

the
FORGOTTEN
GIRL

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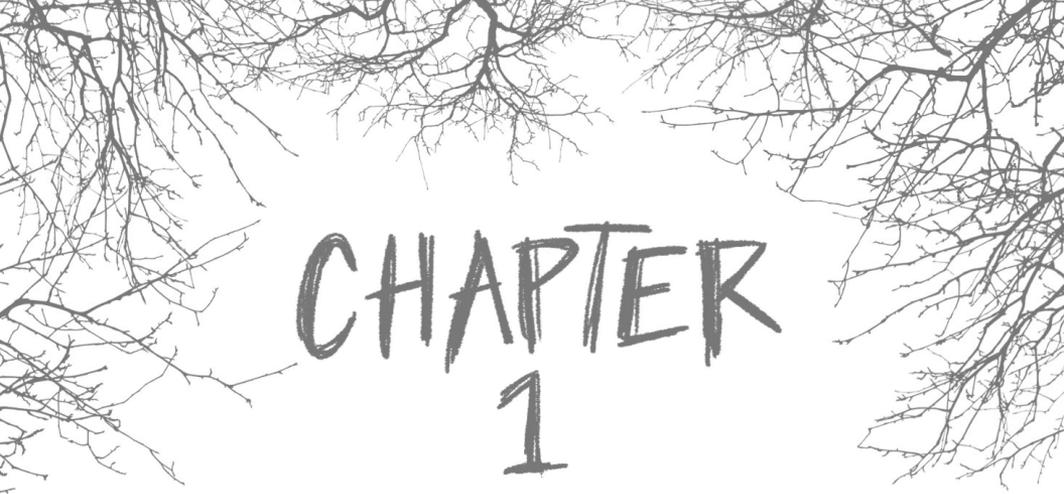
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CHAPTER 1

Iris's nightmares terrified her.

Especially the ones when she couldn't tell if she was dreaming or not. When she was barely awake but not quite asleep, frozen to her bed. Unable to move as monsters crept from the shadows in her room, walking toward her until she squeezed her eyes shut and hastily thought of a prayer.

"When that happens, the witch is riding your back," Daniel's grandmother Suga would say every time she recounted a dream. "To stop them, you have to put a broom under your bed, so she'll ride that instead and let you go."

Everyone else wrote it off as another one of Suga's old superstitions, but Iris so wished her parents would let her keep a broom under her bed, at least for one night. Instead,

she just slept with a night-light, even though she felt too old for that.

Her nightmares were what made her afraid of the dark—well, not exactly afraid. She just didn't like how *unsure* the dark was. The way you had to make your best guess. Was that a person standing over her bed, or was it her lamp? An animal eyeing her or a pile of dirty clothes?

The night-light helped.

And so did the snow.

It snowed just enough here, in the small town of Easaw, North Carolina, and Iris was more enchanted by it than anyone else. She loved the way the sunlight danced on the snow in the daytime. Snow made the light even brighter, playing off it and making its own beauty. Even at night, the snow made the world sparkle as it captured the glow from the streetlights.

Iris jumped out of bed and turned her flashlight on and off three times in the direction of Daniel's bedroom window. This was their signal—if either one of them did it, they needed to meet outside immediately. The signal indicated an emergency. And this was *definitely* an

emergency—the first snow of the season! She couldn't miss it.

She didn't make a sound—the only noise to be heard was the blood pounding in her ears, matching her heart's thump. She couldn't contain her excitement. She wouldn't let her stupid fear of the dark stop her. Plus, the snow would help her, brightening the night sky like it always did.

And she was careful—she had made Mama tie her scarf on her hair very securely before bed. Mama thought it was so Iris's braids would stay just as fresh as they were when she left the hair salon earlier that day. And it was partly that, and partly their thing, one last time to bond each evening before Iris went to sleep. But tonight, it was also so the *clink clank* of the colorful beads at the end of her many braids wouldn't make a sound when she went outside. Because she *was*, indeed, going outside.

"Please, Mama!" she'd begged just a couple of hours ago as her parents cleaned the kitchen together, Mrs. Rose washing, Mr. Rose drying and placing the dishes in the cabinet. Vashti was laughing at some baby cartoon on the TV. Iris could see the snow outside had started to fall lightly but slow and steady in that Easaw way. She *had* to go out tonight.

“No,” Mrs. Rose said without even turning around, without even considering Iris’s request. “It’s too late. It’ll snow all night and be there waiting for you in the morning, Iris. You’ll have all weekend to play.”

