habit of appearing in times of crisis. It is he who takes control of the situation by calling for a doctor, calling the police, going out searching for Freddie, or contacting the bully's parent. Each crisis is dealt with by this Traditional father and is never left for Mrs Bobbsey to oversee. Though this father's presence is more frequent and he is given dialogue and provided with a name, he is still not given distinctive character. His presence is more frequent, but it is still limited to the role of protector and therefore used as a plot device rather than demonstrating depth of character. In this manner, Mr Bobbsey does not exhibit behaviour beyond the scope of a Traditional Father.

Another example of a Traditional Father in American literature is in Elizabeth Enright's children's novel *The Saturdays* (1941). In this story Mr Melendy demonstrates these characteristics by providing protection for his family. ("‘Cuffy!’ shouted Father. ‘What’s burning?’" [154]). Mr Melendy also established authority over his house by asserting rules ("‘But he had certain conditions which they already knew by heart. They were the same

ones he had imposed when they started going to school by themselves” [20]). In addition, Mr Melendy is attributed with an overall positive image (“... they *did* have Father and he could not have been improved upon as a parent” [9]). Though his office is at home he is still largely absent from the events of the story due to work: “Father’s study, where through the closed door you could almost always hear the pecking and chiming of his typewriter” (10). Mr Melendy is only involved in scenes of *The Saturdays* on rare occasions. Due to this, Mr Melendy, as a Traditional Father, is present within the narrative to serve a purpose: as the authority of the household he grants permission and asserts rules, as the protector he takes control when the house is in crisis, and as his family’s provider he works tirelessly.

As the role of the Traditional Father is simple, to provide for his family, his non-presence in the plot of children’s literature was never a concern. As long as he was at work, he was fulfilling the role set out for him. Bengt Sandin notes, “At the start of the twentieth century the absent father was discussed solely as a problem of poor relief – how could he be made to pay maintenance to the mothers and children so that they did not become a burden on society?” (18). Though consistently absent from their households, these fathers are never considered neglectful, and their absence never causes resentment, for they are believed to be fulfilling their role as provider and protector. Chamutal Noimann writes of Edith Nesbit’s work that “Part of Father’s perfection is his absence because, according to contemporary societal expectations, the fact that he is away at work proves his commitment to his family’s social standing and economic stability” (372). The role of the father is simple and his presence in the day-to-day functioning of the household and the activities of his children is not expected. By going to work or going to war, he is fulfilling his duty, and if he neglects either of these to stay home and partake in his children’s adventures, then he may be considered a failure. However, if a father written in today’s children’s literature were to have such a limited role with his children, he would be considered neglectful. Within British and

American society, expectations of the father have changed, his role is more expansive, and more is demanded of him than financially supporting his family making it necessary for this change to be reflected within children's literature.

1.3 THE PASSIVE FATHER AND THE DEGRADATION OF AUTHORITY

In the 1960s there was a shift in children's literature and the once uncomplicated role of the father was no longer popular in children's literature and relationships depicted between the father and his child began to grow more complex. Though the role of the father had begun to change in the first half of the century, this change was not seen in children's literature until the latter half. The nuclear, middle-class family, which had dominated the representation of the family in children's literature, fell away to greater diversity in the representation of the family, including depictions of 'single-parent families... issues of divorce and abuse' (Alston, *The Family* 59). The changes in family and society which had begun in the first half of the century grew more prominent, as noted by Cabrera et al:

As we approach the twenty-first century, the structures and functions of family life are rapidly changing in the face of four prominent social trends: increased female employment, increased father absence, increased father involvement and increased cultural diversity. These changes have led to different family structures as well as expectations and beliefs about roles of fathers. (Cabrera et al. 132)

The father figure, rather than being a background character of authority, began to take form, developing an individual character and gaining an active role within children's fiction.

Authors demanded more of the father figure and if he did not meet these new standards he could be depicted as inept, neglectful, selfish, or even a source of danger. This lies in strong contrast to the heroic, infallible father represented in the work of Ransome and Blyton.

‘Parents might not be god-like,’ writes Alston, ‘They might not even be satisfactory, but they are becoming human, and to become human, feelings have to be portrayed’ (The Family 59). If the father is to be portrayed, not as the stalwart Victorian concept of what a father should be, but a realistic example of what a ‘modern’ father was, then he would need to be imbued with feelings and flaws as well as virtues. The American Psychological Association attributes the shift in the role of the father to the changing roles of women:

Their [women’s] increase in financial power made paternal financial support less necessary for some families. In tandem with the growing autonomy of women, related trends such as declining fertility, increasing rates of divorce and remarriage, and childbirth outside of marriage have resulted in a transition from traditional to multiple undefined roles for many fathers. Today’s fathers have started to take on roles vastly different from fathers of previous generations. (n.pag)

This suggests that the role of the father has had to change as their very purpose, to provide for their family, is no longer solely their responsibility. Furthermore, different family structures had arisen, leaving the role of the divorced, separated or single father somewhat undefined within literature. In texts of the Traditional Father, it was common to have families of multiple children; and the children would go on their adventure together. In children’s literature from the latter half of the twentieth century onwards it is more common for the families featured to have only one child. The child protagonist is alone in all of their experiences, including their relationship with their parents. This lone child protagonist can be of either gender, without discernible difference in treatment from their father. Rosalind Engel, whose research focuses on the status of the family in children’s fiction of the 1970s, notes that children’s literature “kept pace” (150) with the diversifying forms of family made prominent during that decade. Thus, the changes in the representation of the father in children’s literature may be understood as a reflection of the changing status of the father,

though, as noted earlier, the diversifying form of the father had been noted outside of children's literature decades earlier.

The father figure most like the Traditional Father to emerge after the 1950s is what I have termed the "Passive Father." The Passive Father is still a background figure, not involved in the larger plot of the text, as he still spends his days working to support his family. The Passive Father is more visible than the Traditional Father, as he is more likely to have a direct conversation with his child and to make regular appearances throughout the text. He is portrayed as a kind, somewhat absent-minded character. He is not a disciplinary figure, and his authority is secondary to that of the mother. In these texts the father no longer holds his place as the head of the household; instead, he is a docile figure often undermined by his own children. It is this disintegration of authority in the Passive Father that distinguishes him from the Traditional Father.

This Passive Father is portrayed in Derek Landy's novel *Skulduggery Pleasant* (2007). The protagonist Stephanie's father, Desmond Edgley, is presented as a muddled and eccentric character, in need of assistance to accomplish basic tasks such as remembering to put his shoes on (12). His forgetfulness is a recurring trait: later in the novel he forgets his underwear (255), and in the sequel *Skulduggery Pleasant: Playing With Fire* (2008) he forgets his shirt (39). When Desmond Edgley is first introduced he is ambling "through the house, looking like there was something he'd forgotten and he was just waiting for it to occur to him again" (11). Landy provides comments from Stephanie's mother such as "He's got the attention span of a goldfish" (13). The author provides the outline of a man who is sweet and forgetful, and though he is a good provider for his family, he is not as sharp or as capable as his eleven-year-old daughter, who manages a double life fighting the evil of a supernatural underworld. This imbalance of power is in contrast with the traditional authoritarian figure of

the father and suggests that the daughter, in some respects, is the superior figure in the parent/child relationship.

This concept is reinforced later in the novel when Stephanie returns from her magical escapades, having left a mirrored version of herself as a decoy for her parents. Desmond says to Stephanie, “In the last few days sometimes there’s a distance in your eyes I haven’t seen before. I don’t know what it is. I look at you now and you’re my little girl. But I’ve been getting the feeling that... I don’t know. Recently, it seems like you’re somewhere else” (260). Though Desmond is caring and intuitive enough to sense the difference in his daughter from a shadow creature, he is incapable of grasping the full scale of the situation, as the concept of a secret magical world in which his daughter performs death-defying feats is beyond his realm of comprehension. Desmond is put in an inferior position, as the power of the relationship rests with his daughter, who has chosen to withhold information from her parents. Though Desmond notices the difference he does not demand an explanation, but instead offers to support and listen should she wish to talk about it. This is a kind and gentle gesture, but also a passive one that once again results in the daughter maintaining power over her own decisions, even when they affect the rest of the family.

Another recent example of the Passive Father can be seen in Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002), a novel which focuses on the parent/child relationship. In this novel, Coraline’s interactions with her parents are pivotal to the plot. Though the father is a more significant character in this novel than the father in *Skulduggery Pleasant*, he is still presented as a passive parent, particularly when compared to his counterpart, the mother. Coraline’s interactions with her father are brief and often focus on Coraline’s disappointment at his behaviour. Their relationship is defined when Gaiman writes:

Coraline went to see her father.

He had his back to the door as he typed. 'Go away,' he said cheerfully as she walked in.

'I'm bored,' she said.

'Learn how to tap-dance,' he suggested, without turning around.

Coraline shook her head. 'Why don't you play with me?' she asked.

'Busy,' he said. 'Working,' he added. He still hadn't turned around to look at her. (13)

Coraline's father does not address his daughter's need or sympathise with her boredom or lack of friends in their new home, nor does he turn to acknowledge her or speak to her in full sentences. Though she is not physically neglected and has no greater issues than boredom, Coraline is clearly dissatisfied with her father and the amount of attention he shows her. Coraline's father receives his daughter's behaviour with minimal reaction or interaction, referring to his wife's disciplinary decisions or allowing Coraline to microwave frozen pizza when she criticizes what he has made for dinner. He is a passive, grey figure, seemingly without any strong emotions or decision-making abilities.

The father figure is not strictly fixed in his form. Some father figures are capable of changing as the story unfolds. The Traditional Father remains steadfast. He is not perceived to possess any faults, for he fulfils the duties required of him and thus change is unwarranted. It is also difficult, though not impossible, for the Dead Father to show progression of character, given his generally limited and stagnant role in his text. The Passive Father can, but does not always, demonstrate change. The father in *Skulduggery Pleasant* does not show any signs of change, but the child shows no dissatisfaction with their father's character, so, as with the Traditional Father, change is unnecessary. However, the father of *Coraline* shows a form of regression. From the beginning of the novel, Coraline's discontent with the lack of

attention and consideration she is afforded by her parents is made apparent. In contrast, when she is forced to take on the responsibility of rescuing her parents, Coraline recounts a time when she was younger, and she was closer to her father: “The air was alive with wasps... And while I was running up the hill, my dad stayed and got stung, to give me time to run away... I only had one sting on the back of my arm. He had thirty-nine stings, all over him. We counted later, in the bath” (40). This anecdote shows that Coraline’s relationship with her father was not always as it is during the timeline of the text. When Coraline was younger and a more dependent member of her family, she and her father shared a greater level of intimacy. Richard Gooding notes, “In her memory, Coraline had her father’s undivided attention, and she could enjoy a peculiar intimacy with him...” (400-401). Coraline remembers her father’s devotion in the form of his unhesitating sacrifice and the closeness of their everyday routine, before she had outgrown that stage of their relationship. At the conclusion of the novel Coraline’s dissatisfied relationship with her father has shifted and he shows a return to the more intimate relationship they once shared, “He put the computer to sleep, stood up, and then, for no reason at all, he picked Coraline up, which he had not done for such a long time, not since he had started pointing out to her she was much too old to be carried, and he carried her into the kitchen” (96). This display of affection between father and daughter, which had not been shown in the text at any other stage, shows a return to the earliest state of their relationship. By responding to his daughter, Coraline’s father overturns one of the qualities that contributed to his classification of the Passive Father and while this does not purport a complete transformation of character, it does demonstrate change.

In *Coraline*’s alternative world the roles of the Other Mother and Other Father still adhere to recognisable tropes. The Other Mother who adopts the role of the head of the family. She is the creator of the other world, the creator of the father and the punisher when things are not carried out as she has ordered. The Other Father is described as “this grub-like

thing... Its skin was tacky, like warm bread dough" (Gaiman 76). Once again, in contrast to the Traditional Father, the Passive Father is stripped of authority. He is portrayed through simile as insignificant like a grub and easily malleable like dough. The Other Father is merely a tool, passively awaiting orders. The dehumanisation of the father into a weak and literally malleable substance is hyperbolic of Coraline's view of her real father and his role within their home. Though her own father is not reduced to a disintegrating mess, the balance of power in her family is rendered clear, as is her perception of her father's strength of will.

This is demonstrated further when the Other Father is shown pity by Coraline, his daughter and theoretical inferior. "'Poor thing,' she said. 'You're just a thing she made and then threw away'" (Gaiman 76). Coraline demonstrates her superiority not only when she displays sympathy for the character, but also when she demonstrates her own strength of will as she fights and defies the Other Mother, showing the feebleness of the Other Father, as he is unable to disobey her orders despite his own desire to protect Coraline. The Other Father demonstrates the Other Mother's control when he exclaims, "Run, child. She wants me to hurt you, to keep you here for ever [sic], so that you can never finish the game, and she will win. She is pushing me so hard to hurt you. I cannot fight her" (76). Far from being the provider and protector of the household, this father figure is a threat to his assumed child due to his own weakness.

The Passive Father is one of the most frequently occurring fathers in children's literature written after the mid-twentieth century. On a superficial level he fulfils the same functions as the Traditional Father, to provide and shelter his family, by his absence from the text being due to his work. However, where the Traditional Father was an outline of what it was believed a father should be, the Passive Father is flawed. He is outwitted by his child, passive in his parenting, and is frequently undermined and teased. He does not have the authority of the Traditional Father, but has more depth and realism. While the Passive

Father's role in the text is still limited, it shows progression from the idealised and distant Traditional Father.

1.4 ABSENT FATHERS AND ANGRY CHILDREN

Like the Passive Father, the Absent Father appears in texts in the second half of the twentieth century. While the commonality of the fictional fathers is their absence, I have named the Absent Father thus because his absence is not narrative convenience, but a predominant theme throughout the text. Though they are absent the Traditional Father and the Passive Father are, within the story, considered a significant and present member of the household. Their absence is not a matter of contention within the text. By contrast, the Absent Father dominates his text. He is rarely physically present in the story, but his absence has such a significant impact on his child, the protagonist, that it becomes the subject of the entire novel. The result of the Absent Father is the Angry Child, who spends the course of the novel dwelling on their father's absence. In the portrayal of the Absent Father his character fluctuates between desired and vilified; he often fails to provide for his family, therein forsaking one of the traditional functions of the father, to provide for their family, and his absence causes grief, confusion, and anger in his child.

The defining difference of the Absent Father, when compared to the Traditional Father, is the reaction of the Absent Father's family to his absence. The absence of the Traditional Father and the Passive Father is expected and even encouraged. When these fathers are absent it is because they are earning money to support their family or defending their country; they are fulfilling their role as provider and protector and little else is expected of them. By contrast, though the Absent Father is often working when he is away, this no longer sufficient consolation for his family. More is expected of this form of father: a day-to-

day presence, a sense of assurance through regularity and, most revolutionary, emotional expression and understanding. The Traditional Father was never expected to be an emotional support to his child, but this changes in the Absent Father. There is anger at the absence of this father, as well as longing, confusion, and rejection. Where the absence of the Traditional Father, the Passive Father, and most Dead Dads has little impact, this father's absence becomes the theme of the text. There is greater difficulty for the father to be considered as competent, let alone with the reverence with which he was perceived as the Traditional Father. In fact, no father after the Traditional Father is considered with such admiration. The fathers of the latter half of the century onwards must be all things; they must provide and also be present for their child, they must be strong and emotionally available. No example provided in children's literature is able to fulfil these apparently conflicting demands.

Beverly Cleary's *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1983) is written in the form of a series of letters and journal entries by protagonist Leigh Botts. Leigh rarely sees his father, Bill, as his parents are divorced and his father, a truck driver, is constantly on the road. Leigh's longs for his father throughout the novel as he waits for his father to call him from the road. Numerous times throughout the text, this longing is demonstrated through Leigh's dialogue when he says: "Dad should be phoning me any day now" (49), "Dad should phone today or tomorrow" (51), "...I am waiting for Dad to call" (61), "Dad still hasn't phoned and he promised he would" (62), and "Dad still hasn't phoned" (64). This repetition shows Bill's absence dominating Leigh's thoughts and how Leigh is desperate for Bill's recognition. This Absent Father impacts his son's day-to-day life, causing Leigh to dwell on his father's character, why he is absent, and why he cannot keep his promises. Even though Bill is rarely seen in the text, his character is a dominant figure by psychologically tainting scenes even when he is not physically present for them.

Preoccupation with the Absent Father is also demonstrated in Mary K. Pershall's *Stormy* (1993). Stormy's father, like Leigh's, is a truck driver and often away on long hauls. As Stormy's mother died when she was young, Stormy is left with neighbours when her father, Ed, is away. Stormy's desire to keep her father home is an ongoing theme in the text; she fantasises about starting a business and fixing up their home so that he will feel tempted to stay with her, as demonstrated in the following scene:

When her dad walked in here and saw how she'd fixed the place up, his face would be full of light. But deeper inside her, behind the music, a dark little voice nagged: what if he never comes back?

He will! Stormy screamed at the voice. He's on his way home now!

It doesn't take a month to haul a load to New York and back. You know that, Stormy.

Maybe something slowed him down this time! Maybe he had trouble... (47)

Stormy's longing for the return of her father is clear. By trying to dream up new avenues of income and attempting to renovate their home, Stormy is taking on the role of provider for the family. Simplistically, she addresses the reasons for his absence as she sees them, such as a need for income and a desire for a welcoming home, and she attempts to remedy them. However, her internal conflict is also clear because, even as she dreams of making a better home, her subconscious recognises that this will not be enough, as there is another reason for his absence. Pershall presents this internal conflict in the form of dialogue, giving both Stormy and her voice of doubt new lines as the conversation goes back and forth. Even as Stormy fantasises about her father, she experiences anger. This combination of love and fury felt towards her father dominates the text, bringing Ed into the spotlight despite his physical absence from most of the story.

