

c h a p t e r

1

A gnes was burying something beneath the elm tree.

From the window above the back stairwell, I caught the bent shape of her. The hem of her pinafore darkened with soil. Her hands moved quickly while working the earth.

I stepped outside. My boots sank into the lawn, damp with morning dew. Fog blanketed the perimeter of the grounds, and for a moment, it felt like nothing existed beyond the estate.

“Agnes?” I said, not too loudly, so as not to wake the rest of the children inside.

She didn’t turn around.

Perhaps she didn’t hear me. Or maybe she was just too busy at her task.

I crouched beside her. The soil seeped through my skirt. “Hi, Miss Wendy.” She turned to face me, her bright face flecked with dirt. The ends of her braids were darkened with mud. “You should be asleep. What are you doing out here so early this morning?”

A tiny palm opened, revealing a bright white bird skull, delicate as fine lacework. Its hollow eyes were fixed on nothing and everything.

“Planting this,” Agnes said, sounding very proud of herself.

“Planting?” I laughed, both curious and confused. “My dear, seeds are planted. Not bones.”

“No,” she said quite sure of herself. “This will sprout up. Bones are like seeds. If you bury them, they’ll grow.”

“Agnes,” I said gently, “where did you learn that?”

She didn’t pause her work. Instead, she dropped the bird skull into the hole she’d made. Slowly she began scooping up dirt from the mound and sprinkling it atop.

She looked up at me, eyes wide and unblinking. “From the boy in my dream.”

“A boy in your dream,” I repeated.

I turned back and looked at the timeworn manor, its stone walls fading into the morning mist.

“One of the children here?” I asked, thinking that’s what she’d meant.

A smile formed on her lips. With the bird skull now covered, she pressed her hand on top of the mound. A final flourish, as if to say, *all done*.

“No, someone I’d never seen before.”

“Miss Wendy?”

I stood up and brushed dirt away from my hands.

Rosie stood at the entrance, her apron flaring in the cold air. “Miss Eleanor would like to see you upstairs.”

I nodded. “On our way.” I extended a hand for Agnes. “Come along now.”

She told me how she’d like to come back tomorrow morning and check if the bird skull had sprouted. I just nodded and continued listening to her, because that’s what adults should do, listen to the stories that children tell.

It was then that I heard a great caw. My body flinched. The call of those birds felt like a strike, and no matter how often I heard them, their call was always a terror. I looked behind my

shoulders and watched as it swooped low and landed on a branch just above Agnes's bird skull.

\* \* \*

Miss Eleanor stood in the doorway.

As always, she was wearing black from collar to cuff. Her husband had died so long ago, leaving her this huge home. She grew lonely here. For some time it was just her and Rosie, the cook; Lucy and Hannah, who helped with the household duties; and Samuel, who maintained the property. She wanted life in this house, and so she opened the doors to children who had nowhere to go and whom nobody wanted.

The October sun caught the silver edges of her brooch, and for an instant when she angled her face, she looked less like a woman in her sixties and more like some sort of eternal magical creature.

I stifled a laugh, but as always, she spotted my mind as it raced to create a story.

“What’s that?”

I cleared my throat. “Nothing, I just . . .”

The apartment was all warm wood and afternoon light. I crossed to the window seat and lowered myself there.

“Many will continue to arrive here over the course of the war, in different ways, for different reasons. Hunger. Loss of a parent. We’ll make room for as many as we can.” Her voice quieted.

I nodded. I suppose she stood at the doorway to give me a moment to imagine what this space would feel like if I made it my own.

The noises below grew as the children were awakened, gathering their things for the day. With their voices came the clamoring of feet and shouts:

“Who’s got my socks?”

“Stop tugging at my hair ribbon, Beatrice!”

“Miss Lucy, I can’t find my jumper.”

The house came alive with the sound of children and the smells of breakfast. From the kitchen downstairs emerged the scent of porridge and cinnamon. I’d meet them soon in the classroom for their lessons.

Eleanor took a step forward and kept talking.