Iris tried hard to catch her father’s eyes, willing him to take her side, like he sometimes did when Iris asked for one more piece of cake, to read one more chapter of her book before bed, or to perform one more impromptu step show with Vashti for their parents.

“Daddy?” she asked. It was a risk, asking Daddy right in front of Mama. But she was desperate.

“You heard your mother,” was all he said.

Clenching her fists, concealing her anger well enough for her parents not to see, she walked upstairs to her room, careful not to stomp. Her mother did *not* play about stomping.

She changed into her pajamas, brushed her teeth, and waited for her mama to help her tie her hair up and both her parents to kiss her goodnight. She waited until their laughter at their grown-up TV shows stopped, until she heard their footsteps go into their own bedroom. She waited until the entire house fell into hushed silence to crawl out of bed, flashlight in hand, to look at the snow

and wait for Daniel. He *had to* know she'd want to go out tonight.

She was still waiting.

"Come on, Daniel," she mouthed, not even chancing a whisper. Neither of them had cell phones, only tablets, and Iris wasn't allowed to use hers before bed anymore. Mama was convinced that late-night screen time was part of the reason she was having nightmares. Daddy said they'd think about giving Iris a cell phone when she turned thirteen if she kept her grades up. This signal was all they had.

She waved her flashlight back and forth across the branches of the tree in the middle of both of their yards. Still nothing.

She did this twice more, then started to get discouraged. Daniel was *way* more of a rule follower than she was. Iris could go by herself, of course, but it wouldn't be as fun without him.

Just as she contemplated this, she saw a light mimicking her own move across the branches. She grinned. Daniel was coming.

She put on her favorite gray sweatpants and purple puffer jacket over her pajamas and opened her door so slowly it felt like an eternity. She tiptoed down the stairs,

praying that they wouldn't creak, that Vashti wouldn't open her door, asking where Iris was going. She walked through the kitchen and out through the back door, her feet crunching in her snow boots. She *loved* that crunch.

Iris saw him immediately—her best friend in the whole wide world. Daniel was standing in the yard between their houses in his black puffer coat, looking around. When he saw Iris, he stood up straighter, trying to look less nervous than she knew he felt.

Daniel wasn't always ready for these adventures with Iris. It usually took some convincing—he'd have an argument ready about things not being safe enough, or worrying their parents. Iris had agreed not to push Daniel to go on too many adventures if he'd just play with her outside during the first snow of the season. So he agreed—reluctantly, of course.

“You ready?” he asked, his breath forming a small cloud in front of him. He pushed his too-big glasses back on his nose with a gloved hand.

Iris grinned.

“Let's go.”

She chose the woods behind the houses across the street. There was a clearing right before the woods got too

deep, far enough away where they could play without anyone seeing them, close enough that they could run back to their houses quickly. They'd never done this before—their parents told them many times they weren't allowed to go back there—but Iris had seen those woods peeking out behind the houses so many times walking home from school, or walking out her front door.

She knew it was the perfect spot.

They walked across the street and slipped between two houses, one of them being the house with the brightest blinking Christmas lights on the block, loud and colorful ones that put Iris's family's plain white lights to shame. Iris chanced a glance backward on the way, in the direction of her house. The windows were so dark, she wouldn't be able to tell if someone was looking back at her. She hoped her parents wouldn't glance out of them, that the snow would continue to fall all night and cover their tracks, as they edged between the backyards and walked through the line of trees to the big clearing.

There were no more flowers or leaves this time of year; just a wide blanket of snow, getting thicker by the second, and the prickly branches of the trees, curling toward the sky like fingers covered in frosting, sparkling in the night.

The trees arched over Iris and Daniel as if they were looking down, watching them.

Once they got to the clearing, they made the biggest snowballs and threw them at each other, giggling but covering their faces with their hands and scarves so no one could hear them. Covered in snow and out of breath, they dropped down to make snow angels on every inch of clear snow. They made so many, not even one was distinguishable anymore.

Iris stood up and looked at their work. The ground was covered with heads and hands and footprints from their angels. She imagined that they belonged to someone other than her and Daniel, that they were signs of invisible people following them around.

She shook the thought out of her head.

“You can’t even see the angels anymore.” Iris frowned. She looked around for a fresh patch of snow. Deeper in the woods, she could see a smaller clearing in between the tree trunks, before the woods turned thicker and pitch-black. She squinted, trying to see past that little clearing, but her eyes wouldn’t even adjust. The snow fell silently around her, touching her nose, her gloves. The

moonlight darkened a bit. The darkness was an odd shade of pink.