Both the Traditional and the Absent Father are absent for the majority of the text. This absence is presented differently in the text and so is received differently by their respective children. The Traditional Father is not often called upon in his absence, but is presented as a reliable figure, and when he is called upon, he responds e.g. Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* 'Duffers' telegram. The absence of the Absent Father resounds through the text as their children wait for their promised return or phone call. The Absent father is called upon to reach out to his family, but does not live up to his word, and so his child waits and wonders. The child of the Absent Father desires more frequent contact than that expressed of the children of the Traditional Father, so more is demanded of the of the Absent Father. However, given the advancement in communication, the increased availability of phones in the decades between the Traditional Father and the Absent Father, the ability to be in contact with their child, to call when they say they were going to call, would have been significantly easier for the Absent Father, thus explaining this increased expectation.

The Angry Child is a by-product of the Absent Father. While little reaction is given to the absence of other types of father, the Absent Father inspires fury in his children. The Traditional Father is allowed to absent without ramification from his wife or children; his absence is viewed as part of his duty as he works to support his family, sometimes also defending the nation. In the latter half of the twentieth century it is no longer sufficient for a father to only financially support his family, for his children's well-being he must also be emotionally present and available. While the child may still love their father and desire their presence, this does not prevent the child from reproach their father when he continues to fail them. In *Dear Mr Henshaw*, when Leigh manages to get in touch with his father, he exhibits irritation with his father's constant detachment:

'Well, kid—' he began.

‘My name is Leigh!’ I almost yelled. ‘I’m not just some kid you met on the street.’

(Cleary 70–71)

Though the term “kid” may have been meant in affection, Leigh finds it distancing, as though his own father does not know who he is. Given the constant physical distance between father and son, and the intermittent contact they share, the impersonal nature of the term “kid” is enough to provoke Leigh’s anger.

Titular character Stormy is known for her temper, and her frustration with her Absent Father has none of the subtlety of Leigh’s anger, but demonstrates the disappointment and anxiety found in her near constant state of longing for a father that is involved in her life. Stormy hears a truck in the distance, hopes it is her father and waits in anticipation for the vehicle to appear, but when she discovers it is not her father she lashes out:

‘Damn it!’ she screamed, and threw the can of soup out into the yard with all her strength. It landed against a clump of weeds without so much as a thud. She wanted noise! She wanted to hurl something hard and heavy, wanted something to break. She went out in the yard, picked up a rusty crowbar, heaved it against the house. That at least made a thud. Then she spotted a mayonnaise jar lying on its side the dirt, and she brought the crowbar down on that. The glass shattered, sent bright shards flying through the afternoon sun. She smashed what was left of the jar again, and again. She lifted the crowbar high and smashed and smashed, until the weight of the iron made her shoulders too tired to lift any more. (Pershall 42)

Stormy demonstrates her anger many times throughout the text, highlighting the significance of the impact of the Absent Father. Pershall portrays Stormy as a raw character, one who is sensitive and reactive; she becomes aggressive when she feels any kind of rejection. Due to

the near constant absence of her father, Stormy is in a constant state of rejection. The absence of this father is detrimental to the emotional state of his child. This is made more poignant still when there is no reaction to Stormy's tantrum; there is no adult to chastise or console her and she suffers her emotional state alone.

Like the Traditional Father both Stormy and Leigh's fathers are absent due to work, however this premise is no longer presented as sufficient reasoning for a distant relationship with their children. These children want to have time with their father and wish for returned affection. Their concern is not for how well their father provides, but if their father remembers them and is thinking of them. These examples show how the Angry Child is the result of the Absent Father and demonstrates the changing perception of the father and his role and responsibilities within his family.

In these post-Traditional Father texts, a significant element of change can be seen in the societal expectations of fatherhood. The father can no longer be a distant figure: he is expected to interact with his children. The children of the Absent Father crave emotional support and a significant amount of their distress comes from their Absent Father's inability or reluctance to communicate. While the Traditional Father is required to be stoic, the Absent Father is admonished for being so. In Cleary's *Dear Mr. Henshaw* Leigh expresses confusion, frustration, and longing at his father's inability to express himself: "I am bothered when my Dad telephones me and finishes by saying, 'Well, keep your nose clean, kid.' Why can't he say he misses me and why can't he call me Leigh?" (Cleary 28). Leigh's confusion is evident through Cleary's use of rhetorical questioning. Leigh is flummoxed and distressed by his father's inability to be affectionate or emotional and he questions his father's behaviour without expecting an answer. These examples illustrate how the role of the father has expanded from its limited form in the early half of the twentieth century.

Despite the lack of emotional intelligence of the Absent Father, there are moments when even this stereotype is infiltrated by a character's feeling. Within *Dear Mr Henshaw*, there are moments in which Cleary allows the audience to glimpse the underlying emotional state of the father. Leigh recounts a phone call he has with his father, saying: "Then Dad surprised me. He asked, 'Do you ever miss your old Dad?'" (105). Leigh is surprised at the emotional vulnerability of his father, showing again how this behaviour is not typical; but from this it can be seen that the separation of this father from his family has also affected the father. This vulnerability, not seen in the Traditional Father, shows a depth of character that readers were not previously privy to. The Absent Father is capable of emotional expression, though he is inhibited, self-absorbed, and his expression demonstrates his limited knowledge of his child.

The depth of the Absent Father is also demonstrated in Pershall's *Stormy*, as the reader is shown Ed's tormented past and possibly given reason for his inability to stay in one place:

That night, jerked out of sleep, Stormy sat straight up in bed. Someone was screaming. Mike Hammer was at the window! No. It was her dad. She grabbed a flashlight, went into his room, woke him up. 'Dad. Dad! It's all right...' It was the war. Fran said he'd been shell-shocked. When he was frantic like this he would never say what was scaring him, and in the daylight when he was normal and calm, Stormy did not want to ask. (Pershall 85-86)

Though it is clear Ed's absence affects Stormy, this scene, followed by Ed indicating his intention to leave, shows the Absent Father has his own needs. Although Ed loves his daughter, he does not live solely for her. Though the abandonment of his daughter is hurtful, the reader is better able to understand his behaviour, due to having an insight into Ed's own

emotional world. Ed could be judged, therefore, as not wholly bad, nor wholly good. Thus it can be seen the Absent Father is multifaceted, and not as simplistic a character as the Traditional Father.

Ergo, the Absent Father is not shown as a totally incapable and uncaring father figure because although he has moments of emotional failure, there are also moments of success when he is able to connect with his children. To illustrate, Cleary depicts scenes in which Bill displays great care, consideration and effort to make his son happy. Cleary depicts a scene before Christmas in which Lee's father gets Lee a thoughtful gift: "Dad had sent what I always wanted – a quilted down jacket with a lot of pockets and a hood that zips into the collar... It was the right size and it felt great. Getting a present from my Dad in time for Christmas felt even better" (44). From this scene it can be noted that Bill showed organisation and effort to obtain his son a Christmas present on time. Furthermore, the present was desired by his son, suggesting Bill has paid attention to his son's desires and made the effort to meet them. It is scenes such as this that allow the reader to understand why Leigh may continue to show faith that his father cares about him. Though Bill may often fail as a father, there are times when he lives up to Leigh's expectations. This contradictory display of behaviour, from the repeatedly inconsiderate to the unexpectedly thoughtful, is ultimately confusing for both Leigh and the audience. Bill's character and behaviour are not consistent, and as a result this father cannot be consigned to the binary of good or bad father.

Similarly, this contradictory behaviour can be observed in Pershall's *Stormy*. Stormy's father also shows his daughter great affection and consideration, in contrast to his extended absences and broken promises, which dominate the majority of the text. Ed buys his daughter pets and teaches her how to ride, he remembers her birthday, and shows pride in her strong temperament and mechanical skills. It is clear Ed loves his daughter and enjoys her

company. Therefore, his choice to stay away, despite her obvious distress at his absence, seems insensitive in contrast.

The demise of the Absent Father is most starkly shown through his inability financially support his family. While the Traditional Father is absent with the purpose of providing for his family, the Absent Father is absent and fails to fulfil this most basic task of fatherhood. This is demonstrated as Cleary depicts Leigh's father repeatedly forgetting to send his support payment, as Leigh states, "Maybe I was mad about other things, like Dad forgetting to send this month's support payment" (31). Leigh's father is irresponsible, neglecting the one of the few duties he is able to accomplish from the distance which his work demands. This financial neglect angers his son, who, despite his age, is aware of his family's financial difficulties. As the father neglects his duties, the child is less able to remain as a child. As Leigh's father fails to provide monetary support for his family, Leigh is forced to become concerned with money.

The Absent Father is a complex kind of father, as these examples reveal. He is shown to be both caring and inconsiderate. He is spoken of with great affection and admiration, only to then be spoken of with mistrust and anger. The important fact remains, though, that the Absent Father *is* spoken of; whether referred to in a positive or a negative light, the Absent Father is a significant character in whichever text he occupies. He is no longer an outline, but a multi-dimensional and complicated character, and it is perhaps because the Absent Father is a rounded character that he has flaws. The families of the Traditional and Passive are typically nuclear, originating from middle-class backgrounds. The Absent father gives insight to alternative family structures and often comes from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Because of this, the Absent Father provides a more complex, realistic, and emotionally engaging depiction of the family in children's literature.

1.5 THE DIVERGING FATHERS IN MY CREATIVE THESIS

It was the ambition of my creative thesis to explore as many forms of the father as possible. There was not room to explore the character of Lux's father with great depth, but the impact of his death upon Lux results in an angry and reckless character whose actions drive the plot of the novel. I feel that it is unrealistic for the death of the father to have such a limited impact on his child as is shown in *The Graveyard Book* and *BFG*, and this is one aspect of the fictional father I have addressed in my creative thesis by not only endowing Lux with freedom, but also demonstrating the lack of connection, and the results with which the child must contend.

From a limited perspective, the father in my creative thesis, Clarence, father of the protagonist, could be viewed as a Traditional Father. He is initially absent from the home, occupied with financially supporting his family. When he is first introduced, he is greeted by his daughter Everly, with enthusiasm, demonstrating that she appreciates him. As with Edward Walker's telegram in *Swallows and Amazons*, Clarence sends his instruction from a distance, for example, texting his daughters to come straight home from school during a storm. Sarah and Everly's obedience indicates Clarence has some degree of authority; however, his authority is not absolute. Clarence receives reprimands from both his daughters for being absent from the home and, though she is initially excited to see him, Everly's relationship with her father is complex, oscillating between anger and affection. As such, Clarence's relationship with his daughters does not simply reflect the unblemished admiration of the stalwart Traditional Father. My creative work briefly exhibits some elements of the Traditional Father through the character of Clarence, but I do not depict a figure which fully represents the Traditional Father. The Traditional Father is absent for the majority of the story without any complaint or upset from his children, and as such is no longer an appropriate figure of fatherhood in contemporary society.

Elements of the Passive Father are reflected in my creative work, with the father's initial behaviour. Clarence makes dinner for his daughters, though he is not at home for the meal himself and the food is frozen. Ignoring their father's efforts and instructions, Sarah and Everly decide to have cereal for their evening meal. The children's act has an air of solidarity, a joint discontent with their father's absence. There is no consequence to the girls' misbehaviour; Clarence is not seen to realise it or acknowledge it, which demonstrates that the father passively receives their actions. When Sarah criticises her father, his appearance, and his parenting, he receives her admonishments quietly, barely defending himself. While his passive behaviour does not last the duration of the text, his manner only becomes more active due to more stressful circumstances to which he is forced to react.

That the Absent Dad manifests itself in the Angry Child is an element that I have attempted to express in my creative work by demonstrating Sarah and Everly's dissatisfaction and anger towards their father. Though different from other Absent Fathers, Clarence lives in the home and attempts to create a safe and caring environment for his daughters. Clarence is similar to the Absent Father as his daughters demand more from their father than financial support, indicating once again that more is required of the father than was expected of him in his traditional form. This is exacerbated as Clarence is the only parent present and is required to perform both of the traditional mother and father roles. As in the former examples, Everly is preoccupied by her father, thinking of him frequently, and imagining interactions between them. This psychological conjuring of her father's presence allows Clarence to take part in the narrative, even in his absence, which is reminiscent of the fathers in *Dear Mr Henshaw* and *Stormy*. However, as Everly is drawn into a fantasy realm, the absence of the father in the home does not dominate the text as it does in Absent Father texts. In texts featuring the Absent Father there is no relief for the child, no respite from reality.

1.6 CONCLUSION

The treatment of the father in children's literature varies wildly: he can be anything from unacknowledged, like the father of Enid Blyton's *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair*, to a character who dominates the narrative, like Leigh's father in *Dear Mr Henshaw*. These representations, though they may demonstrate some unique characteristics or behaviour, consistently fit one of the four above types: the Dead Dad, the Traditional Father, the Passive Father, or the Absent Father. Though represented in different ways, the uniting characteristic of all the fictional fathers explored above is that they are mostly absent from the text and therefore from the lives the story's protagonists, their children. The persistent absence of the fictional father may be a writer's device to gain freedom for their child protagonist, but the varying manner in which the fictional father is absent, and the manner in which he is perceived by his family, illustrates the changing role of the father in society.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FATHER IN THE GAME

AN INTRODUCTION OF THE RAREST FORM OF FATHER IN CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE

The Father in the Game is the rarest father in children's literature. The Father in the Game is not sent to work for the duration of the adventure, nor is he a bumbling and ineffective background figure or a father who has largely abandoned his duties to his child. Every other type of father I have identified is notable for their absence. The Father in the Game, however, is present and engaged. In texts which feature this father, the adult figure actively joins the adventures of the child protagonist. In these cases, the relationship between the father and the child is at the forefront of the novel and the character of the father developed and full. The Father in the Game is the only form of father in children's literature where the father is a primary character throughout the text. Proving the father need not be ejected from the story for the child to have an adventure, but can be present for and part of the primary story line. This chapter will examine the features of the Father in the Game, how this type of father is employed in the texts, and examples of this father in Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), Roald Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World* (1975), Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* (2003), Sarah Singleton's *Century*, and my creative thesis.

The reappearance of the father figure in children's literature, if he reappears at all, most often signals the end of the adventure. The child has returned to the safety of the home and now the father, representative of that safety, may reappear. The father is set apart from the adventure, because the adventure is a time for the child to prove themselves and in most texts that would be difficult under the supervision of a protective carer. As explained above, the father in children's literature has been traditionally viewed as a protective figure. In children's literature from the first half of the twentieth century, the father is frequently called upon in times of need. He is the trusted authority within his household, respected and admired. However, the Father in the Game is not faultless. He is most often an affectionate and loving father, and as such is actively involved with his children. The Father in the Game is not only admired and loved by his children, but, there is a realism and modernity to this

father. As a consequence of his character being rounded, his faults must be shown. This father makes mistakes, but, as his heart is good, he attempts to rectify them. Most importantly, the Father in the Game is not capable of solving every problem brought forth during the story as he has his limitations. This father is the most active type of father in children's literature, but he is unable to take over the action and save the day. As a result, the story still belongs to the child, allowing the child protagonist to remain the hero of the narrative. If the Father in the Game were to be the admirable and faultless hero of early children's literature, his involvement in the story would bring the plot to a swift end and leave the child protagonist with little or nothing to do. In this way, the plot of early children's literature is only possible due to the absence of the Traditional Father. The Father in the Game is present, but his limitations allow the child protagonist to have agency within the story. It is not the purpose of the Father in the Game to shield and protect the child protagonist, but to support the child as they grow. In turn, the child comes to recognise the limitations of their father. As the child completes tasks the father is not able to do, they surpass their father and gain independence.

The standard plot of the Father in the Game is for the father and child, in a traditional relationship of carer and charge, to encounter a course of danger and adventure. This danger is often the result of the uninformed or misguided actions of the father. During the ensuing adventure, the father will prove unable to conquer all challenges and keep his child protected. As a result the child will step forward, proving their capability and in doing so surpassing their father and disrupting the balance of the father/child relationship. The child ends their story with greater independence, responsibility, and become an equal with their father.

A Wrinkle in Time (1962) by Madeleine L'Engle is an early example of the Father in the Game. This text provides the most overt example of the child protagonist's realisation of the limitations of their father and the subsequent surpassing of father by the child. In texts

which include the Father in the Game, the relationship between the father and his child is generally positive and affectionate. In *A Wrinkle in Time* the relationship between the child protagonist, Meg, and her father, Mr Murry, is strong and intimate, but strained. At the beginning of the story, Mr Murry is missing and the significance of his absence is noted in all aspects of Meg's life. When Meg gets into a fight at school or has difficulty fitting in, it is noted that her father would normally counsel Meg when she feels out of place. When Meg does her homework, it is noted that her father taught her maths, the skill in which she is strongest. Though the relationship between father and daughter is strained by his absence and the uncertainty surrounding it, the bond between them is still strong and Meg still views her father with admiration and loyalty. That loyalty is illustrated when Meg defends her father's appearance, "He is too handsome" (49), and when she insists that her father will come home when her school principal starts referring to Mr Murry in past tense. The story, despite Mr Murry's absence, begins with a traditional relationship of carer and charge. Meg believes her father will come home and set everything right.

Subsequently comes the encounter with danger. In novels which feature the Father in the Game, the father is not only caught up on the action of the novel, it is he who is responsible for the ensuing adventure and all of its danger. Karen Sands-O'Connor says of modern children's literature that parents are "frequently present and they are a source of danger for the child" (231). The Father in the Game is not malicious or violent, and he does not intentionally bring his child into this adventure, but he is ultimately responsible for it due to his own misguided and/or uninformed actions. In *A Wrinkle in Time* the father, a physicist, was experimenting with time and space. While he never intentionally pulled his children into the adventure, he did willingly partake in the experiment despite the fact that the last of his colleagues to do so disappeared and never returned. He attempts to "tesser" to Mars, but ends up on the hostile planet of Camazotz, which is controlled by a dark entity known as IT. His

children, Meg and Charles Wallace, must travel across the universe to rescue him. The father's misadventure leads the children into their own adventure, thus, the call to adventure comes through the father. As a consequence, the father is not just part of the adventure; he is, inadvertently or advertently, the initiator of the novel's complication. The Father in the Game is not only a present parent, but an active and central character to the text's plot.