I shifted in the seat, my fingers brushing the worn leather strap of my satchel where it hung at my side. My journal sat inside. Just feeling its weight steadied me. Some people clutch rosaries or talismans for protection. I clutched paper.

The garden shimmered in autumn colors. Trees shrugged off gold and copper leaves, and for a moment I just let myself breathe. My fingers found the window latch before I decided to check it. *Locked*. Good. I pressed my palm to the glass and focused my attention on the garden below.

“Willie, you’re going to hurt yourself!” Lucy said below. I looked to the opened door.

A loud thud rattled the house. Shrieks, followed by laughter. I stood. My satchel tumbled, sending all its contents spilling out.

Books, chalk, my pencil case, all scattered across the floor.

Rosie called from downstairs. “It’s just Willie jumping from the stairs again.”

“That child,” Eleanor muttered.

I crouched, gathering my things. “He’s quite spirited, that boy,” I said.

Noise swelled again from downstairs. I pictured Rosie as she herded the children toward the dining room.

Soon came the faint clatter of spoons against bowls and children’s chatter, bits of dreams recalled, and sightings of rabbits spotted in the garden from the windows.

Yes, little ones arrived here carrying grief. Many cried for parents and siblings who could no longer care for them, or who

no longer existed. But it was moments like these, the joyful chaos, in which I found delight. They all sounded as they should, like happy little children.

“Well,” Eleanor said. “What do you think?”

“It’s a generous offer.”

My house was gray and silent. It was a home where laughter had lived at one time. Today, however, it felt more like a mauso-leum. Yet I felt bound there, a guardian to a room I believed should be kept locked forever.

Eleanor’s tone softened. “Take the time you need to con-sider,” she said. “But we will need you here, Wendy. The chil-dren will need you here. All of us must prepare for the changes of the coming months.”

She was right.

The war crept closer each day. More children would arrive at our door. Small faces stunned and silent. They’d ask when Mummy and Daddy were coming back. And I would have no answer except to say that they were safe here with us at Marigold House.

Something shifted then, in the light. A streak of shadow—no, not a streak. A shape. Moving wrong. Shadows don’t move against their source.

I turned back to the window. A flicker drew my gaze upward.

My stomach dropped. Against the dull gray, a bird. A crow.

Another one. I said it aloud. “A crow.” Not quite believing myself. My fingers had already found the fabric of my wool skirt, digging into it. Twelve years of telling myself they were just birds was a very long time.

Eleanor’s voice came behind me. “It can’t hurt you.”

“I know,” I said.

*That Wendy Darling with such fancies in her head.*

It was there in my past, further back than That Place. The fear of crows. Flapping its wings. All my brothers could do was stare.

I ran. My shoes slipped in the wet grass until I came upon a giant tree. Its bark was slick and sticky with sap, but I climbed.

My brothers vanished through the garden gate, calling for Mother.

I climbed onto a sturdy branch, my whole body shaking, the tree shaking with me.

It landed right beside me. I remember how its talons curled around the bark. Sharp claws. Its feathers gleamed blue-black. It smelled of rain and dirt, and something else.

The crow tilted its head, moving an inch toward me. Inspect-ing me. Gathering me in with its shiny black marble eyes.

“Get out of here, you stupid bird!” In the depths of its eye I saw something behind me stir. A shadow. A boy’s silhouette.

I gasped but was too afraid to look behind me.

The crow opened its mouth, and a whisper followed.

*Wendy . . .*

Its breath was so cold it felt like ice against my skin.

I gripped the bark, so scared to fall. The crow moved closer.

*Come with me, Wendy. He’s waiting,* it said, though its beak hadn’t opened again.

Mother’s voice reached me and I exhaled relief. “Wendy! Get down here. It’s only a bird. Just shoo it away!”

The crow jerked its head toward the sound of my mother. And then it extended its wings and was gone.

I scrambled down the trunk, slipping on the last branch, falling, stumbling, running into my mother’s arms.

Even as she held me, and even as I cried, I still felt the cold breath of that black bird on my cheek. Sometimes I still feel it.