Iris knew that straight through these woods was her school, but she'd never bothered to test out the shortcut. Their parents warned them not to go into the woods by themselves. And Suga warned them twice as much about the spirits of the snow. How they preyed on children who wandered out in the snowy darkness alone.

But in that little clearing, there was a fresh, untouched blanket of snow, calling her farther into the woods, just before that impenetrable wall of darkness.

It was *too* dark. The branches looked like spiders, waiting to pull her into the darkness and swallow her whole. Like in one of the nightmares she had last week.

She shook her head again. She was *not* afraid of the dark. And she didn't want to pass up the chance to keep playing.

She pointed a purple-gloved finger deeper into the woods.

"Let's go over there."

Daniel cleared his throat. "Iris, we can't go over there. We shouldn't even be out *here*."

She rolled her eyes.

“It’ll just be for a second. I promise.” She added, when he frowned at her, “Please? Come on.”

He nodded slowly. Iris pulled him farther, past the edge of the big clearing, through the next line of trees, to the smaller one. The darkness seemed so solid as it surrounded them, it felt like they were in a cave. All around her, Iris could only see trees. As if they’d entered another world.

The trees seemed to stand in anticipation under the pink-and-black snowy sky. Watching, waiting, so still as the snow touched the branches. She shivered, probably because of the cold. She lay down slowly, the cold pressing closer against her back than it had before. She moved her arms and legs, making the angel, ignoring a strange feeling that she was slowly sinking into the snow . . .

Daniel reached out his hand and pulled her up. Iris shook the feeling off and smiled. She was proud of her work. “I’ve never made a snow angel this good!” She looked at Daniel to agree, but he was leaning over, frowning at her angel.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing at it. “Look.”

She peered more closely at the angel, the way her dress flared around her feet, her arms frozen in midair as if she'd finally gotten their attention.

There was something buried, just barely, under the snow angel's chest, where her heart would be. It glistened in the moonlight. They bent over and worked together to uncover it.

Their hands froze in midair, mimicking the angels'.

Daniel gasped.

"Iris, that's . . ."

Iris stared down at the crumbling stone, a gust of cold air pushing past her, forcing her to speak.

"A grave."

The wind whistled as they looked down at the marker and the angel surrounding it. She almost looked like she was guarding it. Iris felt the sensation of someone standing behind her, and whipped around just in case. She thought she saw something flicker in the distance, and she forced herself to calm down. It must be one of the twinkling lights from the Christmas house.

Iris shivered. It felt even colder, but surely that was because they had stopped running around.

“What does it say?” she whispered, her voice cutting through the silence. Daniel wiped the falling snow away from his glasses, took a breath, and knelt down by the small gray square. He was shivering, too.

“Avery Moore. Rest in peace, darling. May 5, 1945 to September 7, 1956.”

Daniel stared at the grave marker for a second, his lips moving as if he was counting under his breath, then looked up at Iris, his eyes even bigger behind his glasses.

“She was our age.”

Iris shivered again. They were silent, both probably thinking the same thing—*what happened to her? Why was she buried here?*

Suddenly, the snow didn't feel fun anymore. It was too dark out. Too cold. Too quiet. They felt too far from their houses.

“I'm cold,” they both blurted out at the same time, startling each other. Their voices seemed to carry farther than they should've on the wind.

“Iris, let's go back.” Daniel scrambled to stand up and grabbed Iris's hand again, first walking, then running through both clearings. The trees stood tall and dark, ominously, as they passed by. The snow fell heavier, no

longer looking like frosting. The white branches were now skeletal hands, waving them backward. Iris could almost feel it, a pull trying to keep them there.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Daniel breathed, before letting her hand go and slipping through the back door to his house. Iris slipped through her own, forgetting to wipe her feet on the mat outside, not so carefully walking up the stairs, and throwing all her wet clothes into her closet. The darkness felt thick, the same way it had by the little clearing. Like it followed her here.

Still shivering, she trained her eyes on her night-light, but the small glow gave her little calm. She began her usual ritual of looking around to prove to herself that the pile of clothes in the corner wasn’t an animal, that the *tap-tap-tap* in the window right now was just ice and not someone trying to get her to look up—

But when she glanced at the window, it was into the black, round eyes of a little girl.