A Wrinkle in Time also provides an excellent example of how the Father in the Game is also endowed with limitations. This occurs when Meg, Charles Wallace, and their friend Calvin are recruited by Mrs Whatsit, Mrs Who and Mrs Which to rescue Mr Murry from the other side of the universe. Meg believes once they have rescued her father, she will return home and everything will go back to normal. However, during the rescue mission they lose her brother to IT. Meg is angry and blames her father, who she had believed would remedy the situation upon his liberation. His inability to do so is highlighted in the following scene:

She had found her father and he had not made everything all right. Everything kept getting worse and worse. If the long search for her father was ended, and he wasn't able to overcome all of their difficulties, there was nothing to guarantee that it would all come out right in the end. There was nothing left to hope for. (207)

Though Meg had ventured across the universe to save her father, she had done so under the belief that once he had been saved, her father would save her in return. Once she had liberated her father, she expected him to assume his parental responsibilities. She had been determined to return to the traditional father/child relationship of carer and cared for. At the beginning of the novel, Meg views her father with unlimited admiration and unquestionable loyalty. Because of this idealised perception, she expected her father to defeat the powers of darkness which were taking over the universe. Meg is flummoxed when her father's rescue mission ends with the capture of her brother and her father tells her simply, "I

am a human being, and a very fallible one” (207). Meg must accept her father as he is, and therefore accept that he is not capable of acting as her saviour and that now she must take on some of the present responsibility herself. Meg learns that she cannot sit passively by and be protected by her father, though that is what she had hoped for. Meg demonstrates her new understanding of her relationship with her father by saying to him:

I wanted you to do it all for me. I wanted everything to be all easy and simple... So I tried to pretend that it was all your fault... because I was scared, and I didn't want to have to do anything myself. (242)

As a result it is Meg alone who confronts IT on the planet Camazotz and rescues her brother. She forgives her father for his limitations and assumes responsibility for the safety of her family. In this way Meg surpasses her father. Where he spent a year in captivity, Meg defeats IT in one quick confrontation. Where Mr Murry failed, Meg has triumphed and as such she assumes the role of the Murry family's protector.

As The Father in the Game does not ultimately become his family's rescuer, and the children are forced into defending themselves, it could be argued that the Father in the Game has failed as a father. Mr Murry has inadvertently both abandoned his children and introduced danger into their lives, and therefore, not only failed to protect them, but has become “a source of danger” himself (Sands-O'Conner 231). If the Father in the Game were to be measured by the standards of the Traditional Father, then Mr Murray would be viewed as unsuccessful in that role. However, it is not the purpose of the Father in the Game to intercede and conquer all challenges presented in the text; rather, he must recognise his limitations and allow his child to surpass him. Though Meg's father acknowledges that he is not capable of defeating IT, he still attempts to take Meg's place in the fight, until he is told to step aside by one of their guiding celestial beings: “You are going to allow Meg the

privilege of accepting this danger. You are a wise man, Mr Murry. You are going to let her go” (242). Mr Murry must stop protecting his daughter and in doing so he does not fail as a father, but allows for his child to grow beyond his care. If Meg’s father did not reach his limitations, Meg would have been excused from facing danger and she would have finished the novel as she had started it. This demonstrates that the crucial step in the development of the child protagonists that the father, by necessity, must show himself to be flawed as he is not the saviour of the text; his child is.

This pattern of the Father in the Game is again seen in Roald Dahl’s *Danny the Champion of the World* (1975). Danny’s father is the sole influence on Danny’s character and a driving influence on the plot of the text. Karen Sands-O’Connor asserts that Danny’s father and “his parental guidance are the central force of the novel” (227). Danny’s father presents a fine model for the Father in the Game. The child and father start their story in a position of harmony. The child is filled with admiration for his father and in return the father is a loving and attentive carer, as Danny declares, “my father, without the slightest doubt, was the most marvellous and exciting father any boy ever had” (205). Danny’s father raises Danny alone and though their circumstances are limited, particularly financially, Danny never feels that he wants for anything. Danny’s father is an eccentric character with strong opinions. He keeps Danny out of school until he can assemble a car engine by himself. Danny is also the recipient of his father’s time and attention, with this Father in the Game mentoring Danny in the skills of flying kites, building treehouses, wielding bows and arrows, boomerangs, as well as walking on stilts.

As with the previous examples of the Father in the Game, this harmony is disrupted by the call to adventure. Once again it is the father who invites danger into his family. When Danny is nine, his father begins to poach pheasants again, a habit he had abstained from after Danny’s mother died as he did not want to leave Danny on his own. Danny knows thieving is

wrong and his initial reaction is one of confusion, as he states, “I was shocked. My own father a thief!” (30). But Danny’s father’s influence is such, and the owner of the pheasants, Mr Hazell, is so spectacularly dislikeable, that Danny concedes to the idea. Upon reflection Danny surmises, “You will learn as you get older, just as I learned that autumn, that no father is perfect. Grown-ups are complicated creatures, filled with quirks and secrets” (25). Danny’s realisation of his father’s faults is significantly less traumatic than Meg’s in *A Wrinkle in Time*. So smooth is his acceptance of his father’s criminal activities that Danny eventually joins his father in his poaching. Once again, the father is the trigger for the story’s complications, but it is these complications which lead to the growth of the child.

Danny’s growth becomes apparent, not only in his initiative to rescue his father, but also in his abilities, as his skills in poaching surpass that of his father. Danny devises a new technique which his father receives with enthusiasm. When Danny initially asks his father if he can join him when he tries Danny’s new technique, Danny’s father agrees with gusto: “But my dear boy, of course you can come with me! It’s your idea! You must be there to see it happening!” (102). There is no hesitation by Danny’s father and he is thrilled to have his son come poaching with him, despite the danger and moral questionability of the act. Though Danny had never been poaching before, he manages to surpass the efforts of his father on the first expedition he joins. Danny’s new poaching trick allows him and his father to gather one hundred and twenty pheasants, which Danny’s father declares to be a new world record, making Danny the “champion of the world” (159). Even as Danny outdoes his father, Danny’s father receives his son’s achievements with joy. As Sands-O’Connor surmises, “... in *Danny the Champion of the World* the book ends with the father idolizing the son” (228).

In novels featuring the Father in the Game, the growth of the child occurs when the child surpasses the father and proves their independence. Eva Sturvosa describes this attainment of equality between father and son as “adultification... a form of emotional caregiving when the

parent or adult consider the child being mature enough to be his or her best friend, source of support and social companion” (27). At the beginning of the novel the reader is presented with a small boy who is told marvellous stories before bed and has a “midnight feast” of sandwiches prepared for him by his father. Danny’s transition from child to companion is illustrated when at the end of the text when Danny walks hand in hand into town with his father to buy an oven. They discuss having a dinner party for their friends and what they will need to buy before they have guests over. The discussion of cutlery is far more grounded and less fanciful than their interactions at the beginning of the story. They sound far more like partners than father and son.

However, Sands-O’Connor suggests that this independence is something for which Danny is “ill-equipped physically and emotionally” (228) and that as he achieves a level of equality with his father Danny will potentially “end up fearful or damaged from lack of guidance” (227). Sands-O’Connor asserts that this growth and independence is premature: “Danny is still a child, but a child who has become the sometime-partner and sometime-protector of the person, his father, who still should be protecting him” (229). This view is one which sentimentalises childhood and suggests the goal of the text should instead be the protection of the child’s inherent innocence, rather than the development of their character as they progress through childhood (Dodou 239). If this is the case, then the child protagonist’s growth, as demanded by the plot of the *Father in the Game*, is unhealthy, rather than a triumph. And yet, it must be remembered that the child of the *Father in the Game* fiction is often an extraordinary child, although this can only be demonstrated through extraordinary circumstances, and cannot be judged on ‘real world’ standards. Danny is the champion of the world, and it is his unconventional childhood that has made him so. Stursova describes Danny as “a well-adjusted, independent child” (28). Though he can no longer say that he does not have a care in the world, he still describes his adventure as “fun” and says he “loved

it” (208). A plot which demands the preservation of innocence is one which would stunt the potential of the child and infantilise them. The Father in the Game cannot keep the child from danger, but can support them as they mature and grow.

Unlike the other examples of the Father in the Game, Dahl’s novel is not a work of fantasy; there is no secondary world into which the father and child are drawn. Presumably this would ease the facilitation of the father/child relationship, as there is no means to separate them. However, arguably it is the strange adventure induced by the introduction of fantasy which progresses the relationship of the father and the child. Danny’s relationship with his father progresses around a particular incident, though the incident itself is not extraordinary; so the progression of their relationship is somewhat natural. The Father in the Game is present wherever the adventure may be, whether it is one of realism or one of fantasy.

Inkheart (2005), though German, is also included in this canon due to the popularity of its English translation. From the outset of the novel *Inkheart*, Cornelia Funke establishes a strong and intimate relationship between the child protagonist Meggie and her father Mo. The relationship between Meggie and Mo is introduced in a similar manner as depicted in other examples: “Meggie had inherited her love of books from her father. When she took refuge from a bad dream with him, nothing could lull her to sleep better than Mo’s calm breathing beside her and the sound of pages turning” (9). Meggie has a familiarity with Mo’s habits which suggests a high level of dependence. Mo is her stability: “Mo was her home” (34). Meggie is shown to have a comprehensive knowledge of Mo which can be seen as she knows his opinions and his facial expressions, and always knows when he is lying. She empathises with his feelings, and hence feels happy when he laughs and concerned when he appears worried. Meggie adores her father and even wishes that she resembled him instead of her mother, as stated in the following narration: “But Meggie wished she did look more like him.

There wasn't a face in the world she loved more" (16). Meggie's mother has been missing since Meggie was three and though Meggie herself is said to be friends with children from the village, those friends are never introduced to the text. The only relationship Mo and Meggie are shown to have is with one another, accentuating the sense of Meggie's dependence upon Mo as being very strong.

Once again, the call to adventure comes through the father. Mo has the ability to bring fiction to life whenever he reads aloud. Mo only discovered this ability when Meggie was three and he read aloud to her from the novel "Inkheart," bringing to life several of its characters, mainly villains, and losing his own wife, Meggie's mother, who disappears into the novel. From that time, Mo and his daughter have been pursued by "Inkheart's" villain, Capricorn, who desires both the copy of the novel in Mo's possession and Mo's ability to read fiction to life. Mo manages to evade Capricorn for nine years, stalling the pending confrontation. It is Mo's mysterious ability which brings trouble to his family and ultimately pulls Mo and Meggie into the adventure of the novel. Though Mo could not have predicted the result of his reading aloud, the origin of the story's adventure ultimately leads back to him.

Meggie's growth to independence is more difficult than that of Danny or Meg, as Mo's initial reaction is to protect Meggie and separate her from the danger. While Danny's father joyfully accepts the growth of his child and Mr Murry accepts his own shortcomings and the need for his child to face the danger herself, Mo attempts to keep Meggie safe at all times, even if he is ultimately unsuccessful. In chapter six, "Fire and Stars," Mo willingly goes with Capricorn's men when they come to take the book, on the stipulation that Meggie remains at her aunt's house. Though Meggie prefers to remain with her father, despite the danger present, Mo offers throughout the book to remain in danger if his daughter is allowed to return to safety. This trait makes Mo the most realistic of all the Fathers in the Game.

Danny's father is all too excited to have his son commit a crime, while Mr Murry only puts up a token resistance to his daughter facing IT, despite himself having been kept hostage by this being for months. The ability of these fathers to accept their child's independence and allow them to take their place as the story's hero is significant. Though Meggie does end up becoming embroiled in danger, Mo never willingly allows this to be so. Circumstances, however, move beyond his control, and although his fallibility is revealed, Mo never permits his daughter to join the fray.

Despite her father's reluctance, Meggie shows her assertiveness and independence from early in the novel. She is dependent on Mo, but it is this dependence which drives her to action. She cannot be without Mo and so she must brave enough to rescue him. When Mo leaves with Capricorn's men he inadvertently takes the wrong book. Meggie discovers this and panics, believing Mo will be in danger, and takes it upon herself to take the copy of the novel *Inkheart* and follow Mo to Capricorn's village. Meggie is fearful, but she is determined and does not hesitate to go to her father's aid. This independent will of the child is noted by Sturvosa, "even without parental encouragement children may assume responsibility for their parent's well-being and may proactively intervene as caregivers" (31). Sturvosa's observation is apt for Meggie who instinctively assumes care for her father. Circumstances provide the opportunity for Meggie to act independently of her father. It is not demanded of her that she should put herself in danger, she chooses to put herself at risk. In this way, *Inkheart* affords its child protagonist greater agency. In contrast, in *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg needs to return to face IT in order to save her brother, but she does not want to go: "'I can't go,' Meg cried. 'I can't! You know I can't'" (235). Though she eventually acquiesces, it is only because she believes there to be no other option. Meg is forced by circumstance into independence, while Meggie elects to be independent.

The surpassing of the father is more subtle in *Inkheart* than in the first two examples of the Father in the Game. Mo is never removed from action and is undertaking the rescue of his daughter when Meggie defeats Capricorn. But although Mo has been running and hiding from the villainous Capricorn and his men for nine long years, it is Meggie who ends the peril. When she is kidnapped, Meggie, who has inherited her father's gift to read fiction to life, devises a plan with Fenoglio, "Inkheart's" author, who has been imprisoned with her. Fenoglio writes a new ending to the story, destroying all the villains, and Meggie reads the story to life. Mo is still pursuing the rescue of his daughter and Meggie is still anticipating that her father will come for her, but the hero of Funke's novel is ultimately Meggie. Meggie defeats the villain. Meggie saves the day. Furthermore, by the time she has carried out her plan, Meggie is no longer in need of rescue. What her father could not accomplish in nine years, Meggie has dealt with in the short time span of the novel providing yet another model of the child surpassing the father.

But the independence of Meggie is not unambiguous and resolute. When Meggie is about to read the words that will end Capricorn's life, her voice wavers and she hesitates. It is then that Mo appears and, taking the book from Meggie's hands, reads the words which kill Capricorn. Meggie, brave and tenacious, is still innocent and unable to kill, even in self-defence, so her father takes on that burden for her. Afterwards, Meggie is shaken and attaches herself to her father to find comfort: "She had nestled her head under Mo's arm, as she always did when she simply didn't want to see the world" (521). Throughout the novel Meggie demonstrates her independence by disobeying her father, accusing him of lying, demanding that he tell her the truth. Meggie also eavesdrops on conversations to discover information, she goes to his rescue when she discovers Mo is in danger, and she undertakes the plan to end Capricorn's life. Although Meggie is free thinking and as brave as the situation demands her to be, she still needs her father. As Meggie in *Inkheart* denotes, the

child of the Father in the Game shows growth and asserts independence, but this does not eclipse the fact that the father is still loved and needed. While there is independence from the father, it is not absolute.

Century (2005) by Sarah Singleton provides an unusual example of the Father in the Game. *Century* is the story of Mercy, a young girl from a family of immortals. After a traumatic incident, Mercy's father places a spell over the family estate, forcing the household to live the same winter's night over and over again. Mercy rises as the sun sets and goes to sleep when the sun rises. When Mercy decides she wants to be free, she must defy her father and break the spell.

At the beginning of the novel, the relationship between the father and his child strays from the standard Father in the Game exemplar. Typically, that relationship has been shown to be close and intimate with a special understanding for one another, but in *Century* the father is emotionally distant and unavailable, much like a Traditional or an Absent Father. The father, Trajan, is distant and formal with his daughters, Mercy and Charity. In spite of this, Mercy is still shown to be fond of her father; she is excited to see him, but it is that excitement which illustrates how unusual it is for Mercy to see her father: "Trajan had kept himself at such a distance for so long. He wasn't part of the sisters' repeating winter lives, except as a shadow moving dimly in the background" (57-58). This lack of reciprocity in their relationship leaves Mercy feeling "very shy" (14). She is fond of her father and misses him, but their relationship is stilted. Mercy is full of questions, but too nervous to ask them, and in return Trajan is distant, speaks with uncertainty and "stared at the girls as though they were strangers, struggling to remember their names" (14). His visit with them is brief and the girls are left in the care of their governess, Galatea, and their cook, Aurelia. This contrasts with the relationship of the Father in the Game and his child as found in the other texts. However, the father and child do find common ground, for instance, the talent which allowed

Trajan to create the spell around his home has been inherited by his daughter. It is this likeness between father and daughter which ultimately results in Mercy becoming a threat to her father.

Though the discipline and care of the girls is left to the servants, it is clear that Trajan leads the household, albeit at a distance. Singleton describes the household dynamic, "...both the servants were obliged to follow Trajan's orders" (73). The servants are loyal to Trajan showing that he has the authority and formality of a Traditional Father, but lacks his strength. When Mercy disobeys her father, he threatens her indirectly, telling her that her governess is angry. He does not admit to being angry himself, though he is the one who was disobeyed: "Mercy resented him shifting the anger to Galatea as though it were nothing to do with him" (58). Mercy resents being disassociated from her father, as though she is no longer under his care, but under Galatea's care. In fact, Trajan acts as though he is an impartial mediator. This dynamic distances the relationship between father and daughter, but also illustrates Trajan's weakness. It becomes obvious that this Father in the Game cannot discipline his daughter directly, just as he cannot care for her directly.

