

DOWN  
THE DRAIN

Through his wet eyes, Ben's unfinished map looked as blurry as his future. He paced back and forth in his small bedroom, clenching the hand-made drawing. How could Grandma Daphne be dead when he could almost hear the whisper of her voice, and sniff the freshly baked ginger cookies in her kitchen? And that breeze that filled her white curtains until they danced like ghosts now seemed to be billowing through his room, lifting the hairs on the back of his neck. Suddenly an ambulance screamed past his house with a merciless howl, shattering his reverie and leaving him shaking. There had been no ambulance to save his grandmother. Not in the forest. If only it had happened when she was visiting them here in the city, she might still be alive.

During the long months of seventh grade, Ben had dreamed of the forest by spending hours painstakingly filling one half of a large white sheet of paper with familiar details: the steep cliffs and springs of Mount Portal, winding pathways, creeks, the cedar throne, disappearing deer trails, the giant boulder that had split in two so you could walk through it, the pond, and the towering fir tree he'd climbed last year to watch ravens playing in the sky and to see beyond his grandmother's side of the forest. Down the middle of the paper he'd drawn the ravine and swamp that divided the forest into his grandmother's side, where he and his younger sister Sara spent summers exploring; and the far side, forbidden and dangerous. Until now he had kept his promise to his grandmother and never set foot in it.

At the sound of a knock, Ben folded the map and hid it inside a book.

“Ben?” Sara, wrapped in a blanket, her freckled face puffy and her eyes red and swollen, appeared in the open door. “I can’t sleep,” she sniffled. “Can I come in?”

“I guess.”

Sara pushed the door closed with her long toes and curled into a ball on the floor. Her white rabbit, Bijou, poked his head out of the blanket to sniff the air. Then he squeezed out one paw with a black mark on it that looked like a single clover leaf with a stem, and squirmed free, revealing another black mark, this one on his left hip, that resembled three clover leaves, without a stem.

“What’s going to happen?” Sara’s voice came out in a squeak. “Who’ll take us to the forest now? Mom hates it there.”

“Maybe Dad,” replied Ben. “I’d rather go alone anyway.”

“How could she have died?” cried Sara.

“Heart attacks just happen,” Ben muttered, pushing his dark hair out of his eyes. “You’d better go back to bed now.”

“How will we spend the summer at Grandma Daphne’s without her?”

“I have no idea. In case you haven’t noticed, I can’t sleep either.”

“I miss her!” sobbed Sara.

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DURING the week after her death, Grandma Daphne’s empty house in the forest received several visitors. Right now there were two. One was hiding at the edge of the meadow, watching the other visitor, who was just leaving.

Archie stepped out onto the front porch, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. Daggett waited until the white-haired man set down his tattered briefcase and began to shuffle through his keys, then threw back his head and let loose with a string of piercing coyote howls. From the far side of the forest his pack responded with a lunatic symphony of yips, shrieks, and screams. Archie froze, and the keys dangling from his motionless hand ceased moving as if they too were stunned. The sun slid behind a dark cloud, abandoning the man to clammy coldness, and a menacing growl rumbled across the meadow. Seizing his briefcase,

which caught on a nail and gave way with a ripping sound, Archie lurched towards his car and fled, having quite forgotten to lock the house.

Once the engine's sound faded, Daggett trotted out of hiding, padding over the spring grasses that were just beginning to shoot up. As he passed beneath the apple tree, two pink petals fell on his gray, straggly hair. Another crept beneath his collar.

This was too easy. He pulled the door open and left it swinging, creaking on its rusty hinges, and began to prowl through the two-story wooden house. In the dim hallway he stared at a fading black and white photograph on the wall. For a moment the sinister expression on his face dissolved, and his eyes softened around the memory they held. Then a tremor of anger rushed through him. His breath quickened, and he moved on. He searched the bookcase in the living room and removed a small volume, tucking it inside his patched jacket, ignoring the basket beside Daphne's spinning wheel. Behind his back, something rotated slowly beneath its green cloth.

In the kitchen he turned the faucet on full blast and grinned at the sight of the clear water swirling down the drain, back into the earth. The well would run dry. With luck, the pump would burn out as well. He studied Daphne's shelf of homemade preserves, dropped a jar in each pocket, and stepped out the back door, leaving it swinging. A black fly buzzed inside as Daggett slipped out, and a moment later, the lanky man vanished into the forest, back across the swamp to his home.

A WILL, AND THE  
DEAREST FRESHNESS  
DEEP DOWN  
THINGS

“**F**ill her up and check under the hood, will you, Roy? I’m going inside for coffee.”

“Sure thing, Archie,” the attendant replied.

The café door swung shut with a bang, and the waitress looked up. “Morning, Archie. Breakfast?”

“Just coffee today, Sylvia. I’m driving up to the city.” Archie nodded at a deputy sitting at the counter. “Morning, Joe.”

“Hey, Archie.”

“Say, Joe, do me a favor, would you? Keep an eye on Daphne’s house if you’re out that way? I’ve got an uneasy feeling about it.”

Joe gave a short laugh. “Sure. But what could happen? Nothing ever happens around here.”

“So why wasn’t Daphne’s daughter at the memorial service?” asked Sylvia, handing Archie his coffee. “Went all through school with her, would’ve been nice to see her again.”

“Lily didn’t much like it here,” muttered Archie. “Real uncomfortable. Guess they had a private service for Daphne in the city.”

“Lily always was a little spooked,” said Sylvia. “High-tailed it out of here the minute she graduated, like she couldn’t wait to escape Cedarwood.”

Archie sighed. “I remember. Not sure what’s going to happen now.” He started for the door. “You’ll check on the house?” he asked Joe again.

“Yup. Don’t worry about a thing,” replied the deputy.

“BEN, Sara,” Lily Maclennon explained, “this is Grandma’s lawyer, Archie Greenwalt. He’s come all the way from Cedarwood.”

“Weren’t you one of my grandma’s friends?” asked Ben.

“We’ve heard stories about you,” said Sara, looking curiously at the stranger. She pushed her apricot-colored hair behind her slender ears.

Archie smiled. “Your Grandma Daphne and I were friends ever since childhood. I helped her with legal matters as well.” He put a warm hand on Ben’s shoulder. “You were just a little guy, maybe two years old, when I moved away eleven years ago.” Ben shuffled his feet in embarrassment and shoved his oversized hands in his pockets.

Turning to Sara, Archie added, “And you—you were just taking your first steps. My, but you look just like your grandmother did at your age. You must be what, twelve?” Sara nodded. “Looking at you brings back memories.” He stared at Sara until tears came into his eyes. “Ever since I returned last fall, I watched Daphne counting the days until your summer visit.” His face drooped and his voice grew hoarse. “She didn’t quite make it. I am so, so sorry.”

“Could we maybe live with you this summer?” asked Sara. “We *have* to spend our summers there.”

“Sara, really!” cried Lily. “Go on, you two. Go find something else to do.”

“Actually,” Archie said, “Ben and Sara are named in the will, so they need to stay.”

“I see. Shall we sit down?” Lily wiped her eyes and nodded to her husband, Peter, who pulled out a chair for their guest.

“Tea?” Lily asked, her deceased mother’s china teapot poised above a mismatched set of cups. A bead of water began to swell at the bottom of a hairline fracture on the porcelain pot, and fell to form a tiny damp circle on the tablecloth.

“Yes, please.” The quiet that followed was embroidered with the tinkle of the last cup being filled. “A fine woman she was,” Archie murmured. His fingers twitched, and at the sound