“Wendy?” Eleanor’s voice drew me back.

“The bird’s gone,” I said.

My shadow seemed to be missing in the reflection of the glass.

“This entire flat would be yours,” Eleanor said.

High plaster ceilings. Rich wood molding with detailed carvings, leaves and berries and pinecones. Light loved this room. It poured in through the windows in soft ribbons.

My gaze drifted to another window latch.

A lot of my time at Marigold House was spent checking and rechecking to make sure the windows were locked. There were those narrow windows in the hall. The arched panes in the class-room. The stained glass in the chapel. Each window was an opening. Each window could become a lifetime wound, so each window must always be shut and latched.

“You must start thinking of yourself,” Eleanor said.

“I’m not sure if I know how.”

“You can’t sit in that house alone every night for the rest of your life, especially when we all want you here.”

In the garden below, something shifted. A shock of color. A lavender blur caught in the blackberry thorn.

“Are any of the children missing a blanket?”

Eleanor’s brow lifted. “No,” she said. “None that I recall.”

Her eyes followed mine. When she spotted it, she gasped.

Without another word, she turned, out the door and down the stairs. Her heels echoing down the halls.

I followed.

The hallway carried the smell of fresh bread and soap and a faint hint of coal dust.

Downstairs, breakfast continued: spoons clinking, a kettle screeching from the kitchen, and children’s voices rising and crashing against one another like waves.

We reached the back door. Eleanor pulled it open. Bitter morning air rushed in. She looked down.

A wicker basket sat on the step. Inside, a baby, pale, perfect, and damp. And yet, even with the cold, wet air, she slept peacefully.

Eleanor's voice fell to a whisper. "They all come in different ways."

My palm touched the child's cheek. "She's so cold." I picked her up and wrapped my scarf around her, waiting for a cry that didn't come. She felt good in my arms, my body remembering the rhythm of rocking a sleeping infant. I had rocked so many here when they were much smaller.

"Why isn't she crying?"

"She'll wake up soon, I'm sure." Eleanor stepped past me into the garden and crossed over to the blackberry bushes. She returned with the lavender blanket in her hands. "Thank goodness the fairies didn't take her," she said.

I wondered if it was a joke, but I remained silent.

Rosie appeared, her apron dusted with flour and her dark hair slipping from its pins. "My goodness, look at this sleeping beauty," she said, taking the baby from my arms.

Samuel appeared, standing outside beside Miss Eleanor. He grasped at his head in a panic, as if he were the one to have left the baby out there.

"I . . . I didn't hear a thing," he stammered. His eyes wide with awe and guilt and shock. "Is she all right?"

Rosie smiled. "She's fine," she said, brushing her nose against the infant's brow. "Just cold."

The baby stirred, a tiny fist breaking free from the folds. Her face tightened, and then she unleashed a glorious cry.

Samuel blinked, then let out a short, surprised huff of laugh-ter. "I'll get back to it then."

"Oh, you poor darling," Rosie said, rocking her gently.

Relief coursed through me.

Every child who came to Marigold House carried a mystery. Some arrived without names. Others without memories. Each one had questions.

In all of my years, only one set of parents—mine—had ever returned to reclaim a child.

“I wish they would have knocked, whoever left her, but we found her and she’s well. That’s what matters. We’ll call the doc-tor to pay her a visit, make sure she’s all right, and she’ll be stay-ing with us,” Eleanor said.

Rosie opened her mouth to say something else, but then—Glass shattered.

We froze.

Eleanor’s jaw tightened, a small tic flaring at her temple. “I’ll get it,” I said, knowing it was a child who had gotten into something.

I stepped past Rosie.

Agnes stood near the pantry. At her feet lay a shattered jar. Honey pooled thick and golden around the shards. Her fingers glittered with it.

“Sorry, Miss Wendy,” she whispered. “I wasn’t stealing. Only . . . Rosie said there was new bread cooling and I thought . . .”