At the start of *Century*, Singleton describes her Father in the Game as a distressed figure: "He looked rather shabby and old. His white shirt and cravat were dingy and stained and there were dark marks, like fingerprints, on his jacket. His hair hung in untidy black and iron-grey clumps" (14). Trajan is encompassed by grief, incapable of maintaining himself or interacting with his daughters. His appearance is unkempt, his conversation is stilted and vague and his reactions are irrational. He elicits orders, but cannot fully explain their reasoning. When Charity asks about her mother he shatters his wineglass and leaves the table. He is not a figure capable of caring for his daughters, unlike other Fathers in the Game.

Like all novels which feature the Father in the Game, the complication is the result of the father's actions. However, unlike the aforementioned examples in which the father inadvertently introduces danger into his child's life, this father deliberately creates the complication, which his child then spends the duration of the novel trying to overcome. In *Century*, Trajan himself is the continuing obstruction: he is, in a form, the enemy which Mercy must overcome. He is Meg's "IT" and Meggie's "Capricorn." It is Trajan who casts a spell over the estate and locks his daughters into continuously reliving the same, cold, uneventful night. Trajan asserts that he has cast the spell for the protection of his family, proclaiming: "Change has come upon us but we must fight it for our own protection. I understand a malign influence is at work in the house, causing disruption and I will resist it" (59). Crippled by fear and grief, and while operating under the guise of protecting his children, Trajan refuses to recognise the detrimental effect that living under the spell is having on his daughters. They are described as looking "thin and tired" (92), and they have no appetite. Trajan represents the status quo, while in opposition, Mercy represents change and the desire to move forward.

Trajan exercises his fatherly protection through the possession of his daughters. His spell traps his daughters within the grounds of the estate, isolating them and containing them. His spell also traps them in time and despite being trapped in the house for over one hundred years, Charity and Mercy remain at the age they were when the spell was cast. As they are unable to reach adulthood, they remain dependent upon their father. Trajan has therefore inhibited their natural progression and by doing this he has achieved ultimate control and is determined to maintain it.

In addition, Trajan attempts to keep this control through the emotional manipulation of Mercy. As Mercy begins to unravel Trajan's spell on the house, he first attempts to keep this from happening by using her affection for him against her. Though Trajan is first presented

by Singleton as a distant figure, barely able to speak to his daughters, it becomes apparent that as Mercy begins to challenge him, Trajan uses his daughter's latent affection for him to gain her loyalty and obtain information. He speaks with her directly and demonstrates tenderness towards her that he appeared incapable of performing previously, for example: "He reached out his hand and touched her cheek. The affection in the gesture was so pleasant and unexpected, Mercy began properly to cry" (76). Mercy relishes this attention from her father and, for a time, even this moment of affection keeps her loyal to him. She is determined to follow his orders: "No. No! She would ignore the ghost. She should go back to sleep. Her father's voice echoed in her head. His comfort" (78). In this example of the Father in the Game, the familiar plot point of the child surpassing the father is made more complicated as the child must act against the judgement of the father. Mercy does not have the support of her father, as Meg and Danny did, and so she is required to think and act with even greater independence: "Rebellion wrestled with guilt" (79). Mercy's curiosity and desire to be free overcome the emotional manipulation of her father. Mercy determines that her father's desire for continuity and safety are born of fear, and it is a fear which she does not possess: "Trajan, despite his powers, did not have the strength to rise to the challenges of new life and Mercy's compassion was tempered with impatience" (132). Mercy's strength outweighs that of her father and so her decision to break the spell, despite her father's emotional manipulation, is the first moment in *Century* in which the child surpasses the father.

When Mercy persists in discovering the secrets of her family and unravelling the spell, Trajan employs stronger forms of control. He orders the servants to follow her and ensures she is never on her own. Trajan also has her room searched. Trajan then uses guilt, telling Mercy that her actions are endangering her family. When she persists, Trajan has Mercy locked in her room. When she escapes, he has her locked away and attempts to convince her

that she is insane. Trajan's tactics are brutal and cruel as his determination to maintain his hold on the house is absolute.

Unlike other Fathers in the Game, Trajan's acceptance of his child's growing independence and surpassing capabilities comes not before the child must face their challenge, but at the end of the novel. Trajan does not recognise the shortcomings of his decisions and so does not recognise the need for his daughter to exercise free will. Mercy finally breaks her father's spell, freeing the household from its time loop. Trajan, once again appearing broken, admits defeat: "You have bested me, Mercy. Nothing I threw in your path could stop you" (213). Mercy's bettering of her father has greater significance than the former examples of the Father in the Game due to Trajan's opposition. A supportive father would perhaps have eased his child's challenge, as is evident from previous examples of Fathers in the Game, and Mercy's triumph would have been of lesser consequence. By the father himself providing the opposition in the story, the growth of the child is made more extreme.

The final relationship between the father and daughter is salvaged as Mercy apologises while ceding none of her strength: "I'm sorry I had to disobey you. But I'm not sorry for what I've done" (212), and Trajan admits the flawed reasoning behind his actions, "But I was selfish, Mercy. I didn't think of you and Charity. Your need for life was stronger than my desire for the end of it" (215). The relationship is saved through Mercy's ability to forgive and Trajan's admittance of his shortcomings. However, this only occurs after Mercy has achieved what she desired, and Trajan has finally given in. The relationship achieves harmony, but the balance of power is not the same.

Century is the most unusual example of the Father in the Game, because Trajan assumes several different forms throughout the text. He is initially a distant figure, reminiscent of the

Traditional Father. When Trajan regains some of his strength, he becomes villainous, manipulating and imprisoning his daughter. It is only once he is defeated that he assumes a more affectionate relationship with his daughters, befitting that of a Father in the Game. While Trajan does not fulfil the initial close relationship of father and daughter as found in other examples of the Father in the Game, he is still the initiator of the text's complication, and despite his initial distance, plays an active and vital role in the text. Trajan is protective, as may be expected, but this protectiveness develops to the point of mania, perhaps signalling the danger of a father whose control is absolute. If the purpose of the Father in the Game is to develop the child protagonist, allowing them to be the hero of the text, then *Century* is the greatest example. The protagonist of *Century* is literally trapped in her childhood by her overprotective father; she is unable to mature, grow or leave the house. By defying her father and breaking the spell which traps her, she not only surpasses her father, but challenges the concept of the father as a protective figure.

2.1 THE FATHER IN THE GAME IN MY WORK

In my creative thesis I attempt to represent all forms of fathers I have examined in my research, but the form of father which most significantly impacts the plot of my story is the Father in the Game. The Father in the Game, illustrated through Everly's father Clarence, significantly changes the outcome and the impact of the plot.

As in *Century*, this Father in the Game does not conform to all typical traits as found in the former texts. The initial relationship between the father and the daughter is strained. Clarence is absent and busy with work, and his interactions with his daughters are limited. Everly is fond of her father, but feels alone and neglected. Everly is passive and because of

this she does not confront her father, although she enjoys the time she manages to have with him. Their relationship is loving, but weighted with grief and anger.

The initiation of the complication cannot be tied directly to Clarence. When the adventure begins, Clarence is a Traditional Father and his impact on the plot of the text is minimal. It is only later in the story, when Clarence becomes actively involved (“in the Game”), that he begins to exert influence of the direction of the plot.

The father’s journey into the secondary world affects the story in several respects. The first, conforming to the standard plot of the Father in the Game, is the growth of the child protagonist. Everly’s growth is subtle. At the beginning of the plot, she is a passive character, indecisive and heavily reliant on Lux to lead her. When Everly re-enters the secondary world with her father, she demonstrates a newfound confidence. Everly views Clarence as stepping into her territory; Everly believes she is the only one with experience of the strange land and so of the pair she has the authority in this situation. This sense of authority partnered with her fear for Lux’s safety allows Everly to become expressive, strong-willed, and decisive. While Clarence attempts to keep Everly safe, she defies him, illustrating the evolution of her character.

The growth of Everly’s character and the return to the secondary world bring Everly and Clarence to a state of equality. Everly’s new ability to express her dissatisfaction opens communication between the father and daughter. Clarence is angry that Everly has been so reckless and secretive, but is ultimately confronted with how little he knows of his daughter. Everly challenges her father’s absence and withdrawal, while coming to understand that he is grieving for the loss of her mother, just as she is. Inhibitions are lifted as they are removed from their typical circumstances; Everly is unable to hide in her room and Clarence is unable to retreat into his work.

Furthermore, it is revealed that both father and daughter have been to the island before, connecting them through a unique and traumatic experience. The immediacy of the danger reinforces their importance to one another. This is illustrated during Rathbone's transformation when Everly chooses to leave Lux behind and go with her father. Everly's devotion to Lux has been shown throughout the story; however, she still chooses her father despite the strained state of their relationship. Everly is disillusioned with Lux, who has abandoned Everly so she can return to the fantasy house. In contrast, Clarence refuses to let Everly go, proving his care for her. Everly's experience at the house allows her to discern who she can and cannot trust.

The presence of the Father in the Game ultimately changes the outcome of a story. In texts which leave the father out of the adventure, the growth that the child undergoes on their journey is often unacknowledged at home. The child protagonist returns home to parents who are unaware of the trials which they faced and so treat the child as they have always been treated. When the father is there to acknowledge the capabilities and experiences of the child, the child does not return to innocence, but maintains their new status. Everly did not simply go on a childish lark, but has undergone a strong physical and emotional experience. Clarence is not a clueless parent, but bears witness to the extreme and bizarre incidents which have shaped his daughter, and so can accept the changes in his daughter in the aftermath. Clarence's presence, therefore, provides a further example of how The Father in the Game brings gravity and consequence to the story.

2.2 CONCLUSION

Even the Passive Father would arguably protect his child, if he had any awareness of what his child was doing. The Father in the Game challenges the concept that protection is a

father's ultimate role, and that the child should remain in a permanent state of innocence. In texts featuring the Father in the Game, the child protagonist is the hero of the story and to save the day they must step beyond the safety of their father and act independently. Part of this relies upon the father's acceptance of their child's growth. In *Danny the Champion of the World*, the father accepts Danny's growth with enthusiasm and the pair transition into a partnership. In *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Inkheart*, the Father in the Game is not enthusiastic about allowing their child to face danger, but accepts it. The father and child remain in roles of carer and cared for, but the child has demonstrated their independence and their capability of achieving what their father could not. These texts find similarities despite their being published over four decades apart. *Century* illustrates a father who is determined to protect their child and keep them in stasis. Despite being the most recently published of the texts it demonstrates the most traditional of views: that the child should remain under the protection of the father. The father's acceptance of his child's growth only becomes apparent at the end, once he has been defeated. In my creative thesis, Clarence is confronted with the emotional turmoil and growth Everly has undergone in his absence. His initial reaction is to protect and contain, but in the end, there is recognition of her growth and an element of equality between them. As Clarence signifies, whatever his doubts, the Father in the Game must ultimately accept the growth of his child.

The Father in the Game is already unique due to his presence and participation in the text. His being there could be construed as problematic to the independence of the child during their adventure, but it is the father's presence which validates the child's growth. The presence of the Father in the Game promotes the growth of the child protagonist, rather than the maintaining of innocence and dependence. The Father in the Game does not only participate in the story, he plays an integral role in the story set up, progression and conclusion. It is the actions of the father, whether intentional or inadvertent which trigger the

complication of the plot, his guidance and shortcomings effect the actions of his child, the protagonist, and it his acceptance of his child's growth and their evolved relationship which draws the story to its close. Although The Father in the Game is loving, he is flawed and limited. These flaws and limitations create a more complex, grounded, and realistic character.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FATHER AND PORTAL FANTASY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

HOW THE PORTAL IN CHILDREN'S FANTASY LITERATURE CAN SHAPE THE
ROLE AND REPRESENTATION OF THE FATHER

The father's place in fantasy changes depending on his form. In texts featuring the Traditional Father and the Passive Father, fantasy is used to separate the father from the child protagonist. The father, representing all that is stable, rational, and safe, exists in contrast to fantasy, which represents the temporary, magical, and often dangerous. For the Traditional and the Passive Father, fantasy is a barrier that excludes him from the story and minimises his role in the text. In texts of the Absent Father, fantasy is more subtle. The texts examined in this exegesis that feature this father are not typical works of fantasy; they are gritty and realistic. There is no place of wonder and escape to which the child protagonist may remove themselves. Fantasy is only present in the form of the child's daydream. In texts featuring the Absent Father, the child protagonist will fantasise about their father returning to them. They imagine a relationship with the intimacy and stability they have been lacking. In these texts this idealisation of the father is short-lived: the child is disappointed by their father again and the harshness of reality returns. In Dead Dad texts, the death of the father can act as a trigger for fantasy to take over the text. The father's death frees the child from any ties to reality, so the child can not only disappear into a fantasy world for an adventure, but they can also stay there, as they have no familial incentives to return home. In all these forms of father, fantasy is for the child and the father is kept separate. Fantasy, and in particular portal fantasy, which I will later define, is a popular and convenient method for allowing the protagonists of children's literature a degree of independence. Many features of portal fantasy lend themselves to the opportunity to separate father and child: physical separation, the relativity of time, etc. However, fantasy, even the presence of a portal, does not always guarantee the separation of the father and the child.

In texts which feature the Father in the Game the relationship between the father and fantasy becomes more complex. In all other forms of father, fantasy is a means of separating the child from a reality, embodied in the father, which is sensible, ordered, and steady. But in

texts which feature the Father in the Game, the father is no longer separated from fantasy; the father becomes involved in fantasy, as involved in it as his child. He no longer represents logical and steadfast reality, for his world becomes as dangerous and magical as his child's. The choice of genre, therefore, can affect the formation, function, and perception of a character.

In this chapter I will discuss the genre in which I chose to write my creative thesis: fantasy. I will begin by speaking broadly about the genre, then speak more specifically about portal fantasy, and finally I will discuss the role of portal fantasy in children's literature and its effect on the role of the father. In each area I will discuss the genre or sub-genre's essential qualities and my choice to utilise or subvert those qualities within my creative thesis. I will draw on a wide range of example texts, with a focus on examples of portal fantasy in children's literature.

3.1 FANTASY

The genre of fantasy is difficult to define or encapsulate. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn have described fantasy literature as "tremendously difficult to pin down" (i) and Richard C West notes that deciding "where fantasy fits in can be problematical" (7). This may be due to the propensity of fantasy to wander across other literary fields. Kelly Kramer, amongst others, notes that literature has roots across ancient myths and legends, medieval romances, and fairy tales (153). Charlotte Burcher et al. describe fantasy as a "chameleon" (227), and Maria Nikolajeva describes fantasy as "a synthetic genre" which has "assimilated traits and motifs" (35) from other genres. Presently it can be found wandering through almost every other genre, including adventure, nonsense, romance, historical, crime, and adventure. (Burcher 227, Nikolajeva 35). Brian Attebery's solution to the difficulty of defining fantasy

is the concept of the “fuzzy set”. Attebery states that “Genres might be approached as ‘fuzzy sets... meaning they are not defined by boundaries, but by a centre” (12). This suggests that it is not necessary to restrict the concept of fantasy to include or exclude texts, styles, modes, or literary techniques. Instead, there are staple qualities which when found in a text allow it to be included into the broad and far-reaching genre which is fantasy literature. The qualities recurringly found at the heart of fantasy are “the impossible”, reader immersion or “enchantment”, world-building and desire.

A reoccurring trait mentioned in fantasy scholarship is that of “the impossible” (Mathews 2; Jones & Mendlesohn i; Cheyne 109). The most recognisable quality of fantasy literature is the departure from reality, the normal, or the mundane, and the introduction of what is thought to be impossible, or what is sometimes described as “infinite possibility” (Mathews 1). Cheyne writes that “fantasy reading is driven, at least in part, by the desire to encounter wonders or marvels, such as magic, gods or mythical creatures” (109-110). As such, the impossible encompasses all manner of notions “that cannot be understood by the rules of reality” (Burcher 227).

Partnering “the impossible” is the concept of wonder. Wonder, also referred to as enchantment, can be defined as the immersion of the reader in the fantasy presented by the author. For the story to carry any impact there must be a willingness in the reader to suspend disbelief, to set aside the rational and accept, on some level, the fantastic despite its fiction. Nikolajeva describes this as “putting the reader in a temporary state of enchantment” (153). To successfully establish a sense of wonder and enchantment the fiction presented must hold some verisimilitude and world building is essential to achieving this. Cheyne describes world building as “the meticulous realisation of an often wondrous fictional world” which “encourages and enables the reader to immerse themselves in the text” (112). This “meticulous realisation” is the creation of a world in which the fantastic can be presented

alongside reality or a fantastical world with depth, history, and detail—the greater the depth of detail, the better. Deirdre Baker calls fantasy “a literature distinctive for its abundant visual imagery” (79). This visual imagery is essential as the reader is presented with events, histories, culture, laws, creatures, and often entire worlds which are unfamiliar and so must be well described for the reader to be able to visualise and understand. Enchantment, immersion, and wonder are only achieved when world building is thorough and consistent.

Fantasy is often reductively described as escapist, a means by which a reader may remove themselves from reality. It is argued, because it is so removed, that fantasy offers no real substance, no comment on reality. But fantasy does not exist independent of reality and so does not provide an escape from it. Fantasy is a reflection of reality, and of desire, as Rosemary Jackson states, “At the heart of fantasy, there is desire” (2). In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, children’s literature was used to galvanise Christian moral behaviour. In more recent decades “social rather than religious concerns can be seen to provide the moral energy behind much children's fiction” (Webb 1-2). Caroline Webb states that children’s fantasy writers such as J. K. Rowling, Diana Wynne Jones, and Terry Pratchett use their work to “subvert expectations, compelling young readers to evaluate for themselves both the power of the story to shape our understanding of the world and the values and qualities needed for ordinary life” (4). The imagination inherent in fantasy can empower the reader to see beyond the world as it is presented to them, to see “new possibilities” (Webb 3). The substance of fantasy is in the formation of the mind of the reader.

