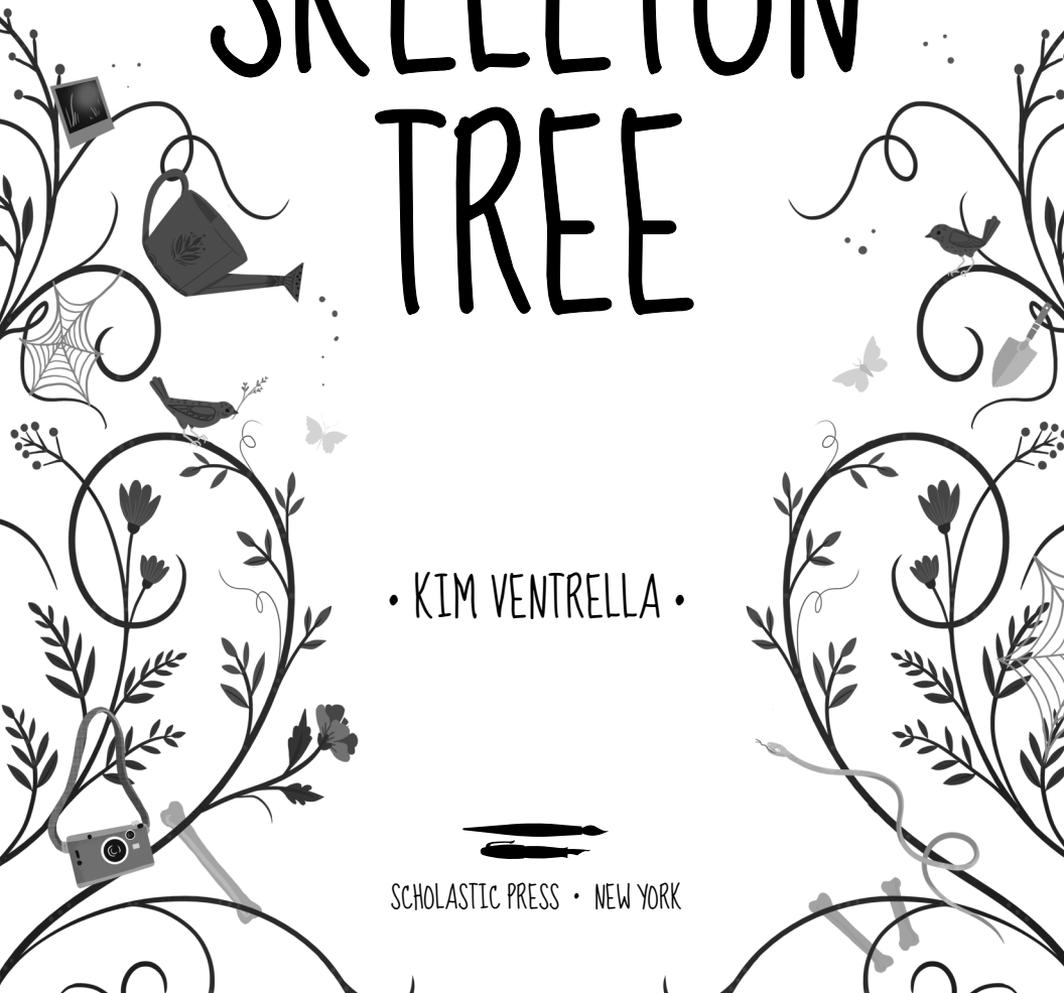


SKELETON TREE

• KIM VENTRELLA •



SCHOLASTIC PRESS • NEW YORK



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-04270-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 17 18 19 20 21

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, October 2017

Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll

CHAPTER ONE

The day the rain stopped, Stanly Stanwright found a bone in the garden, poking up out of the dirt. It could have been a bean sprout, only it was white and hard and shaped like the tip of a little finger.

Stanly bent down to investigate. A shiver tickled his toes and curled all the way up the back of his neck. He touched the bone, quick, like it might bite. Cold seeped from the bone finger into his fleshy one. Wind slapped his face, blowing orange and brown leaves in from the neighbor's yard.

In that moment he felt like an explorer, like Dagger Rockbomb, hero of his favorite video game, *Skatepark Zombie Death Bash*. He might find something good hiding underground, like a dinosaur fossil. Or he might awaken a horde of slimy, flesh-eating zombies.

Some days were like that. One little thing happened, and nothing else was ever the same. The day Stanly's sister was born, for example. Or the night ten months ago, when his father



took a taxi to the airport and never came back. Finding the finger bone felt the same way.

“Hey Bony-Butt, don’t you know it’s treasure time?” said Miren, racing down the cracked stone path and punching Stanly in the chest.

“Stop it! That hurt!” He stepped in front of the bone so Miren wouldn’t see. The bone was his discovery. If Miren saw it, she would tell Mom and ruin everything. Mom never let him dig in the backyard anymore, since Dad left. “You know what Mom said about running too fast.”

“I can breathe fine.” She shrugged and sprinted back to the house. “Last one to treasure’s a rotten nobody.”

“Egg,” said Stanly, shaking his head, but Miren was already gone.

Seven-year-olds get a lot of things wrong. Like how Miren told him cows pee milk, and playing video games can make your fingers fall off. Stanly wondered if he’d said dumb things like that when he was seven.

He didn’t think so.

When he was seven, he already knew how to read and change diapers and get Miren to take her medicine. The kind that smelled like canned worms. Even Mom and Dad didn’t know how to do that.

“Stanly, you promised you’d be in the garage by five to ten. Your sister’s waiting,” Mom said through the kitchen window. Her hair hung in wet curls around her chin. The one

time something really important happened to him, and he had to leave. He felt bad about Miren going to the doctor, again, but why couldn't he do what he wanted just this once?

Before he went inside, Stanly snapped a shot of the bone with his old Polaroid camera. He would have used a phone, but he didn't have one, and Mom's was so old it couldn't do anything but make calls. The photo came out all gray and blobby, because Polaroids take ages to develop.

"Stanly, hurry up!" Mom shouted. He shoved the photo in his pocket and ran for the garage. Before he got in the car, he grabbed a Diet Coke from the mini-fridge he'd helped Dad pick out last year at a yard sale. The sides were still rusty, because Dad had left before he could repaint them.

In the station wagon on the way to the doctor, Miren started coughing. Big, wet coughs that made her entire body shudder.

"I don't want to go to the doctor," Miren said. She cupped her eyes and started to snifle, like she was still three instead of seven.

Mom rolled down a window so some air could reach Stanly and Miren in the backseat. "What about the treasure chest?" Stanly said.

Even though it was filled with baby stuff, Miren loved to pick out a toy from the inflatable treasure chest in Dr. Cynthia's office. She loved it even more than cheeseburgers or those spinny things you get at the school carnival. She told him once. In those exact words.