Her wide eyes flicked toward the hallway where Rosie and Eleanor rushed off with the baby. “I heard Miss Eleanor talking about fairies. That true? Fairies take children away?”

“It’s just an old superstition,” I said. Not wanting to speak more of things that children should fear.

“I heard her crying,” she whispered.

“The baby will stay with us,” I said. “At least for a while.”

Agnes bent to gather the shards, but I reached a hand out quickly, stopping her before she sliced her fingers. Her braids swung forward, brushing the sticky floor.

“Because of the war?”

I gave a nod.

“Harold said lots of soldiers stay where they die. I suppose that means they become bones right there. Maybe they’ll sprout too, like the bird skull I buried. Bones planted in the garden.”

I opened my mouth to correct her, to say that isn’t how death works. One can’t just plant the dead and expect them to revive. But that felt too cruel to tell a nine-year-old child with no family at this early hour. There was no need for her to know the reality of loss right now. So I remained silent.

The honey smell thickened. Sweet, then bitter. It coated the air. I carefully brushed the shards into a dustpan.

Agnes wrinkled her nose. “Why does it smell like that?” “Not sure,” I replied, knowing I’d smelled this smell long ago, but trying to brush that from my thoughts.

“Go wash your hands,” I told her softly. “We’ll be starting lessons soon.”

“I’m sorry again, Miss Wendy,” she said before darting away.

I poured warm water on the floor and scrubbed until the honey loosened and washed away.

Down the hall, I heard the baby crying and children squealing with delight to discover they were no longer the littlest ones here.

Then came a tap. Quick. Measured. Like the tip of a finger against glass.

My body went still before I could tell it to.

I turned around and faced the back door. Perhaps Samuel had locked himself out. Perhaps one of the children was playing a trick. If so, there would be a face behind that glass.

There was no face.

What was there was a faint handprint on the surface. Small, faint fingers spread wide.

I stared.

*Wind.* It's the wind. Wind can press against glass. No, wind couldn't leave handprints. Maybe it was a child's print from earlier I hadn't noticed.

"It's just wind," I said aloud. Or even a twig that'd come loose and crashed against the door.

But still, I should check, because what if it was a child outside? It was almost time for their lessons and they should be making their way to the classroom.

I eased the back door open to brush away whatever had struck it. Cold air rushed in. *See, the wind.* Nothing more.

I looked down and staggered back before my mind could catch up. My hip struck against the counter.

A black bird. Small. Still.

Its feathers were stiff with honey, gleaming like amber.

Where its eyes should be, only two dark hollows stared back.

*A cat. It must have been a cat.* Cats kill birds. Cats eat the soft parts. And the honey, maybe they found it somewhere? Maybe the bird died elsewhere and the cat dragged it here.

Hollow bird eyes watched me attempt to explain it all away. I looked past it, into the garden, searching for something ordinary. The oak tree, its familiar shadow stretching across the lawn. This existed here, in a world where things behaved as they should.

The shadow lengthened. I watched it bend. Stretch. And then . . . *no.*

It unhooked itself from the trunk. Peeled away from its source like the skin from some fruit. It moved with purpose, slinking across the lawn toward the blackberry bushes until it disappeared out of sight.

I slammed the door, locked it, and pressed my back against the wood. My heart beating as if trying to crack through my ribs.

*That Wendy Darling . . .*

*Your daughter should be sent to the Bethlem asylum . . .*

I didn't see that. I didn't see that. I didn't see any of that. It returned.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

I covered my mouth with both hands, trapping the scream that had lived inside me for twelve years. A scream I didn't think I'd ever need again.

My hands shook. My legs shook. I squeezed my eyes shut.  
No. No. No. No.

This isn't real. You're tired. You've been reading the newspapers and sleeping badly because of it.

The tapping stopped. Silence pressed against the door.

And then, slipping through the seam between wood and glass, a whisper.

*Wendy.*

I didn't answer. I wouldn't answer. But my shadow answered for me.

It stretched across the kitchen floor, and flickered once, like something that remembered what I had been trying all of these years to forget.

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