The world presented in fantasy fiction, strange and unfamiliar as it may appear, is a recombination of this world’s fundamental features. Jackson describes fantasy as an inversion of reality (12). Nothing presented in works of fantasy exists without some realistic basis. Jack Zipes suggests that “fantasy can be subversive and resistant to existing social conditions,” and so can “undermine what passes for normality, to expose the contradictions of civil

society” (82). Accordingly, fantasy can be seen as challenging the status quo and provoking its reader to do the same. Fantasy approaches a subject indirectly, making it more palatable than facing it directly. The purpose of fantasy is not to provide a means of escape from life, but to reframe life. Superficial fantasy attempts to escape reality, but good fantasy is always addressing and criticising reality. In Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002), Coraline begins the story bored and frustrated by her parents’ lack of understanding and attention. She desires for her life to be more interesting and entertaining. In the secondary world she experiences a home in which everything is interesting and her fantasy parents know and deliver everything she desires. It is through this experience that Coraline comes to realise: “I don’t want whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted just like that, and it didn’t mean anything? What then?” (82). Coraline matures and achieves a new level of relationship with her parents. Instead of demanding they look after her, she takes on the responsibility of carer, rescuing them from her fantasy mother. *Coraline* is a book that initially appears to be about wish fulfilment, but turns into a story of growth and the changing relationship between a child and their parents.

Fantasy still has desire at its heart, but its purpose is not necessarily to indulge that desire. As fantasy confronts and challenges reality, it must also confront and challenge desire. Nikolajeva describes fantasy as “a mindscape, an externalisation of the protagonist’s inner world” (152). This “inner world”, comprised of the protagonist’s fears and desires, is projected in fantasy to be confronted and challenged. Jackson writes that fantasy expresses desire in two ways, to manifest desire or to expel desire, noting that manifesting desire often results in its expulsion (2). Fantasy lays desire bare, externalising the “protagonist’s inner world”, and so challenging it. It can be concluded that poor fantasy indulges desire, but good fantasy confronts it.

3.2 PORTAL FANTASY

Like all fantasy literature, portal fantasy can be thought of in broad or narrow terms.

Mendlesohn describes the portal fantasy as a story in which “a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place” (1). In the following paragraphs and in my creative thesis, I explore how the portal functions as both a gateway, initiating the story, and a border, complicating the story. I also explore how the portal functions as a space within itself, and how its detail adds a third dimension to the story.

The focus of portal fantasy often falls on the secondary world, rather than on the portal itself. While there may be brief consideration given to whatever magic or power has allowed the protagonist to pass from one world into another, this is soon overwhelmed by the discovery and exploration of the secondary world. “The portal fantasy is about entry, transition, and exploration” (2), writes Baker. Though it is the namesake, the uniting feature, and the essential plot device for the entire sub-genre, the presence of the portal takes up relatively little of the text. The portal has magic, but it also has a very straightforward function: to transition the protagonist from the primary world into the secondary world. Marius Conkan labels the portal as an “initiation agent” (92); it is a trigger for all successive events in the text. Once these events begin, the significance of the portal is diminished.

“What is a portal?” Conkan asks. “A frontier, a process or maybe both? Are we talking about physical space, or rather about an internal and abstract dimension?” (110). The portal may be thought of two ways: the first is as a border, and the second is as a gateway. As a border, the portal provides distinction between the two worlds, between the mundane and the fantastic. As a gateway, the portal is a means of crossing the border, of perforating “the categorical membrane separating real from unreal” (Baker 470). Baker considers how a portal be both “chasm and bridge” (487). The portal marks the line between the two worlds, but also allows for that line to be crossed. Without the portal there would be no awareness of the

secondary world, and so no perceivable boundary from primary to secondary. Only once the bridge is provided can the chasm it spans be made obvious; both of these perceptions are important in portal fantasy. The bridge, the ability to cross into the secondary world, is obvious in its pertinence; however, the boundary, the separation of reality and fantasy, is equally important. The border created by the portal separates not only one world from another, but protagonist from what is familiar. The protagonist finds themselves in the unknown, and, given the fickle nature of portals, often struggling to return. In C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), after Lucy's initial visit to Narnia, she attempts to show her siblings all she has discovered, but the wardrobe that had been her portal is now only a wardrobe and Lucy is discredited (Lewis 28). Lucy's experience shows that the nature of the portal is often fickle, a magical entity without clear rules.

The portal within fantasy has a clear function, to link one world to another and provide the opportunity for the story's protagonist to cross between the two. However, the representation of the portal, and the manner in which it functions, varies from text to text. The portal, thought of frequently as a door, is often an event with no physical presence. Sometimes the transition is instant, and other times the portal has its own physical space, an in-between which is not of the secondary world or the primary world, so that for a period the protagonist exists in neither.

Moreover, sometimes the portal is so subtle that the character does not notice their passage. In Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980) Abigail transitions from the present day to 1873, only noting that she walks through an alley which she had not noticed before. In *Tangara* (1960) by Nan Chauncy, it takes Lexie years to realise that the young Aboriginal girl she made friends with when she was seven had lived a century before. In these texts, the protagonist does not choose to go through the portal and the line where they have crossed from their world into another is undefined. The portal has no physical presence, but is an

event triggered by a significant object: Lexie wears her great aunt's necklace and Abigail wears an old piece of crochet. These objects act as talismans, allowing the protagonist to breach a pre-existing border and move to where they have been unable to move before. A special significance is given to a seemingly ordinary object. This is highly suggestive for the child reader, implying that if one were to pick up the right object, an innocuous trifle from one's own life, then perhaps a similar transition could be achieved.

Another German text that attained wide popularity in English-speaking cultures, Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1979), provides a further example of an object being the catalyst for obtaining passage through a portal. The protagonist, Bastian, makes another involuntary transition, though the means of his transition, a copy of "The Neverending Story," is not to be considered an ordinary object. The book is described in detail and, even before its magic is revealed, there is great power associated with it. Bastian is entranced by the book and, finding himself unable to leave it, he steals it demonstrating from the outset, that the book holds great significance. It is not until half-way through Ende's own novel that Bastian makes his transition, finding himself described in the book he has stolen. Far from being a curious explorer, Bastian is fearful and does not know what to do: "He turned over on his back like a beetle, and played dead" (Ende 176). Ende's novel highlights the power of words. The notion of enchantment, immersion, and wonder is taken literally as Bastian disappears into the book in which he is so enraptured. Cornelia Funke, following Ende, also explores the power of the written word in her *Inkheart* trilogy (2003-2007), in which reading aloud from a text can bring fictional characters into reality, but also send people from reality into fictional worlds. The words themselves are the portal, which is essentially the goal of all works of fantasy.

Demonstrative of the above examples, the portal transition of my creative work is also an event, rather than a clear door. My protagonist, Everly, and her friend Lux first go through

the portal when they run along the beach at dawn. The initial transition is involuntary, as neither girl knew what would occur. It is described as a fall, and both girls lose consciousness for the duration of the transition. The girls, when attempting to return, are unsure of the cause or location of the portal, and so attempt to recreate the circumstances under which they initially transitioned. The rules of this portal are left as a mystery. The girls do not thoroughly question the nature or function of the portal; their concerns are fixated on the mysterious house and the creatures within. However, the text does not downplay the significance of the portal, and the transition becomes more heavily featured and integral to the plot as the story continues.

Within fantasy, some characters are more deliberate in their transition from the primary world to the secondary world. The portal is a door in which the protagonist actively chooses to pass through, often driven by curiosity, boredom, or the need to escape. This portal is not just a doorway, and to pass from one world into another, but also an experience in itself. These transitions, as Mendlesohn writes, “is not instant but is to be explored as much as other places” (27). In C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lucy Pevensie does not step into the wardrobe and immediately find herself in Narnia; rather, she walks deeper into the wardrobe and Narnia is slowly revealed. Firstly she feels snow underfoot instead of wood, then she feels tree branches on her face, then she sees a light ahead, and so on, until she finds herself in the middle of a forest (Lewis 13). Anticipation and wonder are built as Lucy continues to reach for the back of the cupboard but cannot find it. In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), Alice takes a long, slow fall down the rabbit hole, in which she shows a penchant for talking to herself and accepting the bizarre with ease. In J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1911) the flight to Neverland spans across multiple days and oceans. Peter Pan gathers food for the Darling children from the mouths of birds and catches them when they fall asleep and drop from the sky. In Gaiman’s *Coraline*, the portal changes as the

story progresses. Initially the door through which Coraline passes leads to a hallway much like her own, with the only distinction being that “it smelled like something very old and very slow” (20). On Coraline’s last journey through the corridor the space becomes a beast in itself. When Coraline touches the wall, at first it feels “warm and yielding,” as if “covered in fine downy fur” (92), then “hot and wet, as if she had put her hand in somebody’s mouth” (92). Coraline attributes a consciousness to the corridor, as though the space itself were a beast, dangerous and aware of her presence.

It is this last text which is most similar to the nature of the portal in my creative thesis. The portal which carries Everly, Lux, and eventually Clarence from reality to the island is changeful and dangerous. Everly and Lux do not choose to make their initial journey, which is brutal, and renders the girls unconscious and confused, washed up on an unfamiliar beach. As the story progresses, the transition through the portal becomes even more dangerous. The last journey from the primary world to the secondary results in Everly and Clarence landing in the ocean, with dangerous currents which threaten to drown them. The increasing difficulty and danger of the portal reflect the danger of what awaits them on the island. It also signals the impending close of the story, suggesting that if anyone were to attempt to use the portal again, they would not survive the journey. The portal, once a gateway, becomes a border, and the story that was once about the exploration of a magical house, becomes a struggle to return to the primary world.

The portal, often overlooked and oversimplified, is presented in these texts as more than a means of getting from point A to point B. The portal becomes its own space, and while the protagonist makes their transition from the primary to the secondary world, for a short period they are in neither; they exist only in the portal. When Coraline is in the portal, she is not in the territory of the other mother, but neither is she safe at home. The portal is an indeterminate space which is not owned by the protagonist or the antagonist, making it

unpredictable and therefore more dangerous. Giving space to the portal allows another layer to the text as it not only gives space to introduce the secondary world, it gives gravity to the transition between the two worlds. This space highlights the distinction from one place to another, the tenuous nature of their connection, and sometimes provides a sense of foreboding.

3.3 CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, PORTAL FANTASY AND MY CREATIVE THESIS

Neither fantasy nor portals are exclusive to children's literature, but many of the recurring features of portal fantasy fit well with the needs of children's literature. Mendlesohn writes that though "portal fantasies do not have to be quest fantasies the overwhelming majority are..." (1). In most children's portal fantasies, to step through the portal is to initiate the adventure and truly commence the story. The portal allows for the separation of the protagonist from the primary world, which in children's literature additionally allows for the separation of the child from their carer. This separation typically allows the child protagonist to mature and limits the role of the father to a background figure. In my creative thesis, I have chosen to subvert this concept, challenging the separation of the father and the child and the limitation of the father's role as a fundamental part of children's portal fantasy.

The presence of the portal in children's literature can provide independence for the child protagonist, circumventing the dilemma of having to choose between a protective adult figure, who would need to be avoided, and a negligent one, who would provide emotional turmoil that would need to be confronted. Catherine Butler observes that independence of children, especially those of middle-class background, is "considerably more limited than in the past" and that this "lack of independence militates in favour of fantasies set entirely in

secondary worlds or in which real-world protagonists are decisively removed from their surroundings and transported to another time or reality” (225). Portal fantasy is well suited to children’s literature because it provides freedom and independence, or what Nikolajeva terms “temporary empowerment” (58), for the protagonist without stipulating the form of the protagonist’s relationship with their carer(s). This leaves the writer free to determine those relationships for herself rather than as a matter of format.

In my creative thesis, the presence of the portal allowed me to slowly establish the relationship between Clarence and Everly, rather than limiting his role from the outset. As Everly and Lux spend many chapters in the secondary world, there was no demand to immediately define Clarence’s character or his relationship with his children. Initially, Clarence is shown to be absent, but attentive. He is not there when the girls are going to school in the morning, but he has made them lunch. His relationship with his daughters, his struggle to raise them by himself, their anger at his absence and Everly’s devotion to her father, coupled with her sadness, build over the course of the text to create a complex and layered relationship. Though the father is initially kept distant with his work, he is not limited to the role of a Traditional Father. Moreover, though he is initially oblivious of the magical adventures of his child and somewhat inept in his parenting, he is not limited to the role of the Passive Father. Additionally, though his children are shown to be hurt and angered by his absence, he is not limited to the role of the Absent Father. The portal initially functions as Everly’s escape from reality, but it later becomes a means of expanding the role of the father. Clarence was not a neglectful father, nor was he a logistical problem I had to deal with as parents in children’s literature are so often limited to becoming. Instead, I was able to develop a layered character, without him dominating the story.

The liberation of the child protagonist provided by the secondary world through the portal, and the separation from the father, gives space for the child to take on the role of the

adult in the story. The child protagonist must become the decision maker, a role they are often unable to take on in the primary world because of the supervision of adults. The secondary world then becomes an opportunity for the child protagonist to grow. Mendlesohn has labelled the journey through the portal as “a metaphor for coming of age” (7). However, this coming of age is often undermined by the return home, when the children are once again under the supervision of adults.

In my creative thesis I chose to both acknowledge and subvert this Mendlesohn’s concept. Initially, Everly and Lux enter the secondary world without adult supervision. On a superficial level, this would appear to be Everly and Lux’s movement into independence. However, even before passing through the portal, Lux had an established sense of independence. With only an uninterested aunt as her carer, Lux is already a decisive and liberated character and the journey through the portal is only a continuation of her independence. There is no hesitation in Lux’s immersion within the secondary world, because the freedom and desire which are prevalent in the secondary world are an extension of qualities she already possesses. The portal is also not the beginning of Everly’s independence. Upon entering the secondary world, Everly continues to be guided by Lux; she does not assert her independence and does not start making decisions for herself until her final journey into the secondary world, when she is accompanied by her father. Everly’s greatest dependence is upon Lux, and it is Everly’s separation from Lux, not her father, which determines her growth and independence. The portal may typically allow for the separation of the father and the child, giving the child the opportunity to come of age, but my creative thesis demonstrates that this does not need to be a rule.

The Father in the Game, the form of father Clarence ultimately takes, does not possess the same level of influence as demonstrated by other forms of father, such as the Traditional Father. The Traditional Father is too dignified to be part of a child’s adventure, but as

Clarence, as a Father in the Game, is drawn into the secondary world with his daughter, he is brought to her level. Butler determines that “parents and other adults, no longer bastions of authority to the same extent as in previous generations, may be drawn into the adventure as more or less equal participants with the children” (225). In fact, in texts in which the father enters a fantasy world with his child, the father is shown to be not only equal with his child, but reliant on his child. As I have demonstrated in Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), Mr Murry relies on Meg to be rescued; in Sarah Singleton's *Century* (2005), Mercy breaks her father's spell and frees him from his grief, and in Funke's *Inkheart* (2005), it is Meg's plan which defeats the villain, Capricorn.

In my creative thesis, the father is not at a superior level, too venerated to be involved in the magical adventures of his daughter; instead, he becomes reliant on Everly as they navigate through a world and an experience with which she is familiar, but he is (apparently) not. It is Everly who leads the way through the portal and is followed by her father. Everly rescues her father from the water when he is nearly drowned, decides they will stay and try to rescue Lux, shows her father the way to the house and attempts to explain its magic. Everly is placed in a position which is superior to her father and that superiority causes a shift in their relationship. Everly, because of her experience and her loyalty to her friend, defies her father, and it is through this confrontation, not through separation, that she grows.

A practical advantage of the portal in children's fantasy is not only the separation of the parent and the child, but the alibi provided for the child by the time disparity between the primary and secondary world. Nikolajeva refers to this as “the motif of time distortion” (142), in which “characters may easily live a whole life in the imaginary world while no time will pass in their own reality” (143). In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the Pevensie children live into adulthood in the secondary world of Narnia, and when they return home they revert to childhood, finding that no time has gone by since the moment they left, their

father is still away at war and their carer is unaware of their extended absence. Bastian, of *The Neverending Story*, disappears into the secondary world of Fantastica for months, and awakens to realise that only one day has gone by. Bastian's father is relieved when Bastian returns: "'Bastian, my boy!' he said over and over again. 'My dear little boy, where have you been? What happened to you?'" (390). During Bastian's absence his father has called Bastian's teachers, called the police, and searched all day and night. Though Bastian's absence is noted, because it appears that he has only been gone one day, Bastian can return to his life with little difficulty. The time disparity between the primary and secondary world gives the child the freedom to leave and have their adventure, while not disrupting their day-to-day life. They can disappear for an unlimited amount of time without the father ever realising something is amiss. In doing so these children have the opportunity to escape the mundane, achieve growth, and never have to sacrifice their childhood or their position in the family.

In *Coraline*, Coraline disappears into the secondary world for an unconfirmed amount of time. However, as she goes through the portal at night and wakes up in her bed the following morning, it is unclear if there is a disparity in time between the two worlds or if her parents did simply not note her absence. This is a concept I carried into my creative work. When Everly and Lux initially enter the secondary world, they do so at night when they have snuck out of the house and return to bed before morning. It is unclear if there is a time disparity, but their first adventure appears to go unnoticed by either of their carers. It is upon their return from their next adventure in the secondary world that I subvert this concept of time disparity. Clarence discovers Lux and Everly at the beach the morning after their second journey through the portal, having realised that Everly was missing earlier that morning. By dispensing with the motif of time distortion I add a measure of reality and culpability to the fantasy story. There are consequences for the girls disappearing into another world. Their

adventure is not held in isolation. It is demanded that they explain themselves and in so doing they must reconcile the reality of the primary world with the fantasy of the secondary world. This is how the father gets introduced to the story. Clarence is unable to ignore Everly's absence and their confrontation results in his entry to the secondary world. The lack of time disparity leads to the recognition of the child's absence by the adult, which in turn leads to the father's involvement in the fantasy and ultimately affects the ending of the story. Once the children would go through the portal, have their adventure, and return home. The portal would act as a distinct border, preventing the fantasy from affecting the primary world and there are ultimately no consequences for the child's departure. However, when the father gains awareness of the child's absence, and crosses through the portal, the primary and the secondary world begin to bleed together. The awareness by the parent of the child's absence means the child does not return from their adventure without consequences, bringing a new level of gravity to the children's portal fantasy.

Mendelsohn writes that most portal fantasies are quest fantasies. The child enters the secondary world, discovers or is handed a quest, and, upon completion of the quest, they return home. Their time in the secondary world is limited and purposeful. In Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the Pevensie children must conquer the White Witch. In L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg must rescue her father and then her brother from IT. However, Mendlesohn does note that not all portal fantasies are quest fantasies. When the quest is taken away from the portal fantasy the adventure through the portal has no clear end. There is no trigger for the child to return home. In my creative thesis, Everly and Lux enter the secondary world without a quest. Their time in the secondary world is driven by curiosity and exploration. It is only Everly's doubt which draws them back to the primary world. On their final journey to the secondary world, Everly undertakes a mission to find Lux and bring her home, believing her to be in danger. When Lux refuses to come home, and the danger of

the secondary world comes to a peak, Everly must leave without accomplishing her quest. Quests give a sense of conclusion to the portal fantasy; without them the reader begins to question the need to return to the mundane of the primary world after the fantastic found in the secondary world. Lux, who has no aversion to danger and no attachment to the primary world, does not feel compelled to return. For Lux there is no quest, no lesson to be learned and nothing to return to in the primary world, so there is no end to her portal fantasy.

In children's fantasy literature of the early twentieth century, the return of the child protagonist was an essential stage of the plot. The child goes into their fantasy realm, undergoes their adventure, learns their lesson, and returns to reality and the safety of their parents. The adventure often proving the child's inadequacies and their reliance on authority figures. Butler suggests that children's fantasies are about maintaining the status quo, the preservation of society as it stood (224). In some texts, even much more recent ones, the story ultimately becomes about the struggle to return home. Coraline must defeat the other mother to save her parents and restore her home to what it was. Bastian must traverse Fantastica to regain his memories and return home to his father. These texts show the child protagonist fighting to restore the normalcy with which they were once so dissatisfied. Their lesson learnt, they may return home with a new perspective and face the same reality with greater satisfaction. The secondary world is not presented as a sustainable place to live, but a device to demonstrate the necessity of the existing order of the primary world. Alice may go on her adventures in Wonderland, but she gladly wakes at home and goes in for tea. Wendy flies to Neverland with Peter Pan, but decides she must return home and grow up. The return is not deeply questioned, but it is expected. Nikolajeva writes that "it is common for children's writers to bring their characters back to the security of the home and of adult protection" (58). In these texts, the adventure does not end until protagonist returns to reality.

However, the return is no longer unquestioned, nor is it guaranteed. As Butler writes, “It is now less common to find fantasies that are delimited in the sense that the end of the book and the resolution of the plot coincide with a return to non-fantastic ‘normality’” (225). The primary world, where the story began, is no longer presented as the only way to live. The child may now choose to reject the reality presented to them by the adults of their world. If they have sought out a fantasy world to remedy their boredom, loneliness, disappointment, or lack of acceptance, and the fantasy world succeeds in doing so: why would they be compelled to leave? There is no longer a fixed rule of how a children’s portal fantasy must end, and so the ending is no longer predictable. In Funke’s *Inkheart* trilogy, the final two texts take place in the secondary world, with the entire cast of characters deciding to live in the fantasy realm, rather than return to reality. The land of faeries and magic is decidedly more interesting than reality, and though it is dangerous, the conclusion does not conform to the typical pattern of the return.

It is worth noting that in typical examples of children’s portal fantasy, the child is separated from their family by the portal, and so to give up reality and decide to live in the secondary world, the child protagonist would also be sacrificing the chance to see their family. They would be choosing to remain independent from then on, and so would also be giving up their childhood. However, in Funke’s *Inkheart* trilogy, the entire family decides to stay in the secondary world, and so no familial ties are severed. It may be concluded that part of the difficulty of determining to stay in a secondary world, and forfeit the primary world, is that in most children’s portal fantasies it would also mean the forfeiture of family and friends.

I had the opportunity to both conform and challenge the motif of the return in my creative thesis. The story of Everly and Clarence demonstrates a typical ending of a children’s portal fantasy. Everly only returns to the secondary world on the final journey so that she can convince Lux to return to reality with her, while Clarence’s objective is to return

home with his daughter. However, Lux is drawn to stay in the secondary world because of her lack of ties to reality. Everly has Clarence and her sister, and while their relationship is strained, she is still unwilling to part with them. Lux only has her aunt, who makes little effort to care for her. Lux's strongest tie to reality is Everly, but Lux is a more independent character and is therefore more prone to be led by the actions of another. The presence and strength of relationships in the primary world is a large factor in determining whether or not my character would feel compelled to return to reality. Those like Lux, without strong ties, who do not feel accepted or optimistic about their place in the primary world, would naturally consider the secondary world a significantly more appealing place, despite its flaws.

In *Coraline*, the choice to stay in the secondary world was shown to result in the loss of the child protagonist's soul. In *The Neverending Story*, Bastian's extended stay in Fantastica almost led to the loss of all his memories and therefore the loss of his father. Deciding to stay in these secondary worlds has consequences and discovery of those consequences contributes to the protagonist's incentive to return home. This same incentive is built into the secondary world of my creative thesis, though it is not overt. A prolonged stay in the secondary world results in the gradual loss of oneself. As time passes, the characters become more like the creature they identified with upon first entering the secondary world. Maria disappears into her cocoon to become a moth, Orpheus becomes a tree, and Rathbone becomes a beast. Once the decision is made to stay, it cannot be reversed, as demonstrated by Jarius's unsuccessful attempt to return to the primary world. Everly, wary about the magical house from the start, is determined that she and Lux cannot stay. Convinced that there is danger, Everly spends her time trying to gather information. She is both intrigued and terrified. Lux, taken in by the beauty and the freedom of the offered world, does not sense the danger and is determined to stay. Everly is determined to find a reason to leave, and Lux is wilfully blind to any danger. For Lux, the concept of losing herself and

becoming existing as a different being is not repulsive. What Everly perceives as a kind of death, Lux sees as a transformation. In the contrasting positions of the two main characters, I am able to explore both the traditional compulsion to return to reality and the desire to remain in the fantasy world which draws the reader into the story and always appears to be more enticing than reality.

Due to the involvement of the father and because Lux stays in the secondary world, the return of Everly to the primary world is altered from a typical return in a children's fantasy portal. Typically, a child would return to their reality and be surrounded by all that is familiar and steady. Their parent would be waiting, normally unaware of what has occurred, and their day-to-day life would remain largely the same. However, Clarence is aware of what has occurred and his relationship with his daughter is altered because of it. Everly no longer has her best friend, and Lux becomes a missing person. Though Everly has grown from the experience, she is also traumatised by it. The consequences of the secondary world do not stay contained, they permeate into the primary world, affecting those who were not involved.

Many elements of portal fantasy are convenient for children's literature. The separation of the child from the father by the portal allows for a level of independence which is increasingly rare for children. The motif of time distortion limits the consequences of an adventure in a secondary world to the memory of the child protagonist, so they may finish their story by returning to their life with all they have learned, but without sacrificing their childhood. The traditional return home neatly bookends the story with slices of reality and affirms the comforts of home. However, the constant separation of the father and the child by the portal can limit the role of the father and stifle the relationship of the father and the child. Time distortion restricts the impact of the overall story, allowing the protagonist to return to their comfort zone, instead of pushing them to further growth. The return home is too often unchallenged, despite the enticing worlds which get left behind. These elements of portal

fantasy are useful, but as I wrote and found myself succumbing to this formula, I also found myself restricted. Challenging and questioning these elements allowed me to develop my creative thesis to new depths and greater originality in my work.

CHAPTER FOUR

HOMES, WEIRD HOUSES AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE FATHER

THE REFLECTION OF FATHER IN THE HOME AND THE ROLE OF THE HOME AND
HOUSES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE PLOTS

The child's story always begins with home, whether the home is a reality or the home is only a desire: home is an enduring theme in children's literature (Waddey 14; Wilson and Short 140). In portal fantasy, the good home bookends the novel, a safe base to which adventuring children return, but the bad home propels the child out into the world, triggering the adventure and challenging the need to return to the mundane. Whether represented positively or negatively, the home affects the trajectory of the text. The enduring nature of this theme is not solely based on home as structure as shown in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1957) where he describes the house as a "psychic state" (91). The home can reflect values, a manifestation of the needs and desires of the child, but most frequently the home is a construction of the father. In this chapter I will discuss the concept of home in children's literature, the role of the father in relation to the home, how the plot of the story is structured by the home, and the depiction of homes and houses in my creative thesis.

4.1 THE HOME IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

What is home? Moira Donald writes that home is more than just a "physical structure": "The English term 'home' suggests something of deeper significance – a moral or emotional resonance attached to the particular building we inhabit" (103). Alston and Virginia L. Wolf further suggest that the concept of home is a myth, that no place can fulfil the promise of safety, continuity, and contentment that is promised by the concept of home. The home is an idea born of nostalgia and perpetuated by adults in children's literature (Alston 60; Wolf 53). Nevertheless, the concept is familiar and strong. It is an idea to which most children can readily relate, which is one of the reasons for its pervasive use in children's literature.

The home, and thus the family, is regularly presented in two forms in children's literature: positive and negative. In the positive representation of the home and family, the

house is a sanctuary, a place in which the child is safe and cared for both physically and emotionally (Alston 56; Stott & Francis 223). In these texts, the concept of home is tied to the idea of the family, so much so, that when the concept of home is discussed “we are in essence discussing the family” (Alston 60). Arguably the nature of the home and the father are linked, with the form of the father influencing the nature of the home. The father is often considered the head of the household and so it is logical that the home reflects the type of father; each father type has a home which reflects his values and behaviour. The Traditional Father has an ordered house, which is kept safe and stable, a reflection of the Traditional Father’s character. The Passive Father also has a safe house, but it is less restrictive than the Traditional Father. The Passive Father, as a less disciplinary figure, has a house with fewer rules which allowing the child to become a dominant figure. The Dead Dad has a dead home: he is gone and so too is the safe and warm environment he created for his child. The Absent Father’s home is developed through his inattention and limited financial contributions; as the Absent Father is not present and/or neglects to send money to his family, his home falls into disrepair and becomes void of comforts as well as failing to emotionally support the child. Texts featuring the Father in the Game, a father involved in adventure, have homes which are unstable. The home, particularly the home in which the story begins, reflects the nature of the fictional father.

In addition, the state of the father is reflected in the presentation of the home. The positive nature of the home is made clear in its description, and so a ‘good’ home will be “overflowing with signs of domesticity” (Alston 55). The ‘good’ home is typically presented as middle to upper-middle class; it is often fully staffed, clean, orderly, and wholesome. In this idealised scenario the child has no concerns because their home is faultless; their greatest complaint is boredom. This boredom is a reflection of the stability of the home and can only be present when the father has established a safe home of structure, routine, and rules. In this

state, the child is aware that while they remain under the protection of their home and their father, they will not encounter anything new, exciting, or dangerous.

This type of home, and the father that inhabits it produces a recognisable plot pattern. Stott describes this as a “circular journey,” Wilson and Short refer to it as the “modern metaplot,” while Waddey names it the “Odyssean pattern.” In this plot pattern, the child begins at their home, leaves for an adventure, and returns home by the end of the novel. Nodelman writes that this plot is “found so frequently in children’s literature that the pattern can usefully operate as a cognitive model” (228). Contrasting all the chaos and adventure at the centre of the novel is the home: stable and safe. Waddey states that the home is an “anchor” for the child protagonist, and it is because they have this stability that they feel “free to explore” (13). The home, which bookends the novel, brings the child protagonist back to reality.

The purpose of the adventure in such fiction is to reinforce to the child the benefits of home, should any dissatisfaction grow, and share the message that “home is still the best, the safest place to be” (Nodelman 30). In E. Nesbit’s *Five Children and It* (1902), each wish the children are granted by the sand-fairy reinforces the idea that they should be happy as they are. In one instance the children wish for their home to be turned into a castle, only for the castle to be under siege. When the battle becomes violent the children are anxious for the sun to set so the wish can be over, so that they may return to their home again. The plot of the good home uses the journey to assert the value of the home and the family. Wilson and Short argue, “It is only by leaving that one can appreciate what/where one has left” (131). These stories show that the child must leave the home to realise the home cannot be improved upon. If the child has any dissatisfaction with their home or family, the journey is a place to learn, and “what they learn makes it possible for them to want to be able to come home” (Stott

474). As these homes and families are without fault, if the child is dissatisfied it is up to them to change.

So why would the child ever leave home? Even when the home is depicted as a sanctuary, this sense of safety is partnered with an element of restriction (O'Connor 34). Though the home is safe, it is made and kept so by the father, and as such it is a place controlled by the father. Alston asserts that the home is a place of surveillance, in which space is "heavily invested with issues of power and control" (15) and it is clear that when the child is home there are limits as to what they are allowed to do and expectations as to how they should behave. This home is the front of the Traditional Father, and as established in the first chapter of my exegesis the role of the Traditional Father is provider, protector and disciplinarian. As long as the child resides in their father's house they must follow the rules which he has established. The child protagonist is relieved of these restrictions and expectations when they leave the home and have their adventure. In Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), the Pevensie children, sidelined and sheltered from World War Two, leave their carers and fight their own war in Narnia. In Blyton's *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (1937) Mollie and Peter use their flying chair to visit magical lands without the supervision or knowledge of their parents. These children have the chance to make their own choices and go where they please. Ultimately, the danger and chaos of the adventure should make the child long for home and appreciate the restriction placed upon them by their carers. After each of their wishes goes awry, the children of Nesbit's *Five Children and It* (1902) learn to appreciate their status quo and stop wishing for their lives to change. The adventure teaches the child to be satisfied with what they have. The child returns home, surrendering the independence experienced outside the home, for the order and protection provided by their home and their father. In these stories the journey of the children is circular because the home was never at fault.

4.2 THE FATHER OF THE “GOOD HOME”

The home that features the circular journey is found in texts featuring the Traditional Father and the Passive Father. The dominance of the Traditional Father is clear: he is the head of the household and the disciplinarian, he sets the rules and is the one to whom all decisions are referred. When the children are at home, even when the father is not, they are under his authority. Even when the children are on their adventure and attempting a level of independence, often the voice of the father stays with them. They are guided by his advice and quote his expressions. Alston writes, “Even if they are not actually physically observed, the children believe themselves to be and thus the power of the adult becomes absolute since the children, having internalised the possibility of surveillance, regulate their own behaviour” (25). Though they are free of his control, the authority of the father permeates the text, influencing the thoughts and decisions of the children. This concept is explored in the first chapter of my exegesis in the discussion of the Traditional Father. As I observe, in *Swallows and Amazons* (1930) by Arthur Ransome, and *Five Children and It* (1902) by E. Nesbit, the children quote their father’s advice and allow his words guide them. As the concept of the father and the family is synonymous with the idea of the home, if the father never leaves the child, then the child never truly leaves home.

In the home of the Passive Father the premise of the circular journey remains the same: the child leaves their home, has an adventure, and returns. However, with the diminished authority of the father comes the diminished safety of the home. In Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002), Coraline leaves a safe and nurturing home because she is bored. Through her adventure she learns to be satisfied with her home and family, and so she returns home again. Gaiman’s book and his representation of the Passive Father differs from the Traditional Father in two aspects. First, Coraline does not carry the voice of her father throughout her adventure, referring to his example only once throughout the story. The

Passive Father, and thus the home, does not carry the same influence as the Traditional Father. As explored in the first chapter, in texts featuring the Traditional Father, the father is held in a position of reverence, “They also had a father who was just perfect” (Nesbit *The Railway Children* 4). The home, an extension of the father, is also perfect and so the return to the home is never questioned. The Passive Father is not considered with the same reverence, and neither is his home, so the return home is no longer unquestioned. In Gaiman’s *Coraline* the reclamation of the home is not as simple as returning. Coraline returns home from the secondary world to discover her mother and father have been kidnapped by the other mother. Coraline has attempted to return home, but her home has been disrupted. To restore her home she must re-enter the secondary world and rescue her parents. Coraline’s home is no longer a place of safety established and maintained by her father, and therefore Coraline must protect her home herself. Coraline not only rescues her parents and restores the home, but she continues to protect the home when the dismembered hand of the other mother comes through the barrier by trapping it in an old well. Coraline has assumed responsibility of the protection of the house and her parents; she has taken the place of the father. The child experiences a truer form of independence in their adventure and when they return home it is through their own volition, rather than the internalised influence of the father and the home.

The second differing aspect of the Passive Father is the sanctity of the home. With the diminished authority of the Passive Father comes the diminished authority of the Passive Father’s home. Both houses in *Coraline*, especially the house in the secondary world, are dominated by the mother, with the father appearing as a secondary parent. But both versions of Coraline’s father demonstrate the capacity to protect her. In the secondary world, before being overcome by the power of the other mother, the other father attempts to protect Coraline by warning her away, “Run, child. Leave this place” (76). In the primary world Coraline recounts the wasp story, in which Coraline’s father stays and allows himself to be

stung by a nest of wasps so that Coraline has the chance to run away. Ultimately, he too is overcome by the other mother and is abducted with his wife. When the father is abducted the sanctuary of the home is broken and becomes unsafe. Both versions of the father are protective of the child, but are prevented from protecting Coraline by the power of the other mother. Coraline, inspired by the wasp incident with her father, takes over the position of the family's protector. When the child of the Passive Father returns from their adventure, they do not surrender the independence and growth they experienced outside the home, and they do not return to a state of innocence. Instead, they move closer to the state of adulthood and a level of equality with their parents. Coraline chooses to rescue her parents instead of hiding in her home and assuming the adults can look after themselves. She returns home with a changed mentality, not only accepting that she cannot always have what she wants, but with a sense of responsibility and care towards her parents and her home. The home is no longer a space in which Coraline passively receives care, she becomes a carer and takes ownership of the home. This circular journey in texts of the Passive Father move beyond a plot in which children learn to appreciate what they have, to a story which results in emotional growth in the child protagonist. This growth ultimately changes the relationship the child has with their father and their home and so the home too is changed.

4.3 THE "NOT HOME"

The home in children's literature is not always represented positively. The negative representation of the home depicts a place that is not a sanctuary. The negativity of the home may be made clear as the home is depicted as unclean, unsafe, and run down. Alston asserts that "it is the untidy, unclean homes that represent the bad families; tidiness – especially with regard to the adult spaces – is the epitome of order and goodness" (18). Many depictions of

negative homes are of low socio-economic backgrounds, and the lack of homeliness is partnered with a lack of food, clothing, and other objects of comfort. In Pershall's *Stormy* (1993), the child protagonist, Stormy, sits in an empty house eating cold soup from a can because the house has no gas (39). The inattention to the house reflects the father's neglect of Stormy. The canned soup takes minimal effort and skill so that Stormy can feed herself, suggesting that Stormy's father has taken minimal effort to care for her. In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), Harry's only clothes are from his much larger cousin who is "four times bigger" and his glasses are "held together with a lot of Sellotape because of all the times Dudley has punched him on the nose" (20). Harry's status in the house is made clear by his uncle and aunt's exaggerated favouring of his cousin and their unwillingness to buy material goods to suit Harry himself. Alternatively, the bad home may be safe, clean and provide every physical necessity, but is a place in which the child does not feel cared for emotionally. In Louise Fitzhugh's novel *Harriet the Spy* (1964) child protagonist Harriet comes from a wealthy house, but her care is delegated to a nanny and a cook while her parents are frequently out. When Harriet is ostracized at school and acts out, her parents are unable to understand why, so they send her to a therapist. Harriet's material needs are met, but her relationship with her mother and father is shallow and unfulfilling. Stott and Francis go so far as to say that any home which does not meet the needs of the child cannot be called home at all, referring to such places as "not home" (223). If such a place is to be called home at all, then it is a "failed home" (Wilson and Short 134). This representation of the negative home demonstrates a departure from the unquestionable perfection of the good home.

Stories of the "not home" have their own typical plot pattern. Stott and Francis call this structure "a linear journey" (228), Wilson and Short refer to it as the "postmodern metaplot" (134), and Waddey names it the "Promethean Pattern" (14). Following the concept

of the “not home” asserted by Stott and Francis, this plot pattern does not begin at home, “but with the protagonist as a kind of exile” (Waddey 14). The child is in a place in which they do not feel loved or safe, or which is “physically or emotionally unsuitable for the child” (Stott & Francis 228). Unsurprisingly, the “not home” is frequently depicted in texts which feature orphans. In J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* sequence (1997-2007), Harry lives with his abusive aunt and uncle. In Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), James lives with his “selfish and lazy and cruel” aunts (2). Due to the untenable condition of the “not home,” the child is pushed out into the world (Wilson & Short 141). This is a less joyful exploration than that of child protagonists in good homes. The child of the “not home” does not leave on a lark, “they have no choice. This is not an attempt at being an adult; it is a forced march toward adulthood” (Wilson & Short 138). Even before leaving his home, James is deprived of his childhood; he is isolated, overworked and abused. James does not want to be an adult, instead he dreams of what other children are doing: “Some would be riding tricycles in their gardens. Some would be walking in cool woods and picking bunches of wild flowers. And all the little friends whom he used to know would be down by the seaside, playing in the wet sand and splashing around in the water” (7). The “not home” denies the child protagonist of the opportunity to be a child and forces them to face hardships for which they are not yet prepared.

The linear journey of the postmodern metaplot does not start with home, but it does end with home. The concept of home is still strong, but it has changed. Home is no longer restricted to the traditional concept of the clean, stable house and the nuclear family; home is whatever the child protagonist requires it to be. The child protagonist, having left their failed home, does not return. They do not learn to accept the home they left, like the child of the modern metaplot (Wilson & Short 138); instead, their adventure must end in the creation of a new home (Waddey 14; Wilson & Short 138; Stott & Francis 224). Waddey states that this

new home “becomes their alter ego” (14) and reflects the ‘psychic state’ (Bachelard 91) of the child. The child can create their new home so that it meets their needs and desires. Because the home is built around the child, it becomes a reflection of the psychic state of the child, rather than a reflection of the father as in the initial home. In *The End* (2006) by Lemony Snicket, the Baudelaire children establish their own home on an island. They live under the tree planted by their departed parents; Violet invents and maintains equipment, while Klaus conducts research and Sunny provides sustenance. They create a place of safety, peace, and knowledge, which they had been denied since the first book of the series. As the new home is found, chosen, or created by the protagonist, it holds greater significance. The new home means the child does not return and submit to the authority of the adult; they retain the independence they have gained through their journey. The Baudelaire orphans choose a world free of adults, as all the adults who were entrusted with their care only bring them danger and the clever orphans are capable of caring for themselves. This is not acceptable under the traditional idea of home in the modern metaplot, as the Baudelaires live without adult supervision, but in the postmodern metaplot it is important for the child to establish their own home separate to that of the father. The new home needs to reflect the ‘psychic state’ of the child, to suit their emotional and psychological needs. For some this may mean giving up the innocence of childhood, but as the postmodern child is without home and family to begin with, there is no sacrifice.

4.4 THE FATHER OF THE “NOT HOME”

The home of the postmodern metaplot is found in texts featuring the Dead Dad. The Dead Dad, and the subsequent orphan status of the child protagonist, typically results in a loss of home. The orphaned protagonist is put under the care of relatives or an orphanage, and their

living conditions and treatment in their new residence are horrible. James of Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* is verbally and physically abused by his two aunts. Harry Potter of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* sequence lives in a cupboard under the stairs and is scorned by his uncle, aunt, and cousin. The Baudelaire children of Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999–2006) are transferred from one incompetent carer to another, while being pursued by a murderer. The child protagonist may once have experienced a home in which they were safe, loved and cared for, but the death of the father leads to the death of the home. It is then put upon the child to escape and create their own home. In Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*, James never returns to his aunts, but sets up home in the giant peach pit in the middle of central park. He lives with enlarged, speaking insects, and so not only establishes his own home, but chooses a new family. In the Harry Potter sequence, Harry establishes a home at Hogwarts, his wizarding boarding school, with an acquired family among his friends. In Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the Baudelaire children set up home on an island, forgoing the world of adults who have failed them. They even adopt the orphaned child of a friend and raise the baby themselves. These child protagonists, having been failed by adults, essentially becomes the adult themselves.

In my creative thesis, the plot of the Dead Dad and the orphaned child is exemplified by Lux. Little information is provided about Lux's parents, except that they have died and left Lux in the care of her aunt. There is no fondness between Lux and her aunt and although Lux is not shown to be physically or verbally abused, she is neglected. Lux's aunt provides shelter and food, but there is no protection or care provided beyond that. Lux's emotional disconnection and her dissatisfaction with her home are crucial to her drive to find a new home. Lux approaches the potential for a new home in the portal world with a hunger and abandon. For Lux there is no hesitation in leaving the primary world behind. She is the ultimate postmodern metaplot child. Lux is on a linear, postmodern journey, leaving her

failed home to establish a new home. However, with this plot there is a new layer of reality. While Harry is protected by his magic, James is protected by the miracle of the peach and its enhanced inhabitants, and the Baudelaires are saved in every novel by the cleverness of their unique skills, Lux is without protection. Though Lux is intelligent she is still an ordinary child. She is not enhanced by magic or miracles or extraordinary intelligence. The failing of her home and her carer does not mean that Lux is equipped to establish a new home herself. Lux wants a new home, but her priorities are immature and her decisions are poor.

It would be easy to say that these child protagonists of the postmodern metaplot reject the concept of home, but it is not the home which is rejected, it is the authority of adults. Wilson and Short argue that “The theme of a failed home is synonymous with a failed parent” (135). The child leaves the failed home and the failed carer, but the concept of home is not abandoned as finding a home is the purpose of the child’s journey. The notion of home is as highly regarded in the postmodern metaplot, as it is in the modern metaplot. The child still seeks a place of safety, of comfort and of love, only now they reject the aspects of discipline and dominance. Despite the journey being linear and not circular, the story still ends at home (Wilson & Short 141).

4.5 DIVERGING FROM THE METAPLOT

Not all of children’s literature falls into the pattern of either the modern or postmodern metaplot. While some texts may adhere to the structure and sequence of the modern metaplot, their tone reflects the perspective of the postmodern metaplot. From a structural perspective texts of the Absent Father appear to conform to the plot points of the modern metaplot. The child, initially dissatisfied with home, goes on a journey, whether metaphorical or literal, and by journey’s end learns to accept their home as it is. The child adapts to suit the home, rather

than the home changing to suit the needs of the child. In Mary K. Pershall's *Stormy* (1993) and Beverly Cleary's *Dear Mr Henshaw* (1983), the child protagonists begin their stories dissatisfied with their father and their home and end their story with the same home and an unchanged father. The child protagonist must grow and learn to accept their father and home as they are; there is no expectation that the father and home will change.

However, texts of the Absent Father do not tonally match modern metaplot ideals. The modern metaplot idealises the home and the father, but the Absent Father is not an idealised character. The Absent Father neglects his child and fails to provide for his family. The home of the Absent Father reflects his failings: it is shabby, unwelcoming and often unclean. This disillusioned representation of the family, specifically the father and the home, is typical of the postmodern plot. Wilson and Short refer to these types of texts as "post-patriarchal; there is a realisation that father (if he is around) does not know best and there is no safety afforded by traditional structures" (135).

In Pershall's *Stormy* (1993) child protagonist Stormy, impatient about being left by her father, chooses to leave her home and move in with her sister. Stormy is out of place in her sister's clean and ordered home and ultimately decides to return to the home that she once found so dissatisfying. Structurally, Stormy follows the circular journey, changing her viewpoint so that she appreciates her home for what it is. However, tonally there is a resignation to this child's return. Though the story ends at home, it does not end with Stormy venerating her father; rather, she learns that her father will not change and comes to accept this. The child follows the journey of the modern metaplot, but the father does not meet the standards of the modern metaplot. The father is not present or repentant when Stormy returns; he remains absent and self-involved. His house has no electricity or gas; it is filthy and littered with items he collects from the tip. The child returns home, but as it is a failed home, it does not offer protection and so the child does not return to a state of safety and innocence.

In Cleary's *Dear Mr Henshaw* (1983), Leigh, initially dissatisfied with his father and his home, goes on an emotional journey, and comes to accept his father for what he is and in doing so accepts his home. Leigh's story ends at home with the acceptance of the home and father and so follows the structural pattern of the modern plot. However, as in Pershall's work, the tone of Cleary's text is that of a postmodern metaplot. The father is not venerated, and the home is not considered safe. Leigh, though he loves his father, recognises that he is not a stable or reliable figure. At the close of the novel Leigh narrates, "I had learned by now that I couldn't count on anything he said" (132), demonstrating that the child is disillusioned with the father. The home provided by the father is also inadequate. Leigh's parents are divorced, and he lives with his mother. The home they share "is sort of falling apart, but it's all we can afford" (21). Leigh mentions being able to hear the noises of the gas station and how he leaves for school early, so he does not have to be at home alone. The text also mentions how Leigh's father is inconsistent with his support payments. The father fails to provide financially which adds to the fact that Leigh's home is small, falling apart, and in a bad location. In form with the postmodern metaplot, the father, and thus the home, are inadequate.

These texts present a grittier reality than modern or the postmodern metaplot. The texts show families who live below the middle class, which is the family type that dominates the majority of children's literature texts. It also shows alternative family types, such as those with a single parent, or a divorced parent. The home is not ideal and the father is not ideal, but instead of escaping to find a new home and family, the child protagonist must resign themselves to the inadequacies of the home and accept the shortcomings of their father. Texts featuring the Absent Father have no hint of fantasy and nowhere to escape to. Children of the Absent Father are entrenched in reality and must accept that reality as it stands.

Texts featuring the Father in the Game also play with the plots and tones of the home in children's literature. Unlike with the Absent Father, there is little consistency in the representations of the home or the father in texts featuring the Father in the Game. The Father in the Game is a rare form of fictional father, one with less consistency in his representation. As the home reflects the father, rather than the child, the home becomes less predictable in its representation also.

In L'Engle's novel *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), Meg is a child protagonist of a seemingly postmodern bent. During the course of the novel, she sets out to rescue her father and ultimately comes to realise that her father cannot fix their situation. This text challenges the idea of the child being dependent upon the father and as such feels progressive; however, the representation of the home is largely traditional. The home is shown as Meg's safe space as it is welcoming and warm. Meg does not feel compelled to escape her home and only leaves so that she can rescue her father and bring him home. It could be argued that Meg's main objective is to return her home to the status quo. The representation of the father is progressive, but the representation of the home and desires of the child protagonist are traditional.

In Funke's *Inkheart* (2003), meanwhile, the home is transient. Meggie and her father, Mo, are initially living in an old farmhouse which is described as "too big and draughty for her liking, with all those empty rooms full of fat spiders" (24). At the beginning of the novel, Meggie and Mo have been living in the house for less than a year, and by the end of the second chapter they leave the farmhouse and do not return. It is mentioned that Mo frequently travels for work, often pulling Meggie out of school and bringing her with him. It is not a typical or stable home, but the relationship between Meggie and Mo is strong as he is an attentive and protective father. The instability of the home does not reflect the negligence of

the father, but his lack of control. Though Mo works hard to protect his daughter, he is often unable to do so.

In *Inkdeath* (2007), the end of the *Inkheart* series (2003-07), Meggie and Mo establish a new home within the fictional world of a fantasy novel. Though the new home is chosen by both father and daughter, the choice to live in a fairy world is juvenile. Both the home and the trajectory of the text are postmodern; the home is unhomey, and the plot is linear. However, the child protagonist does not leave the father behind. Instead, Meggie and Mo take this linear journey together. As the father accompanies the child on the journey, the representation of the family is not modern or postmodern, neither does it follow the pattern of the Absent Father: it is something entirely unique.

The strongest representation of the home in texts of the Father in the Game is Sarah Singleton's *Century* (2005). This novel revolves entirely around the house, and the title of the novel is also the name of the house. In this text the father, Trajan, uses the house as a means of protecting his daughters. Trajan casts a spell over the house and the grounds, trapping his two daughters and their two servants, forcing them to continuously relive the same day, isolated from the rest of the world. Wilson and Short write that adults can be "obstacles to the child's growth and create an atmosphere for the child that is messy and confusing" (142). This is literally demonstrated in this book as Trajan prevents his daughters from growing up and doctors their memories. The home of this Father in the Game is dusty and falling apart. It is a cavernous house of many empty rooms, many crawl spaces, and several portals to other times. It is a place of adventure and mystery, but it is not a home. This house also reflects the father, who is controlling, as the house is a prison, containing his children. The father is weak in his grief, and so the house falls into disrepair. The father keeps the past of the family hidden, and so the house is a maze with closed off rooms. When Mercy, the child protagonist,

breaks her father's spell and saves him from his grief, the house is revived. The condition of the father and the house are linked.

Mercy begins and ends her journey at the same house, but the story does not follow the typical modern metaplot, in which if the child is dissatisfied with the home at the beginning of the novel they learn to accept the superiority of the home by the end of the novel. The child must adapt to suit the home; the home does not change to suit the child. In *Century* Mercy changes her present home and the state of her father to a condition she deems acceptable. Rather than leaving and establishing a new home or submitting to the dominance of the original home, Mercy becomes the dominant member in her family and re-establishes the state of the home herself.

The representation of the home in my creative thesis can be viewed as a good home on a surface level. Everly's home is clean and well maintained, and there is food available. The home is consistent and stable, and Everly has familiarity with the space, forming habits with her environment. Bachelard writes that:

the house we were born in is physically inscribed on us. After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways, we would recapture the reflexes of the "first stairway," we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house's entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands. (36)

Revealingly, in the first chapter of my creative thesis I show Everly moving through her house at night; more specifically I show her walking down the stairs. She knows which steps to avoid so she does not wake up the household. She knows the habits of her neighbours. She knows where the chocolate is hidden. This knowledge shows Everly has an intimacy with her

space. This intimacy is increased because Everly spends this time by herself in the early hours of the morning. The time is all her own and the nature of the house, the quiet and stillness, makes the house a different beast than what it is during the day. The house is a creature which belongs to Everly alone. Everly has a warring relationship with her home – when she is at school, she feels the desperate need to return, and yet when she is at home, she feels unwelcome and out of place. There is a familiarity, nonetheless, to how she moves within the space, as her habits are formed and cannot be unrooted even though her relationship with the space has changed with the altered state of her family. From the beginning this reveals the significance which homes and houses will hold in my creative thesis and the importance the concept of home has to my protagonist.

Throughout the text Everly's home remains a place free from danger, a haven to which the child can return. However, because Everly is dissatisfied with home and with the absence of her father, the home may also be viewed as a bad home. The father is not considered beyond reproach like the fathers of the good home, nor is he dead like the fathers of the bad home: Clarence does not fit the father type presented by the modern or postmodern metaplot. Furthermore, the trajectory of the story does not fit either the modern or the postmodern metaplot. While Everly's journey is seemingly circular—she leaves her home dissatisfied and returns from the secondary world by the end of the text—the initial home is not the end of the story; Everly moves with her father and her sister to a place inland. Just as in Funke's *Inkheart*, a new home is established by the father and the daughters together.

Lux's journey differs from Everly's, but still shares a parallel with the *Inkheart* series. The *Inkheart* series is linear. Meggie and Mo do not return to the home from which they begin, but establish a new home in the world of a fantasy novel. They choose not only to leave their former home behind, but to leave reality as well. As discussed in relation to Portal Fantasy, Lux does not feel compelled to return home. She stays in the secondary world, so

that like Meggie and Mo, her journey is also linear. Unlike Meggie and Mo, however, Lux's journey does not end well. As a postmodern child Lux chooses her home, but the home she chooses is dangerous and insidious. Lux desires what is interesting more than what is safe and is seduced by the magical qualities of the house in the secondary world. Unlike in the postmodern metaplot, which moves from failed home to good home, Lux trades one bad home for another. In a way Lux's failed linear journey supports the modern metaplot concept that a child should return home. As entertaining and educational as an adventure may have been, the fantasy world must be left behind for "to stay with one's fantasies is dangerous" (Stott 475).

As shown, the concept of home and family are strongly linked. Across all the varied examples given, the pattern which emerges is that the type of father is reflected in the state of the home and the state of the home determines the course of the novel. Even when the experience of the home is negative, it does not mean the concept of the home is rejected, it only means that a new home needs to be established. In these cases, the pursuit of home becomes a theme of the novel and is the ultimate goal of the protagonist. By recognising the most frequently used patterns of children's literature, I have been able to identify and confirm the recurring motif of home and subvert these patterns and motifs within my own work.

4.6 WEIRD HOUSES

The home in children's literature is most often represented by a house, but the presence of a house does not always mean home. In some texts this house is the beginning of the journey, the initial "not home" that must be abandoned by the child so they may find or create their own home. In other texts this house is encountered along the journey; it is part of the adventure and sometimes part of the danger. There are houses with extraordinary qualities,

houses of wonder and magic, which are a joy to a curious and adventurous child. In Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel" (1812) the children encounter a house made of bread and cake and begin to eat, only to be captured by a witch. In *Coraline*, the child protagonist encounters a house which mirrors her own, in which everything is more interesting and suited to her tastes, but discovers it to be a trap. These extraordinary houses are not at the start or end of the story; they are the complication. Bachelard writes, "On whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being" (20). Accordingly, the house in fiction may be used as another means to illustrate the mental and emotional state of the fictional character. In the above examples the house illustrates the temptations and desires of the child protagonists as they test the weaknesses of their character. The house is an opportunity as a writer to explore the needs and desires of characters – an opportunity I have employed in my creative thesis. Wolf writes that "mythic places flourish in children's literature" (56). This may be because the child protagonist, and thus the reader, is primed to accept the fantasy house that is presented and eager to explore. A house like this can have such a presence it becomes "a character in the story in its own right" (Wein 248). In the following section I will discuss how I have utilised the fantasy house to explore the psychology of my characters, as well as the borderless quality and the sentience of the fantasy house in children's literature.

In my creative thesis the house of the secondary world represents something different to each of the characters. They each approach the house with a different objective and to each of them the house serves a different purpose. For Everly, the house initially represents a reprieve. Everly is emotionally overwhelmed and not coping with her home life. The house in the secondary world, therefore, offers a distraction. This house is away from all that troubles her and it is a secret that bonds her with Lux. The house stops being a reprieve, however, when Lux expresses her intention to stay. Although Everly enjoys the adventure of it, but is

wary of the house and does not feel compelled to stay as Lux does. Everly struggles with her home life, but is not so displaced and in need that she does not recognise the sinister nature of the house in the secondary world. She does not see it as a home. The house is exciting and wild, but it is not domestic. The girls see no kitchen or bathroom, and while they are there they receive no food or water, though the idea of hunger and consumption is repeated. The house is not a place which meets basic care. Lux's intention to stay, despite the danger, changes the house from Everly's reprieve to Everly's challenge. Everly charges herself with the mission to bring Lux home. It is a mission in which she ultimately fails, but in doing so she grows into a character of greater strength, decisiveness, and expression.

Lux is the most uninhibited about her intentions. To Lux the house is about belonging, about finding a place in which she is wanted. Lux is the most suited to the house because it fulfils so many of her pre-existing desires. The house is wild, savage, entertaining, and dangerous. If the house reflects the psychic state of any of the main characters, it is that of Lux, who is unpredictable, lonely, and full of wanting. Lux views the fantasy house as a magnificent palace without rules or restrictions.

As Lux's character demonstrates, the house draws in those who feel they have no place in the world. It creates a place for them, a room which is their own. Marie Talbot-Stokes has the conservatory, a place to cultivate life and beauty as her father did. Jarius, who venerates knowledge, is always found in the library, a place of endless information. Blythe has the run of the ballroom, a place which is grand and speaks to her desire for all that is fine and beautiful. Orpheus, who desired peace and steadiness, finds his place in a sheltered garden. Hugo Rathbone makes his home in his study, a space which shows an effort of civility and control, but which has begun to disintegrate. Lux speaks of finding her own room, though it is not seen by Everly. As each resident becomes more entrenched in their place in the house, they begin to shift into a creature signified by their room. There is a

symbiotic relationship between the house and its residents, in which the house feeds off the humanity of those within until they lose their identity and become part of the house, more an element of the landscape or architecture than they are resident.

For Clarence the house is a beast of another nature. The house does not represent home or any particular desire; instead, it is a representation of the past. Bachelard writes of houses: “Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are ‘housed’” (21). The house stores the memories he created when he visited as a child, so when Clarence visits the house, he revisits a significant and traumatic period of his childhood. Though he has not visited the house for decades, he has an intimate familiarity with the space. Clarence’s ability to navigate through the house, despite the time which has gone by, illustrates the emotional significance of what occurred to him there as a child. The house in the secondary world houses the memories of his childhood, the emotional ties he has with his wife. For Clarence, to step into the house is to step into his memories. This is further emphasised by the boy which Everly sees in the mirror each time she visits. The boy is her father at the age he was when he visited the house. His image trapped within the mirror suggests there is a part of Clarence which became lodged in the house as a child and has remained trapped there until his return.

Some houses in children’s fantasy literature are not simply imbued with magic, but are written as having a life of their own, a consciousness. Wein writes of the house being “a sentient presence” (248). In children’s literature the house, a character in itself, can be presented as helpful, malicious, or an ambivalent observer. In Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002), the house is a strong but subtle character. It is Coraline’s new house which facilitates her travel to the parallel world. While it enables Coraline to enter a dangerous situation, the house is not an enemy, nor is it a friend. “Whatever that corridor was was [sic] older by far than the other mother. It was deep, and slow, and it knew that she was there” (92-93). While the “other

mother” is the enemy of the text, the house is only an observer. It creates the opportunity for chaos, and yet does not force the actions of either Coraline or the other mother.

In J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* sequence (1997-2007) sentience is suggested of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The castle is held in high esteem by the staff and students, and it is the centre around which all the events of the series take place. Though many deadly events occur at the school, it is spoken of lovingly, almost like a parent or old friend. “What wouldn’t he give now for a message from Hogwarts?” (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 12). The castle itself shows moments of sentience such as “the Room of Requirement” or the “Come and Go Room,” a room in the castle which provides those passing with whatever they require, whether that be a bathroom, a hiding place, or, in the case of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), a secret training room to gather and practise Defence Against the Dark Arts. The castle senses the needs of the students and provides for them, much like a carer. Despite the dangers encountered there, in every novel, Hogwarts is considered to be helpful.

In my creative thesis I wanted to convey the sense that the house in the secondary world is a hungry beast which feeds off the life of its residents. The life of the house is conveyed by the wilderness which surrounds it and penetrates it. There is a suggestion of decay and instability, of that which was once civil becoming something savage and dangerous. The house initially appears inanimate. Everly and Lux push their way into the house through a side door into a dim, empty room. The initially passive behaviour of the house gives a sense of security. This is contrasted by Everly’s last journey to the secondary world when Clarence is almost killed by malicious tides, and they are both hunted by a beast in the jungle. It is suggested that the house is attempting to protect itself from those it considers problematic. Everly unconsciously copies the habit of the fantasy house’s residents, speaking of the house as though it is sentient, asserting, “This place doesn’t like you being

here. It didn't want me to go and get you" (143). Everly has come to think of the house as the enemy, even more than any particular resident. Though she does not trust Khadi or Blythe, Everly recognises them as previous victims of the house's seduction.

The idea that the house is consuming its residents is shown through the metamorphosis of the residents. Each resident was once entirely human, but after living in the house for a length of time they begin to transform. Jarius is compared to a bat, Maria is compared to a moth, Blythe and her party are compared to jellyfish. The residents transform into that which represents their nature. At the end of their transformation all humanity is lost. Orpheus has become a tree, Marie disappears inside her cocoon and Rathbone transforms into a panther, powerful and dangerous. Khadi views these transformations as a kind of evolution. Khadi, whose skin is tattooed with moving butterflies, embodies metamorphosis. She changes little because she already invests so much of herself into the house, serves the house, and tries to convince others to stay. Jarius views the transformations as a loss, a death. He attempts to figure out how the house works so that he can save Rathbone. These two forms of thinking are seen again in Lux and Everly. Lux is ready to give herself over to the house, to belong somewhere, to lose herself. She wants to be transformed. Everly sees Lux's choice to stay as a kind of suicide. Lux will no longer be in her life and eventually Lux will become a creature which has no memory of herself or of Everly.

At the beginning of my creative thesis, the appeal of the secondary world is initially the exploration of the house. The joy of exploring a new house is demonstrated in many works of children's fantasy literature. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), the Pevensie children explore the large country house to which they have been evacuated. In Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), neglected Mary spends her days exploring the house and the grounds. One of the frequently chosen features of the fantasy house is that it is large. Small houses are quickly explored, and their mysteries easily solved, but large houses have

dusty, forgotten rooms with hidden treasures and buried secrets. There are always passageways to be discovered and drawers to open. The seeming endlessness of the house promises that the protagonist will never be bored. This is best exemplified in J. P. Martin's novel *Uncle* (1964). While ostensibly about the ongoing battle between the titular character Uncle, an elephant, and the residents of Badfort, Martin's text is really an exploration of Homeward, Uncle's enormous castle. The castle is without end and people frequently become lost. From the outside it looks like "about a hundred skyscrapers all joined together and surrounded by a moat with a drawbridge over it" (Martin 1). Instead of stairs in his room Uncle has a slide. There are towers so thin they bend in the breeze. There are baths, and a train, and waterfalls and a lighthouse. There are monkeys, leopards, dwarves and more. While Uncle visits many sections of the castle throughout the novel, it is clear the reader will never get a comprehensive idea of all the rooms and all those who live there. The castle is chaotic and without end. This endless castle is presented as a play house, a fantasy home. Though it is mentioned that it is easy to get lost, the narrator also remarks "you are sure to come across something to eat, even if you have lost your way" (2). The vastness of the castle is not meant to be sinister or intimidating, but joyful.

This is a feature of the house presented in my creative thesis, but I have subverted the playful tone of the borderless fantasy house. The house in my secondary world has an endless number of rooms and residents. Initially this is presented as being wonderful. Everly and Lux are shown a couple of rooms at a time, as they are slowly introduced to the occupants of the house. The magic and unexplored house promises to be interesting and welcoming. However, when they start to explore themselves, without the guidance of Khadi, the first being they meet in the house, the house becomes more dangerous. Here we see the house as a psychic state, reflecting differently in the two characters of Everly and Lux. Lux revels in the endless opportunities for exploration and regards the house as an escape to freedom. She chooses to

explore the house alone, leaving Everly behind. However, Everly finds herself constricted by the house. While Lux is diving off the tower top with vines, Everly finds herself alone in dark, confined spaces, in a secret tunnel without end, in a ballroom with the dangerous Blythe, or in a hallway with starving ghosts. Everly, initially dependent upon Lux, struggles to be alone and the endlessness of the house becomes overwhelming. Less intent on exploring the space than Lux, Everly struggles to find a way out, so the endlessness of the house becomes a trap, enclosing her. Here the borderless quality of the house is sinister rather than joyful. The house appears as a maze and there is a threat that the protagonist will not be able to escape. Bachelard writes of Spyridaki's expanding house, "that we live in it in alternate security and adventure. It is both cell and world. Here, geometry is transcended" (72). The boundless house offers both freedom and constriction. While the boundless space is fine for an adventure, there is comfort to familiarity. As the child protagonist would never be able to become familiar with the space, the space can never become a home.

4.7 CONCLUSION

Even when the home does not exist as it should at the beginning or the end of the novel, the idea of home, the desire for a home, dominates the pages of children's novels. As Wilson and Short state, "Children's literature is rife with the idea of home" (130). The concept of home is treated differently across texts. The idea of home may be extolled, it may be subverted, or it may be disappointed. Throughout all these representations the father's influence prevails. A Traditional Father and a Passive Father will provide a safe and stable home to which the children can return to normalcy after their adventures. The Dead Dad is a trigger for the lost home, for a once happy and loved child to be mistreated and neglected. The Absent Father fails to provide a clean or safe environment. The Father in the Game creates a loved child, but

an erratic home life, full of inconsistency and danger. The home and the family are linked. As the father is typically a dominant figure in the household, and a dominant figure in children's literature, even when he is not present, it follows that the house and home will be influenced by the type of father he is.

Weird homes in children's literature allow for the reflection of the child's fears and desires. In its lighter forms, such as Martin's *Uncle*, the fantasy home is whimsical and fun. It has slides instead of stairs and is populated by speaking animals. It is a joyful fantasy of little reflection. In darker novels, such as my own creative thesis, the fantasy house is a place of desire and fear. Lux, fearless and full of want, charges into the belly of the beast. Everly, so fearful and uncertain, learns to take courage and follow her own convictions instead of trailing behind her friend. The fantasy house I present is grimmer than most, because not all overcome the challenge it presents. The child protagonist cannot return to her untouched home and her state of innocence. Everly is also challenged by the concept of home. Initially it appears that she must choose between her bleak reality and vibrant, but dangerous fantasy. However, with her father, Everly creates a third option, one which Lux never saw. The home, initially something established by the father, becomes a construction of the father and child together and the house, which once separated them, with the father in one world and the child in another, becomes an experience which bonds them.

In my creative thesis I endeavoured to demonstrate the shifting form of the father from the perspective of the child and the full impact the father can have upon a story. The father can subvert genre tropes, validate the growth and independence of the child, and influence the setting. His mark is always on the novel, even when he is sidelined. The fictional father is also a reflection of society. The tendency towards depicting flawed fathers, complicated family relationships and imperfect homes from varied socio-economic backgrounds, and away from the middleclass homes of steady and faultless fathers of the

nuclear family, suggests a desire for honesty and realism. The variety of fathers depicted in children's literature illustrates the changing values and expectations not only of the father, but of the home, family and the concept of childhood.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

THE FATHER, THE CHILDREN, THE PORTAL, THE HOME

Throughout this work I have discussed the varied role of the father in children's literature, his influence over the concept of the home and how his role is affected by the genre of portal fantasy. The father is a significant figure in a child's life, so it would stand to reason that he would play a significant role in children's literature, however the participation of the father is typically limited in the storyline allowing the child to have an unsupervised adventure. But I have demonstrated that even when the active role of the father is restricted within the text, the manner of his absence can reveal a great deal about the social conventions and ideals of the period. Furthermore, through the work of L'Engle, Dahl, Funke and Singleton, as well as my own creative thesis, I have shown that though it is the convention to limit the role of the father, it is not essential. The father can play an active role in the story, and develop a relationship with their child.

Writing my novel has afforded insight into how the role and the perception of fathers has changed over time. The concept of what a father should be has become more complex. His roles and duties have multiplied and in some circumstances appear to be contradictory. To be a perfect father by the standards of society, by the perception of the child, has become impossible. In children's literature the father has been recognised as his own being, with needs and desires outside his duties as a father.

The portal served multiple functions in my thesis, as both a mechanism for the coming-of-age story and a means to subvert the typical plot of fathers in children's literature. Typically, the portal is used to separate the child from their parent and allow them the opportunity to act independently. When the child returns home to their parent, who is unaware of their child's experience, they return to a state of dependence. However, as my thesis has demonstrated, when the father joins their child through the portal a more significant and permanent independence for the child is achieved and well as progressing the child/father relationship.

As a young adult, I find the home is an emotional, spiritual and psychic topos. It can simultaneously be a sanctuary, a place which in one is most at ease, and a place of confinement, in which one is stifled. It is a place which, as we grow, we attempt to both escape and create. In my creative thesis, the individuality and plurality of the house in the secondary world demonstrates how the child coming of age desires both their own space and to be part of a family, to have both the change and excitement of adventure and the safety of the home. Khadi tempts Everly with her own space, a sanctuary in the centre of a danger zone. Everly asserts her independence by not choosing a home which has been made for her, but by electing to make one herself with her father. Thus, the home becomes both a place of independence and family.

My work has provided insight into how the perception and expectations of the father has changed over time. I have explored the different representations of the fathers, finding patterns and themes. I have revealed the impact of the portal on the coming-of-age story and demonstrated how the portal can be used to preserve or progress the father/child relationship. I have shown the home as a psychological landscape, established and effected by the behaviour of the father, and changed by the evolving relationship of the child with their father. The representation of the father in children's literature, particularly middle grade children's literature, is a subject which has received little attention, and so my work in this thesis has made an original contribution to this field of knowledge.

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